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Global Dharma Conference a Resounding Success

7/25-27/ 2003(New Jersey)

Nikunj Trivedi

HSC joins together with other campus organizations to bring together a three day event that was the Dharma Conference

History was made at 10:00 AM on Friday, July 25th as NJ Assemblyman Upendra Chivukula officially inaugurated the Global Dharma Conference that was held in Edison, NJ this past weekend and as former NJ Senator Leon opened a cultural exhibition on dharma that was prepared by youth volunteer Utsav Chakrabarty. The spectacular three-day event was the largest event ever organized by the second-generation Indian American community and brought together approximately 2000 attendees from across the world. The Hindu Students Council (HSC), with over seventy university chapters nationwide, was the primary driver behind such an attempt to introduce the universal concept of dharma to the larger community and initiate dialogue on important global concerns. World renowned speakers, fulfilling discussion sessions, and exciting cultural programming captivated conference attendees as they engaged the topic of dharma and interacted with likeminded individuals.

Global Dharma Confere

The main Friday afternoon attraction was quite appropriately a diaspora session where youth leaders from five different continents narrated their personal experience with social service work in different communities. Dharmesh Mistry, president of the National Hindu Students Forum, U.K. informed the audience about the role of South-Asian youth in raising awareness on Hindu heritage and spiritual lifestyle in Europe. Saumitra Gokhle, a social activist from the Caribbean, presented a pictorial history of the evolution of different communities in Guyana, Surinam and Trinidad. Gotham Chopra, a young writer and motivational speaker, addressed spirituality in America and the relevance of dharma to the American lifestyle. Moksha Watts, president of the Australian Students Union, spoke on the vibrancy of Indian culture and its appeal in the Australian socio-cultural context. Anand Shah, a Harvard graduate who has been working with tribal communities in India through Indicorps emphasized that "a common belief in the effort to understand ourselves is what brings us together to search for the meaning of dharma. As Indians who live abroad it is essential that we understand what India means to us as Individuals, and more importantly what we mean to India." Friday evening activities continued with a plenary session that highlighted the relevance of dharma to various aspects of life. Anjalee Pandya inaugurated the session with a symbolic lighting of the lamp of hope. New Jersey Governor James McGreevey opened the session with an

explanation that "Dharma is the law of the universe, and of life, mind, and consciousness" and that "you must be the change that you want to see in this world." Dr. Murli Manohar Joshi, India's Human Resource Development Minister, similarly urged second generation Indian Americans to utilize their heritage from the east and resources from the west to show a new path to the world: "Principles of Dharma will help you to strike the golden balance of your rights and duties." Alternative medicine pioneer Dr. Deepak Chopra echoed these sentiments as he emphasized the close relationship between modern science and spirituality and that it would frankly be irresponsible if "upholders of dharma, do not usher a new age of humanity."

Friday night bhangra/raas festivities and special performance by international pop-star Apache Indian continued until 1:30 AM, but conference participants were awake and ready early the next morning for an intensive day of workshops, debates, and discussions. Leading experts in a variety of fields explored the themes of dharma and self, dharma and family, dharma and society, and dharma and the world as nine different breakout sessions occurred at one time and covered topics ranging from Brainwaves of a Yogi to Dharma for Sustainable Development and Good Governance. Participants found Saturday's parallel sessions especially fulfilling as they were able to interact with speakers and attendees in groups that ranged from as small as ten to as large as three hundred. Among the large number of incredibly rich sessions that were offered, participants were especially impressed with Kiran Bedi's talk on crime and punishment, Brother Reuben Thuku's views on religion and conflict, Rita Sherma and Anju Bhargava's discussion on dharma and women, Jeffrey Armstrong's ideas on Personalities of the Mahabharata, and Subhash Kak and George Sudarshan's understanding of the close relationship between quantum physics and religious realities. Following the afternoon sessions, an international concert was held where respected artists Zakir Hussain, Shankar and Gingger, and Shivamani played together for the very first time. Their combination of tabla, double violin, and percussion absolutely spell bounded the audience as did a performance by STEM dance theatre that explored dharma through nonverbal communication. In a play titled "Without a Script", the Houston-based Shunya theater group enacted the moral dilemma faced by the young generation in daily life and actress Goldie Hawn addressed conference participants via live video conference. The Shanti-Shanti sisters stole the hearts of everyone with their melodious chanting of mantras and particularly inspired Indian American youth to learn more about their heritage. The Shanti Shanti Sisters are of American origin and are the only Sanskrit rock band in the world. They kept the audience cheering till 1 am in the morning. The final day of the conference was also memorable as an intertraditional panel discussed the universal appeal of dharma and importance of international harmony. Some of the panel speakers included Gurudev Chitrabhanu - spiritual head of the Jain Meditation Center; Swami Dayananda Saraswati - spiritual head of the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam and head of the advisory council for the conference; Director of Institute of Vedic Studies, Anand Amarjit Singh, Honorary-Affiliate of the Sikh tradition at the United Nations; and Mr. Bawa Jain, Secretary-General of the UN sponsored World Council of Religious Leaders. Following the panel, the President of India, Dr. A.P.J.

Abdul Kalam, addressed participants via live video conference and exhorted Indian youth living in different parts of the world to become "enlightened citizens" and contribute to the cause of a "happy, prosperous and peaceful India." His interactive style and insightful comments undoubtedly contributed a great deal to the conference experience as did Anshuman Mishra's articulate moderation of the session. Live video messages from Jagadguru Sankaracharya of Kanchi and Pramukh Swami Maharaj of the Swaminarayan tradition were also an important part of Sunday's ceremonies and especially significant considering that Sankaracharyas are not meant to cross boundaries of ocean and space.

The first-ever Global Dharma Conference came to an emotional close as key conference organizers and advisors shared their own sentiments and commented on the success of the conference. Conference Public Relations Director Nikunj Trivedi, in his vote of thanks, urged all attendees to act dharmically, quoting from scriptures and speaking in Sanskrit "Those who protect Dharma, Dharma will protect." In his concluding comments, Dr. Mahesh Mehta, a well-respected community leader and conference advisor, congratulated the youth for taking charge of tomorrow's leadership. Kanchan Banerjee, coordinator of HSC and chairman of the Dharma Conference Committee, offered "that the gathering of youth in the Dharma Conference would create a momentum that would have global impact." He also recognized the incredible amount of effort that youth volunteers from all over the country had invested in the success of the conference. Rakhi Israni, who was the Conference Program Director and one such volunteer, commented that this was a "life time opportunity to work with and to see that the efforts of the young generation made such a huge impact in the minds of young and old alike." While the Global Dharma Conference 2003 came to an end on July 27th, it was obvious from the excitement and motivation of the youth volunteers and organizers that another such event is certainly in the near horizon.

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