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Feature Story

Sri Swami Gopal Sharan Devacharya 2009 Hindu of the Year

by Rajiv Malik, New Delhi

Sri Swami Gopal Sharan Devacharya, of Vrindavan and New Delhi, was chosen by Hinduism Today as the recipient of the Hindu Renaissance Award, becoming our Hindu of the Year for 2009. Swamiji is of the Nimbarka Sampradaya, one of the four traditional Vaishnava teaching lineages. He travels extensively and is the force behind the construction of 72 new temples worldwide.

When I first met Swamiji at his Vrindavan ashram, he recounted his unusual life story. When Swami was just five years old, a renowned sadhu approached his parents. Theirs was a special child, he said, with potential for greatness. However, the boy would have close encounters with death, and would only survive if he lived a pure, spiritual life, under the care of a saint.

Alarmed, but filled with faith, the parents traveled to the sacred city of Vrindavan. They took the child to Sri Swami Lalita Sharan Devacharyaji of the Nimbarka Sampradaya. When the young boy reached the ashram, he was overwhelmed with joy, playful and relaxed, as if he had found his long-lost home. Swami Lalita Sharan Maharaj took the boy to the banks of the sacred Yamuna River and declared, "Today, this boy has received a new life." Later Swami Lalita Sharan recounted, "His parents left him with me, and I do not even remember their names."

Shortly after the boy moved into the ashram, the prophecy of death was fulfilled. It was during an eclipse, a time astrologers caution against as eerie and inauspicious. Bathing in the Yamuna and singing bhajans, but unable to swim, the youth was caught in a strong current. Had a sadhu not pulled him out, he would have drowned.

Being in the company of holy men had saved his life, literally.

At the age of seven, the future guru took his first vows in preparation to one day become a sannyasin. "I learned everything at the ashram; even my secular schooling happened there," recalls Swamiji.

He enrolled in Banaras Hindu University as a teenager, to study Sanskrit and Vedanta. Then, just 17 and still pursuing his studies, he was initiated as a sannyasin by Swami Lalita Devacharya. His guru instructed him with eloquent simplicity: "A saint, a tree, a river, a mountain and the earth, these exist but for the welfare of others."

Following his initiation, Swami Gopal Sharan began his ministry quietly, finishing his Sanskrit studies and preparing for the days ahead. A final purification, perhaps the last of the events augured by his childhood seer, was a serious car accident at the age of 18. Swami was the only survivor. Hospitalized for forty days, he pondered the fact of human suffering and the divine grace that had granted him life. Finally healed and spiritually more mature, he began to travel. "In the year 1980 I started traveling abroad to promote Hinduism. My first trip was to the UK," Swami recalls.

It was the start of a far-reaching and influential global mission. "He has a constant travel schedule all around the world," says Brahmachari Vrajvihari Sharan, a close disciple studying in the UK. He regarded his travels as a means of promoting Hinduism and speaking to Hindus no matter where they are. In 1980, most Hindus in the UK were immigrants who spoke Indian languages.

A Spiritual Powerhouse

While his guru stayed in the Vrindavan ashram, Swamiji reached out to devotees in Canada, America, the UK, Germany and elsewhere, inspiring, consoling and guiding each one. In so doing, he cultivated and nurtured an international following that is wide and influential, and this only by his early thirties.

In spite of his youth, Swami Gopal Sharan was considered an obvious choice to become the successor to his guru, Sri Swami Lalita Devacharya Maharaj, who also

made it clear to his close devotees that he regarded Swami as the one most qualified to carry on his work. The guru described him as "always quick to learn and profoundly compassionate." Swami Lalita Devacharya, immersed in God and blissful devotion, free from the stress that ails ordinary humans, left his body in 2007 at the age of 104.

Swami Gopal Sharan told Hinduism Today, "My guruji was a man of a very simple nature. For as long as I can remember, I found myself at his feet. He had the highest moral character, promoting our traditions and helping the poor and the needy. He loved to inspire others to inquire, to learn, to know more. His life was full of discipline and love. Those are qualities I have tried to imbibe from him."

Building God's Palaces

Building and maintaining places of worship and ashrams is an esteemed activity in the Nimbarka Sampradaya. Swami explains, "We have ancient temples of our sampradaya all over India. I am not involved with all of them, but in many prominent places I either belong to the managing committees or they frequently seek my advice. I think we have ashrams in every nook and corner of India! In Vrindavan, the gurus of the Nimbarka Sampradaya have more than 60 ashrams, big and small. I estimate that in all of India we have hundreds of ashrams, mostly in Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Punjab, Bengal and Maharashtra."

It was in holy Vrindavan, the city where Lord Krishna spent his childhood, that Swami Gopal Sharan built his first ashram, not far from that of his guruji. Today,

Swami lives most of the time at Brijwasan Golok Dham, a five-acre sanctuary of beauty and tranquility that he established in 2004.

