Meet Hong Kong's Harilelas
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Can 50 people-parents, uncles, aunts, teenagers, children-all live in the same house? In fact, if you count the young married sons, their families who live in an adjoining annex and staff, the household numbers close to 95 people. In a village or rural setting, this may be possible, but in fast-moving, glittering Hong Kong? Yet an exceptional Hindu family has shown that even in modern societies where the pull of Western culture is strong, it is indeed possible for several generations to live under one roof in love and harmony.

They are the Harilelas, multi-millionaires and hotel kings of Hong Kong. The Harilela Group encompasses hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, real estate and stores. Although they have lived in Hong Kong for over 64 years, their roots go across the oceans to Hyderabad, Sindh, which is now in Pakistan. The secret of their success? Hindu family values and a lifestyle which centers around religion.

Like many other Indians, the Harilelas have come up the hard way. There are six brothers: Hari, George, Peter, Gary, Bob and Mike. One sister, Rani, passed away recently, and the youngest is Sati, known as Sandee. In the 1900s their father, Naroomal Mirchandani, was a small merchant in Canton. On receiving the news that his mother was very ill in Sindh, he rushed to India. When he arrived, he was devastated to learn that his mother had just died and the family, without waiting for him, had already cremated her. Deeply hurt, he renounced the family name of Mirchandani and created his own surname by joining the names of his parents, Haribai and Lilaram. Thus was born the name Harilela, and the reason why there is only one family by the name of Harilela.

Naroomal Harilela returned to Canton in China, and then to Hong Kong. He and his sons saw many ups and downs. The Great Depression of 1930 knocked down their fledgling business, and the boys had to sell newspapers on the streets of Hong

Kong to make a living. Through hard work they managed to open a small shop catering to the British troops, but along came World War II and once again the brothers had to live by their wits. Their integrity and cooperation won over the British who commissioned them to make uniforms for soldiers. When the Korean War started, the Harilelas got contracts to outfit the American troops. Gradually their company became the largest mail-order house in Hong Kong.

The Harilela brothers have stayed together in good times and in bad, and the force uniting them was Devibai, their mother, lovingly known as Ami. Bob Harilela remembers that during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong a bomb fell on their shop and his brother Peter was badly injured. There was a curfew on, but his father rushed out in search of a doctor. Ami held the profusely bleeding Peter on her lap in the makeshift shrine in the store and prayed fervently. Finally, the father found a Japanese doctor, a captain in the enemy army, who amazingly not only attended to Peter, but came for the next 15 days to change his dressings. Says Bob, "That was a miracle, and my brother's life was saved.

The brothers realize the transitory nature of money, for twice they have made fortunes and lost them. Says Bob, "Our belief in God has always been strong. We always have the hope that if there's night, there has to be day." Today they are worth millions, and the six brothers lead a very comfortable life. Hari, the second brother, is the official spokesperson of the family and the force behind the multi-million dollar business. All the brothers handle diverse aspects of the business and are very active in the Hong Kong community, interacting with the Chinese, Indian and British leaders.

Today the six brothers and one sister live in the extensive Harilela mansion with the unmarried children, and behind that is a connected annex where the young married couples live in eight condominiums. This Mughul mansion has many grand living rooms, halls, 40 bedrooms and 20 garages. It is rather like a small, elite hotel. There are 30 servants, 3 cooks, several repairmen, gardeners and chauffeurs, and even a live-in tailor. At the heart of this bustling dynasty is the beautiful temple room from where the Harilelas draw their strength. No one eats breakfast or leaves for work without seeking blessings in the temple every morning.

Sandee, who is the managing editor of Bharat Ratna, the family-owned magazine for overseas Indians, believes that this strong family unity is the gift of Ami, "When we were young, she would tell us many stories. She would say, 'If you

take a stick and break it, it breaks very easily. But if you take a bundle of sticks and try to break that, it will never break. Even if you have no money, stay together and pool your resources.'" Having been taught the importance of patience and sacrifice, Sandee says, the brothers have no jealousy of each other and the sisters-in-law do not envy each other if someone has more or less.

When the Harilela matriarch was alive, she would get up a 5:00am to do her devotions in the temple. One would always find her in the temple room, and old and young alike would start the day by seeking her blessings.

Eldest brother George's wife, Chandra, is deeply devoted to the temple, and she and her sisters-in-law supervise the shrine room duties in rotation. The one who is overseeing the temple must get up at 6:00am, do the ritual bathing of the murthis, read the holy scriptures, conduct the arti and bathe the Sivalingam. Throughout the day family members drop in for their own private prayers. Some stay for half an hour, some just for five minutes. All Hindu holy days are observed.

The children are encouraged to visit the temple, and Ami had started the custom of giving each child fifty cents after they had prayed at the temple. Although she passed away 19 years ago, the tradition continues, and Chandra now gives each child a dollar. She says, "It is initially to attract the small children. Once they are older, they understand and realize the value of prayer." Reading the Ramayana, chanting slokas and prayers are daily examples which the children watch and learn. One of the Harilela daughters, Meera, conducts religious classes every Monday.

When Kamilla, the wife of youngest brother Mohan (Mike), came into the house, she knew neither Sindhi nor Gurmukhi. A special tutor was retained to teach her the two languages so she could read the holy books, including the Granth Sahib. She learned all the religious rituals, prayers and even how to prepare the prashad-not just a cup, but an immense pot for the entire family. She laughingly recalls, "You had to be well-versed in everything, and I learned a lot after my marriage. I'm very grateful to the family. Today my mother tells me I know more about Hindu traditions than her! Now I train all the new brides who come into the family."

Although the brothers, like brothers everywhere, have their disagreements, they always work their way through them with patience and by keeping egos out of the picture. By not letting minor issues become major, the essential harmony is maintained. The wives are all supportive of the joint family system. Hari observes that if plans are made to split up, the wives tell them, "You can leave if you want to, but we are staying here." Kamilla recalls her own reply to her husband Mike, "I can't leave my family. You've made me live with 40 people. Now I need 40 people to live with!"

Although two generations have lived together, whether the third generation of Harilelas will be able to stay united remains to be seen. Many of these young people received educations in the U.S., London, Paris and Switzerland, and have been exposed to different influences. Their family unity will depend on whether the Hindu values learned in childhood are remembered and acted upon.

The benefits of living in a large extended family are many. Kamilla points out that any time she and her husband decide to travel, they know the children are in good hands. The children never get bored because they have so much company. Her daughter, Shirina, 19, echoes the same sentiments, "Growing up in this family, you get the best of everything. You have so many people, you're so close to all the dadas and bhabhis. You just have a very happy childhood because everyone's there to look after you and cares about you."

Thirty-three years back, journalist Frederick Kogos wrote that impressed as he was by the material riches of the Harilelas, he was most struck "by the well-disciplined life in the home. The love, devotion and respect each member of the family showed to the other and the unfailing call each morning and evening made by every member of the house at the prayer room, and also the visit to the mother's room before leaving for work and before retirement at night.

The Harilelas have firmly followed the Hindu tenets of devotion to God and respect for parents and gurus, and although Ami is no longer physically with them, her mantra of prayer and family unity continues to sustain them.