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A Unique Man Shares Vision of Self-Sufficiency

Dato S. Samy Vellu is unquestionably Malaysia's most able and widely respected Hindu politician, son of a modern-day Benjamin Franklin. "Dato," (an honorary title awarded by Malaysia's king, somewhat akin to "Sir"), is credited with not only numerous programs to advance the Indian population, but with unifying the contentious Malaysian Indian Congress-previously so divided as to be the subject of ridicule by Indians, Chinese and Malays alike. The MIC is the official political representative to the government for the country's 1.2 million Hindus.

Advancing himself without benefit of much formal education, Dato started out as an architect, then switched to drama and brought plays to the estates under the Ministry of Information. Later he went into politics where he built a reputation with his honest personal life and for getting things done without creating reactions. HINDUISM TODAY'S interviewer said Dato is "very cordial, dynamic, deep voiced, every inch a real leader. His thinking is powerful, very strong."

Hinduism Today: Dato, what is the secret of your success in raising the status of Hindus in Malaysia?

Dato S. Samy Vellu: I have just sought simply to help all Malaysians to educate and upgrade themselves, but there is also at the same time a growing awareness among the Indian community, a growing urge, a need to be at par with the other communities here. And a unified approach is what has been needed all along. In the past, we suffered from endless divisions, but now more are coming forward with a sense of cooperation. This has been a significant change. We will come to be economically on par with the other communities.

We are even now making plans for a new vocational college for 3,500 students for

Indians and others from the poorer areas. You see, we cannot just give things to the poor. Gifts don't do much, they don't do much in the long run. What they need is knowledge and encouragement. Once they have knowledge and courage, they will possess their own means to success.

HT: Dato, what would you say is the next step for Malay Hindus?

Dato: Next we have to speak to the government and explain ourselves to them. They do listen. Although the government is constituted so it is bound to promote Islam, still it allows other religious groups to exist. It does not oppress. You must appreciate that it is in fact the most liberal Muslim government in the world. Of course, problems exist, as they always do, especially in a racially and religiously mixed society such as ours, but all problems can be solved when we put our minds to it.

HT: Even so, Dato, Hindus still seem to be basically uncomfortable surrounded as they are with a community whose ultimate purpose is to Islamize Malaysia. That is the purpose or the direction of the present government, isn't it?

Dato: Islam in Malaysia is strengthening itself, that's certain. This government is duty bound to see to the progress of Islam. But we need not be overly bothered by that. What we do need to do is strengthen ourselves as well. That is what we have to do. If we don't do that, then indeed we have a problem.

HT: Then what is the best way for Malaysia Hindus to strengthen themselves?

Dato: We must talk with the government with one voice. Islam has one voice. And to this effect I have proposed for years the establishment of a Hindu religious council for Malaysia to strengthen ourselves vis-a-vis the government, but this has not been accepted. We still have too much conflict in our views. But I still feel this is the answer, one Hindu council to get us organized and all pulling in the same direction. We can do it, we have the means. I feel that the temples, our temples of which we have so many, should be the center for educational programs, for social programs, for so many other things that we could do.

There should be active training centers for the youth. This is the kind of thing we should be concerned about, to make our religion more attractive. Other religions make themselves attractive by all manner of means. The youth should be attracted by Hinduism. But unfortunately, Hindus aren't doing anything at all to attract. Even our own youth, you go to the temple, what happens? The priest gives you a little bit of vibhuti, that's it.

HT: What do you think of the shortage of priests in Malaysia and the government's reluctance to issue visas for priests from India?

Dato: The government says, "We have been independent for 32 years now. The Christians and the Muslims have trained their own local priesthood in that time. What have you done in that time?" Nothing has been done by the Hindus to establish their own training schools in Malaysia. In this view, I intend to establish a priest training school. First bringing in priests from India and training at least 50 good qualified people who can then train others.

HT: Do you think the government will make laws to protect Hindus from conversion, as they have done for the Muslims?

Dato: No, this government cannot put impediments to the growth of Islam. That is impossible. But we should not look for such protection. What we must do is build up the willpower, keep ourselves tight and strong. The Malaysia Hindu Sangam asked me recently if I could do anything to stop Hindus being converted on the isolated estates. I said, "No, we shouldn't try to stop conversion in that way, we have to build up the willpower and faith in our religion." We should not be anti-conversion. We should educate our people so that they are not potential converts. People who try to convert others, what do they do? They are looking for good "catchment" areas. So if they come around, it is because we are easily caught. We're the ones who should prove that we are not so easily attracted and caught by such bait.

