South Africa Holds a World Class Conference and Invites the World
Category : October 1995
Published by Anonymous on Oct. 02, 1995

South Africa Holds a World Class Conference and Invites the World

30,000 Hindus Gather to Affirm a Place of Pride in a Post-Apartheid Society

Ajith Bridjraj, Steven Pillay and Rajesh Jantilal, Durban

It was arguably the largest single Hindu rally on the African continent, ever. Guided by its theme, "Hinduism Vision for the 21st Century," the World Hindu Conference was a triumph for the South African Hindu community. Over forty independent organizations mobilized the money, manpower and mental force to pull off this massive international event which drew delegates from 20 countries. That collaboration alone was, organizers noted, epochal. Participants were beguiled. "It was equivalent to a journey to the transcendental realm," exclaimed Ranjen Pillay, a university law student from Durban. The event was a political success too--accentuated by South Africa President Nelson Mandela's address in which he acknowledged the contribution of Hindu thought to South Africa's relatively peaceful transition from apartheid to equality.

The conference was inaugurated at the University of Durban-Westville's elegant new Hindu Centre on July 7th with a havanconducted by two South African swamis. Forty national

and international swamis, sadhus, scholars and a devotional crowd of 1,000 gathered at the stunning hilltop setting for the Vedic blessing. As the incense, smoke and Sanskrit mantras drifted over the campus, one could sense an aura of spirituality settle upon the scholastic environs. Twenty-two-year-old Charmaine Murugan, who travelled over 600 kilometers from Johannesburg to be there said, "Being in the presence of such great atmas,souls, I immediately felt elevated. So began a four-day spiritual journey that I wished had never ended." Her friend Jyothi Bhana added: "It was 1ike a Hindu Haj[the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca], but the difference was that I was able to experience this in my own backyard instead of venturing all the way to Benares, India, a place I always wanted to visit."

The rest of Friday was casually scheduled. Most of the crowd walked through the creatively displayed poster exhibition on "Hindu Dharma." Through the images of Hinduism in South Africa, the international delegates were surprised to see how faithfully the country's Hindus had maintained their ancestral faith, despite so many years of politically-enforced isolation.

Registration was, as always, hectic. Twice the expected number had shown up. Only frantic work on the part of a swiftly-assembled band of students who jumped behind the registration tables saved the day. That evening 2,000 invitation-only guests packed the plush Durban City Hall to capacity for the formal reception dinner.

With the support of nearly every major local Hindu organization, the event managed to skirt any contentious

South African or Indian political issues. India's Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao sent a congratulatory message, and Mahday Mangalmurthi of the Indian High Commission attended.

The Saturday session and forums drew thoughtful participants. A few of the dozens of subjects discussed and analyzed that day were: "Religion and Philosophy," "Ethical Issues and Hinduism" and "Hindu Youth and Strategies for the 21st Century." The Saturday Youth Conference was particularly well-attended [see page 14]. Delegate Adhir Singh, 27, observed, "As I watched the youth, I was amused by the East versus West attire--takkies and jeans contrasted with kurtas and brightly colored punjabisand sarisas they trooped to their respective venues to map their vision for the 21st century." Of particular concern to the youth were caste prejudices, the downtrodden and the lack of religious education which they targeted as the prime cause of conversions to other religions. "We have hundreds of temples and millions of dollars spent on them annually. How active are they? We need to employ full-time Hindu missionaries to counteract social injustice and simplify Hindu dharma for the common man," remarked Shanmugam Chetty. "The women's sessions brought up many important aspects of the role of women today in society, but overlooked the most basic idea, the basis of Hinduism--that we are one," Nirvada Singh, 22, said. Commenting on the linguistic divisions among Hindus, she asked, "Why cannot my Tamil friend marry his Gujarati girlfriend or my Hindi friend marry her Telugu boyfriend? Aren't we all Hindus?"

Mauritius' Minister of Youth and Culture, Sri Mukeeshwar Choonee, was especially appreciated for his attunement with

the concerns of youth and his astute analysis of the future. He counseled: "The Third World War will be the war of cultures and 'cultural identities.'" He called for religious tolerance but added, "Asserting Indian culture is a Hindu's duty."

