

## [South Africa Youth Group Shouldering the Dharma](#)

Category : [April 1992](#)

Published by Anonymous on Apr. 02, 1992

# South Africa Youth Group Shouldering the Dharma

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National Hindu Youth Federation Matures into a Bold, Educated Force Eager to Teach, Minister and Uplift

An Indian Ocean morning sun splashed inside the open tents propped up in the little park. Emerald waves curled and broke on Durban's white beaches yards away. Eight a.m., 60 minutes to the magic moment, prepared for by months of late night coffeehouse planning sessions. Now elegantly attired in snow-white kurtas and punjabis, the young men and women officers of the Durban branch of the National Hindu Youth Federation were still scurrying about. Broad smiles and excited laughter helped hide last-minute tensions. Casually clad girls and boys converged and swelled the canopies. NHYF event organizers, keenly aware of their still "proving ourselves" status, felt on stage - watched by older, established Hindu bodies and their own demanding peers. Yet with confidence, they proceeded to launch Hindu Youth Day, January 12th, Vivekananda's birthday.

After a message of support by P.V. Lakhani president of the Hindu Maha Sabha, 22-year-old student and NHYF Education Officer Satish Komal took the microphone, his slight form and reserved speech disguising his muscular efforts to make the NHYF succeed. His eyes lit up as he welcomed everyone, sharing briefly NHYF's high goals and reminding the guests that they all represent an untapped power as preservers of the faith at this challenging time as South Africa enters a democratic era.

Podium talk crisply dispatched, the friendly crowd re-huddled cross-legged in sacred circles around homa fires, officiated by a priest and two priestesses. Vedic mantras resonated sonorously between four yagnas for over an hour. As youth in tee-shirts offered grains of rice into Agni's flames, a warm shakti bonded the group. The inclusion of priestesses in the ritual was deliberate and symbolic, Satish Komal emphasized in a phone interview later with HINDUISM TODAY. "We are a non-sexist

organization. The role and contribution of women within Hinduism is important and vital."

The well-liked and youthful Swami Saradananda of the Ramakrishna Mission then spoke, forcefully encouraging them to engage in more social/welfare work as both a vehicle and expression of Hindu teachings, echoing the strong humanitarian theme of Ramakrishna missions today worldwide.

Discussions, food, fun and sports filled the afternoon. New friendships forged. "But what came out most striking on that day was that the NHYF should not expect its aims and objective to be fulfilled by programs of this nature," Satish soberly summarized.

### Inside the NHYF

The seed idea for NHYF germinated at a potent conclave of 500 youth in December 1987 in Transvaal. For four days a war of ideas and ideals raged - soaring visions, scintillating dialogue, searing diatribe, propositions, accusations, aspirations - all engulfed by boundless spiritual enthusiasm. "It was sight for the Gods to see," elder guest Siva Perumal remembers. Then for several years the NHYF concept dug roots, sprouted and neatly spread branches to other South African cosmopolitan centers. On March 31st, 1991, it launched as a registered body with articulated goals and objectives. Today it commands over a 1,000 members and a sturdy but invisible staff of parents.

### Molding the Machine to Serve

NHYF members were impressed with Swami Saradananda's advice to do more social work, an emphasis of lay service very popular in Christianity. HINDUISM TODAY asked Satish Komal if he felt that following this direction would minimize the NHYF's dedication to teach strictly Hindu tenets, e.g. temple worship, karma and reincarnation, etc. "I get asked a lot what we are going to teach," he laughed. "It's not the high, bombastic teachings we want to impart initially - more basic morals and ethics etc. Then the philosophy." The NHYF wants a balance -

determined to avoid the mistake of feeding Vedanta to "someone whose tummy is hungry," and, on the other hand, committed to deliver the unadulterated Hindu message.

The NHYF teaching focus and vision is still unfolding but wants to remain flexible, responsive. "Encouragingly, there is a more serious spirit developing where our nation's youth want to know what is this Hinduism we are all talking about," Satish related.

### Self-Taught, Self-Licensed Ministers

Admirably, most of NHYF's core group have, on their own, ingeniously untangled the world's most complex spiritual tradition enough to both appreciate it more and qualify themselves to teach it. But the scene of nationwide NHYF members surrounded by swarms of kids every Saturday morning soaking up the Vedic amrita is an idyllic vision of the future, not today.

"Conversion [to Christianity] is our major problem now - it's rife in the Phoenix settlement," Satish shared. ("Settlements" are the strictly segregated living areas established by the Apartheid system.) "The time has gone when all the youth expect is to be entertained. On weekends we drive to these settlements, chanting mantras and prayers. We go up to homes and give out pamphlets. A Sai Baba devotee was so inspired with what we were doing, she forced us to come into her house where she sat us down and told us how important what we are doing is. On the other side, there was one incident where the husband was Christian and the Hindu wife was too afraid to accept our literature for fear of victimization by her husband."

Of all their activities - Diwali functions, cultural shows, conferences, even Aids and ecology awareness meets - it is the house-to-house missionary work that takes them to the religious front. Face-to-face with their brothers and sisters they see Hindu beliefs in all conditions - sometimes strong, more often bruised, broken or dying. To each they leave a glowing ray of religious pride only youth so infectiously imparts. "At our next meeting we want to form a special committee to do just this form of ministry," Satish mentioned.

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## Voices of the Leaders

Hinduism is often viewed as the mother of religions because of its embracing quality, yet not totally influenced by them. Hinduism has taught me tolerance - essential for one living in our divided South African nation. Westernization has manacled our Hindu community with the idea that Western culture and religion are superior to Hindu culture and religion - making many susceptible to conversion. The poorest Hindus are converted by bribing them with financial aid. The government must introduce laws to protect them. Religious education should be compulsory in schools. More yoga camps are needed for children. Our greatest hindrance to promoting Hinduism is lack of financial support. The small hand of Hindu businessmen who help us are being drained. Though there has been a definite revival of Hinduism, I wish I could be more optimistic - Arvashini Sing.

[Fear of] Western influence is overemphasized. Hinduism has the dynamism to cope with change while still retaining the essential aspects of its teachings - Satish Ranchod.

Hinduism is everything. I look at life holistically. I see everything as one - i.e. nature, animals and man. Before I underwent a spiritual experience in 1987, I could not understand what Hinduism was all about. I think the experience saved me - Pravesh Hurdeen.

Hinduism is not dogmatic; it allows for diverse thought. It is the source of optimism for a brighter future and will remain very dominant for thousands of years - Veresh Sita.

I am proud to belong to a family of priests. My family is very supportive of my involvement in the NHYF, including condoning all the late nights getting home, etc. Hinduism, the eternal religion, does not dictate a single path to God. It allows for individual freedom and teaches love and compassion for all living creatures - Priya Maharaj.

Despite its teething problems, the NHYF is beginning to win the respect of the S.A community. I see its role as vital in creating Hindu unity in diversity. Hindus must be made aware that we must be able to live together first, and that sectarian religious affiliations etc. is secondary. The Hindu voice must be strong - Satish Komal.

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