

HINDUISM



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



Ram Returns



(Left) The five-year-old Lord Ram enshrined in the newly opened Ramjanmabhoomi Temple in Ayodhya (note the toys at His feet—wheeled cart for walking, elephant, spinning top, horse and camel); (above) Kheer Bhawani Goddess Temple in Tikker, Kashmir

JULY/AUGUST/SEPTEMBER, 2024 • The Hindu Year Krodhi, 5126 • क्रोधी

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Aḍi Shankara's Birth Home

Kerala artists Gopi Chevayur & Ajithan painted these murals for the Eastern courtyard wall at Melpazhur Mana, the birthplace of Aḍi Shankara. In 1990 Pujya Gurudev Swami Chinmayananda established here the Chinmaya International Foundation. Page 36...





Voice for Hindus: Pandit Krishna Kripa Dasa was born in Spain to a Indian Hindu father and a Spanish Catholic mother

SPAIN

Priest Joins Religious Congress

JUAN CARLOS RAMCHANDANI (PANDIT KRISHNA KRIPA DAS) PARTICIPATED in a congress on the "Legal Status of Religious Minorities" in Spain in March, 2024. *El Faro Ceuta* reports that Ramchandani spoke about how Hinduism has a documented presence in Spain for 150 years and has about 75,000 members, but lacks the status known as Notorio Arraigo (well-known roots). Therefore, it lacks official recognition with the privileges and duties that the government of Spain grants to the religious faiths that do have it. "So, we have a precarious administrative situation in issues as important as the recognition of marriage through the Hindu rite, exemption from paying property tax for places of worship, access to subsidies, ease of permits to build temples, regulation of ministers of worship and a long list of shortcomings," said Ramchandani.

AUSTRALIA

Matchmakers Facilitate Quest For Happily Ever After

IN AN ERA DOMINATED BY ONLINE dating and rising divorce rates, many Australians are returning to the time-honored tradition of matchmaking to find lifelong partners. As reported in theindiansun.com.au, the Special Broadcasting Service, which publicizes minorities, profiled this resurgence in the Hindu, Muslim and Jewish communities in a three-part series called *The Matchmakers*, in February 2024. It follows on the heels of the well-known Netflix series *Indian Matchmaking*.

Debating for the Hindu portion, Preeti Kothari and Heena Kajaria have dedicated themselves for a decade to fostering

connections as matchmakers among Indians in Australia and beyond. The women share similar backgrounds as Gujaratis, initially migrating to New Zealand and eventually settling in Australia. Their paths converged in Sydney, where they discovered their shared goals. Preeti initiated Soulmate Matrimonial about ten years ago. Heena later joined the venture, bringing her social connections into the mix.

They maintain a database of about 2,000 candidates, mainly from Australia, New Zealand and India. Nowadays, says Preeti, they are receiving registrations from around the world. Clients have lists of requirements, and

GLOBAL DHARMA

NEPAL

Retrieving Religious Artifacts



Recovery: Sanjay Adhikari in front of the Laxmi Narayan Temple in Lalitpur, whose main Deity he helped to recover from the US

THOUSANDS OF ARTIFACTS HAVE been looted since Nepal opened up to international trade and tourism in the 1950s. "Kathmandu valley was an open museum," Rohit Ranjitkar, director of the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust, told *The Guardian*. "Besides temples or monuments, there were old treasures. I think the local people did not value it all or were unaware. So much was gifted, thrown out or sold by locals." Recent years have seen a concerted effort by Nepali heritage hunters to repatriate these

objects, helped by the changing attitudes of Western governments and institutions, which have become more willing to return disputed artifacts. Sanjay Adhikari's life changed after reading that a statue of Lakshmi-Narayana from Nepal was on display at a Dallas, USA, museum. He successfully campaigned to get it returned in 2021, inspiring him to launch the Nepal Heritage Recovery Campaign. As one of the country's leading heritage lawyers, he has helped to recover about 30 artifacts.



Marriage brokers: Preeti and Heena say that currently 80 percent of the candidates are prioritizing education and compatibility over caste

sometimes caste and horoscope play a role. But Preeti advises: "Don't be so picky, limit your criteria." She believes that if there's a 70-80 percent compatibility, a couple should meet. It's not a

commitment to marriage, and a meeting can be beneficial. After meeting or chatting, seeking family input can further guide the choice, she says.



ABU DHABI

Abu Dhabi Inaugurates First Hindu Temple

IN FEBRUARY 2024, THE CAPITAL city of the United Arab Emirates saw the consecration of a new BAPS Hindu Temple complex. According to [msn.com](https://www.msn.com), India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi had laid the foundation stone in 2017 as part of cultivating relations with the Middle East. Spanning 27 acres, the complex boasts a stone temple capable of accommodating 3,000 devotees, a community center and exhibition hall.

Rising to 108 feet, the temple

is adorned with seven spires representing each of UAE's emirates, and houses shrines to seven Deities. Brahmavihari Swami, head of BAPS international relations. He told *The Week*, "Hundreds of people told me that a traditional temple, built of natural stone, of this magnitude, was not possible in this region. But, as hearts and minds connected, everyone connected, and it became possible. Genuine places of worship are a source of harmony."

INDONESIA

Government Ministry Plans To Serve All Religions

PARISADA HINDU DHARMA Indonesia (PHDI) Bali responded positively to the Indonesian Ministry of Religion's plan, announced in March 2024, to be a service center for all religions. [Nusabali.com](https://www.nusabali.com) reports that, so far, the Ministry only performs services for Muslims, while other people use services at other institutions such as the Civil Registry Service.

PHDI is the highest religious body in Bali. Chairman of the

PHDI Bali Daily Management I Nyoman Kenak (photo right), while appreciating the plan, said that synchronization was needed with the system that had been running so far. "If we are invited by the Ministry of Religion, we are ready to help," he affirmed.

The Ministry of Religion has mapped out 40 existing services that are ready to expand and serve people of all religions, including marriage registration, recording, issuing letters of

recommendation, receiving data, as well as correcting and changing marriage data, issuing status certificates and pre-marital guidance, consultation with Buddhist, Muslim and Christian families, the issuance of identities of places of worship and letters of recommendation for assistance for places of worship.

Minister Yaquut Cholil Qoumas said this will promote tolerance and harmony, and that various Ministry facilities can also be used as a temporary place of worship for non-Muslims who still have difficulty setting up their own house of worship due to economic or social factors.



GHANA

Jagannath Temple Opens In Ghana's Capital City

A JAGANNATH TEMPLE IN THE city of Accra built by the Utkala Ghana Association was inaugurated from January 27 to February 4, 2024. The *Times of India* reports that the High Commissioner of India to Ghana, Manish Gupta, was the chief guest. Numerous Indian associations, ISKCON Ghana and countless Lord Jagannatha devotees extended their support and assistance in the

construction.

The rites were conducted by a team of five priests from Puri, India. Highlighting the event was the kalash yatra on January 28, in which over 1,000 devotees participated. The temple complex boasts a main sanctum resembling the famous Puri Srikshetra, plus smaller shrines for Lord Siva, Lord Ganesha, Maa Bimala, Maa Lakshmi and Lord Hanuman.

"With this temple's inauguration, I am happy that our children are learning about our culture and traditions," said Tapan Kumar Panda, joint secretary of the Utkala Ghana Association.





KAILASH ASHRAM

A Unique Paradigm for Holistic Health

SHIVARATNAPURI TEMPLE OF HEALTH, A pyramidal abode of wellbeing, is a place where wellness is the mantra, cure is an amalgamation of science and faith, and participants are not called patients. A dream project of Sri Jayendra Puri Swami, pontiff of Kailash Ashram in Bengaluru, the facility is located a few hundred feet from the famous Sri Rajarajeshwari Temple of Kailash Ashram. An imposing pyramid modeled on the lines of the Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt, it is a curative center with a difference. All disciplines of treatment, from traditional to modern medicine, are made available for a person to choose from. There are no inpatients; it is only for outpatients and consultation, open five days a week from morning to evening. The motto is “freedom from medication.”

Built to one fifth the size of the Great Pyramid, the structure is perhaps the first of its kind in India, according to engineering experts involved in the process. The pyramid is a free-standing hollow shell, 150 by 150 feet at the base, constructed in concrete with no steel reinforcement. “We have used Reinforced Plastic Bars (RFP),” says one expert engaged in the construction. “It was a technological challenge; pouring concrete on a slant to a height of 97 feet wasn’t easy. Jayendra Puri Swamiji, an engineer himself, closely oversaw the work every day.”

Honoring his guru, the founder of Kailash Ashram, Swamiji reflected, “Every moment Shivaratna Puri Swami guided me and gave me the confidence. Whenever we hit a road-

block, he would bestow the intuitive knowledge to overcome it. The first four attempts of securing the walls failed, yet I never lost faith. Molding cement into the slabs at a slant was a huge challenge. I took a decision to pour concrete directly into its final position on site, in boxes customized for the walls, and it worked. Layer by layer we built the slanting walls to hold all the sides together. I learned AutoCAD and CorelDRAW in two weeks to work on the drawings.”

Architects and construction engineers from Singapore and elsewhere were brought on board. Glass-fiber reinforced polymer was imported from Russia. Built inside the pyramid frame are seven stories housing various departments. This internal structure is a stand-alone conventional construction using steel and other common materials.

Facilities

“Almost all the doctors of the various disciples have been empaneled” Venugopal, Public Relations Officer, explained. While some sections are directly managed by the Kailash Ashram Charitable Trust, many others have been outsourced to already existing clinics, treatment and diagnostic centers.” Some departments—such as dentistry, ayurveda, speech and hearing therapy, diabetic reversal and acupressure—are fully operational. “In the next few months the entire hospital will be fully operational,” says Venugopal.

The spacious ground floor has a temple for Dhanvantari, the Lord of Medicine and healing. Also on this floor are a physiotherapy

Pyramids: The main edifice has seven floors. Two small pyramids house a play hub and a registration center and dispensary; (inset) the inside walls of the large pyramid are decorated with lotuses

and occupational therapy center, diagnostics lab, X-ray and scanning, allopathic pharmacy, administrative office and Dine Divine, a cafeteria serving sattvik meals and snacks.

Of course, each higher floor is proportionately smaller. The first floor houses a dental department, ophthalmology, a diabetic reversal (a new technique based on diet and yoga), and Nele, a speech and hearing treatment center, as well as therapy center here for differently abled children, run by a private entity.

The second floor is exclusively for alternative medicine. Doctors from Bhagwan Buddha College run the homeopathy center. Dr. Rajashri, a devotee of Kailash Ashram, runs the ayurveda centre. DORN therapy (Reflexology) is run by a visiting doctor from Tiruchi (Tamil Nadu) thrice a week. “Siddha medicine, acupressure and acupuncture sections have been operating successfully with a good recovery rate,” says Venugopal.

The third floor is for yoga. A morning session from five to six is conducted by Jayendra Puri Swami. A evening session is conducted by a visiting expert. Sound therapy sessions are conducted twice a month.

The fourth floor is for meditation, open to the general public with prior permission. The fifth floor is strictly for mendicants and ascetics to engage in contemplation. The sixth floor houses a water tank to capture the pyramidal energy. The seventh floor, a small space right under the pyramid peak of the pyramid enshrines life-like wax models of Jayendra Puri Swami surrendering to his Guru, Shivaratna Puri Swami.

Why a Pyramid?

Since 1992, a modest dispensary under Sree Rajarajeshwari Charitable Hospital Trust operated under the aegis of Kailash Ashram. Says Jayendra Puri Swami, “In 2009 we decided to construct a hospital. When I visited the plot, I was triggered by the thought of a pyramidal construction that would contribute to the health of the people because the structure itself would be an energy center.” He was inspired by studies indicating that the geometry of the Egyptian pyramids channels and focuses cosmic energy.

As in Giza, two smaller pyramids stand beside the large one. The first is a play hub for children, with sea sand on the floor. The second is a registration center and a dispensary that offers free medicine. Around the complex is a walking path filled with sea sand that is regularly treated with turmeric water and neem leaves to enhance healing.



HINDUISM TODAY was founded on January 5, 1979, by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (1927–2001). It is a nonprofit educational activity of Himalayan Academy, with the following purposes: 1. To foster Hindu solidarity as a unity in diversity among all sects and lineages; 2. To inform and inspire Hindus worldwide and people interested in Hinduism; 3. To dispel myths, illusions and misinformation about Hinduism; 4. To protect, preserve and promote the sacred Vedas and the Hindu religion; 5. To nurture and monitor the ongoing spiritual Hindu renaissance; 6. To publish resources for Hindu leaders and educators who promote Sanatana Dharma. Join this seva by sending letters, clippings, photographs, reports on events and by encouraging others.



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IN MY OPINION

Growing Up in My Religion

How my grandparents' traditions ignited my curiosity and a lifetime of religious practice

BY RAAM KUMAR RAJENTHARAN

IAM OF TAMIL DESCENT, BORN and raised in Malaysia within an extended family structure. My childhood and adolescence were deeply shaped by my grandparents, who nurtured me in the core practices and beliefs of Hinduism. This foundation profoundly influenced my personal and spiritual development.

My grandparents, who served as my primary caretakers, instilled in me the values and traditions of our faith. My grandfather's teachings were based on the principles passed down from his father, and my grandmother's beliefs were similarly influenced by her father. My grandfather, originally a tailor from Karaikudi in Tamil Nadu, migrated to Malaysia in 1956, where he initially continued his trade before eventually becoming a school security guard. My grandmother was born in Malaysia to a man from Kerala who was a teacher of local traditions before working as a laborer.

A pivotal aspect of my upbringing was the daily application of vibhuti (holy ash) on my forehead, a practice emphasized both in the morning and at night before bed. This routine was not just about religious observance; it also served as a constant reminder of the related concept of impermanence. This ash underscores life's fleeting nature and the importance of maintaining spiritual mindfulness amidst the pursuit of earthly legacies. “Apply vibhuti” became a philosophical maxim for embracing life's transitory state and fostering equanimity.

I was also taught to recite hymns from a young age, which included *Ainthu Karathanai*, a prayer to Ganesha composed by the Tamil saint Tirumular in his tenth-century *Tirumantiram*. This hymn, describing Ganesha as a Deity of wisdom with an elephant face and five limbs, taught me to view the Divine with affection and reverence. Another hymn I learned during my adolescence was *Thodudaiya Seviyan*, by the child prodigy saint Jnana Sambhandar. This hymn



opened up further insights into the lives of the saints of the bhakti movement, which emphasizes a personal devotion to the Divine.

Bedtime stories told by my grandmother about figures like Adi Shankara, a philosopher and theologian, also enriched my understanding. These stories depicted his life choices, such as

his commitment to celibacy and his spiritual quests; and though sometimes mythic, they inspired deeper reflection on his teachings and philosophies.

The influence of media, particularly devotional films, was another formative aspect of my spiritual education. Films like *Thiruvard Chelvar*, *Auvaiyar* and *Athiparasakthi* portrayed the lives and devotions of various saints, enhancing my understanding of their personal sacrifices and the depth of their love for the Divine.

Additionally, the poetry of Bharathiyar, a renowned Tamil poet, resonated deeply with me. His poem featured in the film *Naalu Veli Nilam* particularly touched me because of the personal story my grandmother shared about its significance during her courtship with my grandfather. This poem, along with others by Bharathiyar, often combined spirituality with social justice themes, motivating me to explore further into his works and the broader context of Tamil poetic tradition.

Overall, these diverse experiences and teachings from my Tamil heritage have profoundly shaped my understanding of my roots and beliefs, bridging the gap between simple cultural practice and deeper spiritual enlightenment. This rich tapestry of religious and cultural influences has provided me with a strong sense of identity and a resilient foundation in Hindu philosophy.

RAAM KUMAR RAJENTHARAN, 34, a medical officer in Malaysia, has interests in philosophy and theological studies. Email contact: kosalairaman@yahoo.com

Daily Spiritual Practice Is a Must

Finding and following a routine is the secret to success. Let's talk about worship, introspection, affirmation and scriptural study.

BY SATGURU BODHINATHA VEYLANSWAMI

A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, DURING A seminar with a group of Hindu university students, I asked the question, "What is the goal of Hinduism?" They answered, "To realize the Self." This, of course, is the correct answer. I then asked, "How much progress did you make yesterday toward that goal?" The group grew silent. This lofty attainment, which takes many lifetimes, hardly relates to most people's daily life. Clearly, a more reachable goal is also needed. A good immediate goal is to achieve steady spiritual progress in each lifetime.

Spiritual progress relates to the ever-deepening experiences of our soul nature, known in Sanskrit as the *atma*. The first experience of the *atma* is as a consciousness that is content, kindly, creative and intuitive. A deeper experience is awakening compassion and divine love for all beings. Still deeper is seeing a brilliant inner light and the possibility of visions of Deities and rishis. And the deepest experience of the *atma* is to find ourself immersed in endless inner space, pure awareness—and ultimately realize the Self, the transcendent source of that awareness.

A comparison of Hinduism to Hindu classical dance, such as the Bharatanatyam style, provides a helpful way of understanding how to achieve spiritual progress. In this tradition, the goal is to hold your first public performance, called *arangetram*. What is needed to accomplish this? The answer is universally understood: practice! It can't be done simply through reading books, attending the dance concerts of others or participating in a weekly dance class. In fact, students typically undergo rigorous training in dance techniques, repertoire, music and expression, combined with dedicated daily practice, for up to ten years or more before they are deemed ready to perform their *arangetram*.

In Hinduism, dedicated repetition of spiritual disciplines over an extended period is called *abhyasa*. One who performs *abhyasa* is an *abhyasi*. It's not about sporadic efforts but sustained commitment, acknowledging that spiritual growth occurs incrementally, with each session, each meditation, each mantra contributing to one's progress.

In his *Yoga Sutras*, Sage Patanjali states that progress in yoga is achieved through *abhyasa*, emphasizing that such repetitive practice must be cultivated uninterrupted and with devotion for a long time. Clearly this is parallel to the efforts needed to achieve an *arangetram*. Both require consistent daily practice over a long period—dance taking many years and Self Realization taking many lifetimes.

For Hindus wanting to adopt a daily practice, unless your family is following a strict tradition it is hard to know where to start. To provide guidance at the beginning, I have developed a ten-minute



daily spiritual exercise that can be performed whenever time is available and does not require initiation. It includes four areas of yoga disciplines and daily practice, or *sadhana*. I suggest it be taken up around age fifteen, which is the traditional age that Hindu youth commit themselves to some form of daily spiritual routine. At that age a young person is mature enough to sustain the practice and not give it up after a few months. I also suggest that after all schooling is complete, the routine be increased to half an hour. We have named this ten-minute daily routine "Spiritual Workout." The concept of physical workouts is widespread in our modern world. An effective routine includes different types of exercises

and must be done regularly to maximize the benefits. The same principles apply to one's spiritual workout.

The monks have designed an app that includes all of the above. It is available from both the Apple's App Store and Google Play. "Spiritual Workout" is also available at: bit.ly/SpiritualWorkout. The app's description gives this overview: "While today nearly everyone appreciates the need for daily exercise to stay fit and healthy, many don't realize the need to maintain a balanced spiritual life through daily practices. The 'Spiritual Workout' is designed primarily for Hindus who would like to maintain a daily spiritual practice, but who might not have much time to give to spiritual well-being. The app has four main areas: worship, introspection, affirmation and study. Together they provide a well-rounded set of Hindu practices that can readily be performed daily."

Worship

The purpose of a devotional routine is to deepen our connection to the Deity. The first practice given in the app, lasting two minutes, is to verbally or mentally chant the mantra *Aum Gam Ganapataye Namah* nine or more times, ideally while offering grains of rice to a Ganesha murti or picture with each repetition.

Introspection

The purpose of the introspection routine is to calm the mind and raise our energies into the refined, spiritual part of the mind, moving awareness into the higher chakras. The practice, lasting two minutes,



SURESH MUTHUKULAM

is to chant the mantra *Aum* nine times with eyes closed. Breathing exercises are included.

Affirmation

The purpose of the affirmation routine is to help us become more positive and self-confident, making us more successful in everything we do. The initial practice, done for one minute, is to repeat nine times the affirmation "I'm all right, right now."

minute Spiritual Workout, a jump to half an hour is suggested for young adults who have finished their education. And that can be further lengthened, such as to an hour, for those who consider spiritual progress a high priority. Retirement is an excellent time to significantly increase one's daily spiritual routine. My advice for the retirement years is to double the amount of time you spent earlier. In fact, I know retired individuals who devote two hours a day or more to their daily practice—qualifying themselves as true *abhyasis*.

Bend it with bhakti: A seeker stays fit and flexible with daily hatha yoga, which prepares her for other spiritual *sadhanas*, including mantras, scriptural study and worship
.....

Study

The purpose of the study routine is to increase knowledge of our faith and catalyze insights into Hindu philosophy and practices. The initial practice, lasting five minutes, is to read a sacred Hindu text that awakens new understanding and insight.

For those wanting more advanced disciplines, the "Spiritual Workout" app gives a number of options. In the worship section, the advanced option is learning a full home puja to Lord Ganesha. The app includes recorded chants for each of the puja's sections to help in learning the correct pronunciation. For the introspection section, a basic pranayama is given. Ten-minute guided meditations on inner light, inner sound and inner self are the advanced practices.

Individuals taking up a daily practice can expect some challenges. My guru, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, spoke of the challenges that one faces in establishing a daily practice. "When you first begin your daily *sadhana*, it is likely to begin in an awkward way, and you may come to know yourself in a way that you don't want to know yourself. Don't be discouraged when the mind runs wild as you sit quietly and are unable to control it. Don't be discouraged if you find that you are unable to even choose a time to sit quietly for one half hour on a regular daily basis. If you persist, soon all this will be overcome and a firmness of mind will be felt, for it is through the regular practice of *sadhana* that the mind becomes firm and the intellect pure. It is through the regular practice of concentration that awareness detaches itself from the external mind and hovers within, internalizing the knowledge of the physical body, the breath and the emotions. Concentration of the forces of the body, mind and emotions brings us automatically into meditation, *dhyana*, and into deeper internalized awareness....*Sadhana* harnesses and transmutes the instinctive-intellectual nature, allowing progressive spiritual unfoldment into the superconscious realizations and innate abilities of the soul."

Ten minutes a day is a good start, but this ideally is increased in the same way that 5,000 steps might be a good start for a daily walking routine in which the eventual goal is 10,000 steps. Having matured in the ten-





LETTERS

Kashmir Story

Thank you for printing the story “New Temple Signals a Peaceful Turn for Kashmir” (Jan/Feb/Mar 2024). This is a real heart-warming essay in more than one way. The friendship extended by Muslims and the dedication of those involved in creating the temple is unbelievable. I salute all of them, the Hindus as well as the Muslims in successfully consecrating the Sharda Temple. I also thank Sringeri Shankaracharya Math in Karnataka and the writer of the story, Smt. Choodie Sivaram.

JAYENDRA THAKARU
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Excellent article! An example of true journalism, journalism of courage and bravery. Journalists, especially the Western-oriented Communists and Congress-supporter so-called writers and journalists, historians and academics should read this and learn from this. There is always negative reporting about India—especially after the abrogation of clause 370 from the constitution—without understanding the facts, without knowing what is happening in Kashmir and what India is doing.

We hope we will be able to visit Mata Sharada and other parts of Kashmir in the coming days if Bharat continues to move like this. Well done, Choodie Shivaram! Congratulations!

CHIRAN PAUDYAL
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This article describing rebuilding Mata Sharada Temple and its pratishtapana in 2023 at Teetwal instills pride in the heart of every follower of Sanathana Dharma. It is elaborately and eloquently written, giving geographical position, photos, history to provide an in-depth look at the situation prevailing in Kashmir over the past centuries and an ideal harmony existing between communities. The efforts of the Save Sharada Peeth committee are commendable, kindling the hope of Sharada Peeta Yatra in the near future.

MEENAKSHI MOHAN
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Salutations

We deeply appreciate the service rendered by your publication. Congratulations also on the Consecration of the Iraivan Temple. We watched the videos with great interest and appreciation for the beauty of the temple and traditions.

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Hindu Identity

I enjoyed reading Fred Stella’s article, “A Hindu-Sort of...” (Apr/May/June 2024). The question of who can call themselves a Hindu transcends narrow definitions and rigid boundaries. Rooted in ancient scriptures, elucidated by sages and interpreted by Hinduism experts, the essence of Hindu identity lies in spiritual realization, ethical conduct, and engagement with its rich heritage. As the *Rigveda* declares, “Truth is one, the wise call it by various names,” affirming the inclusivity, plurality and universality of Hindu principles.

Whether born into the tradition or drawn to its teachings later in life, anyone who embraces the quest for self-discovery, inner growth and ethical living can rightfully claim affiliation with Hinduism. As the diverse perspectives within Hinduism illustrate, the essence of Hindu identity lies not in external labels or rituals but in the transformative power of spiritual wisdom and universal values.

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Historical Inscriptions

I enjoyed reading “Temple Inscriptions, Illuminating the Pivotal Role of Ancient Hindu Temples in the Preservation of South India’s History Encapsulated by Chronicles Carved in Stone” (Apr/May/June 2023). I often wonder, as I walk through Srirangam Ranganatha temple, what the inscriptions carved on the walls are saying. These writings are in different South Indian languages from various time periods through history. The ceiling paintings, which have partially survived over time, the sculptures and the lofty granite

architecture are breathtaking. These structures have survived for more than a millennia, yet our modern roads don’t last a year. I would love to know if our Indian archaeology has any links or research into the writing, painting and sculpture work at Srirangam Ranganatha temple.

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Miniature Masterwork

The article “Exploring India’s Miniature Painting Tradition” (Apr/May/June 2019) introduces us to a world of beauty and intricacy. These paintings, despite their small size, are filled with immense detail and artistry, showcasing stories, landscapes and cultural nuances with incredible precision. The vibrant colors and meticulous techniques are truly awe-inspiring. Each miniature painting is a masterpiece in its own right, reflecting the rich artistic heritage of India. This article does a wonderful job of introducing readers to this fascinating tradition, offering a glimpse into a world where artistry knows no bounds. Looking forward to delving deeper into the world of Indian miniature paintings.

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Hinduism and Science

I appreciate the beautiful way Mr. Cavalli writes this article (“Hinduism’s Enduring Respect for Science,” Oct/Nov/Dec 2023). He delivers poignant information without beating around the bush. Direct and to the point. I look forward to reading his next article.

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Diwali Festival

I would like to draw your attention to two points for the article on Diwali in the Oct/Nov/Dec 2023 issue. 1) It is stated in the “Tidbits” section that Ravana effigies are burned on Diwali day. To my knowledge, Ravana effigies are burned on Vijaya Dashami—the day of Ram’s triumph over Ravana. Diwali was the time of Ram’s return to Ayodhya. 2) A suggestion for the future: the article would be enriched by explaining that Diwali is actually a five-day family celebration with each day dedicated to a special purpose: 1) house cleaning, 2) decoration, 3) Lakshmi puja, 4) visiting friends and relatives, and 5) celebrating the bond between siblings.

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Insights on Yoga

Namaste! What a pure and simple flow of insight to understand, dwelling on the importance of yoga (“A Youthful Primer About Hinduism’s Eight-Limbed System of Meditation and Spiritual Striving,” Jan/Feb/Mar 2024). Personally, I feel the clarity in thought that is essential to imbibe Patanjali’s prescribed eight limbs of Yoga. Thanks so much for your writing style in keeping the mystery of yoga, which is muddled so much on the social media with incongruent

postures. As a principal of a pre-k-12 school, I have taken the liberty to provide your link to parents as a resource to appreciate the essence of our Sanatana Dharma, or Eternal Truth.

SHARADAPRASAD RAMADEVANAHALLI
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Take Pride in Your Hinduness!

To the author of “My Unfortunate Conversion, How Christian evangelists ... lured me into joining their faith” (Apr/May/June 2022), you were lucky, very lucky that you came back! It is sad that people belonging to Indic faiths have been made (still happening) to feel guilty about what they worship and are even derided as Satanic worshipers, idolaters, polytheists. Nowadays if anyone professes to be a proud Hindu (this would not mean hating other religions), they are labeled as Sanghis or pro-Hindutva. It’s the same old strategy that I see being played out. Constructive criticism is always welcome, but abuse is not welcome. One of my college professors said, “To the Westerners, Hinduism is mythology, but Christianity is full of miracles.” Technically, the word *mythology* might be correct, but sadly, very sadly, it is used exclusively for religions like Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism.

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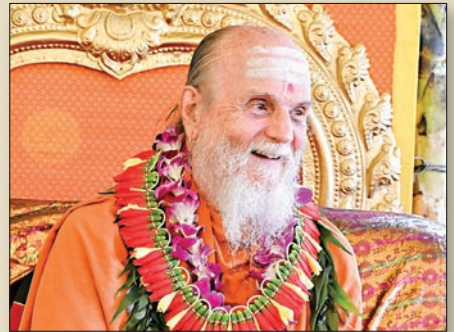
Saiva Siddhanta in Hawaii
Hi. I am from Tamil Nadu, the place where great siddhars like Tirumular and the Nayanmars spread Sanatana Dharma. But nowadays, even here, people have started forgetting Lord Shiva, Muruga and Shaiva Siddhanta as a whole. They have become an enemy of *Vedas* and Hinduism. New political parties have started saying that Iraivan Shiva and Murugan (Karttikeya) are not Gods, but mere humans. But when I saw Kauai’s Hindu Monastery and learned of the monks’ works to reinstate Shaiva Siddhanta dharma, I literally got tears. My namaskarams to the Swamijis who have dedicated their lives for dharma. HINDUISM TODAY magazine is awesome; it’s an eye opener for all Hindus.

