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Ministry

Meet the US Army's First Hindu Chaplain

Six years into her service, Captain Pratima Dharm has found her life's calling: ministering to the men and women of the American military

By Lavina Melwani, New York

She's a captain in the army who has served in the combat zones of northern Iraq and been awarded several honors, including the Bronze Star. But she doesn't carry a gun and has never fired a shot. She says simply, "My defense is God." Meet Pratima Dharm, 45, the first-ever Hindu chaplain in the US military, now in her sixth year of service. Pratima goes where the soldiers go, offering spiritual guidance and strength to all, regardless of their individual faith. She is currently posted at Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington, D. C., working with wounded soldiers.

"Hindu Chaplain" may sound unusual to an Indian-American, but the concept is far from unknown in the Hindu world. India's military has religious teachers assigned to every unit, and there are Hindu, Sikh and Christian places of worship on every base (see *Hinduism Today*, July, 2005).

Hindu chaplains also serve in the armies of the UK, South Africa, Indonesia and Nepal. Chaplains, or similar designations, have been a part of armies since ancient times. Military chaplains are noncombatant religious teachers, advisors and priests who in modern times minister to soldiers of all faiths, as the occasion requires. Chaplains go through standard army training, except for weapons. There the soldiers take over; and Dharm says they are very, very protective of her.

Chaplain Dharm grew up in the cosmopolitan cities of modern India, in landscapes

dotted with temples, churches, gurudwaras and mosques. As a child in Patna and Bombay, she encountered many different communities peacefully living together. Her early education was at Notre Dame Academy, a Catholic school; later she studied at Mithibai College and Shri Nathibai Damodar Thackersay Women's University.

She retains fond memories of celebrating Hindu, Muslim and Christian festivals with friends and neighbors. "In India there is barely anything that is not religious or spiritual," she says. "I mean, even the most common person over there--such as someone selling tea and sweets on the street--can talk to you so spiritually. Everything around us was spiritual. Both my parents were very open to other religions and did not believe that Hinduism is the only way. Of course, we were raised as Hindus, but never did I hear a conversation at home, even when I was a young child, that was against any religion. My parents would always encourage me to ask questions about God, and find God for myself through family discussions."

"From early on," she explains, "I would love to fast on Janmashtami; and the way I was talked to about Lord Krishna, by my mom especially, He seemed like a person to me. It was not somebody far away, you know, not a distant God, but somebody very personal, a personal friend, somebody who would listen to you, somebody that you could go to for anything."

"In our home," she recalls, "there was a big tradition about making every festival colorful and meaningful, through food, through different activities, through connections and community relationships. It was not uncommon for 200 people to come to our home over a period of several days during the festivals of Janmashtami, Diwali, Holi or Durga Puja."

So, in moving from India to the US, how did Dharm get attracted to the unusual field of chaplaincy? "I have a master's in psychology, and I was drawn to God since I was a child. When I got an opportunity to study theology in this country, I pursued it. Chaplaincy was the only field I found where you could integrate theology and psychology."

In our Hindu traditions, she points out, the emphasis is on understanding the self, and psychology also emphasizes the study of the individual. She believes that the

Bhagavad Gita, the teachings of Sri Krishna, can be applied to our daily lives in powerful ways. "How does one go through grief, how does one go through anxiety? As we read Krishna's teachings and we understand it, it gives us a lot of courage to go through life and get self-knowledge."

"So once I understand who I am, what makes me happy, what makes me sad, I allow that to the other person, to my patients or my soldiers that I come across in my ministry. Their story perhaps may be different than mine, but the basic principles are the same, so it's about allowing the other person space to process their own story, and offering them understanding, offering them care."

Though people are of different faiths, Dharm is able to distill the commonality, the core that connects, because of her grounding in Vedanta. She explains, "I have to give them what I have, but I also have to have the ability in me to accept what they have. It is an exchange. And sometimes I may not be able to give something to the person or may give little, but the main thing is I am open to that. The chaplaincy is a deeply pluralistic environment for the study of the relationship between person and God, between persons, and the relationship between cultures. In that pluralistic environment, one has to be open."

Path to the Chaplaincy

To become a chaplain in the army, one must have formal training, usually in a seminary, and endorsement by an authorized religious institution. When Dharm decided to prepare for the chaplaincy, there was no authorized Hindu body--and there are still no seminaries which offer a degree in Hinduism. Dharm received her initial training, therefore, in a Protestant seminary, and she was first endorsed by the Pentecostal Church of God. She underwent baptism and wore the service badge of a Christian chaplain, even though she is a Hindu. There were no other options available; hence this unusual route.

