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A Monthly News Digest

Ramayana Building A Global Network

The Vishwa Sahitya Sanskriti Sansthan (Institute of World Literature and Culture) held its successful 10th International Ramayana Conference in December of 1993 and plans are in progress for '94, '95 and '96 conferences. In a report sent by Dr. Prem Sahai, the Secretary of the Sansthan, Lallan Prasad Vyas, explained the history of the conferences.

The very first International Ramayana Conference was held in India in November, 1984, on the banks of the river Saryu in Ayodhya. Since then successive conferences were held in other countries: Thailand, Canada, Nepal, Mauritius, Surinam, Belgium and Indonesia. The 1988 conference was held in India and so too the 1994 conference marking an unbroken series of two global rounds. For those familiar with international gatherings whose organizers frequently break up, such continuity is remarkable.

The tenth conference was held at four places in India-New Delhi, Gayatri Sidhapeeth (Kanpur), Chittrakoot and Mahuwa (Gujarat). It drew Ramayana devotees from Mexico to China, from Holland and Czechoslovakia to Indonesia, testifying to a truly international network.

Indian sages and master exponents of Ram Katha such as famed Shri Murari Bapu were on hand to raise the conference to high spiritual levels. Lallan Prasad Vyas said, "I sincerely feel that the world series of Ramayana Conference has a touch of divinity and is the realisation of a cherished dream of many saints and

sages. We, the workers of International Ramayana Conference, feel we are as mere instruments in the divine hands of Shri Ram." The '94, '95, '96 conferences will be held in Thailand, Holland and China.

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Narmada Dam and India's Future

The following was excerpted from a report by Rajni Bakshi, Bombay, which outlines broader concerns of the Narmada Bachao Andolan's struggle to halt the construction of the Narmada Dam.

Over the last eight years a powerful movement has emerged which demands justice for the displaced families and opposes the Narmada Dam as an ecologically and economically unviable. It is much more than just another local disagreement between environmentalists and industry. The issues surrounding the Narmada controversy are critically relevant not only for the future of India but for the course of human civilization. The dam will displace 100,000 persons and submerge 91,400 acres of land. The government of Madhya Pradesh has stated that it will not be possible to resettle all the displaced persons because it cannot give them new land elsewhere in exchange for the land that is or will be flooded. Yet people continue to be ousted without adequate resettlement and rehabilitation facilities. The World Bank, the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (the official project monitoring agency), the Union Ministry of Environment and the Narmada River Control Authority all call for halting the project pending review of the rehabilitation and environmental protection problems.

But the question of rehabilitation and environmental solutions is meaningless as other facts show that, even completed, the financial and practical goals of the dam may not be viable. Originally costed at roughly one billion dollars, the World Bank now estimates the dam will finally cost US\$11.4 billion. Net returns over costs will in the end, if any at all, be marginal. And massive siltage due to deforestation has reduced the water flow by nearly 20%, raising the question if there will even be sufficient water to validate the project. The dam is supposed to irrigate about 1,200 square miles, give drinking water to 40 million people and electricity to parts of

Gujarat and Maharashtra. Yet a wide array of social activists and scientists suggest that the idea that the dam will be a "life-line" is a "pipe-dream."

Post independence development has benefitted only certain sections of society. The vast majority of people have not only been excluded from this prosperity, but many have been reduced to much worse conditions than existed 50 years ago. It is no longer a conflict between western free-market capitalism or Soviet style state-controlled capitalism, nor it is a movement toward destabilizing revolution. It is a question of a new definition of progress where more and more people are involved, permitting them greater control over local natural resources and access to decision-making. The struggle surrounding the Narmada Dam has given shape to certain energies which will not evaporate. The common ground needed for this quest is a faith that the only acceptable prosperity is one which is based on respect for all living things."

Stars More Scientific Than Science?

A July article in The Hindu cites famed astrologer B.V. Raman calling upon scientists not to reject astrology as supersition and acknowledge its success in prediction of rain, quakes, illness and accidents and the use of astrology for accurate analysis of problems in behavior and psychology. It is common knowledge that 90% of weather forecasts go awry despite the existence of meteorological departments manned by scientists well supported by sophisticated instruments. He asserts, "If 30-40% of astrological predictions go wrong the science is debunked....[but] it is possible to forecast weather astrologically more accurately than meteorologically." Despite astrologers warning scientists against launching a rocket from Sriharikota Range on a particular inauspicious day, they went ahead only to see the rocket plunging into the Bay of Bengal seconds after it was fired.

Swaminarayan Temple Will Look Like a Catholic Spanish Mission

The original temple design was scrapped. Now, gopurams and vimanams are gone, and plain Spanish archways replace ornate columned entrances.

