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HINDU VISHWA

Vishwa Dharma Digest

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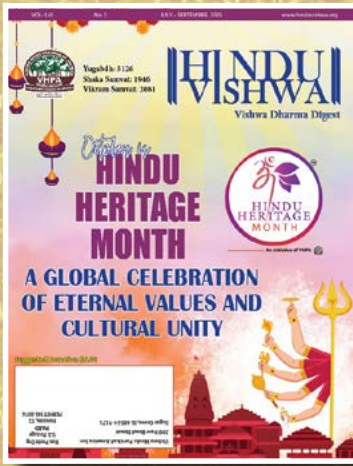
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शुक्लकृष्णे गती ह्येते जगतः शाश्वते मते ।
एकया यात्यनावृत्तिमन्ययावर्तते पुनः ॥

- श्रीमद्भगवद्गीता 8.26

śukla-kṛṣṇe gatī hy ete jagataḥ śāśvate mate ।
ekayā yāty anāvṛttim anyayāvartate punaḥ ॥

According to Vedic opinion, there are two ways of passing from this world – one in light and one in darkness. When one passes in light, he does not come back; but when one passes in darkness, he returns.

- Bhagvad Gita, 8.26

ABOUT THE HINDU VISHWA

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World Hindu Council of America (VHPA), founded in 1970 and incorporated in the state of New York in 1974, is an independent, nonprofit, tax-exempt and volunteer-based charitable organization serving the needs of Hindu community in USA. It aims to build a dynamic and vibrant Hindu society rooted in the eternal values of Dharma and inspired by the lofty ideal of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, i.e. “the entire creation is one family”.

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PRESERVING HINDU ETHOS IN THE AGE OF AI

Two centuries ago, Macaulay's education policy reprogrammed the Hindu mind, replacing Sanskrit learning with colonial syllabi. Today, machine learning models perform the same role. They "train" on skewed textbooks, activist blogs, and biased media, then deliver that distortion back to our children, professionals, and lawmakers as "truth." A student asks about caste and is presented with a one-dimensional narrative of Hindu oppression, lifted straight from activist talking points. These are not neutral answers — they are the biases of algorithms and the training data that powers today's Artificial Intelligence.

This distortion does not remain on computer screens. It translates into law. California's SB-403, the so-called "caste bill," codified Hinduism as synonymous with caste-based oppression. SB-509 injects anti-Hindu stereotypes while dismissing Hindu objections. Both of these bills and many others in the pipeline are informed by the very biases that AI systems now amplify.

When policymakers or staffers "research" Hinduism, they increasingly rely on generative AI tools for summaries. But if these tools are trained on hostile or shallow sources, then Hinduphobia becomes institutionalized and automated. It is no longer just individuals writing biased textbooks — it is algorithms writing the first draft of policy.

For Hindu Americans, this is not theoretical. Our children return from school ashamed of their heritage. Our professionals encounter workplace "diversity" workshops where Hinduism is singled out for caste discussions. Our community leaders watch as legislators cite "research" drawn from Wikipedia and AI summaries rather than authentic Hindu voices. The age of AI raises the stakes. Unless



Hindus shape the data and narratives AI consumes, our civilization will be caricatured by voices that are hostile to our very existence and survival.

What is to be done? What is our Dharma? We must embrace this new dawn of technology as a civilizational calling. We should publish authentic, accessible, and high-quality content on Hindu Dharma that AI systems will inevitably ingest. We must preserve scriptures, oral traditions, and cultural practices in digital formats, ensuring they are part of AI training datasets.

American Hindus are well equipped to be the guardians of Sanatan Dharma in the digital age. Algorithms and AI may reduce us to "caste, cow and curry", but our Dharma demands that we assert our civilizational depths. If AI becomes the new scripture of modern society, we must ensure it does not become scripture against us. The battles around SB-403 and SB-509 are warnings: if we do not define ourselves in the age of AI, others will define us — in classrooms, in laws, and in the code that governs our digital world. ■

HMEC and HMPC Celebrate a Remarkable Milestone

The Hindu Mandir Empowerment Council (HMEC) and Hindu Mandir Priests' Conference (HMPC) have marked another significant milestone in their ongoing journey. HMEC began its mission in 2006, followed by HMPC in 2012. Both initiatives were taken under the auspices of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (VHPA), which was chosen and blessed by Brahmleen Pujya Swami Dayananda Saraswati Ji of Arsha Vidya Peetham. The goal was to create a platform for Mandirs and Hindu spiritual organizations across America to collaborate, deliberate, and protect Hindu Dharma and its traditions for generations to come.

VHPA's Role and Annual Conferences

Since their inception, VHPA has consistently organized annual conferences in partnership with numerous Mandirs. These gatherings serve as a forum to discuss pressing societal issues and develop solutions within the context of the Mandir community.

Talking about the HMEC initiative, President Tejal Shah said that "Our Mandirs serve as centers of Shraddha (faith), Buddhi (knowledge), Karuna (compassion), and Ekta (unity). They are anchors of identity for the diaspora — nurturing future generations while honoring the richness of our ancestral traditions. In every aspect of Hindu life, the Mandir plays a vital role, offering individuals a sense of community, purpose, and spiritual strength."

The 2025 Combined Conference

This year, the joint conference of HMEC and HMPC was hosted at DFW Mandir in Irving, a suburb of Dallas, TX, from September 12th to 14th. The theme, "The MahaKumbh of Sanatan Traditions," was inspired by the once-in-144-years divine celebration at the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati rivers in Prayagraj, which took place in January. The gathering was supported by 19 sponsors and saw participation from over 67 unique organizations, reflecting the strength and unity of the global





Hindu diaspora.

Conference Structure and Participation

The conference featured nine sessions with presentations by 54 speakers. Effective time management was essential, and 12 moderators skillfully coordinated the sessions. Six young emcees captivated the audience with their engaging introductions of moderators and session topics.

Dignitaries and Distinguished Speakers

The Keynote Addresses were as follows:

- Swami Svatmananda ji (Arsha Vidya Gurukulam) emphasized unity and Vedantic wisdom.
- Swami Bhakta Rakshaka ji (Fundación Bhagavata Dharma, South America) spoke on consciousness in the age of AI, bridging technology and spirituality.

The event was attended by a number of prominent figures. Dr. Romesh Japra from the Bay Area,

California, a well-known philanthropist and Hindu activist, attended the conference. He is the founder of Americans4Hindus, a non-partisan organization. Dr. Japra also previously chaired the Fremont Hindu Mandir.

Dr. Prakasa Rao Velagapudi, an energetic octogenarian, was awarded HMEC Key Contributor Award for his unwavering support to the HMEC program. He is renowned for his involvement with the Karya Siddhi Hanuman Mandir in the Dallas area and for establishing the Global Hindu Heritage Foundation (GHHF). Additionally, Paramacharya Sadasivanatha Swami of Hawaii's Hindu Monastery also received HMEC Key Contributor Award, honored for the Monastery's steadfast support of HMEC and HMPA.

Shri Pankaj Kumar, the founder of Ved Puran, addressed the importance of preserving and propagating Vedic knowledge.

Opening Ceremonies and Cultural Presentations

The conference commenced with Vedic chanting by several priests, creating a sacred atmosphere. A touching Shanti Mantra, led by Shri Amitabh Mittal, and prayers for peace in light of recent events in Dallas, reminded attendees of the unifying power of spirituality.

Smt. Vallabha Tantry, convener of HMEC, shared her moving experiences at the Maha Kumbh and displayed photographs that inspired longing among attendees.

"Inspired by the sacred spirit of the Kumbh Mela, this year's theme — 'Hindu Diaspora: Mahakumbh of Sanatan Traditions' — reflects our vision of HMEC as a modern-

day confluence of temples, priests, volunteers, and devotees from across North America. Just as the Kumbh Mela brings together millions in spiritual harmony, HMEC aspires to unite the Hindu diaspora beyond regional, linguistic, and sectarian lines. It is both a celebration and a call — to honor our eternal Sanatan values through collective dialogue, collaboration, and action.", Smt. Vallabha Tantry; Convenor said.

A session was dedicated to the contributions of music (both vocal and instrumental), dance (nritya), and painting in supporting Mandirs, as well as the impact of Mandir patronage on these art forms. Young Bharat Natyam students Ashrita Murli and Siddhi Tantry spoke about their spiritual experiences performing before deities in sacred locations like Varanasi.

Practical Sessions and Special Presentations

Prominent Temples/ Organizations such as ISKCON and Srimad Rajchandra Mission, Kaivalya Gyan Mandir participated in this conference.

Demonstrating the conference's practical value for Mandir custodians, Himani Shukla traveled from Bharat to discuss the restoration of Vighrahas and Murtis that had faded over time. She presented before-and-after photos of her meticulous restoration work, which has earned her recognition and awards both in the United States and Bharat.

Shree Prem KV provided an engrossing talk on the significance of temple architecture. Meanwhile, activist Kiran Chukkappali shared his experiences traveling by motorbike to more than 80 refugee camps for Pakistani Hindus in Bharat. His heartfelt appeal emphasized the need for the Hindu community to recognize the hardships faced by their brethren and to advocate for more rapid government rehabilitation efforts. His pictorial exhibition left a profound emotional impact on the audience.

Parallel Sessions and Youth Engagement

Parallel sessions addressed Mandir management and sustainability, the Balvihar network, priestly concerns, and youth involvement. Each session generated insightful discussions. The youth segment, led by Sohini Sircar, Chairperson of the Hindu Students Council (HSC), organized a hackathon designed to foster innovation, creativity, teamwork, and problem-solving. The youth discussed their vision for the future of Mandirs and strategies to engage the next generation and maintain relevance.

"The conference was deeply committed to fostering the next generation of young leaders," said Sohini Sircar, Chairperson of Hindu Students Council. "We dedicated



an entire plenary session to elevating young Hindu voices and exploring new ways to support students. It was also inspiring to see students and young professionals engage in a fast-paced Hackathon, where they brilliantly blended



tradition and technology to envision Hindu mandirs of the future."

Awards and Recognition

The conference bestowed six Archaka Bhushan and three Archaka Shree awards to distinguished priests and purohits from Mandirs throughout the USA.

Talking about the Priest awards, Shri. Murali Bhattar; Chief Priest of Hindu Society of Minnesota said,

"The Archaka Bhushana and Archaka Shree awards are more than honors — they are a heartfelt recognition of the lifelong dedication our senior priests have shown in preserving and promoting Sanatan Dharma across North America."

Booths and Organizational Presence

A distinctive feature of this year's HMEC-HMPC conference was the presence of booths representing activist and educational organizations such as the Hindu University of America (HUA), Tatva, Global Hindu Heritage Foundation (GHHF), Americans4Hindus, HinduPACT, Ekal Vidyalaya, International

Hindu University, and others. This reflected the integration of individual spiritual needs with the collective needs of the Hindu community.

A special recognition was extended to the Bhutanese Hindu Community by VHPA President, Smt. Tejal Shah – for their extraordinary display of resilience and community building. The award was accepted by Shri Narad Adhikari (GBHO).

The evening closed with sacred Agnihotra rituals and a screening of the thought-provoking film "Caste Rush", offering a nuanced look at social justice through a dharmic lens.

Appreciation and Acknowledgments

HMEC and HMPC extend their heartfelt gratitude to the many sponsors, volunteers, donors, delegates, and especially the management and dedicated volunteers of DFW Ekta Mandir under the leadership of Sri. Manoj Chopra and DFW VHPA chapter for their efforts in making



the conference a memorable success.

Last but not the least, our sincere gratitude to all the sponsors including:

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- Ved Puran
- Hindu American University
- International Hindu University

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Hindu Heritage Month: A Global Celebration of Eternal Values and Cultural Unity

In a world increasingly defined by cultural homogenization and historical amnesia, Hindu Heritage Month (HHM) has emerged as a timely and powerful initiative—one that seeks to honor, preserve, and share the vast spiritual and cultural legacy of Hindu civilization with the world. Observed throughout the month of October, HHM is more than just a festive celebration. It is a grassroots-driven global movement that reconnects Hindus with their civilizational roots and invites the world to appreciate the beauty and wisdom of Sanatana Dharma.

The Origins of a Movement

The idea behind Hindu Heritage Month is refreshingly simple: unify existing Hindu festivals and observances that naturally occur in October—such as Navaratri, Durga Puja, Dussehra, and Diwali—under a collective, global banner. This collective celebration transforms what were once isolated or locally organized events into a coordinated, recognizable public expression of Hindu identity and pride.

Launched officially in 2021, HHM quickly gained traction across the Hindu diaspora. In its inaugural year alone, close to a hundred organizations joined hands to celebrate, and several U.S. states and cities issued formal proclamations acknowledging the contributions of Hindus to society. Since then, HHM has only grown—in scale, in participation, and in meaning.

A Decentralized, Collective Celebration

What makes Hindu Heritage Month unique is its open architecture. There is no single controlling organization

or rigid structure. Instead, HHM thrives on collaboration and autonomy. Any group—whether a temple, a school, a youth club, or a cultural association—can organize events during October under the HHM umbrella. These events can range from traditional celebrations and spiritual lectures to community service drives and academic seminars.

In many ways, HHM functions like the Kumbh Mela—a self-organizing phenomenon where thousands gather at a sacred confluence for a shared purpose without centralized command. It is this decentralized yet united spirit that allows HHM to resonate with Hindus of all backgrounds, regions, languages, and philosophies.

Celebrating Diversity Within Unity

Hindu Dharma is not a monolith—it encompasses a stunning diversity of regional traditions, philosophical schools, ritual practices, languages, and cultural expressions. HHM embraces this diversity. In recent years, **HHM events have included:**

- Cultural Showcases: Dance and music festivals featuring Bharatanatyam, Odissi, Garba, Carnatic concerts, and regional storytelling traditions.
- Spiritual Discourses: Talks and panels exploring Vedanta, Yoga, Ayurveda, and Hindu values like Ahimsa (nonviolence), Dharma (righteousness), and Seva (selfless service).
- Social Service: Blood donation drives, food distribution, environmental cleanup campaigns, and charity walks.



- **Academic Engagement:** Webinars and conferences addressing topics like Hindu contributions to science, interfaith dialogue, and combating stereotypes and misinformation.

- **Youth-Led Initiatives:** Student forums, leadership workshops, and youth-run ceremonies that ensure the next generation is not just included but empowered.

