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Category : [January 1995](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jan. 01, 1995

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Rajesh Jantilal, Durban

His limousine flotilla wound up the small mountain and parked beside the magnificent new Hindu Centre at the University of Durban, dramatically perched overlooking Durban suburbs. As President Mandela got out, thousands of students and adults screamed, "Viva Mandela, Hare Krishna, Sai Ram, Namaste, Vanakkam and Viva ANC!" The 76-year-old statesman untied his shoe laces and entered the elegant marble-tiered shrine. Straying past his own security aides, Mandela approached the guard of honor formed by the Brahma Kumaris and the Arya Stree (women's) Samaj and Smita Singh's dance troupe. He personally greeted almost every one of the colorfully sari-clad ladies. Black and Hindu students sang freedom songs outside the shrine. Inside, the temple priest placed a red pottu on Mandela's forehead and the president then offered arati to the Deities. "For me that was the highlight of the whole visit, confided Kavitha Singh. "I just came to see him do that." Adding even more potency to the visit was the presence of a platoon of regional and national political leaders, the Indian High Commissioner and the American Consul General.

After the puja, the giant crowd squeezed into the university auditorium. Mandela lit a row of arati lamps and Brahma Kumari Usha Jivan presented him a scroll with a laudatory message. He was so touched by it, he hugged Usha, then told the joyous assembly: "In our country, good has triumphed over evil. We are free at last to celebrate Deepavali without the divisions of the past, and with the full backing of the country and all its people and government. No longer is any religion officially consigned to the ghetto of the so-called 'ungodly,' treated as inferior and despised. The Hindu faith is as much a part of South Africa as any other religion." Leaving the university campus, he drove to the monumental and lavish Hare Krishna temple where 10,000 greeted the president. He namaskared to everyone and again expressed his support that Indian culture and religion be nurtured for the enrichment of South Africa.

The overwhelmingly jubilant affair attracted only one indirect criticism. Yashika Singh, ex-member of the Hindu Students Association, voiced the lament shared by her peers: "We former students worked so hard to see the Hindu Centre manifest. Naturally, it was sad to see youth totally left out of the main function. This always happens. Our elders need to know that each time youth are not invited to be part of these events, they get more frustrated and apathetic or go join Christian youth groups where they are given greater recognition, support and participatory responsibilities."