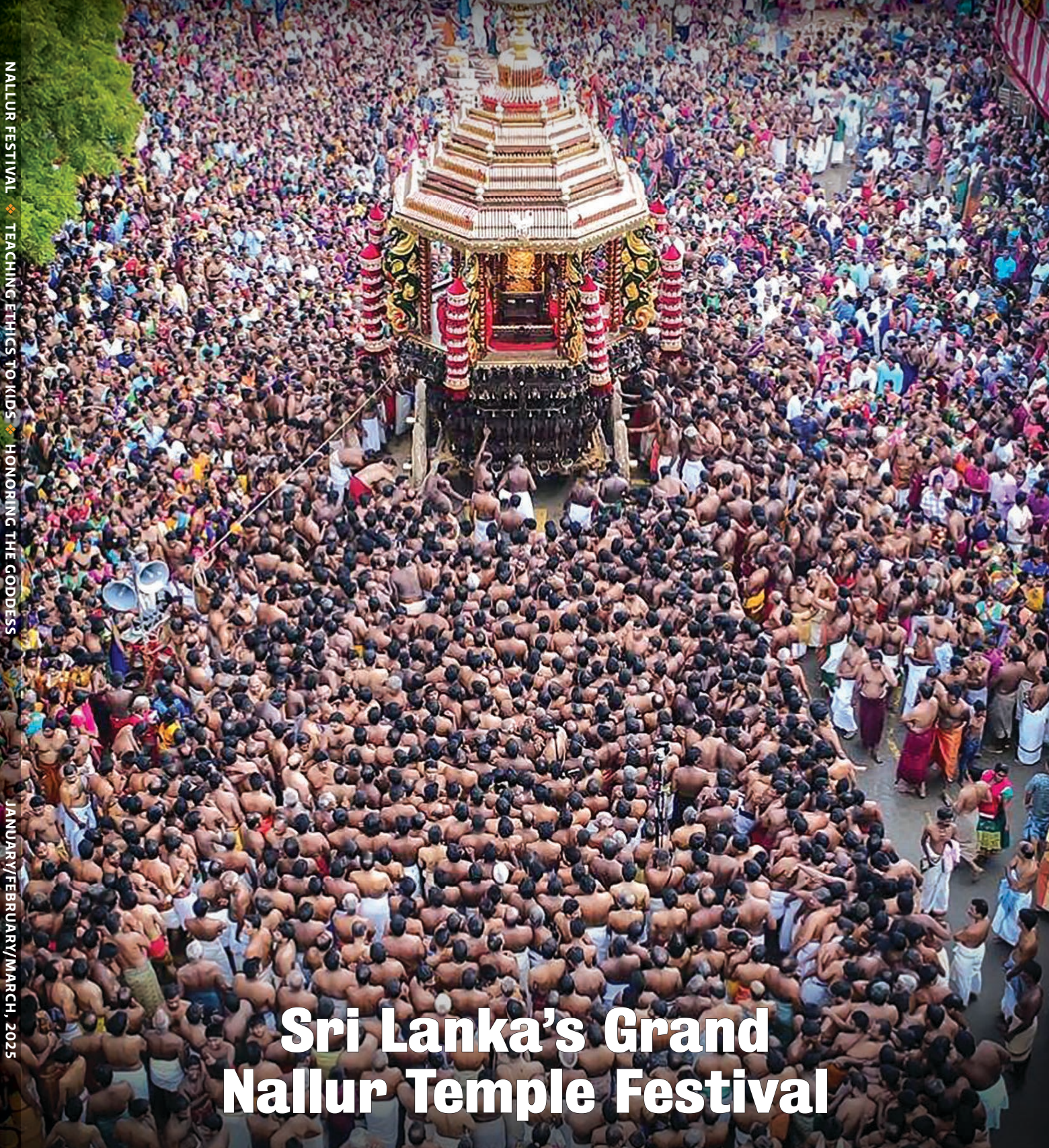


HINDUISM TODAY®

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



Sri Lanka's Grand Nallur Temple Festival

DEV RAJ AGARWAL



(Cover) On Nallur Temple's closing annual festival days a huge chariot is pulled around the temple by hundreds of men through a crowd of thousands; (above) pilgrims of the annual Kanwar Yatra return from Haridwar to their villages carrying Ganga water

JANUARY/FEBRUARY/MARCH, 2025 • The Hindu Year Krodhi, 5126 • क़्रोधी

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New York City's Elephant Herd

A hundred elephants fashioned with lantana bush stalks graced the city streets, part of an ambitious project to preserve the mighty animals in their native India. . . page 30

GLOBAL DHARMA

USA

Grandparent Uses Modern Media to Pass on Her Faith

AMERICAN HINDU PARENTS and grandparents are grappling with how to keep their children connected to Hinduism as religiousness among youth in the US continues to drop. A report by *Religion News Service* in July, 2024, explains how social media, summer camps, Sunday schools and more are used to spark excitement about the faith.

Social media in particular is becoming more crucial. Every day since March, 2024, 63-year-old Ranjani Saigal has posted a 90-second Instagram reel. "I'm not a social-media person," said Saigal, who goes by "thehindugrandma" on Instagram. "I didn't know what a reel was, I didn't

know what TikTok was, any of that. Like many other grandparents, I was like, 'Social media? I should stay away from that.'"

But Saigal, who lives in Boston, was determined to reach the next generation of Hindu children, and she knew social media is the place to find them. Through short educational videos answering questions such as "Why do Hindus wear a bindi?" or demonstrating a step-by-step everyday morning prayer ritual, Saigal has become a symbolic "dadi," "ajji," or "ammamma" to over 100,000 followers. "Somehow people seem to like to learn from grandma, and hence seem to listen in more," she said.



Learning devotion: A young boy has been taught by his family how to worship God and the Gods.

ARTS

Troupe Dances in Temples in Several Countries

THE GLOBAL SIVAPADAM DANCE team has a mission to inspire Hindus everywhere about their cultural wealth, especially the centrality of temples in our life. It was founded by art director Vani Gundlapalli as part of a larger initiative called Know Your Roots Foundation, according to their website. Comprising dance gurus and their students from many countries, the team

creates shows mainly based on over 1,000 poems by composer Brahmasri Dr. Samavedam Shanmukh Sarma, collectively called SivaPadam. Vani focuses on the theme of oneness, or *advaita*, by bringing all six classical dance forms into one production. The shows are taken on the road to temples in India, USA, Singapore and Cambodia. In fifteen years Vani has



Teaching online: Every day Ranjani Saigal makes 90-second social media reels to educate youth in various facets of the religion.

"People love their grandmas, at the same time they're kind of missing them in their lives. And I don't know, it touches me a lot, so it makes me keep wanting to go with it."

Saigal is a trained purohita, or family priest, and a Bharatanatyam teacher. She feels Hinduism

is a "star-studded, gem-filled" tradition that has a real power to connect with youth. "The more Hindu a teacher you are, the more you should allow for questions," she said. And I think that kind of vibes with the modern generation."

produced more than 50 shows, with themes centered on Lord Siva, *Ramayana*, *Annamayya* and Saint Ramadasu. In July 2021, Vani produced a SivaPadam dance production called Jyotirlingam, a historic composition on the 12 jyotirlingam temples across India, many centuries after Jagadguru Adi Shankara composed Jyotirlinga Stotram.



SivaPadam team: the dance troupe pose on a hill near the San Marga Iraivan Temple in Kauai, Hawaii, where they performed during the temple's first annual festival.

SCIENCE

New Consciousness Theory

A NEW THEORY BY MICHAEL Pravica, a professor of physics at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, suggests that human consciousness could originate from hidden dimensions of the universe rather than solely from brain activity—something Hindus have known for eons. Featured in the *Economic Times*, Pravica asserts that during moments of heightened awareness—like making art, practicing science or even dreaming—our consciousness can transcend the limitations of our physical dimension and tap into these invisible realms.

At the core of Pravica's theory is hyperdimensionality, the idea that the universe consists of more dimensions than the four we experience: height, length, width and time. He explains this concept using a hypothetical scenario involving a two-dimensional being: "Imagine you're a two-dimensional being

living in a two-dimensional world, like a character in a comic book." As a three-dimensional sphere passes through, it would appear as a dot that grows and shrinks, illustrating how limited perceptions can hinder understanding of higher dimensions.

Pravica believes that just as two-dimensional beings cannot perceive three-dimensional shapes, we might have difficulty detecting higher dimensions that exist around us. Pravica's theory has sparked significant debate within the scientific community. Some—including Stephen Holler, a physics professor—express skepticism. Holler suggests that the cornerstone of Pravica's theory "borders on science fiction." Despite the controversies surrounding his theory, Pravica remains optimistic about future advancements in technology that may provide evidence for hyperdimensionality.



The inner dimensions: an AI illustration of higher consciousness from a human perspective



Sudhi Wadani ceremony: Camille Caballes signs a document affirming her entrance into Balinese Hinduism.

BALI

Filipino Citizen Converts to Balinese Hinduism

PART OF THE FULL LEGAL BALINESE Hindu wedding ceremony is Sudhi Wadani, a purification ritual in which a couple pledges adherence to the faith. It is also used for rare occasions when the bride or groom is converting into Balinese Hinduism from another religion.

In September 2024, Camille Ginn Custodio Caballes, a Filipino citizen, underwent the ritual before marrying Ida Bagus Gede Ady Suryana, a local Balinese Hindu. The ceremonies took

place in Bakas Village, according to *Jarrakposbali.com*.

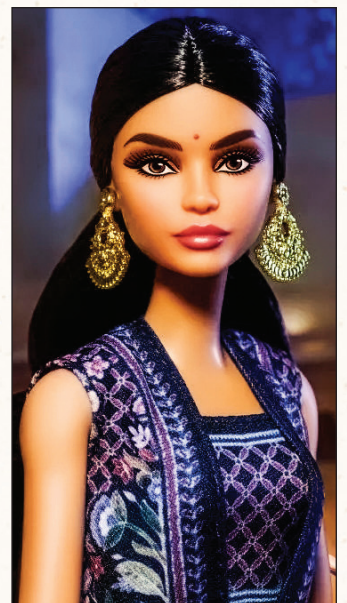
"Sudhi Wadani aims to cleanse oneself from the influences of previous religions or beliefs, so that the person can begin their spiritual journey in Balinese Hinduism in a pure condition," said village head, Cokorda Oka Adnyana. This indicates that the person is now considered part of the Hindu community and has the right to follow all the teachings, ceremonies and traditions of Balinese Hinduism.

TOYS

Mattel Unveils Diwali Doll

BARBIE LAUNCHED ITS FIRST-Ever Diwali doll in October, 2024, collaborating with Indian fashion designer Anita Dongre. *India Currents* reports that Barbie Diwali is outfitted in a Moonlight Bloom set with a choli top, floral Koti vest and lehenga skirt adorned with dahlias, jasmine and Indian lotus—symbols of strength and beauty. Golden bangles and shimmering earrings complete the look, reflecting radiant lights of the festival.

Dongre advocates for female empowerment. Her fashion brand has spearheaded initiatives for training tribal women in garment-making and partnered with government agencies and NGOs to provide steady employment opportunities to skilled rural artisan women.



Elegant: Mattel's new Barbie Diwali doll



Ready to roll: (above) The wheels are shown to the public before being attached to the chariot; (right) The procession begins on the first day of the bright lunar fortnight.

NEPAL

Building New Wheels for Rato Machindranath Chariot

EVERY YEAR IN APRIL/MAY, THE Newar community of Nepal celebrates the Rato Machindranath Jatra in the city of Patan. The festival is a major religious event that honors Rato Machindranath, the God of rain and compassion. According to the *Ask Me About Nepal* blog, it is

held just before the monsoon season hits the Kathmandu Valley, and the date is based on the lunar calendar. A special feature of this event is that every 12 years, the Barahi carpenters of the Newar clan build new wheels from scratch for the chariot. Their skills pass through



the generations.

They do certain work on the chariot annually, starting as early as December. They scour forests for specific types of timber for the wheels or to refurbish other parts of the chariot. The wood used for the wheels is a rare type, monkeypod (Samanea Saman), and also for the dhombar—a long wooden trunk in front of the chariot upon which the charioter stands to lead the procession.

The Yewal clan joins the

Barahis by weaving rope and rattan to make sure the structure of the chariot doesn't collapse. These craftsmen are not provided with insurance to cover the dangers of construction, but they devotedly continue to refurbish the chariot every year to preserve their culture. The refurbishing happens 10 days before the events begin. Before the Deity is placed in the chariot, it undergoes 10 ritual ceremonies performed by local priests.



Ayodhya Ram: The Deity is featured on Laos's new postage stamp

LAOS

World's First Stamp Released Of Ayodhya's Ram Lalla Deity

IN JULY, 2024, LAOS BECAME the first nation to feature the main Deity of Ayodhya's new Ram Temple on a postage stamp. *OpIndia* reports that India's External Affairs Minister, Dr S. Jaishankar, and

Laos's Deputy Prime Minister, Saleumxay Kommasith, jointly unveiled the stamp in Vientiane, the capital of Laos. It is part of a set, the other featuring Lord Buddha of Luang Prabang, Laos's former ancient capital.

BRIEFLY...

DR. DEOKINANAN SHARMA OF Trinidad, age 87, passed away in August 2024. The *Trinidad Express* recalls him as the visionary who created the foremost institution for Indian culture in the island nation, Divali Nagar.

AROUND 2,500 DELEGATES OF THE 10th World Water Forum met in Bali in May 2024, emphasizing the sustainability of water resources. They partook in the Segara Kerthi traditional water purification ritual. *Antara News* quoted I Nyoman

Kenak: "This ritual is a means to ask for blessings, so that the sea, as a water resource, can be clean both in the physical and non-physical terms."

CAMBODIA'S ANGKOR WAT FACES problems with international visitors who intend to recreate the famous mobile game called "Temple Run" by running, leaping and crashing through the temple. The *Curly Tales* blog, in August 2024, has stated that by doing this, the 900-year-old structure could

get seriously damaged over time, and the spiritual vibration is lessened. Local authorities have warned visitors to not recreate videos as seen in the game.

THE KOH-I-NOOR DIAMOND FINALLY has been recognized by the British Crown as "A Symbol Of Conquest" in a new exhibition at the Tower Of London in May 2024. As per *CNN*, the most controversial gem was in the public eye in the same month as the coronation of the new king and queen.

A NEW HINDU TEMPLE OPENED IN Gothenburg, Sweden, in late 2023, as reported in *Business Region Goteborg*. Up to 4,000

visitors attended on opening day. The temple serves a growing, highly educated, 11,000-strong Indian population that moved to this region to fill a skills gap.

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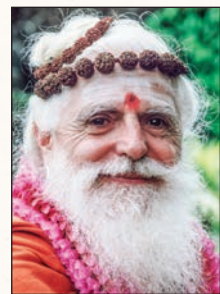


IN MY OPINION

The Value of Hindu Art Forms

How Bharatanatyam instills discipline, devotion and connection to our traditions

BY OVIAA MADANGANESH SUMATHI



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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AT THE AGE OF SIX, Bharatanatyam was simply fun. And, of course, it was! For little ones, it's a great way to expend all the energy they seem to have a surplus of while learning how to move their tiny bodies the right way. It is quite evident that it helps in developing fitness, balance and flexibility. "Healthy body, healthy mind," right?

Most importantly, in retrospect, I understand it was these early lessons that instilled deep respect for teachers within me. At the beginning of every class, we would recite two *shlokas*. One was "Guru Brahma, guru Vishnu...shri gurave namah." While being taught, we would try our best to stand still, with the spine erect, hands folded back and feet together. At the end of the class, we would touch the feet of the teacher in respect and leave.

Another aspect was consistent practice—which, as a small girl, I never did! Here, your peer group matters. None of my friends learned any classical dance form, so practicing dance every day after school felt unnecessary to me. But in a few years, as I made best friends with two girls who learned Carnatic music and dance, the seed of daily practice was sown, and slowly, the discipline of the same was cultivated.

Growing up, I began to understand the meanings of the songs we danced to. Bharatanatyam is generally set to Carnatic music, which has a grand variety of songs solely and soulfully dedicated to the Gods. We had fun just listening to the songs or watching dances or traditional stories being enacted. The problems began when we had to perform them ourselves—we would have to use facial expressions to depict various emotions and characters, and like most children, I was too shy.

One year, our family pilgrimaged to Palani Hills. I was just around 12 years old. After the long queue, when we finally were in front of Murugan, I gazed at my mom's face—her eyes welling up with tears, glis-



tening in the lamp light, her smile calm and grateful. Just looking at her face, I was melting away, like an ice-cream in the Sahara Desert, experiencing devotion, bhakti. After that, feeling connected to the Divine, I really began doing expressions in class. The more we danced, the closer we felt to God.

And the closer we felt to Him, the more our dance improved. We began to find meaning in our religion. Our teacher's dedication to Bharatanatyam was also inspiring. This was important, since while many were becoming "modernized," we had reason enough to stick to our tradition and culture!

As our family became spiritually aligned, I began to find many insights into the art form. The training taught us to honor the guru and control the body and mind, a necessary prerequisite to transcend them and feel our soul nature. The dancer matures with the dance, and now I am able to savor dancing as a spiritual practice, a sadhana, of surrendering body and mind to Him, embracing stage performance as a seva, a service, to share the inner calm one feels while dancing with others. I think that is one of the purposes of our ancient art forms—they give us the experiential basis of our religion.

I do feel that it is a blessing to learn an art form, especially in a time when it is not valued as much, and it is difficult to find dedicated teachers. Many reputed Indian dance schools have developed certified online courses to learn classical art forms, which are great for children—not just to keep boredom at bay but also to stay rooted in Hinduism. If it is the lack of time or interest in learning, consider just listening to devotional music or watching it being performed as a dance—it really does keep you close to the art form and, obviously, to Him.

OVIAA MADANGANESH SUMATHI, 17, is a 12th grade student in Bengaluru, India, with an interest in Bharatanatyam, which she has been learning for 11 years

Is There Still a Need for Hinduism?

An answer to the academic world's notion that religion has been superceded by rational thought and the ascendance of science

BY SATGURU BODHINATHA VEYLANSWAMI

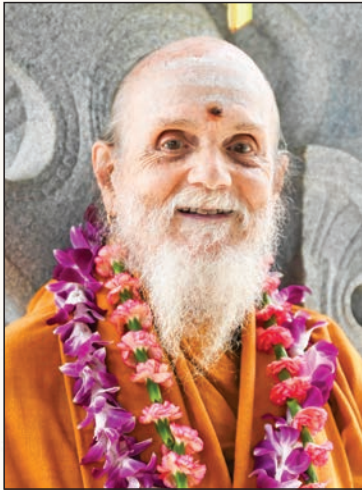
IT MAY SURPRISE SOME READERS TO LEARN that professors in today's universities are increasingly claiming that humanity has outgrown religion, dismissing it as a primitive system of thought. A common rationale for this radical approach is that we are living in an age where truths are based not on faith but on empirical evidence and the scientific method. The existence of a Supreme Being, being based on faith, cannot be scientifically proven, so God's existence is rejected.

When it comes to Hinduism, these anti-religion ideas overlook a central aspect. Hinduism is not about accepting the existence of a Supreme Being on faith; rather, it centers on the personal experience of Divinity in the present moment. Sadly, the modern world often overlooks Hinduism's focus on personal experience of God, leading some to erroneously group it with religions they regard as no longer relevant. To bridge this gap, we can initiate a dialogue using a modern approach that is independent of traditional religious frameworks. Our first approach involves the concept of transcendence in Hinduism, which can be understood as a direct spiritual encounter. Generative AI tells us that "Transcendence involves a state of being or awareness that goes beyond the usual and mundane aspects of life, reaching a higher or more profound level of understanding, experience or existence."

A well-known example is found in Transcendentalism, the literary and philosophical movement that emerged in the United States in the early 19th century. This school of thought regards nature as a source of inspiration and spiritual insight, believing that spending time in nature is a way to access heightened states of consciousness. Although there is no formal Transcendentalist movement today, many individuals still seek the beauty and seclusion of nature's mountains, lakes, rivers and forests as their catalyst for experiencing an exalted state of consciousness.

In the modern school of Positive Psychology, transcendence can be found in all forms of beauty, from nature to art to mathematics to science and everyday experiences. Pointing out such broader catalysts can help individuals grasp the idea that Hindu religion is focused not merely on faith but on providing time-tested ways to experience higher consciousness.

Our second approach for appreciating Hinduism's experiential nature is to explore the idea of spirituality. Generative AI gives this definition: "Spirituality is a broad concept that involves a sense of connection to something greater than oneself, often associated with a search for meaning in life. Spirituality is typically focused on the spirit or soul, rather than material or physical things, and it often



involves practices or experiences that help individuals connect with their inner selves, others, the universe or a higher power."

Spirituality and transcendence are related concepts. One difference is that spirituality rests on the idea that Divinity exists within the individual, that man has an eternal nature, or soul, that can be known through various practices such as yoga and meditation. Among those with a solid grasp of spirituality, it's easy to convey that Hinduism centers on the personal quest for Divinity, supported by well-defined disciplines that guide this journey. Before exploring such disciplines, let's look at how Hindus approach the question of the existence of God.

The superconscious insights of the rishis of a few thousand years ago are documented in the sacred Upanishadic scriptures. Consider the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* (4.20). "His form is not to be seen; no one sees Him with the eye. By the heart, by thought, by the mind, one sees Him. Those who know this become immortal."

In more recent times, we have the example of Sri Ramakrishna's vision of Mother Kali documented in his biography: "At that very moment, Ramakrishna had a vision of the Goddess Kali. He described it as an overwhelming experience where the Divine Mother appeared before him, radiant and full of life. The world around him vanished, and he was filled with an indescribable joy and peace. He saw the Goddess not as a mere image but as a living, conscious reality. This experience left him in a state of divine ecstasy, and he realized that the Divine Mother was always with him, guiding and protecting him. This vision profoundly influenced Ramakrishna's spiritual journey, affirming his belief in the living presence of the Divine Mother and shaping his teachings and life thereafter."

Sometimes I am asked, "How do we know that God exists?" Perhaps not surprisingly, it is usually a child about ten to twelve years old asking this question. The answer I give is that we can know that God exists by reading the experiences of saints, such as Sri Ramakrishna. I assure them that we, too, will have such profound experiences, in this or a future life.

Hinduism provides two primary approaches to experience Divinity: temple worship and meditation. Many Hindus experience Divinity



Seeing God: Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, our publisher's satguru, lifts his hands aloft during a direct vision of God Siva.

to India and Sri Lanka, devotees attended grand ceremonies at ancient temples. Those temples, and the mystical rites within them, provoked visions in some devotees. They witnessed the stone or bronze murti moving and smiling at them, or turning into an animated, human-like figure. Others, with their eyes closed, inwardly saw the Deity's face, as real as any living being. Though occasionally a devotee may have such a vision, the more common way we experience the Deity in a temple is as an uplifting, peaceful, divine energy radiating out from the sanctum, a blessed presence called *sannidhya*.

