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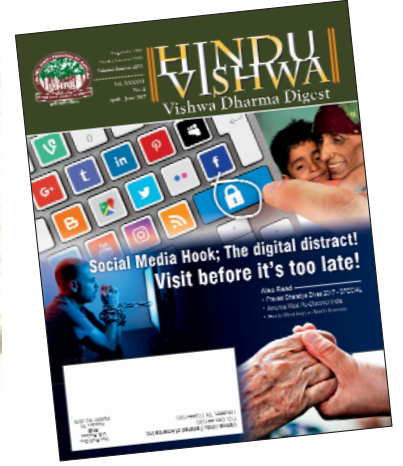
प्रवृत्तिं च निवृत्तिं च जना न विदुरासुराः ।
न शौचं नापि चाचारो न सत्यं तेषु विद्यते ॥

श्रीमद् भगवद् गीता १६-७

*pravrttim ca nivrttim ca jana na vidur asurah
na saucam napi cacaro na satyam tesu vidyate*

Shrimad Bhagavad Gita 16-21

Persons of demoniac nature cannot understand actions in their
best spiritual interests and actions in their worst spiritual interests;
there is never purity, nor good conduct nor even truth in them.



Read in the next issue

**Bahurangi Hindu Heritage
Day Celebration Brings
Community Together**



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World Hindu Council of America (VHPA), founded in 1970 and incorporated in the state of New York in 1974, is an independent, nonprofit, tax-exempt and volunteer-based charitable organization serving the needs of Hindu community in USA. It aims to build a dynamic and vibrant Hindu society rooted in the eternal values of Dharma and inspired by the lofty ideal of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, i.e. the entire creation is one family.

The views expressed in the articles presented in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organization, officials, editorial staff or the donors.
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The digital distract!**

Visit before it's too late!



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Divas 2017 - SPECIAL**



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Social Media Hook; The digital distract! Visit before it's too late!

In 2016, according to small biz trends, Facebook was listed as the most popular social media tool. It is used as an integral tool to bridge the distance that now exists among parents and children, families and friends; employees and employers, and etc. It connects people and businesses globally. For business and personal interests, humans spend a lot of time each day on internet devices, and especially on Social Media sites, with some consequences.

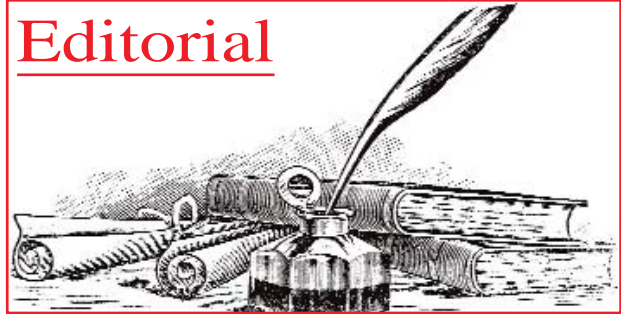
Not so long ago before social media was even a dream, we as humans, used to look forward eagerly to the times when we would meet up with friends, families and loved ones, and have face to face chats, and conversations. If we were in distant places, away from each other, we would write letters and, or call each other on the telephones. Even though we were not visible to each other, we were at least able to hear the voice of our loved ones, and share our feelings. Enter 'Social media'! Technology has filled that visual gap and provides the ability to see, and speak with our loved ones, via video. Letter writing is becoming a 'thing' of the past, now replaced by email.

Compared to the costs of travel, not to mention the risks of travel, the internet has made global communications very, very affordable and mostly free, as long as parties are connected. While we may not be able to reach out and physically touch each other, we sure do have greater ability to see and speak with each other, in a 'live' manner, from long distances.

But, is social media also becoming a tool for aversion from physical interaction with loved ones? Are we putting off those trips to mom and dad, or to a loved one, because, compared to travel, it is so easier and cheaper to 'facetime', or keep in touch via other social media platforms?



Editorial



The use of electronic devices combined with the internet, and social media usage, raises so many questions, and, has so many unknown influences and impacts. Users control when they disconnect or hang up, and, for any reason they choose. Any party can sign off when they no longer want to chat or 'facemeet', and blame it on 'bad connection'. Many of us, can admit guilt to these 'instances', and these aren't the only ones. In addition, social media reduces visits and personal interactions with our loved ones.

The lack of such personal interaction can result in physical and emotional setbacks, which can lead to greater issues. E.g. we should not always use Social Media as an alternative to visiting our parents, grandparents and loved ones.

No social media contact can replace that feeling of love and joy when you are able to see, touch and hug your loved ones in person. Don't just 'call' home or use social media to say hi. Create opportunities and make time for personal visits and physical interaction with loved ones, especially your parents and grandparents. Don't become that person that regrets not making time for a personal visit with a loved one, after hearing the sad news of, an illness, or a demise? A verse from Taittiriya Upanishad expounds it pretty well.

*Maatru devo bhava Pitru devo bhava,
Aachaarya devo bhava Atithi devo bhava*

Respects to Mother, Father, Guru and Guest. They are all forms of God.

Why wait till then? Make time for visits!



"I have Miles to Go Before I Sleep"

Dr. Mahesh Mehta, founder of VHPA Receives Pravasi Bharatiya Samman



Dr. Mahesh Mehta and Raginibahen
with Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award

By Gaurang G. Vaishnav

(former General Secretary, VHPA),
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In most languages of Bharat there is a phrase- गागर में सागर, "ocean in a pot"; this is used when the information on hand is so vast that it's practically impossible to process within constraint of time and place, or the matter is condensed to the nth degree to convey the profound message cryptically. A good example of ocean in a pot would be Shrimad Bhagavad Gita which encapsulates essence of all Upanishads.

Thus, when I am asked to write about Dr. Mahesh Mehta, popularly known as Maheshbhai, my task is as difficult as putting the ocean in a small vessel.

The occasion to write this article is appropriate. Back in January, Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award was bestowed on Dr. Mahesh Mehta by the Government of Bharat for his community service in USA. This is a much sought-after award as it recognizes valuable contribution of NRIs in different fields of life wherever they might be. As it happens, the awards do not always go to deserving candidates. Normal politics and politicking are part of the

game and there are worthies who have everything one can ask for and yet they lobby the bureaucrats, ministers and those who might have some pull, like a beggar for the award.

Then, there are people like Maheshbhai who have spent their whole life for the benefit of the community sacrificing family life and personal pleasures without expectation of any returns.

Maheshbhai came to the USA in 1969 when he was a 34 years old youth brimming with energy and enthusiasm. He had been trained in RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) from the tender age of 10. He had served as a Pracharak, the President of Gujarat state Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (AVBP), etc. He had proven his academic credential by obtaining a Ph.D. in Chemistry and serving as a lecturer at the M.S. University





of Vadodara. When he decided to migrate to USA, he went to meet the Sarsanghchalak (Supreme head) of RSS, late Shri Golwalkarji to seek his guidance for social work in the USA. At that time, Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) was a nascent organization in Bharat. Guruji advised Maheshbhai to build VHP in USA.

Maheshbhai started his post doctorate studies at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, NJ, but his spare time was consumed with the thought of binding the small population of Hindus together. He actively sought out NRIs, all young at that time, who had either RSS background or were infused with a desire to serve the Hindu society and their motherland. Thus, was born Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (VHPA) in 1969 as Maheshbhai jokingly says, when 15 people got together on the 16th floor apartment of one volunteer in the Queens, New York.

Through his acumen, dedication, understanding of the human nature and motivation, organizing capacity, original thinking, oratory and ability to take others with him, he was successful in sowing seeds of an organization that has withstood the test of time. VHPA is pushing close to 50 years (to be exact, 47 years) but it is perhaps, the only organization that didn't splinter, went to a court or had a fight for position. It is because of the training given to the first batch of volunteers then all 35 years or younger to put the goal above all and personal likes and dislikes, ambition and hankering after recognition, behind. That batch of volunteers could inspire the next generation of volunteers by their deeds and actions (not by lectures), and so the tradition continues.

We like to call Maheshbhai's home in Boston a Dharmshala or a railway platform. Maheshbhai and his ardhangini, Raginibahen always welcomed everyone with open arms. Their home was like a beehive where there was constant influx of local volunteers, volunteers from across the country and a steady stream of visitors and dignitaries from Bharat and from across the world. There was no such thing as a weekend. Weekends were busier than the weekdays, as rarely there was a weekend when there was no meeting. It is hard to comprehend how both managed their professional lives - Maheshbhai as a research director at a fortune 500 company and Raginibahen as a finance manager. I don't think they ever got sufficient rest on a weekend to be ready for the next work week. But their love for the mission of VHPA and for the Hindu society was so intense, that perhaps, those unending meetings, programs and hosting the international guests served to recharge them 24/7.

As VHPA grew from strength to strength and from state to state, Maheshbhai was sought after by many

Hindu organizations for speaking engagements, resolving disputes, advice on building up an organization, etc. He traveled incessantly and his scope enlarged to encompass several countries around the world.

Maheshbhai's ability to organize and work under tremendous stress were put to a fire test during 1975-77 when Mrs. Indira Gandhi promulgated "internal emergency" in Bharat, after a high court invalidated her election for malpractices and debarred her from contesting elections for a period of six years. To subvert the judgement and keep her power intact, she resorted to the bogus emergency, suspended fundamental rights of the citizens, jailed hundreds of thousands of political opponents and muzzled the free press. All thinking people, across the world were incensed, and this atrocity gave birth to a freedom fight from outside of Bharat. Followers of four diverse ideologies that were at a loggerhead in Bharat were compelled to sit together. The Socialists, the Leftists, the Old Congress (opposed to Indra Gandhi's Congress) and the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (later BJP) - all were under the gun, their top leadership behind the bars. It was a matter of survival. Out of all the groups, the Jan Sangh group had a strong and dedicated cadre in the USA. After intense deliberations, disagreements, cajoling, give and take, and finally shake-hands, an organization named Indians For Democracy (IFD) was born to fight the emergency under one banner. Maheshbhai became the driving force behind it and in time became its undisputed leader. During that 19-month period, Maheshbhai provided visionary leadership to a group that was riding the high and low of emotional waves. His leadership forged bonds with workers who had very different political outlooks.

From this struggle that was won by the nationalist forces, emerged two organizations of which Maheshbhai was a founding member. Friends of India Society, International (FISI) and Overseas Friends of BJP (OFBJP). Today, both are involved in engaging the Diaspora for betterment of Bharat.

As VHPA moved forward, Maheshbhai was instrumental in providing leadership to create Hindu University of America (Orlando, FL), Hindu Students Council (HSC) for college campuses and Ekal Vidyalaya for the education of the tribal children in Bharat. While HUA was started as an independent body, HSC and Ekal Vidyalaya remained as VHPA's projects for a considerable length of time before they became independent organizations.

Maheshbhai is not only a visionary; he is willing to take risks to make the vision a reality. In early 1980's when VHPA had hardly any funds to speak of, he



Ministry of External Affairs
Government of India



conceived the idea of a mega Hindu conference, first of its kind, in New York. Two years of intense planning and travels by a dozen volunteers, culminated in the 1984 World Hindu Conference at the Madison Square Garden in New York. The Conference attracted 4500 delegates from the USA and several countries. The conference was so successful that later this model was followed for Hindu conferences in Europe and elsewhere. This was followed by yet another mammoth gathering of Hindus, this time 8,000+ in greater Washington, DC area in August 1993 to celebrate 100 years of Swami Vivekananda's famous Chicago address. The conference was called Global Vision 2000, promoting values of shared knowledge and cooperation in the new millennium.

This was followed by his concept of Dharma Samsad of Hindu religious leaders from the Western World, Dharma Prasar Yatra and International Dharma Prasar Yatra. In the year 2000, the United Nations hosted a Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders. Under the leadership of VHP (Bharat) a contingent of 108 saints with their associates came as delegates. As the leader of VHPA, Maheshhbhai accepted the challenge to host all the saints and arrange their post summit programs. VHPA volunteers in New Jersey and New York carried the major burden to make this happen. But the interface with all saints and VHP (Bharat) was facilitated by Maheshhbhai.

All these events had significant implications for NRI Hindus across the globe. No doubt, that Maheshhbhai was surrounded by capable and dedicated volunteers of VHPA but these events showcased his vision, ability to think out of the box, change existing paradigm and can do attitude.

With his busy schedule, Maheshhbhai found time to write a book: Hindu Philosophy in Action. This 2006 book is the essence of Maheshhbhai's thoughts on what attributes a Hindu volunteer needs to develop to be effective. It is a fascinating journey through times narrated in his own words. It is like a daily primer for all VHPA volunteers, old and new.

All these became possible because Maheshhbhai didn't pause to take rest. He didn't think of personal discomforts. He didn't give up in the face of adversities and setbacks, he didn't sit on his laurels. Instead, he continued to push towards new boundaries. Perhaps, his greatest contribution is creating and mentoring truly dedicated, selfless volunteer leaders throughout the USA, who are still engaged in VHPA or similar organizations in the seva of the society.

After retirement from the professional life, Maheshhbhai reduced his active role in VHPA. He had served VHPA as founding General Secretary for 20 years and subsequently as a president for six years. Then he was the mentor, philosopher and guide as the Chairperson of VHPA's Advisory Board. One would have thought now that he would retire to a comfortable life. But then, that wouldn't be Maheshhbhai. He turned his attention to Bharat and its villages. He established an organization, India Quality Group (IQG) in USA which operates as Innovative Quality Group in Bharat. Objective of this organization is to bring education to the villages and change villages' thinking pattern. Though he had already crossed 70, he was able to attract the college going students and recent graduates to join in the effort to volunteer in the villages. After ten years of consistent

efforts aided ably by on the ground coordinators Ms. Hiral Mehta (Maheshbhai's grandniece and a college lecturer) and Ravin Vyas (a US returned entrepreneur) today IQG works in 11 villages of Gujarat. In 2012-2013, when Bharat was going through a lot of political turmoil after a decade of unbridled corruption and a rudderless government, there was a talk about a new leadership under BJP government. Maheshbhai conferred with some of us and came up with an idea to start an organization to rally NRIs behind Shri Narendra Modi, whom he has known personally for a long time. This was not a political movement per se, because we had realized that unless there were a government in place with dedicated focus on the improvement in the life of the marginalized, no efforts like IQG would bear long term fruits. So, in mid-2013, under Maheshbhai's leadership Global Indians for Bharat Vikas (GIBV, www.gibv.org) was formed. GIBV met instant success enrolling more than 800 volunteers many of whom went to Bharat for the election campaign.

Once the elections were over, Maheshbhai turned his attention back to villages. GIBV decided to focus on the national reconstruction by emphasizing rural and slum empowerment and Citizen Awareness Campaign. Under Maheshbhai's guidance, IQG and GIBV work together with the expanded scope of bringing solar electricity, water purification, healthcare, smokeless cooking, job oriented skills training, and entrepreneurship training, etc. to the villages besides the education.

To facilitate work of GIBV-IQG, Maheshbhai has built at his own expense a training center for village volunteers on his farm house near Amdavad, Gujarat.

Thus, Maheshbhai has been the change agent for a lot of things and for a lot of people over last five decades.

