Summit Ponders Next Generation
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CONFERENCES

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Hindu Collective Initiative formed by 400 Hindus gathers in New Jersey

After initially wondering if anyone would attend, Dr. Ved Chaudhary finally had to close enrollment in the Dharma Summit 2005 on August 13 when it reached capacity at 400 (including representatives from 80 Hindu institutions). Scores were turned away. Under the inspired and personal direction of one of today's most dynamic spiritual leaders. Sri Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Dr. Chaudhary organized the Summit to "bring together heads of all devalayas, spiritual institutions and dharmic intellectuals in North America to exchange thoughts and ideas, and share experiences on how to impart spiritual and cultural education to our next generation and remove misconceptions about our faith traditions from the society in order to maintain our traditions with dignity." The conference included Hindus, Jains and Sikhs.

Chaudary told Hinduism Today, "I consider the most important outcome of the conference to be the spirit of unity that the conference fostered among the attendees, the awareness and acceptance of contemporary issues facing the community and an overwhelming desire to undertake a collective initiative to shape the future of Hindu traditions in North America."

The days were long throughout the sessions, running from the 7:30 am gathering to 9:30 or 10:00 pm, with vegetarian breakfast, lunch and dinner provided free by BAPS volunteers and served at the conference venue at the Student Center at Rutgers University. Rutgers is one of the oldest colleges in America, founded by Benjamin Franklin in 1766. It is a red brick college near a river, in a 350-year-old town.

Major spiritual leaders graced the conference, including Swami Dayananda Saraswati; Swami Chidananda Saraswati (Muniji) of Parmarth Niketan, Rishikesh, India; Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, publisher of Hinduism Today magazine and HPI; Gurudev Chitrabhanu of Jain Ashram, New York; Dr. Pranav Pandya of Gayatri Pariwar, Haridwar, India; Swami Jyotirmayananda of Vivekananda Center, Mangalore; Swamini Janeshwari Devi of Barsana Dham and others. An unexpected guest speaker was Sri Sudharsan, head of the RSS. Many intellectuals also spoke, including Dr. Ved Nanda, Prof. Bhudev Sharma, Dr. David Frawley, Dr. Piyush Agrawal, Sri Kanchan Banerji and Dr. Rakesh Shreedhar.

Swami Dayananda Saraswati proposed the formation of a Hindu Collective Initiative. Swamiji outlined a basic organizational structure for continued cooperation. The Initiative would allow all Hindu religious organizations to work together to shape the future of Hinduism in North America. It would address issues such as promoting changes to enhance the participation of the new generation and correcting biased views of Hindu traditions.

Of paramount concern was the transmission of Hinduism to second- and third-generation Hindus now growing up (or grown up) in the US. Generally speaking, few organizations present said they have adequate programs for teaching the youth, though some, such as the Swadhyaya Pariwar founded by Sri Athavale, have fully developed programs of weekly classes and summer youth programs. Several temple directors and managers (and there were dozens there) talked about the need for effective programs.

Bodhinatha Veylanswami emphasized in his talk the need for the temples to educate the parents in Hinduism right along with the youth. He also stressed the importance of parents' setting the example in religiousness, beginning with maintaining a home shrine where the family worships daily. Passing on the faith has its strongest promise in the home, supplemented by educational programs like temple classes, summer camps and cultural training.

A second prominent issue at the conference was the poor treatment Hinduism receives in the dozens of textbooks used in American schools and colleges. Speakers explained how to approach local school boards at the time books are up for adoption, how to influence the selection and even future editions of books. Rajiv Malhotra explained the ways American and European academics have distorted the understanding of Hinduism, and he offered ways that Hindus can correct the

situation.

Speakers associated with temples touched on the need to integrate with the majority community, to become more actively engaged in their neighborhoods and communities. They lamented that a number of Hindu communities live a rather insular life in America, unaware of the religions of their neighbors and not trying to join into the mainstream or be part of their town or county. Speakers encouraged temples to reach out more, to study the philosophy, history and practices of the faiths they are surrounded by, get to know the leaders of other religious communities, develop strong connections with the press, participate in local charities, free clinics, free feedings and the like.

There was a youth presence from the Hindu Students Council and the Hindu American Foundation. It can also be said, however, that the youth presence was not as strong as it should have been, nor was the participation of women.

On August 15, India's Independence Day (and Swami Dayananda's birthday), attention turned to a constellation of temple issues in a workshop organized by the Hindu University of America. A vital topic was priest training and duties. Concern was expressed over the duties of priests with regard to the temple ceremonies, and the duties with regard to home ceremonies, especially funerals. In India these are traditionally handled by two different groups of priests. One group performs the temple ceremonies, and the other performs home ceremonies. In the West, due to a shortage priests, many temples have priests from either tradition performing both tasks, one of which they are often not trained for.

Another area of focus was the need for teachers of Hinduism and counselors to deal with devotees' personal problems of. Priests are trained to perform neither of these functions, though some priests have done both successfully. Participants debated whether community members should be trained to fulfill the role of spiritual counselor, or if the priests should be so trained, with the general opinion favoring the former.

Kathy Nanda of Denver spoke on the legal aspects of temple management, including financial and fiduciary responsibility, liability, libel and defamation. She urged temple board members to clearly understand their legal duties and

responsibilities.

To assure a future based on the founding principles, stress was given to making sure the constitution of every temple is strong, for that is the primary guide for future management boards. Constitutions are difficult to change, it was noted, while bylaws can be easily altered by a simple majority vote.

The Bridgewater Temple of New Jersey, just a 15-minute drive from the venue, outlined an innovative program called the Traveling Mandir. The motivation is to keep college-age students involved in Hinduism. Their parents organize a temporary temple at the local college, Rutgers in this case, on Sunday morning during the time other students are attending Christian services. The program includes a puja, prayers-meditation and scriptural study. The youth reportedly appreciate this effort to give them access to religious observances.

Devotees should be encouraged to include a donation to the temple in their wills, "even if it's just two percent." The Salvation Army, America's richest nonprofit by far, receives a large part of its donations each year in the form of bequests from wills, the result of long efforts to encourage people to include the Army in their will.

Overall, it was a successful three days, as Hindus from many parts of the country came together to share their thoughts on issues of mutual concern. For those who would like to know about and participate in future plans, please contact Dr. Ved Chaudhary at ved.chaudhary@gmail.com