Hinduism Rides Asian Studies Boom Into World's Classrooms and Libraries
Category : August/September/October/November 1996
Published by Anonymous on Dec. 31, 1969

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Everyone's seeking paradise, and a special group of Asian Studies souls found it--for a few days in the Sandwich Islands. The International Association for Asian Studies annual meeting was held in Honolulu, Hawaii this year, from April 11th to the 14th, just an eighteen-minute flight from our Hinduism Today offices at the monastery on Kauai. So we flew two monks to Waikiki, to see what the AAS was doing of interest for Hindus and Hinduism. It was certainly not a religious gathering and barely "Asian" in tone. But thanks to the high level of scholarship and ample interaction, we were not at all disappointed by the multi-faceted event. It provided a snapshot of Hinduism and India in the scholastic community, a window on a massive network through which Hinduism is flowing out to the world.

The AAS has 8,500 members and is growing. Despite a distant venue, (a 4.5 hour flight to the nearest continent,) this 48th annual conference drew over 2,819 people from as far away as the Netherlands, Tokyo, and Beijing. The AAS has done enough conferences to minimize "plenary" sessions where one speaker holds captive a group who would rather be elsewhere. Instead they maximize the "networking" potential. Asked to explain what "does the conference do," AAS staff information officer

Carol Hanson, said simply "For example, the Rajasthan Studies Group knows they can get together here and talk, and we provide a venue free of charge."

What an understatement! In four days 116 formal programs presented 780 papers among peers from all over the world with mutual interests. We counted 19 pre-conference events such as executive committee meetings of the American Institute of Asian Studies, Council on International Educational Exchange, China-executive Committee, Committee on Teaching about Asia. Beyond formal sessions there were 81 special events and meetings: ranging from Presidential Address and Awards Ceremony; meetings of the Committee on Women in Asian Studies, the aforementioned Rajasthan Studies Group; Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Studies Group and dozens of regional committee meetings, with continuous video showings.

Both India and Hinduism fall under the AAS South Asia section and had sessions such as Secularism: the Personal Laws and the Dilemmas of the Indian State,which was organized by Rina Verma, and chaired by Ashutosh Varshney, both of Harvard University. Papers and discussion panels touched on key current issues of serious import: TheQuestion of the Secular Constitution in India: A Comparative Perspective; The Hindu Code Bill: Forging an Uneasy Peace.And Hindu scholars were also deep into human rights. [see side bar on Dr. Sharma.]

India, Hinduism and indeed all of Asia are getting new attention in the academic forum. Sympathic, informed teachers are getting beyond the "Cows, Caste and Karma" [see

My Turn, Page 3] stereotypes. Carol Hanson told us, "Despite cut backs in educational funding, Asian studies continue to grow. America is involved so deeply economically and politically with Asia, we cannot pretend any more. People want to learn more about Asia. That I am glad about! Somewhere there will be a growth of awareness and hope for compassion and understanding. I have a real committment to making Asia important, understood, precious and acceptable to children as early as possible."

Dr. Indira Viswanathan Peterson, member of the AAS, South Asia Council, says: "People are realizing that Asian culture is important, not just in terms of population but in terms of contributions to civilization. The AAS and similar associations are dedicated to getting rid of stereotypes. Through AAS outreach to the community at large, from video tapes to teachers going out speaking to classrooms, we are starting very young in education on Asia."

We enjoyed meeting the librarian from the University of Beijing. We gave him copies of Hinduism Today, Dancing with Sivaand Loving Ganesha--probably the first ever copies to go to China. He bowed gratefully in a beautiful moment. At another booth a brief business card exchange has now led to key Hindu publications going off to the Phillipines. As Mr. Vinod Mahajan, owner of Nataraja Books said, "It appears that little happens at such conferences, but the fruit of these contacts comes in the years ahead."

Dr. Peterson said, "Thanks largely to the AAS, in the last 25 years there has been a lot more exchange between scholars.

Books published in India, China, Japan, USA and Europe are now more broad based. The AAS is one place where the colonial mentality is no longer prevalent. It has really nurtured this global awareness as opposed to the old North/South East/West polarities."

We encountered first hand the curious phenomenon we dubbed "the closet devotees"--Western academics personally deeply committed to Eastern beliefs, but who cannot or do not make this overtly known. One even told us they had a guru in India but, "Please don't print my name, I have to keep my tenure. Later, one day, I will retire and wear my kurta for good!" Meanwhile, such academics/devotees write "studies" of India's traditions deeply infused with real personal understanding of the principles of the Sanatana Dharma.

Indian scholars in the system with Hindu backgrounds can openly espouse their roots and take a lead in Hindu dialogue. Dr. Indira V. Peterson, for example, wrote Poems to Shiva, the Hymns of the Tamil Saints, and brought authentic Saivism to the academic forum. And two strong distributors of books from India--Nataraj Books and South Asia Books--use the AAS meetings and other similar US gatherings of the Association of South Asian Studies and the Association of Religious Studies to bring original works from Bharat into American classrooms and libraries.

Of course, it was not all jasmine and champa--the split brain problem of loving your subject while maintaining righteous academic objective aloofness "in the interests of truth" was everywhere evident. Some still obviously look down on their

Asian subject matter. "Our education and mentality is such that we essentially seek secular identities," says Dr. Anand Yang, editor for the AAS Journal. "Sometimes we are not interested in religions and especially we are not interested in religions of other peoples which we consider to be so alien. We can only imagine it as something that is suffused with superstition and otherness which somehow makes it inappropriate or out of touch with modern rationalism." It was humorous to watch the head of one prominent American Asian studies group curtly dismiss our monks in robes as he turned to serve cocktails to the other members, while one Indian professor, clutching a papaya amidst the sushi said, "It's hard to find anysattvic food in this whole place."

