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Ramjanmabhoomi, Social Reform and Improving Relations With Other Religious Groups Top Agenda

Allahabad, an ancient holy town in Uttar Pradesh, North India, was on January 25 and 26, 1993, a venue of what has come to be known as the Maha Sangam, or "Great Gathering," comprised of saints and seers from all over the country. Officially known as the Dharma Sansad, "Parliament of Righteousness," it was attended by about 3,000 Hindu religious leaders and several Buddhist and Jain monks. The Maha Sangam was held at a vast expanse of land called Sangam (at the confluence of three sacred rivers, Ganga, Jamuna and the invisible Saraswati). It coincided with the most important Hindu holy gathering called Kumbha Mela, attended by more than a million pilgrims.

The meeting was specifically called to decide the next phase of the movement for the construction of the Shri Ram temple in Ayodhya. But the speakers there one after another drew attention to the need for building a strong Indian society based on the foundations of its prana-dharma as defined by Lord Shiva and Lord Krishna and preached in the Upanishads and other holy scriptures. By prana-dharma is meant the inherent spirituality that has always been an essential characteristic of India, permeating the entire social fabric. When this inherent spirituality has been deserted in the past, crises have developed in the nation.

India is witnessing a unique phenomenon today: resurgence of Hinduism in a way not even dreamt of by its most ardent protagonists. It is being felt as a "wave" sweeping across the country, bringing about unexpected changes. It has helped millions of agnostic Hindus return to the fold of what has been called dharma here

for centuries. It has also won over for this land thousands of those who often drew inspiration from abroad. Even those who denied the existence of spirit but always tried to turn the matter into a God, such as the communists, have begun quoting from the Gita and the Upanishads.

The meeting was meticulously planned by the All-India Sant Samiti, headed by Mahant Ramchandra Paramhansa and the Ramjanmabhoomi Reconstruction Committee headed by Swami Vander. The impact has upset political parties opposed to the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party and the forces hostile to India's newly resurgent Hinduism. It is being claimed that its decisions - for example the creation of a new all-India body, Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas Manch, to rebuild the Ram temple - would go a long way towards frustrating the efforts of those who are trying to prevent bodies like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the BJP from setting the country's agenda.

The Maha Sangam, also called "Virat Hindu Sammelan," had the blessings of two Shankaracharyas. The Shankaracharya of Jyotishpeeth, Swami Shantanand Saraswati Maharaj, supported the resolutions the meeting had adopted for the protection of culture and nation and the creation of a Hindu State. The Shankaracharya of Puripeeth, Swami Shri Nischalanand Saraswati, asked the meeting to carry its message all over the world through video cassettes and bring to light the tortures Hindus are facing in Pakistan, Bangladesh and several Arab countries. But he also advised those attending to think of ways of establishing brotherhood between the Hindus and other communities in India. Digambar Jain Muni Ganadharacharya emphasized the need for everyone to fight the forces which are violating the honor and dignity of the Hindu Samaj.

A number of saints spoke from the dais in challenging and warning tones to those who, they said, still harbor intentions against Hinduism, which believes in the principle of universality and works for oneness of human society. The speakers included Swami Vamder, President of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas; Swami Vijayanand of Calcutta; Mahant Ramchandra Paramhansa; Mahant Aavidyanath; M.P., Swami Rambhadra from Chitrakoot; Mahant Nrityagopal Das; Swami Chinmayanand; M.P., Swami Vasudevacharya and Sadhvi Uma Bharti, M.P. Each of them received thundering applause from thousands of people who sat for hours listening to their appeals to work for the unity of the Hindu society. Some of them did speak angrily about the persons in power denigrating Hinduism to appease Muslim fundamentalists for electoral benefits, but none called for retaliation against any minority community. They urged their audience to work peacefully.

Swami Vamdeva called for a "revision" of the constitution in such a way that it suits the country's socio-cultural ethos. Item five of the resolutions adopted at the meeting called for ensuring "social justice to the workers, exploited, women and those discriminated against on the basis of caste." It also called for "eliminating poverty" from the country by promoting forces that can bring about genuine economic changes.

