Did the Tribes' Meeting in Rio Really Help Planet Earth?
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Hindus Join History's Largest Powwow, Equal Parts Council, Carnival and Last-Ditch Crusade

Extraordinary. Colossal. Bizarre. Hopeful. Bewildering. Like the proverbial elephant described differently by five blind men, it was hard to grasp the real Earth Summit in Rio de Janiero, even for those of us - among them HINDUISM TODAY'S publisher and editor - standing square in the middle of its environmental friendliness. Three years in the planning, this was the world's largest and most complex conference ever held and the greatest gathering of heads of state in history, over 120. Like the legendary pachyderm, the Earth Summit was too prodigious to embrace all at once, and too strangely diverse to easily discern. Perhaps that was itself a message, for the environment peril, too, is complex beyond our present understanding and its problems confound us still.

Over 30,000 people converged on Rio de Janiero to debate and discuss our common future. The immense scale of undertaking underscored the widely-held view that environment problems can no longer be solved at the national level. They must be grappled with globally. That premise and the persuasive threat of extinction brought peoples from every nation together to ask what kind of earth will the next generation inherit from us? Will there be blue skies and clear streams? Will there be forest paths and Bengal tigers? Will there be sufficient food, social justice and security?

Three Rio Summits: There were really there Earth Summits there in Brazil. Most of the world press focused on two of them: 1. The heads of state and United Nations committees meeting at Rio Center from June 1-13, and of course on George Bush,

of whom it was said in Rio "the only thing environmental about this man is his last name" and; 2. The two-mile-long Eco-Woodstock (a reference to the US watershed musical festival of the 60's) where literally thousands of independent grassroots groups - from the Sierra Club to Rajneesh's OSHO Spiritual Health Organization - plied their wares, said their piece and distributed enough literature to cause concern for the world's forests, (the UN alone produced 24 million pieces of paper for the event).

Virtually ignored by the media was a third gathering, a three-day session which in the long run could hold as much promise for the survival of the planet as the hundreds of grassroots and governmental conclaves.

It was called the Parliamentary Earth Summit (PES), co-sponsored by the Brazilian government and the New York-based Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders for Human Survival. From June 5th through 7th three hundred religious and political leaders met behind closed doors to focus not on bald eagles, CO2 emissions, North-South inequities or population policy but on something much more basic - value changes and their effect on human behavior.

The Parliamentary Earth Summit tackled the issue of human values and habits, two subtle and powerful forces which it describes as the first requirements of environmental sustainability. If humanity goes on believing and behaving as we are, the problems will deepen despite any and every technological advance. There is one solution, and it does not lie in the hands of governments or on the agendas of green institutions.

That one solution is for each of us to understand which values are driving mankind to foul and plunder the earth's limited resources, bringing us and countless other species closer to extinction - materialism, conquest of nature, selfishness, failure to care for women and children, etc. - and which values do we need to adopt or rediscover in order to turn the tide.

Gore Gets it Going: There were approximately 75 spiritual and 225 parliamentary leaders at the PES, all gathered under tight military security in Brazil's most historic building, the elegant Palacio Tiradentes, a classical structure built in 1926. US Senator Al Gore gave the opening address, setting the tone in a surprisingly

spiritual appeal, "People all over the world feel themselves part of a single global family. This Earth Summit is the first of many conversations on this subject. Why then are spiritual leaders joining parliamentarians in this dialog? It's because the ecological crisis is fundamentally a spiritual problem. Crisis springs out of the relationship between human beings and the Earth." Gore emphasized three causes: 1. Population explosion; 2. The scientific-technological revolution which gave us more power to destroy; and 3. Our way of thinking, the assumption that we are somehow separate from nature. "This thinking has led to exploitation - this must change." He noted that after 10,000 generations of human habitation there were just 2 billion people on earth in 1945. Fifty years later there are 5.5 billion!

Other Voices: the Brahma Kumaris who work closely with the UN were in Rio, but not as delegates of the PES (they are reluctant to affiliate themselves with Hinduism). Another unofficial presence was that of the Ananda Margis. Perhaps a dozen bright, orange-robed sannyasins came, mixing with visitors and sharing their energetic kirtan.

