

An Interview with Pujya Swami Dayananda Saraswati Sept 7, 2008



Swami Dayananda Saraswati is a great visionary, an eminent teacher of Vedanta, a powerful thinker and writer. As a teacher of Vedanta, he has established four traditional teaching centers and many more across the globe, through his students.

To get a better understanding of the various activities of Pujya Swami Dayananda Saraswati, an interview with Swamiji was conducted by Dr. V. Swaminathan, a scientist by profession, on Sept 7, 2008 at the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Saylorsburg, PA and others, to learn about Swamiji's activities connected with the protection of Hindu Dharma, Traditions, and Culture. The proceedings of the interview are detailed below:

VS: Pranams, Swamiji. Besides your teaching and public talks, you have lately launched several initiatives with the express intent of safeguarding and nurturing the Hindu dharma, traditions, and culture. Here is a list of various activities that I have got glimpses of in satsangas with you:

- Teaching of Vedanta
 - Gurukulams & Spiritual Retreat centers: Running these facilities and Teaching camps and long term courses for 5 to 6 months in a year
 - Inspire and train a large number of people to become Vedanta teachers
 - Many Public talks all over the world every year
 - Outreach program
 - Bhagavad Gita Home study program
 - Research and Publications
- Recognizing contributions to Arsha vidya (Institution of 'Arsha Kula Sreshtha' award)
- Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha (apex body of ancient Hindu sampradayas)
- Hindu Dharma Samstha Pramukh Sabha (body of more recent Hindu institutions which are not members of the Acharya sabha)
- Dharma Rakshana Samiti
 - Recognition and encouragement of Guruswamys
 - Propagation of Grama devata worship (cala-pratistha of Angala Pramesvari Amman)
- Pathshalas for preservation of Vedas and agamas
- Preservation of Temple traditions and cultures
 - Oduvars – recognition and support for livelihood
 - Construction of Ashta DikPalakas and proper offerings at Brhadeesvarar temple
 - Thiruvaidaimarudur ther (chariot) project
- Hindu-Jewish summits
- Promoting Education
 - Dayananda education trust
 - Krupa by Dayananda- B.D.Goenka seva trust
 - Vedic heritage teaching program
- Preservation of arts and music
 - Institution of Arsha Kala Bhushanam awards
 - Thiruppugazh conference
- Promoting global harmony and world peace
- Thinkers meet (a forum for thinkers to address Hindu and National issues)
- Digital library project
- International conference on Vedic Sarasvati River and Hindu Civilization (to get the true story of ancient India)
- Fighting Global warming (by advocating avoidance of red meat eating)

Would Swamiji like to add any other initiatives? I wouldn't be surprised if I missed a few.

Swamiji: I think you have all the significant ones.

VS: Swamiji, this is an incredible amount of work! Let us begin with teaching, that being an area very dear to you. Can Swamiji please speak about his work in this area and about the Gurukulams set up in India and overseas?

Swamiji: I have been teaching Vedanta for almost fifty years now. Currently, I teach courses and hold camps for about 5 to 6 months each year and also deliver public talks in a number of cities in India and overseas. As a student I recognized that for a mumukshu to study Vedanta is not simple – one needs a good teacher, a place to stay, bhiksha – each one of these requires grace. Therefore, I created facilities for a three-year program of study at Rishikesh, Saylorsburg, Anaikatti and lastly in Nagpur. The long-term study program has a syllabus that includes study of Vedanta prakaranas, Bhagvad Gita, Upanisads and finally chatussutri. All these imply the study of Sankara Bhashya in the original. Along with these studies, the Sanskrit language is also taught with Paninian grammar. Besides all this, there are daily meditation and satsangas (which are often question and answer sessions). I along with my students have taught ten of these three-year programs (eight in India and two in the United States) and many of my students from these programs are now teaching all over India and abroad. My students are totally free to pursue what they like after the course. I encourage them to share their knowledge and be contributors wherever they are.

