

WORLD HINDU CONGRESS – 2014

on 21st, 22nd and 23rd of November, 2014

at The Ashok Hotel, Diplomatic Enclave, 50 B, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi, 110021

Address by Chief Minister, Northern Province, Sri Lanka

WHITHER HINDUS?

Gurur Brahma....

Mr. Chairman, Venerable Persons including our Good Hindu the most Venerable Dalai Lama, Distinguished Guests from all over the world, my dear Brothers and Sisters!

I am honoured to be invited to this august assembly of men and women from across the four corners of the World who are mainly votaries of the ancient Sanaadhana Dharma, which has been christened later as the Hindu Religion. The Hindu Religion identified and recognised eternal global and human principles. It had a holistic approach to life. Despite differences in *sampradayas* or religious backgrounds the Sanaadhana Dharma had progressed without being institutionalised. The main reason for this, in my view, was the fact that beneath the vast differences between the different schools of thought there existed the idea that one's view was but a glimpse or a perception of the Truth. The ancient Vedic saying "*Ekam sat; vipra bahutha vadanthi*" (Truth is One; Sages call it by different names) encompassed the spirit of that quality. This resulted in the encouragement of debate and discourse and a pluralistic worldview. The very fact that the Dalai Lama has been chosen as our Chief Guest today proves my point.

As Amartya Sen contends in *Argumentative Indian* the tradition of debate with regard to religion in the subcontinent extends back millennia and was advocated and fostered by not only religious leaders but the temporal rulers as well. There was, therefore, no reason for religion to be institutionalized to afford it protection.

But over the last few centuries political projects utilising institutionalized religions as the means to exert or consolidate political power had deleterious effects on the Hindu Community. These political projects originating from outside the subcontinent tended to decry pluralism and alternate worldviews. Not being in a position to wield political power during this period rendered Hindus helpless. Naturally this threat compelled the votaries of the Hindu religion to take steps to protect their beliefs and collective identity.

It was in this context that Hindus from different backgrounds decided to form an organization to strengthen Hindu society throughout the world. Prominent and respected Hindu leaders such as Swami Chinmayananda Saraswati, Shri M. S. Golwalkar, and Shri Shivram Shankar Apte, undertook this initiative supported by many influential Hindus throughout the World. Over forty important Hindu spiritual and civic leaders after lengthy deliberations finally formed the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) on August 29th, 1964.

Over the past fifty years, the VHP has strived hard to bring together different sections of the Hindu community, to usher in cohesion amidst them and create

greater understanding of the Hindu tradition and religion among the different sections.

They had started a wide range of service and education projects to serve the less fortunate members of Hindu society. VHP played an important role in restoring pride among Hindus about their glorious heritage and made efforts to unify Hindus across the Globe.

Permit me at this stage to address certain specific challenges faced by the significant Sri Lankan Hindu population in our Country. We in Sri Lanka too have faced immense difficulties on account of our religion, quite apart from the other discriminations heaped on communities for other reasons. Our forefathers had worked hard to preserve the Hindu society in the face of successive assaults by Portuguese, Dutch and English colonizers, who wielded their religions as weapons against the Hindus. Though there were several attempts at withstanding the onward march of imperialistic forces, which at the time attempted to convert the Hindus to their religions, it was Shri Arumuga Navalar of Jaffna who initiated in the 19th century a great revival of Hindu traditions. He was a pioneer who was able to rally Hindu forces not only in the North East of Sri Lanka, but also in South India through his mesmeric preaching and his powerful publications. While there may be disagreements on certain aspects of the revivalist movement, especially in relation to the entrenchment of caste hierarchy, the context of the revival as a reaction to the existential threat it faced at the time must be borne in mind. It was a response to the pernicious attempts to change and save the “heathens”! After the initial spadework was done to stem the flow of conversions and

systematic destruction much efforts were expended in internal reform by successive generations of Hindu leaders.

