The United Nations After Fifty Years Why Does Hinduism Have No Voice?
Category : February 1996
Published by Anonymous on Feb. 01, 1996

The United Nations After Fifty Years Why Does Hinduism Have No Voice?

Eastern Religions Seek a Greater Role in the World's Foremost Crisis Control Institution

Lavina Melwani, New York

Think of conflict resolution and human rights, and you think of the Untied Nations. Think of food for the starving, health care for children, education for the girl child, and once again you think of the UN. In an ideal world, global cooperation and world unity would be maxims to live for and die by, but in our imperfect world, full of strife and racism and disease, the United Nations is the lone shining beacon. It is the voice of reason in a world of chaos.

This remarkable world body, which has just completed 50 years, embodies many noble principles. Wherever there has been strife in the world, UN diplomats have sat and tried to negotiate peace. Blue helmeted UN peacekeeping troops have gone to dangerous war-torn countries to bring an end to strife. The various UN agencies have been the ray of hope for populations ravaged by war, floods or famine.

But in this jubilee year, the UN is almost an endangered

species. On the brink of going broke, it has received more criticism than accolades, with complaints about its ineffectiveness, vast bureaucracy and expense. Yet, without the UN there would have been many more wars in the world. Be it the bloodshed in the Middle East or apartheid in South Africa, the UN has managed to avert catastrophes and save lives. Imagine a world without the UN and you quickly see how vital it is to the peace and well-being of the world, especially that of developing nations.

Is There Spirit in the UN?

Like the UN, religion believes in global harmony and compassion. Eastern faiths especially believe in the oneness of humans, plants and animals, and the importance of our environment. Could the collaboration of various religions and the United Nations save the world? After all, the ideals of religion and those of the UN are not that different.

It seems an obvious alliance. Yet, religion plays no official role at the UN. In fact, the UN is a secular institution which prohibits religions from being represented. Only "states" are members of the UN perse. Ironically, the Vatican, which is considered a state, has official status, giving it a uniquely privileged position. Vatican representatives attend UN sessions as ambassadors, and no other religion can do that. With this single exception, religious organizations can only be affiliated to the UN as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and they participate as supplicants, as lobbyists.

According to Dr. Kusumita Pedersen, Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at St. Francis College in Brooklyn, New

York, some people are of the opinion that the UN tries to keep the NGOs out, or muzzle them, and that some countries are hostile to them, trying to keep them out of official conferences. An example is the recent Beijing Conference. She says, "Religions of the world are not really a part of the UN. However, the people who work for the UN are themselves religious and they don't necessarily have ways of expressing this in their business. Then there's the paradox that all across the world people regard the UN in a spiritual light because it's a symbol of world unity."

Since the UN is a political body, religions have no direct input in its activities, programs and resolutions. Notes Gayatri Naraine, spokesperson for the Brahma Kumaris, "I don't think the UN disregards religion. But because religion in the world has been positioned as a major source of conflict, it becomes an area of extreme discomfort for governments." She points out that 1986 was designated the International Year of Peace, but the UN viewed peace more from a socio-economic and political perspective, targeting conflict resolution and peace-keeping.

Hinduism's NGO Seat?

India is an important member of the UN, worthy of a seat on the Security Council, and Indians are also valued players in the various UN agencies. However, its major religion, Hinduism--the faith of millions in the world--stands nowhere amongst the various religious NGOs affiliated with the UN. While there are over a thousand religious NGOs at the UN, with heavy representation of Western faiths, there is no Hindu representation. NGOs are there purely on a voluntary basis--those who have the money or the motivation. Some

maintain their office jointly with the UN, while others have their offices in other countries. The directory of the NGOs tells the story--there are many Catholic organizations but very few of Asian religions. One of the shining exceptions is the International Mahavira Jain Mission.

Says Pedersen, "So it's a very skewed picture. The World community of religions is not there in that very few have offices in the UN. There is no institutionalized Hindu presence in the UN on the NGO side. There is no organization which has the word Hinduismin its title. As an interfaith organizer, I find it very difficult to get Hindus involved in multi-faith activities. The exception being that various followers want their masters to speak at gatherings and global conventions. But when it comes to getting someone to commit or form a coalition, it is quite hard."

Could it be that this is because Hinduism is introspective and not really aggressive in blowing its own trumpet? Pedersen says: "I'm not sure. It may have something to do with the stage the Hindu community in the United States is at, which is still pretty inward-looking, where tremendous energy is still going into building temples and worrying about how kids are going to be brought up as Hindus. There has been some quite sophisticated work to enter into US politics, but the interfaith and NGO matters are coming last. We hope this will be rectified."

