Diaspora
Category : July 1999
Published by Anonymous on Jul. 01, 1999

Diaspora

HEALTH

Toxic Bindis

Alarmed by stories of Indian women developing the disfiguring skin disease leucoderma on their forehead, India's Industrial Toxicology Research Center launched a major study. The culprit, center scientists Dr. Girish Gupta and Dr. A.K. Shrinivatava discovered, was the glue used to affix "stick-on bindis." These are plastic or fabric dots in various shapes and colors used nowadays in place of traditional kumkuma as a beauty mark on the forehead. Earlier, manufacturers used Beroza, a natural adhesive from trees, but now a synthetic counterpart is substituted. No tests have been done to assure its safety, and there are no quality control standards for its manufacture.

INDIA

Village schools

The children sit cross-legged on the sun-hardened earth, shouting in unison the letters of the Hindi alphabet. Their schoolhouse is a borrowed mud hut with gaping holes in the clay-tiled roof. They have one ill-trained teacher for 63 children in two grades, one blackboard and five copies of the only textbook. Two years ago, there was no school in the cluster of houses near Kharbhara, a village of 3,500 people on the edge of a forest in Madhya Pradesh. Only two people in this village walked the one mile to the nearest school; the rest stayed

home, to remain, like their parents, illiterate. In 1997, India's Madhya Pradesh state government took a new approach. It decreed that any community demanding a school could have one, if it had 40 children living more than half a mile from an existing school. A teacher is found locally and the school controlled by the village council. The state pays us$200 a year for each school, including us$12/month for the teacher. The response was astonishing. Since the program began, more than 20,000 schools have been created--40 every day--in villages that may not have a single person that can read a newspaper. They hope that this will raise the literacy levels in India, which, according to the United Nations, holds half of the world's illiterates.

INDIA

Gold Ganesha

The gardens of Draupadi Dharma Patil in the small village of Dive Agar, Maharashtra State, India, yielded more than vegetables when workers uncovered a meter-long copper box two years ago. Inside was a 3.3-pound, 1.25-foot high solid gold Ganesha mask, dated to the 17th century. According to a report from V.L. Manjul of Pune, the discovery has turned the village into a holy place, with pilgrims visiting from far away to see the exquisite artifact. The increased business to the area is worth many times the us$15,000 of gold the mask is fashioned from. A related copper plate dated 1060 ce, contains the oldest Marathi engraving ever found. A second plate, yet to be found, is mentioned on the box's cover and may reveal the mask's origin.

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Vedanta Conference

Sixty philosophers from US, Canada, England, Israel, Guyana, Trinidad and India met in the posh Holiday Inn of Trinidad for the 10th Annual International Congress of Vedanta, March 10?12, 1999. It brought a welcome awareness of the Vedantic heritage to Trinidad Hindus, reports Hinduism Today correspondent Anil Mahabir, as several seminars addressed their concerns for the future of Hinduism on these Caribbean islands. Anantanand Rambachan, professor of religion at St. Olaf College in Minnesota, USA, pointed out that Vedanta came to the American shores not 100 years ago with Swami Vivekananda but 150 years ago with the Indian emigrants to Trinidad, Guyana and Surinam. According to conference founder-director Professor S.S. Rama Rao Pappu, a unique feature of this conference was the enthusiastic participation of the local community. Not only did Trinidad Hindus join the congress, but the visiting scholars met with community leaders at the University of West Indies and various temples to discuss the future of Caribbean Hinduism. "Hinduism here is under attack," said Dave Rampersad of the Hindu Vision Society of Trinidad. "These meetings have given a new hope and optimism among us for our religion and an

enthusiasm to preserve and transmit the Hindu traditions and way of life."

BRITAIN

Youth Input

About 50 young Hindus met at the House of Lords in Britain February 4, 1999, to discuss their future with community leaders. The "British Hindu Youth Initiative" was hosted by Lord Navnit Dholakia, one of the few Hindus in Britain's House of Lords. The initiative is intended to help youth develop professionally, as well as to train a new generation of Hindu leaders, said Shri Deepak Naik of the National Council of Hindu temples. It will bring together 1,000 families and allow them to exploit existing community resources--for example, finding mentors for a youth's chosen profession. A central database will track the resources, as well as youth projects. A specific goal is to ensure trained leadership for existing Hindu organizations.

