Thailand Hinduism
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FEATURE

Thailand Hinduism

Many Thai's regard Hinduism as an offshoot of Buddhism and ardently worship Siva, Vishnu, Durga, Ganesha, and Brahma

Rajiv Malik

Hundreds of thousands of devotees participate every year in the nine-day Navaratri festival in honor of the Goddess at the Sri Mariamman temple in the heart of Bangkok, Thailand. The rush is so heavy that the adjacent Silom Road, a major thoroughfare, is closed to traffic for hours at peak times. This would all be quite typical for a Hindu temple in Delhi or Calcutta during any of our major festivals, but this is Thailand, and the Thai Buddhist devotees at this Navaratri festival outnumber Hindus ten to one. There are just 100,000 Hindus in Thailand, mostly relatively recent immigrants, with about eleven Hindu temples. But Hinduism, which first arrived here from South India over 2,000 years ago, permeates Thai religion and culture. Consider, for example, that the King has his own brahmin priest of Thai ancestry, or that the Thai script is based upon the South Indian Grantha script.

I was sent on assignment to Thailand by Hinduism Today to meet the Indian Hindus of Thailand and to explore the ways in which Thais worship the Hindu Gods and Goddesses. I spent over a week in Siam, visiting Bangkok and the northern city of Chiang Mai in early February, 2003. Thailand is a relatively prosperous country, and justifiably proud of the fact that, among all the nations of Southeast Asia, it was never conquered and ruled by a foreign power. Ninety-five percent of the 62 million Thais are Buddhists, the highest percentage of Buddhists in any nation in the world.

The Indian Hindu community is comprised mostly of business people. Every

Sunday finds hundreds of families gathered for weekly satsang at Bangkok's Sri Mariamman, Dev, Vishnu, Sindhi, Arya Samaj and Durga temples. Their enthusiasm for the Hindu festivals and the Sunday satsangs is commendable, but typical of a community thousands of miles from their homeland.

What boggled my mind was the Thai population's devotion to the Hindu Gods and Goddesses, which was no less than I've witnessed among Hindus anywhere. When I visited the Sri Mariamman temple on a typical Wednesday afternoon and evening, 95 percent of the devotees present were Thai Buddhists. Their devotion was in no way less than their Hindu countrymen and women. They offered garlands of marigolds (dok dao rueng in Thai, or gainda in Hindi), coconuts, bananas and other puja materialsÃall readily available from the rows of flower and offerings shops just opposite the temple. They lit incense sticks and put oil in the temple lamps. Each was spending up to 100 baht (us$2.50) on the offerings, certainly more than the average Hindu in India would spend on a routine temple visit. Most knelt before the Gods, folded their hands, closed their eyes and quietly meditated for quite some time. The flow of devotees was heavy and constant from afternoon to late in the evening. Hurditya Deva, a rare Thai convert to Hinduism and friend of Hinduism Today, was my guide and translator during much of my visit.

He said that what we were seeing at the Mariamman temple is typical. "Hinduism and Buddhism are considered to be so close," Hurditya said, "that not many people differentiate between the two. Hindu and Buddhist rituals are conducted simultaneously. The Thai people think that it is almost the same. Some even think that Hinduism is just a ritual and not really a religion, or they think Hinduism is an off-shoot of Buddhism. They happily participate in the Hindu rituals, and seek direct communion with the Gods and Goddesses in meditation."

Many approached the South Indian priests of the temple for a traditional puja on their behalf. On this particular evening, a special havana (fire ceremony) was being performed by the priests on a raised platform. Nearly everyone attending was Thai, with only a rare South or North Indian. Upon completion, hundreds of Thais lined up for blessings from the final arati lamp which is traditionally circulated amongst the devotees after the puja is over.

