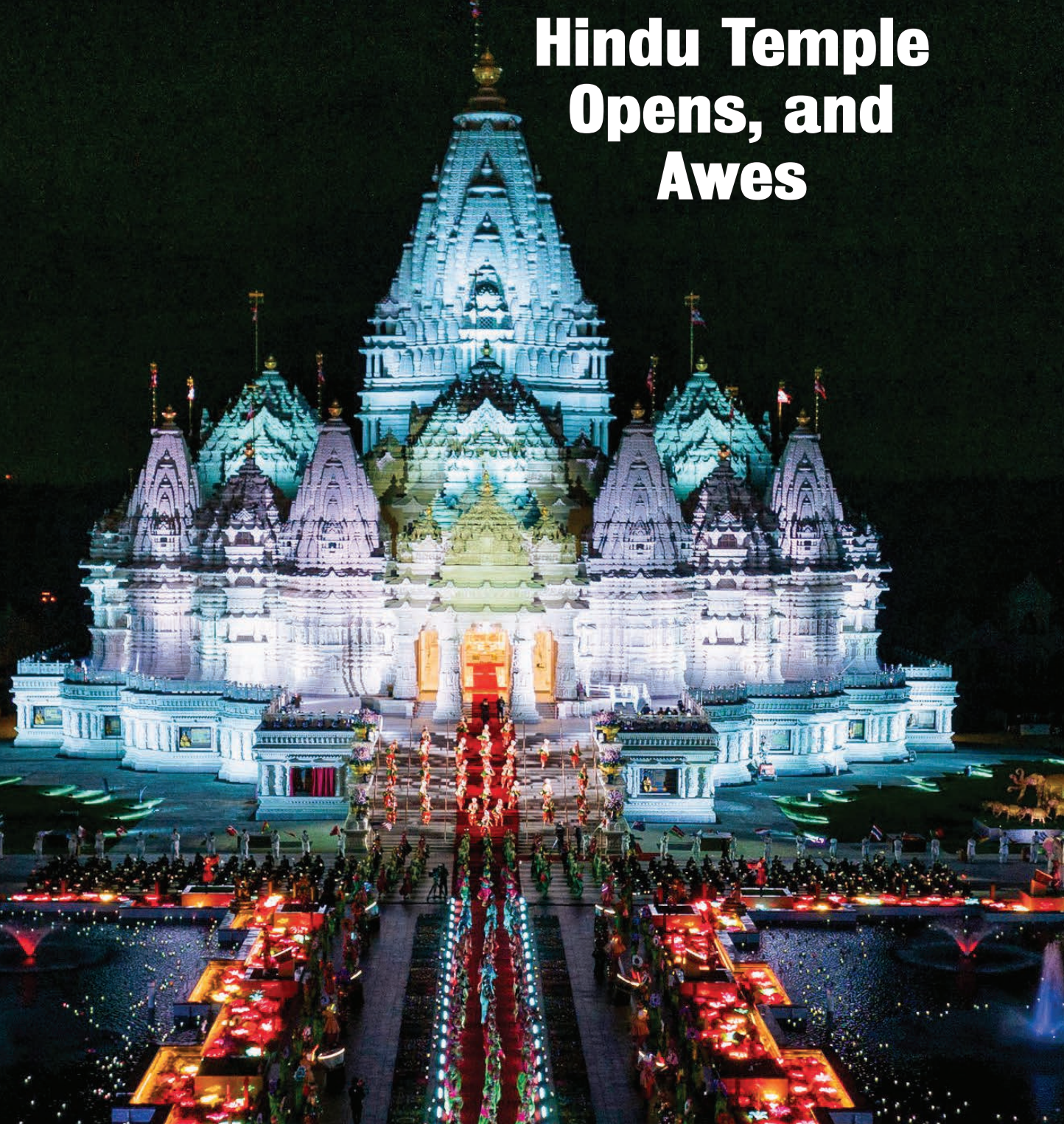


# HINDUISM TODAY

Affirming Sanatana Dharma and Recording the Modern History of a Billion-Strong Global Religion in Renaissance

## America's Immense Hindu Temple Opens, and Awes



(Left) Nighttime photo of the newly dedicated BAPS Akshardam Temple in New Jersey (page 30); (above) a young girl practices pranayama on a banyan tree branch, part of the 18-page Educational Insight on ashtanga yoga for children (page 36)

JANUARY/FEBRUARY/MARCH, 2024 • The Hindu Year Śobhakarṭa, 5125 • शोभकृत

*Bodhinatha Veylanawami* [www.gurudeva.org](http://www.gurudeva.org)

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# Kashmiris Welcome a New Temple to Goddess Sharḁa

This newly inaugurated temple is located on the Line of Control about 70 miles south of the ancient Sharḁa Peeth, now in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir. Hopes are high that a corridor will be opened for pilgrims to travel from this temple to the ancient Peeth ruins (inset photo below) .... Page 18

**Riverside Temple:** The new Sharḁa Temple, shown here with the hills of Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir in the background, sits just over a half mile from the Kishanganga River marking the Line of Control between Indian territory and PoK; (inset) derelict Sharḁa Peeth today in PoK



Sharda Peeth Today



# GLOBAL DHARMA

GHANA

## Two Ghanaian Hindus Take Sannyas Vow

IN MARCH 2023, THE INDIAN Social Cultural Center of Accra, Ghana, celebrated the initiation of two new renunciates. Weeks earlier, reports [Pulse.com.gh](https://pulse.com.gh), Swami Shankarananda and Swami Geetananda took vows in India on Mahasivaratri. They belong to the Hindu Monastery of Africa, the foremost indigenous Ghanaian Hindu organization, founded in 1975 by Swami Krishnanand Saraswati.

Swami Shankarananda was born into a Christian family, then delved into Buddhism and soon Hinduism, all before age 14. He joined the monastery in 2009 and recently completed the

Chinmaya Mission Vedanta program in India from 2020–2022.

Swami Geetananda belonged to the Presbyterian Church of Ghana before being introduced to Hinduism by her brother. She joined the monastery in 1983, guided by Swami Ghanananda Saraswati (1937–2016), the first black African Hindu monk, then by his successor Swami Satyananda Saraswati. Worshipping for many years, she was initiated as a brahmacharini

in 2018, then also took the same Chinmaya Mission Vedanta program from 2020–2022.

Kofi Dadzie, officiating at the event, said, “The path to enlightenment is the ultimate goal for every Hindu, so to have people of this distinguished calibre undergoing the training and finally being initiated as swamis is extraordinary.”

**New life:** (above) Swami Geetananda; (right) Swami Shankarananda. They are the third and fourth renunciates of the Hindu Monastery of Africa, which today has five branches in Ghana and another in Togo.



**More financial support:** The Hindu Forum of Belgium currently maintains this and nine other places of worship across the country

BELGIUM

## Hinduism Seeks Recognition

IN JULY 2023, THE BELGIAN GOVERNMENT approved an initial annual \$43,785 subsidy to the Hindu Forum of Belgium, with potential to be doubled. As shared in *The Brussels Times*, it's a significant milestone in the slow march towards Hinduism's recognition as an official religion. The Hindu Forum first applied for the status in 2013, and they expect the process to take another several years at least.

Belgian law currently offers official recognition to Catholicism, Protestantism, Anglicanism,

Islam, Judaism, Eastern-Orthodoxy and Buddhism, as well as several non-religious philosophical organizations. All receive government subsidies in proportion to the number of adherents. Official recognition means that priests or preachers can receive a state stipend and parents are able to choose to send their children to specialized religious schools.

The Hindu Forum estimates there are up to 40,000 active followers of Hinduism, including Western converts who account for almost half of this number.

nation. The annual Thap Ba festival here honors the Goddess. Yards away lies another temple where pregnant women receive blessings in the Goddess's name. For more temples and info, go to [tinyurl.com/hindutemplesvietnam](https://tinyurl.com/hindutemplesvietnam).

**Po Nagar Tower:** Additional towers in the same temple complex are dedicated to various Deities, including Lord Ganesha and Lord Siva.



VIETNAM

## Visit Ancient Hindu Temples

OUTLOOK TRAVELLER, INDIA'S largest travel magazine, recently published a guide to some of Vietnam's oldest surviving Hindu temples. They were built in the first millennium of the Common Era after traders and others from India ventured into Southeast Asia. These interactions led to the assimilation of

Hindu beliefs and practices into the local indigenous cultures, creating a unique blend.

For example, the Po Nagar Tower in Nha Trang, dedicated to Goddess Yan Po Nagar, was built under the supervision of Cham ruler Satyavarman in 784bce. Yan Po Nagar is revered as the mother figure of the

IRELAND

## Lord Murugan Finds a Home

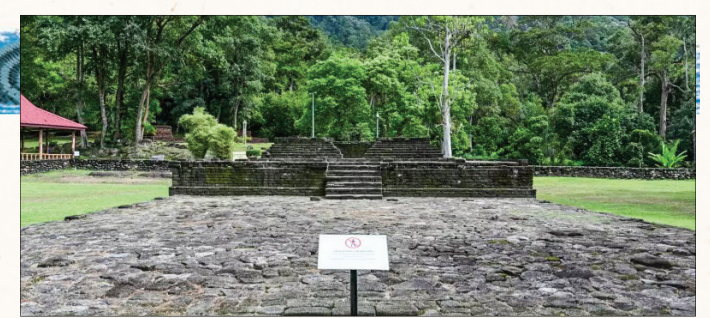
THE FIRST ANNIVERSARY OF the Ireland Murugan Temple in Athlone was held in June 2023. Perhaps by divine coincidence, the temple is located in a suburb called Monksland. Utilizing a small hall initially, it is the first Murugan temple in Ireland and first Hindu temple outside of Dublin.

The *Westmeath Independent*, on hand to document the event, said over 200 devotees gathered from all over Ireland, with more joining through a livestream. The temple's youth group performed Bharatanatyam dance and sang carnatic music.

Kandee Singham, founder of the temple, said, “This event was a great opportunity for all the temple devotees to come together and create a further unity amongst the Hindu and wider communities.” Michael Power, a local resident and the CEO of Involve Youth and

Community Services, said, “It was a wonderful experience to be invited to join this celebration; the community is a warm and welcoming one and I have gained a wealth of understanding of the Hindu culture.”

**Granting discernment:** A Vel is covered in sandal paste at the Ireland Murugan Temple



**Revealed:** Remains of a Hindu-Buddhist temple found in Kedah

MALAYSIA

## A Plea to Uncover Southeast Asia's Oldest Civilization

FROM 2007 TO HIS RETIREMENT in 2021, Professor Mokhtar Saidin and his team from Universiti Sains Malaysia uncovered evidence of a thriving iron export industry at the Sungai Batu archaeological site in Bujang Valley in the coastal state of Kedah. Dating as far back as 788bce, it is much older than the famous monuments of Borobudur (8th century) in Indonesia and Angkor Wat (12th century) in Cambodia, reports *Channel News Asia*.

For more than a century, researchers have dug up evidence

in Bujang Valley of Hindu-Buddhist temples, iron smelting sites and ancient relics. They say this is proof the area was a bustling, cosmopolitan trading port on the sea route from China to India and further on to Arabia. Mokhtar, who believes only ten percent of the area has been uncovered, is concerned that research has stalled since his retirement, partly due to local controversy of these ancient discoveries occurring in an Islamic country. He prays that officials will heed the call to continue exploration.

INDIA

## Scientists Visit Tirupati Temple before Moon Mission

*Excerpted from a opinion piece at Firstpost in July 2023 by Vijender Sharma*

IN THE RUN-UP TO THE LAUNCH of Chandrayaan-3, a team of scientists from Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) visited the Tirupati Venkateswalaraj temple in Andhra Pradesh, taking a miniature model of Chandrayaan-3 with them. As expected, a section of influencers and media personalities ridiculed the scientists, accusing them of being irrational and abandoning their belief in science in favor of the unknown. Such ridicule has happened before and is likely to happen again, as ISRO scientists will probably visit temples before future missions.

One can argue that a scientist visiting a temple is an irrational behavior and science alone should be paramount. These reactions, like many other

progressive ideas, trace their origins in the Western world. The soft power of the West, especially the US, influences the rest of the world, propagating Western ideas as the only truth. The same influence contributes to the ridicule of anything religious.

Is it strange that ISRO scientists are comfortable visiting a temple and don't find themselves in conflict with their scientific beliefs? The comfort doesn't come from being religious; it comes from knowing that Hinduism and science are not two opposing forces. They know this because, for them, both are complementary, both serve each other, both are at ease with each other.

From texts and archaeology, we know that science and religion in India were never opposed to each other, unlike in the West. In fact, people depended a great deal on science to practice their religion. From building

the altars to finding the right time to perform a ritual, people depended on astronomers and their astronomical tables. Imagine having to build a square altar and then a circular one with the same area as that of the square altar. This could only be possible if one knew the value of Pi. Then comes the right time or the muhurat to perform the ritual. The position of nakshatras, the

time of the day, the day of the month, planetary positions, etc., have to be calculated to arrive at the right time. All this requires knowledge of astronomy.

**Blessed:** ISRO scientists visit Tirupati just before the mission in which India became the first country to land and operate a rover on the Moon's South Pole







JAVA - BALI

## Palm-leaf Manuscripts Being Digitized in Britain

IN COLLABORATION WITH THE Ecole Francaise d'Extreme-Orient, the British Library is digitizing its collection of 70 palm-leaf manuscripts from Java and Bali, written in Old Javanese, Javanese and Balinese. This article is based on the library's Asian and African Studies Blog's report on the project.

For centuries, palm leaf was the standard writing medium throughout India and Southeast Asia. The leaves, usually of the palmyra or talipot palms, were cut, treated and dried. Text was incised on the leaf with a sharp stylus or knife and then rubbed with ink, which settled in the

grooves of the letters.

In Java and Bali, the palmyra is used for palm-leaf (lontar) manuscripts. These usually have four lines of text on each page. However, probably the oldest Indonesian palm-leaf manuscript in the British Library is a copy of *Sang Hyang Hayu* ("The Divine Good"), written in Old Javanese, circa 1493ce, not on palmyra but on gebang. The gebang palm (*corypha utan*) is associated with very old manuscripts from west Java. Although many leaves are intact, there are countless small fragments which have been grouped together on small strips of laminate for repairs.

The most intriguing and potentially significant collection of Javanese manuscripts in the British Library was acquired by Col. Colin Mackenzie during his stay in Java from 1811 to 1813. Mackenzie described them: "Twenty-four texts written on Cadjan (kajang) leaves in the Hindoo manner, most of them in the Javanese character, and some in a character yet undeciphered."

"From explanations of the titles of some, they appear to belong to the ancient (or Dewa) religion of these islands; but though a native of superior intelligence was found capable of reading them, the prejudices of religion prevented any further information of the contents of books supposed to be adverse to the Muhammedan tenets. This difficulty might, however, have

**Saving texts:** First page of Sang Hyang Hayu, a Hindu text written in Old Javanese on gebang leaf circa 1493ce

been got over. These texts are apparently ancient, and brought by the civility of a regent from a long deserted house in the distant forests, where they had lain neglected for years."

The British Library collection from Bali includes a manuscript of the *Ramayana* and illustrated leaves containing images ranging from depictions of narrative scenes from literary epics, to magical diagrams and calendars.

Already over half the Javanese and Balinese manuscripts held in the British Library are viewable on their website. The project is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2023.

in three to four hours and is a good alternative for smaller travel budgets. These initiatives are part of a broader effort by India to help rebuild Sri Lanka and counter China's influence.

**THE SRI VENKATESWARA TEMPLE** in Helensburgh, south of Sydney, Australia, held a kumbabhishhekam in April 2023 after two decades, reports *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*. Renovations, started last year, cost us\$2.036 million. The event was witnessed by more than 20,000 Hindus, including 15 priests and visitors from Singapore, Malaysia and Mauritius. The large temple, built on top of a hilly area, opened in 1985.

**IN 2023, THE INDONESIAN MINISTRY** of Religion is distributing

us\$1,324,319 to 415 Hindu temples across 33 provinces, according to *Kemenag*. Prof. I Nengah Duija, Director General of Hindu Community Guidance, says the annual assistance program for temples is part of the government's effort to realize inclusivity in religion.

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HINDUISM TODAY was founded on January 5, 1979, by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (1927–2001). It is a nonprofit educational activity of Himalayan Academy, with the following purposes: 1. To foster Hindu solidarity as a unity in diversity among all sects and lineages; 2. To inform and inspire Hindus worldwide and people interested in Hinduism; 3. To dispel myths, illusions and misinformation about Hinduism; 4. To protect, preserve and promote the sacred Vedas and the Hindu religion; 5. To nurture and monitor the ongoing spiritual Hindu renaissance; 6. To publish resources for Hindu leaders and educators who promote Sanatana Dharma. Join this seva by sending letters, clippings, photographs, reports on events and by encouraging others.



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IN MY OPINION

## What Is Dirt Really Worth?

### The regenerative agriculture of ancient India focused for good reason on the health of the soil

BY DR. APPACHANDA THIMMAIAH

IN THE MAGNIFICENT TAPESTRY of our world's history, there lies an ancient wisdom, deeply woven into the cultural fabric of ancient India—a wisdom that not only nourished the body but also nurtured the soul. It's a wisdom rooted in the sacred understanding of soil, a wisdom that transcends mere scientific knowledge and touches the very essence of our existence.



as detailed in *Atharva Veda* 12.1.4–6. It emphasized the significance of preparing the land correctly, highlighting that proper preparation could transform even seemingly poor soils into "gold-bearing soils." Terracing, to prevent soil erosion and harness water for crops, was also a practice well understood and implemented. Soils were

revered and treated with profound respect, with prayers uttered before stepping onto the sacred ground. Farming wasn't just a utilitarian task; it was a sacred ritual to invoke the blessings of nature, fostering harmony and coexistence. Hindus recognized lunar influences on crops, animals and humans, integrating lunar rhythms into both spiritual practices and agriculture. Farmers during the Vedic period used the moon rhythms for both spiritual practices and in agriculture.

This sacred approach to agriculture can still be witnessed in Bali, where temples dot every rice field, and over 40 rituals accompany the journey from sowing to harvest. One remarkable ritual, known as Nyepe, is a "day of silence" when the rice flower transforms into a seed. The entire island observes this silence, a mark of respect for the rice plant's transformation, for it is considered akin to a human being. What can we glean from these ancient Hindu practices? It's the understanding that sacredness in our actions begets sacred outcomes. The climate crisis we face today is not merely a result of external factors but a reflection of our inner climate. In the profound wisdom of our ancestors lies the keys to a regenerative future, where science and spirituality coalesce to nourish both the soil and the soul, ushering in a new era of harmony and sustainability.

Soil is more than the ground beneath our feet; it's a dynamic entity providing essential ecological services. It filters, buffers and transforms elements between the atmosphere and groundwater, nurturing the food chain and serving as a source of water for humans, crops and animals. The *Atharva Veda* even categorized soils—much like modern science does today—differentiating them into brownish (*bhabhru*), black (*krishna*) and red soils (*rohini*). Ancient Hindus understood which soils were suitable for cultivating various crops, displaying an impressive knowledge of soil management. Land preparation was deemed paramount,

revered and treated with profound respect, with prayers uttered before stepping onto the sacred ground.

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DR. APPACHANDA THIMMAIAH is a life-long advocate for regenerative agriculture and advisor to international organizations, agribusinesses, governments and NGOs across Asia, Europe, Africa and the Americas.

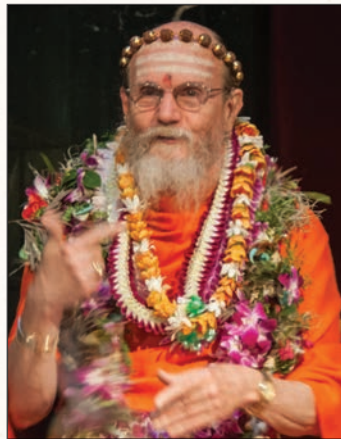


# Worship in the Home

Puja in the home connects the family with the Divinities, bringing protection, right living and shared spirituality

BY SATGURU BODHINATHA VEYLANSWAMI

ONE PRACTICE THAT MOST WORLD'S RELIGIONS share is having an ordained priest or minister conduct a religious service in a place of worship which lay members of the faith attend. In the Western (Abrahamic) religions, this takes place on Friday, Saturday or Sunday. In Eastern religions, there is no universally accepted day of the week on which adherents worship.



In Hinduism, priests are ordained through initiation, called diksha, and usually perform ritual worship, called puja, every day in a temple, sometimes multiple times a day. As explained in our *Hindu Lexicon*, "Puja, the worship of a murti through water, lights and flowers in temples and shrines, is the Agamic counterpart of the Vedic yajna rite, in which offerings are conveyed through the sacred homa fire. These are the two great streams of adoration and communion in Hinduism, drawn from Hinduism's two massive compendiums of revealed scripture—the *Vedas* and the *Agamas*."

Puja performed in temples, often complex in nature, is called paratha puja, which means it is done for the benefit of others, for those attending but also for the wider world, for humanity. In Hinduism, two popular days for the faithful to attend these temple pujas are Monday and Friday. However, in urban areas many Hindus attend a temple on Sunday, as it is a day off and therefore more convenient than weekdays.

What is different in Hinduism is that significant worship also takes place in the home, ideally on a daily basis. Commonly conducted by the husband, sometimes by the oldest son, it is called atmartha puja, which means puja done for oneself. Even priests perform daily atmartha puja in their own homes. The *Karana Agama* explains: "Only a well-qualified priest may perform both atmartha puja, worship for one's self, and paratha puja, worship for others." The *Agama* also says, "Worship of one's chosen Linga by anyone in their own home for divine protection is called atmartha puja." In other words, in Hinduism it is traditional for a family man to function as a lay priest in his own home.

There is an excellent testimony about home puja in the introduction to Himalayan Academy's publication *Living with Siva*. "Every Hindu family in our village had a home shrine where the family members worship their Gods. Even the poorest set aside a place for this. Rituals are periodic celebrations which are religious and spiritual in character, and they address the inward feelings rather than outward. Such

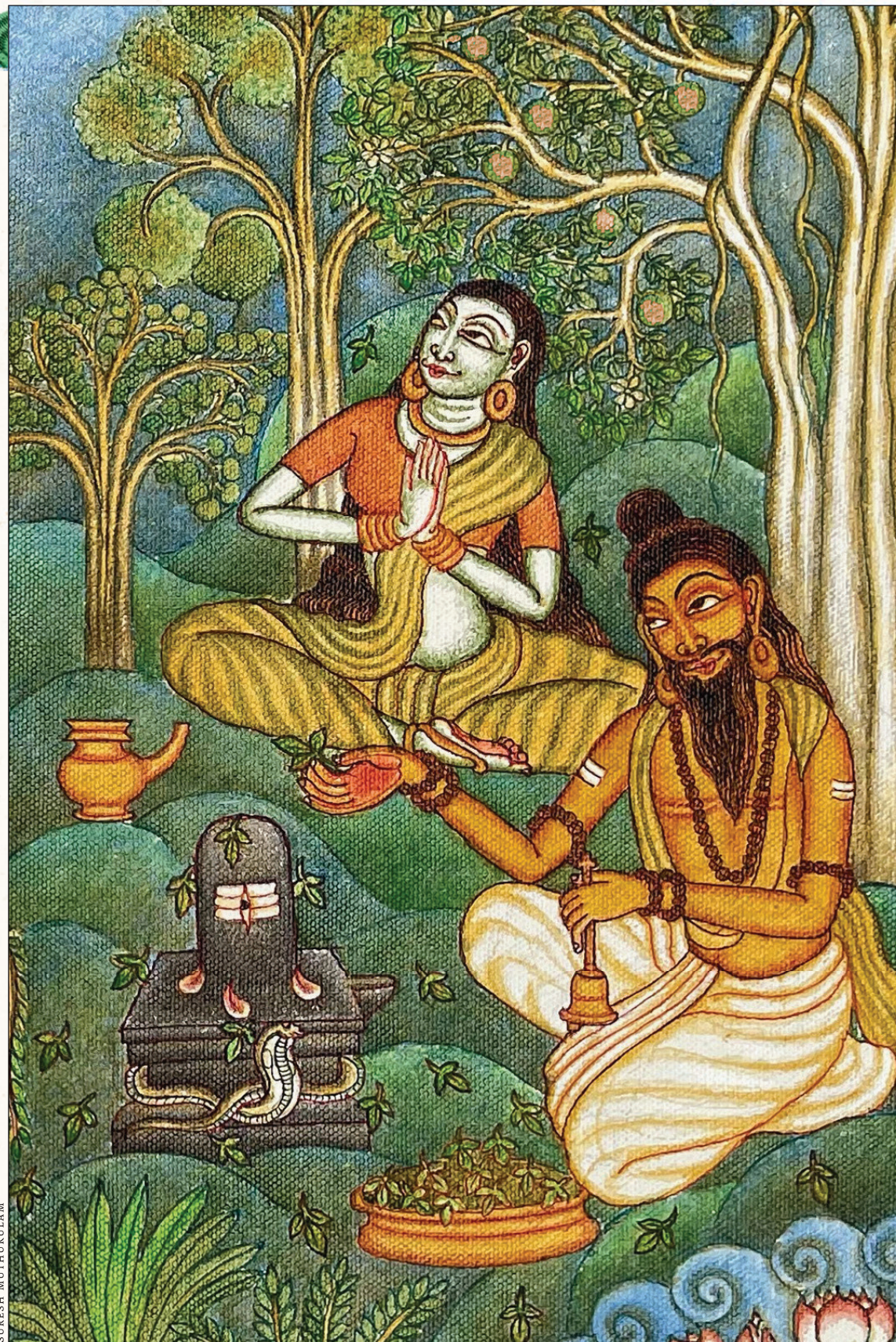


pujas and rituals give an individual a chance to pause, look inward and concentrate on something more meaningful, more profound, than mere materialism and the daily drudgery of life. Worship and

rejoicings in the name of God, fasting and observances of special days enable people to look beyond the day-to-day life to a larger scheme of things. In the best homes I know, the father performs the rites daily, and the family joins and assists. I guess it's like the old adage, 'The family that prays together stays together.' Even in the busy rat race of life in cosmopolitan cities like Mumbai or Los Angeles, there are many Hindus who perform at least a mini puja daily. They claim that even the small ritual of a few minutes a day makes them concentrate, feel elevated spiritually, brings their minds on an even keel, enabling them to perform better in their line of work."

