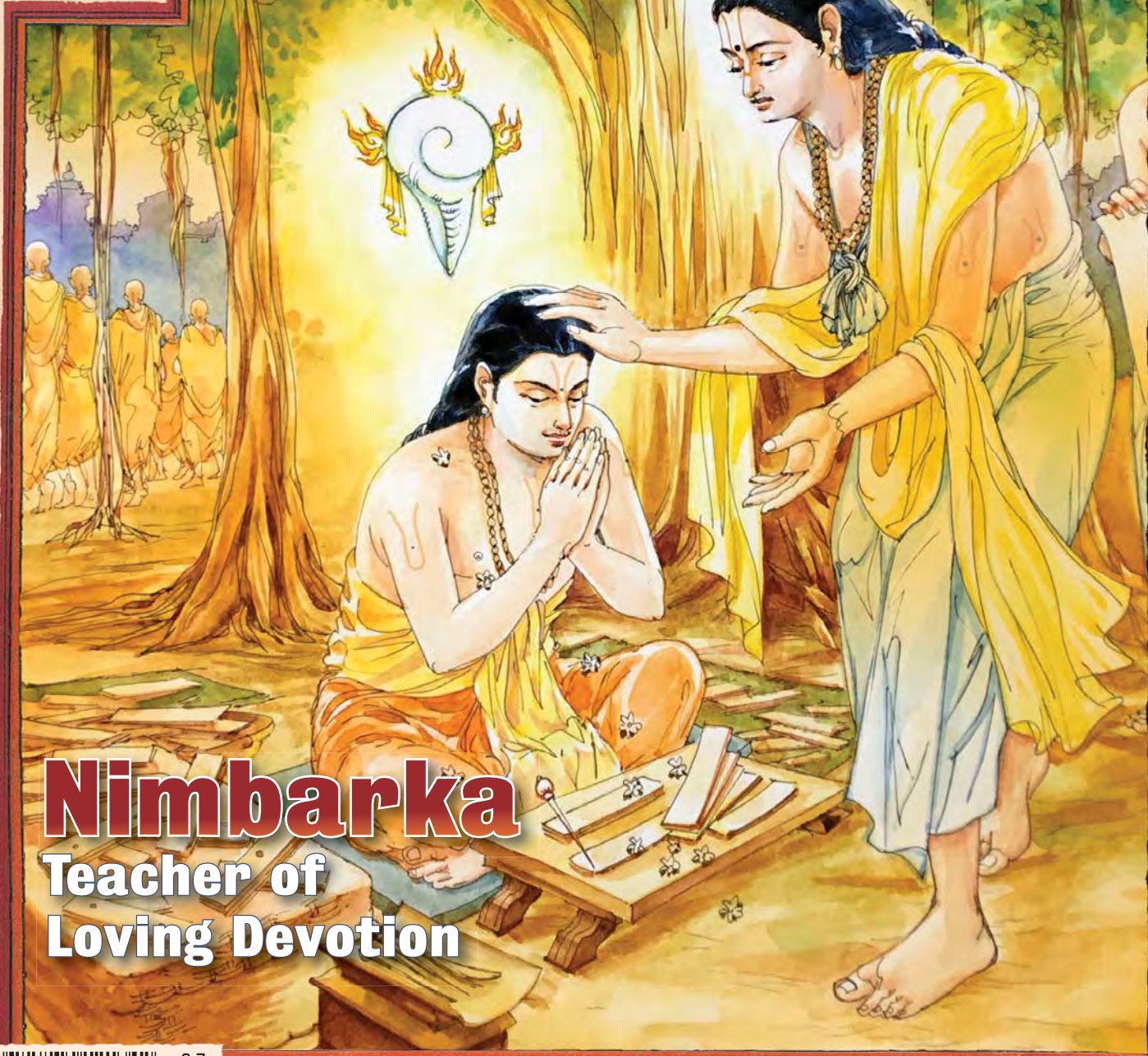


HINDUISM TODAY
ADVENTURES IN ASSAM
SHRI NIMBARKACHARYA
SBNR
MAHASIVARATRI IN MAURITIUS
JULY/AUGUST/SEPTEMBER, 2017

July/August/September, 2017 US\$7.95

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(Cover) The great Pandit Vidyanidhi is seated beneath a banyan tree. His guru, Bhagavan Shri Nimbarkacharya, blesses him with Self-Realization, for he is the incarnation of Shri Krishna's conch shell. (above) Recent surveys show a growing number of people, in the United States and elsewhere, who consider themselves spiritual but not religious—"SBNR."

JULY/AUGUST/SEPTEMBER, 2017 • THE HINDU YEAR HEMALAMBI, 5119

Bodhinatha Veylanswami

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INTERNATIONAL

- Feature:** Assam, the Multifaceted State that's Called "an India in Miniature" 18
Festivals: There's Nothing Like Mahasivaratri on the Island of Mauritius 52
Culture: Y.G. Srimati Lived in Manhattan, Sharing the Art, Dance & Music of Her Native India 58

LIFESTYLE

- Empty Nest:** Wise Words from a Mother whose Only Child Just Left Home for College 34
Insight: The Life of Shri Nimbarkacharya, Founder of Radha-Krishna Worship 36
SBNR: "Spiritual but Not Religious" Is the Fastest-Growing Belief Category in America 62

OPINION

- In My Opinion:** The Importance of Practicing Yoga in Its Fullest Form, Inner and Outer 9
Publisher's Desk: Understanding the Three-Fold Role of Surrender in Spiritual Life 10
Letters 12
From the Agamas: An Exploration of Three Shaktis that Guide the Soul's Evolution 17
Activism: A Globe-Trotting Pakistani Hindu Speaks Up 68

DIGESTS

- Global Dharma** 6
Quotes & Quips 14
Digital Dharma 86

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Mahasivaratri in Mauritius

Discover a remarkable festival that takes place each year
on a small island in the Indian Ocean ... Page 52

GLOBAL DHARMA

HINDU SOLIDARITY

European Hindus Unite in National Organizations

IN APRIL, 2017, THE HINDU FED-eration of Spain (FHE) and the Swiss Association of Hinduism held events commemorating the creation of one united Hindu voice in their respective countries.

The FHE was officially launched in Barcelona with a full-day seminar in April. Conceived in 2015, the FHE held its first meet-ing in Madrid the following year. It has had official meetings with the Spanish government and cre-ated ties of collaboration with the Embassy of India in Spain. At the most recent meeting, Swami Satyananda Saraswati spoke of the

various paths Hinduism offers, concluding that it offers a single, integrated way to cosmic unity.

Also in April of this year, the Swiss Association of Hindu-ism met for the first time, with representatives of one dozen organizations plus 60 private individuals. The organizations included Zurich's network of Tamil community temples, the Ramakrishna Mission in Geneva, the Omkarananda Ashram from Winterthur and a Nepalese Hindu group.



Hinduism worldwide: Naren Herrero, above, host for the FHE event, explaining the history of the organization; (below) Swami Satyananda Saraswati and FHE president, Juan Carlos Ramchandani (to his left), with seminar attendees



INDIA

Honoring a Great Tamil Sage

ON THE EVE OF TIRUVALLU-var day, January 12, 2017, the Gurukulam Matriculation School, Agalar, near Ooty, India, gathered students for a mass *Tirukural* recitation. Some 390 students recited the sage's 2,200-year-old Tamil master-piece on ethics while dressed up as Tiruvalluvar himself—com-plete with beard and hair knot. Each of the younger students recited one couplet of the holy

text, while the older ones recited two or more. The school's princi-pal, B. Suresh Kumar, explained why the 1,330 verses are so important: "To learn all the 1,330 couplets will help the kids not only to mold their own character, but also to influence their per-spective of society itself.

"Therefore," he tells students, "learn the *Tirukural* not as just a lesson in school, but as an important duty of your life."

thought, but a Goddess believed to have been sculpted for Tamil traders living in the area from 960 to 1279ce. The Quanzhou, downstream from Chidian, was the busiest port in the world at that time, hosting frequent trade with India.

.....
Tamil origins: The small shrine remains active even after an earthquake consigned the rest of the building to rubble some 500 years ago



HISTORY

The Goddess in China

"THIS IS POSSIBLY THE ONLY temple in China where we are still praying to a Hindu God," says Li San Long, a resident of Chidian, China, where a myste-rious shrine to a Goddess is wor-shipped by a few dozen villagers, according to a report in *The Hindu* newspaper of Chennai.

At the Xingji Pavilion, the resi-dents pray and burn incense—as in all the Buddhist and Taoist villages of Eastern China. But

here the golden Deity is neither Buddhist nor Taoist. The four-armed Goddess has unmistak-ably Indian features and resem-bles deities in the Vishnu and Shiva temples of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. She sits upright, flanked by two companions and presiding over a figure repre-senting the lower nature.

It was just a decade ago that scholars learned this Deity was not the Bodhisattva Guanyin, as

INDIA

Akshardham Pilgrimage

"Until philosophers are kings:" Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Australian PM Malcolm Turnbull traveled by city metro train to Delhi's famed Hindu temple of Akshardham in April, 2017. The leaders toured the vast complex, talked and offered prayers—all captured in this charming set of photos.



SRI LANKA

Colombo Center Dedicated to Satguru Siva Yogaswami

THE SIVAYOGASWAMI TIRUVADI Nilayam of Colombo, Sri Lanka, dedicated to Siva Yoga-swami (1872-1964) of Jaffna, officially opened on August 31, 2016. Much credit goes to the many years of dedicated work of Somasundaram Sanmugasunda-ran, one of Yogaswami's earliest devotees. "Dr. Shan," as he was called, also assisted Yogaswami's successor, HINDUISM TODAY founder Sivaya Subramuniya-swami, in many ways, even coming to America to record Yogaswami stories and help bring Saiva culture to the West.

Dr. Shan lived in Colombo but frequently visited his guru in Jaffna. After Yogaswami's passing in 1964, there were only

two centers dedicated to his teachings, both in Sri Lanka's north. Though his Colombo devotees gathered every month for decades to honor him, the civil war interrupted plans



for a dedicated center of their own. Once the war ended, though, it was quickly built by the Sivayogaswami Trust of Sri Lanka, whose current president is Dr. Shan's son, Sri Ranjan.

The center was blessed by Subramuniyaswami's suc-cessor, Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami. The event started at the adjacent Ramakrishna Mission, where presiding Swami Sarvarupanandaji spoke briefly. Yogaswami's photo was then paraded to the new facility,

.....
Manifested dream: (left) Siva Yogaswami's shrine at the new center; (right) Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami attends the opening



where an elaborate abhishekam was held to his sacred sandals, accompanied by beautifully sung *Natchintanai* songs com-posed by Yogaswami. Congratu-latory speeches were made by representatives of many influ-ential organizations.

BOOK REVIEW

Making Sanskrit Approachable

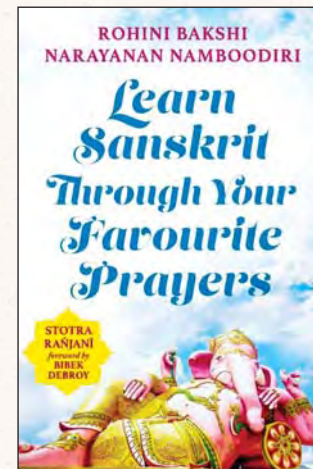
ROHINI BAKSHI'S UNUSUAL Rstyle of teaching Sanskrit through Twitter, #SanskritAp-preciationHour, has been going on since 2013. The outgrowth of this is her new 500-page book, *Learn Sanskrit Through Your Favorite Prayers*.

The book is a treasure house of details in Sanskrit and in

English. The effort by Bakshi and co-author Narayanan Nam-boodiri constitutes a welcome enhancement to the overall, universal campaign for Sanskrit. The book makes it possible for people to study Sanskrit outside the rigors of a class-room regimen—a laudable step. Bakshi and Namboodiri provide

the original Sanskrit verse, a word-by-word translation and a prose version in English for eleven popular Sanskrit *stotras* (prayers), including *Ganesh-ashthakam*, *Shri Hari Stotram*, *Rudrashtakam* and *Aditya Hridayam*. Seven are from the works of Adi Shankara. Hindus who know these verses can now learn their exact meaning.

Reviewed by Prof. K.K. Chawla, Alabama, USA



PROSELYTIZATION

Major Christian Charity Pulls Operations from India

COMPASSION INTERNATIONAL, a Colorado-based Christian charity, was given the option to either register as a religious organization or stop transferring funds to India. In response, after 48 years of work, the organization decided to discontinue its operations in India.

According to *The New York Times*, more than 11,000 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have lost their licenses to accept foreign funds since Prime Minister Narendra Modi took office in 2014. Compassion International, repeatedly ranked as India's largest single foreign donor, has been transferring around US\$45 million each year. The organization solicits donations through its \$38-a-month "sponsor a child" program and distributes them through church-affiliated service centers.

In January, 2017, Compassion's general counsel went to New Delhi to plead their case to India's foreign secretary, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, in a meeting also attended by the second-ranked United States diplomat in India. Indian officials suggested that Compassion International re-register its Indian partners

as religious entities. The charity's legal team discouraged this option, saying it would lead to further paralysis.

A Ministry of External Affairs official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that Compassion International's partners were violating Indian law by engaging in religious activities, and confirmed that the organization had declined a government offer to re-register as a religious organization, which would have allowed it to continue its work in India but under increased governmental scrutiny.

An Indian Home Ministry official interviewed by *The Hindu* said, "Compassion Int. has been told it will not be taken off the watch list. The representatives were here a few days ago and they were shown evidence of religious conversions being done by NGOs funded by them. There is no rescinding the decision." At the meeting, various sources confirmed, the Indian side made it clear that CI, accused of funding NGOs unregistered for religious activity, would get no exemption from the FCRA ruling for "prior permissions."



"Jesus is the core of our ministry:" (above) Screenshot of CI's website; (below) feeding children in a CI-assisted school in India

Adverse reports on two CI-funded NGOs—Chennai-based Caruna Bal Vikas Trust and Compassion East India—were instrumental in putting the foreign donor on the Home Ministry's watch list, said *The Hindu's*

sources. Among other regulatory issues, CI's own mission statement on its website, which says its aim is for "children in poverty to become responsible and fulfilled Christian adults," had raised a red flag.

created has some potential for Eastern mysticism, which has caused concern among members of the Catholic Church."

THE HINDU UNIVERSITY OF

America, in conjunction with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America, announced a two-part on-line training course to become a certified Hindu chaplain. Chaplains work within hospitals, hospices, prisons or schools, providing spiritual care to patients, inmates or students.

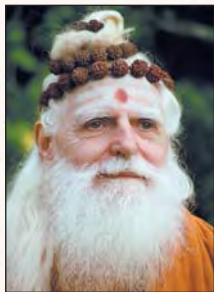
The self-study course is supervised using state-of-the-art virtual class software by Swami Sarvaananda, a board certified chaplain with 15 years experience in medical and hospice chaplaincy. The first 12-week

course introduces students to the concept of chaplaincy, while the second teaches the basics of pastoral care and spiritual counseling. See: bit.ly/HinduChaplain.

Global Dharma
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HINDUISM TODAY was founded on January 5, 1979, by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (1927–2001). It is a nonprofit educational activity of Himalayan Academy, with the following purposes: 1. To foster Hindu solidarity as a unity in diversity among all sects

and lineages; 2. To inform and inspire Hindus worldwide and people interested in Hinduism; 3. To dispel myths, illusions and misinformation about Hinduism; 4. To protect, preserve and promote the sacred *Vedas* and the Hindu religion; 5. To nurture and monitor the ongoing spiritual Hindu renaissance; 6. To publish resources for Hindu leaders and educators who promote Sanatana Dharma. Join this *seva* by sending letters, clippings, photographs, reports on events and by encouraging others.



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IN MY OPINION

Yoga: Beyond the Body

A reminder of the original application and purpose of this ancient system of self-improvement

BY ANJANI GHARPURE

WHAT IS YOGA? IS IT about improving flexibility, relieving symptoms of osteoarthritis, diabetes and depression? Is it a cure for insomnia, a method for toning our bodies, a means to look good? Is this the understanding that we have and that we want to pass on to future generations? Could this tradition—handed down to us from ancient times—really only be about postures, physical beauty, fitness and maybe temporary peace? There must be a subtler, more profound purpose.

Yoga is a science of right living to be incorporated in all areas of our daily life—physical, psychological and spiritual. A life of yoga is a life of training—first of the body and breath and then of the distracted mind. Finally, it is an art of delving deeper within our being. True yoga is about evolution. It is about gaining maturity. It is about moving from functioning at the instinctive level, to eventually leading a moral life. It is about becoming a mature person, ready to discover the essence of our own existence.

Are we really practicing true yoga today? The common physical practice of hatha yoga postures, *asana*, is not the goal of the system; it is a tool to lead one towards yoga's spiritual dimensions, to help straighten and master the mind. Over the last few decades this ancient science has increasingly been prescribed for its side effects (physical fitness and wellness), while its real goal is usually ignored. Without the greater goal of personal evolution, yoga is incomplete. Yoga is a multi-billion dollar industry in the Western world, and most yoga teachers get their training and certification from agencies based in the US. Such programs generally do not have the means, will or expertise to delve systematically into yogic philosophy, largely because of conflicting interests and a resistance to exploring scripture-based teachings. The result is that while many instructors call themselves "yogis," few know the essence of yogic philosophy as



found in *Patanjali's Yoga Sutras* and elsewhere.

As the *Upanishads* point out, "Peace cannot be created; peace is your natural state. You create agitation and disturb peace. Where is the agitation created? In the mind. You keep giving momentum to thoughts because you do not have mastery over the mind." The mind is the world,

and the world is the mind. All problems, all conflicts arise because of a disturbed mind. The mind is our link to the world outside of our body as well as a link to our own inner peace. When disciplined and regulated a once wandering mind becomes calm, focused and ready to handle the stresses of everyday life.

To master the mind you must go beyond the physical aspects of yoga and learn the philosophy behind it—the wisdom of yoga as taught by the saints and sages and presented in the *Yoga Sutras*. The philosophy of yoga is a sophisticated psychological analysis of the human mind. It teaches a person to rein in and discipline themselves to find peace, to find beauty and fall in sync with life's rhythms. These philosophical teachings help one to understand and manage the emotions, improve focus and develop peace. Such a path is greatly pertinent in this day and age, especially when shrinking attention spans, cognitive deficits and shallow thinking increasingly rule.

If we attend yoga classes, we ourselves need to understand the deeper philosophical tenants and speak up when we notice distortion of philosophy or of the Sanskrit language. If we at least request that instructors undergo proper study of the philosophy behind yoga and of the Sanskrit language, we will have helped tremendously in keeping yoga complete for future generations.

ANJANI GHARPURE is a yoga teacher and author in New Jersey, US, who has been actively involved in teaching Hindu philosophy at various yoga certification programs. yogatomasterthemind.com

BRIEFLY...

IN NOVEMBER, 2016, MALAYSIA

issued 750,000 postage stamps in a series called "Places of Worship." The stamps feature houses of God for five major religions—Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and Buddhism.

IN INDONESIA, US VICE PRESIDENT

mike Pence met with religious leaders of Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Confucianism in April, 2017. Pence expressed appreciation to the nation "for its shared commitment to religious freedom and reaffirmed that

the United States will continue to defend this fundamental freedom, at home and abroad."

KANSAS STATE'S BENEDICTINE

College announced in April, 2017, that the campus will no longer offer academic or recreational yoga classes after spring semester 2017. The decision was made in response to a growing number of concerns from students, alumni and faculty, and by request of Archbishop Joseph Naumann and Abbot James Albers. College president Stephen Minnis summarized, "Yoga as

Surrender Is Central to All Yogas

It is perhaps a great cosmic irony that to attain our immortal Self we must relinquish our personal self

BY SATGURU BODHINATHA VEYLANSWAMI

INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE NOT RELIGIOUS make progress toward achieving their goals in life by self-effort. Whatever they accomplish is, from their perspective, solely the result of what they do to achieve it. People who are religious have another factor in their life—the help of divine forces. Even in Buddhism, which does not recognize a Supreme Being, the idea of surrendering to a higher power is present, as followers take refuge in the Buddha, the teachings and the brotherhood. Religious individuals invite blessings into their lives by practicing self-surrender, humble submission or taking refuge in the Divine.

Before individuals have surrendered to the Divine, their free will is likely an expression of their instinctive nature, focused on accomplishing what they desire, which often entangles them more in the world. If that instinctive willfulness is thwarted or they fail to achieve their goals, the reaction is often frustration and anger. Fear and worry are also commonly experienced. Devotees who have surrendered to Ishvara, God as a person, no longer become angry or live in fear or worry. As my Gurudeva wrote, "When difficult times come, they know it is because they are being unwound from accumulated and congested, difficult karmas or being turned in a new direction altogether. They know that at such a time they have to consciously surrender their free, instinctive willfulness and not fight the divine happenings, but allow the God's divine will to guide their life."

Devotion in Bhakti Yoga

When looking at self-surrender within Hinduism, it is natural to think first of bhakti yoga. In fact, an alternate term for bhakti yoga is *sharanagati yoga*—the yoga of self-surrender. This is the practice of devotional disciplines, worship, prayer, chanting and singing with the aim of awakening love in the heart and opening oneself to God's grace. Such practices are done at the temple, in nature and in the home shrine. Bhakti yoga seeks communion and ever closer rapport with the Divine, nurturing qualities—such as love, selflessness and purity—that make such a profound relationship possible.

In Hinduism, the soul comes closer and closer to God through these practices. In Vaishnavism, the devotee is seen as progressing through five levels of relationship with God: neutrality, servitude, friendship, parental affections, and belovedness. Saivism has a similar paradigm for the relationships between jiva and Siva. The final stage is called *prapatti* or *atmanivedana*, defined as unconditional submission to God.



My guru, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, shared: "You might ask how you can love something you cannot see. Yet, the Gods can be and are seen by mature souls through an inner perception they have awakened. This psychic awakening is the first initiation into religion. Every Hindu devotee can sense the Gods, even if he cannot yet inwardly see them. This is possible through the subtle feeling nature. He can feel the presence of the Gods within the temple, and he can indirectly see their influence in his life."

Devotion in Karma Yoga

While most commentators agree that surrender is central to bhakti yoga, few acknowledge its importance in karma and raja yoga. Karma yoga is the path of service and sacred action. In its most profound sense, it is performing all actions in a spiritual manner, as a conscious offering to the Divine. This can be conceived of as worshiping God by serving all beings as His living manifestations. The fruit of all action is surrendered as service to the Lord, a concept known as *Ishvara arpana buddhi* in Sanskrit.

Normally karma yoga is done at a temple or ashram, but it is wise to extend service as widely in your life as you can, such as helping others in your workplace, performing beyond what is expected, willingly and without complaint. Performing menial tasks in the home, temple or ashram is an effective way to restrain pride and nurture humility. Practically speaking, this can include washing dishes, laundering clothes, caring for the kitchen and bathrooms, working in the gardens, washing the windows and sweeping the paths—all without seeking or expecting praise.

Performing our work with the aim of reaching God naturally leads to the perspective that each task is an offering to the Lord. Every act, from the grandest to the lowliest, becomes a sacred rite. Work is worship. The whole of life is sanctified and the conflict between secular and spiritual ceases to exist.

Karma yoga can ultimately lead to the realization that the universe is all the action of God. This insight gives the perspective of not merely renouncing the fruit of action but also surrendering the sense of being the doer. My Gurudeva shares an insight on this: "Having the Self as a point of reference and not the material things, with the life force constantly flooding through these nerve currents, you are actually seeing what you are doing as part of the cosmic dance of



Perfect surrender: Two devotees, graced with a vision of God Siva as an infinite pillar of light, rush to humble themselves before the Source of all

restraints and religious observances followed by ever-deepening stages of concentration, meditation and contemplation. Samadhi is the goal of yoga, a oneness between the meditator and the object of meditation, and surrendering to God, to Ishvara, is the key to attaining it. Patanjali speaks of it as *Ishvara pranidhana*, the fifth essential observance (*niyama*), the surrender of our limited self-identity to the infinite perfection of Ishvara, the source of the yoga teachings. This surrender is the acceptance of God's perfection and our desire to be influenced by that as we progress on the yoga path. We seek divine blessings, wisdom and ultimately union, samadhi, through the grace of the adi (first) guru of yoga.

Before developing Ishvara pranidhana, progress in yoga is self-centered. We think, "I am making yogic progress through my striving and dispassion." Ishvara pranidhana supplements such effort with reliance on Ishvara to bestow the ultimate grace called samadhi.

Swami Hariharananda Aranya interprets Patanjali's thinking: "Through contemplation on God as on a liberated being, the mind in the normal course also becomes calm and thereby concentrated. From knowledge derived through such concentration, the spiritual needs of a yogin are met."

Let us compare this to taking a test in school. If you were to simply study and take the test, you would get a B+. However, by also sincerely seeking God's blessings, you do better and earn an A. In all complex fields, an individual can only go so far on his or her own. To truly master any discipline, a qualified teacher or coach is needed. What better teacher for raja yoga than its progenitor and first guru—Ishvara? Taking Ishvara as your teacher is done through the practice of Ishvara pranidhana.

My guru gives an insightful description of how the advanced meditator practices self-surrender, or giving up, while experiencing God's absolute state (*Si*) and God's all-pervading consciousness (*Va*): "While in a dual state of assuming some personal identity, he states, 'Siva's will be done,' as his new and most refined sadhana of giving up the last of personal worldliness to the perfect timing of the infinite conglomerate of force and non-force within him. This he says as a mantra unto himself when he sees and hears in the external world. But when eyes and ears are

closed, through the transmuted power of his will he merges into the samadhi of *Va* and *Si* and *Si* and *Va*, experiencing Reality as himself and himself as Reality."

As we have shown, surrender is present in three major yogas: bhakti, karma and raja. Its role is central to realizing the deepest attainments of all three disciplines. It is perhaps an irony that to attain our immortal Self we must relinquish our personal self.

Siva [Ishvara], as the energy of Siva flows in and through you." Paramaguru Yogaswami put it simply in one of his four great sayings: "Siva is doing it all."

Devotion in Raja Yoga

Surrender has a seldom-recognized place in raja yoga as well, as Patanjali noted in his *Yoga Sutras*. Raja yoga begins with ethical



LETTERS

Many Thanks

African Lotus Productions expresses its sincere gratitude to Ramalingam Moodley for all the efforts he has taken in highlighting *Sadhana—The Inward Path* on the global scale in the April/May/June, 2017, issue. Thank you for the beautiful story, which covered the essence of the show and its promotion of Hinduism in South Africa. May you continue to serve our Hindu Dharma.

JAYAN MOODLEY
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Tradition and Culture

In the last issue of the magazine, Mr. Himan-shu Vyas, being a left-handed Hindu, raised a question on handling things. While I am not learned or an acharya or monk, I thought I'd reply since it's an intriguing question.

Hinduism's broader aspects, along with our puja practice, are governed by rituals, traditions and culture. Rituals are derived from the *Agamas* and are therefore not compromised. Traditions differ from place to place. Culture is a smaller version of tradition and also differs.

For example, in the Tirupati temple, devotees are not allowed to enter wearing headgear; in Pashupati Nath temple, Kathmandu and Nepal, only Hindus can enter the temple. In the Kanyakumari temple and Anant Padmanabha temple, a devotee will not be allowed to enter unless wearing a dhoti or sari. These are temple traditions that differ from one to another.

As far as my knowledge extends, the use of right hand over left is an ancient tradition that is honored in every temple. When a priest gives tirtha or prasadam, he extends his right hand and devotees accept with the right palm, or right palm over left palm. It is also the right hand of the devotee that gives dakshina to the priest. I am 75 years old, brahmin, and I have never seen a priest performing such functions with the left hand.

HIRISAVE K. RANGNATH
NEW YORK, US

Great Reads for Young Minds

Great articles as usual. The April/May/June article on consciousness and mind bridging inner science and modern science is a great read for young minds. The subheading *Yoga in the Waking State* should be highlighted to spread the knowledge of living fruitfully in this busy world. The statement by Acharya Vamadeva Shastri, "There is nothing the world can offer that can compare to the depth of awareness, perception and insight within us," is profound! In addition to describing

what it is to be in the present moment, the article also gives the tools to help us abide in that fruitful state. Also, I wish more would take advantage of your low rate for the lifetime subscription.

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Upanishadic Wisdom

I thoroughly enjoyed reading your article "Science and the Mind" (April/May/June, 2017). I agree with the author that mind and consciousness are not produced by the brain. Rather, the brain is an instrument of the mind, and mind is an instrument of consciousness, our true eternal Self, Atman, which transcends body, mind, action, time and space. Nothing explains this concept better than the third *valli* of *Katha Upanishad*, which presents the parable of the chariot to highlight how Atman, body, mind, senses and empirical reality relate to a human being: "Know the Atman to be the master of the chariot; the body is the chariot; the intellect is the charioteer, and the mind is the reins. The senses, they say, are the horses. The objects of the senses are their paths. The wise call the atman—united with the body, the senses and the mind—the enjoyer" 1.3.3–1.3.4

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Dharmic Intellect

Thank you for the most glorious, balanced and thought-provoking magazine. I look forward to it each quarter and read and devour it from cover to cover. I collect the magazines, share with interested colleagues and use aspects of the articles in my discussions on Hinduism. HINDUISM TODAY is the best source of information, filled with detailed and in-depth study of various aspects of Hinduism. The magazine has answers to almost any subject and vigorously places our Dharma on the highest and well-deserved platform. I am proud and honored to have a life membership for your esteemed and respected magazine. Please keep up the good work and may Lord Siva continue to guide you towards Dharmic intellect.

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Remember the Truth

I have been a subscriber to HINDUISM TODAY since 1997 and enjoy reading its uplifting articles. India has been an independent nation since 1947. Yet its media still follow

the humiliating terms of the English colonizers and their Christian missionary allies. Hindu DVDs and movies are still classified as mythology. For example, search for a *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, or *Shiva Mahapurana* set from Indian businesses. Why are Hindu literary works about things which happened in the past called mythology, while the Christian Bible is called factual history? Why do we Hindus still accept the colonialist derogatory terms for our civilization?

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Professional Yoga Teachers

I read with interest your article *Do Britain's Yoga Teachers Really Need Regulating?* I have been a member of The British Wheel of Yoga almost since its foundation and I hold a BWY Teachers Diploma (1974). I feel that we should perhaps differentiate between professional (paid) teachers of the practice and theory of yoga, and those for whom there is no monetary or in-kind reward.

It was certainly a rule of conduct which I was given by my guru Swami Pranavananda Brahmendra Avadhuta, in Tamil Nadu, that I should not seek or accept financial or other reward in exchange for my yoga teaching. Perhaps here we need to recognize the difference between a spiritual practice and goal, and the search for health and well-being physically and mentally.

Western developments in the practice of yoga over the past 100 years have increasingly focused on yoga as a fitness and health practice. In a world where material and financial stability are a daily concern, it is little wonder that yoga has come to be seen as a business and a well-paid profession. As a yoga teacher I would not dream of employing someone if I felt they were not fully trained and qualified, backed by professional organizations and comprehensively insured.

However, I also hold dear the spiritual sadhana of yoga. I accept that in the modern, Westernized world it is not practical for sadhus and yogis to live in forests and caves and rely on the gifting of food for sustenance. What all yoga teachers should be able to realize is that they do have the option of leading unpaid classes or workshops, providing tuition for the needy at reduced fees based on ability to pay, and to make themselves available for satsang for students to discuss the true meaning of yoga. It is not valid to claim that just because we teach yoga, we are absolved from our duty and care towards our students and therefore require no formal protection.

