Making of the Encyclopedia of Hinduism

Epic Effort

To subscribe 1-877-INDIA-ABROAD (1-877-463-4222) www.indiaabroad.com/subscribe
Epic effort

Twenty-five years in the making, worldwide in scope, and bringing together nearly 1,000 scholars and experts, Aziz Haniffa reveals the mammoth undertaking that culminated in the 11-volume Encyclopedia of Hinduism.

The 11-volume Encyclopedia of Hinduism was officially unveiled at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, August 26. With hundreds of scholars, students, dignitaries, and Hindu religious leaders in attendance, it was a culmination of an ambitious project — 25 years in the making, worldwide in scope, and bringing together nearly 1,000 scholars and experts.

It is a deep honor for the University of South Carolina to be participating in the American release of the Encyclopedia of Hinduism, said UNC President Dr Harris Pastides. After 25 years of remarkable scholarship and meticulous research, we now have 11 definitive volumes, in English, that cover the entire spectrum of Hinduism from the dawn of civilization to the present. It is almost difficult to comprehend the magnitude and scope of this important work. It is great hope that many in academia and every day life will turn to these volumes as a resource to better understand the characters, the tenets, and the impact that Hinduism has had, and is having in the world. Most important, this work will provide extensive insight into the wisdom and traditions of close to a billion of our global brothers and sisters.

Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world with nearly 1 billion adherents.

The Encyclopedia of Hinduism was first conceptualized in August 1987 at the Hindu Jain Temple in Monroeville, Pennsylvania, founded by Swami Chidanand Saraswati, who was among the honored guests at the August 26 unveiling.

Pastides said, "It is under his guidance at the India Heritage Research Foundation that this project began.

In 1989, the project began to take shape, the University of South Carolina offered an academic setting for the project. And by 1990, a full academic infrastructure was in place with the offices, a library and other facilities where regular as well as visiting scholars could work.

Pastides said, "It was the right thing to do and we are a better university for having done it. Today, we not only look forward to the unveiling of the international edition of the Encyclopedia of Hinduism — published by Mandala Earth Publishing — but also to participating in an enlightening conference featuring some of the most prominent Indian scholars worldwide."

He announced, "As we religious the launch the Encyclopedia of Hinduism, the University of South Carolina will also begin CarolIndia, a year-long celebration of India through a series of fall and spring events and activities that will include visiting scholars, film festivals, lectures, and exhibits. It is my dream that our students body of over 80,000, as well as our administration, faculty and staff, will find both the encyclopedia and CarolIndia will further a university-wide quest to become better informed citizens of the world."

On August 26, the university president and his wife Pastides Moore-Pastides hosted a reception at their home on campus to celebrate the release of the encyclopedia and thank those involved with its inception and undertaking. Among the attendees were South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley, the Indian Consul General in Atlanta Ajit Kumar, Indian anti-corruption activist Kishan Bahadur Amma Hazare, and South Carolina GOP Congressman Joe Wilson, former co-chair of the Congressional Caucus on India and Indian Americans and a regular at Indian-American events across the country.

Pastides thanked Haley for her commitment to South Carolina being more globally engaged in connective and culture.

Labor of love

The Encyclopedia of Hinduism was first conceptualized in August 1987 at the Hindu Jain Temple in Monroeville, Pennsylvania, founded by Swami Chidanand Saraswati.

The encyclopedia project was located at the University of South Carolina until 2008, when the project was transitioned to India for the final stages.

Running over 7,000 pages in 11 volumes, the encyclopedia is being seen at the most comprehensive guide to date of one of the world’s oldest religious and cultures.

In April 2010, the Indian edition was launched in Noida, Uttar Pradesh, by the Dalai Lama.

July 27, 2010, the encyclopedia saw a soft launch at the Manav Sansad Mandir in Chicago (India Abroad, August 16).
Cover Story

India Abroad September 13, 2013

Consul General Ajit Kumar, left, speaks with Senior Citizens of Saraswati, second from left, as Dr. Meera Narasimhan, right, looks on as the regional University of South Carolina president Harris Pastides hosted a home to celebrate the launch of the Encyclopedia of Hinduism.

