

[Meditation Retreat Signals Fruition of Hindu Church Pattern in Mauritius](#)

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As the powerful Indian Ocean quietly pounded the white sandy shores with 4 and 5-foot waves, 45 souls sat raptly meditating on the red, white and yellow currents within their spine. Inside the thick cool walls of a simple beach bungalow, most of the silent watchers were less than 75 miles from their homes spread around the idyllic isle of Mauritius. Others had traveled half way 'round the globe to be here. Yet it seemed all had transcended both space and time as they pondered color and its corresponding moods and emotions as they flit and flow through the mind like a brilliant kaleidoscope and shimmer in the aura surrounding the human body. Then as if a voice from within, they heard the deep tones of their Guru, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, resonantly chanting "Aum" to bring the group back to current time and space: the last 2 weeks of July, not far from Chemin Grenier at a secluded beach resort.

Pulling numb legs out of full lotus, the mediators looked around. Some paused to enjoy the clear blue sky through the windows, reflecting on the meaning of that particular shade, mentally referring to their lessons on "color meditation." Before them sat two of their Guru's 11 sannyas disciples, Siva Veylanswami and Siva Ceyonswami, and one senior sadhaka, Adiyana Hara. Fresh from Hawaii's cloistered monastery, Kauai Aadheenam, they were fully geared up to teach and serve these and other members of the Saiva Siddhanta Church congregation. Their enthusiasm was surpassed only by the interest and openness of the devotees. For this was a golden chance to study firsthand with their Guru and his swamis subjects they would later peruse on their own or in classes with other Mauritian Hindus. Interest was piqued, too, because of the newness of the material. Up until now they had eagerly learned about the basics of Hinduism, and Saivism in particular. In Book 2, Sadhana, they studied the nature of the mind. Now Gurudeva was presenting intriguing new perspectives: the study of the human aura, self-improvement through understanding color, and more.

Charting the Within: That evening in another class the retreatants listened with open eyes as Siva Ceyonswami introduced Shum (pronounced Shoom), "the

language of meditation." He explained that Shum had been unfolded to Gurudeva during his meditations in 1969 in Ascona, Switzerland. Its crisp, magic-sounding tones are chanted in precise cadence: "Eee, Mmm, Ing, Ling, Lee, Nee, Ka, Sim..." Little Gomathi Mardemootoo, age 5, picked it up in an instant, chanting the first 18 characters in perfect rhythm and tone after one listening. The Shum characters, explained the swami, are placed together to make "portraits" to communicate ideas, especially depicting states of mind, inner concepts difficult to express in the English language. Meditating on a series of portraits is a guided meditation. Each evening the group of happy, good-natured devotees followed this inward trail as their orange-robed guide called out one portrait, then another. He later described the mood of the retreat as "joyous, always uplifted. The Mauritian Tamils were grateful for the opportunity to be together with other Church members out of the family karma for a time in this beautiful setting to think about inner things and with Gurudeva. The American Hindus were extremely taken up with the Mauritian Hindus, whom they said were unlike any other people they had ever met in their openness and religiousness. Many became lifelong friends with those they had just met."

One of the greatest binding factors was congregational singing of the Thirumurai, the devotional hymns of the Tamil saints of South India. Each evening amid much laughter and sharing of jokes, individuals, duets and larger groups demonstrated their skill and bhakti at these difficult but beautiful carnatic songs to Siva.

This was the fourth visit to Mauritius by Gurudeva, Sivaya Subramuniaswami, founder of Saiva Siddhanta Church, each visit more fully manifesting his vision for furthering Saivite Hinduism in Mauritius and advancing Hinduism here as a whole. "This visit fulfilled," he said, "the pattern of Saiva Siddhanta Church in Mauritius, with the establishment of 10 missions, a branch of Kauai Aadheenam, with a monastic group living at the branch on land purchased by the Church. It also brought the inauguration of the Indian Ocean edition of Hinduism Today for distribution in that area of the world. This formalized the stability of all the work done in the past 4 to 5 years since we were invited to the country by members of the Tamil community to teach Saivism."