Singer John Denver brought some lovely music, a song written for the occasion called "One World." Paul Winter's compositions were truly remarkable. He recorded the voices of three threatened species - a timber wolf, a whale and an Amazon songbird - then played their enchanting songs on his saxophone.

Businessmen spoke eloquently of the need to be servants of the community, to renounce greed and run their enterprises so as to reflect more humane and spiritual values.

There were impassioned appeals by women, still beleaguered in a man's world, still denied simple rights and opportunities while literally carrying the daily burden of life on their shoulders in much on the developing world.

Children, too, were a powerful voice at the PES. Street children ages 8-17 were brought into the assembly hall in their tattered attire. They spoke of being beaten by Brazilian soldiers, of turning to prostitution to survive, of the terrors of seeing friends maimed and even murdered. Their testimony brought tears to many delegates, who sat listening helplessly to a child's call for love and life.

Here are some words of wisdom from Brazilian children, ages 6-15, who remarkably were able to address the delegates in their own words and their own way:

"I like nature, cause it gives us so many things." "The Earth doesn't need money. It needs peace and love. The Earth is like life. If you lose it, you can never get it back again." "Please, God, don't let man destroy what You made with so much love." "One day man will see there are no more animals and plants, and he will look in a mirror and see a monster." "Save our planet, and our hearts."

Spiritual Leaders Speak: The Dalai Lama was a strong presence in Rio, always pressed by the 7,000 media professionals who came. Standing out in his maroon and yellow robes, the Tibetan leader spoke softly, almost inaudibly, urging those present to be compassionate toward one another, to cooperate.

Global Forum co-chairman Rev. James Parks Morton asked those present to examine the large murals painted below the palace's central dome. There, he noted, were shown the white Portuguese conquerors, Christian crosses held aloft, marching into Brazil, determined to convert and dominate the stunned indigenous tribals. That was just another of the values, Rev. Morton intimated, that led us to where we are and that must be reevaluated if we are to go forward as a one human race.

Each faith offered a prayer or meditation, and Sivaya Subramuniyaswami asked each one to renew their concern for and assistance to the children. He urged delegates to remember when they were young and vulnerable and needing support, and he ended by asking all present to chant the universal Divine Sound together, and the Aum filled the hall three times.

Swami's Message: Swami Paramananda Bharati of India's famed Sringiri Mutt gave the major Hindu address at the PES, stressing Vedic values. Science, Swami asserted, was implicated in the environmental problems now facing the Earth: "Five centuries ago the leaders of religion imagined that it was their right to say when the world originated and how it worked. Then scientists started showing that believers' belief in these matters was illogical. As their assertions were demolished one after another, the faith of the common people shifted gradually from religion to

science. During the present century, the common people have totally lost faith in religion. Emboldened by their successes, now scientists have started imagining that it is their right to say what is God and what is Soul - adopting the same wrong attitude that categorized the clergy five centuries ago. According to these scientists, there is no God; What is called "God," they say, is really just the set of natural forces. Likewise, there is no soul also. They say what is called "soul" is nothing more than the body, which itself is but one small part of a wholly material universe.

"Common people, who may not understand either science or religion, are impressed by the successes of science and so have lost faith in God or soul and believe now only in the body and the material universe or environment. So they have started pampering the body and exploiting the environment to further the comforts of the body. They seem to have concluded that the quality of life is increased if the quantity of this pampering and exploitation is increased. This misunderstanding of God and soul is the root cause of today's degeneration of our values, our bodies and the environment."

Swami noted that continued materialistic solutions from science were no solutions at all. The only real, permanent solution "lies in traveling back to God and soul and leading a simpler life in harmony with nature. This is possible only on the basis of a scientific religion in which reason is not subordinated to faith. In Hinduism, this basis is called dharma - which is at once scientific and also religious."

In speaking of God's pervasive nature, Swami Bharati noted that it is essential to see the world as the body of God, and thus to treat it with humanity and respect. He concluded, "Dear friends, it is dharma which should form the foundation of environmental ethics and nurture a life of high quality and simpler living. I do not agree that high consumption signifies high quality of life. We all preserve our praise for a machine which consumes less and works more. But how funny that we praise a man or a society which consumes more and works less! So high quality of life automatically implies simple living whose philosophical basis is Sanatana Dharma."

