

[Young Hindu Bard Vitalizes Storytelling Art](#)

Category : [November 1989](#)

Published by Anonymous on Nov. 02, 1989

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Rameshbhai Thrills Crowds with Sacred Song And Soliloquy but Faults Narrow-Mindedness

Garud, Nandini "Do you want more?" he asked. The rapt audience roared, "Yes!" and 32-year-old Rameshbhai Oza drew in a full chest of air and sang on, inundating the urban Hindu crowd with three more hours of divine melody, soulful philosophical soliloquy and yams of exquisitely woven, metaphoric tales of Gods and Goddesses. Finally, the midnight hour encroached bringing sobering thoughts of long drives home, worried baby-sitters and 5:00 AM alarm clocks. The temporal magic subsided and all parted the young kathak (divine storyteller) enriched with an experience of tangible spirituality.

For ten days in August, this brahmin commerce graduate enthralled over 9,000 people-mostly Gujarati-in a series of oratory performances at the San Jose Civic Auditorium, California, sponsored by his local devotees, the "Devotional Associates of Sitaram."

Rameshbhai, married and without children, jaunts around the globe (usually with his wife) doing kirtan, katha and parayana (scriptural discourse). Though "home" is downtown Bombay, you are more likely to find him in London, Sweden, Portugal, Bombay 01 Africa.

The handsome and daringly opinionated Rameshbhai is the "inspirer and adviser" of the international Sanskruti Foundation. Like himself, it is young, forming and full of vision. Through its aegis, Rameshbhai plans to train children-even Hindu children from abroad-in Vedic religion. His tiny half-acre ashram in Gujarat, India, is now too small, and he has reportedly leased around 200 acres from the state government to build a bigger, self-sufficient ashram/school/farm near Porbandar, India. Mrs. Nandini Garud interviewed Shri Rameshbhai for HINDUISM TODAY at the home of Mr. Naranji Patel, president of Sanskruti Foundation USA. The interview was translated from Hindi.

Rameshbhai looks directly at you while speaking. He has an engaging look, gleaming white teeth, a self-assured stance and an impressive presence. He is convincing as a religious leader but you could also visualize him behind an executive desk calling the shots.

HINDUISM TODAY: What is your advice to Hindus living in India?

Rameshbhai Oza: We are Hindus and we should be proud of it. I have not seen another religion which has as profound a philosophy as Hindu dharma. However, shackled in rituals, divisions set in of caste and subcaste, touchable and untouchable. Because of this, our religion suffered a lot. Secondly, Hindu dharma has many sampradayas [spiritual lineages]. All these sampradayas are different roads told by rishis to obtain God, but the goal is the same. In the diversity of sampradayas, our society lost unity. Whatever sampradaya we may belong to, they all flow from the same lake of Sanatoria Dharma [Eternal Way]. We should become "Sanatanis."

HT: What is your advice to Hindus living in the West?

Oza: When we go outside the home, we become Westernized. It is essential that the atmosphere in the home be completely Hindu. The problem is we bring the Western customs into our homes. This is a nation of immigrants. I hear the president here pleads to people to preserve their own culture and language. The problem is we are not proud of what we are. We take pride in becoming Western. This should not be. If we have become citizens of America, we have full responsibility towards this nation, its laws, the national anthem. But when it comes to religion, all Americans are of different religions. When we are home, we should be completely Hindu. There should be a small shrine of God in the house. The house is worth a million dollars, but there is no image of God or picture, no lamp is lit twice a day, no prayer is offered even once a day. If we do not remember God at the time of dinner, then how are we Hindu? Secondly, we should speak only our mother tongue at home. If your language is not preserved, you will not understand your religious scriptures, your culture and the thoughts of your religion. It hurts me very much that parents take pride in conversing with their kids in English. It is like striking our feet with an axe in our own hands.

HT: What is the biggest problem facing Hindus today and what will be the biggest challenge in the 1990's?

