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Kabul Hindus and Sikhs Face Challenges to Cremation

Since the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, Kabul Hindus and Sikhs who remained or returned to their homes are facing a challenge in reclaiming their cremation sites. After ten years of disuse, many are now hedged in by newly built residences. The Afghanistan religious affairs ministry has granted Hindus usage rights to Kabul's 200-year-old Hindu cremation grounds, but locals are objecting. Abdul Wali Sahi, a local Muslim leader, says that Hindus can build anything they want, "but we can't accept their cremation ground, " which is only 200 meters from a family residence. Hindus currently cremate their dead in their homes or take them outstation.

CANADA

Brij Sood Honored

Dr. Brijendra K. Sood of Calgary, Alberta, was honored by the Governor General of Canada, Adrienne Clarkson, at a ceremony October 24, 2003, in Ottawa as a member of the Order of Canada. The Order "...recognizes people who have made a difference....our country's highest honor for lifetime achievement." The citation read, "A dedicated physician, Brijendra Sood has promoted multicultural awareness by recognizing and valuing the strengths of Canada's rich cultural mosaic. Since arriving in Canada in 1964, he has worked to develop and strengthen the social and cultural fabric of Calgary's East Indian community. He has played leadership roles in the city's India-Canada Association, Multicultural Centre, Hindu Society and Temple, and has received numerous honors for his ethno-cultural contributions, including Outstanding Physician of the Year 2000 from the Calgary Medical Society."

TRINIDAD

Centenarian Swami on Tour Delivers a Strong Message

Swami Akshayanandaji Maharaj, current president of the Bharat Sevashram Sangha, Calcutta, toured Sangha centers in London, Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago in the fall of 2003. In Trinidad he visited Felicity's Trinidad Sevashram Sangha and its many temples and leaders throughout the country. Swami was accompanied by three other swamis. Though Swami will be 100 years of age in July, 2004, he still has a clear voice, sharp mind and memory and needs very little help to get around, reports Paras Ramoutar. Swami became the head of the Sangha in 2000, the fifth in the lineage since it was founded in 1917. The Bharat Sevashram Sangha now has ten million members worldwide. Swami says, "The Bharat Sevashram Sangha is a spiritual brotherhood of monks and selfless workers devoted to the service of humanity....The goal of life is universal emancipation and self-realization. Religion is self-sacrifice, self-discipline, adherence to truth and continence, while real death is forgetfulness of the Self."

USA

Newsweek Highlights Meditation

Newsweek's November 10, 2003, article, "Faith and Healing " examines the growing trend of bringing spirituality and religion into mainstream medical practice. The issue of medical doctors encouraging patients to pray is fraught with controversy, says the article. What if a zealous Baptist doctor tells a Hindu girl to pray to Jesus? What if a devout patient is encouraged to pray, but still becomes terminally ill? Does that mean God doesn't care? Meanwhile, the practice of meditation, which generally transcends such concerns, is making a move. A photo caption reads "Meditation especially has captivated scientists who are studying its effects....Doctors are prescribing the practice to patients to reduce stress...improve health. Now the unlikeliest Americans including professional tough guys are signing up to sooth their souls."

CENTRAL ASIA

Kazakhstan Convenes Inter-religious Pow-Wow

Kazakhstan, with signs of human habitation going back a million years, has long been a multi-cultural milieu. Kazakhstan's president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, believes it can be a model for the world. Amidst global religious tensions, he took a proactive step with his state-initiated Congress of World and Traditional National Religions in September, 2003. For two days in Astana, 120 religious leaders from 18 nations joined in inter-religious dialog. Vaishnava leader Sugunendra Theertha Swamiji, head of the Madhwacharya Matha, Udipi, India, led the Indian delegation and delivered the Hindu teaching of tolerance. This central Asian Silk-Route arena of ancient bloody battles, the world's ninth largest country in area, is rising from Soviet obscurity, striving for a new world order of international cooperation. See <http://www.dialog.inform.kz> and <http://www.kz> for a ray of hope in the struggle for world peace.

