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Academics Debate Texts

Scholars assembled in Honolulu for the Association for Asian Studies on the Pacific Coast Conference from June 15 to 17, 2007. Their goal was to examine changes in how Asian cultures are viewed, including in the area of religion.

Toward this end, Dr. Shiva Bajpai, director of the Center for Asian Studies, California State University, Northridge, assembled a panel discussion on the California textbook issue. At his invitation, Paramacharya Palaniswami, editor-in-chief of Hinduism Today, presented a well-received overview of the controversy in which Hindus had challenged the negative portrayal of Hinduism in the state's proposed sixth-grade history books and requested--with some success--that Hinduism be treated with the same respect as other religions.

GERMANY

Festival Marks Success Story In Hamm

Ten thousand devotees worshipped the Goddess Kamakshi in Germany during the annual two-week June chariot festival of the Sri Kamadchi Ampal held in Hamm, June 1-12. The temple is the largest in continental Europe and a remarkable success story of Hinduism's integration into a land far from India and Sri Lanka. See www.kamadchi-ampal.de

Arumugam Paskaran (pictured), who fled the war in Sri Lanka in 1989, started the temple in a residential basement cellar. As it grew in popularity and its annual processions in the streets of Hamm became more and more grand, neighbors mounted insurmountable objections. Hamm authorities helped the Tamils relocate their temple in a more remote residential area with plenty of space. Out of this struggle, with a lot of cooperation from both sides, a full South Indian style temple was opened in 2002--the Goddess helping Germany move toward a much needed peaceful religious pluralism.

UGANDA

Sugar Plans Gall Africans

In 1972 Idi Amin ordered Uganda's 70,000 Indians to leave the country with one suitcase and \$100.00. Blacks had accused them of racial discrimination, cruel mistreatment and economic exploitation.

Today the 18,000 prosperous and newly re-established Indians who returned after the new Museveni government offered them financial reparations and a forgive-forget deal are working hard to contribute to the country by getting directly involved in politics instead of focusing only on economics.

But the old accusation of exploitation is arising once again. On April 12, Africans stoned an Indian man to death in a protest of an Indian firm's government-approved plan to cut down 7,000 acres of the precious Mabira Forest reserve in order to grow sugar cane.

WASHINGTON DC

Zed Gives Historic First-Ever Hindu Prayer in the US Senate

History was created on June 12, 2007, when Rajan Zed, a Hindu chaplain from Reno, Nevada, opened the daily session of the United States Senate with the Gayatri Mantra from Rig Veda. The prayers were in English, as required by the Senate. This was the first Hindu prayer in the Senate since its formation in 1789. Usually the Senate Chaplain delivers the opening prayer, but sometimes guest chaplains are invited. The only other non-Christian, non-Jew to offer a prayer was Muslim Wallace Mohammed, in 1992.

As Zed was being introduced by Senator Robert P. Casey of Pennsylvania, three Christians shouted protests from the visitors' gallery and were summarily arrested and led off in handcuffs. After a nervous moment, Zed, wearing a saffron colored kurta, rudraksha mala and sandalwood tilak, bravely collected himself and gave his prayer, which included references from the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita. He urged the senators to strive constantly to serve the welfare of the world by devotion to careful, wise, selfless work, guided by compassion. He concluded with "Peace, Peace, Peace be unto all."

The scheduled prayer and its disruption by Christians was hot Internet news. In the days before the 12th, Christian groups were hard at work to thwart the prayer. They called Hindus polytheists who do not believe in a One God and criticized the Senate for not uphold America's "One Nation under God " motto by allowing for a "non-monotheistic prayer." The protesters, who all belong to the Christian right-wing anti-abortion group Operation Save America, had traveled to Washington from North Carolina to protest a hate crimes bill. Learning of the Hindu prayer, they stayed on to disrupt it. The first protester shouted: "Lord Jesus, forgive us, Father, for allowing a prayer of the wicked, which is an abomination in your sight. We shall have no other gods before You."

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, the Democrat from Nevada state who invited Zed to the Senate, spoke shortly after the prayer. He defended his choice and linked it to the war debate. "If people have any misunderstanding about Indians and Hindus, " Reid said, "all they have to do is think of Gandhi, " a man "who gave his life for peace." "I think it speaks well of our country that someone representing the faith of about a billion people comes here and can speak in communication with our heavenly Father regarding peace, " said Reid, a Mormon.

Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, lamented that the protest "shows the intolerance of many religious right

activists. They say they want more religion in the public square, but it's clear they mean only their religion."

Hindus were at once jubilant and dismayed by the protest. Ishani Chowdhury, Hindu American Foundation's Executive Director, wrote, "Our community is heartened and grateful by the brave voices of Senator Harry Reid and other Senators who made this historic moment possible in the halls of Congress today. We reach out to everyone to join us in continuing to build a society based on the principles of tolerance, pluralism and understanding."

The American Jewish Committee issued a statement saying they were "deeply troubled by the verbal assault on Zed."

Harish Nevatia, an engineer in Mumbai, commented on the "suite 101 " blog, "When this event was reported in the Indian media, it evoked surprise and even shock. Religious prayers are not allowed in the Indian Parliament or government events, because of the secular nature of the government." He noted that the younger generation is perplexed by the American interest in Hinduism at a time when they themselves are abandoning Hindu culture in favor of the West's.

The town of Fazilka in Punjab, a place visited by Zed in the past, held a celebration, complete with fireworks to mark the event.

