

Reports on the Dharma Summit

The VFA Had a Strong Presence

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80 US Organisations Launch Hindu Council Initiative

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In an effort to present a united voice in an alien country and to shape the "future and destiny" of the Hindu community in coming decades, leaders of as many as 80 important Hindu organizations and temples in the U.S. have come forward to constitute a Hindu Council Initiative (HCI) of North America.

A result of the Dharma Summit-2005 that concluded early this week, the Hindu Council Initiative has mandate to create a network allowing all Hindu religious organizations to work together and provide necessary resources on continuing basis to all temples and other religious organizations in the U.S.

The conference general secretary, Ved Chaudhary, told The HindustanTimes.com: "The Hindu Council Initiative would address only issues of concern to the Hindu community in North America."

Prominent among them include promoting changes to enhance the participation of new generation, correcting biased and distorted views of the Hindu traditions in educational institutions and media, improving temple management, developing resources, enhancing the role of temples, and helping temples and religious organizations to reach out to larger community with voluntary services and education, Chaudhary said referring to resolution passed by the Dharma Summit-2005.

In fact, this was probably for the first time that such a large number of Hindu religious leaders and institutions had come together on one platform.

This was also for the first time that prominent American academicians, intellectuals and believers in Hinduism also joined mainstream Hindu platform.

Among these were the world renowned Hindu-scholar, David Frawley; Stephen Knapp, who has written more than a dozen books on Hind and Hinduism; Dr. Frank Morales, who is recognized as one of the leading authorities on Hindu philosophy, yoga and meditation in the US; Jeffrey Armstrong, a Vedic astrologer, and Beth Kulkarni, who is the only American Hindu on board of various Hindu temples in the US.

The concern many young generation Hindus in the U.S. are not learning and maintaining Hindu traditions was clearly evident throughout the conference, which brought together heads of trustees of temples, spiritual institutions, and organizations together with many intellectuals and committed volunteer leaders from throughout the USA.

Prominent Hindu religious institutions to attend the conference were the Arsha Vidya-Vedanta Gurukul, PA; Arya Pratinidhi Sabha America; BAPS-Swaminarayan Temple; Barsana Dham, TX; Gayatri Pariwar; Hindu Monastery in Hawaii; Hindu University of America; Sadhu Vaswani Center; Sringeru Vidya Bharati Foundation; Sri Ganesh Temple in NY; Sri Venkateshwara Temples; Sri Meenakshi Temple, TX; Vraj Dham, PA and ISKCON.

Other Hindu groups included, Educators Society for 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; Vishwa Hindu Parishad-America., American Institute of Vedic Studies, Vedic Friends Associations and the Vedic Foundation.

Chaudhary said, 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.

Theme of the summit was: "The Future of Dharmic Traditions in North America."

Giving details of the conference, Chaudhary said workshop was organised by the Hindu University of America which is starting a program to train Hindu priests in the USA to meet the needs of temples in America for priests who can communicate with the younger generation and with the interfaith community.

Report on the Dharma Summit 2005

By Lakshmi Ravu

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New York

The overwhelmingly successful Dharma Summit that recently took place at Rutgers University was arguably the largest and most important Hindu conference ever organized on American shores. In this gathering of almost 450 Hindu leaders, gurus, and intellectuals, a new course was outlined for the future development and growth of the Hindu community in North America, India, and throughout the globe.

Several of the themes of the conference included: a) the need for Hinduism to assert itself as a unique and living religious tradition, b) the importance of referring to our religion as "Sanatana Dharma", c) that Hindu management and leadership needs to become more professional, better trained, and more effective, d) that any and all attacks against Sanatana Dharma (whether by Christian missionaries, Islamic terror, anti-Hindu academicians, etc.) need to be combated forcefully, e) the rejection of Radical Universalism (the false idea that all religions are the same), f) that energetic and fired-up Hindu youth need to take charge of the task of saving Hinduism for the future.

Some of the most important Hindu leaders in the world were present for this event. Including: Sri Swami Dayananda Saraswati (the inspiration behind the Dharma Summit, and convener of the event), Sri Chidananda Muniji (the creator of the Hindu Encyclopedia project), Sri Bodhinatha Veylanswami (Publisher of Hinduism Today Magazine) and several of his sannyasis, Sri K. S. Sudarshan (leader of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the largest Hindu service organization on earth), Dr. Pranav Pandya (leader of the several million members of the Gayatri Pariwar), Sri Swami Jyotirmayananda (Ramakrishna Order), Dr. David Frawley (Vamadeva Shastriji), Dr. Frank Gaetano Morales (the well-respected American Hindu intellectual and philosopher), Sri Steven Knapp (a prolific American Hindu author), and many others. These Hindu lights and dignitaries all filled the first row of the auditorium. Several Jain, Buddhist, and Sikh leaders were also present.

