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ACCESSION NO. 1/442

Printed by
UNIVERSAL PRINTING WORKS
53 Beatrice Street, Durban



The
Hindu Heritage
in
South Africa

UKZN
Gandhi-Luthuli
Documentation

Centre

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Published by
THE SOUTH AFRICAN HINDU MAHA SABHA
49 Lorne Street, Durban
November 1960

Building at Crabbe Street, Durban



Sanathan Sabha Govt. Aided Indian School, Westville

Surat Hindoo Association

THE forefathers of the Surat Hindus of South Africa came to this country as free passengers towards the end of the nineteenth century. Most of them did not bring their families with them so they lived a single life. They used to visit the mother-country every three or four years. Some of them brought their sons with them because in those days this was permissible. It was not necessary for them to be accompanied by their mothers. In the early days most of them were engaged in hawking fruit and vegetables as there was very little scope in other business.

Although they did not know English most of them had an elementary knowledge of Gujarati, and as they were religiously inclined they celebrated the important Hindu festivals, among them, Ram Navmi, Krishna Ashtmi, Deepavali and Holi.

In the year 1907 some people with foresight got together and formed the Surat Hindoo Association at the suggestion of Swami Shankeranandji Maharaj. In 1910 the Association purchased a property at 127 Victoria Street, Durban. To pay for this property money was collected in Durban and Johannesburg.

On this property there were two cottages which were let on rent. Some rooms in the central portion were kept vacant as a Dharmashala or rest-house for visitors from Johannesburg and the Cape Province. From the accumulated income of this property the Association bought another property in Cross Street in 1917, where a new building, comprising two shops and a warehouse on the ground floor and three storeys of flats, is in the process of construction.

Adequate attention was given to mother-tongue education. Mr. V. N. Naik used to run a private Anglo-Vernacular school to which both Hindus and Muslims were admitted. Some children attended Gujarati classes in the Madrassa School in Pine Street but they were forced to leave the school be-

cause the School Committee passed a resolution that the children attending Gujarati classes should also learn Urdu. Mr. Shaikh Mehtab took exception to this resolution and resigned from the Madrassa School Committee. At this stage the Surat Hindoo Association opened a private school in Mr. D. P. Desai's warehouse in Brook Street, which was obtained rent-free for the purpose of a school. Mr. Shaikh Mehtab was engaged as the teacher.

In 1925 the Association demolished the front portion of the Victoria Street building and erected in its place a magnificent edifice, comprising two shops, flats and a hall. About this time the Union Government passed a law restricting the introduction of sons unless they were accompanied by their mothers. In order to meet this legal requirement many of the people were obliged to bring their wives to this country. As a result of this the number of school-going Gujarati children increased rapidly, thus causing a pressing need for a proper vernacular school. In 1933 a property was purchased in Prince Edward Street where, a year later, a Gujarati school was built.

To run the Gujarati school a new body, named the Surat Hindoo Education Society was formed. In order to support and maintain the Gujarati school, this Society collected some £300 and purchased the property at 47/49 Prince Edward Street. As time went by, it became difficult for children to get admission into English schools. Therefore, a private English school was opened in the hall at 127 Victoria Street in 1948-49. As the number of school-going children continued to increase annually the Association decided to build a proper English school at 137/139 Prince Edward Street, Durban.

After undergoing some initial difficulties, the Association managed to get its school plan passed by the City Council, and obtained an occupation permit from the Minister of In-

terior in accordance with the Group Areas Act. The erection of the school building, comprising 11 classrooms and a magnificent hall, was completed in 1954. Children of all sections—Gujarati, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Christian and Muslim—are admitted without any distinction. There are some 900 pupils in this school, including the annexe and the afternoon platoon section. Those attending the Gujarati School number approximately 1,000.

To erect the school and hall the members of the community donated very liberally. Some committee members went on a collection drive to Capetown, East London, Northern Natal and the South Coast. The people of these areas gave generously. The Association is contemplating a separate girls' school and a temple on its property at 47-49 Prince Edward Street. It is hoped that the permission to begin with this project will be obtained in the near future.

Members of the Association have, from time to time, given donations to many schools and religious institutions throughout South Africa. Relief in time of distress, such as floods and riots, has also been given to the local people. Financial assistance has been sent to India during earthquakes and floods. During the non-violent struggle for India's independence medical aid was sent to the wounded and injured. A dispensary at Kasturba Ashram, Maroti District, Surat, where poor patients are treated at very nominal fees, has been built through the contribution of members of the Association.

Some of the well-known personalities and social workers of the early days were the late

Messrs. Odhavbhai Kanjee Patel, Dayaljee Rambhai Patel, D. A. Desai (of G. D. Hansraj & Co.), G. M. Desai, K. S. Mistri, Bhanabhai Parsotam, Ravjee Bhoola, Morar Bhoola, Parsotam Vallabh, R. K. Kapitan, Ramjee Bhikha, K. V. Patel, M. H. Desai, G. Hari-bhai, Morarjee Bhakti, Makanbhai Dayal Mistri, Patel Mavjee, M. B. Naik, Hirabhai Ramjee Patel, D. K. Patel, D. P. Desai, V. N. Naik, and C. R. Mehta.

Mr. M. N. Bhoola and Mr. C. N. Rana, who passed away recently, played an important part up to the time of their death. Those who are prominently connected with the Association at the present time are Messrs. Govan Mani, Dayaljee Pranjivan, Vanmali Gosai, G. C. Kapitan, T. N. Bhoola, C. N. Jeena, N. P. Hargovan, C. K. Mitsri, N. K. Mistri, Keshavbhai Bhana, Devabhai Gopal, Naran-das Dayal, Narsi Govind (of Jagan Bros.), Bhikhubhai Parsotam, Bhagoo Ramjee, Dahyabhai Bhikha, L. B. Patel, Lala Govind, Ratilal Morarjee Desai, Govanbhai Madhav, Gopal-bhai Bhikha, Nathoobhai Naran, Daya Khoosal, R. R. Patel, Dahyabhai Makanjee, Chhaganbhai Nana.

The Surat Arya Bhajan Mundal runs a temple, known as the Saptah Mandir, which is managed by Messrs. Manilal Ratanjee, Ranchhodhbhai Koovertjee, Mangaldas Bhikha, Keshavbhai Bhikha and several other members. This temple celebrates all Hindu festivals and holds eight-day non-stop (day and night) Kirtan during Shraavan Mas. This temple is housed in Mr. V. N. Naik's building in Prince Edward Street, rent-free, with the kind permission of the owner.



Surat Hindoo Association Building, Victoria Street, Durban



Bharat Hall and Surat Hindoo Govt. Aided Indian School,
Prince Edward Street, Durban



Surat Hindoo Association, Cross Street, Durban – New Block of Shops and Flats