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Diaspora

USA

Strong Women

Shamita Das dasgupta is one of two Indian-American women whose images grace the 12-poster series of Asian American Women of Hope, produced by the National Health and Human Services Employees Union. The Union initiated the poster campaign to provide positive role models for the young. The 18-by 24-inch posters are now in thousands of schools, colleges, libraries and public places across the US. Dasgupta is one of the founders of Manavi, the first advocacy group in the US for South Asian women which runs Ashiana, a transitional home for abused women.

BANGLADESH

Devastated by Floods

There are times to pray for life-giving water. And there's Bangladesh, where it's the other way around--praying for life-taking water to go away. The country's most ferocious and longest floods this century claimed nearly 1,000 lives between July and September, 1998. An already struggling economy faced more trouble as the floods put 52 of the country's 64 districts under water, including two-thirds of Dhaka, the capital. Hinduism Today correspondent Bashudeb Dhar reports that agriculture, infrastructure and industry were severely damaged: two million tons of rice was lost, and 2,000 kilometers of embankments and 600 km of water supply lines

were badly affected. Bangladesh's government estimated that 30 million people were severely impacted (millions of them are Hindus), hence it requested ^{US}\$800 million in emergency donations. On September 16, Hindu women engaged in special prayers for the floods to recede, which they did just days later!

UNITED KINGDOM

Pull, Pull, Pull!

A record-breaking crowd of nearly 15,000 devotees celebrated the 15th annual chariot festival of London's Murugan Temple on August 16. A beautifully decorated chariot, holding an icon of Lord Murugan, took to the streets of Manor Park, East London. Pulled by men, women and children singing with traditional nagaswaram musicians, it rolled on for two hours, according to Hinduism Today contributor Rajas Sivanathan. Hundreds of houses and shops were blessed along the way. It was the culmination of ten days of special pujas and homas. The present temple is being reconstructed at an estimated cost of ^{US}\$5.8 million.

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78 CHURCH ROAD, MANOR PARK, LONDON E12

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THAILAND

Vegies & Fire

About 150 years ago a fatal epidemic hit Chinese workers in Phuket, Thailand. Realizing they forgot to pray to certain Gods, they started a yearly tradition of refraining from eating meat and other sensual activities for nine days. Ever since, the epidemic vanished. Today the October festival includes kavadi, where the faithful perform penance by piercing their bodies with spears. Hindus at the large Sri Mariamman temple in Bangkok (below) also carry bowls of fire.

CELEBRITIES

Host of Spirit

There's little question that Oprah Winfrey,

44, is the most influential, wealthiest woman in US entertainment today. Her Oprah Winfrey Show remains television's most successful and respected talk program. Now the show has a new direction--she calls it "Change Your Life TV"--and a commitment to improving viewers' lives. Her own philosophy is the driving force. "I meditate every day," she told TV Guide magazine in October. "What's worked for me is that truly, in the deepest part of myself, I know who I am is connected to who everybody else is. That is a gift if you really know it, because it means you walk through life not judging other people. And you realize their mistakes just come in a different form, different color, different package from yours."

INDIA

Packin' the Pachyderms

About 40 lucky tuskers in Kerala had one cool meal on July 17, 1998. But not because they asked for it. July, the twelfth month of the Malayalam Era, is the month of scarcity and hardships because of incessant monsoon rains and floods. Each year Hindus therefore offer a special feast to elephants as a prayer to Lord Ganesha, God of abundance, to alleviate their sufferings.

This year the elephants--ranging in age from four to 65--lined up before the famous Vadakkumnathan Siva temple in Thrissur. A special "Ashtadravya Mahaganapathi Homa" using 1,008 coconuts, molasses, sesame oil, sugar cane, lemon, rice flakes and rice corn initiated the ceremonies, reports Hinduism Today correspondent

Vrindavanam S. Gopalakrishnan. The expectant pachyderms were then offered 500 kilograms of sweet rice cooked with tumeric, honey, molasses and sesame oil. Plus they munched on pineapple, plantains and sugar cane--adored by Ganesha. Four-year-old baby elephant "Hariprasad" got the first portion from Raman Namboothiri, the temple's head priest.

Thrissur is the site of the famous Porram festival. Held every April, 100,000 people attend the non-stop, 30-hour celebration featuring 100 gold-caparisoned elephants and concluding with fireworks costing ^{US} \$150,000. The high point is the hour-long kudamatorn, a competition wherein mahouts upon two rows of fifteen tuskers face each other, offering a rapid changing of fans, umbrellas and other decorations

from atop their elephants.

ENCYCLOPEDIA

Another Step

Indian Prime Minister Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee presided over a September 26 celebration of the formal publishing contract between the University of South Carolina Press and the Indian Heritage Research Foundation for the Encyclopedia of Hinduism. At New York's Hilton Towers, Vajpayee asked that the team of 1,250 scholars "mine the immense hidden wealth of Hinduism in science and spirituality." The 18-volume set will include 3,500 photos and six million

words--covering 12 categories, from fine arts to women's studies.

THE VEDAS God's Word, Sages' Voices

O man and woman, having acquired knowledge from the learned, proclaim amongst the wise the fact of your intention of entering the married life. Attain to fame, observing the noble virtue of nonviolence, and uplift your soul. Shun crookedness. Converse together happily. Living in a peaceful home, spoil not your life; spoil not your progeny. In this world, pass your life happily, on this wide earth full of enjoyment!

YAJUR VEDA 5.17

O divines, may the husband and wife, who with one accord, offer the elixer of dedication with pure heart and propitiate you with the milk of sweet devotional prayers--constantly associated, may they acquire appropriate food, may they be able to offer sacrifice and may they never fail in strength and vigor.

RIG VEDA 8.31.5?6

May the Provident One lead you, holding your hand! May the two

Asvins transport you on their
chariot! Enter your house as that
household's mistress. May authority
in speech ever be yours!

RIG VEDA 10.85.26

Who Is a Hindu?

"Acceptance of the Vedas with
reverence; recognition of the
fact that the means or ways to
salvation are diverse; and the
realization of the truth that
the number of Gods to be

worshiped is large, that indeed is the distinguishing feature of the Hindu religion." B.G. Tilak's definition of what makes one a basic Hindu, as quoted by India's Supreme Court. On July 2, 1995, the Court referred to it as an "adequate and satisfactory formula."