The Pure Thai Temples

On Friday, I went to the outdoor Brahma temple in central Bangkok, near the World Trade Center, along a main road with constant traffic day and night. It is an

open-air temple inside a low-walled compound, with a fabulously ornate Thai-style roof over the four-faced Lord Brahma. The temple is very popular, and I witnessed an endless stream of Thai devotees. There are no priests. The devotees conduct their own worship. A few attendants were there to remove the immense quantity of flower offerings.

Each devotee washed his hands from two large bowls of water, then purchased materials for worship. They entered the temple without removing their shoes, which I found a bit shocking. The devotees would light incense sticks, offer flowers, kneel down four times before the four-faced Brahma icon, one face at a time, and pray for some minutes with folded hands and closed eyes.

Let me make it clear that this was a Thai temple, and though the Lord Brahma being worshiped here was the same God Hindus revere as the Lord of Creation, here it was the Thai Brahma which was being worshiped. Now, this was a bit confusing for a first-time visitor to Thailand.

At the Brahma temple there was a group of Thai women dancers in traditional dress and beautiful make-up, along with several musicians. Twice in the hour I was there devotees paid about $15.00 for a 20-minute performance to honor the Deity. Small wooden elephants or carved dancers were also offered, and many could be seen at the base of the shrine.

Brahma is dear to the Thais, and considered a most auspicious God. For the sake of prosperity and well-being, small Brahma temples, shrines and statues have been put up at many commercial centers and outside big hotels and restaurants. In addition, the Thais have many small temples for Lords Siva, Vishnu, Ganesha and the Goddess. Like the Brahma temple, these are outdoor shrines and not enclosed buildings.

At least two of these shrines, the spectacular Ganesha shrine on the cover of this issue and the Sadasiva shrine on page 23, were specifically built to counteract the impact of the Brahma shrine upon nearby business. They were recommended by local experts in Feng Shui, the Chinese art governing building design akin to the Hindu Vastu Shastra.

Hurditya explained to me, "Thai people have been offering flowers to Deities for many, many hundreds of years. They go to Hindu Gods to pray because they think that Devas are more interested in the welfare of human beings than the Buddha. So they feel they should seek the aid of the Devas, for example, Brahma, Indra and Ganesha, to help them in the normal affairs of life. They even go

Vishnu Temple and Hindu-Thai Interactions

The next day, Saturday, I went to the Vishnu temple in central Bangkok. The Indians attached to this temple are mostly from Uttar Pradesh. There I met Sri Vidya Dhar Shukla, 74, Thailand's official Chief Hindu Priest. Sri Shukla, of Indian ancestry, was born in Thailand. He has served as a priest his entire life. As Chief Priest, he is second in stature only to the King's priest, known as the Rajaguru, whom I met later. Unlike Sri Shukla, the Rajaguru is of the Thai brahmin lineage from ancient times. Sri Shukla guides a team of 45 young priests.

"The Hindu-Thai relationship is extremely sweet," Sri Shukla told me. "Thais like to keep the pictures of Hindu Gods and Goddesses in their home, due to which there is a lot of demand for these. In Thailand, the number of temples is increasing. Thais liberally spend money on flowers and the dance shows at the Brahma temple, as they believe that pleasing the Gods will bless them with health, wealth and prosperity."

Sri Shukla went on, "Few people know that Thais are ardent devotees of the Hindu God Brahma because Brahma appeared before Lord Buddha when he was doing penance and had given him a lot of guidance. As Lord Buddha did not give any rituals, Thais use the rituals of Hinduism. Ceremonies for the King are done first by Hindu priests, then the Buddhist monks."

To a Hindu, some Thai festivals look very familiar. For example, practices of their new year, Songkran, include throwing scented water on each otherÃakin to Holi; tying of strings on the wrists of loved onesÃakin to Raksha Bandan; applying a white paste as a sign of protectionÃakin to the use of vibhuti(holy ash); and providing food to temples. "On Kartik Puranmashi, they offer floating lamps to the river in a beautiful manner," said Sri Shukla, "worshiping it just as we worship Mother Ganga." Hindu temples, he added, celebrate all the Thai Buddhist festivals with a lot of enthusiasm.

