Krishnanand
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90-Year-Old Swami For Teens

Parag, Anil; Mardemootoo, Shivakumaren Born into the royal Rajasthani Jadhpur family, he suddenly quit his post as district magistrate at age 37, donned orange robes and headed for the Himalayas.

The year was 1937. In one short ceremony, the bright young path finder renounced his royal bloodline, title and family and walked away with a new name - Swami Krishnanand Saraswathi. He bid farewell to his guru, Swami Vishnudevananda, and started northward with 100,000 rupees tucked in the folds of his robes. He reached Rishikesh, sequestered himself in a mountain cave and meditated. After some time he emerged, gave the rupees to Kali Kamli Ashram and vowed never to touch money again.

Today Swami Krishnanand has no personal bank account but ably manages millions of dollars that flow through the international arteries of his 400 socio-service centers under the umbrella organization, the Human Services Trust. His caves are now the cabins of Boeing 747s as he flies from center to center with the spry spirit of a teenager.

Swami Krishnanand is independent-minded and begs direction from no one. Even back in 1937, as a fledgling monk, he rebuked his fellow ashram inmates who had scolded him for mixing and eating among untouchables. He has not changed. Today - 53 years later - he sits beside heads of state or society's waifs, loyally oblivious to class distinction. Personal gifts he abjures. Once at the Kumbhamela, a wealthy man gave him a US $1,000 Kashmiri shawl. Ten minutes later Swamiji casually wrapped it around an old man shivering from the cold, patently ignoring the wealthy patron's vain protests.

Swamiji's Human Services Trust extends its benign influence into Hindu communities of 21 countries in Africa, Asia, India and Europe. Its programs are aimed at cultural revival and assistance to the poor, aged and infirm. But the fullest bloom of his work is in Mauritius. Courting government concerns, Krishnanand has built his Trust into the country's largest socio-cultural organization. Its 150-bed infirmary cares for Hindus, Muslims and Christians. "Man should pray for the living God that is man," exhorts the university-educated, universal-minded Swamiji. Unquestionably his greatest contribution in Mauritius is the mobilization of an ayurvedic dispensary. Swamiji's practical application of the traditional Hindu perception that "all souls are God's children" does not impair his appreciation of where he learned it - Hinduism. He attends to serving specific religious Hindu needs - e.g. distributing 100,000 copies of the Ramayana. "I have known him for 34 years," reflects devotee Mr. Bahadoor. "Though I have never seen him practicing any ritual as such, like homas, or pujas - his daily prayer, yoga asanas and his meditation are always there. He sometimes reads the Gita and chants the names of Siva, Ganesha and Kali. He believes in them all."

Swamiji's real love is the youth. He know they are critical to the Hindu future, and likens them to the heart of the body. To keep the heart strong it needs to beat fast regularly. So he puts the youth to work staffing demanding service programs. They respond. He doesn't condemn Rock & Roll and Western ways as long as youth don't abandon Hindu values. The almost-century-old swami is comfortable talking about anything with teens - metaphysics or politics. Thirteen-year-old Varsha Bissessur feels, "Swami loves me because I sing bhajans." And 17-year-old Sachin Bahadoor enjoys Swamiji's presence because he "likes to joke with us." His progressive message to girls is: get a better education than the men. "It is mothers who teach the children; if they don't know anything, what can they teach?" he warns.

When Swamiji left the Rishikesh Ashram back in 1937, he met Mahatma Gandhi, spent the early '50s in Nepal setting up eye camps and in 1956 headed for East Africa by steamer. He mastered Swahili and in 1971 organized the first All-African Indian Conference. He founded two monasteries in Ghana and Accra. Its swamis are native Africans. In 1967 a group of infectiously kind and persuasive Mauritian Hindus stole him away to expand his service into their country.

"I still have no back account," Swami Krishnanand remarks today. "But I have earned men in the world who stand ready to help me financially, no matter what the amount. All this is possible because such is God's will by which I live."

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