The great work of Hindus in facing up to the calamitous religious and cultural persecution under Colonialism in Sri Lanka came asunder as a violent civil war visited the Hindu dominated North-East regions of Sri Lanka in the last several decades. According to the figures released by the Sri Lankan government's own Ministry of Hindu Religious and Cultural Affairs, out of the 1607 registered Hindu temples 1479 were damaged as of the year 1993. In 2010, which had seen the end to the brutal war in the previous year, the memorandum forwarded to the Director General of the UNESCO by the Hindu Religious Priests' Organization of the North Eastern Provinces said "More than 1560 Hindu temples have been damaged and rendered useless while 240 Hindu temples have been totally destroyed due to the ongoing war in the North and East". This was the violent side to it – there were of course the more subtle measures at play parallelly. The 1972 Constitution cast away secularism, while Hindu missions and communities were evicted from places where they had lived for centuries. This was carried out in Anuradhapura in the North Central Province, where I spent a few years as a young boy, and in Kathirgamam in the Southern Province where most Hindus in Sri Lanka visited at least annually, under the guise of sacred area preservation.

The suffering of the Hindu community did not end when the war came to an end in 2009. It continues to this day as highlighted by the Centre for Policy Alternatives, a leading think tank in its March 2013 report.

"Access to temples in High Security Zones and areas restricted by the military;

Military intrusion into religious practices and rituals;
Buddhist and other religious symbols being set up in the vicinity of Hindu religious sites; Allegations of destruction of kovils and shrines;
Disputes over archaeological sites;
Threats to religious places from development activity;
Concerns of conversions from Hinduism to other religions”

were listed as the major impediments facing the Hindus of the North and East. In fact, when I attempted to visit an area recently as the Chief Minister, upon hearing that Army personnel were destroying a Hindu place of worship, I was politely denied access.

The impact of religious violence and war goes well beyond the physical destruction of places of worship or the denial of the right to worship. Instead these acts undermine the very fabric of society by dismantling the social and cultural ethos thereby laying the foundation for the breakdown in social cohesion and the overall health of our communities. As a Chief Minister of a war torn province with 89,000 war widows I cannot emphasize enough the vital role these religious institutions play in providing comfort to the war affected and facilitating the recovery of communities by acting as a hub for the rebuilding of social linkages and support networks. The vulnerability of war widows struggling to eke out an existence when they have been mostly dispossessed of their lands and livelihoods is even more apparent when you realise that they are surrounded by an occupational army of one hundred and fifty thousand soldiers. Hindus, who place Shakti and Shiva on equal footing in the deeply symbolic

Arthanareeshwara concept will be proud of our women who have had to assume the role of both man and woman in order to preserve what is left of their lives.

In Post war Sri Lanka there has been a virulent rise of religious intolerance particularly towards minority religions by groups that enjoy the protection of the Government. Such has been their activities that His Holiness the Dalai Lama issued a public plea to stop religious persecution in the name of Buddhism. The power of political impulses are such that despite Sri Lanka having a very large population of Buddhists, we dare not invite the Dalai Lama for fear of angering China.

In Sri Lanka, as in many other parts of the globe, both in Asia and beyond, Hindus thus have a situation not too far off from what was faced under colonial rule - religion being used as a tool for oppression and control. While I do not presume to speak on the challenges faced in India, I dare say that the need to identify ourselves as a discernible unit of human beings following an ancient way of life has grown in recent times.

It is such a scenario that has necessitated us to assemble here today once again to formulate effective strategies to combat the many challenges. In formulating our strategies I believe that we should focus on two aspects. The first is to help different communities of Hindus facing existential threat to neutralise those threats effectively. The second, no less important, is to turn inward and reflect on the ways by which Hindus can better focus on their own spiritual enlightenment.