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Letters with writer’s name, address and daytime phone number should be sent to:
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Kapaa, Hawaii, 96746-9304 USA
or visit: www.hinduismtoday.com/letters

Letters may be edited for space and clarity and may appear in electronic versions of HINDUISM TODAY.

Helping Swamis & Swaminis Keep the Philosophy Alive
Our magazine is a far-reaching medium for Hinduism’s leaders and their message



By Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, publisher of Hinduism Today

HINDUISM TODAY REGULARLY CARRIES a column called *Minister’s Message*, which features inspired outpourings from distinguished swamis and swaminis. These great souls have much to say, much to teach, and much to remind people of. It is, in part, our magazine’s mission to help them be better known and heard.

On page 16 of the Jan/Feb/Mar 2024 issue, Swami Advayananda, President of Chinmaya International Foundation, delineates frankly

what keeps people bound up in externalities and unable to dive within themselves, where they would find finer, more satisfying principles to live by. The obstacles, he explains, are usually habit and plain, ordinary desire. Thoughtlessly, one wants to “bask in the warmth of the external world of glittering objects and eke out small tinsels of ephemeral pleasures.” Thus, people tend to keep going round and round until finally they decide firmly to turn within.

In the Apr/May/June 2020 edition, Swami Avdheshanand Giri Maharaj, Acharya Mahamandaleshwar of the Juna Akhara, says, “To attain perfection, one has to follow the six indispensable steps: selfless service, self-assessment, companionship of righteous people, patience through self-discipline, tenacity in beholding spirituality and self-development. When one understands these six steps in a true sense and abides by them firmly, his consciousness awakes, his conscience gets cleared and his thoughts enlightened.”

A decade ago, in the Jan/Feb/Mar 2013 issue, it was the turn of His Holiness Sadyo-

jat Shankaracharya Swamiji, head of Shri Chitrapur Math, Karnataka: “Concentration on a mantra helps a beginner, in particular, to hold other thoughts at bay until one realizes that he is learning to surrender to a divine force that exists within and without. Consistency helps the seeker to shed all the negativity within until he understands that ‘pure’ is not what he has to become. ‘Pure’ is who he is!”

These apt thoughts are worthy of disseminating. Even when they are not applied immediately, the listener has nonetheless heard them, and the philosophy is kept alive deep within him. That is perhaps the ultimate effect swamis have had through the millennia: keeping the philosophy and the religion alive—at times perhaps in seed form, awaiting the right time and circumstance to bloom and be the answer to devotees’ prayers.

Help your magazine continue to preserve that blessed tradition by helping it to remain financially strong and secure.

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QUOTES & QUIPS

“You don’t want to see God. You must feel God. God is you. Just be that.”

Satguru Siva Yogaswami (1872–1964), *Sri Lankan sage*

We are what our thoughts have made us; so take care about what you think. Words are secondary. Thoughts live; they travel far. **Swami Vivekananda** (1863–1902)

The pure mind is itself Brahman; it therefore follows that Brahman is not other than the mind of the sage. **Sri Ramana Maharshi** (1879–1950)

When you came, you cried and everybody smiled with joy; when you go, smile and let the world cry for you. **Rabindranath Tagore** (1861–1941), *Bengali poet and philosopher*

An arrow can only be shot by pulling it backward. So when life is dragging you back with difficulties, it means that it’s going to launch you into something great. So just focus, and keep aiming. **Paulo Coelho**, *Brazilian author*

One whose seeds have not yet sprouted does not give up planting. *Kenyan proverb*

It’s better to see God in everything than to try to figure it out in everything. **Neem Karoli Baba** (1900–1973), *North Indian mystic*

You were born with wings, why prefer to crawl through life? **Rumi** (1207–1273), *Sufi mystic and poet*

It’s my duty to see that they get the truth; but that’s not enough, I’ve got to put it before them briefly so that they will read it, clearly so that they will understand it, forcibly so that they will appreciate it, picturesquely so that they will remember it, and, above all, accurately so that they may be wisely guided by its light. **Joseph Pulitzer** (1847–1911), *newspaper publisher*

He who does not take action today is unable to take action tomorrow. *Somali proverb*

A human being is a part of the whole called by us “universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. **Albert Einstein** (1879–1955)

There is something good in all seeming failures. You are not to see that now. Time will reveal it. Be patient. **Swami Sivananda Saraswati** (1887–1963)

Yoga is anything which reveals or reflects the wholeness that we truly are, and the world is anything that makes us feel that we are fragmented, dissected, cut into pieces and out of tune with ourselves. **Krishnananda Saraswati**

Kindness is the language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see. **Mark Twain** (1835–1910), *American author*

If you can’t do great things, do small things in a great way. **Napoleon Hill**, *American author*

In all chaos, there is a cosmos; in all disorder, a secret order. **Carl Gustav Jung** (1875–1961), *Swiss psychiatrist*

Guard your self-control as a precious treasure, for there is no greater wealth in life than this. *Tirukural, verse 122*

Be like a child—clear, loving, spontaneous, infinitely flexible. **Mother Meera**, *Indian spiritual leader*

There is the presence of space enclosed within a pot. When the pot begins to wear away by constant use, only the pot becomes

damaged, not the enclosed space. The self residing in a body is comparable to this space. *Yoga Pada of the Raurava Agama, 2.52*

Above all, don’t fear difficult moments. The best comes from them. **Rita Levi-Montalcini** (1909–2012), *Italian neurobiologist*

When we practice ahimsa, anger will naturally give way, the mind will become clear and will easily be controlled. **Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati** (1894–1994), *Shankaracharya of Kanchi Peedam*

It’s really impossible to quiet down a mind that’s always disturbed, so we need to wisely harness karma; then the mind is controllable. **Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami**, *publisher of Hinduism Today*

One can’t command compassion. Before

compassion comes love. Compassion is the outgrowth of love. Love is the outgrowth of understanding. Understanding is the outgrowth of reason. **Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami** (1927–2001), *founder of HINDUISM TODAY*



DID YOU KNOW?

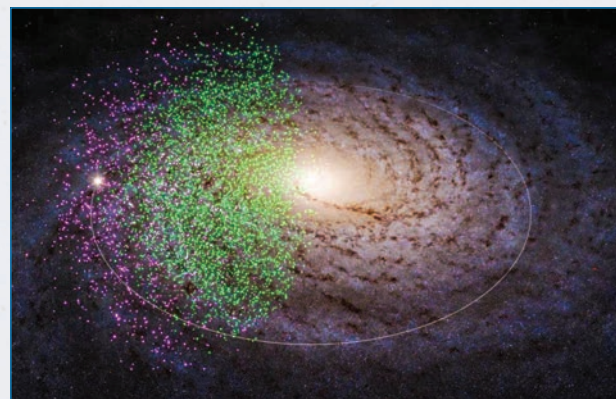
Science Says the Milky Way Contains Siva & Shakti

RECENTLY, THE MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE for Astronomy announced a ground-breaking discovery: remnants of ancient galaxies which are potentially key primordial components of the Milky Way. These remnants have been named “Shiva” and “Shakti,” and are thought to be from two galaxies that merged with an early version of the Milky Way about 12 to 13 billion years ago, significantly contributing to its growth. The discovery, made possible through data from the European Space Agency’s Gaia satellite and the Sloan Digital Sky Survey (SDSS), highlights the galactic equivalent of an ancient settlement expanding into a city.

Galactic collisions are pivotal events that initiate various processes, including star formation, when colliding hydrogen gas becomes unstable. Distinguishing which stars come from which original galaxy after a merger is complex, but fundamental physics

provides clues. Stars maintain specific properties from their original galaxies, such as velocity and direction, making it possible to identify their origins through their energy and angular momentum, both conserved in galactic gravitational fields.

The team’s analysis of Gaia and SDSS data focused on the chemical composition and the energy/angular momentum of metal-poor stars, leading to the identification of two distinct groups. Researcher Khyati Malhan, who named the galaxy remnants, suggested that Shiva and Shakti are likely the early building blocks of the faint stars that were around when our galaxy was young, marking a crucial phase in its evolution into a significant galaxy. This



Seeing stars: a mapping that demonstrates the stars in our galaxy from separate beginnings—shown in purple and green

discovery sheds light on the complex processes behind the formation and expansion of our galaxy, providing a glimpse into its ancient history and the dynamic events that shaped its development.

PUZZLES

Word Search

Instructions: in the word cloud, find and circle the words given below. They might be horizontal, vertical, diagonal or even spelled in reverse.

A	D	S	E	R	I	G	V	E	D	A	Q	D	M	G	X	T	Z	S	U	V	N	H	N	C	K	M	U	C	A
R	U	W	T	U	D	M	J	S	T	Y	Y	Y	U	Y	K	F	N	G	E	R	P	D	O	S	O	Q	N	W	E
I	Y	Y	R	D	G	Y	C	O	D	O	X	X	U	V	Y	F	T	V	I	Y	U	A	T	F	C	J	C	D	S
Y	A	J	U	R	V	E	D	A	G	D	V	D	N	Q	M	L	O	S	S	J	N	G	H	K	I	Q	U	Y	G
S	A	I	H	A	Y	Z	I	A	M	R	A	H	D	A	W	S	R	X	Q	U	Q	V	Y	T	R	X	V	P	I
Q	D	V	M	K	J	H	H	P	L	H	I	Q	B	O	Z	A	J	R	W	A	O	E	U	L	R	K	B	Q	P
Z	V	A	D	S	K	H	D	P	T	V	A	C	C	L	P	C	M	L	P	V	Y	Y	R	E	D	P	R	U	F
P	A	J	B	H	A	O	A	H	Z	J	V	G	Q	I	K	E	L	O	E	E	U	U	W	E	P	E	S	H	R
P	R	A	N	A	Y	A	M	A	O	Y	O	A	I	U	Q	Q	W	S	B	D	L	W	R	H	O	Y	U	D	B
W	N	Q	U	Y	J	A	A	K	M	H	A	N	U	M	A	N	X	A	H	S	K	O	M	V	M	E	Y	A	Y
O	A	V	Z	S	A	Y	S	M	S	B	I	E	J	L	O	C	K	R	V	V	L	M	N	E	E	X	D	S	K
K	S	Y	H	A	X	G	A	J	R	L	W	S	N	B	S	K	H	A	U	S	E	K	D	C	M	D	P	T	G
W	H	B	X	P	C	O	T	T	A	A	U	H	U	P	A	N	I	S	H	A	D	D	B	E	L	P	A	F	P
N	R	D	I	A	V	I	Z	D	R	T	K	A	V	M	P	W	O	W	X	L	K	L	A	A	L	R	D	D	T
E	A	I	J	T	R	M	N	M	P	A	Y	M	B	M	W	I	E	A	P	R	U	U	F	N	J	F	Q	X	Z
M	M	F	X	T	A	U	U	S	Y	Y	K	A	N	J	B	J	M	T	X	L	A	A	J	V	T	U	B	G	P
V	A	W	H	N	K	M	I	F	E	O	F	N	O	Q	N	L	T	I	E	V	I	N	W	R	L	A	P	E	D
R	K	A	D	K	Y	R	Y	I	C	C	N	T	N	A	V	A	R	A	T	R	I	T	K	A	H	B	O	I	H
P	A	I	H	Q	X	R	S	J	L	O	S	R	C	W	E	A	P	E	B	I	W	R	I	S	H	I	F	T	F
S	R	O	W	V	U	A	T	I	A	V	D	A	M	Q	L	M	A	X	G	S	F	A	E	F	J	U	Q	V	C

TAPASYA	SARASWATI
MOKSHA	HANUMAN
SWADHARMA	MANDIR
RIGVEDA	RISHI
AYURVEDA	NAVARATRI
ADVAITA	SADHU
VEDANTA	GURU
VARNASHRAMA	KUNDALINI
SAMADHI	DEVA
YAJURVEDA	TIRTHA
RUDRAKSHA	
UPANISHAD	
PRANAYAMA	
BHAKTI	
GANESHA	
MANTRA	
PUJA	
KARMA	
YOGA	
YATRA	



Join Us for Video Visits to Four Dharmic Temples in Los Angeles

These four ten-minute videos capture class visits to a Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and Sikh temple. They were developed by Hinduism Today for use in California sixth and seventh grade social studies classes in which the history of these four Indian-origin faiths is taught. Each visit was hosted by a member or clergy of the temple and approved by the temple management. Through these tours, students learn the basics of the related faiths and experience their sacred spaces.



HINDUISM



JAINISM



BUDDHISM



SIKHISM



Go to the YouTube Playlist: bit.ly/TempleTourPlaylist

FROM ATTI CHUDI Words for Youth

Part one of Saint Auvaiyar's poignant counsel for children

Below are the first 64 of 109 verses from Atti Chudi, a poem by second century bce saint Auvaiyar. Here she offers terse advice for youth, one topic for each letter of the Tamil alphabet.

Let us always respectfully praise the Lord [Ganesha] Who is sitting on the lap of the Lord [Siva] who is wearing a garland of Thiruvaatti flowers.

1. Desire to fulfill dharma.
2. Cool off anger.
3. Do not refuse to give what is possible to give away.
4. Do not prevent acts of charity.
5. Do not boast about your possessions.
6. Do not give up industriousness.
7. Do not despise mathematics and writing.
8. Accepting alms is shameful.
9. Share with the poor before you eat.
10. Live in harmony with the world.
11. Do not discontinue recitation.
12. Do not speak envious words.
13. Do not short-sell the amount of grain given.
14. Do not speak about what you did not see.
15. Bend like the letter "nga" [ந] to do physical labor.
16. Take an oil bath on Saturdays.
17. Speak pleasantly.
18. Do not build a house that is too spacious.
19. Befriend after ascertaining compatibility.
20. Protect your father and mother.
21. Do not forget gratitude.

22. Plant a crop during the proper season.
23. Do not make a living by grabbing others' land.
24. Do not act in an improper way.
25. Do not play with snakes.
26. Sleep on a silk-cotton bed.
27. Do not speak deceitful words.
28. Do not do disrespectful things.
29. Learn when young.
30. Do not forget dharma.
31. Do not oversleep.
32. Give up harsh words.
33. Protecting others is a sacred commitment.
34. Strive to achieve greatness.
35. Give up that which is mean.
36. Do not give up that which is high-minded.
37. Do not become estranged from good friends.
38. Stop disrupting others' lives.
39. Make ongoing efforts to listen to words of wisdom.
40. Do not hold back in teaching a handicraft.
41. Do not desire to rob.
42. Stop playing hoaxes.

43. Give up vilifying others.
44. Follow the laws of the country.
45. Stay in the company of the wise.
46. Do not speak hyperbole.
47. Do not forget to strive for renown.
48. Do not speak angrily.
49. Do not desire to gamble.
50. Everything you do, do it well.
51. Approach a person, ascertain his or her nature and then befriend.
52. Do not wander with insults.
53. Do not be careless when speaking.
54. Do not move through life in an apathetic manner.
55. Move through life so that you are a worthy person.
56. Desire to be charitable.
57. Devotedly serve Lord Vishnu.
58. Give up wrongful actions.
59. Do not bring suffering on yourself.
60. Weigh every action.
61. Do not disrespect God.
62. Live in harmony with your countrymen.
63. Do not eavesdrop on women's conversations.
64. Do not forget ancient times.



KAILAS RAJ



SPECIAL FEATURE

Ram Janmabhoomi

Let the Pilgrimages Begin!

In the sacred land where flows the Sarayu River, Ram Lala has made His divine return after five centuries of exile to His birthplace on the sacred soil of Uttar Pradesh in India. His newly inaugurated grand temple is the summit of devotion, engineering and national pride. It was inaugurated by India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi on January 22, 2024, ushering in a new era of spiritual awakening in Bharat.

Dressed in full regalia, joyous pilgrims carrying offerings of milk in clay pots and celebratory flags crowd the path to the temple



It was early morning in Kathmandu when I received an email from HINDUISM TODAY inviting me to chronicle the splendor of Ram Mandir. I exclaimed, "Jai Shri Ram." With hearts overflowing with devotion, fellow journalist Rajeev Gurung and I embarked on this sacred journey by plane on February 13.

BY NIKKI THAPA, NEPAL

THE CAPTAIN'S VOICE RESONATES through the cabin, heralding our plane's imminent descent into the just-opened Maharishi Valmiki Airport in Ayodhya, and the ambient air vibrates with chants of "Jai Shri Ram, Jai Jai Shri Ram." This vibrant mantra will be our constant companion during our five-day pilgrimage to Lord Ram's Treta Yuga birthplace.

We arrive at the partially constructed temple under the cloak of evening; but it is not too late, since the generous darshan hours extend to 10pm. Immersing ourselves in the throng of devotees from diverse backgrounds, we navigate through crowds busily taking selfies, posting live on social media, or video calling with friends and family back home who couldn't join them this time.

At the pilgrims' entrance, we deposit our shoes at booths arranged alphabetically. Volunteers efficiently deal with the massive influx of pilgrims, accepting shoes from one side of the booth and returning from the other side. A similar system is used at the cloakrooms, where we deposit our belongings—bags, mobile phones, cameras, watches, snacks, and even flowers and prasadam—before joining the *parikrama* route to the temple.

Photography inside the temple premises is strictly prohibited after this entrance. The

ritual circumambulation takes us about forty minutes, starting and ending at the pilgrims' entrance. All the while, the air resounds with jubilant and harmonious chants of "Jai Shri Ram" as we make the procession towards the sanctum for darshan of Ram Lala.

As it is already dark, my ability to appreciate the exteriors, designs and motifs of the temple is limited. However, I note the newly installed statues of a pair of elephants, lions, Garuda, and Hanuman on plinths flanking the temple's entrance stairway to the small and newly completed Chowki Samran. This is the first of five progressively larger or-nately roofed halls leading up to the as yet unfinished main towering *shikhar* (pinnacle) over the sanctum sanctorum or *garbha griha* ("womb chamber"), which houses the main



INSTAGRAM

Deity.

A serene granite murti of Lord Ram presides at the heart of the shimmering garbha griha. To our right is the Kirtan Mandap, Hall of Music, resonating at the moment with soul-stirring Carnatic *kirtana*, devotional songs composed by South Indian classical musician Shri Tyagaraja (1767-1847), offered by the musicians of Kerala. This is part of "Shri Ram Raag Seva," a magnificent 45-day festival of music initiated on January 26, 2024, five days after the historic inauguration day.

In the moment, as I behold the Deity from afar (approximately 30 feet), the surrounding chants seem to fade into the distant murmur, leaving me to only hear myself chanting prayers for my family. From that distance, I try to discern whether the visage of Ram Lala bears any resemblance to the reclining Vishnu of Budhanilkantha Temple in Kathmandu, as my mother believes. To my eyes, it indeed does.

According to Dinesh Chandra, patron of Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the temple was only 10% ready at the time of the inauguration, with the remaining 90% of construction anticipated to extend over the coming year. We appreciate his optimism, but it looks like much more than a year's work

.....
First impressions: (left) view of the Deity in one of the few photos we could find taken inside the temple—and yes, that is actress Priyanka Chopra and her daughter; (below left to right) architectural drawing of the temple; a secondary marble statue of Ram Lala destined for its own shrine; devotees stream down Ram Janmabhoomi path, the main entry route

Ram's Black Granite Murti

THE 51-INCH Ram Lala murti (right) is regally attired on *pran prathistha* day in a Banarasi dhoti and a stole, richly adorned with pure golden threads, featuring Vaishnava symbols—conch, chakra, lotus flower and peacock. He wears a jewel-encrusted gold crown, large earrings and *kantha* (a crescent-shaped neck piece), along with the regal lavalier studded with a large ruby *kaustubha mani*, the five-stranded diamond and emerald necklace called *padika* on His chest, and the *vijaya mala* or victory pendant. More jewel-encrusted ornaments include massive bangles, waistband, toe rings and gold anklets.

A *tilaka* embellished with diamonds and rubies marks Ram Lala's forehead, while His feet are beautified with a lotus design, beneath which sits a gold garland. Later, silver toys including a rattle, a horse, a toy cart and a spinning top were placed before the Divine Child. Just below His feet is the original small statue of Ram. A golden umbrella crowns His nimbus, adding to the aura of divinity. Vishnu's ten avatars, Hanuman and Garuda are carved on the black granite arch surrounding the murti. Here Prime Minister Narendra Modi and RSS head Mohan Bhagwat make official offerings on the consecration day.

The intricate ornaments for Ram Lala were crafted by Harsahaimal Shaimal Jewelers and certified by the International Gemological Institute. They blend gold with precious stones including diamonds, rubies, emeralds and pearls, following extensive research into sacred text and under the guidance of Champat Rai, Vice-President of VHP.

The jewelry is a display of the meticulous efforts of 131 artists over 15 days to honor the Deity's majesty. That very short time schedule was because the ornaments could only be made after the final murti had been chosen. Initially the temple trust had chosen the white marble Ram Lala by Rajasthani artist Satyanarayan Pandey, which would be typical of a North Indian temple, but at the last minute switched to this one for its durability.



10

The Child Rama's New Home



TATA CONSULTING ENGINEERS LIMITED



Tens of Thousands of Devotees Arrive Daily



NIKKI THAPA

lies ahead for the temple. Three towering cranes, removed for the dedication, are back in place now. And what to say of the rest of the 68-acre site! But his determination is evident. "Our years of *tapas* (austerity) have borne fruit. Our Hindu brothers were chased, beaten and arrested for it, but we are witnessing this historic moment now."



Dinesh Chandra

In the *Ramcharit Manas*, Saint Tulsidas says there is no suffering and distress in Ram Rajya, literally "under the reign of Lord Rama." That society is perfectly based on virtue, morality and justice. The construction of Ram Mandir, according to Dinesh, is the first step towards the Ram Rajya.

Now let us begin our tale of this magnificent creation with the story of the central Deity, Lord Rama as a five-year-old boy.

Murti of Shri Ram Lala

The murti of Ram Lala (page 21) is in a standing posture, a masterful creation 51 inches tall weighing 3,000 pounds. Sculpted from a single block of black granite, it arrived at its eternal abode in Ayodhya just five days before the consecration ceremony, amid fervent prayers and rituals.

This murti was crafted by the skilled hands of Mysuru-based sculptor Arun Yogi-raj, who has a family background of five generations of famous sculptors. It captures His innocent divinity and kingly aura with unparalleled grace. He holds a golden bow and arrow, signaling His readiness to vanquish *adharma*, unrighteousness. He has lotus eyes, as described by scriptures, allowing devotees

to gaze into the depth of compassion and wisdom. Adorned with lavish gold and jewels, the murti reflects the royal lineage of Lord Ram, embodying His sovereignty and divine power.

The ancient original murti of Ram, which had been housed in a tent for an extended period, now stands positioned below the newly enshrined one. This statue

measures just five to six inches in height, making it inconspicuous from a distance of 30 feet. Hence the decision was made to opt for a larger statue, ensuring its visibility and prominence in the sacred space.

Because of its youthful innocence, divine presence and royal demeanor, the temple trust authorities selected Arun's creation unanimously over two other murtis by equally skilled carvers from Rajasthan and Orissa. The other two, a black stone statue carved by sculptor Ganesh Bhatt and a white marble one sculpted by Satyanarayan Pandey, await their final placement within the temple complex.

Arun had procured the three-billion-year-old rock for chiseling the Ram Lala statue from Ramdas H, a venerable 70-year-old Dalit farmer residing in the Gujgewodanapura village near Mysuru in Karnataka State. The stone is Krishna Shila or black schist, with a dark blue tint—very much as Krishna is often depicted. Overflowing with joy, Ramdas deemed it a blessed occurrence that a stone block from his land became a chosen

material for the revered murti. According to him, Yogiraj selected additional stones from his property to sculpt the temple's murtis of Bharat, Lakshman and Shatrughna. In a triumphant gesture, Ramdas declared his intent to donate one acre of land to facilitate the construction of the Ram Temple in Mysuru. Surprisingly, he was not invited to the events of January 22.

"Now, talking about the murti of Shri Ram Lala," explains **Durga Prasad Gautam**, one of the *mukhya acharyas* (main priests) of the Ram Mandir, "we don't have the tradition of

making black granite murtis in North of India, only white marble, but it appears to have been Shri Ram Lala's wish that He manifest in black granite, so that is how He came in the form of a five-year-old boy."

Rajkumar Temabre, a pilgrim from Gondia district, Maharashtra, leading a group of 150 pilgrims from Vidarbha, describes the darshan as an unforgettable moment of his life: "It is a dream come true for all of us, all the sacrifices that my ances-



Durga Gautam

.....
Plan and progress: (clockwise from upper right) view from east of complete plan; pilgrims Kailash Parmar (left) and Nita Mamtara; construction as of April; Prana Pratishtha dedication ceremony; pilgrims having darshan at the Hanuman Garhi Temple a mile from the temple; drone photos (youtu.be/x74B7gaXzAk) from April 4 showing pilgrims streaming in and out of the temple.

tors made for 500 years, the constant struggles and our brothers who gave up their lives for Ram Mandir, all these dreams have now come true."

The Ongoing Construction

In recreating the original temple, there was little to go on from the past. The archeological excavations following the destruction of the masjid definitely indicated the prior existence of a temple about 200 feet long in the north-south direction, but there was little information about its construction.

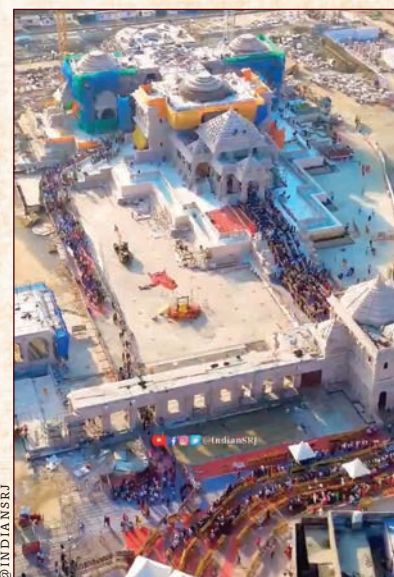
The new Ram Janmabhoomi temple, being built in a traditional Nagara style, spans over 380 feet in length and 250 feet in width, and will rise to a majestic height of 161 feet. A compound wall or *parkota* encloses the immediate seven-acre area. At the four inside corners of the wall will be mandirs dedicated to Surya Deva, Devi Bhagwati, Ganesha and Shiva. Two more, to Annapurna and Hanuman, will be located along the wall.

Looking at the 3D view of the architectural layout prepared by Tata Consulting Engineers (page 20), the temple is a three-story monument with each floor measuring 20 feet high. The ground floor is supported by 160 pillars, the first floor by 132 and the second by 74. There are 44 doors in total. The temple complex is accessed on the eastern side by ascending 32 stairs to the main temple platform and then through the Chowki Samran, the temple's entrance tower. This then leads to the five halls, one each for dance, theater, assembly, prayer and songs. The 400-square-foot sanctum sanctorum, at the western end, is topped by the 161-foot-tall shikhara tower.

As Dinesh Chandra mentioned, the work



Pilgrims's Darshan Route



The Grand Plan Is Quickly Manifesting Itself



on the temple is yet to be accomplished. As of February 2024, most of the work has been completed on the entry point on the eastern outer wall and the temple's five halls, but only the central sanctum chamber is fully finished. He said the temple was only 10% finished as of now. Temporary structures resembling the final towers were installed for the dedication, but these have since been removed and the giant cranes set up again beside the temple. It is a vast construction zone. Amidst this progressive chaos, the finished pillars and walls that have risen so far are adorned with intricate-

ly sculpted depictions of Hindu Deities and celestial angels of Lord Indra. The laborers in their yellow and blue helmets are a common sight—navigating the scaffolding with expertise, skillfully carving motifs into sandstone pillars, slicing through stone slabs and stacking them, maneuvering cranes to erect roof structures, and so on. This bustling construction site goes on behind the makeshift boundary of advertisement billboards, a physical barrier wall between the construction site and the carpeted walkway path used by pilgrims exiting the temple after darshan through the southern door. The ecstatic devotees, immersed in post-darshan bliss, seem to traverse the disorderly construction site with ease, largely unconcerned with the ongoing construction and its optimistic timeline.

The historic event that has unfolded with



the construction of the temple in the sacred city of Ayodhya is a testament to the fusion of ancient tradition with modern science to ensure the temple's longevity and significance for generations to come. Top Indian scientists have been integral to the construction since its inception. The temple is designed to withstand a 2,500-year-return-period earthquake, as rigorously tested and confirmed by the Central Building Research Institute.

The foundation, constructed with a 46-foot-thick layer of roller-compacted concrete, stabilizes the temple in an area of otherwise unstable sandy ground beside the Sarayu River. Tens of thousands of bricks inscribed with "Shri Ram," prepared by thousands of devotees, were ceremonially included in the foundation. The temple itself is made from natural stone and not bricks.

The construction also eschews the use of

steel or iron. Instead, it relies on Bansi Paharpur pink sandstone, granite and mirzapur stone to ensure durability and adherence to traditional practice. Makrana marble, renowned for its purity and durability, adds to the temple's splendor, covering nearly 50,000 square feet of the sacred structure.

The temple's design incorporates environmental and water conservation principles. Seventy percent of the seventy-acre area has been designated as green space, reflecting a holistic approach to spiritual and environmental well-being. There is a commitment to ac-

cessibility and inclusivity, with provisions such as ramps and lifts ensuring that the disabled and elderly can partake in divine experience.

