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Out on a windswept rock in the Indian Ocean near Kanya Kumari at the tip of India stands the majestic memorial to Swami Vivekananda, the foremost guardian of Hindu culture. This massive marble monument was erected in 1970, not through a government decree or public funds, but by the heartfelt emotions of the common people who contributed the money, rupee by rupee. Eknath Ranade, who was the moving force behind this monument, at that time pondered on how fitting it would be to also create, besides the tribute of stone, a living memorial to Swami Vivekananda's ideals. Vivekananda Kendra, which started out as an idea 20 years ago, today has 100 branch centers throughout India.

Serve Man, Serve God

Says Dr. M. Lakshmi Kumari, dynamic president of the organization: "Our main theme is 'Man making, nation building.' Let us build the character of the man and thus build up our nation. Not starting from the top to the bottom, but from the bottom to the top. One thing which I have felt during my association with the Kendra and my interactions with the youth is that Hinduism must again become a living thing. We are preaching so much and living very little. This transformation of truth into life, that is dharma. And that is a super-fine technology in which India has a lot of expertise."

Swami Vivekananda believed in "Serve man, serve God," and the Kendra carries out his credo that "service to humanity is true worship of divinity." To fulfill

this goal, the Kendra has a variety of programs. Some are for the purpose of propagating yoga; others use education to develop the personality. There are rural development programs to channel the energies of the people toward national reconstruction, and natural resource development programs to convey ecological technologies to rural areas.

To strengthen the fibre of the younger generation the Kendra has initiated the Clean India for Cleaner Life project during the Vivekananda Decade which runs from 1993 to 2002 to commemorate Swami Vivekananda's historic address at the Chicago Parliament of Religions in 1893. Says Lakshmi Kumari: "From 1993 to 2002 we have declared it the Vivekananda Decade. Our slogan is 'Be an Indian, be a proud Indian.' We have taken cleaning up in a very serious way. We hope to transform Kanya Kumari into the most beautiful and cleanest town in the country and that will be the beginning. In all of our 100 centers we will be insisting on cleanliness for our youth. Cleanliness, physically in your environment and mentally in your life."

Among the programs of the Vivekananda Decade is the Rock Memorial truck [see photo above] which was taken all over India in 1993 to commemorate Vivekananda's appearance at the 1893 Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Despite many difficulties, the Kendra's message was preached to millions of people as part of this program.

The Kendra's objective is to awaken Vivekananda's moral fire in ordinary people. Lakshmi Kumari explains the concept behind a program called Deepa Puja [see photo above]: "Through this beautiful program we link the religious impulse with social service. Every woman, whether poor or middle class, puts away one handful of rice chanting a universal prayer for the work of the Kendra. So we collect every month a thousand kilograms of rice, by which every grain is impregnated with a prayer. And this rice we pump into our welfare nutrition programs so thousands of women are involved in our social activities."

Education research for students includes development of the physical, mental, emotional, intellectual and spiritual personality. The Kendra also tries to awaken the civic sense, patriotism and spirituality of the younger generation. Lakshmi Kumari told Hinduism Today, "For the past 20 years we have been interacting with youth in a tremendous way. Thousands of youth have already come into our fold, and it is by making use of them that we are doing all of our service activities."

Two years ago the Kendra held its first International Conference. As a result, the Karnataka state government introduced yoga in all schools in the state on a compulsory basis and entrusted the Kendra with shaping the curriculum. The Sri Lankan government has also introduced yoga in the fields of education and therapy, and sends its medical and educational personnel to be trained at the Kendra. Last December the second International Conference on "Frontiers of Yoga and Its Applications" was held with several distinguished participants.

Appropriate Technology

Another aspect of the Kendra's work is revitalizing the villages by giving them appropriate technology such as solar energy and biogas. According to Lakshmi Kumari: "Our uniqueness is that we involve the people. Near Kanya Kumari we have a village where all 79 houses have a biogas plant. We have a community center where there is a radio or television working on solar energy, and we also provide them with solar cookers, heaters, etc. The village has come to be called Energy Village."

The Kendra runs an impressive number of social welfare projects. There are 90 balwadis or creches with 2,300 children supervised by trained teachers. Medical centers located in 26 places cater to 100 surrounding villages and provided treatment to 85,000 patients during 1991-92. Eye camps were held at 174 places for 30,000 people; the Bala Samskara Vargas were held in 400 locations for 12,000 children; youth camps, lectures and competitions on character-building themes are also integral parts of the programming. All these activities make the Kendra a vital part of village life.

According to N.V. Raghu Rao, "The Kendra is actively involved in several social developmental activities based on the ideas and values taught by Sanatana Dharma. These include education for the tribal children of Assam, Arunachala Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur and Andaman and Nicobar Islands; rural development projects in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Bharat, etc."

Funds for these innovative programs are raised from the nominal fee charged the millions of people who visit the Vivekananda Rock Memorial every year. Money is also raised from individual donations as well as government grants.

The Programs of VK Yogas

Yoga is much more than physical yoga asanas or meditation, and the Kendra aims to present it as a science of holistic living. The Vivekananda Kendra Yoga Anussandhana Samsthan (Research Foundation), or VK Yogas, is housed in Prashanti Kuteeram at Giddenhalli, 32 kilometers from Bangalore City. It looks to the education of the complete person, offering courses such as Yoga Therapy Treatment, personality development, promotion of positive health complete with a postgraduate diploma for doctors.

The therapeutic research includes work on ailments such as bronchial asthma, diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, cancer and paralysis. They have also developed an integrated yoga therapy to counter psychosomatic ailments and psychiatric problems.

Thousands of people visit Vivekananda's memorial in Kanya Kumari every day, to pay their respects to a great soul whose ideals embody the best of India. What is remarkable about the Vivekananda Kendra is that in a time when drugs and delinquency are becoming increasingly common, and the onslaught of Westernization is endangering the younger generation, it nurtures and amplifies Swami Vivekananda's message of pride in culture and country to a whole new generation in a way that is personal, that reaches out and captures the youth.

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