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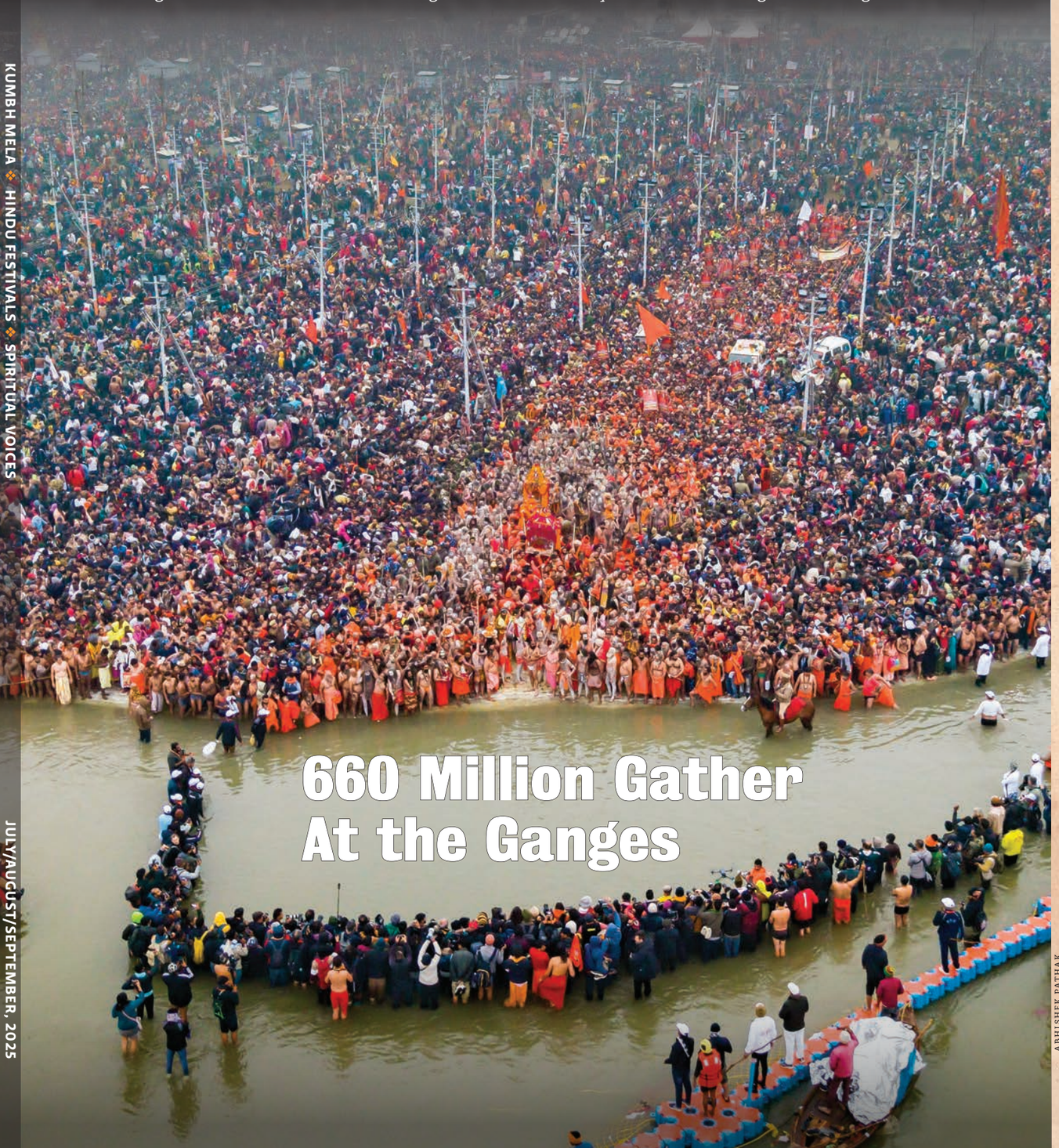
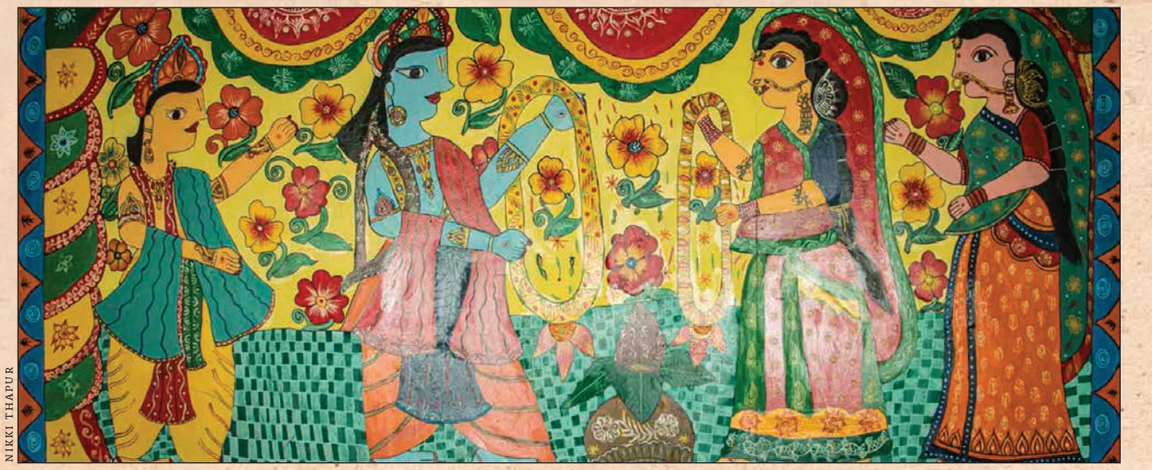


660 Million Gather At the Ganges

ABHISHEK PATHAK



NIKKI THAPUR

(Cover) Procession of saints arrive at the main bathing area during the 2025 Kumbh Mela in Prayag, the largest human gathering in history; (above) Mithila wall art depicting the exchange of garlands between Ram and Sita during their marriage in Nepal

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Kumbh Mela 2025 Prayagraj, India

660 million Hindus, equal to 45% of the population of India and nearly twice that of the US, pilgrimaged to the Kumbh to take their holy bath in the confluence of sacred rivers.

Crossing the Ganga: *An endless procession of saints crosses over the Ganga to participate in the holy bath at the Sangam, the meeting place of the Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati rivers*

PRAMIL DWIVEDI

GLOBAL DHARMA

MALAYSIA

1.5 Million Devotees Attend Thaipusam 2025 in Penang

GEORGE TOWN: MORE THAN 1.5 million Hindu devotees and tourists from across the nation and abroad attended this year's Thaipusam festival in Penang state, Malaysia, held on February 11 at the Sri Arulmigu Balathandayuthapani Temple.

According to an article in *The Sun*, Penang Hindu Endowments Board (LWHPP) Chairman RSN Rayer said that all parties—especially the temples and committees involved—had actively prepared to ensure the smooth progress of the religious event.

"Last year, the number reached one million visitors. People are not only traveling from across Malaysia but also from abroad, including Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and more," said Rayer. "We expect an even larger crowd this year, because Thaipusam coincides with the school holidays."

He addressed the media during a press conference on the 2025 Thaipusam festivities held at the temple office. At the event, he unveiled a Golden Chariot tracking system, a joint initiative between LWHPP and the company Digital Penang.

The Golden Chariot is a metal structure plated with gold. It carries a Vel (spear of Lord Murugan), and is only used for this single annual event. Made at a cost of US$181509, it resides primarily at the nearby Maha Mariamman temple. During the festivities, it is pulled slowly by a decorated truck while devotees hold ropes on both sides. Rayer explained that devotees can access the Chariot's location in real time through the "Pathrikai & Chariot Tracker" app, to plan ahead for prayers at nearby temples along the route.

The Golden Chariot departed from Maha Mariamman temple at 6am on February 10 and arrived at the Sri Arulmigu Balathandayuthapani Temple the following day.

Vetrivel Muruganukku Arogara!!: *Pilgrims carrying milk pots on their heads walk towards the Arulmigu Balathandayuthapani Temple to participate in the abhishekam for Lord Murugan*

GUYANA

Siva Stands Tall in South America

GUYANA: A 50-FOOT STATUE of Lord Siva was inaugurated in February 2025 at the Badrinaath Ashram in Essequibo Coast, Guyana. This statue is the largest of its kind in South America, marking a significant development for the Hindu community on this continent.

It was handcrafted in separate pieces in India and assembled by the founders of Triveni Mandir in Ontario, Canada. The inauguration ceremony, which auspiciously included a rain shower, took place just in time for Maha Shivaratri on February 26, 2025, according to *WIC News*.

The event commenced with everyone singing the national anthem of India. Participants wore traditional Indian clothing—women adorned in saris and men in kurtas and pajamas.

The event was attended by several officials, including President Dr. Irfaan Ali, Prime Minister Mark Phillips and Minister of Local Government Sonia Parag.

The ceremony marks a new chapter for Guyana and for Hinduism in the country. Another statue of Lord Siva stands at Versailles Shivala temple in the region of Demerara.

President Ali emphasized that investments of this nature are important to reinforce the sense of community, belonging, selflessness, faith and conscientiousness, which are all important tenets of Hinduism.

According to the president, his government is working on ways to support the development of pandits, pastors and imams from across the country, because faith and spirituality are essential pillars of a grounded nation.

Hindus are a significant minority group in Guyana, comprising about 25% of the population according to the 2012 census. Guyana is the country with the highest percentage of Hindus in the western hemisphere.

Opening ceremony: *(middle to right) President Dr. Irfaan Ali, Prime Minister Mark Phillips and Minister of Local Government Sonia Parag; (left) 50-foot-tall Siva statue*

PHOTOS (TOP TO BOTTOM): BERNAMAPIX; X.COM/@INDIAINGUYANA; BRAMPTONTRIVENIMANDIR.COM

SOUTH AFRICA

150 Years of Faith and Ritual for Hindus in South Africa

EVERY YEAR, HUNDREDS OF devotees gather to test their faith and courage by walking barefoot over burning embers in the ancient firewalking ceremony called *thimithi* at the Umbilo Shree Ambalavaanar Alayam, also known as the Cato Manor Second River Temple.

MSN reported in March 2025 that this revered location, perched on a hillside surrounded by rich greenery in Cato Manor, houses Africa's oldest Hindu temple and marks the origin of firewalking in South Africa.

The temple was once the center of a bustling community until apartheid forced devotees away. Now they are scattered, but many travel from as far as Phoenix and Shallcross to attend the temple's various programs.

The temple celebrated its 150th anniversary in April 2025. Major renovations were completed, ensuring the preservation of its rich history and spiritual significance. The site is home to three temples. The Lord Siva temple is known as Ambalavaanar. The second temple, in honor of the Mother, is known as Sri Draupadi Alayam. The third is the Phutu (Phutuvan) Temple.

Declared a national monument in 1980, the temple stands as a testament to the enduring power of faith and tradition. Kamlanathan Naicker, the temple's treasurer, said the renovations, which included tiling, painting and roofing, had been long overdue.

Holy walk: *a lady performs thimithi, walking on hot embers, while carrying a Trisul, her mouth pierced with a sacred metal spear*

A big win: *Chandrika Tandon poses for a photo with her Grammy Award after winning for the best album.*

USA

Sacred Sounds Win Grammy

THE WINNER OF THE 2025 Grammy Award for best new age, ambient or chant album was *Triveni*, by India's Chandrika Tandon, South Africa's Wouter Kellerman and Japan's Eru Matsumoto. *Triveni* means "the confluence of three rivers" in Sanskrit—an apt description for the album's weave of Vedic chants, melodic flute and cello.

Tandon, a prolific musician, recounted that the title, which names the meeting point of the holy Ganges, Yamuna and Saraswati rivers, came to her in one of her daily meditations.

"It was a beautiful coincidence that our album won the Grammy on Vasant Panchami while the Maha Kumbh was going on," Tandon told *RNS*.

NEW ZEALAND

Women Take Center Stage at Holi Festival

THE TIMELESS HINDU FESTIVAL of Holika Dahan took on profound new meaning this year in March at the Hindu Heritage Centre in Rotorua, as the Hindu Women Forum led the celebrations in an inspiring display of spiritual strength, empowerment and cultural unity.

Holika Dahan, celebrated on the night before Holi, represents the victory of righteousness over wickedness. The ritual typically involves lighting a sacred fire, honoring Prahlad's steadfast faith, and the destruction of evil. As reported by the *Hindu Post*, the organizers secured the necessary permits from Fire and Emergency New Zealand to safely conduct the Holika Dahan bonfire, ensuring a responsible and community-driven celebration.

Night with fire: *Hindu community women celebrate Holika Dahan at the Hindu Heritage Center.*

PHOTOS (TOP TO BOTTOM): FACEBOOK/DK PHOTOGRAPHY THE MEGHALAYAN EXPRESS; HINDU HERITAGE CENTE

INDIA

High Court: Temple Not Allowed to Fund Resort

In a Madras High Court hearing in March 2025, the Tamil Nadu government withdrew its prior order allowing funds from the Masani Amman Temple in Pollachi, Coimbatore, to be used for a luxury resort project at the Western Ghats hill resort town of Ooty. The court was hearing a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) filed by petitioner P. Baskar against the Principal Secretary of the Tourism Department and other officials of the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (HR&CE) department, challenging the legality of the government's earlier order, according to *The Commune*.

The PIL sought a writ of certiorari to quash a government order of December 2024, which permitted withdrawing US$1.75 million from the surplus funds of the temple which are under the control of the HR&CE department. The funds were earmarked to build the resort in Ooty's Kandal area, near the Subramanian Swamy Temple.

Senior Advocate J. Ravindran, representing the government, assisted by Government Pleader Edwin Prabakar, began the hearing by stating that the use of the term "resort" in the government order was a mistake and that the proposed project was intended to be a "Yatri Niwas" (pilgrim accommodation). However, the petitioner's counsel, B. Jaganath, strongly opposed this claim, arguing that the government order explicitly mentioned the term "resort" in the tabulated estimates and that the project violated multiple provisions of the HR&CE Act.

Further strengthening the petitioner's argument, a March 2025 news report from *Dinamalar* was presented, highlighting that devotees had raised objections against the proposed construction. Several petitions had been sent to the Chief Minister's Office and the HR&CE Minister but this had been in vain, as there was no response.

The petitioner also cited a January 2025 judgment of the Madras High Court, which restricted the diversion of temple funds for nonreligious purposes.

After considering the submissions, the Division Bench, consisting of Chief Justice K.R. Shriram and Justice Mohammed Shaffiq, remarked that the matter could be addressed either by granting an interim stay or through the withdrawal of the contested order. In response, the Additional Advocate General informed the court that the government had opted to revoke the order in question. The judgment has been welcomed by devotees and temple activists, who argue that temple funds should be utilized strictly for religious and welfare purposes as per legal provisions.

Religion or resort?: *(Top) Pollachi Masani Amman Temple; (Bottom) aerial view of Madras High Court at Chennai*

BRIEFLY...

THE KAILASH MANSAROVAR YATRA will resume this year. It had been paused for a few years due to an India-China border dispute, according to *India West Journal*. This decision is expected to strengthen cultural and spiritual ties between the two countries.

THE EDITORS OF HINDUISM TODAY recently met with Tejal Shah, President of the World Hindu Council of America, and presented a hard drive of the *Agama* scriptures. The palm-leaf scriptures had been digitized in a project headed by Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, publisher of Hinduism Today magazine. In February 2025, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad presented the drive to Narendra Modi, Honorable Prime Minister of India, who pledged to include the million-plus digital photos of palm leaves in the National Museum and Research archives.

KASHI VISHWANATH TEMPLE IN Varanasi, India, received 14 million pilgrims in just one month in early 2025. *Social News XYZ* stated that after participating in Prayagraj's Maha Kumbh, sadhus and saints arrived in Varanasi, setting up a vibrant camp along the ghats of the River Ganga. Then came millions of pilgrims who had completed their Maha Kumbh bath. For some Hindus, the ritual bath at the Kumbh is considered incomplete unless followed by a visit to the Kashi Vishwanath Temple.

CALIFORNIA BEGAN A YEARLONG celebration in February 2025, marking 125 years since Swami Vivekananda's first impactful visit to the state. The event took place in 1900 with his powerful lectures at the historic First Unitarian Church of Oakland. Organized by the Vedanta Society of Berkeley and the Indian Consulate in San Francisco, the celebration honors his legacy.

A RE-ELECTED LABOUR GOVERNment in Australia will invest $85 million to support the construction of the first-ever Hindu school in the country. The new primary school will be located in Oakville in northwest Sydney. According to an April 2025 press release by the Minister for Education, there are more than 680,000 Hindus in Australia. It is the third largest religion and the fastest-growing major religion, but it is underrepresented in the schooling sector. Australia's government has funded faith-based private schools since 1964.

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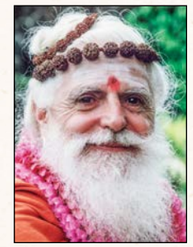

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IN MY OPINION

One Truth, Many Forms

She who destroys darkness also nurtures light—both exist within Kali's sacred form

BY DEVANSH AGARWAL

Kali, whose name comes from the Sanskrit *Kala*, meaning time, is the Goddess of time, change and death. In the *Devi Mahatmyam*, She emanates from Durga's brow to destroy chaos-wielding demons. When Her fury spirals beyond control, threatening the very Gods She came to protect, Shiva lies down before Her. Stepping on Him jolts Her back to awareness, and Her rage gives way to humility and calm.

This form, where Kali steps with Her right foot, is called Dakshina-Kali, symbolizing traditional worship. In Her left-footed form, She is Vama-Kali, representing the side of reality that society often rejects. Kali, central to the Shakta sect of Hinduism and to tantra, is especially revered in Bengal, Odisha and Assam. Growing up in this region, I was introduced to Her stories early and have been captivated ever since. But before exploring Kali Herself, it's important to understand tantra.

Tantra, meaning "technique," is a spiritual science using tools (yantra) and hymns (mantra) to connect with the Divine. It emphasizes personal experience through sound, symbols and invocation. Shakta Tantra includes two main clans: Shri-Kula, which reveres Tripura Sundari and suits householders, and Kali-Kula, focused on Kali and meant for those detached from social norms. Both see the Deity as a nurturing mother, though their methods differ.

Kali's worship appeals because of Her dual nature—a loving yet powerful mother who can punish when needed. Though often misunderstood as dark or cruel, Her purpose is to destroy darkness, even by becoming one with it. She teaches acceptance and transformation. For me, surrendering to Her feels like an act of grace, as if even uttering Her name is only possible through Her blessing.

Spiritually, Kali represents the duality of nature—how things are not always what they seem and how every part of creation has a purpose. True spirituality is recognizing this, seeing that Self realization and God realization are two sides of the same coin. In Her highest form, Mahakali, She embodies supreme consciousness and eternal bliss—the natural state of all beings and the universe itself.

In sadhana, one may choose any Deity, understanding that all are expressions of the same divine consciousness, appearing in various forms to meet the needs of each soul's journey. Though called by many names, they are fundamentally one.

A key philosophy in Hinduism is advaita, or non-duality, which teaches that man and God are not separate. There is one divine Essence present within every life form. The Self and the Supreme are the same, seen in countless ways by different people. Shaktas call this presence Shakti or Devi; Saivites see it as Lord Siva. Both are expressions of the same energy. Even modern science echoes this truth—energy cannot be created or destroyed, only transformed. Solar energy becomes food, then electricity, then movement. So, too, does divine energy have many forms.

For me, Kali embodies that truth. I worship Her with the understanding that She is one with Shiva, Vishnu and all others. The choice of Deity arises from individual nature and emotional makeup. One may turn to Krishna for love, another to Kali for intensity. My nature resonates with Her, and Hinduism honors that, asking only for sincere devotion and surrender—bhakti.

Devansh Agarwal, *20, is a student interested in Hinduism and writing. His goal is to help people see the beauty of his religion, while dispelling inaccuracies about it.*

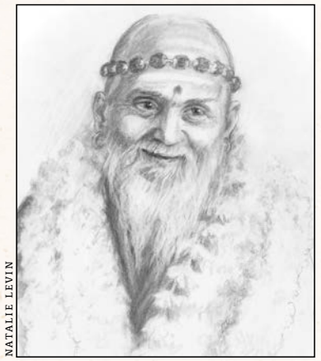
PUBLISHER'S DESK

Hinduism Has an Innate Form of AI

It takes practice to unlock the intuitive abilities of the mind, but the effort is worth it, bringing inner guidance for a rich life

BY SATGURU BODHINATHA VEYLANSWAMI

OVER THE PAST TWO YEARS, THERE HAS been a remarkable surge of interest in the field of artificial intelligence (AI). An evolutionary development is the emergence of generative AI, particularly large language models, exemplified by popular platforms like ChatGPT. These systems have the ability to provide answers to questions in a human-like way at remarkable speed. Toward the end of 2024, Apple unveiled Apple Intelligence, a suite of AI features powered by both in-house and third-party models. That gave me the insight that Hinduism has its own innate form of AI. I call it Adhyatma Intelligence.



NATALIE LEVIN

The Sanskrit word *adhyatma* means spiritual. So, Adhyatma intelligence, or spiritual intelligence, refers to knowledge that comes from the soul. Such knowledge is commonly referred to as intuition, superconsciousness, inner voice, insight or foreknowledge. A Sanskrit term for intuition is *anubhava bodha*, which means knowledge from inner experience. This is distinct from the intellectual knowledge acquired by studying books, for which the Sanskrit term is *buddhi jnana*. My guru, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, gave this description of intuition: "The first sadhana, therefore, is to always hold the overview and cling in your memory to the intuitive flashes that come as a result [of your practices]. These intuitive flashes come from deep within and are the only thing that should be remembered, for this is your *jnana*, your insightfulness, your own wisdom, breaking through."

We commonly hear the phrase "awakening our intuition," implying that it is not currently functioning. Gurudeva presented another perspective. "Intuition day by day occurs spasmodically, but it does occur. And systematically one can gear his observation of his own intuitional faculties and find out exactly when these intuitive functions occur within him. It is a well-defined fact that we have the faculty of precognition of coming events. It is also concurrently known that feelings of fear may precede impending danger. It is for the individual to disentangle and sort out within his own daily experiential pattern which is which. In this way, he becomes knowledgeable in the great university of his own mind as to what is a daily intuitive occurrence and what is not."

Imagine soft music being played in a noisy room. The music is there, but it is drowned out by the noise. It is the same in our mind, where the constant mental noise of thoughts and feelings prevents us from hearing our quiet inner voice. But sometimes our inner voice is louder than the mental noise, such as when facing danger. Imagine a child, playing outside, who is about to be hurt. From inside the house, the mother senses the danger and runs to protect her child, arriving just in time.

It is important to learn to distinguish genuine intuition from ordinary thought. Gurudeva gives a useful explanation of the difference. "Desires come through feeling, warmth of emotion, as do thoughts, schemes, ways of manipulating the media forces for one's own personal benefit or that of a loved one. This is contrary to the power of intuition, which runs cold and is direct, like a bolt of lightning in the inner sky or the subtle rainbow of an etheric aura which bypasses the processes of current thinking, giving answers before the question and solving problems before they have accrued."

A key practice enabling the regular experience of intuition is to observe how our thinking mind functions. This is facilitated by practicing meditation regularly over a long period of time. When attempting to meditate, our thoughts tend to quickly run to past events and future plans. We must gradually control this pattern through our meditation practices. In fact, that is the definition of yoga that Patanjali gives in Sutra 2 of his classic work, *Yoga Sutras:* "Yoga is the restraint of mental activities." Sutra 3 takes this idea one step deeper within. "Then awareness abides in its essential nature." When mental activity is restrained, the soul's faculty that witnesses thoughts naturally turns in on itself, remaining temporarily aware only of itself until thoughts again arise. A person is at that moment in his soul nature, which is, of course, the source of intuition.

A second practice is needed—keen observation. Gurudeva explains: "Observation is the first faculty of the awakening of the superconscious regions. This observation is cultivated by abstinence from excessive talk." Unfortunately, excessive talk is a strong habit. Constant talk overloads the subconscious mind and is the source of unwanted thoughts that arise when we try to practice meditation.

To avoid excess talk, it is helpful to establish a weekly time of silence—for example, one hour every Sunday during which talk completely ceases. For those who are retired, the period can be longer. The discipline of remaining silent is called *mauna* in Sanskrit. Fortunate individuals have a schedule that allows them to practice mauna for an entire day every week. Ardent seekers in India may take vows of silence for months, or longer.

Paramaguru Yogaswami didn't experience AI, but he spoke of what I'm calling Adhyatma Intelligence. He worked intuitively, responding according to "inner orders." He explained this process, "When you are pure, you live like water on a lotus leaf. Do what is necessary, what comes to you to do, then go on to the next order you receive, and then to the next that comes." In this way, he prodded visitors to follow their intuition. He advised, "Boldly act when you receive orders from within. You need not wait until all details are in order. If you wait for everything to be worked out, you may miss your chance. Have faith and do the work that comes from within. Money will trail after you if you are responding to divine orders. Helpers will come. Everything will come. You have only to follow carefully that which comes from within."

DALL-E

Inner knowing: *In a redwood forest a meditator quiets her mind sufficiently to allow the radiance of intuitive knowledge to reveal itself*

When asked how to find one's inner voice, he offered, "*Summa iru*. Be still! Be still, and what you need will come to you." "*Summa iru!*" was his constant command. He practiced this himself and heeded the instructions that came. Someone would ask him a question and he would wait for his inner orders. If he felt no orders, he would do nothing. Once a man drove up to Swami as he was walking through town and asked if he could drive him somewhere. "No orders," Swami replied and waved the man on. A few minutes later the driver came by and stopped again. "Now I have my orders," Swami said, and got into the car. Gurudeva's and Yogaswami's advice on how to find our intuition is the same. Gurudeva: "Practice *mauna*. Abstain from excessive talk." Yogaswami: "Be still. *Summa iru!*"

Here are two useful techniques for tapping your intuition to solve a problem. The first is that if you find yourself unable to solve a problem and are thinking in circles about it without making any progress, take a break. Take a fifteen-minute walk. Come back and look at the problem again. Sometimes the answer will be immediately self-evident. Relaxing, taking the mind off the problem, allows your intuition to be known.

Second, at night just before sleep, write down the problem. Make sure your description is accurate and complete. Rewrite it until you have captured it fully. Go to sleep with the expectation that you will awaken in the morning with the intuitive insight that eluded you.