The facilities for long-term teaching that I talked about are called Gurukulams and they impart 'Arsha Vidya' i.e. the vidya (knowledge) of the rishis (seers) with a primary focus on teaching Vedanta and Sanskrit. During these courses, related disciplines like Vedic chanting, Yoga, Classical music, Dance, Ayurveda, Jyotisyas etc., which all stem from the Vedic culture, also find expression, and encouragement in all our institutions. (The word 'Arsha' has also been used by many of my students in naming their facilities). I do not believe in large centralized organizations and these institutions are simply meant to facilitate the teaching. The four institutions are at:

- Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Saylorsburg, P.O. Box 1059, PA 18353, USA (www.arshavidya.org)
- Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Anaikatti, Coimbatore - 641108, TN, India (<http://www.arshavidya.in>)
- Arsha Vijnana Gurukulam, Vedapuri, Tah Katol, Dist Nagpur, Maharashtra, India (www.arshavidya-nagpur.org)
- Swami Dayananda Ashram, Rishikesh 249201, Uttaranchal, India <http://www.arshavidhyapitam.org>)

These institutions have a temple, facilities for teaching, bookstore, library, simple boarding, and lodging for residential students with the focus being on the teaching of Vedanta. They offer a range of programs including weekend students programs, spiritual retreats, meditation camps, courses of various durations like 1 week, 2 weeks, 4 weeks, 6 weeks, 3 months, 6 months, 3 years in Vedanta, Sanskrit, Yoga, Astrology, Ayurveda and even Classical music. All the institutions have had the privilege of having conducted one or more rigorous three-year programs in Vedanta. Gurukulams also provide you with a support group and satsanga which help new aspirants stay the course.

In addition to the four institutions I mentioned, we are also trying to establish a retreat center in a scenic location in the Western Ghats in India. The Dayananda Education Trust has recently taken over a center in Amboli, Maharashtra for spiritual learning and retreat. Amboli is a place surrounded by rain forests receiving 300 to 350 inches of rain in the monsoon season. It is situated on the road connecting Goa and Belgaum. The facility can be used by Arsha Vidya teachers for holding spiritual retreats.

VS: Thank you Swamiji, these Gurukulams are a blessing for people who are able to come and spend time there. How can others, who are unable to visit these Gurukulams, benefit from the teachings?

Swamiji: There are a few options that such people have. You can make use of the outreach programs. The gurukulams reach out through outreach programs. Our teachers travel to more distant communities which have a core group of people who are interested in learning and make the teaching available to them right there. So you can approach our Gurukulams to arrange the outreach programs in your neighborhood. Our Swamis, Veditatmananda, Tattvavidananda and Pratyagbodhananda, travel to various locations in the US each year and deliver classes.

The Bhagavad Gita Home Study Course is another very effective way of imbibing the teaching. The Gita Home Study course material is based on actual classroom teaching of the Bhagavad Gita to students of a three-year program in Vedanta conducted at Saylorsburg, PA. There were about 360 classes, which were transcribed and edited carefully to form this material. Since the material is based on a classroom teaching, it is very effective. You can also supplement this study material with the Bhagavad Gita home study MP3 CD set made up of seven CDs which cover all the 360 plus classes forming the basis for the home study material. There is also a searchable version of the course material for those who prefer an online resource rather than books. Recently, Aruna (Alan) has published a five volume set of books to learn Sanskrit grammar through the verses of the Bhagavad Gita - so you can learn grammar and Gita at the same time. So

go for it. You can get all these from our bookstore at the Saylorburg Gurukulam.¹

Bhagavad Gita is a complete teaching including yoga (the preparation) and the Gita Home Study material will make things very clear. There was one person who had been studying for several years – he had studied all Upanishads with bhashyam, sutra bhashyam etc. but still had something obstructing his understanding. He came to the US to visit his children, and took the Gita Home Study books. He called later to tell me that the Gita Home study had cleared his doubts and that it was very good material to get clarity. I recommend people form a group for the study of these books. Form a small group of 8 to 10 people, which we call a Gita Vicara Group, with a commitment to meet at a regular interval, like once in a week, and study together. One person can play the role of a facilitator and the group members can choose to take turns playing this role. Each member in the group reads a couple of pages loudly and then it can be discussed. The group becomes a support group and will help you stay with the satsanga through thick and thin. If the group is unable to find answers, you can note down the questions and have them addressed by one of the teachers at the Gurukulam.

In addition to these, the Arsha Vidya Centre for Research and Publication based in Chennai is publishing a number of books on the teachings. I am doing the final editing for all of these books – about 20 books have been published so far. There are different series of books, like the series on ‘Public Talks,’ ‘Moments with oneself,’ ‘Vakya Vicara,’ ‘Mantras and Stotras’ and ‘Upanisad’ series. In addition to these series, there are other books like ‘Visnu Sahasranama,’ ‘Collection of essays’ etc. published elsewhere. All these books are available at the bookstores in our Gurukulams and so are a number of DVDs, CDs and tapes on various topics. You can use these books and CDs to keep learning.

VS: Thank you Swamiji. I would like to tell the readers that the Gita Home study course includes not only a very germane explanation but also contemporary examples and jokes, which keep the readers from losing attention, even when the discussions are very technical.

