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HINDUISM TODAY

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



Chennai Street Festival

Each Year Thousands Gather for
the Community Kolam Art Event



CanadaCAD 10
India.INR 150

Malaysia.....MYR 14
Mauritius . . MRU 115

Singapore.....SGD 10
UK.GBP 5



RAJEN MANICK

(Cover) Spectators at Chennai's annual kolam festival view the finished designs as the winners are announced; (above) priest offers the purnahuti during the annual the Ganesha Chaturthi festival at the Spiritual Park in Rempart, Mauritius

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Kerala Mural Art Thrives In a Modern World

Hear from some of today's most recognized mural artists as they give us a glimpse into their work, which fuses craft and spirituality. Page 18...

Painter Sasi Edavarad depicts Sri Rama's Pattabhishekam, or coronation ceremony. Here we see Rama being ritually bathed in the center with Sita seated to his left. They are surrounded by other characters of the *Ramayana* epic, including ascetics, monkeys and members of the royal court.

GLOBAL DHARMA

WORSHIP

Temples Are Being Built and Renewed Despite Lockdown

ARAGING PANDEMIC HAS done little to impact the opening of new Hindu temples in various parts of the world. Ireland saw the opening of the Vedic Hindu Cultural Centre in Dublin on August 22, after two decades of persistent effort by the Hindu community. The worship had previously been conducted in temporary premises. "It is a proud moment for us as an Indian community that we now have a Hindu temple to perform our religious rituals in a land away from home," Ravinandan Pratap Singh, a local NRI, told [timesnownews.com](https://www.timesnownews.com).

This is one of only three Hindu temples in the country, joining the Vinayaka Temple in Dublin and the Hindu Temple and Indian Community Centre in Donega. As well, there is a Ramakrishna Mission in Dublin. There are 25,000 Hindus in Ireland, just half a percent of the overall 4.9-million population.

About three weeks earlier, on July 29, the Shree Salasar Mandir was dedicated in Padua,

Italy, just outside Venice, Italy. This temple is dedicated to Lord Hanuman in the form of Salasar Balaji. The back story is that in 1754 a farmer in the village of Asota near the city of Salasar in Rajasthan, India, found a murti of Hanuman in his field, and it was later enshrined in a temple.

According to Venice restaurant owner Pankaj Sharma, about 1,000 Hindus live near the new temple, and many of the 400,000 Indian tourists normally visiting Venice each year take a side trip to Padua. Some have not returned home on account of the pandemic, and the temple gives them a connection to India and Hinduism as well.

In Melbourne, Australia, the year 2020 marked the completion of several years' work to improve the Sri Vakrathunda Vinayagar Temple. The US\$3 million project focused on replacing the central shrine, ten ancillary shrines and rooftop vimanam with elegantly carved granite edifices brought from India. Carving work for the



From Ireland to Australia: (above) The north-Indian style Vedic Hindu Cultural Centre in Dublin; (below) a new granite central shrine at Ganesha Temple in Melbourne

improvements had been going on in India since 2018, under the direction of Stapathi Purushothama, the main architect. He and 20 artisans arrived in Australia a week before March 20, just as the country shut down.

The temple was closed to the public, but construction was allowed to continue. The absence of devotees made it easier for the artisans to complete their work. In all, they placed 1,200 stones, weighing from a few hundred pounds to six tons.

With the work finished, the kumbhabhishekam consecration was set for June, but then postponed due to the pandemic.



INDIA

School's Tree Project Honored

THE GURUKULAM MATRICULATION school in Ooty, western Tamil Nadu, won the "Green Apple Environment Award" from UK-based The Green

Organization for its "One Student, One Tree" program started in 2008. The rural school at this popular hill station was established to provide

English-medium education to the children of local farmers.

The New Indian Express quotes school spokesperson N. Arjunan, "This scheme motivates our students to continue to plant a tree every year throughout their lives. The inspiring

scheme won against some 500 entries worldwide, and we are the only one from India to get this credit. The award will motivate us to pursue our green projects with extra zeal." India's former president APJ Abdul Kalam also praised the project.

ENVIRONMENT

Germany Leads Europe in Turning Away from Meat

A STUDY PUBLISHED IN THE scientific journal *Foods* (bit.ly/GermanyVegan) has discovered that just 45% of Germans questioned said they eat meat "without restraint"—putting them in the minority for the first time. Already 11% are full vegetarian. By comparison, 68.5% of French participants said they eat meat "without restraint." Both numbers indicate there is still a huge number of carnivores in these neighboring countries, but the downward trend is remarkable.

One of the study's lead authors, Christopher Bryant of Bath University, England, told the *Guardian* newspaper, "The social implications [of the German

numbers] here are potentially quite profound. The view that being a carnivore is 'normal' is part of the lay moral reasoning for continuing to eat meat. But once that is a minority view, and meat replacement options become cheaper and tastier, the trend is likely to continue in one direction."

The *Guardian* also quotes Christian Kuper, who gave up a career in management consulting to start the Vincent Vegan chain that sells plant-based burgers at shopping malls in Berlin and, appropriately enough, Hamburg (whence the ground cow patty in a bun gained its name). He chose shopping malls,



Cow-less burgers: Not necessarily the healthiest meal, but Vincent Vegan burgers are part of a Europe-wide meat-free trend

he told the *Guardian*, because "We wanted to go straight into the mainstream—we knew that is where the demand will be."

Curiously enough, Bryant's study was not about vegetarianism as such, but

about the likely acceptance of cultured (ie, lab-grown) meat. The study found a third of the French and a majority of Germans would buy lab-grown meat, citing concern for both animal welfare and climate.

UNITED KINGDOM

Stolen Deities Returned

THREE SMALL MURTIS OF LORD Ram, Sita and Lakshmana stolen 40 years ago have been recovered after years of work by the India Pride Project. Dedicated to recovering just such artifacts, one of their members spotted the Rama murti on the website of the British Antique Dealers' Association and ultimately identified it as belonging to a 15th-century temple built during the Vijayanagara

Empire. Having located a 1958 photo of the missing Deities archived at the French Institute of Pondicherry, they worked with local police in India and London and successfully confirmed the identity of all three statues. The dealer holding them willingly turned them over to the High Commission of India. Had they been sold, they could have fetched millions of dollars, according to a BBC report.



Heading home: The 500-year-old statues of Rama, Lakshmana and Sita were recovered, but not the Hanuman originally with them

PANDEMIC

Bali Reopens too Soon

WHEN INDONESIA SHUT down in April on account of the pandemic, Bali had few cases, but its tourism-based economy came to a standstill. Thinking the island somehow immune from the pandemic, local officials decided to open Bali to domestic tourists on July 31. Soon they were receiving 4,000 a day—and Covid-19 cases rose fivefold, according to a report by ABC News Australia.

Most visitors came from the nearby island of Java, which has had the highest infection and death rates in all of Indonesia.

By the end of December, new lockdowns were imposed across Indonesia. Designated crematoriums in Bali went from cremating one body a day to a dozen. A priest offers the final prayers, and a limited number of family members are allowed to watch from nearby.



By the dozen a day: This crematorium in Bangli is one of the few in Bali able to safely deal with victims of the pandemic

Assessing Yogananda's Impact a Century Later

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO, on September 19, 1920, the Indian yogi and guru Paramahansa Yogananda arrived in Boston as the Indian delegate for the Unitarian Conference of Religious Liberals. Yogananda's arrival, along with an earlier visit by another Indian teacher, Swami Vivekananda, began yoga's rise on these shores into a major industry, as well as one of the most significant examples of syncretism—a religious and cultural mash-up—in the history of the West.

Yogananda's Self-Realization Fellowship eventually offered as many as 800 temples, ashrams and retreats in 60 countries. Its blend of traditional Hindu practice with the American self-help culture resulted in the flowering of earlier movements such as Transcendentalism and New Thought. Yogananda combined pop-culture stardom with an approach to faith that emphasized a personal consciousness of the Divine, and the fundamental unity of all spiritual paths, over

specific dogma or doctrine.

Humankind's goal was "knowing in all parts of body, mind and soul," he wrote, "that you are now in possession of the kingdom of God; that you do not have to pray that it will come to you; that God's omnipresence is your omnipresence; and that all you need to do is improve your knowing."

Yogananda created a new model for pop spirituality. A bestselling author, his 1946 *Autobiography of a Yogi* has sold over four million copies and was distributed at Steve Jobs' funeral by order of the Apple founder himself.

According to one attendee at Steve Jobs' funeral, Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff, the implicit message behind the gift of Yogananda's book was "Actualize yourself." Jobs, according to Benioff, "had this incredible realization that his intuition was his greatest gift. He needed to look at (the) world from (the) inside out ... his message was to look inside yourself and realize yourself."



Paramahansa Yogananda: One of the early pioneers bringing Hindu thought to the West through his writings and speeches

A century on, Yogananda's project of self-realization, and his vision of a unifying spiritual force, is more powerful than ever. Indeed, as more and more Americans join the ranks of the

religiously unaffiliated, or spiritually remixed, this might just be our new civil religion. *Excerpted from Religion News Service report by Tara Isabella Burton.*

World Religions (bit.ly/UN-call). It has an excellent section by Dr. Kusumita Pedersen on the teachings of the world religions on creation and the environment. Among several points, all agreed that: "The natural world itself has value beyond serving human needs, and non-human creatures have moral significance."

RAGHUNATH TEMPLE IN SRINAGAR is being rebuilt, three decades after being heavily damaged by Islamic terrorists in the campaign to push the Hindu Kashmir Pandits out of the Valley. The temple, dedicated to Lord Rama, was completed in 1860.

ONE CONSEQUENCE OF THE Covid-19 pandemic has been a "large reduction" in missionary work by the Catholic Church,

according to a report in *Religion News Service* quoting a priest, Martin Lasarte. Also, Europe is witnessing an accelerated decline in Catholic faithful, who find "life is very comfortable" without having to attend church weekly, according to Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich. Lasarte said he took comfort in the "few, but good" approach and believes "Christianity still has a future."

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IN MY OPINION

Prisoners Chanting Mantras

Recounting the unexpectedly positive impact of simple Hindu chants with women inmates

BY SWAMINI VISHWAPRATIBHA MA

Hinduism can be intimidating with its plethora of source books, sampradayas and gurus. But there is one Hindu gift that everyone can benefit from immediately, and that's *japa*, or chanting mantras.

Before becoming a Vaishnava swamini in the Sri Sampradaya founded by Sri Ramanuja

Acharya, I was a freelance writer. I was hired by Social Services here in Canada to write life histories for foster kids. I wrote hundreds of stories of abandonment, abuse and pain. I wove in spiritual wisdom here and there to help these kids learn the lessons from their lives and hopefully forgive the people they felt had harmed them.

I wanted desperately to help them before they, too, grew up to be abusive parents. I felt that somewhere in Hinduism there could be an easy solution, but I realized I had to "fix" myself first. I spent years in India observing sannyas and was made a swamini by my guru, Paramahansa Vishwananda.

As soon as I arrived back in Canada, I resumed volunteering at the prison for kids, hoping to help in some way. Guruji told me to teach them "Om Namo Narayanaya." It didn't matter if these kids believed in "God." The chant, itself, was God and would help them.

The first young woman I taught had been in the system her whole life. She had run away from foster care and was now in jail for a crime she said she didn't commit. I met her the night before she was to appear in court. She had refused legal counsel, telling me, "I don't trust adults. I want my day in court, I want to defend myself."

"Then you need to learn this chant," I replied. We spent our hour together playing Jenga (making a tower of small blocks, then removing one by one) and chanting together. She won.

"I want to chant this forever!" She declared. She was absolutely radiating. I assured her it would change her life. She thanked me and



was led away. A few days later the prison contacted me to say she had successfully defended herself in court and had been set free.

Week by week, more teenagers learned to chant. Some weren't interested and just wanted a kind soul to talk to. Others immediately asked about my Vaishnava tilak and the orange clothes and

were excited to learn to chant. The guards and staff noticed a gentle change coming over the prison population and asked if I could do something similar in the women's prison.

I suggested an ancient healing technique done by rishis: chanting Om. There are thousands of Om chanting circles active around the world created by Paramahansa Vishwananda and His guru, Mahavatar Babaji.

Participation is free, simple and open to all regardless of religious affiliation. The bonus is that it influences a radius of two kilometers outside the circle, rebalancing people without them even being aware. The prison agreed and scheduled an evening for the First Nations women inmates. The event consisted of Om chanting, followed by a Native American drumming circle.

When the night arrived, the shy aboriginal women were led in and I arranged them in two circles, one inside the other. And we chanted. As the sound of "Om" filled the room and drifted out into the corridors, into the cell blocks, I felt Lord Krishna smile. My prison liaison admitted he was surprised how all the women relaxed and became calm. He asked one inmate how she felt and she replied in amazement, "Happy!" That is not an easy emotion to experience in prison. We have all lived in prisons of our own creation. But we can chant wherever we are and set ourselves free.

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BRIEFLY...

DEVI MANDIR'S NAPA TEMPLE WAS burned to the ground in August by one of California's major forest fires this year. Some of the residents fled the recently built ashram with only the clothes on their back as rapidly shifting winds brought the fire to them.

THE YEAR 2020 MARKS THE 100th anniversary of the birth of Ram Swarup, one of the great Hindu thinkers of the 20th century. He wrote in 1992: "Hinduism satisfies man's deepest spiritual and ethical urges. It has developed different methods that facilitate growth into a more meaningful, unitive and intuitive life. It is pluralist, compassionate and

nonviolent in temper. In fact, it has all that man seeks in his deeper being, and it is the product of this seeking."

BARON'S PALACE IN CAIRO, EGYPT, also known as the "Hindu Palace," was designed and built in 1911 by a French architect after the style of temples in Orissa and Angkor Wat and served as the home of a Belgian billionaire. The Egyptian government acquired the dilapidated (and reportedly haunted) building in 2005, and just opened it after extensive renovations.

THE BOOK FAITH FOR EARTH—A Call for Action has been released by the UN and Parliament of



Our Daily Modes of Consciousness

Ancient texts teach us a way to comprehend the mysteries of mind, describing four fundamental states of consciousness

BY SATGURU BODHINATHA VEYLANSWAMI

THE POPULAR VIEW OF HINDUISM POR- trays a religion centered around ceremonies drawn from the ancient *Vedas* and *Agamas*, rites meant to in- voke the presence of Divinity through dif- ferent Deities. That description, however, disregards Hinduism’s deeper teachings, such as its ancient insights regarding the mind’s four states of consciousness. The oldest writing that contains the states of mind is the *Chandogya Upanishad*, vari- ously dated around the 8th to 6th century bce. Many people are amazed to learn that over 2,500 years ago, India’s rishis were re- vealing insights on the states of consciousness experienced by human beings. The same ideas are expanded on in 12 verses of the *Mandukya Upanishad*, dated around seven centuries later.



These four modes of mind, called *avasta* in Sanskrit, are: *jagrat* (or *vaishvanara*), wakefulness; *swapna* (or *tajjasa*), dreaming; *sushupti* (or *prajna*), deep sleep; and *turiya*, “the fourth,” superconsciousness or samadhi.

A Wikipedia contributor makes this comment on these teachings from the *Upanishads*: “Distinctions in types of awareness appear in the ancient thought of India, influenced by Hinduism. A central idea of the *Upanishads* is the distinction between a person’s transient, mundane self and their eternal, unchanging soul. Divergent Hindu doctrines, and Buddhism, have challenged this hierarchy of selves, but have all emphasized the importance of reaching higher awareness. Yoga is a range of techniques used in pursuit of this goal.”

Let’s look at each of these four states in more detail. In the wak- ing state the atman, or soul, has a limited sense of self and is con- scious of and experiences external objects. In the dreaming state, the atman has the same limited sense of self while being conscious of and experiencing his mental landscape and the astral world. In deep sleep, awareness of objects is absent, some of the limited self-sense is overcome and a deeper peace is experienced. In the fourth state, the atman abides in its full spiritual nature. Then the individual is omni- present, without any sense of something existing apart from him. We can think of this as living in a house with three rooms: one for wake- fulness, one for dreaming and a third for deep sleep. As long as we remain in the house, our consciousness is limited. However, if we step outside, we can remove this limitation and experience ourselves as omnipresent consciousness.

The first two verses of *Mandukya Upanishad* (translation by Swami Nikhilananda) present this idea of oneness in terms of atma, Brahman and Aum.



1. Aum, the word, is all this [i.e. the whole uni- verse]. A clear explanation of it is as follows: All that is past, present and future is, indeed,

Aum. And whatever else there is, beyond the threefold division of time—that also is truly Aum.

2. All this is, indeed, Brahman. This Atman is Brahman. This same Atman has four quarters (*padas*).

The statement “This Atman is Brahman” (*‘Ayam atma Brahma’* in Sanskrit) is one of the four Mahavakya, great statements, of the *Upanishads*, declaring the oneness of Atman and Brahman.

Reaching Turiya with Aum

The *Mundaka Upanishad* states that Aum can be used as a means of realizing this oneness. “Aum is the bow; the Atman is the arrow; Brahman is said to be the mark. It is to be struck by an undistracted mind. Then the Atman becomes one with Brahman, as the arrow with the target.” Certainly one way of utilizing Aum as a bow is through its repetition as a mantra, a practice of japa yoga. My Gurudeva, Sivaya Subramu- niyaswami, explains this practice in the “Cognizantability” resource section of his book *Merging with Siva*.

“The Seventieth Aphorism: To aid in the depolarization and trans- mutation of creative forces, certain mantras are chanted. These logi- cally concentrate the conscious mind, harmonize its subconscious and magnetize the brain. This draws the creative forces from the instinc- tive to the intellectual and superconscious regions.”

“The Seventy-First Aphorism: The letters A-U-M, when correctly chanted, transmute the instinctive to the intellectual, and the instinc- tive-intellectual to the superconscious. Direct cognition will then be attained.”

Gurudeva commented on this aphorism: “Aum is the universal mantra which can be performed safely by the initiated and the unin- itiated alike, under any condition, in any circumstance, whether the body is clean or dirty. It will heighten consciousness by harmonizing the physical with the mental and spiritual when chanted correctly.”

Gurudeva explained that for the repetition of Aum to be effective as a mantra, it must be pronounced correctly. The first syllable is A, pronounced as the English word “awe,” but prolonged: “aaa.” The sec- ond syllable is U, as in “roof,” pronounced “oo,” but prolonged: “ooo.” The third syllable is M, pronounced “mm” with the front teeth gen- tly touching and the sound prolonged: “mmmm.” Each repetition is sounded for about seven seconds, with two seconds on A, two sec- onds on U and three seconds on M, with a silence of about two sec- onds before the next repetition. The three syllables are run together: AAUUMM (silence), AAUUMM (silence), AAUUMM (silence). On the first syllable, A, we feel the solar plexus and chest vibrating. On the second syllable, U, the throat vibrates. The third syllable, M,



SHUTTERSTOCK

vibrates the top of the head.

The *Mandukya Upanishad* (verses 9–12) draws a clear correlation between the “quarters” of Aum and the four modes of consciousness, supporting Gurudeva’s teaching of using the parts of Aum to move to more subtle levels of being.

9. Vaishvanara Atman, whose sphere of activity is the waking state, is A, the first letter [of Aum], on account of his all-pervasiveness or on account of his being the first. He who knows this obtains all desires and becomes first [among the great].
10. Tajjasa Atman, whose sphere of activity is the dream state, is U, the second letter [of Aum], on account of his superiority or intermediateness. He who knows this attains a superior knowl- edge, receives equal treatment from all, and finds in his family no one ignorant of Brahman.
11. Prajna Atman, whose sphere is deep sleep, is M, the third let- ter [of Aum], because both are the measure and also because in them all become one. He who knows this is able to measure all and also comprehends all within himself.
12. The Fourth [Turiya] is without parts and without relationship; It is the cessation of phenomena; It is all good and nondual. This Aum is verily Atman. He who knows this merges his self and Atman—yea, he who knows this. (Without parts means without sound. Turiya is the soundless Aum.)

In *Cognizantability*, when Gurudeva mentions moving from the instinctive to the intellectual mind, he is speaking of raising our state of consciousness. For example, fear is a negative emotion that we can rise above through a few minutes of chanting Aum. We can move

- Wakefulness, Jagrat
- Dreaming, Swapna
- Deep Sleep, Sushupti
- Superconsciousness, Turiya

Mindfulness: An artist portrays the brain and its consciousness graphically as blue eggs in a nest of twigs. The four states and their Sanskrit names are on the right.

from an agitated state of mind to a peaceful one in the same way. Anger can be transmuted into forgiveness as well—all through the power of Aum. If an individual is in a negative state of consciousness, he can move to a positive state. Chanting the mantra Aum is only one of many practices that Hinduism gives us for accomplishing this.

Gurudeva points out elsewhere in *Merging with Siva*: “Generally people take problems too personally by identifying closely with them. When they experience anger, they are angry. When they experience bliss, they are blissful. The mystic identifies with the experiencer instead of the experience. He sees himself as pure awareness that travels in the mind. When he is in San Francisco, he is not San Fran- cisco. Similarly, when he is in anger, he is not anger. He says to himself, ‘I am pure energy. I am the spiritual energy that floods through mind and body. I am not the body, the mind or the emotions. I am not the thoughts I think or the experiences I experience.’ Thus, he molds a new identity of himself as a free being who can travel anywhere in the mind. Such a person is always at the top of the mountain.

“We have to examine this concept of who we are. When we begin to totally feel all right about ourself, the meaning of the word ‘I’ begins to change. ‘I’ no longer means the body of us. ‘I’ means energy, aware- ness and willpower. Soon we gain the total truth that we are living in the body, but we are not the body we live in. Examine the word ‘I,’ and honestly see what it means to you.”



LETTERS

Reaching Out in Covid Times

I have subscribed to HINDUISM TODAY magazine for two years now and find it inspiring and vivifying to my faith, although I am living in a nursing home at age 79 and am limited therefore in my ability to practice. However, my inner life is rich with devotion to Shiva, and I find japa-mala meditation to be a source of loving peace. My life has been fulfilled and transformed by my relationship of devotion to Shiva. In the overflowing of love for Him, I felt compelled by the nature of these pandemic times to express my devotion and to share a blog expressing my somewhat nontraditional, yet sincere, approach, thinking that it could be helpful to Westerners: www.this-happened.blog

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The Fetish Over Fair Skin

I want to expression my appreciation for your recent publication of Anu Kumar's excellent piece on discriminatory attitudes towards darker skin. Looking forward to more articles from this astute, affirming and globally aware young writer.

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2020 Hindus of the Year

At the onset I would like to congratulate Ms. Choodie Shivaram for her article "Our 2020 Hindus of the Year" in the October/November/December 2020 issue. Ms. Shivaram has done an extensive research work and data collection on the Dikshitar community, the priests of Chidambaram Temple. The quest to know who are these Dikshitar, their mythological background, historical background and touching base with the continuity of the age-old traditions in today's world is outstanding. This article makes us realize how enriched our Hinduism is. On the other hand, it makes us sad that we are leaving our traditions, surrendering ourselves to the negative onslaught of pseudo globalization and modernization. I took special note of the author's description of the temple management, with nine administrators and their democratic system of election. This, as an archaeologist, reminds me of the well-known Uttarameruru Inscription of Parantaka I of the Chola dynasty, which specifies the local government and its democratic way of electing council members. The same thousand-year-old democratic system is still being practiced in this South Indian hamlet.

This article in particular, and the journal

HINDUISM TODAY in general, has been a great reflection of our Hindu tradition and culture. It has reminded me to be grounded to our ancient roots and helped me to spiritually elate my thoughts while practicing Bharatanatyam, the classical dance of India, as well as in my Indological research.

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Our Rivers Are Suffering

I read with interest Tulasi Srinivas' article, "Bathing the Gods in Bottled Water?" (HINDUISM TODAY, Oct/Nov/Dec, 2020). It is indeed sad and disappointing to learn about the pollution of our sacred rivers, and I sincerely hope that a concerted effort is being made to address the pollution issues. According to *Chandogya Upanishad*, "All this is Brahman" ("Sarvam Khalvidam Brahman"), which includes our sacred rivers as well. Mountains, trees, rivers, animals and humans have in them a common, yet multiple, life and are guided by conscious beings who are the attendants of the Earth Goddess, which again is a manifestation of Brahman. According to *Kalika Purana*, "We cannot know when looking at a lifeless shell that it contains a living being. Similarly, within the apparently inanimate rivers and mountains there dwells hidden a genie. Rivers and mountains take the forms they wish."

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Shri Tulsidas

The article on Sree Tulsidas, as published in the HINDUISM TODAY April/May/June 2020 edition, narrates: "Rambola (Tulsidas) utterly adored Ratnavali (his wife). Once, upon returning from a trip and realizing that she had gone to her parents' home (a common custom for young brides), he rushed to be with her. Amar Chitra Katha comics portray him using a corpse as a raft to cross a river, and mistaking a snake for a rope while climbing up to her window. Once he and his wife were face to face, she was so stunned by his intense dedication to her that Ratnavali reminds him of the impermanence of earthly love. She explains that while the body is a temporary reality of bones covered with skin, the love of Rama lives on forever. Shocked to the core upon hearing such wisdom from his wife, Rambola sets out on the path to Truth."

There is a similar account in the life of Saint Bilvamangala. As per the *Encyclopedia of Gaudiya History*, "Although born in a South Indian brahmana family, Sri Bilvamangala Thakura fell down with a prostitute

named Cintamani, who ultimately satisfied his deepest desire. He became attached and rabid with lust. Even immediately after performing the sraddha rituals for his deceased father he ran to enjoy her. A raging storm and tossing waves could not deter him. In lustful delusion, he held a corpse to cross a turbulent river. Finding the gate locked, he scaled the wall by grabbing a cobra, which he foolishly saw as a rope. Seeing Bilvamangala soaking wet, burning with desire, totally exhausted, Chintamani advised him, 'You're so much attached to this lowly bag of flesh and bones. Better you become attached to serving the blissful Lord Govinda. Go to Vrindavana, and there you will find complete satisfaction and eternal happiness.'"

You will note that the two stories describe almost identical situations. I used to think these saints were one and the same because of the stories. Can you confirm that they are indeed two different devotees born in different times and places?

