

[To Be a United Voice for Hinduism](#)

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CONFERENCES

## To Be a United Voice for Hinduism

Leading saints tackle government interference, conversion, and more in Mumbai

Rajiv Malik, Delhi

Seventy-four top Hindu swamis gathered in Mumbai from October 16 to 18, 2005, for the second meeting of the Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha. The event, held at Sanyas Ashrama, Vile Parle West, was meticulously organized by Swami Dayananda Saraswati of Arsha Vidya Gurukulam. It followed on a similar gathering in Chennai two years ago. The Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha ( "Organization of Teachers of the Hindu Religion ") brought together in the two meetings many of the religion's top leaders on an unprecedented scale. Present in Mumbai were saints from sampradayas, or teaching lineages, spanning the Hindu theological spectrum. They included the sampradayas of Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, Ramanand Charya, Sen, Kabir, Satradhikar, Saiva, Varkari, Saiva Aadheenams and Swaminarayan. There were also representatives of the four Shankara centers. The saints included prominent leaders of the Mahanirvani monastic order and its branches. This order has hundreds of thousands of sadhus. [See the inside front cover for a three-page gallery of many of the saints in attendance.]

Swami Dayananda said, "The Sabha is committed to speak for Hindu Dharma and represent the interests and views of the Hindu population of India. For the same reason, the Acharya Sabha shall have the mandate to engage in discussion with anyone or any government or any other entity, including those representing different religions, on matters of importance to Hindus. We are seeking to create a single voice that could speak for the entire Hindu society and fight against the shabby and discriminatory treatment being meted out to Hindus and Hinduism in India."

During the three-day event, each saint was given twenty minutes to speak. Many complained that although Hindus are in a majority in India, they are not treated as well as the minority religions that have figured in vote-bank politics in the country since its independence. The minority faiths have been given special privileges, they pointed out--such as separate civil codes governing marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc.--which is contrary to secular principles of government. The institutions of the minority faiths are left alone while Hindus are faced with government takeover of temples and subsequent diversion of temple funds to non-religious projects and interference in the administration of monasteries. Many protested the manner of arrest and short incarceration of the Shankaracharya of Kanchi Mutt, who is implicated in a murder and conspiracy case. He was treated like an ordinary criminal, they charged, and regarded as convicted even before he has been tried. To address these and other issues, the swamis called upon all the Hindu sampradayas to set aside differences and join the apex body of the Sabha.

The three-day event was held under tight security in a specially constructed 80-foot by 58-foot air-conditioned tent auditorium. It accommodated the 74 saints of 17 sampradayas, over one hundred sadhus and sadvis belonging to Arsha Vidya Gurukulam and around 100 family devotees. Chinmaya Mission members were in attendance and helped with the organization. The hall was equipped with a high-tech video and audio system. Not only could one clearly listen to what the saints were saying, but large plasma screens displayed larger-than-life-size, live images of the saints addressing the convention. Many people waiting outside the high-security venue rushed to greet the saints each time they came and went. There at the personal invitation of Swami Dayananda, photographer Milind Ketkar and I were the only media persons allowed to attend the proceedings.

The conference was held in Hindi, though Swami Dayananda characterized his own Hindi as "a bit doubtful." Twelve translators provided simultaneous renderings into Hindi, English, Kannada, Tamil, Marathi and Assamese. "We allowed, " Swamiji said, "the acharyas to express their views in their own native languages so they could do so fluently without searching for words."

I spoke with many of the saints, and they shared their concerns. On the following page are the extended remarks of Swami Avadeshananda Giri, one of the leading lights of the enormous Juna Akara monastic order. Swami Dayananda said, "Temples and monasteries are created by the offerings of the devotees. Whenever there are complaints of misappropriation of funds or misuse of money, the government tries to take them over [under a special provision of Indian law which, in theory, could be applied to any religion, but in practice is applied only to Hindu

institutions]. It is like cutting the head of a person if there is a headache. We feel that it would be better if a judicial committee is formed to look into such cases and solve the problem. Moreover, the temple wealth and income should not be allowed to be treated as a source of patronage by political leaders and used for purposes other than the welfare of the temples and Hindu society to which the wealth rightfully belongs." He said the Sabha would undertake legal research on remedies to this situation.

On the issue of conversion, Swamiji said that Hindu preachers would be trained to go out to the distant villages and tribal communities to reassure the people that their indigenous religious faiths shall be preserved, and that their educational, health, economic and social needs will be attended to.

