Preface

The year 2012 marked the 100th anniversary of the founding of the South African Maha Sabha. To commemorate the occasion the Maha Sabha organised conferences, speeches, plays and music festivals all over the country while several newspapers published supplements in recognition of this historic landmark. The centrepiece of festivities was the banquet on 26 May 2012 which was attended by President Jacob Zuma and Dr Zweli Mkhize, the Premier of KwaZulu, which is home to the largest number of Hindus in South Africa. In his speech at the banquet, President Zuma made it clear that Hindus and Hinduism are a part of the fabric of South African society:

The centenary also allows us to appreciate the Hindu faith and culture. It is important to note that Gandhi's philosophy of Satyagraha is based on the Hindu faith; the philosophy of non-violence premised on the understandings of Satya (seeking the truth). It is also based on Ahimsa, which refers to reverence for life and commitment to total non-violence, as well as Sarvodaya, which speaks to the welfare of all people. We are also impressed and inspired by the strong values which guide the activities of the Hindu Maha Sabha, which include selfless service, volunteerism, accountability, respect, fairness, continuous improvement and unity. These are values that we all believe in, and which promote peace and good neighbourliness. We also welcome the fact that the central mission of the Maha Sabha is to contribute to good relations between Hindus and other communities locally and internationally towards sound nation building. That fits in well with the goals of government, of promoting social cohesion. The centenary of the Maha Sabha is not only an important day in the calendar of the Hindu community, but also for our country as a whole. It is an opportunity to celebrate our collective inheritance of diversity, the joy of a country at peace with itself, with its neighbours and with the world

The centenary of the Maha Sabha provides an opportunity to take stock of the state of Hinduism in South Africa, just over a century and half after the first indentured Indians set foot in the country. Hindus are not a homogeneous grouping. One marker of identity is language, with the Hindu community including those who

speak Hindi, Gujarati, Tamil, and Telugu. Differences of ritual and belief correlate to some extent with language. Over the past century, Hindus and Hinduism have undergone enormous changes. There has been a breakdown of the extended or joint family system as a result of urbanization and the Group Areas Act, which resulted in Indians being herded into townships; the movement into townships also resulted in the breakdown of longstanding instructional processes and consequently put an end to many traditional ritualistic practices at home; western education and the adoption of English as the home languages have also contributed to the erosion of rituals; and there has been large scale conversion to evangelical forms of Christianity.

However, the arrival of neo-Hindu movements, the growing reach of organizations such as Hare Krishna, Divine Life and the Ramakrishna Centre and the resurgence of the Sai Baba movement facilitated by renewed and easier links to India has seen a revivalism of the religion albeit often in new forms and new environments. These movements depend less on family, with worship and learning usually taking place in temples and Ashrams. A scripture based approach is more prominent compared to the oral tradition which was prevalent since the days of indenture. Neo-Hindu movements are also more tolerant, something acknowledged by the slogan of the South African Hindu Maha Sabha: *Vasudev Kutumbakum*, which acknowledges that the entire world is just one family.

The selection of papers in this volume seeks to track these changes over the past century and underscore this diversity as well as reflect on some of the challenges facing Hindus and Hinduism in the contemporary period. The chapters by Vahed and Gopalan trace the history of the Maha Sabha; Desai and Chetty focus on temples; Anand Singh, Jagganath, and Kumar examine the reformist Hindu movements; Shukla focuses on the importance of the Ramayana tradition among South African Hindus; Hiralal looks at the role of Hindu women; while Maharaj and Shanta Singh examine some of the challenges facing Hindus and Hinduism in the contemporary moment.

Together, these contributions point to the fascinating journey of Hinduism in South Africa, one that began with the arrival of indentured

Indians in 1860 and is today an important part of the South African landscape, as acknowledged by President Jacob Zuma. The articles, while illustrating the specificity of the South African November 2012

experience, also takes cognizance of the influence brought over the oceans from India and the impact of Hindu organizations with a global reach.

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