Global Dharma
Category : January/February/March 2011
Published by dharmalingam on Nov. 26, 2010

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India

A Victory For Ganga Champions

The thought of dams in the Himalayas evokes images of the giant, highly controversial Tehri dam, which impounds the Bhagirathi River. High above Rishikesh, its reservoir generates 1,000 megawatts. But its construction required massive deforestation and the relocation of 100,000 people. Built on a seismic fault line, it poses the risk of catastophy.

Hundreds of other dam projects have been proposed for the Himalayan region. Eighteen were scheduled for the Bhagirathi, the sacred river that carries water from Gomukh in Gangotri for 217km to Devprayag, where it merges with the Alaknanda River to become the Ganges proper. Just two Bhagirathi dams are operational, the giant Tehri and the Maneri Bali I. The latter is a "run-of-the-river" dam, which means it diverts the river into an underground tunnel to generate power. This type of dam does not create a surface reservoir to submerse forest tracts and habitation. Instead, it it leaves the river bed dry. Road building and underground blasting required to build the dam destroys the pristine surroundings. If all the current plans for similar dams were realized, the Ganges would be a dry river bed all the way from Gangotri to Haridwar.

Recently environmentalists and other people who oppose the dams prevailed. The Loharinag Pala project, just 70km from Gangotri was halted in March 2009, after noted India scientist, A. D. Agarwal, nearly died during a hunger strike in protest. "The water is not ordinary water to a Hindu. It is a matter of the life and death of Hindu faith," pleaded Agarwal, former dean of the Indian Institute of Technology. On September 2, 2010, under pressure from environmental and religious groups the Central Government officially cancelled the dam. This was the third such cancellation. The government finally declared the 135 km stretch from Gangotri to Uttarkashi as "sensitive" under the Environmental Protection Act. A coalition of environmentalists and Hindu groups under the leadership of Swami Avimukteshwaranand, the authorized representative of the Shankracharya of Dwarka and Jyotirmath, was instrumental in persuading the government to

intervene. Search Google and YouTube for "Save the Ganga."

India

Ayodhya Split Three Ways by Court Decree

The Babri Masjid was built in Ayodhya in 1532 by India's first Muslim conquerer, Babur. He was known for his ruthless destruction of Hindu and Jain temples and monuments. The site is widely accepted by Hindus as the birthplace of Lord Rama. In 1949, some Hindus surreptitiously placed images of Rama and Sita inside the Mosque, re-igniting the ancient dispute. A court case was filed, the site was deemed "a disputed structure" and remained locked, with the court case pending, for forty years. In 1992, 150,000 Hindus rallied at Ayodhya to advocate building a Rama temple on the site. Among them was a small coterie of "kar sevaks" who used the rally as an opportunity to destroy the Masjid. Subsequent bloody riots cost the lives of 2,000.

Excavations of the site by the Archeological Survey of India in 1970, 1992 and 2003 unearthed evidence proving the Masjid had been built on top of a Hindu temple. Finally, in September 2010, the High Court of Allahabad ruled to split the land into three parts, two of which were given to two Hindu groups and one to the Muslims contingent. The factions plan to appeal the division to the Supreme Court of India. But the general consensus is that this is a big step forward toward a resolution of the sixty-year-old dispute.

Temples

A Thousand Years and More

The Brihadishwarar Temple in the town of Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, was built by Emperor Rajaraja Chola in 1010ce. It is popularly known as the "Big Temple," with a 216-foot main sanctum tower. The world's first complete granite temple, it is a monument to the religious dedication and the heights of the Tamil Saivite Hindu culture.

In September 2010, a five-day festival marked the millennium celebrations. A thousand folk artists performed in two days of cultural events. A month-long dance festival was held beginning December 26.

The temple languished in neglect during the British Raj. Today it is a UNESCO designated World Heritage Site that is gradually returning to its status as a living spiritual and cultural center, a testimony to the power of timeless Hindu faith.

Transitions

Yogi Bua Passes On

Swami Bua was one of thegreatest yoga practitioners of the 20th century. He passed away in Bengalaru on July 23, 2010. Though he never disclosed his age, his closest devotees place the date of his birth at 1889 or 1890, making him 120 years old. Named Hindu of the Year in 1998, he was featured in the January 1999 issue of Hinduism Today, available on our website.

