Foundation Ganesh Tackles Holland's Tough Projects
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A Savvy Group Works with Dutch Ministries On Hindu TV, Army Issues and Education

In America, any Hindu teen can tell you HBO stands for Home Box Office, the glitzy cable movie channel that this month is featuring Biloxi Blues, Willow and Short Circuit 2. Across the Atlantic, in the flat and socially generous Netherlands, the graphics of HBO will soon announce the Hindu Broadcasting Organization, a weekly TV and radio program. The week's lineup may include a Ramayana segment, the Shankarachariya movie, a documentary on the Chidambaram Siva Nataraj temple and an interview with Swami Agnivesh of the Arya Samaj.

HBO of Netherlands hasn't hit the airwaves yet. It exists entirely in the brainwaves of a small, patient, glacially persistent organization called Foundation Ganesh (FG). According to Victor Bijlert, a principal officer and spokesman of FG, HBO will probably be operating in late 1989 or early 1990. Bijlert's colleague at FG, R. Dielbandhoesing, 37, who is also president of a group called Foundation Vyasadeva, says "The HBO project represents a pinnacle of success for us. When our first show goes on the air, all the coaxing and lobbying will have been worth it." Bijlert, a mid-30's Ph.D. researcher with a trim beard and scholar's glasses, is an adoptive Hindu of Dutch birth - "I was initiated into the Ramakrishna Mission after my involvement with Foundation Ganesh." For Bijlert, much of the excitement of putting together HBO is working out by committee the programming for the broadcasts. It has to be scheduled months in advance and represent the interests of Holland's multiple sects and organizations. It is this prickly process of representing Holland's Hindus in toto to the Dutch government that gives FG its unique ambassadorial character. As a result, since its founding in 1982, FG has tallied a string of successes. In contrast, other more partisan groups have failed, most notably in the bungling of a large grant from the government for a real Hindu temple on Holland soil - there is not a single major temple, only shrines. The group seeking the grant could not make its case for representing all Hindus and the government indefinitely closed the door on it. FG hopes to salvage the temple funds soon.

In its short six-year life, Foundation Ganesh has managed to finesse a major legal adjustment on the Netherland's cremation laws that allows Hindus to perform death ceremonies within five days after the body is turned over to the crematorium. It has become the Hindu representative to a national Dutch interfaith council and is the guiding hand for a Hindu syllabus that is part of an interfaith religious course now under experiment in several of Holland's private Christian and public schools. FG is also engaged in developing three Hindu schools by 1990 and creating a new cadre of pandit/ministers who have degrees on their walls and deep Hindu interests at heart. And finally, it is currently shepherding through the enactments and cooperation necessary to designate a Hindu pandit as a chaplain in the Dutch National Army. All this, and writing and publishing as many Hindu brochures and bulletins as their government allowance supports.

For Hindus in Europe, the Netherlands represent a giant opportunity in its social welfare structure: everything from art to tulip growing is subsidized. Minorities have access to considerable allotments of funds if they can convince the local, provincial or national government - depending on what is sought - that the funds will equally benefit the entire minority populace. Holland's Muslims long ago recognized the value in presenting a unified face. They now have several mosques, and their TV/radio broadcasting organization has been on the air for several years. In fact, because the Muslim population is twice that of the Hindu (120,000), the Muslims are given twice as much time on TV and radio stations as the Hindus will receive.

The Muslims and Hindus came to Holland at the same time - mid 1970's - for the same reason: employment in Holland's factories. But whereas most of the Muslims came from their home culture, the Hindus came from Suriname in northern South America, a double immigration from India to Suriname for four generations, then to Holland. In Suriname, the populace had split with roughly 20% following a charismatic disciple of Swami Dayananda, founder of the Veda-revivalist Arya Samaj, and 80% following a traditional North Indian pattern called Sanatani. Despite the Dutch welfare opportunities, the Surinami Hindus' greatest obstacle was their fractionation between Sanatani and Arya Samaj loyalties.

In an interview with HINDUISM TODAY, Bijlert and Dielbandhoesing of Foundation Ganesh talked about their formulas for success in dealing with the Hindus, the government and the Dutch unions that comprise much of the nation's private and public work force.

