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Published by Anonymous on Feb. 02, 1999

PROGRESS

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VHP seeks unity for hemisphere's Hindus

Richard Vara, Houston Chronicle

Western Hindus, seeking to maintain religious and cultural identities, are founding a council of senior leaders to codify moral standards and religious practices. The "Dharma Samsad," organized by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America along the lines of similar VHP meetings of Hindu religious leaders in India, first met in August at Swami Dayananda Saraswati's ashram in Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania. It attracted 30 religious leaders, including swamis (half of whom were from India). Also attending were more than 200 community leaders from the USA, Central America and the Caribbean.

Community leaders asked their religious leaders for guidelines on strengthening the family and averting divorces, instilling cultural pride in youth and preventing the defection of Hindus to Christianity or Islam. They also want Hindu ideals adapted to Western lifestyles, community acceptance of "white" Hindu converts and networking among the far-flung and autonomous Hindu communities in the Western Hemisphere, according to a report from the Pennsylvania meeting. Priya Dasi of Austin's

Barsana Dham, one of the nation's largest temples, said Hindu spiritual leaders agreed to hold annual meetings in the future to tackle problems and to formulate samskaras, rights of passage such as name-giving, coming of age and marriage, in a standardized way adequately adapted to the Western situation. The next meeting will be held this year at Barsana Dham under the auspices of its founder, Swami Prakashanand Saraswati.

California-based Swami Muruganandaji gave another example of the important issues. "We have, for example, long rituals, but there is hardly any time for this in a fast-paced world." The swami favors arranged marriages over the individual selection favored in the West, and proposes to adapt that Hindu tradition for the West. He describes the council as more of a think tank than a legislative body. Kanchan Bannerji, leader of the Hindu Student's Council, expressed concern about growing violence within the Indian community. "There are gangs that we cannot reach," he said.

All agreed on the need for renewal in Hinduism. Dilip Vedalankarji, a Houston leader, suggested that Hindu youths study India's history and religion to appreciate their heritage. He also emphasized the need for Hindu unity in an age of rapid growth and new temple construction. "Until we unite, we can't do anything," he said.

VHP OF AMERICA, ONE PRINCESS STREET, PARSIPPANY, NEW JERSEY 07054 USA.
E-MAIL: rishi--98@hotmail.com

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