Meeting Western-World Challenges
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COMMUNICATION

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Speakers call for action in education, media outreach and community ministry

The second Hindu dharma summit met December 14 to 16, 2007, at the University of Southern Florida to explore the challenges facing today's Hindus in America and internationally.

There was much to discuss, and words were not minced. Among the first speakers was Dr. Anuja Prashar of the UK, a fourth generation Hindu out of India via Africa. She astounded the audience with her account of the Joshua Project, a global Christian evangelical plan carefully engineered to evangelize and hopefully convert the remaining 2,334 "people groups"--most of them in India--who have yet to accept Christianity."I grew up in Africa and went to Christian schools," she shared, "but I never saw these aggressive plans. As I completed my PhD in international business, I became aware that these groups function exactly as multinational corporations." Hindus, she advised, should become aware just how sophisticated the missionary work is. And, she warned, "There is a violence in their language--for example, crusade--that is remarkable for this day and age."

Dr. Prashar's unsettling presentation set the tone for a high-energy weekend--just as intended by organizer Ved Chaudhary of the Hindu Collective Initiative (http:/www.hcina.org). The HCI was proposed by Swami Dayananda Saraswati during the Dharma Summit 2005 and nurtured since then by Chaudhary to "impart education about Hindu culture, religion and philosophy to our next generation and remove bias and misperceptions about our faith traditions so that we can maintain our culture and traditions with pride and dignity in North America."

This year's summit, planned and hosted by the Hindu University of America, brought together one hundred Hindu community leaders, swamis, academics and activists. Speakers included educationalist Dr. Piyush Agrawal, author Robert Arnett, Dr. Shiva G. Bajpai of Northridge University, Professor T.S. Rukmani of Concordia University and Swamini Janeshwari Devi of Barsana Dham. Topics encompassed global Hindu human rights; passing on the religion to the next generation; Hinduism in the US education system; and how Hindus can better work with the media, governmental agencies and interfaith groups "to improve the portrayal of India and Hindu dharma."

In addition to Dr. Prashar's wake-up call regarding Christian missionary activities, the first day's sessions addressed human rights in Bangladesh and Kashmir, and the Hindu American Foundation's efforts to survey human rights issues in Hindu communities worldwide. Of particular concern is the management of Hindu temples by the state governments of India. In his presentation, Prakash Rao explained how temple lands have been sold illegally and temple income diverted into government coffers."We are fighting for separation of church and state in India," he declared, and asked US organizations for help. Dr. Chaudhary followed up rhetorically, "Why do they take control of only Hindu temples and siphon off the money to the treasury? Why do they not take over the management of a gurudwara, a mosque or a church?"

Sri Sat Maharaj of the Hindu Mahasabha of Trinidad described the strong Hindu tradition that his country has maintained despite a century-and-a-half separation from India. He suggested their experience in Trinidad could be of use to American Hindus. He was followed by Chandresh Sharma, a young Trinidad politician who inspired the audience with this clarion call: "The world is looking to the Hindu religion for answers. We need to take our rightful place. Fear not to be a Hindu wherever you are."

The second day began with a plenary session address on religion and media (see http:/www.youtube.com/hinduismtodayvideos) by Hinduism Today's editor, Paramacharya Palaniswami, explaining how the media views religion and, in particular, Hinduism and India. The conference then divided into two parallel sessions, one dealing with education and the other with media and outreach.

The education program focused on improving the way Hinduism is taught in American primary and secondary schools and gaining greater Hindu influence at the

university level."How can these non-Hindu scholars," asked one speaker, "think that their voice can convey Hinduism better than a Hindu? We have to reclaim our authority to define ourselves. We have to step up to a new level of sophistication."

Palaniswami recapped the California textbook controversy, focusing on the disparity in the way various religions are presented. Hinduism, he demonstrated, is consistently shown in a negative light, especially compared to the sensitive, sympathetic treatment afforded to other religions. In 2007, as a first step to counteract this, Hinduism Today's managing editor, Sannyasin Arumugaswami, worked with a focus group of educators to produce a history of Hinduism between 300 ce to 1800 ce for secondary-school classes. Highlighting another area of concern at the conference, Arumugaswami gave an overview (also available on YouTube) of the religious worker visa program under which priests and temple builders are brought to the US and showed how recent changes in the administration of the visa have negatively impacted Hindus by making it more difficult to get visas. He pointed out that India provides a larger immigrant group to the US gaining permanent residency (approximately 50,000 per year) than any other country except Mexico, and this predominantly Hindu population requires temple builders and priests from India to meet its needs.

In a session on Hinduism and Indic studies at the college level, Dr. Balram Singh discussed the ongoing problem of the disrespectful and inaccurate depiction of Hinduism in academia. He also assessed the bleak fate of major grants given by the Hindu community to various universities in the past few years: "All the India-related chairs established by the funds from the community have turned out to be either indifferent or anti-Hindu academic positions." On a positive note, Dr. Umesh Jois of the Omkar Foundation reported on his well-received program of conducting puja worship on campus for students.

Dr. Anuja Bhargava chaired a valuable session on infrastructure development in which participants concluded that Hindus need to establish professional-level community services, including youth religious education, marriage counseling, elder support and family crisis hotlines. While a few temples, such as the Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago, successfully run such programs with volunteers; the consensus was that the community needs to move up to a well-managed, paid staff. Prof. B.V.K. Sastry advocated establishing a program to train Hindus as qualified chaplains to serve in health-care facilities, prisons and the military.

The final day of presenting focused on interfaith efforts. Bawa Jain asserted that Hindus should study organizations such as B'nai B'rith to understand how to impact the political process in America, and Professor Nathan Katz of the Florida International University in Miami gave a well-received talk on the synergistic relationship between Jews and Hindus (see this issue's page 9).

Summarizing the consensus of the 2007 Hindu Dharma Summit, Dr. Chaudhary identified four strategic action areas: 1) a 2008 conference in Delhi will address control of temples in India by the government; 2) a committee of academic experts was formed that will work with Hinduism Today magazine in creating more textbook supplements for US schools; 3) Hindus must develop sustainable, appropriate and effective social service programs connected with temples and 4) Hindus must work more closely with other religious groups.