

## Hindu climate activists take lead on combating climate change

By Murali Balaji | FEBRUARY 15, 2019



A panel discussion underway during The Hindu Earth Ethics and Climate Action conference at Yale. (Photo by Andy Lee)

Citing the need to become more prominent voices in fighting climate change — and ushering in a new green revolution — Hindu climate activists met Feb. 9 to lay out the theological and practical framework for collective action.

The Hindu Earth Ethics and Climate Action conference at Yale was the culmination

of months of work in bringing together climate activist leaders, academics, and policy-makers who are also Hindu, in order to claim a mantle of leadership in fighting what many call an existential threat to humanity and the world.

Organizers noted that the event was designed to tie Hindu scriptural teachings on seeing the divinity in all beings to taking everyday action in fighting climate change and global warming.

“What climate change presents is answering the question at the heart of Hinduism,” said Gopal Patel, executive director of the [Bhumi Project](http://www.bhumiproject.org/) (<http://www.bhumiproject.org/>), a U.K.-based Hindu climate action group and one of the conference’s organizers. “What does it mean to be a person in this world?”

Patel noted that followers of Hinduism and other Dharmic religions like Buddhism have long argued a different model than those of Abrahamic faiths in combating climate change. That’s because, he says, rather than looking at climate change from a matter of human rights, Hindu philosophy prioritizes the idea that “all life has rights.”

Speakers emphasized the urgency with which Hindu leaders must work to take the lead on combating climate change, arguing that fighting to preserve *Matre Bhumi* or Mother Earth, was critical. With greenhouse gas emissions increasing at faster rates than ever, many scientists note that the climate is reaching a point of irreparable damage, leading to widespread extinctions and population displacement.

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**“We are at a strong inflection point in history and humanity is literally fighting an existential crisis.**

—MAT MCDERMOTT

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“We are at a strong inflection point in history and humanity is literally fighting an existential crisis,” said Mat McDermott, communications director for the [Hindu](#)

[American Foundation \(https://www.hafsite.org/\)](https://www.hafsite.org/), another conference co-sponsor.

McDermott was one of the leader authors on the 2015 [Hindu Declaration on Climate Change \(http://www.hinduclimatedeclaration2015.org/\)](http://www.hinduclimatedeclaration2015.org/), which was endorsed by over 100 Hindu organizations and leading activists worldwide.

McDermott and others noted that addressing climate change can be viewed from the lens of *bhakti*, or selfless devotion. Hindu theologian Chris Fici added that “love is the foundation of Hindu ethics.”

For many of the younger activists, sitting on the sidelines as climate change has worsened has not been an option. Some noted that they became climate change activists before making the connection with their religious identities.

Narayan Subramanian, who helped write key parts of the landmark 2015 Paris Climate Accord and advised the Marshall Islands, tied Hindu philosophy to other indigenous ways of life, noting that preservation and love towards the Earth is central. He said that the markers set by the accord are modest and must be viewed as a starting point.

Other speakers, including faculty members [Dr. Maya Prabhu \(https://medicine.yale.edu/psychiatry/people/maya\\_prabhu.profile\)](https://medicine.yale.edu/psychiatry/people/maya_prabhu.profile), assistant professor of psychiatry, and [Miraj Desai \(https://medicine.yale.edu/psychiatry/people/miraj\\_desai.profile\)](https://medicine.yale.edu/psychiatry/people/miraj_desai.profile), an instructor in the Program for Recovery and Community Health at the medical school, said that climate change is already having deep psychological impacts on displaced refugee populations, a crisis that is likely to worsen. Vijah Ramjattan of the [United Madrassi Association \(https://www.madrassi.org/\)](https://www.madrassi.org/), which represents Indo-Caribbean Hindus, said that diasporic Hindu populations must also be engaged in helping to take on a holistic approach.

The participants also gave a full backing to the [Green New Deal \(https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/109/text\)](https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/109/text), an ambitious and holistic policy plan led by progressive Democrats. Varshini Prakash, one of the founders of the [Sunrise Movement \(https://www.sunrisemovement.org/\)](https://www.sunrisemovement.org/) and a visionary for the Green New Deal movement, said Hindu Americans and others must hold

elected officials accountable for their action (or lack thereof) on climate change.

“We can’t wait any longer,” Prakash said, drawing enthusiastic applause from student members in the audience.

Organizers Asha Shipman and Vineet Chander, the directors of [Hindu Life at Yale](https://hindulife.yale.edu/) (<https://hindulife.yale.edu/>) and Princeton, respectively, said the conference exceeded their expectations. They hope to convene another gathering soon and use this event’s dialogue as a platform for sustained action.

Held at the historic Marsh Hall, which was designated a National Historical Landmark in 1964, participants noted the venue location as an important reminder of preservation. The Jacobean-style brownstone mansion originally built for paleontology professor Othniel C. Marsh sat on seven acres of woodland, and several speakers referenced the tree-lined vista outside the venue.

Yale faculty members [Mary Evelyn Tucker](https://environment.yale.edu/profile/tucker) (<https://environment.yale.edu/profile/tucker>) and [John Grim](http://environment.yale.edu/profile/grim/) (<http://environment.yale.edu/profile/grim/>), two of the leading scholars on religion and ecology, were keynote speakers, and noted the remarkable progress Hindus have made in leading the discussion on climate change.

Tucker said the conference “has great potential for transformative social and environmental change.”

In addition to Yale’s Hindu Life program, the Bhumi Project, and HAF, other sponsors included the [Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology](http://fore.yale.edu/) (<http://fore.yale.edu/>), the Yale Chaplain’s Office, the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, [Princeton’s Hindu Life program](https://hindu.princeton.edu/about/hlp/) (<https://hindu.princeton.edu/about/hlp/>), and [Grounded](https://environment.yale.edu/sigs/grounded/) (<https://environment.yale.edu/sigs/grounded/>), a student interest group at Yale.

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