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Letters

Great Festival Articles

Thank you for such unique coverage on Hindu customs, culture and more ("15 Hindu Festivals," Apr/May/June 2010). The articles are also a condensed history of the people of Bharat. They clearly describe their everyday life based on dharma, the universal love and life leading to peace and goodwill. The what, when and how of various festivals, celebrations, prayers, avatars and more are covered. The articles are small enough for easy reading but informative enough to show how the ancients lived according to practices developed by rishis over thousands of years for an ideal and fulfilling life. Unfortunately, foreign invaders with lower and corrupted values mistakenly introduced their own lower civilizational standards based on greed, power and wealth accumulation, which over time resulted in the demoralization of today's Hindu society. It is time for Hindus to understand and appreciate this fact and go back to dharma. The need to drop superficial barriers created as a result of generations of foreign rule is becoming more acute over time.

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Sita Sings the Blues

It was very disappointing to read Lavina Melwani's fawning review of Nina Paley's "Sita Sings the Blues" (Oct/Nov/Dec 2010). This work can be said to be a good example of a bad American trait of petty self-absorption in elevating herself to the position of the revered and self-sacrificing Sita, and then bringing down Rama as an example of a wife-abandoning husband. Paley's work's puerile superficiality and Melwani's uncritical review is bad enough. It adds insult to injury for a Hindu to have to read this in a magazine for Hindus dedicated to Hindu issues.

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There has been some criticism of the animated movie "Sita Sings the Blues." It is not, in my opinion, a children's movie. I say this because this film delves into such topics as spousal abandonment. I wish to clarify the misuse of a term that I hear often: religious fundamentalist. For example, I am a fundamentalist Hindu in the sense that I hold the faith dear to me. I incorporate my spiritual and religious beliefs into my everyday life and hope that my words and my actions are a positive reflection on the path that I follow. Those people who have made threats against Nina Paley are not fundamentalist Hindus. They are known as religious fanatics. What is most shameful about religious fanatics is that these zealots often violate the very teachings of the faith they claim to be a part of.

"Sita Sings the Blues" is a fascinating animated movie. Nina Paley tells the story of Rama and Sita from the perspective of a woman (Ms. Paley) who can relate to Sita and Sita's trials and tribulations to prove Her (Goddess Sita's) purity to Lord Rama. Ms. Paley intertwines her own story of spousal abandonment in this movie.

"Sita Sings the Blues" is nothing short of an intense theological exercise. It is a movie that will give a person quite a bit of food for thought. I think every ashram, and every college that has an Eastern Religious Studies program, should have this DVD in their library. Needless to say I shall incorporate "Sita Sings the Blues" into my discussions about Hinduism.

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With a sad heart, I am reading the Oct/Nov/Dec 2010 issue of Hinduism Today, to which I have subscribed for many years. I always had great respect for your illustrious publication, as you always strived to defend Hindu thought and beliefs in a Western society, providing balanced, insightful articles. However, as a devotee of Lord Ram, I am deeply saddened and offended that you chose such an inappropriate image from "Sita Sings the Blues" for the cover. I also find your unflattering article on the topic biased, and I feel you do not make enough effort in the article to correct misrepresentations about Ramayan. What pains me most is

that this happened in the very publication that in the past has fought such misrepresentations of the Hindu faith.

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If someone from another country, with a different culture, does something when in your house that in your culture is considered rude or inappropriate, but you know they didn't mean anything by what they did and that they were operating by the norms of their society, would you still choose to be offended? I think Nina Paley's actions have to be viewed in terms of her intent in order to determine whether there was any real insult. In her culture, sacred texts are not untouchable, and are regularly reinterpreted by people, which is pretty typical of the way the Ramayana has been historically treated, with no single version existing but, in fact, many.

It's totally missing the mark to say that she insulted Sita. She clearly sympathized with Sita and even identified with Her, as she perceived her own circumstances to be similar to Sita's. There is no challenge from Nina to Sita, but to Ram's integrity as a husband and a man, and she makes that challenge pretty dead on. And indeed, many people in India have as well. Why should it be inappropriate for her to do so because her skin is white?

James Nigh
via Facebook

I sympathize with people who are hurt and offended by what feels like an attack on their faith, and I appreciate those who are trying to approach this rationally. Sometimes those two views are very difficult to reconcile. I'm Hindu, and a hereditary priestess in a line of priests and priestesses, educated in rites, scriptures and philosophy by my parents. In my tradition, critical discussion of the sacred text is commonplace. Hinduism has a strong scriptural tradition of commentary (e.g. Upanishads); and there is often virulent disagreement among scholars and priests.

There are many versions of the Ramayana. I simply see "Sita Sings the Blues" as another one. The commentary is in a more contemporary form. Ms. Paley has studied the Ramayana like any good scholar, and now is trying to make sense of it through her own experience.

I understand that many Hindus find it offensive. I'm not one of them. I think the Ramayana is strong, wise and ancient enough that it can take some modern commentary without crumbling. I think it is enriched and can offer greater wisdom by being flexible; much like Hinduism itself, it can play many roles in the manifestation of divine wisdom.