We all meet people who happily boast of their connections with the higher ups. It is a natural human

डॉ. महेश मेहताजी भारत माँ के ऐसे सुपुत्र हैं, जिनके सम्पर्क में आना मेरा और अर्धांगिनी पल्लवी का परम सौभाग्य रहा।

एक ऐसा व्यक्तित्व जिसका हमारे बीच बसना एक सकारात्मक उष्मा औष ऊर्जा का अनुभव कराता है। संगठन में कठिनातिकठिन परिस्थितियाँ आयीं, जिनसे यह भारतपुत्र जूझता गया; कभी हार नहीं मानी। इन्दिरा का आपात्काल; फलस्वरूप भारतीय एम्बसीद्वारा कार्यकर्ताओं के पासपोर्ट जप्त होना; ना. ग. गोरे, सुब्रमण्यम स्वामी, मकरन्द देसाई इत्यादि का प्रवास ऐसे अनगिनत प्रसंगों - समस्याओं में अमरिका का हिन्दू संगठन मार्ग निकालते निकालते आगे बढ़ा है।

और जिस प्रेरणा से आज अनेक भारत हितैषी संस्थाएँ ऊँजी आज खड़ी हो चुकी हैं, उनका विवरण इस संक्षिप्त टिप्पणी में समाना असंभव है। यह सहिष्णु हिन्दुत्व का आंदोलन अनेक समस्याओं से घिरता, मार्ग निकालता, आगे बढ़ता रहा, जिस कर्णधार के कारण, वह कर्णधार है महेश मेहता।

आपकी अर्धांगिनी श्रीमती रागिणी जी का भी पूरा पूरा समर्पित योगदान इस सम्मान का अंग है। इस सम्मान में आप दोनों का सम्मान है।

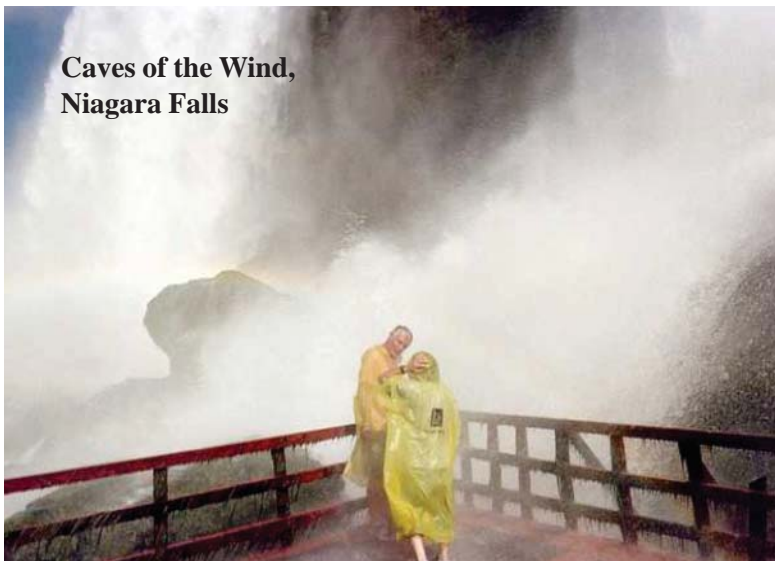
गत चार दशकों में, अनगिनत अघोषित अनचाही कठिन समस्याएँ आती गयीं। जिनका एक कुशल योद्धा की, चारों दिशाओं से आते प्रहारों की षट्पदी की भाँति प्रतिकार करने, जिस व्यक्ति ने अपना सर्वस्व दाँव पर लगाया, उस व्यक्ति का यह सम्मान मेरी दृष्टि में वर्षों पहले अपेक्षित था। वें मात्र त्यागी ही नहीं पर सर्वथा कुशल और बुद्धिमान नेतृत्व हैं।

देर से ही सही, शासन ने एक सर्वथायोग्य व्यक्ति को सम्मानित कर हम सभी कार्यकर्ताओं का भी सम्मान किया है। डॉ. महेश मेहता और श्रीमती रागिणी मेहता दोनों का अभिनन्दन करता हूँ।

प्रत्यक्षदर्शी मधुसूदन और पल्लवी

Dr. Madhusudan Jhaveri, First President of VHPA

**Caves of the Wind,
Niagara Falls**



tendency. Maheshbhai is different. Because of his deep roots in RSS and his leadership of Hindus, he has come to know many spiritual, religious, political, social and nationalist leaders. He has hosted them at his home, traveled with them, and had discussions with them. But he would not speak about them unless you ask him. This list includes Prime Minister Narendra Modi, former Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Shri L. K. Advani, Dr. Subramanian Swamy; Sarsanghchalaks of RSS, Balasaheb Deoras, Dr. Rajju Bhaiya, Ma. Sudarshanji; Ashok Singhalji, Swami Chinmayananda, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Swami Tilak, Sadhvi Ritambharaji, etc. The list is endless. I used to tell Maheshbhai that his house was more like a temple where all



these deities had left their vibrations.

One quality of Maheshhbhai that I admire is that he doesn't waste time in idle gossiping or badmouthing others. He is very patient. Many a time, people at the helm of affairs of any organization, institute or a corporation for a long time tend to become autocratic and develop the attitude of my way or highway. At times, during his long tenure at VHPA, the Executive Board of VHPA had disagreed with his proposed plan or a project. He never tried to force the issue and accepted to wait for the right time. Often, after a lapse of time, his colleagues saw the validity of his proposals and worked on them enthusiastically. These qualities of listening to others, respecting their thinking and taking all in confidence and using them to create an impregnable fortress of a mission oriented team of selfless volunteers have enamored many volunteers and even bystanders to Maheshhbhai.

One would wonder, where does a person like Maheshhbhai get his vision, energy and enthusiasm from?

Having observed Maheshhbhai from close quarters for more than forty years, I can confidently say that it is the strength derived from spiritual practices. Besides practicing yoga and meditation, his reading of spiritual matters, is vast. Being a research scientist, he examines spiritual practices in the light of the science and comes up with original interpretations. More and more of his later day talks have a basis in the inner divinity of the human being. He explains that when selecting the name Global Indians for Bharat Vikas, he deliberately used the word Vikas in place of Development because in a general sense, Development refers only to material progress while Vikas denotes the material progress rooted in the inner transformation of the individual.

Have you ever been to the Caves of the Wind at the Niagara Falls? This is where you go down 150 feet towards the base of the fall negotiating wooden walkways and stand on the wooden platform, known as the Hurricane deck. With the deafening sound from the Bridal Veil Fall barely 20 ft. away, you are doused with the generous spray of the water from the fall. At once, you want to retreat to the safety of the elevator from where you came and yet, you stand paralyzed by the ferocity of the Mother Nature and the sheer beauty of the moment. For those moments, you are lost to this world.

If I had to describe my experience of one on one sitting with Maheshhbhai without any scheduled agenda on hand, it is like standing on that Hurricane Deck. In such meetings, his best comes out- his spiritual thoughts comedown cascading. So many times, I have wished to record such instantaneous downpours of wisdom, though I have failed to do so because when he is speaking on

such occasions, you do not feel like getting up for a moment to record or take a photograph. He has this innate ability to explain the most intriguing scientific theories and juxtapose them with spiritual truths.

I should narrate here a recent incident to throw light on Maheshhbhai's irrepressible urge to continue to work for the society. When I was in Bharat past February, I came to know that Maheshhbhai had suddenly taken very ill and was hospitalized for a few days and then recuperating at home in Amdavad. I called his home next day to find out what would be the good time to go see him that day. Maheshhbhai came on the line and said, "Gaurangbhai, why don't you come tomorrow, this afternoon I have to attend a meeting!" Here is a person for whose health we are all worried, whom the doctor has advised rest and yet, he is thinking about meetings to continue his social work.

To sum it up, if anyone deserved an award for the real community service, it was Dr. Mahesh Mehta. While in my humble opinion, many awards, including Bharat Ratna, Padma Vibhushan, Padmashree, Nobel Prize, etc. have been compromised from time to time due to external considerations and political exigencies, there are moments when they are bestowed on people who have helped shape the world around them for the better. A few chosen persons like Maheshhbhai leave the footprints on the sands of time while rest of the people are happy building sand castles. I am also happy to note that two of our VHPA colleagues, Shri Ramesh Shah of Houston and Dr. Hari Bindal of Maryland received the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award for the community service and environmental engineering. They deserve our congratulations.

That Maheshhbhai has a magnetic personality is a well-known fact. There would hardly be a person who after spending half an hour with him, wouldn't want to go back to him to listen to him more. But more than a magnet, he is a Parasmani, which according to the folklore is a gemstone that has the attribute to turn into gold anything that touches it. Maheshhbhai has touched and transformed hundreds, nay, thousands of lives and continues to do so even after crossing 80 years. From Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America, we offer our hearty congratulation on this singular achievement and recognition by the Government of Bharat. Congratulations are also in order for Smt. Raginibahen Mehta without whose rock like support, unshakeable faith in the path Maheshhbhai chose and her incalculable sacrifices, Maheshhbhai wouldn't have been able to achieve what he has. We wish them both a healthy and happy life.



Dr Bharat Barai conferred Pravasi Bharatiya Samman



Born in Mumbai, India, Dr Bharat Barai migrated to USA in 1974 and became Naturalized US Citizen in 1981. He had a brilliant academic career with an MD in Medicine (Uni of Illinois), MD in Medical Oncology (Northwestern Uni Med School) and MD in Hematology (Rush Uni Medical School). He is currently Medical Director of the Cancer Institute, Methodist Hospitals, Clin Asst Prof of Medicine at Indiana University Medical School, Secretary and former President of the Medical Licensing Board of the State of Indiana (since year 2000). He has been the President of the Medical Staff, Chairman of the Medical Executive Committee, and serves on the Board of Directors of the Methodist Hospitals.

He also serves on the advisory board of the Indiana University School of Business. He also serves on the Medical Advisory Panel for US Senators and Congressmen.

Public service is the second hobby of

Dr. Barai. He has received numerous community service awards in last 25 years for his voluntary services to the local communities. He is a Trustee and former President of The Federation of Indian American Associations (FIA) Chicago land area; Founding member and Former Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Manav Seva Mandir, a large Hindu temple in Chicago land area, Trustee of the Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago, Trustee of the Indian American Cultural Center NW Indiana and many Indian American organizations.

He believes in social responsibility and has served communities to improve health care education and services. He served as voluntary Medical Director of Sickie Cell Foundation of NW Indian for the Children of Gary, IN; served as a director of the American Cancer Society, NW Indiana for public education and cancer screening. He has organized meetings to raise resources when natural disasters have struck: Asian Tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, Earthquake in India, Earthquake in Haiti.

Dr Barai has been very active in promoting India US relations. He has worked with several Indian Ambassadors, Indian Consul Generals in Chicago, and elected US Officials towards this goal. He

has co-hosted many Indian leaders when they visit Chicago and has accompanied some US elected officials when they visit India. He was part of the NRI delegation that accompanied President Clinton during his State visit to India. Dr Bharat Barai is recipient of the 2013 Ellis Island Medal of Honor as well. His Medical Professional story as an immigrant is featured in US National Museum of Immigration, Ellis Island, NY. In 2014, Dr Bharat Barai was the lead person and President of the Indian American Community Foundation that organized the legendary reception for Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Madison Square Garden.



Pravasi Bharatiya Divas 2017 - SPECIAL



Pravasi Bharatiya Divas
Ministry of External Affairs
Government of India



Ramesh Shah Receives Bharatiya Pravasi Samman Award for Community Service



Ramesh Shah receiving Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award from President of India Hon. Pranab Mukherjee.

HOUSTON: In January 2017, Ramesh Shah received the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award (PBSA) from President Pranab Mukherjee, the highest honor conferred on overseas Indians by the Government of India in recognition of achievements both in India and abroad. The PBSA is a lifetime achievement award for Ramesh Bhai, who has been actively engaged in the Indian community since he moved to the United States in 1970. He has been involved in Houston, working together with the community to set up the Gujarati Samaj, the India Culture Center and supporting many other organizations and leaders.

Recently, Ramesh Bhai is best known for his work with Ekal Vidyalaya—working to provide education to the millions in tribal India, who have little access to education. Ekal Vidyalaya originally operated from his home. He is now the global coordinator for Ekal Vidyalaya, where he travels worldwide to advocate Ekal's mission ranging from Denmark to New Zealand. Additionally, with his other brother Dinesh, Ramesh Bhai is also active in Hindu Swayam Sevak Sangh.

Ramesh Bhai was one of the co-founders and the first president of the Gujarati Samaj of Houston. In fact, he is currently fundraising for the organization's community center.

Ramesh Bhai was one of the leaders behind Prime Minister Narendra Modi's historic speech and community reception at Madison Square Garden in

September 2014. His behind the scenes efforts are legendary; he worked tirelessly to bring the community together, raise money and recruit volunteers. He has a personal magnetism that attracts others to set high standards and meet them!

Service is a part of his family. Ramesh Bhai grew up in



Gabat, a small village in Gujarat, and remembers his father paying for a pipeline from the river that would assist local farmers to irrigate their crops. While it was good for his father's grain business, Ramesh Bhai remembers that his father personally cared for the farmers and village people on a human level. For many, Ramesh Bhai is a favorite friend and neighbor. He is the first person they call in a difficult situation. He has been a community resource in times of emergencies, helping the community navigate difficulties in immigration, accidents, and family crisis. He has block-walked for political campaigns around the US and in India. And he is willing to fight for justice. In 2010, Ramesh Bhai drafted a petition to the Indian Overseas Ministry and led a silent hunger strike to protest the unfairness of the renunciation certificate rollout. His wife Kokila shares in the award as she has opened her heart and home to take care of hundreds of people in Ramesh Bhai's gallant service adventures. He has inspired his children and many other young people to selflessly serve locally and in India.

In addition to his devotion to service, Ramesh Bhai is an



From Left: Roopal (daughter), Ramesh Shah, Kokila (wife), Shilpa (daughter-in-law) holding grandson Niam, Sonal (daughter) holding granddaughter Leya and in the back is son Anand.

avid movie goer. Those that have played antakshari with Ramesh Bhai know that he has watched his share of movies in college and has a wicked memory for old songs.

Source: <http://www.indoamerican-news.com/ramesh-shah-receives-bharatiya-pravasi-samman-award-for-community-service/>

Hari Babu Bindal conferred Pravasi Bharatiya Samman for Environment Engineering

Mr. Hari Bindal retired after serving the US Government (Air Force, Navy, and Coast Guard) for 26 years. He has a PhD in Environmental Engineering Management, Masters in Environmental Engineering and another Masters in Public Health Engineering. Prior to coming to the USA in 1974, he served UP Jal Nigam as an Assistant Engineer for 2 years and as Lecturer in Madhav Engineering College for 6 years. Mr. Bindal served many social, political, cultural, and religious organizations at local and



national levels, including ILA, ICCC, IAFPE, IHA, VHPA, HAF and UHJT. He founded the American Society of Engineers of India Origin (ASEI) in 1983. Mr. Bindal made an expert suggestion on cleaning of Ganga to Hon'ble Prime Minister and Minister of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation. Mr. Bindal's leadership qualities and patriotism are shown through his film 'Akanksha', promoting Hindi language in USA, founding ASEI, and establishing scholarships in schools in India to encourage education in rural India.



America Must Re-Discover India

By Rajiv Malhotra

I had argued that certain South Asian studies programs in the US may be undermining India and had suggested that many Indian scholars and writers catering to English language readers need to rethink their positions on India. **Today's two-part column looks at how certain South Asian Studies discourses could also be detrimental to US strategic interests.**

Many American universities and think tanks are still fossilized within old paradigms like the Cold War, even though the US government now has a more nuanced understanding of India's potential as a democratic ally. The time has come for American universities and think tanks to re-image India. This means going beyond a post-Cold War rethinking and into a post September 11, 2001 rethinking.

India in the American mind

Asia is reclaiming its historical position as a leader of innovation, wealth creation and global culture. Across America's school systems, there is a groundswell of interest in Asian studies, and it is refreshing to note that this trend is driven by the intention to remove many prevailing stereotypes.

For instance, the Committee for Proposing Asian Studies in New Jersey recently examined a report by the Asia Society, which recommends the following reasons for teaching Asia in American schools:

'...as a nation, deeper understanding of Asia will be critical to sustaining our economic well-being, improving our standard of living, opening new markets, maintaining peace, and embracing cultural diversity.'

The report goes on to propose that the curriculum should depict Asia as a market, as a partner, as a competitor, and as a growing part of American culture.

