

HINDUISM TODAY®

Affirming Sanatana Dharma and Recording the Modern History of a Billion-Strong Global Religion in Renaissance

Rudraksha Beads: Nepal's Cash Crop

SHUTTERSTOCK



(Cover) Blue rudraksha fruits fresh off a tree ready to be cleaned and sold—amazingly, such sales are a full six percent of Nepal's gross national product; (above) the traditional banana leaf may be the most eco-friendly plate on the planet today—story page 30

JULY/AUGUST/SEPTEMBER, 2023 • The Hindu Year Śobhakṛta, 5125 • शोभकृत

Bodhinatha Veylanswami

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SHUTTERSTOCK PHOTO BY ROOP DEVI

Homes that Celebrate Art & Divinity

A woman in Rajasthan sits in her colorful home's courtyard. Our story by Anne Petry explores the divinely decorated domiciles of Tamil Nadu.... Page 56

GLOBAL DHARMA

TEMPLE RENEWALS

Temples Are Reconsecrated In India and Singapore

THOUSANDS OF DEVOTEES WIT-
nessed the highly antici-
pated kumbhabhishekam of the
ancient Sri Dhandayuthapani
Swamy Palani Murugan Temple
in Tamil Nadu, India, in early
2023. Usually occurring after
renovations every 12 years, this
one followed a 17-year gap. The
hilltop temple is the third of six
Arupadai Veedu temples on a fa-
mous pilgrimage circuit extolled
by saints and sages through the
ages.

Around 9am on January 27,
reported *The Hindu*, chanting of
“Arohara” filled the air as priests
carried large kumbhas of water
and herbs—sanctified during

the previous three days—from
the yagasala to the main shrine,
where they were poured over the
gold-plated kalasams atop the
towers. Some 6,000 people were
allowed atop the hill to witness
in person, while devotees below
were provided various amenities
including LED screens on which
the event was livestreamed. About
US\$2 million had been spent on the renovations.

Weeks later, Singapore’s oldest
Hindu temple, nearly 200 years
old, reopened after a year-long,
US\$2.6 million restoration. *The
Straits Times* reported about
20,000 devotees braved early
morning rain on February 13



Shower of petals: Flowers were scattered on top of each Palani Murugan temple tower, much to the devotees’ excitement

to throng the Sri Mariamman
Temple in Chinatown for its
kumbhabhishekam. Amid
reverberation of chants, priests
climbed the rajagopuram and six
vimanams to perform the rites.
“The consecration is just as big an
affair as it was in my childhood.
There is the same intense pious-
ness, and yet much less hassle,”

said devotee Sumathi Nadesan.
Electric lamps illuminating
the Sri Mariamman Deity have
been replaced with traditional
oil lamps. The sanctum will now
evoke feelings akin to being in a
“mother’s womb,” temple chair-
man S. Lakshmanan said.

Livestream—
youtube.com/live/Qn5tcTDko



Special guests: Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong receives a commemorative gift while attending the ceremonies

AFGHANISTAN

Decoding Links with India

A BOOK TITLED *THE AFGHAN CONNECTION*
was published in mid-2022 by Dr.
Pramod V. Pathak, a PhD in Vedic litera-
ture. As reviewed by *The Organizer*, this
magnum opus, available at amazon.in,
draws parallels between India’s ancient
Vedic civilization and the Vedic culture
prevalent in pre-Islamic Afghanistan.

Pathak shows the striking resemblance
between antiquities and symbols of
Vedic culture and artifacts obtained
from archaeological sites in Afghanistan.
Examples include sacred bull seals, fire
temples, priest-king heads and altars,
and the importation of lapis lazuli from

Badakhshan in Afghanistan to India.

He describes the major modern-day
Afghan tribes’ connections with Rigvedic
tribes dating from the historical Battle of
Ten Kings. The word *Afghan* comes from
avagana—meaning *isolated* or *solitary*—
in the 6th-century text *Brihatsamhita*.

The fourth chapter details how people
of Vamasthana province followed Vedic
culture and resisted repeated coercive
Islamic conversion attempts. The most
popular deity of their pantheon was Imra
(identical to the Vedic Indra).

The area eventually fell to the rulers of
Kabul, who renamed it Nuristan.



Ancient seals: A sacred bull stamp seal from the Harappan Indus Valley civilization which encompassed what is now northeast Afghanistan

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: KARTHIKEYAN G; LAWRENCE WONG; AMAZON.IN

FRANCE

Bali Wows Audiences in Paris

THE PHILHARMONIE DE PARIS
is presenting “Dances and
Masked Ballet of Bali” through
September 18, 2023. Their web-
site says each part is accompa-
nied by a full gamelan—an en-
semble of primarily percussive
instruments made of bronze
and bamboo, also including
drums, flutes, strings and voice.
This large-scale evening high-
lights jewels of Balinese dance.

After a musical opening with
the gamelan gong kebyar, which
involves 25 instrumentalists and
is marked by explosive changes
in tempo and dynamics, the first
hour of the evening presents a
series of emblematic Balinese
dances.

The second hour begins with
a musical piece played on a
magnificent gamelan semar
pegulingan—the older, sweeter
and more reserved ensemble—
which is rarely heard nowadays.
Then the legong kraton (royal
narrative ballet) takes the stage,
a stunning peak of classical Ba-
linese dance, finally ending with
a spectacular story involving
two gamelans, beautiful masks
and a choreographed kecak
choir. As the evening winds
down and the lights become
dim, the performers close with
the chant “Aum Shanti, Shanti,
Shanti Aum.” Watch a recording
of this live performance at bit.ly/bali-paris.



At the Paris Philharmonic: The Jaya Semara Wati troupe from Bali’s Sebatu village perform in France in March, 2023

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: BBC.COM/SUSHMITA PATHAK;
BIV.COM/DAN TOULGOET; JOACHIM BERTRAND



Resembles lamb skin: Nachiket Kuntla, head of R&D at Phool, holds up a sheet of Fleather, embossed to look like leather

ENVIRONMENT

From Flowers to Leather?

MEET THE STARTUP PHOOL
in Kanpur, first in India
and one of many companies
worldwide researching leather
alternatives made from bio-
materials rather than plastic. A
BBC profile shares how Phool
co-founder Ankit Agarwal
started with upcycling flowers
into incense sticks after notic-
ing massive amounts of temple
waste flowers being dumped
into rivers, where they leach out
harmful chemicals from pesti-
cides. (*BBC* did not mention any
pesticide residue in the incense.)

In 2018, Phool scientists no-
ticed a whitish layer on a pile

of waste flowers on the factory
floor. Experiments with feeding
the flowers to microorganisms
sourced from the jungle near
Kanpur eventually resulted in a
fabric-like, microbial material
resembling the feel of leather.
They call it “Fleather.” The sub-
stance is entirely biodegradable,
whereas the competition still
incorporates some polymers.

Phool has made several pro-
totype products—wallets, sling
bags, sandals and trainers. The
research goal now is to increase
fiber density for long-term du-
rability and the necessary ten-
sile strength for items like belts.

CANADA

British Columbia Rentals Allow Vegetarian-Only Ads

THE PRACTICE OF RENTING TO
vegetarian tenants is often
driven by the deep cultural and
religious tenet of ahimsa, not just
dietary preferences. An article
at BIV.com says that across B.C.
83,860 identify as Buddhists and
81,320 as Hindus. Landlords from
these religions often look for
vegetarian tenants to keep their
environment meat-free while
they rent their homes.

For renters, protection against
discrimination is addressed in
Section 10 of the B.C. Human
Rights Code. When shown a
Craigslist ad calling for “vegetar-
ians only,” lawyer Laura Track
said, “I don’t think this ad would
violate the Human Rights Code,
as it doesn’t appear to engage a
protected characteristic.”



Veggie rentals: No violation of the B.C. Human Rights Code



CONSECRATIONS

Iraivan Temple in Hawaii Installs Crystal Sivalinga

AT THE KAUAI HOME OF HINDUISM TODAY, the naturally formed 700-pound crystal Sivalinga had “temporarily” resided in Kadavul Temple since August 1987, awaiting its move to the all-granite Iraivan Temple. Over thirty years passed as the temple was arduously hand carved in Bengaluru, India, and assembled on our Garden Island.

Our architect, Selvanathan Sthapati, indicated that with the completion of the structure and the installation of the 11,000-pound, five-metal pedestal in the inner sanctum, it was time to install the Sivalinga.

Based on that instruction from our master builder and guidance from India’s Sivacharya priests, the auspicious dates of March 21–26, 2023 were set—but not publicized, due to lack of infrastructure for a large crowd. The six days of rituals, conducted by ten Adi Saiva priests, were livestreamed on our Kauai’s Hindu Monastery YouTube channel so all could watch. Subsequently, 45 days of mandala pujas to stabilize the



The big moment: (clockwise from left) Blessed kumbhas are poured simultaneously in three spots at 10:07 am on March 26; the crystal Deity, named Mahalingeshvara, days before final activation; the main kumbhas are prepared by four senior Sivacharyars

new vibration were performed by two of the priests. One Adi Saiva priest remains here to perform the daily nitya pujas.

Attendance must still be strictly limited until we have built new parking and safe

access facilities starting at our rudraksha tree grove. When all is ready, the Swarna Bandhana Maha Kumbabhishekam—the grand opening—will welcome larger numbers of pilgrims to Siva’s green jungle abode.



BRIEFLY...

WITH LOCKDOWN RESTRICTIONS finally lifted in Malaysia, an estimated 15 million-plus devotees attended Thaipusam festival celebrations in Penang in February 2023, according to *New Straits Times*. This was many more than usual, due to not being allowed to fulfill their penance vows in recent years. This also meant big business for kavadi makers, who had suffered for the past two years.

FIFTY-EIGHT MEN WERE INITIATED into the BAPS Swaminarayan

monastic order in January 2023 by Mahant Swami Maharaj, as part of the late Pramukh Swami Maharaj’s massive, month-long birth centenary celebrations in Gujarat, attended by more than 12 million. *Face2News* spoke with new monk Gunvaibhav Swami who effused, “It is their [gurus’] selfless life that inspires me to take this path of renunciation, service and devotion.”

TRAGEDY STRUCK THE ANNUAL Maha Shivaratri walking pilgrimage to Grand Bassin lake

in central Mauritius in February 2023 when a 26-foot high kanwar parade float returning home caught fire after hitting a high-voltage line. *Le Matinal* reported that the fire then caused a battery to explode. About fifteen people were injured and at least two did not survive. Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth canceled a planned trip to Ethiopia.

FERTILITY RATES IN INDIA ARE falling steeply across all religious groups, as reported by *Statista*, even as India has now become the most populous nation in the world. India is following China in reversing population growth; the number of children

born per woman in India had dropped to 2.0 by 2019. To maintain a stable population in any given region, not exceeding 2.1 births per woman is necessary.

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PHOTOS: RAJKUMAR MANICKAM; HINDUISM TODAY; SWARAJYA/TWITTER



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IN MY OPINION

Inter-Hindu Marriage Impact

Couples merging very different Hindu heritages are redefining the religion in America

BY MURALI BALAJI

WHEN MY WIFE AND I started dating, we thought our shared Hindu faith would make things simpler. We had friends who had dated non-Hindus who had encountered bumps when it came to how they would tie the knot and how the children would be raised. The fact that we were both Hindus meant we could sidestep those kinds of interfaith hassles.

We soon learned that, even though we both called ourselves Hindu, some key differences in the way we each practiced the faith complicated our relationship.

The Hindu identity of my wife’s family was shaped by generations of living in Guyana, a former British colony in South America. Their practice was shaped by the trauma of indentured servitude, pressure from Christian missionaries and cultural hybridity over generations in the West Indies.

My family traces its lineage to the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where our faith was shaped by thousands of years of rituals and rites of worship, some of them germane only to Tamils.

As our lives were intertwined, I adapted to singing devotional songs that were foreign to me while growing up. I learned to celebrate Holi, which is less known in South India. My wife, for her part, had to familiarize herself with my family’s observance of regional festivals such as Pongal, celebrating the sun Deity Surya, which is observed widely in the Tamil diaspora on January 14.

Our conflicts may not have the same implications as a Catholic marrying a Protestant. Nonetheless, nearly two decades after we met, we still occasionally encounter tensions about when to celebrate a given holiday or which mantras—prayers—are correct in certain religious observances. Over time we have come to understand that our differences are cultural deviations, and that our spiritual practices are enriched when we meld the best of both of our backgrounds.

In raising our child, we are combining



MURALI BALAJI

elements of our cultural practices and theological interpretations of Hinduism, making sure that he participates in the Hindu devotionals that enabled his Caribbean ancestors to maintain their religion through a life of bondage, while teaching him how to identify religious symbols in Tamil, my ancestral language.

Groups such as the Pew Research Center that study religious demographics don’t keep data on inter-cultural and inter-tradition relationships and marriages, but such bonds among American Hindus are clearly on the rise as the children of different diaspora communities meet at school or at work and have begun identifying more with the idea of being Hindu than belonging to a specific sect or tradition within the faith.

The choices American Hindus make about who they will marry will have profound implications for the next generation. In some sense, the implications are contradictory. Some Hindus will inevitably move away from regional and cultural identities—losing some of their grounding in the faith—while at the same time more deeply embracing a faith based on common devotional practice.

But younger American-born Hindus are also less attached to theological considerations or fidelity to a sampradaya, or philosophical tradition. As a result, more Saivites are marrying Vaishnavites or devotees of the Goddess Shakti. This could mean some sampradayas may see a dip in their memberships as more Hindus identify with a broader religious community and a more unified idea of American Hinduism, distinct from other Hinduisms in regions like South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Caribbean.

For those of us who are now raising that next generation, these changes are an opportunity and challenge as we redefine what it means to be Hindu in America.

MURALI BALAJI is a journalist and a lecturer at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

Merit, Demerit & Liberation

Yes, perform good deeds, but know there is more involved in the soul-maturing process leading to freedom from rebirth

BY SATGURU BODHINATHA VEYLANSWAMI

IN HINDUISM, HUMAN CONDUCT IS SUMMED up by two salient terms—*papa* and *punya*. *Papa* refers both to unethical action and the demerit earned through wrongdoing. Indian texts provide various lists of wrongful actions. Among all transgressions, injuring others, *himsa*, is considered the most serious offence. Conversely, refraining from injuring others, called *ahimsa*, is the foremost virtue. The *Mahabharata* extols its supremacy: "Ahimsa is the highest dharma. It is the highest purification. It is also the highest truth from which all dharma proceeds." In ashtanga yoga, the idea of avoiding wrongdoing is called *yama* or restraint. Sage Patanjali, in his *Yoga Sutras*, lists five famed restrains, of which *ahimsa* is the first. An excellent definition of *ahimsa* is found in the *Shandilya Upanishad*: "Ahimsa is not causing pain to any living being at any time through the actions of one's mind, speech or body." The text points out that the virtue is not limited to injuring others with one's body but also one's speech and even thoughts. So subtle is this transgression that one is admonished for hurting someone in a dream.

A common justification for resorting to violence is in retaliation for injuries inflicted on you, members of your family, your religion or nation. Many in the world today believe that in those instances, retaliation is not only permitted, it is one's duty. Hinduism does not support this "eye for an eye" mentality. In fact, our oldest scripture, the *Rig Veda*, speaks against it: "Return not blow for blow, nor curse for curse, neither meanness for base tricks. Shower blessings instead." Mahatma Gandhi put it boldly, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind." Individuals who have harnessed the instinctive tendencies to become angry and hurtful naturally manifest a greater concern for others.

This brings us to the opposing term—*punya*—virtuous action and the merit earned through right thought, word and action. Charity is a common way to earn *punya*, which is a kind of karmic bank account—giving to others—donating to Hindu temples, ashrams and community activities.

As we know, 21st century society is highly materialistic. Hindu youth are growing up with worldly, self-oriented motivations: wealth, career, name and fame. For the greater good, this materialistic tendency should be balanced by helping others. As I jokingly say in my talks, two Mercedes in the family garage is enough, meaning we want to be surrounded by quality possessions, but having no limits on luxuries one enters the slippery path of self-indulgence. It turns out the happiest among the wealthy are those who use their abundance for high purpose and avoid excessive gratifications. The noblest



among them are turning their immense wealth over to humanitarian causes. For example, Bill Gates, one of the world's richest men, founded the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to improve healthcare and reduce poverty worldwide. He has stated that wealthy people have a responsibility to use their resources to make the world a better place.

A second way to earn *punya* is selfless service, or *seva*, which is traditionally done at a temple or ashram, for example helping with the many tasks involved in preparing for a festival. In modern cities, this approach may not always work, especially when traveling from home to a temple or ashram takes a long time. There is a solution: redefine selfless service to include helping others wherever we are: at home, work, school, in the neighborhood and community. In its broadest sense, *seva* includes anything we do to help others that we are not being paid to do or don't have to do. Our recompense is good will, merit and good karma.

A Sanskrit term that describes the earning of *punya*, merit, is *ishthapurtam*. Swami Harshananda, in his *A Concise Encyclopaedia of Hinduism*, gives this explanation. "The term refers to the cumulative spiritual result or merit due to a man's performance of ritual worship and charitable acts. *Ishtha* includes all types of ritual worship, including the gifts given during its performance. *Purta* indicates the various acts of charity and public utility such as building and dedicating deep wells for the good of the public, building temples and gardens, free distribution of food, giving gifts, nursing the sick, and many other acts of charity sanctioned by the holy books." Swami Harshananda advocates sponsoring ritual worship, including *yajna*, or fire ritual, often conducted by many priests for the upliftment of the world.

A popular concept in Hinduism—in other religions, too—is that if we live virtuously, earning abundant *punya*, then after our transition from life on Earth we will permanently abide in the heaven worlds. The *Mundaka Upanishad* decrees this concept to be false. While the *punya* earned by *ishta* and *purta* does grant access to the heaven worlds, eventually that *punya* is used up and the soul is reborn once again. Verse 1.2.10 explains, "These deluded men, regarding sacrifices and works of merits as most important, do not know any other good. Having enjoyed in the high place of heaven won by good deeds, they enter again this world or a still lower one."



Worship: In a remote forest, a man and wife worship Siva as their *ishthapurtam*. They know this is part of the path that includes *tapas* and self-study leading to realization.

have taken birth in a physical body to grow and evolve into our divine potential. We are inwardly already one with God. Our religion contains the knowledge of how to realize this oneness and not create unwanted experiences along the way."

In talks on how we can grow and evolve into our divine potential, I use the analogy of dance. I ask the audience, "What is most needed for a youth to become good at Indian classical dance?" Invariably, many give the answer I have in mind: "Practice!" Reading books about dance won't make you a good dancer. Nor will attending classes without practicing what you have learned. Regular, disciplined practice is needed. Likewise, to grow and evolve into our divine potential—to manifest our inner perfection in our outer intellectual and instinctive nature—requires regular practice, called *sadhana*.

In dance, it is clear you need to start by making the body strong and limber. Then you systematically master the various movements, positions, gestures and expressions, combining them to perform simple dances. After that, more and more complex dances can be perfected.

We can think of the basic practices of selfless service and devotional worship as equivalent to the simpler dance steps. These steps are important but are not the entirety of the path to mastery. Philosophically, their practice creates a dualistic relationship with the Deity, called *dvaita* in Sanskrit. There are always two of you, the devotee and the Deity who is the object of your worship.

Meditation, a further step, is a deeper type of practice. In its most profound form, there are no longer two. You and the Deity are the same. However, it is not the personal God that you are one with, it is the impersonal aspect of God, *Satchidananda* or *Omnipresent Consciousness*. Beyond that there is an even deeper experience, which is oneness with the transcendental Source of *Satchidananda*. In philosophical terms, this experience is nondualism, called *advaita* in Sanskrit. It is the state of the *jivatma* experiencing itself as *paramatma*. This is *Paramatma Darshana*, Self Realization. The *Mundaka Upanishad* 2.2.3-4 instructs, "Taking as a bow the great weapon of the *Upanishads*, one should place in it the arrow sharpened by meditation, drawing it with a mind engaged in the contemplation of that (Brahman), O beloved, know that Imperishable Brahman is the target. The syllable *Aum* is the bow, one's self, indeed, is the arrow. Brahman is spoken of as the target of that. It is to be hit without making a mistake. Thus one becomes united with it as the arrow (becomes one with the target)." Translation by S. Radhakrishnan.

What is it, then, that grants the soul freedom from rebirth? It is *Paramatma Darshana*—the *jivatma* experiencing itself as *Paramatma* in the state of *jnana*, enlightened wisdom. Thus we can say that the fruit of *jnana* is *moksha*—total liberation from the cycle of birth and death on Earth.

My guru, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, gave a succinct description of this idea: "Deep inside we are perfect this very moment, and we have only to discover and live up to this perfection to be whole. We

Good works are needed to control the mind and enter deeper states of consciousness. They are fundamental steps on the spiritual path. While one is creating *papam*, he cannot really meditate. *Karmas* pile up, consuming mind and emotions, creating barriers, boulders, life after life. Deep meditation comes only when the mind is clear, the heart is pure, actions of past and present are resolved and *dharma* is fulfilled. Yes, perform good deeds, but know there is more involved in the grand, soul-maturing process leading to liberation.





SHUTTERSTOCK

LETTERS

Mindfulness

"The Hindu View of Mindfulness" (Publisher's Desk, Oct/Nov/Dec 2019) is a great study for those interested in understanding the Hindu perspective. The author does an excellent job of providing an overview of philosophical concepts and providing practical tips for how to incorporate mindfulness into our daily life.

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The Benefits of Ghee!

Thank you for the article "The Buttersweet Benefits of Ghee" (Oct. 1998). I came upon it while searching the web. It helped me a lot.

ANIKET GUPTA
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Advice from the Tirukural

Wherever it may wander, the world follows the farmer's plow. Thus despite all its hardships, farming is the foremost occupation. 1031

Those whose fields lie shaded by abundant sheaves of grain will see many nations overshadowed by their own. 1034

Those who eat food harvested with their own hands will never beg and never refuse a beggar's outstretched palm. 1035

Media's Negative Slant

This is a beautiful exposé on our complicated portrayal in the American media landscape: "Hinduism in the American Media" (Oct/Nov/Dec 2021). You've done a laudible job of taking us through the various eries. I've had a hard time contextualizing why this is so troubling to me. I think I'd rather be attacked than erased. The issue is that the media do both at the same time. They erase our connection to Hindu things like yoga, meditation and mindfulness, and then turn around and attack us for casteism, our Gods and our Vedas/Upanishads. It's disheartening to say the least. But I am glad other young Hindus are talking about it! We have hope if our eyes are open!

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Back to Basics

Kudos for the knowledge you have imparted in the educational insight "Hinduism in a Nutshell" (Jul/Aug/Sep 2019). I know we can all gain from it. I am thankful for HINDUISM TODAY. I have been a Hindu all my life, but am still learning the fine points needed to live the right way—to be good, do good, not expect anything in return and leave the rest to God.

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Your Amazing Self

Thank you, beloved Satguru, for your Publisher's Desk, "Introducing an Amazing Person," (Jan/Feb/Mar 2023), and for always explaining with incredible clarity about our internal

universes. We are greatly blessed to listen to you and follow you. Aum Namah Sivaya.

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Studying this article changed a lot for me. I was feeling sad and so lazy. Now I feel uplifted. Something I will remember to practice is being kind in thought, word and deed.

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Thoughts of Vrindavan

Hello, I am Kavita from Himachal Pradesh. Thank you for the article on Vrindavan (Oct/Nov/Dec 2003). I visited the sacred town on Holi where the festival was celebrated with passion and joy for Krishna ji. The colors on everyone's face made me smile from my heart. I forgot about my problems and all other things in world, just going on singing "Radhe Radhe." That was the best moment of my life. It is wonderful that this is a movement to clean up the holy town. There is so much plastic being used and needing to be removed from the streets. Please connect me to those cleaners so that I could help purify Janha ji's property. It will be blessing for me.

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Mysticism in Meditation

Thank you for sharing this excellent article "Hindu Mysticism," June 1987, which focuses strongly on the use of crystals. While crystal power is not a new concept, it has seen renewed interest in recent times with claims

Hindu basics: (left) Hinduism is a joyous, reverent, mystical faith, as evidenced in its fabulous festivals, such as the Kumbha Mela, pictured at left, being celebrated in Haridwar in 1998 on Mahasivaratri, where 25 million devotees gathered to honor and seek blessings of the Divine.

of healing and contacting spirit guides. The article offers a word of caution, however, that any method of contacting the higher worlds can also contact the lower ones. Also, once an object is used for Hindu worship, it must be regularly worshiped or disposed of properly. The piece provides an interesting perspective on the use of crystals in Hinduism and offers a glimpse into the mystical side of the religion.

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Siva Advaita

The article entitled "Siva Advaita" (March 1994) confuses the Shiva Vishishtadvaita (Shaiva qualified nondualism) of Shrikantha with Shiva Advaita (Shaiva nondualism) of Appayya Dikshita, which are totally different systems. The former is one step below Shiva Advaita and Advaita Vedanta, which are close to each other and are the highest steps,

according to Appayya in his work *Sivadvaita Nirmala*. An exponent of Shiva Advaita, he wrote several other books on this subject. While Appayya Dikshita is considered to be the first exponent of Shiva Advaita, this doctrine was originally embedded in the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* of the *Yajurveda* (Treta Yuga), the foundational text of Shaiva sampradaya (Shaiva tradition), wherein Shiva as Rudra is equated with Brahman (the absolute). That ultimate reality in this system is both personal (Saguna) and impersonal (Nirguna). On the contrary, in Shiva Vishishtadvaita stress is laid upon Saguna Brahman.

MILOSZ WOZNIAK
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Surely, Milosz's objection is not reasonable. He unnecessarily draws a difference between the terms *Shivadvaita* and *Shiva Visishtadvaita*. Sri Appayya Dikshita, in his commentary on the bhashya of Sri Nilakantha Sivacharya, popularly known as *Sivarkamani Dipika*, establishes that Shiva Visishtadvaita and Shivadvaita are one and the same. Not even a single doctrinal difference could be seen there. To avoid confusion, Appayya Dikshita maintained the term simply as *Shivadvaita*. Further, the work of Appayya Dikshita is called *Sivadvaita Nirnaya*, not *Sivadvaita Nirmala* as mentioned by Milosz. In his book *Sivadvaita of Srikantha*, Dr. S. S.

Suryanarayana Sastri (former HOD of philosophy, University of Madras) has dealt extensively with the system of Shivadvaita based on Dikshita's *Sivadvaita Nirnaya*, *Siddhantalesa Sangraha*, *Sivatattva Viveka* and such other works. I would suggest that Milosz study Sr. Sastri's book. Sometimes, Appayya Dikshita also uses the term *Shuddhadvaita* to denote *Shivadvaita*. Sri Sastri asserts that Shiva Visishtadvaita and Shivadvaita are one and the same.

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Letters, with writer's name, address and daytime phone number, can be mailed to:

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or visit: www.hinduismtoday.com/letters

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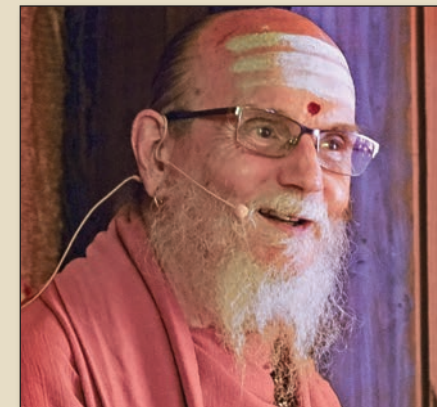
Convincing Young Hindus of Their Religion's Value

"Life is meant to be lived joyously;" our religion is the guidebook to make it so

By Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami,
publisher of Hinduism Today

Contemporary Hindu youth tend to be indifferent to religion, asserts A. Ramachan, professor of religion at Saint Olaf College in Minnesota, USA. In a 2017 Hinduism Today article, he writes that unless we take serious action, "Most [young Hindus will] pursue a fine education, achieve success in their careers, live productive...lives—all without any significant commitment to the Hindu tradition. It will not inform their choice of a profession, a marriage partner, their leisure activities or their political values. They will not conceive that religion might contribute to the pursuit of their primary life goals, or that they may have religious needs." Their choice, he says, is not between Hinduism and another religion. It is between Hinduism and no religion at all! In this situation, he urges, "We need to be clear about the ways a Hindu world view enriches individual and community life."

He has well expressed our magazine's mission! For several years, HINDUISM TODAY



has published articles and opinion pieces by young people who share their religious outlook and experience. In the April 2023 issue, for example, there are three such articles. One is by 13-year-old Krathu Sankaranarayanan, "Celebrating Navaratri, Tamil Style." Another is by 14-year-old Tanesha Kumaraswamy, "My Super Summer Camp." A third is by Shreya Mahasenan, a senior at McGill University in Montreal, "Why I Hold

to Hindu Values." All three express enthusiasm for the Hindu religion and highlight its blessings. This forum gives opportunities to young authors to formulate their convictions and sentiments and for young readers to hear and share in them.

The young need to realize what a treasure they have at hand—which is theirs, which is their heritage, and which begs to be enjoyed.

On practically every page, the magazine presents religion as being very real, and of very real value. Hindu religion and philosophy teach that life is not designed to be darksome or onerous, but a joy when lived rightly. "Life is meant to be lived joyously," the founder of our magazine, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, proclaimed.

Please help HINDUISM TODAY remain financially strong and secure to continue broadcasting a beautiful and salutary philosophy that people of all ages so urgently need today. Donate now or occasionally to help meet ongoing expenses. Your gift will be especially meaningful at this time of soaring prices. Donate at: bit.ly/help-HT. Or contact us:

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QUOTES & QUIPS

“To listen to some devout people, one would imagine God never laughs.”

Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950)

Let what comes come. Let what goes go. Find out what remains. **Sri Ramana Maharshi** (1879–1950)

A successful man is one who can lay a firm foundation with the bricks that others throw at him. **Swami Chinamayananda** (1916–1992), *founder of the Chinmaya Mission*

In the midst of great joy do not promise anyone anything. In the midst of great anger do not answer anyone's letter. *Chinese proverb*

There is no treasure equal to contentment and no virtue equal to fortitude. **Sarada Devi** (1853–1920)

Black holes are where God divided by zero. **Albert Einstein** (1879–1955)

Worrying about something is like paying interest on a debt you don't even know if you owe. **Mark Twain**

The one who plants trees, knowing that he will never sit in their shade, has at least started to understand the meaning of life. **Rabindranath Tagore** (1861–1941)

The more sand has escaped the hourglass of our life, the clearer we should see through it. **Niccolo Machiavelli** (1469–1527), *Italian diplomat*

Vision without action is a daydream. Action without vision is a nightmare. *Japanese proverb*

God is the creator, and the best way of offering prayer to Him is to be creative. God is all loving, and the best way to serve Him is to serve humanity. **Swami Dayananda Saraswati** (1825–1883)

The downfall of a religious sect begins from the day that the worship of the rich enters into it. **Swami Vivekananda** (1863–1902)

He creates the Universe, then reveals Himself to us and in us. He made Himself manifest. *Guru Granth Sahib*

If you really wish to evolve spiritually, you should at once make a start and pursue a regular and steady course of sadhana.