Sri Shukla is worried about the future, a concern I heard expressed many times during my visit. "The biggest challenge the Hindu community faces," he said, "is of the parents devoting almost all their time in chasing money and material comforts. The result is that though they can somehow maintain their own identity as Hindus, they have no time to transfer these values to their children. For education, the children are sent to the Western countries or convent schools in India, and from both these places they come back with a soft corner for Christianity and English. The situation is worrisome and after two, three generations, a sort of crises will come if things do not improve. The parents must educate their children about Hinduism. And for this, they themselves need to know the basics of Hinduism and practice them."

Hurditya concurred, "The Hindu youth here likely speak Thai more fluently than Hindi. Their parents are extremely busy in managing their business and take no time to teach their children. That is the reason we saw no one under thirty at the Vishnu Mandir or Hindu Samaj."

Most of the sons of the Hindu priests are not entering the priesthood, as they no longer find it remunerative. Just one of Sri Shukla's sons has now become a full-time priest, though earlier he was reluctant to take it up as a career. "It so happened that I had fallen sick, and therefore I deputed him to some places to perform ceremonies. He was really happy with the respect he got as a priest. The families where he went praised him for his job," says a smiling Sri Shukla.

I met here Ravi Kant Sharma, a businessman. He told me, "Hindus in Thailand are more proud to be Hindus than the Hindus in India. We go to our temples wholeheartedly. We have been able to maintain our culture, customs, traditions and way of life." But he also had a complaint, "Christians and Muslims are coming here with money from abroad and distributing it to the needy. They are also building a lot of churches and mosques. But our Hindu saints and swamis come and deliver lectures and go back to their native countries and ashrams with whatever money is given to them. We are not getting any backing from the cultural and religious bodies based in India."

Mrs. Seema Mull of Delhi, a religious singer here for the havana and a first-time visitor to Thailand, has been in Bangkok for around six weeks. She was not much impressed by the lives of Hindus in Bangkok and said, "People here are in a mad race to make money, and for this they are prepared to do anything. Hindus here

may be financially well off, but they are not as peaceful and happy as their brethren back in India." "But," she added, "one good thing here is that unlike in India with problems of law and order, Bangkok is a peaceful place."

We next visited the Sri Mariamman temple. According to the secretary, Sri Surphong Siridhornkul, 49, the temple was built by South Indians who migrated from the Thanjavur District in Tamil Nadu to Thailand about 150 years ago. It was the first Hindu temple built by the immigrant Indian community. The temple brings priests from South India to perform the rituals here. Recently, the temple has undergone major renovation. Siridhornkul said, "We are worried about the next generation, so we are doing the best we can to make the temple beautiful now and not leave anything pending. I personally feel that there will come a time in the lives of the youth when they will turn to the temples, and then they will have to just come and manage it."

I met Meera Kapoor here, a newly-married housewife from Delhi. She said, "I find the temples here in the South Indian style are very different from Delhi's. When I see the Gods here and pray to them, in my mind the image of our own Gods appears and then everything is alright. I feel that if you really pray truly through your heart, you can reach your own Gods. I must say, the Thai people are very warm and welcoming. I have not yet come across even one Thai person who was angry. That is something very nice about this place."

Sayee Gayatri, 20, a postgraduate student in management, was also at this temple. She explained, "The reason why so many Thai people are visiting the Mariamman temple is that She is considered to be the Goddess of Protection. During World War II, when a lot of places here were destroyed in the Japanese occupation, the temple remained absolutely safe."

