Mandela Befriends South African Hindu Community
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At Ritzy Diwali Event Apartheid Iconoclast Dismisses Comparisons of Himself As Rama Returning from Exile

November 3rd, Durban airport. The moment he stepped through the jet's bay door, a smiling Nelson Mandela was showered with an avalanche of Hindu hospitality. Treating the guest as God, Hindu priestess Saroj Ramawtar chanted a Vedic hymn as she passed the arati flame before the international champion of democratic rights and charismatic leader of the ANC (African National Congress). She then placed a mithai (sweetmeat) in his mouth as a sister would do for a brother on a special occasion. Garlanded by Mr. R. Sookaye, president of the Shree Ramayan Sabha, and visibly glowing in the richness of the ancient custom, Dr. Mandela was escorted to a packed City Hall where a splashy affair culminated in his keynote address to over 1,500 lay leaders of the Hindu community. Introduced by Prof. Reddy, rector of the University of Durban Westville, Dr. Mandela urged the Hindu audience to support and co-operate with him to "push against the forces of darkness that we have been confronting and struggling against for so long. We believe that this is not different from what your Hindu scriptures have been saying." The Indian Hindu community, who have actively cooperated with the ANC for some time, applauded his message.

The day was Diwali, Hindu Festival of Light - a dramatic stage setting. For many in South Africa's million strong mixed Hindu community, Dr. Mandela is a light - a survivor of apartheid's crushing region of darkness and a beacon toward a brighter future. Some likened him to lord Rama returning triumphantly to Ayodhya after his 14-year exile, to renew a reign of righteousness. Dr. Mandela himself diplomatically but quickly rejected the passionate and religiously delicate comparison: "While I am moved, let me hastily reject any similitude between myself and Lord Rama. I remain a humble human being." Others soberly see in Mandela a powerful,

intelligent mind and logical spokesperson in a country 80% Black.

Historical Setting

For decades the ruling colonial Dutch/British governments severely segregated the people into four color groups - White, Colored, Indian and Black. Each group was forced by law to live in separate residential tracts called "areas," use different store entrances and swim on different beaches. The ruling Whites barred everyone else from political office, by law. While the fair-skinned amassed fortunes from the country's fabulous gold and diamond deposits, Blacks eaked out survival existence digging in their mines. Indians and Colored languished in an in-between world of small-shop economic privileges and social and educational straight-jackets.

But in recent years with volcanic force - culminating a century of fiery underground Black agitation - South Africa has spectacularly disarmed itself of all its apartheid laws. A highly sensitive period of social and civil reconstruction is in full process as the world watches hopefully, ready to denounce anything less than total democratization.

Hindus Evaluate Dr. Mandela

Dr. Anil Sooklall, senior lecturer in Hindu Studies at the University of Durban Westville and Chairman of the Diwali Celebration Committee, spoke at the luminous Diwali days' event. He praised Dr. Nelson Mandela for his sacrifices made to secure a democratic government in South Africa. Interviewed later for HINDUISM TODAY, he shared: "Indians in South Africa have allied themselves with the progressive democratic movement from the time of Mahatma Gandhi's demonstrations and fight for justice and equality when he was here."

The immortalized human symbol of nonviolent resistance, Gandhi struggled for 21 years against White rulers who even refused to recognize India marriages as legal. Infuriated by this injustice towards his kinsmen, Gandhi fought and won back legalization of non-White marriages. But few of his Indian countrymen followed his Satyagraha brigade for civil equality with equal force. They continued to suffer, and

despite economic gains secured by their own hard work and enterprising aptitude, they were decidedly second-class "have-nots." So the potent Durban meeting with Mandela was exciting, initiating many new faces into their country's political arena.

Honest Self-evaluation

Indisputably, the Indian community has fought harder for financial gain than social or political gain. Though understandable, Dr. Sooklall wants a change. He hopes a courageous Hindu leadership will guide its community into greater participation in the democratic process and not "sit on the fence," waffling between a sense of nostalgia for the close-knit identity as a sub-class and apprehension about the changes and challenges of a fully integrated society. He asks fellow Hindus to remember they come from a religious tradition that has always agitated for righteousness and an egalitarian society. So they should now cooperate to create a new South African nation where all can enjoy equally the providence of God.

A Mandela/ANC Government?

What would life be like for Hindus under a Mandela/ANC Black-dominated party? Shri P.V. Lakhani, president of the South African Hindu Maha Sabha, told Mr. Rambharos for HINDUISM TODAY: "I have no doubt that if the future government is in the hands of the ANC, then we would be assured of a bright future. The ANC's Bill of Rights provides for the security of all people irrespective of their religious, sex, ethnic or other differences." In fact, there are many Hindus who have been in the ANC party for 20 - 30 years, along with a few Whites and Coloreds.

S. Rambharos, president of the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha and Aryan Benevolent Home Council, also attended the religion-politico Divali f[?]te. He later told HINDUISM TODAY: "South African Indians - meaning those who are descendants of the first settlers who came to South Africa in the 1860's as indentured laborers or passenger Indian - make up about 3% [over 300,000] of the population. In recent years, our situation has changed appreciably for the better. The non-White population is being given more recognition and many posts are being filled now on merit instead of skin color. However, prejudices die hard, and it will take a few generations to have them eliminated."

One of the great ironies of apartheid is that it did in fact serve to preserve traditional Hindu religious life by insulating Indians from other ethnic groups. But Hindu youth abhor any justification or apology for the shameless policy. In their eyes, it bred prejudices, hatreds, jealousies, fears, constructed cruel racial barriers and obscured the most vital vision - a one South African community. Spurred by the vital, though charged, climate of change in their country, Hindu youth have organized bodies on many campuses and a new, forceful Hindu youth federation is promoting Hindu self-awareness and building up pan-South African Hindu solidarity.

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