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# HINDU VISHWA

Vishwa Dharma Digest

## Roma people: The Medieval Indian diaspora

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- The Kumbh Mela: A Great, Living, Ancient Tradition
- Are Images Idols?
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# Atlanta Balvihar Celebrates 25 Years of Service



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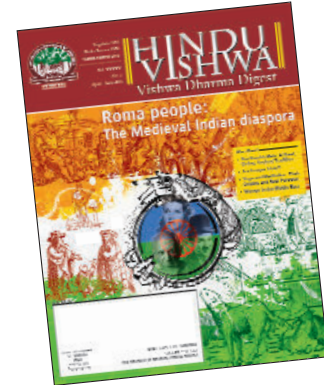
त्रिविधं नरकस्येदं द्वारं नाशनमात्मनः  
कामः क्रोधस्तथा लोभस्तस्मादेत्त्रयं त्यजेत् ॥

श्रीमद् भगवद् गीता १६-२१

*tri-vidham narakasyedam dvaram nasanam atmanah  
kamah krodhas tatha lobhas tasmad etat trayam tyajet*

**Shri Mad Bhagavad Gita 16-21**

The three kind of doorways to hell are lust, anger and greed;  
therefore these three are so destructive to the embodied self must  
be abandoned.



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## Roma people: The Medieval Indian diaspora

Around 600 years back these people migrated from North Western India to Europe and America, but from there on they

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were never allowed to be part of mainstream social arena. They were continuously threatened, harrassed, tortured & even persecuted. It is estimated that around 5,00,000 to 15,00,000 Roma people were killed during Nazi regime. Sadly, still now no one is caring for them.

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# Hinduism

## The Ultimate Democracy in Religion

This Editorial is meant to supplement and expand the article in the last issue (January-March 2016) of the Hindu Vishwa (HV) on the important topic of monotheism versus polytheism in Hinduism. This is vital because of a great deal of ignorance and misconception about this connection in the West which should be countered. A

concerted effort by Hindus is called for also to ward off attacks on Hinduism in the ideological warfare raging in the world at present, as always, in various forms including Islamic terrorism, Evangelical proselytization and the ever lurking but rampant Hinduphobia in Western academia.

A touchstone on the powerful assimilation and symbiosis between polytheism and monotheism in Hinduism is abundantly available in the *Vedic*, *Upanishadic*, and *Puranic* passages. See, for example, the following shlokas of the Bhagvad Gita [Hindi and English translations by the Editor]:

तुम्हीं वरुण हो, तुम्हीं अग्नि हो, तुम्हीं वायु हो एवं हो यम;  
सभी देवता तुम ही तुम हो; तुम्हीं चन्द्र औ दिनकर अनुपम  
तुम्हीं प्रजापति हो, उनके भी परदादा हो तुम्हीं  
सहस्रो तुमको नमन,

पुनरपुन फिर भी बारम बार तुम्हें नमन मम ॥११.३९॥

In this prayer by Arjun to Yogeshwar Krishna, his mentor-friend-charioteer in the battlefield of Kurukshetra, upon witnessing Krishna's Viraat Roop (Mammoth, All-encompassing in the Universe Form), Arjun unambiguously proclaims: Thou art Yourself also Varun (Water-god), Agni (Fire-god), Vayu (Wind-god), Yama (god of Death), Dinakar (Sun-god) and Chandra (Moon-god), Prajapati (the Creator of all beings), and his Grandfather (Brahmaa), and all other Devatas (gods). This All in One and One in All mantra, a key-revelation to Arjun as a representative of all humanity, is doubtlessly a deep message of a synthesis of monotheism and polytheism unique to Hinduism. Yet all the Upanishads tirelessly invoke the concept of "The Ultimate Reality", called *Brahman* (not to be confused with Brahmaa, the Creator-aspect of godhead), a Single Universal Power from whom the universe emanates and finally dissolves into. *Brahman* is a single formless, attributeless, *Viraat* pure super-consciousness governing

### Editorial



a myriad of forms and appearances of the universe, and is the ultimate goal for human consciousness to venerate and realize, laying the foundation of monotheism as the evolutionary principle as an ultimate guidepost to enlightened souls. Not that this principle negates or prohibits the choice by individuals

of a personal god as the object of devotion and worship - which is also explicitly given equal due importance by Krishna.

Thus, a devotee can believe in and venerate a complete spectrum of divinity from individual deity (gods, goddesses) with various forms and specific attributes, as well as scriptural interrelations of great astronomical and cosmic proportions (polytheism) to Formless *Brahman* as the Supreme Power behind the origin and dissolution of the Universe and its infinite manifestations, or a combination of the two, based on one's personal inclination and intellectual-spiritual state of mind. There is no conflict or schism whatsoever between the two paths; and furthermore, there is room aplenty for evolutionary developments to properly accommodate new scientific facts and principles.

This freedom of choice is very much akin to the concept of democracy in socio-political domain. In contrast, the Abrahamic religions, the fundamental religious dictum is to obey the scriptures, without questioning or timely modifications of the underlying belief-pattern, similar to strict dictatorship or old-fashion monarchy. Such orthodox beliefs may be outright ludicrous and at total variance with scientific discoveries or even common rationality. A follower can entertain absolutely no personal choice from birth to death, without invoking a cry of heresy by the authorities and inviting banishment or severe punishments evidently seen in the past including cold-blooded death by means of fire-stakes, guillotine, crucifixion, or a cup of poison. The follower of one of these religions is strictly bound to follow a nominal patriarchal God (Judaism), Jesus Christ and his Father in Heaven (Christianity), or Allah (Islam) as a figurehead of divinity, which is way different than a Hindu simply worshipping a deity of his/her choice. ■



# Atlanta Balvihar Celebrates 25 Years of Service

*By Smita Daftardar*

Balvihar Hindi School, an educational program of World Hindu Council of America (VHPA), is one of the longest running culture and language community programs in North America. Balvihar, a shining example of this tradition, recently celebrated its 25th anniversary. The two day event was attended by alumni, students, former and current volunteers, and especially, some of the volunteers involved since the inception of Balvihar.

