

[Hindu Shopkeepers Who Lost All in LA Riots Lean On Gita to Rebuild Lives](#)

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Hindu Shopkeepers Who Lost All in LA Riots Lean On Gita to Rebuild Lives

Dongre, Archana

Though the Arson and Looting Left Many Indian Families Shopless, Very Few Reacted with Bitterness or Despair

Tulsi Savani co-owned the Big Saver Food on 9th and Vermont. It sold Mexican groceries to a Spanish-speaking clientele. On April 29th, it turned to ashes in the two-day, raging race incendiary that erupted in Los Angeles and left 60 dead and a US \$800 million dollar trail of destruction. Tulsi, his whole livelihood now just water-logged, charred black timbers, refuses to crumble: "My Hindu beliefs have helped me cope with the situation. The Bhagavad Gita's teaching of karma yoga says you perform your duties to the best of your ability, but that you have no control over the results. This gives me courage."

It is almost two months since a Los Angeles jury acquitted four local White Los Angeles policemen of allegedly using excessive force against a Black man. The decision unexpectedly ignited a packed powder keg of frustration, helplessness and anger in a poor, Black and immigrant sector of the city. Rioters, succumbing to mob frenzy, retaliated by looting and igniting 5,000 fires before the police and National Guard brought it under control. Hundreds of Korean businesses were destroyed along with dozens of Indian businesses - shops, manufacturing plants, restaurants and consulting service operations. Ironically, Rodney King, the victim of the videotaped police beating, appeared on television imploring the hoodlums to stop the senseless theft and destruction.

The whole world watched it all on CNN in disbelief, amazed that America - always championing human rights and racial equality in other countries - had such

unresolved racial tensions and hostilities at home. Though many reports left the bitter impression that faith in America as the unequalled friend and protector of the immigrant had died, many Indians reacted more positively. In conversations with several Indian entrepreneurs who collectively lost millions of dollars, the indication is that although material wealth was lost, spirits are renewing with even more resilience than before. Like the proverbial phoenix bird rising out of its ashes, the Hindu as well as the non-Hindu Indian businessman have sprung back with more courage and determination than before. Many cite religious values as the source.

Gordhan Patel for instance. He is one of the owners of J.G.L. Inc. located on Alvarado and Beverly Blvd., a jewelry manufacturing business with an annual turnover of about 15 million dollars and employing 75 people. The damage to his business was estimated at two million dollars. Within a month after the havoc, they are already back in business on a limited basis. While speaking with HINDUISM TODAY, Patel commented, "When you see destruction, you come up with a stronger will. We had adequate insurance to cover inventory, equipment and business interruptions and one might be tempted to take the insurance money and shut down the business. But a true entrepreneur feels an obligation to the society, to his employees, the suppliers, the sales people and to the customer as well. After the fire, some of my employees who have been with me for 16 years came to me asking, 'What next?' and I told them we will rebuild everything if you work hard with me."

Tulsi Savani, who lost his Mexican grocery store and draws solace and guidance from the Gita, further told me. "What helped me perk up the spirits was my culture, and the fact that I am an immigrant. I had built the business starting with nothing and I can do it all over again. I do not blame anybody now." His unbitting, understanding reaction dramatically highlights a like mood among other Hindu businessmen, who can appreciate the Black's rage at not only the verdict but the pains and hurts of racism in all its insidious forms. All Indian Hindus unequivocally condemned the brutal lawlessness, but along with the rest of the country's leaders, realized that racism - and complex interwoven factors of inner-city unemployment, drugs truancy, etc. - is real and did not disappear with Martin Luther King's march to Montgomery or the Civil Rights Bill.

Savani narrated to HINDUISM TODAY more of his ordeal: "I asked the police for protection but they claimed they had no manpower. I think the police wanted to teach a lesson to the poor community and the businesses in that community. They wanted to let the poor people destroy themselves. Had it been a store in

[fabulously wealthy] Beverly Hills, they would have even resorted to shooting to stop the riots." But Savani is now well on his way to recovery and plans to reopen his store on the same location, keeping his Spanish speaking employees.

Jeevan Godhwani owns Fame Fashions, a store of ladies' wear, leather jackets and 14 kt. gold jewelry, on Hollywood Blvd. Although he had good security, the rioters looted his store and his loss amounted US \$45,000. "Out of the two shops I had in the area, one was damaged. I am thinking of relocating the store perhaps to downtown," he told me. "Religious beliefs have helped me to develop right mental outlook. In times of crisis, religion always helps." Godhwani also said that Indian or Hindu businesses were not singled out or targeted by the rioters. The rioters seemed to be more after the Koreans. Our business just happened to be there."

Mr. Bhatia is the owner of India's Oven restaurant that was burned down, causing damages totalling over a million dollars. Despite the tragedy, Bhatia's spirits are unscathed and as optimistic as ever. "I do not feel bitter about the situation. Maybe the God wanted it this way. Maybe He wanted to teach us a lesson. We can all muster up our courage and build our enterprises again," He said his restaurant will open again in a month. Though he is Sikh, his sister is Hindu and sends him a rakhi (blessed thread bracelet) every year. He has a message for fellow Indians: "Ethnic business owners should give up the mentality of hiring only their kith and kin. Koreans perhaps had that idea and that could be one reason they seem to have been targeted." Other agree that the addition of at least some employees from other ethnic backgrounds increases inter-cultural understanding and dilutes hardened stereotypes and prejudices.

In India and elsewhere, the extensive TV coverage of the riots uncovered for many the low-profile, mainstream, less-than-wealthy, middle class, Indian shopkeeper. For years, he has been eclipsed by the prodigiously successful highly educated, wealthy professionals, mostly doctors and engineers.

Though the Los Angeles riots shocked even most Americans, few in this "land of opportunity" naively thought it was a land of perfect equality. Racial and religious frictions are still rooted like tough weeds. Indian professionals regularly bump into "invisible ceilings" in the corporate promotional structure and Hindu children are, sometimes, teased by schoolmates for "worshiping cows" and other silly slights about their religion. Koreans, despite their exquisite cultural refinement, are often harshly judged because of a small hoodlum element within some of their

communities. Though the LA riots brought seemingly pointless deaths and destruction, America's political leaders responded by assuring that the tragedy would catalyze a new resolve to more responsibly respond to the Black and immigrant communities' complex - sometimes almost hidden - needs, challenges and problems in order to avert a recurrence of the Monisha Bajaj nobly assesses that ultimately the challenge to create a racist-free society is up to her generation. At a political event (reported in India West newspaper) after the riots she said bluntly, "In 25 years nothing has changed. In my mind, I feel that now it is my generation's chance to make a difference."

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