Much has happened in the country in the last 50 years that has not only made the common peoples' dreams of living a happy and contented life more difficult to realize but also caused, on the contrary, fresh socio-economic problems for them. According to Brahmachari Tapanandji Maharaj of Calcutta, casteism has become more pervasive, the evil of untouchability continues to be practiced with greater vigor by socially advantaged persons. Social evils have been used by political parties to further their interests, and sectarian feelings have been exploited to grab state power. Above all, minorities have been pitted against the Hindus by the politicians for selfish ends. Says the Brahmachari: "This compels the saints to fight against these evils by working for re-establishment of dharma."

These sittings have helped bring about a strong sense of unity among all sections of Hindus, forgetting all their differences. This unity has become fortified following the actions taken by the government to denounce the demolition of the disputed structure in Ayodhya, ban Hindu organizations like VHP, RSS, Bajrang Dal and dismiss the BJP Governments in four States. The recent decision to ban a one-million strong rally of the Hindus by the BJP in Delhi on February 25 has only further helped the Hindu forces to organize.

The resurgence of Hinduism does not mean only that Hindus are seeking an identity for themselves or coming together and rising above their regional, linguistic and caste differences. It means much more: "It is, in essence, the re-assertion (if the prana-dharma of the Bharatvarsha [India] in the face of continuous onslaught on it for centuries," says Swami Chinmayanand, a young and articulate Member of Parliament.

The Indian press was not particularly charitable in evaluating the meeting. India Today reports that the BJP had agreed in 1989 to accept "the sadhus' supremacy" and agree to resolutions adopted by the Dharma Sansad. The magazine states in a January 31st article that, "The party's agenda has been hijacked by the saffron-robed sadhus whose blind obsession with the mandir issue has led them to

treat the constitution, the law of the land, its secular commitments and the democratic process with undisguised contempt." They quote Sitaram Yechurch, a Communist Party of India (Marxist) politburo member. "By mixing religion with politics, the BJP is taking the country back to medieval theocracy."

The first major sitting of the Dharma Sansad, or Parliament of Righteousness, was held in Delhi in 1984. It played a major role in organizing the saints and swamis in the country to put up resistance to the onslaught on Hinduism. The last such parliament met 14 centuries ago in the reign of the Hindu King Harshvardhan to solve the problems the society had then faced. The 1984 meeting was attended by 528 saints and swamis. It unanimously resolved to work for the protection of Hinduism against attacks and denigration and to restore the prestige it had once enjoyed. The pressure mounted by this meeting resulted in the opening in 1986 of the locks on the disputed structure in Ayodhya where the idols of Rama had been installed in 1949.

Four more sittings of Dharma Sansad were held thereafter - the second at Udipi in 1985, the third in Allahabad in 1989, the fourth in Delhi in April 1991 and the fifth again in Delhi in October 1992. The attendance of holy men at these meetings has been steadily going up from about 600 at the first to 1,000 in 1992 and 3,000 this year.

Dharma and The State

Jagatguru Ramanujacharya, Vasudevacharya, now based in Ayodhya, said at Allahabad that in the days when India evoked admiration all over the world. Raja Shastra (political science) was an integral part of Dharma Shastra (science of dharma). The reason is that no aspect of life can be divorced from dharma. "How then can one claim today that politics is separate from dharma?" he asks. In a similar vein speaks Mahant Ramchandra Paramhansa, a renowned saint: "Religion (in the sense of guiding dharma or righteousness and not a particular sect) has been indistinguishable from politics since the Vedic days. Through religion we learn truth, honesty and tolerance - integral parts of politics." Mahant Narainjanachari claims "far from vitiating it, religion always cleanses politics."

The tradition of dharma guiding the political activity, as largely was the case

before 1947, was largely set aside with India's independence and adoption of "secularism" as a national policy. In the beginning it meant maintaining equidistance from all religions. Later anti-religious forces in the form of the atheists and communists slowly maneuvered "secularism" into a virtual abandonment of any traditional sense of dharma. It suited many politicians to practice secularism with this meaning as it freed them from the control of dharmic injunctions. They began to claim that dharma and politics are separate, even though the fact is that India had always functioned - till the arrival of the Muslims - under the benevolent watch of dharma and dharmacharyas.

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