Vishnu Peace Statue for India
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Hindu Minstrel, Sant Keshavadas, Amassing 130 Million Hand-Scribed Rama Mantras For 30-Foot Granite Image

August 27th, 1987. High in the central Himalayas near Ranikhet-high enough to thin out the oxygen and freeze the body even in summer-53-year old Sant Keshavadas is sitting cross-legged, meditating in a cave. Surrounding this saintly man, who can sing enchantingly about every myth or saint in Hinduism, is a large group of devotees, mostly Americans. The cave is reputed as the abode of the legendary Babaji, an immortal yogi who transmuted his physical body into an undecaying, ever-youthful state.

Keshavadas knows Babaji...personally. He literally chased him down in the streets of Allahabad, North India, during a Kumbha Mela celebration in 1966. Babaji told Keshavadas, "Go to the West, spread the eternal, cosmic religion." By that time, Keshavadas was already a well-known and highly-honored singer in the ancient Haridas (servants of Lord Vishnu) tradition of Karnataka state. (He has composed 6,000 songs and cut 50 records.) Alternating song and story-telling in a style known as kathar, these minstrels can enrapture sophisticated and village audiences alike for hours.

Keshavadas had experienced an indelible vision of Lord Panduranga Vittala (Vishnu) at age 11. By 1966 he had completed 47 rounds of India's pilgrimage sites. He opened an ashram in Bangalore, Karnataka. He knew several Indian languages plus English and as a married man (to Rama Mata) was familiar with the spiritual needs of family life. He was ripe for a mission. He came to the West, by way of West Germany and England to New York, determined to offer bhakti and deity worship as a balance to the jnana yoga and Vedanta offered by Swami Vivekananda and others. When he landed in New York, another famous envoy of Lord Krishna, Swami Prabhupada, founder of ISKCON, was establishing himself in San Francisco.

Now, 21 years later, as Sant Keshavadas steps out of the darkened mouth of Babaji's cave into a fantastic Himalayan panorama, he is winding up his tenth annual pilgrimage from America to India. On his way back to America, he can justifiably feel proud of his mission: establishing five ashrams, three near Bangalore-including the headquarters, Vishwa Shanti Ashram (Universal Peace)-one in Trinidad and his home ashram at Oakland, California. He says he spends 4-5 months in the West, one month in Trinidad and 4-5 months in India. In America he's been instrumental in helping many temples manifest from dreams to concrete.

Certainly a common theme in his preaching is individual and world peace. Toward this end he has made 27 global tours and met personally with Pope Paul VI. But his most monumental peace project is the proposed erection of a 30-foot Lord Panduranga statue at his Vishwa Shanti Ashram. "The vision came from Lord Panduranga himself to establish this image of peace and healing," commented Keshavadas. The idea is relatively newborn, coming to Keshavadas as he was lecturing at a Vittala (another name for Panduranga) Temple in India in January, 1986. But it has grown fast-the projected installation of the image is scheduled for July 24th, 1988. Originally, Keshavadas saw the image as standing a towering 108-feet tall, surveying the beautiful Bangalore countryside (which is remarkably similar to the high country of the American Southwest). This would have established a Hindu Vaishnavite deity on the scale of the sitting Buddha on the Yangtze River in China and the Jain's standing Mahavira in India.

A battery of engineers were consulted on the 108-foot version. They proposed concrete and steel reinforcement. But the trade-off was that it would last 100 years and then begin to deteriorate. Keshavadas couldn't see this as a lasting hallmark so opted for a 30-foot tall statue carved from a monolithic piece of granite. "Twenty-five to thirty sculptors are working on the image now in South India," Keshavadas proudly notes. According to him, this image-which traditionally is considered strictly a Vishnu deity-contains elements that represent Siva and Brahma, thus it is a tri-murthi image. "It is Mahavishnu with a Sivalingam forming His crown," he explains.

One of the main thrusts of the peace project is to generate 130 million handwritten copies of a preeminent Vaishnavite mantra known as the taraka mantra, "thirteen syllable mantra." The mantra, "Om Shri Rama Jaya Rama Jaya Jaya Rama" is considered especially efficacious for bringing peace. So far 50 million have been written in India and Keshavadas encourages all to participate by writing the mantra as many times as desired and sending them by May, '88, directly to the Vishva

Shanti Ashram, 24 K.M. Arasinakunte, Tumkur Road, Dasanapura Post 562 123, Bangalore District, India.

The total cost of the project is $325,000-$70,000 of that for the Vishnu deity alone. Keshavadas says $50,000 has been raised with another $275,000 needed. Much of the cost is going into beautiful walking and meditation gardens and a paved road into the site. Keshavadas sees his image as catalyzing individual peace which in turn will help establish world peace. His next project at the ashram: a Santana Vishwa Dharma University to "teach the ancient wisdom of the Himalayas."