Hinduism's Universalist Presence

While Hinduism has no formal, direct representation at the UN, there are several Hindu-based religions and spiritual groups

that put forward Sanatana Dharma's high ideals. They convey the message of Hindu dharma with dedication and persistence, decade after decade.

Sri Chinmoy: A Lobbyist for the Soul

Kusumita Pedersen is a disciple of Sri Chinmoy, an important spiritual influence at thc UN. For over 27 years he has been fostering peace among people and among nations thought his literature, lectures, meditations and concerts, through 100 meditation centers all over the world. When Sri Chinmoy started his Peace Meditation Group in the Untied Nations in the 1970s, he received warm support from then Secretary General U. Thant. His twice-weekly meditations at the UN continue to this day.

Says Sri Chinmoy, "Some approach reality from the outside and feel that they have to bring the world into order first before they can have peace in their own lives. We feel that first we have to pray and meditate to bring peace and oneness to the fore from within; only then can we offer it to the political, economic and social world." He continues: "Because of our prayer and meditation, many problems with no outer solution will somehow be solved. The human mind will call it a stroke of fate, but the heart will say it is because there are some sincere seekers who are crying for world peace. It is our accumulated prayers and meditations that are solving these problems."

Pedersen notes: "Sri Chinmoy has devoted his whole life to promoting peace on the basis of spirituality and certainly considers, in an inner sense, that the UN is the center of the

global consciousness and that peace has got to emerge from there."

The Brahma Kumaris: Spiritualizing Politics

Another spiritual organization active in the UN is the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University. It recognizes that while conflict, poverty and exploitation require practical and sustainable responses, the root cause of these troubles lies in the values held by individuals and communities. Founded in 1936, the organization has 3,700 branches in 65 countries. It teaches moral and spiritual values and the power of meditation for peace of mind and developing one's potential.

Last year the Brahma Kumaris initiated the "Sharing Our Values for a Better World" project to emphasize spiritual values and the importance of individual self-development to enhance the quality of life for all people. The organization, which is an international NGO, has consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council and with UNICEF. According to spokesperson Gayatri Naraine, "By offering meditation and a value-based educational approach, we are affirming faith and enhancing the worth and dignity of the human person so that people can identify with the United Nations in a more humane way rather than in a political way.

"We did a program called 'Million Minutes of Peace,' dedicated to the UN International Year of Peace, and reached the people of 88 countries. It offered positive thinking, prayer and meditation, and the response was overwhelming, with people praying for peace. This project resulted in six national and one international Peace Messenger Awards from the Secretary

General of the UN."

As the Brahma Kumaris noted in their statement to the UN at the annual NGO conference in 1995, "A more spiritual approach can help us to address the root cause of interconnected problems in an integrated way. While this method may not be able to boast the seductive appeal of the quick-fix solution, it is the basis of arriving at solutions with long-lasting effects. This additional spiritual perspective would strengthen and enrich the broad framework of existing UN programs and activities. The understanding, practice and expression of moral and spiritual qualities, including peace, unity, tolerance, respect, love, care, cooperation, justice and empowerment, constitute the pillars on which the purposes and principles enshrined in the United Nations will stand or fall."

Jainism, Carving a Niche For Indian Religion

Jainism, a sister faith to Hinduism, represents India's strongest orthodox religious presence in the UN. Perhaps Hindu organizations can take a leaf from the book of the International Mahavira Jain Mission. Propagating the ideals of Acharya Sushil Kumar, it is the first Jain organization to get affiliated with the UN, and has actively participated at many UN conferences, including the Earth Summit, trying to bring a religious perspective to the proceedings. Bawa Jain became very active, got elected to the executive committee and became the treasurer of the NGOs. Currently he is the Vice Chairman of all the NGOs, the first Asian to hold this position.

Jain explains, "This has helped us in further outreach in terms

of our focus and our work. The Social Summit took place in March, 1995. I started a Values Caucus to integrate into the work of the United Nations the basic values that exist in every religious tradition, in every culture. We sought to create an awareness of these values and integrate into the documents of the agenda, language which reflects the consciousness of our one shared humanity. We were very successful in that the whole document, as it was adopted in Copenhagen, reflected that quite extensively. Leading from that, the major conference, Habitat II is coming up in Istanbul, and we've again convened a values caucus."

Jain also convened the official Interfaith Service for the 50th anniversay of the UN, where the nonviolent ideal was stressed. At the session of the Heads of State, Bawa Jain was one of three NGO representatives invited. He notes, "We are constantly trying to put religious and spiritual aspects into the documents of the UN. We've been quite successful because we've lobbied the delegates extensively. But Eastern religions are not represented enough, and that's my constant fight and struggle. It's a tragedy that we don't have any Hindu organizations in the UN. Although I am a Jain by religious philosophy, by culture I am a Hindu and I constantly try to get people aware of the Hindu tradition and Hindu way of life."

