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Category : January 1986
Published by Anonymous on Jan. 01, 1986

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At Second Summit, Spiritual Leaders Set Policies for Casteism, Education, Hindu Unity Day - Want Temples Freed; Oppose Star Wars and Pope's Tour

It has been a season for world summits. At Geneva, U.S. President Reagan and U.S.S.R. Secretary General Gorbachev shook hands and talked geo-politics. In Rome, a plenary synod of Catholic Bishops met at the Vatican to review whether the so-called fresh air of the 1966 Vatican II policy wasn't turning toxic. Both figured into the 2nd Dharm Samsad, "Parliament of Religion," the largest summit in Hinduism's known history - bringing together 851 Hindu monastic leaders from 165 sampradayas (teaching order traditions) to the coast town of Udupi in Karnataka, India. From October 27-31, Udupi was the epicenter of Hinduism.

The abbots' objective: develop a pragmatic strategy to stop the erosion of dharma in Hindu society, eradicate casteism and dowry, institute a wider and more creative approach to international Hindu education; and lodge serious (in one case, suicidal) protests to the Indian government concerning the Catholic Pope's February, 1986, tour of India and the government's locking down of two renowned Rama and Krishna temples in Ayodhya, North India.

There hasn't been a gathering of the dharma forces like this since 630 A.D. when the Buddhist King Harsha convened an all-North, Central India conclave of Hindu monks and acharyas to debate the Chinese Buddhist, Hiuen Tsang. (Tsang won.) In April, 1984, the 1st Dharm Samsad met in New Delhi. Far fewer abbots attended. Thus there was uneven commitment across sect ideology and geography. The New Delhi summit's commitments and ideas were falling flat A 2nd Samsad, much larger in attendance and scope, was needed. The Samsad's sponsors, the global Hindu resurgence organization, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, in an extraordinary feat of orchestration, spent months delivering personal invitations to monasteries in Himalayan snows, dense jungle and desert sand.

For five days, Udupi was a preview of the Spring '86 Maha Kumbha Mela in Hardwar. The little town, fanning out around its famous Sri Krishna Temple, was awash with monks - a good percentage of this century's holy men and their retinues of sannyas disciples.

Despite the site's rugged remoteness, hundreds of swamis in every shade of orange, Buddhist bhikus in bright yellow and Jain monks in sparkling white were striding into the town that once was Madhva's (12th century Dvaita Vedanta formulator) headquarters. One courageous swami, painfully paralysed, was carried by two stout disciples. Saffron orange flags and banners were whipping in the breeze everywhere from masts and roofs, even telephone poles. Vaishnav monks with thick V-shaped sandalpaste down their forehead told mantram beads while Saiva Nathas with triple white stripes across the forehead sat locked in lotus. Street conversation was high theology, often rapid-fire in several languages. The sight and smell of cooking fires circled by monks in the dawn and sunset was a scene from ancient days.

The main two-day Dharm Samsad was preceded by a 3-day conference of the Marg Darshak, a 100-abbot body that works as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad ecclesiastical authority. Their job was to set the Samsad's agenda, a fairly smooth affair that only turned rough when one faction wanted more women swamis and acharyas included in the Samsad. It was a closed-door debate resulting in a final statement that more women would be invited for the next summit.

In the cool morning of the Samsad's first day, 300 abbots, heads high like they were looking into the future, robes billowing, wound through town in procession. Led by the temple elephant with drums pounding and nagasvara clarinets slicing the air, they crowded into the Sri Krishna Temple courtyard for an invocation. H.H. Swami Vishveshtirtha of the Madhva-lineage Pejawar Monastery, who hosted the Samsad, stated the gathering was like the churning of the ocean of Hinduism to remove its poison.

The summit was held in the Temple's Darbar Hall, a forest of monk's danda staffs poking up in the air as everybody sat according to their home state. Pamphlets put out by several monasteries explaining their activities circulated from hand to hand. Earphones were swaddled over many heads, meant to provide immediate translation of the speeches, but were quickly removed when the system failed.