Hinduism provides a second way to experience Divinity, through meditation on one's soul nature and its oneness with God—which is called monism. Our experience of going deeper and deeper within in meditation occurs in four steps. One step inward takes us to a consciousness that is content, creative and intuitive. Two steps brings us to the level of divine love for and oneness with all beings. Three steps within take us to the level of brilliant inner light and the realm of visions of Deities and rishis. After four steps within, we find ourselves enveloped by omnipresent consciousness and the transcendent source of that consciousness.

A Sanskrit term commonly used for omnipresence is *Satchidananda*. Our Himalayan Academy lexicon gives this definition: "Satchidananda: Existence-consciousness-bliss. A synonym for Parashakti. Lord Siva's Divine Mind and simultaneously the pure superconscious mind of each individual soul. Satchidananda is perfect love and omniscient, omnipotent consciousness, the fountainhead of all existence, yet containing and permeating all existence. Also called pure consciousness, pure form, substratum of existence, and more. One of the goals of the meditator or yogi is to experience the natural state of the mind, Satchidananda, holding back the *vrittis* through yogic practices." My paramaguru, Yogaswami, had a concise way of explaining this state: "Sat Chit Ananda. That is one thing—Satchidananda. Sat is 'you are.' Chit is omnipresence—prakasha, light as from the sun, all-knowing. Ananda is bliss. They are three; but they are one. That is your nature."

Hinduism does not ask followers to accept God's existence merely on faith, to believe this or that. Rather, it boldly states that you can actually experience God and in that way prove God's existence to yourself. Two methods, and there are more, for knowing God are: temple worship, where we can sense and even inwardly see God's personal form; and meditation, where we can experience God as impersonal, omnipresent consciousness and its transcendent source. All of this is our answer to the question of Hinduism's relevance. It will always have a vital role to play in providing seekers with time-proven methods for knowing God, which is, after all, the most compelling assurance of God's existence there is.





LETTERS

Venerating Ram via the Gita

For hundreds of years, devotees have been studying and chanting the *Bhagavad Gita* in homes and temples, schools and colleges across India. The *Gita* helps individuals to overcome life's challenges by making the mind strong and positive. This ancient text is read and reflected on by devotees, students, scholars, philosophers, psychologists, political leaders and educators across the world.

Sugunendra Tirtha from Puttige Matha has initiated "Koti Gita Lekhana Yajna" for the welfare of humanity with the goal of having at least one crore people write the *Gita*'s 700 verses in any language in a blank book provided by Sri Matha and offering it to Sri Krishna at Udupi.

Every day, I feel so peaceful while writing the *Gita* for 15 minutes. My husband and my 8-year-old son also feel blessed to be able to write the *Gita*. Interested devotees can visit: sriputhige.org.

SAPNA KUMARASWAMY
BENGALURU, INDIA

Kudos

It is always a pleasure to read HINDUISM TODAY. I just received the October-December 2024 issue and have read your Publisher's Desk editorial regarding the inner and the outer life, with which I entirely agree. As usual, this issue is packed with interesting articles and pictures.

DR. KARAN SINGH
DRKARANSINGHJNMF@GMAIL.COM

Jai Shri Shankaracharya

I thoroughly enjoyed reading "Adi Shankara, India's Great Spiritual General" written by Swami Advayananda and Sudarshan Ramabadran (Jul/Aug/Sep 2024). Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta is considered superior

to other philosophies in academic circles for its logical rigor, comprehensive commentary on sacred texts, unification of diverse philosophical strands, and profound spiritual depth. His systematic approach, dialectical skills and ability to synthesize various philosophical traditions into a coherent non-dualistic framework have cemented his legacy as a preeminent philosopher. The practical and experiential dimensions of his teachings further enhance the relevance and appeal of Advaita Vedanta, ensuring its enduring influence and academic recognition.

PRADEEP SRIVASTAVA
PRADEEPSCOOL@HOTMAIL.COM

I read and enjoyed the article on Bhagvatpada Adi Shankara a few days ago. One point stands out: the article propagates that the birthplace of Bhagavatpada is not Kalady. I am curious as to where this information is sourced. It sounds new to me. I request you to kindly enlighten me, have I missed out on something?

CHOODIE SHIVARAM
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From time immemorial traditionally it has been accepted that Kalady is the birthplace of Adi Shankara Bhagavatpada. The popular *Madhaviya Shankara Vijayam* and many other sources enforce this idea. When such is the case where is the need to give an alternative narrative? Such narratives will only create avoidable confusion in the minds of followers of the Shankara sampradaya. It is better not to alter such deep-rooted beliefs.

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Regarding the authenticity of the source mentioning the birth home of Sri Adi Shankaracharya at Melpazhur Mana in Veliyanad, Ernakulam, I would like to clarify that this

information is well-known among the local residents. Melpazhur Mana, the ancient Nambuthri Mana, is recognized as the ancestral maternal home of Aryamba, the mother of Sri Adi Shankaracharya. According to tradition, it was customary for a woman to give birth at her maternal home, and this is where Aryamba is believed to have delivered her divine child. It is also the site where his Vidyarambha and Upanayanam were conducted. This understanding is not new or speculative; it has long been part of local lore. Additionally, Gurudev Swami Chinmayananda himself referenced this in an archival video from the late 1980s, where he narrates the story of Adi Sankara Nilayam. He reiterated the same in his inaugural address, further solidifying the Mana's connection to Adi Shankaracharya's life. For further reference, you may explore the Chinmaya International Foundation (CIF) website, or consult the following publications: *Unto Research* and *Adi Sankara Finite to Infinite*. I hope the above explanation provides the necessary clarity. Ultimately, we are but humble messengers in service to the Lord.

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Guardians of South Indian Saivism

Thanks, Dr. Koppedrayer, for your thorough insights into the Aadheenams, which even many in Tamil Nadu itself are unaware of (Oct/Nov/Dec 2024). Their profound long lineage from Siva Himself and the holy practices that have sustained the spiritual power even in this kaliyuga is inspirational. Saivism is a treasure of eternal dharma, thanks to Siva and all these efforts of great humans.

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Training Priests in the Diaspora

I read with interest the article "We'll Train



Our Own Priests," describing the conviction of Malaysia's largest temple (Feb 1989). My reaction is that finding youths for this is going to be ever challenging. If instead you ask for retired people to train in this segment, I think it will be hugely successful.

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Kashmir Temples

I enjoyed reading "Kashmir's Temples Emerge from Difficult Times Stronger than Ever" (Jul/Aug/Sep 2024). During my visit to the newly constructed Sharada Yatra Temple, I also visited other temples: Sharika Mata Mandir at Hariparbat, Ksheer Bhavani Temple at Tulla Mulla, Marthand Sun Temple and Sharika Mata Mandir at Pokribal. It was a happy time. I am proud that I participated in Ganga Arati at Nandalal Ghat of Kishanganga River at Teetwal on April 9, 2024, which was held after a gap of 75 years.

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On Thomas Jefferson

Commenting on the article entitled "Analysis," discussing the ideas of Thomas Jefferson (April 1988), I agree: "Yet the real genius of Jefferson was in his ability to translate the theory of *rita dharma* into effective political

and civil practice through his creations of dharma-based political documents and dharma-based laws." Jefferson appreciated John Locke, whose writing also confirms an understanding of *rita*: "The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one; and reason . . . teaches all mankind . . . that, being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions . . ." (*Second Treatises of Government*, 1689).

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Tagore's Spiritual Legacy

Reading about Rabindranath Tagore (Apr/May/Jun 2006), which observes: "In *Sadhana* he states, 'Man becomes perfect man, he attains his fullest expression, when his soul realizes itself in the Infinite being who is Avih, whose very essence is expression,' I'm reminded of the following couplet by Adi Shankaracharya, recommended for morning recitation:

*prātaḥ smarāmi hṛdi saṁsphurad-ātmatvaṁ
saccitsukhaṁ paramahamsagatīm turīyaṁ
yatsvapna jāgarasūptimavaiti nityaṁ tad-
brahma niṣkalamahaṁ na ca bhūtasanghaḥ*

"At dawn I remember the Reality which is the Self, shining brilliantly in the heart, existence-

consciousness-happiness, the goal of Paramahansa sannyasins (sages)—the Fourth—That which knows always the states of dream, waking and deep sleep. That Brahman which is partless I am, not the cluster of elements." Tagore's poetry and philosophy appear to be a multi-faceted expression of the realization of one's self as Brahman, and not *bhutasanghaḥ*, a cluster of elements.

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Correction: Our October 2024 article on the grand Mahasivaratri festival in Mandi, contained an erroneous reference: "Bhootnath Vishnu Temple." It should have read "Bhootnath Temple," as Bhootnath is dedicated to Siva, "Lord of bhutas" (ghosts or spirits).

THE EDITORS

Letters with writer's name, address and daytime phone number should be sent to:
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107 Kaholalele Road
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.

Preserving and Promoting Hinduism in the Modern World

Our publisher submits that help given to this magazine benefits all Hindus



Satguru at a temple event in Montreal during a two week journey in October 2024

HINDUISM TODAY publisher Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami was recently asked in an email interview, "How do you see the role of media in preserving and promoting Hinduism in the modern world?" Here is his answer.

The information age, which began around the 1960s and 1970s, is now in full bloom. With the Internet and its 200 million active websites and almost a dozen major social media channels, there exists a plethora

of information on all subjects, including Hinduism. Unfortunately, when it comes to Hinduism, information is often not accurate. There is an abundance of innocent misinformation as well as some deliberate disinformation. With this in mind, a primary role of Hindu media is to provide a source of authoritative and accurate information. We see our own publications as a trusted and authentic counterbalance to all the misinformation out there.

We share the stories of Hindu ashrams and leaders, stories from all over the globe that are compiled in no other place we know of. This tells the world that Hinduism, representing one-sixth of the human race, is alive and well, culturally rich, artistically adept, musically gifted and spiritually unrivaled.

Hindu leaders contribute articles that address contemporary issues, such as being spiritual but not religious (SBNR), the idea of secular humanism as an alternative to religion, the promotion of atheism in universities, the academic assertion that humanity no longer needs religion, and the relationship of yoga to its Hindu roots. Our team con-

tinues to actively create apps, YouTube videos, spiritual art, educational documentaries, children's stories and more that amplify the global influence of the magazine.

* * *

To cope with higher expenses and lower subscription income, we ask our magazine donors to direct gifts to the current expenses fund at bit.ly/help-ht. For gifts to the magazine's two endowments—the Production Fund and the Complimentary Subscription Fund—we suggest that this support be done through one's estate plan; see hheonline.org

Directing donations to the current expenses fund will ensure that the finances of HINDUISM TODAY are strengthened, funds are available to generously distribute free copies, and there is ample income available to meet the higher production expenses caused by inflation. This will enable HINDUISM TODAY to continue to dynamically fulfill its mission of uplifting Hinduism, Hindus and like-minded souls everywhere.

Donate at: bit.ly/help-HT, or contact us at +1-888-464-1008 • support@hindu.org

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cent paid and/or requested circulation: 60.21%. The actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date is: (a) Total number of copies printed: 10,284; (b) Paid circulation: (1) Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, and counter sales: 1,474; (2) Paid or requested mail subscriptions: 4,621; (c) Total paid and/or requested circulation: 6,095; (d) Free distribution by mail: 942; (e) Free distribution outside the mail: 3,157; (f) Total free distribution: 4,099; (g) Total distribution: 10,194; (h) Copies not distributed: (1) Office use, leftovers, spoiled: 90; (2) Return from news agents: not applicable; (i) Total: 10,284; Percent paid and/or requested circulation: 59.79%. I certify that all information furnished above is true and complete. I understand that anyone who furnishes false or misleading information on this statement or who omits material or information requested on the statement may be subject to criminal sanctions (including fines and imprisonment) and/or civil sanctions (including multiple damages and civil penalties). Swami Durganatha Shanmuga, Administrator.



QUOTES & QUIPS

“If you go on working with the light available, you will meet your master, as he himself will be seeking you.”

Sri Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950)

Meditation can turn fools into sages but unfortunately fools never meditate. **Swami Vivekananda** (1863–1902)

The man who works for others, without any selfish motive, really does good to himself. **Ramakrishna** (1836–1886), *Indian mystic*

Hindu society is the only significant society in the world today which presents a continuity of cultural existence and functioning since time immemorial. **Sita Ram Goel** (1921–2003), *Indian political commentator*

Change is not something that we should fear. Rather, it is something that we should welcome. For without change, nothing in this world would ever grow or

blossom, and no one in this world would ever move forward to become the person they’re meant to be. **B.K.S. Iyengar** (1918–2014), *influential yoga teacher*

Instead of cursing the darkness, light a candle. **Benjamin Franklin** (1706–1790), *scientist, philosopher and US founding father*

It’s not the love you make. It’s the love you give. **Nikola Tesla** (1856–1943), *Serbian-American inventor*

All problems of existence are essentially problems of Harmony. **Sri Aurobindo** (1872–1950)

The devout seeker is he who mingles

in his heart the double currents of love and detachment like the mingling of the streams of Ganges and Jumna. **Saint Kabir** (1440–1518)

It is difficult to free fools from the chains they revere. **Voltaire** (1694–1778), *French writer*

Kindness in words creates confidence. Kindness in thinking creates profoundness. Kindness in giving creates love. **Lao Tzu** (4th or 6th century bce), *author of Tao Te Ching*

Man is not worried by real problems so much as by his imagined anxieties about real problems. **Epictetus** (55–135 ce), *stoic philosopher*

DID YOU KNOW?

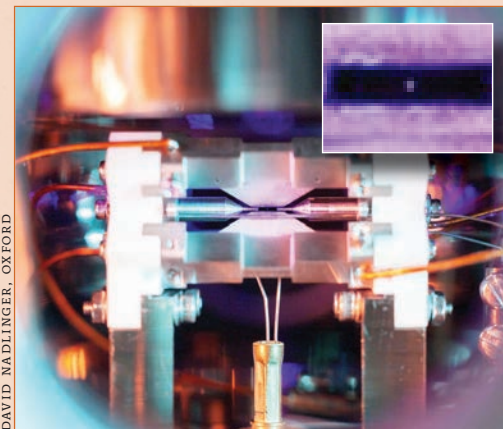
The Concept of Atoms

LONG BEFORE MODERN ATOMIC THEORY, ancient Indian sages envisioned atoms as the smallest building blocks of matter. Around 600bce, Sage Kanada introduced the concept of *anu*—meaning atom—in his *Vaisheshika Sutra*, proposing that all matter is composed of these tiny, indivisible particles. Kanada’s description of atomic behavior closely mirrors ideas in modern science. Sutra 7.1.9 states: “Each atom holds a dual nature of shared and specific attributes, making it the elementary, indivisible unit that forms the basis of all material objects.” This duality reflects Kanada’s theory of *anu* as not only the fundamental components of physical matter but also as elements with unique characteristics.

There are several accounts in the Hindu scriptures indicating an early grasp of atomic theory. Kanada’s atomic theory described atoms as having distinct properties, like weight and motion, which determine how they combined to form objects. This view

aligns with modern chemistry, where atoms bond to create molecules. Yet, Kanada’s vision went further, connecting atoms to both physical and spiritual realms.

The *Tirumantiram*, by the Tamil saint Tirumular, also touches on cycles of creation and destruction, with Siva’s cosmic dance symbolizing the endless transformation of material elements. Tirumular describes Siva’s dance as both the force of destruction and regeneration, a cycle that embodies *srishti* (creation), *sthiti* (preservation) and *samhara* (dissolution). This aligns with Kanada’s cyclical view of the universe, where atoms continually combine, break apart and reform in a perpetual cycle of rebirth and decay. Kanada suggested that the universe is in constant flux, with atoms endlessly combining, break apart and reforming. In sutra, 7.1.22 he states, “*anavah samyoga-vibhaagabhyaam drishyate*,” meaning that atoms become observable through their fluctuations between “associative and dissociative” states.



Atomic scale: An image of a single strontium atom, by David Nadlinger, shows it suspended by electric fields and illuminated by laser, making the atom briefly visible as a tiny glowing dot.

Kanada’s work demonstrates an early scientific inquiry in India that parallels many ideas in modern atomic theory. His perspective on the universe, as a continuous process of formation, dissolution and reformation, offers a unique bridge between ancient metaphysical views and modern science’s understanding of atomic behavior.

Normality is a paved road: It’s comfortable to walk, but no flowers grow on it. **Vincent van Gogh** (1853–1890)

The earth is a beehive, we all enter by the same door. *Kenyan proverb*

Efforts and courage are not enough without purpose and direction. **John F. Kennedy**, (1917–1963), *Former US president*

Look at the sky. We are not alone. The whole universe is friendly to us and conspires only to give the best to those who dream and work. **A.P.J Abdul Kalam** (1931–2015), *Indian aerospace scientist and statesman who served as the 11th president of India*

All honest work is good work; it is capable of leading to self-development, provided the doer seeks to discover the inherent lessons and makes the most of the potentialities for such growth. **Paramahansa Yogananda** (1893–1952)

Keep a constant awareness and a conscious effort to say good words, perform good actions, and to practice patience and compassion. **Mata Amritanandamayi**, *Kerala-based hugging saint*

Wonder is the scientist’s way of worship, the rational mind’s spiritual experience. **Anonymous**

Do something because you really want to do it. If you’re doing it just for the goal and don’t enjoy the path, then I think you’re cheating yourself. **Kalpana Chawla** (1962–2003), *Indian-born American astronaut who was the first woman of Indian origin to fly to space*

The music that I have learned and want to give is like worshiping God. It’s absolutely like a prayer. **Ravi Shankar** (1920–2012), *Indian sitarist and composer*

In Hinduism belief is only the first step. Hindus want to move beyond just believing in God to experiencing the Divine for themselves. **Bodhinatha Veylanswami**, *publisher of HINDUISM TODAY*

Finally, you go beyond light. Finally, you go into the core of existence itself, the Self God, beyond the stillness of the inner areas of mind. That is the mission and that is what humanity is seeking—total Self-God Realization. **Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami** (1927–2001), *founder of HINDUISM TODAY*

HINDUISM TODAY – IMAGE GENERATED BY DALL-E AI



PUZZLES

Word Search, Next Level

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

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

ANANDA	ABHYASA
DUKHA	SADHANA
SUKHA	UDYAMA
KRODHA	VRITTI
PREMA	SAMVIDHANA
VAIRAGYA	VIBHAJANA
SAMVEDANA	NIRMANA
MOHA	VARDHANA
SHRADDHA	PARIVARTANA
PARVATA	<u>TATTVA</u>
VANA	MAYA
SAMUDRA	PARAMNANDA
NAKSHATRA	SHASHVATA
JALAPATA	SAMSARA
SURYA	DHYANA
CHANDRA	SHODHA
VRISHNI	TAPA
AGAMANA	SAMSKRITI
PARYAVARANA	PARAMPARA
KRIYA	SAMBANDHA

I Want to Be a Monk

Life at Kauai’s Hindu Monastery in Hawaii is profound, spiritually demanding and richly rewarding. If you or someone you know feels called to a life of selfless service and meditation, we welcome the discussion. Candidates must be male, under age 25, single and ready to embrace a strict and traditional Hindu way of life. E-mail: monklife@hindu.org



More details about the Saiva Siddhanta Yoga Order can be found by scanning the QR code.



Join Us at 4 Dharmic Temples in L.A.

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. By these tours, students learn the basics of the related faiths and experience their sacred spaces.



HINDUISM



JAINISM



SIKHISM



BUDDHISM



See the videos at: bit.ly/TempleTourPlaylist

SARVAJNANOTTARA AGAMA Disciplines of Yoga

A path to self-mastery through solitude and dedicated practice

The following are excerpts from Dr. S. P. Sabharathnam’s translation of the Sarvajnanottara Agama, chapter 1, verses 1–16.

O, Sanmukha! I will explain the disciplines of yoga as applicable to the one who is alone keeping himself dissociated from the company of worldly-minded persons, who is with settled mind, who is with deep sense of detachment by keeping his mind under control, who takes moderate food, who limits himself in his routine worldly activities and who sleeps moderately and keeps himself awake sufficiently. Listen to my instructions on yoga. 1.1

Only that person who has known well the nature of meditator, meditation and the fruit of meditation is fit enough to undertake the disciplines of yoga. The individual self is the meditator. Mind is meditation. The Great Lord Siva is the One to be meditated. The attainment of the supreme qualities of Siva, superior to which there is nothing, is the fruit of meditation. 1.2–3

Keeping the mind balanced well when honored or abused, and in the same way when delighted or distressed, and having completely freed himself from being subject to excessive delight, fearfulness and despondency, the sadhaka should repeatedly practice the disciplines of yoga. 1.4

In the places such as a solitary house, charming monastery, auspicious temple charged with divinity, bank of river not frequented by people, one’s own house, unapproachable dense forest, sequestered places hidden by trees, places free from disturbing sounds, and a quiet place free from the presence of humans, animals, insects and so forth; in places free from those who cause hindrances and disturbances to yoga practice, in places not owned by others, and in places well protected from the sun’s scorching heat—in such places the sadhaka should commence yoga practice. 1.5–6

Having taken the usual ceremonial bath, maintaining purity in body and mind, having performed the succeeding rites, such as being besmeared with vibhuti and sprinkled with consecrated water, having prostrated before Siva and his acharya who has initiated him into the discipline of yoga, the sadhaka should attentively involve himself in the disciplines of yoga. 1.7

There are many postures suitable to yoga practice, such as padmaka, svastika, ardha pitha, ardha chandra, sarvatobhadra and so forth. Having assumed a posture compatible to him and folding hands together in supplication, keeping his body upright, having well aligned his head and having dispelled all negative thoughts from his mind, O, Guha! the sadhaka should practice yoga with his mind well established within his own self. 1.8–9

Without allowing the upper row of teeth to touch the lower teeth and without allowing the tongue to touch the corners of the mouth, and keeping his eyes half-closed



and raised, the sadhaka should repeat the mula mantra of Siva in a perfect way as instructed by his guru. 1.10

The systematic repetition of mula mantra illuminates and makes known all the tattvas—such as the subtle elements (tanmatras) and others—to the embodied self. O Shanmukha, the sadhaka then becomes capable of severing his bonds born of these tattvas through the particular repetition of astra mantra instructed to him by his guru. 1.11

The sadhaka who practices in this way need not repeat the hridaya mantra, siro mantra, shikha mantra, kavacha mantra and netra mantra separately at the completion of mula mantra japa, since all the six anga mantras originate from that mula mantra. 1.12

Having equalized the outbreath and inbreath (prana and apana) and having enabled the breath to flow through within the central channel (sushumna) and having arrested the workings of inbreath and outbreath, the well-skilled sadhaka should deeply meditate on Lord Siva. 1.13

Through the continued practice of such disciplines, the sadhaka becomes capable of establishing himself in unflinching and inseparable union with the luminous form, which is extremely subtle, pervasive, eternal and immutable. 1.14

The specific kind of pranayama known as sagarbha pranayama is of three kinds—the superior, intermediary and slow. The sadhaka should practice the control of breath through puraka (inbreath), kumbhaka (retention of breath) and rechaka (outbreath). 1.15

By the practice of pranayama, the sadhaka incinerates all defilements. By dharana, he annihilates all of his sinful effects. By pratyahara, he maintains himself completely free from negative thoughts and vices. And by dhyana, he becomes capable of nullifying the effects of even those qualities that do not decay. 1.16

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



A drone shot from 2017 of the main chariot being pulled around the temple by hundreds of devotees, followed by dozens more rolling on the bare sand behind it. Drones are no longer allowed during the event. (below right) Temple's parade murthi of Muruga's six-faced form, Arumugam.

