Hindus in West Africa Hang on to Dharma
Category : June 1996
Published by Anonymous on Jun. 02, 1996

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The Small and Contented Families of Senegal Quietly Cling to their Identity

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Only five permanent families constitute the Hindu community in Dakar, the capital of Senegal on the Western coast of Africa. It is remarkable that this small conclave has been able to keep their religious and cultural values alive. On the streets, the Hindu community is all but invisible, their presence revealed only by shop names--like the "Taj Mahal" in a prominent street of Dakar. The country is Islamic and French speaking, which makes it very difficult for an English-speaking visitor to trace or locate the Indian origin community. Once contact is established, however, the community is forthcoming and an instantaneous network of communications machinery is mobilized.

Mr. Prem Roop Chandani was born in Senegal and received his education in the UK. He praises his upbringing for retaining his faith in Hinduism. He grew up with the belief that Hinduism was his personal inheritance. He commented, "I was told, 'This is your God and the religious path to follow' and I live by that." According to Chandani, there is complete freedom of religion in Senegal, but because the number of Hindus is so small and

they come from different regions of India they do not have a community temple. Each family has a small temple in their own home, and they join together to celebrate festivals like Holi and Diwali. Chandani's family maintains the Hindu lifestyle and values. They have a small temple in their house with 12 images of God and some pictures.

When asked why their family chose to live in Dakar, in a country little known and so far away from India, Chandani related his family history. It began with the partition of India. His father, displaced from Sindh, Pakistan, moved the family to Ghana, West Africa, to make a living. The Elder Chandani later moved to Senegal to join his senior brother-in-law, who had settled there in 1940.

Chandani recounts with pride the upbringing of his three children according to Hindu tradition. The children are well versed in Indian culture. The girls perform Indian dances from Hindi movies and also practice classical dance. As they study in an American school, they are more comfortable speaking English but know and speak Sindhi within the family and among Sindhi school friends. The children have been encouraged to uphold Indian culture, and they all wear Indian dress.

The children went to India to gain first-hand experience of their country of origin. They visited temples and sadhus. They returned uplifted with positive impressions. Now, no one dares say anything against India in their presence, lest they invoke a vigorous rebuttal from the youth.

I asked Chandani which single factor had helped him to keep his faith and tradition alive. He answered, "My mother has given me my beliefs, and they are part of me. If I did not have faith, I could not teach my children. My beliefs are so strong that my whole existence is governed by them." The family performs puja every evening.

When I asked Chandani if he would like his children to live in India or if he had plans of returning, he replied simply, "Who am I to decide? Destiny knows where they will go." His response reveals the worry-free approach to life of the few-but-strong, faithful Hindus found in this remote corner of the world.

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Sidebar: Last Rites Remain a Hindu Event

Prem Chandani's father died in 1992, and his body was taken to Free Town for the performance of last rites. Earlier, his aunt died and the Indian embassy helped to carry her body to India. That observance was found to be time consuming, expensive and full of formalities. Chandani concluded it was more practical to do the needful at Free Town, which is nearby and has all the facilities.

Free Town, in Sierra Leone, has a much larger Hindu community than Dakar, including a Hindu association and a priest. Like in Dakar, Hindu families here are close-knit and celebrate major festivals collectively in individual houses, as

there is no Hindu community center or temple. Mr R.C. Joshi is an attache and Councilor Officer in the Indian Embassy. This embassy services four other countries besides the host country: Gambia, Guinea Bassu, Mali and Mauritania. Although Senegal is a secular country, only two religions, Christianity and Islam, are recognized. Cremation of dead bodies is illegal in Senegal, because the country knows only the traditions of Christianity and Islam, where bodies are buried and cremation is forbidden. Earlier Hindus used to take their deceased loved ones to India, but it has now become difficult to do so, so for the last few years the cremation facilities at Free Town have been utilized. Some still prefer to perform the last rites in India, especially if the majority of the family resides there, but most Hindus settled in Senegal opt for Free Town, and Mr. Joshi assists in all possible ways to ease the process. At times, he has to play the role of priest due to the lack of formal arrangements. Joshi has also served in Islamic countries, like Egypt. He is a proud father of two sons who are being raised in the Hindu traditions and Indian culture, but he declares that he does not believe in "rituals that have become totally irrelevant."