

Confederacy of joy

More than a million people gathered at Bangalore for a mammoth show of music, meditation, and oneness to celebrate the silver jubilee of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's Art of Living Foundation. Vijay Simha went to check out what the fuss was all about

It's getting to be 5.30 in the evening as the sun slowly sets over the Jakkur Flying Club airfield on the outskirts of Bangalore. The field is big enough to hold a dozen large stadiums. There are close to 10 lakh people here: eight lakh in position and another two lakh on their way in. It is February 19, Sunday, the final day of the grand three-day celebration to mark the silver jubilee of the Art of Living (AOL) Foundation. There are women, men and children; the old and the young; the hale and the ill; the single and the married; the damaged and the healed. Some can dance, some have to be wheeled in. For three days, they've all been part of music, meditation and discussion in this mammoth spiritual Woodstock. Now, they waited.



Bangalore, the capital of Karnataka, was one of the original boomtowns 20 years ago. It has close to 40 spiritual institutions where there is enormous churning of thought as some of the prime religious minds in the country get to work. It was here that militants gunned down one of Delhi's top scientists a few weeks ago at a conference. It has produced some of India's top cricketers, and hosts thrilling cricket matches. It has made giant strides as one of the world's leading centres of Information Technology (IT). This Sunday, as the traffic thinned outside the Jakkur airfield, it was about to make a mark in another it: Inner Transformation. The sermons and speeches were over. It was time for silence.

Abruptly, Ravi Shankar stopped chanting and it was over. Moments of absolute silence followed. Then, some began to laugh. Some sobbed. This was mass catharsis. It's like they were being turned inside out. The result of the most intimate human act, breathing. For many this was their first time being silent

"Everybody sit where you are. Just sit down and relax," said a man of perspicuous, delicate agreeableness. He had flowing black hair and a beard with a strong streak of white. For days, his face could be seen all over the city, having displaced the glam brigade from the billboards. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar was all but ready to lead the biggest yoga and meditation exercise the world had seen. He was 30 feet up on the colossal dais. In front of him was a sea of heads, stretching as far as the eye could see. The shuffling stopped. A prodigious hush fell.

The Sudarshan Kriya — a yogic routine of rhythmic breathing at differing speeds, which can last from 45 minutes to an hour-and-a-half — was about to begin. "Soooooo hamm, soooooo hammm, soooo hammm," Ravi Shankar chanted. You inhaled with 'sooo', exhaled with 'hamm'. Inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale. A sudden signal and 20 lakh arms went up. This was stage four of Sudarshan Kriya — inhaling as the arms went up and exhaling as they came down. Like the chugging of a train picking up speed, the pace became faster and faster. And then, abruptly, Ravi Shankar stopped chanting and it was over. Moments of absolute silence followed. Then, some began to laugh. Some sobbed. Others fell into a trance of sorts. This was mass catharsis. It's like they were being turned inside out. The result of the most intimate human act, breathing. For many this is their first time being silent. Ravi Shankar is gentle with them. "Take a few more minutes if you want and just sit quietly," he says.

In the silence you can sense that an enormous dialogue is taking place. A dialogue between different worlds. This is what Ravi Shankar refers to in the public forum, the most private conversation between self and spirit. That intimate communication where God as spiritual interrogator asks questions that spurs a response from the heart. There are people in the congregation who have lived with the consequences of professional ferocity, emotional violence, and material vehemence. In their individual encounters with the spirit they were experiencing a conferment of personhood denied by social interpretation and unreason. This was divine dialogue.

William James, considered the father of psychology, described this experience in his seminal work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: "To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior, and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior, and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities. This at least is what conversion signifies in general terms, whether or not we believe that a direct divine operation is needed to bring such a moral change about."

It is, in a sense, a collision with the infinite. And many are not prepared for the clarity it brings. Partho Kumar narrates how it happened to him eight months ago: "I've been a journalist with Zee News and Amar Ujala. I used to write a lot of critical stories on godmen who amass wealth. One day a swami came while I was on a visit to my hometown. I was skeptical. He held my hand and said, 'Make me one promise.' I asked, what. He said, 'You would take the Art of Living course once.' It was a small thing to ask, so I agreed. I enrolled in a six-day course. When it was over I returned home. Six days without meat or liquor was a bit heavy. So I called a friend over, bought some whiskey, and got some fish fry. I dimmed the lights. I am a Bengali and love fish. I took a bite of the fish. It had a bad smell and a bad taste. I spat it out and took a sip of whiskey. I was shocked. It tasted like the first ever time I drank. So I said to myself that I must have beer instead. The same thing happened. I was like a virgin drinker. I couldn't do it. Since then I've been in the Art of Living. I feed my son meat. But I'm a vegetarian now."