Gurusharanandadaji, head of Sri Udasin Karshni Ashram in Mathura, explained, "The irony is that we are the majority in India but still our voice is not being listened to. We ourselves are responsible for all this, and it is time we introspected on the matter. We are not united, and we have to change. We have to ponder if we are giving proper training to our new acharyas to face the new challenges in today's world."

Swami Sankarananda Sarasvati, head of the Sri Jnanesvar Mutt Trust in Mumbai, observed, "For the ancient mutts, unauthorized possession of their ashrams and properties is a big problem. For instance, most of our time goes in to fighting legal battles with those who are occupying our properties in an illegal manner. Even the banks connive with these squatters. Another problem is the government eyeing the properties of sadhus and mutts who do not have a clear-cut successor."

Swami Shivswaroopananda, head of Manva Kalyan Ashram in Haridwar, recounted, "In Rajasthan there are many Muslims who celebrate Hindu festivals like Holi and Diwali. They would like to come back to Hinduism. But their main concern is that, once they become Hindus, would the Hindu community accept their daughters and sons getting married to their children? And if this is not possible, then why should they come back to the fold of Hinduism?"

Nachiappa Jana Desika Swami, head of Kovilur Vedanta Mutt in Tamil Nadu, warned, "We must not complain about the other sampradayas, but coordinate among

ourselves in a better manner. We should have our own directory and website."

Sri Ananda Chaitanya Saraswati, head of the Anand Ashram in Haridwar, offered, "What Hindu community needs today is shiksha (education), sanskars (culture) and sangathan (unity). Islam and Christianity are taking advantage of our divisiveness and flourishing in this country. It is high time that our own shakti [power] must be awakened. We must become one, we must have an identity of our own. Our kids must have a distinct identity of their own. They must wear kurtas and topis [traditional Hindu shirts and head-gear]. Islam has a dress of their own, and Christians also have a dress of their own. Similarly, we must have an identity of our own as well."

Swami Vidhyabhinava Vidyarana, of Karnataka, warned, "While collecting the donation money for our various projects, we must ensure that the money we collect is good money and not bad money." Swami Advaitanandaji Maharaj, of Maharashtra, advised, "Hindus must attach a lot of importance to the well-being and development of their women. The emphasis on women should be there, as it is they who pass on the good samskaras (impressions) to the new generation."

Swami Sri Balagangadharnatha, head of Adi Chunchanagiri Mutt, Karnataka, said, "It is not just the Kanchi Shankaracharya. Today all of us are being attacked and defamed. Large-scale conversion is taking place, but when we question it, we are attacked. If we do not wake up, the day is not far off when foreigners will again start ruling us. Today a lot of government interference is there in the field of education. This has to be stopped. If the government does not listen to us, we will have to warn the government on this matter. The government must allow us to preserve our great ancient heritage and culture. Today we see that use of drugs and violence is there all around us. We must work for ridding society of drugs and violence. Drugs are being used for spoiling our young generation."

Sri Abhinava Vidya Shankara Bharati, representative of Sringeri Mutt in Karnataka, said, "Our ancient rishis had intended sannyasins to totally devote themselves to the promotion and propagation of Sanatana Dharma. But today we are beset with legal problems and must spend time defending our own monasteries and temples in courts. The real cause for which we should work, propagation of dharma, is suffering as a result."

Many swamis also gather at the Kumbha Mela, but for the purpose of interacting with their devotees and members of their monastic orders. This gathering was unique in its attempt to create a collective consciousness of top Hindu saints from all lineages and to establish a permanent forum from which the Hindu voice will be heard in a timely fashion. Its biggest strength is that it is totally apolitical--associated with no political party and harboring no political ambitions. Its greatest responsibility lies in the fact that the Hindu world will have very high expectations of this newly formed body.

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## INTERVIEW

### Room for Improvement

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#### Swami Avadheshananda shares his thoughts on the Acharya Sabha, temples, youth and more

During the Acharya Sabha Mumbai meeting, Hinduism Today reporter Rajiv Malik interviewed Junapeethadheeshwar Acharya Mahamandaleshwar Swami Avadheshananda Ji Giri, a leading saint of Juna Akara monastic order.

What is the purpose of forming this Acharya Sabha?

We want to speak in a united manner in the interest of the 85 percent Hindus of India, and Hindus all over the world. Our ways of worship may be different, our ways of thinking or belief systems may be different, but we are one from the viewpoint of spirituality.

What is your view on Hindu temples?

