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Hindu Education Center Rises in South Africa as Pyre of Apartheid Smolders

Reported by Rajesh Jantilal, Durban

Hellishness and hope are the self-proclaimed heads-of-state in pre-election South Africa. Whites, Coloreds, Indians and Blacks are trying to see colorlessly for the first time. The hates and hurts writhing so long beneath a ruthless reign of racism erupt daily. Nerves wrench and muscles spasm as families sit together and watch on TV another victim of the 6,000 who have died this year in pre-election political crossfire. The king of the Zulus declares Kwazulu/Natal a sovereign nation and some Dutch Afrikaners refuse to surrender their white supremacist mentality and now want their own state. President De Klerk muzzles battle cries and holds together an eggshell peace amidst a raging racial catharsis.

Despite all the tragic events of desperation and destruction, equally potent forces of harmony and religious resurgence are at work. For three days, March 4-6, spiritual energies as cool and healing as a Himalayan spring flowed from the peak of a small mountain jutting out of a Durban suburb. Amidst flames of ghee, showers of flowers, Vedic chants and happy cries, 4,000 Hindu youth of the University of Durban at Westville and members of the surrounding Hindu community enjoyed the inauguration of a place dedicated to shanti.

Thirteen years in construction, the elegant million-dollar University Hindu Centre officially opened. Majestically cantilevered out over surrounding Indian neighborhoods, with its scalloped North Indian gopuram, soft coral hue of brick and polished marble and glass interiors, it looked like a pink gem cut and set by a Madurai jeweler. Sixty-three women huddled on the back of an open flatbed truck and ceremoniously escorted a pantheon of Deities on a five-kilometer procession around the suburbs, then up to the hilltop for installation.

Pride bubbled throughout the buoyant three-day choreography of consecration rites, speeches, serious socializing and spectacular culture shows each night. Two vegetarian meals were prepared daily and served as prashadam by volunteers during the event.

Unquestionably, the Centre broke molds. It's a one-of-a-kind, all-in-one, meet-all-needs, one-stop, "unity in diversity" Hindu service center. On the ground floor is a book and video religious library, a boardroom and offices and a multi-use assembly hall seating 750 that can be rented out to the public. On the second level is a meditation hall for those who see God as formless. On the third tier is a smaller cloister for those who worship God with form. This room is special, really palatial. The floor and terraced altar is beautiful, mirror-polished rose marble. The pink walls and soft lighting make it ethereal and bathes the soul in divine softness. A priest is employed and a private residence is being built for him.

The Hindu Centre will be the headquarters and likely social "hang-out" for members of the university's high-energy Hindu Students Association (HSA), but equally a venue for other groups' yoga classes, bajan groups, singing and dance classes, seminars, youth forums, concerts, weddings, talent shows-basically anything that meet the needs of the Hindu community and helps promote Hinduism and harmony.

The idea for a Hindu center hatched in 1978 when students, faculty and an umbrella organization, the Hindu Maha Sabha, felt remiss in not having a place of worship and religious study for Hindu students as the Moslems had so caringly done in building a beautiful small mosque on campus. But then, no one wanted to give-"Nice idea, you do it. Good luck!" The excuses were pathetic but telling and went a bit like this: "The students don't really need it; they can worship at home;" "The Rand is so weak now, I can't afford it. It's not really a good time to build a temple." The saddest excuse went like this: "Let's just give up Hinduism. We can't get priests, or anything, from India because she is boycotting us. Our kids aren't interested in rituals and the Christians have such nice, modern facilities and youth programs." Lamentations like that pricked the conscience of more and more who saw the critical need of not one but hundreds of centers to build up a backsliding Hinduism.

Then "Let's get some life back into our religion" show of spiritual force and fibre kicked in from a core, creative band of HSA members. First, diligently educating

themselves in Hindu philosophy, they engineered countless programs to awaken a Hindu pride based on knowledge, not solely faith. "We worked our tails off for years-fund-raising, putting on ump-teen cultural shows, sales, and going door-to-door," confessed a ex-member. Though the HSA students were from the beginning at the heart of the Centre's vision and manifestation, there were many others. During the 3-day event each party graciously bent over backwards to defer the credit to another. But a pair of beloved wealthy Durban businessmen who broke through the chronic drought of funds with two large gifts that "made it finally happen," received well-deserved adulation.