Meeting the Rajaguru

Sri Siridhornkul arranged an interview with Phara Rajaguru Vamadevamuni, the Royal Priest of the Royal Household of Thailand, for Saturday evening. We met at Rajaguru's temple, called Devasthana Bosth Brahmana, located in the Sao Ching Cha area of Bangkok. Rajaguru's lineage of brahmins had been in Thailand so long, and intermarried with the Thai community, that he is completely Thai in appearance. When I first met him, I could just not take my eyes off his charming and royal face. His pony tail hair added to his divine looks. Rajaguru, a graceful, divine and soft-spoken person, discoursed at length in a down-to-earth manner

about the challenges faced by the Hindu community in Thailand. [See sidebar opposite for the interview.]

One person I spoke with later shared an incident which illustrated the Rajaguru's influence. Two years back, I was told, a company started using Lord Hanuman in an advertisement for an anti-itching medicine. This person complained to the company, and to other Hindu organizations, but to no avail. He then brought the matter to the Rajaguru, who in turn spoke to the police. The police requested the company to discontinue the advertisement, which they did.

Hurditya observed, "The role of Rajaguru today is to conduct pujas for the Royal Family. I do not think that what he does has much impact on the youth. And then only one person cannot revive the five million population of Bangkok. I see that he wants to revive Hinduism, but it is a hard job. If it continues the way it is [with the youth not being interested], Hinduism is going to disappear from this country in the future, for both Thais and Indians."

A Vegetarian's Quest

I had little trouble finding vegetarian food in the city, but could not help noticing this was very much a meat-eater's society. I asked Hurditya about it, and he said, "There are few vegetarian people in Thailand. A lot of the Indian Hindus have started eating chicken and other nonvegetarian food. They are not very strict Hindus. Had they been so, they would not have come to Thailand. Because they were not strict from day one, the decline has been very fast. The next generation says, 'OK, if I can eat chicken, then I can eat beef as well. What is the difference between chicken and beef? After all they are both animals.' Thai people in general are not vegetarian. In Buddhism, they do not even teach you vegetarianism. In Bangkok you have just two well-known vegetarian restaurants. So when a kid goes out and has vegetables and fruits, he is the odd man out. There is peer pressure on you to consume nonvegetarian food." Fortunately, I enjoyed scrumptious vegetarian meals at both Chennai Kitchen and Komala's.

Ananda Marga's Children Programs

When my visit to Thailand was first planned, Hinduism Today put out a request for local contacts through its daily e-mail news service, Hindu Press International. Within hours the editorial staff was in touch with Dada Shambhushivananda of Ananda Marga. It turned out that we had a dear mutual friend, the late B.M. Sinha, the previous Delhi correspondent for Hinduism Today, whom I succeeded. Dada was

an immense help in organizing my program. The first event I attended in Bangkok was a breathtaking yoga performance by the small children who belonged to two orphanages run by Ananda Marga in Thailand. These orphanages are located on the Thailand-Myanmar border, and most of the children are of Thai or Burmese origin.

Dada received his doctorate in business and applied economics from the University of Pennsylvania and has delivered around ten thousand lectures on yoga and related subjects from different platforms all over the world. For the last many years Thailand has been the base for Dada Ji.

He said, "We at Ananda Marga are bringing people to the Hindu way of thinking by teaching them things which are relevant in their lives. For example, people are under stress and their health is not good, so by practicing yoga and by learning to do Ananda Marga meditation, they improve their lives. They find it something very scientific and very relevant."

"In the school where our children who performed yoga for you live, around fourteen hundred children are learning yoga," he said. "The government of Thailand allows for three hours of classes per week which can be, among other subjects, devoted to yoga and meditation. I have developed one program which is known as Yoga Education for Schools [YES]. It is not just yoga exercises. It has the whole philosophy of vegetarianism and the related practices."

"Buddhism has Wat schools," he explained, "which are attached to the temple. It is a tradition that every Thai child has to become a monk for one week or more. They start at a very young age, but even when you are an adult, you can become a monk for one to three months. This they do once in life, sometimes more than once in life. I think that is a very beautiful concept. It keeps the Buddhist religion alive. Hindu religion has no such concept."

