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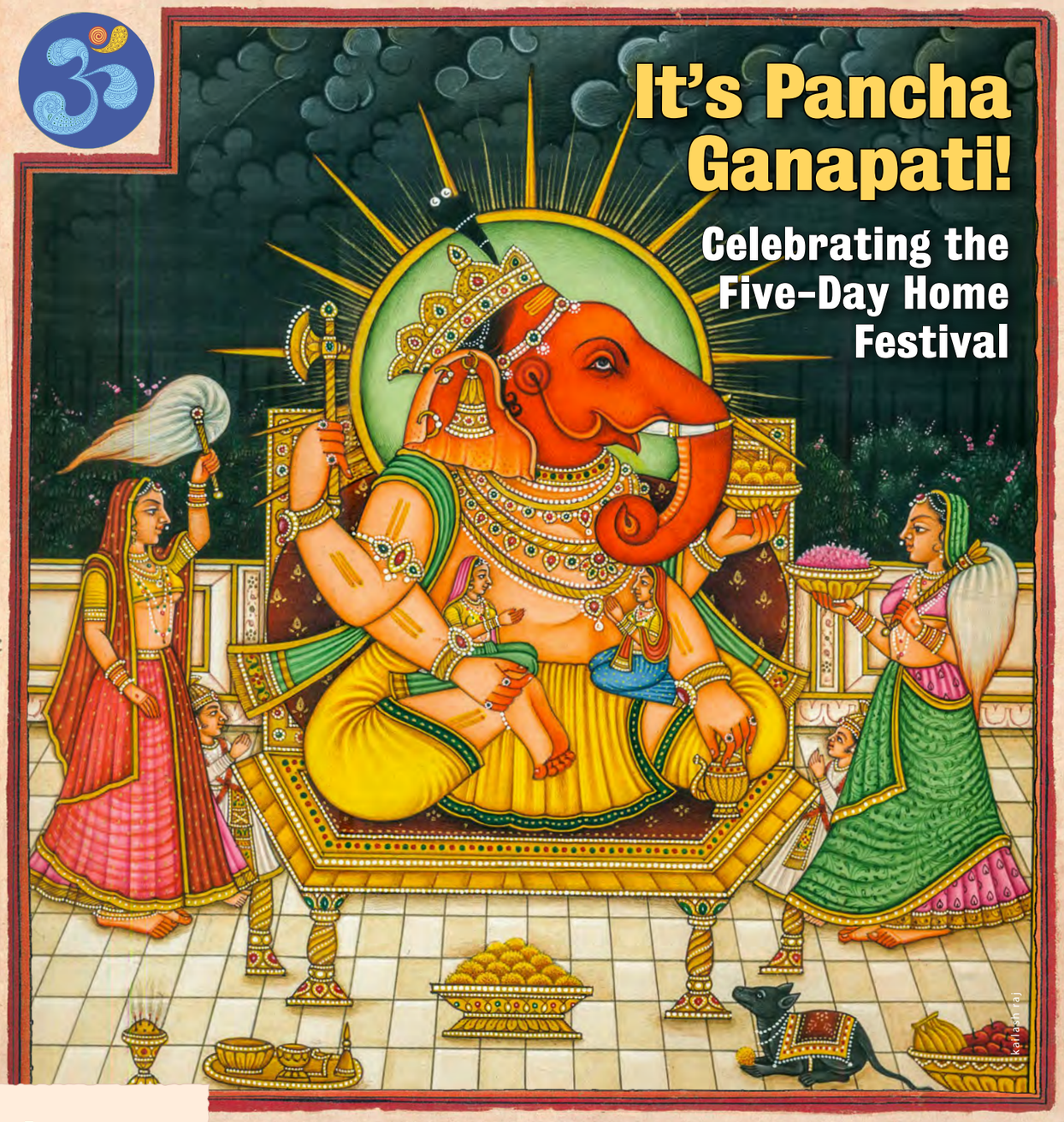

It's Pancha Ganapati!

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Kamlesh Raj

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(Cover) Lord Ganesha takes center stage in our hearts and minds during His five-day home festival known as Pancha Ganapati; (above) Follow us to Chidambaram Temple and discover who has earned our Hindu of the Year award

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USA Contacts: Letters to the editor, subscription and editorial inquiries may be sent to Hinduism Today, 107 Kaholalele Road, Kapaa, Hawaii 96746-9304 USA, letters@hindu.org. Hinduism Today (ISSN# 0896-0801; USPS# 023082), October/November/December, 2020, Volume 42, No. 4. Subscriptions from USA and Canada 1-877-255-1540; subscriptions, copies or bulk orders from other countries 1-808-822-7032, ext. 103; subscribe@hindu.org. Advertising: 1-888-464-1008, ads@hindu.org. Hinduism Today is published four times a year in January, April, July and October by Himalayan Academy, a nonprofit educational institution at 107 Kaholalele Road, Kapaa, Hawaii 96746-9304 USA. Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, Founder; Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, Publisher; Paramacharya Sadasivanatha Palaniswami, Editor-in-Chief. Global subscriptions: US$35/1 year, $65/2 years, $95/3 years, $155/5 years, $299/lifetime. **International Contacts:** In Malaysia: Sanathana Dharma Publications, Kovind Enterprise, No. 17, Jalan Ungu U9/29, Sunway Kayangan, 40150 Shah Alam. Tel: 016-380-2393; E-mail: silvaraj05@yahoo.com. In Singapore: Sanathana Dharma Publications, Blk 210 #06-326, Pasir Ris Street 21, 510210. Tel: 9664-9001; E-mail: dsam55@gmail.com. For permission to republish a Hinduism Today article, e-mail letters@hindu.org. Printed in USA. Periodicals postage paid at Kapaa, Hawaii, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Hinduism Today, 107 Kaholalele Road, Kapaa, Hawaii, 96746-9304.

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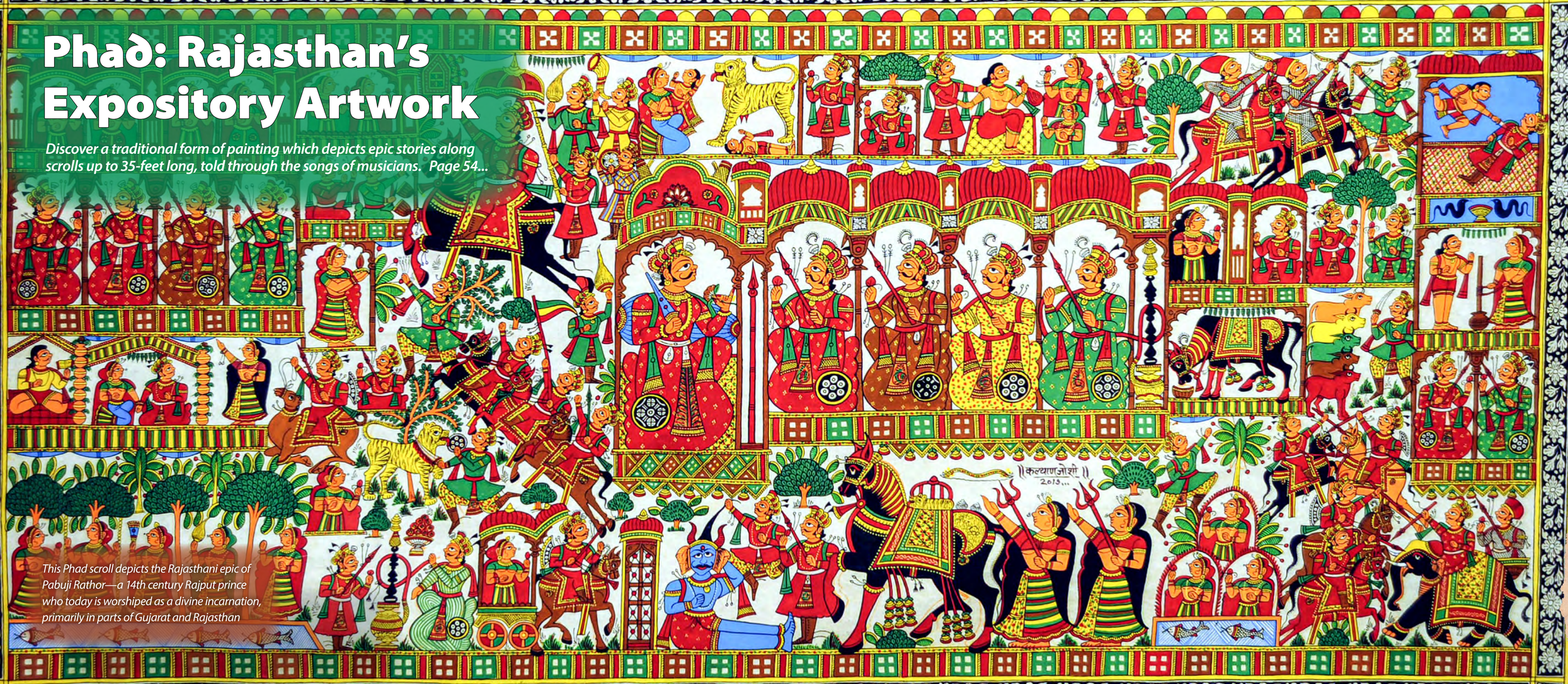
Phad: Rajasthan's Expository Artwork

Discover a traditional form of painting which depicts epic stories along scrolls up to 35-feet long, told through the songs of musicians. *Page 54...*



This Phad scroll depicts the Rajasthani epic of Pabuji Rathor—a 14th century Rajput prince who today is worshiped as a divine incarnation, primarily in parts of Gujarat and Rajasthan

unknown

GLOBAL DHARMA

united states

Children Honor Their Teachers the Hindu Way

By Dinesh R. Pai

Inculcating hindu values in our children while living in a society that has very little or no knowledge about our traditions can be challenging. A recent survey on bullying in US schools revealed that over three-quarters of Hindu students surveyed experienced social isolation or bullying because of their beliefs. The challenge becomes more acute when kids are discouraged by learning about Hindu culture through textbooks that negativly represent Hinduism.

Hindu Americans, particularly parents, must help with the younger generation's confusion and identity crises. As a religious group, we have done well to meet the material needs of our children, but not as well for their sense of self recognition and personal approval. Being met with ridicule of their culture and traditions is resulting in insecurity and a lack pride. Parents can help by engaging their children in discussions about their traditions, but they are often ill equipped to do so. Hindu organizations in the US should step up and provide aid in this effort.

Guru Vandana is one such initiative. Meaning "Salutations to the Teacher," the event is an expression of love, gratitude and reverence. During the months of May and June, the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS), USA, organizes such events across the nation, mostly for grade school teachers and students. Over the years, the Guru Vandana celebrations have gained traction within and outside the Hindu community. In 2019, over 1,700 academics, including teachers, principals and superintendents, plus over 8,000 attendees, participated in 68 events in over 20 states in the US. Taking a cue from the HSS initiative, we at the Hindu American Religious Institute Temple in Pennsylvania have been organizing Guru Vandana since 2016. The event involves the traditional Hindu welcome of teachers and their guests, an exhibition showcasing contributions of Hindus in diverse fields, a short cultural program involving Hindu children and the highlighted felicitation ceremony. During the main event, children line up in front of their teachers and shower rose petals upon them, wave an arati and apply tilaka to their teacher's forehead, then touch their teacher's feet in respect. Lastly, personalized mementos are given to each teacher. Afterwards the teachers and students get an opportunity to share their experience about the event. Teachers also receive a pamphlet on Hinduism and a book on Hindu symbolism.

Guru Vandana provides a comfortable milieu for parents and children to interact with teachers and to strengthen their bonds. Our children gain a subtle affirmation of their cultural heritage from their teachers, and the teachers get an opportunity to know more about their students' backgrounds. As one teacher stated: "What a beautiful way to honor teachers. I felt so special and welcome. Every aspect of the day was a day I will always remember. Thank you for making teachers feel so special!"

Sharing culture: Hindu students enjoy an Indian meal with their teacher and her daughters during last year's Guru Vandana observance

Setting standards: the Konark Sun Temple in Odisha seems an apt location for a major solar project

india

Odisha's Konark Sun Temple and Town Are Going Solar

India's ministry of new and renewable Energy (MNRE) has taken up the complete solarization of Konark Sun Temple and Konark town in Odisha. The plan envisages setting up a 10 megawatt grid-connected solar project and various off-grid solar applications like solar trees, solar drinking water kiosks and solar power plants with battery storage. The project will be done by Odisha Renewable Energy Development Agency with 100% central financial assistance (CFA) of around US$3.3 million through MNRE. The plan is designed to meet all the energy requirements of Konark town.

According to an article in Mercom India, Odisha is one of India's least developed states in terms of solar expansion, having only 416MW of solar projects currently in operation and 58MW of projects under construction. However, another 100MW project may soon arise in Odisha's Jharsuguda district, assuming Vedanta Limited's recent request for proposal is approved.

CleanTechnica.com notes, "The state of Odisha, where Konark is located, is no stranger to 21st century solar power. In 2015, it announced plans for a one gigawatt solar power plant. In 2016, Sonthalia Group unveiled plans for a 600MW solar power plant, and the state announced plans for 70MW of rooftop solar."

photos: dinesh r pai, shutterstock

environment

Biodegradable, Plant-Based Bottles Get Big Backing

A biochemicals company in the Netherlands is seeking investment in a pioneering project to make plastics from plant sugars rather than fossil fuels. According to an article in The Guardian, plans by renewable chemicals company Avantium have already won the support of beer-maker Carlsberg, which hopes to sell its pilsner in a cardboard bottle lined with an inner layer of plant plastic—a joint effort with Paboco, "The Paper Bottle Company." Avantium's chief executive, Tom van Aken, says he hopes to greenlight a major investment in the world-leading bioplastics plant in the Netherlands by the end of the year.

The project, which remains on track despite the coronavirus lockdown, is set to reveal partnerships with additional food and drink companies in late summer. The project has the backing of Coca-Cola and Danone, which hope to secure the future of their bottled products by tackling the environmental damage caused by plastic pollution and a reliance on fossil fuels. Globally around 300 million tons of plastic is made from fossil fuels every year, which is a major contributor to the climate crisis. Most of this is not recycled and contributes to the scourge of microplastics in the world's oceans. Microplastics can take hundreds of years to decompose completely.

Avantium's plan is to initially produce 5,000 tons of this new plastic every year using sugars from corn, wheat or beets. It could appear on supermarket shelves by 2023. The company expects the demand for renewable plastics to climb, driving increased production. To avoid impacting the global food supply, they intend to eventually use plant sugars from sustainably sourced biowaste.

Trials show the new plastic decomposes in one year using a composter, or a few years longer in normal outdoor conditions; but it would ideally be recycled.

A cleaner future: This handsome bottle designed by The Paper Bottle Company is engineered to biodegrade after just a few years

archeology

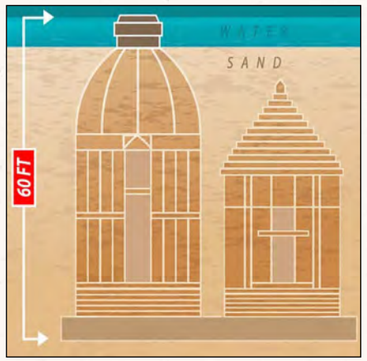
Lost Temple Reappears After two Centuries

An ancient hindu temple that was submerged in a catastrophic flood 200 years ago has re-emerged, as lower water levels revealed its sunken spire for the first time in decades. The 500-year-old 60-foot tall monument to an avatar of the God Vishnu once stood proudly on the banks of the Mahanadi River in Odisha, eastern India, and provided a place of worship for seven nearby villages. But after torrential floods in the 1800s, the river changed course, forcing villagers to abandon the temple and their homes which disappeared beneath the swirling rapids.

According to The Daily Mail, in June of 2020 the Mahanadi's water level dropped low enough to reveal the spire once again. Anil Dhir said his team of archaeologists had successfully documented many temples of the Mahanadi River valley, but all efforts to locate this one had proved futile. "The temple was in the midst of seven villages, collectively called Satapatana," he said. "Sometime from 1830 to 1850, after catastrophic flooding, the river started to change its course and engulf the villages. The villages were abandoned and shifted, but the temple was left intact, with the statue being removed and kept in a makeshift place." A new temple was built and the statue installed there sometime in 1855. That temple exists today. Mr. Dhir emphasizes that there are no plans to excavate the temple presently. "It will be left alone," he said. "The river is a dangerous stretch at this place, with swift currents. Also, statue thieves may try to get some old pieces from it."

An account from NDTV.com provides additional detail: Some 11 years ago, according to locals, the waters had dropped far enough to expose the top of it, and researchers from the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) have been keeping an eye on it ever since. Mr. Dhir, INTACH chief, says around 65 temples in the area are still underwater. Being the tallest structure, this Gopinath Temple was the first to surface.

Revealing waters: locals of the Mahanadi river valley touch the capstone of the rediscovered Gopinath temple



photos: paboco; deepak kumar nayak; pen news

archeology

Exploring the Madras Museum

The chennai government Museum, also known as Egmore Museum or the Madras Museum, is the second oldest museum in India, with the largest archaeological and numismatic collections. The complex comprises six buildings and has 46 galleries. It showcases extraordinary collections of classical coins, currency and medals, archaeological remains from ancient Indian culture and the rarest and most popular works of world-famous Indian artists such as Raja Ravi Varma.

Represented in the Stone Sculptures gallery are collections from the Pallava period (300-897 ce), Chola period (850-985), Medieval Chola period (985-1074), later Chola period (1074-1350), Vijayanagara period (1350-1600) and the modern period, from 1600 onwards. Also found here are collections of sculptures from the Chalukya, Hoysala and Rahtrakudas dynasties.

Excluding Fridays and a few holidays—Republic Day (January 26), Independence Day (August 15) and Gandhi Jayanti (October 2)—the museum is open daily from 9:30am to 5:00pm. Entry fees are minuscule: ₹15 for adults and ₹10 for children. For foreigners the fees are a mere US$3.33 for adults and $1.66 for children. If your interest is more than superficial, a two-hour guided tour with the KeyTerns Chennai Government Museum Heritage Walk is well worth the price, at just $70 for a group of up to four. The guide is an archaeologist who can provide a wealth of history and the mythology associated with the various pieces.

The museum was founded in 1851 and is the tenth oldest (and third largest) museum in the world. Its collections of bronze Deity statues, 500 of which date to 1000bce, are the richest in Asia. The museum houses a 19th-century theater which is used for cultural and academic programs such as art workshops, lectures, conferences and drama performances. Next time you're in Chennai, drop in to explore history.

Appreciating the past: (clockwise from right) one of the countless Deity statues found throughout the museum; a glorious gopuram in miniature; one of the museum's six main buildings

BRIEFLY...

ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN, WAS recently on track to receive the city's first Hindu temple, which would stand as a symbol of tolerance. In 2018, Pakistan's former government allotted land for the Shri Krishna Mandir, which was quickly met with protests. However the project moved forward and the foundation stones were laid in June of 2020 as government officials touted a beginning of a new and tolerant Pakistan. The nation's Prime minister allocated $1.3 million to the project. Unfortunately the pledge of funds has since been withdrawn due to mounting pressure from Islamic religious leaders in the city and public outcry that taxes were being given to support a Hindu temple. With this project derailed, it seems less likely that the current Prime Minister will be able to deliver on his promise of improving religious coexistence, which he had made upon taking office.

IN JULY, 2020, THE UTTARKHAND High Court ratified the state government's takeover of 51 temples including Badrinath and Kedarnath. The decision is a sizable setback in a national movement which aims to take back control of Hindu temples from government. The court ruled that the ownership of the properties would remains with Char Dham shrines and that the power of the government board would include the administration and management of said properties and all income.

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Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami

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IN MY OPINION

Vedanta & Covid-19

We cannot control the crisis that grips the planet, but we can control how we respond to it

BY VINI MELWANI

Today, amidst fears of Covid-19, as humanity experiences two basic instinctive reactions, panic and paralysis, if ever there was a time to fall back on the teachings of our ancient collection of sacred scriptures, the Vedas, it is now. The anxieties of working from home, not having a home, not having work, death and gloom, all spiral us into a hole of despair which seems impossible to climb up from.

Philosophy, religion and spiritualism are judged by their capacity to enhance and illuminate life. We rely upon them to help us deal with life's many challenges. Therefore, the question today is how does the wisdom of Vedanta, India's treasury of spiritual wisdom, help us cope with the demands and stresses of the Covid-19 pandemic?

Within each of us are basic desires, such as connecting socially and physically with family and friends. In the current phase, we find ourselves encountering barriers that thwart those desires, creating frustration, anger and fear in us. Vedanta—which includes worship, meditation, spiritual study and selfless service—teaches and guides us to filter what we digest, thus conquering our fears. It is more important than ever before to navigate through the current times with mental clarity and unwavering faith. Fear is addressed in the Vedas as self inflicted. Our focus on the crises occurring every day initiates in us the panic that everything is slipping from our control. We cannot control the fear around us, but we can limit the fear within us.

The Vedas speak of the benefits of minimalism when things get tough in life, getting back to the basics, centering our focus inwards, where peace really lies. Outwards lies only ramification and attraction to bright and shiny objects. Ancient teachings emphasize that fascination with the outer can mislead our senses and entangle us in a state of bondage. The roller coaster of emotions meshed in desire leads us to the last stop, despair, because that which is temporary was mistaken as having lasting value.

We must change the narrative, change our consciousness and practice raising our defenses against the distress and anxiety surrounding us. The Vedic practice of meditation allows us to achieve this by shifting the balance and training our minds to quiet our thoughts. Through meditation, the whirlwind outside subsides, leaving us in silence and equilibrium inside.

It is not an easy task to face the innumerable types of experiences, challenges and changes the world subjects us to. Once we start practicing co-existing in the state of Brahman (the infinite consciousness) and the World, we slowly start to feel the greater reality of one over the other. We become aware of how we drive our lives forward by using our mind and by seeking sense pleasures, which in today's Covid-19 world are limited. Spiritualism and its practice teach us to see this world through a different lens, exposing its illusory nature.

Global suffering connects us today like never before and invokes the ancient imperative to overcome division through unification. It requires us to overcome disconnectedness through establishing connection with our self. Vedanta practices bring awareness of our existence and pure consciousness and guides us in finding the light amidst the darkness. We cannot control many things around us, but we can shift our attention and have faith in our inner strength and courage, knowing there is no birth of consciousness without pain.

"Elevate yourself through the power of your mind, and do not degrade yourself, for the mind can be the friend and also the enemy of the self." Bhagavad Gita 5.6

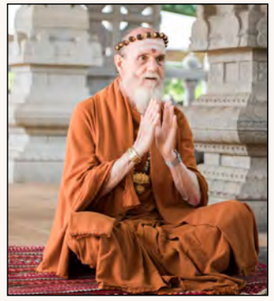
Vini Melwani is author of the blog Hinduism Symbolism @HinduismSymbols. She also writes for the non-profit organization One Bread Foundation Inc.

PUBLISHER'S DESK

Is the Future a Work-from-Home World?

A new lifestyle has been thrust upon the world by a tiny virus. How we respond to it will redefine our families and households.

BY SATGURU BODHINATHA VEYLANSWAMI



In many parts of the world, the covid-19 pandemic necessitated that governments institute stay-at-home lockdowns. This, in turn, forced many employers and educators to restructure their businesses and schools so that employees and students could work productively from home. It is becoming clear that unanticipated consequences have been created, including the very real possibility that the temporary stay-at-home world may be morphing into a permanent work-from-home world for large segments of society. Here are two prominent examples that illustrate this trend.

Forbes magazine offered this in a May 13, 2020, article: "Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey, in a paradigm-shifting, COVID-19-inspired move, informed his employees that they can continue working from home 'forever.' Understanding this option is not suitable for everyone, Dorsey is keeping the door open for those who wish to work within the traditional office structure. He's leaving the decision to either work from home or at the office in the hands of his employees. Given the time frame of reopening, coupled with the opportunity to remain working from home, this new program means that it's highly conceivable that the vast majority of Twitter employees will work remotely for the foreseeable future—or forever."

The New York Times, on May 21, 2020, wrote: "Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's chief executive, told workers during a staff meeting that was live-streamed on his Facebook page that within a decade as many as half of the company's more than 48,000 employees would work from home. 'It's clear that Covid has changed a lot about our lives, and that certainly includes the way that most of us work,' Mr. Zuckerberg said. 'Coming out of this period, I expect that remote work is going to be a growing trend as well.'"

Another trend that has been accelerated by COVID-19 is telemedicine. To treat patients during the COVID-19 crisis, physicians have by necessity greatly increased the use of telemedicine. Many project that the use of telemedicine will continue to rapidly grow. A May 19, 2020, article in Tech Republic states: "We've been telling doctors for years that by 2024 there will be more virtual visits per day than in-person visits. COVID has brought that date two years, maybe three years, forward." We know some doctors who are already practicing telemedicine from their homes.

Let's look now at a Hindu perspective on the trend to work from home. Remote working gives more time, as there is no need to commute. Many live far from their office or school and spend significant hours each day in transit to and from work. With these extra hours in the day, we see four opportunities here to improve life.

Enhancing the Home Shrine

The first is: what better place to put some of that time than in strengthening the home shrine. It is traditional for Hindu homes to center around a special room set aside and maintained to create a temple-like atmosphere in which we conduct puja, read scripture, meditate, perform sadhana, sing bhajans and do japa. My guru, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, stressed the shrine room's importance in many of his talks. He knew how it could uplift and inspire. Here is an excerpt from his writings: "All Hindus have guardian devas who live on the astral plane and guide, guard and protect their lives. The great Mahadevas in the temple that the devotees frequent send their deva ambassadors into the homes to live with the devotees. A room is set aside for these permanent unseen guests, a room that the whole family can enter and sit in and commune inwardly with these refined beings who are dedicated to protecting the family generation after generation. Some of them are their own ancestors. A token shrine in a bedroom or a closet or a niche in a kitchen is not enough to attract these Divinities. One would not host an honored guest in one's closet or have him or her sleep in the kitchen and expect the guest to feel welcome, appreciated, loved. All Hindus are taught from childhood that the guest is God, and they treat any guest royally who comes to visit. Hindus also treat God as God, and devas as Gods, when they come to live permanently in the home. Mothers, daughters, aunts, fathers, sons, uncles—all may perform puja within their own home, and do, as the Hindu home is considered to be nothing less than an extension of the nearby temple."

The vibration of your home shrine can be strengthened by regularly going to a local temple. Then, when you come home from the temple, light an oil lamp in the shrine room. This action will bring the temple's religious atmosphere into your home, mystically bringing devas who were at the temple right into the home shrine. They are able, from the inner world, to bless and guide family members and strengthen the home's religious forcefield.

Family Bonding

A second opportunity from not commuting is to spend more quality time with the children. Also, working at home, your schedule may be flexible, allowing you to be focused on your career when the children are at school and be free when they are home. Gurudeva put great emphasis on family gatherings and suggested holding a once-a-week "Monday Home Evening." Here is his description: "Monday Home Evening is practiced by many religions, including the Hindus. On Monday evening, Siva's day, the family members get together, prepare a wonderful meal, play games together and verbally appreciate one another's good qualities. It's an evening when the television is not turned on [nowadays this would include not using social media]. They don't solve any problems on that day. They just love each other, and everybody has a voice, from the littlest child to the oldest senior. It's a family togetherness, one day a week when everyone will look forward to having Mom and Dad at home. That doesn't mean it will be on Tuesday or any other day if Monday is missed. Family home evening is always on Monday, and everyone's life has to adjust to that."

Gurudeva describes this type of activity as true wealth. "Many families find even this is impossible because of their careers. Nowadays people think that they have to have two incomes, three incomes, to be comfortably well off. Money is gained and lost, sometimes rather quickly. As quickly gained, often as quickly lost. But what is wealth? Wealth is a diamond with many facets. One facet of wealth is money, but it is not the only one. A happy family that enjoys each other—that is a great wealth. Doing things together and enjoying doing things together is another great wealth."