CELEBRATIONS

Join in Nallur Temple's Awesome Annual Festival

Every year in the fall, tens of thousands of Hindus and others come to participate in all or part of the 25-day annual festival of Sri Lanka's most famous Murugan temple. The magnificent event, managed by the temple's priest trustees, takes place with unmatched precision and devotion at every stage.





BY BALAKUMAR MUTHU, CHENNAI

IN AUGUST 2024, I VISITED THE NALLUR Kandaswamy Temple to attend the final days of the grand annual festival. It was a transformative experience. This iconic temple dedicated to Lord Murugan—here in the form of Alankara Kanthan or “Lord of Exquisite Adornment”—is located in the Jaffna District in the north of Sri Lanka. Stepping through its gates, I was immediately struck by the temple’s grandeur, history and the palpable devotion that filled the air. The temple has existed for over a thousand years, a resilient testament to the faith, artistry and spirituality of the island’s Tamil Hindu community.

Nallur was once the capital of the Jaffna Kingdom, and this temple is deeply embedded in the region’s rich heritage. Ancient Tamil texts, such as *Yalpana Vaipava Malai* and *Kailaya Malai*, highlight the temple’s significance. Its foundation was laid in 948ce, during the Chola dynasty. Over the centuries, the temple endured multiple challenges, including destruction in 1621 by the Portuguese, who replaced it with a church. Yet, the spirit of Nallur persisted. In 1749, under Dutch rule, key figures such as Krishna Suba Iyer and Rangunatha Maapaana Mudaliyar led efforts to rebuild the temple, restoring it to its former glory with the support of the Tamil community.

The architecture, shaped under the guidance of Kumarathas Mappana Muthaliyar, achieves a delicate balance with nature by integrating the five elements—fire, water, earth, wind and space—into its design. Currently

the temple is managed by a dedicated trust that has successfully preserved its ancient practices while evolving to meet the needs of modern devotees. Unlike nearly every temple in India, it is not under any form of government control, but devotedly managed by the



BALAKUMAR MUTHU

descendants of Rangunatha Mudaliyar.

Inside, six daily pujas are conducted with precision and devotion, adhering to *Saiva Agama* traditions. The priests, or *archakas*, perform their duties with such reverence that Muruga’s divine presence is palpable. Their chanting of Vedic mantras, coupled with the pujas, creates an atmosphere of profound spirituality. A total of some 60 priests were present for this annual festival, both the permanent staff and others invited to help with the enormous event.

Adherence to Tradition

Nallur Kandaswamy Temple adheres to tradition in even the simplest of things. For

example, puja tickets have been priced for decades at one Sri Lankan rupee—presently just a third of a US cent. This small amount symbolizes that spirituality is accessible to all, regardless of wealth. I noticed that everyone is treated equally—there are no VIP statuses

or special privileges, unlike at temples in India. It was heartening to see that all visitors, regardless of background, must follow the same rules and regulations. The strict dress code further highlights the respect and reverence maintained at the temple. Men are required to wear a *veshti* (dhoti) and remove shirts before entering the temple, while women are expected to wear saris or other modest attire.

Nallur’s Festive Days

I was in awe of the scale and devotion involved at the festival. Held during the Tamil calendar month of Aadi, between July and August, this 25-day event drew tens of thousands of devotees from around the globe. The energy during the flag-hoisting ceremony was electric.

.....

Chariots, kavadi and more:

(clockwise from right) Muruga’s Vel in center, flanked by Devayani and Valli; the festival’s biggest chariot moves out at night; young boy carrying kavadi around temple; one of the many evening parades; as penance, woman carries pot of burning hot coals around the temple



BALAKUMAR MUTHU

The streets of Jaffna came alive during these days, with homes and roads adorned with mango leaves, coconut fronds and flowers. I was struck by the intricate kolam designs decorating the ground, each one a sacred yantra invoking blessings from Lord Murugan. The entire town was transformed into a vibrant spiritual canvas. Statues of Lord Murugan were carried in daily processions on various

sacred *vahanas*, including silver and green peacocks, bulls, horses, cobras and swans—each symbolizing different aspects of His divine nature. The festival culminates in the Tiru Kalyanam—Lord Murugan’s divine wedding.

The Festival Experience

From the moment you step into the temple’s sacred premises, the energy is palpable. I

had the opportunity to experience pujas and processions firsthand. Each day had its own significance, with rituals that unfolded in the inner sanctum and then spilled into the surroundings as night falls. Processions often went late into the evening, filling the air with the hum of sacred chants, drums and nadaswaram music.

Devotees explained the key ceremonies

Annual Festival in Full Swing



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BALAKUMAR MUTHU



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to me. Beginning on August 8 this year, the powerful form of Siva called Bhairava, whose vehicle is a dog, was invoked for His protective blessings over the 27-day event. The canine-shaped chariot, draped in black flags and symbols, carried the Deity in a grand procession around the temple at dusk.

This invocation was followed by *kodiyetram*, the ceremonious flag hoisting that signaled the official start of the festival. Eyes filled with tears as the intricate flag cloth, woven by the Sengunthar Mudaliyar descendants, was carried to the temple in a chariot amidst chants of "Alankara! Nallura!" As the flag was raised, Lord Murugan's Vel was symbolically placed on a silver peacock chariot, followed by His consorts, Valli and Devayani, as the entire community united in one purpose—to celebrate and invoke divine blessings.

The Mancham Festival, held on day ten, was particularly awe-inspiring, devotees explained. The slow-moving Mancham chariot, symbolizing Lord Murugan's bed, adorned with intricate depictions from Puranic stories, lit up the night.

On day 17, the great Tamil Saiva poet Arunagirinathar, who composed the Tiruppugazh, was honored through a reenactment of his temporarily taking the form of a parrot to

access celestial realms. Dressed in parrot-green attire, the priests and officials added a colorful flair to the evening, making it feel like the spirit of the saint was very much present, singing the praises of Lord Murugan.

One of the unique and unforgettable as-



BALAKUMAR MUTHU

pects of the festival was the Suriyotsavam, or Sun Festival, on the 19th day. A stunning chariot, symbolizing Suriya riding with His wives, was pulled around the temple at dawn by seven horses.

The evening of the 20th day featured one of the most intricate and beautiful chariots. It depicted Mount Kailasa, the heavenly abode of Lord Siva which Ravana attempted to lift. Lord Murugan in His majestic Vel form was seated in it with His two wives. The next

morning, day 21, focus shifted to Goddess Durga, or Maha Kali. Her chariot resembled the mythical Yali, a creature part lion, part elephant. That same evening, Muruga rode the iconic golden chariot, drawn by golden horses. The entire atmosphere turned pink with flowers, decorations and clothing awash in this vibrant hue.

The morning of day 22 was the Thandauthapani Utchavam, the Mango Festival. This was a reenactment of the story in which Lord Murugan—after losing a race around the world for a mango to His elder brother Lord Ganesha—retreated to Palani Hill in South India as a sadhu, dressed in a loin-cloth and carrying His Vel. The energy of the festival took a dramatic turn with the evening event, which symbolized Lord Murugan

Bhakti in many forms: (clockwise from above left) homes next to the temple set up shrines and worship the chariot as it passes; devotees make way as the main Deity circles the temple with dozens of men rolling on the ground in its wake; the difficult austerity of rolling on the hot sand; men play cymbals and sing on the 12th night; a woman with vel through her cheeks and tongue, carrying an offering pot of milk and honey with margosa leaves on her head



Penance, Devotion, Celebration and Song



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TAMIL GUARDIAN



embarking on a hunt. Dancers, musicians and soldiers parade alongside Him, while the priests carried weapons instead of the usual puja items (photo far right).

On the 23rd day, in the evening, Lord Murugan rode on the massive Sapparam chariot. The sheer size of the chariot and the number of devotees pulling it was a sight to behold. If there's one day that stood out above the rest, it was the 24th day—the Ther Thiruvizha, or Chariot Festival. Thousands of devotees gathered, chanting and pulling Lord Murugan's colossal six-headed, twelve-armed murthi. The drums, nadaswaram and temple bells created a rhythm that seemed to shake the heavens. Lord Shanmuga was seated regally, dressed in dazzling attire, as confetti of flowers showered from the skies.

On the 25th day, the Theertham, or Holy Bath, takes place. After symbolically defeating the forces of evil, the Deity was bathed in the temple's sacred tank, which in turn purified all who participated. I, too, felt spiritually lighter, as if washed clean of difficult karmas.

That final evening, the flag, hoisted two weeks earlier, was ceremoniously lowered. The chariot decorations and clothing were predominantly white for this event. The flag was returned to the Sengunthar Mudaliyar family, signaling the end of the festival

proper. But it was not over yet.

The Epilog

One of the heartwarming rituals was the reenactment of Lord Murugan's marriage to His second wife, Valli, on the 26th day. It was



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playful and full of love, especially the part where His first wife, Devayani, locked the newlyweds out of the temple until songs of negotiation convinced Her to open the doors. The drama and music made it feel like we were witnessing a divine family moment.

The final day, September 4 this year, brought a deep sense of closure. Lord Bhairava, who had guarded the festival from start to finish, was honored once again. It was a quiet,

reflective moment as His special guardianship was paused until the next year. The festival came to a close as the chariot carrying the temple's murthi of Lord Murugan returned Him to His inner sanctum.

The Major Elements

The Nallur festival is not just a religious event; it's a cultural phenomenon that leaves a profound spiritual impact on everyone who participates. Following are some of the key rituals and customs I experienced during the event.

One of the most intense rituals I observed is the *kavadi attam*, also known as the burden dance. Devotees carried a *kavadi*—an intricately decorated, semicircular structure adorned with flowers and peacock feathers—on their shoulders while dancing in a trance-like state. Many had a small spear inserted through their cheeks and tongue as a kind of penance. The *kavadi* represents the burden of devotion

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Related events: (clockwise from right) priests parade as soldiers in front of the chariot during the Orumuga festival day; festival dance performance; top Carnatic musicians in concert; Nallur temple priest; coconut breaking on a massive scale



FACEBOOK NALLUR ALANGARA KANTHAN

Public Penance, Performances and Huge Offering of Coconuts



BALAKUMAR MUTHU



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offered to Lord Murugan and the dance was a deep act of faith and atonement.

Even more extreme was the *paravai kavadi*, in which participants had silver hooks pierced into their back. Ropes were attached to the hooks and the devotee suspended face-down from elevated carts decorated with bells. The carts moved in procession through the streets.

I observed *angapradakshinam*, where devotees rolled their bodies along the temple's hot sand pathway, either while following a chariot or on their own. With arms outstretched and hearts full of prayers, they rolled completely around the temple, with

head facing the sanctum sanctorum, all while chanting "Alankara! Nallura!!"

Among the more dramatic rituals is the mass breaking of coconuts outside the temple. As devotees hurled coconuts, the cracking sound filled the air, symbolizing the breaking of the ego and the release of purity within. It was an incredible sight—hundreds of coconuts being broken one after the other in an energetic flurry.

The *thee chatti*, or fire pot ceremony, was performed by female devotees. I watched as women, barefoot, carrying small pots filled with burning coals in their hands, walked around the temple in prayer. This act of

devotion symbolized the purification of the soul.

Devotee Reports

I had the opportunity of hearing accounts from various devotees about divine intervention and answered prayers that profoundly deepened their connections with Lord

Acts of devotion: (clockwise from above) Children sing as they walk around the temple; extreme *paravai kavadi* devotee hung from hooks in his back; elder carrying *Muruga's spear*, *Vel*; walking *kavadi* carrier

Murugan. One particular story that resonated with me was that of a local teacher from Jaffna. Battling severe health issues and financial difficulties, she approached the temple with unwavering faith. After immersing herself in a series of rituals and heartfelt prayers, she experienced a remarkable recovery and a turnaround in her fortunes.

Another touching narrative involved a family from Colombo with the father struggling with alcohol addiction. Through spiritual guidance gained at the temple, he found solace and redemption. Their path to the temple was filled with rituals and acts of devotion, ultimately leading to the man's successful rehabilitation.

One Tamil family I met came from Switzerland. They had left their homeland decades ago during the civil war and always dreamed of returning to visit the temple. They described their current trip as a pilgrimage not only reaffirming their identity but also deepening their appreciation for their heritage. For this family, the experience allowed them to reconnect with their roots and find the sense of belonging that they longed for.

As I listened to these narratives, I couldn't help but notice a common theme—devotees viewing their visits as transformative journeys offering a profound sense of peace and connection.

A True Community Event

A remarkable aspect of the Nallur Murugan Festival was the sense of unity and

shared devotion among the participants. The festival brought together thousands of devotees, all united in their love and respect for Lord Murugan.

A delightful part of the festival experience for me was *annadhanam*, the tradition of serving free meals to devotees. The scale of this operation was impressive—volunteers worked tirelessly, from chopping vegetables to cooking massive quantities of food. The meals, offered as prasadam, were simple but delicious, consisting of rice, vegetables and local sweets.

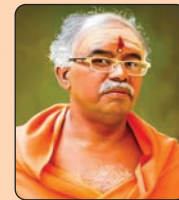
One touching tradition I encountered is the *thanneer pandhals*—refreshment booths set up by local families around the temple. Walking long distances in the heat, I, like many other devotees, were grateful for the free drinks offered at these booths. From buttermilk to sherbet, each refreshing sip felt like an offering of kindness and hospitality. What struck me most is that these booths have been set up by the same families for generations, showing their commitment to ensuring no devotee goes thirsty during the festival.

The homes surrounding the temple are beautiful to behold, especially as the chariot carrying Lord Murugan approaches. In front of many houses, families offered *padayal*—a traditional blessing that includes a lit oil lamp, puja items and food. When the chariot passed by, the families waved the *sudam*—the sacred fire—and broke coconuts. What makes this moment even more special is

Thoughts from Religious Leaders



Sri La Sri Thirugnanasambanthar Paramachariya, head of Nallai Aadheenam, remarked on how the temple attracts devotees from the local area and around the world. "The atmosphere is welcoming; everyone is treated equally, with no special privileges based on status. There's a popular saying among the devotees: 'Stepping onto Murugan's sacred street is like receiving His sacred ash (vibhuti).'"



Aru Thirumurugan, from the Siva Poomi Foundation, shared, "I have been a devoted worshiper of Nallur Murugan since childhood. At this temple, the rituals are conducted with strict punctuality, fostering a deep spiritual connection that draws thousands of devotees each year."

Sri Sri Vetha Vithyasagar Swami highlighted the popularity of the festival, "This significant occasion begins on the new moon day in the Tamil month of Aadi. During this month-long celebration, the entire Jaffna region immerses itself in a holy lifestyle centered on Saiva principles, focusing on food and devotion."



Penance in Many Forms



the sharing of these offerings with others on the street as prasadam.

One enchanting moment during the festival was hearing the sweet, angelic voices of children singing Thiruppugazh from their homes as the chariot moved through the streets. The children's heartfelt singing as they stood with their families welcomed the chariot.

I witnessed beautiful Bharatanatyam performances that brought to life stories and themes connected to Lord Murugan. Accompanied by Carnatic music, the dances added an artistic depth to the festival—beyond entertainment, it was a spiritual expression through movement and sound.

Needless to say, the festival has a profound impact on the local economy, bringing business to local hotels, restaurants and shops, as well as providing temporary employment for many locals as guides, vendors, transport operators, etc.

Bells, shops, horses and more:

(clockwise from above) dramatic horse dancers accompany the procession; stilt dancers during the parade of the Sapparam Chariot; one of the many businesses set up for the event; the temple's huge bell precedes the main chariot during the final circumambulation



Conclusion

For me, the Nallur Murugan Temple pilgrimage is a transformative journey that offered peace, connection and spiritual fulfilment. I found myself immersed in timeless rituals, surrounded by intricate decorations and unwavering devotion, which truly embodies the essence of Hindu spirituality. In the presence of Lord Murugan, I felt a deep sense of comfort and divine grace, reaffirming my faith and strengthening my bond with my heritage and spiritual roots.

Additional photos can be seen here: bit.ly/NallurPhotos; and a video on the festival here: bit.ly/NallurVideo



THE AUTHOR

Balakumar Muthu is a software consultant, avid traveler and culture photographer blogging at CasualWalker.com.

Jaffna Becomes a Pilgrimage Destination

BY RISHI THONDUNATHAN

As the successor to Yogaswami of Sri Lanka, Gurudeva Sivaya Subramuniyaswami held a deep connection with the country and its people. With his guru Yogaswami's blessings, Gurudeva established his first ashram in Sri Lanka 75 years ago. Since then, he has played a significant role in the lives of the Saivite Tamil community, especially during challenging times. When the civil war began in 1983, Gurudeva founded the Sri Lankan Tamil Refugee Relief Fund, which helped hundreds of families. As the conflict escalated, people began emigrating to North America, Europe and other countries, yet they remained in close contact with Gurudeva. In the 1990s, he visited refugee camps across Europe, offering comfort and encouraging families to settle and raise their children in these new lands. He urged communities to build temples, preserving their religion and culture.

Today, three decades later, hundreds of temples founded by Sri Lankan Tamils flourish across Europe, North America and Australia. During the 1990s, Gurudeva continued to guide the diaspora through lecture tours, phone calls and other media. I had the privilege of accompanying him on these journeys, translating his talks into Tamil.

Gurudeva strongly believed in a peaceful political resolution to the conflict in Sri Lanka. During that time, he even arranged meetings and spoke with peace negotiators, urging them to seek a peaceful solution to the ongoing civil war.

Once he told me, "After the war, Jaffna will become a place of pilgrimage." When I asked for clarification, he explained, "Now, thousands of Tamils are forced to leave their homeland. Many believe they

will return after the war, but in reality, as they settle and raise their children and grandchildren in their new countries, the second and third generations will be less inclined to move back permanently. However, they will feel a connection to their ancestral homeland and be drawn to visit it. What will attract them back are the village temples and holy sites in Sri Lanka."

Today, we are witnessing Gurudeva's prophecy. The war ended in 2009, and as time has passed, damaged temples have been restored with renewed grandeur. The diaspora has returned to rebuild their village temples, and now we see these people and their descendants making pilgrimages to their homeland, particularly during temple festivals and special occasions.

The Nallur Temple stands as the most significant pilgrimage site for Sri Lankan Hindus. During its annual 25-day festival, thousands of devotees come to worship Lord Murugan at Nallur. Many former Sri Lankans now living abroad make it a point to return to Sri Lanka for this event. The Nallur Temple is a vital pilgrimage site for Hindus in Sri Lanka, attracting not only Hindus but also Buddhists, Muslims, Christians and people from all walks of life. Daily, busloads of visitors from the south come to this temple, as well as many foreigners. Nallur Temple is a source of pride, heritage and legacy for Sri Lankan Hindus, and the influx of pilgrims provides a much-needed boost to Sri Lanka's economy.

In our guru lineage, four of the revered satgurus have shared a profound connection with Nallur Murugan. I am certain these satgurus continue to bless and guide us from the inner world.



Endless Variety





DARYANANI LAW GROUP/FIONA DANYKO



COURTESY COEXISTENCE COLLECTIVE



MARIA BURTON



COURTESY ELEPHANT FAMILY USA



COURTESY ELEPHANT FAMILY USA

ENVIRONMENT

Herd Lumbers Across the USA

An invasive toxic shrub is transformed into models of elephants in South India to raise millions for forest restoration and animal-based charities

BY LAVINA MELWANI, NEW YORK

AT A TIME WHEN SO MANY THINGS SEEM to be going wrong in our world, we have a real-life, good-news story for you. It comes from the Meatpacking District in New York City, which a century ago was an area of local slaughterhouses. Now it is a beloved hub of culture, with one hundred elephants visiting from the Nilgiri Hills in South India with a message of peace and coexistence. On September 6, 2024, the community turned out to welcome them with a blessing ceremony, showering them with rose petals.

"We are humbled and proud to welcome these elephants from India to take up residency here for the next six weeks. They'll bring lots of smiles and many double takes," said Jeffrey LeFrancois, Executive Director

of the Meatpacking District. "As you quickly turn your head, there's this immediate sense that they suddenly just belong here, too, and that feels really good."

Indeed, it was a joy to see whole families interacting with these massive creatures, taking photographs together, and children touching them as if man and elephant had always lived together here.

These hundred elephants are not real live pachyderms but sculptural masterpieces designed to convey positivity and hope. They are made of *Lantana camara*, the second most invasive species in the world, which is toxic to humans and elephants. This fast-growing shrub has taken over 40% of forests in India, thus diminishing food sources for animals and forcing them to seek sustenance in urban areas.

In order to free up land for agriculture and to safeguard all living creatures, these poisonous shrubs need to be cleared. But rather than fill up valuable landfill space with them, human ingenuity has turned the toxic material into a potent silent mantra and symbol of the can-do spirit, supporting coexistence and sustainability.

The Great Elephant Migration is created by Elephant Family USA, a charity that works to protect Asian wildlife. One of its trustees is Ruth Ganesh, an environmentalist specializing in large-scale outdoor art exhibitions that benefit conservation work, and who has raised over \$20 million for wildlife conservation.

At the blessing ceremony, surrounded by VIPs and curious people, Ganesh said, "I can't even contain the emotions to finally have

the herd of elephants landing on the iconic streets of the Meatpacking District. The firing gun has officially started on a dream that has incubated for 10 years. These elephants are a direct imprint on what is happening in India right now, and they speak for all the animals that are wandering through towns, cities, agricultural plantations and across highways around the world. It's actually a very positive story, despite the fact that wildlife are up against it right now. It celebrates the story of India, where despite the doubling of a human population, there's also been a doubling of the number of elephants, tigers and rhinos. At this particular moment in time for the world, that is absolutely remarkable. India is a miracle of a country for so many reasons, but we passionately believe that the spiritual tapestry underpinning the entire culture is what's led to such an empathy where animals are increasing, despite humans also increasing. Elephants have been around for about six million years, long before we were. They love, they grieve, they have thoughtful conversations, and they negotiate an incredibly human-dominated world."

She went on to discuss the amazing journey this special herd has embarked on: "We are going to migrate this 100-strong herd of elephants from the East Coast to the West. It

is going to take one year and one month. It is 3,500 miles in length. Every single elephant is for sale. We plan to sell the herd 10 times over and raise \$10 million for all sorts of conservation NGOs that are helping humans overlap with different animals."

The Live Herd and Forest Caretakers

Dr. Tarsh Thekaekara is another trustee of Elephant Family USA. He is a researcher-conservationist who lives in the Nilgiri Hills with the real elephants. Most of his work revolves around human-elephant coexistence and a community-based approach to managing invasive species, particularly *Lantana camara*. He holds a PhD in Geography from The Open University and an MSc in Biodiversity, Conservation and Management from The University of Oxford. He is a trustee of The Shola Trust, a founding member of The Real Elephant Collective, and adjunct faculty at the Human-Wildlife Coexistence Cell at the Trans-Disciplinary University.

