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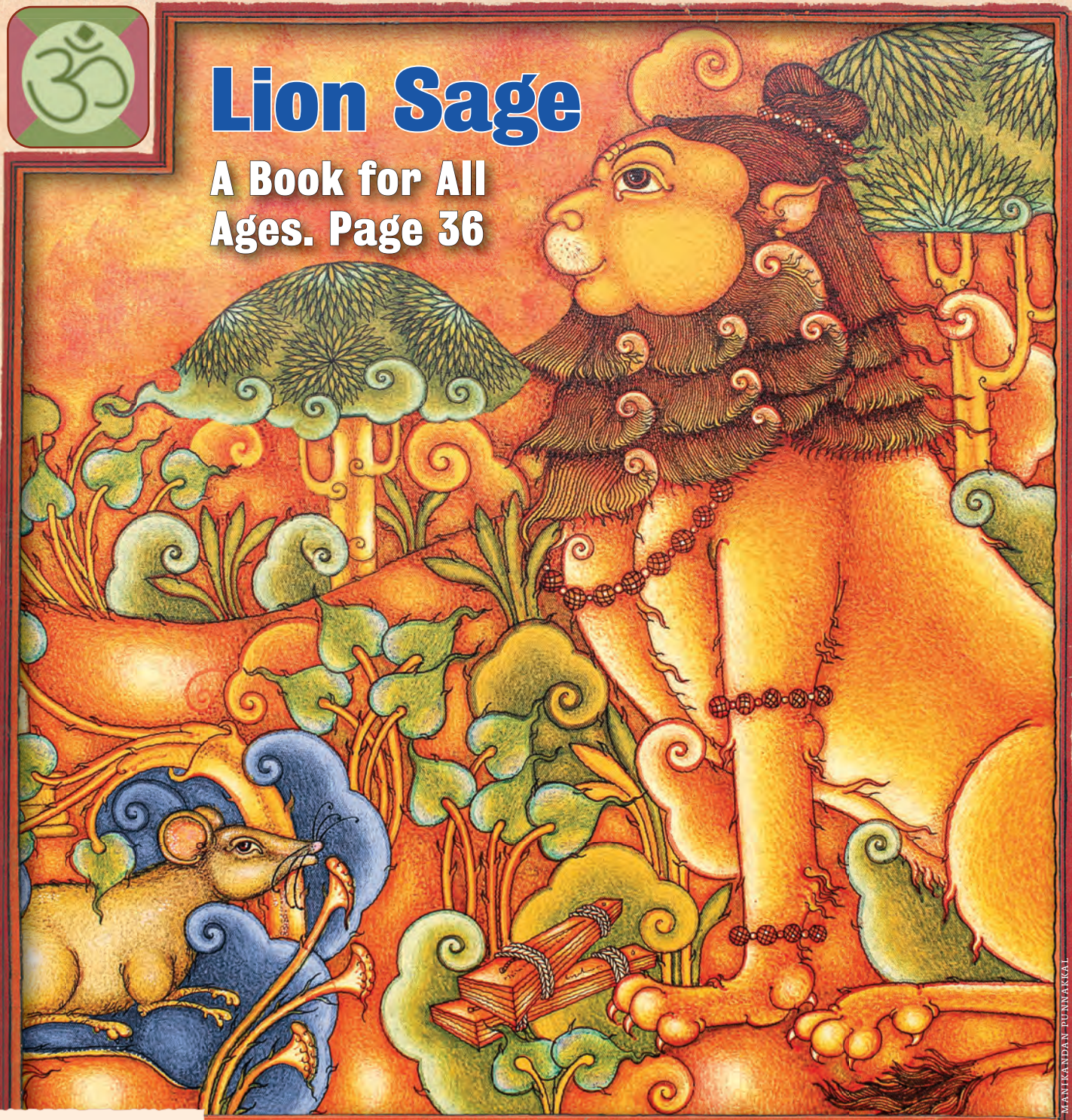
HINDUISM TODAY

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



Lion Sage

A Book for All
Ages. Page 36



(Cover) The cover painting for a new children's book about a sagely lion who imparts wisdom to a curious mouse, artwork by Kerala muralist Manikandan Punnakkal; (above) a group of friends cruise down the Ganga at Farrukhabad

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Maitili Folk Art Takes Center Stage In Janakpur

Meet the women who are transforming the Maitili wall painting tradition for modern times. Page 50...



Art, acting and action: Three Maitili artists perform a drama at their art center in Nepal, the Janakpur Women's Development Center, where they combine artistry and social messaging

GLOBAL DHARMA

THE ARTS

Celebrating the Seminal Scripture of Indian Dance

THE BHARATA MUNI TEMPLE IS located in Pattipulam village, just an hour's drive south of Chennai, India. The Casual Walker website (bit.ly/BharataMuni) has a marvelous slide show presentation of both the temple and the adjacent Bharata Museum dedicated to the author of *Natyasastra*. This ancient text, plausibly dated to before the 5th century bce, is a comprehensive treatise on music, dance and theater whose influence in India cannot be overstated.

The origin of Bharatanatyam dance in particular can be traced directly to the *Natyasastra*, and this is the context of the temple and museum created by Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam, 78, a classical Bharatanatyam dancer and recognized scholar of the

performing arts.

What is most remarkable at the museum is her interpretation of the famed 108 dance poses of Siva as Nataraja, Lord of Dance. She felt that the few existing sculptural depictions of these poses, which are described in detail in *Natyasastra*, do not capture the movement inherent in each. To attempt to convey this, she created 108 sculptures showing Siva and Parvati dancing together for each pose, which brings the intended movement to life.

Origins of Indian dance: (above) the shrine to Bharata Muni; (below) a bas-relief carving of Tandava dance pose 65, Vidyutbhrantam



SINGAPORE

The Strange Case of a Temple's Purloined Jewelry

THE SRI MARIAMMAN TEMPLE in Singapore's Chinatown district placed implicit trust in its priest to protect the temple's substantial inventory of jewelry, valued at over US\$15 million. But in February 2021, as reported in www.todayonline.com, Kandasamy Senapathi, the priest of the 149-year-old temple, was arrested for misappropriating and pawning gold jewelry. As a result, Singapore's Hindu Endowments Board is taking steps to more closely track all the valuables in the four temples it manages.

Between 2016 and 2020, Senapathi allegedly took 174 pieces of jewelry from the temple and pawned them, then eventually retrieved them from the

pawnshop in time to have them appear at the next temple festival where they would be expected to be on display.

But during one festival,

someone in temple management noticed gold ornaments were missing. When questioned, the chief priest returned all of pieces and was fired. Ultimately, the temple did not suffer any loss.

The news reports do not explain how Senapathi profited from this pawning and redemption scheme, but do say he wired

\$105,000 back to India during this time. Apparently, he used the funds for some sort of business venture, but because of the Covid-19 impact on business, could not make the last redemption in time, and so they were found missing.

Senapathi, 37, faces multiple charges under Singapore law. He could be sentenced to many years in jail and fines up to \$375,000. He remains in custody, unable to post bail of \$75,000.

This incident is an object lesson for other temples to maintain multiple checks and balances on their valuables.

Sri Mariamman Temple: Singapore's oldest Hindu temple founded in 1827 by businessman Narayana Pillai, the city's first building contractor



Nature's blessing: A pony—apparently a stand-in for a young heifer—gets an offering as part of the reconsecration ceremonies

AUSTRALIA

Two Melbourne Temples Get A Boost During the Pandemic

SHOWING THE RESILIENCE OF THE HINDU COMMUNITY IN AND around Melbourne, Australia, two temples made major strides in early 2021. The Sri Vakrathunda Vinayagar temple outside Melbourne officially reopened on January 25, 2021, after US\$3,000,000 in renovations under pandemic conditions. The work included spectacular ornate granite stones carved in India and assembled to create new sanctums and a six-ton dome over the main Deity. Some 2,000 devotees attended, staggered throughout the day, with temperature checks

and social distancing.

Then in April, 2021, the Victoria state government gave US\$388,000 to the Shri Shiva Vishnu Temple in Carrum Downs, as part of a \$16 million infrastructure improvement project intended for multicultural community facilities suffering from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Founded in 1982, this is the largest Hindu temple in the southern hemisphere. Its land was acquired in 1984, and the temple opened ten years later. In a normal year, 200,000 devotees visit.

The 2021 grant brings to US\$620,000 the total government grants to this temple in the last seven years. It will go toward the construction of a new multi-purpose hall.

The 2016 census showed 135,000 Hindus in Victoria state and 440,000 in the country—1.9% of Australia's total population.



Helpful grants: government officials, staff and devotees gather in front of the grand Shri Shiva Vishnu temple outside Melbourne; (inset) horse and buggy form part of a temple festival parade

ENVIRONMENT

Kerala Fishermen Cash In On Ocean Plastic Trash

UNTIL RECENTLY, THE PLASTIC fishermen found in their nets every time they drew them in was just a nuisance, something to be picked out and tossed back in the ocean. But now that plastic is being collected, brought to shore and recycled.

A prime use is for road building. A number of Indian cities and villages have started adding 8 percent recycled plastic to their asphalt for roads, following some demonstration projects around Chennai.

The program started in 2017 as the Suchitwa Sagaram or Clean Seas initiative of the Kerala state government. According to a report in *The Hindu*, there are 55,000 people working on 3,600

boats. Under the program, harbor authorities distribute bags to each boat with instructions to collect all the plastic caught in their nets.

As of April, 2021, the program has collected 176,000 pounds of plastic, more than half of which has gone into 84 miles of road.

The program has detractors, including environmentalists themselves. A 2019 article on the environmentalist website chinadialogueocean.net carries the subhead "Using salvaged plastic waste in roads may be doing more harm than good."

There are two environmental concerns. Toxins are released when the plastic is heated with the bitumen. Furthermore, the

method just delays actually dealing with the plastic itself.

As one NGO representative put it, "You are hiding your plastic waste for some time and

converting all your roads into toxic land." They would prefer the focus to be on reducing plastic use altogether.



Less ocean junk: Fishermen unload salvaged plastic at Sakthikulangara harbor in Kollam, Kerala

Bill to End Alabama's Ban On Yoga Fails to Pass

IN MARCH 2021, THE ALABAMA STATE SENATE DEFEATED A bill that would have modified a 27-year-old law forbidding the teaching of yoga, hypnosis or meditation in public classrooms. The bill's sponsor, Democrat Rep. Jeremy Gray, told the *Associated Press*, "This whole notion that if you do yoga, you'll become Hindu—I've been doing yoga for ten years and I go to church and I'm very much a Christian."

The bill would have allowed public schools to teach poses and stretches if they so choose, while expressly forbidding the use of chanting, mantras, mandalas and the greeting "namaste." The director of the conservative organizations opposing the bill said, "If this bill passes, then instructors will be able to come into classrooms as young as kindergarten and bring these children through guided imagery, which is a spiritual exercise, and it's outside their parents' view. And we just believe that this is not appropriate."



"Dangers" of yoga: (above) Children in a yoga class practice the "namaste" gesture. Practice such as this would have been banned even under the recently defeated Alabama bill.

BRIEFLY...

THE TELANGANA STATE ENDOWMENTS Department reports that the Sitaramaswamy Temple at Sitarampur has received little income from its 1,148 acres of land for decades. It is unknown how many temples are facing the same problem in the new state, which was split off from Andhra Pradesh in 2014 with Hyderabad as its capital. The land records of the temples are not in the public domain.

A RELATED CASE HAS COME UP IN Odisha. In March 2021, the government announced a plan to sell over 35,000 acres belonging to the famous Lord Jagannath Temple in Puri. According to *News Bharati*, "The decision of the Navin Patnaik government in Odisha to sell the land of the Lord Jagannath Temple has come under the sharp criticism from the devotees who feel that this is the betrayal of the trust of the millions of Hindu devotees."

LOOTED OBJECTS FROM AFGHANISTAN were handed to the Afghan ambassador, Roya Rahmani, by the Manhattan district attorney's office on April 19, 2021.

The 33 antiquities, both Hindu and Buddhist, were part of a hoard of 2,500 objects valued at US\$143 million seized from Subhash Kapoor, a Manhattan art dealer, between 2012 and 2014. Kapoor is currently in jail in India on smuggling and theft charges. Upon receiving the items, many of them delicate heads made from stucco, clay and a soft stone known as schist, a grateful Ms. Rahmani nonetheless warned that "the environment that allows for the plundering of Afghanistan's treasured antiquities is the same environment that allows for the perpetuation of conflict."

THE SREE SREE ANANDAMAYEE Kali Mandir in Brahmanbaria, 30 miles east of Dhaka, Bangladesh, was ransacked in late March by a group called Hefajat-e-Islam. In Magura district, an equal distance west of Dhaka, attackers destroyed buildings including an adjacent temple at a cremation ground. A month earlier, several thousand members of Hefajat-e-Islam looted Hindu homes in the Sunamganj district.

IN FEBRUARY, 2021, THE INDIAN medical association criticized Dr. Harsh Vardhan, the Union Minister of Health, for appearing to endorse the Coronil treatment for Covid-19 developed by Pantanjali Ayurved Company. Economist Saket Hishikar, in an article in *Moneylife*, objected to this criticism, saying he was baffled by the attack on ayurveda, which he called "an important part of India's soft power projection" and of recognized value. He concludes: "The idea of making profit from human suffering that the British implanted has today made the dominant system unethical and way beyond the means of common man. Thus, it is imperative that the government create a level playing field, as ayurveda can offer treatment of many common ailments at one fiftieth the price of allopathic medicine."

MALAYSIA'S GOVERNMENT HAS allocated one million dollars to help 1,934 Hindu temples in the country that have seen a sharp drop in income during the Covid-19 pandemic. According to Malaysia Hindu Sangam president, Datuk R. S. Mohan Shan, who pleaded with the government for help, the funds will allow temples to pay at least part of their basic expenses. The limit

on weddings in particular has impacted the temples' earnings.

THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS officially endorsed the concept of reincarnation in a bill passed at the end of 2020. Though probably not their intent to make a religious statement, the Tibetan Policy and Support Act, according to Religion News Service, "has drawn attention for weighing in on the current Dalai Lama's reincarnation, one of the few instances the Buddhist concept has been mentioned in US law." The actual intent was, as expected, political, with the goal of preventing or at least weakening the Chinese government's claim to name (and therefore control) its own Dalai Lama. Traditionally, the reborn successor is found and verified by a group of disciples close to the previous Dalai Lama.

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IN MY OPINION

A Step Beyond SBNR

A "Spiritual But Not Religious" life is not the final remedy for our inner aspirations

BY REILEY WILSON

I had always thought of myself as spiritual but not religious (SBNR). Growing up, I attended a Lutheran church and was taught gnostic teachings at home by my mother. I did not believe in what the church was preaching, yet I continued to attend with my parents as I was merely a child.

I first heard the term *Hindu* at age 16. In my light, preliminary research, I found and absorbed many of the aesthetic aspects. For example, seeing Ganesha's image made me feel good, so I kept photos of Him in my school locker and on the home screen of my cell phone.

At the time, I did not know any Hindus personally, though I had interacted with a Hindu woman online. Her answers to my questions were short and somewhat vague, and she said she did not think conversion was possible. So I stayed away from the term *Hindu*, but continued to practice meditation, chant mantras, and sing and dance to bhajans. I didn't know what the words meant, but they sounded beautiful. I had no idea I was engaging in anything considered to be a religious practice.

In March of 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, I stumbled across the word *advaita* online. From there I quickly deepened my research. After only a few hours, I knew I was a Hindu and adopted that title. It seemed as though all of my core beliefs and practices—that I had already been doing for several years—were right in front of me!

When I considered myself SBNR, I felt I was free from what I considered the constraints of religion. But I have learned that Hinduism has none of those limits. I am convinced that today's push towards spirituality without religion, and even towards atheism, comes from a rejection of Abrahamic faiths, since those do not offer the countless options of worship and introspection as found in Hinduism. This authoritative and oft



unyielding approach to worship and belief causes many youth to foster a blanket rejection of all religions, and to enter the realm of SBNR. I feel it is important to teach Americans about Hinduism so they can realize that not all systems of belief are as limiting as what they may have grown up with.

I've watched talks by Dr. Rajiv Malhotra on his U-Turn theory. He points out that many Westerners

have gone to India, obtained spiritual knowledge and returned with the notion that this knowledge can be applied to any lifestyle—that it does not solely belong to Hinduism. This is precisely what I experienced as an SBNR person. I was being fed Hindu knowledge but was not shown its roots. Now that I know the source, I have an immense body of information at my disposal.

When I was SBNR, I had no concrete direction, understanding or way of worship. Hinduism provides all of these in a logical and clear manner. I love being a Hindu, because every practice has meaning. SBNR focuses very much on manifesting material and social wealth for this one lifetime. It has no end goal, such as moksha. Hinduism explains that samsara lays out the foundation for the four goals of life. It includes a multitude of paths and lineages, of yogas and sampradayas.

My SBNR mindset had kept me stuck with a limited understanding, even though it had claimed that religion was what was limiting! It is in Hinduism that I have found my foundation and my path.

REILEY WILSON, 21, is pursuing a master's degree in Leadership and Policy Studies. She is active in the online Hindu community and wishes to spread awareness of Hindu philosophy. Email: ryewomanroxx@gmail.com.

Now Is a Good Time to Update Your Plans

The restrictions imposed by the pandemic can give us time to plan and manifest a positive future for ourselves and our family

BY SATGURU BODHINATHA VEYLANSWAMI

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IS PROVING ITSELF a time when the daily difficulties faced by individuals and families are far greater than usual. Under the stresses of lockdown, masks and social distancing, life may be overly focused on the current moment's challenges without giving adequate thought to the future. Seeing these dynamics inspires me to suggest we set aside time to establish goals for what we want to be doing when the pandemic is over. That done, we can put in motion supporting plans that will make those goals achievable. The need for goals and plans applies to you personally, all your family members, your workplace and any nonprofit you are involved in. One reason this is particularly important is that post-pandemic life is not going to be identical to pre-pandemic life. Important changes will have taken place, and goals and plans must take that into account. What kinds of changes? Remote working will be more common, and children's education may need extra attention to compensate for the limitations of months of online study. Temples may face restrictions on large gatherings for some time to come, which brings a need to develop alternative spiritual activities.

My guru divided the planning process into four steps. He wrote a sutra which states: "Siva's devotees approach each enterprise with deliberate thoughtfulness and act only after careful consideration. They succeed in every undertaking by having a clear purpose, a wise plan, persistence and push."

Purpose

Let's look first at the idea of "clear purpose." Another term for purpose is goal. Economic goals, of course, are the ones that are usually in the forefront of everyone's mind—meeting monthly needs, saving for retirement and for the children's education. Educational goals generally are a secondary priority—and that goes for the children's secular and religious education as well as adults' acquiring new skills. Ideally goals encompass the spiritual, social, cultural and physiological aspects of life. Examples in each area might be:

- ✳ **spiritual:** yearly pilgrimage to distant temples, learning more hatha yoga
- ✳ **social:** special family outings, participating in service or education programs
- ✳ **cultural:** attending performances of music, art, drama and dance; learning a craft, an instrument or new songs
- ✳ **physiological:** regular exercise, improvements to diet, home, habits and clothing; caring for the environment



Plan

Moving on from clear purpose to a "wise plan"—I have had opportunities over the years to talk to many people about achieving their goals and later ask if they were successful. There are many reasons for lack of success. But, when it comes to a goal that is complicated, the reason for being unsuccessful is usually the lack of a wise plan. The plan was not carefully thought through. It wasn't detailed enough. It was an impulse list more than a practical plan. When it comes to planning any complex task, it is best to consult with others. On your own,

you won't necessarily be able to figure everything out. You need to talk to someone who is experienced in that field. For example, Hawaii real estate has its unique ups and downs. If you are thinking of buying a home in Hawaii, you should talk to people who know about Hawaii real estate. Otherwise, you can purchase at just the wrong time and suffer the consequences. In any major business venture where you're putting your life savings on the line, it is prudent to hire a consultant to make sure you get the best advice available.

Persistence

The third part of the sutra is "persistence." Let's start with an example of non-persistence. You know someone with chronic back pain. They have a clear purpose: they are desperate to eliminate, or at least significantly reduce, the suffering. Their plan includes engaging a physical therapist who gives them exercises to do. The person does the exercises for a month and stops. Then he goes to an ayurvedic doctor. The doctor suggests a regimen of herbs. That's easier than exercise, and he manages to take the herbs for two months and then slowly abandons the program. Six months later, as the pain persists, he goes to another doctor for yet another remedy. That's human nature. We tend to have a solution in front of us but we don't stick to it; we don't fully implement it. We lose patience and want to try another approach. Not surprisingly, we don't achieve our clear purpose; we don't eliminate back pain, if we jump from one solution to another.

Of course, sometimes it's necessary to change a plan when it is clearly not working. On this Gurudeva wrote: "Changeableness means indecision, not being decisive. How can we discriminate between this and the strength of a person who changes his or her mind in wisdom because of changes of circumstance? A person who is changeable is fickle and unsure of himself, changing without purpose or reason. Persistence describes the mind that is willing to change for mature reasons based on new information but holds steady to its determinations through thick and thin in the absence of such good reasons. The decision is based on wise discrimination. Having made



a solid decision in the first place, only reconsider it in light of new information."

Persistence or perseverance is important in overcoming obstacles. We have a great plan, clear purpose, we're moving forward and we hit some major obstacles. In the Hindu world it is sometimes thought, "Oh, Lord Ganesha is blocking the plan; I'm not supposed to do this," and we stop. Encountering an obstacle doesn't necessarily mean that you should abandon the plan. Some obstacles are best broken through, and some need more careful analysis, guided by Ganesha. Intuition will guide which is which. Sometimes the problem is simply that we are being unrealistic. One of the points I often make is that the larger a project is, the more obstacles you should expect. How many obstacles has our monastery encountered in the project of building a hand-carved granite temple in Hawaii? Lots! By persisting, each barrier was overcome. Therefore, once you create a clear purpose and a wise plan, make sure you are being realistic in terms of the number of obstacles you anticipate before you start the project. Then, when obstacles come up, you can smile instead of getting discouraged. You say, "Oh, obstacle number one, here you are. Welcome. It's been about three or four months since we started; that's about right." You're not surprised or disheartened.

Push

The last concept in Gurudeva's sutra is "push." Push, in this context, means willpower—the ability to power something through, to accomplish it. An example of lack of push is the student who wants to do well in school, who plans to get up early in the morning and study hard but sleeps in regularly. The result? He does not excel. The plan is there, but the willpower to fulfill it is not. Willpower can be compared to a muscle. Muscles are so interesting. The more you use a

Upward trajectory: A young man is conceptualizing the steps to his ideal future, mapping out the interrelated aspects, solidifying his plan forward

muscle, the stronger it gets. Most things go away when you use them. Take a jar of rice. You use it; you end up with an empty jar. Money: you have money in a bank account, you use it, the bank account ends up empty. But willpower is the opposite. The more you use it, the more you have. Similarly, the more you exercise a muscle, the stronger it becomes, the more it can do. Therefore, you need to make sure you are adequately exercising your willpower. Fortunately, there are many opportunities throughout the day. Gurudeva gives a clear guideline. He says to strengthen willpower, you need to do two things: finish every job you start, and do it to the best of your ability—and even a little better. That strengthens your willpower.

Prayer

There's another "p" which Gurudeva added in some of his writings, and that's "prayer." He wrote, "Be sure to initiate your wise plan with prayer." In other words, go to the temple and have an archana done, for example, to Lord Ganesha, and start the activity out with religious blessings. It is also helpful, particularly for major activities, to begin on an auspicious day. Hindu astrology can provide information as to which days are auspicious and which days are inauspicious for starting new endeavors.

A clear purpose, wise plan, persistence and push, initiated with a prayer, is definitely a powerful combination for successfully achieving your major life goals. The current pandemic gives abundant time to reflect on the future positively.



LETTERS

Gratitude

Greetings of the day! I hope you are doing well. I was so excited when I saw our school news in the Jan/Feb/Mar 2021 edition of HINDUISM TODAY—Global Dharma: “School’s Tree Project Honored.” I am short of words to express my gratitude. On behalf of the Ooty Gurukulam family, I convey my hearty thanks for this recognition. And I am glad to inform you that the gurukulam has got another feather on its crown. The Green Earth Appeal Organization has conferred our school and our School Correspondent with the CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) Excellence Award 2020. It is a proud movement for all of us. The District Collector of the Nilgiris attended and presented the certificate to us.

BALRAM SURIYA
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A Debate on Faith and Reason

I was disappointed to learn that my letter on “Spirituality’s Wise Faith,” published in HINDUISM TODAY, Oct/Nov/Dec 2020, was so grossly misunderstood by Mr. W. Kennedy (“Faith and Reason,” HT, April/May/June, 2021). How can he argue with “intuition and direct experience” in the context of belief in God as emphasized in Hinduism? There is an old axiom, “The proof of the pudding is in the eating.” If we cannot even find out how a pudding tastes without eating it, how can we expect that mere “reason and science” can provide “proofs for God’s existence and goodness,” as claimed by Mr. Kennedy? Laws of science, reason and logic rely only on mind and senses, which are finite, limited and, therefore, incapable of proving the existence of God, who transcends mind and senses. According to *Katha Upanishad*, “Spiritual understanding cannot be attained by *tarka* (logic).” Swami Vivekananda, while commenting on this verse, states, “Logical reason has been judged to be inconclusive by every religious system; but what these systems offer as a substitute is revelation as contained in their respective scriptures. Other philosophical thinkers offer intuition as such a substitute. Vedanta, including Buddha, accepts the position that the highest spiritual experience is beyond the reach of logical reason; but it adds the proviso that neither revelation nor intuition should contradict logical reason.” Mr. Kennedy has a faulty understanding of our *Upanishads*.

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Skanda Shashti

Suran Poor (Conquest of Demons) aka Skanda Shashthi is a six-day religious festival for Lord Murugan, second son of God Siva. Many devotees of Lord Murugan fast for six days, depending on their physical health. On the sixth day there is great excitement as the war between Lord Murugan and the demons is enacted. Before going to battle, Lord Murugan receives the Vel (a lance) from his mother, empowering him with strength and courage. The demon appears with different faces and disguises to challenge Murugan: first in his natural demonic form, then hidden within clouds, within fire and in a mango tree. Lord Murugan’s powers enable him to see through the demon’s disguises. Eventually, the foe is defeated and transformed into a peacock and a cockerel by Lord Murugan. After the defeat there is great rejoicing.

While living in Amsterdam, I witnessed this drama many times at our small Ganesha temple. Now, visiting from our UK home, I am seeing it from a different angle. These demons abide within us if we give them a safe space to occupy. I say occupy, because they infiltrate and occupy this space by using their power and strength. When this happens, the faces of anger, resentment, jealousy, selfishness, greed, desire and pride manifest and cause disturbance.

Dramas, shlokas and poetic verses are metaphorically used to help explain the complexity of the human mind, intellect and consciousness. These plays and stories offer simple ways to live our daily lives away from the fearful, painful dreams of the mind. They illustrate an enlightened, conscious method of freeing oneself from the grip of torment and merging into the greatness that surrounds us, to accept joyfully what is in the moment.

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Two Clarifications on Yoga

I enjoyed the article “Today’s Yoga Evolves Beyond the Body” (January/February/March 2021), especially the discussion on the inner (antara) limbs of yoga. Unfortunately, the author states that the word *yoga* means “to join.” The author also references the *Patanjali Sutras* in the article. I need to make it clear that the meaning of *yoga* in Patanjali’s work has nothing to do with joining.

There are 32 definitions for the word *yoga* in Apte’s unabridged *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, one of which is “joining.” Another is “application or concentration of the thoughts, abstract contemplation, meditation, (esp.) self-concentration, abstract meditation and mental abstraction practiced as a system (as taught by Patanjali and called

the Yoga Philosophy).” The second meaning is correct here.

In sutra 1.2, Patanjali says, “*yogash chitta vritti nirodha*,” which means “yoga is the stilling of the fluctuations of the chitta (mind-stuff).” This is the state of yoga. When your mind is stilled, you are meditating; you aren’t joining anything. This is also emphasized by Vyasa’s commentary on this sutra in which he states that “yoga is samadhi.” This is unequivocal.

The article also says that “yoga enables a process of self-discovery, of joining with one’s true self.” While this sounds nice, how can you ever not be joined with your true self? You are yourself and always will be. I would prefer to say that yoga allows you to understand that your true self is different from the body, mind and all matter. It is simply pure consciousness.

I maintain that the goal of yoga, according to Patanjali, is moksha, or complete separation of purusha from prakriti. It should be noted that Patanjali never uses the word *moksha*. Instead, he uses the word *kaivalya*, “absolute aloneness, absolute independence, liberation.” However, Vyasa uses both *kaivalya* and *moksha* in his commentary, indicating that the terms are synonymous. In sutra 1.3, Patanjali states the goal of yoga: “*tada drashthuh svarupe vasthanam*,” or “Then the seer abides in its own form forever.” He talks about this in several sutras (e.g., 1.51, and 2.26), and Vyasa’s commentary supports this idea. This means that moksha is when the purusha disconnects completely from prakriti and is in a state of kaivalya, or absolute aloneness, forever.

