Dispora
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# Dispora

Israel

## Hindus and Jews Are Talking

Reciprocating the first Hindu-Jewish summit held in Delhi in February, 2007, Israel hosted the second summit in Jerusalem, February 17-20, 2008. A model for the kind of inter-religious dialog needed in this world, it was a fruitful meeting of two ancient, non-proselytizing religions who shared their beliefs, traditions, and ideals, finding much common ground. Of the nine resolutions signed by the summit, the one of particular significance for Jewish-Hindu community relations states: "The swastika is an ancient and greatly auspicious symbol of the Hindu tradition...A distorted version of this sacred symbol was misappropriated by the Third Reich in Germany...The participants recognize that this symbol is and has been sacred to Hindus for millennia, long before its misappropriation."

Fiji

## Strength thru Joy: Holi in Fiji

The renowned spring Festival of Colors, Holi, was observed in Fiji by thousands of devotees on March 22, 2008. An ancient agricultural harvest festival, it evolved to become one of several Hindu annual commemorations of the triumph of good over evil. Holi is particularly popular among North-Indian Vaishnavites, who celebrate Lord Vishnu's defeat of demon-king Hiranyakshyapu.

Shalendra Prasad writes from Fiji: "The colorful festival bridges the social gap and renews sweet relationships. On this day, people hug and wish each other 'Happy Holi.' Devotees join in small groups known as mandalis and move around their area singing devotional songs and playing with colors."

Holi is much more than celebrating the harvest or the triumph of the Gods over demons. The boisterous and uninhibited splashing of colors crosses class and caste boundaries, melding Hindu society in a spirit of love, joy and devotion.

Sri Lanka

## Seniors' Home A Model for All Hindus

The Siva Poomi Elderly Home was built and is run by the Siva Poomi Trust, founded by Aru Tirumurugan, one of Sri Lanka's prominent Hindu leaders.

One of several programs run by the trust, the seniors' home is a noteworthy model for other Hindu communities. Whether split apart from their families by war, as in Sri Lanka, or by the constantly moving lifestyle of young professionals following new job offers in foreign countries, Hindu elders are increasingly being isolated and discarded. Jaffna's Siva Poomi Elderly Home is a creative solution. Life in an elderly nursing home would normally be the last thing that Hindus families would want for their parents. But here residents live together in a spiritual environment, are cared for and maintain their traditional culture and lifestyle.

Twice a month, the facility hosts a cultural event with drama, music and dance. What began as a simple presentation performed by the local schoolchildren has evolved into a robust and exciting show. It is an uplifting social and cultural event, not only for the elders, but the entire surrounding community, bringing interaction between the elders, local families and young people.

Daily activities for the seniors include morning worship, physical exercise, therapy and crafts, such as weaving baskets and other useful arts.

The complex includes rooms for one or two individuals, a temple, a cultural hall, library, kitchen, dining and other facilities, and an infirmary.

The Siva Poomi Trust does not charge for its services and they do not receive any grants. It is supported purely by charitable donations from the local community and the diaspora community. For information contact: hhe _@_ hindu.org.

Bharat

## Avalanche of Christian "Aid" Falls on India

Each year the indian government's Ministry of Home Affairs issues the report "Receipt of Foreign Contributions by Voluntary Associations." With just 58% of the 32,000 registered associations reporting for 2005-2006, the total contributions were us$2 billion. Nine of the top fifteen donor agencies are Christian, six are secular and none is Hindu.

The amounts reported by these nine organizations and their countries of origin are: Gospel Fellowship Trust, India (USA), $60 million; Gospel for Asia (USA), $36 million; Fundacion Vicent Ferrer (Alicante, Spain), $27 million; Christian Aid (UK), $21 million; Miseror Mozartstrasse (Germany), $20 million; Fundacion Vicente Ferrer (Madrid, Spain), $20 million; Kindemothilfe (Germany), $14 million; Manos Unidas (Spain) $13 million; Missio Germany (Germany), $13 million. That totals $226 million in aid from Christian organizations.

Secular organizations sent a total of $110 million, as follows: Plan International (UK) $29 million; Oxfam (UK), $20 million; NOVIB, (Netherlands), $19 million; Department for International Development (UK), $16 million; Save the Children Fund (UK), $14 million; and Population Service International (USA), $13 million.

One example of how the Christians use their funds comes from the The Gospel for Asia mission statement for India: "Plant another 300 Baptist churches, start 10 Christian schools and establish 3 Bible colleges within the next 10 years." They claim to have already planted 156 Grace Baptist churches and converted 20,000 people. Germany's Kindemothilfe, founded in 1992, "encourages monthly sponsorship of a needy child. The sponsorship of 60 marks a month is transferred to the native churches and Christian organizations of third world countries."

Many of the sponsored activities by Christian organizations are secular in nature, with relief work, rural development and child welfare topping the list of activities. Hindus, of course, support similar work on a large scale also, but not necessarily with foreign contributions. Still, the amount of money sent in by organizations with conversion goals is unnerving.

