Veerashaiva Youth Speak Out at Canada Gathering
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Two Generations of North American Siva Lingam Worshippers Tackle Tough Issues with Open Minds

"I went to this year's convention voluntarily," law student Hemant Parvatraj carefully emphasized. He has been to these events before. Packed in the car, driven a long way, fed and returned. Parents' orders. This one was different. "After this one, I feel comfortable being a Veerashaiva. You could call me a born-again Veerashaiva!" he laughed. Though such spiritual awakenings didn't descend on everyone, the July 6th gathering for the 500-family strong Veerashaiva Samaja of North America was the "best yet." Youth and adult workshops, humor, face-to-face confrontations, friendly differences, a little preaching, lots of mind-stretching, new friendships, fun and a fantastic vegetarian food fare unequivocally brought their "family" closer together. The site this year was the invitingly cosmopolitan Canadian city of Toronto. About 125 families flew or drove from far reaches of the US and Canada to resonate religious identities. Amazingly close-knit for the distances that divide them, this energetic band of egalitarian-minded Sivalingam worshippers trace their roots to Karnataka and further to Saint Basavanna, the rebel founder/saint of this sect.

The opinion gristmill of the conference was expectedly the workshops. First youth and adults met separately. Then punctually, 60 Veerashaiva brothers and sisters entered the adult arena from behind closed doors where they had conclaved for over an hour. A sturdy, well-dressed young man took the microphone and faced a sea of adults. Parents eagerly awaited his "report" - all noticeably more intimidated each year as their "kids" were all-too-suddenly maturing into opinionated adults.

We discussed several things," Prashant Prabhu began, "our religion, faith versus practice, racism. We talked about sex, premarital sex, dating and sex after marriage," he half-teased his audience. Suppressed giggles escaped some, but

icicle expressions condensed on most others. Pregnant pause. "We all expected some sense of humor," the MC quickly interjected on a separate microphone, coaxing his generation to "lighten up."

Premarital sex? Though it did come up at their workshop, the youth didn't waste precious annual moments together formally adopting Western-patented promiscuity. "It came up," Prashanth later related. "Many of the youth had no objections to it; but I also sensed others want to follow the pattern of their parents." What more vigrously occurred was a reckoning process by young navigators setting a course on new seas using two maps - one from India and one from the West. Mr. Deo Kernahan sympathizes with (heir challenge: "Some parents never give an inch. They forget there is something dynamic in this ancient non-dogmatic tradition that can change without losing its fundamental principles of truth and beauty."

Marriage, as usual, bent the compass the most directions. As in every Hindu community, most Veerashaiva adults desperately want their youth to grab hold of the cultural reins of their tradition and take Veerashaiva spouses to insure this happens. But 4 of 14 recent Veerashaiva marriages have been with white. Western girls. This unnerves many but wins surprising philosophic tolerance from others. "Even one of our key speakers. Dr. Ishwaran, made the point," convention cochairman Prabhakar Mahant relayed to HINDUISM TODAY, "that Basavanna gave up his life supporting the idea of marrying outside one's faith and caste. I myself think Basavanna would today say 'Marry whoever you want.'" Others disagree. "Basavanna did not say to go out of Veerashaivism and marry some other person," Mrs. Subramania persuasively told a packed hall. "He said if you do marry outside caste, convert the person you marry and make them a Lingayat." Applause followed. Actually, the youth themselves are not against inter-faith marrying. "I myself do want to marry another Veerashaiva, but someone raised here," Padma Rajashekar, 20, told HINDUISM TODAY, adding that she, and her age-group, needs to meet more youth to choose from.

The arranged marriage issue also splinters the group. "In arranged marriages, love starts on the day of the marriage; in love marriages, the love ends on that day," joked an adult, igniting a chorus of laughter. The youth weren't humored. "I don't want to sound rude," responded Prashanth, "but in a way I'd feel violated of my rights [if my marriage was arranged]. As much as I want to preserve my religion, I would rather find a person myself I would be happy with."

Youth idealism erupted at every turn. "Why, if we are supposed to be such non-materialistic people, do we always look at the man's professional earning power first, rather than consider how religiously he follows the faith?" another challenged. "I thought spiritual happiness was most important."

Many voiced the need for more facilities. "Every Sunday, my 10-year-old son asks, 'Why don't we go to church?'" a concerned mother confessed. Others said more youth camps are needed both for socializing and to provide that nebulous panacea, religious education.