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The Sacredness of Kashi

Editors’ Note: In our April/May/June issue we featured the remarkable spiritual publications giant, Gita Press. Here are excerpts from an interview with Radhey Shyam Khemka (1933–2021), who served as a trustee and editor of the Gita press journal Kalyan. Rajiv Malik conducted the interview for HINDUISM TODAY in 2015.

Gita Press has over two thousand publications. Our aim is to spread and propagate the traditions of Sanatana Dharma, Hinduism, through our work. According to Sanatana Dharma, the ultimate aim of the soul is to seek liberation from the cycle of life and death. When a soul is born as a human being, God bestows the intellect and the capacity to think. The aim of Gita Press is to help human beings on the path of liberation.

Kashi (or Varanasi) is known for its *masti* (spirit of fun, blissfulness). In fact, a popular saying here is that the joy of Kashi is available

On the Ganga: A view of Kashi (Varanasi), the world’s oldest and holiest city

at a very low price. The city is said to be more fascinating than all the three lokas (worlds). It is said this most ancient place has existed since creation came into being. Due to its special location and geography, it rarely faces natural calamities, such as earthquake tremors. Everything here is so sacred that, as per tradition, even particles of earth are not taken outside, lest any small beings or insects that go with the soil would be denied the liberation to which they would be otherwise entitled just by passing away in Kashi. Holy water from the Ganga is also not taken outside.

When I was a student, I observed that even the not-so-well-off people of Kashi used to work just a few hours each day and spend the rest of their time enjoying life with their friends. After working half the day, a barber or a rickshaw puller would take a boat across river Ganga for a bath and then have some bhang with friends. During this trip they wore just their undergarments and a simple wrap-around cotton cloth known as safa,



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which they also used as a towel for bathing. This custom was followed even by the rich. Meanwhile, they would do their chanting and worship of God. This joyful routine is known as safi pani. After that, they might play cards for entertainment and then take a boat back to their homes. People performed safi pani either in the morning or in the evening, depending on their work schedule.

Making Mandirs Cool for Kids

In the article on raising Hindu youth (“Raising Children as Good Hindus,” April/May/June, 2021), Swamiji comments that Hindu mandirs aren’t cool anymore, given the amount of substitutes for people’s attention

today. Instead of adjusting to this reality, why not try to find a way to make the mandirs cool again? Some of my best memories when I was younger, for example, included running through the mandir halls playing tag. As we ran through the various rooms, sometimes we caught a glimpse of a play or utsav that piqued our curiosity. If it was really interesting, many times we would join in, and perhaps ask the pujaris for more information. In this way I learned about many aspects of Hindu history, such as the stories of Prahlad, and Durga and Mahishasura. If we could look for similar (perhaps more digital for this generation) activities to promote in mandirs, we may encourage more youth to come to the mandir, where they could get indirectly exposed to our activities, and slowly learn more about Hinduism in the process.

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

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

Finding and Bringing Out the Poet Within

How a Malaysian supports our magazine in the way that means most to him

DR. ARJUNAN SUBRAMANIAM IS REPUTED as Malaysia’s top revenue lawyer. At age 80, he is still the star advocate sought out by countless eminent personalities. “But that is not who I am!” he protests. “What matters to me, what I live for, is God—God and poetry.”

Only those HINDUISM TODAY readers who live in Malaysia know the barrister, but all will recognize the poet whom they meet in every issue, on the inside back cover (including this one).

“Since I was a child, I’ve always enjoyed silence, solitude, reflection. I see poetry as that which allows us to live. I believe there is a poet living in everyone. He may be deep or well hidden, but he’s there. Poetry is the soul’s expression, the soul’s longing to know God. I write poems whenever I feel the need, whenever, for a moment, I cannot contain my feelings, my appreciation. It’s a work that never ends. When I’ve written my last poem, I think I’ll just fade off and wake up in the inner worlds.

“I discovered HINDUISM TODAY in the mid 90s, just in time to help me navigate a turning point in my life. I wanted to help the maga-



Dr. Arjunan Subramaniam:

“Hinduism Today is a moving temple, our point of contact with all things higher.”

soul’s best expression. I trust that once in a while a poem may grab the attention of an inner poet somewhere out there, but it is not my main purpose. I am graced to participate thus in this divine journal, which is itself a poem, and find it fitting that the poems come on its last page, as a goodbye affirmation: “Yes, when all is said and done, we put God first. All else is second.”

Dr. Arjunan has submitted perhaps 100 poems to HINDUISM TODAY advertising over nearly 30 years. Further, he has booked all the inside covers through the year 2030, paid for it all in advance, and refused the customary repeat-ad discount. “It is up to each soul to support the magazine in his own way,” he urges readers, “in the way he or she loves most.” Yes, generosity in any form is always an expression of the inner poet. Help HINDUISM TODAY continue to be Hindu dharma’s eloquent voice at: bit.ly/help-HT Contact us:

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QUOTES & QUIPS

“Put your heart, mind, intellect, and soul even to your smallest acts. This is the secret of success.”

Swami Sivananda (1887–1963)

Happiness is your nature. It is not wrong to desire it. What is wrong is seeking it outside when it is inside. **Sri Ramana Maharshi** (1879–1950)

Success or achievement is not the final goal. It is the spirit in which you act that puts the seal of beauty upon your life. **Swami Chinamayananda** (1916–1992), founder of the Chinmaya Mission

Everything is determined, the beginning as well as the end, by forces over which we have no control. It is determined for the insect, as well as for the star. Human beings, vegetables or cosmic dust, we all dance to a mysterious tune, intoned in the distance by an invisible piper. **Albert Einstein** (1879–1955)

A tree is known by its fruit. *Zulu Proverb*

Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes. Don't resist them; that only creates sorrow. Let reality be reality. Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like. **Lao Tzu** (4th or 6th century bce), author of the Tao Te Ching

We could never learn to be brave and patient if there were only joy in the world. **Helen Keller** (1880–1968), American author

The devout seeker is he who mingles in his heart the double currents of love and detachment, like the mingling of the streams of Ganges and Yamuna. **Saint Kabir** (1440–1518)

Know the world in yourself. Never

look for yourself in the world, for this would be to project your illusion. *An inscription on the wall of an ancient Egyptian temple in Luxor (Thebes)*

You live on Earth only for a few short years which you call an incarnation, and then you leave your body as an outworn dress and go for refreshment to your true home in the spirit. **Chief White Eagle** (1825–1914), Indigenous leader of the Ponca tribe

When the whole world is silent, even one voice becomes powerful. **Malala Yousafzai** Pakistani activist and Nobel Prize laureate

Listen while I tell you the path to liberation: truth, patience, calmness and discipline of self; discrimination between the

eternal and the passing; devotion to the humble servants of the Lord; rising in the early morning and bathing before daybreak; repeating in the way prescribed the flawless Letters Five; worshipping the guru's feet; applying holy ash; eating but when hungry; with the whole heart giving praise; studying the shastras; seeing others as oneself; severing attachment to all property and wealth; speaking with fit courtesy; avoiding argument; driving from the mind all thought of family and caste; being ever free of the smallest like or dislike; living and abiding beneath the Lord's eternal feet. **Siva Yogaswami** (1872–1964), renowned Sri Lankan mystic

Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding. **Khalil Gibran** (1883–1931), Lebanese-American writer, poet and artist

Everything in the future will improve if you are making a spiritual effort now. **Sri Yukteshwar Giri** (1855–1936)



Truth, like gold, is to be obtained not by its growth, but by washing away from it all that is not gold. **Leo Tolstoy** (1828–1910), Russian author

I became a vegetarian after realizing that animals feel afraid, cold, hungry and unhappy like we do. **Cesar Chavez** (1927–1993), American civil rights activist

Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it. **Rumi** (1207 1273), Sufi mystic and poet

Our meditative practice has to be important. It doesn't work for it to be the sixth out of seven priorities in our life. It needs to be a top priority in order to make progress. **Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami**, publisher of HINDUISM TODAY

The Hindu religion brings to us the gift of tolerance that allows for different stages of worship, different and personal expressions of devotion and even different Gods to guide our life on this Earth. **Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami** (1927–2001), founder of HINDUISM TODAY

DID YOU KNOW?

Awesome Aums

The all-pervading sound: A collection of 32 Aum symbols from around the world, displaying diverse depictions of this cosmic chord



BASICS

Why Do Hindus Wear a Dot?

THE DOT WORN ON THE FOREHEAD IS A religious symbol. It represents divine sight and shows that one is a Hindu. It is called the *bindi* in the Hindi language, *bindu* in Sanskrit and *pottu* in Tamil. In olden days, all Hindu men and women wore these marks, and they both also wore earrings. Today it is the women who are most faithful in wearing the bindi.

The dot has a mystical meaning. It represents the third eye of spiritual sight, which sees things the physical eyes cannot see. Hindus seek to awaken their inner sight through yoga. The forehead dot is a reminder to use and cultivate this spiritual vision to perceive and better understand life's inner workings—to see things not just physically, but with the “mind's eye” as well. The bindi is made of red powder (called *sindur*, traditionally made from powdered turmeric and fresh lime juice), sandalpaste or cosmetics.

In addition to the simple dot, there are many types of forehead marks, known as *tilaka* in Sanskrit. Each mark represents a particular sect or denomination of our vast

religion. We have four major sects: Saivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktism and Smartism. Vaishnava Hindus, for example, wear a v-shaped tilaka made of white clay. Elaborate tilakas are worn by Hindus mainly at religious events, though many wear the simple bindi, indicating they are Hindu, even in the general public. By these marks we know what a person believes, and therefore know how to begin conversations.

Men and women of a particular religion wishing to identify themselves to one another often do so by wearing distinctive religious symbols. Often these are blessed in their temples, churches or synagogues. Christians wear a cross on a necklace. Jewish boys wear small leather cases that hold scriptural passages, and the round cap called *yarmulka*. Sikh men wear their hair in a turban. In many countries, Muslim women cover their head with a scarf, called *hajib*.

Do not be ashamed to wear the bindi on your forehead in the United States, Canada, Europe or any country of the world. Wear



it proudly. The forehead dot will distinguish you from all other people as a very special person, a Hindu, a knower of eternal truths. You will never be mistaken as belonging to another religion. Don't be intimidated when people ask you what the dot means. Now you have lots of information to give a good answer, which will probably lead to more questions about your venerable religion.

Drawn from the teachings of Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami

GUEST EDITORIAL

A Family's Quest For Spirituality

Who knew our weekly Zoom discussions on *Bhagavad Gita* would be so much fun?

BY RAM S. GUPTA

OURS IS A CLOSE-KNIT FAMILY OF THREE GENERATIONS. First are the grandparents, then our son and his wife, and our two daughters with their husbands, each of whom have two children—our grandchildren.

Many of us have been religious for decades, participating in and leading monthly puja groups, as well as going on religious pilgrimages, performing daily prayers, observing Hindu customs and rituals. More recently we've been involved in the opening of the first Hindu temple in our area. However, exposure to the spiritual aspects of Hinduism has been limited. Lately this is changing, through study of Vedanta books and lectures, meditation and increased self-awareness—and conversations within the family.

Recently, while discussing health issues, we all thought that studying the *Bhagavad Gita* together over Zoom would be a good way to tap into the power of spirituality, to aid healing and to support each other morally. We embarked upon a weekly Family Gita Study Group four months ago. The participants: we grandparents in Rhode Island; our son and his wife in Rhode Island; one of our daughters in Virginia; our other daughter's husband (our son-in-law) in Delhi; and our daughter-in-law's mother in Delhi.

We start each session with Sanskrit recitation of Chapter 12, on bhakti yoga, which has long been the family's tradition. Then we study a couple of shlokas with translation and commentaries, followed by discussion and sharing of personal experience.

Because of our trust in each other, and in the absence of a *Gita* authority among us, we were able to explore mutual challenges without a sense of judgment or vulnerability. Family support served as a bridge to the faith to embark and progress on the spiritual journey. Each has served as a model for others, to help each other and give assurance that spiritual progress is possible, real and meaningful, although at varied levels.

With no specific goal, our sessions are engaging and meaningful to each of us. There is no rush to get through a curriculum. We can spend an entire session discussing one shloka. There is no designated leader; everyone takes turns reading, interpreting, asking questions and providing perspectives.

Although we have not gotten the kids to participate fully, some do join the sessions from time to time. We also arrange small exposures for them—such as getting one to try meditation, and two others to join in pujas. This will instill samskaras in them. Hopefully, their participation will gradually increase.

The gatherings have been deeply beneficial to us all, inspiring greater reflection on oneself and others, less conflict and argument in households, appreciation for other points of view, openness to recommendations and suggestions; and a willingness to try spiritual



practices, such as meditation. Here is some feedback I gathered from the group.

Family member one recognized the need to calm the mind, the role of ego in creating sorrow, the value of meditation, and the role of effort and practice rather than awaiting God's grace.

Member two was impressed by the deeper understanding she is gaining of a text that she had read countless times before. The practical approach, with family participation, has given her assurance that change is possible and worth striving for. Participant three is thrilled by how much the sessions have improved relationships among family members. She has gained a deeper awareness of the connections between bhakti, jnana, karma and raja yogas.

Member four listed many benefits: "There is a greater awareness of who I am in relation to others. This has resulted in a willingness to reflect before reacting. Dinnertime conversations about our *Gita* discussions are uplifting for everyone, including those who don't attend the sessions. It has been incredible to have these deep conversations. Now I feel more connected to Mom and Dad, especially Dad. I was not very religious before and had a tough time spending time reading the *Gita*, because something else always took precedence. In this model, there is low-level accountability, which is really nice. I think it's amazing we haven't missed a weekend!"

Family member five shared, "I am slowly getting into it. I go back and re-read the shlokas, building confidence gradually. At a funeral recently, I was able to explain to others the connection between the soul and the body. I am getting softer in communicating with family members, not getting as angry, not contradicting everything, trying to become silent, trying to maintain peace at home. I know we don't have to be saints. There are lots of people who live simply and do only seva."

Family member six spoke of the spiritual impact: "The *Gita* sessions and ancillary discussions have deepened my search for answers to the eternal questions of existence. It is becoming clearer to me that the truth resides in self and that our attention and awareness are the creative source of our universe. My own mind is seeing this grand search becoming simpler and simpler over time. I am now able to grasp a bit of what our saints have always been saying—the search is all internal; the playful drama is an interaction, but to search the truth, the long journey can be done sitting within a room. At a mundane level, the sessions have helped me be more creative and spontaneous at work, trusting my instincts and the answers my mind brings up during my consulting sessions."

RAM GUPTA, (SEE ABOVE PHOTO, AT BOTTOM LEFT WITH HIS WIFE) after a long professional career, currently devotes his time to spiritual studies/discourses and devotional services at the temple, and teaching Hindi and culture at HARI Vidyabhavan.

FROM THE TIRUMANTIRAM

Divine Coalescence

A rishi's rhapsody on the yogic path of complete union in God

The following text is from Rishi Tirumular's *Tirumantiram* chapter 14, "The Wheel of Time," freely translated by Dr. S. P. Sabharathnam Sivacharyar, verses 755-758, 760-767 and 769, edited for clarity.

HAVING FOLLOWED THE DIRECTIONS REVEALED BY LORD Nataraja through their guru, yogis now blessed with the qualities of Siva may experience the blissful states described in scriptures. By remaining in concentrated contemplation, repeatedly experiencing the results of such experiences, they become one with Lord Siva, existing forever as incomparable yogis.

O, eternal sadhaka! Listen to my instruction on the levels of perfection found in this unique process of *prasada yoga* (the practice of raising the breath through the central energy current in the spine while reciting a specific mantra). Each day an average human goes along with their natural experiences of 30 common states of being (*avasthas*)—some experiences of a base nature, others more refined, and some occurring at the contemplative center between the two eyebrows. If you practice Sivayoga in such a way as to maintain only harmonious daily states of being—with ten at the center between the two eyebrows, ten at the center of the heart as well as the ten pure (*nirmala*) *avasthas*—you will attain oneness with the Lord of Dance, who is eternally present in the Golden Hall and who shines forth with the brilliance of pure gold.

Having realized the synchronized presence of Lord Nataraja in all souls, all worlds and all objects—from the minutest atom to the greatest mountain—the Sivayogis continually practice the yoga of *prasada pranava* in which they experience, within their own body, the entire range of worlds over all the eight directions. While seeing the entire universe within themselves and experiencing a multitude of blissful visions, if they can fix their mind on the form of Nataraja seated inside the lotus of their heart, they will be blessed a hundred-fold with such blissful experiences.

In this world, there are normal people who are exalted for leading a worldly life of material gains, while giving no effort to knowing the true nature of their soul, the world and God. Many people take actions that do not benefit themselves or others. Without perfecting their minds to experience the grace of the Lord, they fail to see how the grace-giving shakti of Siva—whose vision is in and through all things—is continuously working for the evolution of all souls.

Those who cannot realize the ephemeral nature of life and possessions will leave their body without having realized the true purpose of human birth. Feeling no regret over their deep involvement in worldly enjoyments and having no sense of shame for immoral actions, these people speak elaborately on the immense benefits of worldly living, neglecting the path of virtue. Ephemeral, worldly possessions are renounced by the saints, who see nothing but the presence of Siva everywhere; whereas worldly-minded people are unable to realize the true nature of these possessions and instead waste their precious human life without realizing its basic purpose!

Those who remain detached from worldly objects of short-lived, ephemeral pleasure will, in due course, find and be elevated by a guru who is in oneness with the Lord, having himself renounced



these delusions. If they endeavor to realize the presence of the Lord within their heart—from which all vices will disappear—they will soon see, face to face, the Perfect Being who has transcended the realm of *tattvas* (the evolutes of creation).

As the guiding Master of all souls, Lord Siva sees within and through them all. He is without beginning. He is present in each embodied soul, yet He is the one and only Lord. He remains in solitary oneness at the time of universal dissolution, but it is also He that pervades all eight directions. He is steadfast in His aim to free souls from their state of bondage. Thus, it is He Himself that becomes the eminent path leading to the highest state. He is the ultimate refuge for all who are willed to attain oneness with Him.

For those of such resolve, Yama, God of Death, does not approach; there is no destruction or obstruction to their blissful state. They then turn their attention toward the welfare of all humans, and may become their guiding and protecting masters. This is the final and eternal truth realized by all those who are capable of seeing the presence of Siva in each soul. Is it possible to convey this eternal Truth to those who are not inclined to attain such a state?

The essential truth that I instruct to you is that all of this is the eternal path, which begins with the utterance of "a," "u," and "m." The utterance of other sounds which follow "m" should be done while contemplating the various levels of *prasada yoga*. Through this mantra repetition, one may attain oneness with God.

Nobody truly knows the eternal and transcendental abode of the Absolute Lord. He enshrines Himself within the heart of all who are able to identify His supreme plane of existence. He is ever present there, without losing His all-pervasive nature. If the sadhaka is able to realize the Lord's vibrant presence in the minute space of his own heart, He can become Siva Himself at once.

Very rare are those who have realized the state of absolute oneness with Siva. Here, listen to the process of attaining such state of absolute oneness: practice the incantation of *prasada mantra* in which you observe the unified existence of Siva and the soul in the inaudible sound and realizable light associated with that mantra. In that state, Lord Siva lends Himself to be visible through the contemplation of the sadhaka.

If you practice in this way, you can realize the presence of Brahma and Vishnu within your self; realize the presence of Rudra and Maheshvara in your own frame; see the presence of Shakti and Sadasiva. Even more, you can realize the inseparable merging of Siva and your soul—for such a merged state has already been established for you.

DR. S. P. SABHARATHNAM SIVACHARYAR, of the Adisaiva priest lineage, is an expert in ancient Tamil and Sanskrit, specializing in the *Vedas*, *Agamas* and *Silpa Shastras*. This excerpt is from his translation of Rishi Tirumular's *Tirumantiram*.



In the Pehran ceremony at Farrukhabad, an offering of sewn-together saris is draped from bank to bank of Goddess Ganga in a ceremony involving a priest, the sponsors, several boats and boatmen, a band, and numerous celebrating family members—several precariously perched in the small crafts

SPECIAL FEATURE

Along the Lesser-Known Ganga Below Haridwar

Join photographer and writer Dev Raj Agarwal on assignment as he travels down the Ganga River from Haridwar to Varanasi, along the way documenting the temples, river ghats, religious fairs and local histories. Be part of the bank-side daily worship of ordinary Hindus as well as the special rituals—from the first head-shaving of young children to wedding blessings, final cremation rites and offerings to ancestors.



BY DEV RAJ AGARWAL, DEHRADUN

MANY TIMES WHEN I WAS YOUNG MY mother took me to Haridwar, just 30 miles from my home, to take a dip in the holy Ganga at Har Ki Pauri ghat. Later in my life, I visited Varanasi several times; but except for Prayag, everything between Haridwar and Varanasi was just names on a map to me—until I proposed to HINDUISM TODAY we explore that 600-mile stretch of the holy river. That proposal resulted in a fascinating week-long journey starting February 20, 2021.



Haridwar to Shukratal

DAY 1 In the old days, such a grand journey would have poetically begun with a footstep. Today, it's a four-hour drive along narrow, dusty roads through small villages and fields along the river. Finally, we reach the first significant pilgrimage center downstream from Haridwar: the ancient town of Shukratal (recently renamed Shukartirtha). Located on a low mound just off the Delhi-Haridwar highway, this small town with its conglomeration of temples and ashrams is a favorite place for pilgrims and tourists alike. The river ghats here are small and beautiful. Technically, the ghats are on a small tributary river, Budhi Ganga, with Ganga itself a bit to the east, but all who come here regard these ghats with equal reverence.

An intricate web of mythological stories and beliefs encompasses this place. It is said Abhimanyu's son, King Parikshit

of Hastinapur, spent the last seven days of his life here listening to a recitation of the *Bhagavatam* by Sage Shukdev under a banyan tree. A huge banyan here on the grounds of the Shukdev Ashram, said to be that same tree, is still used for discourses by prominent saints of the area. The sprawling ashram property has many temples, including one for Shukdev, rooms for pilgrims and a large cow shelter.

In the courtyard of the Hanuman Dham Ashram stands a 77-foot-tall statue of Lord Hanuman. Like Shukdev Ashram, Hanuman Dham has (or is building) many facilities—library, Sanskrit institute, old age home, free pilgrims' hostel, free food facilities and more.

Here I am able to speak with Swami Keshavanand Saraswati, who explains the strong connection of this place with accounts in the *Mahabharata*. He tells me that some of the temples in the area are as old as 1,000 years. He appreciates the government's efforts to clean the river. "The Herculean task of cleaning Ma Ganga will be easier to finish if it becomes a movement of the people and not the duty of a handful of people," he tells me.

A few of the other prominent ashrams here are Ganesh Dham, Shri Ram Ashram, Shiv Dam and Durga Dham. For pilgrims whose only goal is a bath in holy water, Shukratal is a better option than Haridwar. It is quieter, cleaner, cheaper and more comfortable than among the bustling crowds of Haridwar.

I am told of a temple and ashram across the river in Bijnor district dedicated to Vidura, a central figure in the *Mahabharata*. He was the prime minister of the Kuru kingdom and a close ally of the Pandavas.

I visit the Vidura Kut, as it is called, in the

evening. It was built by the Birla family and opened in 1960. While there, I meet Daal Chand, a simple villager from Naugama in Bijnor, who has come to the banks of the river to immerse the ashes of a relative. "We have Ganga close to home, why go elsewhere for rituals and bathing?" He tells me thousands of people throng to the sandy banks on full and new moon days. I stay the night, returning the next morning to the right side of the river on a narrow road through heavy fog.



Shukratal to Hastinapur

DAY 2 Situated in ravines adjacent to the Ganga, Hastinapur was once the capital of the Kauravas. Today it is just a small town, with a population barely over 20,000, but its temples and ancient ruins testify to a rich cultural past. The town figures prominently in events of the epic *Mahabharata*. The one hundred Kaurava brothers were born here to their mother Gandhari, wife of King Dhritrashtra.

The most prominent temple here is the

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Shukratal: (clockwise from right) A Google Earth view of the upper part of the Ganga basin, showing places covered in this article and the night halts; Swami Omanand Maharaj, head of Shukdev Ashram; huge Hanuman statue at Hanuman Dham Ashram; impromptu collection of Deities along the sandy banks of the Ganga near Vidura Kut, where people immerse the ashes of their relatives



Along the Quiet Riverbanks and Ashrams at Shukratal



Pandeshwar Mahadev temple, which was extensively renovated in 1798 by Raja Nain Singh of Bahishuma Fort, Parikshitgarh. It is surrounded by high walls, with dome-shaped pavilions called *chatri* in the corners of the walls. A huge banyan tree faces the façade. The Lingam inside the sanctum sanctorum is believed to be from the times of the epic. Ruins of old forts made with thick walls of mud and brick can be seen on Pandav Teela, a tree-covered hillock to the right of the temple. One also sees a few caves, perhaps used for meditation by saints and sages.

In 1945, excavation of a nearby site uncovered a stone panel with five figures, badly deteriorated with age. At the suggestion of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, this was installed in the temple, where it can be seen on the wall near the Lingam [see photo below]. The temple's head priest has said the five figures are the Pandavas, but a definitive determination is impossible.

Swami Shankar Dev of Karna temple tells us that in the government's official revenue records, the area of the temple is still called *Kaurvan*, "the area of Kauravas," and the other part of the town is called *Pandavan*—"the area of Pandavas." As recounted in the *Mahabharata*, the town was completely destroyed after Duryodhana was killed.

Departing this area, our road is occasionally blocked by tractors pulling trailers carrying huge loads of sugar cane. But the sweet smell of boiling sugarcane is sufficient recompense

for any inconvenience. Along with wheat and rice, sugarcane is a main crop in this fertile and prosperous area of the Gangetic plain. Much of the day is spent on these small roads, which lack restaurants, petrol stations and restrooms. Here the cities, towns and major roads have been established at a safe distance from the river, which can change course easily and unpredictably in a single season.

Finally, we reach Garhmukteshwar, the first actual city near the river after Haridwar. Once part of the kingdom of Hastinapur, Garh (as it is popularly called) is full of good hotels, petrol stations and amenities. Major east-west and north-south highways pass through, bringing hundreds of thousands of devotees from Haryana, Delhi (just 70 miles away), Rajasthan and nearby places. The high point of the year is the Ganga Snan Mela on Kartik Purnima in November, but this was canceled in 2020 on account of Covid-19. Ordinarily, the Mela caters to the Delhiites with a show of luxury and extravaganza, including air-conditioned tents and all modern facilities.

In the evening I visit Brijghat, three miles east of Gahr proper. The neighborhood is clustered with temples and ghats—like Varanasi, but on a very small scale. Brijghat has special significance for performing the pindaan offering to one's ancestors, as in Haridwar. Walls of the ghat are painted with slogans to keep the Ganga clean, which to me seems a successful mission by the

government. Late in the evening, after a boat ride, I visit Vedant Mandir, one of the many ashrams and temples along the river. I then return to Gahr for the night.

Garh to Kasganj

DAY 3 This morning I head for the imposing temple of Mukteshwar Mahadeva in Nakka Kuan, a complex located in Gahr. An Urdu inscription on the structure explains it was constructed by Raja Kishan Chand of Peshawar in the year 1836. It enshrines a Sivalingam along with murtis of Mahishasuramardini, a form of Goddess Durga, as well as Bhairava, a form of Siva. Pilgrims come here in large numbers during their visit for the Ganga Snan Mela.

Hastinapur: (clockwise from right) Huge stacks of mats just below the Ganga temple are from the local weaving industry; this family had their children's head-shaving ceremony along the banks; a pot seller stops to worship at the 84-step entrance to the Ganga temple; Swami Mangalanand Giri, the temple's young head, in front of an ancient banyan tree in the temple's courtyard; Sivalingam of the Pandeshwar Mahadev Temple, with panel behind it thought to depict the Pandavas

Unfortunately, only a few temples in the Nakka Kuan area remain in good condition. In India, only the most important ancient temples come under the oversight of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI); these are generally well cared for. The rest, falling under the particular state's often overwhelmed and underfunded archeological survey or temple management division, are less well maintained. For example, the Tamil Nadu State Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department is responsible for 36,425 temples and 56 monasteries!

A few hundred yards from Nakka Kuan is a small hillock, the only elevated feature in the area. Perched at the top, overlooking the vast Gangetic plains, is the Ganga Temple, which has an imposing murti of the Goddess as well as other Deities. One reaches it by climbing a flight of 84 steps. Temple lore has it that the stairs were originally 104 in number and reached the Ganga itself, which originally flowed nearby but is now three miles away. I tend to doubt it had ever passed by this area.

At the bottom of the stairs I encounter a temple devotee named Padam, who sells earthen pots from his tricycle. He has stopped here to worship as part of his daily routine. "This temple is a divine wonder, the house of a living Goddess. Whatever I am, is because of Ganga," he avers, impressing me

with his devotion.