Oza: People are awakening to [the idea] that nobody should be considered untouchable by the reason of caste. Secondly, our Vedanta. There was much talk about palayanavadi Vedanta, [escapist Vedanta] - "Whatever is happening, let it happen; everything is happening by His will." [It teaches] even if dharma is in danger, we watch as a witness. Hinduism is known for its generosity and tolerance; this should not be interpreted as timidity. We should understand Hinduism as Vivekananda did. Roar like a tiger, brother! Arjuna [facing his enemies in the Mahabharata war] would have said, "Why do I need to kill? I will walk away!" But Krishna said, "Kill because dharma is to be saved."

Also, we have the darshanashastras because we have freedom of thought and speech. In other religions if someone says something contrary to the established religion, he is killed off! We even allow charvak darshana which is atheistic, totally against the philosophy of Hinduism.

But you are asking me what can be done for the coming generation, after the 1990's? Truth, austerity, purity, and compassion. These four pillars are of the Universal Dharma. There is no narrow-mindedness in them...And tap does not mean sitting in the forest holding the nose; it means enduring whatever difficulties that may arise while adhering to the truth, without forsaking the truth. Also, purity in eating and drinking: for this we have rules for not eating whatever, whenever, wherever we please.

HT: This includes being vegetarian?

Oza: Yes. Acharya Vinoba Bhave puts beautifully the meaning of the word Hindu: "The person who is saddened by harming is Hindu."

HT: What specifically is the challenge or the problem for the Hindus ahead?

Oza: We have to get away from rituals. The problem today is, when we leave home to go to the temple, our religion starts only then. Once we reach the temple, take the darshan [view God], it is over. The dharma, the temple, should be the Gangotri [source of the sacred Ganges] of our religion. When we get out of the temple, the Ganga of dharma should flow with us; we should bring it home, to our work, to our office...Religion should be in our breath, not just in rituals when we wear the mala, put on tilak and go to temple to become "religious."

See, I believe, as I was telling my wife, the religion of the entire world is one. Just as the cloth is originally white and people color it with different colors, we call this Vaishvik Dharma, Sanatana Dharma. Islam and Christianity came and colored it with different colors...When I was in Sweden, the journalists asked me if I had come to convert. I told them, "We are Hindus. We do not convert. We convince."

HT: When others want to convert Hindus, here and in India, how can we deal with them?

Oza: Our Hindu brothers and sisters who convert are very poor. They are bought into it because they are given food, clothing, education for the kids...When we had Moslem emperors there were conversions out of helplessness and fear. Now we have conversions out of greed...We have to do something for our destitute classes with our religion so that they do not convert out of greed and helplessness. I am not opposed to temples and gurudwaras [Sikh temples] where we do not have any...But the millions and billions of rupees that we sink in temples, we [could] spend instead for the manav mandir [human temple], that is, our destitute brothers and sisters.

HT: What was your greatest disappointment in your work as a spiritual leader?

Oza: Was and is-people do not come out of the narrowness of sampradayas but keep quarrelling inside under the name of sampradaya. Even the "big gurus" of our sampradayas keep telling their followers miscellaneous, superfluous things to keep holding their own. I am very disappointed seeing this...But we can surely overcome this because our coming generation is educated; it has its own power of free thinking. They do not simply follow the dharma guru; they test that the guru's saying is true, real. This sign seems very good to me. Simply accepting is not faith.

Our new generation has questions. And if there are questions, it is a very good thing. We must appreciate their questions. For this reason, if they later on act after understanding, then dharma will not remain shackled in rituals. Whatever we do, if we do it without understanding, it is mere ritual; with understanding, it is true religion.

HT: What has been your greatest challenge and/or reward in your religious work?

Oza: Challenge - to eradicate extreme adherence to custom that has been implanted for years. And my greatest reward is the joy of life I am experiencing after coming to this field.

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