Moving from teaching to your activities for dharma samrakshana, can Swamiji begin by telling us more about the Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha initiative?

Swamiji: The Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha is a unifying body that provides leadership, guidance and a collective voice for the Hindus. It was formed in 2002. The uniqueness of it is that for the first time in the history

¹ The books and CDs can be ordered online through <http://books.arshavidya.org> and also from the Arsha Vidya Gurukulams in India (Refer Page No...)

of India, heads of Hindu religious institutions have come together under one umbrella organization. The Sabha has presently 140 members who are mandaleswars and heads of ancient traditional institutions that are a few hundred years old. It consists of Acharyas belonging to all the ancient sampradaayas of Hindu Dharma each having a congregation of millions of people. The sabha is a federation of religious leaders with a religious trust consisting of eleven of these leaders. These eleven trustees (with the exception of the managing trustee) are variable and hold the office for a three-year term. A new team of trustees then takes over at the end of three years. This trust is an official body of the Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha and through this trust, the Acharya Sabha is engaged in various activities.

The Acharya Sabha is a collective voice of the Hindus, making the Sabha an apex body of the Hindus to raise a unified voice against callous disregard of Hindu sentiments and adverse propaganda against Hindu Dharma. We have held three annual conferences since inception. There are regional committees each with their own convener. One of the activities that the Acharya Sabha is seriously engaged in is matters of religious endowments and temple governance in many states like Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. The Sabha is also providing leadership at various levels including legal and legislative processes and in statutory changes in the manner of temple governance. It advocates temple committees comprising local temple worshipping communities for transparent and accountable management. You can look at the Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha web site, <http://www.acharyasabha.org/> for information on all its activities and the resolutions that have been passed during the 3rd conference in Shri Adi Chunchunagiri Math (near Bangalore).

Q: Swamiji, can you tell us about the AIM for Seva, a unique movement initiated by you and its activities and the necessity for such a movement?

Swamiji: Ours is a culture in which there is no place for competition. A child inherited the profession of its father. The competition was only how well you are able to do whatever you did and what your commitment is. Therefore it is a spiritual society. The duties called *svadharma*, were well defined. Duties remain the same for everyone. The inner composition, disposition alone undergoes transformation.

Competition means you have to follow norms. Without rules there is no competition. Whether it is a game or business, you need to follow rules. The rules have to grow upon you. The competition that we see now is thrown upon us. Therefore people are insecure and you find the symptoms of the insecurity in terms of grabbing and hoarding and taking advantage of each situation. This is a society which is unknown to us, and now it is seen to be very rampant.

Therefore, I thought we should create a new chemistry. In our culture there is such a thing as daanam, sharing, caring. We are caring people. We

do not throw our elders to old age homes. We have homes and we keep them with us and we respect them. Therefore, we have to emphasize some of these very important values in our own being and these values have to surface. For this, a movement is necessary. You need a movement and therefore I started this movement called, All India Movement for Seva. Then, I started doing various things in the villages. In Anaikatti, Coimbatore, where we have our Gurukulam, there are a lot of tribal villages. I did not even know that they existed, until I started looking for them. I found that there are about 100 villages all around. In these villages we began providing whatever the local people wanted, like water and so on. Then I was looking for one thing that can really initiate this movement. I asked one of the women in the village, 'What do you expect us to do? What do you want?' She said, 'Please start a home for the children. We want our children to study. Now we cannot send the children to school because the school is 5 miles away. Since there are wild animals around, we cannot send the children to school. Please start a home.' That struck me as this is what we should do. Our Chairman was Sri R. Venkataraman, ex-president of India, and he said that we will start one Chatralaya in every district to begin with. That was the commitment with which we started.

Then we started schools, hostels, hospitals and chatralayas in many states. There are 10 schools being run under AIM for Seva. They are functioning in Tamilnadu, Gujarat, Karnataka, M.P, and Madhya Pradesh. We are even administering Government schools in Gujarat. In the villages, the government schools do not even have chairs, tables or chalk to write with. We supply them with all these and make the school function. If they do not have enough number of teachers, we give them teachers also. There are now almost 62 Chatralayas in 13 states. There are 5 hospitals located in Tamilnadu, Gujarat, U.P and Bihar. We are even running a Government hospital and it is functioning well. In Mathura there is an eye-hospital. 7 Health care centers are functioning in Tamilnadu, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Karnataka. Mobile Out Reach Programmes—where a mobile unit equipped with medical facilities visits the villages—are functioning in Gujarat, Tamilnadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. There are Day Care Centres for children below 5 years. In Anaikatti alone there are 170 of them. Bengal is the only state where we don not have anything because they will not let us do anything there. They say give the money to us and we will do everything. We hope that we will be able to do something there also. As part of Tsunami activity, 3 desalination plants have been set up in Pazhaverkadu area near Chennai. We have done a lot of good work during Tsunami. Help was given to the fishermen in the form of providing boats, fishing nets and new homes and also renovating old homes. Kofi. A. Annan – Secretary General, UNO recognized our activities and AIM for Seva was mentioned in his report. All this has happened within these few years. So we have a good track record within a short span of a few years. I could do all this because of my disciples. I taught them only to teach Vedanta. Now I am asking them to