Creating a Balance in Life

A third opportunity is to find more richness and balance in one's life. Time spent commuting may displace important activities such as a half hour a day of physical exercise. The stress of modern life can be reduced by exercise and by the regular practice of hatha yoga asanas in the home, something that is impossible in most offices. Stress can also be reduced through simple meditation techniques. More time can allow for healthier meals to be prepared and for enriching activities such as local cultural events, outings and learning adventures.

Feeling at home: Much, not all, of the workforce of the world is migrating back to the home. The Internet has made the transition possible, whether for college coursework, medical consultations, marketing or everyday business matters. Families of the past all orbited around the home, and those days may be returning, to the benefit of humanity.

Serving the Community

A fourth opportunity is to give some of this gift of time back to the community. Seva projects can be arranged in which all family members participate. The importance of seva, selfless service, is best impressed on the mind of youth by actually doing it. A great benefit of performing seva is that it offsets the spirit-diminishing emphasis on materialism, working with the singular purpose of building wealth for one's immediate family. It is suggested that if there are no formal Hindu seva projects in your area, then expand the search into the general community for activities related to improving the environment, disaster relief, or providing clothes, food and care for the needy. In the aftermath of the devastating 2001 Gujarat earthquake, Pramukh Swami Maharaj of BAPS counseled his followers: "When people are facing difficulties and sorrows, our Indian tradition is to offer them solace. We feel that by serving human beings we serve the Lord Himself."

Of course, there are many more possibilities created by working from home. We hope these four ideas catalyze your creative thinking about new possibilities for increasing the home's spirituality, enhancing your well being, and serving the wider community while strengthening family bonds.

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LETTERS

Vietnamese Hinduism

I was really disheartened to see this documentary on the extinction of Hinduism in Vietnam: youtu.be/1AqFiJWBfIQ. Cham Hinduism in Vietnam is a distinct practice, like Balinese and Javanese Hinduism, different from Hindu practices in the Indian subcontinent. It should be preserved with the help of Hindu missionary work. Vietnam's ancient pilgrimage sites should become known by Hindus in other parts of the world and be visited by them. This will bring a sense of unity among Vietnamese Hindus, as a part of the broader Hindu culture and civilization. A documentary on Vietnamese Hinduism should be filmed and broadcast to the world on television and the Internet. I am a freelance researcher of Hindu culture and civilization from India. My field of interest is the impact of Vedas and Upanishads on Buddhism and their interrelation. But financially I am not capable of doing this great work. I hope someone will come forward to help in this effort.

Vinod Kumar Yadav
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Pranams to the Bhakti Saints!

I enjoyed reading the article titled "Seven Bhakti Saints of North India" (HINDUISM TODAY, April/May/June, 2020) by Lakshmi Chandrashekar Subramanian. The article was thorough and insightful. During the years from 1200 to 1700, when India was under brute foreign rule, the bhakti saints mentioned in the article had a big role in protecting Hinduism and evolving it. The devotional environment that these God-realized saints created in North India resulted in the spiritual rise of numerous humans. Moreover, the saints united Hindus, reformed Indian society, and released Hindu spirituality from the grip of the so-called scholars whose knowledge only came from books and not from authentic religious experience.

Mukul Shri Goel
Kota, Rajasthan, India
writer@mukulshrigoel.com

Appreciation from Bengaluru

My respects to you and your Siva ganas who have been guiding the "pashus" towards Lord Pashupathi through your selfless service. Here at Bengaluru, His Holiness Sri Sri Ravisankar Gurudev Swamigal and the Sathsang are continuing the sevas. Apart from the regular activities, His Holiness has been giving a helping hand to the needy during this pandemic. On behalf of the institution I express my gratitude to your Aadheenam for having published the detailed article about our Sri Sri Gurukulam (HINDUISM TODAY, July/August/September, 2020). We received the electronic format of the article.

I thank you on behalf of the Agamikas for all your encouraging words towards Agamas, Alayas and the Adisaivas. I have shared the article with all the students. I am sure this will kindle the interest in Agamikas to pursue their traditional studies. It will also inform the mundane world about the system and the people involved in giving the positive energy the world needs. My special thanks to Sri Arumuganathaswamiji for all his guidance and also to Smt. Choodie Shivaram Ji for her understanding and presentation about our institution to the world in the way they may understand. I also appreciate the dedication she showed during her visits to Sri Sri Gurukulam. Thanks once again for all your unconditional love. I am sure with Sri Parameshwara's grace and His Holiness's and your blessings we will progress and bring back the divine tradition in practice.

A. S. Sundaramurthy Sivacharyar
Principal of Veda Agama
Samskrutha Maha Patashala
Bengaluru, India

Priest Training Flourishes

The article on training priests in the July-Sept 2020 issue of HINDUISM TODAY beautifully explains the daily hard schedule of the trainees. The pictures are impressive as always. It is interesting to read that the students participate in that rigorously disciplined life so enthusiastically. I was heartened to read that they are hired as priests immediately after their graduation. The gurukul will survive and progress due to that demand.

I would respectfully recommend modification in the timings of the students' dinacharya, i.e., the daily schedule. Breakfast should be around 7am, lunch by 11:30am, and their dinner around 7pm. The students should be allowed about eight hours sleep after their rigorous schedule each day.

Dr. Prabhakar G. Joshi
Libertyville, Il, USA

I Am Proud of Our Traditions

This institution [the Veda Agama Patashala of Bengaluru] teaches us to be ourselves wherever we go. For example, we have this dress code: the dhothi and veshti. This is what we wear all the time. No matter where I go, which country, I am proud of my attire and will never change to suit the world. On the contrary, I have seen that people respect our traditional dress and individuality. We should never let go of our traditions. I find great pride in holding on to them.

Arun Kumar (a Senior Student)
Erode, Tamil Nadu, India

Spirituality's Wise Faith

I read with interest Kailash Dhakshinamurthy's letter, "God Exists as the X Factor?" (Hinduism Today, July/August/September, 2020), which was a rebuttal of my letter with the same title, published in Hinduism Today, April/May/June, 2020. However, all the arguments the author proposes to disprove the existence of God are based on those proposed by Western philosophers who rely purely on logic and rationality to analyze any issue. But that approach cannot work to analyze the concept of God, because God, while immanent as Nature, transcends logic and rationality and falls in the realm of spirituality.

Logic and rationality can help us analyze the finite material world through our finite senses and mind, but cannot comprehend a spiritual world that transcends the material world and is infinite in scope. God is infinite: Satyam, Gyanam, Anantam Brahman ("God is Existence, Consciousness and Infinite"). Belief in God is thus indeed a matter of faith. But unlike Abrahamic religions, which rely on blind faith, Hinduism encourages and emphasizes faith stemming from intuition and direct experience that can be felt but cannot be described, just as a person can experience the sweetness of a cake through the sense of taste but cannot describe that sweetness in words. So, Hindu spirituality transcends, but does not contradict, logic and rationality.

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

veda agama samskrutha maha patashala

Learning the priestly arts: Faculty and students of the Veda Agama Samskruta Patashala of Bengaluru with Hinduism Today publisher Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami

Navigating Challenging Times

How you can help our magazine continue providing spiritual tools for today

We asked our publisher, satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, how he sees Hinduism Today's role in these agitated times.

"The world is certainly going through a difficult period right now. We have lots of new opportunities to worry, if we allow it—to become anxious, even fearful. Fortunately, Hinduism is here to remind us that these emotions can run wild, if allowed. But they are ours to control. Hinduism provides the knowledge and the practices to harness them and turn negatives into positives.

"We are encouraged to see the beginning of an inspiring trend of many Hindus and others, especially the young, preferring to take personal, inner responsibility for their spiritual unfoldment. They are not depending solely on outer affiliations or congregational participation. These are vital, too, but we need to maintain a balance; we should never neglect personal self-effort.

"This reawakening to sadhana (regular practices to enhance spirituality) is promising. And our magazine is perfectly poised to help by continuing to highlight the philosophy, the vocabulary, the techniques and practices that best support individual striving.

"Pandit Vamadeva Shastri (Dr. David Frawley) praised Hinduism Today in our October-November-December 2020 issue for framing ancient Sanatana Dharma in fresh metaphors and language, making it available and appealing to the contemporary mind. We have always strived to present Hinduism in a way that is usable in today's world. Hinduism is ever a religion of today, helping us face issues of today and giving us tools for today, rather than dwelling heavily on history and the past.

"I would say that Hinduism Today is as relevant today at it has ever been, perhaps even more so. But it, too, has challenges to face at this time, especially regarding fortifying its finances. Due to the pandemic, print sales are drastically down. It is fortunate that readers are turning to digital versions and overall readership is steady. But digital versions are of necessity free and cannot offset the drop in copy sales."

Help our magazine navigate today's shifting currents and remain strong and able to continue fulfilling its vital mission. We ask all who would support Hinduism Today to direct all gifts—yearly, monthly or occasional donations—to the Hinduism Today Current Expense Fund to meet day-to-day expenses: bit.ly/help-HT

Or please do contact us at:
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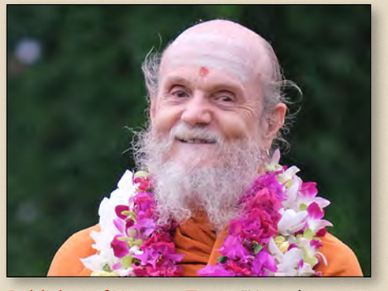

Publisher of HINDUISM TODAY: "Now that we are under duress, this is a great time to grow into the individual and into the community we want to be and are destined to be."

QUOTES & QUIPS

"There is something good in all seeming failures. You are not to see that now. Time will reveal it. Be patient."

Swami Sivananda (1887-1963), founder of Divine Life Society, Rishikesh

Character is formed from the repeated choice of thoughts and action. Make the right choice. You shall have a firm and noble character. Swami Chinmayananda (1916-1992), founder of the Chinmaya Mission

The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), mystic poet

Within such a yogi who establishes himself in absolute non-dual union with Lord God and who keeps himself free from all sorts of differentiating notions, the exalted power of all-knowing gets unfolded in all its fullness. Raurava Agama Vidya Pada 2.15

The real measure of your wealth is how much you would be worth if you lost all your money. Anonymous

The most difficult thing is the decision to act; the rest is merely tenacity. The fears are paper tigers. You can do anything you decide to do. You can act to change and control your life; and the procedure, the process, is its own reward. Amelia Earhart (1897-1937), American aviation pioneer

I have often regretted my speech, never my silence. Xenocrates (396-314 bce), Greek philosopher

Don't talk too much, your ignorance exceeds your knowledge. Spanish proverb

In a day when you don't come across any problems, you can be sure that you are traveling in a wrong path. Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902)

Life's most persistent and urgent question is, "What are you doing for others?" Martin Luther King Jr (1929-1968), leader in the African American civil rights movement

The spiritual aspiration is innate in man; for he is, unlike the animal, aware of imperfection and limitation and feels that there is something to be attained beyond what he now is. Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950)

To whomsoever it is not known, to him it is known: to whomsoever it is known, he does not know. It is not understood by those who understand it; it is understood by those who do not understand it. Kena Upanishad 2.2.3

Let go or be dragged. Zen proverb

If you are a king, will you have contentment? If you are a beggar, will you have contentment? Whatever your walk in life may be, you will only have contentment through knowing yourself by yourself. Siva Yogaswami (1872-1964), renowned Sri Lankan mystic

No person is born great. Great people become great when others are sleeping. African proverb

Be as simple as you can be; you will be astonished to see how uncomplicated and happy your life can become. Paramahansa Yogananda (1893-1952)

When mankind can roll up space as if it were a piece of leather, then there will be an end of sorrow—apart from the sorrow born of not knowing God. Svetasvatara Upanishad 6.20

Raise your words, not voice. It is rain that grows flowers, not thunder. Rumi (1207 1273), Sufi mystic and poet

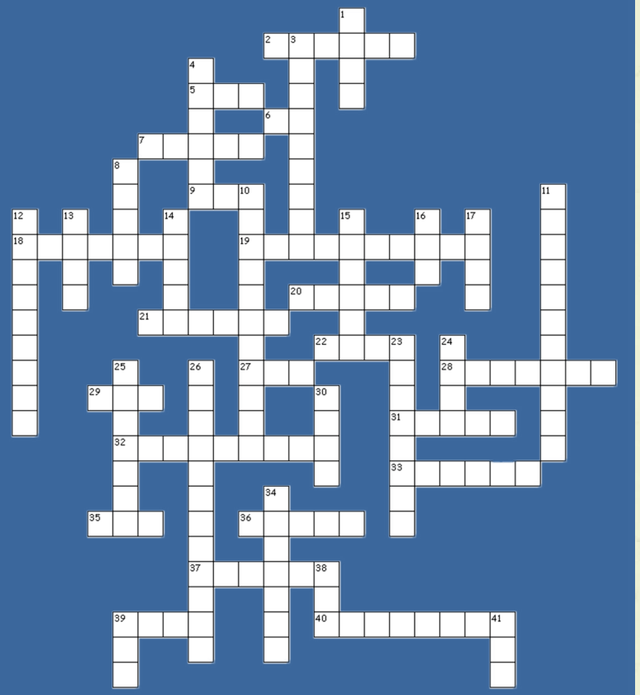
One accurate measurement is worth a thousand expert opinions. Grace Hopper (1906-1992), American computer scientist

Culture is coded wisdom. Wangari Maathai (1940-2011), first African woman to win the Nobel Prize

When you are content to be simply yourself and don't compare or compete, everyone will respect you. Lao Tzu (4th or 6th century bce), author of the Tao Te Ching

We're not trying for perfection, we're trying for improvement. Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, publisher of Hinduism Today

It is the day-to-day reactions to circumstance that indicate the attainment and not mere recorded knowledge about the path. Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (1927-2001), founder of Hinduism Today



Answers : On page 15, at the bottom, upside down

FUN & GAMES

Crossword Puzzle

Down: **1**. Moisture condensed from the atmosphere; **3**. Focusing of the mental powers upon a subject; **4**. Naturally occurring; not acquired; **8**. Easy to perceive or understand; **10**. Dissolving or breaking up into parts; **11**. Famed disciple of Sri Ramakrishna; **12**. A division into two parts, usually sharply distinguished; **13**. Hindi for clarified butter; **14**. Move rhythmically to music; **15**. Sound, syllable, word or phrase endowed with power; **16**. A feeling of great pleasure and happiness; **17**. A thought; **23**. A primary spice in curry known for its anti-inflammatory properties; **24**. Allowing access, passage, or a view through an empty space; **25**. Goddess of Wealth; **26**. That which cannot decay or die; **30**. Actually existing as a thing or occurring in fact; **34**. An act of religious devotion; **38**. Used to refer to the whole quantity or extent of something; **39**. Over a large expanse of space or time; a great distance; **41**. A region of the atmosphere

Across: **2**. An elongated, edible fruit produced by several kinds of large flowering plants; **5**. The present moment; **6**. Reference to one's self; **7**. Tranquility; **9**. To finish; **18**. Supreme or Personal God; **19**. An aromatic wood used in rituals; **20**. A transparent, tasteless, odorless substance; **21**. A building for religious or spiritual activities; **22**. Crystalline substance which gives seawater its characteristic flavor; **27**. Drink made by infusing leaves in water; **28**. To permeate; **29**. Be able to; **31**. A juicy stone fruit, loved by Ganesha; **32**. A star that suddenly brightens due to an explosion, ejecting most of its mass; **33**. Hidden away or difficult to reach; **35**. Viscous, typically flammable liquids that are insoluble in water; **36**. A species of highly venomous snakes; **37**. Space or ether; **39**. Be aware of a sensation; **40**. Giving off light; shining

BASICS

God and the Gods

Hindus believe in one supreme Being, the Supreme God, who created an extensive hierarchy of Gods, said to number three hundred and thirty-three million. In the Vedas, the Supreme is called Brahman, who simultaneously exists as absolute, transcendent Parabrahman, as omniscient consciousness or Parashakti and as Parameshvara, the primal soul. The word Brahman comes from the Sanskrit root "Brh," meaning to grow, manifest or expand. Brahman is simultaneously Purusha, the Primal Soul, who is perfection of being, the original soul who creates innumerable individual souls—including the Gods—like waves in an ocean or sparks from a fire. It is thought that some Gods did not undergo evolution as humans know it, but were emanated as mature intelligences, as Mahadevas, to govern and interpenetrate specific orders of space and time. They are so close to the Supreme that they fulfill their cosmic functions in perfect accord with the wisdom, intent and action of their Source. The Gods are real inner-plane beings existing at the vibratory rate of our soul nature. Down through the ages, ordinary people and saints alike, in all cultures, have had visions of them. Their decisions and actions are so vast in their implications and complexity that we could never comprehend them with our limited human faculties.

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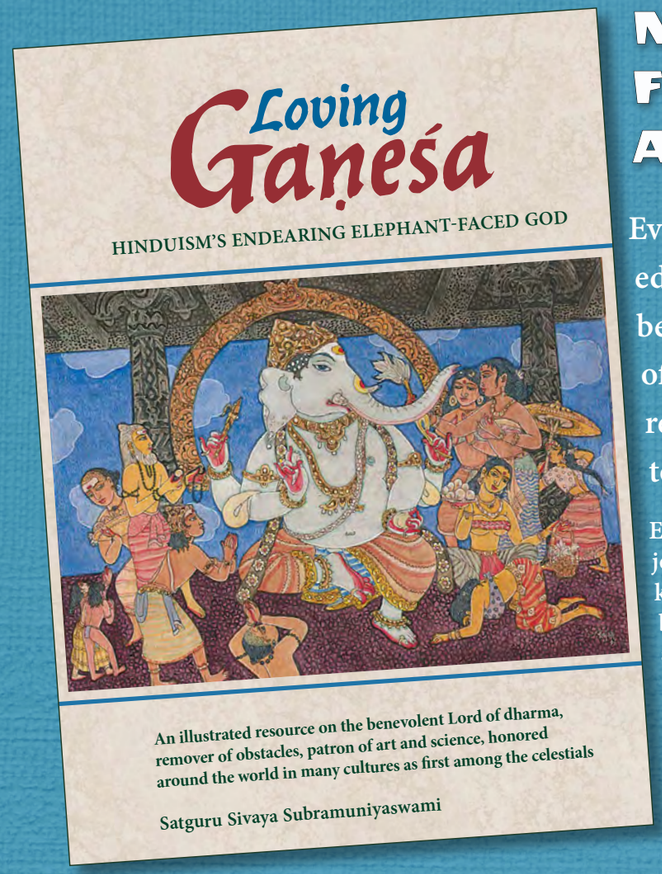
Depicting the ineffable: These 12th-century carvings are several of many which depict various Gods and Goddesses at the Halebidu Temple in Karnataka, India

Across: 2. banana; 5. now; 6. me; 7. peace; 9. end; 18. Ishvara; 19. sandalwood; 20. water; 21. temple; 22. salt; 27. tea; 28. pervade; 29. can; 31. mango; 32. supernova; 33. remote; 35. oil; 36. cobra; 37. akasha; 39. feel; 40. luminous.

Down: 1. rain; 3. attention; 4. innate; 8. clear; 10. dissolution; 11. Vivekananda; 12. dichotomy; 13. ghee; 14. dance; 15. mantra; 16. joy; 17. idea; 23. turmeric; 24. open; 25. Lakshmi; 26. imperishable; 30. real; 34. worship; 38. all; 39. far; 41. sky.



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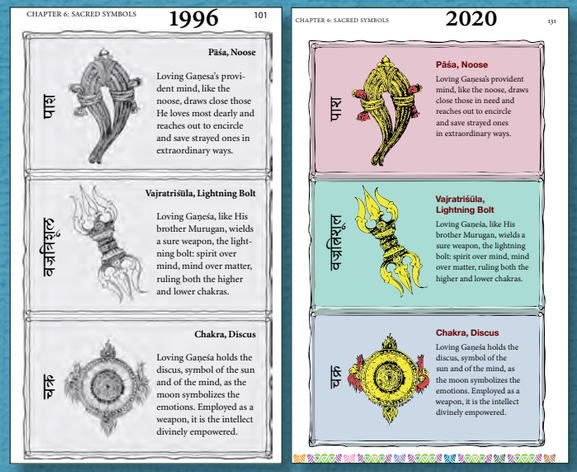
Ever since its first black and white edition in 1996, *Loving Gaṇeśa* has been a popular book among Hindus of all denominations each of whom reveres the portly Deity who is first to be worshiped among all the Gods.

Even the most austere yogī starts his inward journey by invoking this God, who softens karma and guides dharma. He reigns over our beginnings, our changes, earthly decisions and problems—always there when needed, never aloof. Here a Hindu master invites us into Gaṇapati's interior meanings, rites, mantras and sacred symbols, unfolding an intimate depiction of the mysterious Deity. Loving Gaṇeśa is part of the comprehensive works of Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (1927-2001), founder of Hinduism Today magazine.



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FROM THE UPANISHADS

Who Is a Brahmin?

What is it that truly distinguishes someone as being of the priestly caste?

The following is a translation of the Vajrasucika Upanishad from The Principal Upanishads by S. Radhakrishnan. This Upanishad belongs to the Samaveda. The following verses, 1 to 9 have been lightly edited for clarity.

1 I shall describe the Vajrasuci doctrine which blasts ignorance, condemns those who are devoid of the knowledge of God and exalts those endowed with the eye of true knowledge.

2 The brahmin, the kshatriya, the vaishya and the sudra are the four classes (castes). The idea that the brahmin is the chief among these classes is found in the Vedas and is affirmed by the Smrtis. By such a concord of thought, it becomes a point worthy of investigation. Who is, verily, the brahmin? Is he the individual soul? Is he the body? Is he the class based on birth? Is he so by knowledge? Is he so by deeds—previous, present or prospective? Is he so by the performance of religious rites?

3 Of these possibilities, the idea that the jiva or the individual soul is a brahmin, is not correct. For the individual soul's identity is one and the same within its numerous previous and prospective bodies. Even though the jiva is one, it assumes many bodies due to its past karma, and in all these bodies the form of the jiva remains one and the same. Therefore the jiva is not the brahmin.

4 If it is said that the body defines the brahmin, that is incorrect. This is because the nature of the body—composed of the five elements—is the same among all human beings of all castes and outcastes. They all share the common features of old age and death, virtue and vice. There is, for example, no regularity in complexion within the four classes. The brahmins are not all of white complexion, the kshatriya is not all of red, the vaishya is not all of tawny complexion and the sudra not all of dark complexion. They too share the same liability of tainting their families and kinsmen if they were to murder a brahmin or perform other sins. Therefore the body is not the brahmin.

5 If it is said that birth defines the brahmin, that is incorrect, for there are many species among creatures other than humans. Many sages are said to be of diverse origin. We hear from the sacred books that Rishyashringa was born of a deer, Kausika of kusa grass, Jambuka from a jackal, Valmiki from an ant-hill, Vyasa from a fisher girl, Gautama from the back of a hare, Vasishta from a celestial nymph and Agastya from an earthen jar. Among these, despite their birth, there are many sages who have taken the highest rank, having given proof of their wisdom. Therefore birth does not make a brahmin.

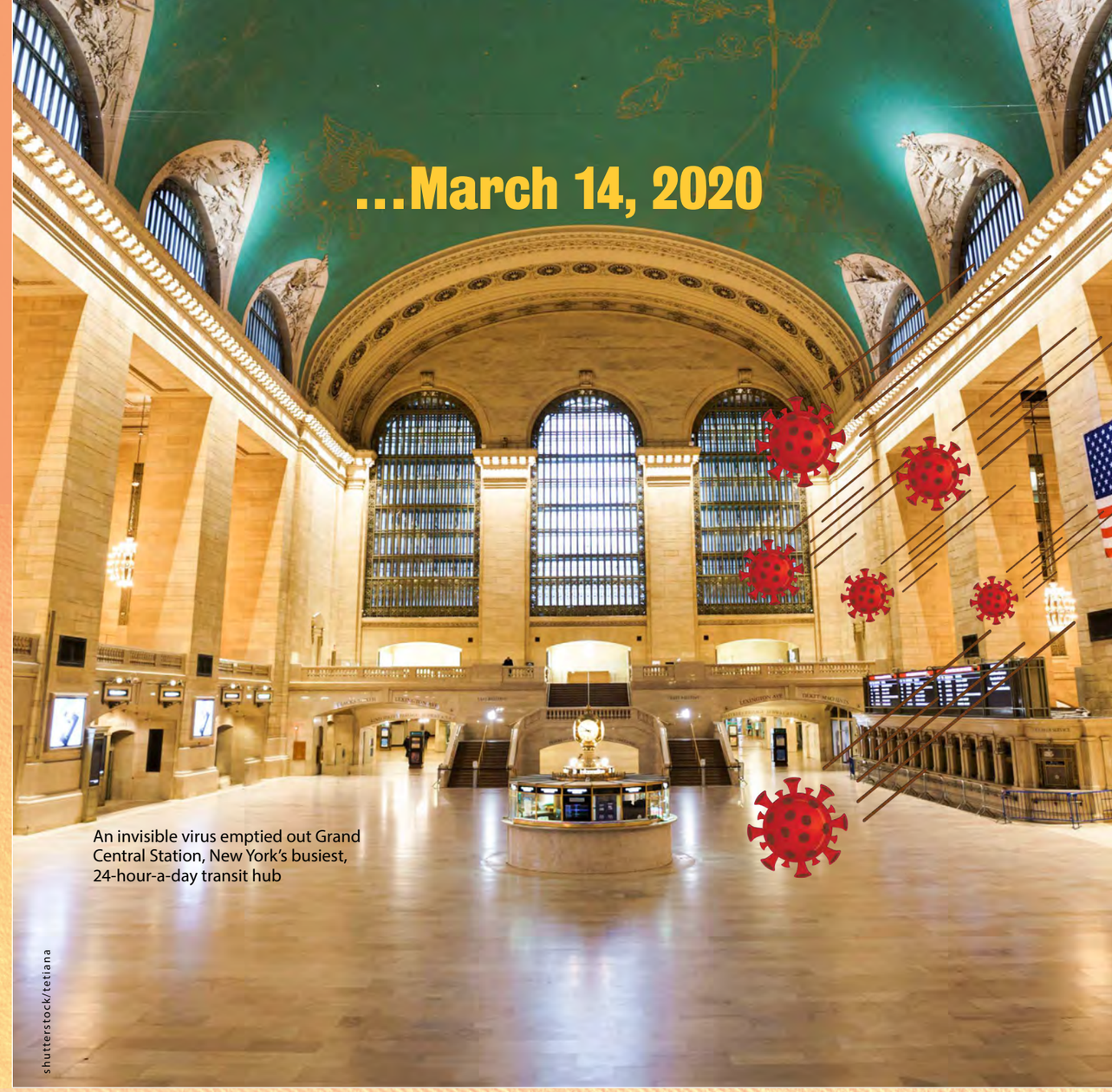
6 If it is said that knowledge defines the brahmin that, too, is incorrect, because among kshatriyas and others there are many who have seen the Highest Reality and attained wisdom: Therefore knowledge does not make a brahmin.

7 Then, if it is said that work defines the brahmin, that is incorrect. We see that works commenced in the present lifetime, accumulated during the previous lives, or which will commence in future lives, is a commonality to all living creatures. We see that good men perform works impelled by their past karma. Therefore work does not make a brahmin.

8 If it is said that the performer of religious duties is a brahmin, it is not so. There have been many kshatriyas and those of other castes who have given away gold and more for religious purposes. Therefore the performer of religious rites is not the brahmin.

9 So then, who truly is the brahmin? It is he who directly perceives the Self—as simply as perceiving an amalaka fruit in the palm of one's hand. The Self is without a second, devoid of distinctions of birth, attribute and action. It is devoid of all faults such as the six infirmities and the six states. It is of the form of Truth, of wisdom, bliss and eternity. It is that which by Itself is devoid of purpose, and yet It is the basis of endless purpose. The Self is That which functions as the indwelling spirit of all beings, which pervades the interior and the exterior of all like ether, and which is of the nature of bliss. It is indivisible, immeasurable and realizable only through one's own experience. The Self then manifests Itself directly as one's own self and through the fulfilment of one's nature rids one of the faults of desire, attachment and others while endowing one with tranquillity. The Self removes spite, greed, expectations and bewilderment, forging a mind unaffected by ostentation, self-importance and the like. Thusly the realized one lives. He alone, who is possessed of these qualities, is the brahmin. This is the view of the Vedas, our tradition, our ancient lore and the halls of history. Without the attainment of the Self, the accomplishment of the state of the true brahmin is not possible. Meditate on being, consciousness and bliss. Meditate on the Self, without a second. This is the Upanishad.

