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India

Agama Scholar Honored

For over 50 years, s. sambandha sivaçarya has worked ten hours a day to collect, preserve and translate the Saiva Agamas. In February, 2009, the French government awarded him the "Ordre des Palmes Academiques" in recognition of his contributions to the study of the languages, texts, history and cultures of India. Established in 1808 by Napoleon Bonaparte, this is one of the world's oldest awards--and one of France's most prestigious.

Sambandha Sivaçarya began extensively collecting and studying Saiva manuscripts in the 1950s under the guidance of Pandit N.R. Bhatt. Though born, raised and trained in a family of Adisaiva priests, he decided to forego the life of a temple priest in order to devote his life to saving the scriptures of his faith.

Australia

Vedas Are Thriving in Australia

The first anniversary of the Sydney Veda Patasala was celebrated at Scout Hall, North Carlingford, Sydney on April 5, 2009, with a unique Vedic chanting program. More than 150 people participated. The patasala (school), an initiative of Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) of Australia, started in 2008 in Baulkham Hills with ten students under the guidance of Swami Vigyananand, Joint General Secretary of the VHP. During the recent program, Swami acknowledged the selfless commitment of the teachers, Sri Subramanian, Sri Ravi Gurukkal, Sri Ramarathinam and Sri Narayanan in preserving this ancient oral tradition and wisdom, declared by UNESCO to be a World Intangible Cultural Heritage. Mrs Akila Ramarathinam, Joint General Secretary of VHP, explained that the Sydney Veda Patasala is the first of its kind outside the Indian subcontinent. It encourages study by the whole family and is open to all, regardless of age, caste, creed, race or gender. Mr. Jonathan Nanlohy, Cultural Development Coordinator from Baulkham Hills Shire Council, praised the community. "I am impressed by the Hindu society's initiative and participation in this revival." He expressed amazement "in seeing entire families from grandparents to grandchildren learning together in an program undertaken without any

government financial support."

Pop Culture

Reincarnated: "Superbrain Yoga"

Much to the amusement of many Hindus, the ancient practice of crossing the arms to grasp the earlobes and squatting several times, known in Tamil as thoppu karanam, has emerged on the pop health scene. The renowned New Age teacher of Pranic Healing, Master Choa Kok Sui [dates of life], co-opted the practice and copyrighted the label "Superbrain Yoga." A CBS piece on the exercise found its way onto YouTube, and now people are bobbing up and down all over the world.

Practitioners claim they have documented its positive effects on learning-disabled autistic children and depressed, forgetful adults. Most Hindus know this as an old form of discipline performed as an act of worship before Lord Ganesha. Although once again our cultural heritage has been openly pirated for profit, clinical validation is always good for the Hindu faith.

Seychelles

Hinduism Is Strong in Seychelles

Far off the east coast of Kenya, in the Indian Ocean, lies the spectacularly beautiful country of Seychelles, comprising 115 islands. Its small, ethnically diverse population of just 80,000, drawn from countries all over the world, includes South Indian Saivite Tamil Hindus, whose ancestors came as indentured laborers in the late 1700s, to join a 3,500 worker community established by the French. It is a testimony to the steadfastness of the faith of these Hindus that two centuries later their religion and faith are not only strong, but flourishing and growing.

V. Sivasupramaniam reports from Seychelles on this year's January festival for Lord Murugan. "Thaipooam Kavadi Festival was started in the Seychelles Navasakthi Vinayagar temple in 1993-one year after the opening of the temple-on a modest scale in the inner courtyard of the temple. It has since grown in size to become a national festival. In 1998, the government declared kavadi day a holiday for the Hindus. It now involves not only many locals but also attracts globe-trotting tourists, who get an insight into our oriental cultural values.

He said, "The kavadi festival is a powerful assertion of Hindu individuality and a forceful expression of Hindu solidarity in a multi-racial and a multi-cultural country such as Seychelles. At the same time, this festival evidences our Tamil cultural roots and the relevance of Saiva Siddhanta philosophy. It makes a proud statement of our common membership in a great, rich and enduring Hindu civilization, a heritage shared by a wide diaspora that has reached across the globe."

India

Madurai's Wonder Renewed

After fifteen years of renovation, the re-consecration of the 2,000-year-old Meenakshi Sundareswarar temple in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, was conducted from March 26 to April 9, 2009. Work (usually done every 12 years) began in 1994 and cost millions of rupees. Improvements included plating of Goddess Meenakshi's tower with 30 kg of gold. The Mahakumbhabhishekam was conducted flawlessly, with the administration doing a superb job of crowd management. Thousands of devotees were blessed with the darshan of dozens of priests pouring the blessed waters over the temple's golden spires at 9.15 am on April 9.