The celebration took off on March 19th, with a gala dinner for alumni, and former and current volunteers at Tadka Restaurant in Alpharetta, GA. The venue was tastefully decorated with flowers and candles, a memory tree displayed photographs of Balvihar students and volunteers over the period of last 25 years. The old pictures of picnics and cultural programs brought back sweet memories for many of the guests. Also playing in the background was a video chronicling the 25 year journey of Balvihar; a compilation of photographs of past events, messages from alumni and feedback from Balvihar parents. Attendees enjoyed the social hour as they caught up with old acquaintances and made new ones. The formal anniversary celebration opened with a welcome address by Kusum Khurana, VHPA President Atlanta Chapter. Manju Tiwari, a dedicated volunteer of Balvihar and VHPA since 1992, introduced the chief guest and keynote speaker Sanjay Mehta, VHPA General Secretary, himself a veteran Balvihar volunteer in Pittsburg, PA. In his keynote address, Shri Mehta ji applauded the noble goals of Balvihar and the efforts of all volunteers to achieve them. He stressed the need for

immigrant communities to stay connected to their roots, even as they actively take part in and contribute to mainstream society. Knowledge of Hindu traditions and values, and Hindi language, helps kids growing up in the US appreciate their own unique identity in a culturally diverse society.

After the keynote address, the alumni were extended a special welcome and some of them were recognized for their outstanding contribution to Balvihar as volunteers. These young volunteers continue to serve as great role models for their peers as well as younger members. Balvihar alumni Nihit Tiwari and Amruta Houde were congratulated for their initiative to start a Hindi language course in Georgia Tech in 2012.

Among the guests were some of the VHPA volunteers who were instrumental in starting the Balvihar program in Atlanta 25 years ago. In early 1990, the VHPA Atlanta Chapter with the help of volunteers conceptualized the very idea of teaching Hindu culture and Hindi language to children, and the seeds of Balvihar were sown. Among them were Prakash and Madhur Gupta, who continue to volunteer in Balvihar till date. On this occasion, Shri Gupta ji was felicitated by the chief guest for his invaluable *seva*. He took the audience down memory lane, sharing their initial struggles to find a venue, teachers and a curriculum. The dedication and determination paid off; Balvihar flourished and evolved into a successful language and culture school. Today, Balvihar has two branches, in Gwinnett and Cobb, with more than 200 students and a large team of committed volunteers.

Guptaji's reminisces were followed by photo sessions



and a delicious dinner. Sabitha Ragnathan, a Balvihar and VHPA volunteer, conducted a few games for the attendees, especially alumni, including building castles with a pack of really slick playing cards. The concluding vote of thanks was given by Madhav Katdare, coordinator of Gwinnett Balvihar, followed by the VHPA Prarthana. The event resembled a large family reunion, a family of young and old volunteers, some active, some retired, all bound together by a commonality of value systems, belief and purpose.

On the second day of the silver jubilee celebration, current Balvihar students presented a cultural program and mela, at Berkmar High school. Every year, Balvihar students participate in a theme-based cultural program, with every single student performing on stage. This year, to commemorate the 25th year of Balvihar, students presented both a cultural show and an exhibition showcasing the multi-dimensional learning that students experience in Balvihar.

The cultural segment commenced with the traditional lamp lighting by chief guest Sanjay Mehta ji and prayers by students. The MCs for the program, students of the graduating class of Balvihar, took charge of the program from here, introducing the first show "*Bharat kee Jhaanki*". The youngest group of students presented a colorful image of India, dressed in regional attire and greeted the audience in regional languages. This was followed by a Hindi reading competition. Every year, Balvihar celebrates *Hindi Diwas* by organizing various competitions to encourage students to read, write and speak Hindi. This year, students participated in a reading competition, reading a given passage in one minute, and were judged on their diction and reading skills. The winners of the semi-final round, Roshan Desai and Nimay Patel from Cobb Balvihar and Rohan Desai and Roshni Desai from Gwinnett Balvihar, competed on stage and were judged by a panel of three judges. Rohan placed first, winning the trophy, while all other participants were awarded medals. The *Hindi Diwas* competition was managed by Neetu Sharma, coordinator of Cobb Balvihar.

Next, a group of students performed a string of songs and poems based on the motivating theme - with strong determination, any goal can be achieved. The kids sang the famous *Nanhe-munne bacchae teri mutthee mein kya hai*, followed by a group recitation of two inspiring poems "*Lakshya hamesha bada rakho*" by Yogi Saraswat and "*Koshish karne vaalon ki kabhee haar nahin hoti*" by Harivansh Rai Bacchan. The fluent rendering of the poetry was testimony to the efforts put in by the students and the teachers, and the audience

appreciated it with a hearty applause.

This year, Balvihar parent volunteers conducted a series of interviews with parents and alumni to get feedback on the Balvihar program in a bid to evaluate and improve it. The feedback was very positive, along with a few suggestions for changes. Highlights of these interviews were presented to the audience in the form of a short video clip.

