Letters
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Great Hindu of the Year

I would like to send you our deepest appreciation for Hinduism Today, a magazine par excellence in all respects. Great job. Carry on; it's a wonderful service, a service touching the points needed by spiritual seekers. In the Jan/Feb/Mar 2009 issue, you selected Swami Avdheshananda as the Hindu of the Year. A master in all respects, Swamiji truly deserves this honor. We would like to send our congratulations to him as an excellent yogi and to you for making a fine selection. All of us at the Omkarananda Ashram know him; he visited and put his holy feet in our Omkarananda Saraswati Nilayam Inter College. The comments about Swami Avdheshananda are excellent and show clearly that he is in all respects a leading spiritual personality. To him and to his mission, our deepest adoration.

Swami Vishveshwarananda
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Hinduism Today Turns 30

I was pleasantly reminded through the Jan/Feb/Mar 2009 issue that our wonderful magazine has reached its thirtieth birthday. I am particularly happy and proud that I started reading Hinduism Today from its first issue in 1979. At that time, it was a simple black-and-white newspaper. Today, after thirty long years, Hinduism Today has improved by leaps and bounds. Because it has a large readership circulation and the articles are so well researched, it is valued and read by Hindus and non-Hindus alike. As for me, Hinduism Today has made me a better Hindu and a better man. It has made me become a vegetarian and a karma yogi. I wish Hinduism Today a very happy birthday and many, many more birthdays to come. Thanks to the editors and all the staff who make this magazine tick.

K. Thuruvan
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Cremation Is Cremation

In response to Jay Lakhani's article, "Open-Air Cremations in Britain" (Hindu Press International, Mar 28, 2009), I want to say, with utmost humility, that we may be missing the woods for the trees. My personal experience in America has been that people take Hinduism for granted. (I am still deeply offended when people gift me items made of calf leather!) The last time such a strong position was taken was when Taco Bell was sued for serving beef. Both in politics and business, there is nothing like a lawsuit to make everyone sit up and take notice. Ahimsa is certainly a hallmark of Hinduism, but many times one is mistaken for being a pushover. To give you an example, it is the tradition of married Hindu women to pierce their noses. So when a friend of mine got hers done, her boss told her that as long as the ring is small she did not have a problem with it. My friend did not have any intention of sporting a large nose ring anyway, but was offended by the presumptuousness of her boss's statement. We wondered how her boss would have reacted if my friend had told her she could wear a cross as long as it wasn't too big.

Even if open air cremation is permitted in Britain, most Hindus there would probably still prefer regular cremation. But by bringing the issue to the forefront, it is focusing attention on the fact that Hinduism, like all religions, has certain special requirements, and society needs to be tolerant of that. After all, when the British ruled our Hindu nation for 200 years, did we not make allowances for their steak dinners and open consorting?

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The soul has a lot of attachment to the body and its possessions during life. After death, we release the soul from these attachments by burning the body and giving away possessions as alms to the needy. This helps the soul move on. No matter what kind of crematorium the body is burned in, the end result is the same. If this is understood, there will be no need for debate. It is not necessary to be fanatical about such a procedure. Scriptures give alternate ways to go about many practices, provided the bhava, feeling, is maintained.

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Don't Hate "The Love Guru"

It has been many months since the release of Mike Myers's "The Love Guru" and its subsequent criticism in Hinduism Today ("Vulgar Film Incites Hindu Censure," Diaspora, Oct/Nov/Dec, 2008). Being a Hindu convert, it has taken me some time to summon the courage to voice my support for the movie and its writer. To begin, I have a high regard for Myers as a comic writer and as an actor. I believe the comedian--as much as the poet, artist or philosopher--serves an essential function in every society, pointing out our faults and fallacies, preventing us from taking ourselves too seriously. That said, I also confess to possessing an occasionally juvenile sense of humor, to which Myers often appeals. However, if it were only the puerile potty humor, I wouldn't give his work a moment's notice. But his work has subtleties of expression and quirks of social commentary that add a redeeming dimension. "The Love Guru" fits that model: plenty of bathroom and bedroom jokes but also a nuanced commentary on neo-Eastern, pseudo-spiritual, self-proclaimed, self-help gurus and the curiously American fascination therewith.

I advise caution against taking ourselves too seriously, and vulgarity is an excellent cure for this. Let's be honest: while human form and sexuality can be sacred, the human body and its many functions are purely ridiculous. Laughter is good for us. And from a scriptural perspective, it should be remembered that even our dear Lord Siva manifests many counter-cultural impulses that cause the most pious to raise eyebrows. When assessing the madman dancing through graveyards, who was right: Daksha or Sati?

Most importantly, though, I am wary of condemning an artistic endeavor on religious grounds, especially before it has even been seen (as happened in these pages last summer). Honor to Lord Siva and all the devas, yes, but I reject the idea that our religion is too sacred for jest. Will we next be torching cinemas as much as issuing death threats to artists or their publishers? Is this the hyper-piety to which we aspire? Are our Gods and our dharma so delicate that they cannot withstand levity? Are we so insecure in our beliefs that we cannot laugh at ourselves? To paraphrase "The Love Guru:" if Gandhi, Einstein and Shakepeare were talking and

they saw two elephants mating, even they would laugh. So please, friends, in all of life be slow to condemn, fair in forgiveness and always quick to smile.