H.H. Swami Chinmayananda, in his inaugural address, hammered at the potential power of the Hindu vote to protect their rights. "...the mahatmas have to leave their seats of meditation and come out of their caves to mobolise the Hindu vote and unite the people," he thundered. "After Hindus have secured their heritage then they can return to meditation." Concerning the Pope's tour, he suggested that every home fly a saffron flag from its rooftop and then the Pope will know India belongs to the Hindus.

The abbots then focused on three target areas: dowry, corruption and untouchability. Dowry, they decreed, was blackening Hinduism. They appealed for a grassroots reversal of the custom, asking engaged couples to take a vow not to demand or accept dowry. In some candid moments of self-criticism, the monks reaffirmed that is they who must set the example for reversing casteism by routinely touring and teaching in outcaste villages and areas. This was a major ambition of the 1st Samsad, but was timidly applied. By birth most of the monks are brahmins, a subconscious status hard to erase even in sannyas renunciation of caste and social distinction.

They asked Hindu industrialists and businessmen to underwrite educational/social projects in specific locals. If successful, Hindu consciousness and well-being among outcaste and tribals would be raised and Christian and Muslim inroads effectively countered. Spontaneously, a collection was taken, bringing in Rs. 100,000 on the spot

Swami Poornananda Giri, from Tamil Nadu, in a private statement to the press challenged the older abbots to let him tour India with 50 outcaste harijans, and invite them into their monasteries to dine. His monastery exclusively serves harijans in a dense Christian area. He says he left the management of the institution in care of his brilliant secretary, a young outcaste otherwise destined to poverty and shame. It was a bulls eye point Two Harijan swamis attending the Samsad had complained that they weren't given a voice in the casteism discussions. Only by press corps intercession did they speak up, then saying they didn't want to make an issue out of it.

In the final late-night hours of October 31st, 34 resolutions were passed - each one receiving a deafening "Aum" in chorus by the monks to indicate support. They included: the establishment of a Hindu Unity Day, a world Hindu hostel and cultural center with 64,000 satellite branches; strong condemnation of the Reagan

administration's Star Wars plans and Pope John Paul II's state visit to India. If the government failed to unlock the Ayodhya Temples by Maha Sivaratri, March 8th, there would be mass demonstrations designed to fill the jails much as Mahatma Gandhi had done to stymie the British Raj.

While the elder abbots were daring in speech, some younger swamis were promising more than a bark. White-robed Brahmachari Ramachandrasji reaffirmed his cool-nerved vow to immolate himself in a funeral pyre if the Ayodhya temples weren't opened by Rama Navami Day, March 20th, 1986. He asked for and received volunteers from the swamis to join him in death vows that haven't been seen since Vietnamese Buddhist monks torched themselves in the 60's.

The Samsad, representing 165 paths-to-God, was a living example of Hinduism's organic, teeming diversity. The subject sparked vaulting oratory and the creation of" Ekatmata Divas," Hindu Unity Day. The abbots chose Ekadashi in November/December as the day all Hindu sampradayas would unite in a show of solidarity. They asked Hindu almanac publishers to include the Day, December 11th, in their 1986 calendars. H.H. Swami Vibhudeshatirtha said, "When an emergency arises, we all become one. We are proud of our diversity and would not like a single dictatorial hold like that of the Pope."

When the abbots headed home, they carried vigorous, activist messages and plans that will be tested early in 1986. The Pope will be in India February 1-10. Already conversion activities have escalated in anticipation. The abbots don't want him fanning conversion yet they have to quell zealot Hindus who might unlawfully interfere with his tour. They also have to keep the Ayodhya temple liberation program under control and dharmic. Many Samsad plans will require enormous funding, a test of worldwide Hindus to see with the monks' vision of the future and build it.