Global Dharma
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After the assassination attempt on Pope John Paul in which he was seriously wounded, the pope acquiesced to standing behind a special bullet-proof glass shield in his Vatican touring jeep. But Satya Sai Baba--one of India's most popular gurus--strolled about his Puttaparthi, South India, ashram with studied non-chalance the morning after a night time assassination raid on his home June 6th. Satya Sai Baba was untouched in a bloody melee when four ashram college students tried to gain access to the sleeping guru at 10:30 pm by telling his aides they had an urgent message to deliver. When denied entry, the four men flashed knives and short swords, attacking and killing two of Satya Sai Baba's aides--including his closest personal assistant--who heroically held them off long enough for two other wounded ashram officials to call the police. The assassins barricaded themselves in a room on the 2nd floor--the same floor Satya Sai Baba was on. The police broke in, scattered the assailants and eventually shot all four dead in a chase.

Satya Sai Baba had no comment on the bizarre tragedy which blackened with mystery as an investigation lurched into motion three days after the attack. As of this publishing date, it is still not clear exactly what happened that night--there are multiple versions. As to the motive, several speculations circulated, ranging from religious politics related to the Ayodhya crisis to infighting between two ashram management groups. The four dead assailants were members of Satya Sai Baba's ashram and attended or graduated from his Institute of Higher Learning. Two days after the thwarted assassination attempt, land mine-type devices were found at an ashram college facility. Two other men, believed to be linked with the murder attempt and the mines, are at large. With the killing of the four attackers, the police lost their witnesses as to motive and conspiracy. The police involved are being investigated by the government Central Intelligence Division--assisting in the assassination investigation--for excessive use of force.

Holland Looks at a Hotel for Suicide

It sounds like dark comedy fodder for Dave Letterman or Jay Leno, hosts of the late-night TV talk shows in the US. A hotel for suicide in Holland, where you check

in, but don't check out.

Seriously, the suicide hotel is a serious proposal from the Department of Humanistic Society in the town of Alkmaar, Netherlands. Called the Horizon Hotel, it would be an institution where suicide could be carried out in a supportive, comfortable environment. A spokesmen for the proposal, J. Hilarius--a funeral arranger for the Humanistic Society--says "People who are thinking about suicide must have the possibility to talk about it several days with professional counselors. That period of time will be maximized." He explains the idea is not to talk them out of suicide--that is not the hotel's purpose. The counselors will mainly listen. But some may choose to leave the hotel.

The idea was published in the Algemeen Dagblad newspaper in early July to test the waters for public reaction. Euthanasia (mercy killing) is legal in the Netherlands, either by morphine ingestion if the party is conscious or by injection if unconscious. But the idea of government-sponsored suicide is virgin ethical territory. So far the response has been nearly comatose. Only the Dutch Union of Voluntary Euthanasia has responded. Even the head office of the Department of Humanistic Society is waiting to see the outcome of the discussion. The only other known response came from the editors of the Hinduism Today Dutch Digest who faxed the Algemeen Dagblad editors a copy of a Hindu essay explaining the unfortunate metaphysical reality of suicide. In the Netherlands, 6,000 people a year undergo euthanasia, fully 6% of the total annual deaths.

Hindu Researcher Finds Danes Isolated

Reams of anthropological studies have been published by Western researchers on Indian village life, but anthropologist Prakash Reddy finally turned the microscope the other way around. Reddy lived for four months in the hamlet of Hvilsager on Denmark's Jutland peninsula. Population 104, one-fifth of which are farmers, the remainder make the village their suburban home. In his new book Danes are Like That! Reddy sketches Danish village life as emotionally cold, socially isolated and lonely and spiritually poor, the polar opposite of the typical Indian village's communal beehive of interaction and interdependence. He writes, "Coming from an Indian village, I was used to seeing people in the streets...but here in Denmark not a single soul was sighted and except for the sound of a passing automobile, absolute silence prevailed. The villagers live behind closed doors and hedges, running between home and office, time conscious, their children thinking incoherently, their family life confused."

Of course, European village life wasn't always like that. It is a reshaping of living patterns in the long-time forge of industry, convenience consumerism and urban congestion. And Indian villages have altered too--the advent of TV in villages is spawning notable social changes. But to Reddy this wintry social life blown in by science and mercantile progress should be examined by social scientists in India so that India's modernization doesn't seriously erode human values.

