Book Reviews
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Book Reviews

A Lineage of Mystic Masters

Anyone on the spiritual path knows it is rare that the illumined lives of yogis and gurus are laid before us. We have but a handful: Autobiography of a Yogi; Milarepa: Tibet's Great Yogi; Ramakrishna and His Disciples and a few others. Now comes The Guru Chronicles, filled with the magical and mystical stories of seven masters of an ancient lineage--five from recent times and two from long ago. The swamis at Kauai's Hindu Monastery in Hawaii--that would be us, the editors of Hinduism Today--began this labor of love 39 years ago, so we can't be accused of a hurried effort. All our writing and design skills from decades of experience are on display in this 832-page ride through 2,200 years of our gurus' history.

We know how to tell a tale (if we do say so ourselves) but we also knew when to step aside and let the great sages speak for themselves, quoting directly and often from the masters' own oral and written legacies. This brings an intimacy and immediacy to the stories. You are hearing about God directly from those who knew God within.

The book would be a unique accomplishment if that was all there was, but the precious illustrations graciously supplement the engaging text. The late S. Rajam sequestered himself for two years in a tiny studio in Chennai, crafting hundreds of paintings, all grounded in the South Indian art language.

As the book begins, a young man, who will one day become Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (1927-2001), sails to India and Sri Lanka in 1947 aboard the first vessel to leave America after World War II. He is off to find his guru. After years of arduous training, he falls at the feet of the Tamil master, Siva Yogaswami of Jaffna. Following his guru's orders, the enlightened yogi returns to America to teach the path to God Realization.

Hinduism's many guru lineages are the spiritual rivers that pass the power on through the ages. The story hearkens back to the progenitor of Subramuniyaswami's lineage, Maharishi Nandinatha, some 2,200 years ago in the Himalayas, then tells of his disciple, Rishi Tirumular. Jumping forward to the 19th century, the authors weave together the histories of a nameless Rishi from the Himalayas, the magic-making Kadaitswami, an unkempt sage named Chellappaswami and his disciple Siva Yogaswami before returning to the story of our modern sage, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami.

Hindu history is replete with stories of noble souls who are born to uplift and guide mankind. Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami was born in modern times to meet modern challenges--born, as he would say, "to protect, preserve and promote the Saiva Dharma," to bring the knowledge, worship and realization of God Siva into the 21st century.

Those close to Gurudeva, as he was affectionately known, saw his communion with the inner worlds, experienced his life of revelation and realization. He looked and acted like Siva Himself, tall, powerful, compassionate, urgent. He did things people don't do: created a new language, talked to the light-bodied devas, established America's first South Indian monastery, founded Hinduism's first international magazine (which you hold in your hands) to cultivate an abiding solidarity among all Hindus, saw and then recreated the future. Little wonder he was chosen by Yogaswami to carry on the Nandinatha Kailasa lineage. Little wonder he was recognized in the East as the West's first authentic satguru. Everything he did was to meet a need, to elevate consciousness, to preserve Hindu dharma for the future--not the nearest future, but the far future of thousands of years, what he loved to call "the future of futures."

The Guru Chronicles, by the Swamis of Kauai's Hindu Monastery, isbn 978-1-934145-39-5 (hardcover), 978-1-934145-40-1 (ebook), himalayan academy, 107 kaholalele road, kapaa, hi 96746 usa, $59.95, www.minimela.com

Hindu History For Schools

The editors of Hinduism today have just released The History of India from Ancient to Modern Times, written in collaboration with Dr. Shiva Bajpai, Professor Emeritus of History, University of California Northridge. It is a richly informative and entertaining book for Hindus and non-Hindus alike. Written for 6th and 7th grade, it

is formatted as a typical textbook for these grade levels and includes exercises, tests, glossary and index, along a Hindu festival supplement.

The first chapter starts with the threads of Hindu practice evident in the Indus-Sarasvati civilization, the largest and, in many ways, the most advanced of the ancient civilizations. This chapter covers Indian history to 300ce and describes the major aspects of the Hindu religion. The next chapter traces the development of Hinduism through the early empires of India, a time of great advances in science, architecture, art and literature--during which Europe was experiencing the Middle Ages. The third chapter covers the years of trial by invasion and the Hindu response in the Bhakti Movement. The fourth is on the mixed blessings of life as a British colony, which left what was once the world's richest nation impoverished. The fifth chapter opens with India's hard-won independence, its development into the world's largest democracy and third most powerful nation, and the spread of Hindus to nearly every country of the world. The book highlights the people, philosophical ideas and religious practices of each period that are key to the Hindu religion today.

The 128-page book, which includes many photographs, will be useful in public middle schools, temple classes and even college courses. It is an accurate, terse but comprehensive presentation of the world's most ancient faith and the history of India.

The History of Hindu India, by the Editors of Hinduism Today magazine and Dr. Shiva Bajpai, isbn 978-1-934145-38-8 (hardcover), 978-1-934145-41-8 (ebook), Himalayan Academy, 107 Kaholalele Road, Kapaa, HI 96746 USA, $19.95, www.minimela.com

Shocking Truths

In the blood never dried, john newsinger offers short, sharp pieces on moments and places of the British Empire. We read how the government decided that the free market would solve the Irish Potato Famine of 1846, resulting in a million deaths. We discover how the British murdered their way from Egypt to China; how, in the interests of free trade they fought two vicious wars for the right to sell opium to the Chinese and raped, pillaged and plundered the country.

