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Published by Anonymous on Oct. 02, 2005

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Cache of Hindu Treasure Rescued from Smugglers

In June, 2005, Pakistan's Customs Drug Enforcement Cell confiscated 1,482 pieces of pre-Harappan artifacts, Gandhara, Hindu-era, Islamic-era sculptures and more from a container that was to smuggle them to United Arab Emirates. Authorities said the antiquities are worth over US\$11.7 million dollars). A case was registered against exporter Khwaja Muneer Ahmad of Kashmir Carpet House, who had declared the shipment as furniture, brass and copper items worth only \$13,400. A thorough examination uncovered the artifacts packed in 66 boxes. Such smuggling appears unfortunately common.

USA

Srinath's New Texas Home

Lord Shrinathji--the seven-year-old form of Lord Krishna worshiped by Vallabhacharya Vaishnavas was moved from a simple dwelling in Texas to a fabulous new Houston home in June, 2005. The Vallabh Priti Seva Samaj (VPSS) held a week-long celebration to consecrate and open the doors of the new state-of-the-art \$7 million, 40,000 sq. foot premises on eight acres of land.

The Houston Chapter of VPSS began in 1979. From humble beginnings, with prayer meetings held in private homes and garages of devotees, the group, through intensive fund-raising, procured premises on Bintliff Drive in 1991. That was Lord Shrinath Ji's first Houston home. Fifteen years later, excited devotees moved Srinathaji to His new home.

The project, which already has a grand community center, is still in phase one. Future plans include a 150-unit retirement community, a 50-unit assisted living facility and a 25-unit nursing home. The goal is to build an enduring facility for future generations to enjoy, said Executive Chairman Suresh Patel. See <http://www.vpsshaveli.org>

USA

McDonald's Supersizes Hindu Charities, but Still Beefs Fries

They deceived the public about beef flavorings in their "vegetarian fries." They got caught. They were sued. They settled in court. In July, 2005, McDonald's mailed a check for \$254,773.19 to Hinduism Today magazine's endowment fund, one of 24 American institutions to share the \$10 million settlement.

It started with Seattle lawyer, Harish Bharti, a vegetarian Hindu who makes a habit out of identifying ingredients in purportedly vegetarian foods. In 1990, he examined McDonald's French fries after they switched from beef tallow to vegetable oil for frying. McDonald's had a problem. Their veggie-oil cooked fries didn't taste like tallow-cooked fries. So, they added beef flavoring to the potatoes before frying, labelled "natural flavor." Vegetarians assumed--and McDonald's did not try to dissuade them--that the fries were now vegetarian.

Bharti sued McDonald's in 2001, and that grew into a lawsuit involving a number of lawyers and organizations. Ultimately, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, Muslims, vegetarians and vegans joined the fray--the Jews because the beef flavoring was not kosher and the Muslims because it wasn't halal.

In March, 2002, the lawsuit was close to being settled. McDonald's agreed to issue a formal apology, better disclosure of ingredients, creation of an advisory board and payment of \$10,000,000 to organizations which promote vegetarianism and issues related to the fries.

The apology reads, in part, "McDonald's sincerely apologizes to Hindus, vegetarians and others. Mistakes were made in communicating to the public. Mistakes included instances in which French fries and hash browns sold at U.S. restaurants were improperly identified as 'vegetarian.' "

Organizations were invited to submit specific proposals to Bharti and the other lawyers for a share in the settlement. In May, 2003, the Illinois court where the suit was litigated announced the 24 organizations awarded money under the settlement, one of which was the Hinduism Today endowment.

After an appeal was dismissed, the final disbursement of \$10 million was made during the first week of July, 2005.

Hindu vegetarians around the world may wish to take note of the little-publicized fact that McDonald's made no changes in their fries, which are still beef-flavoring saturated. Sure, the oil is vegetable. But make no mistake about it. There is meat in those luscious Golden Arches French fries. For settlement details see:
http://www.hinduismtoday.com/press_releases/mcdonalds/

GUATEMALA

The Mayan Vedic Nexus

In the tranquil environment of Antigua, Guatemala, Hindu and Mayan elders shared their belief systems in a conference held on May 29 and 30, 2005, organized by the International Center for Cultural Studies (ICCS), USA. Fifty delegates came from five countries. Dr. Yashwant Pathak, coordinator said, "Never before has such a symposium been organized."