It took over ten years to sell the idea and raise the money. A numerically smaller Muslim community raised funds for their mosque in "just one afternoon." But then, religious rivalry is near absent on campus. Although Ayodhya churned up some emotions, goodwill and sincere curiosity are the norm between students of the different faiths. Interestingly, when the Centre idea first germinated, the university was "Indian only." Today its about 40% Indian and 60% Black, White and Colored.

Critics of the Centre all along argued it would become a "white elephant," but first signs indicate they are wrong. "Already seven nights a week there are yoga classes, bhajan groups, dance and music classes, Gita classes and Saturday and Sunday all day satsangs."

South African President F.W. De Klerk, the King of Nepal, India's Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and Prime Minister of Mauritius Sir Anerood Jugnauth all sent salutations. The presence of a 36-member delegation from India meant a lot to South Africans who felt abandoned during their homeland's boycott of South Africa. The only flaw in the event was the absence of even one youth speaker, with so many so highly qualified. In contrast, many Hindu organizations in the US now insist that teens speak at events and hold seats on steering committees so they grow up feeling integral, valued and respected participants. But with the Hindu Center now complete, youth are saddling up to take as many reins as they can in its management. And like it that way.

Impressions

"The urge to see the UHC in front of me was like a vow I had taken. Now we will go on a propaganda blitz to make the students well aware of its existence and inspire its fullest use. The Centre promotes "Unity in Diversity." For example, there is a meditation room for the Arya Samajists, who don't believe in God with form and I have escorted Muslim students and Black students through it. They were impressed and said they would be back."

-Vinod Bhagelu, chairperson, Hindu Students Association UDW

Vinod Bhagelu

"The spiritual vibes are tremendous. Today, everything is rush-rush. As soon as I sit in the shrine, I feel at peace. All our politicians talk of peace, but unless they spend five minutes a day sitting peacefully, do they have the right to preach peace? The Centre is a steppingstone to invoke spiritual unity in our troubled land. Enough speeches. Let's get physical, real, practical. I am optimistic." -Nerushka Lachman, 18, student

"The whole atmosphere was electric and elegant-the flight of stairs to the shrine, glowing lights, murthis and a painting of Lord Krishna lying down in a sleeping position was very peaceful to look at. I will definitely be attending the student satsang every Tuesday. [It is scheduled during the lunch hour. Students skip lunch to attend, but are served prashadam at the end.] It is a modern, beautiful facility and will be well used by students and the Indian community." -Nita Dhanraj, 22

"I never thought it would come true. We were involved since 1986. It was a Herculean task to raise funds while being students. But many Hindu youth are so apathetic. The temple must now combat a negative view of our religion. It is not all taboos as some believe. The Muslim students have a mosque and are proud of it, so why not we too? Whenever I've felt down, I've meditated in front of the murthis in the Centre and felt a power emanating from them and forgot all my problems." -Shalini Ramraj, chairperson, Reservoir Hills Hindu Youth Association

"Phew! Unbelievable! Our social future will be mixing with those of other cultures, but Hindus, because of their ignorance of dharma, are not so well prepared to face the challenge of living in a multi-cultured society. The Centre must fulfill itself as a propagation headquarters for Hinduism. It is especially very unique in being located at a place of learning. What better place?" -Yash Maharaj, 24

"We who have worked for the last six years having so much difficulty finding a venue for our satsangs are now fulfilled. A dream come true. It is unique because all schools of thought are catered to. The library has Hindu scriptures in all the major Indian languages. Nearly 500 students visit the temple on a weekly basis."

-Rajan Govender, 27, member Reservoir Hills Youth Association

"I was involved with this project from the foundation laying 'till its completion. The feeling is ecstatic, one of total satisfaction. It's like a part of me belongs to this temple. We are presently restricted at our local hall. And there, the elders call all the shots in the running of the temple and hall in every aspect. There are no youth at all in the Reservoir Hills Hindu Seva Samaj. Elders feel threatened, but we youth need to know how our ceremonies are performed so we can teach our children. I took a vow to get married at the Centre years ago. My wedding is next month. I am so excited.

-Shenaaz Mahabeer, 23, HSA member