He feels one of the reasons for Hinduism being invisible at the UN is that there is no unity amongst Hindu organizations. He says, "If you were to ask who can be called to be a representative of the Hindu tradition, there isn't anyone. We might have our differences, but when it comes to an international forum, we need to have some unity amongst ourselves. In the last decade or so, the Hindu tradition has

been labeled with some amount of fanaticism and that's not helping us one bit. Where are we on the international scene? We have to share the wonderful aspects of our culture."

Religion in the UN: The Next Fifty Years

Religion may indeed have a larger impact on the UN in the years to come. Naraine observes, "Religion and spiritual values can enter the UN through unofficial channels. What is happening is that because the UN does not have a religious or spiritual base, the political base is rocking, because it does not have the inner strength. But little by little, the word value is becoming popular." She adds that the UN in its 50th year is in a very vulnerable transitional period. Though it knows political, economic and social values, the challenge is to link these to the core spiritual values. At a meeting before an upcoming conference on the habitat in Istambul, the point was raised that if spiritual values are not addressed, then there is no habitat to talk about, since communities around the world are built around people's religious and spiritual values.

"In this way I see religion and values coming into the UN," says Naraine. "It's a very new area. It will require people--individuals, statesmen, women--who not only profess these values but who have the courage to live these values and can bring them into the UN in an organized and non-threatening way. It can help empower the UN and also empower people's lives--that's what the UN stands for. It's not only a political body. It's there to help people live better lives."

Kusumita Pedersen summarized: "I've been around the UN for 20 years, and in those days you would have been considered

ethereal if you said outer peace depends on inner peace or if you talked about spiritual values. That is no longer true. Now, even in big international conferences such as the Social Summit which took place in Copenhagen, the language of values and spiritual values is emerging more and more, and the recognition that we have to have spiritual values in order to survive is becoming very widely accepted."

As Dr. Jayaraman of Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan writes in a tribute to the UN: "Its failures have received widespread attention, but not its achievements. Its successes in economic and social development, decolonization, human rights, disarmament and peacekeeping have had a tremendous impact on all thinking people during the second half of our century. Since 1945, the UN and its agencies have negotiated peaceful settlements to dozens of regional disputes. They have been instrumental in assuring free elections in more than 45 countries. They have funded or supported tens of thousands of development projects. They have played a vital role in fashioning global programs to protect the environment. They have provided aid to more than 30 million refugees fleeing war, famine or persecution. They have been responsible for drastically reducing child mortality rates and nearly doubling the life expectancy of people in the developing countries. In the grand sweep of human history, the United Nations is but a child. In most cases, a child can only dream and hope. But one day that child will become a man and carry the standard for all humanity."

With the silent benediction of world religions and a greater acceptance of spirituality, it will be interesting to see the miracles the UN can achieve in the next fifty years.

Mrs. Lavina Melwani is a journalist of several publications in the US, India and the Far East. Born in Sindh, she grew up in New Delhi, lived in Hong Kong and Africa. She currently resides in New York with her husband and two children.

Setting Out to Save the World
A History of the UN

By Lavina Melwani, New York

Created on October 24, 1945, by the "victors" of World War II, the United Nations was an organization full of promise, with its idealistic name coined by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. In its Charter, the UN set out economic and social objectives for sustainable development, global living standards, cross-cultural cooperation and universal respect for human rights. The United Nations Children's Fund, started in 1946, has had a vast impact on the futures of the world's children. The Bretten Woods Institutions--International Monetary Fund and the World Bank--were incorporated into the UN in 1947, lending muscle to developing countries. In 1950, the UN Relief and Works Agency was set up as a lifeline for Palestinian refugees. In 1951, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees was established to absorb the refugees created by the Second World War. This year the agency is helping 27 million refugees.

In 1962 the first UN Conference on Trade and Development was held, leading to the creation of the Group of 77, which aids developing nations to voice their concerns. The United Nations Population Fund has helped millions in developing nations. The UN Environment Program promotes sustainable development to ensure that the state of our universe is not forgotten. The

World Health Organization has taken on an ambitious program of eradicating small pox--80 percent of the world's children have been inocculated toward the goal of "Immunization for all by the Year 2000." In a world where 40,000 children die every day from preventable diseases, efforts by UNICEF have reduced the numbers from 14 million in 1984 to 8 million in 1995.