The alternative is to offer our skill and spiritual development to individual students at no cost—and just try telling that to the thousands of "yoga" teachers worldwide.

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The Hard Problem Solved

This letter is in response to the series of insightful articles published under the title *A New Science of Consciousness?* in HINDUISM TODAY, April/May/June 2017.

Science, being primarily physical and spatial in approach, views the body as physical and spatial and the mind as non-physical and non-spatial. Consciousness, a yet unresolved phenomenon, transcends both the mind and the body. Thus, the soul or consciousness is implicitly more than the "physical and non-physical" and "the spatial and non-spatial" dimensions of our reality. Until and unless we (as philosophers, scientists or laymen) acknowledge that consciousness or the soul lies beyond our current paradigms and world-views, we will not be any closer to resolving the "hard problem of consciousness"—what it means to be conscious—nor the "easy problem of consciousness"—the

nature of the mind-body interaction.

In addition, Western philosophy and science generally tend to view "consciousness" (or the soul) as an emergent property of the mind, and the mind emergent of the body. Eastern (Upanishadic) philosophy inverts this view: mind and matter are the emergent properties of consciousness.

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Real vs Fake Yogis

When I was in India in the summer of 1994, I got up at 4am (*Brahma Muhurta*) and heard an unidentifiable sound. Proceeding out of the front gate of my guest house at Sivananda Ashram in Muni-ki-Reti, I walked down to the Ganges River and discovered yogis waist deep in the water performing *pranayama* breathing exercises, prior to everyone gathering at 5am in the samadhi hall for morning meditation. The Indian yogis possess the kind of dedication that is required for success on the spiritual path of the Sanatana Dharma—as opposed to seeing how much weight one might lose in a "hot box" hatha yoga class dressed in zebra-patterned leotards in headstand, simultaneously chanting OM plus

concentrating on the third eye chakra, gazing out the front window to make certain the anarchists don't steal the mauve-colored Bentley automobile full of purchases from the earlier stroll down Rodeo Drive, enjoyed whilst sucking on a peppermint latte to remove the hangover from the Oscar party that lasted until 4am (*Brahma Muhurta*).

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In the Bali Usaba article, April/May/June, 2017, the photos were incorrectly attributed to Putu Eka Prayastiti Kefani but were, in fact, the work of Mr. Putu Sukmana Ghita

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

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107 Kaholalele Road
Kapaa, Hawaii, 96746-9304 USA
or faxed to: (808) 822-4351
or visit: www.hinduismtoday.com/letters

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

Publisher's Vision for HINDUISM TODAY Continued

Including our magazine in your estate plan is the most powerful way to guarantee its future

"THANK YOU TO ALL OF YOU WHO HAVE been supporting HINDUISM TODAY during these first thirty-eight years of its existence," says HINDUISM TODAY publisher, Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami. "Thank you for helping carry forward its mission—disseminating Sanatana Dharma's incomparable teachings to today's hungry world in a way that it understands and appreciates. You have been an invaluable part of the team.

"Now is a good time to take our next step and make the magazine solidly secure going into the future. The need for its contents will only grow over the coming decades, and we want to be sure it is there, financially independent and fully functional to respond to the demand.

"What is that next step? It is to strengthen the Hinduism Today Production Fund to the point where grants can cover all of the magazine's production expenses. Then it will have become financially independent.

"It is a huge step, but we can take our time and reach the goal incrementally through estate gifts. When enough donors have told us they have included us in their estate plan so that their collective gifts amount to US\$5



Publisher Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami with his team who devotedly watch over the Hindu Heritage Endowment—of which the Hinduism Today Production Fund is a part.

million, then we will know the magazine's future is solid and secure, no matter what ups and downs the world may bring.

"The gifts of donors who have told us they have included the Fund in their estate plan currently amount to one and a half million. So, we have three and a half million to go."

If you have already included the Hinduism Today Production Fund in your estate plan, then please do let us know, so we can add the amount to our ongoing tally and know that

we are that much closer to the goal.

Otherwise, when the time comes to make your estate plan, or to revise it, please do think of our magazine and its perpetuation. Readers of the future will benefit immeasurably and thank you for your generosity and vision. You will have done a great service to Hinduism and to the world.

There are many good reasons to make one's estate plan. As you will undoubtedly want to include non-profits to some extent in your giving, you can, with competent guidance, judiciously select which assets to give to heirs and which to leave to non-profits, resulting in a considerable tax advantage to yourself. Even more tax benefits will accrue when you make your gifts at the time of maximum earnings.

Competent professionals are available to offer guidance in these sometimes complex matters.

You can also visit our website www.hheonline.org, which is rich in valuable information on this subject, pleasantly presented with clarity and relevance. You can subscribe to our Production Fund Newsletter at gurudeva.org/email-news. Or contact us at hhe@hindu.org or 1-888-464-1008.

QUOTES & QUIPS

For the shishya who devotedly remembers, “My guru is actually Siva Himself who grants Liberation,” fulfillment is not far off.

Kularnava Tantra 4.2

Hinduism has remained in constant, replenished usage throughout this tremendous stretch of time, impervious to outside influence, as onward flowing as the imperturbable Ganga itself. **Swami Dayanand Saraswati** (1824–1883), *Hindu religious leader and founder of the Arya Samaj—a Hindu reform movement of the Vedic tradition*

Hindu God is not an external God who reveals himself only to a chosen prophet to be then imposed as the ultimate authority on others. **Navaratna S. Rajaram**, *Indian mathematician*

The Hindu religion, or Sanatana Dharma,

is the way of life of perfect living and of gaining mastery over oneself. This religion reveals the secret process which brings forth an effective personality out of a shattered man of despair and disappointment. **Swami Chinmayananda Saraswati** (1916–1993), *founder of Chinmaya Mission*

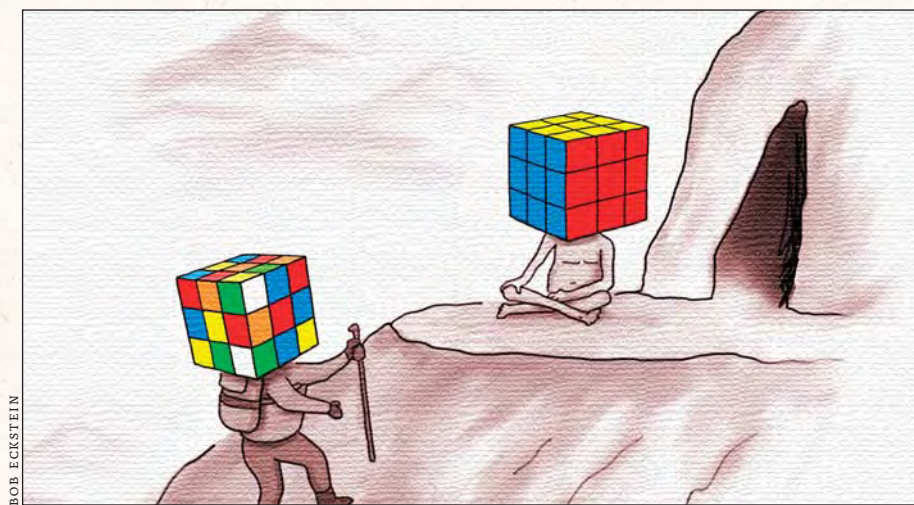
Truth is the offspring of silence and meditation. **Sir Isaac Newton** (1642–1726), *English mathematician, astronomer and physicist*

The sacred scriptures make the life of the spirit real even to those who are incapable of insight. **Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan** (1888–1975), *first Vice President of India*

I’ve been bringing home a Ganapati idol (for Ganesha Chaturthi) for 16 years. I believe that Ganesha will help me achieve my goals faster. **Sonu Sood**, *Indian actor, model, producer*

The first great thing is to find yourself; and for that you need solitude and contemplation, at least sometimes. Deliverance will not come from the rushing, noisy centers of civilization; it will come from the lonely places. **Fridtjof Nansen** (1861–1930), *Norwegian explorer, scientist and diplomat*

The soul, being immortal, having been born again many times, and having seen all things that exist, whether in this world or



in the world below, has knowledge of them all; thus all enquiry and all learning is but recollection. **Socrates**, *from Plato's Menos*

You do not belong to the brahmin or any other caste; you are not at any stage, nor are you anything that the eye can see. You are unattached and formless, the witness of everything—so

be happy. *Ashtavakra Gita 1.5*

The Hindu lives in eternity. He is profoundly aware of the relativity of space and time and of the illusory nature of the apparent world. **Alain Danielou** (1907–1994), *French historian and a noted Western convert to and expert on Saivite Hinduism*

The first great error to be thrown away is a common one—acceptance of the physical body as the real self when it is only an expression and channel, instrument and vehicle of the Self. **Paul Brunton** (1898–1981), *British mystic and author*

An examination of Indian Vedic doctrines shows that it is in tune with the most advanced scientific and philosophical thought of the West. **Sir John Woodroffe** (1865–1936), *British Orientalist*

You don't want to stimulate spiritual power until you have achieved mental calmness. **Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami**, *publisher of HINDUISM TODAY*

One of the fastest ways to destroy the stability of families and societies is through promiscuity, mental and/or physical, and the best way to maintain stability is through self-control. **Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami** (1927–2001), *founder of HINDUISM TODAY*

DID YOU KNOW?

Alexander and the Ten Sadhus

ALEXANDER THE GREAT CONQUERED many lands but ended his campaign near the Indus River, in what is now Pakistan. Few people know of his run-in with naked sadhus, or as the Greeks called them, gymnosophists.

According to Plutarch, a Greek biographer and essayist (45–120 ce), Alexander captured ten sadhus who had caused an Indian prince named Sabbas to revolt against the Macedonians.

Plutarch reported: These philosophers were reputed to be clever and concise in answering questions, and Alexander therefore put difficult questions to them, declaring he would put to death the one who first gave an incorrect answer.

The first sadhu, being asked which, in his opinion, are more numerous, the living or the dead, said that the living were, since the dead no longer existed. The second, being asked whether the earth or the sea produces larger animals, said the earth did, since the sea was but a part of the earth. The third, being asked what animal is the most cunning, said:



1420 MASTER OF THE ROYAL ALEXANDER

be most loved. “If,” said the philosopher, “he is most powerful, and yet does not inspire fear.”

The seventh, asked how one might become a god instead of a man, replied: “By doing something a man cannot do.” The eighth, asked which is stronger, life or death, answered: “Life, since it supports so many ills.” Alexander asked the tenth sadhu how long it were well for a man to live. The answer: “Until he does not regard death as better than life.”

Satisfied, then, with these philosophers, he dismissed them with gifts.

BASICS

Temple Sacraments

From the booklet Visiting a Hindu Temple, HINDUISM TODAY

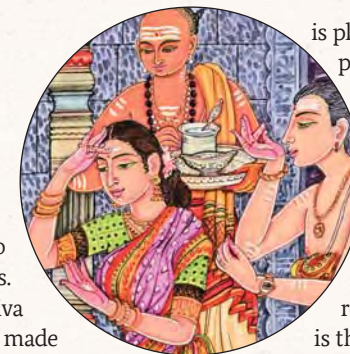
AT THE END OF THE PUJA, THE PRIEST passes out to the attending devotees various substances that were offered to the Deity. By partaking of these offerings, called *prasada*, one absorbs the blessings into one's being. Observe the way experienced temple-goers receive these sacraments to properly learn the nuanced customs.

First, the sacramental lamp which has just been offered at the high point of the puja is passed among the devotees. The devas can see and bless you through this flame as it lights up your face. Sometimes you, too, can glimpse into their world. When the priest comes to you with the lamp, reach out and pass both hands devoutly over the flame. Then bring your hands back, turn your palms toward

your face and touch your eyes with your fingertips to receive the Deity's blessings.

A sacrament offered at Siva shrines is holy ash, *vibhuti*, made by burning dried cow dung with ghee, flowers, yogurt and other ingredients. It symbolizes the purity we attain by burning the bonds of ego, karma and maya to reveal the soul's natural goodness. It is applied on the forehead, generally three broad stripes for men, and one short stroke for ladies. A spoonful of blessed water that was offered to the Deity, or milk with which the Deity was bathed during the puja, may be offered for you to drink.

Sandalwood paste, valued for its fragrance, is often next. A small dab

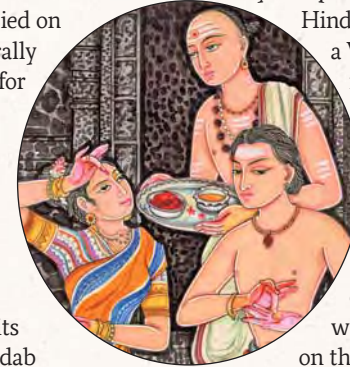


is placed in your hand by the priest, which you transfer to your left palm with a wiping motion. Dip your right ring finger into the paste and apply it with a small circular motion between the eyebrows, or in your chosen sectarian mark. A red powder called kumkum is then given. The priest will

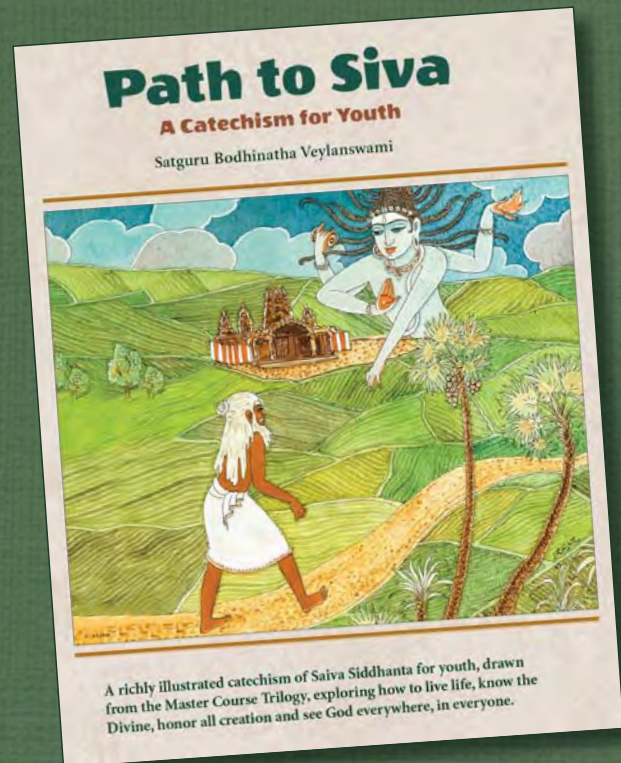
place a small pinch in your right hand or invite you to take some from the container he holds before you. Apply the *kumkum* on top of the sandalwood, creating a dot, or bindi, which represents the third

eye of spiritual seeing. Vaishnava Hindus traditionally apply a V-shaped tilaka on the forehead representing the feet of the Lord.

Flowers may also be distributed by the priest, as well as cooked food. Many devotees wrap portions of their prasada to share with loved ones or place on their home altar.



AFT BY A. MANIVEL



Path to Siva

A CATECHISM FOR YOUTH

Sixty-eight lessons based on Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswam's Master Course Trilogy for passing our tradition on to the next generation, and the next...

PATH TO SIVA PRESENTS ALL OF THE important teachings of the Saivite religion. It is written with youth in mind, but is also ideal for anyone wanting a condensed version of Gurudeva's 3,000-page Master Course. Each illustrated lesson is short—just one or two pages—but packed with information. Here our youth can find answers to questions about God, Lord Ganesha, Lord Murugan and the devas—how they can help us in our lives and how to contact them through temple worship and home puja. You will find clear explanations of karma, dharma and reincarnation, and how to use japa, meditation and affirmations to make your life better. You will learn the best ways to live in order to achieve your most important goals. The lessons include insights on home life, getting along with others, religious tolerance, vegetarianism and caring for the environment. They cover challenging philosophical areas, like death and dying, sin and evil. These short essays will provide a clear understanding of Hindu practices, beliefs and philosophy and give you a deep comprehension of life that few people have. The book was designed as a tool for teachers and for parents with youth, a focus text for exploring Hinduism together. Discussing one lesson a week can keep the family conversation going for more than a year.



A young woman reflects on one of life's most profound questions. The answer may take her an entire lifetime to find, but that answer is the most important discovery she or any of us will ever make.

to unravel the bonds. That begins the most wonderful process in the world as the seeker steps for the first time onto the spiritual path. Of course, the whole time, through all those births and lives and deaths, the soul was undergoing a spiritual evolution, but unconsciously. Now it seeks to know God consciously. Our soul was created by God Siva out of Himself, like sparks flying forth from a fire. Like the sparks and the fire, we are both the same and different from Siva, our source. We live within His boundless creation, this unthinkable vast cosmos which is filled with His divine presence. Siva is the life energy in the birds, in the fish and in the animals. His being flows through all we see and experience. Our Vedic rishis have assured us that "God is the Life of our life." We are all beautiful children of God Siva. Deep within, we are one with Him this very moment. We came from God, live in God and are evolving into complete unity with God. Siva created each of us in a perfect state, but we have to discover that perfection within us to be whole. By seeing the life energy in all creatures and in all people, we are seeing God Siva in action. By drawing close to God, we draw nearer to our immortal soul. Siva is all and within all.

GURUDEVA: When we realize that we have come from Siva, the way back to Siva is clearly defined. That is half the battle, to realize we came from Siva, live in Siva and are returning to Siva. Knowing only this much makes the path clear and impels us to return to Him, to our Source, to our Self.



Five friends take a selfie to share online. Friends are important and worth cultivating. They encourage our ideals and goals in life. They provide fun & keep us safe from the world's negative forces.

two depend on the purity of a man's companions. Following our religious path is made easier when we are part of a satsang group with shared values and goals. Such companionship helps keep our sadhana strong, especially during difficult times in life. As Gurudeva often said, "The group helps the individual and the individual helps the group."

GURUDEVA: Make friends with those who are on the path. Be with fine, positive people. Don't be with negative, complaining people who have no relationship to what you are doing on the inside, or who are criticizing you for what you are doing.

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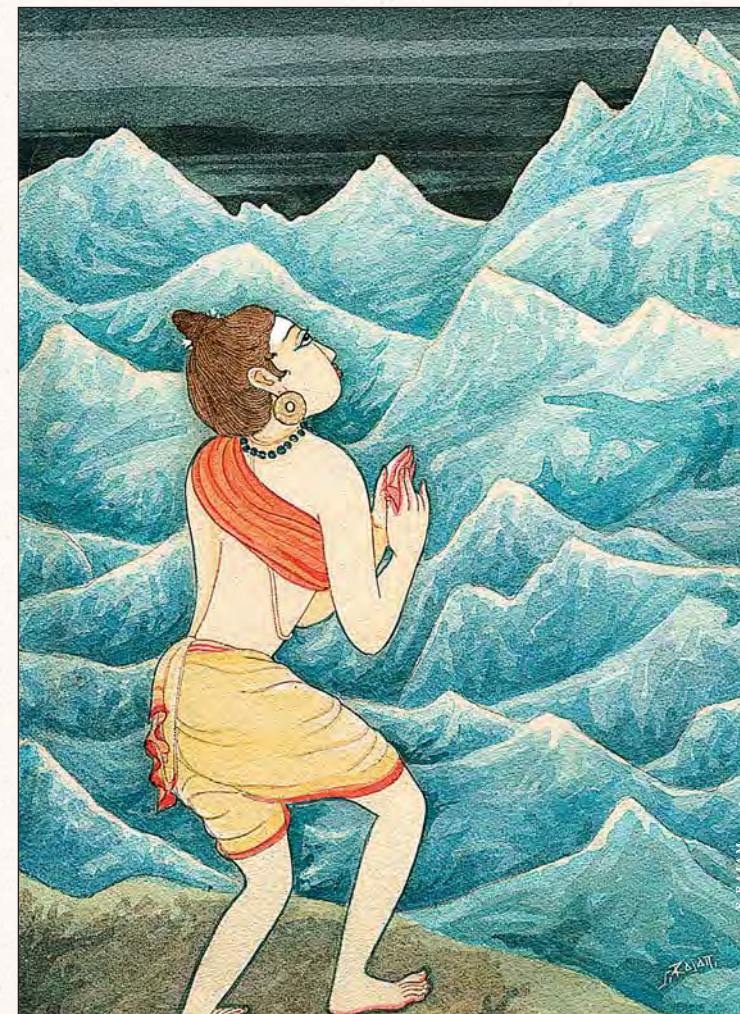
FROM THE AGAMAS

The Sadhaka's Path Is Woven from Shakti

An in-depth reveal about three forces which propel the seeker to liberation

The following is a lucid translation of the Matanga Agama, Section 5, Reflections on the Nature of Shakti. We explore the ending, which speaks about three specific stages of the sadhaka's evolution. These are three of the many shaktis that work with creation, souls and objects, that both conceal and reveal liberation through experience of the tattvas. We can conclude from the text that the shaktis Jvala, Hladini and Stambhini aid in a soul's evolution by: 1) introducing pleasures, both ephemeral and spiritual; 2) giving guidance toward higher consciousness, and 3) bestowing a steadfast character, respectively. This Agama defines shakti as that which does not sustain any modification, even when it is involved in various activities, and which is firm in its own innate state.

THE SHAKTI THAT IS OF THE NATURE OF KNOWLEDGE AND action unfolds the consciousness of souls, kindling knowledge-fire in the hearts of beings that are desirous of ephemeral worldly pleasures. Instilling in their minds a sense of aversion towards such pleasures, and making them desirous of auspicious and eternal benefits, this shakti is known as *Jvala*.



Even when some souls with fully unfolded consciousness are experiencing auspicious enjoyments, Jvala-shakti brings those souls under its control and makes them abhor such *bhogas*. In due course of time, this shakti makes them give up enjoying even auspicious pleasures and directs them to focus their aim on the exalted state of liberation. The soul evolves into a supreme being when the seeds of desire for enjoyment remain fried and burnt by Jvala-shakti.

Ananteshvara—the leading and foremost soul, endowed with powerful shakti-rays that express themselves in various ways—casts his eyes on this supreme being and sets him on the fruitful path expounded in these *Agamas*. All parts of his body, being filled with bliss, are firmly established on that right path. At that time, he comes under the possession of the shakti known as *Hladini*, which directs him towards a competent guru.

This evolved soul becomes interested in doing service for the guru with diligence and care. He is in constant meditation on Siva; he is bereft of desire for worldly enjoyment; he becomes soft and kind and raises himself to the higher states and becomes incomparable. Living this way, he is ever in a blissful state. This supreme one then becomes known for his forbearance and steadfast mindset.

Even when troubled by hundreds of misdeeds and malevolent actions done by others, the exalted soul is capable of exhibiting his patience towards wrongdoers by accepting the troubles and enduring them. At other times, when he is pestered and misguided by others to deviate from the path he has chosen, he remains firm in his conviction without showing any sign of anger or aversion towards them. Such a perfect disciple becomes the repository of all good qualities and becomes blissful in the guidance of this Hladini-sakti, set forth by Anantesvara. This sakti-ray of Anantesvara is always increasing the delighted state of the sadhaka.

The third shakti, which renders the sadhaka steadfast in his path, fixed like a pillar, is known as *Stambhini*. Even when troubled by obstacles or afflicted by likes and dislikes, he remains unperturbed and capable of fulfilling all the austerities that are to be undertaken after diksha. If he is unable to perform his sadhanas due to unfavorable circumstances, and is thereby subjected to mental anguish, still he remains firmly motivated towards the attainment of *sivatva* and never falls from the initiated state. Such firmness is this Stambhini-sakti, comparable to a pillar.

Scrupulous striving: *An aspirant climbs the highest peak of all, the summit of consciousness. Though the higher reaches of this path are arduous, solitary, even severe, he remains undaunted, his eyes fixed firmly on the goal, Self Realization.*

DR. S. P. SABHARATHNAM SIVACHARYAR, of the Adi Saiva priest lineage, is an expert in ancient Tamil and Sanskrit, specializing in the *Vedas*, *Agamas* and *Shilpa Shastras*. This excerpt is from his recent translation of the *Matanga Agama*.



Mother and daughter worship at the Tilinga (bell) Temple in Tinsukia, Assam. They are offering a bell in thanks for the fulfillment of their prayer.

SPECIAL FEATURE

Assam: Land of Devotion

Assam continues to amaze in this second part of our report as we explore the religious centers, called *satras*, founded by the 16th-century Vaishnava saint Sankardev, the great temples of the Ahom kings and the educational projects of a wide range of Hindu institutions striving to meet the state's modern challenges.

BY RAJIV MALIK, NEW DELHI

LAST ISSUE WE EXPLORED GUWAHATI and environs in western Assam, which include both Kamakhya, the state's most famous Goddess temple, and the birthplace in Nagaon of Srimant Sankardev (1449-1568), Assam's most influential saint. Along the way, photographer Thomas Kelly and I met with the Bodo tribal community, visited both a Brahma Samaj and a Bathou temple and spoke with leaders of several organizations engaged in education and social upliftment. The state's immense diversity was immediately evident.

The second part of our adventure, reported here, takes us east and up the mighty Brahmaputra River to Dibrugarh, center of the tea country, and from there to Majuli Island, where Sankardev established the great *satra* centers of Ekasarana Dharma. As around Guwahati, we visited famed places of worship, including Tilinga (the "bell temple") and the 18th-century Sivadol Temple built by the Ahom kings at Shiv Sagar. We met with the tea garden workers whose ancestors were brought by the British from different parts of India as indentured laborers, and with the native Assamese people and tribes, some of whom arrived thousands of

.....
World's largest river island: (clockwise from right) Janardan Goswami, head of Uttar Kamalabari Satra, with a boy who joined the monastery on his own accord; map of Assam; a satra artisan carving a wooden figure; toll chart for the ferry to Majuli includes a rate for elephants (#13); a tightly-packed ferry

years ago. We learned of modern issues, such as the large-scale migration of Bangladeshis into the state, which is impacting its demography with possibly disastrous consequences in the future. Finally, we were impressed with the serious work of a number of Hindu organizations who are developing basic educational institutions in the most remote villages as well as elite schools in the city which challenge even those of the Christian missionaries.

Majuli Island

Everyone we consulted about our trip urged us to go to Majuli Island, telling us we would never understand Assam without a visit to this storehouse of art and culture that was once a center of Assamese civilization. Majuli is where Sankardev met Madhavdeva, who became his chief disciple and was instrumental in the spread of Ekanatha Dharma. It is now rather out of the way, requiring ferry service to reach it, across the Brahmaputra river and having minimalist accommodations for visitors.

When Sankardev established the many *satras* (religious/cultural centers) here in the 16th century, the area was not an island. It was a peninsula between the Brahmaputra and another river. In a catastrophic flood lasting 15 days in 1750—one still mentioned prominently in local folklore—the Brahmaputra broke its banks and captured the adjacent river channel, turning the peninsula into an island. Majuli has been eroding at an increasing rate ever since, going from 483 square miles in 1900 to just 136 in 2014.

One travels there today by ferryboats

that regularly depart from Nemati Ghat, 170 kms downstream from Dibrugarh. Everything gets to the island by ferry, a fact of life reflected in the tariff posted by our ferry's wheelhouse. With occasionally creative spelling, it lists toll rates for all manner of creatures and cargo from people (US\$0.23) and "ducks by the basket" (\$0.05), to a heavy truck (\$14.72), and an elephant with mahout (\$1394).

Uttar Kamalabari

After an hour-and-a-half ride across the turbulent river, Thomas, guide Ramesh Limbo and I are back in our cab and headed for Uttar Kamalabari Satra, one of the island's most famous religious centers of the Ekanatha Dharma, and first of three we will visit. Lush green farms and beautiful stands of bamboo line both sides of the road. Peace and spirituality permeate the unpolluted environment. As we approach the satra's grand entrance, we see a huge billboard announcing the popular Raas Leela programs scheduled for November. Pilgrims and tourists flock here for the celebration from Assam itself, the rest of India and even overseas.

Uttar Kamalabari Satra is a center for art, with artists trained here in classical *sattriya* music and dance developed by Sankardev himself. A brahmachari we meet on our way in (whom we take to be a kitchen worker, as he is spreading out rice to dry) is himself an

Toll Rate

Toll Rates of Neamati-Kamalabari ferry service Under I.W.T.
Department fixed by the Govt. Vide Order
No. TWT-1/98/Pt-1/325, Dtd.24th August / 2010

Sl. No.	Name of Items	Unit	Rates
1.	Passenger	Each	Rs. 15.00
2.	Bicycle	Each	Rs. 10.00
3.	Goods every 20 kg or there of	Each (20 Kgs.)	Rs. 3.00
4.	Moped with One Ridder	Each	Rs. 30.00
5.	Motor Cycle & Scooter with ridder	Each	Rs. 45.00
6.	Auto Rickshaw with driver	Each	Rs. 60.00
7.	Light Vehicle, like Jeep, Ambassador with driver	Each	Rs. 106.00
8.	Vehicle (empty) like Matadoor, Small Truck etc. Driver handiman	Each	Rs. 756.00
9.	Vehicle (loaded) like Matadoor, Small Truck etc. Driver handiman	Each	Rs. 857.00
10.	Heavy Vehicle (empty) with driver and Handiman	Each	Rs. 907.00
11.	Heavy Vehicle (loaded) with driver and Handiman	Each	Rs. 958.00
12.	Additional Load per Ton Km. Above 12 Ton	Each	Rs. 50.00
13.	Elephant with Maut	Each	Rs. 907.00
14.	Buffalo	Each	Rs. 45.00
15.	Bull, Cow, Horse & like animal etc.	Each	Rs. 30.00
16.	Calf, Pig etc.	Each	Rs. 15.00
17.	Sheep, Goat etc.	Each	Rs. 10.00
18.	Milk per busket of 10 ltrs.	Each	Rs. 3.00
19.	Hen, Duck etc per busket	Each	Rs. 3.00
20.	Egg per Busket of 20 kg	Each	Rs. 3.00
21.	Rickshaw with puller	Each	Rs. 45.00
22.	Thela with puller	Each	Rs. 76.00
23.	Trailor with puller (loaded)	Each	Rs. 76.00
24.	Trailor (empty) upto 8 Ton capacity	Each	Rs. 101.00
25.	Trailor above 8 Ton capacity	Each	Rs. 151.00
26.	Trailor above 8 Ton to 12 Ton capacity (empty)	Each	Rs. 252.00
27.	Trailor above 8 Ton to 12 Ton capacity (Loaded)	Each	Rs. 302.00

By
(P.K. Gogoi)
Executive Engineer
I.W.T. Division, Dibrugarh



THOMAS L. KELLY

Majuli Island: Ancient Vaishnava Center



RAJIV MALIK



THOMAS L. KELLY



HINDUISM TODAY

accomplished dancer who has performed in many parts of the world. This satra has some 400,000 devotees across Assam and in other parts of India.

The satra's head, Satradhikari Janardan Goswami, grants us a long interview. It was here, Janardan explains, that Sankardev started the tradition of *naam ghar* ("prayer house"), such as the one we visited earlier at Batadrava, Sankardev's birthplace. As mentioned in the last issue, naam ghars are temples with no enshrined Deity in which devotees chant the names of Krishna before a seven-tiered throne which holds only the *Bhagavat Purana*. This is a central practice of the Ekasarana Dharma ("shelter-in-one religion") founded by Sankardev. Each satra includes a naam ghar as well as other facilities.

The satras founded by Sankardev, a householder, are run by family men. The six begun by Madhavdeva, a bachelor, are run by brahmacharis; these are called *udasin satras*. Of the island's original 64 satras, only 37 remain active. In the whole of Assam, there are 23 udasin satras (including this one), staffed by 800 brahmacharis, and 900 satras run by householders. "The householder satras are more in number because the households give birth to children who start their own," Janardan explains. There are, we are told, ten thousand naam ghar temples in Assam.

