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January Rishikesh Summit Led by S. Rao

Professor K.L. Seshagiri Rao is exuberant. His voice, at age 58, still sounds youthful, like the hum of an electric turbine at full spin. Hands lifted in the air, he says, "We want to give expression to the genius of Hinduism, to the self-expression of Hinduism." What he's talking about in an interview with Hinduism Today is an English Encyclopedia of Hinduism. And with a summit meeting on the project scheduled for Rishikesh, India, on January 3-4th, 1988, involving some 80-100 leading scholars and avid lay and monk supporters, he can almost feel the weight of the first volume in his hands.

What is the summit planning? It's scholastically akin to compressing the Earth down to the size of a soccer ball. Take the staggering mass of Hindu thought and accomplishment, past through present, and condense it into thousands of finely edited and illustrated text entries alphabetized over twenty thick volumes. All meticulously cross-referenced, and according to Professor Rao, "Better than the Encyclopedia Britannica. We will surpass it," Just a quick calculation shows that hundreds of thousands of man-hours and dollars are involved. Ambitious? Yes, he cheerfully admits it is. Realizable? Unquestionably!

So we can imagine a time-Rao projects the work will be completed in a decade from its start (probably next year)-when a tall set of creamy white-and-red (the Hindu colors) bound books with gold letters reading "Abaddha to Bhakti" and so forth will sit prominently in Hindu homes worldwide. Rao, who will be the chief editor, says the first volume will be the toughest. "There's a lot of entries that begin with A."

Respected author and professor of comparative religious studies at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Rao is the father of this long overdue and high-priority project. It's been germinating in his mind for fifteen years. He's been taking it to bed with him at night and feeding it with power from his dawn meditations and

prayers in the family shrine room. A devotee of Vishnu - "I visualize in my meditations one of the incarnations of Vishnu" - and finding his greatest inspiration in the Bhagavad Gita, Isa and Katha Upanishads, Rao is determined to preserve the entire spectrum of Hindu knowledge. "It was actually the idea of my students. They wanted to consult an encyclopedia. I kept having to tell them there isn't one."

He correctly notes, "Almost every major religious tradition, except Hinduism, has produced one or more sets of encyclopedia as a source of information and academic tool." He then lists several Christian works, a Judaic set, a Buddhist one and four Islamic sets.

So, with the realization that over 5,000 years of Hindu history needed systematic recording, and finding time between his career and - with his supportive wife, Saraswati - raising four boys, he has approached funding institutions, aired his project to fellow scholars and written a Draft Prospectus. But it was only the latter half of this year that things started to quicken.

Several meetings on the U.S. east coast and a count-on-it commitment by Swami Chidananda Saraswati, spiritual mentor of the Hindu/Jain Temple in Monroeville, Pennsylvania, to oversee the mammoth financial side of the project culminated in the formation of an organization: the Hindu Heritage Research Foundation. The Rishikesh conference is being hosted by Swami Chidananda's home monastery, Paramatha Nikethan on the Ganga River - certainly an appropriate location.

Rao's bottom line approach to the project: "We don't want anybody taking a paternalistic or orientalist type of attitude. We have to be methodologically very sophisticated. We want an expert in each area of Hinduism - each sect, school, tradition. An expert who would be fair to that tradition." This is an important statement, for the majority of books on Hinduism are broad depictions of liberal Hindu thought based on Adi Shankaran teachings. A Hindu Encyclopedia should nobly and impartially embrace all.

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