Swami Sivananda (1887–1963)

I traveled a long way seeking God, but when I finally gave up and turned back, there He was, within me! **Lalleshwari** (1320–1392) *Kashmiri mystic poet*

Science sometimes runs the risk of not seeing the truth, because it does not want to know about miracles. **Jacques Cousteau** (1920–1297) *explorer, oceanographer and filmmaker*

If you own something you cannot give away, then you don't own it. It owns you. **Albert Schweitzer** (1875–1965), *Alsatian-German philosopher*

A physicist is just an atom's way of looking at itself. **Niels Bohr** (1885–1962), *Danish physicist*

Destiny's last days may surge with oceanic change, yet perfectly good men remain, like the shore, unchanged. *Tirukural* 989

We need the devotional practice of religion so that the philosophy doesn't make us even more proud or arrogant than we were before we studied it. **Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami**, *publisher of HINDUISM TODAY*

For me, true free will means the dharmic will that is divine and guided by the superconscious. In reality, only this kind of will makes you free. **Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami** (1927–2001), *founder of HINDUISM TODAY*



“Shall we take a moment to address the elephant in the room?”

DID YOU KNOW?

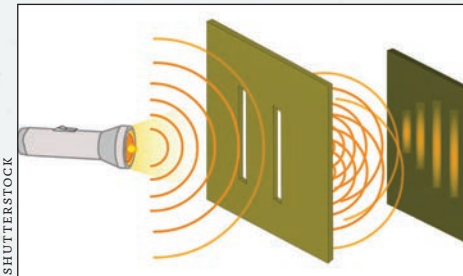
The Present Can Affect the Past

THE FIELD OF QUANTUM MECHANICS HAS long been a source of fascination and puzzlement, with its seemingly counterintuitive principles defying our everyday understanding of the world. Hindu philosophy has long discussed the idea that underlying reality is a Divine epicenter, existing in timelessness, as well as the idea that our state of awareness is foundational to the experience of our reality. These and other ideas offer insights that resonate with some of the phenomena seen in quantum physics today. One such example is the peculiar behavior of light, which exhibits both wave-like and particle-like properties depending on how it is observed. The double-slit experiment provides a striking illustration of this duality. However, an even stranger phenomenon arises when observation seems to influence past events, as suggested by physicist John Wheeler's delayed-choice experiment.

In the experiment, light is directed toward a barrier containing two narrow slits, with a screen placed behind it to capture the

resulting pattern. When the slits are unobserved, the light behaves as a wave, creating an interference pattern on the screen, suggesting that it passed through both slits simultaneously. However, when the experimenter observes which slit the light passes through, the light behaves as a particle, and the interference pattern disappears, indicating that the light went through one of the slits only. This remarkable demonstration of wave-particle duality raises questions about the role of observation in shaping the behavior of subatomic particles, hinting that reality might be more malleable than previously believed.

In 1978, John Wheeler proposed an intriguing thought experiment, which was later carried out in 2007, to further explore the relationship between observation and reality. The delayed-choice experiment involves waiting until the light has passed through the slits before deciding whether or not to observe which slit the light went through. Astonishingly, the act of observing



the light after it has passed through the slits retroactively forces it to have behaved as a particle, as if the present observation influences the past behavior of the light. This phenomenon is known as backward causality.

Though the effects of backward causality are observed over minuscule time frames in laboratory settings, Wheeler postulated that it could have implications on a cosmic scale. He theorized that light from distant stars, bending around gravitational wells, might also be subject to similar observation-induced changes. Consequently, observing a phenomenon today could potentially alter events that occurred thousands or even millions of years in the past. Wheeler himself rejected this possibility, but the entire concept has fascinated scientists for decades, and no one has proven it impossible.

BASICS

What Are the Goals of Renunciate Life?

CERTAIN PEOPLE ARE BY NATURE inclined toward realization of the Self, and disinclined toward desires of family, wealth and property. Some among them are sadhus dressed in white. They are anchorites living in the seclusion of distant caves and remote forests or wandering as homeless mendicants, itinerant pilgrims to the holy sanctuaries of Hinduism. Others dwell as cenobites assembled with fellow monastics, often in the ashrama, aadheenam or matha of their satguru. These monks, both anchorite and cenobite, may live with no formal vows or take certain simple vows. When initiated into the order of sannyasa, they don the saffron robes and bind themselves to a universal body of Hindu renunciates whose existence has never ceased. Scriptural doctrine states that the two paths, householder and renunciate, are distinct in their dharma and attainments, affirming that true renunciation may not be achieved by those in the world even by virtue of a genuine attitude of detachment.

The two fundamental objectives of

sannyasa are to promote the spiritual progress of the individual, bringing him into God Realization, and to protect and perpetuate the religion through his illumined leadership.

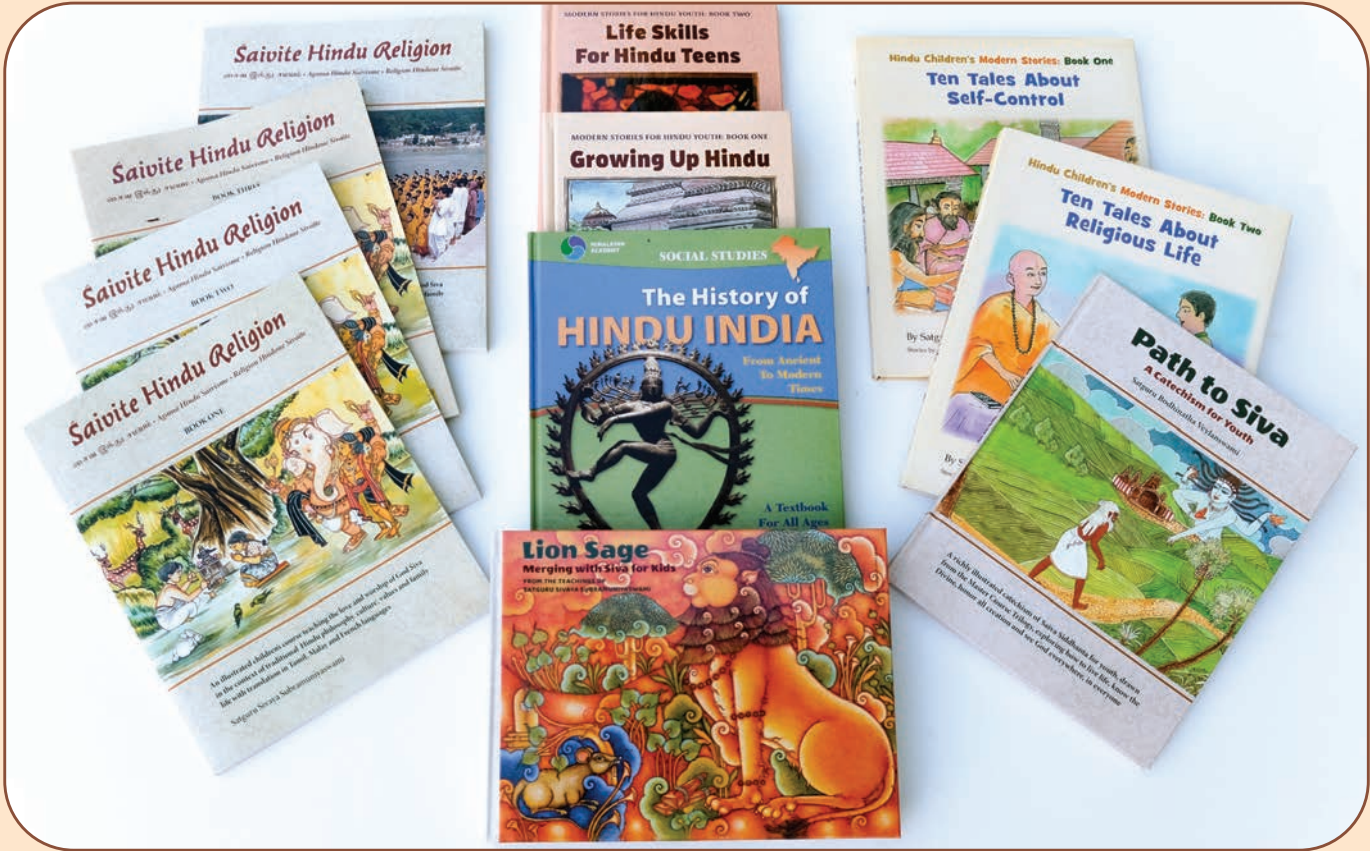
Renunciation and asceticism have been an integral component of Vedic culture from the earliest days, the most highly esteemed path of the Hindu Dharma. Monastic life has both an individual and a universal objective. At the individual level, it is a life of selflessness in which the monastic has made the supreme sacrifice of renouncing all personal ambition, all involvement in worldly matters, that he might direct his consciousness and energies fully toward God. Guided by the satguru along the sadhana marga, the initiated sannyasin unfolds through the years into deeper and deeper realizations. Ultimately, if he persists, he comes into direct knowing of Parabrahma, Transcendent Reality. At the universal level, Hindu monasticism fosters the religion by preserving the truths of the Sanatana Dharma. Competent swamis are the teachers, the theologians, the exemplars



of their faith, the torchbearers lighting the way for all. The ancient *Vedas* elucidate, “The ascetic who wears discolored robes, whose head is shaved, who does not possess anything, who is pure and free from hatred, who lives on alms, he becomes absorbed in Brahman.”

Drawn from the teachings of Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami

Help Your Children Grow Up Hindu



Good English resources for children, well designed and written, are woefully rare. Over the years, Himalayan Academy has developed a trove of valuable illustrated resources for educating youth. Today’s generation, who are disinclined toward religion of any kind, need well-presented, logical explanations of our faith. While these works are written from the point of view of Saivite Hinduism, they can serve Hindu families of any tradition.

Growing Up Hindu and **Life Skills for Hindu Teens**: Companion books of engaging stories focusing on real life challenges and how to face them.

Ten Tales About Religious Life and **Ten Tales About Self Control**: Compelling stories designed to inspire virtue and spiritual practice for the preteen and early teenage years.

Lion Sage: A fun, captivating bedtime version of *Merging with Siva*, introducing 4-12 year-olds to

Hinduism’s mystical side, giving tools to inspire confidence and purpose by knowing one’s true self.

The History of Hindu India: A comprehensive chronicle of India from ancient times written for middle and high schoolers, available in book, digital, video and even song form.

Path to Siva: A highly approachable catechism summarizing Hindu belief and practice in 68 one-page lessons for teens, 20-somethings (and adults).

Saivite Hindu Religion: A four-book set aimed at children (5-12), giving the basics of Hindu thought and culture based on a course that is taught in Tamil schools in Sri Lanka.

There’s More: Additional resources include **A Character Building Workbook** by Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, **Saivite Virtue** (about brahmacharya) and the popular 16-page parental pamphlet, “Raising Children as Good Hindus.”

“Hinduism Today’s Hindu history book is both correct and authentic, and definitely better than I have seen in any school textbook. If each Hindu were to learn and remember this narrative, the Hindu community would be better off in this increasingly pluralistic society.” *Shiva G. Bajpai, Professor Emeritus, California State University Northridge*

“As a mother, I face the challenge of teaching my children—currently 9 and 11—the basic Hindu values for living according to dharma. Definitely *Ten Tales about Self-Control* and *Ten Tales about Religious Life* captured their attention and made a lasting impression on their minds.” *Sheela Visswanathan, California*

FROM THE AGAMAS Fit for Meditation

Elaborating the yogic steps leading from posture to profound unification

The following are selected excerpts from Dr. S. P. Sabharatham’s translation of the Raurava Agama’s yoga pada, chapter 1.

-
- 2-3 Only that person who has known well the nature of meditator, meditation and the fruit of meditation is fit enough to undertake the disciplines of yoga. The individual self is the meditator. Mind is meditation. The Great Lord Siva is the One to be meditated upon. The attainment of the supreme qualities of Siva, superior to which there is nothing, is the fruit of meditation.
- 4 Keeping the mind balanced well when honored or abused, and in the same way when delighted or distressed, and having completely freed himself from being subject to excessive delight, fearfulness and despondency, the *sadhaka* should repeatedly practice the disciplines of yoga.
- 7 Having taken the usual ceremonial bath and having performed the succeeding rites—such as besmearing with *vibhuti* and sprinkled with consecrated water—having prostrated before Siva and his acharya (guru) who has initiated him into the discipline of yoga, the *sadhaka* should attentively involve himself in the disciplines of yoga.
- 9 Having assumed a posture compatible to him and folding the hands together to express supplication, and keeping his body upright, having well aligned his head and having abandoned all the negative thoughts from his mind, the *sadhaka* should practice yoga, with his mind well established within his own self.
- 10 Without allowing the teeth to touch and without allowing the tongue to touch the corners of the mouth, keeping his eyes half-closed and raised, the *sadhaka* should repeat the *mulamantra* of Siva in a perfect way as instructed by his guru.
- 13 Having equalized the outbreath and inbreath (*prana* and *apana*) and having enabled the breath to flow through within the central channel (*sushumna*) and having arrested the workings of inbreath and outbreath, the well-skilled *sadhaka* should deeply meditate on Lord Siva.
- 14 Through the continued practice of such discipline, the *sadhaka* becomes capable of establishing himself in unflinching and inseparable union with the luminous form which is extremely subtle, pervasive, eternal and immutable.
- 16 By the practice of breath-control, the *sadhaka* incinerates all the defilements. By concentration, he annihilates all of his sinful effects. By sense-withdrawal, he maintains himself completely free from the negative thoughts and vices. And by meditation, he becomes capable of nullifying the effects of even those qualities which do not decay.



- 23 The *sadhaka* who has known well the system of yoga should increase the duration of pranayama by one *tala* (a unit of counting) day by day. Increasing the duration of pranayama should not be done very swiftly or very slowly. He should increase the duration gradually and in due order.
- 25 Then the *sadhaka* becomes capable of perceiving directly the five subtle elements—smell, taste, form, touch and sound (*gandha, rasa, rupa, sparsha and shabda*).
- 27 Then he sees all those tattvas which are above the subtle elements—*ahankhara, manas, buddhi, guna, prakrti* and *purusha*—all these tattvas as associated with their respective forms and qualities become evidently manifest to him.
- 28 Then, having seen the tattvas *vidya, kala, kala, maya* and *suddha vidya* one by one in their due order, the *sadhaka* should dissociate himself from these tattvas by severing them with the mantra of Sivastra.
- 29 Then the *sadhaka* is able to see Ishvara tattva, the location of eight Vidyeshvaras, and then the supreme Sadasiva tattva. Having severed his bonds connected with these tattvas with the mantra of *kshurikastra*, he should enter the foremost tattva known as Siva tattva, which is subtle and unreachable even to the sages.
- 30 The knower of this supreme yoga system, having entered into the highest and subtle Siva tattva, becomes immortalized, evolves to become the knower of all, doer of all, indweller of all, seer of all and the lord of all, comparable to Siva.
- 31 In all the Agamic scriptures, the four eternal existents which are to be essentially known have been explained. They are—*pashu, pasha, pati* and Siva. These are to be known systematically as set forth in the *Agamas*.
- 32 Having known in this way the ultimate One, which is formed of eternal tattvas and which is the quintessence of all the revealed scriptures, the *sadhaka* evolves into a liberated embodied being (*jivanmukta*). Even though he may be wandering in this world like an ordinary human being, for him this is the last embodiment. He will never get embodied hereafter.

DR. S. P. SABHARATHNAM SIVACHARYAR, of the Adisaiva priest lineage, is an expert in ancient Tamil and Sanskrit, specializing in the Vedas, Agamas and Silpa Shastras.

Go to: kauaishindumonastery.com/youth-resources/
for a complete list of resources and guides for parents and teachers



Growing &
Marketing

Sacred Rudrakshas

SPECIAL
FEATURE

Photos: (left) A farmer holds freshly harvested fruits in his hard-working hands; (below) A beautiful view of the forests and paddy fields in Ramche, Bhojpur, with Mt. Makalu in the background



BY NIKKI THAPA, NEPAL

AMERE THIRTY-THREE MILES FROM MOUNT EVEREST in the world's deepest valley—Khandbari in Nepal—grow some of the finest rudraksha trees on earth, selected and cultivated over the centuries by tree farmers who have become a significant part of Nepal's export commodities. The dried beads (each containing one or more seeds) of the rudraksha fruit have long been sacred to Hindus. Associated with God Siva, they are used as prayer beads and commonly worn for protection. According to legend, as He looked down on earth and witnessed all the suffering that humans had created, Siva shed a tear. The tear fell to earth and from it grew the first rudraksha tree. Over time rudraksha trees proliferated, granting a host of new opportunities and challenges to Nepal's farmers and traders. Indeed, in not so many decades, the rudraksha bead has caused a significant economic stir.

While previously Nepalese traders were the rudraksha farmers' primary buyers for the Indian market, the trade has grown more complex. Some farmers have also become traders, while many buyers are contracting with farmers for the yield of trees far before the beads have even been harvested.

In a dynamic shift, Chinese merchants have entered the trade, traveling to Nepal to buy from farmers and traders in local bazaars, or to contract directly with forest farms. The Chinese trade began about ten years ago, when rudraksha malas and bracelets became fashionable in China. As a result, rudraksha jumped in value, as Chinese buyers were willing to pay higher rates. Before the pandemic, an estimated 500 Chinese businessmen arrived on tourist visas just to buy beads. The recorded income from their purchases was close to \$650,000 for 980,444 pounds of beads. During 2020-21, rudrakshas were Nepal's tenth most valuable export commodity to China, although Nepal recorded selling only 619,221 pounds, worth about \$200,000. Because this is an informal cash business, actual annual export figures are higher than those recorded and are probably in the billions of rupees.

AS SOON AS THE MONSOON SEASON ends, Nepalese farmers and traders converge in Khandbari, a valley in eastern Sankhuwasabha district. They arrive anxious and eager as the bidding begins for their loads of *mukhdaars*—beads with eight or more *mukha* or “faces” (segments)—for which there is no fixed price. The traders count the number of mukhas, roll the beads in their hands and tap them against their teeth to ascertain their weight and compactness. Mukhdaars are prized by the Indian buyers, the long-established market that values these many-faceted beads for their religious significance.

Although some traders wear official badges that read *dana byapari*, or “bead trader,” other local people join in the action. Schoolboys arrive and negotiate hard, smiling proudly as they wave a hefty bundle of elephants (slang for Nepalese 1,000-rupee notes, on which an elephant is pictured). An elderly woman wanders into the bazaar with a beautiful nine-mukha bead she has just plucked from a tree by her house. I keep my eye on her as the traders descend, fearful she may be duped into selling it cheaply. Soon I am relieved as she pockets a large sum of money.

With the arrival of Chinese traders in late autumn, trading intensifies, with larger sums of money exchanged. The sacred bead has brought forth an international event. Shang Fuheng and his Korean girlfriend Park su Zee are bargaining with a Nepalese farmer over a single bead. It’s their fifth year in the

business and the Nepali translator that they hired through a travel agency tells me they have been selling their beads on WeChat and TikTok. Shang Fuheng holds the bead in his palm, measures it with his calipers, and examines its mukhi. He turns the bead round



NIKKI THAPA

and round while the farmer waits in suspense. I wonder if the bead’s odd shape was created by the farmer putting it in a clamp while the fruit still hung on the tree. Bulging at the center and relatively flat on top and bottom, the shape of such beads appeals to the Chinese market, whereas Indian customers eschew such manipulated beads.

Many Chinese traders wire their yuan to

a Chinese entrepreneur in Jyatha, Kathmandu’s de facto China Town. The entrepreneur then transfers rupees in installments to rural Khandbari so that they have plenty of cash on hand for trading in the weeks ahead.

Through his translator, Shang Fuheng names the price, and the farmer protests several times until an agreement is reached. Shang Fuheng counts out rupee notes from his leather pouch, makes the payment. Quickly he and the farmer part company to search for new transactions.

“I’m aware that Hindus hold these beads in high respect,” Liu Sulin, another Chinese trader, tells me, “but the whole reason I’m in this business is to make money.” Liu, who has been trading for fifteen years, laughs when I ask if he’s become rich. “I recently bought a Mercedes,” he admits, “but I don’t own a house.” He predicts that the already declining rudraksha trend in China will phase out within six years, while trade to India will remain steady.

“Wearing a rudraksha bracelet is a fashion in my country,” he comments matter-of-factly. “Like any other trend, it will have a short life span.”

In the evening, I meet Nepalese traders gathered at the Kanchenjunga Hotel in Tumlingtar. Each year Prakash Giri rents a room here for three months to conduct his trade. Once serving as a Chinese translator for \$80 a day, he decided to join the rudraksha business himself. “Within seven years I bought a house and two more plots in Kathmandu. Why shouldn’t I be in the business if



THOMAS KELLY

I can earn ten lakhs (\$7500) from a one-lakh investment?”

Sambhu Shrestha, a trader from the local community, takes another view. To Sambhu, Prakash is a bigshot trader, like others who have bought houses in Kathmandu and whose children go to expensive medi-

cal or engineering schools. “It is not easy to get good beads without hard bargaining and competing with other buyers,” he says. Sambhu walks for days in and around the neighboring villages, in sun and rain, to collect the season’s finest beads.

“I sell the beads to bigger businessmen in

Kathmandu,” he continues. “These guys try to take advantage of the fact that most of us have had to take out loans to do this business. So, I often end up selling with little profit margin or even at cost so that I don’t have to pay the interest on my loans.”

Few of the world’s fruit stones have re-

Navigating the Colorful and Competitive Rudraksha Market Scene



NIKKI THAPA



NIKKI THAPA

(Clockwise from above) The Haat bazaar in Khandari where farmers and traders converge to buy and sell; this pair of beads with a high number of faces will sell high, the darker one is from the previous year; an elderly woman wearing a rudraksha pendant at Tumlingtar Haat Bazar, Sankhuwasabha; Nepalese, Indian and Chinese traders barter publicly over rudrakshas; clamps are placed on some fruits to create a flattened shape which appeals to Chinese markets



NIKKI THAPA



ceived such careful attention to their peculiarities, or been categorized and ranked according to their value and special features. Rudrakshas with one, two and twenty-one facets (mukhi) are considered rare and hence most valuable. Four, five, six and seven mukhi beads are ordinary. Many Chinese buyers are often satisfied to buy up the ordinary ones, while Indians have cultivated a preference for mukhdaars (beads with eight or more mukhas) or beads that are larger in size, are "prickly," or bear several facets with clear, deep mukhas. One tree can produce different

sizes of beads, with up to 23 different mukha (or mukhi). Other unique beads are the Gauri Shankar (two beads naturally conjoined) and Trijuti (three beads naturally conjoined.)

Some claim that certain trees give low numbers of faces and others yield the highly prized high-numbered beads. This is a misconception. While trees of different cultivars do give reliable sizes, small to large, the many-faced beads come as genetic anomalies from all trees. While real numbers have never been established, one might find a ten-faced bead among 20,000 harvested and a single-faced bead in a million. It takes a patient eye and hours or days of sifting through the harvest to find the truly precious ones.

According to Indian astrology, each mukha corresponds to a particular Deity and planet, and provides specific benefits. One astrologer advises that thirteen mukhi helps to make timely actions in making deals, whereas twenty-one mukhi will attract wealth. Most wearers believe that rudraksha beads are bestowed with special powers by Lord Siva, protecting wearers and helping them overcome obstacles on their spiritual journey. The *Padma Purana* states that rudraksha beads are not objects of worship in themselves but can be used as aids in the spiritual quest. Because the beads contain numerous beneficial compounds, it is believed that wearing them helps to control stress, regulate blood pressure, improve concentration, treat rheumatism and regulate heartbeat. Other benefits are also claimed, ranging from elimination of diabetes to curing of mental disorders. A Buddhist healer explained that he breaks open the fresh bead, removes the viable seeds and crushes them together with certain herbs

to create a medicine that strengthens the cardiac muscle. It is his go-to prescription for patients with heart problems.

I once purchased a Gauri Shankar bead. The larger of these conjoined beads is referred to as almighty Siva, whereas the smaller one is Goddess Parvati: their joining represents their celestial union. I bought the Gauri Shankar on the advice of my astrologer who said it would brighten my future, but it turned out to be a fake. Two beads had been glued together! Later, my jeweler was able to source for me a genuine bead from a distant relative.

So when I return to the Khandbari bazaar the following week, I am intrigued to see buyers, one Chinese and one Nepalese, competing to buy a Gauri Shankar from a farmer. It is as if the power play between China and India is represented in this three way barter. In this instance the Chinese buyer wins, the Nepalese trader walks off frustrated, and the farmer looks pleased. I am left wondering—was the Gauri Shankar genuine?

"My eyes are well trained, and I can tell in a heartbeat if the beads are real or fake," Nagesh Basnet tells me proudly. He only buys mukhdaars, claiming that 80% of all mukhdaars pass through his home in Kathmandu. "Nonetheless, I have to certify each before pitching it to high-end boutiques in India."

According to Nagesh, it was his father who started the first commercial rudraksha plantation. Before that, the trees were viewed primarily as good firewood, while people ate the not-so-appetizing ripened skin and pulp. Sometimes the beads were given as alms to sadhus, with the best ones brought as offerings to Pashupatinath or Varanasi, but their commercial value had not yet been considered, nor had the opportunity for deceit.



The Allure of Premium Beads for Discerning Buyers

(Clockwise from upper left) A whole bag of high-mukhi beads; Hari Rai, center, who owns a rudraksha shop at the Pashupatinath Temple, measures the Gauri Shankar rudrakshas he bought this year from four districts; a pair of naturally joined beads (Gauri Shankar); a Chinese trader holds a freshly harvested 7-mukhi bead; a farmer from Dingla examines a tree that is bearing fruit in its third year, pointing out that trees normally take five years to start producing



"I am planning to buy a scanning machine and set up a government-certified lab in Kathmandu," Nagesh tells me. "It would make sense if Nepal, the country of origin, were to issue a certificate of authenticity for rudrakshas."

I hear his concerns echoed by Kabir Singh, an Indian buyer who spends almost two months in the region sourcing beads. He is not in a happy mood when I encounter him, carrying his purchases of the day. "As a customer, I expected good service but I am not getting any. There is no testing lab in Nepal. I have to scan all my purchases on my return to India and, in case of fakes, I have to courier them back to exchange them. The only thing they do here to test the rudraksha is tap them against their teeth! They put something so spiritual in their mouths! And the bacteria passing from one person to another, especially during the COVID pandemic!" Kabir rolls his eyes in despair.

At the hotel after another day of negotiations, Chinese traders watch TikTok as their interpreters swap stories with Nepalese traders. Kabir Singh has his day's purchases on a table, measuring and discussing them with other traders. I reflect on my own impressions: farmers carrying mukhdaars and bundles of money in worn backpacks, and Chinese traders receiving impromptu wire



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transfers equivalent to thousands of dollars to buy only 10 kilograms of beads. A single twenty-one mukhdaar sold for the cost of a car. I am astounded how these barterers in the small bazaar involve so much money. Despite all of cash exchanged, I muse whether the farmers are earning enough.

Nagesh explains the pattern: a farmer will sell to a local trader, who sells to a regional one, and then finally to an international entrepreneur who exports to Indian Hindus worldwide. "I have heard that Prime Minister Modi, actor Amithabh Bachan and other famous Hindus own these valuables. Many of the special beads originated with me, but there are many people involved before they make it to their posh destinations."

Yet patterns in trade are in flux: a local farmer, Laxmi Kumar Shrestha, reports a

bonanza upon having sold 1500 beads from a single tree to a businessman for \$7500. He says that the rudraksha bead that once sold for five rupees now fetches Rs 2,000, thanks to the interest of the Chinese. It seems that through the direct sales to Chinese traders, farmers stand to gain increased benefit—for as long as the trade with China holds.

The Farmers

The first time I visited the farms of Bhojpur district as HINDUISM TODAY's journalist was during the early harvest season, in September of 2022, in the company of trader Agam Singh Rai.

That first annual harvest yields mostly mukhdaars, while the second harvest,

Harvest season: (above) Sculpture-like buttressing roots of 45-year-old trees at Kauai's Hindu Monastery in Hawaii; (upper right, clockwise) Aakash Kumar Shrestha and his wife inspect fruits at their farm in Ranichhap; Agam Singh Rai, a rudraksha dealer from Kathmandu, poses with his farmer friends at Buttare Bagan; a caretaker at the Sankhuwasabha Forest District office tends nursery tree seedlings, which are given to farmers each year; (below, left to right) Harvesters gather large sacks full of fruits; rudraksha flowers in bloom heralding the season; a friend of Mr. Rai, at left, scaling a 20-foot-tall tree for rudrakshas



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The Challenge of Re-creating what Once Was

The Sacred Rudraksha Tree

Rudraksha (*Elaeocarpus ganitrus*, *E. grandis*, *E. serratus* (from Sri Lanka) and *E. sphaericus*) is an evergreen softwood tree, *elaeo* meaning 'oil' and *carpus* meaning 'fruit.' The trees, with their rough-textured, grayish-white bark, can grow to a height of 30-60 feet and bear a handsome crown of oblong, shiny green leaves. Among the green foliage it is common to see a cluster of leaves that are bright red. It's quite striking. Many of the mature trees are buttressed at the base (see photo above) by strong roots radiating out along the ground. In spring, dense racemes of tiny white flowers with fringed petals appear, and then the tree bears its small, round green fruit which, as they ripen, turn blue or violet by autumn. World War I aviators regarded the wood as

the choicest for making airplane propellers, due to its light weight and ability to sustain torque without breaking.

Nepal's rudraksha forests are expanding as farmers convert their traditional agricultural fields to rudraksha orchards. At the peak of the monsoon season, farmers come from near and far to collect two-year-old saplings that nurseries of the Forestry Sub-Division distribute free of cost. Each year about 4,000 saplings, roughly a foot tall, are carried away to be planted. The young trees will require minimal care and start to fruit from the third year, although beads produced from the fifth year onwards are of better quality. The ultimate quality of the rudraksha may depend largely on the climate, soil and altitude. The trees are happiest at about 1,000 meters but are also known to be highly pro-



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Exploring Nepal's Traditional Methods of Rudraksha Farming



LAKSHMI GRACE PHEONIX

ductive in Australia and Hawaii, where there is a sacred forest planted by monks in 1978 (the same monks who produce this magazine). As an example of variation, the trees in

the Arun Valley in Sankawasabha district yield smaller beads than the trees near Bhojpur district, where rudrakshas are larger and take longer to mature.



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between the holidays of Dashain and Tihar, yields more common varieties.