The cultural program was followed by a mela in the school cafeteria which was decorated to create the ambience of a village fair. Students of the three highest grades of Balvihar manned eight stations where they explained the various goals of Balvihar and the activities undertaken to achieve them. With the help of posters, quizzes and games, students presented the cultural, social and academic activities they participate in. They talked about the various festivals celebrated in Balvihar, the Graduation ceremony "*Guru Dakshina*" and the academics and language related games such as spelling bee and reading competitions. The students also highlighted the importance of volunteering and the fact that all Balvihar graduates return as volunteer teaching assistants for at least one year.

As the audience moved around different stations, interacting with students and learning about Balvihar, the last group of performers took their positions. In keeping with the mela atmosphere, a large group of students performed a medley of six fast paced dances. Since no village fair can be complete without food, at the end of the show, all attendees were treated to snacks and *mithai* (sweets) and hot *chai*.

The 25th Anniversary celebration of Balvihar was an occasion of great satisfaction to all who are involved in this program. The goal of Balvihar, since its inception, is to teach Hindu culture and Hindi language, and help students appreciate their rich cultural heritage. Most of all, build confident young men and women who are proud of their roots, and who respect all different cultures and religions, which is the basic tenet of Hindu religion. The success, and indeed the very existence of such programs, is heavily dependent on the convictions and values of the participants, on both sides of the aisle, the provider as well as the user. As Balvihar grows and evolves, it is staying true to its goal, and it is in step with the growing Indian American community. While the world has changed phenomenally in the past two and a half decades, it is probably safe to conclude that the fundamental goals of life are here to stay and will endure. ■

*(Glimpses of this program is on inner cover pages)*

# Roma people: The Medieval Indian diaspora

*By Dr. Abhishek Gaur, MD*

In the last article (HV Oct-Dec 2015), we described the initial four hundred years of history of Roma people from their initial enslavement resulting in exodus from the Northwestern region of Indian subcontinent culminating in their slow spread throughout Europe around 1400 CE. They sought settlement in different regions and tried to settle down but faced persecution and bias and moved from one place to another. In German speaking countries, they were called '*Sinti*' which has been sometimes attributed to the word '*Sindhi*' and possibly their origin from Sindh. Initially, these regions were hospitable as they received a letter of supports like the protection from German-Roman emperor Siegesmund. However, with passage of time each state passed anti-Sinti laws forcing their movement and nomadic life. Notable amongst these, was the passage of law banning *Sintis* in Brandenburg, followed by several German states and annulling the letter of protection from the prior emperor. Blamed for the spread of plague, being 'un-Christian', Turkish traitors, murderers and kidnappers, they were caught and imprisoned and fled from one region to another.

In France, they were called '*Manush*'. They arrived at the gates of city of Paris in 1427 but were sent to the town of Pontoise within one month. In 1502, Louis XII



Gypsy arrested 1928

Gypsy-life.net

expelled them from France. They were referred as *Gitanos* in Spain and influenced the flamenco dance form in the Andalusia. Although flamenco was not invented by the Roma, they have been associated with development of this dance. The first anti-gypsy laws were passed in Spain in 1492 subjecting them to inquisition and trial as heretics. Series of anti-gypsy laws were passed in Milan, England, Sweden, Scotland and Holland. Switzerland passed a series of anti-Romani laws authorizing their killing. Portugal decided to deport them to Brazil. England sent them to North America and Australia. In the 18th century, Empress Maria Theresa of Austria and

**Dr. Ian Hancock's, official ambassador to the UN for the world's 15 million Romanies and the only Romani appointed to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, with his gypsy relatives. Posted by Ruth Fayvre**







*Romani with their wagon, photographed in the Rheinland of Germany in 1935.*

*Credit: Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-J0525-0500-003 / CC-BY-SA, distributed under a Creative Commons license (German Federal Archives)- See more at: <http://www.livescience.com/44512-gypsy-culture.html#sthash.ISSB4hLS.dpuf>*

Hungary passed several laws that forbid the Roma from using their language, prohibited marriage among Roma and ordered Roma children to be removed from their parents for forcible adoption by native Hungarians. This policy was subsequently copied in several regions of Germany.

In Eastern Europe, their condition was no better. In Wallachia, a part of Romania, they were slaves for more than 500 years until freed in 1863. Catherine, the Great from Russia assigned them the status of crown slaves. They were known for their craftsmanship, metal workmanship, military skills, skills in caring and treatment of horses, music, dance and fortune telling. They led a nomadic

life mostly due to circumstances, as when they came they were initially welcome but later persecuted. A parallel is sometimes drawn between nomadic tribes in India like Banjaras. The Roma people are distinct and are considered to have originated from Rajputs.

During Nazi era (1935-45), anywhere from 500,000





to 1.5 million Romanies were systemically killed in 'Porajmos' or Romani holocaust. Unfortunately, due to inadequate resources and lack of organization to highlight this Roma holocaust, this has not received much attention. United Nations has not included this during the Annual Holocaust Remembrance Day. In 2012, after years of efforts and disputes, Angela Merkel unveiled the Memorial to the *Sinti* and *Roma* victims of National Socialism in Berlin.

Even in recent times, the Czech Republic, they were considered 'socially degraded stratum' and subjected to sterilization through coercion, misinformation and money. The discrimination continues even today as highlighted by Amnesty International report citing segregation and bullying of Romani children and placing them in 'practical schools' for those with learning disabilities.

In 2010, French President Nicholas Sarkozy initiated a systematic deportation of Romanian and Bulgarian Roma people. This was criticized by United Nations committee on the elimination of racial discrimination as well as by the President of European commission.

Since, the 1850s, Roma have immigrated to the United States in several waves. In the US, they are more integrated into the mainstream. It is estimated that there are about one million of them. There they have listed themselves by the country of origin and their larger concentration of population is noted in Southern California, Pacific Northwest, Texas, cities of Chicago and St Louis.

