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The Challenge of Urban Expansion

Malaysia and Indonesia hold a unique position in the world of Muslim nations. While elsewhere violence erupts on many sides, these countries are managing to hold a course of peace and dialog between different religious communities. But there are serious challenges. In Malaysia many of the over 17,000 Hindu temples and small shrines are located directly in the path of highway expansions and real estate development projects. A few are full Agamic temples over a century old, others are small roadside shrines, perhaps started with nothing more than a small Ganesha murti placed in a tree. Most were started before Independence and urban sprawl.

In early 2006 a number of temples were summarily demolished in spite of protests by Hindus in Kuala Lumpur with sanction from city officials in a rush to allow developers to build through certain areas. An unsuitable alternate venue for the relocated Sri Kumaravel Temple temple next to a sewage pond and high tension wires further upset Hindus. Activists raised a red flag and emotions ran high.

Amidst a climate of tension and accusations from all sides, the Malaysia Indian Congress and the Malaysia Hindu Sangam initiated discussions with the government. The President of the Malaysian Hindu Sangam, Datuk K. Vaithilingam, who is in the sensitive position of having to carry the Hindu banner and, at the same time, dialog with a Muslim administration, issued a press release on July 26th: "The first meeting of the City Hall Kuala Lumpur (DBKL) Liaison Committee Regarding Places of Worship (non-Muslims) was held on Monday this week at the DBKL Jalan Raja Abdullah, chaired by Tuan Haji Mohd. Amin Nordin bin Abdul Aziz, Deputy Director General DBKL, with government officials and Hindu leaders. A formula was discussed to conduct a survey of places of worship and their status so as to find solutions to the problem of location. The meeting agreed that all parties will study the proposals and decide in two weeks the formula. It was also agreed

that all notices issued for places of worship to be demolished will be put on hold." See <http://www.hindusangam.org.my> for complete texts.

Hindu activists are still not happy, saying their leadership is not taking a strong enough stand. Fortunately, Malaysia is still holding to its high ground where media, discussion and debate continue to be the admirable, nonviolent tools for interaction between religious communities.

USA

Mother's Day Goddesses

On May 7, 2006, at the chinmaya mission tri-state center in Kedar, Pennsylvania, 100 families celebrated Mother's Day, Seva Day and Chinmaya Jayanthi. The children honored their mothers in a grand Mathru Puja led by the resident Acharya Swami Siddhanandaji. During the puja, the mothers closed their eyes as they remembered their mothers. A sumptuous lunch was prepared and served by the fathers, who tirelessly worked to make the occasion enjoyable and memorable. At the end of the day, the children prostrated to their parents, seeking their blessings.

USA

Minnesota Hindus Rise Triumphant

Though the destruction of Deities in April, 2006, at the new Hindu Temple of Minnesota was a great blow to the community, devotees rallied with an amazing spirit to carry off a grand Mahakumbhabhishekam in July, even as some new murtis were being recarved in India. It was a relief to learn it was an act of thoughtless vandalism, as confessed by two local teenagers, and not a hate crime. Today, there is only excitement and anticipation for the new temple. "This is a sea change from the time we heard about the vandalism. We were all devastated, and we have recovered beautifully, " said Hindu Society member Umesh Singh.

TRINIDAD

National Award to Change

Indo-trinidadians have scored a resounding victory for religious pluralism and equality in this oil-rich Republic of Trinidad and Tobago as they celebrate the 161st Indian Arrival Day, May 30, 2006, reports Paras Ramoutar. After several years of legal battle, Justice Peter Jamadar, a Presbyterian, has ruled that Trinidad and Tobago's premier national award, "Trinity Cross, " is discriminatory against Hindus and Muslims. In an 80-page judgment, Justice Jamadar said, "I concluded that the creation and continued existence of the Trinity Cross, given the historical, religious and sociological context of Trinidad and Tobago, combined with the experiences, as well as religious beliefs of Hindus and Muslims, amount to indirect adverse effects (of) discrimination against Hindus and Muslims." Subsequently, on June 2nd, Prime Minister Patrick Manning announced in Parliament that a committee had been appointed to "review all aspects of the nation's highest award, examine such other national symbols and observance which may be considered discriminatory and make appropriate recommendations to government."