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) was an Indian philosopher and statesman, India's first Vice President (1952–1962) and second President (1962–1967).



An invisible virus emptied out Grand Central Station, New York's busiest, 24-hour-a-day transit hub

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SPECIAL FEATURE

Life Under Lockdown, New York to New Delhi

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought disruption unprecedented in recent history to most of the world, including a billion Hindus. Faced with closed temples and canceled festivals, Hindus have compensated by increasing the intensity of worship, meditation and yoga within the home and harnessing the powers of the Internet to access temple rituals and satsangs with gurus and fulfill as best as possible the key rites of passage. In this report we share the personal accounts of more than two dozen Hindus from the US, India and Nepal.

With Temples Closed, Hindu Worship Goes Online

By Lavina Melwani, New York

Back in march, few predicted that a tiny virus was about to cause a worldwide pandemic, upending life as we know it. As we go to press July 31st, 17,422,252 people across the world have been infected by Covid-19, with 675,584 deaths. The US is the world leader in these grim statistics, with over 4.5 million infections and 152,940 deaths. India, too, has seen increasing numbers, with 1,638,827 infected and increasing by 50,000 a day. There have been over 35,745 deaths in India, increasing by an average of 735 per day. A 24-day nationwide total shutdown begun on March 24 did not have the desired impact.

Millions in America, India and elsewhere are under quarantine and lockdown or simply sheltering in place, struggling to work from home and manage their families while dealing with the crisis. India in particular has experienced heart-rending misery during the lockdown. Thousands of impoverished migrants, told to return to their villages, had to walk all the way back.

New York, initially the epicenter of the pandemic in the US, has flattened its curve, but the disease is raging in over 33 states in the country. Social distancing, masks and frequent hand washing are the new safety measures. There is no end in sight; health authorities, including Dr. Anthony Fauci, have said we are still in the "first wave." The more virulent Spanish Flu lasted from February 1918 to April 1920, infecting a third of the world's population in four successive waves and killing an estimated fifty million people.

In our report, we'll first discuss the pandemic's impact on Hindu temples and organizations, then share first-person testimony from people around the world on how their religious life and activities have changed—often unexpectedly for the better.

Hindu Temples Adjust

Although temples and places of worship closed during the quarantine, most Hindus have a home shrine and could therefore continue their worship and entreat the support of a higher power. In times like this, all can attend the temple within themselves. As of press time, many temples have reopened to limited numbers of devotees, under social distancing rules; others, in Texas, for example, have shut down again. Nearly all have made efforts to provide online access to the worship, which the priests have continued uninterrupted.

The **Ganesha Temple of Flushing** has now reopened for socially distanced darshans. Its famous Ganesh Canteen—ranked one of the best Indian restaurants in New York, despite its modest name and unlikely location in a temple basement—is providing deliveries, curbside pickup and socially-distanced, sit-down dining. The temple is providing online darshans and yoga classes via live Facebook feeds.

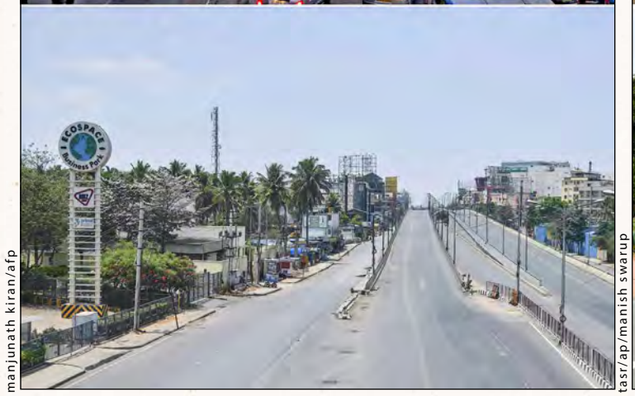
All **BAPS Swaminarayan temples** worldwide closed on March 19. This included the huge Akshardham complexes in Gandhinagar and New Delhi and every other BAPS temple in India, as well as those in the US, Canada, UK, Europe, Africa, East Asia, Australia, New Zealand and the Gulf countries.

Within a week, the individual BAPS temples were offering webcasts in Gujarati, Hindi and English on YouTube (bit.ly/BAPS-satsang), allowing devotees to access their formerly in-person weekly assemblies and other activities for each age group: children, teens, young adults and families. Daily postings to their YouTube channel also offer darshan and talks by Mahant Swami Maharaj, festival celebrations, bhajan sessions by the swamis, newly published talks by Pramukh Swami Maharaj, reports of their pandemic-related community service projects and much more. On March 29, their six USA temples held a Mahapuja, "great worship," for the well-being of everyone and a quick resolution to the pandemic. The ceremonies, conducted by the swamis of each temple, were joined online by 12,000 BAPS families across the country.

Swami Chaitanyamurtidas reports: "Although the sense of community, physical gatherings, and temples are core pillars of BAPS devotees' lives, all devotees have embraced the adjustment—quite smoothly, actually. Many have focused their attention and energy inwards, spending more time in devotion or reading religious texts.

"Heavy emphasis has been placed on improving the bonds of family through regular family gatherings. Hindu spiritual wisdom

aran veylan



manjunath kiran/afp

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Home as temple: (below, left to right) Maha Ganapati Temple in Edmonton, Canada, is shut down, with only two cars belonging to the priests parked outside; BAPS Swaminarayan families perform at home the ceremonies they would normally do at the temple

For India, a rare emptiness: (above left)This typically packed Bengaluru thoroughfare was devoid of traffic following the general lockdown; (above right) Delhi's India Gate, the memorial to 70,000 British Indian Army soldiers who died in World War I, shown above on October 28, 2019, with several visitors and abundant pollution, and on April 20, 2020, with a rare unimpeded view and clear air

baps swaminarayan

baps swaminarayan

baps swaminarayan

has helped our devotees cope and adjust smoothly to the disruption of life. Devotees miss the mandir environment and now realize how much a mandir was an integral part of their life. They have also realized that the lessons they have learned from going to the mandir have become extremely useful in these difficult times."

Beginning in June, BAPS began a cautious reopening, temple by temple. Devotees could come for darshan of the Deities by appointment only, wearing masks and maintaining social distancing. The main Robbinsville, New Jersey, temple remains closed.

BAPS intends to permanently continue several of the programs developed during the pandemic. These include the daily blessing by Mahant Swami Maharaj and their "BetterLiving" initiatives for the youth on YouTube, Instagram and Apple Podcasts.

Other spiritual groups, from Sadhu Vaswani to Chinmayananda, have provided a positive boost in these stressful times by offering Gita classes and satsangs via Zoom, Skype and other virtual platforms. A group of Indian women on Long Island who had met every week for Gita classes have simply moved to Zoom to listen to their guru imparting wisdom. On Zoom they can still see each other and chat, though they miss sharing the hot chai and delicious vegetarian food after the weekly discourse!

Unfortunately on Zoom a group bhajan is impossible because of the audio time delay. One person can lead, but others have to follow along by themselves without hearing the others. Video recordings appearing to show a choir singing in unison on multiple small Zoom screens, are not live; they have been mixed by a sound engineer.

Bhairavasundaram Sivachariar, founder and head priest of the **Boston Sri Kalikambal Shiva Temple** in Massachusetts, closed his temple to the public on March 15th, continuing the daily pujas in private. April's popular nine-day Vasantha Navaratri celebration was broadcast online, as was a 16-day Maha Lakshmi yagna performed for the welfare of the community and the quick recovery of the economy. "The common feedback we received," he writes, "is that these livestreams allowed for many to take their minds off their worries for a few hours, which provided great solace for them during these tough times." The temple reopened in June—to just ten masked and socially distanced devotees at a time.

A total ban on their operations would have presented a serious problem: pujas in the temple must be conducted daily, and if terminated on account of a catastrophe, begun again only after major rituals of purification restore the temple's spiritual powers. They did face shortages of milk, fruits and flowers for worship, but made do as best they could.

Devotees continue to donate to the temple to meet day-to-day expenses, lessening the financial impact. Last year they bought land for a new temple, as they currently operate out of a storefront. Fundraising for that project has been put on hold for now (see: bit.ly/kalikambaltemple). But optimism rules: "As Sivachariyars, it is our duty to serve Lord Shiva through temple worship, which in turn blesses not only those who come to the temple but the community as a whole. Despite these tough times, I am confident that Lord Shiva will guide the world through these challenges."

Pandit Hemant Ramrakhyani, priest at the small **Satya Narayan Mandir** in Elmhurst, Queens, now has 500 people attending puja online, more than double the temple's actual capacity. Pandit has conducted several funerals using Zoom. In one particularly difficult situation, a young man was not being allowed to attend his father's cremation at a local crematorium. After Hemant intervened with the funeral home, the man was allowed to be present while Pandit chanted the prayers via a video phone call. The bereaved son got some closure, but due to the Covid-19 restrictions he was not allowed to press the button to ignite the funeral pyre. The Satya Narayan Temple has now re-opened in a limited way, with worshipers, masked and observing the two-meter distance, allowed to enter for brief darshan.

Organizations Go Online

Suhag Shukla, executive director of the **Hindu American Foundation**, reports: "As the

On the front lines: (clockwise from above right) Beaumont Hospital, Dearborn, Michigan; Shama Mehta; New York nurses and doctors, June 13, 2020, during a moment of thanksgiving

Thanking Those on the Front Lines

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Hindu Hospital Chaplain Tells Her Covid Story

By Shama Mehta, Dearborn, Michigan

In-person, face-to-face interactions with patients, families and staff have always been a key aspect of a chaplain's spiritual care. But the Covid-19 pandemic has shifted the way chaplains can conduct spiritual care in hospitals. Instead of in-person meetings, now a large part of my day is spent being a liaison through phone and video calls between patients and their families. The hardest part is when a patient is nearing the end of life and their family is unable to visit them in person. If some of those family members have also been infected, they are also unable to be with each other. I've spent many hours conducting conference calls with such families.

shama mehta

One particularly difficult situation that I had to deal with revolved around a multi-generational family that all lived in the same house. Three adults of that family were infected with COVID and were hospitalized the same day at different locations. Because they all lived in the same house, the rest of the family, though asymptomatic, were quarantined in the home. The patient who was hospitalized at my location was actively dying, and I was paged to be of support to the family. I went to the patient's ward and made a conference call to the rest of the family, including those who were hospitalized and those at home, so they could say their goodbyes over speakerphone. It was heartbreaking to hear the pain in their voices as the family expressed themselves. After the expiration of the patient at my site, I continued to follow the other two patients upon their request.

The pandemic's impact does not end with the passing away of a patient; it has also changed the way funerals are conducted. One Hindu family who lost a loved one to Covid-19 were only able to see their deceased loved one through a video call, and only a very limited number were allowed to attend the funeral home before cremation. The pandit, contacted through video-call, conducted a modified version of recitation of mantras before the deceased was cremated. The immersion of ashes in water is still pending for some families I know.

In May, I lost my maternal grandfather in India. His death was not Covid-19 related, but the lockdown in India severely impacted the way his antyeshti samskara took place. As a family, we are still waiting for an opportunity to gather, both here and in India, to truly grieve. The inability to hold the traditional rites and rituals around death and dying has resulted in complicated grief situations. The healing and unfolding of the grieving process can only be addressed slowly over time.

The hospital staff has also been experiencing unprecedented levels of stress. The Spiritual Care Department developed printed cards with notes and quotes of encouragement to distribute to staff as a reminder of our presence. During shift changes, we have continued meeting individual staff members in a physically distant setting to allow them to share their stress. We pray, read sacred literature, and often simply listen. I am routinely told by staff that just seeing us making our rounds brings them comfort. The spiritual care team itself also gather periodically to share our emotions, the highs and lows of our work. We all pray together, each in our own way.

I have been at the bedside of patients in intensive care and critical care units, all gowned up, to support patients and staff as best I could. In normal times, spiritual care has depended largely on nonverbal communication—body language, smiles, holding a hand or even sharing hugs during a crisis. But now all that is hidden or prevented by masks, gowns and protocols. The pandemic does not allow any human touch, so the challenge has been to continue finding more words of strength, comfort and encouragement.

On a personal level, I find myself wanting to spend more time listening to devotionals and bhajans. I am thankful to be able to come home to my family, share my emotions with them and be grateful for our time together. We've always worshiped together, but now we are studying the Upanishads as a group. Satsangs have moved online and the pujas are being live streamed from the temples, but the inability to gather socially and worship as a community is affecting the mental health of many, creating issues which may still have to be addressed after the pandemic is over.

Shama Mehta is a Board Certified Chaplain through the Association of Professional Chaplains. She works as a hospital chaplain at Beaumont Health in Dearborn, Michigan. She holds a Master's in Pastoral Ministry (Interfaith Chaplaincy) and is also a Qualified Bilingual Medical Interpreter

realization set in that this was indeed a fast-spreading and deadly pandemic that wasn't going to be ending any time soon, our discussions at HAF shifted to asking what we as an advocacy organization could do to meet the needs of our members and the community at large. These discussions were also informed by the challenges we were personally facing—issues with focus, with balancing young children attending virtual school from home and trying to get work done, worries over uncertainty and the safety of the elders in our respective families.

"Shifting to online programming wasn't a huge leap for us. From the beginning, HAF has had a distributed workforce, with staff members working from home offices in several different states and time zones. Also, we already offered some online programming, such as our Dharma Ambassadors and Dharma Advocates programs (which are still being offered), and other webinars on topics related to our work. To these we added a seven-part 'Coping with Covid' series with a group of experts.

"Financial support is another matter: well over half of our fund-raising occurs at in-person events, usually an evening of sharing, entertainment and food. We've hosted one online so far and plan another for August."

Vineet Chander, Coordinator for Hindu Life at Princeton University and full-time Hindu chaplain, reports on how his counseling work has been impacted. "As I've experienced it, Hindu college students went through many of the same experiences as their non-Hindu counterparts... the shock, the disappointment, the anxiety/worry, and in some cases the feelings of displacement, isolation, loneliness, loss of community."

He explains that many of these students had relied on the Hindu activities on campus to keep them grounded in their faith, and suddenly they were home and no longer had these anchors unless they came from families with an active religious life. He has set up online activities to replace what was in person before, including one-on-one "virtual coffee dates" and group study programs on Zoom.

One unexpectedly successful program he developed is called "Shanti in Place," a weekly meditation and philosophic discussion. "The idea was to hold a short, guided meditation, and then give a brief talk on principles drawn from Hindu wisdom texts that might help us navigate anxiety in this time. The program has resonated with a lot of folks—students, grad students, staff, faculty, locals, some of whom identified as Hindu and others who didn't."

The international students experienced anxiety, frustration and helplessness—and sometimes anger and outrage—at their uncertain visa situation. The pandemic also brought up tensions around what is home for them—India, which they may want to go back to, but can't because of the shutdown, or America, where their prospects of staying permanently are suddenly less certain.

Vijay Pallod of Texas, a prominent activist in the Hindu community, has found it difficult to stay positive in the current situation, but his Hindu faith is helping him to not worry too much about the future. In normal times, he'd be attending two or three Hindu community meetings every week, but now everything has gone online. His family made the best of celebrating Holi at home. International Yoga Day, usually a big event in Houston, went virtual, with an appearance by Swami Ramdev of India.

The **Hindus of Greater Houston** have sponsored a Hindu Heritage Youth Camp every summer for the last 35 years. This year the camp was conducted virtually, with its organizers discovering ways to make it an even better camp. The community has also sponsored blood drives and distributed food to the needy.

Houston-area temples, closed in mid-March, opened again in June for about six weeks, but are now shut down again as cases have spiked in Texas. The daily pujas continue, many live-streamed. Hardest hit have been independent priests who would conduct worship at people's homes. Their income has dropped to near zero, and they cannot claim unemployment benefits.

India to New York: (left to right) The reduced Holi festivities this year included burning this effigy of the Covid-19 virus in Mumbai March 9; the Rath Yatra in Puri, Odisha, would normally have millions of people, but this year only 500 could pull each chariot, with no spectators allowed; Adda Indian Canteen in New York joined others to feed people in need

Impact on Home and Family

As part of developing this article, HINDUISM TODAY sent out a request for personal testimony on the pandemic's impact. We received a wide range of responses with informative and insightful observations which we share here with our readers.

Nepal-born **Dr. Sthaneshwar Timalsina**, Professor of Religious Studies at San Diego State University, had to replace his popular weekly satsang with friends at his home with an online version. "It took some time to find alternative ways to stay in touch with our extended family, but slowly we found new means to communicate. Digital platforms became active and colorful, and we confronted our distress with humor. Even though this shift is inherently dissatisfactory, as it lacks the quality of real corporeal presence, it has expanded the scope of our reach. Now our small home satsang gathering has become intercontinental, with members joining from all over the globe."

Murali Balaji of Philadelphia runs an education consulting service, Maruthi, from home. His wife, Devi Ramkisson, has a federal government job, so financially they have been OK.

The personal side took more work, as their baby was born just shortly before the pandemic started. "We've both been religious our whole lives, and we come from religious families, but the era of staying at home and social distancing has compelled us to lean even more into our faith, helped by technology. I've used FaceTime to do puja with my siblings and to perform my mother's annual rites with a priest. My wife's family is from Guyana, and Covid-19 has hit the Guyanese community in New York hard. We've been in contact with them to help as best we can."

Easan Katir of Davis, California, a financial planner and a local advocacy director for HAF, finds the pandemic has affected his religious life in a positive manner. He was already teaching religion classes online, but has increased the frequency at his students' request. Before the pandemic, he would see his guru (Bodhinatha Veylanswami) in person only once or twice a year, but now he attends online satsangs with him every Sunday—with 80 participants instead of the 20 that could attend in person. The local Concord Murugan Temple now conducts pujas online. As HAF's local advocacy director, he used to travel extensively to conduct training sessions. "Now, I conduct these classes online. Expenses are reduced dramatically, and people participate from all over the world."

Namrata Ragade of Oregon shares her experience: "As the pandemic spread and we all hunkered down, I soon observed it was easier to 'live in the moment.' I did not have to plan much ahead, because worldly activities had come to a halt. Next, my sense of hurry and need to get things done melted away. This mental freedom allowed me to deepen and enjoy my spiritual life.

"My religious group initiated weekly online Zoom satsangs, which have been a boon and allowed me to connect with other devotees in a way that had previously not been possible—a needed anchor in these uncertain times. The slower pace of life has allowed me to enjoy my walks in nature, cook new dishes, finish books partly read in the past, and explore my creative self, which had been hidden. This has brought forth a deeper joy and contentment, previously not experienced."

Karolina Goswami of Delhi, who has a popular YouTube channel on India, reports the pandemic has brought financial challenges, but also allowed her and her husband to meditate and exercise more, as well as engage in more social work. "I think the pandemic has shown us how fragile we all are. We may eventually have a good scientific solution for this virus, but there is no guarantee more new viruses will not emerge in the future. Therefore, our best defense is our own immune system, and we have learnt how much more we need to take care of it. India's timeless heritage—in terms of yoga, ayurveda and spirituality—comes to the rescue again."

Celebrations Adjust to the Pandemic

rudhransh sharma / sopa images/sipa usa/newscom

doorsarchan

Free Food for Those in Need

Vatsala Sperling (who often writes for HINDUISM TODAY) and her husband, Ehud, were visiting their Costa Rica farm when the shutdown started in mid-March. They've been stuck there ever since, in a rural area with limited access to stores. But they somehow have a 5G Internet connection, so Ehud can still run his publishing company and she is continuing her homeopathic practice. Their son Mahar is managing their local reforestation program.

The pandemic has altered Vatsala's perspective: "Is life just about work, a safe place to stay during lockdowns, and having enough to eat while the virus roams free? Every day of the four months of sheltering in Costa Rica, I have found that life is also about finding meaning in our existence, in developing ourselves as healthy individuals with relationships that nurture our longings for love, connection and togetherness.

"In order not to get overwhelmed by close proximity, we have created a system of personal boundaries. We do not listen to each other's work conversations, and we respect everyone's need for personal space and solitude, reading time and entertainment. One ground rule is that the 24/7 news channel is never turned on!

"In 'my time' I do yoga and walk ten miles daily on the dirt road in front of our farm, not encountering anyone. This helps me relish the present moment, relate to the sounds of a babbling brook, the breeze and the birds, watch specks of clouds covering the sun and realize that as in the sky, so in life: clouds are transient, sun is permanent. I worship what is permanent and feel grateful for the transient.

"I use my cell phone to hear M.S. Subbalakshmi singing Vishnu Sahasranamam and Suprabhatam. I sing aloud Hanuman Chalisa and many bhajans and shlokas that I had committed to memory while growing up in India. In the absence of a soundscape that connects me to my homeland, I have rediscovered Indian religious chants!

"Rural Costa Rica is 99% Catholic. I am the only Hindu here and have no Hindu communities and temples to go to. In the absence of external affirmations of my faith, I find that religion and spirituality boil down to what I carry within me and the Gods I can meditate on, visualize and sing about."

Aran Veylan of Edmonton, Canada, sent this heartfelt report: "The gently ringing bell pierces the early morning stillness and the soft light of a dipa lamp illumines Ganesha's expressive form. It is a familiar ritual performed in countless Hindu home shrines through the millennia, but in mid-March of 2020 it quite unexpectedly became the only show in town for many devotees as temples worldwide began a Covid-19 lockdown. At our local Maha Ganapathy temple in Edmonton, the priests continued to perform their daily worship, but no one was allowed to attend, and the temple doors were closed

"Suddenly we were on our own, isolated in our homes and no longer standing shoulder to shoulder with our fellow devotees enjoying light banter and prasadam while basking in the afterglow of the temple puja. Released from the tugs and pulls of worldly engagement, our life became simpler and less ramified within our family bubble, especially when we dialed back the media input to one or two sources once or twice a day. The mind quieted and meditation deepened. The continuity from each morning meditation to the next became more palpable.

"Finally, after about 108 days of isolation, doors creaked open. Passing through, we found ourselves in a "new normal" of temperature checks, questionnaires and mandatory masks. But we have emerged energized and strengthened by our spiritual retreat, enjoying once again the company of devotees and deeply appreciating the presence of Lord Ganesha in His temple on the banks of the Blackmud Creek."

Suhag Shukla of HAF said, "Personally, the biggest change in our lives has been the complete halt of travel. My husband and I travel quite a bit, for both work and leisure. We do enjoy it, but we had definitely underestimated the time that's swallowed up before and after the actual trip.

"With that and even local social engagements out of the picture, it's opened up more time to increase our focus on personal growth with more frequent Gita readings with a group of friends locally; weekly online lectures on Vedanta; going on long walks; eating at home more and trying new, healthy recipes, among other things.

"I've picked up Hindustani classical vocal again and am even trying my hand at some gardening, in spite of a black thumb. We miss the ability to visit friends and family, and worry about not being able to be there physically for our loved ones, should they need us. For now, though, we are deeply fortunate to have our health, a stable home, the virtual camaraderie of friends and family, and work that is deeply fulfilling."

The Food Dimension

The quarantine has another silver lining. People are discovering themselves as well as their families. Many have taken up new activities such as learning a new language or skill via the Internet. Cooking has become a passion with many families, who now have time to plan, experiment and rediscover the pleasures of executing traditional recipes with grandparents and children.

Hotels, motels and restaurants (many of them Indian-owned) have been among the hardest-hit industries, with shuttered doors, laid-off workers, no clients and no income. But restauranteurs soon started finding solutions and feeding people, quickly getting into delivery service so they could stay in business and keep their workers employed. Home deliveries have become a lifesaver for restaurants, employees and customers alike.

Surbhi Sahni, who owns Saar Bar and several other restaurants with her husband, chef Hemant Mathur, transformed the way she works by starting a new home food business called Tagmo, in which she offers a meal plan and delivers homemade Rajastani, Punjabi and Bengali meals, along with desserts. "We love feeding people the foods of India, and our weekly meals reflect how nutritious and diverse Indian food is. Each week we feature a different regional cuisine. We also offer gluten-free and vegetarian food."

They are doing what they can to help in the Covid-19 crisis: "Our community is our lifeline, so we offer a pay-it-forward meal donation to people in need and frontline medical workers. We're also partnering with NYC Department for the Aging to bring nourishing meals to the elderly."

Several restaurateurs are teaming up with nonprofits to feed the needy as well as health care workers. They have sought donations and city alliances to cook meals for food pantries. Chef Chintan Pandya and owner Rony Mazumdar of Adda Indian Canteen and Rahi have linked up with World Central Kitchen and Off Their Plate to provide hot Indian meals to hundreds of hungry people.

Vikas Khanna, the noted Michelin chef and host of MasterChef, has been working to feed millions in India during the pandemic. Khanna has been a chef at several New York restaurants, including Junoon, and is currently the chef of Kinara in Dubai. Quarantined in New York during the pandemic, he marshaled his generous spirit, his celebrity and his cell phone to start the Feed India campaign, connecting his food industry contacts with people in old age homes, hospitals and slums. In its first 100 days, the campaign delivered 20 million meals and dry rations. Using the power of social media, Khanna has linked thousands of fans and supporters to those struggling in India's small towns.

Due to high unemployment, food insecurity is one of the biggest challenges of the pandemic. M.R. Rangaswami, founder and chairman of the board of Indiaspora, a US-based nonprofit, wanted to do something immediately that would be high impact and scalable, and which would help both America and India. Indiaspora launched Chalo-Give for Covid-19, which has raised over a million dollars to feed the hungry. Donations are allocated to two major organizations, Feeding America and Goonj.

Conclusion

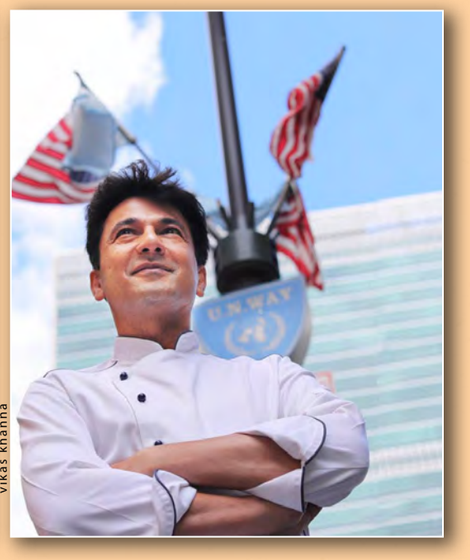
We've updated our pandemic statistics as we go to press at the beginning of August, but we cannot know what will happen next. We know the Spanish Flu abated after its first wave, but it returned again and again, striking down millions. Hopefully Covid-19 will not be so brutal, and we can all soon return to a more normal life, strengthened by insights gained during lockdown on the true meaning and purpose of life.

About the Author

Lavina Melwani is a New York-based writer for several international publications and regularly blogs at www.lassiwithlavina.com. Follow @lavinamelwani.

Doing Their Best in Trying Times

firdia lisnawati



vikas khanna

Care and caring: (below, left to right) checking temperatures in Bali as the island reopens; Chef Vikas Khanna has organized food relief programs in India while himself locked down in New York City; the Garg family in Delhi

One Delhi's Family Story

Surviving Together

As the virus rages on, we have a heartening story to share about a family who could not be torn apart—even by coronavirus. Dr. Mukul Garg lives in Delhi in a joint family of 17 family members in which all the adult family members became infected—yet all survived, even the elderly grandparents aged 90 and 84. Their story attracted considerable media attention.

Asked how he managed to stay positive under such dire circumstances, Dr. Garg told HINDUISM TODAY: "Staying positive was the only choice we had during that time. As we would say, we could either swim or sink, so we swam. My family members are deeply religious and spiritual. They relied on prayers to keep themselves up. I read a lot about the disease and realized it could be managed well if the symptoms were mild. So we had a blended outlook, religious and scientific, towards the disease. In times like these, living in a joint family was life saving for us. We benefited from each other's positive energy and relied heavily on each other for emotional and psychological support."

