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In My Opinion

## Protecting the Diaspora

The diaspora is our future, but it needs our help to overcome crises, trauma and alienation

By Dr. Greesh C. Sharma

I have been traveling the world since 1970, and whether it was Fiji, Mauritius, Kenya, South Africa, Zambia, Guyana, Trinidad, Suriname or Bali, members of the Hindu diaspora treated me instantaneously like a long-lost cousin. I felt safe, "local" and immediately part of vasudhaiva kutumbakam, "the worldwide family." My inspiration comes from many beautiful personal encounters with Indians all over the world, from Haiti to Hindustan. There is no greater pilgrimage than visiting the countries where the Indian diaspora have settled.

Visiting 106 countries, I came to notice that underneath the smiles, hospitality, warmth and affinity, the Hindu diaspora suffers from poverty, alcoholism, domestic violence, depression-suicides, unemployment, alienation, isolation and a lot more. I have witnessed the threats of Christian missionaries proselytizing and splitting Hindu families, Islamic terrorism, racial discrimination and blackmail. In essence, the Indian diaspora in the majority of the countries in Africa, the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, Pakistan and Bangladesh are living under the threat of racial-religious-political oppression. Their choices are nil to few and their desperation is beyond imagination.

With 27 million non-resident Indians living in 150 countries, clearly the Hindu diaspora needs to work as a gestalt to manage its inherent vulnerabilities regardless of national boundaries. The Hindu virtues of nonviolence, accommodating others regardless of their ulterior motives and downplaying their own faith, culture and tradition makes Hindus invisible and unmistakably soft targets. Yes, they are hardworking, law-abiding, family-oriented, entrepreneurial and loyal to the societies in which they have settled. But it would be an illusion to

fantasize that they are prosperous, safe, empowered and able to live peacefully in the sanctuary of their homes and temples.

This was the understanding that led me to establish Vanaprastha Corps in 1992. Since then mental health/medical/addiction treatment camps have been carried out in Fiji, Mauritius, Zambia, Cambodia, Nepal, Trinidad, Guyana and Suriname. The mission is to empower the Hindu diaspora wherever there is crisis and trauma and to enlist rich, resourceful, retired professionals with necessary specialties to coordinate and provide needed services.

Vanaprastha Corps has been reaching out to Hindu communities by offering counseling, guidance, referral resource identification, providing medicines, books and equipment, lectures, training and direct treatment. The process begins when a leader in a community, government, mental health department or NGO requests assistance. Then the exact needs for services and programs are identified, a service delivery program and timetable planned, interdisciplinary volunteers recruited, and finally the treatment camps are conducted.

All volunteers pay their own expenses. Programs usually take place in university premises, government buildings, community centers or mandirs, and include lectures and workshops to train local volunteers as well as give direct treatment and consultation for patients. Local professionals and community leaders are involved in every aspect in order to promote networking and follow-up services once our team leaves.

Apathy is an anathema for the Hindu diaspora. If we protect the Hindu diaspora, it will protect us and future generations. We are in it together no matter what country we find ourselves in. Let us begin the process of networking, identifying our needs and strengths and searching for solutions collectively.

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