Kids with Class
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EDUCATION

Kids with Class

Teaching programs for Hindu youth find a surprising venue at Mauritius' sumptuous hotels

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Can you imagine yourself for a moment comfortably seated in the lotus posture on a marble floor in the conference room of a five-star hotel meditating to discover the Self within? Several times a year a lucky group of young Mauritius Hindus are doing just that, part of the innovative Siva Yogaswami Youth Retreat Programs organized by the Saiva Siddhanta Church of Mauritius (locally known as the Saiva Dharmasala). Instigated under the direction of Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (publisher of Hinduism Today), and run by two of his sannyasins, Tyagi Murugaswami and Tyagi Devaswami (with the considerable help of local family devotees), the programs are designed to instill knowledge of Hinduism and develop an increased sense of self-worth.

With the advent of the 21st century, the young Hindus of this island nation, immersed as they are in Western culture, education, music, television and movies, find it difficult to integrate themselves harmoniously into the traditional Hindu

framework. Many believe Hindu values are out of fashion, because no one gives them rational explanations of the many "whys" that plague their minds. No doubt parents are trying their best, but they can only pass on what little they themselves have learned from their own parents about temple worship and home rituals. When it comes to philosophical questions asked by their better educated children, mothers and fathers are at a loss. The result: youth who know more about Madonna, Spice Girls and "Beverly Hills 90210" than they do about karma, dharma, reincarnation, ahimsa or yoga.

The island of Mauritius, with a population of one million, floats in the Indian Ocean off the coast of Africa, near Madagascar. Most citizens are Hindu, and a Hindu government has ruled for many years. Some of the world's most elegant resort hotels have been built along its idyllic beaches, frequented by rich Europeans on vacation. One of the unique features of the Satguru Yogaswami youth retreats and seminars is the use of these elegant seaside hostelries--ranging from quaintly picturesque, thick-thatched-roof bungalow-style inns like Marina Village and Villas Pointe aux Roches to the 2,000-acre deer wildlife reserve, Domaine du Chasseur, to palatial world-class mega-resorts like Le Touessrok, La Pirogue and Le Grand Gaube. "Not appropriate," a handful of doubters first whispered, suggesting the "kids" (ages 15-25) were being unnecessarily pampered and good money wasted. They recommended instead the conservative and austere free public government camp barracks for overnight programs and temple mandapams for day programs.

But after two-and-half years, those initial worries have faded and everyone is delighted. The hotels have worked, and

fantastically at that. The most important reason is idiosyncratic to Mauritius. Because the tourist industry hotels are so expensive, most Mauritians simply can never afford them, nor in fact even see them, encircled as they are by high rock walls. Private guards, security police and locked entrance gates keep out all but paying guests. Visitors are rarely allowed. So, when the seminar participants drive through the big wrought iron entrance gates in their chartered bus, are waved to by the Hindu security guards, and coast down flower-lined lanes to a cordial welcome in the lobby by senior management, they get a feeling of being special. Maybe someone thinks they are really worth something.

Worth is a big word in Mauritius. One boy explains, "Because these programs are so professionally put together and staged at such impressive hotels, it makes us youth feel like someone not only cares about us but thinks we are valued. Most people, even our parents, often just call us 'worthless.' " So, yes, instilling a secure sense of self-respect is a basic plus of the fancy sites.

These hotels are a joy to be at and easy to teach in. They are beautiful, picturesque, elegant, classy and very clean. Everyone feels uplifted. Their conference room facilities are state-of-the-art, with video projectors for big-screen presentations, sophisticated sound systems and air conditioning.

Most critically, these venues work because hotel managers graciously offer low rates. Standard conference center and room rates--at us$300+ per night--are prohibitive. Why give

the youth a break? Mr. Norbert Angerer, the cosmopolitan general manager of the spectacular four-star Le Grand Gaube Hotel, told Hinduism Today, "Hotels like ours all try to do what we can for the citizens of Mauritius--more than just hire them. In these programs, we see a fine spirit, value and service to the youths. This inspires us to help." Kailash, the Hindu manager of Island View Club Hotel, agrees, "We know that these retreats are helping our youths understand Hinduism better, so we are happy when we can give lower rates." Mr. Requin, the manager of five-star Le Touessrok, appreciated "the dedication in educating the youth of today and instilling noble values in the their minds." As a result, the programs cost the youth a reasonable Rs.400/day (US$25). Each month there is one weekend program and in December a seven-day seminar. Local family members make all the arrangements and chaperone the events. The swamis conduct classes.

Classy content: The programs themselves are actually what take place at most ashrams, only the facilities are more modern. All participants are required to dress in elegant Hindu clothing, which compliments the surroundings. Seminar topics include Sanatana Dharma, monistic Saiva Siddhanta, the soul, God, Hindu metaphysics and much more, all presented with the aid of computer displays, sound systems and large video screens. Other sessions cover hatha yoga, near-death experiences, vegetarianism and reincarnation.

Each dawn the youth have what often turns out to be their first experience of an early morning puja worship and meditation, sitting on the seashore facing the rising sun. While religious teachings are the crux of the youth retreats, participants are treated to other activities which make the gatherings modern,

exhilarating and adventurous. To mention but a few, there are deep-sea trips on a chartered catamaran or sailing ship, picnics on nearby islands, hikes into the island's deep gorges, non-competitive games, horseback riding, cultural and fashion shows put on by the youth and more.

Youths described the changes these retreats have wrought: pride in their heritage, decisions such as taking a brahmacharya vrata, vowing to uphold chastity until marriage, or decisions to incorporate vegetarianism, regular meditation, worship and hatha yoga practice in their daily life.

Youth and adults alike endorse the programs. Mahesh Dayal, 18, son of the Commissioner of Police, Mr. Raj Dayal, said, "I have always recommended my relatives and friends to attend these programs because I know these activities will make them better Hindus." Dr. C.M. Pillay said, "It's a real opportunity for our youth to be in an active Hindu environment with two very competent swamis." Dr. Harry, specialist surgeon at the SSRN Hospital: "I always look forward to these youth activities for my children because I know they will come back home with valuable spiritual knowledge." The results speak for themselves. Several hundred Hindu youth have attended and enjoyed these retreats. All who have participated feel as if they have awakened from a dream to find that the Hindu religion is not austere and irrelevant, but a treasure they have to protect, practice and preserve.