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India

A Great Soul Moves On

Swami Chidananda Saraswati attained Mahasamadhi on August 28, 2008, at the age of 92. Given his frail health, his passing was not unexpected. Swami had been a monk since 1949 and the president of the Divine Life Society (DLS) since 1963. He was a direct disciple of Swami Sivananda, the founder of DLS. Beyond his position as a world leader, Swami lived his life at a transcendent level of purity, austerity, humility, simplicity and selfless service. He struck a deep spiritual chord in everyone he met and was deemed a living saint by all. He received Hinduism Today's Hindu Renaissance award as Hindu of the Year in 1999.

True to his principles to the end, he left written instructions (see www.sivanandaonline.org) that his body was to be unceremoniously disposed of within three hours in the nearest river (which was the Ganges) following the ancient tradition of the Shankaracharya Order of sannyasins.

He was ever urging his listeners to live the divine life, saying, "To enter into the spiritual life is a rare blessedness, it is a great good. To take it seriously and engage in active spiritual sadhana is a second blessedness and a still greater good. But to persevere in the spiritual life, to be ever progressive and ceaseless in one's spiritual life, is the greatest good, the crowning blessedness."

On September 28, 2008, His Holiness, Sri Swami Vimalananda, 76, a senior monk of the Sivananda Ashram, Rishikesh, was elected as the new Chairman and ex-officio President of the Divine Life Trust Society.

Bali

Spectacular Cremation

It was the most spectacular royal funeral in Bali in at least three decades. On the auspicious day of July 15, 2008, in a roar of orange flames, the body of Agung Suyasa, who had died in March, 2008, head of the royal family of Ubud, and two members of his extended family were reduced to their earthly elements in a mass cremation that included 68 commoners. In a Balinese tradition, the bodies of the commoners had been kept to join Suyasa's cremation. Some had been buried or mummified for months or even years, awaiting the auspicious occasion of a royal cremation. Although cremated at the same time, the pyres of the commoners were in a separate location.

According to Balinese belief, the soul can return to inhabit a new being--generally a member of the same family--only after it has been freed through cremation. "None of us is brand new," said Raka Kerthyasa, the younger half-brother of Suyasa, who is now the guardian of the ancient but symbolic royal family and who oversaw the cremation. "We are part of the cycle of life."

Canada

Toronto Rites Growing

Canada's province of Ontario now has the largest Sri Lankan diaspora in the world. The 2008 annual chariot festival of Toronto's Sri Varasithi Vinaayagar temple drew a crowd of 15,000. Sri Lankan temple officials and devotees pride themselves on conducting high-standard pujas and festivals. They have carried this tradition to lands far and wide. For the annual rites, the temple hired priests from India, nagaswaram (temple horn) players and 12 temple drummers, plus an elephant from the local zoo.

While their homeland continues to sink under ruinous warfare, Sri Lankan Hindus here are moving forward. Fifteen-year-old Vignesh Markandu writes: "I have been praying at Sri Varasithi Vinaayagar Hindu temple since the year 2001. I have become very devoted to Lord Ganesha, Who has become indispensable in my life. There are no cultural/age difference in this temple. It has a balanced blend of Hindu youths, adults and seniors. Although the temple is based on South Indian rituals and language, it is becoming a multicultural, multiethnic center. The last time I went to the annual festival I saw Caucasians and many Chinese. Everyone is accepted.

"Recently the temple and priests have begun publishing materials and explaining things in English, and the youth are paying more attention. The temple also has a

school for youth and programs for seniors. The priests here do all the ceremonies according to the traditional principals. This temple is truly an example of opulent South Indian Hindu culture. Sri Varasithi Vinaayagar is no ordinary temple. It seems to have been unearthed in Jaffna and brought to Toronto."

USA

Woman Priest Fills Shortage

With over 3 million Hindus in the US and Canada, attending more than 700 temples and mandirs, there is a growing shortage of priests to perform the necessary rites in temples and in homes. Stepping in to fill the gap is Shashi Tandon, 68, a retired teacher. She and a few other women in America are learning the sacred rites out of necessity. Male brahmin priests once held a prestigious position in Hindu society. But today educated brahmins are taking up secular work and looking down on the priesthood as a less sophisticated and less lucrative vocation.

When facing resistance from conservatives, Tandon says, "Can you tell me who gave birth to you? The mother is the true priest. She is the true teacher, the first teacher of the child."

