Where is Hinduism Heading?
Category : December 1992
Published by Anonymous on Dec. 01, 1992

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Readers keep reminding us that no other journal in the world monitors today's news about the people, projects, problems and perceptions of the global Hindu community. But perspicacious perusers also ponder the future. So, now and again the news of where we are must be extrapolated toward where we are headed. We offer here our continuing assessment of the changes and directions facing Hinduism, divided roughly into major and minor trends.

Megatrends: 1) A replacement of historical timidness with a new-found pride and determination to preserve dharma. This is being called the Hindu Renaissance; 2) Rebirth of ritual. When the Germans first brought Hinduism to the West, philosophy was emphasized and ceremony ignored. When Vedanta swept into Europe and America, nothing was said about puja. Today's seekers don't just listen to lectures anymore, and they aren't agonizing over idol worship, as did their less-informed forerunners. Instead, they are mastering the mantras and sitting for long, elaborate rites. This devotional thrust has become a major theme in Hindu groups and yoga institutions; 3) An intensification of the influence of Hindu dharma in the West, including environmental groups, the health and vegetarian movement, the ecumenical movement, new age movement and more; 4) The emergence of women at all levels of Hindu religion, and their refusal to tolerate unfairness in forced marriages, spouse abuse or economic disadvantage: 5) The reversal of centuries of decline in temple emphasis, reflected in the remarkable flood of temples being constructed, especially outside of India. In a related trend, lesser tirthas, once considered low-caste, are becoming popular and losing their stigma - Katiragama and Sabarimalai are examples. Thus, old pilgrimage sites are now competing with new, aggressively-financed ones: 6) A tendency to be more extroverted, to creatively reach out to help and serve others coupled with the institutionalization of many kinds of social service and the sometimes violent approach to solving social problems; 7) Once-scarce Hindu resources are becoming abundant. These include children's courses, Hindu schools and academies for art, dance and music, a first-ever Hindu encyclopedia, the rise of Sanskrit studies and

more university courses focusing on Asian studies; 8) India's emergence as the world's newest superpower, a fact made more momentous by the 1992 demise of communism; 9) The dizzy change from an agricultural era to one of technology, nuclear power, space exploration and communications (backyard satellite TV dishes giving uncensored access to Western broadcasting, and Apple computer's recent agreement to produce Macintoshes in India are two indications); 10) Key setbacks, such as difficulties in preserving the culture and tradition, failure to teach Hinduism to a whole generation of children, abandoning the vegetarian ethic, public perception problems caused by "anti-cult" Christians like TV evangelist Pat Robertson and the (now deceased) non-Hindu leader Rajneesh; 11) Increased academic honesty. Hindus (and most non-Christians, including American Indians, Jews, Hawaiians and Pagans) have endured the abuse flung their way by scholars of the past. Even dictionary writers have published their prejudices. An early Webster's New International Dictionary defines swami as "often equivalent to yogi, fakir, wonder-worker, etc." Recently Webster has done better in its New World Dictionary: "A Hindu title of respect, especially for a Hindu religious teacher: a learned man. pundit." That improvement reveals the new intellectual balance among scholars toward non-Christian matters: 12) Movement away from village life and consciousness to a global presence.

Minitrends: 13) Corporate protectionism. Something extraordinary is happening in the global dharma business. Hinduism is doing well in the marketplace, and people want a piece of the action. SYDA copyrighted the term Siddha Yoga. Another group is seeking exclusive use of Self-Realization. A third is said to have locked up the word vairagi, the term for a desireless and detached soul. Does all this portend a future where groups divide up our spiritual teachings and terms, then fight to defend their claims? One hopes not.

14) Condemnation of injustice. There is a loud cry among Hindus against injustice toward untouchables, widows, wives and children. If this sounds familiar, it is. Every society is looking at these issues more now than ever.

15) New friendships. One hears too little about the smaller, gentler cultures with no voice in politics. Recently, Pagans, Polynesians, Wiccans, Gypsies and Aborigines have rediscovered a kinship with Hinduism and are forging informal ties. A related trend is the fast growing rapport of Indians and Blacks.

16) Less strict mores. Historically, swamis and sadhus have been celibate monks.

In fact, if one was not, he was assiduously avoided, even maligned. There is a trend of late for Hindus to accept, or at least tolerate, married swamis. A related microtrend is coed ashram life. The strict separation of single men and women engaged in yoga and spiritual pursuits is no longer an assumed protocol. Men and women are sharing the same living facilities, and experiencing the often difficult consequences of such arrangements.

17) Redefining Hinduism. Oddly, to call oneself a Hindu in India carries with it an implication of communalism. Hinduism is reemerging there, but political ambitions are in the way. A new model of Hinduism needs to be developed and defined in a universal sense. There is a tendency in India to misrepresent and improperly classify Hinduism as right wing and fundamentalist, whereas Hinduism stands for ecology, vegetarianism, etc. (which are left wing in the West). Hinduism is a positive term. For a long time, people would say, "I'm a Christian" or "I'm a Buddhist," but the Hindu would say, "I'm a follower of all religions." That's not so true today.

18) Burial versus cremation. In Sri Lanka, under the weight of years of ethnic struggles that have cost 17,000 lives, Hindus have stopped cremating and begun to bury their dead. A similar trend is emerging outside of Asia, where cremation facilities are lacking and burial is the only option.

19) Dharma can be entertaining. Major visitor centers are evolving, designed around Hindu thought and culture. Swaminaranaya's Cultural Festivals. TM's Disney-like Veda-Land and the Brahma Kumaris" Global Museum in Kenya are examples. Also, bold. Creative movie-makers are finding new ways to make the old epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana work, and films are breaking out of old constraints.

20) Once Hindus wanted to ape everything Western. No longer. It's stylish to be yourself these days. One result: we are enjoying our uniqueness and breaking our addiction to comparing ourselves with the rest or the world.

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