Whatever Happened to Guru Maharaj Ji? Once Heralded as the Avatar of the Age, the Leader of the Divine Light Mission is Hard to Find These Days
Category : October 1983
Published by Anonymous on Oct. 01, 1983

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In 1971, a 13-year old north Indian boy stepped off a plane in New York to be greeted by hundreds who had come to see the one acclaimed by many as the avatar of the age. Handbills had been circulated announcing "The Lord Has Come," and even Newsweek magazine had picked up on the story.

The young Vaishnava guru's mission: to bring his "Knowledge" to the West, was well underway. He was assisted by two American businessmen who had met him in India urged him to bring his teachings to the U.S. and provided him financial support and a solid public relations base.

By the following summer, Maharaj Ji was so well known that his Guru Puja in Colorado was attended by 2,000 premies (lovers of God). By the summer of 1973, his Divine Light Mission claimed 40,000 premies in the U.S. alone, and thousands more near 480 centers in 38 countries. The 15-year old spiritual leader was the most talked about star on the metaphysical horizon at a time when the "new-age" spiritual groups were most prolific. A heady atmosphere of confidence filled the 30 ashrams coast to coast as plans were announced that a forthcoming festival, "Millenium '73" would bring together perhaps 100,000 of the faithful for a three-day meeting with their Guru in the mammoth Houston Astrodome. It was touted as "the most significant event in the history of mankind."

But in 1983 where is Guru Maharaj Ji and his Divine Light Mission? Oddly enough, the DLM-related business could not be located via normal channels in the U.S. Less than 8 years after the young Sat Guru and his DLM were national news, not one ashram, printing house, or DLM-related business could be traced in the listings of the major cities of the country. The Spiritual Community Guide, perhaps the most

comprehensive listing in the nation, had no information on the subject. Intrigued, "The New Saivite World" phoned Carroll Stoner, co-author of All God's Children and Features Editor of the Chicago Sun Times, who put us in touch will a group who led us to former premies who, in turn, gave us the phone number of a veteran premie in Florida. From him we learned that the DLM actually is no longer known by that name, nor is it any longer functioning publicly. Assurance was given that it is alive and well in America, nonetheless. What brought about the radical change? And where is Guru Maharaj Ji today? And what effect is he having, on Hinduism in particular? The search for the answers led us from the Florida premie to an attorney in Florida who responds to literature requests with a beautiful brochure and letter, then to more premies and a few ex-premies who rounded out the picture by their stories. The picture that unfolded from a dozen interviews portrayed drastic, across-the- board restructuring changes within the DLM since the mid-70's and a low, even mysteriously vague, now-you-see-it-now-you-don't American profile.

Guru Maharaj Ji brought to this country an impressive spiritual reputation already well-established in India. At the age of 6, he gave his first lecture in English at his father's ashram. At 8 upon his father's death, he inherited the mantle of the 6-million strong DLM in India established by his father some 40 years before. At 13, he dropped out of school and announced he was taking the "knowledge" he possessed to the West. Arriving in London en route to New York, Maharaj Ji stated publicly, "Your mind is the computer that has gone wrong. Give it to me. I have the universal screwdriver. It will fit any man."

Accompanied by his mother, Mataji, and his three older brothers, the teen-age Maharaj Ji flashed brightly into the national consciousness. Incorporated in Colorado as a tax-exempt church, the Divine Light Mission grew quickly into a multi-million dollar-a-year enterprise, Between January and June of 1973, its business concerns ballooned 800%. Income rolled in from premies renouncing all personal assets and paychecks, gifts, real estate, printing businesses, construction companies, film studios, restaurants and even a rock band. The sky seemed no limit as initiations into the "Knowledge" were being conducted by the Mahatmas (initiators-a name later dropped) by the dozens and hundreds coast to coast. Six hundred full- time, live-in renunciates received regular directives via telex on line to computers at the multi-storied DLM headquarters in Denver. The young holy man owned a green Rolls Royce, a Mercedes 600, a Lotus sportscar, several motorcycles, homes in London, New York, Denver and the palatial Anacapa View Estate (complete with tennis courts and swimming pool) overlooking the sea on 4 acres in Malibu, California.

However, certain internal and external forces coalesced with the 'Millenium '73' festival and set changes in motion that would make these highly visible DLM enterprises either non-existent or renamed and untraceable before the end of the 70's.

Expectations for the festival ended in a disappointing attendance that fell below 20,000. The audience was dwarfed by the huge Houston Astrodome where 90,000 Lutherans had convened the month before. The press corps went away feeling they had not been allowed a significant interview. Christian groups approached arriving cars to urge the passengers not to participated, and the Hare Krishnas chanted so loudly in the parking lot they had to be arrested. And the festival left a debt of $650,000. A growing negative mood in the U.S. toward new religious movements of this kind was directed, perhaps unjustly, to Maharaj Ji's work, leading his Executive Secretary, Joe Anctil, to announce that the DLM was "dropping its Hindu trappings and changing its public image." Ashrams were either eliminated or put on a local basis, economic strictures enforced and a title introduced. Then, early in 1974, Guru Maharaj Ji married his American secretary, Marolyn Johnson. That proved another turning point

The youthful teacher's strong mother and mentor objected to this marriage (holding that her son had broken one of his spiritual disciplines - celibacy). a split in the family widened, leading to her departure for India with two other sons. Where she installed her eldest as head of the DLM in place of her youngest. Maharaj Ji went to India and settled the matter in court, receiving court-decreed DLM sovereignty over most of the world except for India, where his brother would be recognized as head of the movement. What is more, 50% of the U.S. premie population dropped out because of the marriage.

