

## **Address at the Opening of the Hindu Convention**

6 September 2003

Master of Ceremonies,  
President of the South African Hindu Maha Sabha, Mr Ashwin Trikamjee  
His Excellency, Indian High Commissioner, Mr Muckerjee,  
Minister Pahad and KZN MEC's,  
Deputy Mayor of Ethekwini,  
Vice Chancellor of UDW, Dr Saths Cooper,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a real pleasure for me to speak at this very important first ever Convention of the Hindu organisations of our country.

The process we are beginning today constitutes a significant development in the evolution of our society. There was a time when it was unthinkable that a religion which, according to the Apartheid ideology, was outside the officially sanctioned religious mainstream, could assume its rightful place in our spiritual life.

Apartheid not only suppressed political freedom, but also stifled religious choices. Through forced removals, there has always been destruction of the most sacred places of our people. As we know, during removals, graves, temples, halls and other cultural institutions were destroyed in areas such as Cato Manor, Riverside and Clairwood.

Indeed, one of the grave consequences of forced removals was the disintegration of the family system and traditional lifestyles.

We all know that deep and lasting attachments to our places of birth and abode form an important part of our consciousness. Homes, temples, churches, mosques, schools and burial places are places that define human existence and the disruption of such emotional human constructions destroy the human soul.

It took the Hindu community a long time to rebuild their places of worship in relocated areas such as Lenasia, Chatsworth and Phoenix.

In its submission to the TRC, the South African Hindu Maha Sabha emphasised that the religious sites in areas such as Chatsworth and Phoenix were readily sold to any willing buyer. Scant regard was shown to the owners and users of these sites as their religious beliefs were despised by those who ruled our country.

In the new South Africa all religions are recognised and there is freedom of worship. We also believe that religious organisations must be at the forefront of inculcating strong religious and moral values in a society that is trying to reconstruct itself from the ravages of apartheid.

Given our divided history, religious organisations have an important role to play in the reconstruction and development of our country, especially in the welfare and civil society sectors.

In this regard, there are many lessons that we can and must learn from the Hindu religion.

You would know better than me, that volunteerism has long been an integral part of Hindu society, dating back to 1 500 BC when it was mentioned in the Rig Vedas. Indeed, this tradition in India plays an important role in social and economic development.

We know that volunteer campaigns help in the fields of education, medicine, cultural promotion and during times of crises such as droughts, floods, epidemics and foreign invasions. Through these contributions the disadvantaged and the poor are taken care of by social mechanisms outside the state - through the family structure, social groups, guilds, and individual religious philanthropy.

Individual and religious philanthropy have always been interrelated. One of the most important lessons of the Hindu religion is the principle of hospitality and charity, which is part of an important hallmark of Vedic culture.

As we know, our country and people are engaged in the volunteer and self-reliance campaigns of Vuk'uzenzele and Letsema. Today, we have a duty to unite the good and noble teachings of volunteerism of the Hindu faith with the campaigns that our people are conducting.

In this way, we will be able to attend to the many challenges facing our society.

The diffusion of this spirit across all sections of our society is a necessary condition to the sustenance of the values of selflessness and the new patriotism engendered by our democracy.

I am informed that Hinduism, the world's oldest religion, has no beginning - it precedes recorded history. It has no human founder and, as one of its illustrious sons, Mahatma Gandhi once said, "it is a relentless pursuit after Truth".

This historic gathering of representative Hindu organisations of our country also constitutes a tribute to Mahatma Gandhi, and the ideas he lived for, and for which he ultimately paid the supreme price.

We all know the impact of Gandhi's ideas, not only here in our country and India, but the world over; and the philosophical impulses that drove the Civil Rights Movement in the United States of America. Mahatma Gandhi's championship of the cause of the harijans teaches us that we too must act in support of the poor and marginalised.

Chairperson,

There is a general view that Hinduism arrived on our shores in South Africa in 1860. However, archaeological sources have suggested that Hinduism had been in Southern Africa for at least 400 years earlier.

Clearly, if archaeological findings are anything to go by, the links between Africans and the Hindu people goes back to the days of yore. We can conclude from this that there have always been mutual respect, exchanges, trade, and communications between the peoples on both sides of the Indian Ocean.

Today, research and evidence show clear links between Hinduism and indigenous African religions. And like Hinduism, the African faiths have lived for thousands of years, in unbroken continuity.

We affirm that the essence of humanity as expressed by this religion shows us to be one.

The falsehoods peddled by colonial discourse that history on these shores, like anywhere else in the world, dawned only with the arrival of the colonisers has already been proved to be false.

We know that the South African Hindu Maha Sabha, the national voice of Hindus in our country was formed in 1912. The wisdom and foresight of its founders are discernible in the present membership of the Maha Sabha and its affiliates across the country.

This is the same year that the African people met to form the ANC to fight for our rights and for the democracy that we are enjoying today.

Being primarily a religious body, the South African Hindu Maha Sabha initially devoted much of its attention to the religious needs of Hindus in our country. However, because of the abnormal situation that obtained in our country, it was inevitable that members of this faith had to unite with their compatriots to fight for the common cause of freedom.

Accordingly, we are happy that for many years the South African Hindu Maha Sabha contributed to the national effort for the creation of a society where all people are equal. We are indeed strengthened by the fact that members of the Hindu community continue to work for the transformation of our country.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the president of the Maha Sabha is also the chairperson of the National Religious Forum.

I am confident that this Convention will mark the beginning of another exciting era in the history of Hinduism as a religion in our country. We are sure it will assist Hinduism to make an even greater contribution towards the spiritual enrichment of our diverse society, and the development of our nation. It will empower the Hindu community of our people to enhance its contribution to peace in our country.

Through our actions together, all the people of South Africa will be able to live up to the wise words from the Rig Veda:

Come together, talk together,  
Let our minds be in harmony.  
Common be our prayer,  
Common be our end,  
Common be our purpose,  
Common be our deliberations,  
Common be our desires,  
United be our hearts,  
United be our intentions,  
Perfect be the union among us.  
(10 - 191:2)

On behalf of our government and people, I am pleased and honoured to wish this important Conference success. We look forward to the outcome of your deliberations.

I thank you.