Swami Nirliptananda
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Swami Nirliptananda

Guyanese-born monk heads London Sevashram

Krishan Dutt, London

No one walking past house 99A on Devonport Road in the "Shepherd's Bush" area of London would imagine it in any way to be different from the other terraced houses huddled together in an area devoid of neat front gardens or wide, open forecourts with well-trimmed hedges and flowering plants.

But stepping inside, one is in for quite a surprise. The large hall on the ground floor is a spacious Hindu temple with beautiful idols of Radha and Krishna adorning the farthest end of the temple, where leaflets and brochures on Hinduism are on display. High up the wall, a large orange silk banner says, "London Sevashram Sangha." Here is an oasis of tranquillity.

I had come to this ashram to have a meeting with Swami Nirliptananda, originally from Guyana, South America. Since 1992 he's been the resident head priest at the Shepherd's Bush ashram. As I toured the upstairs of the temple complex, it was interesting to see that the priest's office contained a modern computer and an up-to-date filing system.

A little later, during our talk, Swami explained the Sangha's ambitious "Om Day 2000 Global Vision for Unity and Peace" project, started in January of 1999. Conceived as an undertaking for the promotion of universal fraternity, it was observed throughout the year in Britain by holding interfaith seminars which included recitations of the Gayatri Mantra, devotional singing, fire ceremony and worship of the Deities. Every day of the year 2000, Gayatri worship began at dawn at the ashram. Hindus far and wide attended, bringing offerings of fruits, vegetables and milk. According to Swami Nirliptananda, "As the world's oldest religion, and as we enter the new millennium, Hinduism has a dynamic role to play in the coming century. Hinduism's principle of mutual respect and harmonious coexistence are very relevant to preserving mankind's very existence here on this planet. At the same time that our world is becoming increasingly smaller with the development of the vast network of modern communications, it has also become increasingly more hazardous to live in because of the development of lethal weapons of mass destruction. It is, I believe, vital that the human race develop a sense of oneness to usher in an era of harmony and peace."

Swami travels periodically back to the Caribbean countries, including Suriname, Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and his native Guyana. He was recently a Hindu representative at The Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders held in New York in August. The ashram maintains a website with notices of their activities and back issues of their magazine.

London Sevashram Sangha is a branch of Bharat Sevashram Sangha, founded in 1917 by Acharya Srimat Swami

Pranavanandaji Maharaj (www.angelfire.com/al/bharatsevashramsangh/). It is a teaching and philanthropic organization specializing in community service and disaster relief. The Sangh has centers in Canada, USA, Trinidad, Guyana and Bangladesh, in addition to 40 in India.

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Hindu Education in England

By Krishan Dutt, London

Jai Prakash Lakhani, a quiet, unas-suming gentleman from Wembley, is pioneering a unique field, the teaching of Hinduism in English schools. A few Hindus have in the past experimented with propagating Hindu dharma as a school subject, but it is Lakhani, popularly known as Dalip, who, with his vision and determination, has been most successful. Following my call for an interview, Dalip, founder of the Wembley-based Vivekananda Centre, invited me to his class on the following Sunday at the Hindu temple on Lady Margaret Road in the West London suburb of Southall.

Vivekananda Centre (VC) often represents Hinduism at religious education conferences and seminars held at schools and colleges around England to help religious education teachers gain a better, more accurate insight into the Hindu dharma. The Centre has devised a course to prepare students for General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) A-Level examination in London University. During 2000, the Vivekananda Centre in Wembley prepared as many as 150 students to sit for their GCSE examination in Hindu Dharma.The Centre also promotes the teachings of Swami Vivekananda to youngsters keen to understand spirituality in a rational way.

Vivekananda Centre, under Dalip's guidance, arranges school trips to Hindu temples and monasteries in the UK; participates in inter-religious debates and seminars; runs Sunday classes on Hinduism for children at various venues in and around London in which about 400 children take part on any given Sunday; puts up pictorial exhibitions on the life and teachings of Swami Vivekananda in educational institutions and community centers; creates plays on religious

themes; and promotes the sayings of Sri Ramakrishna on the radio. They maintain an internet site (www.btinternet.com/~vivekananda/centre.htm) which includes a reference page for school children who are researching Hinduism. They're particularly happy with their latest play, "Sri Ramakrishna," and will send the script to any institute wanting to try it out.

Dalip has lived in Britain for 37 years. He earned a master's degree in theoretical physics at King's College, London. Now retired, he devotes most of his time to the activities of Vivekananda Centre, which he founded seven years ago. During summer months he conducts classes in Hinduism for young boys and girls at the Southall Hindu temple. The one to which I was invited had attracted 45 participants.