This spectrum of activities reflects the ethos of Hinduism itself: pluralistic, inclusive, and grounded in eternal principles while being adaptable to the needs of the present.

Global Footprint, Local Impact

What began as a primarily North American initiative has now gained truly global momentum. Organizations and individuals from countries as far apart as New Zealand, Norway, India, Canada, Mozambique, the United Kingdom, Germany, Trinidad, and Australia have participated in HHM. Events are organized locally, but they are increasingly interconnected through shared platforms, livestreams, and social media.

One of HHM's greatest strengths lies in its ability to foster a sense of global Hindu unity without erasing local identities. It allows a Tamil Shaivite in Malaysia, a Gujarati Vaishnava in London, and a Nepali Hindu in Toronto to each celebrate their own traditions—while being part of a larger, unified celebration of Sanatana Dharma.

Political and Public Recognition

Hindu Heritage Month also offers a crucial opportunity for public engagement. In recent years, numerous states and cities across the United States, Canada, and other countries have issued proclamations formally recognizing Hindu Heritage Month. These acknowledgments are not just ceremonial; they serve to normalize and legitimize the Hindu presence in multicultural societies.

Political recognition also helps to correct historical imbalances. For too long, Hindu contributions to art, science, philosophy, and social harmony have been either ignored or misrepresented in global discourse. HHM becomes a platform to assert—not aggressively, but confidently—that Hindu civilization has much to offer to the modern world.

Youth Participation: The Future is Now

One of HHM's most inspiring features is the emphasis on youth leadership. Whether through organizing cultural programs, moderating academic panels, or hosting digital content, young Hindus are stepping up to define what heritage means to their generation. This is critical, as cultural continuity depends not just on preservation but on innovation—on the ability to make ancient values relevant

for modern challenges.

Programs like “Voices of Diaspora-Raised Hindus” and youth-led closing ceremonies reflect a broader strategy: to transfer the torch of Dharma in a way that is dynamic, not dogmatic. By giving the youth ownership over HHM, the movement ensures its longevity and evolution.

The Road Ahead: Vision for the Future

The momentum behind Hindu Heritage Month is real, though the movement is still in its early stages. To help HHM grow into a lasting presence on the global cultural calendar, community leaders have shared a broad vision for the future. This includes encouraging greater international participation, deeper engagement from youth and student groups, and seeking broader institutional recognition in various parts of the world—perhaps even at the highest global forums someday.

These aspirations are ambitious, but with the dedication, creativity, and cultural strength of the global Hindu community, they are certainly within the realm of possibility.

Why HHM Matters

At its core, Hindu Heritage Month is about more than rituals and festivals. It is about reclaiming a civilizational narrative—one of resilience, contribution, and spiritual depth. It is about challenging reductive stereotypes and presenting the Hindu identity as something rooted in universal values: compassion, truth, harmony, and respect for diversity.

It is also about healing. In an age marked by division, conflict, and ecological crisis, the wisdom of Sanatana Dharma—its reverence for life, its call to inner realization, its commitment to duty—has never been more relevant.

Conclusion

Hindu Heritage Month is not just an event; it is a movement. A celebration of the past, a reflection on the present, and a roadmap for the future. It is a declaration that the world's oldest continuous civilization is alive, thriving, and ready to engage the modern world with humility, courage, and compassion.

As more nations, organizations, and individuals join the celebration each year, HHM is poised to become a beacon—not just for Hindus, but for all humanity seeking timeless values in a turbulent world. ■

एष धर्मः सनातनः

(This Dharma is Eternal)



SAC Stages Sampoorana Ramayan “Raam Ratan Dhan Payo” Across US

Support A Child brought a breathtaking show for the US audience this year - “Raam Ratan Dhan Payo” - Sampoorana Ramayan brought to life in 2 hours by 6 talented Kathak artists of Sharayu Nritya Kalamandir, led by Guru Sonia Parchure, an acclaimed Kathak dancer and choreographer. A recipient of the Maharashtra Government Cultural Award for Classical Dance, Vidushi Sonia Parchure is a distinguished Kathak exponent with over 30 years of experience in the field. She has performed at prestigious art festivals, including the Khajuraho Dance Festival among others. Sonia Parchure continues to refine her mastery of laykari under the guidance of Padmashree Taalyogi Pandit Suresh Talwalkar. An empaneled artist with the ICCR, she has proudly represented India on international stages. In addition to her accomplishments in Kathak, Sonia Parchure is a celebrated choreographer and actor, contributing significantly to Marathi cinema and theatre.

In the show “Ram Ratan Dhan Payo” accompanied by five of her students, Kshitija Mate, Kunal Rasal, Sakheel Parchure, Vijet Mulay, and Harshita Mulay, Sonia ji pre-

sented a fast-paced dance sequence that carried the audience from Ram Janm, Ravan-Vadh to Ram-Rajyabhishek, with each artist effortlessly transitioning through multiple roles. Intricate footwork of Kathak, paired with exquisite role play, perfect coordination and a beautiful selection of songs made this show a huge success! A well thought out and articulated narration in between the dances tied the entire show into a seamless presentation.

Ram Ratan Dhan Payo was performed in 22 cities in the US over a period of 10 weeks, and opened to large crowds, with several shows sold out well in advance. The audience reactions captured the beauty of the show and it was quite evident that the artists touched the hearts of the audience, young and old. The comments from members of audience across US speak for themselves:

“The audience cried and then laughed and went through a wide range of emotions during the whole event B L I S S!”

“Huge success . What a show . The whole Ramayan enacted by just 6 performers ”



“नमस्ते Indianapolis event was a huge success”
 “The whole experience was divine”
 “Only 2 words to summarize धन्यः अस्मि ।”

“We went to see the show in Dayton! It made me cry! The artists are wonderful and their expressions and dance drama was excellent! One artist played 2 to 3 roles and that was amazing!!! Classical Kathak dance was also amazing!! Please see that!!!”

“Also together with the English commentary it became very engaging. Our grandchildren 6 and 9 watched in the front row and did not even blink.”

“I can vouch for that. I was very emotional and had a tough time not crying. Not that Ramayana is some sad story. It was just an emotional experience. Each and every artist is worth their weight in GOLD. I am really proud to be associated with the organizing committee. Thank you for this amazing opportunity.”

“The Dayton show was phenomenal. Everyone loved it and was emotional. Thanks for making me part of this.”

“Yes, the program was awesome—everyone was truly impressed!”

“We had a very successful show greatly appreciated by the audience. It was a stellar performance by the artists!”

Mukund Kute of Philadelphia Ganesh Mahotsav summarized it quite effectively in his comment:

“Kudos to SACUSA and Sonia Ji Parchure’s team of artists for a grand success in Philly yesterday! It was a full house with us too. Coming from GopiKrishna’s lineage, Sonia ji and her team deployed entire tool sets of Kathak Gharanas to pour their body, heart and soul in the Katha of Shri SiyaRam. She included Ramayan related songs from different parts of Bharat and weaved a great magic together. This show is NOT to be missed !!

I have rarely seen such an energetic, accomplished Kathak team in my 25+years of Cultural program hosting in the USA. Best wishes for hosts of remaining programs in Staten Island, Texas and California. Jai Jai Siya Ram!”

Every year, the SAC team in the USA works hard to bring quality shows from Bharat to the US, in a focused effort to preserve and promote Indian performing arts, while working for the noble cause of educating and caring for underprivileged children in Bharat. The Support A Child team starts working behind the scenes 9 months in advance to make these shows happen. The heartfelt appreciation shown towards the performances, and the generous outpouring of donations, makes this whole endeavor a grand labor of love for the countless volunteers. ■





Constructing Reality

A GAME OF PERSPECTIVES

● By Sarika Jaswani

Immigration is often painted as liberation the chance to break free from inefficiency, corruption and endless struggle. And for many individuals, it does provide opportunity, stability and success. Yet immigration rarely eases the cultural habits, attitudes and unresolved challenges of the society, left behind. Instead, it transports them.

The truth is that real change cannot be found in escape. Prosperity built abroad may offer individual comfort, but it cannot heal the wounds of the culture left behind. If Indians want a future of opportunity, dignity, and balance they must build it within India itself. It requires working not just for oneself, but for the nation as a whole – strengthening institutions, caring for the environment, respecting culture, and creating systems that uplift the many, not just the few. Only then will India become the place its people dream of finding elsewhere.

My trip to India is always a journey through time – one that is stretched between ancient traditions and modern ambitions, between nostalgia and change. Travel always has a way of breaking open a familiar pattern of thought, and India – with all its contrasts, complexities, and contradictions – becomes a mirror through which I see not only a country but humanity itself. The most striking moments of perspectives come before



I even touch the sacred ground.

During take-off and landing the earth looks like a carefully drawn map, cities reduced to grids, rivers to silver lines, and people to invisibility. From the goldilocks zone (not in the clouds not on land) the concerns that dominate our lives – our struggles, our ambitions, our conflicts – seem almost laughably small. It is a

humbling reminder that we occupy such little space in this vast universe, and yet we live as though everything revolves around us.

But once you land the contrast is stark. The same humanity, so invisible from the skies, is everywhere in full force. The air is heavy with pollution, rivers run murky, and forests turn petite for human expansion. Our



activities in our quest for progress and convenience have been slowly dismantling the very earth that sustains us. It is ironic – while the view from above puts us in perspective, the view on ground reveals how blind we are to the consequences of our actions.

In India, I have witnessed more and more, a culture defined by hustle. Everywhere people are striving – pushing forward with determination, craving out opportunities amidst immense challenges. There is something admirable in the relentless energy. And yet, something always feels missing. The old wisdom of Vasudev Kutumbhkam - “the world is our family” - once shaped the Indian thought and reminded people of the duty towards each other and the planet. Today in the race for abundance (not survival) and short-term gain, that spirit of balance and sanity has slipped into amnesia.

The side effects of selective memory are seen at traffic lights, parking spaces, right of way for ambulance with general disregard for rules from which even the temples are not spared – a space meant for devotion and peace. One particular moment now has come to stay with me, during my recent trip to India, of the time I visited a replica of Vaishnodevi temple in the heart of the city of Ahmedabad. Under the sweltering heat, with lines that stretched endlessly, nobody wanted to wait. The air was thick not with prayers but with frustration, as people rushed through rituals just to get over with. The temple became less of a place of stillness, more of another task to complete. It struck me as symbolic

of the larger cultural mood – movement without reflection, activity without pause.

The restless energy also explains the waves of immigration from India to other countries and the recent immigration rules felt as setback in achieving dreams of better life. Many leave in search of prosperity, to escape the monotony of system that feels stagnant or failing. *Immigration is often painted as liberation the chance to break free from inefficiency, corruption and endless struggle. And for many individuals, it does provide opportunity, stability and success. Yet immigration rarely eases the cultural habits, attitudes and unresolved challenges of the society, left behind. Instead, it transports them.*

“

The truth is that real change cannot be found in escape. Prosperity built abroad may offer individual comfort, but it cannot heal the wounds of the culture left behind. If Indians want a future of opportunity, dignity, and balance they must build it within India itself. It requires working not just for oneself, but for the nation as a whole – strengthening institutions, caring for the environment, respecting culture, and creating systems that uplift the many, not just the few. Only then will India become the place its people dream of finding elsewhere.

”



Communities of immigrants often recreate miniature versions of their homelands abroad. This provides comfort, continuity, and cultural pride, but it also allows old problems to resurface in new contexts. Social hierarchies, divisions and outdated practices – whether related to religion, gender or politics – are carried across borders and woven into the immigrant experience. In this way, people leave their country to escape dysfunction, but often unconsciously reproduce the same elsewhere.

This creates a paradox while Indian immigrants have contributed vibrancy, innovation, and diversity to their host nations, the deeper issues that drive migration - like apathy toward governance, disregard for public systems, or the prioritization of personal gain over societal improvement – are left unresolved at home. Personal prosperity is achieved, but collective transformation is stalled.

The truth is that real change cannot be found in escape. Prosperity built abroad may offer individual comfort, but it cannot heal the wounds of the culture left behind. If Indians want a future of opportunity, dignity, and balance they must build it within India itself. It requires working not just for oneself, but for the nation as a whole – strengthening institutions, caring for the environment, respecting culture, and creating systems that uplift the many, not just the few. Only then will India become the

place its people dream of finding elsewhere.

In the end, my trip became a lesson in perspectives. From the skies, I saw our insignificance in contrast to the vastness of the earth, from the ground I saw our destructiveness to prove otherwise. In the temple, I felt the weight of traditions that have carried meaning for centuries, now pressed against the impatience of modern life. ***And in the stories of migration, I saw a cycle repeating itself: people fleeing the shortcomings of their homeland only to recreate fragments of it elsewhere. I saw both our resilience and vanity. Immigration showed me another angle – the futility of seeking solutions abroad without first confronting problems at home. Progress without reflection is blind, and reflection without action is empty. Every society, not just India, the world, stands at crossroads – the challenge of balancing heritage with innovation, ambition with responsibility, and individuality with collective good. Whether we choose hustle at the cost of harmony, or prosperity rooted in shared responsibility will define not just a nation – but the very future of humanity.***

This collision of past, present and future left me with a simple realization: true progress is not about escape, nor about blindly rushing forward. It is about remembering what is worth carrying from the past, letting go of what harms us, and building systems today that future generations will not need to flee from India. The world, stands at a threshold. Whether it becomes a place where prosperity and harmony can coexist depends on whether its people choose responsibility over resignation, and reflection over forgetfulness.

Perspective, after all, is not just how we see the world – it is how we decide to shape it. My journey through India showed me that the game of perspectives is really a game of choices. And the choices we make now will determine whether we leave behind a legacy of exhaustion and escape, or one of renewal and belonging. ■

About the Author



Doctor by profession. **Sarika Jaswani** is a Crochet Artist, Art Tutor, Writer of Children's Stories. A philanthropist at heart she runs a non-profit by selling her fiber art on Etsy. A published poet who passionately reads & writes poetry. An art Lover, bird lover, she's a dreamer and blogger. Her poetry has been received well by various online literary magazines and anthologies.



VHPA AND HINDU AMERICA

A 55-YEAR JOURNEY OF CULTURAL CONTINUITY – PART 1

● Jai G. Bansal, VP of Education and Prachar, VHPA

This article presents a comprehensive summary of the proud 55-year history of VHPA, one of the pioneering Hindu organizations in the United States.

