

[Can 40,000 Holy Men Shepherd India's Future?](#)

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Can 40,000 Holy Men Shepherd India's Future?

Yes, Asserts the Stalwart Bharat Sadhu Samaj, Provided Saints Stay Above the Political Fray

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Bharat Sadhu Samaj is an all-India organization of sadhus, saints and ascetics formed back in 1956 for the purpose of bringing together the holy men of India. Not to meditate, mind you, but to direct their wisdom and insight toward education and constructive social service activities for all-round development of the country and betterment of the world on the basis of truth, nonviolence, fearlessness, equality and unity.

Does it work? The Samaj's influence was sufficient to quash the Uttar Pradesh government's plan to regulate temples and ashrams some years ago. It has more or less had the ear of India's central government to the present day, enjoying the patronage of successive prime ministers, including Pandit Nehru, Mrs. Gandhi, Morarji Desai and Rajiv Gandhi. It has been, many say, unfairly characterized as affiliated with the Congress Party. No doubt it has been supported by Congress (and other) politicians, but it remains financially and morally independent of both government and political parties.

The idea for the Samaj did not come from the sadhus. According to 106-year-old Swami Bua of New York, it was the inspiration of Gulzari Lal Nandi, then Minister of Labor and Employment under Nehru. Swami served with the Samaj in the late 1950s. In addition to their teaching programs of yoga and meditation-part of Nandi's specific purpose in suggesting the Samaj-they have been involved in reforming robbers, offering relief in disasters and ferreting out and punishing imposter sadhus. The Samaj was officially begun in 1956 in Rishikesh.

The need for such an organization may not be obvious. Indeed, one could say the quadrennial Khumba Mela well serves the purpose of communication and coordination amongst India's hundreds of thousands of sadhus. The Samaj is perhaps best likened to the modern "professional organization," such as those formed by doctors or lawyers. In the old days, sadhus simply had the direct ear of the king and his ministers. Under a democracy, there is no king. Professional organizations serve the purpose of safeguarding the interests of members and representing them to the government and the public. The Samaj functions toward similar ends.

Samaj Goals and Organization

Swami Harinarayananand told Hinduism Today, "The Samaj has over 40,000 members out of which around 5,000 are actively participating and monitoring various programs of the organization. It has over 22 branches spread all over India and a general council of 125 people including a number of prominent heads of religious sects of India."

Our interview took place in Swami's personal chamber in the spacious building of Bharat Sadhu Samaj. This building is situated at Sardar Patel Marg in the heart of New Delhi-quite a posh area of the capital. The air-conditioned room of Swamiji has a small temple in it.

A recent revision of the Samaj's programs includes improving the community's religious standards, promoting national solidarity, assuring cleanliness in religious places and places of pilgrimage, ensuring proper administration of religious places and "to endeavor to protect the way of life of sadhus." The Samaj's success in meeting its goals is questioned by some and applauded by others [see sidebar]. Some of the criticism is misguided. If sadhus were to become engaged full-time in social service, they'd be unable to fulfill their primary responsibility of living up to the spiritual expectations of their tradition.

Membership

"Any sadhu," explained Swami, "who has attained the age of 18 years, who lives a life of purity and renunciation, is inspired by spiritual ideals, has no family ties, is interested in the work of social and religious upliftment and has been initiated in the sadhu order by a guru will be qualified to become a member of our organization." The Samaj is deeply committed to the continuation of the Sannyas tradition. It is supported by a US\$4.00 annual membership fee, grants from ashrams and other organizations, and income from rental property. It receives no money from the government.

Swamiji was highly critical of those who roam about in the garb of a monk or a sadhu and exploit the religious sentiments of innocent people. According to him, there are some religious institutions, maths, temples and ashrams which are not administered properly or in conformity with the terms of their foundation. The Samaj has formulated a set of principles on which the impostors may be checked, and the sanctity of the holy institutions may be preserved with dignity and tradition. They have formulated a separate program for protection of religious endowments and their proper utilization for spiritual and social service of the people.

Mahamandaleswar Ganeshanandji, age 74, of Giri Krishna Ashram, Tahargank, New Delhi, and president of the Delhi State Samaj branch explained, "The sadhus who are members of the Samaj belong to all castes and communities of India. However, a potential member must first belong to some ashram or organization. Even sadhus from other countries can come and take our membership. However, let me clarify that we do not admit sudras as sadhus directly in the Samaj. But if some other order has taken in sudras as sadhus, we do not object to it. So much so that such sadhus can freely come to our meetings and community get-togethers. We even do not mind having food together."

"So far as checking out the impostors among sadhus is concerned," Ganeshanand said, "we do not undertake this job ourselves. We pressure various organizations to keep a check on impostors, and even punish them. This method works quite well. Moreover, the Naga sadhus have an important roll to play in this correction. Naga sadhus are the protectors of the sadhu society, and they take stern action against erring sadhus and impostors."

Swami Harinarayananand said that Bharat Sadhu Samaj does not admit women as its members, however women sadhus are on the advisory committee of the Samaj and due importance is given to their views on important matters.

The Founder Secretary General

Swami Harinarayananand left his family at an early age of eleven years and joined the ashram of His Holiness Brahmachari Mangaldeoji Maharaj-a freedom fighter and renowned scholar of Sanskrit language and Indian scriptures. Swamiji took his initiation at the famous Barimuth Dharamasthan situated in Nalanda District (Bihar) in 1943 and later became its head.

Swamiji took an active part in "Quit India Movement" launched by Mahatma Gandhi. He was one of the participants in the National Flag Hoisting held in August, 1942 which signified an open revolt against the British Rule in India and in which several students were shot by police.