The two types of knowledge, anubhava bodha and buddhi jnana, are distinct but complementary. Anubhava bodha is using the soul's faculty of intuition. Buddhi jnana is using the intellect's abilities, such as memory, reason, logic and observation. The knowledge we acquire through the intellect can provide the basis for intuitive insight. In science, for example, mastering the existing knowledge in a field, such as quantum physics, can be the foundation for unfolding deeper insights in that field through intuition. In spirituality, studying Hindu texts such as the *Yoga Sutras* can be the inspiration for inner experience of the truths the texts are describing—for example, gaining inner knowledge and experience about your soul's inherent omnipresence.

LETTERS

Quotes and Quips

The AI-generated quote for the Quotes and Quips section in the Oct/Nov/Dec 2024 issue prompted varied reactions. While the capability of a machine to produce such a coherent statement is undeniably impressive, it invites us to explore its implications more deeply. AI's potential in crafting spiritual quotes seems effective at first glance but raises significant questions upon closer examination.

Can a machine truly exercise creativity? The answer is both yes and no. While AI can simulate creativity on an intellectual level, it lacks the intuitive flair integral to genuine inspiration. The intellect reshapes existing knowledge into coherent thoughts, whereas intuition arises spontaneously from within. While both faculties hold value, spiritual insights often spring from the latter. AI embodies intellectual prowess, predicting outcomes based on past data, yet it remains bereft of the soul's intuitive spark.

Consider the AI quote: "True strength is not in the force of our actions, but in the patience of our responses." Though logically sound, it bears a noteworthy resemblance to Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Patience and fortitude conquer all things" or Mahatma Gandhi's assertion that "Strength comes not from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will." Moreover, does the AI quote genuinely hold truth in suggesting that true strength lies in the duration it takes us to respond?

Perhaps it is wise to let machines excel where pure intellect is required, but to entrust matters of the heart and soul to us humans.

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Kumbha Mela

The Maha Kumb is bold evidence of the fervor and faith in our nation's religion. It is devotion that drove millions of people from every corner of this vast country to the sacred calling of the river at Triveni Sangam. The Kumbh is overwhelming and deeply moving, a gathering unlike any other in the world.

India as a nation is dotted with Gods. There are Gods in each city, village, central square—everywhere. There are Gods on the roads and highways. According to ancient Vedic belief, trees are considered the origin of life. Thus, they hold deep significance in Hinduism. In fact, every tree has a Deity or a God who is worshiped and given offerings. Someone places an image of a God under a tree, and eventually people build a shrine—thus creating a pilgrim spot. On special days, sacred trees are worshiped for long life and fulfillment. Holy spots are often associated with a water body (*tirtha*), such as a pond or a confluence of rivers. The *Puranas* describe many such sites. Miracles happen when one goes to these pilgrim spots. Diseases get cured, children are born, fortune is restored.

This is a nation imbued with faith and traditions, a place where the Gods and Goddesses can appear under a tree or in a neighborhood to create a feeling of community, to support the lost and the hopeless—a moment of connection, a moment of peace that transcends human limitations.

Dr. Ramesh Upadhya
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Ramana Maharshi

I just received the Apr/May/Jun 2025 issue of Hinduism Today, packed as always with valuable information and insights into Hinduism. I always look forward to your magazine. The article about Ramana Maharshi is superb—so informative and insightful. I plan to visit Ramana Ashram and the Annamalaiyar Devasthanam this year. But for the nine-mile walk around the hill, I'll have to think about that. I am 76 years old, "running 77," as they love to say in India!

I just looked in Wikipedia and discovered to my great dismay that the British had renamed *Tiruvannamalai* to *Trinomali*—an anomaly to suit their tongues. They renamed countless other localities across India as well. *Tiruchirappalli* became *Trichinopoly* with the British imposition on local place names. *Tiruvannamalai* consists of three words: *thiru* (respected), *anna* (older brother), and *malai* (hill, mountain). But *malai* in Tamil, pronounced *mälai*, can also mean either evening or garland. I beg you to use diacritics, particularly Ä/ä, to extend the 'a' as in the word *far*.

Raja Bhat MD

Eastern Faith Parallels

Regarding your article, "Taoism's Hindu Parallels" (Jul/Aug/Sep 2022), I too find an immense amount of similarity between ancient faiths—Shintoism, Taoism, Shamanism and Hinduism (unfortunately misappropriated due to the labels of -isms by Europeans). The common theme is the cosmic order, the interconnectedness, living in harmony with nature, being grateful to nature, and walking on the right path. I agree that there are strong possibilities of these systems originating individually, with some exchange of ideas.

With the depth of discussions and ideas these faiths engaged in through history, I have no doubt that they must have participated in gatherings of intellectual and spiritual discourse. I feel there was something similar all over the world—a natural system that has been forcefully replaced by artificial ways, crafted for the benefit of a few, and to amass an army of volunteers in the name of religion.

Devika
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Mothers and Babies

Fantastic article and a great read for everyone in the family—"Nurturing Babies and Mothers" (Jan/Feb/Mar 2018). The highlight for me was the focus on reviving our own Hindu traditional medicinal practices, which are losing their influence due to Western cultural medical practices. As a next step, we should work to develop our traditional systems by opening training centers and development hubs to further these long-lost traditions. Many thanks to the authors who put their efforts into this article—kudos to them! I look forward to reading more articles that highlight our ancient wisdom and its relevance in modern life.

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The Nature of Consciousness

I thoroughly enjoyed reading the article "New Consciousness Theory" (Jan/Feb/Mar 2025). It is true that what science thinks of as a new consciousness theory was something Hindus have known for eons—that consciousness could originate from hidden dimensions of the universe rather than solely from brain activity.

Even though I am an engineer with a science background, Advaita Vedanta's holistic and nondualistic approach deeply resonates with my understanding of consciousness. The *mahavakyas*, such as *Prajnanam Brahma* ("Consciousness is Brahman") and *Satyam Jnanam Anantam Brahma* ("Brahman is Existence-Consciousness-Infinity"), emphasize consciousness as the infinite essence of all that exists.

From the Advaita Vedanta standpoint, consciousness is self-evident—the essence that differentiates living beings from inanimate objects. Its absence equates to lifelessness.

An analogy from Advaita Vedanta likens the brain to a transmitter of consciousness, much like a radio transmitting sound waves. The brain facilitates the manifestation of consciousness but does not produce it.

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Entering Hinduism

I have been receiving your magazines for several years. They bring me warmth and love from my spiritual family. Thank you.

A few things struck me about the article "Bali Filipino Citizen Converts to Balinese Hinduism" (Jan/Feb/Mar 2025). Firstly, I always love to hear of people finding a home in Hinduism. But I was disappointed by the attempt of Sudhi Wadhani to "cleanse" the convert from their old religion's influences. Sanatana Dharma is infinite and encompasses all realities simultaneously. What need is there for cleansing? Secondly, the signing of a document to enter the faith? Entering that state of being—the reality described by people's beliefs—is not a contract. It's a divine right and miraculous journey. But, it's all good. Keep up the good work!

Sigh'n, Matthew Grier
New Boston, Texas

Facts on Vegetarianism in India

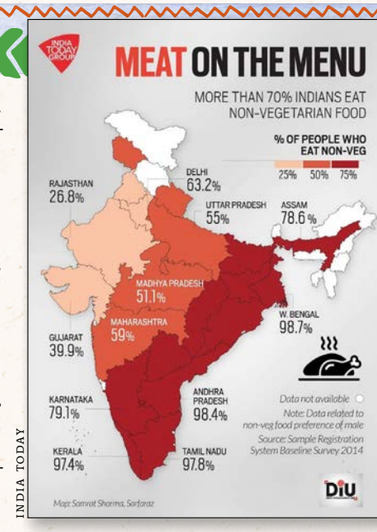
I enjoyed reading several articles on your site, particularly "How Our Soul Matures." But in the feature, "14 Questions People Ask about Hinduism," I noticed the statement, "Vegetarians are more numerous in the south of India than in the north."

This is factually incorrect. An Indian Government survey conducted in 2014 shows that North India has a much higher percentage of vegetarians than the South. I am from a South Indian community that does not consume meat, so I am well aware of the actual ground reality. Source: nall.ai/indiatodaymeatveggie

Also, please note that eating meat is on the rise in India. According to a Pew study, only 39 percent now identify as vegetarians. Source: nall.ai/pewresearchindiavegetarianism

I draw your attention to this so that what you publish accurately reflects the reality of India and maintains your excellent credibility.

Sowmya



INDIA TODAY

Correction, from the Editors

√ You are correct, Sowmya. Thank you for flagging the error. We will update the article on our website. As you noted, government data cited in the *India Today* article shows that states like Rajasthan, Haryana, Punjab and Gujarat have the highest vegetarian populations, while nonvegetarianism is far more prevalent in southern states such as Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala. This confirms that vegetarianism is more common in the north and west of India.

The *India Today* article also notes a national trend: meat consumption is on the rise, with 80% of Indians now eating some form of meat—up from 74% in 2006.

It is important to point out that India has one of the lowest per capita meat consumption rates in the world—about 4.5 kilograms per person per year, according to a 2005 FAO report titled Livestock Sector Brief: India. Link: nall.ai/faolivestocksectorbrief

In contrast, the average American consumes about 120 kilograms of meat per year, based on U.S. Department of Agriculture data. This stark difference reflects the deep cultural and dietary contrasts between the two countries.

Letters with writer's name, address and daytime phone number should be sent to:
Letters, Hinduism Today
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.

Nurturing Dharma Through Youth Expression

Helping Hinduism Today helps Hindu youth enjoy and share Sanatana Dharma

A common concern shared by Hindu leaders and parents alike is how to effectively communicate Hinduism to our youth. Sincere efforts are being made by organizations, both large and small, to accomplish this. One of our approaches in Hinduism Today is to let youth speak for themselves, through opinion pieces and narratives of their experience of Hinduism. Our thought is that other youth will relate well to the ideas presented when the writers are of their own peer group.

In a recent "In My Opinion" column, Oviaa Madanganesh Sumathi, 17, of Bengaluru, India, wrote about practicing Bharatanatyam dance since the age of six. She describes how her understanding of the dance deepened over the years, along with guru bhakti, appreciation for disciplined practice and closeness to the Divine. In her words, "The more we danced, the closer we felt to God."

In another op-ed, Aran Malhotra, 17, of Chicago, Illinois, shared how his upbringing in a devout Hindu home, coupled with visits to Kauai's Hindu Monastery and dedicated study of the faith, led him to start a Hindu Students Club and a blog titled "Hindu Tools for Teens." His goal is to inspire teens to lead values-driven lives, rooted in love, honesty and nonviolence, while holding respect for all faiths. Aran hopes his efforts will spark similar endeavors at other schools.

Mugdha Shinde and Sanjeevani Dedge—both residents of the San Francisco Bay Area and participants in our "Young Writers" program—wrote on balancing religion with the demands of high school life. They addressed a common concern: that academics, sports and extracurriculars leave little time for Hindu practices. In response they listed eleven simple practices that can be woven into one's day, requiring minimal time. One example: carry a Hindu book—printed or digital—and read from it, even for just five minutes, during breaks in the day.

Krathu Sankaranarayanan, a tenth grader from Missouri City, Texas, shared a touching account of traveling with his family to Varanasi for the ceremony of placing his grandfather's ashes in the Ganges. His story offers a heartfelt glimpse into the living traditions of our faith and the deep emotional connections they foster across generations.

These enthusiastic articles remind us all that the Sanatana Dharma is alive in the hearts of young people.

You can support this unfolding story. Help Hinduism Today continue to provide a platform for youth to share their experiences and promote Hindu education for the next generation. Your generous donation helps keep the magazine financially strong and secure.

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

QUOTES & QUIPS

Truth alone triumphs; not falsehood

Mundaka Upanishad 3.1.6

The great secret of true success, of true happiness, is this: the man or woman who asks for no return, the perfectly unselfish person, is the most successful. **Swami Vivekananda** (1863–1902), *Hindu monk and philosopher*

A narrow vision is divisive, a broad vision expansive. But a divine vision is all-inclusive. **Swami Tejomayananda**

You are essentially, *"sat, chit, ananda"* or existence, knowledge, bliss absolute. That is our essential nature. **Swami Nikhilananda Saraswati**

Spiritual life is not a matter of theories; it is a matter of practice. **Swami Ashokananda** (1893–1969), *monk of the Ramakrishna Order*

Life is the manifestation of consciousness in the gross body, and the purpose of life is to realize this consciousness. **Swamini Vimalananda** (1836–1886)

The prayer of a pure heart never goes in vain! **Dada J.P. Vaswani** (1918–2018), *spiritual leader and humanitarian*

Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. **Ralph Waldo Emerson** (1803–1882), *American essayist and philosopher*

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

What you are is God's gift to you. What you become is your gift to God. **Hans Urs von Balthasar** (1905–1988), *Swiss theologian and mystic*

Stop acting so small. You are the universe in ecstatic motion. **Rumi** (1207–1273), *Sufi mystic and poet*

The best worship is to respect each and every living being and always keep their welfare in mind. **Swami Avdheshanand Giri,** *Acharya Mahamandaleshwar of Juna Akhara*

If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is: infinite. **William Blake** (1757–1827), *English poet and mystic*

Be kind whenever possible. It is always possible. **The Dalai Lama**, *spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism*

In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few. **Shunryu Suzuki-roshi** (1905–1971), *Japanese Soto Zen master*

Serve, love, give, purify, meditate, realize. **Swami Sivananda** (1887–1963)

Imagination is more important than knowledge. **Albert Einstein** (1879–1955), *theoretical physicist*

Your own Self-realization is the greatest service you can render the world. **Sri Ramana Maharshi** (1879–1950)

Selfless service alone gives the needed strength and courage to awaken the sleeping humanity in one's heart. **Swami Chinmayananda** (1916–1993), *founder of Chinmaya Mission*

Silence is not an absence but a presence. **Swami Veda Bharati** (1933–2015), *Himalayan yoga scholar*

The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence. **Rabindranath Tagore** (1861–1941), *Bengali poet and Nobel laureate*

One of the qualifications to be born is the ability to make mistakes. If we don't have that ability, we wouldn't be born. There's no point in being here if we won't make mistakes. It will happen, we'll feel bad about it, and then we'll need to pull ourselves out of that. **Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami,** *publisher of* HINDUISM TODAY

SPEEDBUMP DAVE COVERLY

We must live in the now to follow the path to enlightenment. In the lower realms of the mind, where time and space seem very real, we are worried about the past or concerned about the future. These two intermingle and limit conscious awareness. **Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami** (1927–2001), *founder of* HINDUISM TODAY

DID YOU KNOW?

Sacred Grains

NAVADHANYA, THE OFFERING OF NINE sacred grains, is a key part of Hindu ritual, especially in Navagraha homas and temple consecrations. These nine seeds are not chosen for agricultural value but for their traditional correspondence with the nine planetary forces—*grahas*—as outlined in Vedic and Agamic texts. Their offering is meant to acknowledge, harmonize with, and seek clarity regarding the karmic patterns they reflect.

In Hindu cosmology, the Navagrahas are not considered to cause events or influence free will. Rather, they are seen as indicators—cosmic instruments that reveal what already exists in our karmic field. Much like a clock does not create time but only shows it, the planets point to cycles, tendencies and turning points that are already seeded within us. Their patterns are visible in the macrocosm and mirrored within the microcosm of the individual.

Each grain in the Navadhanya set is matched with one graha and symbolizes a quality of consciousness or life-force to be brought into balance. Rice is offered for the Moon, evoking emotional steadiness and purity. Wheat corresponds to the Sun and represents vitality, confidence and right action. Green gram, for Mercury, supports clarity of speech and intellect. Chickpeas are linked to Jupiter, associated with spiritual growth and ethical expansion. Black sesame, used for Saturn, addresses endurance, karmic purification and grounded patience. Horse gram, offered to Mars, embodies courage, energy and the ability to act decisively. White beans are for Venus, promoting harmony in relationships and refinement in expression. Black gram, tied to Rahu, acknowledges the complexity of transformation, ambition and illusion. Mustard seeds, for Ketu, invoke spiritual detachment and insight into the unseen.

The scriptural basis for this system is found in the *Atharva Veda*, Graha Shanti rites and the South Indian *Agamas*, where detailed correspondences between grahas, mantras, metals, colors and food items are recorded. Each offering becomes a gesture of alignment with the natural order—a recognition that inner and outer worlds are not separate. The fire in which these grains are offered serves as the bridge between this and the inner worlds.

RAJKUMAR MANICKAM

Ready to be offered: *A collection of grains to be offered to the sacred flames during a temple consecration*

PUZZLES

Word Search

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

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

ABHISHEKA
ADVAITA
AGNI
AJNA
AMRITA
ARTHA
ASHRAMA
ASURA
ATMAN
BHAJAN
BHAVA
BRAHMA
BRAHMACHARYA
CHAKRA
DARSHANA
DHARMA
DIVYA
DVAITA
GRAHA
GUNA
HOMA
INDRA
ISHTA
JAPA
~~JIVATMAN~~
JYOTISHA
KALPA
KIRTAN
LOKA
MANTRA
MOKSHA
NAVARATRI
PADMA
SMRITI

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

PAINGALA UPANISHAD

You Are That

A Sacred Teaching on Identity, Reality and Liberation

The following is an excerpt from S. Radhakrishnan's translation of the Paingala Upanishad, *Chapter 3, sections 1–6, edited for length and clarity*

In a gathering of teacher and disciple, the sage Yajnavalkya imparts the wisdom of the Self to his devoted student, Paingala, revealing the essence of non-duality and ultimate liberation.

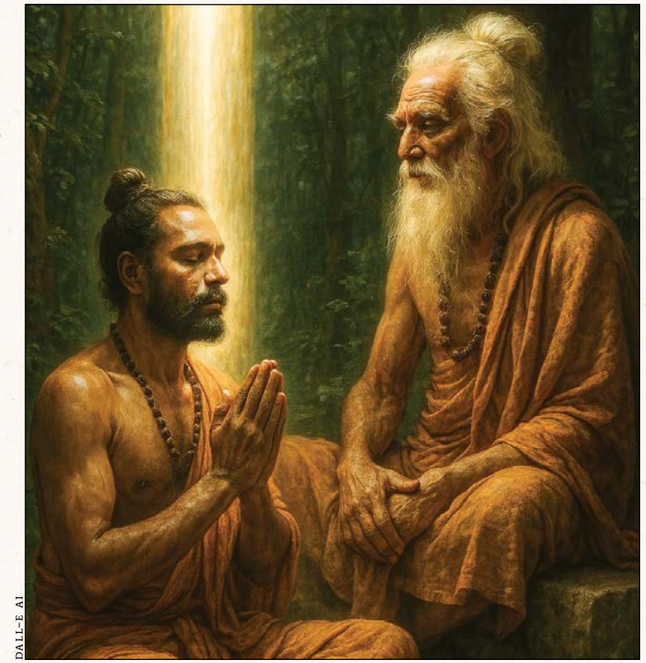
Paingala asked, "O revered teacher, please explain in detail the great teachings that lead to liberation." 1

Yajnavalkya replied: "One should meditate on the truth of 'That Thou Art' and 'I am Brahman.' In this context, 'That' refers to the unseen, all-knowing divine being—endowed with the power of maya and existing as pure being, consciousness and bliss—the very source of the universe. 'Thou' refers to the individual self, shaped by personal experience and identified with the sense of 'I.' When the veiling power of maya and ignorance is removed, the Supreme and the individual self are realized as one and the same—Brahman, which is not separate from the true Self.

"Inquiry into the meaning of the great sayings, such as 'That Thou Art' and 'I am Brahman,' is known as hearing (*shravana*). Focusing intently on the meaning of what is heard is reflection (*manana*). Fixing the mind with one-pointed concentration on what is realized through hearing and reflection is meditation (*nididhyasana*). When meditation becomes completely absorbed in its object—when there is no distinction between the meditator, meditation and the object of meditation—the mind becomes steady, like a flame undisturbed by wind. In this state, the Self is not perceived as an external object but is realized inwardly, as direct knowledge beyond the reach of the senses.

"With this realization, the accumulated karma from countless past lives dissolves. As the practice deepens, an unceasing stream of spiritual nectar flows from all directions. Because of this, accomplished yogis refer to this highest realization as 'the cloud of virtue' (*dharma-megha-samadhi*). When all past impressions—both good and bad—are completely dissolved, and karma is extinguished at its very root, the direct perception of Brahman occurs as clearly as one sees an amalaka fruit held in their hand. At this stage, the realized being is *jivanmukta*, liberated while still embodied. 2

"Ishvara, the Supreme Lord, wished to reverse the process of creation. He withdrew the universe back into its subtle causal state, causing all elements and forms—macrocosms, microcosms, bodies, senses and the mind—to dissolve into their original essence. One by one, earth dissolves into water, water into fire, fire into air, air into space, space into self-awareness, self-awareness into the first cosmic manifestation "the great principle" (*mahat*), mahat into the unmanifest, and the unmanifest into the Supreme Self.


DALL-E AI

"At the cosmic level, *Virat* (the manifested universe), *Hiranyagarbha* (the cosmic mind) and Ishvara (the supreme controller) dissolve into the Absolute. At the individual level, as the effects of past karma come to an end, the physical body merges into the subtle (astral) body, the subtle body into the causal (soul) body, and ultimately, the causal body merges into the unchanging Self. Likewise, the three states of waking, dreaming and deep sleep dissolve into the inner Self. When the microcosm is purified by the fire of knowledge, it merges into the Supreme.

"Thus, the seeker, having attained self-restraint, should meditate without ceasing on the identity of 'That' and 'Thou.' As ignorance dissipates, just as the sun shines in full brilliance when the clouds clear, the Self is revealed. The enlightened one perceives the Self, shining in the heart, like a steady, smokeless flame inside a lamp. 3

"One should meditate upon the unchanging, eternal reality that manifests all things. A sage who remains engaged in this meditation, uninterrupted—until sleep overtakes him or he departs from this world—is truly established in the Self. 4

"Such a realized being, liberated while still in the body, is blessed and has fulfilled all duties. When the time comes to leave the body, he enters into *videha-mukti* (disembodied liberation), just as air becomes still when it ceases to move. 5

"He transcends all sensory experience—beyond sound, touch, form, decay, taste and smell—eternal, without beginning or end, beyond even the great principles of creation. In that final state, only the flawless, unchanging, and ever-pure Reality remains." 6

Sarvapelli Radakrishnan, (1888–1975) was an Indian philosopher and statesman, India's first vice president (1952–1962) and second president (1962–1967). He held doctorates in science, philosophy and theology.

MAHĀ KUMBH MELA Prayag 2025

THIS YEAR MARKED THE GREATEST GATHERING OF human beings in history—660 million congregating at the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna. Dev Raj Agarwal walks us through the Mela with him, and gathers insights from saints and renunciates on Hindu matters. Ellen Coon focuses on women pilgrims' experiences with the sacred bath in Mother Ganga's lap and meeting holy ones.

Around 130,000 pilgrims at a time congregate at the famous Triveni Sangam Ghat to take a holy dip in the rivers' confluence on a Shahi Snan, royal bathing day

COURTESY X.COM/CMYOGIADITYANAT

By Dev Raj Agarwal, from Prayag

The Kumbh Mela is a festival that unites people. Differences of caste, creed, social status and religious affinities are forgotten when all walk through the crowd, jostling to keep family members together. Millions congregated this year in a small area of 25 square miles for that magical dip in the water at the confluence of the holy Ganga, Yamuna and the hidden Saraswati rivers. This dip brings forth sublime joy, spiritual contentment, realization and new confidence to the devout.

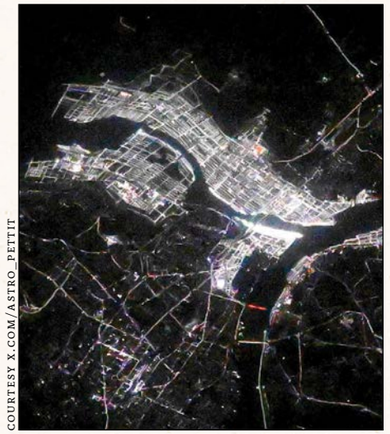
The festival lasted from January 13 to February 26, 2025. It was aptly called the Mahakumbh, the grandest of all the Kumbh Melas, held on a special celestial configuration that occurs every 144 years. The near-seamless management of the challenges of stay, food and sanitation for such crowds became an international inspiration. The world also noted the exemplary behavior of the pilgrims. There were no tussles or fights, no robberies or snatching of belongings.

For me, participating in the Mela was an opportunity to test my physical and mental endurance for seven days.

Pilgrims to Prayag

Pilgrims poured into the area 24 hours a day, their numbers surpassing all expectations of the organizers. When the crowd swelled beyond the limits of control, incoming pilgrims were stopped well before the city limits. Trains were canceled along with confirmed reservations, and road traffic was blocked miles before Prayagraj city.

Pilgrims had to walk long distances to reach the Sangam, the meeting point of the three rivers, but none seemed bothered in the least. They came in large families—men, women, small children and even grandparents. Poorer ones carried their belongings in plastic trash bags. Elders walked briskly but cautiously, staying together in the crowd with the help of a saree used as a rope.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People coming from afar had to spend at least one night in Prayagraj. The Jan Aashray Sthal tent city, set up in different parts of the Mela, could only house a tiny fraction of the influx. Hotels in Prayag were a luxury, and festival-time tariffs were high. As a result, many spent the night by the road or on the riverbank.

Nothing is wasted in India. Large printed plastic sheets about five feet square, discarded from the packaging industry, were sold in the Mela for 23 cents for use as bed sheets.

All pilgrims had one extra item to carry on their return journey—the pot containing Gangajal, Ganga water. Come what may, they must maintain its sanctity as they made their way back home. The plastic jerrycan for sacred Ganga water was the most-sold item in the Mela.

One could not miss groups of Kalpavasis camping in the Mela area. These are extra-serious pilgrims who spend more time in the Mela, with rituals, pujas, meditation, listening to discourses and eating little. It is the simplest kind of penance and detoxification of body and mind. They slept on straw mats, cooked their own food and spoke little. I was overwhelmed by the simplicity and dedication of a group of Kalpavasis from Nepal wearing yellow dhotis.