In Europe, they are estimated at 8-12 million with the largest number in Romania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary and former Yugoslavia. The first World Romani Congress held in 1971 called for self-determination and unity and adopted the Romani flag. The flag is dark blue on top representing the heaven or sky and green below (representing the earth) with the red sixteen-spoke chakra in the center (in recognition of the Indian origin of the Roma), representing movement and the burst of fire from which all creation emerged at the beginning of time.

The claim for non-state Roma nation was made at the fifth Romani World Congress held in 2001. This was largely ignored and considered impractical and since then the call for Romani nation has faded. On April 8, the world Romani day is celebrated but the movement towards a coherent geo-political entity has not happened. Many Roma people believe that a unified political entity a la Roma nation will restore dignity to the people. They believe that Roma identity transcends religion, nationality, color and language differences and



**Romani Flag created in 1933 and adopted by Romani Congress in 1971**

*Image courtesy Wikipedia*

the Roma can get together to decide their future. In September 2011, Roma led Roma Academy of Arts and Sciences was founded in Belgrade.

Some prominent celebrities with Romani heritage include comedian Charlie Chaplin, actress Rita Hayworth and artist Pablo Picasso. President Bill Clinton is believed to have Romani ancestry by some researchers. On February 12, 2016, the dynamic Indian External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj called Roma people as India's children and praised them to be flag bearers of Indian ethos and culture. She lauded them for peaceful coexistence in challenging times. The Roma community hopes that one-day they would be recognized on par with rest of Indian diaspora. ■

#### **Credits:**

- ★ <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/roma-eastern-europe-still-searching-inclusion>
- ★ [Amnestyinternational](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/04/czech-republic-systematic-discrimination-against-romani-children-in-schools)
- ★ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/04/czech-republic-systematic-discrimination-against-romani-children-in-schools>
- ★ [Romahistory.com](http://Romahistory.com)
- ★ *Gypsies Wanderers of the World*. Bart McDowell, National Geographic Society 1970
- ★ *A History of Romani People*. Kyuchukov, Hancock

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# The Kumbh Mela: A Great, Living, Ancient Tradition

*By Maria Wirth*

During the Kumbh Mela in Haridwar in 2010, a Frenchman exclaimed, "Oh, it must have been so different then" when he came to know that I was in 1986 at the Kumbh already. "No, it was not", I realized. It was very much the same. It may have been the same for centuries. This year, the Purna Kumbh Mela is in Ujjain and the Ardh Kumbh in Haridwar.

Here is my description from that time (translated from my German book):

Luckily I don't get afraid, when I am stuck in a crowd; otherwise India would be the wrong country for me. I actually enjoy the atmosphere, so incredibly colorful and diverse, a wave of human beings that carries everyone along, innumerable pair of eyes meeting my eyes, fleetingly, friendly - for a short while thrown

together at the same place.

So when I heard that the full Kumbh Mela will be celebrated in Haridwar in April 1986, I wanted to be there, for surely there must be a reason, when millions of pilgrims from all corners of India undergo a lot of hardship to reach this festival on the Ganges. In fact there are even two reasons.

Number **one**, a bath in the Ganges at the auspicious time of the Mela is a big attraction, because it is supposed to be very powerful, purifying internally and giving a boost to one's spiritual development.

And number **two**, there is the prospect of benefitting from the presence of great *Rishis*, the successors of the ancient wise women and men from Vedic times.

Traditionally, the Kumbh Mela is the meeting place for those pillars of Indian spirituality, who have dedicated their whole life to the search for truth. Even today the hermits who are usually hidden in caves in the



Himalayas and the *Sadhus* (wandering monks) who wander all over the country with a begging bowl and a staff in hand stand for an ideal. They embody the dream of freedom and independence for those who feel tied down in the world.

The reason why during the time of the mela bathing in the Ganges is especially helpful for spiritual growth is given in a story of the Indian scriptures which is since ancient times connected with existing locations in northern India.

Long, long ago, at the beginning of our present world cycle, gods and demons tried to release the lost nectar of immortality by vigorously churning the milk ocean. When the jar (kumbh) full to the brim with the nectar finally emerged, a wild chase started. The son of a god had seized the vessel with the precious content and the demons followed at his heels in hot pursuit. Sun, Moon and Jupiter played the role of protectors for the gods and influenced the outcome in their favor from certain positions. The chase lasted for 12 days, until the jar was finally safe with the gods.

According to the scripture, a few drops of the nectar spilled over at four places in northern India, which thereby became especially sanctified and celebrate the Kumbh Mela once in twelve years: Haridwar, Allahabad,

Nasik und Ujain.

When the drops fell into the Ganges in Haridwar during the chase, the Sun protected it from the position of Aries and the Jupiter from Aquarius. This constellation repeats itself once in 12 years, because according to Indian tradition one year in the life of human beings corresponds to one day in the life of gods. Each time, when this constellation repeats itself, the influence of the celestial bodies is again supposed to be very beneficial for the place and millions of pilgrims converge at the place to celebrate the Kumbh Mela.

So much about the story. It explains why many pious Hindus dream of bathing in the holy river during the Kumbh Mela. The explanation however may not convince a European. When I walked along the banks of the Ganges, and watched the pilgrims, who stood up to their waist in the water, held their nose with their fingers, bent their knees and submerged themselves again and again, I would not have guessed that this kind of gymnastics is helpful in getting to know the truth.