A small child joins us during the interview,

playing with Janardan's mobile phone and being handled with a lot of love and affection. We learn that a householder attached to the satra offered this child, his son, to the satra as he saw him as a future monk. Once brought to the satra, the boy refused to return with his parents; and even now has no interest in seeing them.

"We worship only Krishna; in other places they worship both Radha and Krishna."

SATRADHIKARI JANARDAN

Of the satra's 100 bramachari, most were given by the parents around the age of six. "It is not compulsory they remain brahmacharis; they can later opt for the householder life at an appropriate stage and time and serve the satra in that way," Janardan explained. The children attend both the satra's gurukulam and government school. "We place a lot of emphasis on good quality education."

Janardan explained at length about the activities of Sankardev; and as he lived 120 years, the saint's story is long indeed! Sankardev worked among the many castes and tribes of Assam and initiated saints from all communities in an effort to bring them all under the umbrella of Vaishnava Hinduism.

"The main difference between Majuli and other centers of Vaishnavism is that we worship only Lord Krishna, while they worship both Radha and Krishna," Janardan told us.

"Earlier," he said, "the satras focused mainly on religious activities and the promotion of art and culture. Now they are taking up social work, including education and medicine." He himself travels regularly to visit the naam ghars in various villages. His brahmacharis, one hundred in number, perform kirtan and bhajan but do not perform priestly functions such as puja, yagna, samskaras or marriage ceremonies.

Janardan said he is pleased with the work of Ekal Vidyalaya, which has 210 schools on Majuli, some in remote areas lacking even government schools. Ekal has been effective, he told us, in countering the influence of the Christian missionaries among the tribals.

He advised, "If we want our youth to

.....
A multifarious landscape: (counter-clockwise from below left) a local dance troupe welcomes our reporters; famed mask maker Koshakanta Dev Goswami of Chamguri Satra; stilt houses are required in areas subject to flooding on this flat and immensely fertile island; Raju Gam on his motorcycle

A Missing Voice

Departing Majuli on the ferryboat, we meet Mising tribe member Raju Gam, 28. Numbering one million in Assam—Misings are the second largest tribal group in the northeast, after the Bodos, also of Assam. Raju is a graduate in agricultural studies who works for Amar Majuli, an NGO engaged in the empowerment of women and focusing on organic agriculture and youth leadership.

THERE ARE FIVE opeems, OR CLANS, among the Mising: Mayang, Bagra, Delu, Ayong and Sayung. Their traditional practices are the same, and they are equal to each other, with no caste hierarchy. I consider myself a Hindu, as do many others in the Mising tribe. We worship Lord Krishna as our chief Deity.

We marry outside our own clan, that is, into one of the other four groups. If the marriage is arranged, 101 betel nuts are presented to the bride's father and her family by the groom's side. This offering is symbolic and considered equivalent to a gift of 100,000 rupees. After this, the bride and her family are brought to the groom's house, where they are offered rice wine, *apong*, as part of the marriage ceremony. Having wine is part of our rituals, but drinking to extreme is rare among our people. Earlier, marriage took place around 17; now, with education and better employment, the age is going up. Previously the focus was on the number of children; now it is on their education. Literacy is today 50 percent among the Mising.

Love marriages, such as my own, which my family has accepted, are becoming common.

The positive thing about the satras is that they help educate the poor children through supporting the Ekal movement. They also contribute to the local economy and its development by attracting tourists and pilgrims. However, when it comes to the people of the Mising community, we are not so welcome in the satras because we are taken as meat eaters and consume liquor. Because of this attitude of the satras toward the community, some of our people are attracted to Christianity, as they do not discriminate against us for the reasons the satras do. The missionaries help us in our education and do it without insisting we convert or interfering in our religious practices. Those who do convert do so out of their own willingness.

Most boys living in the satras are from a low economic background. At the satras they get a good education, and when they grow up they are free to become householders. However, the children of the Mising community are not given the same opportunity, despite our aspiration to do so. Consider my own case. Though I am a vegetarian, no satra will allow me to stay with them and be educated utilizing their facilities inside their campus. The same is true for all other children from the Mising community. The satras will also not entertain people who in any way question their authority.

It is unfortunate that people dump garbage in the Brahmaputra River. We Mising tribals would never pollute the river, whom we call Brahmaputra Baba and treat as a God. Now the river is shrinking, and we are quite worried about it.



Majuli's Dancers and Mask Makers



become spiritual, then the parents must follow the path of spirituality as well. Today the problem is that the parents do not, and therefore are not at peace with themselves. Once they connect to the spiritual lifestyle, they will become blissful and peaceful, and the youth will be inspired to follow. Then there will be real change in society."

Like all satras, Uttar Kamalabari has a large hall where its monks perform their daily prayers, bhajan, kirtans and rituals. The hall here is full of spiritual vibrations though no activity is taking place there when we visit. On all the four sides of the naam ghar are rows of rooms, about twelve feet on a side, sleeping quarters for the monks, including the monastery head. This is a common pattern for the satras.

Auniati Satra

We arrive at Majuli's second-largest satra, Auniati, to find the head, Dr. Pitambar Dev Goswami, deeply engaged in arranging their next raas leela dance and drama performance. But when he learns we are from HINDUISM TODAY—which he has been reading for years—he is delighted to meet us. He compliments our work, saying, "I am happy that the magazine is run by a group of Saivite saints, and that it gives coverage to other Hindu communities, including Vaishnavites."

This is another brahmachari satra, with four hundred in residence. As at Uttar Kamalabari, the boys are trained here from a young age and can opt later to enter householder life if they choose. The focus is on

music, drama, dance, bhajan and kirtan, as promoted by Sankardev to foster harmonious coexistence. The residents specialize in several forms of service, including leading kirtan and bhajan, playing musical instruments, such as the dholak drum, and teaching.

A satra, according to Dr. Pitambar Goswami, is a place where resides Guru, Dev (God), Naam (chanting of God's name) and Bhagat (devotee). "At other holy places, these four things come together only at particular times, but in our satras they are continuously present."

This satra's main following are the tribal people of Majuli—500,000 from the Sonwal Kachari tribe alone, as well as a large number from the Mising and Deori tribes. Many Mising tribals, Dr. Pitambar reports, have converted to Christianity. The satra's efforts have succeeded so far only in reconverting two or three percent, but he feels their work is gaining momentum. He praises pollution-free Majuli Island as a "very pure and spiritual place" and urges us to return for at least a month on our next visit.

The Mask Makers

Our third stop, Chamguri Satra, is famous for its mask making and the home of the



Dr. Pitambar Dev Goswami

nationally recognized artist, Koshakanta Dev Goswami. His big drawing room is full of masks of varied sizes and different historical characters, mainly belonging to the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. Students are regularly sent here by Sangeet Natak Akademi—India's renowned National Academy for Music, Dance and Drama in Delhi—to learn the intricacies of this unique and colorful art.

Koshakanta is not only an ardent follower of Sankardev, who popularized mask making in Assam, but a direct

descendent. He says he is optimistic about the future of the art of mask making, though he wishes the artists were better paid for their work. As he bluntly puts it, "I have received a lot of recognition in my life for my work, but not enough money." He is happy with the way his four sons are carrying forward his lineage and tradition. One, Pradip, tells us mask making is quite a tedious process, with a single creation sometimes taking weeks to make.

After a night in modest accommodations, we depart Majuli by the morning ferry and

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Tea country: (below, left to right) weary pickers getting their day's harvest weighed; tea estate near Dibrugarh

Tea Country. . .



An Assamese Overview

Prof. Dambarudhar Nath holds the Sri Sri Aniruddhadeva Chair in the Department of History of Dibrugarh University. He is the author of Religion and Society in North East India and other books on Assam. He heralds from Majuli and is a disciple of Auniati Satra, which we visited earlier. We interview him at Mayamora Satra, founded by Anirudhadeva (1553–1626) a householder guru in the teaching lineage of Sankardev.

IN ASSAM, VAISHNAVISM HAS FOUR BRANCHES, or *sanghatis*: Brahma, Purush, Nika and Kaal. The first two are grouped under the Sagun Panth and the second under Nirgun Panth. All consider themselves followers of Sankardev in some fashion and all derive their philosophy from the *Bhagavat Purana*. In the Sagun Panth, bhakti is practiced, and the incarnation of God with attributes is worshiped in the form of a sacred murti or image. Those following Nirgun Panth, which is similar to the philosophy of Sikhism and Kabir, do not worship idols but believe in the principle of Param Brahma [transcendent God]. In Sagun Panth, the caste system is observed, and in Nirgun Panth it is not. Anirudhadeva himself expounded the philosophy of *mayamora*, literally "illusion kill," which is part of the Nirgun Panth. It is a kind of advaita view, like that of Adi Shankara, which holds that earthly life is an illusion, and there is no distinction between the Supreme Reality and this world.

This satra was founded in 1601 in Majuli, but shifted here to the eastern side of the Brahmaputra when its original location on the river's bank eroded away. It is now the main Mayamora satra. In the Mayamora system, the head of the satra may nominate any relative as successor; Anirudhadeva himself appointed his son. The present guru, 90 years old, has appointed a relative who is now effectively the head of this satra. Anirudhadeva believed in a direct relationship with God through bhakti, without seeking any mediator, including priests—an approach that appealed to the tribal and low-caste people of the area, who all joined Anirudhadeva's movement. This was a political factor in the great civil war of 1769, the Moamoria Rebellion, in which the king was deposed and a follower of this satra succeeded him. The war was so violent it is said half the population of Assam was killed, among them 800,000 followers of this sect.

At the time of Anirudhadev, upper Assam was full of tribals. They were Sanskritized and in a way detribalized, as their tribal culture was eroded by Vaishnava culture. That is the role which Sankardeva and Vaishnavism have played, and that is a great role. Now, although they are disciples they maintain the original culture of drinking, eating meat and moving hither and thither in the jungles. They maintain some part of tribal culture and also maintain their Vaishnava culture. This Mayamora sect has a huge following; almost half of the Vaishnavites of Assam belong to it. It may not have 10,000 naam ghars, but it has a million disciples.

Assam and India

We do not need to look into our connection with India keeping in mind just the 14 km corridor that connects us. India is interwoven and united with Assam. If you think India lives here in its heart, its spirit and spirituality, then this narrow geographical corridor is of little consequence. In the 16th century, Sankardev wrote in praise

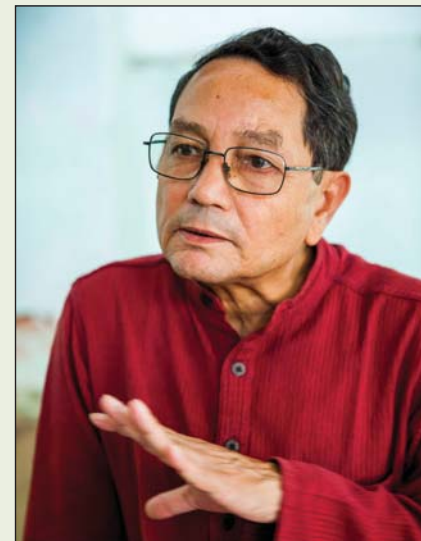
of India in *Bhakti Ratnakar*: "Life in India is fruitful. Life in India is to be welcomed. Life in India is to be congratulated. Life in India is meaningful for all human beings." He repeats those lines 46 times—this when many people had little sense of India as a whole.

Bangladesh

The Bangladeshi infiltration problem in Assam is very serious. Assam is now full of Bangladeshis. Out of the 30 million population of Assam, around ten million have infiltrated from Bangladesh. The situation is such that you will be afraid of traveling to some parts of Assam. When you visit these places you will feel that you are in

Bangladesh and not India. People in the rest of India do not understand the kind of problems we are facing due to Bangladeshis. In some of the places full of Bangladeshis our Hindu population does not even venture out in the marketplace in the evenings, as they are afraid they may be attacked. Human migration is something which is well accepted, but there must be a certain limit.

There is all this talk of Hindu and Muslim Bangladeshi. How can we distinguish between them? A Bangladeshi is a Bangladeshi. He is a foreign national. The problem with foreign nationals is that they do not have any loyalty for our country. They are loyal to another country, not to India. When the country was divided in two parts on the basis of religion, a point was made, and still the impact of that is there in the minds of the people. The people who have formed the government of Assam today are the people who always had the interest of Assam in their mind. So now I trust that they will do good for Assam and not



Satra expert: Historian D. Nath

bad for Assam.

Tribals and "Mainstream Hinduism"

Why should the tribals be persuaded to come into "mainstream Hinduism"? This is something problematic. In fact, what the tribals do, they are doing within Hinduism already. I think Hinduism has a lot of variety in it. For example, if you undertake animal sacrifice, you are a Hindu. If you believe in nonviolence, you are a Hindu. If you use the priesthood you are a Hindu; if you perform the rituals yourself, still you are a Hindu. Even if you do not perform rituals, still you are a Hindu. If you bury your dead, you are a Hindu, and if you burn your dead, still you are a Hindu. Are we not varied? The tribals are also following systems of their own and can still be a part of Hindus and Hinduism. We, as Assamese, would like to maintain the plurality to form a better Hindu culture by allowing even the smaller cultures to grow. We do not look down upon any as an inferior religion or "animist;" we treat them as equals. When you have to embrace so many people coming from different backgrounds and you have to make a united India, you will have to see these things in the right perspective.

Youth

It may appear to an outsider sometimes that the tribal youth or our Assamese youth are not much interested in our culture. But if you get to see and participate some of the big religious festivals, like Durga Puja and Sankardev Utsav, Ras Leela, Bhavna, etc., you will realize they very keenly get together to celebrate and organize these events. So, from their Western dress style, which includes jeans and T-shirts, please do not conclude that they do not take interest in their own culture, or that they are going away from spirituality and their own culture. I believe their soul is still connected to their culture.

return to the river's eastern side to explore the area's major temples, starting with the Tilinga.

Tinsukia's Bell Temple

The small but powerful Tilinga or "bell" temple was founded in 1965. The local tea estate workers had discovered a *svayambhu* (natural, self-manifested) Sivalingam emerging from the ground near a banyan tree. The estate management then built a small Siva temple at the site. No one is precisely sure how the custom of offering bells began, but at some point, a devotee who came to pray at the temple promised to tie a bell to the tree if his prayer was answered. His prayer was answered, and he dutifully came and tied the bell. The news spread, and as more and more people had their prayers fulfilled, the tradition of tying bells to the limbs of this grand old banyan developed. Eventually the tree became unable to support so many bells; so now they are hung on the walls enclosing the temple grounds.

The temple is a full of great energy, life and charm. Priests are available to perform puja for the devotees, and occasionally one will dash outside to the street to bless a new vehicle, a popular service of this temple. But anyone can approach and personally offer worship to the Sivalingam at the base of the banyan with lighted lamps and incense.

After making their prayer, a devotee ties a red sacred thread around one of the temple pillars. Once the prayer is fulfilled, he or she returns to offer a bell. If you are not likely to come back—as in our case—you can tie your

bell immediately after making your wish, in anticipation of a positive outcome. Thousands of bells are hung here, each a symbol of hope, aspiration, prayer and gratitude by pilgrims whose prayers were fulfilled.

Outside the temple we witness a procession of more than a hundred devotees of Sankardev walking barefoot along the road. One is carrying *Srimad Bhagavad Purana*

"The truth is, Assam and the northeast have a special place on the religious map of India."

GIRDHARI PARIKH

on his head and the others are chanting the name of Lord Krishna. All are dressed in white, with the traditional red-and-white gamcha scarves around their neck. It is a charming demonstration of the remarkable devotion to Sankardev present in Assam.

Offering a Hindu Education

Our first stop after the bell temple is the nearly completed Ekal Abhiyan Gramothan Research Centre. According to Shri Sanjay Trivedi, head of the Van Bandhu Parishad, the center is being established to foster village economic development through improved education, health, medical services and farming techniques. The Parishad already runs 270 Ekal Vidyalayas in the area.

Next is a boys' hostel run by the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, part of their

nation-wide program to uplift India's tribal population. The local leader, Girdhari Parikh, tells us this particular hostel, one of five they operate in Assam, is for children from poor families in the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe communities.

Parikh said once the children complete eighth grade and depart to pursue higher education, the ashram loses contact with them and they may fall under the influence of Christian missionaries. "The missionaries have a very wide network," he explained, "and their level of work is much bigger than ours. For example, they have orphanages which can accommodate hundreds of Hindu children, and we have no such similar facility. They specifically target the people our society has neglected. But the situation is changing fast because of the Ekal schools."

He offers his view on a topic we asked several people to comment on: the relationship of the northeast with the rest of India.

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Facets of Faith: (clockwise from right) Devotees of Sankardev in barefoot procession carrying *Srimad Bhagavat Purana*; puja lamps at the Tilinga temple; some of the many bells hung all about the temple grounds; officials of the Mayamora Satra



Mayamora Dinjyoy Satra



"It is unfortunate that there is this feeling we are different or there is some kind of a gap between the North Indians and us. The truth is, Assam and the northeast have a special place on the religious map of India. Parasuram, an avatar of Lord Vishnu, is associated with this area, as is Rukmini, wife of Lord Krishna. Bhima and Arjuna of the *Mahabharata* married girls from here. In fact, Assam is a great pilgrimage destination and should be promoted as such."

We stopped at the offices of the Shri Hari Satsang Samiti, a wing of the India-wide Ekal Abhiyan or movement. Its head, Madhu Gupta, explains they have 108 speakers, known as Vyas Kathakars, trained in Vrindavan and Ayodhya to narrate *Srimad Bhagavat Purana* and perform Ram kathas. They do so in two- to three-day events at both large and small venues, mostly in the villages with an Ekal school. The speakers teach the villagers how to perform puja and other simple rituals.

Nepalese Community

Again here we searched out the local Nepalese community, this time in the remote Doom Dooma Taluk of Tinsukia district. They originally came to other parts of Assam during British times, and were resettled here along with other communities following the

massive 1950 Assam earthquake. The magnitude 8.6 quake devastated entire regions of the state with landslides and floods. At the time, this area, called Philobari, was dense forest, but it has been developed with extensive government assistance.

We are welcomed by a few hundred people in an event organized for our visit, a highlight of which is the performance of traditional Nepalese dances by the young boys and girls. They are delighted when our Kathmandu-based photographer, Thomas Kelly, addresses them in fluent Nepalese.



Siva Sagar: Ducks and people alike enjoy the reservoir

The hardworking community, now numbering about 50,000, is doing well financially in agriculture, as tea estate workers and in other businesses. They have some temples in Nepalese style, but also worship in the area's Hindu temples and visit the nearby naam ghars.

Temples of Siva Sagar

Fifty miles southwest of Dibrugarh is the famed ancient temple popularly known as Sivadol, located in the town of Siva Sagar, former capital of the Ahom kingdom. It sits

Assam's Nepalese: (right) Gurka community of Doom Dooma Taluk area

on the banks of the large Siva Sagar tank or reservoir, a half mile on a side. Sivadol is a majestic example of Ahom temple architecture with a center tower over one hundred feet tall—one of the highest pre-modern structures in India, we are told. Nearby are located the smaller Vishnudol and Devidol temples in the same style.

There is no murti of Siva installed in the inner sanctum of this unusual and quite powerful temple. As shown in the picture on page 31, there is simply a hole in the altar where the Lingam would normally be placed. The worship is conducted to this unseen Lingam. The chief priest, Suresh Badthakur, explains, "The God here is formless, and one can use one's imagination to visualize His own form and worship." Siva here is known as Mukti Natha, which means He who grants liberation to those who worship Him. Badthakur shows us the sacred shaligrams in the main sanctum, for which he alone is allowed to conduct the worship. Representing Vishnu, their significance in this Siva temple is unclear to me.

A senior temple official, Ganga Prasad Baruahai, 83, tours us about the grounds and relates the history of the Ahom people and the temple. The Ahom originated in south China and came to Assam via Myanmar in 1228 under the Tai King Sukapa. *Ahom* means "undefeated," while the "Tai" are a large group of people in southern China and southeast Asia who speak related languages, including the people of Thailand, Laos, Myanmar and



Shiv Sagar Temple Complex



the southern part of the Chinese province of Guangxi. Today the Ahom people speak Assamese. In 1671, at a key moment in India's history, the Ahom general Lachit Borphukan stopped the eastward expansion of the Mughals by defeating their forces near Guwahati. Had he failed, the entire northeast might have come under Muslim domination.

"King Sukapa," Barguhai told us, "brought with him a complete civilization which included the Furalong religion, medicine, agriculture and dairy farming." The Ahom were originally Buddhists, then in 1654 King Jaidhava Sing adopted Hinduism. The Ahom still follow some of their ancient traditions, especially in their worship of ancestors.

The stone-and-brick Sivadol temple, 195 feet in diameter and 104 feet tall, was built between 1742 and 1744 by Jaidhava Sing's great grandson Sivasinga and his wife Ambika Devi. Sivasinga invited priests from Ujjain—Badthakur's ancestors—to come and serve in this temple. Other kings brought priests from Bengal to serve in the many Hindu temples they built across Assam. On account of its age, Sivadol comes under the jurisdiction of the Archeological Survey of India. Barguhai complains that the ASI bureaucracy makes it difficult to maintain the temple properly. The outer walls are adorned with stunning sculptures, especially of the many forms of Goddess Durga. In one corner, bells are hung and red threads tied, as at Tilinga Temple. Sivadol's largest annual festival is Mahasivaratri.

Here we encountered Ashini Kumar Chetia, 42, chief advisor to the All Tai Ahom Students Union at the Sivadol Temple. The organization's purpose is to preserve the

ancient monuments of Assam and to nurture the Ahom culture. "We call ourselves Hindus, but our Ahom culture is different than Hindu culture. For example, our way of worshiping is different. At the Siva Sagar temple, we can, if we want, request the puja be conducted by our own priests in Ahom manner. We worship not the usual Hindu Gods, but an esoteric power named Shundev. The animal sacrifice that is done here is not part of our tradition. There are four million Ahom in Assam, mostly landowners engaged in agriculture. All of us, our youth in particular, love our culture."

The 129-acre temple tank is a marvel in itself, as its banks maintain a water level ten feet above the adjacent ground level. The average depth is 27 feet, and the source of the water is unknown. Auspicious in its own right its water is used during festivals and social occasions such as marriages. The tank is also a popular picnic area for the local population.

Here we met Purvi Rajkunwar, 28, a member of the Ahom community who said she considers herself a Hindu and worships Lord Siva. "As do other Assamese, we also follow the philosophy of Sankardev and visit the naam ghars. We worship the Sivalingam, but not idols. In our homes you will find pictures of the Gods and Goddesses, but not statues as such. Our young girls are as free as our young boys; both are given equal love and equal opportunity."

Dibrugarh Area

Dibrugarh is called the Tea City of India. Located 439 kms east of Guwahati, it is the center of industry, communication and health

care for the upper Assam region. Here we mostly visited the local headquarters of the same organizations we encountered in Guwahati.

By chance in Dibrugarh we encounter a tribal dance festival underway near a tea shop where we stop for refreshments. This is the annual Karam festival for the children of the tea estate workers. These workers came around 1860 during the British era—about the same time the Nepalese arrived. The workers hailed from a group of small princely states known as Chota Nagpur, now part of the modern Indian states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal. Karam Devta, honored in this dance festival, is a God of power and youth worshiped in Chota Nagpur and adjacent areas.

Two-thousand students attend the English-medium Sampurna Kendra Vidyalaya school. Principal S. P. Suresh explains this is a private trust set up to promote Indian culture and values. "Earlier, only the three missionary schools in Dibrugarh were English medium, and the cream of our society opted for them. In fact, I can say we have reduced the influence of these missionary schools by setting up our own well-managed institutions."

We next meet with local RSS leaders at the clinic of Dr. Ramesh Agarwal, an eye

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Shiv Sagar area: (clockwise from right) Inner sanctum of the Shivdol temple (the hole in the altar in front of the Nandi is the invisible Siva Lingam); royal viewing pavilion for the Ahom sporting grounds (note the rooftop crocodiles); oil well, a frequent road-side sight; gamcha shawls



Gamchas: Trademark of Assam

The gift for every guest in Assam is the red and white gamcha shawl, with every region having different designs. The storekeeper whose goods you see at right only brought out the shawls when asked; he felt they were too sacred to put on display like ordinary merchandise. We asked Dr. Nath to explain this regional symbol.

EVERY COMMUNITY HAS ITS OWN SPECIALLY DESIGNED RED AND white gamcha shawl. It is a symbol of all Assam; the red represents all the tribes; the white represents peace. It is a symbol of tolerance toward all castes and religions. The gamcha is also called *fulom* which means floral design. Whatever flowers are available locally are woven in the gamchas. Women of every family and every caste weave these gamchas. In other parts of India, weaving is treated as a low level profession. But in Assam, weaving is done by everyone: the queen, the brahmins, the peddlers on the road. All the tribal women make them. During the Ahom kingdom the queen had her own weaving workshop where women were taught to make gamchas with the training given by the queen herself. Every tribal community in the whole northeast has its own piece of cloth that is a type of gamcha but the color is different. The red and white colors belong to the Assam valley.



ALL PHOTOS: THOMAS L. KELLY

specialist and head of Dr. Hedgewar Sewa Samiti. Dr. Agarwal tells us that just a few years back people here were not very familiar with the RSS, its activities or ideology, but now there is more appreciation for their work. A major topic of discussion at the meeting is the high and unabated rate of infiltration into Assam from Bangladesh, which is impacting Assamese life in not only the cities but in the villages and tribal areas. The other major challenge to Assamese life is the Christian missionaries' concerted efforts to convert the tribals.

"Our approach to the tribals," explained Dr. Agarwal, is to allow them to preserve their distinct identity and way of worship. At the same time we tell them that their worship and identity is very close to that of Hindus and Hinduism. They are not different from us. They face the same pressure from urbanization to change their culture as does the rest of Hindu society."

"As to youth," he went on, "the Bangladesh infiltration has made them aware that our whole existence is under threat. The long-term fear is that Assam will be captured and annexed to Bangladesh. In India, after Kashmir, it is Assam with the highest Muslim population by percentage. Most Indians are unaware of this."

Another volunteer, Dr. Mukul, an engineering professor at Dibrugarh University, said when he was young, the Muslims of his village would participate in the Hindu

festivals and all lived in a cordial manner—just a few decades back. "In the nineties it all changed when Bangladeshi immigrants took over as imams," Mukul explained. "The Muslim community stopped participating in the Hindu festivals, and the women even started wearing burkas—a very big shift."

While in Dibrugarh we visit the Ekal headquarters, situated in a huge campus in a posh locality. A lively training program is in progress for the artists who go with musical instruments from village to village singing bhajan, dancing and holding satsang.

"The Bangladesh infiltration made our youth aware that our whole existence is under threat."

DR. RAMESH AGARWAL

Through these sessions the Ekal movement has been able to establish a strong personal bond with the villagers of the areas where Ekal projects are running. The villagers, in turn, are very helpful with the Ekal projects, especially the schools for their children. Besides the Ekal, the RSS, Vivekananda Kendra, Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, Vidya Bharti, VHP and Sewa Bharati all work in this area.

One Ekal supporter and member of Vidya Bharati, Dinesh Modi, stated, "In the India of the 18th century, according to a British survey, there were 720,000 gurukulam

schools running in the country. The British made a deliberate move to disrupt this traditional education system and introduce a new one. Now Vidya Bharati is running 18,000 schools in India to connect to our roots through our ancient system while incorporating the modern one."

Conclusion

Our nine days of intensive travel through Assam's cities, villages and tribal areas impress me strongly with the relaxed outlook on life, inherent religiousness, affectionate behavior and loving nature of the Assamese people. The beauty and essence of Assam lies in its multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-religious society. Here one finds all three main streams of Hinduism: Shakti worship at the Goddess Ma Kamakhya temple, Siva at the temples of Siva Sagar, and Vaishnavism throughout. This great diversity encapsulates the whole of

India in the one state of Assam. No wonder it is called an India in miniature.

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Lively Celebrations: (clockwise from right) A dance competition at the annual Karam Festival put on by the tea estate workers and their children; girls of the Gorkha community dancing to a Nepali folk song; the ornate minibus—a rolling temple, really—used by the Ekal volunteers to go from village to village



Dancing Across Assam





SHUTTERSTOCK

CULTURE

Embracing Life's Changes as Natural Stages

How a stay-at-home mom, whose child grew up and left home, reinvented herself to overcome the “empty nest” syndrome

BY VATSALA SPERLING, US

FOR OUR FIRST WEDDING ANNIVERSARY in the green mountains of rural Vermont, my husband, Ehud Sperling, presented me with a book, *The Organon of the Medical Art* by Samuel Hahnemann, the visionary 19th-century physician who first developed homeopathic medicine. I looked through the book once and asked why he gave me a book instead of a more romantic present, say, a piece of fancy jewelry! Having founded a highly successful publishing company when he was twenty-four years old and having worked with scores of women on his staff, he had a fairly practical idea about what would make a perfect gift for his wife. “Books change lives,” he said. I chose not to argue and put the book away without realizing that in a not-too-distant future this book would open new doors for me.

Years ago, as our son prepared to come into our lives, I got busy with motherhood. I made friends with women in my neighborhood and watched them raise their kids.

When one of them sent their kid to college, other mothers would ask her, “How is the empty nest?” I was awestruck when I heard this phrase for the first time. “Women are not birds. They do not build nests,” I thought. “Kids are not hatchlings who fly off the nest the moment their wings can carry them. Why do Americans compare the experiences of women whose kids have gone away to school with that of a mother bird?”

I was raised with the Hindu cultural tradition of viewing life in four stages, *brahmacharya* (childhood and student life), *grihastha* (householder), *vanaprastha* (retirement) and *sannyasa* (renunciation). When following this path, Hindu culture ensures that you grow spiritually within yourself and make peace with every stage. This means that when the time comes, you can embrace the sannyasa stage and successfully reach the ultimate aim of life—a state of loving detachment and inner renunciation. This Hindu attitude toward life does not mention an “empty nest.” I had never heard the phrase in India where I grew up.

But here in the US, the question was common, “How is the empty nest?” “This must be a purely American phenomenon,” I said to myself, as I tried to understand the culture in which I found myself living and raising our son Mahar.

Mind you, Vermont is a pretty homogeneous, white state. I was the only woman of Indian origin in my town. Around me were all sorts of mothers. Some chose to put their education, job and career on hold and become full-time mothers, as I had done, and others continued to work while sending their kids to day care. Whatever choices the women around me made, I could see in them the presence of an efficient, skillful, multi-tasking Goddesses with the ability to juggle jobs and family life, some without a husband or partner. These women raised kids, managed their households, paid the bills and made sure everyone’s needs were taken care of. Their lives were a hectic 24/7 drama with no intermission. They reminded me of the Ashta Lakshmi—the eight forms of Goddess Lakshmi: Dhana, Dhyana, Santana, Veera,



VATSALA SPERLING

Vijaya, Vidya, Saubhagya and Vara Lakshmi. I felt grateful to my Hindu culture for helping me recognize the Goddess in each of these women.

As we all know, kids grow up and move on in search of education, jobs or relationships. The intense years of child-rearing eventually come to an end. Particularly in the West, where most Hindu households have nuclear families, Indian women get a taste of the empty nest just like their non-Indian sisters. Women who stay with their jobs or careers while raising kids might find themselves relishing the new-found freedom once kids leave home, but those who chose to be full-time moms are hit hard with this syndrome. Their spouse is busy with his career, the kids are away, and the house is empty. The woman has little to do, nothing to look forward to, except the holidays when the kids will be home again.

