A victorious South African President Mandela promises religious equality.
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"I burst into tears the moment Mandela took his oath," gushed 25-year-old Nalini Gangiah, a law student. "I was one of those millions who had just voted for the first time. I felt emancipated for life, terribly excited." Joining 20 million Blacks, most of the nation's 1.2 million Hindus reveled, rejoiced, danced and drummed, prayed and partied, celebrating emancipation from 300 years of white domination. On this day, nobody really cared if President-elect Mandela would be able to fulfill every noble pre-election promise. The lawful adoption of a raceless national vision and a successful democratic election were sufficient cause for jubilation.

For the whole world, the day marked the extraordinary triumph of a soul jailed for 27 years who believed so deeply in racial equality, he made it become the law of his land. "I shed my tears for those who gave up their their lives for this day," said Yasantha Moodley, who reflects a budding fraternity with her Blacks and Colored brothers sisters who she is only really just getting to know for the first time. Twenty-two-year-old Anju Prabdial, a medical technologist and Bharata Natyam dancer, now wants to pursue cultural exchange programs with Black dance groups and even choreograph some Black/Indian mixed-culture pieces.

Hindu leaders welcomed Mandela and his commitment to religious freedom. Pranal Lakhani, President of the umbrella organization, the Hindu Maha Sabha, and one of five religious leaders to read a prayer at the inauguration, said, "We congratulate the new state president. Now all religious bodies should firmly commit themselves to peace."

President Mandela, who often endearingly called Gandhi his "mentor," was suspected by most to be the automatic choice of the South African Hindu sector. But post-election studies surprisingly revealed that the majority of the Indian vote

went to De Klerk, supporting the now radically reformed White party that historically held Indians down as second-class citizens. The reason for the apparently last-minute switch was, apparently, De Klerk managed to convince a large percentage of the unabashedly money-minded Indian community that Mandela would bring political instability, hence harm them where it hurts the most, income.

Nikki Kuhn, 22, works with several Hindus in a graphics design firm in Pretoria. Interestingly, she voted for the minority Black party, the Inkatha Freedom Party, explains, "Being a white person, I am supposed to be one of the 'oppressors,' but I was brought up in a home where you judged people on decency, manners, respect, not on a person's color or religion. I am pleased that the IFP ran, mostly for the Zulus in our country who had their hands tied so long." Her colleague, Rita Dave, commented, "I have mixed feelings-happy because of the positive changes and sad because of the heartache we have to go through for these changes." Geyani Mahado, 25, another Hindu associate, said, "I'm very proud to be part of this new South Africa. I think our flag is fabulous!"

Oddly, in this information-saturated age, many Hindus outside the country still visualize South Africa as a backward and barefoot nation-jungles, deserts, giraffes, wireless telegraphs, and savage tribes still at large. The truth is this gold and diamond capital of the world is a land of dizzying contrasts. Pretoria, the capital, with its bronze-tinted, mirror-clad skyscapers, six-lane highways, herds of BMW's and Singaporean, cosmopolitan upbeat ambience, makes New York City look, by comparison, like a Neanderthal cave settlement. On the other hand, there are Black districts where the poverty and squalor are as grim as Calcutta. It is an endless patchwork of races, national groups, languages, customs and contradictions. In fact, contradiction is part of the South African psyche. A common expression that follows a statement is 'Ja, nee' (yes, no), meaning: 'I agree. I disagree. Maybe, I Don't Know. What do you think?'

Reactions

We have now joined the international family after 400 years of oppression. We believe in Advaitism and President Mandela has declared the oneness of our people, and that will lead to peace. We must unite irrespective of our religious beliefs to secure peace. It's possible. For example, during the four days of voting there was no violence. If during such a volatile time we lived peacefully, we can do so in the future. Hinduism must be a source from which we work. It is a democratic, peace-loving religion. I am in favor of a religious body to promote interfaith harmony. -Swami Arjunananda, spiritual head of the Saiva Sithantha Sungum

I was involved with the voter education program and mixing with people from other races. It was an eye-opener for me. It was fun and exciting as we got to know each other for the first time. If we could work so well for those two weeks as South Africans, why not for the rest of our lives? Youth my age are becoming more vocal not only politically, but on many issues. The highlight of the inauguration was hearing a Hindu prayer read. As I listened to the Gayatri mantra, I knew the whole world was watching with me. My message to non-South Africans is-don't judge us so hard. Come and visit this beautiful land of ours and see why we are proud of being South Africans. -Anju Prabdial, 22

We have been fighting for non-racialism all these years, so why form an exclusive Hindu religious party like the Muslim parties? -Rajiv Singh, 25

In the past, we were bombarded with Christian nationalism. That is why so many Hindus have converted to Christianity. -Niranjan Narsee, 34

I just can't wait to be part of that feeling of being a part of the human race again without the prejudices which wrecked thousands and millions of lives in the past. I'm more than optimistic. -Nalini Gangiah, 25

We Indian businessmen have a proven record in business and should share our expertise with the Black Africans who have been oppressed so long. We should create partnerships with them and invest in their townships. To help others in distress is Hindu. -Vivian Reddy

I felt ecstatic, like being born again. We have finally been liberated from the chains of hatred. Apartheid is dead and buried. We now have a bill of rights which protects the religious beliefs of all South Africans. We were always subjected to Christian nationalism. Dr. Mandela could have taken revenge when he was released from jail. Instead, he speaks of reconciliation and building bridges between Blacks and Whites-the sign of a great statesman. Hindus here are materialistic and will vote for the party that will keep this materialism alive. -Jerome Amir Singh, 20, law student

I had mixed feelings about the "new South Africa" as the Whites have done a lot for this country. On the other hand, the Blacks have been oppressed for so long. I feel we have not been oppressed as far as Hinduism is concerned. The proposal of a new interfaith parliament or some body is a good idea. But let me add, their basic aims should be to educate our kids about one's religion. They should not involve themselves in politics. Presently, Hindu bodies bicker and fight. We need to spearhead a Hindu renaissance.

-Vasantha Naidoo, secretary of the Indian Academy of South Africa