University Students Studying Indian Religions In Hk Explained On The Intricacies Of Hindu Dharma During Temple Visit

On 23rd March, 2019, 14 students from the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) visited the Hindu Temple to learn about the worship traditions and rituals being followed by Hindus.

The chief editor of Sandesh Bharati, Nirmal Laungani, also vice president of HSS HK, was invited by Steven Matthews, initiated in ISKCON as Chandrasekhar Das, to speak on the various facets of Hindu Dharma. The students are a part of the “Course on Indian Religions” at CUHK that are being conducted by Chandrasekhar Das.

It was not their first introduction to an Indian temple, as they were familiar with the Sikh and Jain temples, as well as having visited the Hare Krishna (ISKCON) temple. But it was definitely their first trip to the main Hindu temple in Happy Valley.

The students got acquainted with the deities of Lakshmi-Narayan, Parvati-Shankar and Ganesh, Hanuman, Jhulelal and Ved Bhagwan (in the form of the scripture). Probably this was the first time that they had encountered a vision of so many forms of Divinity in the same temple.

Nirmalji explained that there was only one GOD who appeared in different forms and incarnations. GOD can be approached both in the personal form and even in the impersonal form (formless). He also explained the 4 major schools of Hindu Dharma – Vaishnav, Shaiv, Shaka and Smarta. Even though each philosophy had many differences yet at the base level they shared the same roots.

There is an intrinsic bond that united Hindu Dharma that was just not possible in the groups and sects that made up other religions. For example, Catholics would never pray in a Protestant church and vice versa. But in the case of Hindus, a devotee of Shiv would feel equally at home praying in a Vishnu temple and so on. So also the different ways of reaching GOD, be it through KARMA, GYAN or BHAKTI – complement each other and are not contradictory as such.

He also explained the various practices and customs, such as ringing the bell when entering the temple, playing of the conchshell (shank) before worship began, offering Abhishek (oblations) to the Shivlinga, etc.

He elaborated on karma and re-incarnation which is the bedrock of Sanatan Dharma, and also followed by Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs. He clarified that karma was not fatalistic the way many people thought. He explained how this karma and reincarnation was even believed by hundreds of millions of people in the West who were born in Christian or Jewish families, religions that did not accept this doctrine.

Nirmalji also corrected the many misconceptions that others had towards what is today called as the caste system. He said that the varnashram system of ancient
Bharat has got completely corrupted in the present times. There was never meant to be any kind of discrimination between the various varnas. In the Vedic period, an individual had the freedom to select whatever vocation he/she wanted to do, and accordingly one would be classified as a Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya or Shudra. It was not determined by birth, but by one’s action. He gave examples of Ved Vyasa, the son of a fisherwoman and Valmiki, a highway robber, both of whom would be considered as “low-caste” today but in those days were considered as the greatest of holy people / sages due to their activities. While the former wrote the Mahabharat and edited the Vedas, the latter wrote the Ramayan.

He also touched on Hindu veneration and respect of cows and the uniqueness of mother cow compared to other animals. Though Sanatan Dharma strongly recommends a vegetarian diet, yet for even those who must have meat, beef was strictly prohibited.

And finally, Nirmalji also spoke of how Hindu Dharma influenced other cultures in Asia, including China, whether through Buddhism which is today among the largest religions being practiced, or directly. For instance, he pointed out that the worship of GANESH and BRAHMA was more prevalent in Thailand than in India!

The world’s largest Hindu temple complex, the Angkor Wat, was not even located in India, but Cambodia. And Bali continues to remain a Hindu majority island in India.

But more importantly, even where people were Muslim or Christian by religion, the Ramayan continues to have paramount impact in the lives of people in South East Asia.

The same is the case of Sanskrit language which has had a profound influence on the languages and cultures of the region. Sanskrit in fact is considered as the mother of all languages.

The response to the interaction was most encouraging. ISKCON is definitely doing yeoman service in spreading the message of Vedic Dharma in Hong Kong.