South Africans Tap Prayer Power
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Leader Teaches Positive Approach to Hard Times

Shri Pandit Prafulbhai Shukla of Gujarat, India, was surprised and saddened, during his second visit to South Africa last September, by what he perceived as a general deterioration of life in that country. "In contrast to the signs of promise I had found just two years ago," he said, "I now find an escalation of communal tensions and violence, a worsening economy, a devastating drought and, most sadly, widespread dejection and uncertainty about the future." A local businessman, Vinod Mistri, concurred: "All this paints a very grim picture for our visitors."

Displaying a characteristic positive turn of mind, Pandit Shukla decided: "I shall do something about it!" He inspired his Hindu hosts to hold a "mass prayer for peace," which happened on October 11 in a football stadium near Durban - a six-hour yagna (fire ritual). "Our purpose was to solicit the Gods' help in restoring calm for all South Africans, and we invited people of all religions and political affiliations," explains Rajesh Jantilal, one of the organizers.

Sri Shukla dedicated and launched the function by reiterating its solemn purpose to the 800 faithful gathered from all parts of the nation. He mentioned that special mantras for peace would be introduced into the liturgy, and asked everyone's participation through concentration and prayer. He pointed out that Hinduism - by virtue of its power of ceremony and prayer - had much to offer to any country in which it is welcome, and expressed his conviction that the seven sacred fires about to be lit would not fail to have their positive effect. Specifically, he had faith that the dreadful drought would end soon.

Indeed, a few days later it did, a driving rain drenching most of the nation. It was a first auspicious sign. A second one came with this update from Rajesh Jantilal

received at press time: "In the last few weeks violence has, in fact, decreased to a certain extent, mostly due to the efforts of United Nations missions and to a National Peace Accord signed by the most influential bodies of the country." The most mystical will doubtless interpret these as fruit of the sacred fires. Jantilal, more down-to-earth, feels the yagna has already proved successful because it "left people more optimistic than before. The fact that it was the first event of its kind in South Africa did much to uplift spirits." Kishore Patel of the Hindu Youth Movement came 500 miles from Johannesburg and testified, "It was a great experience." There are no immediate plans for another such event, "but people will be favorable to the idea when the time comes," assures Jantilal.

South Africans flock to Pandit Shukla's talks which are generally inspired from the Ramayana and the Srimad Bhagavatam and appreciate his energetic and practical approach to spirituality. He is now back in India where he has a large following. In South Africa, he has no initiated devotees or established centers yet, but he did leave this message: "If you apply what I have taught so far, I will have no hesitation in returning."

Shukla and the yagna committee chose to hold the event in Durban because violence in the province of Natal, where the city is located, had been especially severe. Hindus are rarely victims or participants in the violence, but the climate of violence has generated a lot of stress - psychological, financial and social. Because of the economic recession, unemployment rose sharply during the months between Shukla's two visits, increasing tensions, resentments, irrationality and setting off a corresponding rise in crime, mental imbalance and suicide.

South African Hindus are suffering an identity crisis, as their status in a new South Africa is totally unpredictable. "The Hindus feel this insecurity more acutely than other communities," explains Jantilal, "because we have too long been aloof from the political processes of the country and, though many younger Hindus are now involved in fighting racism and apartheid, the impression has been made that we are indifferent to apartheid. Whenever we meet, the conversation invariably turns on our future, here, and what it holds for us - and the consensus is that it looks bleak."

"The ubiquitous conversion efforts of Christian missionaries and the government are exacerbating the general disequilibrium and insecurity," Jantilal explains. "Thousands have already been seized through overt coercion or covert

manipulation, such as promising financial advantage, jobs etc. Widespread ignorance of Hindu dharma among our people sets the stage."

A lot of work waits for Sri Pandit Shukla - and many more like him, hopefully.

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