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Ananda Marga

Controversial Movement Survives Years Of Conflict, Emerges Stronger Than Ever

Shrii Shrii Anandamurti is a survivor. Even his enemies concede this. And enemies he does have-though not as many today as 20 years ago. The years have made him a little older and lot wiser. Ananda Marga, the organization that he founded in 1955, means "path of bliss." But for Anandamurti, the path of events through these last 34 years-seven of them spent in prison-has been anything but blissful. The early stages of his organization's development were characterized by a zealous, high-profile and outspoken social/political posture which eventually churned a backlash of highly publicized conflict and controversy that has been very difficult to overcome. Only through arduous, unrelenting social service coupled with a carefully restructured public image, sustained over a number of years, has the Calcutta-based Guru quelled earlier animosities. Good will toward the six-million-strong movement is growing steadily as they overcome bad press with good works. Twenty years ago the conventional wisdom was that Ananda Marga was a strange, secret, politically motivated cult. Today, a common understanding is that "the aspirations and ideals of the group appear to be noble and worthy."

Ananda Marga is primarily a spiritual organization. Yet, its agenda features far more than meditation.

Fiercely dedicated to certain political and social objectives in addition to their more contemplative endeavors, Ananda Margiis have fascinated and attracted a wide variety of people through the years. From quiet humanitarians and aspiring mediators in pursuit of the ultimate enlightenment to fiery radicals and political activists out to change the world, the ranks of Ananda Marga have swelled with a colorful kaleidoscope of individuals. While the Ananda Margiis of India were completely engulfed in a chain of political scandals that led to Shrii Shrii Anandamurti's 1971 arrest for murder, many students of Ananda Marga centers in the USA were lost in the Tandava Dance of Siva, singing kirtan and seeking absorption in Nirvikalpa Samadhi during hours of daily meditation.

Ananda Marga is established in 182 countries. Its international headquarters is registered in Calcutta as Ananda Marga Pracharak Sangh with Shrii Shrii Anandamurti as president. Outside India it is divided into nine world sectors headquartered in Berlin, New York, Hong Kong, Manila, Delhi, Nairobi (Kenya), Cairo, Georgetown (Guyana) and Suva (Fiji). Each sector is further divided into regions, dioceses, districts, towns and, finally, villages.

HINDUISM TODAY conducted an in-depth written interview via fax with Dhruva (Clark Forden), an Ananda Marga public relations associate for North and Central America. He explained that the sadhana of the Ananda Margiis is based in tantra. By tantra he means a set of "spiritual practices" which he contends were "never regarded as part of Hinduism," yet are "based on the teachings of Siva"-not to be confused with Saivism, which he agrees is a sect of Hinduism. Dhruva says that Ananda Marga "does not recognize, nor does it practice deity worship." However, they do study the Sanskrit language and place strong emphasis on the use of mantras. Like many other present-day spiritual organizations with a similar genesis in Hindu thought, Ananda Marga has carefully selected certain teachings of Hindu origin to form their philosophy, yet claim no affiliation to Hinduism-even as a source for such basic Hindu concepts as karma, reincarnation and the practices of yoga. Ananda Marga once sought to establish itself as a separate religion, but on October 21, 1983, the Supreme Court of India determined that Ananda Marga was not a separate religion, but simply a "religious denomination of Hinduism." Dhruva summarizes the aspiration of Ananda Marga as "liberation of self and service to all living beings."

The Social Vision

Shrii Anandamurti is considered brilliant. Many of his perceptions are highly organized though spiced to his disadvantage by a sometimes vociferous manner. They frequently reveal an intriguingly farsighted vision. Unlike many mystics he is supportive of scientific progress and makes extravagant speculations for its future.

"A day will come when man will be able to 'procreate' human bodies right in the scientist's laboratories," he proclaims in his 1973 book, *The Great Universe*. "Not only this, even spermatozoa and egg cells will be created in those laboratories. Slowly the human progeny will lose their procreative power; but this energy will be expressed as the creative impulses of the mind and will not be lost."

Baba, as Shrii Shrii Anandamurti is affectionately called by his devotees, frequently mentions science in connection with social progress-but with a qualification: "Civilization has an intimate relationship with science. They progress together, but when scientific progress surpasses civilization, the latter meets its end. Take, for instance, the history of Egypt and Greece."

Baba laments that through the years spiritual and religious leaders have done well in teaching the highest wisdom to a chosen few but have failed to bring such knowledge into the more mundane spheres of government, politics and economics. His view is that "this physical, material world is neither an illusion nor a great temptation, but the starting point of a spiritual journey" and should be developed with great effort. Upon this premise, he throws himself and his organization to the task of social work and politics-with a clear analysis of the problem:

"It is true that in the materialistic world a mighty attempt has been launched to conquer time, place and person," asserts Baba. "This attempt drags man forcibly forward. Whether any good is accomplished or not, speed is the main criterion. As a result, different social trends are unable to keep pace with one another. Some advance far ahead, some lag far behind, and the whole social structure crumbles."

