Global Dharma
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New York

Tradition Versus Environment

New York park rangers and Hindus are in a stand-off over holy debris in Jamaica Bay, which is part of New York State's Gateway National Recreation Area. According to a New York Times report, Hindu offerings to Mother Ganga are a mounting problem. Coconut shells, decaying limes, water-logged colored cloth, incense sticks, pictures and even cremation ashes are washing up on shore. Rangers responsible for the fragile habitat, an enclosed bay that does not sweep refuse away, are trying to be diplomatic, talking to Hindu groups to educate them on the environmental pollution and "Leave No Trace" policies. But Hindu priests are not willing to tell devotees they cannot make what some consider obligatory offerings to Ganga. Some Hindus are collaborating with officials on clean up, while others continue making offerings.

Idaho

Public Ganesha Protested

Lake Coeur is one of America's fabulous scenic Rocky Mountain tourist magnets. Locals work hard to overcome Northern Idaho's stigma of being a center for the white supremacy group, Aryan Nations. But Coeur d'Alene City officials received another publicity blow after including a sculpture of Ganesha in a year-long public art display. The Kootenai Constitution Party, claiming that the US was founded on Christianity, protested the piece, calling it an "abomination" installed by a "godless group." Some local citizens reacted by citing freedom of religion and mounted a protest to protest the protesters. The art stayed.

Kerala

Gigantic Chariot Splendor

In the malayalam month of kumbha each year in the dis-trict of Alappuzha in Kerala, Hindus conduct the Kettukazhcha festival. It is perhaps the most extravagant of all Hindu temple chariot festivals. Instead of the Deity leaving the temple for a public parade, devotees build elaborate towering offerings and pull

them with great energy to the temple. Each of the big temples in Alappuzha has attached village areas called karas. After Maha Sivaratri each year, in the days preceding the bharani nakshatra, karas artisans vie with each other to create the most intricately decorated kuthiras (effigies) , some reaching 70-80 feet. The most famous are the Nandi bulls that are taken to the Padanilam Parabrahma temple where Lord Siva is present as the integration of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva and the gigantic chariots carrying kuthiras of Bhima and Hanuman who are taken to the 1,200 year-old Bhagavathi temple in Chettikulangara. Devotees also offer miniature kuthiras. On the afternoon of aswini nakshtra, the whole village departs for the temple, the men pulling the chariot. The arrival of multiple ratham at the temple is a huge, exciting spectacle. The main festival rites are done the following morning during bharani nakshatra and then the rathas return home for another year.

Karnataka

Predatory Conversions

By R. Guru Prasad

Dr. M. Chidanandamurthy, noted researcher, columnist and a social activist in Bangalore, released a case study in March, 2011, on Christians proselytizing with cash. Murthy and his friend Ramachandra Upadhya where shocked by discoveries they made in Manjunathanagar near Marathhalli. First, Murthy reports, missionaries identify Hindu families who are financially weak. Evangelists and their local agents go to low-income homes carrying sweets and an attractive, framed image of Jesus. Money is offered if the family will include Jesus in the home shrine. Phase two comes a few weeks later: another cash payment to place Jesus more visibly over and above the Hindu Gods. In phase three another, larger cash gift is paid to those who discard all images of Hindu Gods and Goddesses. Afraid to throw images and sculptures of Hindu Gods into the dust bin, poor, gullible Hindus place them in the premises of Vasuki Subramanya Temple out on the national Highway.

In the next stage, more money is used to induce families to fully embrace Christianity and display Christian symbols in their house. Murthy comments in his study: "It is a bargain, and if the converted Christian is willing to wear a cross around his neck, he gets another bonus from the agents who also earn incentive money for their work from foreign funds used by Christian missionaries." He notes that agents are also preying on Hindus who are sick, offering a free prayer meeting to get rid of diseases under the guise of converting them to Christianity under the pretext of a "faith" healing.

United Kingdom

Brent Cuts Events Funding

Among a population of over 260,000 in the London borough of Brent, seventeen percent declared themselves Hindu in the 2001 census. Brent's generous policy to provide financial support for 14 annual ethnic festivals is being reduced due to lack of funds. In June, 2011, 6,000 residents petitioned to continue support for Navaratri, pleading their case for its cultural value. Their bid was successful. Navaratri was kept in the 2011 budget, as was Diwali, which was attended by 60,000 in 2010 compared to 1,000 for the Saint Patrick's day parade. Based on "equality assessments," however, support for more activities may be reduced in 2012, including Navaratri, Saint Patrick's Day parades, Islam's Eid day, and even Christmas street lights.