Dada Ji concluded, "I think that Hinduism has an appeal forever because of its deep philosophy and deep faith in God. Hinduism can bring a perspective of life which can give stamina and culture to a civilization. That is why Hinduism must be saved, because if Hinduism can be saved, the whole spiritual culture of the world can be saved."

The Dev Temple

The Hindu Samaj's Dev temple is popular with the Punjabi Hindus, as well as with the Thais. I spoke there with Sri Raj Kumar Matta, president of the Hindu Samaj, which manages the Dev temple. He said, "Every year the government's religious department organizes a seminar and calls all of us to check up if we of the various religions are facing any problems. They are very helpful and cooperative." The temple caters to the Thai population with its statue of Lord Buddha and big celebration of Buddha's birthday. The Hindus here have taken to Thai ways as well, and each year several hundred go to an upcountry Buddhist temple assigned to them by the government to donate worship and food items for the monks, just as the Thais do. The temple has taken an innovative approach to engaging the youthÃeveryone on the management committee has to be under forty, with the exception of the president.

A challenge for parents and youth is Hindu-Thai marriages. Matta said, "If the youth believe in Hinduism, then we should accept such marriages. If we do not accept these marriages, then chances are that we may lose our own children. Hindu-Thai marriages do take place, but they are not very high in numbers."

The temple runs a school in which most of the students are Thai, and Hinduism is not part of the curriculum. Devotees at the temple told me Hindus themselves preferred to send their children to well-known Christian schools in Thailand, India and other countries. In all my visits to temples here, I have hardly seen a single teenage boy or girl.

Ganesha's Milk Miracle in Thailand

At one place I met Ajay Pawa, 50, a documentary film maker and marketing executive. He said, "I have made documentaries on Hindu temples in Thailand and on Hindu wedding ceremonies, samskaras and festivals. But the biggest of all was one we made on Lord Ganesha drinking milk in 1995, the Milk Miracle which took place at Hindu temples all around the world. I went to a temple here. I tried it myself with the crystal Nandi and saw that it was actually happening. We showed it in the documentary. Then I called the local media people. They published a very big article. Even the television people were convinced that it was happening, and started recording. Later on it became a controversial issue. A lot of negative articles came from all over the world, especially from India, so these people had to get the film censored before televising it."

Ajay complained about something which the Rajaguru also mentioned during our conversation. Ajay said, "There are people in Thailand misusing the name of Hinduism, They say that they go into trance. Once there was a conference of two or three hundred of these people. There one person said he was possessed by Ganesha, another said he was possessed by Siva and someone else that he is possessed by Durga. All those who do this are Thai people who claim to be Hindus, but they do all this to make money and to fool people. We have to find a way to stop that. We have to spread the word that Hinduism does not believe in these things."

Visit to Chiang Mai

My visit to Chiang Mai in North Thailand took me away from Bangkok's heat, concrete, humidity and congestion for a day as I took the morning flight from Bangkok and came back that evening. The view of Chiang Mai from the airplane was breathtaking. I could see conical-hatted farmers toiling in the patchwork of rice fields while the cars went along leisurely on the ribbon-like roads. Though this city is the biggest in Thailand after Bangkok, it is different due to its natural surroundings and cool, hill-station-like climate. Life moves here at an unhurried pace, and I could feel the peace and tranquility in the air. History has it that Chiang Mai was founded more than 700 years ago as the capital of the Kingdom of Lanna ("land of one million rice fields"). The metropolis today has some 250,000 people. Despite urbanization, the city gives the feeling of an overgrown village, and its easy-going charm is intact.

