Indians Caught Between Blacks and Whites in South Africa
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Hindus Comment On Racial Conflict in Apartheid State

On September 9, black anger in the republic of South Africa materialized against the Indian community. Hundreds of chanting, stick-brandishing blacks laid siege to the mixed-race township of Inanda and the Asian settlement of Phoenix, 15 miles north of Durban. As blacks ran through the area looting and burning homes and shops, Indian vigilantees retaliated with pistols and shotguns.

Rioters rampaged through the former home of Mahatma Gandhi, who left South Africa in 1914 after working as a civil rights lawyer and champion of Indian civil rights. An adjoining house belonging to Gandhi's son was set ablaze.

This was the first attack on the Indian community since the Cato Manor riots of 1949. This incident was far less severe, but fearing the worst, hundreds of Indian residents fled their homes and shops, many of which were looted and burned. The day climaxed four days of rioting and black internecine fighting near Durban in which 40 blacks and 2 Indians died.

Indian residents of Inanda were told earlier by the government that the area is due to be incorporated into the autonomous Kwazulu Tribal Homeland. They will have to move.

South Africa, a nation divided since 1948 into racial groups under the system of apartheid (literally, "apartness"), is, indeed, nearly coming apart at the seams. It is pressured by world opinion against a repressive white government, and bursting with its own black people's resentment against racism.

Indians in South Africa number about 800,000 (500,000 are Hindus), a tiny fraction of a total 30 million. They are classified as "Asians" and enjoy more privileges than blacks, but less than "whites," (who comprise % 15 of the population). The Indians' relative affluence, their clannishness and their business acumen has, by most accounts, put them at odds with the black community. As a group, they have tried to remain in good graces with the government, yet many righteously identify with the black cause at the same time.

Indians and Blacks were further polarized by the new constitution's tri-cameral parliament, which went into effect in September of 1984. It gave new political rights to Asians and Coloreds (mixed races), but made no concessions to the nation's 22 million blacks, who make up nearly 73% of the population.

In the past year, riots and protests have occurred almost daily. Police have cracked down. More than 500 people (mostly blacks) have died at the hands of frenzied mobs or in clashes with police. Over 1,500 have been arrested during the state of emergency declared July 21 under the government's new get-tougher tactics. Mass funerals, until they were banned, attracted crowds of up to 60,000 and became platforms for militant black opposition. South African President P.W. Botha firmly refuses negotiations with black leaders and vows to maintain apartheid, despite strong criticism and pressure from the USA and other nations, including economic sanctions.

Hinduism Today sought the comments of Hindus in South Africa on the present situation. The opinions of Mr. T.S. Pillay (74) of Verulam, Natal, and Mr. Sugan Appasamy (23) of Johannesburg, which follow, clearly reflect the two almost opposite positions of the Indian Hindu community. Mr. Pillay views apartheid positively, feeling that blacks are better off in South Africa than in most other African nations. Mr. Appasamy sees it as a social evil breeding hatred and violence.

Hinduism Today: How serious is the racial conflict, and what do you expect the outcome will be?

T.S. Pillay: "The unrest is due to what should be regarded as the work of some self-styled [black] leaders and newly named bodies without mandate of the

majority. Students are involved to an extent. Criminal incitement appears to be easily found in badly behaved complexes...Indian homes and shops have been burned down, and the Indian people have suffered. If the blacks have a grievance, then it must be aired with the government, and not through violence and unforgivable sins against innocent people. Among the blacks, mob violence is a great attraction. It is because the blacks are bad thinkers and people of low intelligence."

Sugan Appasamy: "The unrest is very serious. There is trouble in virtually every city and township. The black Africans are now voicing their opinion as never before. Due to the recession and the high unemployment rate, millions of blacks are frustrated. The government has not improved the situation with its policies; it has merely fueled an already burning cauldron.

"The root of the problem is the hideous policy of apartheid. Unfortunately, reforms are just words in the mouths of beguiling politicians. If there are no significant reforms soon, I foresee much greater problems, and I know that the land will be plunged into turmoil."