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Tulsidas and Bilvamangal are indeed two different saints. Tulsi was a Rama bhakta, while Bilvamangal was a devotee of Krishna. There are many common motifs in the stories of Hindu saints, and I believe this is a case of that. As these stories get passed down orally through the centuries, key incidents sometimes get "recycled" over time, simply to show the greatness of the saint and evoke bhakti in the hearts of the listeners. To ensure that our portrayal of a saint is as accurate as can be, we reference and quote widely accepted sources such as Bhaktirasabodhini and Amar Chitra Katha. Hope this helps!
Lakshmi Chandrashekar Subramanian

Pashupata Saivism

Jay Shivling! This is a letter about an article from quite a while back ("Pashupata Saivism," March 1994). According to the *Shiva Purana*, Lakulish was born around the times of Krishna, i.e., nearly 4,500 years ago, and not, as the author states, around 200 CE. This latter dating is a serious mistake, repeated after Indologists, that goes both against the scripture and tradition. Further, there is no connection between Pashupata yoga and Gorakhnath as some scholars believe. The founder of the Nath school, to which that Mahayogi belonged, was Adinath, or Lord Shiv Himself. Similarly, the Virashaiv school has developed independently. It was reformed into the Agamic tradition by Panchacharya Jagadgurus, beginning with Renukacharya, who lived during the times of *Ramayan* (end of Treta Yuga). Before that, a succession of its teachers goes back to the Upanishadic period



(end of Sat Yuga) and belongs to the Vedic Puranic tradition. Otherwise, the article provides interesting information on pre- and post-Lakulish Pashupata yoga.

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Who Is a Brahmin?

In regard to the article "Who Is a Brahmin" (HINDUISM TODAY October/November/December 2020), while the page is profound, the subtitle is both misleading and counter to what the Upanishad says. The subtitle is "What is it that truly distinguishes someone as being of the priestly caste." As we well know, the priestly class specializes in and performs religious rituals. Such rituals are neither necessary nor sufficient to realize the Self, as Shankara would attest; although they probably are an anvil to discipline the mind and focus it. The main message of this Upanishad has been stated elsewhere as *brahman charati iti brahmana*: "The one who pursues Brahman, the Ultimate Reality, is Brahmin"—is belied by reducing the Brahmin to a mere member of the priestly class.

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In This Topsy-Turvy Time, Two Things That Will Not Change

Help HINDUISM TODAY remind the world of Hinduism's salutary teachings & practices

WE ASKED OUR PUBLISHER, SATGURU Bodhinatha Veylanswami, how our current turbulent times compare with other difficult periods of the past. "This time is uniquely intense," he answered. "Virtually everyone everywhere is facing an unprecedented number of challenges, all at the same time. An unrelenting pandemic has impacted millions directly and disrupted the lives of countless more. People are having to adapt to loss of income or livelihood, staying home and reorganizing their lives in a multitude of ways. Powerful social movements and political polarities are growing around the world. Natural disasters are proliferating: super storms, wildfires, floods, sea-level rise and general environmental degradation. Changes are coming faster and faster, and it is difficult to imagine what next year, or tomorrow, will bring, or when things could return to normal. Having to deal with all of that, all at once, is unprecedented in recent times, and it certainly can be overwhelming.

"The idea is to *not* be overwhelmed. It is at challenging times that religion is most

The Right to Work from Home

The stress of living a dharmic life is immense. It took Covid-19, in my opinion, to force top corporate leadership to surrender their negative opinions of work-from-home employees. Technology was available to allow this option, but changing the minds of bosses required dire and drastic events. I also believe that Gurudeva's teachings about harmony within a family being the source for greater harmony within the world will be supported by employees working from home rather than being stuck in commuter traffic. The Golden Age required an end to old ways of business. Who could have imagined it would take a pandemic to bring worldwide business to a screeching halt.

I was employed for 25 years by Fortune 100 pharmaceutical and chemical companies that had their HQs in northern New Jersey. Until Covid-19, top leadership refused to embrace working from home even though it was very popular with employees. If an employee asked to work from home, either randomly or on a routine schedule, that employee was somewhat "blacklisted." The corporation's leadership was unwilling to accept and embrace work-from-home options even though the HR and PR departments needed these benefits to recruit and retain employees.

This created a toxic environment of mistrust.

In northern New Jersey a 20-mile commute one way to work was extremely stressful and normally took about one hour. The roads were an obstacle course of repairs, construction and frequent fender-bender accidents. This resulted in both the morning and evening commutes being highly unpredictable. A mother or father with children waiting at home for dinner must have had an extremely stressful daily situation. Corporate six-figure jobs paid the bills, but the stress just from the commute was increasing year after year. I am excited for office workers that now can work from home. Covid-19 is a blessing in so many ways.

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QUOTES & QUIPS

“United your resolve, united your hearts, may your spirits be at one, that you may long together dwell in unity and concord”

The final mantra of the Rigveda

Rainwater never stands on high ground, but runs down to the lowest level. So also the mercy of God remains in the hearts of the lowly, but drains off from those of the vain and the proud. **Ramakrishna Paramahansa** (1836–1886)

Worldly comfort is an illusion, As soon you get it, it goes. **Mira Bai** (1500–1550), *Rajasthani princess, poet and saint*

Middle path. No extremes. **Siva Yogaswami** (1872–1964), *renowned Sri Lankan mystic*

Sweetness cannot be described in words. It can be known only when you put something

sweet on your tongue. Similarly, God cannot be explained in words. It is essentially something to be realized by oneself. **Sri Chandrashekhara Bharati** (1912–1954), *Jagadguru of the Sringeri Sharada Peetham*

As fragrance abides in the flower, as reflection is within the mirror, so does your Lord abide within you. Why search for Him without? **Guru Nanak** (1469–1539), *founder of Sikhism*

The Holy Land is everywhere. **Black Elk** (1863–1950), *medicine man of the Oglala Lakota people*

If your plan is for one year, plant rice. If

your plan is for ten years, plant trees. If your plan is for one hundred years, educate children. **Confucius** (551–479 bce)

A man who uses force is afraid of reasoning. *Kenyan Proverb*

Re-examine all you have been told. Dismiss what insults your soul. **Walt Whitman** (1819–1892), *American poet*

Great suffering brings with it the power of great endurance. When sorrow is deepest, all the forces of patience and courage are banded together to do their duty. **Rabindranath Tagore** (1861–1941)

DID YOU KNOW?

The Cosmic Egg

ACCORDING TO HINDU PHILOSOPHY, THE UNIVERSE UNDERGOES endless cycles of expansion and contraction, to and from a point where all potentiality exists as one—an initial singularity. Of course, a singularity isn't really a “point” at all, because it is unobservable. When everything is coalesced into one, there is nothing else for it to relate to with which to define it as anything. It is truly nothing. Several Sanskrit terms used for this source of all things, such as *Parabrahman* or *Parasiva*, translate as “beyond God” or “before God,” denoting supremacy even to the greatest of celestial beings or divine intelligences.

This ancient idea of a cyclical reality finds affinity with today's Big Crunch and Big Bounce Theories. These ideas postulate that everything erupts from the Big Bang, but that universal expansion eventually slows as gravity becomes the dominant force. While engulfing stars and galaxies, black holes would collide and combine like beads of water traveling back to a single origin. Ultimately, the universe would collapse into the singularity from which it began and, according to some theorists, would be ripe for another cosmic cycle.



Thus far, our current cycle of the universe has been expanding for about 13.77 billion years. In an oversimplified answer of how we know that, it's because that is how far back in time we can see from our perspective here on Earth (after accounting for the stretch in spacetime caused by expansion). As you look off into the stars, you are looking back in time. The more distant the star, the longer its light has taken to reach us, thus, what we see is a star's past. Look far enough into space and you start to see infantile stars, the first elements, and finally a lot of nothing. By knowing the speed of light (just over 186,282 miles per second), the rate of cosmic expansion, and the calculated distance to these ancient stars, one can deduce how long it has taken for the oldest light of the universe to reach us. This mind-bending reality of staring through time has an interesting outcome. Much like the idea of the *Brahmanda* (the cosmic egg), from wherever you are in the universe, you exist in a bubble, born of your exact point in space and time, all defined by the speed of light. To kindle your meditations a little further, the universe erupts from the singularity, yet, when we look out into that universe, that same unobservable nothingness is what defines its edges.

.....
You are the center of what you can see: *a logarithmic scale conception of the observable Universe with our solar system at the center, illustrated by Pablo Carlos Budassi*

The desire to reach for the stars is ambitious. The desire to reach hearts is wise. **Maya Angelou** (1928–2014), *American poet*

Once you can accept the universe as matter expanding into nothing that is something, wearing stripes with plaid comes easy. **Albert Einstein** (1879–1955)

Wisdom is knowing I am nothing, Love is knowing I am everything, and between the two my life moves. **Nisargadatta Maharaj** (1897–1981), *a guru of the Inchagiri Sampradaya*

Nowadays, the practice of yoga stops with just asanas. Very few even attempt dharana and dhyana (deeper meditation) with seriousness. There is a need to search once more and reestablish the practice and value of yoga in modern times. **Tirumalai Krishnamacharya** (1888 1989), *Indian mystic and yogi*

Whatever they are here, whether a tiger or a lion or a wolf or a bear or a bird or an insect or a mosquito, they become That. *Chandogya Upanishad VI 9: 1-3*

If I love myself despite my infinite faults, how can I hate anyone at the glimpse of a few faults. **Swami Vivekananda** (1863–1902)

Thoughts come and go. Feelings come and go. Find out what it is that remains. **Ramana Maharshi** (1879–1950)

Just keep in mind: the more we value things outside our control, the less control we have. **Epictetus** (55–135 ce), *Stoic philosopher*

At first was neither Being nor Nonbeing. There was not air nor yet sky beyond. In what was it contained? Where? In whose protection? Was water there, unfathomable and deep? There was no death then, nor yet deathlessness; of night or day there was not any sign. The One breathed without breath by its own impulse. Other than that was nothing else at all. *Rigveda x, 129, 1-2*

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The two greatest follies are believing you're a human and believing in sequential time. **Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami**, *publisher of Hinduism Today*

Your recognition of what is, is the way you create it to yourself. **Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami** (1927–2001), *founder of Hinduism Today*

BASICS

What Is the Nature of God?

GOD IS ALL AND IN ALL, ONE WITHOUT A second, the Supreme Being and only Absolute Reality. God, the great Lord hailed in the *Upanishads* and adored by all denominations of Hinduism, is a one being, worshiped in many forms and understood in three perfections, with each denomination having its unique perspectives: Absolute Reality, Pure Consciousness and Primal Soul. As Absolute Reality, God is unmanifest, unchanging and transcendent, the Self God, timeless, formless and spaceless. As Pure Consciousness, God is the manifest primal substance, pure love and light flowing through all form, existing everywhere in time and space as infinite intelligence and power. As Primal Soul, God is our personal Lord, source of all three worlds. Extolling God's first Perfection, the *Vedas* explain, “Self-resplendent, formless, unoriginated and pure, that all-pervading Being is both within and without, transcending even the transcendent, unmanifest, causal state of

the universe” (*Manduka Upanishad 2.1.2*). Describing the second Perfection, the *Vedas* reveal, “He is God, hidden in all beings, their inmost soul who is in all. He watches the works of creation, lives in all things, watches all things. He is pure consciousness, beyond the three conditions of nature” (*Shvetashvatara Upanishad 6.11*). Praising the third Perfection, the *Vedas* recount, “He is the one God, the Creator. He enters into all wombs. The One Absolute, impersonal Existence, together with His inscrutable maya, appears as the Divine Lord, endowed with manifold glories. With His Divine Power He holds dominion over all the worlds” (*Shvetashvatara Upanishad 3.1*). In summary, we know God in three perfections, two of form and one formless. We worship His/Her manifest form as Pure Love and Consciousness. We worship Him/Her as our Personal Lord, the Primal Soul who tenderly loves and cares for His/Her devotees—a being whose resplendent body may be seen



in mystic vision. And we worship and ultimately realize God as the formless Absolute, which is beyond qualities and description.

Drawn from the teachings of Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami



FROM THE SAGES

Song of the Sannyasin

Swami Vivekananda's thirteen-verse poem is an ascetic's creed and a compelling reminder of the supreme spiritual path

BY SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

Wake up the note! the song that had its birth
Far off, where worldly taint could never reach,
In mountain caves and glades of forest deep,
Whose calm no sigh for lust or wealth or fame
Could ever dare to break; where rolled the stream
Of knowledge, truth, and bliss that follows both.
Sing high that note, sannyasin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

Strike off thy fetters! bonds that bind thee down,
Of shining gold, or darker, baser ore—
Love, hate; good, bad; and all the dual throng.
Know slave is slave, caressed or whipped, not free;
For fetters, though of gold, are not less strong to bind.
Then off with them, sannyasin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

Let darkness go, the will-o'-the-wisp that leads
With blinking light to pile more gloom on gloom.
This thirst for life forever quench; it drags
From birth to death, and death to birth, the soul.
He conquers all who conquers self.
Know this and never yield, sannyasin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

"Who sows must reap," they say, "and cause must bring
The sure effect: good, good; bad, bad; and none
Escapes the law. But whoso wears a form
Must wear the chain." Too true; but far beyond
Both name and form is atman, ever free.
Know thou art That, sannyasin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

They know not truth who dream such vacant dreams
As father, mother, children, wife and friend.
The sexless Self—whose father He? whose child?
Whose friend, whose foe, is He who is but One?
The Self is all in all—none else exists;
And thou art That, sannyasin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

There is but One: the Free, the Knower, Self,
Without a name, without a form or stain.
In Him is maya, dreaming all this dream.

The author: (above) Swami Vivekananda (right): Swami with his disciples during his first visit to Kashmir in 1897. From left to right: Swami Trigunatita, Swami Sadananda, Swami Shivananda, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Turiyananda and Swami Brahmananda.



The Witness, He appears as nature, soul.
Know thou art That, sannyasin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

Where seekest thou? That freedom, friend, this world
Nor that can give. In books and temples, vain
Thy search. Thine only is the hand that holds
The rope that drags thee on. Then cease lament.
Let go thy hold, sannyasin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

Say, "Peace to all. From me no danger be
To aught that lives. In those that dwell on high,
In those that lowly creep—I am the Self in all!
All life, both here and there, do I renounce,
All heavens and earths and hells, all hopes and fears."
Thus cut thy bonds, sannyasin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

Heed then no more how body lives or goes.
Its task is done: let karma float it down.
Let one put garlands on, another kick
This frame: say naught. No praise or blame can be
Where praiser, praised, and blamer, blamed, are one.
Thus be thou calm, sannyasin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

Truth never comes where lust and fame and greed
Of gain reside. No man who thinks of woman
As his wife can ever perfect be;
Nor he who owns the least of things, nor he

Whom anger chains, can ever pass through maya's gates.
So, give these up, sannyasin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

Have thou no home. What home can hold thee, friend?
The sky thy roof, the grass thy bed, and food
What chance may bring—well cooked or ill, judge not.
No food or drink can taint that noble Self
Which knows Itself. Like rolling river free
Thou ever be, sannyasin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

Few only know the truth. The rest will hate
And laugh at thee, great one; but pay no heed.
Go thou, the free, from place to place, and help
Them out of darkness, maya's veil. Without
The fear of pain or search for pleasure, go
Beyond them both, sannyasin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

Thus day by day, till karma's power's spent,
Release the soul forever. No more is birth,
Nor I, nor thou, nor God, nor man. The "I"
Has All become, the All is "I" and Bliss.
Know thou art That, sannyasin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

"Song of the Sannyasin" by Swami Vivekananda is quoted, with written permission, from Inspired Talks, My Master and Other Writings; copyright 1958 by Swami Nikhilananda, trustee of the estate of Swami Vivekananda.





SPECIAL FEATURE

Muralists of Kerala

Meet the Contemporary Masters of an Amazing Temple Craft

From the depictions of the Supreme in the forms of Brahma, Vishnu and Rudra, to the many demigods constantly battling power-seeking demons, to mythologies of holy avatars and so much more, Kerala mural paintings have been visually narrating epic tales for centuries. They grace the walls of ancient temples and palaces with astonishing artistry. An ancient Dravidian art believed to have originated in the 7th

century under the influence of the Pallavas, this creative form reached its zenith between the 17th and 18th centuries alongside the Bhakti movement. Though the art nearly became extinct due to fading royal patronage, zealous revival efforts have brought this indigenous practice forward in today's art scene. It has been gaining appreciation and love from enthusiasts and collectors worldwide.

INTERVIEW

Manikandan Punnakkal

What distinguishes Manikandan Punnakkal's artwork is the experimental twist he adds to classical forms. With his remarkably innovative skills, he has rediscovered Kerala mural art in a fresh and exciting way employing a variety of media. Achieving well-deserved recognition, his pieces have been exhibited in venues throughout India and abroad.

Please share your artistic experience during your recent two-year project of restoring 80 murals at the historic Vaikom Mahadeva temple in Kerala.

By restoring the Vaikom Mahadeva temple frescos, I've been able to leave a small but significant mark in history. The project was a profoundly spiritual experience; my work was a meditation in creative action. This is the biggest blessing any muralist can receive.

Working on these ancient murals brought me back in time, helping me to truly understand the craftsmanship of the original artists of that era. It was like a raw training for me, and all the diligent effort I put in has really helped me in my career. Restoring wall art in temples has a level of selflessness, unlike painting for oneself, which is about ego and is tied to personal profit.

Which role is more challenging, a restoration practitioner or a contemporary artist?

Without doubt, the role of a restoration practitioner is more challenging. The temple murals are not commercial products that can be sold and bought in the market. They are based on holy scriptures. Therefore, one needs to observe all the scriptural guidelines very carefully, whereas a professional artist's objective is to discover his or her own path and style. I find it is still less about the mind, and more about the soul than what I experience in my other art.

In painting temples, the artist also needs to keep in mind that the restoration is irreversible and the end result should be able to survive harsh conditions. Painting these flaking and fading historical treasures is a task of great responsibility.

As an artist, you have received your knowledge in the traditional gurukula style. Please comment on how guru-shishya parampara adds value in the learning process.

The biggest asset of our ancient gurukula system is that the students live near their teacher in a common residence or a monastery. This coaching method is most appropriate for mural training, because there is a great need for a close interaction between the guru and shishya (student). We are talking about a practice-oriented training which requires in-depth knowledge. Constant guidance from the teacher is a must.

In a gurukula, students lead a disciplined life, adhering to a strict schedule. Experiences like mundane chores and eating simple temple meals may seem insignificant to a layman, but they play a great role in character

development. A shishya trained in the gurukula style graduates as a responsible and mature individual, confident and skilled enough to face the challenges of life.

Your relief murals are immensely experimental. Has the practice of these three-dimensional murals changed your approach towards other media like canvas and paper?

My murals in cement (see lower left photo) are actually an adaptation of the leather puppets made for Tholpavakoothu, the shadow puppetry that is practiced in my hometown, Palakkad, Kerala. It's a ritual art form dedicated to Bhadrakali and is performed in Devi temples. The feedback I have received from fellow artists and clients is that my two-dimensional art has gone through a transition since I started creating the relief murals. There's more depth in my paintings. Such changes in style are inevitable. Each time one tries a new medium, it's bound to have a ripple effect on one's other creative work.

Unlike in ancient times, where mural artisans enjoyed rich patronage of the royals, a full-time artist in contemporary times faces many hardships, in terms of commissions, time, money, etc. Did that discourage you from taking up this practice as a means of living?

Trials and challenges exist in every field, but that has never deterred me from taking up this profession. My dream and my goal were always clear. I was fortunate to have started my career with the right resources and exposure to art.

The art market is extremely competitive and demands a lot of passion and commitment. Artists need to constantly discover and



explore their creative limits in order to grow farther and keep up with the changing times. Dwelling over hardships will only stagnate and kill one's creativity.

What are your views on the prospects of mural art in Kerala in general? Will it survive another century?

Traditional mural art is here to stay. In fact, it has just stepped out of the temples, and its global journey has just begun. However, to make a mark in the art circuit an artist needs to develop his own unique style for the sake of originality. One needs to have an individual expression and emotion.

As for the murals in the temples, many positive efforts are being made to preserve and revive this rich heritage. The Institute of Mural Painting, established by Guruvayur Devaswom in 1989, kick-started the process of preservation. Subsequently, several more government-initiated institutes, like Vasthavidya Gurukulam in Aranmula and Sree Santharacharya University of Sanskrit in Kalady, have offered certified courses in Kerala mural painting. Many enthusiastic students enroll every year in these institutes, which shows the growing popularity of this art form. Kerala murals are now counted amongst the most iconic artworks in the country.

Safeguarding and recasting an ancient art form



(Clockwise from top) Manikandan Punnakkal next to a large painting of Ardhanareswara; the Vaikom Mahadeva temple in Vaikom, Kerala; Manikandan works on a large painting of Krishna and Radha; a depiction of Saraswati; banana leaves holding traditional pigments; a painting of Kinnaran, a deva of heavenly music; Manikandan sculpting a cement relief mural, styled after traditional shadow puppetry





INTERVIEW

Sasi Edavarad

Since the beginning of his career, Sasi Edavarad has made it a mission to work towards conserving and promoting this sacred art. He's the founder of the Chitrasopanam school of mural painting, an institute distinguished by teaching techniques that closely follow the authentic principles defined in the Vedic Shastras (scriptures). The primary mission of the school is to pass our heritage to the next generation.

As an artist, you transform verbal descriptions of the cosmic world into visual expressions. In a way, these paintings serve as a pathway to enlightenment. How has this practice helped you evolve spiritually?

I consider myself a disciple of Kerala mural painting. It is a teacher on my path to Self-realization. This art form works as a liberating activity for my mind and intellect.

A verse from Chitrasutram (an an-

cient text on painting) explains my sentiment eloquently: "Chitrakala (the art of painting) is the foremost of all art forms; thus, a person who does worship through Chitrakala attains the four goals of life, leading them to moksha (freedom from rebirth)." Kerala mural art is appropriately termed as Sopana Chitrakala—the art that leads one wholly to the Lord.

How significant is faith and devotion for a classically trained muralist? Do

you have to be a devout Hindu to master this sacred art?

Any person who believes in our Vedic Shastras can be part of this art form irrespective of other affiliations. But as you rightly put it, this is a sacred art form whose genesis is the ancient texts, so a proper understanding and faith in these scriptures is essential.

I have taught many aspiring artists from other beliefs who have shown great conviction to this sacred art. As long as one honors the discipline and accepts the principles laid down in the Grantha Shastras, the artist would experience as-wadhaan (utmost joy) in painting the temples.

The classical texts like the Shilparatna and Vishnu Dharmottara Purana contain the working guidelines for Kerala muralists. Do you

feel diligent adherence to these rules is too restraining and leaves little room for freedom of creative expression?

These guiding principles are not rules, as they aren't restrictive in character. Rather, they are strategies or philosophies that form a bedrock for creativity. The ancient texts which we artists use as reference are a result of knowledge distilled over thousands of years. Leave alone the thought of mastering them, just comprehending the scripts accurately would take more than a lifetime.

As the artist begins to understand these guidelines, he starts building upon them with limitless creativity. These classical texts are the backbone of Kerala mural painting.

As the founder of the Chitrasopanam school of mural painting, how do you see your role in terms of preserving and promoting the traditional Kerala art? What is unique about Chitrasopanam?

I started this school with the sole purpose of creating awareness and appreciation for our traditional art form. Chitrasopanam's syllabus starts from the bare basics. Our main purpose is to cater to the students who don't have prior knowledge of art. Praveshika (initiation), Naipunya (specialization), Acharya-I and Acharya-II are the four levels of our two-year course. The techniques we follow are strictly traditional for all the stages. These include color preparation from natural sources, drawing and painting methods, and restoration processes.

Our school also organizes painting workshops and seminars on a regular basis to engage the general public with ancient art and culture. I'd like to believe that my humble undertakings have helped in the revival of this traditional art, even if in a small way.

Is there any prior knowledge an average viewer or buyer should have, in order to appreciate or connect with this art form?

When a viewer appreciates an artwork, a connection is formed inevitably, irrespective of the reason. A shloka from Vishnud-

harmottra Puranam explains this concept eloquently: "The fine lines are appreciated by the acharyas (teachers), the shading by the pandits, women admire the ornamentation, and ordinary men the vibrancy of the colors." People from different spheres experience or value a painting each in their own way. One need not be an art connoisseur or an expert to admire aesthetics. If there's an attraction, a link is formed instantly.

Which subject depicted in Kerala mural style is most popular among art enthusiasts and buyers?

There are many themes which are favorites among buyers, such as Ananthasaynam (reclining Vishnu), Ganapati (Lord Ganesha) and Venugopal (Krishna with flute). In my experience, however, the most sought-after subject has been Siva's Pradosha Nritham—His dance performed at dusk. Siva in dancing form is depicted with sixteen arms. With his left leg, he tramples upon a Muyalaka—a demon—an act representing victory over ignorance. Siva's right leg is lifted, signifying liberation from darkness, or the raising of oneself to enlightenment.

Teaching traditional technique to a new generation



(Clockwise from upper left) Sasi Edavarad with banyan tree roots in the background; Sasi stands with a painting depicting Siva and Parvati; one of his temple murals; Siva's Pradosha Nritham, the cosmic dance; Sasi works with a student at his art school in Kerala



Kalamandalam Bindhulekha

Kalamandalam Bindhulekha is both a classical dancer and an accomplished muralist. Part of what makes her artwork so fascinating is how she blends both these art forms in a surrealist style. The first female artist to paint on the walls of temples, she is best known for her unique compositions.

Were you artistically inclined since childhood? Could you please say a few words about how you started your artistic journey?

I feel, if you're an artist, you have a natural-born talent. I was a very creative child, so aiming for an academic discipline in fine arts was a given. After I finished my graduation in classical dance (Mohiniyattam and Bharatanatyam), I wanted to try my hand in painting. Seeing my brother-in-law's inspirational artworks, I discovered that art is my true calling. Recognizing my passion and commitment for this traditional art, he took me under his tutelage as his shishya and thus started my six years' gurukulam-style training.

I was lucky to receive on-the-job training by assisting him for many of his prestigious



projects, which served as great exposure for an amateur artist like me. Eventually, after my debut work in the Bhadrakali temple, I gained enough confidence to take up mural painting as my full-time career.

How has the practice of this sacred art helped you evolve spiritually?

We all have our own interpretation of spirituality. For me, my guru's grace is the most sacred blessing I have received. I can't stress enough how fortunate I feel to have received his guidance. My guru, P.K. Sadanandan, is a renowned artist and the only traditional muralist featured by the Kochi-Muziris Biennale (the largest art festival in Asia). He was the disciple of the legendary muralist Mammiyoor Krishnankutty Nair.

He believes an artist should have the potential to carve out their own space for cultivating personal expression. Following this

principle, I have learned to portray my own vision and interpretations. So in a nutshell, for me, spirituality begins and ends with my reverence for my guru.

As we understand, you are the first woman to paint on the walls of a temple. When you started your career as a temple muralist, did you face any resistance? Did people respond positively?

