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100,000 Hear Leaders' Vision on Peace, Hindu Unity, Women's and Youth Issues

Mathur, Rakesh An estimated 100,000 Hindus from all comers of the United Kingdom gathered at the Milton Keynes Bowl, some 50 miles north of London, England, on August 26th and 27th, 1989. In the benign presence of scores of dharmacharyas and swamis, they were joined by several hundred of their counterparts from over twenty countries, It was a sight to see and a memory to cherish. Never before in history has such a mammoth gathering of Hindus taken place outside of India.

The huge Milton Keynes open-air, grass-carpeted amphitheater became "Om-City;" its three gates were called Jnana Marga, Bhakti Marga and Karma Marga, the Hindu paths of knowledge, devotion and action. The stage was named the "Unity Platform," where Hindu spiritual leaders of diverse traditions came together in a visual demonstration of Hindu solidarity.

The conference theme, "Hindu Jage - Vishwa Jage" ("If Hindus live, then the universe lives"), meant that in our upholding of the Hindu religion, all of creation will be benefited. The slogan, "Let us ennoble the world," also reflected this theme as did other banners and posters strewn throughout the vast setting.

On Saturday morning the festivity commenced with the mass singing of the patriotic song, "Mere Desh Ki Dharti Sona Ugal[?]" ("Gold just blossoms from the ground in my country's land"), extolling the abundance of Mother India. Exactly at 9:00 AM, Pandit Abaji Panshikar, a learned Sanskrit scholar from Leicester, started havan, the ancient Vedic fire ceremony. Virat Hindu Sammelan President Shri Natubhai Jagjivan fulfilled the duties of the ceremony's host. Many people were miffed that they were expected to pay US \$161 as a donation to join the havan.

Some grumbled, "Is Hinduism reserved for the rich people only?"

After the havan ceremony, about 600 young boys and girls sang songs in chorus. They also raised placards displaying symbols like Om, deepa, VHS, welcome and Ganesha. Three-hundred-fifty oil lamps were simultaneously lit to symbolize the unity of the 350 organizations behind the gathering. A giant oil lamp placed in front of the grandstand was kept lit throughout the weekend.

Doctor Swami of the Swaminarayan Hindu Mission (Bochasanwasi) lit the lamp to begin the events. Then Acharya Sushil Kumar and the chief guest, Lord Mayor of Milton Keynes Roger Bristow, hoisted the saffron flag of Hindu unity and Britain's Union Jack. There followed a parade of distinguished guest speakers.

The inaugural speech was delivered by Swami Chinmayananda who, with Acharya Sushil Kumar and others, founded Vishwa Hindu Parishad exactly 25 years ago. Swamiji spoke of three necessary programs: to look after the children, the young generation and the old people. "I hear so often that our youths are useless. I would say that they are not "useless," but "used less."

Muslim Sher Azam, President of the Council of Mosques in the U.K., told the crowd, "Britain today is a multicultural, multi-religious society. You Hindus and others should practice your faith without fear of insult or abuse."

Mr. Cannon Michael Wells, speaking on behalf of the Church of England's Archbishop of Canterbury, said that it is important that the strength and value of each tradition be maintained. Children should also be nurtured and educated in the values of our various religions, he advised.

Chairperson Acharya Sushil Kumar's inspiring speech dealt with the theme of "Hindu Jage-Vishwa Jage." "Our dharma and culture have emphasized that there is freedom of thought but limitation of conduct. Hindus believe in the holistic and integrated approach of life. We have spread in many countries in the world, but we are one and we have to realize that oneness. I am happy that all the sadhus and sannyasins have come on one common platform to unite you."

The second half of the day was dominated by the Youth Sammelan. Doctor Swami told the young adults: "Satsang [religious meeting with scriptural readings and discussion] is very important. Every family should spend at least fifteen minutes in satsang each day. In satsang, one learns about the treasures of our religion. The German philosopher Schopenhauer said, 'The Upanishads have been the solace of my life and will be the solace of my death.' We have to know why the westerners feel like this - why they think that the Hindu dharma is the noblest of all the dharmas."

Women's conference

Towards the late afternoon, the Women's Sammelan took place in which several vital issues were discussed for an ungenerous one hour. The conference coordinator, Saraswati Dave, has proved to be an important force among the UK's Hindu women. She spoke about the changing role of women in the society today. "Women are not only giving samskaras to their children but sometimes play the role of a bread-winner in today's society, too."

Rajmata Scindia explained that in the UK, "We are concerned about four main issues: joint-family system, arranged marriages, dowry system and intermarriages. We also talked strongly about the religious education in England, where the Education Reform Act 1988 has made it compulsory for every child to attend Christian worship in schools. Christian teachings are obligatory and other religions have been ignored. It is very well that many spiritual leaders come from India, but they do not necessarily understand our needs. So, we women have to sort out these problems ourselves."

