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A Monthly News Digest

US Citizens Join Fiji Muruga Festival

A short January article by Hari Gaunder and Avinesh Gopal in the Fiji Post gives us a glimpse of Lord Muruga's international network of devotees. "Four United States citizens flew in especially to take part in the 10-day Thaipooosam Tirunal observed at the new Sri Siva Subramaniya Swami temple at Nadi-two of them, Vel Alahan and his wife Mrs. Valli Alahan, are longtime converts to Saivism and have been devotees of Lord Subramaniya for some years. They have already pilgrimaged to the famous six temples of the Lord in South India.

"The four devotees commenced prayers at the temple at 6:00am and went around the temple 108 times without stopping during the offering on Tuesday, the Thaipooosam Day, doing japa on their beads, reciting the name of Lord Subramaniya continuously. Mr. Vel Alahan also offered kavadi, piercing his cheeks, face and neck with at least ten sulams (small silver spears). The American devotees started their prayers early in the morning at the temple and remained there until the final prayers at night.

"According to temple officials, several hundred devotees made kavadi offerings at the temple. Thousands of people from all parts of Fiji and abroad converged on the temple to pray and participate in the religious activities conducted by 18 priests."

UK Blossoming to Meet the Needs

The Ramana Maharishi Foundation of UK has expanded its facilities to a Victorian residential house with rooms for meditation, classes, offices, library, meetings, dining, guests and a caretaker's flat. Under the presidency of V. Ganesan, a grandnephew of Sri Bhagavan, the foundation has been active with satsangs, concerts, lectures, video and film presentations. It focuses on the practical and spiritual support of serious seekers of spiritual transformation. Their winter issue of Self Enquiry had an interesting "Letter to Shiva" by Jane Adams expounding on the nature of the Sivalinga and Sakti and another article by a prominent France-based hatha yoga teacher, Dr. Susunaga Weeraperuma, who pays homage to the great saint of Sri Lanka, Sage Yogaswami.

The Sivananda Vedanta Center of Putney, UK, founded by the late Swami Vishnu Devananda provides workshops for nominal fees on yoga, kriyas, karma and disease, thought power, diet and nutrition, cooking, fasting and light yoga. The light yoga is popular among much-stressed ladies of London suburbia. The center has collaborated with local fitness boutiques in "yoga fashion shows" to present leotards and aerobic gear during yoga demonstrations. The center is successfully promoting Swami's easily understood and palatable program of proper exercise, proper breathing, proper diet, proper relaxation, proper meditation.

ASNET was founded by Neelu Chaudhari, a divorced pharmacist with a seven-year-old son. While trying to make a new start, she met other expatriots from the Indian sub-continent in similar circumstances and created this new non-profit social organization to improve communication between individuals and groups. Neelu feels there is discrimination against divorcees and single parents from the commercial mainstream introduction agencies. Within a year of its operation, ASNET has been very successful in addressing the problems of single parents in the Indian community. The social stigma attached to widows and divorcees has put them in circumstances where providing a healthy upbringing of their children is difficult. ASNET fills the gap by bringing people together in an informal but organized forum.

by Rakesh Mathur, London

Secondhand Smoke: Industry Conspiracy

While the debate on smoking cools under the chilling acceptance of its indisputable dangers, a new controversy is heating up on the evils of "second-hand" smoke or "passive smoking," -the involuntary inhalation of smoke from nearby smokers. The January issue of Consumer Reports says in 1993 the US Environmental Protection Agency, after a painstaking and wide-ranging scientific review, declared secondhand smoke a known, human carcinogen, responsible for the lung cancer cases of several thousand US non-smokers each year. It has also been linked to a host of other ills, such as asthma and bronchitis in children, and heart disease. A major blow to the \$48-billion US tobacco industry, the EPA declaration caused many businesses and the US military to ban smoking in the work places. Seventy percent of the nation's shopping malls are now smoke-free. Several states are considering laws to control workplace smoking. At least two lawsuits against tobacco companies have been brought by relatives of non-smokers who died of lung cancer after long exposure to secondhand smoke at work. The EPA studies estimate that each year an extra 150,000 to 300,000 respiratory infections among children under the age of 18 months are caused by second-hand smoke in the home.

New revelations show that the tobacco industry knew the problem and launched a deliberate campaign of obfuscation. In 1986, Imperial Tobacco Ltd, Canada's largest cigarette company, commissioned a secret study to combat anti-smoking activism. The study documents, made public in the course of a lawsuit, state: "Passive smoking should be used as the focal point...of all the issues the tobacco industry has the most chance of winning...It is highly desirable to control the focus of the debate...attack the credibility of the evidence...find a sympathetic doctor."

The tobacco industry continues spending millions to confuse the facts. With domestic sales shrinking, new marketing strategies have pushed up teenage smoking with a "It's cool," message. Also-India and Asia beware-American tobacco companies are expanding markets overseas to make up local losses.