Part of his PhD involved understanding individual elephant behavior and personalities, which forms the basis of creating the *Lantana* elephant herd. That herd of 100 elephants has been twinned in the sculptures: each one is a replica of a real elephant who lives with the indigenous people in the Nilgiris, almost

Migration underway: (clockwise from far left) second stop, in New York City; Dr. Tarsh Thekaekara in his element in the Nilgiri Hills; closeup view; opening day in the Meatpacking District; Ruth Ganesh, Elephant Family USA trustee

like family.

Dr. Thekaekara puts a personal face to the whole endeavor, since he lives in close proximity to the wild elephants. He told the gathered crowd, "So, the story of the elephants starts a long time ago, and it's a long and complex one. The primary objective is for the elephants to inspire people. People around the world already love elephants, but the elephant that lives in the popular culture and in peoples' mind doesn't often connect back to the real wild elephant that lives in the forest and plantations around the world. This project is trying to leverage the cultural elephant to feedback into conserving the real elephant on the ground. Each of the sculptures is based on a real wild elephant that lives in the neighboring hills in tea and coffee plantations, alongside people."

He pointed out the end result of this project: "Finally, perhaps the innermost core of this project is the story of the people who



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live alongside animals. Stories from India rarely come across here, beyond the Ambani weddings and other things, but there is a deep culture and an animistic tradition among the people of India, particularly the indigenous communities, who live in the forests, respecting and living with animals. There are 200 indigenous artisans who are the traditional stewards of forests going back centuries, but got displaced from them. Now they can return to stewardship. By making these elephants, they gain a livelihood and they heal the forests.”

One of the main sponsors of the Great Elephant Migration is the iconic Indian fashion house Sabyasachi, which hosted an elephant outside the flagship store on Christopher Street. Founder Sabyasachi Mukherjee attended the blessing and explained why he is a part of it: “Preservation is at the core of what we both do. Elephant Family with their conservation of the world’s endangered animals, and Sabyasachi in our safeguarding of heritage craft and traditional skills, are ensuring the continuity of humanity’s shared treasures for future generations.”

According to Elephant Family US, “In the last 30 years the population of India has doubled to 1.4 billion. Remarkably, the population of elephants, rhinos, lions and tigers has also doubled over this period. They coexist in extraordinary ways, tolerating each other and constantly negotiating space.

“India’s elephants are flagships for coex-



THE HINDU

istence, with 80 percent of their range outside of Protected Areas. In Gudalur, in the Nilgiri Hills, 150 elephants share space with a quarter of a million people. Humans and elephants share the same land, food and water, but still find ways to live alongside each other relatively peacefully.

“A range of beliefs and practices emphasize respect and reverence for nature. India’s ancient cultures go hand in hand with a range

of modern technologies, from smart fences to AI-based monitoring systems. Their remarkable relationship with wildlife is ultimately down to a collective empathy for other living beings at a national scale.”

Negatives into Positives

So how did The Great Elephant Migration change a negative into a positive, creating value out of something harmful and otherwise useless?

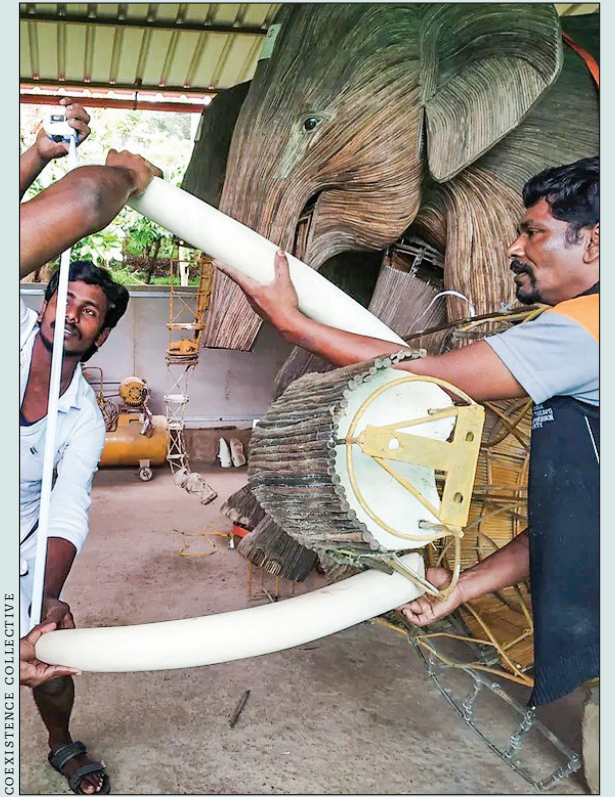
The migration art project supports a large-scale lantana removal effort in India, converting it into biochar which improves soil fertility and water retention. Biochar is a solid, black carbon product created by heating organic materials like wood chips, plant residues, or manure in a limited amount of oxygen. It is a direct capture solution for sequestering carbon into the ground to mitigate climate change. The project will restore vast areas of forests over the next five years. It is not only about a cleaner world but also about providing livelihoods for some of the most marginalized people in the world.

The creation of the elephants supports long-term sustainable employment for indigenous communities in Tamil Nadu. Currently, 200 members of the Soliga, Bettakurumba, Paniya and Kattunayakan tribes form The Coexistence Collective, part of The Real Elephant Collective, a community social enterprise. In



THE HINDU

Ground zero: (left) A senior elephant in Mudumalai forest, Nilgiri Hills, Tamil Nadu; (clockwise from above) artisans (l to r) Chandran, Pradeep, Arun, Ketan, O. Ramesh, Pravin, Manikandan, Ketan and Mani of the Shola Trust in Gudalur; wood tusks are assembled for a large replica; the invasive shrub *Lantana camara* alongside a road in Nilgiri Hills



COEXISTENCE COLLECTIVE

addition, sculpture sales support global conservation efforts, with proceeds benefiting 21 NGOs working in the US and around the world.

This collaboration between indigenous artisans, contemporary artists and cultural institutions will raise millions of dollars for wildlife conservation efforts. These elephants are ready to be gatekeepers and companions in gardens, museums and institutions, a heritage for coming generations.

The elephants come in four sizes and are created by using dried *Lantana camara* wrapped around a steel rebar frame and coated with Osmo Oil for protection. It takes six to nine months to make each one. So, what does an elephant cost? A matriarch is \$18,000, is 75 x 12 x 4ft and its average weight is 660 pounds, while a mighty tusker is 770 pounds and costs \$22,000. An adolescent is \$14,000, while a winsome baby elephant is 220 pounds and costs \$8,000. Each elephant is twinned with a conservation NGO, whose work directly benefits from the proceeds of their sculpture sales.

By now, the herd of 100 elephants has left New York City, and the majority have been bought by institutions and individuals to benefit conservation efforts. Each time an elephant is sold, there’s another one ready to replace it, so that the goal is to raise millions of dollars for sustenance and for various animal-based charities.

Mighty herds are waiting to explore other parts of the United States with their message of coexistence. These peaceful animals eat

nothing, stand immobile forever but evoke so much love and awareness for all wildlife and spread a message of love and tolerance. From New York, they will travel to Miami Beach in Florida, Houston in Texas, Browning in Montana, Jackson Hole in Wyoming and finally to Los Angeles in July 2025.

Awareness of elephants and indigenous people works hand in hand. The herd will travel through the unceded traditional lands, waters and territories of the Narragansett, Lenape, Tequesta, Calusa, Miccosukee, Seminole, Shoshone-Bannock, Apsaalooké (Crow), Eastern Shoshone, Cheyenne, Tongva, Tataviam, Serrano, Kizh and Chumash peoples.

Notes the Elephant Migration website: “We acknowledge the painful history of genocide and forced occupation of their territory. In gratitude, we honor the wisdom of past, present and future elders and community members, and the enduring strength of their cultures and connections to the earth.”

The good news is that these elephants are actually clearing up the forests and generating income with their plant-based bodies. Not only are the forests being allowed to breathe again by the removal of the toxic shrub, but indigenous tribes are getting a new lease on life and livelihood.

According to the site thegreatelephantmigration.org, the elephants are celebrated on the world stage, commanding a high price by notable collectors, and finding homes in some of the world’s most celebrated gardens, including

the official residence of India’s president, and of Britain’s king and queen.

This is amongst the notable indigenous enterprises in India. It is especially significant because for thousands of years indigenous communities have been guardians of the environment. Although they are today only around 6% of the global population, they protect 80% of the biodiversity left on Earth. This effort celebrates indigenous knowledge and enables them to continue to be custodians and stewards of the forests in a modern context.

Just as elephant families are matriarchal, with herds led by an older female, this venture, too, has a matriarchy: many noted powerful women in today’s world are supporting it and standing up for a new world order which respects the values of coexistence of all species.

A brief quote from David Suzuki captures the spirit of the Great Elephant Migration and shows why it must be something we all try to follow: “The way we see the world shapes the way we treat it. If a mountain is a Deity, not a pile of ore; if a river is one of the veins of the land, not potential irrigation water; if a forest is a sacred grove, not timber; if other species are biological kin, not resources; or if the planet is our mother, not an opportunity—then we will treat each other with greater respect. Thus is the challenge, to look at the world from a different perspective.”

The planet is our mother, and all species are our biological kin. This one line can save us from the possible darkness of the future. 🌿

The Bicycle Thieves

A Telling Tale for Kids

Excerpted from two storybooks that teach moral values based on the yamas & niyamas, Hinduism's twenty cardinal virtues

STORY BY ANURADHA MURALI ❖ ILLUSTRATIONS BY RAJEEV N.T.



THE COLLECTION OF STORIES IN BOOKS ONE AND TWO OF *HINDU CHILDREN'S Modern Stories* was written and illustrated at my request to convey Hinduism's ethical and moral values and basic religious observances, which are the traditional *yamas* and *niyamas*, to a new generation. "The Bicycle Thieves" story is drawn from *Ten Tales about Religious Life*. The stories, set in India and America, are intended for children ages ten to twelve, when it is natural to learn about being good. Each story speaks to a single value, for example, nonviolence, honesty, purity or giving. Some stories illustrate the choices a child may face in his or her life, such as lying to cover a mistake, and the pleasant or unpleasant consequences that may result from those choices. They show how negative consequences can be softened by confession, apology and penance. In other stories, the characters model positive, noble behavior, helping others and applying religious principles in real-life situations. In "One Tired Student," children who make fun of a boy who constantly falls asleep in class discover compassion when they learn he is tired because he stays up most of the night helping his ailing grandfather. Several stories encourage children to think about the friends they make, and choose those with similar positive values. The stories follow the principles of Positive Discipline, a system of child rearing that avoids corporal punishment, sees mistakes as opportunities for teaching and lets children learn by fully facing the consequences of their own actions. In "Caught in a Friend's Lie," a boy who has been deceitful at school does not face an angry, judging parent upon returning home. Rather, his father reacts in a kindly, loving, thoughtful manner to help his son understand his error, how to make amends and not to repeat the mistake in the future. In many of the world's schools today, ethical and moral values are often overlooked. I hope this set of short stories will provide Hindu and non-Hindu parents alike one means to convey all-important character-building values to their children.

BY SATGURU BODHINATHA VEYLANSWAMI

Four teens, supported by their parents, approach a fire puja being performed by two priests. They are seeking blessings for their studies in the year ahead, knowing the guidance of the devas will keep their minds strong and focused on the challenges of learning so they can excel.

RAJEEV NT



"Silly! Stolen food tastes better! Don't you know? Come on! Or are you chicken?"

Stung by the words, Nilakantha objected, "I'm not chicken!"

"Come on then! What are we waiting for?" Matching his words with his actions, Rohit ran to the bike, "What luck! It's not even locked." Wheeling it to the road, he climbed on the seat and whispered, "Jump on the back!"

Against his better judgment, Nilakantha climbed aboard, and off they rode. Nilakantha was too scared to turn around and see if anyone was watching them.

They rode along merrily till they reached Shanti Grove. Its pine trees were tall and strong, casting a soft shadow on the ground.

The two rode in the woods for a long time. Finally they stopped to rest, and Nilakantha said, "Rohit, we have been playing with this bike for over an hour. When are we returning it? The owner must be pretty worried and upset that it is missing!"

Rohit laughed loudly. "Who said we were going to return it? Do you think they'll find it funny and just let us go if we give it back to them now? No way!"



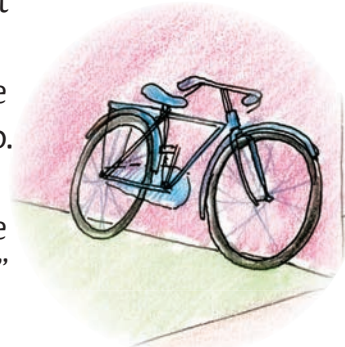
The Bicycle Thieves

Summer vacation was starting to seem long and boring. On the outskirts of Pondicherry in South India, Rohit kicked a pebble down the street a few miles from his home. "There are too many rules. Don't do this, don't do that! And when I ask my parents the reason, they say I'm too young to understand! Bah! I'm not young! I'll be twelve this September!"

Nilakantha watched his friend's face. "What's Rohit up to?" A slight feeling of fear tingled up his spine. Nilakantha liked Rohit a lot, though he didn't always approve of his ways. But then that was what made him exciting to be with! There was nothing boring about him.

Walking down the street, they noticed a shiny blue bicycle leaning against a building. Rohit's eyes lit up. "Wow! What a beauty! I need to take that for a ride!"

Nilakantha looked with disbelief at Rohit, "Hey! We have our own bikes. Why do you need to ride this one?"





They'll hand us over to the cops, that's what they'll do."

Nilakantha felt his lunch rising up to his throat. He swallowed hard and stood still for a moment. His head felt light and dizzy. Police! What would his parents think? His father would lower his head in shame and his mother would cry. Oh, why had he listened to Rohit?

"Don't worry, pal, I have a plan." Saying that, Rohit jumped back on the bike and rode fast to the lake at the center of the grove. Nilakantha ran panting behind him. Suddenly he heard a loud splash. When he caught up with Rohit, he saw the bicycle slowly sinking into the muddy lakebed, a few yards offshore.

"What have you done?" he screamed.

"Stop it! Don't shout! We can't do anything else. Come on, let's go back home."

Back in town, Arumugam, the owner of the bike, came out of the office. The boss's assistant had just told him, "This letter must be delivered to the bank within 30 minutes." Arumugam wasn't worried. He knew he could

get there much faster than that on his new bicycle. The thought of his bike brought a smile to his face. He had wanted a bike all his life, but because of all the other expenses, including looking after his two little daughters, his wife, his sisters and his parents, there never seemed to be enough money. Somehow, with God's blessings, he had finally bought the bicycle, a big accomplishment for a man who had never gone to school.

As he stepped out the door, he suddenly knew the bike was gone. Instinctively, he felt the loss even before he saw the empty space where he had parked it.

He had a second to make up his mind. He could stand there and raise a noise about his missing bike, or he could get the letter to the bank. Duty came first, so he dashed off, with tears dimming his sight.

Arumugam was a simple man who did not even own a watch. He calculated the time of day by looking at the sun. A half an hour had little meaning to him. He walked with quick strides to the bank. The road was





long, and the distance seemed even longer. When he finally reached the bank, he was upset to see the sign, "Closed for the day."

He hurriedly asked a passerby, "What is the time?"

"Ten past one."

Arumugam realized that he had walked for more than an hour!

"When will the bank be open?" he asked the watchman.

"Today's Friday. Won't be open till Monday. Sorry."

Stunned and helpless, feeling a loss greater than the loss of the bike, Arumugam walked back to the office, hanging his head.

"What! You didn't deliver the package?" Mahadevan, Arumugam's boss, cried out.

As poor Arumugam told the sad story, Mahadevan shook his head, not knowing whether to laugh or to cry. He felt his plans crash around him. The parcel had contained his bid for a government construction project. The deadline for submissions was the end of Friday. Because of Arumugam's failure, the bid would never even be considered. This was an important project, and the company had to have it to keep ahead of the hard economic



times.

"You may have cost me my company, Arumugam! I cannot employ you any longer. You are fired."

With slumped shoulders, Mahadevan turned, walked into his office and closed the door. Arumugam left the building in shock, wondering what he would he say to his wife and what would he do. The job was so important to his family.

The next day, at lunchtime, Nilakantha just picked at his food. His father, Srinatha, was explaining yesterday's incident. He had heard about it from his friend who worked for Mahadevan. "Why did the bicycle thieves have to steal that poor man's bike? He saved money for years to buy it."

A few tears rolled onto his plate, and Nilakantha did not try to wipe them. Suddenly, he blurted out, "Appa, I, I stole the bike." Later he wondered what had made him confess; but as he did so a huge weight was lifted from his shoulders.

Srinatha stared at his son as though he was seeing him for the first time.

"You don't mean that!" Seeing the intense pain Nilakantha was in, he softened his tone, "Why, son? Why did you do it?"

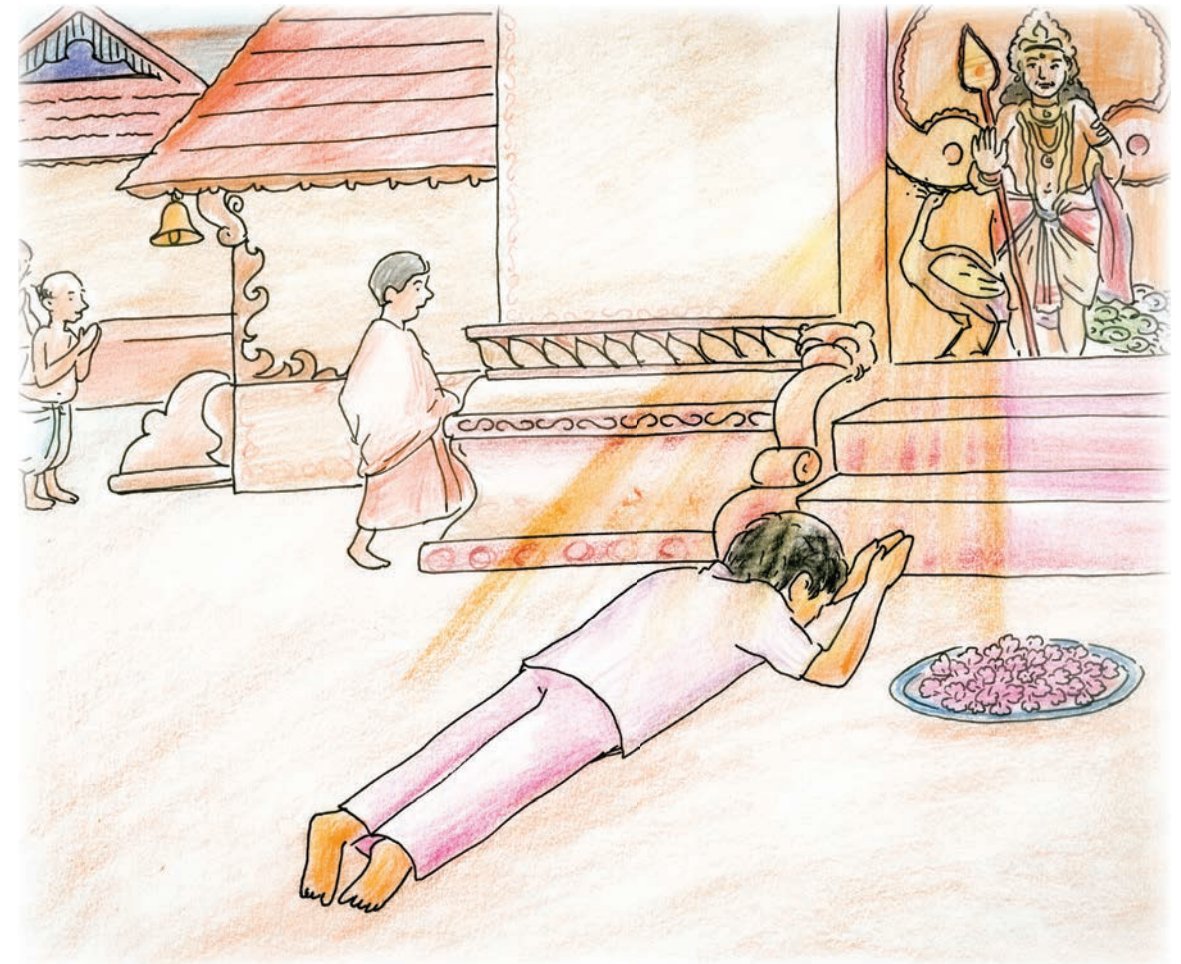
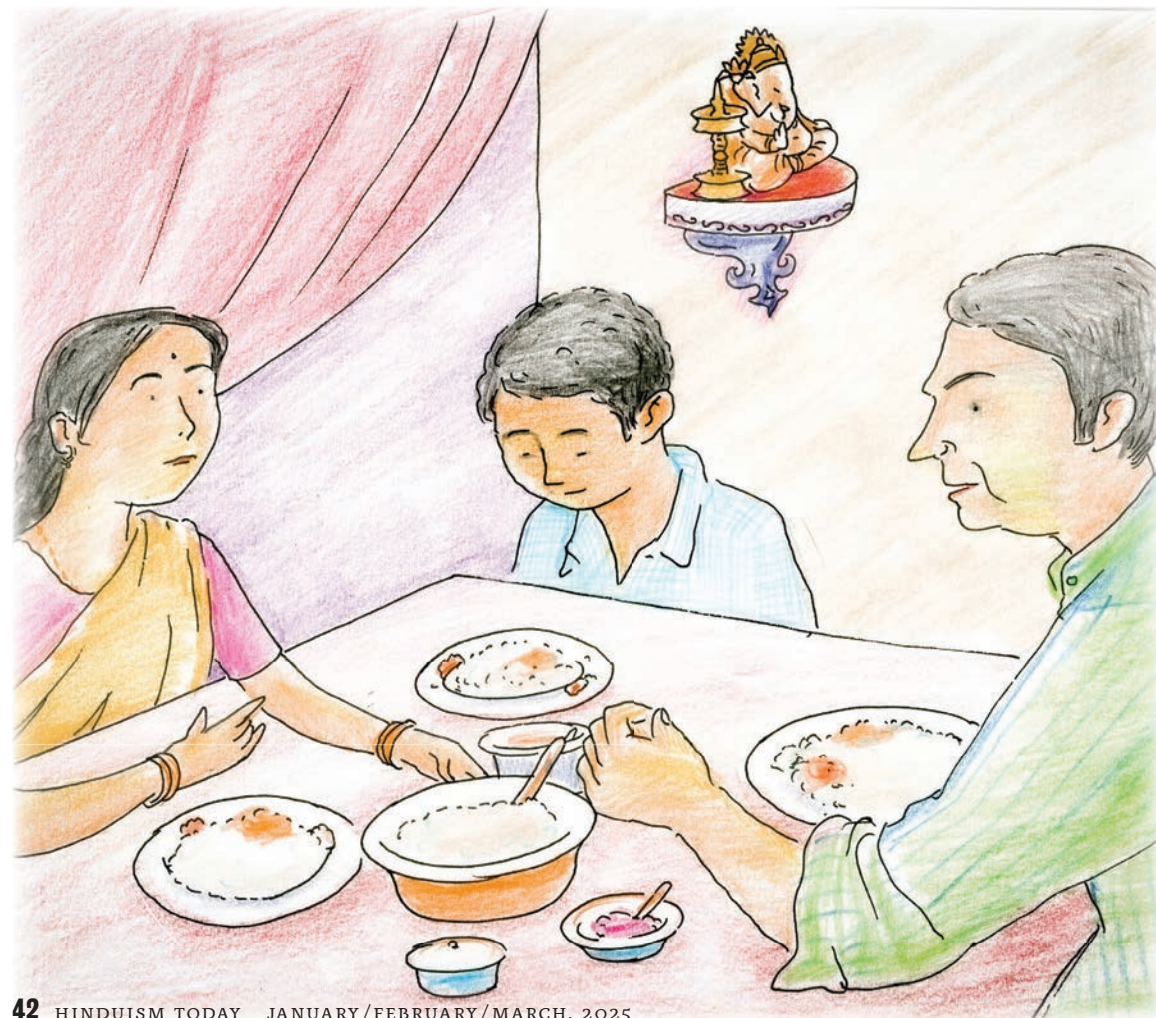
Nilakantha remembered Rohit's face, but what would be achieved by telling his father about Rohit? Sobbing quietly, he confessed, "Appa, it was just for fun. I'm so sorry."

