

There is No Room For Hate in America

Putting the Hindu flag at the back of the yard is like standing at the back of the bus. These flags should proudly adorn the front of Hindu homes as a symbol of peace and love and security should be provided to ensure that they are not desecrated.

The United States of America is the land of Liberty. It is a beacon of hope for many that leave the fear and repression in their countries to find freedom in the home of the brave. When people hurt America through hate it should be condemned and outlawed because it goes against the ideals of our country.

Despite its imperfections our democracy works and it is a model for others to follow. There are those that may find our democracy inconsistent with their beliefs. They have the option to return to their countries of origin and help to create the society of their choice in those places.

In the past fortnight the Homeland has been rocked with two incidents; one local, the other national that threaten the foundations of tolerance. When Roy Narine woke up on Thanksgiving morning in Woodhaven, New York, he thought that something was amiss. His son had seen the fire truck depart from their yard. It turned out that earlier that morning someone had entered Narine's yard and set fire to dozens of his Jhandi flags. These are the multi-colored flags that celebrate the offerings in the Hindu puja or worship ceremony and are placed outside to signify the culmination of a successful self-purification.

According to the police the surveillance videos 'shows the man setting fire to 40 religious Hindu flags in front of a home in Woodhaven.' The suspect is described by the police as an adult male that wore a baseball cap and a three-quarter length jacket. This act of desecration is not isolated in the Hindu community. There are cases of persons singling out Hindu homes to break into since the flags on the front lawns are seen as a

sign of wealth.

The desecration of the Hindu flags in Woodhaven might have gone unnoticed and taken as another routine attack on the Hindu community had it not been for the activism of a group of Hindus from 'Sadhana.' This organization was founded by progressive Hindus. The aim is to bring greater awareness about condi-

bring the community's attention to the fact that discarding the murtis on the beach can negatively affect the environment. But its activism did not end there. In March 2015 Aminta Kilawan brought to the attention of the community an offensive graffiti 'Hindu Gang' that was scrawled on the window of the Knights of Columbus building. She interpreted this as an attack on her faith and the incident was given prominence on CBS television.

Sadhana continued its activism and outreach and one of the high points to date has been recognition of its work in the 'New York Times.' In its No-

She gave examples of the various places in which hate has raised an ugly specter, including San Bernardino. Public Advocate Letitia James in her remarks vowed to use her resources to stamp out hate and violence. There were a number of other speakers and they included Reverend Alfonso Juan who called on all to fight hate crimes as did Imam Sarfraz from Masjid Al Abidin. Assemblyman Mike Miller said that 'what the coward did will not be tolerated here. We are fighting to make sure that good triumphs over evil.' Mr. Miller pledged \$500 as an incentive that would lead to the arrest

said that no thug could divide us. He added, 'if you want to know what America looks like you should look around. An injury to one is a blow to all of us.' Simone Jhingoor, a co-founder of Jahaji Sisters read a poem 'Middle Passage' in which she recalled the odyssey of indenture, the power of the universal Mother and the travails of mothers in the other Eldorado.

Henrick Ross is the new Executive Director of the Indo-Caribbean Alliance. He said that too often new Americans find that their culture is misunderstood. According to Mr. Ross, 'the reason why this person committed this hate crime is not because they have problems with Hindus it's because they don't understand that we live by certain rules.' Richard David, a member of Community Board 9, said that he was delighted with the response and that he was distraught that the hate crime had to happen. He said, 'we are a silent community but we need to stand up for our rights



From left, Councilman Erich Ulrich, Organizer of the Rally Aminta Kilawan, Assemblyman Mike Miller and Public Advocate Letitia James.

tions affecting the Hindu community. The principal founders of 'Sadhana' are Sunita Viswanath, Aminta Kilawan and Rohan Narine.

