Hindu Families of New Orleans Face Challenge of Raising Their Children as Hindus
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The town that has often been called the "gayest and liveliest city East or West of the Mississippi" - New Orleans - is now the home of over 200 Hindu families, many of whom are soberly calculating how much time remains to teach their children Hindu values before American values supersede through default. So far, so good. Due to the assiduous efforts of a core group of families, the prospects for "Hindu values first" looks promising. The mainstay organization, The Hindu Temple Society of Greater new Orleans (incorporated and tax-exempt), bold in their committment to the next generation, recently acquired a 1/2 acre site for an Agamic temple near the banks of the Mississippi River.

Dr. C. Sharma, Secretary of the Temple Society, explained that in the first half of 1983 they plan to build a hall on the property where a Ganesha Deity will be installed. Regular pujas will be done to win His blessings for the removal of all obstacles to the success of the full-fledged Agamic temple that they want to build on the same property. To date, it had not been decided who the presiding deity for this Agamic temple proper will be. The focus now is on getting the hall built to provide a much needed place to meet and worship. Several members of the Society, architects by profession, have offered their skills for the task. Fund raising plans are underway.

The Society began in an unassuming, yet strong manner in November of 1978 when 4 families met in one of their homes for worship and bhajan. Those families were Mr. and Mrs. Dharmarajen, Dr. and Mrs. Sharma, Dr. and Mrs. Radhakrishnamurthy, Mr. and Mrs. Sukumar Nair and Dr. and Mrs. Vijayagopal and their young children. They had been living in America for many years and had devoted their primary energies towards establishing a solid economic footing in this country. But at this first informal puja meeting in one of their homes, one might say, a bit of magic happened. With everyone seated on the floor before a small altar with Gods Ganesha, Shiva, Krishna and others, the officiating priest, Dr. C. Sharma, clad in simple white dothi with holy ash glistening on his forehead, performed a simple arati. Honest and candid conversation followed regarding the

impending consequences to the children if no steps were taken to inculcate in them the teachings and practices of Hinduism, explained Dr. Vijayagopal. All agreed that with no religious identity their children would dearly suffer, as the negative aspects of American life would undoubtedly secure a toll. "We decided right then and there," said Dr. Sharma, "to continue to meet each Sunday to sing bhajans and performs puja to our Gods." Their responsibility to the children had been clearly cognized. And Mr. Vijayagopal readily admits that not just a little fear helped to shape their thinking at that point. Along with the resolve to continue these weekly services, two additional resolutions, informally made, became the core objectives of the then incipient society - to provide religious education for the children and to build a temple.

The New Orleans Society has made sticking to their first objective look easy. Since that first meeting in 1978, over 230 consecutive Sunday pujas have been performed by Dr. Sharma, (assisted by Mr. Sukumaran Nair). Not one was missed. On some occasions there was only the priest and one devotee. At times nearly 100 persons have crowded into the shrine room of the host's home, though the average is 20 to 30. For special holy day pujas, halls are rented; for the last Divali Puja, for example, over 300 people attended. "Consistency is the keynote that will see the temple built," Dr. Sharma adamantly maintains. "It is not the money that will built the temple, it is the power that comes from seeing that the puja happens every single Sunday," echoed Mr. Nair. It is hardly coincidence that Dr. Sharma and Mr. Nair view the regular performance of pujas with such a dutiful spirit. Both of their grandfathers were highly respected priests in Siva temples in South India and they had the blessing of growing up under the umbrage of religious parents who often took them to worship at nearby temples.

After 4 1/2 years, on the other hand, little had been accomplished toward the second resolution - providing regular religious instruction for the children. Then, again in a quiet, unassuming manner, classes were generated. In August, 1982, Sadhaka Diksha Kandar, a Saivite Hindu monk for 15 years, arrived in New Orleans. He approached the Society leaders initially to seek contacts for Hindu missionary work in Trinidad. Upon learning that the Society had no regular religious classes for the children, he requested permission to help get some classes started, and asked if one or two adults could join him in the endeavor, so that when it came time for him to continue on in his missionary work, the classes would continue. "Two prominent men in the Society, Dr. Murthy Akundi and Dr. Vinod Thukaral, both university professors, volunteered their time and energies to help." Sadhaka Kandar explains, "and within two weeks, classes on the basics of Hinduism were being held." The classes were soon very popular, not only with the children but with the parents as well. Several members humorously chastised Dr. Sharma for not informing adults of the class - not so they could bring their children so much as

they could attend themselves! Through the combined efforts of the visiting sadhakas and the two professors, the classes became an inspiration. When, after 2 1/2 months, the time came for Sadhaka Kandar to leave, Dr. Akundi and Dr. Thukaral took full responsibility for continuing. Dr. Vijayagopal, father of two children, said candidly, "When Sadhaka Kandar left, the children were in tears." Enrollment to date stands at about 20 children.

Recently Sadhaka Kandar sent some questions to the professors to ask the children. The first question was, "What is the most impressive thing that you have learned about Hinduism that you did not know before?" Anu Vijayagopal, age 11, answered: "that God's soul is a body of light and that we go through many many lives before we are pure and our souls are [as] bright as God's, and then we live with God." Arvind Mirtipati, age 9, said he was most impressed in learning "that our religion is the best in the world!" Aruna Akundi, age 8, revealed the most impressive thing she learned was "that we have another body of light inside us." A second question asked was, "Give an example of how what you have learned has made you a religious person during the week, between classes." Rajani Nair, age 9, answered that she learned to pray to God every night so as not to have any bad dreams. Pramod Vijayagopal, age 9, answered that he learned the importance of doing his homework and practicing Sanskrit slokas.

One of the greatest challenges to the temple project is finance. New Orleans is not a large Hindu settlement and "financial support is irregular," explains Trustee Dr. Vijayagopal. "We have cultural programs which raise some funds, but we need greater and broader support from all the families who live here. If each of them contributed even a small share we could have the temple built right away. But then it is not an easy thing to interest everyone in the essential need for a temple."

For this young generation, obviously time if of the essence. Those who were 6 and 7 four years ago are 10 and 11 today. "There is much at stake," readily admits Dr. Vijayagopal. But if religious efforts persist with past vigor, American values will face stiff Hindu-value competition for New Orleans children.

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