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Published by Anonymous on Dec. 02, 1989

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With No Wars to Fight, a Hindu Army Chief Leads His Men into Karma Yoga

In 1986, the Chief of the Mauritian Army, Colonel J. R. Dayal, took leave of duty and went to India. No gun, no privates swashbuckling at his side and not one thought of war. He was after peace, of the most personal kind. He tracked down one of the 12 fabled Jyotir Lingam temples in Ujjain - a city in India's arid northwest - and prostrated before a big, oval, black stone. What he received was not the Ultimate Peace, but a commission of peace - a seed idea to build a Sivalingam temple back in his French/Creole-speaking, 50%-Hindu country.

Colonel Dayal returned. Two years passed as his vision slowly matured. He proceeded to have a black granite stone quarried from the hills of Rajasthan, India, and carved into a 4-foot-tall, 800-lb. Sivalingam. It arrived in Mauritius on February 8th, 1989, and was safe-guarded at one of his Special Mobile Forces (SMF) units for a couple weeks. Meanwhile, high atop this tiny island, in misty rain, on the edge of the island's most sacred lake, Grand-Bassin, a small cadre of army soldiers - Christian, Muslim and Hindu - were feverishly mortaring together a temple to house the magical stone. Their work order said, "Complete in 30 days!" They had only until the 26th. They obeyed orders, got it done on time and the giant rock sank into its pedestal base amidst Sanskrit chanting, flowing ghee, honey, curd, rice and flowers.

Then some local magic happened. As reported by Sadhaka Adiyanhara, "On the fifth day of installation ceremonies, the weather was very stormy and the wind was blowing hard - this lake is 2,500 above sea-level - and it blew out the lamp in the shrine. A uniformed soldier saw it and told Colonel Dayal. Just as he bent over to light it, a bolt of lightning cracked, striking the brass trident protruding from the dome. Raw electricity surged into the wiring and momentarily lit the shrine's colored ceiling lights. Torrential rains fell, raising the lake's water level one foot, nearly inundating the shrine itself. The Nepalese priest, Acharya Sharma, later contacted authorities in India and concluded these unusual events confirmed that this was the 13th Jyotirlingam." Though this new identity will, for most, take more

time and continued testimonial experience to indelibly establish, attendance meanwhile is guaranteed. This is because half the island's million people (including many non-Hindus) trek forty miles to their revered, mountain-top lake, Grand Bassin, each year at Shivaratri - a national holiday - to worship at an older Lingam temple and now at the soldiers' new Maurituseswar Nath Shiv Jyotir Lingum Temple, too.

The 'Big Little Army' Serves All

Colonel Dayal's army is not Hindu. Though this month they built a Hindu temple, next month they might be repairing a Christian convent. And, they are soldiers not unlike you would find in any other country in the world. But Mauritius itself is not like any country in the world. Mauritius is small, very small - only 750 square miles - and safely surrounded by a quiet, aquamarine ocean, 1,300 miles off the coast of Africa. Its only attackers - year-round - are invading hordes of pale, European tourists who come to bask on the island's white sand beaches and pay fares that keep the economy afloat.

With peace as pervasive as the canopy of flowers and sugarcane-fields that girdle the island in brilliant colors, the army (actually a branch of the police department) simply can't justify spending all its time engaged in war games. So, with zest and regimen, they fight an array of very practical concerns. For example, while on a "terrain familiarization" exercise on the tiny, nearby island, Rodrigues, their Alpha Company distributed TVs, food and clothing. And their Engineer Squadron hand built a peace monument called "Global Co-operation for a Better World," conceived by Colonel Dayal. Under their humanitarian agency called, "SMF Hearts and Minds Campaign," they win the hearts and minds of the islandfolk by doing things like raising US\$4,000 for a Drug Rehabilitation Fund, removing thousands of pesty, porcupine-like sea urchins from beach lagoons, repairing a mosque's minaret during the Moslem holy month of Ramadhan and even playing Roman soldiers in a stage drama Jesus Christ Superstar, performed for the Royal Highnesses, the Duke and Duchess of York, visiting from England.

But don't think these kindly, karma yogis are "soft." They drill hard, and are, by any standards, a crack troupe - discipline and decorum are tight. And though the soldiers are mostly Indian, there's a very marked British air of regalia and showmanship about them - a character imprint left behind by British rule. But the deeper spirit of the SMF soldiers today is their new way of looking at themselves as

social servants, using peacetime to do peaceful things, like erect a temple.

Here's the kind of straight talk that the colonel uses to create this new self-image: "A committed and dedicated soldier invigorated with the ardour of spirituality is always geared and preconditioned to meet the challenges of daily pressure with a certain philosophy that he is always above pettiness and lowliness. His prime motive as a karma yogi [selfless servant] is Self-Realization within the framework of the Supreme Soul." And in Dayal's army that means getting dirt under the fingernails, getting jobs done and doing them for others - now. Even the army's military motto, "The difficult we do immediately; the impossible takes a little longer," was too complacent for him. He changed it to, "We'll do it; What is it?" And that's why the island likes him.

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