There was no opposition from any group. In fact, I was cheered on and received a lot of support from my friends, family and the temple authorities. When I'm painting, I'm quite oblivious to my surroundings, I become totally immersed in my work, so even if there was negativity from a temple visitor or someone else, it never would have really come to my notice.

Your first commission was a 50-square-foot mural made in the Vadakurumba Bhadrakali temple in Thrissur. Could you expand a little on the concept of this theme and your experience?

I wouldn't call it a commission since there was no money involved. It was sort of a spiritual practice, an act of piety for me. The theme was of the three gunas, or qualities: rajas, tamas and sattva. They are illustrated in the three forms of Devi. Sattva is depicted in Saraswati, as the enlightened, knowledgeable one, painted in shades of white. Tamas is represented by Bhadrakali, the fierce form of Shakti, and is painted in the shades of dark blue. Mahalakshmi, the Goddess of

abundance and success, depicts rajas and is painted in shades of red.

I gained a lot of practical knowledge and understanding with my debut project. Painting on a wall as compared to a canvas is altogether a different experience. It took two years for me to finish this wall art. There was no time constraint, so I took my time and enjoyed the learning process with no outer pressures of any kind.

You're a formally trained classical dancer, the influence of which is clearly visible in the figures of your paintings. Could you talk a bit about the interweaving of these art forms?

Most of our ancient Hindu texts state that both *chitra* (painting) and *natya* (dance) are fundamentally connected. One of the verses from *Chitrastutram* explains this inter-linked relationship very well: "What cannot be demonstrated in a dance form can be expressed in a painting and vice versa."

The *Natyashastra*, the earliest literature on dance, has heavy influence on the iconography of our ancient paintings. The classical text is said to have laid a deciding foundation for many fine art writings that followed. Being a dancer, I can comprehend the connection very readily. Depicting the gestures and postures onto the canvas comes very naturally to me.

We find that Kerala mural paintings are also printed on various products like vases, coasters, magnets, accessories, clothes and so on. Do you think that reduces the essence

of the art form or does that leverage the popularity of this traditional skill?

Personally, I feel the art form loses its exclusivity if sold in this manner. Popularity

gained through such means is temporary, a passing trend. This classical art has survived for centuries because of its ingenuity; it doesn't need endorsement to gain recognition or win appreciation.



Combining proficiency in dance and painting to create something unique



(Clockwise from top left) Artist Kalamandalam Bindhulekha; one of Kalamandalam's paintings depicting a woman upon a bed of lilies; a Goddess floats through clouds; Kalamandalam works on a painting of Krishna; one of Kalamandalam's recent gallery shows; her sketch of Venugopal





INTERVIEW

Saju Thuruthi

Saju Thuruthi is the head of the Fine Arts Department of Sree Sankaracharya Sanskrit University. He has earned praise for his selfless contribution to the Kerala art scene as the founder of the unique residential art gallery "Art and Mind." Additionally, as a professionally trained art conservationist, he has restored murals in over fourteen historical temples across Kerala. His artworks can be found in many institutes and prominent private collections throughout India and abroad.

At what age did you first encounter the sacred art of Kerala mural painting? Did you start out of sheer devotion or was it an artistic calling?

I would say it was both my passion for creativity and my religious beliefs that lead me to this holy art. I grew up in a religious family; many of my childhood memories revolve around our regular visits to the Guruvayoor temple. I still remember how those exquisite murals fascinated the artist in me. I feel each artist is born from a certain inspirational experience, and those temple visits worked as that stimulus for me. So, yes, devotion and spirituality did play a major role in making

me a muralist.

As for art being my true calling, I was creatively inclined since childhood and had a special affinity for traditional art. Still today, I draw inspiration from the murals of Guruvayoor temple, which illustrate stories straight out of our holy scriptures. I feel that I recognized my creative potential at a very early age and art has indeed been my inner calling.

The Shilparatna suggests that, while holding to the techniques learned from one's teacher, the artist needs to use his own mind to visualize the Deities from the slokas. Do you agree with this point of view? Kindly elaborate.

Yes, it's imperative to exercise one's own imagination and intuition for creating art of any kind. Translating the verbal expressions of the verses into visual language while still following the defined principles might seem like there's a common template set for all the artists, but the options for creativity are endless. The *rupa* (form) has been defined in the scriptures, but the artist needs to use his own mind to visualize subjective elements like the *rasa* and *bhaava* (emotions and sentiments), embellishments and other details. Similarly Panchavarna, the traditional five-color palette (red, yellow, green, white and black) is predetermined, but the formation of dif-

ferent tones is purely dependent on one's creativity.

As an art conservationist, you've had the good fortune of restoring wall art in various historical temples. Looking back, do you think this practice has gradually changed your relationship with the Divine?

It's not as profound as you say it, but it's surely been a consequential journey for me. It's a spiritual practice after all; there's definitely a special link formed between the artist and the murals.

I have always been a very religious person, so I wouldn't say that my faith has gone through a transition, but rather that my profession has strengthened my beliefs. These historical paintings are chronicles of the holy literature that encapsulates my religious understanding. Painting them has only magnified my consciousness.

Your initiative "Art and Mind" is probably Kerala's first residential art gallery for murals. Can you share a little about your new venture?

"Art and Mind" has been my dream since the beginning of my career, an open space for emerging artists to showcase their work. We organize art camps, exhibitions, creative workshops, discussions and other such activities that serve to cultivate creativity. It's built as a support structure for upcoming artists, a space to get them to concentrate, to do research, to produce, to connect and to collaborate.

To build a dialogue between artists and

aesthetes, we regularly host art shows and invite audiences to watch and interact with artists during residencies and retreats. Many art enthusiasts have a keen interest in witnessing the making of Kerala mural art, which further spreads awareness of this art form. My ambition is to expand this platform even wider, as an energy center for art discourse.

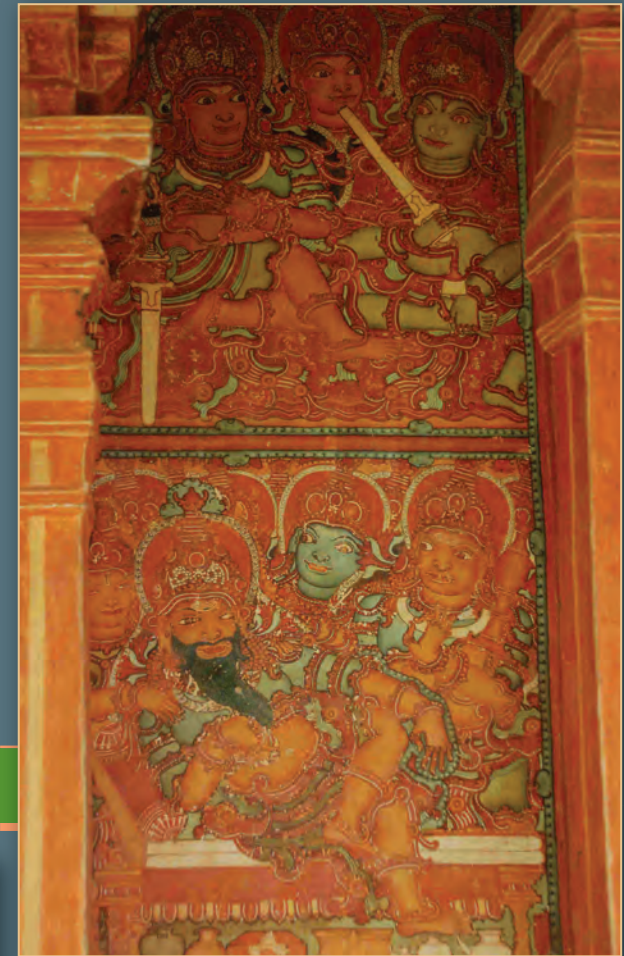
Is there any other art form that fascinates you?

For me, all art forms hold a unique aesthetic value in their own right. However, if I were to pick a favorite, then I would say the ritualistic art form of Kerala, Kalamezhuthu, a traditional art that has intrigued me since childhood. It's practiced in temples, where large pictorial representations of Deities like Kali and Lord Ayyappa are made on the floor by sprinkling natural colored powder. Kerala mural painting is said to have been inspired from this ancient Dravidian art.

Is there any specific teaching process you follow to help your students cultivate a better understanding?

I've gained this knowledge through guru-shishya parampara, so I like to follow the threefold gurukul teaching technique: *shravan*—listening

and receiving the knowledge, *manan*—analyzing and thinking by the student, and *nid-dhyaasana*—complete comprehension and applying that knowledge practically. The first step involves learning and absorbing the information. The student is then expected to assimilate the knowledge using his own mind and imagination. Finally, the last step is hands-on practice with complete focus.



Creating a space for new artists to learn, collaborate and thrive

(Clockwise from top left) Artist Saju Thuruthi; a restored temple mural done by Saju; an example of Kalamezhuthu, a type of artwork made on the floor with colored powders, said to have been a precursor to Kerala mural art; Saju works on one of his traditional paintings; standing with one of his pieces on display at his "Art and Mind" learning center; Saju's artwork on display at an exhibition



Restoring Temple Murals

TODAY, DESPITE CONTINUOUS EFFORTS being made by temple authorities and the Kerala State Archaeology Department in restoring historical murals to their former glory, many still remain desperately in need of a face lift. Sadly, some have become dilapidated beyond hope of preservation. So, those murals are being redrawn. In such instances, we can spot a few contemporary inclusions by modern artists. Sasi Edavarad shares a fine example: "The cloud motif often seen in present-day murals is borrowed from Thangka painting (Tibetan Buddhist artwork). Such elements are region specific. Clouds are an inherent feature of the Tibetan Plateau; whereas authentic Kerala Murals carry imprints of bountiful trees, animals, etc., indicative of the biodiversity of Kerala."

Traditional belief is that the organic materials used for the murals help in forming a special link with the cosmic energies. Therefore, for restoration, artisans strictly follow the indigenous method of using only nature-sourced articles. Depending on the size and condition of the paintings, temple authorities identify a group of skilled and experienced artists who, while boarding within the temple, lead an austere lifestyle, as is required for working at a holy site. An elaborate renovation project can easily last three years, involving a team of two to ten artists. Respecting the temple protocols, the renovation activities are performed mostly between the morning and evening pujas.

The deterioration of these old treasures is typically due to exposure to extreme climatic conditions and human contact. Since they are painted on the exterior walls of the Sriko-vil, or sanctum sanctorum, the circumambulation path around it leads to unavoidable physical contact by devotees.

However, there is uplifting news for art enthusiasts. Some experts claim these renovated mural paintings can easily last 100 years. Rest assured, the contributions made by these artists will be witnessed by generations to come.

Presenting Kerala's art to the world: (clockwise from right) Suresh Muthukulam; a piece by Suresh depicting a mahout bathing his elephant; a close-up of Suresh's mural at the T2 terminal of the Mumbai Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport; another view of the massive work, now viewable for travelers from around the world



Kerala muralist Suresh Muthukulam...

Internationally recognized muralist Suresh Muthukulam has been long known in the art world for his creative escapades. In recent times he has made a mark in the industry with his monumental 4,000-square-foot mural at the T2 Terminal of Mumbai Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport. The wall art, made in Kerala mural style, is part of the Jaya He GVK New Museum, an ambitious art venture initiated by GVK Power & Infrastructure Limited. This six-year project involved more than 100 artists and 1,000 craftsmen, including architects, designers, engineers, technicians and laborers. The museum showcases diverse traditional, folk and contemporary art forms of India, spreading across a two-mile span within the T2 terminal.

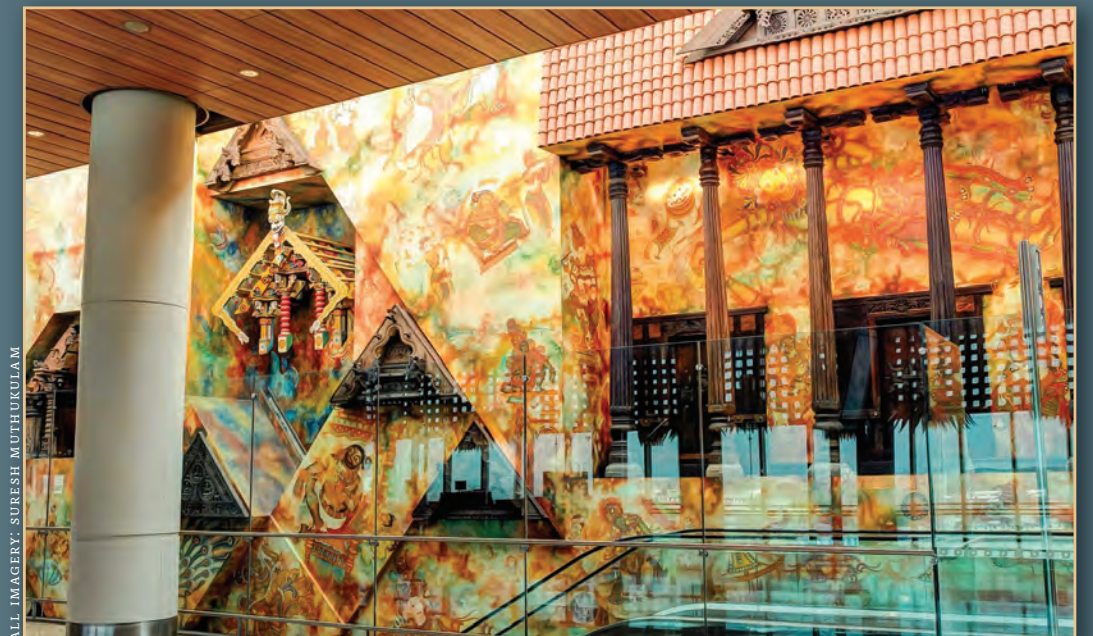
The theme of Suresh Muthukulam's iconic mural is Ashta Dikpala—guardians of the eight directions, a subject that was well chosen for the concept of



traveling and touring. This group of Deities, Kubera (north), Yama (south), Indra

Bringing the craft to countless travelers from around the globe

(east), Varuna (west), Isana (northeast), Agni (southeast), Vayu (northwest) and Nirrti (southwest) are traditionally illustrated on the walls and ceilings of Hindu temples. Painted in the Panchavarna color scheme, the mural has attracted widespread interest and won admirers from across the globe. He has skillfully given the artwork a modern look, while still maintaining the ancient Kerala mural style as the base. This vibrant piece, along with other artwork and artifacts of the museum, can easily be counted as one of the most recent and best art tourist attractions in the country.





YOGA

Today's Yoga Evolves Beyond the Body

India Foundation's Center for Public Diplomacy and Soft Power collaborates with Ritambhara Ashram to promote International Yoga Day

BY SUDARSHAN RAMABADRAN, CHENNAI
SOFT POWER IS SUBTLE. UNLIKE HARD power, it works by changing people's interests and preferences, thus wielding its influence from within. While the term *soft power* has its genesis in the West, India's soft power has influenced the world from time immemorial. Michel Danino's book, *The Lost River: On the Trail of the Sarasvati*, describes Mohenjo Daro (in today's Pakistan)—believed to be the world's largest city of its time—as actively engaged with other countries, from Europe to Mesopotamia to China. Swami Vivekananda's famous speech at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, along with his subsequent teaching mission in the West, popularized yoga and meditation in the West. The great religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, now widespread, are all Indian exports.

Five years ago, India put yoga on the global map by inspiring the United Nations and countries worldwide to declare June 21, the summer solstice, as International Yoga Day for the benefit of humanity. The adoption of this resolution with a record 175 co-sponsors marked a widely acknowledged chapter in India's soft power story. The day gave a boost

to yoga in every nook and corner of the world. Yoga's influence is unmatched, organic and pervasive. Eddie Stern's book *One Simple Thing: A New Look at the Science of Yoga*, expounds upon the rich ancient contribution of yoga. Stern, a New York-based ashtanga yoga teacher and author, credits T. Krishnamacharya and his disciples as being responsible for at least half of the yoga that is practiced around the entire world today. He cites a 2016 study sponsored by *Yoga Journal* that concluded around 36 million people in America were practicing some form of yoga. Another source estimates this has increased to 55 million in 2020 in America and possibly 200 million worldwide, mostly Indians.

Yoga, as practice or philosophy, could mean many things to each one of us. The word itself means to join, from the Sanskrit root *yuj*. By turning the attention within, yoga enables a process of self-discovery, of joining with one's true self.

As a student, seeker and practitioner of yoga, I have tried to ask myself for the sake of clarity some basic questions in order to delve deeper. What exactly are the sources of yoga? What form of yoga is practiced in today's time and age? Is it more of physical asana and

pranayama practice? Or is it more reflective, moving to the *antaranga*, inner work aspect of yoga, making it a more transformative practice? Finally, I often muse, what could possibly be the future of yoga?

Roots of Yoga

Disturbingly, the increasing commercialization in recent years is leading to yoga's being cut off from its roots. Yoga has become commoditized. The *Yoga Journal* study estimated in 2016 Americans alone were spending us\$16 billion a year on "yoga classes, clothing, equipment and accessories," and that spending worldwide was likely \$80 billion. In addition, curious variations have been invented. "Beer Yoga" is held in a barroom, drinking beer during or after the asanas. In "Goat Yoga" tame goats engage with the practitioners. Then there's "Laughing Yoga," "Hot Yoga," "Naked Yoga" and more.

Raghu Ananthanarayanan, an alumnus of IIT Madras, student of Krishnamacharya and co-founder of Ritambhara Ashram based in Tamil Nadu, explains that the roots of yoga are eternal, nourished by the insights of the rishis. "As with anything that becomes popular," he told me, "unscrupulous teachers focusing only on the commercial aspects have



Yoga embraces the globe: (left to right) Hariprasad Varma joins Tshaphel School in the Haa Valley, Bhutan, for International Yoga Day, 2019; Dorota Babs at her "Velvet Yoga" studio in France; on the beach in Nha Trang City, southern Vietnam, May 2019

come in and muddled the waters. Cultural appropriation, also, has impacted the purity of the stream."

The commercialization and cultural appropriation of yoga is most clearly discernible in the US, as evidenced by scores of articles and research papers. Working to stem this tide are educational and advocacy organizations such as the Hindu American Foundation, steering important efforts. For example, HAF's "Take Back Yoga" campaign highlights the importance of the real roots of yoga. Suhag Shukla, HAF's executive director, explains, "In the West, in the yoga industry and in academia, we see a deliberate delinking of yoga from its religious and spiritual Hindu roots to achieve the successful commoditization and marketing of yoga." She adds that specific research efforts are attempting to delink the asana practice from the tradition of yoga itself.

These disturbing trends have even led to conflicts with nature, which violates the very purpose of yoga. Hariprasad Varma, yoga coach and member of the Ritambhara Ashram, points out, "For instance, the microfibers used in New Age yoga pants [and many other garments] are reported to be among the major sources of plastic that is polluting the oceans and contaminating seafood. It is disheartening to see many popular yogis promoting such yoga pants as fast fashion. If one were rooted in yama-niyamas of yoga, one would develop sensitivity to the world and beings around."

But all is not lost. Campaigns such as "Take Back Yoga" and related efforts are shaping

global conversations on the five Ws (What, When, Why, Where, Who) and the one H (How) of yoga. "The high point was sparking off a global conversation," explains Suhag. "I measure its success by the fact that it got coverage in mainstream media including the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *CNN*, *National Public Radio*, and unexpected platforms, including *Al Jazeera*. To this end, the coverage provided an opportunity to reach a diversity of audiences and get them to think more deeply about what yoga is and where it came from."

In addition to global conversations steered by advocacy organizations such as HAF, credible teachers both inside and outside India are working to preserve and honor the sacred roots of yoga and stay true to its tradition. For these teachers and their organizations, yoga is too deep a philosophy to be cut off from its roots. "The roots of yoga lie in Vedic wisdom," declares Raghu of Ritambhara Ashram. "This is undeniable. However, I believe that yoga is deep and wide, and these disturbing developments will not blind the real seeker." He advises that one must be alert and never let one's guard down in these matters.

New York's Eddie Stern observes that the practice of mindfulness followed today by many across the world has its origins in Buddhism, and practitioners and teachers of mindfulness rightfully ascribe it so. In a similar vein, he says, it is important that we ascribe yoga to its real origin, which is India and Hinduism, and this is especially the responsibility of Westerners taking to yoga. Anyone and everyone can practice yoga, he

says, but they should recognize and acknowledge its source in India's traditional ethos. "It doesn't mean that you have to be a Hindu to practice yoga, just as you don't have to be Buddhist to practice mindfulness. But what we should be doing as Westerners practicing a Hindu practice is to ensure that they correctly understand the practice originated in India."

Adding Inner Yoga to Our Outer Yoga

Yoga is one of twenty soft power themes focused on by the India Foundation's Center for Public Diplomacy and Soft Power. In promotion of this theme, and in the run-up to this year's International Yoga Day, the Center collaborated with Ritambhara Ashram to create a unique yoga initiative, which has now run for two years and spans 17 countries.

Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* presents eight "limbs" of yoga: *yama* (ethical restraints), *niyama* (observances), *asana* (postures), *pranayama* (breathing), *pratyahara* (withdrawal), *dharana* (concentration), *dhyana* (meditation) and *samadhi* (absorption). The first four comprise *bahiranga*, the yoga of the outer limbs. The second four comprise *antaranga*, the yoga of transcendental inner space.

Moving from the outer yoga to the inner is a challenging process that requires turning away from the power of the external world and shaping one's mind so that it becomes capable of entering the realms of *samadhi*. During research for this article, I learned that 70 of the 195 sutras in Patanjali's classic, *Yoga Sutras*, speak of this very important component, *antaranga* yoga.



What does antaranga yoga, also known as “Inner Work Through Yoga,” help achieve? People come to yoga not just for physical practice. Being a student of yoga, I do attach immense value to the physical practice. But the inner search enabled by contemplation to attain knowledge of oneself is the pristine goal of one taking to yoga seriously. Swami Vivekananda states in the *Complete Book of Yoga* that the goal of mankind is knowledge. This, he believes, is the one important ideal placed before us by the Eastern philosophy.

Making it Real

For us at the India Foundation’s Center for Public Diplomacy and Soft Power, Ritambhara Ashram does all the heavy lifting in organizing and presenting this process of yoga. Hariprasad, who takes the lead, guided by Raghunath, keeps the trainers and teachers from various schools involved. Hariprasad has alluded to the importance of seamlessly combining both facets of yoga. “When we thought about the program design for the International Yoga Day with the India Foundation’s Center for Public Diplomacy and Soft Power, we decided it was important to highlight both the bahiranga and antaranga aspects of yoga. We used curated stories from *Mahabharata* for facilitating the antaranga yoga sessions. In these sessions, the evocations and provocations of the individual as they engaged with the characters and incidents in the story were used for deeper contemplative dialogues, connecting them to concepts from *Yoga Sutras* where relevant.”

The feedback from trainers and teachers from several countries indicates success. We have found the need to include this very integral component of antaranga yoga, to be an effective catalyst in pursuit of inner peace for an individual facilitating real change. For the first year, in 2019, we called the program “Yoga for Peace.” This year we have remodeled it with the name “Peace and Sustainability Through Yoga,” to be more relevant in the Covid-19 era.

Yoga teachers and practitioners from several countries participated in both years’ initiatives. For both the bahiranga and antaranga practices we have had participants from India, France, Greece, Italy, Germany, Turkey,

International Yoga Day: (clockwise from above) Facing the morning sun, Stefania Loreto leads her class in Alberga, Italy, under the watchful eye of Ganesha; celebrating the day in the Ukraine; Times Square New York, pre-Covid-19, packed with yogis; Greek yogis along a Mediterranean boardwalk

steering the yoga soft power theme, or in today’s marketing terms, a *vertical*, meaning an area of interest to a specific group of people.

Any form of yoga practice is for inner transformation. It has to do with the mind. If, as a seeker, you find there are impediments and you are in pursuit of decluttering the mind, yoga is a great manual to use. Its deeper significance can be understood if one can move from the physical to exploring the inner work, or at least finding the right balance between the two. In doing so, the real essence of yoga will reveal itself to the seeker. I say this with conviction, as it has made an impact on most of the practitioners throughout the world whom I have spoken to, in and through our evolving effort.

Feedback from Countries

Antaranga yoga is not to be seen as something different from yoga. As soon as the mind is still with

the help of the regular bahiranga practices of asana and pranayama, antaranga begins. This time of introspection proves invaluable for self-unfoldment. This is precisely what we have read in the feedback received from yoga teachers and trainers from across the world.

Valentina Bianca Ranzi, a yoga teacher



from Milan in Italy and an active member of our cohort, feels that yoga in Italy is still a body-oriented exercise. But she took to learning, studying and teaching it, as she was in pursuit of understanding the deeper essence of life. The ability to introspect and reflect after the regular asana-pranayama practice has enabled her inner search and become a tool to settling down reactions to the pair of opposites that we face in life—reactions that create a ruckus in everyone’s body-mind complex.

Ayça Güdücü Erdem, a yoga teacher from Turkey, has learned to analyze the mind more deeply by adding antaranga practice. She says she can see its effects in her mind and in all aspects of her being, including body, breath, perceptions and actions.

Ajlaan Raza Sayani, a yoga enthusiast from Pakistan, reports the yoga movement is nascent and small in his country, but has grown noticeably in the last three years. In and through the antaranga yoga practice, he has learned not to judge any stimulus that comes his way, but to simply be aware. In order to be aware, he affirms the key is understanding that you are not your thoughts. He’s discovered that thoughts are temporary and go as speedily as they come.

Consistent and successful practice of antaranga yoga will help connect minds and

enable one to understand oneself better, for this is the very objective of yoga. It would be a great disservice to the tradition if we do not inspire the students and teachers of yoga to pursue yoga’s supreme goal of spiritual understanding.

The Future of Yoga

Considering the slow but definite shift to understanding the depths of yoga through



antaranga yoga, it is vital to see where the future of the yoga movement is headed. What should we expect to see, say, in 2030?

I see two prominent strands emerging, but these, too, may evolve with time. The unanimous response we got from credible yoga teachers in India and abroad indicate how

important it is for seekers to put into practice antaranga yoga and create the intended balance, if not already achieved. This will decisively instill in seekers the clarity they seek while practicing yoga. It will relieve the sufferings that the seeker is experiencing as well, for which he or she took to practicing yoga in the first place.

Secondly and most importantly, I feel that yoga will promote social cohesion. It will be

the responsibility of yoga teachers to include people from various sections of society, regardless of their caste, creed or color, in imparting the lessons of yoga. This will truly achieve the holistic vision of “Yoga for All and All for Yoga,” as well as succeed in keeping the authentic traditions and practices of yoga intact.