Many pilgrims visited the *akharas*, monastic orders, in the camp area across the Ganga. They sought darshan of saints and sadhus, especially the Nagas in Saiva akharas. Some Naga sadhus wore fancy sunglasses, and carried a mobile phone as their inseparable tool. Tall headdresses, often made of rudraksha beads, seemed to be the in thing.

Affluent people, mostly disciples of gurus, preferred to stay at the akhara camps, where they could join service programs and attend discourses and kathas by saints. There was a noticeable increase in the number of foreign visitors at this Mela, as Westerners increasingly want to learn about Hinduism.

Close and far: *(clockwise from below) A young boy playfully splashes family members in the Ganga; the Mela temporary city seen from the International Space Station; Rishabh and Shilpi Shukla hold a rope for safety while dipping three times; many pilgrims slept on the roadside; transporting Gangajal back home*

DEV RAJ AGARWAL

Pushpender Mehra and his family from Jaipur spent two hours on the left bank of the Ganga across from the Sangam. I watched the group taking utmost care in performing rituals on the water. "We left home four days ago, had a holy dip in Haridwar and then darshan of Kashi Vishvanath in Varanasi," related Pushpender. "Then we came here. We offered clothes to Ganga Mata. We are 120 people in buses, one big family. Our objective was not to wish for anything but to appease our Devis, Devatas and forefathers by offering a small puja in their names."

Times are changing. The younger generation is developing an interest in spirituality and following traditions of the family, becoming health conscious and trying to understand what the wise men say. This was evident from the wholehearted participation of youth in the bathing rituals at the ghat. Chhavi, 22, an MBA student, rushed to the ghat with her family for a bath. "Is the younger generation of Hindus going away from their traditions and rituals?" I asked her. "No, I don't think so. We take part in all religious activities of our family." Chhavi's two cousins had the same views. They were anxious to take a dip.

It was the first time to Prayagraj for Rishabh and Shilpi Shukla from Sitapur. They were almost in tears, overwhelmed by the divine feeling after their dip in the Ganga. "We had heard and watched so much about the Mahakumbh and wanted to see it for ourselves," they said. To them it mattered little having to walk three miles for the bath. They looked like a blessed couple, with beaming foreheads and benign smiles.

The influx of pilgrims remained undaunted even after a deadly stampede on January 29, but most people then avoided staying in Prayag itself. Itineraries were revised. Destinations like Ayodhya and Varanasi were added to new pilgrimage plans. It made sense for some to park vehicles as far as forty miles away and take public transport to Prayag.

Saints' Guidance for Pilgrims

I asked some of the saints what a devotee should do on a pilgrimage and after returning home. Yogi Sheel Nath of Adinath Akhara opined, "Once home, he should organize a feast for his relatives and friends. The pilgrim should try to leave all *durguna* (bad habits, demerits) here in Ganga. It's a celestial event that affects the entire universe. Whatever punya we do, it reaches the *param paramatma*. We should come to an event like a *sahayogi* (helper) and not as a *badhak* (obstructor)."

According to Ma Santoshi Mata, "The humblest pilgrims have a main goal, the holy bath, followed by darshan of saints. They carry belongings on their heads. Such pilgrims are the real form of dharma. No yatra is a real yatra without ordeals. We must feed them, look after them, welcome them. We must also alert pilgrims to infiltration by fake saints."

The Personal Immersion

THOMAS KELLY

PRAMIL DWIVEDI

DEV RAJ AGARWAL

Food, Hygiene and Health

Free food was served to millions of pilgrims by camps of akharas, individual saints and by large corporations. The number of people fed depended on the size and financial ability of the camp. Some had dining space inside, while others served food by the road. Pilgrims could freely enter any camp for meals. Eating in the huge dining tent of Niranjani Akhara was a great experience for me. The tent accommodated about five hundred people at a time. The food quality was comparable to an expensive vegetarian restaurant. With a staff of 180, they fed 25,000 pilgrims on each of the busiest days and 10,000 on other days.

I asked Mahamandaleshwar Ravindra Puri of Niranjani Akhara how they managed their mega kitchen. "We are trying to offer seva to the society. People are here from all walks of life, from north to south. Many do not have arrangements to spend the night, as they cannot spend 20,000 rupees on a dingy room. We offer them shelter and food. Although space in the camp is limited, we try to accommodate as many people as possible."

How did they assess the amount of food to prepare? "We go outside the camp and ascertain the thickness of the crowd on the road. This helps us decide how much food to prepare on a particular day. We have hired professional cooks. Our effort is to offer very tasty and hygienic food to the visitors."

Himmat Singh was part of a 100-strong pilgrim group from Himachal Pradesh that ran a roadside kitchen outside Juna Akhara, serving food to thousands of passersby every day. The best seva, Himmat and his team said, was feeding hungry pilgrims who were unable to buy food in the Mela area. It was the duty of men to prepare and serve food while women prepared rotis on a large hot plate. It was heartening to see pilgrims feasting on rotis made of corn flour, very popular in Himachal Pradesh.

Cleanliness was a major focus of the Mela. Huge dustbins were spaced every 250 feet. There were no flies, monkeys or stray dogs. Volunteers with long-handled brooms cleaned the roads frequently. An astonishing 150,000 toilets were cleverly hidden behind the streets of the Mela area, and these were cleaned and refreshed twice a day. Filtered drinking water was provided through vending machines for free. A large number of hospitals and dispensaries were always ready for ailing or injured pilgrims.

Crowd Management

Managing surges and safety was of prime importance for the organizers of the Mela. Thousands of workers were involved. A crowd assessment team had 1,800 CCTV cameras. Crowd density was assessed with the help of AI techniques and drone images. Additionally, there were 744 cameras with 360-degree view. The Mela area had 211 police posts. But despite all efforts, several dozen died in a pre-dawn stampede on January 29, the most auspicious day for bathing.

Bharat Scouts and Guides established their camp in Mahakumbh with 5,000 young Scouts, Guides, Rovers and Rangers deployed to help the police and workers. According to Lalita Pandey, State Commissioner of Scouts and Guides, the Scouts returned more than 300 smartphones to the police from the site of the stampede.

Booths constantly announced people who got separated from family members. Numbers had been painted on all electric poles in the Mela, and these poles became meeting points. Sachin Tiwari, working at one of the ten lost-and-found centers, told me, "Information and pictures of a lost person are fed into the AI-assisted computers. Sector-specific data makes it much easier to look for the lost person in a limited area."

Early on in the Mela, people often had to walk many extra miles because bridges were suddenly closed for VIPs and their families entering the Mela in big cars with horns blaring. This was perhaps the only show of social disparity in the festival of unity. After a few incidences of reaction from the frustrated public, the administration stopped entry of VIP vehicles.

After weaving through thick crowds to reach a bathing spot, many pilgrims proceeded to quieter areas for darshan of thousands of saints, yogis and scholars gathered for the mega event. I took the opportunity to meet some of the saints to ask for their views on this Mela, dharma, spirituality and the future of Hinduism. Excerpts are on the following pages.

Caring for Pilgrims

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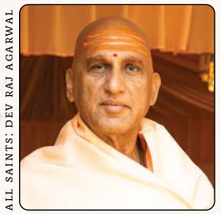
Interviewing Saints & Renunciates at the Kumbh

Significance of 2025 Kumbh Mela to the World



ALL SAINTS: DEV RAJ AGARWAL

Swami Avdheshananda Giri (left), head of Shri Panchdashnam Juna Akhara: The Mahakumbh is a show of social harmony. From among millions taking a dip in the Ganga, no one was asking the other devotee about his caste or social status. The whole world watched in awe the unity of Bharat. The surge of millions, the congregation of saints and wise men and the smooth running of the grand show took the entire world by surprise. While some were present in the holy festival, others were watching the goings-on of the Mela from home. Many who could not attend earned the blessings of Ma Ganga anyway by taking a bath with a few drops of Gangajal added.

Foreign pilgrims were attracted to our dress, food, our graceful demeanor and discipline in a gathering of this enormity. There was food available for every person. No other nation can think of organizing an event with so many people. The number of pilgrims traveling in trains to the Mela was more than the entire population of Europe, all uninvited, without financial support from any agency, and totally unguarded. There were no helmets, no guns, no teargas shells. Policemen stood with folded hands, offering a helping hand to the old and sick or guiding people to take the right road. They were busy all the time.

Mahant Rajendra Das, President of Akhil Bhartiya Nirmohi Ani Akhara: Kumbh is associated with ancient traditions. It is the symbol of dharma, of our faith. Millions of devotees visit the places of Kumbh to drink the elixir of life during the special days of the Mela. We call it Amrut Kaal. It fills our heart and soul with new energy. Kumbh is the path to salvation. The present Kumbh is an example of universal brotherhood for the entire world. Millions of people visiting from the West come here as curious travelers but return home totally changed, forced to ponder what is so special about Hinduism.

Shri Mahant Bhardwaj Giri, chief secretary of Shri Panch Dashnam Avahan Akhara: Mahakumbh Mela is the biggest pageant of the political, cultural and religious system of India. According to the *panchang* calendar, there is a special *yoga* (time or moment) of the arrangement of planets when this place is filled with cosmic energy. Apart from millions of devout Hindus, there are many philosophers, thinkers, dharma gurus, saints and sages who are coming to Prayagraj at the time of the Mahakumbh to witness and understand the celestial event. There are many, especially Westerners, looking for saints, to seek advice from them, to find answers to their unsolved questions. They return home as content souls filled with peace and joy, with admiration for Hinduism and more faith and dedication to their guru. Our saints and dharma gurus have gained a lot of respect. Many feel that Hinduism is the only way to maintain world peace.

Yogi Sheel Nath, member of Adinath Akhara: Everyone taking a dip in the chilly Ganga water is equal—after all it is just the cold water for all, no special luxury for any one of them. Millions of devotees from all walks of life reach here, leaving behind the comforts of their homes. The most significant message from the Mahakumbh is universal brotherhood and world peace.

Swami Gyananand Ji Maharaj, Gita Gyan Sansthanam: The Sanatan faith has been well understood by the whole world from the Mahakumbh. People who raise questions on Hindu belief, who talk of disparities like those of caste and untouchability, saw that it was a dip of unity and dignity at Mahakumbh. There was no one to check the national identity cards of pilgrims. The participation of youth was proportionately high in the Mahakumbh. It is a very positive sign for the future of our dharma.

Role of Dharma in the Modern World

Swami Avdheshananda Giri: Dharma is the entity that holds the existence of mankind. It makes the present and future perfect and complete. Dharma makes us complete when we use truth, energy, capability and consciousness in our deeds. There are two kinds of things in the world; one is *nashwar*, transient, which will perish or which is subject to change. The only immortal thing is the *atmatattva*, the essential reality of the Self. The entity that introduces us to this truth is dharma. Dharma makes us realize what our duties are, what we

Food and hygiene: *(below, right to left) Hundreds prepare to sweep the Mela grounds; the huge feeding tent of Niranjani Akhara; women prepare rotis*

PRAMIL DWIVEDI

should do.

Shri Mahant Ravindra Puri, Niranjani Akhara: Our Prime Minister is taking Sanatana Dharma to new heights. He raised his voice in 2014. The youth before then did not have much interest in Sanatana Dharma; they criticized it and did not put tilak on their foreheads during pujas. They were reluctant to visit temples, criticized teachings and preachings of saints and gurus. There has been a noticeable change now. Today our younger generation has great interest in religion. They go to temples, follow rituals and feel proud to be Hindus. I see thousands of young men coming to Haridwar to formally wear *yagnyopavit* thread every month. We need to strengthen the gurukulam tradition to keep away from outside influences of all sorts.

Yogi Sheel Nath: Dharma means accepting or adopting creation. Our saints have kept dharma in forefront with this idea. We should respect our parents. We have mentioned the relations with each other like between husband and wife, father and son, daughter-in-law and mother-in-law. Nothing can move forward without love and affection towards all living beings. There is no use of the word "divorce" in Sanatana culture. The idea of divorce never rang true to us.

Shri Ma Santoshi Mata: In today's time of modernization and globalization, some people cannot be very comfortable following the ancient ways. For this, the practice of dharma can be made spontaneous and simplified to some extent. The present Maha Kumbh is an example of this. The use of multimedia, conveniences offered to the pilgrims and teachings of gurus reaching their homes are some new additions to dharma.

Swami Gyananand Ji Maharaj: Technology and globalization has benefited mankind in many ways, but at the same time our stress level is increasing; we are facing pressures, grudges and conflicts. Anarchy and disturbances are the order of the day. It is the ideology of Sanatana Dharma which can bring about mental peace and brotherhood in the world.

Bridging Ancient Traditions with Today's Generations

Swami Avdheshananda Giri: In Sanatana Dharma we stress the purity of food. One of the biggest threats to the planet is the effect of non-vegetarianism. Most corn produced in the United States is fed to cows to prepare them for slaughter. Trillions of liters of water are used in tanneries. Greenhouse gas emissions are increased because of the agricultural production process and land-use change. According to UN statistics, the entire ecosystem is disturbed because of production and consumption of beef and other kinds of meats.

Shri Mahant Ravindra Puri (left), President of Akhil Bhartiya Akhada Parishad: We see the wave of multimedia and social media platforms. We see the ever-increasing enthusiasm of people taking part in pujas, rituals and festivals. It is heartening to see the interest of youth. Look at the surge in the number of devotees visiting places like Kedarnath. The young generation is taking great interest in understanding the system of Hinduism.

Shri Mahant Bhardwaj Giri: The most beautiful ancient tradition of Bharat is living in a joint family, which is not liked by the younger generation. It *seems* like a good idea to live separately, but practically there are lots of challenges. Most of the time, nuclear families have to eat from outside sources, which is absolutely not healthy. We have to bridge the gap ourselves, by going to ashrams and temples to find solace. We should pray for removal of ignorance from us.

Swami Gyananand Ji Maharaj: We find in certain cases that youth are getting disoriented, distracted from the goal and losing direction. The Internet, TV and mobile phones have many negative things. Thankfully, we are seeing youth talking about the nation, its dignity and our faith. The astonishing proportion of youth participation in Maha Kumbh is an example of this positive change. Youth are now more health conscious, more focused towards their goals.

Spirituality Versus Religion

Shri Mahant Bhardwaj Giri (left), chief secretary of Shri Panch Dashnam Avahan Akhara: Spirituality is for the soul as well as for the well-being of the people; whereas religion or dharma is for the entire universe. Every single entity of the universe has its own dharma. Modern lifestyle is dragging us away from our dharma, and this is a big hindrance in our spiritual upliftment. We have to maintain a balance between the two.

Mahant Rajendra Das: Spirituality is something personal. We pray, meditate, read, get curious about something, seek answers. This process is for Self consciousness. On a broader level, religion consists of the guidelines we follow as per our family tradition, our duties towards our own family and society. We follow many rituals, undertake pilgrimage, visit temples. We may call it religion. But listening to a wise man or a saint can be a spiritual experience.

Shri Ma Santoshi Mata: There are two sides of all of us, the *vyavaharik*—the practical, which we can call dharma—and *parmarthik*, the transcendental. Any person who wishes to fly high like a bird will have to balance these two attributes of spirituality and religion.

Environmental Consciousness

Shri Mahant Ravindra Puri: Our scriptures and other religious literature have put great emphasis on love for nature and environment. The science of ayurveda is based on nature. We recite mantras in reverence of the elements. The gurus and saints all lived in forests. Following dharma can solve all kinds of environmental challenges across the globe.

Yogi Sheel Nath (left), member of Adinath Akhara: We have to start from home, instill in our children the habits that ensure a healthy environment around us. We talk of rejecting *moha*, attachment. But I say we should have more moha—moha towards our relations with others, with nature and things around us. This kind of attachment will help us take more care of them. We should consider the society as our own family.

Shri Ma Santoshi Mata: The first job Lord Krishna did after reaching Vrindavan was to clean the water of Yamuna. He inspired people to protect forests after performing puja of Giriraj, the master of mountains. Sages and gurus taught us that our lives will be safe when we have well-protected forests, clean air and water. In the Vedic traditions, *yagyas* were performed to free the air of any pollutants.

Scenes: *(below, left to right) women renunciates joyously rush to the sacred bath; Swami Avdheshananda Giri, head of the largest akhara, speaks with reporters; pilgrims crowd around a statue of Goddess Ganga blessing the proceedings*

Charging Towards the Water

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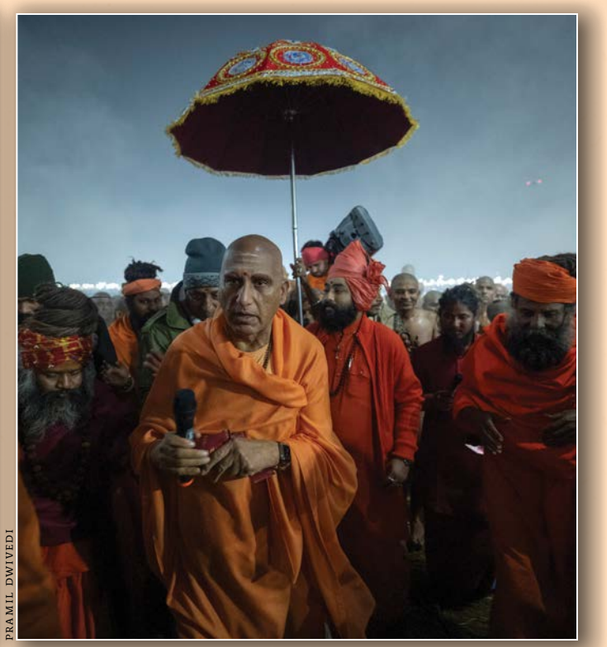

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Blessed by the Goddess

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Swami Gyananand Ji Maharaj: The five elements should remain balanced and arranged. This is the sign of good environment. In Hinduism, the five elements have been wisely and very cleverly incorporated. We do not cut trees near sacred places. Peepal (ficus) and Tulsi (basil) are very sacred to us. We have festivals dedicated to certain fruits or trees, such as amla (Indian gooseberry). Faith leads to conservation. This is one aspect of environmental consciousness. The other, according to *Bhagavad Gita*, is that greed leads to exploitation. Cutting of trees, polluting air and water, reduction in fertility of land happens because of our greed, when we try to snatch as much as possible from nature. There is ideological pollution in the society.

Strengthening Hindu Unity

Sri Madhukar Nath (left), yogi, spiritual guide and head of Satsang Foundation: The current form of Kumbh Mela was envisioned and brought to life by Adi Shankaracharya because he wanted people of all denominations to come together in one place during the Kumbh and evolve themselves in dialogue. However intersectional dialogue at the Kumbh is rare now because India has such a vast panorama of spiritual streams that some in their theory are totally opposed to the other. If only people could see that all streams lead to the ocean. Unfortunately, out of self-interest, people have dismissed that idea. They think, "I belong to a particular stream and I want only that to survive, not the others."

Shri Mahant Ravindra Puri: With such a great diversity in thought and practice, it is hard to keep all united. But it is so surprising to see how all of us stand together on one platform (Kumbh Mela) for Hinduism. We sit together for discourses and discussions and interact freely. Saints freely follow the principles of their spiritual paths and sects and parampara, but stand together for dharma. This is the beautiful concept of "Unity in Diversity."

Mahant Rajendra Das (left): In recent times more and more people are taking and interest in Hinduism; they are more inclined towards Dharma and the spiritual aspects of it. This is an indication of a strong fraternity of Hindus. We have Mahamandaleshwars in our Akhara from Malaysia, South Africa, Mauritius and Indonesia. This shows the unity of Hinduism

Shri Ma Santoshi Mata (left), Mahamandaleshwar of Niranjani Akhara: All of us have the freedom to follow our own sects and beliefs, but there is only one Paramsatya, the ultimate Reality. For reaching it, we should all be one. We must have a well-protected nation to reach that goal. We have to be patriotic. Aham Rahtriya Swaroopini—Devi Bhagwati says She is the nation. We must unite with the supreme power, Devi Bhagwati. According to the *Vedas*, the society with unity alone will progress in Kali Yuga.

The Role of Women in Hinduism

Swami Avdheshananda Giri: Woman has stronger cells for creation than man. It is the woman who carries the child in her womb for nine months. "Matru Devo Bhava"—revere your mother as a Goddess. When the devas were counted, it was the women Deities who were counted first. The life of a household revolves around the woman. Important duties like running the household and financial management are generally in the hands of women. We believe in "Yatra Naryastu Pujyante, Ramante Tatra Devata"—devas reside in places where woman is worshiped.

Shri Mahant Ravindra Puri: In Hinduism we have smartly devised directives of behavior for men and women. In our Akharas, we have separate "Mai Wara"—the womens' quarters. Women have been a subject of worship in the Hindu pantheon. The spread of education and exposure from outside sources are instrumental in placing women at the same stature as men. Today we have women Mahamandaleshwars, the President of the country and more.

Yogi Sheel Nath: Women have participated in Sanatana Samskriti since time immemorial. Our culture has a team of women as ministers. The finance minister of the entire world is Ma Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth. The education minister of the entire world is Ma Saraswati, the Goddess of learning. The department of food is looked after by Ma Annapurna. The women and child welfare department is in the hands of Mata Parvati and the ministry of defence is looked after by Ma Kali and Durga! Similarly, women should efficiently look after various departments of their own homes like finance, food, education and health. Today we have women officers in the police, army, administrative services. They even fly fighter jets. Women should live with dignity, should live like Lakshmi and Durga. And when need be, they should take up the role of Ma Kali!

Shri Ma Santoshi Mata: In the Vedic era, women were an object of respect. She was considered as Shakti Swarupa, the symbol of power. In the medieval times, when we were invaded by outsiders, it was a bad phase of life for the women of India. It was just during the times of the invaders, women were not kept in the forefront. Women themselves must find the real woman in them.

Swami Gyananand Ji Maharaj: One of the main pillars of our faith is woman. If a woman is well aware of the practice of religion and spiritual life, it is directly going to affect the entire family. One educated woman means one educated and awakened family. The path to be followed by our next generation is decided by the woman of the house.

Maintaining Hindu Identity Wherever We Live

Swami Avdheshananda Giri: We should keep our rituals alive. Hinduism was never a threat to anybody. People have communal, territorial differences among them. Hindus never tried to convert other countries. Everybody has the right to maintain his affinities. Proselytizers converting others think they are superior. People were forced to change their ethnic identity, their clothes and languages. Names of cities and countries were changed. Indulging in such practices cannot alter the inherent character of a society, cannot make people a better society. Conversion is the biggest fraud on our planet.

Sri Madhukar Nath: Those who have already settled abroad and have a good understanding of Hinduism must be proactive in conversing with newly arriving Hindus. They should not clash with the religion of the place where they live. You do your own. Don't find fault with others. I have many centers abroad and am happy to mostly see young people there. They are open to understanding. Some are fed up with the way religion was practiced by their parents and want to know the truth. When you show them that this is a treasure trove

Satisfied: *(below, left to right) a young member of a Vaishnava monastic Order; one of an estimated three million foreign visitors attending the Kumbh; family members tie cloth to each other so they don't get separated in the massive moving crowds*

At Peace

PRAMIL DWIVEDI

DEV RAJ AGARWAL

PRAMIL DWIVEDI

which you can dive in freely and choose from, they are delighted.

Yogi Sheel Nath: The key focus should be our own conduct. There is only one God, with innumerable manifestations. Each manifestation has the same power and importance. It is like a lamp lit by the fire of another lamp. Once lit, it becomes the same fire, with the same strength of energy and light. Similarly if a person sees Brahma, he also becomes Brahma, like the fire of the lamp.

Shri Ma Santoshi Mata: Deprived people are distracted easily from the path of dharma. I have been working in Kalahandi region of the state of Odisha. Even the basic needs of people are not fulfilled there. They are easily lured into conversion to other religions. Society must bring such people back to the mainstream by providing assistance. We must show them the way to lead a self-reliant life instead of teaching them to live on charity.

Challenges to Hinduism from Academia

Shri Mahant Bhardwaj Giri: The West comes to India to benefit from our knowledge about the Sanatan system, our lifestyle and our spiritual superiority. They have had enough of materialism. They find peace and solace in Bharat. They are able to feel the cosmic energy of Mahakumbh and are often overwhelmed by the enormity of things in our great nation. Then they realize the power of Sanatan Dharma.

Swami Avdheshananda Giri: The wrong narratives from academia about Hindu philosophy are a big challenge, presenting a distorted picture of our religion. We are discussing how we can project Hinduism in the right perspective. Attacks on our lifestyle, culture and scripture have continued for the last 1,500 years. There are thousands of articles on different facets of Hinduism in the website called Hindupedia. I am sure the time will come when people will know the truth and accept Hinduism in its true spirit. Academia is targeting us in new ways. They have tried to split us by creating baseless differences such as between the people from northern India and from the South. We grew up as one entity, as one society, with similar social and religious affinities.

The Role of Meditation and Yoga in Modern Life

Swami Gyananand Ji Maharaj (left), founder, Shri Krishna Kripa Seva Samiti: The situation is a little complex, a dilemma. People are promoting themselves in their own ways. There is no harm in having a commercial angle to the promotion of yoga and meditation. But please don't consider monetary gain above your duty. Our cultural values have to be the source of inspiration for a common man, and this is the primary duty of preachers, teachers and trainers. If we are sincere and strive to practice the nuances of yoga and meditation seriously, then we cannot go wrong in selection of our guru. We must not follow anyone blindly.

Technology for Spreading Hindu Teachings

Swami Avdheshananda Giri: We always respect technology and welcome the use of gadgets. Our dharma is spreading to the corners of the Earth with advancements in the field of telecommunication. It is easier for people now to understand the concept of dharma and practice it. I use social platforms myself. I am on X, previously called Twitter. There are 465 million users of the Indian telecommunication company Jio and 385 million users of Airtel network. I have heard that X is collaborating with these companies in India. This will further strengthen our network and reach of Hinduism.

Shri Mahant Ravindra Puri: As a young saint, I remember carrying a bag full of books. Now I have Google with me. There is a plethora of books and literature available on the Internet. Scans of innumerable rare manuscripts are now within easy reach of scholars. Technology and social media has taken the Mahakumbh to the remotest corners of planet Earth. Millions of people watch the religious programs of katha and religious discourses on specialized TV channels and on platforms like Youtube.

