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India

Ganga Sagar's Shifting Shores

From the mouth of the Ganges in Bangladesh, going south along the coast to the mouth of the Hoogly River just below Kolkata, facing the Bay of Bengal, is one of the world's most magnificent delta regions. Known as the Sunderbans, "beautiful forest," this area is a UNESCO world heritage site and home of the world's largest mangrove forest. The complex region of waterways, shifting mud flats and small islands protects the interior from raging seas, supports a dense array of wildlife and, increasingly over the past century, human activity. It is now threatened by erosion.

At the Indian southern end of the delta in West Bengal lies the sacred Sagar Island, also known as Ganga Sagar. Each year on Makara Sankranti, when the sun moves from Capricorn to Sagittarius, a million souls come here to bathe and be cleansed of their past karmas. Some say it is the largest annual gathering in India.

The delicate ecosystem of the Sunderbans, made of silt and clay, is constantly changing. A 2004 study by Girish Gopinath and P. Seralathan showed that 29.8 square kilometers of Sagar had been lost to erosion since 1967. The region has become a focus for claims by global warming theorists that seas are rising.

But locals, while despairing that their farmlands are washing away, don't agree with climate change proponents. In an article published in April in the Deccan Chronicle, Ajay Patra, the headman of Ghoramara--an island in the Sunderban chain near Sagar that is likely to wash away soon--said: "It is not because of global warming. It's because of natural erosion. People settled this island before they should have, the land mass is unstable." In fact, Indians historically stayed off the land, knowing it was unstable. It was a Scot, Sir Daniel Hamilton, who pioneered settlement of Sagar in the late 19th century.

Whether it is due to natural erosion or rising seas, the Sunderbans are constantly shifting and various small islands are washing away. Ganga Sagar's shores are changing. It is still high enough above sea level to withstand considerable erosion. For how long? No one knows.

Vegetarianism

Filthy Silver Foil in Food

Varakh, or ultra-thin silver foil, is used on mithai, Indian sweets, and in Ayurvedic preparations such as chyavanprash. Business India reported that Indians eat an astounding 275 tons of silver each year. To produce this much varakh requires beating silver between the intestines of 516,000 cows and skins of 17,200 calves. Besides contributing to the death of animals, varakh is contaminated with cow flesh and fecal matter. A new mechanical process produces varakh without use of animal skin. It is wise to research the source of food silver.

UK

Caste Issues Migrate West

While UK Hindu dharma appears jubilant and healthy, behind the scenes the poison of caste discrimination may be undermining UK Indian society. A November 2009 report by the Anti-Caste Discrimination Alliance (ACDA) revealed that 58% percent of 300 persons surveyed said they have been discriminated against because of their caste. Dalits are the primary victims. Discrimination ranges from verbal abuse to being passed over for promotion and even being refused proper medical treatment by "high caste" doctors. ACDA is trying, so far unsuccessfully, to have the equality bill amended to make caste discrimination illegal.

USA

Hindu Youth Focus on Seva, Education

A fresh new hindu youthgroup called the "Hindu Students Association" (HSA) in the US Southwest kicked off their activities with a weekend South Region retreat, February 5-7, 2010. Over 90 students from Texas, Arkansas and Arizona gathered in rustic cabins by the lake in Fort Parker State Park in Mexia, Texas. HSA's goals are to bring more religion and knowledge into their service and cultural activities.

The two-day retreat comprised a homa conducted by Acharya Praveen Gulati from Houston, student-led discussions and debates and some high level guest speakers that students say made the retreat extra special. Anju Bhargava, a member of

President Obama's new Faith Advisory Council, flew in from New Jersey to share her work as a pioneer in Hindu public service. Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, who HSA's press release described as "renowned for his interaction with Hindu youth," flew from Hawaii to lead discussion groups. Rishi Bhutada from the Hindu American Foundation and Sewa International regional coordinator Vasudev Singh gave the students an eye-opening vision of work they can do for Hinduism after graduation. It was a powerful beginning for HSA.

Since February, the group has formed new chapters at universities in Houston and Dallas, held a leadership workshop in April, 2010, and conducted a huge event at the University of Arkansas linking religion and classical art forms.

Indonesia

More Siva Temples Unearthed

A recently discovered set of two small Siva linga temples found in Yogyakarta may be, according to some experts, the best-preserved ancient monuments in Java. They were discovered several feet underground at a site next to the mosque of the Islamic University of Indonesia where a new library was planned. The construction crew, finding unstable soil, excavated more deeply and hit on a temple wall. Government archeologists descended, excavating the site in 35 days to uncover the 1,100-year-old shrines.