Reinvent in Advance

I can now understand—my son having just gone off to college—how Western, home-bound women inevitably face the empty nest! Society and culture here lack the depth to ease their transition into a new stage of life. But I realized that we can counteract one American phrase, “empty nest,” with an equally potent and practical American phrase, “reinventing myself.” As women, on the day our kids are born we have to ask ourselves the question, “How am I going to deal with the empty nest when it comes around?” This question, as noted earlier, is especially relevant to those who choose to be stay-at-home moms.

Reinventing ourselves finds its roots in a clear understanding of the four stages of life and in seeing how each stage is a stepping-stone that helps us prepare for and grow naturally into the next stage in a seamless, organic and life-affirming manner. Here in the West, reinventing oneself is a well-known down-to-earth business of assessing one’s strengths, weaknesses, ambitions,

desires, dreams, skills and talents.

While our children are small and still in our care, we would be well advised to take stock of these aspects of ourselves and steer our life in a direction that considers our future. In practical terms, it could mean acquiring a fresh education, keeping a hobby that could be turned into gainful work, mastering new skills that could help us re-enter a job market, learning a new profession, or preparing to volunteer in our community, if we happen to be financially comfortable. After all, we have over a decade of time on our hands to plan and prepare for the day when our kids will fly from the nest. With this focused preparation we can then turn a new page in the book of life, instead of moping around the house, complaining of loneliness and boredom, having nothing to do.

Destiny is a mighty force to contend with. We turn out as we are destined to. But it is also true that life, with immense kindness and wisdom, gives us choices and opportunities for growth, self-development, self-realization and self-fulfillment. We are meant to nurture not only our family and kids, but also our own body, mind and spirit. Women would be wise to remain alert to opportunities for growth and seize them while children are still small. Once the kids move on, we can then embark upon a whole new stage of life with meaningful job, career or other pursuits for the next 25 or 30 years.

The idea is that instead of seeing life as a series of missed opportunities, we can make use of our circumstances for personal growth. It is within women’s power to create new meaning in their own life. They do not have to be left behind to stare alone at the empty nest that they so lovingly built.

In short, mothers, you should know that the day will come. Plan and be prepared for it. When it does come, you will have successfully reinvented yourself in a truly American manner. You will have transformed yourself to succeed in a new stage of your life. Life is a series of opportuni-

A family tradition: (far left) Empty nest syndrome is common in the West for mothers whose children leave for university; (left) a Ganesh puja performed at the Sperling residence with family, friends and Pundit Ji Kailashanathan Sastrigal, celebrating Mahar’s high-school graduation and admission to NYU Gallatin School of Individualized Study

ties for growth, and our job is to remain awake, seize the moment and go with the flow.

The Empty Nest & Hindu Culture

I thought of writing this piece for HINDUISM TODAY because it is particularly relevant in Hindu culture. Hindu women are encouraged since birth to be selfless mother-goddesses. No sacrifice is considered too big when it comes to raising their kids and nurturing their families. In our homeland, we are lucky to be immersed in our culture and the multi-generational extended families which ensure that women in the “empty nest” phase find something meaningful to do.

In Western society, cut off from their native culture and spiritual resources, Indian women face enormous challenges. While facing this stage in life, they may also be dealing with an aging spouse, intense loneliness, menopause and other age-related issues. If women work relentlessly at reinventing themselves while their kids are small, they will be able to sustain a meaningful and productive existence later on.

This technique of reinvention worked for me. I had left behind a thriving career as the chief of clinical microbiology services in a children’s hospital in India to marry and come to the US and raise a family as a stay-at-home mom. The book my husband presented to me for our first wedding anniversary in 1997 became a source of inspiration that launched me into a whole new path. While my son was still on my lap, I began studying homeopathy in full seriousness and today I run a successful practice in Vermont. I have clients from many states in the US, in France and a few of the South American countries. I count this as a stroke of good fortune, and I am extremely grateful for all the opportunities life presented me.

My Hindu sisters, especially in the US, who are stay-at-home moms can put the reinventing technique to use in their own lives. The good news is that their own culture offers them the tools for reinvention. 🍽️



EDUCATIONAL INSIGHT

A Blessed Path through Philosophical Jungles

The Life & Teachings of One of India's Great Luminaries, Śhrī Nimbārka



Excerpts from the ancient hagiography *Nimbārka Vikrānti*, rendered into English by Brahmachari Vrajvihari Sharan, PhD



Who am I? Why am I here? Who are all of these other beings? What is this material universe? What is the source of all this? How am I related to this source and to these other beings? Such questions have perplexed serious thinkers and seekers for millennia. In Hindu history, there were six classical systems of philosophy which sought to answer these conundrums. Of them, Vedānta persists as the quintessential Hindu philosophical system. That does not, however, mitigate the fact that there are several understandings, or schools, of Vedānta. The oldest surviving school of this ancient knowledge system is that of Śhrī Nimbārka.

Quite removed from the realm of socio-political ministrations and desires for starting a wide-reaching movement, Śhrī Nimbārka initiated a school of Vaiṣṇava Vedānta that he saw as the continuation of the ascetic tradition passed down to him by Śhrī Nārada Muni. The Nimbārka Sampradāya, as it came to be known, was a lineage of ascetics and renunciates that actively eschewed participation in the wider world. Theirs was a mission of introspection, of spiritual endeavor, of compassion to the sincere, and of wariness towards the overtly ambitious. It is because of this apathy regarding the social milieu that Śhrī Nimbārka and his tradition eluded the historical record for many centuries.

The latest research by Indological scholars (Ramnarace 2015, Malkovsky 2001, Agrawal 2000 and Satyanand 1997) has shown that it is likely that Śhrī Nimbārka lived sometime between 620-690 ce, though the Nimbārka Sampradāya maintains the *Bhaviṣhya Purāṇa*'s statement that he incarnated on Kārtika Pūrṇimā 3096 bce, six years after Bhagavān Śhrī Kṛṣṇa concluded His earthly pastimes. Whether we accept the tradition's dating or that of the scholars, it is still clear that Nimbārka's School of Vedānta precedes all the currently extant schools.

Who was this enigmatic āchārya? What exactly did he teach? The following is an account of Śhrī Nimbārka's life, translated for the first time into English from the *Śhrī Nimbārka Vikrānti*, a hagiography written by his immediate disciple Śhrī Audumbarāchārya. Before we unravel his life, we'll first take a look at his philosophy.

Parabrahman is shown here as the unified radiance of Śhrī Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa. Śhrī Nimbārka Bhagavān is seated beneath a neem tree with his hands clasped in adoration. He is the combined personification of Śhrī Kṛṣṇa's emanation of Aniruddha (through the Sudarshana Chakra), and Śhrī Rādhā's emanation of Raṅgadevī Sakhī.

Śhrī Nimbārka's Philosophy

By Brahmachari Vrajvihari Sharan

If there is any concordance to the apparently cacophonous theologies and philosophies that populate the thickets of contemporary Hindu spirituality, it is due to the efforts of Lord Bādarāyaṇa, author of the *Brahmasūtras*. In that text of 555 aphorisms, he sought to synthesize a coherent conclusion (anta) to the seemingly self-contradictory totality of divine revelation (*Veda*: the *Samhitās*, *Brāhmaṇas*, *Āraṇyakas*, *Upaniṣhads* and *Sūtras* belonging to the various recensions of the four *Vedas*). The system known as Vedānta (originally a term designating the *Upaniṣhads*) developed from his aphoristic summary, successfully demonstrated that all of these variegated scriptures are, in fact, harmonious due to their foundation in Brahman.

However, the secrets of his cryptic teachings remained the preserve of the sincerest seekers and would have remained largely unintelligible were it not for the explanations produced by realized āchāryas after the 5th century ce. Each of the major āchāryas established his line of interpretation as a school, or sampradāya; his particular take on the *Brahmasūtras*,

with the Lord as the main *mokṣha-sādhana*—means to liberation from transmigration.

Śhrī Śhaṅkarāchārya used many *pūrvapakṣhas* (prima-facie views), against which he clarified his doctrines and crystallized those of other schools he saw to be deficient. The majority of rival tenets that he countered belonged to Bhedābheda (also known by the synonym Dvaitādvaita), which scholars suggest is the oldest philosophical understanding of Vedānta, a fact to which pre-eighth century Buddhist writings attest. Some of them go as far as to claim that the *Brahmasūtras* were composed from a Bhedābheda doctrinal foundation. Of the various post-*Brahmasūtra* Bhedābheda theologians (such as Bhartṛprapañcha, Bhāskara, Yādavaprakāśha, etc.), the oldest continuous tradition of this philosophy belongs to the Svābhāvika-Bhedābheda exegetical school founded by Śhrī Nimbārkaachārya Bhagavān, at whom Śhrī Śhaṅkarāchārya aimed most of his polemic (especially in his *Bṛihadāraṇyakopaniṣhadbhāṣhyam*).

Śhrī Nimbārka composed a brief explanation of the *Brahmasūtras*, styled the *Vedāntapārijātasaurabha* (the Fragrance of the Heavenly Flower of Vedānta), which he used to reiterate the ancient philosophy of Bhedābheda against newer philosophies being propounded by Dharmakīrti, a seventh century

Left: The threefold emblem of the Nimbārka Sampradāya: the Sudarshana Chakra (discus), the Tilaka of the Lord, and the Pāñchajanya Śhaṅkha (conch). Right: Nimbārka Bhagavān is immersed in the worship of the holy murti Śhrī Sarveshvara Bhagavān, which was given to him by Śhrī Nārada Muni (holding a vina). Nārada had received it from the four sages: Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanātana and Sanatkumāra; and they received it from Nārāyaṇa Himself in the incarnation of Śhrī Haṁsa (the white swan).

revealed through divine inspiration. This knowledge was passed down through each school's sacred guru-disciple lineage (paramparā) which, in genuine cases, originated from the Supreme Being.

Today, Hindus delving into the limitless treasure-trove of philosophical inquiry become familiar with āchāryas such as Śhrī Śhaṅkarāchārya, Śhrī Rāmānujāchārya, Śhrī Madhvāchārya, Śhrī Viṣṇuswāmī, etc., each of whom established their own sampradāya of Vedānta interpretation. Among them, Śhrī Śhaṅkarāchārya ranks as pre-eminent due to his numerous erudite treatises in an effort to reclaim the hearts of seekers from the profusion of sects—both theist and atheist—that were popular in eighth-century India. His Kevalādvaita or Advaita Vedānta has been described as a reductionist and idealistic reading of the *Brahmasūtras*, the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Upaniṣhads*. Commentaries on this scriptural triad, known as the Prasthānatrayī, are the systematizing exegesis upon which a school of Vedānta could be founded. Śhrī Rāmānujāchārya, Śhrī Madhvāchārya and Śhrī Vallabhāchārya responded to this with their own scripturally substantiated viewpoints in which the Supreme Being retained a personable side, (re-)promoting the relationship of devotee

Buddhist monk of the ancient Nālandā University, who vehemently opposed Vedāntic spirituality. Śhrī Śhrīnivāsāchārya, the successor of Śhrī Nimbārkaachārya Bhagavān, wrote in the beginning of his sub-commentary, the *Vedāntakaustubha*, that he was commanded by his guru to expand upon the *Vedāntapārijātasaurabha* in order to clarify any remaining doubts of spiritual seekers regarding the Bhedābheda interpretation of the Vedic scriptures.

Why is Bhedābheda so crucial to Hindu Dharma? All Hindu philosophies accept that the Vedic texts (*Samhitās*, *Brāhmaṇas*, *Āraṇyakas* and *Upaniṣhads*) are divine revelation. The *Upaniṣhads* present myriad doctrines on a variety of topics; however, they do not give a unified position on the understanding of a few crucial principles, chief of which is the identity and relationship of the three major ontological categories: Brahman (Supreme soul), Jīva (individual soul) and Jagat (creation). Are the Supreme Soul and individual soul one and the same, or are they different? Is the universe an illusion and therefore not really existing, or does it exist but is just temporary? Depending on which part of a certain *Upaniṣhad* one peruses, divergent answers may be found.

Śhrī Śhaṅkarāchārya adopted a unique approach to solve this disparity

in his theory of Kevalādvaita: he theorized that those Upaniṣhadic statements that support the illusory nature of creation and the oneness of Brahman and individual soul constitute higher knowledge; all other statements of difference are lower knowledge. Śhrī Madhvāchārya inverted this in his formulation of Dvaita, showing statements of difference as the highest wisdom. Śhrī Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita subordinated the assertions of difference under the teachings of oneness. Before all of these āchāryas, however, Śhrī Nimbārka simply taught that if the *Veda* is divine revelation, then none of it is lower knowledge; all of it should be accepted as equally teaching the supreme knowledge. This all-embracing concept of Svābhāvika-Bhedābheda (natural simultaneous difference and oneness) expounded by Śhrī Nimbārka could account for the concurrent existence of both types of statements. This requires an intellectual openness and all-embracing outlook that may not have appealed to

their glorious variety. The Supreme Being has created all of us with different mind-sets and proclivities, according to our previous karma, and has established authorized paths that cater to all sorts of viewpoints on returning to the Divine. Secondly, it permits us to understand the variety existent in this creation as expressions of the Divine, and find joy in this vibrancy. Developing an open mind and an accepting heart is the first step on the ladder to spiritual progress required by the Bhedābheda philosophy. Thirdly, it encourages us to experience the world and really understand the temporary nature of the pleasures it has to offer. By doing this, one gains the power to discriminate between those pursuits that will give us temporary happiness and those that will give us eternal happiness.

Finally, it helps us to explore myriad ways of interacting with the Divine. If we find peace in the scriptural meditations of oneness with the Divine, then that is perfectly acceptable—similarly true of meditating



all types of spiritual seekers. Hence, the Supreme Lord empowered the later āchāryas mentioned to start their own traditions. Śhrī Nimbārka's philosophy also served as foundations for variations by later theologians, such as Śhrī Vallabhāchārya's Śuddhādvaita and Śhrī Chaitanya's Achintya Bhedābheda. Even Śhrī Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita is a reformulation of his scriptural teacher Śhrī Yādavaprakāśha's understanding of Svābhāvika-Bhedābheda.

So, what does this Svābhāvika-Bhedābheda mean to the spiritual seeker? First and foremost, it allows one to fully embrace the scriptures in

on having a relationship of any type with the Supreme. Whether we are content with accepting the Supreme Being as the origin or the source of conscious energy, or we prefer to relate with the Supreme as our friend, master, parent, regent or love: all are acceptable. Bhedābheda provides a firm theological grounding, using which seekers can experience a scripturally authorized connection with the Divine in the manner most suited to them. The only proviso is that seekers must be honest with themselves, and develop the maturity needed to embrace variety, eschewing a zealous grip on any philosophy that professes to be the only path.

The Life of Śhrī Nimbārka Bhagavān

Excerpts from the ancient hagiography *Nimbārka Vikrānti*, rendered into English by Brahmachari Vrajvihari Sharan, PhD

The spiritually fertile land of Bhārata, the traditional name for India, has been darkened during numerous oppressive epochs. Just over fifty years before Śhrī Śhaṅkarāchārya Bhagavatpāda incarnated, Hindus who visited places of pilgrimage were taxed, public celebrations of major festivals like Diwali were banned, Deities were forcibly removed from temples, and conversion was made finan-

chose for the beginning of His Earthly pastimes 5,242 years ago, the situation was dire. Mathurā had great strategic significance as a prominent city on trade routes that not only spanned the length and breadth of Bhārata, but also from Rome in the West to China in the East. The wealth of the traders made it an ideal focus for taxation, so conquering Mathurā remained top priority for kings. Non-Hindu rulers built many sprawling religious edifices in an effort to attract Hindus away from the simple ancient temples and hermitages. The few remaining Hindu ascetics avoided the city and continued to meditate in the forest groves around Mathurā, including the holy thickets of Vṛindāvana. Unfortunately for them, even their āśhramas were not spared, so the majority of Mathurā's



towards the western sea ports, arriving at the major city of Pratiṣṭhāna (modern Paithān) just before the holy Mārgaśhīrṣha month (November-December) commenced. They learned that the great sage's hermitage was in the nearby village of Vaidūrya Pattanam (modern Mūngī) on the southern bank of the Godāvarī River.

Upon entering the āśhrama, the sādhus were moved to tears by the nostalgic vision before them, not seen in Braj for many decades: young brahmachārīs were reciting the *Veda*, wives of resident seers were preparing evening bhoga, and Śhrī Aruṇa Rīshi was sitting under a *nimba* (neem) tree, sharing the knowledge of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣhad* with advanced students.

Aruṇa Rīshi received the sādhus with traditional Vedic hospitality, and was utterly dismayed to hear that Braj, particularly Mathurā and Vṛindāvana, was no longer safe for devotees of the Lord. As a solution, he encouraged them to perform a Gopālayajña (a fire-ritual to the Supreme Lord in His form as Śhrī Gopāla) in the safety of his āśhrama, with full faith in the Lord's promise to incarnate whenever there was a decline in Dharma (*Bhagavadgītā* 4.7-8). They were to perform this month-long *yajña* during the holy month of Mārgaśhīrṣha, which is dear to the Lord (*Bhagavadgītā* 10.35).

At the completion of the observance, thankful for this opportunity, the sādhus wished to show their gratitude to Aruṇa Rīshi by blessing him. Noting that the couple had no children, they blessed

Left: Śhrī Nimbārka arrives at the famed Anantapadma-nābhaswāmī Temple in Kerala for darśhan. As today, one can see the murti of Viṣṇu reclining on the serpent Śheshanāga in the nearby pond. Brahmins are performing a lavish yajña, more for wealthy patrons than for God. Some of them leave the yajña to welcome the visiting saint, angering the local Brahmins. Right: Viśhrām Ghāt in Vṛindāvan, the headquarters of the Nimbārka Sampradāya from the time of Jagadguru Śhrī Keśhavakāśhmīri Bhaṭṭāchārya (1400's) until the 1560's, when Jagadguru Swāmī Paraśhūrāma Devāchārya relocated it to Salemabād, Ajmer, in Rajasthan.



the seer and his wife, saying that by the grace of this Gopālayajña, the Lord would surely respond to the couple's desire for progeny, while also bringing Dharma back to Braj.

The Supreme Being and the Love of Devotees

At the core of the inner realms of existence lies the Eternal Source from which all of creation—with its myriad universes, dimensions, beings, matter and antimatter—arose. The *Purāṇas* teach of a hierarchy of realms presided over by various emanations of the Supreme Being: Indraloka is the kingdom of Indra, Pitṛiloka is where the ancestors reside, Brahmalo-ka is the realm of Lord Brahmā, Śhivaloka is Lord Śhiva's domain and Vaikuṇṭha is Lord Nārāyaṇa's abode. These realms and beings exist during the time of creation. However, at the very beginning, everything was in an unmanifest state of pure brilliance, eternality, consciousness and bliss. It is into this brilliance that everything will be absorbed at the end of time; this brilliance, Parabrahman, is the source of everything.

According to Vaiṣṇava teachings from the *Rīgveda*, *Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣhad* and the *Bhagavadgītā*, the eternal form of Parabrahman is Lord Śhrī Hari. At the commencement of creation, Lord Hari manifests the Chaturvyūha emanations (Vāsudeva, Saṅkarṣhaṇa, Pradyumna and Aniruddha), then Brahmā, Viṣṇu/Nārāyaṇa and Śhiva (presiding over each of the three guṇas), and indeed all other Deities, emanations, incarnations and empowered beings. Of all the various forms, in the capacity of preserver, Śhrī Hari is meditated upon as Lord Nārāyaṇa.

In the realm of Vaikuṇṭha, Lord Nārāyaṇa listened to the entreaties of

the sādhus led by Aruṇa Rīshi. The All-Knowing Lord turned to His most devoted personal associate, the Sudarśhana Chakra—the personality of the divine discus who cuts away pains, suffering and ignorance from devotees in order that they may attain the Supreme. In his essential form, Śhrī Sudarśhana is an emanation of the power of Lord Aniruddha, one of the Chaturvyūha.

In the *Bhaviṣhya Purāṇa*, Sūta jī relates the following: "Listen to the activities of the divine soul Nimbārka. He was told by the Supreme Lord: 'O mighty Sudarśhana, whose brilliance is equal to that of millions of suns! Do this task by My command: reveal the divine path to those who are blinded by the darkness of ignorance'" (*Pratisargaparvan* 7.68-69).

The Lord told Śhrī Sudarśhana to incarnate in the Tailāṅga region south of the Narmadā River, in Aruṇa Rīshi's āśhrama on the southern bank of the Godāvarī River. He would eventually meet Śhrī Nārada Muni who would instruct him on the most confidential secrets of the scriptures. With that knowledge, he would have a vision of the Supreme Lord in the Original, Eternal State. Thus empowered, he was to reinvigorate Dharma:

"You must restore Dharma in My lands, in Mathurā, Naimiṣhāranya, Dvārakā, Badarikāśhrama, Sudarśhanāśhrama and the many others, O spotless one! Saying 'Aum,' Lord Śhrī Sudarśhana accepted the Lord's command, and the fulfiller of the desires of the Lord's devotees manifested himself on the Earth" (*Pratisargaparvan* 7.71-73).

The Incarnation of Śhrī Sudarśhana Chakra

Back on Earth, auspicious signs were seen in the holy fires during *pūrṇāhuti*, signalling both the successful completion of the Gopālayajña and the fruition of the blessings the sādhus had given the rīshi and his wife. The Braj sādhus began their journey back to Mathurā certain that their wishes would soon be fulfilled.

On a cool winter evening in the month of Pauṣha, after the departure of the sādhus, Aruṇa Rīshi had a vision of pure brilliance before him. That brilliance suddenly disappeared into the heart of Aruṇa Rīshi who relished the divine encounter—not quite certain what happened, but thrilled nonetheless. When Jayantī Devī came to take the blessings of her husband after her evening worship, he placed his hand on her head and that luminous energy transferred from his heart to her mind. As time went on, Aruṇa Rīshi was overjoyed to see the signs of pregnancy in his wife, knowing that the blessings of the sādhus of Braj had borne fruit.

In the calm, cool air of the full-moon of Kārttika, the moon was situated in the Kṛttikā (Pleiades) constellation of the Vṛiṣhabha (Taurus) sign, with Meṣha (Aries) as the ascendant, and with Chandra (the moon), Maṅgala (Mars), Budha (Mercury), Bṛihaspati (Jupiter) and

cially attractive by non-Hindu rulers. Still, on the peripheries, devout followers of Hindu Dharma strived to preserve Vedic teachings for future generations, ever wary of the threats of persecution and death. Brāhmaṇas who had benefitted from state sponsorship were now without the support of the kings. Although the majority remained committed to Dharma, even if that meant languishing in poverty, a sizable number took to increasingly superstitious rituals in an attempt to create new sources of funding. Whenever the scriptures were invoked by the wise to make people realize that these fanciful crazes were illogical, the few miscreant Brāhmaṇas sought to discredit, and in some cases harm, those honest teachers who adhered to Dharma.

In Mathurā, the main city of the Braj region, which the Supreme Lord

sādhus adopted a peripatetic lifestyle, continuing their meditations on the Lord in the devotional mood of Vṛindāvana. When they were harassed at a certain place, they would simply move on; true sādhus find the Lord wherever they are.

The Sādhus of Braj Meet Śhrī Aruṇa Rīshi

One such group of sādhus decided to remedy the situation. They had heard of one last āśhrama, that was home to the great descendant of Bṛiḡu Rīshi, Śhrī Aruṇa Rīshi. The great Rīshi and his wife Jayantī Devī were extremely poor, but that did not deter thousands of earnest students from building huts near their home, forming the famous Aruṇāśhrama. In the autumn, the sādhus set off following the trade route from Mathurā



Śhani (Saturn) in exaltation. This extremely auspicious cosmic arrangement heralded the arrival of a divine incarnation. The attacks on sādhus and hermitages unexpectedly calmed down, and the fires of the evening agnihotra grew bright; flowers were in bloom, animals rested gladly, and humanity was peaceful. The Gods rejoiced in the heavens, the ancestors were filled with delight, for at the exact moment of *sandhyā*, evening twilight, the glorious brilliance of Lord Sudarśhana was born from the womb of Jayanti Devī.

Śhrī Nimbārka's Early Life

During his Nāmakaraṇa ceremony, the divine baby, who was showing signs of advanced cognition, was given the name Niyamānanda. Other names bestowed on him were Āruṇi (the son of Aruṇa Ṛishi), Jayanteya (the son of Jayanti) and Haripriya (dear to Hari). When the boy was five years old, Aruṇa Ṛishi noticed, to his great delight, that instead of playing with the local children Niyamānanda would sit for hours on end, absorbing the *Vedas* as they were being taught to the students. As her son's eighth birthday approached, Jayanti Devī organized his upanayana saṁskāra. Amidst the Vedic rites, Aruṇa Ṛishi invested his son with the yajñopavīta, the sacred thread worn over the left shoulder, and initiated him into the holy Gāyatrī Mantra. Soon after, the vedārambha was performed and the youth's formal religious studies commenced. With-

parents to establish their new dwelling. Later that place would become renowned as Nimbagrāma, or Neemgaon, the holy ground where Niyamānanda performed his austerities.

Śhrī Sudarśhana Is Given the Name Nimbārka

Lord Brahmā, architect of creation, presiding Deity of rajoguṇa and grandfather of all living beings, is an expansion and devotee of the Supreme Lord, eternally engaged in meditation upon Him. He noticed that Lord Nārāyaṇa's right hand was empty: the Sudarśhana Chakra had disappeared. Whilst eight human years had elapsed on Earth since Niyamānanda's incarnation, a miniscule amount of time had passed for Lord Brahmā—His twelve hours (one kalpa) is equivalent to 1,000 mahāyugas (4.32 billion human years). Knowing that Brahmā Jī desired to see Sudarśhana, Lord Nārāyaṇa dispatched Brahmā Jī to signal Niyamānanda to start his mission. Lord Brahmā decided he would take on the form of a Buddhist monk, generally mistrusted by Hindus in that era, to test Niyamānanda.

In the late afternoon, Aruṇa Ṛishi had gone to the banks of the Yamunā River for evening worship, and Jayanti Devī was busy gathering flowers. Little Niyamānanda was playing with the other youngsters when a Buddhist monk arrived at the āśrama. The monk explained that he was meditating in the nearby forest but, as he was a Buddhist monk and new to the

is equal to that of millions of suns, reveal the divine path to those who are blinded by the darkness of ignorance. You must now accomplish the goal for which you have incarnated. Soon after I leave, my son Nārada Muni will come [and explain more]. And, because you have shown me the sun (*arka*) amidst the neem (*nimba*) trees, you will henceforth be known by the name Nimbārka by people and especially in the scriptures" (*Āchāryacharitam*, *Ādyāchāryacharitra*, 3.37-39).

Lord Brahmā then told Nimbārka of his previous birth as the great Havirddhāna Muni, who appeared to solve the confusions of the great convention of sages and seers held in Naimiṣhāranya during Dvāpara

Earth when Aruṇa Ṛishi himself was a student. Understanding his inability, he meditated on the Supreme Lord, seeking a solution.

Listening to the prayers of Aruṇa Ṛishi, the Lord turned to His devotee Nārada Muni, the mind-born son of Lord Brahmā, and indicated that now it was time for him to bequeath the knowledge that had been imparted to him by his elder brothers, the quadruplets Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanātana and Sanatkumāra. These four sages were the disciples of the Śhrī Haṁsa [swan] incarnation of Śhrī Hari. The Vedānta, the confidential mūlamantra and advanced theology, and the worship of the eternal Deity form of the Śhrī Sarveśhvara Śhālagrāma, all given originally



Left: This art depicts the famed initiation moment, when Śhrī Nārada Muni blessed Śhrī Nimbārka Bhagavān (seated). He is also given the Śhrī Sarveśhvara Deity, which glows effulgently on the right. On the left we see Śhrī Nimbārka's four main disciples: three renunciates and one a householder. Right: Nimbārka Bhagavān was attacked by jealous Brahmins at night in his forest camp. After failing to kill him with their weapons, they set fire to his dwellings. Śhrī Padmanābhaswāmī arrives, intent on dispatching the mob, but Nimbārka Bhagavān, using the fire as a protective wall, beseeches the Lord to forgive them.

in a short time, Niyamānanda mastered the extensive scriptural body of knowledge that is the Vedic canon: the four Vedic *Samhitās*, *Brāhmaṇas*, *Āraṇyakas* and *Upaniṣhads*, as well as the *Sūtras* and *Smṛitis*.

Relocating to the Spiritual Lands

Niyamānanda was enthralled by his father's recounting of the various incarnations of Śhrī Hari and was particularly taken by the accounts of Bhagavān Śhrī Kṛiṣṇa's activities. Another band of sādhus traveling from Braj visited the āśrama, enkindling Niyamānanda's desire to live in Braj. Aruṇa Ṛishi and Jayanti Devī, fully aware that theirs was no ordinary boy, consented to his wish. Accompanied by a few renounced souls, Aruṇa Ṛishi, Jayanti Devī and young Niyamānanda began the journey to Braj, stopping at various holy places enroute. Finally, they arrived at Braj, where they visited Śhrī Kṛiṣṇa's place of incarnation in Mathurā. Upset that the land was overrun by people with no faith in Śhrī Kṛiṣṇa, they retired to the nearby forests and groves. In a grove midway between Barsānā, the land of the incarnation of Śhrī Rādhā Devī, and Govardhana, where Śhrī Kṛiṣṇa took His cows to graze, Niyamānanda asked his

plight, Niyamānanda asked him to rest and said food would be arranged. The monk was sad, however. He explained that it was past sunset and he now must fast, as his rules permitted him to eat only during the hours of sunlight.

Niyamānanda consoled the monk, saying it only appeared that the sun had set due to the thick jungle surrounding the āśrama. He pointed to a group of neem (nimba or Azadirachta indica) trees and said, "Look! The sun is just behind these trees. Please take your meal." Delighted to see the sunlight, the monk relished the meal offered to him. As he finished the last morsel, the sun abruptly disappeared. A nearby water clock revealed that, in fact, it was 96 minutes (*ghaṭi-chatuṣṭayam*) into nighttime. Seeing the spiritual prowess of Niyamānanda, the monk revealed his true form of Lord Brahmā. Niyamānanda immediately prostrated and begged forgiveness; as the sun amidst the Neem trees was actually his own effulgence which he had, in compassion for the monk's hunger, projected to look like the sun.

Lord Brahmā spoke in a soothing tone to Niyamānanda, reiterating the command of the Supreme Lord: "O mighty Sudarśhana, whose brilliance



Yuga under the auspices of Śhaunaka Ṛishi. Lord Brahmā continued, saying that, through Śhrī Nārada Muni, Nimbārka would realize all his former incarnations and, indeed, his eternal position. Nimbārka, overjoyed at the darśhana of Lord Brahmā, bowed again and again to the grand-architect of the universe. Smiling, Lord Brahmā disappeared.

The Glory of the Dikṣhā Guru: Back to the Beginning

Following this encounter with Lord Brahmā, Nimbārka found himself pondering the great questions of life. Realizing that the glorious scriptures sometimes had divergent views, he asked his father to instruct him in a coherent conclusion that made sense of these differences. Aruṇa Ṛishi knew that long ago there existed a system of Vedānta, based on the writings of Bhagavān Bādarāyaṇa, that provided sound answers to these questions. However, the teachers of the Vedānta traditions had suffered centuries of persecution and Vedānta had no true representative on the

by the Supreme to the four sages, were now to find their first ever human recipient in Śhrī Nimbārka Bhagavān.

