

Vidarbha learns the Art of Living

October 31, 2007



The scene outside Dr Ambedkar Airport in Nagpur on October 29 was frenzied. Dozens of volunteers dressed in white and sporting a pink head band were among the crowd that had converged to catch a glimpse of their revered *Bangalore ke baba*. Spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar was to arrive on a much-anticipated visit to Vidarbha.

However, much to the disappointment of the waiting admirers, Sri Sri was whisked away from another airport exit. The convoy of cars swelled during the 155 km journey to Yavatmal district in Maharashtra's Vidarbha region. Along the road, people waved and cheered - having waited for a darshan of their guruji.

This was Sri Sri's first visit to Yavatmal (second to Vidarbha). The reason: Art of Living, a non-governmental organization founded by him, has been trying to address the psychological trauma and financial burden of the farmers in the region. He also participated in the three-day Kisan Sanjeevan Shivir (farmers' camp) organized in the district, with over 15,000 participants.

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After the darshan, Sri Sri headed towards Bodhbodan, one of the villages in the district where the AOL's Swavalamban (self reliance) program had paid rich dividends.

The stadium was packed. Blaring loudspeakers and big screen coupled with religious chants evoked a festive yet spiritual environment at the stadium.

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After a round of felicitations, Sri Sri began his interaction with the estimated two lakh-strong gathering.

He said: "*Poverty and financial distress are not the cause for suicides. Even progressive states like Kerala and developed countries like Japan have a high suicide rate. Falling self confidence due to lack of spirituality is the major factor behind suicides.*

"Begging is a better option than suicides. Lord Buddha taught his disciples to seek bhiksha (seeking alms). Ask without hesitation. Let not your egos come in your way to seek help from your neighbour when you need it the most.

"Let nobody be allowed to commit suicide. It is not a solution to any problem. We have faced floods, draughts and other calamities... we even fought the British to win our independence...yet we never lost courage or resorted to suicides. So why is it that we have this situation now? It is simply because we have forgotten the inner strength that we have."

Sri Sri's words were greeted with thunderous applause. After the discourse, the spiritual leader asked his disciples to meditate. The calming effect of Sri Sri's words had an instant impact...even on me (not usually a believer).

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The spiritual leader then headed for Brahmi village, where the self reliance program had yielded notable results. Riding a colourful, decorated bullock cart, he went around the village, interacting with residents.

Addressing the farmers, Sri Sri stressed upon the need to adopt zero-budget farming. *"Excessive use of chemicals has poisoned the soil and it is bringing down the produce. Grow alternative crops. If you are reaping only losses in cotton farming, grow groundnuts and vegetables that can increase your profits while at the same time enriching the soil,"* he advised the farmers

Through the AOL's Youth Leadership Training Program, women in the village have been

empowered to work along with the men. Over 40 women have been financially supporting their families, thanks to the stitching course initiated by the AOL.

Efforts are on to provide adequate sanitation facilities in the village. An initiative to provide smokeless chulhas and toilets in every household is also underway.

During his visit, Sri Sri also met officials of the six affected districts, including collectors, deputy collectors and zilla parishad executives. He urged them to work for the betterment of the debt-ridden farmers

"Administrators need to have patience to listen, acquire proper judgment and develop intuitive power. You need to motivate your subordinates to perform to their potential," the spiritual guru told the government officials.

The two day tour of Vidarbha, though hectic, did reveal one aspect -- Help others to help yourself. It works!