Anandamurti wants to solve the problem. He speaks of a new kind of leader, a sadvipra or "true spiritual leader." This sadvipra will guide a new society of men who, unlike "the scientist who only worships creation and the hermit who contemplates destruction," will move judiciously toward "salvation," respecting all aspects of life equally.

The Federation

Baba seeks to mobilize these sadvипras to organize all of humanity into a one world federation, extinguishing all "provincial or national organizations" in the process. This concept has not been generally well accepted. Driven by a utopian vision and seeing himself and his organization at the center of a communist-like society, Anandamurti contends that "nationalism is fast becoming outdated" and that the problem is simply 'local leaders' fear of losing their control." He adds that with the passage of time "the necessity of a world federation will be felt in the heart of every human being" since it will become increasingly obvious that basic

physical problems would have to be solved on "a collective humanitarian basis." Baba's world federation will satisfy the fundamental needs of society by providing: 1. A common philosophy of life; 2. A common constitutional structure; 3. A common criminal code; 4. Availability of life's essentials.

"Human society is a singular entity," says Baba. "It is one and indivisible. Mankind has the same origin and the same destination-the same goal. All are coming from God and going to God. You come from the abode of peace and go to the abode of peace, but life is a struggle."

His perception of this destiny for mankind is the source of his idealism. His recognition of the fact that getting there is a struggle and requires effort is the source of his gut-level pragmatism. The differences between these two dramatic extremes in thought form a riddle for which, according to Baba, there is only one answer: Love.

"Building anything on humanistic lines requires a foundation of real love and affection for humanity," he asserts. "Where love is paramount, the question of personal loss or gain does not arise."

Education

Baba stresses the importance of education, starting none too soon in a child's life. But he doesn't believe in coerced learning.

"The thirst for knowledge must be awakened in students," he declares. "To satisfy that thirst adequate and proper education must be imparted. Then alone will education contribute to the well-being of the student's mind and spirit. No real good will come to human society if, instead of awakening the thirst for knowledge in the students' minds, the teachers make them swallow knowledge like quinine pills."

Baba' stresses morality, too. He speaks to parents, a student's first teachers: "The most important thing is that the child be infused with a strong idealism. To impart this, the parents require self-restraint and good judgment."

Baba's students find "morality" to be a repeated lesson of growing importance. His teachings hold that, not only does a contented society rest balanced on the firm foundation of morality, but the end of yoga is achieved only from within the safety and security of this most crucial quality.

"Morality is the foundation of sadhana. Morality is the base, intuition is the way and Life Divine is the goal," he propounds.

Anandamurti also says that man educates himself naturally because of his "inherent tendency to evolve." He sees this human inclination as the mechanism by which his perfect society will eventually manifest.

As he puts it: "The moment man sees the possibility of a defeat in the conflicts of this crude physical world, he undertakes to evolve new weapons to meet the challenge. Had there been no physical conflicts, the evolution of the human mind would not have been possible. The subtle human intellect would not have developed."

Shrii Shrii Anandamurti was born in Jamalpur Bihar, on Vaisakhi Purnima in 1921 to Shrii Lakshmi Narayan Sarkar and Shrimati Abharani Sarkar as Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar. As a young man, he worked as a railway clerk. Today, at 67 years of age, he lives in seclusion in Calcutta. He is actively discharging his duties as President of Ananda Marga Pracaraka Samgha and as spiritual guide for millions. Devotees say he requires only a few hours of sleep each night, which they regard as a sign of his excellent health.

There are many intriguing stories conveying the ethereal nature of Shrii Shrii Anandamurti's early mystical training. One of them goes like this: Night after night, a strong wind would blow in Jamalpur and the child (Anandamurti) would be carried away by the winds. He would not awake till the storm landed him on a far bank of

the Ganga, all alone in the dead of night. As the storm subsided, a sadhu with saffron robes, a long flowing beard and a trisula in one hand would appear from nowhere before the little child. He would recite the Sivamantras and urge the child to repeat them. Then, with the reappearance of the storm, the sadhu would vanish, and the child would be carried back home to his bed. This happened night after night, allowing the child to learn many ancient Sanskrit slokas. One night the child snatched away the sadhu's trisula. The sadhu cast away his guise and stood before the little child as Lord Siva Himself.