That afternoon, father and son walked up to Mahadevan's office. Arumugam was sitting outside on the step, looking lost, sipping a cup of tea. "My son took your cycle." The very words seemed to age his father.

Arumugam bowed his head, "It is okay, sir. Boys love to ride bicycles. Your son is, after all, like my son!"

Srinatha pulled some bills from his pocket and pressed them into Arumugam's hands. "We are very sorry. Please buy yourself a new bike."

As Srinatha turned to walk away, Arumugam asked, "Sir, can you help get me a new job?"



"Why? What happened?"

Arumugam explained that he had been fired for failing to deliver the package.

"Oh, no!" Nilakantha thought, "Not only did I steal his bike, I cost him his job, too!" His mind wandered to the scene of the bike sinking into the lake.

"Ok. Let's go," he heard his father order sternly.

The rest of the weekend was a storm of tears and remorse for Nilakantha. But with the remorse, there arose a new strength of character, which his father did not miss. On Sunday evening, father and son sat outside the house watching the sunset. Srinatha spoke, "Son, I know you too well. You could not have done this on your own. Who was with you? Was it Rohit?"

Nilakantha kept quiet, and his father knew he was right. "I thought so. I will speak with Rohit's father. And son, I know you had to go through this incident to realize your strength. You will never again be weak enough to fall



into wrongdoing. I see how much you have regretted stealing, and I know you will never do such a thing again. I am proud of how you have benefitted from the experience.” Srinatha hugged his boy tightly.

Monday was a busy day. Srinatha took Nilakantha with him to be present as he talked to the bank manager and then with Mahadevan. Like most stories where “all’s well that ends well,” this story, too, saw everything being cleared up. Thanks to Srinatha’s influence, the bank accepted Mahadevan’s late proposal. Arumugam not only got his job back, he was given a raise for his selfless attitude which had made him walk to the bank instead of going to the police to report the theft of his bicycle.

Nilakantha knew that while his father and Arumugam had forgiven him for the incident, and he had made amends by helping to get Arumugam’s job back, he still needed to do penance for his crime.

He had always been taught that life’s actions, good or bad, come back to us.



That Friday he gathered 108 flowers in a basket and went to the temple. As he had seen his father do, he prostrated 108 times before Lord Murugan and offered one flower with each prostration. It took almost two hours. As he got up from the 108th prostration, he saw a white light enter his heart and felt a great rush of kindness and forgiveness. It seemed to come from the silver Vel in the hand of Lord Murugan. He knew then that he was free from the ill effects of his action.

Srinatha talked to Rohit’s father, and the two of them shared the cost of the bike. Rohit had to confess to stealing the bike, but he felt no remorse; he only regretted getting caught. The idea of doing penance never occurred to him. He would just be more careful next time, and surely not choose Nilakantha as a partner!

Vacation ended and school was back in session. Nilakantha was worried about how Rohit would behave toward him. They were not really friends anymore. They had not been together since the day they took the bike. He was surprised one day when Rohit showed up late for school.

The next morning, while riding to school, Nilakantha saw Rohit walking along the familiar pathway. “Rohit, where’s your bike?” he asked as he stopped to give him a ride.

Rohit scowled, “Someone stole it. I left it outside the game parlor, and when I came out, it was gone. Cursed luck!”

Yes, it seems two boys had taken his bike for a joyride and then thrown it in a ditch in hopes of not being discovered.



Other Fun Stories in the Series

Below are previews of four more stories in which children encounter challenging situations that are familiar to them. The stories illustrate the power of worship, contentment, karma, faith and more, while highlighting the purpose and value of applying religious principles in daily life.

The Creators

The stories in the two books of *Hindu Childrens' Modern Stories* was written by Anuradha Murali of Bengaluru, India, an award-winning creative writer, author of *The Coconut Cutter & Other Stories* and *Wingless* (Sishti Publications, New Delhi). The were illustrated by Rajeev N.T. of Vuthiri, Kerala, India, an award-winning illustrator for children's books and creator of several cartoon strips.

Where to Obtain the Books

Book One, *Ten Tales About Self-Control* and Book Two, *Ten Tales About Religious Life* are each 84 pages long and profusely illustrated, available as hardcover and as e-books through Amazon.com and Apple's iBookstore. Books include a narrated CD. Order at minimela.com or through Amazon.com.



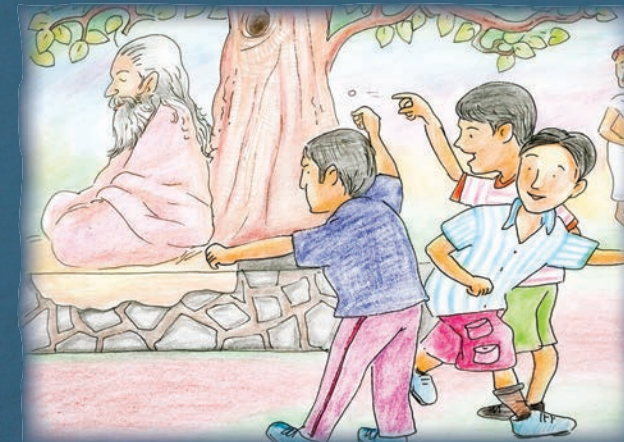
Be Satisfied with What You Have

Yogesh, visiting his grandparents in a village in India, is frustrated by the lack of modern comforts and longs for his video games. After spending time with his great uncle and the local village children, he begins to appreciate the simplicity of rural life. Learning to milk cows, play traditional games and live without technology, he discovers happiness in unexpected places. By the time he returns to the city, he is transformed, realizing that true contentment doesn't come from material possessions but from connecting with others and enjoying life's simple pleasures.



The Milk Miracle

In 1995 Revati experiences a miraculous event when Lord Ganesha drinks milk offerings at her local temple in Delhi. The miracle quickly spreads across the world, with similar events reported in temples from India to the U.S. and Kenya. Devotees flock to offer milk, and even though hundreds of gallons are given, barely any is spilled. Revati and her mother, along with many others, offer milk to Ganesha and are overjoyed to witness the miracle firsthand. Although skeptics claim it to be capillary action, devotees are convinced of its divine nature. The event, covered by media worldwide, reinforces the faith of countless people, including Revati. She reflects on the power of faith and the wonders that arise when the divine intervenes in everyday life.



Understanding through Experience

Jaykumar learns the law of karma firsthand after finding a \$5 bill on the ground and choosing to keep it, even though he knows its owner is searching for it nearby. A few days later, he brings \$20 to school to buy books, only to find it missing from his bag. During a class on karma and cognition, Jaykumar realizes the connection between his actions and the loss he suffered, understanding karma as a direct cause-and-effect law. Seeking redemption, he returns to the bus stop where he found the money, spots the man, and confesses, giving the money back. The man praises Jaykumar's courage in admitting his mistake. Jaykumar's guilt is relieved, and shortly after, his stolen \$20 is returned anonymously. The events solidify his understanding of karma.



Praying for Ganesha's Help

Vasuki overhears her parents discussing her father's job loss and worries about the family's future. To help, she turns to Lord Ganesha, her family's beloved Deity. Each morning before school, she gathers flowers, makes garlands, and prays to Ganesha for her father to find a new job. As weeks pass, his job search remains unsuccessful, and the family grows more anxious, but Vasuki continues her worship, even when her fingers are pricked by thorns while gathering roses. Eventually, her dedication is rewarded. Her father not only finds a new job but one that pays better and offers more responsibilities than before. Her faith in Ganesha deepens as she realizes the power of consistent, sincere devotion in times of hardship.

INTERVIEW

Invoking the Divine Feminine

With Maa Gyaan Suveera

BY ERICA BASSANI, RISHIKESH

DURING MY RESEARCH ON FEMALE MASTERS TO INTERVIEW for the Women Awakening Project, I visited the international community of Auroville, in Tamil Nadu, for the third time. Constantly inspired by reading Mirra Alfassa ("The Mother") and Sri Aurobindo, I felt I might find some new leads by going there on a special occasion. It was February 2024, and a nine-day festival called Shaktikumbh was taking place. This event was a congregation of women spiritual leaders meeting to revitalize the Indic knowledge system of shakti for future generations. Maa Gyaan Suveera was one of these gifted women, and I arranged a private meeting with her. A Vedanta teacher, healer, life coach and mentor, Maa Gyaan Suveera lives by the banks of Mother Ganga on the outskirts of Rishikesh. Her presence immediately struck me as she sat close to me in the beautiful garden of the Unity Pavilion, wearing a simple black tee shirt and a long orange skirt. I could see a peacock feather tattooed on her left arm and some Sanskrit syllables on her right wrist. She had a big, dark red dot on the third eye. Pouring down from her neck was a rosary of very big beads of the rudraksha tree. The qualities that I immediately recognized in her were a practical strength and determination, a very grounded spirituality and self-confidence. I was ready for a conversation that goes straight to the point.

Maa Gyaan Suveera, where and how do you live?

I live in an ashram in Rishikesh. It's my home. It is called Kirti Hermitage because I live alone there, with some helpers. We have a very balanced ecology there and a temple established with a very old form of Tantric Ganesha. I am a Ganesha Upasak (devotee). We organize satsang for yoga groups and traveling groups. I teach Vedanta and I focus on healing modalities; this is what I do for a living. But the seva, the service I feel called to do, is to interact with anyone that comes across my path. Every day, from 3 pm to 5 pm, I hold a space for people who need to come and talk, or enroll for our courses and teachings. I don't keep myself aloof.

I'm researching the Divine Feminine. Would you please share with us insights on the nature of Siva and Shakti according to Vedanta?

In the Vedanta philosophy, we say that consciousness is akin to the qualities of the masculine, Siva. He's a huge source of energy with fathomless possibilities and infinite potential. However, He cannot produce anything or do anything without the moving energy of the shakti. So, shakti is an essential part of the whole completion process in this universe. Whether in a man or in a woman, if the shakti is not in a balanced proportion, then he or she is not a complete human



being. More so it is evident in women: they often don't recognize their own power. The creation, sustenance and the whole cycle of the universe completes with her, through her energy. She complements the potential energy of the masculine. The masculine is potential energy. She is kinetic energy. The kinetic energy is an essential aspect of the entire process of creation. If it is not invoked in us, then we are like machines, whether we are a woman or a man. And that's why there is a lopsided development in the society, because the men do not acknowledge the feminine in them and the women have forgotten the divine feminine inside them. So, they are like machines at the mercy of their individual egos, and at the mercy of the social, societal, familiar conditioning. Their behavior and the interaction with each other and the society is completely against spiritual living.

We are primarily spiritual in nature. Externally we are material, we belong to a gender and everything else, but at the core we are spiritual beings. When you say "beings," it means that this life has to be guided by the spirit, not by the ego-system or by the logical system. So, invoking the Divine Feminine is one of the most important needs in today's society, both for men and women. For men, to become more loving, sensitive and lovable. Otherwise, you are obsessed by a man, scared by a man or dependent on a man. Being in love with a man who has a certain balance of the feminine and masculine within himself is a great gift and opportunity for a woman and vice versa.

How can we move more into the light and revere the Divine Feminine inside of us?

I think it's important to understand the science of consciousness and energy. All human beings function through mind and intellect. The mind can go crazy with its imaginations and everything, while the intellect is the storehouse of logical data and can be a guarding monitor. So, when your intellect is fed with the right knowledge, right information, and the science of how life is, the science of what spirituality is, then it functions not under the guidance of the ego



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but is guided by the light. Our life has to be guided by the light and not by the power of the ego. The ego can be subservient to the light and it will behave. It has to go along with the law of the universe and nature. Otherwise, the ego can be the biggest demon living in us. So, coming back to your question: to revere Shakti, you have to understand the creation process, the yogic psychology and be in a very surrendered, gentle mode. I cannot love someone that I'm not truly understanding. So we need to experience Her, in order to love Her.

Which ways do you suggest to get in contact with Her?

In India we have no lack of facilities: there are stotras, mantras, meditations and teachers that can bring you on the path of bhakti or on the path of meditation. There is so much of jnana yoga here. We have many means. Even for people who are not educated, or for people who don't want to engage in more studying, there is the bhakti marga, where they can sit and sing the glory of the Lord and She awakens inside. It's enough to approach Her in the mode of surrender.

Can you share more about the qualities of this surrender?

Yes, what do we surrender? We surrender our ego. We surrender our personality at the feet of the Lord, at the feet of the Divine, of Shakti. You surrender and say, 'Please, come and stay in me. Come and live in me. Let me know Your presence in me. I want to experience You.' When you surrender your ego and have conversations with the Divine, then the activation of the energy happens. The Divine is not a human, someone sitting somewhere with a long dress. The Divine is energy, so it can be invoked. A conversation with a genuine

A guiding light: (left to right) Maa Gyaan Suveera is ready to counsel visitors at her Kirti Hermitage in Rishikesh; havana with students of her "10 Great Incantations Program"

attention and seeking in the heart.

In Hinduism we see infinite forms of Devi. Can you tell us something about this?

It's like clothing. Someone likes red, someone likes blue, someone likes white, so...the spiritual masters are so kind and generous that they have offered us an array of paths, whatever appeals to you. You like to sing, then you go towards the bhakti marga; you like to study, then you go the jnana marga; if you are more into action, you do karma marga. The different forms and facets of Goddesses are facets of the human ego and human personalities. There are millions of us in different forms and there are millions of them in different forms. Whatever we feel connected to, we call it Ishta, Ishta-devata, which means "what my heart connects to." I make Her my representative for the entire power of this universe. And I start a communication, a conversation with an attitude of surrender and invocation to Her. That's the basis of worship here in India. We make one icon that represents Paramatman (Absolute Self)—the whole fathomless power of the universe—and you start your journey with Him or Her. That's the way. And then what happens is a cause-and-effect kind of process. The more I connect, the more I receive. The more I understand, the more I experience. So, the path opens up and

eventually you realize the presence of that Goddess that you are worshiping, inside of you. You realize Her inside of you and you understand. Knowledge comes automatically. Knowledge is not in pills. Knowledge has to come from the akasha, from somewhere. It has to land in your intellect so that you can then understand it and realize it in the heart. It happens automatically. There are ways and means that the masters have given us: we follow them, that's it.

So, we can also say that the potential that is already within, awakens?

Yes, it awakens and we realize it. What is realization? Realization is not just understanding on the intellectual level, but actually feeling it in the heart.

One last question, how did you come to be on this path?

I studied in the Mother's International School. My inner journey and self-exploration started then, around 1978. I could say that I felt initiated in silence by the Divine Mother in the Aurobindo Ashram. But the truth is that I don't know. The Divine pulled me.

The Author: Erica Bassani is a copywriter, author and spiritual seeker since her early twenties. She's combined her highest passion with her deepest love by founding the Women Awakening Project (www.womenawakeningproject.com), a space to gather interviews with female masters of all spiritual traditions.



U S A

A Journey of Devotion

Ram Rath Yatra Traverses 27,000 Miles to Unite Hindus Across the US

BY REENA RATHORE, US

IN A MONUMENTAL EFFORT TO BRING THE sacred blessings of Ram Lalla, the child form of Lord Ram, to Hindu communities across the US, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America spearheaded an ambitious and heartfelt journey, the “Ram Lalla Rath Yatra.” This spiritual odyssey, which commenced at VHPA’s headquarters in Sugar Grove, Illinois, on March 25, covered nearly 27,000 miles, ultimately stretching to 49 states, reaching over 850 temples and weaving a tapestry of devotion and unity among the Hindu diaspora.

The two-month-long trip, a remarkable feat of devotion and determination, was initiated to distribute prasad and *akshatam* (blessed rice) from the Ram Mandir *prana pratishtha*, or consecration ceremony, in Ayodhya, India. The inception of the yatra was deeply rooted in a promise made to Hindu temples in the US. Following the grand announcement that the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya would be inaugurated on January 26, 2024, the VHPA reached out to temples across the US through the Hindu Mandir Empowerment Council, encouraging participation in the prana

pratishtha ceremony from home or through local events, rather than traveling to India—a turnout which might have overrun local infrastructures. They provided letters and promotional materials with instructions for involvement. Car rallies were held to inform temple communities about the ceremony and stress the importance of staying in the US for the event. The promise included the delivery of prasad from the consecration ceremony to each temple, a vow that fueled the journey’s inception.

“So, how do you make good on a promise to deliver the prasad you pledged in writing, with your signature right there?” recounted Amitabh Mittal, general secretary of VHPA, to HINDUISM TODAY. “I felt personally responsible for this, even more than VHPA itself. And since I love driving—I’ve traveled to every state, though never at this scale—I just thought, ‘I’ll take a car and go.’”

A detailed plan was created with the executive board to ensure the journey was well organized. The plan estimated an 8,000-mile trip, and intended to make it comfortable for participants. A van was acquired and decorat-

ed by volunteers to resemble a mini-mandir, and the team of four set off, carrying a replica of Ram Lalla, sacred murtis, and boundless devotion. They received three copies of the statues of Lord Ram, but unfortunately, two were damaged.

The journey began with high spirits, but the task’s magnitude quickly became apparent as the miles and temples added up. They traveled over 500 miles on the first day, visiting nine temples. A key moment came when the team reached the East Coast, having already covered nearly 6,000 miles. “We realized very quickly that this would be humongous,” said Tejal Shah, a key figure in the Hindu Mandir Empowerment Council and joint general secretary of VHPA. Mittal noted, “We realized then that it was going to be far more than 8,000 miles. But that only gave us more energy to keep going.”

Each visit, lasting about 30 minutes, was filled with deep ceremonial significance and followed a strict ritual protocol. At each temple, the team installed the sacred statue of Ram Lalla in a temporary shrine, following rigorous guidelines established by the Shri



From Ayodhya to America: (far-left) A group photo with the van. Amitabh Mittal is seen in the driver’s seat; (clockwise from above) during each temple visit, the sacred murti of Ram Lalla was reverently installed for a brief period; the US leg of the Ram Rath Yatra begins at the VHPA headquarters in Sugar Grove, Illinois; at every temple, the yatra was warmly received by local temple trustees, priests and a large number of devotees

Ram Janma Bhoomi trustees in Ayodhya, India. This level of care emphasized the spiritual weight of each visit. The significance of the yatra lay not only in the thousands of miles traveled but also in the spiritual connections made at each temple.

During each stop, amidst the chanting of mantras, they performed rituals that included combining the akshatam from Ayodhya with each temple’s own akshatam, symbolizing the unity and continuity of devotion across the country. In Hindu tradition, akshatam holds symbolic meaning and is often used in blessings, representing purity, abundance, and goodwill. After the rituals, the akshatam and other offerings were distributed to the devotees, extending the blessings.

“What it symbolizes is taking your emotions across the USA to all the mandirs,” explained Tejal Shah, a leader in the yatra. “Each temple we visited symbolically travels with us, united in this *kumbhakalash* that we carry from place to place. It doesn’t deteriorate,” he said, describing the sense of unity felt along the journey. Each temple received an official certificate and a two- by three-foot portrait of Ram Lalla, commemorating the occasion.

Each stop was unique, with local communities warmly embracing the yatra. Gujarati temples welcomed the travelers with garbha dances, South Indian temples greeted them with a poorna kumbha swagat, and North In-

dian temples celebrated with dhol and tashas (traditional drums). This outpouring of joy, devotion and tears underscored the yatra’s profound impact. “People treated us with immense respect, feeling that, even if they couldn’t go to Ayodhya, Ayodhya had come to them,” said Shah. The unity and emotion witnessed during the yatra were palpable, as each temple welcomed Ram Lalla with open arms and hearts full of devotion.

Deepti Mahajan, VHPA coordinator in the San Francisco Bay Area, joined the yatra for two days. She echoed these sentiments: “People were pleasantly surprised, overwhelmed, and ecstatic, just wanting to touch the murthi and pray to it. Many said they had never seen anything like this before. It was so professionally done, and some even wished they had been involved from the start. People would attend the event at one temple and then follow us to the next,” she recounted.

The yatra followed a carefully planned route managed by a dedicated logistics team

to avoid backtracking, adjusting the schedule along the way as new temples were added. Starting from Chicago, the journey zigzagged across the country from the East Coast to the Southern, Western and Northern states before returning to Chicago. Sometimes the team visited as many as 19 temples in a single day, sustained by a sense of duty and the overwhelming support and enthusiasm of local communities.

Early starts and disciplined scheduling kept them on track, with Mittal describing the “military-like regime” they followed to stay organized, visiting multiple temples daily despite delays and the physical toll of the journey. Volunteers joined in for various segments, adding to the collective spirit of devotion. Bharat FM’s Manan Rawal accompanied them from start to finish. The journey was full of unexpected blessings and meaningful encounters.

The trip had its challenges. The team dealt with vehicle repairs, inclement weather, and





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A journey remembered: Devotees pose at the Vadtal Dham Shree Swaminarayan Hindu Temple in Houston, TX; the custom-designed van, adorned with imagery of Ram Lalla and carrying the murtis of Lord Ram, Goddess Sita, Lord Lakshman and Lord Hanuman, served as the Rath, or chariot.

the physical toll of nonstop travel. However, they felt buoyed by what they called divine interventions—unexpected help and support at crucial moments. For example, Mittal recounted, “It would downpour while we were driving, but the rain would stop when we ar-

rived at a temple.” Wrong turns sometimes led to shorter routes, and they even visited a Ganesh temple in Alaska that had been established by a guru from a Hawaiian monastery, thanks to connections made in Phoenix, Arizona.

In one memorable instance in Washington state, a truck driver who had seen videos of the yatra tracked them to a rest area for the chance to have darshan. Other touching moments included arriving at a remote gas station managed by two Indian women who were eager to have darshan. In another case, the team was given food meant for a group of eight and shared it with truck drivers they met. One memorable stop was Texas A&M, where 400 Hindu students gathered to express their gratitude and excitement.