Nārada Muni gladly bowed to Śhrī Hari and descended to Earth, thrilled to be returning to the holy land of Braj. When Aruṇa Ṛishi and Śhrī Nimbārka saw Śhrī Nārada Muni, they fell flat on the ground, prostrating to this divine visitor. Śhrī Nārada Muni explained that he had come to instruct Śhrī Nimbārka on the highest truth: "Nimbārka! You are the incarnation of Śhrī Sudarśhana, who always obeys the command of the Supreme Lord Śhrī Kṛiṣṇa. Therefore, I will perform the initiation ceremony for which you are now eligible" (*Āchāryacharitam*, *Ādyāchāryacharitra*, 4.8-9).

Śhrī Nārada Muni initiated Śhrī Nimbārka with the pañcha-saṁskāra-vaishṇava-dikṣhā and instructed him in the science of spirituality. He taught him the rituals of *Pañcharātra Āgama* and also the highest knowledge of Svābhāvika-Bhedābheda Vedānta, which remains the



most coherent philosophical understanding of the scriptures. Finally, he bestowed upon Śhrī Nimbārka the Śhrī Sarveshvara Śhālagrāma. With the parting instruction to re-establish Dharma across the land, Śhrī Nārada Muni returned to the Lord's abode.

Taking up the Mission

Resolved to have darśhana of the Lord's original eternal form, in accordance with the teachings of his guru, Śhrī Nimbārka began to perform austerities. He renounced the world, following the rules of naiṣṭhika brahmachārya (perpetual, total mental and physical celibacy), becoming a sannyāsī known as Śhrī Nimbārka Muni. He immersed himself in japa of the mantras given at initiation, and in meditation on the Supreme. He

ate no solid food, drinking only the extremely bitter juice of pressed neem leaves to sustain his body.

Day by day his spiritual glow grew, until finally he attained the vision of the Supreme Lord, Śhrī Hari, in the eternal, original, most secret form found in the essence of the scriptures—the form of Śhrī Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa unified. He became aware of all his past existences and those he would take in the future; he realized that his eternal position was that of Sakhī Raṅgadevī, the closest associate of the Supreme Being. As such, he was the combined incarnation of both Śhrī Kṛṣṇa's emanation as Lord Aniruddha through Sudarśhana, and Śhrī Rādhā's emanation as Raṅgadevī. He remembered the command of the Lord that brought him to Earth. His parents and all who resided in the āśhrama witnessed this

process, realizing that, indeed, Śhrī Nimbārka was a divine incarnation. They henceforth referred to him as Śhrī Nimbārka Bhagavān and learned from him the truth of all existence. His parents happily remained in the āśhrama while the renounced Śhrī Nimbārka began his work.

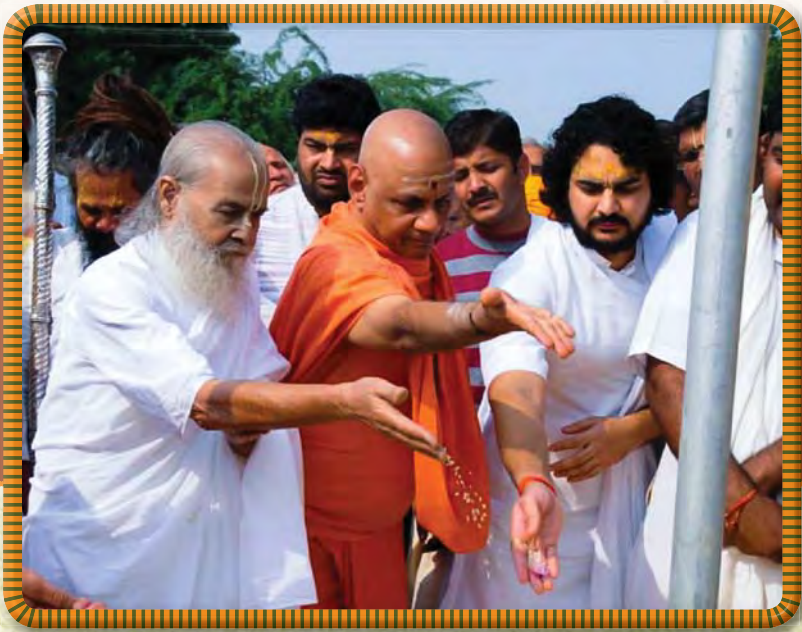
Purifying Footprints: the Spiritual Revival of Bhārata

Accompanied by a few disciples, Śhrī Nimbārka set out on foot across the country, overnighing in the forests on the edge of villages and towns enroute. He departed in the springtime towards the north, passing Indra-prastha before having darśhana at Haridwar, Rishikesh, Gaṅgotri, Yamu-notri and finally at Śhrī Badrinātha. He then trekked to Śhrī Muktinātha and Dāmodarakuṇḍa high in the Himalayas. Having paid obeisance to the natural origin of all Śhālagrāmas at Dāmodarakuṇḍa and worshiped Śhrī Sarveshvara Bhagavān with the holy waters of the lake, he turned southeast, aiming for Purī. As he was descending through the Himalayan foothills in what is now Assam, his disciples made camp on the banks of the vast Brahmaputra River. They rested a few days there, reacclimatizing to the heat of the plains, observing the river in its autumnal spate.

One afternoon as Śhrī Nimbārka was walking on the banks of the river, he heard the desperate cries for help of nearly 100 people on a large merchant vessel that was sinking in the middle of the raging waters. As he watched, the boat sank and the people were adrift in the dangerous rapids. Helplessly looking on, one disciple noticed that Śhrī Nimbārka was nowhere to be seen. The next second, cries of relief and amazement filled the air as the boat magically reemerged. Śhrī Nimbārka was seated in the middle of the now buoyant vessel. He helped all those who were swept away back onto the boat and guided it safely to shore. The grateful survivors sought to reward Śhrī Nimbārka with great sums of money, but the renounced āchārya asked them instead to use the wealth to help the poor and destitute in the area. They all became his disciples. It is thought that some of them are ancestors of Śhrīmanta Śhaṅkaradeva, the founder of the later Mahāpuruxiya Dharma in the 15th century, of which the



Left: The Śhrī Rādhā Golokavihārī Bhagavān Mandir at Shri Golok Dham Ashram in New Delhi. Right: Pictured at a flag-hoisting ceremony during the Ujjain Kumbh Mela (left to right): the 48th Jagadguru Nimbārkaāchārya Śhrī Śhrījī Mahārāj of blessed memory; Swāmī Govind Dev Giri Jī (founder of the renowned Maharshi Ved Vyas Pratishthan and numerous Vedic colleges); and the newly enthroned 49th Jagadguru Nimbārkaāchārya, Śhrī Śhyām Sharaṇ Devāchārya Jī Śhrī Śhrījī Mahārāj.



Śhrībhaṭṭa Devāchārya (c.1440-1520) was the first-ever author to compose Vāṇī poetry in Braj Bhāṣhā, and was an inspiration to other nascent Vaiṣṇava traditions in Braj at that time. His disciple, Śhrī Harivyāsa Devāchārya (c.1470-1540), was a great reformer who charged his 12 main disciples with spreading the tradition throughout Bhārata. Śhrī Paraśhurāma Devāchārya (1525-1607) was anointed as the next leader of the sampradāya out of those 12. He performed austerities in Rajasthan near Lake Pushkar, worked tirelessly to eradicate fanaticism and promoted interreligious dialogue in the late 16th century, being in close proximity to the tomb of the Sufi saint Moinuddin Chishti. Successors of Paraśhurāma's lineage are the Jagadgurus of the entire Nimbārka Sampradāya.

Paraśhurāma's elder god-brother, Śhrī Svabhūrāma Devāchārya, similarly worked to eradicate fanaticism and protected Hindus, establishing 52 centres in Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Mathura. A sizeable number of modern Nimbārki are part of his branch. Another famous monk among the 12 disciples was Śhrī Uddhavaghamaṇḍa Devāchārya, who initiated the Rāsa Līlā performances of the pastimes of Śhrī Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa. Śhrī Mukundaśaraṇa Devāchārya was dispatched towards Mithilā, and there are still many followers in this sub-lineage.

Today, followers of the Nimbārka Sampradāya are found throughout India, Nepal, Bangladesh and the diasporas. Hundreds of temples, monasteries, schools, orphanages, hospitals, clinics and libraries are maintained by Nimbārki. The 48th Jagadguru Nimbārkaāchārya, Swāmī Śhrī Rādhāsarveshvaraśaraṇa Devāchārya Jī Mahārāja, presided over the dif-fuse tradition from the headquarters near Pushkar, in the village of Śhrī Nimbārka Tīrtha. He was instrumental in many intrafaith, interfaith and humanitarian initiatives, including the rebuilding of the birth-site temple of Śhrī Nimbārka Bhagavān in Mūṅgi Paṭhan. His Bhagavad-dhāma-praveśa took place on 14th January 2017 while this history was being written; and in the sidebar on page 48 we glimpse the passing on of the

power of the paramparā to the 49th Jagadguru. There are many dedicated monks in this sub-lineage; among them, Śhrī Yugal Śaraṇ Brahmachārī has developed a world-famous ayurvedic center around his monastery, Pātnārāyaṇ Dhām, in Abu Road. Many householder devotees of the Paraśurāma sub-lineage also manage centers, and Keshav Śaraṇ Śukla has recently opened a Nimbārki temple in Boston, USA.

From among the Śhrī Svabhūrāma sub-lineages, Swāmī Śhrī Gopāl Śaraṇ Devāchārya (HINDUISM TODAY's Hindu of the Year in 2009) has inspired dozens of Hindu temples serving the Indian diaspora in the West, especially in the U.K., Canada, USA and Germany, while founding the Śhrī Golok Dhām Āśhrams in Delhi and Vrindavan. The Kāthiyā Bābā sub-lineage is renowned for the monks' strict ascetic rules, including wearing a chastity belt made from wood. Swāmī Śhrī Rāsh Behārī Dās Kāthiyā Bābā of this tradition is well known internationally, and has centers in Bengal and Bangladesh, as does Swāmī Śhrī Vrindāvana Behārī Dās Kāthiyā Bābā. Swāmī Mohan Śaraṇ Devāchārya (Bal Sant) has developed religious centers in Nepal around Chatarā Dhām.

In the lineage of Śhrī Devāchārya Jī, followers of Swāmī Śhrī Haridās Jī are prevalent in vast numbers in Vrindāvana, with ancient centers at Taṭiyā Sthān Āśhram, Gorilāl Kuñj, Swāmī Haridās Sevā Sansthān and others. These and other numerous notable monks, along with scholars such as Prof. Vaidyanāth Jhā, Prof. R. V. Joshi and Prof. Madan Mohan Agarwal, Kāthā preachers such as Śhrī Devakīnandan Thākur, Śhrī Morārī Bāpū, priests and householder devotees have drawn their spiritual inspirations from the work of Śhrī Nimbārka Bhagavān.

The Nimbarka Movement Today

Many Indologists have underlined the fact that history has not been kind to the Nimbārka Sampradāya. Nevertheless, the tradition has contributed great luminaries to the heritage of Bhārata. Śhrī Jayadeva Kavi (author of the famous Śhrī Gīta Govinda), members of the royal dynasties of Amer, Jaipur, Jodhpur, Merta, Udaipur, Bikaner, Kishangarh, Rupangarh, Bharatpur, Budhiya (Haryana) and others from the 16th century until Indian independence, the great Hindi poets Ghanānanda, Sundar Kumvarī, Bāṅkāvatī, Nāgarī Dās, etc., were all followers of monks of the Nimbārka Sampradāya. Nāgarī Dās, the spiritual name of Maharāja Sāvānt Singh (born 1699), was the founding patron of the Kishangarh style of painting. Many hundreds of poems he composed after renouncing, dedicated to the Supreme Lord, are sung not only by Nimbārki, but also

by followers of the Puṣṭīmārga (Śhrī Vallabhāchārya's sampradāya). These are a small sample of those who credit their talents to the blessings of the Supreme Lord and the gurus of the Nimbārka Sampradāya.

After Śhrī Nimbārka Bhagavān and Śhrī Śhrīnivāsāchārya Bhagavān, the tradition was led by renounced scholar-ascetics who contributed much to the traditional literature. Śhrī Devāchārya, a 13th-century leader of the tradition, had a branch of disciples within which the famous Dhruvapada (Dhruvada) and Samāj Gāyan reviver Swāmī Śhrī Haridās was initiated in the 16th century. Swāmī Haridās Jī's devotion caused the appearance of the renowned Deity of Śhrī Bāṅke Bihārī Jī in Vrindāvana, and his disciples maintain a completely ascetic lifestyle. Śhrī Keshava Kāśhmīri Bhaṭṭāchārya (c.1420-1490) reinvigorated Vaiṣṇavism in Braj through his mastery of scholarship and spirituality. His disciple Śhrī



Sattrā monasteries of Mājuli Island (the world's largest river island) are renowned.

Continuing south, Śhrī Nimbārka arrived in Purī, where he had darśhana of Lord Śhrī Jagannātha, Śhrī Balabhadra and Śhrī Subhadrā Devi at Their abode, and then pressed on. He saw that not only were there various atheist philosophies that were extremely popular, but many who professed to be followers of the eternal Dharma were, in fact, either so confused as to have a highly superstitious view of reality, or were scoff-laws, scrounging money from any source they could. The holy places had fallen into disrepair, and temples were overrun by profiteers seeking to usurp Deity offerings to fuel their vices.

However, when Śhrī Nimbārka set foot on these sites, people left what they were doing to come and see this muni who was aglow with spiritual potency. They felt their sorrows and troubles melt away, and experienced bliss through his every comforting word, replete with the essence of the scriptures. Thousands abandoned immoral practices and returned to the shelter of Vedic Dharma. He was invited to debates with top scholars in each region, and, through the knowledge imparted to him by Śhrī Nārada Muni, he reasserted the supremacy of the Vedic path. A few scholars even renounced the world, becoming sannyāsīs of Śhrī Nimbārka's holy order of monks. Slowly but surely, the number of renunciates grew, and after a short time, the traveling party consisted of thousands of sannyāsīs. In his heart, however, Śhrī Nimbārka was in constant meditation on Parabrah-

Telling the sage not to worry, Śhrī Nimbārka walked down to the river of blood, and touched the toe of his right foot to the water. Instantly the river began to flow clear. Fish soon returned to the waters and the surrounding land once again became verdant. Happiness returned to the kingdoms, and Agastya Rīshi was overjoyed. Realizing that Śhrī Nimbārka was a divine being, he asked the monk to reveal his hidden form. The compassionate incarnation revealed himself as Sudarśhana Chakra, and then revealed the origin of the Sudarśhana Chakra, Lord Aniruddha, whose four hands wielded the conch, mace, lotus and gesture of benediction. Ecstatic, Agastya Rīshi requested the great āchārya to reveal the purpose of his incarnation, and they spent the rest of the day glorifying the Lord. The vision of Agastya Rīshi then disappeared, and Śhrī Nimbārka returned to his disciples.

Śhrī Anantapadmanābhaswāmī, the Savior's Savior

Tamil literature of the ancient Sangam period glorifies the Lord in His form of Śhrī Anantapadmanābhaswāmī, Lord Padmanābha (Lord Nārāyaṇa with a lotus in His navel upon which Brahmā appeared), who is reclined upon the Ananta Śheṣha (divine serpent) bed. Śhrī Nimbārka was told by his Malayali disciples that greedy Brāhmaṇas had overthrown the pious attendants of Śhrī Anantapadmanābhaswāmī and were promoting an illogical, superstitious concoction as Vedic Dharma. Many people left the Dharma because of this, and thousands took up atheistic philosophies. Saddened, Śhrī Nimbārka turned southwest and headed for what is now Thiruvananthapuram, the city of Śhrī Anantapadmanābhaswāmī and current capital of Kerala.

When he and his troupe of ascetics made their way through town to Śhrī Anantapadmanābhaswāmī's temple, people stopped what they were doing and marveled at the sight. A few non-Vedic rituals being organized by nefarious Brāhmaṇas were going on at the time. Innocent-hearted attendees stood up and welcomed Śhrī Nimbārka, which angered the money-minded Brāhmaṇas. Śhrī Nimbārka was not perturbed. Instead,

Left: Swāmī Śhrī Gopāl Śharaṇ Devāchārya Jī and the 48th Jagadguru Nimbārkāchārya gaze at the newly consecrated Deities at Śhrī Golok Dhām Āśhram in 2004. Right: In a forest near Dwārakā, a group of extremists attend a Jain festival, having chased all believers of the Veda out of the area. Angered that a Vedic āchārya dares to visit, they seek to slay him. Lord Dvārakādhiśh intervenes. Due to His blessings, when Śhrī Nimbārka's right toe touches the earth, a torrent of water is released that keeps them at bay. Astonished by the miracle, the attackers repent and seek the shelter of Lord Dvārakādhiśh.

man, Bhagavān Śhrī Rādhā-Kṛīṣṇa.

Śhrī Nimbārka Meets Śhrī Agastya Rīshi

Śhrī Nimbārka and his disciples journeyed further south, passing through the Pothigai hills (Agastiyar Malai). One morning, as Śhrī Nimbārka went in search of a stream to bathe in, he had a divine vision: the ancient sage Agastya Rīshi sitting on the bank of the Rāmagaṅgā (Ramanathi), a tributary of the Tāmraparṇī (Thamirabarani) River. However, the sage was dejected. Seeing Śhrī Nimbārka Bhagavān, he prostrated and explained that long ago the river flooded and washed away his āśhrama and students. Agastya Rīshi knew that all those who died had ascended to elevated states of existence; but a few surviving rīshīs had cursed the river, saying that because she had committed brahmahatyā (murder of priests), she was tainted with their blood and should become a river of blood. Agastya was sorrowful that even after thousands of years, the river, source of biodiversity and economy from there to the tip of South India, was still dead, resulting in poverty and illness for the whole area.

he magnanimously went to meet them and solicited their blessings. With fake smiles, as the whole city looked on, the duplicitous Brāhmaṇas gave Śhrī Nimbārka a token welcome, and the āchārya moved on towards the temple. The rogues, seething with rage, met in secret to plot the death of this intruder who threatened to destabilize their entrenched ritual scam.

After enjoying darśhana of Lord Anantapadmanābhaswāmī, together with Śhrīdevī and Bhūdevī, the āchārya and his disciples retired to the forest, set up their encampment and began the evening's worship. A little while later, a gang headed by the villainous Brāhmaṇas surrounded Śhrī Nimbārka as he sat outside his hut enjoying the blissful sounds of kirtana from the disciples' camp not far away. The miscreants hurled abuse. With no reaction from the great āchārya, they charged forward with weapons raised, intending to murder the saint. At that moment, a fruit from the Udumbara tree (Ficus racemosa) above Nimbārka Bhagavān's hut fell in front of him, rolled to his feet and touched his right toe. A blinding light emerged from the red, fig-like fruit, stopping the would-be murderers in their tracks. From that light emerged a muni, who praised Śhrī Nimbārka

for turning the mere fruit into a holy being, replete with form and knowledge similar to Śhrī Nimbārka himself. Nimbārka Bhagavān named him Audumbarāchārya (the teacher who appeared from an Udumbara fruit). Normal people would have seen this and recognized the divine power before them. Not this bunch.

Instead, they regrouped, realizing that it would be challenging to defeat the āchārya, who to them seemed a powerful magician. They set the āchārya's hut alight, encircling him with fire. Śhrī Nimbārka disappeared into the flames, and the marauders began to celebrate. Śhrī Nimbārka was more than capable of quelling the fire, but the Supreme Lord wished to perform a pastime for the sake of inspiring His devotees to return to pure, scripturally guided devotion.

Śhrī Padmanābhaswāmī, observing the unfolding spectacle in the for-

who accompanied them. When they returned, followed by the entire retinue of disciples, Śhrī Nimbārka led the worship of Śhrī Narasimha and Śhrī Padmanābhaswāmī. As he offered the sweet-rice porridge in dishes made from coconut shells, the disciples and the repentant Brāhmaṇas sang praises. Before returning to the sanctum of the temple, Śhrī Padmanābhaswāmī told the gathering to accept the teachings of Śhrī Nimbārka and Vedic Dharma. Seeing this from His heavenly abode, Lord Shiva requested Lord Padmanābhaswāmī to reside with Him forever at this miraculous place. Even today one can have the darśhana of the Śhivalinga under the hand of Lord Padmanābhaswāmī reclining on the Śheṣha bed, with Śhrīdevī and Bhūdevī nearby, and Śhrī Narasimha Bhagavān's temple in the vicinity.



HINDUISM TODAY



MANIAM SEIVEN

ests near His temple, became agitated that these people would cross the line from lying to murder just to protect their ritual scam business. His ire appeared as Lord Narasimha, who swallowed the flames surrounding Śhrī Nimbārka and sent them toward the gang. The Brāhmaṇas began to quake in their boots. Knowing that their sins were unforgivable, their last hope was to seek the grace of the divine āchārya, and they begged him piteously.

Śhrī Nimbārka sought the blessings of Lord Anantapadmanābhaswāmī to proceed, and with a divine side glance from the Lord signaling His assent, Śhrī Nimbārka gazed at the fire surrounding everyone and the flames were miraculously extinguished. Śhrī Padmanābhaswāmī in his Narasimha form grew calm, and Śhrī Nimbārka directed the defeated Brāhmaṇas to join his disciples and cook sweet rice to offer to the Deity. They accomplished this through the powers of Śhrī Audumbarāchārya,

The Liberation of Śhrī Dvārakā Purī

Śhrī Nimbārka continued his journey, heading up the coast to Śhrī Dvārakā Purī, the ancient kingdom of Bhagavān Śhrī Kṛīṣṇa. He was disheartened seeing the city overrun with atheistic people who had no regard for the divine heritage of the area. These citizens hurled verbal and physical abuse upon those who came to Dvārakā with hopes of praying at the site of Śhrī Kṛīṣṇa's former palace. Śhrī Audumbarāchārya records in the Nimbārkavikrānti that Śhrī Nimbārka was a completely open-minded, compassionate being. He never killed evildoers. Instead, he purified them, removing their bad qualities so their inherent good qualities could shine.

As Śhrī Nimbārka entered Dvārakā, a festival was being held by atheists to honor the founder of their philosophy. Śhrī Nimbārka sensed that his presence might vex the extremist followers of that cult, so he kept his distance. Seeking water for his disciples, he made his way to a



nearby reservoir, where it happened that a few extremists were also fetching water. Seeing that Nimbārka, like his followers, was adorned with yajñopavīta and kaṇṭhī (sacred thread and prayer necklace), which the atheists had eradicated from the region long ago, hatred erupted in their minds. They began verbally assaulting the disciples and their leader.

Śhrī Nimbārka tried to placate the mob, but they sent for additional sympathisers with as many weapons as they could carry—for on this day they would rid Dvārakā of anyone who believed in Bhagavān Śhrī Kṛṣṇa, Bhagavān Śhrī Śhiva, Bhagavatī Durgā Devī or any other Vedic tradition. A few moderate citizens tried to pacify the assailants, but that simply precipitated more violence as the extremists began their attack. The moderates ran to Śhrī Nimbārka and begged for protection. His disciples similarly gathered round, seeking shelter from the divine āchārya.

Digging his right toe into the ground, he flicked up some earth with his toenail, which shone like moonlight. From the tiny hole in the ground sprang a mighty torrent of water, gushing towards the aggressors. A few, in wonder at the supernatural sight, surrendered immediately to Śhrī

Lord of Dvārakā, Śhrī Dvārakādhiṣṭha.

Return to Braj; Anointing a Successor

Śhrī Nimbārka viewed Śhrī Vṛndāvana's forest as the natural temple of the Lord. When he returned from his travels to live at Nimbagrāma, he and his disciples would visit Śhrī Vṛndāvana in the daytime to meditate and perform service for Śhrī Sarveśhvara Bhagavān, but would return to Nimbagrāma in the evening, as it was inconceivable to pollute the holy forest with human bodily functions, or to visit upon it the destruction of nature that accompanies the building of dwellings and infrastructure.

From time to time, great scholars traveling throughout Bhārata challenging other scholars in debate would visit Nimbagrāma. Often the mere sight of the divine ascetic āchārya would evaporate their ambitions, and they, too, would become his disciples.

After Śhrī Sudarśhana had left Vaikuṇṭha to begin his mission on Earth, the personification of the divine conch, Śhrī Pāñchajanya, who resides in the left hand of Lord Nārāyaṇa, requested guidance from the Lord. Śhrī Nārāyaṇa said that Śhrī Pāñchajanya should also incarnate, but he would not remember his real identity until he became a disciple of Śhrī Sudarśhana. He accepted this condition and incarnated after a few human decades in the eastern part of Bhārata, becoming a great Śhākta scholar known as Vidyānidhi. He embarked on a tour of India, defeating many prominent scholars in debate. On having darśhana of Śhrī Nimbārka, however, Vidyānidhi realized his true and eternal identity and at once became a disciple, earning the name Śhrī Śhrīnivāsāchārya Bhagavān.

Left: The 48th Jagadguru Nimbārkaachārya being awarded the President's Honour for services to Sanskrit by the President of India, Shri Pranab Mukherjee, in 2014. Right: The great Paṇḍit Vidyānidhi is seated beneath a banyan tree. His guru, Bhagavān Śhrī Nimbārkaachārya, blesses him with Self-Realization, for he is the incarnation of the Pāñchajanya Shaṅkha, the personified conch shell of Śhrī Kṛṣṇa, born to reinvigorate Sanātana Dharma through distilling the authentic essence of the scriptures. A disciple holds a scroll with ten two-line verses written by Paṇḍit, the shortest summary of the Brahmasūtras ever composed, the Vedāntakamadhenu. On the left a group of Buddhist monks walks away. On the right Jain monks retreat. Thus did Śhrī Nimbārka preserve Mathura as a Hindu sanctuary.

Nimbārka and begged his forgiveness and were not affected; but those who remained intent on his destruction were washed away by the miraculous river.

Śhrī Nimbārka suddenly grew in size, becoming as large as a mountain. The flood of water rose up, bringing with it the assailants. As soon as the water touched his feet, it calmed and retreated back into the earth. The bodies of the attackers were washed up, and those still alive by dint of their latent good karmas began to repent. Śhrī Nimbārka returned to normal size and, with a smile, brought the drowned antagonists back to life. Absolutely gobsmacked and thoroughly convinced of the āchārya's divinity, they begged forgiveness and pleaded to be accepted as disciples. Śhrī Nimbārka's face was wet with tears, as he was forced to resort to deadly means to free these souls from their vicious ways. He gladly took them under his tutelage and thus reestablished Dharma in Dvārakā. Those who decided to renounce the world were initiated by him with the *pañcha-saṁskāra-vaishṇava-dīkṣhā*, restoring the practice of *tapta-mudrā* at Dvārakā. Those who elected to remain as householders were initiated into *sādhana-bhakti* (also known as *prapatti/sharanāgati*, the path of surrender to the Supreme Being) and were invited to restart worship of the

As the conclusion of his Earthly pastime approached, Śhrī Nimbārka anointed Śhrī Śhrīnivāsāchārya as the next leader of his order of monks. He ordained that although the eternal Dharma had been restarted, it was never to be preached for the sake of increasing the number of disciples. Just as in his own life, where people came to him having observed his virtues, Śhrī Nimbārka Bhagavān admonished his disciples to perfect themselves first—becoming ideal sannyāsīs, self-realized and thoroughly knowledgeable in the scriptures.

He further taught that the Lord reciprocates with devotees in accordance with their individual proclivities. At the beginning of one's spiritual journey, a person may seek to acquire divine wisdom. Such a person would contemplate Parabrahman as an abstract, non-anthropomorphic principle, or Avyakta Brahman. When one develops and realizes that surrendering to the will of Brahman is the best path to liberation due to the endless faults of an individual and the inability to know everything, then that person should worship the feet of Parabrahman in the form of Śhrī Lakṣhmī-Nārāyaṇa in accordance with the scriptures.

As knowledge of the scriptures and devotion to the Supreme Being increased, the disciple could worship the Lord according to a devotional

relationship. Meditating upon the Lord from the peaceful state of desirelessness is known as *śhānta bhāva*. Seeing that the Lord is the creator, the universal sovereign, a person could instead worship the Lord as one's master, in *dāsyā bhāva*, which is profoundly typified by Śhrī Hanumān Jī's relationship with Lord Śhrī Rāma. Developing a devotional mood in which the Lord is an eternal friend and companion is known as *sakhyā bhāva*; the chief example of this is the relationship between Bhagavān Śhrī Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna. Where one develops a protective feeling toward a child form of the Supreme, one's devotion is called *vātsalya bhāva*, parental affection, like the love of Śhrī Yāśhodā for Śhrī Kṛṣṇa. Śhrī Nimbārka then said that, whatever the case may be, all four devotional moods should be directed at Śhrī Lakṣhmī-Nārāyaṇa or one of their incarnations.

moods—is none other than the unified Bhagavān Śhrī Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa. Only the most advanced devotees should worship Bhagavān Śhrī Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa, for only they possess the spiritual wisdom and devotional maturity to correctly envisage the Lord in this original form.

Spirituality is meant to be a path that caters to every individual's stage of progression. One cannot simply say that the Lord is 'X,' therefore worship 'X.' Rather, in this multi-layered revelation, a person can reciprocate with the Supreme Being in accordance with their understanding and feeling until such time as they develop a propensity for *parābhakti*, whether in this life or in others in the future. This innovation of Śhrī Nimbārka is a legacy which many now ignore, though it has significantly influenced many later denominations and sub-denominations of Vaiṣṇavism.



NIMBARKA SAMPRADAYA



MANIAM SELVEN

However, those who have completely renounced the world and taken sannyāsa dīkṣhā from a true guru ordained in the order of monks founded by Śhrī Nimbārka, who have performed bhajana and meditations on the Supreme Being using the methods described and become perfected therein—those souls would be ready to worship the Supreme Brahman in the form of pure unselfish Love. When devotion to the Supreme Lord in this mood was cultivated, known as the mood of sweetness, or *mādhurya bhāva*, then the form of the Supreme Being that should be worshiped is no longer Śhrī Lakṣhmī-Nārāyaṇa.

For disciples who have achieved this exalted state of *parābhakti*, supreme loving devotion, Śhrī Nimbārka revealed for the first time ever that the original, eternal form of Parabrahman—that Supreme Soul, the source of all incarnations and emanations, who is worshiped by all realized and liberated souls in accordance with their own devotional

Finally, Śhrī Nimbārka affirmed that the sampradāya's sole mission is to help people progress spiritually by whatever means are best suited to them. Monks should be supported; but never should a sannyāsī of Śhrī Nimbārka's holy order seek to build a self-serving institution, accumulate wealth or galvanize followers for the purpose of becoming influential or famous. Instead, each renouncer in Śhrī Nimbārka's order should strive to remain simple, live a pure and unassuming life and actively eschew the company of persons or events that would result in the popularity of the monk him/herself in place of the popularization of the glorious philosophy of Vedānta. Sannyāsī and householder alike should observe the regulations of the Vaiṣṇava Dharma, seek to imbibe the philosophy of Svābhāvika-Bhedābheda Vedānta and develop a truly humble nature worthy of a sacred devotional relationship with the Supreme Being.