I arrive in this lush valley with the notion, I'm in "old Nepal" (out of the trekking zone, though just 33 miles from Everest) and entering deep into Nepal's eastern rural hills and villages. As we bump along in our jeep through a lush green rudraksha forest, Chinese men on motorcycles overtake us. They are heading to the forest, we are told, to check out the rudraksha trees they have contracted from local farmers. This direct contracting began when Chinese traders in search of beads around Kathmandu's Pashupatinath

Temple crossed paths with the rudraksha farmers. The traders cut out the middlemen and instead spend months contracting for the yield of entire trees, each for a thousand dollars.

Agam Singh Rai, for example, choose trees after inspecting the flowers and young fruit in the spring, making verbal, non-binding contracts with farmers. We meet Govinda and Deepak Kattuwal, who have contracted to Agam Singh Rai the entire year's yield off their 150 rudraksha trees, which covers five acres. The forests around us are busy with pickers and packers hired by different con-

tractors. The teams have come with tents, sleeping bags and enough food and drink to last the duration of their work.

When we park by the Kuttuwals' forest, agile young men and women are climbing high into the trees to free the fruit from the branches. I watch anxiously as they take off their plastic sandals and scale the tall trees, balancing nimbly on high limbs, partly obscured by foliage. Finding a strong branch, they stop to strike the fruits with a long bamboo pole that has been fitted with a forked end. Where trees are short, they strike with their poles from the ground. Then, dur-



ing a break, fallen beads are packed into bags. The work must be done in rotation to prevent the pickers from being hit like a bullet by the falling beads.

To show me the quality, Deepak Kuttuwal and his friend Anil Rai crack open the blue outer husk with a wooden block or use a machete (khukuri) and then brush the bead with a comb. Traditionally this the way of cleaning the beads, scrubbing them with a brush under running water, then wrapped in fine muslin after drying. Agam Singh Rai laments, "It was fun in the old days when all the farmers set out very early in the morning to the nearby river to wash our harvest. We'd spread the beads on plastic tarps along the river bank to dry in the sun. We had picnics, or played cards while keeping a watchful eye on the beads." Those days are gone. Today the beads are packed into sacks and stored in a dark room for one week till the outer husk decays. The shriveled beads are then cleaned in bulk with a pressure washer, making the work much faster.

After two days Agam Singh Rai packs a tractor with the yield from his 150 trees—34 heavy sacks, nearly 2,700 pounds of beads. After cleaning, the they will be drilled and crafted into products in his studio in Kathmandu. Not all engage in this value-added work. Some traders simply export packages of the common variety of beads to India. Agam hires laborers to drill and string the beads and then make japa malas (garlands used for reciting mantras) of 108, 54 or 36 beads interspersed with pieces of red or pink velvet. A 108-bead mala may have a "guru" bead added, to help mark

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the cycle of mantras, such as "Aum Namah Sivaya," as the beads are turned in the hand. His workshop also produces bags, key chains and backrests for car seats.

The Future of the Trade

It's not just traders, contractors, farmers and

producers of final products who benefit from the rudraksha business: hoteliers like Sudarshan Dhakal do, too. He says, "I don't have an eye for rudrakshas, but nevertheless I am earning from them. My fifteen-room Kanchenjunga Hotel in Tumlingtar is fully occupied by Chinese buyers for five

The Art of Harvesting and Cleaning Rudraksha Fruits



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(clockwise from top-left) A harvester preparing a piece of bamboo for picking; up in the tree using the bamboo to dislodge fruits; a rough brush is used to remove the fruit from the bead; cutting open a fruit; Durga Bahadur Baral, a farmer from Khandbari, Sankhuwasabha, picking mukhdaar rudrakshas. Durga has been cultivating rudraksha for 20 years; Anil Rai and Deepak Kattuwal dehusk and examine beads from their trees



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months. Who would come to this district if its trees did not produce the finest beads in the world? Not just hoteliers but vegetable vendors, motorbike renters, fast-food stalls, harvesters and packers and a lot of others look forward to the harvest season.”

Many farmers who have become traders remember when the beads had little value. Aakash Kumar Shrestha, a farmer in Khandbari, recalls, “Our fathers didn’t understand

the value. They might eat the seeds inside or collect good ones and offer malas of rudrakshas to sadhus and saints who passed through the region. Honestly, we don’t know why the rudraksha is so important or why people pay so much money for it. We have around 80–90 trees and earn good money when the Chinese come.”

Durga Bahadur Baral, who like Aakash has been in the business for twenty years, remembers: My grandfather used to tell us how sadhus would come to this region

to collect rudraksha. They used to educate us about the importance of wearing different mukhi rudrakshas, thus there was already awareness of the spiritual importance early on. Sixty years ago my father gave them away for free. He take bags of them to pilgrimage sites to give to sadhus or make offerings at temples. This was considered to be a great *punyam* (good merit). Then gradually people started trading. The whole region is now dependent on this industry, and I hope that with your article, rudraksha will become



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sought after in America as well.”

But with the fresh opportunities opened by the growing and selling of the beads, there are pressing concerns about regulation. The beads must be genuine, without extra hand-carved lines or glue, so there are calls for a government certified lab. Currently numerous companies offer lab tests and x-rays, but their legitimacy is questionable.

Nor should the growth of trees be aided by chemicals. Bir Bahadur Shrestha of the Nepal rudraksha Traders Association is worried about the recent increase in chemical use. “It

has dampened the reputation of Nepalese rudraksha in India and moreover harmed the trees. It may be lack of knowledge in mixing the dosage. We have also begun a campaign to discourage manipulation of the beads. It is ironic that the clamps and chemicals are imported from China, automatically sending back the money that the Chinese have brought into Nepal.”

Some farmers and traders wish for a better taxation system. Currently the government of Nepal taxes rudraksha sales by volume rather than according to the actual money earned. Hence a farmer who sells but a few highly priced 21-mukha beads may pay no tax, while a farmer who sells 50 sacks of ordinary ones is charged heavily. Farmers also have difficulty depositing their earnings, since they cannot validate the source, nor can they take bank loans against their valuable beads. If the industry

was better regulated, people working all through the value chain would benefit.

For the farmers, this unusual bead clearly offers hope for a better future. Yet there are many unknown factors. Will the Chinese market stabilize and continue to grow? Will the commercial value of beads increase around the world? Will the supply of beads exceed demand, and farmers regret having converted agricultural fields to rudraksha forests?

Indian trader Kabir Singh says, “There is a big market for rudraksha in Tamil Nadu. The Nepali traders could tap into that potential. During Mahashivaratri, everybody wants to buy rudraksha. But my sole purpose of bringing these to India is to earn *punyam*.” His goal is not to make profit but to gift temples, friends and family with the holy beads. “We have people in India who can energize these beads for different spiritual purposes. The beads from Nepal are truly special.”

Nabin Gauli, a hotelier in Sankhuwasabha, gave up the rudraksha-bead business that had nurtured him for years because of his 74-year-old mother, Sushila admonition. A Siva bhakta and follower of Om Shanti, she requested Nabin not to bring home money that had been made by selling the beads that are as holy as Lord Siva himself.

What will remain stable and true is faith in the spiritual power of the rudraksha. The mala that so many of us hold in our hands, counting the beads whose color deepens with time, is a dear companion and reminder of our spiritual quest. May the trees be nurtured then, for their many benefits to mankind, both spiritual and economic.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Creating Crafts from Nature. . .

(This page, clockwise from top left) A rudraksha backpack and oversized necklaces fashioned out of coveted beads on display at a shop in Sankhuwasabha. These accessories serve as a testament to the artistry and creativity of rudraksha jewelry makers in the region; Nepalese women string the drilled beads for crafts; a needle is passed through a drilled rudraksha; they are used here to create a large mala



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. . . Rudrakshas in Jewelry Making

(This page, clockwise from above) Babita Shakya, the proud owner of a rudraksha souvenir shop in Khandbari, shows off the beautiful and unique rudraksha goods created by her husband; a statue of Lord Siva covered with rudraksha garlands; a rudraksha mala of 54 beads (on the left) made from last year’s harvest. The Nepali beads are not oiled but naturally change color with time. The colorful mala of 18 large beads on the right and the loose beads are from this year.



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ENVIRONMENT

Leaf Plates: Our Traditional Past Meets the Ecological Future

BY DEVI RAVINDRARAJ, TEXAS

WHAT IS BEAUTIFUL, HEALTHFUL, ENVIRONMENTALLY-FRIENDLY, fun to eat from, and a long-established feature of Hindu culture? Leaf plates! One of the joys of growing up Hindu in the diaspora is celebrating festivals from different regions of India, not just one. What we may not know is that each has its own practical, eco-conscious ways of serving festive foods. Learning about these bio-platters can open many doors, illuminating connections between our culture and the world around us. It can provide a window into botany, biochemistry, soils and other sciences. It can open our eyes to the lives and struggles of farmers and connect us to global social issues such as sustainability, Indigenous forest rights, waste management and climate change. Most of all, it empowers us with something we can do

with our own hands.

There are a multitude of ways to categorize leaf plates: fresh or dried, large or small, single or stitched. Many leaves can be used in various ways. Let us begin with the banana, one of several plants honored with the Sanskrit title *kalpataru* ("wish fulfilling"). Banana leaves are freshly picked, washed and used as a plate by themselves. Small leaves can be used whole; larger ones are cut into sections. Banana leaves are absolutely relished by cows and other animals, and compost easily.

Either pre-softened or used directly with piping hot food, banana leaves also make pliable, aromatic wraps to transport cooked meals. Such parcels can be tied with the dried ribbon made from the "trunk" of finished banana plants—the same strong, flexible fiber used to tie thick garlands. Larger strips of

banana sheath can be machine-pressed into the shape of small cups.

Other plates are made from multiple leaves stitched together. Many types of leaves are used in this way, and they come from plants as diverse as the climates of India. Sal leaves, from the towering *Shorea robusta* are very popular. Often found growing up the sal tree is the thick, woody vine *Phanera vahlii*. Valued for their size, shape and flavor, these vine leaves are known as *taur* in the Himalayas, *siali* in Odisha and *mantharai* in Tamil. Additional sources of leaves include (but are not limited to!) jackfruit, teak and several trees from the *Ficus* genus, including banyan, peepal and *Ficus auriculata*, which features particularly large leaves.

In addition to stitching together flat plates, the deft use of tiny sticks also quickly shapes leaves into cones, cups and bowls. In Nepal,

patravali are referred to as a trifecta: *tapari* (slightly curved large plate), *duna* (medium-sized bowl) and *bota* (the smallest). Throughout the subcontinent, stitched leaf plates and bowls may also be shaped with the help of a hydraulic press, which makes them easy to store and transport. The same type of press is used to transform fallen areca palm sheaths into the uniform party dining ware now popular for the export market.

While, roughly speaking, banana leaves for dining are more famous in South India and Sri Lanka, and stitched leaf plates more so in North India and Nepal, there are many areas of overlap. Northeast India is extremely rich not only in cultural uses of banana leaves to craft delightful plates and bowls but also in banana biodiversity. Arunachal Pradesh alone has 11 species of native wild bananas. In Odisha, the mahaprasadams of Lingaraja and Ananata Vasudeva temples in Bhubaneswar are served on banana leaves; in Maharashtra, a delicious thali has its own rules for arrangement on a fresh banana leaf, oriented upwards. In the South, dried leaf plates of sal, maloo creeper and other leaves are especially popular for smaller snack items.

Tamil Nadu's famous Chidambaram Temple uses dried-leaf donai to serve sweet

rice, curd rice and sundal. In Trichy, children who participate in singing Tiruvembavai while circumambulating Uchi Malai Kovil early every morning during Margazhi gleefully receive a leaf donai filled with breakfast prasadam before heading to school. In Bihar, for a great example of a meal served using multiple types of traditional leaf plates, both fresh-cut and dried/stitched, watch Anubhav Sapra's visit to Darbhanga for a Mithila feast (youtu.be/FFpaivxo4R8?t=1937). Another example of convergence, in Mauritius, occurs where the banana leaf is de rigueur for traditional feasts among Hindus of all regional backgrounds.

From Kerala's Onam sadya and the vazhai ilai sappad of Tamil Nadu, to the rich regional dhams of Himachal Pradesh, India has no shortage of feasts that would be incomplete if not served on their iconic leaf bases.

Small bites, however, have just as big of a role to play in environmentally friendly eating. A street-side samosa just tastes better when you know that its leafy plate will quickly biodegrade and, unlike a plastic one, can even be a tasty treat for an animal friend. Even those delicacies whose leaf is primarily known for the flavor and structure it imparts during cooking (such as with kumbilappam, turmeric-leaf patholi or leaf-basket idlis) can

Old becomes new: (left) South Indian rice-and-curry meal served on a banana leaf; (above) village woman stitches together leaf plates; (insets) two of 749 search results for "leaf plate" on Amazon.com—the top one comes from the leaf of the sal tree (common across North India and Nepal), the other and more processed one, from fallen areca palm leaves

be eaten by hand with a minimum of waste thanks to their built-in wrapper.

One leaf we have not yet mentioned is that of the lotus, India's national flower and Hinduism's most sacred plant. A traditional but lesser-known alternative to the banana leaf, lotus leaves are also large enough to hold an entire meal. Throughout the Indian subcontinent, lotus leaves are used interchangeably with other types of leaf plates. For example, in a delightfully detailed caption to one of her paintings shared on Instagram, acclaimed artist Upasana Govindarajan describes childhood picnics with her grandmother, including how a neighbor would fetch lotus leaves from a nearby pond if they had not packed banana leaves.



DR. PRASAD HENDRE



DEVI RAVINDRARAJ

Practical use: (left) stitched-leaf bowls display farmers' rice varieties at a meeting of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture; (above) parotta, Indian flat bread, ready to go; (right) Sohari leaves growing in Trinidad; (far right) a leaf plate returns to the soil along the banks of the River Ganga

Leaf Plates in the Diaspora

While in India the use of lotus leaves is drifting towards the nebulous realm of nostalgia, in Guyana vegetarian food served in a lotus leaf is such a national point of pride that the government has included a "Seven Curry Tour," including harvesting the lotus leaf, among three initiatives recently launched by the Guyana Tourism Authority. And anyone who dares tag a photo of an otherwise authentic-looking meal (but served on a polystyrene plate) as "Seven Curry" will be met with a chorus of replies asking where the lotus leaf is.

In Trinidad, the sohari plant (*Calathea lutea*), indigenous to the area, has long assumed a place of pride alongside banana leaves for serving delicious "prayers food," as the vegetarian meal accompanying any puja is fondly called in the Caribbean. It may be that the wild-growing sohari was originally adopted by indentured laborers because of restricted access to the leaves of the banana plant, which were the property of the British plantation owners. However, this alternate leaf has now grown into a beloved part of Indo-Trinidadian culture.

Will Leaf Plates Be Left Behind?

Despite this rich and varied history, and bright spots of adaptation and resilience, Hindu leaf plate traditions are at risk. The first risk is the sheer size of influence from Western disposable products. Ruchita Kumari, in her late twenties, says that natural leaf plates are still available in cities such as Patna if you ask for them but their prevalence has been drastically reduced, especially

in the last fifteen years. She is clear about the cause of this shift—clever marketing. Plastic products, she says, have been promoted as "equally as good, and even better quality" than the traditional Indian materials, "but they don't go back to the earth. There are consequences for your health. All of these negatives have been neglected in the marketing campaigns for plastic. But once they enter the market, they replace all other products." Despite mounting hazards to our oceans, rivers, mountains and entire planet's health, global single-use plastic production is only gaining speed, not slowing down.

Recognizing the gravity of the problem and building upon state and citywide initiatives, India passed one of the world's most ambitious plastics bans in 2022. Such actions can potentially help the farmers, gatherers and artisans who produce traditional leaf plates. As Baldev Kumar, a leaf plate maker from Himachal Pradesh, told the *The Tribune* after that state's plastic ban in 2018: "We have heaved a sigh of relief as we can continue with our traditional profession, which was on the edge because of machine-made plastic plates." However, serious questions about the national ban remain.

The second risk is assuming that no matter how long we wait, eco-friendly traditions such as leaf plates will be waiting for us, somewhere, should we ever wish to return to them. Like the Svalbard Global Seed Vault for Earth's crops, are there protected enclaves for biocultural diversity such as our leaf-plate traditions? The answer is complex, and worrisome. As Dr. Tara Devi Sen succinctly says of taur and tremal plates on

her site Himalayan Wild Food Plants (bit.ly/thakurplates), "These traditional practices are in sharp decline due to easy availability of plastic plates. The need of the hour is to promote and revive these eco-friendly social practices." Lotus and all other leaf traditions have been similarly eroding.

While banana-leaf feasts for weddings are still popular in many places, use of the leaves in diverse and everyday ways is waning. Meal parcels wrapped in a banana leaf can no longer be found for purchase on Indian rail journeys, whereas they were readily available up to the late 1990s. Food bloggers today attest to this timeline, prefacing special recipes with nostalgic praise for the banana leaf packets they relished on childhood train journeys. Reading these stories of nutritious, eco-friendly food packed by parents and grandparents is pleasant and mouth watering until the thought strikes: who will have these memories three, two—or even one—generation from now?

The same saga of the banana leaf has played out in Malaysia. Centrally located within the original homelands of the banana family, banana-leaf traditions survived and thrived in Malaysian Hindu communities. Yet, despite having a warm tropical climate that is only getting warmer, in Malaysia banana leaves have been edged out as the default plate-plus-packaging material in just 30 years, largely by polystyrene. Meanwhile, Australia grows all its own bananas but lacks a banana-leaf industry, despite the abundant availability of leaves.

Even in those diaspora areas where leaf plates are still popular, eco-friendly systems



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for disposing them such as composting may be minimally available. This is a concern because when any one part of the cultural ecosystem is lost, it becomes easier for other parts to become merely token, symbolic—and then replaced. In India, for example, the presses designed for leaf donai are now often used to make identically-shaped bowls using plastic scrap. And when banana-leaf feasts are held in the United States on special days in the Hindu year, the leaves are always sent straight to a landfill, rolled up in a paper or plastic sheet. In such ways, the usefulness of the original practices is entirely lost, both literally and educationally.

A third risk is that Hindu youth may not even identify eco-friendly traditions such as leaf plates as being part of our culture. This last risk highlights another, different fate that could easily await Hindu leaf-plate traditions around the corner: appropriated and transformed into a trendy, commercial product by and for the West, readily available for sale in stores but no longer found in temples. Such an outcome, with leaf-plate traditions bereft of their cultural and ecological moorings, would be a loss to everyone.

Turning Over a New Leaf

In this dire situation, one may wonder how we can support leaf-plate traditions if we are living far away from India, or even in any highly urbanized area. Surely, the necessary leaves will not be readily available? There are many ways to answer this question. The first is simply to realize that plastic products such as polystyrene are not "locally available" anywhere.

All have to be extracted from deep in the earth, refined via highly polluting processes, pressed into tiny pellets (the infamous "plastic snow" that blanketed Sri Lanka's beaches after the X-Press Pearl container ship burned and sank in 2021), shipped to manufacturing plants to take the shape of various products and then finally transported back to distribution warehouses and stores from which we purchase them and further transport them to our homes, halls and temples.

This entire process entails much pollution and up to several trips around the globe—and that's before the products enter the trash stream. Once we realize this, we can wake up to how these Western products became normalized and imagine what we may want the future to look like instead.

Fortunately, all of the perils discussed have solutions, if we start soon. While we live in an age of homogenization and mass extinction, many things have indeed been saved from this fate—languages, art forms and biological species—when alert individuals have woken up to the situation, organized others and acted decisively. Like other aspects of Hindu culture, leaf-plate traditions exist as part of an ecosystem—literally! To bring these traditions fully alive for young Hindus around the world, this ecosystem should be as vibrant and environmentally-meaningful as possible. Here are some ways that we can do that:

Compost: Sonal Agrawal, who grew up in a Rajasthani family in a small town, fondly remembers that all the vegetable scraps from her household's kitchen would be collected in a bucket which she delighted in taking out to feed any of the neighborhood cows. She

feels that getting involved in composting is the best opportunity to give youth in highly urbanized areas the same feeling. While there is nothing quite like the fun of feeding a banana leaf or a crunchy dried-leaf donai plate to an eager ruminant, composting is the most nature-friendly option that most of us living in urban areas have access to for our used leaf plates.

For whatever types of leaf plate we are working to revive, it is crucial that we make composting available, either by starting our own at home or in our temple community, or by accessing composting resources already available where we live.

Leaf plates of all kinds are uniquely well-suited for composting, because there is no need to separate food waste (hopefully minimal!) from the eating surface—both go together into the compost. Even in reusable plate/bring-your-own systems, the use of a leaf as a liner facilitates easy composting, minimizes the washing required and maximizes sanitation.

Involve a youth corps: Involving temple youth in a program of serving with and composting leaf plates, and even growing some of the leaves in home and temple gardens, can go a long way in reinforcing Hinduism's strong history of environmental values as well as the values of seva and anadanam. Leaf plate traditions also integrate seamlessly into existing Bal Vihar programs in a variety of ways. The names of plants used for leaf plates can even be featured in the temple's language classes, with leaf coloring, tracing and cut-outs for little ones and research posters for older students.



BACKYARD CAFE



R. RAVINDRARAJ



DEVI RAVINDRARAJ

The eco-friendly leaf: (clockwise from left) Enjoying Guyana's seven-curry meal on lotus leaf; sundal in a simple banana-leaf cone; USA lake full of plate-ready lotuses; Bihar feast; cold-tolerant banana thriving in North Carolina, USA; leaf bowls used by priests in a temple fire ceremony; banana leaf pot covers



DEVI RAVINDRARAJ



RAJKU MAR MANICKAM



DEVI RAVINDRARAJ



DELHI FOOD WALKS

Learn/listen: Visit elder relatives or artisans in India to observe the process of making stitched leaf plates. Take time to listen to their stories about demand for the plates, access to materials and other issues. Back home in our local environments, learn about commonalities with Indigenous communities where we live: what local plant materials make good food surfaces and strong, flexible ties? What obstacles do Indigenous people face in being able to access materials that their communities traditionally use?

Discover new leaves: Another way to honor the wisdom of our ancestors and follow in their footsteps is to carefully observe the plants around us and think creatively about how they can be used. It may be a native plant or one already widely introduced. *Coccoloba uvifera* (seagrape), for example, is native to the southeastern United States and the Caribbean but has been widely planted around the world for its salt tolerance and versatility. Its leaves are round, sturdy and smooth, keep well for many days without refrigeration and are the perfect size for serving snacks and temple prasadam.

When using banana leaves: In addition to purchasing banana leaves from wholesalers and grocers, grow some of the leaves locally and organically. Backyard growing reduces pesticide exposure and is highly educational. While bananas require many months of consistent temperatures to produce ripe fruit, the vegetative parts of the plant are fast-growing and thrive in a much wider range of climates. Bananas have more than 75 known species and hundreds of varieties and

cultivars, all with excellent leaf properties. Some cultivars produce lush leaves while remaining extremely compact, resisting wind damage and fitting into an easy-to-carry pot. Mountain-growing species are highly cold-tolerant, reliably re-emerging every spring even in snowy climates. Modern edible fruit varieties are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to sources of banana leaves.

In addition, explore the many faceted utility of the banana leaf. Did you know, for instance, that a banana leaf placed over a serving dish or pot of hot food, secured with a banana-fiber tie, molds even better than plastic wrap? To revive such eco-friendly traditions, we will have to become re-conversant in the capabilities and properties of various leaves so that we can quickly and efficiently use them.

Perhaps the most under-utilized connection yet between Hindu leaf-plate traditions and our new environments is North America's own lotus, *Nelumbo lutea*, which grows abundantly in lakes as far north as Eastern Canada. The sole sister species to the sacred lotus of Asia (*Nelumbo nucifera*), the "American lotus" shares the same properties of luxurious, water-repellent leaves and edible tubers and seeds. While holding protected status as a native wildflower in some parts

of the US, in other areas local departments actually destroy the lotus to create better fishing access for boats. These leaves could be harvested instead. It's a shame to let this beautiful and useful plant go to waste.

Let's find ways to adapt our traditions to benefit our local environments wherever we live and inspire our younger generations back in India, Sri Lanka and Nepal with pride. 🍽️

LEARN MORE...

- ✳️ **Read:** Kora, A.J. "Leaves as Dining Plates, Food Wraps and Food Packing Material: Importance of Renewable Resources in Indian Culture." *Bull Natl Res Cent* 43, 205 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s42269-019-0231-6>
- ✳️ **Watch:** Ekta Chaudhary's "Prepare Khaal/Compost from Kitchen Waste" is a nice introduction to composting, in Hindi with English subtitles, especially geared towards urban dwellers: youtu.be/daAh_evRnoQ.
- ✳️ **Collaborate:** <https://forum.pradakshina.org>. Volunteers share memories of leaf plate traditions from childhood, knowledge and strategies gleaned while working to reintroduce leaf plates at Hindu temples and youth programs outside of India, and gardening and composting expertise... all towards the common goal of keeping Hinduism's leaf plate traditions healthy and vibrant around the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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THE ARTS

Siva's Cosmic Choreography

How Lord Nataraja's Divine Inspiration Helped Me Embrace Dance and Transform My Entire Life

BY SAVITA TIWARI, MAURITIUS

MANY FORMS OF SIVA ARE LOVED AND REVERED by His devotees. The Sivalingam is perhaps the most celebrated and ancient form; others include Ardhanarishvara, Bhairava, Pashupati and Dakshinamurti. Nataraja—Siva as the cosmic dancer—is naturally the form most worshiped by performing artists.

Nataraja created the universe with His dance. He is like a cloud filled with water waiting to unleash the thunderstorm, or the firm light of a lamp in a place with no air movement. In this form, Siva is the center of the world. Just as an atom dances in its orbit, the universe is dancing in the cosmic orbit of Nataraja. In Nataraja form, Siva is the master of all dance enthusiasts, with the universe as His stage, performing His life-giving dance for the world.

The word *Nataraja* translates as “the king of acts” or “king of dance.” Devi Sarasvati is the Goddess of creativity, knowledge, music and wisdom. Writers, singers and anyone from the creative fields who follow Hinduism pray to Goddess Sarasvati for blessings and success. But for dancers, especially Indian classical dancers, Nataraja is God. One will find Nataraja's image in the logo of many dance academies and displayed on classical dance competition posters. His divine statue graces the altar of myriad performers.

After reading about Nataraja in a few books and blogs, I turned to the primary source of knowledge, our scriptures. A shloka in *Ashtadhyayi* by Sage Panini: “At the end of His cosmic dance, Nataraja, the Lord of Dance, with a view to bless the sages Sanaka and others, played His *damaru* (drum of creation) 14 times (first nine times and then five times), from which emerged the 14 sutras, popularly known as the *Siva Sutras* or *Maheshvara Sutras*.” Based on these 14 sutras, Mahapandit Panini recorded his grammar of Sanskrit—*Ashtadhyayi*—and thus the mother of all languages was encapsulated.

Every human being can interpret Nataraja according to their level of consciousness. Some say Nataraja represents cosmic dance. Some say He represents destruction and creation. For some, this form is the manifestation of Siva's shakti. For some it is grammar. For me, however deep I went, Nataraja simply remains king of dance.

The dance of Nataraja is called Ananda Tandava. His pose is described in detail in scriptures such as the *Anshumadbhed Agama* and *Uttarakamika Agama*. Four-handed, Nataraja holds a damaru (drum) in one hand and Agni (fire) in the another. A third hand is in *abhayamudra*, gesturing “fear not,” and the fourth points towards His raised foot. Damaru is the representation of the akasha tattva—space element. It is *nada*, the sound of Aum, said to be the begin-



SAVITA TIWARI

Sacred steps: Author Savita Tiwari performs her dance for the Sivalingam at her family's temple in Mauritius

ning of the universe. Agni is the fire element, which represents pure knowledge, as it burns all material things, leaving only the eternal.

Personally, I relate every element of Nataraja's symbolism to dance. Damaru is music, and fire is the energy needed for dance. Abhaya-mudra is a blessing to the performer, and the hand pointing downward is *prithivi* tattva, which is needed for balance. The circle of fire around Nataraja is the border of the dance platform. The small person named Apasmara beneath the Lord's feet is the ego of the dancer. The raised leg stands for leaping confidently towards perfection.

I decided to learn dance to understand Nataraja more fully. It wasn't an easy decision for a full-time writer and mother of two young kids with a busy priest husband. But I was inwardly drawn to dance, revering it like so many who follow the Hindu path. It is common to see statues of our Gods in dance poses, such as Ganesha, Siva, Radha-Krishna and Durga. Our Gods dance, and so can we. Until now, dancing was limited to clapping for others. Now, I would move beyond clapping and join the performance.

There were nine classical dance forms from which to choose. I chose Kathak dance because of easy access to an online guru, and because, as a writer, I like to tell stories, and Kathak originated from Katha, storytelling. Once I started learning, it became clear I was on a path of spiritual growth and not merely learning a classical dance form. Each time I danced, I felt connected to the unknown. To say that Kathak elevated me to a new level would be cliché, but those words are true to my core.

My first lesson was to hold strong the position called utpatti, meaning “origin,” the stance from which all movements begin and end. For some, utpatti can be home, for some it can be a person who feels like home. For me, utpatti is the strong hold of Mother Earth—Bhoomi Devi assuring me to dance without fear of falling, as She will always be there to catch me.

In Kathak, the utpatti position is also called *sam*, which means “even.” This reminds me of India's most important Nataraja temple, Chidambaram Thillai Nataraja-Koothan Kovil, which is situated directly on the magnetic equator, making it appear free of any magnetic force from north or south. Similarly, in utpatti, is a place where we can balance ourselves, just like Nataraja.

Chidambaram is one of five holy sites of Sivalingam worship in South India that represent the five natural elements. Chidambaram Lingam is a small crystal that represents akasha tattva, or ether. This is also the only Siva temple in India where the dancer Siva in the form of Nataraja enjoys the full status of chief Deity. Whenever my dance teacher scolded me to keep my balance, I imagined myself on even ground at Chidambaram and was able to balance myself. Indeed, the importance of controlling my mind is the first lesson I learned. The second lesson is to complete my actions, to finish what I start, in every aspect of my life.

I am also on the path to subdue the personal ego, represented by the dwarf, Apasmara, under the right foot of Nataraja—who epitomizes the greedy, possessive self. These qualities cannot be erased from the human heart but can be suppressed through spiritual wisdom. It is interesting to note that epilepsy, a brain condition that may cause seizures and sudden loss of consciousness, is called Apasmara in ayurveda. There is a Nataraja pose in yoga used to treat patients with epilepsy.

Dance now impacts all aspects of my life, how I express myself, how I carry myself and more. For example, I have completely stopped slouching. Initially, my teacher had to alert me whenever I slouched during class. But after six months my body aligned itself, and now I rarely slouch.