In Chiang Mai, I visited with Brother Dr. B. Budhacharan, president of the Spiritual Centre of Siam, and a long-time disciple of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. He has a plan to start a gurukulam school run on the Vedic system with youth from Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Burma, Malaysia and Thailand. He drove me to the only big Hindu temple in Chiang Mai, the Dev temple, after the Bangkok temple of the same name. There I spoke with the temple priest, Sri Pawan Sharma, 37, who had been at the temple for the last five years. He said, "This temple is one of the biggest in Thailand. We also have one big Sikh gurudwara here which is 120 years old. The same devotees go to both the gurudwara and the temple. On Tuesday, for our weekly satsang, you will find a large number of Thai devotees here. Lord Buddha is the God of this country, and we also have a statue of Lord Buddha in our temple. Still, the number who come to this temple is few." I spoke with one Thai devotee here, Anuma, who said she was a "Buddhist Hindu" and a devotee of Mother Durga. She had once been seriously injured in an accident and brought to this temple, where she experienced a miraculous recovery. "After that," she said, "my faith in the temple increased tremendously."

Next I met Dr. Jaspal Rai Ahuja, Managing Director, Chang Puek Hospital, Chiang Mai and founder member of the Dev temple Management Committee. He said, "I have been here for the past 32 years. We have to do something in Thailand to promote and propagate Hinduism in the language which our kids understand. Hindi and Sanskrit will not work. The language either has to be an international language like English or the local one, Thai. The situation is that during the marriages many times the priest has to translate the meaning of the Vedic hymns either into English or in Thai." After this meeting, I bid farewell to Dr. Budhacharan and returned to Bangkok.

The Next Generation

One prime focus of my visit was to ascertain the future of Hinduism here as it was manifesting through the next generation. It was a major issue for people, and there were no easy answers. Several sources offered insights into the issue. One was Shri Tilak Raj Sharma, the chief priest of a small Vishnu temple just opposite the Bangkok Dev temple. He said, "The young generation today asks questions. If you cannot answer their questions, then you can consider yourself a failure. The general impression among the youth is that many preachers who come here from India are only after money. These preachers must realize that the youth watch their activities closely, and when they see that their inclination is towards the rich, they get disillusioned."

Sayee Gayatri, 20, whom we met earlier, said, "I feel more learned people should come here often and teach the youth about Hinduism. This would help the Indian people in Thailand, who are under tremendous Western influence and who are going away from their roots. While Sikhs have a school here, Hindus do not."

Krishna Pawa, a member of the Hindu Samaj and owner of a vegetarian restaurant, said, "If we want our children to fully adopt the Hindu culture, we need to bring some changes. One thing that today's children do not like is superstitions. We need to convey to our future generations that our Sanatana Dharma is not just a religion based on stories but that it has a solid scientific base. Let me also tell you, if you do not mind, that even in India people are not that firm on the Sanatana Dharma as we are here in Bangkok. Just visit our Durga temple on any Monday and you will see how the young girls gather there to worship Goddess Durga and Uma."

Sri Jay Prakash Mishra, Chief Priest of the Geeta Ashram, Bangkok, observed,

"Our younger generation, though it is affected by the glamour of materialism and Western culture, still has those who maintain their identity and culture. Even in India things are pretty bad. Here, still, children have the courtesy to sit down and listen to the parents and elders."

Hurditya too had insights to share. "Some people are embarrassed to call themselves Hindus," he said, "If you worship Hindu Gods and Goddesses, you would be asked, 'How could Siva or Kali have a thousand hands?' and all that. Because of these legends, some are shy to say that they are Hindus. They are shy to admit they worship a God who has an elephant head. These are some of the problems the new generation of Hindu kids face. They have to overcome their own weaknesses. They should be connecting to their culture, tradition and religion, but they have not been doing so."

As soon as Hurditya uttered his final words, my attention shifted to the sound coming from a nearby construction site where a multi-storied building was coming up. The clang of metal resonating was something like, "Ta Thai, Ta Ta Thai," I took it as a signal from Lord Buddha and the Hindu devas in Thailand, who were probably reminding me that the time of my leaving the land of Buddha was approaching fast.