Adjacent to the Ganga Temple on the hill-ock, but now hidden by recent construction, is the Ram Darbar Temple with a black murti of Lord Rama. This temple is in very bad shape but was obviously once quite beautiful. Near the foot of the hillock is a large settle-



ment of families who make mats from a tall reed that grows along the river. Their multifarious weaving activities catch my photographer's eye. A local weaver named Vijay tells me there are about a hundred weaver families in this neighborhood, and weaving has been done here for generations. They make mats, sitting stools and other small articles from the same reed. Local authorities buy the mats at US \$0.50 in large quantities to use in place of plastic ground sheets for the hundreds of

tents pitched during the Ganga Snan Mela. "The marshes are declining, as more land is transformed into cultivation," Vijay tells me. "We are now forced to get the reeds from as far as Bijnor."

Leaving the weavers, I proceed several miles downstream to Aupshahar, a rough, three-hour trip on a pot-holed road. Located here is the sprawling Mast Ram Ghat, recently constructed by an industrial house. This could well be the longest, cleanest and most beautiful recently built ghat on the entire river.

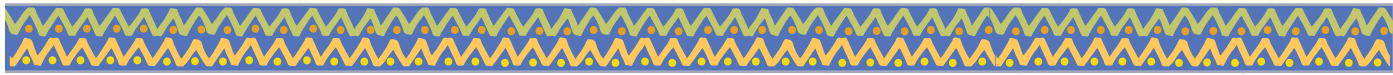
Nine miles from Aupshahar is Karnavas, a rustic village just downstream from the river's confluence with its first left-bank tributary, the Ramganga. This neat, clean place is the site of the beautiful Kalyani Devi Temple, believed to date back to the *Mahabharata* era. Devotees come in large numbers despite the absence of public transport. Before coming to the temple, they take

a dip in the river, 200 yards away. The temple has a delightful door with artwork in brass.

I encounter Jeet Singh Soni at the temple. He has brought his wife, recently-married son and daughter-in-law to seek the blessings of the Goddess for the wedding, which took place last year under Covid-19 lockdown. For people like Jeet Singh, pilgrimage has changed with the times. Now, they arrive by cars on good highways, perform rituals and reach home by night the same day.

Hastinapur and Environs, Sacred from the Time of the Mahabharata





Other prominent nearby temples include Bhagwati, Shetala Mata and Karna. About half a mile away is the ancient Bhuteshwar Temple and a Hanuman temple. Along the river is the beautiful Pakka Ghat with an adjacent dharmasala which can house many devotees during festivals.

Karnavas has some extraordinarily beautiful houses, with amazing artwork. These homes flank both sides of the narrow street reaching the ghat. Unlike dismal sights we will shortly encounter as we head south, these show no signs of abuse at the hands of invaders.

Karnavas has always been a center of learning, according to Dr. Baikunth Nath Sharma, the principal of Acharya Ramesh Guruji Ved Vidhya Sansthanam, a school in Vedic studies. This is one of a hundred schools, including two more in Karnavas, established by the Sandipani Rashtriya Vedvidya Pratishthan of Ujjain. Sharma states that, in addition to their study of *Vedas*, the students are taught all subjects of the state's education department. "Many students from here are teachers of Vedic studies now. Interest of people across the globe is increasing in Vedic studies, and our students have great job prospects."

Four miles downstream is Rajghat, a popular bathing ghat especially during the full and new moons. There are no concrete ghats, but there is a bridge. I've noticed ghats close to bridges are more popular, as people from both sides can come. We spend the night at



Kasganj and proceed to Farrukhabad the next morning.

Farrukhabad to Kannauj

DAY
4

Heading downstream, the changing topography favors potatoes over sugar cane. It is harvest time, and farming families are busy in their fields. We've come to the area just in time for the month-long Ramnagar Mela, with thousands of devotees in attendance. Many are there for a bath, a boat ride and some fun, a few for more serious worship and sadhana. A similar fair, the Magh Mela, is held in Prayagraj at this time, January 27 to February 27.

During the Mela, devotees make a unique

offering by draping Ma Ganga in a sari. One such group comprises more than 30 men, women and children gathered on the ghat. They look super excited and lost in themselves, so joyous in their celebration. Priest, boatmen and even a band have been assembled for the ritual. I watch in awe, having never seen this ceremony before.

Some eight to ten saris, each five or six yards long, have been sewn to each other end to end. One boatman stands on the river bank, firmly holding one end of the saris. Everyone else, including the band, sets out in the boats. The roll of saris is held by the family and unrolled by some of the boys as the boats slowly cross the river. Youth and elders alike dance to the tune of Ganga Arati in the boats.

When they reach the other side, the length of flamboyant red saris swings across the

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A school, fair and ashram: (clockwise from right) Acharya Ramesh Guruji Ved Vidhya Sansthanam students with teachers in Karnavas; Ramnagar Mela in Farrukhabad; (inset) ancestral rites being conducted at the site; Neem Karoli Baba Ashram in Neem Karoli village; a couple married last year during Covid-19 lockdown, ready for a delayed blessing from the river; a woman performs puja on the river bank



Farrukhabad Fair and Nearby Neem Karoli Baba Ashram





whole width of the river, as if playing in the holy water. Those on the far bank loudly hail "Ma Ganga" and roll back the heavy, wet bulk of saris. Everyone comes back across the river, loudly praising Ganga and the family gives the saris to the priest. They all dance again in a frenzy for 30 minutes, then depart.



This ceremony is called *pehran*, Hindi for "draping." One member of the group, Praveen Kumar Bajpayee, tells me it is performed at the Magh Mela and Ganga Snan in thanks to the river for granting the family's wishes. Hundreds of rows of large tents have been set up for the devotees called Kalpavasis. These spacious tents have a kitchen, wash-room and room for a family of five. A stay here is a period of abstinence for these devotees, a time for discipline of body and mind, self-assessment and correction. They eat satvic food, meditate, attend religious discourses and perform rituals on the river. Sanjeev

Pandit, the local priest who performed the sari ceremony, stays in one of these tents, undergoing the disciplines of a Kalpavasi and performing the duties of a priest. Many Hindus coming here for the mela also visit the Neem Karoli Baba Ashram in Neem Karoli village, 15 miles outside the

city, where Baba's famed "train incident" occurred and after which he took the village's name. He stayed here performing sadhana from 1912 to 1935. The ashram is buzzing with activity when I visit, with thousands awaiting their turn to have darshan of the statue of Baba in the temple. The ashram priest, Bhanu Ji Maharaj, narrates the famous train story to me. In brief, Baba was traveling through the area by train and had seated himself in first class. Finding that Baba had no ticket, the conductor stopped the train and ordered him off. Baba complied, but then the engineers could not restart the train. Even

another engine brought in could not move it. A local magistrate who knew Baba suggested they invite the sadhu back on the train. Baba consented, but on two conditions: that the railroad department build a station at Karoli (none was nearby for miles) and that they treat sadhus better. The train officials agreed, Baba reboarded, and the train started. After we leave the ashram, a short trip on good roads takes us to Kannauj, where we spend the night.



Shivrajpur to Prayagraj

DAY 5 Kannauj is an ancient city located on major trade routes. It has figured in Indian history for three millennia. Here one notices a change in the design of Hindu temples. Several here are taller, slimmer and more ornately embellished, such as Anandeshwar Temple along the main road. The main bathing ghat here is Mehndi Ghat, which is best seen from the Kannauj-Hardoi highway just next to it.

Our main interest in this area is not **Work, rituals and celebration:** (clockwise from above left) a plentiful potato harvest near Khereshwar temple; broken relics from the time of Muslim attacks; cremation area near Khereshwar Ghat; central sanctum with Siva Lingam at Khereshwar Temple; family members sing and dance during the *pehran* sari-draping ceremony on the Ganges; head-shaving ritual with extended family



Kannauj, but the small village of Shivrajpur about 24 miles downstream on the Aligarh-Kanpur highway. The Khereshwar Temple here is a highly revered Siva temple of this region's more ornate style. The main Lingam of this imposing temple was damaged by Muslim invaders. The temple priest, Akashpuri Goswami, said, "Aurangzeb followed the Grand Trunk Road and plundered temples everywhere in easy access, with Khereshwar no exception." Lying on the ground behind the temple are broken pieces of intricately chiseled stones from medieval temples, evidence of major destruction. Scores of broken and defaced statues and portions of temples lie unattended in the courtyard, brought here as they are discovered in the area; long slabs of stone and baked bricks come to surface when farmers cultivate their fields. Noticeable color variation in these statues indicates that probably there was more than one temple in the vicinity. A local priest, Anil Shukla, tells me King Sati Prasad built two temples, one for Siva and one for Shakti, at the north end of the ghats with very fine quality brick in 1443ce. It seems Khereshwar had some beautiful Hindu temples prior to the Muslim invasions, replaced since then by the present temples.

Nearby temples today include the Ashwathama and Dudheshwar temples. In the

courtyard of Dudheswar is a small shrine for Baba Mast Ram, who is believed to have initiated many of the temples.



The Ganga runs close by the temples. The beautiful Khereshwar Ghat was built under the patronage of local kings and wealthy families. The river does not seem to have moved away or intruded upon the ghats during the last few hundred years. Walking down the riverbank toward the ghat, I realize Ganga is our companion throughout our lives. Cremations are taking place on nearby Kaharraya Ghat. Here on Khereshwar, a newly wed couple, Vikas and Manju, are thanking Goddess Ganga by immersing themselves the river. Nearby, a group of men, women and children are happily gathered around a barber shaving the head of a little boy, a Hindu rite of passage

or *samskara*. They offer the hair to the river with folded hands and enjoy some prasadam. Later I see them all seated on the floor of a giant trailer pulled by a tractor, chanting Ganga's name as they leave Shivrajpur after a happy day-long outing. How beautifully our social/religious goals are pursued with a pinch of leisure and entertainment! Downstream of Khereshwar Ghat, Chandel kings built beautiful ghats and pilgrim facilities in the 15th century. There are spacious changing rooms along the ghats and overnight facilities further from the river. Unfortunately, all this is lying in a state of neglect. A few miles before Kanpur is Bithoor, an ancient city which paid a very high price for its key role in India's independence struggle, particularly the 1857 rebellion. Bithoor was home to some of the most prominent rebels, including the Queen of Jhansi, Lakshmi Bai. In July 1857, in retaliation for the killing of 300 British men, women and children at Cawnpore, British troops looted and laid waste to the town and killed 25,000 Bithoor men, women and children, leaving many hanging from trees to rot. Nowhere else in the world, it is said, had so many people died at once in the attempt to gain freedom from British rule. Much further back in history, Bithoor was the site of the ashram of Valmiki, who offered shelter to Sita after she was abandoned by Ram and where their children, Ram and

Khereswar Temple and Ghats



Kush, were born. It is here Valmiki composed the *Ramayana*.

For those living downstream in Kanpur city, Bithoor is the preferred place to worship the Ganga. It is clean and quiet, with the river flowing past long rows of ghats, the most sacred of which is Brahmavart Ghat. Another popular ghat is Patthar, built of red sandstone in the early 19th century by Tikait Rai, a local ruler. The Mahakaleswar Temple above the ghat, built of the same sandstone, has a giant trident of Siva in the courtyard. Today this temple is under the supervision of the ASI.

In the evening, we drive 15 miles to the city of Kanpur, once noted for polluting the river with effluents from its numerous tanneries. That pollution has been significantly curtailed in recent times, but we decide to continue another 130 miles to Prayagraj (formerly Allahabad) for the night.

Prayagraj to Varanasi

DAY 6 Prayagraj has been covered extensively in earlier issues of HINDUISM TODAY, so we spend little time here. This is the month of the Magh Mela, so normally the area would be flooded with hundreds of thousands of worshipers and Kalpavasis. But due to Covid-19, there are few devotees, and practically no sadhus. The early-morning rush of people on the

ghats is as usual, but these are all local people coming for their daily rituals. After a morning here, we head on to Varanasi. Though it, also, has been covered many times in the past, I hope to arrive in time to photograph the evening Ganga arati worship on the ghats.

Varanasi to Kanpur

DAY 7 The earlier one gets up to enjoy the Ganga at Varanasi, the better it is. As boatmen row their boats at full strength, the rising sun creates high-contrast figures in black silhouettes, especially when seen through the viewfinder of the camera. Allowed to sit in a boat which is waiting for customers, I watch the outbursts of devotion along the ghats from a front-row seat. Definitely the best views of the Varanasi ghats are offered by a boat ride.

I inspect the Ganga corridor work which is in full swing here to open a wide area between the Kashi Vishwanath Temple and the ghats. Photography is forbidden, unfortunately, as some aspects of the work are controversial. But the corridor will greatly improve the experience of those coming to the temple and then the river. As with Kanpur, the town and industries of Varanasi were once notorious for polluting the river, but this has been improved substantially, espe-

cially in the areas I visited.

By midday I am ready to begin my return journey, stopping at a couple of places I passed on the way downstream. At Vindhyachal in Mirzapur district, I visit the Vindhyavasini Devi Temple. The Vindhyachal mountain range starts here. Vindhyavasini is one of the most famous Shakti temples in India. Thousands of devotees come here every day, and one has to stand in long lines, sometimes for hours, to worship. The surrounding premises of the temple are being opened up and widened under the Vindhya Corridor Project, which will create a 50-foot wide circumambulation path through what is presently a highly congested area with narrow lanes.

The temple stands some 80 feet above the river. A steep, narrow lane goes about 300 yards down to the ghat, where the view of the Ganga is divine. The water is clean and azure blue. The far bank of the river is at the horizon. This is perhaps the best view of the river after the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna at Prayagraj.

Next I take the opportunity to visit the Deoraha Baba Ashram, just two miles from

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Mind and spirit: (clockwise from above right) Deoraha Baba Ashram; masked worshiper on the Yamuna Ghat in Prayagraj; Brahmavart Ghat at Bithoor; ancestor rituals at Brahmavart Ghat

here. That famous saint passed away in 1990, age unknown. The ashram is situated in a corner of a huge property from which one can glimpse the undulating slopes of the Vindhyachal range. After darshan in the beautiful temple, I am directed to the quarters of Deoraha Baba's successor, Shree Devraha Hans Baba. After singing in divine ecstasy for about twenty minutes, and then examining the magazine with great interest, he gives me a message for us. "As evident from the articles," he said in Hindi, "it is a constant effort of HINDUISM TODAY to infuse spiritual ideas in their writings, which will help in awakening of divine consciousness among the readers."

Continuing my journey home, I stop again in Bithoor for a boat ride along the ghats, and another night stop at Shahjahanpur. I finally return home to Dehra Dun, exhausted, on the 29th.

Conclusion

Winter—preferably February/March—is the best season for a visit to the plains. The various ghats along the river have a lot of color and activity during the new and full moon, so a visit on those days can be quite enjoyable. During Kartik Purnima (November) there are major fairs at Garhmukteshwar and Ramnagar in Farrukhabad. The grandeur of the old ghats of Vindhyavasini, Bithoor and



close to Ma Ganga, much closer than in the big cities She passes through. There is so much more to Ganga than ghats, boats and crowds. It is the rustic charm of Her natural banks, sacred spots where tales of *Mahabharata* are still so fresh in the minds of devotees. Each temple, ghat and ashram has its own page of history. With my eyes closed, I can relate to all the places and incidents of the great epic, places like Hastinapur, and characters such as Raja Karna, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, strung together so logically and in perfect chronology. I remain awed by the grandeur of temples and ghats constructed by kings and nobles of the past, who drew inspiration from

Karnavas is best absorbed from a boat, which are cheap to hire in the smaller places.

This soul-stirring week has kept me so

saints and sages visiting these lesser-known corners of the vast Gangetic plains in search of peace and tranquility.

About the Author

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



Deoraha Baba Ashram and Brahmavart Ghat



Famed Kerala Temple Wins Supreme Court Decision

After a decade, trusteeship of this fabulously wealthy temple of Lord Vishnu has finally been returned to the ruling family of Travancore

By CHOODIE SIVARAM, BENGALURU

DEVOTEES OF KERALA'S HISTORIC SREE Padmanabhaswamy temple rejoiced at the July 13, 2020, ruling of India's Supreme Court upholding the rights of the royal family of Travancore to administer the wealthy temple.

The two-judge bench of Justice U. U. Lalit and Justice Indu Malhotra reinstated the rights of the royal family as the *shebait*s (a person who serves and supports the established Deity), overruling a 2011 judgment of the Kerala high court. "We hold that the death of Sree Chithira Tirunal Balarama Varma (the last maharajah of Travancore) would not in any way affect the shebaitship of the temple held by the royal family of Travancore," the court stated.

The Kerala High Court had directed in 2011 that the state government take control of the management and assets of the temple, immediately divesting the royal family of their hereditary rights to administer the temple. The family appealed to the Supreme Court against this judgment.

By May of that year, the Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple had caught the world's attention by reports on the extensive wealth preserved in the underground vaults (*kallaras*) for centuries. Soon social media ex-



ploded with exaggerations, including fake pictures of the treasures (see my 2012 article: bit.ly/padmanabhaswamy).

According to Uma Maheswari, author of 33 books on the history of the state and this temple and regarded as the world's most authoritative expert on Travancore history, "The wealth found in the kallaras are offerings made by the royal family over centuries. The description of the ornaments, the weight, length, type, number of gems used, money, etc.—every detail is exhaustively documented in the Mathilakom records. The royal family have inherited divinity and their offerings to Sree Padmanabhaswamy haven't stopped. They don't make it public."

The 2011 Vault Opening

In 2011, India's Supreme Court appointed a seven-member committee, which ordered the opening of all the temple's kallaras, some of which had remained sealed for centuries. Devotees and Hindu organizations vehemently opposed this judicial interference in their religious beliefs and tradition, but five out of the six vaults were opened. When vault A was opened, a symbol of a hooded snake on the back wall of vault B could be seen. It is believed the symbol indicates forbidden territory, and opening it would bring widespread misfortune. After strenuous protests, the contentious vault B was left untouched.

When the five vaults were opened, rumors of the wealth flowed freely. Overzealous committee members described publicly what was found without considering the ensuing security risks. But no doubt the value is in the billions of dollars.

In 2012, following hiccups in administration and communication with the court-ap-

The Lord's home: (above) A painting of the temple tower, devotees and enshrined Deity; (below) a view of the temple from across the large adjacent tank



ANIL BHASKAR

pointed committees, the Supreme Court appointed Gopal Subramaniam, a lawyer, as an amicus curiae (Latin for "friend of the court"). At that time they also appointed an executive officer to run the temple. He, unfortunately, did not adhere to the temple's centuries-old rituals and practices. "He enjoyed the confidence of the amicus curiae and started making changes to the structure and rituals," states K. P. Madhusoodhanan, General Secretary of the Fort Area Residents Consortium (FARC), who fought against these violations.

On condition of anonymity, a temple official stated, "The amicus curiae was insistent on having B vault opened, saying he had a vision of a Sri Chakra inside which should be

placed in the temple sanctum. Claiming divine direction, he wanted to enter the sanctum sanctorum, an area that has never been entered into by anyone other than the priests and certain pontiffs."

Other changes were demanded with regard to the central sanctum. Mandapas (open pillared shrines) adjacent to the temple tank were demolished. An attempt to install an automated steel door below the main gopuram caused structural damage (and the door never worked). Contrary to custom, pesticides were used in the adjoining Sree Narasimha Temple. Without reason, the custom of blending saffron with the sandalwood paste offered to the Deities was



N. P. HARIHARAN

Guardians present and past: (clockwise from above left) Several of the many armed police and commandos who guard the temple stationed in front of the central sanctum; Maharani Setu Parvati Bayi (seated, 1896–1983) and her son (succession was matrilineal), His Highness Chittira Tirunal (1912–1991), the last king of Travancore; Uthradom Thirunal Marthanda Varma (1922–2013) in procession—his nephew is the present Maharaja of Travancore

discontinued.

One of the most significant rituals associated with the royal family—the offering of sandal paste upon the birth star of the

Behind the Takeover

Hindus in India have been protesting for decades against governmental interference and takeover of temples—while at the same time the government leaves churches and mosques untouched. A takeover of the Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple—beyond its effects on the temple, devotees and royal family—loomed as one more glaring injustice to Hindu faith.

Following Independence—when princely states were merged with the Union of India—the then Maharaja of Travancore, Chittira Tirunal, was given the opportunity to retain properties of his choice. In unequivocal terms he sought that the administration of Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple be continued in trust with the ruler of Travancore. This was part of the covenant signed while handing over the princely state

of Travancore (most of modern-day Kerala). The Maharaja was assured that the temple administration would remain with the royal family.

The covenant of merger between the Indian Union and the Maharaja hence protects the sublime relationship between the Travancore royal family and

the temple.

According to advocate M. K. S. Menon, one of the team guiding the case, "While signing the covenant, Maharaja Chittira Tirunal was given the choice to retain properties of his choice. The Maharaja wanted the temple to remain with the royal family since it is the centrifugal force of their very existence. Chittira Tirunal stated that he could not sign the covenant since he was not the sovereign.



Sree Padmanabhaswamy is. So the Maharaja signed as the representative of Sree Padmanabhaswamy."

Misinterpreting the term *ruler for sovereign* (in the sense of "political leader"), the Kerala high court decided that the government must take over the temple. "The senior most member of the Travancore royal family was not the ruler in a political sense. It was a status he held. The Travancore Cochin Religious Institutions Act 1950 endorses the rights of the 'Ruler' in the administration of the temple. When this act came into force, the government retained the word ruler, though rulership [as a political power] was abolished post-Independence. This was accepted by the state of Kerala, too, when it was formed in 1956," states advocate Menon. In other words, the "Ruler" referenced in the 1950 Act was the Maharaja, not the head of the Kerala state government. It was a subtle but critical point.



SHUTTERSTOCK



UMA MAHESHWARI



SUBHASH KUMARAPURAM

previous rulers—was stopped. The obvious intent was to remove any link between the royals and the temple. The temple's requirement that devotees come in traditional attire was relaxed—a decision ultimately reversed by the Kerala high court. The amicus curiae also requested a change to the ritual 3:30 am waking of the Deity, which had always been done by blowing a single conch. He wanted to do it with nadaswaram horns and two dozen other instruments—a combination capable of overloading a decibel meter.

Dark Days of Litigation

For generations, the royal family have completely submitted themselves to the Deity, dedicating everything they have to Him. They live for Sree Padmanabhaswamy and lead a life of piety and frugality. Unlike some other princely families in India, they have eschewed political involvement and extravagant lifestyle.

Ratings-hungry media circulated false and sensationalized reports accusing the royal family of misappropriation of wealth. The amicus curiae report was replete with sting- ing accusations against the late Maharaja Uthradhom Tirunal, who at past ninety years, with a leg injury, would still walk three kilometers barefoot to the beach during the Aarat festival, as he led the Deity parade carrying a 17th-century ceremonial sword (photo page 31 bottom). Insinuations of theft and even murder were implied.

Since the matter was sub-judice, the royal family could not defend themselves in public against the smear campaign. When I had asked the Maharaja, the late Uthradhom Tirunal, how he felt about T. P Sundararajan dragging the royal family to court with false allegations, he simply stated, "Keshava [Vishnu] can come in many forms."

Madhusoodhanan of the FARC was less forgiving: "Their intentions were shrouded in viciousness, it was to taint the royal family, divest them from temple administration and change all the traditional aspects of the temple. People were manipulated to turn against

the royal family. The amicus curiae's reports were given credence, since he was appointed by the apex court. Public opinion was built towards separating the royal family from the temple. This was the ulterior motive and very disturbing. We decided to fight this injustice; the royal family had to be supported and the temple had to be saved."

People for Dharma worked with FARC to prevent a government takeover of the temple. "The State is a tenant which does not vacate once it enters a temple's framework," asserted advocate Sai Deepak of People for Dharma in his written submission to the Supreme Court.

"We sought that rituals and traditions must not be tampered with, and that the amicus curiae report must be rejected by the court," explains Madhusoodhanan.

The royal family's Princess Ashwathi Tirunal Gouri Lakshmi Bayi took a very active role in the case. "I was present in the court for every hearing, spending long hours at the advocate's office, traveling late at night, waiting all day in the dusty corridors on the hard benches for the case to be called, without any food through the day.... I remember how I stayed up all night making notes for the case the next day and collapsed in front of Sree Padmanabhaswamy's photo at 6:30 in the morning and wept and wept and wept.

"Once when our case came up for hearing, a journalist sitting beside me in the court said, 'Oh, they are the people who stole from the temple.' Another journalist who recognized me nudged her. The lady looked at me and said, 'Sorry, I simply said it.' I told her, 'For you it may be "simply," but for us it's a big blow. It's people like you who create the problem, you don't know the truth do you?'"

Eminent jurist William Blackstone once propounded that it is better that ten guilty persons escape than one innocent suffer. But in this case, slanted media, rumors and sensationalism were letting the guilty escape while the innocent suffered.

Advocate Menon one among a team of senior advocates, faced a tough task to win the

Temple activities: (above, left to right) Deities being taken out to the seashore during the Aarat festival; the present titular monarch, Sree Moolam Thirunal Rama Varma (center with large green emerald pendant); devotees depart the temple after worship; the four nambis, or chief priests

case while enduring the challenges of hierarchy in advocates. "The emotional trauma that they went through—every second they were in pain," he says. "I wanted only one thing, justice must be done."

The Supreme Court Battle

Ultimately, the priests and devotees had enough. Advocate Menon approached the Supreme Court for the removal of the executive officer. "He was called to the court, questioned and asked to resign," recalls advocate Menon, one of the few positive signs during this trying period.

The 2012 case was fought with historical documents on both sides. Countering false reports denigrating the royal family were the temple's own records, called the Mathilakom collection and numbering three million palm leaves. They document minute procedural details relating to the functioning of the temple and narration of events over centuries. "These records also prove that the history of Travancore, the royal family and history of Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple are interlinked. The temple is their identity," says Uma Maheshwari.

When news broke in July of 2020 that the Supreme Court judgment was imminent, temples across the country performed special pujas praying for the victory of the royal family, including by the Dikshitar priests of the Chidambaram Nataraja temple. Special abhishekas were performed at the Kashi Vishwanatha Temple in Banaras. Innumerable devotees and well-wishers engaged in prayers, many reading the *Srimad Bhagavatam*.



SHUTTERSTOCK



UMA MAHESHWARI

Victory and Aftermath

In the Supreme Court's final judgment (see below), temple control was completely returned to the purview of the royal family. The reports of the amicus curiae and auditor Vinod Rai were not considered for the final order. It was the end of an unsavory and harrowing decade-long litigation during which the royal family were made bystanders, helplessly witnessing administrative failures and the flouting of temple traditions.

The battle drained them in more ways than one. The innumerable trips to New Delhi and lawyers' fees, among other costs, had financial implications. During the litigation, while the temple was run by the court-appointed committee, the royal family through the Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple Trust continued to shoulder all temple expenditures. According to local sources, US\$1.1 million was unnecessarily spent by the ad hoc administration on installation of a number of gadgets, unauthorized renovation work around the temple complex, appointment of unnecessary staff,

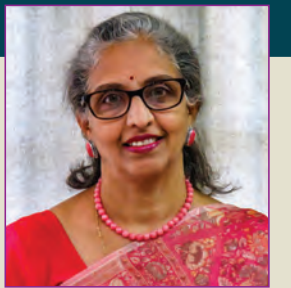
multi fold increase in salaries and other excessive spending. Monthly expenditure rose to \$157,000, against an income of \$68,000. Now, with the new administrative and advisory committees in place and the royal family regaining the temple rights, the bitter past and mismanagement can be put behind. "On the day of the verdict," recalls Princess Aswathi Tirunal, "the entire family along with our staff were in front of the TV that morning, and we saw a flash news that the Travancore royal family has won the Sree

Padmanabhaswamy Temple case. We were grateful to all the known and unknown people who have stood by us, prayed for us, grieved with us, worried for us and fought for us. It's a debt we can never repay."

The royal family released a joint statement, concluding: "We regard today's Supreme Court verdict as a blessing from Sree Padmanabha Swamy, not just for the family, but for all His devotees. We pray for his continued benevolence on all humanity to keep us all safe and well."

About the Author

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



What the Court Finally Ordered

Restoring the rights of the temple to the royal family for posterity, with the head of the royal family as the Trustee having the final say, the verdict also prescribed the formation of an Advisory Committee and an Administrative Committee, of which all members must be Hindus.

The **Administrative Committee** consists of five members. The first is the district judge of Thiruvananthapuram, who serves as chairperson. The second is the chief priest of the temple. The remaining three are

nominated one each by the royal trustee, the government of Kerala and the Minister of Culture of the government of India.

The Administrative Committee is authorized to take a fresh look at the current standard operating procedures with respect to all aspects of the administration and operation of the temple. In all matters spiritual and religious, or concerning rituals, the views of the chief priest will be binding on the committee.

The **Advisory Committee** shall consist of 1) a retired judge of the High Court of Kerala as

chairperson, 2) an eminent person to be nominated by the royal trustee, and 3) a reputed chartered accountant nominated by the chairperson in consultation with the royal trustee.