My passion for Kathak became the talk of get-togethers with family and friends. I was annoyed when they scoffed at classical music and dance performances. It was easy to forgive their ignorance, but it was also bothersome that they wanted me to show them some moves. I refused politely, but when they kept pressing I shared why that was not so simple. I explained that I must first pray to Lord Nataraja and then to Bhoomi Devi, for their blessings. Then I pray to the five elements, Pancha Tattva, my guiding angels during the dance. I must also show gratitude to my guru for teaching me this sacred art. Upon hearing this, they understood how serious and reverent I am

about dance, and how it should be treated with great respect.

Now no one asks me to show them dance moves, but they are interested in what new life lessons I have learned from my dancing. There are many small but important things I have learned during my journey of exploring my inner Nataraja. For example, I don't feel bad if I trip during practice in front of others. I just regain my bearings and resume where I left off. I have also improved my respiratory control. Then there is the strong bonding with the musicians, who keep you in sync. Inwardly they become my best friends, though we never get a chance to hang out. Dance has become my solace. If I am angry, I dance it out. If I am stressed, I dance it out. If I am happy, I dance it out. It's my daily dose of pure spirituality.

My teacher compliments me for my commitment to the art, and commitment is the foremost requirement of learning these art forms. Although I don't fish for praise, my teacher's words warm my heart as a gentle reassurance that I can complete what I started.

The left side of the sanctum in Chidambaram Nataraja temple is concealed by a veil that is only removed on special occasions, and just for a few moments. Beyond the veil an empty space represents Siva in the form of akasha tattva. Legends say only the blessed ones understand this mystery (*rahasya*). I like to connect this chamber with the thousand-headed Adishesha who is ready to give individualistic knowledge to deserving students. Maybe someday I will be a good enough student to understand the *rahasya*. One day I will be able to pull the curtain of maya from my

mind and see the real truth of life. Until then, I will continue my dance journey in front of Nataraja.

Dance has taught me how to move with fluidity, flexibility and stability. It has liberated me in the most fundamental way, helping me positively define and control my emotions and thoughts. I treasure the feeling of having an appreciative guru and classmates, the recitation of padhant, the completeness of a sum, the *jugalbandi* (duet) of tabla, the soothing and at the same time energizing sound of *ghungroo*, anklet bells. For the first time, with the chance and platform to express my stories and emotions, I feel my soul has a voice and is enjoying every single second of expressing itself.

Taking care of myself is not a task anymore, it is a lifestyle. Eating a regular balanced diet, carrying myself properly, and having a happy and empathetic mind has, I believe, made me a better person. It is said that life is simple until we complicate it. The same goes for dance—the first rule is to keep it simple.

I am eagerly awaiting the day I offer my first dance to Nataraja in a temple. Just like manas puja, I am going to offer nritya puja to my beloved Mahadev. I will offer flowers and fruits with my hand movements and will show my emotion with my eyes. And I will offer my devotion in the form of tears of happiness flowing down my cheeks. Imagining that day gives me immense happiness, just like Narayan imagining the Ananda Tandava of Nataraja. My journey toward finding Nataraja has begun with one giant step, and I have already seen the best changes in my life. I can't wait to see what more I will encounter during this journey. Jai Nataraja!



SHUTTERSTOCK

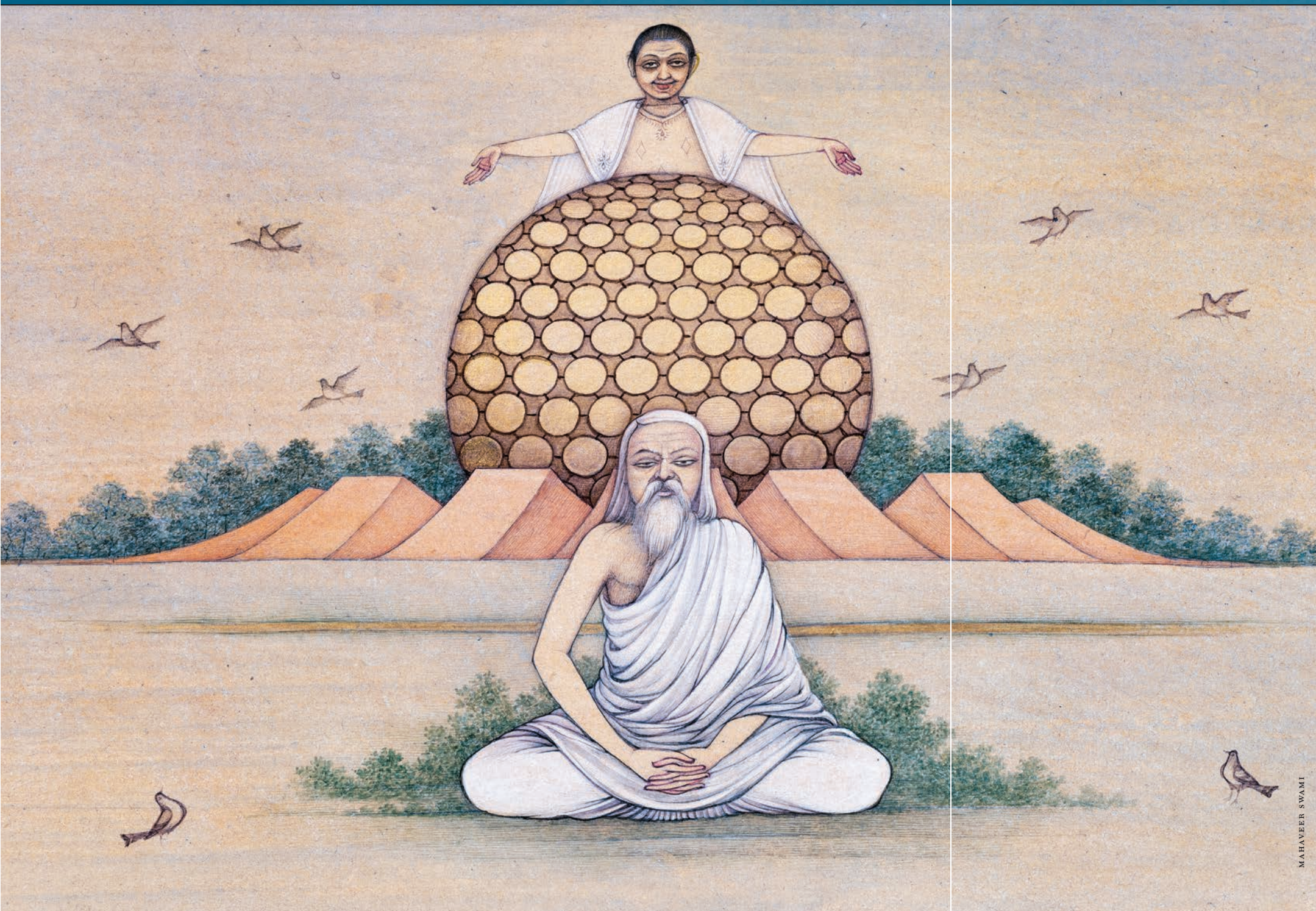
Lord of Dance: A bronze Nataraja deftly depicts Siva's dancing pose

EDUCATIONAL INSIGHT

SRI AUROBINDO

Honoring the Life and Philosophy Of India's Revolutionary Rishi

Written by Sudarshan Ramabadran • Art by Mahaveer Swami



MAHAVEER SWAMI

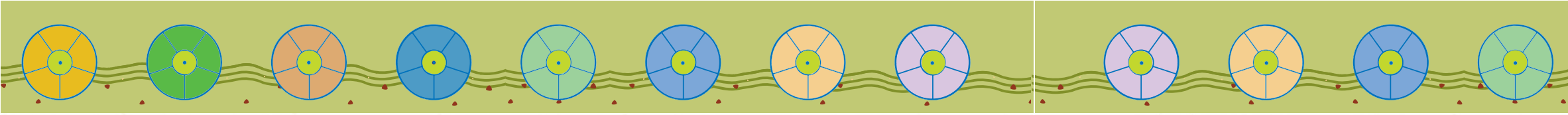
AS A CIVILIZATIONAL NATION STATE WITH HINDUISM AT its core, India has produced seminal thinkers who have attracted seekers from around the globe. While soft power is in vogue now, these thinkers were ambassadors of the phenomenon. In their time, they drew millions to their teachings, and they do so even today. It would be an understatement to say that they have exercised the most enduring influence over seekers, cutting across ethnicity, creed and religion. This has made them truly universal in thought, word and deed. These thinkers have inculcated in humanity the thought that the world is one family, and its challenges are our own.

The year 2022 witnessed India celebrating the 75th year of independence from colonial rule, and Sri Aurobindo's 150th birth anniversary. There have been many changes and advancements from the time the British left India until now. One thing has not changed: India's commitment to the spiritual quest, the unifying thread of our civilizational ethos spanning countless centuries. The state of Bengal has produced more than its share of pivotal minds who have enabled the country's brethren to prosper intellectually and spiritually. Foremost among them were Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950).

Sri Aurobindo was a multifaceted personality. Educated abroad, he returned to India to become an educationist before joining the revolutionary movement whose goal was to drive the British out of the country. He wrote extensively through his journals and newspapers, embodying true nationalism, then in midlife turned inwards through raja yoga. His life presents a wide array of accomplishments for all to observe, study and use as tools for evolving. Through his writings in the *Life Divine* and *Savitri* and concepts such as Integral Yoga, Aurobindo unveiled his spiritual discoveries, which are followed by thousands around the globe today.

During the 200 nationwide programs organized for the annual G-20 (Group of 20 countries) summit in 2023 by the Government of India, one of the venues of the deliberations was Puducherry, where the delegates visited Auroville and got glimpses into the life of Sri Aurobindo.

World center: The artist shows Sri Aurobindo seated before the Matrimandir, a geodesic dome and meditation chamber 117 feet in diameter at Auroville in Puducherry, India. Started in 1971, decades after the rishi's mahasamadhi, it was completed in 2008. Above, with arms outstretched, Mirra Alfassa, the Mother, offers this amazing icon as a posthumous gift to her guru.



Years in England: Aurobindo Ghose converses with his fellow students at Cambridge University, with the Church of Saint Mary the Great in the background. He spent 13 years studying in the UK.

as Bhawani Bharati, Kali, Goddess of strength, whom Ramakrishna Paramahansa worshiped.

Aurobindo defined Bhawani Bharati as infinite energy and more: "In the unending revolutions of the world, as the wheel of the Eternal turns mightily in its courses, the Infinite Energy which streams forth from the Eternal and sets the wheel to work, looms up in the vision of man in various aspects and infinite forms. Each aspect creates and marks an age. Sometimes She is Love, sometimes She is Knowledge, sometimes She is Renunciation, sometimes She is Compassion. This Infinite Energy is Bhawani. She also is Durga, She is Kali, She is Radha the Beloved, She is Lakshmi. She is our Mother and the Creatress of us all." Aurobindo's diction was unmatched.

The message was a call to Indians everywhere to work relentlessly for the rebirth of the country. In the manifesto he went on to lay out general rules for those taking up the task of rebuilding the country, such as committing four years of service to this humongous work. Money received by them or through their work and publications would be directed towards the country that was referred to as Mother. There would be no gradations or hierarchies in this work, and the main task would be to serve the people. He aspired to make India universal through this manifesto.

Beginning the Fight for Freedom

Knowing he could not openly join the freedom movement while in government service, Aurobindo began to express his thoughts in political writings, starting with a series of seven articles in the *Indu-prakash* in 1893. The series heavily criticized the then Indian National Congress under the title "New Lamps for Old." During his stay in Baroda, one can see how selflessness was imbued in Sri Aurobindo. He wrote not for personal recognition but to sow the seeds of uncompromising freedom in the minds of Indians.

Bipin Chandra Pal—nationalist, writer, orator, reformer and Indian-independence freedom fighter and Sri Aurobindo's colleague during his revolutionary life—wrote of Aurobindo's writings, especially his articles in *Bande Mataram*, a newspaper owned by Pal: "The hand of the master was in it from the very beginning. Its bold attitude, its vigorous thinking, its clear ideas, its chaste and powerful diction, its scorching sarcasm and refined witticism were unsurpassed by any journal in the country, either Indian or Anglo-Indian." Sister Nivedita termed him "the real protagonist of Indian nationalism," strongly opining that it was Aurobindo who gave Indian nationalism a "creative expression." In turn, research shows, he respected the Scottish disciple of Vivekananda, regarding her book, *Kali the Mother*, as inspiring to Indians fighting for freedom.

Sri Aurobindo was born in Calcutta (today's Kolkata) in India on August 15, 1872, to Dr. Krishnadan Ghosh and Swarnalata Devi. He had two elder siblings, Benoybushan and Manmohan, a younger sister Sarojini and one younger brother Barindra Kumar. According to *Sri Aurobindo, A Short Biography* by Matthijs Cornelissen, "His father, a thoroughly Anglicized Indian doctor in British Government service, wanted his sons to have a solid, British education, and when Aurobindo was seven, he sent him, together with his two brothers, to England with the specific instruction that the three brothers should be kept free from Indian influence. . . . When he returned to India in 1893, he had an excellent command of English, Greek, Latin and French, and knew enough German and Italian to enjoy Goethe and Dante in the original, but ... he knew rather little about India."

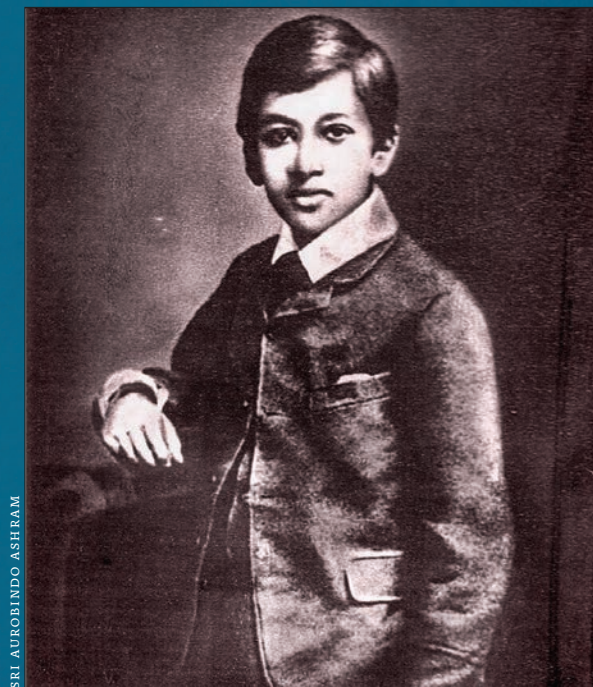
Some accounts say his father played a key role in sensitizing his son's mind to the struggles and ill treatment of the Indian under colonial rule. Towards this, the youth formed a group of Indians to rebel against the leadership of Dadabhai Naoroji and his moderate or pacifist brand of politics, a political approach that he was against. It is believed that while he was in the UK, a secret society by the name Lotus and Dagger was formed with the intention of overthrowing British rule, but it never acted.

After his extended time in London, Sri Aurobindo moved to Baroda (Vadodara) in West India, where he spent 13 years in state service

that included assignments in the settlement and the revenue department. He served as professor in English and as vice principal and acting principal of the Baroda College, today known as the Maharaja Sayajirao University. He also performed secretarial work for the Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III of Baroda, which included writing some of the ruler's speeches and reports. During these years, he mastered several Indian languages including Marathi, Gujarati, Sanskrit and Bengali. Author Vinayak Lohani writes that for Sri Aurobindo the first real discovery of India happened during his days in Baroda. His tryst with Sanskrit happened here, as he immersed himself in reading the works of India's greatest poets—Valmiki, Kalidasa, Veda Vyasa and so on. Amongst his favorites was *Ramayana* and its author Valmiki. I have been fortunate to visit the Aurobindo Ashram in Baroda, which houses some of the master's literature and is open to all for meditation. The calmness of the place is surreal.

Awakening to India's Plight

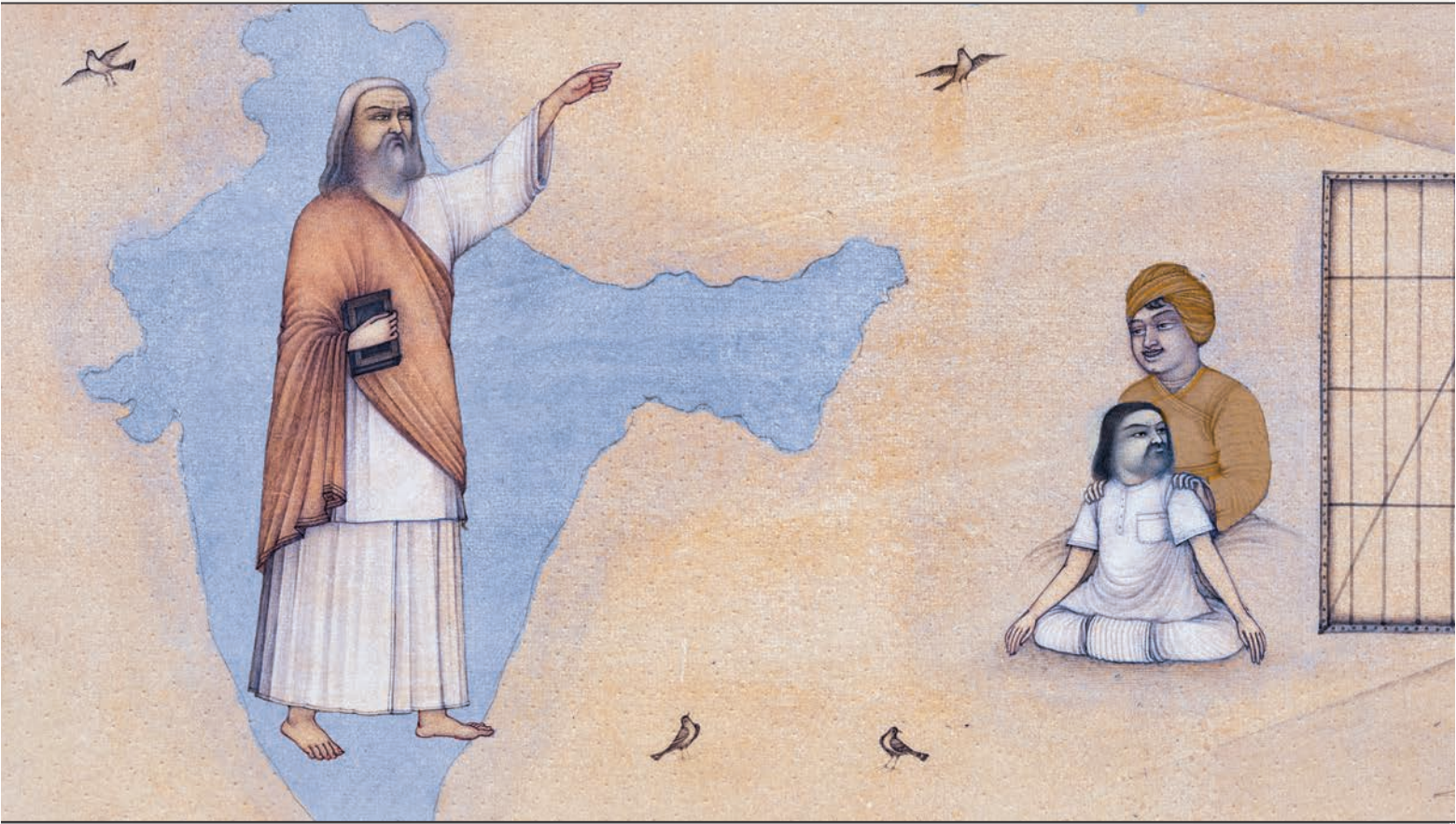
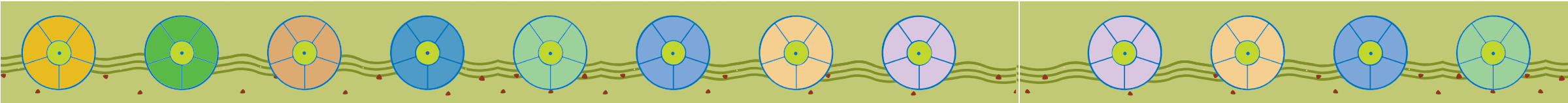
It is reported that sometime in 1905, during a seance guided by Aurobindo's brother Barin, Ramakrishna Paramahansa called upon Aurobindo to build a temple of selfless workers for the reconstruction of India. This gave rise to the famous Bhawani Mandir pamphlet, a fascinating manifesto in which he referred to Mother India



Sri Aurobindo at St. Paul's School, London, 1884

From His Epic Poem *Savitri*

Thought falls from us, we cease from joy and grief;
The ego is dead; we are freed from being and care,
We have done with birth and death and work and fate.
O soul, it is too early to rejoice!
Thou hast reached the boundless silence of the Self,
Thou hast leaped into a glad divine abyss;
But where hast thou thrown Self's mission and Self's power?
On what dead bank on the Eternal's road?
One was within thee who was self and world,
What hast thou done for his purpose in the stars?
Escape brings not the victory and the crown!
Something thou cam'st to do from the Unknown,
But nothing is finished and the world goes on
Because only half God's cosmic work is done.
Only the everlasting No has neared
And stared into thy eyes and killed thy heart:
But where is the Lover's everlasting Yes,
And immortality in the secret heart,
The voice that chants to the creator Fire,
The symbolled OM, the great assenting Word,
The bridge between the rapture and the calm,
The passion and the beauty of the Bride,
The chamber where the glorious enemies kiss,
The smile that saves, the golden peak of things?
This too is Truth at the mystic fount of Life.



Prison visitations: *The artist places the rebel on a map of India, indicating his crucial role in the nation's independence from England. Locked in prison for a year on false charges, he had life-changing experiences in which Swami Vivekananda verbally conveyed "knowledge of the intuitive mentality."*

Gangadhar Tilak to have made a definite pronouncement on the caste system. 'The prevailing idea of social inequality is working immense evil,' says the Nationalist leader of the Deccan. This pronouncement is only natural from an earnest Hindu and a sincere Nationalist like Srijut Tilak."

Aurobindo, in his work as a revolutionary, believed in communicating his ideas for complete independence, self-reliance, self-rule and for building individuals who would carry forward this idea to the masses. He lived at a time when common minds thought independence was a far-fetched ideal. But he wanted an awakening, one spark to ignite the country. Even through a cursory look at his life, one would conclude he succeeded in communicating his political ideas in acts that ultimately shook the foundations of the British empire.

Praise from His Peers

Be it Rash Behari Bose, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Rabindranath Tagore, Bharathiyar or Sister Nivedita, they all looked to Sri Aurobindo for his inspirational vision of seeing India as a global contributor to thought and humanity purely through the strength of knowledge.

In *The Transformation*, a video documentary on Sri Aurobindo, Rash Behari Bose, one of the founders of the Indian National Army, said it was Sri Aurobindo who embodied "positive Indian nationalism." Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose described him as his spiritual guru, as one of the most "popular leaders of Bengal" and a "fearless advocate of Independence." Netaji Bose went on to add that Aurobindo was his "spiritual guru" to whom he had dedicated his mind and soul. Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore defined him as "the voice incarnate of India's soul." True to this, his life inspired not only the minds in the east of India but across the length and breadth of the nation.

Man-Making Through Institutions

Aurobindo foresaw that India needed men and women of steel who could help realize his vision and establish her rightful place in the comity of nations. His vision was to set up institutions with this sole purpose, and the Bengal National College was no exception. Aurobindo's vision was that any education must be in tune with a student's svabhava, true nature.

His stirring speech "Advice to Students," given at the college on August 23, 1907, prior to his arrest by the British in the Bande Mataram sedition case, stands as proof of his vision for education. "What we want here is not merely to give you a little information, not

Marriage

While in Baroda, another chapter of Aurobindo's life would unfold. In April 1901, at age 28 he decided to marry Mrinalini Devi, age 14, daughter of Bhupal Chandra Bose, a distinguished attorney, after meeting her through a matrimonial advertisement he put out seeking to marry a Hindu girl according to Hindu rites. Dr. Kavita Sharma, former President of the South Asian University, writes that after four years of marriage Aurobindo decided to part ways with Mrinalini, saying it was due to a generational gap. Others suspect he was being drawn more into politics, revolutionary activities and the nascent stages of his encounters with yoga.

The book, *Sri Aurobindo's Letters Written to His Wife Mrinalini Devi*, reveals she never came in the way of his work and spiritual practice. After Aurobindo left Bengal, he never met Mrinalini again. She contemplated receiving sannayasa diksha (monastic initiation) from the Ramakrishna Mission order. Aurobindo disallowed this but promised her spiritual support. She longed to join him in Pondicherry (Puducherry), but fate would have it otherwise. She died of influenza at the age of 32.

His famous letter to Mrinalini on August 30, 1905, in which he recounted his "three madresses," symbolizes his vision of God and country. He described the first madness as regarding whatever accomplishments and wealth he had gained as belonging to God. The second madness, he wrote, is his deep desire for a direct vision of God; and the third madness is that he looked at his country as a Mother while others looked at it as an "inert piece of matter."

Deeper into the Freedom Movement

Aurobindo's revolutionary vision took wings after an outbreak of protests following the partition of Bengal by the British in 1905. He gave up the Baroda Service in 1906 and moved to Kolkata as principal of the newly founded Bengal National College. There he urged students to explore different ways to give back to India, their motherland. His nationalism did not merely mean that one's country came first; it meant a total rebirth of India through the prism of a civilizational ethos that would be a beacon, a guiding light, for the world.

In 1906, Aurobindo was editing the newspaper *Bande Mataram*. He also wrote articles in *Jugantar Patrika*, a Bengali weekly, focusing on the partition of Bengal. *Bande Mataram* was not outwardly advocating an armed end to British rule, but in several articles *Jugantar Patrika* clearly espoused an open, armed revolt against the British. Aurobindo was arrested in 1907 on sedition charges for some of his articles that appeared in *Bande Mataram*. However, the court found no evidence of sedition in the writings and he was released. This sedition case began the real unfolding of his notoriety as a revolutionary.

He drew inspiration from Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak, who epitomized *swaraj*, self-rule, and gave the famed clarion call, "Swarajya is my birthright and I shall have it." He also championed the *swadeshi* movement, which called for Indians to boycott British goods and buy Indian products. Aurobindo rightfully called Tilak a "great mind, great will, and a great pre-eminent leader."

Tilak also inspired Aurobindo's worldview on castes. In one of his articles for *Bande Mataram*, entitled "Un-Hindu Spirit of Caste Rigidity," Aurobindo wrote, "*The Bengalee* reports Srijut Bal

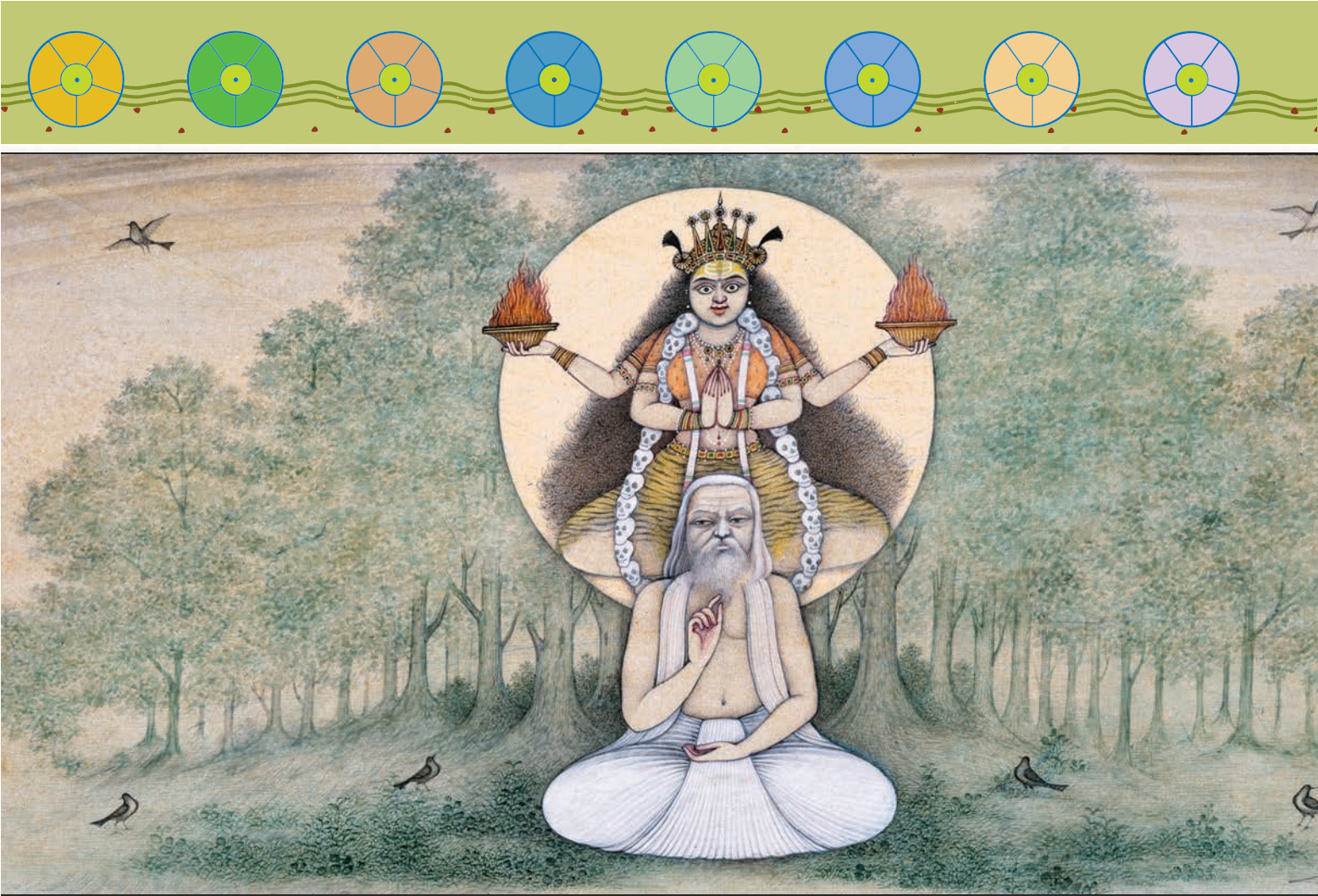


Evolution's Potent Momentum

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WWW.SRIAUROBINDOASHRAM.ORG/FAQ/YOGA.PHP

Sri Aurobindo's teaching states that there is a one Being and Consciousness involved here in Matter which is impelled to enlarge and develop towards a greater and greater perfection. Life and Mind are only the first two steps of this evolution. The next step of the evolution must be towards development of a greater spiritual and supramental Consciousness which will release the involved Divinity in things, after which it will become possible for life to manifest perfection.

