

The Bhumi Project

HINDU PLANS FOR GENERATIONAL CHANGE

October 2009

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Introduction

In April 2009 a meeting was held at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies (OCHS) bringing together representatives of the four largest Hindu temple communities in the UK, the first state funded Hindu School, and the Alliance for Religion and Conservation (ARC).

Inspired by ARC and facilitated by the OCHS, the meeting conceived the Bhumi Project, an initiative aimed at educating, inspiring, informing, and connecting Hindus interested in service to Mother Earth. The project was officially launched at the Windsor Celebration of the Faith Commitments for a Living Planet in November 2009.

The project is aptly named after Bhumi Devi, a Sanskrit name for the personality of Mother Earth, famed in Indian literature. Known by other names, Bhumi is also called Dharti, meaning 'one who holds everything'.

The project aims at long term sustainable plans beginning with the Nine-Year Plan outlined in this document. For convenience we break down the plan into three main areas, namely, Networking, Action, and Education. We wish to encourage as many Hindu communities as possible to sign up to these plans.

With a Hindu population of 900 million worldwide including up to 15 million in the diaspora, Hindu communities, sampradayas, and sangas could become an important voice in addressing climate change. The unique contributions Hindu teachings can make will have benefit well beyond the confines of Hindu traditions, bringing new perspectives to the debate based on Indian concepts of atman, dharma, ahimsa, and sattva, to name a few.

Alongside the other major cultures and faith traditions, Hindus have a responsibility to understand and act on their own teachings regarding care of the planet and its populations. In a culture where Mother Earth speaks to us in a personal form we see a special imperative for Hindus to act and make their voice known.

The challenge faced in developing a Hindu response to anything arises from one of the tradition's strengths – its diversity. There is no church, no single leader or scripture, or no global council to make a pronouncement. Therefore we hope to spend our first year taking stock of the ancient and contemporary thinking regarding the environment, examples of good practice we would like to inform others about, and building a base of global friends and partners.

Therefore, not presuming to speak or act for the whole community, we would like to work with its natural diversity by encouraging and inspiring individual and community creativity.

This nine-year plan is a work in progress and we hope that it will improve and expand as time goes on.

We ask volunteers from any Hindu background, or none, to help fill our teams, conduct research, offer networks, advice, expertise, and financial support. Working together for such a universal cause will be a nurturing experience for all and a positive contribution to our shared environment.

*'Mother Bhumi, may whatever I dig from you grow back again quickly,
and may we not injure you by our labour.'
—Atharva Veda*

Networking

The Bhumi Project is a global effort to bring Hindu communities together for environmental action.

The Project will work to promote the work of individuals and communities that are presently engaged in environmental action. It also aims to bring those with similar aims and ideals together to learn from each other and teach others.

We want to encourage partnerships and consultations with those who can help advance our aims and address our concerns, at all levels of development.

In this section we break down the areas and ideas that will help promote a healthy culture of networking for the project.

Bhumi infrastructure

The broad and far-reaching nature of the Plan requires an infrastructure that is robust yet flexible.

A working party has been formed in the UK and work is underway to establish a similar team in America. A first draft of the constitution for these working parties has been completed and is currently under review. We aim to create working parties in each country that proposes to implement the Plan.

Each working party will be required to adopt the constitution. The international central team will be based in Oxford, England, and will oversee the worldwide implementation of the Project.

We hope to develop a management system with a light touch and one in which working parties and projects can work with and learn from each other.

Temples, organisations, and individuals are encouraged to form their own working parties to develop and execute their own versions of the Nine Year Plan.

Publicity and promotion

The largest Hindu temples in the UK are working together to develop and implement the Nine Year Plan. We will aim to replicate this model around the world and believe this will increase support and act as our greatest medium of publicity and promotion.

When working with these temples we have, and will continue to ask young people to work with us. This has been a very successful strategy that brings enthusiasm and creativity to the project.

We will also approach high-profile individuals and celebrities to endorse the Plan. Coupled with this, web media, print materials and advertisements, and television commercials will be produced for the various parts of the Plan.