ANIMAL RIGHTS

Yet Another Elephant Dies Young in a Zoo

Gita, a 42-year-old elephant, died on the morning of June 10, 2006, in the Los Angeles Zoo. The night before she "downed " herself, sitting on her haunches with front legs out. It is assumed muscular toxins led to vascular failure. Zoo and city officials focused blame on a night zoo-keeper (who subsequently resigned) for failure to report her condition. But animal rights activists said he was just a scapegoat. Catherine Doyle of In Defense of Animals says: "The fact that Gita was in a downed position for more than 10 hours did lead to her death. However, we believe it was because of her painful arthritis and chronic infections of the feet that Gita could not rise once she had gone down. Lack of space for critical movement (elephants walk tens of miles a day in the wild) and the unyielding, hard surfaces that Gita stood on for decades, including concrete and hard-packed dirt, can irreparably damage elephants' feet and joints. Simply put, inadequate conditions for elephants at LA Zoo caused Gita to die prematurely. The zoo's proposed \$40 million, 3-acre expansion is grossly inadequate." Activists want elephants moved to large sanctuaries. See <http://www.idausa.org>

INDONESIA

Shattered by Earthquake

May 27, late Monday, in less than a minute a magnitude 8.7 earthquake killed over 6,000 people in Indonesia and sent Prambanan temple's carvings crashing to the ground. Much reconstruction and restoration work begun in 1918 was destroyed. The Buddhist Borodhur temple was spared.

SRI LANKA

Sivapoomi - Special Needs

A visitor to Sri Lanka in 2005, sent this report of a small historical breakthrough in that war-torn nation. The Sivapoomi School, the first institution for special needs children in Northeastern Sri Lanka, is thriving, with over eighty students between the ages of six and eighteen, all with various forms of mental retardation. Hindu leader Mr. Aru Tirumurugan started the school in 2004 with the help of many generous donors. The tuition-free school's seven-to-one student/teacher ratio provides much needed special attention for each student. Thirteen specially trained teachers guide Sivapoomi's curriculum, which covers various levels of mathematics, art, reading and writing skills, in a one-story building with classroom, storage and office space. Saivite theology, worship and religious study are part of the daily schedule, as well as South Indian music and dance. In the past, children with disabilities have usually dropped out of schools unable to cater to their needs, growing up to become unproductive citizens. Sivapoomi is changing the perception of these children, opening the door to main streaming them into society and reducing the stigma once attached to their affliction.

ECOLOGY - ENERGY

India Wins Ashden Energy Awards

The ashden awards are recognized globally as the world's leading green energy

awards scheme rewarding outstanding initiatives that use sustainable technologies to meet the needs of local communities and at the same time radically improve quality of life and address the urgent challenge of climate change. India's Appropriate Technology Institute won the Food Award for its "revolutionary application of biogas technology to an urban environment, transforming food waste into clean household cooking fuel." International Development Enterprises, India, took the Enterprise Award for "commercializing a simple, sustainable technology (the treadle water pump, see photo) which helps poor farmers achieve massive improvements in yield and income." Happy pumper Bhikram Singh is a sprightly 79-year-old farmer near Lucknow, in Uttar Pradesh. He says, "Before, I made US\$6.82-\$9.00 profit per crop and I just had one crop: wheat. Renting a diesel pump was expensive. I couldn't always get one, and it washed away all the topsoil. Now I've got my treadle pump, I'm making around US\$56.81 per crop and I get three or four crops a year. My family eats better now. I can sell the surplus at the market and buy new clothes for all the children. Next year I'm renting more land." But isn't it hard work, pedalling away for hours at a stretch? "Nooo, not for me! I like working the pump. See this knee? It used to be swollen and painful. Now, after treading, the pain's eased and the swelling's gone right down." See: <http://www.ashdenawards.org>

Briefly...

Archaeologists in Andhra Pradesh claim that a centuries-old temple exists two kilometers from Visakhapatnam coast, on the sea bed.

Tirupati was declared an autonomous religious township in July, 2006. The Andhra government also expanded the jurisdiction of the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam to the full surrounding 80,628 acres, mostly a reserved forest, where no mosque or Christian church can be built. Only Hindus will be allowed to enter, or be employed by, the temple.

After years of legal battles, the British Privy Council has ordered the Government of Trinidad and Tobago to give the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha (SDMS), led by Satnarayan Maharaj, a license to run the country's first radio facility promoting Hinduism in the Caribbean. There are over 300,000 Hindus in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mickey Wienstein, former White House lawyer and third generation military man is suing the US Air Force in an effort to keep at bay the growing wave of Christian proselytization in the military. The latest Air Force rules explicitly allow commanders to share their faith with subordinates.

India's major river action program, the Ganga Action Plan, has led to a significant improvement in the river's water quality. Last year's summer average values, recorded from March to June, for dissolved oxygen (DO) and biochemical oxygen demand (BOD) showed a marked improvement as against the levels noted in 1986, according to data released in July.

Renowned Bharata natyam guru Shri Mani passed away, June 28, 2006, after a prolonged illness, his family said today. He was 84. One of the main people responsible for the growth of bharat natyam in Mumbai, he founded the Kalasadan Institute of Fine Arts in 1954.