But can I be sure? It can neither be verified nor falsified, whether the astrological constellation in question charges the Ganges water in some subtle, special way or not. And after seven years in India, I was already broad minded enough to consider the Indian

view as possible and not only the western view, which would regard such belief 'from a scientific angle' as nonsense. The Indians trust that their sages and their tradition know a lot about the subtle interdependence between man and cosmos. And they may be right. Science keeps validating more and more insights of the ancient wisdom.

To be fair, westerners should have the same level of acceptance towards the Indian belief, which they have towards the baptism in the Christian Church. Rather even a higher level, as no Indian threatens anyone with eternal damnation, if he does not bathe in the Ganges.

I personally did not consider the bath as important. Nevertheless, it so happened that in the middle of the night at 2 o'clock, at the most auspicious hour, I went to the Ganges to take a dip. A group of people who were gathered around a tiny, fragile woman, Rani Ma by name, took charge of me. I had landed up in this group in the previous evening by chance.

Rani Ma did not talk much. Her guru was Babaji, who was also the grand guru of ParamahansaYogananda. Her devotees from Kolkata considered her as

enlightened.

There was no doubt that this group would take a bath in the Ganga in the night and Rani Ma insisted on taking me along. I did not object. We slept for a couple of hours on reed mats on her veranda and then joined the steady, unending stream of human beings winding their way through the town to Har ki Pauri, the most auspicious place on the Ganges. The stream was so dense that I hardly managed to bend to take off my slippers when we reached the ghat area. The others had wisely left theirs behind. There was real danger that the stream of people would run over one, if one falls to the ground.

It actually happened. Fifty people had died in the night. The continuous stream of pilgrims had been blocked for a while to make way for some VIP politician and then was waved on. Many, who had squatted on the ground and dozed off while waiting, could not get up fast enough, when the crowd suddenly moved forward. They were trampled to death.

Still, I was grateful for that amazing experience and glad that I had not slept through the night.

About half a million sadhus, swamis, sanyasis, as the



potentially holy men and women are called, had come to Haridwar - a good representation of spiritual India. Anandamayi Ma had already passed away, but Devaraha Baba was there and I was happy to have his darshan again.

The Mela presented a colorful, fascinating picture. Many sadhus were naked, just smeared with ash from head to toe. Others had wrapped an orange colored, sometimes also white or black, and often worn out cotton cloth around their hips. On their foreheads they had mysterious marks. In one hand they usually held a begging bowl and in the other a wooden staff and in some cases, a dangerous looking metal trident. Their hairstyle was eccentric. If their heads were not shaven, their hair was matted with ash and piled in several layers on the head or it reached down to the waist.

If I had not noticed it already earlier, I would have noticed it during the Kumbh Mela - the fact that not all of them were close to sainthood. Only because someone is naked or dressed in orange, does not necessarily mean that he is a pure, calm, great being who is a well-wisher for all of mankind. As is the case everywhere there are such and such individuals.

And so there were also here the genuine ones who had dedicated their life to the search for the truth - fully and sincerely - and among them there might have been some who had come to an end of their search and could feel what they truly are in their essence.

I have to admit that I did not meet too many really impressive personalities, but in some cases I could envision that someone lived his or her life from a deeper,

more awakened level of consciousness.

Once for example I was sitting on a small wooden bench in front of a tea shop on the road side. An elderly man with a towel wrapped around his head sat down next to me. I moved a bit away from him, because his clothes looked dirty. He carried a sack over his shoulder which had the same dirty white color.

A skinny bitch, whose puppies were stepping over each other under her belly, positioned herself behind our bench and looked at us full of expectation. We both turned towards her at the same moment, and I was surprised, how much compassion shone from the eyes of this man.

Now I suddenly felt love for him and wondered whether it was appropriate to pay for his tea, as he looked poor. Just then Melita Maschmann passed by and we chatted. Meanwhile the man paid and left. We also left and Melita pointed at him, "Look at this man in front of us. People here claim that he is enlightened. He is always calm, kind, unperturbed, even though he is poor and earns his livelihood by collecting mud for soaps."

Melita and I participated in the morning *arati* in the temple where Anandamayi Ma's *Samadhi* (tomb) is the focus of worship. Afterwards we went off in different directions. I was walking, when the man from the teashop came to my mind, and I wished I would see him once more. Somebody walked ahead of me, but he didn't have a towel around his head, so I didn't take further notice. Suddenly I became aware of the prominent varicose veins on his legs and realized that it was him. At the same moment, he turned and smiled at me.

Some other time, I sat with a group of people on Rani Ma's veranda, when a sadhu from Uttarkashi in the Himalayas joined us. Rani Ma greeted him warmly. Both of them conversed with each other for a while. Then he sank into stillness. We all were still and it felt very peaceful. After he had left, Rani Ma claimed that he was enlightened. Of course I can't know, whether it was true.

Probably I have walked past a number of people without recognizing that he or she felt truly one with all.

I suppose that there were some even in those huge tents, which the government had put



up for the very poor. There people chanted almost non-stop one of the many names of god. Among them there were emaciated, old men with hollow cheeks and eyes sunken deep in their sockets, who accompanied their chanting with cymbals - and had time to look up and invite me with a smile to join in.

They were devotees of Vishnu, who is the preserver of the universe. Vishnu is said to incarnate in human form on earth, whenever the evil gets the upper hand, to show again the right path to human beings. Ram and Krishna are Vishnu's most loved incarnations (*avatars*).

The life story of Ram is narrated in the Ramayana and Krishna's in the Mahabharata, which consist of 100,000 stanzas. Krishna lived supposedly some 5000 years ago and Ram several thousand years earlier. The devotees of Vishnu are generally milder compared to those of Shiva. They want to be constantly and lovingly aware of his presence and merge with him or rather merge with that form of him, which they love the most.

