The Hindu Heritage in South Africa

Edited by
RANJIT S. NOWBATH
SOOKRAJ CHOTA
B. D. DALLA

Published by
THE SOUTH AFRICAN HINDU MAHA SABHA
49 Lorne Street, Durban
November 1969
stark relief the naked, essential, religious aspect alone. There will be the symbolic drapery and other embellishments to emphasise the significance of marriage and its relationship to Dharma.

There was a time until quite recently when festivals and ceremonies were built elaborately and intricately round some event of historic or religious importance to Hindus, such as the birthday of an Avatar, or of some great religious personality, the symbolic representation of the conquest of some evil power by Divine Grace, the New Year Day and the worship of certain attributes of the Divine, e.g., Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, Durga, Laxmi, and Saraswati. Special pujas and various other observances centring round these show evidence of declining interest and popularity.

Among the young, ignorance was widespread as to the origin and purpose of these “religious occasions”. In a vague way it suggested to many opportunities for feasting and rejoicing under the banner of religion. Such a suggestion was not entirely without foundation, for there was much feasting and merry-making with very little religious practice about some of these occasions.

With the awakening of religious consciousness among the more educated and imaginative, a fresh interest in these religious events punctuating the Hindu calendar, has been revived. The realisation that these special occasions, commemorations and celebrations could be employed as a means of importing the real philosophy and religious principle inherent in them or associated with their conception, has shifted the emphasis from blind faith to purposeful enlightenment of the fundamental aspect of Hinduism.

A study of the celebration of Krishna Jayanti which is increasing in popularity annually, illustrates the change that is taking place. As an even commemorating the anniversary of the birth of Lord Krishna, one would expect that the events preceding and related to his birth, his death, and some details about his life and work would form the central theme to be underlined on such an occasion. Because of the enigma surrounding Krishna’s personality, the myths and legends that have grown round him as an epic character, and many other mystical factors not easily appreciated by the ordinary mind—even scholars have been baffled—there is a marked shift of emphasis from Mathura, Gokul and Brindaban to Kurukshestra, in order to focus attention on the Bhagvat Gita, the nectar of Hinduism which draws its spiritual essence directly from the Upanishads of the Vedas.

This new attitude is resulting in an increasing emphasis on the fundamental and the cardinal and characterises the change taking place in the profession and practice of Hinduism today in this country. What the precise scope and form of Hinduism will be at any particular time in the future, I must confess, is beyond my imagination.

Ambassadors of Hindu Culture, Religion and Philosophy

By SOOKRAJ CHOTAI

THE Hindus who migrated to this country under the indentured system brought with them their religious beliefs and rituals, traditional practices and customs, music and art, language and dressing, and feasts and festivals. But as the majority of them came from the lower ranks of society they were in the main illiterate. There was very little sign of social, religious or cultural awareness, but nevertheless within the hearts of many there was hidden the germ of religious and national pride, inherited from their ancestors. At the first opportunity, after the demoralising effects of the system under which they had come and the humiliating treatment which they had received at the hands of their masters had disappeared on the expiry of their indenture, they blossomed into their own, exhibiting the strength of their spiritual background and the fragrance of their religious observances. They banded themselves together, contributed their mite from the niggardly sum they earned and established small schools for the teaching of their mother-tongue and built temples to satisfy their spiritual needs. In spite of their attempts to keep Hinduism alive some of the Hindus who had received English education were attracted to the western way of life, whilst others, mainly the ignorant mass, observed alien festivals and practices. The situation needed a saviour.

August 5th, 1905, was indeed an auspicious day when Professor Bhai Parmanand set foot on the shores of South Africa. It was through the initiative and zeal of Mr. Mokam Chand Varman, who was very much concerned about the degeneration of Hindu society, that Professor Bhai Parmanand was sent out to this country by Mahatma Hansraj, the Principal of Lahore College, India, as a torch-bearer of the sublime teachings of Hinduism. Being an excellent orator both in English and Hindi, Bhaiji was able to attract within a very short time thousands of followers. Though he was an ardent Arya Samajist he concerned himself with the unification of all the different linguistic and denominational groups of Hindus and to achieve this he established Hindu Young Men’s Associations (H.Y.M.A.’s) wherever he went. Eloquent addresses on Hindu religion and culture were delivered by him in all the main centres of South Africa. In Johannesburg the chairman of the reception committee was Mahatma Gandhi. Professor Bhai Parmanand stayed in this country for just over four months and, therefore, was not able to stabilise his work but still he succeeded in raising Hinduism to an exalted place. The H.Y.M.A. of Pretoria stands as a monument to his work.

