

**Vision-2000: Interview with Ashok Singhal**

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The GV-2000 was successful Beyond all Expectations  
GOI's Behavior Shameful

Q:What, in brief, is your impression of the recently concluded GV-2000 Conference in America?

Singhal ji: The Conference has been a success beyond all expectations. It was conceived with a view to projecting the ideals, the message and the relevance of Swami Vivekananda in today's America and we have been successful to a very large extent. Of course, there was opposition: only those who have already lost their self-respect and self-confidence could oppose such a programme. Their number was negligible: hardly 30 to 40 people turned up, raised a few hackneyed slogans and left.

Many people in the west appear to have formed an opinion that the new-found pride in Hindutva and the awakening in India is a kind of fundamentalism. The opposition that is witnessed in India is no doubt reflected in the western countries mainly because it is the English language papers such as The Times of India, The Hindu, The Statesman that reach the overseas countries. And although these are shockingly out of tune with the national mood and ethos, the readers consider their opinion as gospel truth. So, when this section of the Indian Press dubs the rise of Hindutva communal, reminiscent of Fascism, and equates it with the vandals of a 'masjid' and declare them fundamntalists spreading hatred, the same image goes around in the west. But slowly they are all realising that the new upsurge is not to esclate violence, hatred and enmity. Rather, it is the resurgence of the eternal national spirit.

The successful culmination of this Conference will also help the US government realise that the Hindutva upsurge has not only transformed itself into a truly global phenomenon but has now certainly come to stay.

Q: The Conference might have opened the eyes of the American government but what precisely did the Hindus in America gain from this exercise?

Singhal ji: Well, the Conference had a number of achievements. Hindus in the west are caught in the conflict between two very different cultures - the American and that of their own families. Now if the Hindu looses pride in his heritage he will turn away from his culture but if he retains the pride, certainly there will be no turning back. This Conference has aroused that pride.

For instance, the exposition of our cultural legacy through the medium of dance, devotional music and the other performing arts had a significant impact on youth. They realised that we ought to preserve, promote, protect and practice our hoary culture.

I, however, feel that the saints' speeches reached straight to the people's heart. One contributing factor might have been that saints in such large numbers had perhaps never confronted America. It was for the first time that the American Indians saw and realised the spiritual greatness of Hindu saints.

The success of the Conference in kindling the latent pride has convinced me that from now on the Hindus abroad will not only preserve but also promote our culture even in the midst of the confluence of cultures that America is. I dare say it might eventually lead to a cultural offensive.

Secondly, the increase of the political clout of Hindutva in India has instilled confidence in the Hindus abroad also. They are now witnessing that the influence of Hindutva is no more confined to the philosophical and cultural fields; it has now spanned into the political field as well. The Conference had a lasting impact not only on the Hindu world but on the western governments

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as well.

Q: You earlier mentioned that the opposition was limited to hardly 30-40 people. Then how come it could persuade a dignitary like the Dalai Lama to decline the invitation?

Singhal ji: You see, in the long run it all depends on the attitude of the Government of India. A mere suggestion that attendance at the program could be viewed as an 'unfriendly act' is sufficient to put them off. Why, even the King of Nepal, who was keen on attending the function was discouraged by GOI. The Dalai Lama, after all, is in exile. He is not exactly a free person. But his representative did visit the Conference. The Dalai Lama also wrote a letter of regret to Dr Mahesh Mehta that he was pressurised into abstaining.

It was not New Delhi alone that went out of its way to pressurize the Dalai Lama and others. Even the Indian Embassy in the US exercised enormous pressure on a large number of performing artists. One of them, the noted dancer Sonal Mansingh said that she was pressurized personally by none less than the HRD minister Arjun Singh himself. GOI's role in this regard has been most deplorable. They should have at least refrained from demonstrating their tussle with the VHP before foreign governments.

Q: Were there any other hinderances from the Government?

Singhal ji: Many. Sources in the State Department informed the organisers that the GOI was pressurizing the American Embassy to refuse visas to the participants. The organisers also came to know that India's Ambassador in America, SS Ray had visited the American Embassy in India specially for this purpose. Anup Jalota and Sonal Man Singh, for instance, had for the first time in their life had the harrowing experience of their entire troupe being denied visas.

Similarly, pressure was mounted to refuse customs clearance for nearly 20 boxes meant for the Conference. However, after protracted negotiations and frayed tempers almost all the boxes could be retrieved but the customs insisted on retaining one box as a symbolic gesture.

Again, the few people who came to demonstrate were instigated by our Embassy although they represented about a dozen nondescript associations. Actually five of them were granted permits to hold demonstrations but sensing the meagre turn-out they all clubbed together and held a single demonstration. It clearly shows that government spared no efforts to thwart the Conference. In spite of it all the programme was an unprecedented success and it has taught a lesson to one and all.