‘Groundwork for this project began 20 years ago at the University of South Carolina’

AZIZ HANIFFA

Bangalore-born Dr. Meera Narasimhan, chair, Department of Neuropsychiatry, and vice dean, University of South Carolina School of Medicine, was an integral part in the unveiling of the Encyclopedia of Hinduism.

Narasimhan, who spearheaded the organizing of the scholarly conference to coincide with the encyclopedia’s release, believes it was timely that the USC was the site for its publication.

Narasimhan, who attended Gandhi Medical College in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, and moved to the United States in 1993 to complete her psychiatry residency and a neuroscience fellowship at Yale University, selected the University of South Carolina in 2004.

The recipient of numerous regional and national honors and awards throughout her professional career, she said nothing was as fulfilling as being associated with the publication of the Encyclopedia of Hinduism and its release after more than two decades at the University of South Carolina, where much of the initial development of the encyclopedia had had its roots.

How did you get involved with this project? Why did you think it was important to organize a conference around its release?

I had the distinct pleasure and honor of meeting and receiving the blessings of mahanta Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji in Columbia (South Carolina), three years ago. This also happened to be the year the Encyclopedia of Hinduism’s Indian edition was being unveiled by many distinguished spiritual leaders including the Dalai Lama on the banks of the Ganges. In my conversations with sarvajniji, I learnt that the University of South Carolina had served as a seat of learning fostering a confluence of scholars from the east, west, north and south — both Hindus and non-Hindus — for over 20 years. I spoke to Dr. Harris Pastides, the president of the university, who was thrilled to hear of our institution being involved with such a monumental project.

We talked about a launch in the US on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Encyclopedia of Hinduism’s international edition, an idea that was due to be released by Mandala Earth Publishing in September 2013. This year’s launch was also to coincide with the US tour of the US tour of the Sarvajniji, who was visiting the US. The stars were perfectly aligned for an auspicious launch of the encyclopedia at the USC. More importantly, it was a celebration to express our gratitude, honor and recognize the contributions of over 1,000 scholars who are the true heroes of this grand project.

How did you get involved with this project? Why did you think it was important to organize a conference around its release?

I had the distinct pleasure and honor of meeting and receiving the blessings of mahanta Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji in Columbia (South Carolina), three years ago. This also happened to be the year the Encyclopedia of Hinduism’s Indian edition was being unveiled by many distinguished spiritual leaders including the Dalai Lama on the banks of the Ganges. In my conversations with sarvajniji, I learnt that the University of South Carolina had served as a seat of learning fostering a confluence of scholars from the east, west, north and south — both Hindus and non-Hindus — for over 20 years. I spoke to Dr. Harris Pastides, the president of the university, who was thrilled to hear of our institution being involved with such a monumental project.

We talked about a launch in the US on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Encyclopedia of Hinduism’s international edition, an idea that was due to be released by Mandala Earth Publishing in September 2013. This year’s launch was also to coincide with the US tour of Sarvajniji, who was visiting the US. The stars were perfectly aligned for an auspicious launch of the encyclopedia at the USC. More importantly, it was a celebration to express our gratitude, honor and recognize the contributions of over 1,000 scholars who are the true heroes of this grand project.

I would have been very happy to serve as a liaison between sarvajniji and the university and being of service, God alone in his immense wisdom knows how he got me involved as the program chair, emcee, taking on the responsibility of arranging this launch at the USC. This could not have been possible without an incredible team of diligent, dedicated, devoted USC staff, Sadhvi Bhagawati, and the scholars who made this a successful launch. So, I consider it my good fortune to be able to cherish and be associated with the launch of a comprehensive literary portfolio of wisdom, insight and tradition of the spiritual and cultural heritage of India during my lifetime.

How did someone like you with a specialty in neuropsychiatry not only get involved with the encyclopedia project but also go on to organize a conference and get so many Hindu scholars from India and across the US?

Being raised a Hindu, Hinduism to me is a way of life, one of the oldest civilizations, a vast ocean of knowledge that has provided a depth of richness, integrity, understanding and meaning to my daily life. The tenets of Hinduism capture the roots of Indian heritage for the universal good and human welfare, which is what led me to pursue medicine. I have been strongly influenced by the Eastern philosophy. As a physician trained in Western medicine, it has provided me an abundance of knowledge to help better understand the mind, body, spirit connection as the key in understanding health as it pertains to disease and wellness.