do this work also, but at the same time not to give up Vedanta. So they are doing all this.

I have told all the acharyas of Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha that in their name I am doing all these activities of AIM for Seva. They should also do this work. Individually they are all doing now. There is a certain awareness that has been created and we need to do this work.

Any movement needs to reach a critical point and from that point alone it will take off. I think we are somewhere around. The new chemistry has to come – CARING. Just to CARE. Why? Because there is no other way a person can really mature. The whole process of maturing implies the transformation from being a consumer to a contributor, even though one continues to be a consumer. The one who contributes more than what one consumes is a grown up person. Otherwise, the person is still a child. Therefore one has got to discover oneself as a contributor and that inner transformation has to take place. That is India. Giving is India. We have to therefore, emphasize this caring - programmes of caring. We should get the people involved because, the problems are so enormous. Even the people who see the problems cannot do anything, because they are emotionally paralyzed. They cannot think of doing anything. Therefore we have to create an avenue for the people to pitch in. It maybe small help, but when there are a lot of people pitching in, then that becomes a movement. So that's the whole vision. All our sadhus are also engaged in this work. There are also a lot of people who are quietly doing small things individually. But all of them have to be brought together in a movement. This is the movement.

VS: Swamiji, this is indeed a significant achievement. Can you say something about the Dharma Rakshana Samiti?

Swamiji: The Dharma Rakshana Samiti was founded to preserve the native spiritual culture of Bharat inherited from the Rishis and to raise the awareness among Hindus of the Vaidika Dharma (a.k.a. Sanatana Dharma). This Dharma which has percolated in every aspect of our society makes all our pursuits as sacred. Our culture recognizes and respects divinity in every being and in every aspect of the creation. We have 32 full time workers all over Tamil Nadu. This number is growing and is spreading to other states. The Dharma Rakshana Samiti has been doing several things. For example, we have held 3 conferences of Guruswamis (A devotee of Lord Ayyappa, one who has gone to Sabarimala without a break for 18 years for the annual Makara Jyothi festival) and honored them. The Guruswamis inspire fellow devotees and others about the importance of the ayyappa vratam and motivate them for preserving the Sanatana Dharma. The Samiti has engaged in validating, preserving, and propagating the worship of Grama Devata and Kula Devata. It reaches out to slum areas and distributes lockets, leaflets/free booklets on various topics to promote and propagate Hindu religious practices and rituals and the Vedic vision of God. In addition, we

distribute clean water in the slum areas. Another important activity is called Amman Yatra. This consists of taking Angala Parameswari Amman (Goddess) on procession (cala pratishtha) through many villages facilitating village people to offer worship in village samudayams (communities). Thirteen bronze vigrahas of the Goddess have been made to be taken to different villages and 340 villages have been covered so far. The demand for vigrahas is increasing.

VS: Swamiji, this is truly inspiring. I understand that you have started several Veda Pathasalas for the preservation of Vedas and Agamas. Can you please tell us about this?

Swamiji: Several Veda sakhas are becoming fast extinct due to lack of infrastructure for learning. Hence, we are establishing Veda Pathasalas for the preservation of the sakhas facing extinction. For example, we have a Veda Pathasala for the Maitrayani sakha of the Krishna Yajur Veda and one for the Kanva sakha of the Sukla Yajur Veda. Both these are at Manjakudi. The Raanaayana sakha of the Sama Veda is a recent find and we have pathasalas at Karnataka, Vadakkupattu (near Chennai), and Coimbatore for this sakha. We have a pathasala for the Jaimini sakha of the Sama Veda at Kodluntarapalli (near Palaghat, Kerala) and for the Pippalada sakha of the Atharva Veda at Bangalore.

At Kudavasal we have a pathasala for Vaikhanasa Agama for training priests for Vishnu temples. This Agama is Vedic and the priests often function without any training. So we started this pathasala to address that. In addition, we are trying to establish another pathasala at Maduramangalam through the Jeer matha there, for the preservation of Vaikhanasa Agama of the Vaishnavite tradition.