When I got up to leave, an old man advised me to travel to Ayodhya and even enquired whether I had enough money for the train ticket to get there. He genuinely wanted me to visit the birth place of his



beloved Ram, who is for a Hindu the same as Jesus Christ is for a Christian - god in human form.

In front of a photo shop, a young sadhu approached me and asked in fluent English where I came from. He was wearing only a loin cloth and was a naga sadhu - "since yesterday", he told me already in his second sentence. The previous day I had witnessed, as a few thousand young men sat on the banks of the Ganges, their heads freshly shaven and naked except for a loin cloth. They took `sanyas`, that means, they vowed to renounce the pleasures of the world and not to dream anymore of wealth, family and position, but instead to dedicate their life completely to the search for god.

One of those young men stood now before me, who, only day before yesterday, would have looked completely normal, with shirt and trousers on his body and hair on his head. I asked him why he chose to become a naga sadhu. "I want to meditate in a cave in the Himalayas to become one with god", he answered, as if this kind of desire was the most natural thing in the world for a young man of his age. I used the opportunity to ask him whether he could introduce me to his guru. He readily agreed.

The naga sadhus consider themselves as the warriors of Shiva. Shiva is on one hand the destroyer in the trinity besides Brahma, the creator and Vishnu, the preserver. On the other hand, Shiva is considered to be the Highest, the only one, above the trinity.

In the 8th century (some say, even earlier), the great philosopher Adi Shankara had grouped the individual sadhus into ten orders, as per their main spiritual practice, reacting to the Buddhist monk communities.





Adi Shankara also asked them to visit the Kumbh Melas, to keep in touch with each other and to exhort the common people to live a righteous life.

The naga sadhus fought against the Muslim invaders, who made between the 8th and 18th century life difficult for Hindus and often killed them if they did not convert to Islam. Today, however, the belligerence of the naga sadhus is limited to fighting over who can take a dip in the Ganga first or to frightening photographers. A Frenchman had to run fast to save his camera. I also dared to take a photo of the nagas, even though the press officer had asked us not to. Secretly and quickly with my small Minox and I was sure that nobody had seen it - till the film was developed. Three nagas looked directly into the lens.

The manager of the tourist bungalow in Haridwar had warned me about the naga sadhus. In case they do not like something about me, it could have disastrous consequences, because most of those sadhus have occult powers, he claimed.

Yet my young companion seemed extremely peaceful and his guru, too, was surprisingly friendly, almost gentle and rather stout. He not only allowed, but seemed happy that I took photos, and called the whole company of his sadhu disciples to his tent. He offered me tea. Conversing however was difficult, as my Hindi was very limited.

The guru dictated the shopping list to the young man who had become a naga only the previous day, who carefully noted down all the items needed. I wished him the best for his path, wished that he may realize the truth

and keep up his enthusiasm. Because the vow to renounce the world by itself is no guarantee, that worldly desires do not again gain the upper hand. But I have respect - not only for those who have achieved the ideal of an even-minded, serene personality, but also for those who strive for it.

It is easy to ridicule those strange looking figures because of their appearance or to put them down as parasites of society. And there is no doubt that many of them wear orange only because it is easier to beg in this color, and possibly there are even criminals among them who hide in that garb. But can I really know how much courage many sadhus muster to untie all their relationships and to let go of the dream of a happy family life and success in a career - in favor of an inward journey, where they have to walk alone, without health insurance and without being certain that the next meal will indeed find its way into their begging bowl?

They demonstrate a life style, which is diametrically opposite to the modern life style. They are not interested in fulfilling desires, but in relinquishing them. They don't want to create needs, but to reduce them. And in this way they act like a barrier against the mighty trend towards the materialistic consumer society.

'If in doubt, be in favor of the wandering monk' is still the motto in India. And even critics of the spiritual scene in the country do not doubt that there are enlightened beings among the sadhus, somewhere high up in the inaccessible Himalayas - who only leave their cave for the Kumbh Mela...



### 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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# Are Images Idols?

By Dr. D.C. Rao

A central teaching of Hindu scriptures is that the whole of creation emerged from the One Supreme Being that is Pure Consciousness. Hindus are taught to see the Divine in all things: within themselves, in all other humans, in all beings and in the whole universe. Mountains and rivers, trees, animals and planets are all seen as sacred, being manifestations of the One. This is not merely a 'belief'; it has to be a way of living.

To see Divine presence in everything around us, at all times, requires a mind that is exceptionally pure, calm and one-pointed. Hindu scriptures offer a variety of ways of transforming our minds to achieve this state of mind. For some people the best path might be deep study of the scriptures or a sustained practice of intense meditation. For most Hindus, however, the best way is the path of devotion to God, developing an attitude of total surrender to God.

Surrendering to God is far from easy. It is made less difficult when we can see God in intimate terms as a mother, father or trusted friend; as one who knows our deepest anxieties; as one who is always there to guide and lift us up in our darkest moments. This is a very personal relationship that is nurtured over a long period of growing devotion to God and is a precursor to seeing

**Hindu scriptures repeatedly emphasize that the essence of spirituality is to rest one's mind in God "by any means whatsoever."**

God in all forms in the universe. Hinduism responds to this yearning for a personal relationship with God by promoting the practice of worshipping God in a specific form. The specific form is represented as a picture or a sculpted image and is used by a devotee to help focus the mind in ardent devotion. It is the nature of the human mind to create a mental image even when thinking of an abstract concept. Pure Consciousness, beyond name and form, beyond the conceptual capacity of the human mind, is the ultimate in abstraction. Worshipping God as represented in a physical image is a means for the human mind to connect with the Supreme Being that is the source of all life and manifests in all forms in the universe.