In Sri Aurobindo's view, Man, at present, lives mostly in his surface mind, life and body. There is an inner being within which pushes him to a constant pursuit of a greater beauty, harmony, power and knowledge. He has to awaken to the greater possibilities of this inner being and purify and orient, by its drive towards the Truth, the rest of the nature. There can follow afterwards an opening upward to the several ranges of consciousness between the ordinary human mind and the Supramental Truth-Consciousness, and their power brought down into the mind, life and body. This will enable the full power of the Truth-Consciousness to work in the nature....The process of this discipline is therefore long and difficult, but sustained effort in this direction brings the seeker ever closer to the goal of this Yoga.



merely to open to you careers for earning a livelihood, but to build up sons for the motherland to work and to suffer for her,” he proclaimed. “That is why we started this college and that is the work to which I want you to devote yourselves in future. What has been insufficiently and imperfectly begun by us, it is for you to complete and lead to perfection. I wish to see some of you becoming great—great not for your own sakes, not that you may satisfy your own vanity, but great for her, to make India great, to enable her to stand up with head erect among the nations of the earth, as she did in days of yore when the world looked up to her for light.

“Even those who will remain poor and obscure, I want to see their very poverty and obscurity devoted to the motherland. If you will study, study for her sake, train yourselves body and mind and soul for her service. You will earn your living that you may live for her sake. You will go abroad to foreign lands to bring back knowledge with which you may render service to her. Work that she may prosper. Suffer that she may rejoice. All is contained in that one single advice.”

Prison’s Profound Impact

The turning point in Aurobindo’s life was the Alipore Bomb Case involving the Anushilan Samiti group in Bengal. The group, which was at the forefront of initiating revolutionary violence against the British, spent its time teaching young recruits how to make bombs. Among targets of the group was the British magistrate Douglas Kingsford. Two young revolutionaries, Prafulla Chaki and Khudiram Bose, were sent to assassinate him. In April 1908, the duo hurled bombs at Kingsford’s carriage, but it was not he in the carriage, but another

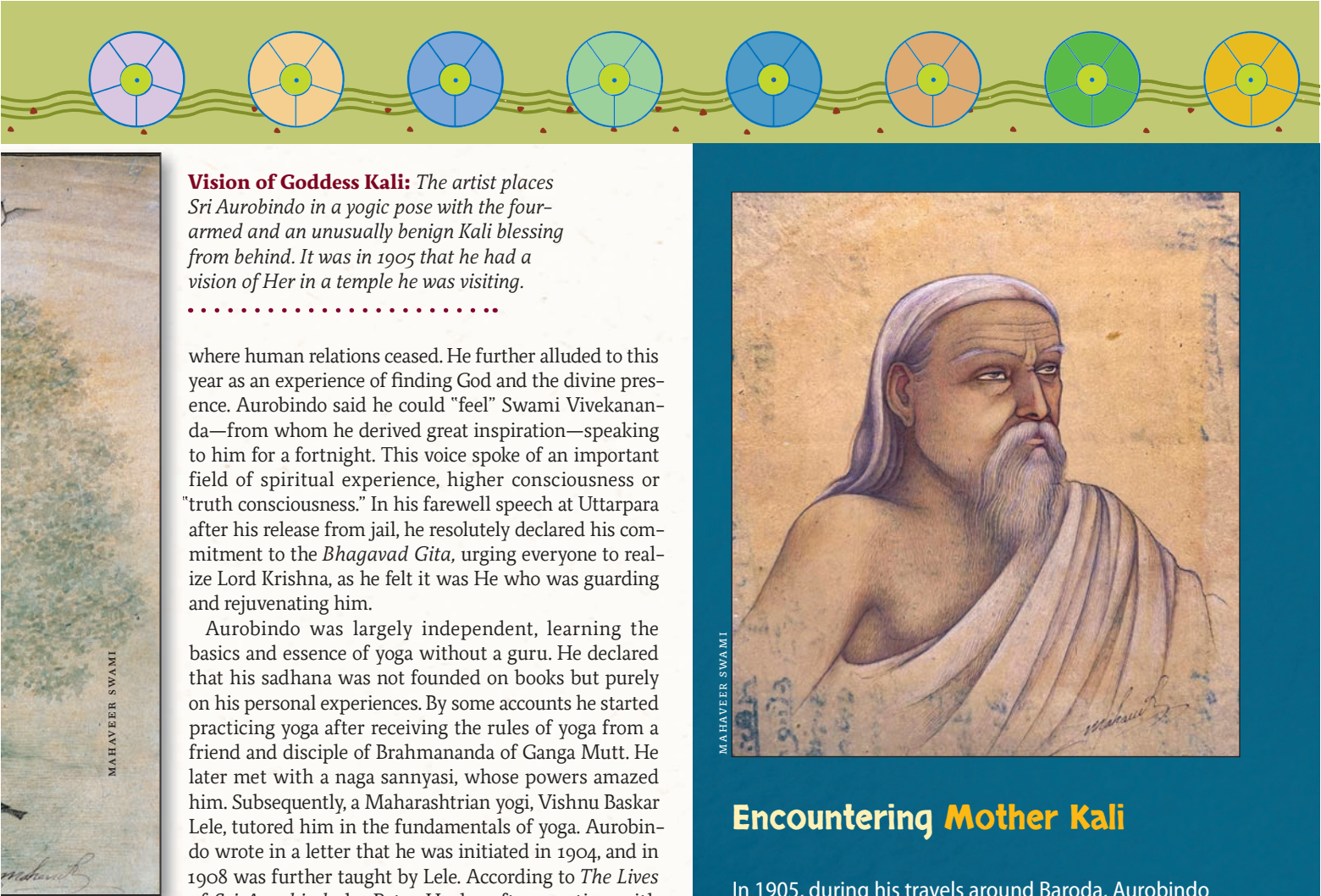
British barrister’s wife and daughter, who were killed.

While fleeing, Prafulla Chaki fatally shot himself to avoid capture. Khudiram Bose was arrested and hanged at the age of 18. Further investigation led the police to arrest Aurobindo. After exactly a year of trial, during which he was imprisoned, the court acquitted Aurobindo and others. Some faced life imprisonment, but were later released, and some received life sentences.

The lengthy trial and his year in prison had a profound impact on Aurobindo. Cornelissen documented: “His incarceration had one major effect, which the British police could not have foreseen, or, for that matter, understood. Aurobindo took his arrest and yearlong incarceration as a God-imposed opportunity to concentrate fully on his inner, spiritual development, or sadhana. While in jail, he showed remarkably little concern about the court-case, but made an in depth study of the *Bhagavad Gita* and realized the presence of the personal Divine in everything and everybody around him.

“In his own words, ‘It was while I was walking that His strength again entered into me. I looked at the jail that secluded me from men and it was no longer by its high walls that I was imprisoned; no, it was Vasudeva who surrounded me. I walked under the branches of the tree in front of my cell, but it was not the tree, I knew it was Vasudeva, it was Srikrishna whom I saw standing there and holding over me His shade. I looked at the bars of my cell, the very grating that did duty for a door and again I saw Vasudeva. It was Narayana who was guarding and standing sentry over me.’ ”

He spent considerable time on his spiritual practice, striving to transform himself and understand his life’s true purpose. He later compared his stay in prison to living in an ashram or hermitage



Vision of Goddess Kali: *The artist places Sri Aurobindo in a yogic pose with the four-armed and an unusually benign Kali blessing from behind. It was in 1905 that he had a vision of Her in a temple he was visiting.*

where human relations ceased. He further alluded to this year as an experience of finding God and the divine presence. Aurobindo said he could “feel” Swami Vivekananda—from whom he derived great inspiration—speaking to him for a fortnight. This voice spoke of an important field of spiritual experience, higher consciousness or “truth consciousness.” In his farewell speech at Uttarpara after his release from jail, he resolutely declared his commitment to the *Bhagavad Gita*, urging everyone to realize Lord Krishna, as he felt it was He who was guarding and rejuvenating him.

Aurobindo was largely independent, learning the basics and essence of yoga without a guru. He declared that his sadhana was not founded on books but purely on his personal experiences. By some accounts he started practicing yoga after receiving the rules of yoga from a friend and disciple of Brahmananda of Ganga Mutt. He later met with a naga sannyasi, whose powers amazed him. Subsequently, a Maharashtrian yogi, Vishnu Baskar Lele, tutored him in the fundamentals of yoga. Aurobindo wrote in a letter that he was initiated in 1904, and in 1908 was further taught by Lele. According to *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo* by Peter Heehs, after meeting with

Lele, Aurobindo went into seclusion for three days. Following the yogi’s instructions, he had his first major spiritual experience—said to be a nirvana state of perfect quiescence, free all mental activity.

Cornelissen wrote: “Within three days he managed under Lele’s guidance to completely, and permanently, silence his mind. Soon after, he had the realization of the silent, impersonal Brahman in which the whole world assumed the appearance of ‘empty forms, materialised shadows without true substance’ . . . The presence of the silent Brahman never left Aurobindo, though it subsequently merged with other realizations of the Divine. Interestingly, all this happened during one of the busiest periods of his life while he was at the peak of his political influence, and he managed, in his own words, to organise political work, deliver speeches, edit his newspaper and write articles, all from an entirely silent mind.”

A Higher Calling

After his release from prison in 1909, Aurobindo continued writing, launching two weeklies, *Karmayogin* in English and *Dharma* in Bengali. They explored religion, literature, science and philosophy, among other subjects. He edited and wrote translations of *Upanishads* in *Karmayogin*. The British again tried to prosecute him for a purportedly seditious article in *Karmayogin*, but this time he fled to the French enclave of Pondicherry via Chandernagore. Sister Nivedita edited *Karmayogin* until it ceased publication in 1910. The *Dharma* weekly folded the same year.

Once settled in Pondicherry, Aurobindo became fully dedicated to his spiritual and philosophical pursuits. In 1914, after four years of

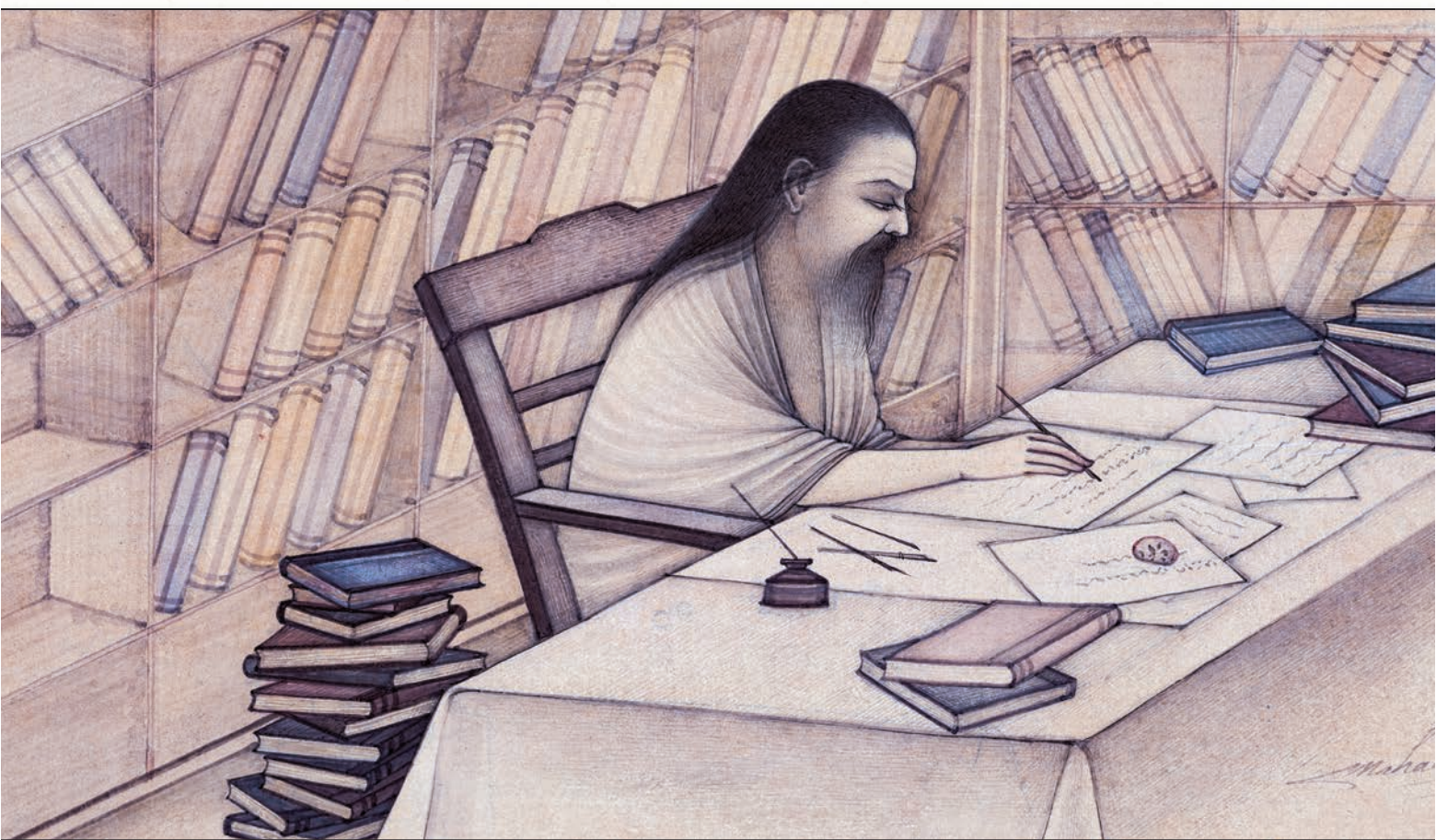
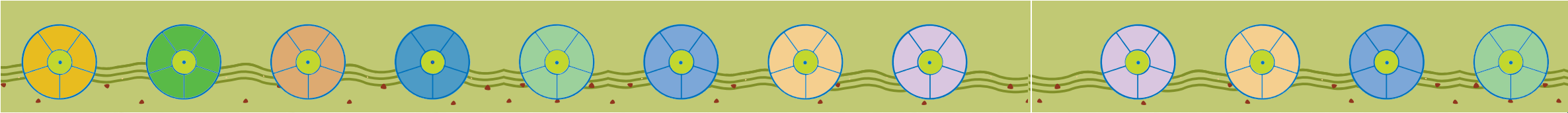


Encountering Mother Kali

In 1905, during his travels around Baroda, Aurobindo visited a Goddess Kali temple in Chandod on the banks of the Narmada River. There, according to his biography, he experienced a palpable living presence of Kali manifesting before him, a life-altering experience he captured in the following poem.

The Stone Goddess

From sculptured limbs the Godhead looked at me,
A living Presence deathless and divine,
A Form that harbored all infinity.
The great World-Mother and Her mighty will
Inhabited the earth’s abysmal sleep,
Voiceless, omnipotent, inscrutable,
Mute in the desert and the sky and deep.
Now veiled with mind She dwells and speaks no word,
Voiceless, inscrutable, omniscient,
Hiding until our soul has seen, has heard
The secret of Her strange embodiment,
One in the worshiper and the immobile shape,
A beauty and mystery flesh nor stone can drape.



Wordsmith: The artist captures Sri Aurobindo at his writing desk, his various essays, books and poems strewn about the desk and on the shelves. His writings, in several languages, flowed prolifically from his pen.

one Self, it is separate, but it is possible to remove that veil and become aware of the true self by virtue of psychological discipline. Evolution certainly enables this, but the process does not stop there. Life is the first step, with the next being the development of the supermind and spirit. The aim is simple, that one can discover Self and not just stay there, but evolve to a higher consciousness.

Aurobindo and the Mother worked on the descension of the supramental force on the mind. This was the ultimate transformation, according to the rishi. Aurobindo's core philosophy is best described by A.B. Purani, one of his biographers: "Sri Aurobindo advocates the control of Matter by the Spirit, but to be able to do that, man must rise above his present state of consciousness. He must rise from his mental consciousness to the truth-consciousness, to the super-mind."

Aurobindo was prolific, completing a huge body of work. According to *Reading Sri Aurobindo*, the master's printed work exceeds 21,000 pages, almost six million words. His writings are not easily approached. I have read and re-read some of his works, as have many of today's young readers. One has to delve deep and ponder even deeper to understand him. Dr. Frawley quipped, "For Aurobindo a sentence can be a paragraph and a paragraph can run into pages." He also uniquely allowed contrary opinion in his works, further making it difficult to

understand his philosophical scope because it is many-sided, a rare feat very few writers in Indian history managed with such aplomb. Having lived in and learned from the West, Aurobindo felt Western thought was not adequate for genuine seekers. He forecast, according to Dr. Frawley, that Western thought would degenerate into many ideologies, and its culture was in decline. In comparison, Aurobindo strongly felt independent Indian thought was strong and steady.

Heralding the Vedas

Central among Aurobindo's teachings was his call for people to return to the philosophy and understanding of the Vedas. In his words, "The recovery of the perfect truth of the Veda is therefore not merely a desideratum for our modern intellectual curiosity, but a practical necessity for the future of the human race." He encouraged seekers to set their sights on the truth of the Veda through revelation and experience. Aurobindo believed revelation, inspiration, intuition and intuitive discrimination are the preeminent processes of ancient inquiry.

The *Sri Aurobindo Archives and Research*, issues December 1985 and April 1997, record he was convinced that Hinduism sprouted into existence from the seed called the Veda. "At the root of all that we Hindus have done, thought and said through these many thousands of years, behind all we are and seek to be, there lies concealed the fount of our philosophies, the bedrock of our religions, the kernel of our thought, the explanation of our ethics and society, the summary of our civilization, the rivet of our nationality, a small body of speech—Veda. The

consistent yoga, he began expressing his wisdom on paper, launching the 64-page monthly called *Arya*, which for the next six years was the vehicle for his major works, in serial form, which were later published in book form—*The Upanishads* (1922), *Essays on the Gita* (1928), *The Life Divine* (1940), *The Synthesis of Yoga* (1948), *The Human Cycle* (1949), *The Ideal of Human Unity* (1949), *The Foundations of Indian Culture* (1953) and *On the Veda* (1956).

About his writing the *Times Literary Supplement of London* wrote: "He is a new type of thinker, one who combines in his vision the alacrity of the West with the illumination of the East. He is a yogi who writes as though he were standing among the stars, with the constellations for his companions." Sri Aurobindo wrote in various languages, including Bengali, Sanskrit, and French, but is best known for his works in English, which he used to express his philosophical and spiritual ideas.

The Mother

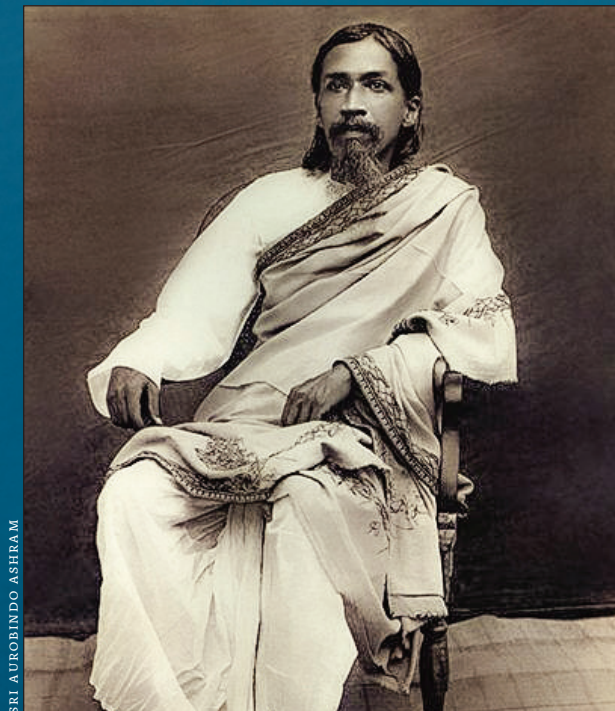
In 1914, Mirra Alfassa, a Jewish mystic born in Paris in 1878 to Turkish and Egyptian parents, first met the rishi, who was six years her senior. She was profoundly moved by that first meeting, writing that on that day she had met Krishna: "It matters little that there are thousands of beings plunged in the densest ignorance, He whom we saw yesterday is on Earth; his presence is enough to prove that a day will come when darkness shall be transformed into light, and Thy reign shall be indeed established upon earth." In 1920 she began to permanently reside in Pondicherry as Aurobindo's spiritual collaborator.

In 1926, they founded the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. He withdrew from active participation later that year, leaving day-to-day management and further development to Alfassa. In 1943, she started an ashram school. In 1968, at the age of ninety, she formally established Auroville, an experimental township dedicated to human unity and evolution located six miles from Aurobindo Ashram. She died on November 17, 1973, at age 95, in Pondicherry.

"We know relatively little about what Sri Aurobindo did during the 24 years after his retirement to his rooms," Cornelissen chronicled. "He spoke hardly to anybody, except for a short period just before the Second World War when he needed physical assistance after breaking his leg, and he saw his disciples only three to four times a year in a silent 'darshan.' What we know of his inner life during this period is largely from his letters, from his poetry, and from the changes he introduced in some of his earlier writings. During the 1930s, Sri Aurobindo answered a staggering number of letters to his disciples, of which over 5,000 have been published. Most of them deal with sadhana, quite a few with literature, and a smaller number with other issues. Roughly during the same time he also took up the revision of a few of his major works like his *Essays on the Gita*, the first two parts of *The Synthesis of Yoga*, and *The Life Divine*." From the late thirties onward, his primary pursuit was the 24,000-line epic poem *Savitri*.

Essential Teachings

Aurobindo's essential teachings state that behind the appearance of the universe there is consciousness. Although this is united by that



SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM

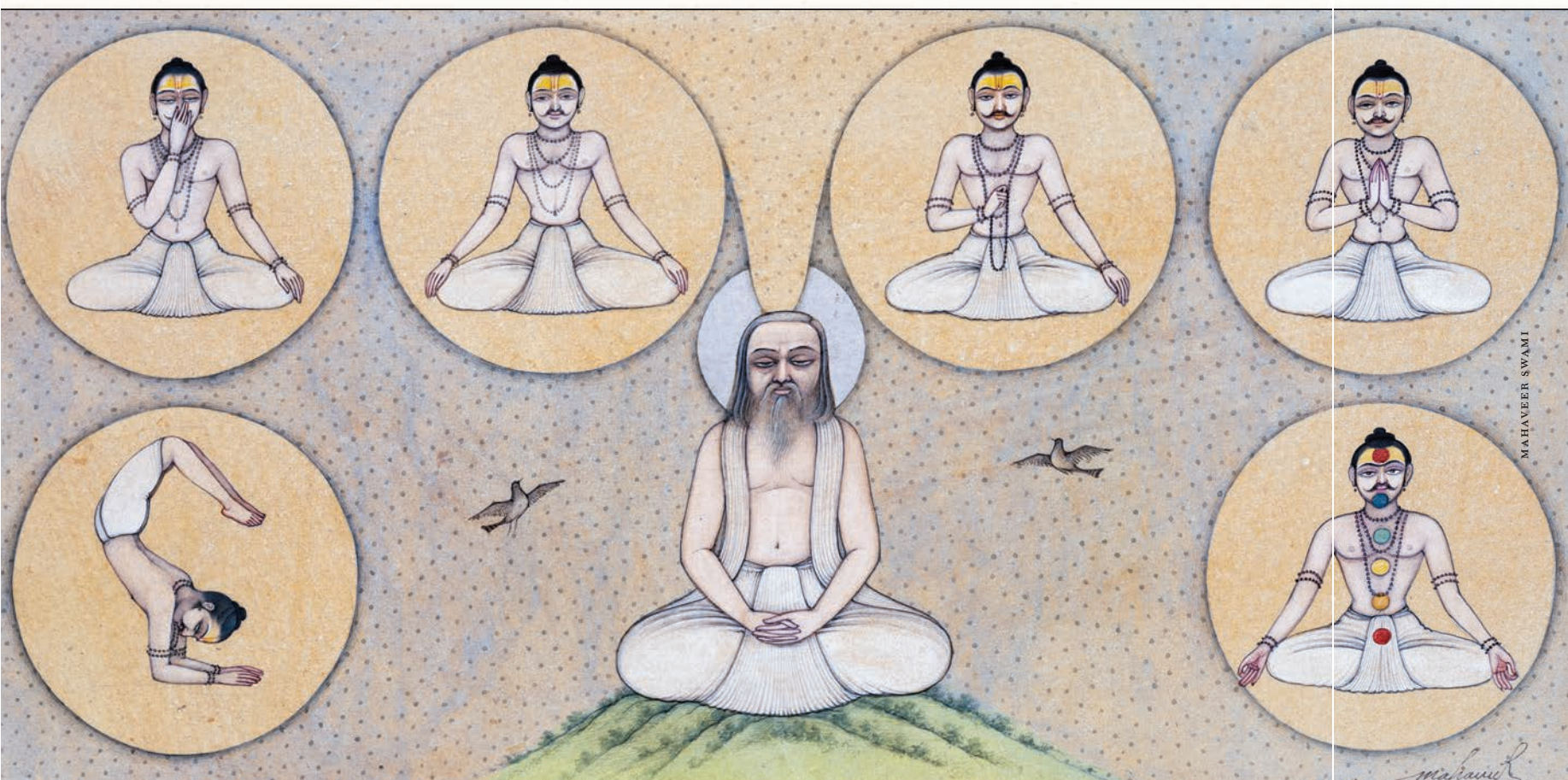
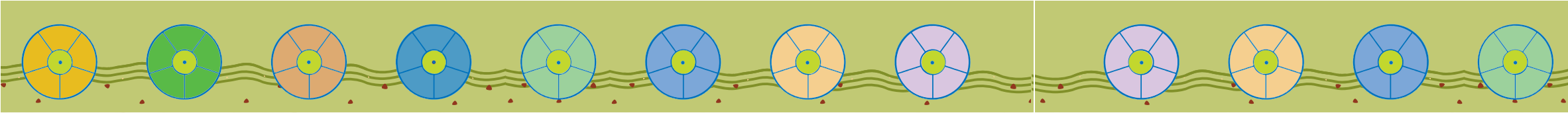
The Supreme Truth-Consciousness

From Sri Aurobindo's *The Life Divine*

One seated in the sleep of Superconscience, a massed Intelligence, blissful and the enjoyer of Bliss. . . . This is the omnipotent, this is the omniscient, this is the inner controller, this is the source of all.

Mandukya Upanishad, verse 1

We have to regard, therefore, this all-containing, all-originating, all-consummating Supermind as the nature of the Divine Being, not indeed in its absolute self-existence, but in its action as the Lord and Creator of its own worlds. This is the truth of that which we call God. Obviously this is not the too personal and limited Deity, the magnified and supernatural Man of the ordinary occidental conception; for that conception erects a too human Eidolon of a certain relation between the creative Supermind and the ego. We must not indeed exclude the personal aspect of the Deity, for the impersonal is only one face of existence; the Divine is All-existence, but it is also the one Existent—it is the sole Conscious-Being, but still a Being. Nevertheless, with this aspect we are not concerned at present; it is the impersonal psychological truth of the divine Consciousness that we are seeking to fathom: it is this that we have to fix in a large and clarified conception. The Truth-Consciousness is everywhere present in the universe as an ordering self-knowledge by which the One manifests the harmonies of its infinite potential multiplicity. Without this ordering self-knowledge, the manifestation would be merely a shifting chaos, precisely because the potentiality is infinite—which by itself might lead only to a play of uncontrolled, unbounded Chance."



Integral yoga: Here the artist depicts six forms of yoga surrounding our revelatory rebel. Clockwise from lower left, they are hatha yoga, pranayama, dharana, dhyana, Ishvarapranidhana and samadhi.

Auroville was envisioned as a place for the future, especially those who seek a vision of peace, unity and knowledge. Alfassa, the Mother, was the prime mover behind the creation of Auroville, which she founded eighteen years after Aurobindo left his body. Since its inception, Auroville has received widespread coverage in Western media, positive and negative, some calling it the “capital of a spiritual empire.” It has attracted seekers from Western countries, especially France and the US, with many making it their permanent home. UNESCO has termed Auroville “Aurobindo’s city of global unity.” People from India and other countries throng there for spiritual benefit. My family and I are regular visitors to the ashram and the Matrimandir, finding Auroville an important place for pilgrims to soothe our minds. There are centers all over the world promoting Aurobindo’s thought.

In 1972, Aurobindo’s birth centenary year was celebrated. In 2022, the 150th year of his birth, the government of India released a commemorative coin and postage stamp. According to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Aurobindo’s life and message continue to inspire generations and he “left his impressions wherever he went.”

Irina Bokova, former UNESCO director general, summed up Aurobindo in today’s context, “To him we also owe the magisterial commentary of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the gift of sharing understanding of Hinduism’s deepest sources across all borders, the gift of drawing bridges of understanding between Western and Eastern cultures, between all societies. The life of Sri Aurobindo was inspired by a deep devotion to human dignity and freedom, guided by his vision of life as an opening of the mind. The stars might find it is no coincidence he was born on the day that India achieved independence. Aurobindo appealed for unity, peace, and concord, qualifying his great nation as a ‘helper and leader of the whole human race.’ Sri Aurobindo embodied the conviction that the ethical and spiritual dimension—the quest for self-knowledge—offered the most fertile ground for creating more peaceful, just and harmonious societies.”

It is important to understand Aurobindo’s life in a contemporary framework. He was an original thinker and a man of ideas. It will be fitting if we pick up any one of his readings, letters or speeches to explore the depths of his persona. It is also important not to de-Indianize him, nor claim that his vision was and is universal and not Indian. This is the very least one can do towards the maharishi who said, “All life is yoga.” His 150th birthday could be the perfect opportunity to strive towards a holistic, inclusive model India that can present to the world as he envisioned.

Critics may criticize Aurobindo for being an escapist because he fled

Veda was the beginning of our spiritual knowledge; the *Veda* will remain its end.”

His core thoughts on interpreting the *Vedas* are found in the *Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 15: “The hypothesis on which I shall conduct my own inquiry is that the *Veda* has a double aspect, and that the two, though closely related, must be kept apart. The Rishis arranged the substance of their thought in a system of parallelism by which the same deities were at once internal and external powers of universal nature, and they managed its expression through a system of double values by which the same language served for their worship in both aspects. But the psychological sense predominates and is more pervading, close-knit and coherent than the physical. The *Veda* is primarily intended to serve toward the spiritual enlightenment and self-culture. It is, therefore, this sense which has to be first restored.”