Despite the obstacles, like reversing on a highway to meet a follower or managing unexpected delays from fallen electrical poles in Missouri, the journey continued without major setbacks.

Shah observed, “The larger impact of the yatra was uniting and connecting with our community. It allowed us to reach every corner of the US, connecting with people we otherwise wouldn’t have reached.” The yatra revealed the community’s deep devo-

tion, even among college students and those at remote temples. Over 200 students gathered at Dartmouth, filling the room and participating with deep emotion in the prayers. This dispelled doubts about the younger generation’s commitment to spiritual activities, said Mittal. “It’s mind-blowing. The room is packed with not an inch of space left...they’re crying, and the prayer is ongoing. It made me question why we underestimate the second generation’s dedication.”

Despite initial concerns about turnout in Vermont, the reception there was warm, showing that communities everywhere, large or small, value these connections. “People in big cities might overlook those in remote areas, thinking ‘let them be,’ but this yatra showed that the entire Hindu community cares,” Mittal said.

Supported initially by VHPA and sustained through donations, the journey relied on faith, trusting that support would come as needed—and it did. Mittal and Shah concluded that the yatra was more than fulfilling a promise; it was a pilgrimage that strengthened the Hindu diaspora, bringing the sacredness of Ayodhya to American soil.

This remarkable journey has been recognized by the World Book of Star Records, with the Prime Minister of Nepal announcing the award on August 11th. An 18-foot-long, 9-foot-wide, and 8-foot-tall replica of Ram Lalla also took center stage during the 42nd India Day Parade in New York on August 18th.

MINISTER’S MESSAGE

Our Duty to Make Offerings

The various forms of yajna teach us to see beyond our individuality

BY SRI JAYENDRA PURI SWAMIJI

THE PRIMARY DUTY OF ALL HUMANS IRRESPECTIVE of any classification or discrimination is to observe dharma, or righteousness, which implies doing only good and constructive activities and never destructive activities, from birth to demise. This occurs through four stages of life, or *ashramas*. The first stage is *brahmacharya*, the student period of scriptural study and acquisition of other knowledge to lead a virtuous life. The second stage is *grihastha*, the period during which one accepts the life of marriage, begets progeny and lives a virtuous life by providing for society, specifically for people in the other stages. The third stage is *vanaprastha*, the retirement and respected elder period after having lived a virtuous life and providing for progeny a good livelihood and entry into *grihastha* stage. The final stage is *sannyasa*, granting the option of complete renunciation of all desires and total surrender to only God-Realization, subsisting on the barest food and other requirements.

One of the components of dharma is the duty called *yajna*. *Yajna* is a collective word for all activities performed for the welfare of mankind, other living beings and the world at large. It is derived from the root *yaja*, which means “to worship, adore, honor, revere.” *Yajna* has a threefold meaning: 1) *devapuja*, offering to God (or Deities), 2) *sangatikarana*, congregation of virtuous persons, and 3) *danam*, acts of charity. *Danam* is often translated defectively into English and other languages as “sacrifice.” *Yajna* is a compulsory activity for all humans. This is mentioned in the *Vedas* and various other allied texts.

Our personal expression of dharma and *yajna* varies through life. As a student *brahmachari*, one obtains knowledge by studying the sacred scriptures given by great rishis. Since one lives in a group or society, one is helped by associating with fellow beings, like friends and relatives. *Brahmacharis* are supported by persons in the *grihastha* stage for food, clothing, shelter and needs. The great seers and ancestors must be remembered with gratitude for their contribution to his overall development.

One’s duties become multifold as he enters the *grihastha* ashrama. The physical body comprises the *panchabhutas*, five elements, and is obtained from one’s parents, nourished by the milk of cows and by grains, vegetables and fruits. The *devas* and the ancestors bless one’s endeavors and activities of daily life. The five sense organs, with whose help one conducts one’s life, are a blessing of the Gods, and thus one learns to be grateful to the Gods who gave him abilities and intellect.

Protecting other living beings, such as cattle, dogs, ants, birds, medicinal plants and trees, is an integral part of Sanatana Dharma. The householder, on whose shoulders rests the responsibility and well-being of all, animate and inanimate, is thus entrusted to care for these speechless beings with due dignity towards them. Food, milk and grains are all provided by this bountiful nature, and man owes gratitude and reverence to plants and trees. Thus, in the overall evolution of man, he learns humility and compassion by providing for and protecting them. The *Garuda Purana* details the importance



of cows, not only for providing material things required for sustenance in this world, but greatly stresses the absolute requirement of a cow, which helps one cross the river of this lifetime to its end, when the soul is transiting from the material world to the yonder world.

The Panchamahayajnas, or five great offerings, are especially important in daily functions for one in the householder stage of life, which is the stage of providing for others. Listed in the *Krishna Yajurveda*, the Panchamahayajnas comprise five duties as a repayment of the debts we owe to five aspects, or gifts, of God’s manifestation. They are: *Deva Yajna*, *Pitru Yajna*, *Bhuta Yajna*, *Manushya*

Yajna and *Brahma Yajna*. The performance of these five yajnas is conducive to the overall evolution or growth of a person. An individual in Sanatana Dharma observes these five yajnas daily and gradually learns that one is not a separate entity, isolated creature or isolated unit, but is a part of a great whole.

Deva Yajna is worship of God and the Gods as a repayment of the debt in the form of grace through which we are born as humans and not in any other species, and other unlimited gifts.

Pitru Yajna is leading a virtuous life, performing one’s duties diligently with good fame in the society, as the repayment of the debt to one’s parents and ancestors for the gift of the physical body and the glorious lineage.

Bhuta Yajna is respect towards and protection of nature in the form of other living beings, vegetation and all natural resources and all manifestation, animate or inanimate, as a repayment of the debt of making use of all of them for our benefit.

Manushya Yajna is service to humanity and all fellow human beings as a repayment of the debt for their support in all walks of life.

Brahma Yajna is study of all good texts and sacred literature as a repayment of the debt to the rishis and all gurus and teachers for the knowledge they have given us.

Whenever any of us takes the help of or avails a favor from any of our fellow beings, we say, “Thanks,” “Thanks a million,” “Thanks a lot,” “Much gratitude,” etc., in one’s own language. This could be even the smallest of favors like offering a seat to an elder or to a mother carrying a child. It could be magnanimous favors, like being there for someone for a prolonged period when everything seemed dark.

Keeping this in view, the rishis of Bharat, whose experiences are recorded as sacred lore, implore us to perform these five yajnas in gratitude to all the five gifts, the five manifestations, as guided by the sacred texts.

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The karma of one's actions,

Positive or negative, may be experienced immediately, sometime later in one's present life, or possibly in a future life or lives. The cycle of birth and rebirth is called **samsara**.

A person's karma is based on the choices they make and the thoughts, words, or actions that are the result.

EDUCATION

Dharma Defenders in America

The Hindu American Foundation's Dharma Ambassador Certification Program helps graduates explain the religion convincingly and accurately

By CLAIRE BURKERT, NEPAL

“IT’S WRITTEN IN MY KARMA,” HE SIGHED with a smile, serving himself a second piece of cake. “Nobody writes your karma,” I told this person seated next to me at a birthday party, but he repeated, “I can’t resist. It’s my karma!” I am an American who frequently visits the US from my home in Nepal, where I’ve lived for over 35 years. My first thought was, “Who is this person telling ME about karma?” As he enjoyed his cake, I began to explain: “First of all, karma is not the same as predetermination. That’s a common misconception. Karma is about causality.” I thought, *I have to get better at this.*

At that birthday party, I was speaking to someone with whom I shared the same language and culture. I wondered how could I effectively broaden this conversation? The term *karma* comes up in many conversations but is little understood. A few days later, a friend told me he had “bad cell-phone karma” (having lost his iPhone), and again I wanted to dive into a discussion. But despite having lived so long in Nepal, taking part in Hindu rituals and festivals and having Hindu friends, I realized I was ill equipped to speak intelligently and clearly about karma—and, for that matter, other key Hindu concepts.

Finding Clear Guidance

After a little searching, I found a course designed to help Hindus explain their religion

convincingly and accurately. This program, offered by the Hindu American Foundation (HAF), provides certification to become a “Dharma Ambassador.” I contacted its HAF’s National Programs Director, Easan Katir, a financial advisor and longtime convert to Hinduism who is responsible for education, policy implementation and community building through the Dharma Ambassador Certification Program. He has worked continuously to bridge the gap in understanding that Americans have with Hinduism’s depth and breadth.

Encouraged by our conversation, I registered for the free two-hour course online at www.hinduamerican.org/get-involved/dharma-ambassadors. Usually the course takes place monthly on a Saturday. After completing it, participants receive a certificate as a “Dharma Ambassador” and are notified about follow-up courses and Dharma Ambassador meetings.

The syllabus began with “Path to Great Speaking”—a framework that would help with any occasion requiring a formal or informal presentation. We were given pointers about how to engage the audience through both body language and ways of speaking. One useful technique that I had never considered was repetition. Isn’t that something you shouldn’t do? Easan explained: “One might say that’s a negative, not a positive. However, when presenting a new concept

to an American audience, such as “Sanatana Dharma,” which most may be hearing for the first time, it is helpful to repeat the name several times throughout the presentation so that it sinks in.”

Techniques emphasized included careful listening, bringing in an interesting fact or piece of humor, and resisting the attempt to overpower the interlocutor or audience. At the same time, speakers were advised to not let any negative or doubtful audience energy overcome their own positive energy.

Participants’ comments about this first section of the training were overwhelmingly enthusiastic. “I never thought of applying presentation skills when talking about Hinduism,” said one person. “We sort of wing it and can go on and on about it. My biggest takeaway was to prepare and frame what you say, keeping the audience in mind.”

I remembered how my friend Bimal once enlightened me, gently pointing out similarities and differences between Hindu and Abrahamic faiths. He was diplomatic and friendly, as a Dharma Ambassador should be. I’d said to him after reading the *Ramayana*, “It’s intriguing to me how the Hindu religion is so infused with myth. Sita’s father unearthed her with a plough—really?”

“Claire,” he responded gently, “Jesus walked on water.” And he went on to lead me in an amiable conversation about how the Divine appears in various shapes and ways, and how

there are different paths to knowing God. A light went on in my head as I realized the limitations of my thinking about the Divine.

After presenting many techniques for effective communication, Easan discussed basic facts about the numbers of Hindus worldwide, then the different categories of Hindu scriptures. We learned about key concepts such as the atman, the yogas and the cycle of rebirth, samsara. The course also addressed topical issues, such as the rights of Hindus and the role of women. The slides, narrated by Easan, were well designed and easy to follow. Along the way, participants exchanged thoughts about their own practices and favorite Gods. We were reminded of Hinduism’s diverse sampradayas, or traditions. An important aspect that the course emphasizes is Hinduism’s pluralism. “It is not a dogmatic faith,” Easan told us. “It invites us to search.”

“I think the best part was how to handle the detours,” said one participant. By this she meant that conversations about the meaning of Hindu Dharma could be derailed by the singling out of social ills. Certainly, when questions about caste are raised, they must be seriously addressed; and the course offers ways to address such important issues without letting them “take over the room.” Following the course instructions, participants gave mock presentations, allowing them to practice their communication skills and gain feedback. This was the culmination of the course, empowering participants to go into the world to continue to speak about Hinduism. Easan gracefully suggested improvements in delivery. Commented one woman, “Instead of just saying “good job” and moving on, I liked the way you specifically offered a gentle critique to each speaker.”

Overall, the course made clear how Hindu Dharma is relevant today. “We’ve always sought the Divine,” said Easan. “Hindu Dharma continues to provide—it fills the

need. Therefore, it is imperative to not only practice individually, but to make sure the Hindu religion can continue into the future. To be an Ambassador is to be a custodian of Hinduism’s best practices.”



COURTESY GAUTAM SHARMA

It is expected that after this initial introduction and declaration of commitment by participants, each will actively develop their skills by “on the job” training, making Dharma presentations in various forums. There are also follow-up programs by HAF to clarify particular areas of concern in bringing a clearer understanding of the Hindu religion to both Hindus and non-Hindus.

Commonly Asked Questions

Interviewing several Dharma Ambassadors, I learned that all were asked similar questions and had thought through ways to answer them. Christians, they noted, wanted to know: “Do Hindus have an equivalent of the Bible/Quran/Torah? How does Hinduism view other religions? Does Hinduism have heaven or hell?” To the latter question, col-

Dharma Ambassadors: (top left) Easan Katir with the graduating class of 2019 in California; (right) one of the course slides presenting principles of karma; (below) Ambassador Gautam Sharma is a Hindu chaplain.

lege student Arnav Rege prepared this reply, “Since Hindus believe in reincarnation and rebirth, eternal places of glory or damnation do not exist.”

People were also curious to know how Hinduism is practiced: “What is the significance of festivals such as Diwali, Holi and Navaratri?” Others asked, “Why are some Hindus vegetarians, and why do some not drink alcohol?” Lipka Devara said, “Americans often ask about the ‘red dot’ on my forehead, the bindi. I explain that the bindi is worn by Hindu women and others for various reasons, including symbolizing the ajna chakra, third eye, and aiding in meditation. I educate them on its cultural significance and dispel misconceptions.” Hrishikesh Chelmella adds a scientific explanation: “The area between the eyebrows is a significant nerve point, and applying pressure here is believed to relieve stress and fatigue.”

From information gleaned in their school textbooks, children might also ask, “Do Hindus really worship cows?” Many Ambassadors took the opportunity presented by this question to explain their beliefs in nonviolence (ahimsa) and respect for sentient beings.

One man commented that he stays well prepared to address a typical blend of what he called “caste/cow/curry” questions, but that such stereotyping and lack of information can be combatted if more Ambassadors are “in the field.” A yoga teacher feared that by being “openly Hindu” she could be mistakenly viewed as anti-Muslim. It was clear that for Dharma Ambassadors, the courage to



COURTESY VIVEK GUPTA



be openly Hindu was boosted by their confidence to respond knowledgeably to questions about their faith.

Easan had emphasized that when they take questions about Hinduism, Ambassadors should be skillful to win hearts, not arguments, and to show respect for different schools of Hinduism and different religions. Such advice was echoed by Dharma Ambassador Gautam Sharma, who is a Hindu Chaplain. "I highlight a key strength of our belief system in my responses: there are many schools of thought in Hindu philosophy, a function intended to invite discussion, discourse and even respectful debate," said Gautam. "The pluralistic nature of Hindu philosophy has the added benefit of rendering obsolete any need to proselytize."

Expression in Various Venues

Many told me that the Hinduism as perceived by most Americans is not the Hinduism they know in their households and temples. This disconnect was a primary reason they took the course. At the same time, they said Americans tend to be eager to learn and have stereotypes and misconceptions corrected. The Ambassadors overwhelmingly found their interlocutors thoughtful, open and interested to learn more.

Dr. Kingsuk Ganguly, a 38-year-old doctor in New Jersey, explained to me: "Whenever I looked for topics regarding my religion, I perceived a Western lens. I wondered which version was more truthful, what I learned from my parents or from books, teachers and social media. So, when I saw HAF's work and Easan sent me an email about how the program teaches you to speak confidently about Hinduism, a chord was struck. I had not felt confident to speak about it since my experi-

Out in the field: (above) Dharma Ambassador Vivek Gupta started a Hindu group at the Fortune 500 company he works for. Among various activities, they celebrate Diwali at the corporate offices; (opposite top) Another common outreach effort is to participate in interfaith gatherings such as this roundtable at Duke University in North Carolina

ences were only firsthand from my parents or going to the temple."

He continued: "High school classes on world religions focused on the caste system and a pyramidal hierarchy, whereas I knew that growing up I socialized with people of all strata. In books, again there was a focus on the caste system and how cows are perceived. But these concepts were not central to my experience as a Hindu, where we asked questions such as "What is our purpose?" or "Why are we suffering?" In his reading of the scriptures, he found the expression of the oneness of mankind, as well as the symbiosis of man and animals. I've used the tools I've learned to help our hospital. I served on the Medical School Diversity Committee for six years and was able to create the first Holi event on campus. I sent out HAF's Holi toolkit to doctors and to many other people, who participated in a huge, successful event."

A tenured university professor of Hinduism took the course for another reason. "I know too much. I need to simplify," she said. She could teach a course but, like me, she would not be able to communicate in simple terms with a man who confused karma with pre-determinism, who had thought he was eating birthday cake because some force had "written his karma" to do so.

Some Ambassadors employ their speaking skills in interfaith forums. When Abhijit Bhure traveled extensively across Europe and the US, he discovered that Hinduism was

little understood. As a Dharma Ambassador, he attended interfaith sessions with a Jewish community and with a Mormon church to speak about key tenets of Hindu Dharma, ayurveda, ancient mathematics and science, and to show how Hinduism is relevant today. He found that American groups left these sessions with a desire to meet again and learn more. They would ask, "Where can I read more about Hindu Dharma? Where can I buy ayurvedic items from Indian stores? Are there Indian stores in our area?" After discussions, he would serve Indian food, which was also highly appreciated.

Other Ambassadors gave presentations in schools. Ravi Khanna was born into a religious Hindu family and had read *Hinduism Today* for 25 years. As a retiree, he wanted to share dharma with others, and so he looked to the course for direction. He spoke at schools and colleges and started an education program on teaching about Hinduism through his local Hindu temple board. They compiled a list of over 100 questions asked by kids and adults during their sessions. Similarly, Hariharan Pothulu, who teaches a 6th-grade social studies class and a high school World Religions class, also composed a list of discussion questions, including: "Does atma have the ability to merge or divide? Are there really 33 million Gods? Why worship idols? What is Moksha? What happens to non-Hindus after death?"

Deacon Steve Herrera, trained in the Cath-



COURTESY DUKE UNIVERSITY

olic Church on how to teach religious material, leads a course on World Religions in a Catholic school, and refers to Hinduism positively when he preaches in church. The Dharma Ambassador's course helped him to speak accurately about Hinduism, a religion for which he has great respect.

Several Ambassadors serve as temple guides. Godan Namburipad is involved with the Hindu Society of Minnesota, speaking at public venues and serving as a guide at its temple. He has given tours to people ranging in age from 10-80, including the Rotary Club and a group of students visiting from Nebraska. He pointed out that the need to teach Hinduism in schools has grown, since the state curricula requires teaching of world cultures and religions.

For some people, learning about Hinduism and how to communicate its tenets deepened understanding of their own identity. Lavender Sedlock has Romani ancestry. When she learned that Romani people have ancestral roots in Northern India, she was anxious to learn as much as she could: "I am mixed race, fourth generation living in America, and raised without the practice and knowledge of Hinduism. As I became more involved with the practices and teachings, I wanted to be sure I was representing Hinduism accurately, and that I was practicing and learning the genuine history and teachings."

Often parents take the course and then enroll their children in it. Hrishi Deshmukh's mock presentation focused on the need to engage youth, who may feel disconnected from their religion. "I believe this topic is important, as fostering a deeper connection can enrich the cultural and spiritual lives of our newest generations," he said. Indeed, youth who are establishing Hindu student clubs found the course helpful. Says high school club founder Aran Malhotra, "By

becoming a Dharma Ambassador, I thought I would learn how to expand my club into new chapters, learn new content and improve my presentation skills. I aim to teach members a new key term of Hinduism every week, such as ahimsa, reincarnation or karma, and almost always there are numerous questions that need to be answered."

Other Ambassadors have spoken up in city councils or found new ways to activate their local Hindu organizations to interact in the community. One group arranged for a showing of a new Hindu film, *Namaste*, in Northern California venues. Another hosted a Diwali dinner for local elected officials.

Conclusion

Easan says that HAF now hosts a WhatsApp group for Dharma Ambassadors to share news of their activities and continue discussions. He is proud of the growth of the course and its impact on wider society. The thousands who have gone through the program during the past six years reflect its transformative effect. As the Hindu American community continues to grow, the program's importance in promoting understanding and appreciation of Hinduism on a broader scale becomes even more significant.

"In the American milieu there are a thousand-plus Hindu temples now, uncounted swamis, priests and meditation teachers, yoga schools, ayurvedic clinics and music and dance academies," says Easan. "The Hindu American Foundation's Dharma Ambassadors work to create and maintain the cultural and sociological safe space in North America for all these groups to practice religion freely."

Returning to my own story, after decades living in Nepal, I have now gained essential knowledge to help me better speak and write about Hinduism. I will feel more confident if the topic of karma surfaces at a dinner party.

Feedback from Ambassadors

Divya Selvakumar: In 2011, I established a small international NGO called American Hindu World Service. The primary object of AHWS is to promote Hindu faith-based perspectives in international service and development, and also educate the public about Hinduism. Hence, the Dharma Ambassador program was a very valuable asset, which I completed in 2017.



Srivats Iyer: I was inspired to take the Dharma Ambassador program to counter misinformation and present the Hindu point of view from an insider's perspective. More than 15 years ago, in the

military (U.S. Air Force Reserve), I had an opportunity to give a Hindu prayer with the help of my unit's chaplain. This was done to show representation, that we actually exist in all spheres. Similarly, within Google, I am part of a Hindu group that seeks to promote mutual respect.

Arnav Rege: I recall one of the presentations about karma. It intrigued me because I was never taught the concept that our positive actions lead to positive outcomes in the future, and negative actions lead to negative outcomes. It was not until much later that I experienced karma viscerally, when I helped an old lady with her groceries and found a \$20 note on the ground the same day.



Roopkotha Day: Growing up Hindu in the US was like being stuck between two worlds. Many of my Hindu friends seemed more drawn to Western culture, rejecting their heritage. Being bombarded with Western movies, music and food, it was hard finding a place where my

Hindu identity was celebrated. When my dad told me about the Dharma Ambassador Program, I thought it would be an Indian man dressed in robes lecturing until I was bored out of my mind. However, as I felt an intense desire to learn more about my religion, I agreed to do the program. I was in for a surprise. When I joined the Zoom meeting, I found myself intrigued by what Mr. Easan Katir was saying.



TAMIL NADU

Embodying the Goddess

Vibrant traditional dress brings the Mayana Kollai's fierce traditions to life

STORY BY PADMA KRISHNAN
ALL PHOTOS BY ANNE PETRY

SHAKTI WORSHIP IS FOUND IN ANCIENT Tamil tradition, where the fierce form of the divine feminine was celebrated as Kotravai, the warrior Goddess. Over time, Kotravai became revered in the broader Hindu tradition, associated with forms such as Durga and Kali. *Kali* has become the main reference to the Warrior Goddess, with Her worship mentioned in classical Tamil literature. The 12th-century Chola court poet Jayamkondan, in his epic hymn *Kalingathuparani*, gives us a glimpse of Kali's importance in prehistoric Tamil society. Writing to celebrate the victory of the Cholas over the Kalingas, Jayamkondan's vivid imagery and poetic language guide us through Kali's sacred dwelling in the forest, Her temple, and Her army of *bhutas*—supernatural beings who

embody divine justice. Jayamkondan reflects on the profound themes of the battlefield, rather than glorifying violence: the consequences of human conflict, the transience of life, and the ultimate triumph of the Divine over chaos and evil, as symbolized by Kali and Her attendants.