Analysts have stated how difficult it is for observers to measure a country’s soft power prowess, but over the years we have been able to see the subtle effectiveness of the nature of yoga. It has effectively contemporized the famous saying of the Tamil philosopher, Kanniyar Pungrundunar, *Yaadhum ore, yavarum kelir*, which means “Every town is my town and everyone is my relative.”

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Seven Indian Women Luminaries

Celebrating the life, virtues and spirituality of a few of Bharat's remarkable Hindu women

BY LAKSHMI CHANDRASHEKAR SUBRAMANIAN

“Hindu scriptures hold women in high esteem because of their ability to engage in bhakti more effectively than everyone else,” states Sri Krishnapremi Swamigal of Paranur. “Why? Because their heart, mind and body are gentle and innately devotional, a necessary quality for a devotee’s heart to melt in surrender and devotion unto the Lord.”

Our utmost gratitude to Sri Krishnapremi Swamigal of Paranur, an illustrious 20th-century saint and scholar whose works have been the cornerstone of this Insight. The idea to write about these awe-inspiring women came from Smt. Vishakha Hari’s *Iconic Indian Women*, an adapted English translation of Sri Krishnapremi Swamigal’s Tamil treatise *Sati Vijayam*. The book details biographies of 103 powerful Hindu women of India—Goddesses, celestial women, seers, queens from the *Puranas* and *Itihasas*, warriors and bhaktas—who excelled in devotion, education, art, bravery and politics.

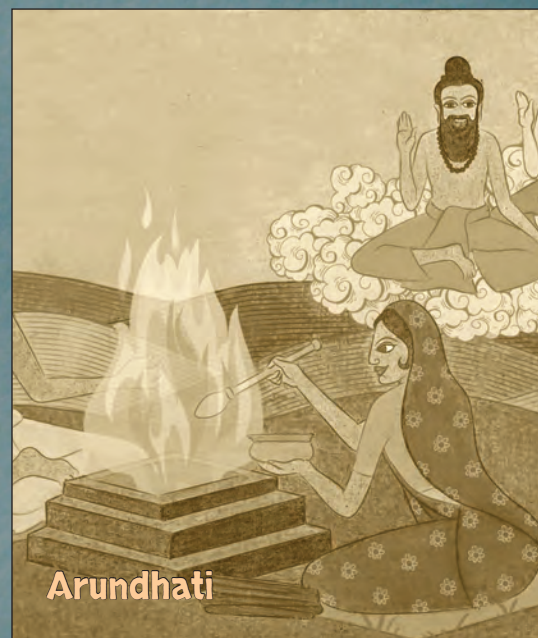
Hindu devotees have worshiped Goddesses since time immemorial. But that isn’t all. “India doesn’t just worship women Goddesses, but women as Goddesses,” emphasizes author Vishakha Hari. Indian culture has nurtured and revered wise, progressive, spiritually advanced women throughout history.

In this Insight, we delve into the lives of seven such luminaries: Arundhati, Devahuti, Gargi, Ghosha, Vakdevi, Auvaiyar and Vasuki. Some were princesses who married great Hindu sages. Others were born to rishi parents who nurtured their interest in spirituality from childhood. A few, like Vakdevi and Ghosha, were expounders of Vedic hymns; others, brilliant philosophers like Gargi, are spoken of in the *Upanishads*; and still others, like Vasuki, are

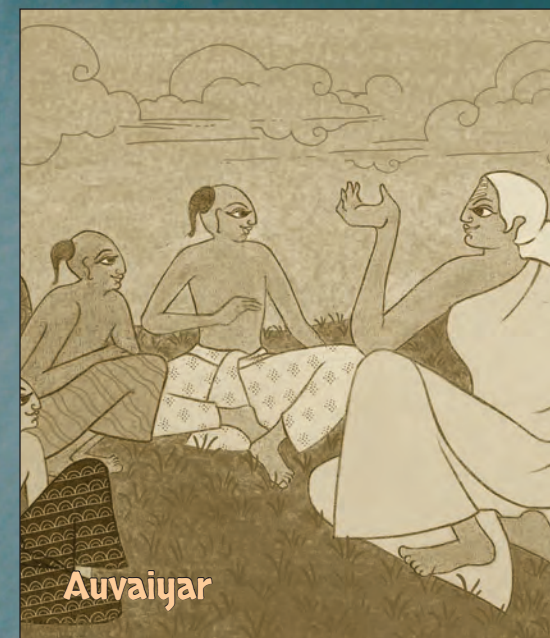
renowned for virtues such as chastity, loyalty, humility, compassion, and deep inner contentment. Their intense spiritual penances along with familial duties characterized their resolve to attain the ultimate Truth. Each was a shining gem in her own right.

Traditional accounts record that many women in ancient days enjoyed a high level of autonomy to undertake spiritual pursuits. Girls often had the freedom to choose their husband, based on their own temperament and life goals. We see this in the life of Devahuti, who sought marriage to a serious seeker, as she wished for a spiritually fulfilling life. These saints did not care about being “equal to men;” their goal was simply to be the best possible version of themselves, which naturally placed them intellectually and spiritually on par with any great sage or devotee. Gargi debated with distinguished male rishis, while Arundhati held a prominent place alongside the Saptarishis (seven sages). Sacred literature recounts many great women who composed Vedic hymns and attained the rank of rishika and mantra drashta.

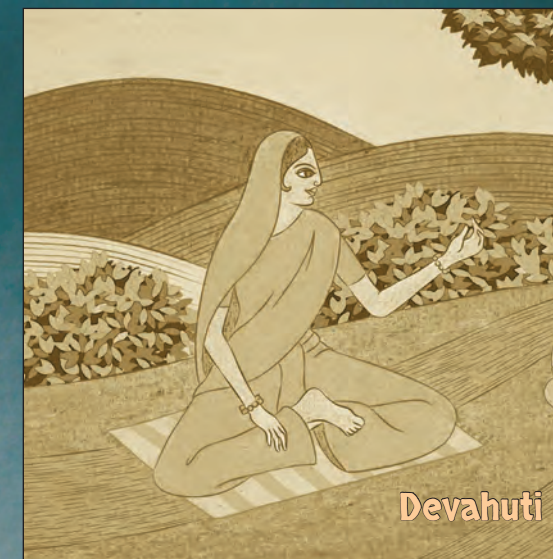
Countless less-known women seers have been pillars of strength for their husbands and the reason for their noble children’s success. Like Auvaiyar, other spiritual giants have eschewed marriage and dedicated themselves to the service of God and people. Women are an integral part of society, and India is proud to have nurtured such empowered saints and seers who have proved their excellence in virtue, devotion to God and myriad other ways.



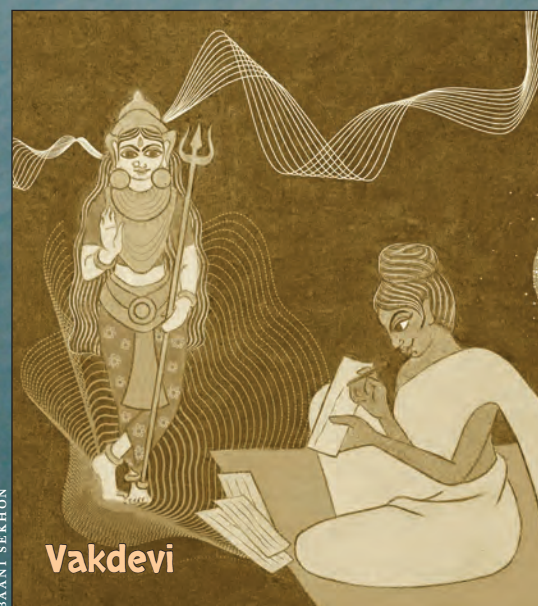
Arundhati



Auvaiyar



Devahuti



Vakdevi



Ghosha



Gargi



Vasuki



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Living as one: Arundhati sits at the holy homa fire, offering ghee into the flames as her husband chants the mantras. The seven Vedic rishis bless from their spiritual realm.

life skills, discipline, social grace and etiquette, building the foundation for her spiritual achievements later in life. Legends say she was groomed by the universal mothers Savitri, Saraswati and Sandhya, whom Arundhati served with humility and sincerity.

Once she was old enough to marry, the perfect groom for her was sought. This was none other than Vasishta Maharishi, one of the greatest Brahmarishis. He is famous for having been blessed with the divine cow Kamadhenu and her calf Nandini, two bovines who could grant any wish to their owners.

Arundhati and Vasishta were an ideal couple in following a dharmic life, complementing each other in every respect, even performing spiritual penance (tapas) together. Arundhati, possessing the same serene composure as her husband, was respected and worshiped on par with the seven seers (Saptarishis). Indeed, the *Mahabharata* describes her as an ascetic who gave lofty discourses to these transcendent sages. In due course, Vasishta became the spiritual master of the Ikshvaku dynasty, to which King Dasharatha and his divine sons—Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata and Shatrughna—belonged. This meant that Vasishta and Arundhati were prostrated to by Lord Rama himself!

One of the stories in the *Puranas* goes thus: One day, Vasishta needed water for his daily rituals and requested Arundhati to fetch some from the river nearby. Arundhati took a pot to the river, and, lo, behold, three devatas—Indra, Agni and Surya—appeared before her! She bowed to them in reverence and continued her duty of fetching water without a second glance. Surprised, the Divinities asked how she could remain so focused in their presence. She replied that serving her husband was like serving God, and to her that was more important than anything else in the world. Nothing could distract her attention. This ability to steady the mind and direct focus where one wants, regardless of the whims of the wandering, truant mind, is the goal of many Hindu spiritual practices.

When the three Lords offered to fill the water pot for her, Arundhati smiled knowingly. Despite their best efforts, they could not fill the vessel to the brim. Arundhati alone was suited to the task, using her spiritual powers to bring the water of River Ganga into her pot. Humbled, the Gods blessed her and Vasishta, and disappeared. It is not surprising that even the *Vedas* hail her as “Rishinam Arundhati,” meaning Arundhati the sage. Today devotees can visit the Vashishta Guha (cave) and the nearby Arundhati Cave, in Uttarakhand, India, located on the banks of the river Ganga enroute from Rishikesh to Devprayag. The ascetic couple are believed to have meditated in these caves.

Arundhati, Vedic Sage

Daughter of Devahuti and Kardama Prajapati, and the granddaughter of Svayambhuva Manu and Shatarupa, Arundhati was a shining example of devotion, grace and nobility from childhood. Vedic and Puranic incidents demonstrate that she was as great as her mother in many ways, a woman of extraordinary spiritual dedication and wifely perfection.

There are various narratives about her birth. Her story is found in the *Siva Purana* and *Bhagavata Purana*. Still revered as an inspirational figure in post-Puranic Sanskrit and Hindi literature, she is featured in Valmiki’s *Ramayana* as well as Sant Tulsidas’s *Shri*

Ramcharitmanas, given her husband’s key role in the *Ramayana* epic. Her meetings with Rama and Sita are especially noteworthy. Arundhati was the great-grandmother of Veda Vyasa, the legendary author of the *Mahabharata* epic. Vyasa is the archetypal guru to whom the annual Guru Purnima festival is dedicated. Arundhati is believed to be present amongst us even today in the form of a glittering star in the night sky (see sidebar).

Spiritual Upbringing

Growing up in her parents’ hermitage, our luminary was trained in

Holy Texts

The *Vedas* (literally, knowledge or wisdom), dated around 3,500 years ago, are the earliest literary sources in Hinduism. According to tradition, the *Vedas* are divinely inspired truths that were heard by the rishis of India. A rishi (from the Sanskrit root *drish*, to see) is a seer of mantra, or thought, and is also known as a mantra drashta. The Vedic revelations are hence referred to as *shruti*, or “that which is heard,” as the rishi is simply seeing or hearing what is already there. *Vedas* are not associated with a single seer,

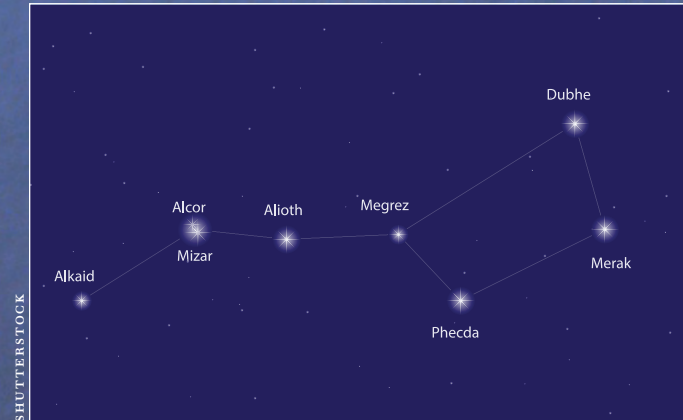
but with numerous sages who discovered them over at least a 1,000-year period.

In Swami Sivananda’s words, “The Vedic rishis were great realized persons who had direct intuitive perception of Brahman or the Truth. They were inspired writers. They built a simple, grand and perfect system of religion and philosophy from which the founders and teachers of all other religions have drawn their inspiration.”

The four *Vedas*, composed in Vedic Sanskrit, consist of creation hymns, devotional hymns for a good life, and philosophical discussions on the Self and the Divine. Nature is revered in the *Vedas*, with prayers to Agni (God of fire), Parjanya (God of rain),

Ushas (Goddess of dawn) and other Deities of nature. The *Vedas* also discuss social life, moral teachings and prevention of diseases.

The chanting of Vedic mantras continues today in several contexts. In addition to the mantras chanted by devotees in daily life such as the Gayatri mantra, Vedic hymns are recited by priests in temple ceremonies. They are also chanted during rites of passage, including an infant’s name-giving, first feeding, coming of age, marriage rituals and last rites. Scriptures state that a Hindu ceremony is considered complete only if the couple perform the rituals together, the wife being present along with her husband.



Arundhati in Indian Weddings

In ancient Indian astronomy, the Mizar star is known as Vasishta, and its fainter counterpart next to it, the Alcor star, is known as Arundhati. The Mizar is perhaps the most famous star of the Big Dipper asterism (Saptarishi Mandala). In Western cosmology, this pair of stars in the Big Dipper’s handle is called “the horse and rider”.

Orbiting one another in the Ursa Major constellation, these binary stars are considered in the Indian context to symbolize an ideal couple. In some Hindu communities, priests conducting a wedding ceremony point out the constellation to the newlyweds as a symbol of marital harmony and loyalty. This is one of the key rituals in traditional South Indian Hindu weddings. The husband holds the wife’s hand, and both look towards the Arundhati star in the sky. They take a solemn pledge of commitment in front of the sacred fire and the community of family and friends.

In Indian astronomical terminology, these stars appear in the Saptarishi Mandala (constellation of seven sages). The fact that the stars orbit each other is believed to symbolize equality in the marriage. Since Sage Vasishta was married to Arundhati, he was also called Arundhati Natha, the husband of Arundhati.





Saint Auvaiyar, Illustrious Tamil Poet

“I shall offer to you, O Lord, the delicacies four—fresh milk, pure honey, cane sugar with cereals mixed—O elephant-visaged, bright-jeweled Lord of the Universe, if you will enrich me with the triple-treasured Tamil tongue acclaimed by the ancient academies.”

This famous Tamil devotional poem by Auvaiyar (“wise elder woman”) is featured in the book *Loving Ganesha* by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami. Auvaiyar was also affectionately known as Auvai. Over the centuries several women have been known as Auvaiyar in Tamil Nadu, as they were torchbearers of the abundant treasures of Tamil literature. Of them, two are renowned.

Auvaiyar I lived towards the end of the Sangam period, around the 2nd century ce. She was a greatly respected poet who had royal patrons, such as the ruler Adiyaman Neduman Anji, and is likened to other Sangam poets such as Kapilar, whose benefactor was chieftain Vel Pari. Her contributions are found in early anthologies of Tamil Sangam literature such as the *Akananuru*, a collection of 400 love poems, and *Purananuru*, 400 poems addressed to benevolent Chera, Chola and Pandya kings on themes of warfare, poverty and public life.

Auvaiyar II lived around the 12th century in the Chola empire (9th to 13th century) during the times of the poets Kambar (author of *Kamba Ramayanam*) and Ottakoothar. Some legends feature her as an ambassador of peace between warring kingdoms. She composed famous children’s poems such as *Aathichudi*, *Kondrai Vendan*, *Nalvazhi*, *Moodurai*, as well as devotional hymns such as the *Vinayagar Agaval*, appealing to kings and lay people of all ages, even today. This is the Auvaiyar whose inspirational life and contributions we celebrate here.

Raised by a wandering minstrel family of Pannars, Auvai displayed an aptitude for religion and literary pursuits at an early age. She grew

up to become an intelligent and strikingly beautiful young woman, whom many aristocratic suitors wanted to wed. At an age when most girls prize youth and beauty, our Saivite poet-saint wept and prayed to her chosen Deity, Lord Vigneshvara, to make her body old. Her only interest was in a life of service to Lord Siva and society, and she saw the removal of her youth and beauty as the only way to avoid the unwanted duties of marriage. The young poet knew she could impart wisdom better with a mature and experienced body and mind.

Hearing her fervent prayer, Lord Vigneshvara (Ganesha) granted the wish: her hair became gray, her skin wrinkled and her eyes sunken. Thus was “born” Auvaiyar, in the form she is known and loved. She never married, but became a grandmother to all children through her writings.

Hymn of Praise to Lord Ganesha

Famous among Auvaiyar’s many beautiful devotional songs, “Vinayagar Agaval” is a soulful hymn to Lord Ganesha, sung in a trance towards the end of her life. Considered her sacred masterpiece, it remains one of the most accessible Tamil literary compositions of the period. Shortly before composing the hymn, she had a vision of Ganesha, who promised her that upon leaving her mortal form, she would be taken to Mount Kailasa, the divine abode of Lord Siva. The 72-line Agaval is a form of blank verse that begins with a contemplation on Ganesha’s majestic form and continues as an outpouring of gratitude to the Divine. The hymn is to this day sung throughout Tamil Nadu, especially during Ganesha Chaturthi celebrations.

Ratna Ma Navaratnam describes Auvaiyar’s approach to her beloved Lord in *Om Ganesha: the Peace of God*: Auvaiyar “views Him

A mother to all: Auvaiyar is seated in a meadow, teaching the youth about their culture and faith, as her favored Deity, Lord Ganesha, blesses from the inner worlds.

enjoying the triple delicious fruits and is amazed at the incongruity of Pillaiyar’s riding on His rat mount! It reminds her that life is a bundle of contradictions and contrasts. The massive elephant with His immense strength and prudence is no more important than the humble mouse.”

Inculcating Values in Children

Auvaiyar’s *Aathichudi* is an alphabet rhyme for children consisting of 109 single-line proverbs. In these, Auvai offers insightful guidelines for life expressed in simple yet powerful words that are easy for children to grasp as they learn the Tamil alphabet. Advocating moral values, good habits and discipline, Auvaiyar’s *Aathichudi* and *Kondrai Vendan* have long been a part of the Tamil language curriculum in schools in Tamil Nadu, India, as well as in Sri Lanka and Singapore, where Tamil is an official language. Auvai’s sayings are learned and recited by children beginning in the first grade to build their vocabulary and memory skills.

Our poet’s influence doesn’t end with children; her proverbs are a part of daily conversation in the most elite circles. Her poignant words were quoted in the Singapore Parliamentary debates on October 17, 2011, when Mr. Vikram Nair recited the proverb *Kattradu Kai Mann Alavu Kallathathu Ulagalavu*, meaning, “What we have learned is equal to a handful of mud; what we are yet to learn is as vast as the Earth.” Another translation is exhibited at NASA to inspire employees.

Auvaiyar’s Legacy

Blessed with the vision of the Divine, Auvaiyar is considered the wisest woman of all ages throughout Indian culture. In 1991, a crater on Venus was named the Avviyar Crater by the International Astronomical Union. (All craters on Venus are named after historic women, or are given a female first name.) The Auvaiyar statue at Chennai’s Marina beachfront is a famous landmark, standing alongside statues of Mahatma Gandhi, Subhas Chandra Bose, Sage Tiruvalluvar, Bharathiar and Kannagi. The annual Avvai Vizha, organized by the government of Tamil Nadu, commemorates the poet’s contributions to Tamil literature. Community leaders and Tamil scholars come together to discuss the wisdom poems of this beloved poet-saint.

LEARN MORE

- ✱ **Watch** a famous musical dialogue between Auvaiyar and Murugan from the 1967 film “Kanthan Karunai,” “By the Mercy of Kanthan” (with English subtitles): bit.ly/Auvaiyar-Muruga-Movie
- ✱ **Download** the Aathichudi Android app on Google Play to learn Auvaiyar’s proverbs (Tamil and English)
- ✱ **Enjoy** Aathichudi as a children’s rhyme (in Tamil) at bit.ly/AuvaiyarKidsRhyme
- ✱ **Hear** Vinayagar Agaval by Seerkazhi Govindarajan: bit.ly/VinayagarAgavalSung



From Auvaiyar’s *Aathichudi*, a Rhyme for Teaching the Tamil Alphabet to Kids

Vowel	Proverb in Tamil	Translation
அ (a)	அறம் செய்ய விரும்பு	Desire to fulfill dharma
ஆ (ā)	ஆறுவது சினம்	Cool off anger
இ (i)	இயல்வது கரவேல்	Give as much as you can
ஈ (ī)	ஈவது விலக்கேல்	Do not avoid charitable deeds
உ (u)	உடையது விளம்பேல்	Do not brag about your possessions
ஊ (ū)	ஊக்கமது கைவிடேல்	Never lose motivation
எ (e)	எண் எழுத்து இகழேல்	Do not despise mathematics and writing
ஏ (ē)	ஏற்பது இகழ்ச்சி	Begging is disgraceful
ஐ (ai)	ஐயமிட்டு உண்	Share with the poor before you eat
ஒ (o)	ஒப்புரவு ஒழுக்கு	Live in harmony with the world
ஓ (ō)	ஓதுவது ஓழியேல்	Never stop learning
ஔ (au)	ஔவியம் பேசேல்	Speak not with envy.
அஃ (ak)	அஃகம் சுருக்கேல்	Do not shortchange others.



BAANI SEKHON

Devahuti, sincere spiritual seeker

An exemplary daughter, wife and mother, Devahuti dynamically pursued the path outlined by the *Vedas* throughout her life. The Hindu scriptures remind us that every human being should cultivate and focus on the inner desire to realize the Self. Devahuti was one such sincere spiritual aspirant. She chose not to waste her life in trivial pursuits or sensory desires, but opted for liberation, as evidenced by her every decision.

Early Years

Devahuti was one of the adored daughters of Shatarupa and Svayambhuva Manu, “Emperor of the Universe,” as outlined in the *Siva Purana* and *Bhagavata Purana*. The *Brahma Purana* hails Shatarupa as the first woman to be created by Brahma, along with Manu. The Sanskrit word for “human being” is *manava*, meaning “of Manu,” in other words, we are all the descendants of Manu.

Despite growing up in an affluent family, Devahuti was spiritually mature and mentally detached from a materialistic lifestyle from an early age. She was a living example of Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami’s words, “This physical world, though necessary to our evolution, is the embodiment of impermanence, of constant change. Thus, we take care not to become overly attached to it.” Her mind never swerved from devotion towards Lord Vishnu and liberation.

Upon reaching marriageable age, Devahuti envisioned an equally spiritual husband to grow with on the path of wisdom. Sage Narada advised her parents to have her marry Kardama, an ascetic engaged in severe penance, but who would soon embrace family life. Hearing of Kardama’s intense spiritual activities, Devahuti felt certain he was her ideal husband. Manu took Devahuti to Kardama

Rishi and expressed his daughter’s wish to marry him. Kardama agreed, and the two were soon wed in a simple ceremony.

Manu and Shatarupa left their princess daughter in the forest with Kardama. Years went by, and Kardama’s austerities continued. As the young couple grew older, Kardama grew oblivious of Devahuti’s presence. Meanwhile, Devahuti continued to fulfill all her wifely responsibilities. She realized the importance of his spiritual life and never once demanded more of her husband, never once drew him away from his spiritual work.

One day, Kardama Rishi opened his eyes after a period of penance and looked at Devahuti in amazement. He expressed gratitude, and openly acknowledged her selfless service and unconditional love: “My dear wife, you are an exceptional woman, and more of an ascetic than I am! Please tell me what I can do for you in return.” Devahuti graciously replied that it was her duty to take care of her husband, especially when he was engaged in profound penance, and that she needed nothing in return.

Touched by her response, Kardama created a beautiful palace with his yogic powers. Thereafter, the couple lived in luxury and were blessed with ten gifted children; nine daughters—named Kala, Anasuya, Shraddha, Havirbhu, Gati, Kriya, Kyati, Arundhati, Shanti—and a son named Kapila Vasudeva. The daughters grew up to be great Vedic women in their own right, and Kapila, believed to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, became a renowned sage. Devahuti’s accomplished daughters, like their mother, married great rishis: Kala to Marichi, Anasuya to Atri, Shraddha to Angiras, Havirbhu to Pulastya, Gati to Pulaha, Kriya to Kradhu, Kyati to Brigu, Arundhati to Vasishtha, and Shanti to Atharvana.

Equals: Here Devahuti and her husband discuss matters of the spirit in the compound of their forest abode. Their life was full on all levels and their nine daughters and one son exceeded all expectations.

Devahuti’s Daughters

Anasuya (meaning “devoid of envy”) was the celebrated wife of Sage Atri. Like her husband, Anasuya engaged in penance. Once, using her spiritual powers she reinvigorated a forest. Severe drought had befallen the ancient sanctuary of nature. All the flora was destroyed, animals died and birds migrated to far-away lands. Even the sages were worried. Anasuya, with her meditative powers, brought heavy rains. Life in the forest was restored to its initial glory and she gained renown in the three worlds.

Kyati, another daughter of Devahuti, was married to Sage Brigu, mentor of the asuras (demons), whose cruel follies she overlooked like a kind mother. Maha Vishnu was once after the asuras. When Vishnu asked if the demons had come to Kyati’s hermitage, Kyati lied out of love for and loyalty towards the asuras. Vishnu then destroyed her as well as the asuras she protected. The infuriated Sage Brigu cursed Maha Vishnu that he, too, like Brigu, would be separated from his wife, Goddess Lakshmi. Lord Vishnu honored Sage Brigu’s pain by accepting the curse. Thus, when Maha Vishnu incarnated as Rama, Sita was abducted by Ravana and Rama suffered the pangs of separation from his wife.