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USA

Texas Temple

The Hindu Temple of San Antonio sits on a serene hill outside the city made famous for the 1836 siege of the Alamo. The main shrine is for Lord Vishnu, as are many other temples in the US. But the nearby octagonal shrine housing Ardhanarishvara is believed unique, says Mrs. Pemmaraju. This was her lifelong dream which turned into reality when she and her husband accepted our publisher's 1992 offer to send an icon of Ardhanarishvara--Siva as half-man and half-woman--indicating that God is both male and female. Following a new trend, the temple project has proceeded on a cash basis, incurring no debt and paying no interest.

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USA

Siva Leaps to Hawaii

The world's only known complete set of the 108 dance poses of Lord Siva in bronze now resides in

Kadavul Hindu Temple, Kauai, Hawaii, USA. These are exquisite bronze pieces, each weigh 15 pounds and are a foot high. They have been carefully cast by the master craftsman Sri Devasenapathi Sthapathi of Swamimalai, South India. "It was a challenging work," he said of the eight-years effort. "The poses had to be meticulously sculptured, with exact expressions on the face and uniformity." With these poses, Siva, as the King of Dance, set the pattern for much of Indian dance.

JAINISM

Count Us Out

Jains do not want to be counted as Hindus in the India census of 2001. According to a letter by Prakash Mody to the Census Commissioner of India, someone is trying to have Jainism listed only as a part of Hinduism and not as a separate religion. Mody, a Canadian Jain leader, said, "We are a minority, but not an insignificant religion. Jainism is a distinctively different religion by itself and should be listed separately." According to one calculation, in 1991 there were 3.2 million Jains in India. Buddhists, too, have objected to being included under the broad definition of "Hinduism."

MALAYSIA

And the Winner is...

The Malaysia Hindu Sangam held the 12th annual Bhagavad Gita/Ramayana Festival 1999 on February 27. A total of 180 boys and girls from five to 21 participated in five different age groups. The two-day festival, attended by 400 people, was a combination cultural show, held at the Sri Lakshmi Narayan Temple in Kuala Lumpur and contest on the Ramayana and Bhagavad Gita, held at a local secondary school. For the Gita, children had to correctly recite or sing five or six verses, and then give a summary of their meaning. Various local ashrams helped train the children in recitation and interpretation. For the Ramayana quiz, groups of four competed to answer questions posed on a computer screen. There were many prizes, both trophies and engraved plates, and a treat for everyone in the younger groups.

SOUTH INDIA

Tenants Stiff God on Rent

Many ancient temples of South India are struggling to get enough income to perform daily pujas or even light the oil lamps in the sanctum.

The problem is the temples can't collect rent owed on land and buildings owned by them, according to a report in The Hindu. Unpaid rent has backed up to a staggering us$21.4 million, with little chance of recovering even ten percent. One of the reasons for this backlog is the government's issuing mandates for economic and political reasons excusing the renters from paying--19 times since the 1970s. The government also adjusted the tenant-owner ratio of sharing from 60:40 to 75:25. Still the temples cannot collect. The Vedaranyeswara Temple owns 11,000 acres, but last year it only received 12 tons of rice. The temples are praying that the government doesn't renew the rent exemptions that expire on June 30, as this year's a bumper harvest.

THE VEDAS

God's Word, Sages' Voices

He through his lordship thinks on beings of the earth,
On heavenly beings through his high imperial sway.
Come willingly to our doors that gladly welcome thee, and heal all sickness,
Rudra, on our families.

Rig Veda 7.46.2

He who dwells in the light, yet is other than the light,
Whom the light does not know, whose body is the light,
Who controls the light from within--he is the atman within you.
Shukla Yajur Veda, Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 3.7.14

Whatever moves in this universe, whatever is either seen or heard,
Whatever is inside or outside--all is pervaded by the Lord.
He is therein established.
Krishna Yajur Veda, Mahanarayana Upanishad 244?245

I'll not sell you, not for a thousand or ten thousand pieces!
O Indra, you are more to me than a father.
I count a brother naught compared to you. You and a mother,

O bountiful, vie with each other in generous giving and in bestowal of joy.
Rig Veda 8.1.5?6

The Vedas are the divinely revealed and most revered scriptures, sruti, of Hinduism, likened to the Torah (1,200 bce), Bible New Testament (100 ce), Koran (630 ce) or Zend Avesta (600 bce). Four in number, Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva, the Vedas include over 100,000 verses. Oldest portions may date back as far as 6,000 bce.

Who Is a Hindu?

"Acceptance of the Vedas with reverence; recognition of the fact that the means or ways to salvation are diverse; and the realization of the truth that the number of gods to be worshiped is large, that indeed is the distinguishing feature of the Hindu religion." B.G. Tilak's definition of what

makes one a basic Hindu, as quoted by India's Supreme Court. On July 2, 1995, the Court referred to it as an "adequate and satisfactory formula."