

# India Abroad magazine

## Finding oneself

Summer camps held at ashrams provide both spiritual and cultural solace



Children and counselors at a Rangoli competition at the Hindu Heritage Summer Camp

## ■ COVER STORY ■

**W**hen she first attended summer camp, Sumati Jain and her brother were to attend it for just a week. Now, after eight years of attending, she's the director of the camp.

Sumati is one of the many children who have blossomed at the Hindu Heritage Summer camp, says organizer Padmanabh Kamath.

Run by the Hindu Heritage Summer Camp Inc., this camp lasting two weeks is held in Penfield, about 25 minutes drive from Rochester, New York.

Sumati, who is from Shreveport, Louisiana, had come over with her brother for just one week but had loved the experience of people like themselves – an experience they sorely missed where they were – that they asked their parents to send over money for the second week, too.

According to Kamath, demand has been so high that, for the last four years, two camps have been held every summer.

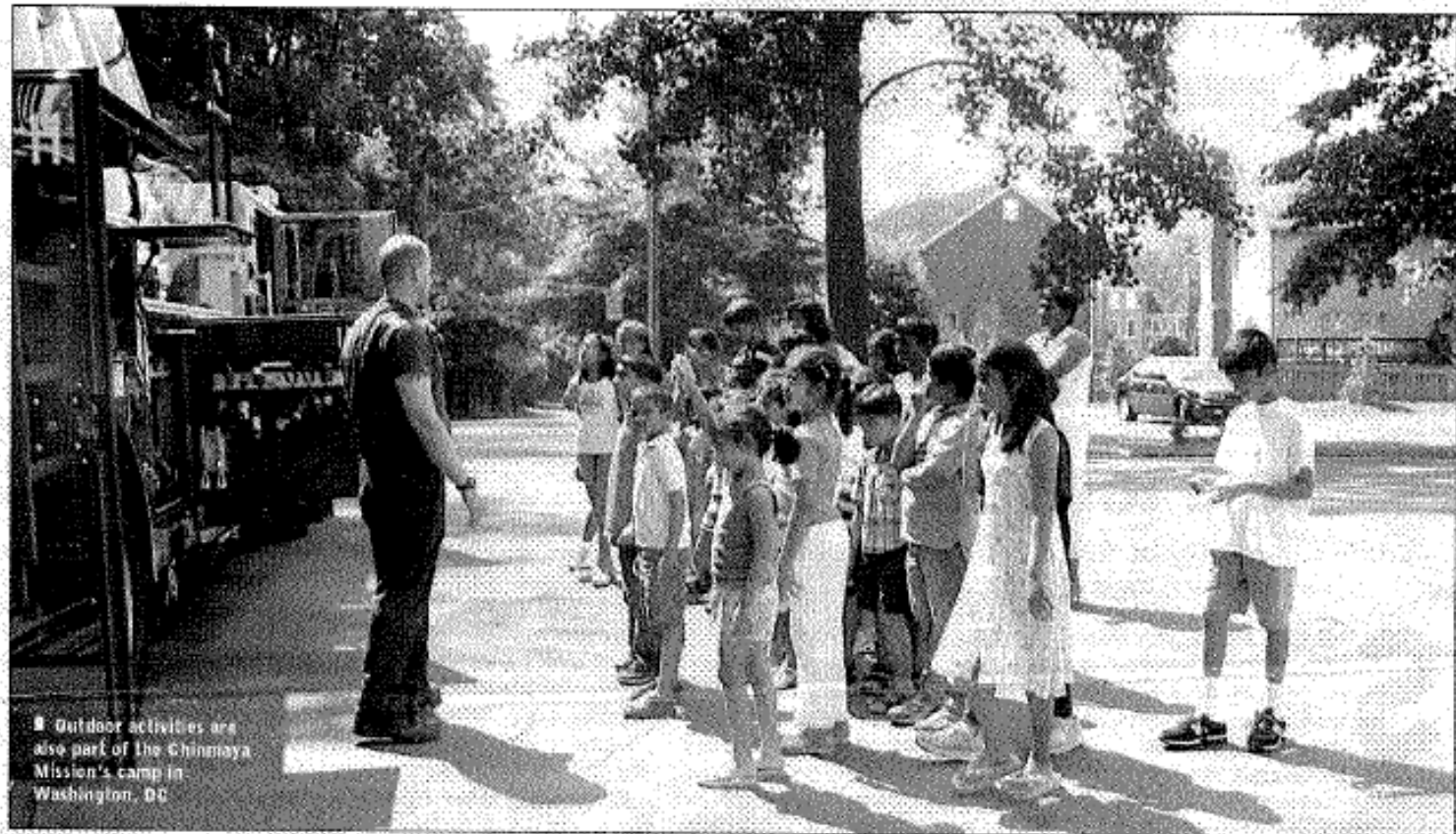
The camp, situated on a hill and with a scenic view, has children getting up at 7 am and doing yoga between 7.45 am and 8.30 am. After breakfast, they participate in a puja from 9.15 am to 10 am, after which they learn Indian philosophy and Sanskrit till noon.

After lunch the children get free time, only to return in the evenings for arts and crafts and to listen to experts discuss their areas of expertise. A recent speaker on non-violence was Arun Gandhi, grandson of the Mahatma.

Counselors – old campers themselves – hear them out and, with young directors like Sumati who have had the same experience, the children have a great time, says Kamath.

"The counseling sessions are very helpful," says Sumati, adding, "In our culture it is hard to find our voice." And the sessions, at which adults are persona non grata, allows children to develop better verbal skills, she says.

The Chinmaya Mission in Washington, DC, holds, if anything, a more intense camp, one lasting four weeks. Going from 8 am to 5 pm, it involves training in traditional chanting, Sanskrit shlokas and yoga. The theme of the camp this year, 'Grow and



■ Outdoor activities are also part of the Chinmaya Mission's camp in Washington, DC

## Mixing fun and spirituality

Culture and camaraderie find common ground in children's camps, says **P Rajendran**

glow,' was based on the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. The camp breaks children into three groups – those aged 5 to 6, 7 to 9, and 10 to 12.

As in the Rochester camp, children who have attended the camp can come back when they're older and become volunteers, getting trained in leadership and in the nuances of dealing with children, says Sethuraman Balan, one of the organizers.

Swami Dhirananda, the resident acharya at the Mission in Washington, DC, also

takes time out to teach the children, he says.

Besides the intensive training, the children also learn both indoor games and some outdoor ones.

The demand is high enough to ensure that applications go into waiting lists, he says.

Demand is always not so high in other places. Swami Atmavidyanath of the Vedanta Society of South California says that the society had to close down a children's camp because of a lack of demand. Now it runs a more intellectual retreat for

adults, he says.

Other places hold camps that are stronger on culture than spirituality. So Barsana Dham teaches children dance during the summer.

According to Balan, these camps help children bond in a way they wouldn't otherwise. "Children don't want to go. I hear that these children humming bits from the Gita in the bathroom," he says.

You can't expect something more traditional than that. ■