Dharma Discussions -- Mela 2003
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INTERVIEWS

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Eighteen of Hinduism's top spiritual leaders offer their views on the Mela, dowry, youth, cloning, corruption, untouchability and other tough issues facing Hindu society today

The main aim of the Kumbha Mela in the past was to discuss dharma. Now such discussions are only a small portion, " observed Srimahant Govindananda Brahmachari. In an effort to rectify this lapse, Hinduism Today commissioned our Delhi correspondent, Mr. Rajiv Malik, to seek out as many of the Mela's prominent swamis as he could in the course of his week's assignment in Nashik and ask each to comment on real-life issues facing Hinduism. This report lists the issues and responses. Quoted and pictured on these pages are eighteen prominent swamis. Among them are the heads of several of Hinduism's largest monastic orders. Swamis are, as a rule, not inclined to give interviews to reporters. These renunciates spoke to Rajiv only in recognition of the good work of Hinduism Today. Some were interviewed at length and responded on multiple issues. Others were available only briefly and commented on a short list of main topics.

What is your message on the occasion of Kumbha Mela?

Mahant Swami Vidya Giri: "What is Kumbha? It is the demonstration of the power of Hinduism to the whole world. It is the time when we can assess our dharma, and see what challenges we face. It is very reassuring to see so many pilgrims participating with such religious fervor."

Anant Shri Vibhusit Acharya Mahamandaleshwar Sri 108 Swami Shivendra Puri Ji Maharaj: "Here at the Mela you get to meet so many people in an atmosphere of love and harmony. The biggest gain is the darshan of so many realized saints. The faith of so many people is concentrated here; you cannot remain untouched by this river of faith."

Shri Mahant Paramananda Saraswati: "As in the past Melas, this time also we have deliberated on the burning issues facing the country. We have come to the conclusion that the policies and intentions of our politicians are not good. Problems like terrorism and corruption are increasing. Our political leaders are following the policy of appeasement, and now we not only have enemies of Hinduism outside, but now inside our home as well."

Swami Raghavacharya Vedanti: "History is witness to the fact that whosoever ran his kingdom based on dharma was able to deliver peace and justice to the people. Now politicians talk of secularism as dharma nirpeksha, 'bereft or neutral to dharma.' I cannot agree with this. Maharaj Manu said that truth is dharma, nonviolence is dharma, brotherhood is dharma and harmony is dharma. Whether one lives in Pakistan, Afghanistan or any part of the world, his life should be full of truth, nonviolence and brotherhood. Until people become dharma sapeksha, 'respectful to dharma,' the society cannot prosper. Secularists and communists have created such an atmosphere today that people have started hating dharma."

Acharya Mahamandaleshwar Swami Samvidananda Saraswati: "It is the duty of the Hindu parents to instill good sanskars (impressions, values) in our own children, so that we can fight this invasion of our culture from the West. I have no doubt that Bharat, which was the Vishvaguru, guru of the world, in the past, still enjoys this position and will continue to maintain it.

Mahant Shri Foldol Behari Das Ji Maharaj: "Today we study engineering, history, geography and so much else, but we never try to seriously study our own self. Once we know who we are, then we understand that there is no difference between us and others, and thereby have peace and harmony in the world."

Pujya Shri Sadguru Haricharandas Ji Maharaj: "When conversions were being done by the Muslim rulers, saint after saint came forward to make all kinds of sacrifices to keep our dharma intact. Had they not, Islamic rule would prevail today across the whole of India. Today we claim to be a secular country, but secularism is only imposed on Hindus. Muslims are not told to be secular. True secularism gives the same rights to all communities. There are parts of India with a Muslim majority which are mini-Pakistans, where Hindus dare not enter. When Hindus speak out against such a situation, we are labeled communalists."

What is your advice for Hindu Youth -- and parents?