HT: What would you say is the biggest problem that Hindus face in Malaysia today?

Dato: We don't do our religious activities in an orderly manner. We don't have the proper machinery with which to propagate our religion. We need to review our machinery and modernize it for propagating Hinduism at this time. I'll give you an example. You ask a Christian, "What church do you belong to?" "Oh, I belong to St. Thomas over on such and such a street or I belong to St. Gabriel." But you ask a Hindu what temple he belongs to, he doesn't belong anywhere. No commitment, no machinery, no organization. That's our biggest need.

HT: Dato, four years ago, Hindus in Malaysia were quite concerned about extremism or extremist tendencies which were challenging the present government. The people were concerned about these extremists coming to power.

Dato: Well, they've lost out. In 32 years, that kind of thinking has lost all the ground that it has ever gained. The present government is strictly struggling against this tendency. It does not support extremism.

HT: What is the most successful part of the Muslim government's treatment of the Hindus.

Dato: The government provides the Hindus with places for worship, with land to build them on and with funds for building it. It spends about 1.5 to 2 million ringgits a year to do this and it does it without any fanfare, without being prodded or pushed into it.

HT: Do you have any thoughts, Dato, about Hinduism worldwide?

Dato: We must contact Hindus all over the world, in the most remote places, share information, help each other, continue in our efforts to present a one voice worldwide. And I believe that Hindus wherever they live in the world have to stand on their own. I've been saying to the Malaysians, we cannot depend on India anymore. Other than India's temples, there is not much happening there. You have all these mutts. I've traveled there myself and saw nothing great going on. They had gurus training one successor. I saw this happening at Kanchi Mutt. They had these very wealthy temples. They are building more and more great facilities, and

that's great. But there is no vast training in any significant manner for young people. We must establish our own styles and develop them ourselves.

Right in. Pesticides also killed the paddies' once-plentiful fish and eels and, according to the local hospital, even several farmers. Gradually, people abandoned the modern methods and went back to the water temples.

Still the determination to modernize Bali's agriculture did not end. Though Dr. Lansing insists, "There are no villains in this story," the scientists advising the Green Revolution stubbornly refused to accept that the water temple system had any value. "We don't need a high priest, we need a hydrologist [water scientist]," punned one engineer.

Meanwhile, the high priest was about to outmaneuver the scientist, for he had gotten the sympathetic ear of 38-year-old Dr. Stephen Lansing, currently chairman of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Southern California, and Dr. James Kramer, associate professor of biology at USC and Macintosh computer expert. Dr. Lansing told HINDUISM TODAY how they got involved. "I went to Bali [at age 21] in 1971 for six months and lived in the house of a man who was studying to become a priest. [By the mid-1970's] many of the people, who were my friends by then, were having to cope with the real chaos in irrigation and the major problems caused by the unenlightened side-effects of the Green Revolution. The concerns and the ideas of Balinese farmers and priests were not being taken seriously. I got Jim Kramer in this to communicate the meaning of these practices in a way that they would not be simply dismissed."

Studying the Water Temples

There are water temples all over Bali. They are part of a sophisticated form of Hinduism with ties to the ancient Angor Wat civilization of Cambodia. Rituals are conducted in Sanskrit, Balinese and ancient Javanese language, which is itself 50% Sanskrit. Goddess Dewi Danu is considered a feminine form of Lord Vishnu.

Dr. Lansing speaks fluent Balinese. When in Bali, he wears Balinese attire and

participates in the religious rituals of the water temples. He knew the temple system worked, but he didn't know how, so he set about systematically studying it. What he discovered explained simultaneously the success of the water temple system and the failure of the modern methods.

The particular set of temples in the Badung district which Dr. Lansing researched are under the authority of Gero Gde of the Ulun Danu Batur temple and control about half of Bali's agricultural land. The highly productive system is an intricate complex of canals, weirs, tunnels and ditches connected to 74 square miles of rice paddies. Every field has a temple at one corner, and every important point along the irrigation system has one also all the way up to the main temple.