The most vital element needed to safeguard vulnerable religious minorities is to ensure that there is a network of connections that transcend national boundaries. When oppressive forces realise that their actions elicit trans-boundary concerns they are more cautious. The next step is to ensure that the specific vulnerabilities of each community are addressed. In Sri Lanka, for instance, not only do we need to renovate and rebuild the devastated temples, we also need to ensure that we have personnel, skilled in *vedic* and *agamic* teachings who can impart that knowledge to a community that is fast losing touch with their roots. We need to establish institutions of learning that cannot be targeted by marauding extremist groups, only because of their connections to Indian organisations. I would therefore be honoured if the members of this august assembly take an active interest in the lives of the Hindus in Sri Lanka and establish a firm connection.

In our efforts to identify ways and means to march forward it is necessary to take stock of our existing circumstances and ambience. Units of our own families inhabit scattered parts of this wide World pursuing lifestyles different to what they had been born into. Though Hindus, we are exposed to shades and nuances of the same religion according to the areas we inhabit or reside. For example my Teacher in College, who had been the recipient of Indian and Sri Lankan awards for his book on the Indian Schools of Philosophy and Thought had given me sufficient insight even as a student to discern the essentials of Vedantic, Saivite and even Buddhistic philosophy and thought. I had been exposed to the Vedantic School of Hindu thought on account of the close proximity to Ramakrishna

Mission in Colombo and was fortunate to have been initiated into traditional Vedantic Hindu thought by two famous disciples of Swami Sivananda.

The electorate to which I have been elected as Chief Minister and where I spent nearly a decade as a judge, the Northern Province in Sri Lanka, is steeped in Saivite thought and practices. Fortunately I do not pursue a pedantic, parochial, partisan participation in my Religion!

The first recommendation, on the spiritual side, that I wish to commit to this august assembly is the stressing of thoughts and philosophies and their meanings rather than routine rituals to our votaries. Today everyone is privileged to receive an education however mundane or routine it may be but centred around rationality and practicality. Is it not high time for us now to stress on thoughts rather than rituals, which have sometimes taken our Religion to a ridiculously ritualistic regime often unaware of the purpose and import of such rituals? Let not anyone think I am against rituals. I am against the ignorant insistence on religious rituals not accompanied by adequate understanding.

What I am advocating is less of routine rituals and more of enlightened rituals. In some villages in South India the rituals set apart for various caste divisions are followed more vigorously than the essential rituals prescribed by our Religion. Equally important is to invest in rigorous scientific research to study rituals and endeavour to understand their necessity. All too often we have a tendency to string together plausible scientific explanations without adequate research.

Next I would like to suggest the social contemporaneity of our religion. Our religion must look at the society around it as it is today and formulate projects and services to make the ordinary people participate in them and at the same

time receive benefits. People's service must become an intrinsic part of religious worship and the work of the VHP in this regard is laudable. The need to stress service and love as intrinsic parts of the Hindu Religion is more urgent today than any other concept or thought.

In this connection I must congratulate Honourable Prime Minister Modi for having initiated a "clean the villages" all India effort. Cleaning and the maintenance of hygiene is only a part of the project. It is the concern for one's environment and love for one's neighbour that is the essential facet of this admirable project. In fact I conceptualised a few months ago the cleaning up of Tanks and Waterholes in the Jaffna Peninsula on a Shramadana basis since we get our water not from rivers but from waterholes and tanks and they needed immediate attention. It has been scuttled on the basis of a lack of funds by certain members of the administration who do not have the interests of the community at heart. I intend on going back to galvanise the support of the Community at large to complete the scheme.

So let me summarise the recommendations I have put forward as an essential facet of Hindu regeneration as an answer to the question 'Whither Hindus'. Firstly to rationalise our rituals and secondly to make service as an essential ingredient of Religion. Service entails love for fellow human beings. It was said over two thousand years ago by a Hindu Saint Thirumoolar that Love is God! Anbe Sivam! I thank you for your patient hearing!

Justice C.V.Wigneswaran

Chief Minister
Northern Province,
Sri Lanka.