Mahant Swami Vidya Giri: "Youth must accept modernity in their outward life, but not let it touch their innermost beings. They can use modern tools for working in the outside world, but not for the exploitation of people around them. When the youth start questioning the importance and relevance of temples, scriptures and even holy traditions like taking a dip in Kushavrat at the Kumbha Mela, then the process of deterioration will start. Our society is standing on the bedrock of dharma. Our shastras say, 'Wherever dharma is followed, victory is there.' So if you want progress, be connected to dharma. A lot of young people come to me to satisfy their quest for spirituality. But unfortunately the elderly people of their own families discourage them, 'You are young, what is the need for you to approach these sadhus?' If the girl goes to the temple, she will be told, 'You stay back and take care of the household chores. Let the old people go to the temple.' If this is our approach, then how will our youth make progress on the path of spirituality? We have to free them from the irrational limitations imposed on them due to the selfishness of our own elderly people."

Swami Raghavacharya Vedanti: "Today's youth are obsessed with the culture of television. In our preaching to them, we try to awaken their consciousness, but after they leave, the culture of television overpowers their minds. Wrong television programs are a big pollution which has engulfed our society. Today young sons, daughters and daughters-in-law watch obscene programs together. The decorum and decency that was traditionally maintained in our families is disappearing. They all laugh together at the wrong type of scenes. TV should broadcast programs which uplift the human mind. From time immemorial, the mind is attracted towards desires, just as water poured on a slope flows downwards. To bring the mind up requires sadhana, spiritual disciplines and practices. But if we uplift the mind for one hour and then let it float downwards for ten, what will be the result? Today the people of affluent countries are fed up with material things. They are upset and do not understand why peace eludes them. They came here to India in search of peace. Just see our state of confusion! People from the West come to us looking for peace, while we are going toward the West and adopting a materialistic lifestyle."

Sri Swami Pragyanand: "Today due to the influence of Western culture, the youth are taking to drugs, and dating has become a common thing. I would not blame the children. It is the parents who are responsible for this state of affairs. A few days back, I was at the home of a disciple, and the parents there shared with me that they themselves were pure vegetarians but their children took nonvegetarian food now and then. The father further said that he was against it, but his wife felt that

there was no harm if children ate that kind of food. So I told this father that the mother was not a mata, a good mother, but a kumata, a mother who promoted evilness."

Acharya Mahamandaleshwar Swami Samvidananda Saraswati: "Today the parents have no time for their children. Most leave their houses early in the morning when the children are sleeping and come back at night when the children are again asleep. Only on Sunday do the children come to know who their mother and father are. Maid servants take care of them. The children grow up and do not give due respect to their parents, and at times even insult them. The onus of growth and development of the children rests on the parents."

Mahant Shri Foldol Behari Das Ji Maharaj: "I will only say to the youth that in the morning when you get up, first of all touch the feet of your parents and get their blessings. Mother is the first guru of the child. If this culture of respecting the parents and touching their feet disappears, then how will the children attain peacefulness? Earlier, wherever people would go, they used to go with the blessings of their mothers. They understood that mishaps can be averted through her blessings."

Anant Shri Vibhusit Acharya Mahamandaleshwar Sri 108 Swami Shivendra Puri Ji Maharaj: "Just look around us and see all those volunteers who are young people. But with families that are not religious minded, their children naturally do not get to see an event like this. In those families, the parents and teachers do not tell them about their own culture and traditions. You just cannot blame that section of youth for being absent. But those who are taught about their religion and roots at home definitely come here. We have to understand that youth today are living in a different kind of world from the youth of fifty years ago when religious and family traditions were followed quite strictly. But the family traditions still influence the youth more than radio and television, because these are just means of entertainment. We have always taught our youth by our actions and not by our words. If the elders in the family touch the feet of their parents, their youth follow."

Mahant Nritya Gopal Das: "The damage that could not be done to our culture and heritage in the past five hundred years by Islam and the British has now been done by the obscene television programs which are being viewed together by the families in our homes. We are giving the opportunity to our youth to get attracted to what the senses demand. All this is very dangerous."