VS: Swamiji, please tell us about your initiatives for the preservation of Temple traditions and cultures.

Swamiji: Let me first tell you about the Oduvar Project. The term Thevaaram is used to denote the devotional poems sung by the three Saiva saints - Appar, Sambandar, and Sundarar who lived in the 7th and 8th centuries CE. There are nearly 8000 Thevaarams. These hymns, together with the ones composed by 23 other Saiva saints, have been compiled into 12 volumes known as "Panniru Thirumurai." They constitute the canonical books of Saiva Siddhantam and they are also an essential element of ancient Tamil literature. During Raja Raja Cholan's rule in the 11th century, Thevaarams and other Thirumurais were sung in the Saiva Temples. With the loss of the royal patronage, there has been a slow decline of this extraordinary tradition with the result that many ancient temples are without the services of qualified oduvars. With a view to stop the downward slide of the ancient Saiva tradition and to revive it to its original glory, I launched an Oduvar (singer of the Thevaarams) Support Program in 2005. The program consists of appointing oduvars in the Saiva Temples, conducting annual festivals known as Thirumurai

Thiruvizha, and honoring senior oduvars who have dedicated their lives to preserve the ancient tradition. We have honored so far 10 senior most oduvars by conferring upon them the title “Thirumurai Sevamani” and presenting each a cash reward of Rupees 20,000. This recognition of the senior oduvars will become a regular feature in the future Thiruvizhas. At present, the Oduvar Project is supporting 21 oduvars who are serving in different temples in Tamilnadu. As we discover more qualified oduvars we will appoint them in all those temples which have the services of oduvars. We hope to achieve our goal of having one oduvar in every ancient temple visited by one or more of the composer saints. I have started a Thevaara Pathasala in Thiruvaidaimarudur and appointed a teacher who has committed all the 8000 thevaarams to memory.

In other areas, I have undertaken the construction of the Ashta Dik Palakas at the famous Brhadeesvarar Temple in Tanjore. Currently, these are damaged due to lack of maintenance. I have instituted daily maha naivedyam to commensurate with the size of the Siva Linga at the Brhadeesvarar Temple in Tanjore. I have arranged for the daily offering of naivedyam of 10 kilo rice either as pongal or puliotharai. After institution of proper puja and appropriate naivedyam in the temple there is an admirable increase in the number of devotees visiting the temple daily with devotion and fervor.

Another project that I have recently launched is the Thiruvaidaimarudur Ther (Chariot) Project. I have recently founded a trust consisting of eminent persons of Tamilnadu with the main objective of preserving the various forms of declining fine arts of our country. These fine arts include wooden and granite sculptures, traditional painting, folk music and dance, puppetry etc. This trust, registered as Sri Mahalingaswami Seva Trust, has taken up as its first project the construction of five wooden rathas (chariots) for Sri Mahalingaswami Temple situated at Thiruvaidaimarudur near the famous temple town of Kumbakonam in Thanjavur District of Tamilnadu. Thiruvaidaimarudur, a great sivasthalam, is known as madhyarjunam and is said to be on par with Benares. The Sri Mahalingaswami Temple’s sprawling campus is bejeweled with lofty towers and ornate mandapams. The colossal Nandi is a distinct and inspiring feature at the temple. This temple is associated with Kulottunga Chola I, Varaguna Pandyan etc. Tiruvaidaimarudur is one of the Thevaara Paadal Petra Sthalams and is considered to be the 30th in the series of Tevara fame temples in the Chola kingdom. Among the temple rathas of Tamilnadu, the Thiruvaidaimarudur temple rathas are very famous. The main ratha of Sri Mahalingaswami is one of the biggest rathas like Thiruvarur temple ratha. Due to various reasons, all the five rathas disintegrated over time and there has been no rathotswa at the Thiruvaidaimarudur temple for the past 74 years.

With the gracious consent of the Gurumahasannidhanam of Thiruvavaduthurai Adheenam, the Mutt, which manages this Temple, I have taken up the mammoth task of building the five rathas through this

newly formed Trust. The five rathas are, respectively, for Lord Mahalingaswami, Goddess Brahadsundarakucambika, Lord Ganesa, Lord Subrahmanya and Lord Chandikeswara. The total cost of renovation, which includes building the rathas, ratha-stations and establishing a corpus for the annual running of the rathas, is estimated to be about \$1.2 million. Rathotsawa in our country is not only a religious celebration but it is also a social function, which brings together people from all walks of the society. It not only invokes the grace of the Lord but also generates mutual love, respect, and goodwill among different communities of our ancient land. Luckily there are still a handful of artisans who are well versed in the art of ratha construction, living near this ancient town. The construction of the five rathas generates job opportunities for these artisans and also accomplishes the significant feat of preserving this art culture by providing a great opportunity for the artistically talented youth in the town to get trained in the fine art of wooden sculptures.