The room in which this worship takes place is called the home shrine. Ideally it is a separate room unto itself. When that is not possible, a portion of a room that is less busy than other areas of the house can be used. My guru, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, gave this description of the ideal home shrine: "Every Saivite maintains a home shrine. It is the most beautiful room in the house, an extension of the temple, the abode for Deities and devas, and a holy refuge for daily worship and meditation. All Hindus have guardian devas who live on the astral plane and guide, guard and protect their lives.

"The great Mahadevas in the temple that the devotees frequent send their deva ambassadors into the homes to live with the devotees. A room is set aside for these permanent unseen guests, a room that the whole family can enter and sit in and commune inwardly with these refined beings who are dedicated to protecting the family generation after generation. Some of them are their own ancestors. A token shrine in a bedroom or a closet or a niche in a kitchen is not enough to attract these Divinities. One would not host an honored guest in one's closet or have him or her sleep in the kitchen and expect the guest to feel welcome, appreciated, loved. All Hindus are taught from childhood that the guest is God, and they treat any guest royally who comes to visit. Hindus also treat God as God and devas as Gods when they come to live permanently in the home. . . . The shrine room is meticulously cared for and not used for purposes other than worship, prayer, scriptural study and meditation. . . . By means of such sacred rites and the divine energies invoked, each family makes their house a sacred sanctuary, a refuge from the concerns and worries of the world. Pujas



**Worship:** In a South Indian forest a man and his wife perform puja to a cobra-guarded Sivalinga beneath a bilva tree, offering devotional love and bilva leaves to God. Their practice, known in Sanskrit as *Ishvarapranidhana*, is one of three *sadhanas* prescribed by Sage Patanjali in his famed *Yoga Sutras*.

extension of the temple. This can be the case when the family attends a temple on a regular basis, at least once a week. This regularity ties the temple and the home shrine together in the inner worlds. There is a specific practice given by Gurudeva to build this connection. First thing when you return from the temple, light an oil lamp in your shrine room. This brings devas who were at the temple right into your personal sanctuary, where they can bless family members and make the religious force field of the home stronger.

A important question to answer is "Are all Hindus qualified to perform puja in their home?" As we can see from the following quote from a revered pontiff of Kanchi Pitham, it depends on the type of puja. "Every family must perform puja to Ishvara. Those who find it convenient to do so may conduct elaborate types of puja after receiving proper initiation into them. Others need perform only a brief puja, not lasting more than ten minutes or so. Office-goers must offer at least this brief worship. The sacred bell must ring in every home." (Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswathi Mahaswami, 1894-1994). The Shankaracharya thus advised that performing elaborate pujas requires initiation. For certain simple pujas, initiation is nonobligatory.

Here at Kauai Aadheenam, we have developed a simple home puja to Lord Ganesha that does not necessitate initiation. It can be downloaded at: [www.himalayanacademy.com/looklisten/chanting](http://www.himalayanacademy.com/looklisten/chanting). The webpage gives this description and suggestions regarding learning the puja: "The chants of the simple Ganesha puja given here are in Sanskrit, Hinduism's ancient scriptural language. Time spent mastering the pronunciation is time well spent. Ideally, training is received personally from a priest, pundit or other person proficient in Sanskrit, so that you can chant the verses properly. Such a teacher will generally begin by teaching the alphabet and will offer training in reading in the Devanagari script, as well as the transliteration, to help English-speaking students. Learning Sanskrit is not mandatory, and for those who do not have a teacher, we have a voice recording of this entire puja for learning the mantras properly."

In conclusion, in Hinduism regularly attending the temple once a week is an important practice but not the full practice. The other part is equally as important, which is having a shrine room in the home in which the husband performs a daily atmartha puja. Over time, this daily puja steadily increases the religious vibration within the home, which benefits all members of the family and helps them live more peaceful, more wholesome and successful lives.

can be as simple as lighting a lamp and offering a flower at the Lord's holy feet; or they can be elaborate and detailed, with many chants and offerings. The indispensable part of any puja is devotion."

A point Gurudeva often stressed is that the home shrine is an



FROM: "FOURTEEN QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK ABOUT HINDUISM"

## Do Hindus Believe in Reincarnation?

**Y**ES, WE BELIEVE THE SOUL IS IMMORTAL and takes birth time and time again. Through this process, we have experiences, learn lessons and evolve spiritually. Finally we graduate from physical birth. *Carnate* means "of flesh," and *reincarnate* means to "reenter the flesh." Yes, Hindus believe in reincarnation. To us it explains the natural way the soul evolves from immaturity to spiritual illumination. Life and death are realities for all of us. Hinduism believes that the soul is immortal, that it never dies, but inhabits one body after another on the Earth during its evolutionary journey. Like the caterpillar's transformation into a butterfly, physical death is a most natural transition for the soul, which survives and, guided by karma, continues its long pilgrimage until it is one with God.

**"I can't prove it scientifically, but I believe in reincarnation because it offers a more plausible explanation than any other theory about what makes people tick."**

SHELLEY LONG

Even modern science is discovering reincarnation. There have been many cases of individuals' remembering their past lives. These have been researched by scientists, psychiatrists and parapsychologists during the past decades and documented in good books and videos. Young children speak of vivid past-life memories, which fade as they grow older, as the veils of individuality shroud the soul's intuitive understanding. Great mystics speak of their past lives

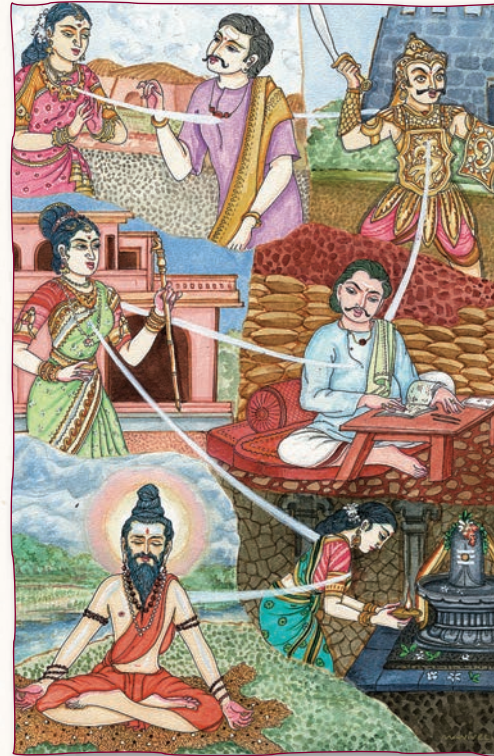
as well. So do our ancient scriptures, the *Vedas*, reveal the reality of reincarnation.

Reincarnation is believed in by the Jains and the Sikhs, by the Indians of the Americas, and by the Buddhists, certain Jewish sects, the Pagans and the many indigenous faiths. Even Christianity originally taught reincarnation, but formally renounced it in the twelfth century. It is, in fact, one of the most widely held articles of faith on planet Earth.

**Elaboration:** At death the soul leaves the physical body. But the soul does not die. It lives on in a subtle body called the astral body. The astral body exists in the nonphysical dimension called the astral plane, which is also the world we are in during our dreams at night when we sleep. Here we continue to have experiences until we are reborn again in another physical body as a baby. Each reincarnating soul chooses a home and a family which can best fulfill its next step of learning and maturation.

After many lifetimes of following dharma, the soul is fully matured in love, wisdom and knowledge of God. There is no longer a need for physical birth, for all lessons have been learned, all karmas fulfilled. That soul is then liberated, freed from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Evolution then continues in the more refined spiritual worlds.

Similarly, after we graduate from elementary school we never have to go back to the fifth grade. We have gone beyond that level in understanding. Thus, life's ultimate goal is not money, not clothes, not sex, not power,



not food or any other of the instinctive needs. These are natural pursuits, but our real purpose on this Earth is to know, to love and to serve God and the Gods. That leads to the rare and priceless objects of life: enlightenment and liberation. This Hindu view of the soul's evolution answers many otherwise bewildering questions, removing the fear of death while giving assurance that each soul is evolving toward the same spiritual destiny, for the Hindu believes that karma and reincarnation are leading every single soul to God Realization.

## LETTERS

### Pilgrimaging to Sabarimala!

Thank you, Madan Ganesan, for your accurate and inspiring article, "My Sabarimala Pilgrimage" (Oct/Nov/Dec 2023), about Lord Ayyappan and your 18 pilgrimages to His temple. The photos are also excellent. I went to Sabarimala with my Guruswamy two times when I was 60 years old. I lived in India for about two years. I am back in Kalamazoo, Michigan, now. I love meeting Ayyappan devotees. We are all part of his great spiritual family. He is made of love, pure love. I also wrote a biography about my Guruswamy when I returned to Michigan. It is on Amazon, entitled *Driven by the Divine*. One of the chapters is devoted to my discovery of Dharma Shasta Lord Ayyappan. He is made of light and bliss. You know that. I know that.

FRANCES KOZLOWSKI  
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### Confronting Death

I found the article "Life after Death" (Sep 1999) very helpful, as knowledge overcomes fear. Well, belief is a vagary and knowledge only counts when you know, and you only know after you experience. So I can't say, "I know;" and saying, "I believe" is meaningless

to the reality or not. I have practiced meditation for some time, and going out through the chakras I can understand. The author says aim for the crown, but we might not necessarily go out on that, the highest, level. But the article has given me comfort and an extra way of dealing with death. Why we have to learn all these as lessons I don't know; surely we were created perfect as we are the sparks of source.

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### Restoring Hindu Temples

The article "The Amazing Grass-Roots Effort to Restore South India's Neglected Temples" (Jan/Feb/Mar 2023) was very interesting. We are also engaged in this effort. Please check out the following website for temple renovation projects and ways to help: [behindeverytemple.org](http://behindeverytemple.org). [Editors: Quoting from this inspiring site: "At present, there are over 5,000 ancient dilapidated temples just in Tamil Nadu alone. Oftentimes miscreants are damaging such monuments and some sculptures are disappearing from villages. In other areas, these ancient temples are being demolished and the land is being sold off illegally. Hindu temples reflect synthesis of tradition, arts, the ideals of Sanatana Dharma, beliefs, values, and the way of life cherished under

Hinduism. The temple is a link between man, Deities, and the Paramatma (God) in a sacred space. . . . Temples represent an integral part of dharma and the upliftment of society as a whole, so we are dedicated to doing everything in our power to help save and protect them while ensuring the ancient science of India is not lost to future generations." ]

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### Shell Augury

This insightful article from HINDUISM TODAY'S August 1998 issue, "Telling the Future by Shells," delves into the rich traditions and practices that connect spirituality with the natural world. A truly enlightening read that reminds us of the profound wisdom embedded in ancient practices.

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or visit: [www.hinduismtoday.com/letters](http://www.hinduismtoday.com/letters)

Letters may be edited for space and clarity and may appear in electronic versions of HINDUISM TODAY.

## Helping Swamis & Swaminis Keep the Philosophy Alive

Our magazine is a far-reaching medium for Hinduism's leaders and their message



By Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami,  
publisher of *Hinduism Today*

**H**INDUISM TODAY REGULARLY CARRIES a column called *Minister's Message*, which features inspired outpourings from distinguished swamis and swaminis. These great souls have much to say, much to teach, and much to remind people. And it is, in part, our magazine's mission to help them be better known and heard.

On page 16 of this current issue, for example, Swami Advayananda, President of Chin-

maya International Foundation, delineates frankly what keeps people bound up in externalities and unable to dive within themselves, where they would find finer, more satisfying principles to live by. The obstacles, he explains, are usually habit and plain, ordinary desire. Thoughtlessly, one wants to "bask in the warmth of the external world of glittering objects and eke out small tinsels of ephemeral pleasures." Thus, people tend to keep going 'round and 'round until finally they decide firmly to turn within.

In another issue, April/May/June 2020, Swami Avdhesanand Giri Maharaj, Acharya Mahamandaleswar of the Juna Akhara, says, "To attain perfection, one has to follow the six indispensable steps: selfless service, self-assessment, companionship of righteous people, patience through self-discipline, tenacity in beholding spirituality and self-development. When one understands these six steps in a true sense and abides by them firmly, his consciousness awakes, his conscience gets cleared and his thoughts enlightened."

And long ago, in the January-February-March 2013 issue, it was the turn of His Holi-

ness Sadyojat Shankarashram Swamiji, head of Shri Chitrapur Math, Karnataka. "Concentration on a mantra helps a beginner, in particular, to hold other thoughts at bay until one realizes that he is learning to surrender to a divine force that exists within and without. Consistency helps the seeker to shed all the negativity within until he understands that 'pure' is not what he has to become. 'Pure' is who he is!"

These thoughts are most apt to proliferate. Even when they are not applied immediately, the listener has nonetheless heard them, and the philosophy is kept alive deep within him. That is perhaps the ultimate effect swamis have had thru the millennia: keeping the philosophy and the religion alive—at times perhaps in seed form, awaiting the right time and circumstance to bloom and be the answer to devotees' prayers.

Help your magazine continue to preserve that blessed tradition by helping it to remain financially strong and secure.

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### Annual Statement of Ownership

Statement of ownership, management, and circulation (required by USPS DMM 70783) of *Hinduism Today*, published four times a year at 107 Kaholalele RD, Kapaa, HI 96746-9304, for October 1, 2022. General business offices of the publisher are located at 107 Kaholalele RD, Kapaa, HI 96746-9304. Name and address of publisher is Swami Bodhinatha Veylan, 107 Kaholalele RD, Kapaa, HI 96746-9304. Name and address of editor is Swami Sadasivanatha Palani, 107 Kaholalele RD, Kapaa, HI 96746-9304. Name and address of managing editor is Swami Arumugam Katir, 107 Kaholalele RD, Kapaa, HI 96746-9304. Owner is Himalayan Academy Publications, 107 Kaholalele RD, Kapaa, HI 96746-9304. There are no known bondholders, mortgagees, or other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities. The average number of copies of each issue during the preceding 12 months is: (a) Total number of copies printed: 9,081; (b) Paid circulation: (1) Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, and counter sales: 1,900; (2) Paid or requested mail subscriptions: 4,156; (c) Total paid and/or requested circulation: 6,056; (d) Free distribution by mail: 1,024; (e) Free distribution outside the mail: 1,890; (f) Total free distribution: 2,914; (g) Total distribution: 8,970 (h) Copies not distributed: (1) Office use, leftovers, spoiled: 111; (2) Return from news agents: not applicable; (i) Total: 9,081;

Percent paid and/or requested circulation: 6751%. The actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date is: (a) Total number of copies printed: 8,937; (b) Paid circulation: (1) Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, and counter sales: 1,698; (2) Paid or requested mail subscriptions: 4,275; (c) Total paid and/or requested circulation: 5,973; (d) Free distribution by mail: 1,036; (e) Free distribution outside the mail: 1,827; (f) Total free distribution: 2,863; (g) Total distribution: 8,836; (h) Copies not distributed: (1) Office use, leftovers, spoiled: 101; (2) Return from news agents: not applicable; (i) Total: 8,937; Percent paid and/or requested circulation: 6760%. I certify that all information furnished above is true and complete. I understand that anyone who furnishes false or misleading information on this statement or who omits material or information requested on the statement may be subject to criminal sanctions (including fines and imprisonment) and/or civil sanctions (including multiple damages and civil penalties). Swami Durganatha Shanmuga, Administrator





## QUOTES & QUIPS

“Remain still, with the conviction that the Self shines as everything yet nothing, within, without and everywhere.”

**Sri Ramana Maharshi** (1879–1950)

Through devotion to Ishvara, samadhi is attained. **Maharishi Patanjali**

An evil man is a saint of the future. See good in everything. Destroy the evil-finding quality. Develop the good-finding quality. Rise above good and evil. **Swami Sivananda** (1887–1963)

The one who plants trees, knowing that he will never sit in their shade, has at least started to understand the meaning of life. **Rabindranath Tagore** (1861–1941), *Bengali poet and philosopher*

If you see no reason for giving thanks, the fault lies in yourself. *Minquass proverb*

There is nothing that wastes the body like worry, and one who has any faith in God should be ashamed

to worry about anything whatsoever. **Mahatma Gandhi** (1869–1948)

Following the path of knowledge without love and devotion is like eating stones. **Mata Amritanandamayi**, *Kerala-based hugging saint*

Stand firm and the waves will break. *Tongan proverb*

The pendulum of the mind oscillates between sense and nonsense, not between right and wrong. **Carl Jung** (1875–1961), *Swiss psychiatrist*

Your hand opens and closes, opens and closes. If it were always a fist or always stretched open, you would be paralyzed. Your deepest presence is in every small contracting and expanding

the two as beautifully balanced and coordinated as birds' wings. **Rumi** (1207–1273), *Sufi mystic and poet*

Accomplish but do not boast, accomplish without show, accomplish without arrogance, accomplish without grabbing, accomplish without forcing. **Lao Tzu** (4th century bce), *author of the Tao Te Ching*

When you have completed 95 percent of your journey, you are halfway there. *Japanese proverb*

Having dispelled all the impressions lingering in the mind, being with contented heart, being free from the three impurities—*anava, karma and maya*—and firmly rooted in the unassailable notion of nonduality, the *sadhaka* should always meditate on his own Self which is in total identity with

the Supreme Self. *Raurava Agama 7.6.16*

This All is universal power, of infinite extent and infinite in potency, a God so great that all His parts are infinite. Name any place, and He is already there. **Plotinus** (204–270 ce), *Roman philosopher*

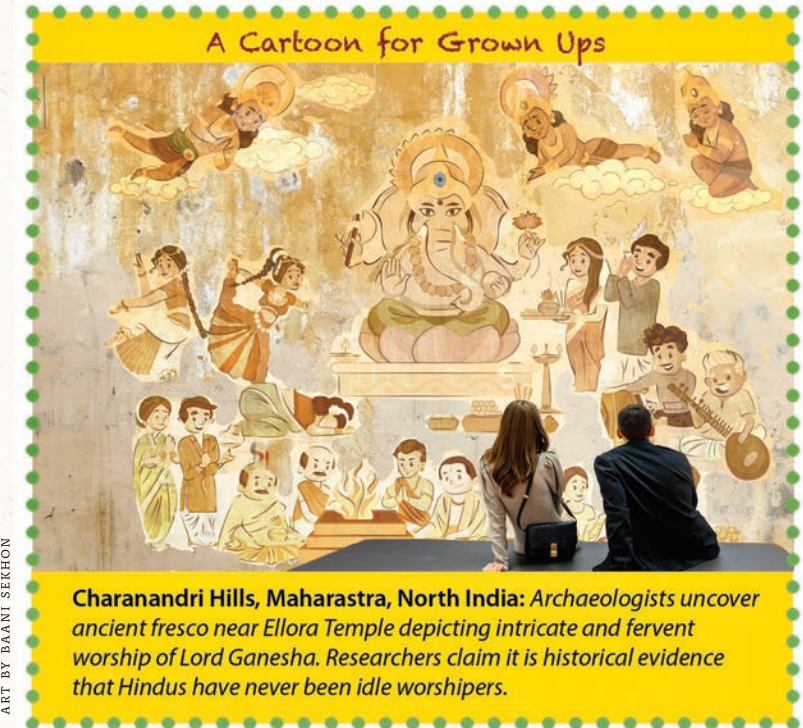
The realm of bliss belongs to those who give up their assumed separation from God and seek refuge in His perfections. **Swami Omkarananda** (1930–2000), *founder of Omkarananda Ashram, Rishikesh*

How long are you going to wait before you demand the best for yourself? **Epictetus** (55–135 ce), *Stoic philosopher*

Guard your self-control as a precious treasure, for there is no greater wealth in life than this. *Tirukural 122*

Only one task to do here: find out who you are. How do you find out who you are? Dive into silence and see. **Satguru Siva Yogaswami** (1872–1964), *Sri Lankan sage*

For all of mankind, no matter where one is on the spiritual path, spiritual advancement comes from improving



ART BY BAANI SEKHON

**Charanandri Hills, Maharashtra, North India:** *Archaeologists uncover ancient fresco near Ellora Temple depicting intricate and fervent worship of Lord Ganesha. Researchers claim it is historical evidence that Hindus have never been idle worshippers.*

one's behavior. Said another way, it comes from learning from one's mistakes.

**Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami**, *publisher of HINDUISM TODAY*

The individual soul, when mature, can

make the leap from the consciousness of space-time-causation into the timeless, causeless, formless Self. This is the ultimate maturing of the soul on this planet.

**Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami** (1927–2001), *founder of HINDUISM TODAY*

### DID YOU KNOW?

## Three Types of Sacred Threads

**I**N HINDU CULTURE, THE PUNUL, RAKHI and *kai nool* holy threads are rich with intricate spiritual and cultural symbolism. The punul, often worn by young men, signifies an important rite of passage. Similar to the North Indian *janeu*, the punul marks eligibility to partake in religious rituals, perform *sandhya vandanam*, and serves as a reminder for wearers to adhere to the spiritual path of *sadhana* and *dharma*.

The rakhi thread, central to the annual Raksha Bandhan festival, carries profound meaning. Sisters lovingly tie a rakhi onto their brothers' wrists as a token of love, blessing and prayers for well-being and prosperity, while the brother reciprocates with a gift and a vow to protect his sister.

The *kai nool*, which resembles the North Indian *mauli* or *kalava*, is tied around the wrist during various

ceremonies and festivals to signify protection and divine blessings. *Kai nool* threads are most prominent in weddings, symbolizing the heartfelt eternal bond between the bride and groom.

The tying of holy threads is an act of *sankalpa*, the affirmation of a solemn purpose or commitment. Wearing these threads serves as a constant reminder of those commitments. Whether inspiring men to lead righteous lives through the punul, symbolizing protection with the rakhi, or fulfilling a multifaceted role as the sacred *kai nool*, these threads hold profound significance in life's pivotal moments and rites of passage.

They represent a rich tapestry of Hindu spiritual and cultural values, providing individuals both with a spiritual anchor and a link to the roots of precious, timeless traditions.



SHUTTERSTOCK

**Family ties:** *a sister wraps an ornate rakhi around her brother's wrist during raksha bandhan*

### BASICS

## How Do We Treat the Environment?

**T**HE HINDU TRADITION UNDERSTANDS that man is not separate from nature, that we are linked by spiritual, psychological and physical bonds with the elements around us. Knowing that the Divine is present everywhere and in all things, Hindus hold a deep reverence for life. We hold an awareness that the great forces of nature—the earth, the water, the fire, the air and space—as well as all the various orders of life, including plants and trees, forests and animals, are bound to each other within life's cosmic web. Our beloved Earth, so touchingly looked upon in our scriptures as *Bhumi Devi*, the Earth Goddess, has nurtured mankind through millions of years of growth and evolution. However, the Earth's large human population, its industries, automobiles and lifestyle are causing significant damage to

the environment. As one sixth of the human family, Hindus can have a tremendous impact. We should take the lead in Earth-friendly living, personal frugality, lower power consumption, alternative energy, sustainable food production and vegetarianism. All of Earth's diversity is to be cared for, from the soil, water and air to the plants and animals of every shape and kind. To achieve this, we practice restraint in the use of Earth's resources. We do not exploit its minerals, water, fuels or soil. We avoid polluting our blue planet. We work to protect the many endangered plants and animals. We do not buy or use products from exploited species, such as furs, ivory or reptile skin. We recycle paper, glass, metal and plastic and use efficient means of



UPPLASH/JEREMY BISHOP

transportation that save on energy. We plant trees and do not waste food. In these ways we express the fundamental Hindu reverence for the Earth and all life upon it.”