In order to improve ourselves, as people, as cultures, as faiths, we have to think critically. We have to see that there are areas we can improve. We have to see that there is more than one way to understand something. To think critically is, to me, an act of love.

There are things in my sacred texts that I struggle to understand and come to terms with. My own relationship, as a woman, with Sita and the Ramayana has been uneasy most of my life. I have talked with many swamis, pandits and lay Hindus and non-Hindus alike. Insight has come from all sources. Ironically, it was Nina Paley's movie that helped me get over my dislike of Sita, and to see the character and what She represented (to me) in a compassionate way. I am not alone in being a Hindu/Indian woman who finds the character of Sita challenging.

Hinduism has a long tradition of debate and critical thinking. Some of that is satire. We cannot understand ourselves as Hindus, Indians, humans without some critical thought. Hinduism is diverse. The Ramayana is not only scripture, but also a verbal folk tradition. Ram leela is done in every village; it is different everywhere, and I have seen many that incorporate satire and sharp social and political criticism. I have seen it make politicians and priests squirm. It is of the people and for the people. Would anyone say that those villagers do not have the right to reinterpret the Ramayana? I don't think so.

Saumya Arya Haas
via Facebook

Hindu History Lessons

I am 19 years old, and I am studying to be a teacher. I saw a link to the website with your Hindu history lessons for middle-schoolers. Thank you for such a great work, which makes the subject easy to understand. School books here in Norway don't have all of this information about India, and most of what they do have is incorrect. Being proud of my religion and culture, I want to teach kids the right thing.

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Treatment of Monkeys

Is the persecution of monkeys in Mauritius something that Hindus should fight against? After all, Hanuman is revered by Hindus. Should we get together and tell the government in Mauritius to stop ill treatment of them, sending them to labs abroad to be tortured and killed? Hindus should have a say and persuade the government to stop this barbaric trade.

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Thank You, Hinduism Today

I learned of your inspiring monastery when a guest of the ashram I am living at left a copy of Hinduism Today in the library. Even though the copy was eight years old, I enjoyed it so much, and more copies have come since. The selection of news stories of all kinds, written with excellence and sympathy, brought me a sense of connection to other Hindus, which I have been lacking, since reading news of the world is discouraged in the ashram. I was especially inspired by the article "Teaching Children to Forge a Peaceful Future" (Jul/Aug/Sep 2003). I believe in right action in the face of tragedy perpetrated by those who act with himsa.

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Corrections

Makara Sankranti takes place when the Sun moves from Sagittarius to Capricorn, not from Capricorn to Sagittarius, as incorrectly given in "Global Dharma: Ganga Sagar's Shifting Shores" (Jul/Aug/Sep 2010).

In "Holi" (Apr/May/Jun 2010), we incorrectly refer to the legend of "Holika and her brother Prahlad." Rather, it should read, "Holika and her nephew Prahlad."

Perceiving That We Are One Spiritual Family

How generosity helps reach hearts and souls

I am a Hindu to the core, have been my whole life, and for many lives before that," explains David Wiekrykas who was born in the US 55 years ago of Lithuanian ancestry.

Since he was a child, David has been blessed with profound spiritual experiences. When he was 13, he had a life-transforming "lightning experience" one day as he was walking the hallways of his school. Later, having become an auto worker at General Motors in Detroit, "I had a vision of the Divine Mother right in the factory, among the deafening noise and hubbub. I was really taken aback!" Today, he has come to be known as a spiritual light among his co-workers and bosses, who often come to him for upliftment.

David lives alone because years ago he vowed to be a brahmachari the rest of his life. "I wanted to dedicate my life to God," he says. His world today is one of daily inner experiences and rare insights.

In explaining his connection with Hinduism Today, David has to go back to the 1940's when on two occasions his paramaguru, Paramahansa Yogananda, met Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (Gurudeva), the magazine's founder. "The

power of those meetings established a deep rapport that still vibrates today." Later, Gurudeva met David's guru, Roy Eugene Davis, a direct disciple of Yogananda and head of the Center for Spiritual Awareness.

"I saw the two of them as great and rare old souls who had known each other before. They remained in constant touch thereafter. And the electricity from my own meetings with Gurudeva feeds my soul to this day. We are one spiritual family."

Since David was introduced to Hinduism Today by his guru in 1992, he has read every word of every article of every issue. "Hinduism Today not only tells about the Hindu renaissance, it is helping to bring it about. The information it contains is the stuff of life, it is the power of creation, like everything Hindu. Because my guru introduced me to it, I feel his presence in it. He speaks to me through the words. There is no difference between us. Hinduism Today is my resource, my guru and my own voice at the same time."

David has generously made the Hindu-ism Today Production Fund, which is a part of Hindu Heritage Endowment, a beneficiary in his estate plan. "The magazine is getting the message out there at a time when the world needs it most, and I can't think of a better cause to support," he said.

Please consider helping create an abundant future for Hinduism Today by including the Production Fund in your estate plan. This makes for a powerful gift that will empower our magazine and greatly benefit future generations. Ask for our Planned Giving Toolkit by contacting one of our monastic staff at 1-808-634-5407 or hhe@hindu.org. Visit www.hheonline.org/productionfund and subscribe to the Production Fund e-newsletter at: www.gurudeva.org/email-news