CANADA

Grotesque Ganeshas Protested

In November 2006, Edmonton's Art & Design in Public Places Program picked Ryan McCourt's four images of Lord Ganesha for its annual award. The exhibit, titled "Will and Representation, " comprises four sculptures: The Reawakening of Ganesha, Destroyer of Obstacles, Guardian of the Golden Gate, and Om Sri Ganja. The sculptures are on public display at the Shaw Conference Centre, 97 Street and

Jasper Avenue until November of this year.

One might conclude from the titles that the artist, though a self-declared atheist, had good intentions. But in fact, his depictions of the Hindu God are profane, grotesque and have understandably made Hindus unhappy, though organizers said some Hindus expressed a positive view. Roop Charkravorty, for one, wrote to the Shaw Centre: "It was a pleasant surprise to find Edmonton and Edmontonians celebrating the Indian culture and one of its most beloved Deities with such clarity and dignity." In contrast, Vaidyisa Bala shared: "This has been done without any knowledge or consultation with the many Hindu temple priests in town. It is deplorable that an ancient civilization's main icon of worship today is depicted publicly in such a distasteful and disrespectful manner." He recommends that the City of Edmonton have them removed. Aran Veylan notes: "One could accept the choice of 'industrial media' and an abstract style. But this exhibit is paid by our tax dollars, and some of the elements, like the exposed female breast and genitalia, and the chain around Mushika's neck to Ganesha's leg certainly do not fulfill our Mayor's stated objective to make Edmonton a capitol that honors and respects a diversity of cultures. It's about education and it's not over yet. Hindus here are organizing to deal with this issue."

EDUCATION

St. Olaf Picks a Hindu

In June, St. Olaf's college in Northfield, Minnesota, a Lutheran Church private institution, appointed Anantanand Rambachan as head of its religion department. He has taught religion and philosophy at St. Olaf since 1985. Rambachan, a practicing Hindu, was born in the Caribbean. He spent three years as a monk in the Ramakrishna Order. He is on record as saying, "Certain forms of Christian proselytization have given rise to tension and even violence between some religious communities," referring to discussions held in Rome with the World Council of Churches on the issue of conversion.

Bloggers from the Christian Right are chagrined that a Hindu could even teach religion in a Christian college, let alone be head of the religion department. And Washington DC's Council for Christian Colleges and Universities said that St. Olaf

would not qualify for membership.

John Brooks, director of the news service for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, confirmed that the appointment was made by the college. "That's a decision that they made. We're not here in the role of oversight. That's about all we can say about it." College officials are citing former professor, Harold Ditmanson, who endorsed the hiring of Rambachan earlier. He argued, "St. Olaf is a church college in the Lutheran tradition, and Lutherans believe that studying religion at a college is not the work of the Church but rather the work of a liberal arts education in the religious things of the world."

SELF-HELP

Whatever Happened to Maharaji?

For those who have no clue about Maharaji of the late sixties and seventies--first a little history. In 1960, Shri Han Ji Maharaj formed the Divine Light Mission (DLM) in Delhi. An initiate in the Sikh-Hindu Rhasoami Sant Mat tradition, he taught age-old yoga kriya techniques of listening to inner sound, focusing on inner light and the supremacy of the Satguru. He was succeeded by his eight-year-old son, Prem Rawat, popularly known as "Guru Maharaji." At a 1971 Delhi event, which the then 13-year-old called the "Peace Bomb, " Maharaji declared to an audience of one million that he was greater than Rama or Krishna.

A turbulent two decades followed with global expansion, accumulation of great wealth, an eye-raising opulent lifestyle and a schism between Prem and the Indian DLM mission. His following decreased from millions to thousands. Prem married his American secretary and formed his own organizations, Elan Vital and the Prem Rawat Foundation.

Articulate and charismatic, Prem Rawat has transformed himself from young-avatar-guru into a suave California-based inspirational speaker. His finances and mode of operation remain controversial. His presentations carry no mention of its Hindu roots and no religious overtones other than occasional references to the

"Divine within." But despite its secular wrapper, his message is essentially Vedanta, that God is within us, and the way to peace is through sadhana and the raja yoga practices inherited from our Hindu rishis of old.

Briefly

The government of Andhra Pradesh, to prevent the possibility of religious conversions at the village level, has decided to revive pujas and rituals in all old temples. As a first step, the department will extend monthly financial support to 4,000 temples out of 32,000 in the State. It will give US\$24.40 for pujas and \$36.58 as honorariums to priests.

Nearly 200,000 Bangladesh Hindu families, according to Abul Barkat, Professor of Economics at Dhaka University, have lost 40,667 acres of land, including their houses, in the six years since the Vested Property Act was annulled in 2001.

The Swaminarayan Fellowship continues with its dynamic march across North America, this time opening yet another large and spectacularly beautiful Hindu temple in Toronto in July, 2007.

Amarnath's ice lingam melted away early this year, disappointing tens of thousands of pilgrims. Reasons cited include huge early gatherings of pilgrims who hugged the Lingam, lit incense and lamps, helicopter traffic and global warming.

The R-1 religious worker visa relied upon by dozens of Hindu organizations in the US, is up for revision by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service. Under this visa, religious organizations are able to bring in ministers, priests, teachers and other religious workers to serve their congregations. Hindus have brought in hundreds of temple priests and artisans for temple construction under the R-1. The proposed revisions, intended to prevent fraud, make the visa process much more complex. During the 60-day comment period which ended June 25, over 65 religious organizations and their lawyers blasted the revisions as excessive,

expensive and uncalled for. Hindus in particular complained that the rules were written with Christians and Jews in mind and do not encompass traditional Hindu religious occupations.