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Published by Anonymous on Oct. 02, 1998

Diaspora

COMMUNITY

Helping Strangers

I thought that was awfully nice of them," said Debbie Marsh in a hot and muggy Yuba City, California, after she stopped by the Sri Narayan Hindu Temple for free cold drinks and fruit. Every year temple members serve whoever drops by, a continuance of their East Indian tradition. "It's to please God," explains temple spokesman Paul Mehta. "All nationalities, all cultures come close to love each other." Marsh told Mehta, "I think it's wonderful you guys are doing this."

TEMPLES

Festival of Renewal in Malibu

Three days of religious fervor fueled devotees June 5, 6 and 7 at the Shri Venkateshwara temple in Malibu, California. The event centered around the installation of new deities in the Ganapati, Siva and Subramanyam shrines of the new Siva complex. Twelve priests, headed by Thanga Bhattar from New Orleans, with some 50 years of experience under his sash, performed dozens of rituals, commencing 10am Friday and lasting until late Sunday afternoon. In addition to the six resident Vaishnava priests, six Saiva priests were invited to assist: Bhairava Sundaram from Boston; Bhairava Murthy from Flushing, New York; Sundareshan from Nashville; Chandrashekhar Sharma from Detroit and Vaidyanathan Shastry from Washington, D.C. An estimated 6,000 people

attended. "I have seen many temple events in South India, but this tops them all in authenticity, approachability and enthusiasm," commented a tearful 75-year-old woman.

FOR THE BLIND

Braille Dharma

It almost seemed that in order to be blind and religious, you had to be Christian. When Damara Shanmugan searched the internet for "braille Bible" she found 93,900 hits. "When I searched 'Hindu braille,' " she recalls, "there were 3 hits, and upon inspection, none of them actually offered any Hindu scriptures in braille, even though there are about 3 million blind readers of English braille in the world today." By founding the SHIVA Braille Foundation, Damara hopes to tip the braille scale the other way. She is sending braille transcriptions of Hindu teachings free of charge to any individual school or library that requests them.

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ECO-PIRATES

Stolen Sandals

Awakened by a crash, son of Karnataka Cooperation Minister, S.S. Patil, alerted house security. But it was too late to stop rogue tree poachers from stealing a mature, sacred sandalwood tree. The brazen theft of June 5 punctuates a persistent concern for Bangalore police and residents alike. Police commissioner L. Revannasiddhaiah assures, "The latest is the handiwork of a gang close to Bangalore. It is just a matter of time before we apprehend them."

ANIMAL RIGHTS

Bovine Rescue

The verdict is still out on who was really saved, the crying bovine or the men who freed him. In either case, the miraculous moment in a Hong Kong slaughterhouse has changed the lives of many. One bison, about to become beef, fell to its knees and began weeping. The ten seasoned slaughterers who witnessed this also began to cry. "I began to shake," one butcher recounts. "The hair on my skin stood on end. We knew that none of us would be able to kill him." Collectively they bought the bison and gave him to a Buddhist monastery where he could "live the rest of his life in peace." Only after assuring the beast that it would not die did it stop its tears and follow the changed men to freedom. Three workers have quit, vowing never to kill another animal.

PILGRIMAGE

A New Cave Is Discovered

Every year they go. The threat of death by wretched weather or weathered terrorists cannot dissuade them. These hardy, humble pilgrims to the Amarnath ice Lingam cave are certain that the benefits of their arduous devotional trek far outweigh any risk of mere physical calamity.

In 1996, weather claimed the lives of 300. In 1995, Muslim separatist guerrillas staged two bomb attacks upon the heavily guarded pilgrims. This year, well over 30,000 pilgrims reached the sacred destination. But many rejoiced as much in what they found along the way. "Tell the people that if you want to see Hindu-Muslim unity, visit this place," Mrs. Poonam Mehta of Mumbai told *The Hindu*. Her husband, Arun, describes the muslim locals as "excellent people" and adds, "Next year we

will bring our children."

Unbeknownst to the Mehtas, on July 15, Doda District security forces had a lethal confrontation with foreign mercenaries who had planned to attack pilgrims. According to police reports, three militants were killed in the gun fight and several automatic weapons and grenades were confiscated.

Elsewhere, in the Zaskar Valley of eastern Ladakh, minister of state for tourism, Tsetan Namgyal, has disclosed that a Siva Lingam much larger in size than Amarnath's has been discovered inside a similar cavern at a height of about 4,000 meters. The discovery, now being officially investigated, was made by Buddhist lamas during a recent visit to the area.

FASHION

Bindi Hits The Big Time

It would seem that the Cool Dot Club [Turning Cruel to Cool, July, 1998] has capped a cultural coup. Now, Hindu youths' biggest concern about wearing their bindi, the Hindu sectarian forehead mark, is whether it's in step with latest fashions. July's cover of the rave teen magazine, 19, shows a young Euro-damsel sporting a Hindu bindi. But that's just the bindi beginning. Stuck on every cover in the UK was a free package of bindis and quasi-Indian tatoos.

THE VEDAS

God's Word, Sages' Voices

Words cannot describe the joy of the soul whose impurities are

cleansed in deep contemplation--who is one with his atman, his own Spirit. Only those who feel this joy know what it is.
Krishna Yajur Veda 6.34

There is on Earth no diversity. He gets death after death who perceives here seeing diversity. As a unity only is It to be looked upon--this indemonstrable, enduring Being, spotless, beyond space, the unborn Soul, great, enduring.
Shukla Yajur Veda, Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.4.19?20

What people call salvation is really continence. For through continence man is freed from ignorance. And what is known as the vow of silence, that too is really continence. For a man through continence realizes the Self and lives in quiet contemplation.
Sama Veda, Chandogya Upanishad 8.5.1.

By means of the hymns one attains this world, by the sacrificial formulas the space in-between, by holy chant the world revealed by the sages. With the syllable Aum as his sole support, the wise man attains that which is peaceful, unaging, deathless, fearless--the Supreme.
Atharva Veda, Prashna Upanishad 5.7

"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."