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Diaspora

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Just What Did Churchill Say?

Chris McGovern, director of the traditionalist History Curriculum Association, has criticized England's new guidelines on how to teach about the British colonization of India. McGovern said, "The general tone of the unit is anti-British, with little about positive consequences of imperial rule." He in particular challenged a statement that English PM Winston Churchill ever called Gandhi a "half-naked fakir..." It's true that Churchill didn't quite say that, but what he did say was close enough: "It is alarming and also nauseating to see Mr. Gandhi, a seditious middle-temple lawyer now posing as a fakir of a type well known in the East, striding half-naked up the steps of the viceregal palace, while he is still organizing and conducting a defiant campaign of civil disobedience, to parley on equal terms with the representative of the king-emperor."

USA

Hindu Woman In Space

Sunita Williams took Lord Ganesha into space on December 11, 2006, aboard the space shuttle Discovery, along with the Bhagavad Gita--and a packet of samosas to spice up her rations--for a six-month stay on the International Space Station. On February 4th, she set the record for space walk time by a woman, amassing a total of 22 hours and 27 minutes in space. The previous woman's record was over 21 hours. Sunita was a US Navy test pilot and diver before joining the astronaut program. Her father is an Indian-born doctor and her mother a homemaker of Yugoslav descent.

FRANCE

City of Lille Morphs Into Mumbai

From October 14, 2006, to January 14, 2007, the city of Lille in France was completely transformed for a three-month India cultural extravaganza. Following the rave success of its 2004 Cultural Capital of Europe festival, the 2006 Lille 3000-Bombayers De Lille, two years in the making, drew millions into a total immersion experience of "the heart of India and its multiple facets: festivals, metamorphoses, visions of the future, exhibitions, artists' installations, films, music, performances."

Opening on Navaratri, the festival began with a grand parade led by 1,200 dancers. Visitors arrived at a Lille train station that was remodeled into an Indian palace with 20 full-sized elephant carvings across the street and Bollywood billboards adorning the town.

Various priced passes allowed visitors--who might never travel to India--to attend a few events or to spend 24 hours inside the exhibition grounds, for a total immersion experience in a modern Indian city.

Lille festivals cover both tradition and modern ways. Guests could roam through a Hindu temple, explore Indian spirituality in the Third Eye exhibition or listen to contemporary Indian jazz fusion artists. The festival was held in conjunction with a similar three-month-long Festival of India prepared by Bozar, the Brussels Centre for Fine Arts. Together these two festivals provided perhaps the largest-ever exposure to Indian culture in Europe.

USA

Swadhyay Pariwar, Strong and Growing USA Gita Elocution Contest

The swadhyay pariwar, founded by Pandurang Sashtri Athavale (1920 2003), is flourishing under the leadership of his adopted daughter and successor, "Didiji." The organization never aggressively publicized its work, and most are unaware of the Pariwar's huge scope. Recently the "Family of Millions " has begun releasing briefs to show how a positive seva enterprise can bring revolutionary changes in society. See www.swadhyay.org and click on "Recent News " for some success stories.

One small example of the Pariwar's dynamism was its four-day 2006 Thanksgiving program in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. Put on by 500 volunteers, over 2,000 from the spiritual "extended family... gathered from all walks of life regardless of status." The Pariwar's Bhagavad Gita elocution contests are also noteworthy. Running for decades in thousands of locations each year, its participants just crossed the 3.5 million mark.

MAURITIUS

Colorful Temple Renovation

On the Northern coast of Mauritius, beyond the coral reefs, is Gunners Coin, a spectacular green, wedge-shaped island jutting glistening in the azure blue ocean. In this idyllic setting stands the Siva Soopramaniam Kovil, a 20th century Saivite temple. Built in 1985, it was completely renovated in 2006 at a cost 1 million rupees (\$US34,000). The six-day consecration ceremonies in November drew 2,000 devotees. The sanctuary is one small example of the global renaissance of Agamic Saivism.

ANTHROPOLOGY

Global DNA Search Snag

The genographic project launched by The National Geographic Society, IBM, geneticist Spencer Wells and the Waitt Family Foundation hopes to map mankind's migrations out of Africa. Most of the world's six billion people, however, are far

removed from their ancient homes. So the Genographic Project wants 100,000 DNA samples from people still living in their ancestral homelands, because they provide the crucial geographic link between genetic markers found today and ancient routes.