Today, the ritual of Mayana Kollai celebrates the Goddess every year in Tamil Nadu and some parts of the bordering states of Karnataka and Andhra. Usually held on the new moon day after Mahasivaratri, it is observed as part of the festivities dedicated to Goddess Angala Parameswari. Mayana Kollai combines elements of village practices and ancient pre-Vedic rituals, similar to the masked trance performances of Kerala's Theyyam and West Bengal's Gomira, where local Deities are invoked through dramatic displays of dance and ecstatic trance.

I first saw the Mayana Kollai ritual in Pondicherry a few years ago. The month of Maasi (February–March) marks the onset of summer in this region, as well as the beginning of festivities dedicated to Shakti. Colorful posters and banners of Maa Kali in Her fearsome form adorn Amman (Devi) temples across Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry.

Mayana Kollai means “pillaging the cremation grounds.” It represents the symbolic victory of the Divine over death and darkness. Through this ritual, devotees invoke the Goddess's power to transcend the fears of mortality and the cycle of life and death, embodying spiritual renewal and the ultimate triumph of light over chaos. Plundering the cremation ground is a metaphor for ascending above the forces of destruction, where the Goddess and Her followers celebrate the eternal victory of the soul and divine justice.



ALL PHOTOS ANNE PETRY

Divine devotion: (far left) glitter and makeup are applied for a young girl joining in the processions; (clockwise from above) the festival players enter a temple; a young man in his completed makeup and costume; the procession passes the Arunachalesvara Temple



Myths and Traditions

Mayana Kollai is deeply connected to the worship of Angala Parameswari, a Goddess worshiped at Melmalayanur, whose name signifies Her supreme power as part of Siva. The events are shaped by several village myths, including the story of Parvati's curse, where She wandered as an old woman in the cremation grounds until She regained Her divine form and liberated Siva from Brahma's skull. Another tale portrays Parvati as a midwife who prevented the birth of a child destined to threaten the Gods, a narrative cherished by the transgender community, who view Angala Parameswari as a protector. Lastly, a story of Kali's conquest in the cremation ground highlights Her role in overcoming a monster at Siva's request, emphasizing the Goddess's fierce protection over the realms of life and death.

Pillars of Mayana Kollai

In the heart of Tamil Nadu, Melmalayanur and Tiruvannamalai stand as sacred sites deeply entwined with the myths surrounding the ancient ritual of Mayana Kollai. It is here, in these hallowed grounds, that Siva and Shakti were said to have been liberated from their respective curses. Melmalayanur's grand summer festival, the Massi Thiruvizha, is renowned for its vibrant celebrations, which span several days and include

both firewalking and the fierce Mayana Kollai. Within this context, the full moon honors the Goddess's creative energies, while the new moon reveres Her destructive power, symbolically enacted through the Mayana Kollai ritual. This dramatic re-enactment of Maa Kali's victory over evil is a testament to Her eternal guardianship over Her devotees.

Tiruvannamalai, a site rich in spiritual lore, celebrates Mayana Kollai with great reverence. It is said that in this town, resting in the shadow of the sacred Arunachala mountain, Maa Parvati was freed from Sarasvati's curse, thus intertwining the myths of these powerful Goddesses with the geography. Here I encountered Santosh, a young college student who has faithfully participated in the ritual for the past three years. He led me up the stone stairs to the small Kali temple nestled on the mountain's foothills. There I had the privilege of meeting Shekhar Swami, the head priest. For decades, Swami has been at the helm of the Mayana Kollai ritual, a tradition passed down through his family. His small shrine, located near the revered Mulai Paal Theertham pond, houses a Kali idol of black-stone, adorned with threads, red and black, infused with potent mantras. These offerings protect devotees from malevolent forces. The fragrance of camphor, lemon and neem permeates the air, carrying with it the timeless essence of devotion.



Shekhar Swami greeted me with a gentle smile and piercing eyes. As we sat together, he shared his personal spiritual journey. From the age of sixteen, Swami had been guided by visions of Maa Kali, embarking on pilgrim-



ALL PHOTOS ANNE PETRY



One with the Divine: a display of images that give insight into the care and detail that goes into the festival's elaborate costuming

ages to the Himalayas and Varanasi in search of deeper truths. Eventually, he returned to his homeland, becoming the priest of the Kalamman Temple. He spoke of his *kuladevi*, Angala Parameswari, and the numerous miracles that had blessed his life and the lives of his followers. The ritual of Mayana Kollai, he explained, is more than a symbolic celebration—it is a direct communion with the Divine Mother, a process of transformation in

which ordinary devotees assume the power of the Goddess.

Transforming Devotees into Deities

The metamorphosis of devotees for Mayana Kollai is intense and beautiful. For the participants, this is a ritual of both body and spirit. They begin their purification three days before Mahasivaratri, abstaining from all non-vegetarian food and intoxicants. As the day approaches, they prepare themselves for the sacred task of embodying the Goddess, a process known as *vesham katrathu* in Tamil.

This transformation is a visual feast. Faces and bodies are painted in vivid colors—deep

blues, vibrant reds, emerald greens, and black—symbolizing the fierce aspects of both Siva and Shakti. Their makeup is designed to awe. Protruding teeth, blood-streaked tongues, and heavily shadowed eyes transform the devotees into embodiments of Maa Kali. The costumes are equally magnificent, a labor of love and tradition. Heavy prosthetics, towering crowns, and layered skirts, all richly decorated, bring these divine beings to life. The textures shimmer with sacred energy, glinting under the sun or firelight as they move.

Shekhar Swami's sister Lalita speaks with admiration about her brother's trans-

formation. "It's as if he becomes someone else. When Maa Kali descends into his body, his eyes turn bloodshot, his face fierce. He doesn't eat, doesn't speak—he's in another world." The costumes they wear weigh many kilograms—crowns made of metal and jewels, glittering sarees, and anklets that chime with each step. Even after undergoing heart surgery, Shekhar Swami continues to don the full costume every year, driven by his devotion to the Goddess.

Folk-theater artists, skilled in creating larger-than-life characters, often assist in applying makeup, a practice passed down for generations. While some devotees own their costumes and props, others rent them from specialty vendors. The preparation takes hours. The completed transformation is a sight to behold. The ordinary becomes extraordinary as the devotees embody the fierce warrior Goddess and Her clan of protectors. The costumes and makeup, however, are only part of the shift. A spiritual transformation occurs too—tears, laughter, and a powerful connection to the Divine are evident as each participant assumes their sacred role.

Many of the devotees choose to embody local guardian Deities such as Pavadairyan or Kateri, who have their own unique place in Tamil folklore. These Deities, once worshiped in nearly every village, now find a place in this ritual, a reminder of the region's rich heritage.

The Procession

As evening descends, the devotees, now fully transformed, make their way through the streets in a grand procession. The rhythmic drumming grows louder, each beat echoing in the hearts of those who watch and participate. The air is thick with the scent of lemon, turmeric and incense. Devotees dressed as Kali and Her attendants move with a fierce, primal energy ahead of the chariot carrying the Goddess. Heavy anklets jingle as they dance with abandon, oblivious to the weight of their costumes. The energy builds with every step as they approach the cremation grounds, the ritual's climax.

For some, like Santosh, this is a family tradition, handed down through generations. For others, like Shekhar Swami, it's the culmination of a year's devotion, a rite in which they offer themselves fully to the Goddess. Onlookers place offerings at street corners, and babies are placed in the arms of the costumed Deities to receive blessings. As the procession nears its destination, the excitement builds, and the energy becomes palpable.

Blessings of the Goddess: (top to bottom) Devotees receive blessings; ceremonies inside the temple as the celestial artists arrive at various shrines

At the ritual's peak, the procession enters the cremation grounds, where a final puja is performed. The dancers, still in a trance, scatter food—peanuts, mangoes and rice—as offerings to the spirits of the cremation ground and to secure a bountiful harvest. The act symbolizes the Goddess's protection against malevolent forces and serves as a reminder of the agricultural roots of these ancient practices. The dancers, like Kali Herself, are believed to protect the devotees from malevolent spirits that may dwell in the cremation grounds.

The ritual of Mayana Kollai is a living tradition that connects ancient myths with modern devotion. It has evolved over the years,

with certain practices fading while others remain fiercely alive in the hearts of devotees. At its core, Mayana Kollai is a celebration of the divine feminine in Her most potent form—fierce, protective, and transformative.

As the ritual comes to a close, the devotees shed their divine personas, and the heavy costumes and crowns are carefully stored, wrapped in yellow cloth, awaiting next year's reenactment. For Shekhar Swami and countless others, the power of Angala Parameswari is not confined to the temple or the cremation ground; She lives on in the hearts of Her devotees, guiding them through the trials of life and death.



BOOK REVIEW

Colonization and the Hindu Image

Explore the origins of what American schools continue to teach about Hinduism

BY KOENRAAD ELST

KUNDAN SINGH’S AND KRISHNA MAHESHWARI’S book, *Colonial Discourse and the Suffering of Indian American Children*, deals with a real concern of Hindu Americans: the harmful reputation created for their homeland and religion from colonial times to the present day. It inscribes itself in the worldwide task of decolonization, and specifically applies the distinctive analysis produced in the French-speaking part of the colonial world as contrasting with the better-known Anglo-spheric approach.

“Decolonization” has been all the rage for a while now, especially in India. Like most people in what used to be the Third World, Indians have needed some time to supplement the formal political decolonization of 1947-50 with the next stages.

During the first half-century of Independence, India could hardly take up its role as a new world power. This was due in part to its immersion in proverbial poverty, largely self-inflicted because of Jawaharlal Nehru’s and Indira Gandhi’s statist policies and the concomitant corruption. It’s one of history’s paradoxes that in many decolonized countries, the new elites were swayed less by indigenous ideologies than by Western imports like Fabian Socialism and Marxism. To be honest, the anticolonial thinkers we are about to discuss here were not free from this tendency either.

This stagnation reflected on the image of Indians in the diaspora. The first Indo-American children were frequently confronted with stereotypes of Indian poverty, of “lepers dying in the gutters of Kolkata” who, if lucky, were picked up “by our Mother Teresa.”

The decisive course correction came in 1991, with the liberalization by Narasimha Rao. The onset of visible economic emancipation coincided rather precisely with the millennium: since then, PMs Atal Behari Vajpayee, Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi have successfully pursued policies of growth. India started catching up with its daughter communities abroad that had already established a name for competence and entrepreneurial success. Any regular visitor has witnessed how India has become less poor, less chaotic, more efficient and cleaner.

So far, so good. This more prosperous and dynamic atmosphere creates the right condition for the final stage: cultural decolonization. The last decades have seen the emergence of independent pro-Hindu platforms through Internet channels. These have taken up cultural decolonization, first as little more than a slogan, but increasingly as a real program. The BJP government since 2014 initially showed no interest in this cultural dimension, apart from the symbolic gesture of some changes of Moghul or British names of towns or streets to indigenous ones. But at last it has started promoting the exposure to and study of “Indian Knowledge Systems.” Pioneered by professors Kapil Kapoor and Michel Danino, these focus on India’s ancient contributions to science and social progress and their promise for future development. Hinduism’s self-image is at last taken up as a subject of concern.



Meanwhile in the West, and surprisingly even in the USA, as the multicultural country par excellence, the colonial-age stereotyping of India and Hinduism proves remarkably resilient. Hindu organizations have to wage a struggle for every inch of correction to the picture of Hinduism painted in school textbooks, movies or publicity.

Oppression and James Mill

The starkest instance of colonial stereotyping, thoroughly analyzed in this book, was James Mill’s book *The History of British India* (1840). In the introduction, he is described as having “devoted considerable space to arguing that Hinduism was a primitive and Pagan religion” that was “irrational, superstitious, incoherent and child-like.” Hindu pupils in the American school system are taught about their own religion in a format almost literally taken from Mill’s book, as Singh and Maheshwari illustrate with examples from the California Board of Education’s official history curriculum and an approved textbook.

This sums up the image problem that Hindus as such are still confronted with, though the language is now often sanitized to comply with multiculturalist guidelines. It is a case of “epistemic violence,” in which the colonizer cemented his oppression through his discourse about

the colonized which then became the “accepted truth.” Christian and secular Americans have inherited and embraced it, and the otherwise over-used term “oppression” still applies in this respect to America’s “wealthiest immigrant community”—Indian Americans. The configuration of forces has changed since Mill’s day, but two factors have remained. The first, which actually predated him, galvanized by the new opportunities created by colonization: missionary Christianity. Much less important today, the US is the main country where it still makes a difference. Ancient Christian objections to “idolatry” are still hurled at Hindu-American kids today.

The second factor that has functioned all through till today, and was somewhat surprisingly emphasized by Mill—a scion of Britain’s class society—is egalitarianism. During this period, the British Navy was intercepting slave ships, and the Empire was nudging or forcing other countries, including what remained of the Moghul Empire, to abolish slavery.

The narrative on Hinduism “revolves around hierarchy and oppression,” state the authors in the introduction. So, mind you, instances of oppression between natives serve as arguments justifying colonial oppression. Many indictments of Hinduism as oppressive were cited by Mill and by numerous anti-Hindu polemicists since then, also by modern missionaries. Among ignorant Westerners, the wider background to the popularity of Hinduphobia today is the vague knowledge of Hindu inequality, particularly caste. In America, the nation that fought a terrible civil war over the abolition of racial slavery, there is a basic disapproval of a caste inequality, which is perceived as another form of racial slavery. This perspective has been applied to India via the Aryan Invasion Theory. To sum up, the authors show that the language of egalitarianism versus oppression has been instrumentalized into a bludgeon against Hinduism.

Francophone Critique

To this problem, Kundan Singh and Krishna Maheshwari bring to bear the analyses of three Francophone authors who lived through

the political decolonization: Aimé Césaire from Martinique, a local politician (*Discourse on Colonialism*); Frantz Fanon, also from Martinique, a psychiatrist (*The Wretched of the Earth* and especially *Black Skins, White Masks*); and Albert Memmi from Tunisia, novelist and literature professor (*The Colonizer and the Colonized*). Most active in the 1950s, they were fairly influential in the European Left and were promoted by leading intellectuals like Jean-Paul Sartre. In the Anglosphere, at least, their books did get translated over the years; but the present book will certainly make a difference in highlighting their message.

At that time, French was still a close second to English as a medium for intellectual discourse, pioneer of ideological fashions like Structuralism and Existentialism. It was the language of the second (to Britain) Colonial Empire, which experienced a more dramatic disintegration. Since at least the difference between England’s “Glorious, Bloodless Revolution” (1688) which transferred power to the people from the king and France’s more violent revolution in 1789, the English have been better at dressing up their political dramas, like the Gandhi-colored “Transfer of Power” in India vs. the intense Decolonization War in Vietnam and Algeria. So French-language intellectuals can be counted on to give the raw version.

Singh and Maheshwari begin by citing Fanon and Memmi as pointing out that “every European imperial power engaged in the construction of the colonized in every country as barbarian and uncivilized,” and that the “complicit intellectuals” developing this discourse thus “provided the rationale for the continued colonization.” In the European imagination, India had always been looked up to and remained a fascinating wonderland until the onset of colonization, when it lost much of its shine very swiftly.

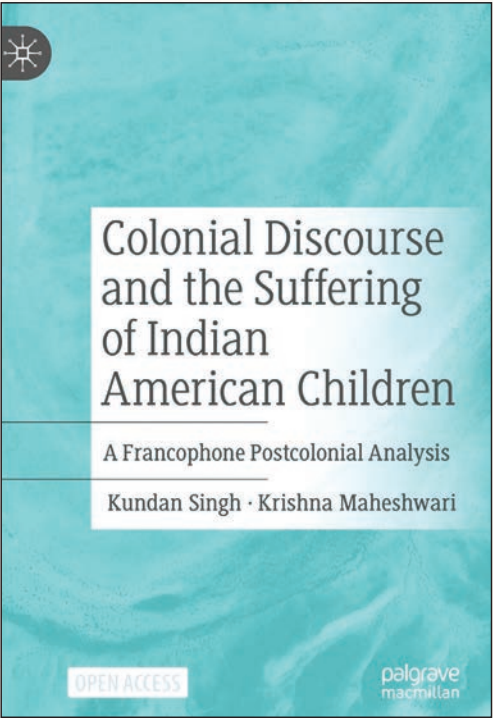
An insight from this school, which gradually became accepted wisdom, is that Fascism and Nazism were forms of “colonialism and racism turned inwards.” Hitler himself took the Britons in India as model of his own plans in a conquered Russian living-space. Conversely, one can deduce that colonialism itself was the more exotic sister of Fascism, making the recent trend of an apologetics of colonialism by Conservatives more difficult.

Racism

According to both the considered authors and those of the present book, “this misrepresentation is essentially racist.” Similar phrases echo throughout the book. As an account of the message and influence of a few thinkers, no fault can be found with it, but around the term “racism” a major problem arises that most who support this analysis seem not to realize.

A discourse that the authors characterize as “colonialist and racist” is, according to them, “still alive and kicking.” Yes, the anti-Hindu discourse is very alive, but is it still racist? It must be, if we are to believe the numerous Hindus who have been giving their opinion on trendy Hinduphobia as “racism.”

Yes, there is a clear continuity in the discourse on Hindus from the colonial age till today; and yes, racism was a motive behind it—back then. But here it takes a leap to project the racism situation in the days of James Mill or even Frantz Fanon onto today’s post-Obama



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America. Is present-day “Hinduphobia,” in itself an undeniable phenomenon, really due to “racism”?

For decades now the *New York Times* has been working to make and keep its editorial board racially proportionate to the general population; yet it has not become appreciably more pro-Hindu. The NYT correspondent spinning news in an anti-Hindu sense today may well be Black or Hispanic, or indeed South-Asian. The paper is militantly anti-racist, but that doesn’t make it less anti-Hindu.

Think of it: like whites in the US, Hindus in India are the (dwindling) majority to be figuratively shot down. They too, as inheritors of the Aryan Invaders, oppress the indigenous population. Their caste system, according to the Hindu-haters, is a racial Apartheid system: if we were right in destroying South-Africa’s Apartheid, shouldn’t we also eliminate casteism and its underlying motive, Hinduism?

When you explore the real hotbeds of anti-Hindu agitation, like the “Dismantling Hindutva” conference or the initiatives to divide American Hindus by caste, you might perhaps find a white crypto-racist as supporter, but the starring role is

invariably for so-called South-Asians, mostly born Hindus. It’s not for racial reasons that those people hate Hinduism.

A factor of Hinduphobic discourse, which many Hindus polemically put down as “racist,” was and still is missionary Christianity. This was then and remains today a motive for slandering Hinduism. But Hindus are setting themselves up for defeat if they mis-characterize this as “racism.”

In the Roman empire, the missionaries converted fellow Mediterranean types, using all the tricks that their (increasingly native) colleagues use in India today. When Ethiopia got converted in the 4th century, it at once started depicting Jesus as Black. If Europeans likewise started depicting him as European, it was fully correct, not because Christianity is white racist, but because it targets all mankind: its Son-of-God doctrine means that “God has become one of us.” If Ethiopians or North Europeans depict Him as one of their own, it is historically imprecise but theologically fully correct. Religion is not race. You can frame the Hinduphobia problem in racial terms and feel great surfing the Woke Zeitgeist, but you’ll be intellectually lazy, and more consequentially, you’ll be wrong.

So in conclusion: as an exercise in erudition, exploring relevant yet new ground, this is a great book. It is very informative on anti-Hindu propaganda in history and today. But as a help to the Hindu cause in America today, it risks encouraging many readers in an already extant anachronistic reading of their situation. Rather than due to racism, the Hinduphobia they face is due to 1) the import from India of petty political quarrels playing out over there, to 2) a lingering Christian fanaticism, and today especially to 3) a heightened egalitarianism poorly informed about historical and present-day Hindu society.

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PILGRIMAGE

The Ganga Water Pilgrimage

Yearly in mid-summer, millions of Hindus walk to Haridwar in the Kanvar Yatra to collect and carry back *Gangajal* for worship at their home temple

BY DEV RAJ AGARWAL, DEHRA DUN
VAISHNAVI, A STUDENT OF CLASS FOUR, is returning home with her father and twenty-five members of their group of kanvaris from a western suburb of Dehra Dun. The July heat and humidity force them to rest frequently as they make the 55-mile return walk with the kanvars (a bamboo pole holding two water pots) on their shoulders. Their mattresses are spread at the edge of the highway, and the plastic cans filled with Gangajal (jal is water) are tied in front of the tractor. They cook their own food and sleep in shifts inside the tractor trolley, which is fitted with the luxury of four comfortable beds.

The Kanvar Yatra is a twelve-day festival in July/August, during which devotees carry Gangajal from Haridwar to various Siva temples in North India. This once humble event has undergone a total transformation in the



last few decades. This year, 45 million pilgrims reached Haridwar to collect Gangajal from the holy river, each in their own novel way. Nearly all came on foot from within a radius of 100 miles, with some from as far as 150 miles.

Earlier, two brass urns with lids were filled with the holy water, tied to the ends of a bamboo stick, and carried on the shoulders by the pilgrims. Thirty years ago, we saw only a few men walking alone with this simple kanvar for the festival. Now, not only the kanvar, but the kanvaris, too, have taken on a new look. Plus, kanvaris have devised new ways to perform the ritual, changed the appearance of the kanvar, and started to travel in groups. Many bring along large trucks or tractors with trailers. One also sees more women taking part in the yatra. Large social and religious groups from every town and village set up huge camps along the yatra



routes where kanvaris can rest, have food, and seek basic medical attention.

Kanvaris express their ingenuity in making the kanvars, decorating them beautifully. The most devout spend months creating huge structures, some as tall as fifteen feet. Still carried on the shoulders, such large kanvars are controlled with the help of strings to turn them to the right or left. One can also see people carrying Gangajal in small containers, neatly covered with saffron cloth and tied to their waists. This is probably the least strenuous and most practical way to perform the ritual. A few devotees pull ornate four-wheeled chariots with the pots mounted on them. Some bring and hang on their vehicles containers for friends who could not make the pilgrimage themselves.

Walking in a group is another way. Such teams carry a large amount of the sacred water in metal vessels or large plastic containers, enough for all devotees to perform the ritual. Paucity of time has given rise to the *dak kanvar*, literally “postal kanvar.” Like athletes in a relay race,

they walk briskly with large pots, passing them to the next person when tired. They may then board the trailing vehicle to rest. The *dak kanvar* goes on without a halt. This way, they are able to cover long distances in a short time, with the goal of reaching the home temple where the deity is to be bathed with the Ganga water at the time fixed by



the temple priest. If the kanvar arrives late, the water will be regarded as *khandit*, broken, and unfit for offering.

The newest addition to the yatra is kanvaris on motorcycles—thousands every hour during the festival’s last few days. Motorcycle kanvaris ride recklessly at full throttle, with no helmets and often barefoot. They do this with a pure soul, but surely risking their lives and those of others, too! Such is the spirit of Kanvar!