The religious fervour created by Bhai Parmanand continued to exist after his departure. Efforts were made to invite another preacher but it took almost three years before success was attained. It was on 4th October, 1908, that a large crowd waited at the Durban harbour with enthusiasm and excitement to welcome a Sanjaya who was later to become their guru (preceptor). He was none other than His Holiness Swami Shankeranandji. His tall and lovable figure, clothed in saffron robes, was at once inspiring and magnetic. He received a reception befitting royalty. From the very moment he landed he began to radiate spiritual energy and religious consciousness.

His brilliant discourses covering many aspects of life—culture, religion, civilisation, ceremonies, mother-tongue education, faith in God—were listened to with rapt attention. In his lectures he laid stress on the observance of Hindu festivals, the performance of ceremonies and the importance of the mother-
Swamiiji excoriated his people to celebrate Deepavali instead of alien festivals, some of which had become the principal festivals of the Hindus. He introduced a procession of vihara (chariots) and explained the significance of the Births of Lord Rama and Lord Krishna.

The message of Swamiiji reached every nook and corner of Natal. There was a demand for him everywhere. He was an eloquent orator, being able to hold a large and enthusiastic audience. His delivery was always pleasing and possessed an excellent command of the English language. His lectures always left behind an indelible impress on the minds of his audience which seemed to last for generations. As a result of his tireless and unflagging efforts, he managed to build up a large and devoted following among the Hindus.

Swamiiji’s work was also carried out in the South African newspapers. He was a frequent contributor to the newspapers of the day and his articles often appeared in the leading newspapers of the country.

The missionary work of the Swamiiji was continued by Pandit Bhawani Dayal (later known as Swami Bhatwan Dayal Sannyasi) who was the first Indian to be ordained as a priest in Natal. He was educated in India and obtained a degree in the Hindi language and philosophy. He continued his work in Natal and established a branch of the Swamiiji’s mission in the town.

Swamiiji’s work was also carried out in the South African newspapers. He was a frequent contributor to the newspapers of the day and his articles often appeared in the leading newspapers of the country.

Swamiiji continued his missionary work in Natal and established a branch of the Swamiiji’s mission in the town.

The Swamiiji’s mission was continued by Pandit Bhawani Dayal (later known as Swami Bhatwan Dayal Sannyasi) who was the first Indian to be ordained as a priest in Natal. He was educated in India and obtained a degree in the Hindi language and philosophy. He continued his work in Natal and established a branch of the Swamiiji’s mission in the town.

Swamiiji’s work was also carried out in the South African newspapers. He was a frequent contributor to the newspapers of the day and his articles often appeared in the leading newspapers of the country.

Swamiiji continued his missionary work in Natal and established a branch of the Swamiiji’s mission in the town.

The Swamiiji’s mission was continued by Pandit Bhawani Dayal (later known as Swami Bhatwan Dayal Sannyasi) who was the first Indian to be ordained as a priest in Natal. He was educated in India and obtained a degree in the Hindi language and philosophy. He continued his work in Natal and established a branch of the Swamiiji’s mission in the town.

Swamiiji’s work was also carried out in the South African newspapers. He was a frequent contributor to the newspapers of the day and his articles often appeared in the leading newspapers of the country.

Swamiiji continued his missionary work in Natal and established a branch of the Swamiiji’s mission in the town.

The Swamiiji’s mission was continued by Pandit Bhawani Dayal (later known as Swami Bhatwan Dayal Sannyasi) who was the first Indian to be ordained as a priest in Natal. He was educated in India and obtained a degree in the Hindi language and philosophy. He continued his work in Natal and established a branch of the Swamiiji’s mission in the town.

Swamiiji’s work was also carried out in the South African newspapers. He was a frequent contributor to the newspapers of the day and his articles often appeared in the leading newspapers of the country.

Swamiiji continued his missionary work in Natal and established a branch of the Swamiiji’s mission in the town.
their many shows held in several parts of the country they realised a total of £5,000, which went towards their Mahavidyalaya. They were missionaries in a different sense. They helped to mould the youth to acquire the glory of Indian womanhood.

It was in 1937 that Yogi Yashpal arrived. He mystified his audience with the performance of Yoge feats and archery. He was buried alive at Curries Fountain and two hours later he was exhumed alive to the amazement of the thousands that had assembled to witness his remarkable performance. His feats in archery progressed from the apparently impossible to the absolutely incredible. They included five arrows, five marks; two simultaneous shots in opposite directions; blindfold sighting by sound and touch. In his own inimitable way he carried the teech of Hindu Dharma and culture.

It was Mr. M. C. Varman again who invited Pandit Rishiram to this country. Pandit Rishiram arrived in 1937 from England. His lecture tour was organised by the South African Hindu Maha Sabha. Panditji was a good exponent of the Vedas, Upanishads and the Gita. His lectures testified to his deep study of the works of Gandhi and Tagore, Radha Krishna and Aurobindo. His series of lectures on "The Nature and Destiny of Man" were acclaimed by all. Pandit Rishiram advocated the building of friendly and harmonious relationship with the indigenous people of this country. He established the Gandhi-Tagore Lectureship Trust to ensure the continuous flow of missionaries from India, but due to the diplomatic break between this country and India, the Trust has been prevented from fulfilling the aims and objects for which it was founded. He returned to this country in 1947 and again in 1952 with new ideas and a new approach to his missionary work. His religious and philosophical discourses, infusing new spirit, awakened the consciousness of young men to the greatness of Hinduism, faith of all Indians, in respect of their rich cultural heritage.

