Global Dharma
Category : January 1995
Published by Anonymous on Jan. 01, 1995

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A Monthly News Digest

Ramayana on New And Old Frontiers

- UK Radio The Ramayana of Valmiki is the most expensive production ever mounted on the BBC Radio drama, featured for two weeks during October and November, 1994. BBC Radio 4, known for its middle class, affluent, conservative white audience, took pride in this program with a select cast of Indian narrators, and an enthralled audience estimated at five million.

According to producer and director, Mr. Alby James, "Peter Brook's impressive dramatization of the Mahabharata has apprised the western world that Indian culture holds a wealth of extraordinary, fascinating, magical epics. The Ramayana, India's premier tale, is relatively unknown outside Indian communities. Ram is the classic epic hero and his story is a journey of self-discovery in which he is tested, refined and proved first divine, then superhuman and finally, human."

- The "Oriental Connection"

Dr. Jin Ding-han teaches Hindi at the Department of Oriental Studies in Beijing University, China. He also translated Tulsidas' Ramcharitmanas verses from Hindi to Chinese. He recently gave a lecture at the South Asian Institute in Columbia University, New York, "The Ramayana in China." Though some Chinese scholars maintain that Ramayana had no influence on China before the 1980's, Dr. Jin proved that numerous redactions of Ramayana had been produced in China since the 5th century. Though Buddhist characters often replaced Hindu ones, the main story is recognizable. A 6th century monk refers to both Ramayana and "Bharat Granth."

Tibetan versions have been discovered with various characters changed. The famous 19th century Mongolian poet, Jambadorji, wrote "Crystal Mirror," which contains the whole story of Ramayana. Its impact was such that monkey worship is prevalent in Mongolia despite its frigid monkey-free environment. In 1996, the 13th International Ramayana conference will be held in the new city of Shenzhen China, near Hong Kong.

SYDA Feeds Souls in Erstwhile Restaurant

Siddha Yoga Dham of America, founded by Swami Muktananda, saw a dramatic expansion in November 1994 at the opening of its new center in Los Angeles. A giant 26,000-square-foot restaurant and bar was stripped, "upma and sour Siddha Cereal and Siddha coffee" replaced the steaks and whiskey. The former restaurant area has become a meditation room that can hold 1000 people for satsangs and intensives. Chanting and shakti-filled silence now fill the once raunchy, smoke-filled air. In front is a small temple with a life-sized murthi of Muktananda's Guru, Swami Nityananda. The opening was a typical SYDA gathering, simple yet powerful. Two hundred voices chanting as one for hours, diwali arati to Gurumayi Chidvilasananda, SYDA's spiritual leader, and the deep shakti of the siddha lineage joyfully transformating all.

A Hindu Link for UK Hindus

Hindu Link is a new organization attempting to unite "the diverse and bickering Hindu community where individuals are not known as Hindus but identify themselves as Punjabis, Gujeratis, Tamilians or Bengalis and are also divided by class and caste." Widely traveling engineer, Mr. Rajan Khurana, tries to meet as many Hindus in cities and suburbs as possible. He decided to set up the non-sectarian Hindu Link in UK with the objective of "working together that we can over come the difficulties we face presently and in the future. Immediate focus is on improving Hindu image on TV, coordinating UK's 60 plus temples, reaching out to educational institutions to provide materials and forming a Children's Club throughout the country." Hindu Link: PO Box 587, Rainham, Kent, ME8 7LF, UK.

BBC Program Slams Mother Teresa

Unflappable British viewers were stunned by "Hell's Angel," a most unexpected and uncomplimentary documentary on Mother Teresa, regarded by Catholics as a living saint. Reuters news service reported, "The documentary said the Nobel Peace prizewinner and fervent anti-abortion crusader pushed a strongly political message and consorted with criminals and dictators. Amid footage showing Mother Teresa accepting awards from world leaders and meeting with dictators and business leaders convicted of fraud, the program accused the 84-year-old nun of preaching the conservative message that the poor must accept their fate and the rich and powerful are favored by God."

Hindus are, of course, familiar with Mother Teresa's anti-population control stance in India, by which she has severely hampered some government programs of birth control. Divya Satia, a volunteer at Mother Teresa's home for the dying in Calcutta in 1994 reports, "A sister informed that when their missionaries go into the villages to provide clothing and other provisions to poor villagers, they educate them on the evils of contraception and abortion. The sisters preach that contraception interferes with an act of God."

The program was written and narrated by Christopher Hitchens. Hitchen's charge against the nun, if it can be called that, is that she is the "roving ambassador of a highly politicized papacy." In a comment on the program, Hitchens said his objective was to reveal the "secular political agenda" of Mother Teresa, and he felt he had done so. But Mother Teresa is just preaching the strictest code of the Catholic Church.

The Albanian-born Mother Teresa arrived in India in 1928 and founded the Missionaries of Charity in 1948. The multi-million dollar organization now has 500 centers in about 100 countries, feeding half a million families a year.