KENYA

A Shrine to Sri Aurobindo in Africa

On July 13th, 2003, an historic facility honoring Sri Aurobindo's contributions and influence in Africa manifested at the Sri Aurobindo Society, Nairobi Centre. Five members of the Nairobi Centre had traveled to India earlier and returned on the 12th, with Smt. Sushilaben Melvani of the Pondicherry Sri Aurobindo Society, bringing relics of Sri Aurobindo to Nairobi. The following morning, the day of the Guru Purnima festival, the relics were enshrined in the Relics House, and Sushilaben cut the ribbon to the new Sri Aurobindo Bhavan Meditation Hall. The Sri Aurobindo Bhavan was consecrated to the Divine Mother on her 125th birth anniversary, an event that locals described as "a landmark in the history of the African continent and the spiritual history of the Earth." Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), was a prolific writer, freedom fighter and yoga mystic whose powerful writings were a key contribution to last century's Hindu revival.

HEALTH

Ninety Percent of Earth's Water Is Now Polluted

Trekker's and travelers face a common dilemma: unboiled water can make you ill. But what if you can't boil? This online excerpt from The Backpackers Field Manual by Rick Curtism, <http://www.princeton.edu/~oa/manual/water.shtml> is a clear guide to water purification. Whether you are going to Yellowstone Park, Calcutta, Mexico City or Africa, the tools are simple. A good water filter or purifier and correct usage of iodine or chlorine with knowledge of the time they take can keep you well.

FESTIVALS

Deepavali Goes Worldwide

Previously ignored on so-called multi-religious public calendars and official agendas outside of India where Hindus are a minority, Deepavali 2003 moved up several social notches into government halls. Celebrations were held in the White House, British House of Commons, and Australia's New South Wales Parliament, to name a few. England topped the lot with the presence of Prime Minister Tony Blair. Australia came in second with a large number of MPs joining in the ceremonies. And US Hindus were delighted that their lobbying efforts elicited a Deepavali statement from President Bush and ceremonial observances in the White House with a delegation of Hindus from around the country.

BRIEFLY...

Livermore Hindu Temple in California has begun a program to provide food, shelter, medical and educational assistance to needy area residents. The commendable program will give away US\$15,000 this year.

The Malaysia Hindu Sangam cracked down on abuses of the age-old penance of kavadi during the Thai Pusam festival at Batu Caves. The practice involves carrying a highly decorated arch to the temple and piercing the body with small spears. However, in recent years, it had degenerated into a spectacle of many nontraditional and objectionable elements. Now, only those following the tradition will be allowed entrance to the temple grounds where more than a million celebrated in February.

The Mysterious Decline of the Asian vulture, a critical part of the Indian ecosystem, has been attributed to the birds eating the carcasses of cattle treated with the common veterinarian drug diclofenac, also used in humans to relieve pain. The research, published in Nature magazine, did not offer a plan to end use of the drug.

The Sri Lanka government is taking a proactive approach to peace in the country by training hundreds of clergy of all faiths in mediation and conflict resolution. The program started for Hindu clergy on January 17 in Trincomalee.

A Texas judge created a bit of a sensation when he sentenced a man who slapped his wife to take yoga classes as part of his one-year probation. The sentence garnered national attention. The judge said he thought the yoga classes would help the man control his anger.

Fiji's Hindu temples continue to be the targets of robbers. Most recently pillagers struck the country's largest shrine, the Shri Shiva Subrahmanya Swami temple in Nadi. Though some desecration has occurred during the robberies, the motive in recent years appears to be money.

January 24 was honored as "Gurudeva Day " on Kauai, home of Hinduism Today. The day was designated by the mayor and is arranged each year by local residents who revered our late publisher, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniaswami, as a warm friend and gentle guide.

This is their way of giving thanks for his many contributions to the island community.

Pune's Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute was ransacked in an incident regrettable for its violence and irreversible damage to historical items. The Hindus were protesting the book Shivaji Hindu King in Islamic India by James Laine. They took exception to a passage raising questions about Shivaji's parentage. Considerable damage was done to the institute, which is a repository of ancient manuscripts. Laine himself was later booked by local police under the Indian Penal Code section 153 which prohibits, in part, "doing acts prejudicial to the maintenance of harmony."

South African Hindus are creating their own replica of one of India's most popular and richest temples, Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh. The foundation stone was laid for the temple, which is being built in Lenasia, south of Johannesburg.