Many inspiring talks were given during the three-day event. Both Sri Swami Dayananda Saraswati and Sri Chidananda Muniji spoke on the crucial need of defending Hinduism as a unique religious tradition, and on the importance of fostering global Hindu unity. Sri Dayananda Saraswati also stressed the importance of rejecting the false notion of Radical Universalism – the mistaken idea that Hinduism teaches that all religions are the same. "Hindus do not teach that all religions are the same", he assured the large audience, "After all, we're not idiots!"

Sri Bodhinatha, Publisher of Hinduism Today, gave an impressive PowerPoint presentation on how to explain Hindu beliefs to children. Sri Anuttama Prabhu of ISKCON spoke at length on the importance of Hindu organizations adopting professional techniques to more effectively communicate the Hindu message to the media. Dr. Frank Morales gave one of the best received talks of the event (even beginning his talk in perfectly pronounced Hindi!), stressing that Hindus need to reject derogatory terminology when referring to Hindu beliefs and practices, and need to use the term "Sanatana Dharma" rather than "Hinduism". Other speakers included: Kanchan Banerji, Rajiv Malhotra, Ved Chaudhary (the conference's main organizer), and other Hindu leaders.

The last day of the event was devoted to issues revolving around temple management. It was reported that there are presently well over 700 Hindu temples in America, with another 20 – 25 being started every year.

Overall, the mood of the Dharma Summit was exuberant and enthusiastic. The many Hindu leaders and delegates in attendance left Rutgers University with a renewed sense of excitement and optimism about the future of Sanatana Dharma in America and throughout the world. The overwhelming consensus was that the very best days of Sanatana Dharma are yet to come!

Ms. Lakshmi Ravu was born in 1983 in New York of Telugu speaking Hindu parents. She is currently a student majoring in philosophy and law.

NEWS BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY, August 16, 2005: (HPI note: This report was prepared before the above press release arrived, so there is some overlap in the information.) After initially wondering if anyone would attend, Dr. Ved Chaudhary finally had to close enrollment in the Dharma Summit 2005 when it reached capacity at 400 (including representatives from 80 Hindu institutions), in the process turning away scores. Under the inspired and personal direction of one of today's most dynamic spiritual leaders, Sri Swami Dayananda Saraswati, who turned 75 on the final day of the New Jersey event, Dr. Chaudhary organized the Summit to "bring together heads of all Devalayas, spiritual institutions, and Dharmic intellectuals in North America to exchange thoughts and ideas, and share experiences on how to impart spiritual and cultural education to our next generation and remove misperceptions about our faith traditions from the society in order to maintain our Dharmic traditions with dignity." Quite an ambitious set of objectives. The conference included Hindus, Jains and Sikhs.

Organizer Ved Chaudary told HPI, "The conference exceeded my expectations in the number of attendees and organizations that participated, and the quality of presentations from many speakers. The conference met the highest professional standards. What I consider the most important outcome of the conference is the spirit of unity that the conference fostered among the attendees, the awareness and acceptance of contemporary issues facing the community and an overwhelming desire to undertake a collective initiative to shape the future of Hindu Traditions in North America."

The days were long throughout the sessions: a 7:30am breakfast gathering, 9 am starting of the formal session which went on to 9:30 or 10 pm, with breakfast, lunch and dinner (provided free by BAPS volunteers) served at the conference venue at the Student Center at Rutgers University (one of the oldest colleges in America, founded by none other than Benjamin Franklin in 1766, a red brick college near a river, in a 350-year-old town.)