Asked how important it is to have faith in these difficult times, Garg had a deep answer: "I believe faith is a very subjective matter. For my parents and grandparents, God Is faith. In difficult times, they surrender themselves to God and believe whatever will happen, it will have a purpose by God.

"People of my generation pray, but we also have faith in science and medicine. We believe diseases can be treated, phenomena have scientific basis and coincidences can happen. And I think we have been extremely lucky to have beaten the odds. Plain lucky. Period."

Covid-19: The Nepal Experience

By Thomas Kelly, Nepal

Until late may, nepal was an outlier in south asia and the world for its low number and slow rise of confirmed Covid-19 cases. The country went into relatively strict lockdown on March 24, and cases remained under 1,000 up until May 28. But since then, cases have increased over tenfold as tens of thousands of migrant workers began returning home from India, which eased its internal travel restrictions on June 1, and as Nepal began a phased reopening on June 15. Nepal's case tally is over 12,000 today, although the death rate remains anomalously low—fewer than forty people have died. This may be partly explained by the fact that, so far, most of the infected have been youth. As I write, Nepal, with its 50% recovery rate and 0.2% fatality rate, is a sharp contrast to the United States, whose 3,600,000 confirmed cases and 138,000 deaths produce a fatality rate of 4.1% and a recovery rate of 44.4%.

Why are Nepal's numbers of Covid-19 so few? Many reasons have been offered: its tropical climate, protection offered by the tuberculosis vaccine Bacillus Calmette-Guérin (BCG), exposure to malaria, and a weaker strain of the virus in the Indian subcontinent. Fifteen global health and infectious disease experts, researchers and epidemiologists all warn that there is little scientific evidence to back most of these claims. "There is currently no data to suggest better immunity among South Asian populations, no reason to believe the potentially small benefit of hot, humid weather will even be visible against a backdrop of a nearly 100%-susceptible population," said Jessie Abbate, an infectious disease and epidemiology research scientist with the French Laboratory for Translational Research on HIV and Infectious Diseases. "There is no evidence of any functional mutations resulting in different 'strains' of the virus anywhere (let alone strains with different rates of virulence), and a recent study has shown no correlation between BCG vaccination and Covid-19 susceptibility." Demographics with large youth populations, however, is suspected of helping curb the virus's impact in the region.

According to a recent paper in The Lancet, the world's richest countries accounted for more than 90% of all reported Covid-19 deaths by early May. Demographic data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reveal that age is one of the biggest risk factors for the disease. In the U.S., patients 65 years and older have accounted for 80% of deaths from Covid-19. The Indian subcontinent, meanwhile, has a relatively young population, with a median age of 27.6 years. This, experts say, is one of the more reasonable explanations for the low number of Covid-19 infections and fatalities in South Asia.

The lockdown, of course, hit the most marginalized the hardest, and soon the borders of Nepal were surging with migrant workers in India fleeing home with no income, no place to stay and no transport home after India's five-hour warning of lockdown on March 25th. Unfortunately Nepal had locked its borders—to its own people—the day before.

For many, the lockdown in Asia was a call for retreat, an ideal time to recite japa or mantra and honor the family Deity of the home. During lockdown no one was allowed out to offer rituals at local temples. Early morning and evening, Kathmandu residents would rush for essential food supplies and a few would stop at temples for prayer. The Nepal government gave permission for only 25 pilgrims at a time to enter the holy Pashupatinath Temple, and they must honor social distancing. In a display of kindness, guards, staff and volunteers are making sure cows, monkeys and birds on the temple grounds don't starve during the country's lockdown, which has stopped the crowds that used to daily line up to feed the animals. "We are trying to make sure that these animals are not starving and they are taken care of," said Pradeep Dhakal, an official of the Pashupatinath Development Trust, which controls the temple and surrounding areas.

Ritual gatherings of Hindus have suffered immensely during lockdown. The first heavily affected Hindu festival was the spring festival of Holi, celebrated with caution even before governments started enforcing lockdowns. In Nepal, Bisket Jatra in Bhaktapur was cancelled and Nepalis were locked in their homes for Chait Desain and Nepali New Year. Even the Indra Jatra festival in September looks uncertain.

Key festivals have persisted, with appropriate social distancing. On April 10th, amidst the nationwide lockdown, the Mahasana (bathing ceremony) of Rato Machhindranth and the related Kumari Puja were completed quietly in Nepal's city of Patan. The tradition of pulling the chariot of Machhindranath was begun in 879 ce by King Narendra Dev and is believed to bring good health and good luck. That is why it was considered essential to conduct this festival even within a pandemic—as many here believed the pandemic was caused by people's sins.

By Hari Bansh Jha, Nepal

Before the lockdown started, there was a sense of panic among the people here. They feared consumer items would disappear from the market. Therefore, there was a buying spree for essential commodities. However, there was no such shortage of essential commodities in the local market, though the public transport services remained closed during the lockdown. Except for the shops selling essential food items, all other shops were closed. Movement of people was restricted. The Indo-Nepal border was sealed, and the cross-border movement of people between the two countries came to a standstill.

As compared to several other places, there have been fewer cases of Covid-19 in Janakpur, where I live in Nepal. For this, the credit goes not so much to the government, but to the Hindu lifestyle. We live mostly in the open space and they avoid shaking hands with each other. Such a practice is itself a form of social distancing.

The Hindu system of cooking food is another factor that largely checked the spread of Covid-19. Hindus mostly eat well-cooked food rather than raw food. Also, the different spices that we use in cooking have medicinal values. Such factors largely saved us from the Covid-19 disease, in my opinion.

I, along with my family, remain largely confined to our home during the entire lockdown period. Rarely, I go to my farm during the morning hours, which previously had been my daily practice. But now I am enjoying the quiet. I find myself more relaxed now than ever before in my life. The pollution is much reduced, as there are fewer transportation services on the roads. Because of the improvement in environment, even Mount Everest, the highest peak of the Himalayas, can be seen from several areas of Nepal's Terai region and even from the adjacent Indian territory, which was unthinkable before. New birds have been observed recently, and for some reason, the amount of rainfall has increased. All such developments in nature are soothing to the heart.

During the lockdown period, I have concentrated on reading religious texts like the Devi Bhagwant Mahapurana, as well as the Shiva Mahapurana. Also, I am more regular in meditation. Even though people have been suffering a lot from Covid-19, it has allowed self-realization and spiritual progress to grow faster. Such a time for inner striving comes after centuries, and the people in our generation are lucky to have it.

A quiet Kathmandu: (left to right) Kalo Bhairava temple, Durbar Square; devotees at the Bhairava shrine; (above) selfie taking with the cows and dogs on New Road shopping area; (below) masked street vendors in Asontole Market; Ram Prasad (standing) receives prasad on the first year anniversary of his father's passing, at Pashupatinath Temple, across from the temple's cremation gates

Nepal's Central Religious Sites Nearly Vacant

all photos thomas kelly

HEALTH

On Point with Ayurveda in Italy

How a neuroscientist frustrated with the allopathic approach to health became one of Europe's foremost champions of Ayurveda

By Sudarshan Ramabadran, Chennai

I was charmed by dr. antonio morandi's presentation during the UN's World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development" ("World Culture Day" in India) event held online by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations on May 21, 2020. As he spoke on the contemporary relevance of Ayurveda, his love for India, Hinduism, Vedic science and Ayurveda itself was self-evident. Trained as a neuroscientist, he had worked three decades in that field in the US and Italy before the limitations of modern medicine became too much for him. Two decades ago, he turned to Ayurveda. Today, after lengthy training in India, he heads Ayurvedic Point, a school and clinic in Italy, and is president of the Italian Scientific Society for Ayurvedic Medicine.

Dr. Morandi's passions coincide precisely with our work at the India Foundation's Center for Public Diplomacy and Soft Power, as he exemplifies one of our major goals. We have identified Ayurveda as one of India's civilizational strengths. As such, we are advocating the creation of a World Ayurveda Day, along the lines of the International Yoga Day, which likewise celebrates one of India's key soft powers. Partners in this effort to create a World Ayurveda Day include Rajiv Vasudevan, head of AyurVAID Hospitals; Dr. Rammanohar, research director of Amrita School of Ayurveda; JIVA Ayurveda; and 60 organizations in 32 countries. Our pilot initiative in 2019 was endorsed by India's Ministry of Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy (AYUSH) and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations.

Guiding our thinking in part was a 2017 study by the Confederation of Indian Industry, which warned policy makers and practitioners not to let Ayurveda be appropriated by other countries—as has happened with yoga—but rather to keep it firmly attached to its roots. Dr. Morandi is an excellent example of how Ayurveda can be successfully transplanted to a European country with full authenticity.

ayurvedic point

One Doctor's Journey to Ayurveda

The word best used to describe Dr. Morandi would be inquisitive. All his life, he has intended to understand the functioning of the mind. This drove his study of neurology and his career as a conventional medical practitioner. But he did not find there the answers he was looking for.

"Modern medicine dealt with health science in a fragmented way. I felt I needed a different epistemological approach, one that could give me a global world view and could link elements which were considered by modern medicine to be separate, unrelated. Thus, I started to explore other systems of knowledge. After some consideration of diverse areas, in both traditional and non-conventional medicines, I found my pathway to Ayurveda," he explains.

He has studied Ayurveda in India and from Indian teachers in Europe, and continues his study on a daily basis. His principal teachers have been Maharishi Vaidya Jaya Ramanuja Raju and the late Ashtavaidyan Alathiyoor Narayanan Nambi. He maintains close connections with Raju and with Nambi's family.

He has taken Swami Joythimayananda, a Sri Lankan Tamil saint, as his spiritual guru and considers him a great master of yoga and Ayurveda. Morandi recounts he initially found it difficult to accept spirituality, owing to his background in neurology and attitude as a modern physician. But soon he realized that spirituality enabled him to look beyond those limitations. "In following Swamiji, I began to understand who I really am."

Inspired by Swamji, Morandi established Ayurvedic Point in 2001, with cofounder Carmen Tosto. Tosto studied Ayurveda with the Nambi and Ashtavaidyan Thaikkattu Mooss families. In the process, both she and Dr. Morandi embraced Hinduism. Carmen first met Morandi through Swami Joythimayananda with whom she was also studying Ayurveda. "My goal and dream," she said, "had always been to promote the integration between yoga and Ayurveda. Morandi and I began to work together by founding Ayurvedic Point, with a twofold objective: the care of patients and the creation of a training school in Ayurveda operated with respect to the tradition. Our experiences in India with our teachers guide and inspire our steps to this very day."

Ayurveda for Today's World

"Challenges to modern medicine are fast emerging," Morandi observes. "There's an increasing disease burden for which the pharmaceutical industry is failing to produce cures."

Ayurveda's person-centered approach is mainly concerned with the maintenance of health, the prevention rather than the treating of disease. Because it looks beyond the purely structural and material view and considers life as a whole, Morandi believes it has much to offer contemporary health science. This is exactly, he points out, the approach of the 21st-century physicists who are attempting to include the phenomenon of consciousness in their understanding of the universe.

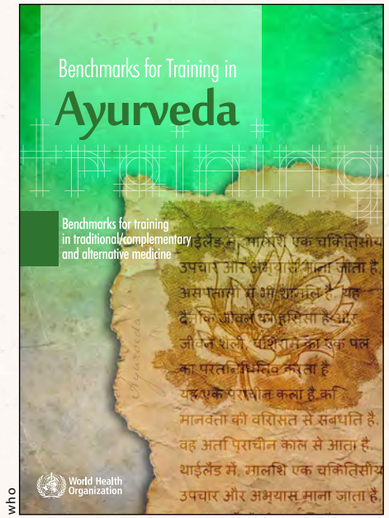
He explains, "The nature of the individual is a parameter on which the whole system's scale is tuned. Health is resilience, or the capacity of adaptation of an organism to the environmental variations. Ayurvedic diagnosis is based on the definition of the prakriti, the inborn psycho-physical constitutional health state of the patient. Its biomedical validity has recently received wide confirmation from genomic studies. Health is an individual, relative state, and prakriti explains the individual susceptibility to particular diseases. Ayurveda promotes a model of positive health, thinking, feelings and general state of well being."

But Ayurveda is more than just health. Morandi believes Ayurveda reflects all the darshanas (schools) of philosophy in which Indian thought is rooted. It is itself a full-fledged knowledge system, only one component of which is medicine. In fact, states Morandi, "I don't like to use the term Ayurvedic Medicine, because it is very limitative and reflects the deterministic model of thinking, which is typical of the modern Western world. The Western system of thought is based on objects and that everything must be well defined and have clear boundaries to be understood." The holistic knowledge system of Ayurveda, on the other hand, provides a representation of reality within which we can define our most appropriate lifestyle, one in perfect alignment with nature and with the possibility of enjoying an ideal state of health.

Ayurveda Enables Sustainable Living

Morandi's holistic approach to Ayurveda mirrors that of the Ayurveda Day Pledge developed by our team in India: "I pledge to make Ayurveda an integral part of my daily life and thereby enable good health and well-being for myself, my family, and my community, in harmony with nature." This was accepted by all participating countries and affirms the importance that Ayurveda attaches to coexisting with nature.

Living in harmony with nature has been a consistent theme in the various conferences on Ayurveda Morandi has organized over the past decade. Ayurveda helps one know nature through the eyes of nature, thus it is one of the best enablers of sustainable living. It is a science of perfect ecology. Morandi sums it up aptly: "In the West, ecology is the study of environmental balances, but always considers man as an external observer. In Ayurveda the ecology includes man and it is an autopoiesis mechanism." Autopoiesis means "a system capable of reproducing and maintaining itself," which nature should be if man, in particular, respects his place in it.



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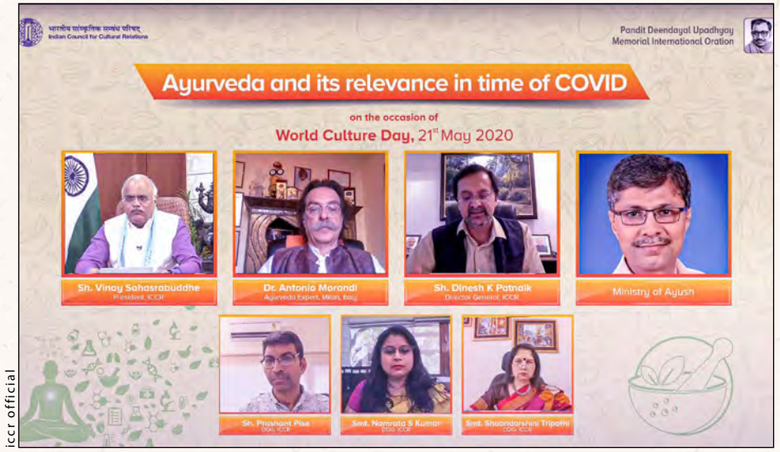

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Ayurveda, Italian style: (clockwise from left) Dr. Morandi and Carmen Tosto, cofounders of Ayurvedic Point; cover of the World Health Organization's 61-page guideline for Ayurveda; the May IJst online conference on Ayurveda and Covid-19 to mark World Culture Day; class at SNA Oushadhasala, India

all photos: ayurvedic point

At the clinic: (counterclockwise from top left) learning proper footwork; preparing for the shirodhara oil treatment; ingredients at the ready; demonstrating the shirodhara technique; eye treatment; well-equipped clinic room

Ayurveda's Legal Status in Italy

Morandi has worked diligently to increase the acceptance of Ayurveda in Italy. Currently, he explains, Ayurveda is considered as a "medical act" by the Italian Federation of Medical Doctors board. By medical act is meant any activity which deals with the health of people and involves diagnosis and prescription. In Italy the practice of ayurvedic diagnosis and prescription can be performed only by a certified modern medical doctor who also has a certified training in Ayurveda—a significant constraint.

No traditional form of medicine has yet been duly and fully recognized by the Italian government. But Morandi is positive there is growing interest in academic, scientific and clinical worlds towards Ayurveda in particular. For example, he recounts, "We have just completed a project in collaboration with the University of Milan, Departments of Neurology and Clinical Psychology, on Duchenne muscular dystrophy." In addition, he is actively involved with the University of Milan's Faculty of Medicine to develop an elective course, "Introduction to Ayurveda," to expose fifth- and sixth-year medical students to the principles and vision of Ayurveda.

Programs at Ayurvedic Point

Morandi and Tosto founded Ayurvedic Point in 2001 to help manifest this vision of Ayurveda in Italy. The activities of Ayurvedic Point comprise three key pillars: an educational and cultural sector; the school of Ayurveda; and a clinical and research sector. Since 2007, Ayurvedic Point has been awarded the ISO 9001 certification of quality for its teaching activities.

The School of Ayurveda offers two four-year postgraduate courses, one for physicians and one for technicians. Each course follows a comprehensive set of training standards in Ayurveda produced by the World Health Organization (bit.ly/WHO-Ayurveda).

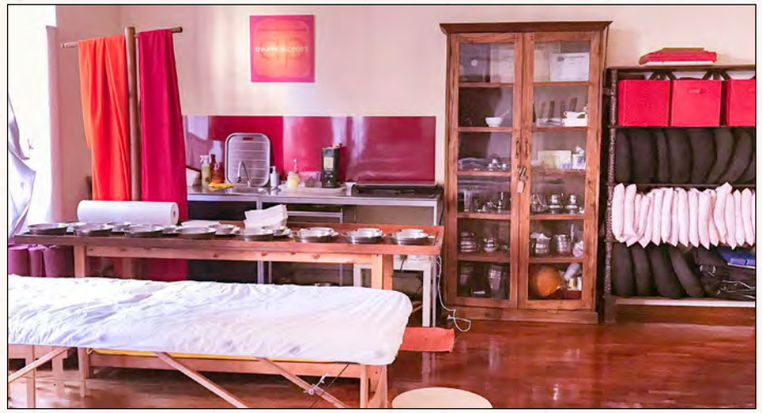
In addition, Ayurvedic Point offers in-depth clinical research programs in collaboration with the Ayurveda Research and Education Institute of SNA Oushadhasala, one of India's leading producers of ayurvedic products.

Students at Ayurvedic Point can earn credits under the Italian Governmental Program of Continuous Education in Medicine. The course for technicians is also recognized by Accredia, a private, nonprofit organization recognized by Italy and the European Union which publishes voluntary technical standards, including UNI norm 11756:2019, the standard for Ayurveda. Morandi says it has taken six years of hard work to accomplish this much, and still Ayurveda has no official recognition in Italy as a medical system. In general, he explains, alternative medicine contends with political and economic interests and an overall hostile environment.

Ayurvedic Point's teaching board currently comprises fifteen teachers, ten of whom are medical doctors with documented clinical, research and teaching experience. Coordinating the faculty are two medical doctors and a certified Ayurveda technician who is qualified both in India and Italy.

Ginevra Franzoso graduated as an Ayurveda technician in 2019 after four years of study and now works at the Milan clinic. He continues to be a student of the joint SNA/Ayurvedic Point program in India and Italy. Franzoso's immensely grateful for his training and, as he puts it, "the opportunity to meet Ayurveda in its most traditional and purest sense." "My life," he states, "has profoundly changed. As I have travelled down this path, I have understood how strong and vital this ancient knowledge is and its impact on all of us."

Over 100 students are currently enrolled in the school. In the 19 years since its founding, 400 students have completed the four-year course either as doctors (who necessarily are licensed allopaths in Italy) or technicians in Ayurveda. With the help of SNA Oushadhasala they have developed a further diploma program, "specialist in panchakarma." There are two courses of study, one four years for doctors and the other three years for technicians. Six hundred students



are in the process of study or have graduated. In addition to these formal programs, 3,000 people have attended academic seminars and received a certificate of attendance. All these teachings are performed under the ISO 9001 certification of quality.

Ayurvedic Point operates outpatient medical centers which so far have treated more than 15,000 patients from Italy and the wider European Union.

The school conducts advanced seminars on a monthly basis. In addition, it develops research projects in collaboration with Italian and international academic institutions. Periodically they organize major conferences on Ayurveda. Two have been held in Milan, in 2009 and 2016, and one in Thrissur. Each attracted about 300 delegates, mostly from the European Union.

Dr. Morandi reports, "Our main vision of the conferences over the years has been 'Ayurveda: The Meaning of Life,' with a focus on the relationship between awareness, environment and health. Each event produced large echoes in the worlds of Ayurveda and modern science. Prof. Brian Josephson, Nobel laureate in physics, opened the first congress in 2009. These events witness participation by high-level policy makers from both India and Italy, including the vice president of Italy's Health Commission, members of the Senate of the Italian Republic, India's consul general for Italy, joint secretaries and advisors of India's AYUSH Ministry."

A Broader Vision Going Forward

In his decades of studying and serving Ayurveda, Morandi has found it possible to address, understand and deal with any subject through the principles and vision of Ayurveda. He explains: "When we encounter Ayurveda, a deep part is activated within us that makes us feel connected with everything and everyone. This gives us the possibility to manage and overcome the perceived limitations of material reality. Through Ayurveda, it is therefore possible to attract and bring together interests of various kinds. Ayurveda is never coercive in nature."

Because of this inherent quality, the India Foundation's Center for Soft Power is committed to showcasing the strength of Ayurveda as yet another gift from India to the world. According to Morandi, the first Ayurveda Day in 2019 was a milestone that generated a tsunami of awareness and spread organically throughout the world. But he advises that consistent coordination among practitioners and ambassadors of Ayurveda is essential for widespread dissemination of the practice. Also required is consistent worldwide exchange of the latest developments and research findings. Ultimately, Morandi sees the creation of a World Interactive Ayurveda Network.

Although the WHO is the UN-designated nodal organization for international dissemination of traditional systems of medicine and their integration with current practices, Morandi points out it has not yet made much progress on this front. He believes the promotion of Ayurveda can counteract the present lack of focus and coordination among practitioners and facilitate a broader integration of traditional medical systems overall.

Looking Ahead

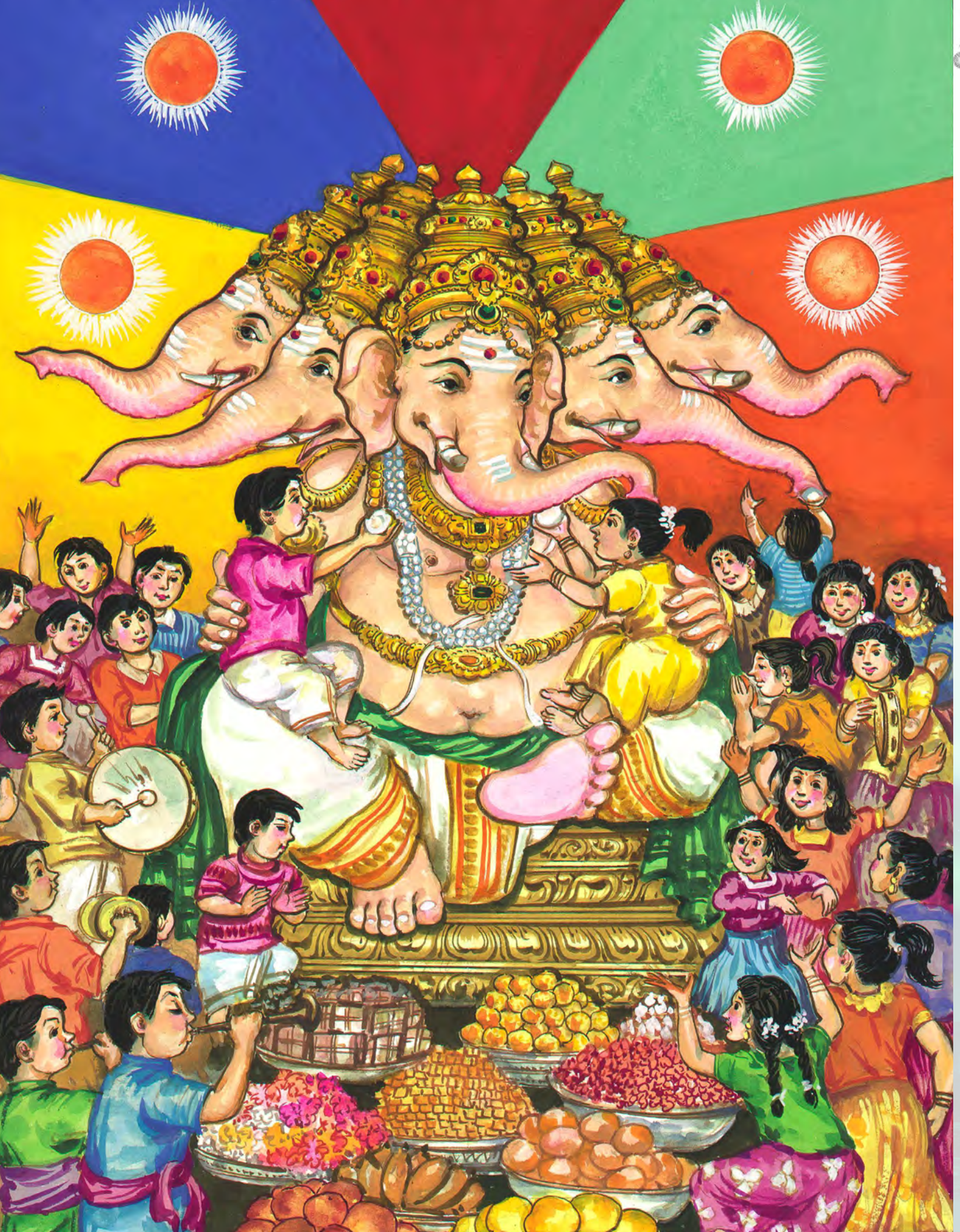
In his communications and writings, Morandi categorically states that India and the world must firmly anchor Ayurveda to its original tradition in order to assure its future. He believes humanity's traditional knowledge is the only path to finding our true nature and the meaning of life. We must establish a seamless dialogue between Ayurveda and modern medicine in order to successfully advance medicine and the other sciences.

Morandi foresees a global expansion of Ayurveda in the next ten years. Not only the products and techniques, but the knowledge system itself will resonate with the global populace. But he is well aware that any effort to concretize and legitimize the benefits of Ayurveda will need social will from elected leaders in each country, and not just from Ayurveda ambassadors, doctors and enthusiasts.

For this to happen, he believes existing scientific support for Ayurveda should be brought to the forefront. This should be done with the clear understanding that Ayurveda has its own epistemology and cannot be explained in and through a Western scientific lens or be bent and distorted to satisfy the models of modern medicine. "If modern medicine and Ayurveda can meet in order to enable greater stimulus and forge a new paradigm of development in the field of medicine and science, it could benefit humanity at large in the future," Moraldi concludes.

I, for one, am fully convinced Ayurveda is in safe hands with such a seeker as Morandi. After his deep study of science and long practice of its tenets, he realized its limitations and turned to Ayurveda to understand the real potential of life. His sincerity is evident. India, he has stated, is both the mother and the future of all civilizations. He speaks of the vision and mission of Ayurveda with a childlike enthusiasm, and asserts confidently that based on a thorough, evidence-based approach, Italy will soon see its way to recognize this holistic form of medicine.

Sudarshan Ramabadran is a Senior Research Fellow and the Administrative Head at India Foundation's Center for Public Diplomacy and Soft Power.



EDUCATIONAL INSIGHT

Pancha Ganapati

The Family Festival of Giving

from the teachings of satguru sivaya subramuniyaswami

Think of Pancha Ganapati as the Hindu Christmas, a modern winter holiday full of family-centered happenings, but with five days of gifts for the kids, not just one. From December 21 to 25, Hindus worship Lord Ganesha, the elephant-headed Lord of culture and new beginnings. Family members work to mend past mistakes and bring His blessings of joy and harmony into five realms of their life, a wider circle each day: family, friends, associates, culture and religion.

Pancha Ganapati is a modern Hindu festival honoring the Five-Faced (pancha means "five") Maha Ganapati—Lord of Categories. It falls during the 30 days of the ancient Markali Pillaiyar home festival and lasts for five days—from December 21 through 25.

