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ONE-HUNDRED-EIGHT RECITATIONS of the Ramayana in 108 days at 108 mandirs was performed by Trinidad Pundit Munelal Maharaj, 29, during the island nation's celebration of the 500th birth anniversary of Saint Tulsidas, author of the most popular version of the Ramayana. The recitation took place between June 1 and September 16 in the Pundit's effort to establish "a new spiritual paradigm, a new spiritual consciousness to motivate all of us."

A COMPROMISE TO DATING is attracting both plaudits and brickbats from America's Patel community. A July convention in Illinois of the Charotar Patidar Samaj, one among many organizations of the 200,000-strong community, again included a "matrimonial meeting" in Illinois allowing over 300 boys and girls to mix and meet and maybe marry. Twenty-five couples wedded after last year's event. "The meetings attempted to combine the need to find a spouse within the confines of the community with some degree of independence for the boy or girl in the decision-making process," an official told India Abroad. Candidates met first at a "young adults" ice-breaker party (sans parents), then in smaller groups and, for those who so desired, short private meetings in booths on the convention floor. Not all parents approved of the process, which left them "out of the loop," and did not include calculations of astrological compatibility.

BALAJI'S BIRMINGHAM, England, home, a new \$6.6-million project described as a "millennium monument to Hindu culture," saw its foundation stone set in place in May. Completion of the Chola-style temple is expected in three years. The UK government's Millennium Commission granted half the cost for the edifice and its 12 acres.

FURIOUS TEXAS CATTLEMEN are suing talkshow hostess Oprah Winfrey. In a 1996 broadcast her guest said that feeding ground-up animal parts to cattle could spread "Mad Cow" disease to humans. "It has just stopped me from eating another hamburger," she exclaimed. Meat prices fell for the next two weeks, and beef mongers lost millions. The suit is possible because of a Texas "veggy libel law" against falsely disparaging products. When health-food advocates (often vegetarians) warned about the chemical Alar used to spray apples in 1989, apple prices plummeted. The libel laws are designed to constrain such critics, but may not hold up in court.

HINDUISM IN THE SCHOOLS of Devon County, England, is being refined by the Standing Advisory Committee for Religious Education. Dr. Jatindra Saha, part of a Working Party (with ten Christians) to write teaching materials on Hinduism, reports the need for careful monitoring of syllabus materials. "Although it contains some good points, hidden in the text there are some remarks that undermine the very fabric of Hinduism," he said. In the compulsory religious education for all government schools, Christianity is mandatory; the teaching of other religions is only "recommended."

A SHIVALINGA UNEARTHED in western Nepal is being hailed as the "Jyothirlinga of Jyothirlingas" because of its detailed natural markings and mystical effects. Sri Lil Bahadur Vishwakarma discovered it in 1994. He immediately began worshiping the stone and plans to construct a temple at the site. Nepal Hinduism Today correspondent Dr. Hari Bansh Jha who visited the site reports, "Om is written quite distinctly on it. Idols of Shiva and Parvati are found on the left side." Also, he said, identifiable on it are images of Vishnu, Ganesh, Kumar, Krishna and Hanuman, Kali, Nandi and trisula.

BASMATI RICE IS NOW PROTECTED, at least in name, by international law. The Trademark Administrative Commission has rejected a US commodity-trading firm's efforts to trademark the names Texmati, Kasmati and Jasmati. India's fight to protect its basmati rice market also includes a suit in Thailand over efforts to register the name Basmalli.

MUSICAL HISTORY is being made--and re-made when necessary--by Balakumar Dave, a 33-year-old Chennai resident and Ph.D. candidate who can play over 300 struck, plucked or blown instruments. The Guinness Book of Records is interested. But more importantly, relying on obscure scriptural references, Dave is reconstructing historical instruments lost over the centuries. He has built, for example, a pari vaadini, a seven-stringed instrument mentioned only once in a cave-temple inscription.

"EXTINCTION RATES" of traditional indigenous communities have reached epidemic proportions," reports the Hawaii-based Pacific Cultural Conservancy, whose ambitious fifty-year

Indigenous Initiative includes plans to bring together in the Netherlands 200 indigenous people from communities throughout the Pacific Rim to discuss priorities and solutions for the future.

MICROSOFT'S BILLIONAIRE chairman/CEO, Bill Gates, has pledged \$750,000 dollars worth of software to support Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Computer Education and Information Technology. Two centers have opened, in Mumbai and Chennai. Applauding the Bhavan's dedication to offering free computer training to underprivileged children, Gates and Microsoft will provide software for PCs provided by Siemens.

ISRAEL'S HOLY COW--that's how some describe ten-month-old Melody, believed to be the first red heifer born in the biblical holy land in two millenniums. Others consider the rare calf a harbinger of the Messiah. Liberals fear the calf's potential for inspiring religious zeal could upset Israel's already tenuous peace process. They want the calf destroyed.

THE HINDU PANTHEON is reaching new generations of Jimi Hendrix fans, with the re-release on CD of the electric-blues guitarist's 30-year-old album "Axis: Bold As Love." It carries the original cover which depicts a classical array of Hindu Gods and sages, with the Hendrix trio's faces installed atop the classical trimurti. "The back of the cover features, in garish Indian calendar style, Goddesses armed with weapons," writes Lavina Melwani. The cover has yet to inspire an Aerosmith-style backlash.

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