One must highlight what this report is not recommending: It does not recommend that the core theme should be to prosecute Asia on human rights in the

classroom, or to focus primarily on other divisive issues, or to glorify the West's triumphs in Asia over the past few centuries. On the contrary, the report emphasizes moving the discourse away from Eurocentrism to better explain Asian civilizations as serious markets, partners and competitors, and as suppliers of American culture.

Furthermore, the Committee has agreed that 'respect for Asia and Asians' should be a central theme in the future curriculum. For example, while history books should include critical thinking, they should not disparage



whole cultures and civilizations from Eurocentric perspectives.

A review of current educational materials shows that presently India is not taught according to these proposed new guidelines. Moreover, the teaching of India is not on par with practices that characterize the teaching of many other Asian countries. For instance, while China, Japan and Korea are usually studied as distinct countries, India, a rising economic power, the world's largest democracy, and the second most populous nation on earth, is not given comparable treatment. Instead, India is subsumed in the amorphous and incoherent grouping of South Asian 'problems.'

The South Asia construct is sometimes defended on the grounds of fostering peace and harmony. However, superimposing a false view of similarities is not the way to harmony. The distinctions between China and Japan do



not come in the way of their friendly relationships. Men and women are friends, but are not the same. Individuals of diverse races, ethnicities, cultures and religions should be friends, and yet their distinctiveness should be celebrated. India's *jatis* co-existed peacefully for millennia without any movement to erase their distinctiveness. On top of the naiveté that harmony requires similarity, there is a second layer of flawed thinking: that the burden is on Indians to be like the others, in the interest of political correctness and harmony. One could even theorize that Pakistan's recent interest in (apparent) friendship with India is because of India's enormous success.

India's complex relationship with its neighbours is no reason to paint it with the same brush, particularly when India has clearly outstripped its neighbours in every respect. Furthermore, India is many times more complex than Japan or Korea, by virtue of its multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-political nature. Almost every state in India is larger in area and population, than most nations in the world.

Why, then, is Kissinger's strategy of 'balancing' India with Pakistan still the implicit meta-narrative in US universities and think tanks today? Why do these scholars under-value the fact that India is ten times Pakistan's size in economic terms and that the differences are even greater in the rates of technological and sociological development?

Current educational materials tend to portray India in terms of hopeless poverty, backwardness and superstition - using caste and conflict as the predominant lenses. On the other hand, countries like China, Japan, Korea and Singapore are approached from their own positions of strength.

Fortunately, each of my Asian-American colleagues on the Committee is very supportive about repositioning India's treatment as a major positive player in the global economy, technology and culture.

The discrepancy between what many American school educators want to teach about India, and what the curriculum offers, may be originating in American higher education, aided and abetted by certain Indian-American scholars.

There is a contradiction between the US government's

positive new policies towards India and the jaded focus of many Indian-American scholars. This is a matter of grave concern, as many such scholars are also political activists, and they can exacerbate the cleavages in Indian society in ways that subvert and destabilize its sovereignty.

To be critical is scholarly, but being hostile is prejudice. Many of these scholars maintain ambiguous identities to conceal their ideological hostility to the majority religion and culture of India.

America's Paradigm Shift

US strategic interests, including the collective interests of its citizens, businesses and government, should determine its aims in teaching India. The old paradigm was the Cold War. India was classified either as a Soviet satellite to be contained, or, at best, as an exotically strange civilization or a patient of cultural diseases.

THERE IS A CONTRADICTION BETWEEN THE US GOVERNMENT'S POSITIVE NEW POLICIES TOWARDS INDIA AND THE JADED FOCUS OF MANY INDIAN-AMERICAN SCHOLARS. THIS IS A MATTER OF GRAVE CONCERN, AS MANY SUCH SCHOLARS ARE ALSO POLITICAL ACTIVISTS, AND THEY CAN EXACERBATE THE CLEAVAGES IN INDIAN SOCIETY IN WAYS THAT SUBVERT AND DESTABILIZE ITS SOVEREIGNTY. TO BE CRITICAL IS SCHOLARLY, BUT BEING HOSTILE IS PREJUDICE. MANY OF THESE SCHOLARS MAINTAIN AMBIGUOUS IDENTITIES TO CONCEAL THEIR IDEOLOGICAL HOSTILITY TO THE MAJORITY RELIGION AND CULTURE OF INDIA.

in South Asia is explained.

China is seen as a highly modernistic threat, using economic and technological might to try to beat the west at its own game of power projection.

The third and most recent threat (which could also be leveraged as an opportunity) has yet to be seriously examined, but has already become a hot political issue: the impact of the emerging global free market of labor. Recent high profiling of the outsourcing phenomenon has made many Indians very proud, for good reasons. But when Japan got similarly profiled in the 1970s, it led to a massive US political and labor backlash. That is when the Japan Foundation, with the help of Asia Society and others, swung into action, to re-educate Americans in a positive manner at all levels about Japan. Result: Japan-bashing stopped. Unfortunately, there is no similar strategy with respect to India, or even an adequate understanding of this issue.

In addition to this new geopolitical reality, there are other major changes (with respect to India) that are being

In the new paradigm, however, the Soviets are gone, and the US faces three new threats: Pan-Islam, China, and labor competition from overseas. The Islamic threat is often seen as a disorganized and scattered force that would take the world back to pre-modernity. Later, how this threat could play out



woven into the US socio-political tapestry: the rise of the Indian Diaspora voice and the enculturation of America with Indian spirituality, music, cuisine, fashions and culture in general. These positive new images of India often conflict with the negative and morbid images still advocated by many scholars in South Asian studies.

Old India was seen as incapable of making positive contributions to the US or the world at large, and was studied for its otherness to the normal, i.e. in contrast with Western civilization. Old India's desi elitists still try to outdo each other in proving their rejection of native Indian symbols and identity by adoption Western substitutes. They resemble starving hands reaching out to the West for nourishment. India-bashing has become their passport to 'Civilization,' which they consider to be synonymous with adoption of a Western identity.

Indian scholars' US nexus

Many Western-based South Asian Studies scholars are either members of/or affiliated with specific Indian political parties and/or political NGOs (Non-Government Organizations). These range from Dalit separatists, Muslim extremist groups, Communist parties (especially Communist Party of India (Marxist)), Christian proselytizers, Congress Party Nehruvianists, etc. to name a few. The field is highly skewed to the kind of radical Left whose political positions destabilize India, and is not balanced by criticism of those positions from opposing perspectives.

The 'Left' as it manifests in the Indian environment is very different from what liberal middle class Americans view as Left. In the US, the Left is where the heart is, and this is very different from an Indian leftist's orientation, which is colder and more opportunistic. To give a specific example, the typical leftist/liberal profile in America often thrives on traditional Indian culture, such as *yoga*, meditation and vegetarianism, whereas the Indian 'Left' considers these as the chief culprits coming in the way of 'progress.' These Indian scholars use their Western academic credibility to raise funds from the Diaspora, and use the money to sponsor unrest in India and foreign travel for their comrades back home. The Indian side of this axis provides filtered data to US-based activist-scholars, as well as a channel in India to distribute the

ideology spun on US campuses.

A series of case studies needs to be done to ascertain whether these linkages compromise academic objectivity. In particular, shouldn't such affiliations have to be disclosed to students, to peers and to the public, so that they may factor these potential conflicts-of-interests while interpreting the scholarship and making donations?

To what extent are certain US-based academic scholars operating as satellites of specific political parties and movements in India?

To appreciate what is going on, the following hypothetical analogy may help: Imagine if Michael

Moore or Bill O'Reilly was hired as a professor in a Chinese college as the authority on American politics, and there was no alternative perspective presented. Imagine if people like Reverend Al Sharpton, Pat Robertson, and other fringe political activists in the USA, were to capture the chairs of America studies in prestigious Chinese universities, and were seen as the 'voices of America.' Would that give the students and public in China a broad, balanced and fair portrayal of America?

The analogy becomes even more poignant if one further imagines that these American scholars in China were adopting the Chinese identity, because, hypothetically, it had a far superior brand premium than their original American identity. As a consequence, these American scholars would be alienated from America and enthusiastic about denigrating it in China as a way to prove their Chinese-ness and to advance their Chinese careers.

Finally, to complete the analogy, imagine that these self-alienated Americans in China were aiding and abetting insurgencies in America on 'human rights' grounds. (Of course, in practice, such a hypothetical scenario could only be possible if China was the world's foremost power and America was a poor third world country.) This analogy has serious implications especially for the many desi pseudo-leftist and 'sub-nationalist' scholars and authors in the US, whose personal narratives are not shared by the vast majority of the billion people of India. To become members of the Western Grand Narrative - even in marginal roles - these Indians often sneer at Indian culture in the same manner as colonialists once did.

Recalling my days at St Stephens College (Delhi),



such Indians tended to have excellent communications skills in English. In fact, English Honors was the discipline that produced the largest number of these 'intellectuals,' followed by History Honors. They mastered the art of quoting from Western literature, philosophy, politics and history in order to create an impression, but had very little depth of understanding. In particular, their knowledge of their own heritage was limited to simplistic conclusions which they had picked up from Western accounts.

Western academe employs these brown *sahibs* as 'Indian voices.' But many of them are career opportunists, and are artificially sustained by Western funding and patronage, enjoying little legitimacy back in India. They are also out of place in this era of free markets, having received sanctuary in US South Asian studies. To sustain their credibility and usefulness in the US, they must constantly dish out sensational accounts of problems in India. They are simply Uncle Toms.

While espousing anti-colonialism, they are, in reality, the neo-colonized, and their intellectual positions are often diametrically opposed to what liberal American secularists would advocate. Some examples illustrate why they are 'pseudo' leftists:

1. India's pseudo-leftists oppose bringing a uniform civil code for marriages in India, because this enables them to exploit Hindu/Muslim cleavages, even though this has denied human rights to Muslim women. No American liberal has proposed that there be a separate Muslim Civil Law or a separate Jewish Civil Law or a Black Civil Law in America.

2. They oppose proposals to bring secular education to India's tens of thousands of *madrassas* (Muslim religious schools), even though these proposals would add science, math and democracy to the curriculum, and prepare Indian Muslim students to prosper in the new global workplace. This appeasement of the orthodox Muslim clergy is driven by their own petty agendas.

3. While *yoga*/meditation are accepted by American liberals, Indian pseudo-leftists vociferously oppose every attempt to introduce *yoga* in India's schools (on the grounds that it is primitive superstition), and thereby deny Indian society the benefits of stress reduction, violence reduction and increased compassion that are now well recognized by several studies in the US.

4. While interfaith dialogs are becoming

commonplace in America, and China's government funds academic religious studies and the restoration of 500 Buddhist shrines, India's pseudo-leftists continue to deny that religiosity is a legitimate part of being human. Furthermore, they do not believe in building common ground, and continue their call for all-out war to defeat Indian dharmic traditions, for the sake of some sort of apocalyptic birth of Utopia on Earth. They are, in fact, contributing to the radicalization of Hinduism in India.

The US must protect its interests by reducing its dependence on those Indian scholars who are trapped in

obsolete paradigms. It must articulate its own long-range strategic vision, and New India's place in it, and then reevaluate each of the programs in South Asian studies through such a lens. Presently, many of

the tilts in academic programs are unofficial or covert remnants of the past that have simply not been re-examined since the ground shifted. They are often subliminally carried out, without many scholars being fully aware of the larger picture. The reason that so many recent events in India contradicted what these Indian scholars predicted is not that India is incoherent; but, rather, that many pundits installed in US academe are simply unreliable.

Lessons not learnt

US policy has made many catastrophic miscalculations in Asia in the past, because its intellectuals had a murky and befuddled understanding of non-western cultures and politics. Similar errors of judgment cannot be ruled out in the case of India. Deposing the Shah of Iran on the grounds of human rights violations did not improve human rights in Iran under the Ayatollahs that followed. Repeatedly backing Pakistani military coups has subverted its fragile democratic institutions, and has reduced it into a nation governable only by the military or by the mullahs. Pampering the Saudi theocrats for decades has alienated the Arab populace. One wonders about the role of academic scholars in these short-sighted policies, and the extent to which they may have simply ignored data that was incompatible with their own personal ideologies and agendas.

Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the US-backed *Mujahedeen* reinvented themselves as anti-US jihadis. US Secretary of State Zbigniew Brzezinski had sponsored and

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Balvihar Annual Program Showcases Hindu Values to Live by

By Smita Daftardar

Balvihar Hindi School of Atlanta (VHPA) recently held its annual cultural program, a show presented by the students and volunteers of the two branches of Balvihar, from Gwinnett County and Cobb County. The program is a tradition of Balvihar, now in its 26th year, showcasing the talent and Hindi language skills of the students, and reflecting the dedication of the team of volunteers who run these programs.

Every year, the cultural program adheres to a theme relevant and aligned to the vision and mission of Balvihar and VHPA. This year, the theme was "Hindu Values to Live By." Growing up in a Hindu household, almost all of us have heard the stories of Ramayana and Mahabharata, extolling the virtues of Ram, the devoted son, Arjun, the dedicated student, and countless other characters that shape our perception of righteousness, duty, morality and ethics. Stories of great kings, statesmen and warriors, from Purans as well as Indian history inspire and reinforce the virtues of purity of thought, word and action. These are the samskar (values) that set the Hindu value system, and its followers, apart from the rest of the world. And it is this tradition that Balvihar strives to preserve and pass on to the future generations.

The cultural program was inaugurated with the traditional lamp-lighting ceremony by the Chief Guest

Shri D V Singh, and a welcome address by Kusum Khuranaji, President VHPA, Atlanta chapter, in the auditorium of Norcross High School. The three hour long cultural program comprised a colorful mix of dances and plays, interspersed with poetry recitation and a story telling competition. Balvihar celebrates Hindi Diwas every year, and winners of the preliminary rounds compete in a final round in front of the entire audience during the annual cultural program.

The students of graduating class of Balvihar were the emcees for the program. The youngest students of Balvihar, the five year olds, were the first performers of the cultural program, presenting a parade of inspiring characters from Hindu scriptures and Indian history. Next in line was a play about Krishna and Sudama, whose friendship, transcending socio-economic barriers, set an example of what true friendship should be like. This was followed by a series of plays and dances. The story of Lav and Kush reciting Ram Katha in front of the entire Ram-darbar, set an example of fearlessness and confidence for the young kids in the audience. A play on the ideal ruler King Shibi, showed how the head of a state should rule: protecting everyone, upholding everyone's rights and honoring nature's law of "Jeevo Jeevasya Jeevanam".

Prayers are integral part of any religion, and devotion may be expressed in various forms. This is especially true for Hindu Dharm. Multiple examples of true



devotees can be found in our pauranik stories, but the purity and simplicity of Shabari's bhakti has a place of its own. The story of Shabari offering berries after tasting them, and Shri Ram calmly accepting them, was aptly enacted by a group of students. Another form of bhakti, the Raas-Leela of Krishna and Gopis, based on Narsi Mehta's bhajan was performed as an example of the selfless love and devotion of gopis for Lord Krishna.

When the gopis yearn for Krishna, he reciprocates their love by taking up the flute, and mesmerizes them with his beautiful music.

Talking of bhakti, it is impossible to not mention Hanuman. Considering the many qualities of Hanuman, it was only fair to have multiple programs dedicated to him! A group of students presented an energetic dance on "Jai Hanuman", a fitting tribute to the brave one; the destroyer of evil. This was followed by a beautiful drama showing the unmatched devotion Hanuman had for Shri Ram. In the first act, Hanuman is shown rubbing sindoor all over his body for his Lord's long life, in response to Sita putting sindoor on her forehead for Ram's long life. The second act had Hanuman tearing apart his chest to see if Shri Ram and Sita indeed lived in his heart, drawing a huge applause from the audience. The show progressed with stories of some inspiring characters from Indian history. Chanakya, the renowned statesman and advisor to King Chandragupt is a historical character whose relevance seems to only grow with passing time. A short play on Chanakya's policy of never using state funds for personal work highlighted the importance of integrity and ethical behavior, especially

among bureaucrats. Chanakya is indeed a great role model, especially for anyone aspiring for a public office. Next, the audience was treated to an amusing story where Birbal, beloved historical figure, one of the "Navratna" of King Akbar's court, wins a bet by quoting a number for the population of crows in the kingdom, knowing very well he could not be proven wrong! Birbal sets a great example of intelligence, fairness, and of course, quick-wittedness.