Having instructed his disciples and successor, Śhrī Śhrīnivāsāchārya,

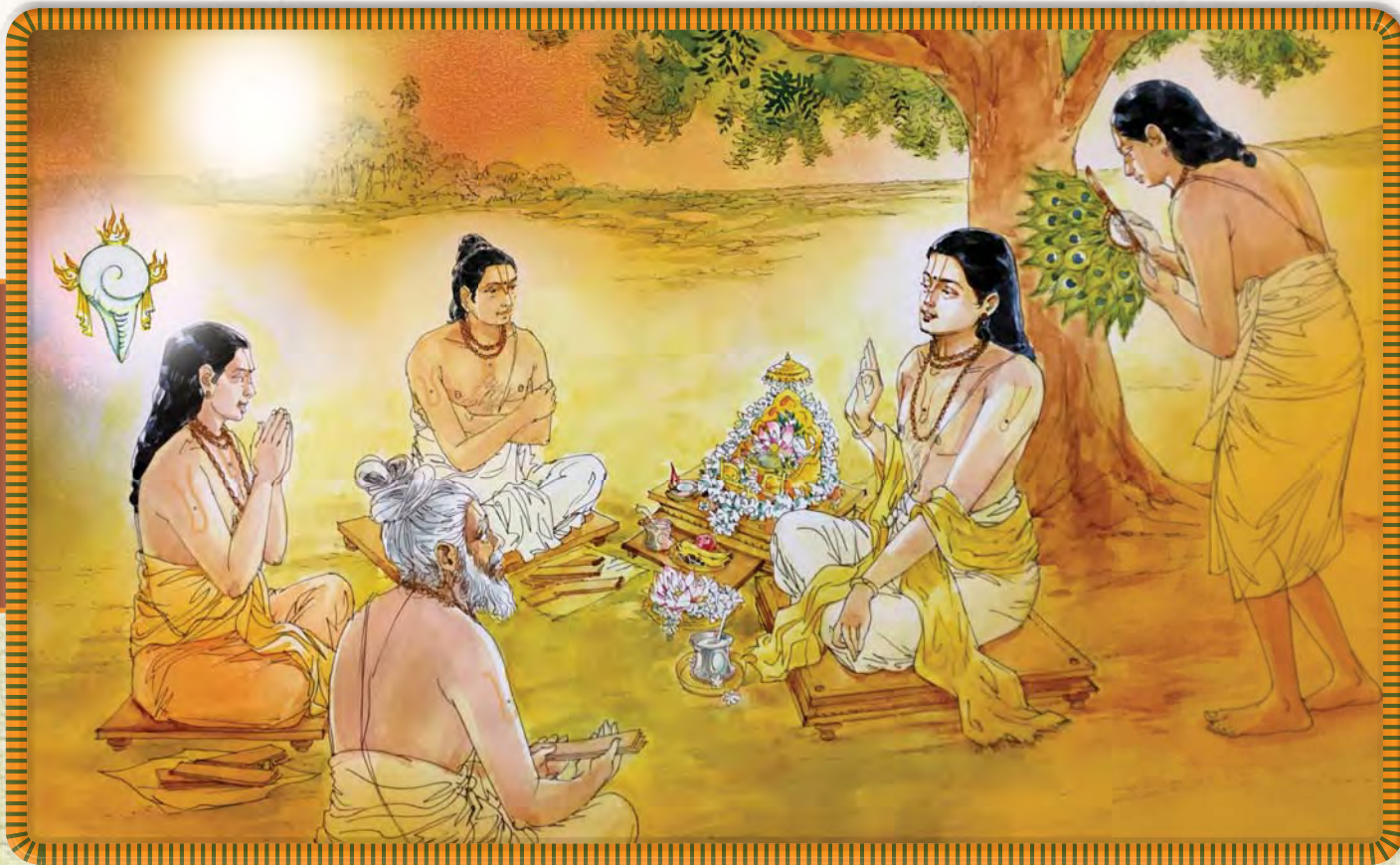


in this manner in the middle of Nimbagrāma, Śhrī Nimbārka ascended into the sky, where he changed into the form of Śhrī Sudarshana Chakra and returned to the right hand of Śhrī Nārāyaṇa in Vaikuṇṭha. Seeing this glorious event, despite their feeling of separation from this divine incarnation, the devotees present resolved to follow his teachings and help anyone seeking their guidance, without any prejudice based on bodily

identifications.

Even today, living by his example, Nimbārki monks prefer to worship the Lord in seclusion. They typify the true paramahansa, which is why the tradition is also known as the Paramahansa Sampradāya, the lineage of the supremely renounced.

In the centuries following the founder, the tradition suffered greatly.



MANIAM SELVEN

January 2017 Enthronement of the New Jagadguru

Amazingly, during the months that this Insight was being developed, the Jagadguru of the entire Nimbārka lineage entered the Divine Realm at age 87. Śhrīji Mahārāj, the 48th Jagadguru Nimbārkaachārya, left his body during the auspicious Uttarāyaṇa, in the early morning of Makara Saṅkranti, January 14, 2017, in the Śhrī Nimbārkaachārya Pīṭham, Rajasthan, India. Śhrī Śhrīji Mahārāj, enthroned on June 5, 1943, served as Jagadguru for 73 years and was looked upon with fondness by the Jagadgurus of all Hindu denominations. His final rites were performed at the Pīṭham on the morning of January 15. Two weeks later, the transfer of leadership to the appointed successor, Swāmī Śhrī Ś Sharaṇ Dev, took place in Rajasthan from January 30 to February 1. It is a sign of the vigor of the Nimbarka lineage that 200,000 devotees were in attendance.

Who is the new Jagadguru? Swāmī Śhrī Śhyām Śharaṇ, now 31 years old, was born in Salemabad village on September, 9, 1986, to parents Balmukund Sharma and Santoshi Devi. At age seven, on May, 23, 1993, young Śhrīkānt was, with the blessings of the 48th Jagadguru, publicly



Sanandana, Sanātana and Sanatkumāra Bhagavāns, Śhrī Nārada Muni, Śhrī Nimbārka Bhagavān and Śhrī Śhrīnivāsāchārya Bhagavān). The Pīṭham's Vedic scholars and their students recited the *Shukla Yajurveda* (*Mādhyandiniya Shākhā*), and thousands of visitors enjoyed the various special darśhanas.

Brahmachārī Vrajvihārī Śharaṇ, who flew in from Georgetown, Washington DC, gave this detailed report: “The evenings were reserved for

annointed the Yuvāchārya—the Āchārya's heir—during the Golden Jubilee celebrations of the 48th Jagadguru's own enthronement in the presence of Jagadgurus of other sampradāyas. Two years later, on May, 5, 1995, taking the vow of celibate renunciation at age nine, he was initiated by the 48th Jagadguru as Yuvāchārya Śhyām Śharaṇ Dev. Now, 21 years later, he has been formally installed as the new Jagadguru of the Nimbārka Sampradāya.

During each day of the enthronement celebration there was a special elaborate morning worship ceremony of Śhrī Sarveśhvara Bhagavān, Śhrī Rādhā Mādhava Bhagavān and the five divine Āchāryas (Śhrī Hamsa Bhagavān, Śhrī Sanaka,

Firstly, extremists and zealots reduced the holy lands of Mathurā and Vṛndāvana to blood and bodies, destroying the sampradāya's libraries, thus severely obstructing the transmission of knowledge in the tradition. Secondly, other Hindu denominations, seeking to gain followers, discredited the Nimbārka Sampradāya in their written histories, or omitted the tradition from their records in order to lay claim to the innovations of Śhrī Nimbārka and his followers.

Nevertheless, the timeless message of the remarkable ārchārya's life and teachings continue to be sung not only in Vṛndāvana and the rest of Uttar Pradesh, but in Rājasthān, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Haryana, Bengal, Orissa and other states in India and Nepal, as well as in the world-wide Indian diaspora where sincere devotees preserve the message of the founder from millennia ago: that spirituality must be based on the revealed scriptures to have real substance and efficacy; and, even more importantly, that there is nothing in the whole of creation or beyond it that can surpass true and unselfish love.

Left: Nimbārka Bhagavān blesses his four main disciples before departing for the eternal realms. He anoints Śhrī Śhrīnivāsāchārya (with conch above his head) as his successor. The other three, Audumbarāchārya, Gauramukhāchārya and Lakṣhmaṇa Bhaṭṭa, pledge to teach all who desire instruction on the path of Vedānta. Below: During the enthronement ceremony for the new Jagadguru Nimbārkaachārya, Śhrī Śhyām Śharaṇ Dev, the oath of a Jagadguru is administered by the Jagadguru Vallabhāchārya Śhrī Vallabhrāy Mahoday of Surat.

bhajan programs and celebrations of the life of the previous Jagadguru Nimbārkaachārya. On the night of the 31st, I was called to sit on stage with the heir and the group of Mahants of the Sampradāya. Even at 11pm, over 9,000 devotees enjoyed the devotional singing.

“Vasanta Pañchamī commenced with the special ārchana to Śhrī Sarveśhvara Bhagavān, followed by Samāj Gāyan of ancient hymns of the Nimbārka Sampradāya that are only sung by the renounced sants of the tradition. This esoteric genre of classical music is historically the origin of Dhrupada/Dhruvapaḍa music, which is the father of Khayāl (North Indian classical music). At 11am Śhrī Śhyām Śharaṇ Dev arrived at the main Mandir and worshiped Śhrī Sarveśhvara Bhagavān, as rituals were led by the hereditary priest of the Āchāryapīṭham. Following this, he descended to the main hall of the Mandir. This Mandir's supreme authority is



BRACHMACHARI VRAJVIHARI SHARAN

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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ABOUT THE ARTIST



Artist Maniam Selven, of Chennai, enjoys a full range of techniques, from traditional to high-tech. He has done illustrations, signed MaSe, for *The Handbook of Tamil Culture and Heritage* (depicting the ancient *Tirukkural*), and the *Upanishads* for the Ramakrishna Mission. maniamselven@gmail.com

Jagadguru Nimbārkaachārya of the 16th century, Swāmī Paraśhūrāma Devāchārya, upon whose place of austerities the Mandir was built. As such, no one can sit higher than ground level, as that is the level of his samādhi. Respecting this tradition, all present sat on the ground.

“Outside, 200,000 people watched on large LCD screens fixed at five locations around Salemabad. First, Śhrī Śhyām Śharaṇ Dev sat in the middle of the gathering on a simple āsana (seat), while the priests anointed him with sacred waters to the chants of the *Yajurveda*. He then turned to the simple white āsana that represents the throne of the Jagadguru Nimbārkaachārya and, recollecting the 48 Jagadguru Nimbārkaachāryas who preceded him as stewards of the seat, offered flowers.

“Then he was then invited to stand by Jagadguru Vallabhāchārya Śhrī Vallabhrāy Mahoday, who asked him to recite after him the oath of the

Jagadgurus. In this simple, heartening statement he vowed to follow the strict rules of the renunciate tradition of the ancient Nimbārka Sampradāya, serving Śhrī Sarveśhvara Bhagavān without ever letting a mistake occur in His service. He resolved to sever any remaining relationships with his former family, as now the entire Nimbārka Sampradāya is his family. Further, and to thunderous applause from the devotees outside, he decreed that while never breaking his vow of celibacy, he will strive every moment to serve all of the Nimbārka Sampradāya, Vaiṣṇavism and the wider Hindu community for the rest of his life.

“At that moment, he was invited to take his place as the 49th Jagadguru Nimbārkaachārya, Swāmī Śhrī Śhyām Śharaṇ Devāchārya Ji, Śhrī Śhrīji Mahārāj. Following this, the Paṭṭābhiṣheka commenced, with the assembled Jagadgurus and senior monks of the Nimbārka Sampradāya, other Vaiṣṇava, Śhaiva and Smārta traditions and other sects, such as the Dādū Panth, Rām Sanehis, etc., all offering shawls to him as a felicitation. A grand feast followed for everyone in attendance.”



FESTIVALS

Mauritius Mahasivaratri

Savita Tiwari takes us on her personal pilgrimage to the sacred lake known as Ganga Talao during the island's exuberant celebration of Siva's great night

BY SAVITA TIWARI, MAURITIUS

Savita, 36, grew up in India and is now a resident of Mauritius. She is an avid journalist, blogger, writer and poet with a love of dharma and for exploring many other topics

through the streets; but pass by a Hindu temple or community event and you'll likely see an assortment of colorful sarees, chudidaars and kurtas. There is plenty of Indian food to be found, even though the island's renowned French cuisine often takes center stage. The island is quite small, at just 48 miles from Gris Gris in the south to Grand Baie in the north, just a one-and-a-half-hour drive. The distance from east to west is 34 miles.

The three thousand miles of ocean between India and Mauritius have not weakened the spiritual and religious connection. In the lives and upliftment of Mauritian Hindus, few places hold such importance as Ganga Talao—for it fulfills the same role on our island as Ma Ganga plays throughout India. As Mauritians, we may not have the idyllic, milky-white river to turn to for reverence, but on Mahasivaratri, "Siva's great night," countless pilgrims from all over the island make the *yatra* (pilgrimage) and *padyatra* (pilgrimage by foot) to Ganga Talao, experiencing the same holy effect on mind, body and soul. On their shoulders, many pilgrims carry *kawar*—decorative structures, large or small, used to transport water from the lake. Thus these pilgrims are known as *kawartis*,

and their trek is known as the Kawar Yatra. The goal for many is to travel from their local temple to Ganga Talao. Once there, they gather the lake's sacred water and carry it back to their home temple as an offering.

The feeling of Mahasivaratri in Mauritius buzzes in the air and in the attitudes of everyone you meet. Men, women and children, most dressed in the white garb of pilgrims, are found walking en masse along the roads towards the lake. Streams of *kawartis* are accompanied by other foot travelers, while some pilgrims opt to travel by car or bus. Everywhere the white clothes of traveling pilgrims dominate the nation.

Rest houses, temple halls and individual homes all over the island are decorated with flowers, leaves and pictures of Lord Siva, indicating that these places are available for travelers to rest and sleep, or for *kawartis* to take a break from carrying their cargo. Gifts and supplies are stockpiled at important junctions, welcoming the *kawartis* and providing sustenance along their journey. Local companies distribute white t-shirts to pilgrims enroute to Ganga Talao, and many people and organizations hand out juices and snacks. Pilgrims are lavished with free sweet-potato

cakes with coconut, fried and battered chili peppers, rice pudding, fried breads, fried chickpea-battered potatoes and many other mouth-watering edibles.

As you leave the festive towns and make your way up through the forested hills, you come closer and closer to Ganga Talao. On arrival at the lake you are welcomed into a different world by Lord Siva Himself. Standing 108 feet tall, He is the largest figure on our island. Calm and smiling, He looks out over the sacred lake with the same peace that approaching pilgrims feel in their hearts. As you walk past Siva's feet, you are enveloped by the sound of bhajans, bells and voices chanting "Hara Hara Mahadev." This may seem like the end of the pilgrimage, but actually your spiritual journey is only just beginning.

Preparing for Pilgrimage

In planning to write this article for HINDUISM TODAY, I want to find a perfect way to cover these festivities. I am not sure where to start—until Mahadev Himself resolves the issue, when a friend invites me to start the Kawar Yatra from their temple in Grand Baie. As the northernmost location of our island, this idyllic bay is the furthest point from which you can begin the yatra to Ganga Talao in the south. This would be perfect. Because of the distance, pilgrims starting at Grand Baie are the first people on the island to begin the yatra. They start three to five days before Mahasivaratri and travel some 75 miles to and from the lake.

A two-hour taxi ride brings me to Grand Baie at 6 pm on the day the yatra will begin. The ride presents me with the first of many interesting meetings and happenings that will define my journey. My cab driver's name is Ketan—Ken to his friends—and he seems to have views on almost every topic in the world. Instead of the common pleasantries of "namaste," he asks me, "Why are you going so far, all the way to Grand Baie, to write your article? You will end up passing 100 temples on the way, each playing the same scene: people gathering and bidding farewell to all the *kawar* carriers as they leave for Ganga Talao. What's so special about Grand Baie? It's a tourist destination without many locals and without many Hindus." His words are a little discouraging for me, but I think, "Let's just reach Grand Baie first and find out for ourselves." All the way he is criticizing Hindus on the island for not taking care of their religion, complaining that bygone days were much better.

As we reach the Siva Kalyan Nath Temple in Grand Baie, my driver falls silent. There in front of the temple is a crowd 500 strong—pilgrims dressed in white and ready for the departure. With them stand their families and friends, wishing them well. I glance at Ketan with smile. He quickly responds, "So



Island life: (far left) an aerial view of the idyllic island; (from top) the 108-foot-tall statue of Siva at Ganga Talao; a group of uniformed *kawartis* prepare to leave from the temple in Grand Baie; a satellite view of Mauritius, marked with a popular route from Grand Baie to Ganga Talao

what? It's not a big deal. They all are Hindu. By coming to temple today they are not doing anything out of the ordinary, it's just obligatory." It's hard to make some people see good in things, I guess.

Inside the temple everybody is greeting each other with "Har Har Mahadev." I do not immediately find the friend who invited me, but I soon meet Sudhir Gungadoss, who is serving juice to the *kawartis* and instructing them to take care of themselves: "Drink enough flu-





ids on the way, it's extra hot these days. Walk in the morning, evening and nighttime hours and avoid walking in the afternoon. Take afternoon naps at rest areas. Keep your rain-coats! Just because no rain has been forecast for the next few days doesn't mean it couldn't still happen!" Nobody pays much attention, though. Many have heard these words all their life. Sudhir offers me juice, and I take the opportunity to ask him questions. He tells me he is responsible for the cooking department of the temple, and explains their schedule for the festival: "There are two temples in this area, and around 500 to 600 people go on foot to Ganga Talao from Grand Baie each year. Normally the Kavar Yatra starts just a few days before Mahasivaratri, but the yatra beginning from this temple follows a different routine.

It is a long journey, and we have to take care of the kawartis' health, so we take it slow. We start our journey three days before, and we have special places where we rest. We travel only in the morning, the evening and at night. It's important we follow these guidelines, because we have to travel around 37 miles to Ganga Talao and then back the same distance."

I ask him about the kavar that are carried. He says, "Because of the long distance, many large kavar are made with wheels. It is actually more like a parade float, but since the kawartis use them to carry the water they collect from Ganga Talao we still call it a kavar. We reach Ganga Talao in the afternoon on the day of the official festival there, and we visit the lakeside temples. We gather water from the pure lake and then take an afternoon nap so we can start back the same evening.

"We return to our temple carrying the sa-

cred water and usually arrive on the third night or early the fourth morning, which is Mahasivaratri day. We keep the kavar in the temple and sleep there ourselves before participating in Brahma Muhurta puja on the day of Sivaratri. Everyone then goes home to bathe before returning to the temple to have prasad as breakfast, lunch and dinner. The whole day is spent at worship in the temple. Then all the kawartis participate in *char pahar puja*, which includes pouring the collected water over the Deity. This starts around 6pm on Mahasivaratri evening and ends at 5am the next morning. Everyone participates in the final havana. Then we take prasad and return to our homes energized with Siva's blessings for the entire year and with the determination to re-enliven our lives again next year with another five days of worship."

As I finish chatting with Sudhir, I notice a girl taking a selfie next to a kavar. I ask her if she is going on foot with the kavar and she says yes. She tells me she is 18 and this will be her second year walking the yatra. Last year she was so tired on the return journey that she took a bus part of the way; this year she is determined to complete it all on foot.

She says, "On the return trip everyone is very tired. During the whole journey, you take baths in the public bathrooms, sit on roads and sleep in tents. As you can imagine, we don't bother to take selfies with the beautiful kawars at that point because we look and feel exhausted." I ask her why she does it all if it is such a challenge, and, just like that, this 18-year-old selfie-girl turns philosophical: "These five days out of our comfortable homes may be five days of physical pain, but they are also five days of relief for our souls. We feel

At the water's edge: (above) pilgrims perform worship and gather water at the banks of Ganga Talao

so proud of ourselves. Our parents feel proud as well. Last year my parents praised me in front of every guest coming to our home, telling them I had walked the padyatra to Ganga Talao. Although, I felt a little guilty when they would edit out the part where I took a bus.

"Overall, doing this yatra makes you feel fulfilled and happy for the whole year. And besides, living on your own for five days is an experience every youth wants to have. Also, kawartis coming from Grand Baie get a lot of respect because we travel farther than anyone else on the island."

The Yatra Begins

A bell starts ringing in the background, and Selfie-girl perks up: "Ok, I have to go. It's puja time. This is another thing we all love about the event. All the aratis done for the departing kawars are done only by women. It's fun. It kind of feels like we are soldiers going off to some great battle as the sky is filled with the sound of 'Har Har Mahadev.' It really gets the adrenaline going!"

As Selfie-girl rushes off to help with the aratis, many of the mothers of the kawartis are ready with puja plates to bid their children farewell. All the kawartis stand in a line, and the temple acharya comes through to give a blessing for each kavar by breaking a coconut. Suddenly, just like Selfie-girl had said, the sky is filled with "Har Har Mahadev! Har Har Mahadev!" and 500 people with hundreds of kawars begin their march to



Ganga Talao. I have never witnessed anything like this before.

I don't walk the yatra with this group; instead, in order to stay fresh for my interviews, I utilize taxis to meet people along the way. The next day I catch up with this same group at a rest house area in Beau Bassin at eleven o'clock in the morning. Everyone is fast asleep. Only a young couple are awake, chatting quietly. I want to interview someone there but don't want to disturb these two, so I wait outside for another pilgrim to wake. Just then an elderly man walks up, intent on resting here.

"Bonjour madame, why are you sitting outside?" I tell him I want to speak with the young couple inside but don't want to disturb them. He looks inside, then returns with a broad smile and sits beside me. "Today's youth are more devout than my generation was. I used to do this yatra when I was young. But the fact was, I started the padyatra for Ganga Talao just so I could meet up with my girlfriend. Those days parents were very

strict. Padyatra was a good option for dating," he laughed. "But now youth can meet whenever and wherever they want, yet they are still trekking to Ganga Talao. So I feel like they are more religious."

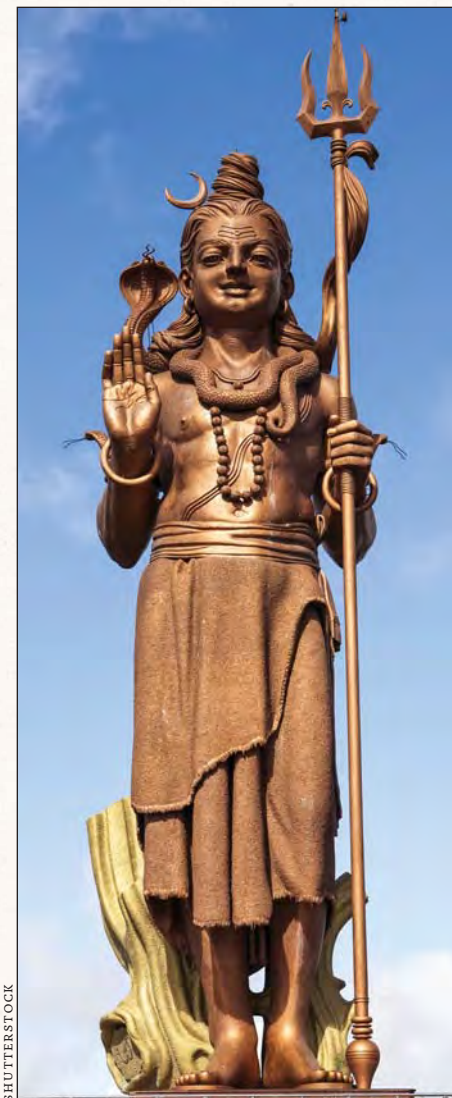
I inquire about those early days. "Twenty years ago this yatra was more of a thing for elders, and not many youth participated. But today youth make up the majority. In those days we would just string two water pots to a bamboo stick and our kavar was ready. But now we see youth working for a whole month every night after their jobs or school studies. They gather in their village temple or any other place that will do and they prepare their kavar. It's so nice to see them working hard for their religion."

I leave the Grand Baie group sleeping peacefully and head to La Marie, the last village on the way to Ganga Talao. After La Marie, it's just lush green jungle and forests, but with unexpectedly well-paved roads—made so specifically for this event's massive yearly traffic. It is a vast and peaceful nature reserve.

Like other towns along the pilgrimage routes this time of year, La Marie is experiencing a large traffic jam of people headed to the lake. I get out of the taxi and proceed on foot. This is the best way to explore anyway. Most of the year the motor traffic makes it unsafe to walk along the roads, but during Mahasivaratri, with thousands on the roads, it's quite safe.

I spot an Indian couple having juice at a nearby tent. Mauritians have nearly the same features as Indians, but identification is easy because the two groups carry themselves differently. I join them and indulge my love for conversation. Mamta and Rajesh are their names. Rajesh has joined a telecom company

A journey on foot: (clockwise from left) The 108-foot-tall-statue of Siva which greets pilgrims as they reach Ganga Talao; large kavar are paraded to the lake; a pilgrim, shoulder well padded, carries a decorative, shrine-like kavar





in Mauritius, and they moved to the island just six months ago. This is their first Mauritius Mahasivaratri. I ask if they are enjoying the week of festivities. Mamta exclaims, "One week? More like one month!" They both start laughing. "You know what happened to us a month ago? As you know, after 8pm you barely hear a sound in Mauritius. But at 9:00 one evening we suddenly heard a noise like someone was trying to break into the house. Rajesh grabbed a badminton racket and I rushed to the kitchen to get a knife. We were so scared. When we reached the back door, we realized the noise was coming from the back yard of the temple next to our house. Thinking thieves had come to steal from the donation box, we immediately called a member of the temple committee. We felt so proud to be saving the donation box."

The committee member rushed to the temple—and five minutes later we were being laughed at from over the temple wall. The committee member and about ten young boys were there. The boys had been planning and building their kawar for Mahasivaratri. Standing there with badminton racket and knife in hand, we could only laugh at ourselves. It was so embarrassing. So you see, we learned the hard way that, here, Mahasivaratri starts a month in advance!"

This brings a big smile to my face. It is wonderful to find yet another mention of our youth's dedication to their religion. I'm told all pilgrims observe a strict vegetarian diet for the month that they are building the kawars. During Mahasivaratri Week, all Hindus on the island are strict vegetarians, even those who eat meat at other times.

Providing for Devotees

On that note, it's hard to discuss Mauritius Mahasivaratri without mentioning food. With all the free food distribution, you can feel the presence of Annapurna, the Goddess of nourishment, who has come to feed the pilgrims. All over the island Her presence is manifest in all who help provide for the devotees who have left their houses and villages to pray to Lord Siva.

Nobody has ever claimed to know just how much free food is actually distributed around the island during this week, but it is an enormous amount. The Human Service Trust (HST) alone feeds around 150 thousand people over three days at Ganga Talao—and HST is just one of several hundred organizations that provide free food all over the island. Along with community organizations, many temples also provide rest and food facilities to kewartis, along with bathing facilities. These facilities are mainly for kewartis traveling on foot, but even people driving by car are welcome to have food from them.

Many individuals also turn their homes into rest houses. A Mrs. Kisson from L'Avenir tells me she and her family wait with anticipation each year for Mahasivaratri, just so they can serve people going to Ganga Talao. "It's the most beautiful part of Mahasivaratri. All year we are just four people in this big house, but on Mahasivaratri it's like having a festival in our home. We have done this for the last ten years, and now we have some kewartis who never miss paying us a visit." Other individuals cook fried vegetables, dals, puddings and cakes at home and take them in vans to distribute to people held up in traf-

fic jams. They'll also serve this food outside temples where weary and hungry wayfarers are waiting in long lines for darshan. One smile and a "thank you" from the receiver is sufficient repayment for the giver.

An English Pilgrim

At one such stop I hear someone behind me saying, "Anna data sukhi bhaye," after receiving rice pudding. I turn around to see an Englishman in his sixties wearing a white dhoti, kurta, a tulsi mala around his neck, a beautifully painted tikka and a friendly smile on his face. I smile back and ask what his words meant. Though I know they are a blessing honoring the source and giver of the food, I feel that from his answer I might still learn something. The old man beckons me to sit at a bench nearby. He is in the mood to offer a whole lecture, and I am always up for listening—especially when I have an article to write.

He tells me he feels like "a tourist on Earth who wants to thank everyone who feeds him along his journey." Now that is more philosophical than I expected. I ask him what bought him to this part of Mauritius. He says, "I am not here just to go to temples at Ganga Talao and get Siva's darshan. If I wanted that, I would have gone to some Jyotirlinga in India, which are very powerful and beautiful. But the beauty of Mahasivaratri in Mauritius lies outside the temples, and this is the main reason I come here on Mahasivaratri every year. The ambience is so beautiful. You can feel the meaning of 'Sivaoham' in this spiritual atmosphere."

"You know, Mauritians are very strict about



SAVITA TIWARI

Beginning a tradition: (far left) Siva Lingams encircle a giant Lingam inside one of the many sacred temples near the lake; (left to right) a statue of Jhummun Giri Gosai, the first to find and pilgrimage to Ganga Talao, is perched above the lake; a view of the lake and many of the lakeside temples from a hilltop Hanuman shrine

their jobs and day-to-day routines. They even make sure their marriages are on Saturdays or Sundays so their everyday life and work will not be disturbed. But they break all their rules for God Siva. They don't mind kids skipping school during Mahasivaratri; they save up their sick days from work, just for this time of year; and though they never walk on roads all year, on Mahasivaratri half of Mauritius is walking through the streets. Here you can see Siva's presence in all the free services and all the giving. At this time of year you don't have to enter temples to feel Lord Siva's grace—you can feel Him everywhere."

Discovering Ganga Talao

I leave La Marie and make my way up through the nature reserve to Ganga Talao, arriving along with countless other pilgrims. As you enter Ganga Talao, you cannot miss the 108-foot-tall statue of Lord Siva greeting you; but just a little further my attention is drawn to a small, less obvious statue, an ordinary-looking man holding a kavar on his shoulder. Why is this statue standing here with images of the Gods? I learn this is a



SHUTTERSTOCK

statue of Jhummun Giri Gosai, the first person to set foot on the Kawar Yatra to Ganga Talao. He is the man behind this world-famous Mahasivaratri celebration.

In 1898 Jhummun Giri Gosai, a Siva bhaktar and a resident of Triolet in northern Mauritius, had a dream. In that dream a group of fairies led him to a sacred lake on a mountain in the south of the island. There they told him that he no longer had to miss the sacred waters of Ma Ganga in India. He had no idea then that his dream would shape the spiritual destiny of the whole island.

Days later he decided to search for this place with a friend. To their amazement his dream was true—he found the very lake which the fairies had shown him. Overwhelmed by the experience, he promised himself to walk to that lake every year on Mahasivaratri. He also installed a Sivalingam there, and the lake became known as Pari Talao, "Lake where fairies reside." In 1972 water was brought from Gangotri, India, and poured into the lake, and it became known as Ganga Talao.

Having now heard a great deal of testimony from pilgrims, I want to speak with someone in government and get their thoughts. During the festival, all government officials, including the prime minister, visit Ganga Talao. I meet Mr. Somdutt Dulthmun, president of Mauritius Sanatan Dharm Temple's Federation, in his organization's tent. I ask him how he views Mahasivaratri in Mauritius today. He tells me, "In today's world, where every religion is facing the problem of their youth becoming disinterested, it brings me peace to see that the Kawar Yatra of Mauritius repre-

sents the power of the youth in our country. I feel immensely proud to say that 90 percent of kawar coming to Ganga Talao are on the shoulders of our youth. Thousands of kawar reach Ganga Talao every year on Mahasivaratri—so many that we've had to start asking pilgrims to just bring small kawars on their shoulders as foot traffic, because the larger ones are causing extra congestion along the roads. Travelers are sometimes stuck in traffic for 5 to 6 hours at a time. Thankfully, many groups are heeding our requests. Some have begun making and bringing small, beautifully made, identical kawars. All these kewartis will wear uniform clothes for their march to Ganga Talao. It looks beautiful and it is also more traditional, bringing with it a sense of personal bhakti that might not be as present when simply walking alongside a float. Overall, Hinduism in Mauritius is in very good health."

