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Saiva Council Conference

January 27-29, 2006, Sydney, Australia, was the venue for the 10th World Saiva Conference, held by the World Saiva Council, founded in 1992 in Chennai, by the late H.H. Swami Siva Nandi Adikalar (UK). The Council is the international education arm of the London Meikandhar Aadheenam and is exclusively oriented to Saiva Siddhanta as manifest in Tamil culture and literature. Lingayat and Kashmir Saivism are not encompassed. This year's gathering brought thousands of Saivites together from 10 countries. Three monastic religious leaders from Tamil Nadu, India, Jaffna, Sri Lanka and Hawaii, USA, were present. Discussions and presentations focused on basic Saiva Siddhanta, the challenges facing the revival of Saivism in the modern era, clarifying the identity of Saivism within Hinduism, fostering participation of women and youth, and more.

USA

Sacred Space At Home

While home shrines are nothing new to Hindus--or religious families of many faiths--it is interesting that designing personal sacred space is a hot new trend in America. The spread of Fung Shui and Vastu knowledge, in response to the need for connectedness and peace in our noisy, fragmented world, are leading many to establish an altar at home. The trend is eclectic, syncretic and great for business at shops that sell everything from statues of Ganesha, Mother Mary, Quan Yin and Buddha, to incense, bells, lamps and books on Vastu. Light a lamp, add a few flowers, a bowl of water, open up your latest Internet dot com business plan for review by your guardian spirits and sit for a twenty-minute meditation for peace of mind before rushing off to work.

THAILAND

Brahma Deity Broken in Bangkok

The famed landmark statue of the four-faced Brahma outside the Erawan Hotel in Central Bangkok, was smashed with a hammer by Thanakorn Pakdeepol, a Muslim, early in the morning, March 21, 2006. By the time police arrived, he had been beaten unconscious. He died soon afterwards. Two shrine cleaners were arrested for the murder. Thanakorn's father said his 27-year-old son had been in and out of mental hospitals over the past ten years. The popular 50-year-old image was draped with sheets. The faithful prayed sadly and offered yellow garlands and lotus flowers.

USA

Court-Ordered Vote Settles New York Temple Dispute

A five-year long battle between a group of new york Sri Maha Vallabha Ganapati Devasthanam devotees and it's board of trustees came to a close in March of this year after a court-ordered election resulted in the incumbent trustees' being voted in and retaining control. The complex case raised temple management issues side-by-side with larger questions on the separation of Church and State. "Insurgent " devotees claimed that the temple's original by-laws required elections. But the incumbent board cited a subsequent set of by-laws which made the board a self-appointed body. The challengers claimed, and the court agreed, that the latter by-laws were not legally adopted. While the challengers won by getting the court-ordered vote, their slate of directors lost to the incumbent board by a wide margin. It remains unclear if the by-laws will now be changed to make the board self appointing, or if regular elections will continue to be held.

MALAYSIA

Dynamic New Malaysia Hindu Mission

A new organization is arising in Malaysia, a country whose Hindu history goes back for millennia but where home-grown Hindu religious leaders have been few and far between. Immigration laws have not allowed ordained swamis (or temple priests) who are not Malaysian to take up permanent residence. For decades the only "official " swami in the nation was the one heading the Divine Life Society in Kuala Lumpur, presently Swami Guhabhaktananda.

These days a few more Malaysians are taking to renunciate life. One is Maharishi Paramahansa Shankarananda Guruji, who was initiated in India by a mystic sage in the lineage of Sri Raghavendraswami, the famed 16th century Tamil Vaishnava proponent of Madhva dualism. Shankarananada Swami says the sage gave him the title "Maharishi Paramahansa." After a period of wading and sadhana in India, he returned to Malaysia and, in 1998, founded the Shankarananda Mission, also known as the Dakshina Mantralaya, in the southern state of Johore, just north of Singapore.

The Mission has evolved rapidly. Propounding a universalistic-Hindu philosophy, swami maintains an orthodox Hindu ritual tradition. He conducts pujas and festivals, teaches yoga and meditation, and spiritual camps, and trains aspirants for monastic life as monks and nuns. The Mission and is also active in social service, providing four free meals a day for the public, caring for animals through its Pet Care Center, delivering groceries to the needy, holding motivation sessions for students in schools, raising funds for victims of natural disasters. Currently Guruji has a monastic order of five sannyasins, two yogis, a number of brahmacharis and brahmacharinis.

The Mission stands proudly as a positive force for Sanatana Dharma in this country where Hindus face challenges from modernization and other forces.

See <http://www.gurunath.org>

JAMAICA

Hindus Thrive In Jamaica

In Jamaica, the third largest island in the Caribbean and the tourist haven of reggae music, 3.4 percent of the three million population are Indians. The first wave of Hindu migrants, 36,000 indentured sugar plantation laborers, arrived in 1845. Their religion and culture went virtually unrecognized until 1956. Despite this, many held on to their faith and customs. The second wave of Hindus started in 1927 with the influx of Sindhi businessmen, and the third with Indian professionals in 1970.

Michelle Daswani tells Hinduism Today that Hinduism is now thriving on this tropical paradise. Families conduct traditional celebrations, such as Dipavali, Sivaratri, Ganesha Chaturthi and Janmashtami. A mandir located in the capital city, Kingston, is well attended. Devotees hold prayers and satsangs in their homes. Some families have spacious home shrines to accommodate larger groups. Holding Jamaica's motto "Out of Many, One People" close to their hearts, Hindus here and are an integral part of the national ethnic landscape.