*Drawn from the teachings of Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami*



# Using Mind to Transcend Mind

Why do the *Upanishads* warn seekers that following the path to God is akin to walking on a razor's edge—narrow and difficult to traverse?

BY SWAMI ADVAYANANDA

**G**OD IS THE VERY SELF, THE VERY CORE OF ONE'S personality. However, veiled by the mind, He remains unknown. Thus, beyond the mind is *Ishvara-darshanam*, the vision of the Lord. But, to meet Him, the journey beyond the mind can be accomplished with the help of mind alone. This precisely is what makes the spiritual journey comparable to walking on the razor's edge.

The mind rarely cooperates in this sacred journey, for going inward and transcending itself is anathema to it. Its natural inclination is to rush out and bask in the warmth of the external world of glittering objects and eke out small tinsels of ephemeral pleasures. The mind is unaware of joys other than these fleeting, albeit alluring ones. Furthermore, having repeatedly engaged in such pursuits, life after life, the mind is firmly habituated and addicted to these. Thus, on embarking upon a spiritual pursuit, all seekers face the uphill task of weaning the mind from the external world.

Compounded to this extrovertedness, the mind is enmeshed in a web of desire-anger-greed-delusion-pride-jealousy, the "six enemies" (*sadripu*) of spiritual pursuit, all interconnected. To explain: Desire when not fulfilled transforms into anger; and when fulfilled graduates to greed. Anger when not curtailed leads to delusion. Indeed, one in the grasp of raging anger is oblivious to the damaging consequences of one's own rage. Gratified greed leads to pride and ungratified greed disfigures itself to become jealousy. Such is the interconnected web of the mind's negativities. All accept this status quo of their minds, except the spiritual seeker who discerns the wicked game of the mind and with alertness and alacrity wages a determined war against the six enemies.

Even if one were to conquer, so to say, these "regular" enemies, the task of mastering and transcending the mind is still a work in progress. There are yet three more deeply entrenched inner saboteurs—*loka-vasana*, *shastra-vasana* and *deha-vasana*—who hide unrecognized until the six visible, wicked foes are somewhat weakened. While the negativity of the wicked six is evident, these three impostors pretend to be our good friends.

*Loka-vasana* is the hankering for recognition, for name and fame. It is the desire to conduct oneself in such a manner so as to evoke the admiration and approbation of others. It also manifests as the tendency to avoid by all means the criticism of those around us. This does not mean that the scriptures advocate us to live a life of utter disregard to the feelings or thoughts of others, but rather it is the inner maturity born from the understanding that one can never win the admiration of all or stop the mindless chatter of others.

Truly speaking, what is important is to be rooted in dharma, rather than considering whether it will bring respect or disrespect. Has there been anyone in this whole world who was or is praised by one and all? Was not Sri Rama, the embodiment of all virtue, criticized? Was not the venerable mother Sita, the epitome of nobility, slandered? If they were not spared by this mindless world, what then to say



about you and me! One should learn to be equanimous in praise and censure.

The next is *shastra-vasana*. It is the attachment to study and the mastery of many disciplines of knowledge. This too is a distraction for spiritual unfoldment. What is more important is to know the essence of the scriptures and walk the path to the Ultimate. Poets speak of the hamsa bird that drinks only milk from a mixture of milk and water. So too, a seeker ought to grasp the essence of the scriptures. Spending all one's time just mastering the scriptural content, one text after another, for an entire lifetime, would be a sheer waste of life. All scriptures have one instruction alone: turn

within and realize the Self. *Shastra-vasana* forces one to shift the goalpost from knowledge "of" God to knowledge "about" God!

There is an anecdote of Sage Durvasa going to Kailasa carrying a mountain load of books for his study. The celestial Sage Narada laughed at him, comparing him to a donkey, a beast of burden. Angered at this comparison, Durvasa threw all his books into the ocean. It was only thereafter that Lord Siva taught the sage the sacred Self-knowledge, liberating him from all incompleteness and inadequacy. Beware: *shastra-vasana* is a subtle but firm bondage. The wise declare that an ounce of practice is worth tons of knowledge.

*Deha-vasana*, the third of the subtle tendencies, results from deep-rooted identification with the body. It expresses as a preoccupation with the body—to ever add some goodness to it and/or constantly strive to remove some defect pertaining to it. It manifests in numerous ways: being ever intent in beautification—decoration of the body, striving for a smooth, shining skin, perfect body structure, non-stop worrying about maintaining consummate health and so on.

It is the nature of the body to decay, and one day it must perish. Keep it as healthy and fit as you possibly can without undue preoccupation with it. Constant thinking of the body will only keep a seeker firmly rooted in body consciousness and prevent the higher pursuit of the Self. Remember this is not a call to "disregard" the body, but is rather to not "over-regard" it and make it the sole focus of one's life. The human body truly serves its purpose if it is utilized for Self-Realization.

For all seekers, the spiritual path becomes akin to walking on the razor's edge because of these six enemies (*sadripu*) and three tendencies (*vasana-traya*). But where do all these reside? In the mind, isn't it? Who has to conquer them? Indeed, the mind alone. The mind is the robber; the mind is the police! Therefore, O seeker! Be alert. Turn to the Lord and the guru. Their grace and blessings are your sure support.

SWAMI ADVAYANANDA, *disciple of the late Swami Chinmayananda, is President of the Chinmaya International Foundation, a Trustee of Chinmaya University and the Resident Acharya of the Mission's two-year Vedanta Course at Sandeepany Sadhanalaya, Mumbai.*

# Jnana Diksha

Scriptural instructions for one of the supreme spiritual initiations

*The following is excerpted from Dr. S. P. Sabharatham's translation of the Kamika Agama's Uttara Pada, chapter 24.*

The eminent acharya should perform the *jnana diksha* for competent disciples through the perfect instruction on the essence-of-knowledge section of the *Agamas*. He should do this in the auspicious bright side of a lunar month, on an auspicious day and *nakshatra* and in an auspicious duration (*muhurta*), giving attention to all exacting rituals. Especially, he should perform this *jnana diksha* during the last phase of midnight. This *jnana diksha* should be done in a solitary place, a place not frequented by the people. 1-2

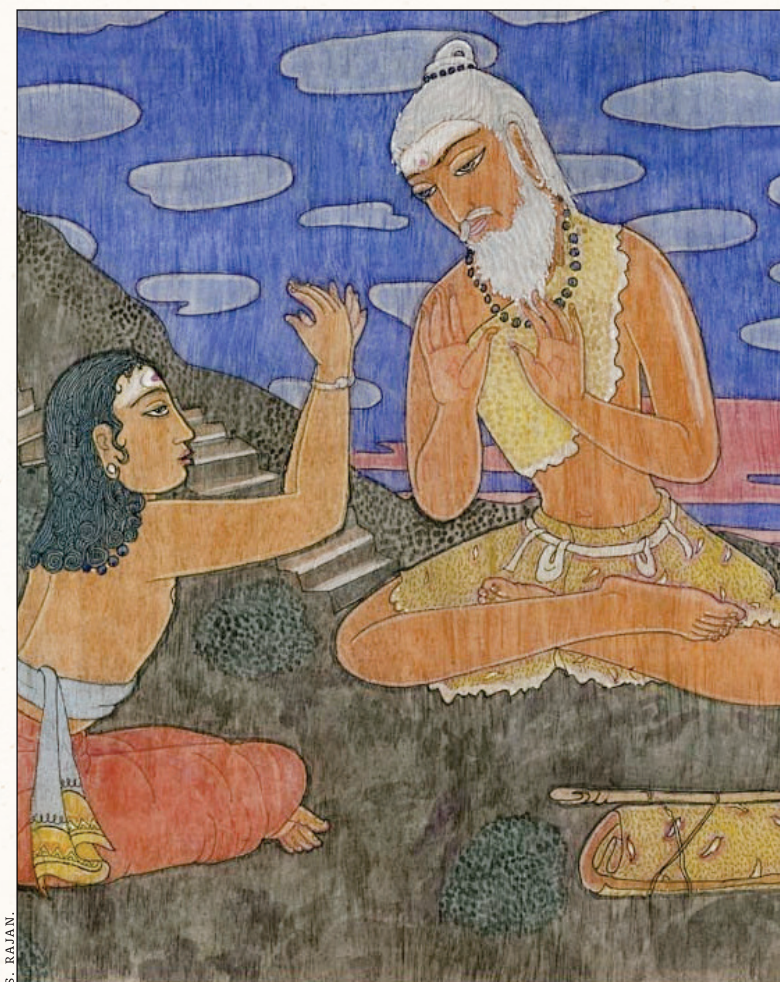
A Siva temple, the residence of the guru, a *sakthi pitha*, monastery, house, a sacred place frequented by saints—these are suitable locations for the performance of *jnana diksha*. The acharya may select any one of such auspicious places. The disciple, born in the lineage related to five *gocaras* (regions), should stay in his guru's residence, contemplating the attainment of the essence-of-knowledge section of the *Agamas*. He may sit on a seat designed with *darbha* grass or tiger skin or on a seat made of wood based on the *vastu mandala* consisting of a 36-square grid. 3-4

The disciple should honor his guru seated on the *yoga pitha*, offering all kinds of services such as cleaning and others. He should adorn him with silken cloth and ornaments. Having worshiped him with sandal, flowers and such other substances, he should offer *payasam* (milk boiled with green gram and sugar), sweet cakes and *tambula* (betel leaf and areca nut) to him. Then he should worship the feet of the guru, with the accompaniment of sixteen kinds of offerings. 5-6

The most eminent acharya should perform *jnana diksha*, giving attention to specific aspects of this kind of *diksha*. The disciple should spontaneously come forward to surrender his body, wealth and *prana* to such a great guru. Without showing any sign of shyness, he should prostrate before the guru, casting himself down on the floor like a fallen long staff. To such a competent disciple, the acharya should give instructions on the essence-of-knowledge section (*jnana pada*). 7-8

The guru should place his right palm, holding fragrant flowers, on the head of the disciple. Then the compassionate guru should place his feet, which were worshiped before, on the head of the disciple. After this, he should give instruction on the eternal principles which are to be contemplated by the *sadhaka*, and which enable the *sadhaka* to be in a state of total absorption. The eternal principles are listed here. 9

*Tattvarupa*, the nature and function of the *tattvas*, is the first; *tattvadarsana*, knowing the dependent state of *tattvas*, is the second; *tattvasuddhi* (to be dissociated from the *tattvas*) is the third; *atmalakshana*, the state of the Self in which it takes cognizance of *Pati*, *pashu* and *pasha* (God, soul and world), is the



S. RAJAN.

fourth; *atmadarsana*, cognizance of the exact nature of the self, is the fifth; *atmasuddhi*, being immersed in the grace of the Lord, is the sixth; *sivarupa*, being motivated towards the attainment of *Sivajnana*, is the seventh; *sivadarsana*, the state in which Siva reveals Himself to the self, is the eighth; *sivayoga*, the state in which the self transcends the triple state (*triputi*: knower, known and the knowledge), is the ninth; *sivabhoga*, the state in which Siva grants the ineffable bliss to the Self by showing the exact path to the Self and himself seeing that path, is the tenth. 10-12

The impeccable knowledge of the three realities, *Pati*, *pashu* and *pasha*, is woven in these ten eternal principles which remain grouped in three sets. The first three constitute one set; the next three constitute the second set; the last four constitute the third set. By mere instruction of such principles done by the guru, the state of *jivanmukti*—being in a liberated state even while living as an embodied being—is fully unfolded with all its effulgence. Continued contemplation on these ten eternal principles is prescribed for those who are following the *jnana marga* (*sanmarga* or "direct path" to God). 13-14

This is the end of the 24th chapter, "Directions for the Performance of *Jnana Diksha*," of the *Uttara Kamika*.

DR. S. P. SABHARATHNAM SIVACHARYAR, of the Adisaiva priest lineage, is an expert in ancient Tamil and Sanskrit, specializing in the *Vedas*, *Agamas* and *Silpa Shastras*.



# New Temple Signals a Peaceful Turn for Kashmir

Decades after the violent expulsion of the Kashmir Pandits from the Kashmir Valley, peace has largely been restored and the region's historic tradition of interreligious harmony has reasserted itself, as witnessed by a new Sharda Temple opening just feet from the Line of Control, sponsored by Sringeri Shankaracharya Mutt in Karnataka and assisted by local Muslims



The new Sharda Temple along the Kishanganga River with the hills of PoK in the background; (left) the junior pontiff of Sringeri Mutt, Sri Vidhushekhara Swami, installs the Deity; Swamiji approaches the temple in procession



SRI SHANKARA ADVAITA RESEARCH CENTRE, SRINGERI

BY CHOODIE SHIVARAM, KASHMIR

LAST APRIL, I SAW A PHOTO A FRIEND HAD posted online—a picture of him with family at the new Sharda Temple in Teetwal, Kashmir. Just a few months earlier I had learned the 572-pound Ma Sharda murti, created for the temple by the renowned Sringeri Shankaracharya Mutt, would soon be transported by car to Kashmir. I took photos and interviewed Ravindra Pandita and others, thinking to put the story together for HINDUISM TODAY. After seeing my friend's post, I contacted the magazine editors and arranged to cover not only the new temple but also a few among the numerous temples of antiquity in Kashmir Valley.

Friends learning of the assignment were shocked, concerned for my safety, and I soon stopped telling anyone I was heading to Kashmir. I booked my tickets and packed my bags. The temple was scheduled for consecration on June 5 by the Sringeri Mutt's junior pontiff, Sri Vidhushekhara Swamiji. He was accompanied by a team of priests who conducted the pre-consecration rituals plus several officials of the mutt.

Kashmir itself, these days, is as safe or unsafe as any other region in India. After 30-plus years, schools are open and running without break, businesses are operational as in any other city, people move around freely, the economy is on the upswing, and the general feel-good factor among people is high. Religious worship in all communities is back to normal. Tourists have returned in force—20 million in 2022 alone! With no fears or doubts, and an ambitious list of temples to visit in addition to the new Sharda Temple at Teetwal, I embarked on my journey. Somewhat unexpectedly, my husband joined me, having felt Ma Sharda was beckoning him.

Kashmir as a destination is always exciting to the traveler. Every inch of the land seems magical. This journey was to be different. My agenda did not include the popular Gulmarg hill station, boat rides on the pristine Dal Lake, Shikara rides and sightseeing at Sonmarg. Instead, in addition to the Sharda Temple at Teetwal, we traveled into the interior of Kashmir to visit dozens of temples in eight of its ten districts, many of them dreaded as terrorist hideouts some years back. I also visited the popular Shankaracharya Hill Temple, Marthand Sun Temple and the Mattan Sun temple ruins. In this article, however, we will focus on the creation of the Sharda Temple at Teetwal, because it is the perfect case study in showing how much Kashmir has changed in recent times.

## Sharda Peeth, Abode of the Goddess

Namaste Sharade Devi, Kashmira Puravasini—  
"Salutations to Goddess Sharda Who abides in Kashmir."  
This prayer to the Goddess of Learning from the Saras-



wati Rahasya Upanishad is one of the first to be taught to a child. The hymn avows Kashmir as the abode of Goddess Sharda, the Kashmiri name for Saraswati.

As children, we knew little of Kashmir and nothing of Sharda Peeth. Its ruins are in Sharda village on the Kishanganga River, 5.6 miles inside the Line of Control (LoC) in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) about 70 miles north of Teetwal, which is just on the India side of the LoC. Prior to partition, Teetwal was a historic camping point of the annual pilgrimage to Sharda Peeth.

Sharda Peeth, a major Shakti temple, was one of the most prominent universities of Vedic knowledge and learning between the 6th and 12th centuries CE, when it was known as Sarvagna Peeth. Scholars from all over the subcontinent congregated here. It was a repository of invaluable Vedic texts and the source of the Sharada script. It housed the famed Sharda University and was the foundation of Sharda civilization.

Sharda Peeth is synonymous with Adi Shankara, the foremost proponent of Advaita Vedanta philosophy, who ascended the throne of knowledge here. Sringeri Mutt in Karnataka, closely tied to Sharda Peeth, is formally known as Dakshinamanaya Sri Sarada Pitham, the first and southernmost of the four main monastic centers established in India by Adi Shankara in the 7th century. Its two main temples are Vidyashankara to Siva and Sharda Amba temple to the Goddess.

The ancient Sharda Peeth was desecrated and reduced to ruins by invaders. A powerful earthquake is said to have further damaged the structure. Still, enough of the temple remained that worship continued until late

1948. The last Hindu saint resident at Sharda Peeth was Swami Nandlal Maharaj, who is deeply revered by Kashmiri Pandits. Prakash Swami Bhat was the last priest. Despite raging atrocities inflicted on Hindus after Partition, the saint refused to leave the temple. In December 1948, Swami Nandlal and Prakash were forced to return to the Indian side of Kashmir. Thereafter, the temple was vandalized, leaving just a stone shell, and was no longer visited by Hindus.

Kashmiri Pandits Ravinder Pandita, Mohan Kumar Monga (an international entrepreneur turned renunciate), S. K. Koul and a few others have set out to revive the traditional Sharda pilgrimage, forming the Save Sharda Peeth Committee of Kashmir in 2018. They are asking that a corridor be opened through PoK so that Indian citizens (presently forbidden to enter the area) can visit Sharda Peeth. A precedent for such a corridor was set in 2019 with the establishment of the 3.4-mile Kartarpur Corridor, allowing pilgrims from India to visit the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib near Lahore in Pakistan from the Gurudwara Dera Baba Nanak—both revered sites in the Sikh tradition.

The Save Sharda Peeth Committee of Kashmir comprises three Muslims, one Sikh and five Hindus. They have engaged with the governments of Pakistan and India and connected with supportive locals in both countries to bring forward the Peeth's importance, origins, people, habitation, religious practices and present site conditions. They have made progress toward establishing the corridor. Significantly, just a week before the murti of Goddess Sharda reached Teetwal from Karnataka, the government of Pakistan-

occupied Kashmir (a separate entity from the government of Pakistan itself, subordinate to it) passed a resolution calling for the opening of a corridor. "The Goddess is with us," Ravinder Pandita exclaimed when he heard the news. They have also gained support from local Muslims in Sharda village, who provided him with small stones and soil from the site. One of the stones has been installed in the new temple, and some of the soil was used in the rituals for the Ram Temple construction in Ayodhya in 2020.

#### How the Teetwal Temple Came to Be

Prior to Partition, there were four traditional routes to Sharda Peeth. The main route included Teetwal along the Kishanganga River. The pilgrimage, an annual event in the months of August and September, would take seven days to cover the 70 miles and end with the singing of Adi Shankara's song (since adopted as an anthem by the Pandits), *Leela Rabda Stapita Khala Lokan*, at the Sharda Temple.

Until 1947, Teetwal was famous as a flourishing trade center. The Qabali raids immediately after Partition changed all that. The raiders, tribals from the Pashtun territory supported by the Pakistan army, invaded Kashmir, attacking and killing people irrespective of the community they belonged to. None were spared. People's homes were looted and set on fire. The raiders desecrated and burned temples, mosques and gurudwaras. People fled in fear. The devastation was intense. A prosperous town with the largest market in the country and a robust economy, where Hindu-Muslim unity was impenetrable, was reduced to wreckage.

## Adi Shankara and Sharda Peeth

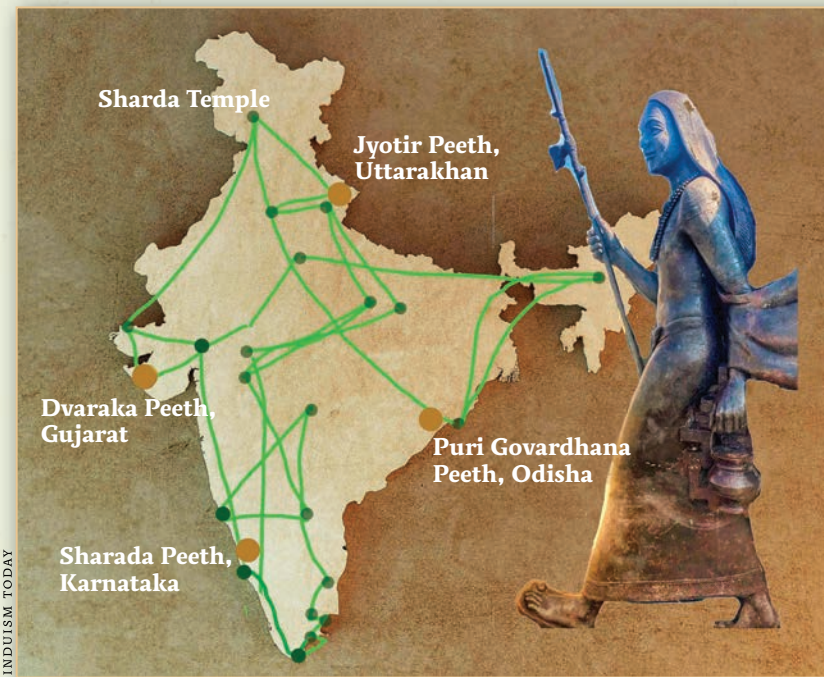
Adi Shankaracharya ascended the throne of knowledge at Sharda Peeth. According to his 14th century biography, "Shankaracharya came to know about a temple with four gates for Goddess Sharda in the Kashmir region. The temple was famous for its Throne of Omniscience (Sarvajna Peetham), signifying that only an omniscient one can sit on it. Shankara felt that he was divinely ordained to attempt to ascend the Sarvajna Peetham through the southern door and headed to the Sharda Temple in Kashmir. People greeted Sri Shankara enthusiastically and hailed his advent as a lion ruling over the forest of Advaita.

"Shankara approached the southern entrance. There was an intense debate spanning a few days where Shankara was questioned by scholars of all other religions and schools of thought. Only when they were convinced of his eligibility did they approve of his ascent to the throne. Holding the hand of Padmapada, the Acharya was about to ascend the Throne of Omniscience when he heard the voice of Goddess Sharda. The Goddess challenged him that it is not enough if a person is omniscient but he should also be pure. Shankara cannot be said to be pure because of his stay at the palace of King Amaruka (where he took over the king's body). To this challenge, the Acharya answered that from his birth he had done no sin with this body of his, and what was done with another body will not affect this body. Sharda became silent, accepting the explanation, and allowed Acharya to ascend the Throne of Omniscience, to the ovation of the people there. The heavenly conch shells blew, kettle drums sounded like roaring of the oceans and flowers rained down in praise of Sri Shankara." Adi Shankara, foremost proponent of Advaita philosophy, became synonymous with Sharda Peeth. The sandalwood murti of Sharda long worshipped the Vidyashan-

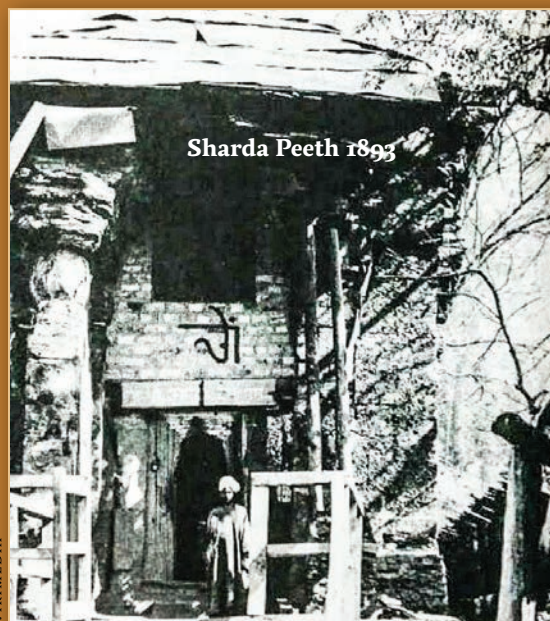
**The Saint's Travels:** In his short life, Adi Shankara traveled the length and breadth of India on foot to establish four spiritual centers. One of the most significant places he pilgrimaged to was the Sharda Peeth in Kashmir, the northernmost reach of his long treks.

kara temple at Sringeri in Karnataka is believed to have been brought here by Adi Shankaracharya from Sharda Peeth.