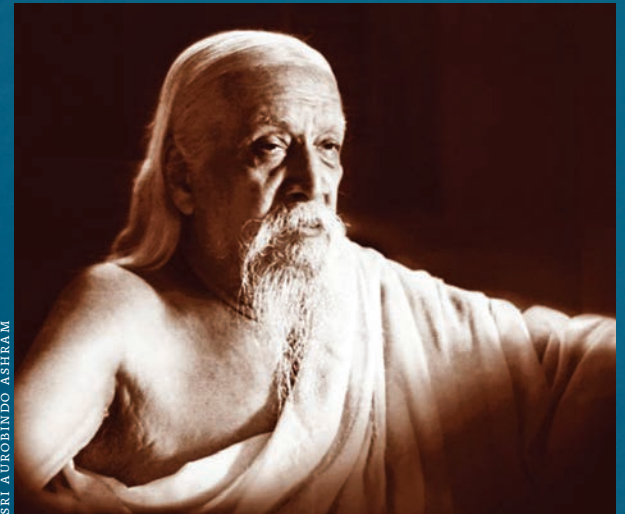
In Volume 16 he continues, “The Vedic rishis were mystics who reserved their inner knowledge for the initiates; they shielded it from the vulgar by the use of an alphabet of symbols which could not readily be understood without the initiation, but they were perfectly clear and systematic when the signs were once known.” In the same volume, he laid down processes for interpreting the *Vedas*. First, it must be a “straightforward rendering word by word of the text.” Second, it has to be “seen for what its actual purport and significance is,” and third, “if a symbolic interpretation is put on any part of the text, it must arise directly and clearly from suggestions and language of the *Veda* itself and must be brought in from outside.”

Let’s look at an example, widely cited without attribution, to

illustrate this idea. Indra is the God of mind lording over the Indriyas, that is, the senses. Vayu represents air, but in its esoteric sense means prana, or the life force. So when the *Rig Veda* says “Call Indra and Vayu to drink Soma Rasa,” the inner meaning is to use mind through the senses and life force to receive divine bliss. Agni, the God of the sacrificial fire in the outer sense, is the flame of the spiritual will to overcome the obstacles to unite with the Divine. Thus the sacrifice of the *Vedas* could mean sacrificing one’s ego to the internal Agni, the spiritual fire.

Impact and Legacy

The message of Sri Aurobindo is not confined within the borders of India, but lives in followers’ hearts and small institutions on several continents, even though he never traveled to propagate his thoughts and ideals. A.B. Purani emphasized this in his *Sri Aurobindo Life Divine Lectures* in the United States. G.H. Langley, in his book *Sri Aurobindo, Indian Poet, Philosopher and Mystic*, wrote, “Sri Aurobindo is both a poet and a speculative thinker. The same is true of Rabindranath Tagore, but the thought of Sri Aurobindo appears to me more comprehensive and systematic than that of Tagore.” Dr. Frederic Spiegelberg of Stanford University wrote that he “had never known a philosopher so all-embracing in his metaphysical structure as Sri Aurobindo. None before him had the same vision. I can foresee the day when the teachings—which are already making headway—of the greatest spiritual voice of India, Sri Aurobindo, will be known all over America and be a vast power of illumination.”

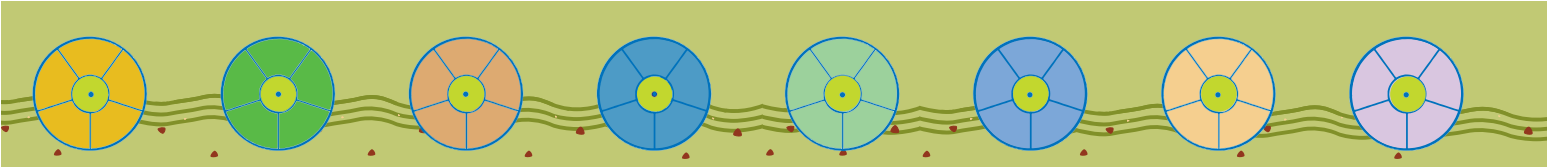


On His Synthesis of Yoga

From Sri Aurobindo’s *The Life Divine*

In practice, three conceptions are necessary before there can be any possibility of Yoga; there must be, as it were, three consenting parties to the effort—God, Nature and the human soul or, in more abstract language, the Transcendental, the Universal and the Individual. If the individual and Nature are left to themselves, the one is bound to the other and unable to exceed appreciably her lingering march. Something transcendent is needed, free from her and greater, which will act upon us and her, attracting us upward to Itself and securing from her by good grace or by force her consent to the individual ascension.

It is this truth which makes necessary to every philosophy of Yoga the conception of the Ishwara, Lord, supreme Soul or supreme Self, towards whom the effort is directed and who gives the illuminating touch and the strength to attain. Equally true is the complementary idea so often enforced by the Yoga of devotion that as the Transcendent is necessary to the individual and sought after by him, so also the individual is necessary in a sense to the Transcendent and sought after by It. If the Bhakta seeks and yearns after Bhagavan, Bhagavan also seeks and yearns after the Bhakta. There can be no Yoga of knowledge without a human seeker of the knowledge, the supreme subject of knowledge and the divine use by the individual of the universal faculties of knowledge; no Yoga of devotion without the human God-lover, the supreme object of love and delight and the divine use by the individual of the universal faculties of spiritual, emotional and aesthetic enjoyment; no Yoga of works without the human worker, the supreme Will, Master of all works and sacrifices, and the divine use by the individual of the universal faculties of power and action. However Monistic may be our intellectual conception of the highest truth of things, in practice we are compelled to accept this omnipresent Trinity.



the Indian freedom struggle at its peak in pursuit of higher living, or that his writings may overly adopt Victorian English, or that he professed a philosophy that is opaque and difficult to comprehend. But there is no escaping the fact that he stands tall as an author of India's spiritual story. It is up to us, "we the people," to read through and understand the real Aurobindo.

Early in life Aurobindo Ghose took a violent, coercive path to overthrow the British through his revolutionary writings and activities. But that is just one side of his biography. The other side, more enduring, is that he understood early on how to nurture in others a persuasive attraction to spirituality and was himself its embodiment. Today, Indian spiritual thought inspires seekers around the globe and serves as a guiding force to fight for peace. His evolution from political radical to ascetic yogi can be best understood, in modern terms of international relations, as a transition from hard power to soft power.

Final Message

In a radio broadcast on India's independence day, August 15, 1947, his 75th birthday, Aurobindo put forth his five lifetime dreams for the benefit of India, the world and humanity at large. He felt that even though India was, after too long a time, now politically free, it needed to be united. Hence, his first dream was "a revolutionary movement that could create a free and united India." The second dream was for the "resurgence and liberation of the peoples of Asia and Asia's return to her great role in the progress of human civilization." His third dream was a "world union forming the outer basis of fairer, brighter and nobler life of mankind." The fourth was that the "spiritual gift of India to the world has begun," and the fifth was raising

The center of it all: An aerial photo by Vyas Abhishek captures the cynosure of Auroville in Pondicherry, a golden geodesic dome 117 feet in diameter, with earth-colored petals representing the "twelve paths of spiritual liberation." Inside is a 28-inch spherical crystal designed to focus spiritual energies for those meditating in the chamber.

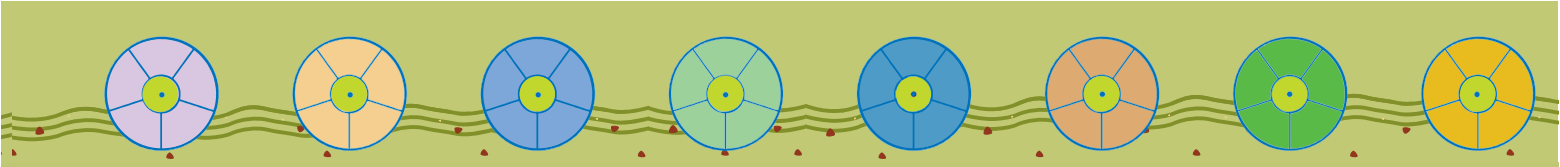
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"human evolution to higher consciousness to bring about solutions to problems." Sri Aurobindo made his transition on December 5, 1950. His body was entombed without cremation in a chamber called The Samadhi located within the Aurobindo Ashram complex. It is a place of pilgrimage and worship for many of Sri Aurobindo's followers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sudarshan Ramabadran, author and researcher, is currently studying at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, in the master of public diplomacy program. He was a Professional Fellow for Governance and Society, South and Central Asia Program in Washington D.C., an exchange program run by the U.S. Department of State. In April 2021, he co-authored the book, *Makers of Modern Dalit History*, aimed at highlighting pioneering Indians on diversity, equity and inclusion.



VIAS ABHISHEK, SHUTTERSTOCK

The Rishi's Lifestyle & Habits

EXCERPTS FROM THE WEBSITE [COLLECTEDWORKSOFSRIAUROBINDO.COM](https://collectedworksofsriaurobindo.com)

"The routine of his daily life was as follows: After morning tea Sri Aurobindo used to write poetry. He would continue up to ten o'clock. Bath was between ten and eleven o'clock and lunch was at eleven o'clock; a cigar would be by his side ,even while he ate. Sri Aurobindo used to read journals while taking his meals."

"He took less of rice and more of bread. Once a day there was meat or fish. There were intervals when Sri Aurobindo took to complete vegetarian diet. He was indifferent to taste. He found Marathi food too hot (with its chilies) and Gujarati food too rich in ghee. Later, he once had a dinner at B.G. Tilak's, which consisted of rice, puri,

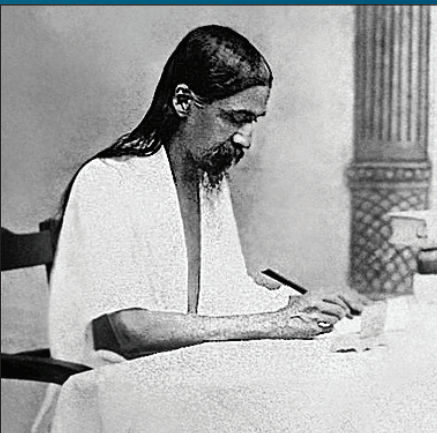
legume (dal) and vegetables. He liked it for its 'Spartan simplicity.'"

"Desireless, a man of few words, balanced in his diet, self-controlled, always given to study, reading far into the night, and hence a late riser. . . . Aurobindo talked very little, perhaps because he believed it better to speak as little as possible about oneself. . . . It was as if acquiring knowledge was his sole mission in life." (The Bengali tutor, Dinendra Kumar Roy)

R.N. Patkar, a student of Aurobindo: "At home he was clad in plain white sadara and dhoti and outside invariably in white drill suits. He never slept on a soft cotton

bed, as most of us do, but on a bed made of coir (coconut fibers) on which was spread a Malabar grass mat which served as a bedsheet. Once I asked him why he used such a coarse, hard bed and he said with his characteristic laugh, 'My boy, don't you know that I am a brahmachari? Our shastras enjoin that a brahmachari should not use a soft bed, which may induce him to sleep.'"

"Books, books were his major preoccupation; the Bombay firms of booksellers, Thacker Spink and Radhabai Atmaram, supplied him regularly with the latest catalogs, and he then placed orders for selected books which duly arrived in bulky parcels by passenger train. His personal library thus came to include some of the latest books in English, French, German, Latin, Greek and, of



course, all the major English poets, from Chaucer to Swinburne. . . . But because he liked this reading did not mean that he did not join us in our talks and chats and our merrymaking. His talk used to be full of wit and humor."

"Beyond a nodding acquaintance with the

broad ideas of certain European philosophers, he had no interest in the highways and byways of Western philosophical thought. Of the Indian philosophers also he had read only some of their main conclusions. Actually, his first real acquaintance with Indian spirituality was through the reported sayings of Ramakrishna Paramahansa and the speeches and writings of Swami Vivekananda. Sri Aurobindo had certainly an immense admiration for Vivekananda and a still deeper feeling for Ramakrishna."

"Sri Aurobindo was loved and highly revered by his students at Baroda College, not only for his profound knowledge of English literature and his brilliant and often original interpretations of English poetry, but for his saintly character and gentle and gracious manners. There was

a magnetism in his personality, and an impalpable aura of a lofty ideal and a mighty purpose about him, which left a deep impression upon all who came in contact with him, particularly upon young hearts and unsophisticated minds. Calm and reserved, benign and benevolent, he easily became the center of respectful attention wherever he happened to be. To be close to him was to be quieted and quickened; to listen to him was to be fired and inspired. Indeed, his presence radiated something which was at once enlivening and exalting. His power sprang from his unshakable peace, and the secret of his hold on men lay in his utter self-effacement. His greatness was like the gentle breath of spring, invisible but irresistible, it touched all that was bare and bleak around him to a splendor of renewed life and creative energy."

How Vivekananda Gave Me Purpose

A chance encounter with an L.A. property where Swami stayed briefly in 1899–1900 launched me on a path of personal rediscovery

BY NIKHIL MISRA-BHAMBRI, CALIFORNIA

JANMASHTAMI, THE CELEBRATION OF LORD Krishna's birth, brings out crowds all over Delhi, as temples overflow with devotional singing, dance, drama and recitations of the *Bhagavad Gita*. As a six-year-old boy visiting from America, I am overwhelmed. My aunt and grandmother are very protective of me, and try to explain the significance of the noisy, colorful crowds. Their concern changes to amazement when I suddenly recite to them Krishna's entire life story.

Amar Chitra Katha comics and Balvihar gatherings had captured my attention at home in Pasadena, California, making me a walking encyclopedia of Hindu Gods and Goddesses. But while my Indian relatives were amused at my enthusiastic recitations, my schoolmates, who were mostly Caucasian and East Asian, found me odd. To gain their acceptance in elementary and middle school, I immersed myself in *Pokemon* and *Star Wars* with the same intensity I had brought to the comic book legends. Striving to be cool, I even embraced the world of gangsta rap, hood movies, urban dressing and "getting turned up" (partying). Slowly, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva receded into the background.

Living in South Pasadena, a suburb of Los Angeles, I often drove down the city's main thoroughfare, Monterey Road. At one end, on the town's outskirts, lies Foremost Liquor Store. Run by Indians, it attracts young adults and underage drinkers with fake IDs. The first time I went there with friends, I noticed a vintage Victorian home obscured by the store's dominating facade. Curious, I walked to the house and discovered that it was a designated historic landmark, a one-time residence of Swami Vivekananda back in 1900. Digging deeper into his story, I learned that he had spoken at Castle Green, a fancy wedding venue, in Pasadena's bustling Old Town. These disparate events began for me a journey of rediscovery, almost 15 years after my Janmashtami experience in Delhi. I think I was destined to rediscover myself by discovering Swami Vivekananda.

My cousin, Vivek Saraswat, is a group product manager at Google, and a Silicon Valley native. He learned about Vivekananda when he had to do a project in elementary school about a namesake. He

Sowing seeds of spirituality: Swami Vivekananda in front of the home where he stayed for six weeks into January, 1900. The site has been preserved as a designated historical landmark known as Vivekananda House.



recalled, "The misconceptions held by many Westerners at the time of Vivekananda's visit helped me better understand my own Indian American identity. Today, living in modern California with many Indians, we take a certain level of awareness about Hinduism for granted. However, this was not the case when Vivekananda visited. He was a trailblazer who created the awareness from which future generations of Indian immigrants benefited."

Vivek's comment led me to listen to a modern dramatic rendition of Vivekananda's iconic speech at the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1893. I was riveted as I heard his fearless declaration, "I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and refugees of all religions and nations of the Earth."

Eager to learn more, I visited the Vedanta Center in Hollywood, just in time to hear Swami Sarvadevananda, the current spiritual leader of the Vedanta Society of Southern California and a monk of the Ramakrishna Order since 1965, deliver his Sunday morning lecture. Towards the end, an attendee asked, "I am from a nation which is ruled by a tyrant, and many citizens have had to flee our homeland. How can we love the God in someone so cruel?"

Sarvadevananda replied, "Vedanta says inner light is everywhere but may be covered by tamas, darkness, which results in a brutal mind. If we can do something to take out someone's brutality, then do that, but, if we cannot, then we shall respect the Lord inside them, not the whole package. Here seeing God means that you see the inner light. As one moves in spiritual development, you can see behind good, evil, holy and unholy. The one spiritual truth resides everywhere. Only appearances are darker, lighter, happier, joyful or miserable. Spiritual practice means cleaning the mind, emotions, the darker aspects of our personality. When those are clean, all becomes all, and the sinner will be a saint."

Trying to understand how different people interpreted Vedanta, I spoke with several in attendance, the first was a young Indian Bengali American whose family's involvement with Vedanta dated back to his grandparents' days in Kolkata. He told me, "One of the things that continues to attract me to Vedanta is its intent and actions to foster religious unity. It is the direction humanity must go towards; the idea that we are all one."

Another was Ellis Fowler, a young African American actor and personal trainer who frequently attends sessions at the center. After studying different spiritual



VEDANTA SOCIETY

traditions, he found that Vedanta best resonated with him. He told me, "I like how Vedanta embraces every part of a human being. I was born and raised Christian but I realized that a lot remained unexplored, and much of the human self was rejected." He continued, "Realizing that the God in me is the same as in everyone else really opened me up in terms of compassion, love and awareness of my own actions and life purpose. As an actor, I am now able to look at a character in a deeper way than before."

The people I spoke with displayed a certain peace and serenity. Was it their belief system? Was it daily meditation practice? I wanted to feel the peace and serenity myself, but was unsure about what specifically I should do. So, I asked Swami Sarvadevananda what Vivekananda would say if I said that I don't know what to believe.

The elder monk replied, "If you ask yourself 'Who are you?' you do not need to think of God and what you believe. You are Nikhil now in a waking state. When you sleep and dream, this Nikhil goes away, but you do not actually go away. You say, 'I dreamt.' You are the observer of your dream. When you sleep, you say, 'I slept.' So, Vedanta would say you do not need to believe in something called 'God,' but if you believe in yourself, there is always someone as 'I' observing everything. The observer is always separate from the observed. You are the observer, the 'I.' Vedanta would say 'find that 'I,' we cannot ignore it.' Yesterday, today, after one month we always say 'I' because that 'I' is the same. That 'I' is called consciousness and eternal reality. In loving terms, we call it God."

The message that comes through again and again is that there is Divinity in everyone. But why do I not see it? When I am struggling to understand something abstract, I sometimes call Mark Kriger, a friend of my father who has become my mentor over the years. He immerses himself in several spiritual traditions and has been a frequent visitor at Ramana Maharshi's ashram in India. Mark told me, "Self-inquiry is the most important. If we keep returning to the thought 'Who am I,' then we become one with that awareness. Many people are motivated by wealth, achievement and power in order to attain happiness and fulfillment. However, the process of self-discovery is unending. Advanced yogis have found that there is no level of materialistic achieving where we ever enter a state of real peace. Thus, the key is to be aware of that which is awake to everything, which is the Self."

Vivekananda emphasized in his writing, "God in Everything," divisions between humans and nations are simply due to our own ignorance. He stated, "Vedanta says this separation does not exist, it is not real. It is merely apparent on the surface. If you go below the surface, you will find unity between man and man, between races and races, high and low, rich and poor, Gods and men, and men and animals. If you go deep enough, all will be seen as only variation of the One."



My teacher: Swami Sarvadevananda Puri Maharaj giving a talk on the Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi; entrance to the Vedanta Center in Hollywood

As I learn more about Vedanta, I realize that I have been exposed to this philosophy from the time I was a child. I grew up taking pride in India's religious and ethnic diversity because that is what my maternal grandmother modeled every day. Though she personally suffered the horrors of India's Partition, her music teacher was Ustad Iqbal Ahmad Khan, a Muslim from the Delhi Gharana tabla teaching tradition, whom she treated like family. One of my treasured childhood memories are her practice sessions in her living room in Delhi with Khan and his musicians. Even today, Muslim singers recite Hindu chants at our family religious functions.

I often re-read Vivekananda to see which words and sentences resonated with me. The most impactful lines for me are "the Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth." I realize that I had not always followed this path. Instead, I had been pulled by superficial differences. Even recently, as an undergraduate at University of Southern California, I had become increasingly distant from my birth faith. As I searched for social acceptance, I joined different religious groups based on whether they had an active social community, and I tried to follow their customs and practices. Briefly, I even "converted" to different religions. Over time, I became increasingly stressed, because for the sake of being accepted by others, I was contradicting my innate nature. Slowly, I realized that I could not force something unnatural upon myself for the sake of social popularity. Rather, I had to start from within myself, by understanding who I was at heart, and the rest would fall into place. I had to believe that I had Divinity inside me.

Today, twelve years after I lived in South Pasadena near "Vivekananda House," I am studying to become a special education teacher, employing the fundamentals of Swami's teachings to help severely disabled and emotionally disturbed students believe in themselves. It will be a journey, maybe without an end.

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Meet Kavi Sharma, Mattel's American Girl Doll of the Year



By Sanjeevani Dedge and
Mugdha Shinde, California

Each year, a long, thoughtful process takes place to create the American Girl of the Year doll. These limited-edition wonders are meant to be more than just simple dolls. They have complex back stories, dreams and passions, and are created to reflect the life of a typical American girl in the given year. In January, American Girl announced their 2023 Girl of the Year: Kavi Sharma.

Girl of the Year focuses on cultural diversity. Last year's was Corinne Tan, the first-ever Asian American Girl of the Year. The company's press release stated, "Kavi joins the company's long line of contemporary characters, introduced more than 20 years ago, that represent a wide range of backgrounds to reflect what it means to be an American girl today."

On the American Girl website, we see that Kavi is an Indian-American Hindu living in New Jersey. Her description says, "Kavi loves performing, but can she find a way to stay on top of her schoolwork and get her dance moves down before the curtain goes up?" At HINDUISM TODAY's request, the two of us studied the new doll and consulted with friends and family to create this review.

Overview

Kavi, just like other American Girl dolls, is expensive. The doll itself with a journal telling her story costs \$155, plus there are many outfits and accessories that consumers can buy. These include her dog (\$34), songwriting accessories (\$115), yoga accessories (\$30), and a backstage trunk (\$125). There are also multiple costumes, such as Kavi's performance outfit, pajamas, and her yoga attire, each costing \$30-45. Her Bollywood dance costume (\$45) is the accessory we think is most significant. This is the costume she wears at the end of the journal while performing with her friends. It is also worn by dancers in a video performance during the American Girl Reveal for Doll of the Year. What we really appreciated about this outfit is that it comes with not only Indian jewelry for Kavi, but also a mini packet of bindis—a nice addition.

As the bindis show, it is essential to ac-



knowledge how American Girl does not shy away from expressing Kavi's Hindu identity as part of her story. They boldly depict Kavi as Hindu by including Hindu festivals, dances and bindis in her accompanying journal.

The journal, written from Kavi's perspective, revolves around a big dance performance that she and her friends are working to prepare by the end of the month. However, they cannot agree on what type of dance they want to do. Kavi has to figure out how to balance her schoolwork while coming up with a dance they can all agree on.

Speaking of dance—that art form is a big part of Kavi's backstory. The whole marketing campaign for Kavi is based on her love of performing, and several types of Indian and Western dance styles are included in the journal. These include Kathak, Hip-Hop, and finally Bollywood dance, which is shown to be a way for Kavi to combine her Indian roots and American upbringing.

The Attention to Detail

American Girl worked with Arusha, a 12-year-old Indian-American dancer, and Rina Shah, owner of Aum Dance Creations. This clearly

shows their effort to not only correctly represent Indian dance but to get a full understanding of what Kavi's life might look like as an Indian American tween.

American Girl continues to show this attention to details throughout the journal. There are many references to Indian/Hindu things that are a part of Kavi's life, for example, her good-luck elephant charm that she named Haathi. *Haathi* is the word for elephant in Hindi, and the journal mentions that elephants symbolize wisdom in Hindu culture (a subtle nod to Lord Ganesha). Further, Kavi's grandma is shown wearing a sari and bindi to attend a performance of Broadway's "Wicked."

Another great aspect of the doll is the name: Kavi. It is a uniquely Indian name, and also quite clever and well-thought out, as *kavi* means "poet" in Sanskrit, and writing is one of her hobbies.

American Girl does a great job not only by featuring Diwali in the journal, but also by noting the specific five days of the festival. Often, the media's representation of Diwali only focuses on one day or explains what the festival is as a whole. It is clear that American Girl did their research. They included a description of what Kavi did each day: a day for cleaning, decorating the house with diya lamps, a day to eat vegetarian food, a gift exchange day, and finally a day to visit family and watch fireworks.

The descriptions of the days are accurate, but including the names of the days would have further elaborated the Hindu aspect. And it is strange that the reason for celebrating Diwali was not included. They also failed to mention Ram's coming home to Ayodhya, which is a very significant part of the festival for most Hindu families.

A novel to be released describes Kavi celebrating Holi, which is a nice addition. Hopefully there will be some mention of Holika or other key elements that give meaning to the celebration of that festival.

Room for Improvement

Near the end of the journal Kavi goes to a yoga class with her dad, and she writes about her great experience, "Yoga *did* calm my mind. Afterward I felt amazingly relaxed." It is also

nice how in a poster with yoga poses Kavi gets from the class it says "Yoga Asanas," with the explanation that *asanas* means "poses." At the end of the book there are images and instructions for various yoga asanas for the reader to try out. We think they should have provided the Sanskrit names for the asanas along with the English names. For example "downward dog" could also have also been written as *adho mukha svanasana*. Given the attention to detail in the rest of the journal, including the names of the asanas was expected.

Another opportunity for improvement would be mentioning Kavi's practice of Hinduism. There are multiple illustrations of her wearing a bindi and her explaining how she celebrates Diwali, but she never talks about how the religion connects to her.

A big part of any religion is its God(s), and Hinduism is well known for having several Gods, both male and female. Thus, it is a bit surprising that there is no mention of Gods or details on how Kavi worships. This was especially apparent in the Diwali part of the journal, which doesn't include the religious activities that take place during the festival. American Girl could have noted that it is common for Hindus to pray at least once a day in their home, especially during festivals. A temple should also have been mentioned in the journal, along with the yoga studio and Broadway theater, as being an important part of Kavi's life.

Varying Reactions

Gargi Dedge, an Indian-American fifth grader, the target audience for Kavi, told us, "I'm so happy to see that there's an American Girl doll that's just like me! She is Indian American, Hindu, and she does Kathak—I do Bharatnatyam. I also liked seeing that she celebrated Diwali, because I and my family do too. I think this doll will make many girls like me feel included."

We also asked a Hindu parent living in the US, Forum Dhulakar, how she felt about Kavi. Her thoughts were, "Introducing a different ethnicity does support diversification of its customer base. However, I feel the American Girl doll is not truly representing India as a whole, a secular nation. In terms of improvement, they can introduce more friends representing different parts of India, and different festivals. Yes, Diwali is synonymous to India and Indians, but there is more to India."

Aditi, a 9th grader, said, "I do not think it is a good representation of Indian-Americans in the US, because it seems to follow all the stereotypical things that many people associate with Indians in general. It talks about her taking advanced courses and struggling

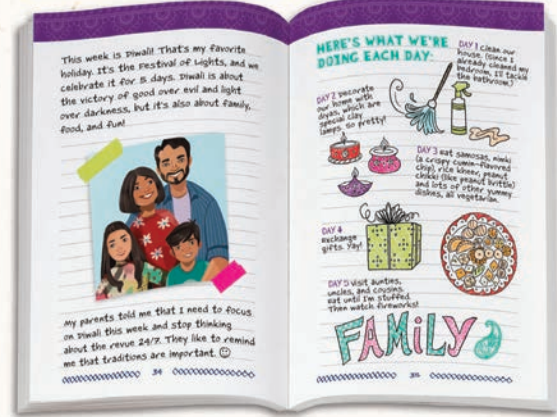


to get good grades to please her parents, which is something that many students struggle with and is often harmful to their mental health. It may do its part in encouraging young students to follow their dreams, but it may also pressure kids to live up to the insane expectations that are set for them." This is an interesting point that is undoubtedly important to address.

Conclusion

These reactions make us wish we had a doll like Kavi when we were younger. Growing up, we'd only seen and bought mostly white dolls, and if they were any other race, they were usually Black, Hispanic, rarely East Asian, but never Indian. We're so happy that other young Indian American girls are getting an opportunity we never got.

While we think that while there is some room for improvement in terms of the Hindu



Kavi's story: (clockwise from opposite page) Doll of the Year announcement image; in traditional dress with bindi; ready for yoga; (inset) backstage set; journal entry of her family's celebration of Diwali

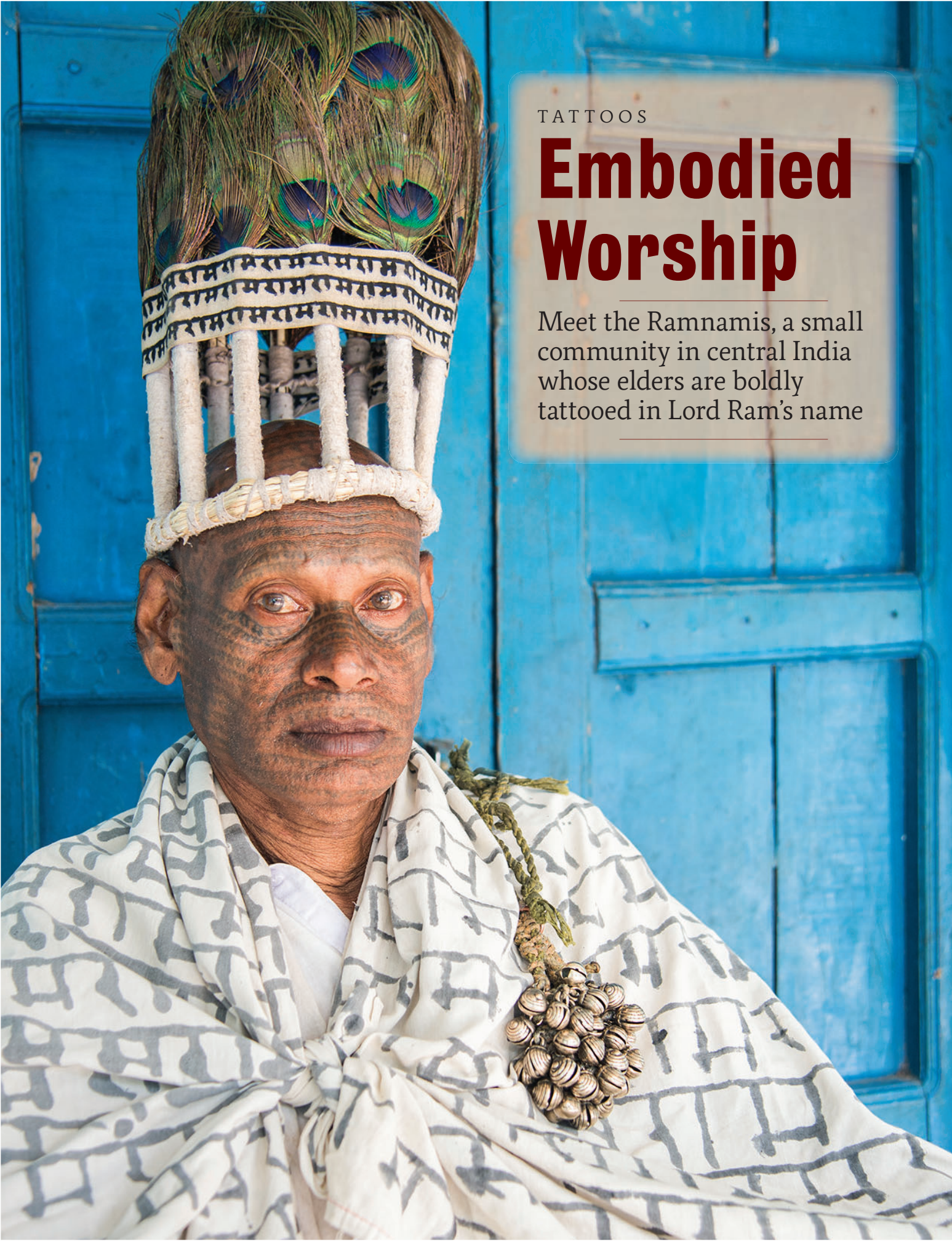
aspects of her life, the doll will definitely make young Indian American girls feel included and represented. All in all, Kavi is undoubtedly a step in the right direction for a more Hindu-friendly culture in the US.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sanjeevani Dedge (left, with newly arrived Kavi) was born in Santa Clara, California, and lives in San Jose. Now a 9th-grade student at Dartmouth Middle School, she enjoys dance, swimming and reading. sanjeevanisdedge@gmail.com

Mugdha Shinde, (right) 15, is an 9th-grade student at Cupertino Middle School in Cupertino, California. She plays the trombone in her school's band and enjoys cooking and baking. mugdha.shinde29@gmail.com





TATTOOS

Embodied Worship

Meet the Ramnamis, a small community in central India whose elders are boldly tattooed in Lord Ram's name



Divine adornments: (clockwise from left) A peacock-feather headdress called "mukut;" like a matriarch, Setbai is full of wisdom from years of experience; Setbai invites us into her home; Pitamber was 40 years old when he got his face, skull, chest and back tattooed; although shy, even reserved, the Ramnamis are proud of their tattoos and always happy to talk

PHOTOS AND TEXT BY ANNE PETRY

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, BY SHEER CHANCE, I saw a picture of an old, skinny, wrinkly person wearing a simple printed black and white cloth and with tattoos on her legs, arms and face. I remember I stayed astonished in front this portrait, not

only because of the full body tattoo, but because somehow through this photo I could feel the devotion and the faith this individual seemed to have for her God.