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Slumdog Millionaire, So What?

In response to The Wall Street Journal's article, "Slumdog: A Legacy Not to Be Envied" (Hindu Press International, Apr 5, 2009), it's only a piece of fiction, and the film does not portray India or Hinduism in any negative way. The entire film was shot in India, on location in the Mumbai slums and surrounding countryside. It used India as the backdrop for the storyline. It is a reality that there are huge slums, children are kidnapped and forced into prostitution and beggary, there is corruption and Hindus and Muslims have had riots where both sides have murdered the other. The film does not make a judgment on India; that judgment seems to be happening by Indians themselves. This film is no more a negative portrayal of India than American films, such as The Departed, are a negative portrayal of America. Indians, Hindus especially, sometimes become reactive and oversensitive about the reality of Indian society. If Hindus are concerned about the subjective image of Hinduism worldwide, then they should be actively working to counteract genuine misinformation, rather than complaining about a fictional piece of filmmaking. The California textbook issue is a good example. Hinduism was misrepresented and given a negative slant, and Hindus, American and Indian, came together to make a positive change. If Hindus are concerned about negative or sensational journalistic portrayals of Hinduism, they should get active in journalism that gives all points of view instead of focusing on the sensational. They should also become active in promoting and writing for Hinduism Today, which has probably done more to show the world what Hinduism is really like than any other journalistic source.

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Bane of Zoo-Bound Elephants

In "Toronto Rights Growing" (Global Dharma, Jan/Feb/Mar, 2009), you describe the annual chariot festival of Toronto's Sri Varasithi Vinaayagar Temple, including that the procession included an elephant from the local zoo. In the wonderful Publisher's Desk article, Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami explains how Hinduism Today has moved forward in the past thirty years to become a glorious, global voice for Hinduism. Perhaps it is also time for Hinduism itself to move forward into the 21st century and to recognize that elephants and other animals are not meant for human exploitation. It is only by refusing to support exploitive facilities like zoos and commercial businesses that these practices, including the barbaric capture of baby elephants from their loving mothers and herds, will end. I realize that many Indian temples have elephants. I am not addressing elephant care and maintenance in India. I am focusing solely on the plight of elephants in North American zoos, specifically American and Canadian zoos, which are governed by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA).

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Tolerating Conversion in India

I don't understand why the government of India tolerates any form of organized religious proselytizing anywhere within the frontiers of India. Given the nature of India and her history, the fact that Hinduism is not a religion that seeks to convert others, the fact that Hinduism, in addition to being a network of closely related spiritual philosophies based on the Vedas, is also a 5000+ year-old culture which is the very fabric of Indian civilization, why do the people of India allow their government to either tacitly or overtly support the destruction of the very foundations upon which India is built? I am not advocating the suppression of other religions within India, like how non-Islamic faiths are treated in Muslim countries. But if well financed Hindu organizations started going into Canadian or US towns aggressively proselytizing to the point of creating communal disturbances and violence, there would be a huge outcry. The governments of Canada and the US would find a way to shut down the proselytizers and their organizations. They would have no choice; otherwise there would be an outbreak of real violence and societal breakdown, which is something no democracy can allow.

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Tilak on Their Forehead

Tilak is a mark of auspiciousness. It is a unique sign for Hindus, which you have reported on several times. I saw the feature story "Meet the Young Hindu American Foundation" (Apr/May/Jun, 2009). I appreciate seeing that young Hindu ladies wear the bindi on their forehead at least during religious events and conferences to show their identity.

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Creating Self-Confident Tiny Tots

Help provide tools for teaching dharma to children

One day, when she was four years old, Anya brought her Ganesha to preschool and her little friend exclaimed, "God doesn't look like that!" She answered, "Yes, He does. God has many faces." Four years old!

More recently, little Ravi, also four years old at the time, was told by a preschool mate that if he held "wrong beliefs," he would go to Hell. Ravi responded, "Oh no, God lives in our hearts." Mrs. Lila Mehta tells these stories not only because she is Anya's and Ravi's naturally proud grandmother and teacher of Hinduism, but also because the stories show how much self-assurance Hindu teachings can confer to even a small child. "Oh," she adds, "and little children are the best of students; they absorb so well."

Lila and her husband, Dr. Arun J. Mehta, live in Vancouver, Canada, and are retired; she was a school teacher and he a physician. They came from India in 1966

and have, ever since, worked as a team to teach Hinduism to the children of the community, their own children and now their grandchildren. And, yes, Hinduism Today has been a part of the team--from the first issues back in 1980. All along, the Mehtas gleaned from it materials for their classes, especially from the wisdom-rich center sections. "It's given us so much clarity, answers to our questions and formulas to explain the teachings," says Mrs. Mehta.

The Mehtas donate to the Hinduism Today Production Fund, which is a part of Hindu Heritage Endowment. "The magazine is rare among the media today," explains Dr. Mehta. "It presents Hinduism in a positive light, and it keeps the teachings pure against so many forces today that seek to dilute it. This is the highest dharma. I am convinced it is our philosophy alone that can save this world." Please consider donating to the Hinduism Today Production Fund so that we may continue to provide teaching and learning tools to the grandparents and grandchildren of the world. Learn more about the Production Fund at www.hheonline.org/productionfund/and ask to receive our Production Fund e-newsletter at www.gurudeva.org/email-news