Nepal

Maoists Keep The Goddess

To the surprise of some, the new Communist, allegedly atheist, government of Nepal has chosen a new Kumari, the living incarnation of Goddess Kali and protectress of the state. Formerly chosen by the King's royal priest, the selection was made under the auspices of the state-run Trust Corporation that oversees the country's cultural matters. Her selection from a Buddhist Shakya-Newar family was performed in accordance with tradition, after consultation with astrologers. Previously her horoscope had to be compatible with that of the King. How this mandate was fulfilled after the abolition of the monarchy is not known, but it was encouraging for Hindus to note that under the new government, this sacred tradition was not discarded.

Germany

Protesting Places of Faith

Germany's radical right wing party, the neo-nazi National Democratic Party (NPD), is openly racist, anti-semitic and against minorities of all kinds. Their membership

of 7,500 is raising alarms and controversy in Germany and Europe.

In August, 2008, displaying a red flag (see photo) previously made for an anti-mosque protest, 155 NPD demonstrated against plans to build two Hindu temples--a Sri Ganesha temple in Hasenheide and a Murugan temple in Blaschkoallee. Meanwhile thousands of anti-fascist Germans protested against the NPD, taking the side of Hindus, saying that "Berlin is not brown [the Nazi color], it is multi-colored!"

China

US Hindu Olympian

Texas hindus were jubilant on August, 12, 2008, watching Raj Bhavsar, a 27-year-old artistic gymnast, earn a bronze medal as a member of the 2008 US Olympic Team, becoming the third Indian-American ever to win a medal at the Olympics, after Mohini Bhardwaj and Alexi Grewal.

Girish Naik, president of Hindus of Greater Houston, said, "Hindus of Greater Houston would like to congratulate our own Raj Bhavsar of Houston on his accomplishment at the Olympics. Hindus are great leaders in many fields in the US, but we are lacking in sports. Today Bhavsar has filled the void. He is someone our youth can look up to." After returning from China, Raj was honored at an August 30th Janmashtami celebration in Houston.

Briefly

US hindus are Possibly marrying fewer Christians and Muslims than has been thought. Informal community assessments have put the rate of marrying "out" at 50% to as high as 90%. Dr. Dilip Amin (dilipamin@yahoo.com) did an analysis of Macy's extensive on-line marriage registry and found lower rates. For example, 170 of 494 Patels, 34%, married partners of Abrahmic religions. While interfaith marriages among "dharmic religions" (Hindus, Sikhs, Jains) are historically common in India, intermarriage between dharmic and Abrahmic religions can be cause for concern, as both Islam and Catholicism require children to be raised in those faiths.

An EU-commissioned study has found that the global economy is losing more

money every year from the disappearance of forests than it has in the recent banking crisis. The total lost value of forest "services"--providing clean water and absorbing carbon dioxide--the study estimates to be between \$2 trillion and \$5 trillion annually. While Wall Street lost some \$1-\$1.5 trillion in its crisis, this \$2-\$5 trillion loss recurs year after year.

Sri rangam temple authorities near Tiruchirapalli, Tamil Nadu, have announced a decision to demand rent from the 3,600 families who live and own shops on 98 acres of land that was granted to the temple by various Maharajas and later ratified by the British. Such lands were given to temples to provide an endowment. But in recent decades tenants have not paid and left-wing courts sided against the temples, leaving the temples with little income.

The Netherlands' Hindu Education Foundation opened its fourth primary school in August, 2008, in Almere. The Shri Ganesha school has 35 students and is expected to grow to 200. It is the sixth Hindu school in the country.

more than 100 schools in 26 states use yoga in the classroom to relieve stress, says New York state Board of Education President Julie Reagan. But after Christian parents objected to teaching yoga in classrooms at the Massena, N.Y., high school, a compromise was reached to allow an after school yoga program but not to use the word yoga. Instead it is called "Raiders Relaxation."

Orissa VHP leader, Swami Lakshmanananda Saraswati, and several devotees were brutally murdered in October, 2008, sparking protests and violence by Hindus across the state that left dozens of Christians dead and churches damaged or destroyed. Initial reports blamed Maoist rebels for the murders, but subsequent police investigation uncovered a link between Maoists and young Christian militants who were attempting to stop the swami's successful reconversion campaigns. The Police Inspector General said, "Maoists were given money to train certain youths to eliminate Saraswati." The conflict is compounded by tribal rivalries.

The Hindu Mandir Executive Committee met in Romulus, Michigan, September 30, bringing together representatives of 113 temples and Hindu organizations from 25 states, Canada and the Caribbean. Swami Dayananda Saraswati encouraged the group to make their temples halls of learning for the youth, as well as altars of

worship, in serving America's 2.5 million Hindus. The group promised to "work as a family to restore and further the dignity of Hindu identity."