I make my way from the organization booths down to the lakeside. At the lake, everyone is feeling Siva's presence, including me. Vedic chants echo through the air as priests perform pujas. Incense billows from the temple entries and from the many lakeside offerings presented by pilgrims. Youth gather water from the lake for their kawars, which are lined up above the lake, colorfully decorated and waiting to return to their temples.

After this, I will leave to celebrate my own Sivaratri. Without a doubt, this has been one of the most memorable Mahasivaratri celebrations I've ever experienced, and I'm excited to see what next year will bring. Aum Namah Sivaya.



ART

Y.G. Srimati, an Unsung Hero Honored

The Met showcases a Chennai artist who flourished in New York City

BY LAVINA MELWANI, NEW YORK

WHEN Y.G. SRIMATI SAILED FROM INDIA for the West as a young artist in her 30s, she carried much more than could fit into any suitcase—the spirit of the mighty Shiva Gangadhara, Bearer of the Ganga; the blessings of Saraswati, Goddess of learning and the arts; the ragas which emanated from the vina, her beloved musical instrument, and a passion for the arts and culture of the Indian universe.

Born in a Tamil Brahmin family in 1926, she was the granddaughter of the royal astrologer to the Maharaja of Mysore. She left for foreign shores in the 60s but always carried a glorious India in her heart, mind and hands. This was all the more remarkable because she had grown up in the British Raj, where everything Indian was often stifled.

Srimati was part of the nationalist movement for an independent India and actually spent time with Mahatma Gandhi, who profoundly influenced her way of thinking and the art she created.

Though Indian in spirit, she lived for 40 years in America, always telling the story of India's religion and culture through her vibrant watercolors and her classical music and dance. Yet not many knew her story and her glorious work. She died in 2007 at the age of 81 back in her hometown of Chennai, but she spent most of her life in her New York home, a stone's throw from the iconic Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Showcasing a Quiet Visionary

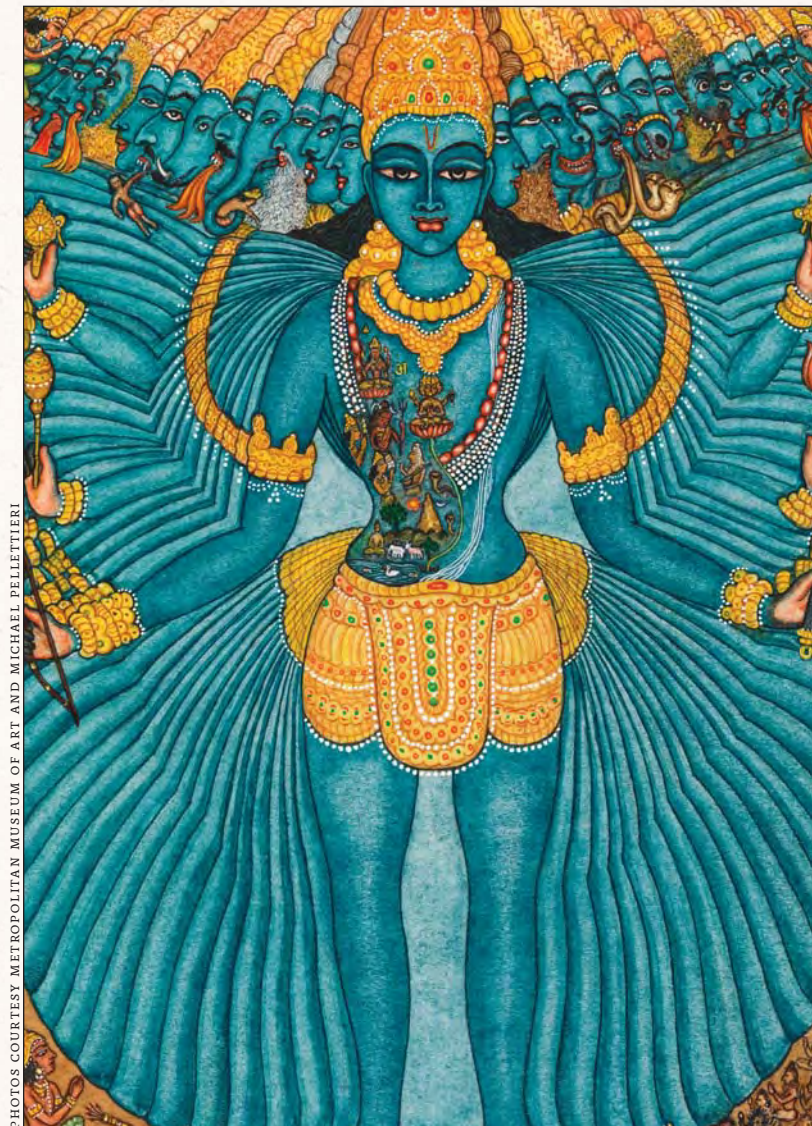
It is fitting that in December, 2016, the Met launched the first retrospective devoted to

her little-known art, a small, jewel-like exhibition which ran through June 18, 2017. The exhibit, curated by John Guy, took several years to develop. It was drawn from private collections as well as The Met's permanent holdings. Though focused on the first two decades of her career, it included works from her later periods. It featured twenty-five watercolor paintings, her musical instruments, archival photographs, and performance recordings.

"It is an exhibition which is really intended as a small historical corrective to re-establish the position of an artist who had really been forgotten," said Guy. "Srimati's painting displayed a consistent commitment to her vision of an Indian style. She explored themes from Indian religious epic literature and scenes of rural culture, asserting traditional



Divinity on canvas: (clockwise from left) Y.G. Srimati in her studio at Sait Colony, Egmore, Chennai, circa 1950; Shiva Gangadhara; Krishna Vishvarupa



PHOTOS COURTESY METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART AND MICHAEL PELLETTIERI

subject matter as part of a conscious expression of nationalist sentiments; her choice was personal and idiosyncratic.... Through her highly controlled and softly modulated use of watercolor washes, Srimati built on the poetic and lyrical styles developed a generation earlier in India by Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose."

Guy pointed out that her many roles of classical singer, musician, dancer and painter influenced and pollinated each other. He went on to explain, "Hers was a generation much influenced by the rediscovery of a classical Sanskrit legacy devoted to the visual arts, notably the ancient text on art, *Chitra-shastra*, and the treatise of performing arts, *Natyashastra*."

Early Life—a Multi-Faceted Talent

For Srimati, music, dance and art were as essential as life's mundane necessities. Her father died when she was young, and she was raised by her older brother, Y.G. Doraisami, a

serious patron of the arts in Chennai. Under his mentorship she learned classical dance, singing, instrumental music and painting. Even as a teenager Srimati was renowned in Chennai as a classical musician, dancer and vocalist. She had several solo shows in Chennai and Delhi, one of them presided over by India's vice president.

Indeed, many volatile events made her follow the path she did. Writes Guy, "For the young Srimati, the explicit referencing of the past and of religious subjects came together in an unparalleled way, driven by the explosive atmosphere of an India in the final push to independence. This experience gave form and meaning to her art, and largely defined her style."

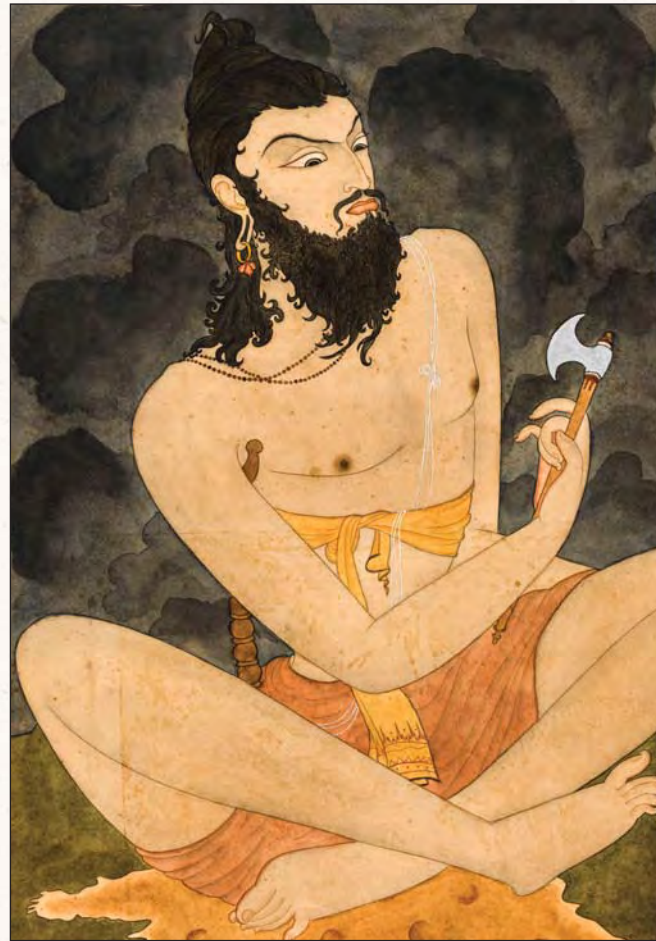
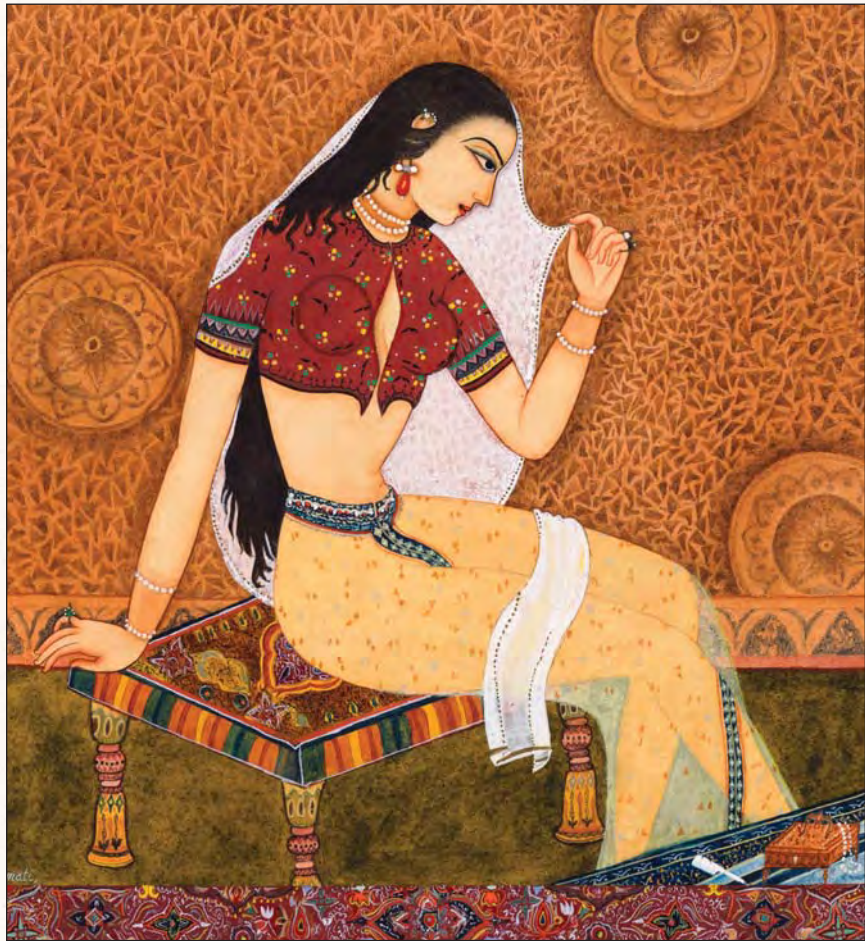
As a young woman, she sang bhajans by Gandhiji's side at many of his rallies. Even when she embarked on her Western journey, she carried with her a uniquely Indian perspective of art, music and the world. In 1959–60 she visited the UK, where she did solo

shows and recorded vocal and instrumental works for the BBC.

She came to New York with a scholarship to the Art League in 1963. It was here she met fellow artist Michael Pellettieri, who later became her partner. After her passing, he donated some of her artworks and musical instruments to the Met. I asked him about her interests and he said, "She was both modest and charismatic, religious but open to universal ideas and music. Besides north and south Indian music, she loved the Beatles, Elvis Presley and Mozart."

An Ambassador for India and America

In 1961, she was one of the early Indians to be granted a US visa based on special ability. In her later years she took American citizenship. In 1967 the Smithsonian Institution commissioned her to create an etching for the Geneva Peace Conference. Over the following years, she continued to paint, while also giving lectures and presenting concerts



on college campuses across the US. Pellettieri recalled, "Most Indian musicians travel with a troupe, but she would travel alone, a suitcase filled with her paintings, instruments and her saris. In the 70s the Vietnam War was going on and there were a lot of protests on campus. She would always end her concerts with the simple peace invocation "Om Shanti Om," which created a warm camaraderie with her audiences."

Appreciating Srimati's Art

India remained the soul and breath of her paintings. In 1961 she worked on 15 commissioned paintings to accompany a deluxe edition of the *Bhagavad Gita*. It is in these powerful paintings that you see her strong Hindu beliefs. In an article in *Orientations*, John Guy touches upon the spirituality that imbues her art: "Among Srimati's most successful early works were her explorations of subjects drawn from her deep understanding of Brahmanism and its rich imagery embedded in ancient literary sources, most notably the great religious epics and commentaries. Her choice of subjects was personal and idiosyncratic. These are fresh and original interpretations, clearly informed by her marrying of a passion for the sculptural qualities of Indian dance and a profound understanding of the

spiritual dynamics of the subjects chosen."

Shiva Gangadhara, Bearer of the Ganga (1945) is a powerful painting capturing the saga of Shiva holding back the flowing Ganges in His hair to safeguard the Earth. Yet another large-scale work from 1946 shows Parashurama with the Battle Axe, the sixth avatar of Vishnu. One of the most remarkable works is her watercolor of Mahakali (upper far right). Srimati wrote in her diary that she was awakened at night by the crushing sounds of the skulls in Kali's skirt and kept hearing them until she finished the painting that encapsulates the power of the Goddess.

As the art critic Holland Cotter noted in the *New York Times*, "Ms. Srimati's choreographic take on naturalism makes everyday subjects—a woman dressing, a family riding to market—look heroic, and images of deities and saints look approachably human. In the end, she's a devotional artist, in the religious or spiritual sense: Her 1947–48 painting of the Hindu goddess Saraswati was originally displayed on her family's home altar."

A striking painting that brought music and devotion to Srimati's canvas was Saint Tyagaraja Singing Hymns in Praise of Lord Rama (1952–55). In fadeout in the backdrop of the painting, almost like a heartbeat, you see

Activist Artist: (clockwise from left) Srimati accompanies Gandhi at an independence rally; Rajput Princess; Parashurama; Mahakali; The Bullock Cart

Lord Rama, Sita, Lakshmana and Hanuman, and even Sage Narada. Proclaims Guy, "This is devotional painting at its purest."

A Gentle, Generous Soul

Srimati traveled back often to India often but made her home in America. She delighted in sharing her love of Indian art and culture with Americans, giving lectures and demonstrations. In her Manhattan apartment she cooked vegetarian food for her students and friends, introduced them to the music of the vina and gave classical Indian dance performances. In addition to her personal artistic expression through painting, vina and dance, she loved the opera and cinema.

Pellettieri recalls that she was always generous and encouraged ordinary people to perform informally at her home concerts. She was a great cook who shared her home-cooked meals, her art, music and dance with her guests. Her home in Manhattan was a salon for artistic evenings, just as her family home in Chennai had been.

Faithfully Hindu

"She was well-known in India, but once she came to the US she did not go back to exhibit," he recalled. "She supported herself through teaching and commissions. Most of the time artists try to push their career—she just was not that kind of person. She took what came. She did not do self-promotion—she was very content painting in New York. She did her prayers and meditation every single day; she considered her work her worship."

Indeed, devotion was a big part of Srimati's life. On her trips to India, visits to the temples were a must. While many artists change their style to fit in with changing trends, Srimati remained faithful to the Indian tradition even when other artists had forsaken it. For her, the figurative style imbued with the spirituality of the past was not a style statement or a passing fad but an expression of devotion based on a profound belief system.

Lavina Melwani is a journalist who writes for several international publications. She blogs at Lassi with Lavina. lassiwithlavina.com Follow @ [lavinamelwani](https://twitter.com/lavinamelwani)



“I’m Spiritual, But Not Religious”

Nineteen million young Americans, designated as SBNR, unknowingly hold core beliefs and practices that resemble Hinduism

BY LAUREN VALENTINO, NORTH CAROLINA

EVEN THE CASUAL STUDENT OF HISTORY will observe what looks like a trend toward secularization in the modern world. According to data from the General Social Survey, thirty years ago all but 7% of Americans identified themselves as religious. Today that figure stands closer to 20%. What’s more, scholars generally agree that over the last few centuries, religion has become less important in the public life of industrialized countries.

These two trends—declining religiousness among people, and declining religious authority among nation-states—form what social scientists call “the secularization thesis:” with the inevitable march of modernity, technological progress and scientific discoveries steadily close the gap between the explained and the unexplained, leaving little room for the existence of any divine or mystical forces. Theologians use the term “God of the gaps” in describing the theory that unexplained phenomena provide the evidence for God’s existence. The fact that some things in this world cannot otherwise be explained is this theory’s proof of a Divine.

So, do these trends mean that people are abandoning religion and moving towards atheism? Not really. The most recent study on American religion, conducted by the Pew Research Center, found that fully 89% of Americans believe in God, and only 3% consider themselves atheists. A steadily growing proportion of the US population identify as “agnostic” or “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR). Scholars of religion term this group “nones” (having no religious affiliation). This group now includes about 29% of all people in the United States. Society may have become less religious, but it has become more spiritual.

What, exactly, does spirituality entail? Scholars define *spirituality* as the set of beliefs governing one’s relation to the self, to others and to God. It is a person’s stance about the meaning of life, the degree of connected-

ness to other beings, and their hopes for the future.

Where religiosity in the Western experience is about embracing specific doctrines and publicly participating in formal religious institutions, in the East it is more closely married to spirituality. In fact, many among the spiritual-but-not-religious crowd see religious institutions, such as churches and synagogues, as hindering spirituality, rather than enhancing it.

For Abrahamic religious traditions—Christianity, Islam and Judaism—this divide between religion and spirituality makes sense. These traditions have a history of building vast empires on the basis of a com-

plex, top-down power structure. They have developed intricate training programs for clergy to minister to the faith’s adherents. Their texts contain admonitions about the importance of belonging to a congregation and what duties membership entails. These are, in essence, public religions that expect public actions and commitments from their members.

No wonder Abrahamic faith leaders tend to be wary of the SBNR trend. Michael Horton, creator of *White Horse Inn*, a popular online Christian magazine, warns fellow Christians, “There is a problem in being too spiritual. You are an idolater. This particular person, Jesus of Nazareth, is God in the flesh.

Not all this spiritual stuff. Not a sacred cosmos. Not everything is holy, not everything is spiritual, not everything is sacred.”

By contrast, in the Dharmic faiths there is little division between religion and spirituality. These religions have a relatively flat organizational hierarchy. They see enlightenment as a personal spiritual journey that requires no clergy. Being a good Buddhist, Hindu, Jain or Sikh does not require attending regular religious services, belonging to a congregation or donating part of one’s income to the faith. Dharmic traditions are structured more to prioritize individual spiritual progress than public commitments to religious identity.

The West has seen surging interest in Dharmic religious beliefs and practices. In 2009, an editorial in *NEWSWEEK* proclaimed, “We are all Hindus now.” The author, Lisa Miller, asserted that Americans are gradually becoming more Hindu because of our growing belief in religious pluralism (that multiple religions can lead to eternal truth). She observed that today many Americans believe in reincarnation and cremate their deceased. Miller’s insight led me to want to know more. As a social scientist, I wondered:

To what extent can we characterize the growing spiritual-but-not-religious population as being, essentially, Dharmic in their practices and beliefs? Furthermore, how aware are SBNRs that what they are practicing is fundamentally Dharmic in origin and nature?

Mining the Data

To answer these questions, I turned to the National Study of Youth and Religion—the most comprehensive data available on the religious views of young Americans. This is a nationally representative survey of youth between 23 and 29 years old, containing in-depth interviews with a subset of the survey-takers. The data was collected in 2012 by a group of researchers from the University of North Carolina, the University of Notre Dame and several other leading universities around the country. Using this unique data set, I examined the prevalence of the SBNR trend, the similarities between SBNR views and practices and those of Dharmic faith practitioners, and the degree to which these youth recognize such similarities.

I found that fully 62% of young people in the US consider themselves “spiritual but

not religious” in some way; and 25% of these youth have rejected views that are explicitly Abrahamic: they don’t believe Jesus was the son of God, nor that there will come a judgment day when God punishes some and rewards others. But just how Dharmic is this one-quarter of spiritual young people in their beliefs and practices?

It is difficult to define a religion’s views. Hinduism in particular is heterogeneous by nature. But the essential Hindu beliefs include the interconnectedness of the universe, the cyclical nature of life, and the omnipresence of the Divine. All the Dharmic faiths teach that there are many paths to truth, and no one religion holds a monopoly on that truth. Further, they all encourage people to care for other beings, to minimize harm, and to do so selflessly, without any expectation of reward.

The data clearly showed that the majority of these spiritual youth subscribe to Dharmic views about the influence of stars and planets on peoples’ fates (56%) and the existence of reincarnation (76%). A plurality believe that God is like a cosmic life force (44%) or a personal being (12%). Most young



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Cosmic song: A teenager plays the singing bowl, drawing the wooden baton around the edge of a brass vessel until it vibrates with a musical voice; (inset opposite) an elegant Aum tattoo on a young SBNR’s upper arm



Sacred power: A young seeker presses his palms together in introspection, his body covered with meaningful symbols

A thoughtful man who goes to school while bartending part time says he enjoys reading Hindu texts like the *Ma-habharata*. A young massage therapist reads about tantric philosophy in her spare time. A Hispanic woman who grew up Catholic is a yoga instructor and plans to pursue a career in Ayurvedic medicine.

The beliefs these young people hold dear are the very core of Hinduism. Many explicitly say they believe in karma, dharma, reincarnation or seva. A chef who left the church after coming out as a lesbian shared that her belief system centers on the notion of karma, which to her means “do good things for other people and good things will come to you generally.” A hard-working woman who just finished medical school expresses her purpose in life as finding happiness and helping others to do the same. Although she doesn’t use

the term *dharm*, she acknowledges that she adopted this as her life purpose after reading the Dalai Lama’s writings. A professional dancer articulates her belief in reincarnation as a way for our spirit to continue learning from wherever we left off in our previous life. A young man who lives in the inner city and works handling cargo at the airport is dedicated to selfless service and says his spiritual role model is Gandhi.

I also noticed that so many of these young people described yearning for a community of like-minded individuals who value these kinds of practices and beliefs. The tantra-reading massage therapist says she’s been actively searching for a community that also prioritizes spirituality in every aspect of life. A freelance artist wants to teach his future children the practices of mindfulness and meditation. An insurance salesman who grew up Catholic but now meditates regularly reported that he misses the rituals, tradition and culture that religion provided him when he was younger. A young man who practices what he describes as Native American/Buddhist/Zen spirituality shares that he would love to get involved with people who have similar views if he could only find such a group in his area.

Despite their often-overtly Dharmic religious views, these youth generally do not identify as Buddhist, Hindu, Jain or Sikh. Only 8.7% of interviewees identified as out-and-out Hindu or Buddhist. The rest called themselves “agnostic,” “atheist,” “Wiccan,” “culturally Catholic,” “Lutheran,” “spiritual,”

SBNRs also hold a Dharmic view on the role of religion: they do not believe in proselytizing (82%), they are religiously tolerant toward other faiths (88%), and they think it’s okay to incorporate diverse religious views into one’s personal spiritual practice (80%).

The vast majority say they personally care about equality between racial groups (86%), the needs of elderly people (88%), and the needs of the poor (82%). This concern demonstrates an intuitive understanding of the Dharmic principle of karma, the universal law that one’s actions, thoughts and intentions will ultimately come back in some way. Sixty-seven percent of SBNRs reported having engaged in community service or volunteering, called *seva* among Dharmic faiths.

A nontrivial proportion of these young people said they have practiced explicitly Dharmic spiritual techniques. Thirty-one percent said they try to include Buddhist, Hindu, Zen or other Asian practices in their spirituality. Twenty-seven percent reported practicing meditation. Eleven percent have fasted or practiced self-denial as a spiritual discipline.

If we assume the researchers were successful in selecting a nationally representative group to study and apply this study’s findings to the much larger US millennial population (people born between 1982 and 2004, ages 13 to 35), about 75 million people today, we can estimate that 19 million young people hold Dharmic spiritual views and engage in Dharmic spiritual practices.

Let us redefine secularization in our own

way. Could we say that it is a movement away from Abrahamic religious institutions toward Dharmic ways of life? These statistics on spiritual practices and beliefs seem to say yes. However, according to Pew, less than 2% of Americans identify with a Dharmic religion, such as Hinduism or Buddhism. I wondered how these young spiritual people regard themselves. Do they recognize that many of their beliefs and practices are derived from Dharmic texts and traditions dating back thousands of years? Do they realize that their own spiritual lives resemble, in many way, those of Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs around the world?

SBNRs Speak Out

To answer these questions, I drilled down into the second part of the data from the National Study of Youth and Religion: the interviews. Here I was able to see how these young Americans talk and think about their spiritual practices and beliefs.

While most did not acknowledge the source of their beliefs and practices, these young people described their own spiritual lives as filled with practices that are, in fact, profoundly Dharmic. A young woman who lives in a trailer out in the country with her common-law husband and two young children practices meditation and mindfulness on a daily basis, and credits this with curbing her of anxiety and panic attacks. Another woman, who works in renewable energy, does yoga as a spiritual practice and regularly chants a Sanskrit mantra using mala beads.

“spiritual-but-not-religious,” “Christian” and “New Age.” In fact, most refer to their views as “Eastern,” “New Age” or “hippie.” They seem unaware that the concepts of karma and reincarnation and the practices of meditation and yoga originated in Hinduism. One intense young financial analyst states that he regards his frequent practice of yoga as a religious practice because it helps his conscious mind speak to the rest of his body. Yet, later in the interview he says, “I don’t know anything about Hinduism.” He is completely unaware of the rich history of yoga as a Hindu practice.

This ignorance is understandable: most respondents learned these beliefs and practices in settings which did not credit them to Hinduism. Five main sources are identified in the study: school, work, yoga classes, books, and practicing Hindus or Buddhists. Those who were exposed during their schooling typically took a course on religion or philosophy during college or high school, but a few also learned meditative techniques while in rehab treatment centers for addiction.

Then there were those who worked at places with an explicit focus on health of the mind and body. For instance, the clinic where the young massage therapist works was dec-

orated with Buddha statues and every room was named after a different deity; another interviewee was raised Muslim but worked for some time at a holistic health center that taught classes on spiritual rituals, including reiki and yoga. In fact, a great many interviewees were exposed through yoga. The interviewee who works as a yoga instructor had to read the *Yoga Sutras* as part of her training. She also bought a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita*, which she plans to start studying soon. Some interviewees learned about Dharmic ideas and practices through books, both fiction and nonfiction. For instance, a young man who works stocking shelves at a grocery store said Jack Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums* was an important influence on his views. Notably, very few interviewees’ entry point to Dharmic views and techniques was through a practitioner of the religion itself. Most, in fact, didn’t seem to think they knew anyone who practiced a Dharmic faith, and those who did tended to mention a friend or family member who had dabbled in Buddhism.

Ignorance about Dharma

Why do so few of these young people call themselves Hindu (or Buddhist or Jain or

Sikh) when, as we’ve seen, their religious views resemble these faiths? The interview data provides fascinating insight into this dilemma.

The most obvious answer here is that these young SBNRs are ignorant about Dharmic religions. Indeed, ignorance is an important piece of the puzzle. Even among the young spiritual seekers in these interviews, the vast majority were simply unfamiliar with Hinduism and other Dharmic faiths. As I showed, most were exposed to elements of this tradition not in the context of Hinduism or Buddhism, but as, for instance, the disjointed practice of meditation or as the isolated concept of dharma. These interviewees have little to no contact with Dharmic practitioners in their everyday lives. They are simply not exposed to Dharmic faiths as the source and context for much of what they’ve come to practice and believe.

The ignorance I noticed among the interviewees is consistent with evidence on Americans’ exposure to other religions generally. Another Pew study found that among all religious groups, Americans have the least familiarity with Hinduism, closely followed by Buddhism. Only 22% of Americans say that

What’s Happening to Religion?

AS PREVALENT AS IT HAS BECOME, THE SBNR TREND REMAINS something of an open secret. Those who are affected know well what is going on: ministers, priests, rabbis, polsters and the millennials themselves (though even the latter have not given a name to their own movement).

Basically, millennials (and outliers of other generations) are no longer filling the pews, temples and synagogues. They don’t trust organized religion, don’t feel it serves their more interior spiritual needs. What caused them to become disaffected? Some have been hurt or angered by their religion’s treatment of others, some speak of the religion’s lack of acceptance or even abusive behaviors. Others see the divisiveness between religions as unacceptable, even as a source of much human suffering. Some intuit an interconnectedness in the universe, a unity that Western religions do not normally teach. Some are turned off by the pressure to

convert or the “only-one-path” sermons. They would have religions cooperate instead of compete.

So they opt out, often seeking God in the beauties of nature, in yoga, in animism, pagan rites, spiritualism and the oneness with nature found in Native American practices. They take refuge in a medley of teachings garnered from various faiths, or from mystics and meditation mentors. They fill yoga studios around the world.

While devout SBNR seekers eschew all formal hierarchy and doctrine, they remain interested in matters of the spirit, in higher consciousness and philosophy. They are not atheists or agnostics, as many assume. In fact, as a group they are more involved in personal spiritual effort than most who remain on church membership lists. They value having many metaphysical options to choose from, regarding traditional faiths as too narrow, too dogmatic and not as inclusive as they are. In powerful ways, they are changing the religious landscape of America.



they know someone who is a Hindu, whereas 61% of Americans report knowing someone who is a Jew (even though Jews make up only 1.9% of the population!). Because most of the interviewees don't know a Hindu or Buddhist, they have no way of knowing that they share so many core beliefs and practices with Hindus and Buddhists around the world.

But we can't simply expect SBNR youth to learn about Buddhism and Hinduism by taking the initiative to seek out Dharmic practitioners or information about these faiths. For one, these religions remain for many "unknown unknowns." That is, they remain in the realm of things which these young people don't know that they don't know. But more importantly, the interviews with these young spiritual seekers show that everything they've learned about religion, faith and spirituality prevents them from seeking out Dharmic religions as a solution to their yearning.

Because their entire experience of religion has been Abrahamic, they understand the

word *religion* to mean a very public affair, prone to corruption and often imposed on others—a rigid, even intolerant belief system which is fundamentally anti-science and therefore out of step with modern knowledge. When SBNRs envision religion, what leaps to their minds are features of religion that are either explicitly or implicitly Christian, Muslim or Jewish in nature.