The "Jewel in the Crown" of the Empire, India, makes for several interesting chapters documenting how the manner of British rule led directly to the uprising of 1857--Newsinger calls the event an uprising rather than a mutiny, as it is normally termed.

Newsinger argues that the brutal nature of the uprising, described with glee in the media of the time, was only brutal because it was a response to the violence of British rule up to that point. He quotes Karl Marx, writing at the time that however violent the action of the rebels, "It is only the reflex, in a concentrated form, of England's own conduct in India, not only during the epoch of the foundation of her Eastern Empire, but even during the last ten years of a long-settled rule." The violence of the British troops in putting down the revolt--often glorified as bravery and worthy of many medals--was characteristic of all of Britain's colonial rules.

excerpted with permission from a review by martin empson at resolutereader.blogspot.com

The Blood Never Dried, by John Newsinger, isbn 1-905192-12-6, Bookmarks Publications, 1 Bloomsbury Street, London Wc1b 3qe, UK, #11.99, www.bookmarksbookshop.co.uk

Protecting Hinduism

After Christianity and Islam, Hinduism is the world's largest religion and the largest of the non-Biblical traditions. While missionaries are virtually banned in China and in Islamic countries, in India they are typically tolerated, respected and given a wide scope of activity. Since Christianity is in decline, particularly in Europe, it has a need to find new converts, for which India is one of the main potential locations, particularly as a comparatively high percentage of Hindu converts are willing to become priests and nuns. Pope John Paul II, in a trip to India some ten years ago, spoke directly of looking for a "rich harvest of souls in the third millennium in Asia," specifically India.

Yet most Hindus and groups sympathetic to them are not aware of this "siege on Hinduism" that continues unrelenting as part of the multinational missionary business. In this context, Stephen Knapp's well-documented, deftly written book,

Crimes Against India: and the Need to Protect its Ancient Vedic Tradition, is most timely. The siege has been going on since the first Islamic armies and Christian missionaries entered India, as he clearly delineates, and has continued in various forms, violent, subversive or even charitably based.

excerpt from review by Dr. David Frawley

Crimes Against India: And the Need To Protect Its Ancient Vedic Tradition, by Stephen Knapp, isbn 978-1-440111-58-7, Iuniverse, 1663 Liberty Drive, Bloomington, IN 47403 usa, $24.95, bookstore.iuniverse.com

Music in the Diaspora

Remembered rhythms explores the role of music and cultural memory in shaping and creating diasporic identities. With contributions from leading scholars in the fields of ethnomusicology, cultural studies, sociology and anthropology, the essays range across the musical traditions of the Indian diaspora in Trinidad, the role of Hindi film music in the diaspora, the music of the African and Jewish diasporas in India, to more general issues at the heart of contemporary diaspora studies.

Remembered Rhythms: Essays On Diaspora And The Music Of India, edited by Shubha Chaudhuri and Anthony Seeger, isbn 978-1-905422-50-0, Seagull Books, distributed by The University of Chicago Press, $29.00, press.uchicago.edu

All About Giving

In a fast-modernizing society, are the old giving traditions doomed to die, or can these also be modernized and revived, helping fund the financial needs of a vibrant development sector? Sanjay Agarwal's Daan and Other Giving Traditions in India takes a close look at the varied traditions of charity among the orthodox. Priya Viswanath of Dana Asia writes, "At the onset, it is a work that takes the reader back to the basics in terms of understanding giving traditions...in various milieus." Mark Sidel of the University of Iowa adds, "Faith-based giving... needs to be better understood on its own terms, and in the diverse and changing forms in which it is practiced today in India if we are to have even the hope of a comprehensive understanding of the complex tapestry that is giving and philanthropy in India. [This] volume is of exceptional value for its discussion of the doctrine and history

underlying these faith-based motivations for charity and philanthropy, as well as for the detail of the research presented."

Daan And Other Giving Traditions In India, By Anjay Agarwal, isbn 978-8-191085-40-2, Accountaid, 55-b, Pocket C, Siddharth Extension, New Delhi, India, rs 500, www.accountaid.net

Temple Tales of India

India, a land where whole villages and towns are dedicated to God, has also been home to millions of temples large and small that have arisen over thousands of years. These edifices beckon believers and non-believers alike--by their sheer beauty if not their spiritual magnetism. As Mark Twain said, Indian pilgrimages sanctified by temples are "older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend." Each of these temples has a story to tell.

The author, who traveled across India with her notebook and camera, relates little-known stories, from hidden caves in the Himalayas to shimmering seas in the South, to a holy lake in the midst of a desert--in a refreshingly readable and adventurous manner. Eminent musician Pandit Jasraj, who wrote the foreword, comments, "This book is a beautiful piece of art created in search of the ultimate creativity: God."

Temple Tales From India, By Kumud Mohan, isbn 978-8-191027-90-7, Culture India, 28, Anand Lok, New Delhi 110 049, India, $79.00, kumudmohan _@_ gmail.com