The court ordered that these two committees also look after a slew of other tasks, including: preserving all treasures and properties endowed to the Deity and belonging to the temple; protecting all tenanted properties, and taking appropriate measures to ensure reasonable financial returns from such tenanted properties; as well as

ensuring that all rituals and religious practices are performed in accordance with the instructions and guidance of the chief priest and according to custom and traditions.

The Administrative Committee can only with the prior approval of the royal trustee take a decision on the following matters: any expense item exceeding US\$20,475 per month, any one-time expense of more than \$136,500, any major renovation or expansion of the temple, any changes in established operating procedures, and any fundamental changes in the character of the Temple that would affect the religious sentiments of the devotees.



FESTIVALS

King Shivaji's Fort Comes to America

Kids in Maharashtra—and now California—build mud forts during Diwali in honor of the great warrior's victories hundreds of years ago



BY SANJEEVANI DEDGE, 12, CALIFORNIA

IF YOU EVER VISIT VILLAGES IN MAHARASHTRA during Diwali, you will see a unique tradition as part of the festival celebrations: mud forts made by children in alleys, against walls, in front and backyards.

Actual forts themselves in India date back 2,000 years and were a core part of building empires and kingdoms. However, it is said that the tradition of creating small mud forts on Diwali originated about 350 years ago from a bold and powerful king named Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj.

Shivaji turned the tide of approximately 300 years of Islamic rule in the region, and formed a kingdom that Hindus could call their own. In his early teens, it is said, Shivaji Maharaj would construct fort models made of clay or mud so that he and his soldiers could study them and prepare for battle. From this, it is believed that the practice of making forts during Diwali started.

In Maharashtra, the fort-making is usually centered around Shivaji's famous battles. But, in our fort, we wanted to highlight many significant figures, events and geographical features that positively impacted Hindu civiliza-

tion. This included people such as Rana Pratap, a heroic king of Mewar, and sage Gargi, a clever female philosopher and judge. It also included places—Nalanda University, Mohenjo Daro and Angkor Wat. My family and I, as well as friends—of which only two are from Maharashtra—have been making mud forts in California for a few years now.

The latest fort we made was pre-Covid, in 2019. That year, before I did anything else, I contacted a group of friends who I thought would be interested in making the fort. We chose to build it in front of my garage and work on it during the weekends.

On the first week that we met, we formed groups and sketched out our ideas on how we thought the fort should look. Usually, people create their fort off of existing forts in India, but we wanted to create our own fictional fort and incorporate different features that we saw on other forts, such as cannons, temples and caves. Once everyone finished, we presented our ideas, and then we merged them into one big fort plan and made a list of all the materials we would need.

Most homemade forts are a bit smaller than ours, and do not need a structure inside

made of bins and bricks, and can be made entirely of mud. But ours was a bit bigger, so by the second week, after we had gathered most of our materials, we began to create a base for our fort made up of rocks, tiles, upside-down bins, bricks and buckets. Once we were satisfied, we draped it with a big, old cloth.

On the third and fourth week, we began to cover the cloth in thick mud using our hands and sprinkled some seeds on the fort that would later sprout, giving it a forest-like look. We had to sprinkle water on the seeds with our hose every other day. At the time, it would occasionally rain, so, to protect the fort, we set up a big canopy on top of the fort.

By the fifth week, the mud started to harden and the seeds had sprouted and turned into a luscious mini-forest. In the sixth week, we added labels for figurines and locations on the fort, along with one big sign in front that summarized the tradition.

Once the fort was complete, each of my friends prepared to narrate a story about a historical character, structure or event present on the fort. For example, one told the story of Tanaji Malusare, Shivaji's military



Fort Making 101: (facing page): Nearly finished fort in family's driveway; (top to bottom, left to right) messier part of the operation; refinement under way; detail of Jiva Mahale; some modern touches; unpacking the figurines from India; real vegetation adds to the impact; supervising fort engineer and article author Sanjeevani



PHOTOS COURTESY SANJEEVANI DEDGE

general, and another told the story of the death of Afzal Khan, an evil general who destroyed Hindu temples and attempted to kill Shivaji. On some days passersby stopped, saw the fort, asked questions, and listened to the stories told by me and my siblings. On other days, 30-40 guests, kids and families gathered.

"This magnificent fort as part of Diwali tradition in US is a fitting tribute to Shivaji Maharaj and his idea of a Hindu swarajya, the concept of Hindu self rule," said Karan Raskar after he saw the fort.

Around this time, my sister Gargi and her entire class were going to walk to the library for a field trip. When my dad heard about this, he suggested to her teacher, that since our house happened to be really close to the school (literally seven houses away), and it was on the way to the library, that they

should stop by in front of our house and observe the fort before continuing their trip. Once they arrived, they were very excited and curious. Gargi told the story of Hirkani, a brave mother who scaled a fort for her baby.

Throughout the entire experience of making the fort I learned three key things. The first was teamwork, as I learned about collaboration and listening to others' ideas. Second was planning and management, because I brainstormed and helped decide the best design for the fort, the best materials, how to get them and what we needed to accomplish week by week. Third, I learned about the stories of numerous historical figures and events, and I learned how to tell a story with thrill and suspense to keep my audience en-

About the Author

Sanjeevani Dedge was born in Santa Clara, California, and now lives in San Jose. Now an 8th-grade student at Dartmouth Middle School, she enjoys dance, swimming and reading. sanjeevanisdedge@gmail.com

gaged and on their toes.

I was happy to be able to apply my creative skills while celebrating the festival of Diwali, and I was thrilled to be part of the rich tradition that has been flowing through generations and teaching many others about this wonderful tradition. And, of course, I look forward to the upcoming Diwali—and hopefully a bigger fort, Covid-19 willing!



Lion Sage



Merging with Siva for Kids

SATGURU SIVAYA SUBRAMUNIASWAMI



ASHLEY MOORE

EDUCATIONAL INSIGHT

Excerpts from a magical book for young children about yoga & the mind



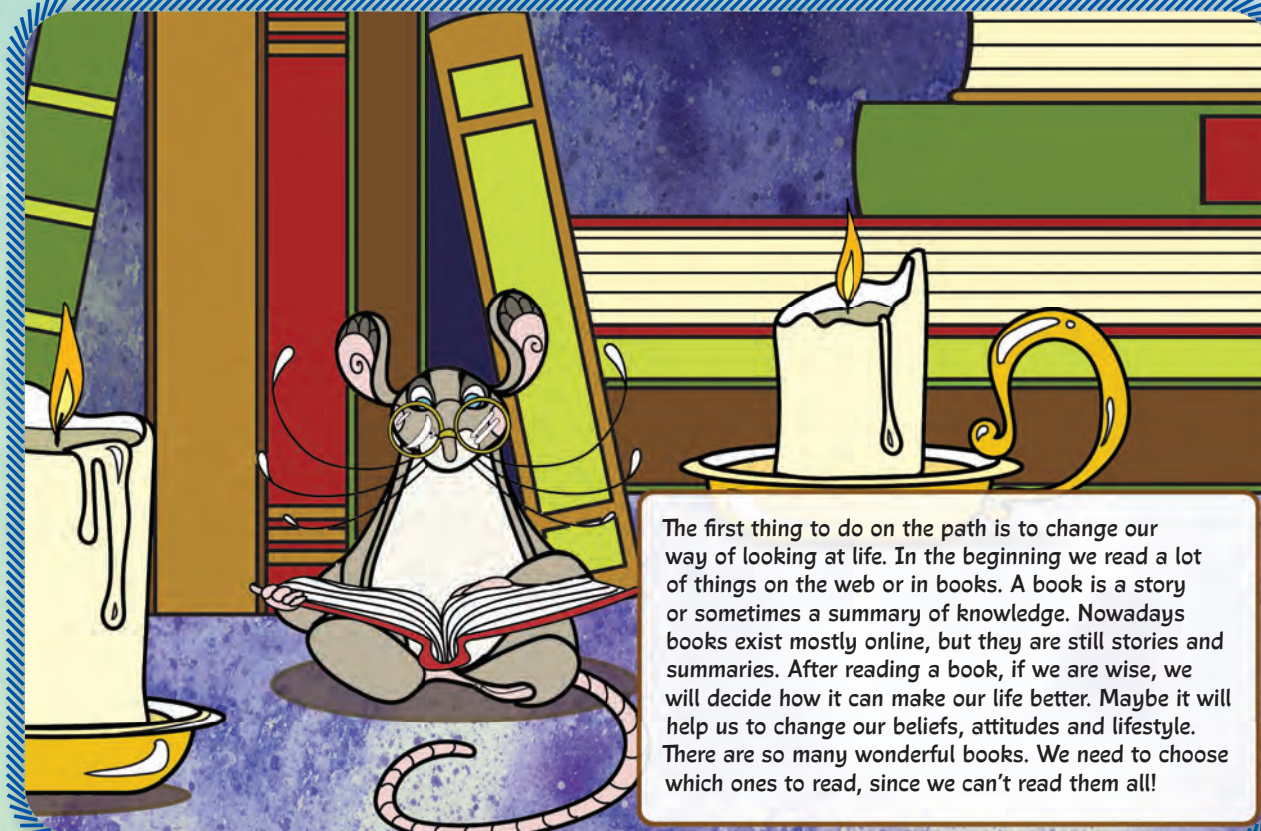
WELCOME TO *LION SAGE*, A SPIRITUAL adventure for children. Adapting an earlier work by Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, called *Mystic Mouse*, the editors of *HINDUISM TODAY* magazine enlisted Ashley Moore in California to redraw all of the art, adding color and her creative ability to tell stories with graphics. Ashley spent many months conceiving the ideas and executing them in the style you will soon discover. The cover (of this magazine and the book) is by Kerala muralist Manikandan Punnakkal. *Lion Sage* is a child's version of the metaphysical masterpiece *Merging with Siva*. It teaches children how to face life's challenges, but most importantly informs them of their true identity. They are not the body which suffers now and then. They are not the emotions that well up in good times and not so good times. They are not the thinking mind. They are light and love; they are an immortal soul on a path of self-discovery. Knowing this one truth can alter a young life forever.

As you take your children through these pages, you are providing a deep comprehension of life and values that few people have. You are teaching them to live in the now and not dwell on the past or worry about the future. You are strengthening their self-esteem, their ability to solve problems and cope with relationships. You are giving them tools to create a happier, less stressful childhood. You are erasing much of the negativity that the outside world rushes to burden them with. And you are endowing them with the basic wisdom of Saiva Siddhanta, the profound spiritual path of South India that the author embraced and lived. And, who knows, maybe you are inspiring yourself a little in the process.

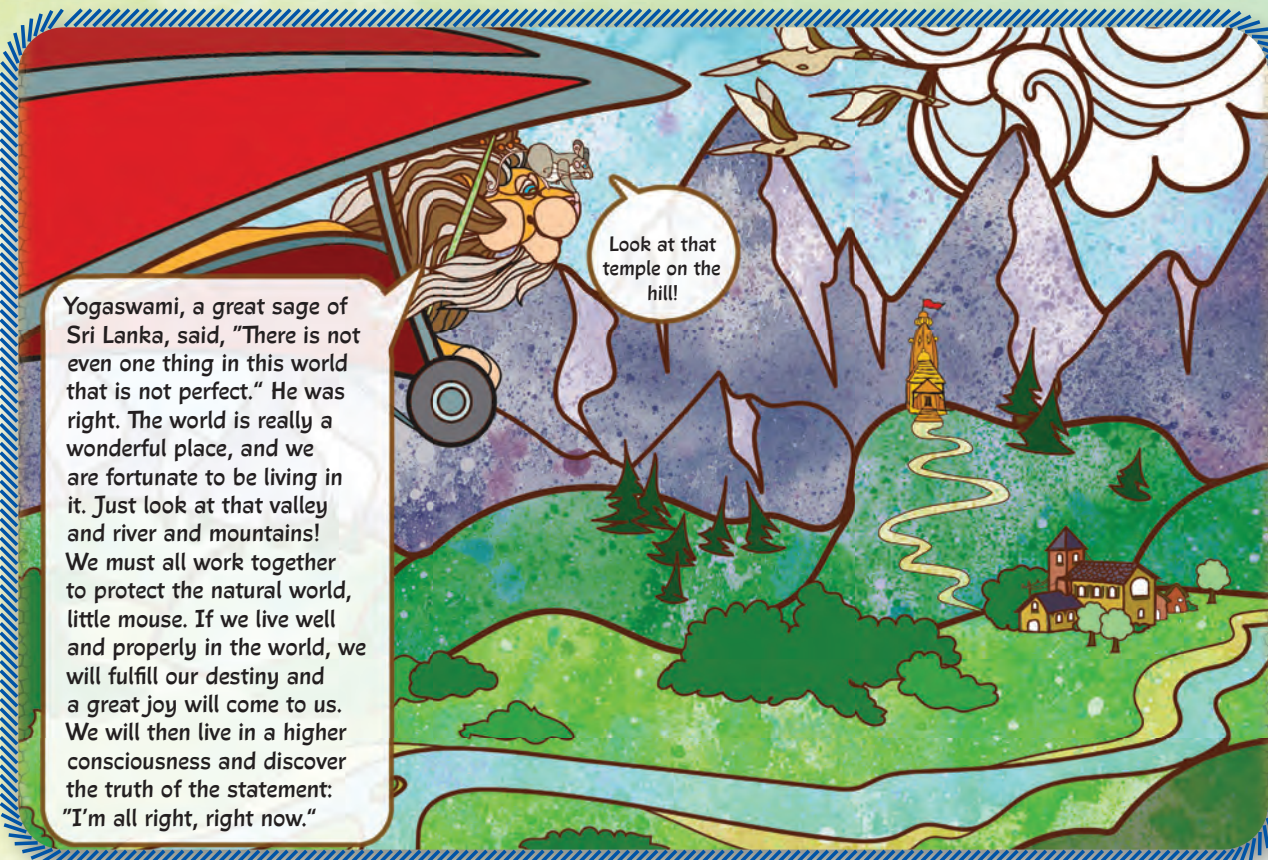
No doubt you, as parent or teacher, will be called upon to answer many questions, to elucidate some of the more obscure concepts. You can also add your own insights and stories for the child. Your anecdotes about the eternal now, or about the importance of letting go will be an essential part of the story of the mouse and the lion. Be the lion when called upon to bring clarity to the adventure. As *Lion Sage* might say, "Are you ready?" These pages contain two of the nineteen chapters of *Lion Sage*. The full book can be downloaded for free at: bit.ly/LionSageBook

I'm All Right, Right Now

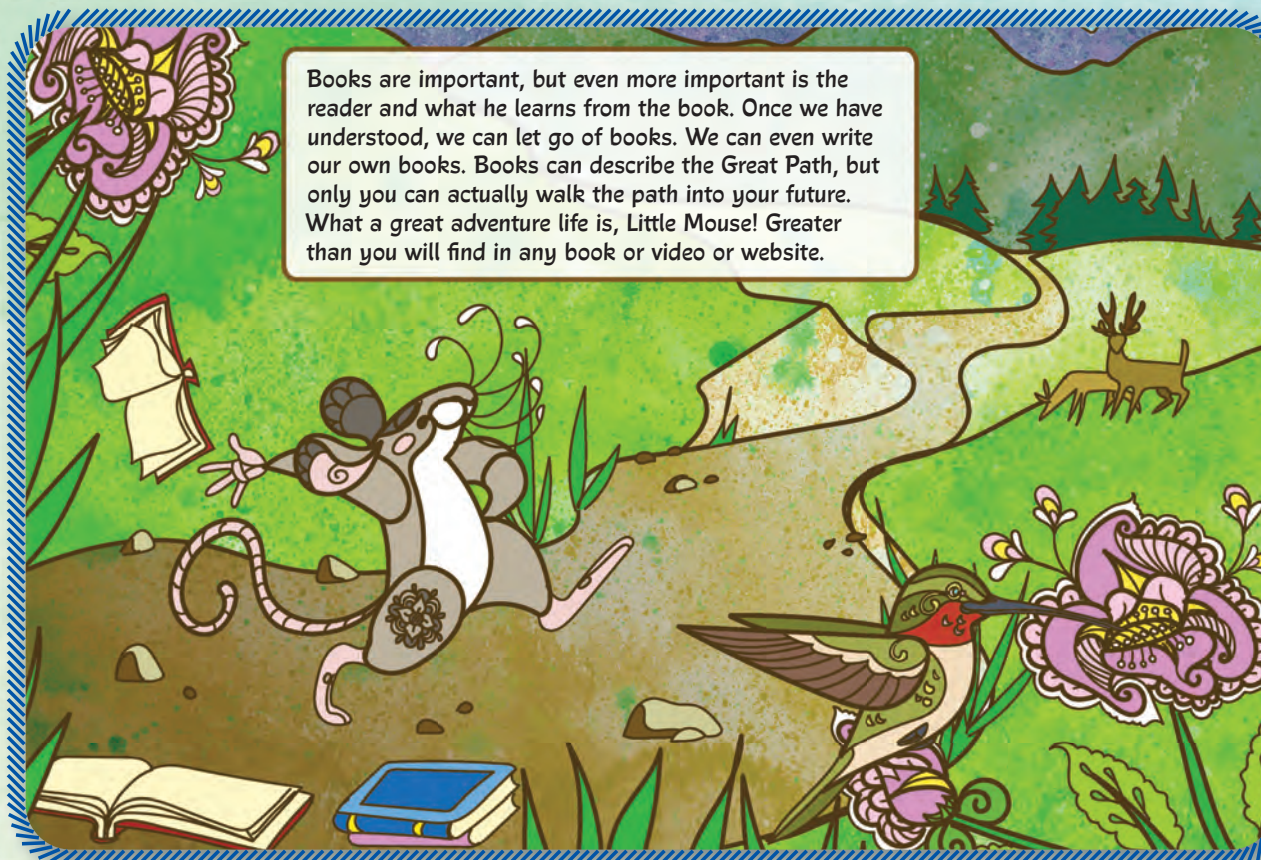
Chapter 16, in which Lion Sage teaches our mouse how to be peaceful and unafraid no matter what challenges life may bring



The first thing to do on the path is to change our way of looking at life. In the beginning we read a lot of things on the web or in books. A book is a story or sometimes a summary of knowledge. Nowadays books exist mostly online, but they are still stories and summaries. After reading a book, if we are wise, we will decide how it can make our life better. Maybe it will help us to change our beliefs, attitudes and lifestyle. There are so many wonderful books. We need to choose which ones to read, since we can't read them all!



Yogaswami, a great sage of Sri Lanka, said, "There is not even one thing in this world that is not perfect." He was right. The world is really a wonderful place, and we are fortunate to be living in it. Just look at that valley and river and mountains! We must all work together to protect the natural world, little mouse. If we live well and properly in the world, we will fulfill our destiny and a great joy will come to us. We will then live in a higher consciousness and discover the truth of the statement: "I'm all right, right now."



Books are important, but even more important is the reader and what he learns from the book. Once we have understood, we can let go of books. We can even write our own books. Books can describe the Great Path, but only you can actually walk the path into your future. What a great adventure life is, Little Mouse! Greater than you will find in any book or video or website.

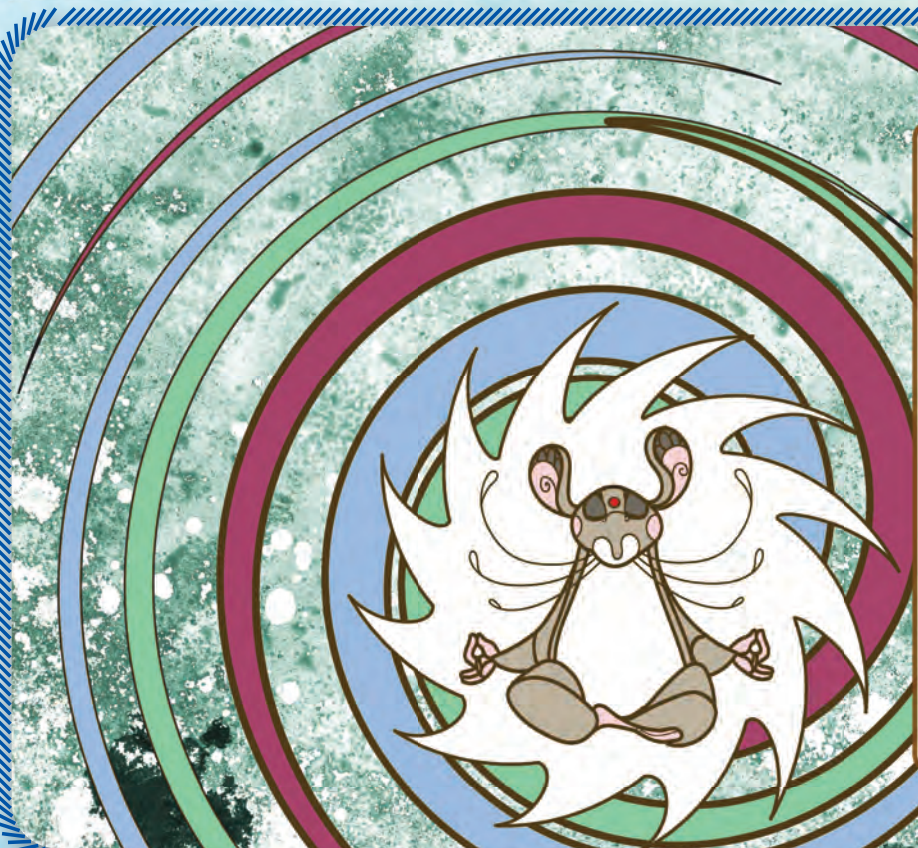
Learn to lean on your own spine, little mouse, to be the source of your own strength. Everyone wants to lean on someone else. We lean on our families and teachers. We lean on our friends. For true peace of mind, you must learn to lean on your own spine. This means depending on your own strengths and intelligence to get through experiences. You can start doing this by feeling: "I'm all right, right now," especially in difficult or challenging times. No matter how big the challenge, even this fierce dragon, you are not afraid. You can face anything.



Most people on the path say they want to get rid of their desires. It's an impossible battle. Have you ever tried to get rid of a desire? It's better to adopt new and better desires. The old ones will then go away on their own. So, if you love to eat sugary candy but know that is not healthy, you can desire instead to eat dark chocolate, which is good for you. After a while, your love of pure chocolate replaces the desire for sugary goodies. Learning to use desire positively is an advanced lesson on the path.



Let's look closer at the practice of leaning on our own spine. As we learned earlier, it means depending on yourself. You are strong when you depend on yourself for support. You are wise if you depend on yourself to solve problems and face challenges. You are peaceful if you depend on the life force, or energy, in the spine for security. So you can see it is a valuable thing to learn. Sit for a moment, little mouse. Meditate on the spine and the life force flowing through it to reach every cell of your body. That energy is who you really are!

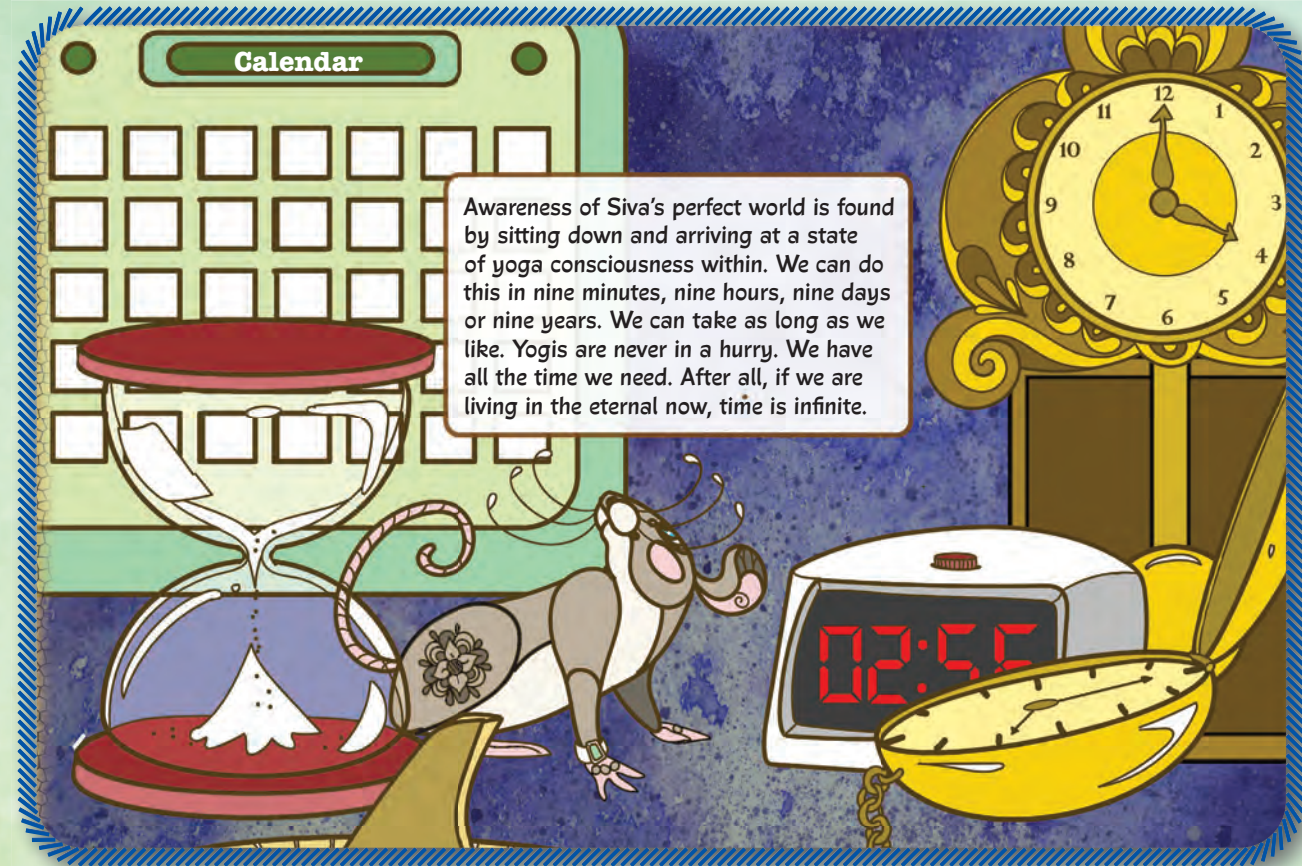


Feeling all right inside ourself and adopting positive desires leads naturally to meditation. When we begin meditation, we must find a happy place and be among good people. Meditation takes us to that quiet and safe place inside. When we meditate, there is no worry, no fear, no confusion. It is helpful to practice the yoga postures for a few minutes before we meditate. This quiets the mind and relaxes us, gets us ready to sit without moving. When we meditate, the body should be oh-so-still. The room should be clean and undisturbed.

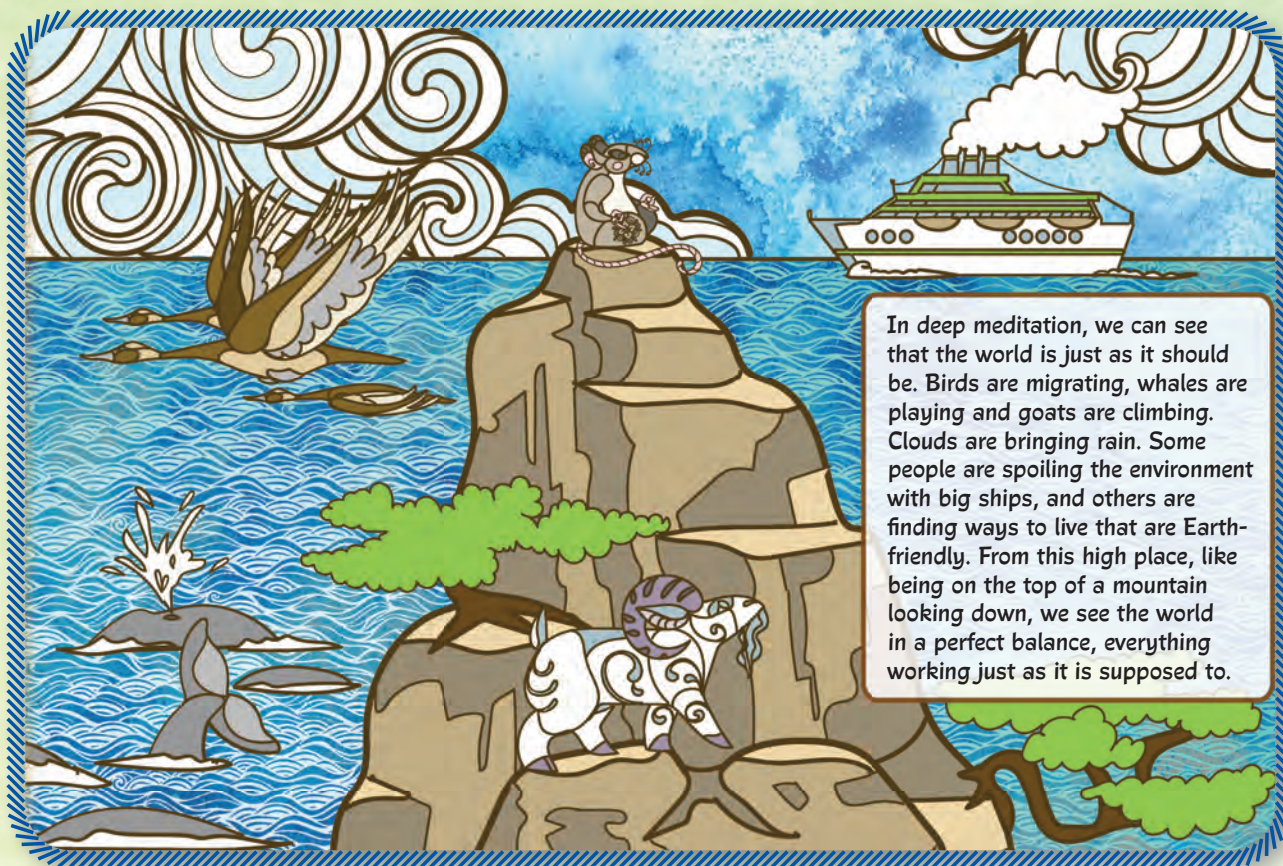




The magical thing is, little mouse, when we meditate, the outside part of our life also becomes better and better and better. The happier we feel inside, the more we experience good things around us. When you come out of your Meditation Station you will see things with new eyes, see things you never saw before. That is one of the powers of meditation, to let us appreciate Siva's perfect world. It turns out that if we find the perfection inside our self, we realize that same perfection is all around us.