As a result, they strongly distinguish religion from spirituality. In fact, they speak of spirituality as diametrically opposed to their Abrahamic notion of religion. To them, religion is public, spirituality is private. *Religion* implies seeing things as black or white; spirituality involves a willingness to engage with life's gray areas. Religion is intolerant toward other faiths; spirituality allows seekers to incorporate whatever tools, techniques or texts from other faiths that may be useful in their journey.

This stark conception of religion-versus-spirituality may also partially explain the movement away from Hinduism among

young Hindus in the United States. A 2014 Pew study found that 20% of people who grow up Hindu eventually leave the faith. Could they be identifying as spiritual—but-not-religious due to lack of knowledge about how Hinduism differs from the Abrahamic religions? As the Research Fellow for Hindu Life at Duke University, I recently conducted a survey of young Hindu undergraduates in an attempt to answer this question. I found that a full three-quarters consider themselves spiritual—but-not-religious. Moreover, this trend was more prominent among undergrads who were born in the US.

This suggests that the religion-versus-spirituality dichotomy is something one subconsciously absorbs when growing up in Christian-dominated America. In India, on the other hand, all but 0.1% of the population identify as religious, according to India's most recent census. All the scientific evidence suggests that the SBNR trend—at least at present—is a uniquely American phenomenon.

The strong separation between religion and spirituality—as young Americans understand it—applies to Abrahamic faiths, but makes little sense in the context of Dharmic religions, which are more spiritual by nature.

New York yogi: (below) Eddie Stern in front of Ganesha's shrine in Brooklyn. While not an SBNR himself, he shared with *HINDUISM TODAY* his insights into the trend; (above right) an artist's depiction of finding the Divine in nature, as a youth looks into the eye of God.

A Few Moments with Eddie Stern

MY NAME IS EDDIE STERN. I AM the director of a yoga school called Ashtanga Yoga in New York. I also started a new place called the Brooklyn Yoga Club, and I founded the Broome Street Ganesha Temple in 2001, which is a traditional South Indian Hindu temple. I trained in India under the Mysore master Pattabhi Jois for about 18 years.

While I am a very religious person, I still identify as being Jewish culturally. I guess my *adhikara*, or true affinity, is worshiping within the Hindu tradition. I don't consider myself a Hindu. I have no good reason for this. I am Hindu in practice, but by birth I am Jewish. I have never wanted to renounce that part of my cultural heritage because I love my parents and I loved my grandparents and my ancestry is dear to me. I don't see any contradiction between what I practice and my family background. I allow both to exist, like the paradox of the world we live in.

However, if I go into synagogue, the whole way that it's set up doesn't speak to me in the same way that worshiping Ganesha speaks to me. When I do my ritual in the morning, I feel like I have addressed the most important aspect of my being, and now I am ready to do my yoga practice or anything else. There is something unseen about it that quenches my inner thirst for connection with That which can't be seen but which seems to drive everything.

I think institutionalized religion, particularly in the West, has been a big disappointment for many people. They haven't found



the answers they're looking for, and they haven't been given the structure that addresses their inner need for growth. So they come to something like yoga, or they are drawn into meditation, and they feel that is addressing their need to understand who they are and what their purpose is. The churches aren't providing that for these people.

I think it is quite valid to say that the state of religion today does not reflect the state of religion in its earliest form or the pre-religious state. If people are looking just for spirituality, maybe they are looking for that initial spark which drove seekers to search in the first place, and when they find it has been codified, put in a box and monetized, they are not satisfied.

I think our practices should generate a really positive, loving, forceful, sacred, mysterious energy that draws people in so they feel, "Ahh, this is where we want to be." What is spirituality divorced from divine presence? And divine presence can be shown in any way. It can be shown as Shiva, as Ganesha, as a life; but it is going to be a symbol of something, and those symbols ultimately are the things that religions are formed around. So, I can't really separate the two.

Yoga came to life for me in the temples of South India. When I was traveling there with my guru, we would go from temple to temple, stay for a few days, meditate, practice and chant in the back corners of Madhurai or Srirangam or wherever. That's where it came to life, and I wanted that in New York.



Thus, for many of these SBNR youth, opposition to religion is not a rejection of religion writ large. What many of these young people do not yet realize is that they are opposed to those religions that do not encourage the spirituality that they practice or believe. They have yet to discover that their spiritual understandings are basically Dharmic.

So, how to break through the strong false dichotomy in which religion and spirituality are fundamentally opposed in young Americans' minds? Such a breakthrough would require Dharmic faiths to make a major intervention into public perception. The research clearly suggests that there is a deep need for educating people about what Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism and Sikhism are. Only then will people begin to change their understandings of the entire concept of religion. Then Dharmic traditions can go from an "unknown unknown" to a "known unknown," and, ideally, to a "known known."

According to what I've uncovered in these analyses, it seems like Buddhism may be on the right track. The fact that some of the young people interviewed referred to any Dharmic belief or practice as "Buddhist" suggests that people are perhaps beginning to gain familiarity with that faith. Moreover, what little familiarity they have with Buddhism has planted the seeds for them to question whether religion and spirituality need to be divorced in their minds.

How Can We Educate the World?

We need visible, familiar representations

of the Dharmic faiths and their adherents. Compared with other faiths, Hinduism and Buddhism are vastly underrepresented on Americans' screens. According to the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), a comprehensive online database of all television and film, there are 2,178 shows or movies featuring Christianity, 1,200 featuring Judaism, and 893 featuring Islam. By contrast, there are only 419 shows or films featuring Buddhism and a paltry 260 featuring Hinduism. Because Dharmic faith is largely absent from the American mediascape, people who do not grow up in a Hindu or Buddhist household are unlikely to ever get an accurate understanding of either religion—let alone Jainism or Sikhism.

We can use the known entry points of school, work, yoga and books to provide important context for teaching about Hindu practices and beliefs. Some progress has already been made: a few American universities, such as my own, have created a Hindu Chaplain position. These chaplains coordinate events for Hindus on campus and also work toward greater awareness about Hinduism among all members of the college community.

As it stands, we simply don't know what most people (mis)understand Dharmic religions to be, so it's difficult to know where to begin in educating the American populace. Like the Jews, Muslims and other minority religious groups in the US, Hindus should band together to fund original research studies to understand the sociology of Hinduism

in America from a Dharmic perspective.

The best data we currently have on the SBNR trend suggest that Dharmic beliefs and practices are widespread among the 19 million young Americans who consider themselves spiritual but not religious. These young people believe in reincarnation, *samsara*, *ahimsa*, *karma* and *dharma*. They engage in *seva*; they practice yoga and *vipasana*; they chant Sanskrit mantras over mala beads; they meditate regularly; they read the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Yoga Sutras* and Tantric Buddhist texts.

These young people typically draw a stark line between religion and spirituality because—especially in the West—they associate religion so strongly with the Abrahamic faiths. Because of this limited understanding, these seekers do not relate to the Dharmic faiths as a resource for their spiritual quest.

Fostering the growth of spirituality in the West means breaking through the barriers of ignorance, fear and prejudice surrounding the Dharmic religions. It means teaching the spiritual—but-not-religious youth of America to transcend the limits of their current understanding of religion. Even young American Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains, growing up in a materialistic society, tend to be poorly educated in their own religion. Thus, these youths, too, will benefit from our efforts. Through education we can help all Americans to understand that there need be no antagonism between religion and spirituality—nor between religion and science—and that being religious doesn't make one a fanatic or a fundamentalist. Instead, we can show them that, for Dharmic practitioners, religion is a noble and authentic pathway for the pursuit of spirituality. With a few strategic initiatives, we can open the doors to enlightenment for all seekers.



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Aiding Hinduism in Pakistan

Couple reports progress on some fronts, though many issues remain for the nation's Hindus

BY LAVINA MELWANI, NEW YORK

IN DECEMBER, 2016, SANJESH DHANJA and his wife Kiran Kumari were hosted by the Hindu American Foundation for a US tour to enhance awareness of issues faced by Hindus in Pakistan. In 2009 these two tireless human rights workers co-founded the Pakistan Hindu Seva Welfare Trust (PHS, www.pakistan-hinduseva.org), a charity organization whose mission is to create a peaceful Pakistan, free from discrimination and to strengthen human values through opportunities for minorities and deprived communities. Dhanja, the president of PHS, says, "Our goal is secular, not political: to work for education, health and human rights in Pakistan, largely for the millions of deprived Hindus there."

The current estimate of Hindus in Pakistan is 1.9 million. This is considered low. The long overdue national census in 2017 should provide higher numbers, if one includes Dalits, who will instead be designated as a separate religion even though the vast majority practice Hinduism. Says Dhanja, "Just about 2% are in the middle class, and at least 90% are very poor. Many are from scheduled castes. About 8% of the Hindus are wealthy, in business or serving in the legislature. Though they represent the entire Hindu community, they don't always support poor Hindus. We need funds to help this poor population."

Kiran Kumari, secretary of PHS, explains the disappearance of Pakistan's Hindus: "Some converted, some migrated and some lost their lives in various crises. Some Muslim groups do try to pressure Hindus to convert. We are working to resist this. Educated Muslims do not want Hindus to leave their faith. Because their strength is with us, we are able to raise our voices."

PHS works on a broad array of fronts: burial and cremation matters for Hindus, an education center in Karachi, bringing the community closer by organizing cricket tournaments and preventing vandalization of temples. In 2014 six Hindu temples were attacked. Dhanja shares, "We believe every religion is a good religion," and the challenge

is to teach Hindus about their faith in an Islamic nation.

"Ours is a painful story," confided Dhanja. "With no laws protecting Hindus, there is no access to justice. But there is some change today. We are trying to create awareness of our



Reaching out in USA: Sanjesh Dhanja and his wife Kiran Kumari take their message to Washington DC

society, for we, too, are part of Pakistan." Kiran reports that at least 25 new cases of rape and forced conversion are registered every month, mostly in the poverty-stricken interior of Sindh. These include forced conversions and "love jihad," where girls are compelled to convert in order to marry Muslim men who use social pressure to take advantage of women's poverty.

If poor Hindus cannot feed their family, conversion can seem attractive. Ten percent of the girls convert willingly, but the majority are compelled. Dhanja and Kumari have led protests against forced conversions and even rescued two girls. Threatened because of this activism, they focus now on societal issues for minorities.

"Health, education and women's empowerment are the next phase of our work, and these will alleviate the problem of forced conversions," says Dhanja. "We want to teach the tenets of the Hindu faith to our children and want our Hindus to be aware

of their religion so they won't convert out of duress; if they do convert, it will be after a thoughtful process."

"In every religion, people try to teach the tenets of their faith to their children from birth, but this does not happen with Hindus in Pakistan," she noted. "We live in a society which does not allow us to learn about our own faith."

Ninety percent of Hindus are bonded laborers and receive no education. Says Dhanja, "The hate material in the school textbooks is not good for our children. What is falsely written about non-Muslim minorities needs to be corrected." PHS holds *Bhagavad Gita* quiz challenges for young Hindus to teach them a correct view of Hinduism.

Working with the government and with other NGOs, the couple are seeing incremental changes. In 2017 the government made some changes in the school textbooks, and included chapters on Hindu festivals like Diwali, Holi and Navratri. The government has given Hindus plots to build new temples. Cremations, disallowed in many Islamic countries, are available to Pakistani Hindus. Yoga is better accepted; there is even a popular yoga program on television. In 2016 the government announced holidays on Diwali and Holi for the Hindu community. "Also," Dhanja adds, "68 years after Independence, Hindu marriage is now recognized under the law, but only in Sindh. We hope it may become law on a national level in the future."

Travel for Hindus to India is also easier now. "We get visas to go to India, and this year a group of 90 Hindus traveled to India for a yatra. We went to Vrindaban, Rishikesh, Haridwar and also the Akshardham temple in Delhi," states Kiran Kumari.

Dhanja would like Hindus from India to come and visit the pilgrimage spots in Pakistan, such as the ancient Shiv Temple in Chatwal, where Shiva's first tear had fallen and become a pond. He says, "The very name *Hindu* comes from the Sindhu River in Sindh. We should be very proud of that." Dhanja concludes, "We Hindus live together with the Muslims, who are very good neighbors. Extremism is the only problem we face."

The couple see Pakistan as the home of all its citizens. "Our work is for all Pakistanis: we are working for the larger community. We work to benefit all humanity in Pakistan, not only the Hindus. We have to live in Pakistan—we are born of the soul of that country! Pakistan is our *vatan*, our homeland. We are facing the problems of the country together—we would not want to leave but rather stay and solve the problems we face together."

Hindu Heritage Endowment

CALCULATE THE VALUE OF YOUR ESTATE

As part of the estate planning process, it's important to determine what you own and to calculate the value of your estate. By calculating your estate size, you can plan for the future and leave your loved ones better prepared.

Determine your estate size by taking the following four steps:

Step 1: Inventory Your Major Assets

Assets can include many items, such as the following:

- Cash, including savings accounts and CDs
- Stocks, bonds, mutual funds
- Retirement accounts, such as 401(k)s or IRAs
- Home(s), land and other real property
- Life insurance policies
- Tangible personal property, including automobiles, jewelry and antiques
- Equity/ownership interest in a business like a sole proprietorship or partnership

Step 2: Determine How and With Whom Your Assets Are Owned

Ownership generally falls into three categories: solely owned, jointly owned with rights of survivorship, and tenancy in common. Owning an asset with your brother, for example, is different than owning an asset with your spouse. Also, married couples who live in community property states have additional record-keeping requirements.



If you are unsure how your assets are owned, review the title of each asset. This information can typically be found in the deed, title or account information. If you are still unsure, ask your attorney or financial advisor.

Step 3: Calculate Your Debts

Debts are subtracted from the value of your assets at your passing. Common debts include mortgages on a primary residence or vacation house, equity loans and credit card balances. Vehicle loans and other loans are also calculated here.

In addition, your estate itself will incur legal fees and other expenses that will reduce the amount of your estate subject to taxation.

Step 4: Total Up Gifts You've Made

Don't forget the gifts you've already made to others. You are allowed to gift up to \$14,000 (for 2016) per year per person without having to declare the gift or pay gift taxes. Gifts made during your lifetime in excess of this amount will reduce your estate tax exemption (currently \$5.45 million).

Strengthen your family's future and continue your support of Hindu Heritage Endowment by downloading the pdf file at www.hheonline.org/tool-kit.shtml.

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Kauai Aadheenam Monastic Endowment			
Anonymous	US\$783.50		
Janava Dharmadeva	1,248.00		
Roshan Harilela	375.00		
Gunasekaran Kandasamy	132.22		
Mira Das & R. Mahalingam	250.00		
Ramalingum Moodley	100.00		
Gayatri Rajan	50.00		
Chamundi Sabanathan	78.75		
Hitesvara Saravan	42.00		
Other Donations	30,000.00		
Total	33,059.47		
Iraivan Temple Endowment			
Frank Burkhardt	30.00		
Murari Singh	100.00		
Anonymous	49.09		
Other Donations	30,000.00		
Total	30,179.09		
Kauai Aadheenam Annual Archana Fund			
Thirujnanam Arnassalon	5.56		
Juhivaasana Koothan	2.82		
Anil Kumar	27.00		
Saroja Devi Manickam	2.50		
Ashwini Maureemootoo	22.38		
Saroja Maureemootoo	11.26		
Anonymous	65.60		
Jogendra Moorooogen	1.39		
Vidyadevi Moorooogen	1.39		
Vandana Nathoo	251.00		
Subramaniam Pennathur	49.98		
Bhaumika & Monica Shah	500.00		
Hemavalli Sivalingam	59.29		
Deepan Sivasarana	116.73		
Total	1,116.90		
Hinduism Today Lifetime Subscription Fund			
Jeyanthi & Sujan Baheetharan	300.00		
Gunavadee Caremben	5.64		
Somasundaram Caremben	5.64		
Sukanta Caremben	5.64		
Kamila Jagambrum	164.78		
Bhaveshan Moorghen	8.42		
Shanda Kumaran Moorghen	8.42		
Udeyadeva Moorghen	8.42		
Vandana Nathoo	499.00		
Mizar Pai	299.00		
Anonymous	348.00		
Bijamati Pareatumbee	40.00		
Muthukumar Shanmugam	28.39		
Sai Singh	120.00		
Hemavalli Sivalingam	31.05		
Samynaden Veerapen	1,008.00		
Total	2,880.40		
Gurudeva's Trilogy Distribution Fund			
Vel Mahalingum	11.19		
Manogaran Mardemootoo	84.51		
Total	95.70		
Kadavul Nataraja Ardra Abhishekam Endowment			
Uma & Ram Challa	1,296.00		
Aravindraj Chandrasekaran	9.00		
Devajyothi Kondapi	108.00		
Lakshmi Munukutla	51.00		
Gowri Nadason	119.59		
D.V. & J.D. Raikhelkar	126.00		
Dohadeva Samugam	108.00		
Parimala Selvaraj	93.00		
Gopichand & Yasodhara Somayajula	51.00		
Anonymous	27.09		
Total	1,988.68		
Kauai Aadheenam Matavasi Medical Fund			
Shyamadeva Dandapani	33.00		
Rajendra Giri	242.00		
Mira Das & R. Mahalingam	250.00		
Kulagan Moonesawmy	16.82		
Gowri Nadason	119.59		
Rajeswary Ramamoorthy	225.00		
Aran Sambandar	108.00	Total	333.00
Vayudeva Varadan	72.00		
Anonymous	609.36		
Other Donations	4,800.00		
Total	6,475.77	Kauai Aadheenam Religious Art and Artifacts Fund	
		Rajadeva Alahan	102.00
Iyarappan Temple Trust			
Krishanth Rajasooriyar	45.00	Murugan Temple of North America Pillaiyar Shrine Fund	
		Pathmini Saravanapavan	150.00
Tirunavukkarasu Nayanar Gurukulam		Sayanthan & Anupama Sivanathan	15.00
Anonymos	324.00	Total	165.00
Kauai Aadheenam Renovation Endowment		Thank You Bodhinatha Fund	
Anonymous	501.00	Anonymous	7,097.00
Adi Srikantha	108.00	Amarnath & Latha Devarmanai	324.00
Total	609.00	Debashis Ghosh	300.00
		Lorraine Jackson	30.00
Sri Subramuniya Ashram Scholarship Fund		Suresh Jambunathan	365.00
Anonymous	324.00	Gunasekaran Kandasamy	476.86
		Thulasidas Nadarajah	100.00
Sri Subramuniya Kottam Fund		Anonymous	108.00
Anonymus	21.00	Mano Navaratnarajah	150.00
		Aran Sambandar	162.00
Kumbhalavalai Ganesha Temple Endowment		Thambimuttoo & Thavam Sivagnanam	14,296.00
Mano Navaratnarajah	75.00	Peter Smith	50.00
Nuckiren Pyeneeandee	28.16	Adi Srikantha	108.00
Total	103.16	Anba Dayananden Valayten	10.93
		Vayudeva Varadan	84.00
Hinduism Today Production Fund		S R Venkatramanan	101.00
Mahendra Jagirdar Charitable Fund	250.00	Michael Wasylkiw	648.00
Ron & Jennifer Burke	150.00	Total	24,302.79
Anonymous	193.00	Udayan Care Endowment Fund	
Thom Drinkwater	25.00	Anonymous	27.09
Prabhakar C Ghosh	90.00	Sri Chandra Madhab Debnath Endowment	
Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	2.82	Shyamal Chandra Debnath	150.00
Rajendra Giri	108.00		
Hiranya Gowda	93.00	Murugan Temple Yalpanam Festival Fund	
Subramaniam Pennathur	50.01	Pathmini Saravanapavan	150.00
Gayatri Rajan	75.00		
Chamundi Sabanathan	2,424.82	Manitha Neyam Trust Fund	
Aran Sambandar	108.00	Nutanaya Sivaceyon	30.00
Thilaka Sunder	5,000.00	Kumaraswamy Sivakumaran	125.00
Total	8,569.65	Total	155.00
Hindu Orphanage Endowment Fund		Kerala Temple Trust	
Benevity	590.00	Devdatta & Swati Mhaiskar	21.00
Bank Of America	51.00		
Anonymous	260.00	Taos Hanuman Fund	
Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	4.21	Anonymous	27.09
Tamnash Gupta	108.00		
Roshan Harilela	375.00	Pazhassi Balamandiram Orphanage Fund	
Gunasekaran Kandasamy	132.22	Filippo Bagarolo	10.00
Chamundi Sabanathan	78.75		
Rodney & Ilene Standen	30.00	Karnataka Temple Development Fund	
Matthew Wiczork	18.00	The Puppala Family Charitable Trust	
Total	1,647.18	3,000.00	
Suntheram Family Trust Fund		Hiranya Gowda	4,500.00
Ramachandran Suntheram	1,845.00	Total	7,500.00
		Swami Vipulananta Children's Home Endowment	
Hindu Press International Endowment Fund		Canaganayagam Kugendra	60.00
Hiranya Gowda	63.00		
Loving Ganesha Distribution Fund		Hindu Literature Fund	
Chittibabu Choppari	150.00	Uma & B.S. Kasinath	108.00
Ravi Madapati	100.00	John & Abha Wiersba	153.00
Mano Navaratnarajah	225.00	Total	261.00
Gassa Patten	1,350.00		
Total	1,825.00	Hinduism Today Complimentary Subscription Fund	
Spiritual Park of Mauritius Endowment		Hiranya Gowda	153.00
Anil Kumar	27.00	Rajagopal Krishnan	60.00
		Total	213.00
Positive Discipline Endowment		Himalayan Academy Book Distribution Fund	
Vinaya Alahan	33.00	Shyamadeva Dandapani	33.00
		Nrusimhayya Manda	40.00
Tirumular Sannidhi Preservation Fund		Total	73.00
Shyamadeva Dandapani	33.00		
Srinivas R. Madaboosi	300.00		

JANUARY TO MARCH ENDOWMENT CONTRIBUTIONS

Yogaswami Hindu Girls' Home of Sittandy Endowment			
Anonymous	1,154.13		
Marlene Carter	162.00		
Subramaniam Pennathur	50.01		
Kumaraswamy Sivakumaran	125.00		
Sivaruban & Nishiya Sivanesan	150.00		
Soma Sundaram	5.00		
Total	1,646.14	Rajendra Giri	108.00
		Gunasekaran Kandasamy	66.11
Murugan Temple of North America Puja Fund		Ramadevi Swaminath & Anand Sampath	250.00
Vayudeva Varadan	72.00	Total	9,232.53
India Hindu Temple Cleaning Fund		Kauai Aadheenam Info-Tech Fund	
Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	4.21	Hitesvara Saravan	21.00
Hiranya Gowda	99.00		
Kulagan Moonesawmy	16.82	Insurance Premiums	
Total	120.03	Mrunal Patel	3,003.00
Anantha Ladies Home Endowment		Kauai Aadheenam Renovation Endowment	
Sayanthan & Anupama Sivanathan	30.00	Other Donations	600.00
Cows of Kadavul and Iraivan Temples (Kovil Maadu) Endowment		Total Contributions	\$140,617.20
Anonymous	181.23		
Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	4.21	Funds at Market Value, Mar 31, 2017	
Rajendra Giri	121.00		
Hem & Sonia Maharaj	121.00		
Natraj Narayanswami	33.00		
Krishanth Rajasooriyar	15.00		
Sivaruban & Nishiya Sivanesan	150.00		
K. Vasanthakumari	100.00		
Arunasalam Vathavooran	75.00		
Total	800.44	Grand Total	\$14,883,855.18
Jaffna Kannathiddy Kali Kovil Endowment			
Anonymous	27.09		
Pakistan Hindu Empowerment Fund			
Murali Balaji	251.00		
Shankar Ganesh Krishnan	5.00		
Anil Kumar	27.00		
Total	283.00		
Digital Dharma Endowment			
Anonymous	8,808.42		

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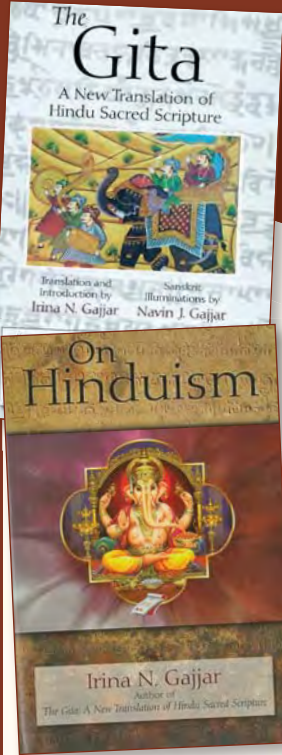
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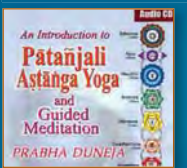
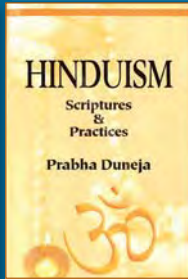
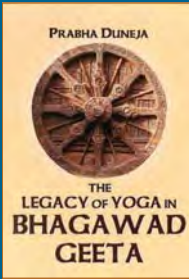


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19–21, Washington, DC
23–24, Warrington, PA
26–28, Princeton, NJ

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9–11, Cleveland, OH
15–18, Toronto, ON
23–25, Chicago, IL
30, Seattle, WA

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1–2, Seattle, WA

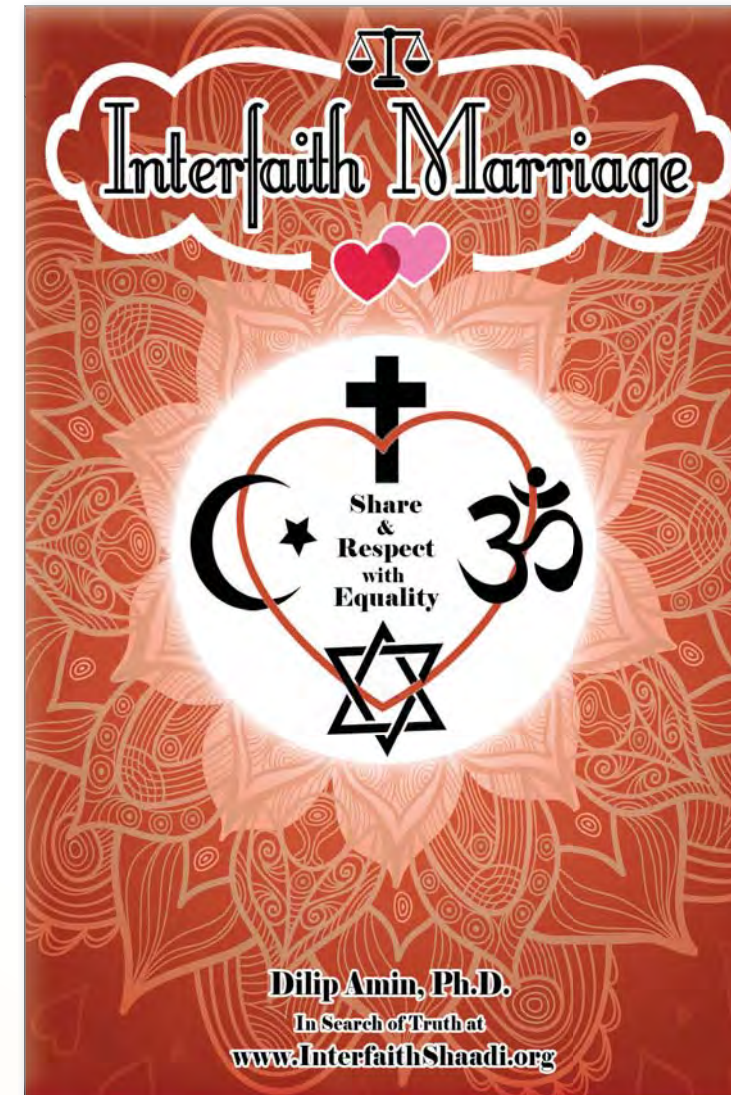
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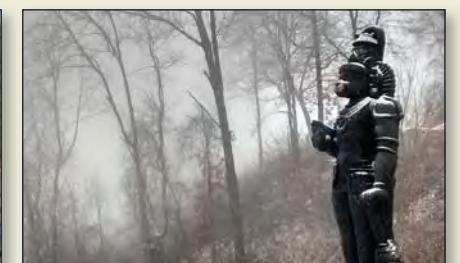
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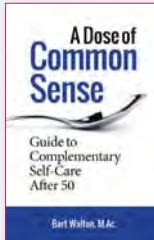
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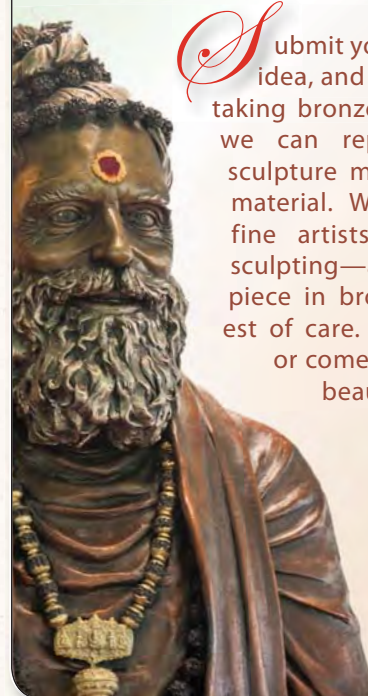
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Among the peaks of Sonamarg,

I sit.

Emerald waters rush by,
Whispering Thy Name.

Thou, Infinity within Eternity,
Can wisdom ever reach Thee?

Cloud upon cloud,
Sky upon sky,
Space upon space,
Galaxy upon galaxy;
Will it suffice, my Lord,
To behold a form,
My Shiva,
Form of the Formless?

My Shiva,
Whose waves upon waves of compassion
Wash over the stones
Of my wounded heart,
Whose hands guide me
Through dim samskaras,
Rod of Light
Among thoughts' gloom.

My Shiva,
Who instills courage
To embrace Destiny.

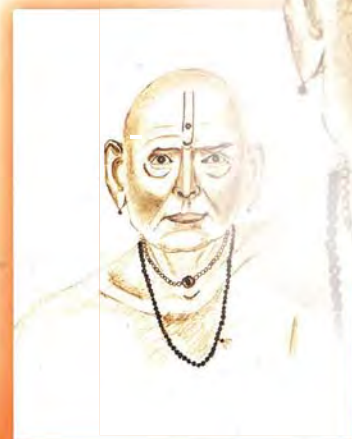
My Shiva,
Comrade in crisis,
Mother to a babe
Lost in dire wilderness.

My Shiva,
Who propels, impels me
Toward Thyself.

My Shiva,
Creator and Lord
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Shutterstock image of Sonamarg, Kashmir's Golden Valley

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The free app has four main areas: worship, introspection, affirmation and study. The Worship section includes mantras, chants and a Ganesha Puja (with audio files for learning). The Introspection section includes "Aum" chanting, a simple breathing exercise and a guided meditation. The Affirmation section presents several affirmations which can be repeated to positively reprogram one's subconscious mind, and the Study section makes available some of Himalayan Academy's important publications. The "10 Minute Sadhana" section organizes these four areas into a standard routine. There is also a timer for use in your own custom spiritual regimen.

The app was inspired by Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami's publisher's desk article which you can read here: bit.ly/PublishersDesk

Satguru's keynote for the Ten Minute Spiritual Workout is also on YouTube here: bit.ly/KeynoteVideo

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Spiritual screens: (clockwise from upper left) The Spiritual Workout app's home portal screen. Choose your area of focus in the four sadhana areas, click the top button for the 10-minute workout as described in the original publisher's desk article, or click the "Sadhana Timer" to time your own routine; the affirmation portion of the app helps to mold your subconscious positively; the Study section gives access to several Himalayan Academy's major publications; the chanting practice section for practicing the home ganesha puja

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