A recent Los Angeles Times article by Jill Gottesman reports that after three years of struggle a small congregation of Swaminarayan Satsang families in Norwalk, California, has finally received permission to build a temple. Unfortunately, two years ago they had to give up their original Hindu design (below). The report says, "The golden Indian domes have been replaced by a red tile roof, and the ornate Hindu carvings at the entrance have been scraped in favor of curved archways....the building will end up looking more like a [Catholic] Spanish mission than a Hindu temple." Nattoo Patel, who heads the group said, "Our intention was to use traditional Hindu architecture. But we want to be good neighbors, too." The group was forced to give up its original plans because residents complained that its distinctive, traditional design was incompatible with the surrounding area. Neighbors are also worried about crowds and traffic problems. Besides removing nine gopurams, its golden vimanams and intricate carvings, they reduced the size from a 15,000 square foot, 530-seat temple to a 12,000 square foot, 322-seat area, to accommodate more parking. The Rev. Nyal Royse, a pastor of the neighboring Church of Christ, had called the temple a "grotesque monstrosity." The new plan was approved by the City Council despite continuing protests. Patel said: "We had to make a lot of concessions, and we eliminated many of the proper ceremonial elements that we would have preferred. The mission design was hard to swallow for some of the more orthodox members." But one elder, Dinker Inamdar, said, "We are not disappointed; this is a gift from God. What we needed was a place to worship, not a decoration or a monument to our religion."

Trends to Watch: Bharat's Languages Leap Into the Information Age

The hegemonic Roman alphabet faces powerful new contenders in the Hindu information arena as Indian languages find new wings in cyberspace, landing on lithographic presses from Moscow to Tokyo.

The typesetters tale of yore began with manually arranging small letters made of wood or lead side-by-side into words. Print technology evolved rapidly in the US and Europe where Latin type dominated-26 very efficient, "Roman" letters. Automatic computer typesetting and modern print processes deluged the world with Roman printed matter. The dispersion of calligraphically oriented languages (with complex character sets) and the cultures they embodied was inevitably suppressed, locked within national boundaries. If you wanted books in Marathi you had to get your type set in India. Print some class lessons for your local Hindi class at the temple? Forget it! Do it by hand! An electric Tamil typewriter could cost US\$12,000.00!

Meanwhile, scanners started taking pictures of complex alphabets, turning them into digital images. In the 1980s, Apple Computer and companies like Ecological Linguistics pioneered the "miniaturization" of alphabet production, making any language in the world available to anyone with a small computer. Today you can get a "cheap" and slightly less than perfect Hindi alphabet for \$25.00.

An unexpected historic door opened-the power to mass reproduce Sanskrit in the Devanagiri script, anywhere at any time. Mr. Pankaj Patel at Brahmitype in Canada, which produces classy artistic type, says: "We felt Sanskrit should be the national language of India. There was also a demand from ashrams, departments of philosophy and Sanskrit studies. As the market for Sanskrit is limited and saturated, vernacular languages now make up 50% of our sales. Indians are very intent on making their kids learn their languages. Parents are now buying Indian alphabets for their children at home to use on their Mac or PC. Some Indian organizations publish newsletters in their mother tongue. Large communities like the Tamils here in Canada really need Tamil alphabets. Unfortunately a lot of cheap type is sold that may not look that good." A new company, India Typefaces, offers over 1008 alphabets. A global explosion of all language typefaces is underway.

Fijian Interfaith Police Prayer

July 27th at the Police Academy Hall, Nasova, Fiji, Police Commissioner Isikia Savua presided over a dawn Hindu prayer meeting for officers from all different religious backgrounds led by Pundit Ashok Dwivedi. The commissioner said, "Police should learn to respect every officer's faith, accept them without bias and sacrifice to accommodate the needs of the force." He announced that holy day exemptions from work would not be given to anyone. "Our duty is to the people." Pundit Dwivedi spoke on Vedic tolerance, offering quotes elucidating the four facts of Hinduism: Karma, Dharma, Reincarnation and Worship/Yoga.

Vedic Fire In US Nilgiris

July 8-10, scintillating, "professional" Vedic chanting filled the air at Vraj Bhumi, a religious retreat in the verdant Pennsylvania Blue Mountains. The North American Sankethi Association organized an orthodox Gayatri Maha Yagna presided over by Swami Paramananda Bharati of Bangalore. Eighty-six male participants, including

14 young brahmacharis, received diksha robes (above), Gayatri instruction and each performed 5,000 Gayatri japam and 500 Auhutis. During the rigorous rituals, women volunteers provided support services with devotion and discipline.

Brahma's Puskar Vegetarians

Legend says the only Brahma temple on earth is in beautiful Puskar, Rajasthan. Brahma dropped three flower petals here to form three lakes. Perched on one is Brahma's exquisite white marble temple (above), built in 1809 on the site of the original which had been destroyed by the Mogul Aurangzeb. With a small population of 12,000, all brahmins, Pushkar is big on religion. With 400 well-kept temples, every home has a shrine and everyone is a pure vegetarian. No non-vegetarian food is ever served in Puskar, even to tourists during the colorful Annual Fair and Camel/Horse Safari. Not a single egg. Omnivorous workers must commute to Puskar from nearby towns.

Singapore Edition of HT

As Singapore readies to enter its 30th year of independence, it will do so with a new publication to serve its 145,000 Hindus. TDGK Trading is launching a Singapore Edition of Hinduism Today this month. The company is confident it will win instant acceptance by the well-established Hindu community. TDGK Trading is even counting on the Chinese to subscribe. "They buy anything new of an interesting spiritual nature, New Age things, crystals, etc., and they do like Hinduism," said a company associate. Welcome to our newest readers in S'pore!