During class, he talked on aspects of the Hindu faith, mythology and philosophy as propounded in the ancient Vedas. Dalip laid particular emphasis on the practical side of life. Desires, for example, should be legitimate, within reason and not far beyond one's reach. It is vital that one should be able to control one's desires. A lot of misery in the world today, said Dalip, is because we are not able, or willing, to keep our desires under control. He talked about how meditation and yoga, practiced properly and regularly, are of immense benefit. He drew from the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita. Dalip concluded, "While teaching or learning the true values of Hindu Dharma, one should not be bogged down with superstitious dogmas, but think and act in a rational way."

When I asked ten-year-old Bindu what she thought of the Vivekananda class, she said, "Such classes are helpful for English boys and girls to understand the Hindu way of life, and I get more knowledge of the Hindu teachings." In Southall, Satya Pal Kapur, Secretary of Vishwa Hindu Kendra which manages the Southall temple, said, "Vivekananda Centre is doing a very good work, and we are pleased to provide facilities for their classes on Hinduism.

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Rukmani Transformed

How a very English Woman trekked into a new life

By Krishan Dutt, London

For me, Hindu dharma is more of a unique way of life than a religious affiliation, insofar as it provides, through its superior karma-philosophy, a foundation on which to base one's day-to-day actions," said Rukmani Devi as she sat cross-legged on the floor in our lounge in London. Attired in a simple white khaddar kurta/pyjama with a yellow "Hare Krishna Hare Rama" shawl draped over her left shoulder, and a necklace of wooden beads around her slender neck, this elegant and academic English lady spoke softly with a piety and conviction that was quite inspiring.

As my wife Satish served a vegetarian meal, Rukmani unfolded a fascinating story. We could not but marvel at the remarkable change of heart she experienced and her tenacity to work amongst what the locals in Madhya Pradesh, India, called "the lowest of the low" in very trying circumstances. Her philosophy revolved around the popular Hindi saying Usskee sewa kar, jiska koi nahi ("Serve those whom no one cares for").

Born in 1939 in a typical, English, middle-class environment and given a staunch Christian upbringing, Rhobena, as she was

originally named, developed at a early age a keen interest in Oriental philosophy and Eastern religions, especially Hinduism. While her classmates read comics and romantic novels and went out with boy friends, Rhobena dug out books and pictures on Hindu dharma and spent hours with them in her room. She was particularly fascinated with stories of Ram, Sita and Lakshman--the obedience, faithfulness, devotion.

As she grew up, Rhobena trained and worked as a science laboratory technician in schools, and along the way got married, brought up three

children, and acquired the trappings of a good lifestyle: a big house, a big car and, according to her, a big ego! But deep within she felt hollow, living a life without a purpose, and was later divorced.

"I was about 10 years old when I read Seven Years in Tibet," she reminisced, "a fascinating book of a fascinating land high up in the mountains and a way of life that greatly appealed to me at the time. From then on I had this deep longing to get to Lhasa and see the Dalai Lama." But it was not until 1989--at age of 50--when Rhobena left England and went trekking in

the Himalayas of Nepal and made trips to Bangladesh.

"It was as if I was on a mission, in search of something that at that time was not clear to me," said Rukmani. She took an active part in issues such as Nuclear Disarmament, Friends of the Earth, Green Party, Vegetarian Society, and charitable projects in the Third World.

"Then came the Great Event: My first visit to India, in 1994! I made the usual rounds of Hindu temples,

dharmashalas (monasteries), meditation centers, pathasalas (religious schools) and soaked up all I could about the Hindu dharma."

While her new-found faith had created an awakening deep within her, Rukmani had yet to reach her goal. "My goal appeared suddenly and unexpectedly when I landed up in a little village surrounded by a forest deep in Madhya Pradesh, Central India." It was a two-day train journey from Delhi to the town of Raipur, followed by a seven-hour coach ride to this little village not far from the Madhya Pradesh-Orissa border.

To cut a long story short, Rukmani decided to help the local inhabitants in uplifting their lives by throwing herself into community work. With her bare hands, she mixed mud, straw and cow dung, and plastered the village huts with a thick layer that acts as an effective, and very cheap, water-repellent during the rainy season. She quickly endeared herself to the villagers, who were amazed at the help from not only a complete stranger, but a foreigner. She planned and helped build a school for infants?the first of its kind in that part of Madhya Pradesh. Rukmani returned to England after her five-month

sojourn in 1994 in that little isolated village, but not for long, as her heart now lay in India. She returns every year to "to do my bit" for the villagers.

