Dada J. P. Vaswani
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HINDU RENAISSANCE AWARD

Dada J. P. Vaswani

Beloved Sindhi religious leader, 84, is honored as Hindu of the Year

LAVINA MELWANI, NEW YORK

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If anyone has a blueprint for a better world, it is Dada J.P. Vaswani, the gentle and unassuming spiritual head of the Pune-based Sadhu Vaswani Mission. Hinduism Today is proud to honor him with the Hindu Renaissance Award as Hindu of the Year, 2002. His life is a synonym for peace, grace and compassion, and it is these qualities that he passes through word and action to thousands of people in countries as far apart as India, the US, England, Hong Kong and Australia.

Starting in 1990, Hinduism Today has honored one eminent Hindu each year who has most impacted the faith and spread its values, compassion and profundity across the globe. Past renaissance winners are: Swami Paramananda Bharati ('90), Swami Chidananda Saraswati, "Muniji" of Parmath Niketan ('91), Swami Chinmayananda ('92), Mata Amritanandamayi Ma ('93), Swami Satchidananda ('94), Pramukhswami Maharaj ('95), Sri Satya Sai Baba ('96), Sri Chinmoy ('97), Swami Bua ('98), Swami Chidananda Saraswati of Divine Life Society

('99), Ma Yoga Shakti ('00) and priest Sri T. S. Sambamurthy Sivachariar ('01).

Dada Vaswami's life is a life well lived, proof that even one person can make a difference in changing mindsets and changing the world. Born in 1918 in Hyderabad, he was drawn to the teachings of his uncle and mentor, the great spiritual leader Sadhu Vaswani. As a child, he remembers his uncle's allowing him to win in a round of Scrabble, a game that in those days was called Word Making and Word Taking. When he asked his uncle why he did that, the master replied, "I always giveÃ□I never take." Recalls Dada, "And that I remembered all my life. I thought I would be joining a great giver, and to do that I had to give up everything, and I was ready to do so."

A brilliant student, Dada received three double promotions in school and matriculated at the age of 13. In college he excelled in English and science, and his family hoped he would sit for the ICS exam. In spite of having received B.Sc and M.Sc degrees and having passed the LLB examination, he decided instead to follow in the spiritual footsteps of Sadhu Vaswani.

As a child, he saw that Sadhu Vaswani not only gave his shirt to a beggar but even his cap when the man pointed to it. Says Dada, "His words are engraved on

the tablet of my heart. He said, 'This cap and this shirt and everything that I have is a loan given to me to be passed on to those whose need is greater than mine.'"

"That was his teaching," Dada explained, "Everything we have is a trust, a loan to be passed on to others: our time, our talent, our experience, our knowledge, our wisdom, our position and prestige in society, our bank accounts, our properties, our possessions; our life itself is a loan given to us to be passed on to those whose need is greater than ours. And that left such a stamp on me."

Sadhu Vaswani's ideals have been translated into reality by Dada through the many humanitarian activities of the Sadhu Vaswani Mission (www.sadhuvaswani.org). The Saint Mira schools, named for Mirabai, the famed 15th century Hindu woman saint, include excellent schools and a college in Pune. They are character-building institutions which give children a first-rate education and also Indian ideals and a strong value system.

The many institutions of the Sadhu Vaswani Medical Complex include state-of-the-art hospitals, dispensaries and clinics providing services to the needy. Dada believes that, "Service of the poor is the worship of

God." The Mission is vital to the life of Pune, and its wonderful effects have spread into many Indian cities and states, as well as into the wider world outside.

Dada has been a tireless traveler, reaching out to people across the world. Sadhu Vaswani centers have sprung up in many countries with a devoted following. His visits encompass talks, satsangs and sadhana camps, which are an exercise in spiritual fitness.

An internationally acclaimed thinker and philosopher, Dada has spoken at eminent venues including the House of Commons in London, the Global Forum of Spiritual Leaders in Oxford, the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago and the MillenniumWorld Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders at the UN in New York.

Dada has been the recipient of many awards, including the U Thant Peace Award, and has written over 75 books that have been translated into several languages. His many parables, his wisdom, his humor and his approachability make his message accessible to both the scholar and the man on the street. At 84, he maintains the

optimism and joy of a child and takes each day as a gift from God.

