

## [The Holy Men In India's New Parliament](#)

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# The Holy Men In India's New Parliament

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'We Have Come to Cleanse Politics,' Say Delhi's Priestly MP's

Gone are the days in India when saints and seers were content with advising and guiding the political leaders in their careers. Many of them are now themselves in politics. Quite a few have even entered the country's Parliament. These members of Parliament are not many - only about ten among 545. Most of them sit not on ruling party benches but with the opposition because they were elected to India's highest legislature on the ticket of the ruling party's main rival, the Bharatiya Janata Party.

Their aim? To re-establish the supremacy of the moral values in both politics and society and work for the betterment of the lot of the poor and down-trodden in the country. They do raise hopes of a new era of morality and spirituality once again becoming the basis of all human activities as it was several centuries ago. The people are waiting, hopefully, for their efforts to succeed.

The BJP has taken full credit for bringing seven of these swamis into parliament. It had gone to every length possible to persuade several saints of different Hindu denominations to contest the last parliamentary election in May/June 1991 on its ticket. It offered them its dedicated cadres' hard work for their success. Its leaders impressed on them the need for bringing the country's politics under the control of moral and spiritual authority as was the case in ancient India. As a result, India has today in parliament seven BJP supported Hindu saints who had earlier thought of confining their activities only to temples and ashrams. Prominent among them are Mahant Avaidyanath, Swami Vishvanath Shastri, Swami Chinmayanand and Sadhvi Uma Bharati - some of whom trounced well-established politicians.

Religious leaders in the world's politics are not that unusual - the US Congress has had many in its history. Presently there are two Christian clergy (three until a few months ago), including the highly respected Senator Danforth (an ordained Episcopal priest).

The Hindu concept of one's becoming a saint (sannyasin) generally means that one should practice sacrifice (tyag) and detachment from the world. That explains the surprise and even shock many Hindus, let alone members of other communities, feel at several well known swamis taking to politics, which has come to be treated now as a dirty game. HINDUISM TODAY talked to some of the saints in parliament for an answer.

Says Swami Chinmayanand: "Society needs moral education which the politicians have failed to provide. That is why the seers and saint have to take up this task now." He won the election from Budayun in Uttar Pradesh - one of the largest states of India. "Sannyasin is associated with the welfare of the society faces danger from the self-centered politicians, he is duty-bound to come forward to save it from them," he added.

In the view of Swami Chinmayanand, India today faces grave dangers from the rise of fundamentalism, and the society is threatened with disintegration by the deep religious differences and communal tension. The swami denies that mixing religion with politics - which the entering of the swamis into politics means - would harm the country. "Even before India's independence in 1947 religious leaders like Maharishi Dayanand and Swami Vivekanand had given a direction to freedom struggle against the British," the swami points out. He explains that the quality of politics began to deteriorate some years after independence because "the religion's leaders went back to meditation believing the politicians can manage the country's affairs alone." But this assumption proved wrong. Before the mid-sixties the people had faith in the Government as it was run by politicians like Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel who were learned and who upheld the supremacy of dharma in all spheres of life. "After the sixties deterioration set in as the rulers worked as dictators and followed the British policy of divide and rule."

There are many who wonder how saints and seers who mostly lived in ashrams far removed from the hustle and bustle of cities can work in a place like Delhi full of manipulators of power. Could the swamis not influence the politics from their ashrams and temples and change it the way it ought to be practiced? Mahant

Avaidyanath admits it is possible but only when the situation is not so bad as it is today. "Our working silently for the society has begun to fail producing results. Our pleas for a sane society are no longer listened to by powerful lobbies of politicians," says the Mahant who is not new to India's parliament also from Gorakhpur in U.P. He is one of those few saints who came to the conclusion about 20 years ago that their intervention in politics was necessary if society was to be saved from degeneration.

Says the Mahant: "We are in parliament as mediators between the Government and the people. There is another reason: the politicians have ruined the country in the name of religion. This has compelled us to come into politics and prevent religion from being exploited for petty purposes." But he has been in politics for a long time. Why has he failed to achieve his objective so far? "Yes, I have an objective to achieve but a long stay in politics alone doesn't mean success. We will not succeed in accomplishing our task till we are in a majority in parliament," the Mahant says adding hopefully that he and his fellow swamis are moving towards gaining an absolute majority in parliament.