VS: Swamiji, recently you have written about a Hindu Jewish declaration. Can you please elaborate on it?

Swamiji: We organized the first Hindu-Jewish meet in Feb 2007 at New Delhi. This was facilitated by the World Council of Religious Leaders. This was a great event as both the Hindu and Jewish traditions, which do not have aggressive programs of conversion, advocated a way of life to accomplish the view. The point of the dialogue was to look for common cultural features and common philosophies behind the two religions while gladly accepting the differences. A joint declaration was issued acknowledging the shared value of the two traditions and for deepening the bilateral relationship predicated on the recognition of the One Supreme Being.

A second summit was held at Jerusalem Feb 17-20, 2008. The Government of Israel supported the Meet and the entire Rabbinate and Jewish scholars participated in the dialogue. The Hindu delegation consisted of members of the Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha, including representatives of Shankaracharyas. The second meet was as extraordinary as the first one in that, it emphasized and illustrated the importance of honest dialogue between any two religious traditions to resolve seemingly irresolvable differences. The Jerusalem meet concluded with a landmark declaration that Hindus worship 'one supreme being' and are not really idolatrous. The implications of this are profound in content and far-reaching in effect. Judaism was born of the complete repudiation of idol worship and rabbinic literature abounds with denunciations of idolatry. Due to an incomplete understanding, Hinduism has been perceived by the Jewish and other Abrahamic traditions as idolatrous and promoting many gods. For centuries, the Hindus have experienced the extremely violent consequences of this wrong perception. The historic declaration made at the Jerusalem meet sets to rest the wrong notion that Hinduism is idolatrous. The declaration reads: "It is recognized that one Supreme Being in its formless and manifest aspects has been worshipped

by Hindus over the millennia. The Hindus relate to only the one Supreme Being when he/she prays to a particular manifestation. This does not mean that Hindus worship ‘gods’ and ‘idols.’ We worship devatas who are manifestations of the one Supreme Being. The Chief Rabbi announced that it was a matter of relief to know that their hitherto held perception was wrong. I urge all the readers to read the article that I have written on the declaration. I would also like to inform you that the 3rd Hindu-Jewish meeting will be held in 2009 in the US.

VS: Swamiji, all the readers would certainly agree that this declaration is indeed a hallmark declaration showing the way for meaningful dialogue between leaders of different religious traditions and help remove wrong perceptions arising from lack of understanding and/or misunderstanding. Can you shed some light on your activities in the area of education?

Swamiji: I established the Dayananda Educational Trust to provide quality education to the economically backward sections of rural Tamil Nadu, particularly Manjakudi and surrounding villages. The Trust has enabled a model for rural education. Nearly 3,500 students attend schools/college daily and we provide in one campus pre-grade to post-graduation education. Both the school and college offer co-education. The trust has also under it the management, two other schools in nearby villages (Semmangudi and Mudikondan). Overall, the schools and college serve the need of ~ 200 villages within a 30 km radius. By and large the student body consists of 1st generation students. We have both commuting as well as residential students. The schools and college are run with high efficiency. You would be surprised to know that there are nearly 3,500 daily commuters (students & staff) exceeding the village population of 2,500. Four school buses are run by the Trust to address the inadequate public transport. The Government furnished free bicycles to facilitate commuting from homes. Student volunteers manage the student density during school start and end times. The facilities include a hygienic canteen and adequate toilet facilities. Over the years, there is a steady increase in the enrollment of girls in the college, indicating the progressive empowerment of women. More parents are sending their children to schools and there is a greater awareness of the importance of education leading to economic well being and improved standard of living. Further, there is also an increased awareness of health, hygiene, and nutrition in families through students. The Manjakudi schools and college are indeed a good model for replication in other similar rural areas.

I should also mention about Krupa, an institution for the mentally challenged that was established in 1998. The Dayananda - B.D. Goenka Seva Trust is managing the institution. Krupa was started with the aim of helping mentally challenged children to get proper care and give their parents a better quality of life. Krupa is an institution of caring. It has 25 residents currently and the aim is to grow the number gradually.

