

[South African National Convention Confronts 1980's Issues and Challenges](#)

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## South African National Convention Confronts 1980's Issues and Challenges

### Hindu Maha Sabha Makes Tough Resolutions on Conversion and Religious Apathy at Durban Meeting

In America it was the 1982 Memorial Day weekend: May 29th through the 31st. In South Africa it wasn't a holiday, but it was a weekend of far reaching importance for South Africa's 650,000 Hindus. Marking the beginning of their 8th decade, the South African Hindu Maha Sabha orchestrated one of its rare national conventions, the 9th one in its seventy-year history.

Assembling from a cross section of South Africa's four provinces, several hundred delegates from the Maha Sabha came together in Durban for a three-day face-off with a number of wildfire issues - conversion, religious apathy and illiteracy, and a vacuum at the administrative level of the Hindu organizations. In effect, it was a strategy session, and an unprecedented urgency was felt in transferring the strategy into grass-roots work.

After the opening day's welcoming and warming-up formalities, the convention quickly settled down to its agenda, with a morning session targeting the theme of "Hinduism Today" and an afternoon session surveying the "Inroads into Hinduism."

In his highly charged opening address, Thillayvel Naidoo, a Lecturer in Hinduism at the University of Durban, set the emphatic tone of the conference - "Make no mistake about it. The need for serious discussion on the challenges we face is very urgent. More urgent is it for us to find solutions that will help firstly to arrest the decay that has set in our religion-cultural life, and secondly to build a totally new cultural outlook for the future."

Alluding to the Muslim oil wealth and Christian administrative capabilities, Naidoo pointed out: "None of these resources is available to Hindus and they themselves appear to do very little to acquire modern administrative ability...Unlike Christian ministers, who are trained at universities and possess high qualifications in Hindu theology. This is one of the key areas of concern, and the sooner we grasp this the better."

After its rally-the-troops start, the morning session moved into its main theme, "Hinduism Today." To best articulate this subject, the Maha Sabha invited three guest speakers, a man, a woman and a young man to address the particular concerns of their respective peer groups.

Leading off was a law student, Pravesh Singh, whose brief but poignant speech laid bare a sensitive nerve common to Hindu communities all over the planet - the greatest and most fragile resource, youth. With a candidness typical of this conference, Singh professed, "Firstly, the youth of today are born into a scientifically advanced age. Youth are exposed to Western entertainment, literature and lifestyles. Against this backdrop they formulate their definitions of values, culture and individuality. Seen through this perspective, religion poses a threat..."

After expressing the importance of the family unit in passing on religious values and knowledge, Singh put forth one of the most perceptive statements of the convention: "If we are to blame Western-oriented society for the perspective that it projects, then it is necessary to draw a comparison with other religious sections of the greater community. Why aren't all youth victims to this inherent danger? It is quite evident from the level of religious awareness...that they jealously guard the principles of their religious institutions. I must conclude from this that the stance adopted by Hindu youth arises more from ignorance of their religion than indifference towards it." Attributing youth apathy to ignorance rather than disinterest was one of the most solid planks of the convention's platform, and only a month later, in June, a pilot youth workshop was set up. Plans were also made for special workshops for women to provide them enough religious background to answer their children's questions on Hinduism.

Selvakanthy Thulkanam, speaking on Hinduism today as seen by Hindu women, called for a new awareness of responsibility on the part of women. She further suggested a reorientation of the Hindu priests' duties to include ministerial

activities alongside of their temple responsibilities. A keynote of the convention, this point of action became one of the first resolutions adopted by the assemblage.

Covering Hindism today as seen by Hindu men, Mr. R. G. Pillay addressed the same concerns, but often advocated universal solutions that would sweep aside crucial sectarian differences within Hinduism. It was a tightrope the convention walked all weekend: trying to preserve Hinduism's distinctive sub-religions' (Saivism, Vaishnavism and Saktism) needs but at the same time trying to generate programs that will reach all South African Hindus. At one point a suggestion was put forth (later passed as a resolution) to adopt the Bhagavad Gita as the central religious text to be used in the youth education program, as it is widely believed to be representative of Hinduism. Many authorities, however, point out that the Bhagavad Gita is a Vaishnavite scripture, and not a trans-sect scripture, as many would suppose. To adopt it as the Hindu scripture, they strongly state, would be more fragmenting to Hinduism than unifying.

Armed with pages of statistics, Mr. R. S. Naidoo, a distinguished educator, launched into the afternoon's session, "Inroads into Hinduism." Closed to the public, it was a no-nonsense look at South Africa's escalating conversion problem. Of particular concern is the accelerated pace of conversions in the new suburb areas where the Hindu population has moved enmasse over the past decade. Citing this migration's effect of shrinking the family unit size from an extended to a nuclear family where the matriarch's influence has virtually disappeared, Mr. Naidoo noted, "In the Chatsworth survey, one factor stands out. There is no strong religious commitment. In fact, religion is often looked upon as an impediment to material progress."

Again hammering at the lack of a comprehensive religious instruction program, compounded by the fact that South Africa's National Educational Policy Act, 1967, decrees that public education shall have a Christian character, Mr. Naidoo fired a round of stunning facts drawn from the Chatsworth survey: over a ten year period, one in five Hindus became Christians; Hindu temples are attended by 13% of the Hindu families regularly, while Christian churches and Islam mosques are attended by 88% and 87% of their members regularly; 15% of Hindu families read their scripture regularly - 90% Moslim and 82% Christian families regularly read theirs. Mr. Naidoo further noted that the Hindu organizations don't offer a comprehensive structure of social and ministerial support for Hindus, particularly in times of difficulty.

Monday, the 31st of May, brought the convention to its 18 resolutions. Reflecting a common resolve to get down to work, the resolutions far outdistanced those of the previous eight conventions, calling for swift implementation of educational programs, a national meeting of Hindu priests in a first attempt to redefine their roles as ministers of religion, the formation of several research committees to look at restructuring the Sabha's administrative apparatus, and a dozen other minor enactments.

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