Swami Gyananand Ji Maharaj: We have to convince people that Hinduism is a system of generosity and goodwill. Hinduism's philosophy talks about the welfare of the entire humanity. We must help people to see that no other religion or ideology finds their good by doing good to others. Other religions believe in their own expansion and removal of other beliefs and ideologies.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dev Raj Agarwal of Dehradun, India, is a photographer who loves to capture Bharat's immense diversity of people, cultures and nature, especially in the Himalayas. He is retired from the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Botanical Survey of India. Email: devrajagarwal44@gmail.com

DEV RAJ AGARWAL

Warmth: *(below left) Naga sadhus warm themselves and converse during the cold evenings; (right) a young lady performs Ganga Arati on a raised platform; the arati is then received by pilgrims below*

Spiritual Gatherings

PRAMIL DWIVEDI

DEV RAJ AGARWAL

DEVRAJ AGARWAL

PILGRIMS

How Women Experience the Mela

The sacred bath in Ganga's lap, they say, connects them and their families to ancestors and descendants in a timeless moment of grace

By Ellen Coon, from Prayagraj

At least half of the pilgrims I saw at this year's Maha Kumbh Mela were women. Preliminary estimates say 660 million people attended the festival. That means nearly as many women as the entire population of the United States, 340 million, were there. Not just pilgrims—women were visible in a variety of roles, from religious leaders and saints, to vendors, policewomen and temple attendants. I was curious—what is this historic event like for them?

Most pilgrims take advantage of the Kumbh's proximity to Kashi, visiting the holy city immediately after or before their trip to the Kumbh. Some of the interviews presented here were done in Kashi, with women who had just come from the event.

Experiencing the Kumbh Mela

Both getting to the Mela and being there are hard on the body. Like everyone else, photographer Thomas Kelly, translator Pratiksha Patel and I walk for miles through moving crowds so dense we sometimes feel squeezed on all sides. Even so, almost all of the women I encounter are shining with happiness—they have won the astrological lottery. Under a rare cosmic alignment, an enormous gush of heavenly power is pouring down into the Ganga River confluence, so auspicious that bathing in it can change your life, and your family's life, for the better in an instant. Of course that is true for men as well as women. But the women I meet seem to feel blessed not only as human beings, but as women. They have received a kind of positive affirmation of their own worth that has helped them, both with their outer family roles and with their inner spiritual lives. Their stories help me understand how their experiences both liberate them personally and keep them connected to a larger divine reality.

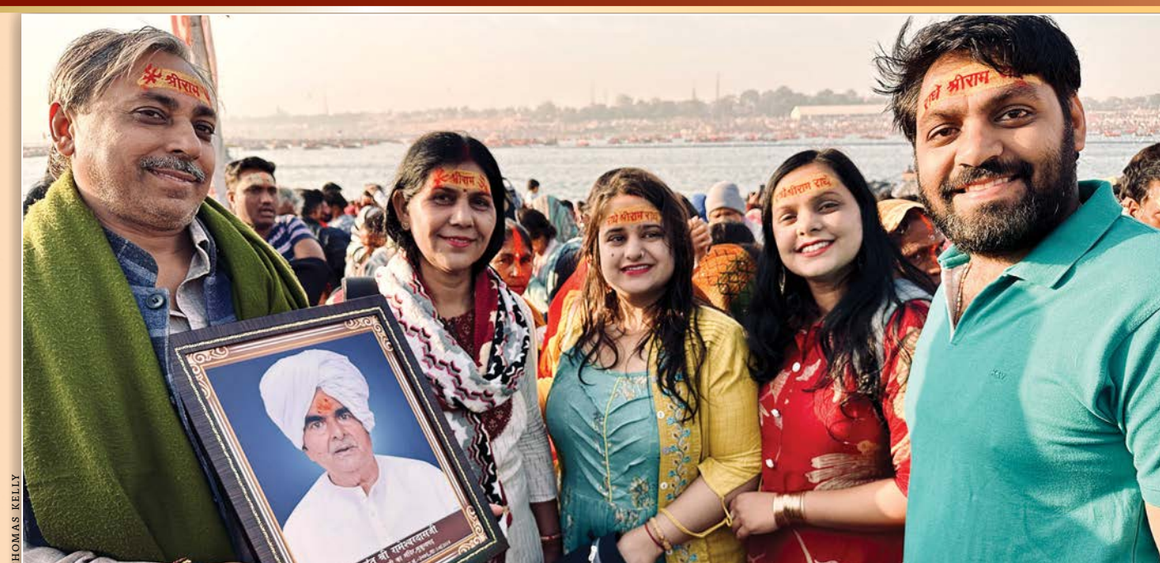
The River and the Saints

A woman at the Kumbh immerses herself in this divine reality when she enters the river, stands praying for a few moments, and then takes her "holy dips," bending her legs with her back straight until the water closes over her head. The most powerful spot to bathe is the Triveni Sangam, where Ma Ganga is joined by the Yamuna River and the invisible Saraswati River. A pilgrim looking at the river perceives its multiple identities—as purifying water, as a divine female body, and as one or more Deities, each with Her own characteristics and story.

Each element of the Kumbh is like that—a physical reality that points to an expanded divine identity. For example, women pilgrims tell me when they see saints at the Kumbh,

Blessing the family: *(left) A woman offers prayers before submersing herself in the river; (below) Indu Sharma, husband and relatives from Haryana with photo of their father/grandfather—their foreheads read* Rama Shri Ram Radhe *"Rama, glorious Rama, in Rama [I dwell]"*

Connecting with Ancestors and Descendants



THOMAS KELLY

they see them as human beings and as manifestations of Lord Siva.

At the Kumbh, the presence of so many saints renews the story of how Lord Siva made it possible for Ganga to pour down from Heaven. The story erupts from eternal time into the present. Ganga was a celestial Goddess made of the Milky Way. To allow the divine river to descend without hurting the Earth, Lord Siva caught Her in His sadhu topknot, so the waters could trickle safely down His dreadlocks. One woman explains that the thousands of saints camped on Ganga's banks make each other more powerful: the saints' *tapasya*, or austerities, generates a tremendous energy that infuses the river when they bathe, while Ma Ganga Herself purifies the saints and electrifies them with cosmic energy. Just seeing the matted hair of the saints at the Kumbh is a blessing.

Taking a Holy Dip

We arise on February 16th while it is still dark and hasten to reach the Sangam by dawn. People hope to enter the water at sunrise, though they bathe in the Ganga and at the Sangam at all hours of the day and into the night. I can hear singing and chanting as beautiful golden light suffuses the scene.

A view from far above would show the riverbank and the shallows alive with a glittering mat of humanity extending for miles. Everyone is pushing their way to the riverbank, climbing into the water, spending a few minutes in it, scrambling back out, and changing wet clothes as modestly as possible, while others assemble fragile offerings of leaves and flowers on the bank, and police officers push their way back and forth telling people not to linger, to move along. I don't see anyone getting angry. People treat each other kindly, or at least tolerantly, as elation breaks out on faces and some laugh aloud with joy.

I ask people climbing out of the water how they feel. "Energized! The energy! It's amazing!" says a man of around 40. "I drove 15 hours from Delhi, all night. Do I even look tired?" He is a manager in a factory that makes rods and pistons who has come with his colleagues. Other men describe how the water has removed a lifetime of fatigue and hit a powerful reset button in them, charging them up. "It's Ma's shakti!"

Women tell me the water's marvelous vitality can instantly restore health—and not just for oneself. By bathing at the Kumbh, a woman can lengthen the life of her husband, even if he isn't here. Husbands and wives taking their holy dips in pairs, holding each other's hands, strengthen their eternal union. I am told that afterwards, a husband applies fresh red vermilion powder with a fingertip to the parting of his wife's hair, just as when marrying her, and presents her with new wrist bangles.

Many facets: *(clockwise from above) Grandma, mom and daughter worship at Sangam; Raghni and Adishri Mishra; Tejarao Guwlli; two naga sadhus bless pilgrims with peacock feathers; Meenakshi Guruma at the dhuni of a naga sadhu in Kashi on Magh Purnima; procession of sadhvis and sadhus at the Mela*

Caring for the family's well-being is a primary responsibility for most Indian women, and a focus of their religious life. Mrs. Indu Sharma, who has come with her husband and relatives from Haryana, tells me her holy dip has helped the whole family. "I only look like one person. But when I entered the water, I brought everyone with me. I could feel them with me. I took one dip remembering my deceased mother and father, another dip for my husband and his family, a dip for my brothers and my sisters and their families, a dip for my children and their families. All of them—even those who are deceased and those yet to be born—are purified of their wrong karma and become lighter. As a family, we become stronger and more harmonious."

Climbing into Your Mother's Lap

Women in particular describe Ma Ganga in personal, intimate terms, as their mother's body. They make offerings to the river of saris and bangles. In the early morning, they bring Her cups of tea and pour them into the water. They leave invitations to their children's weddings on her banks.

I meet Raghni Mishra in the bright early morning light of Magh Purnima, the full moon on February 12, in Kashi. She has taken her holy dip and is making offerings to worship the river Goddesses. I ask what it felt like when the water closed over her head. "I feel like I have just climbed into my mother's lap," she says. "Her lap is always there, always ready to take me, and when I'm inside the water I feel the utmost peace. Bliss. I don't want to come out." Her daughter, Adishri Mishra, age 13, added, "Unlike our human mother, Ma Ganga is very calm. She never gets angry, and she forgives us everything."

A large group of Rajasthani women is emerging from the water, laughing and teasing each other, their wet clothes plastered to their bodies. "Yes, as a grandmother I'm very old to need a mother," jokes Panno Devi. "But even so, we do! Our Ma Ganga… the feeling between us can only be called *pyar,* love. She loves me, and I equally love and adore Her. She gives me pardon for all my mistakes and says, 'Never mind! It's all right now.'"

ELLEN COON

Beyond the riverbank, I encounter Vaishnavi Guwlli, 17, who has already taken her holy dip and is wearing a purple, Western-style dress. She has come from Hyderabad with her father and relatives. She says, "When we get into Ma Ganga… it's like when we creep into our mother's lap and she covers us up with the pallu of her sari to cuddle us. When the water covers us, it's like that. You relax completely; it's like a mother carrying her child. And when Mother is carrying you, no worries, we don't have to take care of anything."

She is startled when I mention that a Western person might hesitate to get into the river, thinking it dirty. "No, no! No matter what is on her clothes, Mother can never be dirty! However she looks, we don't care—She is my Mother. That's it. She is everyone's mother."

We Should Be Like Her

After taking their holy dip, people stand around chatting with paper cups of tea bought from vendors who make it in big aluminum kettles over hot charcoal. Dr. Deepika Sethiya, an ayurvedic doctor who practices in Pune, has come directly to Kashi from her dawn dip at the Kumbh and is relaxing with elder female relatives. I ask how she is feeling—"Very light, joyful! The water comes straight from Lord Sivaji and Parvati, and so obviously it feels amazing!" She continues, "We [women] should be more like Ma Ganga.… You should be pure. You should have your femininity. You should be delicate and soft."

For some reason this made me, as a Westerner, anxious. "That doesn't mean you aren't strong?" I interjected. "And what do you mean, by feminine?"

Sethiya answered, "Parvati is there, for strength. Strength can be delicate. Feminine means, you know your worth. Obviously, we should dress up well, but that's for yourself;

An Abundance of Women Saints and Sadhvis

Seeking the Saints' Blessings

ALL PHOTOS: THOMAS KELLY

there is no need to put on a show for anyone else. Ma Ganga is motherly. She is warm, she is loving. We should be like Her."

Seeking the Blessings of the Saints

There's a storied relationship between the figure of the pious Indian householder woman and the wandering sadhu or renunciate who appears at her gate to be fed and honored. In legends, these encounters are usually one on one. At the Kumbha Mela, millions of householder women come together with thousands of sadhus, all at once. There's also an inversion in their relationship: the sadhus are settled into semi-permanent encampments according to monastic orders, while the householders are the ones on the move, walking from the riverbank after taking their holy bath, seeking the blessings of different sadhus as they move from camp to camp, and visiting important temples, often within a single day or a couple of days.

Here, it's the sadhus who feed the householders. Most sadhu orders, *akharas*, offer free meals to pilgrims, as well as a central area where pilgrims can lie down under a blanket for the night—though plenty of pilgrims just bed down in the open on the soft, sandy ground. Offerings of money are accepted, but not compulsory. Saints sometimes give money to pilgrims, too.

As the sun climbs the sky and the morning grows hotter, we follow streams of pilgrims walking up into the main areas of the encampment, looking for saints after their holy dip. Two Naga sadhus smeared with ash stand on a platform by the road. Each holds a bundle of peacock feathers and blesses the people shuffling past with a feathery tap on the head. It is a long line, with more women than men. The pilgrims and saints kept chanting "Har Har Mahadev!"

I ask a young woman dressed in green, her head covered by the end of her sari, if she feels embarrassed by the Nagas' nakedness. She says it is the opposite: their nakedness is a sign of their great discipline. "Look, it's very cold; an ordinary person can't go without clothes. When I see the Naga, I bow to Lord Siva in front of me and say, Jai Bholenath! Plus, we don't see a Naga saint very often, some people never see one. They usually do meditation and tapasya alone in a wild place, like a cave or in the jungle. When they come together here, it creates a huge energy. The blessing of the Naga is the most powerful."

Throughout the day, I see women pilgrims sitting with Naga sadhus and saffron-clothed saints near their sacred fires, by the twos and threes, bowing, receiving blessings and also whispering the questions or troubles closest to their hearts. One woman shows a Naga a sapphire she purchased on the advice of an astrologer. The Naga baba examines the gem carefully and indicates that it is a fake. Upset, the woman sits near the saint for some time. He blesses her by touching her shoulder with his iron fire tongs, then uses them to scoop a bit of sacred ash from his *dhuni* (sacred fire) and hold it out to her. She dips her finger in the ash and smears some on her forehead, then sprinkles the rest on her head and into her mouth. The saint gives her private instructions, then folds a 100-rupee note around some ash and gives it to the woman, whose face relaxes with faith and gratitude. Each woman who bows down before the saint receives his blessing and careful attention to her problem.

Two older women who have come by bus from Delhi sit next to me and other devotees on a piece of carpeting across the dhuni from the Naga saint. They tell me they have been at the Kumbh for two weeks and have taken a holy dip every day, then sought the blessing of every saint and sadhu they could find. Leaning forward, Ramamurti showed me her knees and said, "I have been healed of my pain. It was a terrible problem for me, I couldn't even walk, and now it's gone. The saints have healed me—this one most of all. He is a real one, he embodies *sat*, Truth."

Many facets: *(below, left to right) flower seller Priyanka Mali and her daughter at the Vasuki Nag temple; family with their son who has a coconut offering for the river; Sri Mahant Meera Puri conducts a fire ceremony to clear all obstacles for the newly initiated sadhvis of Juna Akhara*

Disciplined Saints Are Real Saints

Pilgrims at the Kumbh don't just seek blessings from saints and sadhus. Coming together from all over India gives potential gurus and disciples the chance to find one another and make lasting bonds. Many women pilgrims tell me they have a guru as their spiritual preceptor back home; others tell me they have not yet met their guru. But with even the government publishing lists of "fake gurus," how can they know whom to trust?

We are sitting near the dhuni of a Naga saint who was three years into a twelve-year vow of silence. His eyes flashing, he gestured for a junior Naga to come before him. We met this person earlier at the gate of Juna Akhara, wearing dozens of jingling necklaces and flashy rings, offering us black magic, palmistry, and other dubious services. Now, without speaking the respected saint gives him a furious interrogation. Dissatisfied with the answers, he begins to beat the offender on the back and shoulders, first with his iron fire tongs and then with a club. He strips off the offender's necklaces and has him thrown into the street. An hour later, with the intercession of a respected sadhu, the chastened man creeps back in and prostrates to the senior saint. Holding his earlobes in a sign of contrition, he vows he will never act the charlatan again, begs for forgiveness, and promises to spend his days and nights in intense practice. The women watch quietly and nod. Seeing the Nagas' discipline increases their faith.

Women Saints and Women Gurus

Several hundred women Naga sadhus, or sadhvis, are initiated at the Kumbh this year after the male Naga sadhus, in a highly photographed event. Spaces for female saints within the akharas are now larger and more visible than earlier.

Like most other sadhus and sadhvis at the Kumbh, Naga sadhus belong to one of thirteen *akharas,* highly structured and hierarchical monastic orders. Their organizational structure can be seen in physical form as we walk past each akhara's tented encampment. Some have fantastic gateways—there is one in the shape of a large rocket ship—and pennant flags on tall bamboo poles, fluttering in the breeze. Adi Shankaracharya, an 8th-century Vedic philosopher-monk, is credited with founding the akhara system as well as the Kumbh Mela gathering at Prayagraj, in part to defend Hinduism against invaders.

On Magh Purnima in Kashi, we meet Mataji Meenakshi Giri, a member of Juna Akhara, who tells us about her initiation as a Naga Sadhvi. Just over 50 years old, she completed 12 years of preparatory practices as a brahmacharini before coming to the Kumbh. Although she is South Indian, from Chennai, for the last three years she has practiced intensely alone in the forests of Uttarakhand, at 10,500 feet in altitude. We are sitting together outside Juna Akhara when she begins by telling me, "Naga means warrior." Her spiritual path demands courage.

She said, "My struggle has been such—always struggling. Climate, food, environment—everything was totally different. Practice, practice, practice, I kept going." She shows me a leopard's claw around her neck. "I was in deep forest. Can you imagine, leopards just walking past me openly. Guru gave me this to not be afraid. So I'm carrying myself like a leopard, so the smell, they understood. I walk at seven or eight o'clock now and nothing happens. Then, leeches, O my God, all over my body. I had never seen them before. It's one thing to practice tapas in a nice building, but in the jungle, fear automatically comes. You have to face it."

At the Kumbh, dressed in white and with their heads freshly shaven, she and other initiates perform the *pinda daan* rituals. These are final offerings for all of her ancestors, as well as her own death rituals, ending her previous family identity and preparing to be reborn as a Naga sadhvi. She said, "My grandma, my grandfather, everybody—I felt their presence in the astral plane very close and near. When I closed my eyes, all of my ancestors came to give me their blessing.... It's very simple, but intense, the *vijay havan sanskar*. In 24 hours at this Kumbha Mela I was newly born. New born, I made offerings for the dead to myself, too. So now I am a new baby, born this 28th of January.

"I feel a lot of liberation. I'm not talking

Flower Selling at the Mela

The Bath

Blessing for New Sadvhis

ALL PHOTOS: THOMAS KELLY

about physical liberation, no, it's a feeling of liberation with everything. I feel very light, peaceful. Everybody is like my close relative; I feel warmth toward everyone."

She describes the feeling of bathing at the Sangam and of meditating on the riverbanks. "Ganga is raw energy. We take a holy bath and call it Ganga water, but that is actually raw energy. The sand, too, is always purifying the raw energy. And that is increased by so many Nagas coming together. We Nagas have been in the forest, been in the mountains, doing intense practices (*tapas*) and worshiping Agni by tending our dhuni, sacred fire. When even two Nagas come together and meditate, it increases the energy so much, you can feel it. Imagine what happens when all the Nagas sit together at the Kumbh. The body—automatically vibrations will come.

"During the Kumbh, especially the Maha Kumbh, all the devatas and Deities come to the Sangam in astral form to absorb the blessings and distribute blessings to everybody there. You can feel their presence even if you can't see them. Not just Deities—gurus and rishis who have left their physical bodies in the last 200 or 300 years still come in their astral or subtle body (*sukshma sarir*) to give us blessings and teachings."

She tells us she has experienced this herself, while meditating at the Sangam. Remembering that Mahavatar Babaji—a 2,000-year-old hermit saint who is said to still have a physical body—showed himself to Swami Sri Yukteswar at the Prayagraj Kumbh in 1894, she prayed to Mahavatar Babaji: "You come and meet me, I want your presence." Suddenly, her eyes closed, she sensed a huge foot coming out of the river and then another, the feet planting themselves on either side of her. Mahavatar Babaji was indeed at the Kumbh and had blessed her new life as a Naga sadhvi.

Women Nagas wear saffron robes, and when bathing wear a single piece of unstitched cotton cloth. Meenakshi Mataji says that when they perform those Digambara sadhanas that require them to be naked and smear themselves with ashes from their sacred dhuni, for practical reasons these are done in private. But she cautions women not to over-identify with our gender. "OK, when you get married, when you give birth, at that time we are identifying with our female body. But otherwise, don't go around 24/7 thinking, oh, I'm female, I am female. The soul is One."

Despite Meenakshi Mataji's downplaying the importance of gender in spiritual life, at the Kumbh I can see gender categories being actively negotiated, with expanded recognition and opportunities for women. In 2019, Juna Akhara began the formal initiation of Naga sadhvis at the Kumbh Mela; and in 2018, Kinnar Akhara was formed as part of the Juna Akhara, for non-gender-conforming sadhus. There have always been female gurus with both male and female disciples. Some women gurus are explicitly working to increase respect and support for women as women.

Although we do not meet her, we walk into the encampment of Anandmai Puri, the Mahamandeleswar of Niranjani Akhara, who has the authority to teach and make initiations. Inside, two policewomen are relaxing in the warmth of the afternoon, their boots unlaced; one of them has her thirteen-year-old son leaning against her arm. They convey a sense of ease and well-being that is difficult to describe. A feeling of rightful place.

A Symbol of Unity for A ll Indians

Walking near the river later that afternoon, we meet Laxmi Devi, who is sweeping the road with a long-handled broom made of stiff twigs. She is wearing the government-issued vest of an official sweeper. She says she feels proud of her service. "This Kumbh is for everybody. Anybody and everybody can come here and take part in the blessings." She continues, "Ma Ganga is my Mother, She has bestowed me with my life and my livelihood. I see myself in Her—She is so hardworking, always taking away everyone's dirt and sin without ever complaining. When I enter the water, I feel Her sweep my burdens away, and all my tiredness dissolves into a feeling of lightness, of bliss."

She said, "Ma Ganga does not discriminate. She embraces everybody, male or female, old or young, rich or poor, saint or sinner." Earlier the same day, Tejarao Guwlli said, "We have all come together because of our River Mother. Ma Ganga and this Kumbh are a symbol of unity for all Indians."

Back to the Beginning

At the end of the day, we walk with groups of women who, accompanied by a male relative or two, are completing their pilgrimages with a visit to nearby temples. The first is a shrine to Adi Shankaracharya in the Shankar Vidam Mandapam, a Siva temple. The second is the Lete Hanuman temple, where a recumbent Hanumanji lies on the floodplain, covered with flowers. And the last is a large temple to Vasuki Nag Raja, the holy serpent king Lord Sivaji carries around his neck. These three temples near the Triveni Sangam function like pins dropped through time, bringing pilgrims into the eternal present of mythic events.

The women we meet know the divine beings and their stories intimately. They visit them in the temples with eagerness, not as a duty to be completed. Mrs. Menaka Mishra, from Bihar, offers marigolds to a black stone image of Adi Shankaracharya and tells me that he is the Adi Guru of the Kumbh.

Mrs. Kusum Lata, a policewoman at Guru Ma Anandamai's camp, tells me having the darshan of Hanumanji is the high point of the whole Kumbh for her, since He exemplifies and strengthens her highest aspirations as a police officer: loyalty, strength and service.

Mrs. Indu Sharma, from Haryana, tells me Vasuki Nag is worn by Lord Siva and was the fulcrum between the Danavas and the Devatas at the churning of the ocean. She says it is very important to end one's pilgrimage by bowing to Vasuki Nag, as well as to the Siva Linga and Hanuman at the temple.

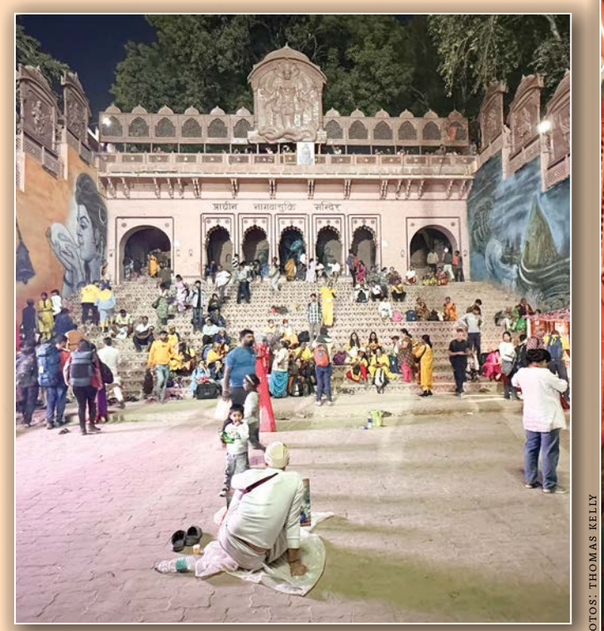
It is nearly dusk, but the Vasuki Nag temple is still busy. We sit next to Priyanka Mali (photo page 32), who is selling flowers for offerings with her little daughter by her side. She tells us that unlike the temporary flower vendors at the Kumbh, she is of the Mali caste and this is her full-time work; she has sold flowers here every day for 14 years, since her marriage. "I love this place," she exclaimed. "Even when I am anxious at home, I feel safe and relaxed here. How could I not? I am with my beloved Lord Siva, and His powerful Vasuki Nag, and Lord Hanuman, and my Mother Ganga."

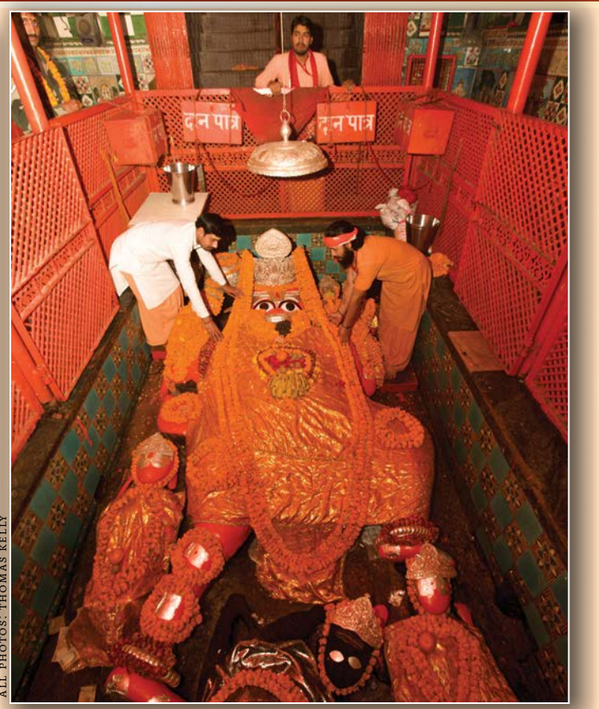
Although she had been too busy to take more than one holy dip since her marriage, Priyanka Mali was utterly determined to take one during this Maha Kumbh: "What am I doing living here if I don't share the blessing of this moment, which will never in my lifetime come again?" On Magh Purnima, she rose before 3:00am to bathe at the Sangam, and reached her workplace by sunrise. "I thought the water would be cold, but when I got into Ma Ganga I found Her warm and very soft. The water's touch felt soft. All of my worries and tiredness just melted away," she says. "I feel I have done the most important thing I will ever do in my life."

