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Diaspora

SAINTS

Ashram Update

On January 4, 2001, devotees at Mahamandaleshwar Omkarananda Ashrams around the world will observe the one year anniversary of Swami Omkarananda's Mahasamadhi, or "great departure." He left his physical body at the age of 70 while at his Austrian residence. His chosen successor is Swami Visheshwarananda. However, currently the organization is run by the late Swami's close disciples at Swami's ashram branches in Austria, Switzerland and Rishikesh. In recent months, attempts are being made by outsiders to lay claim to Swami's extensive ashram property in Rishikesh. Swami Visheshwarananda has been spending time in Delhi sorting out these difficulties.

Omkarananda Ashram Austria, A-6932 Langen Bei Bregenz, Gschwend 77 Austria

LAW

Smackless!

Germany is now the ninth European country to pass legislation banning smacking of children under any circumstances, according to a report by Epoch. The new law is an amendment to the Civil Code and has passed its final stages in the parliament and just needs to be confirmed by Germany's state representatives--a formality. Abolition of corporal punishment in African schools is also quickly

spreading. Most recently, a high-level Zambian court declared corporal punishment in schools to be unconstitutional, and the Kenyan Minister of Education announced in June 2000 that the government would ban school corporal punishment. This action is in response to a report by the Human Rights Watch, titled "Kenya--Spare the Child" that spoke of African school violence as "routine, arbitrary and often brutal."

INDIA

Soldier's Purity

In September, 1999, the Special Security Board (SSB) in Kashmir was on its way to Baramula town for the election when a mine blew one of the vehicles to pieces, said a report in Indian Express. Miraculously, all the passengers survived with only minor injuries. For the media and security agencies watching the tense election, this was just another attempt at disruption. But for the SSB survivors, it was a warning from God to never again defy His code of conduct--don't eat non-vegetarian meals or drink liquor inside the temple premises. The night before, these young men broke this rule, passed on from the previous guards, and ate chicken on the temple grounds they were guarding. After the blast, the jawans, as the young soldiers are called, became vegetarians. In another case, a jawan took two swigs of whiskey he smuggled into a temple before leaving on a routine patrol. On his patrol, militants threw a grenade at a passing car. The grenade missed the target and landed near the jawan's feet, but didn't explode. He said, "I realized that God has given me a new life. How can I go against His preachings?"

INDIA

Tigers Perish

Thirteen royal bengal tigers died in an Indian zoo, possibly as a result of eating decomposed and contaminated cow meat, claimed a laboratory official who helped carry out the tests. Originally, authorities at the Nandankanan Zoo in Bhubaneswar, Orissa State, said the tigers died in July of sleeping sickness, a disease carried by tsetse flies. Others believed the big cats died when overdosed with drugs to control the disease. The deaths brought a national outrage, and India's Supreme Court ordered a federal investigation. The zoo is home to India's largest collection of tigers. It is still not functioning normally after the disastrous 1999 typhoon. It had 56 of the endangered species. Now it has 43. Nine of the dead animals were white tigers, the rarest of the rare.

TRINIDAD

'I'll Save You!'

Pastor Tyrone Allen, from Virginia, is preaching in a plush hall of the Trinidad Hilton, part of a Pentecostal campaign that worries Hindu leaders in the Caribbean island, according to a report by the Associated Press. Evangelical Christian churches are sprouting up across Trinidad--and Hindu leaders are starting to fight back. "I told our people to throw these people out of the villages," said Sat Maharaj, head of the Hindu organization, Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha. "We're in the soul-saving business," retorts Allen. Hindus chafe especially at visits by American evangelicals like Benny Hinn, who came last year and spoke of Trinidad as a "country full of devils and demons." The competition touches on the delicate balance between Trinidad's East Indian and African communities, each comprising almost half of the population of 1.3 million. East Indians were once overwhelmingly Hindu. But Christian churches have made steady headway in recent decades and now can claim perhaps one-third of the East Indians.

Consequently, census figures show that Hindus now account for only one-quarter of the Trinidadian population. Pentecostals say many Hindus need little convincing. Pastor Winston Cuffie says Hindus in poor, rural areas may find some Pentecostal churches attractive because they look affluent. Many Hindus say they are mobilizing to stop the conversions--if only to maintain a centuries-old tradition on the island. "It is, in fact, a religious war, not in the sense of Muslims and Christians fighting a bloody war, but it is a war," said Kamla Persad, a Hindu activist and newspaper columnist. "No Hindu organization over the years had a program to match the Christians. Now we are going out and trying to reconvert our people. The Hindus are waking up to that."