For more than five decades, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (VHPA) has played a pivotal role in shaping the Hindu American experience by promoting cultural and spiritual continuity, community service, and leadership development. Established in 1970 under the leadership of Dr. Mahesh Mehta and a group of visionary co-founders, VHPA has been instrumental in preserving Hindu identity and values within the growing diaspora in the United States.

The foundation of VHPA was laid in response to the challenges faced by Hindu immigrants in the United States, including cultural isolation and the struggle to balance heritage with the pressures of assimilation. Inspired by the eternal values of Dharma and the ideal of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (“the world is one family”), VHPA’s mission has been to unify the Hindu community and promote universal harmony.

VHPA’s contributions over the past five decades have left a lasting imprint on both the Hindu American community and broader society. Since its inception, VHPA has introduced impactful initiatives aimed at cultural enrichment, youth development, and humanitarian service. The Bal Vihar program, launched in 1974, has instilled cultural and spiritual values in thousands of Hindu American children, fostering a strong sense of identity and pride. Through the Support-A-Child initiative, VHPA has extended its commitment to humanitarian efforts by providing education, housing, and essential resources to underprivileged children in India.

Serving as an incubator for leadership and innovation, VHPA has played an important role in supporting several organizations that have made remarkable contributions. Ekal Vidyalaya, which brings education to millions of rural children across India, and the Hindu Students Council,

dedicated to fostering Hindu identity on college campuses, both originated from VHPA’s initiatives. Established in 1985 with VHPA’s support, the Hindu University of America has become a cornerstone in the authentic transmission of Hindu knowledge and culture in today’s world.

Beyond cultural preservation, VHPA has actively engaged in advocacy efforts to address misrepresentation and bias against Hindus in media and academia. Initiatives such as American Hindus Against Defamation (AHAD), along with more recent programs like HinduPACT and Stop Hindudvesha, have effectively countered misinformation, and promoted understanding and respect for Hindu values within American society.

VHPA’s milestones over the past 50 years include landmark events such as the first International Hindu Conference in 1984, the establishment of the Hindu Mandir Executives’ Conference (HMEC) in 2006, and the initiation of Hindu Heritage Month in 2021, which has garnered widespread recognition across the United States and globally.

VHPA remains dedicated to cultural enrichment, community engagement, and youth empowerment, fostering a strong Hindu American identity. Committed to preserving and promoting Hindu values, it ensures their continued relevance in the modern world. With a lasting legacy of service, VHPA stands as a beacon of unity and progress, inspiring future generations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This article presents a comprehensive summary of the proud 55-year history of VHPA, one of the pioneering Hindu organizations in the United States. It has been a privilege and a matter of great pride for me to research, compile, and develop this compendium of VHPA’s numerous accomplishments. Unearthing information that



spans more than half a century was a challenging endeavor, but it was far from a solitary effort.

I am profoundly grateful to the many dedicated members of the VHPA family who generously offered their time, insights, and invaluable information hidden in long-forgotten archives. Their collective support has been instrumental in bringing this article to fruition. While it is difficult to acknowledge everyone individually, I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to the following key contributors, whose efforts have been indispensable:

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INTRODUCTION

The journey of the Hindu movement in the West can be traced back to the early sixteenth century when Christian missionaries, accompanying the early European colonizers, returned home with extensive collections of Sanskrit texts, including the Vedas, Upanishads, and Puranas—the

foundational pillars of Hindu thought. These texts were studied, translated, researched, and incorporated into broader curricula on world religions.

In the United States, this journey gained momentum in the early 19th century when Ralph Waldo Emerson, then an undergraduate at Harvard, came across an English translation of the Bhagavad Gita. This serendipitous encounter profoundly influenced Emerson, catalyzing the emergence of the New England Transcendentalist movement. Central figures of this movement included Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, and Walt Whitman, whose works and ideas emphasized individualism, non-conformity, and civil liberties. The Transcendentalist movement also contributed to a broader spirit of social reform in 19th-century America, impacting abolitionism, women's rights, and educational advancement. The dissemination of Hindu thought in the United States was further advanced by the Theosophist movement, championed by notable figures such as Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, Annie Besant, and Ernest Holmes.

The next significant phase of the Hindu movement in America began with Swami Vivekananda's historic visit in 1893, followed by influential figures such as Paramhansa Yogananda, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Swami Satchidananda and Swami Prabhupada. These spiritual teachers profoundly shaped America's spiritual landscape and popular culture, fostering the integration of Hindu Dharma into American life. The widespread adoption of yogic practices, in both spiritual and secular contexts, exemplifies this influence. Beyond these practices, Hindu principles have subtly reshaped American spirituality, encouraging a shift from rigid dogma toward a more Vedantic emphasis on personal spiritual experience and individual paths to divine understanding. Respect for diverse traditions has grown, with many Americans embracing the Vedic maxim Ekam Sat Viprā Bahudhā Vadanti—"Truth is one; sages call it by various names."

The third and most recent phase of the Hindu movement in America began with the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which facilitated a new wave of influence through American citizens of Indian descent. These immigrants, primarily well-educated professionals such as doctors, engineers, and scientists, grew from a modest population of approximately 12,000 in the early 1960s to nearly five million today, making them the fastest-growing immigrant group in the United States. As they integrated into the professional and social fabric of their adopted society, they enriched it with their unique contributions. In just six decades, they have secured a vital place in America's socio-economic life and left a lasting imprint on its cultural landscape.



However, the transition for Indian immigrants to America has not been without its challenges. While their professional skills and expertise were highly valued, many of them faced difficulties such as cultural isolation and the ongoing effort to balance their heritage with the pressures of assimilation. Raising families in a new cultural environment added further complexities, as parents sought to instill traditional values while adapting to a rapidly evolving societal landscape. Second and third generation Indian Americans have encountered unique psychological challenges, including navigating identity conflicts, and balancing the expectations of dual cultures. Despite these obstacles, the community has demonstrated resilience, maintaining strong ties to their cultural heritage while making significant contributions to American society across various fields.

ESTABLISHMENT OF VHPA

The preservation of Hindu identity in America did not happen by accident. It was the result of the foresight of several visionary leaders who anticipated the challenges of maintaining cultural heritage in a diverse and unfamiliar environment. These leaders understood the imperative of transmitting Hindu traditions to future generations while ensuring their enduring connection to their cultural roots.



Founding members of VHPA (L-R) Top row: Dr. Mahesh Mehta, Sh. MP Sirinivasan; Bottom row: Sh. Subhash Mehta, Sh. Arvind Sant and Sh. Pranjivandas Patel

It was this forward-thinking vision that led to the establishment of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (VHPA) in 1970 under the leadership of Dr. Mahesh Mehta and cofounders Shri Subhash Mehta, Shri Arvind Sant, Shri M.P. Srinivasan, and Shri Pranjeevan Patel. Guided by the needs of Hindus in the United States and inspired by the teachings of great Hindu leaders such as Swami Chinmayananda, Muni Sushil Kumar, and Ma. Gururji

M.S. Golwalkar, VHPA envisioned “a dynamic, vibrant Hindu society inspired by the eternal values of Dharma and the lofty ideals of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam,” meaning “the entire creation is one family.” This vision became the cornerstone of its efforts to unify the Hindu community while promoting universal harmony and cultural pride.

The Banyan Tree, chosen as VHPA’s emblem, serves as a profound metaphor for its mission and enduring legacy. In Hindu tradition, the Banyan Tree symbolizes longevity, wisdom, and shelter. Its aerial roots grow into new trunks, extending the tree’s reach while staying firmly connected to the original foundation. Similarly, VHPA has

functioned as the cornerstone of the Hindu movement in America, fostering numerous initiatives and organizations. Many of these initiatives have continued under VHPA’s umbrella, while some have evolved into independent entities, collectively forming a thriving network of cultural and spiritual growth.

Over five decades since its inception, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (VHPA) has stayed true to its founding mission of serving the Hindu American community. It has contributed significantly to the preservation of cultural heritage by providing educational programs that instill Hindu values in younger generations, ensuring their enduring connection to their roots. Additionally, it has fostered unity and pride within the community through the organization of extensive celebrations of festivals and cultural events. Furthermore, VHPA has focused on empowering the next generation by cultivating confident and capable leaders committed to upholding and advancing the rich legacy of Hindu culture and traditions.

Today, while numerous Hindu organizations thrive across the United States, many can trace their origins directly to VHPA. In many respects, the history of the Hindu movement in the U.S. is inseparably intertwined with the story of VHPA, which continues to inspire and shape the community’s progress and cultural preservation. ■

About the Author



Dr. Jai Bansal is a retired scientist, currently serving as the VP Education for the Vishwa Hindu Parishad America (VHPA)



INTERVIEW WITH VIVEK AGNIHOTRI ON **THE BENGAL FILES**

Editor's note: This interview with VHPA was recorded during the screening of The Bengal Files in Atlanta.



After the success of The Kashmir Files, which sparked global conversations about the forgotten plight of Kashmiri

Pandits, filmmaker Vivek Agnihotri has turned his lens toward another overlooked chapter of the Indian history:



Bengal. His recently released film, *The Bengal Files*, explores the untold stories of persecution, partition, and continuing communal violence in the region. In this conversation, he reflects on the motivations behind the project, its contemporary relevance, and the challenges of telling truths long buried under political and media silence.

Can you please tell us briefly about the new movie *The Bengal Files*?

While researching for Kashmir files, I realized that Hindu community is the most persecuted and enslaved society in the entire world. We were persecuted for 1200 years, and nobody knows about it. And I realized that a Jew child knows about Holocaust, black people know about slavery, but we don't know. I don't know why this history was not told. Also, the history of partition was never correct. We always showed the Punjab stories. Never showed the Bengal. The playground for partition was Bengal. And also, generally the people believe that if somebody is in majority, he has to be the persecutor, he has to be the oppressor and minority is always right. But in India's case, it's a very strange story, because the minority, which basically attacked Kashmiri pandits, which attacked Hindus, and they took away part of India away from us, they won the war. So it was very important to change the narrative and let people know that his majority can also be victimized. So therefore it's a very important story. Also, I wanted to impress upon the audience that the communal violence which caused all these things is still continuing in Bengal, like in Kashmir, it's still continuing. We have seen in Pahalgam what happened. And so it's true, and until we stop this communal violence instigated by one party which calls itself minority, but in reality, it is the second largest majority of India. Nothing is going to change.

How does this movie relate to the events happening in Bengal these days?

The strategy which they adopted for partition, same strategy they adopted in Kashmir - change in demography inch by inch, inch by inch changing culture, using violence, using terrorism, same strategies being adopted in Bengal. Therefore, in my film, the hero, the protagonist to the Kashmiri Pandit who goes there realizes that it can become Kashmir anytime. If anyone else, if a normal person goes, he won't realize it, but because he's a victim himself, he goes there, he understands the laws of Bengal, and he warns people that it can become another Kashmir.

The recent events in Bangladesh, you know, kind of are similar in a way, do you think that there is an audience for this movie in the Bangladesh?

Yes. In Washington DC, so many Bangladeshi people came to see the film, and they were crying. They were

narrating stories. So many Bangladeshis are connecting with me all over the USA, and I'm sure this will work if Bangladesh allows it to release.

We're very disappointed with the role of media in Hindu genocide, and they have tried to put it under the rug. What are your thoughts on that? Why is the media kind of not telling the true story?

See, media in India is mostly leftist and communist, and these leftist communists have made a nexus with Islamists. So in India, we have a communist, leftist and Islamist nexus. See they never wrote anything against the terrorists in Kashmir, they never even mentioned Kashmiri Pandits, somehow, I don't know why, and most of these communists are Hindus and Brahmins on top of it still they don't. It's very sad commentary.

I know it's very sad. Obviously, your movie is a message to all the Hindus who are staying silent against this persecution, do you think this is going to wake up the sleeping giants?

I have decided to wake them up. And if, after seeing this film, which is such an intense film, if they don't wake up, I don't think they can ever wake up. You know, they will never wake up. So it's very important, that's why I made this film. But also, on the other hand, I think people also want to say this, it's their voice. So what I have done is, I've absorbed their voice and articulated it in form of cinema and I presented it to the world, the collective voice of Hindus who are awakened, who want to talk about it, but cannot talk about their trauma because whenever they talk about their trauma, people say, "Hey, shut up, you are the majority". So we have fallen into the western style of thinking that you are majority so you can't be victimized. But this one will open up lots of wounds, and ultimately it will heal lot of people like Kashmir files did.

The last question, what motivates you to do this? Obviously, you have to face a lot from the people who manage these movies and politicians and all that but you still do this?

I am very angry. I know that India has the potential to lead the world and be one of the most successful countries, but India takes two steps forward. goes four steps backwards because of this communal violence, and many states are empowering these communalists, these Islamist forces. In Kashmir it happened and in Bengal it is happening. And also in other places it's happening. So like there was a dialog in the Kashmir files, and which is true, "sarkar kisiki bhi ho system to unhika hai" (Irrespective of whose government it is, system is theirs) ■



VHPA Balvihar National Workshop

Held in Atlanta

The VHPA Atlanta chapter proudly hosted the Balvihar National Training Workshop on March 29, 2025. Participants included Balvihar schools from across the country—Illinois, Maryland, Virginia, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Indiana, California, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Tampa, and Georgia.

Balvihar, first established in the U.S. in 1975, is a flagship educational initiative of VHPA. Its objective is to instill Hindu culture, traditions and sanskars in the children being raised in Hindu or interfaith families in the US. VHPA Balvihar are open to any family that wishes to familiarize themselves with the Hindu way of life, through Dharmic teachings or through learning a heritage language Bharat. This first-ever Balvihar National Workshop was organized to commemorate 50 years of Balvihar's impactful journey—honoring the pioneers, bringing together volunteers nationwide, and charting the path forward for the next 50 years.

Inaugural Session: Tradition Meets Vision

The workshop began with a warm welcome from VHPA President Smt. Tejal Shah ji, followed by the ceremonial Deep Prajwalan led by Smt. Asha and Shri Gaurang

Vaishnav ji, accompanied by the chanting of the Deep Jyoti Mantra. Tejal ji then recited the Ekatmata Mantra, a prayer celebrating harmony and unity.

Smt. Manju Tiwari ji, a veteran Balvihar karyakarta from Atlanta and VHPA's Sanskar pillar Vice President, delivered the opening remarks and introduced Smita Daftardarji, a long-time VHPA Atlanta volunteer, as the emcee for the day.

