Nepal Hosts World Hindu Conference
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Over 1,500 Hindus From 30 Countries Seek "World Peace Through Hindu Unity"

Landlocked between Sikkim, India and Tibetan China, the world's only Hindu kingdom claims 54,362 square miles of tough terrain with weather ranging from subtropical monsoon conditions in the South climbing to 26,000-feet-high climates of paralyzing cold in the North. Traditionally a land of mystery and legend, Nepal traces its historical origins back to an interesting synthesis of Hindu and Buddhistic myth and mysticism. Migrations of Mongoloids from Tibet and Indo-Aryans from northern India, have produced a diverse linguistic, ethnic and religious pattern, the main and official language being Nepali, a derivative of Sanskrit. Today in Nepal, 90 percent of the population is Hindu, 9 percent follow Buddhism and the remaining few practice according to other faiths. Wedged between the two powerful giants, India and China, this thin sliver of land, 500 miles long and 150 miles wide, seeks to maintain a balance between the two countries in its foreign policy - and thus remain independent. It was here that the World Hindu Organization (WHO) found its home in 1981.

From March 24 through 28, 1988, WHO arranged the second World Hindu Conference (WHC) amidst the scenic beauty of Nepal's capital, Kathmandu.

There are 80 countries world-wide where Hindus live in significant numbers. Thirty of these - Bangladesh, Canada, Fiji, Guyana, Indonesia, India, Kenya, Mauritius, Nepal, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Spain, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, West Germany and eleven others - were represented by more than 1,500 people, including the Sankarachariyas of Kanchi and Dwarka, at the five-day Conference.

"The time has come for all Hindus to move ahead with respect and tolerance for each other's beliefs, values and way of life," proclaimed Nepal's King Birendra at the colorful opening ceremony. The theme of the conference was "world peace

through Hindu unity." WHO president Nagendra Prasad Rijal considered the conference a "success beyond expectation." Asiaweek magazine, on the other hand, referred to the event as a "flurry of rhetoric," commenting that the issue of "Hindu unity" seemed to overshadow that of "world peace." Some were impressed when, in response to WHO's motivation to embrace "all of the religions coming out of India" as a pan of Hinduism, hundreds of Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists marched in parade and publicly declared themselves to be Hindu.

The list of 41 resolutions adopted at the conclusion of the conference was formidable. For various reasons, the King of Nepal emerged as the center of it all. The first 10 resolutions focused completely upon him. He was lauded and extolled for his promotion of a variety of significant religious projects in Nepal but, most importantly, was beseeched to accept the role of being Hinduism's Pope-like leader for the sake of unifying Hindus around the globe working for the common cause of world peace.

The third resolution reads: "'Hindu Unity for World Peace' shall now become a movement with the objective to mobilize and coordinate the activities of the various Hindu organizations throughout the world, so that world peace can become a reality. For this we pray to His majesty. King Birendra, to guide this movement."

There are mixed opinions about the wisdom of establishing a single Hindu leader worldwide. Gurudeva Sivaya Subramuniyaswami of Saiva Siddhanta Church observes: "If King Birendra assumed the leadership of the entire Hindu world, would this not be, in effect, re-establishing the theocratic Hinduism that existed in the era of the Maharajas. The political implications are indeed worth pondering."

Other of the conference's resolutions were concerned with: 1. Raising money to network Hindu organizations and activities around the world; 2. Eliminating violence and bloodshed in the name of religion; 3. Re-establishing Hindu dignity; 4. Developing tolerance for other faiths and beliefs; 5. Training Hindu youth in often-neglected Hindu values, customs and philosophy; 6. Expediting the publication of the recently-written Encyclopedia of Hinduism; 7. Sponsoring gurus, saints and scholars for the propagation of Hinduism overseas; 8. Relating Hinduism to science; 9. Highlighting Sanskrit as "a potent unifying factor among the Hindus;" 10. Resolving to eradicate all traces of the caste system and "untouchability" from Hindu society; 11. Ending the conversion of Hindus; 12. Banning cow slaughter; 13. Establishing "a worldwide broadcasting system to propagate the Hindu philosophy;"

14. Recognizing women as "mothers of the Hindu society" and encouraging them to serve Hinduism.

Observers report that in a related incident, so-called Hindu "fundamentalist," Yogi Narhari Nath, instrumental in the original inception of WHO but currently at odds with the organization, was arrested by the Nepalese police when he attempted to set up a separate conference running at the same time but in opposition to that of the WHC. One of Narhari Nath's current, outspoken, social/religious goals is to have the Manu Dharma Shastras installed as Nepalese civil code.

Who's WHO?

The World Hindu Organization (WHO), also known as Vishwa Hindu Sammelan, was founded in 1981 and is based in Nepal. Seeking to serve a unique purpose of coordinating the activities and voicing the concerns of Hindus worldwide, the organization has found a comfortable home in Nepal where the political atmosphere is uncomplicated and non-restrictive. Currently, two prominent WHO aspirations are to restrain the slow deterioration of Hinduism's spiritual/cultural heritage and to quell religious discrimination against Hindus in different parts of the world. Some prominent Hindus have expressed a worry that the institution may be excessively political, lacking the enlightened leadership of qualified religious authorities.

Benefits of membership, which asks only a nominal fee, are the receipt of the organization's regular publications and association with other WHO members.

As WHO grows, it must face challenges. The first one is administrative. WHO vice-president S.M. Ponniah, Ph.D., states that the organization needs "a precise, practical and businesslike constitution for itself, a constitution that is capable of meeting the immediate challenges faced by the Hindu world." Dr. Ponniah believes that in the process of setting up the organization, certain difficulties have come to the foreground. "Attempting to include the other India-based religions makes the task unwieldy," he asserts. "Let it stand on its feet first."

Fighting a strong tendency, especially among Indian Hindus, to disregard the welfare of Hindus outside India, Dr. Ponniah and others endeavor to establish this international organization of coordination with a sound financial and legal basis and, yes, high-profile publicity. Publicity is important for an organization like WHO. Dr. Ponniah asserts that the world must know about WHO in many languages and through the most modern communication channels available. Dr. Ponniah would like to see WHO represented at the United Nations. [See his Singapore speech on page 10 of this issue.]

In the future WHO will seek to institute regional branches in strategic areas around the world such as South East Asia, the South Pacific, East and South Africa, Europe, etc. WHO's far-sighted and high-minded ideals are as commendable now as they were in 1981 at the organization's inception, but some Hindu traditionalists question its simplistic definition of Hinduism as "the four cardinal principles of Satya (truth), Dharma (duty and right conduct), Prema (love) and Shanti (peace)," and its aspiration to encompass Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism.

Scholars affirm that traditional Hinduism requires the acceptance of the authority of the four Vedas. Is it possible to reject this important qualification for Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains? Hinduism Today invites comment on this point from its readers.

Whatever the Conference problems, the quality and quantity of Hindu leaders at Kathmandu was impressive, bespeaking a newfound awareness among Hindus of the need to cooperate in defining, then resolving, the challenges facing Hinduism.

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