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Published by Anonymous on Oct. 01, 2004

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Goddess Temple Festival

On June 6, 2004, 15,000 Hindus from all over Europe joined the annual Ther Thiruvila (Chariot Festival) of the Kamadchi Ampal Temple, Hamm. The announcement reads: "Goddess Sri Kamadhi has her big trip out around the temple in the adjoining streets, being seen by many people, blessing the town and its citizens." At 1,500 square meters, with a 17-meter tall Rajagopuram and a 700-square meter inner hall, the temple claims to be the largest in Europe. Founded in 1989 by the Sri Lankan refugee community, the temple celebrated its first public chariot festival procession in 1993, moved to its present location in the district of Hamm-Uentrop in 1997 and had its inaugural Kumbhabhishekam in July, 2002. The temple is testimony to the spiritual strength and sacrifice of Sri Lankan Hindus who fled their homeland when ethnic strife became all out war in 1983. Sixty-thousand Sri Lankans now live in Germany, forty-thousand of them Hindus. See the temple's excellent web site: <http://www.kamadchi-ampal.de>

UNITED KINGDOM

Priest Visas - English Only?

The UK has announced that from August 31, 2004, level 4 competency under the International English Language Testing Scheme will be a minimum requirement for a Ministers of Religion work permit visa. After two years, the minimum will be raised to level 6 competency. The legislation was passed despite Hindu Council of UK members previous pleas to the Home Office to allow a 10-year grace period for Hindu priests. They explained that the priests do no preaching, but qualified priests erudite in Sanskrit are absolutely essential to the Hindu religious community. The Home Office agreed to further consultation on the Hindu priesthood issue in the fall.

Existing visas will not be affected.

PORTUGAL

Interfaith Flap In Fatima

On May 5, Sixty Hindus left by bus from Lisbon to visit Portugal's famed shrine, "Our Lady of Fatima." They offered flowers to Mother Mary and their shastri chanted the Shanti mantra from the Catholic altar. National TV station SIC covered the trip, announcing it as "an uncommon ecumenical experience....She is also called the Most Holy Mother, the goddess Devi, the Deity of Nature whom many Portuguese Hindus also find in Fatima."

Orthodox Catholics were outraged. Catholic Family News editor, John Vennari (USA), reported, "They Hinduized the Fatima Shrine, folding their pagan myths and superstitions into one of Catholicism's most sacred sites....a desecration... a blasphemy... placing our Lady on the same level as one more goddess in their pantheon of demonic deities." He condemned the Bishop of Fatima and Shrine Rector Guerra who facilitated the Hindus' visit, writing that Hinduism teaches, in the Bhagavad Gita, "Krishna told Arjuna... hack his friends and relatives to pieces. It is all illusion anyway. No one really dies. This is Hinduism in a nutshell."

The uproar highlights the controversy over Vatican II's pan-religious ecumenism that has sharply polarized those who believe the Catholic Church is the absolute and only path of salvation. The tension heated up in October, 2003, when Catholics held an interfaith congress entitled "The Present of Man--the Future of God: the Place of Sanctuaries in the Relations to the Sacred, " at the Paul VI Pastoral Center adjacent to the Fatima Shrine in Portugal. Portugal's plans to build a new 9,000-seat, stadium-sized basilica that would welcome pilgrims of all faiths fueled fears that there was an initiative to turn Fatima into an interfaith sanctuary. The Hindus' May visit only served to add ghee to the fire (see <http://www.fatima.org>)

A provocateur in the controversy was Belgian Jesuit Father Jacques Dupuis, who called the 1442 Council of Florence declaration a "horrible text." That declaration

says that no one outside the Catholic church can ever be saved. They go into the eternal fires of hell. He also said at the Congress that the purpose of interfaith dialogue is not to convert the non-Catholic, but rather to help "the Christian to become a better Christian and the Hindu a better Hindu." He was branded a heretic by the Catholic right.

On the Hindu side, many will agree with the Portugese Hindu girl, "It is natural to see any manifestation of God, including Our Lady of Fatima, as a manifestation of the same God." Others question embracing icons based on a theology so opposed to Vedic values.

NEPAL

Saving Sacred Bagmati

From June 5 to August 21, 2004, the 4th Bagmati River Festival was held in Nepal. The goal: stop the pollution and clean up the river. The religious and cultural value of this cradle of Nepalese civilization, as well as its present day importance to ecology and recreation, were highlighted with events ranging from rafting to recycling, compost training to poetry and theatrical events in the schools.

Population growth has turned the river into a sewer of human filth and chemical waste. Huta Ram Baidya, 77, recounts (Google "Water Wisdom, " Nepal), "They are constructing toilets that empty into the rivers with the help of World Bank Loans. Now we do not bathe in these rivers, devoid of any life but stinking anaerobic bacteria; we dip our fingers with the greatest reluctance and wash our hands as soon as we leave."

The Nepal River Conservation Trust can use all the help you can give. See: <http://www.NepalRivers.org.np>

USA

Graduation

On Saturday, June 19, 2004, the Hindu University of America, HUA, Orlando, Florida, held its first graduation commencement and formal facility dedication ceremony. Via correspondence studies, Ms. Uma Balu, HUA's first student, received her masters in Hindu Studies and Ms. Jessica Sayle, her masters in Vedic Astrology.

Brainchild of visionaries Dr. Kuldip Gupta, Dr. Khandelwal, Dr. Mahesh Mehta, Abhinav Dwivedi, Braham R. Aggarwal and Ram Agarwal, HUA was incorporated in 1989. It started teaching through correspondence in 1993, acquired land in 2000 and began teaching on campus in 2002. Today it has 60 students, 12 on campus and the rest in "distance education."