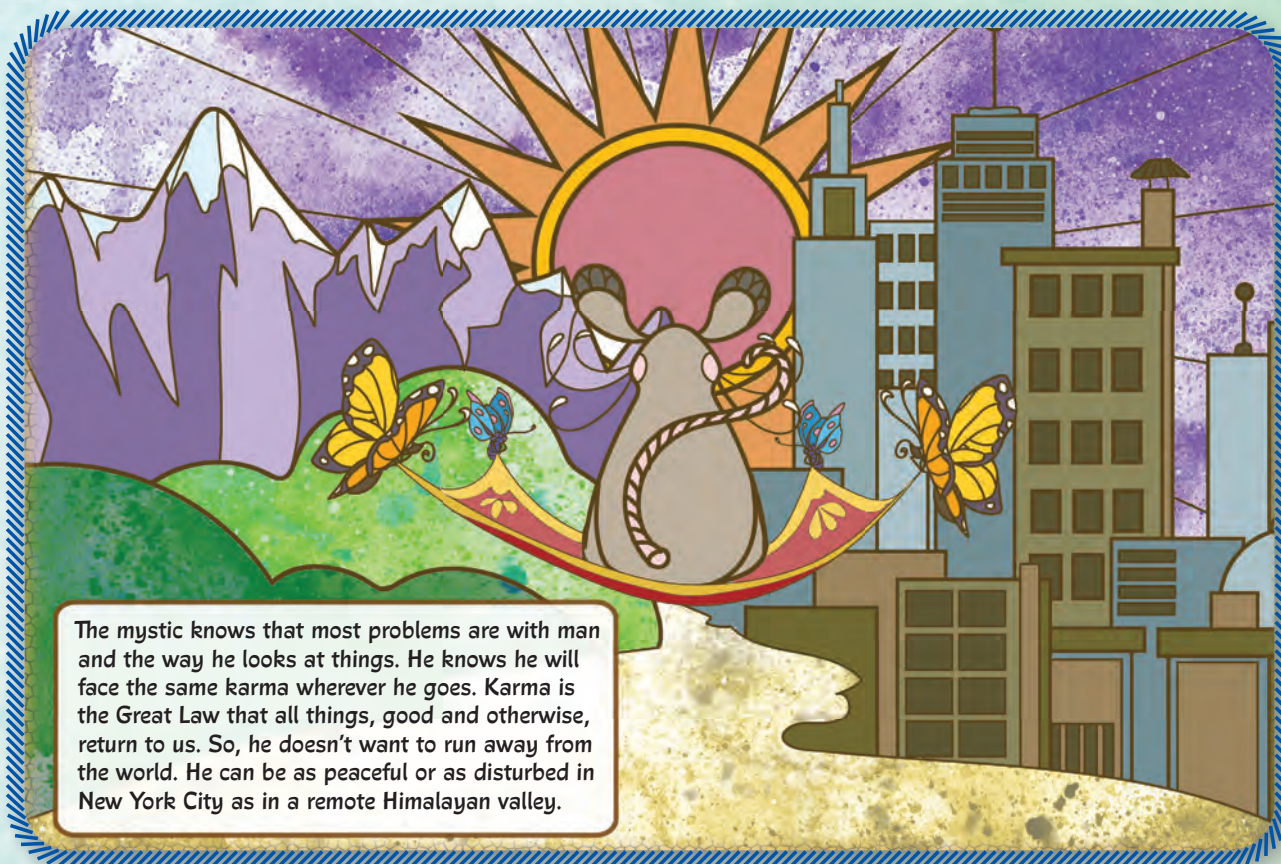
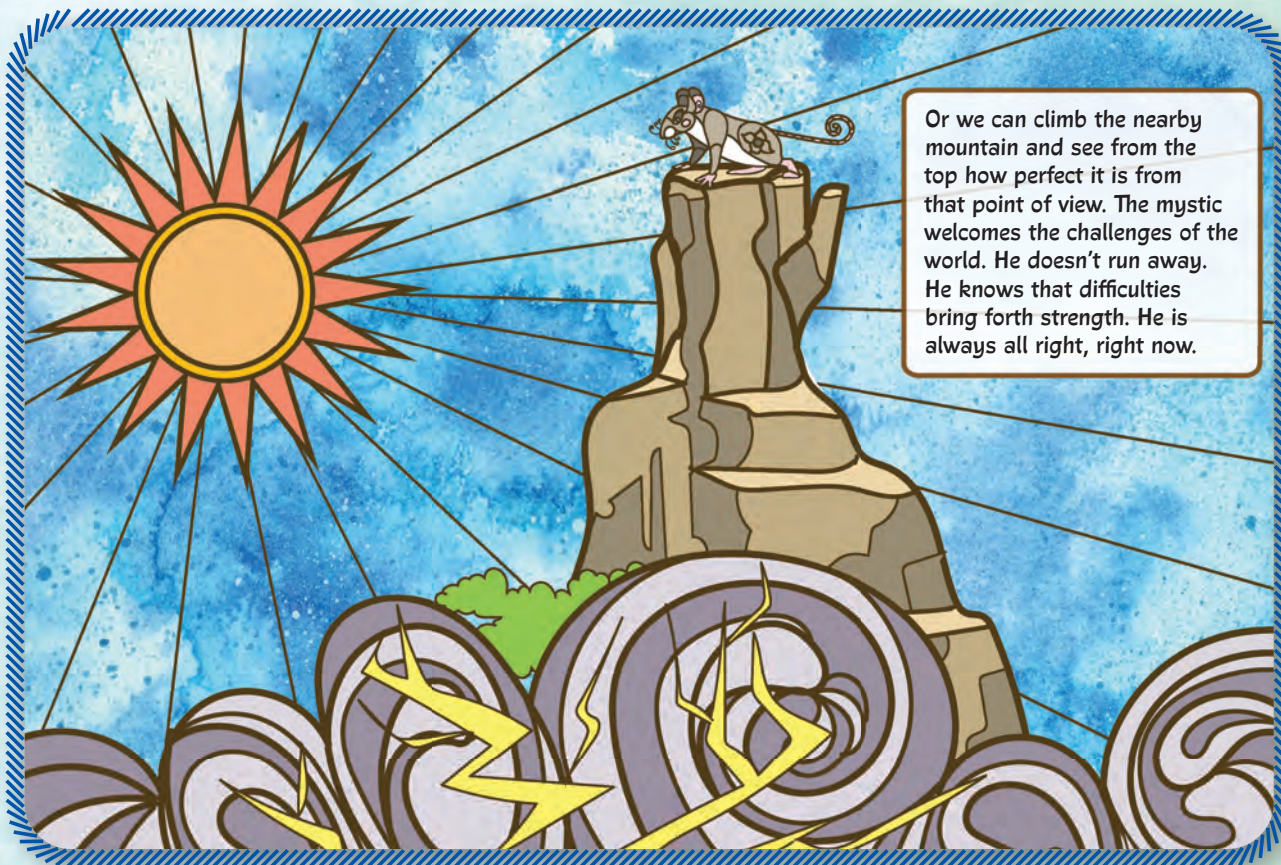
Awareness of Siva's perfect world is found by sitting down and arriving at a state of yoga consciousness within. We can do this in nine minutes, nine hours, nine days or nine years. We can take as long as we like. Yogis are never in a hurry. We have all the time we need. After all, if we are living in the eternal now, time is infinite.



In deep meditation, we can see that the world is just as it should be. Birds are migrating, whales are playing and goats are climbing. Clouds are bringing rain. Some people are spoiling the environment with big ships, and others are finding ways to live that are Earth-friendly. From this high place, like being on the top of a mountain looking down, we see the world in a perfect balance, everything working just as it is supposed to.



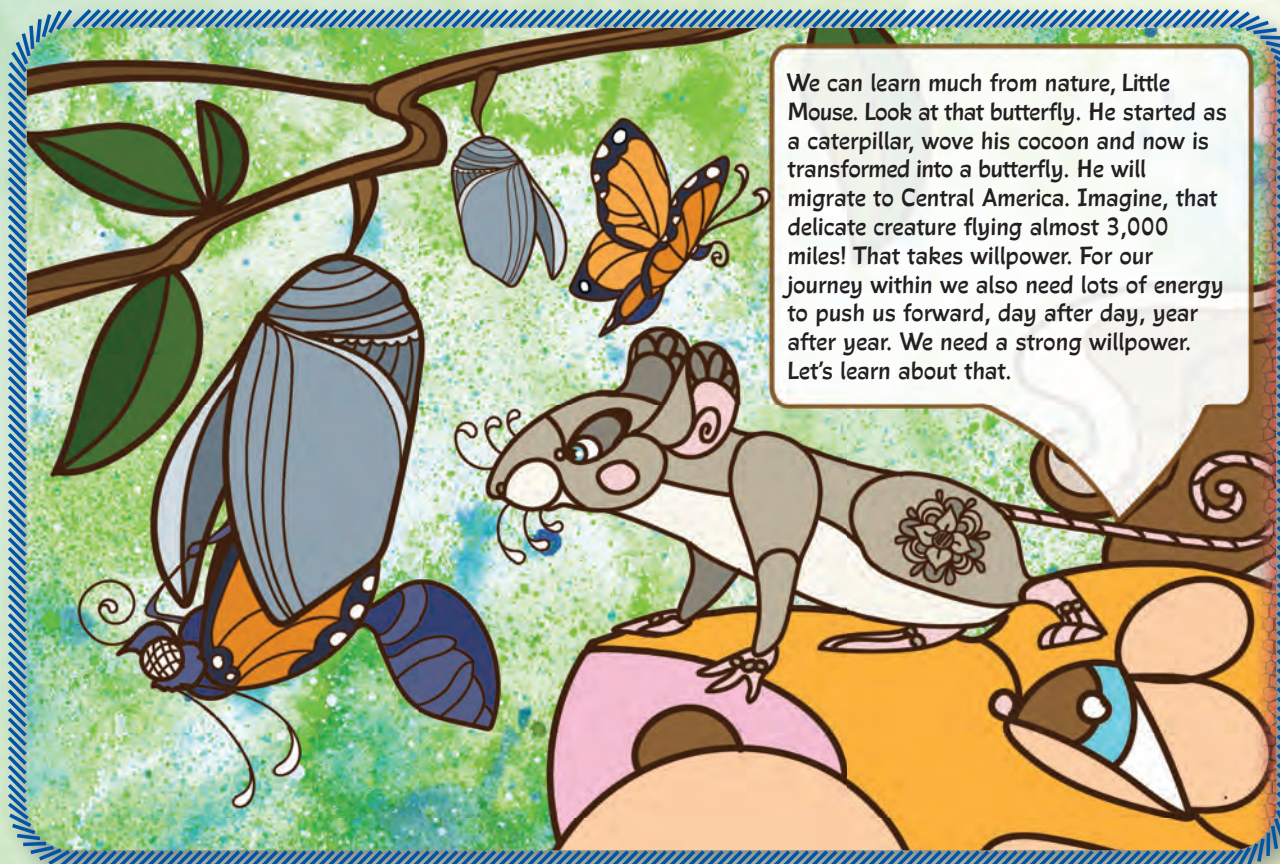
A lot of mice live in fear each day. Fear of storms. Fear of failure. Fear of bullies. Fear of the unknown. But yogis know how to control their mind, and they are not afraid of life. In fact, they welcome everything that happens. They know that Siva will protect them, day and night.



Willpower

Chapter 7, in which Mystic Mouse learns how to use his will, how to breathe properly and how to quiet his mind

SHUTTERSTOCK



Look at that mother bird in the tree. Day and night she looks after the needs of her chick. That's not an easy job, but she has the determination to do it. That is called willpower. It's what allows us in meditation to concentrate, to focus our energies and not be distracted. This means that if you decide to do something, you do it. You finish everything you begin. Always do a little more than you think you can. If you face a challenge, find a way to overcome it. This strengthens your will. Discover the will within you. It is very important.



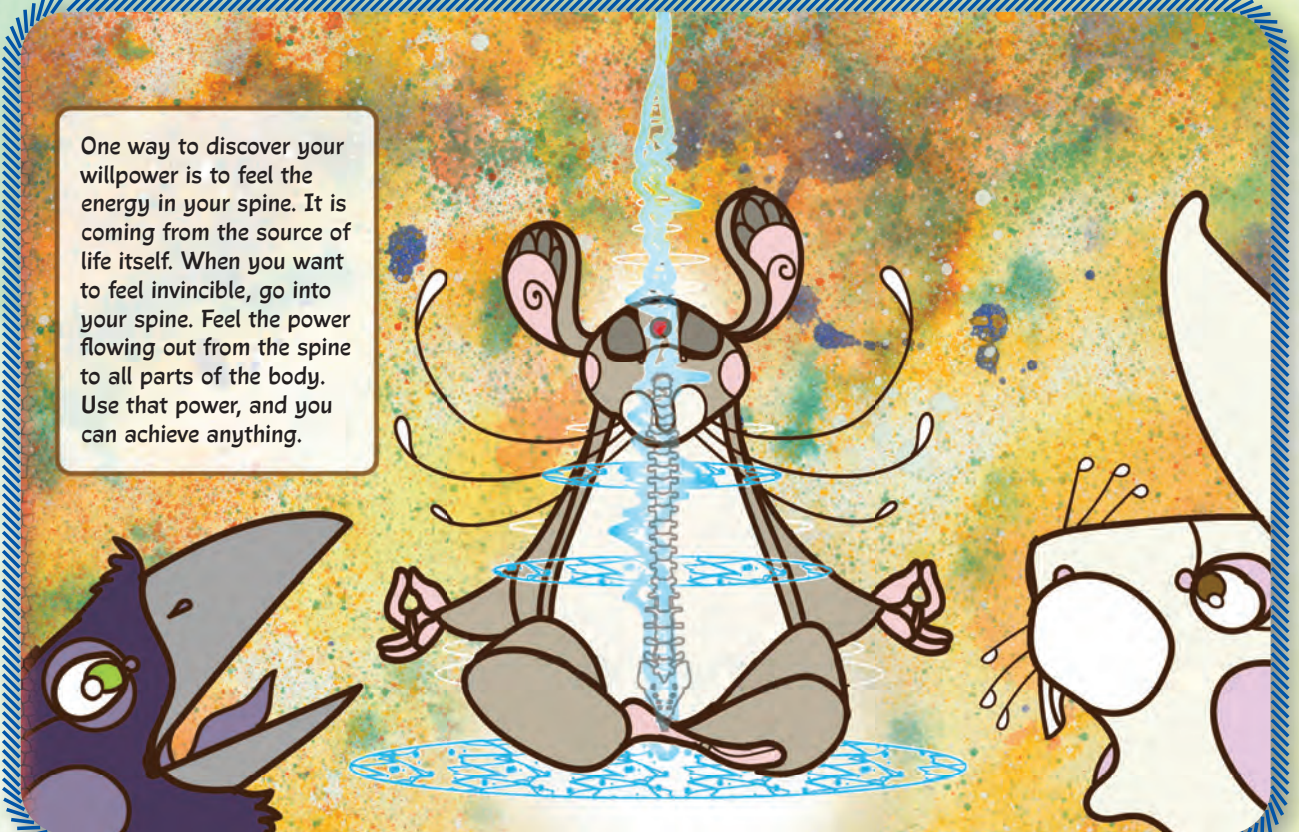
Willpower is like a muscle. The more you use it, the stronger it gets. If you are collecting sunflower seeds all day, the body gets tired. You want to quit and go home. But if you quit, you and your friends will go hungry, so you keep working until you have enough for dinner.

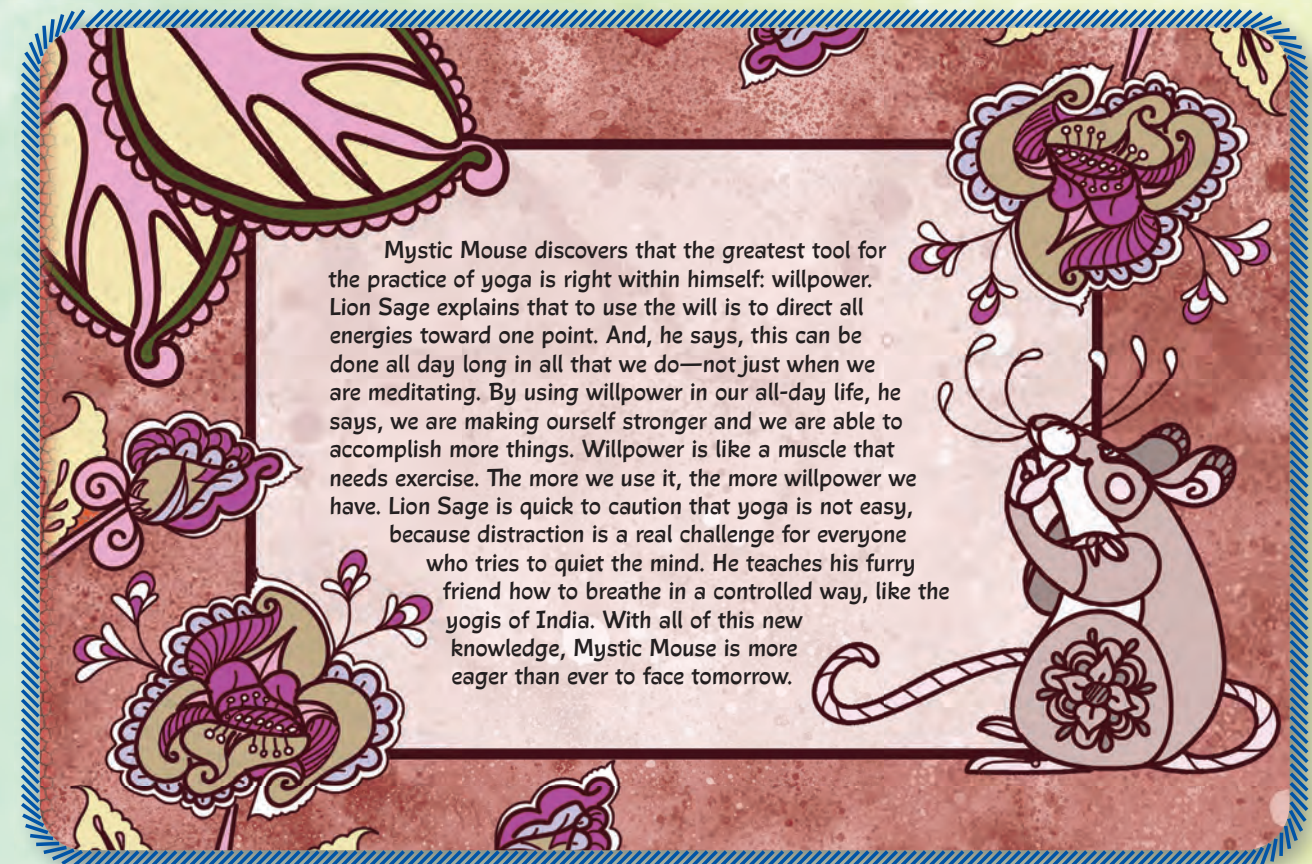
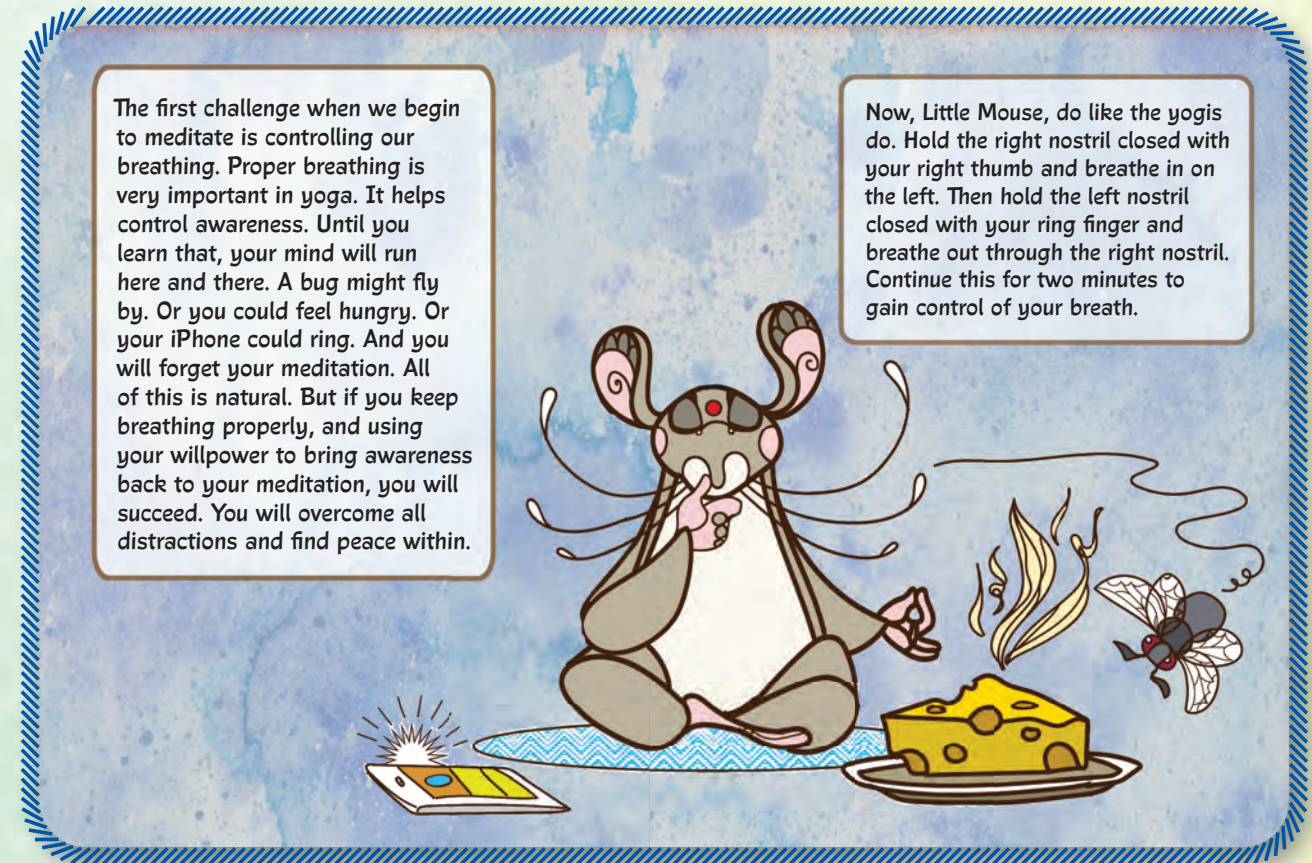
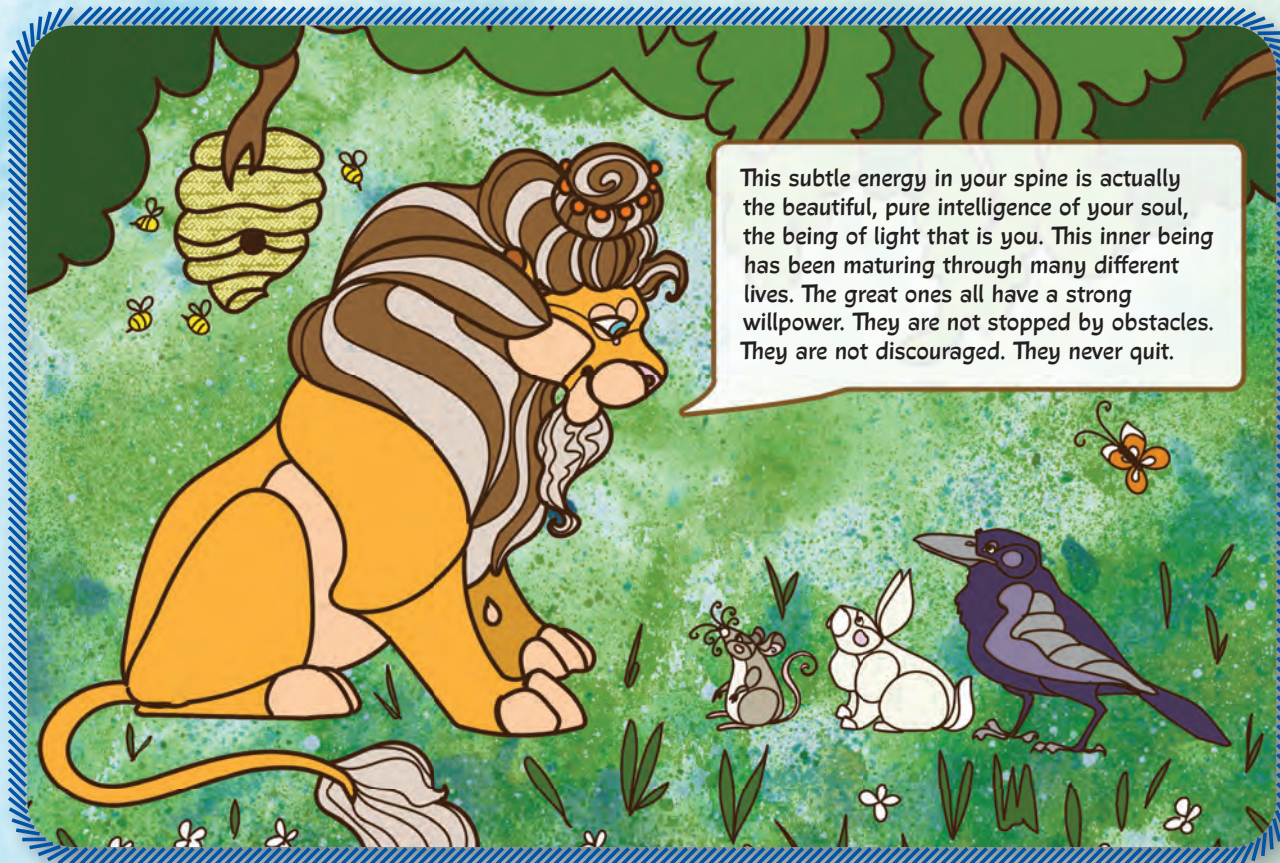
That mouse has a strong will to get things done.



Willpower is the fuel that carries awareness through all areas of the mind. Will is that spirit, that life force, that lets you achieve inner and outer goals. Nothing is impossible when you know how to use your unlimited power of will. You have all the willpower you need to finish any project that you have ever started, to do good things and handle your daily life in a positive and happy way. You just have to use your will. With a strong will, you could even climb the highest mountain on Earth.

One way to discover your willpower is to feel the energy in your spine. It is coming from the source of life itself. When you want to feel invincible, go into your spine. Feel the power flowing out from the spine to all parts of the body. Use that power, and you can achieve anything.







CLAIRE BURKERT

ARTS OF INDIA & NEPAL

Meet the Maithil Women Artists of Nepal

How a dynamic group is transforming a wall painting tradition

BY CLAIRE BURKERT, NEPAL

IN 1988, IN A MUD AND WATTLE HOME IN Southern Nepal, I photographed a painting of Lord Siva. The artist, an elderly woman named Sita Devi, had chosen to paint Siva in hopes that He would bless the marriage of her nephew and his new wife. The image (see photo on page 51) covered most of one wall in a room that had been converted into a *kohbar*, a wedding chamber.

What looked like propellers extending from Siva's head was His flyaway hair. His feet were not crossed in a dance, but rather, she corrected me, were folded in the lotus position: the blue shape between his bent legs defined the empty space there, and the squiggly lines on either side of him were the stripes of the tiger skin on which he was seated. Sita Devi, who learned to paint from her mother, told me wistfully, "The girls don't give painting attention any more. Their world is very different from my world. To them, how can a triangle be a nose?" Sita

Devi foretold what I would later perceive: the wall painting tradition of Maithil women of Nepal was about to disappear.