Trends to Watch: Secular Media Fights For Dharma and Justice

"Please stop smoking!" says a star on USA's wacky, issues-oriented "Northwestern" TV series, as he yanks a cigarette out of the Russian's mouth next to him on the plane. It's hilarious, but the message is strong: second-hand smoke is a health hazard. An ancient trend, katha, stories that teach, is in resurgence on TV and film. Amidst the ocean of fluff, sports, violence and inane sitcoms, come the

new sophisticated series. High-tech, fast-paced, brilliantly written, assuming an intelligent audience, they force us to question and search for dharma. Selective viewers can confront sexual harrassment, wife abuse and the rights of indigenous peoples, daily, all at home.

The movie industry lags behind. While Rocky and Jurassic Park offer sheer awesome entertainment, forty minutes of TV's "Law and Order" deal with more issues of conscience than 20 hours of cinema. India's once innocent, conflicted romance formula, hero/villian fighting, dance/music productions seem to backslide. A recent Tamil film had fighting from beginning to end, including a lunatic machete marketplace mass murder, which incited an actual copycat slaying in the streets of Klang, Malaysia.

But all is not lost. You have choices. Southern producers especially continue the old epic "thread-of-dharma, fight-for-justice" plots. K. Viswanath is well known for his moral, issue oriented Telegu films. Ashok Thakeria filmed the sickening Tamil tale of a young wife who stands up for a servant girl who is gang raped at home on Holi. Women's issues in the Indian family context are common, inflaming our yearning for change and justice-dowry abuse, rape, self-determination, widow isolation etc. Horizons are broadening. Award-winning new films from Karnataka by a psychiatrist couple highlight India's mentally retarded.

Before TV there was an evening katha in every village, grandparents to spin an old myth. Today a katha may be rare, but TV is ever present. Rational young Hindus don't buy the pandits ramified exegesis of Ramayana and Mahabharata anyway. Many see these epics not as sacred but as stories filled with violence and questionable standards. They are as likely to watch an old Star Trek re-run. The trend for TV to replace our story tellers and bedtime tales is a powerful one, directed by our choices.

Classy Poster Counts Math An Indian Treasure

In a series of striking posters distributed by L.W. Swienciki, the ancient math systems of various cultures are graphically portrayed and explained. These posters are a tribute to the beauty and culture of ancient societies and an integration of math and art bound to uplift cultural consciousness in adults and children alike.

Bharat's remarkable contributions are cited and would make any Hindu child proud of their ancient heritage. We quote from the Math of India poster: "Modern mathematics owes much to India. Many important discoveries were made in the theory of numbers, in geometry and in astronomy. Our present number system traces back to India in the third century BCE. The use of the numeral zero and a place value system were well developed in India by the ninth century CE. Even the ten digit numeral system in use today can be clearly traced to ancient India. India developed a beautiful lattice method of multiplying numbers. The earliest written record of the method called shabakh occurs in Hindu works of the twelfth century. The method is illustrated in the side panels of this poster."

L.W. Swienciki, Educational Materials, P.O. Box 32295, San Jose, California, 95152, USA.

Swami Merges in the Ganges

On September 4th, revered 67-year-old Swami Haridas Giri was pulled into the swift Alakand river while taking his bath at Rudraprayag where it merges with the Ganges, (north of New Delhi) and was never seen again. Two devotees who jumped in to save him also disappeared. Beloved as a mesmerizing, life-changing divine minstrel and spiritual orator, he was a pure ascetic of great simplicity (usually wearing only a small waist wrap). He participated in numerous sangams and was a strong advocate of India's spiritual heritage. His powerful presence will be sorely missed, but his memory will continue to inspire and uplift all who met him.

Temples Restored and Thriving

Saivism has flourished in Vietnam since 200CE. The country exchanged richly with India. Buddhism rose for a while and Saivism again from the 10th century onward. In 1977 and '78 during the war many Indians were forced to leave. But lately three remaining temples, all in Ho Chi Minh City, managed by Tamil Chettiars, have been revived. The refurbished Mariamman and Subramanya Swamy temples attract huge crowds and financial support from local Vietnamese. The oldest, 200-year-old "Chetty" Dandayuthapani Temple (above), lags behind, awaiting the outcome of negotiations with the government to establish management by Vietnamese resident Indians.

Radha Rani Ashram Complete

An international VIP guest list inaugurated the new Shree Raseshwari Temple/Barsana Dham Ashram of Swami Prakashananda Saraswati on October 15th and 16th, near Austin, Texas. The exquisite structure has men's and women's dormitories flanking a central temple and hall. In a dynamic feat of dedication and sacrifice, the ashram/temple began construction in January, 1993 and was completed in less than two years. After decades of isolated sadhana, Swami's founded the International Society of Divine Love in 1975, with centers now in countries around the world.