The five-year project, started in late 2006, was stalled by Alaskans who say the research could be misused to disprove tribal beliefs about living in one place since the beginning of time and possibly jeopardize land rights and other benefits extended to native peoples. Scientists are aghast that anyone would take such a position. But native rights advocates point out that--given the history of broken promises and dismal treatment of indigenous peoples--caution is wise and well-advised.

BALI

Cakolosal--Massive Peace Dance

Bombings in Bali in 2002 had a devastating impact on Indonesia's spirit and Bali's economy. Tourism dropped along with national morale. In September, 2006, Hindus in the Tanaban district undertook a dramatic initiative to change the flow of energy. They planned, choreographed, rehearsed and performed what was likely the largest prayer-dance in recorded history. It was a traditional kecak dance performed by 5,000 men at the entrance of Tanah Lot Temple. Dedicated to world peace and tourism recovery, the proactive "destination management " marketing program was rooted in the native culture and environment. See: <http://www.cakolosal.com>

HEALTH

Veggie-Related High IQs

The British medical journal Lancet released results of a study based on IQ tests of 8,179 people taken in 1970. The 366 participants who were vegetarians at age 30 had IQs of 104-106 at age ten. The 7,813 meat eaters had IQs of 99-101 at age ten.

But researchers were left with a question. Dr. Frankie Phillips, of the British Dietetic Association said, "It is like the chicken and the egg. Do people become vegetarian because they have a very high IQ, or is it just that they tend to be more aware of health issues?"

MILITARY

Wiccan Wife Wins Cause

On September 25, 2005, Sgt. Patrick D. Stewart, a Nevada resident, died in combat in Afghanistan. He belonged to the Wiccan faith. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) refused his wife Roberta's request that a Wiccan pentacle be placed on his government-furnished grave marker, because Wicca is not an officially recognized religion in the military. Wiccan clergy were barred from the VA funeral service. Roberta and her friends petitioned for Patrick's Wiccan grave marker without success. In September she threatened to sue the VA. In October, Nevada officials finally approved the pentacle's placement on Sgt. Stewart's grave marker.

The US military is normally accommodating of different faiths, with 38 different symbols approved for headstones, ranging from the Christian cross to the Hindu Aum, and even including the "atomic whirl " of the American Atheists.

NONVIOLENCE

German Ban On Games

In November 2006 in Germany an 18-year-old avid Counter Strike player killed himself with a rifle after storming his school and injuring 11 of his schoolmates. German leaders responded with a bill, soon to go before Parliament, that will put developers and players of games involving "cruel violence " in jail for up to one year. Fully 59 percent of the public support it.

Guenther Beckstein, Bavaria's interior minister, commented, "It is absolutely beyond any doubt that such killer games desensitize unstable characters to violence and can have a stimulating effect."

Briefly

The Hindu council of UK and others protested a proposal to ban the swastika throughout European Union. The ban was mooted by Germany, current EU president, in an apparent show of repentance for Germany's Nazi history. Hindus argue the ban would interfere with the Human Right to Freedom of Religion, and do irreparable harm to Hinduism, which has widely used the symbol since ancient times as an auspicious sign. Without offering any explanation, the German leaders dropped the plan January 29. EU member states were unlikely to adopt such a ban.

Swamini Turiyasangitananda (Alice Coltrane), known for her early jazz and New Age music, passed away on January 12, 2006, in Los Angeles, from respiratory failure at the age of 69. Following her conversion to Hinduism she became a much beloved American Hindu leader and taught Hinduism in Southern California for over 25 years.

Ten million took a chilly bath in Allahabad on mauni amavasya, January 19th, the second of four ablution days of the month-long Ardha ("half ") Kumbha Mela.

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad has succeeded in getting the Tamil Nadu state government to institute "social security " for hundreds of thousands of village temple priests. A welfare board will be established for priests of grama koyils, small temples, that are not administered by the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments department.

Hindu-Muslim riots were sparked in the hi-tech city of Bangalore on January 22 when Muslims protested Saddam Hussein's execution, ransacking Hindu shops and

burning cars. Some Hindus responded in kind. The police fired on crowds killing a 12-year-old boy, before gaining control. The city's software industry, situated away from city center, was unaffected.