I should also mention about the Vedic Heritage program which is followed in more than 100 schools in Tamil Nadu and other parts of India. The culture of the people of India is religious. This religious culture, which touches every aspect of one's life, was imbibed by osmosis from one's home and the immediate community. However, this is not the case anymore. We need to have a program to teach children the religious cultural forms and their meaning methodically and in a classroom situation. With this goal in mind, we have developed the Vedic Heritage program for children of different age groups from grade 1 through 12.

VS: Swamiji, this is extraordinary. Manjakudi is certainly a model for rural education in India and perhaps in other countries as well. Please tell us your initiatives in the preservation of arts and music.

Swamiji: I recently established the Arsha Kala Rangam to promote classical Carnatic Music. We have instituted the 'Arsha Kala Bhushanam' award that goes with a citation and a purse. Arsha means 'what came from the Rishi.' The title means one for whom Arsha Kala is bhushanam or one who is a bhushanam for Arsha kala. We have recognized so far eight senior musicians (both vocal and instrumental) with the Arsha Kala Bhushanam award. I plan to establish awards to encourage upcoming junior musicians also.*

*Pujya Swamiji himself has composed many kirtans in Sanskrit on different deities, many of which including 'Bho Sambho ...' have become a part of many music and dance performance. These kirtans are loaded with philosophical meanings [Ed].

I will be holding a Thiruppugazh conference in Nov 2008 for two days in Chennai and will be honoring those who are propagating Thiruppugazh singing. Thiruppugazh stands for devotional songs composed on Lord Subrahmanya by Saint Arunagirinathar who lived during the 15th century.

VS: Swamiji, you have been participating and taking a lead role in several global initiatives for promoting harmony among religions and world peace. Please tell us about them.

Swamiji: I have been participating in several global initiatives to further the cause of peace between nations. Some of these include:

- The International Inter-religious Encounter, held at Monterrey, Mexico, Sept 2007
- World Youth Peace Conference, Nairobi, Kenya, 2004
- World Youth Peace Conference, Kyoto, Japan 2003
- Dharma Conference in New Jersey, July 2003
- Conference on preservation of religious diversity held at New Delhi (inaugurated by Prime Minister Sri A.B.Vajpayee and attended by the Dalai Llama among others)
- Global Peace Initiative of Women Religious and Spiritual Leaders, Geneva, Switzerland, Oct 2002

- World Council for Preservation of Religious Diversity Bangkok, June 2002
- International Congress for the Preservation of Religious Diversity in Delhi, 2001.
- Millennium World Peace Summit at the United Nations in 2000 in which I led the Hindu delegation
- The fifth Global Peace Initiative of Women convened in Geneva by Ms. Dena Merriam held in Jaipur, India during March 2008
- Upcoming Hindu-Buddhist meet in Cambodia under the auspices of the World Council of Women religious leaders in Feb 2009 (which I will be attending)

VS: Swamiji, tell us about the Thinkers Meet that you have been organizing.

Swamiji: The Thinkers Meet is held annually and so far, we have had many meets. It provides a forum for educationists, journalists, industrialists and political leaders to come together to address Hindu and National issues. The Chief Ministers of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and the Deputy Chief Minister of Bihar attended the latest meet this year. The next meet will be held at Anaikatti in 2009.

VS: Swamiji, please tell us about the Digital Library Project.

Swamiji: We have established a new digital library under the auspices of the Sruti Seva Trust at the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Anaikatti. The purpose of the digital library is to preserve ancient manuscripts that are on the verge of getting lost in digital format, publish texts that are not in print and provide the infrastructure for scholars to stay and do research. The digital library has digital images of palm leaf manuscripts and paper manuscripts running to around 5 to 6 lakh pages and video documentation of rituals running more than 100 hours. These have been obtained from an academic agency involved in the digitization projects since early 1980s. The collection includes texts of Saivagama, Pancaratra agama, Vaikhanasa agama, Sakta agama, Saiva, Vira Saiva, Saiva mahatmya, Saiva tantra, Kashmiri Saiva, Veda samhita, Vedanga, Grhya sutra, Sruta prayoga, Mantra, Vrata, Tantra, Tantra anushtana, Yoga, Purana and Dharmasastra. We have also formed a team of scholars as part of the research council. The scholars include Sri Balakrishna Sastrigal, Sri Radhakrishna Sastrigal, Sri Krishnamurthi Sastrigal, Sri Goda Venkateswara Sastrigal, Sri Mani Dravid Sastrigal, Dr. Abhiramasundaram and Sri Kudavayil Balu. The infrastructure includes computers, scanners, printer, digital camera, high definition video camera, a good library, and facilities for researchers to stay comfortably.