All of which is rather old history today, but it explains why the once mushrooming DLM has become a quiet but still vibrant movement literally without a name in this country. Initiators carry on their work coast to coast, bringing persons of all ages and walks of life into the "Knowledge" wherever the call takes them. And Maharaj Ji? The Sat Guru continues to energetically serve his followers. Flying to major cities around the world almost continually in his private jet, this dynamic wielder Vishnu's discus, dressed in a Western business suit that belies his Eastern background, has taken his message to more than 50 countries, giving sermons to groups ranging form 1,000 to 10,000. In the past two years alone, he has given over 100 programs in 37 cities throughout the world including New York, London, Paris, Kuala Lumpur, Rome, Delhi, Sydney, Tokyo, Caracas and Los Angeles.

Guru Maharj Ji's message has, from the beginning, been supremely simple, and some say simplistic. No ritual or theology adorns it. "I am simply offering an experience of life. God is in you. You can experience the Knowledge of God, you can enjoy it. It's a practical thing. Incredible. Life. And there's an experience to it. There is love of the Creator to enjoy." There is God's magnificence to enjoy." To qualify for receiving the "Knowledge" initiation, one need only be sincere, be truly thirsty for God and not just experimenting. With the meditation techniques the devotee also enters into a strong but distant relationship with the Sat Guru, the essential ingredient to make the whole process successful. Maharaj Ji asks for no fee for the initiation. Inevitably, grateful devotees become deeply involved in creating an organization at their local level to spread the news, frequently bringing in friends and family members and even leaving school and career in his service.

In Malaysia, for example, in just the past two years it is said that approximately 10,000 have received "Knowledge," and presently the ashrams there are busy with regular evening satsangs in which spontaneous testimonials fill the hours, inspiring new comers and veterans alike. Active DLM missionaries are attracting country folk, mostly Hindus from plantations, for lectures and initiations by the hundreds. Premies are noted for giving up negative habits and becoming vegetarian, non-smoking and non-drinking. Their sincerity impresses all who meet them. And the editor of the Fiji Sun, Hari Gaunder, informs us that the following of Maharaj Ji there is around 1,000, mostly from the Gujarati business class.

Yet those who have benefitted from the Knowledge speak glowingly about it: "It's given me an inner contentment, a joy and peace that I could not find anywhere." N.M., San Francisco. "What I have learned from Maharaj Ji allows me to relax and be grateful for what I have." C.B., Los Angeles. "I was always running after time and ever lacking a lot of it, for all I had or wanted to do. Now, I just take it, and sail gracefully through anything, be it turmoil or silence." A.G., Paris.

Not all who have been involved in the DLM are so positive. David, an ex-premie, points out that for a certain type of individual the Mission experience is a haven, one that can straighten them out from dependency on drugs or such negative habits and give them a positive view of life with an uplifting purpose to which to dedicate themselves, namely, helping the world receive a spiritual message. But he appends a reservation: "Even though it is good to get off drugs, exchanging drug addiction for addiction to the Perfect Master may not be, in the long run, good for their spiritual welfare."

Guru Maharaj Ji, 25 and the father of four, shows no signs of slowing his global juggernaut. With his family usually on board joined by a large staff for cooking, filming, controlling crowds and making arrangements, he touches down wherever the spiritually thirsty congregate and offers them his teachings, his inheritance from his successful father, Shri Hans Maharaj Ji, for 40 years guru to millions in northern India. The quasi-Vaishnava theme Maharaj Ji carries forward places much emphasis on seeing the Guru as God incarnate, the avatar of the age, as his father taught before him and carefully set down in his book, Hans Yog Prakash.

Eagerly awaiting their Sat Guru's visits are the likes of Bob Palding of Miami and Mac Jones of Honolulu, two 11-year veterans of "Knowledge." Let their words close our update of Sat Guru Maharaj Ji, Perfect Master to millions around the world: "The Guru is the most important thing in life really. He inspires me not to get off into my little troubles-not to settle for second best." "I was in a dungeon for years. Guru Maharaj Ji set me free and didn't ask for anything. My life is his. I am grateful. He saved my life."

While drawing heavily on his Vaishnava back ground, Maharaj Ji does not hesitate to denounce temple worship and other forms of orthodox Hindu practice as unnecessary superstition. And now with so much of his energy used to proselytize among Hindu people, Maharaji is a powerful threat to tradition. For that reason, orthodox Hindus decry his I-am-the-God-you- seek and instant-enlightenment-without-discipline or-purification approach as non traditional, misinformed and even outright deceptive. To add to the problem, many uneducated Hindus imbued with ideas of ecumenism and religious harmony readily absorb his unorthodox teachings and become confused about their traditional religion. Prominent Saivites in Malaysia and Vaishnavites in Fiji have expressed deep concern over his influence in their countries. One Hindu leader in Kuala Lumpur states, "It is a pity that 90% of the followers are Hindus who have fallen prey to this movement. Many families have been separated due to various brain washings in the center. They feel everything will come by if we only serve God - that is not, to work, not to educate the children...They propagate not to go to the temple, because God does not live there. 'The deities are just stone statues without any meaning.' They also discourage the use of vibhuti and kumkum." Saivite who accept Guru Maharaj Ji are unwittingly swerving form the Saiva Neri and slowly, almost imperceptably, entering onto an unorthodox pseudo-Vaishnavite path - a happening viewed with genuine concern by Saivite leaders and swamis.

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