Websites

As the projects contained within the Plan evolve and grow they will require their own websites. The aim of these websites will be to educate and inform. They will provide the facility for users to interact with one another and share their experiences and success stories.

One central website will link the different websites and provide an overview of the whole project. This website will be online by December 2009.

Major conservation projects

We aim to partner with major conservation projects which are already operating so that we can bring their good work to the attention of a broader audience, and provide examples of good practice and dharmic living.

Some of the projects currently under consideration include:

- The 'Clean Ganga' initiative that aims to clean up the river Ganges.
- Working with the Braj Foundation to restore the kunds (lakes) and ghats (public bathing areas) in the area of Braj, Uttar Pradesh.
- Preservation of the Gulf of Mannar (Ram Sethu).

Green pilgrimage

Most Hindu pilgrimage sites are in India. As the Hindu diaspora and Indian middle class have grown, such sites are seeing a growth in their number of pilgrims. To reduce the environmental impact of the pilgrimages, we wish to develop and promote a set of guidelines that will encourage devotees to see all aspects of the pilgrimage as sacred.

This includes the means of transport, accommodation, and use of resources at holy sites.

By the end of 2010 we will have selected a pilgrimage site in India which will serve as our pilot project for this campaign. Following selection, we will research local amenities, temples, and resources with the aim of creating an example of good practice.

Working in partnership with trustees, priests and other custodians of pilgrimage sites we hope to develop standards that minimise environmental impact.

Bhumi awards

We feel it is important to recognise success. The introduction of a worldwide award scheme will recognise and honour individuals, communities, temples, and organisations that have taken significant steps in either promoting good environmental practice or creating a sustainable and eco-friendly environment.

By the introduction of such an award we hope to create a worldwide network of good examples of Hindu environmental practice. Such a network will serve to promote Bhumi Project initiatives and Hindu ecology.

We will begin to give awards after the first three years of the Plan have been implemented. This will allow time for the Plan to be adopted by a larger number of Hindu communities, thus adding to the significance of the award.

Local initiatives

While promoting and practising good environmental standards in Hindu temples and in the homes of devotees we also encourage working with other local green initiatives. For example, working with local government schemes, those of other faiths, and educational institutions.

Katha – Story telling

The sharing of stories is an integral part of Hindu tradition. Texts such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana are well known to all Hindus, regardless of age or education, and for centuries have provided a foundation for thinking, feeling and decision making. The katha (story telling) tradition is still healthy in India and the diaspora.

We want to encourage this tradition to highlight stories relating to the environment with the aim of an increased understanding of Hindu perspectives on the environment. This may help involve new story tellers and new angles of vision to invigorate the current traditions of katha.

Action

An essential element of our plans is a call to arms. Without encouraging action – thoughtful, informed, and enthusiastic – the best formed Nine Year Plan will be more suited to an archive than an impetus for change.

Thus environmental issues specific to the Hindu community were identified during the development of the Nine Year Plan. These issues are the basis of the projects outlined below.

If successful, these projects will effect positive change in the environmental practices, buying habits, and principles of Hindu temples, organisations, and individuals. We also hope that some of these projects to be of relevance and beneficial to other communities.

We want to form teams consisting of Hindus, non-Hindus, and others with relevant experience and expertise to take each project forward.

Hindu labeling scheme

The Hindu community has purchasing power. We want to develop a set of standards based on the principle of ahimsa (non-violence) that will assist the community in ethical buying in line with its ethos and values. We propose a ‘Hindu benchmark’ for a range of products and services including renewable energy, ethically sourced food, transport, and other products and services that assist sustainable lifestyles.

The labelling scheme will award a mark of recognition of adherence to ahimsa principles.

We will initially work with temples to raise the environmental standards of food and other offerings, and the ingredients used in food sold in temple shops. We will also create a website that will list products and services that meet our standards.

Once such a scheme is established in the major Hindu temples in the UK we will start to work with other faith groups who have successfully developed similar labelling systems. We will also approach government bodies and other organisations for advice and guidance.

