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Ma Durga Gets a Proper Send-Off

Navaratri--the famed nine-night festival honoring Goddess Durga--brings to mind piety, joy and visual vibrance. Devotees gather in blissful worshipfulness--stringing garlands and fashioning Deities of the Divine Mother from clay while priests sprinkle sanctified Ganges waters and lovingly offer arati. It is a memorable time of year for Durga devotees and a beautiful gem on the crown of Hindu festivals. For the Bengali Hindus of London, this past October presented a never-before opportunity. After 40 years of denied requests from the community, London's port authorities granted permission to the London Durga Puja Dusserah Committee to fully immerse a series of Deities in the Thames at the conclusion of Navaratri.

This year, instead of shipping small Deities from India, giant Deities were made in the British Museum by West Bengali craftsmen, another first for the Hindu community. The images were then put on display at Camden Town Hall for nine days of worship before immersion. Cooperative Port authorities netted the non-biodegradable elements downstream. Hindus were deeply touched to be able to fully carry out the entire immersion ceremony, observing the festival in the UK as it was traditionally done by their families in Bengal for centuries.

Noteworthy are the major efforts being made by British institutions and government bodies to improve relations with Indian Hindus and the Hindu faith in the 21st century.

CANADA

Canadian Hindu Stamp

The Canadian Postal Service allows anyone to apply for an officially approved stamp, the printing of which is paid for by the applicant. Applicants are carefully scrutinized, and many are rejected if their background check fails or objections are raised. It is to the credit of the Montreal Murugan Temple and devotee Ravi Suntharamoorthy that they got a stamp carrying a design of the temple's Kumbhabhishekam approved. The stamp has the value of one ounce of postage, currently 51 cents. Even if postage rates go up, the stamp will be accepted to cover one ounce of postage in years to come. Ravi designed the stamp and donated the cost of printing 1,000. For each \$5.00 donation to the temple, supporters get one stamp. It was a novel fund-raising and community awareness initiative and the first time in North America that a Hindu temple has appeared on a public postage stamp.

USA

HSS Raises Hindu Awareness

From September 9-19, 2006, more than 25,000 Hindus and non-Hindus associated with Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS) gathered in major US cities to celebrate and enlighten the community on Hinduism's many cultural dimensions. Yoga, music, dance, Vedic recitation and dramas from the epics were offered in Boston, Atlanta and the San Francisco Bay Area and other locations. Displays were placed in public centers. Over 4,000 children performed Ganesha puja at various venues. The future of Hinduism in the US, and religious morale of Hindu youth grew brighter as thousands of devotees joined to celebrate their heritage.

USA

Hindu Circuit Strong in US

Few and far between are books that chronicle the culture and history of Hinduism outside the borders of India and South Asia. But Krishnamurti Panchapakesan has captured Hindu history in the making with his book Bharat Rekha in America. He

methodically documents the establishment and status of 53 Hindu temples in 33 US states. Bharat Rekha offers a detailed overview of the legacy, fellowship, installed Deities, worship schedules, temple hours and contact information of major American Hindu temples. Although the piece could have benefitted from some editorial polishing, the fabulous photos, printing and binding make it a fine library addition.

Another great feature of Bharat Rekha in America is its detailed location and driving instructions. To take your family on a US "holy vacation, " get in your camper with a copy of this book and spend a month or two on a pilgrimage. It should be noted that only major temples are covered and the US has hundreds more small mandirs and Hindu societies.

Order copies online: <http://www.BharatRekha-InAmerica.co>

TRINIDAD

Hindus Win Radio License

Radio Jaagriti, fm 102.7, began broadcasting on Friday, December 1, 2006, from Trinidad. Run by the Sanatana Dharma Maha Sabha (SDMS), it is the Caribbeans first and only radio station with 24-hour Hindu content, airing finally after 7 years of legal battles. SDMS first applied for a radio broadcast license in 1999. The application was subsequently left unattended by the dominant Peoples National Movement party which won elections in 2001. Meanwhile, the new government awarded a radio frequency to party financiers. SDMS filed a discrimination case against the State for bypassing the Hindus application, taking the case all the way to Londons Privy Council, which finally found for the plaintiffs in July, 2006. The State was ordered to grant the license and also pay for all the SDMS legal fees a big victory for dharma. SDMS plans to add cable TV, making it a full Hindu Broadcast Network

UNITED KINGDOM

A New Home for Sri Balaji

Tividale, England, is now home to one of Europe's largest Hindu temples. Built for Lord Venkateswara, with adjacent temples for Siva and Gan-esh, the Shri Venkateswara Temple of the UK opened last August with great fanfare and elaborate rituals performed by priests specially brought from India. The US\$12 million temple, funded in part by a grant from the Millennium Fund, stands on 12.5 acres of former wasteland. Trustees claim it to be the largest land area held by any temple in Europe. In 1992, the then Black Country Development Corporation made the site available for this unique project. Over 10,000 people attended the five-day event which began on August 23, 2006, and culminated with the sanctification of the majestic edifice built in the South Indian style. "This is the fulfillment of a long cherished dream, the end of a long road and the beginning of a new era, not just for those closely involved with the temple project but for every Hindu in the world," said Dr. V. P. Narayan Rao, the chairman of trustees. The temple construction involved scores of sculptors and artisans from India working ceaselessly to make the intricate carvings of Deities on the walls, pillars and ceilings. The design and construction involved a blend of ancient tradition and materials and modern methods. The temple complex includes a multi-functional community hall that is available to England's 600,000-strong Hindu community.