Nearby temples: *(below left) temple for Vasuki Nag, king of serpents; (below right) Bade Hanuman Ji Mandir houses a rare 20-foot-long murti of the Lord Hanuman submerged in the Ganga waters during monsoon season—both temples are visited by all pilgrims after their bath; (opposite top left) Laxmi Devi; (top right); Kusum Lata*

A sacred assignment: *(below, left to right) author Ellen Coon meeting pilgrims; Ellen blessed by a saint*

Temples Visited after the Sacred Bath





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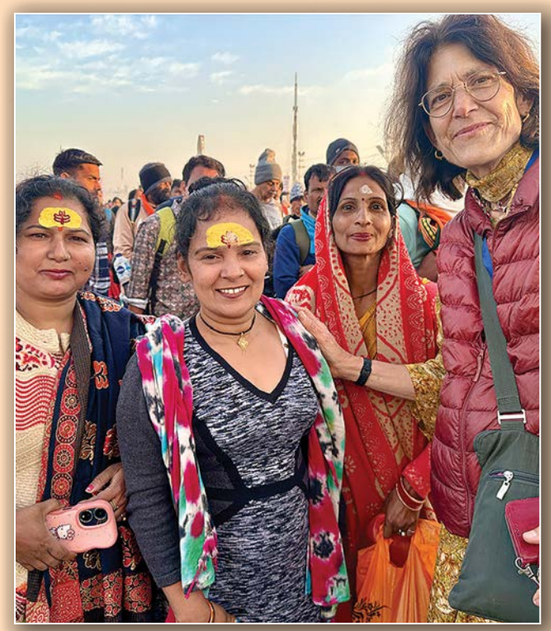
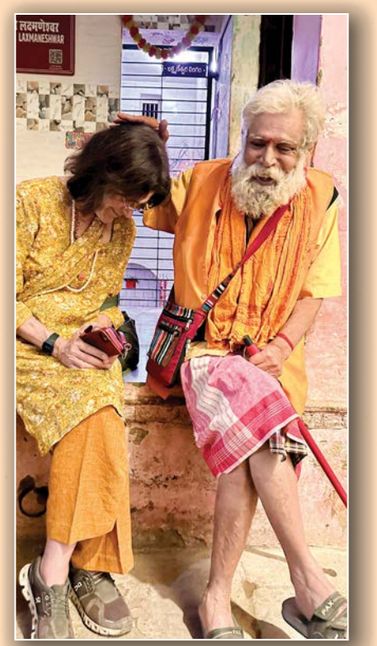
The Author Shares Her Experience



I BATHED IN MA GANGA AT VARANASI on Magh Purnima, and at the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati rivers at the Maha Kumbh before we departed. Although I wanted to share the pilgrims' experience, I was nervous that the water would be polluted. Instead, I was shocked by the beautiful sensations I experienced.

Ma Ganga felt soft and warm and bright, like astral champagne made of mother's milk and starlight. Like many of the women with whom I'd spoken, I felt energized, elated, and deeply relaxed at the same time. My joy lasted the whole day. Bathing at the Sangam, I had a vision of all of my ancestors—and all of humanity's ancestors—behind me, while my children and all future generations flowed in front of me. I felt their living presence very close, and a sense of love and unity I will never forget.



BASIL SAGE

Year at a Glance

APR	New Year
MAY	
JUN	
JUL	
AUG	Krishna Jayanti
SEP	
OCT	Skanda Sashti
NOV	
DEC	Vaikunta Edadashi
JAN	Sankranti/Pongal
FEB	Holi
MAR	

6 hindu festivals!

JOYOUS OCCASIONS THAT ARE THE HEART AND SOUL OF SANATANA DHARMA

HINDUISM IS CELEBRATORY BY NATURE. Hindus miss no opportunity to set mundane matters aside and join with family, friends, neighbors and strangers alike to feast and have fun, to renew the home and the heart and, most importantly, draw nearer to God.

Festivals are perhaps more impressive and varied in Hinduism than in any other religion. The devout Hindu knows these are times of profound mysticism, when God and the Gods touch our world, revitalize our souls, lighten karmas and bless our families.

Yet festivals do even more than this: they are essential to the perpetuation of religion, periodically reigniting the spark of zeal and devotion in the community. They provide the spiritual public square where Hindus engage with one another, affirming shared values and enjoying life's intersections.

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Before each celebration, vows are taken, scriptures are studied, pilgrimages are trodden and fasts observed in preparation—all individual acts of intimate devotion that bring the devotee closer to the Gods and keep him on the path to his inmost Self. As each festival begins, solitary adoration becomes a collective ritual, with millions of people taking their places in an ad-hoc choreography. Tradition is followed, but the result is never the same: every festival is special and unforgettable in its own way.

Thus the Hindu is reminded of his faith by the sounds, scents and the wild medley of tastes laid out for the feast. His mind and emotions are imbued with Hinduism as sacred mantra prayers are intoned, the spiritual teachings are recounted by saints, and the Gods are praised in melodious bhajans.

Each state of India, indeed each village, lends a little of its unique culture to how a festival is celebrated, creating almost endless variations. Recently, with the growing Hindu population outside of India, festivals have acquired an international dimension. They provide a window into Hinduism for the non-Hindu populations in countries as far flung as Norway, Chile and Canada. At the same time, for Hindus immersed in foreign and often very alien cultures, festivals are the most visible and memorable sign of their heritage. Celebrated with unmatched fervor but with paced regularity, festivals serve as a reminder of one's identity and allegiance to Hindu traditions and ideals.

What could be more entertaining, alive, vibrant and yet pious and rich in symbolism than a Hindu festival? Professor Dr. Shiva Bajpai remarked that it is through festivals that most Hindus experience their religion: "Festivals, pilgrimages and temple worship are the faith armor of Hindus."

Hindu Festivals For the Media

Join HINDUISM TODAY in educating the press with accurate and uplifting information about Hinduism

Imprecise information, unflattering photos and an obsession for the bizarre are common when the media features our faith. For most Hindus, there seems little or nothing that can be done about this, except to practice detachment and soulful acceptance. That was the tone at a 2007 Hindu conference in Dallas, Texas, until suddenly the leaders collectively declared, "Enough." Determined to complain less and do more, they masterminded the **Hindu Festival Media Initiative,** a strategic project designed by HINDUISM TODAY in collaboration with the Sanatana Dharma Foundation.

There could be no better time to educate the public about Hindu religion and culture. In 2009, for example, President Obama attended the first Diwali celebration at the White House, an historic moment, complete with Sanskrit chants by a Hindu priest in full garb. Yet, not a single media report rightly explained the festival of lights; a proper description of the festival was found only in the president's brief but inspired speech.

The Pager Project: We selected fifteen major festivals as the core of the project (of which six are in this Insight). Then, collaborating with Soumya Sitaram posters of Bengaluru, we created a series of "pagers"—ready-to-print, newspaper-sized resources. They match standard US newspapers in journalistic style and size, making them easy to use, especially for publishers with limited staff. Each pager highlights a festival in its celebratory, community and family aspects. In the "Fact and Fiction" section and elsewhere, the pagers introduce Hindu philosophical, cultural and spiritual ideas. These resources can also be sent to bloggers and digital publishers, who can repurpose them for their audience.

How the Program Works: Newspapers (especially in these days of budgetary cutbacks) welcome input from faith communities if the material is of high editorial quality, with polished text and eye-catching photos, especially if it's free. Motivated Hindus are encouraged to approach their local newspapers' religion or lifestyle editors with the appropriate pager in the weeks before each festival. Editors may elect to use them as is, or draw from the graphics and words and adapt them to their own style. Television and public radio stations can also be approached; the pagers can provide a comprehensive and authentic summary for voice-overs. They are available on the web as teaching resources for families, schools, summer camps, temples, ashrams, bloggers, etc.

How You Can Participate: Talk to your local temple board, the local Hindu association and newspapers in your area. Visit www.hinduismtoday.com/festivals for more information. There you will find all the pagers in PDF format, with instructions on how to best use them. No matter where you live, these festival summaries will provide your local media with informative, factual information about your faith. By preemptively explaining how Hindus experience and understand Sanatana Dharma, we bridge the we/they cultural gap, proactively bringing more tolerance, acceptance and understanding into the world.

SOUMYA SITARAMAN

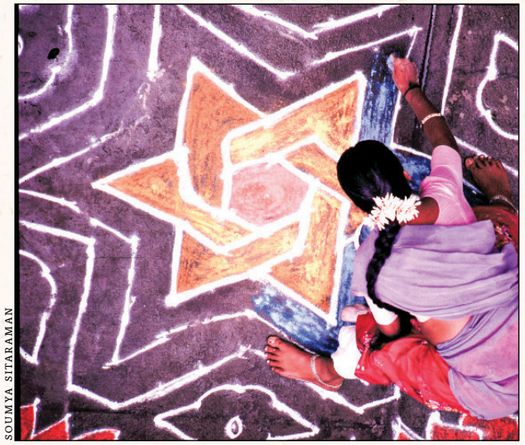
Hindu New Year

Let's Celebrate Springtime!

New Year is celebrated with gaiety and pomp around the world wherever Hindus live, but not on January 1. India's ancient faith salutes the annual genesis at the start of spring, when nature comes to life, in mid-April. The festival has a different name in each regional language: Baisakhi, Vishu, Varusha Pirappu, Ugadi, Badi Deepavali and Bestu Varas are just a few. Homes are lit with oil lamps and decorated with flowers to attract blessings.

Why is New Year celebrated in April?
Like most ancient cultures, Hindus traditionally observe the start of each new year with the arrival of spring, which occurs in mid-April in South Asia. That day coincides with the Sun's entrance into the constellation Mesha (Aries), the first sign in Hindu astrology. Following this astrological calculation, the celebration falls on April 14 in most years.

How is the New Year celebrated?
Hindus don new clothes and exchange sweets, gifts and greetings of goodwill. They clean their homes and decorate the entrance and shrine room with beautiful, colorful patterns called *kolam* or *rangoli*, symbols of auspiciousness. They visit temples, beseeching God and the Gods for blessings for the year ahead. The Goddess Lakshmi and the elephant-headed God, Ganesha, are especially venerated on this day. In some communities, elders give money to youth and children as a token of good luck—making the year's first financial act selfless and thus auspicious. Families feast together with great revelry, enjoying elaborate dishes and good company. People gather to listen to interpretations of the stars' positions and auguries of things to come, for the Hindu calendar is closely interwoven with astrology. An elder or learned astrologer may read the family's fortune for the next 12 months. Predictions are even given on Indian television.



SOUMYA SITARAMAN

What is the "first seeing" tradition?
In South Indian families, a dazzling arrangement called *kani* is created in the home on New Year's Eve. It is a display of money, jewels and clothing, plants and flowers, fruits and sweets, in the center of which stands a shrine with Hindu Deities. At dawn on New Year's Day, the matriarch wakes up the family members one by one and blindfolds them. She guides them to the shrine and there removes the blindfold, assuring that their first sight of the year is the auspicious, gleaming *kani*. Increasing the significance is a mirror, which serves a dual purpose: it symbolically doubles the abundance and reflects the family with all the signs of wealth around them—an elegant catalyst to manifestation!

SOUMYA SITARAMAN

Tidbits About the Hindu New Year

✿ **What is the nature of the Hindu calendar?** The sacred Hindu calendar, called *panchangam*, is an almanac containing astronomical details such as sunrise, moonrise, star-rise, eclipses and lunar phases. It also provides astrological information, including auspicious times for various activities, and inauspicious times as well. The rishis of old imparted the means to calculate this information to help people navigate the ebbs and flows of cosmic energies.

✿ **What part do neem leaves play?** The bitter leaves and flowers of the neem tree *(Azadirachta indica)* are among the central items of New Year celebrations. They are used in food dishes, in decorations and on the *kani* display. Neem is a sacred plant, a botanical marvel with numerous medicinal uses. It is said that its bitterness, spread among the glittering opulence of the New Year's festivities, adds a more realistic perspective on life.

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Payasam

This milk-based pudding is immensely popular and so easy to make.

Preparation time: 5 minutes
Cooking time: 25 minutes; Serves: 6
Cooking equipment: A heavy-bottomed saucepan, a ladle, a dish.

Ingredients
1 cup vermicelli or sago
4½ cups milk
1 cup sugar
1/2 tsp cardamom powder
5–6 tbsp chopped cashews and/or almonds
4 tbsp raisins
1 ½ tsp ghee, pinch of saffron

Method
1. Heat the milk gently until hot but not boiling.
2. Sauté the cashews, almonds and raisins in half the ghee. Set aside.
3. Sauté the vermicelli or sago in remaining ghee for a few minutes.
4. Add a little of the hot milk to the vermicelli or sago; lower the heat.
5. Add the saffron to the rest of the milk, and add it gradually to the vermicelli or sago, stirring until the pasta becomes translucent and soft. Cook until milk thickens.
6. Add the sugar and stir until it dissolves. Turn off heat.
7. Garnish with powdered cardamom, fried nuts, raisins and a few strands of saffron.

Hinduism: Fact & Fiction

FACT: Reincarnation, a central Hindu belief, gives the assurance that there is no eternal Hell, only chance after chance to improve and redeem oneself as the law of karma brings back to us the fruits of our past actions so that we can learn and evolve. All people are seen as divine, yet shrouded by ignorance. While every soul will ultimately achieve the highest spiritual attainment after many births, still there are young souls and old souls. Young souls, who have lived few lives, are often selfish, instinctive and cruel. Old souls, having experienced many lives, tend to be compassionate, superconscious and gentle.

FICTION: It is often thought that Hindus are forbidden to eat meat. This is not true. Hindus teach vegetarianism as a way to live with a minimum of hurt to other beings, but in today's world, not all Hindus are vegetarians.

INDRA SHARMA

Krishna Jayanti

Birthday of the God of Divine Love

Krishna, the preeminent incarnation of God Vishnu, lived life to the fullest. He had divine wisdom, charisma and power, but He also enjoyed mischief, games and the company of His beloved Radha. He was the protagonist in an epic war, inspiring by speech and example. Above all, He is known for loving every living being, for He is every one of them. It is His extraordinary life that Hindus celebrate in this birthday festival of fasting, devotion, drama and games.

INDRA SHARMA

Who is Krishna?
Born in a royal family, Krishna was the son of Devaki and Vasudeva. He is the noble philosopher, born to relieve this world of all evil. He is the divine child who brings laughter, love and beauty into life. He is the celestial charioteer whose discourse on dharma to the warrior Arjuna is the heart of the *Bhagavad Gita*. He is the all-knowing Deity at whose feet devotees lay their troubles. To chant "Krishna Arpanam" is to offer everything in complete surrender to Him with full faith that He will take care of it. It is said that in a grand, cosmic *leela*, or play, He creates illusions around us to catalyze learning and realization. Killed by an arrow as He slept in a field of grass, He left this Earth at the end of the Dwapara Yuga; and upon His death, some 5,000 years ago, our present era began.

What is Krishna Jayanti?
Jayanti means birth, and Krishna Jayanti is the Lord's birthday. The festival is also called Krishna Janmashtami, indicating His birth on the eighth day of the waning moon in the month of Shravana (August/September).

What do people do on Krishna Jayanti?
Anticipating the birth of the divine child, devotees prepare their home shrines with images of Krishna decorated with flowers (particularly tulsi) and lavishly adorned with jewels. The whole house is made festive with *rangoli* designs, lights and fragrant flowers festooning doorways. The discipline is to fast during the previous day and keep an all-night vigil. Families and communities sing and dance late into the night as bards recall Krishna's youthful antics, His passionate love for Radha and His precious teachings. At midnight, the time He was born, a statue of the infant Krishna is bathed, dressed in new clothes, placed in a cradle and worshiped in an elaborate puja. The fast is then broken, and devotees celebrate and feast for hours. At dawn, women paint baby footprints on the floor leading to the shrine room, a sign that Krishna has entered their home.

How do devotees relate to Krishna?
Interaction with Krishna is always personal. Depending on the devotee, the love inspired by the Divine energy that is Krishna is like that of a mother for a child, a teen for a friend, a lover for a life partner. To many, Krishna is the ultimate mentor and refuge in challenging, soul-searching times. He reminds us of our dharma, or duty, and explains the philosophical choices we have in life. Ultimately, Krishna shows us the path to God Realization.

Tidbits About Lord Krishna

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✿ In what ways is Krishna portrayed?
Krishna is normally seen as a young cowherd playing a flute, illustrating His days as a carefree youth who whittled reeds into flutes and enchanted the world with music. As an infant, paintings show Him crawling or holding a ball of butter. As a young man, He is the perfect lover. As an adult, He is Arjuna's wise charioteer on the Mahabharata battlefield. *Krishna* literally means dark. It is said He is so dark that His skin has a bluish sheen.

✿ Who are the women in Krishna's life?
Radha is the lovely young woman Krishna loved. She represents the devotee, loved by Krishna. Rukmini is Krishna's soft, gentle and beautiful wife. Satyabhama, another wife, is a brave, daring warrior. On moonlit nights, Krishna dances with the gopis, lovely maiden cowherds. Krishna's myriad amorous encounters symbolize the infinite capacity of His love, indicating that each of us, no matter how common, can simultaneously be one with the Lord.

✿ What is the *handi* competition?
Reenacting the story of Krishna and His playmates' absconding with earthen pots of buttermilk, called *handi*, young men in Maharashtra form human pyramids to reach a high-hung pot of buttermilk and break it with a blunt object, spilling the liquid on all below. Handis are set up in various parts of cities, and teams travel around in trucks competing, as young men do, to break as many as possible, especially those that promise hefty rewards.

SOUMYA SITARAMAN

Pancha Kajjaya

This sweet, crunchy salad is enjoyed as a snack or an exotic side dish
Preparation time: 30 minutes.
Cooking time: 10 minutes
Serves: 6-8

Ingredients
4 cups thin beaten rice (poha)
4 cups grated coconut—preferably fresh, but frozen will work. If using dry coconut, soak in water for 1 hour and squeeze out.
1 to 2 cups powdered jaggery, 4 tbsp white sesame seeds, 1 tsp cardamom powder, 2 tbsp honey

Method
1. Mix rice with the grated coconut and set aside for 30 minutes.
2. Add jaggery, sesame and cardamom; mix.
3. Arrange in a shallow dish and pour about 2 tbps of honey over it.
4. Decorate with thin slices of ripe banana.

Tip: Use only the very thin, light poha. The thicker variety remains hard in the end product and does not absorb the honey.

Fact & Fiction

FACT: It is widely believed that Krishna was an historical figure, though the date of His birth is disputed. Marine archaeologists have recently found compelling evidence of Dvaraka, the capital of His ancient kingdom. Underwater ruins discovered off the coast of Gujarat match descriptions of the city from the epic Mahabharata.

FICTION: A cursory exploration of Hinduism can make it seem superficial, since much of its popular practice, including its festivals, is grounded in a rich treasury of stories, legends and mythology from the *Puranas* and the epics. In truth, underpinning this delightful literary lore is a deeply mystical nature, vast and comprehensive philosophies, sophisticated systems of yoga and scriptures of peerless profundity.

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Holi
Splashed with Colors of Friendship

Holi is wild and raucous, a frolic of friendly playfulness. During Holi, India's streets are overtaken by crowds awash with colored powder. Clothing, faces, arms and hair are smeared and sprayed with every color of the rainbow. People sing, dance, play, hug each other and smile with such childlike joy that it makes one wonder where so much happiness comes from! No religious festival in the world compares to Holi in terms of engaging young and old alike. It is a celebration of love, forgiveness, hope and just plain fun.

SHUTTERSTOCK

What is Holi?
Holi is a community's exuberant expression of joy to welcome the warmth of spring. In a reflection of nature's abundance, Hindus celebrate with bursts of color, camaraderie and shared abandon. It begins on Purnima, full moon day, in the Hindu month of Phalguni (February/March) and lasts for as long as 16 days.

How does the festival start?
Many communities create a central bonfire on the night before Holi, starting with kindling and logs and adding organic debris as they clean up their property. The fire symbolizes the torching of negative or troublesome experiences and memories. An effigy of Holika, a demoness personifying negativity, is consigned to the flames, and freshly harvested barley and oats are offered. The embers are collected to light sacred fires, and the ashes are used to mark the forehead as a blessing.

When does the color fun begin?
On the day of Holi, people celebrate by playing, dancing and running in the streets. Water pistols are filled with colored water and squirted on family, friends and strangers alike. Dye powders and water balloons are a big part of the play. The wise wear old clothes, usually white, in anticipation of the mess! Virtually anything goes, including ribald humor, practical jokes and sexual teasing—all excused with the saying, "Don't mind, it's Holi!" (Hindi: *Bura na mano, Holi hai.*) Men are at the playful mercy of women, who dance with them and even dress them in drag. Especially in North India, people celebrate with abandon, even splashing color on their homes as a prelude to the more sober custom of renewing the paint with shell-based white. Deities and images of ancestors are hand-painted and placed in beautiful altars. Dramatic events feature devotional songs and the retelling of the love epic of Radha and Krishna. Bonds are renewed, particularly among in-laws and the extended family. Etiquette on Holi requires that one accept all overtures with an open heart, burying grievances to begin relationships afresh. People of all walks of life mingle and greet, applying vermilion on each other's foreheads in an uninhibited exchange of goodwill.

What are the delicacies of this festival?
Special sweet and savory treats including *mathri, puran poli* and *vadai* are made. Many communities make an intoxicating, cooling drink, called *thandai*, made of purified water, sugar, seeds of watermelon, muskmelon and lotus, along with nuts, cardamom, fennel, white pepper, saffron and rose petals.

Tidbits About Holi

✿ **What is the meaning behind the bonfire?** Love, positive values and goodness are celebrated on Holi. Their triumphs over divisiveness and negative forces have been reinforced in legends, such as that of Holika and her brother Prahlad. The famous king Hiranyakashipu had earned a boon that made him virtually indestructible. Blinded by this power, he thought he was God, the only being worthy of worship. His young son Prahlad was devoted to Lord Vishnu and refused to obey his father. Infuriated, the king devised the cruelest punishments. In one attempt, Prahlad's evil aunt Holika, who possessed the power to withstand fire, tricked him into climbing a burning pyre with her. Prahlad's love for true Divinity protected him from the flames. Holika burned while Prahlad lived. The bonfire of Holi is symbolic of this victory of good over evil.

✿ **How did the frolicking with color originate?** Legend has it that Krishna noticed one day how much lighter Radha's complexion was than His own. His mother playfully suggested that He smear Radha's cheeks with color to make Her look like Him, which Krishna did. The strong-willed Radha gleefully retaliated, and a merry chaos ensued. Another legend has it that Krishna celebrated this festival with His friends and the gopis. They danced and frolicked, filling the air with color in a joyous welcome of spring.

✿ **Is this a romantic occasion?** The festive dancing and camaraderie create the perfect environment for matrimonial alliances. Young people find mates, and families formally seal marital agreements during these days.

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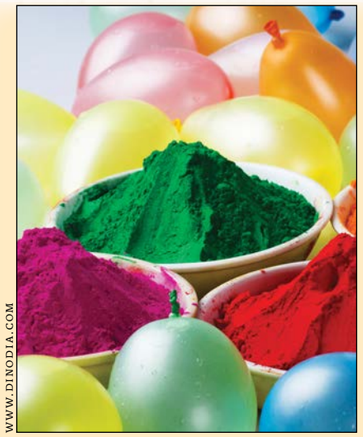

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Making Safe, Natural Colors

Dyes made of toxic chemicals are too often used during Holi. The food-based recipes below, along with edible food coloring, offer safe alternatives for all colors.

RED: Soak red pomegranate rind in water overnight. A pinch of edible gypsum mixed with turmeric powder in water gives a bright red. Or soak red hibiscus flowers in water overnight.

YELLOW: Turmeric powder makes a terrific yellow.

BROWN: Soak betel nut in water overnight and dilute as necessary. Or boil tea or coffee in water.

PURPLE: Boil blueberries in an iron vessel and let stand overnight.

MAGENTA: Slice or grate one beet root. Leave overnight in water. Dilute as needed for different shades.

GREEN: Purée spinach, coriander or mint leaves in water. Strain and use.

Fact & Fiction

FACT: Hindus worship and celebrate the Divine with unparalleled variety and fervor. Dance, song, prayer, meditation, processions, pilgrimage, bathing, painting, symbols and rituals are all valid ways of connecting with Divinity. This is living testimony to the existence of many paths within this ancient faith, all leading to God. Each person finds his own path among the many laid out by gurus and sages. To the Hindu, spiritual life is meant to be lived joyously, as Holi demonstrates.

FICTION: Hinduism is rich with stories of the Gods and their wives. On a deeper, philosophical level, it is widely regarded as a fiction that the Gods are married. The Supreme Being and the Gods are neither male nor female and are therefore not married.

Vaikunta Ekadashi

When Heaven's Doors Open Wide

To those with a pure heart, the gates of Vishnu's spiritual world are always open. But on a precious few days, it is said, that passage is open to all, allowing devotees to more easily reach Vaikunta, the abode of Lord Vishnu, Supreme God to hundreds of millions of Hindus. This is the essence of Vaikunta Ekadashi, a festival marked by fasting, devotion and pilgrimage to famous temples, when devotees draw closer to God in a most personal way.

Who is Lord Vishnu?
In the Vaishnava sect of Hinduism Vishnu is the Supreme God, venerated as the all-pervading essence of all beings, the master of time, the One who supports, sustains and governs the universe and all elements within it. In the sacred *Puranas*, Vishnu is described as the color of dark blue clouds, having four arms and holding a lotus, mace, conch and a chakra. Through the ages, He manifests in several forms, or avatars, such as Sri Rama and Sri Krishna, to guide humans on the path of dharma. Vishnu's constant companion is the Goddess Lakshmi. He represents the potential and She the wealth of potential brought to fruition.