Shri Mahant Paramananda Saraswati: "Our youth are very intelligent and smart, and more aware and alert than us. They view television and use the Internet. But when they truly understand their own dharma, they like to stick to their own roots and do not follow the Western way of living. You just look deeply, and you will find that most of the youth are deeply religious."

What major issues face the sadhu's of India today?

Mahamandaleshwar Paramhans Swami Maheshwarananda: "In India today, the biggest problem is the problem of secularism. Sadhus are ignored by sections of society and by the government. Sooner or later the government has to think about the welfare of the sadhus if they want India to remain as one India. Sadhus are the propagators of Sanatana Dharma and have a very big role in keeping India united. Hinduism gets no support whatsoever from the Indian government. Special rights are given to minority religions which are denied to Hinduism. My biggest problem, after having lived 35 years outside of India, is that nowhere in the world is there a center to protect the interests of Hindus. Anybody can attack you. If some sadhu is in trouble or leaves the world, no one is bothered about what could be done to support him. So today we have no home. We are homeless even in our own home."

Sri Swami Pragyanand: "The population of jatadhari (with long and matted hair) and veshdhari (wearing saffron robes) sadhus and other sadhus was 5.6 million in the census held in the year 1962 more than the population of many countries of Europe. The current figure could be touching eight to nine million. If several went to each of the 700,000 villages of India, the whole country would be transformed."

Acharya Mahamandaleshwar Swami Samvidananda Saraswati: "There has been a move by the government to take over ashrams and temples. Some notices have been served. We have communicated our opposition to this to the Prime Minister. There is a second issue, in which ashrams developed by a saint are taken over by grihasta (family) trustees after the saint's passing. It is our opinion that ashrams developed by a sadhu should be run by sadhus after the founder's passing. A sadhu can carry forward the spiritual work of the organization in a better manner."

Mahant Ramlakhandas Maharaj: "In ancient times the saints used to do penance in the caves, and their energies used to move upwards. When the pilgrims and

devotees used to go to meet such saints at the Kumbha Mela, their energies used to enter them. But today, because we have such huge crowds, here our energies instead of going upwards are moving downwards. Now this is a situation that needs to be studied closely."

Shrimahant Govindananda Brahmachari: "The Kumbha Mela used to be organized by the mahatmas, the sadhu leaders. The British took over the arrangements, and that continues with the government of independent India. Now if you point out the fault of some mahatma, a politician comes forward to back him. There are fake Sankaracharyas and fake Mahamandaleshwars here, backed by politicians. Now for the Ujjain Kumbha Mela next year, the politicians have formed a group of sadhus who claim to be Dalit sadhus and want separate meetings. Sadhus have no caste. This is a very dangerous attempt to spread the poison of casteism among the sadhus, all due to dirty politics."

Anant Shri Vibhusit Acharya Mahamandaleshwar Sri 108 Swami Shivendra Puri Ji Maharaj: "The definition of a saint is that he never asks for anything. If even the saints start asking you for something, then who will you go to? Today the disciples say that our guru is so big that he needs to be offered hundreds of thousands of rupees. Yet the disciple does not even know whether he is a guru or not. Absolutely new sects with no background whatsoever are surfacing these days."

How can the practice of dowry be rectified?

Sri Swami Pragyanand: "Dowry is like auctioning the boy by parents or selling him in the market for the sake of money. I feel that it is like selling the flesh of a son by demanding six million rupees, probably done on a per kilogram basis."

Swami Vasudevananda Saraswati: "People think that because they have spent so much money on the higher education of their son that they must encash it. It is greed. There is no medicine or mantra to get rid of this problem. We have to develop our intellect to understand and decide that dowry is an evil and that it is not doing any good for society."