As is tradition with all VHPA events, an inspiring Bhav-geet set the tone for the day. The chosen song, "Eesh hame deta hai sab kuchh, ham bhi to kuchh dena seekhein", beautifully echoed the spirit of giving back which is at the heart of VHPA. The bhavgeet was led by Jaya Asthana ji and a team of volunteers, with enthusiastic participation from the audience.

Keynote Address: Defining Hindu Identity in a Multicultural Landscape

The keynote speaker for the event, Shri Abhay Asthana ji, past president of VHPA and current chairman of the advisory board. His talk was insightful, inspiring, and deeply thought-provoking. He beautifully articulated the role of Balvihar in establishing the Bharat-vanshi and the Hindu



identity in the multi-layered identity of a child growing up in a Hindu family in America. While the American identity gets reinforced with actions like the pledge of allegiance in the school, Abhay ji pointed out, the Bharateeya origin and the Hindu identity does not actively get rooted in the child's mind. Balvihar, in partnership with parents, plays a unique and irreplaceable role in helping a young child understand the meaning of being a Bharat-vanshi and a Hindu, through learning Hindu values, culture and traditions. While the American identity is certainly a thing to be proud of, these other two identities need to be embraced as well, by the child, in order to grow up as a confident and fearless individual.

Meet the Balvihars:

The keynote was followed by the first session of the workshop "Know Your Balvihars" which brought together all Balvihar chapters to discuss their progress, strengths, and challenges. The session was moderated by Manish Thouri ji, Balvihar coordinator, DC and Neetu Sharma ji Balvihar coordinator Atlanta Cobb Balvihar. Balvihar coordinators from Maryland, Virginia, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Indiana, California, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Tampa and Georgia presented an overview of their programs, focusing on student enrollment, teaching methodologies, strengths, and the challenges they face. Most of the Balvihars shared their strengths as having dedicated volunteers, a structured curriculum that incorporated interactive learning with storytelling, games, and digital tools to make lessons engaging. Students participated in public speaking, storytelling, and cultural programs to develop confidence. Some chapters offer remote learning, digital resources, and

hybrid models to expand access.

All Balvihars focus on cultural Integration, celebrating Hindu festivals, rituals, and teaching values to provide a holistic learning experience. A very important point raised by Shri Vipul Parikh ji, was to address the linguistic and cultural needs of children of second generation Hindu American parents, who themselves may not be very familiar with languages of Bharat and the Dharmic philosophy. Some common challenges that emerged

from the presentations, faced by almost all Balvihars, were student retention, especially at the high school level, parental engagement, and the students' struggle with balancing academics with cultural education. To break the ice, a lively "Know your Balvihar" Kahoot trivia game and a playful selfie challenge brought laughter and bonding to the room—reminding everyone that learning can be joyful.

Honoring the Trailblazers: Celebrating 50 Years of Service

The celebration of 50 years of Balvihar would be incomplete without the gracious presence of our senior most VHPA karyakartas, whose path breaking work established Balvihars in several locations in the US, and made possible five decades of continuous service to the Hindu community. The trailblazers, namely Smt. Asha and Shri Gaurang Vaishnav ji from Tampa, Smt Jaya and Shri Abhay Asthanaji from Boston, Smt Amita and Shri Sanjay Mehtaji from New Jersey and Dr. Shobhana Vora from California were felicitated for their contribution in establishing and running Balvihar in their communities. Smt Veena Katdare Atlanta chapter president and Smt Kusum Khurana, Atlanta chapter Vice President welcomed them with the Tilak. Shri Amitabh Mittal ji, Gen Sec VHPA, shared their accomplishments over the years, in various capacities within VHPA. Karyakartas Shri Vishal Agrawal ji from Minneapolis, Shri Mahendra Sapaji from DC, Shri Rakesh Gupta ji, Shri Rajesh Chatkara ji, Shri Shyam Tiwari ji, Shri Prakash Gupta ji and Smt Sneha Mehta ji from Atlanta presented them with shawl and Shri Ram Paduka, as a token of appreciation of their contribution.



Balvihar Logo: A Symbol of Legacy and Aspiration

Following this, Shri Gaurang Vaishnav ji, who is credited with starting the first ever VHPA Balvihar in the US, was invited to unveil the newly designed logo for VHPA Balvihar, with its motto “सा विद्या या विमुक्तये” (saa vidya yaa vimuktaye). It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words - it couldn't be truer for the Balvihar Logo. The team, and primarily Manish Thouri ji, spent hours on end designing and revising the logo that would accurately reflect not just the mission and vision, but also the aspirations of Balvihar. As the logo was unveiled, Manish Thouri ji read out the symbolism behind the logo - with the brown color depicting our connection with Mother Earth, the orange the color of sacrifice and the dhwaja on Arjun's chariot in Mahabharat. The Om represents Dharma; Devi Sarawsati in the center signifies knowledge as the center of our lives, the open book with the motto, at the feet of the Devi, shows that knowledge liberates and elevates us. The spokes on the outer circle represent that all Balvihar students must reach outward to educate others, that knowledge grows when shared.

Dialogue with the Founding Leaders:

A Q&A session followed, offering a treasure trove of wisdom. Shri Gaurang ji, Abhay ji, and Sanjay Mehta ji reflected on their decades of experience—addressing everything from curriculum philosophy to volunteer training.

The panelists were unequivocal about Hindu Dharmic philosophy guiding all Balvihar curricula, whether Sanskar based or language based. Balvihars are to be open to all; the universality of Hindu principles discriminates against none, and once understood should be easy to embrace by anyone, no matter what religion they follow. The Hindu identity of Balvihar was to be both exhibited and adhered to

while collaborating with other organizations. The panelists advised Balvihar teachers to be creative, have a great sense of humor and be able to connect with the young generation of learners. The teachers themselves had to be life-long learners; it was expounded that being a volunteer in Balvihar was intellectually enriching, not just for the students but for the teachers as well! When asked about challenges, Sanjay ji banished the word, declaring that volunteering in Balvihar was nothing less than a “divine calling,” the students no less than the bal swaroop of Eeshwar! The session was uplifting and rejuvenating; a reinforcement for all volunteers, if at all they needed it, that the work they were doing was truly exceptional!

Methodology and Best Practices in Balvihar

The post lunch discussions featured 3 sessions that focused on methodologies and best practices for teaching in both Sanskar based and Language based Balvihars. Experienced teachers shared their insights as well as samples of their curriculum.

Teaching Sanskars – Shaping the Next Generation

The post lunch session started with Bhakti Modi ji, sharing her experience teaching middle school age children in Hindu American Temple School (H.A.T.S.), Minneapolis. She emphasized the importance of making lessons interactive, relatable, and relevant to their world, reimagining the Hindu Pauranic stories and characters to discuss self-confidence, ethics, and emotional growth. Festival celebrations, she stressed, should also highlight their deeper meanings, such as Diwali representing inner transformation rather than just lighting lamps. It was most important to align the teaching philosophy with the Bhagavad Gita's message— a focus on effort rather than immediate outcomes. A supportive environment was needed, where students feel encouraged to explore and learn rather than forcing rigid educational expectations. Bhaktiji's clarity of thought and immensely practical approach to teaching and learning clearly resonated with the workshop attendees. Next, Manish Chaturvedi ji who runs both Balvihar Vedic Heritage and Hindi language classes in Virginia presented his experiences and approach to teaching. He shared some interesting sample discussions he had with High school age students learning Hindu Philosophy. The depth/scope of discussions was highly impressive where the teacher and students dived deep into the scientific basis of Hindu principles, connecting Hindu philosophy with concepts of quantum physics like the Higgs-Boson or the God Particle. Manish ji, like



his predecessor, emphasized on a practical and interactive approach to teaching. He also drove home the need for the teachers to be well equipped with knowledge, logic, patience and of course, great communication skills, especially when interacting with older kids. Lastly, Jaya Asthana ji shared her experiences teaching the youngest group of students, the elementary school children. She had an endearing account of young children reciting Sanskrit shlokas, listening to Pauranik stories and learning Yoga. She emphasized the need to keep things simple and entertaining for this age group, using games and stories to teach. She recounted the great success of incorporating, in her classroom, simple games that did not need any special equipment. Kids loved them and the games helped greatly in attendance and on-time arrival in class. Overall, the session served as a powerful reminder that effective teaching of Hindu values and philosophy requires not only subject knowledge but also empathy, adaptability, and creativity tailored to each age group. The diverse experiences shared by Bhakti ji, Manish ji, and Jaya ji showcased how meaningful learning can be cultivated through age-appropriate methods, cultural relevance, and a deep commitment to nurturing young minds with both heart and wisdom.

Meaningful Integration of Technology:

While technology for the sake of technology is never recommended in a classroom, staying current with advances in technology is imperative for educators. Balvihar is not untouched by this change and is certainly up for the challenge, as was demonstrated in the next session. The session “The 21st Century Language Class : Best of Old & New,” was presented by Smita Daftardar ji, Manish Thouri ji and Neetu Sharma ji. The session included an overview of online tools, apps and the new AI technology that could enhance teacher effectiveness and student learning. Examples of online Jeopardy games created by students,

quizzes using Kahoot, use of the voice feature of Google translate to practice speaking in Hindi or any heritage language were shared. The use of AI to generate writing examples, meaningful comprehension questions, and play the game “20 questions” in Hindi was demonstrated. It was stressed that technology, especially the all-encompassing AI tools like ChatGPT or Copilot were to be used mindfully, with caution, and assignments designed such that neither the teaching nor the student work was replaced by AI.

Teaching Language to Preserve Heritage:

The next session “Teaching language: Preserving the Heritage” focused on the content and teaching methodologies used in the language based Balvihars. The session took off with a sample lesson by DC Balvihar volunteer Shilpi Mishra ji, who shared various activities used to teach an essay-based lesson. Shilpiji demonstrated how to address the different aspects of a heritage language class - integrating culture, vocabulary, grammar, comprehension and speaking - in a single lesson, aimed at an intermediate learner of Hindi. The second sample lesson was presented by Atlanta Balvihar volunteer Preeti Gupta ji who demonstrated how to design and deliver a story based lesson. The lesson was designed for advanced language learners and involved several interactive tasks that helped students learn vocabulary, checked their comprehension and gave them reasons to make meaningful conversation. In spite of the long day, workshop attendees completed the sample activities for both lessons with gusto, proof that interactive tasks and games help students stay engaged. The presenters pointed out that while the language used in both these sample lessons was Hindi, the lessons could be adapted to any Heritage language of Bharat, since the lessons were in context of Bharat. Hindi language was used as a vehicle, but the content connected the students to the culture of Bharat and Hindu traditions, which upheld the ultimate goal of Balvihar. The session concluded with a presentation by Manju Tiwari ji on the intricacies of the Devanagari script and the rules of word formation. She efficiently engaged the attendees with short and result oriented activities that could be used for teaching or as checks for learning. The session was a rich exchange of ideas and practical tools for heritage language instruction. It reinforced the vision of Balvihar—to preserve and pass on the heritage of Bharat through meaningful and engaging learning experiences.

The Way Forward:

The last session was designed with the future in mind - a discussion on the way forward for Balvihar. Panelists Amitabh Mittal ji, Bhakti Modiji and Sameer Asthana ji, shared their insights and ideas during the last session



Beyond the Balvihar Curriculum: Engaging Parents & Alumni. Bhaktiji addressed the question of engaging parents in their children's dharmic education. She highlighted the home environment as the most influential space for reinforcing values and teachings, and advocated shifting the emphasis from exclusively teaching children in Hindu educational programs to actively engaging parents in the process. Young parents, especially second-generation Hindu Americans, often face challenges such as a lack of structured Hindu education in their upbringing, belonging to multi-faith families, or simply feeling unsure of how to begin. Equipping parents with the skills and know-how was crucial for the continuation of the child's learning at home. On the topic of engaging youth after they graduate from Balvihar, Sameer Asthana ji, an alumni and former youth volunteer of Boston Balvihar, shared his experience of working with Hindu youth. Rather than lament the youth who drift away, his advice was to focus on the handful of alumni who do come back to volunteer at Balvihar. It was important to engage these youth, in meaningful programs - seva initiatives, leadership programs, mentoring younger students - and in the process, mentor them to be the future leaders of the Hindu American community. Amitabh Mittal ji shared his suggestion of VHPA recognizing our youth in their schools and colleges with scholarships, to acknowledge their achievements on behalf of the Hindu community and to foster a sense of belonging. Highschool student, Balvihar alumni and current Balvihar teacher Ritika Singh weighed in on the need to include more Dharmic teachings in language based Balvihars and to offer age-appropriate roles, within Balvihar or VHPA, to engage highschoolers after they graduate.

Lastly, incorporating feedback from the audience, the panel made some suggestions for the future course of action. These were - sharing foundational knowledge with

families in quick and modern ways, involving parents in the childrens' education, such as take-home projects, and incentivizing Balvihar activities by having rewards for both parents and children. Another suggestion was to have social, informal events or connection forums for kids, to build a sense of community, a safe space to share their thoughts with their peers, and a similar but separate forum for parents.

As part of the way forward guidelines, Shri Gaurang Vaishnav ji, made an appeal that Balvihar teachers should strive to use the original terms such as Bhagwan/Eshwar, Granth, Dharmic, Murti or Vighra etc, instead of the English translation, to set an example for children. Linguists refer to words that are culture specific as non-translatable. Using these original words is acceptable across the world.

The Final Word: सा विद्या या विमुक्तये

Sanjay Mehta ji delivered the closing remarks, elucidating, most eloquently, the meaning of the motto "sa vidya ya vimuktaye." He explained that Vidya (true knowledge) liberates us from the belief that we are limited beings with limited abilities and helps us recognize our inherent divinity, as taught in the Bhagavad Gita. Hindus, coming from such a divine tradition, need not cower before worldly challenges. Much as Pavanputra Hanumanji had to be reminded of his powers, Sanjayji's words reminded the audience of the power bestowed on them just for being Hindu. He emphasized that as Hindus, we are not merely physical beings. He reflected deeply on the purpose of Balvihar; without undermining the importance of Bhasha (language), he emphasized that the true goal of Balvihar should be Bhajan (devotion)—in a child's learning journey. Bhajan, he reminded, is not just singing; it is a spiritual practice that purifies the mind and connects us to the divine. Referring to the Gita, he reminded the audience that children follow the example set by elders, and encouraged parents to act with dharma and set the standards for the children to follow. Balvihar is more than just a weekend program—it is a satsang, a collective effort of spiritual upliftment for families and communities.