The premise of the conference was that the Vedic and Mayan civilizations were in close communication in the ancient past. Through history, both Vedic and Mayan traditions faced declines due to internal failures and external onslaughts by other

later civilizations. Both cultures were challenged in the survival of traditions and propagation of their ancestral wisdom for generations.

"Preservation of Vedic knowledge was a magnitude more successful; language, rituals, clothing, etc., survived the invaders and missionaries, due to a persistent retaliation and the deep rooted nature of Vedic philosophy, " explained Dr. Lata Dani, retired professor of English at Nagpur University, India. "We still need to interact because we want to pick up pieces of history we could have lost through time."

The conference started with a Mayan yagna (fire worship). The similarity between the Hindu rite and the procedures and ingredients of the Mayan yagna astounded everyone. Elizabeth Araujo, an elder Mayan woman explained, "We believe in the uniqueness and the infiniteness of the Almighty but still believe in its thousand aspects that are tangible. We believe that the Almighty pervades in all creations; plants, animals, the sun and the moon are all touched by its existence. We believe fire to be a source of purifications, and therefore in the yagna we offer our homage through fire."

Don Alajandro, one of the most respected Mayan elders, addressed the Hindu as "his brothers and sisters " who have come so far to build bonds. He said that this meeting was in accordance with Mayan prophecy. He discussed at length the social and political challenges that Mayans face today. Later as a symbol of brotherhood, the Hindu delegation tied rakhees on the wrists of Mayan attendees.

On the second day of the conference the Hindu delegations impressed their Mayan counterparts by performing a Vedic hawan (fire ceremony) and presented Hinduism's revival efforts. "Unless Mayan youth take up the responsibility of cultural rediscovery, it will remain a challenge, " said Dr. Diwedi, an ICCS executive committee member. The conference was followed by a four-day tour of the ancient temples and sites of archeological relics. For more on the fascinating work of ICCS, visit: <http://www.iccsus.org>

RODRIGUES

Hindu Solidarity Shines in Rodrigues' First Thaipusam

The tiny Mauritian island of Rodrigues held its first-ever Thaipusam, Kavadi festival in April, 2005. Leaders of a Hindi Shivala, devotees of Sai Baba and officials and businessmen from Mauritius cooperated to manifest the event. Last year the Hindi owner of Ram Restaurant, Monsieur Ram, donated a small icon of Lord Muruga, which was duly consecrated by a Tamil priest. This year Muruga's most celebrated festival was observed by all. Vanakkam newspaper in Mauritius reported on the event, making a point of the cross-cultural nature of the celebration, where the congregation sang together in both Hindi and Tamil. Its article closed with these words: "Muruga nous a donne la une lecon d'amour et de cooperation. Une lecon a retenir....Muruga has given us there a lesson of love and cooperation. A lesson to be remembered."

AFRICA/MALAYSIA

One African Mother of All Humanity

In May, 2005, a team of geneticists at the University of Glasgow claimed that their studies of the DNA of Malaysia's Orang Asli ("Original Men ") show that the entire modern human race evolved from a single migration out of Africa 65,000 years ago. The band of hunter gathers, who could not have been more than several hundred, is calculated to have pushed along the coasts of India to Southeast Asia, reaching Australia 50,000 years ago, the date of the earliest known archaeological sites there. Europe was then in an ice age, and these scientists say that Europeans likely descended from Indians who later pushed north through Iran. The report casts further doubt on the Aryan invasion of India theory. A larger global DNA study will hopefully finally settle the debate. The evidence is drawn from studies of mitochondrial DNA, which is solely inherited through the female line. See: <http://www.stats.gla.ac.uk/~vincent/>

MUSIC/DANCE

UK Musicians Meld with Java

Graham Watts' review of the third annual Ramayana performance in London, in "Ballet.co " says, "The Sunarno Dance Company appears all over the world, but I wonder where else--apart from Java and Bali in Indonesia--it is able to perform with an in-situ gamelan orchestra of this quality." What was indeed unusual about the June, 2005, performance was not the excellent dance, but England's own South Bank Gamelan Players.