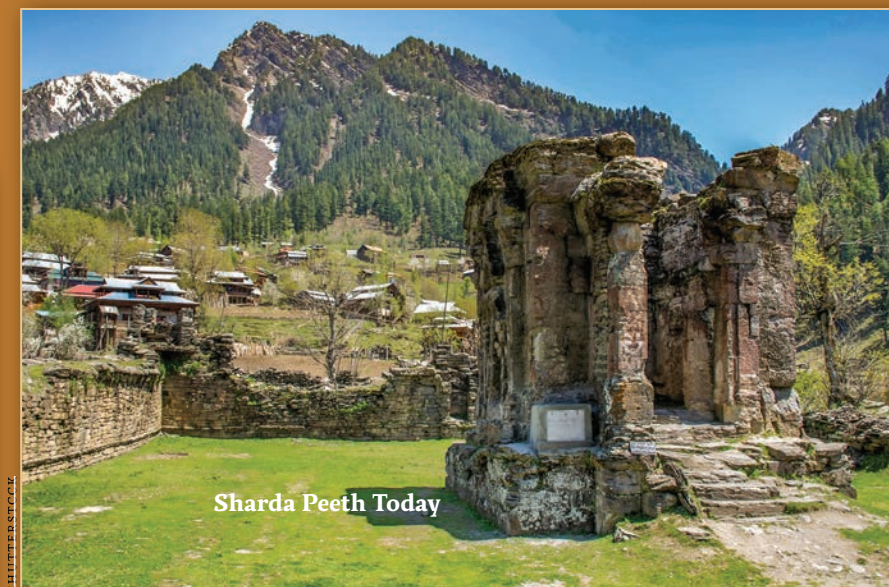
The 10th-century Iranian scholar Al-Biruni and 16th century historian Ab-L-Fazl are said to have made references to the sandalwood murti of the Deity at Sharda Peeth. Some versions say that the murti was lost during a powerful earthquake. The stone slab with Sharda yantra (mystical diagram) remained at the site till October 1947.



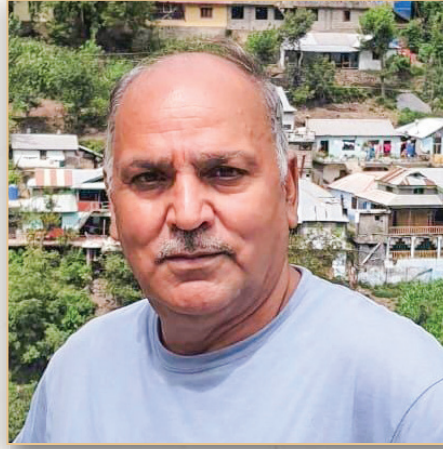
### Sharda Peeth was one of India's foremost centers of Vedic knowledge and learning



(left to right) Map of Kashmir region showing location of Sharda Peeth and the new temple at Teetwal; rare photo of the temple in 1893; satellite view of the ruins in PoK along the Kishanganga river; the Sharda Peeth temple ruins up close today







ALL PHOTOS: CHOODIE SHIVARAM

Nearly eight decades later, the Save Sharda Peeth Committee was denied permission to enter PoK and visit Sharda Peeth, so they decided to offer prayers at Teetwal in an attempt to restart at least part of the annual Sharda yatra. On September 14, 2021—after receiving the necessary permits from the local administration, since Teetwal is at the LoC—the team reached Tangdar, a small town about three miles before Teetwal.

Monga describes their experience. “As we reached Tangdar, we were in for a big shock; there were some Muslims from Teetwal to receive us. There were no Hindus in Teetwal at the time. They garlanded us and escorted us to a youth center, gave us refreshments and said they were waiting for us. They said there is a property in Teetwal they have been protecting and wanted to hand it over to us. This is a land where a temple and a Sikh gurudwara existed prior to 1947. We had no idea of the existence of a temple here. They

wanted us to build a temple there, less than a mile from the Kishanganga River, even though this was never on our agenda! Our Kashmiri community would disbelieve us if we informed them of building a temple at the LoC, after the Pandits were mostly forced out in 1990.”

The Teetwal residents took the visitors to the site where the temple had existed, and from that moment there was no looking back. “I realized that the Goddess is manifesting. I couldn’t speak, I couldn’t stop my tears. It was a miracle,” shared Monga. The mission took a new course. A temple and gurudwara had to be built.

The team headed to the four mutts established in the four quarters of India by Adi Shankaracharya and approached the respective pontiffs with the project to build a Sharda Temple at Teetwal. With over 6,000 square feet of land transferred to the Save Sharda Trust, they had to take the project

**To the rescue:** (left to right) Kishan Kumar Monga, S.K. Koul and Ravinder Pandita, three of the five Hindus of the Sharda Peeth Committee of Kashmir, which includes three Muslims and one Sikh

to fruition—arranging finances, logistics and support on the traditions to be followed. Monga narrated: “Sringeri Peetham Jagadgurus concurred that the temple had to be built. They extended complete support for the Teetwal Sharda Temple, including the panchaloha (“five-metal”) murti. I realized Sharda Peeth had not ceased to exist; the scholastic Vedic culture was still predominant in Sringeri. Adi Shankaracharya had brought the sandalwood murti of Sharda from Kashmir and consecrated it here at Sringeri. Now Mata desires to be sent back to Kashmir from Sringeri.”

Gowrishankar, Administrator of Sringeri

# Teetwal’s Voices

**Aiyaz Khan, Save Sharda Committee Member**



“Ravindra Pandita created a great bonding, bringing Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims together with this temple. I offered to take over the task of constructing the temple and gurudwara. He said it would take time, maybe even six years. I gave him my word, he trusted me and it was completed in less than a year. Our entire district of Karnah has welcomed the construction. We revere Sharda as the Goddess of Learning; we revere Her the most. In 2016 I had been to Sharda Peeth (in PoK); it is in shambles. I felt very sad seeing it.

“Before Partition, there was a dharmashala, temple and gurudwara in Teetwal. Pilgrims would camp here at night. The next morning the Chari Mubarak (holy mace) would officially leave from here to Sharda Peeth. When they came back after performing puja and havan, the Chari Mubarak would be left here. We want to install the sandalwood Sharda now at Sringeri at Sharda Peeth and have a corridor be opened for the Sharda yatra.

“My children are very excited about the temple. My 11-year-old son Momen loves to go there and light the lamp. When the temple opened, he ran in, put his head to the ground then rang the bell in full enthusiasm. After Sharda Mata has come here, She has transformed the lives of people. Religious tourism is progressing. I’m a Muslim sitting on the border of what was a disturbed region, and I have built the temple joining hands with a Kashmiri Pandit. This shows the harmony that exists here.

“We want the Pandits to come back. In the 90s they shouldn’t have gone to Jammu, they should have come to Teetwal, Uri or Tangdar. We would have protected them like brothers. Today we plead with them to come back, our homes are open to them, we will protect you.”

**Akhtar Ali Khan, 103, Bahadurkot, Teetwal**

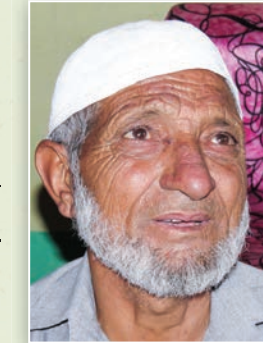


ALL PHOTOS: CHOODIE SHIVARAM

“Teetwal’s history is glorious. It was a prosperous trade center; there was a hospital, tax collector’s court and a number of government departments. There was an endless market with stores open past midnight where you could shop for hours together. Hundreds of people would come from Muzaffarabad (now in PoK) to trade here. There were 6,000 Hindus, about 5,000 Muslims and many Sikhs. Each owned a large number of shops with big showrooms. Hindu-Muslim unity was at its best; we never knew these divisions of religion. There was a big Sharda temple here whose priest was Pandit Bhagwan Das. We would celebrate all the festivals together. We used to play holi with great excitement, even the priest would join us. Janmashtami was a big festival. Sardar Prem Singh, Jambal Ram, Lala Ram, Nadam Ram, Santrapal, Sanderam, Lala Gulisthan, Manthral, they were all my friends, I have no words to say how good they were. I am very happy that the temple has been constructed here. I want my Hindu brethren to come back and start living here. I want the road to Sharda to be opened so that we can take our people to Sharda Peeth. It is my dream to get back those good old days.”

“My father told me a gurudwara and temple existed here; it was a beautiful place. There used to be an informal council where social and personal problems would be discussed and elders from the community would give solutions. We are thrilled about the Sharda Temple here. We are seeing a lot of changes; it has started bringing a lot of good people from all over India. The most important thing that matters for us is peace. This temple is an example of hard work, dedication and harmony.

**Alifuddin Waqar, Retired Forester, Teetwal**



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## The Goddess Comes Home



CHOODIE SHIVARAM



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(left to right) Goddess being worshiped in Bengaluru; a boy wearing a “Sharda Peeth, Teetwal, Kashmir” button, which was worn by everyone; the Goddess; homa rites prior to consecration



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Mutt, told me, "Ravinder Pandita met me in 2017 seeking support for holding a public meeting at the Shankar mutt premises to enlighten people about Sharda Peeth and their mission to revive it. Then in 2021 he informed me that they had acquired a piece of land at Teetwal and had to build a Sharda Temple there. I assured them that Sringeri Mutt would support the project."

Sringeri Mutt guided the team on construction of the temple. The junior pontiff, Vidhushekhara Bharati Mahaswamiji, suggested a granite structure that would remain for posterity. The temple was built and consecrated in consonance with the Shastras. The temple has four doors, signifying the four mutts established by Adi Shankara, just as the original Sharda Temple is said to have had four doors representing the four directions. "It is believed that Adi Shankara entered Sharda Peeth from the southern gate before he ascended the throne. To signify this, we have placed the Deity facing south," Gowrishankar explained.

**The Construction Process**

Sagar Gudigara, a silpi (sculptor) from Magadi, Karnataka, was entrusted with the task of carving the granite—this in the midst of the Covid pandemic. By August 2022, the stones were dispatched to Kashmir, and the temple was completed in October. The labor force and construction was managed by local Muslims. Aiyaz Khan, a resident of Teetwal, oversaw construction and ensured that the temple was completed in record time.

Challenges included crossing mountain regions 12,000 feet above sea level. At one point, the pillars had to be cut into smaller

portions since they could not be ferried across a bridge in the mountains. In May 2022, agitation broke out owing to the killing of a Kashmiri Pandit priest, Rahul Bhat. Threats were received to halt construction of the temple, and the committee decided to put it on hold. It was risky to bring the silpis to Teetwal after they had arrived in Srinagar.

Koul, who worked directly with the laborers, told me: "That's when I decided that nothing will stop the construction. I was not afraid of anything. Even if I were to die, I will die for the Goddess. I decided to stay at Teetwal until the temple was completed. Mongaji also joined me. I vowed to protect the masons and silpis. I took personal responsibility, picked them up from the airport and drove them to Teetwal in my personal vehicle without security. I stayed with them for three months, took care of their accommodation, food and security. I left Teetwal only after the temple was completed and I had put the silpis back on the flight to Bengaluru. This temple is a miracle. Can you imagine me, a 65-year-old, helping move granite slabs weighing 370 to 440 pounds? Stone slabs weighing 1,800 pounds could not be moved without a crane, but heavy machinery was not allowed into Teetwal. We took Sharda's name and lifted it with the help of a hand winch. During construction, I could see the Goddess moving around the vicinity riding on a tiger. It gave me the strength and confidence that the Goddess was making Her temple."



The 572-pound panchaloha murti of Goddess Sharda, a replica of the Deity in Sringeri, now sits majestically in the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. This murti and that of Adi Shankaracharya were given to the temple by the Sringeri Mutt. The Deities were handed over to the Save Sharda Committee on January 24, 2023, in a formal ceremony,

then traveled nearly 2,800 miles by road to Teetwal in an SUV driven by Kashmiri Pandits. Stopping over at various cities to enable devotees to pay obeisance, the murtis reached Teetwal on March 21, 2023. The next day they were placed in the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. The temple complex also has a small prayer room housing the murti of Swami Nandalal Maharaj and a Sivalinga with saligramas. The room vibrates with devotees singing bhajans.

The Sharda murti is imposing. The expression on Her face exudes compassion and benevolence. Her smile is captivating. She is the very epitome of motherly love and grace. Her demure smile welcomes Her children and gentle palms blessed them. Seeing Her even in a photo brings warmth to the heart, courage to the mind, and calmness to the soul. One instantly connects with Her.

"It's a great work of art, and we felt good," says Vishwas Hedge, whose team created this masterpiece. "We followed the *Silpa Sastras* meticulously while creating the murti. After completion we prayed to the Goddess to forgive us for any shortcomings. While making the murti we recite a shloka

*New Temple May Mark the Beginning of the Resurrection of the Ancient Religious Center*



CHOODIE SHIVARAM

*(clockwise from above) Vidhushekhara Bharati Mahaswamiji, Gowrishankar, Advocate General Venkataraman, Monga and devotees during the installation ceremonies; enshrined Goddess; Sharda Temple at Sringeri Mutt in Karnataka; a stone brought from the original Sharda Peeth and placed in the new temple; another view of the ruins; the new Gurudwara*



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that gives the description of the Deity and Her accompanying features,” says Sivakumar, one of the artisans.

The eyes and smile of the Deity are crucial. They reveal the skill of the silpi. “An auspicious time is fixed before we set the eyes and smile of the Deity, *netra milana* as we call it. We observe austerities and wear traditional saffron clothes. Only the working artisans are allowed in the workshop. We recite prayers and then set the face. Sometimes we receive guidance in our dreams,” says Harish, one of the artisans who worked closely on shaping the face of the Deity. “We had no idea that the murti was going to Teetwal, to the place where Sharda belongs. We got to know only after the murti was ready. It is historic and we felt that all these years of our work have been sanctified by this creation.”

#### Formal Installation

The official consecration of the temple was performed on June 5, 2023, by the Sringeri junior pontiff, Vidhushekhara Bharati Mahaswamiji. His presence was seen as a significant message. “After Adi Shankaracharya, the pontiff from Sringeri is the first one to worship the Goddess Sharda in Kashmir. In a region that had fallen to disrepute owing to militancy, the Jagadguru’s presence reaffirmed faith in humanity and brotherhood among all religions, sending out a strong message of unity,” says Monga. At Teetwal, Vidhushekhara Bharati walked through the lanes of the village surrounding the temple, went close to the banks of Kishan-

ganga River and addressed a large gathering of devotees and residents who had come for the consecration. The presence of Muslims, not only from Teetwal but surrounding villages, was significant, all of them wearing a badge of Sharda on their chest.

#### Reflections

The four days I spent at Teetwal in the overpowering presence of the Goddess, being in the company of Seshu, Monga and other devotees where the conversations were all about the Goddess or the great spiritual gurus of Kashmir, and partaking in the bhajan sessions, are a treasure in my memory trove.

Today Teetwal reverberates with the ringing of temple bells, blowing of the conch and Vedic recitation. Sharda is well settled in Teetwal, attracting innumerable visitors every day from all over the world. The economy of the village is seeing a boom, with enhanced business opportunities in transport and accommodation. The villagers have opened their homes for homestays. There is a ghat on the riverbank to facilitate devotees to have a holy dip. Improved lodgings, food facilities for yatrias, an imposing arch at the entrance of the road leading to the temple

and residential accommodation for the priest are works under consideration.

The upbeat mood of Sharda’s arrival is visible among people not only in Teetwal but surrounding towns, too. The Sharda Cup cricket tournament, hosting 40 teams from all over Kashmir, was played at Teetwal. The Sharda yatra resumed on September 23, with everyone’s prayer that the corridor to Sharda Peeth be approved soon. Even the Pakistanis are talking about making the original Sharda Peeth a tourist destination.

The holy mace, symbol of the pilgrimage, was taken to the nearby bridge across the river. There is a white line in the middle separating India from PoK; crossing it without authorization is forbidden. At this point, worship was offered to the river Kishanganga.

Tremendous efforts are being made by Ravindra Pandita and his team to have a corridor to Sharda Peeth opened. Inspired by them, prominent people have been urging the government to allow the corridor. Recently Dr. Karan Singh, a senior Indian politician and descendant of the Dogra royal family of Kashmir, made a representation to the Prime Minister of India seeking his involvement to enable Hindus to visit Sharda Peeth in PoK and offer prayers. With the Save Sharda Movement gaining momentum, the impact made by the temple at Teetwal and the presence of the Goddess, it is hopefully only a matter of time before access to Sharda Peeth enables devotees to reclaim their lost heritage. At least our children have realized the importance of Sharda Peeth and all that connects with it.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Choodie Sivaram** has been a journalist for over three decades. She writes on current affairs, policy matters, constitutional and legal issues, heritage and culture. She wrote and directed the documentary, “At the Altar of India’s Freedom—The INA Veterans of Malaysia,” produced by the Indian High Commission in Malaysia. Choodie holds degrees in journalism and law.



## Those Who Stayed

UNKNOWN TO MANY IS THE GRIT AND COURAGE OF THOSE Kashmiri Pandits who did not leave the valley during the exodus in the early 1990s. It is estimated that eight thousand or more Pandits stayed and endured the turbulent times, while 200,000 fled. I realized that all along I had been seeing Kashmir from only one perspective—the geopolitical angle. My visit revealed a multidimensional form including not only the dangers of cross-border terrorism but, more importantly, the suffering of people irrespective of religion, the bonding and camaraderie of all communities that existed even in the times of adversity and continues to this day, and the resolve of Pandits to stay connected to their roots.

I met nearly a dozen Pandits whose families stayed behind. One was Ashok Kumar. He was seven when his parents chose to not leave their village of Wusan in the Baramulla district. Wusan had sixteen happily settled Hindu families. When the outburst of militancy happened, Ashok said, “ten families fled. The neighbors and the village head pleaded with our parents and the remaining families not to leave. They said the village will be deserted and will get a bad name that we chased away the Hindus. They promised to protect us, and they did. Till this day we have had no problem at all. We all live in harmony. Our temples here have been safe and rituals have continued uninterrupted.” He lives today in the house that his forefathers built.

Another was Vijay Kumar Sas, a resident of Srinagar. Living in the midst of terror-torn Srinagar when militancy peaked in 1989, Vijay’s father, Pran Nath Sas, resolved not to leave. His philosophy was “not to die before death comes,” said Vijay, who was in class seven at the time. “A lot of my classmates had been indoctrinated into militancy. One day I met a classmate on the street and asked him why he had skipped his exams, and in a jiffy he pointed a loaded gun at me. It intrigued me; the only time I had seen a gun was in films,” says Vijay, who was then just turning 13. Being the only son, his parents packed him off to Jammu to be with his grandparents. Vijay went to a migrant camp school in Jammu and returned to settle in Srinagar after completing his studies.

Life was not easy for his parents. Vijay’s mother courageously stood

by her husband in his decision not to leave. On many occasions terrorists barged into their house and held a gun at his father’s neck. Pran Nath Sas fought them back each time. “My father was once abducted by militants to be killed. Muslims from our neighborhood rescued him,” says Vijay. “In 1999, when I came back here, I got a threat letter from a terrorist group asking me to leave the valley in a week else I would be killed. My father showed the letter to a colleague who worked with the judge in the session’s court. The person who wrote the letter was nabbed the next day.” Vijay drew inspiration and courage not only from his father but also from people who fought against the onslaught of terrorism while being in the midst of it. “It’s easy to engage in activism now, but in the 90s, in the kind of situation then in Kashmir, it was unimaginable,” said Vijay.

Vijay has been actively engaged in fighting for the rights of Kashmiri Pandits, protection of temples and reservation for Kashmiri Pandits in education. He founded the organization Kashmiri Pandit Sangharsh Samiti (KPSS), the only non-migrant organization in Kashmir. Since 2007 he has had a battery of lawyers help him in these legal battles. The group has filed nearly 25 cases to get temple lands released from encroachers and secure them. Vijay explains, “When the exodus happened, temples became vulnerable and people started laying claim to them. It was not just some Muslims, but people with criminal backgrounds from outside the state who usurped temple properties and have even illegally leased them out. There are nearly 800 temples in Kashmir, but no official list. As a result of our case, in 2010 the court ordered the Revenue Department to create a formal authorized index of all the temples.”

Pandits who have stayed back often faced uncertainties and wondered whether they took the right decision not to flee. Those who migrated to Jammu did not have a comfortable life either. What has not been reported is that Hindus in Jammu subjected the migrants to ridicule and abuse. People like Vijay have seen it all. “Life has many ups and downs. One would think that we are living a cushy life in Kashmir, but reality is different—a lot of tension, a lot of gunfire from both sides.” Four years ago his name was on a targeted killing list. One of his advocate friends, a Muslim, ensured his name was taken off the list. Vijay has seen a lot of support from the Muslims. “People from outside come and sow hatred here. But we live here together through thick and thin. We have to: this is our homeland.”

## The Goddess’ Sweet Send-off from Bengaluru



CHOODIE SHIVARAM



CHOODIE SHIVARAM

## Neelam Valley in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir

(left to right) a traditional Kashmir painting of Goddess Sharda is elaborately worshiped at Kashmir Bhawan in Bengaluru to bless Her murthi’s departure by car for Kashmir; devotees bring offerings; the Kishanganga River separating India from PoK taken from Simari, the last village on the Indian side; view from Sharda Peeth in PoK toward the Neelam Valley



CHOODIE SHIVARAM



WIKIMEDIA



# Kashmir's History

By CHOODIE SHIVARAM, BENGALURU

**K**ALHANA'S IMMORTAL 12TH CENTURY-CE WORK *RAJATARANGINI* describes Kashmir thus: "Kailasa is the best place in the three worlds; Himalayas is the best part of Kailasa and Kashmir is the best part in the Himalayas." Poets and scholars describe Kashmir's magnetic beauty, calling it a valley of happiness. In his 1935 book *Archaeological Remains of Kashmir*, Pandit Anand Koul writes, "Kashmir is considered the balm for tired minds and sore hearts."

A land where the Gods manifested and powerful kings ruled, Kashmir abounds in antiquity, and is characterized by grandeur, intellectual wealth and piety. The Greek philosopher Ptolemy mentions with clarity the location of *Kasmiriya*. Chinese travellers Hieun Tsiang (in India from 631 to 633 ce) and Wukong (759 ce) "made accurate records of the ancient temples here," reports Pandit Anand Koul in his book. From Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* to Walter Lawrence's *Valley of Kashmir* (1885), historical texts record the growth and times of this land of mystics.

Kalhana's work was continued by Pandit Jonaraja, who wrote the history of Kashmir up to the troubled mid-15th-century times of the last Hindu dynasty and the time of Sultan Sikander. "Most headmen of villages had access to translations of *Rajatarangini*. They repeated stories of Kalhana's chronicle, and the uneducated villagers have a general idea of the history of their country," writes Anand Koul.

In the 3rd century bce, when Kashmir was part of Ashoka's empire, Buddhism became the state religion. Ashoka's son Jaloka, a worshiper of Siva, reverted to practice Saivism. One of the most famous kings of Kashmir was Lalitaditya, who ruled from 697 to 738 and was much loved by his people. With artisans brought from across the territories he had conquered, Lalitaditya built magnificent temples and adorned them with gold acquired during his conquests. The Marthand Sun temple near the Kashmiri city of Anantnag is a grand example; even the ruins speak of Lalitaditya's monumental contribution to temple architecture.

The first appearance of Islam in Kashmir is believed to be a failed invasion attempt by Tartar Khan Dalcha in 1128. History took a bitter course with the entry of Sikander in 1394. He undertook a fierce campaign of destruction, shattering murtis, desecrating Hindu temples and slaughtering thousands of Hindus. Sikander deputed an entire force for a full year to destroy the Marthand temple.

Kashmir came under the reign of the Mughal emperor Akbar during 1555-1605. In the mid-17th century, Aurangzeb rained terror on the people of Kashmir. Hindu Pandits from Kashmir sought help from Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Sikh guru, to protect them from Aurangzeb's oppressive policies. Guru Tegh Bahadur set out to rescue the Pandits but was beheaded by Aurangzeb in 1675.

The death of Aurangzeb in 1707 enabled the Durrani Empire of Afghanistan to consolidate power in Kashmir. "The miseries of the Kashmiris increased, resulting in penury, degradation and slavery," according to Kashmiri scholar Prithivi Nath Kaul Bamzai.

In 1819 Kashmir came under the rule of the Sikhs after Maharaja Ranjit Singh sent his troops to liberate the people of Kashmir from the tyrannical Afghans. After the death of Raja Ranjit Singh in 1839, the Dogra chief Gulab Singh, who was with Ranjit Singh and later helped the British, was installed as the sovereign of Kashmir after signing the treaty of Amritsar in 1846. The last Dogra ruler was Hari Singh (father of the Indian politician, Dr. Karan Singh), who signed the Instrument of Accession, merging Kashmir with the Indian Union after the Partition of 1947.

The story of Kashmir's spiritual heritage is equally complex. For Hindus, Kashmir is a holy land which finds extensive mention in *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, Kautilya's *Artha Shastra*, Patanjali's *Mahabhashya*, Kalidasa's works and innumerable literary and historical texts of yore. Called Bharatha Shira Shikara, the crown of India, Kashmir has been home to rishis, sages, scholars and innumerable saints and mystics, even to this day.