Fifteen years ago, Ashok Singhal (1926-2015), international working president of the VHP, who was in charge of the Ayodhya Ram Janmabhoomi movement, had a visionary dialogue with Larsen & Tourbro regarding the construction of the Ram Mandir, a project then estimated at US\$214 million, to be paid for entirely by public donations and not government funds. As mandated by Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, L&T is constructing the temple in adherence to the traditional Indian style. In alignment with the ambitious project, renowned architect Chandrakant Sompura, who has designed and built more than 200 temples, has brought this architectural vision to fruition.

To realize this monumental masterpiece a dedicated workforce of nearly 1,200 individuals, including engineers, supervising staff and daily workers from within and beyond Ayodhya, labor in two 12-hour shifts. The new temple embodies the collective spirit and devotion of millions.

The Pilgrims

"Ram Bhaktas across the globe have converged in Ayodhya," states Acharya Gautam. Over our five-day sojourn, we observe a steady surge in devotees. Pilgrims hailing from diverse corners of India and even Nepal flock to partake in the sacred darshan every day.

Ram Janmabhoomi Path, the main road to the temple, is adorned with a multitude of devotees spanning all of India's religious traditions, walks of life and age groups, draped in saffron scarves symbolizing devotion to Ram, decked in their regional attire and ornaments, some complemented by traditional scarves and the revered "Sri Ram" tilaka adorning their forehead. The picturesque tableau is embellished with triangular flags bearing prints of Ram or Hanuman gracefully fluttering at shops on both sides of the road.

Along the wide road, long blessing threads dance in the wind, occasionally brushing against the faces of passersby. These are offered to God first, then worn around the wrist or neck for protection. The sweet shops, eateries, fresh juice stalls, complimentary tea and food stalls, souvenir shops, etc., are op-



erating at full capacity. Devotees are engaged in lively haggling to acquire God posters, miniature models of Ram Mandir, and medicinal sanjivni buti grass (useful for treating dehydration). Many are marking their forehead with tilakas or indulging in moments of tranquility, sipping tea, relishing star fruit, queueing up for complimentary meals or finding repose on the road dividers. A star fruit vendor, Gautam Sonkar, says business has gone up significantly. "I am making \$5 to \$6 per day, enough for us to make ends meet. We are very happy."



Narendra Vane

Devotee **Narendra Vane**, 75, a retired teacher from Nasik, expresses his joy: "There is no second Ayodhya in this universe, how lucky are we to witness this historic event of

Prana Pratishtha." He recollects how he came to Ayodhya in the 90s as a Karsevak—a volunteer of the VHP determined to reclaim the temple site. He asserts, "For centuries, the Babri Masjid on the spot of Shree Ram Janambhoomi was a dark stain on the name of Hindu Dharma. But now the day has come when every Hindu can walk with his head held high. It is a proud moment for all of us."

It's a tradition that pilgrims must first pay respect to Bal Hanuman at Hanuman Garhi, then go to the Ram Temple and end the evening at the Sarayu riverbank. At dusk, Ram ki Paidi, a series of ghats along the River Sarayu, transforms at night into a radiant, floodlit spectacle as stories of *Ramayana* are narrated followed by videos of other important pilgrimage sites in Uttar Pradesh, such as Kashi Vishwanath.

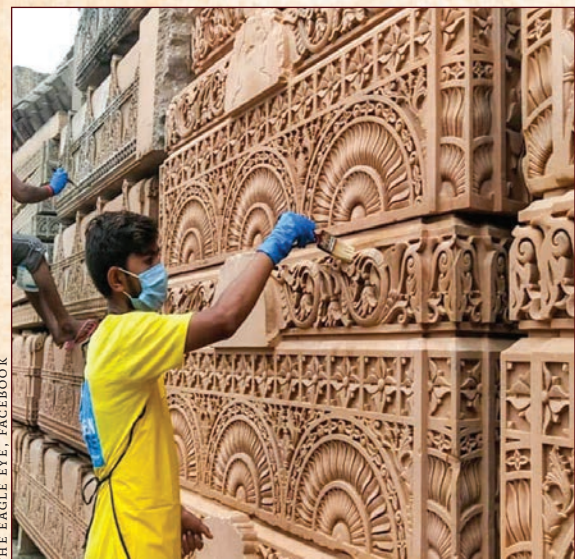
Handling the Crowds

The priority of the Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra is to meticulously organize the pilgrimage experience for all devotees. There are distinct queues, security checks (twice) and facilities for depositing belongings. Saffron-clad bamboo railings up to the temple entrance demarcate the regular and fast-track queues. Notably, the fast-track is not exclusively for VIPs; it is also accessible to devotees who arrive without the possessions (cell phone, bags, etc) which must be left at the first security checkpoint. They then need only pass through the second security check. VIPs and the disabled and elderly can en-

Dedication to Ram Comes in Many Forms



(Clockwise from top left): street vendors along Ram Janmabhoomi path; planner points out Lord Rama's birthplace on an old map of Ayodhya from the archives of the erstwhile royal family of Jaipur—it was most useful during the long court case; Rajkumar Tembre's group from Godia district in Maharashtra; craftsman works on intricately carved stone wall; Renjit C. Thalavoor, who cycled 1,550 miles barefoot from Rameshwaram to Ayodhya



Devotees Come from Across India and Nepal



joy the privilege of Sugam (“easy”) Darshan, obtaining free passes through online registration. After all, the presence of a VIP can itself result in chaos, and the elderly and disabled need to be accommodated. This service, operational from 7am to 9pm, provides a convenient avenue for elderly devotees and those less familiar with technology to secure passes from the temple trust office. At the Ramayana Hotel, we encounter VIPs who have made Sugam Darshan bookings, including Indian actor Pankaj Dheer, renowned for portraying the role of Karan in the Hindu epic series *Mahabharata*.

Dr. Sunil Kohde, a pilgrim from Nagpur, marvels at the diverse gathering of devotees in Ram Nagari, reminiscent of the inclusive realm of Lord Ram. While he appreciates the emerging spirit of equality and brotherhood among the pilgrims, he also humbly questions the need for separate queues for VIPs and commoners. Dr. Kohde emphasizes, “All visitors must be treated equally. Aren’t we all equal to our Lord?”

A Nepali pilgrim from Ghaziabad (India) echoes Kohde’s feelings: “The temple committee seems indifferent to the sacrifices that ordinaries like us have made over the years for the construction of the temple. As a diabetic patient, I almost fainted while standing in the scorching heat while VIPs, arriving in their AC cars, cut the line and enjoyed the privilege of darshan first.” However, her mood brightens when asked about darshan. She laughed and shared, “I forgot all my sufferings when I saw Him and continuously chanted ‘Ram Lala, Ram Lala.’”

We didn’t aim for Sugam Darshan but rather one of the three aarti slots: Shrin-

gar Aarti at 6:30am, Bhog Aarti at noon and Sandhya Aarti at 7:30pm. But these are fully booked for the next 15 days, with only 30–40 devotees permitted at a time.

We encounter people from Nashik, Gujarat, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Kerala, Jharkhand, Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and even fellow Nepalese from the Dang district of Nepal, all pilgrimaging in big groups—100 to 1,500 at a time—making an arduous 30-hour journey on buses or trains to pay homage to God Ram. More than 200 “Aastha special trains” run by the Indian Railways after the Ram Temple consecration ceremony are seamlessly bringing pilgrims to Ayodhya from cities and towns of more than 50,000 across India.

Desikan Narayanan, a writer-columnist from Bengaluru, remembers a prior visit to Ayodhya: “We had to traverse the flooded, labyrinthine alleys of Ayodhya barefoot to reach the temple, and it broke our hearts to see our Lord in a shabby little shelter. It is a normal practice in India, when one visits a temple, to ask for one’s *manokansha* (wish) to be granted; but when we were visiting Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Temple in 2017, I had a feeling that we were all praying for our Ram Lala, we all wanted to see our Ram Lala back in His glory, back in His temple. Now the city has a new face and has little in common with the past.”

Pilgrim Accommodations

There are separate “tent cities” designated for luxury travelers and other pilgrims. The former receive a premium experience at a comfortable heritage stay. Those of lower economic status receive basic accommodations and meals. We visit the Panchavati fa-

cility at Karsevak Puram. Its simple buildings of galvanized tin sheets are adorned with depictions of Lord Ram’s tales on the walls. Each large room has mattresses, pillows and blankets, with separate accommodations for men and women. Meals are prepared at the Sita Rasoi kitchen twice a day, complemented by tea and snacks in the morning and evening. Once registered, a visitor has a 48-hour window to dwell in the facility.

For security, CCTV cameras are strategically placed throughout the facility. “Other facilities scattered around the city mirror the features we experience here in the Panchavati facility,” says Mohit Singh, our VHP contact. “As of now, all the facilities, catering to 25,000 devotees daily, will be operational for two months, but the duration is flexible if the growing number of devotees persists.”

One pilgrim registering at Panchavati is Renjit C. Thalavoor, a retired army officer from Kerala, who embarked on a 25-day pilgrimage covering approximately 1,550 miles, from Rameswaram to Ayodhya, all barefoot on a cycle. He enthusiastically shares, “I commenced my yatra on the Prana Pratishtha day of Ram’s temple.” Despite just completing the journey, he seems not tired. With a cheerful grin, he shares his experiences and life values, pausing occasionally for photos upon request from other visitors. For Renjit, the journey was a joyful picnic; he was relishing meeting people en route, as he saw Ram in all of them. “Actually, I did it as a *tapasya* (penance), but to my surprise, it turned out to be the best journey of my life, by Lord Ram’s grace.”

Here we also meet Gomti and Kuldeep Saut, a medical duo mobilized by Sri Satya Sai Sanjeevani Hospital in Chattisgarh. The hospital

has deployed around fifty staff across Ayodhya to provide first aid to patients, be it injuries or minor sickness. “The most common problems we are treating are food poisoning and dehydration,” says Gomti. Kuldeep adds, “Clearly, there are not enough stalls of drinking water in and around the temple.”

Another character we encounter is Pyare Lal, driving an orange scooter with his six-foot-tall friend dressed as God Hanuman. They had left Jharkhand with just \$30. “When I went to the temple for darshan of

tain cleanliness in every nook and corner of the city.

The New Ayodhya

The genesis of Ayodhya’s transformation can be traced back to the land dispute involving Babri Masjid mosque, which was built in the 16th century by the Mughal emperor Babur. Hindu groups claimed the mosque was constructed on the birthplace of their God

Ram. A series of legal battles and communal tensions led to the demolition of the mosque in 1992, sparking widespread riots across India which claimed 2,000 lives, mostly of Muslims. A 2019 Supreme Court ruling allowed the construction of the Ram Janmabhoomi Temple at the site.

Manoj Varma, regional head of the VHP at Karsevak Puram headquarters here told

of his personal journey to this point: “This is a temple of universal significance that was under attack for centuries. I saw the day when our Ram Lala was locked up in a little shelter. I have seen police brutality and firing on people. I saw the day the Masjid was demolished in 1992. Now I have seen the day of Prana Pratishtha of Ram Lala, a matter of pride for Hindus all over the world. We will soon see a day when Ayodhya is the cultural capital of India.”

Shujaat Hussain, managing trustee



Shujaat Hussain

of Waqf Mosque Nawab Hasan Raza Khan Chowk Faizabad, supports the Supreme Court’s decision: “To begin with, Babri Masjid was never an important mosque for Muslims in general. Most of the mosques from the Mughal era have lost their religious significance. In addition, the tenets of Islam mention that prayer cannot be offered on a disputed

land. The legal restrictions on the land discouraged us from going there to pray.” Therefore, on behalf of the Muslim community, he wholeheartedly accepts the decision of the honorable Supreme Court in the Babri Masjid–Ram Mandir matter.

A more cynical viewpoint is expressed by Dheeraj Muktikami, a social activist from Ayodhya: “Devotion or mere politics?” He claims that Ram Mandir is a platform used by the Bharatiya Janata Party to campaign for the upcoming elections in April 2024. “It

will be foolish to pretend politics have no role to play in this. All of this is a part of the political strategy and nothing else.”

Since the Bhumi Puja in 2020, Ayodhya has bustled with frenetic construction of hotels to accommodate the tens of thousands of pilgrims. The extensive makeover, part of a \$3.85 billion overhaul, is set to transform the cityscape with a new airport and

a massive railway station, both modeled after the Ram temple, and expanded roads, especially crucial routes leading to the sacred site.

Ravi Prakash Sharma is a former truck



Ravi Sharma

Minimalist Shelters Provide Basic Accommodations



Demolition and Construction Continue at a Rapid Pace

(left to right) Pyare Lal and his six-foot-tall friend dressed as Hanuman; minimalist free pilgrim accommodations; (inset) a room inside the sheds; ongoing demolition is removing many homes for which owners feel they are not duly compensated; new housing for pilgrims.



driver who now navigates the streets leading to the temple on his e-rickshaw. Our driver for the next four days, Sharma said a divine boon along with Lord Ram's return has been bestowed upon the city. Hailing from a lineage of farmers, he confidently attests to the wave of economic prosperity that has swept over his life and the entire populace of Ayodhya.

The city hums with the workers toiling tirelessly round the clock to erect infrastructures, lay sidewalks, demolish houses to make room for corridors leading to the temple, paint bridge walls, manage sewers and so on, leaving no stone unturned to ensure the city's economic resurgence. Jai Yadav, a regular visitor for the past 10 years from Mathura, the birthplace of Lord Krishna, marvels at the city's transformation over a mere span of two years. He says, "It's a monumental shift in Ayodhya's fortunes."

Ayodhya is the city resuscitating and rising from the shadows of its past legends and glory. Its economic transformation has also triggered reverse migration as the price of land has skyrocketed. Natives are returning to start businesses or as labor workers in their hometowns. Some, like Sharma, take out a loan to buy an e-rickshaw and acquire a driver's license to ferry pilgrims to the sacred sites.

The Price of Success

Yet, these rapid development projects have

also taken a toll on the local population. Over 3,000 residences and commercial establishments have been razed, partially or completely, to make way for the pilgrims' corridor, leaving the local community ensnared in a dichotomy of progress and loss. Rajeev and

I are witnesses to a demolition spree, particularly near railway junctions. The place is a wreck. Ram Janmabhoomi Path was once wrecked, too, but was refurbished and ready just in time for the inauguration.

The displaced families in the area received a paltry compensation of about \$2,400, which scarcely covered the loss of their homes. Authorities cannot comprehend that they lost not just a roof above heads or floor underneath feet, but a heritage.

Many houses here still exist in a partially demolished state. We meet a deeply disappointed **Manish Gupta**, 32, who is coated in dust while clearing debris from the ruins of his family home of four generations. Grievingly, he speaks extensively to Rajeev. "My father was actively involved and injured during the Karseva movement in the early 90s. He could have never envisioned that his allegiance to the cause would render his progeny homeless." Gupta pointed at the untouched big houses across the street, arguing the demoli-

tion in the name of development permeating Ayodhya has only impacted ordinary citizens. "What kind of development is this? Who is this development for? For wealthy business houses coming from the big cities? For the people with political influence? This is certainly not for us."

Amidst this upheaval, we meet a snack vendor selling *litti chokha* (stuffed wheat balls) whose stall is next to Manish's broken house. A migrant worker from Bihar state, he says his earnings doubled over last year. His good fortune illustrates the varied impact of Ayodhya's transformation across different strata of society.

Champat Rai envisions Ayodhya as a nexus of culture, religion and spirituality in India. He assures, "The whole world will come to Ayodhya to recharge their energy. It is the power station. For all the devotees, Ayodhya is Moksha Nagari; the city that liberates humans from the cycle of birth and death."

The Uttar Pradesh government's assurance of thoughtful urban planning states a design philosophy inspired by global and domestic temple towns like Vatican City, Jerusalem, Cambodia, Tirupati and Amritsar. The team of C. P. Kukreja Architects designed the implementation strategy and the integrated infrastructure plan for the city, aiming to foster a harmonious blend of modernity and

tradition. The plans incorporate sustainable practices to create a model solar city, with additional attractions around the temple such as a heritage walk, insights into Vedic civilization and the development of a wedding city.

District authorities claim that the carefully designed modern infrastructure will ensure that the developments do not compromise the historical and cultural character of the city. But this vision of national progress is marred by the sacrifices of many like Gupta, whose pleas for fairness seem lost amidst the clamor for developments.

But for many who faced unhappiness during the initial stages of redevelopment, having lost properties, their sentiments are gradually turning positive as business thrives. Sellers of flags, sweets, fruits, tea and eateries and tilaka painters express contentment. Notably, there are fewer flower sellers at Hanuman Garhi, as no flowers are allowed inside the Ram Temple. I hope there will be a return of Muslims who originally sold flowers at temples in the city. As Ayodhya strides into future development, it is imperative that its developments touch the lives of Muslims, too, as they are a community integral to Ayodhya's cultural fabric who seem to have been sidelined in the name of development.

Ayodhya envisions itself as a global spiritual and cultural tourism destination, anticipating a daily footfall of two to three hundred thousand. Within a month of its opening, the temple has amassed impressive

donations of 22 pounds of gold, 55 pounds of silver and \$3 million in monetary contributions. The substantial donations underscore the transformative impact the temple will have on the city and the nation.

Conclusion

As Hindus, Rajeev and I are deeply grateful to HINDUISM TODAY for this opportunity to visit the temple, which has offered not just a chance for darshan but also a profound way to connect to the temple's history, its present agendas and promises for the future.

Rajeev remarks that Ayodhya is a special place where Lord Ram manifested and continues to live, where episodes of our Lord's life are interwoven in the narrow alleys of the city, inherent in every grain of sand in the banks of the river Sarayu. Thus the stories such as, "this is where Ram walked down with brother Lakshman, where he took ritual baths in the Ram ki Paidi," "this is where Sita cooked meals in the Sita ki Rasoi"—we feel like they make us a part of our *ithi-hasa*, history. They make us live it in many tangible and intangible ways.

There was a yearning built up in both our hearts for many years to have a darshan of Shri Ram. This journey has made us go through a whole gamut of emotions, from seeing the reigning Deity in the sanctum to crossing paths with overwhelming numbers of Ram Bhaktas from all corners of the world.

Sri Rama Rama Rameti, Rame Raame Manorame means, "By meditating on the name of Rama, my mind gets absorbed in the divine consciousness of Rama, which is transcendental."

In Ayodhya, we have discovered the joy of chanting "Sri Rama Namam" that fills our heart with love and devotion. The echoes of a full throated "Jai Shri Ram," make our hair stand on end, make us want to surrender ourselves to Him and transpose us to another world, a world of our Lord.

We are eagerly looking forward to the moment we can witness the temple in all its completed glory. However, what holds greater significance for me is the principle of inclusivity, the Ram Rajya, kingdom of Ram, that Mahatma Gandhi imagined—where everyone living in Ayodhya, regardless of caste or creed, stands to benefit from the remarkable transformations that the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Temple brings into their lives.



Manish Gupta



Champat Rai



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Ram's Nepalese "In-Laws" Bring Gifts to Ayodhya

For the people of Janakpur, Nepal, Shri Ram is not just a Deity but also a cherished son-in-law who married Goddess Sita of Nepal in the Treta Yuga. The premier poet of Nepal, Shri Bhanubhakta Acharya (1814–1868), in his popular Nepalese translation of the *Ramayana*, sings how brilliantly Janakpur was decked in jewels, flowers and lights when Shri Ram arrived to wed Janaki (Sita), the daughter of King Janak. Thus this holy matrimony between Janakpur in Nepal and Ayodhya in India is not new. The practice of intermarriage across the border is still prevalent. This is a part of rich interwoven tapestry of cultural and socio-economic exchange, often referred to as a "Roti-Beti" relationship ("bread and daughter"—i.e., a multi-purpose marital alliance) that goes back to the Treta Yuga.

The construction of the Sri Ram Janmabhoomi Temple and consecration ceremony brought immense joy to Nepalese Hindus that matched the fervor seen in India. Janaki Mandir, the temple dedicated to Goddess Sita, was adorned with flowers in honor of the Ram Mandir consecration ceremony on January 22, 2024. The sacred place glowed with the brilliance of 125,000 oil wick lamps (above left), illuminating the temple precincts during a spectacular aarti dedicated to Sita-Ram. The jubilant celebrations extended to eight districts in Madhesh province bordering

India, drawing thousands of devotees from nearby regions to partake in the celebration.

Continuing a long-standing tradition, 300 residents of Janakpur, Sita's birthplace, prepared *gharbasak bar*, or housewarming gifts, including jewelry, utensils, clothing and sweets, arranged in specially crafted bamboo baskets—3,000 gifts in all. A 500-strong sacred procession of trucks and cars (above center) traversed through



Jaleshwarnath, Malangawa, Simraungadh, Gadhimai, Birgunj in Nepal and Betiah, Kushinagar, Siddharth Nagar and Gorakhpur of India. They arrived in Ayodhya to ceremoniously hand over the gifts to the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Mandir Trust two weeks before the consecration ceremony.

A year prior, Nepal had gifted two Shaligram boulders, 26 (above right) and 14 tons, to Ayodhya for crafting the temple statue.



Shaligram, representing Lord Vishnu's formless Swaroop and retrieved from the riverbeds of Kali Gandaki River, holds paramount importance. The stones arrived in February 2023. Though inherently sacred, neither was found suitable for technical reasons. Consequently, the temple committee opted not to fashion a murti out of either but decided to allocate a permanent place for them within the temple vicinity once the construction is complete.



PILGRIMAGE

I Surrendered to Kailash's Embrace

How I defied the odds to rapidly prepare for a grueling but liberating trek on foot around the most sacred mountain in the Himalayas

By VIDYA MOHAN, USA

I HAVE NEVER BEEN AN ARDENT DEVOTEE OF Siva. I have never harbored strong aspirations for coming to Mt. Kailash. Yet, on a morning walk in September 2022, I felt a strong urge to go. Maybe it's the subconscious working of many books and podcasts of spiritual seekers, or frustration driven by a lack of spiritual guidance. I hoped in desperation that an escape to these serene Himalayan surroundings would help me find a solution to my spiritual restlessness.

My family received my announcement with shock and laughter. Considering I could not climb a flight of stairs without panting, their concern stemmed from the reality of my fitness, or the lack of it. Also, Tibet had been shut down for tourism over the last few years, and it was unclear when the trek would reopen. The only entry ways into Tibet were through mainland China or via Nepal with a group tourist visa from an agency in Kathmandu. Despite this uncertainty

geopolitical situation, I made a serious plan in March 2023 and paid my advance to Monterosa Travels, which I had shortlisted from my research.

I had resolved to go alone. I yearned for silence, not wanting to be burdened by anyone's safety or comfort. It was a selfish feeling that I wouldn't debate with anyone. I needed to conserve the energy to focus on myself and have a silent conversation with Siva.

Mt. Kailash is the second highest peak in the Kailash range, part of the older Trans Himalayan range. This sacred geography, where the Brahmaputra, Sutlej, Indus and Karnali rivers originate, is dear to Hindus, Jains, Buddhists and Bonpos (people practicing the indigenous Tibetan religion) alike. Since the Kailash range lies in the rain shadow of the Greater Himalayas, it is primarily dry and inhospitable. Out of respect to the sensibilities of the peoples of the subcontinent, climbing Kailash is prohibited, so it is experienced via a *parikrama* or *kora*, a path, around its base.

In the Pacific Northwest where I live, there aren't many mountains that offer hikes at comparable altitudes to Mt. Kailash's kora. I also wasn't a seasoned hiker by any stretch, so with the basic essentials of hiking poles, boots and a hydration pack, I targeted about 2-3 hikes with moderate elevation every week. Plus daily walks of about four miles to build endurance, exercising caution to not exacerbate a recent ankle injury. During these treks, I built focus by inward chanting of slokas of Siva and listening to *Sri Rudram*. When I struggled, I propelled myself to keep moving by visualizing myself by the base of the mountain, hugging it, or sitting by the banks of Lake Manasarovar. These techniques later helped during the actual *parikrama* when despondency and exhaustion took over.

In parallel, I researched lightweight gear, taking inspiration from friends who skied or climbed. The tour agency had committed to providing a duffel bag and a small backpack

The grandeur: (left) Pilgrims depart on the *parikrama* from Darchen base camp; (right) Manasarovar's icy waters lap over Vidya Mohan's rudraksha mala in blessing; (inset) Vidya hikes towards the base of Mt. Kailash behind her

and sent a helpful checklist for packing.

June came quickly, and I found myself in Kathmandu. This friendly, ancient city has a lot of culture that you can experience by visiting the bylanes of Boudhanath or the neighboring city of Bhaktapur. Its crowning glory, however, is the Pashupatinath temple, whose garbhagriha houses a four-faced Mukhalinga. Its sanctity is preserved with Agamic rituals by priests trained at the Sringeri Mutt in Karnataka. I made several visits to sit in the premises and participate in a brilliant arati over River Bhagmati at night.

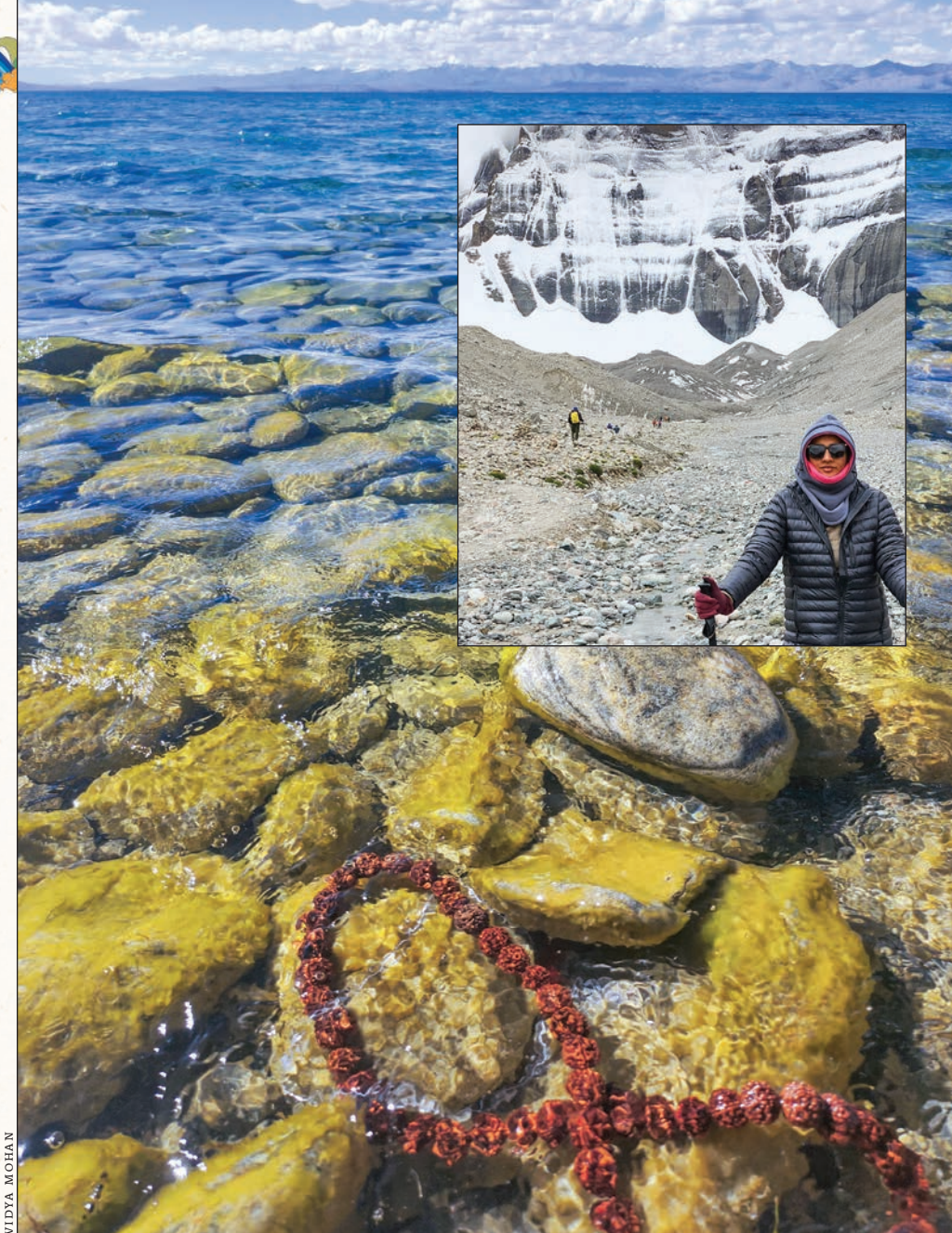
Lhasa's Gonggar airport was still closed, so we used the land-based route that took us through the towns of Kerung and Saga in Tibet. Given the size of our party, our visas were made available a few days after we appeared for biometrics, and we flew to the Nepal border on a clear Friday evening. The border offices were closed for the day, so we stayed at a small hotel in a nearby hamlet called Ghate Khola.

Walking along the roaring Trisuli River, I was moved by the sheer magnitude of the mountains. You don't realize just how vast the Himalayan mountains are until you are there. Then it becomes easier to understand why, for centuries, restless seekers came purposefully to cloak themselves in anonymity, abandoning the comforts of security, warmth, sustenance and familiarity.

The next day we got clearance—after a seven-hour wait at the border and a thorough inspection of our possessions, including cell phones. The buses we boarded were equipped with CCTV, and there would be stops for passport inspection at various points. We looked forward in restless anticipation to reaching the banks of Manasarovar.

We spent that night at a hotel in Kerung and the next day drove towards Saga. At 4,500 meters in altitude, I became dizzy and breathless if I walked at my regular pace. Despite many of us being on Diamox medication, I heard murmurs of headache, nausea and sleeplessness all around. This served as an early warning for us to walk slowly, talk less, eat consistently to energize and drink more liquids. I bought an oxygen canister in Saga in the event of an unlikely emergency.