Mahant Swami Vidya Giri: "Giving dowry to a daughter is the dharma of the father. But if it is demanded, then it is a sin and adharma. King Janaka gave dowry when his daughter Sita was married to Lord Rama, but Lord Rama's father, King Dashrath, never asked for dowry from King Janaka."

Sri Mahant 108 Mahant Ramananda Puri Ji: "Dowry is a tradition. People think that dowry is something very bad. I do not believe so. If you are giving something with joy, then go ahead and give. But I certainly oppose forcibly demanding things."

Mahant Nritya Gopal Das: "How can a person earning us$200/year spend $11,000 on his daughter's marriage? If he is compelled to dole out such a big amount, then he has to earn it through some corrupt practices."

Swami Karshini Gurusharnananda: "It is just greed. No one can bring greed to an end. It has to be dropped by you. Even now we have people who will bring home the bride in the clothes she is wearing and will not accept anything."

Should children be subjected to corporal punsihment?

Mahamandaleshwar Nirmal Das Maharaj: "Why would one beat one's own children? It is totally wrong. Even mentally pressuring them can hamper their development and growth. Children must be treated with a lot of love, and lovingly be told the principles of how to lead a good life."

Sri Mahant 108 Mahant Ramananda Puri Ji: "Children should not be beaten at all. We start beating them because we do not want them to do certain things. The need is to first teach the child what we do not want him to do. Then when he commits some mistake, he needs to be handled with love and affection. Beating children is due to the madness of the parents, guardians and society. In Ramayana, Tulsidas says that a child, an old man, a diseased person and a mentally imbalanced person should be forgiven if they make a mistake. We must also remember that we were once children and committed mistakes. Then we will never beat a child, but forgive him for his mistakes. We must also remember that we should not do to others what we would not like done to us."

Shri Mahant Paramananda Saraswati: "It is a sin to beat children. Children are the form of God. When we politely but sternly tell the child about the wrong he has done, he will understand it. The child should be treated like a friend, especially by the father."

Mahamandaleshwar Paramhans Swami Maheshwarananda: "It is not right to use beating to render punishment to children. The children need love and understanding. Parents should be strict, but gentle. The education of the children is the duty of the mother and the father, and they must perform it together as per the Vedic culture and traditions."

Sri Swami Pragyanand: "I am not in favor of beating of children. We have to understand that the power that is there in love is not there in anger. Anger separates and love unites. So if someone is to be won over by us, it is better to use the power of love and affection. It has been said, 'Bhaya bin hot na preet' ('There is no love without instilling fear'), but this strategy of fear is short lived and temporary. To bring about a change, the heart of the child has to be touched. And to touch the other's heart one must have love and compassion in one's own heart. I have gone all over the world and persuaded over eighty thousand people to drop bad habits such as addiction to liquor and eating nonvegetarian food. I did not use any stick to beat them. I touched their hearts."

Can we resolve untouchability and other caste issues?

India has seen continued activism by the Dalits (as the "untouchables " call themselves), including mass conversion to Buddhism. As well, media outside India, most notably National Geographic, have run major articles highlighting the worst aspects and criticizing India's inability to end the discrimination.

Anant Shri Vibhusit Acharya Mahamandaleshwar Sri 108 Swami Shivendra Puri Ji Maharaj: "Who is caring to ask in public places who is a brahmin and who is not? I think it is useless to talk about this problem. Now it is a fight for vote banks. People of lower class have been labeled as 'scheduled tribes' and 'scheduled castes' by the government. Now you immediately know the person belongs to a lower caste. But what is the need for this? Elections now revolve around caste, and whole ministries also."

Shri Mahant Paramananda Saraswati: "There was a time when if you got touched by a Muslim, you were thrown out of the religion. Today things have changed a lot. The problem of untouchability is no more there. Casteism is there today because, by exploiting it, the politicians can get votes. Today when we travel, do we ask the caste of who is sitting with us? When we have food in a hotel, do we ask them the caste of the cook who has made the food? It is the mean and selfish leaders of this country who are keeping the caste system alive in India."