Vote of Thanks & Acknowledgments

The event concluded with a vote of thanks by Atlanta Chapter Vice President Smt Kusum Khurana ji. The conference sessions were planned meticulously by the National Balvihar Team which included Manju Tiwariji, Jaya Asthanaji, Smita Daftardarji, Manish Thouriji, Neetu Sharmaji and Manish Chaturvedi. The entire VHPA Atlanta chapter team spent weeks preparing for this workshop. VHPA Atlanta chapter members Veena and Madhav Katdareji, Kusum Khurana ji, Sneha and Vasav



Mehtaji, Manju & Shyam Tiwariji, Neetu and Gopendar Sharmaji, Sanjay and Vineeta Guptaji, Sanjana & Surinder Dharji, Smita & Jayant Daftardarji, Seema Laddhaji, Sabitha Venugopal and Ragu Veeraraghavan, Vasudha and Kaushalendra Mishraji, and Pragya Raiji were instrumental in making the entire program a success.

A Final Note : A Blooming Legacy

The National Balvihar Workshop provided an avenue for Balvihar volunteers to come together to exchange best practices and find solutions to common challenges, ultimately strengthening their collective mission of dharmic and linguistic preservation. Most importantly, it was an opportunity to get a holistic view of this educational program

of VHPA, the need for such programs and the goodness that they bring to society. The first Balvihar, started by Smt Asha ji & Gaurangji, was a small step taken to teach Hindu values to children in their community. Today, a large, and growing, number of Balvihars across the country are teaching Hindu sanskaras and heritage languages of Bharat, touching the lives of hundreds of students. As Sant Dnyaneshwar said in his famous abhang,

इवले से रोप लावियले दारी, तयाचा वेलु, गेला गगना वेरी,

मोगरा फुलला, मोगरा फुलला.....

“The tiny sapling that I planted by my door has now reached the sky....., its flowers are spreading fragrance all around.” ■



An Educational Program of VHPA





HINDU DHARMA AND ENVIRONMENTALISM

A Profound Symbiosis Rooted in Sacred Teachings

● By Devansh Joshi and Shawn Ray

Far from being a modern construct, Hindu environmentalism is an ancient spiritual mandate. With its personification of nature, festival rituals, and ethical codes like Ahimsa, it sanctifies ecological balance as essential to cosmic and personal harmony.

- Hindu Dharma envisions nature as sacred and sentient, portraying the Earth and its elements as divine manifestations of the cosmic being, fostering deep ecological reverence rooted in Vedic and Upanishadic teachings.

- Natural forces like rivers, mountains, trees, and the five elements (pañcamahābhūta) are personified as deities, encouraging ritual protection and spiritual responsibility toward the environment.

- Core scriptures such as the Atharva Veda, Upanishads, and Bhagavad Gita frame environmental stewardship as a dharmic duty and a form of divine worship, grounded in metaphysical unity and sacrificial reciprocity.

- Philosophical principles like ahimsā (non-violence), dharma, ṛta (cosmic order), and practices like aparigraha and seva cultivate an ecological ethic that links spiritual liberation with environmental harmony.

- Contemporary environmental harms linked to Hindu festivals stem from modern distortions, not theology; a growing dharmic revival aims to realign tradition with sustainability through conscious reform and ecological awareness.



I. Introduction

“The air is his breath, the trees are the hairs of his body, the oceans his waist, the hills and mountains are his bones, the rivers are the veins of the Cosmic Person.” This profound anthropocosmic imagery from the Atharva Veda [1] reveals the foundational principle of Hindu ecology: that the natural world is not an inert resource but a sentient, sacred entity, the living embodiment of the divine. Within this ancient darśana, or worldview, an intrinsic environmental sensitivity is not an ancillary feature but constitutes its very core.

This ecological ethos is no modern reinterpretation but is woven into the tradition's metaphysical fabric, articulated through scripture, philosophy, and ritual. The Pañcamahābhūta, the five great elements - earth (Pṛthvī), air (Vāyu), water (Jala), fire (Agni), and space (Ākāśa) - are understood as the consecrated building blocks of the cosmos, central to both grand cosmology and daily rites [2]. This worldview transforms the physical landscape into a sacred cartography, where rivers like the Gaṅgā, trees like the Peepal, and mountains like Kailash are revered as living manifestations of divinity, fostering a deep-seated ethic of protection. Yet, a profound dissonance exists between this sacred ideal and contemporary reality. Certain modern practices, such as the immersion of idols laden with toxins and the use of chemical colors in festivals, have created ecological catastrophes. This adharmic behavior, born of commercialism and a decay in civic responsibility, attracts condemnation that mistakenly targets the religion itself, when the actual cause is a perversion of its traditions.

As the global community grapples with unprecedented environmental collapse, this ancient yet living worldview offers a potent spiritual and ethical framework for re-evaluating humanity's relationship with the planet. This article examines how Hindu philosophy, sacred literature, and ritual practices cultivate a deep-rooted environmental ethic by portraying nature as divine and interconnected with human life; it also explores how contemporary eco-conscious efforts are working to reform environmentally harmful traditions by realigning them with the original

principles of Hindu dharma - principles that emphasize sustainability, reverence for the natural world, and a collective responsibility to preserve it.

II. Hindu Dharma's Reverence for Nature

A. Deities and Natural Elements

Hindu Dharma's spiritual worldview finds profound expression in its personification of nature's forces as divine entities. Far from being mere abstract symbols, these deities are the sacred embodiments of elemental phenomena, each signifying a critical dimension of both ecological

equilibrium and cosmic order.

Varuna, the sovereign of the celestial waters, governs not only oceans, rivers, and rainfall but also upholds Rta. This universal law inextricably links the hydrological cycles to the ethical and spiritual integrity of the cosmos. His dominion thus sanctifies the element of water itself, mandating a reverential and restrained approach to its use. In a similar vein, Agni, the god of fire, serves as the alchemical agent of transformation and purification; as the consecrated medium for transmitting offerings to the celestial realm, he is central to Hindu ritual. Agni's dual

presence in domestic hearths and sacred altars underscores the purifying power of flame and the symbiotic necessity of maintaining both spiritual and environmental purity. As the god of air, Vayu manifests as the universal life force, the very prana or cosmic breath that animates and connects all beings, a conception that asserts a theological basis for preserving atmospheric balance. The Earth is venerated as the goddess Prithvi, a nurturing matriarch who sustains all life and is perceived not as inert ground, but as a living, sentient being that demands worship. This maternal framing of the Earth cultivates a profound ethic of stewardship, grounded in principles of filial care and ecological restraint.

Collectively, these elemental deities reveal a sophisticated theology that intrinsically weaves the natural world into its spiritual fabric. Reverence for air, water, fire, and earth is therefore not an optional virtue but an ontological imperative, mandated by dharma and enacted in the rhythms of daily devotional life.





B. Sacred Natural Sites

Beyond the personification of the elements, Hindu cosmology transfigures the physical landscape itself, revering specific natural features as direct manifestations of divine presence and thereby elevating geography into sacred space. Rivers such as the Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati are not merely watercourses but are venerated as living goddesses [3]. The Ganga, for instance, functions as both a soteriological and ecological lifeline, a divine matriarch whose waters are believed to purify sin and liberate the soul, thereby absolving the karmic burdens of those who perform ritual bathing. This symbolic gravitas, rooted in Vedic and Puranic traditions, extends to other sacred rivers as well. Similarly, mountains, particularly the Himalayas, are consecrated as the terrestrial abodes of gods and sages. Mount Kailash, famously associated with Lord Shiva, is conceived as the axis mundi, the spiritual pivot of the entire universe, transforming these mountains from geological features to sacred abodes, reinforcing their spiritual importance in Hindu cosmology [4]. This sacred geography also extends to the botanical realm, where trees such as the Peepal, Banyan, and Tulsi are revered as divine presences. The Peepal tree is considered a dwelling place of Lord Vishnu, the Banyan symbolizes eternal life with its expansive, temple-like form, and the Tulsi plant is a fixture of

daily household devotion to Goddess Lakshmi. Rituals such as Vriksha Bandhan, where devotees tie protective threads around trees, formalize a covenant of respect, affirming the belief in flora as sentient entities deserving protection [5].

These natural features - rivers, mountains, and trees - thus function as living conduits, portals between the human and divine realms. Their consecrated status fosters a deep-seated environmental ethic that reframes the human relationship with nature. Within this sacred cartography, polluting a river or exploiting a forest is not merely an ecological misdeed; it is a spiritual transgression, an act of sacrilege against the divine itself.

III. Scriptural Evidence

Hindu Dharma's sacred literature articulates a sophisticated ecological theology, one in which the natural world is conceived not as an inert backdrop for human drama but as a vibrant, holy sphere imbued with divine significance. Across the Vedic hymns, the metaphysical discourses of the Upanishads, and the ethical teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, the scriptures forge an unassailable link between the divine, nature, and humanity, framing environmental stewardship as a sacred obligation. This worldview finds one of its earliest and most poignant expressions in the Atharva Veda [6]. The evocative Bhumi Sukta addresses the Earth not as an object of dominion but as a mother, establishing



a principle of ecological reciprocity: “Mother Earth, may whatever I dig from you grow back again quickly, and may we not injure you by our labour” (Atharva Veda 12.1.35) [7]. This plea for reverent, regenerative use presents an ancient conception of sustainability. This vision is expanded in the Purusa Sukta, which posits the entire universe as the physical body of the cosmic being, the Virat Purusa, where mountains are his bones, rivers his veins, and trees the hairs on his body [8]. This profound anthropocosmic metaphor dissolves any perceived separation between humanity and the environment, reconceiving ecological destruction as a direct violation of the divine anatomy: an act of adharma against the cosmic order, or rta.

This principle of sacred interconnectedness achieves even greater metaphysical depth in the Upanishads, where the ontological unity of all existence becomes the central theme. The declaration Sarvam khalvidam brahma (“All this is Brahman”) from the Chandogya Upanishad [9] provides the ultimate foundation for an environmental ethic, for if the Supreme Reality pervades every particle of the universe, then to pollute or exploit nature is to defile Brahman itself [10]. The Isa Upanishad builds upon this by mandating a specific code of conduct, stating that the world is “pervaded by the Lord” (Isavasyam idam sarvam) [11]. This notion leads directly to an ethic of tyaga, or renunciation, exhorting individuals to enjoy the Earth’s riches not with greed, but with reverent restraint, taking only what is necessary. This frames ecological consciousness as a direct extension of religious piety.

The Bhagavad Gita further reinforces these themes, weaving them into a comprehensive framework of duty (dharma). Lord Krishna explains that creation is sustained through yajña, a covenant of sacrificial reciprocity binding humanity and the natural world (prakruti) in a cycle of mutual care [12]. Here, yajña symbolizes a cosmic economy of give-and-take, a foundational principle of ecological balance that must be honored through offerings and restrained use. Later, Krishna’s declaration that “Vasudeva

is all” (Vasudevah sarvam iti) [13] powerfully echoes the Upanishadic theme of unity, asserting the immanence of the divine in all creation. This perspective transforms environmental degradation from a mere sociopolitical problem into a profound spiritual crisis, for when the environment is harmed, it is the divine body itself that suffers. Fulfilling one’s personal duty (svadharma) thus becomes inseparable from the ecological responsibility to uphold the health of prakruti.

Together, these scriptural teachings constitute a formidable and cohesive theological framework for environmental stewardship. From the Vedic reverence for a maternal Earth to the Upanishadic realization of cosmic unity and the Gita’s call for dharmic action, this tradition does not merely encourage environmental protection: it sanctifies it as an inviolable spiritual duty.

IV. Philosophical Concepts

Beyond scriptural injunctions, the Hindu ecological ethos is profoundly shaped by a sophisticated ethical architecture that governs moral conduct and metaphysical worldview. Core tenets such as ahimsā (non-violence), dharma (righteous duty), and ṛta (cosmic order) converge to form an integrated system of spiritual ecology, one that posits a sacred responsibility toward all of existence. This framework is not merely prescriptive but is rooted in the soteriological goal of mokṣa (liberation), rendering ecological harmony essential for spiritual progress.

Foremost among these tenets is ahimsā, the paramount dharma of non-violence, which extends its compassionate embrace beyond humanity to encompass every form of life (jīva). This principle is anchored in the metaphysical realization that the singular, eternal Self (Ātman) is immanent in all beings, from the smallest insect to the largest mammal. From this radically non-dual (Advaitic) perspective, harming any creature or element of the natural world (Prakṛti) is an act of spiritual ignorance (avidyā), a self-inflicted wound born from the delusion (moha) of separateness [14].

Ahimsā is thus transformed from a mere moral commandment into an ontological imperative, promoting a profound harmony with the biosphere and demanding opposition to any exploitative practice that inflicts violence upon the manifest body of the divine [15].

This principle is inextricably linked to dharma, derived from the Sanskrit root dhṛ, meaning “to sustain.”

Dharma is the universal principle that upholds and maintains cosmic stability; it is not simply a personal virtue but the duty to act in alignment with the broader cosmic order (ṛta).



Rta is the intricate, rhythmic, and moral law governing the universe, and to live a dharmic life is to attune oneself to its sacred patterns, from agricultural cycles to seasonal festivals. Consequently, actions driven by greed (lobha) and overconsumption constitute acts of adharma. Such ecological negligence actively disrupts rta, introducing a state of imbalance and decay (vikṛti) that generates negative karma and causes suffering across all realms.

These philosophical tenets are not meant to exist in abstraction but are to be actualized through a dedicated praxis (sādhana). The metaphysical emphasis on the interconnectedness of all life is enacted through virtues that function as spiritual disciplines.

Aparigraha (non-possessiveness) offers a practical antidote to the consumerist mindset, while satya (truthfulness) prompts one to perceive the ultimate reality of divine unity in nature. Most importantly, sevā (selfless service) rendered to the environment, through conservation and restoration, becomes a form of karma yoga. This offering purifies the individual while helping to restore cosmic balance. These virtues guide adherents toward a modest and respectful existence, reinforcing the view that the Earth is not a resource to be plundered but a divine partner in the sacred cycle of life.