Animal Welfare

Better Care For Temple Elephants

Tamil Nadu has over 100 captive temple elephants. In the summer of 2009 veterinarian researchers studied them and found 90% suffered from one or more serious foot ailments. A conference of veterinarians, foresters, zoo-keepers, temple administrators and mahouts (including those with privately-owned elephants) was held at the Vandaloor Zoological Park and established a new diet and fitness regimen for the pachyderms.

Madurai Meenakshi's fifteen-year-old elephant, Parvathy from Assam, now has a shower-bath twice a day and periodic oil massages. And the temple mahouts must take their elephants out for two one-hour walks each day.

The daily menu of 550 pounds of grass now includes twigs, neem and mango leaves, nutrition balls, multi-vitamin tablets, and for dessert, at least a dozen bananas after each meal.

Environment

Banning Plastic Bags

Plastic bags, especially the ultra-thin polythene kind, are a menace if not recycled. Humanity produces nearly a trillion plastic bags a year. Most are discarded after a single use. They pollute the environment, take 1,000 years to degrade in land fills, cause the death of animals, are made from oil and clog drains in cities, leading to

flooding and loss of life.

Ireland taxes plastic bags to encourage recycling and alternatives. Many countries require shopkeepers to charge for bags. Plastic bags are banned in Bangladesh and India is moving in the same direction. Himachal Pradesh was the first Indian state to enforce the ban. Others are following suit. China banned ultra thin bags and requires a charge for others. But paper bags cost us millions of trees. What to do? Cloth bags and heavyweight plastic bags and cloth bags are good; you can clean and reuse them. Bags made of corn (available soon) will compost in two weeks. The key is, whatever type of bag you use: reuse, recycle, reuse, recycle...

Integration

The Patel Brand Is Big in USA

The 2000 US Census lists "Patel" as 172nd among the nation's 1,000 most common surnames, ahead of Gardner, Peters, Richards, Spencer and Andrews. Most Patel families came in the first wave of immigrants from India in the late 60s and 70s. As of 2007, 60% of the mid-range motels and hotels in America were owned by Indians, one third by Patels, mostly Hindus from Gujarat. No, patel does not mean "hotel." Traditionally, Patels were state land revenue collectors in ancient India. Business acumen and hard work runs deep in the genes of Patels, who are major contributors to the US economy and have made the American dream a reality.

Celebrity

Julia Roberts:"I Am a Hindu"

In August, 2010, 42-year-old actress Julia Roberts, in an interview for the fashion magazine Elle, said, "I'm definitely a practicing Hindu." She tells the magazine that she and husband Danny Moder and their three children, 5-year-old twins Phinnaeus and Hazel and 3-year-old Henry, all go to a Hindu temple to "chant and pray and celebrate." The interview came in the wake of her film "Eat, Pray, Love" which took her to India and Bali.

Her casual statement sent waves through the media, which made a big deal over her "conversion." In a later interview she clarified she did not convert during the shoot in India but had already been practicing Hinduism. Then America's sweetheart and model Hollywood mother put a lid on it, saying, "I'm done talking about religion." But by then the news had touched off yet another positive blogosphere discussion on the growing adoption of Hindu beliefs and values across the US.

Briefly

The naturally-formed ice Lingam in the 13,500-foot-high Himalayan Amarnath cave shrine of Lord Siva in Southern Kashmir had totally melted by August 2, 2010. The annual pilgrimage, which started on July 1 and ended August 25, brought 600,000 pilgrims--100,000 more than last year. Officials say visitor heat is causing the rapid meltdown.

The Archaeological Survey of India has unearthed the remains of 21 massive temples at Ashapuri, 36km from Bhopal. The project has been named "Bhootnath Temple Series," as the largest edifice is to Bhootnath, a form of Lord Siva.

Sikkim's government withdrew subsidies of chemical fertilizers in 2003, gradually replacing them with organic alternatives. On September 2010, Chief Minister, Pawan Chamling, said, "Though the task ahead is challenging, we are absolutely committed to go 100% organic by 2015."

Research by the Pew Forum on Religion shows that nearly half of all Americans have changed or dropped their faith sometime in life, most before age 24. Half of that group have chosen not to join another faith.