"The temples are not big, but they have features that we haven't found in Indonesia before," said Herni Pramastuti, who runs the Archaeological Office. Timbul Haryano, an expert on Hinduism in Southeast Asia said, "Hinduism was Indonesia's main religion for 1,000 years. It's influence is still strong." Indonesia prides itself on the peaceful coexistence of Hinduism and Islam.

Ahimsa

Veggie Kids Stand Tough for Animal

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Maclean's, a Canadian magazine, ran an unusual piece in February titled "Militant 7-year-old vegetarians." Carolyn Kuchta's six-year-old daughter became a vegetarian two years ago, becoming so fastidious about it that she would not even eat food that had been touched by utensils used to prepare meat. Daisy Sharrock's daughter Kyna became a vegetarian at five. "It happened suddenly," Daisy says. "Once she cognitively knew what a bird was and realized this was chicken, she didn't want to eat it." The parents' biggest challenges are teaching tolerance for

omnivores while keeping healthy protein intake high.

Music/Sculpture

First Granite Indian Oboe

The amazing south indian oboe known as "nadaswaram," traditionally made from a special variety of wood, has a piercing sound that touches the spirit. Sculptor Chinnakkannu used a single piece of hard black granite to make an all-stone version.

Heritage

Smithsonian US Indian Project Alive

Homespun: the Smithsonian Indian American Heritage Project is a major initiative by the Smithsonian to showcase Indian American history, contributions and experiences at the Smithsonian Institution, the world's largest museum and research complex. There are 2.8 million Indian Americans, yet their struggle and emergence in the US is largely missing in history and unknown to the general public. HomeSpun is planned to include a national traveling exhibition, related public programming, a dedicated website and a middle school curriculum guide, all subject to the availability of materials and funds. The entire project will be made available to the 24 million visitors who come to the Smithsonian annually. After a year, the project is gaining considerable traction, but is still in a fund-raising phase. See: www.homespun.si.edu India/Indonesia/France

Shadow Puppets Wow France

The art of shadow puppet theater originated in India and migrated to Indonesia ten centuries ago. The puppets, known as "wayang kulit," were featured at the Festival de l'Imaginaire in April at The Center of Documentation of World Theater in Vitre (a two-hour drive from Paris). The exhibition ran until May 12th. Through photos, videos, maps and lectures, visitors to Brittany gained insights into the importance and relevance of shadow puppet theater in modern times.

The humorous, captivating media draws primarily on tales from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. In India it begins with the worship of Ganesha. Shows command huge audiences in India and Indonesia.

In Java and Bali, wayang kulit is an advanced art form, with master puppeteers, known as dalang, mesmerizing audiences for hours on end. Dalang masters are well paid and enjoy high prestige as performing artists. A dalang may sit cross-legged

for nine hours during their light-and-shadow shows, narrating, manipulating puppets and guiding the gamalan musicians. Because of their endurance and uncanny skill, dalang are highly venerated and believed to be endowed with mystical powers.

Briefly Gandhi's satyagraha legacy

has come to life in the unusual context of the mid-east conflict. Palestinian villagers of the West Bank's Beit Jala village under the leadership of Ahmad Lazza are training in nonviolent protest against the Israeli occupation. Recent visitors to the area included Martin Luther King III and Gandhi's grandson Rajmohan, who talked about the principles and attitudes behind waging a nonviolent struggle.

courageous ladies in maniaya,

Allahabad, India, have defied tradition by taking up the profession of priests who perform last rites. The Vedas do not proscribe women from conducting cremations. In cases where the male priest (mahapatra) has died and left no son, daughters are stepping in as a matter of economic survival. Dressed in saris, the maharajin buas, are chanting the Vedas and officiating at funeral pyres along the Ganges. After three years of resistance, villagers are accepting the maharajins and gradually going to them for related rites, such as shraddha.

Scotland's wardlawhill

Church has been acquired by a 400-family Hindu community in Ruthergien, in the outskirts of Glasgow. It will be transformed into the Sri Sundara Ganapathi Temple. For more information, see: [http:// www.hindutempleofscotland.com/](http://www.hindutempleofscotland.com/)

India's new National green

Tribunal, NGT, will be setting up a specialized network of Environment Courts under the National Environment Protection Authority (NEPA). This will make India the first country in the world to give common citizens a specific venue to seek judicial remedies in cases of environmental damage.