Years of dedication and sacrifice created this small but historic graduation milestone. By 2010, HUA envisions a student body of 1,500 students. With the skilled team of educators and the mission spirit in their hearts, they expect steady progress. You can help or enroll at: <http://www.hindu-university.edu>

MAURITIUS

Tackling Conversion with Intelligence and Upliftment

The awakening forum of Mauritius is challenging Christian proselytization of disadvantaged Hindus with a broad strategy to minister to the Hindu community rather than just complaining. In early 2004 meetings, comprised of representatives from various Hindu organizations, the Forum drafted a plan for educational outreach to homes, priest training, distribution of publications, community surveys, regular hospital visitation by Hindu priests, setting up special funds for the needy, assertion of the anti-conversion stand through the media, and more. Implementation is to be done through local-area committees, who may also enlist other Hindus in their areas to carry out the objectives. The analysis is excellent and the model is well designed, but results have yet to come. Hopefully, they will fulfill their own April Workshop final objective, "Stop talking and get on to action." Stay tuned.

ENGLAND

London's First Jain Temple

In March this year, the stone-laying ceremony was held for London's first Jain temple. Located on ten acres at the Oshwal Centre in Potters Bar, North London, it will serve the 30,000 Jains who live in the city. Here-to-fore, England's only Jain temple was in the city of Leicester.

Generous donor, Mr. Kantilal Jeshan Haria, along with his wife, Champa, of InHouse Kitchens, placed the auspicious first carved stone in ceremonies attended by 4,000 people.

Rajesh Sompura is the Indian temple architect in charge of construction. Most of the stones will be carved in India and then brought to the UK to be assembled. The temple will be in the middle of landscaped gardens. Viewed from the air it will show the Jain symbol of Triloka, and the symbol of ahimsa will be represented by a magnificent mosaic pond.

INDONESIA

Mount Bromo Erupts in Java

Mount bromo, home of East Java's unique Tenggerese Hindus, erupted in June. Two people were killed. Indonesia has 100 active volcanoes. Each year Tenggerese climb to the edge of Mount Bromo's crater and throw offerings to the Gods into its fiery, open vent.

THAILAND

Chinese Give Up Meat

The annual taoist chinese Vegetarian Festival is grandly celebrated in Phuket, Thailand, every October. The vegetarian God Kiu Wong In is worshiped by devotees who purify themselves for nine days by various penances, including fire-walking and abstaining from meat.

USA/NEW YORK

Study Group Is a Big Hit

At the Queens, New York, Maha Ganapati Temple, in May, Texas-based Vedic Foundation conducted a successful study group. Instructor Chirag Patel, Ph.D, using Swami Prakashananand's text, The True History and the Religion of India, held a two-hour seminar every Sunday for four weeks. Students were so inspired they extended the classes for another four weeks.

"Classes like this help present our religion in the right manner. They are few and far between, " said Bhavin Modi, a 26-year-old pharmaceutical salesman. The Vaishnavite oriented Vedic Foundation, www.vedicfoundation.org is well organized, setting high educational standards and providing an excellent model to follow.

BRIEFLY...

An advanced ancient Indian civilization has been discovered in the Gulf of Cambay off the coast of Pakistan. India's National Institute of Ocean Technology scientists found blade scrapers, stones and beads with holes and 9,500-year-old bricks made of clay and straw.

Amarnath yatra by air for the affluent is now available for US\$206 per head via helicopter from Baltal base camp to the cave shrine and back. Tour operators are happy with the business, daily shuttling 30 to 40 pilgrims who want to avoid the treacherous trek.

The Shri Amarnath Board is planning to preserve the ice stalagmite (Sivalingam) by installing skating rink technology in the cave, using ethylene vinyl acetate pipes to maintain a constant sub-zero temperature inside the cave. This would ensure devotees who arrive in July, when the mountain passage is still open, having braved the treacherous 675 km trek, would be able to see the Lingam. Presently the Lingam begins to melt in June and disappears by mid-July. Authorities say there will be no interference with the Lingam itself, just the surrounding atmosphere.

Christian conversion is on the march in Nepal. As many as 100 churches have been built in Makwanapur district and nearly 60,000 people of the Tamang community have already become Christians. The Praja community, too, have become Christians in large numbers. Both communities are poor and illiterate. The conversions are made with enticements of food, clothing and economic assistance funded by foreign aid.

Efforts to enforce the ban against corporal punishment in schools heated up in India in June when two school children died in Hyderabad. Venamma died in the hospital after being forced (though she pleaded ill) to do 150 pushups because she was not wearing her school uniform. K. Lakshmaiah was beaten for not paying fees and not purchasing a uniform. His parents were poor and could not meet the requirements. He hanged himself from a tree.

India's Ministry of non-resident Affairs announced in July that the net amount of remittances sent by NRIs from around the world during 2003-04 was US\$18.9 billion in private transfers as compared to US\$14.8 billion in 2002-03.

In July Paramanand Puriji Maharaj assumed the seat of the Pir of Dattatreya Akhara in Ujjain, as head of one of India's major monastic orders. The leader is very popular. His abhishekam was like a spiritual coronation, attended by many high priests, thousands of yogis of all sects and Muslims whose families have historical connections with the monastery.

The Palani Hills stand in icon which was installed in front of the original Deity to receive ritual ablution was removed in June. The new icon had been brought in to prevent further damage caused by bathing the seriously deteriorated original murti, made of nine poisons. Even so, residents of Palani deemed it highly inauspicious

that the old murti was being blocked from view. Now devotees can once again see and be blessed by this ancient, powerful icon of Lord Palani.