

Hindu Diaspora and Religious Philanthropy in the United States

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Introduction

Much has been written about the Indian Diaspora in the United States and its interest in India's development as manifested in charitable giving. In recent years several studies have tackled the aspect of Indian Immigrants in the United States and Diaspora philanthropy. However none of these of these studies have provided more than a cursory glance at the role played by religious institutions in channelling funds for development purposes. Religion for most Indian immigrants provides the rationale for giving and remains central to philanthropic giving. Religious centres such as Hindu temples and mosques act not only as community cultural centers but also raise funds for charity works in India and the United States.

In light of the recent developments where much has been written about a major social and economic non-profit organisation (targeting Indian Diaspora) in the United States that is allegedly funnelling money to fan communal hatred (refer to www.stopfundinghatred.com), it is important to stress the positive role of religion in promoting social development and reform in civil society. This research takes the first small but important step of documenting the philanthropic role played by the Hindu Diaspora and Hindu religious institutions and studies the various fundraising strategies used by these organizations to garner funds from people of Indian origins in the United States.

Objectives

The objectives of the study were therefore to study resource mobilization techniques and philanthropic activities of religious Hindu bodies (temples and movements) of the Asian-Indian community in the US i.e. to understand the strategies adopted to raise resources and study the scale, scope and nature of philanthropic activities undertaken and supported by these institutions both in India and the United States.

Methodology

Given the time constraints and the sheer number of Hindu religious institutions (there are over 200 temples and 500 Hindu religious movements) in the United States, the research included three Hindu temples and seven Hindu religious movements in the United States. Representatives of key Hindu religious movements such as the Chinmaya Mission, the Swaminarayan Sanstha, the Sathya Sai Organisation etc were contacted and interviews conducted through face-to-face meetings, telephone conversations and emails. In addition important temples based in New York, Maryland and Pennsylvania were also contacted. The researcher wishes to emphasise that the institutions included in the study are by no means representative of the total universe of Hindu religious institutions in the United States and any conclusions drawn are based on the activities of the profiled institutions. This report is primarily based on the information (verbal, written or otherwise) received from the Hindu religious institutions. In addition we obtained public domain information from sources such as religious journals, books and the Internet. Financial information and details regarding activities of these institutions were also collected from secondary sources such as publications, periodicals and the

Internet.

Findings and Recommendations

There is no doubt that faith-based organizations and other private charities are an important part of civic renewal. They provide a partial solution to many of the problems plaguing civil society and provide support in the key areas such as education, medical care, emergency relief, care of the elderly, disabled, homeless and food pantries. The study concludes that temples in the United States help preserve and sustain Hindu religion and culture but are limited in terms of their philanthropy, which is confined to their immediate environments and neighbourhoods. Philanthropy towards social causes in India is not on their agenda at the current point of time. Hindu religious movements on the other hand provide several faith-based outreach programs both in India and the US. The genre of services offered by various groups range between typical (education, healthcare, relief) and atypical (rural development, HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, income generation, women's empowerment). Religious groups like the Sathya Sai Deva Organisation and the Swaminarayan movement tend to direct their service and welfare efforts towards broad, generic and conventional areas such as education and health. However there are a few exceptions such as the Kanchi Kamakoti Seva Foundation, the Veda Vyasa Foundation, AIM for Seva and the Chinmaya Mission's rural development programmes that work with downtrodden groups like the Dalits and tribals (who traditionally fall outside the Hindu caste system) and have extended their service spheres into areas such as rural development, environment, income generation and women's empowerment.

Fundraising activities of these institutions also vary with other groups like the Sathya Sai Baba Movement and the Ramakrishna Mission not soliciting funds, while others like Veda Vyasa Foundation and AIM for Seva approach it in a strategic manner. The latter organizations have websites which provide detailed descriptions of all its projects and have volunteers who host events and fundraisers to mobilise resources.

In addition to this, the researcher has drawn a map of the sector, based on the conclusions drawn about fundraising strategies and the genre of programs supported and executed by these organizations.

A chapter has also been devoted to the negative aspects of religious philanthropy (mostly obtained through secondary sources such as websites and journals). Development is increasingly a vehicle through which the conscription for Hindu right wing extremism takes place. Terrorist and extremist Indian Hindu organizations receive substantial funds from Hindus in the United States and elsewhere. The report briefly lists organizations that have been accused of funnelling funds to Hindu extremists organizations and concludes by saying that one must be careful not to tar all religious organizations with the same brush. Faith based organizations have a long tradition of involvement in charitable activities and allegations of this nature will only serve to hinder their contributions.

The study concludes by stating that the stumbling block for most religious organizations in the US is the fundraising strategies adopted. The report recommends that organizations need to tread the narrow path which spans both spiritual beliefs and secular values and suggests best practices for organizations to optimise its fundraising techniques - namely establish a distinct identity as a non profit by setting up a separate 501©(3) organisation, adopt transparent

accountability mechanisms, approach fundraising in a strategic fashion and extend their program sphere to tackle hitherto atypical areas not previously addressed by religious organizations.