V. Rituals and Practices

The ecological consciousness of Hindu Dharma is not confined to scripture or abstract philosophy; it finds its most vibrant and kinetic expression in the everyday rituals (pūjā) and festival practices that celebrate and honor the natural world. These rituals function as a form of performative

theology and ecological enactment, reinforcing the sanctity of Prakṛti through both symbolic and practical means. Through these consecrated acts, or saṃskāras, the philosophical principle of divine immanence becomes a lived reality. For instance, the practice of Vriksha Bandhan involves tying sacred threads around trees, symbolizing a covenant of protection and reverence between humans and the botanical world. This ethos is institutionalized in the tradition of devara kadu, or sacred groves, which function as biodiversity hotspots protected not by secular law but by a religious mandate that views the forest itself as a temple [16].

This ritual alignment extends to the grand cycles of time (kāla) and seasons (ṛtu), with major festivals designed to synchronize human life with cosmic rhythms. Harvest festivals like Pongal in the south and Baisakhi in the north are elaborate ceremonies of gratitude, honoring the Sun God (Sūrya), the Earth (Bhūmi), and the farm animals whose combined energies sustain human life. Among indigenous communities, festivals like Sarhul explicitly worship the divine essence within specific flora, highlighting the deep animistic and nature-centric roots of broader Hindu ritual life. Initially, these festivals exemplified sustainable living, promoting the use of local, biodegradable materials and foods in a manner that generated minimal waste, embodying a truly sāttvic (pure and harmonious) mode of celebration.

Through these consecrated acts, the abstract principles of dharma and ecological reciprocity become tangible, lived realities, cyclically reaffirming the sacred bond between humanity and Prakṛti.





VI. Addressing the Counterargument

Despite the profound ecological ethos embedded in Hindu scripture and philosophy, a common critique targets the environmental degradation associated with modern festival practices. This criticism, however, frequently commits a fundamental category error, conflating the faith's essential darśana (worldview) with the socio-pathological deviations of contemporary society. It unjustly characterizes Hindu Dharma as the source of ecological harm when, in fact, the tradition itself is a victim of adharmic misinterpretation, commercialization, and a decaying civic consciousness, often driven by a post-colonial, consumerist economy that delinked traditional crafts from their sacred, ecological context.

This dissonance is starkly illustrated in festivals like Ganesh Chaturthi and Holi. The traditional visarjan (immersion) of a mūrti sculpted from river clay and colored with organic turmeric was a perfect enactment of the pañcamahābhūta doctrine, symbolizing the cyclical return of the elements to their source. Today's mass-produced idols, made from toxic plaster of Paris and industrial paints, are a profane substitute. Their immersion is not a sacred dissolution but an act of permanent pollution that introduces viṣa (poison) into the ecosystem, violating the core Hindu value of śauca (purity). Similarly, the replacement of fragrant, flower-based colors of Holi with synthetic chemicals severs the festival's connection to the rhythms of the seasons (ṛtu) and the vibrancy of the natural world. These are not scriptural mandates but material corruptions driven by a commercial ethos detached from dharmic principles.

Grand religious pilgrimages, such as the Mahakumbh Mela, face similar scrutiny for their immense environmental toll [17]. Yet again, the issue is not the act of tīrthayātrā (pilgrimage), a journey for spiritual merit and renewal, but the failure of modern infrastructure coupled with a collapse of communal responsibility. The sacred belief in the Ganga's self-purifying power (pāvana) has been perversely exploited to justify large-scale negligence, ignoring the co-equal emphasis on external and internal cleanliness (śauca) that is foundational to a dharmic life. This represents a crisis of application, not theology.

Crucially, what critics often ignore is the vibrant, internal dharmic renaissance already underway within Hindu communities to rectify these issues. The growing movement among artisans to return to biodegradable clay mūrtis and the promotion of herbal colors are not merely "eco-friendly" trends but acts of reclaiming and revitalizing

sāttvic (pure, harmonious) traditions [18]. These initiatives reflect a conscious reinterpretation of paramparā (tradition) through the lens of environmental dharma, proving that the principles for reform lie within the faith itself.

Ultimately, the root issue is not religion but a crisis in civic culture, where the unbridled pursuit of commerce (artha) has become delinked from the ethical guidance of dharma. The fact that Hindu festivals celebrated in the diaspora are often cleaner further indicates the problem is one of localized implementation, not inherent ideology [19]. Therefore, rather than condemning a profound spiritual heritage, a more constructive approach must acknowledge the ecological wisdom it contains and direct efforts toward education and infrastructure that empower practitioners to live in alignment with it.

VII. Putting It All Together

Hindu Dharma's vast scriptural, philosophical, and ritualistic traditions converge to articulate a profound and comprehensive sacred ecology. It is a worldview that sanctifies the entirety of creation, seeing nature not as a resource for exploitation but as the vibrant, manifest body of the divine. From the Vedic hymns that envision the Earth as a sentient mother (Bhūmi) and the cosmos as the anatomy of the Virat Purusa; to the Upanishadic realization of a non-dual reality (Brahman) where harming nature is a metaphysical self-injury; from the ethical imperatives of ahimsā and dharma that demand compassionate alignment with cosmic order (ṛta); and through the seasonal festivals that enact this covenant with Prakṛti: Hindu Dharma advances a life lived in conscious, sacred alignment with the Earth.

The modern ecological transgressions committed during some contemporary festivals are therefore not expressions of this sophisticated theology, but profound betrayals of it. These lapses represent a manifestation of adharma, where the sāttvic harmony of traditional practice has been corrupted by tāmasic ignorance and the excesses of commercialism. This is a sociological pathology, born of a ruptured civic awareness, not a theological principle. Thankfully, a dharmic resurgence is underway, as a growing movement within the global Hindu community works to restore this sacred connection, using both ancient wisdom and modern innovation to realign its practices with its foundational values.

As humanity confronts an unprecedented ecological crisis, a symptom of a deeply fractured relationship with the natural world, it is all the more urgent to revisit the



spiritual technologies contained within Hindu dharma. The time has come to re-sacralize our perception and to recover the divine not only in temples and texts but in the very fabric of existence: in the trees, rivers, mountains, and skies. By embracing Hindu Dharma's original ecological teachings and creatively modernizing their application, its

practitioners can lead the way in cultivating a just, balanced, and reverent relationship with the planet. Ultimately, this is the essential praxis of vasudhaiva kutumbakam: recognizing that 'the world is one family' is not merely a poetic ideal, but an ecological and soteriological mandate upon which our collective survival depends [20]. ■

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About the Authors



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THE NAME GAME

● By Nitya (Nat) Jaswani

“Hi, my name’s Nat.”

Upon introducing myself to people that way, I often get the question of what ‘Nat’ stands for—the most common guesses are ‘Natasha’ or ‘Natalie’. Unfortunately, I’m not named after a Marvel superhero or someone whose job is to man a port.

My real name is Nitya. I stopped going by it sometime in 7th grade, either because I finally gained consciousness or because I was just sick of having to explain myself. No, it’s not ‘Ni-tee-ya’ or ‘Nidia’ or the worst one I’ve gotten from my freshman geometry teacher: ‘Neechya’.

It’s so much easier to avoid the questions with a simple 3 letters (though some substitute teachers will call me ‘Nate’ regardless).

When I think about this nickname too deeply and the timing of it all, it was at a time when I was on social media a lot. Unfortunately for me, social media is a terrible place for any minority. Anywhere I looked, and even to this day, I’m bombarded with awful comments targeting Indians—that we smell, that we don’t shower, that we eat revolting food. If we’re seen as disgusting, why would we—why would I—ever want to associate with that culture?

I’m a victim of this conditioning. If I saw someone

outside at the mall dressed like Kajol from K3G, my first thought would be one of embarrassment.

It’s heartbreaking to realize how deeply this shame is ingrained—to the point where I feel disconnected from my own heritage.

I’m scared to be Indian.

I’m left in a liminal space: not fully belonging to the culture I came from, nor to any other that isn’t mine to claim. It’s as if I don’t have a culture anymore.

To backtrack though, I can’t say that’s entirely true. I can’t even commit to the bit. Even though I have a painful, sweaty walk to the Bio Building after lunch, I still go all the way back to the dorms to eat the home-cooked food my mom made for me—instead of the 5-star potstickers at Lakeside.

It’s like flipping identities—Nat wears eyeliner every morning (though she’s blind as a bat). Nitya makes bad jokes in Hindi to her brown hallmate. Nat listens to indie pop. Nitya volunteers at her local Hindi school every other Sunday.

But...maybe all of that is all of me.

Here, no one will frown when I tell them my real name is Nitya. Here, I’ll get genuine curiosity at the food I eat and appreciation for the hard work my mom put in to cook for me. They understand that I



and yeah, it sucks that I'm not perfectly fluent in Hindi, but all of that doesn't matter. I am Indian and can't run away from that—and that makes all of my experiences Indian American.

The shame and fear will take a lot to totally unlearn, but I think if I work towards the understanding that Nat and Nitya aren't fighting each other—that they're just existing together—then I can find the truth of who I am.

So, yes: Hi, my name's Nat—but I'm also Nitya. And that part of me will always exist.

Explanation: To get into GHP, I submitted an essay surrounding identity. I never found the answer to the shame I felt in just being Indian and how that made me feel inauthentic. I thought I'd revisit this topic after the Borges and You class, where we discussed, at length, Borges' distaste towards the 'boiling down' of culture. We discussed that, because he is Argentinian, whatever he writes can be Argentinian Literature, regardless of if it fits the set mold or not. I realized the same idea applies to me: whatever I do, that's an Indian American experience—because I'm the one doing it, and I can't erase that part of myself. I've also learned something from being here. I was honestly scared, at first, of being one of the only nonwhite students in my hall. But it didn't matter. There was no judgment. No separation. I felt like I belonged. And for the first time, I didn't feel like I had to be less Indian to be accepted. ■

miss her cooking (and spices in general).

So, no, I won't wear a bindi everyday, no I won't be posting a Bollywood song to my story,

About the Author

Nitya Jaswani is a senior at Johns Creek High school with a passion for storytelling that blends introspection and emotional resonance. When not writing, she's likely drawing, singing, or exploring a new city/country with her family.



MAHAKUMBH 2025

A Phenomenal Spiritual Extravaganza

● Subhasish Chakraborty

My Journey to Prayagraj

As a spiritual practitioner and with my family's umbilical cord tied to the Ramkrishna Math for several generations, my parents had the good fortune to take the holy dip in the Haridwar Kumbh Mela back in 1998. However, with none of them alive now, a sudden phone call from my Dubai based younger brother, triggered in me that irresistible urge to participate in the 2025 Mahakumbh.

I was tremendously swayed by the unprecedented media deluge on the 2025 Mahakumbh from Jan 13 to Feb 26, but never realistically thought of venturing into Prayagraj in the midst of utter chaos - transportation hassles, non-availability of accommodation and the formidable challenge of immersing oneself with the sea of humanity, all of 660 million!

The Wake-Up Call:

The call from my Dubai based younger brother on the evening of 21st Feb, was what triggered the journey from Kalyani to Prayagraj by road. Yes, by road, all of 770 Kms.

I tried every avenue- air tickets, rail tickets, even toyed with the idea of travelling on a VOLVO bus; but drew a blank, much to our consternation. All paths seemed closed.

After hours of mobile conversations with my brother, we were left with the one last option - Self-drive.

I hired a Maruti Swift Dezire, and as the news of my impending pilgrimage to Prayagraj spread in my locality, three economically weak daily wage workers - a carpenter, a plumber and another one, a painter/ Rajmistri, all of whom had in the past worked in my house, showed indomitable courage and requested me to somehow accommodate them



onboard and onwards to Prayagraj.

With time running out, we hurriedly packed all we could - food, clothing, gas ovenand uttering my Guru Mantra on my lips, we commenced our journey by road at around 7 P.M. on the 23rd of Feb to Prayagraj.

Back Breaking Journey - Phase 1:

The road - NH19 was pretty good, and we touched Durgapur, Asansol, Dhanbad, Jharkhand, Bihar and much before entering Varanasi, we took a call not to travel any further as our body was giving up. We were exhausted and drained by 15 hours of non-stop travel, with just two short breaks in between.

Varanasi and Beyond:

As we hadn't made any prior bookings in Varanasi, I started making frenetic phone calls from 4 P.M. onwards, even as we sped on the highway. After approximately 25 calls to 25 different hotels and lodges, by divine intervention, I managed to book a room in a shanty lodge just adjacent to the Kashi Vishwanath temple in Varanasi.

A refreshing shower followed by a quick Benarasi dinner at 11.30 P.M, we retired for the night, only to wake up at 5 A.M.

We hurriedly packed our belongings, checked out of the hotel and embarked on a long walk to the nearest crematorium/ Mahasamshan - Harishchandra Ghat, through the super-crowded alleyways of Varanasi.

Performing Pinda Daan at Varanasi:

The site of numerous scantily clad ash-smeared Aghori Baba's greeted us at Harischandra Ghat. Each one blessing throngs of devotees and pilgrims with their customary peacock-feathered elongated bamboo/wooden rods! A gentle pat on the head, followed by a hit at the back!

Since my father passed away a year back, performing the Pinda Dan at Varanasi was of great significance, as this ritual is believed to be highly auspicious in Hindu Sanatani traditions.

From the teeming multitudes of pilgrims assembled at Harischandra Ghat, 90% of them cherishing the desire to perform the once-in-a-lifetime ritual of Pinda Dan of their ancestors, the scene was straight out of a mysterious melodrama - ash-smeared Naga Baba's chanting mysterious Mantras invoking Divinity, hundreds of boats on the holy Ganges River ferrying pilgrims back and forth and those never-ending funeral flames burning the corpses. A truly surreal setting, as if reminding humanity of the vanity of our material existence!

I for one can vouch for the fact that once you book a slot and sit down quietly on the banks of the Ghat to perform

the Pinda Daan, there indeed is harmony in the midst of all the chaos and cacophony at Harischandra Ghat. The Pundits are well versed and guide you through the entire process, making the Pinda Dan a seamless endeavour. In fact, there are Tamil, Telugu, Malayali and Kannadiga Pundits available at the Ghats of Varanasi to cater to the throngs of South Indian pilgrims who converge to Varanasi everyday with the express intention of performing the Pinda Dan.

Onwards to Prayagraj:

After performing the 1.5 hours Pinda Dan at Varanasi, we had an impromptu lunch and proceeded in all earnest for Prayagraj - a drive of 123 Kms. on NH19, which we covered in 3.5 hours.

As we were travelling on the last leg of the Mahakumbh, the traffic snarls weren't that bothersome. But, yeah, from Varanasi the spectre of cars of all sizes, big and small were wheezing past along the National Highway; all had one destination to reach - Prayagraj.