How much of input did you exercise in selecting the scholars and experts for the conference, and what were the criteria you used?

We sent out invites to all scholars who were involved with the project. We had a number of key scholars who spoke at the event, including the Executive Editors Dr. V. V. Ramaswamy, Dr. Rama Rao Pappu, Dr. Subhash K. Kak, Editors in Chief Dr. K.L. Subbarayu Rao and Dr. Kapil Kapur, and Dr. Radha Lahiri, who served as a senior fellow. These scholars enthralled the audience with their wisdom, command over content expertise and its origin/connection to Hinduism.

What do you wish the encyclopedia will do vis-à-vis the greater society at large?

The Encyclopedia of Hinduism is the first and the only attempt, in the English language, to cover the growth and development of the Hindu tradition from the dawn of civilization to the present. It will serve as a comprehensive, scholarly reference for students, teachers and researchers and anyone who is interested in the world’s oldest tradition and will help deepen the inter-cultural dialogue. It encompasses the depth and breadth of Hindu culture, civilization, art, architecture, spirituality and a wide array of topics. It will have something for everyone, all walks of life.

Another question I am asking everyone. You live in the South, and so several thousand Indian Americans. The South has been disparaged because of racism. So what does the University of South Carolina acting as a catalyst in this project and President Harris Pastides showing such support for the project say about the South, the USC and President Pastides?

Despite South Carolina being a conservative state, in the Bible belt, the University of South Carolina being involved with this project from inception to its launch last year was no ordinary feat. Sarvajniji’s vision, the work of scholars to make his vision a reality, progressive academic leaders who helped facilitate this dialogue and scholars at the University of South Carolina, the spirit of openness, unity in diversity, were the common thread that made it this extraordinary feat possible.

The groundwork for this project began 20 years ago at the University of South Carolina, demonstrating that as an institution of higher learning in the South, it was ahead of its time. The 20th University of South Carolina President Dr. Harris Pastides’ Presidency to be a part of such a historic project that would help provide a better understanding of Hindu tradition in the global context for generations to come.

Also having the Indian-American woman Governor of this great state (Nikki Haley) grace this event with her presence at the launch of one of the greatest gifts to mankind was the jewel in the crown.

Dr. Meera Narasimhan with the encyclopedia.
‘A daunting task’

Harold ‘Hal’ French, Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies, University of South Carolina, speaks to Aziz Haniffa about the epic effort

H ow did you get associated with the Encyclopedia of Hinduism? Did you ever feel that epic effort may never be realized, considering its fruition took 26 years?

I was first involved with the encyclopedia through the region then Dr Bishnupriya Mahanta and Dr Kishalal Sinha to find a site on campus where some scholars would meet to discuss this. I located a spot and the first session was held here on our campus.

There were indeed times when I wondered if we could complete the project. Recall an initial editorial meeting in Shillong in 1989, when we were discussing topics which should be covered. After a day and a half, we hadn’t finished with the A to Z, alphabetically! It was a daunting task, assembling topics and then matching them with scholars who could write on them, ensuring their articles were hand-written in Indian languages, needing translation and then copy and substance editing. An arduous task, requiring much patience and diligence by editorial figures.

What and who inspired you to be involved in the first place and then go on for these 26 plus years?

My interest in India and Hinduism dates back to 1964, when I was invited to teach a course on world religions as a college chaplain. Of the religions studied, I became most interested in Hinduism, and I began to pursue a PhD in South Asian religion. My dissertation and first book were on Swami Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna Movement in the West. So when I was invited to join the project, it seemed like a logical extension of my research to that point.

As an associate editor of the encyclopedia from its inception, how discerning were you in terms of the criteria used to select contributors, and also the topic for the articles?

Criteria used were simply the author’s record of research and publication on the specific topic involved, or something related to it.

What do you hope will be the underlying message of the encyclopedia to the society at large?

We need to learn the value systems which inform different cultures, to become world citizens. This should generate respect and understanding for them, and expand our capacity for appreciation of the incredible kaleidoscopic diversity that colors our world.

The American South has often given a lead role in terms of its tolerance towards minorities, but the University of South Carolina was a catalyst of this project and USC President Harris Pastides once urged the project with a fervent unprecedented campaign in terms of the so-called progressive liberal academic establishment.