What is Vaikunta Ekadashi?
Ekadashi is the eleventh lunar day of every fortnight. Of the two dozen *ekadashis* in a year, Vaikunta Ekadashi reigns supreme. It is known as Mokshada, "bestowing liberation." On this day, the doors to Vishnu's divine abode, called Vaikunta, are open wide to all who seek salvation, moksha. This occurs in the bright fortnight of December/January, the Hindu month of Mrigashira. According to mythology, devas and demons churned the Ocean of Milk for 1,000 years and *amrita*, the nectar of immortality, appeared on this day.

MANIVEL

What do Hindus do on Vaikunta Ekadashi?
Devotees maintain a total or partial fast and observe *mauna*, silence, while remembering Vishnu in prayer. While many Hindus fast on all *ekadashis*, Vaikunta Ekadashi is observed with utmost diligence and self-restraint. A common observance is to consume only water or milk.

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What are the temple observances?
Devotees flock to Vishnu shrines, especially famous ones such as the Venkateshwara temples in Tirupati and Pittsburg, and the Ranganathar temple in Srirangam, where the festival spans 21 days, divided into morning and night observances. Lord Vishnu, adorned in diamond-studded armor, is brought to a 1,000-pillared hall through the northern gate, called *swarga vasal*, "heaven's entrance," which is opened only this one time each year.

What else is celebrated around this time?
In the northern hemisphere, winter solstice occurs in this month, heralding longer, warmer days and agrarian prosperity. This transition to the year's fortuitous half is celebrated with beautiful patterns, called *rangoli*, drawn with colored rice flour on the floor outside homes. Hindus believe that at this time the divine celestials are most attentive to the pleas of mankind. Devotees rise early, perform ablutions and, throughout the month, visit temples with prayers in heart and gifts in hand.

Tidbits About Vaikunta Ekadashi

✿ **What is the legend of Ekadashi?** In an ancient story, Ekadashi is a *devi*, or angel, born of Vishnu's mind, a fierce defender of righteousness, a protectress of those in need. Strengthened by unfailing devotion to God Vishnu, she was feared by the forces of evil and ignorance. Vishnu offered her the boon of being rich, famous, powerful and beautiful in the world of mortals. But she declined, saying she wanted only to share her blessings with humans who fast and pray to Him on *ekadashi*. Vishnu granted her wish, decreeing that anyone worshiping Him by fasting on the eleventh day of the moon would be allowed access through the celestial gates. In the epic *Mahabharata*, Lord Krishna relates Ekadashi's story to King Yudhishthira, praising her and recommending fasting as an ancient and effective spiritual practice.

✿ **How is the fast broken?** The Ekadashi fast is normally broken the next lunar day, *dvadashi*, by partaking of fruit, herbs and milk. The Indian gooseberry, *amla*, known as a wonder food, is eulogized in the *Puranas* as the ideal nourishment to jump-start the system after a fast.

DREAMSTIME

Does Religious Fasting Make Sense?

Fasting in Hinduism indicates the denial of the physical needs of the body for the sake of spiritual gains. According to scripture, fasting helps create an attunement with the Absolute by establishing a harmonious relationship between the body and the soul. By fasting, the devout exercise control over their rioting senses and desires. It is a sacrifice made to the Self, by the self.

By turning within in meditation, they rein in the mind. Since the body is mostly composed of fluids, it is influenced by the phases of the moon, as is the mind. The rishis, ancient Hindu scientists, established these connections and recommended fasting and meditation based on the moon cycle, such as on ekadashi. This causes a natural slowing down of the system and the opportunity to reconnect with one's deeper being.

Fasting breaks life's repetitious regimen and brings clarity, empowering the individual to resume normal activities with greater vigor and conviction.

Hinduism: Fact & Fiction

FACT: Science and mysticism have long blended in Hindu tradition. The ancient sages who wrote down the scriptures also made observations on astronomy, time and mathematics. Long before Galileo, Copernicus and Newton, Hindus recorded knowledge of gravity, heliocentrism and other universal laws in treatises called Siddhanta. Hindu rishis further explored the connections between mind, body and the soul, evolving the sciences of yoga and ayurveda for a rewarding, beneficial life.

FICTION: Western scholars describe Hinduism as polytheistic. This is incorrect. While Hindu scriptures speak of many Gods—as many as 330 million—there is only one Supreme Being worshiped under different names by Hindus of various denominations and linguistic backgrounds. The One Great God created lesser Divinities, suprahuman beings presiding over aspects of Creation, not unlike the archangels of Christianity. Hinduism is neither polytheistic nor pantheistic; its philosophy is rightly called panentheism, God in all things and yet beyond.

Skanda Sashti

Approaching the Lord of Illumination

Skanda Sashti is a six-day South Indian festival to Skanda, the Lord of Religious Striving, also known as Murugan or Karttikeya. It begins on the day after the new moon in the month of Kartika (October/November) with chariot processions and pujas invoking His protection and grace. The festival honors Skanda's receiving His lance, or *vel*, of spiritual illumination, and culminates in a victory celebration of spiritual light over darkness on the final day. Penance, austerity, fasting and devout worship are especially fruitful during this sacred time.

Who is Skanda?
Skanda is a God of many attributes, often depicted as six-faced and twelve-armed. Saivite Hindus hail this supreme warrior, the commander-in-chief of the great army of devas, or beings of light, as a fearless defender of righteousness. They honor Him as the mystic healer of ailments and master of yoga, guiding those who persevere on enlightenment's path. Legends say He was the first to renounce the world and step onto the path of kundalini yoga. God Siva bestowed upon His son Skanda dominion over the chakras of willpower, direct cognition, and the purest, childlike divine love. Murugan is the tutelary Deity of the Tamil community.

How is Skanda Sashti celebrated?
It is considered meritorious to undertake a six-day fast, known as the Skanda Sashti Vrata, or vow, in empathy for Skanda's titanic struggle. Many abstain from all foods, while some permit themselves fruits and simple, unsalted foods. Following immediately after Diwali, the fast is an ideal antidote to that festival's feasting, revelry and overindulging. On the day the fast is broken, families enjoy a sweet pudding called *payasam* along with fried delicacies. A six-part prayer for protection, called the Skanda Sashti Kavacham, is chanted. Six is a number associated with this God. Another discipline is to stand in a river, facing upstream, draw a six-pointed star and write "Saravanabhava," His supreme mantra, on the water before doing ablutions. Special decorations adorn home shrines, featuring images of the peacock and the fighting rooster. Devotees pilgrimage to Murugan's temples, especially Nallur in Sri Lanka, the temple in Lanham, Maryland, and the seaside sanctuary at Tiruchendur in South India.

HINDUISM TODAY

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What is the legend of Skanda Sashti?
It is said that eons ago Skanda fought a powerful asura, or demon, named Surapadman, who embodied the forces of selfishness, ignorance, greed and chaos. Skanda defeated and mastered those lower forces, which He uses, to this day, to the greater good. The subdued demon became his faithful servant, the proud and beautiful peacock on which Skanda rides.

What happens on the sixth day?
In Murugan temples, the Deity is worshiped with oblations of special unguents, milk and other offerings. Crowds gather to watch a dramatic play depicting the conquest of Surapadman. Millions flock to see this drama performed on the beaches of Tiruchendur, where the legendary battle occurred.

Tidbits About Skanda and His Festival

✿ **What else occurs on these holy days?** This festival is associated with a unique tradition of giving, *dana*. A young, unmarried male student, *brahmachari*, is invited to the home, served a sumptuous meal with special sweets and honored with gifts of new clothing (usually a traditional unstitched cotton veshti), betel leaf, betel nut and fruits. This boy represents the youthful Murugan, and service to one is service to both.

✿ **Why does Skanda bear weapons?** Hindu iconography is rife with fighting implements. Skanda, general of the heavenly army, wields weapons which symbolize His manifold powers. These battle arms represent forces He uses in the subtle realms of the mind, piercing the veils of ignorance, rescuing those in distress and defending righteousness. He is called the Great Protector.

✿ **What does His lance signify?** The lance, or *vel*, embodies discrimination and spiritual insight. It stands for release from ignorance into knowledge, from sinfulness into purity through spiritual austerities.

SOUMYA SITARAMAN

Kesari

This quick and easy sweet semolina-based dish gets its name from *kesar*, or saffron, which gives it a bright orange hue.

Preparation time: 10 minutes
Cooking time: 10 minutes
Serves: 4
Cooking equipment: a wok, a large spoon and a plate.

Ingredients
1 cup semolina, 2½ cups hot water,
5 tbsp ghee, ½ to 1½ cups sugar,
½ tsp cardamom powder (or fresh ground),
a pinch of saffron or kesari powder,
2 tbsp raisins, 2 tbsp cashews

Preparation
1. Heat the water and add the saffron, cardamom and sugar to steep.
2. Heat 2 tbsp of ghee, fry cashews and raisins, drain and set aside.
3. Mix semolina with remaining ghee. Cook, stirring until light brown. Remove from heat.
4. Slowly add the semolina to the hot water, mixing continuously to prevent lumps.
5. Return to very low heat and cook for five minutes, still stirring until the whole mass comes together like a ball and does not stick to the spoon.
6. Transfer to a serving dish.
7. Garnish with fried raisins, cashew nuts and a sprinkle of saffron.

Hinduism: Fact & Fiction

FACT: In ancient days Hindu culture spread peacefully throughout Southeast Asia and west towards Greece and Rome via political ambassadors, traders, saints and travelers. Many communities and individuals beyond India's shores adopted the Hindu way of life by choice.

FICTION: Hindus are sometimes disparaged as "idol worshipers" by those seeking to belittle their faith. In fact, Hindus do not worship a stone or metal idol as God. They worship God through the image, invoking God's presence into the image from the higher, unseen worlds, so as to commune with the Divine for blessings and upliftment. Image worship may be likened to using a telephone to converse across long distances with someone: one is not talking to the telephone.

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Sankranti or Pongal

To Earth, a Festival of Thankfulness

Hindus acknowledge the sacredness of Earth and all life. Nature is a creative force worthy of respect, even veneration. Each year at harvest time, agrarian communities all over India celebrate this festival with enthusiastic abandon. They dance, fly kites, sing and exchange gifts in a grand thanksgiving celebration.

SOUMYA SITARAMAN

What is the nature of this festival?
Makara Sankranti ("transition to Capricorn") is four days of giving thanks to four great forces of influence and protection: Indra, the giver of rain; Surya, the Sun; gracious cattle and beloved ancestors. This happy occasion is known as Pongal by Tamils, Pedha Panduga among the Telugus and Lohri by Punjabis. It begins on the day the Sun enters Makara (Capricorn), between January 13 and 15. This is a special time of giving blankets, pumpkins, sugarcane and other items to the poor. Married women are honored, and gifts are given to newborn children.

What is done on the first day?
The day before festivities begin, Hindus thoroughly clean their homes, discarding unwanted, worn out or broken items and obtaining replacements for the year ahead. This clears away stale, negative energy and brings an influx of dynamic blessings into the home. It is a time for clearing the mind as well, to begin the year with focus and confidence. On the first day, Indra, the celestial power of lightning and rain, is worshiped.

What happens on the second day?
Using colored rice flour, women draw patterns on the floor called *kolam* or *rangoli*, depicting the Moon and the Sun in a chariot. Prayers are directed to Surya with offerings of freshly harvested sugarcane and vegetables. The main event happens at sunrise, when everyone gathers in a gaily decorated compound where freshly harvested rice is cooked with milk in a new pot. In Tamil communities, the moment the pot boils over, all shout, "Pongalo Pongal!" ("It's boiling over!"). All watch to see whether the froth overflows toward the East, which auspiciously indicates abundance for the year ahead. Conches are sounded and children dance for joy. A portion of the boiled rice, the season's first food, is offered to Mother Earth as a gesture of gratitude, and to all creatures and nature spirits. The remainder is eaten by the families. Wearing new clothes, families visit one another, exchanging gifts and enjoying feasts.

SOUMYA SITARAMAN

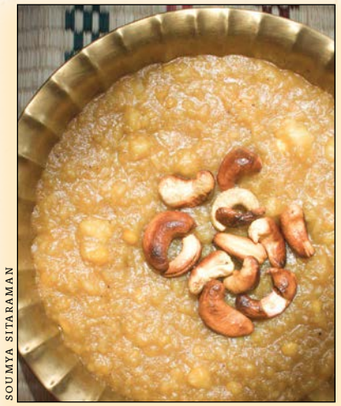
What happens on the third day?
On the third day, Hindus offer thanks to cattle, the farmer's gracious helpers. Bulls and cows are lovingly adorned with cowrie shells, embroidered shawls, colorful ropes and bells. They are fed sweet rice and sugar cane.

How is the final day celebrated?
On the fourth day, ancestors and wildlife are venerated. It is a day for picnic outings and family visits. Young girls and women receive blessings from older women for happiness and prosperity. Youth honor their elders. Brothers and sisters exchange gifts and express mutual respect and allegiance. Poets and their works are revered. In Tamil Nadu, it is also called Tiruvalluvar Day, in honor of the author of the famed ethical scripture *Tirukural*.

Tidbits About the Harvest Festival

✿ **Why is the harvest festival so important?** The months before the harvest considered an inauspicious time, are fraught with anxiety for farmers and for society. All celebrations, such as weddings, are held off. Months of toil in the fields and uncertainty over the harvest come to an end with Makara Sankranti. The harvest brings prosperity. Agrarian communities all over India celebrate this festival with enthusiastic abandon. Once the crops are harvested and cash flows in, communities proceed to plan weddings and other rites of passage. Over one quarter of the *Rig Veda* is devoted to praises of Indra, the lord of the elements, the exalted Lord of the devas and God of rain, who is essential to the yield.

✿ **Are there other festivals during this month?** In the Bhogi bonfire, communities heap and burn organic, agricultural waste accompanied by festive dancing to drums. During Kummi, a folk dance is performed by children, twirling and clapping around a pot to simple poetry chanted in a sing-song manner. For Gombe Ellu, children carry dolls as they visit neighbors with offerings of *ellu bella*, "trail mix" made of desiccated coconut, jaggery, sesame seeds and peanuts. They give and receive treats, learning from a small age the value of community sharing.



SOUMYA SITARAMAN

Sakkarai Pongal

This recipe for sumptuous sweet rice is from Jaffna, Sri Lanka

Preparation time: 10 minutes
Cooking time: 55 minutes
Serves: 4
Equipment: a medium pot, a skillet and a big spoon

Ingredients

2 cups rice, 1/4 cup raisins, 2 tbsp mung dal, 1 tsp cardamom powder, 2/3 cup sugar, 3/4 cup freshly grated coconut (or frozen grated coconut), 1/4 cup cashews, 1 tbsp ghee

Method

1. Roast mung dal in a dry skillet until it is golden brown.
2. Boil rice and mung dal in five cups of water for thirty minutes, until the rice is cooked.
3. Add sugar and coconut and stir well. Reduce heat and simmer for 10 minutes.
4. Fry raisins and cashews in ghee until nuts are light brown, then add them to the rice along with the cardamom powder.
5. Stir well & remove from heat.

Hinduism: Fact & Fiction

FACT: Hinduism places great emphasis on giving. *Dana*, charity or giving, is one of the tenets of yoga. Hindus are encouraged to give to the poor, to holy men and to religious institutions. The *Tirukural* inquires, "The benevolent expect no return for their dutiful giving. How can the world ever repay the rain cloud?" Dashamamsha, or tithing, giving one-tenth of income to the religious institution you are affiliated with, is an ancient Hindu practice.

FICTION: It is commonly thought that all Hindus believe God occasionally incarnates as an earthly being, called an avatar. In fact, this doctrine is specific only to some denominations and traditions.

NIKKI THAPA

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Sacred Site of Ram & Sita's Wedding

The new temple in Ayodhya at Ram's birthplace has cast a spotlight on Nepal's Janaki Temple—Sita's home, where She and Ram were married

By Nikki Thapa, Kathmandu

Sita is a paragon of womanhood—beautiful, graceful, devout, courteous, loyal and humble. Each year, busloads of devotees from across Nepal and India converge at Her birthplace in Janakpur, southern Nepal, to honor and celebrate Her marriage there to Lord Ram of Ayodhya. This sacred occasion, known as Bibaha Panchami, is observed on the fifth day of the waxing moon in late November or early December.

In February 2024, my fellow journalist Rajeev Gurung and I had made a five-day pilgrimage to the newly inaugurated Ram Janmabhoomi Mandir in Ayodhya. We reported on Lord Ram's return to His birthplace after 500 years for Hinduism Today (July/August/September 2024 issue). That article made reference to Janaki Temple, where Ram wedded Sita approximately 7,000 years ago, during the Treta Yuga. The editors requested a follow-up report on Janaki Temple, so we journeyed there in early December to witness the annual celebration of the divine marriage. But first, let's start with a bit of background.

History of the Janaki Temple

The temple is located in Janakpur, 140 miles southeast of Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal, and just over 14 miles from the Nepal-India border crossing at Bhittamore. Janakpur was founded in the early 18th century on what is believed to be the site of the ancient capital of Mithila. According to Mahant Ram Tapeswar Das Vaishnav, the temple's 16th head priest, worship of Sita here has been performed continuously for the last five centuries, while the structure that we see today was built 113 years ago.

While other Nepali temples are built in pagoda style, this one is unique, as its distinctive architectural style blends the Mughal and Koiri or Rajput designs. The present temple was built by Queen Vrisha Bhanu Kumari of Tikamgarh, Madhya Pradesh, India, on the site of the original modest Janaki wedding shrine. The queen vowed to construct a grand Sita temple if she were blessed with a child. Upon the child's birth, she gave 900,000 gold coins for the construction, which began in 1894 and was completed in 1911.

The beautiful white edifice, 50 feet tall, sits in the center of a *chowk*, a rectangular building with a large central courtyard. It takes up about three acres of land. It is often compared to a palace for its colorful facades and intricate carvings. The domes and turrets, arches, intricate latticework and carvings, vibrantly colored glasswork and miniature towers resemble Mughal-era architecture.

The central sanctum, made entirely of silver, houses Sita, the primary Deity, draped in ornate clothing and traditional Nepali jewelry. She is revered as the Goddess of purity, strength and devotion. On Sita's left is Lord Ram, Her husband, the seventh incarnation of God Vishnu. Also enshrined here are Ram's three brothers, Laxman, Bharat and Shatrughna, and their consorts—Sita's sister Urmila and Her cousins Mandavi and Shrutakirti. The four marriages solidified the alliance between the kingdoms of Mithila and Ayodhya.

The Bibaha Panchami Festival

Turning now to the wedding festival, the first day, called Nagar Parikrama, "city circumambulation," mark the arrival of Ram and Laxman in Janakpur. Locals sing ancient Mithila songs to welcome them and Vishwamitra, their guru. The second day, Fulbari Lila, "flower garden play," commemorates the first meeting of Lord Ram and Goddess Sita. The third day is Dhanus Yagya, "bow sacrifice," when Ram breaks Pinaka, the celestial bow of Siva, thereby winning Sita's hand in marriage.

NIKKI THAPA

Sita's home: *(clockwise from far left) Janaki Temple in Janakpur, Nepal; a circa 2018 drone shot of the temple and surroundings; the central sanctum, with Ram, Sita, Laxman and Urmila in the upper row*

The fourth day, Tilakotsav, "Tilak ceremony," is the ceremonial welcome of the groom's party by the priest of the nearby Ram temple. This year, five hundred members of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad came to Janakpur from Ayodhya for the occasion, along with numerous saints representing temples and ashrams in India. On the fifth day, called Matkor, the local women and the guests from Ayodhya gather mud from Dhanush Gangasagar, a large nearby pond, for making the wedding *bedi*, the consecrated area at Janaki Temple which includes a fire altar and places for the bride and groom and priest.

The main event, Vivaha Panchami, "marriage ceremony on the lunar fifth day," takes place with a grand procession on the second-to-last festival day. After an exchange of garlands at the adjacent Rangabhumi ground, the images of Ram and Sita are borne on palanquins to the wedding venue, Janaki Mandir, accompanied by music and dancing. The local women sing and celebrate the occasion until late at night.

The final day, Ramkaleva, "offering to the groom's men," concludes the festivities with Mithila's traditional 56-course feast, along with gift exchanges and farewells.

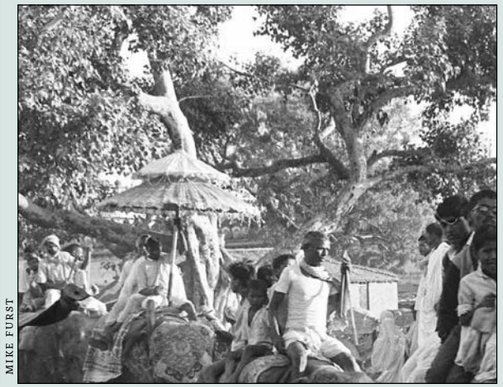
Our Festival Experience

Rajeev and I land in Janakpur shortly after the seven-day event has commenced. The city is already brimming with an estimated

NIKKI THAPAV

MIKE FURST

MIKE FURST



MIKE FURST

Festive mood: *(above, clockwise) the temple at night; Mithila art of Ram and Sita exchanging garlands; temple musicians leading bhajan; pilgrims raise both hands during chanting of "Jai Shri Ram" on Tilakotsav, the fourth day*

1971 celebrations: *(above, clockwise) Dola procession during the 1971 Bibaha Panchami festival at Janaki Mandir; devotees from all regions of Nepal throng the grounds; men and boys riding elephants*

15 million fervent devotees from Nepal and nearby cities in India. We go straight to the Janaki Temple which stands resplendent, adorned with vibrant lights, marigold flowers and colorful plastic accoutrements. Devotees camping in the square are immersed in prayers, chanting and preparing offerings. Throughout the day, loudspeakers play Mithila songs praising Ram, Sita and the ancient kingdom of Mithilanchal.

The roads and footpath leading to the temple are lined with stalls offering everything from fruits and other food to clothes, bags, footwear and bangles, creating a vibrant, chaotic scene. In a busy market in the square in front of the temple, vendors sell colored powders, clay lamps, bangles, marigold garlands, coconuts, syrupy sweets and posters of the temple and its Deities.

Although we arrive on the Dhanus Yagya day, we are unable to reach the event itself at the Rangabhumi area due to the overwhelming crowd. We also cannot attend the welcoming of the groom's party at the Ram temple, but we do witness the subsequent celebration at Janaki Mandir. Here, Mithila boys dressed as Ram and Laxman are on stage, while traditional dances are performed to Mithila songs praising Ram, Sita and Janakpur Dham.

Later in the evening, the sadhus from Ayodhya arrive at the stage. The head priest of Janaki Mandir honors them with colorful scarves. The women of Mithila take pride in the fact that Sri Ram is their son-in-law, giving them the traditional right to tease Him. Their teasing folk songs add light-hearted humor and charm to the occasion.

The next day, we participate in the Matkor ritual at Gangasagar Pond, one of Janakpur's many holy ponds. We set out with the procession of Sita from Janaki Mandir, accompanied by a Nepal army band playing music and devotees singing and dancing. Following the procession, winding my way through the crowd, I find myself a spot near where the Matkor ritual to collect mud is carried out. After an hour-long program of Mithila singing and dancing for Mata Sita and Ganga Arati, a boy dressed as Mata Sita is carried down to the Gangasagar pond shore to collect mud for the bedi. People immediately surround Mata Sita taking photos with their mobile phones, making it difficult for anyone else to fully experience the moment.

Vivaha Panchami

On December 6, the grand day of Vivaha Panchami, we are invited to the Ram temple by Bachan Dev Mandal, a local resident and member of the Ram Yuva Committee, to witness the palanquin procession of Ram and Sita to the Rangabhumi ground. It begins with tight security a little after 1:00pm. Around 2,000 security forces are deployed to manage the tens of thousands of pilgrims. The Hindus from Ayodhya join the procession on trucks behind Ram's palanquin, followed by tractors carrying boys dressed as Ram and Laxman. Hundreds of locals line the streets, showering the procession with flowers and sweets.

We walk for almost two hours. The energy is palpable as the procession makes its way to the Rangabhumi ground, where Ram's palanquin joins Sita's and they exchange garlands as a prelude to their marriage ceremony in the evening. The crowd swells. I find myself squeezed between people and even a stray cow, while Bachan Dev Mandal's warning echoes in my mind: "Don't trip, or you will be trampled." Being short, I struggle to find a vantage point. I eventually manage to secure a few photos while holding my camera high above the sea of heads.

The palanquins arrive at the temple amidst jubilant celebrations. There are moments of panic as people jostle for space; crowd management could be improved. Despite the chaos, the celebrations carry on with unparalleled devotion and joy, encapsulating the essence of Bibaha Panchami.

The celebrations continued late into the night, but we have to cut short our participation due to the overwhelming crowd. Nevertheless, the experience leaves us in awe of the rich Mithila traditions and unshakable faith of the devotees converged in the city to honor Ram and Sita's sacred union.

Meeting the Pilgrims

Judging by facial features and traditional attire, the majority we meet during the festival are from India, with a few from the hilly regions of Nepal. To accommodate these pilgrims, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, several free lodging facilities have been set up. On the Bibaha Panchami day, arrangements are made for free meals, tea and snacks.

Most we speak with came in groups of 35 to 50 people, their luggage on their head, many without any prior hotel reservation. Ramji Sharma, from Betiya, Bihar, shares, "Our family—my parents, my wife and children—came in a group from Uttar Pradesh. We have just arrived, and we don't know yet where we will stay. Let's see what happens."

Some pilgrims have come to offer help with the festival. Ramji Bhai from Surat, Gujarat, explains his mission: "We are a group of 13 volunteers here to help manage the shoes of pilgrims visiting Janaki Mandir. With such a massive crowd, it is often a hassle to keep track of footwear, and many struggle to find their shoes after darshan. This is our first visit to Janakpur. We all feel extremely fortunate to be doing our service here while getting darshan of Janaki Mata."

Similarly, Jin Mata Trust from Surat (Gujarat, India) offer a 108-meter long *chunri* (shawl) to Goddess Sita at Janaki Mandir on the occasion of Bibaha Panchami.