Any discussion about Hindu values is incomplete without the example of Shri Ram, the epitome of dignity and decorum, the duty-bound ideal son, and ideal king. Befitting the theme, the next program was a play about Kaikeyi ordering 14 years of exile to the crown-prince Ram, and Ram accepting it in order to fulfill his father's promise. Respecting one's parents is the cornerstone of the Hindu value system. Matru Devo Bhav and Pitru Devo Bhav are an integral part of Hindu belief. This was beautifully depicted by a dance performance on the song "ye to sach hai ke bhagwan hai...", conveying the message that parents represent God in human form on this Earth and are to be revered. Another virtue which cannot be stressed enough, especially to the growing minds of children, is the importance of truthfulness. Raja Harishchandra was willing to sacrifice the lives of his wife and child in the line of duty. The play showing the sacrifices of Satyavaadi Harishchandra conveyed the lesson that honesty is a very important virtue and is to be upheld at any cost.

As an educational institute, Balvihar cannot stress the importance of knowledge enough. An illustrious





example of pursuit of knowledge can be found in the life of Gautam Buddha, as was depicted by a play showing the transformation of Prince Siddharth into Gautam Buddha, The Enlightened One. Last, but not the least, was a play based on the well-known poem “Rashmi-Rathi” by Rashtr-Kavi Shri Ramdhari Singh Dinkar. Based on Mahabharat, the poem portrayed the attempt of Shri Krishna to broker peace between Kaurav and Pandav, and avoids the horrors and destruction of war. In today’s world, this is a poignant message. Violence should be the last resort, and only after every attempt for peace fails. This episode of Mahabharat, expertly recited by the students, showed the generosity and humility of the all-powerful Shri Krishna. It also highlighted the ignorance and arrogance of Duryodhan, a glaring example of how one should not behave.

The show concluded with all students marching on to the stage to the beats of “*Janani janm bhoomi, swarg se mahan hai...*” a message to all, that protecting and taking care of their homeland is their sacred duty, be it India or the USA. The program ended with a vote of thanks by Shri Madhav Katdare, coordinator of Gwinnett Balvihar, acknowledging the contributions of all the volunteers, parents and especially past graduates of Balvihar who managed the entire backstage. Their support is critical for the success of Balvihar.

www.balvihar.org



Lives in Himalayan Villages

By Maria Wirth

Would you like to come to some villages around Chamba?" a friend asked. I happily said yes. He wanted to visit the kin of former servants of his family and bring them gifts before Diwali. After buying boxes of sweets and drawing money from an ATM, three of us set off from Mussoorie.

The air was crystal clear and the snow peaks shone with great splendor. How beautiful it was to be out in the open at the height of 2000 meters! What wonderful surroundings the villagers live in! Blue mountain ranges were rolling one after the other like waves in the ocean. Kids in school uniform walked on the road. Their school may be much simpler than those in cities, yet the location is enviable and the openness of space seemed very conducive for an open mind.

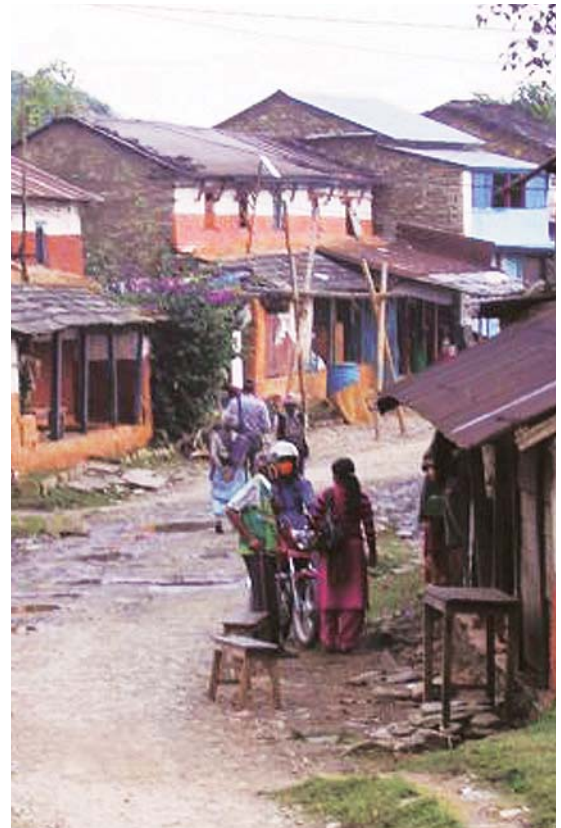
Our first stop was in a tiny village near the old road to Tehri town, which has been submerged in the Ganges due to the Tehri Dam. It was a steep climb down the hill. An old woman was sitting in a courtyard sieving grain. She had few teeth left, yet her smile was warm and

welcoming. It was a surprise visit, and immediately her neighbors gathered, too. "Kursi lao" I heard, and children brought chairs from a neighboring house. The woman lives alone in an old house. Her husband, who was a servant to my friend's family for decades, had passed away several years ago. Her only daughter is staying with her in laws.

We had to stress really hard that our stomachs were very full and had no place even for a cup of tea. Yet water we took and she sent a girl to pluck some lime. My friend had to show her how to use the zip on a jacket he had brought and then the talk was mainly about people she knew from the olden times, and about crops.

When we left, she said she would come to Mussoore to see the father of my friend, who was about her age. Will she still be able to climb up the hill? Probably she can do it. Village folk are hardier than city folk.

Next we drove to a tiny village some 30 km away. It was a two hours drive in a wonderful environment. The car climbed over a mountain range, down into a valley, and in the end, very high up on a kachha (unpaved) road, which was only as broad as our jeep. It was frightening. A mantra kept automatically and continuously repeating





itself in my mind.

We were expected, because Panditji, as the former servant was called, had a mobile. Two boys waited for us at the head of the road to guide us further up, and a table with sweets and namkeen was already laid. His three daughters, who are married lived nearby and his eldest son was working in Hyderabad.

After leaving my friend's house some years ago, Panditji became a part time pujari in a mandir further down the hill – for Rs 150 a month. He has since stopped. The money was not worth the climb. He was offered a full time job as pujari for Rs. 1100. It would have required him to stay the whole day and sleep in the mandir, too. So, he declined the offer as he felt that he was too old to live alone. If something happened to him, nobody would know. His son is sending him money from Hyderabad.

His house had two rooms with a buffalo staying downstairs. And as soon as we arrived, the neighbors gathered at his home. The view from his narrow veranda was truly spectacular. It soon became dark and the hills lit up with lights sparkling everywhere, down in the valley and above in the sky.

Lastly, we went to a house near Chamba, on the new road to Uttarkashi, to visit the wife of a former servant. My friend was all praise for this servant, who was with them for over 40 years ago in Kalkuta, when my friend was still in school. Once, the servant went home to Chamba for a holiday. While there, he started working for daily wages on road construction. After a few days a rock fell on him and he died on the spot.

His wife was young, his only son barely two years old, and physically slightly handicapped. Now his wife was in her sixties and lived with her daughter in law and three grandsons in the village, and her son worked in a restaurant in Ludhiana over 200 km away.

When we reached the simple house made from mud and wood, she had just come back from Ludhiana, after a checkup in a hospital. Her health is not good. She has water in her lungs. Yet her nature was very sweet and loving. It was a pleasure to be with her, her bahu, and the grandchildren, in the small room, which had a garlanded photo of her husband on the wall.

Their belongings were stashed away in trunks and boxes. Quilts were neatly folded, and only school books were piled up on a trunk. Though she must have been tired from the long journey, and though she was ill, she enquired about everyone she knew from that time, while her grandsons were leaning on her. Her hard life has made her into a beautiful person.

I once again realized that it is neither status nor

money that ultimately counts. Of importance, is how one embraces the experiences in one's life; whether one can accept them, or not; whether one has trust and faith in life, or not; whether one feels support from within or not, and whether one can ultimately let go of one's life when the time comes.

While walking up to the road two young men passed us on the narrow track. "Hi!" one of them said, in a tone that one hears occasionally in cities. (It sounded odd in the village). "Where are you from?" he asked further. "Germany", I replied. "Oh, I worked for 3 years in a restaurant in Munich", he surprised by speaking in fluent German.

Driving back to Mussoorie, several jackals got trapped in the light beam of our jeep. We stopped in the silent night and admired the vast expanse of flickering lights down in the valley, which was Dehradun.

What a rich, inspiring day it was! I had been allowed a peep into different lives which are side by side on our beautiful earth. Each person is the center of a unique, private world that depends heavily, if not fully, on the mind. The outer circumstances may be determined to a great extent. Yet the option to be at peace with one's life seems to be open to everyone.

About the Author



Maria Wirth

is a German and came to India for a holiday after finishing her psychology studies at Hamburg University. She visited the ArdhakumbhaMela in Haridwar in April 1980 where she met Sri Anandamayi Ma and Devaraha Baba, two renowned saints. With their blessing she continued to live in India and

dived into India's spiritual tradition, sharing her insights with German readers through articles and books. For long, she was convinced that every Indian knows and treasures his great heritage. However, when in recent years, she noticed that there seemed to be a concerted effort to prevent Indians (and the world) from knowing how valuable this ancient Indian heritage is, she started to point out the unique value of

Indian tradition.

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Cremation, Reincarnation and Spirituality

By Umesh Gulati, Ph.D.

In the August 15, 2009 issue of Newsweek magazine, Lisa Miller, the magazine's religious editor, wrote an article with a title: 'We Are All Hindus Now'. She said: "A million-plus Hindus live in the United States, a fraction of the billion who live on Earth". But the recent poll data show that, conceptually, at least, we are slowly becoming more like Hindus and less like traditional Christians in the ways we think about God, ourselves, each other, and eternity.

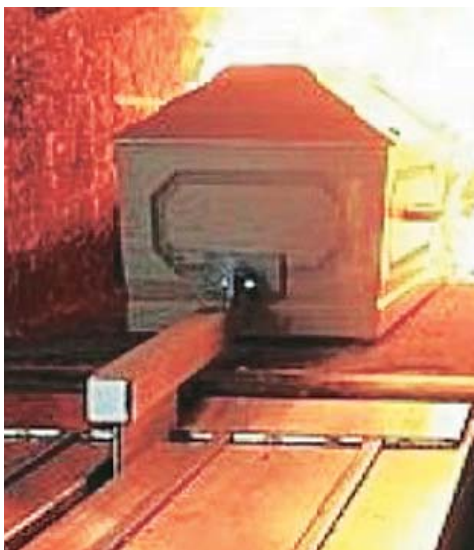
She quoted the Rig-Veda, which says that Truth is One, but the sages call it by various names. A Hindu believes there are many paths to God. Jesus is one way, Islam is another, and Hinduism is the third. The most traditional, conservative Christians have not been taught to think like this.

Ms. Miller further said, "According to a 2008 Pew Forum survey, 65 percent of us believe that "many religions can lead to eternal life"—including 37 percent of white evangelicals, the group most likely to believe that salvation is theirs alone. Also, the number of people who seek spiritual truth outside church is growing. Besides, says Miller, thirty percent of Americans call themselves "spiritual, not religious," according to a 2009 NEWSWEEK Poll, up from 24 percent in 2005.

Then, there's the question, asks Miller, "what happens

when one dies?" Christians traditionally believe that bodies and souls are sacred, and, that together they comprise the "self," and that at the end of time they will be reunited in the Resurrection. You need both, and you need them forever. Hindus believe no such thing. At death, the body burns on a pyre, while the spirit [called the Atman or the Self—where identity resides—] escapes. In reincarnation, central to Hinduism, selves come back to earth again and again in different bodies.

She further noted that 24 percent of Americans say they believe in reincarnation, according to a 2008 Harris poll. So agnostic are we about the ultimate fates of our bodies that we're burning them—like Hindus—after death. More than a third of Americans now choose cremation, according to the Cremation Association of North America, up from 6 percent in 1975. "I do think the more spiritual role of religion tends to deemphasize some of the more starkly literal interpretations of the Resurrection," agrees Diana Eck, professor of comparative religion at Harvard University. (For a full commentary on this News Week article, please see my article, 'How Hinduism Came to America,' in the April 2016 issue of Vedanta Kesari from Chennai.) The reason for providing this long introduction will become clear when we bring into focus the Vatican's remarks in October 2016, regarding cremation and throwing the ashes into a river, etc. as the Hindus do. But in order to





provide a clear picture for what we are going to say on this subject, we need to know certain words that have become part of vocabulary of our religion and culture. The word Dharma means something that supports. And what supports a nation are righteousness, morality and spirituality. So the essence of everything is dharma; our dharma is spirituality, which means that behind this world of names and forms lies the divinity, God or what Hindus prefer to call the Atman. Hinduism asserts that one's identity lies in the Atman, not in the body. The death of a body is like one changing one's old and torn out jacket for the new one; death means that the Atman or the Self drops the old body and takes another body. This last act is called reincarnation, which we will discuss later.

The monotheistic religious leaders, however, have not yet awakened to the present-day liberal environment. For example, in the October 26th issue of New York Times article that we mentioned before, titled, 'Vatican Clarifies Cremation Rules: Bury, Don't Scatter', the Vatican responded to what it called an "unstoppable increase" in cremation and issued guidelines barring the scattering of ashes "in the air, on land, at sea or in some other way."

Strangely, however, while admitting that a number of Christians in both America and Europe are adopting customs like cremation, which the Vatican has admitted as "unstoppable", it, nevertheless, wants Christians to stick to at least to the 'semblance' of Christian tradition of 'burial', by asking them not to scatter ashes in the ocean or keep them in an urn at home. Rather they should be put in a place that is "accessible to everyone, where they can be venerated," so a cemetery is preferable to home!

The news report further pointed out that the Church banned cremation for centuries, but began to allow cremation in 1963, as long as it is not done for reasons at odds with Christian doctrine. Burials are deeply embedded in Christian tradition, and in the United States and elsewhere many dioceses still run graveyards and cemeteries, though cremation and other alternatives are on the rise.

On the following day, Cardinal Muller, Vatican's spokesman, said, "We are facing a new challenge for the evangelizing [emphasis ours] of death." Further more, discussing the centrality of death and resurrection [?] of Christians, he emphasized the church's "doctrinal and pastoral reasons" for burial, which it "continues to insistently recommend."

Cardinal Muller added: "We believe [emphasis added] in the resurrection of the body, so burial is the normal form for the Christian faithful, especially Catholics, whom we are addressing with this document."

In that spirit, the document explains, the church cannot

"condone attitudes or permit rites that involve erroneous ideas about death, such as considering death as the definite annihilation of the person, or the moment of fusion with Mother Nature, or the universe". What an unscientific assertion indeed! In this age of science, who in the world can accept the resurrection of any dead person at any time what so ever. Once again, the Vatican seems to have dismissed what Harvard professor Diana Eck said in the News Week article as being 'very literal interpretations of the Resurrection'.

The New York Times article also pointed out that cremation in Italy [of all the Christian countries!] has become increasingly popular, and also in other countries, including France and Switzerland. Joshua Slocum, the executive director of the Funeral Consumers Alliance, a non-profit group in South Burlington, Vt., that combats exploitive practices in the funeral industry, said, that cremation in the United States has been rising since the early 1960s. "By some estimates", he said, "they may have surpassed traditional burials" [Emphasis is ours]. "The traditional idea of everyone being buried in one cemetery plot in hometown really belongs to a different era," he said.

