Rising Above Apartheid
Category : January/February/March 2004
Published by Anonymous on Jan. 02, 2004

SOUTH AFRICA

Rising Above Apartheid

South Africa's first Hindu unity conferencereceives accolades from the country's president

It was a precedent setting event when South Africa's first national convention on Hindu unity convened on September 6, 2003, at the University of Durban. The two-day conference was organized by the South African Hindu Maha Sabha and attended by 370 delegates from 108 Hindi, Tamil, Gujarati and Telugu linguistic and community groups from across the country. Maha Sabha president Ashwin Trikamjee was master of ceremonies. South Africa's president, Thabo Mbeki, gave the opening speech.

President Mbeki lauded the Hindu community for its role in helping the country achieve democracy and highlighted the significant status that the community had achieved in the country's National Religious Forum, of which Trikamjee is chairman.

"This was the very first time, since the Sabha was born in 1912, that the majority of Hindu organizations got together with a view of discussing Hindu unity and how Hindus must now play an influential role in the future of this country, " said Trikamjee.

Trikamjee went on to clarify that although uniting the country's Hindu communities was a major goal of the conference, there were other important issues which were addressed. Those included giving more attention to Hindu youth and education, getting Hindus more involved in local social issues, improving the quality of temple services and stemming the tide of the conversion of Hindus to other faiths. This last issue of conversion was the most controversial.

"The general view was that rather than criticizing other religions, we should work to strengthen our own religious practices and beliefs among our own people, " clarified Trikamjee. "There was a strong feeling that all of this should start at home. Parents should know their religion and inculcate that knowledge into their children. If we have this sort of strong religious base, there should be no problem with conversion."

Trikamjee emphasized that when poor Hindus are in trouble, financially or socially, the Hindu community itself should have some kind of a support structure in place that can absorb their problems. "This is lacking at the moment and is being exploited by missionaries, " Trikamjee said.

President Mbeki's opening speech was especially notable, not only for its insightful wisdom but for its heart-felt expression of his deep love for the Hindu people and his sincere hope that their future in South Africa should be one of contentment and security.

"The process we are beginning today, " said Mbeki, "constitutes a significant development in the evolution of our society.

"There was a time when it was unthinkable that a religion which, according to the apartheid ideology, was outside the officially sanctioned religious mainstream, could assume its rightful place in our spiritual life. Apartheid not only suppressed political freedom, but also stifled religious choices.

"In the new South Africa, all religions are recognized and there is freedom of worship. We believe that religious organizations must be at the forefront of inculcating strong religious and moral values into a society that is trying to reconstruct itself from the ravages of apartheid. There are many lessons that we can and must learn from the Hindu religion. One of the most important of these lessons expresses the principle of hospitality and charity, which is an important hallmark of Vedic culture.

"I have been informed that Hinduism is the world's oldest religion that it has no

beginning and precedes recorded history. It has no human founder and, as one of its illustrious sons, Mahatma Gandi, once said, 'It is a relentless pursuit after Truth.' Like Hinduism, the African faiths have lived for thousands of years in unbroken continuity.

"There is a general view that Hinduism arrived on our shores in South Africa in 1860. However, archaeological sources show that Hinduism was here at least 400 years before that. Clearly, the link between Africans and Hindus goes back to the days of yore.

"Through our actions together, all of the people of South Africa will be able to live up to the wise words of the Rig Veda: 'Come together, talk together. Let our minds be in harmony. Common be our hope. Common be our purpose. United be our hearts. United be our intentions. And may there ever be perfection among us.' "