

# How Hindus won the right to WORSHIP



**THOUSANDS of Hindus are celebrating an historic victory that gave them the right to worship in one of the most important temples in Britain.**

Bhaktivedanta Manor in Letchmore Heath, Hertfordshire, had been ordered to close its doors to worshippers by Hertsmere Borough Council after complaints from local residents.

The row started off as a local dispute with villagers but quickly turned into an international issue that drew support from Hindus and non-Hindus alike.

"It struck a chord with everyone," said Naresh Chadha, chairman of the temple's defence campaign.

"The future of the temple has been in our hearts and minds for a long time."

After winning the 10-year campaign earlier this year, a spectacular victory celebration took place at Bhaktivedanta Manor which was attended by thousands of jubilant worshippers.

Film star Rishi Kapoor and brother Rajiv flew in from Bombay to take part in Janamashtmi, which heralded the start of the new era at Bhaktivedanta Manor.

Hundreds of supporters were

honoured at the gathering for their hard work and donations which made the temple victory possible.

Among them were the Hinduja family, who donated £108,000 towards building an access road to the Manor which overcame traffic problems in the village.

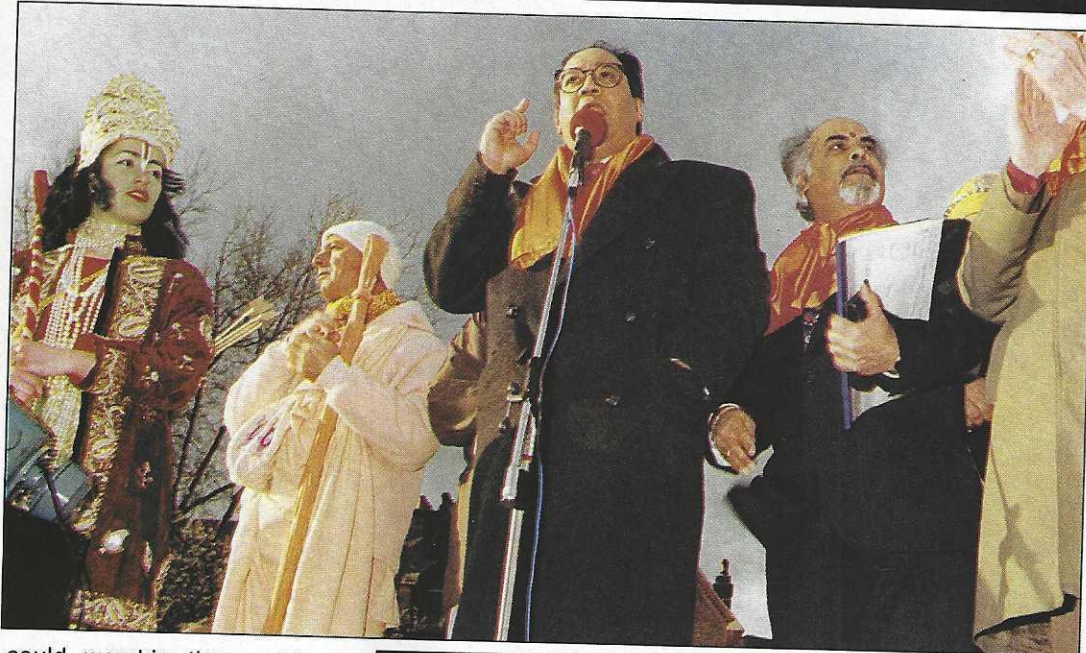
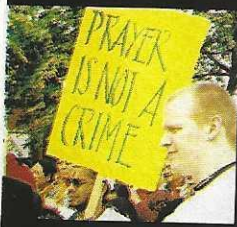
"It was an amazing time for us all," smiled Naresh. "It was a jubilant time.

"We wanted to thank everyone in the struggle for their continued help and support over the last ten years - our celebrations were for everyone."