It seems that the Vatican has not yet awakened to the changing attitudes among Americans, as was indicated by the News Week article, which we referred to in the beginning, nor has it reconciled with the changing social and cultural environment that is more rational and scientific, rather than dogmatic. There is no doubt in our minds that cremation is bound to continue growing among Christians regardless of what the Vatican decrees, for truth cannot be dissolved by a decree.

It is not, however, the first time that Vatican has disregarded scientific truth that is verifiable, and has taken shelter under its so-called religious dogma. Recall when Copernicus discovered that it is the earth that moves around the sun and not the sun that moves around the earth, a belief long held by the Roman Church. More tragically, when Galileo, an Italian scientist, about hundred years later, confirmed this to be true he was convicted by Pope Paul V; and as the Church said, was contrary to the true sense and authority of Holy Scripture. Not until 1992, nearly 350 years later, did the Vatican relent and said that Galileo was right.

Why, it may be asked, do the Hindus prefer cremation? It is because the Hindus believe (which is consistent with science), that body, not just a human body, but also that of any animal as well, is a combination of matter. And when the human body is cremated, the ashes of one body are indistinguishable from that of another body. So, scattering them or putting them in a sacred river



as is done in India, the ashes get merged with the infinity. Besides, what is there in the ashes to bury? Just as we don't care to keep our old and torn-up jacket in a box, the same way, preserving ashes in a grave simply because many dioceses still run graveyards and cemeteries makes no sense.

Since spirituality has lot do with our individuality, let us understand the meaning of being spiritual, and how it aligns with cremation, and reincarnation. So, what do we mean when we say we are spiritual? (Please recall, according to the News Week article, more and more Americans are saying that they are not religious but spiritual.) The opposite of being spiritual is material. Since we are spiritual, our nature, humanity's nature is spiritual, and even though our body is all matter; our essence, however, is spiritual.

Swami Vivekananda described it very beautifully when he said, "Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this Divinity within, by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship, psychic control, or philosophy—by one or more or all of these—and be free. This is the whole of religion." (The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1991), v.1, 124 and 257.) In other words, behind this world of names and body forms lies the divinity, or God, which is not an object, but has to be experienced and realized.

The potential divinity of every being, not just of human beings, indeed, is a very important feature of Hinduism. Swami Vivekananda once said: Islam says that there is no God but Allah; Vedanta says that there is nothing that is not God. So there is no division between sacred and secular in Hinduism; everything is sacred. Thus spiritually speaking, all objects in nature are born equal (though the capacity to realize spirit varies); Hinduism thus is the embodiment of spiritual and social democracy.

So, while our individual self is a function of body-mind complex, which is nothing but matter, Atman or the Self is the Spirit, and therefore divine. According to the Bhagavad-Gita (2.23-2.24), 'no weapons can cleave this Atman, no fire can burn it, no water can wet it, and no air can dry it. It is changeless, all pervading, unmoving, and immovable, this Self is eternal.' The Gita also says that death is like a person changing old and worn out clothes for new ones. (BG: 2.22) So the death is only of the body, not of the Self, which is without birth and death, eternal and immortal, and is our true essence.

One of the implications of this divinity of every being is that we humans are not born in sin as some orthodox Christians would make us believe; we might make

mistakes out of ignorance of our divine nature, but are not essentially sinners. As Swami Vivekananda said, "Men are taught from childhood that they are weak and are sinners. Teach them that they are glorious children of immortality. Let positive, strong helpful thoughts enter into their brains from very childhood. Say to your own minds, 'I am He; I am He [the Atman].'" In fact Jesus Christ, too, said, "except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God." (Cf. Swami Satprakashananda, Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 1975, Hinduism and Christianity, 137).

Swami Dayatmananda of Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre of London, writes in the inside-cover of his January – February 2017 issue of Vedanta magazine: Swami Vivekananda was rarely aware of his body. To illustrate, he writes, that some time in 1895 Swamiji was staying in the house of Miss Ellen Waldo where he was giving discourses to some disciples. Among them was one Devamata. One day, Swamiji saw a long mirror, reaching from floor to ceiling. The mirror seemed to fascinate him; he walked up and down in front of the mirror and gazed at himself intently. Both the disciples thought that he was admiring his own beautiful face. Suddenly, Swamiji turned to Miss Waldo and said: "Ellen, it is the strangest thing, I cannot remember how I look. I look and look at myself in the glass, but the moment I turn away, I forget completely what I look like [because I know, I am not the body]." Quoting Swamiji, Swami Dayatmananda says: "The mistake is that we cling to the body, when it is the spirit that is immortal. We are spirit, spirit that has no form or shape [and no birth or death]. The highest heaven is in our own souls; the greatest temple of worship is human soul [Atman]."

That is what Jesus Christ also teaches us through his crucifixion: overcoming the body-idea by spiritual conquest of the flesh; overcoming the lower self by the higher Self, the spiritual Self. That alone gives us immortality. (Op.Cit. 177.) But the Vatican has ignored even what Jesus had said more than two thousand years ago.

Let's us now take up the question of reincarnation. Mind you, reincarnation does not mean the same thing as resurrection. Resurrection, as we said before, is just a dogma, which has no scientific validity. Reincarnation, on the other hand, involves rebirth where the Self takes a new and different body. So, reincarnation does not mean the same Ram Kumar, a Hindu athlete, comes back (or resurrects) in a new body; rather the previous Ram Kumar might take the body of a John or Jane, a Christian from America.

To understand the principle of reincarnation, therefore,



we have to understand first the divine law of Karma. What do we mean by karma? Karma means any action, thought, word or deed. According to the Bhagavad-Gita every person must act according to one's nature, and every act or work must have its appointed effect. The effect lies inherent in the cause, as a tree lies potentially hidden in the seed.

Again, let us quote Swami Satprakashnanda (Op. Cit. 111-112): "Karma is usually translated as work, but it has a much wider significance than the English word work [emphasis is not ours]. Generally speaking, the Sanskrit term karma is volitional action, though that still does not give a complete picture of what karma is. Any volitional use of the body, the organs, or the mind is all karma as long as it is deliberately or knowingly done.

According to this doctrine, whatever we do will have its consequence either in this life or in the lives to come. So, karma is not 'fate'; for example, if I failed in my exam, I cannot blame my fate. Rather, it is because I didn't study enough. Every cause has to have its effect. Since our present life may not be long enough for all our karmas to work out, so at death the un-ripened karmas, or karmas that have not yet yielded their fruit, called prarabdha karmas, give the soul its initial start in the next birth.

In other words, the law of Karma says that we alone, and not God, are responsible for the pleasures and pains we experience because of our good and bad deeds. As a saying goes: "as we sow, so shall we reap." The law of karma determines our destiny, and we don't have to wait until the dooms day, as in the case of the so-called resurrection.

The death of a body, according to this divine law of karma, does not settle all of one's accounts, for all the credit and debit balances are forwarded to the next page of the ledger. This means that we are born again and again to work out all our stored up karmas that could not fructify in the present life.

In other words, when a person dies with a strong unfulfilled desire that cannot be satisfied on earth, his or her mind strongly yearns for the unsatisfied desire. It is this unfulfilled desire - *prarabdha karma* - that eventually brings the person back to take the new birth, which is reincarnation. (Contrariwise, a sage who has become without desire becomes immortal, which means that he will have no rebirth; he indeed becomes immortal even in this life, *jivan-mukta*.)

Reincarnation, thus, gives a person another chance or chances to gradually evolve spiritually, by gaining various valuable experiences that he or she acquires in one's different incarnations. As Swami Vivekananda once

said: this world is a spiritual gymnasium. Eventually, when one reaches the acme of one's spiritual progress through God realization, one goes beyond all desires and gets one's moksha or liberation, and, will have no rebirth.

Hinduism, thus, believes that every being, even an animal, has the Atman (soul), the manifestation of the soul varies with the medium that embodies it. The animal medium is not evolved enough to manifest all the beauty of that soul. So, according to the Hindu view, a soul can be born as a human being or a nonhuman being according to its Karma. There is one continuous existence, and this view is much nearer to the modern concept of evolution.

In conclusion we want to quote Swami Vivekananda (The Complete Works, v. 1, 30-31): "All the actions that we see in the world, all the movements in human society, all the works that we have around us are simply the display of thought, the manifestation of the will of man. As is Karma, so is the manifestation of the will. The men of mighty will that the world has produced have all been tremendous workers—gigantic souls, with wills powerful enough to overturn worlds, wills they got by persistent work, through ages and ages. Such gigantic wills as that of Buddha or Jesus could not be obtained in one life, for we know who their fathers were. It is not known that their fathers ever spoke a word for the good of the world. The gigantic will, which Buddha and Jesus threw over the world, whence did it come? Whence came the accumulation of power? [This world is a moral gymnasium, as Swamiji himself put it.] It must have been there ages and ages, continually growing bigger and bigger, until it burst on society in a Buddha or a Jesus, even rolling down to the present day [in the form of Sri Ramakrishna].

About the Author

Umesh Gulati, Ph.D.,
Professor Emeritus

Shri Umesh Gulati, based in Durham, NC, is a Vedantist, and a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. He has regularly published articles in Vedanta Kesari from Chennai and Prabuddhabharata from Kolkata, and also in Vedanta magazine from England. Lately he also published articles in Marg magazine. After receiving Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Virginia in 1967, he joined East Carolina University in Greenville, NC the same year and retired in 1999.

A Traveler's tale Memoir



Reviewed by Sabitha Venugopal

The book is a memoir that spans three continents over the last eighty years. Vidya Devi started her life in 1944 in '60 Village', Guyana born to a family of Indian origin. The book meanders through memories of her childhood in the village, the simple pleasures of schools, friends and family and the day to day challenges that most families faced.

Slowly, we see her grow up to be an adult as she decides to move to England to pursue a career in nursing, thus starting the journey of an indomitable woman who faces victories and tragedies with courage and grace. She lived her life in England and then moved to the United States where she currently lives in her golden years. I am sure in the years following World War II, she probably faced numerous struggles as she brought up her kids in England and later in the United States, but she does not dwell on these themes. In fact, throughout the book what struck me the most was her positive tone and her innate determination to succeed at whatever she chose to do.

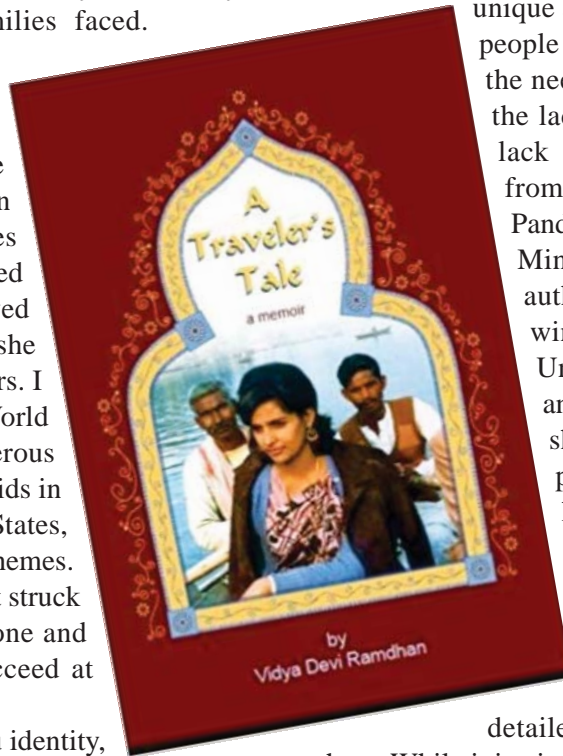
She has maintained her Hindu identity, and her ties to India and her homeland though she has only visited India twice in her life time. Reading this book was like taking a walk down memory lane. My life experiences in India as well as a first-generation immigrant to the United States are so remarkably like the author's descriptions. This book is a testament to the fact that Hindus maintain their values and beliefs no matter where they hail from. Choices in life are made with an unshakable faith that God will help see them through. Maintaining close ties to the extended family, making friends from all walks of life and

integrating into the local environment while still maintaining one's identity are all themes woven in to the narrative by the author. Whether she is describing her marriage, or visits to India or Guyana, her family, or her trips to other countries, her joy and zest for life shine through the pages.

Reading this book evokes nostalgic feelings of a bygone time when airline travel was unique and not the norm, where ordinary people met famous personalities without the need for security or entourages and the lack of technology did not mean a lack of entertainment. Picking fruits from trees or going to a concert to see Pandit Ravi Shankar, or meeting Prime Minister Thatcher are all part of the author's life story. As the narrative winds through her move to the United States, with grown children and grandchildren she also candidly shares memories of her losses. She poignantly talks about losing her husband in the final chapter, but she does it in a way where you join her in celebrating a life well lived.

The book is rather long as the descriptions get strangely detailed in some areas as compared to others. While it is nice to read about her life in Guyana, too much time is spent dwelling on the mundane and the reader must fight through the initial chapters to get to the heart of Vidya Devi's life. It appears to be self-published and could do better with a good editor. All in all, Vidya Devi has a lot to teach all of us about life, love, happiness, and spirituality and I would recommend this book especially to women as a testament to what we can all achieve with perseverance and courage.

Book easily available for purchase on many online retailers. ■





Hindu Weddings in North America: The Day Before and THE Day! (Part -I)

By Dr. A.V. (Sheenu) Srinivasan

**Editor's note: This article will appear in three parts.
An audio book will soon be available which will
include all the mantras chanted by the author.**

Congratulations! Your very special day is here at last. The magic of love that brought you two together will now be formalized through a traditional wedding ceremony. You are about to celebrate your heritage. You both need to know the phrase ?????? ??? ???? ??? (wife is a God-given friend). The friendship element is central to your relationship for the rest of your life. Never forget that.

You have worked together for months planning: consulting friends, researching, discussing with both parents, maybe even arguing pros and cons, who should be invited, how long the ceremony should be, booking the venue, DJ, flowers, photographers, hair dressers, choosing dresses to wear at the Sangeet, the ceremony and reception, bride's maids, selecting music,

performers, sangeet and mehndi events the day before, type of food to be served, the caterer, the mandap, drinks, reception, dance, honeymoon, getting invitations printed, envelopes addressed and mailed and a host of major and minor details with the sole purpose of enjoying the next couple of days you have been dreaming to set the stage for an exciting married life. You prepared a timeline on an excel sheet, emailed the wedding coordinator, friends and relatives that will help to make the two days special. You have proven to be the very model of efficiency indeed. All of that is behind you now. And you are anxious but satisfied that everything has been taken care of and all will go as planned. Perhaps! It depends!

The most critical and central element of the entire effort is the ceremony. It undoubtedly gets attention – but almost always less than it ought to. As a result the experience can be frustrating. It need not be if and only if you believe that the most important element is The Ceremony. No amount of emails, spreadsheets, colorful invitations can compensate for the most sacred part of





the entire event if there is not an understanding of the various steps you will take during that critical hour. Trust me. It is matter of self respect and discipline. In the format I have developed and used for over 3 decades, we have been successful in integrating joy and discipline. Recall your impressions of weddings of your friends you may have attended at a church or synagogue. Recall the hour inside that church with the audience engaged with the ceremony: The quiet, the solemnity, the dignity, the joy would have been evident. That is self respect, that is respect for the tradition and that is discipline.

A Hindu wedding is based on the Rg Veda where a detailed description is given of the wedding of Surya, daughter of the Sun god Surya. I discuss this in great detail in my book: Vedic Wedding: Origins, Tradition and Practice. The Vedic base is a treasure we have inherited from our ancestors and it deserves respect and reverence. Furthermore the mantras are meaningful, beautiful, pleasant, deep and inspiring when they are chanted with proper volume and intonation. You need to read, understand and pay attention to the meaning of the mantras you will be hearing and also repeating after the priest when asked. Please do not skip this step.

