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Sinha, B.M.

It was a colorful session of dance and music that lasted three full nights, September 2-4. It was marked by a devotional grandeur rarely witnessed these days. About 4,000 persons from all over India sat through the 12-hour sessions. There were also scores of foreigners from the West with not only good taste for Indian music and dance but also a deep love for Krishna and Radha immortalized by great saints of this country. The venue was Raman Reti at the outskirts of the holy town of Vrindavan in the district of Mathura. And the occasion was the celebration of the birth anniversary of Swami Haridas, a great exponent of Hindustani music and lyrical devotee of Lord Krishna.

The celebration was described as the "biggest festival" of classical dance and music held in India in a quarter century. It attracted almost all eminent dancers and musicians of the country. They believed participating in it would bring them the honor every good artist aspires after. They got the opportunity not only to give their performance in the presence of a large gathering of connoisseurs of India's arts and culture, but also mingle with holy saints who treated the festival as a place of pilgrimage. As renowned dancer Meenakshi Sheshadri said: "It was a spirituo-cultural festival which both the artist and connoisseurs had come to attend."

Giant Crowds Gently Herded

To arrange for such a festival with a mammoth gathering at a small place like Raman Reti just on the border of Vrindavan was a marvel of logistics. No ordinary organization or person could have ever have made it work. It is possible only for

Acharya Shreegopal Goswami to think about the festival, plan and see it successfully held. He is the founder/secretary of the Swami Haridas Memorial committee founded in 1966. He has been holding this event every year since 1966. This year was the biggest ever and cost about US $70,000.

All those who came to attend the festival were treated as guests by the committee and helped to stay in hotels and rest houses in Vrindavan. Many also stayed in Mathura which is closely associated with the life of Lord Krishna. The government of the State of Uttar Pradesh extended all help to the organizers, insuring supply of amenities like water and food to the guests. The guests rested the first day and then began to converge on the festival venue by seven in the evening. They came prepared to stay awake the whole night under a huge multi-colored tent tastefully decorated with fresh flowers, bunting and lights. The stage where the artists gave performances looked elegant and majestic. It was equipped with a modern acoustic system to insure that even those sitting at the farthest corner could clearly and easily listen to the music. The aroma of thousands of burning incense sticks filled the tent each day, making the audience spiritually intoxicated. The festival was marked by the presence of some all time great names of Indian classical dance and music, like sitar wizard Vilayat Khan, sarod expert Ustad Amzad Ali Khan, renowned vocalists Pandit Jasraj Kishori Amonkar and Siyaram Tewari. Two of the greatest percussionists, Pandit Samta Prasad and Pandit Pagaldas Pakhavaji, enthralled the audience with their presentations. There were also the famous kathak danseuse Shovna Narain and Manipuri exponent Darshana Javeri. The Rasleela dances presented by them were enchanting and captivating. But the most hear-warming performance came from Meenakshi Sheshadri who is a consummate performer in four dance styles. The dance recital presented by her in Odissi style on the Krishna theme was highly evocative.

Questioned about the festival, Acharya Goswami told HINDUISM TODAY, "Swami Haridas [HT, Nov. 1992, p. 28] was inspired by his love for Krishna and his great contributions to music are dedicated to Him. The festival thus not only commemorates the memory of the Swami but also helps us perform upasana (worship) of Lord Krishna with rasa (devotional flow) released by recitals of the dancers and musicians." It was a fact that the audience felt steeped in a high spiritual mood during the event. "This proves devotional music is the nearest approach to God. The experience you get here is far more subtle and ennobling than going through a ritualistic performance," Goswami opined.

HARIDAS LINEAGE

Organizer of the Haridas festival, Acharya Shreegopal Goswami in a descendant of Haridas' younger brother and spiritual heir, Shri Jagannath. Acharya Goswami is a scholar of Indian philosophy and devotional literature and has authored a book on Swami Haridas and propagates his philosophy to inspire people to realize the love Krishna has for all. His dream is to set up an ashram on the lines of ancient gurukulas where both Indian music and philosophy can be taught to deserving students.

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