Holland's First Hindu School Commences
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Primary School May Foreshadow the Creation Of a Hindu School System Across Europe

One-hundred happy Hindu children were greeted by Principal Yogeswar and his six Hindu teachers on August 22nd, the opening day for the Shri Vishnu Hindu Elementary School. After decades of dreaming and two years of persistent effort, the Hindu community of The Hague, Holland, had successfully made use of a Dutch law giving a school facility to any community that can guarantee and enrollment of 50 students. "I think everyone is watching us," Yogeswar said with pride. "If we succeed, it will be a great thing. Then I think there will be Hindu schools across the whole of Europe."

Asked by Hinduism today's editors who toured the facility in September about the reactions so far, Yogeswar said, "The children came with hesitation because they were in other schools with their friends. But now they are happy and very enthusiastic. More and more, the parents are coming to school to participate and help." A former training master of school principals, Yogeswar is more than qualified to run a small primary school. He's a pleasant and personally religious man whose family comes from the Saivite community of Varanasi, India.

Holland's Hindus have not started this school to educate exceptional children. With painful bluntness, school board member S. Ramdhanie detailed the situation the Hindu community hopes to correct: low test scores by the Hindu pupils in regular school, language difficulty, lack of parental involvement in children's education, lack of knowledge of Hindu values and culture. The Hindu self-image is so low in Holland that one objective stated by Ramdhanie is to teach the children, "That colored people [Hindus] can also be in responsible jobs like teaching."

Unwilling to preside over the funeral of their own religion and culture, the Sanatan Hindu Parishad, with the support of the Hindu community and various Hindu organizations, such as Foundation Ganesh, approached the government for their

own Hindu School. Initially they met with resistance within the government and opposition from Christians, particularly the Catholics, who felt the school was "creating apartheid." The latter objection must have taken some chutzpaz to voice, considering that the Catholics operate (as of 1971) nearly 7,000 of Holland's 12,500 schools - a total of 1.3 million pupils. Even the Catholic theological seminaries are government subsidized.

According to Mr. Nandoe Tewarie, the director of Holland's Foundation Ganesh, Catholics want the Hindus to go to the Catholic schools (which have been opened to other religions for several decades). The Foundation is even assisting with a Hindu studies program for those schools. However, such a program must solve the fundamental problem of how a Hindu child can grow up a good Hindu in a Catholic school environment. Experience in other counties shows that a Catholic education definitely serves to weaken a Hindu child's religion.

Fortunately, the various objections were ignored. Just eight weeks before this school year began, the government gave its permission, and work began furiously on a defunct Roman Catholic school last used for "problem" students. Yogeswar described it as "upside down, dusty, old and smelly." With the government paying for the renovation, the help of Hindu parents and 20-hour days, the school opened on schedule.

The school is easily the equal of the typical American school facility. The enormous brick building, complete with a large playground, indoor gymnasium and three stories of classrooms, is capable of handling three hundred students. The building's occupation continues a European and American trend - discomforting to the Christians - of Hindus, Buddhists and others moving into facilities vacated by a diminishing Christian community.

Beyond the large Lord Vishnu painting on the front and a few items inside, there is little indication this is a Hindu School. There are plans to put in a shrine, to have morning mantras and classes in meditation, hatha yoga, dance, music, etc. But it is easy to tell that the school, lacking any functioning model to follow, is on uncertain ground in developing a coherent religious studies program.

With the Shri Vishnu school launched, Holland's Hindus now can conceive the

inconceivable: a nationwide, government-sponsored Hindu school system. Foundation Ganesh plans to open a second school in Amsterdam in just one year. But, Tewarie noted, the lack of concentrated Hindu populations is an obstacle to the creation of more than a few schools. Nevertheless, the Dutch government's willingness to fund religious schools presents a unique opportunity for Holland's enterprising Hindus.

The Shri Vishnu Hindu Elementary School is located at: Da Costastraat 40,2513 RT, The Hague, Netherlands.

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