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Guest Post: Divya Selvakumar on American Hindu World Service

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by asridhar

Divya Selvakumar, MPH, is a Nutrition Professor and Nutrition Consultant at Montgomery County Community College. She has years of experience in child nutrition, prenatal nutrition, general nutrition, and HIV/AIDS nutrition and is currently developing an organization called [American Hindu World Service](#), an NGO which focuses on the Hindu faith-based perspectives of international development and global health. We are pleased to have Divya as a guest blogger today to talk about what motivated her to start up a new faith-based nonprofit.

As an international development professional and nutrition specialist, I spent a couple of years working in Tanzania and in India spreading the importance of nutrition awareness. During this time, I became interested in the role religion played in the implementation of nutrition programs.

Upon moving to DC area a few years ago, I met representatives from and became familiar with World Vision, American Jewish World Service, and Islamic Relief. However, I could not find a non-governmental relief organization associated with Hinduism. This observation formed the idea of American Hindu World Service (AHWS), an organization focused on promoting international development and global health through Hindu faith-based perspectives. AHWS aims to promote, educate and advocate for the Hindu service aspects in international development.

South Asians have a tendency to segregate themselves in American society by living in areas where their fellow nationals are already concentrated. I saw similar trends while working in Tanzania and visiting Kenya a few years ago. Several African locals admit that they do not know much about the Indian members of their community, let alone Hindu culture or philosophy. This is one of the primary reasons for misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and misleading information on Hinduism across the countries where the Indian diaspora has found its home.

Hindus are a small minority in the United States (over 2 million – including both South Asians and non-South Asians), but play major roles in the professional sector, and have made significant contributions in fields such as medicine, engineering, and business. Given their prominence and success, Hindus have a responsibility to be more involved in service work and to educate their fellow American citizens about their faith. AHWS aims to do both; its key goals are promotion, advocacy, and education.

There are more than 850 million Hindus estimated to live around the world. Hinduism is considered to be the third largest faith, after Christianity and Islam. Although the majority of Hindus are located in India, significant Hindu communities are found in several other nations, including Sri Lanka, the United Arab Emirates, Malaysia, Singapore, Guyana, the Caribbean Islands, the United States, England, Australia, and various nations throughout Africa. AHWS will begin doing international development work in South Asia, but hopes to expand its reach to East Africa and other developing nations. As Hinduism traditionally does not allow conversion or proselytizing activities, AHWS welcomes members from all backgrounds and faiths.

Currently, AHWS is developing its agenda and is collaborating with international and domestic interfaith organizations, as well as international development professionals. The organization's agenda will focus on the six areas articulated by the Millennium Development Goals:

- nutrition and food security
- water and sanitation
- environment
- education
- women's empowerment
- microfinance

I first introduced AHWS to the Hindu community when I spoke at the annual Hindu Mandirs Executive Conference in September 2009. To start, AHWS will collaborate with SMILE Trust, a registered charity based in the Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu, India, to promote nutrition programs in rural areas. AHWS will also be represented in the annual Unite for Sight Global Health Conference at Yale University in April 2010.