HINDUISM TODAY spoke with Swamiji about his Rio experience. "I felt that the delegates could be classified into two groups: the people and the politicians. The people were very concerned with the problem at hand. Even from the beginning, however, I had a doubt that the politicians would really do anything significant."

Between sessions Swami and his able assistant, Columbia College freshman Mohit Daswami, visited several yoga and Hindu groups in and around Rio. Of those encounters Swami noted, "The satsangs with Brazilian Hindus made me feel that the solution to all the present day problems lies in the spiritualism of the Sanatana Dharma."

Green Cross Born: One of the truly important practical outcomes of the PES was the announcement by Akio Matsumura of the formation of the International Green Cross. The idea was first proposed by Mikhail Gorbachev at the Global Forum in Moscow in early 1990.

Like its sister, the Red Cross, Green Cross will be a non-governmental organization with national chapters in various nations. Its commission is to "protect and preserve the environment of the planet from accidental or deliberate damage caused by human action."

A good example of the need for the Green Cross is the recent war in Kuwait. When it ended, the Red Cross was on the job assuring medical and living needs of people injured or displaced. But when environmental groups sought to assist with the oils fires and spills, and other injuries to Kuwait's animals, land and resources, they had no official status and were denied access, forced to watch from a distance as the natural tragedy unfolded. An International Green Cross would avert such a problem.

Akio's Reflections: HINDUISM TODAY spoke with Global Forum founder Akio Matsumura about the Green Cross, which in Rio he had called "a new baby needing help and financial support." Mr. Matsumura said that on June 15th he had spoken to friends in Moscow to find that the Green Cross is daily in the news and on TV there. People in Moscow are calling it an imaginative idea. We must generate enormous energies to clean up the inner, psychological pollution which is the ultimate cause of external pollution." Of course, it helps that Mikhail Gorbachev has accepted the first presidency. Gorbachev faxed the forum in Rio to say, "Posterity will reckon that it was here, this morning in Rio, that this critical event took place."

Mr. Matsumura sees events like Rio as "extraordinary opportunities for all of us to discuss value change which the UN cannot do, governments cannot do, for their

discussions are bureaucratic and technical." It was his hope, partially fulfilled, that the value-based discussions of the Parliamentary Earth Summit would influence and inform the UNCED meetings taking place 30 miles away, humanizing the UN discussions. He issued the Rio Consensus, a statement approved by PES delegates, to Brazil's President and Earth Summit head, distributed it to UNCED delegates and called for their moral support in the effort to "transcend political and religious barriers."

Mr. Matsumura's vision is, in part, that all of us need to join in the discussion about our future - artists, women, children, media professionals and of course religious and political leaders. He wants people to "put aside ego, put aside our political and religious barriers." And he takes heart that on a small scale the PES provided an example that cooperation is possible, "People were moved by the fact that we all joined, that we acted in togetherness, in an inclusive manner. I was very happy with that. Up to now each one pushed other people to understand his dogma. Now we see that each one can place the broader world vision into their dogmas, can be less individualistic. We're moving away from old taboos, moving from matters of our own house to global matters, and the environmental crisis is providing us with a common ground. And we are learning that change in human behavior is a great power, an invisible power for good. Of course, we are realistic and expect this to take years, but it will happen."

What's Ailing Our Earth?

Unlike previous Global Forum events held in Oxford in 1988 and Moscow in 1990, the Parliamentary Earth Summit did not match a battalion of scientists forward to chant the lethal litanies of a besieged Earth. The problems, now universally known, gave way to solutions. Still, there were voices warning of population (India alone will double its 875 million in the next 50 years), of poverty and inequitable wealth, of inadequate health services and clean water, of enemies to freedom and of forest and species loss (a raging 1,000 times the natural rate). Climactic changes, energy and waste disposal were there, along with the suffocating world debt. Genetic engineering came under scrutiny as a form of ultimate tempering with forces beyond our ken. Women and children, and erosion of the family as societies' most stabilizing moral component, received eager attention. The loss of cultures and a need to recognize and respect indigenous peoples was last on most agendas, but it was there and widely, vocally supported.