Hindus worship images as physical representations of particular manifestations of the One Supreme Being that is called God. The devotee focuses his or her mind on the image as a way of making the mind single-pointed and to imbue it with love and devotion to the transcendent Divine Consciousness. The image is not seen as an independent source of power or divinity. Before worshipping an image, a special ritual is undertaken to invoke in this image the energy of the transcendent God-Consciousness. Once this is done, the image, known as a *murti*, is seen as a living entity and suitably worshipped. The ritual worship of a *murti* is known as *puja*. Its components are similar to how one would treat a respected guest to one's home. The transcendent Divine force is invoked and invited to reside in the *murti* placed on an altar; the *murti* is bathed and adorned; prayers are chanted or sung to the accompaniment of bells; various symbolic offerings are made including flowers, fruit, incense and light; and finally, the devotee takes leave of the Divine force as it departs from the *murti* until it is time for the next worship ceremony, known as *puja*. Sometimes, the *murti*



is made of clay and ritually destroyed at the end of the *puja*, having served its purpose. It is these practices that distinguish Hindu worship of an image from the practice of idolatry that is so strongly condemned in the Hebrew Bible and the Quran.

The *puja* ritual is designed to captivate the mind by engaging all of the senses of perception. The sense of smell is stimulated by the incense, camphor and fragrant

**Hinduism is the only major religion in which God is worshipped in female form, known as *Shakti* that means energy.**

flowers; the eyes are bathed in the light that illuminates a beautifully decorated *murti*; the ears absorb the sound of bells, cymbals, the chanting of Vedic *mantras* and singing of devotional songs; the sense of taste is satisfied by eating the *prasada*, the food that has been ritually blessed by the deity; and the sense of touch is engaged in all of the activities of performing the

rituals. Engaging all the senses keeps the mind fully focused on the *puja* and enhances the worshipper's devotion.

A significant feature of Hinduism is the large number of names and forms in which God might be worshipped. This has two important benefits: first, persons of every temperament can find a form of God that appeals to their heart and to whom they can offer deep devotion; and second, seeing Divinity in so many different forms creates in Hindus a reverence for the Creator who has brought forth this wondrous diversity. Hinduism is the

only major religion in which God is worshipped in female form, known as *Shakti* that means energy. Hindus pray to Ganesha, the God of Wisdom who helps overcome all obstacles; Durga or *Shakti* as Goddess of power, Sarasvati, the Goddess of learning; Lakshmi, the Goddess of abundance; Rama who came to earth to show humans how to live the path of *Dharma*; Krishna, who came to earth to eradicate evil and protect the good; Hanuman, who is the ideal devoted servant of Rama; and many other forms that inspire Hindus to express their devotion to God. There is a wealth of stories relating to each of these manifestations and Hindus enjoy retelling them to inspire greater love of God in themselves and in others. A Hindu typically worships God in all these forms on various occasions, though most choose to worship a favorite form, an *Ishta Devata* in their daily prayers.

Some Divine forms resemble animals or birds. Lord Ganesha is depicted with the head of an elephant; Lord Hanuman with the face of a monkey; Lord Narasimha with the head of a lion; Lord Hayagriva with the head of a horse; Lord Adishesha as a serpent. God has descended to earth for specific purposes as an avatar in a variety of forms including a fish, a tortoise, a boar and a dwarf. Gods and Goddesses are depicted as accompanied by animals or birds such as the bull, eagle, lion, peacock, mouse, dogs, owl and swan. Sacred rivers such as the Ganga and Yamuna are worshipped as embodiments of Divinity. It is a common practice to worship the *Tulsi* plant every morning as a part of the daily prayers; and the *Ashwattha* or *Peepul* tree is sacred to all Hindus. The variety of such forms reminds Hindus that the entire

creation is merely a manifestation of Divinity, deserving of our reverence.

The *murtis* that depict the various forms of God incorporate symbolic representations that serve to remind the devotees of the transcendent greatness of God. Consider, for example, some of the physical features of the image of Ganesha: the large head represents perfect wisdom; the large stomach symbolizes the Divinity that envelops the entire universe; the large ears represent God's capacity to hear silent prayers; the small feet show that God does not need to go anywhere because God is everywhere already; multiple arms show the all-powerful nature of God; one hand holds an axe that cuts the bonds of false attachments; another hand holds a rope that pulls us to the goal; another hand holds a sweet reward for the

sincere seeker; and one palm is held in a gesture of blessing. Similarly, the physical forms and adornments of each of the images create mental associations that enhance love and reverence of God.

Hindus may relate to *murtis* in a variety of ways depending on the level of their own understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of Hinduism. Some Hindus may believe that their chosen form of God is the only true representation of the Supreme Being; but even so, they respect others who have chosen to worship a different form of God. Those who are more philosophically aware recognize that all the different forms are but manifestations of the One. Sincere devotion to a single chosen form itself leads to deeper love of God and an acceptance of the multiplicity of manifestations described in the Hindu scriptures.

Hindu scriptures repeatedly emphasize that the essence of spirituality is to rest one's mind in God "by any means whatsoever." Scriptures also describe numerous techniques to achieve this goal and one of the most accessible of these techniques is *murti puja*. Worship of a physical representation of God is a reliable means of connecting with the Supreme Divinity that is the Source of all life. ■



### About the Author

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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://hafsite.org/hinduism-101/recommended-reading-hinduism>.