She also told us about a visit to Bangladesh, "I once entered a small village not far from the capital, Chaka. The local Hindus came up to me with flowers and fruit in their hands and beauteous smiles on their faces. I was touched. You see, I had this yellow 'Rama-Krishna' cotton shawl on me, and it seemed to move them. One elderly woman who seemed burdened with the rigors of life came close to me and

said, 'How nice to see someone openly wearing a lovely Hindu garment. Here we dare not do so because of the hostility it would stir from our Muslim neighbors." Rukmani is involved in community work in Raipur for the welfare of Bengali Hindu immigrants who were driven from their homes in East Pakistan in the Sixties and took refuge in Raipur.

Rukmani Devi, 77 Layton Road, Brentford, Middlesex, England

Saint Visits Londerners

Relaxed guru sets his audience at ease

By Krishan Dutt, London

At a discourse on hinduism held recently at the Heston, West London, branch of the International Brahmrishi Mission, local Hindu residents had the rare opportunity of meeting the Mission's founder, Guruji Brahmrishi Vishwatma Bawraji who was on a short tour. The learned sage with a flowing white beard and clad in a simple orange-colored dhoti and chola, commenced his talk, in English, by asking the attentive audience--which also included a group of English ladies and gentlemen--to take part in a short meditation session with deep breathing. This audience participation, under the guidance of

Guruji, seemed to instantly establish an informal and happy rapport between the visitor from India and the audience.

While introducing Hinduism to those unfamiliar with the dharma, Guruji explained in simple terms the importance of Gods Siva, Brahma and Vishnu. He explained how God is One, that He takes incarnations and appears in many forms. "We have thousands of devas and hundreds of thousands of Rishis and Munis [saints and sages]," Guruji remarked, with a twinkle in his eyes, "Too many Hindu icons. I hope you're not too

confused." A ripple of laughter from the audience helped create an atmosphere of pleasant informality normally not found at religious discourses. Guruji added, "And each of these deities and sages has a role to play in their guidance of the human race."

I met with Guruji after the talk. He explained he was born in the holy and ancient city of Banaras, and is now based in Chandigarh, Punjab State. He had no formal education as a child. At the age of eighteen, he came under the guidance of the great yogi, Bhagwan Chandra Mauliji. Later Swami Ram Swaroop

Dass Ji of Ayodhya initiated him into Vaishnavism as a sannyasin monk. He underwent extensive training by several saints in Ayodhya, overcoming his lack of early education to become an adept religious scholar.

Guruji has spent many years preaching Hindu dharma in Europe, America and Canada. Besides his branch in England, there are Mission branches in Amsterdam, Holland, and Suriname, South America.

A noteworthy example of Guruji's involvement in promoting universal peace and amity--and in pursuance of the Year 2000 having been declared as the "International Year for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence"--is his Mission's collaboration with a UN project for the treatment and care of prisoners worldwide suffering from drug addiction. Such prisoners include teenagers and children, who are more vulnerable to this dreaded affliction and need more attention and assistance to become drug free. It was most heartening to see that here was a guru who goes beyond preaching by also engaging in practical rehabilitation work for

the eradication of drug abuse worldwide.

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Hindu Day at the Dome

For the first time in Britain the Hindu Rakshabandhan ritual was celebrated in style. It was held at the Millennium Dome amidst a colorful program of Indian folk dances and musical recitals. Rakshabandhan is a traditional yearly rite in which each brother (or close male relative) affirms his pledge to

look after his sister (or close female relative).

The Dome is the largest tent in the world. Here large crowds witnessed this joyful event and the spectacular Krishna-Leela stage play by children in the central Arena, itself as large as a football stadium.

The significance of other Hindu rituals and festivals such as Holi, Divali, Janmashtami and

Kartikka Purnamashi is explained in the Hindu section of the Dome's Faith Zone.

On the same day, at an inter-religious seminar held in the Dome's conference center, the Hindu point of view was explained to this splendid gathering of people from all faiths by Om Prakash Sharma, MBE, a well-known leader of the Hindu community in UK.

Besides the enchanting Krishna-Leela play, a graceful Garba folk dance by Hindu boys (in orange) and girls (in white), a recital by children, and devotional hymns and bhajanas delighted the large audience which had come from all over the country. At dusk, with all the lights switched on and music blaring, the Millennium Dome was transformed into a veritable fairyland.

The Dome's present use ended with the New Year; its next use is to house an office complex.