

DANAM CONFERENCE 2006

SESSION ADD

Theme: Adhikara in Dharma Diaspora

Deepak Sarma, Case Western Reserve University, *Convener and Presiding*

ABSTRACTS

Introduction: Where and with whom does adhikāra (authority) reside in the Dharma Diaspora? Who has adhikara to speak for the burgeoning Dharma Diasporic community? This panel will consist of both academics and non-academics who will speak about adhikara and related issues in the Dharma Diaspora.

Joanne Punzo Waghorne, Syracuse University

Adhikāra: Authority, Rights of Access, and New Global Hindu-based Organizations

Adhikara appears to have two trajectories: the authority to teach but also the right to learn. Recently I heard the story of a wealthy middle-class but low caste women in India wanting the learn Sanskrit who was told that her meat eating habits made her tongue too thick to ever be able to pronounce the sacred language. Recently in speaking to a rising new guru here, I asked about the practice of excluding most European-American from entering temples in India. Again she explained that their meat eating rendered their bodies unfit to enter the holy house of God. In both cases switching to a vegetarian diet corrected the deficiencies and gave the subject the necessary authority (adhikara) to study. Interestingly a Google search for adhikara turned up a site with numerous articles on the subject—surprisingly this was not an avowed Hindu site but rather the Global Oneness Foundation associated with Kalki Bhagavan with dual centers in Stockholm, Sweden and Delhi, India. Clearly the issue of fitness to practice/learn has become central to new Hindu-based global movements. For this talk, I would like to think about the changing meaning of adhikara as the right to participate, the right to access authority for world-wide devotees of new guru-centered movements.

Neelima Shukla-Bhatt, Wellesley College

Women and Priestly Adhikāra in Dharma Diaspora

For a long time, priesthood was seen in Hindu traditions as the exclusive domain of Brahmin males. In recent times, however, some women (in both India and in the Diaspora) have begun to reclaim the *adhikāra* for priestly activities that they enjoyed in ancient times. This reclamation, however, necessarily involves re-interpretation and innovation. This presentation will discuss the perceptions of priestly *adhikāra* and duties among Hindu women in North America who have been providing services as priests and *pujāri*-s for their communities. It will be based on interviews of four or five such women, who were profiled in the leading ethnic newsweekly in North America – *India Abroad*, and will compare their views with injunctions in sacred texts prescribing codes of behavior for various groups.

Prabhavati C. Reddy, Northwestern University

Institutional and Priestly Adhikāra in American Hindu Temples

Who has adhikara to speak for Brahmanical Hinduism in America? This question is explored in the context of the ways in which Hindu temples operate as institutions of authority and the

exercise of priestly *adhikara* among diasporic communities. From what sources of authority do the American Hindu temples as non-profit organizations claim their status as institutions of religious authority on matters of domestic and temple worship? How do trained priests from India see themselves as custodians of temple traditions in America and from what sources of authority do they claim their priestly *adhikara* as well as speaking for diaspora temple Hinduism?

Suhag Shukla, Hindu American Foundation
Second Generation Hindu American Views

I offer the perspective of a second-generation Hindu American layperson engaged in endeavors to bring my religious tradition to the national dialogue. Hinduism, perceived as it is—a mythical and exotic playground at one extreme, and a ravaging, chauvinistic and racist law at the other—long lost any semblance to what I was reared in long ago. Either there is a transcendent philosophy replete with affirming rituals and festivals with a pluralistic message critical to our times, or the Hinduism I was taught is a massive deception perpetrated by well-meaning parents and disseminating swamis. As I pursued the matter of a fair and equitable representation of my religion on par with other great traditions in this country, we have been faced with the dilemma of reconciling the great heights of Hindu philosophy with many horrible social evils—many allegedly inspired in the name of religion—that affect one of the most ancient societies in the world today. As I searched for academics that could understand and finesse this dilemma, I came across several that perceived this dilemma, could distill social from spiritual for didactic interests, and had one overriding similarity—they were either Hindus that actually practiced the religion, or individuals that came to the academic study of religion with a distinctly inspired passion for religion devoid of a cold, anthropological or nihilistic eye to believers. I look forward to discussing these experiences of seeking credible, authoritative and, most importantly, empathic experts with authentic *adhikāra* to define Hinduism for the American dialogue.