Kapila Muni, Devahuti’s Son and Preceptor

Upon reaching his elder years, Kardama Rishi resolved it was time to fully embrace renunciate life. He was content that he and Devahuti had led a meaningful life and fulfilled their responsibilities. Leaving Devahuti with their son Kapila, Kardama retired into the forest in search of ultimate Truth. Devahuti was no less committed to seeking the highest; she too wanted to renounce the world of material pleasures. Regarding her son Kapila as Lord Vishnu incarnate, she accepted him as her guru. Kapila Muni taught his mother the nuances of Sankhya, one of the six classical systems of Hindu philosophy. He expounded spiritual wisdom about the reincarnation cycle of individual souls and explained the paths to liberation, namely bhakti, jnana, karma, and sankhya, emphasizing unconditional surrender. Having practiced all the teachings, Devahuti’s body, mind and soul merged in complete harmony and she lived the last years of her life abiding in the Self. The great Vedic woman Devahuti attained samadhi and consciously left her physical body behind and merged with the Ultimate, thus fulfilling her life’s purpose.

TO LEARN MORE.....

- ✳ **Explore:** the history and importance of Matrugaya at www.matrugaya.com
- ✳ **Plan Your Visit:** to Matrugaya in Siddhpur by reading this traveler’s blog: bit.ly/IndiaYatraBlog2



Matrugaya, where Devahuti Attained Liberation

Matrugaya Kshetra in Siddhpur, near Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India, is a pilgrimage site where Devahuti is said to have attained liberation following the teachings of her son, Kapila Mahamuni. It is revered as an auspicious place to perform last rites for one’s mother to help her attain moksha. Thousands of Hindus perform such antyeshti rites at this holy site each year.

Matrugaya is home to Bindu Sarovar, one of India’s five most ancient and holy lakes—the other four being Manasa Sarovar in Tibet, Pushkar Sarovar in Rajasthan, Narayan Sarovar in Kutch, Gujarat, and Pampa Sarovar near Hampi in Karnataka.

Tradition says that it was at the banks of Bindu Sarovar that Kardama Rishi and Devahuti were married and did penance for several years. Here also their son, Sage Kapila, had his ashram and taught the ultimate knowledge of Sankhya philosophy to his mother. Having attained the highest spiritual wisdom, Devahuti is believed to have taken on the form of water (jal svarup), and thus the lake became the holy Bindu Sarovar, where devotees bathe before performing rites for their ancestors.

It is believed that Lord Parshuram performed Matru Shradh at the Bindu Sarovar. There is a temple for him here, alongside the temples of Sri Kapila Mahamuni, Sage Kardama and Devahuti, where their hermitages used to be.

Around the 11th century, Siddhpur was at the height of its glory under the Chalukya dynasty. The Chalukya raja Jayasimha Siddharaja built his capital here. He also built the Rudra Mahalaya, a magnificent temple for Lord Siva. Now in ruins, it was an architectural feat with a three-storied central sanctum tower, 1,600 pillars and 12 entrances. Eleven shrines for Rudra stood around the temple. Today the city is home to the ancient Arvadeswar Shiva Temple, sacred to the Natha Sampradaya.



Gargi, Renowned Philosopher

Gargi was an ancient Indian philosopher and illustrious Brah-mavadini, a woman ascetic who was deeply knowledgeable about Brahman and pursued Absolute Truth, the goal of all Hindu spiritual practices. Hailing from the lineage of Garga, and as the daughter of Sage Vachaknu, she was first known as Vachaknavi, and later as Gargi. Historians surmise she lived around the eighth or seventh century bce. She showed great skill in the study of the *Vedas* from a young age and possessed the acumen and confidence to sit in equality with renowned scholars in royal courts for scholarly debates. Brah-mavadini Gargi is famous for her dialogue about the nature of reality with the Advaita philosopher Yajnavalkya, as presented in the sixth and eighth sections of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*.

Let the Debate Begin

King Janaka, ruler of the Videha kingdom and a distinguished scholar, once organized an assembly of scholars in his court. During this assembly, a grand debate was to take place, and numerous intellectuals were invited. The invitees included the accomplished sage Yajnavalkya. The king offered a thousand cows to the most erudite of them all. Immediately Yajnavalkya asked his disciple to take possession of the cows on his behalf. The others were angered by his audacity to claim victory without a single argument. Challenges over the coming days came from eight illumined sages. One by one, they debated with him and were defeated, as he successfully answered their most onerous philosophical questions.

Gargi, the only female scholar in the gathering, equaled all others in intelligence, poise and knowledge. When it was her turn to face the sage, she was keen and relentless, presenting trenchant questions

about quintessential knowledge and the nature of the universe. These queries served as a springboard for their debate, which soon turned to a discussion of atma, the omnipresent soul.

Gargi more than proved her profound wisdom in the way she carried the metaphysical duel with the sage. When even she was defeated in debate, she praised Yajnavalkya for his depth and mastery of knowledge, and proclaimed to the entire assembly that no one could ever defeat him in a discussion about the soul. It takes a great philosopher to know one! Yajnavalkya was glad to be appreciated by the erudite Gargi. Because of her skill, she was honored as one of the Navaratnas (nine precious gems) in King Janaka's court.

Here are excerpts from their exchange (translation from Swami Sivananda's *Essence of Principal Upanishads*).

"Gargi said: O Yajnavalkya, that of which they say it is above the heavens, beneath the earth, embracing heaven and earth, past, present and future, tell me in what is it woven like warp and woof?"

"Yajnavalkya replied: In ether (akasha).

"Gargi said: In what then is the ether woven, like warp and woof?"

"Yajnavalkya said: O Gargi, the *Brahmanas* call this Akshara (the Imperishable). It is neither coarse nor subtle, neither short nor long, neither red nor white; it is not shadow, not darkness, not air, not ether, without adhesion, without smell, without eyes, without ears, without speech, without mind, without light, without breath, without a mouth or door, without measure, having no within and no without. It does not consume anything; nor does anyone consume it.

"By the command of that Indestructible Being, the Sun and the Moon stand apart. By the command of that Being, heaven and earth stand upheld in their places. By the command of that Being, minutes,

Fiery female: Gargi was a woman seer who challenged the most knowledgeable men of her time. At a philosophical challenge arranged by Janaka, she did not win the thousand cows offered by the king, but she equaled all in her knowing. (right) Gargi is played by an actress in a TV series, and Yajnavalkya, her sparring partner, is shown below.

hours, days and nights, half-months, months, seasons, years all stand apart.

"By the command of that Being, some rivers flow to the east from the snowy mountains, others to the west, and others to the quarters ordained for them."

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

As one of the 13 mukhya (principal) *Upanishads*, the *Brihadaranyaka* is important in many schools of Hindu thought. Part of the *Shukla Yajur Veda*, it is estimated to have been composed between 900 and 600 bce. It is a treatise

on atman (Self or Soul) and covers metaphysics, ethics, karma and a yearning for knowledge. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* is known for the major philosophical conversations that make up the core of its teachings. Two particularly famous dialogs are those between Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi and between Yajnavalkya and Gargi. Adi Shankaracharya, Ramanujacharya and Madhvacharya, founders of the three major schools of Vedanta, have written extensive commentaries (bhasya) on this Upanishad, which are widely studied by students of Hindu philosophy.

Did you know that the Pavamana Mantra is from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (1.3.28)? This is a popular shanti (peace) invocation that is chanted at prayer gatherings.

असतो मा सद्गमय ।
तमसो मा ज्योतिर्गमय ।
मृत्योर्मा अमृतं गमय ।

asato mā sadgamaya
tamaso mā jyotirgamaya
mṛtyormā amṛtaṁ gamaya

From untruth, lead us to truth.
From darkness, lead us to light.
From death, lead us to immortality.

The Vedic Age

The *Vedas* are Hinduism's earliest literary sources. The *Rig Veda*, the oldest of the compendium, is reckoned by 19th-century Western Indologists to have been composed around 1500 bce, a date that began a 1,000-year period known as the Vedic Age. This dating, which is closely bound to the now largely debunked Aryan Invasion Theory, proposed and settled upon before the discovery of the Indus Valley civilization, is contested by many Indian historians. Using astronomical references found in the Vedic texts and other advanced dating methods, they place the *Vedas* as far back as 4,000 bce.



Upanishad Ganga Teleserial

Episode 30 of the teleseries *Upanishad Ganga*, entitled "The Existence Principle," dramatically depicts the awe-inspiring story of Yajnavalkya and Gargi, in which Gargi challenges Yajnavalkya with several questions. *Upanishad Ganga* is a popular Hindi television series of 52 episodes, 30 minutes each, that present ancient Vedic culture and Upanishadic wisdom. Originally premiered in 2012 as a "Chinmaya Creations" project, the concept was the brainchild of Swami Tejomayananda of the global spiritual organization Chinmaya Mission. The series was televised on Doordarshan, a channel founded by the Indian government. *Upanishad Ganga* episodes unravel spiritual concepts such as the human goals of life (dharma, artha, kama and moksha), life's stages (studentship, married life, retirement and renunciation), types of yoga (karma yoga, bhakti yoga, and jnana yoga), the theory of creation, birth and rebirth, the primordial Om, and guru. It expounds on these topics through stories of great Hindu saints and thinkers such as Valmiki, Harishchandra, Chanakya, Tulsidas, Mirabai, Arunagirinathar, Bhadrachala Ramadas and Veda Vyasa. Replete with songs and chants, the series provides a family-friendly way of learning Hindu spirituality. The complete series, with English subtitles, is available as a set of 12 DVDs in Chinmaya Mission web stores and from online providers such as Amazon and Flipkart. The set includes relevant Sanskrit verses with English transliteration and translation, and resources for further reflection on the concepts from each episode.





BAANI SEKHON

Ghosha, Vedic Seer

Ghosha was a great ascetic rishika and *mantra darshini*, a seer who brought through Vedic chants. She was the daughter and student of Sage Kakshivan and granddaughter of Rishi Dirghatamas, who coined the oft-repeated Sanskrit aphorism "Ekam Sat Vipra Bahudha Vadanti" (That which exists is One; the sages call It by various names), which appears in *Rig Veda* 1.164.46. Dirghatamas was the chief priest of King Bharata, according to the *Aitareya Brahmana* of the *Rig Veda*. King Bharata, the illustrious son of Shakuntala and Dushyanta, unified all of India under one rule. One of the earliest rulers,

it was he after whom India was named *Bharata Varsha*. Ghosha's son Suhstya also contributed to the *Rig Veda*. Thus, this family of seers is responsible for numerous Vedic hymns we enjoy to this day.

As a young lady, Ghosha was afflicted with ill health, and her marriage was annulled. She worshiped the Ashwini Kumaras in two hymns, praying for abundance, virtue and release from disease and misfortune. Over time, her health, beauty and youthfulness were restored. The Ashwinis (twin brothers) are Vedic Gods of ayurvedic medicine, physicians to the devas. They are invoked several times in

Holy poetess: Ghosha wrote of the twins, Ashwinis, who are carried across the heavens in a horse-drawn chariot, bringing, they say, healing and well-being to humanity; (right) artist's interpretation of the Aum, source of all in the heavens and below.

the *Rig Veda*, depicted as youthful men with horse faces.

Ghosha's two hymns to the Ashwinis appear in the tenth book of the *Rig Veda* as sukta 10.39 and 40, each consisting of fourteen verses. The prayers glorify the twin healers while invoking abundance and prosperity. Ghosha's words glow with a noble woman's refinement and commitment to the path of knowledge. Sri Krishnapremi Swamigal offers a summary of her hymns in his *Sati Vijayam*: (translation by Smt. Vishakha Hari).

"Hey Ashwini Kumaras! Because of your mercy, this Ghosha has become highly blessed. Now she is going to get married. May her husband be a great farmer. Let there be adequate rains wherever he dwells. Let his cultivation

be fruitful. Let him not have any enemies. Bless him that he should be handsome and youthful and that this Ghosha should lead a happy life.

"Hey Ashwini Kumaras! Just as a father teaches and guides his children, show me the true path of knowledge. Guide me in the spiritual path as well. I am helpless, and you should save me from going astray. I should live a great life and beget many children and grandchildren. Grant me the blessing that every moment I should be lovable to my husband."

In his *Vedic Experience, an Anthology of the Vedas for Modern Man and Contemporary Celebration*, Raimundo Panikkar describes Ghosha's Vedic-Age perspective toward health and disease: "Human malady is not a trifling matter, and here there is no room for lofty considerations, nor is there a way of escape. Man is totally engaged in his existential struggle for well-being and he is facing the dire reality of a power that seems to rob him of his health and even of his life. Yet he is determined to face the menace, to struggle, and in the end to win. He has in his hand a medicinal herb, on his lips a sacred mantra, in his heart a burning hope, and in his mind an unflinching faith. He is well aware of the complex web of relations which crisscrosses the whole of reality and he intends to intervene in order to restore the lost harmony and balance."

Ghosha's suktas highlight the necessity to lead a righteous and spiritual life, a theme echoed throughout the *Vedas*.

LEARN MORE

- * **Read** Raimundo Panikkar's *Vedic Experience* for English translations of, and commentary on, Vedic hymns and other sacred texts: bit.ly/VedicExperience
- * **Watch** Part 1 of "History of Hindu India" documentary: bit.ly/2piE84n
- * **Enjoy** a video on Vedic Ritual Practice, with recitation of the *Vedas*, produced by Times Living: bit.ly/VedicPractice

Women in the Vedas

BY NIRMAL LAUNGANI

More than 30 of the Vedic rishis were women. Married and single women alike were acknowledged authorities on the Vedic wisdom. Gargi debated with Sage Yajnavalkya on the origin of existence. Other Vedic hymns are attributed to Vishnavara, Sikta and others. The *Rig Veda* identifies many women rishis; indeed, it contains dozens of verses accredited to the woman philosopher Ghosha and to the great Maitreyi, who rejected half her husband Yajnavalkya's wealth in favor of spiritual knowledge.

It also contains long philosophical conversations between the sage Agastya and his highly educated wife Lopamudra.

Rig Veda clearly proclaims that women should be given the lead in ruling the nation and society, and that they should have the same right as sons over the father's property. "The entire world of noble people bows to the glory of the glorious woman so that she enlightens us with knowledge and foresight. She is the leader of society and provides knowledge to everyone. She is symbol of prosperity and daughter of brilliance. May we respect her so that she destroys

the tendencies of evil and hatred from the society." (1.48.8)

Atharva Veda states that women should be valiant, scholarly, prosperous, intelligent and knowledgeable; they should take part in the legislative chambers and be the protectors of family and society. When a bride enters a family through marriage, she is to "rule there along with her husband, as a queen, over the other members of the family." (14.1.43-44)

Yajur Veda tells us, "The scholarly woman purifies our lives with her intellect. Through her actions, she purifies our actions. Through her knowledge and action, she promotes virtue and efficient management of society." (20.84)



S. RAJAM

Quotes on Vedic Wisdom

Karma is not fate, for man acts with free will, creating his own destiny. The *Vedas* tell us if we sow goodness, we will reap goodness; if we sow evil, we will reap evil. Karma refers to the totality of our actions and their concomitant reactions in this and previous lives, all of which determines our future.

Sivaya Subramuniyaswami

By the *Vedas* no books are meant. They mean the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws discovered by different persons in different times. Just as the law of gravitation existed before its discovery, and would exist if all humanity forgot it, so is it with the laws that govern the spiritual world.

Swami Vivekananda

The Hindus have received their religion through revelation, the *Vedas*. These are direct intuitional revelations and are held to be *apaurusheya*, or entirely superhuman, without any author in particular. The *Veda* is the glorious pride of the Hindus, nay, of the whole world!

Swami Sivananda

All ancient Hindu Vedic gods are but functional names of the One Supreme Power, manifesting in myriad forms.

Swami Chinmayananda

The *Vedas* are not authored by any individual, nor even by a group of rishis, or seers. Vedanta is Knowledge that is revealed by the Lord Himself.

Swami Tejomayananda

Vedas are simply downloaded information. The rishis went into deep meditation, and what they saw and heard they started sharing.

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar



BAANI SEKHON

Vakdevi, Vedic Poet

Vakdevi, the daughter of Rishi Ambhruna, had a spiritual bent of mind right from childhood. Given her father's name, she was also known as Vagambhruni. Vakdevi was a *mantra drashta* (seer) who composed the popular Devi Suktam, also known as the Ambhruni Suktam or Vak Suktam, consisting of eight stanzas in praise of the Mother Goddess. It is the 125th hymn in the 10th mandala of the *Rig Veda*, Hinduism's earliest literary scripture.

Through advanced sadhana (spiritual austerities), Vakdevi reached a level of spiritual maturity that allowed her to identify with the Divine. She then sang this deeply philosophical hymn in a state in which she was one with the Goddess she propitiates, and then speaks as the Goddess herself. The rishika (sage who composed the hymn) and the Devata (Deity propitiated by the hymn) were one and the same. This is a unique feature of Devi Suktam. Having completely transcended her individuality and ego—a spiritual goal aspired by many through the ages—Vakdevi becomes one with the omnipresent Brahman, entering a state of non-differentiation between man and woman, human and God.

Today the Devi Suktam is chanted throughout the world during the worship of the Goddess in daily temple rituals and sacrificial ceremonies such as homa and havana. It is also chanted at the end of Devi Mahatmyam recitations.

The Vedas

The *Vedas* are vast anthologies of ancient Sanskrit hymns and chants envisioned by rishis and rishikas, male and female sages, that are recited in an intoned meter. The intoned chanting, with specificities in regard to meter and style, is one of the primary differences between

later mantras and Vedic mantras. The cadenced recitation of Vedic verses, with four main tones, sounds almost musical. The Devi Suktam is composed in two different chandas (poetical metrics). Seven verses are in Trishtup Chandas, which has 11 syllables per line, while the second verse is in Jagati Chandas, with 12 syllables per line.

Today, Vedic chanting is popular among nearly every Hindu group worldwide. Vedic schools, called Veda patashalas, are located all across India. These are run in the traditional gurukulam format, in which students live with their teachers at the center and train in Sanskrit studies. The patashalas teach chanting and study of Hindu scriptures, rituals, traditions and religious practices to young men who aspire to be priests or pundits. Two of the largest patashalas are the Veda Agama Samskrutha Maha Patashala, Karnataka, and the Tirupati Temple Patashala in Andhra Pradesh. Some patashalas focus on specific *Vedas*, such as the *Yajur Veda* or *Rig Veda*. The patashala in Bengaluru also trains students who aspire to become priests in the Saivagama tradition. (See bit.ly/BengaluruPatashalaHToday for an in-depth article on this school.)

Vakdevi's Devi Suktam

Here is Vakdevi's Devi Suktam, "Hymn of Omniscience," *Rig Veda* 10.125, translated by Ralph T. H. Griffith:

1. I travel with the Rudras and the Vasus, with the Adityas and all Gods I wander. I hold aloft both Varuna and Mitra, Indra and Agni, and the Pair of Asvins.
2. I cherish and sustain high-swelling Soma, and Tvastar I support, Pusan and Bhaga. I load with wealth the zealous sacrificer who pours the juice and offers his oblation.

Devi Suktam: Vakdevi is shown composing the renowned hymn to the Goddess of Speech. Sound, the fundament of speech, is shown by the artist in three forms.

3. I am the Queen, the gatherer-up of treasures, most thoughtful, first of those who merit worship. Thus Gods have established me in many places with many homes to enter and abide in.
4. Through me alone all eat the food that feeds them, each man who sees, breathes, hears the word outspoken. They know it not, but yet they dwell beside me. Hear, one and all, the truth as I declare it.
5. I, verily, myself announce and utter the word that Gods and men alike shall welcome. I make the man I love exceeding mighty, make him a sage, a rishi and a Brahman.
6. I bend the bow for Rudra that his arrow may strike and slay the hater of devotion. I rouse and order battle for

the people, and I have penetrated Earth and Heaven.

7. On the world's summit I bring forth the Father: my home is in the waters, in the ocean. Thence I extend over all existing creatures, and touch even yonder heaven with my forehead.
8. I breathe a strong breath, like the wind and tempest, the while I hold together all existence. Beyond this wide earth and beyond the heavens I have become so mighty in my grandeur.

Meaning of the Devi Suktam

According to Sayanacharya, a 14th-century Vedic scholar and Sanskrit grammarian from the Vijayanagara empire, Vakdevi was a Brahmaidushi (one who has realized Brahman) who has eulogized herself in this suktam. The Devi Suktam can thus be thought of as an "atmastuti," a hymn that glorifies oneself. However, the 'I' Vakdevi refers to in her hymn is not the ego-centric 'I' that we usually mean in our day-to-day speech. Vakdevi refers to the supreme, eternal, absolute Consciousness, the foundation of both the ego (subject) and the universe (object). One can interpret this suktam as an affirmation by the Goddess (Devi), who expounds on Her own glories and powers. Today, Shaktas may conceptualize Goddess as Adi Parashakti, Vaishnavas think of Her as Mahalakshmi, and Shaivas consider Her Parvati. Vakdevi's hymn is one of the boldest (and oldest) proclamations of the realization of Advaita (non-dualist) philosophy by any seer in all of the *Vedas*.

LEARN MORE

- * **Learn** Vakdevi's suktam with this YouTube video (lyrics and translation provided): bit.ly/VakdeviSuktam
- * **Watch/Hear** Vedic Pandits chant the Devi Suktam: bit.ly/DeviSuktamChanting



VEDA AGAMA SAMSKRUTHA MAHA PATASHALA

Vedic Chanting in Daily Life

Did you know that the popular Mrtyunjaya Mantra and Gayatri Mantra are Vedic hymns?

Millions of Hindus worldwide chant parts of the *Vedas* in their daily religious practices. Some schools of Hinduism advocate that everyone should spend some time each day studying and memorizing sections of the *Vedas*.

"Aum" is chanted at the beginning and at the end of all Vedic texts, because it is believed this one syllable is the source of creation and encapsulates the entire *Vedas*. The popular Ganesha invocation, *Ganana Tva Ganapati*, is a mantra from the *Rig Veda* (2.23.1). Several temples perform annual Ati Rudram Mahayagnas where 121 priests chant Sri Rudram many times. 14,641 times (each round taking about 22 minutes). This remarkable feat takes eleven days!

Other popular Vedic chants include several Shanti Mantras, Ganapati Atharvashirsha Upanishad, Purushasuktam, Narayanasuktam, Medhasuktam, Durgasuktam, Shrisuktam, and Shishya Anushasanam. The famous Purusha Suktam emphasizes the correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm. Guy Beck, an American musicologist and historian of religions, discusses this hymn in his work, saying it underscores the idea that the human body and mind correspond to the universe, and one can be experienced in the other. This is the basis of many yogic practices, including those that specifically emphasize sound.

The correspondences between microcosm and macrocosm in Hinduism have remained prominent from the earliest time to the present—for example, seeing the Vedic altar as a symbol of the universal body, seeing God as a human form that fills the universe, seeing the universe as contained within the human body, and experiencing this oneself by practicing yoga.



Vasuki, Perfect Partner

The virtuous Vasuki and her husband, the famed poet-philosopher Tiruvalluvar (or simply Valluvar), are known throughout the Tamil-speaking world. One of the great “power couples” of ancient India, they are held in high esteem for their exemplary family life and their contributions to Tamil literature and Indian society. Scholars debate about the time period they lived in, proposing anywhere between the third century bce and the fifth century ce.

Though difficult to provide hard evidence for incidents that took place so long ago, Vasuki and Tiruvalluvar are believed to have had a strong and beautiful marriage with deep understanding. They were both ideal in their respective roles. All the villagers admired them and sought Tiruvalluvar’s advice on marriage and family life, though he was a simple weaver. Personifying Tiruvalluvar’s Kural 55, “Even the rains will fall at her command who upon rising worships not God, but her husband,” Vasuki considered Tiruvalluvar a living God. Her wifely devotion can be observed in the loving, sincere way she attended to his needs. Many stories demonstrate ways that nature obeyed her command.

One day, Vasuki was drawing water at the well outside their house. Traditional Indian wells (kineru) consist of a pulley system that is mounted at the well and a rope that moves through the pulley. One end of the rope is tied to a bucket which is dropped into the well; the other end is held by the person drawing water. Water is fetched by lowering and raising the bucket.

While Vasuki was pulling up a bucket full of water from the well, Valluvar called out to her. Narratives say that Vasuki did not wait an instant to respond. She abandoned the task with the bucket raised midway, and instantly rushed to her husband. When she came back,

the bucket was still suspended midair, exactly where she had left it! Normally, it would have fallen back into the well with the rope, given the weight of the water—but Vasuki’s virtue and devotion miraculously led to defying the law of gravity.

Tiruvalluvar’s *Tirukural*

Regarded as a Tamil *Veda* and one of the greatest works in Tamil literature, the *Tirukural* (“holy couplets”) consists of 1,330 two-line aphorisms, or *kurals*, that advocate virtue and ethics in daily living. The Tamil word *tiru* means holy, while *kural* means a brief statement or verse. The text is divided into 133 chapters with ten couplets each. The first section, entitled Virtue, has 38 chapters; the second, on the material world (wealth, polity and economy) consists of 70 chapters; and the third section covers love in 25 chapters.

Tiruvalluvar was an intellectual weaver in the Mylapore area of Chennai, Tamil Nadu. He is sometimes considered the 64th Nayanmar (saint) in the Saiva Siddhanta tradition. Western scholars have theorized that he was a Jain. His work covers the entire gamut of human experience, from love and family life, dharma, leadership and management techniques, to life’s highest attainment, Self Realization. His insightful work, highly aphoristic, is often featured in Tamil textbooks for children to enhance memory, advance language skills and imbibe the importance of value-based living.

The *Tirukural* has been translated into over 80 languages. Several scholarly commentaries have been written over the centuries, each offering its nuanced interpretation. Many monuments have been dedicated to the poet-saint, including a 133-foot-tall stone sculpture on an island near Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu; a park in Chennai with

Perfect responsiveness: The poet-weaver Valluvar called for his wife one day as he worked at the loom. She left her water-gathering at the well and rushed to his side. Legend says the water bucket was miraculously suspended in the air in honor of her dutiful act. (right) A statue of Vasuki in South India.

each verse carved in polished black granite; and a life-size granite statue at Kauai Aadenam in Hawaii.

Vasuki’s Unswerving Dedication

Vasuki and Tiruvalluvar led a long, happy and peaceful life together, with children according to some. As Vasuki was about to leave her mortal form, Valluvar asked if there was anything he could do for her. She answered in the affirmative, and said she had one question, about his habit of keeping a small cup of water and needle by his side during meals since their first day of marriage. He had never used either of these in all those years, though she had

dutifully placed them near him every day.