After some research, I discovered that the woman in the picture belonged to the Ramnami Samaj community, a religious movement inside Hinduism that worships Lord Ram. Because they belong to one of the lowest castes, in past times they were banished from temples. And this is why they decided to turn their bodies into their own temples by tattooing all over the name of their God, Ram. This was not meant as a protest against upper castes nor to take any revenge. It was just a way to respond to not being able to go into temples. Ram was inside their hearts and minds as well as on their bodies; the

tattoos reminded them always of their Lord. They could pray to Him no matter where they were, no matter what time it was and regardless of any exclusionary rule.

What a radical and incredible way to step up for their beliefs, isn't it? At that time, it was clear for me: I had to meet those people who were not afraid to change their body appearance in order to claim their devotion.

A few years later, here I was in India searching for a way to meet the Ramnamis. I had read that they never left the banks of Mahanadi River and lived in a small number of villages spread across the densely forested state of Chhattisgarh, known for its beautiful temples and majestic waterfalls. But how to get in touch and how to communicate with them, I wondered, when I didn't speak





Sacred imprints: (above) Ramnamis believe that each member is equal to the other, so there is no priest. All decisions are taken together; (below) two happy grandparents of a large family, of which none of the members, except them, is tattooed



Chhattisgarhi, the local dialect, or any other variety of Hindi, and the elders didn't speak English. But I guess the meeting was meant to happen, as a few days after my arrival in Raipur (Chhattisgarh's capital) and a long bus ride to a remote village, I found myself surrounded by the Ramnamis.

While the young generations were smiling

and so willing to talk, the elders were quiet and reserved. What impressed me right away from those old tattooed Ramnamis was the peaceful energy that emanated from them. No matter the kids shouting and running around, no matter the teenagers watching noisy video clips on their phones—the seniors remained calm and focused, calling out every few minutes, "Ram Ram."

I quickly realized that their God is present everywhere in their lives, from morning to evening, all day long, since "Ram-Ram" has so many meanings, including "good morning," "good night," "goodbye," and "thank you." In accordance with the beliefs of the Ramnami Samaj movement, followers are encouraged to continuously recite the name of Lord Ram as frequently as possible. Therefore while they are working in fields, cooking, walking or riding a bicycle, "Ram" is like a mantra that is chanted uncountable times every day.

To produce the ink that is used to brand their skin with "Ram Ram," they burn kerosene oil under an earthen pot, then collect the resulting soot from the inside surface of the pot. The soot is then mixed with a little water.

It is believed that this tradition started in the 1890s, but no clear report mentions any precise date, nor the name of the first person who in this way dealt with the pain of not being able to go to temples. But there is a legend saying that Parsuram Bharadhwaj, a low-caste man suffering from leprosy, was once blessed by a sadhu who told him to read

Last of a kind: (right) Only a few Ramnamis still have tattoos all over their bodies and faces. They know that this unique tradition will disappear with them, because the new generations of Ramnamis do not adopt these religious tattoos

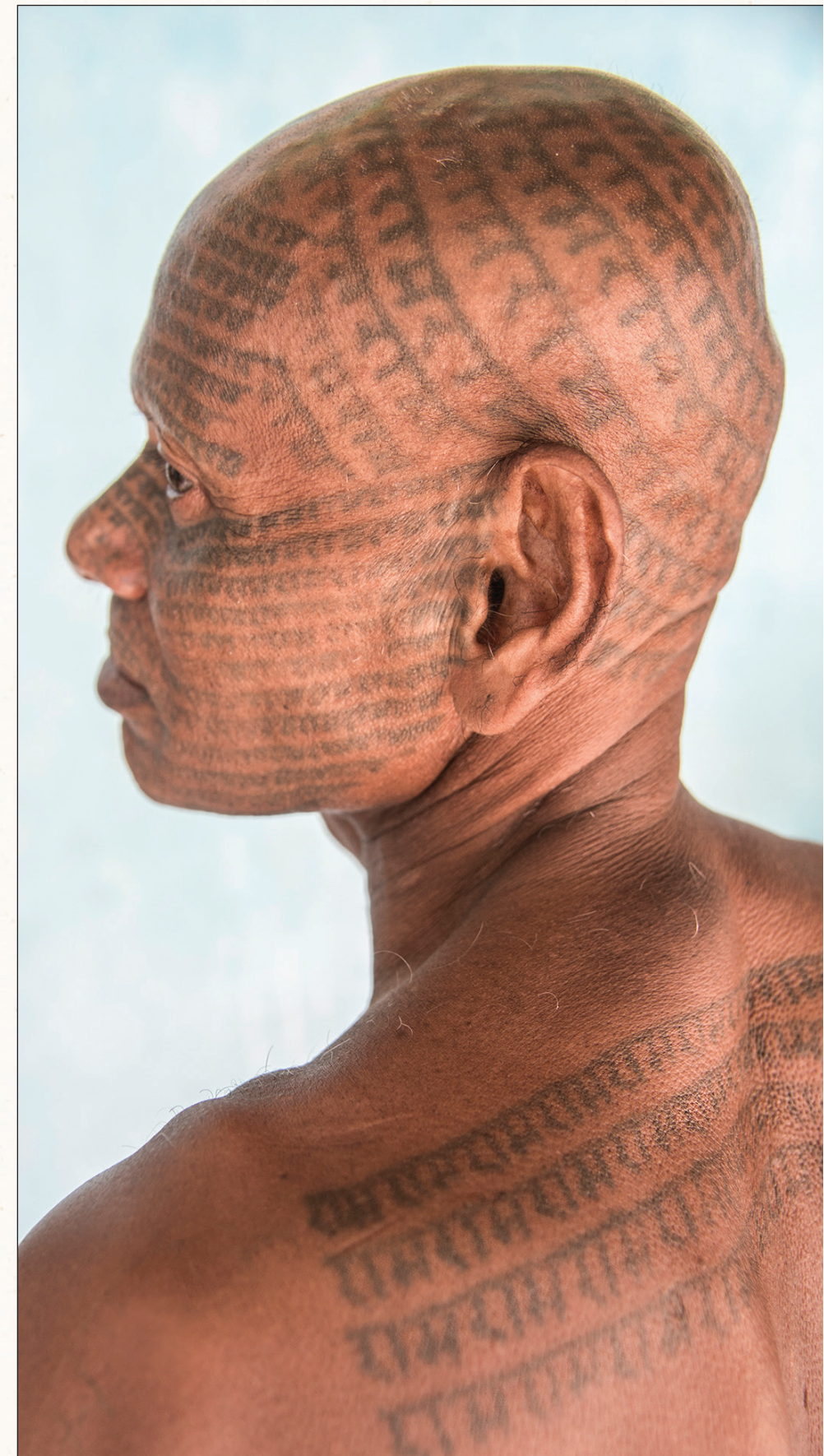
Tulsidas' book *Ramacharitmanas*. The following day, to Parsuram's amazement, the marks of his illness had disappeared and his body had been miraculously tattooed with the words "Ram Ram." This event is said to have marked the beginning of the Ramnami Samaj movement, and is considered to be a divine intervention by Lord Ram himself.

Nowadays, caste-based discrimination being banished since 1955, and because of studies, work and fashion, of course, the practice of tattooing the name of Lord Ram on the body has largely declined. Based on available information, it appears that only a few of the elder members, aged 60 years and above, still have the distinctive "Ram Ram" tattoos on their bodies. Furthermore, of the many Naksikh (full-body-tattooed individuals) who were once part of the Ramnami Samaj community, only two are believed to remain.

Knowing all this and having clearly in mind that the tradition is definitively vanishing, it felt like a rare privilege to spend some time with them. When I asked Setbai, 70 years old, if it was painful to get her face tattooed, her answer was prompt and firm: "No, it was not, because I did it as bhakti, as pure devotion to the God I believe in." Pitamber, who tattooed his face, skull, chest and back when he turned 40, confirmed: "When you do something like tattooing your body for good reasons, because you truly and fully have faith in your beliefs, then nothing hurts!" How powerful were those words for a Western woman like me, who always saw tattoos only as a trend and never thought they could be used as a powerful statement, let alone a spiritual declaration.

Soon after my arrival, when it was already night, Ramnamis from the neighborhood gathered to pray. All wore an *odhani*, a white shawl with black inscriptions of Ram printed on it, a headgear called *mukut* made of peacock feathers, and a few *ghunghru* clutches of bells in their hands. A copy of the holy *Ramayana* epic, a book on Lord Rama's life and teachings, was put in the center of the circle. They were ready to start the bhajans! In the Ramnami Samaj community there is no hierarchy or priest. Therefore, whoever feels the desire can start singing the verses written in the holy book, and the others will follow by chanting "Ram Ram." Being so accustomed to praying together, only a few seconds were necessary to find the right tempo and to sing in unison.

Prayers are always performed in the same simple way, with the Ramnamis sitting on the floor, chanting Ram's name for hours, read-





Devotion: (clockwise from top) A grandmother and her grandson, two generations, one obliged in the past to tattoo her body to live her religion while the other is now free to attend the temple he chooses; reading the Ramcharitmanas is an integral part of daily practice, as is reciting Ram's name as often as possible; Gularam dances while his companions sing. They can chant Ram's name for hours; even if not tattooed all over, the elders have at least one tattoo indicating the name of Lord Ram; the ghunghru bells tinkle during dances

ing the *Ramcharitmanas* and a few of them dancing around, their small ankle bells tinkling. They pray this way to celebrate every important moment in life from birth to death, including weddings and for the simple joy of being together to honor their common God. Being part of this ritual, surrounded by Ramnamis in a remote village, was a mystical and unforgettable experience.

Spending several days living with a Ramnami family, I was surprised not to see any altar in the house, nor did I witness any offerings. So I asked my host, Gularam, the General Secretary of the Ramnami Samaj community about it. The beauty of his answer left me speechless. His statement was clear: "We are free of rituals because we believe God is everywhere, in the five elements (earth, water, fire, air, space), in plants, animals and humans; therefore being good and kind toward all of them is the best way to show our devotion to Ram." Respecting each human being, regardless of caste, color of skin or way of life, protecting animal lives by being vegetarian, living in accordance with nature by respecting the seasonal crops



and finally, esteeming their own lives by not smoking nor drinking alcohol, those are some of the main principles followed by the Ramnamis.

Also, the name of Ram that you find written in so many places, from the inner and outer walls of their houses to their own skin, is so sacred that unlike other Hindus, when someone dies, after nine to ten days of celebrations, Ramnamis actually bury the deceased body instead of burning it. By doing

this, the name of Ram is not destroyed but maintains His holy power.

Does the power of Ram still have such a strong impact on the youngsters' beliefs and lives? For centuries, Ramnamis had a humble way of life and were almost exclusively farmers, but their lifestyle changed about two or three decades ago. Modernity and access to education gave the opportunity to the latest generations (mostly young men) to leave their villages to study and work in town. Slowly they gave up the tattoo practice. In the past, the first tattoo was marked in the center of the forehead; it became more common to place it on an arm or any other body part that could be hidden under clothing.

Still, leaders of the community I spoke to are convinced that their youngsters will not forget the love and the fidelity they have for Ram. Because it has been engraved in their minds since their early age, they will keep on honoring their God in their own ways. In fact, as I spent quite some time with young Ramnamis, I can testify that they seemed proud of who they are and glad to be part of this community.

During my stay in their village, I spent time with the Ramnamis and got to know them better. I found that the elderly people, who had seemed a bit distant when I first arrived, turned out to be some of the sweetest people I had ever met.

Even though we didn't share a common language, there was a non-verbal communication between us that was more powerful than any spoken word. Smiling, touching hands, gazing deeply, those acts are beyond words yet understandable in every human society, despite differences in nationality or religion. In that way, I could say that the elderly Ramnamis and I simply spoke the language of sharing and respect.

I feel blessed to have met these extraordinary and unique persons, not just because they have their faces and bodies tattooed, but because they represent a kind of people that is simply disappearing in our standardized society. I am talking about those who don't mind being different, those who treat everybody with equality and consideration, and finally those who see the beauty of God everywhere and in everything.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anne Petry is a French photographer focusing on indigenous populations. Her nomadic life takes her from the Himalaya to the natives in Mexico, from the Shamans in Amazonia to the Hindu priests in India. She is passionate about people who keep alive their beliefs and traditions. Contact Instagram: [annepetryphotography](https://www.instagram.com/annepetryphotography)





THE ARTS

The Colorful and Divine Facades Of Tamil Nadu's Rural Homes

From exuberant hues, to images seeking celestial blessings and protection from unwanted influences, villagers boldly adorn even the most modest of dwellings

PHOTOS AND TEXT BY ANNE PETRY

INDIA IS ONE OF THE MOST RELIGIOUS countries in the world, as well as one of the most colorful—this is known by everyone. Less known is that the South-eastern state of Tamil Nadu could be a prime symbol of India's vivid beliefs and picturesque faith. Let's discover this vibrant state, where Hinduism is a living religion, with ancient customs deeply engraved in the rural psyche.

One of the main gateways into Tamil Nadu is Chennai, formerly known as Madras. With 115 million inhabitants, this is one of the nation's most populous cities; but in such a gigantic modern municipality, it is difficult to sense the pulse of traditions and folklore. So, whoever wants to see and feel the authentic Tamil Nadu has to leave Chennai behind, drive to the countryside and, ideally, take a scooter to wander through the surroundings' hidden tracks.

This is where you catch a glimpse of the typical "village lifestyle." You can walk with farmers going to the fields, chat with women working in front of their homes, get unforgettable smiles from boys in uniforms coming from school and see young girls with braided hair cycling back home. These scenes, which Westerners may know only from movies, are snapshots of India's rural daily life.

Even they work hard and have long days, the local people are always happy to see new

Vibrant facades: (clockwise from right) In rural Tamil Nadu, it is still common for three generations to live under one roof. The Tamil script says, "Home of A. Mahesh;" brightly painted houses are not just in the South of India, as shown in this colorful Himalayan village; Subashni is about to light a lamp in honor of Lord Ganesha.

faces and take care to welcome each and every visitor and make them feel at home. Vendra, who lives in a small hamlet, declares: "It is not very often that we have outsiders here, so whenever someone comes, we are honored. It is our duty to open our door in order to offer a chai and some dry biscuits." Those families might not have much, but it is rare to spend a day strolling through Tamil villages without being invited by locals to visit their homes and sit with them for a while.

Here, one can discover an unusual architecture—low roofed houses painted with bright colors, so that no two homes look the same. In Western countries, we're accustomed to seeing uniformly colored buildings, but traditional village houses in Tamil Nadu are quite the opposite.

In fact, it seems as though hundreds of rainbows have showered the homes, leaving their colors on the walls, which are adorned with three, four, or even five different shades. Prem says: "Nowadays construction styles are different from what they used to be in the past, they are higher, with balconies and big windows, but one important thing remains, colors! And I don't think that it will change, as colorful houses are fully part of our architectural and cultural heritage." It seems, though, that locals have adapted traditions to modernity by incorporating colors not used in the past, like fluorescent hues.

Besides the multicolor facades, homes display Hindu Deities on their outer walls—a statue of Ganesha, a framed picture of Hanuman, or a carving of Lakshmi on a wooden transom. Nagaraj tells me: "You will not find many houses in Tamil Nadu that don't have religious images painted or drawn on their walls, as these play an important role in our architecture."

The affection and love that Indians have for their Gods can be as close as the relationship between parents and children or two best friends. With the faith of devotees being so strong, it feels natural for the population to display their beloved divinities on their homes.

It is a common belief that a deity "works" for their followers, and by submitting wishes, one can hope to receive happiness and security in return. Sita confirms, "Starting my days with a puja is a way to talk to God, to thank Him for this new day. I believe that by doing so, He will watch over me and my





Village protector: (left) A village woman sits under the scary mask of Drishti Bommai, meant to chase away the evil eye; (above) in rural Tamil Nadu, superstition and religion often mix. Here, a mask of Drishti Bommai hangs right next to Lord Ganesha, the Lord of Obstacles.

family all day long.” Pujas can be as simple as lighting a lamp and offering flowers to the Deity, or they can be more elaborate and detailed, with chanting and abundant offerings. Devotees see expressing their devotion as a way to access the divine and make their house a sacred sanctuary, a refuge from the worries of the world.

This longing for protection is still especially vivid in the countryside. Tamil Nadu, despite currently being the most industrialized state in India, has a historical legacy of being an agricultural state, heavily dependent on river water and monsoon rains for sustenance. One drought, and crops can be devastated; one insect invasion, and the work of a

whole year can disappear.

Nowadays, fear of a climate disaster is still strong, and so are the superstitions and traditions! In order to protect their crops, it is common to see the population setting up in fields scary masks or figures made of straw and clay. Having received an education to be a rational person who believes only in what is visible and in what can be defined, I sometimes struggle to understand the purpose and the meaning behind these masks; but just like religion, superstitions are intimate and personal beliefs that don’t require explanation; they only have to be respected.

A famous and intimidating mask that can be found in almost every rural household is

the ugly Drishti Bommai. Meant to ward off the evil eye, the mask is placed directly above the main entrance of the house. With the same intention, a green nameless symbol is often painted on exterior walls (photo, page 63).

Even though precise meanings behind these symbols may be unknown, as per tradition, women continue to draw these patterns. Geetika, 26, says, “As far back as I remember, I have seen my grandmother and then my mother painting a green symbol on our house walls in order to keep our family safe. From what I know, even though it looks like a man, it actually represents a trident with two extra prongs. I am not very sure about the precise meaning, but if my elders painted this symbol, it must be important, and so I honor our heritage by drawing it also.” Perhaps it is related to Bhairava, a fierce protector form of God Siva.

A Lexicon of Painted Divinities

Lord Ganesha

Though Ganesha’s worship dates back to Vedic and pre-Vedic culture, He emerged as a distinct Deity, in clearly recognizable form, in the 4th and 5th centuries CE, during the Gupta period. He is the most well known and the universally-worshipped God in Hinduism.

Known by different names, such as Ganapati, Vinayaka, Vignesvara or Pillaiyar, Ganesha’s icons are found throughout India. He is invoked on all occasions, whether religious or social. Ganesha is widely revered as the remover of obstacles and, more particularly, as the Lord of Beginnings, patron of arts and sciences, and the Lord of intellect and wisdom. It is believed that worshipping Him first brings harmony to our home, removes all complications and actions are always crowned with knowledge and accomplishment.

According to the *Brahmanda Purana*, Ganesha has all universes present in Him, the past, the present and the future. Lord Ganesha’s best-known forms have between two and 16 arms. The serpent is a common feature in Ganesha iconography. It is said that the snake is used as a sacred thread, wrapped around the stomach as a belt. The mouse is interpreted in several ways but generally it symbolises desire. Also, the mouse is destructive and a menace to crops. Ganesha overcoming and mastering the mouse demonstrates His function as the Lord of Obstacles.

By riding a lion and holding weapons, Ganesha offers protection and blessings to his devotees. The lucky cross, called swastika, is associated with the good fortune given by Lord Ganesha. This sign of auspiciousness has crooked arms to represent the path towards our objectives that is not always straight, but filled with changes. The sound Om is considered to be the first creative sound of the universe. It is also chanted aloud and recited in silence each day by Ganesha’s devotees, bringing with it His blessings.

Goddess Lakshmi

The Vedas have developed the concept of a Goddess as the embodiment of prosperity, success and peace. Lakshmi is the Goddess of Wealth. But wealth that does not connote mere material well being, nor money, which is temporary. Real wealth is divine wealth, it is knowledge, wisdom, being fearless and purity of mind and heart. Also, on a more human level, wealth is having a good health, a loving family, affectionate parents and children and it is having a house, land, grains and cows. Mahalakshmi symbolizes auspiciousness, She is the giver of prosperity, splendor and glory; She is known to be the bestower of all benefits.

By praying to Lakshmi and by Her grace, it is also believed that one who has a true deep longing for liberation, can attain achieve mukti. Goddess Lakshmi can manifest Herself under eight different forms representing eight different aspects of prosperity. Gaja Lakshmi, Daughter of the Ocean (picture below), is one of her eight manifestations. She is described as emerging from the Sea of Milk when the devas and asuras were churning it. She came out of the ocean sitting

on a lotus, with two lotuses in Her hands. Two elephants appeared from the ocean with a pot of milk and poured it on Her. Gaja Lakshmi is the protector of humanity, promoter of peace and prosperity.

Lord Hanuman

Hanuman has more than a thousand names and as many qualities: as Janasrayah He provides shelter to people, as Sankat Mochan He eliminates distress and brings happiness, as Sripradah He is the bestower of splendour, as Ajarah He immunises from old age, and as Virah He is the conqueror of enemies in a battle.

He is a very popular Deity, revered by all and often, He is a role model for mankind. Temples dedicated to Him are found all over India. In addition, wherever there is a temple of Ram, Hanuman’s murti is sure to be there. Known for His loyalty and devoted service to Lord Rama, He can fly and change form at will. He is the most valiant among the warriors and possesses divine knowledge. He is recognized for strength and dynamism, and for always meeting emergencies with a clear mind. People revere Lord Hanuman for His unique combination of physical strength and valour with superb intelligence, foresight and wisdom.

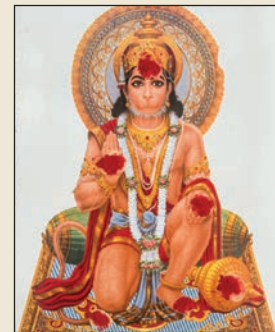
One of the most primal needs for humans is to feel safe and protected. The idea of submitting to a divine being and seeking His shelter is prevalent in most religions, Hinduism included. As Hanuman saved Ram, for the masses He quickly became the perfect guardian to preserve them from wild animals, thieves and other dangers. God Hanuman is often represented sitting in an attractive and powerful posture, having large earrings and other beautiful golden ornaments.

Lord Krishna

Krishna is one of the most widely revered of all Hindu divinities. Across many traditions He is worshiped as an avatar of God Vishnu and also as a supreme God in his own right. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna is the divine speaker and appears as the teacher of Arjuna.

The name “Krishna” means “black,” “dark,” “dark blue” or “dark as a cloud.” Krishna is the very source of bliss. He is the symbol of pure happiness, joy, and love; qualities that are the greatest enemies of the ego. In fact, if there always has been a conflict between ego and love, it is because the ego melts and disappears when love dawns within. Lord Krishna is often supplicated to resolve complex problems and it is believed that He knows how to solve nasty situations in the best interest of all concerned.

He is sometimes depicted as a child, crawling on His hands and knees or dancing with joy, a ball of butter held in His hands. Sometimes He is a young cowherd boy with a dark blue complexion playing a flute or a prince giving philosophical direction and guidance. Lord Krishna has dominated the pages of Indian cultural history for centuries and one can say that He has influenced the Indian thought, life and culture in a very profound way.





However, even the most entrenched traditions are subject to change in modern times. Daya, who is 67 years old, confesses: "When I was young, we used tree leaves to draw this symbol, and after a few minutes, it turned green. Nowadays, even though it is less natural, we use green paint because it is more practical and resistant." This is a way of adapting ancient beliefs to the realities of the 21st century!

Conclusion

In the Western world, daily life is often treated as one thing and religion as another, like

two separate, unrelated domains. In India, it is quite different. Tamil Nadu is the perfect example, where mystic beliefs and Hinduism are closely intertwined with everyday life and traditions. Religion is incorporated as a way of life, a mode of thought that through centuries has become second nature. The tremendous faith and devotion of the Indian people is one of their most distinguishing features. It brings hundreds of surprises to every traveler who decides to visit India, as each corner reveals a big temple or a small altar, all erected in the name of Hindu Deities.

Gods and colors: In India, colors are everywhere, from saris to decoration, including the facades of houses; (left) a woman proudly shows off her home decorations. Above her door is a protective amulet, a brown pouch with simple facial features; (below) at another home, the Deities Lakshmi, Ganesh and Saraswati are carved on a wooden transom door; (bottom) a traditional Tamil house: brightly painted, with a low ceiling, tiled roof and Deities displayed at each entry.



SPIRITUAL LIFE

I Learned Yoga from a Living Master

Among all the yoga teachers that have come to the West, Swami Bua was one of the most authentic exponents

BY PRIYA AYYAR

AT A YOUNG AGE, I HAD THE GREAT fortune to learn and study hatha yoga in New York City with an Indian living master of yoga, H.H. Swami Bua Ji Maharaj. Swamiji was a teacher par excellence and an invaluable source of knowledge of yoga and its philosophy, theory and practice. Many people would argue that Swami Bua was the best yoga teacher of the modern era. His age put him on par with Sri Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, a claim that deserves more recognition and investigation. Swamiji left his earthly body in 2011 at the incredible age of 122, a testament to his life-long practice. He always told us students that longevity depends on flexibility of the spine, leading a sattvic life and practicing daily sadhana. We celebrated his 110th birthday at his apartment off Columbus Circle with a big party in 1999. We played harmonium and sang bhajans, and he blew his conch, as he loved to do at large gatherings.

Looking back at my time with him, I am incredulous that I was able to learn directly from such a repository of knowledge. I found him in 1994 and took class diligently while studying yoga philosophy and Hinduism. Swami Bua treated me like a granddaughter, often speaking to me in Tamil. He felt a close kinship with me, delighting in the fact that my mother's family settled in Chennai but hailed from Thanjavur, as did he and his family. He would question me about my father's being born and raised in Kerala as a brahmin Iyer. He wanted to make sure the family did not eat meat or fish, as many brahmins in Kerala did, according to him. He stressed the importance of being a strict vegetarian as a yogi, and to be non-harming and nonviolent, to love all of God's creatures. I assured him that my parents were raised vegetarian and my grandmothers were orthodox brahmins who wore nine-yard saris and cooked pure vegetarian food. Swami would not allow meat-eaters in his kitchen. He allowed my mother and me to cook for him and eat with him. Swami would invite me to eat share a meal after most classes, to have some kichidi, sambar sadam, or mango and fruits. He has converted thousands to vegetarianism by his injunction, "Do not make the body a burial ground by consuming the dead flesh of animals!"

Swami Bua taught a vigorous 90-minute routine of hatha yoga followed by his sublime yoga nidra while lying in savasana. Other senior students will know exactly what I mean when I say that Swami Bua's yoga nidra was simply the best. We can all still hear his inimitable voice leading us in that closing meditation, "Relax your body, relax your mind, give a mental massage, pray to God..."

Swami was very upset at the commercial nature of yoga in the West. He would say, "There is only *one* yoga for the body. It is called hatha yoga. The other yogas are jnana, raja, bhakti, karma yoga, etc." He would question, "What is ashtanga? *Ashtanga* means eight limbed! It is not a separate yoga!" He would say, "*Vinyasa* means



COURTESY PRIYA AYYAR

flow. It is not a type of yoga." Since Swami Bua was the same age and generation of Sri Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, he watched very closely what yoga was being taught by the next generation, most notably Krishnamacharya's disciples: B.K.S. Iyengar, Pattabhi Jois and Indra Devi. I was so thankful and grateful to him for this clarity. He was teaching the *truth* of hatha yoga that is *one*. He was dismayed at what so-called yoga teachers were selling in the West. My gym at the time, Equinox, was starting to list yoga classes on their schedule, calling them by strange names like "power yoga" and "dance yoga."

When Swami Bua would travel to Brazil or Hawaii, some of us senior students would do yoga downtown at Sri Dharma Mittra's studio or Jivamukti to check out other classes. The classes were intense and focused, and these teachers have inspired and taught thousands of students. However, I can speak from experience when I say no other yoga class compared to Swami Bua's. The scope, depth and comprehensive nature of Swami Bua's hatha yoga asana practice is unmatched. His 90 minute sessions worked every muscle in the body. His mudras were taught to balance hormones and glandular function. He taught four variations of Surya Namaskar, explaining that there are actually six variations, but the last two are very advanced. From standing to seated asanas, to floor exercises, twists and, lastly, inversions, his hatha yoga class remains the most thorough I have ever taken—and I have taken hundreds of classes since studying with him.

His Blessing from Beyond

Swami Bua's blessings stayed with me even after his passing. On the very same day I learned I was pregnant, my mother, my husband and I happened by chance upon an exhibition on yoga to celebrate the release of a book by photographer Michael O'Neill. Amazingly, I opened the book exactly to the page of my yoga guru Swami Bua performing khechari mudra! I had no idea of the contents of the book or who was featured inside! I burst into tears of joy as we all felt it was a blessing from God to happen upon that exhibit after hearing such good news. I knew Swami Bua was blessing me from another plane!