An ensemble-in-residence at the Royal Festival Hall, it was founded by Alec Roth in 1987. Many of the musicians have undertaken extensive study in Java and a number are tutors for the Royal Festival Hall Gamelan Programme. Working closely with dancers, puppeteers and composers from Indonesia, Europe and the USA, the group has established an international reputation both for its performances of traditional Javanese music and for its championing of new music for gamelan.

USA/EDUCATION

Swami Blesses MIT Grads

Amid chants of sanskrit prayers, some 2,300 students of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT) 139th commencement received degrees in Cambridge, June 13, 2005. Swami Tyagananda offered the invocation in the language of the Gods to reflect the large international crowd's spirit of unity and goodwill. "May we be granted clear understanding and the courage to pursue the goals of social justice, nonviolence, harmony and peace, " he said. MIT has 2,724 international students registered for the current academic year, a bulk of them from India and China. MIT has an active campus Vedanta Society.

SWITZERLAND

Swiss Teddy--Jai Ganesha!

We often think here at Hinduism Today that Lord Ganesha definitely has His own marketing program. He made yet another unusual appearance this year in the 2005

summer Swiss teddy bear invasion. Under the auspices of the Swiss department of tourism, artists created and placed polyester teddy bears of all shapes and sizes throughout Zurich--800 in all. Many were full human size. Lord Ganesha was one among them.

BRIEFLY...

In Madurai, Tamil Nadu, the Central Research Institute for Siddha plans to digitalize nearly 10,000 formulae of Siddha compositions for various ailments and host them on the traditional knowledge digital library being evolved by the Department of Indian Systems of Medicine and Homeopathy. This was an effort to prevent the grant of wrong patents for non-original inventions in India's traditional knowledge system at the international level, according to G. Veluchamy, Director, Central Research Institute for Siddha.

Not all temples in India are aware that United India Insurance offers a comprehensive temple insurance covering fire and allied perils, including temple structures and their contents from terrorist attacks. Temples insured include Tirupati Devasthanam in Andhra Pradesh, Madurai Meenakshi temple in Tamil Nadu, Shree Vaishnodevi and Guruvayoor Sreekrishna temple in Kerala among others. The idea of insurance coverage for temples became popular after the deadly terrorist attack on the Swaminarayan temple in Gujarat.

The Hindu University of America, located in Orlando, Florida, hosted its third Graduation Commencement, on Saturday, June 25, 2005. This particular graduation made history with both Masters and Doctoral degrees awarded. A first ever of its kind, the degree of Doctor of Hindu Studies in "Yoga Philosophy & Meditation " was awarded to Mona Khaitan, and the first Masters degree in "Hindu Philosophies " was received by Jadeine Shives.

Another USA Swaminarayan Temple was consecrated in Florida in July, 2005. The new Polk County temple is housed in a 20,000-square-foot building that was purchased about two years ago by local Florida Gujaratis.

UK Immigration Minister, Tony McNulty, MP, invited on June, 30, 2005, Anil Bhanot, Hindu Council of UK General Secretary, and Dr. Narayan Rao, HCUK Director and Vice Chair of the Interfaith Network, to talk about visa restrictions requiring priests from overseas to pass a high-level English language test. Dr. Rao requested that the Ministers of Religion category should be split into two, one for a pastoral role and the second for a non-pastoral role. The latter would apply to priests who would not preach, who know only Indian languages, but are scholars of Sanskrit needed to perform temple rites.

An Unlikely Hindu-Jain controversy has arisen atop Mount Girnar and other peaks, in Rajkot, Gujarat, where Hindus have installed a shrine and icons in areas which Jains claim are protected. The pair of footprints atop Mount Girnar are worshipped as those of Lord Dattatreya by Hindus and Lord Neminath by Jains.