The winter solstice has always been a festive time of year in all countries and religions—among Hindus especially, for it this a traditional season for the worship of Lord Ganesa. In Hindu Vedic astrology this time of year marks the end of the sun's southward movement and the beginning of its movement north, the change from dakshinayana to uttarayana.

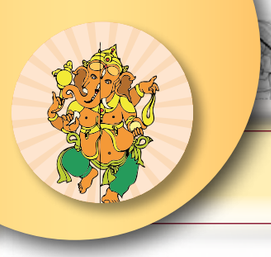
Since most Hindus do not celebrate Christmas, they may find it difficult to relate in a meaningful way to those who do. Their children are often embarrassed when asked why they do not receive gifts on December 25. Adults feel the need to give gifts and mail greeting cards as well as receive them from their relatives, neighbors, friends and business associates. Pancha Ganapati is a Hindu expression of this natural season of worship, gift-giving and celebration.

December 25 and the days that precede and follow it have become a special time of year for people of many religions, and for the non-religious as

TOSHADEVI NATARAJA AND FAMILY

well. In fact, this season has become so universally observed that it is popularly considered a secular, cultural holiday in addition to its special observance by certain religions. Recognizing this fact, the US Supreme Court ruled that Christmas is a secular, social holiday. This is because it has become a time for everyone to rejoice, give and share their abundance, each in their own way.

Pancha Ganapati is celebrated as a contemporary home observance. It is not a temple utsava.



FESTIVAL DAY 1, Dec. 21, Yellow

Nurturing Harmony Among Family Members

The family *sadhana* for the first day of Pancha Ganapati is to create a vibration of love and harmony among immediate family members. The day begins early, with the entire family working together to design and decorate the shrine with traditional symbols, rangoli, lamps and more. A grand puja is performed invoking the spirit of Pancha Ganapati in the home. The sadhana of the day begins with the family sitting together for the purpose of easing any strained relationships that have arisen during the year. They make amends one with another for misdeeds performed, insults given, mental pain and injuries caused and suffered. Once forgiveness is offered to all by one and all, they speak of one another's good qualities and resolve that in the days ahead they will remember the futility of trying to change others and the practicality of changing oneself to be the silent example for all to witness. Gifts are then exchanged and placed unopened before Pancha Ganapati. Family harmony is important to all Hindus, and this sadhana is taken most seriously. Done well, it can heal the past and brighten the family's future.

What Happens on Each of the Five Days?

Each day, using lights, festoons and cloth, the shrine is decorated in the color of the day. Before the puja, a tray of sweets, fruits and incense is prepared and offered to Lord Ganapati, ideally by the children. Chants and songs are sung in His praise. After the worship, diverse sweets are shared by one and all. Each day colorfully wrapped gifts are given to the children, who place them before Pancha Ganapati to open on the fifth day. The adults receive gifts, too! Some families keep a five-faced murti just for this festival and on each day worship one of the five faces of Pancha Ganapati.

What Is the Nature of this Celebration?

Pancha Ganapati includes outings, picnics, feasts and exchange of cards and gifts with relatives, friends and business associates. A special temporary shrine is created in the main living room or the shrine room and festively decorated. At the center is placed a large wooden or bronze statue of Lord Panchamukha ("five-faced") Ganapati, a form of Ganesha. Any large picture or statue of Ganesha will also do. Each morning the children decorate and dress Him in the color of that day, representing one of His five rays of energy, or shaktis.

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FESTIVAL DAY 2, Dec. 22, Blue

Harmony Among Friends & Neighbors

The family sadhana for the second day of Pancha Ganapati is to create a vibration of love and harmony among neighbors, relatives and close friends and present them with heartfelt gifts. Members of the family offer apologies and clear up any misunderstandings that exist beyond the home, among friends and neighbors. Relatives and friends in far-off places are written to or called, forgiveness is sought, amends made and tensions released. Gifts received are placed unopened before Pancha Ganapati.

Daddy, Do We Get Toys for Christmas, too?

The above question was heard in so many Hindu homes in the West that in 1985 Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, founder of HINDUISM TODAY magazine, conceived of and introduced the home festival of Pancha Ganapati. With five days of gift-giving at the time of year when Christmas is widely celebrated, it offers Hindu families, especially in the West, a meaningful way to participate in the holiday season without compromising their Hindu values. Their children receive and give gifts just as do their non-Hindu friends. Adults can fulfill the season's social custom of sharing gifts and greeting cards, as well as accepting them from relatives, neighbors, friends and business associates. Hindus celebrate Pancha Ganapati in a distinctly Hindu way, without Christmas trees, Santa Claus or symbols of other religions. Greeting cards are Indian in design and content, conveying Hindu wisdom from scripture and saints. Hindu music and bhajans are sung, rather than Christmas carols.

Who Is Lord Ganesha?

Lord Ganesha is the benevolent, elephant-faced God, revered all over the world. Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami wrote in his book *Loving Ganesha*, "Among all the wonderful Hindu Deities, Lord Ganesha is the closest to the material plane of consciousness, most easily contacted and most able to assist us in our day-to-day life and concerns. Worship of Lord Ganesha leads the devotee most naturally to the other great Gods.…Lord Ganesha is a Mahadeva, a Great God, created by Lord Siva to assist souls in their evolution. He is the elephant-faced Patron of Art and Science, the Lord of Obstacles and Guardian of Dharma, the first son of Siva. His will prevails as the force of righteousness, the embodiment of Siva's karmic law in all three worlds."

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FESTIVAL DAY 3, Dec. 23, Red

Harmony Among Associates and the Public

The family sadhana for the third day is to create a vibration of love and harmony among business associates, the casual merchant and the public at large. This is the day for presenting gifts to merchants and customers and honoring employers and employees with gifts and appreciation. An important effort on this day is the settling of all debts and disputes. Gifts received are placed unopened before the Deity.

How Is the Home Decorated?

Lord Ganesha is depicted as coming from the forest; therefore, pine boughs, bamboo, palm fronds or banana leaves may be used for decoration. Durva grass, sugarcane, garlands of limes, vadai or sweet modaka enhance the home shrine. Flashing lights, oil lamps and colorful cloth and hanging ornaments are often added. After each puja, the sweets prepared for the day are given to the children.

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Kesari Sweet

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

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

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

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

Crispy Vadai

Spicy donuts to enjoy as a snack or with a festive meal

Preparation time: 4 hours
Cooking time: 40 minutes
Serves: 6-8
Equipment: A small wok or round-bottomed pan, a ladle and a serving dish.

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Ingredients
1 cup urad dal, 1 onion, 2 green chilies, curry leaves, ghee, salt

Method
1. Soak the dal in water for 4 hours.
2. Drain and grind to a coarse paste.
3. Mince the onion and chilies.
4. Add onion, chilies, salt and curry leaves to the dal. Stir well.
5. To make each vadai, roll a small piece of dough into a ball and flatten it. Vadais are usually about 2 1/2" in diameter. You may use your thumb to make a hole in the middle, like a donut.
6. Deep fry the vadai in ghee until golden (about 5 minutes).

FESTIVAL DAY 4, Dec. 24, Green — Harmony through Cultural Arts

The sadhana of day four is to draw forth the vibration of joy and harmony that comes from music, art, drama and the dance. Family, relatives and friends gather for satsanga to share and enjoy their artistic gifts. Children dance and sing. Poems are recited. Plays are presented. When the program is over, all sit together before Pancha Ganapati, Patron of the Arts and Guardian of Culture, discussing Hindu Dharma and making plans to bring more cultural refinements into each household. More gifts are placed before Lord Ganapati.

The Three Worlds Of Existence

"Hindu scripture speaks of three worlds of existence: the physical plane, the subtle or astral plane, and the causal plane. The physical plane is the world we perceive with our five senses, the realm of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching. Within the physical plane exists the subtle or astral plane, the mental-emotional sphere. We function in this realm through thought and feeling and reside there fully during sleep and after death. Deep within the astral plane exists the causal plane—the world of light and blessedness, the highest of heavenly regions, extolled in the scriptures of all faiths. This is the superconscious world, where the Gods and highly evolved souls abide. It is this world that we seek to access through deep meditation and through temple worship, which opens a channel for the Gods' blessings. This most refined realm is not distant. It exists within us as the abode of our divine Self, our pure immortal soul being."

Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami

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FESTIVAL DAY 5, Dec. 25, Orange

Harmony among All Three Worlds

The family sadhana for the final day of Pancha Ganapati is to bring forth love and harmony within all three worlds. Because of sadhanas well performed during the first four days, the family is now more open and aware of Ganesa's grace, and their love for Him is overflowing. On this day the entire family experiences an outpouring of affection and tranquility from the great God Himself. His blessings fill the home and the hearts of everyone within it, inspiring them anew for the coming year. This exchange of affection between all members of the family and the Lord is invoked and perpetuated through the day by performing five special pujas. These five pujas to Pancha Ganapati (see sidebar below) solicit help from His devas in the home and establish the patterns for improvement in family life. The overflowing love that is felt today will inspire generosity in the year to come, bringing abundance and good fortune in return. All gifts received during the day are placed unopened before Pancha Ganapati.

A Concluding Prayer

Recite these short prayers after the final puja on the fifth day of Pancha Ganapati. May His blessings flood your home with bounteous joy. May you and your family experience His boons of abundance, dharma, culture and sensitivity to the feelings of others that He will grant in the months and years ahead.

Om bhur bhuvah suvah
Ekadantaya vidmahe

O divine beings of all three worlds, let us bring our minds to rest in the darshan of Him who has one tusk.

Vakratundaya dhimahi

Let us meditate upon Him who has the form of an elephant with a curved trunk.

Tanno dantih prachodayat

May He guide us always along the right path.

Jai Ganesha!
Jai Panchamukha Ganapati!
Jai Ganesha! Jai! Jai!
Aum shanti, shanti, shantih, Aum.

Victory to the Lord of Celestials! Hail to the Five-Faced Lord of ganas! Victory to the Lord of Celestials! Hail to Ganesha. Jai, jai. Aum, peace, peace, peace, Aum.

The Five Pujas and Opening of Gifts

The first puja is at 6am. Before the puja, personal offering trays are prepared and placed before His shrine. After the puja, each one gives verbal testimony about prayers that were answered during the past year. Hearing testimonies strengthens the faith of everyone. Then vows of sacrifice can be verbally made. Vows should improve the quality of the life of the individual, such as giving up smoking or swearing or correcting other harmful habits. The second puja is at 9am, and the third at 12 noon. The fourth puja is held at 3pm. The fifth and final puja at 6pm is the long-awaited time. The five sadhanas have been completed. Peace, love and harmony among everyone has been restored. After the puja and before the great feast that follows, Lord Panchamukha Ganapati Himself gives His final darshana and prasada to one and all. Gifts are distributed and joyously opened. Happy children. Happy parents. Happy God.

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ENVIRONMENT

Bathing the Gods in Bottled Water?

Our holy rivers are in dire need of our help to reduce poaching and pollution and allow us safe access to their bountiful gifts

BY TULASI SRINIVAS

What if you woke up one morning and the pristine, sacred river where you bathed your Gods had become an oily, noxious-smelling sewer? What if the sacred water started to melt the murtis of the Gods? What if it was undrinkable? What would you do?

Every day at dawn in India's high-tech city of Bengaluru, the 20-year-old priest Srikara Sudarshana of the Gali Anjaneya Temple turns his back on the sacred Vrishabhavathi River just beyond the temple walls and instead fills buckets and bottles with water from the temple's high-end filtration system. The water, drawn from a deep well on the temple grounds, is not potable until run through the filtration system, which produces nearly 265 gallons of clean water per day. Sudarshana uses this for the daily ritual bath of Lord Hanuman. He adds camphor and tulasi (holy basil) to transform it into tirtha, or holy water, for the devotees to consume.

emerson today

The Gali Anjaneya Temple, often featured in Lonely Planet-style guidebooks as a "must see" historic site, is dedicated to the Monkey God, Hanuman, also known as Anjaneya, son of the Wind God, Gali. The temple is covered with sculptured friezes of stories from the ancient Hindu epic, the Ramayana. Built in 1452 on a lush island in the Vrishabhavathi River by Sri Vyasa Raja, a woodland sage, philosopher and master teacher who was enamored of the river's grandeur and importance as a source of water for the region, the temple honors the way the Vrishabhavathi has animated life through myth, ritual performance and ecological presence.

But now, that lush island is a mere memory. The channel that formed one arm of the river is now a highway—a maelstrom of trucks, cycles, bullock carts, buses, cars and scooters that swirl past the temple entrance, horns honking and engines revving all day and night. The other arm of the river is a concrete channel where stinking wastewater bubbles and froths behind high concrete walls.

Today, the God and His priests are trapped between the highway and the drain. Day and night, the temple is permeated by the burning stench of petro-dust from the highway and the rotten miasma from the drain. This pollution of the sacred river poses existential questions: how are you to live when the river has become a sewer? And how can we survive physically and morally in an ecological, cosmological and ethical breakdown, exacerbated by anthropogenic intervention?

Water Is Divine

For the past several years I have been exploring the relationship between the practice of Hinduism and the sacred landscape of India. In the United States, widespread belief in biblical inerrancy is related to decreased support for environmental protection policies and correlates with a denial of anthropogenic climate change. But some religious organizations are now engaging in social movements supporting climate justice. From Pope Francis' laudato si to the 2015 Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change, religious leaders and institutions are increasingly calling for action to curb pollution and reduce our carbon footprint.

The Hinduism is rooted in natural topography. Gods are found in rocks, hillocks, woodlands and trees, rivers and rills. In religious texts and myths, water bodies in particular have an explicit ability to transform space, to extend or truncate time and, most significantly, to manifest God's paradoxical nature as simultaneously transcendent and immanent, independent and dependent, formless and formed. In practice, bodies of water are sacred places, held in special regard in processions and festivals—not only because they sustain life, but because they are considered the abode of the Gods.

In Hindu cosmology, the universe is thought to be a vast ocean on which the divine protector, Vishnu, floats sleepily on His divine serpent bed for eons. His consort Lakshmi, Goddess of wealth, emerges seated on a lotus, a perishable flower that grows in water and responds to the sun. These realms of mythic reality instructed generations of Hindus on their custodianship of water resources.

As I learned from my parents and grandparents and they from generations before them, in Hindu thought river waters represent purity and abundance and connect the twinned worldly and otherworldly landscapes. Rivers like the Vrishabhavathi and Ganga are thought to be Goddesses, made to descend from the heavens by human vows and penances, bringing abundant life to the arid earth of India through their pure waters. Water falling from heaven to earth—the monsoon rains that soak the subcontinent and form rivers and lakes—is conceived of as a material and spiritual bridge between the two realms of life and afterlife. In the Vaishnava scripture the Garuda Purana, all souls cross a sacred river in their journey towards the afterlife. Rivers mark the boundaries of sacred worlds, and their waters wash the soul clean.

In short, Hindus revere water and its flow as a powerful medium of the imagination that shapes space, molds Gods and Goddesses and births worshipful communities into existence. It is water, poured ritually over a God during a bath and subsequently drunk by devotees as a consecrated offering, that awakens the God and purifies the devotee. This cycle of water remakes earth into heaven and heaven into earth, and it is part of the fragile cosmological and earthly ecosystem.

For Hindus, the pollution of India's sacred waters must therefore raise some fundamental questions: Where can and do water Gods go when the water is toxically inhospitable? What happens to a religious and moral imagination rooted in the natural world when the ecological landscape is rubbished? What do we do when a river is systematically killed?

Bathing the Gods in Bottled Water

The year 1975 was when Sudarshana's grandfather remembers last going to the riverbank to draw water from the sacred Vrishabhavathi to bathe the Deity, drink and wash the sacred temple vessels. But when the river started smelling bad and became sludgy and grey, he sadly decided he could no longer use the river water for ritual purification.

The 1980s and 1990s, were years without rain. Water became scarce in the temple and in the city. The priests gathered every morning at dawn and performed ritual invocations to bring the monsoon rains. But none came. The waste water in the channel grew low and the smell became acrid. The priests bought expensive bottled water and saved tap water to bathe the God. Finally, after years of everyday drought, they raised the funds to deepen the well on the property and, some three years ago, installed a high-tech water filtration system.

One of the legends of the temple involves the gift of floods. During the monsoon rains, the river waters would rise and flow into the temple, lapping the feet of the Deity in small wavelets, a sign from the Gods that it would be a bountiful year for the crops as the river silt spread all over the valley through the network of lakes and streams. Today, in a painfully ironic reversal, monsoon season turns the temple into a hive of activity as priests and officiants anxiously build sandbag levees and connect sump pumps and hoses to prevent the toxic river waters from entering the temple premises. In Bengaluru's historic 2017 floods, when the river started to rise, the priests had to sweep away the toxic sludge all day and night, working with brooms and mops, for fear the water would slime the entire temple and dump toxic waste on the Deity.

The priests watch the river with anxiety now. The flood is no longer a divine gift but a feared curse. Quite simply, Sudarshana and his fellow priests are afraid of the water.

Killing the River

The story of the Vrishabhavathi's transformation from pure, sacred

priyadarshini sen/rns

priyadarshini sen/rns

Offering water: (far left) a Sivalingam remains perpetually in the cold waters of the Ganga; author Tulasi Srinivas; (above) the Gali Anjaneya Temple, built on an island in the Vrishabhavathi River; temple priest Srikara Sudarshana offers purified water to a bronze Hanuman

stream to its present state as a stinking nala, or drainage channel for solid waste, is the stuff of Srikara Sudarshana's nightmares.

Ancient stone edicts and colonial documents of the region mention the sparkling river Vrishabhavathi (meaning "arising from a bull) as originating from the hoof of an ancient, sacred, monolithic Nandi bull sculpture in the south of the city. Another, lesser-known origin point was a temple tank with an eternal stream, also dedicated to the sacred bull, in the north of the city. Forgotten for decades, the temple tank was accidentally unearthed in the late 1990s, at the time I was in the city exploring the idea of wonder through ritual activity.

When the city was young, the river's many tributaries, streams and rills formed a watery network as they flowed through Bengaluru, irrigating fields and providing drinking water for the inhabitants. But by the late 19th century, the city had become a colonial center. The Vrishabhavathi was mapped, dammed and rechanneled by British administrators to provide water for the mills and military encampments established in Bengaluru.

With Indian Independence in 1947, Bengaluru became a growing center of scientific and technological development, manufacturing everything from watches to rocket ships. Today, it is one of the fastest growing cities in Asia, home to the tech industry, the "Silicon Valley" of India, tagged as the number one "most dynamic city" by the World Economic Forum. Ringed by clogged highways leading to steel and glass "software parks" housing the global campuses of Fortune 500 companies, the city has doubled in size in 20 years, to over 12 million inhabitants. Bengaluru's success, based on attracting global information and biotech companies, has been retold so frequently that it has taken on a magical, mythic quality of its own.

This growth has attracted migrants to Bengaluru. Newcomers now outnumber locals in neighborhoods all over the city, and conflicts arise. Small industries and businesses such as car repair shops, beauty shops, restaurants, printing businesses, paper mills, cloth mills, chemical plants, plywood and soap factories, tanneries and distilleries, often unlicensed and unregulated, have sprung up everywhere.

Overburdened by the city's waste, the Bengaluru Water Supply and Sewerage Board has thoughtlessly connected the sewer lines to the river. Taking their cue from the city, factories in the Peenya industrial estate up river silently release their effluents into the water at night, while denying culpability to ecological watchdog groups during the day. Samples of water from the channel contain heavy metals, toxic substances and acids causing health concerns. Dead fish float on the dying river, and feral dogs roam its charred banks.

City ecologist Harini Nagendra warns the heartbreaking ecological violence, which includes polluting of ground water, cutting of trees, water theft and an escalating cycle of flood and drought, is leading to extreme water scarcity in Bengaluru. The city has been predicted to face a water crisis of epic and incendiary proportions—a Day Zero, when the water taps in the city are predicted to run dry—in just two short years.

This ecological evisceration of sacred water bodies is a global scourge that has accompanied development. Industrial capitalism, as sociologist Max Weber argued, relies on an extractive ethos that strips the world of its supernatural dimensions. Indeed, it seems that capitalism and development are stronger forces in today's world than even the divine power of Hinduism's Gods and Goddesses. Capitalism has rendered the priests' rituals less sacred and encouraged political corruption. With development there has been a loss of resources, of community stakeholdership, of responsibility and of autonomy. As a result, the waters of the Vrishabhavathi River have become undrinkable.

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A growing city: (top to bottom) the Bengaluru skyline at sunset paints an ideal image of a modern, developing city; the toxic waters of the Vrishabhavathi River; temple priests and locals help to remove the putrid waters that flooded the temple in 2014

manish swarup/ap

A sacred waterway: having cleared away the frothy industrial waste, a man prays after bathing in the Yamuna River near New Delhi

The Moral Justice of Thirst

A time of thirst is upon us all. Urban water scarcity is the biggest crisis of the Anthropocene. Cities with a majority-poor population like Cape Town and Flint, and those that are growing rapidly like Los Angeles, Bengaluru, Beijing and London, are on the path to drought or violent floods. As Anna Tsing notes, we all live in a "disturbance regime" of "blasted landscapes." The World Wildlife Fund estimates that by 2025, two thirds of the world population will face severe water shortages. The urgency of climate justice and water security concerns is obvious and looming.

On June 19, 2018, the National Institute for Transforming India (NITI), an Indian Government think tank, warned that India's water shortage will worsen and is likely to adversely impact some 600 million people, most of them women and the poor. By 2030, India—home to one seventh of the world's population—stands to double its yet unmet water needs. Water wars will undoubtedly erupt between those who have access to clean water and those who don't, those who pollute common water sources like the Vrishabhavathi River and those who rely on them.

Today, the Vrishabhavathi froths daily, its greenish-yellow suds popping, its banks squelchy with dark fluids. Residents south of the nala, who used to till small market gardens of vegetables using the water, now report falling ill frequently with gastroenteritis, bronchitis, skin diseases, coughs and other lung diseases. They make sure their animals don't go into the river. Nobody dares drink from the sacred river, regardless of how thirsty they might be.

Are we now in a permanently thirsty, fiery, post-ecological epoch, as Greta Thunberg suggested at Davos 2020? Are we heading towards a post-life era, or can we begin the moral work of undoing toxic development?

Temples to Rubbish

Bengaluru is no exception. Most of India has a toxicity problem. Its cities quiver with mountains of rubbish; its lakes, rivers and streams are awash with factory pollutants, detergent runoff and sewage sludge. At its inception, the Modi government used this encroaching dirt as a potent symbol, suggesting we "wipe India clean" with their Swach Bharath campaign to make India "clean and pure" in the 21st century. Photo ops of ministers symbolically sweeping city streets flooded the newspapers.

But six years since the Modi government took office, little has been done for one of the program's main goals of improving waste management. Every day, new stories of land thieves and water pirates make headlines in newspapers as the commons are privatized for profit, particularly the forests and waters owned or utilized by poor and lower caste groups.

In the general election in 2018, the Modi government won a resounding majority while ignoring rising pollution. Rather, they politicized the scarcity of water resources as a soul-of-the-nation battle with Pakistan, pivoting to the protection of Indian air and water resources—ecological custodianship implicit in Hinduism's great myths and epics. The focus became policies on Indian prosperity and development amid proud calls for "a new India."

What's Next?

In this chaotic world, the Gods become more important. People pray, more fearful and uncertain of the future. In November 2019, an article in The Economic Times went viral with photos of devotees praying knee deep in the Yamuna River near the capital city of Delhi, surrounded by growing clouds of toxic foam. At the same time, the air pollution in North India was so extreme that devotees dressed their Deities in air filtration masks. Is it surprising, then, that in this new India people are falling chronically ill? Is it surprising that the Goddesses of water such as Ganga and Gods of the air like Vayu are choking and sick? Will our Gods and Goddesses finally decide it just isn't worth staying in this new India?

The Waters of Hope

I have family and friends who are torn over what they see as eroding Hindu pride. In this new India, Hinduism is relegated to performing endless elaborate rituals and expressing a divisive, nationalistic rhetoric. Its vital theological and dynamic ecological principles disregarded, the religion is now publicized as a tool used by angry, ideological politicians to (once more) divide neighbors and friends.

But now, in this undeniably fulcrum moment, I ask: could this be an opportunity to think of a different way to revitalize Hindu pride? Is it time to recognize that the waters and air of the earth are cosmological forces that, once spoiled, are irretrievable and that in their presence they give and sustain life? Can these waters quench the fires of hatred and distrust, birth hope and flow to justice instead?

Indeed, I am hopeful that Hinduism can offer us a new imaginative geopolitical theology for this growing ecological apocalypse. Hinduism can propose a language to think of this catastrophe in religious terms, without being fatalistic or exclusionary. For the very essence of Hinduism—that of earthly custodianship and ecological care—is beyond any single religion and vitalizes a pan-Indian culture that can emancipate us from the dangers of unthinking development and discrimination.

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Phad Sacred Art

Wandering Shrines of Rajasthan

In this unique and traditional art form, mythological stories and folk tales are meticulously illustrated on long canvas scrolls, some five feet high and 30 feet long. Each scroll or Phad (which means "fold" in the local dialect) depicts a sequentially narrated story dedicated to one or more of the Rajput Deities. But more than that, each is an expression of devotion and sanctity. Every stage of the making of the artwork overflows with religious traditions and rituals.

Commissioned by a priest-singer (known as a Bhopa), the painting, regarded as a traveling temple, is initiated with a prayer offered to the Deity. The artist then begins his task, following strict guidelines. The Bhopa accepts the completed painting with yet another elaborate ceremonial prayer. Once the traditions and ceremonies are concluded, the priest-singer, seen here with his stringed instrument, travels village to village, singing and enacting the pictorial depiction of the Deity portrayed in the holy painting, which he displays so villagers can follow his tale.

a bhopa performing with kalyan joshi's painting in the background

By Baani Sekhon, Chandigarh

Bhilwara, rajasthan, is the land of origin of Phad paintings, which can be traced back to the tenth century. These paintings serve as portable temples, capturing a mass of divinity in one scroll. Over the centuries, this painting genre has successfully retained its distinct style and visual approach, having been practiced exclusively by artists from the Nayak community, particularly the Joshi family. The techniques and methodology were carefully kept only within the family, handed down generation to generation with great caution. Only the sons of the household were taught the craft. Since daughters would leave the family after marriage, they assisted only with the preparation tasks—although daughters-in-law, as new members of the clan, were permitted to learn and practice the art.

In recent years, however, fearing the disappearance of this art form from its native land, many Joshi clan members have made generous efforts to share the techniques with other artists. To perpetuate this art form and preserve its distinguishing features and techniques, renowned artist Shree Lal Joshi, a Padma Shri awardee, opened a school called Joshi Kala Kendra in 1960 so that others could learn this art style. This school, now called Chitrashala, serves those who would help to supply the burgeoning international demand for this art.

Folk stories tell us that before setting out on a journey, Devnarayan (believed to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu) fulfilled a devotee's request by asking a Joshi from Bhilwara to depict his story in the form of a Phad. This was the first Phad ever created. Thereafter, Devnarayan assigned a Bhopa to narrate the story to his worshipers whenever requested. The nomadic Bhopas' oral recital continues to this day. The Joshis themselves, however, believe that their ancestors were first commissioned by Chochu Bhat, a devotee of Lord Devnarayan and early mentor of Devnarayan's clan.

Spirituality and Rituals

The creation of a new Phad commences with a prayer ceremony in which the Bhopa's commission for a new Phad is accepted by the artist. For an auspicious and favorable beginning, the first stroke of the painting is made by a girl child (kumari) who is considered pure and pious. She could be from the artists' or any high-caste brahmin family. Afterwards she is offered new clothes and other gifts.

After drawing a sketch of Ganesha, Saraswati and then Dasha Avatar (the ten incarnations of Vishnu) on the canvas to invoke their blessings, the artist spends weeks and months working tirelessly on the intricate art piece. Finally, on an auspicious day, he invites the Bhopa and signs his name next to the central figure of the Deity portrayed in the painting. The Bhopa's name is also added. As a last step, he paints the pupils of the main Deity's eyes, bringing the painting to life and awakening the image of the divine being. The Phad, now a mobile temple, is then given to the Bhopa.