India

Hindu Priests Bereft of Brides

A May report by K. Venugopal in the Deccan Chronicle highlights a growing problem in South Kerala. Hundreds of young priests are in distress because no family is willing to give them a bride. "They are in a very sad situation," said Akkeraman Kalidasa Bhattathiripad, president of the Yogakshema Sabha. An office-bearer of the sabha, Mr. Radhakrishnan Potti, explained, "Priests are officially equivalent to sweepers in the Travancore Devaswom Board's (TDB--a government-appointed Hindu temple administration body) scheme. Despite umpteen demands, the arrogant TDB is not even willing to give them the post of sub-group officer." With no status and a salary of only Rs 5,000 a month (US$112.00) no prospective bride's family will have them. "Priests don't even have a welfare fund, since they are not even considered employees," Potti added.

Nepal

Macchendranatha Lives on

Rato Macchendranatha'stemple is located in South Tabahal, Nepal. The God of rain, He is considered a form of Siva by Hindus, while Buddhists believe the Deity to be a manifestation of Avalokiteshwara. Each year, following the Nepali New Year, a huge wooden chariot wheels the image of the Red Macchendranath around Patan City in a series of complex celebrations to invoke monsoon rains. Despite the overthrow of the king and a new, leftist government, this year's festival ran with as much zeal as ever.

Neuroscience

Healthier Multilingual Brains

Hindu parents who try tocajole their kids to keep up or learn a second language can now bring some hard science to that discussion. Dr. Ellen Bialystok is a cognitive neuroscientist working at York University in Toronto, Canada, who has researched bilingual brains for almost forty years. Her research hit the limelight in 2010 when she received the prestigious $100,000 Killam Prize for her contributions to social science.

Her research shows that bilingual brains have better cognitive skills and "executive control systems" more capable of managing and filtering information. Being bilingual can also delay symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. Bialystok adds, "Learning other languages is important because it helps you understand other people, other cultures, other ways of thinking. Even if it didn't change your brain, there are just so many benefits."

Ayurveda/Natural Medicine

Natural Medicines Are Now Regulated in Europe

Alternative health care practitioners are up in arms. Dreaded new regulations called the Traditional Herbal Medicinal Products Directive (THMPD) went into effect for member countries of the European Union in April, 2011. Critics point out that compliance with quality control requirements and the dossier for registration can cost as much as us$80,000 for a single herb and us$300,000 for a product with multiple ingredients. Small companies with diverse products are knocked out of the market. Getting authorization to sell any herbal product requires vendors to demonstrate that it has been in use in the EU for 30 years, or 15 years within the EU and 30 years outside the EU. Even when such usage can be established (for example a product made with tumeric, amala and boswelia may have been in use for fifteen years in the European Union and over 30 years in India) the cost to register is prohibitive.

Control now rests in the hands of the European Medicines Agency (EMA), based in London, which approves registration for all medicinal products--modern drugs, vitamins and herbals alike, and is accused of bias toward big pharmaceutical interests.

In June, 2011, the European Parliament refused to sign off on EMA accounts, with members accusing the EMA of working to protect pharmaceutical profits. The Parliament's revelations validate claims that THMPD was developed under the influence of World Health Organization's drive for global implementation of Codex Alimentarius, the UN "health food book." Critics point out that WHO gets two thirds of its funding from pharmaceutical companies. In the US, vitamins and herbals are still classified as foods and, at least for now, are freely available.

Briefly

Teenagers in mumbai are being trained to do puja to make up the deficit in priests required to perform rites for the annual Ganesha Chaturthi celebrations. Over 12,000 mandals and 180,000 households need to have pujas done, but the city only has about 4,000 priests. Under the program, which is conducted by the Brihanmumbai Sarvajanik Ganeshotsav Samanvaya Samiti in Mumbai, elder priests will mentor and initiate youngsters, teach them a selection of Vedic chants and honor them with an priestly title.

A US state court of appeals has allowed a lawsuit by sixteen Hindus who were unknowingly served meat to go forward. If the Hindus win, the Mogul Express in Edison, New Jersey, which served them meat-filled samosas, may pay travel costs to India to obtain purification rites.

The digitization project of palm leaf manuscripts at the French Institute in Pondicherry, which was conceived and managed by our own hinduism today team, was completed in June, 2011. Total photos of palm leaves (and a few books) in Grantha, Devanagiri and Tamil: 1,017,324.

The incredible treasure recently found in the vaults of the 16th Century Sree Padmanabhaswamy in Kerala is still being counted, with more crypts yet to be opened. The total value of gold and silver jewelry and precious stones found so far is said to exceed 1.5 lakh crore, or over 30 billion dollars. We plan do a story in the January, 2012, issue.