Hindus Stand Strong In Ancient Tanzania
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Recent articles in Hinduism Today have focused on the large Hindu communities worldwide who are dynamically establishing themselves beyond the borders of Bharat. Giant temples have risen in the UK, Texas, Sydney and South Africa--hallmarks of Indian culture's successful migration. But what about the world's remotely settled and isolated Hindus? How do they fare, and where? Our Kenya correspondent, Prabha Bhardwaj, found some surprises in Africa, where secluded Hindus refuse to let distances dissuade them from dharma.

By Prabha P. Bhardwaj, Kenya

Zanzibar consists of the islands of Ungunja and Pemba, in the Indian Ocean. They lie 22 miles offshore of East Africa, 70 minutes away from Dar es Salaam by fast hover craft.

Ungunja island itself is approximately 100 kilometers long and 14 km wide. History says that 2,000 years ago, if not longer, African trade links from here reached as far as Arabia through the Persian Gulf and to India across the Indian Ocean. The earliest Hindu settlers can be traced back 250 years.

Zanzibar port city is on the western side of Ungunja behind a

well protected natural, deepwater harbor. The 1994 population of Zanzibar city was about 700,000. Of these 98% are Muslim. Only 600 Hindus remained after Tanzania overthrew British rule in 1964. When the new revolutionary government came into power, Tanganyika and Zanzibar joined to form the United Republic of Tanzania.

Though Hindus here are small in number, they are contented, and they fully intend to preserve their Hindu heritage. Mr. Mahendra N. Gondalia, a retired police officer and successful businessman says, "I am very happy here. As long as one follows the laws of the country, there is no problem. I am respected and I have a good life. What more does one need?" His grandfather, a Rajput, came to Zanzibar in 1885 from Jamnagar.

Mr. Gondalia was born here and now has grandchildren living with him who are among the fifth generation born on the island. According to him, Hindus have a bright future, with complete freedom of religion. He maintains an akhand jyoti (an oil lamp that remains lit 24 hours a day) as an offering to the Goddess Khorayar Mataji. He reads the Gita in Gujarati every day, keeps a mala handy and does japa in his spare time. His grandchildren are being brought up with traditional cultural and religious values. They greet visitors with, "Jay Shri Krishna!"

Mr. Gondalia stayed in Zanzibar after the revolution because of the government job he had since 1954. He retired in 1979 and began his own business in 1985. He says recently the government has invited Asians to return to Tanzania, and in

Zanzibar they are being encouraged in their traditional way of life.

A Hindu scholar, who requested anonymity, reported that "Hindus keep their religion and culture intact by interacting with local black Africans strictly for business. They have kept their cultural, social and religious life separate. By keeping this balance, they have been successful in all fields. Even Asian Muslims do not intermingle socially with locals, who have the same religion. Only Arabs are fully integrated."

Most Hindu youth here finish formal education through class six and then get absorbed in the family business. A few go abroad for further studies and then settle down overseas. But the quality of life is good on the island, and the culture and religion are being kept alive. Most Hindus are vegetarians and observe traditional fasts and holy days.

Tale of Two Temples

Mr. Umedlal Hematlal Mehta has been the Chairman of the Hindu Union for the last thirty years. Today there are only two temples in Zanzibar--the Shree Shiv Shakti temple and the Arya Samaj. All Vaishnava Hindus attend the Shiv Shakti temple. Mr. Mehta is a Jain, but his is the last Jain family in Zanzibar, so it is impossible to sustain a temple. They shifted the ancient Jain deities to two temples at Nairobi, Kenya. It is because there are so few Hindus that he has continued as chairman of the Hindu Union for three decades. After the revolution in 1964, hardly any learned men were left to do the work of the Union. The Brahm Mandal organizes all the functions and festivals. Now that Hindus have returned to

Zanzibar, he expects that perhaps elections will be organized and a new chairman elected.

Mr. Praveen Bhai Patel, a businessman, is the President of Arya Samaj. He laments that, with the small congregation of only 28-30, it is very difficult to organize anything. There is no priest, so he performs the duties of priest for the Arya Parivar, including a Saturday havan.

The temple was closed in 1964 and remained that way until 1982, when Hindus made an effort to repossess it. It became functional again in 1985 and is now fully renovated. The community collected donations which it has kept in a fixed deposit, while spending the income from that money on upkeep.

