

[Wow! One Million Join Vedic Rites](#)

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Gayatri Parivar's Goals Are as Prodigious as their Pujas: Spiritual Empowerment, National Prosperity

Rajiv Malik, New Delhi

A million people thronged the small city of Chitrakoot in Madhya Pradesh State for a grand modern-day ashwamedha yajna organized by Gayatri Parivar. Held April 16th to 20th, it was the sixteenth in a series of yajnas begun in 1991 in what has become one of the most successful Hindu religious programs India has seen. Reliable reports put attendance past the million mark for their recent yajnas at Patna and Kurukshetra. In ancient days the ashwamedha yagna, or horse sacrifice-described at length in the Yajur Veda-was performed by the king for the welfare of the nation. This modern version has a similar purpose, but a statue is used in place of a real horse and, instead of being done by hundreds (or thousands!) of brahmin priests, it is performed by all devotees. Indeed, the Parivar's genius has been to generate nearly total community involvement.

The earth and water to make bricks for the yajna's 1,008 fire altars at Chitrakoot were collected from over 15,000 villages in Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, drawing participants from Hindu temples, Christian churches, Muslim mosques and Sikh gurdwaras. Dr. Pranav Pandya, son-in-law of Parivar founder Sriram Sharma, explained the concept to Hinduism Today: "Our workers went to each and every village of the neighboring areas. The villagers became highly emotional about the ashwamedha yajna, as their own earth and water are being used for this holy event. There is no better way than this to involve people in this noble cause. The response and participation of the people of this area is total. We expect it will touch the one million mark by the event's end."

The Parivar's program is by far the largest manifestation of a worldwide Hindu

trend-the popularization in simplified form of the ancient Vedic fire rituals. The trend was started in the 19th century by Swami Dayananda Saraswati of the Arya Samaj, but has picked up momentum in the last decade. Dozens of swamis and organizations arrange yajnas every year, often with thousands of participants. Homas are popular today in Russia, Europe, America-indeed, everywhere where Hindus live and worship.

Chitrakoot is a holy place where Lord Rama spent eleven of his fourteen years in exile. When I arrived, this otherwise sleepy town with a population of about ten thousand was overflowing with people. Thousands of Gayatri Parivar volunteers dressed in lemon yellow could be seen efficiently and devotedly managing affairs. Fourteen mini-cities were created to provide accommodations. A dozen community kitchens were set up. Police and paramilitary forces maintained law and order.

The often hectic activity centered around two main tented sites: the yagashala with the 1,008 fire altars; and the sanskarshala for weddings and initiations. Each of the five days well over 100,000 participated in the fire worship, while several thousand had ceremonies at the sanskarshala.

Traditional Himalayan herbs were used along with truckloads of wood in 1,008 altars of different shapes and sizes created for the occasion. Chanting of mantras strictly followed Vedic rules. Only those who were wearing traditional Indian dress-dhoti kurta-were allowed to participate in the yajna. Many had to buy these from the huge temporary marketplace. Hundreds of stalls all along the paths and roads leading to Ashwamedha Nagar (as the venue was named) sold items ranging from dhoti kurtas to food and refreshments.

Dr. Pandya informed Hinduism Today that Gayatri Parivar plans to have 108 ashwamedha yajnas all over the world by 2011. Out of these, 24 will be held abroad (one is planned for Chicago in July). He explains the yajnas as a spiritual experiment which stimulates collective consciousness, scientifically propagates Indian culture and spirituality, makes the whole ecosystem well balanced and pollution-free, awakens inner spiritual force, teaches the divine heritage of India, promotes vegetarianism, makes society addiction-free, propagates the congeniality and harmony between all religions and sects, promotes universal peace and cultural harmony and makes religion more rational and approachable for the youth. No one can accuse them of having modest goals.

Three people are responsible for this successful program: Ma Bhagwati Devi (Sriram Sharma's wife and spiritual leader of Gayatri Parivar); Dr. Pranav Pandya and his wife Shail Pandya ("Shail Didi" for members of Gayatri Parivar). They spoke for over two hours every evening to a captivated audience of over 100,000 at Chitrakoot. Dr. Pandya focused on the ideology of the movement, while Mata Ji and Shail Didi dealt at great length with issues that confront an ordinary woman of the village—a concern which undoubtedly contributes greatly to the Parivar's success. In between the speeches, devotional songs are sung by highly trained singers. Overall, the event was conducted by the highest professional standards.

Deep yajna (festival of lights) is another attraction. The volunteers lit the 51,000 oil lamps lined up on rows of tables and also on the floor, facing the dais, creating a celestial sight [photo inset page one]. The popular kalash shobha yatra, during which several thousand women dressed in yellow carried yellow earthen pots of water in procession, was performed on the first day of the yajna [photo page one].

At Chitrakoot, thousands could receive any of the sixteen traditional Vedic rituals free of cost. The sacred thread ceremony and marriage were most popular. Thousands received the Gayatri mantra initiation at the thread ceremony, and over one hundred couples of all castes tied the knot in a mass marriage.

Dr. Pandya met the Parivar founder through his father, a former high court judge who was influenced tremendously by the teachings of Sri Ram Sharma. "I came in touch with Gurudev in the year 1963 at the tender age of 13," Dr. Pandya explained. "A little after this, I became his disciple and took diksha. Later on I got married to his daughter Shail. I had done my MD and was also winner of a gold medal. I was all set to go to the USA to practice medicine. However, it was at this stage that I was persuaded by Gurudev to take an active part in the Gayatri Parivar movement and drop the idea of going to the States." His admirable success with the Parivar shows what is possible by those who fight the "brain drain" and dedicate themselves to the upliftment of India.