INTERVIEW

How to Create a Better Hindu Future

Meet Phara Rajaguru Vamadevamuni, Thai Priest, Office of the Royal Household

Saivism is practiced here in this temple, and Siva is the main Deity. The worship rituals are from South Indian tradition, but not exactly as done there today. Our texts use Sanskrit, Pali and Tamil, but we do not know Tamil. All the mantras are in Sanskrit, but because our native language is Thai, it is difficult to pronounce the Sanskrit words. The mantra is exactly the same, but the accent of chanting is

different. In Thailand, our Hindu tradition is called Brahmanism, after the Brahmanas, the second book of the Vedas which describe ritual worship. Contact between India and Thailand was lost during the Muslim rule, so we are influenced only by the older forms of Hinduism.

I am trying to revive Hinduism in Thailand by promoting religious education. As part of this, four brahmin boys of my family are being sent for philosophical study in Kanchipuram, under the guidance of the Shankaracharya there. I myself have no children. Besides studying Hinduism, philosophy and Sanskrit, they will also study Buddhist ceremonies. Out of these four priests, I will decide, based on their merit and talent, who will be appointed my successor as royal priest. The brahmin boys are allowed to marry anyone, because we are running out of brahmins. There are only eleven brahmins of my tradition in Thailand today.

My main job is to perform all the ceremonies for the royal family in the palace. I play an important role in the coronation ceremony. All the coronation ceremonies of the king in the past have been conducted by my ancestors who were from the brahmin community. I am also available to devotees for consultation, for example, when someone wants to get married.

I want people to understand the ritual worship and not regard it as superstition. I try to promote rituals that bring peace of mind to people. For example, I won't say that this worship of Lakshmi, Goddess of Wealth, will bring prosperity. Instead, I teach that the ritual will bring peace of mind and not promote the superstition that by doing this ceremony, you will become rich. I try to include all the good teachings while doing rituals. I'm trying to print mantra books in Thai which explain the slokas so the common man knows what is being chanted. Unfortunately, because of lack of understanding, Hinduism is declining.

I am worried about the children getting involved in drinking and the like. We have to teach them first what is karma, good and bad, then we go on to teach philosophy and religion. The parents are too busy with business and are not teaching their children. They do not even take time to go to the temple, and they do not know about their religion. How can they pass it on to their children? In the public schools the religious studies have been cut back, leaving the children to conclude they should make money in business and not meditate or pray. This problem is the same for the Buddhists. Although our Thai culture is one of meat eating, I try to promote vegetarianism among the youth, as I understand that meat

is a tamasic food.

Each Hindu priest here wants to do things in his own way, including those who have come from India. Some cut the rituals short to finish quickly. Though all the temples are independent, this temple is the command center for them all. Right now the problem is with the priests, and we need to form an organization so there is proper coordination between myself and the priests. I would like to have all the priests meet here and evolve a common code of conduct. But they want to go and earn money, and not sit here doing nothing and getting forced to observe certain rules.

I think the future for Hindus is bright in this country and things will improve, especially if we educate the children properly. These things take time. I am myself a staunch Hindu, and I strongly support Hinduism. I was born a brahmin and worked as a priest all my life, so everything in my life revolves around Hinduism.

Thailand at a glance.....

A unified Thai kingdom known as Siam was established in the mid-14th century. In 1939, the name was change to Thailand. It is the only Southeast Asian country never to have been taken over by a European power. The 3600 bce bronze age culture unearthed at Ban Chiang is one of the oldest on Earth. Early Chinese/T'ai migrations were followed by Indian migration around 300 bce, with Hinduism established by 100 ce and Buddhism by 1000. Ankgor Wat, just inside Cambodia from Thailand was built by the Hindu king Suriyavarman II. The Thai alphabet is based on Mon (Burmese), Khmer (Cambodia) and South Indian scripts, and the language has many Sanskrit words.

Religion:

Buddhist 95%
Muslim 3.8%
Hindu 0.1%
Christian 0.5%
Other 0.6%

Population:

62.4 million

Gross Domestic Product:

us$6,600 per capita one of the highest in Asia, (2001 estimate)