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Diaspora

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Divali Festivities

An eight-day Divali fair in October 2000 brought thousands of people from all over the world to celebrate Hinduism's most popular festival and to learn about Hinduism. The 13th annual presentation of "Divali Nagar" 2000 was organized by the National Council of Indian Culture under the leadership of Mr. Deokienanan Sharma. The fair focused on the theme "Understanding Hinduism," with topics like reincarnation, worship, rituals and festivals. A music concert was held every evening. Swami Aksharananda, who was flown in from New York to give the feature address, noted, "I could not imagine that my culture and religion could have shone the way it did [at the event]." Trinidad Prime Minister Basdeo Panday and President A.N.R. Robinson graced the fair. President Robinson spoke with promise: "Divali 2000 may be regarded as light in the new century, illuminating the path ahead".

FRANCE

Ganesha Tours Paris

Thousands of Hindus who have immigrated here from Sri Lanka participated in the yearly chariot procession of Lord Ganesha in Paris, held September 10, 2000, near the Sri Manika Vinayakar Alayam temple. The massive chariot carrying Lord Ganesha departed the temple on its six-hour

journey starting at 8am. It was pulled through crowded streets by a dozen bare-chested men on foot accompanied by the traditional nagaswaram horn and tavil drum. A leading French magazine described the event as "a unique open and festive spectacle in Paris for discovering the oldest religion in the world." France's Sri Manika Vinayakar Alayam was founded in 1983 by the current president, V. Sanderasekaram, whose family founded many Ganesha temples in Sri Lanka.

KENYA

Four Per Mile

One day, Mrs. Neera Kapila, a volunteer guide at the Kenyan National Museum, approached a young African male teacher to show him around the new exhibit called, "The Asian African Heritage: Identity and History." Before she could show him anything, the teacher brushed her aside. He went into the exhibit on his own, unwilling to let an Indian guide him through African history. The exhibit Kapila was trying to show him was created in memory of the efforts and sacrifices of the Indian rail workers brought to Kenya by the British more than 50 years ago. Around 2,500 workers died while laying the Kenyan railway--four workers per mile of track. This sacrifice and the Indian's contribution to Kenya's freedom struggle are central to the exhibition created by Dr. Sultan H. Somjee to educate native Africans and fourth-generation African Indians. Dr. Somjee hopes it will help ease tensions between the two communities. After browsing the exhibit alone, the teacher came back and apologized to Kapila. He admitted that he had no idea of the contribution the Indians had made to Kenya's freedom. He said he feels that, by bringing their little-known efforts to light, the exhibit should help ease racial tensions and improve relations between the two communities.

TAIWAN

Yoga Mission

In October, 2000, Yogi Balakrishnan, an avid proponent of yoga in Singapore, taught a three-day seminar in Taiwan. The event, organized by the China Yoga Association of Taipei, introduced participants to the eight steps of yoga and the chanting of the mantra, "Aum Namasivaya." Yogi Balakrishnan also answered many questions related to Hinduism and yoga and was honored with a "Doctorate" by the President of the China Yoga Association for his 30 years of research.

USA

Confronting Misconceptions

Two new courses have started at Harvard University that will examine ancient Indian civilizations and the common misconceptions found in academic texts. They are being taught by Arvind Sharma, the first appointee to the new Infinity Foundation Visiting Professorship of Indic Studies. He currently holds the Birks Chair in Comparative Religion at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. "Common Misconceptions in the Study of Indic Civilisation," started in January, 2001. He plans to study common misrepresentations held by Western historians and archeologists and analyze when incorrect views arose and why.

INDIA

Beauty Protest

More and more Indians are winning top beauty contests. Indians won both the 1999 and 2000 Miss World contest, and Lara Dutta, 21, just won Miss Universe 2000. But not everyone endorses the contests. Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Raj Nath Singh went as far as banning beauty contests--much to the

shock of the state's booming beauty and fashion trade. He said, "Showing bare bodies is not part of our culture and tradition. Beauty is something which is given by nature, and there should be no competition about it." Conservatives supported him; others suggested lighter limitations.

