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Government Claims Corruption in Yoga School At Ancient Monastery Site and Threatens Takeover; Ashram Fights Back

There is a strong lobby in the Union Territory Government, Pondicherry, South India, threatening the very existence of the Ananda Ashram founded at the ancient Kambliswami Mutt. In an early-April Assembly, members cutting across party affiliations "lambasted the government for not having taken any steps to put an end to the 'scandalous' state of affairs prevailing at the Sri Kambliswami Mutt here," according to a brief article in the Express News Service, April 11. This is actually a renewal of a previous campaign to investigate and possibly takeover the ashram. That effort peaked in 1983, but fizzled out with no action being taken after one judge appointed to investigate resigned after two years, with nothing conclusive against the ashram; a second judge (R. Harihar Iyer) suddenly died of cancer.

The spiritual head of the Ashram, Dr. Swami Gitananda, and his wife Srimati Meenakshi Devi, have been outspoken against government interference in Hindu religious institutions in general for several years. They fought hard in 1983-84 against the threatened takeover of Ananda, calling on devotees, students and friends to write to the "fact-finding committee" and various government leaders to protest the investigation and endorse the Ashram's good work. They also filed their own case against the government of Pondicherry asking it to show cause for interfering with private religious property.

Charges raised against the Ashram itself, leveled by V. Pethaperumal (Janata party), were unspecific, amounting to little more than name-calling. Tabling a call-attention motion, he alleged that "The mutt, run by a Canadian national...had become a den of anti-social activities and sex scandals." He complained that no action had been taken against Swami Gitananda despite a promise by the Chief Minister during the last budget session. Those chiming in were Mr. K. Swaminathan (Cong-I), who demanded immediate takeover of the mutt by the Government, Mr.

S. Ramasamy, V. Balaji (Cong-I) and Mr. P.K. Lokanathan (AIADMK). Mr. Ramasamy "pleaded for immediate action not only to protect the property of the mutt but also to ensure that the religious sentiments of the people were not hurt."

Personal epithets against Swami Gitananda and references to his difficulties with visas and Ayurveda licensing 10 to 15 years ago revealed an acid disdain for the spiritual head among some of the ministers. Hinduism Today, whose editors visited the ashram personally in 1983 and were impressed by how well it was run, contacted Ananda Ashram for a response to the present sally. Meenakshi Devi, co-director of the Ashram, chose not to confront the accusations but to decry them as part of a broad effort undermining all of Hinduism: "During our absence, long-standing enemies managed to stir up the members of the Legislative Assembly...Our problem is pure and simple. We are caught in the historic time of social change in India. Hinduism is dying, rather, being killed by the politicians and the complete rape of the ancient culture by the most gross form of vulgar society...The politicians found they could take over Hindu temples without suffering any consequences. The Hindus are just too passive to care much what happens outside their own immediate lives...Hence for the last 50 years all Hindu temples have come under government control. As you know, most are in complete disrepair, decay, and all vestige of sanctity is gone. The pujas are not done properly, no one cares for the gods, etc. The land which belonged to the temple has been sold or leased off and even the wealthy temples have no income. Hinduism in India is dying, if not already dead. The common people do not even know who Lord Ram is-except that he is a Hindi-speaking North Indian, or maybe the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. Krishna is a cinema actor. Lord Shiva is a myth. The subtleties of the religion are, of course, far beyond them. No one celebrates religious festivals anymore. They go to the cinema and get drunk, even the women. The old codes of behavior are completely broken, and the society is in real chaos."

Meenakshi Devi continues: "In the last three years, the politicians have been trying to also bring the madams (monasteries) of the south under government control. Many madams have come under the government. There is a bill now proposed that no Swami can name his successor. His successor must be approved by the government. Yet the government does not touch Christian or Muslim religious places for fear of worldwide outrage. Our own situation falls into this historic-sociological context. Seeing the looting all around, our own Pondicherry politicians have decided to claim the hope lands of the madam for themselves...Our opponents are also engaging in character assassination to help their cause. The utter lack of regard for truth and fair play is unbelievable. They are buying journalists, printing anything, saying anything. Legally there is nothing they can do. But they can destroy our reputation and turn the local people against us. This is

their present attack."

Ananda Ashram is a shaded sanctuary in the town of Pondicherry. Of course, that's where one would expect to find a yoga school, but they're actually much more common in America, Europe, Australia, and elsewhere. Many Westerners come there to study and experience India, Hinduism and yoga. Meenakshi Devi is American, Gitananda is half Indian and half eastern European stock. The place, a garden oasis, is conspicuously well kept, and audacious in its insistence on independence from government interference. These are undoubtedly factors in the present verbal attack. There is also the matter of the large statue in the courtyard of Siva and Shakti in conjugal pose inverted, which never fails to raise eyebrows. In addition, Swami Gitananda has often had to defend the propriety of being married and calling himself a swami. Adding the fact that the ashram is overlaid on the ancient Kambliswami Mutt, an ancient monastery based on more conservative footings, gives insight into the forces at work.

But there is no disputing the good work of the center. Its dedicated teachers offer systematic, detailed yoga training to all comers, regardless of caste, along with personal instruction in various cultural arts, music and dance. The staff conducts retreats/seminars for groups from Europe and the U.S. and produces some of the most accomplished hatha yogis in India. Young people are the focus of the ashram, preserving what is termed the "yogic culture," though Ananda is also not shy about admitting that this IS Hinduism they are preaching.