Polymer scientist and ex-president of the VHP of America, Dr. Mahesh Mehta, told the college-age crowd that the old mentality of "exclusivity"--my sect vs. your sect--needs to be replaced by a "unified vision." "We are all part of God," he affirmed. His presence was appreciated by the youth. "It was a great privilege meeting this distinguished scientist who spoke so eloquently on Hinduism," said Navena Noubouth, 20.

Indian human rights activist Swami Agnivesh, in his address to the womens' convention, said to a tumultuous applause, "A1l religions oppress women, and there is a big difference between what is preached and what is practiced. We need to look at how the status of today's women can be improved." He commended the Arya Prathinidi Sabha for establishing the first-ever training center for women priests in South Africa. He further applauded the women of South Africa for ridding themselves of dowry practice.

Dr. Lakshmi Kumari, president of the Vivekananda Kendra, shared, "Since my last visit in 1985, I see so much more freedom, a far better atmosphere. And women are asserting themselves in society." Parliamentarian/sannyasini Uma Bharathi, Rukmani Akka of the RSS and Dadi Prakashmani, head of the Brahma Kumaris, also addressed the women's convention. Levashnee Naidoo, 24, commented, "I've never heard women of such high calibre speak to us about things like

tackling discrimination against ourselves. This has encouraged me to be more active in the women's wing of the Andhra Sabha." Her friend Arthi Singh, 21, said, "Attitudes need to be relearned by both men and women if domestic violence is to be eradicated."

20,000 Attend the Main Event

Sunday at the Chatsworth soccer stadium was for everyone the big event. First came a colorful parade of local and international delegates representing Hindu organizations from 38 different countries. Pithikuli Murugadas, one of Tamil Nadu's most beloved singers, enthralled the 20,000-plus crowd with his tri-lingual bhajans and golden voice. The mood was exuberant as South Africa's ever-popular president, Nelson Mandela, arrived with his entourage and bodyguard about midday. To resounding applause, he was welcomed by a snowy-white, sari-clad 100-women guard of honor from the local Sai Baba group. The president ascended the stage and greeted each of the forty orange-robed sants with namaskaram.Swami Sahajananda, a South African and senior monk of the well-established Divine Life Society, unexpectedly prostrated to the statesman. Some foreign delegates were taken aback, but the swami's countrymen were not. "He sees the divine in all," a Durbanite explained. The crowd thundered applause for Mandela, delighting in his genuine and informed respect for Hindu tradition. "It's unbelievable to see him in person. He is the epitome of dharma," shared a young girl who traveled 600 kms. just to see the Gandhi-like statesman.

President Mandela said, "Our land is graced by temples and

shrines built by indentured laborers who brought Hinduism to our shores some 135 years ago and sustained it under difficult circumstances." He went on to credit our religion's impact on the freedom movement. "Hinduism's propagation of peace and tolerance had a profound influence on the liberation movement and my own thinking. The nurturing of Hinduism in South Africa has been woven into the struggle for freedom and justice. Our vision of a free and equal society is also to be found in the core values of Hinduism." He concluded with a religious tolerance plea: "South Africa is a country of many religions. They should all be respected and play an equal part."

Then followed the largest gathering and address by Hindu swamis and other Hindu leaders ever held on the African continent. A unified message emerged calling for more efforts to teach the dharma to youth in a contemporary mode and to nurture Hindu pride through knowledge, not blind faith or demonstration of force.

For most, the Sunday 6pm aratiand fireworks ended the weekend. But for others, Monday brought new vistas, especially a fascinating exploration of the parallel natures of Hinduism and African spirituality. The blind Mr. Reuben Thuku from Kenya, who read his talk from braille, said both cultures believed in a God that was omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient and also in the laws of karma and reincarnation and the ultimate goal of life. To a standing ovation he stated that African and Hindu traditions could come together "so that people would wish to live in this world rather than want to leave it."