Labour MP Keith Vaz, who has backed the campaign from the start, was amongst those singled out for a special mention in the victory speeches by temple leaders.

"He congratulated the Hindu community," said Naresh. "He recognised that it was our persistence that got us through this long and costly battle."

"It has been a victorious time for us all," added Naresh. "It was a relief to find out that we



could worship there without breaking the law."

But only last year the trustees of Bhaktivedanta Manor were fined £30,000 for letting Hindus enter the temple for worship.

"It was Janamashtmi so people expected to come to the temple," explained Naresh. "And we did not want to turn them away from the door."

"We were made to feel like common criminals."

The dispute was only resolved when Environment Secretary John Gummer gave the go-ahead for an access road to be built on the site so worshippers would not have to enter the temple through the village.

"We have had unbelievable support from the community," added Naresh, who has been involved in the campaign from the start.

"Without them - and generous devotees such as the Hinduja - it would have been extremely difficult to continue the fight to save the temple."

The fate of Bhaktivedanta Manor was taken up on an international scale when politicians in India felt they had no choice but to intervene.

"Everyone was concerned that a few villagers could cause so many problems," said Bimal Krishna Das, campaigner from Bhaktivedanta Manor. "It was a



local issue that got blown out of all proportion.

"I hope that it is never allowed to happen again."

However, he has welcomed the collaboration of Hindus who took on Hertsmere Borough Council who were determined to see the Manor close.

"It should never have got to this stage," said Mr Das, who helped launch the campaign in 1985 when the council issued an enforcement notice banning religious worship."

The 30-year-old believes the battle should not have been fought in the first place.

"This has never been about planning permission," he said. "The council has used that as

an excuse to get rid of us from an all-White village.

"It was like a form of ethnic cleansing which left us all in shock."

But Bimal and the other devotees at Bhaktivedanta Manor are now looking forward to a brighter future in which they cater for the Hindu community.

Manoj Ladwa from the National Hindu Students Forum (NHSF) welcomed the landmark decision to grant planning permission for the new road.

He said at the time "This is a long-awaited but welcome decision," he said. "But it should never have got to the stage where the Manor was on the verge of being closed down."

## Countdown to victory

**1981** - After complaints from local residents, Hertsmere Council issues first Enforcement Notice to ban festivals.

**1983** - Temple signs agreement not to organise events likely to attract more than 1,000 devotees, except on six festival days. Enforcement Notice withdrawn.

**1985** - Two devotees purchase properties in Letchmore Heath. New wave of complaints to Council.

**1986** - High Court refuses Hertsmere's request for an injunction to enforce Agreement.

**1987** - Council issues new Enforcement Notice to stop all worshippers attending the temple. ISKON appeals to DoE.

**1988** - On Hertsmere's suggestion, ISKON applies to build a new temple near Elstree. Then Hertsmere refuses planning permission for it. ISKON appeal again.

**1990** - DoE announces decision. No new temple. Also worship and festivals at Bhaktivedanta Manor to stop within two years. ISKON appeals to High Court.

**1991** - High Court turns down appeal.

**1992** - Court of Appeal refuses to hear the case. Full application lodged for European Court of Human Rights.

**1993** - "Saviours of the Temple" raise funds for buying the land for the new driveway. Agreement reached on purchase of driveway land. Planning application submitted to Council for use of Manor for worship and festivals.

**March 1994** - Enforcement notice takes effect. 36,000 devotees march in London. Hertsmere hold off prosecution while considering new access application.

**July 1994** - Council defer decision on new access. Temple remains open for worship until then.

**October 1994** - Council rejects new access proposal and prosecutes temple for holding Janmashtami festival.

**January 1995** - Public inquiry starts to hear temple's appeal to Department of Environment.

**November 1995** - Temple is fined £30,000 plus costs for holding Janamashtmi the previous year.

**July 1996** - Work for construction of road begins.

**5th September** - Road completed - the right to worship is restored!