Coming from nearby Delhi, a chaotic and polluted urban center, pilgrims find themselves stepping into an unexpected oasis of lush greenery, a place where one can sit under an inviting tree and meditate. Water fountains and a pond add to the serene atmosphere. But, as Swami explains, most important is that the entire complex, built over a 14-year period with the support of devotees worldwide, is designed to honor and foster Hinduism's traditions. The ashram's temple is built according to the Vastu Shastras. On the walls, art and writings convey the wisdom of the Vedas, the Puranas and other sacred literature. There are Hindu symbols

wherever one looks, be they tilak motifs, sacred plants or inspiring architecture.

The Brijwasan ashram is a fitting command center for a global operation. Its heart is the temple of Radha-Krishna, the Supreme God in the theology of Nimbarkacharya, founder of the Nimbarka Sampradaya, who according to tradition was born in 3095 bce. Adorning the feet of the Lord are abundant offerings of sacred tulsi grown at the ashram itself. Three other temples enhance the sacredness of the retreat. One glorifies Sri Durga, who is believed to give the blessings and energy underlying the sampradaya's mantra; another honors Sri Nimbarka Bhagavan and Sri Hanuman; and the third, the Sivalaya Mandir, enshrines Siva Mahadeva.

Nearby is the yagnasala, a vast pavilion built to the dimensions laid out in the Yajurveda, with a massive havana kunda (fire pit) that is more than six feet deep. Here, grains and ghee made with the milk from the ashram's cows are offered during elaborate Vedic ceremonies.

All Hindus have love and gratitude for the cow, but none can match that of Krishna's devotees. Brijwasan Golok Dham's 20 fine cows are cared for at the Sri Hari Gaushala, where Swamiji honors the gentle bovines every day. Feeding them is among his first sadhanas every morning. He offers sweet tokens of gratitude for their service--a few cubes of delicious jaggery. Their buttermilk, ghee, yoghurt and milk are used as offerings to Krishna daily.

Pilgrims from all over the world stay in the Bhakta Nivas 20-room guest facility, while visiting swamis are hosted in special apartments collectively called the Sant Nivas.

There are currently 22 resident brahmacharis. In addition to their sadhanas and religious training, they see to the ashram's many needs. Swami explains, "Brahmacharis have two options ahead of them. If they want to become householders, they can do so. However, they might choose to live a monk's life, and maybe even take sannyas."

Brijwasan Golok Dham ashram has a media department, Karyalaya, where publications, video and audio are produced and www.golokdham.org and www.nimbark.org managed. Swami is avidly using the latest technology to make his message of devotion to Sri Radha-Krishna reach every TV, computer and bookshelf in the world, saying, "Computers and the Internet, if positively used, are good for promotion of dharma." Finally, Swamiji's personal residence is called the Kutir ("small hut"), which includes his office and an audience hall.

Temples and Devotees Worldwide

Swami candidly explains his motivation to build more temples: "The mala we use to do our japa has 108 beads. So, in this lifetime, I should create 108 temples!"

He is well on the way. Seventy-two temples, big and small, have been consecrated so far, 30 of them in the United Kingdom. Temples have been established in Nottingham, Manchester, London and many more cities. Projects are moving forward in Newcastle, Edinbourough, Glasgow and Dublin, and devotees have recently initiated a temple in Munich, Germany.

While many of the temples are not part of his organization, or even belong to the Nimbarka Sampradaya, Swamiji readily provides assistance in any way he can. As a respected saint, he is on the advisory board of many temples. In all 72, he has performed the sacred prana pratistha ceremony, the opening of the Deities' eyes, invoking Divinity into them and marking the commencement of worship. Swami promises, "If any devotee, from anywhere, approaches us to build a Vaishnava temple, I will help."

Swami believes in reaching out to Hindus outside of his sampradaya, supporting and creating bonds with Saivites, Smartas and other Vaishnavas. In any of these branches of Hinduism, he states, one can "drink the real nectar of our Sanatana Dharma."

Swami's positive influence on the community enhances Hinduism's standing in society at large. During the inauguration of the three-story Sri Lakshmi Narayan Mandir at Bradford in May 2007, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and His Royal Highness Prince Philip attended the ceremony. It was the first and only time the monarch has attended the dedication of a Hindu temple. Swami Gopal Sharan

graced Her Majesty with a shawl. Swami said the Anglican Church had opposed her visit, but she decided to attend because she understands how important temples are to the Hindu community. "Everybody bows before love," Swami pointed out.

