News in Brief
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Religious freedom in the USA was reaffirmed by an act of Congress now being hailed as "the most important for religious freedom since the adoption of the Bill of Rights." It overturns a US Supreme Court decision involving the use of peyote in a ritual of the Native American Church, a decision which made it easy for states to restrict religious freedoms so long as they served a "valid" government purpose. The Religious Freedom Restoration Act now demands a "compelling interest" be shown and holds government "to a very high level of proof before it interferes with someone's free exercise of religion," according to U.S. President Bill Clinton. The bill was supported by over 60 theological, political and civil liberties groups. The previous court ruling had affected the rights of Hindu children to wear traditional clothing to school, and Sikhs in the US military. Vandana Shiva, who directs a network dedicated to protecting the environment of India, is co-recipient of the 1993 Right Livelihood Award. It's often called Sweden's "alternative Nobel Prize," and is awarded to people or groups working locally to solve social justice or environmental issues. She shares the award and $200,000 with five other women. Divali celebrations in Vancouver, British Columbia, saw two children injured by flying fireworks, a dozen arrests for drunkenness, and over 2,000 Indo-Canadians partying in the streets on the night of the Festival of Lights. Some local Hindus say Divali is over-commercialized and that people have forgotten its religious significance. Others say despite the problems this Divali was more family-oriented than in years past. The

Hooghly river was polluted with 15 tons of toxic mercury oxide from paint on the 2,000 idols immersed during Durga Puja, according to scientists with the Central Pollution Control Board and the Zoological survey of India. Devotees are aghast at a Tamil Nadu plan to put a new government district headquarters next to Arunachala Hill in Tiruvannamalai. The site falls within the boundaries of the parikrama, the circumambulatory path of the mountain where Lord Siva appeared as the Agnilinga, the infinite pillar of fire. Ramana Maharishi performed severe austerities on this famed sacred hill, and his ashram is located at the base. "This clearly amounts to desecration of this Shivakshetra," opponents write in an appeal for support, adding, "Many of the devotees of this sacred site of Lord Shiva are not even aware of the gravity of this impending disaster." The fledgling Hindu University of America, based in Orlando, Florida, is now "open for business," offering moral and spiritual courses. From its humble beginnings the University envisions a growing enrollment in programs offering degrees in Hindu Studies at both the masters and doctorate levels. Contact: Hindu University of America, Inc., 8610 Vesta Terrace, Orlando, Florida, 32825-7934, USA. New Jersey Hindus are closer to establishing a temple in Sayerville, following settlement of a suit filed against the Sayerville Planning Board. The Shri Bhakti Nidhi Trust's application to use a former Young Men's Christian Association facility as a temple met with community opposition, vandalism, and a 4-4 tie from the Planning Board [Hinduism Today, August, 1993]. The Trust and the YMCA sued, charging violation of the First Amendment's guarantee of religious freedom. Asians returning to Uganda are finding both support and opposition. Seventy-thousand people were affected when Idi Amin ordered all Asians out of Uganda in 1972 and seized 8,000 properties. Now 2,000 many of them Hindus, have returned to claim what was theirs, and many are

still resented by some Ugandans for their previous economic dominance. Others recognize Asian investment as vital in the ongoing rebuilding of Uganda's economy. Hindu ideals are being taught to some of India's tribal boys at three ashrams run by the Sewa Samarpan Sansthan, a social service agency of the RSS. The Banvasi Kalyan Karyakram project began in 1952 as a way to counter fierce propaganda by Christian Missionaries. It features a strict regimen of culture and tradition designed to develop a sense of Hindutva. No television is allowed "because western culture pollutes their mind," says one ashram director. After ashram training, the boys return to their tribal homes. Hindu cuisine is both healthful and a good value. During a 2-year survey of restaurants in Britain, Holland and the USA, Indian eateries topped the list for quality, service and healthy-eating choices. The survey was done by Quality Restaurants-International of England, whose director said, "Although healthy eating options and vegetarian meals are a relatively recent phenomenon in the West, I was surprised to learn that they have been part of India's ayurvedic tradition for over 5,000 years." Ex-Beatle Paul McCartney, a strict vegetarian, takes his ethics on the road with him. When on tour, he demands that his entire road staff abstain from consuming meat. If he finds hamburger wrappers in the trash, he fires the guilty employee. Tamil Nadu's wind energy generation is proving unexpectedly efficient and dependable. With the demand for power much lower than in cities of the West, a single long-bladed, wind-driven turbine can power an entire village-a renewable energy resource without pollution. And given the Indian government's generous incentives, private sector developers envision 80,000 wind generators in Tamil Nadu, Mizoram and Punjab. Over 100,000 patrons from inside and outside Trinidad & Tobago were expected to visit the site of Divali Nagar '93 in Chaguanas. The theme of the celebration was the

life, work, teachings and philosophy of Swami Vivekananda. Events included a spiritually-themed, nation-circling, 300-mile marathon known as Pradakshina 11, which culminated in the running of the final "Saffron Mile." Salman Rushdie she's not, but condemned she is. Author Taslima Nasrin of Dhaka is also a virtual prisoner in her own home, after the government of Bangladesh seized her passport and banned her book, Lajja, which means "shame." The inflammatory book tells the story of a Hindu family in Dhaka after the 1993 demolition of Babri Masjid and condemns the violent Muslim backlash. A Muslim fundamentalist group has declared a fatwa and placed a price on her head of US$1,250 because of her attacks on Islam (and religion in general) and her calls for women's equality. Meanwhile Hindu nationalists are getting the book translated into English and using it to further their own agenda, leaving atheist Nasrin denouncing both sides and fundamentalism of any kind. Lajja sold 60,000 copies in Bangladesh before it was banned. Dancer Vidya Murthi, a 14-year-old student at Sree Bharata Kamalalaya, Inc., is the youngest person ever to win a Princess Grace Foundation-USA Award. The grant honors her achievements in Bharata Natyam, and was presented in New York by His Serene Highness Prince Albert of Monaco. The Arya Samaj is warning members in India and abroad "to be careful against some disruptive forces in the organization." General Secretary Sachidanand Shastri says Shri Kailash Nath Singh, Swami Agnivesh and Indravesh were expelled "some years back on charges of corruption and indiscipline," adding that published reports of their election to the Sarvadeshik Arya Pratinidhi Sabha are untrue. He calls it a "dirty game" aimed at grabbing Arya Samaj properties and destabilizing the Sarvadeshik Sabha. Legal action has been promised. Durga puja in Bangladesh was subdued and largely symbolic as Hindus boycotted the festival in protest of recent attacks on them. The government appealed to Hindus to withdraw the

boycott, dispatched civic leaders to oversee events in their constituencies, and even publicized and televised the pujas. Three incidents of bombings and smashed idols were reported. Some Hindu leaders were also accused of playing politics with puja.