Southern France Loves India - Again
Category : March 1993
Published by Anonymous on Mar. 02, 1993

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Thousands Sample Hindu Culture and Spirituality

It could become one of history's sweeter ironies if "Mr. West," erstwhile proud conqueror of India, turned out to be conquered by her instead! This time, of course, it would be a conquest of the heart, he having been won over by her constant and generous sharing of her precious and timeless wisdom. It could happen. Or is it happening already? Among those Western places where many hearts are open toward India, France must certainly be listed. In the twin towns of Arles and Tarascon for instance. Southern Frenchmen, having appreciated a Festival of India several years earlier, treated themselves to a rerun. From October 3rd to 7th, 1992, several thousand participated in Festival #2, and an estimated 20,000 watched it on TV.

It was a grand success. Not in a splashy or spectacular way, but in the way that it was conceived - as a humble attempt to create for the enjoyment of local folk some of the ambiance and experience of India. And, with very simple means, some creativity and humor, it worked. When HINDUISM TODAY asked Pascal Rouillard, the organizer, why he so visibly included that most risky subject, the sacred cow, in the festival, he answered, "To provide some light-heartedness, and show that humor is a part of Hinduism. And this puja for the cow is such a loving and pure thing. Who could fail to see that? I think people were sensitive to it."

There were dance and music performances, films, lectures, displays and demonstrations. But the emphasis was on experience. Visitors were encouraged to wear Hindu clothing, enjoy vegetarian food and participate in a variety of workshops ranging from yoga and meditation to cuisine and ayurveda, attend daily pujas, and especially to join Divali festivities culminating in a torchlight procession. What most impressed Rouillard was the spiritual atmosphere these activities generated, "It was palpable, and for many, the best part of the festival," he said. "It wasn't planned. It was a dose of magic which just happened."

Rouillard was introduced to Hinduism 25 years ago by his high school friend who was from Bengal. When he went to India, he was captured for life. He has since returned five times and been initiated by his guru, Bhakti Vaibhav Aranya Maharaj, a sannyasi of the Chaintanya lineage. Hindu religion and culture are now his life's work. He has established Franco-Indian societies, set up centers in India for pilgrims and cultural explorers from the West. He organizes several cultural/religious tours to India each year.

Interest in things Hindu has been developing in France from the first contacts on the Malabar coast four centuries ago. And men of letters such as Romain Roland, Ren[?] Gu[?]non and Alain Dani[?]lou have sung the praises of the Vedic heritage ever since. In Pondicherry, where the French foothold lasted until 1947, French scholars still maintain the famed Institute d'Indologie, which carries on significant research on, and publication of, the all-important Saiva Agamas.

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