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INDIA

Pious Pollution?

Mumbai's annual 10-day Ganesha festival is polluting lakes, rivers and oceans, according to a September article in the New York Times. The problem results from the immersion of tens of thousands of Ganesha icons. "Within 24 hours you get massive fish deaths from the toxins in the paint," said Bittu Sahgal, Editor of Sanctuary Asia, an environmental magazine. "The plaster forms an impermeable layer on the water's bottom and organisms can't breathe." Environmentalists want the festival banned. At Mumbai's Chowpatty Beach 500,000 people attend the festivities, many carrying their homemade or purchased Ganeshas. Asked on a New York radio program about the problem, Hinduism Today's publisher, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, advised that the Ganeshas be made of biodegradable materials and paint, as they originally were decades ago.

USA

Youth Classes

Maximum happiness to the maximum number of people for the maximum time" is the motto of the Chinmaya Mission of Southern California, whose main center is Kasi Ashram in

Anaheim (www.chinmaya.net/la/). Swami Ishwarananda oversees classes for children, youth and adults. Some 50 teachers handle the weekly sessions for 420 youth in this area. Satellite centers are located in Norwalk, the San Fernando Valley, Diamond Bar, Bakersfield, San Gabriel Valley and Irvine. Anil Mehta of Bakersfield commended the classes during a visit to Hinduism Today's Hawaii offices. He said the youth learn about ahimsa, humility, respect and the meaning of festivals and the various forms of the Gods. The youth also do social work outside of the ashram, such as cooking and serving food to the homeless.

ENGLAND

World Records!

Pramukh Swami Maharaj of Swaminarayan BAPS is now in The Guinness Book of World Records--not once, but twice. On July 8, 2000, in the presence of 4,000 devotees at his London Mandir, the Hindu spiritual leader from Gujarat was awarded the two prestigious entries, one for consecrating 355 temples in 11 countries between April 1971 and May 2000, and the second for building the Shree Swaminarayan Mandir in London, the largest traditional Hindu temple ever constructed outside India. The famously humble swami responded: "These records are achieved by the grace of God."

MEXICO

Dance Festival

The Sachin Sanker ballet troupe was a hit with its performance on the evening of October 8, 2000, at Cervante's International Fest, Guanajuato, Mexico. The 17-day festival, titled "Cultural Heritage of Mankind," brought together important and distinguished artists from 37 nations. Everything was included--music, opera, theater, dance, plastic arts, literature and audiovisual media, with performances at venues all over the city. One set was "Three centuries of music for the piano." Sachin Sanker's group has toured the world since 1953, sponsored by the Indian government. According to the festival program notes, "Sachin Sanker, director and creator of this group, worked for a long time with Ana Pavlova. He has greatly contributed to ballet, developing, searching and establishing India's dance techniques, inspired by poets and musical directors from his country." The performance in Mexico comprised ten numbers showcasing expressive movement, short stories and aspects of Indian culture.

NEPAL

Heritage in Danger

A high-level team from the United Nation's cultural organization, UNESCO, is visiting Nepal to inspect the World Heritage Sites in the Kathmandu Valley, according to the BBC. The visit comes amid reports that the area described by UNESCO as "Nepalese art at its height" is being spoiled by modern development projects. Keshav Raj Jha, Nepal's ambassador to UNESCO, said management of the area, which has Hindu and Buddhist temples and three royal palaces, is suffering from neglect. UNESCO has the authority to approve or strike off proposed heritage sites in member countries. A delegation visited the area last year to assess which heritage sites were suitable to stay on the approved list or needed to be put on a list of endangered sites. "The major problems are the demolition of privately owned traditional buildings and construction of houses without approval from the municipalities and Department of Archaeology," Jha was quoted as saying by the French news agency AFP. "Electrical transformers, floodlights fixed on or adjacent to monuments, advertising billboards and obtrusive displays of merchandise are all directly affecting the environment of the monuments as well as the monument zones." The delegation will spend a

week inspecting and will advise the World Heritage Committee.

INDIA

Jain Temple Opposed

A proposal to build a Jain temple in the Himalayan holy town of Badrinath has brought protests from local Hindus. The dispute is centered around modifications to an existing Jain prayer hall in the town of Devdarshani, just outside of Badrinath, one of India's most revered temple towns. Local ordinances prohibit the construction of any temple-like structure within one kilometer of the Badrinath temple. The prayer hall began three years ago with government approval, but the final building looked like a Jain temple. In July, a group of Jain saints carrying a Jain icon for installation at the prayer hall was stopped from proceeding toward Badrinath. They apparently planned to install the icon. The issue is also financial since, if a Jain temple is built in the same area it will likely get the considerable offerings of the wealthy Jain community which now go to the Hindu temple. Presently, Jains who travel to Badrinath pay their respects at the Hindu temple, which they also

revere.