Conflict and Controversy

Perusing Ananda Marga's overly sensational media coverage of the past, one might be led to believe that the history of Ananda Marga is an avalanche of corruption and disgrace. Australia, Ethiopia (where Ananda Margiis were expelled in July, 1985), New Zealand and the Philippines have all refused visas to Anandamurti. Following the imprisonment of three Ananda Margiis on charges of attempting to murder Australian government officials in 1978, members have been banned from even visiting Australia.

In the past 20 years three major events stand out significantly: 1. Anandamurti's 1971 arrest for murder. 2. The 1971 exit of Anandamurti's wife from the organization following a sexual scandal. 3. The Calcutta massacre of 17 Ananda Margiis in 1982.

The Arrest: Anandamurti and four of his followers were arrested on December 29, 1971. They were charged with the murder of six ex-Margiis. The trial attracted international attention, especially when some disciples reportedly immolated themselves in protest against the arrest. The five were originally sentenced to life imprisonment but were later acquitted. They spent seven years in prison.

"The 1971 arrest of Anandamurti was one event in a history of persecution against Ananda Marga," Dhruva shared with HINDUISM TODAY. "That whole period [of imprisonment] was especially painful for all Ananda Margiis, as they were separated for years from their Guru. Those in India could not do their normal duties in their respective social service programs, and they could not even engage in open satsang.

"These events did not hamper the determination of Shrii Shrii Anandamurti nor of the members of Ananda Marga. Finally, justice prevailed in the false case against Anandamurti."

Uma Sarkar: Uma Sarkar was Anandamurti's wife. At one time she enjoyed a special place in the Ananda Marga hierarchy as "Marga Mata." On October 1, 1971, she left the organization with her son, Gautam, and a few Margiis after accusing her husband of sexual misconduct. Some say this event had more detrimental effect within the organization than even Anandamurti's arrest for murder.

Dhruva shares Ananda Marga's sentiments: "It is not completely clear what actually happened with Baba and Uma Sarkar. The personal issues between them are just that, personal. No one can fully assume anything about the dynamics that developed in their marriage, and we do not wish to do so here. I will say this though. Baba has acted and always will act with complete moral integrity. He is ethical in his behavior and his words.

"With respect to the sexual scandal specifically, it is completely an allegation based on false statements and someone's intended design to discredit Baba and the organization. It is also common that famous people are the brunt of malicious intent."

The Massacre: In Calcutta on April 30, 1982, 17 Ananda Margiis were brutally murdered in broad daylight before hundreds of witnesses.

Dhruva explains Ananda Marga's perception of the event: "The massacre of 17 Ananda Margiis was a tragic affair. It was a clear example of the persecution of Ananda Marga in its crudest form. Prior to this incident there were many threats against Ananda Marga in Calcutta. [It is suspected that] this act was carried out by the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Sixty-seven people were arrested. The case is currently proceeding. These people were acting as a vigilante group in response to completely false rumors that Ananda Marga was kidnapping children. In truth, Ananda Marga is running thousands of schools. It adopts homeless children into registered children's homes."

Tandava Dance

One fundamental sadhana performed by all Ananda Margiis is the Tandava Dance. Of all their spiritual practices, this is the one most misunderstood and criticized. A 1985 Illustrated Weekly (India) article referred to it as a "bizarre ritual" that used knives, snakes and skulls. It is, in fact, a powerful dance lasting for hours and culminating in quiet meditation.

At one time Ananda Marga tried to get permission to perform the dance publicly in India, but the Supreme Court declared that it "was not an essential rite of the Ananda Marga." Dhruva asserts that the Tandava Dance was introduced 7,000 years ago by Lord Siva, Himself.

"Tandava is the fundamental step, 'primordial pace,' of all oriental dance," says Dhruva. "It is derived from the Sanskrit word tandu, which means 'jumping' (supposedly based upon the behavior of rice grains as they bounced off the threshing floor). Tandava represents the struggle between the forces of life and death. Accordingly, the extended arms hold symbols traditionally associated with each. In the absence of any or all of these objects the process of imagination will suffice to do the dance properly (this is most commonly the practice for Ananda Margiis). This vigorous dance, performed individually as well as collectively, is intended for men only, since it has a masculinizing effect. It also has numerous health benefits."

Secrecy

Through the years Ananda Marga has often been accused of being overly secretive in its activities, thus leaving in some an impression of sinister intent. Dhruva explains that such covert methods of working are common in large organizations and even corporations that need to carefully maintain discretion in order to protect their profit margin. Dhruva adds that Ananda Marga has also become secretive due to years of unnecessary media harassment. Says Dhruva: "There is a secret to success that says secrecy guarantees success. The motives of Ananda Marga remain based on morality and spiritual dharma."

Strong spiritual leaders and institutions invariably attract strong opposition. Ananda Marga is no exception. Courage and faith have sustained them thus far. Now, it seems, they may be poised for a "kinder, more gentle" future.