We hope to start the labelling scheme in the UK before 2014 and to encourage the process in other countries.

Vegetarianism and compassionate living

'Compassion and ahimsa are not two different things [...] we can describe compassion as the concrete expression of ahimsa.' — M. K. Gandhi

Based on the principle of ahimsa – non-cruelty and non-violence to all living beings – we will collaborate with organisations who wish to promote a more compassionate lifestyle.

It is now widely acknowledged that the meat industry is one the largest contributors of greenhouse gases. To help address this, we will encourage all Hindus to consider reducing or eliminating meat from their diets.

We will provide education on the principles of non-violence, build an awareness of cruelty and violence in our environments – natural and constructed – and enable these issues to be addressed practically through a series of courses.

We believe the materials and resources produced will also be relevant to non-Hindus and thus create an awareness of compassionate living in the wider society.

The first seminars on Compassionate Living will be available for delivery in October 2010.

Cruelty-free milk

Current milk production practices are not in line with Hindu ethics. Cows, which can live up to twenty years, are slaughtered after an average age of four years. Coupled with this, cows are mistreated and subject to a range of diseases.

The Bhumi Project will work closely with the Lotus Trust, which wishes to pioneer the production of cruelty-free milk for the Hindu community where no animals are sent for slaughter.

The final aim is to set up a cruelty-free certification system and an ahimsa label for milk showing where milk has been produced with kindness.

Through this we hope to effect wholesale change in the way cows are treated and create a demand in the market for cruelty-free milk - a demand that will potentially draw support from many non-Hindus.

The Lotus Trust is currently working to pioneer cruelty-free dairies in the UK. We will support this endeavour and work with them over the next nine years to achieve the stated aims.

Temple Garden and Green Pooja scheme

We aim to promote the development of temple gardens. Such gardens will use organic gardening principles and include the care of sacred plants. They will also be used to grow produce for use in daily offerings in the temples.

We will work with local and national gardening organisations and experts to learn best practice and increase organic and sustainable standards.

Having clear temple standards will create a positive change in the habits of devotees. To foster this, we will encourage devotees to develop their own gardens at home and grow their own food.

Closely linked with the development of temple gardens is the Green Pooja Scheme. Poojas, yajnas, and other ceremonies are a daily occurrence in Hindu temples and homes. Each of these make use of a variety of natural products and foodstuffs. For example, poojas and yajnas include the offering of rice, fruits, vegetables, and ghee into a sacrificial fire, an aarti ceremony includes the offering of flowers, incense, and water to the deities.

The cumulative amount of products the Hindu community uses worldwide in these ceremonies is substantial. We wish to promote and create an attitude of local and organic procurement for such items. Where it is not current practice or possible to grow these items in the temple garden we will advocate that they be sourced within a 30-mile radius, where possible. Doing so will not only support local organic farmers and reduce the carbon footprint of the items, but bring about a change in consciousness regarding what is deemed a suitable devotional offering for such ceremonies.

For the first year of the Temple Garden Scheme we will assess resources and current practice in temples. We will also develop, based on the Scriptural Research project, a Hindu perspective on gardening. The second year will see this work published in a handbook for temples and partnering with key organisations. By the third year we hope to create a network of temples that promote good practice and to hold a national Temple Garden Awareness Week. In years four–six, devotees will be encouraged to develop their gardens at home and grow their own produce. By year nine we wish to display a Temple Garden at garden shows, such as the Chelsea Flower Show.

The Green Pooja Scheme will work on a similar timeline, with many aspects of the two projects intertwining.

Sacred waste

The Hindu calendar contains a large number of religious festivals – Ramnavami, Janmashtami and Diwali being but a few. Each festival is widely promoted and celebrated using various print materials – leaflets, magazines, and greeting cards – that often carry one or more sacred images. Wedding invitations and similar items are also made using such imagery.

Because they contain sacred images, appropriate disposal of such materials is of importance to Hindu practitioners as they cannot be thrown in the bin with normal waste. These materials have to be burnt, placed in a river, or buried in the ground.