Ever Approachable

Swami's ability to reach out to devotees in faraway lands--as a counselor, a guide or the guru himself--is invaluable to Hindus of the diaspora who feel the need to maintain their connection with India, holding to their religion and their roots. Devotes and admirers speak highly of him and say their relationship with him is profoundly close.

"Guruji is a very loving person," says Dr. Kamal Gandhi, a Los Angeles doctor originally from Mumbai. "He is not a distant figure, far removed from us. When you and he are in the same place, you can always go see him, without making any appointment. We devotees are part of his family. He is our loving father and mother, all in one." Dr. Kamal's wife, Shradha Gandhi, shares, "We are inspired by his devotion to Hinduism. Every time we meet him, he has more knowledge to share. He inspires us to become better human beings. He also reminds us to remain connected to our own roots, follow our own religion,which we sometimes tend to forget while living in the West. He makes us understand how important it is to perform the daily rituals and practices and teach them to our children."

Megh Gupta, 27, an investment banker from Toronto, Canada, has known Swami Gopal Sharan for nine years. "What is important is that I get his one-on-one attention. Guruji has followers and devotees from all corners of the world. Still, he has time to make a phone call to you, talking about subjects that concern you. He calls me from India or even UK if he has not heard from me in a while," Gupta says with gratitude. "From my Guruji I have learned what is important in life, and what is not."

Inspired by their guru, Swami's Canadian devotees created the Golok Parikar. Exemplifying how Swami collaborates with other Hindu groups, the Golok Parikar focuses on tightening the weave of his devotees in Canada and cooperating with the Hindu community as a whole. Ranjana Sharma, a Toronto school principal, explains, "We are focusing now on community service. The Golok Parikar started a project to help the elderly, especially Hindus who have no support. We go to the hospitals and look after them, especially people who are terminally ill. We attended classes to be able to do that in a professional way. " Instead of building temples in

Candada specific to his own sampradaya, Swami wants to help the nation's 200 existing temples provide a solid base for the practice of Hinduism.

Words of Wisdom

Many of Swamiji's followers are young, in their twenties, many but not all from families of devotees. They learn that along with a tranquil, loving nature, Swami possesses has a sharp straightforwardness, and a knack for clarifying lofty concepts and helping disciples understand and apply the principles of dharma. For example, he boldly says,"Anyone who eats the flesh of animals is not a Hindu." Emphasizing purity of body and mind, he explains, "We do not consume items like garlic and onion, which are hot by nature and make our mind become restless. If our food is pure, then our thoughts will be pure. If we have bad food, we will get low thoughts. We must consume fresh vegetables, fresh fruits and fresh milk."

With religion comes the culture, Swami believes, and both shape the identity of the community. Mrs. Bahri, a devotee from Toronto, shares, "Swamiji encourages the Hindu way of dressing, so that others in our society will know we are Hindus. He asks the women to always use the bindi. If we do not maintain our identity as Hindus, then how can we inspire our future generations?"

Swami speaks strongly against corporal punishment of children. "We need to give children lots of love. We must explain the reasons behind things. We should emphasize they need to study to have a positive future. In our ashram, if a child makes some mistake, we point it out to inspire her to become a better human being. We do not have the right to beat any child. Beating is bad and should not happen."

Teenagers and young adults, Swami emphasizes, should live a disciplined life because it is in their own best interest to do so. "One thing youth must avoid is the urge to be free of all restraints and disciplines. Total freedom is a false concept. Youth must have a high moral character, serve their parents in a devoted manner and uphold Hindu dharma. No matter where you live, you must live as a disciplined and cultured person. You cannot accept the company of just anyone, or smoke or drink, or have late nights of indulgence and foul food. Try to help others. Try to help those who are needy and suffering. If you are able to give comfort and happiness to

someone, you must do it."

Another point of Swami Gopal Sharan's ministry is that the home must be the center of worship and daily sadhana. He counsels, "In the homes where morning abhishekam of God's murti is performed, an arati is done and food is first offered to God, the environment is better. Everything depends on how sacred your daily activities are, so for example, if eating becomes an act of devotion, with prayers before eating and food taken as holy prasadam, harmony will prevail. The other option is tamasic food, tamasic living, confused minds and the potential for deplorable domestic violence."

Brahmachari Vrajvihari Sharan summarizes his guru's main message to Hindus: "If people really want peace and progress, if they want real happiness which does not end, they should go back to their old roots, where the flawless Sanatana Dharma is. There, they will find all they need."