I strongly urge couples to engage a priest to perform the ceremonies and study the ceremonial steps and develop an understanding of the rich traditions of your family. Otherwise it is truly a waste of time. This is not

to discourage you but in fact to encourage you and urge you to go a little deeper so you can enjoy the hour-long experience. This format preserves all the essential elements of the Vedic ceremony.

You need to select a priest who can communicate with, and engage the audience throughout the hour. Provide the priest family lineages: greatgrandfather, grandfather and father from both families, your gotras. These will be chanted during pravara to proclaim the families that are coming together to bless the union.

The priest's role is crucial during the hour. A single quote from an uncle of the groom at a wedding I performed should convince you of the enjoyment that can come out of a well conducted Vedic ceremony: "The wedding was like watching a symphony" said the man after the ceremony.

Let me now set the stage for a series of steps you need to take on the day before at the rehearsal so that the ceremony next day will go smoothly like a "symphony". Your day should be special and it can be. When once the wedding program is in place after meeting, consulting and finalizing with the guidance from your priest and printing the program at least a couple of weeks before the wedding day it should be frozen. The tendency to add a last minute item or two can be avoided if the principals (the couple, both parents, uncles, aunts, friends, etc.) involve themselves in the planning stage.

The principals required at the rehearsal

(depending upon the final program elements)

- 1 Wedding coordinator and the ceremony director
- 2 Bride, groom, their parents and/or stand-ins
- 3 Bride's entourage (Example: at least five young women from among the bride's siblings, uncles, aunts etc. and friends)
- 4 Bridegroom's "best men" (Example: at least five young men who will assist as discussed and identified during the rehearsal)
- 5 Bride's brother(s) to assist at Mangal Phera
- 6 Groom's sister to assist while mangala sutra is being tied
- 7 Five married ladies from the bride's family to be in the processional to greet the groom
- 9 Fire managers (two selected from the "best men")
- 10 Garland bearers (one from each side), ring bearers
- 11 A young boy or girl to collect water poured down during kanyadaanam
- 12 Antarpatri bearers (two selected from the "best men")
- 13 Manager of mangalasutra blessing and akshata distribution (one selected from the five ladies above)
- 14 Manager of sound/music/microphones (DJ)
- 15 Manager of pictures/videos
- 16 Ushers (selected from the "best men" and/or bride's family)
- 17 Manager of the mandap: arrangements, arrivals/departures
- 18 Hall manager to direct, control entry and exit doors, lighting, heat sensors

Every step needs to be supported by appropriate mantras so it is unfair to you if the added steps do not receive the same attention. Make sure an aunt or an uncle visiting from India doesn't ask the night before: "Where is ...referring to a step?!" That may be a legitimate question, and one way to avoid such last minute dilemma is to include them in the planning process.

When you are looking for a priest make sure to listen to some of the chants to know if the intonations, sound clarity and volume are pleasant, inspiring and soothing to the mind.

The Day before: Rehearsal

Rehearsal for a Hindu wedding? Never heard of! But our plan and format demand it. In fact I refuse to perform a Hindu wedding without a rehearsal. I impress upon the families the importance of it and it works well. A good rehearsal results in a satisfying experience all around. But it is not a tradition and so some families don't take it seriously and try to get it over with by

sandwiching it between hair appointments, airport runs to pick up relatives, sangeet, photographs etc. etc. The result is obvious and the confusion is visible at the ceremony. This lack of discipline and organization are precisely what puts off the audience and their attention is gone. I have been particularly fortunate in insisting on it and that results in pin-drop silence and undivided attention during the crucial ceremony hour of the "symphony!"

You need a knowledgeable "director" to keep track of the flow of the ceremonial steps and provide cues. At first glance one wonders about the need for stage direction in a religious ceremony. After all it is not drama. Upon some reflection, however, it should be clear that in a sense it IS drama, a real life one in fact, where the principals and helpers have specified roles they need to "play" without missing a beat so that the series of steps do indeed blend together to reflect the meaning and symbolism of the culture and tradition of the families. Much time and money have been invested

Rehearsal Plan

1. Set a time when ALL of the above can be present, preferably the afternoon before the wedding
2. Introductions of principals by either the bride or the groom or the parents
3. Discuss the barat; arrival on horse, car or foot, time to begin and end
4. Determine location and time (place where the bridegroom is to be met, place where the bride will start her procession, length of time needed to reach the mandap, bride's entourage)
5. Set the time when the ceremony begins **
6. Instruct the groom's family to stand to the left of the priest facing the audience and the bride's family to the right.
7. Discussion of what will take place step-by-step by the priest/officiant
8. Make sure the venue has no objection to building a fire for the homas
9. Roles and responsibilities outlined: Director writes down names to cue
10. Meet at the site and walk through the main steps, discuss and practice "difficult" steps, (invocation of sacred rivers, kanya danam, tying of the mangala sutra, pheras, saptapadi) and practice lighting fire
11. Assemble materials
12. Discuss role of the ceremony director (cues, communication, placement and movement of principals)
13. Understand when the ceremony begins and ends ***
14. Prescribe that the helpers be at the mandap at least one hour before the ceremony is scheduled to begin. Assign the materials they each need to bring and assemble at the mandap. See the materials list.
15. Designate the wedding coordinator to call each of them early in the morning to be sure they will be there. You need to name substitutes. Let the wedding coordinator be in-charge of this task to manage last minute no-shows.
16. Decide if the audience can be seated before or immediately after the barat. Let the DJ make appropriate announcements.

** The ceremony officially begins when the bride's party (priest, bride's parents, five ladies and any other group of elders and friends from the bride's side) assembles at and leaves the mandap and proceeds to receive the bridegroom and his party at the decorated gate or other designated location. This procession must arrive a few seconds earlier and wait for the arrival of the bridegroom's party.

*** The ceremony ends when the officiator announces the couple as Mr. & Mrs... and the couple descends from the mandap to seek the blessings of elders from both families, prior to walking down the aisle.

Wedding Materials List

Akshata (yellow turmeric-tinted raw rice), 1 lb.

Kumkum (red powder), 2 tablespoons.

Haldi (turmeric), 4 tablespoons. Agarbattis

Fruits and flowers, 3 to 5 kinds; loose petals, plate of sweets, 1 decorated coconut; these can all be arranged on 3 or 4 plates. Perfume sprinkler (optional).

Garlands (minimum 2), for bride and groom; more if needed by family tradition at Swagatam or Milni if others in the families need to be garlanded.

Water in 1 pitcher or kalasha; extra bowl or smaller kalasha and one ceremonial spoon

(uddharana)

A coconut lightly coated with turmeric, for Kanyadanam.

Paper towels or napkins to wipe hands as needed

Glass mantles or cover protection for deepas/candles used in outdoor ceremonies (or use of battery-assisted substitutes)

Mangala Sutra, rings, sindur, toe rings (optional, as dictated by family practice)

A large sheet or a saree for Antharpat (optional if it is the family tradition)

A slab or rock for Ashmarohana (optional if it is the family tradition)

Materials for Homas/ Fire Rituals (Do not bring huge

amounts. Offerings are symbolic; for example no more than a cup of havan samagri would be more than adequate)

Havan Kund or equivalent metal or metal-lined grille, about 18" x 18"

Small steady stool/table, metal or tile-topped.

Bricks or tiles, aluminum foil. Bunch of dry sticks; paper, 2 fire-starter cakes

Matchsticks or fire lighter and camphor/dry coconut pieces. Havan samagri in a bowl, a cup of akshata; on tray;

Small jar ghee, with spoon. Puffed/parched rice in 4 small cups

Sand in bucket for fire control, discretely located at rear



for many months by the couple and their families. Friends and relatives arrive at the ceremony with great expectation and excitement to watch the couple on their very special day. For these reasons it is important to designate one individual as the director whose primary responsibility is to make sure that everyone and everything is in place as discussed during the weeks of planning and finalized at the rehearsal. While the role of a wedding planner/coordinator covers the preparations in terms of locating and booking the venue, photographer, videographer, selection of clothes, gifts, invitations, music and related activities up to and

surrounding the ceremony itself, the role of the director covers the ceremony. The director may be a knowledgeable friend or relative familiar with the entire ceremony. The director and the coordinator should attend the rehearsal and be familiar with the geographical setting of the wedding site in order to visualize the flow of all steps both in space and time. The goal is a smooth flow of steps at the ceremony. This is possible with a knowledgeable or experienced director.

The second part of this paper will discuss how to plan for a successful wedding day. Part 3 will conclude with detailed answers to frequently asked questions. I am grateful to Professor Jeff Long (Elizabethtown College, PA) for reviewing the entire paper.

About the Author

Dr. Srinivasan

Is the author of many publications including award winning books Vedic Wedding: Origins, Tradition and Practice (The National Best Books 2007 Awards), A Hindu Primer: Yaksha Prashna (2016 Benjamin Franklin Award) and Hinduism for Dummies (see the amazing reviews posted on my site www.avsrinivasan.com and/or on Amazon.com)



Spiritual Practice

By Dr. D.C. Rao

The ultimate goal of Hindu spiritual practice is to become aware of the Divine's presence everywhere at all times in oneself, in every other human being, and in the whole of creation. Achieving this goal requires a mind that is exceptionally clear and calm. Hindu scriptures offer a variety of practices that help the seeker purify the mind and expand his/her consciousness. While the final goal of these practices is moksha, liberation, there are also immediate benefits of great practical value. Such a person rises above sorrows and spreads peace and joy to others.

The purpose of this note is to convey a broad understanding of the principles on which Hindu spiritual practices are based and outline the vast variety of practices that are described in the scriptures.

The core of Hindu spiritual practice is to recognize that our true identity is not the mortal body but the immortal, blissful Atman. Hindu scriptures offer detailed guidance on how to replace this misidentification with an understanding of our essential inner Divinity. When the physical body dies, our minds live on and carry to our next life the level of understanding that we attained in this life. Each life as a human being is an opportunity to improve our spiritual understanding.

The primary impediment to spiritual evolution is the deep reservoir of habits and misconceptions in our minds that prevent us from realizing the truth about our own blissful nature and seeing Divine glory in the world around us. These misconceptions are the cause of endless agitation as we vainly seek to find happiness in the wrong places. "Jerked about" by our likes and dislikes we fail to enjoy the peace of mind we crave for. Replacing false understanding with a realization of the inherent joy in the universe is necessarily a long and arduous process that might take several lifetimes. Hindu scriptures describe this process in depth and offer many suggestions on how to transform our minds and speed our progress on the spiritual path.

In discussions on how to transform the mind, two recurrent themes are abhyasa (practice) and vairagya (non-attachment)¹. As long as our minds are preoccupied with seeking fleeting pleasures in gratifying our senses, accumulating possessions and nursing relationships, we are only reinforcing mental habits that consistently fail to bring lasting happiness and spiritual

growth. Disciplining the mind by cultivating non-attachment, frees our minds to pursue spiritual goals and connect with the Divine within us. Such discipline requires sustained and well-designed practice.

Hindu scriptures prescribe a vast array of practices that can be helpful to a spiritual seeker. With some ritualistic exceptions, practices are not mandated. The individual seeker is free to adopt the practices that s/he finds appealing. Many seekers consult spiritual teachers (Gurus) and follow systematic paths. Spiritual practices constitute two broad categories: those practices that can be practiced by all seekers without much preparation; and more intensive practices that require a higher degree of commitment and preparation. The following paragraphs provide some examples of practices in each of these categories.

Common practices:

Practices as a part of daily life such as: daily prayer at a family altar at home; remembering God in simple prayers associated with daily activities such as eating and bathing; celebrating holy days; visiting the temple; regular fasting on a weekly or fortnightly basis; daily or weekly readings of scriptures such as the Ramayana.

Satsang: Being a member of a community of spiritual seekers to engage in singing devotional songs, scriptural study, and group prayer. Listening to spiritual discourses by learned teachers. This helps keep the seeker on the spiritual path, reinforces good practices and resolves doubts.

Pilgrimage: scriptures extol the practice of visiting sacred sites, preferably with the family. This enhances faith. Some pilgrimages can be arduous and strengthen spiritual discipline. There are scores of sacred sites that seekers aspire to visit, ranging from nearby temples dedicated to family deities to distant temples in the Himalayas.

Dharma: Hindu dharma is a nuanced set of guidelines on what constitutes right action in given circumstances. Basic principles include not hurting others, being honest and living a life of self-restraint. An ethical life is the foundation of spiritual practice. Many scriptures offer guidance on dharma, which is a major emphasis in family upbringing as well. Right attitude in all daily activities. Basic practices include being diligent in performing all duties and focusing on doing the right thing rather than on



enjoying the fruit of our actions. Engaging only in actions that promote the greater good purifies the mind, reducing the force of desire, anger and greed.

Intensive Practices:

Ashtanga Yoga: the eight-fold path is a systematic approach to spiritual practice that includes an ethical foundation; physical and breathing exercises to mobilize inner energies; and mental disciplines that culminate in meditative absorption of the mind and complete liberation. Related yogic practices focus on activating internal energy centers (*chakras*) to expand spiritual consciousness. A yogi sees everything clearly as it is and remains unperturbed.

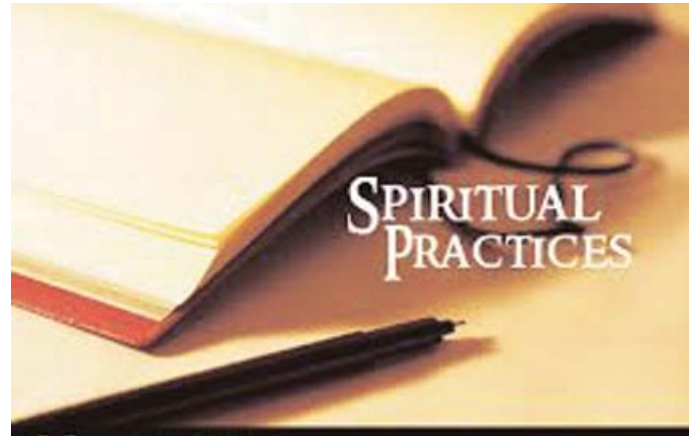
Upasana: more intensive forms of prayer that include use of physical images (*murtis*), esoteric patterns (*yantras*) and the repetition of mantras (*japa*) that represent the Divine. Formal worship includes the practice of *nyasa* whereby God's presence is ritually invoked in each part of the worshipper's body prior to the worship (*puja*). By recognizing God's presence in everything, one sees oneself in all others and all others in oneself.

Yajna: placing offerings in a sacred fire accompanied by chanting of mantras invoking Divine blessings.

Jnana Yoga: intensive study of the Upanishads and related philosophical texts, resolution of doubts on their meaning, followed by contemplation and application of the teachings in daily life. Seeing the One in all diverse forms, s/he sees beyond all divisions and all his/her actions are for the well-being of others.

Meditation: practice of deep and prolonged meditation that brings clarity and tranquility to the mind.

Sanyasa: total renunciation of all possessions, family, professional and social ties; and complete immersion in spiritual contemplation. Some renunciates live in spiritual communities, ashrams, and many wander



freely in a spirit of surrender to the Divine, relying on whatever food and shelter comes their way.

Practices listed above as “common” and “intensive” can be used by both beginners and advanced practitioners to purify and calm their minds. One whose mind is completely clear and calm connects effortlessly with the inner Divinity and attains liberation from worldly agitations and sorrows.

Above is part of a larger collection of essays written by Dr. D. C. Rao and published by the Hindu American Foundation. The full e-book is available at <http://hafs.org/hinduism-101/recommended-reading-hinduism>.

