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Published by Anonymous on Apr. 02, 2005

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Hinduism Enters US TV

Aastha, the faith channel " entered the US in December, 2004, taken on board by leading US satellite provider, DirectTV, alongside DirectTV's other South Asian broadcasts, Vijay (Tamil), and three Star channels (Hindi). But Aastha is different. In the words of its promotional brochure: "Aastha is America's first Asian Indian spiritual and cultural network. It is the only television channel to clock 1,000 hours of real-time live broadcasting of Asian Indian socio-spiritual-cultural events and amass a library of 18,000 hours of content in less than four years." The Mumbai-based company began with a village audience, spread to Indian cities and now the world from satellites tuned into by 20 million households in 166 countries. Aastha avoids use of the "H " word, but 90% of the content is rooted in Hindu culture. With discourses from swamis, coverage of grand Kumbha Melas, bhajanas, classes in Vedanta, yoga and meditation, there is no question where Aastha is coming from. It's a great sign Sanatana Dharma on the air!

UNITED KINGDOM

A Spiritual Revolution?

Paul Heelas' and Linda Woodhead's new book, *The Spiritual Revolution, Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*, (Blackwell Publishing, 2005) is the fruit of the six-year Kendal Project. The authors analyze the claim that traditional forms of religion, especially Christianity, are giving way to New Age, holistic spirituality. They interviewed hundreds of people and groups in the town of Kendal, England, and drew on prior national research on the subject for both Britain and the US. Their thesis points to a shift away from religion that is focused on an external God and His dogma to a movement of people, first into the realm of "subjective well-being

culture " (health, fitness, emotional contentment) and then into the "holistic milieu " where spiritual growth becomes a central concern in both personal and associational activities (attending "self-transformation " workshops instead of going to Church.) But they conclude we don't yet have a revolution per se. The numbers of those in the holistic milieu are too small, just 1.6% of Brits, and are not making up at all for the overall decrease in church-going Christians--now down to only 7.9% of Brits and 24% of Americans.

While they conclude Christianity is clearly waning, a "zero out " appears unlikely. Indeed, some denominations are becoming extinct, but others remain strong and are growing. Still, the authors contend that the "massive subjective turn of modern culture has served to fuel the growth of subjective life spirituality and undermine external religion." They predict that in 40 years participation will equalize to about 3 or 4% of the UK population in each sector.

Of course, many meditating Hindus will find this to be a false dichotomy. Hinduism naturally integrates personal spiritual transformation and commitment to traditional religious, community and family values (dharma).

USA

Hindus Speak Out Against Texas Ten Commandments

On December 13, 2004, an amicus curiae brief spearheaded by the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) was filed with the United States Supreme Court supporting the position that the 40-year-old permanent placement of the Ten Commandments on Texas State Capitol grounds violates the First Amendment guarantee of the separation of church and state. Prepared pro bono by Goodwin Procter LLP attorneys, the brief includes Hindu, Jain and Buddhist points of view and was signed also by leading US Hindu, Jain and Buddhist organizations.

The case, originally brought by Thomas Van Orden against Rick Perry, the Governor of Texas, in 2003, asks for the removal of the religious monument. The Supreme Court decided to hear the case after the Fifth Circuit Federal Court of Appeals ruled

that the monument could remain in place.

The brief argues, "The lower courts completely ignored the effect of the Ten Commandments monument on non-Judeo-Christians, whose beliefs regarding the nature of God and the relationship between man and God differ greatly from those enshrined in the monument and for whom the monument is clearly and unavoidably 'sectarian.' "

AUSTRALIA

National Gallery Siva Puja

Lord Siva's formless form was front and center in an unusual public venue last year. On December 5, 2004, Sri Premakantha Kurukal performed an abhishekam and puja to a Narmada Siva Lingam at Melbourne's National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) in Australia. An audience of hundreds witnessed a ceremony rarely seen by non-Hindus. Three Hindu priests performed a Ganesha puja, a Lakshmi puja and then the puja to the stone Lingam which had been in NGV storage. NGV Photography Curator, Dr. Isobel Crombie, organized the event with the help of her Kashmir Saivite guru, Swami Shankarananda of Shiva Ashram, Victoria. The Lingam is now the focal point of the first-floor South Asian Study storage display where she and South Asian Art curator Carol Cains perform a daily Siva puja. Dr. Crombie says, "I feel its shakti spreading throughout the gallery as more people become aware of our daily puja, people are joining in and love the ritual."

TIBET

Control Your Brain!

Brain scientists recently discovered that, in responding to external experience and input, the brain is able to expand, or strengthen, circuits that are used and shrink or weaken those that are rarely engaged. To document the effects of internal experience, scientists went to Tibet in November, 2004, to study Tibetan monks.

Using functional magnetic resonance imaging, the scientists pinpointed regions that were active during compassion meditation (generating a feeling of loving kindness towards all beings). Most monks who had done more than 10,000 hours of meditation showed extremely large increases in high-frequency gamma waves which underlie higher mental activity, such as consciousness. While novices showed only a slight gamma wave increase, in older monks, activity in the left prefrontal cortex (the seat of positive emotions such as happiness) swamped activity in the right prefrontal (site of negative emotions and anxiety), something never before seen from purely mental activity--scientific proof, perhaps, of the ancient Hindu knowledge of vasana (thought pattern) metaphysics.

