Global Dharma
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Global Dharma

Nepal

Nepal's Furor Over Priests Is Resolved

In December 2008, Nepal's new Maoist government raised a firestorm of Hindu agitation when the Pashupatinath Area Development Trust appointed two Nepali priests to take over the famous Pashupatinath Temple, breaking a 300-year-old tradition. Since 1747, the kings of Nepal have engaged Saiva Brahmin priests from Koteswaram on Karnataka's western coast, in South India. This was due to the custom that the Nepalese are not supposed to work on certain special days, as during the mourning of a king's death, and Indians would keep the temple going. After the recent dethronement of the king, the secular communists had few qualms about dispensing with Indian priests' services.

But the Supreme Court ordered a hold on the new appointments after a petition claimed that the Trust had overridden proper formalities. The Nepali Congess, the second largest party in the country, accused the Maoists of hurting "the religious sentiments" of the nation's Hindus. On January 1, the Raj-

bhandaris, who are helpers to the main priests, locked the gate of the main shrine to stop the two Nepali priests from taking over. For the first time in the history of Nepal's revered Pashupatinath Temple, devotees were unable to offer worship to the centuries-old Deity. Many considered this a bad omen.

On January 2, defying the Supreme Court order, more than a hundred Young Communist League Maoists broke the lock of Pashupatinath's main shrine and took their own newly appointed Nepali priest, Bishnu Prasad Dahal, inside to capture the head-priest's seat. Police confronted Hindus protesting at the scene. Ten people were injured.

Nepal's Foreign Minister Upendra Yadav, told CNN-IBN from Kathmandu: "The Prime Minister is responsible. This is against Hinduism and against Hindu sentiment." Condemnation mounted at home and in India, with the Maoists being accused of violating the constitution by interfering in religion. Bending under the pressure, on January 7 Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal scrapped the appointment of the Nepali priests. Addressing Parliament, he said, "Being the Prime Minister and patron of the Pashupati Area Development Trust, I nullify the decision to appoint Nepali priests, effective from today. I ask that the previous Mul Bhatta continue to perform traditional duties beginning today."

United Kingdom

Diwali Joy Lights London

The seventh "Diwali on theSquare" was hosted at Trafalgar Square, London, on October 19, 2008. The program comprised dance, music and lamp lighting starting at 3pm and ending at 8pm with aarti. London's Mayor Boris Johnson said on the www.diwaliinlondon.

com website: "Diwali is an occasion of great significance to Hindus, Sikhs and Jains, but with its underlying themes of peace, renewal and cooperation, it has relevance and meaning for all Londoners." A marvelous collaboration between the Greater London Authority, generous businesses and religious organizations, Diwali in London successfully brings India's social, spiritual culture to UK's streets.

India

Tribals ComeHome to Hinduism

An October 2008, pressconference held in Nashik, Maharashtra, Jagatguru Ramanandacharya Narendracharya, reputed to have 10 million devotees, informed the media that he had brought over 50,000 Hindus from Christianity back to Hinduism. His most recent program brought home over 5,200, most from Maharashtra's tribal areas. Swami says they have been alienated by mainstream Hindus. In his reconsecration ceremony he gives them the sacred thread, a Hindu identity locket and promises protection from Christian missionary pressure. He wants to see temple attendance by tribals along with integrated social dining and intermarriage with established Hindus. Swami is determined to bring 20 million back to Hinduism by 2010.

India

Tomorrow's Temple Managers

Most temples across the world are groping in the dark for professional management resources. Festivals need crowd management. Ancient temple architecture is crying for preservation. The spector of terrorism calls for greater security. Trained temple managers can take care of all these needs and more.

Shri Somnath Sanskrit University in Veraval, Gujarat, is offering a diploma course in temple management titled Mandir Vyavasthapan. Among the subjects taught are: temple architecture, iconography, event crowd management, rituals and festival organization in Vaishnava, Saiva and Shakta temples, Sanskrit, English, law, donations, finance management, correspondence and use of computers. The course also educates students in the history and status of most prominent temples across the world. The curriculum emphasizes Sanskrit mantra recitation to invoke the Gods and the performance of yajnas according to scriptural injunctions. Value-based classes held in the lap of nature and spiritual awareness characterize the initiative. Training is also given in yoga, pranayama and meditation. Nuances include prasad distribution, rendition of bhajans, interaction with the media, organizing spiritual discourses and pilgrimage tours for devotees, maintaining cleanliness and upkeep of the premises.

Usually the directors of a trust look after temple affairs, but during crucial times there is often chaos due to the obvious lack of trained managers. The Mandir Vyavasthapan course blends managerial skills with a high level of professionalism. Experts are invited to teach as visiting faculty. Pupils tour prominent temples and study their management and functioning. Each student must file a project paper on any temple that he has visited during the course--outlining ways to improve the temple's affairs. The student has to give a PowerPoint presentation of the project and then go through assessment.

Vice chancellor of Shri Somnath Sanskrit University Pankaj Jani reports, "There has been an overwhelming response to the course." The university admitted its first students in August, 2008. There are now 500 students awaiting results of their first exams. The university charges a nominal Rs 350 for the course, which includes all the basic facilities for students in residence. Shree Swaminarayan Gurukul Vishwavidyalaya (SGVP) (Chharodi, Gandhinagar), Bhagvat Vidyapith (Dwarka, Somnath, Dakor and Sidhpur) and HK College (Ahmedabad) also offer the training program. Rampriyaji, the principal of Darshanam Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya, administered by SGVP, says the training will help bring order into the daily affairs of ashrams. He points out that devotion coupled with managerial ability will not only help in administration, but also attract more devotees. He says that the university has been arranging placements by highlighting the fact that their graduates can not

only manage a temple, but serve as priests as well.

