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Hindus Cautiously Optimistic on Future Despite 1993 Violence

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It's not supposed to be a secret, but few will speak of it. Last year between July and September, several killings took place in Kenya. Two shootings were outside the Visha Oshwal Mahajan Warhi and Akshar Purshottam temple (Swaminarayan), one week apart. The attacks were after evening prayers, just as the devotees exited the temple premises. Suddenly, a car stopped, masked gunmen emerged spraying bullets randomly, shouting threatening messages and then escaping. Both times it was the same car, same pattern, same gun, rapid fire with no particular target. Nothing was taken. What could be the motive except to terrorize?

In the first ambush, one person received seven bullets, but survived. In the second, several people were wounded and one killed. In other incidents during July and August,

1993, eight persons were killed and ten wounded. Except one, all were Hindus. According to Mrs. Usha Behan (past chairperson of the Hindu Council of Kenya), in the last three years there were 29 killings reported of which 27 were Hindus. All of them were businessmen. The killings created great fear among Hindus and accelerated an already-existing trend to move the Hindu temples out of older, black-dominated areas of Nairobi into Indian-dominated suburbs.

Why Now?

In a fierce world, Kenya is a generally peaceful country. But since 1992 political and economic changes, coupled with a long drought, have resulted in inflation, local scarcities and unemployment. Robberies and murders have become an everyday occurrence.

Robbery is thought the motive in most cases involving Hindus. But in the murder of Mr. and Mrs. Jethwa in July, 1993, there is suspicion of a rivalry within the Asian community itself. In that case the murderers left leaflets at the scene saying, "Tribal clashes must end, aliens must go, looters must be eliminated and we shall strike again." However, there was no evidence to connect these killings with any known group.

Amin Walji, the only Asian Member of Parliament and an assistant minister, casts blame at the second largest opposition party. "The Ford Asili party has stated that Asians should leave the country. So the killings were stage-managed to frighten the community so that they get scared and leave." It is common knowledge in Kenya that the Ford Asili party is opposed to the Indians, first for their consistent support of the ruling party and second because the Asili party is comprised of African businessmen for whom the Indians are rivals. In recent months this party has seen major defections among its ranks.

Walji, a Muslim, believes that the present government will remain in power for at least forty more years and there is no danger of any kind to Hindus or Asians. He agrees that there is animosity towards Asians by the poor people. "Look at an average Asian family. They live lavishly and their children often go out of the country to study. When their employees cannot afford basic amenities for their families, out of desperation, they get involved with robberies and related crimes."

Deciding to Move the Temples

The British colonial masters carved Nairobi into three residential areas, for whites, browns and blacks. After independence, upward movement started, and as blacks became richer, they moved into brown areas and browns started moving into white areas. Most old Hindu places of worship are now in black-dominated areas. Slowly the number of Hindus visiting these temples dropped. After the killings, the

Hindus decided to build new temples or shift old ones.

One of the oldest temples was Ram Temple in Eastleigh. This year that temple has been shifted to Parklands. Mr Ramesh Bhaganit told Hinduism Today, "The Ram temple had to be moved because the roads leading to it were broken down. Because the area has become black dominated, there was a greater sense of insecurity. Also due to cultural insensitivity, a bar, butchery and disco were established next to the temple. All this was not conducive to Hindu sentiment. But philanthropic activities still go on. Every Sunday morning three-hundred local children continue to be served lunch as before." There are plans to start a school or health care center in the former temple building.

In the heart of the old town, increasingly congested, there is a row of temples and a sizable Sikh gurudwara. Again because it has become difficult for people to go there at odd times, a new gurudwara has been established at Brookside, in an old white locality which is now dominated by Asians.

The Sanatan Dharam Sabha of Kenya has established a temple at Spring Valley, away from the hustle and bustle of the city, in a quiet suburb. According to the priest, Shri Bhupat Girl Maharaj Goswami, "This temple is going to be the biggest in Africa." It has statues of 24 deities and 46 saints, a total of 70, covering all sects and sub-sects of Hinduism, including Sikhism. The main deities were installed in June, 1994, while the complex, which includes a school and marriage hall, was still under construction.

Is There Hope for the Future?

Goswami is hopeful. "Hindus were shaken after the temple killings, but the fear has passed off and everything is back to normal. This Sanatan Dharam temple complex is a living testimony to the bright future of Hindus in this country."

Similar sentiments were expressed by Mr Ramesh Baghani of the Ram temple, "It is true that after the temple shooting no functions were being held after 8:00pm. But slowly life is back to normal and the administration is very helpful. As per

Kenyan law, to organize any gathering for more than fifty people, a permit has to be obtained. When we apply for a permit, the authorities provide two armed guards in plainclothes, without any charge. This is to encourage us to hold our religious functions and cultural shows. I think those killings were undertaken by one segment of society, and it is not at all reflective of popular sentiment. I feel very safe and comfortable."

