

Dharma Summit Concludes in New Jersey

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Publication: Hinduism Today

Date: August 17, 2005

URL: <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/hpi/2005/8/17.shtml>

Hindu Groups Meet to Shape the Future of Dharma in North America

(Press Release from Dharma Summit 2005, prepared by Beth Kulkarni.) For the first time in North America, 400 participants representing more than 80 Hindu temples and religious organizations came together for a Dharma Summit on August 13-15, 2005. The most respected heads of various religious groups who addressed the summit held at Rutgers University over the weekend included Pujya Swami Dayananda Saraswati of Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Saylorsburg, PA, Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami of the Hindu Monastery in Kauai, and Gurudev Chitrabhanu ji of Jain Meditation Center, NY. Also, two of the most respected heads of religious orders in India - Swami Chidananda Saraswati ("Muniji") of Parmarth Niketan, Rishikesh and Dr. Pranav Pandya of Gayatri Pariwar, Haridwar - came to attend and address the summit. Sri Sri Ravishankar sent his personal message that was displayed with a video clip.

The theme of the summit was: "The Future of Dharmic Traditions in North America." The concern that many young generation Hindus in USA are not learning and maintaining Hindu traditions was clearly evident throughout the conference that brought together presidents and boards of trustees of many temples, Devalayas, spiritual institutions, and organizations together with many intellectuals and committed volunteer leaders from throughout the USA. The rich mix of swamis, intellectuals, temple trustees and youth leaders provided a unique opportunity to exchange different viewpoints, thoughts and ideas and share experiences on how to impart spiritual and cultural education to future generations. They also discussed the serious problem of distortion and misinformation about Hinduism and India prevalent in schools, colleges, and in the media. The overall coordinator of the conference Dr. Ved Chaudhary was successful in bringing under one roof persons of various ages and backgrounds to discuss items of common interest.

A workshop was organized by the Hindu University of America which is starting a program to train Hindu priests to meet the expressed needs of temples in the USA for priests who can communicate with the younger generation and with the interfaith community. Legal aspects, media and interfaith relations, successful temple management practices, and financial resource development were key issues discussed with much sharing of ideas.

One of the significant aspects of the Summit was the inclusion of the younger generation on various panels and in all aspects of the program. Dr. Ved Chaudhary referred to HSC as his right hand and his left hand. HSC General Secretary Nikunj Trivedi spoke about the ways in which local temples and religious organizations and HSC can work together to meet the needs

of college students. The souvenir issue of the Dharma Summit, edited by Swami Jyotirmayananda Puri, was packed with messages from spiritual and religious leaders, insightful articles from intellectuals, and information of interest from sponsors.

Dr. Preeti Soni performed the inaugural prayer dance in classical Kathak style for Devi Saraswati. Heads of Sampradayas recited prayers for world peace before the tasty, all vegetarian food was served by the BAPS Swaminarayan temple in Edison. Talks and discussions among spiritual leaders, board members, youth and intellectuals and networking time made this a very activity-packed weekend. Perhaps most important aspect was the panel discussion on "The Path Forward: Actionable Recommendations for Follow-up Activities" moderated by Dr. Sudhir Prabhu. A plan of action was proposed to follow up on the insights and recommendations generated in the earlier sessions.

The positive experience of this conference resulted in overwhelming demand for a collective initiative that will allow all Hindu religious organizations to work together to shape the future of Hinduism in North America, raise awareness of issues, and provide a platform for a united Hindu voice. Together they will address issues such as promoting changes to enhance the participation of the new generation, correcting biased and distorted views of Hindu traditions in educational institutions and the media, improving temple management, developing resources, enhancing the role of the temple, and helping the temples and religious organizations to reach out to the larger community with voluntary services (seva) and education.

The various Hindu temples and religious groups that participated in the conference included: Arsha Vidya-Vedanta Gurukul, PA; Arya Pratinidhi Sabha America, BAPS-Swaminarayan Temple, Barsana Dham, TX; World Gayatri Pariwar; Greater Baltimore Temple; Hindu Monastery, Hawaii; Hindu University of America; ISKCON; Sadhu Vaswani Center; Sringeru Vidya Bharati Foundation; Sri Venkateshwara Temples in Bridgewater, NJ and Pittsburg, PA; Sri Meenakshi Temple, TX; Sri Ganesh temple in NY; and Vraj Dham, PA. Other Hindu groups included: Educators Society for the Heritage of India, Gayatri Pariwar, Hindu American Foundation, Hindu Intl Council against Defamation, Hindu Society of NE Florida, Hindu Students Council, Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, Hindu University of America, Jain Associations in North America, Swadhyay Pariwar, US Hindu Alliance; VHP America., American Institute of Vedic Studies, The Vedic Foundation, Vedic Friends Association; and others.

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