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Voices From The World Hindu Conference Durban, South Africa

Sunny Saturday morning. July 8th. Eight hundred youth stampede the Hindu Centre, its cantilevered decks overlooking Durban city on the University of Durban/Westville campus. Oblivious to the stated room capacity of 500, the spirit-hungry group --attired in pujabis and kurtas of every hue--squeeze into the marble-tiled hall with its sensational panoramic view. This was the "big day." Room limits could stretch. "Wow! So many more came than we even hoped, locally and internationally," Youth Conference chairperson Yashika Singh told Hinduism Today in a post-conference telephone interview. "We were overwhelmed but ecstatic. They were spilling out all over." Taking the microphone first was Minister of Culture and Youth from the next-door island/nation of Mauritius. He was a super choice. "We all liked him," Yashika said. "For me, and many others, he was a role model--an under-forty politician, full of idealism, spiritually-minded, promoting dharma in government spheres." At 11:30am, the crowd swarmed out and across the campus, dividing themselves among three seminars--"Science and Religion," "Youth and Education" and "Religion and Philosophy." "I addressed this last group," Yashika said. "I focused on our most central Hindu metaphysical teaching that there is a single energy/consciousness pervading all existence. Another important seminar on ahimsa condemned animal testing."

After lunch, a single large seminar titled "Youth and Strategies" went on until 5:30pm. Foreign youth delegates from Kenya to England shared their successes and failures in promoting Hindu dharma in their homelands. "It was really interesting hearing the different challenges other countries face," Yashika said. "After a tasty vegetarian dinner, we showed off our home talent. Beautifully trained classical dancers, singers and instrumentalists stunned and thrilled everybody. We felt very proud."

For nearly a week, all the foreign youth delegates were--as were the swamis--graciously hosted with free lodging, post-conference sightseeing trips and socializing. Friends were made and fun was had as the day's discussions continued into the night at hotels and homes. Topics included everything from marriage customs to condemning the distribution of anti-Hindu books by a Muslim group right during the conference [see sidebar page 11].

Though not all 800 transformed into Vivekananda's roaring "lions of dharma," the inestimably valuable experience of just living and sharing with other high-minded Hindu souls was, in itself, a major rite of passage for many and more than reason enough to do it again.

"The women's sammelan was equally fantastic," Yashika related. "Over 300 women attended. Of course, domestic violence came up. Some of our own South African ladies were shocked and saddened hearing how prevalent it was, but everyone was thankful this cancer was finally being operated on and cut out of Hindu society."

Rohit Ambekar(22) Hindu Student Forum (U.K.): The conference was an eye-opener. Meeting so many Hindu youth was very constructive. The need of the hour is to assert our Hindu identity in being examples to others in the form of dharmic life we live. We have to be living examples of discipline, calmness and patience in order to live a Hindu way of life. It's a mammoth task individually and collectively. We have to change so that others will learn.

Pravian Naicker(27) Tamil Youth Movement (SA):We Hindus need to build upon linguistic differences, not tear each other down because of them. Meeting the swamis, for me, was out of this world, and South Africa has been blessed by their presence. Resolutions were passed, but no one clear-cut vision in a single, simple form of a statement came through. I feel inspired to go out to the common man and tell him, "I'm like you" not "Be like me." This will bring togetherness and later simplify Hinduism to him.

Javie Ravjee(28) Lenasia Yuvak Mandal (SA):It was the first time that so many Hindus came together. For me that was an encouragement. Enough of talk. Let's act. Otherwise, we are doomed in that our Hindu identity will be lost into oblivion. We must protect dharma. It's a huge task! I have hope.

Kanchan Banerjee(29) Hindu Students Council (USA):The youth must prove to ourselves that we can lead and show the way forward, the vision, in our actions. We should become a Hindu activist in the true sense of the word, whichever way we can. I was disappointed that the youth participation in the organization was minimal. I dreamt to see more youth on

stage when organizers were thanked. There were just two youths and thirty-plus adults. Let's not let the prejudices of anybody come in our way. We must act and think in harmony. We also need the support of our elders. Through our positive actions we will be respected and supported. We have to be soldiers. We work with one mission: the Hindu cause, nothing else. I felt no practical strategies came forward from the conference, e.g., an actual plan to introduce Hinduism in schools.

Nirvada Singh(20)--a student (SA):Woman is a manifestation of shakti,the great illusory power of the Lord. She charms man with her beauty, gentleness, sweetness, grace and spirit of service and sacrifice. The whole charm of a man's earthly life is centered in a woman. It is she who guides and controls the destiny of men and nations. She thus silently and subtly governs and rules the world. Still, many women who sat at this conference preach Hinduism but then fail to realize the Divinity in all. Many women still hold and promulgate divisive notions such as "I am a Hindi," or "I am Tamil, Telugu or Gujarati," rather than stressing unifying affirmations.

Arthi Singh(21) university student (SA):Hindu women are generally viewed as coming from passive settings and not being concerned with gender issues. I was impressed to see Indian women of all ages gather and take a stand against male dominance and oppression. The women verbalized their experiences, and this was a start as an essential step toward female empowerment. What's even worse is that women are divided into class, culture and race--particularly in South Africa. Therefore, we experience different forms of oppression. We must cut across these and recognize our differences to free

ourselves from the chains of oppression. It is through Hinduism that results will be achieved.

Ashnie Naidoo,(22) student (SA): For the first time Hindu women in South Africa shared a common platform. Although there were some petty Indian regionalistic controversies, this did not worry me. I was there, a proud Hindu. Never did I feel like I did on that day. I realized that it's not Hindu dharma that has oppressed us, but men who have, and influence from the Western world. We are liberating ourselves, and times are changing. If our dharma recognizes the male and female aspects of God, that is our basis to educate others. Afterwards, I went to borrow more books on Hinduism. I felt motivated. This thirst to get involved has awakened in me.

Levashnee Naidoo,(20) Andhra Youth Movement (SA): The greatness of our dharma is that it's not dogmatic and therefore it can, and is, changing with the times. One really nice thing was that I did see a few men in the audience of the women's conference. That's some proof that men--at least some--really do care about our happiness and welfare. But, in the end, we women have the shakti to endure pain.