A performance by a Bhopa is revered as a religious ritual. The priest-singer is invited by the villagers to invoke the Deities for their blessings and ward off negativity, especially during difficult and unfortunate times. The villagers bestow offerings in cash and kind upon the Bhopa.

In preparation for the Jagaran (Phad performance), the ground where the holy temple will be unfolded is cleaned and purified with incense. Offerings, including money, grains and fruits, are made in front of the mobile temple. Customarily, the Bhopa wears a special costume, called Baga. The enthralling performance usually starts right after sunset and proceeds throughout the night, concluding at dawn with an arati, the passing of a blessed flame.

Commencing with the invocation of the greater Gods—Ganesha, Saraswati and Vishnu—the narration lasts for 9 to 12 hours, with short intervals for food and interaction between the folk balladeer and the audience. The Bhopa pauses his musical sermon each time he receives a donation, blowing a conch shell to praise the donor and announce his name.

The story painting is displayed as a backdrop, while the Bhopa enacts and sings the epic of heroism and honor, accompanying himself on a two-stringed fiddle-like musical instrument. Meanwhile, his wife (Bhopi) moves close to the Phad and holds an oil lamp near each episode as it is recited by the priest singer, scene by scene, lighting it up against the night darkness.

After years or decades of traveling and folding, a Phad naturally becomes stained and worn. When that time comes, with reverence and fitting rituals, it is immersed in the holy waters of the Ganga or Pushkar Lake. This ritual is called Tandakarna, meaning cooling of the Godly powers.

Making of the Phad

The canvas for a Phad must be durable, strong enough to survive harsh conditions and last for years. For that purpose, the painters select handwoven cotton cloth, called khadi. The coarse cloth is soaked overnight to thicken the unprocessed threads, then starched with a paste of boiled barley flour or rice. The stiffened material is then stretched and dried in the sun.

After the solidified cloth is cut to the required size, it is placed flat on a hard surface and burnished with a moonstone attached to a wooden block. To make this task easier, considering the size and thickness of the bristly cloth, the wooden block has a weight of 45 to 90 pounds on top. The artist polishes the cloth vigorously until he is satisfied that its finish is even, smooth and glossy.

Modern master: (above) Kalyan Joshi, whose family has been painting in this style for two centuries, uses a fine brush to depict the stories; (left) one of his Phads showing Lord Ganesha being worshiped by humans on Earth and devas in celestial realms.

Technique and Color Scheme

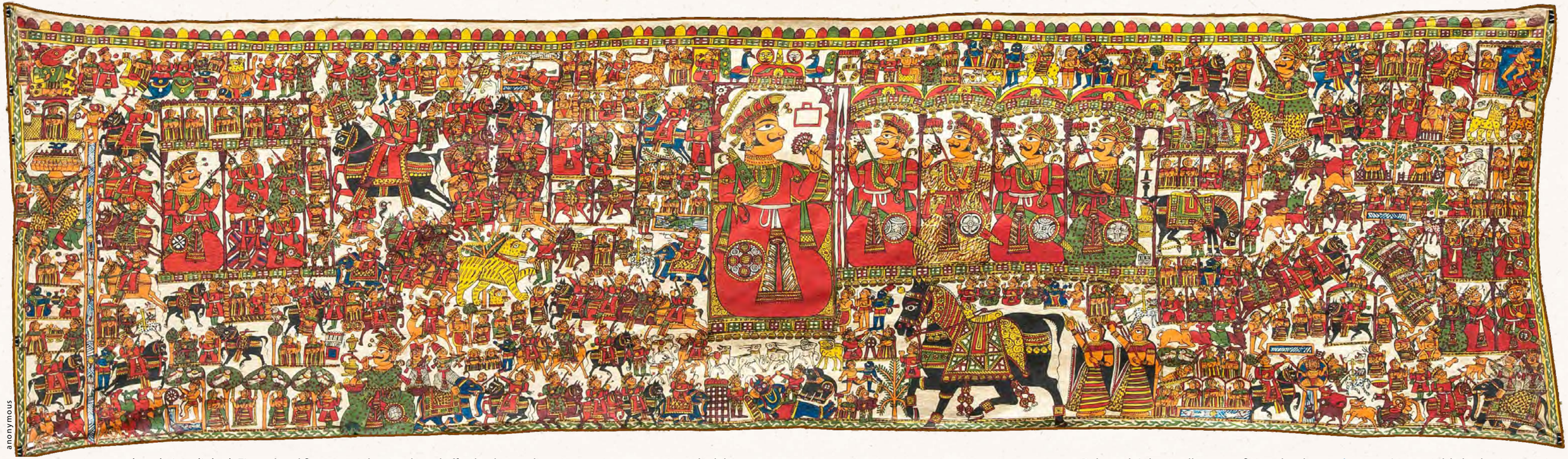
Once the artist has prepared the cloth, he defines divisions and subdivisions on the canvas for the sequence of the tale. Notably, the scenes are not arranged randomly or in a linear fashion, nor are they trapped within frames like comic strips. Instead, they are carefully composed with respect to the viewer's predictable eye movement and logical understanding.

Each scene is first roughly sketched with a light yellow erasable paint, called kacha. The colors used are defined by the age-old guidelines—orange for the figures, yellow for jewelry, green for trees and vegetation, red for clothes and brown for animals and buildings, with no use of gold or silver hues. The application of colors follows an order based on their tonality, starting from the lightest tint to the darkest shade: orange, yellow, green, brown, blue then red. The artist completes the painting by outlining all the elements on the canvas with black, finally animating the historical tale with life.

Traditionally, the paints used by the Phad artists are organic, sourced from natural elements like stones, flowers, plants and herbs. These handmade tints are prepared by vigorously grinding pigments with gum and water for a smooth and even paste. In recent times, however, many contemporary artists have switched to synthetic pigments.

The Unique Style

The Phad storyboarding style distinguishes it from all other folk art. There are many subtle nuances that collectively build it as a narrative tale. For instance, the size of the characters varies based on their social status and the importance of the role they play in the story. In addition, the pictorial



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events are cleverly interlinked. Figures may overlap from one scene to another, and a common background may be used for consecutive episodes.

In other common stylistic features followed by all Phad artists, every figure is flat and two-dimensional, shown in profile, with large eyes and small noses. Color, symbolism and size are used to identify important characters. Every inch of the canvas is jam-packed with these vibrant, boldly outlined figures, yet the storyboard effortlessly portrays the flow of its legends and events. Stylistic similarities notwithstanding, each of these multi-layered masterpieces is original and exceptional.

Theme and Symbolism

From ancient times the scrolls of Rajasthan's folk Deities, like Pabuji, Devnarayan, Ramdevji, Mataji and Gogaji, have served as mobile shrines, taking sacred stories and culture to remote communities which have no formal temples. The two most prevalent subjects are the myths of Pabuji (said to be an incarnation of Lord Rama's brother, Laxman) and Devnarayan (incarnation of Lord Vishnu). Both stories have well-developed narratives. Pabhuji and Devnarayan are always larger than the other figures; they wear red and are invariably shown on horseback as a symbol of holiness.

The epic narrative Pabuji ki Phad, perhaps the best known Phad performance, is held annually at Pabusar, where the audience attendance is in thousands. This festive event is organized by the Jaipur Virasat. In this storyboard, Pabuji's three courtiers are identified by the color of their horses and attire. Lord Siva, Pabuji's horse and demons are painted in blue. While these performances are attended by people of all classes, this strict iconography helps unschooled villagers identify the color-coded characters more easily.

kalyan joshi

Changing Demand

The demand for Phads is dwindling fast in Rajasthan's rural areas, as the next generation of Bhopas are opting for more lucrative professions. One of the last remaining contemporary priest-singers of Rajasthan was Mohan Bhopa, who passed away in 2011. He was known for his captivating and mesmerizing performances; his musical narration brought the Phad's tale to life for audiences. This revered singer was featured in William Dalrymple's best selling non-fiction book, Nine Lives: in Search of the Sacred in Modern India. Currently, his wife Batasi performs with their son Mahavir, keeping the family tradition alive.

Despite its dwindling use in Rajasthan, appreciation for the Phad art style has grown worldwide. Art collectors are now demanding custom canvases. Thus, the paintings are no longer made just for narrating the local sagas. Stories from other popular epics and mythical tales are painted as well.

Common themes include tales from popular mythologies and epics like Ramayana, Mahabharata, Gita Govinda and Hanuman Chalisa. Contemporary subjects like festivals and marriage ceremonies have also become popular.

The paintings remain true to their basic principles. They are still religious in nature, and the techniques, including the formatting of intersecting scenes, are also unchanged. Notably, though, the size of these modern artworks is smaller, as the urban buyers' purpose is home décor.

Full-time career artists are few at present, though this art form is in high demand and critically appreciated by art enthusiasts internationally. Fortunately, the Joshi community members remain loyally determined to spread their rich, age-old heritage. Workshops and presentations are held regularly on a national level. Chitrashala (Phadchitrakari.com) an established art institute in Rajasthan founded by Shree Lal Joshi, trains artists in strict adherence to the age-old Phad style.

Among today's most celebrated Phad artists are Kalyan Joshi, Vijay Joshi, Pradeep Mukherjee and Nand Kishor Joshi. Their colorful mosaic-like paintings are available in online art galleries storyltd.com, mojarto.com and gallerymustart.com. Other beautiful and artistic Phad paintings are available for sale at heartforartonline.com, dollsofindia.com, artisera.com, go4ethnic.com, theindiacrafthouse.com and more.

marc chang sing pang

Sacred stories: *(clockwise from above) A detailed canvas depicting Pabuji, a medieval hero worshiped by herdsmen in Rajasthan; "Heroic Epics," an exhibit of Phad art in the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam; women approach Lord Ganesha with offerings; family creating in their home studio.*

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CULTURE

Are We Ready to Have a Real Conversation about Dark Skin?

One Woman's Tale of a Lifetime of Discouraging and Demeaning Encounters with the Complexities of Complexion

By Anu Kumar, Paris

I clearly remember my first college band camp. I felt so nervous and excited during freshman orientation. Rehearsals were held outside in the hot sun; daily we were told to drink water and use sunscreen. I felt exhilarated when I earned a spot in our pregame and first halftime show. Yet when I saw my parents a few weeks later, their only reaction to my transformative experience was that now I looked "too dark."

This experience is widespread. Nina Davuluri, the 2014 Miss America and the first of Indian descent, wowed audiences worldwide and won the coveted title. The next morning, she saw articles with titles like "Is Miss America Too Dark to be Miss India?"

A recent article by Sameer Yasir and Jeffrey Gettleman in The New York Times reports that Christy Jennifer, a producer with a Chennai media house, was traumatized by color prejudice all during the years she was growing up in South India. Classmates teased her for her darker skin, friends and family told her never to wear black, and she was constantly advised to use skin lightening creams. "Colorism, the bias against people of darker skin tones, has vexed India for a long time. It is partly a product of colonial prejudices, and it has been exacerbated by caste, regional differences and Bollywood, the nation's film industry, which has long promoted lighter-skinned heroes," the article states.

Colorism—color prejudice—is not unique to India, of course; it is even more famously an issue in America. Directed there most viciously at African Americans, it also affects any ethnicity of color. Remy, a first-generation Asian-American, remembers that even as a young boy, family members would make complimentary remarks about Filipino actors and actresses who had light skin while speaking slightingly of their darker-skinned counterparts, who were used as comic relief pieces.

Dark-skinned individuals face a devastating spectrum of hardships and discrimination in the South Asian community: derogatory comments from friends, relatives, mentors and future employers; rejected marriage proposals; bullying; receiving "gifts" of skin-bleaching products—and on and on.

When we understand the survival value of dark skin to peoples from hot climates, the idea of bleaching our skin to be more accepted and valued becomes abhorrently dystopian and the opposite of wisdom.

Evolutionary Purpose of Skin Color

Skin color is an evolutionary adaptation that has allowed humanity to survive and thrive in widely varied areas of our planet. Dark skin functions as a natural sunscreen, helping to prevent the DNA damage that can be caused by exposure to excess sunlight and its destructive UV radiations.

Looking back to the origins of Homo sapiens, there are a few possible evolutionary models. In the "Out of Africa" model, we originated in equatorial Africa, an area of intensely strong sunlight. In such a climate, dark skin reduces mortality by protecting against severe sunburn, skin cancer and even genetic damage.

As time progressed, various groups migrated to different lands around the globe, where they faced different food, terrain and exposure to sunlight. Nearer to the planet's poles, where sunlight is weaker, dark-skinned people did not receive enough vitamin D, which sunlight provides. Vitamin D deficiency has been linked to mortality, partly because it increases the risk of Type 2 diabetes. In such areas, skin color gradually evolved to become lighter because, like any physical characteristic, it is based on one's genes and genetic mutations.

Genetic mutations actually occur by random chance. Some are deleterious, others are neutral and a few prove to be highly beneficial. The beneficial ones reduce mortality, giving a better chance to survive and pass on one's genes—in this case, depending on location, genes for darker skin to protect against damaging sunlight, or genes for lighter, more sun-sensitive skin that can produce sufficient vitamin D from weak sunlight. In this way, the percentage of genetically adapted individuals in a population increases over ensuing generations.

This line of thinking makes sense regardless of which migration and evolution model we follow. Someone born with light skin in a place of intense sunlight has a much higher risk of skin cancer, because they cannot handle the heavy UVA and UVB radiation. Likewise, someone born with darker skin in a weak-sunlight area cannot make enough vitamin D. Changes in skin color, therefore, are driven by population migration, due to natural selection. Such changes have evolved several times over the course of human history.

The genetic factors affecting skin pigmentation involve many different genes and molecules. For many European populations, differences in the MC1R and SLC24A5 genes lead to lighter skin. Humans have invented sunscreens to protect against heavy sunlight. But we've also invented skin bleaching creams to suppress the natural melanin pigment produced in the skin. These creams can target various enzymes and other molecules involved in pigment generation. In using these, people are suppressing a protective mechanism that evolved to make sure we survive and thrive in our environments.

ap photo/julio cortez

Too dark for India? (top left) Nivea and Unilever are leaders in India's $4 billion skin-lightening industry, which offers creams, face washes and bleaches; (above) Nina Davuluri, the 2014 Miss America, stirred controversy following her crowning, with commentators saying she could win in the US, but was "too dusky" to win in India. Nina, who calls colorism a component of racism, is using her renown to actively unpack the archaic cultural preference for pale skin tones. www.ninadavuluri.com

The Increasing Wish for White Skin

As humans, we desire to belong to a group. From an evolutionary perspective, group membership increases our chance of survival. Our need to be part of a community influences our behaviors and choices, including the use of skin bleaching creams. These products exist only because of people who shame others for having dark skin and profit from their social ostracization and insecurity. This creates a never-ending loop of harmful implicit bias. Someone excluded from a social circle or rejected from a potential relationship because they are dark is incentivized to bleach their skin in the attempt to be accepted or find a match.

Most of our biases exist to protect our own in-group, a group we identify with in some way. Groups range from simple to complex, such as alumni of a particular university or a racial-cultural group. Our biases, both implicit (unconscious) and explicit (conscious), can reinforce each other, trapping awareness inside this negative feedback loop of thoughts.

Advertisers deliberately use, and even strive to create and magnify, our biases. For instance, they use celebrity endorsements to help sell products. Our positive associations with the celebrity are transferred to the product, and often even to the brand. If we already have an implicit bias, a celebrity endorsement can reinforce that bias and create new behaviors associated with it.

Here's the scenario: a group of influential people, such as highly admired celebrities or community leaders, state (or just imply) that people can gain success and respect by lightening their skin. Messages of this nature from such high-ranking individuals can influence people to use skin-bleaching cream in hopes of gaining success and respect. Each person doing so begins to subtly disassociate from those who do not, thus solidifying the in-group vs. out-group mentality. "Wait, you're not using a skin lightening cream? But you're so dark, and all of these famous people say you'd be more attractive and successful if you used them!"

Those who use the skin bleaching cream are following the social protocol, and therefore deemed worthy of respect. Those who do not are seen as the out-group. We conform to increase our social survivability, not to meet any primary need like food, water, shelter or safety. We will go to great lengths to avoid being socially ostracized.

illustration by @blahjinder

The Dark Side of Light

People of other cultures can have difficulty understanding the deep roots of this perspective in our culture. Thus, immigrants from India and Sri Lanka can be complimented on our skin tone by people who don't realize we are reprimanded for the same thing in our own community.

Audrey Noble notes this in her article about colorism in Medium, quoting a podcast interview with Joanne L. Rondilla, assistant professor of Asian American studies at San Jose State University. Rondilla explains the gap in cultural understanding: "Skin isn't just skin...Skin has social and racial, historical, political and sociological meaning. When someone says, 'Oh, I love your tan, I wish I had tan skin like you,' that person doesn't understand the historical trauma that comes from the skin itself…"

Lindsey Lazarte, a first-generation Filipino American, notes a cognitive dissonance in Westerners who enjoy being tan, yet are uncomfortable with people of color. In her Medium article, she notes white Americans want to be tan, but wouldn't want to be a minority. She says while her family in the Philippines wanted to be light-skinned, her friends aspired to bronze tones. "And what I wish my friends understood when they used to tell me, 'I wish I could be as tan as you!' is that for some people, it's merely about skin color, but for others it's about race." She adds, "I wanted to tell them that I wasn't trying to be tan—that's just how I look."

On the opposite end of skin bleaching,

light-skinned Westerners have an obsession to be tan which parallels the obsession to be fair. In both cases, this can be related to social status. Instead of wanting light skin so they won't look like outside laborers, Americans seek tan skin so it will appear they can afford to take a vacation and spend time out in the sun. But whether they lock themselves in a box and hit their skin with artificial UV lights, or put on a cream or oil that will slowly darken their skin color, I wonder whether this actually makes them feel good or whether they are simply bowing to societal pressures. While I acknowledge that everyone has the right to bodily autonomy, this parallel to Fair & Lovely does not sit well with me.

The traumatic and horrific incident of George Floyd's death in the United States has served to amplify the conversation about colorism and racism, including skin-whitening products in the South Asian community. As the tone-deaf message of these products bounces in the echo-chamber that is a post-George Floyd world, activists are raising their voices and pointing to the elephant in the room inside so many South Asian households—how the skin-lightening industry fuels and propagates our community's disdain for Black and African people globally. Skin color has been the cornerstone of racism and colorism for many, many years.

Many of our problems are human-made, especially things that stem from cogni-

The Blinkered Boundaries of Beauty

the times of india

This photo says it all. The Times of India newspaper, part of the group that organizes the annual Femina Miss India contest, published this 2019 collage of 30 women, each representing an Indian state, and all uniformly fair-skinned. Anti-colorism activist Muna Beatty described Femina Miss India's selection as a "copy-paste job," with all contestants having the same long, dark hair and skin tone. She warned that such fair-skin bias could affect the mental health and self-esteem of darker-toned women in India, where the contentious issue of the treatment of women has become a nationwide debate. "You have youngsters, kids watching this and thinking to themselves, 'If I don't fit these criteria or this skin tone, then I'm not beautiful' and... 'I'm not good enough,' " she said. People on social media complained that the contestants did not represent the diversity and potential of Indian women.

COMPLEXion

Aurora Vision has teamed up with Nina Davuluri to create a compelling documentary about identity. It explores the complexities of skin color, diversity and human acceptance globally. You can watch Nina's two-minute introduction to the project here: bit.ly/COMPLEXion

tive dissonance yet are accepted as "part of our culture." Such judgments can be unintentional and unrecognized, an unconscious attitude or belief buried in the subconscious that affects how we behave towards ourselves and others. This is called an implicit bias, and it can occur in both positive and negative ways, including the obsession with fair skin. An explicit bias, on the other hand, is a known bias that people can actively pretend they don't have.

Giving your child a fairness cream because of their dark complexion displays an explicit bias. Unintentionally and unknowingly becoming more frustrated at a darker-skinned person who made the same mistake as a lighter-skinned person is considered implicit. But implicit biases do not manifest spontaneously; they must be introduced and nurtured. The implicit bias regarding skin color in South Asia was heavily influenced and reinforced by a long history of colonization and the colonizers' public disdain for the Indian peoples. The seed for hatred of darker skin was planted and watered until its roots grew strong and seemingly unshakable, and to this day it is passed on from parents to their children. If a child is scolded for playing in the sun and observes his or her parents bleaching their skin and disrespecting darker-skinned people, that child will absorb the same attitude towards skin color.

Parallel Struggles: Black Hair

The tragic history of colonization traumatized generations of people to the point where we cannot appreciate the beauty of our natural skin tone. When African peoples were brought to the Western world through the transatlantic slave trade, they faced discrimination about their hair. Under the 1786 Tignon Laws in New Orleans, African women were legally forced to wear a headscarf or piece of fabric, known as a tignon, to cover their hair. Along with skin color, this identified them as part of the "slave class." In the mid-1920s, Madam C. J. Walker, a Black woman, invented a hair-straightening comb which could remove the coils and kinks from their hair. This became understandably popular, since a straight, polished hair texture denoted middle-class status. To avoid at least some ostracism, African-American women rid themselves of a signature part of their race and culture. Hair discrimination persisted, however, as many employers demanded that their African-American/Black employees not wear their hair in traditional styles such as braids or cornrows. In the 1976 case of Jenkins v. Blue Cross Mutual Hospital Insurance, the Afro hairstyle was determined to be protected under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.

Now, in 2020, embracing your natural hair is fast becoming the gold standard. Social media has helped: natural hair products are advertised and popularized on Instagram, and users are sharing their personal acceptance journeys with their hair. Traumatic memories of social ostracization don't vanish overnight, but this positive shift to self-love has been a breath of fresh air to many people. As Jemmar Samuels said to BBC Journalist Taylor-Dior Rumble, "I only started to like my hair when it was permed straight and I began to get compliments. I remember getting so upset every time I'd see new growth of my Afro hair coming through...That's why discovering the online natural hair community was life-changing for me. I remember watching a hair tutorial and at the end of the video the woman said, 'Love your hair.' I used to think to myself, 'Why would you say that?' The whole concept was foreign to me, but I liked hearing it."

Perhaps the South Asian community can take some pointers from the positive movement surrounding natural hair attitudes and style in the African community.

What Now?

In the wake of police brutality against black people in the US, Uniliver's staple product, Fair & Lovely, came under a torrential downpour of backlash from people around the world. Blamed for promoting anti-black sentiment, Unilever recently changed the product's name to Glow & Lovely. A Unilever spokesperson claimed they are afraid to completely discontinue the product because people might use unsafe alternatives to bleach their skin, but I fear the name change is only skin deep.

I ask Remy, who like myself grew up with a multicultural identity, for his thoughts about moving forward. He emphasizes the cultivation of compassion and empathy when initiating conversations with close family members and friends. "Going into that type of conversation and changing that type of mentality does not come quickly, and it doesn't come through force," he says. "It comes with a lot of patience and empathy." He explains much of the difficulty lies in the language barrier and the American cultural disconnect.

I asked Bettina Tauro, co-host of the NRI Woman Podcast, the same question. She pointed out that small changes can lead to significant shifts in thought. "We've heard many times over, 'be the change you seek,' and that's probably the first step," she says. "Be yourself, so the environment reflects you rather than you mimicking the environment. Find ways in your role as the teacher, director, leader, homemaker to encourage those whose lives you touch to take care of themselves physically, mentally, financially and emotionally." The challenge is to redefine the world beyond any rigid concept of beauty.

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Black hair is back: After hundreds of years of hair-straightening, Black women, like this protestor, are boldly braiding their hair, and it's amazing

Nina Davuluri, the first Indian-American Miss America, has been a driving force in understanding the "why" of colorism in Indian culture and in cultures around the world. Her current project, "COMPLEXion series," focuses on individuals' stories from around the globe about their experiences with colorism. Davuluri has also been speaking on Instagram and other platforms to educate and hold more conversations around this topic, using her visibility and reach to hold space for this conversation.

Tanning or lightening your skin should be a choice that you make because you want to, not because of pressure from family or community. This is easier said than done, because this mindset runs much deeper than the skin. It can span back generations of your parents being told to stay out of the sun, and their parents being told to drink milk and eat yogurt more often so that their skin will become lighter. But I believe we are experiencing the beginning of a mindset shift, of more questioning, of more solidarity and support amongst one another.

Our environment influences how we see the world, and we, in turn, impact our environment. There are many different cultures in India, Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Everyone's experience of discrimination based on skin color is unique. Many of us no longer live in our ancestral localities. Daily we encounter individuals of varied skin tones, from various cultures, with varied concepts of beauty. To understand the

Colonial Inheritance

The british held sway over india through trade and economic influence for 100 years, then militarily colonized the nation for another 100 years, finally leaving in 1947. But they left behind Western laws, educational systems and an anti-Hindu media, all of which still endure. Among their bequests are racist attitudes and a disdain for dark skin. For two centuries British administrators showed a clear contempt towards darker-skinned Indians, in government, education, business and public spaces like restaurants—barring them from entry. Conversely, the British Army, with their European skin tones, showed open favoritism towards light-skinned Indian soldiers, employing segregation tactics by treating them better. The subjugators' unceasing public disdain for all Indian peoples eventually crushed the Indian psyche itself into adopting the British contempt for their natural colors, their religions and their culture.

Do Skin Lighteners Pose Health Problems?

A study by the world health organization found that 61% of women in India regularly use skin lightening creams. In a clinical setting, skin lightening agents are intended to treat dark spots, skin discoloration from hormonal changes or sunburn, etc. These products alter various aspects of melanin biosynthesis, or impact cells containing melanin, the natural skin pigment which absorbs 99.9 percent of UV radiation. Using these products is not without side effects. Overuse or misuse, such as attempting to lighten normal skin color, without medical supervision, can lead to unmanaged redness, rash, blistering, itching, scaling, peeling and discoloration. The side effects vary based on the product, frequency and duration of use, and of course the individual.

Some skin lighteners are sold over the counter and others only by prescription. Those based on compounds of natural origin like arbutin, glabridin, kojic acid, glycolic acid and ascorbic acid may present fewer reversible side effects. Other formulations contain potentially hazardous chemically designed ingredients such as hydroquinone, vitamin A derivatives and corticosteroids.

Women of child-bearing age, in particular, should never use skin lighteners without a doctor's supervision. Clinical data show a link between some Vitamin A derivatives and fetal abnormalities. Anecdotal reports indicate the same danger from hydroquinone.

Be especially cautious about skin lighteners if you buy products manufactured in a country which lacks regulatory oversight, as many are formulated with toxic mercury containing compounds known for serious kidney and neurological toxicity. Many counterfeit formulations also exist containing heavy metals such as arsenic, lead and mercury as contaminants with serious side effects.

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Most counterfeit formulations also have undisclosed corticosteroids, which are associated with additional adverse effects such as acne, eczema, stretch marks, atrophy, excessive hair growth, impaired wound healing, as well as exacerbation of certain infections. Corticosteroids are absorbed into the bloodstream from our skin, and prolonged use might lead to hormonal changes, diabetes, hypertension, cataract and glaucoma sometimes even blindness.

Now comes the latest and fastest-growing fad—laser technology, with its attendant cost of $800 in India. It selectively eliminates melanin from the skin surface and has a litany of side effects. Even when successful, this treatment is temporary, since the melanocytes continue to produce dark pigment.

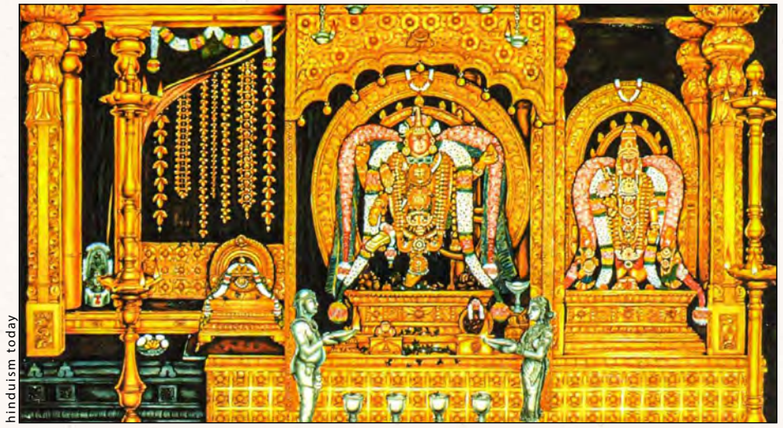
About the Author

Anu Kumar is a recent college graduate and first generation American of Indian descent, born to Indian immigrants. Kumar graduated with a Bachelor's in Neuroscience from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and is now working as a Lab Manager and Research Assistant at ICM, a brain and spinal cord research center in Paris, France. She also works as a freelance writer on a wide variety of topics, ranging from neurobiology to social justice issues. You may learn more about her writing projects on her website aneurokumar.tilda.ws or reach her by email at aneurokumar@gmail.com for collaboration.