There were over sixty yatris, pilgrims, in my tour group. Even though we were strangers from different walks of life and ages, we were united by our bhakti for Siva and shared a strong excitement for this pilgrimage. Everyone was aware that they were on a



special journey, perhaps the most meaningful of their entire life. The remoteness and inaccessibility of Kailash, complicated by the associated expenses and health risks, ensured that most people pushed it out towards the end of their lives, when they had fulfilled their dharmic duties towards family. While this reduced their chances of completing the *parikrama*, it ensured that they at least saw and felt the presence of this mountain once in their life, which a million others could not claim.

Lake Manasarovar

The bus arrived at Manasarovar on July 3rd, just 20 kilometers from Mt. Kailash. Our Tibetan guide announced that we were very lucky to have an unobstructed view of the mountain, so we all sprang out of our seats, clambering to leave the bus. The excitement

was palpable as I ran towards the mountain. When the realization hit that this was a futile exercise, I sat down on the sand and closed my eyes. Nearly thirty minutes passed before I became aware of the lake nearby.

The blue water shimmering at a distance was the fabled Manasarovar mentioned in the *Puranas*: waters born out of the thoughts of Brahma, so special that mystical beings from other realms or lokas visit it every night. The roughly elliptical lake is ten miles wide and 16 miles long. Several of us have imagined and yearned for one dip in these alpine waters in our lifetimes, and suddenly it was near me. I could touch it, but not enter. The Chinese government has forbidden entering the lake since 2017, but we were told that we could bathe in its waters provided in buckets inside a makeshift tent the next morning.



Pilgrimage route: (clockwise from above) Mt. Kailash is seen nearby from Dirapuk monastery in Tibet; the monastery serves as an overnight rest stop for pilgrims before walking across to the base of Kailash; the author embraces the mountain in reverence

We were housed in mud huts by the banks and served tea to bring relief to our bodies wearied by the travel and excitement. The lake was more crowded than normal on account of Guru Purnima that day. I was determined to nap and then get up later that night to soak in the moonlight, so I set up multiple alarms on my phone. However, by the unfortunate placement of my cot near the door, I couldn't sleep, so I silently eased out from under my blanket, careful not to wake up the others in the dormitory. There is a strange onslaught of energy in these areas that just keeps one awake, as if priming us to meditate and not waste any moment sleeping. Along with two other yatris, I walked down to the lake where the staff had erected tents for meditation.

The moon shone really bright, overshadowing the stars in the sky. Alerted by a quick movement, I spotted the streak of a shooting star as it dissolved into the horizon. I briefly wondered if some devata had made their entrance on this grand stage. Puddles glistened bright, reflecting the moonlight. I turned off my headlamp, let my eyes accustom themselves to the darkness and felt myself melting into this frame. I occasionally spied a few birds on the vast expanse of the water. For a moment I was jealous of them as they were

lucky to be able to dip and dance on its serene surface with abandon.

Minutes melted into hours. It was now well past midnight, and more yatris began streaming in. I began heading back and looked once again towards the mountain, now barely seeing it, and mentally thanked Siva for bringing me here. What made it special was that my birthday had just dawned by these banks and in His warm embrace—a moment that neither I nor anyone could have planned for in their lifetime.

I barely slept the remainder of the night and woke up with a searing headache. Relentless pain was shooting through in succession, with no relief provided by painkillers or a warm bath by the banks of the lake in a makeshift tent. Several others also slept poorly and suffered the crippling impact of altitude sickness.

I participated partly in the Rudra homam. As the fire smoked up, something the priest said struck me. He asked us when taking sankalpam to focus on ourselves. To focus on the relationship between us and the higher consciousness and not dilute our prayers by inviting family members and friends into our thoughts. We are lucky to be by these banks, he said. When the time is right, our children, spouse, parents and others, too, will make this journey. He also told us to keep our senses open, and not miss absorbing what happens around us. Even the winds have something meaningful to say, he asserted, and we must be ready to listen. For my wearied self, it was a call to focus on the moment. To quiet the ego, grow deeper into silence and surrender to this vastness.



After brunch, I packed my bag in preparation for the next leg of the journey. An important decision at this point was whether we would employ a porter to carry our day pack or hire a pony to ride upon for the parikrama, circumambulation. Considering today's weakened condition, there was no doubt in my mind that I needed a porter. Already several members were calling off the parikrama as the altitude's impact depleted their energies and made it difficult to even walk a few steps without support. The mood was grim and uneasy as we piled into the bus towards Darchen, the base camp.

Day One of Circumambulation

We awoke early the next day and bundled into the bus towards Yama's Gate, a 10' by 10' shrine that is the traditional entry for pilgrims. Porter and pony assignments were made here through lotteries. Tibetans of both genders came in from remote villages to participate. They make a princely sum carrying the bags of yatris. Their petite bodies are endowed with strong lungs and muscles that effortlessly carry several kilograms of weight. I was delighted to learn that one of the Nepalese staff in my crew, Mani, was elected to be my sherpa. This made it easier for me to converse in Hindi.

Mani effortlessly hauled my day pack, which I had nervously overstuffed that morning, and we were ready to begin our four-day journey together. As was the custom in those parts, I executed three circumambulations around Yama's Gate, sought the blessings of the Hindu pantheon of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva for a safe passage, rang the bell above my head and marched through its cluttered gateway, not looking back once.

On the first day, yatris start at the southern side and walk clockwise around to Dirapuk, close to the northern face of Kailash. This was a distance of a little over six miles that could be covered with a gentle amble except for some steep sections at the end. Mani could tell when I had trouble talking and refrained from engaging me in conversation. He became adept at watching my face for any sign of struggle, guiding me to a rock to rest or offering me the water bottle.

The kitchen staff had provided snacks and hot water that morning. This route is accessible by emergency vehicles, and we had to step away once in a while to let them pass. That day would determine how many would continue the circuit. Nestled in the bare mountains, we walked upon sandy trails by the river as it rushed and sprang delightfully on one side. There was no tree cover, so all



bio breaks were executed behind rocks. My throat and nostrils were dry, given the continuous onslaught of the wind. I chided myself for not packing any nasal spray, as the dry nasal lining bled, making it harder to breathe. Occasionally we would encounter a Tibetan tea house that provided an opportunity for us to rest or refill hot water upon payment.

The day stretched on. I took breaks leaning on my poles, as sitting down and getting up felt like more effort. The sharp sound of the rain and hail as it struck against my plastic poncho, interrupted by the heaviness of my breathing, cut off the rest of the world for me. It was difficult to focus on anything beyond my next step. My extremities were getting wet and cold, and I hoped at every turn I would be gifted with a sight of the Dirapuk monastery where we would overnight.

After what seemed like a long day, Mani finally nudged me and pointed to a building across the road. Even though it wasn't far away, it took another 20 minutes to get there. By then the rain came in harder and I was shivering in the cold. More than six hours after I started, I finally dragged myself into the dormitory where we would spend the night. It was directly across from the north face of Kailash, often considered its most beautiful, but that evening it was hidden by a thick cloud cover.

Several were returning to Darchen as their symptoms were concerning. Sleep was still elusive, and I finally slid out of bed at 2am. The weight of the electric heated blankets helped more than the meager warmth they provided. There were no restrooms in the building; we had to walk to a public restroom or use the natural outdoors. Power supply was restricted to a few hours in the evening, so it was very dark. Aided by my headlamp, I gingerly made my way down the

stairs, clutching the railing.

The rain had stopped and the night was quiet. I could see the silhouette of the mountain right outside, nestled against the stars. It felt deceptively close, as if I could reach out and touch its surface, but I knew we were separated by several hours of hiking at the very least. It was a beautiful silence, interrupted briefly by the ebb and flow of thoughts of how the next few days would unfold. Kailash stood still, as if reassuring me with its presence while demanding complete surrender. I smiled and turned back to catch what little sleep I could.

Day Two

The next day, at least 15 of us were ready to walk towards the mountain. We were not certain if we would make it close, as the previous batch were turned back from Dirapuk given the weather conditions. The patches of green on either side of the steep trail were strangely comforting, in contrast to the grayness all around me. Icy water that had just melted off the glacier on Kailash was flowing down in streams. The trail was becoming more slippery and disappeared completely after a point, as the ground gave way to fields of loose gravel. My pole struck a hard surface, and when I pushed against it, I noticed streaks of white dirty ice below the layer of gravel.

The senior guides plowed ahead to see whether we would be able to get close to the mountain. It was a 2.8-mile trek which got harder as we got close to it, and my pace slowed considerably. I reached mounds of ice underneath a thick layer of rocks and sought assistance of two porters to haul me up. I remember feeling desolate as each physical challenge exposed my helplessness.

A light snowfall rendered a magical feel to



Brilliant colors: (left) Gauri Kund lake, referenced in the Puranas; (inset) Buddhist pilgrims do walking prostrations around Mt. Kailash; (below left) Tibetan prayer flags carpet the top of Dolma La Pass, the highest point in the parikrama

in that environment, looking ethereal and inviting. We had reached Gauri Kund, the private bath of Goddess Parvati where she created Ganesha from the sandalwood paste scrubbed out of her body. With around ten miles of trekking left, I was unwilling to take more risks, so I handed my bottle to Mani to climb down to fill with the lake's waters.

After a break, we continued to cross streams and open fields onto the main road. By now we had the comfort of greenery, trees and yaks grazing languidly on the fields. This change in scenery raked in new outcrops of optimism, helping me forget the strain of the last few days. Rain came down in spurts, darkness slowly crept in and the roads became increasingly isolated, separated by an occasional tent or ramshackle farmhouse. Mani was worried that I was getting exhausted and asked if I wanted to rest in a neighboring house. I shook my head. Just as we began wondering if we had lost our way, we came upon the familiar face of a yatri who had journeyed back to check on us, based on our attempts to reach the staff. After nearly 13 hours of walking, I finally bounded into the warm interior of our dormitory in Zuthulphuk, greeted by the kind hospitality of the staff and a pot of hot soup.

Day Four

On the last day of the parikrama, we started trekking in the dark shortly after 5 am. I was very relaxed, as today would require only a few hours of exertion to reach Darchen. There, we would board a bus towards Saga, with a stopover by the river Brahmaputra.

It was an easy amble until Mani quickly stopped and held my pole. We were on a narrow ridge, and my headlamp revealed a line of Tibetan devotees executing full-body

the whole environment. The mountain was right in front of us, beckoning for an embrace. I felt I needed to draw in on its magnetism, so I turned on my phone to play some Siva slokas in a loop while focusing on its speckled surface. As I caught up with other yatri, I could detect the internal struggle of whether to continue on their faces. Some began turning around as the snow became deeper. I could see ahead that one yatri had accidentally sunk his entire leg into the snow. On a pilgrimage such as this, it is hard to know what is correct. Will you be wise and return to safety as you have family who depend on you, or will you lean a little more into insanity. I smiled, as I rewarded my selfishness with every step.

And then suddenly the base of Mt. Kailash came upon me (photo pg. 32). I remember the wide smile of one of the senior guides, Raju, as he held out his hand. My mind can still picture the long icicles dripping water droplets along the edges, loose gravel on rock ledges, a light layer of sand that clung to my hand upon touching its surface, the pristine whiteness and cold of the environment, and the comforting silence. Surprisingly bereft of emotion, I put my head on its surface and made a request to bring me faster on this journey in my next birth. Then I drew my spatika mala,

and chanted the Siva Manasa Puja.

I turned back, thanked the kind crew with a smile for giving me privacy and not rushing what was an experience of a lifetime before heading back. It would be another four hours of trekking at the minimum, but my heart was full with the realization that every day now was a gift from Siva.

Day Three

The next morning before dawn, we started our hike. It would be the most challenging leg—about 14 miles, longer than the first two days combined. The first several miles would be the hardest, ascending to Dolma La Pass, at an elevation of over 18,400 feet. Many yatri had opted to continue on pony

after the strenuous hike the previous day. I was daunted and weakly resolute, and tried to focus on the scenery around me.

The trail was narrow, relentlessly winding its way through boulders placed on a carpet of dull green grass. The wind whistled continuously and blew without restraint over the dry and barren landscape. My breathing got harder and noisier with every step, and I could do no more than a few at a time. It had barely been an hour since we started. I felt something warm on my face and recognized my tears streaming down, bearing testament to my helplessness. Desolation was beginning to spread and draw in on what little energy I had remaining. I could blame no one for this trip as it was entirely my decision. I looked at Kailash in anguish, wondering what more I needed to offer to complete this journey. Clearly, the mountain and its natural environment was much bigger than I am.

As if understanding, Mani handed me my thermos of hot water that I sipped quietly. An elderly Tibetan gentleman came up, paused, flashed his toothless smile and gave me a thumbs up. We couldn't speak each other's languages, but his intention could be sussed out from his weathered, wrinkled, enquiring smile checking on my comfort. I smiled back. Maybe my surrender wasn't

complete, so after I returned my thermos, I held my hand towards Mani. He understood and pulled me up for the next steps. After that I fell into a rhythm of being led by him on most of the harder sections. Looking back, I wonder if, after years of conditioning as a self-proclaimed modern woman, I had forgotten humility and frowned upon seeking help when I needed. Perhaps I still valued my successes as my own, not paying homage to the invisible hands that supported me. I wouldn't know the answer with any degree of certainty.

After several hours we reached Dolma La Pass, the highest point in our parikrama. The ground was covered with a carpet of prayer flags. I saw several Tibetans gazing in respect and solemnity at the embossed messages and pictures around them. Mani let me stay long enough for some photographs before ushering me on, as it was dangerous to be exposed for long to such altitudes. We quickly made a steep descent through some very narrow rocky passages. I was worried about slipping and hurting my ankle, but internally relieved that from now on it would be easier on the lungs. Shortly, we encountered a stunning emerald-blue lake (above), covered partly in ice. It stood out

prostrations in its cavity with no light to guide them. Hands folded in the lotus mudra, they touched the crown on their head, throat and chest and then dropped their body to the ground. Then pulling themselves up, these practitioners of Vajrayana Buddhism ritualistically purified their bodies by paying homage to Gang Rinpoche. This is a common sight throughout the parikrama where Tibetans, even young children, with only aprons and gloves over their attire, would dispense with their karmic accruals by subjecting themselves to this rigorous pilgrimage. When they got tired, they would roll over where they were and rest. What would take them a day by walk would stretch by several weeks if they prostrated at every step. Mani assisted me up above the ridge and we continued.

As dawn broke over the horizon, I joined other yatri walking towards where our bus awaited. We hadn't seen the mountain at all today, so I asked in which direction Mt. Kailash lay, and prostrated on the ground. I may never see it again, but I couldn't leave without thanking Siva wholeheartedly for this opportunity for me to come to Him. Turning around, I thanked Mani who was instrumental in helping me complete the pilgrimage. My words were limited but I hope he understood their sincerity.

Stopping by a hotel for breakfast, I finally called my family. I had cut contact with them for four days so my resolve for completing the parikrama by foot would not be shaken. I would soon share their secure embrace as I returned to the comfort of my world.

Conclusion

Mt. Kailash provides the perfect foil for someone seeking silence or purpose. It may have the trappings of an adventure, but it is not a routine mountaineering experience. It is a pilgrimage inwards to tap into a little bit of the divinity within ourselves. A pilgrimage such as this is meant to be physically hard, so we exhaust, empty ourselves intentionally and work on our internal growth. For those who wish to visit it at least once, I

hope you are able to go early, as this is a physically demanding trip. For those who greatly desired but were unable to make it, I hope my writing and pictures were able to convey the character of this yatra. While this journey demands a confluence of money, fitness, opportunity and a deep longing, the most essential ingredient, in my humble opinion, is that of surrender: humbling oneself before the vast expanse of nature, humbling oneself before Siva so He may bear the responsibility of every step.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vidya Mohan lives in Washington with her husband and two children. She loves walks, books and painting with acrylic. Her blogs can be found at garudabooks.com/blog/ and on her own website, antarprayanam.wordpress.com. Contact her at X@moh_vidya/ or [Instagram/@antarprayanam](https://www.instagram.com/antarprayanam)



ADI SHANKARA



India's Great Spiritual General

❖ Written by Swami Advayananda, Brahmacharini Taarini Chaitanya & Sudarshan Ramabadran ❖ Art by Sasi Edavarada, Gopi Chevayur & Ajithan from Thrissur

BY BRAHMACHARINI TAARINI CHAITANYA

PROSTRATE TO ADI SHANKARACHARYA, AN INCARNATION of Lord Shiva, who is responsible for the welfare of the universe, who is the repository of the Divine Knowledge of *Vedas*, *Upanishads* and texts of the *Purana* and who is the embodiment of compassion.

श्रुतिस्मृतिपुराणानामालयं करुणालयम् ।
नमामि भगवत्पादं शङ्करं लोकशङ्करम् ॥
śrutismṛtipurāṇānām ālayam karuṇālayam,
namāmi bhagavadpadam shankaram
lokashankaram.

There exists no parallel to him, neither preceding nor succeeding his advent. Adi Shankaracharya stands as a unique fusion of seemingly contradictory attributes—a staunch traditionalist and an extraordinary radical, a captivating idealist and a grounded realist, a profound mystic and a pragmatic religious reformer, an unyielding intellectual and a fervent devotee. Within the span of his short life, merely thirty-two years, Shankaracharya accomplished feats that surpass the reach of even the most gifted individuals. His legacy is a synthesis of traditional wisdom and revolutionary thought, seamlessly blending timeless principles with innovative perspectives. His writings not only reflect the diversity of his character but also encapsulate the essence of his transformative vision, contributing significantly to the philosophical and spiritual heritage of humanity. The profound impact he made extends beyond the boundaries of conventional human achievements.

During the era of Adi Shankaracharya, Bharat found itself in a tumultuous period marked by profound philosophical and religious upheavals. A majority of the country's populace had transitioned away from Hinduism towards Buddhism, contributing to a complex socio-religious landscape.

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Across Bharat: The artist shows Adi Shankara walking the length and breadth of India. Much of his life was trekking to the major centers of Hinduism. The footsteps in the art show his known itinerary and stress the four mathas he founded, one each in the North, East, West and South.

Simultaneously, within the Hindu community, internal strife prevailed as various schools of thought engaged in philosophical contention. It was a chaotic period that required brilliant intervention. It was at such a time that Shankara was born.

Shankara's parents, Shivaguru and Aryamba, were childless for many years. With utmost faith in the Lord, they undertook various austerities. On one pilgrimage they visited the Vadakkumnathan Temple in Thrissur, Kerala, propitiating Lord Shiva. That night Shivaguru was blessed with a dream-vision of Shiva. The Lord posed a question: "Would you like to have a child who is brilliant but will live a short life, or would you prefer a child of mediocre intelligence who will live long?" Shivaguru woke up and narrated the dream to Aryamba. Recognizing the sacred nature of the dream, the couple went to the temple early that morning. Their hearts full of humility, they bowed at the feet of the Lord and took a *sankalpa*: "O Lord, as suggested in the dream, please bless us with a child of great brilliance even though he would live a short life."

Their joy knew no bounds and they returned to Shivaguru's home at Kaladi in Kerala. Soon the child was conceived and, as per tradition, Aryamba went to her natal home, Melpazhur Mana in Veliyanad and remained there, worshipping in the ancestral temples until the birth of their son. Shivaguru named him *Shankara* (the bestower of goodness), in gratitude for Lord Shiva's grace. Shankara showed remarkable intelligence from his early years; what others might take twelve years to learn, he was able to master in two years. Aryamba arranged for his *vidyarambha* (initiation into the study of the Sanskrit alphabet) in Melpazhur Mana, her maternal home. It is said that Shankara mastered the four *Vedas* by the age of eight—an indication of sheer brilliance. Unfortunately, Shivaguru passed away when Shankara was three. His wish to send his son to a gurukula, after performing his *upanayanam* (investiture of the sacred thread), was fulfilled by Aryamba at Melpazhur Mana.



Part 1: Illustrious Life & Accomplishments

BY BRAHMACHARINI TAARINI CHAITANYA

The youthful Shankara would often express his desire to take sannyasa and renounce the world. Aryamba ignored his earnest pleas. One day the boy was bathing in the Poorna River when he felt a tug at his feet. It was a crocodile that had taken hold of his leg and was dragging him to deeper waters. Facing death, he called out to his mother who stood on the bank, pleading to be allowed to take *apat-sannyasa* (renouncing in the face of death). Out of compassion, Aryamba reluctantly agreed, praying that he would survive. Shankara immediately recited the mantras to make a renunciate of himself. Miraculously, the crocodile released him and he emerged from the waters almost unscathed. Aryamba was now sure that this brilliant child was destined to do much more than stay at home and thus permitted him to walk the path of the holy mendicant.

Sensing concern in his mother's heart, he asked if she had any wish that he should fulfill. A devoted seeker, Aryamba bestowed her heartfelt blessings upon her son. Not sure whether she would see him again, she uttered her sole wish—that upon her eventual departure from this earthly realm, Shankara would carry out her funeral rites. The boy assured his mother that he would be there.

In Search of the Guru

Thus, at age eight, Shankara began his arduous journey from Ernakulam to Omkareshwar in Madhya Pradesh—a path most

uncertain, for he knew not where he was heading, whom he would meet on the way or how long it would take. Yet with complete faith in the Lord, he took to the path unknown. Enroute he met many people and there was much that the travel taught him, making his resolve to find his guru even stronger. Finally, on reaching the banks of Narmada, he knew in his heart he had reached his destination.

The mendicant's longing for guidance and initiation was not in vain. It was in Govinda Bhagavatpada, a revered disciple of Gaudapadacharya, that Shankara found the guru he had yearned for. After much inquiry, he was directed to a small cave where Govindapada was immersed in deep meditation. With utmost reverence, the boy approached the cave. Careful not to disrupt the sanctity of the moment, he silently circumambulated the cave and then, with profound humility, prostrated before the entrance and recited prayers, extolling the virtues of the guru who resided within.

As the mahatma gradually emerged from samadhi, his eyes still closed, he inquired about the identity of the visitor. Without hesitation, Shankara spontaneously uttered the Dashashloki—his composition of ten profound verses—revealing not only his identity but also the timeless understanding that transcended the limitations of age and mortal existence.

"O guru, I am neither the earth, nor water, nor fire, nor air, nor space, nor any of their properties. I am not the senses and the mind even; for all these are transient, variable by nature. I am the One changeless essence, Shiva alone am I."

Early life: Our Kerala artist paints major moments in the sage's early life. Clockwise from upper right: Shiva appears in a dream to bless the child's life; when a crocodile seizes her son's leg, Aryamba permits him to become a sannyasin in the face of death; the shaven-headed youth meets and is initiated by his guru, Govinda Bhagavatpada.

The clarity and depth of the child's answer left Govindapada overjoyed, exclaiming, "O child, I have been waiting for you over a lifetime and at last, here you are!" Moved by the earnestness in Shankara's request to be initiated into Brahmadvidya, Govinda Bhagavatpada initiated him into sannyasa. Thus Shankara joined the impeccable lineage that begins with Sage Parasara, whose son was Vyasa and grandson, Suka. Suka taught Gaudapada, from whom his disciple, Govindapada, learned all about Vedanta.

Govinda Bhagavatpada taught his student the import of the four mahavakyas from the Upanishads. Though Shankara may have already gained the crystallized essence of the Upanishadic teachings, Govindapada taught him the spiritual revelations and thought processes that lead to such conclusions.

The *Madhaviya-Shankaravijaya* states that Shankara once calmed a flood from the river Reva, thus saving his guru who was absorbed in samadhi in a nearby cave. After three years, to initiate him into the commentaries, Govinda Bhagavatpada gave him the task of writing a commentary on the *Vishnu Sahasranama*. Pleased with the exemplary work, the guru instructed his disciple to go to Kashi and begin the work of writing commentaries on the scriptures in order to propagate Advaita Vedanta. It is said that Govindapada thereafter sat in meditation and attained mahasamadhi. As per the customs, Shankara and other disciples immersed the Mahatma's body in the Narmada River.

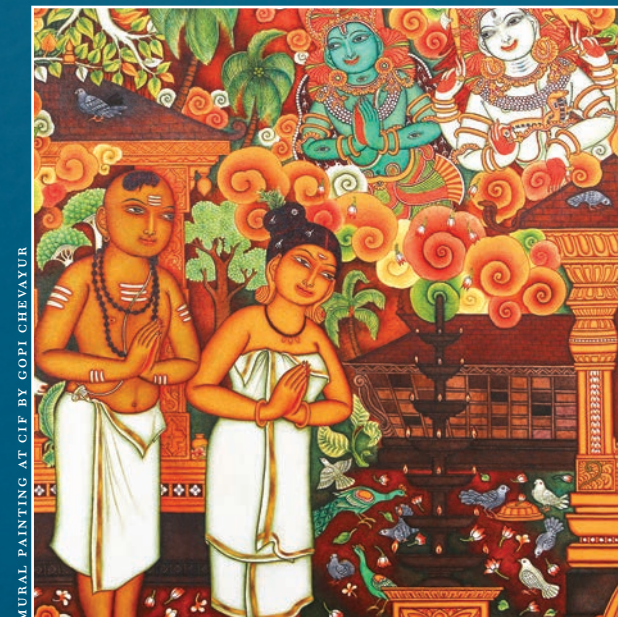
As directed by his guru, the 12-year-old Shankara traveled to Kashi. Contemplation, studying the scriptures and sacred literature, planning his works, spontaneous creativity, teaching the group of eager scholars around him, bathing in the Ganga and worshipping Lord Visvanatha marked his days in Varanasi.

A young man named Sanandana from Choladesha (present-day Trichy) became his first disciple. One day Sanandana was on the far bank of the Ganga when the guru called out to him after his bath from the opposite bank. Lost in his devotion, oblivious to the fact that the waters of the river had risen, keeping his guru alone in his vision, Sanandana walked towards Shankaracharya. Miraculously, with each step the man took, an array of lotuses rose to support him and he crossed the water. Indeed, the grace of the guru is a guardian amulet. Shankaracharya blessed him with the name Padmapada—the one with lotus feet.

It is not surprising that aspirants and youngsters thronged to the master. Apart from tutoring them, he engaged himself in writing down what he taught. It is said a major portion of Shankara's prolific works were composed during his Kashi sojourn.

Composition of Major Works

In his long and difficult journey through forest tracks and mountain trails to Badrinath, the Acharya was accompanied by a few disciples. At Badarikashrama he recovered an idol of Lord Narayana from the bed of the Alakananda River and reinstalled it in the Badrinatha Temple with due ceremony. He also instructed that a Nambudiri

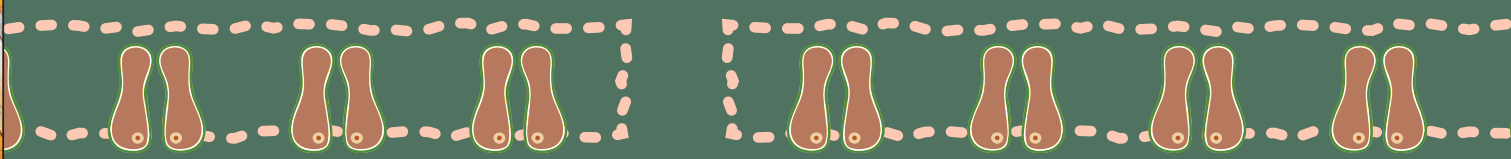


Shanmata: Choosing an Ishtadevata

Raised and trained in the Smarta Brahmanical lineage, Adi Shankara arose to become the preeminent guru of that tradition, which is today one of the four major denominations of Hinduism, along with Saivism, Shaktism and Vaishnavism. His life redefined Hinduism forever. During this time, he promoted and revitalized the ancient Panchayatana Puja—a comprehensive and inclusive form of worship in the Smarta tradition that accommodates five Deities—Vishnu, Shiva, Surya, Ganesha and Shakti—allowing the devotee to choose a preferred Deity for personal devotion while recognizing the interconnectedness of all divine forms. It was his attempt to unify the prevailing sub-faiths of Sanatana Dharma: Ganapatyam, Shaivism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism and Sauram.

The five are represented by small murtis, or by five kinds of stones, or by five marks drawn on the floor. One is placed in the center as the devotee's preferred God, Ishta Devata, and the other four in a square around it. Kumara, often added as a sixth Deity, is generally situated behind the Ishta Devata. Each God may be worshiped in any of His/Her traditional aspects or incarnations, allowing for much variety (e.g., Shakti as Lakshmi, Vishnu as Rama, and Shiva as Bhairava). With the addition of the sixth Deity, Kumara, the system is known as shanmata, "six-fold path." Philosophically, all are seen by Smartas as equal reflections of the one Saguna Brahman, rather than as distinct beings.

By formalizing this puja system, the Acharya has had a profound impact throughout the Hindu world, where it remains widely practiced in households and temples.



Arduous journeys: *The artist captures the missionary zeal with which the sage and his disciples conducted the 'Digvijaya Yatra' throughout Bharat.*

principle of *adhyasa*, “false attribution.”

One night an aged Brahmin visited the Acharya and his disciples in the Himalayas. Welcomed with humility by the young sannyasin, the aged Brahmin raised several objections regarding the Acharya’s teachings. After several days of arguments and counter-arguments, Padmapada recognized Sage Vyasa in the visitor and brought the argument to a close with a humble and diplomatic intercession. Vyasa conceded that his ideals had been faithfully interpreted in Shankara’s commentaries. Shankara was sixteen years old at the time and about to complete his short life. Vyasa granted him a further extension of sixteen years to fulfill the mission of his life.