There is a Hindu community here which helped to foster a climate of support for the encyclopedia project, aided and absolved by a university which was interested in providing resources for this project. This occurred first under President John Palter and our Department of Religious Studies, and has continued now with the launch, hosted by President Pastides and other university personnel. I was chair of the Department of Religious Studies when the editorial office was first installed here, and this was expanded under Dr Carl Evans, who succeeded me as chair.

The university, anywhere, east, west north or south, is a liberalizing influence, and we found such a climate here, with the assistance of the Hindu community. Dr and Mrs Kishalal Sinha

...were wonderfully hospitable to this project on many occasions. This project is an Encyclopedia of Hinduism, not a Hindu encyclopedia, which means that it is not just by and for Hindu, but has, from its inception, welcomed participation by some Western, non-Hindu scholars of the tradition, and it is intended for an international audience. That means that it has value both inside and outside perspectives in the scholarly process.

I believe you were inspired to study Hinduism in-depth after a visit to India many years ago. What got you interested? Were there any particular facets of Hinduism that were the most intriguing of this inspiration? Have you converted to Hinduism? If not, why no? And if so, is it because you can study, be an expert, and immerse yourself in the study of a faith or tradition without becoming an adherent of that faith?

As much as I treasure the Hindu tradition, along with Buddhism and others, I have never felt a need to convert, but to try to understand as best I can what meanings I can derive from studying the tradition, and being as true to it as possible in interpreting them. I’ve been to India some nine times for my own research, participation in the encyclopedia project, being involved in post-9/11 work in Chadhore (in Tamil Nadu), taking some $3,700 in donations from our interfaith group here for the building of an orphanage for children of tribal victims, taking student groups on five occasions. All of these experiences have stretched my appreciation of the wonder that is India. Shillong is one of my Indian homes and another is Kolkata, where my continuing involvement with the Ramakrishna Vivekananda crowned in my participation in the 150th anniversary of Vivekananda’s birth this March.

South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley, left, chats with a group of women at the home of University of South Carolina President Harris Pastides.
The Stanford-educated Jewish American who became managing editor of the Encyclopedia of Hinduism

Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati, president, Divine Shakti Foundation, speaks to Aziz Haniffa

India plays a huge role in today's world. Therefore, it is really vitally important that the religious culture of the country is understood both in historical context as well as in modern context.

How did you get involved with the Encyclopedia of Hinduism? How did you persevere over all these years? There must have been times when it seemed as if its final publishing may not have been realized.

I went to India 15 years ago, in 1998. I had graduated from Stanford University with an undergraduate degree and was doing my PhD in psychology when I decided to travel to India. I was so deeply touched and transformed by India that I stayed on.

I eventually did complete my PhD, but that's a different story. Swami Vishwananda Saraswati, the president and spiritual head of Parmarth Niketan, Rishikesh, in Rishikesh, where I was staying and where the incredible divine personal transformation took place, had already conceived, inspired and begun the work on the encyclopedia from 1987 and work had begun in serious earnest by the early 1990s.

So it happened quite naturally for me to become involved in this project as well as involved in the other myriad humanitarian and charitable projects that Swami was running, including free schools, women's vocational training programs, free medical care programs, etc.

How did you become managing editor of the encyclopedia?

Swami definitely inspired me to become involved, and also the situation itself inspired me. It wasn't that I walked in and said I wanted to be managing editor. I began actually running by helping to copy edit a batch of the articles. When the organization shifted from California, South Carolina, to India in 2005, that was really when I had to take on a much larger role which eventually manifested in being managing editor. There just was so much to be done and the role of managing it all fell into my lap in some sense.

Swami inspired all of us to see every task that came before us as something won by God, so I saw this as service in that way. Also, coming from the West and having been so deeply touched and inspired by India by India's culture and teachings, I also had a personally vested interest in ensuring that the encyclopedia got finished as soon as possible and in the best most scholarly sound way possible — so that it could really take its place as a work of authentic reference.

How do you select the contributors, editors, etc.?

We really wanted experts, not just people who had read secondary and tertiary sources for a bachelor's or master's degree. We wanted people who, ideally, were able to read and understand the primary sources in their original language and who had spent their lives steeped in the tradition and teachings.