Says Dr. Pandya, "Gurudev believed in equality of all human beings, irrespective of class, creed or sex. It was he who began by freeing the worship of Goddess Gayatri (Deity of knowledge) and the Gayatri mantra from the clutches of brahmins and made it available to common people, including women. Gurudev believed that nobody was born brahmin. It is one's actions which determines

whether he is a brahmin or not."

Mr. Shanti Bhai Patel, a law graduate and a full-time worker of Gayatri Parivar says, "What we are aiming at is awakening of masses. Every time one participates in a yajna, he has to drop one bad habit and substitute it with one good habit. Our Gurudev believed that if you want to bring revolution in this world, change the thoughts of people. That is exactly what we are attempting to do through these mega-cultural events."

According to Dr. Pandya, Gurudev transferred his powers to Ma Bhagwati Devi back in 1971, and since then she has taken an active part in the implementation of the various programs initiated by Sri Ram Sharma. Says Dr. Pandya, "Under Mata Ji's guidance the mission is taking rapid strides. If, on an average, one million people attend each of the 74 yajnas that we intend to organize by the year 2001, Gayatri Parivar will have 74 million more people around the world coming to its fold."

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Interview with Mata Ji

Despite her very busy schedule, Mataji granted a brief interview to Hinduism Today at Shantikunj, Haridwar. When asked how Gayatri Parivar was able to attract millions of people to participate in Ashwamedha Yajnas, she had this to say, "All Gayatri Parivar members are my sons and daughters. I give them a lot of love and in turn I get their devotion. Gurudev's disciples have lot of regard for me. And it is quite natural to get this kind of regard from them because Gurudev and myself were not just life partners, we were in fact two bodies and one soul. He gave me all his powers, but I am not one of those who will show them off by doing miracles. My aim is to get the work done which was left unfinished by him. However, I can always feel his presence, and his guidance is always available to me through his spirit. The mission is able to make phenomenal progress because of his help and guidance only."

Mataji added, "We are not affiliated with any political party. In fact, we have nothing to do with politics. However, we invite leaders of all political parties to come and participate in our programs. But when they use our platform, I clearly tell them

that our platform should not be misused for political purposes."

Mata Ji said that Gayatri Parivar was the only institution which invites Muslims to come and participate in yajnas. "Whether it is a Hindu, a Muslim, a Sikh or a Christian, to me they are all my children," said Mataji, who believes all human beings should be treated equally.

Personal Accounts

Dina Trevedi: "I have seen and experienced all the comforts and luxuries that money can buy, but all that does not attract me. I always wanted to do something for society, and the mission gives me that opportunity. I became a full-time worker in 1987 at the age of 24."

Sangita Gupta: "Yajna and mantras enable you to lead a life free from mental diseases. Yajna develops compassion in one towards other human beings and also uplifts one spiritually."

K.S. Tyagi: "The training being given to government servants at Shantikunj will definitely show results in the long run. They are being given lessons on morality and spirituality. These people when they go back to their places of work will work honestly and dedicatedly and will set an example by their upright behavior which others around them will follow in due course."

Jai Pakash Kaushik: "A big change in my life and the life of my wife and children came after we became a part of Gayatri Parivar. My son who used to get up at 8:00am every morning now gets up at 4:00am and recites Gayatri mantra. Our entire family participated in ashwamedha yajna at Kurukshetra and for all of us it was a great spiritual experience."

Dr. K.S. Aggarwal: "Yajnas are contributing in a very big way to the welfare of humanity. Participating in yajnas and reciting Gayatri mantra, if done with devotion and sincerity, can greatly improve the well being of a person."

Y.R. Deshmukh: "Gayatri Parivar has done a good job by organizing this yajna at Chitrakoot. What has impressed me most is the way the relationship between dharma and science is explained to a common man. Also the dowry-less marriages are to be appreciated."

Ramdas Soni: "Attending ashwamedha yajna has been a great experience for me. I feel that my soul will now get liberated after my death, because I have participated in such a big spiritual event."

Durga Prasad Pandey and Savita Pandey: (One of over 100 couples who went through the dowry-less marriage ceremony at the sanskarshala at Chitrakoot.) Savita, a postgraduate in political science, said, "Ostentatious marriages make society poor and dishonest, and therefore Gurudev advocated dowry-less marriages. I am very happy to marry the man of my choice in a ceremony where my parents have had to spend nothing." Durga observed, "I and my wife are well educated and belong to cultured families. I am quite confident that our marriage will be a success as we will adjust to each other very well."

How They Saved \$645 Million

A few critics are unhappy with the huge expenditure involved in organizing the Gayatri Parivar ashwamedha yajnas. Since convincing them of the spiritual benefits of the events seemed unlikely, Hinduism Today asked Gayatri Parivar's main organizer, Dr. Pandya, how he responds. He has a ready and convincing answer: "An ordinary marriage today in India costs over US\$6,450. For your information, as part of these yajnas we have performed over 100,000 marriages so far, on which no money has been spent. Please calculate the amount of money the nation has saved on this one account only." We did: It's \$645 million!

Dr. Pranav Pandya, son-in-law of GP founder Sri Ram Sharma, renounced a lucrative medical career for a spiritual life promoting the Gayatri Parivar.