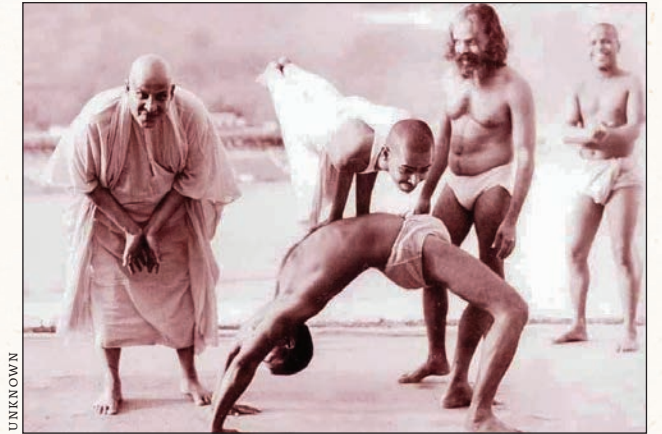
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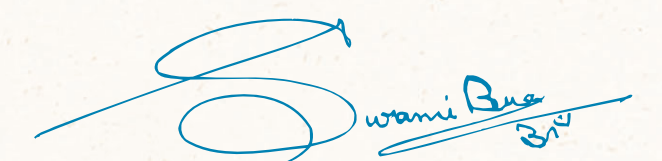
HINDUISM TODAY

What is upsetting is exactly what Swami Bua alluded to all along, that some people start their own yoga studios and, even more astonishingly, will offer teacher training without any conception of how long it takes to truly study and understand yoga—not just the physical asanas, but the entire philosophy. Swami Bua told all of us students that we must practice and study a minimum of ten years before teaching yoga. Yes, *TEN* full years. That wise advice was echoed years later in Malcolm Gladwell's idea that mastery of complex skills takes 10,000 hours of practice—which is akin to ten complete years of study. I followed my guru's edict and did not attempt to teach yoga or lead a class until ten years after I began. I took my first class with him in 1994 and I led my first class as a senior student and teacher in the fall of 2004.

How can one learn to be a yoga teacher in a series of weekends? In one month? It is ludicrous, yet many yoga teacher trainings offer just that. I would marvel at how Swami Bua, while sitting at the front of the room in meditation with eyes at half mast, could instruct his students very specifically to make sure they had the proper alignment. "Straighten your left elbow! Your left elbow!" he might say. If you did not heed his instruction, he would question, "Do you understand English?" He was quick to correct any dancers or gymnasts who came to class a little too self-confident and sure of themselves and their flexibility. I heard him many times telling dancers their backs were crooked and their rib cages misaligned. Once someone walked in and just by looking at their navel, Swami said, "Your back is crooked." He was so incredibly observant and focused on the importance of the correct alignment of the body. He also would tell



UNKNOWN



Through a century: (clockwise from far left) Swamiji with the author, around 2000; in his New York yoga studio in 1999; a joyful Swami Sivananda looks on as Swami Bua (standing middle) guides Swami Vishnudevananda in doing an extremely difficult peacock pose on the torso of a fellow student in wheel pose; Swami's elegant signature

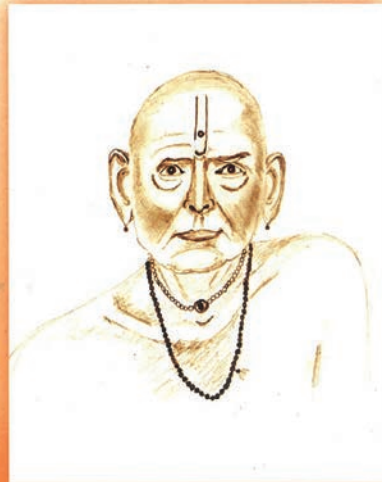
me when I returned from a trip, "Priya, you have lost one kg," or "Priya, you have gained one kg." These observations were always correct. My favorite is when he would spot me for some advanced inversions. Before I attempted scorpion pose (*vrishchikasana*), he would come over and place his arm out for me to kick up against over my head, then remove his arm once I had found my balance. He spotted me multiple times in various asanas and used his feet to correct my hand or foot placement and perfect my alignment. How I miss the days with such a perfect teacher!

Swami Bua taught yoga at Swami Sivananda's ashram in Rishikesh. There are several black-and-white photos of him there practicing yoga, including the one above of a combination pose many would think impossible. Swami Sivananda conferred the title "Yogiraj" on Swami Bua and later bestowed him with the sacred title "Master of Hatha Yoga." Swami Bua also demonstrated the shooting bow pose in front of a young Sathya Sai Baba at the All India Conference of the Divine Life Society hosted by the Raja of Venkatagiri.

As a teacher, Swami Bua combined stern discipline with great humor and good cheer, using puns and word play to make light of life while encouraging his students to learn yoga and practice with dedication and diligence. I am so grateful to have been introduced to yoga by this living master of hatha yoga. Swami Bua Ji was one of the first Indian masters to bring the classical practices of traditional hatha yoga to the United States. He was the master of masters and the oldest living exponent of hatha yoga. My most humble pranams at the feet of my beloved yoga guru Swami Bua Ji.

PRIYA AYYAR earned her BFA and MFA from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts and currently works in entertainment as an actor, writer, and award-winning audiobook narrator. A native Californian, she lives with her husband and son along the beautiful Central Coast. She has studied yoga, meditation, holistic health and nutrition and Ayurveda. She enjoys chanting and reciting mantras while hiking with her family.

ETERNAL FRIEND
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By
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Hindu Heritage Endowment

Legacy Gift Ideas for Young People

By Akhila Satish

In a hopeful sign for the future, 74% of Millennials and 66% of Gen Z donated money to charity during the coronavirus pandemic. This is striking. In the midst of chaos and economic uncertainty, when retreat and isolation may have felt more comfortable, these young populations leaned into the world, determined to make a difference. Young individuals are willing to support causes they care about and are frequently active, hands-on stewards of their donations. This same population is less frequently approached by charitable organizations, as they are assumed to be resource poor and building wealth. This is a mistake, as Millennials and Gen Z have a tremendous opportunity to begin building a legacy of giving.



Teaching children to give while they are young is an important life skill

There are several reasons for this. First, giving conversations have a natural context as life events occur. When you sit down to write your first will, you are more likely to be open and willing to incorporate a charity. It is always mentally easier to set something up initially than revise it later. When you are setting up a life insurance policy for the first time, it is a natural moment to consider broadening it to include a charity.

Second, there are significant benefits to starting certain giving patterns at a younger age. For example, a life insurance policy may offer lower premiums upfront, have a greater potential return and allow the donor to take advantage of tax deductions. The benefits of this kind of policy are explained in detail here bit.ly/HHE-SecurityGifts.

Third, as individuals begin families of their own, inspiration for donating is personal and present. Sharing values of giving, generosity and activism with children is important, and the best way to share such a value is to model it. We are all motivated and inspired by creating a better world for the next generation, and no one more so than a young parent.

Lastly, many young individuals may have received donations, perhaps through endowments or grants for travel. Experiencing that kind of gift first hand is a recent and strong emotional memory that can prompt an individual to give back in their turn.

While economic difficulties may persist for Millennials, and Gen Z may still be too young to participate, there is no better time than the present to share and educate these young generations on valuable opportunities for giving. They have already shown themselves to be compassionate and active donors in a time of grave uncertainty and need. One of the most powerful ways to teach children how to give is through teaching them gratitude. By helping children articulate the gifts they have through no merit of their own, you can help a child understand that they are deeply blessed. That sense of fortune can, in turn, prompt them toward compassion and generosity. As an example, when a child encounters someone less fortunate in some regard, use the moment as an opportunity to ask the child about how they think that person's life might be, what challenges they may face, and how they might benefit from help. Share stories from your life, or your family history, about your own moments of less fortune and the helping hands along the way.

When a child offers generous help, be sure to properly acknowledge the moment with praise. When a child receives help, expand on the gratitude that is felt so they recognize the power they have to help improve another person's life.

JANUARY TO MARCH ENDOWMENT CONTRIBUTIONS

Kauai Aadheenam Monastic Endowment	Venkat & Chitra Ramachandran	249.00	Yongliang Chen	150.00
Roshan Harilela	S. Sehgal	249.00	Michael Doyle	324.00
Gunasekaran Kandasamy	Mani Subramaniam	299.00	Amey Surendra & Amruta Gangal	11.00
Mira Das & R. Mahalingam	Prabha Swarup	249.00	Debashis Ghosh	100.00
Kulagan Moonesawmy	Pravin Tanwar	249.00	Gunasekaran Kandasamy	88.64
Gowri Nadason	Total	5,581.03	Murugesu Kandasamy	33.88
Chamundi Sabanathan	Kadavul Nataraja Ardra		Eric Mackow	50.00
Hitesvara Saravan	Abhishekam Endowment		Ananda Manickam	51.00
Pathmini Saravanapavan	Umasankaran Mohambourame	110.16	Hitesh & Rishitaa Murugesu	33.88
Nirupa & Nagamany	Gowri Nadason	121.88	Mano Navaratnarajah	150.00
Thayalakhandan	Nuckiren Pyeneeeandee	10.36	Cassan Pancham	1,500.00
Anonymous	Parimala Selvaraj	93.00	Bijamati Pareatumbree	100.00
Total	Anonymous	690.82	Nuckiren Pyeneeeandee	10.36
	Total	1,026.22	Ganga Sivanathan	667.62
Iraivan Temple Endowment			Nandi Devi Sivanathan	11.59
Eshwar & Aarati Bandlamudi	Tirunavukkarasu Nayanar Gurukulam		Anba Dayananden Valayten	8.23
Frank Burkhardt	Anonymous	405.00	John Wahlen	36.69
Kunchitha & Girija Gurumurthy			Anonymous	6,560.00
Rajagopal Krishnan	Sri Subramuniya Kottam Fund		Total	10,336.89
Luke Labella	Muthukumar Jeyapalan	5,000.00	Sri Chandra Madhab Debnath Endowment	
Gaurav Malhotra			Shyamal Chandra Debnath	150.00
Sadhunathan Nadesan	Kumbhalavalai Ganesha			
Eswar Raman	Temple Endowment		Murugan Temple Yalpanam Festival Fund	
Murari Singh	Mano Navaratnarajah	75.00	Pathmini Saravanapavan	150.00
Anil Thayamballi				
Anonymous	Hinduism Today Production Fund		Tiptur Shiva Temple & Youth Hostel Fund	
Total	Ian Johnson	60.00	Anonymous	10.00
	Kulagan Moonesawmy	12.66		
Kauai Aadheenam Annual Archana Fund	Subramaniam Pennathur	50.01	Kerala Temple Trust	
J.P. Morgan Donor Advised Fund	Nuckiren Pyeneeeandee	10.36	Anonymous	10.00
Malvi Gandhi	Chamundi Sabanathan	642.00		
Roudhranee Jugurnauth	Anonymous	63.00	Taos Hanuman Fund	
Tejwantee Meetoo	Total	838.03	Anonymous	51.00
Logadhasan Murugesu	Hindu Orphanage Endowment Fund			
Subramaniam Pennathur	Benevity	470.00	Manjung Hindu Sabha Orphanage Fund	
Indrathan Hindurajan Pillay	Tamnash J. Gupta	324.00	Emily Xin Rui Lim	100.00
Chinmayie Rajasankara	Roshan Harilela	375.00	Rajiv Verma	150.00
Jugurnauth Roudhranee	Gunasekaran Kandasamy	44.32	Total	250.00
Chidambaram Sendan	Anupam Kumar Misra	108.00		
Meetoo Tejwantee	Chamundi Sabanathan	78.75	Pazhassi Balamandiram Orphanage Fund	
Anonymous	Hitesvara Saravan	36.00	Steven Lee	30.00
Total	Rodney & Ilene Standen	30.00		
	Jeeva Velusaami	28.00	Swami Vipulananta Children's	
Hinduism Today Lifetime	Richard Bosworth & Kerri Watts	101.00	Home Endowment	
Subscription Fund	Matthew Wiczork	35.00	Sharukaa Uthayasekaran	25.00
Krishan Aggarwal	Anonymous	33.00	Anonymous	51.00
Anup G. Amin	Total	1,663.07	Total	76.00
Jigisha Amin	Hindu Education Endowment		Hinduism Today Complimentary	
Dr. Pratap Chillakanti	Fidelity Charitable	100.00	Subscription Fund	
K. Devacaanthan	Arjun & Revathi Pennathur	75.00	Rajagopal Krishnan	60.00
Ajit Goenka	Total	175.00		
Aloke Gupta	Kauai Aadheenam Religious		Himalayan Academy	
Roudhranee Jugurnauth	Art and Artifacts Fund		Publications Endowment	
Juhivaasana Koothan	Sadhunathan Nadesan	300.00	Mano Navaratnarajah	225.00
Vijay Krishna			Anonymous	54.00
Sumathi Kuppusamy	Murugan Temple of North		Total	279.00
Sangarappillai Manoharan	America Pillaiyar Shrine Fund		Kauai Aadheenam Yagam Fund	
Rajinee Marcon	Pathmini Saravanapavan	150.00	Valliammah Kandasamy	33.88
Prasad S. Mikkilineni			Anonymous	33.00
Bhaveshan Moorghen	Thank You Bodhinatha Fund		Total	66.88
Siva Natarajan	Sumathi Raja Chanda	450.00		
Arjyendu Andy Nayak				
Grant Ottinger				
Indrathan Hindurajan Pillay				
Chinmayie Rajasankara				

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Yogaswami Hindu Girls' Home of Sittandy Endowment	Dharam & Madhu Bahl	54.00	Velika Lawrence	9.99
Moon Jerin	Niki Bengali	25.00	Kulagan Moonesawmy	6.33
Steven Lee	Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	2.12	Logan Mootoosamy	108.00
Subramaniam Pennathur	Srinivas R. Madaboosi	375.00	Vanesh Naidu	30.00
Veena & Venkat Raman	Natraj Narayanswami	41.00	Padmini Samuthiran	162.00
Sivaruban & Carolyn Sivanesan	Alexander Petrov	3,000.00	Tarangadeva Sinhaputra	63.00
Kevina Soobramanien	Padmini Samuthiran	162.00	Rassamma Sinnadurai	100.00
Anonymous	Shebabrata Shaha	108.00	Nandi Devi Sivanathan	34.15
Total	Nandi Devi Sivanathan	22.56	Ravi & Kunjal Thaker	25.50
	Sivaruban & Carolyn Sivanesan	150.00	N. Thayalakhandan	108.00
	Rodney & Ilene Standen	30.00	K. Vasanthakumari	500.00
	Maresh Sundaram	108.00	Jeeva Velusaami	35.00
	Arunasalam Vathavooran	50.00	Saravan Veylan	324.00
	Anonymous	192.09	Anonymous	2,107.26
	Pathmini Saravanapavan	4,542.77	Total	3,858.44
	Total	258.00		
Murugan Temple of North America Puja Fund	Jaffna Kannathiddy Kali Kovil Endowment		Concord Shiva Murugan Temple (CSMT) Endowment Fund	
Covida Mootoosamy	Nigel Subramaniam Siva	1,008.00	Shubha Anantha	101.00
Pathmini Saravanapavan	Anonymous	108.36		
Total	Total	1,116.36	Himalayan Acres Endowment	
			Ashley Raman	11.00
Rani Jothiswarar Memorial Fund	Panchangam Endowment Fund			
Charities Aid Foundation America	Sidharth Sankar	50.00	Total Contributions	\$58,883.25
Texas Instruments Foundation			Funds at Market Value, Mar 31, 2023	
Charities Aid Foundation America				
Schwab Charitable Fund			Grand Total	\$19,921,474.08
Morgan Stanley GIFT				
Charities Aid Foundation America				
Anonymous				
Total				
India Hindu Temple Cleaning Fund	Digital Dharma Endowment			
Anonymous	Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	2.12		
	Kulagan Moonesawmy	8.41		
	Anonymous	322.60		
	Himalayan Academy	12,034.00		
	Total	12,367.13		
Anantha Ladies Home Endowment	Kauai Aadheenam Feed the Monks Fund			
Moon Jerin	Ambika Alagere	6.33		
	Anandkumar Ayyachamy	75.00		
	Rakesh & Pritibha Bhardwaj	100.00		
	Ajita Gupta	30.00		
	Murugesu Kandasamy	33.88		

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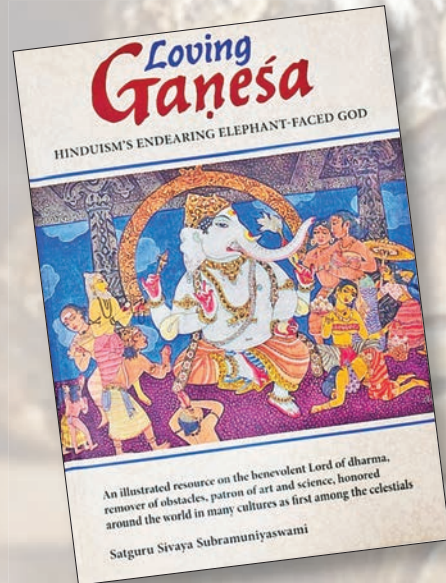


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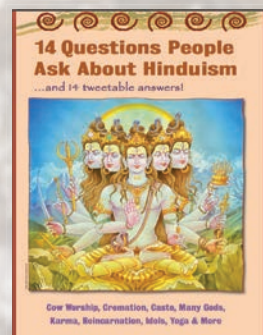
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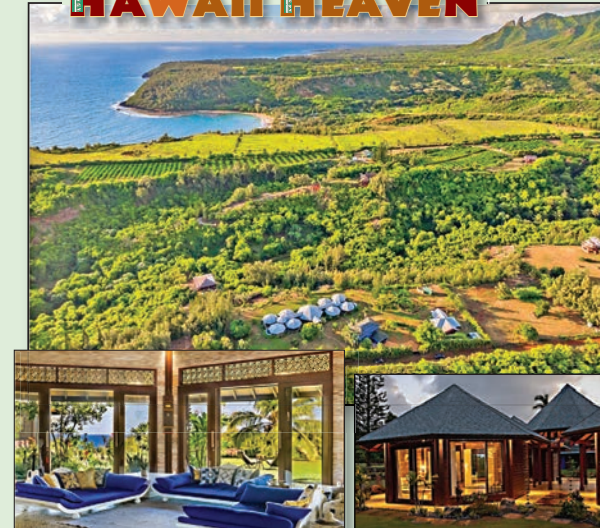
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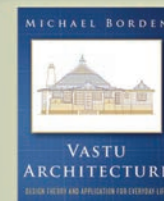
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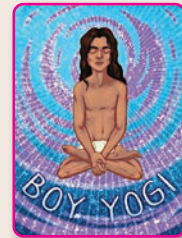


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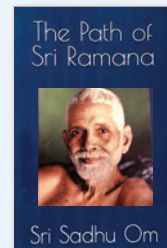


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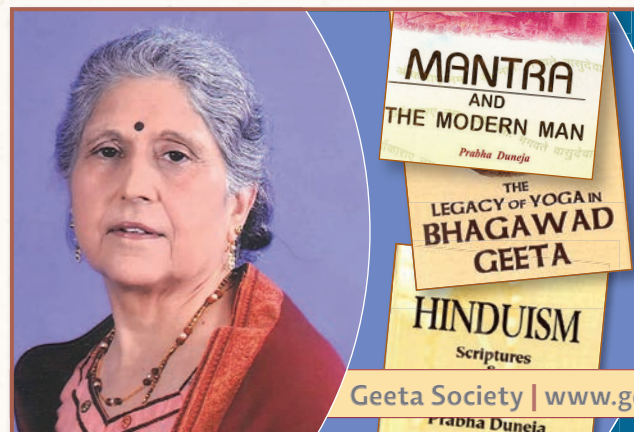
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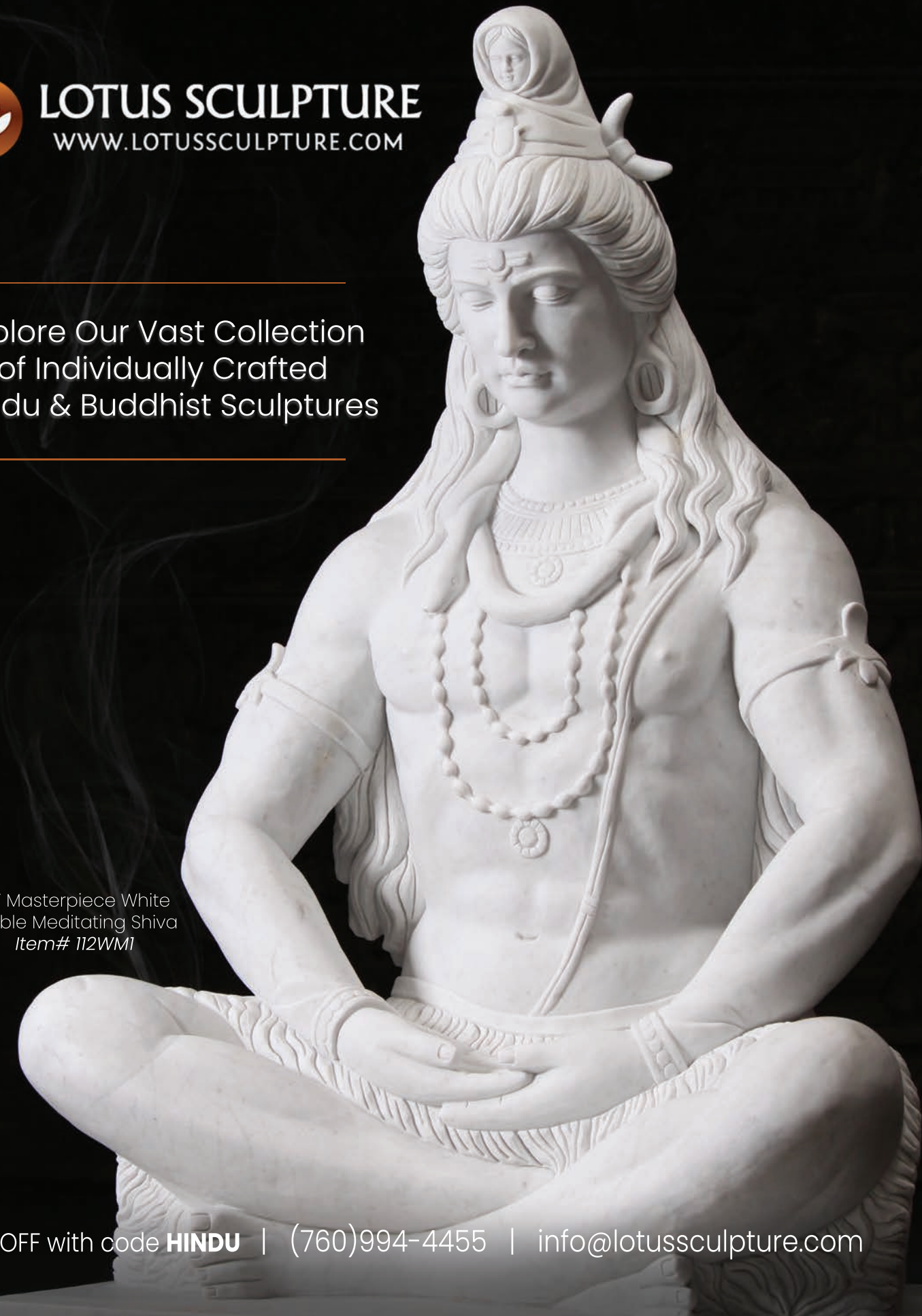


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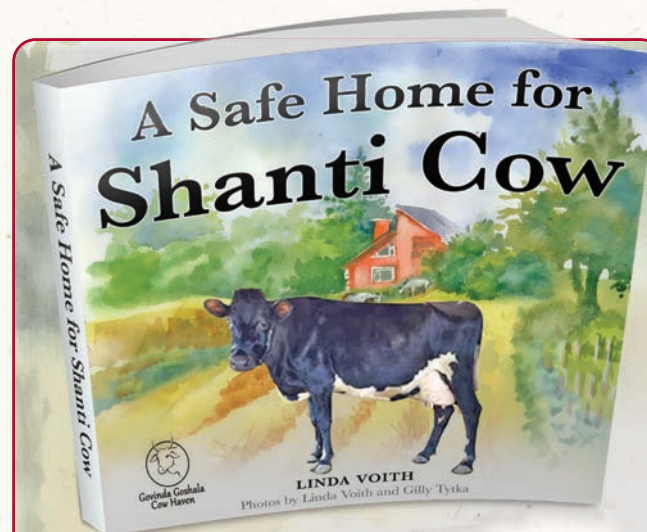
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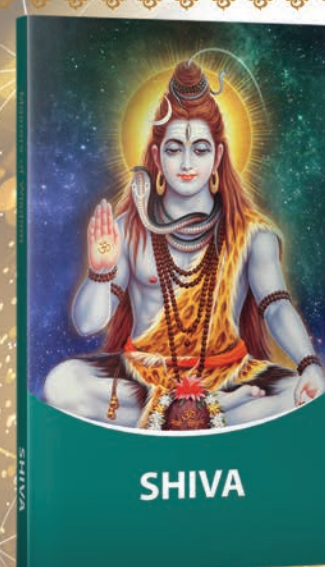
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About the author:

Tatyana N. Mickushina was born in Russia. She is the incarnated master, the Guru.

Tatyana is the founder of the philosophical-ethical Teaching aimed at the restoration of morality in society.

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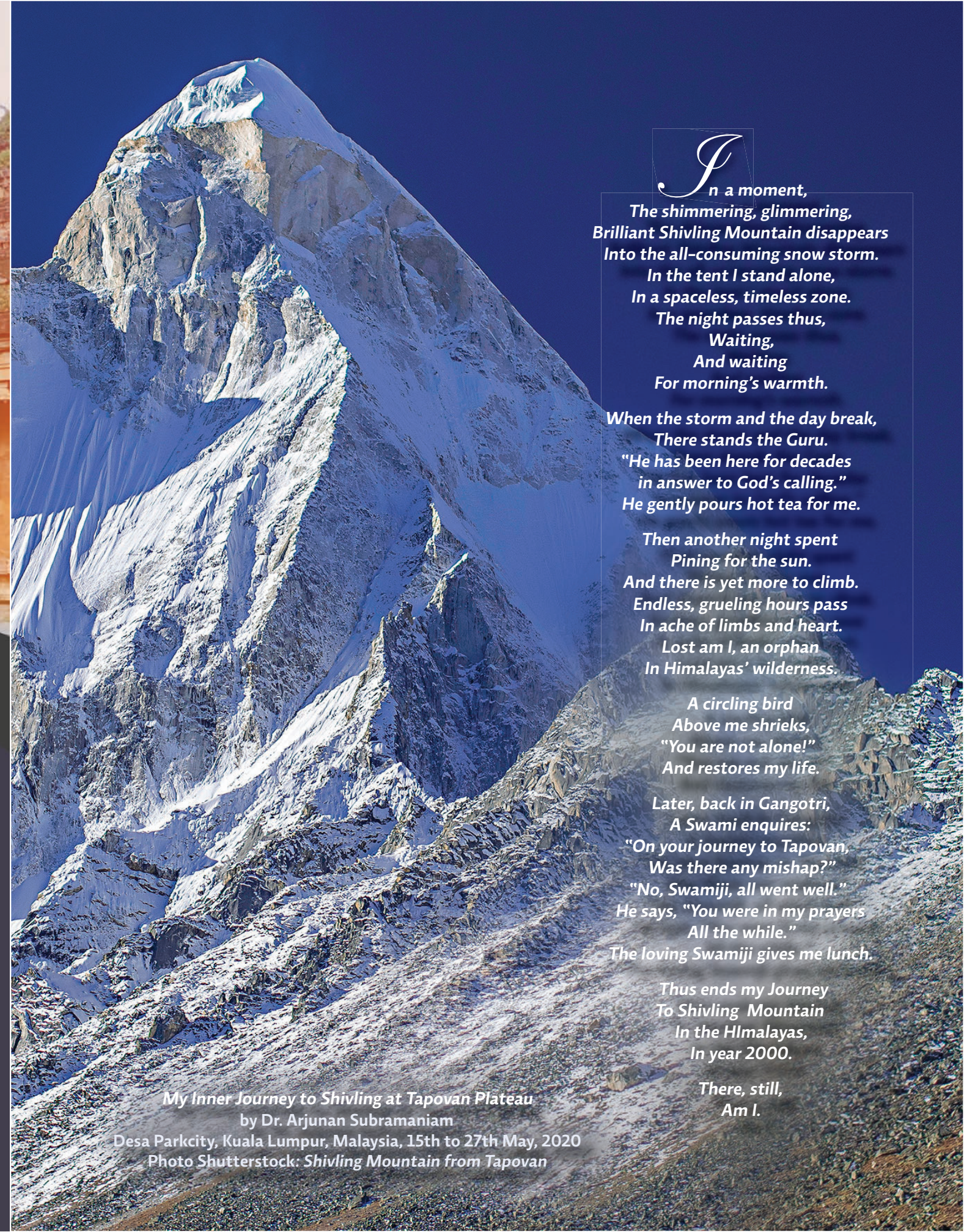
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*In a moment,
The shimmering, glimmering,
Brilliant Shivling Mountain disappears
Into the all-consuming snow storm.
In the tent I stand alone,
In a spaceless, timeless zone.
The night passes thus,
Waiting,
And waiting
For morning's warmth.*

*When the storm and the day break,
There stands the Guru.
"He has been here for decades
in answer to God's calling."
He gently pours hot tea for me.*

*Then another night spent
Pining for the sun.
And there is yet more to climb.
Endless, grueling hours pass
In ache of limbs and heart.
Lost am I, an orphan
In Himalayas' wilderness.*

*A circling bird
Above me shrieks,
"You are not alone!"
And restores my life.*

*Later, back in Gangotri,
A Swami enquires:
"On your journey to Tapovan,
Was there any mishap?"
"No, Swamiji, all went well."
He says, "You were in my prayers
All the while."
The loving Swamiji gives me lunch.*

*Thus ends my Journey
To Shivling Mountain
In the Himalayas,
In year 2000.*

*There, still,
Am I.*

*My Inner Journey to Shivling at Tapovan Plateau
by Dr. Arjunan Subramaniam
Desa Parkcity, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 15th to 27th May, 2020
Photo Shutterstock: Shivling Mountain from Tapovan*

Overcoming temptations that distract us from meditation



SURESH MUTHUKULAM

Beneath a spreading banyan tree sits a yogi in padmasana, dwelling more inside than out. He is surrounded by astral and worldly forces of distraction, assailed on all sides by threats, temptations, desires and fascinations. Yet, he is not moved, but remains *summa*, still, centered on God Siva within. Below, ghouls attack him with swords of hate and spears of fear. Winsome maidens dance to seduce him. Wealthy merchants bring silks, gems and other riches to purchase his attention and pundits draw near to entice him with knowledge. A wizard conjures spellbinding illusions, his wife holding "something miraculous" beneath a cloth. Families lovingly approach with sumptuous foods. Above, five devas gather, well aware of the strength needed, sending divine blessings to the yogi, urging him to stay the course. Kerala muralist Suresh Muthukulam is the artist.

Canada CAD 10
 India INR 225
 Malaysia MYR 14
 Mauritius . . . MRU 115
 Singapore . . . SGD 10
 UK GBP 5