But as a result of all this activity, academia is opening new doors for the dissemination of Hinduism to young Hindus and non-Hindus who unconsciously hunger for dharma and spiritual meaning in a materialistic world. And amidst this conferences coats and ties, a secular "One World, One God" awareness that transcended ethnic and national boundaries percolated through the air uplifting all who attended.

Dr. Arvind Sharma,McGill University, Montreal, Canada:I am a Hindu contributor on a project involving the relationship of religion to human rights, centered at Emory University. There research is also being done on the problems of Christian proselytization in Sub-Saharan Africa and in Russia. When Protestant missionaries with their greater fire power in terms of wealth and command of media go into other countries it raises serious questions about whether the freedom of religion is being justly exercised or not, when one party to the equation is relatively weak in relation to the other. Hindus, Jews,

American Indians, the Australian Aboriginal and the Native African--the "primal" religions--feel that the wording of the present Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which deals with freedom of religion is too heavily influenced by the outlook of missionary religions. It does not fully encompass a person's freedom to retain his or her own religious tradition. We hope to bring about a revision of this article in 1998 when the UN celebrates the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to make it truly universal, lest it carry similar implications in other parts of the the world as it does in the US. In the US, the home of the United Nations, which presumes complete freedom of religion, the indigenous Native American traditions have and are facing tremendous difficulties, bordering on persecution.

Sidebar: New Forum for Sanatana Dharma Religion Courses the World Over.

With better informed professors, the university has become a major player in the global spread of India's spirituality. Several professors shared their experiences and discussed the issue of negative Hindu stereotypes.

Dr. S. S. Rama Rao Pappu, Miami University at Ohio, USA:"I have seen the negativities of India's religious and social structures still presented in American high- school textbooks. But the standard college textbooks are different. A. L. Basham's The Wonder that Was India, or John Koller's The Indian Mindgive balanced presentations. My students compare the 'cultural facts of India' with 'Western cultural facts,' values and 'dis-values' and negative perceptions born of 'holier than thou' attitudes disappear. They consider varnaand jati,class and race together and realize that the slogan that India is

'caste ridden' is a convenient slogan; Indian media reporters could also characterize the West as 'class ridden,' 'race ridden' etc. Caste is not integral to Hinduism as a religion, but a phenomenon of Indian society as a whole. The important thing the students are taught is to look at the positive values in any society. Students are fascinated by India's diversity and pluralism, something which America has just started experiencing. For example, how India deals with 14 official languages when America feels threatened by the use of Spanish as a second language in one or two states. The important lesson they learn is Hinduism's attitude of "Live and Let Live."

Professor Vasudha Narayanan,University of Florida, Gainesville:"I teach courses on religions of India, women in the Hindu tradition, scripture, etc. I don't bypass the perceived negative issues of Hinduism. We look at the historical context, the problems people faced and how it relates to today. I get students to ask if they are perceiving things in an "anti" centered way. Have they been misinformed, and if so, how can we rectify it? I think many text books are fairly responsible these days, but they don't give adequate coverage of the heightened positions women have held within Hindu civilizations. I don't think it is true to say women are entirely subjugated in Hindu society. But the counter perception that women had a high status just because Indians worship Goddesses is also not true. We examine the many historical contexts in which women did contribute to society and had certain kinds of 'power,' a word which is itself problematical."

Dr. Anand Yang,University of Nevada, Utah, USA:"Most US Indian Hindu students know little about Hinduism. Peer

pressure can also make them shy to turn to that identity. Oddly enough, in secular universities, they come to kind of a re-discovery. It sometimes leads them to ask their parents about aspects of their roots that cannot be covered academically in the classroom."

Dr. Indira Viswanathan Peterson,Massachussetts, USA, Mount Holyoke's Asian studies program:"I teach at one of the few remaining women's colleges in the US and face some really 'burning' questions. Pardon the pun, but bride burning is a hot issue. US students think Indian women are just being burnt. I try to bring in a whole variety of perspectives, texts and ideas. There is a lot of discussion in the classroom. There are many students of South Asian descent who have grown up in the United States and others who come from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The classroom dialogue is often very painful because people feel that their culture is being picked on. But by using a woman's poem, Mirabai for example, you see that women too have voices in Indian civilization.

"Twenty-five years ago the attitude was that the West is superior to every other culture. Now students see that each system has grown out of certain given social conditions and that it may actually be very fruitful in some ways. They see for instance that arranged marriage is not the horrible system they first thought it was, that it isn't so absurd. To a traditional Indian a so-called love marriage might seem as bizarre and absurd as an arranged marriage would seem to an American."

Dr. Margaret Case,former editor of Princeton University Press:

"The market for Indian books has never been as great as Far East Asian books for many reasons. We have long philosophical discussions on why. Americans find India much more inscrutable and don't have as warm an empathy for Indian things as they do for Chinese and Japanese culture. I have always found that hard to explain because I love India so much. A lot of it has to do with the reaction to what is perceived as a polytheistic culture by Westerners whose monotheism and dualism is so ingrained from infancy."

Professor Donna Brown, Providence Rhode Island, USA: "My students are very keen. Some are of South Asian parentage, some are searching spiritually and are looking into religious traditions with the idea of taking certain things from them for themselves. I teach courses on different religious traditions in India, Women, Gender in Religion, Music and Drama in Religion. Women in contemporary Bengal strike many of us who study India as having a kind of greater dignity and authority and perhaps power than other woman across the North, not in comparison to women in the South of course at all. I have been trying to unravel why that might be the case and how it might have been influenced by, or how it might be an influence in, the development of Vaishnava worship and Vaishnava theology."