About the Author

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Retired from the World Bank in 1995 to pursue an intensive adhyatmic education ? and practice. He is a Trustee at the Chinmaya Mission, Washington D.C. and actively associated with



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The Ramayana on the Need for a Proper Leader, Part II

By Stephen Knapp (Sri Nandanandana Dasa)

What the king is meant to be

Now that we have seen some of what the Ramayana presents as dangers of a lack of real leadership, there are also a few verses that give insight to what a real ruler should be. This points out the power of such a king by these qualities, if he possesses them.

"(Just) as the eye ever strives for the good of the body (by serving as a guide to it and showing it the right path), so does the king, who is the fountain of truth and righteousness, ever strive for the good of the state. 33

"The king is truthfulness and virtue (incarnate); the king constitutes the nobility of birth in men of a high pedigree. The king is the mother as well as the father; the king is the benefactor of men. 34

"(Even) Yama (the god of retribution); Kubera (son of Vishrava, the god of riches), Indra (the ruler of gods), and the very mighty Varuna (the deity presiding over water) are outstripped by a king of excellent conduct by virtue of such conduct (inasmuch as he combines in himself the virtues of all the above-named deities)." 35

How a king should guide society

A king is not only supposed to maintain law and order, but a real king, a Vedic king, should also provide the means that people can attain the real and spiritual goal of life. So now we look at the solutions to the above problems with how a king should give proper guidance to the people. This is described by Kumbhakarna while rebuking Ravana for all of his misdeeds. Naturally, Ravana, typical of many politicians today, did not like to hear such advice, simply because he had no intention of following it. But it is described in the Ramayana for our benefit.

From Yuddha Kanda, Canto 63, verses 7-21, it explains:

"Holding consultation with his ministers, he who takes into consideration the five aspects of the threefold duties (with reference to hostile kings) moves along the

right path." 7

In this case the five aspects means: 1. The method of initiating an action, 2. The person or material to be worked with, 3. The time and place of action, 4. Provisions necessary to make it successful, and 5. The calculated chances of success.

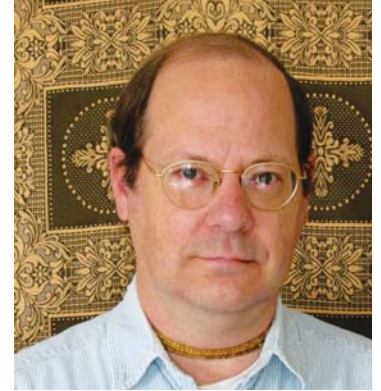
And these aspects are used in three kinds of circumstances when dealing with enemies, which are: 1. The way to attain peace through reconciliation, 2. Acceptance of their allegiance through the acceptance of gifts, or 3. Invasion to force coercion toward peace. A ruler must be strong enough to make these considerations or he will be pushed aside or removed by the enemy who will take over his territory.

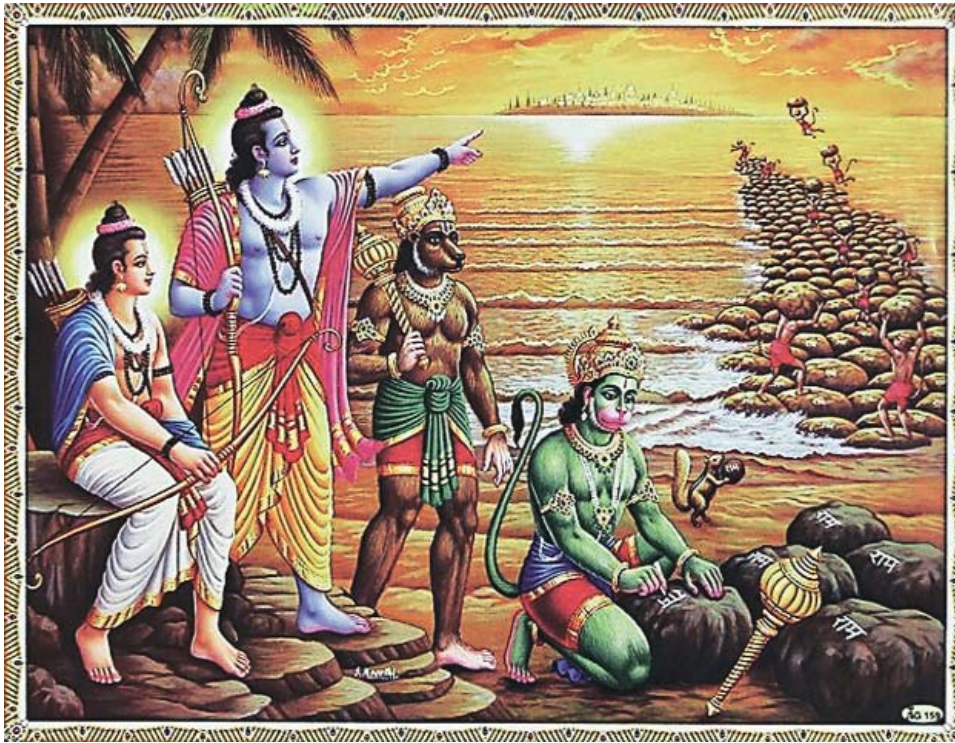
"A king who seeks to determine his duty in accordance with the science of polity and perceive his friends too, along with the ministers, understand aright." 8

Herein, as explained, a king has to realize who he can trust among friends and ministers, and then he can move forward with confidence. This is essential if the king or ruler expects to stay in power or hold onto his position.

"The self-controlled king who, having deliberated with his ministers, bestows gifts, takes to (expedients of) conciliation and, sowing dissension among the hostile ranks, exhibits prowess, O prince of ogres, or resorts to them (all) together and takes recourse both to right action and the reverse of it at the right time and pursues virtue, worldly gain and sensuous pleasure at the proper time never meets with disaster in the world." 11-12

Herein, when it says a self-controlled king, it means a king with spiritual wisdom and virtue. Without understanding what real virtue is, no one can fulfill the proper role of a leader, or for that matter even a





husband, teacher, father, or one who employs others. But more important than merely knowing what true virtue is, is the need to follow it and live according to those virtues, which is especially expected for any ruler. Only by applying this kind of wisdom and virtue will a king encounter success and avoid disaster, not only in his personal life but also for his country.

"A king should take action (only) after considering what is salutary in consequence to him in consultation with his ministers who make their living by their intelligence and know the reality of things." 13

Herein the point is simple, that regardless of how intelligent a ruler may think he is, the saying is two heads are better than one, and a king must consult with his qualified ministers to make sure of the proper action to take. However, this verse also refers to ministers who know the reality of things, as opposed to those who are merely academically trained.

"People whose mental level is in no way higher than that of beasts, and (yet) who have been allowed to take their seat among counselors, desire to express their views through (sheer) impudence without fully knowing the import of the scriptures. The advice tendered by such people, who having no knowledge of the scriptures, are (equally) ignorant of the science of wealth, or who seek immense wealth, ought not to be followed. 14-15

"Men who tender unwholesome advice in a salutary garb through (sheer) impudence should be excluded

from deliberation as they mar the (very) purpose (of the deliberation)." 16

Here is said the obvious, that those who are not qualified, though they may try to appear so by such things as academics, wealth, etc., and with pride may try to force their opinion on others, should not be given any consideration. No one should listen to them, not the citizens and least of all the king, because they will only take the country in the wrong direction, causing problems that will later take much time and money to correct. History shows many examples of this, from which we should learn.

Furthermore, those who are

not true friends of the king or of the citizens and have their own agenda, or who have been bought off by the enemy, will bring the ruler and the country to ruin, as explained in the next few verses:

"Getting united with shrewd enemies, (evil-minded) counselors in this world prevail upon their master to undertake wrong actions in order to bring him to ruin. 17

"A ruler should make out (the reality of) those ministers who have been won over by the enemy to their side (through bribe, etc.) and, thus, have become enemies though appearing as friends, (as discerned) through their (actual) behavior when a final decision is being taken after deliberation. 18

"Aliens find out the weakness of a ruler who is (easily) led away by false appearances and rushes headlong into actions ... A king who, disregarding the enemy, does not actually protect himself, undoubtedly meets with reverses and is dragged down from his position." 19-20

SOME OF THE SYMPTOMS OF RAJARAMA

What follows are descriptions of some of the symptoms of a proper and royal leadership, such as when Lord Rama ruled over the land. This shows the effects on society when there is a good and proper ruler, and how such a ruler should lead society for the ultimate good of everyone. It also shows the influence that such a king can have all over the land, and that any



problems within the kingdom, at least in the olden days, was considered to be the fault of the king who then had to take responsibility and account for them through his own efforts, knowing it was his own lack of quality for the existence of such problems. Therefore, the people should make sure to avoid an unwanted and unqualified ruler and check that the leaders are properly qualified with knowledge and habits of virtue before being elected. Otherwise, the adversities and difficulties of life will be many.

This is from the Yuddha-Kanda, Canto 128, verses 98-106. This is when Bharata gives back the kingdom of Ayodhya to Lord Rama.

"While Sri Rama ruled over the kingdom (of Ayodhya), there were no widows to lament (over their loss) nor was there any danger from beasts of prey or snakes, nor again was there any fear of diseases. 98

"The world had no robbers or thieves, nor did anyone suffer harm. Nor again did old people (ever) perform obsequies relating to [the death of their] youngsters. 99

"Every creature felt pleased, (nay) everyone was devoted to righteousness. Turning their eyes towards Sri Rama alone, creatures did not kill one another." 100

This is the effect of a qualified leader, that his influence can change the whole atmosphere in the cooperation among people, in reducing or eliminating the criminal mentality, in the endeavor to work in harmony with nature, and in everyone to have empathy for all creatures and fellow citizens. This may not be wholly possible in this day and age, but a qualified leader can certainly move humanity in this direction. But if a leader is merely posing as a great personality while harboring wicked or materialistic desires and misguided intentions, the whole country will be directed toward ruin.

"So long as Sri Rama ruled the kingdom (of Ayodhya), people lived to an age of thousands of years, were blessed with thousands of sons, and remained free from diseases and grief. 101

"So long as Sri Rama ruled the kingdom, the talks of the people centered around Sri Rama, Sri Rama, and Sri Rama alone. (Nay) the world itself appeared (to them) as transformed into Sri Rama. 102

"Trees in Ayodhya ever remained firmly rooted and bore fruit and flowers perpetually. Clouds sent down rain (only) when desired and the wind was (ever) delightful to the touch. 103

"Remaining entirely free from avarice and satisfied with their own avocations, the Brahmanas (priestly class), the Kshatriyas (the warrior class), the Vaishyas

(members of the mercantile class), and the Shudras (the laboring class), remained content in their own duties.

104

"So long as Sri Rama ruled, the people remained devoted to pious observances and never told lies. (Nay) all were endowed with auspicious bodily marks and all were given to righteousness. 105

"With his (three younger half-) brothers, the glorious Sri Rama ruled for ten and one thousand years." 106

The king is forced to accept 1/6th of karma of his subjects

From the Ramayana we also understand how important it is for the ruler of people to watch or patrol over their territory to make sure that all unfairness, criminal activities, or unrighteous acts are immediately put to a stop. This is because all such actions produce contrary reactions, not only for the people and the country, but also for the ruler, which is reflected back on them through the acts of nature, disrespect from the citizens, and the dark future created for their next life. Therefore, this shows the importance of electing a ruler who will not neglect his responsibilities of leading the people properly, uphold virtue and spiritual wisdom, and protect and defend the citizens and country without hesitation. In this regard, the Uttara-Kanda, Canto 74, verses 30-33, explains: "Whenever one performs unrighteous deeds not to be performed, and rooted in lack of prosperity, [such a person] indeed goes to hell, however the king also undoubtedly (goes to hell). Righteously ruling over the subjects, the king shares one sixth portion of the (merit) that accrues from pious deeds performed by study and penance. (However) the king also partakes of one sixth (of his subjects' bad karma) if he does not protect the subjects (by leading them properly). So you, O lion among kings, investigate your territory. Whenever you see unrighteous actions done, then make efforts (to put them right); thus righteousness and longevity will prevail among men [as well as for the king]."

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Visit: www.stephen-knapp.com

Source: http://www.stephen-knapp.com/ramayana_on_the_need_for_a_proper_leader.htm

Narasimha Avatara

By Narayanan Komerath

One of our core beliefs is that from time to time, The ParamAtman will take visible form and appear among us. Why? The answer is clear:

*yadA yadA hi dharmasya glAnir bhavati bhArata
abhyutthAnam adharmasya tadAtmanAm srjAmi ahaM*

When Dharma suffers blemishes, O Son of Bharat, and Adharma appears to be ascendant, then shall I make an Appearance.

Why? The Ancients believed in their darkest of hours, the ParamAtman would appear:

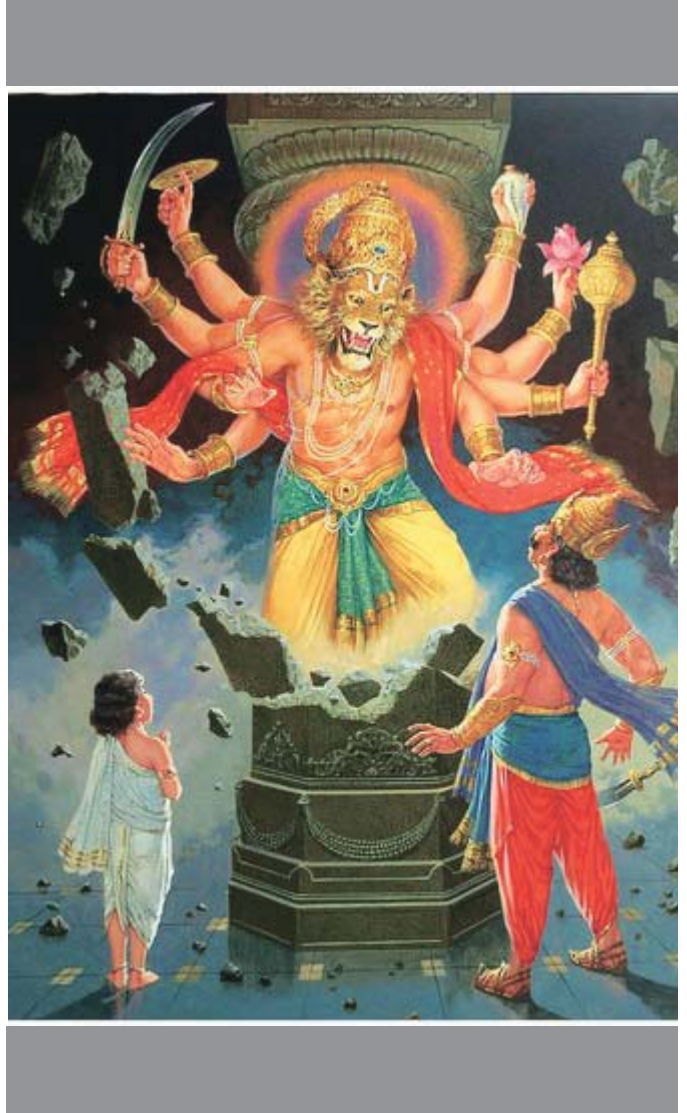
*paritrAnAya sAdhUnAm vinasAya ca dushkrtAm
dharma samsthAnArthAya sambhavAmi yuge yuge*

To rescue the righteous, and to destroy evildoers;
To establish Dharma shall I Occur, in Yuga after Yuga.

The AvatAra that impressed me the most is the NaraSimha: The Man-Lion. A colorful mural on the wall of the Shri Rama shrine inside the Vadakkunathan (Master Of the North) kshetra in my birthplace of Trissur, Kerala, India, depicts the NaraSimha as best humans could, in all His fierceness. The mural is quite graphic: it depicts Him tearing open the chest of the RAKshasa King like brown paper from a postal parcel, blood and flesh scattered all over the place, even as his son Prahlada, partially tied to a fallen pillar, stands deep in prayer, eyes tight shut.

What brought on this horror? The AvatAra conveys a deep lesson about the perils of arrogant crookedness, as much as about the reward for deep faith. It is a timeless lesson.

