

Hindu Mandir Executives Conference, 2009, and some related thoughts

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Greetings, Medhavis. Namaste! And Jaya Shri Krishna!

This past weekend, I had the great pleasure to attend and even greater fortune to meet Medha Journal's own Ravi Joshi at the Hindu Mandir Executives Conference, 2009, in Linthicum, MD (USA). Raviji is a man after my own heart--a deep thinker and a true activist! There were many other great souls in attendance at the conference, too. But I think that in the great order of the universe, the conference was a pretext for me to finally meet Raviji.

So, let me tell you how the conference went. Unfortunately, on account of a literally sleepless overnight journey from Albuquerque, New Mexico to Linthicum Maryland, caused by bad weather and a somewhat careless airline (they lost my bags, so I had to do some shopping), I missed a number of the events and presentations. But I still got to attend many others. At the very least, I got there in time to deliver my own presentation, titled *Multiculturalism and Marriage*. If you want to read the edited speech and view the slide presentation they are published over at the Samprajña Institute site ([click here](#) for the presentation).

I was one of four speakers who addressed the topic of interracial marriage in a two-hour workshop. With regard to our panel discussion, Hindu youth was the conference's hot topic, and that helped make the workshop a lively event. Basically, the issue that seemed to carry the most concern among conference attendees was that as first generation immigrants in America were retiring, second generation did not appear to be all that interested in carrying on their parents' traditions and way of life. As one of the guest speakers said in another session in the conference, "When we built these mandirs, we said they were for our own children. But now that our children have shown little interest in them, we are saying the mandirs are for something else, now." So topics like marriage, youth education, youth involvement--any topic with "youth" in it--was predisposed to generate much interest and participation.

Raviji delivered an excellent presentation on media bias against Hindus and Hinduism in America. Unfortunately, his presentation was part of a panel presentation scheduled near the very end of the conference, when something like half the attendees were focused more on checking out of the hotel before they got charged for another day's stay than they were. At that point, the organizers were trying to rush things along. Even though several of us stood up to ask the panelists questions, the organizers gave no one a chance to ask questions to the panelists. (I think they may have allowed one person to ask a question, but I cannot remember for sure.) And since the theme of the conference itself seemed to be more focused on youth issues than any other issue, the conference focus might have also contributed to Raviji's presentation getting less of a hearing than it should have. In any case, the problem of the media in America vs. the Hindu

community here is not going away. For now, we'll just have to keep our powder dry for the right moment.

Other than that, here are a few other random thoughts that ran through my mind during and after the conference:

The conference organizers, basically, the VHPA, seem to be pretty much in tune with what's going on in the Hindu-American community. This is interesting because social scientists who study the Hindu-American community think they have some radically unnatural agenda and hence aren't legitimate leaders within the Hindu-American community. Right now, I'm reading Prema Kurien's book *A Place at the Multicultural Table*, which is, basically, the type of book many Hindus feared she would eventually produce--an anti-Hindu screed dressed in academese. Of course, Dr. Kurien would probably characterize her own work as a warning against the Hindutva radicalization of otherwise innocent Hindu immigrants in America, but her perspective seems to be a party line among her and her colleagues, which to me was quite unrecognizable among the VHPA organizers. By any reasonable measure, the conference organizers were normal people with the same normal concerns that I think pretty much most Hindus living in America have. And the conference was focused on those normal concerns.

Certainly, many of the issues that concern the conference organizers and attendees concern me, too. But Kurien starts off her work with making what is, practically, an *a priori* distinction between peaceful Hindus and dangerous Hindutva radicals.

Over time I began to realize that in the United States, Hindutva supporters were becoming the central authoritative hegemonic voice that Hinduism had so far lacked, defining Hinduism, Indian identity, Indian history and culture, and the obligations of good Hindus. Thus many elements of the Hindutva discourse were manifesting themselves in the self-definitions and explanations of lay Hindu Indian Americans, even those who were uninterested or opposed to Hindu nationalism. I also began to see how the American context and the functioning of organizations within this environment was indirectly responsible for this development. In this way, I was drawn to studying immigrant politics, much the way that apolitical Hindu Indian Americans have been drawn into the Hindutva movement.

Reading and hearing about the death threats and harassment that scholars (many practicing Hindus themselves) who have been critical of the Hindutva movement or aspects of Hinduism have received has made me, during the course of my research, to ponder whether I should stop and turn to a less controversial project, whether I should write a book and thus risk drawing unwanted negative attention to myself and my family or play safe and write articles for scholarly journals (read primarily by other scholars), and whether I should focus on only the innocuous aspects of American Hinduism.

Prema Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2007) x - xi.

Now, I want to be clear that I am not an apologist for the VHPA, the VHP, or any of the sangh-parivar organizations. And certainly, there are many Hindus who do not identify with the sangh parivar. But to me it is quite clear that she and her ilk tars with way too broad a brush concerns that many many "lay Hindus", as she calls them, have. It seems to me that practically any Hindu, under any affiliation, who becomes politically active is likely to be tarred in much the same way her intellectual peers have tarred the sangh parivar. If

what I have surmised is reasonably accurate, then the problem they have is not as much with political activism in the name of Hinduism but more with Hinduism itself.

With regard to the anti-religious/anti-Hindu stance of a number of social scientists (Christians too in America have taken a good, prolonged whipping from this group), I would like to mention that Ravi-ji and I are conjointly working on a response to a recent article in the Georgetown Journal of International Affairs (GJIA), in which a small group of scholars recommended the ear-marking of Title VI funds for creating alternative, academically vetted supplemental materials about Hinduism and for fighting future court cases, such as the cases surrounding California's school textbooks. Title VI here refers to Title VI of the U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1964, which, in the context of the article in question, means defining Hinduism, as it is understood by many Hindus, as a fundamentally unfair, discriminatory, and hence biggoted religion. These scholars seem to have taken great exception to many of the changes that were finally approved of by the State of California, and this seems to be the motivation for their article in the GJIA.

At the conference, I spoke with some other attendees who knew about the article, and we discussed briefly some strategies for dealing with this. A key premise underlying much anti-Hindu scholarship is that politically active Hindus are, fundamentally, considered ethnonationalists. One of the strategies we discussed was that of having more persons who are not Hindu by birth stepping up against them would seriously challenge the ethnonationalist presumptions many of these scholars harbor. At the very least, a successful implementation of such a strategy would keep these scholars off balance if not divide them.

I'll have more to report later. In the mean time, please contribute some of your time, talent, and money towards our efforts here or towards someone else's efforts in this vein. At the very least, Raviji could use a new pair of glasses. Otherwise, there is always the comments section!

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