During the unveiling ceremony at the University of South Carolina, the swamis had said the encyclopedia was to inform and educate and not convert people to Hinduism.

Yet, swamis is very clear that the history, the culture, the insights and teachings of Hinduism are not meant to turn people into Hindus. They are meant to raise people's human beings. He always says, if you are a Jew, these teachings will make you a better Jew. If you're Christian, they will make you a better Christian. If you're Muslim, they will make you a better Muslim. The Hindu teachings include everything from science to psychology to medicine to natural law. So the purpose of the encyclopedia is manifold. To provide information — specific, authentic, comprehensive — on this ancient yet timeless culture, heritage, civilization and people — and to provide inspiration, but not in any sort of didactic way. Rather, the insights and wisdom within the Hindu tradition are themselves inspiring and inspire all people of every background and every religion to understand themselves and their world in a deeper way.

What do you hope the encyclopedia will do for the society at large, besides the Hindu community, particularly in India?

I hope that it provides a source of reference, authentic reference, on a tradition that is so crucial today, not only because it's the oldest living culture and therefore encompasses an entire vast and deep history, but also because
Epic effort

The Stanford-educated Jewish American who became managing editor of the Encyclopedia of Hinduism

reference to which they can turn with questions about why, how, when regarding their own religion, their customs, their traditions, their roots and their heritage. There has really been a great need for such a reference that is authoritative and complete and also comprehensible for the layman or the student.

The American South has often been disparaged, but the University of South Carolina was a catalyst in this project and USC President Harris Pastides encouraged the project without any reservation.

Of course one cannot stereotype entire regions, but yes, I know what you mean regarding the South's image as being more conservative, etc. It is truly beautiful to see the way that the University of South Carolina, from the very beginning, has been such an active, devoted supporter of this project. As I said at the event, I wish that every student in every institution in this country had the opportunity to study under the vision of Dr. Pastides, because his vision and commitments are so broad and far-reaching that he would truly bring a new way of envisioning other cultures and religions to all of us.

It's not true to say there was no contribution to the encyclopedia from US Representative Tulsi Gabbard, the first and only Indian-American in Congress, who has been embraced by the Indian-American community.

Yes, there uniform analytic in any article by Tulsi. It would have been great. But the actual text of the encyclopedia was completed a couple of years after we launched the India edition by the hands of the Dutch and we have not heard of it at that time. I fast her for the first time just one year ago when we spoke on a panel together in San Jose. When the entire edition comes out we will definitely include her and her great contribution to Hinduism as well as in future print editions.

Are you involved with the digital edition full time or do you have a separate professorial life or are you completely immersed with ye or so on work?

To be honest, there are so many projects we run — for example, from Taxonomy to Divine Understanding Foundation and Freya's Hope — it is impossible to work on only one project all the time. Yet, I work full-time always in about 20 hours a day — but the work varies among all the different areas.

There were certainly large periods of time when I was fully and completely immersed only in the encyclopedia, but not throughout all these years. I am a full time speaker in Nashville. I am president of the Divine Understanding Foundation. On any given day I perform a wide range of works. My main goal is to provide everything ranging from evening schools and educational programs to giving spiritual discources and question-answer sessions, to writing books and also to preparing reports, for international liaison work. In doing an intellectually vast array of things for all of the wonderful projects and charitable programs that run under the umbrella of my guidance and inspiration through our organization.

Where were you born, raised and educated? Where you born Hindu or did you convert? Do you usually wear traditional Hindu clothing or are you comfortable with Western attire?

I grew up in Los Angeles in an American Jewish family. As I had mentioned, I have a PhD in biology. I have taken many courses in Indian studies. I am always asked about my training in the classical sciences, etc. For me, it was not a conversion but an evolvement to such an extent. For me, growing up, I felt deeply connected to the history of the Jewish people, to the land of Israel. And I still do. Nothing about taking order and living in an atmosphere in India has changed that. What has happened to me is that I actually have an experience of the Divine, standing on the banks of the Ganges. That just added so much to my religious/spiritual life. So, now, over the years, I have been building a relationship with the Divine, through all of the various approaches, and that has helped me to take a more spiritual path in my life.