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Vandalism incident unnerves community

By Prem Calvin Prashad
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A vandalism incident in Woodhaven has left community leaders concerned about safety and rising intolerance against communities of color in the borough. Early Thanksgiving morning, an unidentified perpetrator set fire to prayer flags, known as jhandi, in front of a residence near 80th Street and 89th Avenue. According to surveillance footage, the vandal waited until he could be unobserved and then watched the fire from a distance before fleeing.

This desecration, according to community leader Aminta Kilawan, has led to the involvement of the NYPD Hate Crimes Unit, which will be investigating the vandalism as a hate crime. Kilawan is the co-founder of the advocacy group Sadhana: Coalition of Progressive Hindus, based in Richmond Hill. Sadhana released a statement on the incident and will plan a community event to address the vandalism.

Jhandi flags are typically colorful pieces of cloth, usually adorned with a Hindu deity, attached to a bamboo pole. They are typically made at the conclusion of a puja ceremony, which, according to the Sanatana Dharama (eternal order) denomination of Hinduism, is a ceremony to give thanks and create a sankalp (convent) with a deity for the upcoming year, be it a promise to provide for one's family or pursue an education. Most families use the occasion to give thanks and share their prosperity with friends and relatives. Whether the vandal recognized the irony in burning a symbol of giving thanks on the eve of Thanksgiving is not known.

The incident is particularly disturbing to area Hindus, as jhandi flags, displayed in front of one's home, are the most visible symbol of their faith, comparable to Nativity scenes, or mezuzah in front of Jewish homes. Though uncommon in modern India, the tradition of jhandi flags was carried by indentured servants to Guyana, Trinidad and South Africa where the flags came to symbolize pride in one's affinity with Sanatana Dharma and shared cultural roots.

Noting that jhandi flags were among the most "visible and identifiable Indo-Caribbean cultural symbols," Kenrick Ross, the executive director of the Indo-Caribbean Alliance, expressed the need for tolerance, restraint, and respect. "When one family or group in our community and country feel unsafe, none of us feel safe," he said.

"Jhandi flags are to Hindu Indo-Caribbeans what saint figurines are to Catholics," Kilawan added.

Woodhaven has struggled with graffiti and criminal mischief in recent years, including the destruction of a wreath at a neighborhood World War II memorial in November 2014. Richard David, a member of Community Board 9, which encompasses the area, noted that to "deter any further acts of hate and intolerance, the perpetrator should be found and receive the maximum punishment immediately."

Ross and Kilawan tied the incident to growing intolerance and suspicion against the Muslim community in the wake of charged political rhetoric and terrorist attacks in France. Ross condemned the "dangerous rhetoric" that has become part of the nightly news. "Attacks against immigrants and communities of color are commonplace," he asserted.

"The hate is now also trickling into the Hindu community. We need to stand in solidarity and uplift peace in spite of all these disturbing incidents," Kilawan concluded.

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