Pilgrims by the millions: (left top) A group from one village take turns carrying water jugs; (left bottom) Vaishnavi came with her family and neighbors, walking 55 miles each way from Dehra Dun and back; (above clockwise from top left) a determined barefoot pilgrim lugs two 20-liter jugs (90 pounds); an ornate kanvar, with water containers in the kanvari’s orange vest; loading pots with Ganga water in Haridwar; motorcycling kanvaris, a recent and hazardous innovation; (below) tractor with tarp-covered trailer accompanies a returning group

How to Heal Hypertension

Natural methods ensure a healthy body

BY DR. VIRENDER SODHI

ANY VISIT TO THE DOCTOR CAN BE STRESSFUL—EVEN raising your blood pressure temporarily—but the blood pressure test during your annual physical can be critical to your long-range health. If your blood pressure is elevated mildly, your doctor may send you home and tell you to relax, lose weight, exercise and drink less alcohol. If you smoke, he will ask you to give up the habit. These lifestyle changes aid in restoring normal blood pressure. If your blood pressure is elevated consistently for the next few visits, you will be told you have hypertension. *Hypertension* is defined as blood pressure in the arteries being consistently higher than normal, with a reading of 130/80 mmHg or above.

The typical therapy follows a three-step process: First, you are prescribed a Step 1 medication—a diuretic, such as Lasix, Lozol, Chlorthalidone or Bumex. Eventually, the diuretic becomes less effective and a Step 2 medication called a beta-blocker is usually added. Examples of beta-blockers are Lopressor, Levatol, Inderal, Cartrol and Atenolol. This drug also loses its effectiveness in time. In Step 3, an ACE-inhibitor, such as Captopril, Lysinopril, Benazopril Hydrochloride, Quinopril Hydrochloride, or a calcium channel blocker, such as Norvasc, Verapamil or Cardizem, is prescribed.

Looking back on the results of this three-step process, what happened? You took three steps toward curing your hypertension, but with each step you regressed faster towards worsening health. By adding extra medications, your quality of life rapidly declined. You may have gone from taking no medications to taking three or four. You are now tied down to a schedule of prescription drugs, scared into believing that if you stop any of them you will suffer a stroke.

Not to mention the side effects! Diuretics cause potassium loss; it is no coincidence that the sodium/potassium ratio is off balance in those with hypertension. Many people report personality changes from beta-blockers, ACE-inhibitors and calcium channel blockers. Beta-blockers also block the beta cells of the pancreas. Over time, this increases the risk of diabetes and metabolic syndrome. The situation could be stressful enough to lead you to the refrigerator to console yourself with food, resulting in weight gain and further increase in blood pressure!

According to the American Heart Association, 75 million Americans age 20 and older have high blood pressure. That is roughly one in three adults. The three-step medication protocol is given to about 50.6 million patients each year. But the death rate from high blood pressure increased 195% from 1996 to 2006, and the actual number of deaths rose 48.1%. If the death rate has increased that much, one can conclude that the conventional treatment methodology is ineffective. So, why is this popular three-step protocol still being used?

Treating hypertension naturally

Before you look for other ways to lower your blood pressure, it's important to check your knowledge on the topic. Did you know the following? Every part of your body can regenerate itself when it is given the right substances. Drugs are not on your body's wish list! Most block the body's natural healing processes.



Complementary health practitioners have been helping their patients lower their blood pressure for decades. That isn't anything new, and it isn't a fad. Once someone begins a complementary health treatment program for high blood pressure, they start feeling better in the first few weeks. By the end of the program, they may not need blood pressure medication at all.

To determine how to treat high blood pressure naturally, first you have to understand what causes the condition. Medical doctors still don't know the true cause of 90% of hypertension cases, but they do know that it's related to atherosclerosis, kidney disease, chronic stress leading to adrenal disease, as well as diet and lifestyle factors that contribute to these conditions. As with many diseases, there is also an emotional component, contributed by excess worry, irritability, anger, greed and ego.

Many patients with high blood pressure report a frequent tension in their body, as if they are on the verge of a fit of anger. They aren't angry at anyone in particular when this happens. The tension they feel is real. Scientists

have confirmed that this excessive neural tone may be associated with high levels of noradrenaline. A study published by the *Journal of Human Hypertension* in 2002 showed a high correlation between elevated levels of noradrenaline and hypertension. Therapies as simple as relaxation were found effective in this study.

Lifestyle changes

Breathing exercises are simple, and we can benefit from as little as ten minutes of daily practice. In a 2009 *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, researchers reported that various breathing exercises benefited those with hypertension, and that slow breathing had the most value. Hatha yoga is easy to incorporate into one's lifestyle. In a University of Pennsylvania study, researchers found that twelve weeks of regular yoga practice produced clinically meaningful improvements for patients with prehypertension and Stage 1 hypertension. Meditation can also be beneficial. Recently a randomized controlled trial concluded that Transcendental Meditation decreased blood pressure associated with psychological distress and increased coping in young people at risk for hypertension.

One of the easiest factors related to blood pressure that you can control on your own is your diet. Reducing sodium intake can have a dramatic impact on blood pressure. Cut back on processed, packaged foods and read labels for sodium content. Packaged or canned food should have less than 140 mg sodium per serving. Avoid adding salt to food, and incorporate more vegetables and fruits in your diet. Omega-3 fatty acids have been associated with reduced risk of cardiovascular disease and improved blood pressure. Vegetarian sources of this essential nutrient include olive oil, leafy green vegetables and the seeds and oils of walnut, flax, hemp, pumpkin and soy.

Reduce your alcohol consumption. Studies have shown that if you have cardiovascular disease or high blood pressure, a reasonable alcohol limit is 30 ml or 1 oz per day. For men, this equates to two 4-oz glasses of wine (at 12–13%) or two 12-oz glasses of beer (~4%). For women, those limits are cut in half.

Avoid sugars. Foods that are high in sugar, including most processed foods, contribute not only to high blood sugar levels but high blood pressure as well. A rise in blood sugar leads to a rise in insulin and eventual insulin resistance, weight gain and diabetes. In 1997, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published studies showing that diabetes can be predicted by a diet containing foods



with a high glycemic index (and thus a high glycemic load). Glycemic index is a scale that indicates how fast and how high a particular food raises your blood sugar level. Google "glycemic index" and check the glycemic index of the foods you eat. My advice is to find ways to have a sweet life without sugar!

Dietary supplements

A complete dietary supplement list should be determined by your nutritionist or health practitioner based on lab tests. However, these are the most commonly used supplements for those with hypertension, besides a standard multiple vitamin/mineral: Potassium, 2400–4400 mg daily; Magnesium, 2300–4300 mg daily; Vitamin C, 2500–4500 mg daily; Calcium, 800–1400 mg daily; Arginine, 500 mg per 22 pounds of body weight; CoQ10, 100 mg daily.

Moderate blood pressure decreases have been seen just from supplementing CoQ10, a vitamin-like substance present in most cells. Various studies have linked magnesium deficiency and insufficient calcium intake with hypertension. Vitamin C helps the body get rid of heavy metals, such as lead, cadmium and mercury, that can be linked to high blood pressure. Arginine is an amino acid connected with the nitric oxide system, directly affecting blood vessels' ability to dilate and constrict—a key factor in high blood pressure.

Herbal remedies

Many herbs can be used successfully to provide therapeutic benefits to the cardiovascular system and reduce blood pressure. Herbs can often fill in biochemical gaps, missing links in health, providing medicinal constituents that act powerfully in the body. Many medical doctors will tell you a particular herb is dangerous because it contains one specific constituent, but the constituent does not act alone once it is in your body. It acts in concert with other constituents of the herb, which oppose or neutralize it. Because of this, herbs often do not have negative side effects. However, not all herbs are medicinal, and all medicinal herbs have contraindications known to herbalists and health practitioners trained in their usage.

Terminalia arjuna is an herb found in abundance in the Himalayan forests, Bengal, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. The saponin glycosides found in this herb are responsible for an inotropic effect, meaning that the force with which the heart and other muscles contract is affected. The arteries are strengthened by its flavonoids and proanthocyanidins. This important herb also interacts with LDL cholesterol, accelerating its turnover in the liver and inhibiting its oxidation, thus contributing to cholesterol reduction in the body. *Terminalia* has the potential to correct abnormalities in endothelial

Helpful herbs: *The bark of Terminalia arjuna contains chemicals that stimulate the heart and other muscles*

cells, those that line the interior of blood vessels. A study in 2003 indicates that it has beta-blocking activity. *Terminalia* has no toxicity, does not interact with drugs and has no contraindications.

Studies on this herb are very promising. In a 2002 double-blind crossover study published in the *Indian Heart Journal*, 58 males diagnosed with ischemic heart disease were given either the standard medical treatment (isosorbide mononitrate, a blood vessel dilator), *Terminalia*, or a placebo for one week. They were monitored for symptoms of angina (severe chest pain) during exercise. *Terminalia* reduced symptoms better than the placebo and was equal to the standard medical treatment.

The root of the *Rauwolfia serpentina* tree has been used for thousands of years to lower blood pressure. It contains more than 50 active alkaloids that work synergistically. *Withania somnifera*, called ashwagandha in Sanskrit, reduces stress and blood pressure simultaneously. *Convulvulus pluricalis* lowers blood pressure indirectly by lowering LDL cholesterol and reducing anxiety.

Protecting against other degenerative diseases

The same bad habits that cause hypertension are linked to other degenerative diseases: smoking, inactivity, obesity/overweightness, not relaxing enough, not eating enough green vegetables, not eating enough fiber, insufficient vitamin and mineral intake and a diet devoid of herbs and spices such as ginger, cinnamon, turmeric, garlic, licorice and fenugreek. Why not correct these habits now and reduce your risk for hypertension and various degenerative diseases?

What does this all mean to you?

If you have hypertension now, you don't have to have it forever. You could take the road that many people travel when they have high blood pressure, ending up on the three-step medication protocol that leads to greater illness and declining quality of life. Or you can invest in your life and health by encompassing relaxation, diet and supplement changes, and exercise.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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God Siva's Absolute Being, Parasiva (the Self)
is worshiped each year on

Maha Sivaratri

**The Self is timeless, causeless and formless.
Therefore, being That, it has no relation whatsoever
to time, space and form.
Form is in a constant state
of creation, preservation and destruction within space,
thus creating consciousness called time,
and has no relationship
to timelessness, causelessness or formlessness.
The individual soul, when mature, can make the leap
from the consciousness of space-time-causation
into the timeless, causeless, formless Self.
This is the ultimate maturing
of the soul on this planet.
— Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami**

Wishing you
a beyond-blissful
Maha Sivaratri

Hindu Heritage Endowment

You Can Help Support the Monthly Ardra Abhishekam

The six-foot-tall bronze 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."



During the Ardra Darshana festival in December or January of each year, 120 coconuts are used for abhishekam to Kadavul Nataraja

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. A list of the 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 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=o8.

JULY TO SEPTEMBER ENDOWMENT CONTRIBUTIONS

Kauai Aadheenam Monastic Endowment			
Ambika Alagere	US\$6.32	Gowri Nadason	120.64
Raj Chappidi	5.00	Nuckiren Pyeneeeandee	31.66
Brijianand Jugurnauth	21.11	Parimala Selvaraj	93.00
Kulagan Moonesawmy	12.63	Anonymous	186.00
Gowri Nadason	158.70	Total	584.30
Chamundi Sabanathan	78.75	Nadesan Family Lord Muruga Shum Fund	
Hitesvara Saravan	63.00	Sadhunathan Nadesan	300.00
Anonymous	94.00		
Total	439.78	Tirunavukkarasu Nayanar Gurukulam	
		Anonymous	30.00
Iraivan Temple Endowment		Sri Subramuniya Kottam Fund	
Eshwar & Aarati Bandlamudi	303.00	Muthukumar Jeyapalan	5,000.00
Frank Burkhardt	30.00		
B. Elango	50.00	Kumbhalavalai Ganesha Temple Endowment	
Rajagopal Krishnan	324.00	Mano Navaratnarajah	75.00
Vasaant Krishnan	90.00		
Gajanan Nataraj	7.50	Hinduism Today Production Fund	
Easvan Param	303.00	Fidelity Charitable	5,000.00
Mohan & Rajalakshmi Sabapathy	600.00	Ambika Alagere	12.63
Narmada & Ravindra Shenoy	1,500.00	Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	10.62
Nandi Sivam	81.00	Brijianand Jugurnauth	21.11
Nandi Devi Sivanathan	11.62	Raj & Deepa Maturi	1,000.00
Ravi Thaker	6.00	Kulagan Moonesawmy	12.63
Other Donations	117,851.13	Ramanlal Patel	501.00
Anonymous	578.00	Subramaniam Pennathur	50.01
Total	121,735.65	Nuckiren Pyeneeeandee	31.66
		Anonymous	63.00
Kauai Aadheenam Annual Archana Fund		Total	6,702.66
Malvi Gandhi	75.00	Hindu Orphanage Endowment Fund	
Tejwantee Meetoo	20.97	Benevity	720.00
Ramalingum Moodley	50.00	Tamnash J. Gupta	432.00
Matthew Morrison	250.00	Chamundi Sabanathan	78.75
Logathanas Murugasu	21.24	Hitesvara Saravan	36.00
Siva Natarajan	250.00	Matthew Wieczork	200.00
Subramaniam Pennathur	49.98	Anonymous	84.00
Manishankar Sagum	8.44	Total	1,550.75
Nandi Deva Sundaram	300.00	Hindu Education Endowment	
Anonymous	283.00	Fidelity Charitable	100.00
Total	1,308.63	Arjun & Revathi Pennathur	75.00
		Total	175.00
Hinduism Today Lifetime Subscription Fund		Spiritual Park of Mauritius Endowment	
Thirujnanam Arnassalon	4.22	Anonymous	1,005.00
Ishaan Bhatt	249.00	Alaveddy Pasupatheeswarar Temple Fund	
Jayaraman Iyer	249.00	Schwab Charitable Fund	100.00
Venkata Kommaraju	249.00	Anonymous	16.00
Juhivaasana Koothan	4.19	Total	115.79
Kapil Kumar	299.00	Alaveddy Subramuniya Temple Fund	
Supreetha Mave	249.00	The Blackbaud Giving Fund--YourCause	17.70
Tejwantee Meetoo	21.12		17.65
Whitney Merritt	249.00	Total	35.35
Bhaveshan Moorghen	12.63	Hindu Heritage Endowment Administrative Fund	
Logathanas Murugasu	45.96	Sanjay Patel	501.00
Chintan Patel	249.00		
Nirmalananda Saraswati	249.00	Kadavul Nataraja Ardra Abhishekam Endowment	
Chidambaram Sendan	46.67	Umasankaran Mohambourame	153.00
Amit & Anju Sharma	249.00		
Priyanka Sharma	249.00		
Vijay S. Singh	249.00		
Jnana Sivananda	249.00		
Total	3,172.79		

Kauai Aadheenam Religious Art and Artifacts Fund	
The Blackbaud Giving Fund—YourCause	35.52

Thank You Bodhinatha Fund	
Ambika Alagere	62.91
Isani Alahan	108.00
Sumathi Raja Chanda	450.00
Gunasegaran Chitravelloo	102.61
Justice Collier	300.00
Shyamadeva Dandapani	108.00
Chellappa Deva	25.00
Iryna Doroshenko	51.00
Michael Doyle	324.00
Debashis Ghosh	300.00
Shah K.S. Gupta	501.00
Kamila Jagambrum	21.12
Brijianand Jugurnauth	10.49
Roudhranee Jugurnauth	10.49
Gunasekaran Kandasamy	91.71
Inna Linnyk	216.00
Eric Mackow	7.00
Gaurav Malhotra	470.16
Kulagan Moonesawmy	136.31
Seedha Lutchmee Moonesawmy	10.49
Souria Koomaren Moorghen	209.71
Agumbarum Mootoosamy	1,008.00
Covida Mootoosamy	1,008.00
Mano Navaratnarajah	150.00
Cassan Pancham	2,000.00
Janaka Param	1,500.00
Nuckiren Pyeneeeandee	31.66
Suresh Ramamurthi	108.00
Eswar Raman	40.00
Srilakshmi Rathakrishnan	102.00
Chamundi Sabanathan	1,008.00
Aran Sendan	108.00
Nandi Devi Sivanathan	68.81
Adi Srikantha	108.00
Shiva Mariswamy Subramani	10.00
Ravi Thaker	66.00
Anba Dayananden Valayten	13.21
Hema Werner	504.00
Anonymous	6,089.00
Total	17,438.38

Udayan Care Endowment Fund	
Anonymous	51.00

Sri Chandra Madhab Debnath Endowment	
Shyamal Chandra Debnath vvv	150.00

Kerala Temple Trust	
Anonymous	58.00

Taos Hanuman Fund	
Sheldon Williams	5.00

Manjung Hindu Sabha Orphanage Fund	
Muthukumar Jeyapalan	5,000.00
Dayavati Murugan	50.00
Rajiv Verma	150.00
Total	5,200.00

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Hinduism Today Complimentary Subscription Fund			
Niranjan Bukkipatna	250.00	Brijianand Jugurnauth	10.56
Rajagopal Krishnan	60.00	Srinivas R. Madaboosi	375.00
Total	310.00	Natraj Narayanswami	75.00
		Varalakshmi Ramamoorthy	324.00
		Padmini Samuthiran	162.00
		Nandi Devi Sivanathan	21.38
		Rodney & Ilene Standen	30.00
		Arunasalam Vathavooran	50.00
		Anonymous	606.00
		Total	1,888.95
Himalayan Academy Publications Endowment		Hindu Association of West Texas Endowment	
Vel Mahalingum	8.41	Gowri Nadason	38.06
Mano Navaratnarajah	225.00		
Anonymous	54.00	Pakistan Hindu Empowerment Fund	
Total	287.41	Arunkumar Bindingnavile	200.00
		Dhiraj Kamath	25.00
Kauai Aadheenam Yagam Fund		Amit Adiraju Narasimha	100.00
Anonymous	33.00	Total	325.00
		Murugamoorthi Thirukkovil Endowment	
Yogaswami Hindu Girls' Home of Sittandy Endowment		Raj Padman Padmalingam	18,295.00
Arnab Chatterjee	13.00		
Subramaniam Pennathur	50.01	Digital Dharma Endowment	
Kartikatipan Ramachandran	50.00	Gunasekaran Kandasamy	50.15
Hridaya Sivalingam	12.00	Kulagan Moonesawmy	12.63
Anonymous	883.00	Total	62.78
Total	1,008.28	Kauai Aadheenam Feed the Monks Fund	
		Ambika Alagere	6.32
Maha Ganapati Temple of Arizona Endowment		Yuvaraj Athur	153.00
Anonymous	75.00	Anandkumar Ayyachamy	75.00
		Raj Chappidi	5.00
India Hindu Temple Cleaning Fund		Charles Close	108.00
Anonymous	30.00	Kiran M. Datar	108.00
		Rakesh Dixit	451.00
Cows of Kadavul and Iraivan Temples (Kovil Maadu) Endowment		Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	7.96
Arun Aarooren	75.00		
Ambika Alagere	6.32		
Anil Ananda Badhwar	30.00		
Kiran Datar	108.00		
Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	15.85		

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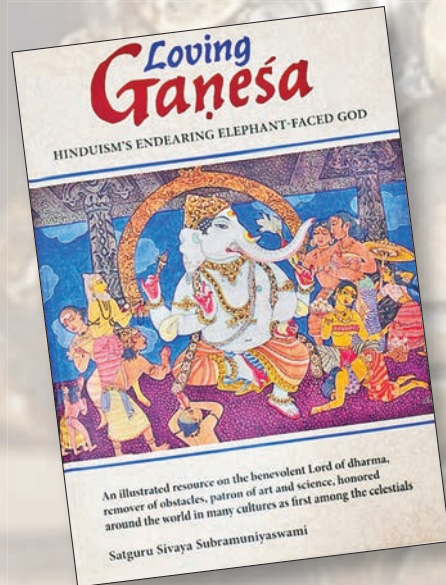


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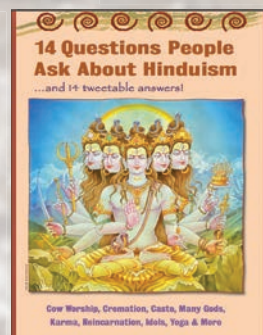
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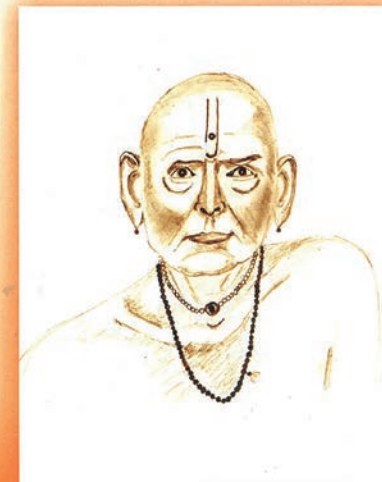


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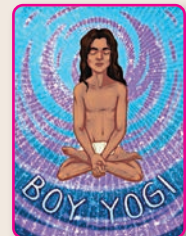


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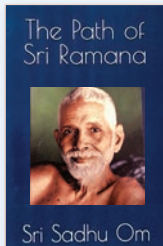


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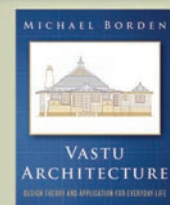
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India's ancient temples are dying. In Tamil Nadu alone, more than 12,000 temples do not have any poojas happening or even a single lamp being lit. Thousands of temples across the state are lying in ruins waiting to be renovated. Behind Every Temple is a 501c3 Non-Profit organization dedicated to ensuring these sacred sites are protected and renovated for future generations. In addition to temple renovation, we also provide free oil to ancient temples in poor condition and regularly perform annadanam (feeding) for intellectually disabled people. We are entirely volunteer-run, so 100% of your tax-deductible donation goes directly to these projects.

For Hindus, dana (giving) is an integral part of one's dharma, so we invite everyone to help participate in these noble projects and help keep India's temples and traditions alive



To learn more please visit us at
www.behindeverytemple.org



SCAN ME

*Thou art
The Magnificent One
Whose Love unfolds
Into thy devotees' hearts
Like a flower opening
To the rising Sun.*

*Regal, majestic
Thou appearest,
Thy glance burning
To ashes
Phantoms
That bind Souls.*

*Thou bearest no gap
Between Man and God,
Between You
And I,*

*While at thy side
Blazes thy mighty
Scepter of Righteousness.*

*The Magnificent One
by Dr. Arjunan Subramaniam
Desa Parkcity, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
30 June to 1st July, 2020*



Saint Tayumanavar writes about God, soul and world



Here Kerala artist Suresh Mutthukulam depicts one of the fundamental concepts in Saiva Siddhanta, called in Tamil *pati*, *pasu* and *pasam*. These three represent all there is, all that exists: God, soul and world. Saint Tayumanavar sits before a Siva Lingam, representing *Pati*, God. Behind the saint, Siva as Ardhnarishvara cradles a devotee in His right hand, which depicts *pasu*, the soul. In Her left hand is the Earth, representing the cosmos, the manifest world, *pasam*. Our saint is writing intently on a palm leaf, as he did all his life, producing an astonishing body of holy songs, indicated by the sea of palm leaves at the bottom of the canvas. His achievement is all the more amazing when we consider he lived just 38 years, intimated by the 38 clouds in the sky.

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