Trends to Watch: A Migration Tidal Wave Flooding the Planet

Asurge of human movement threatens to wash away global stability, according to a ominous analysis published by World Watch, a Washington D.C. "think tank." Until about 1500ce, migration was a collective process, often voluntary, like the shiploads of Indians who went to Suvarnabhu-mi-the Land of Gold (Malaysia) and

Champa (Vietnam). Next, the slave trade displaced roughly 14 million people by force over 400 years while only 2 or 3 million people crossed national borders voluntarily. In the 1800s, 89 million left home in search of economic, religious or political freedoms-60 million Europeans, 12 million Chinese, 6 million Japanese, 10 million Russians and Central Asians and one and a half million Indians.

But nothing compares with today's migratory tsunami. In just the last 40 years the total number of international refugees probably exceeds the total for involuntary international migrants in all previous human history. Added to the old pressures of war, persecution and new opportunity are new ones: the desperate search for food, water and arable land, the flight from over-crowding or disease, widening disparities in income and a bleak, questionable future for one's children. These emerge from a growing complex of over-population, environmental degradation, ethnic/political instability and continuing wars.

The analysts worry that the greatest migrations of mankind have yet to happen. Hot spots are developing from internal displacement where citizens are forced from their homes but remain in the same country, India has its share of citizen "refugees." As populations grow and land goes barren, nations are ready to explode under pressures of basic human needs that are often misconstrued as religious or ethnic issues. Starve, fight or flee become the sad choices for young orphans-"cannon fodder"-easy recruits for building militias.

The World Watch analysis concludes that irrational intolerance and closing borders to immigrants is no answer. Studies prove that they make valuable contributions to their new homes. Rwandan style international crisis aid is also not a solution. Literacy programs can stabilize civil administration with an aware populace. Stabilizing soil and water resources is critical. Hands across the ocean, countries working with each other to make all homelands livable, is man's most helpful course.

Ramakrishna to Grace Madras Temple

On January 1st, 1995, a 181-foot long, 96-foot tall solid stone temple was initiated in Mylapore, Madras with the traditional ceremonies to lay the first foundation stones. The image in the inner sanctum will be Sri Ramakrishna

Paramahansa, seated on a pedestal called Maharaja Leelasana. It was conceived by the Ramakrishna Mission and designed by V. Ganapati Sthapati. He describes the temple in terms of the mystic designs and principles of India's ancient Vastu Shastras. "In the design of the Universal Temple of Sri Ramakrishna, you would find a blend of Sabda Brahman and Artha Brahman in a holistic structural form. It is not only a structure of the universe, but a universal structure adaptable to any belief system on the earth. The main sanctum of Ramakrishna rising to a height of 96 feet consists of three floors, culminating in a circular dome surmounted by a golden finial and surrounded by eight small domes at a lower level, forming thus a constellation of nine domes called Navananda Prasada, signifying a universe embodying nine planets." The magnificent temple will rise on a 7-foot plinth, accessed by several stairways to doors entering a prayer hall that will hold 1,000 devotees with a basement floor below for other monastic and mission activities. Being all stone, the cost will be nearly us\$1.7 million, which is now being collected. Despite the "universal" name, the structure also could also be described as a Hindu Guru temple or an embodiment of Sri Ramakrishna's avatar status as taught in Vaishnava Hindu theology and as believed by many of his devotees.

Rama and Sita at the Rose Bowl

On television, January 2nd, 450 million people worldwide watched Rama and Sita parade on an Indonesian float past a crowd of one million at the 106th Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena, California. The theme of the Tournament was "Sports . . . Quest for Excellence." Indonesia presented dance as its dominant sport, with live Ramayana ballet below the huge sculptures. Native Reyog and acrobatic Japon dancers danced on the street around the float. Covered with lush tropical foliage, coconut, orchids, palms and roses, the presentation won the Grand Marshal's trophy from among 54 floats that participated.

Global Face Lift for Meenakshi

Acclaimed the world's most beautiful temple, the awesome 700-year-old Meenakshi temple in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, had fragments falling from its multi-storied gopurams. The generous international response to the trustees' call for donations now has 1,000 workers renovating five major towers. Donors from Malaysia, Indonesia, Mauritius, Surinam, USA, UK and Australia have contributed millions to the ten million rupee (US\$332,000) goal. Madurai, called the Athens of India, will soon shine even more colorfully in the bright Indian sun.

US Kids Reject Meat, at Age Two!

In an ahimsa movement from within the heart of the child, some US kids are giving up meat. As reported in the New York Times, Dr. Julie Spain, a New York psychologist, says her vegetarian daughter starting spitting out meat at age two. Emma Blumer's mother eats rare beef. Emma, aged six, won't. She knows it comes from animals and she loves her pet rabbit. Untrained parents struggle with nutritional fears, but these kids are happy with spinach. Sam Chermayeff, a veggie, aged 12, says "Some in my class are ardent vegetarians. One little girl, who really gets upset, started telling me my cookies were bad because they had animal fat!"