USA

Locking In

Endeavoring to promote Hindu solidarity among youth, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Hindu Student's Council, and NetOhm held a "Lock-in" on December 1, 2000 at the Houston Texas Rock Gym, according to a report by Shibani Khanna. A "lock-in" is when a group of students (with chaperones) book a venue and stay up the entire night engaged in various activities--in this case sports, games, movies and the highlight of the night, rockclimbing on the gym's artificial cliffs. Hindu philosophy was touched on in a discussion group about the relationship between body and mind.

USA

The Yankee's Yoga

American yoga is one of the hottest fads around. But what is it? It certainly isn't what it used to be thousands of years ago in India. At the end of July 2000, many of the top American yoga masters went to Lenox, Massachusetts, for a conference on "The New American Yoga," to find out what they had in common with it. Yoga in America is now part of mainstream fitness, with TV programs on ESPN and classes in a large portion of exercise studios. Its diversity makes it popular. You can get just about any flavor you want, from traditional yoga in its Hindu context to sweaty "strong" yoga, tension-melting poses, hybrid yoga, like disco yoga, "yogilates" (combining

yoga and Pilates) or Nia (aerobic yoga). "Americans use the yoga mat as a therapist couch, and often as a church pew," wrote Ann Powers in an article in New York Times.

USA

Temple Enters Hall of Fame

The temple to Lord Ganesha in Flushing, New York, is entering the "People's Hall of Fame," announced City Lore, who sponsors the Queen's Hall of Fame. It says that with 18,000 members of many different nationalities, the ornate temple on Bowne Street in Flushing, is not only the religious center of New York's Hindu community, but a cultural center that helps to beautify the city with a wide array of cultural and religious arts. One of the first Hindu temples built in America, it has been very successful since its founding in 1977.

USA

God and US Politics

It's a measure of just how secular America really is. Both Al Gore and George Bush come from two of seven states in the country that require office holders to believe in God. Tennessee--Gore's home state--mandates that "No person who denies the being of God, or a future state of rewards and punishments shall hold any office." Texas requires one to "acknowledge the existence of a Supreme Being." Though regarded as unconstitutional, unenforceable and against the rights of non-believers, the laws still remain on the books. The secular humanist magazine, Free Inquiry, calling for their repeal, wrote that the laws make "atheists, secular humanists and other free-thinkers second-class citizens."

Briefly...

Bahrain Hindus celebrate a grand Divali in Sitra with the Indian ambassador, Surinder Singh Gill, as guest of honor. The festivities took place in the Al Bander Hotel and Resort in the Muslim country. Five hundred Hindus attended. A temporary temple was set up at the hotel, and the resort's lagoon was filled with candles set afloat by the children. "The grounds were transformed into a typically Indian atmosphere, with stalls in a rustic style offering in-house refreshments with a comprehensive variety of recipes from regional Indian cuisine," says the report from the Bahrain Times.

South Africa Hindus acted against AIDS in a concert organized by Yogapragasan Naidoo with the help of religious, cultural and nongovernment organizations in South Africa. A parade was held, followed by a concert of bhajan and kirtan groups (religious singers) and speeches from various AIDS activists. "The idea," said Naidoo, "is part of the schools initiative, run by the South Africa National AIDS Council, which requires schools to do something about AIDS education."

Thailand Elephants have formed a band in an elephant sanctuary in Lampang, Thailand. The group of five are trained to play percussion instruments, xylophones and an elephant-sized harmonica. They've released their first tune, "Chang, Chang, Chang," a child's song in Thai, meaning "Elephant, Elephant, Elephant." Each elephant holds an instrument and plays it when prodded by its mahut. Their next song to learn is "Happy Birthday to You." This same center has sold paintings by elephants to raise money for their programs.

British Airways has stopped using images of Buddha to promote its business class, following protests from Sri Lankan travellers, said the airline officials. Sri Lankan expatriates had launched a campaign on the internet to call for a boycott of BA for using Buddha images in advertisements.