Major spiritual leaders graced the conference, including Swami Dayananda Saraswati of Arsha Vidya Gurukul, PA; Swami Chidananda Saraswati (Muniji) of Parmarth Niketan, Rishikesh, India; Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, publisher of Hinduism Today magazine and HPI; Gurudev Chitrabhanu of Jain Ashram, NY; Dr. Pranav Pandya of Gayatri Pariwar, Haridwar, India, Swami Jyotirmayananda of Vivekananda Center, Mangalore, Swamini Janeshwari Devi of Barsana Dham and others. Also many intellectuals spoke in various sessions including Dr. Ved Nanda, Prof. Bhudev Sharma, Dr. David Frawley, Dr. Piyush Agrawal, Sri Kanchan Banerji, Dr. Rakesh Shreedhar, and many others. At Bodhinatha's request, Parmacharya Palaniswami, editor of Hinduism Today, and Sannyasin Arumugaswami, managing editor, attended the entire event and filed this report.

We could report on the contents of each speech, but it is more useful to outline the overall concerns and issues, many of which were touched on by several speakers. We should confess that we missed several speeches and may therefore not be reporting some of the important issues brought up by speakers. We also admit that our notes are not so complete as to include names with every idea and discussion.

Of paramount concern, as mentioned, was the transmission of Hinduism to the second and third generation Hindus now growing up (or grown up) in the US. Generally speaking, there were few organizations who felt they had adequate programs for teaching the youth, though some, such as the Swadhyaya Pariwar found by Sri Athavale, did in fact have fully developed programs of weekly classes and summer youth programs. Several temples directors and managers (and there were dozens there) talked about the need for effective programs. Bodhinatha in his talk emphasized the need for the temples to educate the parents in Hinduism, along with the youth. He also explained the importance of the parents' setting the example in religiousness, beginning with maintaining a strong home shrine where the family worshipped daily. Passing on the faith has its strongest promise in the home, supplemented by other programs such as temple classes, summer camps and cultural training.

Youth education and guidance were foremost on most speakers' minds, with a secondary issue being the treatment Hinduism receives in the dozens of textbooks used in American schools and colleges. It was only in the 1980s that any religion at all was allowed to be taught in US schools. Prior to that it was forbidden, however a court case permitted that, if all religions were taught equally, then students could have classes in religion, or cover religion in their history or social studies courses. Textbooks were rapidly prepared to cover these new courses, which have been incorporated in most schools. However, the books have given shabby treatment to Hinduism. Different speakers explained how to approach the local school board at the time the books were up for adoption, how to influence the selection and even future editions of the books. There was, many noted, a lot of room for improvement! Rajiv Malhotra explained at length the way in which the American and European academics had thoroughly distorted the understanding of Hinduism and ways Hindu communities and leaders can correct this situation.

A related issue was treatment in the media, also addressed by several speakers. The temples were encouraged to learn how to deal with their local press through press releases, inviting the press to events and making themselves available to respond to questions and express opinions on subjects that arise. Improving community relations depends on the good understanding that the public has, and this is enhanced by thoughtful media communications.

Many of the speakers associated with temples touched on the subject of integration with the majority community, pointing to the need to be more actively engaged in their neighborhoods and communities. It was observed that a number of Hindu communities are living a rather insular life in America, unaware of the religions of their neighbors and not really trying to join into the mainstream or be part of their town or county. Various speakers encouraged the temples to reach out more, to study the philosophy, history and practices of the faiths they are surrounded by, get to know the leaders of other religious communities, participate locally through charitable programs, free clinics, free feedings and the like.

There was a strong youth presence from the Hindu Students Council and the Hindu American Foundation. It can also be said, however, that the youth presence was not as strong as it should have been, nor was the participation of women.

On the third day, a new series of presentations began with a smaller group who were focused only on the management and administration of Hindu temples in North America. Swami Dayananda Saraswati, whose presence was inspiring to all and who patiently sat through the entire conference, began the day proposing the formation of a Hindu Collective Initiative. Swamiji outlined a basic organizational structure for continued cooperation, envisioning a steering committee which would be formed to implement the goals of the Dharma Summit, supplemented by hired, not voluntary, full-time staff.

On August 15th, which happened to be India's Independence Day (and Swamiji's birthday), talks and discussions turned to a constellation of Hindu temple issues. One is priest training. This came in two aspects. One, the specific duties of priests with regard to the temple ceremonies, and the duties with regard to home ceremonies, especially funerals. Traditionally in India, these are handled by two different groups of priests. One performs the temple ceremonies, the other performs all the home ceremonies. In the absence of adequate priests, many temples have priests from either tradition performing both tasks, one of which they are not often trained for. The second is the recognition of the need for both teachers of Hinduism and counselors to deal with personal problems of devotees. Priests are trained to perform neither of these functions, though some priests have done both successfully. Participants debated whether community members should be trained to fulfill the role of spiritual counselor, or if the priests should be so trained, with the general opinion favoring the former. Some temple leaders recognized the "disconnect" between temple priests and youth, and recommended they be trained in American cultural ways and language, even while they are in India. It was reported there are 50 massive temples in America and over 700 smaller ones.

