Hindu Federation of America Launches Bold Effort for Unity
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Outsiders Watch as Fledgling Organization Prepares Strategy to Protect Dharma in a Communications Era

Inspired by the strong-willed Swami Premananda of North India, a small group of professionals and businessmen in the San Francisco Bay area have made up their minds that Hinduism is long overdue to have a unified voice in the USA. Although attempts at forming umbrella organizations are well known, what may distinguish this particular effort from previous ones in this country is its serious blueprint for setting up a loose but effective national Hindu organization which permits members to retain their autonomy, identity and function while lending their voice to a democratically elected Hindu National Board. Already, leaders are asking hard questions and conferring with their colleagues even on international levels about the brave, young phenomenon on the West Coast. In response, the Hindu Federation of America issued a newsletter in October to the heads of hundreds of Hindu organizations in the U. S., explaining their constitution and program to allay concerns that the Hindu Federation represents a "take-over" or "hierarchy" that may seek to dominate member groups or antagonize other religions by a chauvinistic stance. The newsletter also invited suggestions from Hindu organizations to assist the new group with their experience.

Moreover, the HFA points to its already successful Canadian counterpart, begun just months before the U.S. Federation. In August, Toronto was the site for a highly successful Federation-sponsored peace march of 6,000 people of many religions, including Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Moslems and Jews. Swami Premananda lauds this public effort to clarify the Federation's true purpose: "The Hindu ideals of brotherhood among religions, universal peace and love are so needed now. When Hinduism is understood, feelings of separation go away."

What motivates the Federation founders is the conviction that Hindus must take the responsibility for educating non-Hindu society about Hinduism, speaking up when Hinduism is attacked and supporting Hindus in the U. S. whenever they need

help. They point out that Hindus in the West have labored to remain silent and low-profile while forces in a modern society race ahead misunderstanding and even maligning Hinduism. Add to this Hinduism's unique complexity and talent for the founding of individual organizations along regional or ethnic lines, and the world looks on bewildered, convinced that Hinduism is some shapeless confusion without an identity or direction.

Certain Hindu leaders, however, are particularly sensitive at this time about anything that might exacerbate the Hindu/Sikh situation. Dr. Mahesh Mehta, General Secretary of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad in the USA, wonders if the Federation will take a hard stand against. Sikhs or any other sect from India, a possibility suggested by Federation statements expressed in the first press coverage (India West, August 9). In that article, objections were voiced over Hindus being called "dogs" by Sikhs demonstrating after the Indian Army attack against Sikh terrorists in the Golden Temple.

While remaining open to the Federation to communicate and possibly work with the VHP, Dr. Mehta wonders if the new group will have the experience in social work and dealing with the many differing Hindu groups to actually bring about a Federation. "It requires tremendous experience to deal effectively with the various Hindu individuals and groups, assuring them that a Federation will not swallow them and at the same time keeping them oriented toward an ideal of Hindu Solidarity. It would not be good to make promises and not fulfill them. Hindu people have had enough of that already." Also, Dr. Mehta expresses concern over the very concept of Hindu Solidarity, for "when we speak of Hindu Solidarity, we are speaking of taking a stand, even antagonizing, if necessary, powerful forces such as Christianity." The international leadership of the VHP, according to Dr. Mehta, have discussed the appearance of such Hindu Solidarity groups as the Federation and the Hindu Alliance and will go into the matter more deeply when the VHP Governing Board meets in December. "We are wondering just why they are suddenly coming up at this time and what their programs are going to be."

Rajen S. Anand, president of the Federation of Indian Associations (41 member organizations), worries about the fundamentalist and political tones he detects in the first press announcement of the Hindu Federation of America. "Our organization and our internal organization, the Alliance for India's Unity and Secular Democracy, promote the culture and integrity of the Asian-Indians rather than of just one religion. Anything even remotely divisive of India's society we condemn." President Anand adds that the Hindu Federation of America may alienate other religions if it is reactive in any way, such as toward the Sikhs. "You cannot promote India unless

you also promote secularism, because India is built on secularism, just like the U.S." He goes on to say he applauds the Federation for coordinating Hindu religious festivals, but that they cannot be the voice of India at the same time.

Narendra Kumar, Chief Administrator for the HFA, replied to the above observations: "The press statement quoted in India West was a little over-emotional and should not be taken for the Federation's basic goal, which is to improve relations with Sikhs and all other religions. The delicate situation concerning the Sikhs and Hindus at this time is coincidental to the creation of the HFA, which exists to promote brotherhood. We regret that the time now is tense, but the new Federation should not be a victim of it. The Federation reacts against no one, but rather invites all - Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, all religions found in India - to participate as Hindus." N. Kumar points out that the Federation core members are all active people in Hindu temples or organizations and have very carefully considered the creation of a Federation for some time. They have done everything possible to make it the most democratic organization imaginable. "There will be no room or chance for career-building or personal self-aggrandizement," adds Dr. Ramesh Japra, a leading trustee of the Federation.

"Most importantly," N. Kumar explains, "someone has to take the initiative to bring up the eternal values of Hinduism and discover ways together as Hindus as to how we can coordinate our activities in this country." The very spirit of founder Swami Premanandaji's organization in India, the Vishwa Adhyatmik Sangh, and the Swami's personal mission worldwide is to create universal brotherhood among people of various faiths, "not to convert anyone to Hinduism," Kumar adds.

At this writing, the budding Federation is taking steps to put their theories into practice in their own neighborhood. To promote better public relations and understanding, they are initiating a program from their present headquarters in Fremont, California, inviting non-Hindu neighbors to evenings of classical Indian films, art exhibits and even appearances of artists like the famous Ravi Shankar. As for the objection that the HFA promotes Hinduism rather than the culture of Asian-Indians (as the Federation of Indian Associations does), N. Kumar emphatically replies, "Culture is the outcome of religion. They cannot be separated. They are the outcome of centuries of living together. Those who object to the word Hindu never worry if Christians and Muslims spend millions of dollars trying to convert Hindus, but saying Hindu worries them, for they don't truly grasp the universal aspect of Hinduism."

And therein lies the kernel of the internal debate - just what is meant by "Hindu?" The HFA leadership maintains that all religions originating within India are basically Hindu in that they share in the eternal truths of universal brotherhood, love and peace and look upon Mother India as their home. For that matter, Hinduism looks upon all religions, even Islam and Christianity, as valid paths to God. As Emperor Ashoka said, "In revering the faith of others, you revere your own faith."

The Hindu Federation of America clearly has its greatest task cut out for it: communicating its program successfully to fellow Hindus. Early assumptions among some key Hindus in the USA must be changed and replaced with the confidence that, rather than creating a dynasty, the HFA intends to provide a simple structure within which Hindu individuals and organizations can successfully coordinate efforts for the first time in history to bring Hinduism fully into the mainstream of modern times. Just how that will happen will be worked out by the representatives themselves in conference, HFA leaders point out.