There are thousands of temples all over India that are in a very bad condition. The government does not care to take them over because they have no income. In one particular state of India, the government is earning around us\$11 million annually from the income of the temples that are under government control. But out of this income of \$11 million, only \$2.3 million is being spent on the maintenance and development of the temples. The rest of the money is being spent on things that have nothing to do with temples or Hindu religion. There are temples where there are no roads, no arrangement for lighting and no arrangement for feeding the devotees. Even the puja worship is not taking place in a proper manner. Today four hundred thousand temples in India are under government control. If the government really wants to take over the temples, they must also take over those where there is a lack of funds. But is this even necessary? Is Hindu society so weak that it cannot take care of its temples? It is the dharmacharyas who should decide how the temples are to be managed and who should manage them. It is not an issue to be left to the state governments.

What is your concern about education?

This country is running towards development and therefore the ideal for the youth of this country is the Silicon Valley in the US and Singapore. Today's youth want to earn more and more dollars. There is a need to come up with programs that connect the youth of this country to our own roots, that inspire them with love for their own nation and love for their own religion. The education we are giving to the children is lopsided. The day we include the love of nation and respect for their own heritage and moral values in the education will be a day that benefits all. But today if Saraswati Mantra is recited, there are people who oppose it. Today if Saraswati is worshiped in the schools of this country, it is considered something communal and there is a lot of hue and cry about it. What kind of upliftment of youth or direction of youth is given when you are snatching the reciting of Saraswati Mantra from them?

What is your message for youth on morals?

In the West many people are not following good, moral values. They cannot lead a peaceful life. In America some 41 percent of marriages end in divorce or separation

within 15 years. Many people there have a live-in relationship without getting married. If our youth see that society and country with its live-in relationships as the ideal, what kind of new generation can we expect? What will be the character of children born of such relationships? What will be ideals of such children?

I am not criticizing America, but can America ever be the ideal for the people of India? Our divorce rate is also increasing. It is increasing more in the metropolitan cities than in the villages. It is increasing because we have started considering America our ideal country. Are people in the USA peaceful after getting divorced? Does a lot of money bring peace to their lives?

Our rishis have spoken of four important factors that govern our lives. They are dharma, artha, kama and moksha--righteousness, wealth, pleasure and liberation from rebirth. How do you have control over kama without dharma? Without good values and being spiritual, how will you manage money? Making money is a great art, but how you spend the money after earning it may be an even higher art--a greater skill than earning it. Where should the money be spent, where should it be invested? In our country, your income gets distributed among every member of your family, and members of your extended families. Money even goes to your neighbors. But in America life is about spending all the money on Saturday and Sunday.

Right now the message on the value of celibacy, brahmacharya, is not reaching the youth. It needs to be conveyed that only if you can control your senses, can you attain a high level of development. Money should not be your only goal in life. You must aspire to have qualities that include restraint of senses and good character. If your senses are not under control and you lack strength of character, moral values and brahmacharya, then the heights of life will be far away from your reach. We must teach our youth the management of brahmacharya.

How should we improve care for the elderly today?

The trend of neglecting our elderly people is very wrong, and it is something to worry about. Old people's homes are now being set up in this country. I am amazed at this development. Ashrams should definitely be set up in the country, but are old people's homes a part of the culture of this country? This era is a time when cultural

values are being diminished. But that does not mean that everything is going to come to an end; it means that spring is going to come.

Who is a Hindu?

He is a Hindu who has respect for this country and who treats it as his own country. A Hindu is one who has faith in various Gods and Goddesses and also in his mother and father. He believes that God resides in all the living beings of this world. He believes that God is all-pervading. God is there in each and every speck of dust. Hindu dharma believes that mother, father, guest all are devatas, divine beings. A Hindu believes the elements of agni, fire; and vayu, wind; are also devatas. Hindu dharma means, "Sarve bhavantu sukhina, sarve santu niramaya, " "Let all be happy and free from disease." Hindu dharma means, "Vasudhaiva kutumbakam, " "The whole world is a family." We do not seek to forcefully convert anyone to our religion. We do not want to snatch someone's dharma from him. A Hindu is concerned about the balance of ecology. A Hindu is concerned about the welfare of the whole world. He believes, "Para dravya lothavrat, " "The wealth of another is to be treated like a speck of dust." For him the meaning of dharma is, "Parhit saras dharma nahin bhai, " "There is no greater religion than the welfare of others." Such a person, whose thinking is on these lines, we will call a Hindu.