Trekking across Bharat

Shankara traveled with his disciples to Maharashtra and to Srisailam, where he composed *Shivananda-lahari*, a devotional hymn to Lord Shiva. On another occasion, when he was about to be sacrificed by a Kapalika, Padmapada’s prayer invoked Lord Narasimha to save Shankara, who then composed the *Lakshminarsimha-stotra*.

Next, he visited Sringeri to establish the Sharada Peetham. It was in Sringeri that Giri met him and went on to become an important disciple. A devoted student,

Giri was ever engaged in serving the master. he was delayed for a class, but the Acharya decided to wait until his return. The special attention shown to the youth piqued some of the other students, who considered him to be average. When Giri arrived, a mere glance from the Acharya was sufficient to transform him. The young disciple burst out into a hymn in praise of the guru, an unstoppable rush of words in the *totaka* meter, which left the onlookers amazed. Here was a novice presenting a perfect hymn in a difficult meter, so full of lambent faith in the guru! Shankara was delighted and named him Totakacharya after the meter he had used for the hymn.

While at Sringeri one day, the Acharya suddenly learned of his mother’s illness and rushed to her side at her home in Kaladi. Aryamba had been hearing of his glories over the years and was exceedingly happy to see her son. She peacefully breathed her last in his presence. Acharya honored the promise he had made and, despite some criticism (swamis traditionally do not attend funerals, let alone conduct them), performed her funeral rites.

Digvijaya Yatra

After this, Shankaracharya began a *digvijaya yatra*—“victorious campaign in all directions”—for the propagation of the Advaita philosophy. He understood Bharat as one cultural unit, from the Himalayas to Kanyakumari and Kamarupa (Assam) to Gandhara (Afghanistan). He traveled on foot throughout Bharat, from the southern tip to Kashmir and Nepal, preaching to the local populace and debating philosophy with Hindu, Buddhist and other scholars and monks

along the way. With the Kerala King Sudhanva as companion, Shankara passed through Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Vidarbha. Trekking through Karnataka, he reached Gokarna, where he defeated in debate the noted Shaiva scholar Nilakantha. Proceeding to Gujarat, he humbled Bhatta Bhaskara, the proponent of Bhedabheda philosophy in Dvaraka.

The Jains were defeated in philosophical debates at a place called Bahlika. In such manner, the Acharya established victory over several philosophers and ascetics in the region of North Kashmir called Darada. Later, he had an encounter with Navagupta, a tantrika, at Kamarupa (present-day Assam) who too accepted Shankara’s Vedantic teachings.

With his vision of cultural unity within Bharat, it was truly a digvijaya yatra—a triumphant tour annihilating the forces of ignorance and disruption, of consolidation and establishment of the unifying forces of universal brotherhood and understanding, culminating in the goal of all pursuits, the intimate experience of the non-dual Reality, no matter what paths are followed.

The Acharya came to know about a temple with four gates for Goddess Sharada in the Kashmir region. The temple was famous for its Throne of Omniscience (the Sarvajna Peetham), signifying that only an omniscient being can sit upon it. The temple had four doors for scholars from the four cardinal directions. The southern door had never been opened, indicating that no scholar from South India had ascended the throne. Shankara opened that door by defeating in debate in succession the scholars of various scholastic disciplines, such as Mimamsa and Nyaya. He then ascended the Peetham amidst victory cheers by his disciples.

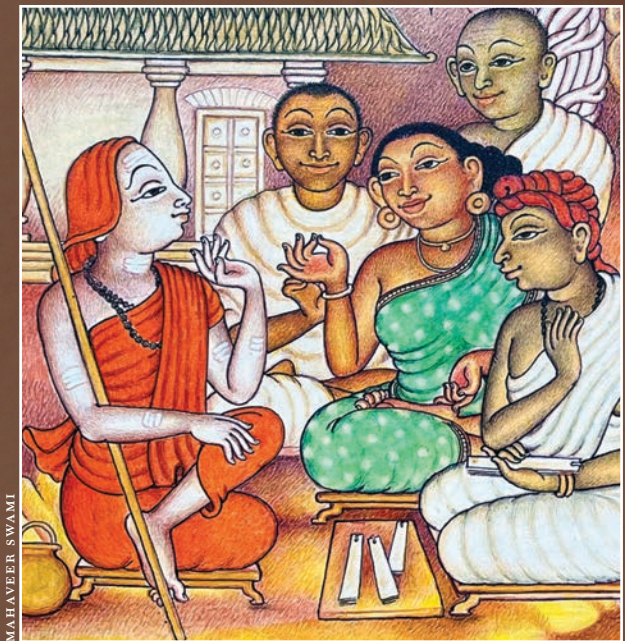
Establishment of Mathas

Shankara founded four mathas (monasteries): Sringeri in Karnataka in the South, Dvaraka in Gujarat in the West, Puri in Odisha in the East and Jyotirmath in Uttarakhand in the North. He then dictated a book, *Mahanushasanam*, setting out the rules and disciplines to be followed in the administration of the mathas.

Tradition states that he put in charge of these mathas his four main disciples: Sureshvaracharya, Hastamalakacharya, Padmapadacharya and Totakacharya respectively. These four are often referred to as the “four pillars” or “four corners” of Shankaracharya’s spiritual order. Each of them contributed to the continuation of Advaita Vedanta, ensuring that Shankaracharya’s teachings were preserved and passed down through generations. The establishment of the four mathas in different regions of Bharat, each headed by one of these disciples, further facilitated the dissemination of Advaita Vedanta across the subcontinent.

Approaching the end of his life, Shankaracharya traveled by foot to the remote Himalayan area of Kedarnath-Badarinath and there attained videha mukti (freedom from embodiment). A samadhi shrine dedicated to the master is located behind the Kedarnath Temple. It is difficult indeed to summarize the life of the great Acharya who in a short life attained that which is immeasurable. To quote Pujya Swami Chinmayananda: Shankara is not an individual but an institution. Mastery over the four *Vedas* by his eighth year and all shastras by age 12, the Advaitic rendition of the *Brahmasutras*, the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita* by his sixteenth year—these were accomplishments impossible for an ordinary mortal. After thus living a visionary life of thirty-two years, the great saint and reformer merged into the eternal Truth. Jaya Jaya Shankara! Hara Hara Shankara! 🙏

References: Sankara the Missionary, Central Chinmaya Mission Trust; Adi Sankara: *Finite to Infinite*, Chinmaya International Foundation



Debate with Mandana Mishra

After the long months of near isolation in the Himalayas, Shankara went to Prayaga in search of the renowned Kumarila Bhatta, a famous Purva Mimamsa philosopher, to debate their distinct philosophies. Unfortunately, when he met Kumarila Bhatta, he was sitting amongst smoldering fires as a *prayaschitta* (penance) for guru-droha (betraying one’s teacher). So, as directed by Kumarila Bhatta, Shankara approached his disciple Mandana Mishra at his home in Mahishmati and humbly sought a debate. Further, Shankara suggested that Mandana Mishra’s learned wife Ubhaya Bharati (an incarnation of Goddess Saraswati) should be the moderator of the debate. A condition was laid that the defeated person would give up their chosen path in life and take up the opponent’s path instead, that is, the householder would become a renunciate or the monk would enter family life. After debating for over 15 days, Mandana Mishra accepted defeat. Legend has it that Ubhaya Bharati then challenged Shankara to debate with her in order to complete the victory. This debate was to be on the subject of *kama shastra* (science of sensual love). But Shankara, being a renunciate from childhood, had no knowledge of this all-too-worldly subject. After requesting some time before entering into this fresh debate, he entered the body of a dead king by his yogic powers and acquired the requisite knowledge of kama shastra. Ubhaya Bharati, in respect for the acharya’s unparalleled quest for knowledge, called off the debate and allowed her husband to take sannyasa. Shankara blessed him with the monastic name Sureshvaracharya.



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Part 2: Shankara's Philosophy & Teachings

BY SWAMI ADVAYANANDA

The above title is a misnomer, for in truth Śrī Ādi Śaṅkarācārya propounded no new philosophy independent of tradition. After Śrī Veda Vyāsa, he remains the most significant proponent of Vedānta and so great has been his contribution that Vedānta has become synonymous with his name. Speaking about this colossus, Gurudev Swami Chinmayananda proclaims: “An exquisite thinker, a brilliant intellect, a personality scintillating with the vision of Truth, a heart throbbing with industrious faith and ardent desire to serve the nation, sweetly emotional and relentlessly logical, in Śaṅkara the *Upaniṣads* discovered the fittest spiritual general.”

Adi Shankaracharya's Core Philosophy

What is Vedānta? The term Vedānta has two components: *Veda* and *anta*. *Veda* is the revealed scripture, the very foundation of Sanātana Dharma, and *anta* means end. Hence Vedānta is the end of the *Veda*. It refers to the *Upaniṣads*, which form the final section of the *Veda*. The *Upaniṣads* voice the philosophical message of the *Veda* and deliberate

on fundamental existential questions—Who am I? What is the purpose of life? What is this world? Who created this world? If there is a God who created the world, what is my relation with God? Where is God? and so on—and conclude that the ultimate Reality, termed Brahman, is verily the Self, and the individual, world and God are Its apparent manifestations. In other words, the individual, the world and God, their Creator, are all but an appearance. In truth, all is but one and non-different from Brahman. This philosophical position is given the nomenclature Advaita (a-dvaita, no duality), the central message of which Śaṅkara expounds through all his works, directly or indirectly. Nevertheless, he founded no new system of his own.

Seminal Texts

What are the principal works authored by Śrī Śaṅkarācārya? To answer this, one needs to first know the foundational texts of the timeless Vedāntic tradition: (1) The *Upaniṣads* are held in the highest esteem as the foremost authority of knowledge; 108 of these are studied in the tradition and ten are considered the principal ones. (2) The

Youthful discipline: *Adi Shankara, shown here learning the scriptures, was raised in a family ingrained in the Dharmic traditions. His prodigious memory allowed him to master the four Vedas by age eight and all shastras by his twelfth year.*

Bhagavad Gītā, presented as a discussion between Lord Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, God and man, systematically conveys the quintessence of the *Upaniṣads* and serves as a practical guide for comprehending and living the Upaniṣadic teachings in daily life. Arjuna is but a representative of each of us. When he is benumbed by his delusions and is about to veer away from the right course of action, God, man's closest friend, destroys his doubts by bestowing upon him the supreme wisdom of the *Upaniṣads*. The battlefield here is symbolic of all our lives and thus the Vedāntic message of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is truly the panacea for the ills of life. Śrī Veda Vyāsa composed the *Bhagavad Gītā*, song of God, in his magnum opus, the *Mahābhārata*. (3) The *Brahmasūtra*, consisting of 555 aphorisms and authored by Śrī Veda Vyāsa, takes up for deliberation doubts and questions that could arise during the study of the *Upaniṣads* and resolves them through reasoning and debate. These three—*Upaniṣad*, *Bhagavad Gītā* and *Brahmasūtra*—form the foundation of Advaita Vedānta and are collectively referred to as *Prasthānatrayī*, the foundational triad. Śrī Śaṅkarācārya has blessed us with his elaborate commentaries on these works, which are at once both lucid and profound—*bhāṣyam prasannam gambhīram*. Such is the glory of these commentaries on the *Prasthānatrayī* that he is reverentially spoken of as

Bhāṣyakara, the Commentator. A thorough study of these authoritative exegeses is essential for anyone wishing to delve deeply into Vedānta.

These principal works, however, would be difficult for a novice to start with. Śaṅkara, therefore, initiates beginners to Vedānta through the many independent preliminary texts that he has authored, both in prose and poetry, termed *Prakaraṇa-grantha*, including *Tattvabodha*, *Ātmabodha*, *Aparokṣānubhūti*, *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, *Upadeśasāhasrī* and *Sarvavedāntasiddhāntasāraśaṅgraha*.

In addition, Śrī Śaṅkarācārya's foundational commentaries on the *Prasthānatrayī*, collectively called *bhāṣyas*, have themselves become the basis for further elaborations through *ṭīkā*s, or notes. Of these, the most significant is *Ānandagiri-ṭīkā*, by Śaṅkara's disciple Śrī Ānandagiri. Then there are also more extensive explanations of the *bhāṣyas* called *vārtika*: for example, on the *Brahmasūtra-bhāṣya* and on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-upaniṣad-bhāṣya* and the *Taittirīya-upaniṣad-bhāṣya*. Many saintly scholars in the lineage of Śaṅkara have written independent texts to expand the core teachings of Vedānta, countless works indeed that have the single purpose of elucidating the message of oneness revealed by the *Prasthānatrayī* and by his commentaries. One can thus see the pivotal role played by Śrī Śaṅkarācārya in the Vedāntic tradition.

All these treatises—from the *Upaniṣads* to the *Upaniṣad*-inspired texts, such as the *Bhagavad Gītā* and *Brahmasūtra* and the

innumerable texts that further serve to amplify or explain the *Upaniṣadic* teachings—fall under the ambit of the umbrella term *Vedānta*.

Essential Teachings

The system of Vedānta progresses through six broad topics:

- (1) Adhikārin
- (2) Gurūpasadana
- (3) Upadeśa, or teaching—the inquiry into:
 1. Tvam-padārtha, or Self
 2. Tat-padārtha, or Īśvara
 3. Asi-padārtha, identity or oneness of Self and Īśvara
- (4) Objections to identity and their resolution
- (5) Sādhana
- (6) Result

1. Adhikarin, the Qualified Aspirant

Success in any field of activity requires a prior capacity or an ability that forms the potential for accomplishment. In the spiritual realm though, since Vedānta is a subjective inquiry into the nature of the Self, the capacity here is more of fine-tuning one's mind–intellect, the very instruments for the aforesaid inquiry. This fine-tuning of the personality reflects as (1) *cittaśuddhi*, purity of the mind and (2) *cittaikāgrata*, focus of the intellect. When both *cittaśuddhi* and *cittaikāgrata* mature, they manifest as *sādhana-catustaya*, or the fourfold qualifications required to gain Self-knowledge.

While discussing the first aphorism of the *Brahmasūtra*, Śaṅkara emphasizes the four qualifications of a successful aspirant: (1) *nitya-anitya-vastu-viveka*, or the discrimination between the eternal and the ephemeral (2) *iha-amutra-phalabhoga-virāga*, or dispassion from the pleasures of this world and the other worlds (3) *śama-damādi-sādhanaśampat*, the wealth of means beginning with śama and dama and (4) *mumukṣutvam*, or the desire for Liberation. In *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* (verse 18) he asserts that only when these four are present will a seeker gain abidance in Reality, and when absent, the goal will not be reached.

The first qualification, *viveka*, is the discriminative knowledge that Brahman alone is permanent and everything else in the world of objects is impermanent. From a firm *viveka* follows *vairāgya*, dispassion, expressed as the absence of desire for any pleasure, be it of this world or of any other higher realm, such as heaven. *Viveka* and *vairāgya* impact one's mind–intellect and flower as the set of six inner capacities: (1) *śama*, control of the mind; (2) *dama*, control of the senses; (3) *uparama*, cessation of extroverted activities; (4) *titikṣā*, forbearance in the face of the unavoidable pains and pinpricks of life; (5) *samādhana*, the ability to walk the spiritual path with focus and concentration and finally; (6) *śraddha*, faith in the scripture and the guru, the very means to accomplish Self-Realization. The six are collectively one, for the rise of even one of these supports the ascension of each of the others in the group. These are the true wealth of the seeker. When all these three—*viveka*, *vairāgya* and *śamādiṣaṭkaśampat*—are perfected, there arises firm *mumukṣutva*, the burning desire for liberation, the fourth of the *sādhana-catustaya*, which then irresistibly compels the seeker to take the next significant step for spiritual progress, which is *gurūpasadana*. Verily, it is desire that propels any activity—be it secular or sacred! Thus, the *sādhana-catustaya* are the very foundation of spiritual pursuit.



2. Gurupasadena, or Surrendering to the Guru

It is a law of the cosmos that when one is ready for spiritual wisdom, the guru appears in the firmament of the seeker's spiritual life. When the bud flowers, does not the bee discover it? So, too, when one yearns for spiritual fulfillment, the guru too is found. In fact, all one needs to do to find one's guru is to evolve.

The guru from whom one can gain spiritual teaching is one who is both a *śrotriya*—one who has the comprehension of the śāstra—and a *brahmaniṣṭha*—one who is Realized. In other words, the guru is one who is himself rooted in the Wisdom that he can effectively expound to the student. Śrī Śaṅkarācārya presents in a few poetic brushstrokes a description of such an exemplary guru and the earnest student surrendering to such a master: “He who is well-versed in the scriptures, sinless, unafflicted by desires, a full knower of the Supreme, who has retired into the Supreme, who is as calm as the fire that has burnt up its fuel, who is a boundless ocean of mercy that needs no cause for its expression and who is an intimate friend of those who have surrendered unto him—worship such a guru with deep devotion, and when he is pleased with your surrender, humility and service, approach him and ask him to explain what you must know. ...How do I cross this ocean of relative existence? What is my ultimate destination? Which of the many means should I adopt? I know nothing of these. O Lord! Save me and describe in detail how to end the misery of this life in the finite. ...To him who, in his anxiety for liberation, has sought the protection of the teacher who abides by scriptural injunctions, who has a serene mind and who is endowed with tranquility, the master should pour his knowledge with utmost kindness.” Commenting on the importance of receiving the teaching from the guru, Śrī Śaṅkarācārya declares that

no one, not even those well-versed in the scriptures, should independently pursue the knowledge of Brahman without the guidance of a teacher. The wisdom is subtle; it is about the very subject Self; and the mind is naturally extroverted; hence, an unguided inquiry into the Self is prone to be an utter failure.

3. Upadesha

Vedāntic teaching proceeds through the unique methodology of *adhyāropa-apavāda*, that is, deliberate superimposition followed by negation (*adhyāropāpavādābhyām niṣprapañcam prapañcyate*). To explain: we have the notion of being the body, mind and so on and also of there being a world independent and external to the self. On inquiry, we may posit a Creator or God, a cause for both the subject self and the object world. Vedānta proclaims that all three—self, world and God—are in truth the one Reality alone. Śaṅkara asserts: “I shall in a half-verse delineate that which has been explained in crores of treatises: Brahman is the Reality, the world is apparent and the Self is Brahman alone and not different from It.”

However, to come to this final comprehension, Vedānta first begins by giving credence to our notion of difference and starts the exploration of what these categories of *jīva-jagat-Īśvara*, or self-world-God really are. Giving these categories a seeming reality during the course of inquiry is termed *adhyāropa*; the culmination of the inquiry leads to the discovery that this triad is merely apparent and that in truth all are Brahman alone: this is termed *apavāda*, or negation. One recognizes all are one (*ekam*) alone (*eva*) and non-dual (*advitīyam*) (“*ekam eva advitīyam*”).

The dissolution of the false and the realization of the Self is

Life stories: The artist captures five scenes from Shankara's life. Clockwise from upper left: he returns home as promised to cremate his mother's body; a chandala (thought to be Shiva in disguise) schools him in his own theories of oneness; falling ill, he made his way to Tiruchendur Temple to beseech Lord Murugan's blessings for renewed health; he won the public debate with Mandana Mishra's wife Ubhaya Bharati; center, shown composing his extensive texts and poems.

enabled by statements such as “Tat tvam asi—That thou art,” “Aham brahmāsmi—I am Brahman” and so on, well-known in the tradition as *mahāvākya*, literally “great statements,” called so because of their emphatic proclamation that the individual and Brahman are one.

Every mahāvākya has three components: Self, God and their identity. For instance, in the mahāvākya “Tat tvam asi—That you are,” the word *tvam*, “you,” refers to the individual, the Self; *Tat*, “that,” refers to That which is the cause of the world, which is God; and the verbal component *asi*, “are,” asserts the identity of the Self and God. In *Vākyavṛtti*, Śrī Śaṅkarācārya explains in detail the mahāvākya *Tat tvam asi*.

“Brahman is the Reality, the world is apparent and the Self is Brahman alone and not different from It.”

3.1. *Tvampadārtha*—the signification of *tvam*, or Self: An object known cannot be the knower, the subject Self. The physical body, or the gross body, cannot be the Self, because it is an object of one's knowledge, possessing qualities such as form and function. In the same manner, we are conscious of the subtle body, the mind, which is but a flow of thoughts, and also the *prāṇa*, which expresses itself in breathing, digestion and so on. In deep sleep, the state of the causal body, we are aware of the absence of all these, the pure ignorance of everything. All these are objects of my awareness. What I know, I am certainly not! If I am not the gross, subtle, or causal body, who am I then?

Know yourself to be that Witness-Consciousness other than the three bodies, in whose presence and proximity all the inert entities—the body, mind, senses, *prāṇas* and so on—function. Know yourself to be the illuminating Principle of the waking, dream and deep sleep states, the Seer that remains free of all changes or modifications. You are the dearest, for whose sake persons and things, such as children and wealth, all appear dear. Thus, the Witness-Consciousness, which is other than the body, mind, senses and *prāṇas*, the Existence that is free of modifications, is what is truly meant by the word *tvam*—you.

3.2. *Tatpadārtha*—the signification of *Tat*, or God: In the *Chāndogya-upaniṣad*, where the mahāvākya *Tat tvam asi* is taught, the word *Tat*, meaning That, refers to Sat-Existence, the ultimate cause of the world and the all-pervading Reality. The *Upaniṣads* describe That as verily the embodiment of Sat-Cit-Ānanda (Existence-Consciousness-Bliss), as neither gross nor subtle and as beyond the senses and mind. That is imbued with all-knowledge (*sarvajña*) and is all-power (*sarvaśakti*). In knowing That, all becomes known, for It alone pervades all objects as their very substratum and cause. It sustains all beings as their very self (*jīvā*) and remains as their inner-propeller (*antaryāmin*). That is also the bestower of the fruits of actions to all beings according to their actions (*karmaphaladātā*). In short, *Tat*—That—is *Īśvara*, God!



Quotes from Adi Shankara

The world, like a dream full of attachments and aversions, seems real until the awakening.

Do not be proud of wealth, people, relations and friends, or youth. All these are snatched by time in the blink of an eye. Giving up this illusory world, know and attain the Supreme.

Do not look at anybody in terms of friend or foe, brother or cousin; do not fritter away your mental energies in thoughts of friendship or enmity. Seeking the Self everywhere, be amiable and equal-minded towards all, treating all alike.

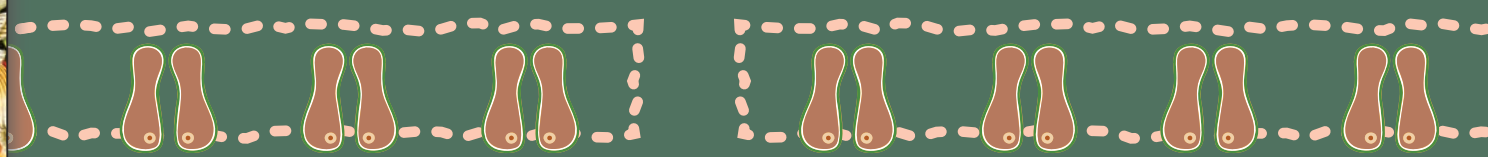
Knowing that I am different from the body, I need not neglect the body. It is a vehicle that I use to transact with the world. It is the temple which houses the Pure Self within.

Even after the Truth has been realized, there remains that strong, obstinate impression that one is still an ego - the agent and experiencer. This has to be carefully removed by living in a state of constant identification with the supreme non-dual Self. Full Awakening is the eventual ceasing of all the mental impressions of being an ego.

When your last breath arrives, grammar can do nothing.

The treasure I have found cannot be described in words; the mind cannot conceive of it.

You never identify yourself with the shadows cast by your body, or with its reflection, or with the body you see in a dream or in your imagination. Therefore you should not identify yourself with this living body either.



Head of the class: Clockwise from upper left: mastering puja; learning to make and scribe Sanskrit on palm leaves; absorbing the wisdom of his teachers; reading the traditional scriptures and bhashyas; center, mastering linguistic styles and meters.

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prods the seeker to go deeper and comprehend the true nature of oneself and Īśvara, for only in the context of their actual nature can there be this identity. The *Upanishads* repeatedly establish the identity of Īśvara and jīva by stripping them both of their relative associations. The differences between God and the individual are only due to the conditionings, and not with respect to their true nature. Īśvara is the Sat-Cit-Ānanda principle, associated with the macrocosmic conditioning of the causal māyā and the cosmic subtle and physical realms—because of which Īśvara appears as the all-mighty, all-knowing Creator-Sustainer-Destroyer of the world. The individual is also the Sat-Cit-Ānanda principle, but associated with the microcosmic conditioning of ignorance, mind-intellect, senses, prāṇa and so on, and appears to experience bondage and limitation, lurching between joy and sorrow ceaselessly. Sans these conditionings, both Īśvara and jīva are the one indivisible Sat-Cit-Ānanda principle. When the kingdom of the king and the shield of the soldier are both dispensed with, there can be neither king nor soldier!

It is these two contrasting standpoints, the absolute and the relative, that the *Vedās* articulate: *Ajāyamāno bahudhā vijāyate*—“Though unborn, He appears to be born manifold!” Being “unborn” is from the absolute or Reality standpoint. “Born” as the manifold world of objects and beings is from the apparent or relative standpoint. This means plurality is experienced but is not true; it appears but is not real: it is *mithyā* or māyā. Akin to a movie one sees—though experienced, it lacks reality, being but the play of light and shadow on a screen.

However, every illusion requires a substratum to present itself. On the changeless, indivisible, immaculately pure screen alone appears the movie, a veritable play of movement and sound. So, too, on the substratum of the Sat-Cit-Ānanda principle is the play of plurality consisting of Īśvara-jagat-jīva, that is God, the world of multiplicity and the infinite variety of individuals. They are all apparent, but what is true in them is the one indivisible Sat-Cit-Ānanda principle. Hence this unequivocal proclamation of the *Upanishads*: *Ekam eva advitīyam*—“One alone and non-dual.” This oneness or non-duality is Advaita!

5. Śadhana, or Means

How does one gain this direct realization or actualization of knowledge? The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (2.4.5) answers: *Ātmā vā are draṣṭavyaḥ śrotavyo mantavyo nididhyāsitavyaḥ*—“O Dear! The Self ought to be realized: should be heard of, reflected on and meditated upon.” These three: (1) śravaṇa, or listening (2) manana, or reflection and (3) nididhyāsana, or meditation—are the threefold practices for realization. Śravaṇa refers to listening and comprehending the *Upaniṣadic* teaching from a competent teacher to reach a definitive

understanding of the identity of the Self and Brahman—to wit, “I am Brahman.” Next follows *manana*, which is to reflect on the teachings of the guru with reasoning, aligning the logic with the *Upaniṣads* so that a crystal-clear, unshakable comprehension arises: “I am indeed Brahman.”

It is observed that even after this intellectual comprehension that the Self is Brahman, there remain contrary notions of oneself being the doer and enjoyer and identification with the body, mind and other conditionings. This is due to the habitual identification with the not-Self over several lifetimes. Such identification does not immediately cease, and it is for dispelling this that nididhyāsana is recommended. The practice of nididhyāsana, or meditation, consists in abiding single-pointedly in the thought “I am Brahman,” and excluding all thoughts of oneself being the body, mind, senses, prāṇas, intellect and so on. As one remains absorbed in this firm knowledge that is already intellectually crystal-clear, the deep-seated contrary notions, termed *viparīta-bhāvana*, finally cease and ignorance is put to an end once and for all, just as medicine that is taken regularly destroys disease.

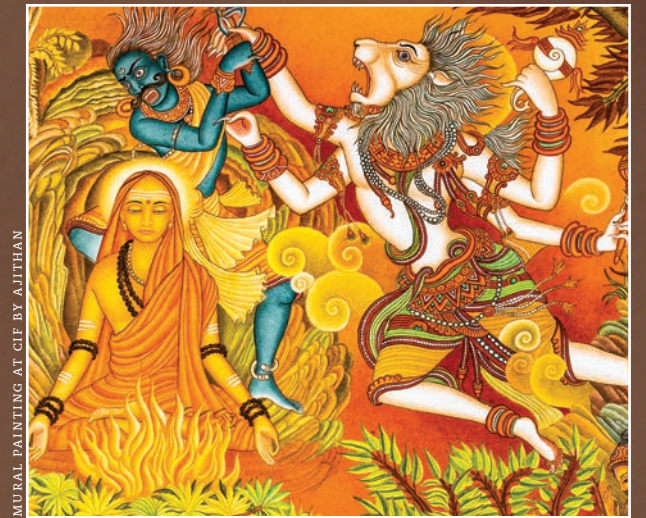
6. Phala, or Result

When ignorance ends, the results of ignorance—to wit, the identification with the non-Self—ceases and thus one is free of notions such as “I am a man/woman, noble/ignoble, saint/sinner,” and so on. Such an enlightened person is termed *jīvanmukta*, one who is liberated while living, who is free from individuality and the consequent sense of incompleteness by being ever established in the Self’s true nature of Sat-Cit-Ānanda, the indwelling formless awareness in all objects and beings.

The *Upaniṣads* state that the very moment one gains *aparokṣa-jñāna*, or direct knowledge of the Supreme, the knots of the heart, the ego and desire, are cut asunder, all doubts are dispelled and all karma shackles (from *punya* or *pāpa*—virtue or sin) are destroyed. This is the end of *saṁsāra*, or the cycle of rebirth. Such a *jīvanmukta* lives seemingly associated with the body, mind and other conditionings as long as the body’s destiny persists. Such a person is verily a blessing to the cosmos, for every action that emanates from him is only an expression of the Divine Will. And when this *jīvanmukta*’s physical body falls, the subtle body—the mind, senses and prāṇas—too resolves into its sources, the *pañcamahābhūtas*, or the five primordial elements. This dissolution of the subtle body, the substrate for individuality, whereby it permanently ceases to be, is termed *videhamukti*, or liberation at the fall of the body. Describing this, Śaṅkara declares: Upon the dissolution of the *upādhis*, limiting conditions, the sage is absorbed in the all-pervading, attributeless consciousness, like water into water, space into space and light into light.