"All the Hindu studies that I did were on my own. I gained experience by working in the temples and, of course, growing up in India," she says. "There was no other opportunity. Even now, I don't think there is any seminary in the Western world that offers Hindu studies or offers Sanskrit as a language. They offer Hebrew, German, Latin and Greek, but they do not offer any of the Indian languages."

While working at Walter Reed Medical Hospital, Dharm finally found a Hindu institution authorized by the military to endorse someone for the chaplaincy: Chinmaya Mission West, the first Hindu organization to receive recognition as an endorsing agency by the Pentagon. To obtain this recognition, Chinmaya Mission worked with Chaturbhuj Gidwani, an Indian-American army reserve veteran and long-time advocate for a Hindu chaplaincy. Dharm took the Chinmaya courses and passed the examinations. Upon learning of her appointment, Gidwani said, "The Hindu community around the world received the news of the appointment of Chaplain Pratima Dharm as an auspicious event in the Chaplaincy Corps."

Dharm does not say much about her move to Hinduism from the Pentecostal Church, or what the Pentecosals thought about it. But the Army allowed the change, and she leaves no doubt that she is, and always has been, a Hindu.

The Work of a Chaplain

Having their own chaplain is something new and wonderful for the approximately 1,000 Hindus in the American Armed Forces, for they now have someone who is competent to address their spiritual needs. Practically speaking, however, these 1,000 Hindus (most of them doctors) are spread around the military, and around the world. Dharm's day consists of visiting the soldiers, marines and sailors of Walter Reed. Like all military chaplains, she ministers to every faith. She finds that soldiers have many issues, especially those who are coping with injuries. "There is an excruciating amount of pain that a wounded soldier goes through, especially in the first three or four months of the healing process," she reports. "We have many soldiers who are amputees, and some of them have returned really scarred from war. My daily duty is being with them, understanding them, processing what is going on with them, and making sure that they are getting the best care possible."

Dharm's psychology training has proven invaluable, as her chaplaincy tasks extend far beyond spiritual matters to encompass everything that is relevant to a soldier's life, including suicide prevention and combat stress training. She provides marriage workshops and marital counseling as needed. She must function as peacemaker between physicians and patients, sounding board for families, caretaker of the psychological moods and spiritual needs of the patients. As a staff officer, she is also assigned other projects, unrelated to her chaplain work.

While ministering to all faiths, Dharm also provides specific religious support related to Hinduism. She holds yoga classes and Hindu worship services for soldiers and

officers. At Janmashtami she held a special prayer service at the hospital, with images of Radha-Krishna and Ganesh. She says the Hindus were overjoyed, happy to the point of tears: they had never seen a Hindu service in the area where they worked. She says, "So it is a start, it is a beginning. I am sure that there have been other beginnings in the past, but I opened it in a way that others can also participate, people of other religions who are interested in joining and attending this program."

Dharm emphasizes that she is not a Hindu priest and therefore does not perform samskaras such as the birth of a child, marriages or death rites for the Hindu soldiers, but generally conducts the worship services and festival celebrations. This is a limitation of Dharm's particular background, and not one of the chaplaincy. A Hindu chaplain with the requisite training could perform any of the rites and rituals done by a Hindu priest, including the samskaras.

What would she do if a soldier is dying and asked for the last rites? "Whatever situation they are in, and especially when they are passing away, that is the most sacred moment for those who are around the soldiers," she says. "Everyone in the military knows that that is the one moment where everything stops, when there is a soldier dying. And if that is the desire of the soldier, I would be more than honored, more than willing to do it."

Challenges of Chaplaincy

Asked about her biggest challenge as a military chaplain, she cites the stereotypes that exist about Hinduism amongst the mainstream. "I think, as Indians, we have done very well, as we have come out of India and established ourselves in businesses and professional fields. But as far as explaining our religion is concerned, we have not done it well. Indians have established temples, and they found a life within the temple, but you know they have kept their professional life and personal life sort of separate."

While she feels the Indian community has tried to do its best, the task is a monumental one. For her the biggest challenge lies in educating the people about Hinduism.

She remembers her childhood upbringing where there was so much common

ground among friends of different faiths. Differences were discussed with interest, respect, love and caring. "The bottom line, I believe, is that all religions connect in more ways that we realize or want to give credit to. We have more similarities with each other than dissimilarities; and even with dissimilarities, I would say it is an approach, it is the difference in the way we approach God."

She does come across some soldiers who are not open to having a chaplain not of their faith. She says, "The important part of being a chaplain is that you let others say what they want to say. I have to be comfortable in my faith and allow that person to be comfortable in theirs; but there is always that element of where is the discomfort in a person, and, as a spiritual doctor or as a chaplain, I look at those areas."

Her Kurdistan Experience

Dharm won the Bronze Star for managing ten humanitarian aid missions in Iraq for the Iraqi people, especially the Kurdish population. These are among her strongest memories of Iraq.