From the moment he experienced the change, Partho Kumar says he was gripped by a desire to devote his days to piety and virtue. He says he feels liberated now and sees his conversion as a mandate to free people from material and emotional bonds.

Says Noah A. Samara, chairman and ceo of Worldspace satellite radio: "My entire being seems to dissolve and everything seems to seep into me. I am one with the animate and the inanimate. Sudarshan Kriya is the highest form of communication. It has transformed me, as it will others. One breath at a time. One person at a time."

And it isn't just Ravi Shankar who is doing this. There has been a massive spiritual revival globally with India at its centre. Ravi Shankar's Art of Living (AOL) Foundation has centres in over 141 countries. A good indicator of AOL's following is the composition of the congregation. Until a few years ago, spiritualism was a refuge for the retired. At Jakkur, nearly 60 percent of the attendees were youngsters. The stress of daily life — at work, at home, in relationships — is affecting the young more and more.

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Exercises like Sudarshan Kriya help 'detoxify' the mind and the body of negative emotions; they help release stress and rejuvenate the individual. Wellness is the mantra here, not gods and goddesses. Which is why, perhaps, a great many AOL volunteers come from the upper strata of society, with a generous sprinkling of the Page-3 type, who are not attracted to religion but take hugely to emotional repair.

So there are art dealers, bankers, financial consultants, journalists and CEOs. Ravi Shankar's following is so large that he has taken a whole hill 40 kilometres from Bangalore on a 99-year lease from the Karnataka government. A sprawling, three-storeyed modern Ashram is situated there. There's a lake, a helipad, dining halls, a cyber cafe, a bookshop and residential quarters. There are so many people milling around that it seems like the whole world is around. People from more than 125 countries attended AOL's silver jubilee celebrations. Ravi Shankar has a dedicated channel on Worldspace radio, and plans to start an online university soon to teach Vedic math. And Ravi Shankar doesn't come cheap: delegates had to pay Rs 5,000 each to attend the AOL celebrations. The fee for a basic AOL course is Rs 200 if it is part of a special promotion drive, and Rs 1,000 for a full-fledged course. At a rough enrolment estimate of about five lakh, the total fee amount would come to Rs 50 crore.

Sathya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi in Andhra Pradesh has long attracted devotees from all over the world. He has an even bigger set-up in Puttaparthi; he runs a university and hospitals. To his followers Sai Baba is divine, with miraculous powers. He commands several lakh devotees worldwide. When it comes to popular following today, Swami Ramdev of Hardwar, comes closest to Ravi Shankar. Ramdev is a television star, and his yoga and pranayam lessons have an audience running into millions in the 10 countries that receive broadcasts from the Aastha television channel.

Then there's Mata Amrithanandamayi, the 'hugging saint' of Kerala. She's the lone woman among the top seers in India. More remarkably, despite her low-caste origins, she too has a huge following among the elites. She runs her own Amritha television channel, and has assets running into crores of rupees. The two famous Bapus — Asaram Bapu and Murari Bapu — are also television stars, known for their discourses, but their following though massive, is less than that of Swami Ramdev and Ravi Shankar.

A spiritualist of an entirely different sort is Swami Agnivesh, who calls himself a heretic and follows his own brand of spiritualism. Agnivesh is a well-known activist, who has campaigned against superstition and religious dogma all his life. He is one of Asia's leading campaigners against child labour. "Let my voice be the voice of a heretic. I practice proactive social spirituality. I have in the past wondered how to relate to the Creator until I realised that the best way was to relate to his creation. I have also understood that to be truthful within, I must challenge the untruth outside."

Agnivesh arrived at his own brand of spiritualism after he questioned his early encounters with superstition. "I was discouraged from asking questions on God. Simple questions of a child like how does a God read with four heads, how does he use a pillow, how do they sleep, how do Gods with heads of various animals talk. Then there were days when I was told not to touch my mother or I will have to take a bath. My own mother and sister became untouchables on some days. Today I ask people to doubt, debate and dissent. To be just within, one must address injustice without. Humanity needs new thought. We must usher in a new world of spirituality," he said.



Ecstasy For The Agonised:
Sri Sri Ravi Shankar leads the meditation class

Ravi Shankar says the world needs more positivity, and less crying. "It is necessary to be happy and healthy. A personality of integrity is necessary. The corporate world especially needs to be spiritual to enable sustainable development. And for the world to come together we need secular spiritualism," he says. Words like these attract many.