"In 1982, we came together very quickly as a joint organization backed up by the Arya Samaj and Sanatanis," recalls Bijlert. Indeed, FG's birth was right out of the dilemma of death rites for Hindus. "Foundation Ganesh was formed to pursue the cremation rites, which meant not dealing with the government only, but with the crematoria union. After two years of letters and meetings, the government started listening, members of the union went to India to see the rites for themselves. In 1986 the law was changed." But Dielbandhoesing notes, "Now you have five days for the Hindu rites. But a lot of family members are in Suriname and they have to get visas and so on. So there is still a small problem, but it was a good solution."

The staff members of FG came from the Sanatani Hindu Parishad, Arya Samaj and other organizations, some with good connections into the government ministries. Bijlert observes, "It takes a tremendous amount of effort to penetrate into the communications network. While FG is privately supported, for particular projects we apply for government subsidies, which takes a lot of trouble. And, unfortunately, prior attempts at subsidies by the Sanatani Hindu Parishad bled away the resources and opportunities. In many cases, we have been turned down." However, with the cremation success and an official government recognition, FG was rolling and in a sense it became an organizational tool for many of the brightest minds in Holland to work in. "Our main objective was to build a group that was so broad no one's Hindu identity would feel threatened. About 90% of all the Hindu groups now recognize us."

Often another group will join with Foundation Ganesh on a project. Dielbandhoesing tells how his group. Foundation Vyasadeva, teamed with FG to pursue three Hindu schools in northern Holland cities. He says, "Within a few months, we will have our first contacts with the local government in Amsterdam. It's very promising."

One of the most watched projects FG is involved in is the interfaith curriculum taught at three Christian schools in areas where the Hindu population is dense. "Those Christians who don't want to convert any more in the modern view of things are trying at least a kind of strengthening of these Hindu pupils in their own faith," says Bijlert. "They want to teach them Hinduism along certain festival themes. FG, in cooperation with Arya Samaj and the Sanatani group, is creating and writing the syllabus for the teacher to follow. Of course, the students will also receive Christian and Muslim teachings, but the Christians will also receive Hindu teachings. In 1983 they had started this project with Muslims. In 1986 a larger project began with Hindus. About 600 children are now involved." HINDUISM TODAY asked if the Christian teachers would deviate from the Hindu course. Dielbandhoesing answers,

"It wouldn't be wise. It is supposed to be cooperative. It is also monitored. Not a strict supervision, but there is a general looking-over-the-shoulder as to what they are doing." We ask if the children will get confused. Bijlert quickly states, "We don't think they will be confused. We've been asked this question many times by non-Dutch people. It is an experiment in three schools to make by trial and error these syllabuses. As members of the writing committee, we have access to all the courses, so if there is some bias in the Christian course, we say so. I think the mainstream of Dutch Christianity is very open-minded."

But a little education in the schools barely scratches the surface of educational needs. "The main problem is the parents can't give proper Hindu education," says Dielbandhoesing. He then tells the story of a girl invited to share something of Hinduism in her class. She spoke about the Gods and was immediately ridiculed for worshipping deities with multiple heads and arms. She had no knowledge to explain this presentation and ended up emotionally destroyed. Dielbandhoesing continues, "One of the problems in this respect is the education of the pandits. They are the ones who have to transmit this religion. Our next truly important project is the education of the pandits. The Christian ministers have this sort of background - university degrees." Bijlert picks up the thought, "He has to be a spiritual counselor, not only a pandit, and he has to be learned not only in rituals, but in philosophy and yoga. In general we mean training Hindu ministers and that is something we have to do. It's even more critical than the school education programs. We have to develop a new generation of pandits with an officially recognized education."

FG usually deploys its resources in a shotgun pattern - blast out simultaneously on a number of projects and see if something begins to connect. Case in point is the rights of 500 Hindu troops in the Dutch national army. "Since 1983 we have letters, a huge pile of letters, to the administration warning about Hindus in the army needing religious considerations. Sure enough, last month a Hindu soldier was put in jail awaiting trial because of insubordination in refusing to eat meat rations," recounted Bijlert. "The top level of the government acknowledges the problem, but the commanders aren't informed. We have connections into the union of soldiers. If you have an army pandit, then the Hindu can receive guidance and redress. Even the Christian and Jewish army priests see this as a necessity." Though the army pandit has yet to be implemented, within a month of this interview the army announced that it is including vegetarian rations in its daily menus and is planning to raise the ratio of Hindus in the army.