The Sacred Waste project will research and promote the best means of disposal of such materials as well as advocating that temples and organisations be mindful of their graphic design and printing procedures.

By the end of six years we wish to have in place a number of schemes that provide for the appropriate disposal of sacred items.

Green festivals and gatherings

Hindu festivals attract large numbers of pilgrims to temples – often tens of thousands. Some temples attract thousands of visitors on a daily basis. From travel to the temple to the plates on which food is served – all can have a significant impact on the environment.

A team will be formed to help each Hindu festival and gathering to incorporate a respectful and protective attitude towards the planet. The team will work with individual temples and communities to implement best practice based on a series of workshops and seminars.

Aspects of the festival that will be considered are:

- Using recycled paper for printing promotional materials.
- Using bio-degradable plates, cups and cutlery for serving food.
- Promoting greener ways of transport to the temple, e.g. public transport or car sharing.
- Ensuring all energy is used efficiently.

Temples will also be encouraged to network and share resources. The task-force will encourage and provide resources for temples to promote greener living to visitors during festival celebrations.

By the end of nine years we aim for all Hindu celebrations and gatherings to follow the highest standards of environmental practice. Temples will be encouraged to meet a set of targets, and raise standards every three years during the initial Nine Year plan.

Education

Effective education is key to all aspects of the plan and is aimed at effecting a generational change in the Hindu community. Our educational initiatives will be for all parts of the Hindu community.

We recognise that audiences, traditions, practices, and teachings can widely differ in the Hindu community. We will meet this challenge by aiming to understand and address all facets of Hindu thought and practice in our educational initiatives.

In addition to the initiatives outlined below, at all levels of our work educational resources will be required to inform, educate, and enthuse the Hindu community.

We see this as an important tool in gaining support and mobilising the community. A team of educators, writers, editors, photographers, graphic designers, and web programmers are required to work on a when-needed basis to produce such materials.

Scriptural research

As the Hindu community begins to engage in environmental action, the theological and philosophical basis for doing so needs to be outlined. Such a foundation will highlight the relationship between the Earth, the individual, and the Supreme from a Hindu perspective.

It will help provide guiding principles on how to care for the environment and fuel creativity in ecological projects. This research will be led by the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, engaging eminent scholars and researchers.

This research will establish a bibliography of work already available and will also specifically research stories, passages and quotations from Indian scriptures and literature that discuss issues of environmental concern.

Over the course of the next year we will see the first findings of this research and will publish it on our website.

Training for priests

Hindu priests are influential in the daily running of their temples and in the performance of ceremonies. Crucial to effecting a positive change in the environmental choices of the Hindu community is the education and training of temple priests. Establishing ecological awareness and standards in temple worship will, over time, influence and change the practice of those who worship at home.

A course is proposed that will encourage priests to reflect on environmental issues in their temples and take appropriate steps to address these concerns.

A year will be needed to develop the course. It will then be taught to priests around the UK starting in November 2010. Updated every three years to reflect changes in environmental thought and practice, these changes will be passed on to those who have already undertaken the training, and re-training will take place where requested.

Online course

Not all Hindus live near a temple, or are able to attend a place of worship or gathering on a regular basis. To reach these people, and others, a short course on Hindu approaches to the environment will be developed by the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies to be delivered online.

The course will explore Hindu approaches to nature, the elements, and conservation, taking historical, literary, scriptural and current practices into account. The course will run over a four-week period, two–three times a year. It is hoped that by the end of nine years, over 25,000 people will have taken it. This course can also be run in classrooms.

Energy Efficiency Pack and Building Survey Pack

As the Hindu diaspora increases, so too does its number of places of worship. It is important, therefore, that these buildings are constructed and maintained in an environmentally-friendly manner.

To achieve this, an Energy Efficiency Pack will be created. Researched and developed by a core group, the Pack will help temples of all sizes to reduce their carbon footprint. The Pack will give information ranging from the importance of and financial incentives for energy efficient light bulbs to recommended suppliers of solar panels.