Conclusion

Self-Realization is God-Realization. This is the highest triumph of the human and the noblest fulfillment, for gaining this one becomes *kṛtṛtya*, or fulfilled. For this unfoldment one is ever grateful to the guru, for even though one has transcended the realm of plurality, this journey to the infinite would never have been possible without the guru. Such a *mahātmā* (great person) who has gained this realization is a benediction upon the world. He enables each one’s spiritual unfoldment; his very presence ennobles and enriches all, like the spring that bestows its gleam and joy on the entire world by its mere arrival. He is the very embodiment of the śāstra, for in him one sees the scripture lived and its veracity established. He is the walking-sitting-talking God, for in him what expresses is not the will of the individual ego but the will of the Lord. He is verily one’s own Self!



Shivananda Lahari

By Sri Adi Shankara, Translated by P. R. Ramachander

28. The Mukti of my becoming you is in thine worship.
The Mukti of my coming near you is in singing
About you and calling you “Hey Shiva” and “Hey Madhava.”
The Mukti of living with you is in sweet conversation
With thine devotees, who in their mind live with you.
The Mukti of forever mixing with you is in thinking
Forever of your moving and stable
form which is the universe.
And so, I get all these in this birth itself,
O God who is the consort of Bhavani;
I am thankful to you for all these.

60. Just like the man dragged by flood longs for the bank,
Just like the tired traveler longs for the tree shade,
Just like the one who is afraid of rain
longs for a pleasant home,
Just like the traveling guest longs for the
sight of a hospitable householder,
Just like the poor longs for the charitable rich,
Just like the one terrified by darkness longs for the light,
And just like one suffering from biting
cold longs for the open fire,
O my mind, you long for the lotus feet of Shambhu,
Which removes all fears and phobias and gives pleasure.

84. O Lord Shiva who rules all the world
And who is the friend of all the world,
O Lord who is ocean of bliss,
O storehouse of mercy,
To serve you beside your consort Gowri,
I am presenting you the maid of my intellect,
Who has all good qualities, with a request to you
To live in the house of my mind.

3.3. *Asi-padārtha*—or the identity or oneness of Self and Īśvara: We see ourselves as the individualized consciousness, associated with the mind-intellect and other conditionings, such as the body, senses and prāṇas. So, too, we consider God, with His Power (called variously śakti, māyā, prakṛti) as the Creator-Sustainer-Destroyer of the world, all-knowing and all-mighty. The mahāvākya *Tat tvam asi*—“That you are,” through the verbal component *asi*, are, declares the identity of the individual Self and God. In other words, what appears to be the inner, individual Self, the conscious being, is truly the non-dual Lord, of the nature of Bliss; and that Bliss is verily the individual Self.

By this teaching, the misconception of the Self being limited and God being distinct and distant to oneself ceases and one realizes one’s true infinite Self-hood, which had been hitherto veiled by ignorance.

4. Objections to Identity & their Resolution

How can Īśvara, God, the Creator-Sustainer-Destroyer of the world, and the finite, bound individual be identical?! This skepticism is natural. The declaration *Tat tvam asi*, through its verbal component *asi*,

Part 3: His Twenty-First Century Influence

BY SUDARSHAN RAMABADRAN

Sarvapali Radhakrishnan, statesman, author and former president of India, observed, “Adi Shankaracharya was not only a great thinker and the noblest of Advaitic philosophers, but he was essentially an inspired champion of Hinduism and one of the most vigorous missionaries in our country.” Dr. Prema Nandakumar, in her book *Adi Shankara: Finite to Infinite*, writes glowingly about how he contributed to knitting together the country with his pristine Advaita Vedanta philosophy, a philosophical thought propounding oneness in all. Shankara’s arrival on the scene redefined India’s spiritual history in myriad ways. His life redefined Hinduism forever. His contribution in such a short span of time added to India’s long-standing culture of inquisitive scholarship for spiritual seekers, academic researchers and students of theology, poetry, literature and philosophy. It is safe to say that he enhanced India’s civilizational continuance in the making of today’s modern nation-state.

Scholars who have studied Shankara deeply have written about his contributions to stotra literature. His soul-stirring hymns like *Bhaja Govindam*, *Soundarya Lahiri*, *Shivananda Lahiri*, *Kanakadhara Stotram* and *Dakshinamurti Stotram* are all examples of how beautifully he sang about the impact of Deities all over India.

Through his own example and the establishment of pilgrimage

sites and mathas, he promoted the practice of pilgrimage. Beginning at age sixteen, the young monk traveled by foot, arduously, across the length and breadth of India, not once but three times. In *Atma Bodha*, he wrote 68 verses about *svatma tirtha*, the pilgrimage to understand one’s own self which each one needs to undertake in life. In contemporary times, for policymakers and data consultants worldwide, monitoring and evaluation have become critical to understanding if an intended policy is to be successful. In the context of the individual, such monitoring and evaluation is essential. This is what Shankara’s *svatma tirtha* can be better understood as, a self-assessment that allows us to live with everlasting peace and happiness.

Working to Unite India

A strategic aspect of Shankara’s work was the establishment of monastic centers, or mathas, in the four corners of India. Twelve centuries later, these mathas are still carrying forward tremendous work for uplifting humanity in all spheres. Shankara is credited with reorganizing the sannyasins of his day into ten orders (Dashanami), each with a unique title: Sarasvati, Tirtha, Aranya, Bharati, Ashrama, Giri, Parvata, Sagara, Vana and Puri. He assigned them specific roles in upholding the scriptures. According to Choodie Shivaram

Clarifying the path: The literary genius sage combines the Advaita philosophical treatises with poetic bhakti stotras. He is credited with over 300 texts. The vignettes here depict the various genres of his writing. Clockwise from upper left: the path of Shri Vidya upasana, Ashtavakra Gita, Yama-Nachiketa samvada in Kathopanishad, Bhaja Govindam; rishis representing the Vedas, Soundaryalahari, Vishnu-sahasranama commentary and Mahalakshmi Stuti.

(*Tattvaloka*, April 2012), “The Dashanami sampradayas, while nominally placed under one of the four mathas, maintained their independence, reflecting Shankara’s respect for diversity within the framework of unity. The mathas also served as a support system for wandering ascetics, providing them with a sense of belonging and purpose.” While the Dashanami monks associated with the Shankara mathas closely or loosely follow the procedures enumerated by Adi Shankara, there are innumerable other Hindu orders with different histories and beliefs that continue to affiliate themselves with mathas, ashrams and temples outside the ambit of the Dashanami sampradayas.

Policymakers in India are resolute that Shankara’s energy will help propel India forward on the path of progress and development. His timeless wisdom resonates deeply in contemporary India, reflecting a profound understanding of unity amidst diversity. Today numerous government-led enterprises support Ek Bharat Shreshta Bharat (“One India, Great India”), an initiative launched in 2015 by Narendra Modi to enhance the cultural connections between different parts of the country and to promote national integration. Events like the annual Kashi Tamil Sangamam and Saurashtra Tamil Sangamam celebrate the enduring connections between different regions, rooted in a shared spiritual heritage. Similarly, the Madhavpur Gedh Fair, held near Porbandar on the coast of Gujarat, commemorates legendary narratives while fostering cultural exchange. Today, India’s Ministry of Education is partnering with Indian universities to promote Shankara’s contemporary relevance. For instance, the Bharatiya Basha Samiti is organizing symposiums in Assam.

Influencing Spiritual Leaders

India’s history is replete with spiritual luminaries who have embodied Shankara’s philosophy. Swami Vivekananda stands as a towering figure in this regard, having represented Hinduism eloquently at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago.

Vivekachudamani

By Adi Sankaracharya, Translated by Swami Madhavananda.

6. Let people quote the scriptures and sacrifice to the Gods, let them perform rituals and worship the Deities, but there is no liberation without the realization of one’s identity with the atman; no, not even in the lifetime of a hundred Brahmas put together.

7. There is no hope of immortality by means of riches—such indeed is the declaration of the *Vedas*. Hence it is clear that works cannot be the cause of liberation.

8. Therefore the man of learning should strive his best for liberation, having renounced his desire for pleasures from external objects, duly approaching a good and generous preceptor and fixing his mind on the truth inculcated by him.

11. Work leads to purification of the mind, not to perception of the Reality. The realization of Truth is brought about by discrimination and not in the least by ten million acts.

13. The conviction of the Truth is seen to proceed from reasoning upon the salutary counsel of the wise and not by bathing in the sacred waters, nor by gifts, nor by a hundred *pranayamas* (control of the vital force).

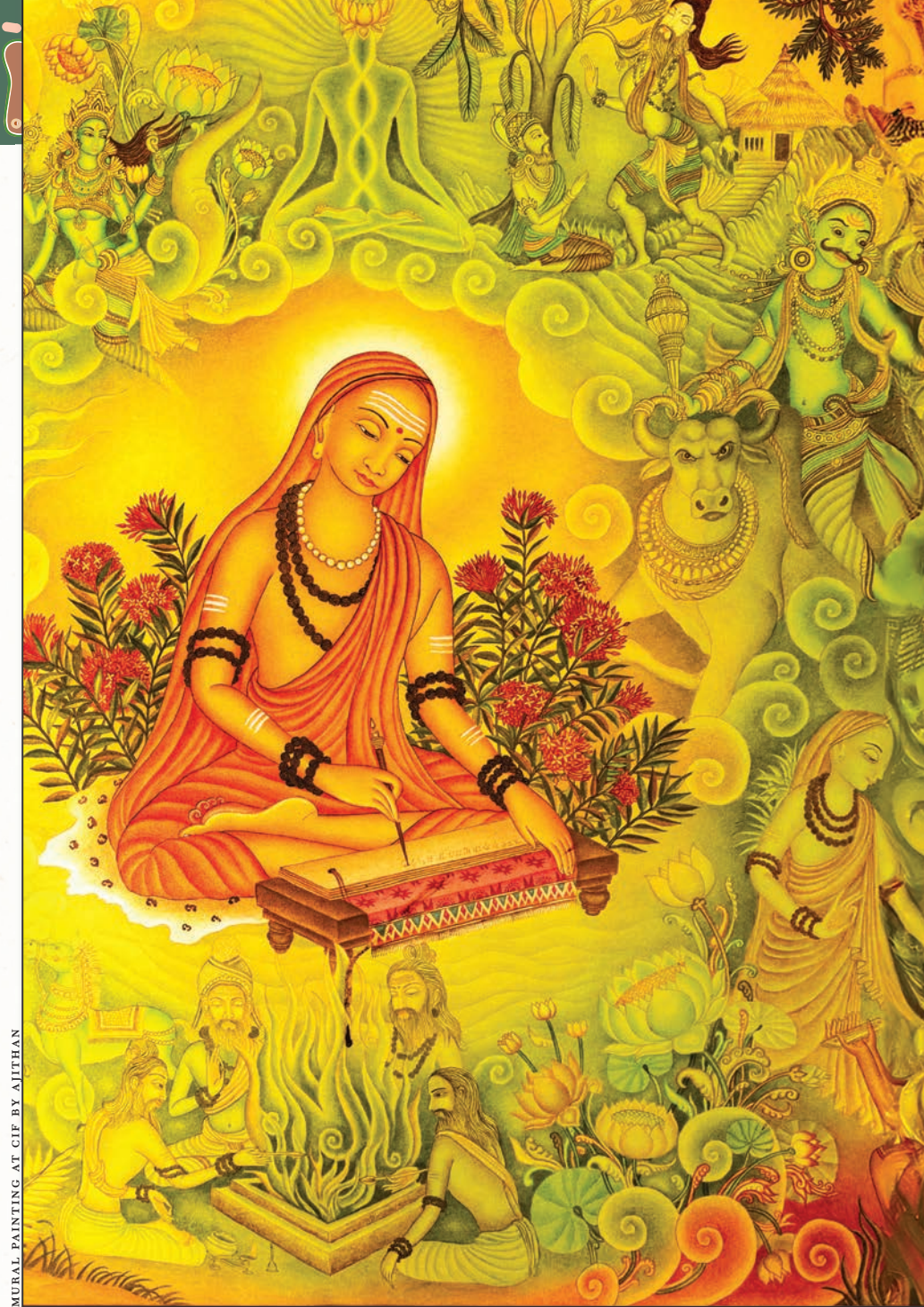
15. Hence the seeker after the Reality of the atman should take to reasoning, after duly approaching the guru—who should be the best of the knowers of Brahman and an ocean of mercy.

81. Know that death quickly overtakes the stupid man who walks along the dreadful ways of sense pleasure; whereas one who walks in accordance with the instructions of a well-wishing and worthy guru, as also with his own reasoning, achieves his end—know this to be true.



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82. If indeed thou hast a craving for liberation, shun sense-objects from a good distance as thou wouldst do poison and always cultivate carefully the nectar-like virtues of contentment, compassion, forgiveness, straightforwardness, calmness and self-control.



MURAL PAINTING AT GUF BY AJITHAN

Vivekananda emphasized the unity of all religions, drawing inspiration from Shankara’s profound insights. He regarded the Acharya as one of the greatest exponents of Vedanta philosophy.

Similarly, Ramana Maharshi, hailing from Tamil Nadu, expounded the principles of Advaita Vedanta in his teachings. His profound insights on the path to Self-Realization. Ramana Maharishi’s early Tamil translation of Adi Shankara’s seminal work, *Vivekachudamani*, attests to his deep reverence for the Acharya’s teachings and his commitment to elucidating them for contemporary audiences. To paraphrase, in his introduction he said that Lord Shiva, taking on the guise of Sri Shankaracharya, had come to guide humanity towards liberation, with *Vivekachudamani* serving as a roadmap.

Swami Chinmayananda, a modern stalwart of Advaita Vedanta,



played a pivotal role in expressing Shankara's teachings in the 20th century. Through initiatives like jnana yajnas and the establishment of Chinmaya Mission, Swami worked to make the profound wisdom of Vedanta accessible to all. His gurus, Swami Tapovan Maharaj and Swami Sivananda, had also furthered this legacy. Swami Chinmayananda was instrumental in buying the ancestral birthplace of Adi Shankara and instituting the Chinmaya International Foundation on the property in 1990. Institutions inspired and founded by these spiritual stalwarts continue to carry Shankara's legacy into contemporary times, both domestically in India and globally. Mata Amritanandamayi of the Amrita Mutt, Sadhguru of the Isha Foundation and Sri Sri Ravishankar of the Art of Living are also carrying forward his foundational teachings. Their followings are significant and thus their influence is far-reaching.

Scholars and saints in India, among them Swami Chaitanyananda Saraswati of the Arsha Vidya Lineage, have increasingly drawn lessons from the life and teachings of Adi Shankara, particularly in the realm of governance and leadership, which revolves around the notion that genuine leadership transcends mere wielding of power or authority; instead, it involves serving others with humility and compassion. True leaders uphold dharma (righteousness) and exemplify qualities such as wisdom, strength and selflessness. By embodying these virtues, leaders can contribute to the creation of a just and equitable society in which the welfare of all individuals is prioritized.

Vedanta and Science

Renowned Indian jurist Nani A. Palkhivala hailed the sage as "one of the 12 greatest men who lived in a country at any age" and credited him with building an "empire of spirit." According to him, "Shankara was a visionary who propagated a universal religion that underlies all religions." He saw the saint's teachings as profoundly aligned with modern scientific principles, noting that scientists like Sir James Jeans, Sir Arthur Eddington, Albert Einstein and Max Planck echoed Shankara's assertion that the universe's appearance differs from reality and that the ultimate reality is the spirit—the infinite spirit. Palkhivala posited that India had recognized this truth long before modern science articulated it.

In 1990, HINDUISM TODAY wrote of an International Congress of Vedanta organized in Ohio, USA, to mark Shankara's 1,200th birth anniversary, in which several hundred scholars deliberated the interconnection of modern science with Advaita Vedanta. In 2023, an international conference, organized by Vedanta Bharati Institute of Yadatore Mutt, was held at Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh exploring the similarities between quantum physics and Vedanta.

As Dr. David Frawley aptly observes, Shankara's vision remains a cornerstone of the Self-Realization movement worldwide, offering profound insights into the nature of reality and the path to liberation. Author and former diplomat Pavan K. Varma, in his seminal work *Adi Shankara: Hinduism's Greatest Thinker* underscores the

Shiva as silent guru: Here Dakshinamurti sits under the banyan tree, conveying without words the lofty teachings to the first four sages to know the Self. Shankara is shown within Dakshinamurti, the artist's intimation that atman and Brahman are one.

need to reexamine Shankara's philosophy in light of modern physics. Varma's exploration highlights the enduring relevance of Vedantic wisdom in an increasingly interconnected world, where scientific inquiry converges with spiritual insight. Subhash Kak, professor of computer science at Oklahoma State University, shared in an interview with me that one inspiration for quantum theory is Advaita Vedanta. "Philosophers of science generally accept that quantum mechanics is consistent with Vedanta. Indeed, the very inspiration for quantum theory, according to its co-founder, Erwin Schrodinger, was the Vedantic idea that the atman (microcosm) is equivalent to the cosmos (macrocosm). This gave Schrodinger the idea that the quantum state should be a superposition of all possibilities."

Swami Mitrananda affirmed to me that Shankara's concepts are being viewed through the prism of evidence-based modern science. He pointed to 2022 Nobel-Prize-winning scientists who posited that the "universe is not real," particularly Alain Aspect, Anton Zeilinger and John F. Clauser. According to Swami Mitrananda, this aligns closely with Advaita Vedanta, which has long maintained that the world is not real and that the observer brings it into existence.

Quantum physics, as illustrated by the double-slit experiment, suggests that particles exhibit wave-particle duality and do not manifest definite properties until observed. Vedanta similarly posits that the universe emerges, exists and dissolves in consciousness, which is identified as Brahman. The universe exists because you see it. Today physicists are postulating that the world did not appear before it was observed.

Shankara was not the originator of Advaita Vedanta; he carried on the rishi tradition of guru parampara, starting from Veda Vyasa. It is his analyzing, dissecting, debating and communicating Vedanta for the benefit of the common man that sets him apart. Professor Kak noted, "Adi Shankara's uncompromising questioning of the nature of awareness and consciousness is the reason his ideas are still relevant."

Movies and Songs

Through expressions of popular culture such as movies and concerts, the life, thoughts and texts of Adi Shankara have reached a wide audience. A 1983 Sanskrit film by G.V. Iyer depicted the sage's life, as did the 2013 Telugu movie *Jagadguru Adi Shankara*, which featured Nagarjuna and other Telugu film stars. The first recipient of the Bharat Ratna award in India (1998), M.S. Subbulakshmi, mesmerized audiences with her rendition of Shankara's song "Bhaja Govindam." She also showcased "Maitreem Bhajata," a composition by Sri Chandrashekara Saraswati, 68th head of the Shankara Kanchi Math. Popular singers like Ranjani-Gayatri and Rahul Vellal, have sung many of Shankara's devotional hymns, avidly watched on YouTube. The rendition of "Bhaja Govindam" by Gabriella Burnel, known as Gaiea Sanskrit on YouTube, has clocked 1.6 million views. She is one of the trendiest ambassadors of Indian culture. Other YouTube channels, such as Tattva Shankara, are spreading Shankara's teachings in local languages. There is a movie in the pipeline on Adi Shankara slated to be released in 2025 by Ekatma Dham of the Madhya Pradesh government, spearheaded by Swami Mitrananda.



Samadhi Sculpture in Kedarnath

After the historic floods of 2013 destroyed much around Kedarnath Temple, including the sage's ancient samadhi shrine (where he left his body), Prime Minister Modi undertook to have a 12-foot statue carved for the site. The project was a collaboration between the government and various private organizations. Carved from chlorite schist stone by master sculptors from Mysore, the statue is designed to withstand the region's harsh weather conditions at 12,000 feet above sea level, including rain, snow and sunshine.

Uttarakhand holds much significance with respect to Shankaracharya's life, as he established one of the four mathas, Jyoshi Math, here in Chamoli district and also established the idol at Badrinath. India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, has been very active in preserving the legacy of Adi Shankara for contemporary India to understand and benefit from. He has encouraged all seekers to undertake travels following the trails taken by the swami across India.

The statue was unveiled and the Samadhi Museum inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on November 5, 2021. The museum celebrates the saint's vast knowledge and qualities and stands as a testament to India's rich cultural heritage. Visiting this site offers a unique spiritual experience, deeply intertwined with the rich tapestry of Hindu philosophy and the breathtaking natural beauty of the Himalayas.



Ekatma Dham

India continues to erect prominent statues at significant places associated with the Acharya's history. The government of Madhya Pradesh, under erstwhile Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, established the Ekatma Dham project, featuring the remarkable 108-foot bronze "Statue of Oneness" in Omkareshwar, unveiled on September 21, 2024 (see photo on page 50). Today it is an integral part of the state's tourism campaign. Omkareshwar, one of the 12 Jyotirlinga shrines of Shiva, is a highly revered Hindu pilgrimage site. The establishment of Adi Shankaracharya's statue here links his Advaita Vedanta philosophy with the broader context of Hindu spirituality and the worship of Shiva. The complex aims to educate visitors about his life, philosophy and contributions to Hindu thought, as well as to promote his message of unity and universal consciousness. Over 23,000 villages in Madhya Pradesh contributed metals for the forging of the statue. The techniques employed to cast, transport and assemble the statue are testament to India's modern engineering methods.

Alongside the statue, there is the Advaita Lok Museum on Adi Shankara. The Acharya Shankar International Institute of Advaita Vedanta is slated to come up there in the future, with centers named after his four disciples in the fields of Advaita philosophy, social science, science, music and the arts. Consider the youth initiative Advaita Awakening Youth Retreat, in which 50 youth delegations are given an introduction to the concepts of Advaita Vedanta and the Prakharana Granthas of Shankara. Teachers from spiritual organizations, such as Chinmaya Mission and Arsha Vidya Mandir, are guides for the retreats, which range up to 10 days each. Ekatma Dham covers all expenses, including boarding and lodging. Interested young seekers in Vedanta are encouraged to register for such retreats. Leaders and

staff of Ekatma Dham include spiritual teachers from Sringeri Math, Juna Akhara, Vivekananda Kendra, Chinmaya Mission, Ramakrishna Mission and others. All these organizations are resolutely enabling this massive endeavor.

On into the Future

Today, the noble vision of Adi Shankara finds resonance in the compassionate endeavors of individuals dedicated to healing and service. One such beacon of hope is Sankara Nethralaya, "Temple of the Eye," which commenced its mission in 1978. This remarkable initiative owes its existence to the visionary call of His Holiness Jayendra Saraswati, from the revered lineage of the Kanchi Sankara Math. In an enlightening article penned for the esteemed *Indian Journal of Ophthalmology*, Dr. Sengamedu Srinivasa Badrinath, the founding father of Sankara Nethralaya in Chennai, emphasized Nethralaya's mission: to provide quality and affordable ophthalmic care to all, regardless of social class or caste, to infuse every endeavor with a missionary spirit and to perceive their workplace not merely as a clinical outreach, but as a sacred space where work becomes worship, carried out with sincerity, dedication and boundless love.

In these turbulent times of mistrust among nations and communities, in a war-ravaged world facing pandemics and their aftermath, it is vital to pivot to the teachings and thoughts of India's spiritual general, Adi Shankara. Especially for the younger generation, there is so much to learn. By the age of 32, he was able to accomplish so much in life. Why cannot we each take up one challenge that confronts our society and work towards eradicating it, be it climate change or any public health or economic challenge? He set up so many institutions;

Yatras: In the center Shankara sits on the Throne of Omniscience in Kashmir. All around, the artist depicts his arduous travels, on foot, from the icy Himalayas to the torrid south. The mathas he founded are shown along with the Sree Vadakkunnathan Temple in Thrissur, Kerala, where the sage's parents propitiated Lord Shiva and performed intense tapas for his birth, and which now holds his samadhi.

it is the institutions that will produce competent individuals. One can take inspiration from him for envisioning long-term institutions that can benefit mankind and face the challenges that confront us as humans. Initiatives such as the "Walk of Hope" led by spiritual leader Sri M to promote interfaith harmony and peace, are espoused to further enhance the message of the sage's teachings of universal love and oneness. India's G-20 presidency in 2023 was themed "Vasudaiva Kutumbakam," which means the world is one family, again aligning with Shankara's philosophy.

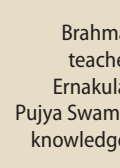
For Shankara, every opinion mattered. In a structured and methodical manner, he put forth his points persuasively. Speaking of persuasiveness, he is an embodiment of soft power, which is a potent force in contemporary international relations. While there are many critics of soft power—the cognitive innovation enunciated by American political scientist Professor Joseph Nye in the 1990s—there is no denying that it has the ability to shape people's preferences through policies, culture and values in a non-coercive manner.

Shankara, in his time, did this with aplomb, attracting like-minded seekers to Advaita Vedanta. While convincing others of his point of view, he never resorted to a single violent or even aggressive tactic. He simply, logically and effectively shared his philosophy of seeing one in all through the prism of Advaita Vedanta as an antidote to sectarianism and conflict. It would be an error to restrict India's prodigy to just philosophy—he was a poet, a literary marvel, a theological genius and an exemplar of devotional practices. Today, through each of these prisms, he remains a source of inspiration for all.

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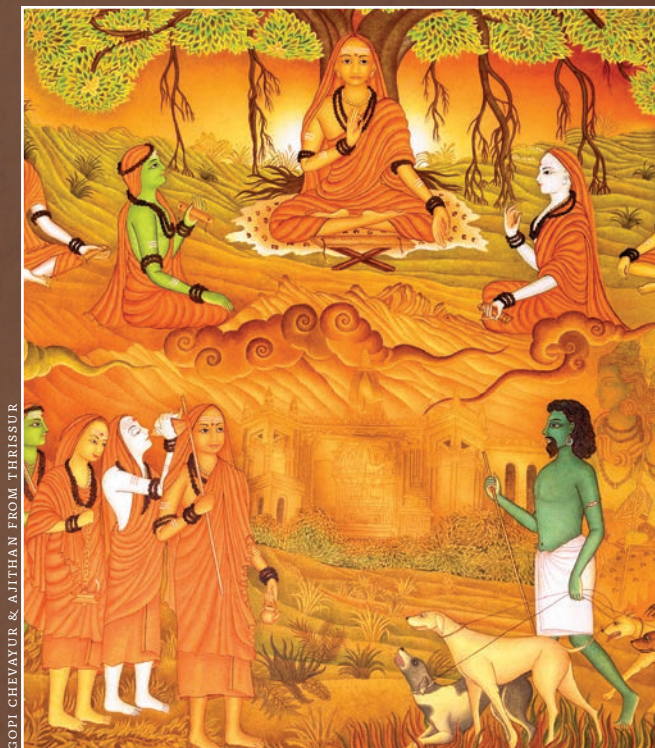


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Meeting the Chandala

One day, following a cool bath in the river Ganga at Kashi, Adi Shankara, Padmapada and other disciples were on their way to the sacred temple of Sri Vishvanatha. Walking through the narrow streets, he encountered a chandala (low-caste, "untouchable") with a pack of dogs in tow. Inadvertently, Shankara uttered "gaccha gaccha—move away." Unmoved, the chandala retorted sarcastically, "O best among the twice-born, by saying 'move move,' do you wish to move matter from matter, or do you wish to separate the pure awareness which is present here in me from the pure awareness present there in you? Is there any difference between the sun reflected in the water of the holy Ganges and that which is reflected in a dirty pool in the street of chandalas?"

Recognizing his folly, the acharya immediately fell at the feet of the man. Inspired by that casual encounter between a wise master and a lowly chandala in the narrow lanes of Kashi, Shankara spontaneously recited the famed *Manisha Panchakam*, a composition relating the four mahavakyas in brief and describing the glory of the guru who is not just the knower of Brahman but indeed Brahman alone. Shankaracharya declares that such a person—no matter how he appears and irrespective of his origin, caste, creed, nationality, status and so on—is his guru. Legend says it was Shiva who appeared as the chandala, and Shiva to whom Shankara prostrated.



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Adi Shankara's Birth Home

BY DR. ARUNDHATI SUNDAR

To truly experience Adi Shankara Nilayam, go past the main entrance listening to the bird calls, strolling in the shade of the tall fruit and flowering trees, drinking in the fragrance, and enter into a quieter, more serene era. Look across the open, sandy yard at the 20-meter wide façade of the main illom (house) with its clay-tiled sloping roof. Off to the left is the Kulapuramalika (traditionally a guest house), and set back between the two is the Saraswati Sabha.

A large sign narrates the historical significance of this compound. Melpazhur Mana, the ancestral, maternal home and birthplace of Adi Shankara, is located in the village of Veliyanad in Kerala. It belonged to Sankaran Nambutiri, a descendent of Adi Shankara's maternal family. He opted to release it to Pujya Gurudev Swami Chinmayananda, who established here in 1990 the Chinmaya International Foundation (CIF), an institute for Sanskrit and Indology research.

In those days the property was in a dilapidated condition. CIF undertook historical preservation of the three ancient structures, retaining the foundation and the walls, reproducing exactly the wooden frame, built without nails—a highly skilled, mathematically exact manual task currently practiced by few artisans.