According to Swami, the Samaj is the representative organization of all religious orders whose preceptors were born on Indian soil. These include Dasanami Sannyasi, Vaishnav Ramanandi, Nimbark, Madhva, Vishnu, Nathyogi, Udasin, Kabirpanthi, Swami Narayan, Nirmala, Dadu Panthi and Ram Snehi.

His eyes shining with pride, Swamiji recounted that various conferences of Bharat Sadhu Samaj were not only graced by the presence of leaders and heads of these various religious orders, but also that of eminent national leaders.

Issues and Opinions

On the political involvement of sadhus and their seeking political office, Swamiji comments, "We do not mind sadhus getting into politics or fighting elections in their individual capacity. But it is not desirable for a sadhu to join a political party and then toe the party's line and be subservient to the party bosses."

On the Ayodhya issue, Swamiji's views are very forthright and clear. He explained, "Babri Masjid had to be removed. I do not want to go into the details of how it happened. But no sadhu or sadhu body in India opposes the construction of

Sri Ram Mandir at the birthplace of Lord Ram. Moreover, the temple has to be constructed at the exact birth site."

Swamiji further opined, "So far as the construction of the temple at the birthplace of Lord Ram is concerned we have no difference of opinion with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. But we are opposed to politicization of religious issues and also to capitalize the name of God Ram for getting votes. We are of the firm belief that politicians have no right to speak on religious matters. No political party should be allowed to take advantage of the mandir issue for consolidating its votebanks."

Respect for the Sadhus

Swami Shukdev Muni Mahant Marishgat, Nalanda, Bihar, and president of Bharat Samaj, Bihar State offered his views on the importance of the sadhus. "Unfortunately, in India today, people in general do not respect the authority of the government, but do respect God and religion. In such a situation a body of sadhus definitely has a crucial roll."

That respect has been earned by thousands of years of enlightened guidance offered by saints and sadhus. The Samaj is one present-day manifestation of that guidance. These sadhus are aware they do not answer to politicians or businessmen, but are independent, answerable only to their spiritual preceptors and the larger body of saints.

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Insider and Outsider Views Of the Bharat Sadhu Samaj

Tara Chand Goel, 64, former government servant, vice-president of Bharat Sevak Samaj, Delhi state (an organization closely related to Bharat Sadhu Samaj) and an active social worker: "The Samaj can work for national unity by bringing people together. People have to be told that they are first of all Indians, then Punjabi, Bengali or Madrasi. In the context of the Ayodhya incident, I must say that

some political parties are taking political advantage of the Mandir issue. The Samaj must persuade such political forces to not meddle in these affairs. Our people have a lot of faith in sadhus, and what they say has tremendous impact. Whereas, on the other hand, the people have very little faith in political leaders as there is a wide gap in what they preach and what they practice. It is high time that the Samaj realizes its responsibility, and does something concrete for the betterment of India and Indian people."

Surrender Saini, 59, social worker and politician, winner of Padma Bhushan, chairperson of Delhi Social Welfare Advisory Board and chairman, Bharat Sevak Samaj, Delhi State: "Hindu Samaj listens to the sadhus with great respect and therefore national leaders like Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru and Mr. Gulzari Lal Nanda were instrumental in creating the Samaj, a body they thought would work for the betterment of the society. It was felt that sadhus who have renounced the world for spiritual development and welfare of human beings are a tremendous force and this force should be utilized for national unity and development."

Pran Nath, 68, retired government servant and member of the Rashtriya Sewak Sangh (RSS): "The Bharat Sadhu Samaj, although in existence since 1956 and claiming membership of 40,000 sadhus out of which 5,000 are active members, does not appear to have made any notable impact on the religious, social and moral life of the people in this country despite its high aims. Its activities are limited to only organizing seminars, meetings and conferences occasionally in which common people are not involved. Sadhus, sants, rishis, gurus and mahatmas have played a very important role in the social, religious and cultural life of this country in the ancient times. They also guided the kings in the affairs of the state. In recent times, Maharishi Dayanand and Swami Vivekananda worked tirelessly to awaken the people. The people of India have great respect for the sadhus and sants. Every temple, ashram and math should become a center of intense activity under the guidance of sadhus."

Radhanath Chaturvedi, 63, journalist and author: "I feel that an organization such as the Samaj must totally dedicate itself to social service. Service of the sick and weak irrespective of caste, creed and religion should be the main aim. I think Ramakrishna Mission is doing just this. Bharat Sadhu Samaj must study the Mission's working. A sadhu organization must serve the humanity at large, and there should be no communal feeling."

Acharya Sudevanand, 60, full-time sannyasin of Anand Marg and educationist: "The Samaj was created to strengthen the spiritual heritage of this country. Sadhus have been known for sacrifice and selfless service. I feel that sadhus should merge spirituality with science and technology and work for the betterment of not only Indians but humanity as such. If the political power comes under the hands of sadhus, it will usher in a golden era-because if this happens politics and society will be based on morality. One other important thing sadhus have to do is to fight against economic exploitation of the people."

Rasayanai Baba (Ramjidas), founder and administrator of Prachin Rashtriya Shakti Peeth Mandir, Kutub, Mehrauli and vice-president of Bharat Sadhu Samaj, New Delhi: "I am of the view that those who contest elections cannot be sadhus. Some time back in a meeting of the Samaj we passed a resolution which said that the members of the Samaj cannot contest elections. The duty of organizations such as the Samaj in today's times is to speak the truth and guide the nation on the right path. On the issue of Ram Janmabhoomi all the sadhus of India are one. I feel that the majority of Muslims understand the viewpoint of their Hindu brethren, but are helpless because the issue is being politicized."