U.S. Temple Council Closes Member Rift After Stroudsburg Conference
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American Hindu Institutions Get Associate Membership

Last year, on a hot July 21st, at the Sri Venkateshvara Temple, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the North American/European Temple Council (NAETC) became a semi-official body. Constitutionally, NAETC was a forum for sharing resources and knowledge among autonomous temple societies, including those just in the planning stage. Membership was an open-door policy, but there was loud grumbling over the participation of ISKCON, who were not even invited to the affair.

On June 8th, this year, Sri Rajarajeshwari Peetham (a Shankarachariya associate monastery), near Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, hosted NAETC's first 1985 conference. The Peetham's Abbotess, Swami S. Devyasharam, chaired the conference till she had to leave. Another swami took over.

This year ISKCON was invited and did send a representative contingent led by Narada Muni Das, from the New Vrindaban community in West Virgina. But the membership issue, still unsettled, again created a yawning rift at the conference. It seems to have now (2 months later) been narrowed to a thin gap.

Only a dozen delegates attended compared to last year's 30 and there was no news coverage this year. Mr. Shrikumar Poddar, one of the delegates, feels the NAETC has an important role to play, but was disappointed by events at the conference, particularly, "the issue of excluding non-native Indians."

At a round-the-table discussion of present activities, ISKCON got about as far as offering their free granite resource (in Georgia, US) for other temple projects before an abrupt shifting to the next speaker. "There was an obnoxious attitude towards

ISKCON," observed Mr. Poddar. "As more temples go up, the competition for funds becomes more intense. The tight control move is a way to protect their turf."

Later when the membership issue was raised, Narada Muni of ISKCON wasn't allowed to address the council, "because ISKCON was not a member." But all the other delegates who were not official members were welcome to speak. As Narada Muni recounted, "We were happy to be there, to contribute to the progression of Hindu culture in the West. We want to now still and will join the council if invited. But when we weren't allowed to speak it seemed futile to even stay at the meeting."

The ISKCON contingent got up to leave but were beset by a half-dozen delegates who apologized for the Council's behavior, saying "these are not our views." Feeling more welcome, the group returned. Yet they still were not allowed to speak.

Both Rajarajeshwari Peetham and Mr. K. Naidu, who runs the NAETC office in New York didn't want to talk about the conference itself. Narada Muni Das noted that it was Shrikumar Poddar who tried to bridge the gap by suggesting that individuals interested in and promoting Hinduism (including building temples) might be Associate Members of the Council. That idea seems to have later caught hold.

Hinduism Today spoke at length with Mr. Naidu of NAETC. "Any Hindu organization is eligible to be a member. There is no exclusion of anybody. The only distinction is that the Indian community's temple-building efforts have unique challenges. Those who are interested in Hindu welfare, such as the swami gurus in America, are Associate Members. They are on a different, higher, level."

In covering this fine-line distinction, Mr. Naidu confirmed that: yes, Rajarajeshwari Peetham would be an Associate Member, yes, ISKCON was invited to be an Associate Member (although Narada Muni hadn't yet received the invitation); yes, ISKCON could serve in an office-bearing position including the chairmanship; yes, all Members, including Associate, have voting and speaking rights on the Council: and yes, all members of the current Council support this view.

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