The 10th-century scholar-saint Acharya Abhinavgupta (950-1016) was one of the greatest proponents of Kashmir Shaivism. His works continue to be researched throughout the world. His student Kshemendra's proficiency in mathematics, astrology, social sciences, Buddhist philosophy, Vedanta, Saiva Siddhanta, mantra shastra, music,

painting and other arts is unrivaled. The 14th-century poet Lalleshwari (1320-1392, also known as Lallade) is what saint Akka Mahadevi is to Karnataka. At 24, she renounced everything, including clothes, and was deeply revered as a saint who touched people's lives. Her compositions in the local dialect are sung even today.

Kashmir has been home to innumerable mystics and saints. In this spiritually magnetic land, Sufism took on a uniquely syncretistic identity, blending Sufi Islam with Advaita and Shaivite Hinduism. The very name of the Sufi order that was birthed in Kashmir—the Rishi Order—reflects this harmonious identity, which forms a part of the larger *Kashmiriyat*, the religious harmony that undergirds much of Kashmir's traditional culture and manifests not only in mutual respect but participation in the festivals of each religion by all. Kashmir's long list of spiritual leaders includes Swami Nandlal Maharaj (1896-1973), Swami Mast Baba (1930-2023), Lakshman Jhoo Maharaj (1907-1991) and Swami Gopinath Maharaj (1898-1968).

Distinct to Kashmir is the Sharada *lipi* (script), which dates back to the 7th century and is said to have originated from the Brahmi *lipi*. Sharada *lipi* is regarded as the base for the Gurumukhi script prevalent today. Nagari *lipi*, from which Devanagari evolved, also traces its origins to Sharda *lipi*. The ninth-century mathematics manuscript *Bhakhshali Hastha Prathi* is written in Sharada *lipi*. *Baijanatha Prashasti*, found in Kangra Valley in Kashmir, is considered the oldest text in Sharada *lipi*, dating back to 804 ce.

Despite or perhaps due to its beauty, glorious heritage and wealth of knowledge, history has not been kind to Kashmir. The invasions followed by persecution created periods of turmoil. Kashmir became a bone of contention after Partition. In October 1947, the Qabali raids by tribals from Pakistan shook the very foundations of harmony. Homes and religious places of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs alike were destroyed and burnt. People were brutalized and prosperous towns became impoverished. After Maharaja Hari Singh belatedly agreed to accede Kashmir to the Indian Union, the Indian army swung into action and successfully drove the raiders back. Unfortunately, the Pakistani-usurped land became a disputed territory now known as Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). Cross-border terrorism, which started in 1947, has haunted Kashmir ever since.

Between 1989 and 1993, nearly 200,000 Kashmiri Hindus fled the valley owing to heightened militancy, threats and aggression. Close to eight thousand Pandits dared to stay back and brave the hostilities. The situation has dramatically improved in recent years, in particular since 2019, following the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian constitution. This article had given what was intended to be temporary, semi-independent status to Jammu and Kashmir. Unfortunately, the terms of Article 370 were not conducive to stable government.

Today's Kashmir is a story of harmony between communities; it is a scene of development and progress. Temples are being rebuilt and cared for by the Muslims. In 2023, after 33 violence-riddled years, a Muharram procession by the Shia community, previously a platform for separatist protests, was conducted peacefully. Live coverage of Janmashtami celebrations from temples, grand Krishna processions in various cities, and celebration of Guru Nanak's birthday on a grand scale, brought back the old fervor of togetherness. In the words of Dr. Touseef Ahmad Bhat, a socio-environmental activist, "Abrogation of article 370 has brought significant changes in Kashmir, integrating it closely with rest of the nation and fostering the economic growth of the state. There is a robust enhancement of infrastructure development, building bridges, highways, ring roads and upgrading the airport. Many schemes have been initiated towards industrial development, tourism, hospitality industry, manufacturing and information technology, offering incentives and subsidies to attract investors."

He continued, "There has been a record-breaking influx of tourists to Kashmir. Last year we had nearly twenty million tourists visiting the valley. Schemes for home stays and border tourism have grown, showing that peace is returning to the valley. Empowerment of women has made gains, and minority groups have been provided equal rights with opportunities, enabling them to participate more actively in social and economic ventures. There are a lot of fashion shows and such activities going on, which had been a distant dream for women here. Implementation of central government schemes for education, health care, rural development and poverty alleviation (something that was denied to us all these years owing to vested interests) have improved the quality of life and contributed to the overall development."

## The Magical Spiritual History of the Beautiful Valley of Kashmir



(left to right) King Kanishka inaugurates Mahayana Buddhism, 3rd century bce; Thonmi Sambhota develops the Tibetan script from the Sharada script; devotee places shawl around a statue of Swami Nandlal Maharaj (1896-1973), the last saint resident at Sharda Peeth; Kashmir Valley's Dal Lake is a favorite tourist place, with boat rides and elegant houseboats for overnight stays.







ALL PHOTOS: BAPS

USA

# America's Largest Hindu Temple Opens in New Jersey

**Y**OU CAN NOW TRAVEL TO INDIA WITHOUT boarding a plane or even leaving your home in America! Indeed, you will think you have arrived in 17th-century India, but you are actually in a small, very American town—Robbinsville, New Jersey. In this bustling, fast-growing town, you drive through typical suburbia—homes, malls, fast-food places, auto dealerships—and then suddenly you make a turn and enter into a breathtaking India.

Behind vaulted high walls lies quite another world, quite another century. You are in the awe-aspiring BAPS Swaminarayan Temple complex, spread over 187 acres. Recently BAPS, a global spiritual organization, celebrated the grand opening of the Swaminarayan Akshardham, the largest Hindu mandir in the United States. It is said

to be the second largest temple in the world, second only to the iconic Angkor Wat, which still stands as a testament to Hindu Dharma.

BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha is a spiritual, volunteer-driven fellowship dedicated to improving society through individual growth by fostering the Hindu values of faith, service and global harmony. Its global network is comprised of more than 1,200 temples and 3,850 centers on five continents. They have over one million followers of which 55,000 volunteer much of their time to the organization's operations. Based on the Vedic teachings propagated by Bhagwan Swaminarayan (1781-1830), it was formally established in 1907 by Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj, and is currently led by Mahant Swami Maharaj (1933-).

In his book on the building of the Robbinsville temple, *If Stones Could Sing*, Yogi

Trivedi, explains why Hindu temples are so vital to our lives, as a visual expression of our faith: "Akshardham is a grand and at once nuanced representation of Hindu faith, history and lifestyle. Visual elements are a highly effective way to transmit these elements to subsequent generations. When spoken words could not be recorded and written manuscripts were brittle, these mandirs carried forth the story of a time and people to future generations. Each mandir carries the distinct cultural stamp of a people for future generations to remember and celebrate."

.....  
**Opening Day:** (left to right) drone shot of the temple campus; the central hall, with swamis and devotees attending the final consecration ceremonies conducted by Mahant Swami Maharaj







In a world where birthday presents are typically received, His Holiness Mahant Swami Maharaj, the spiritual guru of BAPS, chose to give a remarkable gift to the world on his 90th birthday. In his blessings, Mahant Swami Maharaj stated, "It was Pramukh Swami Maharaj's divine wish to construct an Akshardham in North America, where people can come and visit, irrespective of race, creed or religion." Here, embedded like a jewel in pristine land, is the Mahamandir, a rhapsody in carved stone. The temple is a marvel: These stones traveled 21, 500 miles before reaching Akshardham. The final stone (*amalak*) was placed on the main steeple on June 16, 2023.

### Entering a Unique World

What is the special power that draws people here from so many towns and cities, so many countries? As you enter the complex, you enter a unique world. Set in manicured gardens, it is an entire city with flowing fountains, trees, flowers and sculptures. It is the place of worship for over 25,000 devotees of the Swaminarayan faith who live in this area, and it meets all their devotional, social and cultural needs.

As you enter the complex, your eye is immediately drawn to a towering 49-foot-tall gold-hued bronze murti of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's child yogi form, Nilkanth Varni, dominating the gardens and symbolizing the internal steadiness achieved from the spiritual journey. People are drawn to the simple truths taught by this seer who lived in the 17th century. He taught about devotion and service to humanity, values which are the guiding principles of a good life even today.

Though the temple is devoted to the saints, the idea I found compelling was that, in a way, it is a temple devoted to ordinary people from all walks of life, for it is they who, through their devotion and service, have made it a living entity. It is a song to peace

**Day of Celebration:** (clockwise from above left) shrine to Pramukh Swami Maharaj (1921–2016), founder of the Mahamandir; his successor, Mahant Swami Maharaj, addresses the devotees; central sanctum with Lord Swaminarayan (1781–1830) and Gunatitanand Swami (1784–1867) at His feet; dance performance on the temple's steps

and love in a world that is often teetering towards war and destruction, terrorism and global warming, the plight of homeless refugees and the economically challenged.

In this beautiful and calm environment, all the world's troubles seem far away. The message here is that the world is one family—water from over 300 rivers in India and across the world have been blended into the



Brahma Kund, merging to celebrate the oneness of humanity. It is a large body of water inspired by the stepwells of western India, helping the visitor acclimatize to the sacred space, to wash away worries and burdens and enter a place of peace. The water in the Brahma Kund represents India's four most sacred rivers—Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati and Sarayu. The step pond includes waters from other sacred rivers in India and from all 50 US states.

### A Landmark of Hindu Culture

One of the volunteers explains what the Mahamandir means to the larger world: "It's truly a place of worship at its heart and core, but it's also a landmark of Hindu architecture and culture for the entire Indian diaspora, for the entire world to come in and experience. It's our neighbors, it's our friends, it's our family members who can come in and interact and engage with the culture, with the values. It doesn't matter who you are—it's irrespective of one's background, race, religion, caste, you can come here to experience a part of Hinduism and a part of the Indian culture."

Akshardham encompasses many meanings. As Yogi Trivedi, explained, "Akshardham is a mandir and a cultural center. At its core, Akshardham is a home for, or the abode of, the Divine, where millions will come to experience spiritual tranquility and cultural celebrations. Akshardham is a product of bhakti and seva in a visual, permanent form. It is also a hub for bhakti and seva to amplify their impact on society."

The Welcome Center is built like a grand Gujarati haveli (mansion) out of carved Burmese teakwood. It serves many functions, such as spiritual assemblies, classes for the children to learn Gujarati, musical concerts, dancing and community gatherings. The handsome wooden columns are lit by 4,000 welcoming lights or *diyas* which are solar powered, keeping the needs of our changing world in mind.

The Mahamandir is exquisite, created from marble, granite and limestone. The statistics (sidebar, p. 33) are awe-aspiring. So many intricate stories are presented on its ceilings, domes and walls that you will find



something new to contemplate every time you visit. The Mahamandir has so much symbolism built into it—it rests on the jagati or wisdom plinth—with messages from the holy texts, including the *Ramayana* and *Bhagvata Gita* and homage to great saints, poets and seers and philosophers, including the Sikh gurus, the Jain saint Mahavira and the Buddha.

Volunteer guides explain that there is significance and symbolism behind every carving, starting from the first dome inside the Mahamandir, which depicts the eight holy rivers of India, in the form of Goddesses, and the eight holy pilgrimage places. All are there for future generations to see, carved into the structure of the Mahamandir.

The BAPS tradition normally places the

saints in the center, while the Gods are at the side. In traditional Hindu temples, it's the Gods who are the presiding Deities. As an outsider, I found that different, but it was reassuring to see the pantheon of Gods that one daily worships—Siva, Ganesh, Krishna—all had Their shrines. The more I learned about the saints, I understood and realized they had taught the people a special way to live. And people believe in them totally.

### A Strong Tradition of Service

The story behind the temple is as powerful as the temple itself. Over the last 12 years, 12,500 volunteers came together to virtually transport this temple stone by stone and reconstruct it in New Jersey. So, while the stone was quarried from different parts of

## By the Numbers

**Mahamandir Dimensions:** 255 feet wide, 345 feet long and 191 feet tall

**Construction area:** 1.3 million sq. ft.

**Cubic Feet of Stone:** 1.9 million

**Weight:** 220 million pounds

**Stone Pillars:** 548

**Stone Beams:** 548

**Statues and Statuettes:** 10,000+

**Carved Musical Instruments:** 151

**Bharatnatyam Dance Poses:** 108

**Inverted Domes:** 9

**Volunteers:** 12,500

**Volunteer Hours:** Millions...

the world, it was all sent to India and carved there, then shipped across the oceans to Robbinsville. The actual temple was then constructed here, like a giant jigsaw puzzle. In addition to work by licensed contractors and artisans from India, thousands of dedicated volunteers put in millions of hours, often learning as they worked. They were not construction workers or laborers by trade, but white-collar professionals from many parts of the US and the world, including the UK, Canada and Australia. Scientists, doctors and lawyers put work aside, giving up their jobs to dedicate themselves to building the Mahamandir. Women gave up jobs or held fort in the house while their husbands worked in the construction. Women actually donned hard hats and worked in temple construction for the first time in their lives. Like the bowing peacocks carved on the walls, these high-powered professionals put their ego aside in the abode of God and did whatever was required of them to create the Mahamandir.

Yogi Trivedi points out the pioneering role of women volunteers in building the Mahamandir: "Women volunteered to waterproof the stones, operate Lull telehandlers (a type of forklift), assemble and build stone structures under the supervision of the skilled volunteers, and even led their own teams to install rebar for the concrete."

As one woman volunteer told me, "Our guru lived his entire life in the service of others. He is our inspiration and our drive to be a part of something bigger than ourselves in connecting and unifying people. You think





ALL PHOTOS: BAPS

about that spirit, that you're doing something that's going to outlast your own life and will stand there for generations. That's an inspiring thought, that you can be a part of making something that gives so many values and so many messages to so many people for thousands of years."

Indeed, visiting the Mahamandir, one can't help but be struck by the extraordinary ecosystem generated that puts service to others into the DNA of all the BAPS devotees and volunteers. It is something taught to all young people; it is a part of their growing-up years and the formation of their self identity.

Young people serve joyfully in whatever service is assigned to them, be it organizing the shoes of the worshipers or cleaning the glass doors.

Others, coming from varied backgrounds and countries, find their calling as they learn about it through friends and join in the weekly spiritual assemblies. Said one volunteer who had come in from Dubai to serve in the opening of the Mahamandir, "I think because we're so far away from India, we feel this unifying sense of strengthening our cultural identity when we come here. It allows you to thrive in your roots, while being

very much a part of the society around you. So it's not like we're removing ourselves from another place but it's about integrating and thriving collectively where we live."

### The Grand Opening

The grand opening of the Mahamandir started with the Festival of Inspirations on October 3, 2023. The several days of celebration culminated on October 8, the final day of pomp and circumstance, with a beautifully decorated temple, ceremonies and guests from all over the world. It was an extravaganza with illuminations, devotees singing



**The Temple's Many Aspects:** (clockwise from far left) Swami blesses the statue of Lord Rama and Sita; similar blessing for Lord Siva and Goddess Parvati; pouring the enormous concrete foundation slab, four feet thick, in 2014; three years later the temple is partway up; by 2021 all major pieces are taking shape; multi-faith gathering a few days before the consecration;



SILVI MATERIALS

and dancing and exuberant fireworks across the New Jersey skies. The entire event was live streamed for those who could not be there, and a summary video is available at: [bit.ly/baps-10-8](http://bit.ly/baps-10-8).

It is heartening to see that at the grand opening of the temple so many multi-faith leaders had been invited and came together as one big community. In the world, religion can be a source of conflict, such as in the Middle East, so it is a blessing when religious heads come together in peace and unity.

Many distinguished people spoke, and US Congressman Steny Hoyer of Maryland probably voiced the opinion of many: "This mandir is magnificent. We marvel at its immense size. We admire the craftsmanship behind the thousands of carved elephants, peacocks and other sculptures. But what I find most extraordinary is the community that built it. They did it because they believe in the values this structure represents: equality, liberation, truth, harmony and, most importantly, service to others. The values enshrined here are not just Hindu values, they are human values."

### Antidote to the World's Ills

And so stands this mighty holy sactuary in America, in a typical small American town. As parts of the world around us descend into madness, the opening of the Mahamandir is an antidote to the bloodshed, the grief and the breakup of the human family. It reminds us not to give up what is good, but to celebrate the past and the stronger structures of humanity, service and values. It reminds people to donate of themselves, sharing themselves and linking to others, because the philosophy of the Mahamandir is to give and give and give.

As Yogi Trivedi sums it up, "As an awe-inspiring symbol for Hindu faith, culture and architecture, Akshardham serves as a place for all to belong, celebrate and selflessly articulate pride for their tradition while integrating open-mindedly within the America that we love and now call home. It will serve as a bridge between many countries, religions, and cultures for generations to come."

Indeed, the Mahamandir is like a giant solar diya lamp which generates its light, its energy, from thousands and thousands of devotees and then lights up the world with service and spirituality for all humanity. 🙏



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lavina Melwani is a New York-based journalist who has written on the arts, spirituality and life for several international publications. She is a columnist for CNBCTV18.com and is a co-founder of Children's Hope India. She blogs at [www.lassiwithlavina.com](http://www.lassiwithlavina.com). You can follow her @ [lavinamelwani](https://twitter.com/lavinamelwani).

As part of the nine-day temple dedication, BAPS held an event on October 3 called "Celebrating Women's Contributions: Sanskars, Seva and Sanskruti" attended by hundreds of women, during which Lavina (at left) was given an award for her service to the Hindu community.



# YOGA

## A Youthful Primer About Hinduism's Eight-Limbed System of Meditation and Spiritual Striving

FROM THE TEACHINGS OF SATGURU SIVAYA SUBRAMUNIYASWAMI



*To depict rāja yoga, artist Rajeev NT has chosen a spritely theme. Four children have found a banyan tree in the forest, with eight branches representing the eight limbs of aṣṭāṅga yoga.*

Today's popular concept of yoga equates it with haṭha yoga and the practice of the haṭha yoga āsanas, or postures. Many who practice such yoga do so solely for health benefits. However, others pursue yoga, in a deeper sense, in hopes of reaping the spiritual benefits it offers. It is to these spiritual seekers who have higher consciousness as the goal of their yoga that this Educational Insight is directed. Here we describe the path called rāja yoga, the regal (rāja) means to enlightenment, a classical, meditative system that is one among the numerous yogas practiced in Hinduism. Technically, it is termed aṣṭāṅga (eight-limbed) yoga, a name coined by Sage Patanjali, because it consists of eight stages, represented in our illustrations of the village tree with eight limbs. These stages are: yama (restraint), niyama (observance), āsana (seat or posture), prāṇāyāma (mastering life force), pratyāhāra (withdrawal), dhāraṇā (concentration), dhyāna (meditation) and samādhi (contemplation and God Realization). It is worth noting that yama (the restraints) and niyama (the observances) precede āsana (haṭha yoga postures), but they are omitted in most yoga classes today. That is unfortunate, as this ethical basis is of utmost importance. We can liken these eight limbs to a tall building. The yamas are the first part of the foundation, like the steel; and the niyamas are the second part, like the cement. Together they provide the support a skyscraper needs to stand. Āsana, prāṇāyāma and pratyāhāra are like the lower floors, dhāraṇā and dhyāna are the middle ones, and samādhi is the topmost floor, the stratum of realization and illumination.

SATGURU BODHINATHA VEYLANSWAMI



# Yama: Restraints



**“Restraint.” Virtuous and moral living, which brings purity of mind, freedom from anger, jealousy and subconscious confusion which would inhibit the process of meditation.**

**“Yama is abstention from harming others, from falsehood, from theft, from incontinence and from greed.”**

*Sage Patanjali, II, Sūtra 30*

Sutra translations are from *How to Know God, The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali* by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, copyright 1953 by the Vedanta Society of Southern California

It is true that bliss comes from meditation, and it is true that higher consciousness is the heritage of all mankind. However, the ten restraints and their corresponding practices are necessary to maintain bliss consciousness, as well as all of the good feelings toward oneself and others attainable in any incarnation. These restraints and practices build character. Character is the foundation for spiritual unfoldment.

The platform of character must be built within our lifestyle to maintain the total contentment needed to persevere on the path. The great rishis saw the frailty of human nature and gave these guidelines, or disciplines, to make it strong. They said, “Strive!” Let’s strive to not hurt others, to be truthful and honor all the rest of the virtues they outlined.

The twenty restraints and observances are the first two of the eight limbs of aṣṭāṅga yoga, constituting Hinduism’s fundamental ethical code. Because it is brief, the entire code can be easily memorized and reviewed daily at the family meetings in each home. The yamas and niyamas are cited in numerous scriptures, including the *Śaṅḍilya* and *Varāha Upanishads*, the *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā* by Gorakshanatha, the *Tirumantiram* of Rishi Tirumular and the *Yoga Sūtras* of Sage Patanjali. All of these ancient texts list ten yamas and ten niyamas, with the exception of Patanjali’s classic work, which lists just five of each. Patanjali lists the yamas as: ahimsā, satya, asteya, brahmacharya and aparigraha (noncovetousness); and the niyamas as: śauca, santosha, tapas, svādhyāya (self-reflection, scriptural study) and Īśvarapraṇidhāna (worship).

Each discipline focuses on a different aspect of human nature, its strengths and weaknesses. Taken as a sum total, they encompass the whole of human experience and spirituality. You may do well in upholding some of these but not so well in others. That is to be expected. That defines the sādhana, therefore, to be perfected.

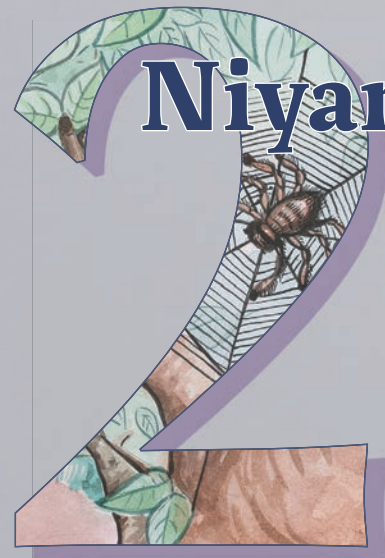
The ten yamas are: 1) ahimsā, “noninjury,” not harming others by thought, word or deed; 2) satya, “truth-



fulness,” refraining from lying and betraying promises; 3) asteya, “nonstealing,” neither stealing nor coveting nor entering into debt; 4) brahmacharya, “divine conduct,” controlling lust by remaining celibate when single, leading to faithfulness in marriage; 5) kshamā, “patience,” restraining intolerance with people and impatience with circumstances; 6) dhṛiti, “steadfastness,” overcoming nonperseverance, fear, indecision, inconstancy and changeableness; 7) dayā, “compassion,” conquering callous, cruel and insensitive feelings toward all beings; 8) ārjava, “honesty, straightforwardness,” renouncing deception and wrongdoing; 9) mitāhāra, “moderate appetite,” neither eating too much nor consuming meat, fish, fowl or eggs; 10) śauca, “purity,” avoiding impurity in body, mind and speech.

*As her brother watches protectively, a young girl swings on a vine, restrained from falling as surely as the moral restraints of avoiding misdeeds keep us from falling from the yoga path. Like the silent witness within, a family of owls watches wisely from their nest in the tree.*





# Niyama: Observances

**“Observance.” Religious practices which cultivate the qualities of the higher nature, such as devotion, cognition, humility and contentment—giving the refinement of character and control of mind needed to follow spiritual disciplines and ultimately plunge into samādhi.**

**“The niyamas are purity, contentment, austerity, study and devotion to God.”**

*Sage Patanjali, II, Sūtra 32*

The niyamas are 1) hri, “remorse,” being modest and showing shame for misdeeds; 2) santosha, “contentment,” seeking joy and serenity in life; 3) dāna, “giving,” tithing and giving generously without thought of reward; 4) āstikya, “faith,” believing firmly in God, Gods, guru and the path to enlightenment; 5) Īśvarapūjana, “worship of the Lord,” the cultivation of devotion through daily worship and meditation; 6) siddhānta śravaṇa, “scriptural listening,” studying the teachings and listening to the wise of one’s lineage; 7) mati, “cognition,” developing a spiritual will and intellect with the guru’s guidance; 8) vrata, “sacred vows,” fulfilling religious vows, rules and observances faithfully; 9) japa, “recitation,” chanting mantras daily; 10) tapas, “austerity,” performing sādhana, penance, tapas and sacrifice.

In comparing the yamas to the niyamas, we find the restraint of noninjury, ahimsā, makes it possible to practice hri, remorse. Truthfulness brings on the state of santosha, contentment. And the third yama, asteya, nonstealing, must be perfected before the third niyama, giving without any thought of reward, is even possible. Sexual purity brings faith in God, Gods and guru. Kshamā, patience, is the foundation for Īśvarapūjana, worship, as is dhṛiti, steadfastness, the foundation for siddhānta śravaṇa. The yama of dayā, compassion, definitely brings mati, cognition. Ārjava, honesty—renouncing deception and all wrongdoing—is the foundation for vrata, taking sacred vows and faithfully fulfilling them. Mitāhāra, moderate appetite, is where yoga begins, and vegetarianism is essential before the practice of japa, recitation of holy mantras, can reap its true benefit in one’s life. Śauca, purity in body, mind and speech, is the foundation and the protection for all austerities.