The day's events were thrown into turmoil due to unexpected heavy rains. No shelter was provided for the audience, who sought refuge under hundreds of umbrellas, polyethylene sheets and even small carpets brought to sit on. Many left early.

Sunday Program

The second day was relatively much better. It was clear, bright and sunny. The atmosphere, according to the organizers, was more religious since the yagna fire ceremony took place in the presence of all the religious leaders.

A ten-kilometer mini-marathon took place with the participation of the Queen's entire Gurkha regiment, who also won it. The main aim of it was to encourage young Hindus to excel in the field of sports and to attain international standards. Young people were also subjected to a cultural quiz.

The star attraction of the day was Sant Shri Morarji Bapu. Before a spell-bound audience, he discussed the Hindu dharma and said that Hindu culture is the "mother of world civilization because it has taught the world how to eat, how to drink and, in fact, how to live." He urged the audience to serve and follow the Hindu dharma without caring for any reaction from others. He assured everyone that the presence of so many saints would turn idealistic plans into real reforms.

Resolutions

Nathubhai Jagjivan, the VHS president, read out the resolutions. One of the most pressing concerned religious education and worship in the UK. The VHS disapproved of attempts by authorities to deny opportunities to learn Indian languages in schools, while learning of European languages is encouraged. The assembly also requested the government to allow freedom of worship by providing proper facilities to establish temples.

Audience Comments and Suggestions

Many of the people I interviewed felt the sammelan was a big opportunity lost. So much could have been done. Most of the people came long distances by the most expensive transport system in the world. They were expecting a small re-assurance, a kind of reminder of how to take pride in being a Hindu. Just talking about unity can be a march towards complacency.

Any Hindu gathering should also be a representation of the sublime. As K.S. Sudarshan suggested, whatever conflict we see in this world is because of ignorance. "Thus to bring about harmony and cooperation it is necessary to make people realize that they are part and parcel of a bigger whole, that they are inseparably bound up with all the other things in the universe and that their existence depends upon the existence of all others."

Prem Sagar, son of Ramanand Sagar, maker of the Ramayana TV series, described his father's reception. "I have just come back from the Ramayan stall in the VHS and it seems that the distributor has done a record sale. There is a demand which we just cannot meet. Each set of Ramayan is 26 volumes and are completely sold out. There is a big queue outside the Ramayan stall. Yesterday my father was mobbed at the stall. There were queues to get his autograph on the sets of the Ramayana that they had just bought. They bowed down to him, touched his feet, kissed his hands. It was a very emotional sight."

The young Sagar also said, "This sammelan helps in the whole culture of the Hindus and the whole awakening of Hinduism. It points out what Hinduism means and what it can do. Like a powerhouse, it generates spiritual values around the globe. Just as Ramayana TV series has been a phenomenal success and it contributed to the awakening of Hindus-kindled every soul around the world. People expect the same from this sammelan. I think that the success of drawing so many people goes to the power of Ram. Today, on stage, when Ramanand Sagar asked the crowd to say 'Jai Shri Ram,' it ignited power in people. The whole Milton Keynes Bowl echoed with Jai Shri Ram chanting. It went up to the clouds."

Durga Jasraj, 25 years old, daughter of the famous classical Bhakti Gayeki singer. Pandit Jasraj, pessimistically noted, "Coming to this sammelan neither contributed anything to my knowledge of Hinduism nor for my faith. I have my doubts if the best of Hinduism can be affirmed in an unruly crowd situation like this."

Om Chauhan, a businessman in his forties, from Rajasthan found "this sammelan completely disorganized. I expected better organization-better audio system for the speeches to be heard clearly, better parking system. There was a chaos at the Milton Bowles parking place. Volunteers did not get any briefing from the organizers. In order to hide their ignorance, they were quite rude. Even God reminded the organizers by a strong shower that they should have thought of the convenience of the public."

Vivek Chauhan, 10 years, was also unhappy. He said, "I did not like going there. It was dirty and I did not meet other kids with whom I could play. There were no good pictures to look at, the crowd was too much and it was easy to be lost."

Bhawnish Dutt Khanna, a middle age banker who studies the teachings of Swami Muktananda felt the sammelan "was at least a good effort. Once I attended a similar sammelan in Bombay-perhaps 25 years ago. That was well-organized. If possible, we should like to have more of these festivals. Promotion of Hindu thought, particularly among the younger generation, needs to be considered. What this Sammelan has enforced is that Hinduism is not merely a religion but a culture which promotes harmony among all communities irrespective of caste, creed and beliefs."

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