Singapore

## KaalaChakra Revelations

From November, 2007, to May, 2008, the Singapore Library put on the Kaala Chakra exhibit, which focused on the cross-cultural interactions between India and Southeast Asia from prehistoric times. Galleries of Southeast Asian artifacts and replicas showed Indian Hindu and Buddhist scripts as far back as the 1st and 2nd centuries ce. Also featured was the history of the Hindu kingdoms of Indonesia, Malaysia and Cambodia. Stone inscriptions showed evidence of Tamil settlements in Indonesia, Thailand and China dating as far back as the 9th century. One young man visiting from India said, "I used to wonder why Tamil is such a common language here in Singapore. Only after I visited this exhibition did I realize it goes back to the bce ages!"

Not so sacred

## Beware Fake Rudrakshas

With the spread of Saivite Hinduism around the world, the sacred rudraksha seed, mystic talisman of God Siva's divine compassion and grace, has become a hot commodity. Their value varies, based on form and number of "faces," and they have become a cash crop for skilled forgers. Take a betel nut and carve it with 20 lines and you have a 21-faced rudraksha. Grind off the sides of two seeds, glue them together and you have a "Gauri-Sankar" (Siva-Shakti) bead. For other species' seeds with similar textures just dye brown and attach a gold clasp.

Some fakes are astonishing in their skilled execution. Our Hinduism Today staff had fun cutting open the four-inch "rudraksha" below. To our utter amazement it was made from a small coconut. Fakes are everywhere. Buyer beware. For info:

www.rudraksha-ratna.com

USA

## Virgin Comics: Wrong Turn

In the july 2006 issue of Hinduism Today, we announced the release of a series of comic books based on Indian themes under the inspiration of Deepak Chopra in collaboration with Virgin Comics. It seemed like a good idea at the time, though we hadn't seen any of the comics. Their web site states the intent: "The creation of original stories and character properties that tap into the vast library of mythology and re-invent the rich indigenous narratives of Asia in a unique, compelling and entertaining way." To date, Deepak Chopra has been successful in presenting Hindu metaphysics in an articulate, clear-minded and uplifting way--albeit distanced from

its religious roots.

So one might have hoped for something better than what has come out of this venture. The four comics we reviewed, Ramayan Reloaded, Shiva, Ganesha and Karttikeya, are loosely based on scriptural stories; but presented as they are in action comic style, they convey little to nothing of the spiritual insight of their sources.

These are your typical comics aimed at teenage boys, complete with muscled heros, sensuous heroines, ugly villains, and lots of violence inflicted by implausible weapons and vehicles. Most Virgin Comics are at least well drawn (see www.virgincomics.com); but these, especially the Ganesha and Karttikeya books, are amateurish, with a testosterone driven plot line and dialogue to match.

Chopra provides an introduction to each comic, mostly pop psychoanalysis of the Deity or story at hand. He says in one that he was inspired by the comics he knew in India (likely the Amar Chitra Katha series) and says he intended "re-imaging the stories of Indian Gods while keeping their authenticity." The result, however, lacks the authentic research and respect for the subject that, at least, informed the Amar Chitra Katha series. Yes, our youth need stories to read about and understand their Hindu religion, but these comic books, with their dark, menacing video game imagery, do not serve that purpose.

## Briefly

After a 50-year hiatus on digs in the area, archaeologists will be excavating two Harappan sites near Noida and Meerut (Pakistan) to determine when exactly the "eastern limit" of the Indus Valley civilization flourished. Local residents have been finding artifacts believed to date between 1500 bce and 700 bce.

In a move to calm one issue raised in Malaysia by the Indian community, the government has recently announced it will again allow or renew the visas of Hindu temple priests, musicians and sculptors currently in Malaysia--visas previously easily extended and then suddenly denied.

Celebration of Tamil New Year on April 13 in government-run temples was banned by Tamil Nadu's DMK ruling party this year. Pongal was chosen as the official "new" New Year. The ban was ignored by several large temples, and Hindus in Tamil Nadu celebrated the occasion despite the government's fiat. Festoons were seen everywhere and feasts were held at almost every home.

Tirupati's Venkateswara Employees' Training Academy, launched a seven-day training program on "Hindu system of worship" in April, exclusively for the fishermen community. The 45 selected trainees will become temple pujaris in their respective hamlets and maintain a temple on their own.

Nepal's April election results surprised the world as the Maoist party took 220 seats of the 601-seat assembly. The Nepali Congress party won 110 seats and the Unified Marxist-Leninist's took third place with 103 seats. If, as expected, the Maoists dominate in a coalition government, the first items on their agenda are abolition of the monarchy and ending Nepal's status as the world's only "Hindu state."

The Tamil Nadu government announced that yoga would be made a compulsory subject in all schools in the state from the next academic year. Education Minister Thangam Thennarasu announced that they have trained 110,000 teachers in private and government schools in the state, with the help of 300 yoga instructors.