The yamas and niyamas and their function in our life can be likened to a chariot pulled by ten horses. The passenger inside the chariot is your soul. The chariot itself represents your physical, astral and mental bodies. The driver of the chariot is your external ego, your personal will. The wheels are your divine energies. The niyamas,



or spiritual practices, represent the spirited horses, named Hri, Santosha, Dāna, Āstikya, Īśvarapūjana, Siddhānta Śravaṇa, Mati, Vrata, Japa, and Tapas. The yamas, or restraints, are the reins, called Ahimsā, Satya, Asteya, Brahmacharya, Kshamā, Dhṛiti, Dayā, Ārjava, Mitāhāra and Śauca. By holding tight to the reins, the charioteer, your will, guides the strong horses so they can run forward swiftly and gallantly as a dynamic unit. So, as we restrain the lower, instinctive qualities through upholding the yamas, the soul moves forward to its destination in the state of santosha. Santosha, peace, is the eternal satisfaction of the soul. At the deepest level, the soul is always in the state of santosha. Therefore, hold tight the reins.

*Reaching the second limb, the girl watches a devotee far below, offering flowers and loving devotion to Lord Ganesha, enshrined at the foot of the banyan. The youth wonders if the spider in its web also knows of the ten observances and if he has a yoga of his own to practice.*





## Āsana: Posture

**“Seat or posture.” A sound body is needed for success in meditation. This is attained through haṭha yoga, the postures of which balance the energies of mind and body, promoting health and serenity.**

**“Āsana is to be seated in a position which is firm but relaxed. Āsana becomes firm and relaxed through control of the natural tendencies of the body, and through meditation on the Infinite.”**

*Sage Patanjali, II, Sūtras 46–47*

Success in meditation requires the ability to sit in a comfortable posture, for long periods, without moving. Proper posture is necessary because the very simple act of equalizing the weight and having it held up by the spine causes you to lose body consciousness. Sit up nice and straight with the spine erect and the head balanced at the top of the spine.

By sitting up straight, with the spine erect, the energies of the physical body are transmuted. Posture is important, especially as meditation deepens and lengthens. With the spine erect and the head balanced at the top of the spine, the life force is quickened and intensified as energies flood freely through the nerve system. In a position such as this, we cannot become worried, fretful, depressed or sleepy during our meditation. Learn to sit dynamically, relaxed and yet poised.

Inwardly observe this posture and adjust the body to be poised and comfortable. Feel the muscles, bones and the nerve system. This posture is possible sitting in a chair, on a cushion, or on your knees. Ideally, a competent meditator will be able to cross the legs for meditation, either in full or half lotus. The hands are held in the lap, the right hand resting on the left, tips of the thumbs touching softly. In all cases, the posture should be natural and easy, and not cause discomfort, which is distracting during meditation. Look inwardly at the currents of the body. Observe their flow.

If you just sit without moving, and breathe, the inner nerve system of the body of your psyche, your soul, begins to work on the subconscious, to mold it like clay. Awareness is loosened from limited concepts and made free to move vibrantly and buoyantly into the inner depths where peace and bliss remain undisturbed for centuries.

The meditative poses are part of a larger system called haṭha yoga, a system of bodily postures, or āsanas, created as a method for the yogi practicing yoga for long hours each day, performing japa and meditation, to exercise and keep the physical body healthy so that his meditations

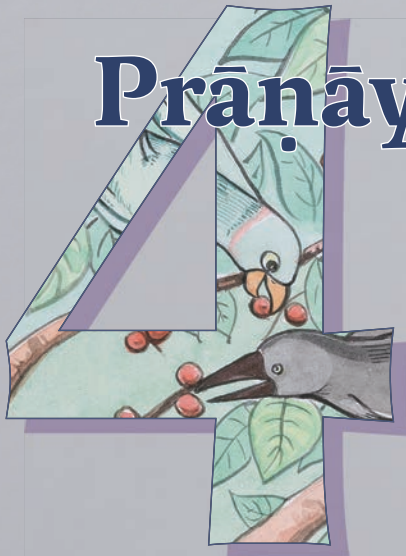


could continue uninhibited by disease or weakness. The purpose of haṭha yoga today again is the same—to keep the physical body, emotional body, astral body and mental body harmonious, healthy and happy so that awareness can soar within to the heights of divine realization. In our haṭha yoga we work with color, we work with sound and with the subtle emotions and feelings of the body when going from one āsana to another. Each āsana carefully executed, with regulated breathing, the visualization of color and the hearing of the inner sound, slowly unties the knotted vāsanās within the subconscious mind and releases awareness from there to mountaintop consciousness.

*Younger brother has reached the third branch, where he deftly assumes a yoga posture designed to fine-tune his nervous system, balance his energies and prepare him for meditation. A peacock poses proudly nearby, demonstrating the poise and natural relaxation the boy yogi is striving for.*



# Prāṇāyāma: Breath Control



**“Harnessing prāṇa.” Breath control, which quiets the chitta and balances the *iḍā* and *piṅgalā* currents within the spine. The science of controlling prāṇa through breathing techniques in which the lengths of inhalation, retention and exhalation are modulated. Prāṇāyāma prepares the mind for deep meditation.**

**“After mastering posture, one must practice control of the prāṇa by regulating the motions of inhalation and exhalation.”**

*Sage Patanjali, II, Sūtra 49*

The entire nerve system of the physical body and the functions of breath have to be at a certain rhythm in order for awareness to remain poised like a hummingbird over a flower. Now, since the physical body and our breath have never really been disciplined in any way, we have to begin by breathing rhythmically and diaphragmatically, so that we breathe out the same number of counts as we breathe in. After we do this over a long period of time—and you can start now—the body becomes trained, the external nerve system becomes trained, responds, and awareness is held at attention.

The first observation you may have when thus seated for meditation is that thoughts are racing through the mind substance. You may become aware of many, many thoughts. Also, the breath may be irregular. Therefore, the next step is to transmute the energies from the intellectual area of the mind through proper breathing, in just the same way as the proper attitude, preparation and posture transmuted the physical-instinctive energies. Through regulation of the breath, thoughts are stilled and awareness moves into an area of the mind which does not think, but conceives and intuit.

There are vast and powerful systems of breathing that can stimulate the mind, sometimes to excess. Deep meditation requires only that the breath be systematically slowed or lengthened. This happens naturally as we go within, but can be encouraged by a simple method of breathing called kalibasa in Shūm, my language of meditation. During kalibasa, the breath is counted: nine counts as we inhale, hold one count, nine counts as we exhale, hold one count. The length of the beats or the rhythm of the breath will slow as the meditation is sustained, until we are counting to the beat of the heart.

Controlling the breath is the same as controlling



awareness. They go hand in hand. During meditation, the breath, the heartbeat, metabolism—it all slows down, just like in sleep. Therefore, the practice of prāṇāyāma and regulation of the breath, the prāṇas, the currents of the body, should really be mastered first. We need this preparation of the physical body so that the physical and emotional bodies behave themselves while you are in a deep state of meditation.

You can spend hours or years working with the breath. Find a good teacher first, one who keeps it simple and gentle. You don't need to strain. Start simply by slowing the breath down. Breathe by moving the diaphragm instead of the chest. This is how children breathe, you know. So, be a child. If you learn to control the breath, you can be master of your awareness.

*Sister takes a seat on the fourth branch, holding her hands in the traditional way to direct the breath through one nostril and the next, as she strives to control the pranas of the body. Two birds pluck ripe berries nearby, too busy making a living to bother with her yogic efforts.*



# Pratyāhāra: Withdrawal



**“Withdrawal.” The practice of withdrawing consciousness from the physical senses first, such as not hearing noise while meditating, then progressively receding from emotions, intellect and eventually from individual consciousness itself in order to merge into the Universal.**

**“When the mind is withdrawn from sense objects, the sense organs also withdraw themselves from their respective objects and thus are said to imitate the mind. Then arises complete mastery over the senses.”**

*Sage Patanjali, II, Sūtra 54*

## Withdrawal

**H**ere is a step-by-step system of pratyāhāra that you can use to begin each meditation for the rest of your life. Simply sit, quiet the mind, and feel the warmth of the body. Feel the natural warmth in the feet, in the legs, in the head, in the neck, in the hands and face. Simply sit and be aware of that warmth. Feel the glow of the body. This is very easy, because the physical body is what many of us are most aware of. Take five or ten minutes to do this. There’s no hurry.

The second step is to feel the nerve currents of the body. Start with the feeling of the hands, thumbs touching, resting on your lap. Feel the life force going through these nerves, energizing the body. Try to sense the even more subtle nerves that extend out and around the body about three or four feet. This may take some time. When you have located some of these nerves, feel the energy within them. Tune into the currents of life force as they flow through these nerves.

The third step takes us deeper inside, as we become dynamically aware in the spine. Feel the power within the spine, the powerhouse of energy that feeds out to the external nerves and muscles. Visualize the spine in your mind’s eye. See it as a hollow tube or channel through which life energies flow. Feel it with your inner feelings. It’s there, subtle and silent, yet totally intense.

The fourth step is to draw the energy from the five senses inward in a systematic way. On the first inbreath, bring awareness into the left leg, all the way to the toes, and on the outbreath slowly withdraw the energy from that leg into the spine. Repeat with the right leg, left arm (all the way to the fingertips), right arm and finally the torso.

The fifth step comes as we plunge aware-

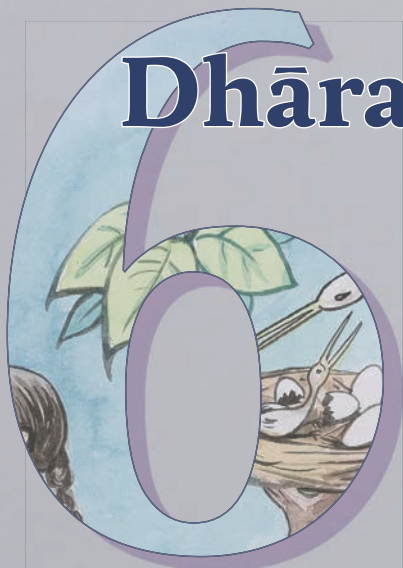


ness into the essence, the center of this energy in the head and spine. This requires great discipline and exacting control to bring awareness to the point of being aware of itself. The state of being totally aware that we are aware is called kaif. It is pure awareness, not aware of any object, feeling or thought. Simply sit in a state of pure consciousness. Go into the physical forces that flood, day and night, through the spine and body. Then go into the energy of that, deeper into the vast inner space of that, into the essence of that, into the that of that, and into the that of that. Once you are thus centered within yourself, you are ready to pursue a meditation, a mantra or a deep philosophical question. Coming out of meditation, we perform this process in reverse.

*Brother finds a place on the fifth branch, where he sits and carefully ties a cloth band to hold his knees in place. It is a traditional way to keep the body in place while working to withdraw from the five senses and go deep within. He is too deep to notice the bee hive buzzing below. Below are two tortoises. One practices his own version of withdrawal, retracting his head and limbs into his protective shell.*



# Dhāraṇā: Concentration



**“Concentration.” Focusing the mind on a single object or line of thought, not allowing it to wander. The guiding of the flow of consciousness. When concentration is sustained long enough and deeply enough, meditation naturally follows.**

**“Concentration upon a single object may reach four stages: examination, discrimination, joyful peace and simple awareness of individuality.**

*Sage Patanjali, I, Sūtra 17*

When we have brought awareness to attention, we automatically move into the next step, concentration. The hummingbird, poised over the flower, held at attention, begins to look at the flower, to concentrate on it, to study it, to muse about it, not to be distracted by another flower—that is, then, awareness moving. Awareness distracted, here, is awareness simply moving to another flower, or moving to another area of the mind.

Give up the idea that thoughts come in and out of your mind like visitors come in and out of your house. Hold to the idea that it is awareness that moves, rather than the thoughts that move. Look at awareness as a yo-yo at the end of a string. The string is hooked to the very core of energy itself, and awareness flows out and it flows in. Awareness might flow out toward a tree and in again, and then out toward a flower and then in again, and down toward the ground and then in again. This wonderful yo-yo of awareness—that is a good concept to grasp in order to become more acquainted with awareness. Awareness held at attention can then come into the next vibratory rate and concentrate.

Here is a simple concentration exercise. Take a flower and place it in front of you. Breathe deeply as you sit before it. Simply look at it. Don't stare at it and strain your eyes. Simply become aware of it. Each time awareness moves to some other area of the mind, with your willpower move awareness back and become aware of the flower again. Keep doing this until you are simply aware of the flower and not aware of your body or your breath. Then begin to concentrate on the flower. That is the second step. Think about the flower. Move into the area of the mind where all flowers exist in all phases of manifestation, and concentrate on the flower. Move from one area to another—to where all stems exist, to the stem of that particular flower, to the root that that particular flower came from, and to the seed. Con-



centrate, concentrate, concentrate on the flower. This is what concentration is—remaining in the thought area of the particular item that you are aware of and flowing through the different color and sound vibrations of the thoughts. How does it work? The powers of concentration—it is only a name. Actually, what is happening is you are flowing awareness through the area of the mind which contains the elements which actually made that particular flower, and you are perceiving how all those elements came together. If you can concentrate sufficiently to have fifty thoughts about the flower without a single thought about anything else, you will have mastered dhāraṇa.

*Climbing even higher, the girl sits before a small oil lamp. She is focusing, concentrating, on the flame, thinking of nothing else, not letting her mind wander to any other object, idea, sensation or memory. Behind her, a heron is concentrating on the full-time job of feeding its newly hatched fledglings.*





# Dhyāna: Meditation

**“Meditation.” A quiet, alert, powerfully concentrated state wherein new knowledge and insight pour into the field of consciousness. This state is possible once the subconscious mind has been cleared and quieted.**

**“Meditation is an unbroken flow of thought toward the object of concentration.”**

*Sage Patanjali, III, Sūtra 2*

After we are able to hold awareness hovering over that which we are concentrating upon, we come into great powers of observation. We are able to look into and almost through that which we are concentrating upon and observe its various parts and particles, its action and its reaction, because we are not distracted. Even observation in daily life, as a result of regular participation in the practice of concentration, comes naturally. We are able to see more, hear more, feel more. Our senses are more keen and alive. Observation is so necessary to cultivate, to bring awareness fully into the fullness of meditation.

This leads us then into our very next step, meditation. Meditation and concentration are practically the same thing, though meditation is simply a more intense state of concentration. The state of meditation is careful, close scrutiny of the individual elements and energies which make up that flower. You are scrutinizing the inner layers of the mind, of how a flower grows, how the seed is formed. You are observing it so keenly that you have forgotten that you are a physical body, that you are an emotional unit, that you are breathing. You are in the area of mind where that flower exists, and the bush that it came from, and the roots and the seed and all phases of manifestation, all at the same time. And you are seeing it as it actually is in that area of the mind where the flower is that you first put awareness at attention upon, then began to concentrate upon. Then you are meditating on the actual inner area of the mind where, in all stages of manifestation, that particular species actually is within the mind.

When you are experiencing the totality of the moment, you are not aware of the past, nor are you aware of the future or anything within the externalities of the mind. You are aware of the *ākāśa*, the primal substance of the superconsciousness of the mind. You are able to have a continuity of intuitive findings



within it and gain much knowledge from within yourself.

As you sit to meditate, awareness may wander into past memories or future happenings. It may be distracted by the senses, by a sound or by a feeling of discomfort in the body. This is natural in the early stages. Gently bring awareness back to your point of concentration. Don't criticize awareness for wandering, for that is yet another distraction. Distractions will disappear if you become intensely interested and involved in your meditation. In such a state you won't even feel the physical body. You have gone to a movie, read a book or sat working on a project on your computer that was so engrossing, you only later discovered your foot had fallen asleep for a half hour because it was in an awkward position. Similarly, once we are totally conscious on the inside, we will never be distracted by the physical body or the outside.

*On reaching the seventh branch, the boy sits in full lotus posture, focuses his gaze on the tip of his nose and holds his thumbs and index fingers together to direct the body's pranas. He is striving for the state of meditation. Two chimps play nearby, uncontrolled and uncontrollable, a reminder of the monkey-like mind that jumps from place to place.*





# Samādhi: Union

**“Union.” Sameness, contemplation, realization. The state of true yoga, in which the meditator and the object of meditation are one.**

**“When, in meditation, the true nature of the object shines forth, not distorted by the mind of the perceiver, that is samādhi.”**

*Sage Patanjali, III, Sūtra 3*

Out of meditation, we come into contemplation. Contemplation is concentrating so deeply in the inner areas of the mind in which that flower and the species of it and the seed of it and all exist. We go deeper, deeper, deeper within, into the energy and the life within the cells of the flower, and we find that the energy and the life within the cells of the flower is the same as the energy within us, and we are in contemplation upon energy itself. We see the energy as light. We might see the light within our head, if we have a slight body consciousness. In a state of contemplation, we might not even be conscious of light itself, for you are only conscious of light if you have a slight consciousness of darkness. Otherwise, it is just your natural state, and you are in a deep reverie. In a state of contemplation, you are so intently alive, you can't move. That's why you sit so quietly. This is *savikalpa* samādhi (“union with form or seed”), identification or oneness with the essence of an object. Its highest form is the realization of the primal substratum or pure consciousness, Satchidānanda.

This, then, leads to the very deepest samādhi, where we almost, in a sense, go within one atom of that energy and move into the primal source of all. There's really nothing that you can say about it, because you cannot cast that concept of the Self, or that depth of samādhi, you cannot cast it out in words. You cannot throw it out in a concept, because there are no areas of the mind in which the Self exists, and yet, but for the Self, the mind, consciousness, would not exist. You have to realize It to know It; and after you realize It, you know It; and before you realize It, you want It; and after you realize It, you don't want It. You have lost something. You have lost your goal for Self Realization, because you've got it. This is *nirvikalpa* samādhi (“union without form or seed”), identification with the Self, in which all modes of



consciousness are transcended and Absolute Reality, Paraśiva, beyond time, form and space, is experienced. This brings in its aftermath a complete transformation of consciousness.

The *Chandogya Upanishad* expresses it so beautifully: “The Self is below, above, behind, before, to the right, to the left. I am all this. One who knows, meditates upon and realizes the truth of the Self—such a one delights in the Self, revels in the Self, rejoices in the Self. He becomes master of himself and master of all the worlds. Slaves are they who know not this truth.” (7.25.2 *The Upanishads*, Prabhavananda and Manchester, p. 118).

*At last, brother and sister reach the top of the banyan, and sit together in silent bliss. Their efforts have brought them to a oneness with the universe as they dive deeply within to discover they are that universe, they are the Self within each other, and within all. A family of bats feeds among the leaves of the tree. Just as bats forage while others sleep, so too do our young yogis seek a greater consciousness which remains asleep in most others.*





**Overview:** (left) Aerial view of the campus as of early 2022, highlighting the roughly 100 acres dedicated to water retention, A 108-foot tall flag in the distance marks the entrance area; (right) one of two tall towers with viewing platforms, holding a water storage tank at the top

INDIAN UNIVERSITIES

## Nalanda Is Revived after 800 Years

The sprawling, redesigned campus is now open for students and faculty

By ANURADHA GOYAL, INDIA

IF XUAN ZANG, THE 7TH-CENTURY-CE CHINESE traveler and Buddhist scholar, were to visit his beloved alma mater at Nalanda in the current-day state of Bihar, he'd find only a portion of its ruins accessible and excavated. Viewing the exposed brick structures, he would have memories of how they were once pristinely lime plastered. He would become nostalgic as he strolled through the vihara, Buddhist monastery, where he lived, studied and taught. He might be pained to see the stupas of his revered teachers in dilapidated shape, but as a wise man he would understand the vicissitudes of time. He would see people he thought he knew, but they were not the students and teachers he remembered. Rather, they were visitors from around the world—such as there had been in his time as well.

Founded in 427 CE as a Buddhist monastic university, Nalanda was purportedly the world's first residential college, at one time

drawing as many as 10,000 students from across Asia.

The university, reopened in 2014, was founded during the Gupta Empire. The Hindu Gupta monarchs recognized the strength and value of Buddhist intellectual inquiry. *Nalanda* literally means “the giver of knowledge,” and the university is credited with having nurtured the greatest Buddhist scholars. After studying there, Xuan Zang carried 657 Sanskrit texts back to China, translated them and contributed to the development of Buddhism in China. The university flourished, surviving two attacks, right up to the Pala dynasty in the 12th century, until its final demise by Turko-Afghan invaders.

Xuan Zang would be sorrowful to know how his university, with its library of nine million books, had been ransacked and burned for three months. But he would gain solace from the sight of the sprawling new Nalanda University campus in the city of

Rajgir, just south of the Nalanda ruins. He would see how the development of this new university takes inspiration from his own campus. Xuan Zang, avid traveler and philosopher that he was, would easily ride the currents of time and accept that what lies before him could be a new manifestation of his university, this one belonging to the 21st century and developing the minds of new students so they might contribute to the present times.

### Campus Infrastructure and Design

I arrived on campus in the late evening, passing through a gate designed to resemble a *chaitiya*—a high roof with a distinctive rounded profile. As we completed the entry formalities, the nearby stupa began to undergo a mesmerizing transformation of colors. I was struck by the beauty of the lighting around me. Lit buildings were reflected in ponds. I passed the Indian flag fluttering proudly on top of a 108-foot pole as I was led to a fashionable guesthouse. The staff

took great care to identify for me the various buildings we passed.

The following morning, I was treated to a guided tour by Dr. Mir Islam and Manoj Ji, both integral members of the engineering team responsible for constructing the campus. With its numerous ponds, the area proved to be an idyllic setting for an early morning stroll. The campus architecture, characterized by the unusual shapes and exposed red brick buildings, exuded an atmosphere of nostalgia, mystique, and intrigue.

Manoj pointed to what looked like inverted grey stupas across a pond. As I was naturally expecting stupas on a campus inspired by a Buddhist vihara, I asked, “For what reason are the stupas inverted?” He explained that they were not stupas at all, but rather amphitheater classrooms with increasing seating capacity to sit as you go up. He asked me to focus on the negative space between the stupas and then I caught on. A meditating Buddha sat in the middle. It occurred to me that such imaginative play with space is what we often miss in modern Indian architecture.

We reached two red brick pavilions erected beside another body of water. These structures resembled medieval Baradari, the 12-door open courtyards that we see in many royal buildings around India. But the comparison ended there when I learned how these structures stand on water storage tanks, a part of the University's unique water management system. The campus uses the age-old local traditional system of water management called *ahar-pyne*. Water runs through a series of channels called *pyne*, which connect to retention ponds called *ahar*. In the past, this system helped the region to withstand unpredictable floods and droughts. I was reminded of a similar system I had seen at the Kanheri Caves in Mumbai, where stone-carved water tanks became filled to the brim with rain water, which then ran to a tank at a lower level. Sringeripur in Uttar Pradesh has a similar ancient tank system that stores excess water from the Ganga during the rainy season. Here on the Nalanda campus, the water management system provides water not only for everyday use, but for ongoing building purposes as well.

If you were to build a new university

campus, what would be the key elements or features of its infrastructure and design? I would have loved to observe the first meetings of those who planned the new Nalanda. I like to imagine them writing with old-fashioned chalk on a big blackboard: “Water.” Water would be foreseen to be crucial for the future, and students who will shape the world must understand its value.

The campus is spread over 455 acres, gifted by the government of Bihar in 2011. Forty hectares—roughly 100 acres—of the campus area is water. In fact, campus construction began with excavating ponds so that water for construction activity could be retained. With 100% rainwater collection, the campus can meet the water requirements of 5,000 people with ample buffer for 18 months. Treated waste water is recycled for flushing or landscaping through a dedicated supply network. No groundwater is used on the campus—a significant achievement for long-term sustainability goals. Furthermore, native and aquatic plants will be introduced to ensure natural air purification and to make the campus climate resilient. In a few years one should be able to see orchards of local fruit trees such as mangos.

