Special Cultural Events Highlight India Odyssey
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The innersearchers on the 1981 India Odyssey enjoyed several beautiful performances in the realm of music and dance, not the least of which was the lilting chanting of the temple Brahmins as they performed puja or chanted the ancient Vedas in traditional style, their voices echoing along the stone corridors, carrying the message of the rishis to contemporary hearts. We were reminded of Gurudeva's saying that "The Saiva Dharma. It is now as it always was."

Among the cultural events, three were particularly outstanding, truly unforgettable. The first was a soulful bhajan and vocal concert by Thiru Murugadas and company at the temple grounds of Tiruchendur. The second was a stunning nadhaswarm concert by Thiru Sethuraman and party at the holy temple of Meenakshi in Madurai, and the third was the graceful Bharathanatyam dance recital of Kumari Swarnamukhi at the temple of Chidambaram.

Thiru Pithukuli Murugadas is the most acclaimed bhajan singer in South India, and his music is listened to on cassette tapes by avid fans all over the world. At this performance, we discovered why. The concert began at 9:00 P.M. on January 23 in a large outdoor stage area near Tiruchendur temple. Murugadas was accompanied by six persons - including his wife who played the harmonium and sang, another female vocalist, a cymbal player, two drummers; one playing the tavil and the other the mirudangam. The music had an inner power and energetic fluidity, bringing the large audience into a fine devotional mood. This was a magical performance by a man of great strength and accomplishment who obviously enjoys his work, and just as clearly sees his work as worship. As Gurudeva stated in a message of appreciation to this artist, "In every age, great souls are born to help us through our life in this world. We all know that Lord Muruga sent Murugadas from the Devaloka to sing for us...the Canadian and American devotees join me in thanking and paying obeisance to this great artist."

The Nadhaswaram concert, performed by Thiru M.P.N. Sethuraman and his brother

playing the Nadhaswaram as well as two young players of the South India drum, called a tavil, and a tala keeper who set the rhythms on the cymbals, was held on the eve of January 25 in the outer prakaram of the Meenakshi temple. Gurudeva and the inner-searchers, seated on the stage near the performers, were virtually transported by the music. The combinations of great talent expressed on these two powerful and dynamic musical instruments, the tavil and the nadhaswaram, created a penetrating and soul-stirring concert.

The concert went on for well over two hours without a single break, holding the entire audience of 600 people spellbound with the skillful display of genius. In his words of thanks to the performers Gurudeva called this "the music of the Gods."

The third great performance witnessed by the 1981 India Odyssey was the Bharatanatyam dance recital of Kumari Swarnamukhi on the evening of February 1 at which a crowd of over 15,000 people were in attendance. Miss Swarnamukhi danced on the portico entrance to the famous Thousand-Pillared Hall of Chidambaram. She is the state dancer for Tamil Nadu and presently the foremost exponent of Bharathanatyam in South India. Special sanction for this rare performance was given by the Dikshitars of Chidambaram in honor of Gurudeva's presence since dance performances at the temple are only rarely permitted. The performance, lasting for one and a half hours, consisted of ten separate dances, each the enactment of a puranic story. During the course of the recital, each of the 108 tandava dance poses of Lord Siva Nataraja was performed, many of which require superhuman flexibility and dexterity to accomplish. Each dance was a lesson in grace and drama. It is a great tribute to Miss Swarnamukhi that with the guidance of her father she has revived all of the 108 poses, as previously 30 or more were not in use. They did this by studying the poses in granite carvings in the temples of Tamil Nadu and beginning her training as a small child just for this purpose. After the performance Gurudeva came on stage and personally presented a plaque to the dancer and expressed his deep appreciation thus: "Many this fine dancer live long and dance long...that many more people will be blessed to see performances like the one we have seen here tonight."

Following each of these concerts, Gurudeva addressed the large crowds that had gathered, stirring them to "stand strong for Saivism" and to educate their children well. All the pilgrims enjoyed these and other special events, and felt humbly honored to have been there at the right place at the right time to see and hear in person wonderful performers who have devoted their entire lives to perfecting their art in a culture where art and religion are two sides of the same coin.

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