The Mana is a four-winged structure (nalukettu) surrounding a central courtyard. The main entrance leads into a square room called the *pumukham*, with 108 lotuses carved into the wooden ceiling. Tall



Holy compound: (clockwise from upper left) Oil lamp in front of the 350-year-old Swayambhu Ayyappa Temple; rebuilt intricate roof structure; the central home courtyard (the lighted doorway at center of photo is the birthroom); the eastern wing, showing Kerala-style mural paintings on the wall; aerial view of main structures



wooden pillars line the corridor around the courtyard. In the eastern section, close to the traditional kitchen and well, is the sacred room where Shankara was born. The mind becomes effortlessly meditative in the divine aura of this space, where an *akhanda-jyoti* (eternal lamp) is kept lit in front of the golden *vigraha* (icon) of Shri Adi Shankara. Local tradition has it that Adi Shankara's *vidyarambha* (a ritual initiation in childhood to literacy) and *upanayana* (initiation to Vedic study) ceremonies were performed at Melpazhur Mana.

A fascinating glimpse into the life and works of Adi Shankara is depicted through the eight Kerala mural-style paintings by Shri Gopi and Shri Ajithan.

The precinct houses ancient temples to Deities—Vettakkoruvaan (Kirata Shiva), Shri Nagayakshi and Bhuvaneshvari Devi—that were probably worshiped since before the time of Adi Shankara and his mother Aryamba. The Swayambhu Ayyappa Temple is comparatively recent, some 350 years old. The stairs lead down to the adjacent *kulam* (pond). At sunset on festive occasions, devotees light the 1,000 oil lamps surrounding the temple, with arati bells adding to the divine ambience.

Chinmaya International Foundation is a place of quiet contemplation, ideal for sadhakas and academics, with a library of manuscripts and Indic research books. It provides residential facilities for retreats and conferences (email: welcometocif@chinfo.org).





ANCIENT CITIES

The Sweet Nectar of Madurai

From the grand Meenakshi citadel to hundreds of roadside shrines, explore the historic streets of this deeply devout South Indian city



PHOTOS & STORY BY ANNE PETRY

ORD SIVA'S BLESSINGS MIGHT EXPLAIN the richness of Madurai's religious heritage. The city has been a major settlement place for two millennia; its historical records stretch more than 2,500 years. Founded by the first Tamil dynasty, called Pandya, Madurai today has a population of over 15 million. Sometimes called the Lotus City or the Athens of the East, it is one of the oldest and holiest cities in India.

It is believed the name *Madurai* comes from *Madhurapuri* (sweetness), after the divine nectar that poured from the hair of God Siva while He was blessing the town. More prosaically, the word *Madurai* could also be a derivative of *Marutham*, meaning "fertile area." Whatever the origin, two things are certain: millions of Indians come every year on pilgrimage to this ancient city, and the inhabitants are undoubtedly among the most religious people in the country.

Follow me for a walk in the historical quar-

ter to learn more about the famous Meenakshi Temple, and also to discover some of the hidden temples in which the locals pray, meditate, gather or work.

In big towns, people are easily overwhelmed by their busy, modern lifestyle, disconnected from nature and animals, more interested in the Internet than the inner worlds. The newer part of Madurai is no exception to this rule, with its brand-new shopping malls and elegant restaurants, monstrous traffic jams, constant noise and large crowds. The old part of the city is a whole other story. No where else in India have I seen a big city with so many shrines and temples in every street, every corner.

Strolling through the ancient, narrow streets, there is a kind of village atmosphere. One can see cows being milked in front of a temple, goats lying next to a shrine or hens looking for something to peck at between two religious statues. In the heart of ancient Madurai, women take time to create

the traditional floor paintings called *kolam*, men wear the conventional dhoti, groups of children in uniforms with bags bigger than themselves happily skip to school, and many people still walk barefoot.

Ram, born and raised in Madurai but now living in another town, told me, "It always feels good to come back to Madurai, because here I find the values of humble and authentic people, which are kindness and attention. The people here actually care about each other, just as they care about the visitors who come to their city for religious or tourist reasons. They cherish their city for its importance in the history of Lord Siva and are very devout believers. They do not question anything in Hinduism but simply practice their religion as it has been done for centuries. Religious habits are strongly rooted in the locals' daily lives, and even today young people go to the temples by themselves, because they have a deep faith in the Hindu Gods."

This loyalty to Hindu Deities is very much



ALL PHOTOS: ANNE PETRY



Streets of devotion: (clockwise from far left) The towers of Meenakshi Temple rise above the city; a local prostrates outside a Meenakshi Temple gopuram; a woman prays at a shrine on her way to work; in Madurai's old quarter, every street has its own shrine, small or big, dedicated to various Deities; in the middle of his working day, a rickshaw driver receives the priest's blessing at a Ganesha shrine

alive among the local population. Early morning is the time when the temples are busiest, as no one would start their day without doing a few circumambulations, a puja or a quick prayer. It doesn't need to be long,

but going to the temple or stopping in front of a shrine seems to be a necessity for most residents. Throughout the day, while walking around the city, one can see a young auto-rickshaw driver stopping his yellow vehicle in front of a temple to get a quick blessing from the priest. A mother with her child in her arms lines up at the window of a temple to give money as an offering. A man stuck in traffic spontaneously gets off his scooter to light a candle for his Gods. Another takes off his shoes and lies down in the middle of the street, in the front of a temple, face down, to make a long prostration.

Sudharsan is the perfect example of this intense faith. He is a 40-year-old priest whose father before him officiated in the

same temple. He comments, "This 300-year-old temple, where I work and spend my days, has always been a part of my life. In fact, my earliest memories are in this temple as a small child. At the age of six, I started learning the duties of a priest. I never had to think about what studies or work I would do, because I always knew that my life would be here in this temple, practicing my religion. Becoming a priest was a kind of legacy that my father left me, and I am fully happy to be a part of people's lives."

Although modern spiritless buildings have invaded the ancient streets, there are still many old structures, such as colonial houses and centuries-old temples and shrines. Being so much part of their environment, locals





Temples everywhere: (clockwise from above left) Every morning, before office hours, Kodal Agar Temple is busy with devotees who come to pray for the day ahead; breathtaking sculptures and paintings inside the Sri Draupadi Temple; priest at Sri Veeraghava Temple performs a puja before an stone murti of Hanuman

fully adapt these traces of the past into their modern existence. They have combined a small temple with a scooter repair store, a medium-sized shrine with a taxi stand and turned a broken statue into a chair used by a couturier for sewing. Very often the inside of a temple becomes a meeting place for friends who want to have a quiet chat.

The historical and religious heritage has been integrated in the modern way of life, mostly for the better and unfortunately sometimes for the worse. In the famous Elukadal Street, the beautiful, ancient carved walls are now used to hang all sorts of things like shoes, pots or blankets, turning this authentic street into a shopping arena. All in all, it is inspiring to see how history and religion are an integral part of the lives of the townsfolk and are not something separate from them or their daily routine.

I met Shreya, 21, from Jharkhand, a state located more than 1,250 miles from Madurai. She and seven family members came to Tamil Nadu for a religious pilgrimage, and

Madurai and its famous Meenakshi Temple were on their agenda. She says, "Walking around the old part of Madurai is like walking through an open-air museum; they speak one of the oldest languages in the world. There is such a rich culture here, and the heritage is quite well preserved. I love the fact that on every street you can find another colorful temple; on every corner there is a small shrine with flowers or lit oil lamps. It is obvious that religious practice is stronger in this state than in my own, and it is uplifting to see such strong devotion and faith."

History and Stories

If there is one place where you can feel this devotion to the fullest, it is the Meenakshi Sundareshwarar Temple, popularly referred to as the Meenakshi Temple, one of India's oldest and largest temples. It is dedicated to Goddess Meenakshi (a form of Parvati) and Lord Sundareshwarar (a form of God Siva). A prime example of Dravidian architecture, this temple is renowned for its exquisite, colorful façade and 14 slightly curved pyramidal towers, called *gopurams*. The tallest of these reaches 170 feet.

Historically, Meenakshi Temple is mentioned as early as the 1st century CE, and scholars claim it is as old as the city itself. The temple as it stands today was rebuilt throughout the 16th century and then repaired, renovated and expanded in the 17th century. Its enormous complex occu-



ALL PHOTOS: ANNE PETRY

Sales and art: (above) Store items hang on ancient walls; (right) a local woman makes kolam drawings with rice flour and flowers on the ground in front of a temple

pies nearly 15 acres in the heart of the city. It has countless courtyards and mandapas (pillared halls), thousands of sculptures depicting Gods and mystical creatures, and a large pond, the Porthamarai Kulam, with golden lotuses floating on the holy water.

A distinguishing feature of this temple is the fact that God and Goddess are worshiped equally in the same place, in matching shrines about 100 feet apart. Several legends are attached to the Meenakshi Temple. One tells that a royal couple who were childless offered their prayers to Lord Siva, asking Him for a son. To their disappointment, a triple-breasted girl emerged from a sacred fire. When the couple expressed their concern about the girl's abnormal appearance, a divine voice told them that the girl's third breast would disappear as soon as she met her future husband. The relieved king named his daughter Meenakshi, and later she became his proud successor.

As the legend continues, Meenakshi ruled over the ancient city of Madurai and also tried to control the neighboring kingdoms by force. It is said that she was on her way to capture Kailash, the abode of Lord Siva, when Siva himself appeared in front of her. It was then that Meenakshi's third breast disappeared and she knew instantly that she had met her better half. Siva and Meenakshi returned to Madurai where their wedding took place, with all the Gods and Goddesses as guests. Even today, the wedding ceremony is celebrated every year in April during a festival called Thirukalyanam (celestial wedding). This month-long festival attracts over a million devotees who attend several events, such as the Chariot Festival and the





Streets of devotion: (top, from left to right) Ceiling paintings, sculptures and engravings take center stage around Meenakshi Temple; religious articles are sold all around; a religious detail on a street corner; ancient sculptures showcase intricate carving; (below, from left to right) the ceiling of a temple entrance corridor; a statue and painting in the Sri Veeraghava temple; locals keep the old shrines or create new ones to integrate into their homes and stores; a huge entry gopuram

Float Festival. Even on regular days, about 10,000 pilgrims from all over India and beyond visit Meenakshi. One hardly hears any ring tones and doesn't see any selfies, as mo-

bile phones and cameras are banned. Modernity stays outside and pure devotion remains inside.

Saranya, who has been working as a hotel receptionist for 13 years, confirms, "A very large majority of the people who come to Madurai are here to visit Meenakshi Temple. I would say that 80 to 90% of them are Indians, traveling with friends or family and making a religious pilgrimage. We are honored to show them our heritage!"

Impressive Temples Nearby

Meenakshi is not the only breathtaking temple in Madurai. The best way to discover others is to wander around and ask the friendly denizens. One such is Koodal Azghar Temple, dedicated to Lord Vishnu, covering about

25 acres. Supposedly built by the Pandyas, the temple was noted in the great epics and poems of Tamil literature. The first mention could be during the Sangam period (300 BCE to 300 CE), when, in the 16th century, pillared halls, sculptures and major shrines were added by the Vijayanagar and Madurai Nayak kingdoms, who held important celebrations and prayer ceremonies here.

With its flamboyant Dravidian style, the architecture is a perfect representation of South Indian temples, with statues and columns of rare elegance—beautiful carvings and engravings on which different shades of colors have been added. In 2006, the temple was renovated using natural vegetable dyes and paints made from Kerala herbs. A unique feature is the presence of three dif-

ferent postures of Vishnu in close proximity. The compound protected by massive granite walls. Pass under the large gopuram into the main courtyard, you leave behind the noisy city and engulfed in peace and serenity. However, during the Tamil month of Vaikasi (May and June), annual festivities take place, the Dashavatara (ten main avatars of Vishnu) are staged and the Koodal Azghar Temple becomes very busy. Thousands of pilgrims come every day to offer their prayers.

Whether it is to pray individually or sit and observe one of the six pujas that take place daily, Koodal Azghar Temple is the perfect place to witness the loyalty of the local

people to their Deities.

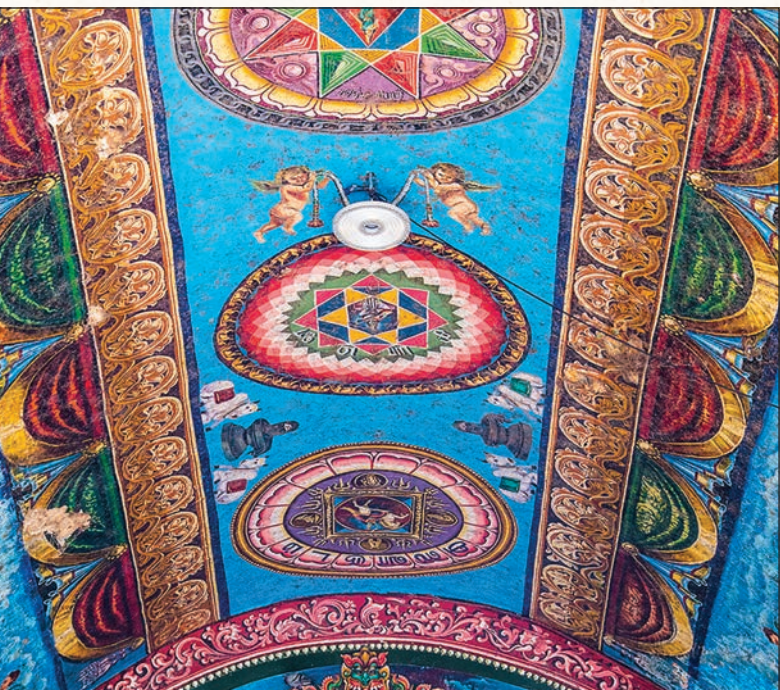
Those who fully want to discover the religious side of Madurai should also visit other temples, including Sri Veeraraghava Perumal Temple, Immayilum Nanmai Tharuvar Temple and Draupadi Amman Temple.

Conclusion

One of the oldest living places in the world, which once had links with ancient Greece and Rome, Madurai has adapted to modern times by using the past to uphold the present. It is a place where the highly logical urban planning principle of the Vedic era meets the chaotic and non-rational architecture

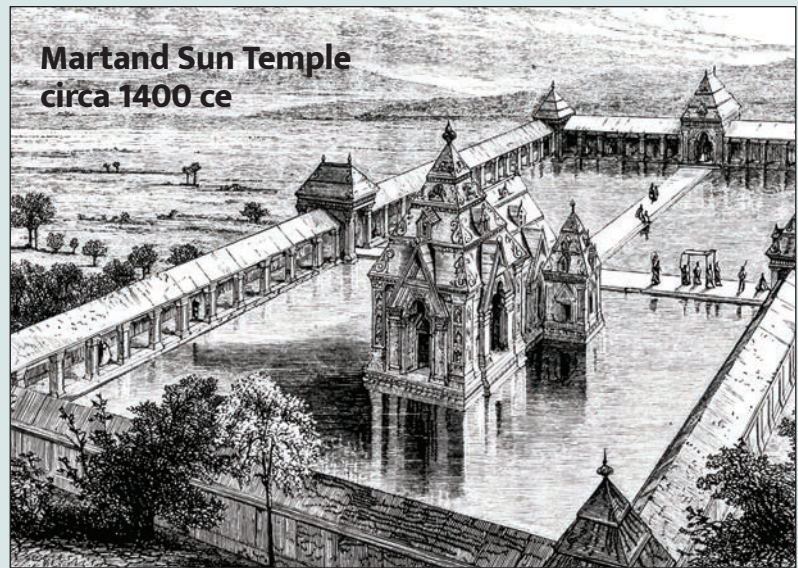
of today, a place where ancient temples still welcome devotees from all over the world.

The cultural capital of Tamil Nadu, Madurai is not a city stuck in the past. On the contrary, it is an extremely lively scene where people can freely express their deep devotion in Hinduism. While Meenakshi Temple is the highlight of Madurai, the pulse of the city can be felt all around, so lose yourself in the small back alleys of the fascinating old quarter and be ready for a journey through time and space.





Martand Sun Temple today



Martand Sun Temple
circa 1400 ce



Ksheer Bhawani Protected



Bhadrakali Rebuilt



TEMPLES

Kashmir's Temples Emerge from Difficult Times Stronger than Ever

While not on the scale of some built by ancient kings, 6,000 temples dot the landscape, many being rebuilt with the cooperation of all communities

By CHOODIE SIVARAM, BENGALURU

HUNDREDS OF ANCIENT TEMPLES IN Kashmir reveal that the land is linked with historical legends from the eras of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Despite repeated invasions that left many temples in ruins, the traditional bonding of people with the land and its heritage has not diminished. Temples like Shankaracharya Hill, Matan Suriya Shrine and the magnificent Martand Sun Temple (above, in ruins) are on the tourism map and frequented by visitors to Kashmir. Unknown to many are the numer-

ous temples in every district of Kashmir that continue to be active. These are small simple structures without any pomp. Most have been rebuilt and maintained by contributions from devotees. This is the seat of Kashmir Saivism, and Siva temples abound. Goddess Parvati, also, is worshiped in many of Her forms: as Shyama, Sharika Devi, Ksheer Bhawani, Roop Bhawani, Bhadrakali, Sharda, Chandi Mata and Maha Ragnya Bhagawati. The ancient text *Bringesh Samhita* contains descriptions of all the major shrines in Kashmir. In this article we will describe a few we visited in

person and this will give a good idea of the rest. We start with **Martand Sun Temple**, one of the greatest of the ancient temples. It lies in ruins thirty-nine miles from Srinagar, in the Anant Nag district of Kashmir. Resting on a vast expanse of land, even in its desecrated form the temple reveals the ancient grandeur of Kashmir. The solid walls 40 feet tall, the lofty central edifice, towering pillars of the surrounding colonnade, figurines of Gods and Goddesses, including those of rivers Ganga and Jamuna, on the walls of the sanctum sanctorum—every element evokes awe and, yes, sadness.

Walter Lawrence writes in his 1895 book *The Valley of Kashmir*, "Martand is a precious specimen of ancient art, deserving a foremost place among the remains of antiquity. It is to be preserved. If the state ever takes up the work of conservation of ancient monuments, Martand is the grandest of the ancient buildings." According to archaeological records, this is the first among the three major ancient Sun temples in India to be built by kings, the other two being Konark in Orissa and Modera in Gujarat. Martand was constructed by King Lalitaditya Muktapida (697–738 ce), one of several temples he commissioned on the lands under his control. It is believed that King Ramdev from Gujarat later expanded the temple, adding 184 murtis in a pillared hallway around the parikrama, or circumambulation path. Our guide tells us, "The Martand temple complex also housed 84 smaller shrines. The roof of the sanctum sanctorum was constructed in such a way as to allow the Sun's rays on the Deity throughout the day. Besides, there were four other temples in the complex. While the two in front were dedicated to worship, the two behind were reserved for resolution of problems and conflicts among

people by the village council, or *panchayat*." As an example of the advanced technology of the period, the guide explained that the temple pond was fed from a mountain spring 22 miles away, and the water was purified by a filtration system. An 19th century drawing (above) of the intact temple shows the enormous pond created by the outer walls, with the temple standing island-like in the middle. Muslim invader Sikander ruled Kashmir from 1389 to 1413. Near the beginning of his reign, he established a large camp just for the demolition of this temple. The solid structure resisted all efforts over a year's time until finally it was destroyed with the help of fire to heat and crack the stones. The archaeology department has been working on the restoration of the temple, uncovering in the process innumerable stone slabs and murtis. Functioning temples in Kashmir are different from those in the rest of India. Prior to the exodus in the 1990s, Hindus were a mere 2.45% of the population, definitely not enough to support a temple on the scale of Martand. There's also the issue of topography, with hilly areas not suitable for large temples. Most temples I visited were wooden structures without any pomp. The Deities are often in the midst of a pond—a unique

Kashmir's temples: (top to bottom, left to right) ruins of Martand Sun Temple; 19th century art depicted the intact temple—notice the huge pond formed by the walled enclosure. Ksheer Bhawani Temple was protected by the army; soldiers perform fire worship. Bhadrakali was burnt down; the bare but living chinmar tree behind the rebuilt temple was all that survived; Goddess enshrined; saint's samadhi shrine. feature common to Kashmir's temples, dating back at least to Martand. **Ksheer Bhawani Temple** of Ragnya Devi at Tikker, located in Kupwara district of Kashmir, is one of the most important shrines for Kashmiri Pandits. Protected by the army, it was virtually unaffected by the unrest. Associated with the Ramayana period, this was Parvati's first stop after leaving Sri Lanka. Nestled in the midst of the mountains, the temple complex has shrines to Goddess Sharda, statues of all the saints who stayed here and nine Chinara trees (*Platanus orientalis* or Old World sycamore), believed to be the manifestation of nine forms of Durga. The annual all-night festival signifying



Mattan Suriya



Gopiteerth



Shankaracharya Hill



Hari Parbhat Sharika Devi Deity

Revered by both Hindus and Muslims: (left to right) The ancient Mattan Suriya Shrine was revered even by the Mughals; the damaged Siva Lingam at the restored Gopiteerth Temple; the famed Shankaracharya Hill, a must-visit place for all tourists to Srinagar; the massive murti of Goddess Sharika Devi at Hari Parbhat

the birth of Goddess Ragnya Devi was celebrated on May 28, 2023. When I went to the temple that night, the pristine surroundings of the temple were filled with the fragrance of smoke emanating from the havan and devotees immersed in singing bhajans in Kashmiri. "This festival had stopped after the exodus, but we resumed it in 2011. Over the past few years the number of devotees has increased to thousands," says Sunil Peschan, a native of Tikker. "This holy water is Ragnya Devi. The color of the water changes, prophesying the future. At times the flowers offered take forms of spiritual symbols."

The temple abounds in stories of miracles. Devotees and security guards posted at the temple narrate incidents of sighting the Goddess in various forms. During the exodus, the temple was handed over to security forces and hence was protected from desecration. The temple has recently seen restoration and the construction of a dharmashala for devotees. "Earlier, people would stay with relatives here; now it has become crucial to provide accommodation for devotees from other cities," says Peschin.

It was not just the Kashmiri Pandits and other Hindus, but many people, irrespective of religion, have faith in the Goddess and take part in the festivities. Firdous Ahmed, a Srinagar businessman, told me, "When I go to the temple, I don't consume non-vegetar-

ian or other non-sattvic foods. During the festival for two days, none of the houses in the vicinity of the temple cooks nonvegetarian food. We revere the Goddess."

Bhadrakali Temple met the opposite fate, being completely destroyed. Traveling to this shrine at Handwara just a few years ago was extremely dangerous; the area was a hotbed of militancy. It is close to Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, where insurgency threats from across the border still keep the army on high alert. Driving through the mountains to reach this temple, we passed through thick forests of chinnar, or Himalayan cedar tree (*Cedrus deodara*). It was so beautiful, I wished we could keep driving.

Located on the top of a hill, the temple enshrines the powerful Deity Bhadrakali. In 1994 it was entirely burned down, but a partially burned Chinar tree survived. The temple was rebuilt by the army in 2004. According to legends, Goddess Bhadrakali settled here after slaying the demon Mahishasura and meditated under this chinar tree, which is now part of the inner sanctum and where the Goddess is believed to reside. Vishnu appeared to thank Her for slaying the demon and granted the boon that whoever visits the temple will have their prayers answered.

Soldiers from the Indian army narrate how the Goddess has manifested often, guiding them to safety and helping them succeed

during military actions. With the soldiers patrolling the dense forest terrain on the mountains on foot, especially at night, with the enemy across the valley, one can sense that it's the Goddess protecting them.

The priest told me, "The temple abounds in miracles. When the militants blew up the temple with explosives, the murti was destroyed and the legendary chinar tree caught fire, but it was not destroyed. The local Muslims have been very supportive. They have immense faith in this temple and regularly come here to pray."

The much smaller **Mattan Suriya Shrine**, about 15 miles from the Martand Sun temple, remarkably escaped damage in the 1990s. It is an ancient shrine, said to have existed from the time of the creation of Kashmir, when the Satisar Lake, which filled the valley, was drained due to earthquake activity. The temple has individual shrines for the Sun God, Lord Rama, sage Kashyapa and, more recently, Siva. The Mattan shrine is regarded as an auspicious place for religious ceremonies, especially *shraddha* (obsequies to ancestors and departed souls).

Tej Kishan Tikoo, secretary of Mattan Teerth Trust, told me, "The local Muslims revere this temple. When anyone falls sick, they consume water from the spring here. If their cattle fall sick, they use this spring water to heal them. They use the earth from

this temple and smear it on their foreheads for well-being, especially if they are unwell. There has been harmony between the communities here; when the exodus happened, five to six Pandit families stayed back and maintained the temple. The temple was unaffected during militancy."

Prathibha, a devotee of Lakshman Jhoo Ashram, was my guide to **Gopiteerth**, reached through a narrow passage alongside a canal. Its serene surroundings of Nishat gardens infuse calmness. A huge chinar tree beckons you to meditate under it.

During the exodus, the temple was desecrated and murtis were discarded. Dr. Maharaj Kishan Razdan rebuilt the temple. He's a 84-year-old surgeon settled in the US who has rebuilt nearly 10 temples (15 more in the pipeline) out of his personal earnings, to the tune of US\$600,000 so far. He personally drives each one of the projects. As with Mattan and other temples, this also is revered by local Muslim villagers.

The most conspicuous monument commanding the attention of a visitor to Srinagar is the **Shankaracharya Hill Temple**. Overlooking the city at an elevation of 1,000 feet, it is believed to be the oldest in Kashmir. As one ascends the 240 well-spaced steps to reach the top, the panoramic beauty of Srinagar leaves you spell-bound. An additional flight of around twenty steps leads you fur-

ther up to the sanctum sanctorum, which houses a majestic Sivalinga.

Originally known as Gopadri, the hill later came to be known as Shankaracharya Hill. The 10th-century saint Adi Shankaracharya, the apostle of Advaita, is said to have spent time in deep meditation at a cave below the temple, where he composed his famous hymn *Soundarya Lahari*. The temple is thought to have been built by King Sandiman, 2629-2564 BCE, and later repaired by Gopaditya, 426-365 BCE, and Lalitaditya, 699-736 CE. For some reason Sikander, who went on a rampage destroying temples in the region, did not attack this one.

The temple is flooded with tourists and devotees from all around the world. Virtually every Hindu tourist visiting Kashmir pays obeisance here. The temple, under the care of Dharmarth Trust, was unaffected by the turmoil of militancy.

Hari Parbhat is an imposing hill in Srinagar that houses numerous temples, the most important being the **Sharika Devi Temple**. Kashmiri Hindus regularly visit this shrine. A circumambulation of the hill is considered sacred.

I visited many other temples during my weeks in Kashmir. Among them was **Manzgam Ragnya Devi** in Kulgam district, which was completely razed to the ground in 1989, with rebuilding starting in 1996. Another

was **Kalpalmochan Teerth** in Shopian town, a shrine of immense importance to the pandits as a place to perform shraddha ceremonies for the dead. It, too, was destroyed in the militancy and its lands usurped. Ramesh Kumar Pandita was instrumental in its rescue and reconstruction from 2009.

Another pandit, Maharaj Kishan Kaul, told me, "Initially the locals troubled us a lot and we fought back. Some locals threatened us. I decided that even if I was going to die I will not give up. This is the place where I grew up, and it's our temple."

The **Chandigam Temple** in Kupwara was abandoned in the 1990s and the murti was taken away by the fleeing pandits. In 2022, a delegation of Muslims along with some pandits approached the local army unit requesting them to rebuild the temple, as well as an adjacent Sufi shrine which had also been destroyed. Work was completed in a short time with the help of local Muslims, and worship resumed. There are over 6,000 ancient temples and hundreds of gurudwaras in Kashmir. Efforts are underway to restore them with the support of local Muslims. Festivals like Janmashtami, Ram Navami, Guru Purab and pujas at Devi shrines have come back to their old glory. Srinagar was all decked up even for Christmas. The harmony of coexistence is returning to the valley.



IMAGE GENERATED BY DALL-E AI

D H A R M A

How Hindus Are Using AI

Adopting artificial intelligence to enhance the productivity, cultural engagement and the spiritual outreach of Hindu dharmic institutions

BY ADITYA MUTHAIAH, OREGON

THE LATEST BIG TECHNOLOGY IN THE world today is AI. Ever wondered how it can be fruitfully used by Hindu dharmic institutions? We look into whether and how such institutions are currently using AI-powered tools, such as OpenAI's GPT-4, Dalle-E, Midjourney, Google Gemini, etc. We also examine how they plan to use Artificial Intelligence in the future, and include recommendations on how AI technologies might be implemented to enhance work efficiency. AI harnesses complex algorithms and vast data sets to enable machines to perform tasks that typically require human intelligence. These systems continuously improve and adapt by learning from their experiences, much like we do.

AI currently helps many organizations by automating tasks, analyzing data for insights, making predictions, and so much more. It

can improve customer service with AI-powered chatbots, and enhance cybersecurity by detecting online threats. As technology advances, AI enables organizations to stay com-



ADITYA MUTHAIAH

petitive by improving worker productivity and efficiency in the workplace. Major tech companies, along the lines of Google, Microsoft and OpenAI, Meta and Amazon, are not only leading the development of AI but also using it in many areas. A few use cases include helping programmers write code, helping creators with their digital creations, such as audio/video/digital art, personalized advertising, creating virtual worlds or interactive spaces, and AI virtual assistants (e.g., Microsoft Office Copilot).

