Global Dharma
Category : April/May/June 2010
Published by senthil on Mar. 02, 2010

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Global

Taking Ahimsa to the Masses

During the parliament of the World's Religions, Swamini Mayatitananda (below) launched a tw0-year global tour of satsangs called "Living Ahimsa--The Power of Peace" satsangs. At each of these gatherings, Mother Maya, as she is affectionately known, speaks passionately on the vow of nonviolence and conducts a guided meditation. Participants then create a Peace Mandala of grains and legumes while reciting: "I take the Vow of Ahimsa. I make inner harmony my first priority. I take the Vow of Ahimsa in my thoughts, speech and action."

It is an inspiring and powerful program, paticipants affirm. The Living Ahimsa Vrata mission makes the spirit of nonviolence a palpable reality for individuals. On the goals page of her website (www.mypeacevow.com), she Mother Maya explains: "This program arouses personal awareness and thereby creates an instant shift into global consciousness. The intention of this work is to heal millions of lives; transforming disease, poverty and despair into health, harmony and prosperity." The "Living Ahimsa--The Power of Peace" program was inaugurated in 2001, just after 9/11. So far, over 143,956 have taken the vow. The vow can be taken in person or online. Central to the vow is a thirty-minute meditation twice a day. Aum is chanted 108 times, two times, followed by contemplation on key Hindu Vedic verses.

"This commitment," Mothe Maya writes on her website, "provides you with an instant spiritual awareness to filter all of your choices. Before you endeavor any major decision or goal, ask yourself the imperative Living Ahimsa question: 'Does this decision or choice support inner harmony?' "

Diaspora Issues

Challenges For Hindus Outside India

Four speakers at a hinduintrafaith panel at the Melbourne Parliament of the Worlds

Religions (PWR) touched on key issues facing Hindus in non-Hindu nations. Following a Vedic chant by Sri Sri Chinna Jeeyar Swamiji, Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, the panel moderator, opened by citing three key phenomena: growing populations of Hindus outside India, temple building and the identity crisis faced by youth who are isolated, often the sole Hindu in their class.

Swami Shankarananda, a leading teacher of Kashmir Saivism in the lineage of Baba Muktananda, whose ashram is in Australia, raised issues relating to Westerners who have adopted Hinduism but who resist identifying themselves as Hindus. He pointed out, "Even though they don't call themselves Hindus, they are part of the same dharma body. But if we Western Hindus can't decide on who we are, then we don't have a voice. If we can say who we are, then we can be together and have a voice." In contrast, he noted, Western Buddhists are proud to call themselves Buddhists.

Akila Ramarathinam, the Joint General Secretary of Vishwa Hindu Parishad of Australia, spoke eloquently about the cultural gap among Hindu communities in the West, lacking the immersion experience of India's culture and the extended family. She also stressed the need for Hindus to be proactive in education. She cited the VHP's amazing gamut of successful educational programs in Australia and its struggles to find staff and funding to maintain them.

The third speaker was Suhag Shukla, co-founder, legal counsel and managing director for the Hindu American Foundation (HAF). Suhag spoke passionately about the need for Hindus to be strong advocates in the public forum. "Defining who we are and where we stand in the West is of the utmost importance--because if we don't, someone else will. Hindus in the diaspora need to proactively participate in the public square and take ownership of our beliefs. If we don't, Hindus will continue to be misunderstood or misconstrued or have others try to speak on our behalf, leading to portrayals that are completely divorced from actual belief and practice."

Paramacharya Palaniswami, Editor-in-Chief of Hinduism Today, urged Hindus to fearlessly engage in open dialog with the media in their communities and take a stand on how Hinduism is portrayed. He shared recent initiatives by the Hinduism Today staff: festival pagers and Hindu history lessons that are targeting the US educational system and mainstream media.

India

Giant Chakra Peace Homa

Sri sri sri sadguru shakti Swaroopananda Maharaj conducted a 21-day Maha Homa (fire ceremony) in Sri Chakra Yantra for Global Peace in December, 2009, in Maheshwaram on the outskirts of Hyderabad.

The homa was performed daily, morning and evening, followed by bhajans and satsang. An estimated ten thousand people participated in the event.

Homa organizers declared, "The Sri Chakra Yantra has a special immense power and is supreme among all other yantras. Worship of Sri Chakra brings good fortune, well-being, good profits, good health and all manner of prosperity. Maha Homa in Sri Chakra Yantra is an auspicious event for the welfare and well-being of all people."

The 150 wide, 22,400 sq. ft., three-dimensional image of the renowned Sri Chakra was built by 100 engineers and 1,000 sevaks (volunteer workers) in just ten days. Organizers note that a replica of Sri Chakra this large has never been created anywhere before.

Thailand

Siam's Inspiring Godly Stamps

Though Thailand's official religion is Buddhism, like most of Southeast Asia, it's history is interwoven with Hindu culture and religion. Highlighting this fact in June, 2009, the Thai government released a, edition of stamps depicting the Hindu Deities Ganesha, Brahma, Narayana and Siva. Designed by Mrs. Veena Chantanatat of the Thailand Post Company Limited and printed in France, the stamps have brought delight to Hindus in Asia and around the world. In an era when nation states' religious affliations are often sources of conflict, these stamps tell a different story. The Buddhist Thai people are proud of the place that India and Hinduism have in the heritage of the rich and colorful Thai culture and tradition.