Rasmus Poulsen is an editor with Denmark's national radio. Poulsen had a chance encounter with Ravi Shankar, and has been a devotee ever since. "I see Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Rastafarians, and others unified by the Art of Living. That is comforting. I have received e-mails from friends in Teheran and Lahore to say they are sorry that some Muslims are burning the Danish flag. They want me to know that such people are in a minority. I replied that I am sorry that we are offending their religion. It doesn't represent the general opinion in Denmark. I am ashamed of the recklessness that my country has become representative of," Poulsen says.

Even Ravi Shankar is not perfect. Followers say he is rarely angry. And when he is angry, he can bring the roof down. And that's just where the kriya comes in

He says that he gave up drinking because of AOL. "It also gave me the strength to not care so much about so many things. There was a competition in Denmark that I and my friends were very keen on winning. We did very well but we lost the final. I was never a good loser but I didn't feel sad at all. That must be because of the exercises I do. It was remarkably different from how I normally do things," he says.

A little away from Poulsen, Kate Bassett is writing to dear ones in London. "Hey girls, being in Bangalore has really changed my perspective. If you really want to do something you can just go ahead and nothing will stop you unless you let it," she writes. Mazhar Shabeeh is a marketing manager from London. He is a Shia Muslim born in Pakistan. He also mentions the cartoon controversy. "Earlier I didn't know how to manage my emotions. I had an anger problem. Now I understand that the cartoons come from ignorance and unawareness," he says. Shabeeh says he was always taught to pray with nothing on his mind but never quite managed it. "Then one day I went to namaz after doing the Kriya. Man, there was nothing in my head except God. It was a beautiful moment. I am here to spread the message to people who are sick with stress that it doesn't need to be that way," he says.

The King of Ghana, Osagyefuo Amoatia Ofori Panin, King of Akyem Abuakwa, is also a convert. He has made his first trip to India for the AOL jubilee. Any manager must do the AOL course, he says. Ravi Shankar's lessons cut across national boundaries. Seeing people of different nationalities at the same time, prompted Philip Claeys, Belgian member of the European Parliament, to say that values existed before politics, and there was nothing much that politicians could do to help in those areas.

That is the key: the root of problems appears to be emotions and no school or college in India teaches how to handle emotions. With stress levels galloping in modern life, there's a desperate search for solutions. Spirituality

appeals because it doesn't come with the tag of religion. In its essence, there are no rituals in spirituality though many spiritual men like to conduct pujas and go through serious rituals.

The heart of it, though, is in the mind. James refers to the example of the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy in his Varieties of Religious Experience. Wrote James: "Little by little, Tolstoy came to the conviction — he says it took him two years to arrive there — that his trouble had not been with life in general, not with the common life of common men, but with the life of the upper, intellectual, artistic classes, the life which he had personally always led, the cerebral life, the life of conventionality, artificiality, and personal ambition. He had been living wrongly and must change. To work for animal needs, to abjure lies and vanities, to relieve common wants, to be simple, to believe in God, therein lay happiness again.

"I remember,' he (Tolstoy) says, 'one day in early spring, I was alone in the forest, lending my ear to its mysterious noises. I listened, and my thought went back to what for these three years it always was busy with — the quest of God. But the idea of him, I said, how did I ever come by the idea? And again there arose in me, with this thought, glad aspirations towards life. Everything in me awoke and received a meaning ... Why do I look farther, a voice within me asked. He is there: he, without whom one cannot live. To acknowledge God and to live are one and the same thing. God is what life is. Well, then! Live, seek God, and there will be no life without him . .

"After this, things cleared up within me and about me better than ever, and the light has never wholly died away. I was saved from suicide. Just how or when the change took place I cannot tell. But as insensibly and gradually as the force of life had been annulled within me, and I had reached my moral deathbed, just as gradually and imperceptibly did the energy of life come back. And what was strange was that this energy that came back was nothing new. It was my ancient juvenile force of faith, the belief that the sole purpose of my life was to be better. I gave up the life of the conventional world, recognising it to be no life, but a parody on life, which its superfluities simply keep us from comprehending,' — and Tolstoy thereupon embraced the life of the peasants, and has felt right and happy, or at least relatively so, ever since.

"... Although a literary artist, Tolstoy was one of those primitive oaks of men to whom the superfluities and insincerities, the cupidities, complications, and cruelties of our polite civilisation are profoundly unsatisfying, and for whom the eternal veracities lie with more natural and animal things. His crisis was the getting of his soul in order, the discovery of its genuine habitat and vocation, the escape from falsehoods into what for him were ways of truth. It was a case of heterogeneous personality tardily and slowly finding its unity and level," James wrote.

Who among us doesn't want to get our soul in order? Even Ravi Shankar is not perfect. Some of his followers report that he does get angry, although rarely. And when he does get angry, he can bring the roof down. That scares people. And that is just where the Sudarshan Kriya comes in.

with inputs from M. Radhika in Bangalore

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