BALI

Youth Take a Stand in Bali

The fledgling World Hindu Youth Organization created last year in Indonesia got off to a start with a five-day summit in Bali, November, 2004. Delegates came from Malaysia, USA and other countries. Standing out from the usual agenda of speeches on Modern Challenges, Position of Women, Social Action, etc., was the Indonesian delegation's complaint that worship is barred in some Hindu temples in Java, which have been turned into National Monuments and tourist attractions. The youth resolved to fight the commercialization of temples and restore them as places of worship through nurturing "spiritual tourism " by organizing yatras to Indonesia.

AYURVEDA

Fourteen Medicines Found To Have Metal Toxicity

A Harvard medical school study released in the Journal of American Medical Association said that 14 of 70 different Ayurvedic off-the-shelf medicines from India, sold in 30 Boston area stores, had "potentially harmful levels of lead, mercury and/or arsenic." North American practitioners, concerned that some people now think all Ayurvedic medicines are suspect, responded in India West. Dr. Sivakumar Varma of Vancouver said that "90% of Ayurvedic remedies use no metals and those that do are for serious illnesses like cancer." He himself only used Good

Manufacturing Seal certified products. The proper preparation of medicinal mercury "could take months, even years, " said Wyne Werner, administrator of New Mexico's Ayurvedic Institute. It is unknown if the high levels are due to soil contamination or improper preparation. New Hampshire based Pandit Ramasamooj said that the JAMA article should be taken seriously as "a wakeup call to all Ayurvedic physicians and the public."

SPORTS/YOGA

Asanas for Cricketers

The entry of yoga into the quintessentially British sport of cricket is raising eyebrows--another bastion of Western culture has been breached by Hinduism's ancient science. Australia's team has added a yoga teacher to their support group, Kate Turner, alongside their fitness trainer and physiotherapist. She offers the team 75 minutes of yoga training daily. The goals? Flexibility, concentration and a release from the mental agitations of competition that leads to insomnia causing players to lose their edge. The only other cricket team with a yoga trainer is India.

In October 2004, while in India, Australian batsman Justin Langer, Kate Turner and their fitness trainer visited the famed 85-year-old B.K.S. Iyengar. While many of his own students rarely get an audience, it turns out Iyengar is a cricket fan and he gave them two hours. Langer said, "I was a bit taken aback...he put me through every yoga pose there is." Langer is convinced yoga will lengthen his career. He says the yoga sessions help him balance the "flogging " he gives his body during training and recover from grueling five-day tests.

SOCIETY

Will Namaste Replace the Handshake?

The Washington Post reported in December that politicians, religious leaders and business people are avoiding the handshake. With heightened awareness of health

issues, "Shaking hands is slowly being transformed from a friendly icebreaker into a potential vector of life-imperiling contagion (the flu). Taken to extremes, handshake phobia could prefigure a revolution in social custom. The standard American greeting would be forever altered.

"But to what?" asks the Post. "The alternatives might include bowing, curtsying, nodding the head, saluting, patting each other on the back, or hugging. Other cultures, of course, are already there. The Hindu namaste greeting (with anjali mudra), is simple, elegant and touchless: a slight bow with hands pressed at the palms near the heart."

BRIEFLY...

Tiruvannamalai remains a place of open worship. In the wake of widespread protests in Tamil Nadu, on January 20, 2005, the Indian Supreme Court called for the withdrawal of the central government's attempt to make the Arunachaleswarar temple a national heritage monument under the jurisdiction of the Archeological Survey of India.

Homeschooling is on the rise in the USA. The National Home Education Research Institute, based in Salem, Oregon, estimates that 1.7 million to 2.1 million children were home taught during the 2002-2003 school year, up as much as 13 percent from 2000-2001.

If you want to sponsor the Udayasthamana Puja at the well-known Guruvayoor temple in Kerala, you will have to wait until 2046. The puja (US\$1,100) is performed 130 days in a year at the Sree Krishna temple. Paid bookings have been made for the next 42 years!

The Lancet Medical Journal released the results of a 15-year survey involving 3,000 young people. It showed fast-food to be a definite factor in the key chronic diseases of Western civilization--obesity, Type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

The British Ministry of Defense will soon appoint Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh chaplains to the British armed forces. Some 300 Christian chaplains already minister to the 210,000 personnel of the Royal Navy, the army, and the Royal Air Force. These chaplains are given commissioned rank as officers. There are also honorary Jewish chaplains. The four chaplains to be appointed will, however, be civilian employees of the Ministry of Defense. The four new chaplains will minister to about 740 adherents of the minority faiths in all three services.

World renowned Indian devotional classical singer, M.S. Subbulakshmi passed away in Chennai on December 12, 2004, at the age of 88. She was considered by many to be the world's great Carnatic vocalist.

Many states, from Kashmir to Bihar, are embracing English as never before, even if they have to make political concessions for it. Education in the Kashmir valley will never be the same again, as all government schools there, from 2004 onward, have begun teaching English from the first grade. They are so sure of its success that they are considering running all government schools in Kashmir in English medium. The reason behind such a step is to make up for the damage caused by 15 years of militancy. "We realized that if we want to do well in this competitive world, we have to teach English, " said Harsh Dev Singh, Education Minister, Jammu and Kashmir.

In Eastern Sri Lanka's Muslim stronghold of Katthankudy, orthodox Jamiat-ul-Ulema, influenced by the Saudi Arabian Wahabi sect, protested violently in November, 2004, against a "Sufi " group. They demolished the Rahmaniya and Ibrahimiya madrasas (theological schools) alleging that these schools, run by charismatic Sufi preacher AJ Abdur Rauf Mowlavi, were spreading Hindu ideas and rituals among the Muslims, especially the young.