Use Cases

Hindu dharmic organizations currently use Artificial Intelligence in many simple ways. This is mainly because Generative AI sometimes produces results with numerous biases and made-up information (hallucinations). Some Hindu institutions have fully steered clear of AI for the time being. One example

Technology superdrive: (far left) Dall-E AI generates an image of a monk at an ashram using AI for his religious outreach; author Aditya Muthaiah; (below) Google introduces its Gemini AI in December of 2023

is Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, commonly known as BAPS. "We have not used AI in any form at BAPS due to the reason that our organization's high-reliability bar is not yet being met by these AI technologies. Hopefully, we will utilize AI in the future, but that time is not now. We use components of technology when and if it makes sense, but there has to be certain attributes in the technology before we deploy it from an organizational perspective," says Biren Gandhi of BAPS.

At Chinmaya Vishwa Vidyapeeth, Chinmaya Mission's University in Kerala, coordinators have the same thought. Bramacharini Taarini Chaitanya explained, "A lot of work will have to be done between AI and subject experts before the generation of authentic data. CVV has included a subject [a university-level course] on AI and its implementation, but this is only its first year, and there's not much to say as of now."

However, this is not true at every dharmic institution. At Central Chinmaya Mission Trust headquartered in Mumbai with worldwide operations, the social media wing is actively using AI in small ways. "We are using AI to refine our content using ChatGPT. We use embedded AI in certain tools, like Canva, and sometimes we are using certain apps and tools for AI voice-generation for our videos. And we occasionally are generat-

ing images for our social media posts," says Ms. Anupama Bathala of CCMT. Anu-ji also spoke about how AI is only being used in social media at CCMT and it is not yet found to be reliable in other use cases: "Everything we are doing so far [with AI] is only from a social media perspective. In actual publications, we have not started using AI much at all."

At the HINDUISM TODAY offices at Kauai's Hindu Monastery, they have started using AI for a broad range of use cases: from creating Hindu games, writing code and cloning the voice of the founder, to other linguistics uses, creating art, generating music and general research. Sannyasin Tillainathaswami gave an example about how they created a small jumbled word game as a demonstration, with words relating to Hinduism and yoga; "this game was created by OpenAI's GPT-4 by using just a few prompts. They have also used ChatGPT for coding small plug-ins, and it proved useful in rebuilding one of their mobile apps. Although ChatGPT does not always give out the code perfectly, it does most of the work, which you can go through and refine, saving much time compared to if you had to code the whole project manually."

The monks have also cloned Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami's voice (founder of HINDUISM TODAY) to complete audio recordings of him reading his major books. According to Tillainathaswami, "One member of our team is working to create this cloned audio voice. Gurudeva had read and audio-recorded a lot of chapters of his books but he didn't finish them all. With this large body of stable audio, we were able to clone his voice in a way that sounds, for the most part, imperceptibly realistic."

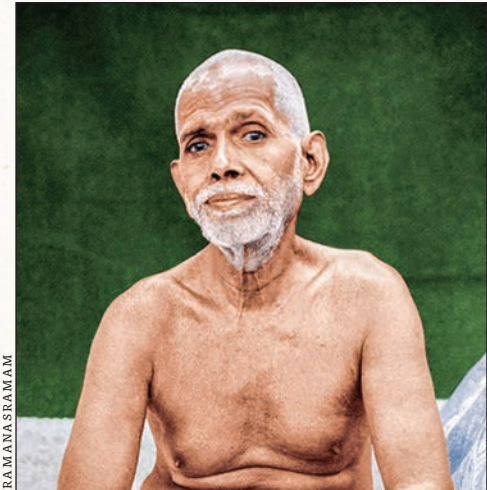
Paramacharya Sadasivanathaswami of Kauai Hindu's Monastery discussed how he uses AI with HINDUISM TODAY to simplify workloads. He spoke about ChatGPT on the linguistics side of things: "We are using ChatGPT primarily for language, for example, I use it for proofreading. In the past, when proofreading articles for the magazine or our book, I would sit down with the page and spend five minutes trying to spot spelling errors and grammatical mistakes, and now I can have ChatGPT do that fairly accurately in two seconds. Its work still has to be double-checked by a human, but it saves time."

"We also have ChatGPT translate Tamil and Sanskrit terms and verses for us. We will drop Tamil couplets in ChatGPT and a few moments later we will have a fairly accurate English translation. We can also ask it to drill deeper into the word. For example, you could tell it give the entomology and the five top uses for a particular Sanskrit word. ChatGPT can also execute small tasks, like alphabetizing lists or comparing PDFs."

Paramacharya spoke about how he uses AI for art: "We have done a few things with Dall-E (an AI-powered image generator accessible through ChatGPT's interface) such as making comics for the magazine. First, I will create an idea for the comic, then I insert that as a carefully worded "prompt" into Dall-E. In a few seconds I have the artwork. After evaluating the result, I may ask for a re-rendering three or four times, editing as I go. This is much more efficient than my normal workflow. Historically, I formulate the idea, make a sketch and send that to an artist with a set of detailed instructions, along with example photos of various elements of the piece. After a few weeks the artist sends a completed sketch, incorporating his ideas. I edit that and send it back with corrections and more instructions. Finally, the artist sends a final color version along with a bill. With the AI approach, all of that three weeks of back and forth and money is compressed into maybe three minutes for the artwork that Dall-E gives me. Additionally, as I keep tweaking Dall-E's work properly and understanding how it thinks better, the results get better and better."

At *Hinduism Today* the monks also use AI for research. For instance, Paramacharya says: "In the 1980s, to find out the major similarities and differences of the six south Indian Saiva Siddhanta sects, we would have had to get on an airplane, fly to Honolulu, which is 102 miles away, rent a car and drive to the University of Hawaii at Manoa, go to the library and spend maybe six hours going up and down in the library, check into the hotel, spend the night, and fly





AI's many uses: (top) The digital production offices of Hinduism Today, where AI is starting to be utilized more and more; (below) because of AI, devotees have new ways of learning from Ramana Maharshi with Ramanasramam's new chatbot

back the next day to Kauai. Now this two-day, \$500 journey to find out the answer to that question can be asked and answered using ChatGPT quite easily in just a minute, virtually free of cost. Yes, going to a search engine is a good option, but hunting down and assembling the information you're looking for is still a large project. With AI, the answer needs tweaking and de-hallucinating, but it's pretty solid. It is quite astonishing how much this tool helps us."

AI is being used at Ramanasramam in India in chatbots, search engines, and tracking bookstore sales. Here is what they said about

their chatbot. "'Chat with Sri Ramana Maharshi' is an immersive AI-powered chat application that invokes the wisdom of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi. This unique tool has been meticulously crafted and deep-trained on the abundant, timeless teachings of Sri Ramana, making it adept at answering your spiritual inquiries precisely in the light of Sri Ramana Maharshi's teachings based on the book *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*."

The Ramana search engine, a search engine that searches all books and magazines and displays results based on the keywords of the search, is also powered by AI. Here is what they said about relating to their search engine, "Our Ramana search engine is also AI-based. AI has revolutionized the landscape of search engines, transforming the way users discover and access information. Through sophisticated algorithms and machine learning capabilities, AI has significantly improved the efficiency, relevance, and personalization of search results. A key aspect of AI in search is its ability to understand user intent. Advanced natural language processing algorithms enable search engines to decipher the context and nuances of user queries, delivering more accurate and contextually relevant results. This helps users find information more quickly and efficiently, enhancing the overall search experience."

At the Ramanasramam bookstore, they are using AI to suggest products by analyzing previous sales patterns to streamline the process of gathering, evaluating and utilizing data. Giridhar-ji of Ramanasramam explained, "Self-learning algorithms can optimize inventory management, predict sales trends, enhance customer interactions, and

automate logistics, ultimately delivering an enhanced customer experience. Our utilization of NLP enhances chatbots, enabling them to proficiently address frequently asked questions and product inquiries. This ensures that customers receive prompt and accurate responses, even beyond regular business hours.

Other Ways to Leverage AI

Content creation and curation, translation, generating ideas, research, summarization and voice generation are some of the well-known and most used today, there are many more ways to use it. For example, you could use it to schedule and post social media content, or you could develop immersive virtual reality or augmented reality experiences.

AI tools such as Buffer, Flick, Content Studio and Oco can help you with anything social media-related. They can create content for social media posts, automatically schedule and post the content, and analyze the content after it is posted. These tools make managing a social media page much simpler and less time-consuming.

With tools such as Tabnine, CodePal, GitHub Copilot and even ChatGPT, you can get the code for a possible VR or AR experience. Though the generated results won't be perfect, they will have done 80% of the work, and all you will have to do is skim through the code and fix any errors you find. Even this part can be done with AI by using tools such as Visual Studio Code and AIXcoder. To bring the 3D rendered objects into the VR and AR experiences, we can use tools like Unity ML Agents, Houdini Engine and TensorFlow.

Experiences that Hindu Dharmic institutions could implement in a Virtual Reality or Augmented Reality landscape could include: tours of temples or ashrams with educational walkthroughs, an interactive walkthrough of ancient Hindu tales, such as the *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata*, and even use it as a way to celebrate and recreate cultural festivals with elements such as interactive storytelling to teach the origins of festivals and why we celebrate them.

Conclusion

It is clear that dharmic institutions are off to a great start in using AI to improve productivity and efficiency. They are on a fast and interesting journey towards finding a way to use technology to promote the Hindu way of life. Just like these organizations, this author is also eagerly waiting to see what more the AI world has in store.

ADITYA MUTHAIAH, 15, is a high school freshman from Portland, Oregon, U.S. He enjoys writing, playing the trumpet, traveling and spending time with his friends. Email contact: muthaiahaditya@gmail.com

Hindu Heritage Endowment

You Can Help Support the Monthly Ardra Abhishekam

The six-foot-tall bronze Siva Nataraja that graces Kadavul Hindu Temple was placed in the gardens in 1973 overlooking the sacred Wailua River where it was spontaneously decorated, bathed and worshiped.

Gurudeva describes what happened next: "That night the exact location of the Deity's installation was chosen by Lord Murugan Himself when He appeared to me in an early-morning vision, upturned His glistening Vel, His scepter of spiritual discernment, and powerfully pounded its point three times on the cement steps at the monastery entrance, marking the precise spot to place the Deity. Lord Murugan's orders were obeyed. On March 12, 1973, the Deity was moved into place, and worship began immediately. A rotating three-hour vigil was established. During this vigil, the monks perform meditation, puja, yogas and chanting, quelling the mind and giving themselves in profound adoration, prapatti, to this remarkable icon. Thus the arrival of the Siva Nataraja Deity transformed our life, and from that day onward life in and around the monastery has revolved around His divine presence."

For many years the monks have been performing a monthly abhishekam to Lord Nataraja on ardra nakshatra. Once a year in the month of Markali (Dec 15-Jan 15) a grand homa and abhishekam is held. This is the major festival day of the year for the worship of Lord Nataraja, particularly at Chidambaram Temple. The festival's name is Ardra Darshana, also known as Tiruvembavai. The scale of the Ardra Darshana celebration in Kadavul requires the monks to start preparations days in advance. Coconuts are collected, yogurt is made, garlands sewn and fruits and other offerings gathered. The list of offerings is impressive:

- 108 gallons of milk
- 25 gallons of freshly made yogurt
- 20 kilos of honey
- 36 gallons of panchamrita, a fruit mixture
- Coconut water poured from 120 green coconuts
- 5 kilos of sandalwood powder mixed in 25 gallons of water
- 5 kilos of abhishekam powder mixed in 25 gallons of water
- 9 kilos of varied fragrant herbs mixed in 30 gallons of water
- Final kumbhabhishekam of rose water, fragrant herbs and saffron

Additionally, plates of fresh cut fruit and cooked delicacies are offered after each part of the abhishekam. For decorating Nataraja, close to \$2,000 worth of garlands are acquired, in addition to orchid flowers for garlands woven by the monks.

Kauai Aadheenam has a fund for the twelve abhishekams to Lord Nataraja—eleven monthly and one annual—called the Kadavul Nataraja Ardra Abhishekam Endowment. This is held as an investment that ensures that items needed for these sacred rites will always be provided. If you would like to help the monks to abundantly perform the Nataraja abhishekams, you can donate to the Kadavul Nataraja Ardra Abhishekam Endowment at www.hheonline.org/donate/fund.lc?id=08



Devotees gather in the maha mandapam of Kadavul Temple for the 2023 Ardra Darshana celebrations.



JANUARY TO MARCH ENDOWMENT CONTRIBUTIONS					
Kauai Aadheenam Monastic Endowment		Logathanas Murugasu	42.17		
Ambika Alagere	US\$6.35	Sai Rajkiran Nagboth	299.00	Hindu Education Endowment	
Ishani Chowdhury	95.00	Aakash Pandhi	249.00	Fidelity Charitable	100.00
Roshan Harilela	375.00	Ben Puvanendran	249.00	Arjun & Revathi Pennathur	75.00
Mira Das & R. aMahalingam	500.00	Bhanugopan Ramudu	149.00	Total	175.00
Kulagan Moonesawmy	12.71	Thuvaarahan Ravichandran	249.00		
Gowri Nadason	75.76	Carmen Roberge	249.00	Alaveddy Pasupatheeswarar Temple Fund	
Pritesh Patel	70.00	Easan Saravan	250.38	The Blackbaud Giving Fund— YourCause	
Gayatri Rajan	1,415.00	Chidambaram Sendan	30.42		35.85
Chamundi Sabanathan	78.75	Aikara & Valsala Sivadasan	249.00	Nathan Lemacher	5.00
Hitesvara Saravan	63.00	Frederick A. Stelthom	249.00	C. Pathmarajah	1,001.00
Sri & Pushpa Srikumaran	108.00	Biju Syamala	249.00	Total	1,041.85
Anonymous	856.00	Radharani Venkatraman	249.00		
Total	3,655.57	Pradeep Warikoo	249.00	Alaveddy Subramuniya Temple Fund	
		Anonymous	252.00	Texas Instruments Foundation	108.00
		Total	5,750.93	The Blackbaud Giving Fund— YourCause	
Iraivan Temple Endowment					35.91
Benevity	102.00	Kadavul Nataraja Ardra		Raymond James	250.00
Eshwar & Aarati Bandlamudi	303.00	Abhishekam Endowment		Total	393.91
Benjamin & Esha Belford	51.00	Umasankaran Mohambourame	110.51		
Frank Burkhardt	30.00	Gowri Nadason	75.76	Thank You Bodhinatha Fund	
Tamnash J. Gupta	108.00	Nuckiren Pyeneeeandee	31.77	Sumathi Raja Chanda	450.00
Aravind & Ramya Kailas	25.00	Parimala Selvaraj	93.00	Michael Doyle	324.00
Rajagopal Krishnan	324.00	Anonymous	186.00	Debashis Ghosh	300.00
Rajesh & Poonam Nair	101.00	Total	497.04	Gunasekaran Kandasamy	206.33
Indrathan Hindurajan Pillay	50.00	Tirunavukkarasu Nayanar Gurukulam		Eric Mackow	72.00
Mohan & Rajalakshmi Sabapathy	600.00	Anonymous	81.00	Ganga Murugan	108.00
Girish Adiga Sathyanarayana	54.00	Sri Subramuniya Ashram		Mano Navaratnarajah	150.00
Tejasinha Sivalingam	11.00	Scholarship Fund		Cassan Pancham	1,000.00
Other Donations	128,301.84	Radhika Iyer	20.00	Nuckiren Pyeneeeandee	31.77
Anonymous	341.00	Anonymous	108.00	Gayatri Rajan	1,008.00
Total	130,402.24	Total	128.00	Suresh Ramamurthi	108.00
		Sri Subramuniya Kottam Fund		Som Sharma	251.00
Kauai Aadheenam Annual Archana Fund		Anonymous	51.00	Nandi Devi Sivanathan	63.17
J.P. Morgan Donor Advised Fund	250.00	Kumbhalavalai Ganesha		Shiva Mariswamy Subramani	10.00
Malvi Gandhi	75.00	Temple Endowment		Anba Dayananden Valayten	8.25
Brijianand Jugurnauth	106.44	Mano Navaratnarajah	75.00	Mangaleswary Vimalanathan	50.00
Tejwantee Meetoo	41.91	Hinduism Today Production Fund		John Wahlen	12.23
Ramalingum Moodley	150.00	Ambika Alagere	6.35	Anonymous	3,236.00
Avinash Mujoomdar	251.00	Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	7.45	Total	7,388.55
Loganaden Murugan	21.54	Murli Melwani	1,000.00	Sri Chandra Madhab Debnath Endowment	
Subramaniam Pennathur	49.98	Kulagan Moonesawmy	12.71	Shyamal Chandra Debnath	150.00
Eswar Raman	40.00	Subramaniam Pennathur	50.01	Manitha Neyam Trust Fund	
Bhanugopan Ramudu	251.00	Nuckiren Pyeneeeandee	31.77	Nutanaya Sivaceyon	20.08
Easan Saravan	250.96	Gayatri Rajan	501.00	Manjung Hindu Sabha Orphanage Fund	
Chidambaram Sendan	14.34	Murari Singh	150.00	Emily Xin Rui Lim	50.00
Nandi Deva Sundaram	300.00	Anonymous	63.00	Saurabh Pathak	30.00
Anonymous	155.00	Total	1,822.29	Nutanaya Sivaceyon	10.00
Total	1,957.17	Hindu Orphanage Endowment Fund		Rajiv Verma	150.00
		Benevity	455.00	Total	240.00
Hinduism Today Lifetime		Tamnash J. Gupta	108.00	Hinduism Today Complimentary	
Subscription Fund		Roshan Harilela	375.00	Subscription Fund	
Vinita Agarwal	249.00	Chamundi Sabanathan	78.75	Rajagopal Krishnan	60.00
Ramesh Gupta	249.00	Hitesvara Saravan	36.00		
Ramesh Hariharan	249.00	Matthew Wieczork	20.00	Himalayan Academy	
Sai Kalyanaraman	249.00	Anonymous	33.00	Publications Endowment	
Om Kanabar	249.00	Total	1,105.75	Nathan Lemacher	5.00
Pallava Kaushik	249.00			Vel Mahalingum	12.71
Juhivaasana Koothan	8.52				
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Avinash Mujoomdar	229.00				

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Mano Navaratnarajah		225.00	Cows of Kadavul and Iraivan Temples		Ajita Gupta	30.00	
Anonymous		155.00	(Kovil Maadu) Endowment		Shivaram & Kiran Kalugotla	25.00	
Total		397.71	Arun Aarooren	75.00	Velika Lawrence	6.66	
Kauai Aadheenam Yagam Fund		84.00	Ambika Alagere	6.35	Bernard Lu	500.00	
			Anil Ananda Badhwar	30.00	Archana Mahavadi	45.00	
			Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	7.45	Kulagan Moonesawmy	6.44	
Anonymous			Shivaram & Kiran Kalugotla	25.00	Varsha & Dilip Naik	225.00	
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Nathan Lemacher		11.00	Varalakshmi Ramamoorthy	216.00	Gayatri Rajan	1,008.00	
Vimala Muniandy		25.00	Padmini Samuthiran	162.00	Padmini Samuthiran	162.00	
Subramaniam Pennathur		50.01	Nandi Devi Sivanathan	10.78	Renu Sinha	108.00	
Nandi Devi Sivanathan		21.12	Rodney & Ilene Standen	30.00	Tarangadeva Sinhaputra	63.00	
Poobarlene Soobramanien		21.34	Arunasalam Vathavooran	75.00	Nandi Devi Sivanathan	63.17	
Anonymous		973.00	Anonymous	556.00	Nesa Kumar Subramaniam	225.00	
Total		1,402.47	Total	1,524.35	Ravi Thaker	18.00	
Maha Ganapati Temple of Arizona Endowment		1,083.00	Jaffna Kannathidddy Kali Kovil Endowment		Siva Veeriah	20.00	
			Anonymous		108.00	Saravan Veylan	324.00
			Anonymous			Anonymous	1,237.00
Anonymous			Digital Dharma Endowment		Total	6,412.44	
India Hindu Temple Cleaning Fund			Ambika Alagere	2.13	Himalayan Acres Endowment		
Anonymous		45.00	Gunasekaran Kandasamy	50.00	Gayatri Rajan	501.00	
Anantha Ladies Home Endowment		200.00	Kulagan Moonesawmy	12.71	Antyodoy Anatha Ashram Orphanage Endowment		
			Rama Chandran & Rema Nair	1,001.00			
			Anonymous	201.00			
Panjan & Dushyanthi Nagaratnam		51.00	Total	1,266.84	Shikha Narula	10.00	
Anonymous		251.00			Aparna Rallabhandi	50.00	
Total					Tejasinha Sivalingam	11.00	
			Kauai Aadheenam Feed the Monks Fund		Total	71.00	
The Endowment for Global Hindu Rights			Benevity	1,008.00	Total Contributions		\$168,199.55
Dhiraj Kamath		15.00	Ambika Alagere	4.22	Funds at Market Value, Mar 31, 2024		
Nimish Shah		42.00	Yuvaraj Athur	153.00			
Total		57.00	Anandkumar Ayyachamy	75.00			
			Subhasis Chakraborti	15.00	Grand Total		\$23,252,297.40
			Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	5.32			

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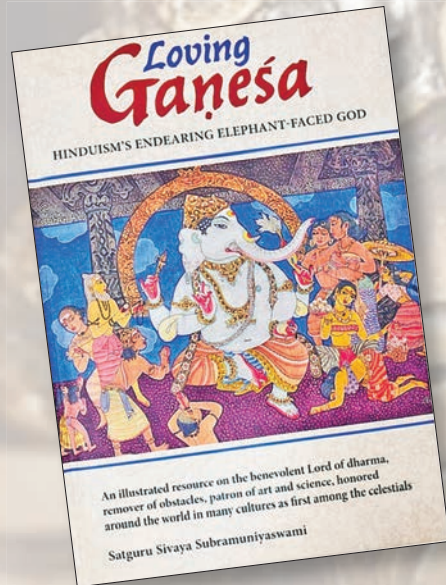


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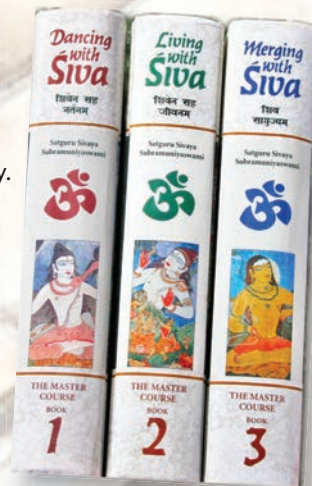
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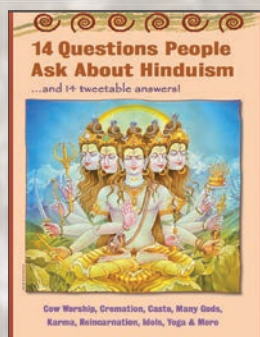


36-bead rudraksha mala grown and assembled by devotees of Kauai's Hindu Monastery and blessed by the swamis.



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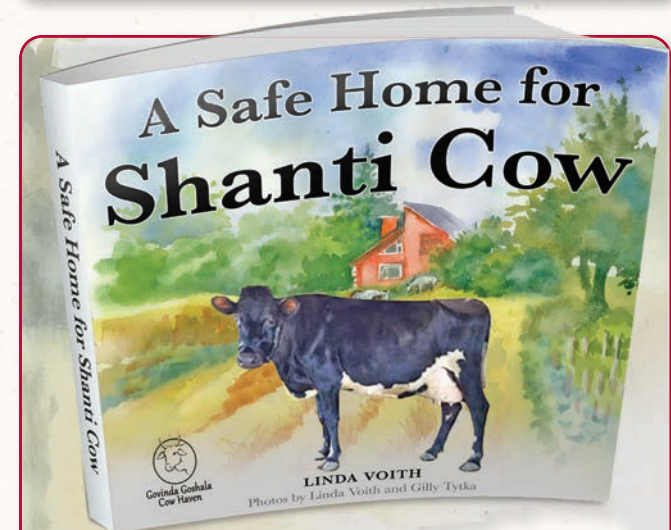
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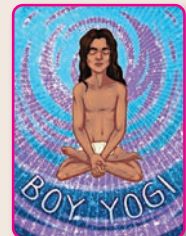
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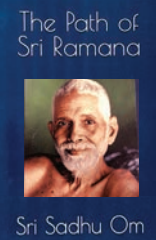
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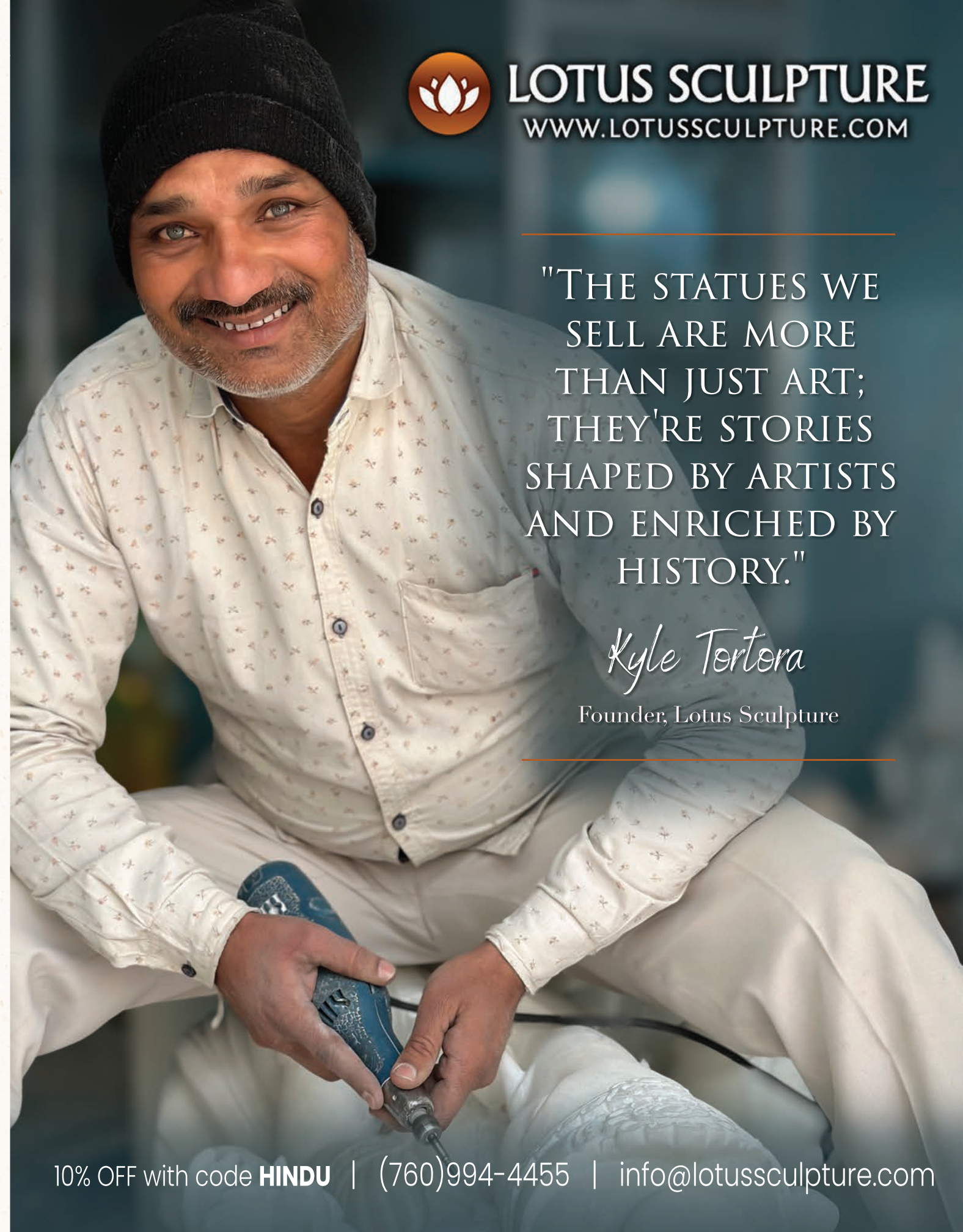


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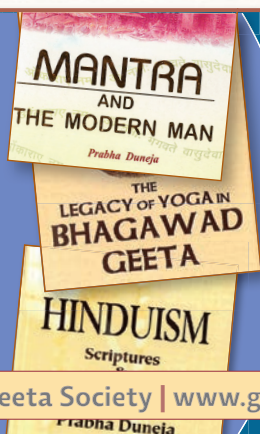
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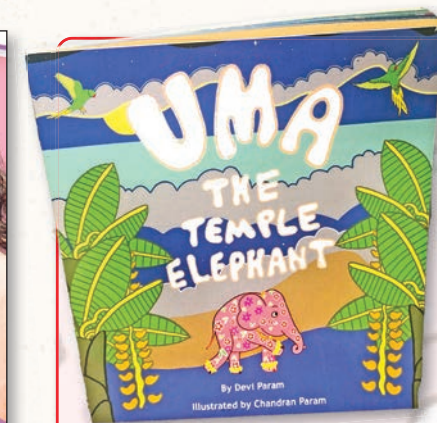
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*Tonight
I think of her,
Arunachala,
My Mother,
Lord Siva.*

*Walking her
Generous circumference,
I felt I was visiting
My Mother.*

*She at my side,
Every step of the way,
Nothing was lacking,
Or was amiss,
Or wanted to be known.
Nothing was
Tomorrow or
Yesterday.*

*Mt Arunachala,
My celestial Mother,
Inspired me*

*To reach for That,
Beyond reach,
To grasp That,
Beyond grasp,*

*Arunachala,
My celestial Mother,
Made me*

*To aspire
To detach
And transcend,*

*To break free from
Tangles of body
And mind,*

*Arunachala,
My Mother,
Lord Siva.*

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