

## **TRINIDADIAN PUNDIT SPARKS HINDU RENAISSANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA**

International motivational speaker and Hindu leader, Pundit Munelal Maharaj recently returned from a highly successful trip to South Africa during the month of May. This was his third visit in three years, together with his wife, Naveeta.

During their stay in South Africa, they conducted 20 programmes, including daily lectures, satsangs, youth workshops and visits to schools and Senior Homes. Their sessions were based mainly in the city of Durban and its outskirts, which has a population of over 1 million Hindus. Their tour also included major cities such as Johannesburg, Cape Town, Pietermaritzburg, and other smaller towns such as Phoenix, Tongaat, Stanger and many more.

The programmes, while stemming from the platform of Hinduism, were based more on a universal approach to life as opposed to orthodox teachings. Popular themes by Pdt. Maharaj included positive thinking, living with inspiration, personal spirituality vs. organized religion and discovering one's inner divine power. He also focused on current issues and challenges in today's world such as family relationships, stress, anger management, problems in the workplace, drug and alcohol abuse and reconnecting with the youth. The programmes also included meditations, self-healing affirmations, devotional chanting, popular Bhajans, and selected film songs, as well as inspirational stories and humorous anecdotes.

He was also assisted by his wife, Naveeta, who accompanied him on the keyboard and also performed Bhajans and devotional English songs. She also gave brief philosophical messages based on the relevant topics, and rendered inspirational poetry specially geared for the youth.

His main message to his audience: "You can't claim to be spiritual, yet still be negative. You can't expect your spirit to be uplifted while you still harbour low self-esteem."

He continually urged the congregation: "Time is going by and life is creeping away. What are we waiting for to transform our lives? That Divine Power exists deep within each one of us. Look inside and discover that power to change your life and change the world around you."

The venues were all quite well attended, with audiences in the thousands, night after night. Several dignitaries were also in attendance, including the Minister of Sports, Mr. R. Rajbansi, the Indian Consulate-General, Mr. Shingla, other members of Parliament and local councillors. Both Mr. Rajbansi and Mr. Shingla were full of praise for Pdt. Maharaj's performance and teachings, and also expressed their great pleasure to discover that Hinduism was alive and thriving in the Caribbean.

The tour was organized by a group of South African citizens who formed the "Pundit Munelal Maharaj Reception Committee." The Committee comprises six executive members and close to 50 other members, all of whom work together to co-ordinate each venue and organize sponsorship so that the programmes are presented free of cost to the public.

Chairman of the Committee and Editor of the Post newspaper of Durban, Mr. Brijlall Ramguthie, says, "The Hindu community in South Africa has been in a state of apathy for some time. However, the presence of Pdt. Munelal Maharaj has certainly created a marked difference. His unique approach to Hinduism comes to us as a breath of fresh air, particularly to the youth. Pdt. Maharaj, with his scriptural knowledge, mesmerizing voice and personal charisma, has brought about the beginning of a Hindu Renaissance within our society. As Hindus, he has lit the torch of hope in our hearts and as such, the Pundit Munelal Maharaj Reception Committee is fully committed to bringing Punditji and Naveetaji to South Africa on an annual basis. Their impact here has been so profound that we already have commitments from sponsors to organize their next visit."

He also commented that their greatest challenge was finding larger and larger venues every year.

The tour was highly publicized in the local media. Many articles were posted in the local newspapers, such as the Post, Rising Sun, Hindu Times and Hindu Light. Pdt. and Mrs. Maharaj also conducted live interviews at two local radio stations, Radio Hindvani and Radio Lotus FM. Radio Hindvani also promoted the tour schedule and covered some of the programmes live, free of charge. Even after Pdt. Maharaj's departure, the radio stations continue to play his CD's, and quote from his books on a regular basis.

When asked to comment about his trip to South Africa, Pdt. Maharaj remarked that one of the highlights was his trip to Cape Town where he

visited the prison at Robben Island that had once housed Mr. Nelson Mandela.

He mentioned, “I was able to actually view the tiny cell Mr. Mandela had occupied for 16 years, and in which he wrote *The Long Walk To Freedom*. It was powerful to think that it was from this very spot, in spite of horrible living conditions, he had been able to orchestrate the end of apartheid. Just as last year, I had visited the home of Mahatma Gandhi in the village of Phoenix, where he had printed his books on freedom, it was overwhelming to know that in South Africa, one can walk in the footsteps of these two historical giants.”

Naveeta commented, “The Hindus of South Africa have a tremendous desire for knowledge of Hinduism, not only about the rituals and stories, but also for the philosophy that underlies these traditions. The youth are crying out a new dimension in orthodox Hinduism so that they can continue to appreciate their ancient culture while living in a modern world. I was very touched by their sincere commitment to Hinduism and India culture.”

Pdt. Maharaj further added that there was great interest by the Hindus in South Africa to learn about how Hindu traditions were observed in Trinidad. Most of his audiences had tuned in to beautiful images of Trinidad and Tobago during the broadcasting of the World Cup Cricket, and expressed tremendous desire to one day visit our shores.

During 2007, Pdt. Maharaj will continue his travels throughout North America and the Caribbean, speaking at conferences, workshops, business seminars and Mandirs. Next year, he already has two trips to India being planned, and has received offers to visit Fiji, Holland, New Zealand, Alaska and other far off destinations. In spite of his hectic travel schedule, he always looks forward to returning to Trinidad, and making his contribution to the local community here.