Valluvar replied that they had a purpose, but she never gave him an opportunity to use them. Seeing Vasuki’s puzzled countenance, Tiruvalluvar explained: “Dear wife, you serve me rice every day. If you ever spilled any, I thought I would use the needle to gather it from the floor, wash it in the cup of water, and put it back on my plate. But you never spilled even a single grain of rice! You have been so focused on serving me with full attention that I have never had to use my needle or the cup of water.”

In the words of Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, “The Tamil understanding of the husband-and-wife relationship is vastly different from modern thinking, which stresses sameness and equality. Yet, those who have seen the deepness of such a family and such a marriage would never call it antiquated. The Tamil wife is pure in thought, devoted to her duties, perfect in hospitality to guests. She is frugal, strong and modest, never bold. She adores her husband and never even looks into the eyes of another man. She is, they say, the authoress of her husband’s renown and glory, the support that lifts him high in the eyes of others.”

Subramuniyaswami also taught that we cannot attain liberation until we have properly performed the various dharmas in our many lives. Vasuki surely performed stri dharma to perfection.

The epitome of attentiveness, patience and love, Vasuki is cited as a role model for wives in Tamil Nadu. A home where the couple is likened to Vasuki and Tiruvalluvar is considered truly blessed.

LEARN MORE

- ✱ **Visit** the Tiruvalluvar Temple in the historic Mylapore neighborhood in Chennai, Tamil Nadu
- ✱ **Read** *Weaver’s Wisdom: Ancient Precepts for a Perfect Life*, an English translation of the Tirukural by Sivaya Subramuniyaswami: bit.ly/WeaversWisdom



Verses from the *Tirukural*

Sivaya Subramuniyaswami’s *Weaver’s Wisdom*

Chapter 1, Praising God, KURAL 1

Akara muthala eluth ellam Athi
Bhagavan muthatre ulaku.

“A” is the first and source of all the letters. Even so is God Primordial the first and source of all the world.

Chapter 3, The Greatness of Renunciates, KURAL 27

Touch, taste, sight, smell and hearing are the senses—he who controls these five magically controls the world.

Chapter 5, Family Life, KURAL 45

When family life possesses love and virtue,
it has found both its essence and fruition.

Chapter 7, The Blessing of Children, KURAL 66

“Sweet are the sounds of the flute and the lute,” say those who have not heard the prattle of their own children.

Chapter 10, Speaking Pleasant Words, KURAL 92

Better than a gift given with a joyous heart are
sweet words spoken with a cheerful smile.

Chapter 11, Gratitude, KURAL 108

It is improper to ever forget a kindness,
but good to forget at once an injury received.

Chapter 14, Possession of Virtuous Conduct, KURAL 140

Those who cannot live in harmony with the world,
though they have learned many things, are still ignorant.

Chapter 20, Avoidance of Pointless Speech, KURAL 200

In your speaking, say only that which is purposeful.
Never utter words that lack purpose.



MAURITIUS

Ganesha's Island Birthday

Come with us to the Spiritual Park in Mauritius, where thousands gather for Ganesha Chaturthi—hopefully with the worst of the pandemic behind them

By Savita Tiwari, Mauritius

MAURITIUS: A LAND OF SANDY beaches, turquoise water, clean blue sky and breathtaking landscapes. This small country, located in the Indian Ocean off the coast of Africa, is a place where Hinduism, the majority religion, stands proudly, people are friendly and religious and every Hindu festival is a national celebration. Ganesha Chaturthi is the biggest festival here, attracting in particular thousands each year to the Spiritual Park, where the Rempart River meets the ocean, to worship the elephant-faced God on His birthday.

As of July 23, 2020, the day of the festival, the Covid-19 pandemic has barely touched us. Currently there are only two active cases on the island, both related to travel. Large crowds are once again allowed to gather without masks or social distancing.

I know parking spaces will be scarce, so I take a taxi for the 25-mile journey from home. For me, that's a long trip—our island is just 40 miles north to south and 30 miles wide. There are many temples closer to home, but

this is an opportunity for a mini-pilgrimage. Passing through our beautiful landscape of mountains, villages and sugarcane fields, I see dozens of temples celebrating the festival. Banners are hung on every roundabout, and every available wall is plastered with posters announcing the festival's celebration by various associations and temples.

As I approach the park, I can start to feel the difference. Still a mile out, traffic has slowed to a crawl. One lane is completely dedicated for devotees to park their cars and walk to the site. All wear colorful traditional Hindu attire: women in saris and churidars; girls in lehengas; men and boys in kurta pajama outfits. Some shop along the way at the colorful stalls lining the road, where vendors are selling everything from puja offerings and souvenirs to hats and books—anything one can think of to buy at a fair. Everything is sparkling with tradition and festival.

In the small, secluded village of Pointe de Lascar, police are directing traffic at the final turn, on to the aptly-named Ganesha Lane. My taxi is allowed no farther. Loudspeakers bring me the priestly chanting of mantras as

I walk the last 100 yards past more vendor stalls. Arriving devotees are buying fruits and other offerings to supplement their prayer platters; those departing after their darshan are buying things for their happy kids. It is around 9am; the earlier showers have stopped and the sun is out, making it a very fresh tropical morning.

The three-acre Spiritual Park, opened to the public in 1999, contains several shrines. The focus today is on the largest, a Kerala-style building housing an eight-foot-tall granite Panchamukha Ganapati, the five-faced form of Lord Ganesha. Conceived by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (founder of HINDUISM TODAY), the park is a branch of Saiva Siddhanta Church, Hawaii, USA.

The devotees' loving effort is evident in their prayer platters. Handmade modakas (reputed to be Ganesha's favorite sweet) along with fruits, flowers and the sacred doob grass surround the centerpiece of each platter, a small murti of Ganesha made of clay, sand, even raw turmeric. I ask one lady about hers. "Oh, I made it with the help of a YouTube video," she said proudly. "It was



ALL PHOTOS: RAJEN MANICK

tricky but still we managed. Isn't it beautiful? We let it dry for a day and colored it with my kids' watercolors. It's the tradition here to make or buy a murti, pray to Him at home, then bring Him here. All the murtis are kept in front of the Panchamukha Ganesha during the prayer rituals. Then we carry our murtis in procession to the river for the immersion ceremony."

This is indeed a park—a walled garden, really—with trees, benches, unspoiled nature, fruit trees and flowering plants. Birds sing in harmony despite humans everywhere. Even the small wooden bridges give one a feeling of nature. A salty breeze announces the nearby sea. A few people, fortunate enough to find a peaceful corner, are sitting in deep meditation. Others of all ages are in full festival mode with a broad smile on their face, greeting all who cross their path, praying, mingling, eating prasad, lighting lamps—a complete dose of the joyful spirit of the day.

The main Panchamukha Ganapati mandapam is nothing like the hurricane-proof concrete temple construction common in Mauritius. Built in the Kerala style, it is a large open-sided ornate wooden building with a blue tile roof. On the central platform stands a magnificently adorned eight-foot-tall black granite Panchmukha Ganapati. Thousands of devotees are seated around the mandapam, so I bow from a distance, still easily feeling the connection, the vibrations, the blessings.

Priests are performing fire worship and related rituals at a big havan kund in front of Panchamukha Ganapati. Tables hold the murtis brought by devotees. On the far side, devotees with musical instruments are conducting bhajan.

Celebrating Ganesha's Birthday: (clockwise from left) Sivacharya Arunachallum (left) of the Goodlands Siva Soopramanar Temple leads the day's special worship with Siven Koothan (right) assisting; devotees in procession to the river hold Ganesha murtis to be immersed in the water

Touring the Park

I meet the person who invited me and am handed over to a friendly lady, Magadevi Canagasaby, for a tour of the place. "Opposite the entrance there is a small store, the Minimela, where we sell publications of the park's founder," she explains. "Scattered throughout the park are the rest of Ganesha's family in small, beautifully carved wooden structures. Across from the main mandapam is a set of stairs down to a landing by the sea."

A lady named Premila is volunteering in the Minimela. I ask if she is not missing the puja. "Not at all," she says. "At the moment my service to Lord Ganesha is to offer the knowledge to as many people as possible through books." I ask how long she has been associated with the Spiritual Park. "It's a long story," she says. "But since I was 12, I was looking for a guru who could answer my questions about dharma and life. When I was 18, I got my answers in an editorial of *Sivaneri* magazine, published by Himalayan Academy here in Mauritius. Since then I am at the feet of Ganesha. I met my husband here; my kids grew up coming to Ganesha. Before that, we didn't know where our lives were taking us. We were doing puja and all, but we didn't know the meaning and philosophy behind the rituals. The books we sell here help people answer their questions just like they did for me."

I next visit a separate small shrine with a three-foot Ganesha murti. Here people can make their offerings and do their prayers

when a big event is being held in the larger temple. Nearby, people are lighting earthen lamps at a beautiful wrought-iron lamp tree while chanting *Gan Ganpataye Namaha* and other Sanskrit mantras. Mauritians are a very spiritual and knowledge-acquiring people, particularly adept at learning mantras.

I ask Magadevi if I might have a small chat with the priest to talk about the rituals. She replies, "We don't have priests here. At the Spiritual Park, everyone who comes prays on their own. We only hire priests for special occasions such as this." I fall in love with this concept: "praying on your own." No one between you and your God. As the wife of a priest, I understand the importance of a priest for a temple, but I also understand when a devotee should be left alone.

I ask why the consort of Siva is not given a place in the park. Magadevi explains, "We don't see Siva and Shakti as two people. For us, they are one."

At the Dakshinamurti Mandapam—Siva as the silent guru—I find people praying with closed eyes, offering flowers and incense. And at the furthest part of the park we encounter Lord Murugan, Ganesha's younger brother, sitting facing the ocean.

At the railing here, where one can see the confluence of the river and the sea, a young girl is standing alone, deep in thought. Although I normally leave people alone, I was inclined to ask what she was thinking. "Nothing," she answers, "I am just seeing how



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the river leaves its identity and merges with the ocean. Today my journey started with the prayer at Panchamukha Ganesha. From there I went to the waterfront and sat watching the serene river. Next I walked to Dakshinamurti and meditated for a few minutes, then to Murugan. I have traveled the whole park like a river. Standing facing the ocean, I feel I have completed my journey as a river. On this pious day of Ganesha Chaturthi, I am ready to leave my ego, my anger and my regrets, ready to be my true self. Ready to merge with the Supreme Being, just like the river is merging with the ocean." Remarkable insights indeed from one so young.

I am next introduced to Kamayshvaran Vythelingum, an active youth volunteer at the Spiritual Park. I inquire about his journey to Ganesha. "My brother bought me here for the first time seven years back. Since then Ganesha is part of my life. We have started classes on the *Path to Siva* book. Anyone is free to join these classes, but unfortunately, only ten people are attending." He seems dispirited, so I encourage him: "Don't worry. The *Gita* was told by one person to just one person. The number of people is not the point when it comes to knowledge." Uplifted, he continues: "I think spirituality is an integral part of human character. Spirituality is not only rituals and volunteering, it is finding peace. The Spiritual Park is not a temple for me. It's a place where anyone from any religion can come and find peace within nature. Though it is embedded into Hinduism, the

philosophy is universal. Due to the Internet, Western culture is influencing youth more and more. We are still trying to find our own identity. In Mauritius youth are now coming to accept that they must have Hinduism as part of their life."

I meet another youth, Arinien Mootoocurpen, an aspiring actor with an optimistic point of view. Before entering university, he completed a six-month work/study program at Kauai's Hindu Monastery in Hawaii, the headquarters of the park's founder, where he lived the life of a monk. Asked about Mauritian youth, he replies, "We are very spiritual by nature. We are inclined toward other cultures, because we want to learn new things. Though we wear pants, we also wear traditional kurta shirt. So we are kind of balanced." He points out the existence of a youth wing in every temple on the island. "Today every temple has its youth team who serve as volunteers during festivals. They take part in bhajans, they serve prasad, they clean the temple. This would not be possible if Mauritian youth weren't spiritual by nature. It is OK if we wear Western clothes and have parties with friends, but we do happily come to the temple with family in traditional attire."

Next I am introduced to the oldest member here: Manogaren Mardemootoo, a senior attorney who has seen 70-plus years of life. He has been associated with the Spiritual Park for 40 years. When I ask if he is the oldest member, he replies, "Oldest member alive. Many others played an

Ready for Ganesha's sendoff: (above) chanting bhajan before the assembled murtis prior to the procession to the river

important role to make this place what it is today, but are not among us anymore. I worked as a youth among them." He tells us the background story of how in the eighties Subramuniyaswami had a vision of Ganesha here and decided to establish a center. Mardemootoo was instrumental in getting the Saiva Siddhanta Church Act passed in parliament to allow the park's development [see bit.ly/spiritualpark].

Mardemootoo explains how the Ganesha Chaturthi festival has evolved here over the years. "Earlier we were giving free food to all the devotees who participated. First, it was 50 people, then after a few years, it reached 1500. It was hard to handle that. We stopped feeding and concentrated just on prayers. Then people started feeding devotees outside the park. And then came the vendors and fruit sellers. Gradually it took the shape of a grand fair spread around more than one mile of distance with tens of thousands of devotees participating from all corners of the island. And the center of all this is the magnificent eight-foot-tall Ganesha standing in His shrine."

Mardemootoo walks back to the Minimela store with me to sit and chat awhile longer. Everyone along the way greets him with folded hands and a very respectful smile. I



ask how he manages to keep inspiring all these people around him. He replies, "We follow the rules which we want others to follow. All the members of the organizing committee, we all wear traditional clothes. Men wear dhoti kurta and women wear saris. People don't do what you say, they do what you do. It's a simple rule. We are proud of what we are. Hinduism is a very beautiful way of life. And it starts with Ganesha here."

Immersion Procession

Rituals concluded, everyone retrieves their Ganesha murti for the Visarjana immersion ceremony. Just as the procession starts, a group of boys in black t-shirts appear with big drums and start playing ferociously. The energy in the air increases by a hundred percent. Everyone is clapping, and some are dancing with their Ganesha murti on their head. After proceeding around the park for over an hour, we turn towards the stairs

Final departure: (above) the Spiritual park—the central Ganesha shrine is left and above of center, above it is the platform at confluence of the Rempart River and the Indian Ocean where the immersion takes place; (inset) young men take the murtis out several at a time for immersion under the watchful eye of lifeguards in a boat (just out of the photo)

leading down to the waterfront.

Everyone gathers at the half-circle waterfront. A dozen men line up in the water, and people start passing their Ganesha murtis to them. They stand waist deep with Ganesha sitting happily on their head while people do arati from the shore. As soon as arati is done, all those in the river take three dips with the Ganesha, leaving Him submerged the third time. In this way all the Ganesha murtis are immersed, with a promise to come back soon again next year.

I am sitting on the stairs watching the ceremony. A few soaked people who already participated in the immersion come and sit on the stairs to dry off. I smile and introduce

myself to one youth, asking what he has learned from the Ganesha Chaturthi festival. He introduces himself as Bhavish, a University of Mauritius student. "I never focused on if I should take any lesson from this festival. I just celebrated it. It was fun together with family and friends. But this past month I had a breakup with my longtime girlfriend. It happened due to long distance during the Covid-19 lockdown. I was very

disturbed. But today while doing Visarjana I felt that this festival teaches us to 'let go.' We pray to Ganesha all day long, we fall in love with Him, we celebrate His presence in our lives and now we just have to immerse Him in the water. We can keep the murti for a day or five or even ten days but we can't keep Him more than that. On Ananta Chaturdasi we have to do Visarjana, as the next day is the start of Pitra Paksha (honoring of ancestors). So it taught me to let go of things. Nothing is permanent in life. We have to move on. This thought just crossed my mind while doing the immersion today, and I am feeling very light now. I can move on with my life without regrets."

As the sun sets, I stand and take in the continuing celebration. People are still dancing, immersion still going on. I return to the main mandapam, where the beautiful black stone five-faced Panchamukha Ganesha of the Spiritual Park is still standing with a smile. I bow before Him one last time, with a promise to return soon.

While coming here in the morning, I wondered why I was traveling so far. But during the ride back home, I am already planning my next trip to the Spiritual Park, where spirituality is in the air.

About the Author

Savita Tiwari grew up in India and is now a resident of Mauritius. She is an avid journalist, blogger, writer and poet with a love of dharma and a penchant for learning more about Hinduism.



Ayurvedic Astrology

With the Covid-19 era focusing humanity on wellness more than ever before, we present a little-known branch of knowledge—medical astrology

By VAMADEVA SHASTRI, NEW MEXICO

OUR HUMAN LIVES ARE GOVERNED BY the same cosmic forces that rule over the universe as a whole. Hindu thought teaches us that the individual human being is a reflection of the universal Being and explains how we can link the two together for overall well-being and for ultimate Self-realization. This connection is mirrored in the discipline of Vedic astrology, or Jyotish, the science of light, which shows how the influences of the stars and planets at a cosmic level affect the movement of our personal human lives through our karma and our dharma.

Modern physics is recognizing our human activities are interrelated with those of the cosmos, both on subtle and vast levels. Modern medicine is slowly accepting the existence of powers of life and intelligence in nature that we cannot reduce to mere chemistry and which we are an integral part of.

One of the most important branches of astrology is medical astrology. After all, among the first questions everyone asks an astrologer are “How long am I going to live?” and “Will my health remain good?” Medical astrology assesses our health potential, our likely diseases, their timing and their treatments. Yet it is not confined to the physical. Medical astrology encompasses our psychological well-being and addresses emotional and mental afflictions, as these are usually our main source of suffering in life. It helps us discern the karmic issues in what we experience, which are mirrored in the placement of the planets in the Vedic birth chart.

Vedic astrology is a limb of the *Vedas* (Vedanga). It is connected with Ayurveda, which is a secondary *Veda* (Upaveda). Vedic medical astrology, also called Ayurvedic astrology, is cast in the mold of Ayurvedic medicine, sharing concepts, principles and values relating to human life. Many Ayurvedic doctors use Vedic astrology or consult with Vedic astrologers, particularly about difficult-to-

treat cases. They examine the birth chart to assess the client's well-being and possible issues and timing relative to disease. Similarly, many Vedic astrologers consult with Ayurvedic doctors on their patients' health conditions. Some Vedic practitioners are trained in depth in both Jyotish (Vedic astrology) and Ayurveda.

Astrology, Health and Disease

Ayurveda and Jyotish work best when used together. Ayurveda examines individual constitution and disease factors according to the three doshas, or biological humors, vata, pitta and kapha, which correspond generally to

the air, fire and water elements respectively, as imbued with prana and functioning at a biological level.

The nine planets of Vedic astrology relate to the Ayurvedic doshas (biological humors). When dominant in the chart, planets set their corresponding doshas in motion. While I have indicated the general dosha and planet correspondence below, the actual interrelationship is more specific. Each planet has its doshic signature and effects.

Mars, the Sun and Ketu are pitta or fiery planets. Moon, Venus and Jupiter are kapha or watery in nature. Saturn, Mercury and Rahu are vata or airy in nature.

Similarly, the twelve signs of the zodiac (*rashis*) follow the scheme of the elements as earth, water, fire or air signs, starting with Aries and the fire element. The twelve houses (*bhavas*) relate to different parts of the body, functions of the mind and factors of health and disease, starting with the first house as the head and relating to our overall health.

According to Ayurveda, most diseases are caused by vata dosha, the biological air humor that governs our overall pranic energy and the aging process. Reflecting this fact, the main planet for causing disease is vata-ruling Saturn, which shares vata dosha qualities of being dry, cold, light and depleting. Saturn, like vata, is responsible for most chronic and degenerative conditions, from arthritis to cancer and nervous debility, including poor immunity and limited longevity, as well as vata-based emotional conditions like depression, fear and anxiety.

Fiery Mars, which governs most pitta diseases, does its share of damage, causing acute diseases, fever, infection and bleeding, extending to fiery mental conditions like anger and jealousy, and often causing physical

injuries. Even watery or kapha Moon, Venus and Jupiter, which generally promote positive health, can cause illness, such as diabetes and heart disease.

As factors that cause eclipses, the lunar nodes, Rahu (cut off head of the serpent) and Ketu (cut off tail of the serpent), said to be like Saturn and Mars respectively, are dangerous relative to our long-term vitality and immunity. In addition, they can subject us to collective karmas beyond our personal control, such as wars and epidemics. The nodes govern mysterious psychological and nervous system derangements, often involving the subtle body, and produce karmic conditions that are difficult to cure or treat.

In Vedic astrology, the malefic or difficulty- and disease-causing planets (Saturn, Mars, Rahu, Ketu) are most dangerous when placed in angular houses in the chart (houses one, four, seven and ten) or located with the Sun or Moon, where their influences are stronger.

Usually benefic planets—the Moon, Venus, Jupiter and Mercury—promote positive health and happiness, as do the planets ruling trine houses (first, fifth and ninth). These

planets can counter the effects of disease-causing planets, particularly if located in angular or trine houses in the chart. Yet, malefic planets can protect one's health if located in certain houses (*upachayas* like the third, sixth and eleventh), where they promote immunity, mental and physical strength.

Even naturally benefic planets, like Jupiter, Venus, Moon and Mercury, can cause health problems if they rule difficult houses in the birth chart from the ascendant, or if afflicted by malefic planets. The sixth and eighth house lords, which govern disease and death, in particular can cause disease and sorrow.

The Practice of Ayurvedic Astrology

Vedic medical astrology can appear ominous. Everyone has periods of ill health and will eventually get sick and die, so every chart has negative health potentials. To look for these combinations, particularly in one's own chart or that of someone close to us, can be disturbing. One is bound to find something. This looking for health afflictions should be balanced by looking for positive health-promoting combinations to counter them.

Seeking knowledge: A mother holds a lamp aloft to illumine the cosmic darkness, to find answers for her life and her daughter's among the distant stars. (Inset) Ayurvedic practitioner massages marma points to stimulate a patient's vitality.





Like other factors of Vedic astrology, the medical side can be quite accurate. For example, I have seen a lot of consistency in the charts of cancer patients in terms of planetary afflictions and timing of the disease.

One chart in particular had typical combinations for breast cancer, from which the patient eventually died. Years later I saw the same combinations in the third house of another client. As these combinations related to the third house of younger siblings, I thought they might affect the client's younger sister. I also saw that the timing would not be favorable for the sister.

Proceeding carefully, I first asked the woman if she had a younger sister. When she said yes, I asked if that sister had any major health problems. She replied that she was very ill. I asked if it could be cancer, perhaps breast cancer. She confirmed my suspicion and said that was one of the reasons she was consulting me. She thought I was a psychic, but I was merely applying classical principles of Vedic astrology based upon previous chart experience.

More recently I have specialized in psychological astrology. Combinations and timing for such conditions as depression, bipolar disorder and even suicide can be found in the chart, particularly relative to the Moon, Mercury, Rahu, Ketu and Saturn. For example, if there are joint Saturn and Mars aspects on the Moon, which is otherwise weak, personal or domestic happiness will be difficult to achieve and a life of renunciation or independent living would be better for overall emotional well-being.

Use of Medical Astrology

Medical astrology has many usages and levels of application. It can show if a person is likely to become ill and when they are likely to recover. If a person with a major illness

is entering into a difficult planetary period (*dasha*), the prognosis is not likely to be good. But if the planetary periods are positive, a quick recovery can be indicated. The chart can also show the types of treatment the person may receive or which treatments may work best for them. Even malpractice or wrong treatment shows up in the chart!

The Vedic system does not leave us helpless before negative planetary forces. By warning us of impending negative planetary periods for health or emotional well-being, Vedic astrology helps us take precautions and be prepared so as to minimize the dangers.

Special remedial measures of Vedic astrology are used to promote health as well as the other goals of life. Gems, yantras, mantras and rituals for planetary Deities or difficult birth times can make a real difference in the vitality of a person and strengthen the immune system. These are commonly prescribed in India and at Hindu temples.

The right gems fortify the pranic field and subtle body, which is highly sensitive to cosmic rays. Yellow sapphire, the stone for benefic Jupiter, is often the best in this regard. Mantras and rituals are even more powerful, but must be performed regularly and with devotion. Rituals are particularly good for problems caused by Rahu and Ketu that have an occult influence or for psychological disorders in general.

However, we cannot simply remove negative karmas with expensive gems or complex rituals. The devas cannot be bought, cheated or treated without proper respect. To counter our negative karmas, we must understand and face them, then change how we live. We must develop more humility, or these measures may not work. We can also use astrology to improve our practice of Ayurveda through the right timing of treatments and by using a person's chart to guide the treat-

Jyotish in the Covid-19 era: *The global pandemic was anticipated by astute astrologers; (Opposite) Two millennials study their shared astrological influences on iPhones.*

ments overall, or bringing in gems and mantras to help enhance dietary or herbal treatments with their subtle energies.

Medical Astrology and Global Health

Mundane astrology is the astrology of the world at large, looking at similar factors as the birth chart but for different countries. Ten years ago I predicted 2020 as the beginning of a "New Time of Troubles for Humanity" based upon difficult astrological factors that were impending. This prediction extended not only to global health problems but to ecological and political issues and dangers.

The lunar nodes, Rahu and Ketu, are the main indicators of collective karma, as they govern eclipses. One difficult type of Rahu/Ketu influence for collective karma is called a Kalasarpa Yoga, or "Serpent of Time" combination. This occurs when all the planets are located between Rahu and Ketu on one side of the zodiac. As the nodes move backward in the zodiac, the Kalasarpa can be either Rahu predominant, if all the planets are behind Rahu in the zodiac, or Ketu predominant if all the planets are behind Ketu.

A Kalasarpa Yoga occurred in 2020 in a rare and ominous manner, with Ketu, which indicates death, transformation or liberation, located in early Sagittarius in the nakshatra or lunar constellation of Mula, which marks a crucial point of the galactic center, suggesting major karmic changes.

The Rahu-Ketu axis goes backward through the zodiac every 18-19 years, so Ketu crossing the galactic center in itself is

not that unusual. It was rendered unusual by the fact that it occurred along with a Kalasarpa Yoga. Most crucial was the fact that this Yoga occurred on the Yugadi or yearly annual chart for the Earth as a whole (new Moon in Pisces), affecting various countries according to the rising sign at that time.

This 2020 Kalasarpa Yoga was dominated by Rahu in Gemini at the point in the zodiac opposite the galactic center. Rahu is the planet of epidemics and Gemini is the sign relating to the lungs and respiratory disorders.

Looking at the annual chart for different countries, I found Rahu was rising in Gemini in western Europe, notably Italy. This included a malefic Saturn/Mars combination in the eighth house of death, particularly afflicting the elderly (who are ruled by Saturn and the eighth house of longevity).

Based on different rising signs in different countries, problems of a related nature occurred globally. In addition, Rahu and Gemini relate to the mind and the media, which shows the many psychological disturbances created by this transit.

