Spiritual Festival Highlights Hinduism, Unites U.K.'s Religions
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It was a grand katha in Roundwood Park, a leafy London suburb, and a twenty-year dream come true for Manubhai Madhvani. For nine days, from July 30 to August 7, fourteen religious leaders and 150,000 people gathered to experience samabhav, a feeling of oneness. This was the first time leaders of the major religions in the U.K. have come together to pray, preach, find points of agreement and search for solutions to the dire religious conflicts around the world.

This Festival of Spiritual Unity, brain-child of Mr. Madhvani, was an attempt to promote and encourage unity among the followers of the world's faiths and to increase awareness in the U.K. of Hindu cultural traditions. The core event was the katha, a recital and exposition of the epic Ramcharitmanas by the highly respected Indian scholar and narrator, Morari Bapu.

Each day the audience witnessed spiritual discourses by two of the attending religious leaders, followed by the saga of Rama as told by Sri Morari Bapu. Live coverage on Satellite TV was seen by more than 200,000 throughout Europe. Thousands of viewers who recorded these programs are now passing video tapes to devotional hands around the world.

Impressive Accomplishments

A major achievement of the festival was the free medical check-ups for thousands of visitors, notably the elderly. Under the leadership of Dr. S.K. Upadhyaya, a team of twenty medical practitioners, focusing on preventive medicine, performed valuable medical screenings. Free lunch was served daily. It is estimated that over 360,000 chapatis were consumed as part of the vegetarian meals served by the Swaminarayan Hindu Mission.

A valuable resource was created in the Festival's souvenir. It is a beautifully printed, 96-page, softcover book containing articles in English, Gujarati and Hindi by internationally respected authors exploring different aspects of world religion, especially Hinduism, and elements of India's rich culture. It includes a brief bio-data and message from the attending spiritual leaders and some leaders who could not attend. Plus, it features a 16-page center section which was revamped and reprinted with permission from some of Hinduism Today's colorful and educational poster pages. It includes: Truth is One, Paths are Many, Hinduism from A to Z, Sacred Symbols and more. This souvenir book, by itself, is something the organizers can be proud of.

However, while we may look to these tangibles to judge the festival's success, Manubhai knows the real value of such a gathering lies beyond what can be picked up and measured. He confides, "In spite of an increasing level of material well-being in the world, I have noticed a growing spiritual poverty, a yearning for spiritual food and a genuine path that would enable us to lift our minds and thoughts beyond our basic and personal needs, to God, our fellow human beings and our spiritual destiny. A conviction has been steadily growing in me that we need greater spiritual unity among the various Hindu schools and among the major religions of the world." He worked more than three-years and personally spent over $300,000 to manifest his dream.

Manubhai specifically targeted the U.K. youth, "I strongly feel that we must develop our younger generation to take an active part in spiritual and religious activities. The future is in their hands. The only way we can do this is by involving and challenging them by our personal example and by presenting to them our scriptures in a logical and attractive manner." Evening workshops and special seminars with prominent speakers were aimed specifically at the youth, and they were well received. Teenager Sheena Verma commented on Sri Morari Bapu's presence, "We like his interesting way of speaking. He is always cracking jokes and making us laugh." While 20-year-old Ketan Gadhia reflected on the more serious message, "The main appeal of this festival was that leaders of different religions were exploring and emphasizing common goals, rather than differences."

Overall, the festival was a heroic success. Manubhai was not shy to state, "The success of this festival has been the coordination between individual organizations and hundreds of volunteers who worked selflessly. The true test was cleaning the toilets everyday. This work was done by the volunteers with a sense of pride and not obligation." Kusum Gheewala, wife of Bharat Gheewala, the franchise holder of the U.K. edition of Hinduism Today, reported, "The festival was a very well-organized event and the response from the public was tremendous. It was a picnic for nine days for 10,000 people. The atmosphere was full of joy and happiness-a mela. Going behind the scenes, we could see the dancing of Siva." Such have been the reactions to this unique, spiritual event.

A Beginning in Oppression

Manubhai Madhvani, born in Jinja, Uganda, in 1930, took the reins of his family business in 1971, after the untimely death of his elder brother, Jayantbhai. The business, established by his father, Muljibhai, is a successful industrial and trading enterprise known as the Madhvani Group of Companies. But, as no one could have expected, Manubhai's fate was to lead him elsewhere. "In 1972, I was imprisoned by Idi Amin for being a brown Asian businessman in Uganda. I worried a lot for my fellow beings whose lives and existence were threatened by the Amin forces. In the jail, my only prayer was that our community should not be annihilated by Idi Amin. I realized that my fellow prisoners were praying for the same goal. We realized that though our ways of praying were different, our goals were the same." This experience-the initial impetus for this festival-was to have a profoundly spiritual influence on Manubhai, on his attitude to life and his relationship with God. On his release, he left for the U.K. "It took me more than twenty years to create this festival of spirituality in which these common points were explored in the presence of thousands of believers." Executed flawlessly, it is a tribute to Manubhai's dream.