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Solidarity in Diversity

Working with those of other traditions while holding firmly to our own denomination and spiritual path

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As the world rapidly becomes a global village, Hindu leaders are collectively discovering that Hindu unity is more important than ever before. Through such unity, Hinduism can stand proudly alongside the other great religions of the world, serving its followers, protecting their rights and working with governmental and private agencies for the upliftment of society. Through such unity, the wise voice of the great grandfather of religious experience can be heard—a voice of tolerance and compassion born of a reverence of the Divine within all beings and all things. Certainly that voice is dearly needed now to help guide humanity through this violent, perilous time, with so many challenges in every area of life. A mutual Hindu front based on the eternal laws of dharma will be a potent social and political force, but the integrity of that unity depends on how we define it.

Some would define it as a "unity in sameness," perhaps because they find Hinduism's phenomenal diversity too complex, too confusing, too great an obstacle to the kind of social and political unity that they envision. But, as my Gurudeva, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, observed, "It is not uniformity or sameness that we seek. It is solidarity, individuals coming together for common purposes celebrating their differences and pursuing their unique ways, not denying them or trying to restrain or even destroy them." A better definition is solidarity in diversity.

Recently I pilgrimaged to Toronto. After my talk at the Hindu Temple of Richmond Hill, as devotees were coming forward for blessings, one man asked, "Swami, should I call myself a Saivite or a Hindu?" Of course, the answer I gave was, "Both." This simple story illustrates what to me is the perfect meaning of Hindu unity, which Gurudeva called Hindu solidarity. He also founded our magazine, Hinduism Today, which last year celebrated its 25th anniversary, as an effective tool for promoting Hindu solidarity. He declared as its first objective: "To foster Hindu solidarity as a unity in diversity among all sects and lineages."

Gurudeva's explanation of Hindu solidarity is as follows: "For all sects of Hinduism to survive in their pristine purity, maintaining their traditions, cultural heritages and religious theologies within our great Sanatana Dharma, each must strengthen the other by strengthening itself. Having found their roots, Hindus of all sects can proceed with confidence and work for Hindu solidarity. The many beliefs and practices common to all Hindus are the meeting ground, the basis, of this profound unity in diversity."

Hinduism has four main sects, also called denominations—Saivism, Shaktism, Smartism and Vaishnavism. Gurudeva indicates that the starting point in achieving Hindu solidarity is for each denomination to strengthen itself. This means that the followers of each of these denominations, and the many lineages within them, should become more knowledgeable about their denomination's beliefs, practices and ways of worship and pursue them more diligently. This is how each denomination is strengthened—as each devotee draws strength from the heritage of his roots.

The second step naturally occurs when other Hindus are inspired to learn more about their tradition and its practices by meeting Hindus who have already become

proficient and knowledgeable. This is the idea of "each strengthening the other by strengthening itself."

This then leads to the third step, which is Hindus of the four major denominations effectively coming together to create a Hindu unity. Their coming together is effective because each follower and each leader is knowledgeable and deeply involved in his or her own tradition.

The nature of this unity is that it is based on solidarity rather than sameness. It cannot be based on sameness, as the followers of the four denominations do not hold identical beliefs and do not follow identical practices. On many points they differ. Therefore, unity must be based on solidarity, coming together on the shared platform of beliefs and practices common to all Hindus while acknowledging that in many ways we differ.

Said another way, the social, political power of the family of faiths we call Hinduism is based on its spiritual, mystical power, which abides in its many individual sects and sampradayas, each with its enlightened guru lineages, dynamic temples, noble traditions and profound scriptural canons. This sectarian diversity is the real power of the Hindu faith and must be preserved.

Sometimes leaders of Hindu organizations in North America and elsewhere share with us a perspective that Hinduism should be presented as a unity without diversity. They believe our differences only divide us and propose that Hinduism, in order to be strong, should have one shared scripture, the Bhagavad Gita. They propose that all Hindus should have a unified view of the many Hindu Deities and hold common beliefs regarding key concepts, such as God, soul and world.

But, as Gurudeva observed, "Sameness in religion is not healthy, not natural. Sameness is a most common, dull, uninspired and unenlightened solution, for it reduces that which is vital with differences, rich in philosophical interpretation and background to a common denominator. Such a solution would be very harmful to Hinduism in the world, and many of us are firmly against that idea." The warning is that Vishnu devotees of a particular guru lineage, for example, should remain dedicated to their tradition, proud of their sectarianism, and not be swayed by efforts to draw them into a universalism that dilutes their tradition in a misguided

effort to create an artificial sameness. Weakening sectarianism will weaken Hinduism as a whole. The stronger direction is solidarity in diversity. In fact, Hinduism's ability to accept and encourage diversity is a strength, not a weakness. It is a model of tolerance and understanding for the world, which is in desperate search of ways to accept the differences of those who follow other faiths.

There is an ancient Greek proverb: "United we stand; divided we fall," meaning that any group is stronger when it is united, and therefore better able to handle the challenges that face it. There are many challenges facing Hinduism today, including unethical conversion efforts by other faiths, the youth not being interested in attending temples, a shortage of qualified teachers, and a lack of religious outreach to the elderly, ill and needy.

To take one issue as an example, in every country with a significant Hindu population, there are serious concerns about conversion. And it is a certainty that this challenge is better faced when the Hindus within a country are united rather than divided. Malaysia provides a good model of a country in which Hindus are effectively united while maintaining their diversity. They are united through an umbrella organization called the Malaysia Hindu Sangam. In recent years the Sangam has held major rallies about the conversion problem, and as a follow-up to the rallies has instigated, through a number of temples, social service programs of Hindus helping Hindus. Their programs have proved to be an effective way of preventing conversion among Hindus living in poverty or neglect, and they accomplished this by working in tandem with all sects within the country.

In every country there are leaders and movements who encourage Hindus to not work together, but to divide by language, the Deity they worship, or other differences and remain apart from other Hindu groups. However, the wise encourage Hindus of different organizations, affiliations and traditions to band together, to stand united in their diversity, to effectively face the challenges that confront the Hindu peoples in the modern world.

The last weekend in May we were guests at an event at the Hindu Temple of Greater Atlanta, USA. It was a simultaneous celebration of the 12-year reconsecration of the existing temple for Venkateswara and the inauguration for the new temple for Siva. On many evenings the Vaishnava priests would help in the Siva ceremonies and vice versa. The smooth, harmonious working together of the Vaishnava and Saiva priests and the Siva and Venkateswara devotees was uplifting

and encouraging, showing how well these two traditions are able to cooperate and blend their energies, without giving up their distinct beliefs and customs.

Hindus the world over, while following unique and varied paths, are united by their belief in karma, dharma, the all-pervasiveness of God, the sanctity of the Vedas, reincarnation, noninjuriousness, enlightenment, yoga, the illumined guru's centrality and the mysticism of worship. That is the basis for coming together to help one another and to reach out to the world. Hindu leaders of varied sects and lineages are coming forward. Their wisdom is being articulated at global forums and interfaith councils, conferred through advisory boards to governments, taught in classrooms and broadcast via TV and the Internet. All this is possible because Hindu Vaishnavites, Hindu Smartas, Hindu Saktas and Hindu Saivites, Telegus, Tamils, Maharashtrians, Gujaratis—devotees of every tradition and language group—are proud and willing to stand up and work together as brother and sister Hindus, respecting and encouraging the efforts of one another, uplifting the world by the power of their own upliftment.