Mithila was once a kingdom extending over part of southeastern Nepal and India's state of Bihar. For generations, Maithil women passed from mother to daughter the practice of wall painting, which was often carried out on the occasion of weddings. Perhaps singing devotional songs as they worked, they called upon the Hindu Gods to bless a newly married couple and secure the well-being of their families. The paintings conformed to a shared Maithil style, with figures outlined first with black and then colors filled in later. Faces were often depicted in profile with wide almond-shaped eyes. Frequently, bold geometric or floral patterns bordered windows and the doorway of the house. Lotus flowers, bamboo, turtles and fish, symbolizing fertility and generations to come, were essential elements of a design made in the wedding chamber.

That the women painted out of deep faith and belief and not for personal expression or recognition moved me. I was a young American, not too long out of college art classes with their rigorous critiques and technical exercises. The paintings of Mithila (also known as Madhubani) were undertaken foremost for an audience of Gods. They were not subject to critical reviews and they were ephemeral. If the monsoon rains did not erase them, they were covered over with a mixture of fresh mud, dung and hay for Laxmi puja, the worship of the Goddess of wealth occurring in the autumn, or for Jur Sital, a spring festival of the new year. At these times, women and girls with mud-spattered faces were seen throughout the village, standing on ladders propped against walls and vigorously smearing mud and dung. The villages with their uniform mud and wattle walls and tile roofs looked pristine, gleaming, renewed. The walls were ready for new paintings.

COURTESY WELTMUSEUM



Maithil masters: (clockwise from right) Adi Shakti blesses a Covid-19 patient by Sudhira Karna; Sita Devi's Siva painting on the wall behind her daughter-in-law; self-portrait by Sudhira Karna; Siva Lingam puja by Anuragi Jha; Manjula Thakur with her wall paintings, 1988; exhibition in Vienna's Weltmuseum in 2019; Indrakala Nidhi paints a Sivalingam; (opposite) woman with auspicious elephants

But gradually Hindi movie posters were favored over painted images, and when brick and cement walls replaced the walls of traditional mud and wattle, these seemed to entirely block the inspiration to paint. Moreover, as Sita Devi had pointed out, the young girls were growing interested in different things.

I decided that the art should be documented and based myself in Janakpur, the legendary city of Sita and Ram's marriage. With the assistance of Professor Rajendra Bimal, a poet and professor of Maithili language, I toured villages in the vicinity of Janakpur. I could not have known then that what had begun as my simple quest to make portraits of the artists with their paintings would evolve into a lifelong commitment to Maithil women and their tradition of making art.

In the early years, on our long hot trips by foot and rickshaw to local villages, Professor Bimal coached me in Hinduism and Maithil culture. I learned there are 40 million Maithil in India and over three million in Nepal where I live. We witnessed the all-night rituals of weddings as well as other rituals related to marriage, such as Dwiragman, when a bride arrives at her new husband's home to take up life with his family. I first learned about Dwiragaman when I visited the home of ninety-year-old Baachani Devi, who had painted for this occasion the God Dharmaraj. This God who judges one's destiny based on one's deeds was a somber choice for a painting to welcome the bride of her great-nephew, and I often wondered how the bride fared in her new home.

And so it was that steadily the paintings on the walls led me behind the walls, to the private lives and concerns of the women artists and their families. I was aware of their poverty, and the strife that a lack of resources caused in the household. There were some women who were too shy to speak: most memorably there was Manjula, who hid from me, speaking in a whisper from behind a door, the edge of her sari pulled over her face, the custom in the presence of strangers. I could not have foreseen that one day Manjula would be calling me on her mobile phone, that she would be manager of a group

PHOTOS COURTESY CLAIRE BURKERT



SATISH KUMAR



COURTESY CLAIRE BURKERT

Creative campus: (above) Author Claire Burkert gathers with the staff and artists of the JWDC in the open courtyard for a family portrait; (right) screenshot from a YouTube video showing artist Rebti Mandal painting at the center

of women artists from communities all around Janakpur, and that she would have traveled internationally five times to represent works of Maithil art on paper. "If I had not traveled, I couldn't have become what I am today. Now I am confident and share my thoughts," she recently explained.

Bimal and I traveled to India where I witnessed what had happened when paper was introduced to the wall painting tradition. In the 1960s, in an effort for draught relief, Pupul Jayakar, chair of the All-India Crafts Board, had the vision to help women earn income by selling their paintings on paper. In the village of Jitwarpur I was lucky to meet the famous Sita Devi, whose son Surya Dev explained to me, "During a terrible draught, artist Bhaskar Kulkarni came to the village and at first was giving Mother only a few pieces of paper, then more and more. Soon it was Mother who earned all our money. Now the demand is so high, every day Mother is making lines and I am putting in color." By

1981, Sita Devi had won great acclaim, including one of India's highest civilian awards, the Padma Shri. Her example had inspired hundreds of Maithil women to continue to paint and earn income for their families.

In 1989 I returned to the villages around Janakpur with a grant and my photo-documentation, always delighted when I could locate the artists whose images I'd captured more than a year earlier. In a rented space in Janakpur the artists came together to paint Gods and auspicious animals on paper just as they had been made on village houses. We used Nepali hand-made paper, which had a texture similar to mud walls. Among these first artists was Anuragi Jha, now revered as a master artist of Janakpur. Never in a hurry, Anuragi painted with delight and intensity. I noted how her art was always puja, it was always an act of worship. When she applied color with her brush, it was as if she was applying sindhur and rice paste to an offering. In 1994, after the establishment of

the Janakpur Women's Development Center, Anuragi explained her paintings in this way: "With painting comes faith that there will be no pain. Going to the temple is the most important thing. But since I must work, why not do my worship by painting Gods at the center? The God I love the most is Hanuman. He is the strongest of the Gods. You can identify my paintings because of the Gods, but also because I fill in space completely. I have to concentrate to make sure colors alternate properly. In many paintings I also draw parrots and elephants, because these bring happiness."

Establishing the Art Center

In 1991 the artists joined together to found a non-governmental organization, the Janakpur Women's Development Center (JWDC), which would preserve the painting tradition and bring new opportunities to local women. In 1994, the founders bought land and built a beautiful workspace. My journal records the day in 1994 when we conducted a puja to bless the foundation. The potter leaned over a hole with a kailash painted with sindhur and filled with mango leaves. The artists and

I pronounced our hopes that their daughters' daughters' daughters would work here one day. Manjula's elderly father-in-law recited mantras in Sanskrit while I showered handfuls of flowers onto a banana leaf over the entombed pot. Her father-in-law ladled water onto the pot with a spoon fashioned from a leaf. With this sprinkling of holy water, the intensity of colors under the hot sky, and each of us holding a handful of flowers, we felt rich. The potter shoveled dirt over the flower-strewn pot and the laborers were fed blessed sweets and pieces of cool cucumbers. We knew a fresh chapter was beginning for us, in a space that was the artists' own.

The new workplace, designed by the late Australian artist Robert Powell, celebrated the vernacular architectural style of traditional mud houses. The artists coated the brick buildings with mud and dung and sculpted traditional relief designs of Hanuman and Sita, along with auspicious tigers, peacocks and elephants. In time, when scarcely any mud walls could still be found in the villages, the JWDC became a popular destination where visitors could see how buildings in the past were decorated.

How It's Done... See a Documentary, or Two

The artists paint on paper made from the daphne plant. The paper is handmade in workshops in the Kathmandu Valley and in the hills of Nepal. First the women draw an outline, and then they fill in the color. While in the past the paints were made from natural materials, today commercial acrylic paints are commonly used. The arts and crafts produced here have become known as "Janakpur Art." Currently the center trains and employs 40 women who work at the center to produce fine art, textile (silkscreen and embroidery), ceramics and paper mache crafts.

They have become project oriented as well. Among their projects is one called Smoke Pollution Awareness. Many rural households in Nepal still use firewood and animal dung for cooking. These have had a detrimental health affects on the lives of children and especially women, who are in the kitchen the most. To raise awareness,



JWDC engaged and paid rural women artists to make traditional style sketches that depicted smoke's problems and solutions. These art pieces are on prominent displays in selected communities.

The JWDC has adapted the traditional imagery from their paintings to other crafts. They make and sell painted masks, children's books, mirror frames, trays, buckets and even watering cans. The sewing section makes embroidered toys and ornaments inspired by the Gods, auspicious animals, vegetables and fruits. The printing section screen-prints traditional designs and patterns onto table covers, greeting cards, posters and bags. Special orders are also possible. The adaptable artists have painted on commission myriad subjects from personal portraits to instructive infographics for NGOs and UN projects that are concerned with disaster management, health education and meeting millennium goals.

Their wide-ranging products can be seen in the JWDC's catalogue, available on request. You can write to: **Janakpur Women's Development Center**, Kuwa Village, Ward #12, District Dhanusha, Nepal

For information on purchasing, please reach out to: contact.jwdc@gmail.com Satish Kumar Sah, Manager. (977) 9800803040. Website: jwdcnepal.org Facebook: Janakpur Women's Development Center @jwdcnepal; Instagram: jwdcnepal

Numerous documentaries can be found on YouTube. These include:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ri6WHN6suUM>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8orIX4o-ILw&t=20s>



Today as then: (clockwise from above) Maithil women celebrate the Chhath festival, praying in a pond that is lined with offerings; a painting of women celebrating Chhath by Suhagbati Saha; a young girl watches Manjula paint at the International Folk Art Market in Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA, 2019

The fine art and crafts of the center steadily became recognized within Nepal and then internationally. The artists and craftsmen began to innovate, taking up different themes and experimenting with various media. In 2019, their work was shown at the Welt Museum in Vienna, in conjunction with a major exhibit of contemporary art in Nepal called Nepal Art Now.

That same year, following their involvement in several education and health projects (including a comprehensive diabetes awareness program), the artists were nominated by the International Folk Art Market for a Community Impact Award. Manjula traveled to Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA, to represent the artists at the awards ceremony, to sell arts and crafts in the Folk Art Market, and to demonstrate her painting skills. She recalls proudly, "Someone asked me to paint Narasimha, the avatar of Vishnu. They were awestruck and asked me how I had memorized the image. When I said I painted out of my imagination, they smiled and told me how they loved my painting of the Lion God."

Many of the JWDC artists have recently

returned to previous practices of making ritual art. Unforeseen at the time the artists first joined together was that one day there would be a new demand for art and objects used in traditional Maithil rituals. In the past the making of paintings and objects had been undertaken by most of the women in a Maithil household, but today many women do not have the time, inclination or knowledge to make paintings for the wedding chamber or to build clay objects such as the small elephants necessary for the bride's worship of Goddess Gauri. The center, therefore, retains memory and skills for the future.

Janakpur Art and Faith Today

I miss the villages painted as they once were. I miss the paintings for their aesthetic beauty and for the faith they represented. Painting the walls requisitioned the Gods to look after the welfare of women's families. I have worried that as the women no longer paint on the walls, a vital connection to the Gods may have been interrupted. Indeed, much in the world has changed. Has their faith changed? Were paintings made on paper disconnected

from religious belief?

One early morning when I woke in artist Manjula's village, she and two neighbor women were gathered on the clay floor of her kitchen, rolling little pieces of clay. It was an intimate scene, this early meeting in darkness, as the women huddled and whispered



prayers to Siva and sang:

Mahadev goes to Himavan's (King of the Himalayas) palace on His bull to woo a daughter of Himavan. He marries one and then goes again on His bull to woo another daughter.

Each little roll of clay represented Mahadev (Siva) and was joined with others to make clumps of 100, and then these were joined to make 1,000 and sometimes they would make even 11,000, 15,000 and 25,000.

When the sun rose, Manjula and the two other artists walked to the nearby Lingam bringing the clumps of clay formed by joining the little rolls to make offerings to Siva. The clumps were scattered with jasmine flowers, and they took as well the leaves of a bael tree, the sacred tree whose leaves and fruit Siva is known to be fond of. When Manjula finished her worship, Mahadev was hidden in a corner of a storage room.

An additional large wedge of clay she called "Old Mahadev." To this wedge she added a pair of eyes. To me, these abstract objects created to represent and worship Siva required imagination as well as faith. How different they were than the paintings the artists had made of Him. Even elderly Sita Devi's loose depiction of Siva on her kohbar wall had looked more to me like how I had imagined Siva to look than these clumps of clay.

And so I asked Manjula about painting for income at the JWDC. Did it require faith—or was it now just a job? Was the image of a God that she painted on paper for sale at the JWDC as meaningful as a God represented

in a lump of clay that she made at home in a ritual?

She answered obliquely by showing me a painting of Meera Bhagwati, surrounded by images of Krishna playing His flute to please Her. "Before making this image, I had so many troubles in my house," Manjula explained. "The environment in my house was so bad that sometimes I did not eat in the evening. So I prayed to Goddess Meera Bhagwati and then I thought to paint her. When I was painting Her image I was not only painting but also praying to Her to solve my problems. My prayers were listened to and She brought peace into my life at home."

"It is the same when I paint God Ganesh," Manjula continued. "I think of the well-being of my family. Ganesh has always helped me. And tales of the *Ramayana* are very important for me. Ram, Sita and Lakshman faced problems in their lives just like we face in our lives. It gives me satisfaction that my problems are no different than the problems faced by Gods and Goddesses in the *Ramayana*. "When I paint the Gods," Manjula added, "I know they will be happy to see their images."

I asked other artists about their relationship to the Gods when painting at the JWDC. Sudhira is an artist of the Kayastha caste who knows well the auspicious imagery of the



kohbar and can make different *aripana* (rice paste designs) for at least eight occasions. She likes to paint Krishna, she explains, as He brought peace to every era. "I cannot paint until I feel God," Sudhira told me. "Painting images of God is like worshipping. I am grateful to the Gods that they gave me a chance to make Their images. I feel someday God may appear to me out of my painting. And I think

it is important that I am working as per Their wish."

Artist Amrita Dutta made a distinction between paintings made for rituals and the paintings made at the center: "We do not paint on the ground as carefully as we paint on paper. Before I paint on paper I know I must make my painting saleable, so I take extra care when painting images of Gods or

rituals. And when I paint Gods, I know that they will be happy that I remember them by painting their images."

The artists often like to turn the lens on themselves, illustrating scenes of the rituals that they perform at home or in sacred spaces. Amrita explained that when she paints rituals, she imagines enacting each step so as to accurately evoke every detail. Popular

amongst the artists are paintings of Chhait puja, during which women worship the Sun God, Surya, and Chauchan, when they worship the moon. Janakpur is renowned for the worship of these two deities.

During the spectacular Chhait puja, the banks of Janakpur's ponds are lined with baskets of colorful offerings. Wading into the pond at sunset and dawn, women hold the offerings up to the sun and pray for the well-being of their families. According to artist Madhumala Mandal, "When I make a painting about Chhait puja, I feel as if I were standing in the pond and offering fruit to the Sun God. It is important to me to paint rituals, as they are part of my life." When the artists paint Chhait puja, they paint a square in the center, which is the pond, containing worshipers holding baskets of fruit. They are often surrounded by fish and turtles, Mithi-

la's symbols of fecundity. The square pond is lined with ceramic pots decorated with rice paste and red powder, as well as ceramic elephants that hold oil lights, stalks of bananas, and platters of sweets such as *thekuwa*, the special cookies made for this occasion using a mold the shape of a leaf.

What the artists have told me is that God is everywhere, and He is also invoked in multiple forms. In the ritual for Mahadev, He is invoked in a clump of clay. At the center, where they paint for income, He is invoked in a way that from mother to daughter they have learned to paint Him. Painting a God on paper can also be an act of worship.

Today the artists also paint scenes of the life they observe around them. For instance, they have made detailed paintings of vehicles, roadwork and brick kilns, subjects reflecting changes in the landscape and the city. Lately many paintings are themed around Covid-19, showing families being tested for Covid, a relief plane arriving with food during the lockdown, and masked travelers on buses. I asked the artists, where are the Gods in this tumultuous time?

Rebti answered my question with a painting of people she's observed in her village, sitting in a rice field to worship Bhagwati with kheer and other sweets, thanking the Goddess for Her care in the time of Covid.

Sudhira answered that it is Adi Shakti, with Her supreme power, who is keeping people safe from the virus. Her painting shows Janaki with protective arms spread wide. 🍷



Author Claire Burkert, the founder of the Janakpur Women's Development Center, is an American based in Kathmandu. For over 30 years she has worked with artists in Nepal, Vietnam, Myanmar, Tibet, Gaza and Turkey. Her articles and publications, including *Himalayan Style* (Roli, 2014), focus on indigenous traditions of architecture, craft and design.



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Social messaging: (clockwise from above left) To address the issue of healthy eating in their community, the JWDC artists perform a drama using their own painted props of vegetables; hand-made cell phones were used in a drama depicting changes that the artists have experienced; hand-painted dolls representing Goddess Lakshmi are popular items in the JWDC gift shop.

My Family's Covid Wedding

Ingenuity, improvisation and inspiration made it a great event



BY SHAINA GROVER, 16, IRVINE, CALIFORNIA
HUNDREDS OF GUESTS, ENOUGH FOOD to last a lifetime, countless celebrations and traditions to follow, elaborate decorations and who knows how many flowers. These are probably just a few of the things that pop into your head when you encounter the words "Indian wedding." You probably don't imagine a giant TV with people's faces on it via [zoom.com](https://zoom.us). But unusual circumstances call for unusual responses.

In America, it is popular to host a Hindu wedding at a grand hall rented out for the weekend. It's probably not held inside your house. During the Covid-19 pandemic, my Uncle Lokesh got married. Where? In my backyard. You might think it was a small, simple wedding, but that's where you'd be wrong. My mom, dad, grandparents, aunt-to-be, uncle, sister and I were able to keep the grand feeling of a Hindu wedding with 200 guests, albeit mostly remote, while still taking the necessary safety precautions and inviting no additional in-person guests (except for the priest) for the three-day affair.

If this were a novel or Bollywood movie, the couple would have met on a perilous journey while trying to save the world or on a train in a foreign country. But in 21st-century pandemic reality, they met through a dating website. Once their relationship got serious, the families got involved. Because my aunt's family was in India and my grandparents were here, most of the communication between the families happened over the phone. My uncle's side of the family got to meet and get to know my aunt Neha very well (my sister and I started calling her *aunt* well before the wedding). Because the families were involved from a fairly early stage, I would call this a "semi-arranged marriage."

We knew in 2019 that the wedding was going to happen soon, so on our trip to India that summer, we bought the majority of our clothes—and, of course, we couldn't have just bought any random colors, we had to coordinate them. Endless calls to my uncle and grandparents, waking them up at four in the morning, and three extra suitcases later, we finally finished our main clothes shopping. At the time, we had no idea Covid-19 was about to happen, so we even got small return-gifts and bags for the expected guests coming to California—all of which are sit-



ting today in our garage waiting for a party to hand out.

Covid-19 completely caught us off guard. Our initial plans of having a wedding in a grand hotel's hall with hundreds of guests from across the country went completely down the drain. We had to start our planning from scratch, staying up several nights until three in the morning discussing logistics, making schedules and planning potential menus for each day—because we had to make the food ourselves. People think planning such an event, especially if scaled down, is easy. But after the wedding, my uncle says he now has "so much respect for the wedding planning industry where they do events like this day in and day out on an even larger scale. This experience was definitely a good learning lesson for all of us about thinking outside the box in order to work out the details based on the circumstances."

Each event or ceremony of the wedding had a coordinated outfit. For example, everyone wore gowns (suits for the men) at the engagement, floral and Banarasi saris at the Ganapati puja, yellow at the haldi ceremony, and green for the mehendi. For the wedding, my aunt had a maroon lehenga (ankle-length skirt) with gold accessories, and my uncle's sherwani long coat was gold with maroon accessories. My parents and grandparents all wore gold lehengas and sherwanis, and you could even say they were as decked out as the

bride. My sister and I maintained the pastel colors theme with matching lehengas in different colors. And of course, masks. Everyone got masks to match their outfits ahead of time so our pictures wouldn't look too weird.

My aunt-to-be came to stay at our house fourteen days in advance for a self-imposed quarantine after she had been Covid-19 tested, to ensure that everyone was safe. She stayed in my sister's room, which had a bathroom attached.

We couldn't have in-person guests, but celebrated with family and friends virtually. My aunt's parents and relatives in particular weren't able to come to the US due to Covid-19 restrictions, so for every event, there would be a computer live-streaming from our living room. Personally, I think this setup with video for the relatives could become the new norm, especially with the hassle of getting visas for Indians. During the wedding and engagement, we invited all of my uncle and aunt's friends to join us through Zoom. The wedding altar included a TV with the faces of everyone who attended—not something you see at a regular wedding. For key events, one computer was set specifically for my aunt and uncle's family so we could see them at all times. Their friends were able to see what was happening through a separate setup with a phone camera.

The next obstacle was decorations. We obviously couldn't hire a professional wedding planner, so we had to figure out a way to have grand decorations that were quick and easy to put up and take down. We put up stands with various backdrops, decorated a canopy tent for the altar with curtains, flowers and more backdrops, and put down a fancy red carpet with Rajasthani umbrellas along the edge, all of which gave the whole backyard an elegant look. We also decorated the living room and switched between there and the backyard for different ceremonies.

Another casualty of Covid-19 was a photographer. We did our best with our SLR camera, ring lights and a tripod, and I'd say the pictures turned out really well.

The wedding preliminaries started on Saturday, November 28, with Ganesh puja performed by my grandparents. Usually the couple's formal engagement would have taken place weeks earlier, but that was also a casualty of Covid-19. Instead, we did a short



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY SHAINA GROVER

Still a great wedding: (clockwise from far left) bride and double-masked groom circumambulate the sacred fire; Lokesh and Neha Sharma Dua's wedding portrait; the eight family members (with writer Shaina fourth from right); the TV displays the Zoom connections worldwide during the engagement ceremony

version that evening with exchange of rings, gift of presents from the groom's family to the bride and speeches by family and friends, both in person and by Zoom. The traditional haldi purification ceremony for both bride and groom was held Sunday afternoon, and in the evening all the girls had mehendi done. Normally, you hire a professional to create the hand designs with henna dye, but we didn't want to have anyone in our house or touching us. Instead, we bought stencils online that only required us to fill in the designs with henna. Personally, I think it's cheating, but I guess we couldn't have done much else.

That evening, even though we didn't have guests to dance and sing with, the eight of us did pretty well. Everyone had individual or small group performances that they had prepared beforehand, including my sister and I, followed by everyone dancing to the music. The beauty of the wedding taking place inside our house was that once everyone got

tired, we just changed into our pajamas and went back to dancing in the living room.

The wedding, starting late Monday morning, was the only time someone not a part of the family entered our house. The priest arrived and did the basic pre-wedding pujas with my aunt and uncle in the living room, including a prayer for peace in the house, the *sehra* bandi ceremony where the groom's sister (my mom) tied a decorative veil to his turban and put a homemade garland of money on him (which at the end was given to my little sister, the youngest present).

The rest of the ceremonies were completed outside, the same as any other Hindu wedding with exchange of flower garlands, taking of vows, going around the *havana* fire seven times, putting on the mangal sutra, etc. During this entire time, we all wore masks, including the priest. In addition, my uncle wore the *shera*, bead mask, during parts of the ceremony when he wasn't supposed to see the bride. Everyone had a mini bottle of hand sanitizer with them, constantly sanitizing after touching anything.

With all the jewelry, masks were a serious hassle. My aunt's nose ring kept getting caught in the mask, and to top it all off, the heat, smoke and sweat made sitting still for an hour very uncomfortable.

Once the wedding was officially over, there were two more things to do, the first being the *ghar pravesh* (the bride's official welcome into the house) and the second, dinner. We actually did the *ghar pravesh* twice—once at our house immediately after the wedding, and once at my uncle's house, which we drove to right after.

Even in this most difficult of times, we were able to pull off this wedding, the first I have attended. It may not have been the most conventional, but it was an extraordinary experience nonetheless. My aunt and uncle told me they were "really glad that with the support of our family we were able to celebrate our big day as per Indian traditions, even though we were all stuck inside the house together. As a family, we all were able to make this event memorable to start a new chapter of our life."

About the Author

Born in Minnesota, Shaina Grover, 16, is a junior at Northwood High School in Irvine, California. She has an interest in STEM and enjoys traveling, dancing, reading and playing the violin. shaina.grover514@gmail.com

John Adams' View of Hinduism

America's second president wrote, "Where is to be found Philosophy more profound than in the Introduction to the [Hindu] Shasta?"

BY RUTVIJ HOLAY, 16, CALIFORNIA
THE HISTORY OF HINDU INFLUENCE IN American dates back to the founding of our nation itself. By studying it, one can gain insight into the Western arguments against Hinduism at that time, which were very much the same arguments that surround Hinduism today.

To find this influence, all one must do is look at the letters of the Founding Fathers themselves. Most know these men—Jefferson, Washington, Adams, etc.—for their work in creating the United States. In addition, it's moderately well known that Jefferson wanted religious liberty for non-Judeo-Christian faiths.

What is less known, however, is the profound respect John Adams, second president of the United States, had for Hinduism. Adams often engaged in the study of comparative theology, which is the idea of comparing various religions from the perspective of an outsider. Late in his life, long after his term as president, he began to study multiple non-Abrahamic religions, including Hinduism, and contrast them with Christianity.

In one such study, described in his letter to Thomas Jefferson on Christmas day in 1813 (bit.ly/Adams25), Adams noted similarities between Hinduism and Christianity. He praised the *Shastras* (which he spelled *Shastas*), noting that they emphasized how "It is enough that, day by day, and night by night, you adore his Power, his Wisdom and his Goodness, in his Works." This line, the idea that Brahman is in everything and bhakti alone can be sufficient, was hailed by Adams to be the most profound philosophy he had heard, and one written in Sanskrit with the elegance of Plato.

Since many in those days read the Western classics in their original languages, one wonders how Adams felt about learning Sanskrit. He did ask, in the rather complex English used at the time, that "Missionaries [sic] would import and translate Sanskrit, and Persian Books, we might possibly learn something useful from them that we do not know which might somewhat abate our Bigotry." It does seem that, though he knew the importance of learning the language, he did not know it himself.

This admiration and knowledge, however, becomes all the more impressive when placed in a wider context of a letter which was a rant Adams had gone on against the writings of one Joseph Priestley, a man whom he called "absurd, inconsistent, credulous and incomprehensible."

Priestley, a devout Christian, was a renowned chemist who discovered carbonated water. He was also a part-time comparative theologian who focused on non-Abrahamic religions. He wrote the *Comparison of the Institutions of Moses, with those of the Hindoos and other ancient nations* (bit.ly/PriestleyonHinduism) which was



SHUTTERSTOCK

intended to prove the superiority of Christianity over Hinduism by using the *Manusmirti* to show that Hinduism was an oppressive religion with "the most tedious and ridiculous observances," as Adams put it.

Adams disagreed vehemently with Priestley, claiming that he was too biased and "ought to have done impartial justice" to each religion. He cited the fact that Priestley praised Pythagoras and Greek culture, yet critiqued him on how he failed to mention Pythagoras' travels to India.

Later on, Adams claimed that the ideas of "Pythagoras and Plato, their contempt of Matter, flesh and blood, their almost Adoration of Fire and Water, their Metempsychosis [sic, theory of reincarnation]" were not solely their own, but "So evidently derived from India."

As to why he says this, it becomes clear once one looks at the ideas of Pythagoras and other Greek philosophers. These men prized fire, the Sun, water and many other elements of nature, to the point that they would salute the Sun every morning—a clear parallel with Sun salutations, or Surya Namaskar.

The Pythagorean diet was very strict. Not only were they vegetarians, they also were prohibited from eating certain foods such as eggs. While vegetarianism in and of itself may have been a coincidence, the banning of eggs, which are still considered nonvegetarian by most Indians, perhaps has a strong origin in India's sattvic diet.

Another key parallel that he brings up is based on the Greek concept of metempsychosis, or reincarnation. There is a large possibility this concept was taken from India, and the fact Adams brings up that there is no doctrine which attributes its origin to a Greek, and that various Indian sadhus such as Dandamis, from the 4th century bce, were well known to the Greeks during their lifetime, makes it even more likely that this is the case. Not only does Adams attribute the ideas of the Greeks to India, but he also attributes the ideas of the Egyptians to Hinduism as well, given that they worshiped cows—all of which is a striking difference to some modern academic claims, such as that Indic scripts have their linguistic foundation in Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Adams goes further and states the Christian concept of the Trinity, the commonly held idea that one God is split into the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, comes from the Hindu Trimurti of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshvara. This idea, along with the general idea of "not one, but not multiple," addressed by Shankaracharya, has been in Vedic thought for longer than Christianity has existed. Furthermore, seeing how the idea of the Trinity runs directly contradictory to Abrahamic monotheism, it makes sense that there may be a foreign origin to this conception.

