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Urges Saivites to Worship Siva and Firm up Religious Boundaries on 3rd Annual India Odyssey Pilgrimage

Meeting a spirit of devout worship with dynamic public addresses, Gurudeva, Sivaya Subramuniaswami, completed his third consecutive annual 35-day pilgrimage to the Orient in January of 1983, through Malaysia, Sri Lanka and South India. Accompanying him were forty members of Saiva Siddhanta Church, adoptive or converts to the Saivite faith. For many of the pilgrims, it was their first times to the holy lands of Saivite Hinduism, the first time worshipping in the physically impressive, and spiritually powerful stone temples. For some it was also the first real opportunity to be among born Saivites in the traditional milieu, a chance to make friends with those who think and believe as they do and to learn of the Saivite culture from watching and being in their midst.

For Gurudeva it was also, no doubt, a richly rewarding spiritual pilgrimage to the holy temples to worship God Siva and his two sons, Ganesha and Muruga. But it was far more, as well. As during the pilgrimages of the two preceding years, he was invited to speak to the devotees gathered to see him on the published itinerary. Usually hundreds and sometimes thousands were in attendance, and his talks often culminated long, elaborate processions replete with elephants, musicians, colorful decorations and frequent stops to give blessings at altars set up before homes. This year he gave over 50 talks in all. And at each venue small printed pamphlets of verses from the Holy Kural were given out afterwards as prasadam, often along with veebhuti, holy ash, when possible.

An intense spirit of mission therefore surrounded the pilgrimage. "Every year we confront you as a Siva yogi from the West, coming toward India on a spiritual mission renewed," the Head of Madurai Aadheenam, H.H. Arunagirinatha Sri Gnanasambanda Desika, announced in greeting. Each talk carried a strong, clear message to its listeners. Above all, Gurudeva's intent message to its listeners. Above all, Gurudeva's intent seemed to be to make Saivism and Saivites strong -

Saivites strong within themselves and Saivism strong as a united group of people. The pilgrims on the Odyssey commented upon returning that their strongest impressions came within the Siva temples: Meenakshi, Chidambaram and Rameshwaram in particular. Gurudeva's central and most memorable theme dovetailed with this perfectly. Over and over again, he encourage Saivites to worship Siva, "Supreme God."

Gurudeva explained carefully that he sees Saivism threatened from within and without. In other words, members are drifting away - into materialism, into existentialism, into other religious and other avenues - while other religious which show a united front continually draw away members through conversion. "Firming up the boundaries of Saivism," was his prescription for the patient. The message was simple, direct and followed a powerful precedent. Gurudeva pointed out that this was the advice that the Nayanars, the 63 canonized saints of Tamil Saivism, gave to their followers 1,000-odd years ago. Then, Buddhism and Jainism were threatening; now, he said, it is Christianity and Islam, and a host of secular modes of thought, that impell a remedy.

At the same time, there was encouragement in each lecture, foremost of which seemed to be the idea that "the fire of Siva is rising in Saivites in all countries of the World." This fire, he explained, is the kundalini, the spiritual force in all men, which bring love into the heart and intuitive insight to the thinking mind.

Last year Gurudeva's talks strove to point out the problems facing Saivite Hinduism, as well as Hinduism in general, on a broad level. The year before, above all he praised the greatness of the religion, its inherent strengths, which stand on the proverbial three pillars: the temple, the Sat Gurus and the scriptures. This year, by the time he reached South India, the focus was precise and crystalline. The previous years' theme formed the warp of the fabric of his talks, the weave was the love and worship of God Siva, above all other Gods.

Opposition was apparent to Sivaya Subramuniaswami's admonishments at certain venues. His call for greater orthodoxy among the Saivites of the world stood in stark contrast to what he termed the "liberal Hindu movement." And explanations of the dangers of leaving orthodoxy and allowing alien influences to infiltrate Saivite belief and practice were often given. He emphatically denounced the idea that all religions are one, and the movement to combine Vaishnavism with Saivism.

Overwhelmingly, audiences and prominent individuals expressed support for Gurudeva's advice, encouragements and assessments. Professor S.V. Chittababu, Vice Chancellor of Annamalai University, Chidambaram, observed, "Here is a Swamiji who wishes to see Saivism once again rejuvenated, restated, revitalized." The President of the Sri Paranjothi Vinayaga Temple of Kuala Lumpur said: "We are honored that God has chosen someone from the West to do the job of revivifying Saivism in this modern age...and that he has ordained someone with extraordinary qualities needed to succeed."

In temples in Kuala Lumpur and Colombo, the Western Guru devolved in detail another primary theme: the need for organizational facilities in Hinduism. Here, as his focus and model of Hinduism worldwide, he spoke of Hinduism in America, where, he disclosed, "We need trained Hindu teachers, we need trained Hindu missionaries, organizers and trained Hindu social workers to fill in the gaps in the technological age,...to represent the religion to the outside world as well as to the young people, the adolescents, to solve problems such as suicides, divorces, abortions, and all the modern problems of the technologies age."

For the pilgrims accompanying their Gurudeva, the 1983 India Odyssey pilgrimage - an intense, rewarding, and challenging experience in many ways - came to an end on the 31st of January in Pondicherry, from whence they began the journey homeward. But Sivaya Subramuniaswami, along with Siva Palaniswami, continued on in the same worshipful and missionary spirit. Two weeks are spent lecturing in Mauritius at the invitation of the Mauritius Tamil Temples Federation, then three weeks in Sri Lanka, centering around the Sri Subramuniya Ashram in Alaveddy.

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