S. Africa's First Hindu Chaplain
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SERVICE

S. Africa's First Hindu Chaplain

Sea change for religious freedom and equity

Ajith Bridgraj, South Africa

In what has been hailed as a first for South Africa, Vipra Kiriti Pillay, 48, has been appointed a full-time uniformed Hindu chaplain to the 458 Hindus serving in the South African National Defense Force (SANDF).

The assignment of the Vipra (meaning "Reverent" or "Learned One") is in keeping with the fledgling South African democracy's white paper on defense, which emphasizes freedom of religion provided that "religious observances are conducted on an equitable basis and attendance at them is free and voluntary."

Until now, only Christian chaplains were appointed to full-time positions, while part-timers served more than 900 religious groups in the defense force. The Hindu Advisory Board, chaired by Swami Saradananda of the Ramakrishna Center, recommended the appointment to the SANDF. "My appointment came as something of a surprise," said the new

chaplain, "as some of the others that were in contention were more academically qualified."

Chaplain Pillay completed a teacher's diploma as well as one in industrial engineering. But his involvement in spirituality has been even more impressive. He joined the Ramakrishna Center for studies in 1965 and was ordained a priest in 1969 by Swami Shivapadananda. He studied Sanskrit, Indian philosophy and Hindu theology for nearly three years at Kailas Ashram at Rishikesh, India. Returning to Durban, he worked voluntarily at the Ramakrishna Centers while maintaining his regular job. For the last ten years, he has been ministering to the congregation in Chatsworth, South Africa's largest Indian township.

Now in Durban, where the bulk of Hindu servicemen and women are based, Vipra Pillay states: "Although my work is mainly with the Navy, I also minister to the needs of Hindus in the Army and Air Force. If a member of the base requests counseling, this takes precedence over everything."

Sub Lieutenant Linda Heslop, the Public Relations Officer at the base, sees a Hindu chaplain as a much needed post, "Although we have been working with Hindus all this time, it is only with this appointment that we have been given an opportunity to learn more about Hindus and Hinduism as well."

The Vipra begins each day at 7:30am, discussing matters of moral, spiritual and inspirational value. Every Thursday at noon he leads a lively service of bhajan, satsang and discussions on

Hinduism. Of the 280 Hindus stationed at the Vipra's operational base in Durban, about 40 to 50 at a time attend the services, which are informal, unstructured and voluntary. Although he plans to draw up a syllabus, talks and discussions currently revolve around day-to-day experiences and real-life situations. In another discussion program called FOCUS, the Hindu and Christian chaplains present their respective views on topics such as suicide, drugs and alcoholism.

In honor of his auspicious appointment, the Hindu Advisory Board designed a special rank insignia unique to Chaplain Pillay's position--a lamp and a flame.

The inspired Self is not born, nor does He die;
He springs from nothing and becomes nothing.
He is not destroyed when the body is destroyed.

Krishna Yajur Veda 2.18.566