Added to this, a Building Survey Pack will also be created. This Pack, developed by the same group, will contain guidelines and standards for the construction of new buildings. It will provide information on how to make best use of current technologies and standards. We believe that if care of the environment is central to the construction of a new temple, the same level of care can remain during the life of the temple and its community.

An interim version of both packs will be developed within the first year and finalised in the second. The effectiveness of the packs will be monitored and updated with changes in best practice. The updated packs will subsequently be released in year four and year seven.

GCSE and A Level inserts

High-school/Secondary education is another means to introduce a Hindu perspective on the environment. It is important that Hindu and non-Hindu children and students are given the opportunity to learn and explore Hindu views on the environment, as is the case for other traditions.

Based on our Scriptural Research project, themes and stories will be extracted that are relevant for study in the classroom. Working with government and curriculum development bodies, we will integrate the new materials with the existing Hindu studies curriculum taught in schools and colleges. From this work, a new generation will grow up with a good understanding of Hindu ecology.

Initial materials will take two years to compile and produce. By the end of nine years we will work to have standard textbooks and other resources updated.

Summer camps

Many temples and organisations run summer camps for the youth of their communities. Such events are an ideal way to educate young people on environmental issues and teach best practice. We will produce resources which these summer camps can use.

We aim to also develop an annual summer camp open to Hindus from different sampradayas, communities, and organisations. By doing so we hope to not only raise awareness of environmental issues, but foster a spirit of community amongst different Hindu groups.

Lectures, seminars, conferences

Over the course of the next nine years we plan to have a series of lectures, seminars, and conferences around the world. These will be held with temple committees, communities, and academics to gain support for the project, to have open discussion, and to generate new ideas for implementation. It is hoped such a process will ease the implementation of the Plan around the world and bring interested persons on board.

Appendices

Appendix I: Contributors towards the Plan

The following individuals and organisations have contributed towards the creation of the Hindu Nine Year Plan:

Anoopam Mission

- Ashwin Popat
- Sharad Viasani

BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha UK

- Yogeshbhai Patel
- Nirav Patel
- Dylan Patel
- Hitan Metha

ISKCON Bhaktivedanta Manor

- Sruti-dharma Das
- Sheila Chauhan
- Mitali Patel

Krishna-Avanti Primay School

- Nitesh Gor

National Hindu Students Forum

- Neal Raithatha
- Dhanisha Patel

Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies

- Prof. Gavin Flood
- Shaunaka Rishi Das
- Lal Krishna
- Gateen Patel

Sri Balaji Temple, Birmingham

- Dr VPN Rao
- Dr Meena Ashworth
- Ram Aithal

Sri Sanatan Mandir, Leicester

- Ramanbhai Barber
- Kishor Gohil

The Lotus Trust

- Sitarama Das

The Living Planet Foundation

- Dr Kusum Vyas

Prof. Martin Haigh, Professor of Geography, Oxford Brookes University
Ranchor Prime, Hindu environmentalist and author

Appendix II: Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies information

The Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies (OCHS) is a Recognised Independent Centre of the University of Oxford. The principal aim of the Centre is the study of Hindu culture, religion, languages, literature, philosophy, history, arts and society, in all periods and in all parts of the world. All Hindu traditions are included.

The Centre also selectively involves itself with public space projects in it's efforts to encourage it's students and scholars to engage in service to society.

To learn more about the OCHS, please visit their website at www.ochs.org.uk or contact Lal Krishna at lal@ochs.org.uk

Appendix III: Alliance of Religions and Conservation information

The Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) was founded by HRH Prince Philip in 1995. It is a secular body helping the world's major religions develop environmental programmes based on their own core teachings, beliefs and practices. It also helps secular environment groups work with faiths to protect the natural world.

To learn more about ARC, please visit their website at www.arcworld.org or contact Victoria Finlay at VictoriaF@arcworld.org

Appendix IV: Bhumi contact details

For further information on the Bhumi Project, please visit www.ochs.org.uk/bhumi or contact Gateen Patel at gateen@ochs.org.uk