

[How Apartheid Affected South Africa Hindus](#)

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Homes and Temples Let Behind Under 'Group Areas Act'

Most countries' residential areas are segregated by race, social status or economics. But few have pursued the division in recent times with such calculated fervor as the whites of South Africa. Even a new word was needed for the scheme - apartheid ("apartness"). As official government policy, apartheid was revoked last year. The international trade and travel sanctions so long in place against South Africa by other countries, including India, were lifted. Today Hindus can look back at apartheid's impact upon their lives and religion and consider the future's promises and perils.

Apartheid proceeded in earnest with the passage of the "Group Areas Act" in 1947 which allowed the all-white town councils to designate where the various races - white, black, colored and Asian - could live. All non-whites were forced out of the settled townships into less desirable and largely undeveloped areas. The Hindus fared far better in this shift than the Blacks, but still the impact was traumatic.

Prior to the act, Indians were less restricted as to where they could live and travel. After World War II, the government passed the Pegging Act which stopped Indians from buying land in any area of their choice. Then in 1947 the Group Areas Act clearly defined where Indians should and should not live.

Compensation for the confiscated land fell far short of its value. The Indians decried what they considered a government-sponsored robbery of their homes. In 1947 they launched the Passive Resistance struggle. Thousands of Indians courted imprisonment as they defied the Group Areas Act.

In 1948 the Nationalist, white-supremacist government swept into power and ruthlessly enforced the Group Areas Act. Settled societies were uprooted and forced into new areas. This was Hinduism's first major setback in South Africa. Settled congregations who for years had prayed at local temples in the various towns and villages were now scattered all over the country without any places of worship, education or public amenities. It took over 20 years for their new temples to develop. In the meantime the Christians - with enormous funding from outside countries - exploited the lack of temples and launched aggressive conversion campaigns.

In just the fifteen years between 1963 and 1978 sixteen churches were built in the Chatsworth area (population 300,000, 80% Hindu) as opposed to 10 Hindu temples. The churches were magnificent edifices, while the Hindu temples were barely adequate. Conversion was government policy: The Broederbond, an Afrikaans newspaper, stated in 1979, "The Christianization of the largely Hindu and Muslim population of Indians is a top priority of the Government."

In the new areas, Christianity had not only financial but also media supremacy. The radio, TV and newspapers are all English-medium and are owned by Christian whites. The implementation of the trade, economic and cultural sanctions by India cut off all religious contact from the homeland. Large scale funding from foreign countries for Christian missionary work could not be matched by the Hindus.

Apart from these losses, a major blow was the disintegration of the extended family system. Before the act, large families - included grandparents - lived under one roof. Taught by the elders, cultural and spiritual values were easily assimilated by the children. But after the act, love and care for the young and old alike eroded. The municipal buildings in the new areas were small, single family dwellings. The extended family, the bastion of Hindu religion, broke down. Young Hindus in particular lost touch with Hinduism in the ensuing decades and became ignorant of the traditional beliefs, customs and practices.

The newly segregated life of the Hindu did have some positive impact. Hindus lived together side by side and were comfortable with the thought of sharing the same customs and tradition. Temples and halls came up in the area and allowed people to be closer to each other. A unique bond was built among Hindus and a degree of reassurance and security prevailed.

Before the act, Indians and black Africans worked and lived together. They came to know the customs, habits, language and mode of prayer of one another. There was free movement socially, and a cooperative spirit of intercommunication was prevalent. But the act's forced separation shattered the bonds of good fellowship that had been sustained and built over many decades. During the course of time there was complete separation at heavy material, cultural and social costs.

HINDUISM TODAY interviewed several South African Hindus about the future of Hinduism. Yuvesh Parmanand Sundar, 24, a student living in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, said, "I am very optimistic for the future - it will be very challenging, yet exciting. It will take the efforts of all individuals to see that South Africa is a peaceful and democratic country." As for Hinduism, he said "the Sanatana Dharma has withstood 300 years of Christianity, 300 years of Islam, the Group Areas Act and other forces. Therefore, it is eternal and immortal."

Twenty-three-year-old Dayanitheer Mudaly, a bookkeeper living in Stanger observed, "In the new South Africa I see a freedom of belief, and I hope this will help keep Hinduism alive. But I'm very skeptical of the plight of Asians in South Africa at the moment. Being a minority, we are in a precarious position. South Africa has been through the worst and the only way now is up."

Mr. M.S. Moodley, 67, a storekeeper living in Stanger, offered, "The Indians in South Africa are here to stay and that Hinduism is flourishing."

Priya Maharaja, 23, the daughter of a Hindu priest, complained about the propagation of Christianity through the state-owned media and the schools. Many Hindus see this lessening or disappearing in the new South Africa. She feels Asians have a "meaningful role to play" in the future and that "the long term prospects seem to be promising." She believes that Hinduism through the National Hindu Youth Federation and other Hindu organizations can be "revived in all its glory once again."

Religious Missions Lifting Hindu Morale

With the lifting of international sanctions against South Africa, the free travel of Hindu religious and cultural missions to the country is now increasing, with a marked effect upon Hindu morale. The Warana Children's Orchestra (right) from the state of Maharashtra, India, warmed and stirred the hearts of everyone who had the opportunity of attending their performances given for thousands of school children. K.R. Sitaram of the Aryan Benevolent Home council said, "These children of Mother India gave us a message of hope and inspiration so that we can gain sustenance and strength through our proud cultural heritage and tradition to weather the storms besetting our lives in present day South Africa."

UK-based Hindu commentator Mathoor Krishnamurti was warmly received during his recent tour of South Africa, according to HINDUISM TODAY'S London correspondent Rakesh Mathur. Krishnamurti gave more than 40 lectures plus radio and TV interviews on the value of Vasudhev Kutumbakam - the world is a one family. He was greatly appreciated for his humility and compassion.

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