Remembering Earlier Days

Dr. Rajendra Bimal, a professor at Tribhuvan University, who was originally from Janakpur but now resides in Kathmandu, reminisces about his childhood. He shares, "If we look for the history of Bibaha Panchami, we don't find it in great detail in older texts, which might suggest that the festival is only a few centuries old. I witnessed the festival in its full glory when we were little kids. As a child, I felt like royalty. I could visit Janaki Mandir freely because my father was manager of the temple for many years. It was another era, where people would come from far and wide, especially from the north of India. There were theaters, Ram Leela Nataks, circuses, markets and dance troupes everywhere in Janakpur.

"The city was transformed from a little sleepy town into a bustling ball of light, sounds and joy. The celebrations back then were mesmerizing, attracting people from all across Nepal. Unlike today, the festival was a vibrant gathering of the hills and plains alike."

He fondly continues, "We used to have thrilling horse races, and visiting devotees would arrive riding majestic elephants. Pilgrims from the hills of Nepal would cook sel roti, traditional sweet breads, and sing Sorathi, their traditional song and dance. People from neighboring Sindhuli district would bring sweet oranges to sell. The people in those days were lucky to experience such an electrifying atmosphere. Everyone came together to celebrate the holy matrimony of Sri Ram and Sita, with traditional artists playing music. Now, sadly, the music comes from loudspeakers, fading the soul of celebrations."

Conclusion

Bibaha Panchami, deeply rooted in the sacred narratives of the Valmiki *Ramayana*, is more than just a religious festival, it is a vibrant cultural spectacle that offers unparalleled charm for pilgrims and tourists. Janaki Mandir is not just a symbol of Nepal's rich cultural and spiritual heritage but a place where history and mythology intertwine, and past and present coexist in harmony. Janakpur, an evolving modern city with expanding infrastructures and amenities—the only Nepalese city with train service since 1937—still thrives on its festivals, Mithila art and culture, all infusing the city with a burst of color, music and devotion.

TEMPLES

Lord Ganesha's Mumbai Home

Our writer does a deep dive into the history, legal wranglings, celebrations and undeniable dynamism of the iconic temple

By Choodie Sivaram, Bengaluru

Siddhivinayak is the mascot of Maharashtra, literally the presiding Deity of the state. The Ashta Vinayaka circuit of ancient temples, the famous Dagadusheth Halwai Ganapati in Pune and many more are power centers of spirituality. The intense, devout fervor during Vinayaka Chaturthi here is an epic celebration of togetherness. Maharashtra has historically been the hub of the Bhakti movement, home to some of the most venerated saints—Sant Tukaram, Sant Jnaneswar, Samarth Ramdas, Namdev, Eknath, Sant Gajanan Maharaj, Sant Gora Kumbhar, Sant Janabai and Sant Muktabai.

Sree Siddhivinayak Temple at Prabhadevi in Mumbai is an icon of the city, where the powerful Lord attracts devotees by the hundreds of thousands. The petite, mischievous-looking murti is flanked on either side by Riddhi and Siddhi (Goddesses of abundance and prosperity), as if They are peeking out from a game of hide and seek.

Thousands throng the temple every day with deep devotion and reverence to catch a glimpse of the Deity. Devotees vouch for miraculous experiences and answered prayers. Like Mumbai, little Siddhivinayak is a city that never sleeps. The temple opens at 4am and shuts close to midnight. On New Year's Day, nearly 500,000 devotees visited the temple. The administrative officers and staff worked for almost 36 hours straight.

A visit to Siddhivinayak and Mumbai Devi Temple is a must every time I'm in Mumbai. During last year's visit, one of the trustees said, "You should write about this temple." Saying yes would mean making a promise in the precincts of the temple, one I wasn't sure I could fulfill. I felt this temple is so famous, every possible media has covered it. What is left for me to write? Replying "as God wills," I left the temple with a strange feeling.

A few months later, when I visited the temple again, the thought continued to overpower me. I messaged our managing editor, Acharya Arumuganathaswami in Hawaii, and asked if Hinduism Today had written about this temple. He immediately responded, "We have carried minor news but haven't featured it. You can write about it if you want." Here was Ganesha summoning me to the task.

CHOODIE SIVARAM

Decades ago when I visited the holy place around midnight, it was brimming with devotees. There is a custom where people whisper a prayer in the ears of the Deity's vahana. A young lady was whispering into the ears of the mouse for quite a while, as I waited for my turn. To me it seemed she's not going to leave that tiny mouse. After a while, I requested her to make way for others and she politely moved away. Later my daughter told me that she was a very famous Bollywood actress. What caught my attention was that none of the devotees really bothered about the presence of a film star; they were absorbed in the little hero majestically seated inside.

Experiences of Devotees

Siddhivinayak has been a benevolent bestower of Grace on His devotees; stories of life-changing miracles abound. Nitin Kadam shared with us, "As a trustee for nearly ten years, I would meet a lot of old devotees who would narrate stories of yore and their own experiences. There was a 71-year-old lady who had been coming to the temple every day since she was 13, without missing a single day. Another devotee was coming for the last 35 years. He was of huge build and had difficulty in walking. I would see him panting and sweating, yet he would never miss a single day, even during monsoon."

Narrating his own experience, Nitin says he was lifted out of the jaws of death miraculously. "In 2013, I had a brain hemorrhage and was paralyzed. My hands and toes were motionless and I was hospitalized for a month. The MRI had shown a big clot. Fifteen days later, when I was taken for another MRI, the clot had vanished. The doctors wouldn't believe it; they repeated the MRI a few more times, and the clot was not visible. The doctor asked me to go to Siddhivinayak Temple the next day and thank Him, since it was His miracle. With a temporary discharge from hospital, I was taken to the temple in a wheelchair, right up to the Deity. People helped me stand up to place my head on the platform before the Deity. Without my knowledge, my paralyzed hands raised and folded in prayer. I couldn't stop sobbing. Thereafter, my recovery was swift. Now the neurosurgeon visits Siddhivinayak every week." Nitin Kadam engages in innumerable welfare activities, and there is not a trace of paralysis in him.

Dnynandeep Patil, an IT professional, is a regular at the temple. "When I visit the temple, I am completely recharged with an energy I cannot explain. When I stand in front of the Deity, I go blank. I'm surrounded by nothingness, and an overpowering peace engulfs me," he confides.

"More and more youngsters have been coming to the temple. Their faith in God and Hinduism seems to have increased," observes Dr. Sandeep, when asked about what changes he has noticed in recent times.

The Legend of Siddhivinayak

The first documented evidence of this ancient shrine is an 1801 imprint on a dome in the temple. In India it is a practice to imprint the year of construction on buildings and private houses as well. When the temple was renovated in 1993, this dome was removed

Constant devotion: *(clockwise from left) Completely rebuilt in 1993 using durable pink granite, the popular temple dominates a corner of Mumbai; the main sanctum; the original temple sits in a yet-to-be-developed field; outside vendors sell sweet goodies loved by the elephant-faced Deity;*

COURTESTY SREE SIDDHIVINAYAK TEMPLE

COURTESTY SREE SIDDHIVINAYAK TEMPLE

CHOODIE SIVARAM

and is now preserved as an artifact in the administrative office.

Centuries ago, Bombay was a barren land surrounded by an expansive seashore and vast stretches of coconut groves. Land holding was free, and local families owned huge tracts of land. This murti of Siddhivinayak was on a plot owned by the Patil family. "Nobody knows how this murti came to be there; it is believed to have been kept under a tree by an unknown person who remained there and worshiped the murti. Prayers were being answered, and gradually the place attracted more people. A lady from the Patil family had made a vow to build a temple if their prayers were answered. It is said that their prayers were not answered, yet she built a modest temple for Ganesha. Today the temple is at that very spot where Ganesha was first placed," explains Nitin Kadam, a former trustee.

The Siddhivinayak murti with Riddhi and Siddhi beside Him is a single piece carved out of black stone, measuring two feet in width and 2.5 feet in height. Vinayaka's trunk is to His right, believed to be a boon-bestowing form. Etched on the Deity's forehead is a third eye, like that of His father, Lord Siva.

The murti is now saffron colored, smeared with sindhur (red cosmetic powder). "There is no record of when the practice of smearing sindhur began, but we continue to do it every year to protect the murti from deterioration. This is done for six days, in accordance with the shastras. Expert artists from JJ School of Art are tasked with removing the old sindhur and applying a fresh coat. The murti is fragile and prone to deterioration, especially because abhishekam is performed regularly. Flowers and offerings also contain moisture, which can affect the murti," says Dr. Sandeep Rathod, Deputy Executive Officer.

It is said that the temple has been managed by random people, some believed to be from the Patil family. Regular puja and worship protocols started in 1936 when revered saint Jambekar Maharaj entrusted the responsibility to Govindrao Pathak, a mill worker. A management committee was formed and the temple administration was vested with government officers. Owing to old age, Govindrao Pathak recused himself from service in 1973.

As the temple's income increased steadily, there were allegations of mismanagement, lack of accountability and ownership claims, which dragged the temple into litigation. The Patil family had disintegrated.

CHOODIE SIVARAM

In the Divine presence: *(left to right) a devotee finds a corner of the temple where she can be close to Lord Ganesha; a festoon of pink and white flowers cascade above devotees approaching the sanctum, creating a celebration of divine exuberance*

Legal Battle Inspires a Special Act

A judgment of the Bombay High Court in the Indira Dattaram Patil case states that the Siddhivinayak Temple was built by Sunder Patil, who died in 1870. After his demise, his sons Tukaram, Manik and Janu took on the management. Janu died in 1928; Tukaram and Manik had passed earlier. Disputes arose between Janu's widow, Jiwoobai, and Manik's son Kashinath over the right of management. Kashinath went to court in 1932. Four years later, in 1936, the litigants entered into a compromise agreement to appoint an Official Trustee of Bombay as the sole trustee. Jiwoobai was made the manager. The consent decree mandated that after Jiwoobai's demise, a male member of the family of Sunder Patil should be appointed as the manager. When Jiwoobai died in 1940, disputes arose between Kashinath and other members of Patil family and the Official Trustee. The temple got entangled in legal disputes.

In August 1955, heeding an application by the Official Trustee, the Charity Commissioner registered the temple as a Public Trust (under the Bombay Public Trusts Act). The temple was now under his authority. In 1975 the Bombay High Court upheld the registration of the temple as a Public Trust. Defiant of the court orders, the Patil family continued to treat this registration as illegal, and disputes ensued.

Huge donations kept flowing in, and the Trust acquired large properties. Owing to continuous litigation, the growing income of the temple could not be fully utilized. On October 11, 1980, the Governor of Maharashtra enacted the Sree Siddhi Vinayak Ganapati Temple Trust (Prabhadevi) Ordinance, which paved the way for the Sree Siddhivinayak Ganapati Temple Trust (Prabhadevi) Act, 1980. This put an end to all the court cases and claims by the Patil family and gave stability to the temple. The temple is now governed by this special Act, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Law and Judiciary, government of Maharashtra. The Act confers powers on Sree Siddhi Vinayak Ganapati Temple Trust Managing Committee to manage and run the temple.

In order to accommodate the surge of devotees, in 1993 the old structure was replaced by an architecturally vibrant palatial building. Without disturbing the sanctum sanctorum, six stories built in multiangular style were added. Five stories house the administrative offices, kitchen for preparing naivedya for the Deity, and storage space. The *kumbhabhishekam* was performed in June 1994 by His Holiness Sri Bharathi Theertha Mahaswamiji, 36th Jagadguru of Sringeri Sharada Peetham.

Three huge doors leading to the sanctum sanctorum facilitate a steady flow of hundreds of devotees. Nearby, the spacious, well-ventilated pavilion is used for performing Satyanarayan puja and Ganesha homa. A decorative arch akin to the Rajagopuram is under construction at both entrances. An adjoining plot is being converted into an underground parking facility to ease parking problems for devotees.

A Staff of Three Hundred

Including the priests, nearly 300 people work at the temple. It is mandatory for priests to be qualified in Vedic knowledge from a recognized institution of Vedic studies.

I wanted to visit the temple on Vinayaka Chaturthi to take photographs. I had expected the administration to decline permission, considering how crowded the temple would be and the tremendous pressure on them. I didn't expect them to answer my call; if they did, I thought they would say "Oh, not today. Please come another day." To my surprise, not only did Dr. Sandeep Rathod respond to my call; without any hesitation, he welcomed me to the temple and permitted me to take photos. Since I was carrying a camera, he ensured I got a hassle-free entry by keeping the security informed. There I was, in the midst of thousands of devotees.

CHOODIE SIVARAM

The staff or security persons never lost patience with the crowd or loudly ordered them to move. Dr. Sandeep and Veena Patil, the Executive Officer, overseeing crowd management since early morning, were calm and poised. During my visits, a remarkable feature I noticed is the crowd behavior. Visitors are completely absorbed in their prayers and chants of Jai Siddhivinayaka and Ganapati Bappa Moraya as they move in the long, winding line waiting to catch a glimpse of their Siddhi Vinayaka. There were no petty fights, squabbles or displays of impatience. Special facilities are provided for senior citizens, differently-abled persons and pregnant women.

Nearly forty thousand people visit every day. The numbers go up to 200,000 on special days and Tuesdays, which are auspicious for Vinayaka. Starting the day at 4am, the temple shuts close to midnight. On Tuesdays and festival days, the temple opens at 3am and closes past midnight.

Every day, some 25 to 30 VIPs—film stars, businessmen, politicians and sportsmen—visit the temple. "Taking care of VIP visits is challenging, but we make sure the common devotee is not disturbed," says Dr. Sandeep.

Festivals and Activities

Ganesha Chaturthi is the most significant festival in Maharashtra. The temple also celebrates other Hindu festivals with equal fervor. Magh Ganesh Jayanti and Angarak Chaturthi draw hundreds of thousands of devotees from 2am onwards. Other festivals celebrated at the temple are Ram Navami, Hanuman Jayanti, Krishna Janmasthami, Gudipadwa, Navaratri and Mahashivaratri.

Income & Charity Work

The temple's only source of income is the offerings from devotees. The annual income is around US$15 million, with no funding received from the government.

Interestingly, the little Lord pays income tax on His earnings. Nitin Kadam shared with me, "We are allowed to spend only ten percent of the income to run the temple, which includes expenditure on pujas, prasad, staff salaries, maintenance, etc. Unspent funds go into savings, which is taxed. Interest earned on the savings is also taxable. The temple is engaged in extensive charity and social development, providing medical assistance to the needy to help them cover hospital bills. Though the amount is nominal, we are hoping to increase it with government approval. The number of people receiving this assistance is huge, so the outreach is considerable. A grant of about US$1146 is given for hip replacement, knee replacement and cochlear implant."

The temple conducts blood donation camps and free eye clinics, provides modern equipment and infrastructure to government and municipal hospitals in rural areas, supports numerous dialysis centers, and also maintains a medical ward at Wadia Hospital.

"Our main focus is on rural areas," Sunil Giri, a trustee, told me. "The temple runs treatment centers for thalassemia patients needing blood transfusion. A village in Ratnagiri district that was submerged by floods was completely rebuilt in 2019 with new buildings using Siddhivinayak funds. The second phase of this project is underway. At a cost of US$2.4 million the temple is also supporting government irrigation programs to provide potable water to all the districts." In 2024, the temple pitched in to help flood-affected districts in Maharashtra.

Annually, it gives textbooks and study material to thousands of students. A well-stocked modern library in the temple precincts caters to students preparing for competitive exams. A digital library exclusively for the visually impaired along with the book bank have been a boon for innumerable students and institutions.

Inside the sanctum sanctorum, Siddhivinayaka looks innocent, oblivious to all the power of His glory. He bestows abundant grace on every seeker; even a casual visitor becomes a staunch believer. No devotee returns empty-handed from His abode.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Choodie Sivaram has been a journalist for over three decades. She writes on current affairs, policy matters, constitutional and legal issues, heritage and culture. She wrote and directed the documentary, "At the Altar of India's Freedom—The INA Veterans of Malaysia," produced by the Indian High Commission in Malaysia. Choodie holds degrees in journalism and law.

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A Vegetarian's Food Diary: New York to Mumbai to New Delhi

The author's journey exploring the diverse vegetarian dishes across India is a vibrant exploration of the country's rich culinary heritage

By Lavina Melwani, New York

I have just come from Shiv Sagar, a humble vegetarian restaurant in Mumbai where every single day you get hundreds of choices, not only South Indian and North Indian, but also Jain, Mexican, pizza, veggie burgers and Chinese. There's even an all-you-can-eat thali which is refilled free as fast as you can finish it! The South Indian menu alone numbers 74 options. Every item is pure vegetarian.

If I were to go back to India every single year for the next decade, I still would not be able to eat all the vegetarian special dishes that seem to crop up from the country's rich heritage of past, present and future menus. Every time you open your mouth, you seem to be offered a new taste, a new fragrance and a new experience.

Indeed, for vegetarians, India is the globe's largest Foodie Club, with hundreds and thousands of possibilities. In the US, in the old days, there were few vegetarian options except for salad, sides and—perhaps—veg pizza. Even now, some mainstream US restaurants offer only one vegetarian dish—take it or leave it.

The Food Stories of India

India means many things to Indians, but one powerful idea is food, especially food shared with family. For me, home food has always meant the joy of eating dishes cooked by mothers and grandmothers, as well as of old cooks who have been with the family for many years.

The best thing about India is the people you meet, and it is through them you learn so many unforgettable food stories. I ate at the home of a lovely 102-year-old woman who is full of zest and lives with her extended family in Bandra, a Mumbai suburb. The home is full of Ganeshas and good vibes. She starts the morning with a shloka from the *Bhagavad Gita* and makes herself a cup of chai. We ate a simple meal of daal, rice and spicy potato sabzi. She was so joyful and happy that the day could not but go well. She has lived a life of many ups and downs, yet she shows the true meaning of acceptance, karma and gratitude.

I also ate a grand meal with the rich and famous at a sparkling big fat Indian wedding in Delhi. It was an experience of rich people, rich food, rich jewels and general opulence. There were hundreds of dishes, both non-vegetarian and vegetarian, with a lineup from around the globe. Special stations held every kind of food, from appetizers to entrees and desserts. In the end, you were satiated because you can only eat what your stomach can digest!

On yet another day I ate in the company of bubbly, joyful schoolchildren in a slum colony in Delhi, and that was quite an experience, too. The cook had made the entire meal in an open-air, tin-shed kitchen for the 200 children, and we all ate the simple nutritious daal, rice and potato sabzi together. This is often the only full meal these children get in a day, and it was actually quite delicious: we found ourselves going for seconds.

Then I ate with a childhood friend. Life had taken us through good times and bad, but here we were, survivors, eating all the home-made vegetarian Sindhi and Punjabi dishes that we loved, and exchanging notes while the cook kept bringing out fresh, puffy hot Gujarati rotis.

We drove to Palghar, 40 miles north of Mumbai, to visit a non-profit educational project. One of the delights in this area is eating at small roadside places, *dhabas*. Here we ate a delicious South Indian meal in the middle of a busy highway, topped with filtered coffee. Everywhere one went, food was always offered, even in a government municipal school, where we had gone to check on doing a partnership with them.

New York to India: *(left to right, top to bottom) "Food" wall art in Shiv Sagar; Gujarati Variety Thali set; big fat Indian wedding dessert station; Ganesha statues in Amma's house; author Lavina Melwani with her family at the Delhi Golf Club; Soam Kathiawadi menu; 102-year-old Amma at the dinner table in Bandra, Mumbai*

Food Shared with Family

I have memories of food that are decades old. I remember in my newly married sister's home, how they would make traditional chunky Sindhi wheat rotis for dinner—the flatbreads would be flaky and rich with oil, served sizzling hot and already divided into two pieces so two family members could eat them instantly. They had somehow calculated that it takes a person a certain amount

Food feast: *(clockwise from upper left) mushroom appetizer and dessert at an art opening; various dishes at the Delhi Golf Club; home-cooked potatoes, peas and besan curry; Kathiawadi dish at Soam; Shiv Sagar pao bhaji; flat bread at Shiv Sagar*

Desi delights: *(clockwise from above) catered dinner served at home; aloo gobi, stir-fried potatoes and cauliflower with abundant turmeric; a family dinner of idli, sambar and coconut chutney at Sagar Restaurant*

of time to eat just half, and so rather than let the other half get cold, it could be shared. Fresh hot ones would be coming to the table as people got ready to eat the second half.

There's Old Delhi, and there's New Delhi, and all the little diasporas where you get Nepali, Naga, Tibetan and Chinese food, which is all part of the Great Indian feast. When close friends hear that you have come to the city, they often send the specialty of their home, so it's like feasting every day without any real reason for celebration.

Growing up in Delhi, we were quite savvy about where you would get the best street food—sizzling aloo tikkis (potato patties) embedded with chana daal. The vendor would expertly grill the tikkis in a large tawa full of hot oil and then slash them in the middle, smearing on tamarind and mint chutney. We would go to the canteens near the sandstone fountains in India Gate to eat this delicacy. The other hot spot was in the by-lanes of Janpath in Connaught Place. It is always a delight to go back to Delhi and see how many of the old spots are still there.

Indeed, there's no end to them. Delhi is embedded with chaat shops in all the suburbs like Green Park, Sunder Nagar and Greater Kailash, and everyone has their favorites. Their tasty treats, not costing a lot, have allowed the lower middle-class to join the foodie bandwagon.

The British Raj in Delhi and Mumbai

And then there's the treat both in Mumbai and Delhi, for people who are fortunate enough to be members of private clubs. It is a whole different thing, where—in the very British colonial style—the waiters keep bringing everything you ask for. Whether it's cheese toast or cucumber sandwiches or peanut chaat, everything keeps coming. You also get coconut water in the shell right there. And to eat indoors in the club is to get every kind of meal, from European to Thai to Indian, and all that again at very reasonable club-subsidized prices.

Eating In Versus Eating Out

Since most of the families I know have great cooks, a meal at home is a feast. Whether in Delhi or Mumbai, eating was always the highlight of the day. It can be something simple, whipped up at home, whatever our hearts desire, which is the wonderful thing about India, that you can just think of what you'd like to eat, and it's immediately on the table. Here, in the end, the meals I enjoyed the most were the ones with the home touch. These big gatherings of the extended family at home had all the dishes that one could think of, with so many different ways of making even a simple thing like paneer. It was quite delicious eating the food of different hands, different home cooks, including things like Indonesian and Thai dishes. Delhi has become like a little New York, where all kinds of food are available, and women take pride in cooking themselves, or getting their cooks to make dishes for them. So many brides have settled in India from foreign lands that those cuisines are embedded in family favorites.

Another delight is to wander in the busy markets, like Lajpat Market or Khan Market in Delhi, and snack on everything from pao bhaji (butter-toasted bread rolls with vegetable curry, a Maharastrian favorite snack) to chikku-flavored ice-cream. There's lots to take back home, be it dried fruit or papads. It was funny meeting an Indian-American family in a crowded Delhi market, who were also tasting the nuts to see if they wanted to take them all the way back to America. Normally, the quality is supposed to be excellent because these nuts come from Afghanistan. But here, the Indian-American man tried a few and he said he much prefers Costco! Travelers bring their own prejudices and likes into the story.

Eating Like a Mumbaikar

On this trip my main attraction was merging into the marketplace with regular Mumbaikars, and buying regular things like clay diya lamps and papayas. In these crowded thoroughfares, green chilies, limes and coriander are laid out like emeralds on a sheet, and bargaining is the order of the day. There is a lot of drama and play-acting between the vendor and the buyer, and the battles are quite drawn out, yet everybody leaves happy.

I also love the idea of a kirana shop, a neighborhood store where everything is available, whether you want fresh vegetables, fruit, diet foods, snacks, packaged food—everything is there. The place seems like a warren, but they know exactly where everything is kept, and will get you just about anything you need. They will even deliver at odd times of the day and night.

But the biggest delights of Mumbai were the simple people's restaurants, like Samrat, Status and the Shiv Sagar chain, specializing in vegetarian food, often the all-you-can-eat Gujarati or Rajasthani thali. In Delhi, I had eaten at Andhra Bhavan, which is a dream come true for lovers of South Indian food where you can eat as much as you want of dosas and idlis for a pittance. Shiv Sagar in Mumbai, with all cuisines under one roof, is where everyman is king—with a menu that boasts more than you can ever eat, including paneer served in every form imaginable, from Punjabi to Chinese to Italian. It was a delight to see whole families gathered together, business associates, too, all having a good meal without emptying their pocketbooks. I also ventured to Soam, a small place in Chowpatty, to try Kathiawadi. This is a fiery and spicy cuisine within the larger more bland Gujarati cuisine that uses a lot of garlic, onions and spices. It was a new experience for me.

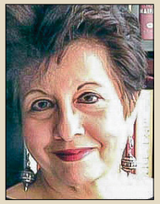
The Hospitality of India

To go to anybody's house at teatime means getting a whole lineup of things, including namkeens, which are salty snacks, sandwiches and some mithai. Often they make the grand gesture of giving you a box of the sweets. Food is very much a part of every ritual, a cup of chai and some snack is always given, no matter where you go. Even a simple villager will offer you at least a clay cup of hot chai and maybe a small package of precious glaxo biscuits.

The trouble is that in India a stay of a month is nothing. You need a lifetime of eating—and even then, you would not have tried every dish there is. Here I have not even mentioned the countless temples where, no matter which one you go to, there's always prasadam. You cannot come away without being given something sweet and delightful by the Almighty to bless your day.

A once-starving nation has now become a self-sufficient, unending food basket which contributes to other nations. God certainly has blessed the Indians with great culinary talents for utilizing their wholesome grains and lentils and vegetables to create an unending array of healthy dishes. Indian women seem to be instinctive cooks, having learned from their mothers and grandmothers before them, and Indian men who cook for a living have used all the tricks of the trade to create every kind of meal, from simple to princely, to keep eaters engaged and happy.

