

Visit to South Africa By Pdt. Munelal Maharaj – May 2006

In May 2006, Pundit Munelal Maharaj, his wife, Naveeta, and five year-old daughter, Vaishnavi, toured the far-off country of South Africa, with the purpose of reawakening the spirit of Hinduism among the 1.7 million Hindus of that country.

This marked their second trip to South Africa. The first trip, lasting about 8 days, occurred last year and constituted a brief introduction to the cities of Durban and Johannesburg. But it was enough to spark the interest of the South African Hindus, and led to what was termed by the local media as “the Hindu Renaissance of South Africa”.

This second tour comprised a packed three-week schedule, and included nightly programmes in many different cities such as Durban, Pietermaritzburg, Dundee and Johannesburg.

Their tour was indeed an awakening to the thousands of people who eagerly flocked to the programmes to enjoy the melodious voices of both Pundit Maharaj and his wife, and also to be inspired by Pundit Maharaj’s dynamic lectures. Punditji broke from the traditional mould of the orthodox Pundit by making his lectures interactive with his audience. The first hour of the programme included a mix of motivational talks and soul-stirring Bhajans by Pundit Maharaj and his wife. The second hour consisted of Punditji moving through the audience, and allowing the members of the congregation to share their thoughts and experiences of Hinduism, or ask questions on any issue in Hinduism that they wished to address. Many were eager to respond, and the comments ranged from personal miracles, to questions on rituals, superstitions and philosophy. Whilst among the audience, Punditji also directed the congregation to jointly offer prayers and to send out positive healing energy for all those present and throughout the community.

His main theme was that, “Spirituality is simply connecting to God from within. It is not about doing a pooja once a year, and then forgetting about God for the other 364 days. Life is about living every moment with the knowledge that God is within you, and experiencing the peace and bliss that results from doing so.” Hundreds of people commented that their lives were changed as a result of experiencing a new practical dimension of Hinduism. Many youths were also greatly inspired by his challenge for them to stop hiding in the background, but to come forward and become leaders of the society.

The response to this unique and pioneering approach to presenting Hinduism was indeed, tremendous. The crowd multiplied from the hundreds to the thousands as South African Hindus could not get enough of the powerful mix of devotion and spiritual teachings that were presented in the 13 nightly sessions. Even little Vaishnavi was a huge favourite as she chanted Mantras and sang Bhajans with her father.

During the day, the hectic schedule also continued with interviews on the local radio stations, visits to schools, homes for senior citizens, youth workshops and a workshop with the Durban police force on suicide prevention.

When asked about what was memorable for him on his visit to South Africa beside the programmes he conducted, Punditji remarked, “Visiting the home in the village of Phoenix, where Mahatma Gandhi once lived was very touching for me. I saw his simple dirt home that contained the printing press where he began publication of ‘The Indian Voice’, and I was struck by how simple his lifestyle was, yet how powerful his impact was on the world. He was a model to us that we can follow our Dharma in a simple and humble way, yet still stand up as lions against the injustices and evils of this world. South Africa can be proud to know that India had sent them Gandhiji the lawyer, but South Africa returned to India a Mahatma (great soul).”

He also observed that even though the distance between Trinidad and South Africa is so far, our history, culture and traditions are tightly enmeshed. The majority of Indians living in South Africa are also descended from indentured labourers brought by the British to work on the sugar cane plantations there. They arrived in South Africa from the same district of Uttar Pradesh as our forefathers some 10 years after the indentured labourers were brought to the Caribbean. Their traditions and religious practices are very similar to ours. Their style of poojas, rituals, weddings, funerals, cultural song and dance vary very little from others. There is even similarity in the food – dhalpuri which is not typically found in India, is the most popular dish among South Africa Hindus. The Bhojpuri dialect is also commonly spoken.

Pundit Maharaj’s South Africa tour was organized by a committee of seven members who had joined together in 2005 to plan for Punditji’s first visit. They were quite pleased with the success of the tour and have already begun planning to bring Punditji and his family again next year to continue the “Hindu Renaissance”.