The organization has involved itself in regular beach-cleanups, outreach and sensitizing the local community on its role in the mainstream. It is quick to spot matters that need attention and to bring them to a wider audience. For example, the beach-cleanups posed a dilemma: what should be done with the murtis or icons that are left on the beach? Sadhana found a solution. Sunita Viswanath, Hemant Wadhvani, and others, went to the Cow Sanctuary in Pennsylvania and it was agreed that the murtis could be stored there.

As a result of this success Sadhana also mounted an exhibition at the Queens Museum that comprised the discarded murtis. The idea was to

bring the community's attention to the fact that discarding the murtis on the beach can negatively affect the environment. But its activism did not end there. In March 2015 Aminta Kilawan brought to the attention of the community an offensive graffiti 'Hindu Gang' that was scrawled on the window of the Knights of Columbus building. She interpreted this as an attack on her faith and the incident was given prominence on CBS television.

When the desecration occurred on the lawns of a Hindu home on the morning of Thanksgiving 2015 it was hardly surprising then that Sadhana would lend its support to the family and bring the issues involved to a wider audience. Aminta Kilawan works as an attorney in the New York City Council. She mobilized politicians and community leaders to attend a 'We are One' Rally. The media turned up to cover the event and it was fitting that the meeting should be kept outside of the home of the aggrieved family.

Ms. Kilawan in her introductory remarks pointed out that hate has no place in our society.

and conviction of the perpetrator of the crime.

Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez said that, 'our community would not be broken or be defined by violence or hatred. We are stronger today than we were yesterday. When we stand together united no one can defeat us. We want the Police Department to do a thorough investigation. Love and compassion is better than this mindless hate.'

Councilman Eric Ulrich said, 'Tonight we are shining a great light in our community and in the middle of winter we are here to send a message that we would not accept any hate crimes. Hindus are here, they are paying taxes, they are becoming citizens. They are making Queens and our city a better place in which to live.' Senator James Sanders

and I am so happy to see so many persons come here for the rally.'

Rev. Corey Briar from the Interfaith Center of New York said that there is no place for hate in New York. It is for all the communities to get together and stand up for the essential values in our community. Vishnu Mahadeo from the Richmond Hill EDC pointed out that that Indo-Caribbeans are numerically number two in Queens. 'This is an opportunity to educate the community what a Jhandi flag is and why it is placed in the front of the yard,' according to Mr. Mahadeo. Martin Colberg from the Woodhaven Resident Block Association thanked the community for coming out and said that we will 'stay together. The individual should turn himself in and man up to his problems.'



Dr. Dhanpaul Narine

The Chairperson of Community Board 12 Adrian Adams said that her heart is filled with love and she has lived among Hindus in New York. Ms. Adams added, 'we stand with the Hindu community as love is greater than hate and hate never wins. We want the world to know that we are one.' This theme was echoed by Mohamed Ameen who said that we must fight against hate while Lakshmee Singh pointed out that she is proud to be a Hindu.

The Rally was a marvelous idea. It showed the excellent leadership skills of Aminta Kilawan who was able to organize the event and bring a high level of awareness and solidarity at short notice. Ms. Kilawan recognized that, 'we should remember the solidarity that was created as we move forward and that what happened in Woodhaven should lead to policies to ensure that such crimes do not occur in the future.' Rohan Narine, a co-founder of Sadhana said, 'it is heartwarming to know that this rally showed the loving side of humans from all walks of life standing together in solidarity.'

Speaking exclusively to the 'West Indian' after the Rally Councilman Erich Ulrich said that, 'hate crimes will not be tolerated in any way. We would never allow crosses to be burned in somebody's front lawn or a Jewish temple to be desecrated. We want the Hindu community to know throughout the world that we stand with them and support them.'

Public Advocate Letitia James said that, 'we must all stand together and use this incident as a moment to teach people about the Hindu flag. We are not going to put the Hindu flag at the back of our homes. It will not be tolerated.'

The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the views of the THE WEST INDIAN.