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Indians Rethink Racial Attitudes After LA Riots

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Many Urge More Openness, Care for Other Minorities

Last year, the long, white arm of the law descended on the black body of Rodney King in Los Angeles in a shower of brutal blows, and people of conscience everywhere were stunned. When an all-white jury acquitted the four white policemen this April, all hell broke loose on the streets of South-Central Los Angeles. For two nightmarish days black, white, brown and yellow collided. Fires raged, homes were demolished, businesses looted and incinerated. Hundreds of Korean families lost heavily, some losing everything they owned. Several Indian businesses were also destroyed, but they were not specially targeted. They just happened to be within the eye of the storm. What was puzzling in this fracas was that Koreans, as people of color, could have been perceived by the blacks as on their side. But something had gone deeply wrong between the two communities. They were totally alienated.

Will America's Indian community - affluent, aloof, proud and complacent - be the next to reap the anger of discriminated blacks? HINDUISM TODAY spoke with some thoughtful Indian Americans to gauge their feelings and hopefully find some solutions.

Mira Nair, the bold film director who usually rushes in where more timid mortals fear to tread, took the prickly subject of race relations head-on in her new film, Mississippi Masala. By portraying a romance between an Indian girl and an African American, she compelled Indians to face an explosive issue they'd rather just ignore. Says Nair of her decision to make this film, "Our relationship with white people has been explored before, but not with other people of color, nor the acute

consciousness of color we have amongst ourselves. It's embedded in our culture that fair is beautiful and dark is not, and that's the springboard for the film. I hope it will be a mirror for people to examine their attitudes toward race and color. It's easy to find fault in others, and not so easy to look at yourself."

Nair says she had a stand strong in the face of resistance from the film industry because she included no white characters. "But," she says, "audiences are becoming far less shortsighted than Hollywood thinks. There's lots of room for such stories, which educate us about another's community, depict the complexity of its characters, and the depth and breadth of what we have in common. Actually this is a film more about ourselves than about others."

In one memorable scene, after he's been forced to break up with the Indian girl due to the outrage of the Indian community, the young black man confronts her father and says, "Your skin is just a few shades lighter than mine." And that is the crux of the matter. Many Indians, no matter what their skin color, tend to perceive themselves as white. As the joke goes, an Indian is simply a white man who's stood in the sun too long.

Another film director, Kavery Kaul, who has worked with both blacks and whites, puts it succinctly: "We are people of color; we aren't white, [but caucasians nonetheless and we aren't British, colonized as our minds may be. In Indian, as in other cultures, white is considered better than black, especially in women. That's definitely a problem. We have to examine who we are here in America, and not in terms of traditional Indian standards of beauty or in terms of trying to be like the British."

Kaul, who like Mira Nair is a Harvard graduate, has been awarded the National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship twice, as well as the New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship in Film. Her film, *One Hand Don't Clap*, celebrates the rhythms of Calypso music and the talents of two legendary black artists, Lord Kitchener and Calypso Rose. She feels that the cultures of Africa, Asia and Latin America have always inspired the arts of Europe, but have never been recognized as equals. "All too often, we're buried alive as anthropological curiosities or reduced to tired social issue clichés." And this seems to rub into the thinking of Indians for as she points out, "In spite of living in such diversity, we don't really know one another. We still interface each community with the white community, as if that's all there is. There's little understanding or dialogue between the black Americans and the

Indian Americans, or even attempts to get to know one another, and I think that's sad. Blacks mistrust Indians because of the white tension set and the "model minority" business. And Indians, they would rather be perceived as white, i.e. successful, rather than black, i.e. unsuccessful. Upward mobility has always meant moving into a white neighborhood. These are ridiculous criteria."

One of the biggest problem in the way of meaningful interface is that Indians sit on the fence, are reluctant to make waves or speak up for injustice. Says Kavery Kaul, "I don't see too much difference between what the Dotbusters do and what the Klan does, or what the L.A. Police did to Rodney King. What Indians have to remember is that Rodney King could be any one of us, and that's really the issue. There has to be a lot more outreach and understanding between the two communities. In South Africa, it's not just a black problem too. There are so many grounds of commonality on which we could strike up a dialogue, but we avoid it."

One has to also remember that the L.A. riots took place in an economically depressed area with 43.8 % unemployment among black teenagers, according to census figures for 1990. The Korean businesses are family-owned and employ mostly family members which further diminishes the employment opportunities in the area. Indian businesses need to rectify this also, as they also hire mostly family members or fellow Indians. In America, it is vital to interact with different communities and make some contribution to their betterment. Japanese American businesses have done very well in generously supporting and generating local projects and charities for the benefit of other communities. As a result, they enjoy very good relations with all communities. Some Indian businessmen are considering following their example. Most already contributes to good causes in India, but they now realize they should not forget the communities from whom one is making money in America.

Cecy Kuruvilla of North Brunswick, N.J. made a valid point in a letter to the New York Times: "Asian-American businesses treat their black customers with suspicion and indict them based on race even before a crime is committed. How can any productive customer-supplier relationship flourish with no basic trust? Why should African-Americans take this added injustice from other people of color?"

