Reaching Out
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RELIGION

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RSS leader celebrates 50 years of service in Kenya

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With garlands in hand, Hindus and non-Hindus, VIPs and well-wishers gathered on January 10, 1997 at Nairobi's airport to welcome Prof. Rajendra Singh, 75, head of India's Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. The beloved leader had come to inaugurate celebrations marking 50 years of service by the RSS in Kenya (known locally as the "Bharatiya Swayamsevak Sangh," or BSS).

Seven thousand Hindus from over 32 institutions from all across Kenya joined together in the "Virat Hindu Sangam" to honor Prof. Singh. Processions, bagpipers and marching bands were all part of the spectacular afternoon. Unlike in India where the RSS is constantly defending itself against accusations from so-called secular Hindus of being too radical, in Kenya the organization has unquestionably been a stabilizing and unifying force.

During his stay, Shri Rajju, as he is affectionately known,

undertook a whirlwind tour of BSS projects in Kenya. At the Deen Dayal Bhavan he presented fifteen amputees with "Jaipur feet"--artificial legs invented in Jaipur, India, and gave wheel chairs to the handicapped and sewing machines to individuals, all part of a program to promote self-employment. In keeping with RSS tradition, all gifts were a result of donations from the local Hindu population. He handed over a check for Shs. 82,260 (US$1,443), collected by the Sthanakvasi Jain Sangh, to the headmaster of Jamhuri High School to meet the tuitions of deserving students. During a meeting with the President of Kenya, H.E. Daniel Arap Moi, he gave Shs. 300,000 (US$5,263) for the president's Moi Street Children Charitable Foundation on behalf of the Hindu Council of Kenya.

Singh, an ex-professor of nuclear physics at Allahabad University, spoke to a receptive audience of mostly African students at Nairobi University, saying," "The modern age has seen a conflict between science and religion. Einstein says 'Science without spirituality is blind and religion without science is lame.' In our ancient literature science is called avidya and spiritual knowledge is called vidya. The necessity of using both has been beautifully expressed in one of the slokas of Isopanishad. 'With the help of science conquer death, and with the help of spirituality attain bliss.' This is what is needed today."

At every stop and turn, Shri Rajju was bombarded with questions about the RSS, Hinduism and life in general, especially by young people. Asked how to inspire youth to become future leaders, he replied, "We consider youth the most important part of our organization. We make them think, 'This country and society have given us so much. What have

we done in return?' "

Several youth told Shri Rajju they felt the RSS-style shakha (one-hour training meetings) with their paramilitary-style organization were outdated--they could not attract the youth in Kenya where there is a tremendous influence of Western culture. Shri Rajju advised, "In India it is also the case. Materialism is ruling. The West is economically well off. But it is riddled with many problems, such as alcoholism, drugs and violence. Our people are aping the West and forgetting that ours is the world's oldest civilization. It is not a question of attraction but of understanding Hindu thought and the purpose of life. Shakha activities are not old-fashioned. Sometimes they are just not appreciated and given due credit. A society becomes great by molding its youth, bringing unity among all sections of the society and inculcating a sense of patriotism and discipline among its members. Rendering service to the society is not only helpful to the society but also elevating to the doer."

Some youths complained the khaki shorts, part of the uniform of the BSS, are a source of ridicule, and youths are repelled from shakha because of this dress. Shri Rajju replied, "We have that problem in Bharat, too. But the outfits are more comfortable for games and other activities. And when we march in uniform it makes a great impact and a sense of pride. If you are proud of it, it will be all right."

One evening Prof. Singh spoke to Sangh members gathered from all over Kenya: "There are 30,000 Hindus in Nairobi, in about 6,000 families. We have in our contact about 4,000

swayamsevaks (religious workers), probably from 400 families. There should not be any Hindu family which had not come into our contact." Prof. Singh is insistent that the entire family participate in Sangh activities. He remarked, "Sometimes I hear people remarking that the children of very good swayamsevaks do not come to shakha. This should not happen."

Some ladies in Kenya complained their husbands were neglecting their families and spending too much time in daily shakha, camps and other activities. Shri Rajju responded, "The wives, sisters and mothers in our families must be given an understanding of our work. They should have more association with our work and evince enthusiasm it it. Swayamsevaks stand in front of the Bhagwa Dhwaj (the RSS flag) and take a vow to make the samaj strong. A number of mothers and sisters are present here. When swayamsevaks from their families spend time in Sangh work, they should understand that their menfolk do not waste their time on idle pursuits."

Concern was expressed by several that the Sangh's wish to build a temple at Shri Rama Janmabhoomi is drawing criticism in Kenya from many who argue that amongst thousands of temples, what good will one more do. Prof. Singh replied, "There are three temples sacred and most revered by Hindus among thousands of temples demolished by Muslim rulers. Hindus want to rebuild them. The mosques at these sites are not holy for Muslims like Mecca, Medina or Jerusalem. Now lakhs of Hindu pilgrims are visiting these places. They return with a hurt feeling and ill-will towards Muslims. If these three places are restored to the charge of Hindus and grand temples are built there, Hindus will forget the historical wrongs done to

them, and there will be goodwill between Hindus and Muslims. So this is not a question of one more temple, but of restoring goodwill. Muslims have to hand over these places to Hindus to win their confidence, with whom they have to live."

When asked about the misconceptions and misunderstandings among the African people toward Asians in Kenya, Shri Rajju said, "The service activities undertaken by the BSS-HCK such as medical camps, helping the disabled and helping educational institutions and poor students create goodwill among Africans. This will bridge the gap between Asians and Africans."

In Mombasa, Prof. Singh visited the Swaminarayan temple and the famous Jain Mandir on Langoni Road. At the Patel Samaj he spoke about the sad state of corruption in India's political life. "This is a sad and shameful matter. Why have we come to this stage? For us it is very simple. We have not paid attention to morality in life, to dharma and to propagation of moral values."

The RSS was founded in India in 1925 by Dr. K.B. Hedgewar as a voluntary organization of Hindus, initially to aid India's independence movement. Today its aims are primarily to uplift Hindus worldwide by inculcating in its members--two million worldwide--a spirit of service and self-sacrifice. It is active in religious education, social service and notably effective at disaster relief in time of earthquakes, cyclones and other calamities.

Prior to his departure to South Africa (and later Mauritius),

Prof. Singh told members of the Sangh: "The Kenya BSS has completed 50 years. At the same time, we have not completed our chosen mission. This feeling prompts us to hasten the work."1Ã4