Dada Vaswani spoke with Hinduism Today in New York. Here are excerpts:

On the origins of Sadhu Vaswani Mission: It came to be known by that name only after Sadhu Vaswani dropped his physical body. Before that it was known as the Brotherhood Association and before that, while we were in Sind, it was known as the Sakhi Satsang Association. It started as a women's organization. Sadhu Vaswani believed it was the woman's soul that would lead us on. He used to say man has had his chanceÃ man has bungled, man has blundered, man has built up a civilization of violence and war, of hatred and strifeÃ the new civilization will be built by women. He told women, "The shaktis (powers) that are hidden within youÃ you must unfold them and spend them in the service of suffering humanity." He started women's stores, a school and college, but gradually the men folk joined in, too.

On the Mission activities: They are based on the teachings of Sadhu Vaswani service of the poor is the richest service that you can offer to God so the aim of many of the institutions we have in Pune is to serve the people. We must take care of the children. The children of today are the builders of tomorrow. So we must give them the right training. We must have mothers of the true type and schools and colleges of the true type. So a humble attempt has been made in that direction. The emphasis continues to be on girls' education. Sadhu Vaswani also believed that the noblest work is to cultivate the soul. Therefore, the basis of all our work is the satsang (gathering for religious instruction and singing). There are three satsangs a day at the Pune center, including one in the evening where hundreds attend. The last half an hour is a meditation at the sacred samadhi of Sadhu Vaswani.

On what gives him satisfaction: That I'm doing my little bit to spread the message of the master. They want something from me because they think I am an agent of the master. I'm a servant, one of the many servants of the master.

On stress: I think there would be no stress if we lived in harmony, in accordance with the will of God. It is because we have forgotten that and are self willed that there is stress. If only we can merge our will with the will of God, if only we can understand that what God wills for us is better than what we will for ourselves, that in everything the Lord wills for us is the meaning of his mercy, because God is all love, God is all wisdom. He is too loving to punish. He's too wise to make a mistake. In our prayers we address Him as our parent, but in our daily lives we do not bear witness to this great truth that we are the children of the Divine. If only we behaved as children! A child has no fear, has no worry, no anxiety because he knows his mother is near to take care of him. If only we lived like children, there would be no stress, no tension and no fear.

On the Gujarat riots: I would not justify what happened. Muslim or Hindu, we are all human beings. We should try to come together and try to understand each other. Why did the Muslims do that? [Dada refers to the attack on the train in Godhra, killing 58 people, mostly women and children, the incident that sparked the March

2002 riots.] Has anyone gone into the problem and found out? That's the way to solve the problem. Problems will keep multiplying. But this is all politics and it's all vote catching. If that is the purpose, then there will be no solution. We were in Sind - Hindus and Muslims lived like brothers. So much so that if the father of a Hindu family had to travel, he would request his Muslim neighbors to take care of his family, and they would take greater care of them than of their own family. There were Hindus, prominent Hindus, wealthy Hindus who were disciples of Muslim murshids Sufi murshids (teachers) who made no difference between Hindus and Muslims. To them, both were the same.

On the Sufi touch in his teachings: It is because we are from Sind and Sind was a place of Sufis. Mystics who believed that there is only one God. Yes, but that has been lost sight of, because of the impact of politics.

On the Ram Temple in Ayodhya: I think they did well when they had agreed to let the Supreme Court decide, and that they would abide by that

decision. It is true that the Mughals came and razed the Hindu temples, hundredsperhaps thou sands of them and built mosques in their place. But that was because the Hindus became weak. They could not protect their own properties, their own country. The Mughals came and sat like masters over them. But once the mosque was permitted to be built, you can't break and raze it to the ground. The mosque is as much a place of worship as a temple. We should have reverence for both. Whenever I pass a mosque, I bow down to it. Whenever I pass by a church, I bow down to itÃ because they are the places of worship of that one God whom I seek. It is true that the Hindus need to become a vital peopleÃthat is the positive aspect of this. The sin of Hinduism is weakness, and if they continue to be weak, then they will be overrun, because that is the law of life. So the Hindus need to become vitalÃbut not vital in the sense that they go and kill innocent people, people who did nothing to them.

His typical day: My day begins with spending time in silence. That is the time I get to myself. Around half past nine I open my doors. I must have a walk every day. My food is very simple, mostly fruit and biscuits and a cup of tea. I used to take raw salads at noon. Steamed vegetables, yogurt, one small chapatti. They give me two vegetables but I'm happy with one. And a cup of dal. I now take soy milk instead of cow's milk because the cows are very cruelly treated in factory farming. Ever since I learned about it nine or ten years ago, I gave up milk. I believe it's the food of violence. The cows are confined to a small area. They can't move and are just milk manufacturing machines.