The solutions to all these tensions may lie with the younger generation. Actress Sarita-Chowdhry who played Mina, the Indian girl in Mississippi Masala, noticed widely differing reactions between the older and younger generations of Indians to

the film. She says: "Younger people empathize with Mina. A lot of them have had the same experience, and they were happy to see me portray them on the screen. Parents and children are discussing the film, and that is good."

Kavery Kaul, who was only six years old when she came to America, says, "My generation which is Indian-American, as opposed to "Indian-not-wanting-to-assimilate," will have more contact and be more open to dialogue. I find a lot of my generation disapproving of their parents' racism. We're exposed to the culture, and that gives us access to the positive side, as we meet black Americans in school who are like us. This experience of the culture and appreciation for it makes our generation different. Also we're different in that we're not happy to sit back and not make waves." She feels Indian parents assume they have nothing to learn from the young. "But in this case, they do," she adds. "Things are going to get worse unless we start doing something about it."

Indeed, for Indians to solve the problems of racism, they have to look at themselves in the mirror held up by films like Mississippi Masala and the hard questions raised by their own children. They must re-examine their attitudes in the light of their Hindu traditions and remember that regardless of skin color, black, white or brown, within each of us there is an immortal soul and that we are all part of the same Paramatma. Our bodies are temple, whether of white marble, black granite or brown earth, which house the immortal atma. The rule of dharma, according to the Bhagavad Gita, is that one should never do to another what one regards as injurious to one's own self. And merely passively practicing noninjury is not enough - Indians have to get involved. As Sri Krishna told Arjuna on the battle field at Kurusheketra, action is all-important. There is nothing so harmful as the silence of good people who look away when they see injustice being done.

People fear one another because of their differences. The way to eradicate fear is through knowledge, dialogue and emphasis of the commonalities, Professor Pravin Chopra, Human Rights Commissioner of Nassau County, New York, deals extensively with the black community. He feels Indians are uniquely qualified to bridge the gap between the black and white communities. He points out, "On Long Island alone, there are 100,000 blacks and 60,000 Asians. We should build a strong relationship with all minorities, not only the blacks. When it comes to politics, the black community is highly organized, so that is probably one area in which we could interact with them. We can build a relationship through the political process by supporting the common causes. We can provide support to them, and get support from them. Action is necessary whenever there is injustice. After all, Martin Luther King was greatly inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and his principles. The Indian

community can take step to interact with the black community, inviting them to Indian functions or visiting their churches and schools on Martin Luther King's birthday to speak about Mahatma Gandhi. Indians can also participate in local community events such as cultural evenings, showcasing Indian culture for other races, both black and white." Indeed, people tend to fear the unknown, and it is only through constant interaction that the different communities will get to know and trust each other, and hence learn to live together."

Kavery Kaul tries to give some answers to the dilemma between the many colors in America in the film she is currently making, *A Distant Raga*. It is about the Indian American experience, about being here and discovering one is a part of this society. She says, "I'm multicultural and very happy about it. I'm Indian and American, and I also know that being American means not just white - it means black, Latin, and Asian. That's what people forget." Indians should remember that America is "one nation, indivisible under God."

Indians indeed are at a particular advantage as potential healers between black and white. Recalls Mira Nair about her early days in the U.S., "When I came here as an undergraduate to study, I felt instinctually in solidarity with black people, and found that I could white comfortably move between black and white. I was neither one or the other and that gave me a certain freedom."

People everywhere - of all colors and nationalities - have been touched by Nair's film, perhaps because she was able to convey her vision. She says, "This film is about the human condition. In seeing the two communities interact, I hope that the unexpected similarities will be seen and the amazing echoes from one to the other will be heard, even though the two communities rarely think of one another as similar or close. Both have preconceptions about the other, and it is my hope that they will see that it is really myopia that is the basis of so much prejudice."

What Race Are Indian Hindus?

According to the widely accepted view of anthropologist Carlton S. Coon, human beings comprise one species divided by minor differences into five distinct races: Caucasoid, Mongoloid, Congoid, Australoid and the nearly extinct Capoid of Africa. Ninety-eight percent of all Hindus are Caucasoids, differing little from our European

brothers and sisters. Some of us, such as the Gond and Bhil tribes of India, are Australoids. Others - the Nagas and the 13 million Nepalese - are Mongoloid.

Skin color is not a determining factor in these racial distinctions. Caucasoids have skin colors ranging from "black" to "white." Light or dark skin color is an adaptation to greater or lesser amounts of sunlight. There is genetic truth in the joke that an Indian is a European who has stood too long in the sun. In fact the Indian's darker skin color is the result of his proximity to the equator - though it may have been the European who went pale in his cloudy northern climate. Puerto Ricans, a group similar in color to Indians, are mostly of white Spanish ancestry, with some Amerindian and African blood; 55% of Mexicans are mixed Spanish/Amerindian, 29% are Amerindian and 15% are of white Spanish ancestry.

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