Ketu retrograding over the galactic center in this situation brings up deep-seated collective karmic issues and planetary karmic rectification. Ketu, when positive, rules over liberation, higher knowledge and astrology. At a lower level, however, it indicates dangerous technologies, weapons, conflict and terrorism, with a weakening physical and psychological immunity.

While this particular Kalasarpa Yoga has ended now, its side effects remain. Another Kalasarpa Yoga will come up later in 2021, not as dangerous but still reflecting the ongoing difficulties of our new time of troubles, which is related to yet other astrological factors we do not have the space to address here. A previous difficult Kalasarpa Yoga in 2019 prepared the way for that of 2020.

Conclusion

With a growing interest in traditional medicine and natural healing, people are developing a new interest in medical astrology, and the Ayurveda/Jyotish connection is gaining recognition once more. By understanding our

Vedic birth chart as well as our Ayurvedic constitution, we gain a compelling model for life counseling and the development of positive life strategies, for physical health and right living on all levels. National or planetary well-being as examined through medical astrology is yet another important area of study that needs more trained astrologers to examine and verify.

This important branch of Vedic medical astrology will remain at the forefront and grow worldwide as Vedic knowledge continues its modern renaissance. Not surprisingly, Ayurvedic schools often teach astrology, and Vedic astrology conferences and seminars include medical astrology with an emphasis on Ayurveda.

If we can bring the beneficent forces of the universe into our lives, starting with the planets, we can greatly increase the spiritual powers at work within and around us. For this we must remember that the entire universe dwells within us, and that we ourselves ultimately transcend all time, space and karma as the Self of all.

The Planets Don't Decree Our Fate

While astrologers speak a language in which "Saturn is the main planet causing disease" and "Venus promotes health and happiness," this is actually shorthand for a deeper understanding of the influences of the planets in our life. The birth chart, it turns out, is an accounting, a reckoning of our summed karmas. The planets' unique positions in our chart form a cypher, which astrologers can interpret as a repository of our karmic potentiality.

Planets have no active agency. They do not cause disease or health; they do not produce poverty or wealth. Nor do they decree our fate. Rather they indicate latent or inherent possibilities, some would say probabilities for our life, possibilities that we ourselves created.

Understanding this, one astrologer turned the tables on the planets, writing: "The popular view is that the placement of our planets in our natal chart 'causes' our behavior. I have long believed that it's the other way around; our actions from past lives create the placement of our planets. In other words, our natal chart in this lifetime reveals our 'karmic package' brought from the past."

Chakrapani D. Ullal, widely honored as the father of Vedic astrology in the West, observes, "Astrology is a science of indications only, it is not fatalistic. Therefore, people should have the idea that they have the power, if they want to—to bring amendments and changes, to modify the influence by their effort and their willingness. When I give a reading, I say, 'By using the willpower, by gaining the grace of God or guru, we can change everything.' Otherwise, people misunderstand astrology by thinking 'Oh, it is in the stars.' It is in the stars only for those people who do not want to take responsibility for their life."

Vamadeva Shastri observes, "A fatalistic and predictive jyotish is indeed dangerous, but we must also respect that karma cannot be

merely wished away or ignored, and that jyotish helps us understand its consequences. Planets do not directly cause karma, but they do reflect it. Much of the chart indicates *prarabdha karma*, which is difficult to change. We need to be humble before the cosmic forces and not think that at an ego level we can control our destiny, or that planets, doshas and gunas do not affect us."

John Heisler wrote: "The position of the stars and planets do not



cause illness in our body or changes in our state of mind, rather they reflect our own karmic patterning, whether it is group or individual karma."

There is another truth at play—that the physical cosmos is not separate from us, that the planets orbit within our own consciousness. Everything is within us. Comprehending this cosmic unity removes the notion that we are being influenced by outside forces. Saint Yogananda of Sri Lanka offered a yogi's insight: "All planets are auspicious for the true Sivabhaktar."



BALAKUMAR MUTHU

CULTURE

Chennai's 2020 Kolam Contest

A photographic essay of the kolam contest held during Mylapore's eighteenth annual Sundaram Finance Cultural festival

By BALAKUMAR MUTHU, INDIA

Balakumar is the editor and photographer of casualwalker.com. He is an entrepreneur, web developer, software consultant, travel photographer and hatha yoga practitioner.

RECENTLY I VISITED THE PULLI KOLAM contest in Mylapore, Chennai, as part of the Sundaram Finance's Mylapore 2020 Cultural Festival, which celebrates the arts, food, craft, games, drama, dance and religious traditions of Chennai's most iconic neighborhood. This year's festival took place from January 9 to 12, in and around the famed Kapaleeshwarar Temple. The festival included 30 cultural contests, activities, and exhibitions with some 400 artists contributing.

The major attraction of the Mylapore Festival is the two-day *pulli kolam* and *rangoli* contest at North Mada Street. The contest is a visual treat to observers, as they scan over



different vibrant and creative designs, and it's a true delight for participants from all the age groups.

The *pulli kolam* is a ritualistic art form carried forth mostly by women of South Indian households. The word *kolam* in Tamil means "beauty" and it is a symbol of sanctity, success and positivity. The curved, looping lines of

traditional *pulli kolams* are a maze of knots that often begin and end at the same point. These designs require great concentration and memory. Many women of South India rise early each day to bless their homes by making a *kolam* design at the entry. Those who have been keeping this tradition alive have built upon the past by adding small, innovative changes in their patterns to create something new every day.

The geometric *pulli kolam* has an inherent mathematical foundation and begins with a grid of dots around which lines are looped following three traditional rules: all line orbits should be closed, all dots should be circumscribed, and two line segments cannot overlap over a finite length. While there are various other types, like *chikku*, *kambi* and *neli kolams*, they all share intertwining patterns that are dynamic and thoughtfully calculated. The idea is that these geometric shapes reflect certain mental energies that bless and uplift our homes.



ALL PHOTOS: BALAKUMAR MUTHU



Celebrating an ancient art: (far left) a woman adds the finishing touches to her artistic submission; (counter-clockwise from upper-left) the registration booth for those wishing to enter the contest; the streets are washed and made ready, with squares marked out for participants to draw their designs in; an advanced kolam design nearly halfway to completion; two children work to create one of their first patterns; looking down the street near the end of the day at the many beautiful, completed designs.

Extreme & Auspicious



Most kolams are colorful, like the massive and elaborate one above drawn by a young artist in Mumbai during Gudi Padwa, a festival that marks the traditional new year in North India. It welcomes the Chitra month and holds utmost prominence in a Maharashtrian household. It is celebrated with decorating the floor with rangoli designs, as shown above in this joyous community sharing. Rangoli, called kolam in South India, is one of the most popular forms of decorating the house on any auspicious Hindu festival. Since Gudi

Padwa has no particular motif, the people celebrating it take artistic liberty, employing a variety of motifs in whichever combination they like.

If you would like to try your hand at making kolams, a good place to start would be to search YouTube for some "how-to" videos. Here is one that demonstrates several beginner-friendly designs: youtu.be/682RhOPHSp8



Masterful creations: (clockwise from top) an advanced flower-like kolam pattern; an elder women demonstrates a lifetime of skill and creativity; this artist begins with the outside patterns, depicting hansas (an Indian goose) around lotus flowers.



HERITAGE

So You Call Yourself a “Woke” Hindu?

A university undergraduate describes the different ways she’s found her fellow students of Indian origin sort out their identity in today’s world

BY ANU SINGH

SO YOU CALL YOURSELF A WOKE HINDU? you’ve gone to a Hindu group since childhood, learned about the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and done puja now and then—maybe you have even joined a Hindu club in college. Better yet, you see through the half-truths spewed by Western media about recent events in India such as Article 370, the Ayodhya Ram Mandir decision and the 2019 Citizenship Act and realize how vital these are to you as a Hindu. Congratulations.

But do I also hear you gasp in horror when your friends in college turn on you when you say something favorable about Article 370 and Kashmiri Pandits? Worse, your childhood friends from Bal-Vihar, Balagokulam, or temple classes detest you when you post something even mildly positive about Citizenship Act and how it was the just decision for many oppressed religious minorities, including Hindus, fleeing the countries surrounding India.

Same here. What happened to our peers? How could they turn on us when we shared the same Hindu lessons, similar heritage and upbringing in America. Why did you turn out to be a woke Hindu and not them? I think it’s high time we talk about what happened to your friends.



The South Asians

You’ve seen them before. They call themselves “South Asians” (maybe Desis but never Indians, let alone Hindus). They hold positions in their university’s South Asian Club. Their parents never took them to any religious classes so they were fed a stale diet of Bollywood, Twitter and the *New York Times*.

After coming to college, they decided to take a sociology class here and there and maybe even a Religion in South Asia class. Immediately, they form a misguided view of the entirety of Hinduism based on colonial lenses and half-baked truths about this ancient tradition. And then they turn on their parents, friends and you. But they don’t know any better.

Did you ever consider that these people are trying to be model American citizens? Indu Viswanathan puts this point beautifully in her *Medium* article, where she explains how American educational institutions are designed to strip children of immigrants of their roots and supply them with Western critical theories. These students long to be virtuous members of American society and apply these lenses to speak up for oppressed, subaltern voices in India. The only problem is that they are mistaken in who these subaltern voices really are. Of course, I am assuming that they are only misinformed and misguided. Some are pawns for forces that

want to continue the oppression of Hindus, but let’s ignore that for now.

So before you scream at them for roasting marshmallows on Diwali celebrations organized by their South Asian group in college, why not try to understand them? Academia is dominated by certain paradigms and it is incumbent upon us that we do our research and understand them. Narrative-building institutions such as universities, view the West, whiteness, masculinity and Brahmanism (in South Asia) as forces of oppression. Brahmanism refers to the domination of brahmins in Indian society and Hindu ideology. Casteism is another closely related term. Hindu society and history are often analyzed from the Conflict theory lens that uses caste conflict and upper-caste dominance to explain Indian history. Needless to say, this an entirely reductionist and parochial view of Hinduism which says Hinduism equals casteism equals racism; or Hinduism equals caste equals oppression.

Essentially, the narrative amounts to the notion that being a Hindu in South Asia is equivalent to being a “White Supremacist with a false religion” as Vamsee Juluri puts it in his book, *Writing Across a Cracked World*. To be a progressive South Asian in America, you must embrace your racial guilt much like white progressives have in America.

Except these people conveniently forget that Hindus aren’t like white people who colonized the world for the past five hundred years, states Juluri. Moreover, Hindus don’t have the kind of systemic privilege that white people have—neither in India nor in America. Hindus are a people of color who were colonized and subjugated for hundreds of years. We are now a post-colonial people who have spread across the world; yet, we are made to be honorary white people in America with a casteist and racist religion and are expected to play guilty for that.

Every interaction that these South Asians have with their religion is approached with guilt and self-reproach for their “inherited superiority.” Diwali turns into a s’mores [a marshmallow/chocolate treat] party so that the Muslims in the South Asian group aren’t offended (even though the vast majority of members are Hindu and it’s a Hindu festival). If they talk about their heritage with others, they call themselves South Asian rather than use terms such as Hindu or even Indian. If they talk about current topics like Kashmir, they want to stand in solidarity with the Muslims rather than with the Hindu Kashmiri Pandits who were ethnically cleansed 30 years ago.

The Middle Hindus

These are the Hindus who went to their local temple, Balagokulam or Chinmaya Mission every Sunday for classes, learned about the *Ramayana*, *Gita*, etc. They can even see why it is appropriate to celebrate Diwali on campus with a puja rather than just a s’mores party. But when something like Article 370 or Citizenship Act comes into the limelight on campus, they may choose to be completely silent or outright attack you when you stand in favor of the Hindu side.

Why? For most Hindu-Americans, being a Hindu is like a jacket that you can take on or off when convenient. When you are in a temple, you call yourself a devout Hindu; but when you want to

blend in with your American college friends, you can conveniently take this identity off to conform.

One reason this is happening is that most institutions that inculcate Hindu values and identities into our American-born generation do not address the value that Hinduism brings to being an American. Understandably, they are most concerned with teaching the traditions that our parents brought from India, but often the link to how this can help us be outstanding Americans is ignored or brushed aside. A dichotomy between our Hindu identity and our American is created and, more often than not, this Hindu identity seems to conflict with being a progressive American.

Another cause is the fear of being labeled as a Hindutva extremist or right-wing Hindu nationalist. The term *Hindutva* only means the essence, or *tattva*, of Hindu civilization and is the Sanskrit term equal to the English term *Hinduism*. Unfortunately, the term has been so politicized and misconstrued that Hindutva has come to symbolize Hindu fascism and regressive doctrines. Instantly, if you speak out against Hinduphobia and claim that Hindus are human beings who deserve human rights, deserve to be protected from religious bigotry, and deserve fair representation in the media, you are automatically labeled as a Hindutva extremist.

So for these Middle Hindus who sincerely appreciate their Hindu backgrounds there seem to be only two options: if you want to keep your Hindu identity you can either a) keep silent on issues or b) speak out against those Hindus who claim they deserve basic human rights. Otherwise, you risk being labeled as a Hindutva extremist as well.

What Is to Be Done?

You’re still a woke Hindu, right? Just checking. Now, I would like to urge you to be a Hindu-American. Don’t pick whichever side of the hyphen is most convenient for the situation at hand. You can be a progressive Hindu-American without walking into the trap of some organizations which pander an anti-Hindu agenda

informed by flawed Western lenses under the guise of “progressive Hinduism.” Make the conscious decision to redefine your identity to include Hindu and American for yourself and then help your peers do it for themselves.

Living in a society where free speech and speaking up for marginalized voices—especially suppressed voices of color—are championed, we shouldn’t believe that speaking our side of the story is incendiary in any way. As Hindu-Americans, we are the ultimate post-modern deal: we are a post-colonial people of color with one of the only surviving indigenous religions that has been repeatedly threatened with suppression and even annihilation until the present. Why can’t we have a voice and create our own narrative? It’s up to you, my friend, to have these conversations with your peers and parents, with the members of your Hindu club on campus and friends from childhood, and with the next generation of college-bound teens. Let’s be “Hindu-Americans.”

ANU SINGH is an undergraduate at Rice University in Houston, Texas. She is involved in Hindu YUVA and is a contributor to the *American Hindu*.



Celebrations on campus: poster for the 2012 Holi festival held on-campus at Rice University, Houston, Texas

SADHANA

Role of Sattvic Food in Spiritual Growth

Why a pure diet improves our emotional balance and makes it easier for us to connect with God through bhakti and meditation

BY MUKUL SHRI GOEL

ACCORDING TO HINDU SPIRITUALITY, NATURE HAS INSTALLED diverse mechanisms within each of us that influence our temperament and contribute to our personal differences. At an inner level, the different ratios of the three modes of nature in a person—*sattva* (goodness), *rajas* (passion) and *tamas* (darkness)—strongly influence our temperament and what we eat. While the predominance of *sattva* in a person causes health-conscious consumption of food, which is said to improve longevity, intellect and happiness (*Bhagavad Gita* 17:8), *rajas* in predominance causes taste-conscious consumption that may even lead to disease. In contrast, *tamas* causes consumption of food out of ignorance, with little regard to health or taste.

Sattvic foods include fresh vegetarian eatables, both raw and cooked, like fruits, most vegetables, cereals, rice, milk, fresh breads and lentils. Rajasic foods include unnecessarily spicy foods, excessively salty foods and soft drinks. Tamasic foods are spoiled, tasteless, unclean, and/or harmful food items. This category includes most deep-fried or processed foods, hard liquor, meat, fish and eggs. It can be noted that all sattvic foods are vegetarian, but many vegetarian eatables may be categorized as rajasic or tamasic.

Irrespective of the yogic path we choose to progress towards God—bhakti yoga (the path of devotion), karma yoga (the path of selfless action), jnana yoga (the path of knowledge), or raja yoga (the path of meditation)—a sattvic diet makes our spiritual progress easier. Hindus do not believe that a vegetarian person is necessarily a better person than a nonvegetarian person. They believe that eating sattvic foods makes progress relatively easier on a yogic path.

Food and Our Thinking

There is a two-way connection between food and disposition: While sattvic people prefer to eat sattvic food, eating sattvic food can make a person more sattvic. We can also say that performing sattvic karma in one area of life increases *sattva* in all other areas of life. In the context of disposition, because the *sattva* mode of nature signifies idealism and involves goodness in all its forms—like truth, honesty,

discipline, perseverance, politeness and enthusiasm in work—eating sattvic food leads to the development of such virtues. A sattvic diet propels our disposition towards righteousness—including how we think and act. Moreover, by increasing the elements of *sattva* within us, sattvic foods can inspire us to participate in bhakti and meditation and move towards God.

In the workplace, while performing professional tasks, sattvic foods influence us to remain emotionally balanced in success and failure. In contrast, eating rajasic foods may push us towards greed, self-centeredness and performing work solely for monetary profit. Tamasic foods can induce the worst qualities in a person, like laziness, sleepiness, arrogance and deceitfulness, which are all tamasic traits. As non-vegetarianism falls under the tamasic category, eating non-vegetarian food amplifies negative *samskaras* or karmic impressions in the mind of a spiritual aspirant.

Because karma includes all the thought processes used to arrive at a decision to do or not do something, the intentions involved in preparing our menu can be important in labeling food as sattvic vs. tamasic. In other words, sattvic food includes *why* we eat something in addition to *what* we eat. For example, if we are allergic to a fruit but regularly eat it because of an addiction, the same eatable could be counted as rajasic or tamasic. Similarly, if a food item on the tamasic list has been recommended for someone by a nutrition expert to improve the person's health, the eatable may no longer count as being tamasic.

In Hinduism, support for a sattvic diet is not solely a bookish concept; it is based on the experiences of spiritually evolved beings. Sages and saints have experienced the benefits of sattvic foods over the ages, and some of their experiences have become available to us through scriptures.

Bhakti

Many Hindus believe that God accepts whatever is offered to Him (or Her) with love and accordingly they place food items in front of an image of God in temples and homes to express their bhakti. While offering food to God, devotees select the purest and healthiest



ALL PHOTOS: SHUTTERSTOCK

Rajasic

food items and therefore almost always offer sattvic food items, like sweets, fruits, milk, purified water, tulsi leaves and rice.

Offering sattvic food to God involves God's remembrance and worship and develops the habits of serving God and surrendering to Him. As God accepts the love that we offer with food, the food becomes *prasadam* and is later consumed by the devotees. In some temples, it is distributed to the needy as a way of serving fellow beings. Selecting the right eatables and offering them to God is a means of spiritual connectivity in many devotional traditions. The practice of offering sattvic food to God is well supported by traditional stories from the epics and *Puranas*, wherein famous devotees offered sattvic food items such as fruits and rice to Lord Rama, Lord Krishna, and Lord Siva.

Meditation

During meditation, we can focus better when fewer distractions are present in our mind. By supporting discipline in thought, lesser distractions and a calm and balanced mind, a sattvic diet enhances the quality of our meditation. While sattvic foods help us go deep within ourselves during meditation and render the mind pure and calm, tamasic foods promote anger, darkness and inertia. Our mind becomes purified by purifying our food; whereas mind-control becomes almost impossible when meat and liquor are regularly consumed.

Because a sattvic diet involves transcending taste gratification, regularly following such a diet involves a good level of austerity, which may be necessary for every spiritual seeker. In fact, human beings may be the only living species on earth who have the ability to renounce their instincts for gratifying taste while progressing in yoga. Just as fewer distractions in the mind can help a spiritual seeker meditating on a form of God, fewer distractions can help a seeker chanting the name of Lord Rama or the name of Lord Siva on the path of bhakti. Also, because of their agreement with the principles of Ayurveda, sattvic foods support better health for the spiritual seeker.

Compassion

In a famous story from the *Siva Purana*, a huntsman sitting on the branch of a tree unknowingly pushed some leaves and water on a Shivalinga that was situated near the base of the tree. As a result of



Tamasic

this devotional act, the man developed compassion and could no longer kill animals for a living. This anecdote highlights how devotion, compassion for other beings and spiritual transformation are interrelated, irrespective of whether we have opted for the path or bhakti or meditation. Not only does compassion encourage progress in spirituality, true spiritual progress is expected to induce compassion within us and make us opt for vegetarian, sattvic foods.

Vegetarianism involves living peacefully with other life forms and creating minimal ecological disturbances. Because selection of sattvic foods is directly related to compassion towards other life forms, spiritual seekers on a yogic path follow a sattvic diet rather than a tamasic one. Practicing nonviolence (*ahimsa*) is one of the *yamas* of yoga and is integral to spiritual growth. A compassionate person practicing nonviolence can more effectively express his or her love for God on the path of bhakti and can better focus on God on the path of meditation.

Reverence for Cows

Beef is strictly forbidden for Hindus, even for Hindus on a nonvegetarian diet. However, milk and some dairy products are considered sattvic and are often recommended. Cows are not to be hurt for our food but revered. Reverence for cows indicates compassion towards all living beings and support for vegetarianism. According to Mahatma Gandhi, protecting the cow signifies protection of beings that are helpless and weak in the world.

Beyond Nature

Whether we opt for the path of bhakti or the path of meditation to connect with God, we must remember that God transcends the three modes of nature (the *gunas*) and is beyond *sattva*. Accordingly, maintaining a sattvic lifestyle is not the final aim of human life; the main purpose of human life is to realize God. This is why we participate in yoga—it takes us closer to God. Once we reach God, we automatically transcend the three *gunas* of nature.

MUKUL SHRI GOEL is an American spiritual writer and blogger currently living in India. He is formally trained in Indian classical music and has a PhD in chemical and biomolecular engineering at the University of Pennsylvania. Please see mukulshrigoel.com.



GUEST EDITORIAL

Why I Became a Dharma Ambassador

Just being raised in India wasn't much help when it came to explaining Hindu beliefs and ways to non-Hindus—or to my daughter

BY DR. BIJAY NAIR

I GREW UP IN A HINDU HOUSEHOLD IN KERALA, India. Like many Hindus I know, I never attended weekend school to learn dharma. Most of what I learned about my religion was imbibed from the ethos of the society around me, and from my mother, who taught through her conduct rather than by didactic sessions. She practiced her religion every day without fail: lit the small brass oil lamp and prayed in a little corner of the house in front of the images of the multitude of Gods and Goddesses, went regularly to temples, did *pradakshina* (circumambulation) around the temple and *pushpanjali* (offering of flowers), celebrated festivals and above all respected the traditions of other religions as being equally valid. I assumed everyone somehow knew what it meant to be a Hindu; I certainly never had to explain it to anyone in my early years in India.

Emigration to the US changed my smug comfort and confidence. I realized I was not prepared to answer even the most basic questions about my religion, its belief system or how it is different from the "religions of the book." When asked about Hinduism by people in the US, I tried to answer in various evasive ways, such as: "Hinduism is a way of life and not a religion;" "It is very complicated, and difficult to answer;" "We have many different Gods and holy books;" "It means different things to different people."

I had tried reading more about Hinduism through works of Swami Vivekananda, Swami Chinmayananda, Eknath Easwaran and Ramana Maharshi, to name a few. All this gave me a deeper understanding of Hinduism for myself but still did not give me a good framework to explain it to someone unfamiliar with it. And I have been asked this question far more times than the average Hindu, in part because of my profession. As a doctor specializing in treatment of cancer, I have often been with patients and families towards the end of their life, having intimate conversations about life and death. Since faith plays a big role in how people deal with these events, I am often asked about my own religious faith and what decisions I would make in such situations. I have sometimes struggled to give a short and honest answer that can assure the patient they can rely on my judgment to help them.

Apart from the professional reasons, a personal reason to find these answers was my young daughter. As she was growing up in the US, she began to ask questions about Hinduism: Gods, mythology, festivals, etc. I felt a need to give her simple and straightforward answers. I searched and found avenues to teach her Hinduism. I had been taking her to a Sunday kids' program run by Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS) called Balagokulam, where I regularly volunteer and help to teach kids yoga, Hindu mythology, slokas, respect for other faiths and the multiple aspects of Hindu Dharma.

It was through HSS that I came to know of the Dharma Ambassador Program run by Hindu American Foundation. I attended the



program in Sacramento in August of 2019. When I signed up, a friend mentioned that Easan ji was going to lead the class for us. Expecting to see an Indian "guru-like" bearded man in traditional clothes instructing us, I was surprised on the day of the course when we were greeted by a clean-shaven white American in kurta with a happy, radiant face. This was Easan Katir. I found it strange that 15-odd Hindus who had grown up in India, steeped in their religion, would be sitting halfway around the world in a hall in California to learn their religion from a white man who grew up in the United States. But as soon as Easan started speaking, we knew why he was the perfect one for

this course.

Easan started by narrating his childhood, growing up in a Christian household, going to Sunday schools at a Christian Science Church, and how that eventually lead to his discovery of Hinduism in his teenage years. He was able to show us how our traditions are seen from a Western point of view and how to articulate Hinduism in a way that would appeal to a Western audience.

There were two broad aspects to this course. The first focused on what points to cover when asked about Hinduism. It was an excellent review of the key aspects of Hindu Dharma that are simple to understand yet give a comprehensive picture. The second demonstrated how to present this information in a lucid and positive way to a non-Hindu audience. Most of us who grew up in Hindu households have a general gestalt of the religion, but there is room for improvement when it comes to verbalizing it or explaining different aspects of it to a curious person unfamiliar with it. Easan gave us several tips about which points to highlight and how to respond to confrontational questions. He emphasized the need to keep it simple and clear, avoiding controversy and arguments. He also talked about positive body postures for public speaking, creating a positive energy in the room, using your hands to emphasize your ideas—to name just a few of the points that were covered. At the end of it, we were asked to give a mock presentation on Hinduism to high school kids. This was an excellent practical exercise; it also gave us useful insights into how different people approached the topic from varying angles.

As a result of this course, I feel more equipped to talk to a Western audience about Hinduism. In fact, in the ensuing months I have given several talks on Hinduism to non-Hindu audiences. I hope that in the future more Hindus can avail themselves of the Dharma Ambassador course. It will surely help them as individuals, and it will be valuable for the Hindu community at large.

DR. BIJAY NAIR is a doctor at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in Roseville, California. Contact: bijaypnair@gmail.com

Hindu Heritage Endowment

The True-Life Story of the Inception of Hindu Heritage Endowment



On September 11, 1992, our island took a direct hit from Hurricane Iniki. The eye of this category 4 hurricane went right over the monastery. Great damage was wrought. Three monastery buildings were destroyed, along with 10,000 trees and plants. It was months before electricity and running water were restored. It was a great challenge for the monks, but Gurudeva took it all in stride. He saw Siva at work even in this tragedy. He had the monks bake bread each day and take it, along with fresh cow's milk, to the neighbors, who were stranded at home since all the roads were blocked. Gurudeva laughed and made the experience a positive one, which was amazing since the destruction and the disruption was so severe. It was a lesson to all the monks, a reminder and a living example of Gurudeva's teaching that it is not what happens to us in life that matters, it is how we react, how we respond. And he responded to disaster with grace, turning the devastation of the monastery he had worked a lifetime to create into an ingenious way to preserve it forever.

