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Pondicherry Yoga Summit

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For three cool but sunny days late in January in the small, cosmopolitan, coastal city of Pondicherry, on the glittering Bay of Bengal, the power of the materialistic world waned. It wasn't an electrical shortage (all too typical here) but rather a spiritual surge that temporarily eclipsed the worldly preoccupations that have too easily standardized our lives. More than 100 delegates from 26 countries and 300 delegates from every state in India gathered to discuss the theme of the conference: Yoga - A Unitive Force for a Divided World.

The delegate, had jumped many hurdles to reach this summit. India Airlines pilots had been on strike for one month and India was still seething with unrest and sporadic incidents of violence after Ayodhya. But the final and most unfortunate obstacle was the last-minute postponement by one week from January 21-25 to January 27-29. For many that was the final straw. Organizers estimate that the last minute postponement caused about 50 percent cancellation, most notably by lights like Yogacharya BKS Iyengar; Yogacharya K. Pattabhi Jois, Dr. M.V. Bhole of Kaivalyadhama: and many other international yoga authorities.

Yet, as impossible as it seemed, the 1993 International Yoga Festival sponsored by the Government of India. Department of Tourism, was a dramatic success. It was originally billed "The Yoga Earth Summit," taking a leaf from last year's global gathering in Brazil. South America. But this summit sought to focus on the problem of a polluted mother earth planet from a new angle-the yogic perspective - clean up our inside first! "Inner ecology then naturally produces an awareness of external ecology - our environment becomes what we are."

All in all, it was a rare confluence of spiritual, political, scientific, professional,

medical and artistic leaders. The first day began traditionally with the lighting of a deepam on the gigantic, beautifully decorated dais. Politicians and sages sat side by side. The leading lights attending were: Sri Swami Dayananda Saraswathi, Sant Keshava Das, Shri Amrit Desai, Yogarishi Dr. Swami Gitananda Giri, and Shri MP Pandit, spokesman for the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry. The leading political dignitaries of Pondicherry state government included: the Lt. Governor Shri Har Swaroop Singh, Chief Minister Shri A. Gandhiraj, Chief Secretary Shri S. Sharma, Finance Secretary Smt. P.M. Singh and Director of Tourism, Shri V. Shivashanmugam.

Government hospitality

The event was clearly historic. It was the first time an international conference had been organized and paid for by a national government. As one Indian administrative service officer put it: "In the old days the chakravarthis, emperors, always supported the cultural and spiritual pursuits of their people. How grand that our government has taken such a step in these times, when it is sorely needed."

The Pondicherry Government carefully engineered the event to be not overly cerebral. So festival, too, it became-with participants basking in a notably buoyant, superfriendly atmosphere.

Days began with early morning prayers, mantras and bhajans from 5:00 AM, practical yoga classes from 6:30-7:30 and lectures in the later morning and afternoon. Olympic standard yoga asana (postures) demonstrations were given each evening at 6 PM, followed by exquisite South Indian cultural programs.

The entire function was held in the huge, new Indira Gandhi Memorial Sports Centre at Uppalam Grounds. Side by side with the conference, the International Yoga Asana Competition was conducted across the playing field. Two hundred participated. Those who wearied of words, simply walked across the grassy field to the mind-boggling spectacle of some of the world's best yoga asanists.

"Guests of the Government" hospitality overflowed everywhere. Most delegates

were housed in the comfortable Government Tourist Home. Superb vegetarian meals were catered by the Pondicherry Department of Tourism Development and the best buses were pressed into service for the delegates.