Mr. Patel plans to start a school to keep the culture and religion alive in a formal way. In a similar initiative a few years ago, he brought a preacher from India, but unfortunately the man could not settle down and finally left. Mr Patel is a bit apprehensive about the future because of the lack of formal religious teaching, which results in lack of language and cultural skills. He is determined to keep the Parivar going and hopes that a mature, learned and committed pandit will come to this island to keep the Hindu Vedic traditions alive.

Mr. Rasikbhai Dave is currently the priest at the Shiv Shakti Temple which was established on May 2, 1958. His father came here around 1915, and Mr. Dave was born on this island. He went to school here and after finishing formal education

started working at the Standard Bank. Ten years ago, then priest Kanubhai Rajyaguru died, and Mr. Dave took over the temple rituals: Shankar Baghwaan's puja during sravan month and celebrating all other festivals. He also looks after other religious needs of the community--mundan sanskars, yagopavita ceremony for the Brahmin boys, marriages, etc. As he is the only priest on the island, he performs all the ceremonies from birth to death. Though retired from the bank a few years ago, he has a long daily schedule, holds a job with a construction company, does the temple pujas every morning and evening and visits peoples' homes for ceremonies when necessary. With a great sense of pride, he said, "Such a beautiful temple was made by our ancestors. I want to keep it going at all costs."

I had the good fortune of participating in the Navaratri celebrations here. Children and women of all ages were offering garbha dance at the temple every evening of Navaratri and all through the nine nights. Men joined the ladies and performed dandia raas. Especially encouraging was the participation of very young children--fifth or sixth generation Zanzibarians who will carry on the traditions of Hinduism on this island state. It would be very easy to lose our culture with such a small community, but they are determined and their enthusiasm is very inspiring.

Dar es Salaam

In Dar es Salaam, according to Mr. P. C. Patel, Chairman of Hindu Mandal (HM), there are some 12,000 Hindus. The total population of Hindus in Tanzania is estimated at 20,000--the largest of the Asian communities here. There are four temples in the city, two of the Sanatan Dharma Mandal and two of

Swaminarayan Fellowship. Most communities have made small temples for their exclusive use. But these four temples are maintained by the general community from daily offerings and income from their properties.

The Hindu Mandal was established in 1910, with the aim of providing social welfare, education, youth and sport activities, religious and, most importantly, medical services. A charitable hospital known as the Shree Hindu Mandal Hospital is efficiently managed by a committee. It offers services to all people, Asians and Africans alike, at a very reasonable rate.

The Hindu Mandal's twenty subcommittees organize various activities. All festivals are celebrated in the traditional way. The Hanuman institute has regular classes on physical exercises for the youth. The institute also conducts, for interested youth, cultural classes in music, dance, language and more. The Mandal manages a crematorium and provides cremation services for free. All its activities are self-sustaining. Funds collected at temples from golak (offerings), rental from the properties and the marginal profit made from the hospital are used to support the various functions.

Retrospective

As increasing ease of communication and travel quickly change large and small communities worldwide, stalwart and dedicated Hindus still cling to the timeless Hindu Dharma, knowing that it will always contain the wisdom needed to understand life's varied experiences, no matter where people may reside.

Hinduism Today correspondent, Mrs. Prabha Bhardwaj lives

with her husband, retired army officer Col. Bhardwaj, in Kenya.

East Africa, Tanzania and Zanzibar

East Africa comprises Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, a land of incredible beauty and some of the highest concentrations of wildlife in the world, including lions, giraffes, elephants, zebra and multitudes of hoofed species. Tanzania, the largest state, just south of the equator, holds awesome contrasts, ranging from the cool, semi-arid highlands around Africa's highest peak, Mount Kilamanjaro, and the paradisiacal tropicanna of the coast.

Until the 19th century, inland Africa was strictly the home of native tribes living in harmony with the earth and wildlife, finding security in a strong culture of community, extended families, sustainable agriculture and animal husbandry. Many tribes still follow this lifestyle. The coastal ports have, for millennia, been multi-ethnic bases of maritime culture and commerce. Islam is the major religion, with a strong overlay of European culture among the elite. Colonial powers came in the 18th and 19th centuries. The British brought Indian laborers to work on the farms and build railroads. The Indians formed a large Hindu community that flourished until the 20th century, when revolutions in East Africa threw off the colonial yoke. Subsequent political and economic instability led to an exodus of Hindus. Today the small Hindu community of Tanzania remains strong. Life is good in this resource-rich land of natural wonders and exciting changes.

Just 80 km from Kilamanjaro rises the second largest mountain of Tanzania. It's name? Mount Meru--the same name as the

famed mountain in Hindu cosmology, the mystical center of the universe.