Fiji Temples Torched
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World Christian Leaders Condemn Youths' Actions

Dressed in Sunday suits, carrying their Bibles and singing Christian hymns, at least 18 members of the Methodist Youth Fellowship in Lautoka, Fiji, fire-bombed two Hindu temples, a Sikh gurudwara and a Muslim mosque on October 15th. The gurudwara sustained the most damage. Eighteen young people were arrested, including 10 men, 7 women and a 16-year-old girl. All pleaded guilty at their initial court appearance.

Local ethnic Fijian Christian leaders and government officials unanimously condemned the attacks. HINDUISM TODAY notified several international Christian organizations including the World Council of Churches, who represent over 400 million Protestant Christians. They each joined in condemning the arson [see sidebar].

Preliminary investigations left little doubt the early morning events were well-planned and orchestrated. The four places were torched in a space of 22 minutes. The youth had attended an all-night prayer session before setting out in separate groups for the attacks.

At 4:15AM five or six youths walked into the Radha/Krishna temple with their shoes on. A visiting African devotee stopped some of them, resulting in a scuffle. The rest of the intruders poured several gallons of gasoline on the altar, lit it and fled singing Christian hymns. The Sikh gurudwara was next. The priest, Bhai Harbhajan Singh, said he noticed six men jumping over the compound fence at about 4:30. He challenged them and they left, but a few minutes later a group of 20 to 25 arrived and started the fire. Onlookers said the group then shouted, "Praise the Lord" as the 60-year-old center burned. The nearby Vishnu temple was attacked at 4:54 and the mosque at 4:58.

The Lautoka fire department had just responded to the call at the Krishna temple when they learned of the gurudwara fire and dispatched a backup engine. Unfortunately, the gurudwara was completely in flames when the truck arrived; the firemen could do little more than prevent the blaze from spreading. The Vishnu temple and mosque fires were put out by bystanders. Each suffered an estimated $8,000 loss. Damage to the Krishna temple and gurudwara was estimated at $130,000 each, with the main building of the gurudwara in ashes.

With apparently no escape plan in mind, eighteen persons were arrested almost immediately still near the fires. All but the 16-year-old girl are being held without bail. The group pleaded guilty when the charges were read in court, but the judge deferred taking the pleas. They face life imprisonment.

Swami Pragyananda of India, who was on a month-long tour of Fiji, told HINDUISM TODAY those arrested were heard shouting, "You can kill me, you can hang me, even then we will continue to burn the temples. We will continue this thing in the whole country." Such statements lent credibility to the stories of a conspiracy by a maverick political faction within the Methodist Church.

Spokesman Ratu Nacaniali Nava of Namoli village, where several of the arrested youths live, said an unknown person had approached Manoa Satala, leader of the Methodist Youth Fellowship in Namoli. Nacaniali explained, "This stranger wanted the Namoli MYF to take part in some sort of a protest, later specified as the burning of Indian temples." The youth rejected the idea but also failed to inform authorities of the plot, according to Nacaniali.

Josateki Koroi, President of the Fiji Methodist Church, said that "while there may be elements [within Fijian Methodism] bent on such activities, the [Methodist] church denies any knowledge of the incident, nor did it give any directive for such acts of sacrilege to be carried out." Koroi offered "hands of reconciliation and sympathy to those who have suffered." Methodist minister Rev. Paula Niukula lamented, "It is a great shame when these [actions] were done in the name of the Methodist Church young people."

The entire Indian community was outraged at the events, but responded in a carefully measured manner by publicly condemning the attacks and calling a

one-day nationwide work stoppage. Every Indian business and most schools were closed as a result. Leaders of the five major Hindu organizations - Sanatan Pratinidhi Sabha, Arya Samaj, the Sikh community, Then India Sanmarga Ikya Sangam and Andhra Sangam - called upon Hindus not to celebrate Diwali this year as a mark of protest. The Sikh community went into mourning for the desecration of their holy book, regarded by them as the tenth Sikh guru. Funeral rites were held for the scripture, just as they would be for a person, followed by 72-hour continuous recitation of the Guru Granth.

Swami Pragyananda conducted a havan ceremony for 2,000 people the day following the attacks despite bomb threats. He also observed, "This is the first time I am watching Hindus go to mosque and Muslims coming to check the [damaged Hindu] temple."

A week later, on October 21st, two Hindu temples in Nadi were damaged and looted by vandals. In a separate incident, a group of people holding Bibles stood outside the 90-year-old Sri Subramania Swami Temple in Nadi and cursed the Hindu Gods, according to the temple's chief priest, Sri Anil Gaunder.