Malaysia

Bujang Pre-dates Angkor Wat

Malaysian archeologists announced that in February, 2009, they have made yet another discovery of ancient artifacts in the Northern State of Kedah. This area is the location of the Hindu civilization of Bujang, established by the Tamil king Rajendra Chola I, son of Rajaraja Chola. Inscriptions in Tanjore, Tamil Nadu, dating back to 1030ce mention his dominion over lands in Southeast Asia. But the recent discovery indicates that the civilization was there seven centuries earlier. Archeological team leader professor Mokhtar Saidi said buildings found at the site indicate it was part of Bujang, "We have dated artifacts from what we believe are an administration building and an iron smelter to 1,700 years ago (250ce), which sets the Bujang civilization between the third and fourth century." The presence of the iron smelter, he said, shows that the civilization was advanced technologically, though it predated the Angkor civilization by 900 years.

India

Gangeshwar by the Sea

According to the mahabharata, during their arduous exile, the Pandavas came to a serene hamlet called Fudam, tucked away on the picturesque island of Mani Nagar, now known as Diu, off the coast of present-day Gujarat. There they pledged to fast until they had properly worshiped Lord Siva. Unable to find a Sivalinga in the

vicinity, the five brothers established their own five lingas in a cave by the roaring sea, each according to his height. The five lingas represent the Pandavas, the largest one installed by Yudhishtira and the smallest by Nakul. Only after performing puja to the Sivalingas did the brothers take their meal.

That was around 5,000 years ago, when the sea was 100 meters away from the cave. With the passage of time, sea levels have risen. Today its waves lash and wash the Sivalingas amid the seafront crags, as if offering obeisance to the Lord. At high tide, the lingas are completely submerged.

The Pandavas stayed here for about a month, living in the jungle. Later, yogis and munis found the Sivalingas and cared for them. A temple came into being some 600 years ago. Murtis of Lord Siva's consort, Goddess Parvati, and Lord Ganesha were installed in the shrine. Under the statues one sees Brahmi script, no longer legible today. There used to be a stone idol of Lord Hanuman on the north side of the temple, but that area is now submerged by the sea. The steps down into the sanctum of five lingas are quite steep. These were made during the Solanki age, 1,000 years ago.

Southwest of the cave is a spring where sweet water gushes out at low tide. Swami Nirmalji, one of the priests at the temple, shared, "We believe it is the holy Ganga jal. It is sweet even though mixed with sea water. This is why we call this Gangeshwar Temple."

Swami Nirmalji says there is an intrinsic power in the Gangeshwar shrine and that worship of its five Sivalingas makes your wishes come true. And the temple holds some mysteries, according to the locals. For example no one has ever been able stay in the temple the whole night. Anyone who dares is found in an unconscious state the next morning. Many who have ventured there after dark reported seeing a man with long hair and flowing beard. And every night, at the stroke of 12, the mysterious toll of the bells and conch resonate far and wide. Rushing to find out who is there, one will find no one. A huge snake appears frequently, curling around the Sivalingas in the wee hours of morning. Those who see it are thought to be very fortunate. Known as the "wonder snake," locals say it spreads out, circles the Sivalingas and then vanishes into the sea, leaving behind an marvelous fragrance.

On Mahasivaratri each year a big fair is organized here, and a festive fervor fills the air when. Drove of devotees come to the wish-fulfilling temple, where the Lord makes His presence felt in every wave that touches the Sivalingas, every breeze that kisses the sea and every bird that chirps in the ambience laden with an undefinable spiritual zeal.

Tirtho Bannerjee Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

Briefly

President Obama's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships was formed to advise the president on faith-based and other key issues, such as fatherhood and poverty. Among those chosen as members is Anju Bhargava, a Hindu, founder of Asian Indian Women of America.

In March, 2009, Over 6,000 devotees participated in a protest march and rally in Tamil Nadu, demanding that the government return the control of Chidambaram Temple to the Dikshitar community, who have managed the temple since time immemorial.

A secular organization in Britain is producing "certificates of de-baptism" for people wishing to renounce their Christian faith. The National Secular Society (NSS) says more than 100,000 ex-worshippers have downloaded the de-baptism certificates from its website, and that thousands of others have ordered parchment versions at about \$4 a copy. The NSS advertisement says: "Liberate yourself from the Mumbo-Jumbo that liberated you from the Original Sin you never had."

UK Hindus Disagree About the initiative of Davender Kumar Ghai, 70, to have Britain honor his religious rights by repealing a 1903 act banning open-air cremations so that Hindus could use traditional funeral pyres. Jai Lakhani said: "The idea that the soul requires an open-air cremation in order to be released demolishes the potency of the soul and thereby undermines the very foundation of Hinduism." Others argue that the Hindu traditional method deserves a fair hearing.

A group of Hindus in Nepal took action in March to protest the government's neglect of the Kumari palace temple. After yet another attempt by looters to steal decorative temple panels, the group blocked tourists from entering the palace and kept the Kumari from appearing at the palace window. They hope to convince the government to use tourist fees for renovation and security.