USA

Working Parents

Families in the USA in which both parents are working have now become the majority, even among the most traditional families--married couples with children. According to a new Census Bureau report, based on data from 1998, both spouses were employed at least part time in 51 percent of married couples with children, compared with 33 percent in 1976. Even married or single mothers of very young children were likely to work at least part time: 59 percent of the women with babies younger than a year old were employed in 1998.

NEPAL

Mata Kalyani

Of 400 or so women in the Kathmandu Valley claiming supernatural powers, one stands out among the rest. Mata Kalyani was unknown until two years ago when she psychically located an ancient Siva temple in Kushanti and had it excavated, reports Dr. Hari Bansh Jha. Mata, he

writes, dresses like Lord Siva, with matted hair, trident and clothes that look like a tiger skin. She was once thought a witch and pelted with stones. She gives daily discourses emphasizing that the ritual sacrifice of animals or birds is a crime. "She wants to change the tradition of animal sacrifice by offering fruits and sweets. The temple would be clean once sacrifice is stopped," says Mani Krishna Shrestha, a noted writer in Nepal. As a result, one major temple banned such sacrifices in 1999, and her followers talk of getting them banned in all of Nepal's temples. Mata also advocates vegetarianism in this country of meat-eaters. She wants religious conversion stopped as a violation of human rights. In a world where common people are becoming violent in their outlook and behavior, Mata Kalyani has been preaching the lesson of nonviolence, compassion and love towards all living beings.

INDIA

Born to Sing

The terrible twos isn't what Vidhwan and Rama Venugopal got when daughter Selvi arrived at that much-feared toddler age. Instead, she was deeply immersed in Indian classical music, able to

recognize a hundred ragas. By four she left listeners spellbound with her command of complicated ragas and talas. By seven she was a full-fledged artiste on stage with the cream of the musical world. Nature and nurture both contributed. Bangalore-based dad (flutevenu@hotmail.com) is an accomplished flautist, her mother a singer who avidly listened to carnatic music throughout her pregnancy.

TRINIDAD

Counter Calypso

For decades, calypso, an African/creole musical form, has been used by its adherents to throw barbs at the Trinidad Indian community. The Indians, reports Anil Mahabir, were never able to devise a suitable response to the musical onslaught. Now there is pichakaree, English verse songs on social and political issues set to Indian rhythms. Pichakaree--named after the pump device used to spray colored powder on others

during Holi--is the brainchild of Sri Raviji, spiritual leader of the Hindu Prachar Kendra. His organization started an annual pichakaree song competition during the spring Holi (locally called Phagwa) celebrations. It started off as a minuscule show in the early 1990s, but it has now grown into a gala event. Not everyone likes it, and conservative pundits scoff at the concept. Yet, pichakaree has offered the Indian community a welcome medium through which they can respond, in like manner, to those who criticize and mock them in this, a highly cosmopolitan society. As one song says, "Long ago Indians were silent; when our culture was under attack; now they have become virulent, and they not taking that." Not Grammy material, but it's got soul.

Briefly...

The Shankaracharya of Kanchi, Jayendra Saraswati Swamigal, led an anti-cow-slaughter protest march through the streets of Chennai in September. The American organization, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, has publicized the horrific conditions of the slaughter trade and called for a ban on Indian leather.

Sister Francesco of the Missionaries of Charity, founded by Mother Teresa, was charged in a Calcutta court with torturing a seven-year-old girl. The nun is alleged to have burnt the girl and several others on the hand as punishment for stealing.

Reincarnation became a hot topic in Israel when a leading ultraconservative rabbi

said the Jews who died under Hitler were "reincarnations of the souls of sinners, people who transgressed. They had been reincarnated in order to atone." The country's chief rabbi, Israel Meir Lau, himself a Holocaust survivor, said Judaism has a concept of reincarnation and of the righteous dying to atone for sin in a previous life but, he told Israel radio, that this did not account for the Holocaust.

A university of Chicago Study of 2,867 couples concluded that when a wife works more than 40 hours a week, her husband's health declines by 25%. Ross Stolzenberg, the study's author, also found "One of the worst things a man can do for his health is to get divorced." The reason seems to be that women are far better at paying attention to family health and well-being, and when they do not

have the time to do so, or are absent, men cannot compensate.

Nottingham City Hospital in the United Kingdom has observed that vegetarian moms have daughters 20% more than expected. The national birth ratio of boys to girls is 106 boys to 100 girls, but the rate for veggie moms was 85 boys to 100 girls. The statistics are based on 6,000 mothers, of whom five percent were vegetarians. There are no theories as to the reason, which may lie in special local conditions.