Many UN programs would seem to be religiously inspired, though the planners may choose not to admit it. In 1985, the first UNICEF sponsored Day of Tranquility was established when warring factions in the Salvadorian civil war agreed to a cease-fire so that relief supplies could be given to victims. The theory of "children as a zone of peace" was successfully applied in the battlegrounds of Lebanon, Sudan and Yugoslavia. In 1992, 104 heads of state, 1400 NGOs and 20,000 observers attended the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro to discuss issues of environmental responsibility. Maurice F. Strong, secretary general of the Earth Summit, noted: "The Earth Summit must establish a whole new basis for relations between rich and poor, North and South, including a concerted attack on poverty as a central priority for the 21st century."

The UN recently attempted to set the record straight on its alleged bloated expenses and bureaucracy: The budget for UN's core functions in New York, Geneva, Nairobi, Vienna and five regional commissions is nearly a billion dollars less than the yearly cost of Tokyo's Fire Department; The UN employs 60,000 people worldwide, but three times as many people work for MacDonald's while Disney employs 50,000 people; The UN system has the equivalent of less than us$1.75 per human being to spend on economic and social development.

The world's governments spent about $767 billion in military expenditures in 1994--the equivalent of $134 per human being. This, unhappily, shows where the world's priorities lie.

Baha'i Has Paved a Clear Path for Religious NGOs

Lavina Melwani, New York

Baha'i International Community is an international NGO with five-million members who believe in a vision of world unity--of one race oriented by one God. Baha'i works closely with the UN. In fact, Baha'i representatives were present in 1945 in San Francisco at the founding. Today it's involved with the World Health Organization (WHO), UN Environment Program (UNEP), United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The Baha'is also participated in NGO Forum for Women '95, in China.

According to Techeste Ahderom, principal UN representative of the Baha'i International Community, "We are for international peace and security, and at the moment the UN is the only such forum where issues of concern can be discussed in a civil manner by countries with opposing views." He points out that the Baha'is share with the world community their perspectives on equality of women and men, on the elimination of prejudice, narrowing of the gap between rich and poor, fostering religious toleration and the promotion of one international auxiliary language.

Ahderom concludes, "The recognition of the oneness of

humanity is an essential requisite for the realization of those goals. During the last few years, religious terms such as spirituality, ethics and moral standards are increasingly being used in official UN documents. Although the terms might not mean the same for all, their frequent use is welcome."

India's Tribute to the United Nations
ONE MUSIC, ONE WORLD

By Lavina Melwani, New York

It was possibly the nicest gift the UN received for its 50th birthday. At a time when it has become fashionable to knock the achievements of this world body, India, via the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, honored it with One World, One Music, an amazing international concert for global harmony. The 5,000-seat Paramount Theater in Madison Square Garden was ablaze with glorious music as a formidable array of talent took to the stage, from Latin American ballad singer Danny Rivera to Nigerian drummer Babatunde Olatunji and his Drums of Passion to American jazz guitarist Larry Coryell. The four hour program celebrated the universal language of music. India was particularly well represented by violinists L. Subramaniam, L. Shankar and V.G. Jog, guitarist Vishwamohan Bhatt, tabla maestro Swapan Chaudhuri, Vinayakaram and Vellore Ramabhadran and vocalist K.J. Yesudas.

Observed Dr. Jayaraman, the executive director of the Bhavan, "The idea was to honor the United Nations because according to our Indian philosophy, the whole world is a family and music is an instrument to reach the supreme being. In fact, music, Nada Brahmanin Sanskrit, itself is considered a supreme being. The music will always remain in the mind."

It was no easy task assembling over 80 musicians from all over the world in New York, including the Beach Boys' Michael Love, Patti Austin, Narada Michael Walden and a host of others from as far away as Japan and Korea. Jayaraman and his minuscule staff spent over six months planning the concert. The support from the Indian community was considerable, raising $150,000 for the event.

The backdrops for the Paramount stage were created by M.F. Husain. Artist after artist took to the stage, from Sri Chinmoy to Carman Moore and The Sky Music Ensemble, and gave their best. The chief guest India's former president, R. Venkataraman, presented a plaque to Ambassador Gharekhan on behalf of the United Nations. Awards were also given to Babatunde Olatunji for his dedication to African culture, to L. Subramaniam who was the Artistic Director of this festival, and to Mike Love of the Beach Boys.

The grand finale was Global Fusion, a many-layered special composition by Dr. L. Subramaniam featuring Mike Love, Larry Coryell, Stu Goldberg, Trilok Gurtu, the Chinmoy bhajan singers and a host of others. As the rich music created from the unity of eastern and western instruments pervaded the atmosphere, rising like the smoke from sacred incense, it seemed hard to believe that conflicts like Bosnia or Beirut could exist in such a harmonious world. So this musical tribute was a perfect salute to the UN. India is the only country to have planned an event of such magnitude. With all the quibbling going on about the achievements of the UN, this was an eloquent acknowledgment of all that is right with the organization.