In particular she remembers her visit to an ancient Roman Catholic church with over 10,000 members. It had been there since the time of Jesus, and the language used is still Aramaic. She conducted several missions, collecting and donating funds, clothing and personal care items to the congregation. The priest invited her to preach--an intimidating task for a woman in a Kurdish neighborhood where women rarely speak in public. As a gesture of respect she covered her head and asked her female soldiers to do the same.

This is a new duty of chaplains: religious outreach to the local community in war zones. During the Bosnian war, in the 1990s, the US military realized the benefit of interacting with religious leaders and congregations and saw that the chaplains, with their strong interfaith training, were uniquely qualified for this task.

Dharma recalls her trepidation at the priest's invitation. "I prayed to God because it was totally a surprise. I preached for 45 minutes on a Biblical passage they gave. When I was done, the people were clapping. They were just stunned. The priest told me I was the first female to preach from that podium. It was a miraculous thing, only God could make that happen for me."

She adds, "God is so real to me and has taken me through the dangers in Iraq and brought me back safe, kept my children safe, given me a good marriage, good life, good job. I am very grateful to Him."

Balancing Family Life

As a woman chaplain in the US army, Dharm has been a path-breaker in more ways than one. She has often had to put her professional duties before her personal relationships as a woman, wife and mother. She was deployed to Iraq just four and a half months after delivering her second child.

"It was difficult, because I am a very strong mother," she acknowledges. "I kept a stone on my heart, and I went to Iraq. I feel that what I am doing is as an example to my daughters. I have two daughters, and it is alright for Mom to follow her calling. My husband is extremely supportive; he has stepped in so many times, and I also have stepped in for him." Dharm's mother has also played a major role, moving in with the family as needed.

Asked if it is difficult being a woman in the army, Dharm gives high marks to the American culture and to the military, which has a large and prominent female population and is hence pro-women. She recalls that in Iraq many of the local Muslim population were surprised to meet a female officer who was always surrounded by men.

Chaplaincy as a Career Choice

Having reached the rank of captain, would she recommend chaplaincy as a viable career to other Hindus? "Absolutely, it is a very, very rewarding career. I think I would call it more than a career--it is a vocation," she replied. "I would encourage people who truly are passionate to become religious and cultural ambassadors through the military."

She warns, however, that this is not an ordinary 9-to-5 job, but a rewarding interaction with long hours where you meet and nurture many different people, helping to bring peace and solace into their lives.

Chaplaincy, she explains, is about feeling God has chosen this path for you. "It has to be done out of deep commitment, and not just because you want to join the military. You will be tried and tested over and over again. It is difficult and challenging. It isn't like becoming an engineer or a doctor. Being a chaplain for me is a calling from God.

"If that first criterion is met, then being a chaplain can be a suitable life career. It is a government job where if you serve for a minimum of 20 years, you retire with 50 percent of your salary for the rest of your life.

"The pay scale is quite good. While you are in the army, housing is free, and there is a food allowance. There are a lot of medical and educational benefits, and retirees who want to study will get these allowances, too. There is a family separation allowance that is given to soldiers on duty. Those who are serving in a dangerous environment are given a certain amount of money every month. To all this, add the prime benefit of serving one's country and protecting the Constitution and the rights of all citizens."

Final Thoughts

"The best thing is that, wherever I go, I am still an Indian," she shared with a smile, full of pride. "I am a US citizen, but who I am is Indian. My roots are Indian. I take that as an opportunity to take myself, my culture and my religion and dialog with others and to understand their culture and religion, because that is just as sacred as mine is to me."

After retirement, Dharm plans to continue religious work. "Wherever I am, even if I am just planting a garden, or if I am just cooking a meal for my family, my goal in life is to serve Him. Whether I am in the military or not, even when I am just doing simple things, I know He is there. I will continue to do that even when I retire."

Asked for any parting words of wisdom, she offered these observations and advice: "I think for many Hindus living abroad there is an element of shame about their faith. One of the reasons I came forward and said I want to be a Hindu chaplain is that I do not myself have any shame about being Hindu or about following my traditions. Even in India, I see a lot of Indians who are not at all following any of their traditions; they follow whatever is the 'in thing' to do. Wherever we are, we

should have atma swabhiman--respect for self and what we have come from, and the courage to not give in to the next 'in thing.'

"I would encourage every Hindu to be proud to be Hindu. No matter whether they are in the Maldives or in the West Indies, or they are in Madagascar, or they are in India, we Hindus have gone all over because of our history. Be proud of it and continue with your traditions--they are beautiful, those traditions--and try to pass them down to your children."

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Update December 12, 2011: Watch a video feature about Chaplain Dharm produced by the BBC [here](#).