MAURITIUS

Giant Siva Graces Island

A 108-foot tall Siva statue named "Mangal Mahadev" now welcomes pilgrims at Ganga Talao (Grand Bassin) crater lake, a famous pilgrimage place on the island of Mauritius. Minister of Environment Anil Baichoo, master-mind behind the project, told Hinduism Today, "It was our dream to have something special to welcome pilgrims on their arrival to this holy lake. The devotees can now see Lord Siva from a distance and be inspired to lovingly walk up to the lake, despite being exhausted after a long march." In 1991 Baichoo was inspired by the 80-foot Siva statue at India's Palam Airport. A group of volunteers led by the late Gulshan Kulmar started planning for a similar one at Lord Siva's sacred home in Mauritius. The project finally took off in 2003 when the foundation was started. A crew from Rajasthan, India, under the supervision of Shri Mathuram was commissioned for the project. After three years the us\$389,000, concrete statue is almost complete with the help and donations of volunteers and well-wishers. Beautifully crafted, the statue inspires devotion. A copper and zinc coating is being applied. The official consecration is scheduled for late 2006.

USA

Virgin Comics Repackages India's Lore

Looking toward asia as the entertainment frontier, Indian comic book company Gotham Entertainment Group has formed a partnership with Virgin empire mogul Sir Richard Branson to create Virgin Comics and Virgin Animation. Among the companies' first projects will be a comic book and television series based on The Ramayana, which Gotham Chopra (Deepak's son and the new venture's chief creative officer,) describes as "The Eastern equivalent of The Odyssey. It is our Lord of the Rings." Chopra explains that Virgin will have three distinct types of comics: the Director's Cut line, which will showcase work from Hollywood; the Maverick line, which will develop graphic novels; and the Shakti line, which will focus on "Asian-edged " content to capitalize on the growing global interest in Indian and Asian characters. The new companies, based in New York and Bangalore, are using Asian-influenced comics as the platform to build a global media company that will eventually create movies, video games, digital applications and TV programming. The comic book Ramayana Reborn is scheduled to be published this summer, with the animated series to come later. See: <http://www.virgincomics.com> and <http://www.gothamcomics.com>

USA

Minnesota Temple Vandalized

The inside of a Hindu temple under construction in Maple Grove, Minnesota, was vandalized on the night of April 5, 2006. Temple doors were kicked in, windows broken and holes smashed in walls and ceilings of the auditorium, dining hall and classrooms. Nine of the 14 stone Deities were broken into pieces. The inauguration of the us\$8-million temple, scheduled to open in early June, was postponed to July, 2006. New Deities are being prepared in India. Insurance only covered a portion of the damage, and a \$200,000 reconstruction and security system fund-raising drive has been started

A pickup truck was spotted leaving the temple, but there are as yet no suspects. The FBI joined the investigation. A week after the crime, a Concerned Citizens Forum was held and attended by 600 people, including congress persons, state

legislators, the mayor, city council members, the city administrator, the chief of police and representatives from other religious organizations. Temple president Shashikant Sane said they have also raised funds for an Interfaith Education Fund to educate the local community in Hinduism. Minnesota is home to more than 20,000 Hindus. The new 43,000-square-foot temple will be the largest in the state and surrounding area." target="blank"><http://>The inside of a Hindu temple under construction in Maple Grove, Minnesota, was vandalized on the night of April 5, 2006. Temple doors were kicked in, windows broken and holes smashed in walls and ceilings of the auditorium, dining hall and classrooms. Nine of the 14 stone Deities were broken into pieces. The inauguration of the us\$8-million temple, scheduled to open in early June, was postponed to July, 2006. New Deities are being prepared in India. Insurance only covered a portion of the damage, and a \$200,000 reconstruction and security system fund-raising drive has been started

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Briefly...

In April, Malaysia authorities demolished a century-old Hindu temple in Kuala Lumpur, bulldozing the building as devotees cried and begged them to stop. The temple was standing on government land. Bulldozers came in the middle of prayers.

A stolen 9th century stone Vishnu Diety with carvings of all the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu began its journey back home to be reinstalled in the Varaha Temple in Mandsour, Madhya Pradesh, from where it was stolen six years ago. American investigators on a tip from Indian police and Interpol, traced it to an art dealer in New York who was working out of his apartment. The Deity had passed through so many hands that no charges could be made.

Decreasing Ganga water levels have devotees worried. They cite the filling of Tehri dam above Rishikesh as the cause. This year in April, in Haridwar, the river was so low that pilgrims could not take a holy dip. Religious leaders are speaking out and approaching the government for solutions.

Sri Sellathurai Swami, president of Sivathondan Nilayam, Jaffna, Sri Lanka (a society established by Siva Yogaswami, guru of Sivaya Subramuniaswami, founder of Hinduism Today), passed away on April 12 at 2pm. Three months earlier, he told devotees that he would discard his body after the 42nd Mahasamadhi celebrations of Satguru Yogaswami, which took place on April 7. He was 92.

Somnath temple now offers remotes for devotees to perform abhishekam. Security restrictions prevent devotees from personally offering Ganga water to the Jyotirlinga. Now, with just a US\$2.27 ticket, the priest will give you a remote control. Press the button and Ganges water stored in a nearby tank flows down and bathes the Sivalingam as you watch.