VS: You recently wrote about a solution for global warming from a hitherto ignored perspective that is quite intriguing and thought provoking. Please tell us about it.

Swamiji: A 2006 report from the United Nations reveals the surprising fact that ‘raising animals for food generates more greenhouse gases than all the cars and trucks in the world combined.’ Tens of billions of animals farmed for food release gases such as methane, nitrous oxide and carbon dioxide through their massive amounts of manure. Animals such as cows and sheep, being ruminant, emit huge amount of methane due to flatulence and burping. “The released methane,” the report says, “has 23 times the global warming potential of CO2.” It is very alarming to note that the livestock industry alone is responsible for 37% of human induced methane emissions. To make room for these animals to graze, virgin forests are cleared. The livestock industry also needs vast stretches of land to raise mono crops to feed the animals. The CO2 that the trees and plants store escape back into the air when they are destroyed. Growing fodder for farmed animals implies heavy use of synthetic fertilizers produced with fossil fuels. While this process emits a huge amount of CO2, fertilizer itself releases nitrous oxide, a greenhouse gas that is 296 times more potent than CO2. Alarming though these facts are I see in them a reason for hope. All that people all the world over have to do is to avoid meat eating. In the absence of demand for meat, there is no more need for breeding millions of animals for daily slaughter. The reversal of global warming is a certainty. If it is too much for one to switch to be a total vegetarian one needs to give up at least red meat eating. This the only option one has.

Q: Swamiji, please tell us about the Hague Conference in which you are representing the Hindu Religion, as the convener of Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha?

Swamiji: In Hague, Netherlands, a conference is being convened by the Catholic Bishops in Netherlands to be held on 10th Dec. 2008. Dec 10th is the day when the Human Rights Charter was adopted by the United Nations. Now on this particular day, they want a re-affirmation of this document and in this document there are some clauses on religion. So the religious leaders are going to gather to make this re-affirmation in Hague. They feel that there is a need for this re-affirmation. They want to emphasize on the freedom of religion, because there is an increase in intolerance now. Therefore, they are inviting the religious leaders to a conference. It is going to be a conference of only about 10 religious leaders and perhaps a few more, representing different religions of the world.

The Vatican is represented by their top Cardinal; the Archbishop of Canterbury for the Protestants; the Baptists; the Evangelists—they all come under one body—the World Council of Churches. The secretary of that body is representing them. There are two major sects in Islam – the Shiites and the Sunnis. Both are being represented by two top persons from Iraq & Iran. Buddhism will be represented by the Dalai Lama and there is one more person. Then there is one person for Taoism & Shintoism. One person for Hinduism and that is me.

This document, which these people are going to sign, has already been prepared. The signatories have been asked to send their representatives to finalize the draft. This preparatory meeting is at Hague, on the 22nd Oct. So I am sending 2 people – Martha Doherty & Prof Vaidyanathan. We want certain changes in this document. We want to include certain clauses and remove certain clauses. We are going to argue that, freedom of religion is also freedom not only to change one's religion, but also to work for the preservation of one's religion. That freedom is a much more powerful freedom, because you are not interfering with any other religion. The freedom of religion is interpreted in many ways. It cannot be one sided. This particular idea can be said in one single word - mutual respect or equal respect. Then we want universal values to be recognized and accepted by all religions so that there are only one set of values for the believers as well as for the non-believers. These two things we are going to emphasize on and we want to propose the addition of a few other clauses also.

VS: Swamiji, I understand that you are the convener for an International Conference on the Vedic Sarasvati River. Please elaborate on this.

Swamiji: Yes, I am the Convener of International Conference on 'Vedic Sarasvati River and Hindu civilization,' to be held during Oct. 24-26, 2008 in New Delhi. The Conference is being jointly organized by Sarasvati Research Centre, AIM for Seva, Bharat Heritage Foundation, and Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha Trust. Recent research perspectives from a number of disciplines have pointed to the importance of River Sarasvati as the fountainhead of Hindu civilization. According to many Vedic scholars, the fact that the Vedas thrived on the banks of the River Sarasvati is proved by the words of the Vedas. The Conference is intended to provide a multi-disciplinary forum for researchers, to present and to review the results of their researches related to Vedic River Sarasvati and Hindu civilization to get the true story of ancient India.

VS: We would love to know what comes out of this conference. Swamiji, Thank you very much for taking the time to tell us about the important activities you are currently engaged in. I am sure people will find this very informative and will come forward in larger numbers to support these initiatives. Pranams Swamiji.