It happened like this. When, months later, the monastery received the woefully inadequate insurance check for \$300,000, Gurudeva refused to cash it, but kept it in his room and meditated on its best use. After a few days, he told the monks that he was putting it all in the bank, and that not a penny would be spent. That fund would earn interest that could be used to repair the damaged monastery. It might take ten years, he said, but at the end of that time all the facilities would be restored, and the \$300,000 would still be intact.

It was a brilliant move, and it taught the monks about the power of endowments. Gurudeva worked with Paramacharya Bodhinatha, his senior disciple, to create a unique financial institution, Hindu Heritage Endowment (HHE), officially founded in 1994. As of 2020, HHE has over 80 funds and \$17 million in assets, helping orphanages, temples, swamis, ashrams and publications around the world. Turning a natural disaster into a global service institution typified the way Gurudeva worked with energy, transmuting it for a higher purpose.

Gurudeva was engaged in every aspect of his mission, knew every detail, approved every budget. He held weekly stewards' meetings with his senior monks, often at seaside hotels, to keep an overview of his global mission.

"As I see it, everything that was strong survived, and everything weak was destroyed in the face of wind gusts measured at 194 miles per hour at the Kauai NASA station. The whole island was engulfed and few escaped damage.

"What is to be done with all this energy? From a mystical point of view, external or internal, negative or positive, energy can be run through the converter named jnana (wisdom) and turned into a creative force. At our spiritual center, we put most of ours into newer and bigger and better publications, including HINDUISM TODAY.

"The scriptures say adversity makes strong men stronger. It is always best to face adversity and success in equanimity, and we have to confess we enjoyed fetching water in buckets, beating our clothing on a rock by the river and cooking over an open fire. All these simple joys reminded us of the many times that our swamis lived the village life on the Jaffna peninsula."

Gurudeva founded Hindu Heritage Endowment as an independent public service trust to provide Hindu institutions with permanent, growing income through charitable endowments. He secured from the IRS a special ruling allowing that beneficiaries can be anywhere in the world. This enables wealthy Hindus in America to support their village temple in India, for instance, and receive a US tax deduction. He was not planning just for his own institution's future, but the future of every Hindu institution in the world.

JULY TO SEPTEMBER ENDOWMENT CONTRIBUTIONS

Kauai Aadheenam Monastic Endowment		Kadavul Nataraja Ardra Abhishekam Endowment		Pritesh Patel	30.00
The Cleveland Foundation	US\$1,000.00	Umasankaran Mohambourame	111.71	Anonymous	108.00
Roshan Harilela	375.00	Gowri Nadason	209.12	Total	464.00
Gunasekaran Kandasamy	46.14	Jigisha Patel	51.00	Spiritual Park of Mauritius Endowment	
Gayatri Rajan	75.00	Parimala Selvaraj	93.00	Kiran Keerodhur	150.00
Chamundi Sabanathan	78.75	Anonymous	349.00	Positive Discipline Endowment	
Hitesvara Saravan	63.00	Total	813.83	Vinaya Alahan	22.00
Jai Sivakumara	600.00	Kauai Aadheenam Matavasi Medical Fund		Alaveddy Pasupatheeswarar Temple Fund	
Keith Wallach	250.00	Shyamadeva Dandapani	36.00	Nuckiren Pyeneehandee	36.66
Anonymous	336.08	Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	7.91	Anonymous	264.6
Total	2,823.97	Kulagan Moonesawmy	14.66	Total	301.26
Iraivan Temple Endowment		Gowri Nadason	209.12	Hindu Heritage Endowment Administrative Fund	
Frank Burkhardt	30.00	Ram Ramamoorthy	45.00	Bijamati Pareatumbree	100.00
Gunasegaran Chitravelloo	11.90	Aran Sambandar	108.00	Murugan Temple of North America Pillaiyar Shrine Fund	
Estate of Danyse Crotti	4,547.29	Vayudeva Varadan	54.00	Pathmini Saravanapavan	150.00
Dinesh Kumar Jayaram	6.85	Anonymous	108.36	Sayanthan & Anupama Sivanathan	15.00
A. Paranthaman	4.65	Total	583.05	Total	165.00
Hansaben Patel	501.00	Tirunavukkarasu Nayanar Gurukulam		Thank You Bodhinatha Fund	
Calayvanee Ragaven	50.00	Anonymous	324.00	Fidelity Charitable Gift Fund	101.00
Jayaram Rajaletchumi	11.45	Kauai Aadheenam Renovation Endowment		Dheeptha Baskaran	20.00
Vijayaluxmy Senathirajah	500.00	Riorita Tkatchenko	100.00	Dinanatha Borzunov	108.00
Indrani Shanmugasundram	11.45	Sri Subramuniya Ashram Scholarship Fund		Neelu Chawla	108.00
Terrill Silke	300.00	Scholarship Fund		Charles Close	108.00
Anonymous	346.00	Rajendra Giri	151.00	Chellappa Deva	50.00
Total	6,320.59	Anonymous	324.00	Amarnath & Latha Devarmanai	216.00
Kauai Aadheenam Annual Archana Fund		Total	475.00	Debashis Ghosh	300.00
Srinivas Akkaraju	299.00	Sri Subramuniya Kottam Fund		Gunasekaran Kandasamy	53.98
Mohan Daya	118.66	Anonymous	375.00	Murugesu Kandasamy	58.12
Tatsiana Mezhenmaya	50.00	Kumbhalavalai Ganesha Temple Endowment		Amravadee Kownden	48.86
Jogendra Moorooogen	4.88	Mano Navaratnarajah	75.00	Inna Linnyk	100.00
Vidyadevi Moorooogen	4.88	Krishanth Rajasooriyar	120.00	Yulia Machalaba	54.00
Aran Pasupathi	50.00	Anonymous	100.00	Ashwini Maureemootoo	2.45
Subramaniam Pennathur	49.98	Total	295.00	Tiviapragassen Maureemootoo	48.94
Manishankar Sagum	19.56	Hinduism Today Production Fund		Mano Navaratnarajah	150.00
Anonymous	21.00	Chandrakant & Patricia Desai	251.00	Nuckiren Pyeneehandee	36.66
Total	617.96	Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	5.27	Sumathi Raja	450.00
Hinduism Today Lifetime Subscription Fund		Ian Johnson	60.00	Aran Sambandar	216.00
Thirujinanam Arnassalon	19.56	Rajagopal Krishnan	40.00	Hitesvara Saravan	108.00
Hemakheshaa Naatha Batumallah	73.00	Kulagan Moonesawmy	14.66	Dharmalingam Siddhan	100.00
Mekaladeva Batumallah	20.00	Josephine Moreau	30.00	Egambrum Sinsamy	122.53
Asha Chaku	299.00	Silvarajoo Muniandy	240.00	Logavalli Sinsamy	122.53
Pawan Deshpande	299.00	Subramaniam Pennathur	50.01	Tejasinha Sivalingam	21.21
Mahesh Duggal	299.00	Nuckiren Pyeneehandee	36.66	Rajita Sivananda Estate	277.76
Jitu Haria	299.00	Gayatri Rajan	100.00	Ramesh Sivanathan	35.95
Ramchandra Hegde	299.00	Aran Sambandar	108.00	Anba Dayananden Valayten	9.53
Cynthia Ann Humes	299.00	Asan Tejwani	108.00	Vayudeva Varadan	63.00
Thampiah Karunanithy	299.00	Easwaran & Beena Variyam	101.00	Sahunthala Vinothachandran	2,008.00
Marcelle Karustis	299.00	Anonymous	63.00	John Wahlen	11.00
Juhivaasana Koothan	7.33	Total	1,207.60	Michael Wasylikiw	756.00
Venkatesan Lakshminarayanan	299.00	Hindu Orphanage Endowment Fund		Anonymous	956.45
Ashwini Maureemootoo	24.44	Benevity	316.00	Total	6,821.97
Bhaveshan Moorghen	7.33	Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	10.55	Sri Chandra Madhab Debnath Endowment	
Shanda Kumaran Moorghen	7.33	Roshan Harilela	375.00	Shyamal Chandra Debnath	150.00
Udeyadeva Moorghen	7.33	Ramana Jandhyala	153.00	Murugan Temple Yalpanam Festival Fund	
N Chanthiran Nagappan	299.00	Gunasekaran Kandasamy	46.14	Pathmini Saravanapavan	150.00
Binu Nair	299.00	Pritesh Patel	30.00	Manitha Neyam Trust Fund	
Raj Nathan	299.00	Chamundi Sabanathan	78.75	Bala Sivaceyon	23.13
Vamsee & Satyavani Pamula	299.00	Hitesvara Saravan	36.00	Nutanaya Sivaceyon	20.00
Karoumee Pareatumbree	425.13	Rodney & Ilene Standen	30.00	Total	43.13
Arvind S. Prabhu	299.00	Anonymous	2.00	Pazhassi Balamandiram Orphanage Fund	
Rachna Rustagi	299.00	Total	1,077.44	Vetrie Senthilkumar	200.00
P. Sai Reddy	299.00	Hindu Education Endowment		Swami Vipulananta Children's Home Endowment	
Vignaraj & Kalyani Sanmugalingam	299.00	Hasu N. & Hansa H. Patel	50.00	Canaganayagam Kugendra	40.00
Chitrnanjan Saravanapavan	299.00	Arjun Pennathur	75.00	Hindu Literature Fund	
Niranjan & Subathra Saravanapavan	299.00	Total	125.00	Rajendra Giri	302.00
Siva Jothiswari Selvanathan	212.00	Loving Ganesha Distribution Fund		John & Abha Wiersba	204.00
Tushar Sharma	299.00	Deepak Chokshi	101.00		
Savithri Sundaresan	299.00	Mano Navaratnarajah	225.00		
Kiran Yedavalli	299.00				
Anonymous	323.44				
Total	7,704.89				
Gurudeva's Trilogy Distribution Fund					
Ramana Jandhyala	54.00				
Vel Mahalingum	14.66				
Total	68.66				

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Total	506.00	Murugan Temple of North America Puja Fund		Bharathi Yoga Dhama Fund	
Hinduism Today Complimentary Subscription Fund		Pathmini Saravanapavan	100.00	Fidelity Charitable Gift Fund	5,001.00
Rajagopal Krishnan	20.00	Vayudeva Varadan	54.00	Digital Dharma Endowment	
Vivek Vyas	25.00	Total	154.00	Gunasekaran Kandasamy	11.53
Total	45.00	Rani Jothiswarar Memorial Fund		Goindamah Moothoosawmy	2.44
Himalayan Academy Book Distribution Fund		Kodiswara Selvanathan	30.00	Anonymous	411.8
Shyamadeva Dandapani	36.00	India Hindu Temple Cleaning Fund		Total	425.77
Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	30.00	Estate of Danyse Crotti	2,239.71	Kauai Aadheenam Info-Tech Fund	
Total	66.00	Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	7.91	Dheeptha Baskaran	10.00
Kauai Aadheenam Yagam Fund		Kulagan Moonesawmy	7.33	Kauai Aadheenam Feed the Monks Fund	
Anonymous	33.00	Krishanth Rajasooriyar	120.00	Benevity	216.00
Yogaswami Hindu Girls' Home of Sittandy Endowment		Total	2,374.95	Thulasidas	188.00
Efrain Raul Eduardo Romano Abarca	52.00	Anantha Ladies Home Endowment		Anandkumar Ayyachamy	51.00
Yovani Curpen	50.00	Yallini Manokaran	100.00	Dheeptha Baskaran	10.00
Subramaniam Pennathur	50.01	Pritesh Patel	30.00	Purushottam Dixit	51.00
Pathmini Saravanapavan	100.00	Sayanthan & Anupama Sivanathan	30.00	Ramana Jandhyala	324.00
Sivaruban & Nishiya Sivanesan	150.00	John Wahlen	11.00	Suresh & Meena Joshi	101.00
Kevina Soobramanien	48.86	Total	171.00	Shivaram & Kiran Kalugotla	54.00
Anonymous	1,184.72	Cows of Kadavul and Iraivan Temples (Kovil Maadu) Endowment		Earl Maron	50.00
Total	1,635.59	Arun Aarooren	50.00	Agumbarum Mootoosamy	500.00
Siva Poomi School Trust		Anil Ananda Badhwar	30.00	Silvarajoo Muniandy	23.94
Sanjay Sharma	101.00	Ishani Chowdhury	65.00	Pankaj Nanda	100.00
Maha Ganapati Temple of Arizona Endowment		Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	7.91	Debashish Pal	25.00
Charles Close	108.00	Srinivas R. Madaboosi	50.00	Pritesh Patel	30.00
Vignesh Sukumaran	600.00	Dasarathi Minjur	40.00	Gayatri Rajan	75.00
Total	708.00	Natraj Narayanswami	37.00	Padmini Samuthiran	162.00
Bharatiya Ekta Mandir of Arizona Endowment		Krishanth Rajasooriyar	120.00	Pathmini Saravanapavan	300.00
YourCause	132.30	Padmini Samuthiran	162.00	Devaladevi Sivaceyon	23.00
Mahendra & Rohini Jagirdar	250.00	Devaladevi Sivaceyon	23.00	Jai Sivakumara	1,000.00
Total	382.30	Sivaruban & Nishiya Sivanesan	150.00	Jagan & Padma Vemulapalli	500.00
India Hindu Tribals Endowment		Arunasalam Vathavooran	75.00	Anonymous	185.36
Malik Muhammad Ahmed	10.00	Anonymous	124.09	Total	3,969.30
Pritesh Patel	30.00	Total	934.00	Insurance Premiums	
Total	40.00	Hindu Association of West Texas Endowment		Mrunal Patel	3,003.00
Pakistan Hindu Empowerment Fund		Anonymous	1.00	Kauai Aadheenam Renovation Endowment	
Pritesh Patel	30.00	Total Contributions		Other Donations	600.00
				Funds at Market Value, Sep 30, 2020	
				Total Endowment Funds	\$51,740.26
					\$17,837,070.43

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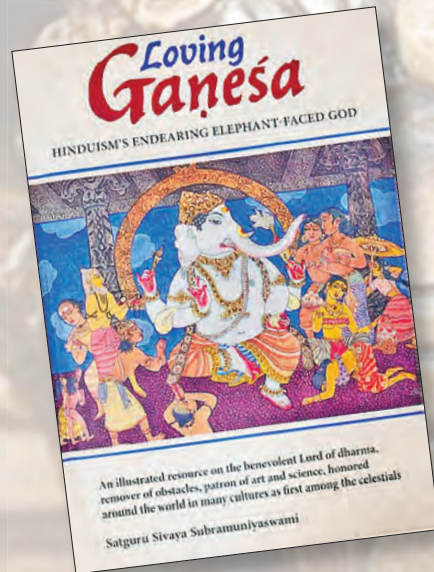


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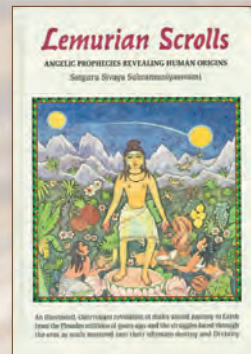
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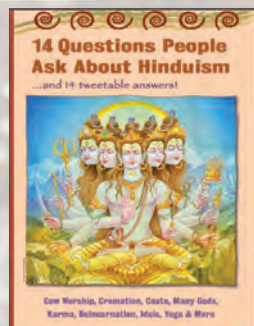
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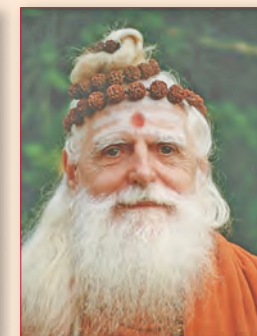
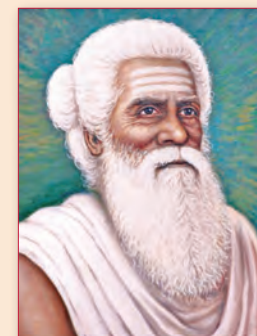
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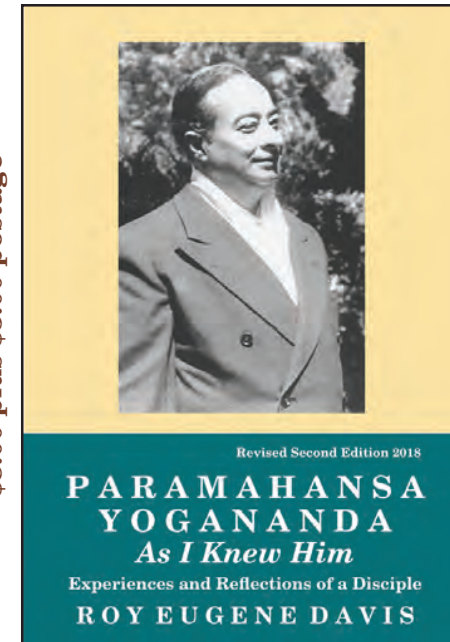
Homa is a most ancient and sacred ceremony in the Vedic tradition of Sanatana Dharma. It is a fire ceremony in which the presence of the Divine is invoked through the power of mantra and profound spiritual intention. Special offerings like grains, clarified butter (ghee), milk, incense and seeds are cast into the fire while Sanskrit mantras are chanted. The combined energy of the fire, offerings, and mantras generates powerful spiritual vibrations that bless and purify everyone present, in person or by proxy, spreading peace and healing through the world. Homa is a fire element ritual which purifies and consumes old habits and blockages, reducing karma while paving the way for new creation. A properly conducted Homa draws the blessings of the Divine. The smoke that rises from a Homa contains powerful healing energy, and as it rises to the heavens purifies the atmosphere, both physically and subtly, encouraging a peaceful environment and gentle weather. The energetic vibrations that are invoked during a traditional Vedic fire ceremony represent the powerful presence of the Divine on Earth.

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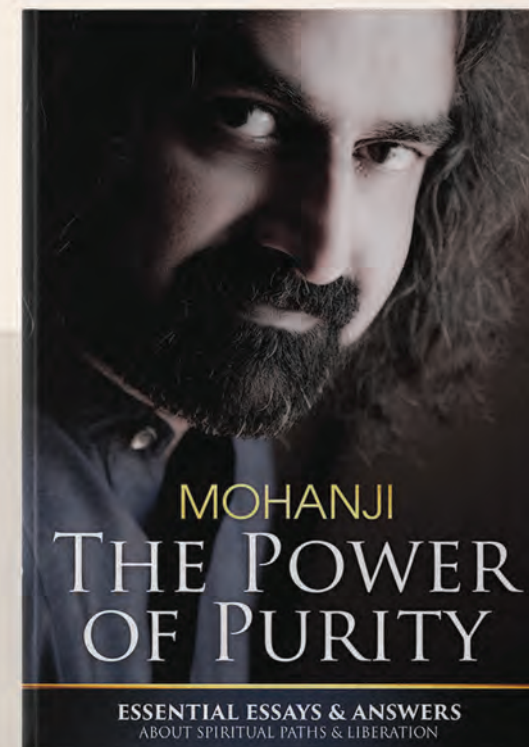
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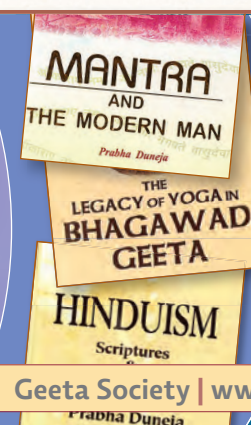


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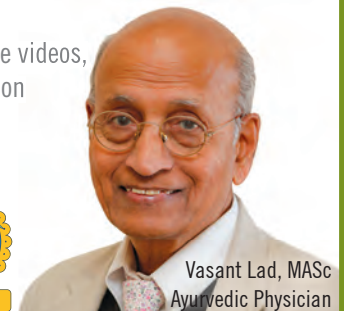
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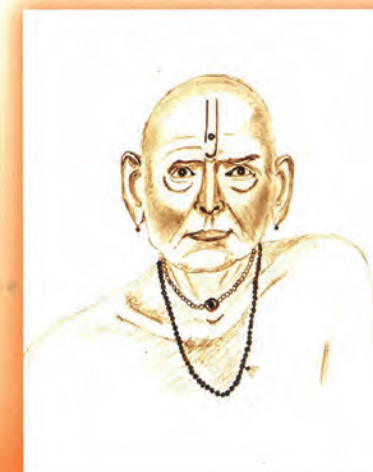
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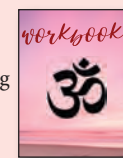
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God Siva's Absolute Being, Parasiva (the Self)
is worshiped each year on

Maha Sivaratri

The Self is timeless, causeless and formless.

**Therefore, being That, it has no relation whatsoever
to time, space and form.**

**Form is in a constant state
of creation, preservation and destruction within space,
thus creating consciousness called time,
and has no relationship
to timelessness, causelessness or formlessness.**

**The individual soul, when mature, can make the leap
from the consciousness of space-time-causation
into the timeless, causeless, formless Self.**

**This is the ultimate maturing
of the soul on this planet.**

— Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami

Wishing you
a beyond-blissful

Maha Sivaratri

The essence of Thy Name,
Satyam, Shivam, Sundram,
In song and music
Makes my spirit
To soar.

Like a child
Sobbing for Mother,
I cry.

Wave upon wave
Of Thy Love
Wash on the shores
Of my longing heart.

Stars in the firmament,
The crescent Moon,
The rising Sun over
The horizon
Bear witness to the
One Truth:

• Shiva is Truth,
Truth is Shiva,
The Beauteous One.

Sātyam,
Shivam,
Sundram.

Satyam, Shivam, Sundram by Dr. Arjunan Subramaniam
1st March, 2020, Desa Parkcity, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

DIGITAL DHARMA

MUSIC

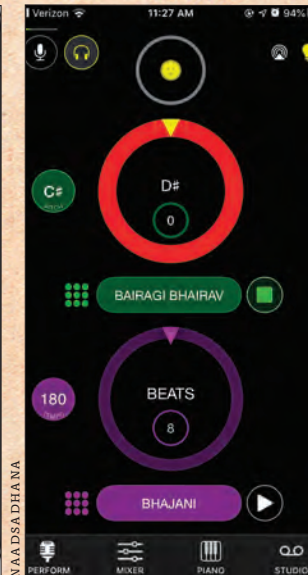
Classical and Devotional Singing with AI



iTABLA PRO



NAADSADHANA



NAADSADHANA

www.hinduismtoday.com

Your Mobile Ensemble: (left to right) iTabla Pro's settings for its six available instruments; NaadSadhana's big green circle means the user is right on pitch; the red circle means the pitch is off—the tala is indicated below

NaadSadhana, which could be translated as "disciplined attainment of correct pitch," uses sophisticated AI to have the iPhone analyze your pitch in real time. A green circle (see screenshot at left) means you are right on; a red circle, way off. The color changes as you sing, indicating to go higher or lower.

With the "Perform" tab at the bottom, you can select vocal pitch, desired raga, tala and tempo as well as record. The "Mixer" tab allows power users to customize accompaniment instruments. Options include tone and pluck tempo for the tanpura, accompaniment modes for tabla ("gentle," "lively" and "dynamo"), and reverb and equalization options for the voice. The "Piano" tab presents a keyboard set to play only the notes of the selected raga. It's a wonderful tool for learning a new raga. The "Studio" tab keeps track of your recordings and allows post-recording adjustment of individual instruments.

The app's AI does a remarkable job of creating a full-sounding accompaniment for solo vocalists regardless of skill level. While it leans heavily towards Hindustani ragas and talas, one could certainly use it for devotional singing. The tanpura plays throughout, while the swarmandal and piano chords trigger at various times in an intuitive way. The tabla and cymbals play along at the set tempo and introduce rhythmic variations that feel more natural than the loop-based sound of iTablaPro and similar programs.

Another fascinating feature is face tracking: using the front camera and specific facial expressions, a user is able to start and stop the rhythm hands-free. For example, open your eyes and the tabla starts.

Overall, NaadSadhana is an excellent tool for vocal practice and solo performance. It has a \$35 annual fee, which can be canceled without charge in the first month.

By Aks and Lakshmi of eclipse-nirvana.com

ELECTRONIC MUSIC HAS BEEN WITH US LONGER than you might think. The 19th century electric Telharmonium could accurately produce the sounds of an entire orchestra. It did have certain drawbacks, such as weighing 210 tons and requiring 671 kW of power. Fortunately, we've come a long way since then and that 6-ounce iPhone in your pocket that uses 4 kWh per year supports apps with remarkable abilities when it comes to classical Indian music. In this article, we will discuss two: first iTablaPro, which provides relatively simple musical accompaniment; and second, the highly sophisticated NaadSadhana, designed for training singers and recording oneself with full ensemble background support. While there are apps equivalent to iTablaPro for Android, it takes the the iPhone's programming capabilities to unleash the remarkable acoustic abilities of NaadSadhana.

iTablaPro: for Everyone

iTablaPro is one of the most widely used apps in the world of Indian classical music. It generates the sounds of one or two tanpuras, a traditional *sur-peti* or shruti box, tabla drums, *manjira* (cymbals) and a *swar mandal* (akin to a zither or autoharp), and it has the complete range of pitches suitable for both male and female singers.

Its tabla feature is especially well done,

able to play 42 different beat patterns such as *teental* (16 beats) and *ektaal* (12 beats). Devotional singers can particularly enjoy singing with the bhajani setting on the tabla and cymbals for an eight-beat cycle.

The app offers more than a hundred popular ragas. By inputting the pitch and a specific raga, it automatically sets up the two tanpuras with the corresponding notes as well as a recommended tala cycle. Any of these can be changed according to the user's preference and saved as a "favorite." The app is \$24.99, with an extra cost for the recording feature. There are also free apps with less functionality, such as iSruthi-Tampura Sruthi Box.

NaadSadhana: the Next Level

Developed originally as a teaching aid by Sandeep Ranade of Pune, India, NaadSadhana lets you record your performance of Hindustani-classical and devotional music with full instrumental accompaniment, generated in real time using artificial intelligence.

The first challenge for new students of music is obtaining the correct pitch for each note. In the old gurukulams, students spend hours with their teachers each day receiving guidance and correction; today they might spend an hour a week with a teacher and the rest of the time on their own—and likely practicing off key.