Q: Is there any direct threat to the Indian population?

T.S. Pillay: "The present trend will be a direct threat to the Indian community if the government does not step in to maintain law and order."

Sugan Appasamy: "As Indians (and South Africans), we identify broadly with and are classified as blacks. We cannot think about the future of the Indians alone. We have to think about the future of the whole population. Being a minority group, we are obviously in a precarious situation; however, the time has come for us to take a definite stance. We cannot sit on the fence any longer. In the event of a dramatic change, our future will only be guaranteed if we play our role now.

" Therefore, although many Indians who sympathize with the regime feel threatened, I think that the majority will accept a change because they lead oppressed lifestyles at present."

Q: Has greater political representation improved the conditions for the Indian community, and how has it affected the blacks?

T.S. Pillay: "The new dispensation extended to the Indians and coloreds is an advantage in many directions. The black community has certainly not been disturbed by the new dispensation."

S. Appasamy: "Political wool has been pulled over the eyes of the Indians and Coloreds (mixed races, 4-5 million). These changes were totally rejected by over 80% of the people [by not turning out for the 1984 constitutional elections], yet Indian leaders were elected, and they supposedly represent us. There have been absolutely no changes since the Indian parliament came into being. They are just lackeys of the government.

"This change has led to the belief that Indians and coloreds are on the side of the whites. Now the blacks feel that we have betrayed them. Consequently much tension has been created. This move was deliberately planned by the government."

Q: How has apartheid figured in the life of the Hindu community?

T.S. Pillay: "The word apartheid is a substitute word for segregation. The Indians have lived in naturally segregated areas since their advent in South Africa. Some Indians are very happy in their own areas, where they have their own trading, temples and churches, sporting facilities, hospitals, courts of law, etc. Indians of higher income go and live in better areas. Apartheid is like the caste system.

S. Appasamy: "Apartheid's effects have been felt since 1948 - its utter destruction of families, men and women cannot even be imagined. I cannot even start to explain how people's lives have been grotesquely distorted just because they are not white-skinned. Everything in life (and death, since non-whites are buried in separate cemeteries) is governed by skin color. Even hospital services and quality of services depend on your race. The white minority has the best in the world, yet every day people (blacks) die from tuberculosis and malnutrition in our country's

major cities.

"I don't think that there is a single person who has been unaffected by apartheid. However, many people have accepted it since they feel that they cannot change the system."

Q: What is the Hindu attitude toward the blacks?

T.S. Pillay: "The Hindu or Indian knows the black very well as a person of lower income and gives him benefits of cheaper articles. Socially, he respects the blacks...Industry has given them a large opening, and we are happy that their earnings are enhanced."

S. Appasamy: "The Hindus (like all Indians) are divided. Many identify politically with the black struggle. Others don't. Socially there is a big gap. There is a very poor communication link between Indians and blacks. Indians are very clannish in South Africa (a result of the apartheid system), with the result that they are totally polarized. However, this political and social polarization of the non-whites is a vital and strategic part of government policy."

No one has any easy answers for the Indians of South Africa. Matters are vastly out of their hands. One thing that seems certain is change. Experts explain that for the past three years, President Botha has secured his position through gradual reform. This gave rise to the separate parliament for Indians and Coloreds, limited local black governments and minor legal reforms. But these are seen as token concessions by the black majority. President Botha announced that his government will not accept the one-man-one-vote concept, which would hand South Africa over to black majority rule.

Black Catholic Bishop Tutu, who has acted as public spokesman for South African blacks, said in August, "Our people do not want to fight; our people want a share of the land that God gave them." But he and other moderates are quickly losing ground to younger and more militant blacks. As Assistant Secretary of State Chester Crocker, chief author of the controversial U.S. "constructive engagement"

policy said, "The process of change from apartheid has already begun...Today it is eroding. It is being challenged. It is being dismantled."

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