LIGAM WORSHIPPERS Veerashaivism must be counted among the spiritual treasures of the earth. It is compassionate, anti-caste, open-minded path, followed by 5-8 million people who live mostly in Karnataka. Veerashaivites seek immediate and personal experience of Lord's Siva and devalue any mediation of that ultimate human encounter. It stresses free will, declares all men equal urges service to mankind and holds, "Siva you are, you shall return to Siva."

Founded at the down of history, it was reformed and revitalized by Saint Basavanna who lived from 1150 to 1167. Veera ("heroic") Saivites are also known as Lingayats, a reference to the personal Siva Lingam members are enjoined to wear. Like Buddha's rebellion in the 6th century BCE, Basavanna also revolted against the Brahminical system. He rejected caste hierarchy, a multiplicity of Gods, the magico-ritualistic (and allegedly self-aggrandizing) priestcraft, temple worship, duality of God and soul an the idea of ritual purity/pollution and doing charity to win God's special favour. To him, formal religions are the "establishment," static institutions that promise man security and predictability whereas religion must be dynamic, spontaneous, freed of bargains extracted in exchange for salvation. One of the greatest mystics to follow and flower from his teachings was Akka Mahadevi. Her poems are now jewels of Veerashaiva scripture. One of the most distinguished and respected devout Lingayats of the modern era is B.D. Jati, twice president of India. He told HINDUISM TODAY recently: "You have to go beyond the form of Siva. When I worship the Siva linga, I am also worshipping myself. The soul is part of the pure Cosmic Energy."

Cosmopolitan Guru

H.H. Jagadguru Mata Mahadevi

After a transforming vision and personal message from Akka Mahadevi, the 12th century woman mystic, a then 20-year-old Mata Mahadevi boldly turned in her sari for the sannyasini's cloth. Today she runs a large institution, Viswa Kalyana Mission, in Bangalore, India, primarily serving the spiritual needs of women. She writes prolifically, commands respect from all charters and travels to uplift Veerashaiva communities throughout the world. The following are excerpts from a recent HINDUISM TODAY interview:

"People think there is no need of religion or spirituality these days but as a philosopher has said, 'Man has learned to fly like a bird in the sky and swim like a fish in the sea, but man has not learned to live like a man.' Only religion in its genuine form can save man from destruction. This world is a beautiful creation of God. We must forget what the "Western-influenced" man has created in this world in the name of God, religion and caste. In the name of secularism there is no freedom for us to teach religion through school education. They have misunderstood teaching religion as & communalism. Also, people in the name of rationalism are taking people away from God. In our organization, the women are especially coming forward and doing very good work. This happens because we give them the opportunity. Uma, Parvati, she was the first yogini. Shiva encouraged the equality of women. In India there are some who say ladies cannot utter the Vedas. But Shiva preached in the Agamas that women can do yoga sadhana, spirituality, everything. Women are initiated into the mantram Awn Namasivaya and they are allowed to be sannyasinis and do tapasana."

The New Guard

Youth Reflections for a Stronger Future

You should call these conventions social gatherings rather than religious meetings. People just go to talk. The bigger purpose of these conventions is to promote our beliefs. But when we actually have them, so many people just sit out in the hall and talk and talk. Like in the morning when the ladies sang bhajans, none of the adults bothered to go in and sit and listen. I think if we had more pujas during these conventions it would help a lot. Many of the youth don't take that much interest in

Veerashaivism and often our parents don't know the answers to our questions. I can't blame the youth. It's really the fault of the parents because most of the parents are only interested in making money and not into religion so much. Although I do have a Sivalinga, I don't wear it. I actually don't know why I don't wear it. I guess it's because I don't want to be embarrassed and be asked questions about it. I do think I want to marry a Veerashaiva girl." - Rajesh Mahant, 22, Convention Youth Coordinator, attends university and enjoys creative computer work as well as running.

"The youth are much more an active part in our organization. Just organizing this youth workshop, we in turn learned much more about the religion and thus are better able to carry it on and teach our own kids. Those in college are more interested. Kids in high school are at the stage where they want to rebel and are not so interested. At college you realize its OK to have different values, be different, be non-Christian. Although I do linga worship during festivals, I don't wear the linga on my person. I would like to see us bring forward more the tenets of the faith not being practiced very much. For example, Veerashaivism proposes there is only one God. Shiva, but my family and others celebrate festivals for other Deities. The related question is: "Can we ourselves modify Veerashaiva philosophy to fit modern times?' I also think we need other means besides these conferences to socialize with other Veerashaiva youth." - Padma Rajashekar, 20, attends medical college, enjoys aerobics and swimming and co-edits a Veerashaiva youth newsletter.

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