On vegetarianism: You don't need to be a vegetarian to be a good human being, because I have seen many who are nonvegetarians and are very good people. But I regard the vegetarian diet as a sattvic (pure) diet, and it's always better to take

sattvic rather than tamasic (literally, "of darkness") or rajasic (passionate). We observe November 25 worldwide as Meatless Day because of the cruelty involved. Hundreds of thousands of animals are being slaughtered every day; but they love life as much as you and I do, as much as those people do who eat them up. I believe it is injustice because creation is one family. The breath that animals take is the same breath that we take. They are our kindred, our kin. It is the duty of man to protect his younger brothers and sisters in the one family of creation, from the cruel knife of the butcher. And I believe animals should be given their rights. Today wherever I go they talk of animal welfare. Animal welfare is not the answerÃ animal rights are needed. Men have their rightsÃ do animals have no rights? Men have their rights. Do they not have duties toward animals who have befriended them since the dawn of creation? The dog, the horse and the cowÃ how much they have taken care of man, how much they have served man. Every animal has certain

fundamental rights and the very first right of every animal is the right to live; for you cannot take that away what you cannot give. And since you cannot give life to a dead creature, you have no right to take away the life of a living one. The 18th century gave rights to man, the 19th century gave rights to slaves, and the 20th century has given rights to women. The 21st century, I verily believe, will give rights to animals, and that will be a glorious day in the history of humanity. I believe there will be no peace on Earth unless we stop all killing.

On educating children: I think it is the duty of parents to educate their children and tell them of the rich heritage that belongs to them as the children of India. But both parents are often busy making money, with the result that the children are neglected. There are thinkers and philosophers the world over who say our hope is in India, India's culture, India's message. It is a sinking world

civilization in which we liveÃthe hope of this sinking civilization is India. If only our children were told of their rich heritage, I don't think they will succumb to peer pressure. Now they have no roots, no foundation to stand onÃtherefore they easily succumb to peer pressure.

On corporal punishment of children: It is a great crime. Never hit a child. You should love him so much that if he does something that he should not have done, you simply turn away from him, and that is the punishment that will set him right. If we hit children, they become more obstinate and it creates a psychological complex within them.

On making children proud of Hinduism: Every Hindu parent should train their child to be a good ambassador of India's culture. Every child is an ambassador in the making if only he will bear witness in deeds of daily living to

the teaching of the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads and the Ramayana. He can be a model. We are a minority here in America. We are a very, very small minorityÃ□but that is our opportunity. We can be an example to the rest of the world.

On Sindhi culture: I'm afraid during the years that have gone by since Partition Sindhi culture is on the wane. [The Sind homeland became part of Pakistan at Partition, and nearly all Sindhi Hindus fled to India and elsewhere around the world.] But I can find, wherever I go, a new movement for the uplift of this culture. I believe Sindhi culture has so much to contribute to the life and thought of humanity, and I have no doubt that it will come up again.

On conversion: Ram and Rahim [a Muslim term for God] are one, but we have to be true to Rama because we have been born in a

Hindu family. We have to be true to our dharma. Each one has his own dharma. I don't believe in converting other people from other religions to Hinduism. You teach those Christians to be better Christians; you teach those Muslims to be better Muslims because they are born in that faith God's will has sent them into that particular faith. Their evolution will be worked out only when they are true to their own faith. Likewise, we must see that we as Hindus become better Hindus. I should be a better Hindu today than I was yesterday. I should be a better Hindu tomorrow than I am today.

On reincarnation: For an Indian it's in his blood to believe in reincarnation and in life after death. But you say, "What is the scientific proof?" Each country has specialized in something or other India specialized in spirituality. It carried out experiments in atma vidya the science of the spirit. But also modern research has been

carried out. A group of twelve scientists went around the world looking at cases of reincarnation. They have given in detail their findings, which point to reincarnation and to life after death. Life doesn't end. This is only one chapter in a huge volume of life, only one small chapter. We learn many lessons. We come to this Earth plane. We wear the human body to be tested whether we have actually learned those lessons or not. Because matter on this plane is gross, when we come into contact with physical matter that is when the test begins. In the astral world, the material is very plastic. It yields to thought. I think of something and it happens. Not so here.

On meaning in life: The word of God and more than that, harmony with the will of God, gives meaning to my day. I rejoice in whatever happens. It comes as a prasadam (a blessed offering) out of the spotless hands of the Lord. By approaching life with this attitude, there is no conflict. You are always

at peace. You are at peace with yourself. You are at peace with those around you. You're at peace with God's cosmic laws. I believe there's no treasure richer than peace of mind. Accept everything that happens. Sadhu Vaswani said God is the Great Cosmic Spirit and humanity is His bride. He loves each one of us. Why can't we trust him?