Diaspora
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MONASTIC LIFE

Monks' Initiation Blocked

On February 8th, in Alwar, Rajasthan, India, District authorities raided the Jain monastery of Mahavir Bhavan. They took away 12-year-old Arun Arora and two other children who were under the guardianship of the priests. The legal "abduction" was mounted to prevent the performance of an age-old ceremony the following day, to initiate Arun as a Jain monk. In the week preceeding the event, planned as a grand public celebration, factions within the Jain community, social activitists and a local Hindi daily newspaper successfully agitated to thwart the "initiation of a minor boy against the provision of the law." Opponents contended that though the boy came to the monastery with his parents' consent when he was nine years old, he should not be initiated until the age of 18. They also plan to push for laws banning the practice in all communities. Jains siding with the priests point out that early initiation into monastic life is traditional in many religions.

INTERFAITH

Preying on Kashi

Christian evangelism is hot on the internet as the 9,000-strong Youth With A Mission in 130 countries coordinate a May '97 "30 Days Hindu Prayer Focus." Guidebooks and leaders denigrate Hinduism, Ganges worship and the power of Kashi: "One of the world's oldest cities, Varanasi (Kashi, 'City of

Light') on the banks of the sacred river Ganges draws thousands of Hindu pilgrims annually, as well as Western spiritual seekers. We see from history that Varanasi is a world influencer, a place of learning that goes out and touches the world. God wants Varanasi to be associated with the Gospel. India and Hinduism are entwined with powers that withstand Truth. It is time they bow the knee to the Lord Jesus!"

LITURGY

Rigorous Rites

India's Adi Sankara order of monks are spiritual authorities for much of India's Vedic priesthood and the large Hindu Smarta denomination. On instruction from the pontiff of Sringeri monastery in Karnataka, the fledgling Sringeri Vidya Bharati Foundation Inc., USA, is poised to make history by conducting a classic Athi Rudra Maha Yagna Vedic fire rite on a magnitude unheard of outside India. From Aug. 22 to Sept. 1, 121 priests will chant the most powerful prayer of Hindu scripture, called "Sri Rudram," (a 20-minute chant) 14,641 times in Shroudsburg, Pennsylvania. The 4,900 hours of prayer and fire ceremonies spanning 11 days are unprecedented in America.

POP CULTURE

Jeep Asanas

Inexorably, Hindu culture is seeping into all levels of the modern world. A striking example appeared in a February, 1997, National Geographic advertisement by Jeep. Yoga postures were featured including a tongue-in-cheek at-the-wheel asana called "The Jeep Grand Cherokee." The lead slogan, "Nine principal postures for achieving greater relaxation and Self-Discovery," unabashedly promoted the

culture of yoga to NG's ten million plus readers.

BANGLADESH

RKM in Dhaka

Founded in 1897 by Swami Vivekananda when West Bengal was still part of India, the Ramakrishna Mission in Dhaka is now in Bangladesh. Under the direction of Swami Aksarananda since 1972, the mission maintains a daily schedule of spiritual disciplines and teaching programs, a full annual festival roster, runs a junior high school, a students' home, a free library, a vocational training center, a medical project in Dhaka and facilities for monastic training. In Bangladesh there are ten affliated Ramakrishna Mission centers which all play a great role in relief and rehabilitation work. An able organizer, Swami Aksarananda has extended RK Mission works to the remote areas of 64 districts of Bangladesh.

INDIA

Siva's Priests Disenfranchised

On March 18, reports The Indian Express, India's Supreme Court upheld an Uttar Pradesh state act which abolished the rights of the priests of centuries-old Kashi Viswanatha temple in Varanasi to receive offerings from pilgrims. The legislation also transferred management of the temple to the state, disinheriting and "firing" the priests. It was a sad new piece of the puzzle of Hindu temple administration in post-feudal India in which a secular government is forced to compensate for the absence of any self-regulating infrastructure for Hindu temples and clerics. "Appalled by the mismanagement of the temple and the exploitation of the devotees," the court held that the priests were not a [passive] integral part of religion [like a

shrine or Deity] who could receive offerings simply by virtue of holding a hereditary post. "Priests are the servants of the temple" and only receive offerings for actual services rendered to devotees, the court decreed. The judgment held that scripture requires liturgical competence to merit appointment. Misconduct or unfitness for service constitutes grounds for dismissal.

It is true that innocent and pious pilgrims to the holy city are routinely rudely accosted by demanding priests. But the contrast of state intervention in Hindu affairs versus a hands-off policy toward Christian and Muslim institutions is perplexing for many Hindus.

ON THE NATURE OF GOD
From the Vedas, Mankind's Oldest Scripture

Fire is His head, the sun and moon His eyes, space His ears, the Vedas His speech, the wind His breath, the universe His heart. From His feet the earth has originated. Verily, He is the inner Self of all beings.

ARTHARVA VEDA, MUNDUKYA UPAN 2.1.4

God is, in truth, the whole universe: what was, what is and what beyond shall ever be. He is the God of life immortal and of all life that lives by food. His hands and feet are everywhere. He has hands and mouths everywhere. He sees all, He hears all. He is in all, and He Is.

YAJUR VEDA, SVETASVATARA UPAN 3.15-16

We know not. We cannot understand how He can be explained. He is above the known, and He is the unknown. Thus have we heard from the ancient sages who explained this truth to us.

SAMA VEDA, KENA UPAN 1.3

To Him ascend these hymns, these steed-swift prayers. He alone hears my words. All-mover, all-conqueror, conveyer of sacrifice, the Child, ever aiding, He assumes great power.

RIG VEDA 1.45.1-3

He is the Supreme Brahman, the Self of all, the chief foundation of this world, subtler than the subtle, eternal. That thou art; thou art That.

ARTHARVA VEDA, KAIVALYA UPAN 116

Verses here are from the Vedic Experience by Prof. Raimon Panikkar, viewable at www.HinduismToday.kauai.hi.us/ashram/HimalayanAcademy/Publications/VedicExperience/VEIndex.html

UNITED KINGDOM

Beef-Free Kids

Fear of mad cow disease is sprouting a new meatless generation in Britain. A Vegetarian Society survey shows 38-percent of 4-to-11-year-olds are avoiding beef and 20 percent avoid most meat. Only three percent of the children surveyed were strict vegetarians, but "almost a quarter of that age group were avoiding meat. They'll be comfortable with a vegetarian diet in the future," said Vegetarian Society communications manager Stephen Conner. A majority of parents agreed veggie tikes can be as healthy as carnivorous kids.

HOTEL SHAMAN

Hold the Rain

At the Bali Four Seasons resort, balians, Hindu priests/shamans, are contracted for a $100 fee to prevent rain during large outdoor events. The "rainstopper," as the Western hotel execs call him, returns the fee in the event of rain. At least he would. So far, the hotel has never had to ask for a refund. "When someone is planning a $10,000 event," said the hotel manager, "they don't worry about an extra $100 to guarantee them good weather."