The Hvilsager villagers didn't readily concur with Reddy's conclusions, charging him with moralizing rather than objectively observing the hamlet's social weave.

When asked what Indians could learn from the Danes, Reddy lists industriousness, a positive attitude toward work, egalitarianism and efficient farming methods. As for Danes learning from Indians, he suggests a sense of community and fellowship.

TRENDS to Watch: New Book Ties Ethnic Network To World Economic Order

"With the end of the Cold War and the rise of a new global economy, age-old ethnic ties are emerging as the most powerful force in international commerce," writes Joel Kotkin is his new book: Tribes: How Race, Religion and Identity Determine Success in the New Global Economy. Kotkin identifies five major tribes that maintain their old strengths and are acquiring new ones: Jews, British (includes North Americans), Japanese, Chinese and Indians. The Jews represent the oldest and smallest ethnic group of great commercial consequence. Indians are the up-and-coming community. Kotkin forecasts, "The more than twenty million overseas Indians today represent one of the best-educated, affluent groupings in the world, with strong presences in Britain, North America and East Asia. The Indians may prove to be the next diaspora to emerge as a great economic force."

Kotkin identifies three critical characteristics of the tribes: "1. A strong ethnic identity and sense of mutual dependence that helps the group adjust to changes in the global economic and political order without losing its essential unity; 2. A global network based on mutual trust that allows the tribe to function collectively beyond the confines of national or regional borders; 3. A passion for technical and other knowledge from all possible sources, combined with an essential open-mindedness that fosters rapid cultural scientific development critical for success in the late-twentieth century world economy."

Readers are invited to share information and ideas with Trends, Hinduism Today, 1819 2nd St., Concord, CA 94519 USA.

10,000 Gold Coins Showered On Head of 99-Year-Old Sage

Numerologists would love this power of tens. An Advaita Vedanta sage entering his 100th year is gently inundated with 10,000 gold coins while a crowd of 100,000 devotees watch in rapt ardor. So went one of several centenary ceremonies for Paramacharya Sri Chandrashekarendra Saraswathi of Kanchi Peedam, the oldest living Shankaracharya. The sage was seated on a silver lion throne, and at first--in a charming vignette of otherworldliness--dozed off while the coins rained on him. But then he awoke to give the crowd a high blessing of two raised hands. Earlier in the month, King Birendra, monarch of Nepal, performed a padapuja (foot-bathing puja) to the saint, and reminisced about Adi Shankara's (founder of the Shankara lineage and monasteries--who died at age 32) preaching campaign to Nepal in the 8th century ce. India's Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao inaugurated the birth centenary kickoff on May 7th, stating that the government was giving permission in principle to the monastery's Hindu university proposal.

India: Interfaith Construction

When a hundred-year-old dilapidated mosque near Pune, India, was scheduled for tearing down to clear the way for a new mosque, a Hindu carpenter volunteered to handle the ticklish job of demolishing the dome. Dozens of Hindus gave toward and helped with the new mosque. In turn, when a Hindu temple was planned next door to the mosque, a Muslim architect donated a practical plan, and Muslims contributed to the funding drive. In five months the temple will be complete and, in a historical first, no wall will be put up between the mosque and temple.

Scotland: Spiritual Art Museum Opens

The first-ever religious art museum opened in Glasgow, Scotland. The Saint Mungo Museum exhibits works from six religions: Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam. Funding for the US$7.4 million institution came from government tourism and development dollars. Senior curator Mark O'Neill says the museum is designed to "reflect the

central importance of religion in human life and especially its role as perhaps the single greatest inspiration to artists and craftsmen through history." He also notes that a mildly Christian mood is cast by all the stained-glass art.

New Zealand: Auckland's Hindu Temple

Members of the Auckland Hindu community unpack a shipment of murthi images for the grand opening of the Bharatiya Mandir of Auckland. The 3-day opening ceremonies took place in late June, drawing a crowd of 3,000 devotees, guests (some from overseas) and on-lookers. The temple committee calls the temple, "one of its kind in the Pacific. It is a landmark and this opening represents a milestone for us."