Mahant Nritya Gopal Das: "The curse today is poverty. When there is no poverty, there is no untouchability. When a Harijan (untouchable) becomes a successful person, people mix with him and have food with him. Today, anyone who is poor is untouchable. If a brahmin is poor, no one wants to associate with him. Therefore, it is poverty which is untouchability. Let us fight poverty, and untouchability will go away on its own."

Mahant Swami Vidya Giri: "Lord Rama ate the fruit tasted by Shabri, a tribal, and addressed her as His mother. He addressed the boatman Khevat, a sudra, as his brother. Now if our Lord called these people as His mother and brother, how can we believe in untouchability? Wherever we have this problem, we should improve it, through sant, satsang and shastra saints, religious gathering and scripture."

What can be done about corruption?

Anant Shri Vibhusit Acharya Mahamandaleshwar Sri 108 Swami Shivendra Puri Ji Maharaj: "The thief who is stealing knows he will be punished if caught. But still there is the temptation of enjoying the booty if somehow he is not caught. It is that temptation that keeps him doing the wrong karma. But one should understand that you cannot deceive nature. One should not be in the race for money, because you will not be able to run for a very long time. If you walk at a natural pace, you will reach wherever you want to."

Swami Raghavacharya Vedanti: "We talk a lot about right karma, but do not do it in our lives. The people of India who believe that nothing can be done without the will of God, and who believe that God is an omnipotent and omnipresent power, still do injustice. That shows that their belief is full of doubts." The Mahabharata clearly states that the king is responsible for what happens in his kingdom. If politics is not

clean, then society cannot be expected to be on the right track."

Sri Mahant 108 Mahant Ramananda Puri Ji: "Corruptions always starts from the top. When the top man is corrupt, everyone down the line is going to be corrupt. Take my own case. I am the head of a temple trust. If I take out one thousand rupees which is not justified, then the person below me will pick up ten rupees, and I will not be able to oppose him."

How should Hinduism view scientific advancements?

We asked about current issues in medicine and science, including cloning, stem-cell research and genetic engineering. (Stem-cell research, which has become a major topic of debate among religions in the West, is the use of stem cells harvested from human fetuses. These stem cells have remarkable properties, including possibly the ability to grow into any organ of the body. The ethical question arises regarding the cell's origin: aborted fetuses. Should we overlook the issue of abortion and take advantage of the potential of stem cells, or does the fact that the source is an aborted fetus render such research morally wrong?) The swamis tended to answer the same way on the issues of cloning, stem-cell research and genetic engineering saying that it is fundamentally unwise to tamper with nature, prakriti.

Mahamandaleshwar Nirmal Das Maharaj: "We treat nature, prakriti, as God. Today minerals, oil and even water are being taken out of nature without need or in excess. This unnecessary exploitation will result in excess rain, earthquakes and other natural calamities. Tampering with nature will result in heavy losses for civilization."

Acharya Mahamandaleshwar Swami Samvidananda Saraswati: "If we disturb the balance of nature, the only place it will lead us is to destruction. Whatever has been created by God has been done after a lot of consideration, keeping in view the requirements of man. Now man tries to disturb the natural flavor of food, such as by adding sugar to milk, which is already sweet, and that is why we invite so many diseases."

Anant Shri Vibhusit Acharya Mahamandaleshwar Sri 108 Swami Shivendra Puri Ji Maharaj: "I do not understand what is the need of cloning. Is there some kind of dearth of population that they are doing all this? My own personal opinion is that science has done more damage to humanity that it has contributed for its welfare. If science can develop human beings who only talk of peace, friendship and compassion, then maybe we would have no objection to such a creation."