Q: It was reported that President Bill Clinton was also to attend the Conference but later changed his mind?

Singhal ji: It is true that the President did not attend but neither had he declined nor accepted the invitation. Senior VHPA leaders had intended to personally call on Clinton but could not do so because of other engagements.

Similarly, the renowned science fiction writer Carl Sagan was invited but he could not attend because of previous engagement. Had he been free he would certainly have participated.

Although our opponents had written to a large number of American intellectuals and other eminent personalities in the US urging them to boycott the programme, about 50 percent of the theme speeches delivered at the Conference were by westerners, two of them Muslims. A noteworthy speaker was Edgar Mitchell, the sixth astronaut to walk on the moon. He justified at length his participation in the programme.

And do you know, Global Vision 2000 was sponsored by as many as 160 associations - both Indian and American - in the US?

Q: What was the vision of the year 2000 projected at the Conference?

Singhal ji: Actually, barring those who subscribe to the Hindu thought and philosophy the world at large does not consider the cosmos as one family. Not

only the cosmos, their family itself is not one indivisible whole: it functions along the lines of a contractual agreement. For them all relationships are contracts: the greatest freedom they enjoy is the freedom to breach a contract only to enter into another. Love, the universal cementing force is conspicuous by its absence in the entire west. As a result, man has entered a mechanical age of prosperity-without-peace.

Our aim is to project the vision of what we regard as our family, that is, the whole cosmos, implying that man and material are not separate. In simple words, the birds and the bees, the stars and the stones, are all members of an indivisible cosmic family. Therefore, the questions of one of the exploiting another does not arise.

Q: Are you contemplating any follow-up programme?

Singhal ji: If course. Our task would be how to carry forward what we have projected at Vision 2000. The humanistic vision of Swami Vivekananda that was projected through the Vision 2000 has to reach both the Americans and the Indians settled in the west. When Vivekananda first visited America, hardly any Hindu lived in that country. But now the picture has completely changed. Naturally if the present multitude of Hindus exert themselves and project the global vision of Hindutva it will create a great impact. May be Vivekananda might have gone all the way to the US with the idea that the Hindu must create a powerful impact in the New World, the likely leader of the future. Washington has already become sort of a world capital. May be Vivekananda thought that by converting America to our view we can automatically convert the whole world. Even now there is need to conquer the American mind because no sooner America changes its views, the Indian government will follow suit. Therefore, Washington certainly was the right choice for the Conference.

Now, the first project we have in mind is strengthening the Hindu Student Council, about 2000 members of which had participated in the conference. The second/third generation Hindu youth do not want to identify themselves with India because they are American citizens but they do not hesitate to call themselves Hindus. This is the generation which is going to throw up the leadership of the future. We therefore feel that they should be the focus of our attention. Our anxiety is that they should not be torn asunder from their own roots.

The second project is a Hindu university for which plans are already afoot. It will be a full-fledged university offering courses in many subjects but its underlying spirit will certainly be Hindutva.

The third is the Hindu Heritage Foundation. The idea is that the foundation would be a machinery through which one would mobilise funds to finance a number of projects.

Q: Having provided a vision to the Hindus in the west don't you think you have returned home only to be confronted with opposition to Hindutva? Ayodhya witnessed the controversial Muktnaad by SAHMAT including, Arjun Singh's participation. Do you have plans to provide some 'vision' to these elements?

Singhal ji: Oh, I consider Arjun Singh as having donned the Hashmi Memorial Trust burqa to play his masjid politics. And as long as the Arjun Singhs continue to indulge in masjid politics, mandir politics will not stop. My view is that politicians should quit dabbling in religious affairs. I can understand these people going to Ayodhya for darshan of Ram Lalla. After all, Ayodhya is identified with Ram. But the antics they indulge in! The masses are already against them. I wonder if they realise that their own party will one day reject them. All people saw that Muktnaad proved no less a flop than Chandraswami's Soma yajna.

Q: What effect did the ban on the VHP in India have on the activities of its overseas chapters?

Singhal ji: The ban proved counterproductive. People are all the more enthusiastic about the VHP. After the Ayodhya event just as there has been a sea change in India, similarly there has been a corresponding change among the people in the west. The message has reached far and wide throughout the world that the Hindu will no more be subdued. Eventually the world at large will come to the

conclusion that after all now they have to deal with a Hindu India.

Q: In a recent column, N. Ram, Editor, Frontline has said that "the same sanctions that apply to the pro-Khalistani NRI elements who are active in the United States and elsewhere in the west must be applied to those who organize, fund and support the activities of the VHP of America". Your comments?

Singhal ji: Well, I am afraid I think he is out of his mind. Do I need to add anything more? The statement is beneath contempt.

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