



HINDU AMERICAN VANAPRASTHI NETWORK (HAVAN) CONFERENCE

Saturday, June 9th, 2018

*Engaging Hindu American Vanaprasthis (Senior Adults) For
Strengthening the Next Generation*



By Dhanesh Binda

On a sunny, warm Saturday, June 9th, 2018, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) of America hosted the Hindu American Vanaprasthi Network (HAVAN) Conference at Shri Surya Narayan Mandir (SSNM) in Jamaica, Queens, New York. With help from the vibrant and dedicated devotees of the Mandir, the conference ran efficiently without any problems. Both Vanaprasthis and youths from across the United States attended the HAVAN Conference. Those who made the journey to New York City represented several States, including Indiana, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Massachusetts. The program included seven sessions throughout the day where speakers engaged Vanaprasthis in topics ranging from financial stability to healthy lifestyles to women's roles in the Hindu family.

The day began at 8AM with registration and breakfast. As participants arrived at Shri Surya Narayan Mandir, they were greeted by energized youths, who guided them to fill out forms and obtain



Registration table for the HAVAN Conference

a folder, which included the agenda, fliers detailing resources available for Senior Adults, paper to take



Early registrants enjoying breakfast

notes, and an SSNM pen. Once registered, members then proceeded to the kitchen where breakfast was served. Bagels, croissants, and fruit along with coffee, tea, and orange juice were offered to those who registered early. Members continued to converse and become acquainted with one another until the conference officially began at 9AM. Within the beautiful, spacious Shri Surya Narayan Mandir, chairs were assembled in front of the projection screen for presentations. Session 1 was moderated by Chandra Reddy and began with the Ekatmata Mantra



Conference set-up inside Shri Surya Narayan Mandir

chanted by everyone present. This was followed by an invocation by the youths of SSNM who melodiously recited the Aaditya Hradya Stotra. The Acharya of Shri Surya Narayan Mandir, Guruji Pandit Ram Hardwar, then welcomed those in attendance. Hari Govardhan, a lawyer and devotee of SSNM, delivered the Key Note after the Welcome



SSNM youths ready to chant the Aaditya Hradya Stotra

Address. Mr. Govardhan detailed and stressed why having a conference to engage Vanaprasthis was critical to the development of the next generation as well as the quality of life for Senior Adults in our society. Kumar Dave then gave an overview of the HAVAN conference, providing the framework of how the day would transpire. He defined the mission and goals of the HAVAN conference as being three-fold: to engage Vanasprasthis in meaningful activities; to utilize their skills and wisdom for the benefit of society, and to develop the HAVAN network for like-minded people. Past conferences took place in cities around the U.S. including Allentown, PA, Indianapolis, IN, Detroit, MI, Houston TX, Toledo, OH, Irvine, CA, Atlanta, GA, and Washington D.C. HAVAN aims to involve more temples, organize more seminars/conferences, and possibly establish a chapter in India.

Session 2 started around 10AM with moderator Vikas Maheshwari introducing Vishnu Mahadev, who presented information about financial



Vishnu Mahadev and Ruchi Shah giving their talks

planning, retirement preparation, and the general resources he provides in the community as an advisor. Ruchi Shah then gave an informative talk about different social media platforms and their uses for the Vanaprasthis. She explained how Facebook could be utilized to connect with old friends and family while Google Hangout can be used for people to get together and chat online. Following Mr. Mahadev's and Ms. Shah's presentations was an open panel discussion about their talks. Several questions were asked by the audience including, "If I have not worked in the United States, am I still entitled to Medicaid?" and "What is the privacy like on Facebook? Can I control who sees what I post?"

Session 3 followed with moderator Kumar Dave at 11AM. He first introduced Natraj Chandramouli who presented on Vanaprasthi ashrams and assisted group living. He likened the four stages of a Hindu's life to 4 Ashrams and described the options available to Senior Adults in group living scenarios. Vinod Gupta then gave an informative talk about how Vanaprasthis can age with dignity. He focused his presentation on two topics: physical/mental health and financial wellbeing. Mr. Gupta gave an overview of the illnesses and diseases that accompany aging, such as loss of memory and organ failure. He advised on a well-balanced diet and plenty of exercise to overcome and prevent these health ailments. Mr. Gupta also touched on mental health and how Senior Adults often deal with depression, fear, and boredom. He stated that one's financial status can play a major factor in mental health. From the cost of adult day care to social security and Medicare, financial planning is important to think about early for Vanaprasthis. Mr. Chandramouli's and Mr.