Kiran Doshi, India's ambassador to Kenya, is also optimistic about the future of Asians in Kenya due to positive action taken by the Government of Kenya. He says, "Violence lasted for only five months last year. Otherwise it is a general law and order problem."

Are Hindus Being Stalked?

Priest Narayan J. Mehta of Ram Krishna Temple, who had been stationed at Kitale, Kisumu, Eldoret and now is based in Nairobi, believes that incidents are often accidental and not intentional-robbers become scared and murder their victim. He believes if the economy of the country improves, the crime rate will go down.

Mr. R. C. Sharma, Secretary to Hindu Council of Kenya, admits that the community was very much shaken last year. He believes, "A repeat of Uganda is not possible with the present government. But who can say about the policies of opposition parties, if and when they come to power? Hindus no longer feel insecure. A lot of investment and development is going on. I visualize a very bright future for our community."

Is There a Future for Indians in Kenya?

The present Kenyans of Indian origin are mostly descendants of laborers brought here by the British towards the end of last century to build the railway line in East Africa. By some estimates the settlers' population was 6,000 in 1860. Today, among Asians the oldest family can be traced to 1898. They are Hindus from Gujarat. Their forefathers came as traders and later stayed and started a school for the Hindu children. After the railway was completed, many workers and Indian traders decided to stay in Africa. And with the railways, the number of new settlers increased dramatically.

This community was referred to as "Indians" by the local people, but after partition of India it became difficult to classify people as Indians or Pakistanis, so they all were lumped together as "Asians" and not classified as Hindus, Muslims or by any country of origin. Society under the British was divided by color: all browns were referred to as Asians, all Europeans and Americans as whites and the locals as blacks.

The whites were at the top, blacks at the bottom and browns in the middle. Hindus were the majority among the browns, they were mostly educated and were good traders and professionals. The Britisher felt threatened and, in order to keep the Hindus subdued, devised a wedge between them and the blacks.

The Hindus are orthodox and conventional and believed in the class system that existed in India. So they could not mix freely due to cultural and dietary differences. In spite of almost a century of living in this country, most Hindus are still uncomfortable with Africans, and that is reflected in the attitudes of different segments of society. There is an animosity among locals towards Asians even today, especially in the common man on the road side. It is mostly due to economic reasons and not to religion as such.

Today the population of Kenya is 25,000,000. Asians number about 70,000, ten percent of which are expatriates. The majority are Hindus and find the environment conducive to following their faith and rituals. In Kenya there is total freedom of religion. All festivals are celebrated with great enthusiasm. According to His Excellency Kiran Doshi, India's High Commissioner to Kenya, "This is the only country in the world where Hinduism and social ethics are offered as main subjects in the formal education system up to class eight. This fact was reinforced by Mrs. Usha Shah, immediate past Chairman of the Hindu Council, who helped to put together textbooks on Hindu religion for the schools. Even in India, Hinduism is not taught in mainstream schools as a subject."

After the exodus in Uganda, Asians left East African countries, including Kenya, in large numbers. It is estimated that those Asians who went to Australia, Canada, Europe, UK, USA, etc., number 600,000. Thus Hinduism has spread on all the continents as a result of that one action by Idi Amin of Uganda. Before independence in 1963, Asians in Kenya numbered 200,000; three times the present number.

Hindus here do not encourage conversion, and there are very few intermarriages. This factor also adds to the negative sentiment towards Asians. One Hindu scholar and philosopher who prefers anonymity says, "The Asians felt insecure after the failed coup attempt in 1982, but slowly life came to normal. There is a love-hate relationship between browns and blacks. Browns are hated because of their business acumen and riches, and they are also respected for the same reasons. After independence, a move was made to Africanize, and businesses were taken away from Asians and given to locals. But they could not manage and six months later, once again Asians owned those businesses and properties. So Asians are accepted even if considered a necessary evil. No government shall try to get rid of them, because they know that move shall prove to be counterproductive. So Asians are here to stay."

Unlike European countries where browns are suspect and looked down upon, it is the opposite here. They are judges, doctors, advocates, engineers, architects, bankers and in government offices. A very large number of Kenyan students are currently studying in India. Indian goods and technology are appropriate for this country. People have a very positive attitude towards Asians.

The question arises, what binds the Asian community to this country where they have made no efforts to integrate with the locals and time and again have been attacked by the locals? Asians know their limitations, but they enjoy a very good quality of life. They have an insignificant role in administration and the political sphere, and a vibrant intellectual life, full freedom for religious and cultural expression. They love the rich life here. The middle generation is here to stay against all odds. Young people who go out to study often settle in the West, leading to a gradual decline in the professional population. The younger generation among the business community, however, tend to stay in Kenya.

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