Briefly . . .
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GANAPATI PUJA IS NEITHER misconduct nor grounds for discipline. So ruled a Kerala court in the case of a government employee who sought Lord Ganesha's blessings when his office was shifted to a new building. The court ruled that since the puja was paid for by the devotee, and no one was required to attend, the religious service did not violate the Government's secular status. "We have no doubt that secularism is not an anti-religious doctrine," the Court ruled.

LONDON'S ARCHWAY Murugan Temple glowed with devotion while six-flamed lamps were waved by six chanting pujaris as the Jaffna Tamil community observed the Nallur Chariot Festival from half a world away. In sympathy for Sri Lanka's ongoing bloodshed, devotees observed a 25-day vow of strict vegetarianism culminating with puja, Devaram singing and parading the Deity around the temple. "There was even a moment of madness that marks a potent Muruga festival, when an amma cried out in anguish for the plight of Jaffna's people, and Skanda's Vel dissolved her suffering. All was holy this night," writes devotee Easan Katir.

THIRTY SACRED SIMIAN residents of Kathmandu's Pashupatinath Temple were buried with full Vedic honors after being electrocuted by a new high-voltage barrier. Fifty-one chanting Brahmins lay the shroud-wrapped monkeys, revered

as incarnations of Hanuman, in a mass grave at Nepal's holiest shrine. Temple devotees watched in helpless horror as monkeys who rushed to the fence to rescue those just electrocuted were themselves killed.

HINDU HUSBANDS seeking divorce in India must go through the civil courts, and are often ordered to pay alimony and child support, but not Muslim men. India's highest court recently acceded to sharia, Islamic law, in matters of Muslim divorce, which states that a man's obligation to his ex-wife and children lasts only three months. Hindu wives claim many husbands are converting to Islam to bypass divorce court.

HUNDREDS OF MONASTERIES in India are in turmoil. In response, leaders have formed an 11-member board for the "control, maintenance and all-around development of Hindu religious places," reports The Hindu. The board is headed by Puri's Shankaracharya, Swami Adhoksbjanand, and only dharmacharyas, Shankaracharyas and saints can serve on it. "Of India's 50,000 monasteries, 30,000 are reportedly financially sound, but 720 are involved in internal disputes. We intend to ask them to resolve their disputes within two months; otherwise the board shall intervene and install the right person there," the Shankaracharya resolved.

SPIRITUALITY ISN'T USUALLY part of a Western doctor's curriculum, but North Carolina's Wake Forest University is now one of six US medical schools to receive a $10,000 grant to teach tomorrow's physicians how to incorporate spirituality into patient care. "It's as important as good nutrition and exercise. Contemplative meditation is like a good drug; the

body was made for prayer," said one instructor, an ordained minister.

MORE TEMPLES MAY MEAN fewer youth straying from their religion. That's how Hindus in Toronto are approaching the dilemma of kids' growing away from--not into--their heritage. While the community supports five temples, "there are not enough temples in consonance with the growing number of Hindus," said Dr. Bhudendra Doobay, President of the Vishnu Hindu Temple. Ontario recently granted $750,000 toward a new $2.5-million Gujarati Community Centre.

MADRAS IS NO MORE--at least not officially. Following the lead of Mumbai, once Bombay, the Tamil Nadu government obliterated 300 years of Christian colonial influence by renaming India's fourth-largest city Chennai. The name is believed to be short for Chennapatnam and traceable to the 16th-century regional ruler Chennappa Naicker. Ironically, it was he who, in 1693, sold the village to the British. The government plans to establish Tamil as the official language of this southern state, all of which was known as Madras until 1967.

A BACKROAD TO Godhead--pardon the pun--was inaugurated on Janmashtami at Bhaktivedanta Manor just north of London. Amid Vedic chanting and with help from cinema star Rishi Kapoor, the opening of the new driveway ended a ten-year legal battle with the local Hertsmere Council over ISKCON's use of the land for a public Krishna temple. The alternate access road, which now bypasses the village of Letchmore Heath, was completed in just four weeks. Villagers had

complained that the crowds would spoil the environment of the local green-belt.

THE FEARED AND REVERED tiger is quickly approaching extinction, reports the World Wide Fund for Nature. Two-thirds of the world's estimated 4,600 wild tigers live in India, the rest in a dozen other Asian countries, but not even governments can stop the decline caused by habitat destruction and poaching. And the demand for tiger parts, used in certain Asian traditional medicines, is on the rise.

THERE GOES THE timeline…again. Archaeologists say rock art engraved on stone monoliths in Australia's tropical Northwest is believed to be 75,000 years old, while artifacts found at the base of the stones date back to 176,000 years. One theory holds that an Ice Age land bridge might have allowed migration between Australia and Indonesia 140,000 years ago--far earlier than previous theories allowed.

FIJI'S CONSIDERATION of a settlement abolishing constitutionally guaranteed political advantages for indigenous Fijians may win that nation's readmittance to the British Commonwealth. Ethnic Indians comprise about 45% of Fiji's population. A racially-biased system ensuring ethnic Fijian political dominance was adopted in 1990, resulting in the islands' expulsion from the Commonwealth. The proposal will require approval by two-thirds of Fiji's parliament.

INDIA'S HISTORY includes a venerable tradition of higher education, and from Takshashila to Valabhi to Odantapuri to

Benares much of its scholarly past is outlined in a new text, World Famous Universities of Hindus by Arjan Lal Sharma, 41 Bowrons Ave., Wembley, Middlesex, HA0 4QS, U.K.

Briefly is compiled from press, TV and wire-service reports and edited by Ravi Peruman, award-winning radio journalist at KGO in San Francisco.