We didn't have any idea where to halt for the night and as we made our entry inside the Mahakumbh City - an endless ocean of tents, dusty roads, floating jetties and weary pilgrims on the move caught our attention.

We followed the advice of the local police and travelled at least 15 Kms. on those dusty makeshift roads that took us to the main Mahakumbh amphitheatre and parked our vehicle at the Sector 10 Parking lot.

With just our rucksacks, mobile phone and wallets in our possession, we embarked on the walk-of-our-life, which we were told was all of 20 Kms. that would take us to the Bathing Ghat.

A kilometer on, our energy levels were dwindling and walking further was such a pain! Here again there was a divine intervention, courtesy, an empty rickety 6-seater auto rickshaw, the kind you find in Prayagraj, who parked his vehicle and offered us not just his transport services, but also walked that extra mile by arranging the much-needed accommodation in his friend's house.

Next morning we woke up at 3 A.M. and embarked on a barefoot walk of 8 kms. towards the nearest bathing Ghat - Kila Ghat. Although there were other Ghats like Dashashwamedh, Saraswati, Rasulabad and the Triveni Sangam, all of them were either too far or out of bounds for common pilgrims.

The past 48 hours of grueling travel, dearth of good sleep and partaking food at roadside restaurants had already taken a lot out of our physical, mental and emotional wellbeing; so much so that walking the last mile to the Prayagraj (Kila) bathing ghat seemed a herculean struggle.



The last wave of the North Indian winter was on and it was actually quite chilly out there when we managed to take those few holy dips in Prayagraj, with at least a million other pilgrims - from toddlers to the aged, cutting across the stupendous geographical diversity of India and across the globe. All united to achieve the one thing that mattered- “Moksha” and “Bliss”.

The Spiritual Explosion:

Every Kumbh is auspicious; but the 2025 edition was the biggest ever congregation on Planet Earth- 660 millions! And, I reckon that the tagline “144 years Once-in-a-lifetime occurrence” was the biggest ever tagline impact in the history of human civilization. This one simple sentence conveyed to the world the message of the Mahakumbh with such precision that would put to shame all the contemporary laser and GPS systems.

The Mahakumbh was a spontaneous display of Bharat's spiritual magnanimity and one could literally live the experience of the phrase - “faith can move mountains” to the hilt.

As a nation blessed with spiritual energy since the dawn of civilization, the Mahakumbh offered to the world a glimpse of Bharat's untamed, raw and unadulterated spiritual potency. The mysterious sights and sounds of Bharat's hidden spiritual laboratories - the Akharas, consisting of Mahanirvani, Niranjani, Atal, Anand, Juna and Avahana cast such a magical spell, which left the world completely stupefied; perhaps even hypnotised.

Spiritual Renaissance:

For me and for millions of other pilgrims, the road to Prayagraj Mahakumbh wasn't easy. And, Mahakumbh being the mother of all pilgrimages was a test of endurance, both physical and mental. The rigours of embarking upon a pilgrimage of such magnitude does have a transformative impact upon the pilgrim's mindset by way of purification. Needless to say, the Mahakumbh has been a humbling experience.

The stupendous cultural diversity of Bharat was on full display and the Mahakumbh offered a peek into the vibrant spiritual potency viz-a-viz the exchange of ideas with saints

and scholars.

How do you comprehend a phenomenon that showcases the origins of the world's oldest civilization - the Sanatan Dharma, from ancient times to a global congregation of 660+ million visitors, using cutting-edge technology and AI powered surveillance systems for a truly immersive cultural extravaganza!

I consider myself so very fortunate to have been a witness to this phenomenal event that accommodated the confluence of 660 million pilgrims in a temporary city spread over 4,000 hectares.

For me, the Mahakumbh was a massive tectonic change of mindset; with Naga Babas, Kalpavasis and Mandaleshwars taking center stage, instead of CEOs, corporate honchos and real estate magnates.

Wrapping Up:

Visitors who had meticulously planned their visit to Prayagraj Mahakumbh at least six months in advance had a stellar experience. Many travel and tour companies offered immersive cultural tours, comfortable deluxe camps, gourmet food, options for exploring the Akharas and seamless transportation.

For me the biggest takeaways from the 2025 Mahakumbh was the purification process through barefoot walking. The 10 Kms. walking tour of Aghori tents offered me with a firsthand experience of the mysterious Aghori practices, their post-mortem rituals and a rare glimpse into their fascinating lifestyle.

To wrap up the Prayagraj Mahakumbh experience, I have come back with a deeper perspective on Bharat's asceticism and a profound connection with Divinity, which otherwise would have been beyond my comprehension.

As a travel writer and a practicing spiritualist, I would definitely recommend every citizen of the world to come on a visit to India and try coinciding your visit during the Purna Kumbh Mela, which takes place every 12 years and Ardh Kumbh, every 6 years.

The Kumbh Mela challenges the very contours of our modern-day conventional spirituality and it is your passport to an India you never knew existed. ■

About the Author

Subhasish Chakraborty is a Travel Writer & Consultant Tourism.



What is Upaniṣad (उपनिषद्) ?

● By Dr. Bharat C. Patel

The word Upaniṣad (उपनिषद्) is not the name of the book. Upaniṣad (उपनिषद्) primarily means knowledge, Vidyā (विद्या). In one word, Upaniṣad (उपनिषद्) means Brahma vidyā (ब्रह्मविद्या). It is like any other Saṃskṛta (संस्कृत) word. Upaniṣad (उपनिषद्) has two prefixes, Upa (उप) and Ni (नि), added to the word Ṣad (षद्) with the root Ṣad! (षद्ल). The prefix Upa (उप) means that which is the nearest. The nearest is oneself, "I," the Ātmā (आत्मा). The prefix Ni (नि) means certainty, that which is well ascertained. Therefore, Ni (नि) implies knowledge. The root Ṣad! (षद्ल) has threefold meanings – षद्ल विशरणगत्यवसादनेषु: 1) Viśaraṇam (विशरणम्) or Śithilikaraṇam (शिथिलीकरणम्) means to loosen; 2) Avasādanam (अवसादनम्) means to destroy; and 3) Gati (गति) or Gamanam (गमनम्) means to take to, or to lead to. The word Ṣad (षद्), being the agent of action indicated by its root and, hence, with the implied meanings of prefixes Upa (उप) and Ni (नि), means that which loosens, puts an end to, and makes one reach.

What does it loosen? Upaniṣad (उपनिषद्) loosens the bondage of Saṃsāra (संसार). It loosens the Āsakti (आसक्ति), excessive attachment, to sense objects. It loosens wrong values, wrong attitudes, or improper insistences. What does it destroy? It destroys ignorance. It destroys self-ignorance. It destroys ignorance about the truth. Where does it take? It takes one to Brahman (ब्रह्मन्). Therefore, Upaniṣad (उपनिषद्)

means the knowledge that loosens the bondage of Saṃsāra (संसार), the knowledge that destroys self-ignorance, and the knowledge that takes one to Brahman (ब्रह्मन्), to one's true nature, one's Svarūp (स्वरूप). सर्व दुःख निवृत्ति द्वारा मोक्ष प्राप्यति इति उपनिषद्, sarva duḥkha nivṛtti dvārā mokṣa prāpyati iti upaniṣad. It eliminates all kinds of sorrows or Duḥkha (दुःख) and takes one to Mokṣa (मोक्ष). That is called Upaniṣad (उपनिषद्). It is the Vidyā (विद्या) or knowledge revealed by a body of words or a set of Mantrāḥ (मन्त्राः). In a secondary sense, the body of the words that reveal this knowledge is also called Upaniṣad (उपनिषद्). When we refer to a book, "This is Upaniṣad (उपनिषद्)," the word Upaniṣad (उपनिषद्) is used in the secondary sense. The primary meaning of the word Upaniṣad (उपनिषद्) is knowledge, the knowledge that destroys self-ignorance and takes one to Brahman (ब्रह्मन्). In other words, Brahma vidyā (ब्रह्मविद्या), or self-knowledge, is called Upaniṣad (उपनिषद्). Such a body of words or the set of Mantrāḥ (मन्त्राः) revealing the self-knowledge, revealing the identity between the individual and the totality (the entirety), appear in various sections of different Vedāḥ (वेदाः). For instance the set of Mantrāḥ (मन्त्राः) in the Atharvaveda (अथर्ववेद), in Muṇḍakaśākhā (मुण्डकशाखा), in Mantravibhāga (मन्त्रविभाग) is known as Muṇḍakopaniṣad (मुण्डकोपनिषद्). Generally, the name given to a Upaniṣad (उपनिषद्) does not have much significance or implication.



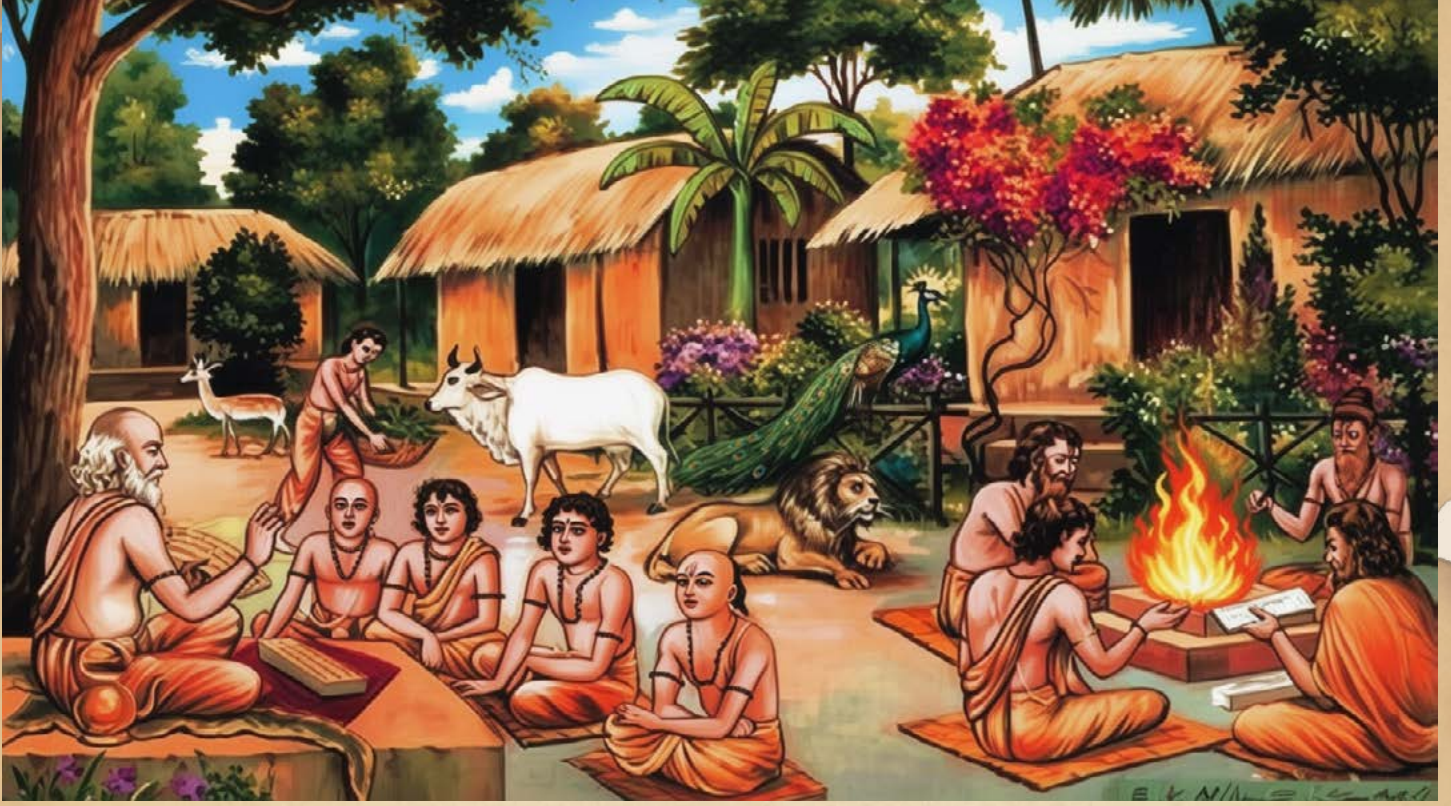
Rṣayah (ऋषयः) never bothered to give names. Sometimes it isn't easy to even know who the Guru (गुरु) is or who the Śiṣya (शिष्य) is. What is passed on by Paramparā (परंपरा), by tradition, is knowledge, and some name is given to the set of Mantrāḥ (मन्त्रः). While some names are based on content, or main topics they deal with, or the Rṣi (ऋषि) who compiled it, or the Rṣi (ऋषि) to whom it may be attributed, or the way they are structured, it is also seen that some names are given based on the first word of the first verse of the set of Mantrāḥ (मन्त्रः). For instance, Īśāvāsyopaniṣad (ईशावास्योपनिषद्) begins with ईशावास्यमिदं सर्वं Īśāvāsyamidam sarvaṃ, all this is pervaded by Īśvara (ईश्वर). The first word of the first verse is Īśāvāsyā (ईशावास्य), and so the Upaniṣad (उपनिषद्) is given the name Īśāvāsyopaniṣad (ईशावास्योपनिषद्). Similarly, Kenopaniṣad (केनोपनिषद्) of the Sāmaveda (सामवेद) begins with केनेषितं पतति प्रेषितं मनः keneṣitaṃ patati preṣitaṃ manaḥ, by whom willed and directed does the mind light on its subjects? The first word of the verse is Kena (केन), and so the Upaniṣad (उपनिषद्) is given the name Kenopaniṣad (केनोपनिषद्).

