Malaysian Women Take Charge
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After a Halting Start, World Hindu Women's 2nd Conference Delivers Plans and a Tough Message

Thiruvasagam, N. The World Hindu Women's Organization (WHWO) 2nd meeting sputtered to life like a cold engine, but ended with an open-throttle roar that made nodding heads jerk up and notice.

On September 4th, the night before the 4-day conference opened, the organizers switched locations. Malaysia Hindus driving and busing in to Kuala Lumpur from "outstation" agricultural districts were caught unaware. Many were disoriented, and some simply got lost.

Because the announcement of the conference came only 3 weeks prior to commencement, only two Malaysia Hindu groups - Hindu Dharma Mamandram and Saiva Siddhanta Mandram - attended in force. Malaysia's largest organization, Malaysia Hindu Sangam, complained of the too-brief time given to inform and mobilize its members, though the Sangam's eloquent President, Dr. S. Ponniah, was on the panel of speakers. Attendees were overwhelmingly Malaysian, with a few swami abbots and speakers from India. No American or European Hindu women were present.

When things finally got rolling there were bright moments. Malaysian women got a rare, public opportunity to explore Hindu womanhood's invaluable presence and contributions both historic and contemporary. Confidence was boosted, and the concept of teamwork among women noticably motivated the audience. Mrs. Dr. Premilla Ganeshan, president of the Malaysia WHWO, second in power to Dr. Saimatha Siva Brindhadevi, WHWO president, were the overshadowing minds. Dr. Brindhadevi is a sannyasini abbotess of an Indian aadheenam monastery. She convened the 1st conference in Tamil Nadu in February, 1984.

The theme was "Unity in Diversity in Hinduism," which shaped itself along the Liberal Hindu lines of Adi Shankara's 6-sect(shanmata) categorization: Siva, Vishnu, Shakti, Ganesha, Muruga and Surya. From there it was a small step for some speakers to postulate that Hinduism embraces all religions, a theme that is rapidly losing ground among aware Hindus.

The Shankara format isn't surprising. WHWO president. Dr. Brindhadevi, was initiated into sannyas by the Shankarachariya of Kanchi Peetam, established a Shanmata temple, advocates Shankaran advaita while teaching pluralistic Saiva Siddhanta and is the first woman abbot of a South Indian aadheenam - a fascinating amalgam of traditions. She wants women in more spiritual leadership positions and is training and has initiated sannyasinis at her monastery, yet none wear the orange robes as she herself does. She told Hinduism Today, "Our view is both men and women should adopt ochre robes once their goal is spirituality and once they surrender themselves to the life of renunciation."

The fireworks went off when Senator Samy Velu, a Malaysian government minister, broke the this-is-so-nice spell on the final day. Catching the Indian abbots offguard, he lambasted swamis who swoop into Malaysia, take-the-money-and-run and charged that the monasteries in India are out of date and out of touch in their methods of propogating Hinduism. He called for an end to puranic story-telling and 1000- pages thick scholastic books that leave youth, already only lukewarm on religion, cold. He ticked off ideas for illustrated children's books and a science-like approach for teaching and promised to fund the efforts personally if the swamis couldn't afford to do the job. It was tough, moving talk. The swamis quickly recovered to rally around the ideas, promising to convey the message from Malaysia to India.

The conference's final resolution: build a women's religious university in India, a dream of Dr. Brindradevi's for some time now. Seventeen hundred acres have already been purchased. The 3rd WHWO conference is stated for Chicago, U.S.A. sometime in 1986.