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Peaceful Paradise for 20,000 Hindus

New Zealand. Population: 3.3 million. Sheep: 63 million. Width: 60 miles. Length: 1,000 miles. In a world fast losing its wildernesses and natural wonders, New Zealand is a virginal land. Life is simple there. People are friendly. Immigrant Hindus mix and mingle and, aside from attracting mild curiosity, they blend into the beautiful landscape.

The Hindus of New Zealand enjoy a rare freedom in the practice of their religion. Perhaps their only shortcoming is that they have not yet taken full advantage of this freedom.

Indian Hindus first moved to this small two-is-land country off the coast of southeastern Australia in 1890, exactly 100 years ago. They come primarily from Gujarat. Once they were established, they worked in harmony - mostly as "green grocers" who bought their produce at auctions and then sold it retail. Nowadays, many own successful dairies, stores and corner shops.

In New Zealand, schooling is free up to the college level. With this convenient access to education, third-generation Asian Indians are seeking higher learning and better jobs. With its clean, unpolluted air and easy-going ways, New Zealand really does seem to do an immigrant's paradise.

Today, the Asian Indians of New Zealand number about 20,000. This includes a large number of recent immigrants from Fiji where current political/religious difficulties have made life for them difficult. There are 3,500 Asian Indians in the capital city of Wellington alone. Most Hindus in this group belong to one of nine regional Indian Associations founded in 1925, all of which are affiliated with the Central Indian Association.

Thus far, Asian Indians have not encountered any racism or religious discrimination in New Zealand. On the contrary, they have found the local people to be especially courteous and kind. Most of the Hindu marriages are still arranged in India, and many traditional Hindu customs continue to be faithfully honored. However, there are no Hindu temples and the general knowledge as well as some aspects of the practice of Hinduism are on the wane. Recent conversions of a small number of Hindus to Christianity highlight this negligence as a potential problem.

The Wellington Indian Association

The WIA strives to promote and encourage cultural and religious practices, sponsor secular education and competitive sports as well as to assist other charitable institutions with similar ventures. It has a membership of 800 people and represents the majority of Asian Indians in the Wellington area. Its members are from Gujarat, Punjab, Bengal and South India. In 1989, the WIA purchased a 3.75 acre plot with a gigantic building which will be used to promote Hindu dharma, educate children and provide facilities for extensive indoor sports exhibitions.

Although the WIA is officially a secular organization, the overwhelming majority of its members are Hindu. Thus, Hinduism and Sanatana Dharma constitute the fundamental thrust of its cultural and religious concerns. The Bhagavad Gita is currently the WIA's primary Hindu scripture and is used in a regular Sunday "Gita class." WIA President Raman Vasani sees Hinduism as an integral part of Indian cultural development in New Zealand. He feels Hindu education is important and should be included with other character-developing endeavors so that young Hindus do not fall prey to Islamic and Christian proselytization efforts. But he realizes, "For people to benefit from our religion, its principles and concepts must be made easily understandable."

Recently, the WIA has founded a Gujarati language school teaching children from seven to twelve years of age. This school includes religious education. Visiting monks and religious teachers, address the students and on occasion provide short courses on Hindu scripture like the Ramayana.

Grand Festivals

Hindu festivals organized by the WIA are grand events attended by thousands. They cater to all sects and traditions of Hinduism without distinction and include such popular celebrations as: Ganesha Chaturthi, Navaratri, Divali, Krishna Jayanthi and "the Holy Month of Shravan" (a favorite Gujarati time sacred to Lord Siva). The nine days of Navaratri honoring Shakti attract up to 800 people each day and Krishna Jayanti, a favorite of the Hindu youth, is celebrated with bhajan song and garbha dance. To many older Hindus of New Zealand, Krishna signifies hope and happiness. But to the Hindu youth, Krishna festivities mean fun. The WIA make allowances for this and exerts special efforts to make Hinduism "palatable" and interesting to the youth. These festivals are very successful in accomplishing this.

New Zealand, though now a quiet haven, is fast becoming part of the global world. It has no special defense against the relay satellite. Influences of every hue and holler will come. The WIA knows the youth are the most vulnerable and hopes its facilities are magnetic enough to keep them within the Hindu orbit. Observers note the centrifugal force of a temple would help a lot.

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