HINDU RENAISSANCE AWARD

Our 2020 Hindus of the Year

Chidambaram's Dikshitar priests have faithfully served the temple for over two millennia



hinduism today

By Choodie Shivaram, Bengaluru

The magnificent chidambaram siva Temple, 141 miles south of Chennai, India, is widely regarded by worshipers of Siva as the most powerful in the world, and its traditional custodians are the Podu Dikshitars. After fighting legal battles since 1885 for the right to manage the temple without government interference, the Dikshitars won their struggle in 2014 when India's Supreme Court reversed lower-court decisions which had led to Tamil Nadu's aggressive move in 2009 to take over the temple (see Hinduism Today's report at the time: bit.ly/dikshitars).

Affirming the Dikshitars' status as a religious denomination, the 2014 ruling restored their unhindered management rights of the temple. In Indian law, a denomination is a small group that shares a common heritage and is the living embodiment of a tradition that needs to be preserved, as endorsed by the Constitution of India. Because of the Dikshitars' unique heritage and practices the Supreme Court recognized them as a religious denomination and granted them full rights to manage the temple.

The decision was widely celebrated in India, as it augured well for the ultimate release to community control of tens of thousands of Hindu temples which have been taken over by state governments. For their perseverance over the last 145 years to claim their rights and set a precedent for all temples, HINDUISM TODAY presents its Hindu Renaissance Award to the Dikshitar community as "2020 Hindus of the Year."

Who Are the Dikshitars?

According to scripture, God Siva appeared at Chidambaram thousands of years ago at the beseeching of sages Vyagrapada and Patanjali. He came accompanied by Goddess Parvati and 3,000 companions, or Sivaganas. Siva performed the Ananda Tandava dance before this multitude, expressing His five powers: creation, preservation, dissolution, concealing grace and revealing grace.

Siva then commanded the Sivaganas to remain at Chidambaram and worship Him there as Siva Nataraja (King of Dance) along with the Goddess in the form of Sivagami Sundari. The Dikshitars are the modern descendants of these 3,000 Sivaganas. There are currently 420 Dikshitar priests. Including their families, their number is close to 2,000.

Various Saivite saints, including Appar in the 7th century and Sundarar in the 8th, extolled the dedication of the Dikshitars. According to scholar D. Nataraja Dikshitar, they are the only people who have the right to conduct worship at Chidambaram, "a legacy we have inherited as a birthright." The 14th-century Tamil poet Umapathi Sivachariar referred to the Dikshitars as "blemishless persons."

From February 2009 to 2014 when the court case was finally decided, a government representative had been stationed in the temple. The Dikshitars suffered state interference for those years, and there was palpable fear of a takeover. For example, breaking age-old tradition, the government placed a hundi (collection box) in the temple. Protest from the Dikshitars yielded no result. Raju Dikshitar, who helped extensively with this report, recalls, "They tried to divide the community, but the case strengthened our resolve and bonding further. It strengthened us as a community."

Winning the case has given the Dikshitars a fresh lease on life. According to Nataraja Dikshitar, "We have inherited it from generations past and we have to leave it in good condition for our future generations. Now we are assured of our position for posterity. The Supreme Court has strengthened our position."

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Temple History

Like the sacred Rahasya ("secret") chamber, the origins of Chidambaram Temple itself remain a mystery. It is believed it was constructed in a forest of tillai trees (Exoecaria agallocha, a form of mangrove) by the divine architect, Visvakarma, after receiving knowledge of the Chidambaram Rahasya from Sage Patanjali, who is dated between the second and fourth centuries bce.

Nataraja Dikshitar explains, "We have copper-plate inscriptions dating to 700ce that mention the Dikshitars. When King Maravarman Sundara Pandyan visited Chidambaram in the mid-13th century, he applauded the Dikshitars for meticulously performing pujas and managing the finances well."

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dinodia.com

Lord Siva's servitors: (clockwise from opposite left) Painting of the temple's innermost sanctum, with the rahasyam on the left, Siva Nataraj in the middle and the Parvati on the right; the temple's gold-tiled roofs; young Dikshitars in training chant as they walk through the temple; chanting Sri Rudram in one of the temple's huge hallways; Hindu Renaissance Award certificate

The temple was a repository of rich literary texts. Works of the great Tamil bhakti saints—Appar, Sambandar, Mannikavasagar, Sundaramurti, Umapathi Sivachariyar, and Sekkilar—were found here. In some cases, these were the only surviving copies. Appar considered the ground so sacred that on entering the temple he would roll to the sanctum sanctorum and back, not wanting to put his sullied feet on the holy ground.

The temple is an architectural marvel, with a 1,000-pillared hall, the golden dome over the Kanaka Sabha and innumerable inscriptions adorning its walls. Wall carvings display all the 108 dance poses described in the Natya Shastra by Bharata Muni, which form the foundation of classical Bharatanatyam dance.

The temple suffered severe damage through the centuries, first from the Muslim invaders and then British and French battles. It was built, rebuilt and expanded numerous times in its history by multiple South Indian rulers, including kings of the Pallava, Chola, Pandya and Vijayanagar dynasties.

History records painful narrations of how the Dikshitars protected the Nataraja Deity during the Islamic invasions of Malik Kafur and Tippu Sultan. The former's invasion, in the early 14th century, was detailed by court poet Amir Khusro in his book Victory Treasures. In the 18th century, Chidambaram Temple came under attack by Hyder Ali's regime.

"These invasions were the dark period of Chidambaram," recounts Nataraja Dikshitar. "Not fearing for their safety, the Dikshitars carried Nataraja, Shivakamasundari and important Deities in a huge wooden box—which is there in the temple even today—and traveled during the night from Chidambaram across South India to Kerala. Many Dikshitars died during the arduous journey. For close to 39 years, Nataraja was kept securely hidden near Allepey, south of Kochi.

"When peace returned to Chidambaram in the 14th century, the Dikshitars frantically looked for the murtis. They found them in a tamarind grove, hidden underground, brought them back to Chidambaram and resumed worship. This explains why the Dikshitars are so protective of Nataraja. During the 18th and 19th centuries, many temples in the region were desecrated by invaders. Chidambaram Temple was converted into a fort by the British—you can see the fort walls even now. For nearly 110 years during this period, pujas were again stopped."

dikshitar community

Chidambaram Temple once owned huge tracts of lands, estimated at 3,000 acres, gifted by various kings and benevolent devotees. The rights were in the name of the Deity, Nataraja. The Dikshitars, being forbidden from engaging in any outside occupation, entrusted the tilling of these lands to farmers who would give a portion of their harvest to the temple each year. This served as a major source of the temple's income.

"The British," Bharani explained, "were disdainful of Hindu temples and helped usurpers and opportunists. Any person named Nataraja could claim some of the temple's land as his, and be granted lawful rights. Many usurped these lands, arguing that their family had occupied it for generations." Today, the temple has no landed property, yet still manages to be financially stable.

How the Temple Is Managed

The Tamil Nadu government has taken over 36,425 Hindu temples to date, under the claim of local mismanagement. It has never taken control of the places of worship of any other religion: no mosques, no churches, no gurudwaras. This discriminatory treatment of Hinduism has been a continued point of contention in every state in India, as each state government has

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likewise asserted control over the temples within its borders. It has even come up as we go to press with the Uttarakhand BJP state government's July 21st takeover of 51 temples, including the famed Kedarnath and Badrinath.

This is not an issue of ownership as such, because the temples are owned by the presiding Deity, who is a legal person. At issue is the management—most specifically, control of the temple's income. There have been continuous complaints of temple funds being used by governments for purposes unrelated to the temple, or even to religion. The Dikshitars' competent management of Chidambaram Temple disproves the state governments' contention that temples so run will always be mismanaged.

By way of corroboration, we explored just how Chidambaram Temple operates. It is, first of all, a democracy. Each of the 420 married Dikshitars eligible to perform pujas and touch the Deity in the temple has equal rights, regardless of age.

The temple is administered by a nine-member committee that serves for a one-year term. Each Dikshitar has a unique identity number. Once a year, these numbers are put in a pot and nine slips are pulled out. These nine form the committee for the year. These nine numbers are put back in a pot a month later and one is picked out; this individual becomes the secretary and heads the committee.

"If a young, inexperienced Dikshitar is chosen as secretary, elders in the family guide him. There is no hierarchy of age; everyone respects his word in matters of temple administration," says Raju.

Besides performing pujas, the duties of committee members include administrative responsibilities such as supervising maintenance of infrastructure, keeping financial records, enforcing rules, setting the roster for when priests are on duty and levying fines if a priest is found violating rules. They also decide on temple policy, discipline of the community and planning of special events.

"Differences do arise, but they don't blow out of proportion and affect relationships. Elders and family members intervene and advise. People in our community don't carry any ill will; the bonding is strong. The community of Dikshitars is like a large joint family," says Raju Dikshitar.

The priests work on a 20-day cycle, with two days at each shrine in rotation. Four priests are assigned to each of the five major shrines: Nataraja, Amman Koyil, Subramanya Temple, Shiva Linga at the Mulasthanam and the Deva Sabha where the parade murtis are kept. They perform all the rituals for the Deities and the private rituals of individual worshipers, and they receive a share of the offerings at the shrines. Priests on duty are responsible for the security of the valuables.

dikshitar community

For special rituals and festivals, a main priest is selected by drawing lots. Each Dikshitar serves one day in two years as the main priest at the central Nataraja shrine. Perhaps just once in a lifetime they may be selected by lot to perform the abhishekam (sacred bath) to Nataraja during the temple's annual festival.

Twice a year, twenty are chosen to manage for the next six months the treasury that houses the Deity's valuables. The main vault has 20 locks, and each of the 20 priests holds one of the keys. All must be present for the vault to be opened. Raju affirms, "This is a tight security system that ensures the protection of jewelry and valuables belonging to the Deities. There is no room for theft and mishandling. A meticulous record of the operations is maintained."

The Dikshitars themselves are the security guards, with 42 on duty every night. They split into groups and take turns going around the huge complex. The young ones can be seen scurrying around the flat rooftops. Nataraja Dikshitar explains, "The invasions by Muslim rulers and the dangers posed to the shrine have made the Dikshitars realize the criticality of protecting the temple. The night watchmen duty has been in practice for generations. The Dikshitars make their rounds with just a flashlight and a stick."

dikshitar community

dikshitar community

dikshitar community

dikshitar community

Temple activities: (above) temple tank and gopuram at night; (below); a mother gives son rice during upanayana samskara

System for the Temple Income

The Chidambaram Temple is perhaps unique in that it does not solicit funds or fees from devotees. There is no hundi, and there is no specified amount for sponsoring pujas or aratis. According to Bharani Kanda Dikshitar, "Devotees for generations have engaged the Dikshitars to perform rituals and specific pujas for them. They pay whatever they wish. We perform the pujas and send them vibhuti and kumkuma prasadam if they reside outside Chidambaram. We have to give the temple a substantial percentage for each day, and whatever remains will be our earnings." The fixed amount is reviewed and increased every few years to adjust for inflation.

Such donations are offered under a kind of informal contract called kattalai. The seva or services provided range from a simple monthly archana to conducting an entire festival. Each priest has 200 to 500 clients who regularly engage them for pujas. Clients can withdraw from their kattalai at any time or choose to engage a different Dikshitar. Some clients have been associated with the temple for generations. The priests may also approach devotees at the temple and offer their services, even to visitors who may be unaware of the kattalai system.

Certain daily pujas and festivals are financed as a hereditary practice by several religious institutions and philanthropists associated with the temple. For example, Tiruppanantal Matam and some devotees donate towards the offering of food to the Deity, which is then shared with the priests on duty and their families.

The Dikshitar in charge of prasada (sugar pongal and tamarind rice) must give the cook an estimate of the quantity of food required for the day; he also pays for the provisions. After sales of the prasada, leftover food is fed to the fishes in the pond; the Dikshitar absorbs any loss incurred. If all the prasada is sold, he gets to keep the profit after giving the temple what is mandated.

A major part of a priest's income consists of his share of offerings at the various shrines during the 20-day cycle, dakshina (contributions) received while assisting with central rituals. He also receives any profit from the sale of prasada and keeps a portion of the proceeds from the kattalais. Dikshitars seek kattalai more for running the temple than for their personal benefit. All the expenses for temple, rituals, maintenance and celebrations are dependent on the contributions of the Dikshitars.

It is no mean task running and maintaining such a huge complex. Issues sometimes arise if clients don't renew a seva or switch to another Dikshitar, but these are sorted out in due course. The community is not much concerned with income. "We are content with what we get." Raju says. "If a priest gets [US]$270 a month in other temples, here at Chidambaram we earn just about $100 a month."

"Our requirements are frugal," adds Nataraja Dikshitar. "There is contentment in the community. We are not materialistic and are not attracted to fancy gadgets, cars, air conditioning or expensive things. We spend most of our time at the temple. If a Dikshitar is not at home, he's at the temple. For us, the temple is our home, and all glory is there."

"Thanks to technology and connectivity, clients have increased and life has become comfortable. Those days we were dependant on a few families, mostly Chettiars (businessmen) who were connected to the temple for generations. We did not see this kind of money," says Raju's grandfather, Dr. A. Ananda Nataraja Dikshitar, former linguistics dean at Annamalai University. He has observed many generations and witnessed the highs and lows of the temple.

Birthday celebration: (above, left to right, top to bottom) ceremony to honor the 80th birthday of Ananda Nataraja Dikshitar, seated with his wife; fire worship; preparations; Ananda and the two small boys get a water blessing

The Dikshitar Lifestyle

While other 21st-century families are battling to keep their children in the fold of tra-

unknown

unknown

dition, in a world of prolific technologies and connectivity, the Dikshitar community has not compromised their customs. They continue to lead an orthodox lifestyle, immersed in rituals at home and at the temple, fully cognizant of the privilege and responsibility of serving at a temple of such great power.

Dikshitars young and old sport the traditional hair style, a partially shaven head with a long tuft drawn into a knot over the left ear, just as they did centuries ago. Their dress code is the white cotton dhoti and veshti, worn with a shirt when outside the temple. The women wear the traditional nine-yard sari with ease, while elsewhere Hindu women are resorting to YouTube to learn how to wrap a sari.

Nataraja Dikshitar explains their philosophy on child rearing: "We are progressing only by offering pujas to Nataraja, not by academic excellence or material achievements. We don't teach our children to aim at becoming a doctor or engineer. We keep telling them, as they grow, that they are Dikshitars, an exclusive privilege, and this is the greatest opportunity they could have in life, to worship Nataraja. They develop a relationship with Nataraja." Visitors to the temple will notice the active presence and participation of the young Dikshitars.

Bharani Dikshitar adds, "At a very young age our children are taught that this is what they will inherit and the responsibility to preserve it is on them. They grow up learning and practicing our traditions despite going to school and mingling with the outside world." Dikshitars do have outside friends but keep their interactions limited. They live in joint families, with three to four generations under one roof.

Marriage

Marriage is sacrosanct for Dikshitars. A Dikshitar is not eligible to perform temple puja unless he is married. Unmarried Dikshitars cannot go into the sanctum sanctorum, touch the Deity or partake in ritualistic activities. They can attend temple meetings, but have no say in any decisions of the temple. They are not eligible to receive the food offerings presented to the Deity.

Once married, a Dikshitar man becomes an earning member of the community. The families celebrate the birth of a girl child with great joy; she will become a vital part of the clan, a partner with her priest husband, qualifying him for the privilege of serving at the temple.

Child marriage was the practice in the pre-independence era. When the girl was two or three years old, she would be chosen as a bride for a Dikshitar boy, their horoscopes having been carefully matched. The families would hold a formal engagement ceremony, and marriage would follow, though the girl continue living in her parents' home, only joining the husband's family at an appropriate age. In the meantime the young husband, would start serving as a priest.

Today the Dikshitars adhere to modern state laws and marry at a legally permissible age. Marriages are still arranged, but at a later age. The chosen bride closely interacts with the family she will marry into, spending an entire day with them during festivals and other occasions. According to Bharani Dikshitar, "This helps her bond with the family and pick up the nuances of that family's practices. When the girl moves into the home as a daughter-in-law, the mother-in-law will be as endearing to her as her own mother. We don't have marital issues in the community; minor issues are counseled, and there is great acceptance among the two families. Girls prefer not to study much; they are mainly home-oriented. We are a family-oriented community." Love marriage is non-existent, according to the Dikshitars.

Festive times: (clockwise from above left) view from a gopuram of the 2015 Sabha Kumbhabhishekam festival in progress; bathing of the gold-tiled roof; Raju Dikshitar playing cymbals during chariot festival; each Dikshitar sports this distinctive hair style

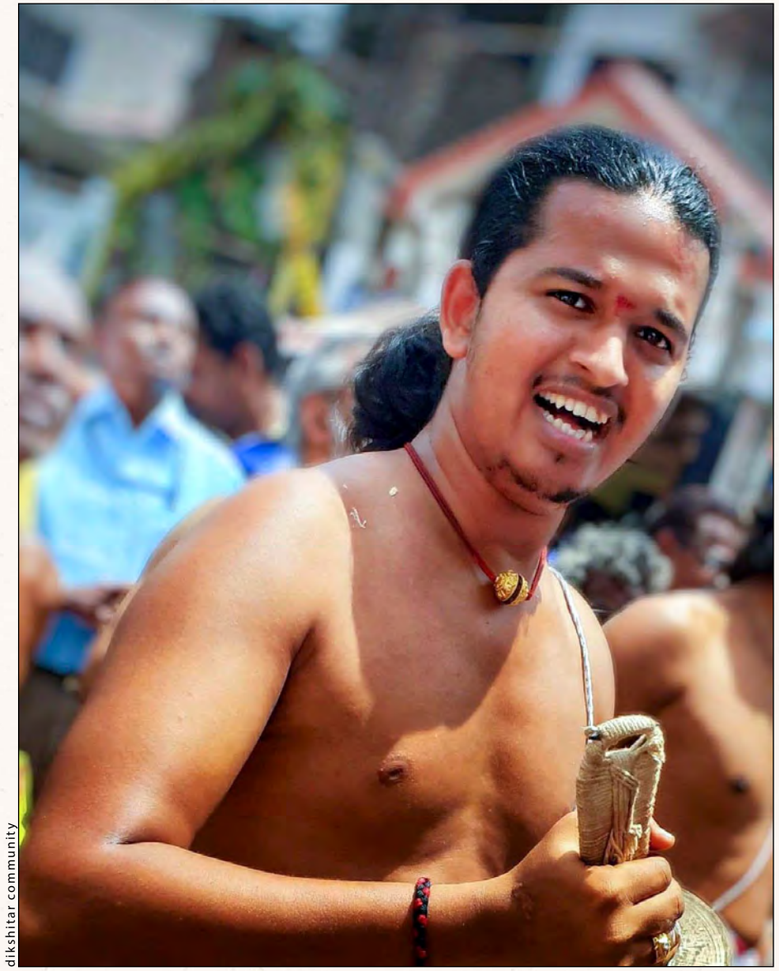
How the Priests Are Trained

Worship at Chidambaram Temple, while unique, is based on Vedic rites and the Saiva Agamas. Children are initiated into Vedic studies at a young age, and by seven or eight are assisting the elders with puja. According to Raju, "Most of the Dikshitars are sent to gurukulas in Kumbakonam, Ramanasramam in Thiruvannamalai, Hyderabad or Chennai. Gurukula education is virtually compulsory, since this study while away from home ingrains self discipline. Dikshitars are adept at the Vedas; some have memorized the entire Yajur Veda."

Dikshitar children are sent for formal schooling as well, and there is no objection to higher studies. However, it is mandatory that they complete their basic education in mantras and rituals. Since they know their livelihood is within the temple, most Dikshitars don't pursue higher studies but immerse themselves in temple activities at an early age. Academic pursuits are not popular, though several priests have doctorate degrees.

Currently about forty Dikshitars are unmarried. They assist with non-ritualistic odd jobs at the temple. Others, who married a non-Dikshitar because no bride was available within the community, leave and settle elsewhere. They come to the temple only as devotees.

Dikshitars are prohibited from taking up vocations outside of temple service. A few have gone out to work, but returned to the temple a few years later. Some of the priests also serve in other private temples. Nataraja


dikshitar community

dikshitar community

Dikshitar explains, "Young Dikshitars feel only a Dikshitar can serve Lord Nataraja, and by working elsewhere they would be doing disservice to the temple and the community. But no matter where they are, they maintain the austerities and rituals of Dikshitars as mandated by the community. A Dikshitar is always a Dikshitar."

The Temple's Major Rituals

The Chidambaram Temple observes the Vaidika form of worship as set down by the sage Patanjali, who witnessed the Ananda Tandava. The Dikshitars believe that because of their pujas here, Siva continues to perform his Ananda Tandava dance for the perpetuation of the universe—which contributes to their strong sense of responsibility.

The idea that worship at Chidambaram sustains the whole world is narrated in the verses of Periyapuranam, where the poet Sekkizhar attributes the illumination of the world to the recitation of Vedas in the Chidambaram Temple. The Dikshitars believe that reciting the Vedas sustains the well-being of the cosmos. "My father," Raju said, "doesn't have breakfast until after he has recited the 1,008 names of Siva and chanted the Vedas at the Nataraja shrine each day. Many Dikshitars follow this practice."

Many different rituals are regularly conducted across the huge 52-acre compound. One of the most significant is the rahasya—"secret" or "hidden"—puja, a daily ritual performed inside the sanctum sanctorum of the Nataraja shrine in a curtained area to the left when facing the main Deity. There is no murti or image in this chamber, only a yantra, mystical diagram etched on a gold plate, called the Samagama Yantra, with a gold bilva leaf garland adorning it. The curtain is removed only for a few seconds during puja to allow darshan of the empty space, which signifies akasha. Devotees find this puja a profoundly mystical experience. The uninitiated can be perplexed by the nothingness.

Yearly, the Deity is brought out of the inner sanctum to the Raja Sabha for ritual bathing on auspicious days. The Nataraja Deity is around three and a half feet tall, and so precious that thirty to forty Dikshitars are required to carry Him safely to the abhishekam pedestal. It then takes nearly six hours to perform the abhishekam, which may use over 210 gallons of milk and many other offerings. The main priest for the ceremony is chosen by lot. This is a rare opportunity that every Dikshitar yearns for. According to Bharani Dikshitar, the rituals have not changed over the centuries.

What the Future Holds

Chidambaram Temple represents the ancient heritage of Hindu faith and civilization. Here, it is believed, Siva eternally performs His cosmic dance of bliss, the Ananda Tandava. All Hindus must ensure this continues unhindered forever. The Dikshitars in particular have a huge responsibility and must tread with extreme caution. They are under the close watch of the media, the government and opponents of our heritage; any lapse or misstep can be used against them. They do not take their status for granted. They know the responsibility rests on them to preserve the temple for posterity. It is this dedication that Hinduism Today honors with its award of "Hindus of the Year." π

GUEST EDITORIAL

Crow Lessons on Life & Immortality

The tale of an eagle near life's end seeking advice from a long-lived crow; and Alexander the Great's quest for a fountain of youth

BY DR. LALITA KUPPUSWAMY

The desire to live forever has existed in humanity since the dawn of civilization. A venerable poem sheds light on this subject. An eagle became sorrowful when he grew old and his youth had faded. He flew to another land to find some elixir rare and wonderful to ease his mortal sickness. There, far below, a flock of sheep grazing in the pasture, seeing the eagle, were startled and bleated loudly. Their fearful shepherd ran away, letting all the sheep scatter. The old eagle settled on a tree where a raven was also perched. The raven subjugated himself to the eagle, who shared with him his plight.

The eagle spoke, "Alas, what is this life to me but a bubble upon waters, my pomp and show gone? Yet, here you remain, black raven, who escaped my father's father's chase with cunningness. O filthy crow, what is the source of your longevity? You seem the same as you ever were, while my life is fading. Please unfold the secret."

Thereupon the raven invited the eagle for a feast where he could eat things sweet and rare. The raven took the eagle to a dung hill, strewn with spoiled food and meat covered with flies. A horrible stench spread far and wide. The spot was so disgusting, the eagle could not sit there at all.

The raven shared that such filth and decay were the secret of his great longevity; whereas the eagle had passed his royal life in the sky, fresh air, with every creature obedient to his command, with the breast of partridge, quail and pheasant as warm and succulent meals. Now, if he seeks such longevity, he should fall upon the base decaying carrion and learn from a raven so disgusting.

shutterstock

The eagle sprang to attention, telling the raven, "Unworthy I am to share your wonderful hospitality. I welcome my fate to die in heaven's zenith. Death I await! I could never live on such dirty things." The king of birds then flew, hovering in the topmost skies, with freedom limitless, abandoning his fanciful quest.

In Hindu literature and in daily life, the crow is associated with Yama, the God of Death. Food offerings are given to crows in funeral rites as symbolic gifts to the departed. It is narrated in the Puranas that once when the Gods were attacked by a demon, Lord Yama assumed the form of a crow and escaped. So Yama conferred the boon of longevity on the crow.

Crow wisdom on immortality is the heart of another interesting story. Alexander the Great, realizing the body is perishable, sought an elixir that would make him immortal. He came across a sage who had neither attraction to riches nor fear of dying and to him expressed his desire for immortality. The sage told him about a secret cave with an eternal fountain whose water would free him from death. Alexander reached the cave. The spring water was pure and attractive. As he bent down to drink, he heard a voice from a crow who warned him thus, "Wait! Don't drink the water. Long, long ago I imbibed and have been sad ever since, sitting here for centuries. I am fed up with this life and I want to die. But death does not approach. Whatever I wanted to know, I have learned, and now nothing remains to be known. Formerly I had many bird friends and I was their king. All have died but I am alive and so alone. Therefore, O great one, before drinking this water, ponder if you would like to become miserable and hopeless like me." Hearing that sobering advice, the king renounced the water and returned to his kingdom.

If he had meditated over the matter properly, Alexander would have understood the truth. He would have realized that the body made up of matter is perishable, and the consciousness which imparts life to that body is imperishable. To realize this, there is no need to find a cave with a fountain of youth. The cave is your spiritual heart, which is the fountain-source of true immortality.

It is daily seen that whoever is born or created—whether man or plant, animal or inanimate pot—perishes one day. This is the law of nature. All religions formulate values and ethical codes for leading a happy, peaceful life, pointing out that the immortal soul in the form of consciousness exists inside the physical body. Without proper understanding, man aspires for physical immortality, which is against the law of nature.

The real import, as enshrined in Vedic mantras, is that as long as we live, we should have a healthy life with healthy organs, dedicating ourselves to the welfare of humanity, leading a worthy life memorable to ourselves and to others.

Life is a blessing and a precious gift from the Almighty. Life itself is so beautiful and has so many secrets to unfold before us, with its canvas of rich, vast, varied, novel and beautiful flora and fauna to learn from. When we find joy in life and nature around us, slowly we will look for something beyond physicality. We read sermons in stones, books in brooks, songs in springs. We find joy and love everywhere. Flora, fauna, nature and human world, all will have a new coloring to us. The spiritual process becomes a natural process of growth for us. This is the goal for which our life here is intended.