Successful agriculture in Bali requires careful timing of planting, crop rotation and efficient and timely use of the ample, but not unlimited, water resources. The priests control the network of canals, ditches and tunnels which deliver the water to each farmer's paddy. Any change in this system must receive the approval of the head priest, Jero Gde. The priests' approach is quite simple and can be seen in the following description given by the second high priest, Jero Gde Alitan, of how he settled a water dispute between farmers and nearby villagers:

"I said to them, 'Who created this water? Who decides if this spring is full or dries up?' I said, 'Do you understand that if we fight over this gift from the Goddess, Her spring might just dry up? Completely vanish?' I brought them all up to the temple here, and when we had it settled, work began. The new canal ran off below the spring, and took off quite a lot of water. But-now this is the point-not 200 meters further downstream, the flow was back to normal. In fact, [the water supply] actually increased after everything was finished! I tell you, that made quite an impression. They're still afraid the spring might dry up!"

Dr. Lansing also discovered how the complex Balinese calendar system accurately set the optimum rice planting times each year. An earlier scientist had dismissed the calendar as, "completely divorced from the flow of observable natural events." In fact, the early study missed nearly every significant aspect of the water temple system. Dr. Lansing attributes this to the typical western attitude that ancient systems have nothing to teach us. He thinks they can teach much. (For Dr. Lansing's study, see the American Anthropologist, Vol 89, 1987, page 326-340.)

Convincing the Authorities

Even after successfully making the case for the water temples, Dr. Lansing could get nowhere with the concerned officials. The ecological interrelationships regulated by the priests and their temple rites were just too complex to easily grasp. Dr. Lansing turned to Dr. James Kramer, biochemist, ecologist and computer expert, to create some kind of simple demonstration of the system. Dr. Kramer set out to create a computer program which would show graphically how and why the water temples worked.

Dr. Kramer's Macintosh computer program considers the important variables of Bali's agriculture, such as rainfall, predators, pest outbreaks, etc. It also shows how the water temple system successfully adjusts to each of these factors to maximize the rice crop. At the same time, the program shows how the government's methods quickly led to extreme outbreaks of pests, just as happened in real life. Dr. Lansing and Dr. Kramer hauled their computer and its programs all the way to Bali. In a meeting held at the Ulun Danu temple, they demonstrated for scientists, high priests and government officials alike the value of the water temples. The demonstration opened many eyes. Now the scientists are looking into how they can integrate some of the Green Revolution's advancements into the water temple system.

Was it Science Versus Religion?

HINDUISM TODAY asked Dr. Kramer how the priests felt about scientific research into their religious, mystical and supernatural world. He explained, "The way the priests say it, it is not a coincidence that Dr. Lansing and I began working on this project at this time. They see our influence in a very positive way in trying to use a line of reasoning to support the temple system which is understandable to people who are not part of that religion." Asked if he felt, as the priests did, that the Goddess brought them to protect Her temples. Dr. Kramer said, "I would be the last to deny that. The circuitous route by which I found myself involved in this project is something less than rational."

In Bali, Dr. Lansing offers prayers at the water temples, receives holy water and is treated as any other devotee. Asked about his personal religious background, he

said, "I was raised as an Episcopalian.

But by now-I don't know how to put it-I'm very sympathetic to the Balinese and try to be helpful. One thing that is different about their set of beliefs is that the question of belief, whether or not you believe this, what things you believe or don't believe, never really arises. It is more a question of what you do and I am quite comfortable with that. The Episcopalians say that you have to begin by promising to believe a whole series of things. The Balinese don't ask for this. And I think that is nice."

The project has received good news coverage in the USA, appearing in Newsweek and The San Francisco Chronicle. Unfortunately, the journalists did not share the researchers' feelings or at least sensitivity toward Balinese Hinduism. The Chronicle said, "The key was not that the priests have supernatural allies blessing the fields," even though Hindus would say that indeed there are supernatural allies giving blessing. Usually tactful Newsweek still talked cynically about the farmers taking "great care not to offend Dewi Danu," and "placating the Goddess," as if the farmers lived in terror of what is really a beloved Goddess. Dr. Lansing and Dr. Kramer proved the scientific value of the system. But neither is prepared to claim his work discredits the supernatural side of the water temples or the benevolence of Goddess Dewi Danu.

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