USA

Stock Market Honors Diwali

On October 17, 2006, in New York, NASDAQ's seven-story, corner billboard sported a giant Indian flag in celebration of Diwali, making US Hindus proud. Within hours, the image went global on the Internet, sparking interesting blog discussions over whether the wording "Indian Festival Diwali" should have been "Hindu Festival Diwali." Either way, it was Diwali's big moment in the sun.

INTERVIEW

Revaluing Religion

Montreal conference organizer offers his insights on how religion can play a positive world role

Arvind Sharma is the organizer of the world Religions after 9/11 Congress held in Montreal from September 11 to 15, 2006. Hinduism Today interviewed Dr. Sharma after the event, which was attended by 2,000 people.

Hinduism Today: What is your evaluation of the conference?

Dr. Arvind Sharma: The three main goals were partially achieved. The first was to change the negative popular perception of world religions to highlight the fact that religion is a force in human affairs like any other, with both good and evil elements. We tried to accentuate the positive dimension of religion. The second goal was accomplished with the release by Nobel Peace Laureate Shrin Ebadi of the draft document of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the World Religions (<http://www.worldsreligionsafter911.com/pdf/UDHRWR.pdf>). The third goal was to recognize that religion is here to stay. To clarify this point, most education and public policy for many decades has been based on the assumption that religion is going to gradually disappear from the public square. Or, to put it rather bluntly, religion was like a bad dream and would soon go away. But religion has shown more staying power than its secular critics expected, and now we have to deal with it, not dismiss it.

HT: What were the most appreciated presentations?

Sharma: I think the panel on "Perspectives on the Crisis in the Middle East " really gripped people. Rabbi Dow Marmur, Professor Gregory Baum, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Karen Armstrong brought four very different points of views which were each presented with great finesse without emotionalizing the issue. Deepak Chopra's presentation was open to the public and had a full house. The talks by Shirin Ebadi and Prof. Nasr generated great interest as a result of the historical and political depth they brought. Swami Dayananda Saraswati said the first rule on conversion is that we should respect the other person's religion. But if you want to convert the

other person, right there the respect is gone. He said everyone accepts the right of a person to convert, but whether someone has the right to come and try to make you convert is open to debate. The presentation by your publisher, Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, was also well appreciated

HT: What are your thoughts on controversy over the Pope's comments on Islam, which occurred at the same time as the conference?

Sharma: I think the Pope's comments, the Rushdie affair, the Danish cartoons and the less publicized controversy over Hinduism in the California school system may all be the beginnings of the negotiation of the terms on which religion is going to reenter the public square. There's a very interesting paradox here. Secular values, such as freedom of expression, are vigorously defended whenever any such issue crops up which involves religion. Now religions are saying, "Just as you will not accept certain statements to be made on secular grounds or have them challenged, there are some statements which we would not like to see accepted and made on religious grounds. Let us talk this over so that we can respect your position and you can respect our position." If religion is to be a partner in public discourse then some of its sensitivities will have to be respected.

HT: What is your analysis of religious pluralism in Islamic thought?

Sharma: The Koran says that there is to be no compulsion in religion, but even more important is the statement, "If God wanted, could He not have made all of one religion? He has made you different so that you may vie with each other in piety." In modern times, the idea that pluralism is acceptable from a Koranic and historical point of view is attractive to me. It still allows for the proclamation of the message, that you think Islam is the best and final religion. But if you also accept pluralism, then the manner in which you proclaim this is drastically affected.

Related Videos:

Invasion by Conversion

Religion and Media

Proselytization and Religious Freedom

BRIEFLY...

Archaeologists in Andhra Pradesh claim that a centuries-old temple exists two kilometers offshore 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 forest reserve, where no mosque or Christian church can be built. Only Hindus will be allowed to enter the temple, or be employed by it.

The protection of women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005 is now in effect in India. Enforcement began October 26, 2006. Meant to protect the wife or female live-in partner from violence at the hands of the husband or male live-in partner or his relatives, the act also protects sisters, widows and mothers. Unlawful dowry-demand harassment is prohibited.

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 proselytizing in the military. The latest Air Force rules explicitly allow commanders to share their faith with subordinates.

India's major river recovery 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 and biochemical oxygen demand showed a marked improvement compared with 1986 levels.

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