Dr. Lalita Kuppuswamy is a retired Associate Professor of Sanskrit from University of Delhi. See: lalitakuppuswamy.blogspot.com

Hindu Heritage Endowment

Shiva Murugan Temple: Beneficiary of New Fund

The Concord Shiva Murugan Temple (CSMT) Endowment, fund #88, grant income includes maintaining the gardens and grounds of the current real property, plus any subsequent connecting temple lands, maintenance and repair of the Temple and Annex Building, care of plants, ponds, paths and fencing. This grant is contingent upon the current real property remaining intact with no portion sold. The grant income cannot be used for non-CSMT building maintenance or repairs, administrative or managerial salaries, utilities, telephone, new construction or legal fees.

The new temple is under construction in Concord, CA

This fund was created by Ravi Nadesan of Concord, California. He explains what inspired him to create the fund, "A dev otee of the Murthis enshrined in this temple since 1978, I had moved our small family to Concord, CA. in '86. Shortly after this, our Gurudeva came to the area on request of the local families. During his private visit with us, my wife and I had asked if a small Hindu place of worship could possibly be established nearby. He graciously responded by suggesting we place a shrine to Sri Ganesha in our backyard and do daily pooja. So, we did. Other devotees probably asked a similar question and received a similar answer.

Ravi Nadesan

Today, the CSMT is thriving with the continued support of the greater San Francisco Bay area Hindu community and is successfully constructing a new temple of the South Indian Traditional architecture on the same site.

Having personally been directly engaged with the management and operations of the temple since 1995, I, among many others, have a passion for the health and wellbeing of this temple and its contents.

I am grateful for our Gurudeva's inspiration and guidance along with the blessings received from Sri Bodhinatha Veylanswami, the Kauai Monastery and HHE for the opportunity to easily set up this or any endowment for the betterment of the CSMT long into the future.

The CSMT Endowment Fund is a designated beneficiary of my Living Trust."

A side view of the new South Indian style temple

Read more about the Concord Shiva Murugan Temple at temple.org. The fund's goal is five million US dollars. This amount will cover the entire temple budget for one year.

It is wise to consult with your tax professionals if you are contemplating a charitable gift under the extended law. Start your estate plan by downloading the pdf file at:

www.hheonline.org/tool-kit.shtml.

April to June Endowment Contributions

Kauai Aadheenam Monastic Endowment

Rajendra Giri	US$151.00
Roshan Harilela	375.00
Mira Das & R. Mahalingam	250.00
Gayatri Rajan	100.00
Chamundi Sabanathan	78.75
Hitesvara Saravan	63.00
Jai Sivakumara	600.00
Anonymous	331.13
Total	1,948.88

Iraivan Temple Endowment

Frank Burkhardt	30.00
Amey Surendra & Amruta Gangal	21.00
Uday & Sangeeta Naik	500.00
Yogini Ratnasabapathy	50.00
Raj & Asmita Shenoy-Akerkar	50.00
Terrill Silke	300.00
Nalin & Kamal Tolia	5,000.00
Anonymous	303.36
Total	6,254.36

Kauai Aadheenam Annual Archana Fund

Adi Alahan Estate	251.00
Bhagawandas Lathi	101.00
Jogendra Mooroogen	3.66
Vidyadevi Mooroogen	3.66
Goindamah Moothoosawmy	12.50
Nirmala Nandigam	608.25
Subramaniam Pennathur	49.98
Manishankar Sagum	14.63
Kodiswara Selvanathan	200.70
Kannan Venguswamy	51.00
Mayuresh Visswanathan	251.00
Anonymous	21.00
Total	1,568.38

Hinduism Today Lifetime Subscription Fund

Syamala Kumari Amma	299.00
Balaji Ariyanan	299.00
Thirujnanam Arnassalon	14.63
Vishnu & Omkaar Bharadwaaj	299.00
Yash Chaudhary	299.00
Sunil Deo	299.00
Purushottam Dixit	299.00
Regina Doss	299.00
The Deshpande Family	299.00
Shivani Gharti-Magar	299.00
Aneil S. Hegde	150.00
Prabhakar Iyer	299.00
Leela Kamalakshan	299.00
Shyam Komandur	299.00
Anjaneyulu & Kumari Krothapalli	299.00
Atharva Kulkarni	299.00
Rama Narayana Kunda	299.00
Prayes Majmudar	299.00
Ashwini Maureemootoo w www	12.36
Saroja Maureemootoo	24.42
Pralad Mishra	299.00
Bhaveshan Moorghen	7.37
Shanda Kumaran Moorghen	7.37
Udeyadeva Moorghen	7.37
Premalatha & N.B. Nandkumar	299.00
Anu Pai	299.00
Karoumee Pareatumbee	26.87
Ankur Patel	299.00
Chirag Patel	299.00
Pritesh Patel	299.00
Anushka Patil	299.00
Daryl Paulson	299.00
Rajdeep Pradhan	299.00
Ramesh Rao	299.00
Debabrata & Jayanthi Sarkar	299.00
Shailesh Shukla	299.00
Bradley Singer	299.00
Siva Subramanian	299.00
Randeep Suneja	299.00
Meris Von Jenef	598.00
Anonymous	12.36
Total	10,129.75

Gurudeva's Trilogy Distribution Fund

Ramana Jandhyala	36.00
Vel Mahalingum	14.58
Total	50.58

Kadavul Nataraja Ardra Abhishekam Endowment

Umasankaran Mohambourame	107.15
Gowri Nadason	81.48
Parimala Selvaraj	93.00
Raj & Asmita Shenoy-Akerkar	51.00
Jai Sivakumara	200.00
Anonymous	196.00
Total	728.63

Kauai Aadheenam Matavasi Medical Fund

Shyamadeva Dandapani	36.00
Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	7.97
Rajendra Giri	151.00
Mira Das & R. Mahalingam	250.00
Kulagan Moonesawmy	14.75
Gowri Nadason	81.48
Ram Ramamoorthy	45.00
Aran Sambandar	72.00
Vayudeva Varadan	54.00
Anonymous	1008.00
Total	1,720.20

Tirunavukkarasu Nayanar Gurukulam

Anonymous	424.00

Kauai Aadheenam Renovation Endowment

Keshav Goyal	1,008.00

Sri Subramuniya Ashram Scholarship Fund

Anonymous	324.00

Sri Subramuniya Kottam Fund

Anonymous	426.00

Kumbhalavalai Ganesha Temple Endowment

Mano Navaratnarajah	75.00

Hinduism Today Production Fund

Community Foundation of Greater Memphis	108.00
Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	7.97
Ian Johnson	60.00
Marty & Carole Kahn	108.00
Rajagopal Krishnan	20.00
Kulagan Moonesawmy	14.75
Subramaniam Pennathur	50.01
Nuckiren Pyeneeandee	36.46
Gayatri Rajan	50.00
Aran Sambandar	72.00
Anonymous	1,429.75
Total	1,956.94

Hindu Orphanage Endowment Fund

Benevity	3,069.54
PayPal Giving Fund	11.00
Benevity	51.54
Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	7.97
Tamnash J. Gupta	108.00
Roshan Harilela	375.00
Ramana Jandhyala	102.00
Nithya Narayan	50.00
Chamundi Sabanathan	78.75
Hitesvara Saravan	36.00
Rodney & Ilene Standen	30.00
Himanshu Vyas	101.00
Anonymous	133.00
Total	4,153.80

Hindu Education Endowment

Fidelity Charitable Gift Fund	50.00
Arjun Pennathur	25.00
Total	75.00

Loving Ganesha Distribution Fund

Mano Navaratnarajah	225.00
Riorita Tkatchenko	169.12
Anonymous	25.00
Total	419.12

Spiritual Park of Mauritius Endowment

Kiran Keerodhur	50.00

Positive Discipline Endowment

Vinaya Alahan	66.00

Alaveddy Pasupatheeswarar Temple Fund

YourCause	132.30
Nuckiren Pyeneeandee	36.46
Anonymous	108.00
Total	276.76

Murugan Temple of North America Pillaiyar Shrine Fund

Pathmini Saravanapavan	150.00
Sayanthan & Anupama Sivanathan	15.00
Total	165.00

Thank You Bodhinatha Fund

Matthew Berresford	51.00
Lutcheemee Curpen	25.00
Amarnath & Latha Devarmanai	324.00
Panshula Ganeshan	50.00
Amey Surendra & Amruta Gangal	11.00
Robert M. Garrison	500.00
Debashis Ghosh	300.00
Toshadevi Nataraj	50.00
Mano Navaratnarajah	150.00
Ambhigai Paghan	30.00
Cassan Pancham	653.00
Nuckiren Pyeneeandee	36.46
Sumathi Raja	150.00
Michael Ruffra	100.00
Chamundi Sabanathan	108.00
Ian Saczkowski	20.00
Aran Sambandar	108.00
Hitesvara Saravan	108.00
Jai Sivakumara	250.00
Vignesh Sukumaran	600.00
Anba Dayananden Valayten	9.48
Vayudeva Varadan	63.00
John Wahlen	22.00
Michael Wasylkiw	648.00
Anonymous	2,616.13
Total	6,983.07

Sri Chandra Madhab Debnath Endowment

Shyamal Chandra Debnath	100.00

April to June Endowment Contributions

Murugan Temple Yalpanam Festival Fund

Pathmini Saravanapavan	150.00

Manitha Neyam Trust Fund

Nutanaya Sivaceyon	30.00

Mahajana College Fund

YourCause	132.30

Taos Hanuman Fund

Anonymous	108.36

Manjung Hindu Sabha Orphanage Fund

Anonymous	100.00

Swami Vipulananta Children's Home Endowment

Canaganayagam Kugendra	60.00

Hindu Literature Fund

John & Abha Wiersba	204.00

Hinduism Today Complimentary Subscription Fund

Rajagopal Krishnan	40.00

Himalayan Academy Book Distribution Fund

Shyamadeva Dandapani	36.00
Nrusimhayya Manda	30.00
Total	66.00

Kauai Aadheenam Yagam Fund

Sanyasi Ganta	501.00
Rajendra Giri	151.00
Anonymous	33.00
Total	685.00

Yogaswami Hindu Girls' Home of Sittandy Endowment

Efrain Raul Eduardo Romano Abarca	39.00
Yovani Curpen	50.00
Subramaniam Pennathur	50.01
Yogini Ratnasabapathy	100.00
Sivaruban & Nishiya Sivanesan	150.00
Anonymous	1,282.02
Total	1,671.03

Bharatiya Ekta Mandir of Arizona Endowment

YourCause	132.30

Murugan Temple of North America Puja Fund

Vayudeva Varadan	54.00

India Hindu Temple Cleaning Fund

Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	7.97
Kulagan Moonesawmy	7.37
Total	15.34

Anantha Ladies Home Endowment

Sayanthan & Anupama Sivanathan	30.00

Cows of Kadavul and Iraivan Temples (Kovil Maadu) Endowment

Krishna Akundi	500.00
Anil Ananda Badhwar	30.00
Sanyasi Ganta	501.00
Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	7.97
Srinivas R. Madaboosi	100.00
Natraj Narayanswami	41.00
V.A. & Radhu Ravi	51.00
Padmini Samuthiran	162.00
Sivaruban & Nishiya Sivanesan	150.00
Arunasalam Vathavooran	75.00
Anonymous	23.11
Total	1,641.08

Jaffna Kannathiddy Kali Kovil Endowment

Anonymous	108.36

Pakistan Hindu Empowerment Fund

Michael Zimmermann	0.50

Panchangam Endowment Fund

Vijay Srinivasan	2.00
Anonymous	51.00
Total	53.00

Digital Dharma Endowment

Anonymous	279.74

Kauai Aadheenam Info-Tech Fund

Anonymous	21.00

Kauai Aadheenam Feed the Monks Fund

Thulasidas	121.00
Robert M. Garrison	500.00
Keshav Goyal	108.00
Elizabeth Hewitt	50.00
Ramana Jandhyala	216.00
Bernard Lu	450.00
Santha Devi Muniandy	66.00
Silvarajoo Muniandy	11.21
Gayatri Rajan	75.00
Nilambeegaye Renghen	200.00
Padmini Samuthiran	162.00
Savithri Sundaresan	51.00
Anonymous	5,435.00
Total	7,445.21

Insurance Premium

Mrunal Patel	3,003.00

Total Contributions **$54,933.69**

Funds at Market Value, June 30, 2020

Grand Total **$17,098,469.23**

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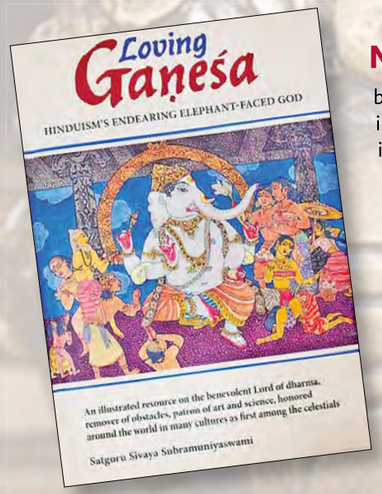

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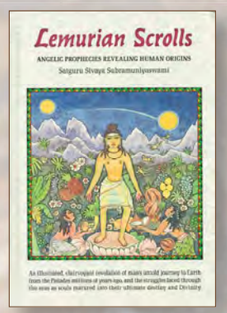

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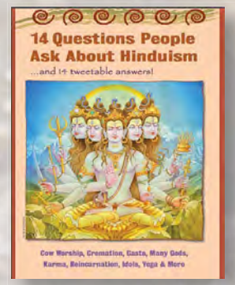

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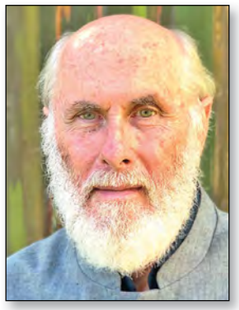

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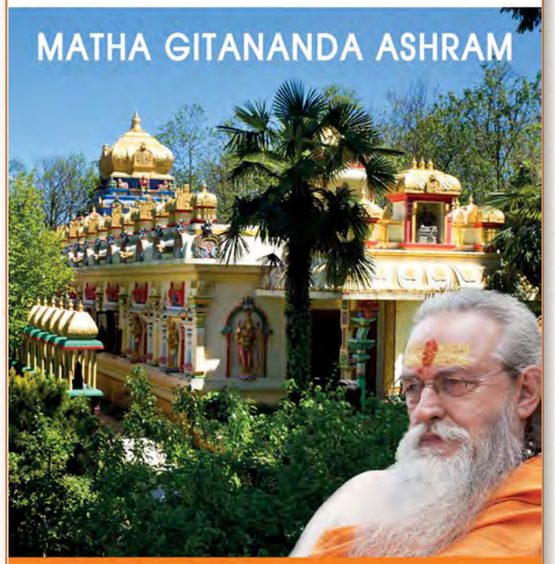

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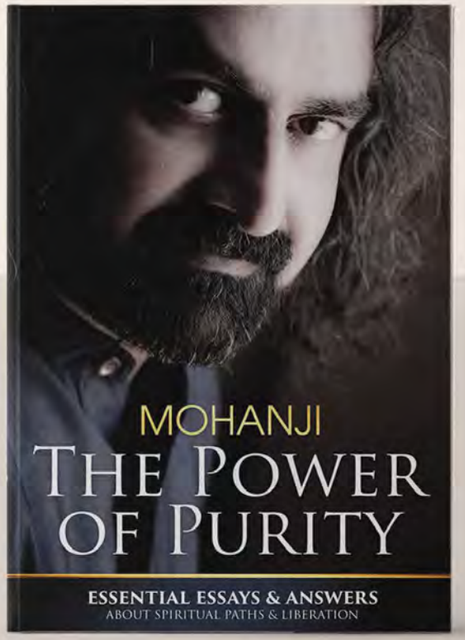

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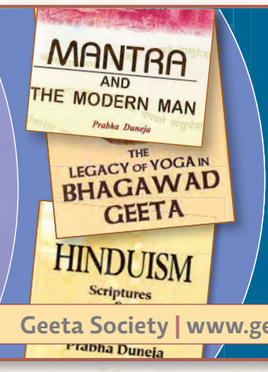

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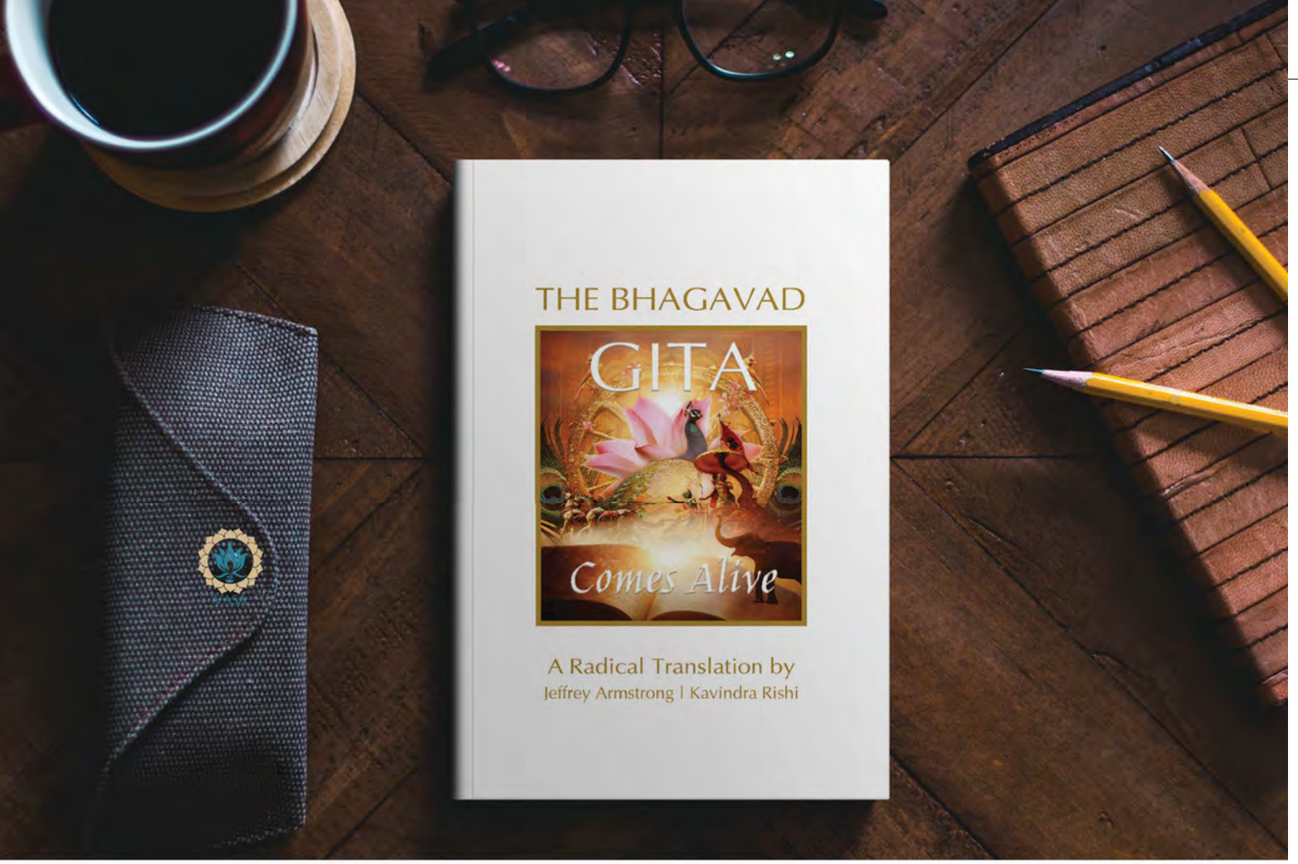

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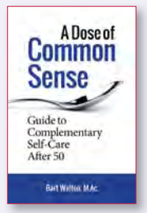

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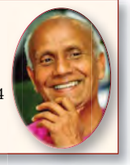

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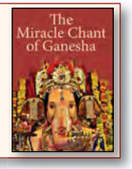

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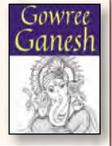

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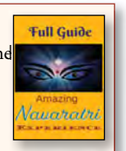

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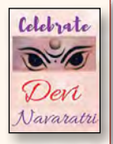

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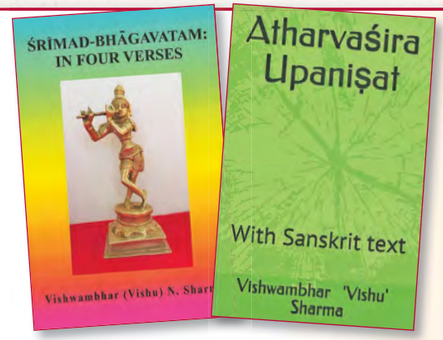

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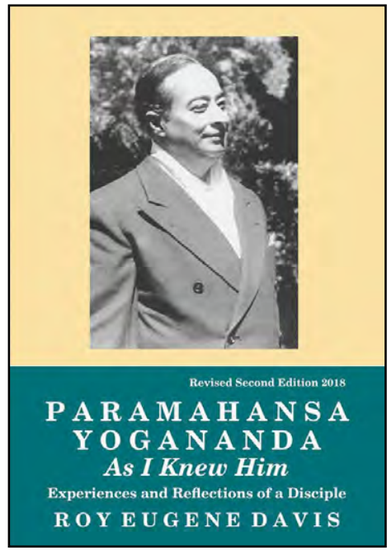

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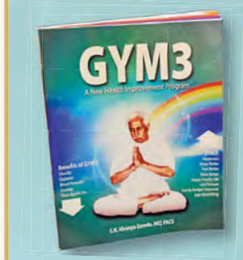

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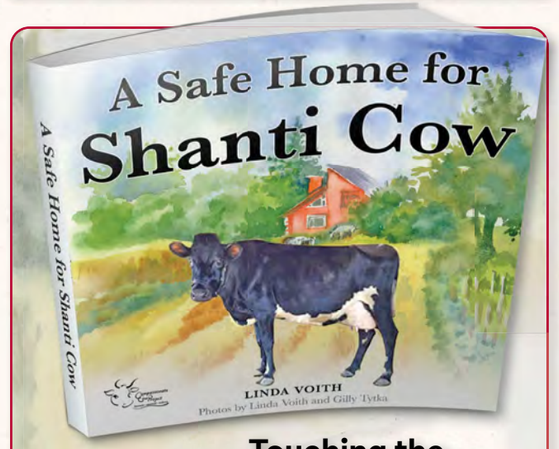

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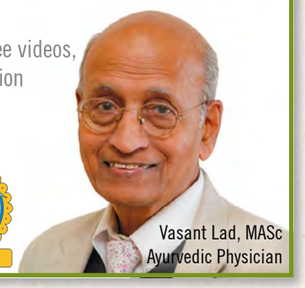

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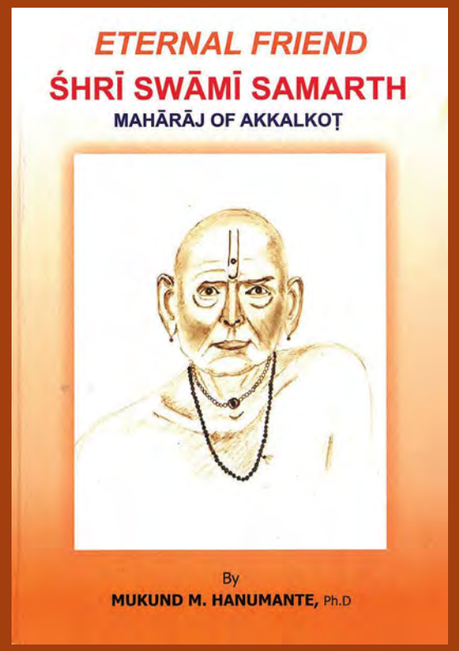

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By M. Hanumante, PhD • 142 p.
hardcover • color
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2020 is coming to an end; 2021 is 'round the bend.

The Hand of the Purifier

When the hand of the Purifier
Swiped the face of the Earth,
I lost my freedom to roam,
Work, shop, mingle or sneeze.
A standing army of a million savants
Has no answer to this one.
He has no religion.
He fears none.

A flick of his finger,
And city after city,
Nation after nation
Silenced.

And I, eternal
And perfect soul,
Am locked down
In Time and Space
By order of the authorities.

The rest you know ....

25th March 2020

My Hermit's Life

2020 is coming to an end;
2021 is 'round the bend.

My Earth Book is full.
The wheels of Time make no sound:
My bones brittle with age
In my earthly body cage.

My Lord of Light
Slide me into a hermit's life,
Meditating on the sacred Letters Five.
Lord of the Crescent Moon,
Thou art the Cosmos
Without an inside,
Nor an outside.

An Entity in Eternity.
Father, though I know
I am in Thy Grace,
Yet, I yearn,
To see Thy Face.

"Infinite are My Faces,
More my love and graces,
Never is there a moment,
I am not with you.
Be patient till you reach
The finishing line
At Kailash."

*15th–23rd July 2018**

A Hermit In Lockdown

At the first rays of Light,
the swimming koi are my delight.
The cascading waters hum, "Aum, Aum, Aum"

A hermit on the hillside,
I walk and walk around my house,
Chanting "Aum Nama Sivaya"
Keeping body and soul in the Light.

Yonder mountains stand still and silent.
On the canvas of the sky.

Blue morning glories
Dance and dazzle
In the breeze.

●

The day begins to fade,
The setting Sun soft and soothing.

Magpies jostle in the trees
For their night's perch.
Raindrops begin to fall.

I hasten back to my celestial cave
And the inner silence;
To be with silence
In the depths of silence.
Immersed in the light
Of silence.

13th – 20th April 2020

Poems by Dr. Arjunan Subramaniam, Desa Parkcity, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

***My Hermit's Life was composed in 2018 for publication at the end of 2020. The poet seemed to sense that 2020 would be a year to remember with 2021 hard to foresee. And his 2018 prayer to be a hermit would be realized in 2020.**

DIGITAL DHARMA

digital travel

Explore India via "Google Arts & Culture"

www.hinduismtoday.com

photos: artsandculture.google.com

Visual education: (clockwise from left) A rustic Siva temple perched in the high Himalayas at Tungnath, Uttarakhand; the famous Chittorgarh Fort in Rajasthan; the ancient city of Rudraprayag, about 88 miles from Rishikesh.

From the golden temple of amritsar to the rock-cut architecture of Ellora and Elephanta Caves, from the Sun Temple of Konark to the hill forts of Rajasthan and the great temples of the Chola dynasty, you can tour some of the most amazing places in India from your armchair—or even while waiting in line to enter a popular store during these days of Covid-19. How? See Google's site artsandculture.google.com/partner/incredibleindia. For the mobile version (which has enhanced creative features), download the Google Arts & Culture free app, and search "India."

The India section is arranged in three sections: 26 "stories" (slideshows), an "In this collection" section (six offerings, ranging from twelve items for "New Delhi" to 144 for "India") and another 153 "Items" (individual photos). In all cases, the photography is exceptional and the captions informative.

The masterful stone carving art of ancient India is beautifully depicted, particularly in the Hampi, Pattadakal, Khajuraho, Ellora, Rani Ki Vav and Chola temple slideshows.

Most captivating is the showcase video "Explore Incredible India in 360," made in partnership with India's Ministry of Tourism. You'll drone over a beautiful seashore, speed down a river and through crowded streets, drive across a bridge high above a pool formed by converging waterfalls. As a temple tank at dawn strikingly reflects the image of an imposing gopuram, with a light shining brightly at the top, you'll want to pause the video and just be there, part of the stillness. Finally proceeding, you'll stand among groups of devotees in a huge temple courtyard at Hampi and be greeted by a lone sadhu. You'll see a huge stone chariot, witness an abhishekam to a Sivalingam, and join a laughing group of women sitting by a river as one applies a mehndi design to another's hand. You'll cycle through green fields along an empty, palm-lined road, ride in a fishing boat in Goa as the fisherman casts his net. You'll join worshipers in the Golden Temple of Amritsar and attend a meal served in the traditional manner to hundreds.

Beyond the India subset, you can peruse collections, artworks and historic places from over 80 countries. That includes 2,000 museums, 10,000 famous sites in Street View, and eight "Insane Views from the Tallest Skyscrapers." Sprinkled throughout are 360° images you can "walk around" in.

The entire Google Arts & Culture site is vast, with countless treasure waiting to be appreciated and fun ways to explore and interact with them. Each section is precious: take just this one: "Time, navigate from artifacts of pre-history to the present day." Wow.