Salt of the Earth Advice

The first speaker of the Yoga Earth Summit, the Lt. Governor of Pondicherry Shri Har Swaroop Singh, sounded more like a rishi than the administrative head of a Union Territory, giving a clear exposition of the ashtanga yoga as a step-by-step scientific approach to evolution. He cautioned: "Yoga is a holistic science. It cannot be taken to pieces and small bits used here and there according to the practitioners' convenience," Yogarishi Dr. Swami Gitananda, madathiapathy of Sri Kambliswamy Madam. In his bright orange robes, flowing white hair and beard took the stage next. Even at age eighty-seven, his voice rang clear. "Everyone has a vacuum inside," he said. "Everyone tries to fill it, but they fill it with the wrong things-alcohol, drugs, tobacco, ambition, lust, greed. The spiritual man fills that vacuum with love and aspiration, and thus reaches oneness or yoga or the Unitive Principle. Swamiji then introduced Shri Swami Dayananda Saraswathi, who kept the audience enthralled with his mischievous humor and easy manner. Swamiji said, "There are not many yogas. There is one. It is achieved by living a disciplined life and choosing and cultivating the right attitudes. He also furthered: There is no path. The spiritual man leaves no trace in his movement. He moves as a bird flies in the sky."

In his talk. Shri MP Pandit exhorted delegates to fulfill their cosmic task which "Conservatism, elevation, enhancement." Dr. John Mumford of Australia look a swipe at the West's old matter/mind guru. Descartes, who saw the circumference of life not much bigger than a brain and a jungle of thoughts. "I think therefore I Am," he concluded. Dr. Mumford said. "The man made a mistake. If he had been a yogi, he would have instead mirthfully mused. "I think I think, therefore I think I am." An unknown young swamiji from Salem, who managed to get himself on the program by a record ten-hour wait in front of the office of the Director of Tourism, was a blessing in disguise and popular with his childish simplicity. The word swami means "I am myself." He said, and proved he deserved the title by being utterly himself, speaking basic truths forcefully and with the punch and candor of an innocent child.

By 6:00 PM on the first day everyone was starving for a visual experience. What a

feast was provided by Yogacharya P. Gopalakrishnan of Bangalore, undoubtedly the best yoga asana demonstrator in the world. He can fashion his body into any shape the human mind can possibly conceive. Also, a South Indian artist ascended the stage carrying a bunch of ceramic howls and a pail of water, called jalatarangam, "water bowls used to produce melody." He sat down and within a few minutes, to the amazement of the audience, began to play the most complicated carnatic melodies and rhythms by hitting the bowls filled with water with a stick.

Bhogis Culled From Yogis

The bhogis (adepts of the world) were separated from the yogis on the morning of the second day as only about one quarter of the delegate strength turned out for morning meditation at 5:30 AM. By the time the sun rose on the three practical hatha yoga sessions held on the large grassy playing field, a few hundred more straggled in, mostly to watch. Yoga Sitaramiah of Hyderabad, Chandra Kumar Giri of Germany and Nancy Ford Kohne and Pat Hanson of the USA (Unity and Yoga) put everyone through their paces.

The Yoga for Women session on the second day was another visual treat as nine ladies from eight different countries proved that beauty was not the prerogative of the young alone. All but one were clad in saris, with flowers in their hair-clearly proving false the bizarre and controversial claim "hatha yoga turns women into men."

Yogaraj Ami-it Desai gave the keynote address on the morning of the third day, saying. "Yoga can happen anywhere, any time, when you are not in resistance to what you are doing, but rather become one with it. God appears when we disappear." Sant Kesav Das along with his wife then embarked upon one of the most magical journeys members of the audience had ever undertaken. He sang favorite religious songs and then stopped to tell the story associated with the emotion, and the spiritual truth it contained, in a manner so graphic, the entire episode unfolded before one's mind's eye. One saw Draupadi pleading to Lord Krishna to rescue her as her sari was being cruelly torn from her body by the wicked Kauravas in the court of the king. The cultural finale was given by Yoganjali Natyalayam, the artistic wing of Ananda Ashram and ICYER, under the direction of Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani. In a spell-binding performance. Bharat Natyam was creatively woven together with difficult yoga asanas into a temple dance

choreography. An avalanche of applause broke tree as the last note rang out, sending a rippling feeling of unity that the conference had so self-consciously sought to create with the intellect, but effected so spontaneously through artistic expression.

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