In 1938 it was the honour and privilege of the Indian community of South Africa to have with them for a very short time Dr. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan (now Vice-President of India), the world famous Indian philosopher. The speeches which he delivered were few but they were memorable. People marvelled at his intellectual genius.

The second missionary of the Ramakrishna Mission to visit this country was Swami Ghatananda. He landed in 1947. His masterly presentation of the philosophy of Vedanta in polished English language attracted several young men to the Ramakrishna Mission, a branch of which he formed at Sea View.

To grace the Silver Jubilee of the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, held in 1950, Pandit Gaag Prasad Upadhyay, M.A., General Secretary of the International Aryan League, India, was specially invited. He is a prolific writer, with no less than 30 books in English and Hindi on Vedic religion to his credit. The theme of his inspiring lectures was based on the philosophy of Swami Dayananda. His catechism on the Essential Teachings of Hinduism is of special interest to South African Hindus.

The saintly personality of Shri Ram is still vivid in our minds. He arrived in this country in 1952 as a representative of the Theosophical Society. His lectures which soared to great spiritual heights dealt with the divinity in man.

The missionary who was permitted to visit this country at the beginning of this year after a long spell of eight years was Birhuk Chandanlal, a Buddhist monk. With his unique exhibition of art and architecture in photography as well as actual specimens displaying "the glory that was Hindu", his screening of films on the vestiges of Indian civilisation in various parts of the world; and with his thought provoking commentaries he was able to capture our imagination.

Other great personalities who have come to this country, though not missionaries in the religious sense, were, nevertheless, mighty ambassadors of Indian culture. Mahatma Gandhi who initiated the Satyagraha movement, the Rt. Honourable Gokhale who made the first breach in the infamous £3 tax, Sarojini Naidu who exploded the myth of white superiority, Mr. Sastri who championed the cause of higher education for Indians, Sir Kurma Reddi who awakened Andhra consciousness, Kunwarani Maharaj Singh who concerned herself with secondary education for Indian girls, and Lady Rama Rau who glorified the religious literature of India, have each in their own way made valuable contribution to the enhancement of the prestige of Indians in this country.

Amongst those who are the custodians of our religion, philosophy and language, and are at the very moment engaged in the dissemination of the very best in our culture must be mentioned the names of Pandit S. N. C. Varadacharyulu, Pandit Nardev Vedalankar, Swami Nishalananda, Brother V. Srinivasen (Swami Sahajananda), Pandit Hari Chand Aarya and Dr. N. P. Desai. The heart and soul of the Ramakrishna Centre of Southern Africa is Swami Nishulananda while Brother Srinivasen is the founder of the Divine Life Society in South Africa. The stalwart of Hindi and a Vedic priest of high eminence is Pandit Nardev Vedalankar, founder-president of the Hindi Shiksha Sangh of South Africa. His counterpart in the Telugu world is Pandit Varadacharyulu who is proficient in five languages—Sanskrit, Telugu, Hindi, Tamil and English. The mainstay of the Hindi Vidya Mandir of Johannesburg is Pandit Harischandra Aarya who has popularised examinations in Hindi, Sanskrit, Gita and Upanishad in the Transvaal. Only last year he held a wonderful exhibition entitled "Glimpses of India". A deep student of Hindu culture, religion and philosophy and a great public worker is Dr. N. P. Desai, the founder of the Kathiawad Hindu Seva Samaj who has championed courageously the rights and privileges of Hindus in this country as an official of the South African Hindu Maha Sabha.

A hundred years has elapsed since our ancestors arrived. The impact of modernism and the process of westernisation are powerful agencies attempting to despoil the soul of the Hindu. The spiritual legacy and the cultural heritage left by our forbears have to be carefully protected. The Hindus have to meet a new challenge for the preservation of their identity. Honest, sincere and devoted missionaries of the highest calibre from within this country and Mother India are required.
They Served Hinduism

PROFESSOR Bhai Parmanand
The First Hindu Missionary to arrive in South Africa in 1905

Pandit Rishiram
Hindu Missionary who visited South Africa three times and founded the Gandhi-Tegue Lectureship Trust

Swami Bhawani Dayal Sanntasi
Distinguished Vedic Priest and Hindi Scholar. First South African Indian to enter the Holy Order of Sannyasa

Mokam Chand Varman
who rendered great service to the Hindu community of South Africa by inviting six Hindu Missionaries to this country at different times

The Maha Sabha—and its work