Hiranyakashipu (H.S.) was the son of HiranyAksha. These RAKshasas surely lived a very long time! HiranyAksha was a son of the entity who hid the Vedas under the Primordial Ocean in a far-past Yuga, triggering the Matsya Avatara. HiranyAksha himself lived up to the propensity of the RAKshasas to impress the Authorities and win great favors, wealth, power and prizes. Having observed pieties and performed rituals to please Brahma, he attained boons that made him immune to destruction



by Man or any carnivorous beast that he feared. Armed with this power, he wreaked havoc. Eventually he abducted Earth Herself, and hid Her in the primordial waters - in fact, under the seabed. MahaVishnu appeared as a wild boar (VarAha). The boar is an herbivorous animal not a carnivorous predator. But it can be pretty powerful and violent. Hiranyaksha had neglected to include this animal in his long list of banned attackers. The VarAha slew the RAKshasa and rescued Earth, having to dredge the ocean floor to do that. The VarAha is said to have fought the RAKshasa for a thousand years, before defeating and killing him, and retrieving the Vedas. A deep lesson there: allow your sacred knowledge, or the Earth, to fall into the hands of hostile entities who would deny them to you, and even the ParamAtman has to fight a thousand years to retrieve



them.

Witness the incredibly brave battle that the Hindus of California under CAPEEM (California Parents for the Equalization of Educational Materials) are fighting every decade, including right now, to improve the textbooks taught to their children, and you may begin to appreciate the lesson the Second AvatAra. I contributed my little bit to that battle, starting way back in 2006, and I thought they won a splendid victory in the courts then. But the RAKshasas don't give up easily either – one has to be eternally watchful. Apparently their antics have returned again this year, forcing CAPEEM to take up the battle again. I hope Hindus all over America see fit to help these brave people – they are fighting a battle for the future of all of us. Just as the Avataras have done in Yuga after Yuga.

But back to the NaraSimha. HiranyakaShipu, or H.S., son of the RAKshasa HiranyAksha, was of course a powerful ruler. He had learned well from his father. And he conducted all the rituals and rigorous observances per the Vedas – no surprise there, his Grand-Daddy had stolen them, remember, and acquired all the technical skills from there. The RAKshasas' rigorous observances brought rewards from the Deities. They usually asked for rewards that helped – you guessed it – their own wealth and power. Not surprisingly, H.S. was concerned that he might have a few enemies among the common people whom he ruled, as well as the Devas, and eventually, the Deities Themselves. He protected himself well, in the manner of a Major Corporation. Over time, H.S. accumulated a portfolio of contracts and treaties that resembled those accumulated by Pakistani dictator Ayub Khan in the 1960s – SEATO, CENTO, mutual defense with the USA, mutual defense with China. Likewise, H.S.' portfolio stipulated that:

No human could kill him

No animal could kill him.

He could not be killed in the daytime.

He could not be killed in the nighttime.

He could not be killed outdoors

He could not be killed indoors.

He could not be killed by any weapon.

It is not specified whether he had also accumulated immunity from chemical and biological warfare – oh, yes! No weapon could kill him, after all. So he had it all pretty-well covered. He wasn't going to make the same mistake as his father and leave any loopholes.

In time, his arrogance grew out of control. He was brutal to his subjects, who were enslaved. He waged war

on the Devas, the Righteous, talented, prosperous, but somewhat complacent luxury-loving suburbanite species who play victim in much of the PurAnas. The Devas complained about him, but there was little that could be done – his protection portfolio was airtight. His lawyers were the best in the Universe. Or so H.S. thought...

H.S., paradoxically, or maybe not so much by chance, had a son, PrahlAda. The very antithesis of his Dad, PrahlAda grew up to be utterly honest, humble and righteous. He was also well learned in the Vedas, with the difference that he actually believed. He was a total devotee of Sri MahA Vishnu. Every day he would pray to Vishnu.

H.S. started getting irritated at this. He considered it an affront that his own son would pray to a mere Deity, whereas he, H.S. was more powerful than any Deity. He ordered Prahlada to stop praying to Vishnu, and commanded him to start saying: Hiranyaya Namah!

PrahlAda politely declined. It was an unforgiveable blasphemy to consider oneself to be superior to the ParamAtman, as he gently informed his Dad.

Eventually, H.S. decided he had had enough, when he found Prahlada praying at twilight. That's another of the ancient sayings:

“Vinasa kale vipareetha buddhi”

At the time of imminent destruction, evil entities' brains work opposite to their interests. It was twilight. His son was praying.

He ordered his own son to be tied up to a pillar inside the palace. Prahlada kept on praying. H.S. roared at him to say “Hiranyaya Namah!” Prahlada declined and kept on praying.

H.S. drew his sword. “Where is this Vishnu of yours now?” the RAKshasa king roared in sneering, cruel laughter. Prahlada answered quietly and respectfully:

“In every twig, in every root, in every leaf, in every rock. And even inside this pillar.”

“Oh, yeah, He is inside this pillar?” H.S. roared. On his way to cutting his own son in two, he brought the huge sword down on the pillar.

The pillar split in two. Was that timber shattering, or a Magnitude 9 earthquake? And with a terrifying roar heard all over the 14 Universes, the NaraSimha came out of the pillar.

He was not man, he was not Beast – he was half man, half lion. A terrifying Appearance of Divine Fury, towering far above the huge RAKshasa king.

It was neither day nor night – it was twilight.

The NaraSimha, roaring in a Divine Fury, dragged the shocked H.S. to the threshold of his palace, and sat



down on the threshold. He dragged H.S. onto His lap.

He was thus neither indoors nor outdoors. And why Lion? Because He needed no weapons. The Lion's claws were better than any weapon: they tore into the RAkshasa's chest.

The Contracts were not violated. The RAkshasa had been a bit too smart for his own good.

The NaraSimha then turned to PrahlAda – the child, now released from his bonds, was standing with eyes closed, deep in prayer and worship. He asked him what boon he wanted for his unshakeable faith and devotion. PrahlAda broke from RAkshasa tradition, and refused any boon at all – seeing The Avatara was reward enough for him. This humility, this absence of greed, was what calmed and quenched the Fury of the NaraSimha. He patted PrahlAda on the head, wished him a long and happy life as the kind and generous, Dharmic ruler of his people, and disappeared.

The lesson here is no doubt one of Faith and standing up for Dharma, even to the extent of refusing to obey Adharmic orders from one's own father. Hiranyakashipu derives not an iota of sympathy from Hindus, parents of teenagers or otherwise. Custom forbids anyone to sit on a threshold at most times, but especially at twilight: it would be considered disrespectful to the NaraSimha. The other major lesson is precisely what was enunciated by PrahlAda: The ParamAtman is everywhere, and can appear in any form, anywhere, and is Omnipotent and Omniscient. Perhaps a word of caution to wily lawyers and contract negotiators: don't try to outsmart yourselves or The ParamAtman- and most of all, do not sneer at, or persecute people for their Beliefs. You may be surprised at Who comes out to protect the Meek, and in what form!

So is any of this plausible? A half-Man-half-Lion coming out of a pillar? A whole Avatara just to save one disobedient small child from a cruel Dad? Remember that much is allegorical, much is in the mind of the perceiver. But is there really any chance of some Higher Entity looking over a small child? A Divine Appearance out of a pillar? I mean, TODAY, in the Modern Age of Science? In America?

Let me close with a story. It happens to be true – at least the way I remember it. It was at least 20 years ago. I was in my little blue Honda Prelude, commuting home in the late afternoon along the same route I had taken for at least another decade before that. Take the ramp from I-85N to I-285W, zoom over the Spaghetti Junction faster than the posted limit, come down the slope and – brake to a halt in the traffic congestion

going to the Peachtree Industrial Boulevard North exit. I was in the correct exit lane, but traffic was whizzing by to my left, and coming in fast from behind on the right. I am always worried whether those coming behind me could stop in time.

A brown truck was coming up fast behind me in the lane to my right. Oh! It was just a tractor cab, no trailer, and it was being driven like a sports car. There was just something a bit unsettling about how fast it was being driven.

Something clicked in my brain. I felt a sudden, overpowering urge to get out of there. And I did what I had never done in the decade before that, and almost never since. After a swift glance over my shoulder, I floored the gas pedal, swerving into the lane to the left, going to the next exit on the highway, a certain delay of several minutes. It was 4 seconds later, accelerating past 40 miles an hour and still alive, that I dared breathe and look back. And what I saw was horrifying. The tractor cab had indeed left it too late: he had tried to stop by swerving to the right, climbed the bank, and overturned, falling back to the left – exactly on the spot where I had been standing 4 seconds before! I would have been squashed flat. A cloud of dust was rising – that might have been pulverized me!

So What or Who prompted me to make such an unprecedented move? Certainly not any brilliant predictive calculation on my part. Never again will I question the scientific probability of any of these lessons that appear in our PurAnas. For as humans have found out all over the world, in the words of the English poet Alfred Lord Tennyson, on the passing of King Arthur of Camelot:

“More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of.”

About the Author

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Qualities of Sainly Souls

By Siddheshwari Devi (Didi Ji)

In Chapter 16 of the Bhagavad Geeta, Shri Krishna describes 26 qualities possessed by saintly people. Cultivating these qualities by practicing sadhna is important for all devotees for it helps in making spiritual progress.

1. Abhayam (Fearlessness): As a person makes spiritual progress, he becomes more and more comfortable with the fact that God is the pilot of his life. He becomes less worried about the day-to-day struggles. Prayer not only leads to detachment but also removes fear from the heart.

2. Sattva Sanshuddhih (Purity of Thoughts): Prayer helps a devotee focus on internal purification. Since all thoughts originate from the mind, prayer helps in generating positive and pure thoughts, which results in more positive and good actions.

3. Gyan Yoga-Vyavasthitih (Discipline in following the Spiritual Path): It is important for a devotee to regularly listen to spiritual knowledge and use that knowledge for regular introspection. It is only when we forget spiritual knowledge that we commit wrong actions.

4. Daanam (Charity): Devotion leads to compassion and the devotee genuinely experiences the pain of others. He also becomes detached from the material world and no longer caters to desires but only to needs. It becomes important for him to give charity.

5. Dum (Control of senses): We have been eternal slaves of our senses. Consequently, we have always given in to short-term gratification instead of the long-term goal of God-realization. As we practice devotion, sacrificing the desire pleasures for the higher goal becomes easier.

6. Yagya (Rituals): Performance of ritual duties and social obligations is a necessity for most people living in the world. It is important that the performance of these rituals not only include the physical body but also the mind which must meditate on God.

7. Svadhyaya (Knowledge gained through self-

study): It is very important that we gain theoretical knowledge. Armed with a strong theoretical foundation, practical devotion becomes easier.

8. Tap (Austerity): Devotion teaches us to willingly accept a simple life of prayer and personal austerity. Seva and discipline become important.

9. Aarjavam (Simplicity): A life of simplicity removes distractions that arise in daily life, preventing a devotee from making spiritual progress. By practicing discipline, taking time out for God, and not running after worldly pleasures a devotee moves towards the ultimate goal of finding true happiness.

10. Ahimsa (Non-Violence): Respecting life and all living things is one of the cornerstones of devotion. A devotee attempts to see God in everyone and works hard to ensure that his conduct and actions do not hurt anyone.

11. Satyam (Truthfulness): Practicing restraint in speech, working hard to ensure that facts are not distorted to further one's own interests, and staying away from gossip become important to a devotee.

12. Akrodh (Absence of Anger): Weeks and months of spiritual progress can be wiped out by a few actions that are performed when one is angry. By continuing to practice devotion and having steadfast faith in the will of God, a devotee gradually overcomes anger.

13. Tyaag (Renunciation): Chasing the material world loses its charm for a devotee. Material objects that were earlier used for one's own use, become slowly but steadily directed towards serving God.

14. Shanti (Peace): A devotee becomes grounded in the fact that peace cannot come from any external person, object, or event. It comes from faithfully building a relationship with God and witnessing His grace at every point in life.

15. Apaishunam (Restraint from fault-finding): Scriptures advise to refrain from thinking about other people's faults. Not only does fault-finding divert the devotee from his goal, these faults (real or perceived) start to take root in his own heart. An introspective



devotee starts to focus on his own faults instead.

16. Daya (Compassion): The devotee starts to see God in every living object, develops empathy for others' pain and suffering, and rises above self-interest.

17. Aloluptvam (Self Control): Desires for the world never cease for most people. These desires can come in the cloak of family, wealth, fame, etc. Constantly working to fulfill these desires adds to the constant stress of daily life. As a devotee begins to understand the futility of chasing these insatiable desires, he practices self-control and learns to do more with less. He starts spending more and more time on more meaningful activities.

18. Mardavam (Gentleness): As spirituality becomes important in one's life, empathy for others increases. Walking in other people's shoes before passing judgement becomes important.

19. Hrih (Modesty): A devotee not only dresses modestly, but also ensures that he is constantly in a modest environment. He is very careful about what he sees, hears, tastes, touches and smells. This removes dangerous temptations and allows him to be focused.

20. Achapalam (Lack of fickleness): It becomes a priority for the devotee to stay focused on the long-term goal of traveling the journey of life with God instead of getting distracted by short term temptations. A devotee practices introspection to take stock of the number of times he waivers from his path, and then does his best to get back on track.

21. Tejah (Vigor): As God becomes more and more important in a devotee's life, the devotee also becomes more confident. The tasks that the devotee undertakes are performed as devotional service; hence there is an inherent drive to do well.

22. Kshama (Forgiveness): The tolerance level of a devotee increases as his love for God increases. The need to retaliate minimizes. The time period for which he is angry with others reduces, and he becomes more at peace with himself.

23. Dhritih (Determination): Devotees don't quit. A person who has faith that God is with him all the time has no reason to do so. A devotee pursues his goals with strength and determination even when the odds are against him.

24. Shaucham (Cleanliness): A devotee is particular about living in a clean and pure environment. He surrounds himself with simple things; which reduces clutter not only externally but also internally.

25. Adroha (Enmity towards none): This quality goes hand in hand with forgiveness. A devotee tries his best to see God in everyone and hence works diligently to neither love nor hate anyone.

26. Natimanita (Without pride): A devotee is careful about not letting pride enter his heart. He tries to spend his energy not in self-advertisement but in helping others and in expressing gratitude towards God. ■

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America Must Re-Discover India

From page 15 - cheered the Islamic jihadis against the Soviets. Dan Rather, the CBS News anchor, profiled the Mujahedeen as the brave heroes of freedom. But this dangerous strategy of "my enemy's enemy is my friend" blew up in unexpected ways and in far-away places. The US failed to mop-up the loose weapons that it had given to the Mujahedeen, despite the fact that the weapons bazaars of Peshawar were prominently featured in the US media. The US simply failed to dismantle the jihadi organizational apparatus that it had helped set up. Meanwhile, South Asian Studies seminars, conferences, talks and documentaries were stampeding for staple topics such as caste, sati, dowry, a rat temple in India, snake worshipping and naked sadhus; but the real threats facing Americans from Pakistan-Afghanistan (part of the US government's definition of South Asia) were ignored.

US policymakers who were involved simply moved on in their personal careers, creating a discontinuity of perspective and a lack of accountability. Scholars of South Asia did not bat an eyelid, either, and went on with

business as usual. There has been an inadequate post-mortem analysis of their flawed thinking. The collective amnesia allowed similar mistakes to be repeated.

The extent to which these scholars fit their findings to suit the needs of political activists and lobbying groups remains a mystery. The system has yet to sponsor any independent research on the history of South Asian scholarship over the past two decades and its contribution to American policy. There is research published on how the Soviet Union, China and Japan were mismanaged by their respective governments. But the management of scholarship on South Asia has not been placed under the microscope.

Ill-conceived policies towards India pose a serious future threat to American strategic interests. ■

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