Aside from these relatively minor issues, Adams disagreed with Priestley on the whole crux of his argument, pointing out that



Hinduism in America in the early 19th century:

(far left) John Adams (1735–1826), (right) Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), chemist and prolific intellectual of his time; Adams' personal copy of Priestley's book on Hinduism

Priestley was comparing the *Bible* with *Manusmriti*. Adams knew that the *Manusmriti* was inaccurate and full of contradictions, due to which it was not representative of Hindu thought. Rather, he felt that before a just comparison could be made between Hinduism and other religions, Priestley ought to have learned about the *Shastras*, "which are more honourable to the original Hindu Religion than anything he has quoted," before jumping to conclusions.

We don't know exactly what Adams meant by *Shastras*, which are just one part of the texts of Hinduism. It is possible Adams assumed that *Shastras* was a word for all holy books (though he did separate the *Vedas* from the *Shastras*). But Adams' point remains valid and is shared by many Hindu experts today. The *Manusmriti* was one of thousands of Hindu texts, no more well known than, say, the *Nitisara* of Kamandaki, until it was brought to prominence solely by the British, who wanted the easy way out when it came to crafting Hindu laws. That aside, the *Manusmriti* contains many contradictions and implausibilities—such as the position of women and the origins of various jatis—indicating it had no single author. The fact is, however, that the *Manusmriti* we are reading today, and the one that Priestley read centuries back, is very likely not the original version, and thus cannot accurately be used to judge Hindu culture. Having access to the exact *Shastras* which Adams read would enable us to gain an even fuller understanding of his works.

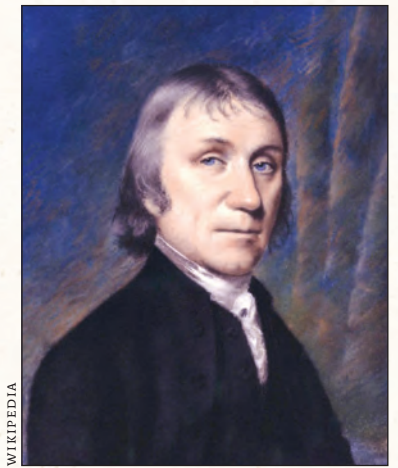
While we may never know which *Shastras* Adams read, his work is brilliant and relevant, especially today. Priestley's legacy still lives on, though he and those who studied him have passed. Middle and high school history textbooks, such as McGraw Hill, still extensively cite the *Manusmriti* (though, to their credit, they cite the *Gita* and *Ramayana* as well). At times they also subtly push a Judeo-Christian narrative, for example stating that the Israelites did not worship "false idols."

Adams' legacy has not been forgotten, though this chapter of his life has been, even by Hindus. The beliefs he held, the criticisms he made, are still being made today. As I read through his letters, it felt as if I was talking today to members of the Hindu Education Foundation or the Hindu University of America. Both of these organizations not only understand the tenets of Hinduism well, but also criticize the leading academicians of our day for their lack of attributions to Hinduism for its contributions to the world, as well as for continued attacks based on *Manusmriti*. In Adams' day, it was an amateur theologian such as Priestley. In our day, it's dozens of academics, at many universities throughout the world who very much follow the same narrative Priestley espoused. In general, philosophers try to improve the arguments of those who preceded them; Christian scholars have just doubled down on those original arguments.

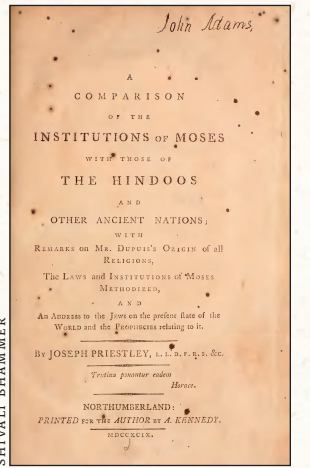
What the Hindu community forgets, however, is that if their

responses have stayed the same, then we have decades of scholarship behind us to back up our counter arguments as well. Not just Adams, many other great men—such as Thoreau, who lived in Christian-majority nations that have never been too sympathetic towards the pagan Hindus—have been defending our way of life in academia long before we started.

Instead of desperately trying to reinvent the wheel and come up with new arguments to the same fixed attacks on caste, polytheism and idolatry, we should dedicate ourselves to understanding the works of our predecessors.



WIKIPEDIA



SHIVALI BHAMMER

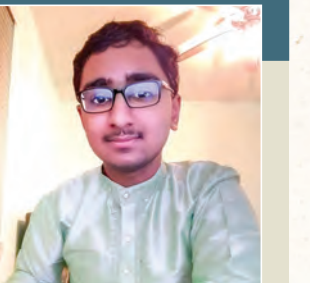
Adams on Priestley

"PRIESTLEY OUGHT TO HAVE TOLD US, THAT PYTHAGORAS passed twenty Years, in his Travels in India, in Egypt, in Chaldea, perhaps in Sodom and Gomorrah, Tyre and Sydon. He ought to have told Us that in India he conversed with the Brahmans and read the Shasta [sic], 5,000 years old, written in the Language of the Sacred Sanscrits with the elegance and Sentiments of Plato. Where is to be found Theology more orthodox or Philosophy more profound than in the Introduction to the Shasta? 'God is one, creator of all, Universal Sphere, without beginning, without End. God governs all the Creation by a general Providence, resulting from his eternal designs. Search not the Essence and the nature of the Eternal, who is one; your research will be vain and presumptuous. It is enough that, day by day, and night by night, you adore his Power, his Wisdom and his Goodness, in his Works. The Eternal willed, in the fullness of time, to communicate of his Essence and of his Splendor, to Beings capable of perceiving it. They as yet existed not. The Eternal willed, and they were. He created Birma, Vitsnow, and Sib.' These Doctrines, Sublime if ever there were any Sublime, Pythagoras learned in India and taught them to Zaleucus and his other disciples."

This article has given a brief foray into Adams' thought, yet far more remains to be found, amongst not only his works, but the works of other American greats such as Jefferson. From there, we will not only gain a greater understanding of the influence of Hinduism in this county, but also the arguments used to attack Hinduism then, and how they were countered, so we can more effectively defend Hinduism today.

About the Author

Rutvij Holay of Irvine, California, an executive committee member of Americans for Equality PAC and a budding Hindu political activist who is presently working with his local school district and a textbook company to change how Hinduism is depicted in education. He can be reached at rutvij.holay@gmail.com.



Dancing for Diwali: Hindu youth in New York prepare to perform a dance in celebration of our festival of lights



QUARTZ INDIA

INTERVIEWS

The Changing Face of Dharma in America

Our reporter asks Hindus throughout the United States to comment on important issues we confront in the country today

BY LAVINA MELWANI, NEW YORK

THE FLOURISHING OF HINDUISM IN America has generated many questions. How does one answer them? A snapshot of our history in America can start by showing how far we've come.

When the first Indian immigrants came to America in the 1900s, all were simply known as "the Hindoos"—no matter what their faith—and were unwelcome in this new world. They were not allowed to bring their families or become citizens. Still they came, trying to create a foothold for themselves in this foreign land.

The 1965 Immigration Act enabled Hindus to bring their families to the US, and soon these few migrants swelled. Census statistics show there are now nearly four million Indians in the US; of these, 54 percent are Hindus. In addition, there are many non-Indian Hindus. One thing is certain: through difficult days and trying circumstances, many Hindus have held fast to the faith of their forefathers and the rituals they grew up with.

The earliest temples built by this pioneer community were makeshift, low-profile shrines in people's homes and basements. Diwali was celebrated in isolation. To wear a bindi on the forehead or a sari was to attract unwelcome attention. Few can forget

the racist Dotbuster attacks in the 80s, when Indians were attacked by white gangs.

Over the years things have changed for Hindus in America. Most important has been the massive surge of the Indian population in the country—and the birth of first-, second- and even third-generation Indian-American children. Many of the scattered storefront temples and humble basement gatherings have metamorphosed: there are now close to 450 temples across America, attended by many different denominations of Hindus, with hundreds of Hindu priests to guide growing congregations.

Hindus are a highly diverse population. They come not only from India but many countries, ranging from Nepal to Malaysia to the Caribbean. Different groups have embraced the faith in different ways. Many have lived here for five decades, while others are fresh off the boat.

Hindus have adapted to America in many ways. Some old customs have been jettisoned, others reinterpreted, and new ones created. The children, in particular, have adjusted and adapted. Some may have given up their religion totally, some have clung to it even more rigidly, and others have redesigned it to fit their life in the US.

The immigrants and their American chil-

dren have brought their own nuances to Hinduism. Many Hindus have intermarried with Americans of other religions and must now rearrange and adjust their faith. Hindu children, growing up among many different religions, races and cultures, also see Hinduism through a different lens.

To explore where Hinduism is headed in America—and whether some of these changes have also been affecting society in India—HINDUISM TODAY interviewed five noted leaders for their opinions: **Dr. Uma Mysorekar**, president of the Hindu Temple Society of North America in Flushing, NY; **Dr. Vasudha Narayanan**, distinguished professor of religion at the University of North Florida; **Swami Ishwarananda** of the Chinmaya Mission; **Dr. Sthaneshwar Timalsina**, a graduate of the Sanskrit University and professor of religious studies at San Diego State University; and **Swami Parameshananda**, the New-York-based United Nations and international representative for Bharat Sevashram Sangha. To include a younger voice, we also spoke with **Anu Singh**, a recent graduate from Rice University with a B.A. in kinesiology, who is an active participant in the Hindu student group YUVA.

Culture, Tradition and Community

"Let's first understand the difference between three often-used terms: *culture*, *tradition* and *community*," said **Swami Ishwarananda**. "*Culture* is the way of life from one's homeland, including food, festivals, language, religious practices and art; this is often adapted to one's new surroundings, as when a person moves from one state to another in India. *Tradition* is less fluid. Here, there are set norms and practices handed from one generation to another with the expectation that they be explicitly followed. Traditions are intimately connected to religious beliefs. *Community* refers to living together as a society governed by the laws of the land. A community may consist of people freely practicing different cultures and traditions, without insisting that others to do the same."

How to Handle Modern Fads & Fashions?

What are your thoughts on trends, such as using religious hymns set to Bollywood music at home or in temple satsang, and wearing Western clothes when visiting the temple?

"I guess accommodation seems to be in order in the US—one needs to consider work situations and weather when thinking about clothes," says **Dr. Narayanan**. "While some temples speak about 'modest clothes' (usually in reference to women), others are more specific. In South India, some temples require men to take off their shirt and wear a dhoti; that is hardly done at all in the United States."

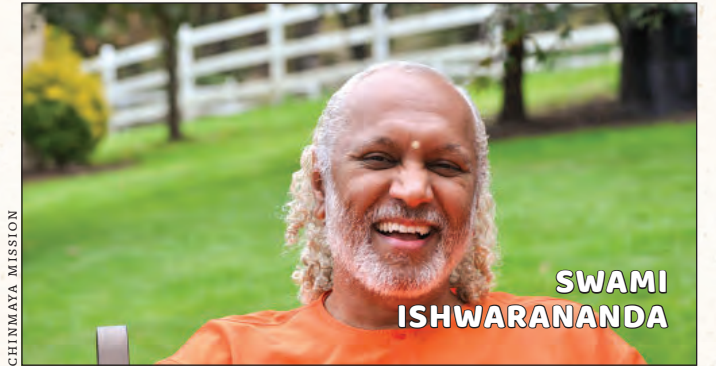
She believes music, like language, is constantly evolving. Some prayers must be said with specific intonations, but other songs are set to catchy tunes. "I think it's a compromise between wanting to transmit the message, focusing on it—or stick to tradition and lose

the transmission. Parents, religious institutions and teachers, in every generation, are in search of that ideal spot."

Swami Parameshananda asserts that traditional mandir music should always be the norm and Bollywood-style music avoided at all times. "If we become too liberal, then there goes morality and ethics, the backbone of a good foundation. We can always carry a change of clothes if we anticipate going to temple. It is all in the planning. Pray, make your offering, meditate, take prasadam and leave. It is all about God, not man."

Swami Ishwarananda says, "Music has no language, neither does love. The love for God should be allowed full expression, irrespective of the kind of music in which the Lord's glory is sung."

Clothing, he says, should always be appropriate to the place. "Would we wear pajamas to work or shorts to a gala? Would shorts be permitted for worship in a church



CHINMAYA MISSION

SWAMI ISHWARANANDA

or mosque? I doubt it. What one wears to a place of worship should not be distracting. It should not evoke passion and lust in the people around. Let's be clear, this applies to men and women alike. Offensive slogans on T-shirts are another problem and should be avoided in a place of prayer and worship."

Sthaneshwar Timalsina does not think a dress code is practical, but everyone should be respectful of the sacred area and dress modestly. As for music, he says, "While popular songs might be quick to catch the minds of the youngsters, they lack the *rasa*, the transformative power. We need to educate people on the significance of the shastric modes. Imposing the ways of the elders in a dogmatic way would only deter the younger generation from going to temple or participating in rituals."

How Can We Inspire More Youth Participation?

It is common for youth of any religion raised in America to become non- or even anti-religious shortly after entering college. What can be done to counter these trends among Hindu youth?

"This is sad but true," says **Swami Ishwarananda**. "The trends in social media, movies and TV shows have become mostly anti-tradition and anti-religious, and unfortunately the younger generation in America believe in these more than what is taught by their parents or religious institutions."

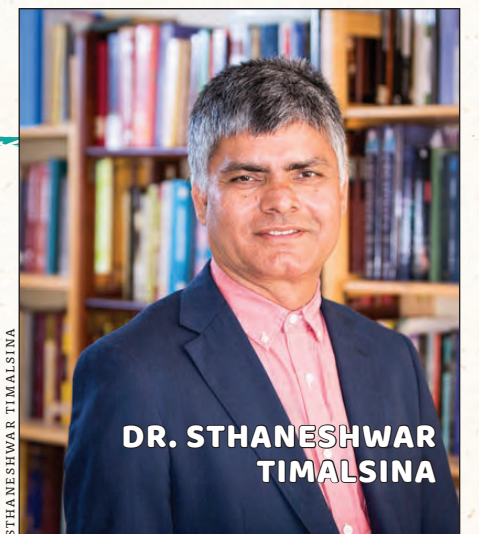
To counter this trend, he says, "parents should make extra effort to maintain friendly conversations with teens at home regarding values to be practiced and have them come together to serve the community through temple events and religious organizations. When they identify with an organization

that stands for social welfare based on religious faith, there is hope."

Swami Parameshananda agrees: "One of the trends we are seeing is that Hindu youths don't attend mandirs, and it gets worse when they enter into higher-education institutions. Some will attend festivals as a form of socializing. Some will attend mandirs because they are musicians or singers. The solution? Create short inspirational talks in English on social media."

He says while working with HMEC (Hindu Mandirs Executive Conference), he observed a youth wing that studied and promoted youth involvement in all aspects of a mandir's operation, including management and planning. Youth, he asserts, should not be regarded simply as support or for following orders from elders.

Dr. Narayanan avers, "Actually, I also see



STHANESHWAR TIMALSINA

DR. STHANESHWAR TIMALSINA

some students who become very religious. Visiting other private universities, I encounter Hindu chaplains who seem to fill a lacuna. In these situations, something is lost when something is found. The students do get to know features of Hindu rituals and philosophy, but some of them may be generic and not the heritage rituals done in that student's

home. Ideally, one continues with the rituals of their childhood and the communities to which their parents belong.”

She suggests a solution: “Many universities offer courses in Hinduism, religion, Indian history, art and so on. Parents may want to encourage their children to take these. I have also seen parents get nervous if their children take too many humanities courses

or courses which are not directly affiliated with a professional curriculum. I hope that in time they will show interest in these areas of specialization also.”

Anu Singh shares her experience of growing up in Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh: “We had positive interactions with the local community, such as tying rakhis to police officers and firefighters, honoring schoolteach-

ers in Guru Vandana, and holding food drives with local food pantries. The main benefit I see is increasing awareness of Hindus within the greater community and showing that we are also valuable members of society beyond just practicing our religion.”



ANU SINGH

in children’s participation, according to their ages and interests, with the younger children being more involved: “The balavihars and story-telling work at a younger age; the challenge is to find ways to keep kids interested. But let us not forget that many young men and women also learn a lot about Hindu culture through the music and dance classes they have when young.”

Sthaneshwar Timalsina believes this is still a work in progress, and some temple organizations such as the Swaminarayan temples do a great job. “We have not created enough themes for attracting the young generation to the temple activities. Back home, children learned rituals and beliefs from cultural osmosis; but here, that is not possible. So temple organizations need to be more youth-oriented. And that will be possible only when they are more open-minded and less dogmatic.”

Anu Singh says, “In many colleges, there

is a trend to become anti-Hindu and identify as South Asian but still practice the surface culture of Hinduism. Anything positive about our heritage is put under the blanket of South Asian, while Hinduism is portrayed as negative and superstitious.” The solution? “I think that youth should first be strong in their identity as Hindu. Then find like-minded people within your university or join a Hindu club on campus so that you can be stronger by associating with others.”

How Can We Make Temple Programs More Engaging?

It is common in some countries, such as Malaysia, for there to be active youth organizations attached to each temple who help especially with the celebration of festivals. To what extent are there programs in American temples that have successfully engaged the youth?

There seems to be a diverse landscape, with different organizations interacting with students at various levels. Says **Swami Ishwarananda**, “There are very few religious organizations and temples where the youth are active. The levels of activity are nowhere near as much as they could or should be. I would certainly hold the parents responsible for the lack of youth participation. Belonging to a faith-based organization does not make the youth antisocial or unable to meld in the mainstream, which most parents seem to think will happen.”

Dr. Narayanan has seen ups and downs

How Are Our Priests Faring?

What about the priests, who are the go-betweens, the interpreters of culture and religion? What about their lives is changing in America, and how will these changes impact future generations?

Dr. Narayanan believes that in general priests are stable, but salaries and long hours vary from temple to temple. Many temples were a bit more secure in earlier days, because there were fewer of them. Now, cities like Atlanta or Houston have dozens of temples in the suburbs. Many are in their early years and may struggle a bit.

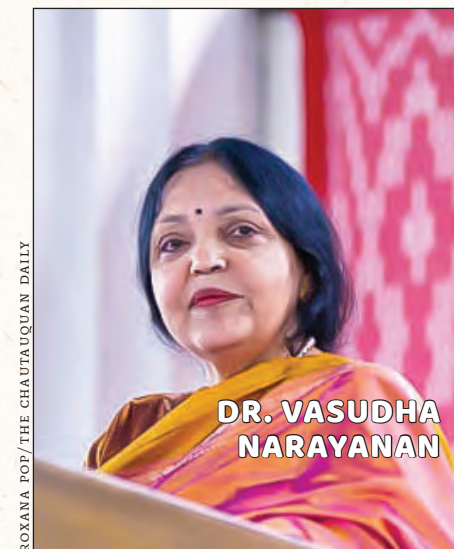
Sthaneshwar Timalsina says the situation is complex: while temple organizations are quite sufficient in themselves, or even rich, priests are broadly exploited. “Often priests are used as servants and expelled for not bowing enough to the trustees. Most priests come from poor families, and they are exploited with the promise of the green card. Often they are asked to not develop their own social network.” He urges that before a priest is brought to the West, he should be

given some cultural orientation, and if he later wants to find another job and move on, the temple committee should be cooperative.

Swami Parameshananda brings a personal perspective to this, since he is from Guyana: “Most temples with Caribbean and South American followings are owned and operated by family, as a business affair. Temples with an original culture are more organizationally run, importing a priest with an agreed salary, medical benefits, housing, vacation and the possibility of getting a green card.”

As president of the Hindu Temple Society, **Dr. Mysorekar** has interacted with many priests. She says, “They are paid quite well, and most big temples do provide them with living quarters and expenses. They send their children to school, colleges and professional institutions. So, they live a comfortable life, and we are happy to see that.” But the story may be different for smaller temples and freelance priests.

For the future, she suggests that the priests need to become more fluent in English so they can communicate with the younger generation. Presently, the older people



DR. VASUDHA NARAYANAN

are the interpreters for the young; but soon there will be a gap between the priests, who only speak the regional languages and Sanskrit, and a youthful congregation who speak mostly English, a smattering of regional tongues—and no Sanskrit.



Powerful Voices: Dr. Uma Mysorekar (in right of photo) walks with a temple parade at the Hindu Temple Society of North America’s Ganesha temple in Flushing, NY;

How Are We Navigating the Waters of Diverse Marriages?

How are temples and priests dealing with the complexities of modern marriage, including unions across castes, races, ethnicities, religions and genders?

Dr. Mysorekar, living in America for five decades, has watched the Indian-American community evolve from scratch. She is based at the Hindu Temple Society of Flushing, New York, built in 1977 as America’s first traditional temple. “I have seen a significant change over the last 50 years. Parents who object to weddings with non-Hindus or across caste often lose their children. They have no choice but to adapt if they want to keep the connection with their children.

“In our temple we have had several weddings between Hindus and non-Hindus. Nobody bothers about caste anymore, and I’m very proud of that. Our temple really endorses this, and our young people are extremely happy about it. Things have changed considerably for the better, from that point of view.”

She adds, “The only ritual we have strictly not endorsed is same-sex marriage. Our priests will not do it.”

Dr. Narayanan agrees that intercultural marriages are now totally accepted in Hindu temples. The ceremony is adapted to satisfy both bride and groom. She points out that marriages across castes and even religions are very common in India and among Hin-

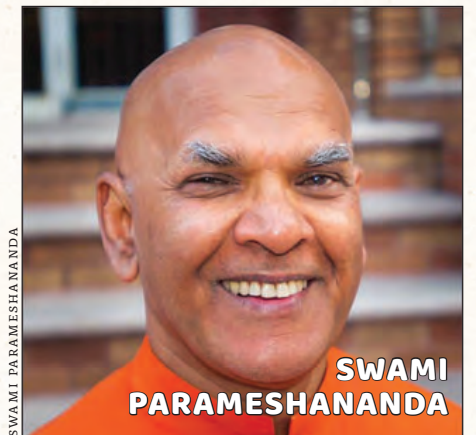
dus all over the world: “In general, the priests have been very cooperative with the couples. It is the couples who struggle with blending customs and traditions. One issue that concerns some couples today is the idea of *kanyadan* (giving away the bride).

“The issue of officiating for a gay wedding seems difficult for some temple managements in the US. I have heard of priests performing them in India and in the US but, in general, they seem to be the freelance priests.”

She points out that some approach the marriage as a ritual of two families coming together. Several couples have asked her to help with the rites and to write up the program. “I highlight the mantras spoken after the *saptapadi* (when the couple takes seven steps around the sacred fire). These aspects of our mantras, such as the friendship and companionship that is envisaged between the couple, seem to bring out the beauty of the ceremony for the couple. Rituals evolve; but some, like the *saptapadi*, are considered integral to the wedding. When one works with the priests, they are also flexible.”

Anu Singh says: “In my view, Sanatana Dharma gives freedom and independence to its followers in many aspects of life, including marriage. As interfaith marriages become more common, temples must address this.”

The issue of same-sex marriage, however, makes most priests and temples uncomfort-



SWAMI PARAMESHANANDA

able. Therefore, most same-sex marriages have been done by freelance priests or women priests who think more progressively. Anu calls this a step in the right direction.

Swami Ishwarananda cautions, “Same-sex marriages may be accepted by the community but not by culture and tradition. Temples, being the bastion of culture and tradition, may not be the appropriate place for same-sex unions.”

Swami Parameshananda offers a word of caution to temples and licensed priests who will not endorse same-sex marriages: “If you are a state-licensed marriage priest in the United States, equal-rights laws can be enforced.”



CONCORD SHIVA MURUGAN TEMPLE

A Growing Religion in America: (clockwise from above) Devotees perform Kavadi and participate in Thai Pusam celebrations at the Shiva Murugan Temple in Concord, California. Over 6,000 people attended the temple's walking yatra in 2019; a copy of the Ramayana at a temple in Kathmandu; students at Flushing Ganesha temple reciting shlokas; cremation ghats at Nepal's Pashupatinath Temple

Should Women Be Allowed to Perform Last Rites?

May a female light a parent's funeral pyre if no son is available or if the daughter is older than the son?

Dr. Narayanan speaks from experience: "I had the good fortune to be with my father when he passed away in Chennai. I am the first of two daughters. Because of the circumstances, I volunteered, and I did the last rites for him in Chennai. I came home emotionally and physically exhausted after the rites and submerging the ashes in the Bay of Bengal, where my father would walk daily. By then, the extended family had come in from Bengaluru and Mumbai. My mother and the larger family were all pleased I had done it. So that question applies to India also."

Sthaneshwar Timalsina says gender roles based on older texts are not fully applicable in today's society. "What if someone has only a daughter, or has a daughter who is willing to perform the rite. Is it not hurtful and adharmic to prohibit her from performing the rites?" In classical times, he points out, this was the son's duty because the daughter's duties would be to another family after her marriage: asking her to perform the last

rites would have been excessive. He adds, "It also had to do with inheritance rights. So many issues have changed today. In classical times, it also had to do with someone carrying on the fire rituals for the *agnihotra*. How many of us are maintaining that today?"

Swami Parameshananda asks, "Why should not the loving, caring, dutiful daughter perform the last rites for her father? The spiritual bonding of father and daughter supersedes all religious dogmas. If there is a son and he is willing, then first preference should be given to him."

Dr. Mysorekar says parents and priests in India are accepting this, so why not here? "I have seen the priests here change because they also understand the changes that are happening here. A daughter's performing the last rites is perfectly acceptable when there are no sons, or if the son is very young and the daughter is older. There is nothing wrong with this. Our dharma does not teach otherwise."

She points out that even in India, there are now women priests who perform rituals. "It is no longer gender-based. We should definitely follow with the times; we're all chil-



SHUTTERSTOCK

dren of God, and I think everybody is entitled to do this Godly work."

Anu Singh refers to the holy texts: "My father heard this story on a pilgrimage in Gaya: Once Sri Ram was away and King Dusharath appeared to Sita Devi near the Ganga. He told her it was an auspicious time and asked her to do his *shraddha* (death ceremony), which she did. So, I believe Hindu tradition allows a daughter to lead the cremation of her father. In many cases it would be impractical not to allow this."

What Is the Most Effective Way to Present the Epics?

Children in America often live apart from grandparents and are unfamiliar with the Ramayana and Mahabharata and the traditions embodied within these sacred books. How can the epics be used effectively?

Swami Ishwarananda points out that besides embodying the cultural ethos and religious beliefs of their particular time, these texts convey values that are essential for every Hindu to understand Sanatana Dharma, which is based on the oneness and mutual respect for all living beings: "It is the wisdom they contain that makes these two books timeless. It should be conveyed contextually and appropriately to the next generation."

Anu Singh believes people teaching these stories can focus too much on the literal events or the morals of those times, which may not resonate with Hindu children raised in the US: "I think focusing on the deeper meanings of the stories and applying the ethics to current situations could make these texts more relevant. Modern youth

are more critical and scientific, so we must present these texts in an appropriate manner. As a child, I learned the epics as stories; but when I grew older, learning the metaphorical meaning of the stories helped me realize their significance and greatness."

Dr. Narayanan offers, "Stories are one of the main ways in which Hindu culture has been transmitted through the centuries. A grandparent telling a story, a bhajan, a dance which depicts the characters—these performative ways are integral to a child's immersion into a narrative and exposure to the larger culture." She recalls that by the 1970s in India, as nuclear families were becoming more common, Amar Chitra Katha versions—and, later, the Doordarshan productions—became very popular, and these became the way children learned about the epics. The animated versions of the epics seem to capture children's attention in the Diaspora. Acting out some of the scenes also has an enormous impact, as does hearing songs, in reinforcing the stories.



SHUTTERSTOCK

Sthaneshwar Timalsina likes using technology in the teaching of the holy texts: "We can make effective video games based on Puranic themes. While we should still teach Sanskrit and mantras exactly the way the tradition mandates, we should be open to altering the medium to convey the message. What is important is not the medium but the message."

How Vital Is it to Teach Our Native Language to Kids?

How important is language in conveying the precepts of Hinduism? Some groups teach youth in English and others in Indian languages. What is the most effective and sustainable approach?

Sthaneshwar Timalsina says, "I am a strong advocate of Sanskrit. But honestly, not many students are going to maintain Sanskrit learning. Most of our scriptures are in Sanskrit language, and mantras cannot be translated. But if we want our children to actually understand something, we have to teach them in the language they are willing to learn. The point of teaching is to make students understand, and if teaching in English helps them understand easier, we should use English, too. But we should also educate our children in our heritage language."

Swami Parameshananda observes, "Mother language is always best in religion. Many Indians and non Indians recite prayers in Sanskrit and other Indian languages they don't understand; but they would not change, as it is culture and tradition. I am a typical example: when I was growing up in rural Guyana, Hindi was not taught in the school or temples, but I am a swami, more spiritual than religious. God's grace transcends all languages. Silence is the language of God."

Dr. Mysorekar values all the regional languages, but believes it is practical to use English so everyone can understand. The Hindu Temple Society has a religious director,

a priest who can teach in fluent English. There is also a youth group and a group of young professionals who conduct lecture series on all aspects of Hinduism. She finds the same situation in India, where educated youth speak their own regional tongue but are also fluent in English, often understanding English better than they understand their regional languages.

