Briefly...
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WESTERN MEDIA tended to be less interested in the Kumbha Mela than other religious celebrations at the same time, despite the Mela's size. According to an analysis by internet whiz Peshala Dikel, a total of 70 stories on the Mela could be found on major news websites between January and May, 1998, whereas 435 could be found on the Haj, the yearly Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, and countless numbers on Easter and Passover. Mela reports tended to be brief, and focused on the exotic side--the San Jose Mercury, one of the largest circulation newspapers in America, even put their May 19 report under a section called "News of the Weird," and noted 300 million gallons of sewage enter the Ganga daily; another report referred to "snake charmers." By contrast, the Mercury (as did other major papers) carried several long articles on the Haj, including excellent pilgrim profiles, but incorrectly labeled the pilgrimage "the world's most-attended religious event"--a distinction which belongs to the Mela.

A NINE-YEAR-OLD BANYAN and four-year-old neem tree were recently "wedded" amidst Vedic chanting at a temple in Kerala, India. It was necessary, because according to tradition, a banyan grows best when wedded to a neem tree. A huge banyan tree (over 1,200 years old) was uprooted at the same spot in 1989. That old tree--considered a Brahmin--was cremated with traditional rites, and this new sapling planted in its place.

WHAT'S A TEEN TO DO AFTER SCHOOLWORK is finished? Get religious--that's what 800 enthused youth did big time in Sydney, Australia, in April, holding dynamic karma and reincarnation conferences and workshops inspired by a Malaysian, Dato J. Jagadeesan. Forming a Community of Hindu TRAC (Tradition, Religion, Aspiration, Culture), the youths' aim is to "re-affirm traditional values that form the cornerstone of the Hindu faith." Weekly TRAC meetings include insightful talks on Hinduism plus classes in rangoli and garland making, traditional cooking and more.

ON JUNE 3 THE USCONGRESS UNANIMOUSLY passed a "tithing bill" that insures secular charities and religious institutions can retain donations given by people who later file for bankruptcy. The bill was in response to a case in which a bankruptcy trustee demanded and got the return of $13,450 given to a church by a couple in the year prior to their bankruptcy filing.

MUSLIMS IN HYDERABAD, INDIA, incensed by Islam-bashing pamphlets, attacked Hindus in June for several days, the riots leaving nine dead and forty injured. The pamphlets included drawings of Islamic symbols under the foot of Lord Ganesha, with text claiming Ganesha the "God of all." The source for the pamphlets was unclear.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN is widespread in Nepal and while 95 percent of the country is aware of it, nothing is being done, says Dr. Arzu Rana-Deuba, wife of former Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba. And it's still common elsewhere. But so are efforts, now, to provide outlets for battered wives. What To Do When Love Turns Violent (Harper Perennial) is a

great resource, written by a lady who spent three years preparing to escape with her children from a violent husband. The U.N. says 20 to 50 percent of married women worldwide are domestically abused.

THOUSANDS OF BUDDHISTS greeted Buddha's tooth when it arrived in Taiwan from India in April. "We pray for Buddha's blessings," said Taiwanese Premier Vincent Siew. The tooth, one of three reportedly found after Buddha was cremated 2,400 years ago, is said to bless and protect those who live where it is housed. Taiwan needs blessings, being recently hit with violent crime, corruption scandals and aviation disasters. China disputes the tooth's authenticity, claiming only two have been found--one in Beijing, the other in Sri Lanka.

SHADOW PUPPET MASTERS WORLDWIDE held a rare conference in Larissa, Greece, to explore how to resuscitate their flagging craft. It was found that India has preserved one of the purest forms of shadow theater, and despite years of waning popularity, it's making a comeback there. Nagabhushana Sarma, an English professor, spent two decades encouraging family troupes to continue performing their elaborate all-night shows in Hindu temples during festivals. "When there are no rains, villagers ask puppeteers to come and perform religious stories," he said. And the rains come!

INDIA'S HINDU MAJORITY IS UNCERTAIN, according to a research firm in Baroda. A 1991 census (covering 1981?1991) shows the Muslim population increased 32 percent and Hindus 23 percent. A reason commonly cited for this difference is lack

of education among Muslims, because less educated people have higher birth rates. But this may not be true, because in the Muslim-dominated state of Kerala--with its 100 percent literacy rate--Muslims increased by 25 percent and Hindus just 13 percent. If the present rate of increase continues, in 2161 the Muslim population in India will reach 5.3 billion and surpass that of Hindus, who will be 4.9 billion.

EIGHT YEARS AGO LOCALS thought Budhdeo Yadav, 70, was mad. How else could they explain his plan to carve 528 steps up to the hilltop Sidhnath temple in Bihar, India? But "Yadav is well respected now," says Kedar Bharati, the temple priest. Before he built the steps, devotees had to scramble through dense brush. Though the government constructed a flight of steps on the other side of the hill in 1995, most devotees prefer Yadav's stairs.

TREMORS FROM THE AYODHYA Babri Masjid demolition six years ago (riots left 1,200 dead) are strong in India's parliament, intensified by lobbying for construction of a new Rama temple. Meanwhile, Rajasthan artisans, unaware of the debate and Supreme Court order to maintain status quo on the disputed site, are quietly shaping pink sandstone pillars--each 16 feet high--as per directions from the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. Thirty pillars have already been shipped to Ayodhya. The proposed temple will be 268 feet long, 140 feet wide and 128 feet high, and cost US$12.5 million.