The Award

Previous recipients of the Hindu Renaissance Award are Swami Paramananda Bharati (1990), Swami Chidananda Saraswati (1991), Swami Chinmayananda , "Muniji" (1992), Mata Amritanandamayi Ma (1993), Swami Satchidananda (1994), Pramukhswami Maharaj (1995), Sathya Sai Baba (1996), Sri Chinmoy (1997), Swami Bua (1998), Swami Chidananda Saraswati of the Divine Life Society (1999), Ma Yoga Shakti (2000), T. S. Sambamurthy Sivachariar (2001), Dada Vaswani (2002), Sri Tiruchi Mahaswamigal (2003), Dr. K. Pichai Sivacharya (2004), Swami Tejomayananda (2005), Ramesh Bhai Oza (2006), Sri Balagangadharanathaswami (2007) and Swami Avdheshananda (2008).

Video of Shri Gopal Sharan Devacharya Receiving the Award During Nimbark Jayanti, November 18, 2010, New Delhi

The Holy Shaligram

It is is the oldest deity on the planet, according to the Nimbarka Sampradaya: a shaligram, worshiped as the manifested form of the Absolute, Sri Radha-Krishna.

A shaligram is a naturally formed stone, svayambhu, meaning "self-generated." Special marks denote it as a materialization of God among Vaishnavites. It is an

event of supreme auspiciousness to find one and worship it. The Skanda Purana says, "Any person who has seen a shaligram, paid obeisances to Him, bathed and worshiped Him has achieved the results of performing ten million sacrifices and giving ten million cows in charity."

Though many shaligrams are adored with fervent devotion, perhaps none is more revered than the one pictured at right. Called the Sri Sarveshwara Bhagawan, it was given by Lord Hamsa to the four Kumaras, who worshiped it from the primordial days of creation. It is believed this very shaligram was the inspiration for their enlightenment. Later Narada, the sage, carried it for thousands of years and eventually passed it on to Sri Nimbarkacharya.

Today, the Sri Sarveshwara Bhagawan is in the care of the Jagadguru of the entire Nimbarka lineage, His Holiness Sri Shri Radhasarveshwara Devacharya Maharaj, known as Sri Sriji Maharaj (see photo above). Only he and his successor are allowed to touch the sacred artifact, Lord Radha-Krishna's gift to humankind.

The Origins of the Nimbarka Sampradaya

Swami Gopal Sharan Devacharyaji belongs to the Nimbarka Sampradaya, one of the most respected Vaishnavite lineages. It has a rich history, an unbroken continuity of saints and safeguards one of the most holy shaligrams in existence (see sidebar, page 24).

The Padma Purana, an authoritative scripture among Vaishnavites, mentions the Nimbarka lineage by name. It says, "All mantras which have been given outside of an authorised sampradaya are fruitless." In the Kali Yuga, the scripture continues, there will be four truthful sampradayas, those founded by Madhva, Ramanuja, Vishnu and Nimbarka.

According to tradition, the sampradaya far predates the birth of Sri Nimbarka Bhagawan 5,104 years ago. First called the Kumara Sampradaya, it began when, in the celestial realms, Lord Brahma was asked a puzzling metaphysical question by His sons, the four Kumaras. Embarrassed, He could not find an answer. The Supreme Lord Radha-Krisha appeared before them as Hamsa Bhagawan and demonstrated that the question was itself fallacious, thus earning the admiration

and awe of the Kumaras, who took Him as their guru. For eons they learned from Him the highest esoteric secrets of creation. Eventually, they chose a disciple, Narada Muni.

One day, walking by a neem tree, Narada was impressed by a pious man called Nyamananda, who took to the tapas of meditating under neem trees and fasting only on neem juice. Nyamananda was no ordinary man. It is the belief of the Kumara Sampradaya that, foreseeing the deterioration of dharma that would occur in the Kali Yuga, Lord Radha-Krishna sent his sentient holy weapon, the blazing Sudarshana Chakra--said to outshine 1,000 suns--to take birth on Earth as Nyamananda. In a human body, he forgot his divine origins, but still longed for the Lord.

Sri Narada Muni initiated him into the sacred Gopala mantra, gave him the name Nimbarka and bestowed the philosophical secret of yugal upasana--that God is the eternal and perfect union of male and female, Radha-Krishna.

Sri Nimbarka later wrote, "Krishna is the Absolute, the Brahman, whose nature excludes all imperfection and is one mass of all noble qualities. Radha, Krishna's consort, is all radiant with joy and is endowed with a loveliness that reflects His nature." He eloquently expounded the doctrine of svabhavika dvaita-advaita, which holds that humans are one with God, yet temporarily different from Him.

Nimbarkacharya established for the Kumara Sampradaya a path to God defined by japa, devotion and selfless service. In the 14th century, Sri Harivyasa Devacharya split the order into 12 branches to better spread the teachings. Each of the branches, called dvaras, has a guru. They work harmoniously together as a wide-reaching spiritual family. One of them, however, is the respected leader of the whole sampradaya, the keeper of the Sri Sarveshwara Bhagawan and the architect of the lineage's future--currently, Sri Sriji Maharaj (see photo on page 24).