Dr. Anand presenting on heart attacks and strokes

Gupta's talks were followed by a panel of accomplished physicians discussing more specific health conditions. Dr. Reddy, a medical oncologist,

talked about Indians' genetic predisposition to certain cancers and how obesity in Indians is different from other ethnic groups. More specifically, the obesity problems for Indians are concentrated in the midsection. Dr. Anand provided background information about what strokes and heart attacks are biologically and ways to recognize when these ailments are occurring. Dr. Mahabir discussed mental health, primarily depression. He elucidated the warning signs and the molecular basis of depression. With Guyana harboring the highest suicide rate in the world, with North Korea in second, he noted how important it is for West Indians to acknowledge depression and suicide and to help each



Dr. Mahabir discussing mental health

other through difficult problems. Dr. Shukhadia ended the panel with a presentation on travelling abroad. She talked about necessary vaccines, common illnesses, and what medications we should always pack when travelling. Following these medical discussions, the conference then dissolved for lunch at noon. The meal included rice, dhal, aloo curry, and bhajee, with kheer as dessert.

The conference resumed around 1PM with moderator Sanjay Mehta beginning session 4 with an introduction of Devina Persaud. Ms. Persaud gave an insightful talk about bridging the gap between the youths and Vanaprasthis. She discussed the



Devina Persaud presenting about bridging the gap between youths and Vanaprasthis



SSNM youth panel following Devina Persaud's talk

prevalence of technology and the breakdown of communication as a result. She introduced the idea of changing family dynamics, such as divorce and re-marriage. Ms. Persaud also probed the audience for their thoughts about how values have changed between the early 1900s and today along with the topics of feminism and women's empowerment. She asked the audience, "Are love marriages better than arranged marriages even though the divorce rate is 50% in the United States?" Following her thought provoking presentation was a youth panel consisting of several youths from SSNM. They gave their viewpoints on what they saw as the problems causing the gap between youths and Vanaprasthis today, such as the American way of life. The panel also provided solutions which involved being more open and communicative with each other. In order for values to be preserved throughout each generation, grandparents and parents must play an integral part in their children's lives early on. Session 4 ended with Dr. Abhaya Asthana's discussion of the roles Vanaprasthis have on the global stage with their knowledge and experience.

Moderators Tejal Shah and Hansa Dave began session 5 around 1:45PM by introducing Guru Maa Radha Hardowar, wife of Guruji Pandit Ram Hardowar, who talked about the roles of women in the Hindu family and their contribution to society. She stated that the most important duty as a mother is to bring forth Dharma Dhurandhars, children who are experts in the field of Dharma. Guru Maa provided simple, concrete solutions that would introduce children early on to the dharmic way. Some examples include having kids offer a lota of water to Surya Bhagavan before school as Surya might get hot and thirsty during the day or making Monday evenings "cookie evenings" where mothers bake hazelnut ghee cookies with their children and offer them to Lord Shiva and his ganas. Once Guru Maa finished, Prajna Khisty presented on utilizing



Guru Maa Radha Hardowar giving her talk on the roles of women in the Hindu family



Shylaputri Hardowar performing her invocational dance

the strengths and approaches of women power for the wellbeing of Hindu society. Ila Shukhadia followed with her talk about women in leadership roles and their impact in building a strong Hindu society. Around 2:30PM, a tea/coffee break took place with snacks, such as biscuits, pholourie, and sandwiches.

The program then began its conclusion around 3:30PM with Sanjay Mehta introducing the next steps for HAVAN. He wants to have such conferences more frequently and all over the country. The President of Shri Surya Narayan Mandir, Pandit Manoj Prasad, then offered a vote of thanks and transitioned into the cultural portion of the conference. The first performance was a dance by Shylaputri Hardowar followed by singing performances from Mahesh Persaud, Avinash and Ravi Bisram, Reta Singh, and Amisha Tiwari. The youths then closed off the conference with a medley. After a group photo, delicious dinner in the form of bake, paneer, fried aloo, and fried rice, with ice

cream for dessert was provided in the kitchen. Conference attendees were able to exchange contact information and say final goodbyes to newly made friends. Overall, the HAVAN conference was a major success with many new relationships established. Plans for the next conference are already underway!



Youths performing their songs. Top Left: Mahesh Persaud; Top Right: Avinash and Ravi Bisram; Bottom left: Reta Singh; Bottom Right: Amisha Tiwari



Group Picture of all conference attendees following the closing ceremony