Sri Mahant 108 Mahant Ramananda Puri Ji: "There is big money in these kind of things, and people do not evaluate whether it is right or wrong to do. Our Hindu scriptures say that we should bother a lot about how money is earned. Is it being earned by picking someone's pocket, telling lies, killing someone? Today the whole focus is on artha, money, and kama, pleasure, and we are not paying any attention to dharma and moksha, liberation from rebirth."

Jagadguru Ramanandacharya Swami Rajeev Lochanacharya Ji: "These types of activities (specifically, genetic engineering) will affect both our bodies and our minds. It is said that your mind becomes the type of food you consume. If we start eating such food, then slowly it will affect our minds and bodies."

Swami Karshini Gurusharnananda: "If they are working purely for commercial gains, they will think one way. If a person has an essence of love in him, he would not do anything that is harmful to others. If he does not have the element of love, he will do whatever he wants. Any knowledge can be used or misused. Atomic power can be used. At the same time it can be misused. Alcohol can be used and also misused, same with sex. Nothing is wrong. The only issue is how it is being used."

Mahamandaleshwar Paramhans Swami Maheshwarananda: "Lord Krishna clearly said that when mixed breeds come, purity is lost and destruction is the result. Things will be polluted and manipulated. Even your consciousness will be polluted."

Are swami's allowed to be married?

Mahamandaleshwar Paramhans Swami Maheshwarananda: "In our Dasanami

tradition of Adi Shankaracharya, it is totally prohibited. However, among traditions such as Jain, Sikh, Buddhist and Kabir Panth, wearing the orange robes and marrying is permitted."

Swami Raghavacharya Vedanti: "Four hundred years ago, Goswami Tulsidas said that those people who become sannyasins after the death of their wives or due to financial problems rarely prove to be good sadhus. This is because they bring the deficiencies of their past along with them. They degrade the atmosphere in which the other sadhus are living. 'Sadhus' who are living with their wives give the examples of married sages like Vishwamitra and Vashishtha to justify their lifestyle. But they forget the kind of tapas, intense spiritual disciplines, which were done by those ancient sages. They are nowhere near the stages of tapas and spiritual powers enjoyed by those sages. They have forgotten that Rishi Vashishtha defeated a whole army by just one roar. Are these people of that category? They even give the example of Lord Krishna, whom they say had 16,108 queens. They are talking about the Lord Krishna who could dance on the head of the huge Kalia serpent. Do these self-styled sadhus have the power to catch even an ordinary reptile?"

Swami Achalanand Ji Maharaj: "It is unfortunate that people wearing the orange robes lead a worldly, married life. Only God can render some punishment to such people. You will find some wearing orange robes who are tricksters. The common devotee should ascertain the sadhu's level of knowledge and devotion, and who is his guru and lineage. One of the ways to recognize a true saint is that once you are with him, you will not like to leave him."

Sri Swami Pragyanand: "Yes, there are a lot of married sadhus today. If the clothes are saffron but the heart is not painted with the love of God, then it is like donkeys covered in the skin of lions. Society should not expect much from these types who have become sadhus out of depression and frustration."

Mahant Shri Foldol Behari Das Ji Maharaj: "Our women used to dress in a sober manner, but today they have started exposing their bodies. Whosoever in our culture insulted our womanhood, his whole clan was removed from this Earth. You can see, for example, what happened to Duryodhan and Ravana. Their whole clans were wiped off this Earth. But today television is showing such obscene scenes and there is no one to stop them. It is unfortunate that this is happening in a country where we say 'Matra devo bhav' ('Worship the mother as a Goddess'). Does any other country in the world treat their women like this? Do the Americans or Africans

treat their mothers as Goddesses? We even call our country as Mother India and the Earth as Mother Earth. Is there any other culture or country in the world who does this? Where in the world do they say, 'Let all be happy'? We are the followers of Sanatana Dharma, and we want the whole world to be happy. We even worship snakes and ants, what to talk of trees. This is what is called the spirit of unity in diversity. We worship all and see God in all."