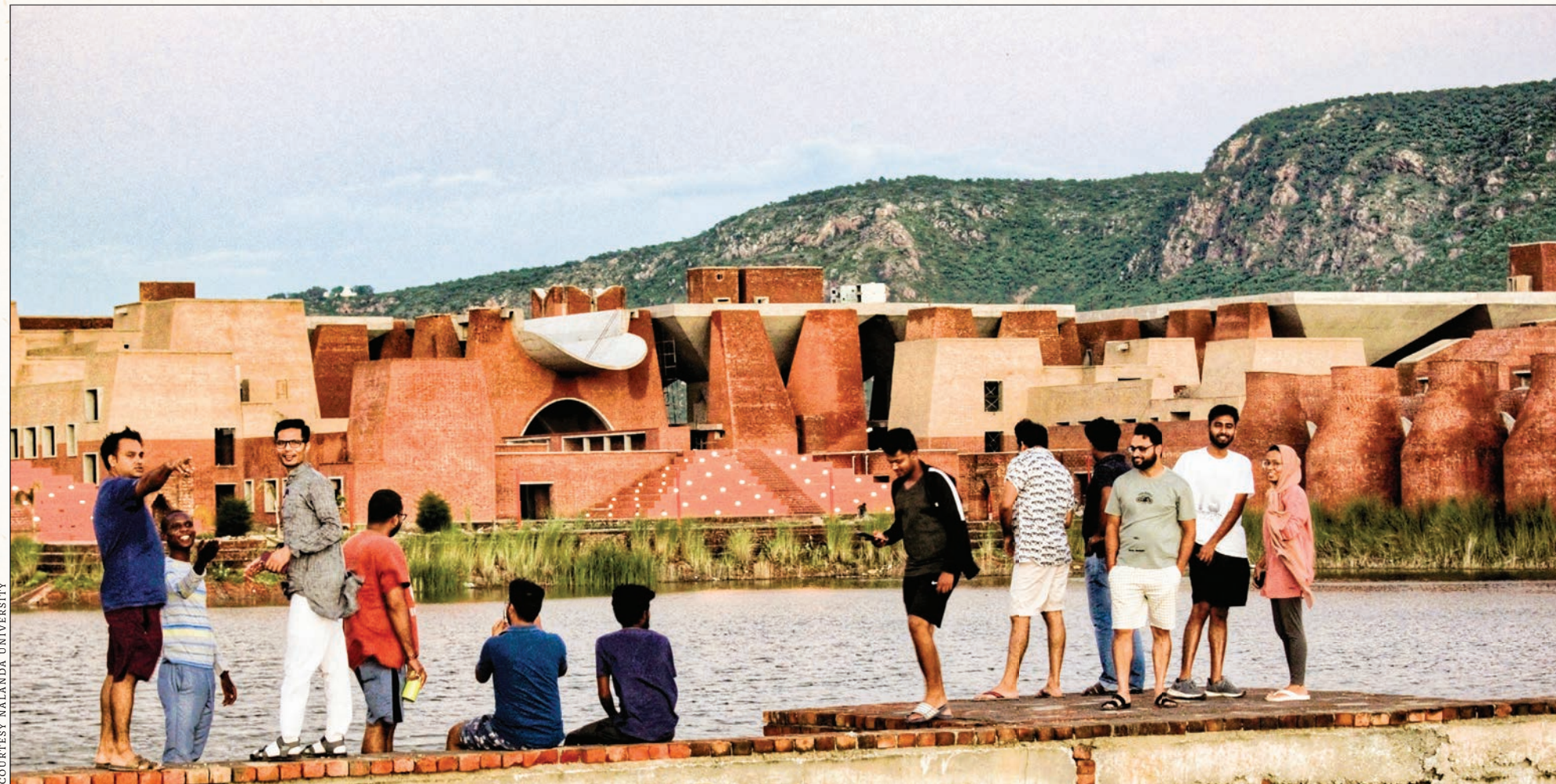
The campus's designers might have also brainstormed around “earth.” During excavation, the top, fertile layer of soil was preserved for horticulture purposes. The mud was used to build roads as well as compressed blocks for buildings.

The tall brick structures, tapering towards the top, resemble the gopurams of South Indian temples. Manoj ji confirmed that they are indeed inspired from gopurams and there are as many as 108 of them spread across the campus. In addition there are four stupas and 22 *chhatris*, or cenotaph-like structures. Even utility buildings like water tanks were provided a character by being covered by red bricks. “So many bricks!” I exclaimed, thinking of the horrors of brick kiln pollution. But I was told these are not common burnt clay bricks, but rather Compressed Stabilized Earth Blocks (CSEB) that are created in-situ using local soil. The soil is dampened, mixed with a chemical binder such as Portland cement, mechanically pressed at high pressure, then dried. These are economical, non-toxic, resistant to fire, insects, mold and sound and are known for better thermal control for external temperature changes.

Solar and other alternative energies were also integrated into the campus design. At the edge of the campus is a 20-acre solar park which can generate up to 65 MW of electricity. Diagonal solar panels are spread out to make the most of the abundant sunshine. This park can produce ample energy to sustain the whole campus. Waste gener-







**Creative campus:** (above) Students relax next to Kamal Sagar, the central water body, with academic buildings behind. Above the buildings are rainwater catchment and channeling structures; (right) the entrance to the central auditorium lit up at night.

ated in the campus, including horticulture waste, is converted into energy using a bi-methanization digester. Solar energy is used during daytime, and biomass-generated electricity is used at night. When the campus is fully occupied by its planned 5,000 people, the waste generated will give ample biomass energy, the second renewable source of energy.

Kamal Sagar or “academic spine” was to me the most beautiful part of the campus. Here you see a row of stupas next to a pond, with a serene open-air amphitheater in red stone. The linear placement of the stupas brings to my mind a caravanserai. But the most intriguing structures are those that intersperse the stupas and amphitheater and look like tall UFOs or umbrellas. These are open mini-amphitheatres for the students to interact. Each has a slightly different design—some are approached through a staircase from the ground, while others are

entered from the top. Each has concentric steps on which students or teachers can sit while engaged in group discussions. I find the design brilliant—you have private space, yet you are out in the open, in the elements of nature.

A circular structure with a stupa-like roof is a chanting room. Its acoustics allow chants to reverberate; I could only imagine how the collective chanting resounds within the room and sends special energy far beyond.

Even the more traditional blocks of classrooms show innovation. At the Nalanda ruins, you can see the different layers of construction stretching back more than 700 years. Pyramidal staircases climb today’s academic buildings, reflecting ancient foundations built upon even more ancient foundations. Most innovative are the interiors, with state-of-the-art interactive classrooms that employ the latest in digital technology.

After covering a lot of ground, my tour

ends with buildings still under construction. One of these is a 2,000-seat auditorium; the other, in a circular shape, will become a multi-floor library. I wonder if one day the library will be as impressive as its predecessor? All its books will be RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) enabled, making it truly belong to the 21st century.

While large campuses often have one or two buildings that can be classified as “green,” Nalanda University has 200 sustainably green structures. Utilizing emerging technologies, the campus design embraces the very philosophy that the university wishes to send out into the world—teaching harmony with nature and fellow human beings. Following my tour, I wish to learn about the ideas the campus will generate through the classes in its unique eco-friendly spaces. What are the subjects to be taught, and who decided upon them?

#### **Purpose and Mission**

In 2006, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, the visionary former president of India, proposed re-establishing the ancient Nalanda University. Around the same time, serendipitously, Sin-

gapore sent a proposal to the Indian government to revive Nalanda. The next year, the then sixteen member countries of the East Asia Summit endorsed the proposal to rebuild Nalanda University and thereby re-establish their traditional ties across Asia. The diverse member countries at that time were Australia, Brunei, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, New Zealand, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand and Vietnam. What a rare situation it is that sixteen countries would come together, readily sharing a common vision and committed to realizing it! A mentors group was established with the famous economist and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen as its head, and in 2009 more member states joined the Summit. While India remained the lead player in establishing the university, member states contributed endowment funds for various programs. Australia, for example, gave support for the School of Ecology and Environmental Studies for a period of three years.

Imagine you were participating in a mentors group, establishing the departments and courses for a new international university.

## Offerings for Aspiring Students

**N**alanda is exclusively a graduate school, currently offering master’s courses and doctor of philosophy programs. The academic framework contains Foundational, Bridge, Advanced and Specialized courses that focus on emerging research domains and India-ASEAN interconnections. It includes courses on languages, Nalanda heritage, geo-informatics, biodiversity and conservation, Buddhist studies, comparative religion, ecology and environmental studies, historical studies, masters in management streams, world literature and Hindu Studies. There are dedicated centers for Bay of Bengal Studies, Common Archival Resource and Conflict Resolution and Peace studies, making a total of six schools and 12 academic programs.

The School of Buddhist Studies, Philosophy and Comparative religions offers a master’s degree and PhD programs in Buddhist Studies, Philosophy, and Comparative Religions, along with masters in Sanatana Hindu Studies. This puts the university among just a handful in India that offer Hindu courses.



There is special emphasis on the study of Buddhist ideas and values in relation to other philosophical and religious traditions. The wider social-historical-cultural contexts of the development of Buddhist traditions are examined through an innovative and interdisciplinary curriculum.

The School of Ecology and Environment Studies, the first school at Nalanda University, has offered a master’s course since August 2014. It aims to promote education and research on the interactions between the natural environment and human activities. The School of Historical Studies offers a master’s degree along with elective courses.

The School of Languages and Literature/Humanities offers a master’s degree in World Literature along with diploma and certificate courses in languages like English, Korean, Sanskrit, Pali and Tibetan. A MBA in sustainable development is offered by the School of Management, with an aim to be a global leader in responsible management.

The minimum criteria for seeking enrollment is 55% or 2.2/4.0 GPA or equivalent in a undergraduate degree. Students coming from any stream can apply for any program, but may not apply for more than two programs. Learn more about this and other aspects at [nalandauniv.edu.in](http://nalandauniv.edu.in).





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**Under construction:** (clockwise from above) The negative space between these classrooms reveals a meditating Buddha; aerial view of the huge main amphitheater. Behind it is a covered chanting hall with acoustics for reverberation; one of several raised, open-air mini amphitheatres for smaller student interaction.

I would have liked to listen in on the discussions about where to give emphasis. The old Nalanda was famous for Buddhist philosophy, mathematics, astronomy and anatomy. It also had courses in the fine arts and the art of war. Today, which courses could bring unique knowledge from Asia to the whole world—a world which struggles with so many issues related to peace, health, ecology, poverty, equal opportunity and more?

One of the university's mandates is "to contribute to the promotion of regional peace and vision by bringing together future leaders of East Asia, who by relating it to their past history, can enhance understanding of each other's perspectives and share that globally." Professor Sunaina Singh, former Vice Chancellor of the university, explained to me that a core value of Nalanda University is character building so that students can contribute to a peaceful and tolerant society in the future. While the education is academic, it also emphasizes the understanding of religions that belong to the Indian subcontinent. There are master's and PhD programs in Buddhist studies, philosophy, and comparative religions, and masters in Hindu studies.

What is attractive to students, most of whom are working toward an MA or PhD, is the inter-disciplinary approach allowing them to pick and choose courses from a menu of sub-

jects, rather than follow a prescribed course of study. This approach is rooted in the ancient knowledge systems in which Shrutis, Smritis, Vedantas, Puranas and Itihasa texts weave together various types of knowledge. Such fluidity between different streams of study encourages thinking out of the box and leads students to be more innovative, creative and humanistic in whatever they ultimately choose to do. An engineer can choose to do his masters in history or a doctor can choose to do a masters in Hindu Studies or world literature. You can drop the baggage of your past studies, although the minimum qualifi-

cation clauses as mentioned on the website for various courses do apply. While the system is beneficial for students who may want to change streams, all students will find their paths invigorated by a cross-pollination of ideas.

Memorandums of understanding with major universities in member countries as well as other leading institutes around the world encourage further diversity in thought. Nalanda University recently joined the launch of AINU, ASEAN-India Network of Universities, establishing vital linkages between premier institutions in the region. Faculty exchange, student exchange and joint research are key activities of this consortium. I see AINU as a key initiative of India's "Look East" and now "Act East" policy that seeks greater collaboration between Asian countries with common cultural ties.



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### Faculty and Students

While the university has set its priorities in terms of subjects, it faces a big challenge attracting highly qualified faculty from metropolitan cities to come teach in the remote town of Rajgir. Bihar still carries the perception of being backward, with few modern facilities, and there are safety concerns. With medical facilities limited—a small health center operates on campus—not many want to move here with their families or leave them behind. But learning from the days of the lockdowns, the university has introduced online classes in order to access top faculty from around the world. It is also introducing small courses for which they can invite visiting faculty to be on campus for shorter durations. In April 2023, noted economist Arvind Panagariya was appointed chancellor, and no doubt he will be building a strong faculty in the years to come.

Student enrollment is another concern, but it is rising steadily since the University opened in 2014. Professor Singh pointed that while most universities and institutes need time and resources to build a strong brand, Nalanda University has a legacy branding of being a Vishva Guru, the knowledge leader of the world. Currently there are 800-1,000 students, 80 percent of whom are international. The first batch of students arrived at

the makeshift campus in 2014. By 2019, the new campus was operational with its first five buildings. Today, students from over 30 countries are studying. Around 250 of them, enrolled in mMasters and PhD programs, live on campus, while the rest study remotely in short-term courses.

At an on-campus, semi-open-air café I approached students engaged in informal discussions. They told me they appreciate the calm environment that allows one to think and contemplate. I concur. I am a restless person by nature, especially when traveling, wanting to move around and experience and see as much as possible. But at the Nalanda campus, I wanted to sit and think about the meaning of my work and how it impacts the world around me. In a natural setting, distanced from the business of city life, you can concentrate. I spoke to a student from Türkiye studying Buddhism with an aim to understand philosophies of world religions, with a goal to build a career in a not-so-popular subject in her country. She was clearly benefitting from the freedom to pursue her interests in a supportive environment.

Students told me they appreciate that the faculty are so accessible, in contrast to faculty in other institutions. Some professors taught during late evenings instead of the usual teaching hours. Of course, some students

were lonely or bored, but I imagine over time they will appreciate the open space and calm for thought and learning that Nalanda provides. Students have many options for recreation. Some were playing badminton, and a huge sports complex is nearing completion. I wondered if there might be a study that bridges the ancient physical disciplines like Kalaripatayu martial art and hatha yoga with modern games like football and tennis.

Most students live on campus in a beautifully designed hostel. Two dormitories remind you of those that you see at Nalanda ruins, but they have modern-day facilities. Since the campus is equipped with radio frequency antennas, the students have continuous wifi. In a state-of-the-art dining room, underneath a huge hanging globe, students enjoy cuisines from around the world. Above, conical-shaped roofs collect rainwater that runs through channels concealed within pillars out to the ground and surrounding water bodies. This water system helps keep the buildings cool, reducing the need for air conditioning by at least 30 percent, through what is called the Desiccant Enhanced Evaporative (DEVAP) technology. Furthermore, thick cavity walls within a double-skin envelope help to retain heat during winters and maintain coolness during summers—a kind of natural thermal insulation.





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SHUTTERSTOCK



स्वेन त्साङ्ग स्मृति भवन  
XUAN ZANG MEMORIAL HALL

**My Takeaways**

The new Nalanda University has a strong legacy to follow, but most important is how it becomes relevant to current and future generations. While the inspiration for a knowledge flow rooted in Asian culture and thought comes from the ancient university, the new university caters to the future needs of societies within and beyond Asia. This unusual campus, conceived with great care, shows the way forward in terms of conservation of water, earth and energy. The academic design has every potential to nurture generations of students who are both strong in their fields and dedicated to the wellbeing of the world. If only Xuan Zang, renowned for his writings about his extensive travels in the 7th century, could write about his time travel to the present Nalanda. I would wish to read his commentary. I believe he'd note the challenges that the university faces but commend the vision and serious effort shared by the

East Asia member states. He might wish to sit in on classes to ruminate about subjects new to him, or to offer advice on teaching the subjects about which he knows best. Of the campus and its technology, he'd be in awe.

I had visited the ruins of ancient Nalanda many years ago, before it was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. When I revisited it after my tour of Nalanda University, comparison between the two was natural. The old university has a vihara-style layout. There are rows of classrooms with a temple or a stupa and a platform for the teacher. These viharas are surrounded by rooms similar to modern dorms—a row of rooms, each with a capacity to accommodate up to two students. In the new university you don't see the same types of temples, but the open-air mini amphitheaters recreate the aura of the ancient ruins.

At the Nalanda ruins I encountered a group of monks from Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka. Their reverence for Nalanda revealed its significance in the Buddhist world. No wonder there are so many visitors to the monuments and so many students coming from universities across Asia. The resurrection of Nalanda University will certainly bring peoples of the eastern region together to share a common ethos. The

Archaeological Survey of India's site museum showcases murtis excavated from the ancient site. You can view old photos of the excavation next to the objects on display. One of the objects capturing my interest was a pot with multiple openings used for Naga worship.

It is clear from the many historical monuments, temples and artifacts in the region how India's three ancient religions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism flourished here. For centuries, Nalanda had attracted the greatest scholars in the world, pushing the boundaries of human knowledge and understanding. Now the rich story of Nalanda, for a time interrupted, is poised to continue. May Nalanda remain the destination of knowledge seekers, a center of spirituality, and the origin of important thought that benefits all the world.

**Facilities old and new:** (clockwise from above left) Guesthouse with a gopura-like feature; abandoned classrooms surrounded by student dorms at the ruins of ancient Nalanda; Memorial Hall next to Nalanda ruins dedicated to the famed monk traveler and chronicler, Xuan Zang.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



Anuradha Goyal is one of India's leading travel bloggers. Her focus at [www.IndiTales.com](http://www.IndiTales.com) is ancient India and temple architecture along with old techniques such as water management with step wells.





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HOSPITALITY

# INDeco Hotels: Luxury Lodging Meets Spirituality & Ecology

Sample a fusion of rich accommodations, sustainability and sacredness, while exploring South India's heritage and culture deep in rural Tamil Nadu

BY BALAKUMAR MUTHU, CHENNAI

LOCATED AMIDST THE GRANDEUR OF three famous UNESCO World Heritage destinations—Darasuram, Gan-gaikondacholapuram and the Bri-hadeeswara Temple, known jointly as the Grand Living Chola temples—INDeco Hotels is a haven of tranquility and heritage stay. Nestled in Thimmakudy Village at Swami-malai, Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu, INDeco offers a luxurious escape from city life while immersing guests in the pleasures of South Indian village atmosphere. It is a conver-gence of leisure, heritage, culture, spiritual-ity, health, nature, aesthetics, fine arts and

entertainment.

INDeco Hotels was established in 1994, restoring three illustrious but dilapidated 17th-century Chola-dynasty villages while preserving their culture and traditions. Every aspect of this hotel, from bricks to its artifacts, tells a story, creating a harmonious blend of preservation and world-class hos-pitality. INDeco enjoys a unique blessing: the mighty Cauvery River flows nearby, and an intricate canal system brings its sacred wa-ters into the heart of the hotel.

I was given the opportunity to meet Steve Borgia, founder, chairman, managing director of INDeco Hotels Swamimalai and part-time

Indologist. He said with enthusiasm, "Im-bibed with love for life and delight for nature, I am enthralled by rural India." His love for rural India and its cultural depth inspired the creation of this unique hotel, where he curates local culture for a global audience.

For its indelible mark on the global hos-pitality landscape, INDeco has earned es-teemed awards and recognitions. It is India's only recipient of the Global Ecotourism Award, a testament to its pioneering efforts in sustainable tourism. *Fortune* magazine bestowed upon it the "6th Best Idea to Save Planet Earth" award, recognizing its excep-tional contributions to conservation.

### Luxurious Experiences

The rooms at INDeco, priced between US\$45–\$95 a night, are immersive ex-periences. The Heritage Block exudes old-world charm, while the Palace Block and Zamin Block offer spacious rooms with classical ambiance. Each space is unique; the creative spirit has been harnessed to weave a tapestry of comfort and artistry in every room. With over 80 ethnic suites to choose from, no two rooms are alike in size, décor or ambiance.

Accommodation are adorned with world-famous Tanjore paintings, sculptures and antique furnishings. Guests are immersed in South India's vibrant colors and intricate designs. Valuable artifacts are displayed in guest rooms and public areas, inviting one to journey back in time.

The hotel has meticulously pre-served the authenticity and charm of the property. The staff, employed from the local communities, proudly wear traditional attire, the men wrapped in white cotton dhotis, and the women in silk sarees. The consumables, also, are sourced locally.

INDeco offers a temple tank with



**A vintage refuge:** (clockwise from far left) peacock welcome; Heritage Village suite interior; Royal Palace Block hallways; Royal Palace suite; Steve Borgia with an on-site jackfruit tree; a hotel elephant

farm-pump bathing, allowing guests to par-take in the irrigation process before the water flows into neighboring farms. Visitors are immersed in South Indian culture, cuisine, heritage, villages, museums, flora and fauna with ancient terracotta-tiled roofs, ornate wooden doorways and lush courtyards of by-gone eras. A recent guest wrote on [tripadvi-sor.com](http://tripadvisor.com), "We and our kid love the surround-ings, it felt very earthly. Best place for family trips. We explored ancient memories taking us to that era. A warm and homely feel, full of positivity. The rooms give you a royal feel."

### Kanchi Sankaracharya's Residence

This estate includes a residence once used as a home for the late Shankaracharya of Kanchi, Sri Chandrashekarendra Saraswati Swamikal (1894–1994), the great Hindu philosopher and reformist. It is a tradi-tional Tanjore house dating back to 1896. This sacred space pays a heartfelt tribute to the spiritual legacy that permeates the





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**Nature and culture:** (clockwise from above) Bharatanatyam performances and workshops; an Ardhhanarishvara statue in a museum collection; a tantalizing traditional Tamil Nadu meal; young hotel guests interact with deer wandering contentedly around the large hotel property; a lotus-inspired bathtub in a suite



region, inviting guests to embark on a deeply meaningful journey of connection with the profound spirituality and wisdom that Maha Periyava shared during his stay in this hallowed place.

### Embracing Sustainability

The name "INDeco" is a fusion of "India" and "ecology," a testament to its commitment to environmental stewardship. The hotel is 100 percent organic—recycling and treating all its water and waste, and demonstrating in many ways its commitment to sustainable businesses in small villages.

Steve Borgia believes that sustainability and spirituality are two essential facets of creation. One serves planet Earth and all the life it harbors, while the other nurtures your inner self and your connection with the Divine. For Steve, safeguarding these two realms is non-negotiable.

Wandering the property, we notice signs emphasizing the hotel's commitment to nature, prioritizing even the smallest insects and creatures. The dedication to sustainability is evident in the massive amount of trees and plants introduced, restoration of ancient structures, rejuvenation of lakes, the return of birds and animals, the unearthing of rivulets, the revival of traditional practices and the creation



of ecological niches.

As we chat, Steve recalls that while most of his peers aspired to become doctors, engineers or pilots, his childhood dream was to become a Maharaja. Despite the laughter

and skepticism of others, he held onto this aspiration—not for the pursuit of wealth but to combat hunger, nurture the environment, build majestic palaces, create enchanting gardens and care for the temples and schools in his vicinity.

INDeco has ventured into the most remote and humble villages, breathing life into now thriving businesses that were firmly anchored in principles of sustainability, responsibility and creativity. Amidst these serene landscapes, Steve Borgia carved his kingdom with a dedication to community empowerment.

### Supporting the Community

Feeding the rural community has always been Steve's foremost concern, the driving force behind his mission. INDeco's workforce—like all the produce used in its restaurant—is fully drawn from the neighborhood. An employee notes that INDeco's initiative has made a significant impact on the area, elevating average income to several times what it was previously.

INDeco emphasizes skill development programs for local youth, creating alternative livelihoods for beggars, restoring and preserving temples, safeguarding local arts, lifestyle, practices and beliefs, and constructing essential facilities in primary girls' schools.

### Historical Treasures

Within INDeco's premises lies the Steve Borgia Indian Heritage Museum, which has the mission to source, preserve and exhibit vintage objects from the past, preserving them for the appreciation of future generations. It is praised as one of the finest civilian collections anywhere in India.

This museum houses an extensive and diverse collection of rare and contemporary objects. Peruse statues of Gods and Goddesses, kerosene-operated fans that once provided respite from sweltering Indian summers, and majestic mahogany cots that cradled slumberers many decades ago. With a collection of vintage cameras and sound equipment from modern theaters, vintage cars, colonial furniture, British clocks and fans, it continues to show off India's rich and varied heritage.

### The Mint Palace

Another INDeco initiative is exemplified by a 17th-century building known as the "Mint Palace," built in the Madras Presidency by Shekhawati Bansilal, the official gold coin minter. When the beautiful structure was razed to the ground by the state government in 2010 to make way for a complex, INDeco purchased all its pieces and painstakingly reassembled it on the hotel grounds in Swamimalai, transforming it into a charming museum.

### A Moment from The Freedom Struggle

Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, a famous Indian freedom fighter, was imprisoned in various jails during his struggle for India's freedom. One of the solitary cells where he was imprisoned was at the Madras Central Jail. That very unit has found its home at INDeco.

### South Indian Cuisine

INDeco's South Indian vegetarian cuisine leads our taste buds on a culinary journey to celebrate the diverse flavors of Tamil Nadu. The hotel's in-house restaurant serves an array of traditional dishes using age-old home-style recipes and locally sourced fruits and vegetables. This farm-to-table approach not only guarantees the freshness and quality of the ingredients but also promotes responsible, self-sustaining food practices.