There is a fear among 'secular' intellectuals here that greater participation of the swamis in politics will make the country a theocratic state and thereby cause suppression of democratic values. This fear is addressed by Swami Vishvanath Shastri, M.P. from Sultanpur. Says he: "In India, religion has always been a part of politics. Religion even determined the functioning of the state." He explains that the religious leaders were greatly respected in the past because they had no political axe to grind. That was also the reason why they had a tremendous hold over the masses. Their predominance in society was because of their deep interest in the welfare of the people. They gave considerable moral support and guidance to just rulers. They were thus a pillar of strength for such rulers.

Sadhvi Uma Bharati is a young woman parliamentarian from Khajuraho in Madhya Pradesh. She began leading a religious life when she was still a child. Like Mahant Avaidyanath, she too was previously an MP. "I firmly believe," she told HINDUISM TODAY, "that saints and seers can make good representatives of the people because they work for the society with a feeling of detachment. The meaning of politics for me is the service to the people of the villages. Mahatma Gandhi had said that the nation cannot develop as long as the villages remain undeveloped. A lot needs to be done in the villages to free them from backwardness, evils of untouchability and crimes against women."

There are some who say that the BJP has brought into parliament several eminent Hindu saints because it wants to gain politically by pitting them against those who are against those who are against the construction of Shri Ram temple at a place in Ayodhya where a mosque stands today. This is strongly disputed by another saint in parliament, Swami Yoganand. Says he: "Ramjanmabhoomi issue is not a religious or communal one. Ram is a symbol of national integrity and national unity. The issue should have been resolved long ago. But the politicians have kept it alive for electoral benefits." The BJP claims (with good evidence), that the mosque was built 400 years ago at a place where Lord Ram was born and where a temple was made in his honor more than a thousand years ago.

Swami Sakshi, another saint to enter Parliament, is not happy with the present Government headed by Mr. Narasimha Rao, as it has enacted a law with the help of communists and parties close to Muslims. The law restores all places of worship in the country to the status they enjoyed as on August 15, 1947. It, however, leaves out the mosque-temple dispute in Ayodhya. He will work for the removal of mosques from the premises of the temples of Lord Krishna and Lord Vishvanath in Mathura and Kashi respectively after his aim is accomplished in Ayodhya. Will all that he wants to do not hurt the interest of the society? "Far from it," says the swami. "Our main aim is to unify the society. And only religion can help keep the society together."

It is not that all the swamis in parliament want to work for the promotion of Hinduism. One of them, Swami Sureshananda, wants to work for the welfare of the untouchables and backward classes. He hopes his colleagues in parliament too would do the same. The city of Jaisalmer in Rajasthan from where he comes has many problems like lack of irrigation sources, poverty and so on. "I visit my constituency every weekend during parliament session and spend most of my time there when there is no session. I personally look into the problems of the poor and the backward." He believes that political work too is a kind of meditation. "As meditation gives one satisfaction so does the work of solving the problems of the people through political work," he explains.

The swamis aren't all that happy with parliament itself. Swami Sureshananda complained to the Bombay Daily, "It is sheer madness. How can I speak under such circumstances? If the parliamentary proceedings are televised live, I can assure you that the people would actually spit on their representatives. The way the speaker is not allowed to conduct the proceedings. The way the MPs get up and shout all the time. It is shameful. The chair should be respected and listened to." Mahant Avidyanath feels restrained. "It's all unavoidable. We're helpless in

parliament. Even if we wish to say something desperately, we can't. We are obliged to obey party whips and observe decorum. The convention cannot be flouted," he told the Daily.

Despite doubts and misgivings that the swamis have raised among India's intelligentsia by joining politics and entering parliament, the results of their efforts to give a new, positive turn to politics are being hopefully awaited by those who want the life of the ordinary people to improve. The hopes the swamis have raised may come true if what Swami Chinmayanand says about politics is put into practice: "Politics is not a business as the politicians have made it today. It is a kind of social service which we should render with dedication. It is with this objective that saints have entered parliament."

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