

[God's Newest African Home](#)

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## God's Newest African Home

Over 8,000 Hindus and guests help dedicate the Gujarati community's

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No expense was spared in ensuring that the Ekta Mandir of Durban, South Africa, an institution of spiritual renewal, captures the attention of all passers-by. At night, its myriad of twinkling lights covering the superbly crafted building transform Durban's nocturnal skyline and the hearts of South African Hindus.

The four-day opening ceremonies for the "Gujarati Hindu Sanskruti Kendra Ekta Mandir" began on April 13, 2001. Six horses and a team of drum majorettes led the nine-float procession each representing a different Hindu organization. Onlookers sang and danced in joyous salutations to the various Deities which paraded by, their beauty magnified by the rising sun. Early morning traffic through these normally busy streets of central Durban came to a complete standstill. As the crowd, representing many differing persuasions, paraded by in unison, it became abundantly clear that the dream of the Ekta Mandir, or "Temple of Unity" had become a vibrant reality.

With its shiny laminated glass front, white and gold painted walls and lotus-shaped design, the Ekta Mandir and adjacent

community center stand out as one of Durban's most breathtaking architectural statements. This comes as no surprise, considering that the temple's ornamentation and decor combines the best of Western and Eastern creativity and innovation. For the past two years, a team of Indian artisans, or karigars, worked diligently to build the temple.

The result is a majestic two-story building, with a dome extending a further eight stories. The temple complex includes a sanctum housing Hindu Deities, a giant stage, a main auditorium that seats 1,200, a 300-seat smaller auditorium, a large conference center, a boardroom, library, media center and snack shop. Different venues are linked by close-circuit television.

"The tremendous planning involved in constructing the physical building brought three Gujarati bodies that had existed independently of each other for decades together for this noble common purpose," said temple president Dr. Prabhakant Patel. They are the 45-year-old Shree Saptah Mandhir, the 94-year-old Surat Hindu Association and the 58-year-old Kathiawad Hindu Seva Samaj. The Saptah Mandhir, located on the first floor of a commercial/residential building in central Durban, was the oldest—and only—place of worship for the Gujarati community prior to the Ekta Mandir's opening.

Twenty-year-old architecture student Yatish Narsi

stated that it was the first time that the youth had witnessed a temple opening. "Because we've been involved in this project for so long, I am extremely excited by its launch and look forward to seeing it grow. Finally, we Gujaratis have something that we can call our own." He added that regular meetings on issues confronting the youth and the community at large were now a distinct possibility. "In the past, we only came together as a community to commemorate the auspicious festivals."

Mrinal Patel, 21, said that the Ekta Mandir and Community Center is not only a significant milestone for Gujaratis but a "unifying banner for everyone to stand behind. I see it becoming an instrument of cultural preservation and promotion. The fact that there are so many teenagers and youngsters here indicates that we needed something like this."

"The Ekta Mandir goes way beyond being just a temple," said Dr. Patel, "Our facilities have been, and will continue to be, used for graduation ceremonies, high school debates, career guidance seminars, medical clinics rendering basic health care, a central point for collecting and distributing food and clothing to the needy, skills empowerment and the promotion of various aspects of community life. It will be open to all who need it."

KwaZulu-Natal Premier Lionel Mtshali showered his provincial government's praises on the Kendra, "Your outstanding effort will be justly rewarded from the gratification that your mandir will bring to many in their hour of need."

South Africa's Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, Dr. Ben Ngubane, unveiled a plaque to commemorate the Ekta Mandir and Community Center's official opening. He stated that if the development of culture was supported and encouraged, it would imbue all South Africans with better standards of living. "The successful completion of this project is a shining example of a self-reliant, community-driven initiative that will enrich all South Africans spiritually, culturally and educationally. Let us not forget that it was Gandhi who had reminded us that service to humanity was service to God," proclaimed the national minister, who was earlier garlanded by Swami Chidanand Saraswati (Muniji) of Rishikesh, India.

"In catering to all South Africans, I am sure that the Ekta Mandir will serve as a catalyst for eradicating racial intolerance and conflict. In

particular, we want our youth to grow up in a society that is multi-cultural in nature but united in its vision and purpose," said minister Ngubane.

Muniji cherished the hope that the temple would bring all communities together "in the name of culture, spirituality, harmony and unity." "When people are united," he said, "they are better able to serve their country. While Indian culture has much to offer the world, Hindus also need to serve their brothers and sisters within South Africa."

The unity has already begun, as Anglican minister, Bishop Rubin Phillip, proudly attended the official opening ceremony. "There is no reason why people of diverse religious persuasions and affiliations need to be polarized and divided. It is my fervent hope that occasions like these will help us find each other and work together towards the renewal of our society."

The four-day opening ceremony was packed with havans, aratis, kirtans, bhajans ,as well as spiritual and philosophical discourses. Delicious

prasadam, or blessed food, and healthy, sattvic lunches provided further opportunities for discussion and cultural exchange. "I do not think that anyone who attended this opening did not attain some level of spiritual bliss," whispered a guest as he queued patiently to sample the mouth-watering lunch.

Unlike the majority of the pioneering Indian population in South Africa, most Gujaratis did not arrive in the country as indentured laborers. The bulk of the Gujaratis came at their own expense as "free" or "passenger" Indians. They were mostly merchants and traders.

Their arrival set off even more racial tensions from whites who felt threatened by the industry and business acumen of their new competitors. Despite attempts to restrict Indian business opportunities and enforce residential segregation, Gujaratis, and Indians in general, constantly strove to uplift themselves as well as create a brighter future for succeeding generations.

"Presently, the Gujarati population comprises approximately 90,000 of the total Indian population in South Africa which exceeds 1.1 million," said Bob Narandas, an eminent Gujarati community figure.

"Indian education was grossly neglected by past governments, so building our own schools became a priority," explains Narandas. He said that the Ekta Mandir and community center was built on the property that had once housed two schools that not only served Gujarati children, but youngsters of all persuasions. "At any given time, the educational needs of almost 3,000 children were catered for by these schools," said Narandas. He said that some of the nation's "best doctors, nurses, lawyers, teachers, accountants and business brains" have passed through these two schools.

When these schools were closed down by the educational ministry in 1992, despite protests from the Gujarati community, plans for the construction of the temple and community center commenced in earnest. Visiting Indian priest,

Shree Rameshbhai Oza, suggested the name "Ekta Mandir," meaning "Temple of Unity" in order to forge unity amongst all Hindus. The resident priest, the late Pundit Gautambhai Shukla, vowed to walk without shoes until the foundations of the new temple and community center had been laid. In August 1994, at the Khat Moorat foundation ceremony, a pair of Indian sandals were placed at Pundit Shukla's feet to mark the fulfillment of his work after he had walked unshod for two years.

An eight-day katha, a dramatic recitation of the Ramayana accompanied by religious songs, conducted for three-hours each day by Shree Rameshbhai Oza brought the curtain down on what was truly a grand and spiritually uplifting opening ceremony for the Ekta Mandir and Community Center. The portents are certainly positive that the temple will be able to play a pivotal role in healing deep-seated rifts within South Africa's communities to give real meaning to one of Hinduism's fundamental tenets that of unity in diversity.

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freelance journalist who serves in many of his country's social upliftment projects.