Back to the Roots
Category : February 1987
Published by Anonymous on Feb. 01, 1987

Back to the Roots

Telegu Vaishnavites Claim Govinden Festival in Mauritius

Manick, Rajen Never has Govinden or 'Govinda Puja-Venkateswara Puja,' as the Telegus call it, been so much organized and celebrated in the island nation of Mauritius. Telegu leaders are claiming that Govinden is not only a purely Vaishnavite festival, but also a purely Telegu festival which is part and parcel of the Telegu culture. In Mauritius almost all Telegus are Vaishnavites, though many are liberal Hindus and worship all the Gods.

New Telegu priests returning to Mauritius from training in Andhra Pradesh want a Telegu cultural and religious revival. They feel that Telegus are not fully aware of their cultural and religious identity and have been carried away into "liberalism" and have lost contact with their roots.

Young Telegu leaders, keen on promoting their religion, say that Govinden is going to be the spark which will light the fire of Telegu religious identity. Telegu leaders argue that Telegus have always worshipped Lord Vishnu as Supreme God. Almost all Telegu temples in Mauritius are called "Vishnu Mandirams."

On "Rama Bajanamoo" (bhajans to Lord Rama), another important Telegu religious festival, after weeks of fasting they pitch a tent near a Telegu home or Vishnu Mandiram, light a big lamp called "simi" (considered by many as the symbol of Telegu religious identity) and have puja performed by Vedic priests. Youth bhajan groups spend the night chanting songs for Lord Vishnu to the rhythm of the drum (dolok) while young men wearing white verthis tightly tied around their feet perform a traditional dance around the lighted simi while striking brass cymbals (jaals). Hot tea and prasadam is served to devotees and guests. This festival has been observed by Telegus for some 150 years. The one difference between Rama Bajanamoo may be that Govinda Puja is celebrated on a set date, while the former can be observed throughout the year.

"We have been neglecting for too long our religious heritage. It's high time we Telegus put our efforts together to sort our Vaishnavite identity and clear the doubts. Govinda Puja is a purely traditional Telegu festival," said Rajen Busurah, Vice Chairman of the Mauritius Andhra Maha Sabha, the largest Telegu organization of the island. This organization is also trying to fight back their greatest opponent - conversion. Many Telegus have been converted by the active Mission Salut de Guerison (Assembly of God). Loyedass Luchiah, Secretary of the Sabha, told Hinduism Today that the MAMS and the Northern Telegu Federation chose to celebrate "Govinda Puja" at Goodlands this year because it was the place where many Telegus had been converted.

"We want all Telegus to join hands to prevent such happenings," said Luchiah. "Once involved in our festival's we shall start to build up a more religious consciousness which will then push each and every Telegu to do something to teach, preserve and propagate Vaishnavite culture and tradition. If in the past not enough importance has been given to Govinda Puja, I think now it is not too late to dig for our roots."

The President of the NTF, Mr. Suven Dhalladoo, in an address to Telegu devotees who came to Goodlands for Govinda Puja this year appealed to all Telegus to participate in all regional and national religious festivals.

Tamil Response: Within the Tamil Community, Govinden received a less enthusiastic response in 1986, though in 1985 it was fervently observed - at least in part to counter assertions that it is a Vaishnavite holiday. The decline this year may be due to the Tamils of Mauritius becoming more conscious of their Saivite identity. One Tamil observer told Hinduism Today, "I have seen less people attending Govinden this year. Many are feeling that it is a genuine heritage of Vaishnavites, especially the Telegus. Yet, it would be unfair to say that if Tamils are not participating publicly they are bringing about division. I think that there is nothing harmful in becoming conscious of one's identity. There is no sin to claim that a Tamil is a Saivite. Everyone will come to understand this truth one day."

Govinda Puja at Goodlands: Govinda Puja was celebrated with much enthusiasm in the Telegu Hall at Goodlands on Saturday, Sept. 27. The ceremony was jointly organized by the Mauritius Andhra Maha Sabha and the Northern Telegu Federation. Many bhajan groups came. The stage was beautifully decorated with flowers, ferns and the lights of simi. Armugum Parsuramen, Minister of Education,

joined the capacity crowd for the all-night ceremony.

Article copyright Himalayan Academy.