Media and community relations were covered, as was participation in interfaith groups. Kathy Nanda of Denver spoke on the legal aspects of temple management, including financial and fiduciary responsibility, with a strong emphasis on liability, libel and defamation, even hate crimes. She urged temple board members to clearly understand their legal duties and responsibilities. She also urged the temples to stay out of courts and incorporate arbitration clauses in their by-laws. Paramacharya Palaniswami followed up on her talk with an explanation of the difference between a religious organization and a "church" under the 501(c) 3 rules of the American Internal Revenue Service which govern nonprofit organizations (click [here](#) for those rules). He stressed the legal and social reasons for achieving the more difficult church designation, which is not at all restricted to Christians. There are Buddhist, Muslim and Jewish "churches" under this designation, as well as the Hindu organizations of Saiva Siddhanta Church (ours), Chinmaya Mission, Sringeri Peetham of Pennsylvania, Barsana Dham of Texas and Swami Satchitananda's IYI in Virginia.

Board composition was discussed, with the recommendation from one participant that all board members be required to actively work for the temple. That led to a discussion about what to do with wealthy donors who wanted a seat on the board for their donation, but weren't willing to do any of the work. One participant of a large temple said the issue of "selling" seats on the board always comes up, but directors and managers should resist with knowledge that money will flow abundantly in a temple that puts Ishwar first. To assure a future based on the founding principles, stress was given to making sure the constitution of every temple is strong, for that is the primary guide for future management boards. Constitutions are difficult to change, it was noted, while by-laws can be easily altered by a simple majority.

The Bridgewater Temple of New Jersey, which is just a 15-minute drive from the venue, outlined an interesting program called the "Traveling Mandir." The motivation here is to keep college-age children involved in Hinduism. Their parents organized a one-hour temporary temple at the local college, Rutgers in this case, on Sunday during the same time others are going to Christian services. The short program includes a puja, prayers-meditation and scriptural study. The youth reportedly appreciate this creative effort to give them access to religious observances, and it should be duplicated by other temples to help college students in their region. The importance of volunteer help, especially under the leadership of women, was acknowledged. In fact, it was said more than once that a strong contingent of selfless volunteers is more essential than abundant finance to the health and dynamism of a temple.

Future financial security was addressed in discussions about wills and endowments. Devotees should be encouraged to include a donation to the temple in their wills, "even if it's just 2%." The Salvation Army, America's richest nonprofit by far, receives a majority of its donations each year in the form of bequests from wills, the result of decades of effort on the Salvation Army's part to encourage people to include the Army in their will.

One director of the Bridgewater temple explained how they have created an endowment for their temple the capital of which cannot be touched. Only the revenue from investments can be spent. Other temples have set up similar funds, usually in the form of a "quasi-endowment." A quasi-endowment is one set up by a board with a decision to set aside money in a special account. A better arrangement, explained Paramacharya Palaniswami, is to set up a formal endowment under a separate corporate structure, the funds of which are managed by third-party professionals. The difference is that the quasi-endowment can be changed or even revoked altogether by any future board, while a true endowment cannot be changed.

Bodhinatha had written up a presentation for the temples encouraging them to clearly define in their literature and on their website six aspects of their temple: mata (their sect or denomination-- Vaishnavite, Saivite, Shakta, Smarta, etc.); murthi (the temple's main Deity); archaka (the temple's formal priestly lineage authorized to perform the worship); agama (the scriptures used for the worship); darshana (the philosophy followed by the temple); and anubhava (the vision or

other divine inspiration which sparked the temple's founding). If more temples described themselves in this careful manner, devotees and the wider American public would have a clearer picture of who they are and what they represent.

Overall, it was a successful three days, as Hindus from many parts of the country came together to share their thoughts on issues of mutual concern. For those who would like to know about and participate in future plans, please contact Dr. Ved Chaudhary at ved.chaudhary@gmail.com. You can also find photos of the event and Bodhinatha's participation at our website, Today at Kauai Aadheenam, http://www.himalayanacademy.com/taka/past/2005/August/August_15_2005/index.shtml, starting part way down the page.

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