Media

Media Leaders Speak on Religion

Another notable panel at the Parliament in Melbourne comprised media

representatives from three faiths who spoke on religion in the media. BBC's Religious Affairs Correspondent, Christian theologian Christopher Landau, explained the BBC's unique position of being state owned. Not bound by commercial mandates, the BBC is able to give broad coverage of religious and cultural landscapes that go beyond the fantastic and bizarre.

Ahmed Rehab is an American Muslim activist and writer with a focus on contemporary social issues, including civil rights, media relations and Islam-West relations. He discussed the challenges facing moderate Muslims who cannot ignore the problem of fundamentalist Muslim terrorists, but at the same time must be careful not to add fuel to racial profiling and anti-Islamic stereotypes.

Paramacharya Palaniswami, editor-in-chief of Hinduism Today, engaged the audience with a graphically rich presentation of the Hinduism's history in the US media. He took viewers from the early 1900s--when India was lampooned and swamis were feared--to today, when successful Hindus in the West are applauded, yoga and Hindu beliefs permeate the media, and a positive India adorns the cover of Time magazine.

Brazil

India Meets Brazil

With its plot immersed in Hindu-Indian culture, the Brazilian television series Ways to India was chosen the best 2009 soap opera at the 37th International Emmy Awards in New York in November, 2009. Written by Gloria Perez and broadcast by TV Globo, it surpassed French and Philippine productions. It was a first-of-its-kind achievement for Brazil.

Airing one hour nightly six times a week from January to September, it had top ratings for 2009, with 150 million viewers, putting Ways to India among Brazil's all-time most popular TV shows. By comparison, the most viewed show in USA's TV history only had 106 million viewers. TV Globo has already licensed it to 80% of Latin America.

At a cost of us$247,000 dollars per episode, the team filmed the first scenes of the show in the Indian cities of Jaipur and Agra. Besides a 40-member crew that the

production took to India, Director Marcos Schechtman also hired the help of an Indian producer. It took 15 months of hard work to produce the series, from research for the characterizations to actual film.

The director turns the state of Rajasthan into a melting pot of North and South India cultures to serve as a backdrop for a soap opera story of forbidden love. Caste, family reputation, arranged marriages, the intrinsic relationship between conduct and beliefs and various media stereotypes about India all provide a rich background for romantic intrigue.

The cliche story involves Maya Meetha (Juliana Paes), a girl from a high Rajasthan business caste, and Bahuan (Marcio Garcia), a successful businessman, educated in the US, who hides his status as Dalit, or untouchable. Maya's family requests the help of a brahmin Pandit (Jose de Abreu) to arrange a marriage for her. He introduces Raj (Rodrigo Lombardi). The love triangle is complete.

But, wait! There's more! Bahuan has business in Brazil, and Raj falls in love with a Brazilian girl. The plot thickens with many twists and flights back and forth between India and Brazil. The brahmin is responsible to uphold the values of the East (India) which are portrayed in conflict with those of the West (Brazil). But he also spreads gossip and demands more and more money for his services.

Gloria Perez, the show's celebrated author, says that exposing Indian culture and religion to a Brazilian audience, while exploring differences and similarities, is a form of reflection. "The clothing, the religious rituals, the dances, the festivals and the magical aspects of India always have a counterpart in Brazil. There are two central stories being told, each on a different side of the world; they work as a mirror to each other."

Setting aside the shallow, fragmented portrayal of Hinduism, Ways to India has brought Brazilians a whole new view of India and its culture. Before its airing, the average Brazilian knew little or nothing of such matters. The meaning and importance of women's clothes, the immense popularity of Hindu Gods, such as Krishna and Ganesha, were but vague impressions. Now, Indian culture and fashion are on center stage in Brazil.

by Elisangela Mendonca Rio de Janeiro (Brazil)

Briefly

The government of India's Union Water Resources Ministry has finally accepted evidence collected by the Indian Space Research Organisation, Archaeological Survey of India, Geological Survey of India and other agencies, that prove beyond doubt the prior existence of the mighty river Saraswati that flowed through the Northwest region as described in Vedic literature. Until now, the government had denied the Saraswati's existence.

The Archaeology Institute of Vietnam and the Khanh Hoa Museum have unearthed thousands of artifacts at the site of the ancient village of Vinh Yen in the south-central province, some of which are 2,000-2,500 old. The findings include a Siva lingam made of rock crystal.

On Monday, December 21, 2009, Maharashtra-based Shree Sampraday sect reconverted 1,747 tribals who had embraced Christianity back to Hinduism in Surat. At a havan conducted by ten priests, the participants were given gurumantra and janai (sacred thread) to mark their reconversion.

To meet the 2010 Kumbha Mela demand for flowers, the Uttarakhand Horticulture Department distributed over 1 million flowering plant saplings to farmers and allocated 4,565 hectares (11,275 acres) for flower farming.