Indian cooks give you just what you need, when you need it—especially soothing daals, rice and vegetarian snacks with wonderful comfort. Even at home, the feasting never stops. Different kinds of desserts are served. Then there's tea from Assam, coffee from the South, lassi from Punjab, sweet rose syrups and sugar cane juice. And you can't possibly refuse that homemade laddoo! You can't say no to that last piece of mithai! In the end, you have to raise your hands in helpless surrender. Enough is enough!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lavina Melwani is a New York-based journalist who has written on the arts, spirituality and life for several international publications. She reports on the Indian diaspora for The Week *and is a co-founder of Children's Hope India. She blogs at www.lassiwithlavina.com. You can follow her @lassi_with_lavina*

ALL PHOTOS: ANNE PETRY

PILGRIMAGE

Girnar Mountain, a Spiritual Journey of Ten Thousand Steps

Exploring the physical and mystical stages of this revered pilgrimage, while embracing struggle, silence and self-discovery

Author: Moshe Adar
Photos: Anne Petry

While planning my trip to Gujarat and researching places to visit in this region of western India, I kept encountering references to Girnar Mountain. At first, I thought, "Okay, one more mountain. Is it really worth visiting?" But a friend of mine, a well-traveled woman, insisted this mountain could be one of the highlights of my trip. I had no idea what she meant, but I was about to find out! So, before the sun rises, take my hand, and let's climb together up the ancient and sacred mountain of Girnar.

I'm typically an early bird, but waking up at 3:30 for a pilgrimage is quite different—especially when it involves climbing a mountain by going up 9,999 steps. Yes, you read that correctly: almost ten thousand steps! But in this month of January, the sun can be intense and temperatures rise quickly, so it doesn't take much motivation to get me out of bed. There's no way I'm attempting this climb during peak sunlight.

By 4:30, I'm in a cab driving from the town of Junagadh to Girnar Mountain, 3.5 miles away. At 5:30, I'm at the mountain's base. While I can only make out its silhouette in the darkness, I know that 866 Jain and Hindu shrines, built between the 8th and 15th centuries, lie above my head. No wonder climbing Mount Girnar is one of India's most important pilgrimages.

It's pitch dark as I face the stone steps and the countdown from 9,999 begins. Almost immediately, I reach the Bhavnath Mahadev Temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva, which hosts its well-known Mahashivaratri each year. The atmosphere is remarkably quiet. Only a few people are around, and the energy is calm and serene—quite different from the hectic India I usually encounter. Is it just the early hour? Are people still waking up? Somehow, it doesn't seem so. There's something special here. A peaceful vibration pervades the area. I notice local vendors selling long wooden walking sticks. "I don't really need one," I tell myself. I'll have second thoughts about that decision in a couple of hours!

The real climb is about to begin. The highest peak, Gorakhnath, reaches an elevation of 3,665 feet. I set aside any aspirations of reaching the top, and any sense of achievement or goal-oriented thinking. Instead, I'll take it step by step. I can feel the presence of millions of pilgrims who have stood here before me. We're all climbing together now.

Sacred Ground

This site holds immense spiritual importance both for Hindus and Jains. The oldest temples are more than 1,200 years old and reflect a blend of architectural styles. I find myself wondering why so many temples were built in such a remote, hard-to-reach place. One explanation could be to provide holy people living here with a sense of withdrawal from daily life. Others say the height symbolizes proximity to the heavens—to the Gods and Divinity. This is said to be a place where hundreds of sages attained their realizations, including the 22nd Jain *Tirthankara*, Lord Neminath.

For lay people, this whole place seems to connect deeply with the concept of sadhana, personal spiritual practice. Pilgrimage requires sustained effort from the pilgrim. It's not as simple as lighting incense and an oil lamp at home. People must step out of their comfort zones, often traveling hundreds of miles across states using local transportation; and when they finally reach their destination, they discover they must climb a mountain or walk barefoot for hours to complete their journey. Such physical challenge can push people into a deeper state of awareness, perhaps a more self-reflective mode. They typically talk less, listen more and become more connected to the present moment. Though they may have traveled with family or friends, the journey becomes individual—just you and the Divine.

The ascent: *(far left) Dattareya Hill; (clockwise from above) pilgrims resting at shrines along the way; a group of women begin their holy hike before sunrise; a few of a group of 200, doing the climb as their class reunion*

Dawn's Embrace

As I climb, the Sun begins to rise. I pause to take in my surroundings. The cool breeze washes over me as darkness transforms into light. The beauty of nature surrounding Girnar Mountain is breathtaking. Soft sunlight gently bathes the hilltops, and the land below gradually becomes visible and seems to extend to infinity. At this moment, I already know the journey is worthwhile. Though many stairs still lie ahead, my feet feel lighter now. I'm floating, carried by something greater than myself—carried by spirit, tradition, and a harmonious unity with nature, people and life itself. "Perhaps this is why pilgrimage requires such effort—this is sadhana," I think to myself. We step outside ourselves and our own little bubble, which can sometimes be petty and self-centered.

I continue climbing, and now when I encounter others, I see them more clearly. I notice a woman laborer carrying a bag of cement up the stairs. I take the bag from her, placing it on my own head as I climb. I can only offer her a few moments of rest. She's incredibly strong and certainly doesn't need my help, but perhaps she understood that I needed to make this gesture.

Unexpected Connections

As I climb, I pass an Indian couple in their fifties wearing matching kurtas. The beautiful flashy pinkish-orange color of their garments catches my eye. Ten minutes later, I notice shirts of the same color again, on four different people. "There must be a special sale somewhere in town," I think to myself. But I keep seeing more people in

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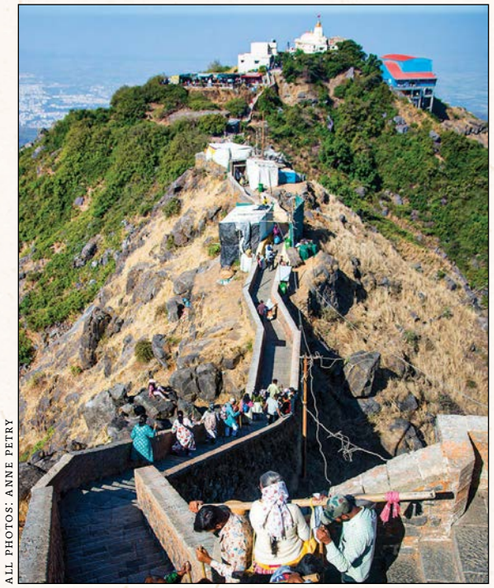


ALL PHOTOS: ANNE PETRY

pinkish-orange, and I finally ask about it. "We're a group of 200 friends and family doing this pilgrimage together," explains Rajesh Mahindra. "We're the Class of 1990 from a boys' boarding school in Mumbai." "And this is your reunion?" I ask. "It sure is."

Every day brings new learning. My idea of a school reunion involves gathering at a venue with snacks and drinks, endless small talk, and sharing memories. But this group has elevated the concept to something unique and inspiring—combining friendship, tradition, family ties, and spiritual journey—all the important aspects of life. This holistic approach reminds me of the Sanskrit word *vipassana*, which means "clear seeing" and suggests seeing the whole picture at once. Through this lens, a school reunion pilgrimage makes perfect sense.

Holy Pathways

Along the path, I pass numerous roadside temples. These aren't large complexes you can enter, but simple stone structures housing Deities or saints. Small groups are gathered around almost every temple. Some use them as an excuse to rest, while others take the opportunity to pray and meditate. Once again, this demonstrates the vastness of Hindu and Jain traditions—a multiplicity where each person can find their own channel to connect with the Divine and the inner Self.

Further up, I reach the first major temple complex—the Jain Derasar, dating back to the 12th century. Standing here, surrounded by structures nine centuries old, I imagine the simple construction methods used to build them, picturing thousands of laborers climbing this same path while carrying sand, rocks and heavy tools. The architectural style is stunning—high, pointed temples surrounded by marble floors. The people are welcoming, and the atmosphere is pleasant.

I've arrived on an auspicious Jain holiday, and there's a festive feeling in the air. People are dressed in their finest clothes, and a massive prayer ceremony is taking place inside the main temple, where women sit on one side, men on the other, all facing the shrine and listening attentively to the priest.

I walk around admiring the beauty while trying not to look too much like a tourist. Before leaving, I'm offered prasadam, which I gratefully accept, hoping these sacred treats will energize and motivate me for the remaining climb.

The Physical and Spiritual Journey

My legs are now letting me know they've been working for three hours straight. I thank them for their service and tell them next time I'll consider using walking sticks. I reflect again on the physical aspect of sadhana. I recall other major pilgrimage sites in India that demand significant effort. Take Arunachala Mountain, for example. Every month in the city of Tiruvannamalai in Tamil Nadu, hundreds of thousands gather to perform Girivalam Pradakshina (clockwise circumambulation of the sacred mountain). It's an eight-and-a-half-mile walk. Most people do it barefoot. Believe me, you don't want to know the temperature of the black asphalt during South India's scorching summer—it's hot enough to damage car tires. Yet occasionally, you might even observe a devotee completing the journey by rolling their body along the ground the entire way. During the Girnar Parikrama Festival, which draws thousands of pilgrims annually, people perform a similar circumambulation around Girnar Mountain as well.

Shrines and temples: *(left to right) a pathway along the rugged ridges; one of the larger temple complexes in the area, the 12th-century Jain Derasar; a young pilgrim's first visit to the hills; a group of pilgrims making their way up the path; one of the many sacred shrines carved in rock*

Another famous pilgrimage requiring significant effort is the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra, a journey to Mount Kailash in Tibet. This site is considered holy by Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and followers of the Bon religion. Known for its challenging conditions, this pilgrimage reaches altitudes of 18,500 feet. Some pilgrims perform the Kailash Parikrama (Kora), a 32-mile circumambulation of the mountain, typically completed over three or four days. Believers undertake these pilgrimages without hesitation, often bringing their children who begin absorbing the values of sadhana, tradition, and devotion from an early age.

Generations of Faith

A memorable interaction with a family from Bangalore—a mother and her two children—illustrates the complex layers of tradition and personal belief. I asked Shanaya Hebbar, the 23-year-old daughter, about her reason for making this journey. "I'm only doing it for

my Mom," she initially said. The mother explained, "We came to honor our ancestors, to bring them peace and ask forgiveness for our misdeeds." I asked Rohan, the 14-year-old brother, if he too was just there to please his mother. He replied firmly: "Not at all. I truly believe in this. I'm deeply connected to our tradition." "Yes, he loves it very much, he's very devoted," his mother added.

I asked Shanaya politely but perhaps a bit provocatively, "So I guess when you have children of your own, you wouldn't bring them here?" Silence filled the space. "Well,... I'm not sure about that; maybe I will." I could see how her certainty had softened into questioning, perhaps even openness. This moment reveals the profound power of tradition. Of course, children can rebel, but when confronted with the crucial moment of potentially breaking the chain of generations who came before them, they often hesitate and reconsider. Few want to be responsible for ending such a noble lineage.

This reflects the strength of Hindu family structure and its resilience. Families remain largely united within modern society. Elderly parents live with their children and grandchildren, who grow up breathing the oxygen of Hindu beliefs. While outer circumstances may change as India modernizes, we're still far from seeing any major collapse of Hindu tradition.

Philosophical Perspectives

Another meaningful encounter is with a family from Agra, a brother and two sisters in their forties. They are on a 15-day trip honoring their deceased father, accompanied by their father's attendant, who had worked for him for 40 years. These are highly educated people with extensive knowledge of Hinduism, philosophy and other belief systems, and they offer nuanced insights.

Vinay Chandra Seth explains, "We believe in the one Reality, Advaita Vedanta. While we respect rituals and various beliefs, we personally don't follow them strictly. We believe in moksha, liberation, and feel it may take many centuries to achieve it, so we hope for human rebirth, which is the optimal realm for reaching the goal."

Kirti Tandon, one of the sisters, adds another dimension: "Pilgrimage to holy places is like accumulating spiritual merit for a better reincarnation and ultimately reaching moksha." I ask about people unable to make the journey due to financial or health constraints, and Kirti is reassuring: "For those who can't afford to travel in India or go on pilgrimage, there are other ways to gain merit, like japa, bhakti, karma and yoga; yet those strongly called to pilgrimage might seek community support or donations to make their journey possible."

During our discussion about the essence of pilgrimage, they share a viewpoint I've also heard from many others, that pilgrimage is a great activity for people over 60, who have fulfilled their worldly duties and responsibilities: "It's a time to dedicate yourself to a higher, ultimate purpose." Vinay also explains the significance of the Char Dham, the four most sacred pilgrimage sites located near the four corners of India. You can read the Hinduism Today article about them here: nall.ai/char-dham

Paths to Enlightenment

Speaking of physical rigor, asceticism represents another form of exertion in sadhana. Physical endurance and mental discipline, such as practices involving self-restraint, like fasting, serve as pathways to spiritual goals. This aspect of sadhana, which involves effort

ALL PHOTOS: ANNE PETRY

From hilltop to hilltop: *(left to right) the stairs leading up to Amba Mata Temple; inside the temple; a woman makes her descent, having climbed to the top; a pilgrim meditates on the hilltop; (below) the panoramic view from one of the sacred shrines*

and striving, relates to the term *tapas,* practiced as a form of self discipline and purification. *Tapas* literally translates to "spiritual heat," symbolizing the process of demolishing one's *vasanas*—mental impressions and deep-rooted habits. Pilgrimage, when difficult, is also considered tapas.

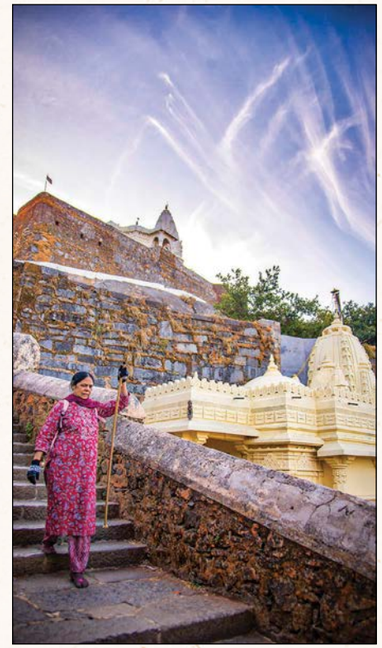
Prayashchitta, penance, is another significant and closely related concept for spiritual purification and atonement. Prayashchitta is seen as a way to cleanse oneself of negative karma (*papa*) accumulated through wrongdoings. The primary goal is personal transformation rather than punishment. It addresses negative karma from both current and past lives, preventing future negative karma by changing one's thoughts and actions. It can include things like meditation, fasting and dietary restrictions, pilgrimage to sacred sites, charitable acts and service, recitation of mantras, and ritual bathing. Underlying all these practices is the pursuit of spiritual progress, Self-realization and liberation.

Amba Mata Temple

As I continue ascending the stone steps of Girnar Mountain, I finally reach a central site of this journey. Located on Gabbar Hill—the first peak, approximately 5,000 stairs from the mountain's base—is the Amba Mata or Ambaji Temple. This site boasts a rich history dating back to the 8th century, with the earliest textual mention in 783 CE. The current temple structure, constructed in the 15th century, is an architectural marvel of simple yet elegant design, made of white marble and featuring gold cones. The temple is dedicated to Mother Goddess Amba, believed to be a manifestation of the Goddess Durga.

Some say this site has been worshiped since pre-Vedic times. It is considered one of the revered Shakti Pithas of India—Hindu temples dedicated to various forms of the Goddess Shakti, also known as Devi or the Divine Mother. Legend has it that Sage Vyasa, said to have composed the *Mahabharata,* meditated here. Another tale tells of a shepherd boy discovering the Goddess's murti on Gabbar Hill, leading to the temple's establishment.

Pilgrims consider this a powerful center of spiritual energy. They believe visiting brings blessings, protection and spiritual upliftment. The temple is especially popular among newlyweds seeking blessings for a happy marriage. Their presence adds a festive atmosphere—seeing all these young couples with sparks in their eyes as they take their first steps toward what they hope will be long and meaningful relationships.



Bridging Past and Present

Modern progress and technology have transformed Girnar Mountain's accessibility. For centuries accessible mainly to the physically fit, the site now offers a cable car station at the mountain's base, which provides a 7,600-foot ride that saves visitors a climb of 5,000 stairs and delivers them very close to the Amba Mata Temple. It's heartwarming to see elderly visitors and those with physical limitations step off the cable car, realizing they're nearly at their desired destination.

From this point, porters (also known as bearers) are available. Two porters are needed to carry one person, who sits in a specially designed chair attached to wooden poles resting on the porters' shoulders. Given the climb's demanding nature, the porters use a supporting stick that allows them to rest by placing it under the main poles, temporarily relieving their shoulders of the load. These porters enable disabled individuals to reach a holy place, providing them the opportunity to complete their long-awaited pilgrimage. And although they are paid for their service, I cannot help thinking that this is their form of sadhana.

Temples of the Peaks

The mountain's summit reveals a breathtaking panorama of spiritual landmarks. Atop one peak sits the Kalika Temple, a shrine dedicated to Goddess Kali, drawing devotees seeking protection and inner strength.

The view opens my heart wide. With no warning, I notice the most impressive sight I could ask for—the Dattatreya Temple, perched alone on a triangular pointed rock at the mountain's highest peak! Its isolation speaks volumes. Standing apart from mundane affairs, it vibrates with an extraordinary stillness and calm. I have seen The Crown Jewel.

This holy site, one of Hinduism's most revered, is dedicated to Guru Dattatreya. It reportedly houses sacred footprints of the sage, enhancing its spiritual significance. The architecture reminds me of an eastern pagoda, giving it a universal, timeless quality, as if quietly inviting me to join it in this serene state. The walk there is pretty long. On an intermediate peak, I discover another significant site—a temple dedicated to Gorakhnath, a revered saint in Hindu tradition associated with yogic practices. This temple attracts followers of the Natha sects, adding another layer to the mountain's rich spiritual tapestry.

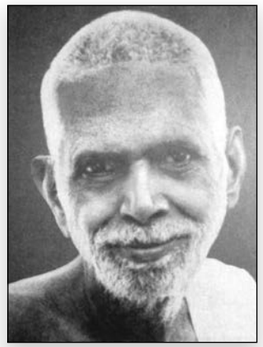
With a bit more to go, the path descends before the final climb. My feet move on their own now. I witness my body being led by something greater as I take the final steps. The five-hour journey culminates when I set foot on the 9,999th step. The experience feels not like a triumph nor an achievement but simply a profound sense of rightness. Being here among the clouds, I recognize myself as a small part of this unique pilgrimage, a mere speck in a broader picture.

All good things come to an end. It's time to go back. As I descend, I pass again all the sites, temples and views. I pass by the porters, the group in matching kurtas, retracing the path that has become much more than a physical journey. A sense of gratitude to life arises, for allowing me to be physically fit to take this adventure.

Reflections

At the mountain's base, memories of the day's encounters flood my mind. I realize something remarkable. My path has intersected with countless others, and we all share something precious in common—we have climbed the sacred Girnar Mountain together on the same day. Despite our different backgrounds, languages, and motivations, we have all experienced a glimpse of the Divine and a feeling of profound unity.

Even a journey of ten thousand stairs begins with a single step. As the day comes to an end and the mountain's silhouette fades into dusk, I realize that Girnar is more than just a geographical location; it's a living testament to the resilience of spirit and tradition. Physical challenges meet metaphysical quest. Each step of the way represents not just a movement upward, but a journey inward.



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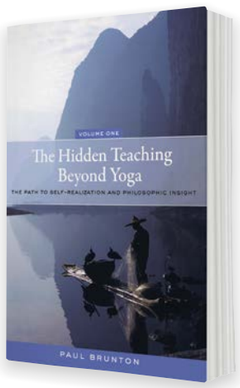

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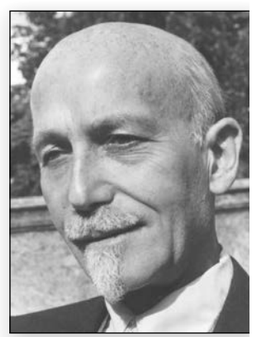

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Gurudeva started his teaching mission in 1957 in downtown San Francisco in a rented room on Sutter Street. From the beginning, a major part of his teaching mission was publishing his writings. The Guru Chronicles gives this description: "Knowing the innate power of the press and having a lifelong affinity for the newest gadget and techie tool, he bought a mimeograph machine, which was used for printing schedules, talks and programs as well as the first editions of his books Raja Yoga and Gems of Wisdom, the center's first publications. Gurudeva learned to use the machine himself and then introduced it to his monks. He would later tell his monks of cranking out tracts and pamphlets late into the night, hands stained with the bluish-purple dyes of a messy, smelly technology. It was the humble beginning of his lifetime of publishing."

In the 1960s Gurudeva opened Skandamalai Monastery in Virginia City, Nevada, in a spacious building which had originally been the Old Nevada Brewery. It provided space for the next phase of his publication endeavors. The Guru Chronicles explains: "Gurudeva bought out a printing business in Oakland and had all its equipment—a functioning shop—moved to Virginia City. By 1968 the Skandamalai Monastery became a humming, productive, professional printing and publishing center. Gurudeva turned out one small book after another, and the monks worked day and night to print and bind them."

A third phase of publishing started in 1985 at Kauai's Hindu Monastery. Again The Guru Chronicles provides the story: "Late one afternoon in 1985 Gurudeva entered a little computer store in the historic town of Kapaa. After playing with a state-of-the-art Macintosh for a while, he bought one for himself." He soon realized its tremendous potential for use in his publishing mission, buying one for each monk.

The convenience of in-house desktop publishing would soon lead to the production of a series of pamphlets which were distributed freely. Gurudeva gave this description of the program: "Jnana Dana, 'wisdom giving,' became a very popular literature distribution program in the 1980s, when hundreds of thousands of pamphlets were distributed in a hundred countries by devotees and temple management committees."

The monks take great joy in continuing this tradition of freely giving away our publications to Hindu temples and visitors as well as individuals. Currently our most popular giveaway is "14 Questions People Ask About Hinduism," which addresses common queries, such as why do Hindus have so many Gods, what is karma, are Hindus idol worshipers, do Hindus have a Bible and why do Hindus worship cows. Misconceptions about Hinduism are a universal phenomenon, even among Hindus. Students, teachers, neighbors and friends all benefit from these thoughtful answers.

To help the monks distribute free literature, you can donate to the "Sponsored Literature" option at donate.himalayanacademy.com/ donate.php. There is also an opportunity to give to the Himalayan Academy Publications Endowment at bit.ly/Gifttopublicationsendowment.

The endowment allows the monastery to use your funds as an investment and draw on the grant income over time. This way your donation's impact endures into perpetuity.

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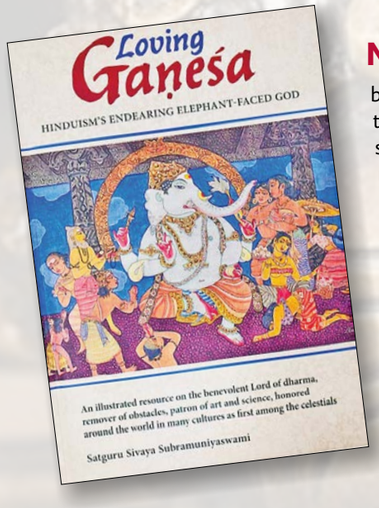

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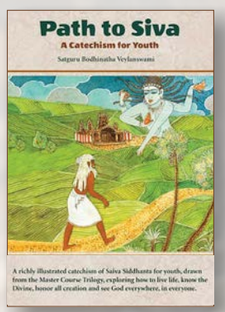

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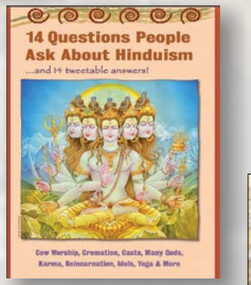

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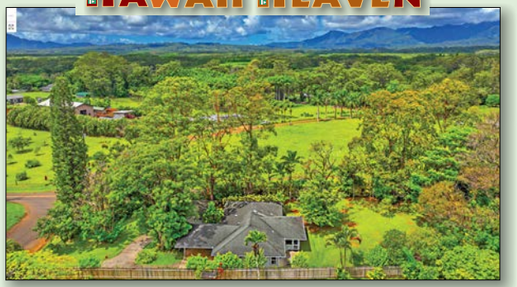

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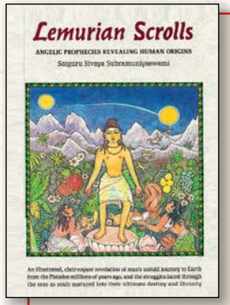

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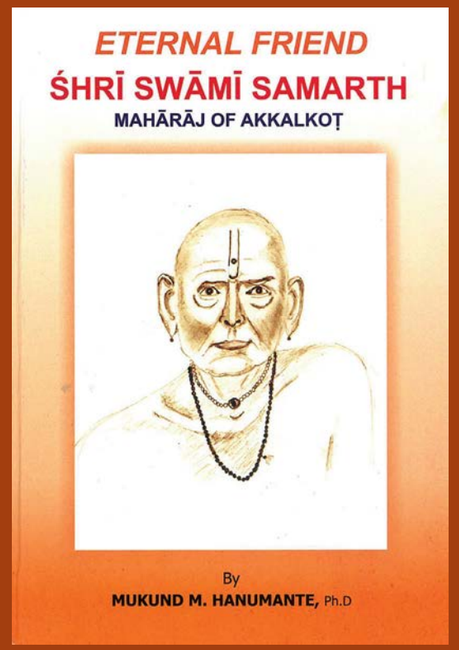

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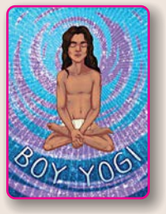

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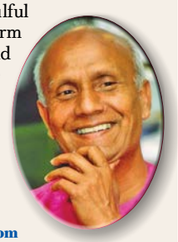

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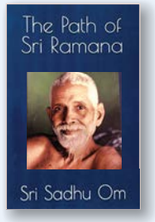

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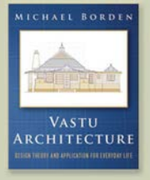

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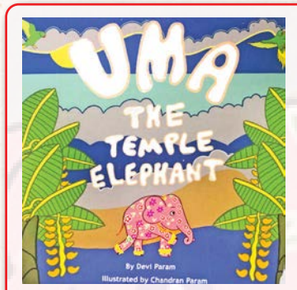

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Thou art the eye
of the Central Sun.

Thy One Glance
Lifted a little boy
Out of the abyss of agony
And onto the shores
Of Tranquility.

Thy One Glance
Turned a torrent of desires
Into a drought-ridden
River bed.

As endless stresses, strains,
Tensions and frictions
Make the car to move,
So the young soul grows
Among endless trials.

" Draw My Light,
Bask in My Radiance,
My child.
Your life's equation
will devolve into
the Truth."

My Lord,
Where shines Thy Vel,
Perishes darkness.

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