By Tirtho Banerjee

USA

Hindus Lead Midwest Pluralism

The Hindu education foundation (HEF), Columbus chapter, conducted "Guru Vandana 2008" at Indian Springs Elementary School, Powell, Ohio on October 25, 2009, an event attended by over 40 teachers from various school districts, and around 250 community members--leaders, academics, children and their parents. Children of Indian origin honored their American school teachers, following the tenets of Hindu tradition. The students invited their teachers to the stage and felicitated them with a momento and a rose offering and expressed their love and respect by singing the traditional Guru Stotram hymn.

Speakers emphasized the importance of the guru (teacher) in the students' development. Children from the Indian community gave a traditional dance and music presentation. Mr. Madhav Naidu, National President of HEF, closed the event, thanking teachers and the local community for their partcipation. He stressed the need for mutual collaboration between the community and the educators to foster a deeper appreciation of different cultures. The program was followed by an Exhibition of 5,000 years of Indian culture.

HEF is an educational project that aims to educate multicultural American society about Hindus, Hindu values, Hinduism and its nation of origin, India. In a world plagued by religious misunderstanding, intolerance, hate and violence, HEF believes that right understanding of any faith, including Hinduism, will lead to greater peace and harmony as well as preservation and nurturing of religious diversity, a vital necessity for the continued well being of any nation.

for info see: www.hindueducation.org

USA

President Obama's Hanuman

The internet was rife with speculation about the US President's Hindu affiliations after a December Time Magazine article that covered tokens presumed given to him on the campaign trail that he kept in his pocket. Among them was a small metal Hanuman.

The truth is, no one yet knows how he acquired the token, what it means to him, or even if he knows the significance of Lord Hanuman. The fact that it has four arms shows it is likely of Southeast Asian origin. Perhaps he got it as a boy while living in Indonesia. He does mention walking around a giant statue of Hanuman in his autobiographical book Dreams from My Father. In any case, Hindus are delighted that Lord Hanuman, God of sacrifice, devotion and awesome strength, is, even in a small way, part of the US President's life. Even more significantly, they were proud to be included in the medley of faiths mentioned in his inaugural speech: "We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and non-believers."

International

Ganesha Festival Goes Global

Hindus in some countries feel culturally challenged when the Christmas holidays arrive each year. Their children are immersed in an intense atmosphere of celebration, anticipation over gift giving, Santa Clause, etc., but they cannot participate. To solve the problem Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, in 1985, instituted "Pancha Ganapati," a modern five-day Hindu home festival dedicated to Lord Ganesha, beginning on December 21 and ending on the 25th. After all, Christmas started as a makeover of ancient winter solstice celebrations, and the Tamil Ganesha festival of Markali Pillaiyar falls during this time; so shouldn't Hindus have their own gift-giving celebration, too?

Though its observance has been limited mostly to families in the US over the past decade, awareness is spreading. This year Pancha Ganapati was celebrated in India, Malaysia, Germany and Australia. Jai Ganesha!

learn about it on the web: www.gurudeva.org/ganapati/

Briefly

President Barack Obama has appointed Preeta Bansal, a leading Indian-American

lawyer, as General Counsel and Senior Policy Advisor at the Office of Management (OMB) and Budget at the White House. Since 2003, Bansal has been a commissioner of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, serving as chair from 2004-2005.

The Episcopal Church claimed a major legal victory in January when California's Supreme Court ruled that breakaway parishes do not have the right to keep Church property if they secede from the national denomination. Dissident breakaway members of the St. James Church were denied the rights to take Church property with them. The ruling may ripple across church and state lines as well, according to legal scholars, bolstering denominations locked in similar battles. Hindu organizations would also be affected by such rulings.

Ganesha goes public in Pasadena, California, where the Pacific Asia Museum will host "Discovering Ganesh: Remover of Obstacles." From March 18 to September 20, 2009, visitors will experience the art and culture of Ganesha festivals through contemporary photographs, installations and multimedia components. It is based on the work of photographer Shana Dressler and the 11th-19th century artists who painted and carved the ancient statues of Lord Ganesha in the collection.

the Telangana Archaka Samakhya (a priests' association) has urged the Supreme Court of India to declare the hereditary priest system an integral part of religious activities under Articles 25 and 26 of the Constitution. According to the petitioner, M.V. Soundara Rajan, president of the Samakhya, the highest court "dealt a death blow to customs, service and sampradayams of temples" when it ruled that hereditary archakatvam is not an essential and integral part of religion.

when the majority of us respondents in a 2007 religion poll conducted by the Pew Research Center said that other religions can lead to eternal life, evangelicals complained that people must not have understood the question. So in August, 2008, Pew conducted the poll again. This time, 65 percent of respondents said, again, that following other religions can lead to eternal life. This time, to make sure there was no possible confusion, Pew asked questionees to specify which religions. The respondents essentially said all of them, including Hinduism and Islam. Nearly as many Christians said one can achieve eternal life by just being a good person as said that one must believe in Jesus.

The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), in December, 2008, submitted recommendations to the government upholding the current prohibition against religious institutions owning broadcasting and distribution services. TRAI recommended that religious shows on regular channels be permitted but monitored. Existing concessions of channels to religious institutions, given under exceptions to the law, would be banned in four years.