INDIA

Kerala's Youth Movement

Over 10,000 Hindu children, ages eight to 15, gathered in Kerala, India, to celebrate the 25th anniversary of "Balagokulam." Balagokulam is a statewide movement created by Mr. M.A. Krishnan. "It is a unique cultural movement of children," he says. "The center of activity is based on the weekly gathering of children, called gokulams, for the betterment of their character, for the upliftment of individuals, society and the nation as a whole. Under the guidance of elders, the children act as organizers of their events. Literate Kerala, under the influence of Western thought and 'isms,' was losing its cultural moorings and our mother tongue. Traditions and the great leaders had become aliens in our own land." At the two-day event, the 10,000 children and their parent listened to speeches by top leaders, including Swami Gothamanda, head of the Ramakrishna Mission Math, Chennai, and Mr. L.K. Advani, the Union Home Minister.

STYLE

Scandalous Sandals

American Hindus against defamation has just launched a new campaign (www.hindunet.org/ahad/shoes/) expressing their outrage and disgust over shoes with Hindu Deities printed on them. The reporter who broke the story, Ravi Adhikari, is a senior editor with New York City-based News India-Times. He found the shoes at a local Manhattan store called "\$10 Express" and traced them to the Fortune Dynamic company in California. Worldwide objections began to flood the company, which elicited a terse response from their law firm: "We regret that you are offended by this style; others found it attractive. Since Fortune Dynamic has not engaged in any wrongful conduct, they will not issue a public apology." Even the New York Times picked up on the issue. Their report begins, "Forget Miami's Cubans. The New York City Hindu lobby is a force to be reckoned with." "All kinds of people bought [the shoes]," said the store owner, "but not Indians."

USA

Elementary Anger Control

A kindergarten class at Thorpe School in Massachusetts sits still with their eyes closed, perfectly quiet, practicing what Jon Oliver calls "self-control time." Self-control time is not meditation; nor is it a form of punishment. "It's a breathing exercise to help children be more focused," says Oliver, a former school teacher who established the Lesson One Foundation, a

Boston-based nonprofit group (www.lessonone.org/). Through its program, "Skills for Life," elementary schools throughout the Northeastern US are learning how to keep a positive attitude, learn responsibility for their actions and work together to resolve conflict. Oliver theorizes that if kids learn early in life to respect themselves and others, to control their impulses and understand that anger need not always be acted upon, they will be less likely to become violent as adults. At Welch Elementary School, Jordana Cardoso, a fifth-grader, describes how her behavior has changed: "Before, when I got mad at somebody, I'd always get into a fight. Now I've learned to use my self-control and deal with it."

INDIA

Birth Bias

The United Nations has criticized India for failing to act over its dismal ratio of females to males. Currently the gender ratio is 960 women for every 1,000 men--a statistic that the UN says reflects the lower status of women in India and

the selective abortion of female infants. India's population is growing by 30 new births a minute.

Briefly...

The Sri Ganesha Hindu Temple of Utah held their first annual fundraising event and raised ^{us}\$110,000, over twice their goal. Utah's elite turned out for the event, including US Senator Orrin G. Hatch. They watched Indian and Hispanic dance performances and ate a fine vegetarian Indian meal.

500,000 British people may die from Mad Cow disease from eating infected meat in the next 30 years, experts estimate. Already, 14

Britons have died from it so far this year. That's as many as all last year. Plus, five others now have the disease, which is always fatal. Other experts, though, don't think this data necessarily means an epidemic.

The mayor of Palos Heights, Illinois, Dean Koldenhoven, vetoed a measure in July that would have payed a Muslim group ^{US}\$200,000 to drop plans to convert a Christian church into a mosque. He called the City Council plan "embarrassing" and an insult to Muslims. The Muslim group though, decided they wanted the money so they could

recoup legal fees and "move on," said their lawyer. "Our people want to be able to worship in peace and without fear of stigma."

Brazilian Indians rejected apologies from the country's Roman Catholic Church made in April for "sins" committed by their clergy against Indians and blacks. "Apologies are not enough," said a 24-year-old Pataxo Indian named Matalaue. "We want respect. We want our dignity. We weren't respected 500 years ago and continue

not being respected today."

Japan is now the healthiest country in the world, with an average healthy life expectancy of 74.5 years. This new calculation by the World Health Organization gives a much truer picture of a country's health than by simply studying death rates. The US rates 24th at 70.0 years. The worst country is Sierra Leone, with a life expectancy of 25.9. India ranks 134th at 53.2.

Nepal and Bangladesh follow close behind at 49.5 and 49.9 respectively.