Decrying Dogma, Guyana Pandit Rallies Nation's Young
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South American Coed Cultural Academy Breaks Up Old Pattern of Apathy

Call him "Patton" because he commands, the "Pied Piper" because the youth love the sound of his upbeat, modernized Hindu oratory, "Pundit" because he's priest or "Deputy Speaker" because he's a distinguished member of parliament for over 25 years. Whatever you call him, the Hindu folk of Guyana aren't confused. Pandit Persaud is a household word in this seaside South American country of nearly a half-million Hindus - 45% of the population. His organization, the Guyana Hindu Dharmic Sabha and its army of volunteers, have waged war on Hindu apathy and chronic neglect of their youth for almost two decades. Finally the tide is turning. And though Pandit Reepu Daman Persaud now often wears an unmodest, exultant smile, it doesn't completely hide a taxed, weathered look showing the road there wasn't easy.

Pandit Persaud's biggest coup is constructing a new cultural center. It's 80 by 45 feet, two-story, costs about US $120,000, quietly located on a small lot on the outskirts of Georgetown and stands three months away from completion. But for thousands of Guyanans the Dharmic Sabha Sanscritik Kendra is already a castle, a colossal citadel of Hindu identity and a key symbol of Hindu revival in their Western-leaning land. "Everyone is very happy," Persaud told HINDUISM TODAY, "but the people who are the most happy are the youth of the rural areas who have been deprived of special education and training. Our new building will allow us to select boys and girls from all areas, house, feed and train them at our academy and then send them back to their areas where they can then be fine models for others. We have developed a very broad syllabus: Hindi, Sanskrit, vocal and instrumental music, dance, Indian cuisine, crafts, philosophy, meditation and vegetarianism. Parents and youth alike are very enthusiastic. We plan to open in September."

With spirits running high, 54-year-old Pandit motors around the country

fund-raising as fast as he can. He parks in a town, rolls up his sleeves and for three days stages rallies every night in open fields. "I gather about 4 or 5 thousand people, give a talk on some aspect of Hinduism, do some bhajans, then make an appeal and make the collections, in cash, right then. About 80% are youth." Why do they flock to hear him? He's "kid savvy." A father of six himself, he knows long-winded lectures on tangled Indian philosophy are death in public. Instead, "I propagate Hinduism in a modern way," he shares. "I often quote from HINDUISM TODAY, telling them, for example, about the mathematical genius Shakuntala Devi, making a point that she attributes her ability to Ganapati and reincarnation."

After his talks, many youngsters invariably corner the slightly-greying, handsome Persaud and grill him for further explanation. It's at this up - close range that many youngsters confide to their hero/teacher their disgust for the caste system, adding that, "absolute equality for the possibility of God - Realization" should replace less democratic thinking.

On Assignment in Moscow

But his country's eighty-three thousand square miles are still too confining for the global mind of Persaud. He's after international Hindu progress as much as national and was one of only 8 Hindu leaders to represent 700 million at two annual Global Forums, in Oxford in 1988 and in Moscow in January of this year. Elbow rubbing with Gorbachev and hobnobbing with the world's leaders in religion, science and politics was his work while there. When among his fellow Hindus, he would always find an apt Vedic quote to elucidate the issues.

His scholarly pedigree and political status notwithstanding, this "Pandit of the people" never feels too high to bend and beg for his new cultural center - his real pride and joy. He couldn't resist putting out his begging bowl to Guyana from Russia. It caught $5,000. "That's quarter million Guyana dollars," Persaud tallies swiftly. Guyana is poor. Persaud can't change that fact. But he is making sure his countrymen are not poorly informed and anchors a regular radio program to disseminate international and national Hindu news.

Where does this athletic-looking priest find time to run Guyana's largest Hindu institution with 120 country-wide branches, serve in parliament, do radio work and

run a big family? No one really knows and "everyone wonders," Persaud admits. But one thing is for sure - his family lightens his load. His wife Indrani runs the Sabha's Women's Wing, teaching Indian cooking and his children are like foot soldiers getting sent on little assignments every time they walk in their front door. They love it. But when the heat of the equatorial sun or the heat of ordinary human emotional involvement overloads his circuits, Persaud confesses he sneaks down to the quays and jetties of the breezy Carribbean, walking alone along the sea walls, cooling off in the ocean spray.

Though he's been an aggressive front-line worker in Hindu affairs for over three decades, one still wonders if he hasn't a criticism or two. He does and openly shares, "I would like to see more flexibility, removal of dogmas as much as possible, or completely, and the projection of Hinduism more as a rich philosophy of values that can be applied on a daily basis." And though he himself conducts the most elaborate of ritual - an 11-day homa in New York last June - he still insists, "People should realize that pujas are not the be - all and end-all of religion."

Persaud is wise. He knows youth are demanding more than temple worship. They want the socializing ingredient. And in today's permissive society, if they don't get it in the name of Hinduism, they'll get it elsewhere - where often there's a price to pay for it. He and his generation don't want that to happen. So dollars are flowing fast into his solutions: the new high-calibre coed Hindu cultural academy and year-round countrywide youth camps with their spectacular buffet of varied activities - a total diet holistically feeding body, emotions, mind and soul.

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