Voices and Values

The voices of rabbis and imams, bishops and roshis, African queen mothers and American Indians were all heard in Rio. It was our voice, a one human voice, that spoke through many leaders.

Dalai Lama: What can we tell the children about peace of mind when they see the great losses of life in forests? The very existence of life is hope. Once hope is most, then even suicide will come. The purpose of life is happiness. To prevent negative emotion is how to achieve peace of mind. I want to tell these people they should not give up hope. The key is education. We need more human compassion.

Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi: The first day, in the evening, I and my dharma brothers went for a walk. We crossed a bridge to a park and walked around inside and noticed it was all fenced in next morning we went to the park. The first thing I noticed which hurt my heart was that the grasses had been stepped on, so many times. Here we are having a conference to talk about how not to pollute, yet see what we are we doing. I ask us all to be aware. Be mindful. Think. Each individual should be responsible.

Acharya Sushil Kumar: Be silent. Meditate. Meditation is divided into two portions. The first is chanting, another is meditation. Chant the mantra AUM, the divine sound. It will give so much vibration, so much good effect. Close your eyes, relax, search yourself. Realize your Self. Body will be tensionless, mind will be thoughtless. Go deeper and deeper. You can dissolve all thoughts into one thought. Go deeper and deeper. Feel oneness with all living beings. Say "Lord, I love you. I respect you." Relax and meditate.

N.P. Jain: The Jain religion has a "live and let live" reverence of all forms of life, of vegetarianism, harmony with nature. Acharya Sushil Kumar has launched a movement for nonviolence. Peace through nonviolence is the only viable solution - not hurting others by our actions, thoughts and deeds. Let all religions and spiritual leaders unite. Jains in India have volunteered as helpers to set up greening projects, such as animal and insect clinics.

Shaman Sapaim Kamaiura: I am a big medicine man. The biggest medicine man. There is no one to equal me. I was chosen by the Amazon forest spirits at age ten. They trained me in knowledge of plants. I know all the plants. I can heal. I talk to the plants, and they talk to me. The white mans' medicine is very weak. We don't use it. We use herbs and plants. The Indian is quiet and unconcerned. He never gets nervous. He never gets a headache like you all do in the city.

Chief Oren Lyons: I wear the power of my brother, the bear, around my neck. I carry the feathers of my brother, the eagle. I am a wolf...We will not survive if we don't care for the Earth. Perhaps an alternative is that we will go and the Earth will renew - cleanse the rivers, purify the streams and wells. I ask businesses to think not of themselves or their nation or even their own families, but to think seven generations ahead, think of those looking up from the Earth, those waiting for their turn to live.

Nana Apeadu: There are 17 million refugees in Ghana, Africa - 80% are women and children. Talk about the environment - these women live outdoors, live in tents. They work morning to night in nature, looking for firewood, carrying water. Don't forget them.

Anonymous: The Amazon tribal says, "I will cut down this tree to make a canoe, and I will plant a tree so my grandson can build his own canoe."

Metropolitan Gregorius: "Religion in past 200 years pushed out of the center of public life onto the margins. But we are afraid of an earlier situation where one religion back to the center, and to stress immanence as well as transcendence."

Rabbi Marshall Meyer: How does one religion express itself in a pluralistic world? Old doctrinal orthodoxies have to be reinvestigated.

Franz Krajcberg: After the war, I fled to Brazil, and found a home in a 2000-year-old tree near the sea. I felt born again in nature. From nature I learned more than from man. I have been discovering crimes perpetrated against forests. Hardly a tree is left where I live, except of the small patch that are mine. My

revulsion, my indignation is expressed in my sculpture. It makes you cry, it's so painful. Millions of acres of land abandoned, and entire regions owned by one man who is exploiting it - while the poor farmer works on small patches. Everything is a business these days - art and now even ecology. Even Bush offers money, gives a tip to UNCED to shut us up. And most of that won't go to the poor.

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