Abjuring air-conditioned restaurants in favor of open-air dining spaces under the shade of banyan trees or amidst the charm of farm settings reflects the commitment to reconnecting guests with nature.

### Cultural Immersion

INDeco offers a plethora of Indian cultural activities like classical music, Bharatanatyam dance performances, iconography, yoga, med-

itation camps and museum walks, allowing guests to not only witness but also actively participate with local artisans in their work, and partake in cultural workshops.

### What's Coming Next

Departing are the days when longstanding pilgrimage destinations in India and Sri Lanka only offered austere accommodations. Today's more affluent pilgrims expect more. INDeco Hotels continues to expand its footprint, from the Swamimalai property to the serene landscapes of Yercaud. Anticipation is building for their forthcoming venture called "The Last Resort" in another famous temple town—Palani. But priorities remain constant: the embrace of nature and the genuine warmth of Indian culture, hospitality and sustainability.



# Lord Siva Dances into Delhi

World's tallest Nataraja graces new Bharat Mandapam exhibition center

**N**ATARAJA KEPT INSPIRING US TO COMPLETE 30 months' work in just six months." That's how Govind Mohan of the Indian government's Ministry of Culture described their commissioning of a 27-foot-tall sculpture of God Siva as Lord of Dance to be installed in time for the G-20 Summit of global economic leaders held September 9-10, 2023. Weighing about 18 tons, it reposes in front of the new, iconic, elliptical Bharat Mandapam exhibition and convention center where the leaders gathered. They marveled at this artistic depiction of India's "essence of unity, strength and grace."

The single-cast, solid statue, costing about US\$1.2 million according to *The Hindu*, is made of an amalgam of eight metals: copper, brass, lead, gold, silver, mercury, iron and tin. Summit organizers wanted to fashion Nataraja in the traditional way, so the art world pointed them to Radhakrishnan, Srikantan and Swaminathan, the three sons of the late master craftsman S. Devasenapathy Sthapati of Swamimalai, Tamil Nadu. Their company, Jayam Industries, uses the Chola lost-wax method. 1) They first create a wax model of the statue. 2) Wax rods, known as sprues, are attached to the model, which will serve as pouring channels for the molten metal. 3) Uniquely soft alluvial clay soil from the nearby Cauveri River is built up around the wax model in at least three layers. 4) The clay-coated model is then placed in a kiln.



As the temperature increases, the wax melts and drains away, leaving a hollow clay mold (hence the name "lost wax."). 5) Molten metal is poured into the clay mold through the channels formed by the removed sprues. 6) After cooling, the clay is chipped away, and the statue is fine-tuned to perfection.

"The G20 Nataraja will last centuries. In fact, it can easily last 1,000 years," Srikantan told the *Times of India*. "The sculptors in our family are known for the purity of the materials they use. We have never used second-grade stuff like gunmetal. We follow all the exact

measurements and patterns as mentioned in the *Shilpa Shastras*. And we make idols for Hindu temples around the world."

**Village to big city:** (below) Brothers Radhakrishnan, Srikantan and Swaminathan carve wax models and fine-tune cast metal murtis at their famous shop in Swamimalai; (above) Nataraja sits majestically in front of Delhi's Bharat Mandapam flanked by national flags before the G20 Summit



**The creation:** (clockwise from below) Sthapati refines details of Nataraja's face in wax; Cauveri River clay soil wrapped with securing metal angle iron encases the wax model; molten metal is poured from a huge cauldron through a chute into the mold, which is buried in sand; Nataraja leaves the shop to travel 1,550 miles to Delhi over two days; closeup of eight-metal Nataraja in His elegant resting place; logo for Sri Jayam Industries





# Teenage Depression

Beware the drawbacks of standard treatments for this common ailment

BY DR. VIRENDER SODHI

**What is depression?**

Fifteen percent of youth reported feelings of depression in 2022 and it is known that childhood depression left unattended can carry into adulthood. Clinical depression is a serious illness that can affect anybody, including teenagers. It can affect their thoughts, feelings, behavior and overall health. Common symptoms are poor appetite, insomnia or excessive sleep habits, hyperactivity or inactivity, loss of interest or pleasure in usual activities, fatigue, feelings of worthlessness or self-reproach, diminished ability to think or concentrate, and recurrent thoughts of death or suicide.



**What causes depression?**

Depression can be the result of psychological as well as physiological factors. The predominant psychological theory asserts that depression is the result of habitual feelings of pessimism and hopelessness. It is important to screen for the various simple, organic factors which are known to contribute to depression. These include nutrient deficiency, hypoglycemia (low blood sugar), hypothyroidism (low thyroid function) and drugs—not only prescription and illicit drugs, but also alcohol, caffeine, nicotine, etc. Although it is uncommon to perform lab tests in the diagnosis of depression, I run a thorough blood and urine test for these factors to determine if any of them is causing a chemical imbalance. Additionally, a deficiency of any single nutrient may alter brain function and lead to depression, anxiety and other mental disorders. Particularly essential in this context are vitamin B12, folic acid and other B vitamins, and the omega-3 fatty acids.

**What are the standard treatments for depression?**

Most people are treated with counseling, or psychotherapy, which is talking about feelings with a trained psychologist who can help one change the relationships, thoughts or behaviors that are causing the depression. Young people should seek help from parents or their school counselor. Parents need to take a very active role by first recognizing that their child is depressed and then providing all the help they can. Some people are helped with counseling and medicine. Doctors routinely prescribe a number of different antidepressant medications. These differ in their side effects and levels of effectiveness. These drugs correct decreased levels of specific neurotransmitters in the blood that can cause or contribute to depression.

**Tackling depression**

Ayurvedic remedies raise spirits as effectively as drug treatments, without troublesome side effects. For example, along with counseling, supplements of 5-Hydroxytryptophan, St. John's wort extract, *Ashwagandha*, *Bacopa monnieri* and *Mucuna pruriens* have all been effective in my clinical experience. The chemical 5-Hydroxytryptophan (5-HTP) is the direct precursor to serotonin which correspond

to feelings of well being. 5-HTP also causes an increase in levels of endorphins and other neurotransmitters. The typical recommendation is 50 to 100 mg three times daily. Meanwhile, saffron (*Crocus sativus*) has been studied and found to improve ADHD, anxiety and depressive symptoms as well as insomnia at the relatively low dose of 20mg a day. It can also be incorporated as spice with strong medicinal benefit.

St. John's wort extract (*Hypericum perforatum*) is a well-known natural antidepressant. Over thirty double-blind studies involving over 2,000 patients with mild to moderate depression have shown St. John's wort extract to be effective. However, while it appears to be as effective as conventional antidepressant drugs in mild to moderate depression, it does not appear to be as beneficial in the treatment of severe depression. The dosage for St. John's wort extract (standardized for hypericin and hyperforin content) is 900 to 1,800 mg daily. In severe cases, St. John's wort extract can be used safely in combination with 5-HTP.

People taking prescription drugs need to check with their doctor or pharmacist before taking St. John's wort extract, as it appears to induce enzymes in the liver and gut that detoxify certain drugs. St. John's wort extract may also potentiate prescription antidepressant and anti-anxiety drugs. While I am of the opinion that St. John's wort and 5-HTP can be combined with low doses of antidepressant medications, I strongly advise it

only be done under the strict supervision of a physician.

In several studies, ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*), standardized for withanoloids, has shown to be effective in the treatment of anxiety and depression alongside pharmaceutical antidepressants. I recommend 1,000–1500 mg three times a day. Ashwagandha is a wonderful adaptogen, increasing the body's resistance to stress, trauma, anxiety and fatigue, and has many other positive health benefits.

*Bacopa monnieri*, another brain tonic herb, has also shown antidepressant and anti-anxiety effects. Both of these herbs can, however, increase the effects of benzodiazepines and phenobarbiturates. *Mucuna pruriens*, another herb, has been shown to increase dopamine in the body, therefore it is effective in cases of low dopamine levels. I recommend 250 mg three times per day.

Studies looking at exercise, yoga, pranayama and meditation have shown positive outcomes especially in anxiety, post traumatic stress disorder, depression, stress-related medical illnesses and substance abuse. I recommend fast walking for at least 45 minutes and yoga and pranayama for 30 minutes every day. Alternate nostril breathing, *anulom-vilom*, and fire breath, *kapal bhatti*, are of great benefit in lowering depression and anxiety. There are many forms of meditation, among them quieting the mind, reciting a mantra, getting rid of all thoughts, guided imagery and keeping attention focused. All forms have shown remarkable results. Keep in mind that it may take four to six weeks before you start feeling the difference when using a combination of herbal and nutritional therapies with exercise, yoga, pranayama and meditation. But this is the same expected time frame as in standard drug treatments.

For more information, please see Dr. Sodhi's channel on Youtube: [youtube.com/@dr.virendersodhi6650](https://www.youtube.com/@dr.virendersodhi6650)

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dr. Virender Sodhi holds an M.D. (Ayurveda) from India and a N.D. from Bastyr College of Naturopathic Medicine, USA. E-mail: [drvsodhi@ayurvedicscience.com](mailto:drvsodhi@ayurvedicscience.com). Web: [www.ayurvedicscience.com](http://www.ayurvedicscience.com).

# Tamil Nadu's Remarkable Copper Plate Discovery

Long-lost hymns from revered 7th-century Saivite saints may be among the treasure



BY S. KRISHNAN, TAMIL NADU, INDIA

THE DISCOVERY OF A NUMBER OF STATUES and copper plates in Seerkazhi Sattainathar Temple is a landmark event—the first discovery of copper plates inscribed with ancient Saiva hymns. The temple is under the administration of Dharmapuram Aadheenam, a centuries-old Saiva mutt. The aadheenam is currently performing *kumbhabhishekam* (consecration ceremony) at a number of temples under its control. The one for Sattainathar Temple, 150 miles south of Chennai near the coast, was held on May 24, 2023, after a gap of 32 years.

While digging a place for constructing the *yagasala* (covered ritual area) for the

event near the west gopuram, workers found bronze artifacts. The digging was stopped, then resumed carefully under the supervision of the head of the aadheenam, Sri Masillamani Desiga Gnanasambanda Swamigal. What was unearthed was a treasure trove.

There were 22 panchaloka ("five metals") murtis including those of Ganapati, Murugan, Somaskandar and Saiva saints such as Appar and Gnanasambandar. In addition, the workers uncovered 55 pedestals, a number of puja utensils and 493 copper plates.

Based on the initial assessment, the murtis were from the 12th–13th century ce, towards the end of the later Chola era. The style of Tamil letters written on the copper plates

An unexpected boon: Experts catalog thousand-year-old plates

indicates they are from the same period.

Apparently they were buried to safeguard against invader attacks, then lost for centuries. Initial reading of the copper plates on display shows that one is a devotional song, the *Thiruvenguru* hymn by Saint Sambandar. He was born in Seerkazhi in the 7th century, one of four renowned saints of the time.

A number of copper plates of Pandyas, Cholas, Pallavas and other kings who ruled the Tamil area during this period have been found previously, but those all deal with grants to individuals or temples. This is the first time copper plates with Saiva hymns have been found. These hymns, immensely popular and collectively known as the *Thevaram*, were sung by Saiva saints Appar, Sundarar and Sambandar during the 7th and 8th centuries. It is said there were originally 38,000 such hymns. Most were lost over the succeeding centuries with about 8,227 recovered due to the efforts of Emperor Rajaraja Chola (985 to 1014 ce), recorded on palm leaves discovered in one of the rooms in the Chidambaram Nataraja temple. Even then, many of the manuscripts had been damaged or destroyed by termites. Rajaraja Chola took the help of Nambiyandar Nambi to arrange them properly into categories of songs, giving us today's *Thevaram* collection, one of Saivism's great devotional compendiums.

New palm-leaf manuscripts of the hymns were made and distributed widely. Ever since then, the songs have been sung on a grand scale in many temples. Grants were given to Othuvars (experts hymn singers) to sing them on important occasions. Rajaraja Chola employed 48 Othuvars in Thanjavur temple alone. Over the centuries, as they were written only on palm leaves, a few of these hymns were again lost, in whole or in part.

According to an inscription in stone at the Chidambaram Nataraja temple, Vikram Chola, who ruled from 1118 to 1135, had the hymns inscribed on copper plates. A 12th-century inscription in Atroor, near Tiruchendur, also mentions hymns by Appar, Sambandar and Sundarar being inscribed on copper plates.

Until this recent discovery, no such plates had ever been found. Potentially, they could assume an immense place in the religious history of Tamil Nadu. Currently, the plates are under the analysis of experts. What will be most interesting to know is if they contain hymns unknown to us so far.

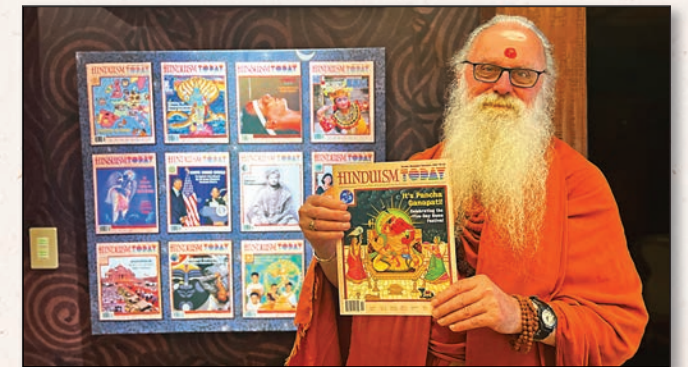
This article by S. Krishnan originally appeared in Swarajya magazine: [bit.ly/seerkazhiplates](https://bit.ly/seerkazhiplates). Edited for length and clarity.



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Gurudeva founded Hinduism Today on January 5, 1979. He later gave this description of its founding: "It was during a [1978] world tour through Singapore, Malaysia, Mauritius, Reunion, Africa, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Europe and other countries that I realized Hinduism had no global voice and no network of communication. The Hindus in Durban had no idea what was happening with Hindus in Colombo. Those in London had no connection with Hindus in Canada. Thus, I was divinely directed by inner orders from our Yogaswami Kailasa Parampara, by my satguru in this life, to fulfill the crying need to create an international network that would interconnect all Hindus into one invincible front."



Paramacharya Sadasivanathaswami is the editor-in-chief of HINDUISM TODAY. Founded in 1979, the first magazine version was published in December, 1996.

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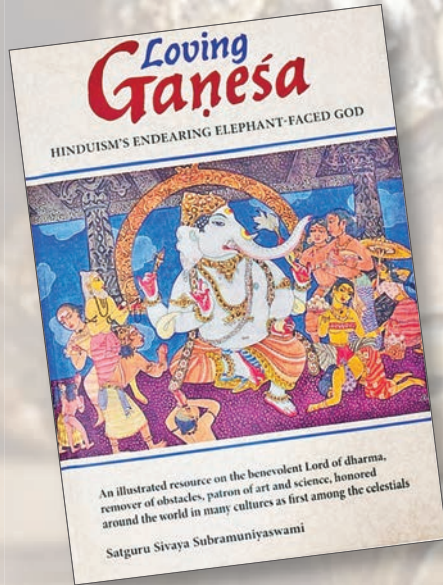
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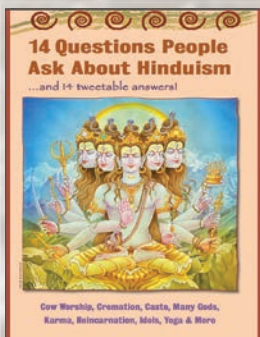


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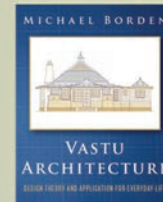


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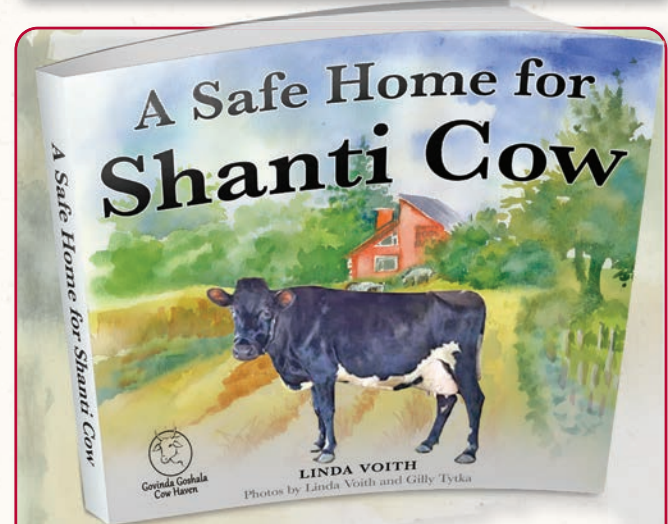

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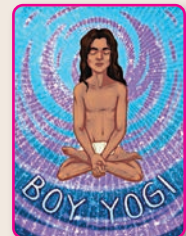
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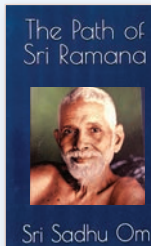
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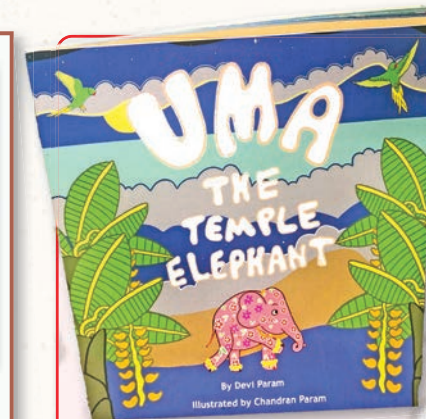
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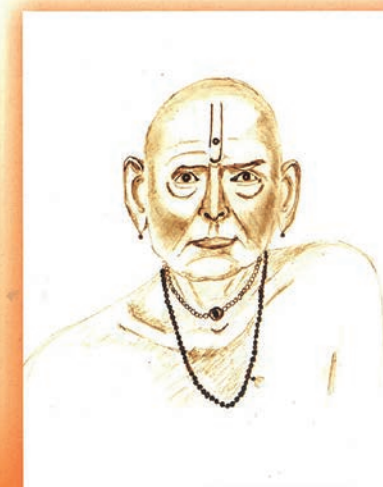


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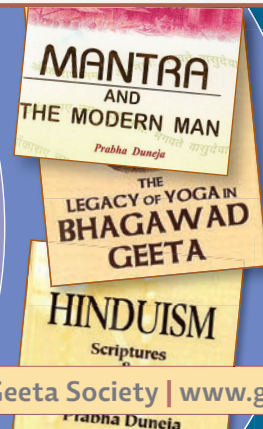
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**Therefore, being That, it has no relation whatsoever  
to time, space and form.**

**Form is in a constant state  
of creation, preservation and destruction within space,  
thus creating consciousness called time,  
and has no relationship  
to timelessness, causelessness or formlessness.**

**The individual soul, when mature, can make the leap  
from the consciousness of space-time-causation  
into the timeless, causeless, formless Self.**

**This is the ultimate maturing  
of the soul on this planet.**

**— Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami**

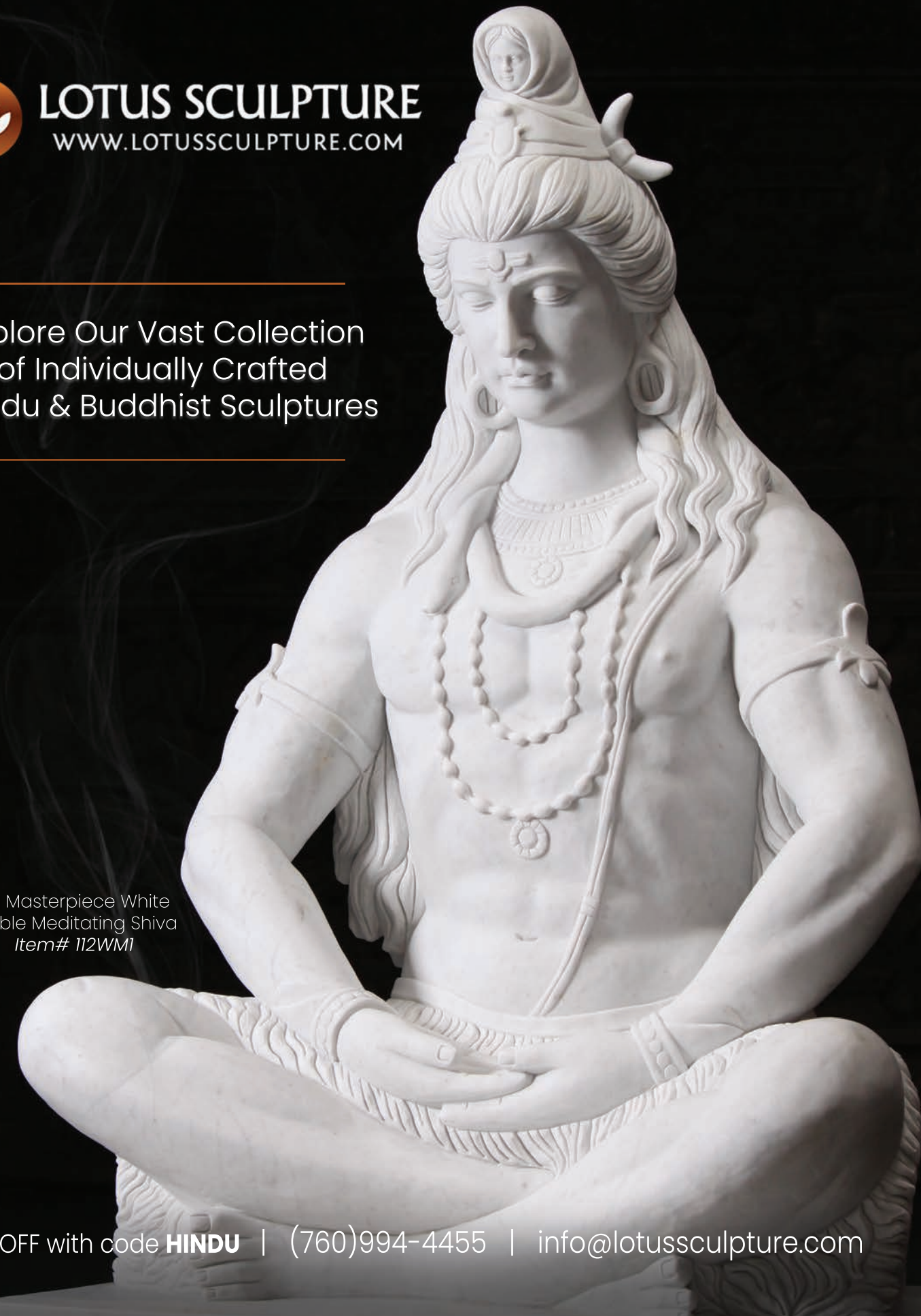
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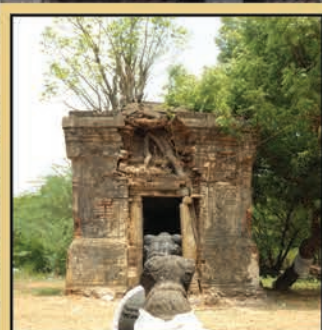
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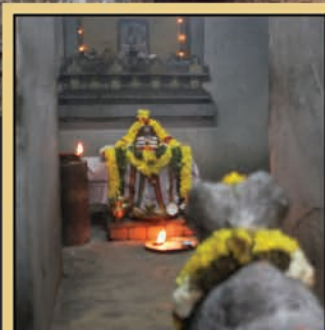
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SCAN ME



*The appointed moment  
In Thy timeless  
Great Night,  
I sit waiting  
For Thy Coming.*

*Windows of Mind open;  
As does Heart  
Like a lotus bud  
To the first rays  
Of the Sun.*

*And Soul raptures  
In the warm glow  
Radiating from  
The Hub of  
Thy Cosmic  
Wheel.*

*Om  
Namah  
Shivâya.*

*Mahashivratri  
by Dr. Arjunan Subramaniam  
Desa Parkcity, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia,  
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# Honoring Sage Patanjali, Bharat's Peerless Yogi



Here, Rishi Patanjali, author of the *Yoga Sutras* (ca. 200–500 BCE), meditates on a giant serpent. His hands are held in Shuni Mudra, which is said to awaken intuition and higher consciousness. The banyan tree, with its vast rooting tendrils, represents the strength and longevity of Hinduism. Above, Sadasiva rides on His winged vahana, Nandi. In the branches, two cobras have wrapped themselves around the ola leaf manuscript of the *Yoga Sutras*, protecting it for future generations. Near the bottom, Siva is present in the sage's personal Sivalinga. Subtly, Siva's two all-seeing cosmic eyes peer out at us from the sky behind.

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