New Aadheenam Branch: A good percentage of the approximately 250 Church members of Mauritius attended the opening of the Aadheenam branch. Many of them had worked long hours preparing the new monastic center for the inauguration on August 11. On days off and late into the night they cleaned, painted and repaired the large 2-story structure situated on 10-acre parcel at Riviere du Rempart. A short walk from the river and in sight of the sea, the

secluded land, commented the 59-year old Sat Guru, "is a perfect place for the Aadheenam Branch. And it feels very much like the Aadheenam on Kauai, even having a similar appearance in many ways." A large grove of coconut trees and a mature mango orchard offer an immediate agricultural endowment. A Vastu Shanti Homa was performed by Sivachariaya Kailasanatha of India to purify and consecrate the site. A shrine room for daily worship was established where Gurudeva gave many initiations. Five young men age 17-25, four from Mauritius and one from Malaysia, took 6-month pre-monastic vows of purity and humility and received Gurudeva's blessings to live, serve and study at the center under the direction of Sadhaka Hara. All have the full blessings of their parents, who along with the entire congregation realize the importance of a well-staffed monastery to sustain the religious community and other family centers or missions. Several young women members expressed interest in starting a brahmacharini ashram, and a donation of Rs. 70,000 was received for a facility.

Numerous appointments were given for teachers and missionaries, and minister (Amachar) appointments were bestowed on Retnon Velvindron, 56, and Manon Mardemootoo, 45. Workshops in these leadership areas occurred daily during the retreat itself, coordinated by Siva Velyanswami. The senior monk told Hinduism Today that with the appointments they had outlined "lecture policies" for the missionaries and ministers. These, he said, would help "avoid problems experienced in the past 2 years of a few Church members virtually taking over the congregation of some community temples by applying Church policies and teachings to too broad a group." One new policy now curtails new lecture series at public temples. Public lectures will focus on "self-improvement themes and religious unity which maintains diversity." The idea, he explained, is to strengthen the Church's Hindu solidarity doctrine, "which has not been done there except by Gurudeva during his two visits this year. Instead, everyone has been promoting monistic theism with dedicated enthusiasm to both Liberal and Sakta groups."

As part of the Church pattern, each of the ten mission plans to build its own Nataraja temple, and one has already done so, in Piton. It is a small, simple cement structure costing about Rs\$50,000, and is nearly complete after only 3 months of work. The American devotees were visibly impressed by the accomplishment and inspired to follow suit in their communities. (The Church has 46 centers worldwide in 9 countries.) Two other temple sites were consecrated by Gurudeva during the visit, one over-looking the Port Louis harbor and another in the hills near Beau Bassin. At each site, the tall white-haired Guru picked up a large stone and planted it where the Siva Lingam should be located. He then instructed the devotees to bring other stones to contribute to a temporary sanctum sanctorum. As they did, he declared, "Now the worship can begin," and said that the Lingam should be bathed each day to establish the temple on the inner planes as it is being created

physically.

To the Nearby Island of Reunion

With the assistance of some of the elders in Mauritius, arrangements were made for a short excursion to Reunion, an island 40x30 miles, 110 miles southwest of Mauritius. Gurudeva and Siva Ceyonswami were accompanied by Amachar Mardemootoo and his wife and hosted by Mr. Catapole Jr. Meanwhile, Siva Veylanswami had flown to Malaysia to meet with members in the process of forming Church missions there.

In Reunion, commented Ceyonswami, "Hinduism is just hanging on by a thread. It is dominated by Catholicism and has only been preserved by building temples, and only by memory, not according to tradition." Until a few years ago, Hinduism here has been virtually isolated. A standing rule, the pilgrims were told, prevented travel to or from India. Through such regulations the government strove to maintain a purely French culture and prevent chances of later bids for independence, as happened in Mauritius.

The present of 7 highly trained Sivachariya priests on the island belies a recent change in policy. They have wasted no time in recreating aspects in Bharat. First, they replaced many of the home-made temple images with new granite murthis from Mahaballipuram. Second, they took up teaching and ministering to the Hindus, tasks they don't normally perform.

Mr. Catapole Sr., spokesman for at least one clan of the Tamil community on the island, formally requested Gurudeva to give them written teachings, in French, with which to educate the youth about Hinduism. The two Church ministers in Mauritius plan to provide such materials. Amachar Mardemootoo will make regular visits to give lectures, and groups of Reunion youth will attend classes at the Mauritius missions.

Hinduism may now be emerging from its Catholic eclipse in Reunion, but its rise will not be easy. By official estimates 96% of the island's 1/2 million population are

professed Roman Catholics. Hindus number less than 1%, somewhere under 10,000. Nearly everyone, even those who consider themselves Hindus, has a French-Catholic first name and has been baptized. Some have a secondary Tamil, Gujarati or Malabari name. Four attorneys are now checking into the procedure for formally adopting Hinduism and leaving the Catholic Church. Their first obstacle is that laws may not permit anyone to change their name. Still, with the avid support of Mauritius, the Indian Sivachariyas and Kauai Aadheenam, Reunionites eager to revive Hinduism may have reason for hope after all.

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