Anu Singh agrees: "I think teaching in English is the most sustainable approach, because it is probably easier for most youth to understand and communicate in English. But there are certain words and concepts that can only be communicated in Sanskrit, such as *dharma*. If we translate everything into English, we will lose the true meaning and adopt an 'Abrahamized' concept of Hinduism due to the language. I think it is important for youth to learn their mother tongue as much as possible and engage in Hinduism with that language, but it may not be the most practical idea for a lot of youth."

Dr. Narayanan is all for language learning, which when combined with religious teachings can be effective. "But there are many challenges, especially in small towns in America. BAPS communities have Gujarati members, and there is a certain homogeneity. That is not seen in other temples or in institutions like the Chinmaya Mission which cater to people from different ethnici-



ties and languages. In such cases, English becomes the only medium of education. It may be effective to combine that with teaching prayers at home and telling kids stories in the mother tongue. In many cases, however, the language gets lost over the generations."

Swami Ishwarananda sums up the pros and cons of the language debate: "The purpose of a value-based, cultural education is to make the students clearly understand the subject matter. Whichever language the student is fluent in should be used. Having said this, every effort can be made to teach the youth Indian languages. Chinmaya Mission has many language classes as part of the curriculum for children to enroll in and remain in touch with their culture. There is no insistence that only one language be learned by the student."



CHINMAYA MISSION

Learning together: Chinmaya Mission members take a group photo with Swami Ishwarananda at their local center in Los Angeles, California.

Summing It all Up

Sthaneshwar Timalisina offers an inclusive and open-minded conclusion to our survey of Hindu dharma in America: "We need to understand the twofold problem we face. One, our traditional marital system is under assault, being labeled as casteist and oppressive. Two, we are not openly thinking about the existence of different ethnicities and different languages, or about conserving different cultures within the broader cultural paradigm. When we are broadly homogenizing cultures, we need to be mindful of the nuances of cultural sensitivities that are being erased today by the blanket statement that these traditional guidelines are all bad and oppressive."

He implies that we have to look at the

larger picture if Hinduism is to remain a dynamic and growing force: "We need to make our tent bigger and open the platform from a real dharmic perspective. In addressing gender disparity, we cannot interpret dharmic codes through the rules from other civilizations and cultures.

"Society has changed from classical and medieval times, so we must openly evaluate each situation according to our times, from within the dharmic culture, with dharmic solutions. Above all, our goal is to disseminate dharma for the welfare of the world; and in this world there are all types of people wanting to live different ways of life. We do not have to like everything people do, but we have to learn to respect the choices people make."



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lavina Melwani is a New York-based journalist who has written on the arts, spirituality and life for several international publications. She is a columnist for CNBCTV18.com and is a co-founder of Children's Hope India. She blogs at www.laviniwithlavina.com. You can follow her @lavinamelwani

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Kauai Aadheenam Monastic Endowment			
Roshan Harilela	375.00	Rajashekar Tulasi	299.00
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Chamundi Sabanathan	78.75	Anonymous	558.8
Hitesvara Saravan	63.00	Total	95,160.66
Arlene Vaughn	99.00		
Anonymous	1209.54	Gurudeva's Trilogy Distribution Fund	
Total	1,900.29	Vel Mahalingum	14.56
		Anonymous	54.00
		Total	68.56
Iraivan Temple Endowment			
Frank Burkhardt	30.00	Kadavul Nataraja Ardra	
Gopal Kodati	108.00	Abhishekam Endowment	
Rohini & Vijay Mashettiwar	101.00	Umasankaran Mohambourame	117.60
Ganga Murugan	725.00	Gowri Nadason	125.48
Garani Nadaraja Kolli	1,000.00	Parimala Selvaraj	62.00
Bhavani Nataraj	180.00	Bala Sivaceyon	11.85
Efrain Raul Eduardo Roman-Abarca	200.00	Ratnavathy Sivalingam	49.00
Pathmini Saravanapavan	100.00	Vayudeva Varadan	18.00
Terrill Silke	300.00	Anonymous	321.00
Anil Thayamballi	108.00	Total	704.93
Anonymous	337.4		
Total	3,189.40	Kauai Aadheenam Matavasi Medical Fund	
		Shyamadeva Dandapani	36.00
Kauai Aadheenam Annual Archana Fund		Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	5.22
Sanyasi Ganta	501.00	Kulagan Moonesawmy	14.56
Jogendra Moorooogen	2.42	Gowri Nadason	111.22
Vidyadevi Moorooogen	4.86	Ram Ramamoorthy	45.00
Mooneeama Naralloo	155.72	Aran Sambandar	72.00
Subramaniam Pennathur	49.98	Nandi Devi Sivanathan	100.00
Manishankar Sagum	9.67	Vayudeva Varadan	54.00
S.R. Thancanamootoo	7.21	Anonymous	108.36
Anonymous	270.00	Total	546.36
Total	1,000.86		
Hinduism Today Lifetime		Tirunavukkarasu Nayanar Gurukulam	
Subscription Fund		Anonymous	324.00
EJCK Rao Family Charitable Trust	3,000.00		
Thirujnanam Arnassalon	9.67	Kauai Aadheenam Renovation	
Pradeep Avadhani	299.00	Endowment	
Shuvro Chakrobartty	299.00	Riorita Tkatchenko	100.00
Surendra Chauhan	299.00		
Leo Demers	299.00	Sri Subramuniya Ashram	
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The Jain Family	299.00	Anonymous	375.00
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Keshav Goyal	299.00	Kumbhalavalai Ganesha	
Stephannie Guilfoyle	299.00	Temple Endowment	
Akshita Iyer	299.00	Mano Navaratnarajah	75.00
Prashant Joshi	299.00	Anonymous	60.00
Radica Kazim	299.00	Total	135.00
Juhivaasana Koothan	2.43		
Nathan Krishnan	299.00	Hinduism Today Production Fund	
Sivakumaran Kurunathan	148.22	Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	5.22
Bhagawandas Lathi	72,000.00	Ian Johnson	60.00
Ashwini Maureemootoo	18.17	Kulagan Moonesawmy	14.56
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Shanda Kumaran Moorghen	7.27	Subramaniam Pennathur	50.01
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Mahesh Patel	299.00	Michael Zimmermann	5.00
Vinay & Hansa R. Patel	9,860.00	Anonymous	105.6
Dr Srirama Prasad Pulavarty	299.00	Total	1,010.76
Parmeshwar Ramlogan	299.00		
Vijay Reddy	299.00	Hindu Orphanage Endowment Fund	
Rajiv Saraiya	299.00	Benevity	858.60
Sundar Satyal	299.00	Arthur Burton	1,008.00
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Savithri Sundaresan	299.00	Rodney & Ilene Standen	30.00
		Manish & Archana Verma	101.00
		Anonymous	186.00
		Total	2,678.57
		Hindu Education Endowment	
		Hasu N. & Hansa H. Patel	50.00
		Arjun Pennathur	75.00
		Nandi Devi Sivanathan	50.00
		Total	175.00
		Loving Ganesha Distribution Fund	
		Mano Navaratnarajah	225.00
		Spiritual Park of Mauritius Endowment	
		Kiran Keerodhur	150.00
		Positive Discipline Endowment	
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		Alaveddy Pasupatheeswarar Temple Fund	
		Rajeshwar & Anu Kumar	250.00
		Nuckiren Pyeneeeandee	24.37
		Total	274.37
		Kauai Aadheenam Religious	
		Art and Artifacts Fund	
		Inder Jit Nicshal	21.00
		Murugan Temple of North	
		America Pillaiyar Shrine Fund	
		Pathmini Saravanapavan	150.00
		Sayanthan & Anupama Sivanathan	15.00
		Total	165.00
		Thank You Bodhinatha Fund	
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		Lutcheemee Curpen	216.00
		Amit Dass	101.00
		Panshula Ganeshan	50.00
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		Hitesh & Rishitaa Murugesu	24.29
		Hitesvar Skandanatha Murugesu	11.88
		Mano Navaratnarajah	150.00
		Cassan Pancham	1,008.00
		Nuckiren Pyeneeeandee	24.37
		Sumathi Raja	450.00
		Sivaja Ranjan	1,001.00
		Aran Sambandar	117.00
		Vayudeva Varadan	192.00
		John Wahlen	22.00
		Michael Wasylkiw	648.00
		Anonymous	2660.19
		Total	7,021.90
		Udayan Care Endowment Fund	
		Benevity	90.00
		Tamnash J. Gupta	108.00
		Total	198.00
		Sri Chandra Madhab Debnath Endowment	
		Shyamal Chandra Debnath	150.00
		Murugan Temple Yalpanam Festival Fund	
		Pathmini Saravanapavan	150.00
		Manitha Neyam Trust Fund	
		Bala Sivaceyon	35.60
		Nutanaya Sivaceyon	11.85
		Total	47.45
		Mahajana College Fund	
		Texas Instruments Foundation	1,201.00
		Manjung Hindu Sabha Orphanage Fund	
		Tamnash J. Gupta	108.00

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Pazhassi Balamandiram Orphanage Fund			
Tamnash J. Gupta	108.00	India Hindu Temple Cleaning Fund	
		Anonymous	60.00
Swami Vipulananta Children's Home Endowment		Anantha Ladies Home Endowment	
Tamnash J. Gupta	108.00	Rohini & Vijay Mashettiwar	101.00
Canaganayagam Kugendra	140.00	Nandi Devi Sivanathan	50.00
Total	248.00	Sayanthan & Anupama Sivanathan	30.00
		Total	181.00
Hinduism Today Complimentary Subscription Fund		Cows of Kadavul and Iraivan Temples (Kovil Maadu) Endowment	
Rajagopal Krishnan	60.00	Arun Aarooren	75.00
		Anil Ananda Badhwar	30.00
Himalayan Academy Book Distribution Fund		Shubha Gangal	250.00
Shyamadeva Dandapani	36.00	Sanyasi Ganta	501.00
Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	30.00	Nrusimhayya Manda	5.22
Bijamati Pareatumbree	40.00	Rajagopal Krishnan	153.00
Total	106.00	Srinivas R. Madaboosi	100.00
		Natraj Narayanswami	37.00
Kauai Aadheenam Yagam Fund		Praful C. Patel	249.00
Anonymous	33.00	Jonathan Rajpaul	303.00
		Padmini Samuthiran	162.00
Yogaswami Hindu Girls' Home of Sittandy Endowment		Srikanth Sankaran	51.00
Tamnash J. Gupta	108.00	Sivaruban & Nishiya Sivanesan	150.00
Adriana Guerrero Lavin	195.00	Rodney & Ilene Standen	20.00
Subramaniam Pennathur	50.01	Jayesh & Darshana Upadhyay	101.00
Yogini Ratnasabapathy	100.00	Aishwarya Vashishtha	30.00
Sivaruban & Nishiya Sivanesan	150.00	Arunasalam Vathavooran	75.00
Anonymous	1188.18	Anonymous	193.72
Total	1,791.19	Total	2,485.94
Bharatiya Ekta Mandir of Arizona Endowment		Jaffna Kannathiddy Kali Kovil Endowment	
PayPal Giving Fund	51.00	Sathyainkara Balendra	21.00
		Pakistan Hindu Empowerment Fund	
India Hindu Tribals Endowment		Eshna Kumar	10.00
Renu Sinha	216.00	Murugamoorthi Thirukkovil Endowment	
Anonymous	32.4	Raj Padman Padmalingam	6,500.00
Total	248.40	Digital Dharma Endowment	
Murugan Temple of North America Puja Fund		Kunal & Sanyogeeta Ghurbhurn	5.22
Vayudeva Varadan	72.00	Rajagopal Krishnan	153.00
		Kulagan Moonesawmy	21.89
		Nutanaya Sivaceyon	11.85
		Anonymous	329.1
		Total	521.06
		Kauai Aadheenam Info-Tech Fund	
		Dheeptha Baskaran	5.00
		Kauai Aadheenam Feed the Monks Fund	
		Anandkumar Ayyachamy	50.00
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		Gayatri Rajan	75.00
		Yogini Ratnasabapathy	150.00
		Michael Ruffra	100.00
		John Russell	28.00
		Padmini Samuthiran	162.00
		Salone Shahi	100.00
		Nandi Devi Sivanathan	100.00
		Shivakumari Tummala	400.00
		Subatra Dewi Veeriah	15.00
		Saravan Veylan	324.00
		Anonymous	1397.36
		Total	4,117.36
		Insurance Premiums	
		Mrunal Patel	3,003.00
		Kauai Aadheenam Renovation Endowment	
		Other Donations	600.00
		Total Contributions	\$137,541.06
		Funds at Market Value, Mar 31, 2021	
		Grand Total	\$20,420,489.99

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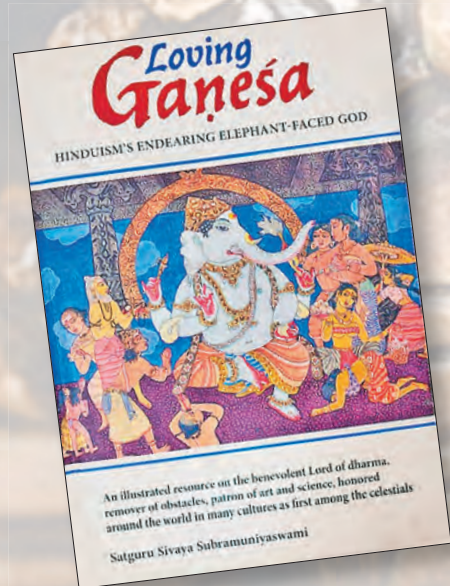


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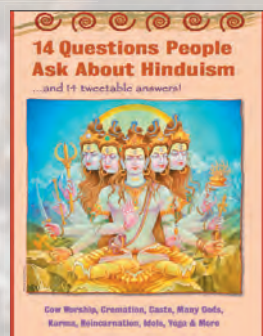
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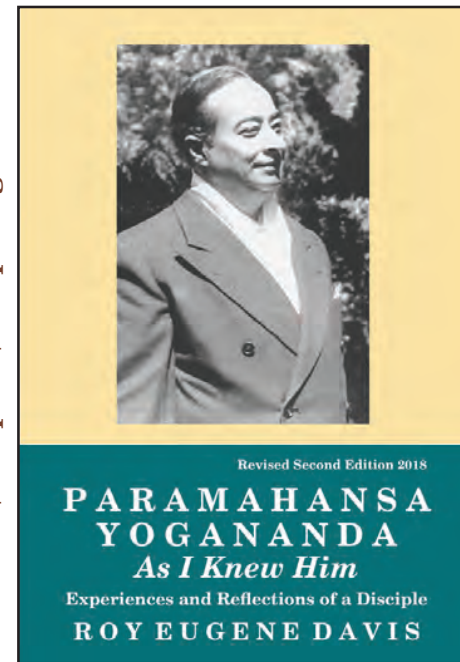


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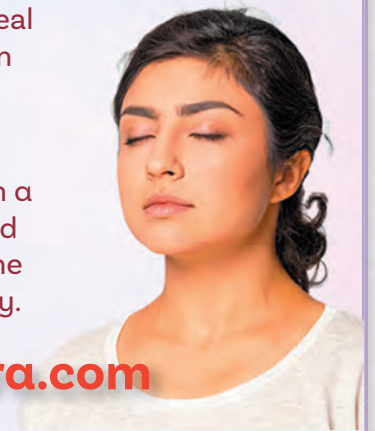
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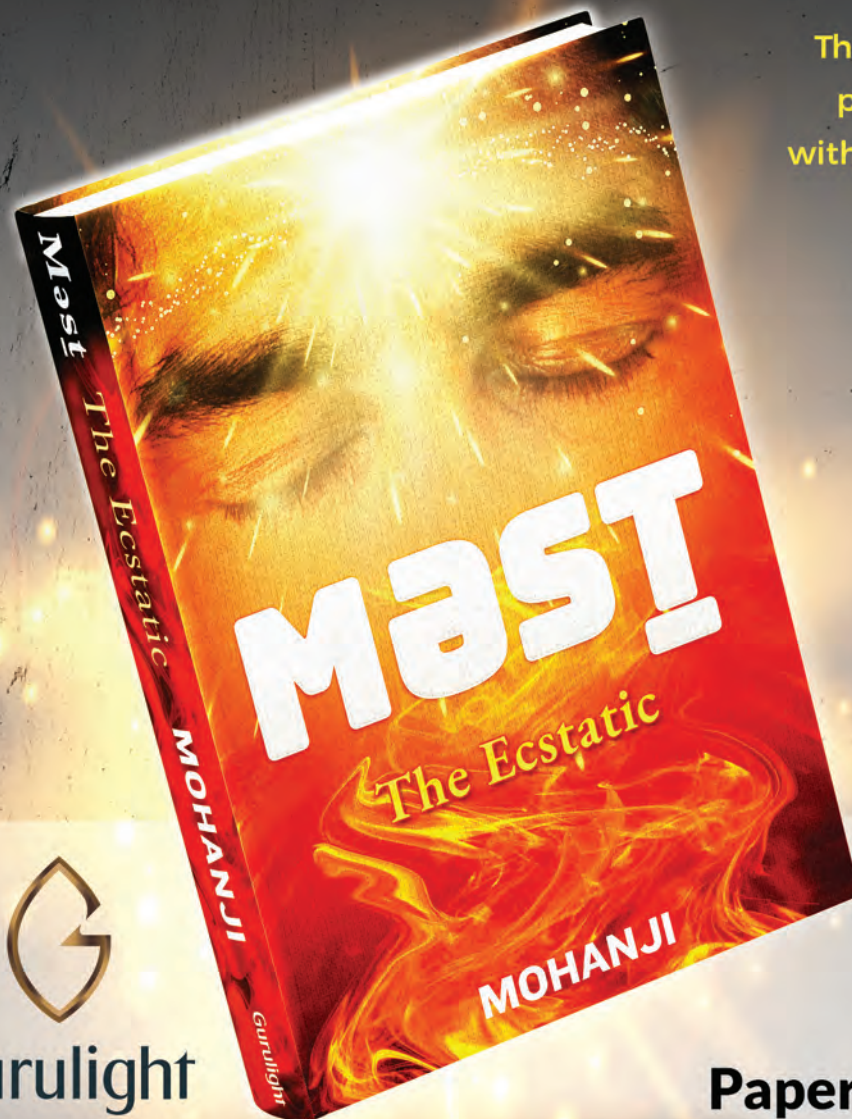
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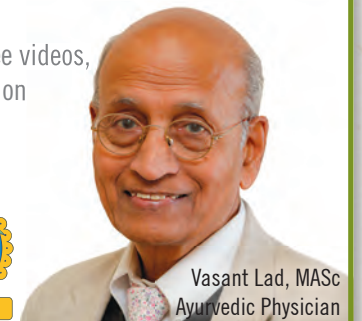
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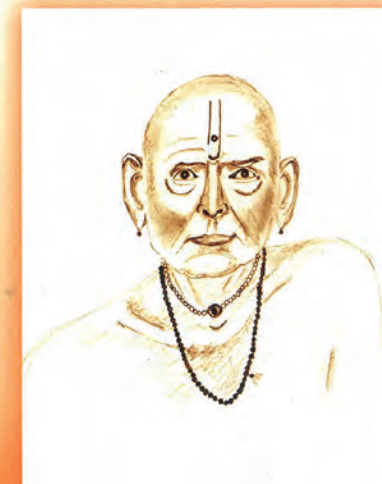
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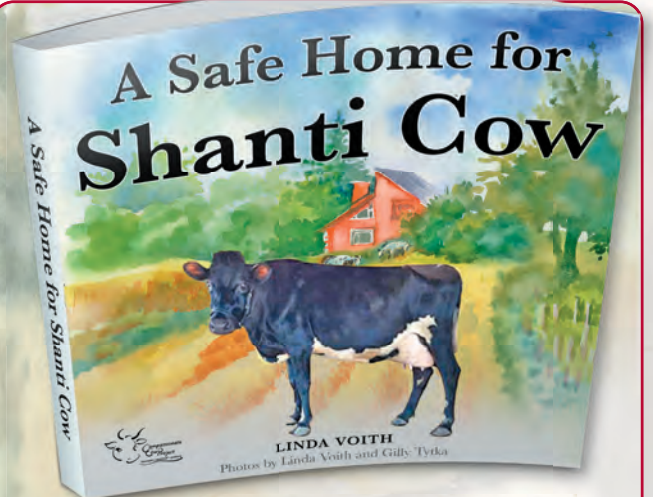
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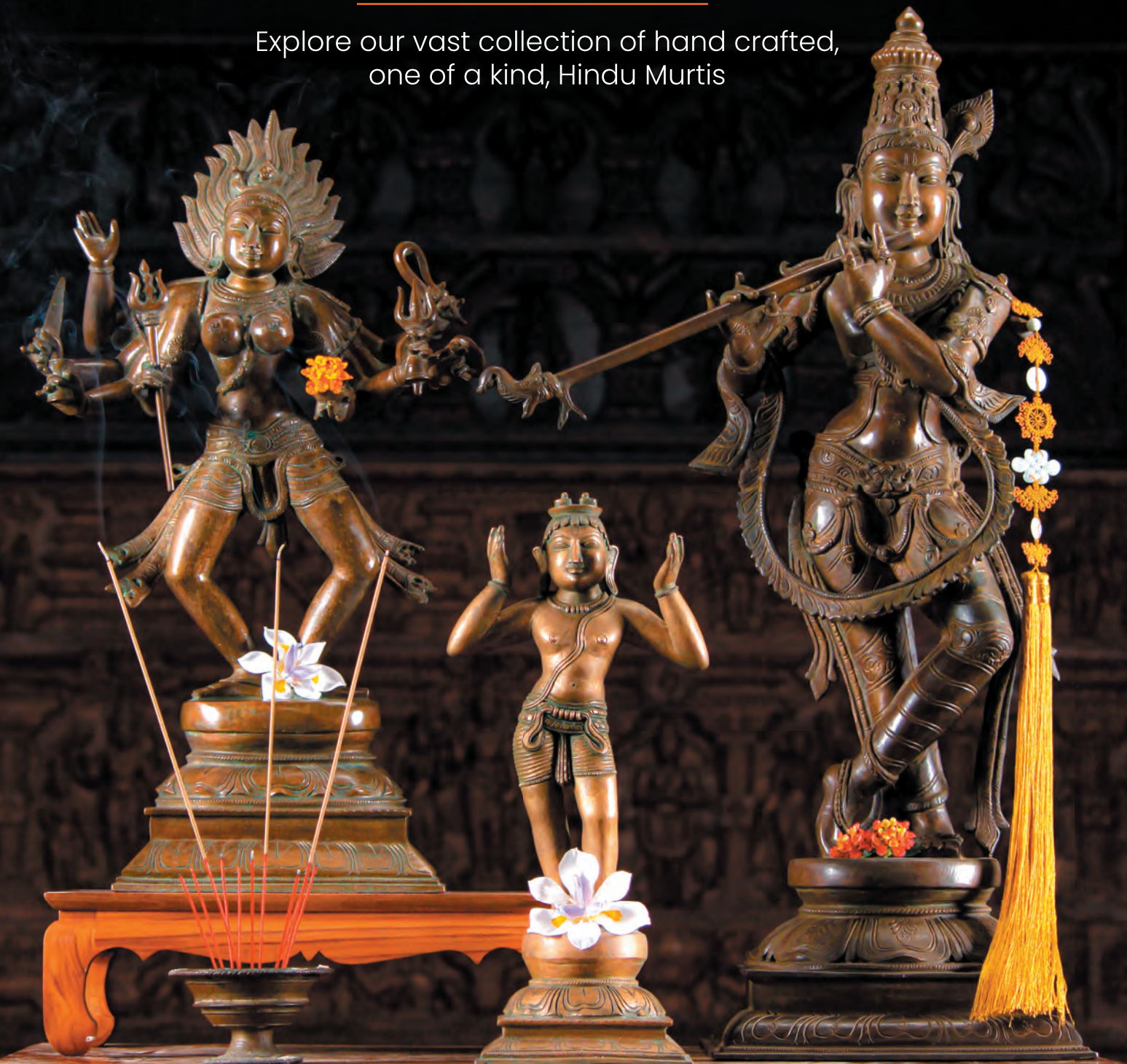
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*S*ince I left Thy Grounds,
There is no moon in my sky;
There are no stars.

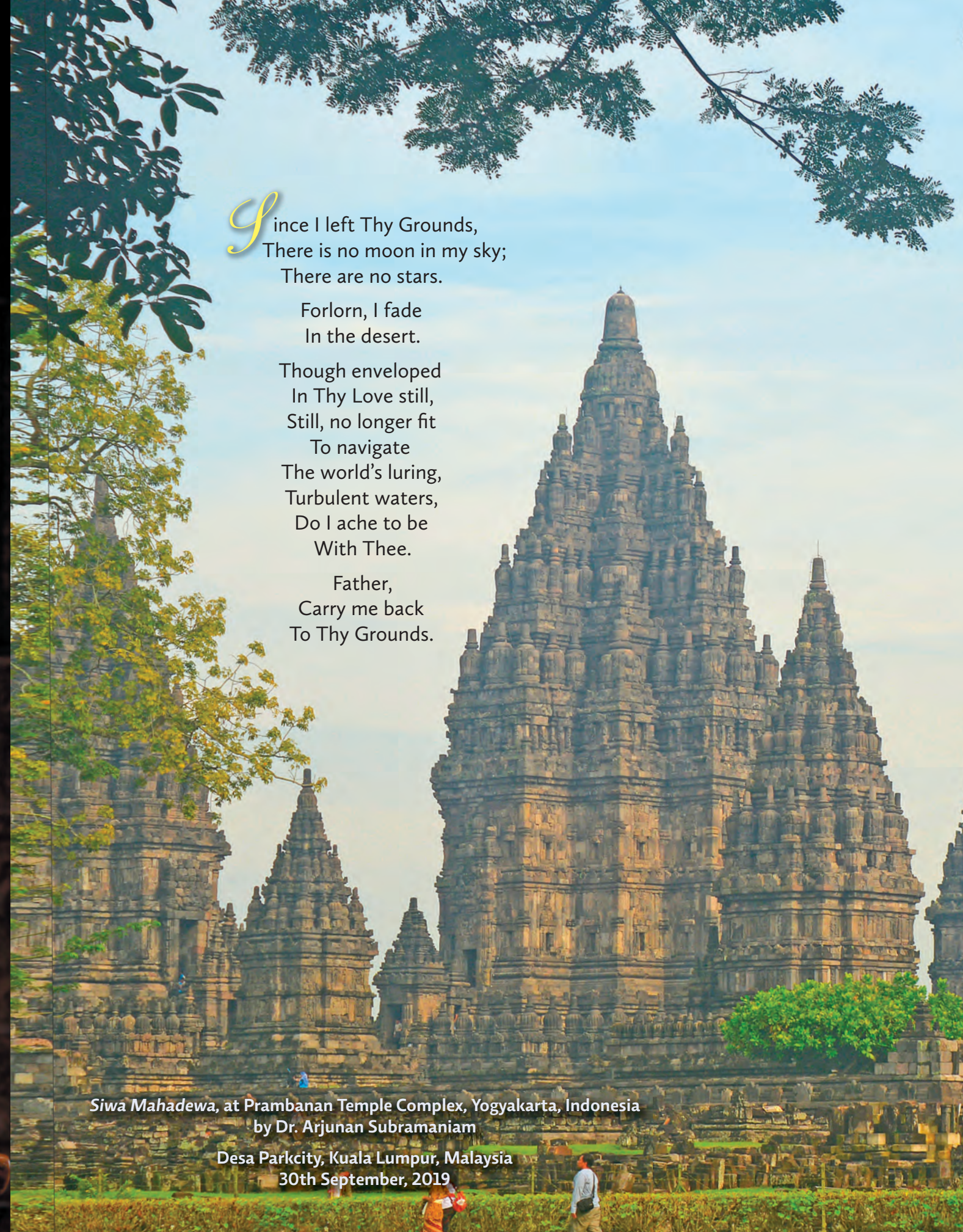
Forlorn, I fade
In the desert.

Though enveloped
In Thy Love still,
Still, no longer fit
To navigate
The world's luring,
Turbulent waters,
Do I ache to be
With Thee.

Father,
Carry me back
To Thy Grounds.

Siwa Mahadewa, at Prambanan Temple Complex, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
by Dr. Arjunan Subramaniam

Desa Parkcity, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
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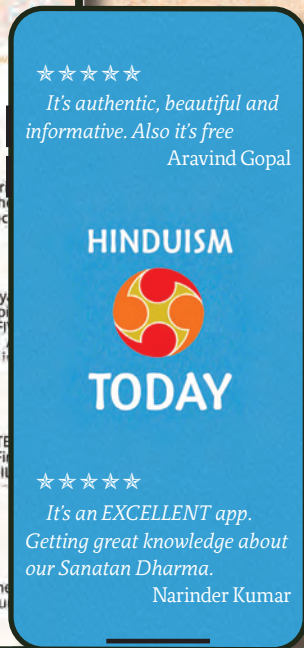
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