Asia-Pacific Conference
Category : May 1988
Published by Anonymous on May. 01, 1988

Asia-Pacific Conference

Hindus From 16 Nations Tackle Problems and Explore Opportunities in Multi-Religious Societies

Five hundred delegates gathered in Singapore during the pleasant spring days of April 1st to 3rd for the First Asia-Pacific Hindu Conference. Convened at the ultra-modern, super-deluxe Pan Pacific Singapore Hotel, the event had a tangible 21st century vibration in this "city of the future." The hi-tech, laser-printed souvenir book mapped Hinduism's march through the next hundred years. Sponsored by the Hindu Centre Singapore, this was the first large-scale international meeting ever held in Southeast Asia. By formal presentations and informal gatherings, Hindu delegates from South Africa in the East to the USA in the West wrestled with the problems of "Hinduism in Changing Societies."

The gathering's four main objectives were: 1) to become aware of the changes taking place in societies with regard to religion and the consequent effect on Hinduism; 2) to understand the value of Hinduism; 3) to create closer links with the Hindu world at large; and 4) to outline ways to solve problems facing Hindus.

The Guest of Honor, Mr. S. Rajaratnam, Senior Minister (Prime Minister's Office) in Singapore's government and Patron of the Hindu Centre, gave the inaugural speech. "Religion becomes evil when it is wedded to politics," he began, "All the holy wars of the past and the present are the inevitable consequence of this illicit liaison between religion and politics." Speaking with dynamism and deep conviction, he pointedly listed the wars fought in the name of religion, then said, "The outbreak of so many holy wars the past 20 years underlines the urgency of distinguishing between the proper and improper use of religion. The only way out of holy wars is to strictly leave politics to politicians and religion to theologians. Priests turned politicians generally breed religious intolerance."

Swami Chinmayananda, a founder and first president of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, gave the keynote address. Despite apparent physical frailty, the

71-year-old swami spoke forcefully. "In the past," he began, "great religious leaders such as Buddha, Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhva have arisen during times of Hindu decadence and revitalized the religion." He went on to explain that in the present day Hinduism has fallen so low that no one individual can revitalize it. "An organization is needed," Swami said. Chinmayananda also countered several points made by Minister Rajaratnam, specifically saying that religious leaders could and should become involved in politics. Swami concluded by suggesting the delegates meet again in two years to see how the conference final resolutions have manifested.

Dr. (Mrs.) Prema Panduranga (Professor of English at Presidency College, Madras, India) addressed the assembled delegates on the role of women in Hindu society. She said that women must epitomize the qualities of gentleness and compassion, be pure in mind, body and soul and each should share her husband's life spiritually, mentally and physically. It is the wife's duty to maintain the family's spiritual balance in the otherwise materialistic world by her prayers. Dr. Panduranga also spoke on the very practical matters of motherhood and raising good children "rather than hoodlums." She said that prenatal care and the thoughts of the mother during that critical time are central to the child's spiritual development. It is advantageous for the pregnant mother to participate in religious activities, she advised.

At this same session, H.H. Sivaya Subramuniyaswami [Hinduism Today's publisher] spoke on "Networking Hinduism in Changing Communities." "Ten years ago," he said, "we took a world tour and found an amazing situation - no one knew of the existence of Hindus in other parts of the world. In response to this situation, we created the newspaper known today as Hinduism Today, to be concerned not about Hinduism in the past, but in the present and the future."

"The greatest lesson that Hindus can teach others," declared Subramuniyaswami, "is that Hindus can work together. Our society is changing because we talk. In just talking we can become friends, learn to trust and love each other. This conference fulfills the need for such communications."

Workshops

Each day, the delegates split up into three workshop groups, for a total of nine workshops during the three days Topics included Hinduism's basic concepts, scriptures, rites, rituals, and temples, the role of women and youth, and the relation between Hinduism and culture and applied sciences. The final workshop dealt with national and international coordination of Hindu activities in the future.

Kapto Sunoto fascinated one workshop group with the history of Hinduism in Indonesia, stating, "The 13,000 islands of the sprawling Indonesian archipelago have, since the beginning of the Christian era, been occupied by not less than 13 mighty Hindu kingdoms, all of which based their existence, ruling and culture on the norms of the Hindu Arthasastra."

S.V. Krishnan explained how Hindu Studies had come to be taught in secondary schools in Singapore, "It is the first time in South-East Asia that Hindu studies is being taught as a subject in the school curriculum," he proudly pointed out. Delegates were interested in this a model for other multi-religious countries.

Concern for the temple was evident in several workshops. Delegates cited better training, working conditions, status and pay as necessary to improve the overall lot of the temple priests. "It is essential to upgrade and unify the standards of our priests who have tremendous influence on temple devotees," said Dr. R. Karunanity, President of the Singapore's Sri Ruthra Kaliamman Temple Others noted that the various Hindu rites and rituals would be more meaningful to everyone if proper explanations were easily available.

Among the best papers presented at the workshops was that of Dr. S.M. Ponniah, Advisor to the Malaysia Hindu Sangam. After careful analysis of the development of Hinduism to the present day, he delineated nine areas of importance - e.g., Hindu unity, proper publicity, unified religious practices, a network of youth and women's organization-and 26-step program to create Hindu unity at national and international levels. He proposed that the World Hindu Council of Nepal be reconstituted as a truly international body with representatives of national and international Hindu councils and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. He stressed, "It is important to bear in mind that this coordination must be achieved without any attempt to control."

On the down side, several delegates objected to the lack of opportunity to ask questions of the speakers or have discussions, even in the workshop sessions which they had thought were set up for those purposes. Some also felt the young people should have been a greater role in the entire proceedings.

Resolutions for the Future

The conference adopted several resolutions at its closing session, including a call for closer cooperation and communication among Hindus, greater participation of women and youth (particularly in the temple activities and management) and the adoption of modern methods of mass media for promoting Hinduism.

The Hindu Centre Singapore did an outstanding job of coordinating what was one of the largest Hindu conference ever held in the country They set an excellent organizational standard Building upon the lessons of this reasonably successful meeting, delegates look forward to future gatherings in the "City of the Lion."

Article copyright Himalayan Academy.