

[Transmuting Apartheid Tensions Into A New Shrine](#)

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Small South Africa Group Teaches Lesson in Service

Many Hindus in the once Dutch/British diamond/gold colony have put religion on hold "for a while." Things are just too disturbed. Though Apartheid is now legally spayed, racism is still rife in daily life. And though the dismantling of one of the most unapologetically skin-coded regimes is inspiring, it brings all the adjustment traumas of major surgery.

Refusing to buckle under the emotional stress - in fact, charging ahead more bravely because of it - are members of the Asherville branch of the Saiva Sithantha Sungam. For the last four years, Working mostly on week-ends - on the super-thrifty, owner/builder system - men and women of the Sungam have been building a temple. With their own hands.

These are mostly middle-income folk. No religious-minded tycoons came forward to write that one big check that would trip into gear a trail of hired construction crews. And any hopes of tapping Hinduism's gold chests like Tirupati temple for a loan were dashed years ago when the apartheid government effectively cut ties with India.

So renouncing weekend party consciousness, Sungum devotees immersed themselves in years of Karma yoga and awoke a new definition of pleasure and, yes, manifested a new building, their temple. Already palm and flower trees elegantly surround the red-brick, handsome edifice. Still to be completed is the dining hall and some fencing.

The Sungum is unequivocally Saivite. The altar includes a Sivalingam, a dancing Nataraja and very dramatic color poster of Siva as Ardhanariswara, half-man, half-woman. Sunday morning worship attracts over a hundred devotees. Vinayaga Chaturthi, Karthikeya Deepam, Maha Sivaratri and guru pujas are also celebrated.

This spirited center has already built up a carousel of colorful activities to spin the potent forces of youth in a positive direction rather than let drugs, drinking and subtler negative influences persuade them elsewhere. The moms are talking a leading role, giving their time and cultural talents - and getting immeasurable satisfaction. Youth and women spearhead the fund-raising drives, house calls to sick devotees, preparing tracts and distributing literature. Cottage services include: caring for those who are informed, funeral ceremonies and small weddings.

The Saiva Sithanta Sungum was founded in 1935 by H.H. Siva Subramanian Guru Swamigal and has many branches throughout South Africa. The dedicated staff to this Asherville branch include Chairman, Caption Marimuthu, Vice Chairman, Mr. Daya Venketsamy, Secretary, Mrs. Tham Naicker and Public Relations Officer, Mr. G.V. Moodley. For this story, HINDUISM TODAY interviewed Mr. Marimuthu & Mrs. Naicker.

Talking Outloud

HT: Please give us details of your career.

Marimuthu: I am a community social worker employed by Dubois City Health Department. Basically my job is to help identify unmet needs in deprived communities and to help them meet these needs. My task is to educate and uplift the community to an optimum level of functioning. I serve the Phoenix and Newlands West India communities presently. I work with all types of groups including the aged, women's, youth, cultural, religious and social groups.

Naicker: I am a branch secretary for a huge insurance company.

HT: How do you manage to combine a career, family life and your religious involvement?

Marimuthu: Only God knows how I find time to do so many things. I believe life is short, God gives the energy. I believe in putting it to good use. After all, "service to humanity is service to God." Of course some things do suffer, especially family life (they make a lot suffer, especially family life (they make a lot of sacrifices). The body health also suffers. But "His" work must be done.

Naicker: I have a very hectic lifestyle in that I do a good days work, go home to the household chores, check on the children's schoolwork, assist with homework, go to music classes and service. I also attend meetings. I am also secretary to the Sydenham branch of FOSA. I enjoy my religious involvement as it gives me peace of mind and sanity in this busy world we live in.

HT: What are your aspirations in life?

Marimuthu: My aim in life is to spread the work of God to everyone - Saivism, non-ritualistic form of worship, to get people to lead a good life.

Naicker: To propagate Hinduism amongst our people.

HT: What is your definition of Hinduism?

Marimuthu: It is a way of life, a code of conduct. It allows absolute freedom of mind and action. It is based on logic, not on a set of dogmas. The individual is not brain-washed. Instead he is allowed to think for himself.

Naicker: Hinduism is a religion whereby one can exercise freedom of choice. No person can compel one to follow a fixed routine.

HT: What makes Hinduism different from other religions?

Marimuthu: Hinduism is characterized by a great deal of tolerance, deep humanity and high spiritual purpose. That is the reason why it has survived the attacks from the followers of other religions.

Naicker: Hinduism is the only religion that never sought to propagate itself through any form of coercion.

HT: Western influence on Hinduism - what is your view?

Marimuthu: The West has tried and failed to influence Hinduism. Instead it is being influenced by Hinduism to a large extent.

Naicker: I don't think that the Western influence has a negative influence on Hinduism, because every person that has come into contact with Hinduism has emerged spiritually richer.

HT: Hinduism and the youth of today - what is your view?

Marimuthu: Western education ignores the Eastern religions completely as if they are outmoded, archaic. Our youth are also caught up in the Western cult which provides artificial if not superficial pleasures - the permissiveness that leads to total corruption and confusion, leading to complete drain of their inner spiritual powers.

Naicker: The non-Hindu youth have not given it a chance. Some youth of today believe that believing in a God is embarrassing.

HT: How can we teach our religion?

Marimuthu: We need to start at the grass root levels, that is not forget our youth, run workshops, classes and youth programmes to spread our teachings.

Naicker: By use of newsletters and newspapers. Not by telling an individual that their religion is bad and that mine is good.

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