In the case of Muṇḍakopaniṣad (मुण्डकोपनिषद्), although the Muṇḍaka (मुण्डक) name is derived from the Muṇḍakaśākhā (मुण्डकशाखा) of the Atharvaveda (अथर्ववेद), there is a mention in the religious votive rites of Vratam (व्रतं) of how the name Muṇḍaka (मुण्डक) originated. Why is it called Muṇḍakopaniṣad (मुण्डकोपनिषद्)? It is said that when someone wants to study this Muṇḍakaśākhā (मुण्डकशाखा), they have to adhere to some Vratam (व्रतं), some vows, and some discipline. One of the disciplines is Śirovratam (शिरोव्रतं), where one keeps a fire in a pot on one's head while studying. It is symbolic. Fire is a symbol of knowledge. In those Vedāntika (वेदान्तिक) times, there were primarily two sources of light: the sun and fire. A very well-lit fire and the blazing sun have almost the same color, a reddish-orange or ochre hue. That particular color becomes a symbol of light, and light is a symbol

of knowledge. Ignorance is symbolized by darkness. Knowledge is symbolized by light. In Hindu tradition, prayers are initiated by lighting a lamp. Generally, Pūjā (पूजा) or a worship ritual is concluded with Ārti (आरती), implying that there is a prayer for knowledge, a prayer for the right kind of wisdom. There is always a proper way of looking at the world. There is a proper way of evaluating oneself and the situation. So, lighting a lamp is a prayer seeking proper knowledge and wisdom. "I must look at my life situation, myself, and Īśvara (ईश्वर) properly." Seeing Īśvara (ईश्वर) properly means knowing Īśvara (ईश्वर) "as He is."

One who commits their lifestyle exclusively to the pursuit of self-knowledge and discovering the truth is given certain clothes of ochre color – the color of light or the color of fire. One who wears these clothes implies and declares to society that he is the one who has committed to the pursuit of knowledge, with the exclusion of all other pursuits. Such a person is called a Saṃnyāsi (संन्यासी). Total commitment to the pursuit of knowledge at the exclusion of everything else is called Mumukṣutvam (मुमुक्षुत्वम्).

The person with such commitment is called a Mumukṣu (मुमुक्षु), one who is desirous of Mokṣa (मोक्ष), one who wants Mokṣa (मोक्ष). What type of Mumukṣutvam (मुमुक्षुत्वम्) should one have? They say it should be Dīptaśikhāvat (दीप्तशिखावत्). A traditional example is a person adorning a huge matted hair lock, a Jaṭā (जटा). The hair of the Jaṭā (जटा) is usually dry because of the lack of oil. Somehow, a spark of fire comes and hits him on the head. At that moment, he may be eating his favorite dish, listening to something he likes, or doing something he needs to do. The Jaṭā (जटा) begins to burn. Instantly, he gives up everything and wants only one thing: water to extinguish the fire. Nothing else matters. He needs water from wherever it is available, from whoever can supply it, or in whatever condition it is. Everything is



subservient. He must have water to extinguish the flame. That kind of single-pointed commitment to adhere to the desire for Mokṣa (मोक्ष) is called Mumukṣutvam (मुमुक्षुत्वम्). Such commitment is symbolized by Śīrovratam (शिरोव्रतं), holding fire on one's head, implying that here is a person who has committed to Mokṣa (मोक्ष) at the exclusion of all other life pursuits.

There is another meaning of "fire on the head." Since fire symbolizes knowledge, here is a person who has some knowledge. Which knowledge? Knowledge can mean anything. Here, knowledge means maturity. One who practices Śīrovratam (शिरोव्रतं) is relatively mature. He is psychologically grown up, not just physically. What does maturity mean? Who is mature? A mature person is a more objective person who objectively evaluates life experiences, relationships, and himself. A relatively objective person is a factual person. On the other hand, a relatively subjective person lives in his subjective world, in his world of likes and dislikes. He tries to fix relationships in his life situations based on his likes and dislikes. He tries to fix up the external world in the structure laid down by his likes and dislikes. There is an absence of Vairāgya (वैराग्य), an absence of dispassion in such a person. A mature person

is Viraktaḥ (विरक्तः), one who has Vairāgya (वैराग्य), one who has dispassion. What does it mean to be dispassionate?

One is said to be dispassionate when one is objective. To be dispassionate, one need not give up things. Even if one has the opportunity to give up, and one does, with whatever world one has to relate to, one must be objective. Vairāgya (वैराग्य) does not mean that formerly, one had countless likes and dislikes but has now reduced to a few. Vairāgya (वैराग्य) means "I learn to be objective in every life situation. Whatever life situations I face, little or less, I still learn to be objective." A person practicing Śīrovratam (शिरोव्रतं) who knows means a person who lives objectively and possesses both Vairāgya (वैराग्य) and Mumukṣutvam (मुमुक्षुत्वम्). Such conduct must be observed at all times. Mumukṣutvam (मुमुक्षुत्वम्) implies exclusive commitment. During meditation, as पूज्य स्वामी दयानन्द सरस्वतीजी, pūjya svāmī dayānanda sarasvatījī would say, "I have an appointment with myself," implying that this is my most important and valuable time. "It is I with whom I am giving time. I should give exclusive and complete attention to the pursuit of study." A Mumukṣu (मुमुक्षु) or Saṁnyāsī (संन्यासी) is committed to giving 24/7 attention. Only such a person can study Upaniṣad (उपनिषद्). Another popular meaning



of Muṇḍakopaniṣad (मुण्डकोपनिषद्) stems from the word Muṇḍanam (मुण्डनं). Muṇḍanam (मुण्डनं) means shaving of the head. Muṇḍakopaniṣad (मुण्डकोपनिषद्) is so named because one who studies this Upaniṣad (उपनिषद्) has shaved his head. What is the significance of shaving the head? Just as innumerable hairs are on the head, so are there countless desires in individuals. There is a similarity between hair and desires. Hair on one's head symbolically represents desires. The more one cuts hair, the more it grows. Likewise, the more desires are fulfilled, the more new ones emerge. Fulfilling a given desire does not guarantee that it will not reappear. Shaving or removing hair means suspending all desires. Though one can suspend desires, they don't go away for good. They will be there as long as the mind is. One has to be objective with a resolve that “मनोबुद्ध्यहङ्कार चित्तानि नाहं, manobuddhyahankāra cittāni nāham, neither am I the mind nor the intellect nor the subconscious mind or ego.” That is the true relinquishing of desires. That is the shedding of all binding desires. So, a Mumukṣu (मुमुक्षु) with a shaven head means a person who has suspended all desires. He has only one desire – Mokṣecchā (मोक्षेच्छा), a desire for liberation. He commits to the lifestyle in the exclusive pursuit of knowledge. That is why it is called Muṇḍakopaniṣad (मुण्डकोपनिषद्). ■



About the Author

Dr. Bharat C. Patel has published three books 1) Searching Happiness

2) Intent of Shrimad Bhagavad Gita – Path to Self-Realization, and 3) Essence of Shrimad Bhagavad Gita - with Compound Separation (पदच्छेद, Padaccheda) and Concordance (अन्वय, Anvaya). They are available on Amazon worldwide.





Bhagwad Gita for Children VI

From a series of talks by Sanjay Mehta, transcribed and
compiled by **Jaya Asthana**

Chapter 3 (contd):

Karma Yog

In Chapter 2 we saw that I am the Atma, not the body. Just like a bottle is called water bottle because it holds water, our body is called atman because it has the atma in it.

We keep repeating it because the second chapter is fundamental. It is important to understanding the rest of the Geeta.

Shlok 14:

annād bhavanti bhūtāni parjanyaḍ
anna-sambhavaḥ
yajñād bhavati parjanyo yajñah
karma-samudbhavaḥ

Shlok 15:

karma brahmodbhavaṁ viddhi
brahmākṣhara-samudbhavam
tasmāt sarva-gataṁ brahma nityaṁ
yajñe pratiṣṭhitam

All beings are evolved from food; production of food is dependent on rain; rain ensues

from sacrifice, and sacrifice is rooted in prescribed action. Know that prescribed action has its origin in the Vedas, and the Vedas proceed from the Indestructible (Bhagwan); hence the all-pervading Infinite is always present in sacrifice.

We are made of food. Food comes from the crops, and crops come from rain. Rain comes from clouds. Clouds are made by evaporation. Water evaporates from the ocean and forms clouds.





That is called action. All our collective action creates the clean atmosphere, and the whole cycle works well. That is good karma. Karma is rooted in the Vedas, and the Vedas are nothing but Bhagwan. So when we offer all our good karma to Bhagwan, we get it back as prasad. In English we can call Prasad as a blessing. Everything we do, we offer to Bhagwan.

But if we pollute the atmosphere, the cycle gets disturbed. This shlok is talking about the ecosystem which is within ourselves. Our body is like an ecosystem, it is perfectly balanced.

Shlok 21:

yad yad ācharati śhreṣṭhas tat tad evetaro janaḥ
sa yat pramāṇaṁ kurute lokas tad anuvartate

For whatever a great man does, that very thing other men also do; whatever standard he sets up, the generality of men follow the same.

Any person who someone follows becomes a responsible person. I am responsible for many things, watering a plant, keeping the street clean, etc. I am responsible for my action (karma). The result of that action may hurt or help someone. If I throw a banana peel on the street, somebody may slip and fall. So I must

be responsible. No matter how old we are, somebody is watching and learning from us. Every action of ours must be thoughtful, because someone may be following us. If we surrender our actions to Bhagwan, they will all be good. At every stage of life, we should be careful, do thoughtful action, keeping Bhagwan foremost in our mind. If we devote all our actions to Bhagwan, it will automatically become good actions (karma).

There was a big snowstorm one day. A man wanted to get something from the barn, which was up on a hill. The snow was heavy and icy. He struggled to walk, sometimes he wobbled and slipped, but managed to regain his steps. The man heard a sound and looked behind him. He saw that his son was walking in his footsteps. The son cautioned his father to be careful because he was following him.

That is what this shlok says. There are people who follow you, no matter what you do. So make sure whatever you do, you do to the best of your ability, because you don't know who may be following you.

We are all leaders in some way. This shlok tells us to be careful and perform all our actions as if we are leading, because we never know when someone may be following in our footsteps. ■





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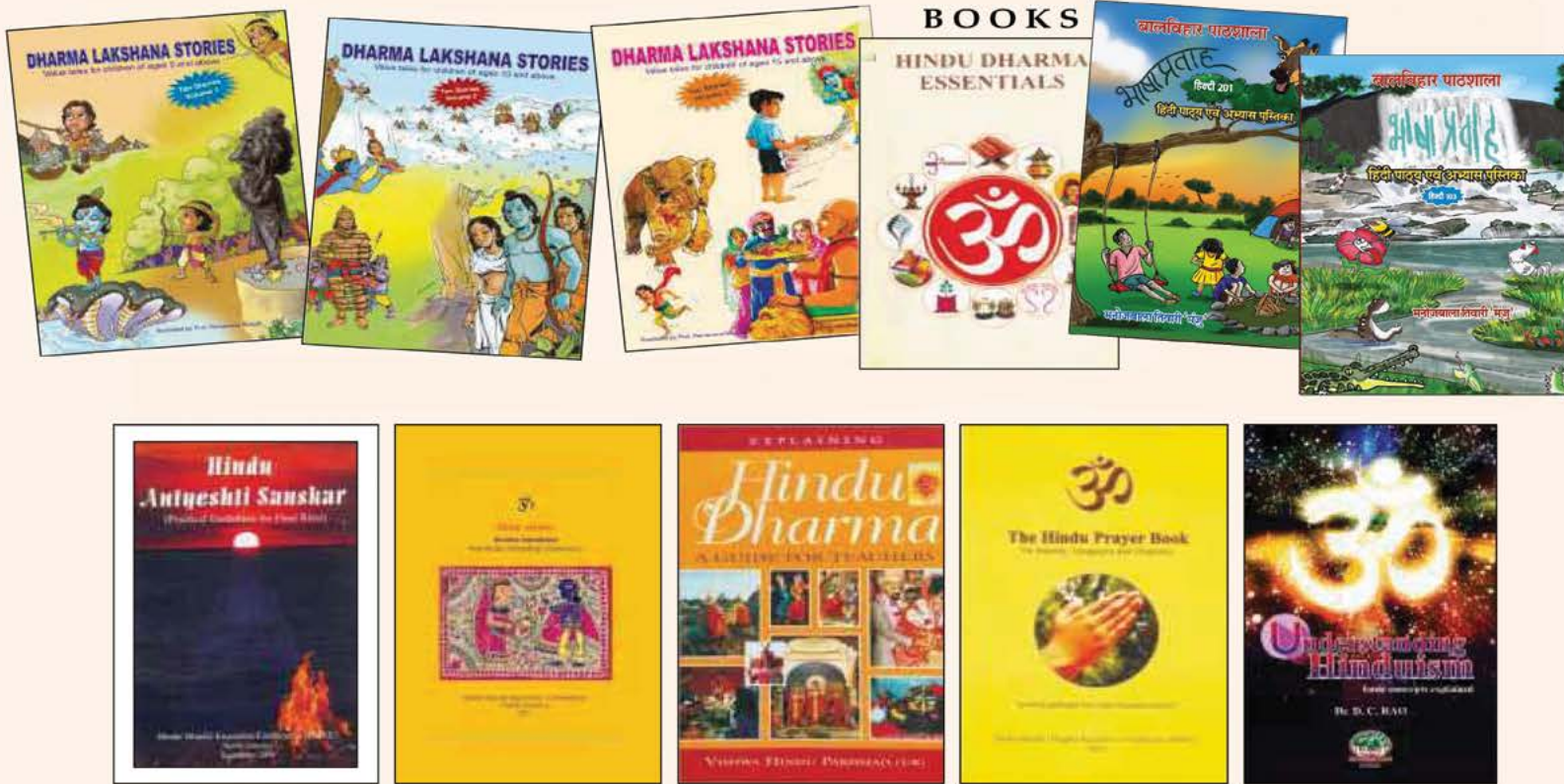
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ॐ असतो मा सद् गमय । तमसो मा ज्योतिर्गमय । मृत्योर्मांमृतम् गमय ।।

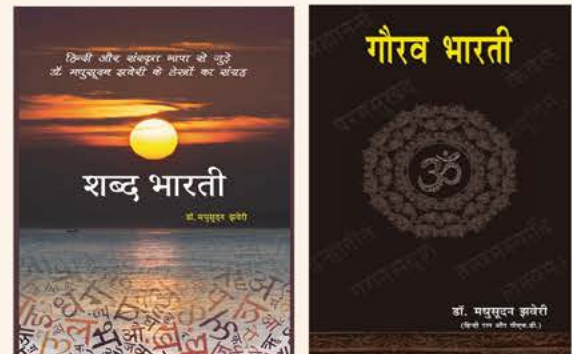
Om, Asato Maa Sad Gamaya; Tamaso Maa Jyotir Gamaya Mrityor Maa Amritam Gamaya

ॐ शांतिः शांतिः शांतिः

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