

Lakota-Hindu Conference report

The conference of Lakota and Hindu communities was held at Manderson Youth Opportunity Center, Manderson, S.Dakota. Volunteers of Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, Hindu Students Council, Seva International and International Center for Cultural studies arrived at Manderson from Minneapolis (MN), Chicago (IL), San Jose (CA), Rochester (NY), Atlanta (GA) and Lincoln (NE). Lakota volunteers and community members from Wounded Knee, Manderson, Ogallala, Manderson and Porcupine villages participated in the conference.

The meet was part of the series of cultural exchange program arranged by International center for cultural studies (ICCS) and of the first kind in Northern Plains area of Mid-west USA. A service project has been taken up by Seva International with active participation from swayamsevaks in Lincoln, Nebraska and Sioux City, S.Dakota for the last one year. This included mobilizing clothing, heating equipment and computers to be distributed to the youth in Wounded Knee and Manderson villages.

The villages of Wounded Knee and Manderson are part of Pineridge reservation, S.Dakota. Pineridge is the poorest county in US with an average life expectancy of 47 years. The problems are compounded by destruction of traditional means of livelihood of the Lakotas and their culture. Many boarding schools that dot the landscape, restrictions on usage of Lakota language for several decades, prevalent bias against the Lakota culture and way of life and suppression of the Lakota community in Social, Political, Economic and cultural spheres contributed to further problems.

The interaction commenced with an emotive speech delivered by Mr.George Tall, senior member of the Lakota community from Wounded Knee village. His one hour speech included references to the history of the community, of their leaders like Chief Crazy Horse, Chief Big Foot and Chief Standing Bear, and their culture's strong family values. He stated that the strong family values is what keeps their community together even though the community is pushed to the wall and lagging economically. He exhorted all participants to work towards defeating the schemes of the Abrahamic thought that is dividing the universe into "believers" and "non-believers". There can be peace and democracy in the world only when religious conversion is stopped and there is respect to one's beliefs.

Elaine Gibbons, the youth center coordinator at Manderson then took over demonstrating the various customs of the community with the help of the local youth. She hailed the Indian Culture which always preached equality, respect for mother earth and the concept of "Vasudeva Kutumbakam" - one world, one family. Youth from nearby villages spoke inspiringly about the seven important customs in Lakota life.

Dr.Yashwant Pathak, Co-coordinator of ICCS praised the Lakota community for adhering to their traditional values and praised the resilience of the Lakota community even in the face of adverse conditions that are affecting them in all walks of life. He inspired the Lakota and Hindu volunteers to work for "just world with the motive of Mitakuye Oyasin". His thought provoking speech generated interest among the Lakota youth. Shri Vasant Pandav, senior volunteer of ICCS observed the uniqueness that is binding all ancient cultures cutting across all continents. He quoted from Maoris of New Zealand, African cultures, Cherokees and Hindus that preached oneness of humanity.

Delicious traditional lunch was provided by the Lakota volunteers on both the days. The lunch included delicacies like "aguyapi" made with kobo bread which tasted more like our north Indian roti, "wgili unka gapi" made with corn and "wojapi", a blue berry pudding. Traditional Hindu snacks were provided by Hindu community in the evening.

The second session involved the cultural presentation (Pow-wow) by the Lakota's groups from all nearby villages. The powwow at the Wacipi neighboring grounds was attended by more than five hundred people who came from several places all over the northern plains. The festival including the "peji na slohan"(grass dance), "ka homini" a la manipuri, "mashteen chalan"(rabbit dance) and sun dance. The festival continued past 1 AM on 1st August. All the Hindu volunteers retired for the day to a bed and breakfast facility in a ranch 44 miles away. The accommodation was provided in a large Tei-Pei (a traditional tent like Lakota home). Accommodation is located in beautiful landscape which took everyone spell bound and gave all volunteers to be very much a part of the nature. The owner of the ranch, Mr. Lamoine D. Pulliam, who is director of Oglala Lakota College happily agreed to be a part of ICCS. Mr.Lamoine and his Wife Ulle agreed to arrange for stay of volunteers coming from other places in future. They made sure everyone's stay was comfortable.

The final day commenced with an intuitive talk by medicine man Mr. Steel Bird from Manderson. He is also a well known trainer of horse riding in Pineridge reservation. He exhorted upon Lakota youth to work for the preservation of Lakota values and culture. Dorothy, a Lakota elder who also worked with Tribal Council went into the Lakota history and called upon youth to erase the historical wrongs done by the aggressive missionaries who went destroying Lakota spirit and culture. She observed Lakota culture and all other ancient cultures which never preached violence, aggression and conversion would prevail at the end. She expressed faith that if all members of the ancient cultures who are children of "Great Spirit" and "Mother Earth" strive hard there will be peace all over and it will be a democratic and just world.

Dr.Pathak in the concluding program praised the richness of ancient cultures. He quoted from Haudosaunee cultures which believe that entire world is "a Long House", Lakotas that believe in "Mitakuye Oyasin", Hindus who believe in "Vasudaiva Kutumbakam" and other ancient cultures. A road map is identified to further strengthen the cultural bond in the form of frequent exchange programs between Lakota and Hindu communities.

The conference as a whole provided a great opportunity for Hindu and Lakota communities to explore the richness of both the ancient cultures.