# Keep Your Word

Recently my laptop needed repairs and when I went to pick it up I found that I was about six dollars short of the required payment. When I told the repairman that he would have the money by evening time, he got a look of disbelief in his eyes and asked with suspicion, 'Promise?' Taken aback, I said, 'of course.' Later I sent someone with the money, and the repairman was shocked. He said that no one really comes back in such a situation.



I am reminded of the numerous times when someone had made a promise only to ignore it later. A young woman called and said, "Didi Ji, I really need to speak with you. May I come over?" "Well, I am travelling tomorrow, but since it's very important you may come over." We made an appointment but she did not show up. "What happened," I called her to ask. "Oh, I was tired, so I fell asleep." That's it. No apology, no regrets, no phone call to say that she would not be able to come.

When you give your word, you should be good for it. When a promise is made, you must do your utmost to fulfill it. If you cannot fulfill it, don't make it in the first place. There is no point in saying, "The check is in the mail" if you have not written it yet. Do not say, "I will be there at 10 am" if you have no intention of being there

before noon.

If you are not true to your word, people will lose faith in you at some point. You may swear up and down that you can be trusted, but your actions will speak louder than your words.

## Look For Milestones

Just as a traveler on the highway looks for milestones as he advances towards his destination, so a spiritual seeker looks for marks of progress on the path he is traversing. These marks of progress tell the aspirant that he is headed in the right direction.

How do you measure your success on the path of spirituality? Many aspirants mistakenly look for dreams and signs. They ask, "I saw a snake on the steps outside my house on *Shivratri*. What is the significance of this?" Or, "What does it mean if I see the color blue in my meditation?"

Spiritual progress is not measured in terms of dreams, visions or signs, but in what you achieve as a result of your continued effort and an abundance of grace showered by God.

You know you are progressing when you start changing from within. You will not only accept whatever life brings you; you will rejoice in all situations and circumstances. At all times you will feel an inward joy, a joy that nothing and no one can ever take away from you. You will not feel angry even when there is a reason to be angry. You will not become greedy even when there is a reason to be greedy. In the face of adversity you will be as strong as a rock. You will treat both praise and criticism alike. You will not fall apart even when it seems that there is nothing to hold on to.

When you walk on the path of devotion, you will begin to see your own faults as clearly as daylight. *Jagadguru* Shri Kripalu Ji Maharaj says, "The fact that you perceive the faults of others is direct proof that you

are faulty yourself." You will always work at making improvements within yourself rather than being possessed with the desire to correct others.

Following spiritual discipline regularly is the key to success.

**★ Don't Waste Food**

Some rice is left over from dinner. You bought some coffee and did not get a chance to drink it while it was warm. Half the loaf of bread you bought last week is now stale, and the bananas are now over ripe because they weren't eaten in time. What do you do with all this



food? You throw it out!

Almost one billion people on this planet have no food or clean drinking water. Their lives are often shown in documentaries. We could have been born in abject poverty. We would then be one of the people we see in documentaries. Can you even imagine going through two days without eating a morsel, or having to eat grass in desperation? No, we cannot imagine because God has been extremely merciful and given us ample food not only to feed ourselves but others also.

How do we repay this mercy? By throwing food away! In Canada alone 30% of the food produced is thrown away. Imagine how many hungry children can be fed with this amount of food. The statistics boggle the mind. The sad part is that we are contributors to these statistics. We throw food out almost every day and add to the numbers.

Let us pledge never to throw food away. Buy only as

much as you think you can eat in a week. Cook only as much as will be eaten in one or two meals. Take only as much food as you can eat, on your plate. A second helping is better than taking too much and throwing it away.

Due to the extreme grace of the Supreme Lord, we have had no lack of food and water during our entire lifetime. Let us respect the planet and respect God's mercy by not wasting food!

**★ Find Your Calm**

Everyone worries about something or another in life.

The rule of thumb is this: The more you have in the way of family and material objects, the more you tend to worry. You cannot avoid problems in life; they are inevitable. However, you can deal with them effectively so that they do not overwhelm you.

**★ Here are some ways in which you can become calmer.**

- 1 Start your day early with meditation. This will set the pace for the rest of your day.
- 2 Avoid tea, coffee, alcohol, soft drinks, processed and spicy food. These agitate the body and the mind.
- 3 Listen to soothing music.
- 4 Unless it is urgent, do not react immediately to what others are saying. Think about it and reflect upon it. Give it some time before replying.
- 5 As much as possible, eat quietly in a calm atmosphere. Put away the cellphone while you eat.
- 6 Feel good about a job well done.
- 7 When things do not go as expected, do not fret and knit your brows. It is not the end of the world.
- 8 Even if it is the end of the world, enjoy the remaining moments rather than worry about them.
- 9 Accept that things will go wrong from time to time.
- 10 Actively think about all the good that has come your way in life so far.
- 11 Try to do some good to someone every single day through words, actions and thoughts. ■

# Yoga and Meditation: Their Origins and Real Purpose

By **Stephen Knapp (Sri Nandanandanadasa)**

First of all, yoga is not a religion, it is a spiritual science that has been practiced and developed over thousands of years. Archeological evidence shows figures in yogic positions from the Indus Valley region that date as far back as 3000 BCE. Yoga is also mentioned in various Vedic literature, such as some of the Upanishads, including the Katha, Svetashvatara, Taittiriya, and Maitrayani, as well as the Bhagavad-gita, the Bhagavata Purana, and others, all of which date back thousands of years. Therefore, yoga, which is essentially theistic, was known many years before Patanjali. Although he is often given the credit for it, he merely codified it in his Yoga Sutras, which is the text many people are aware of, and which is said to have been written

somewhere between the fourth century BCE and the fourth century CE. In this way, it should be clear to anyone that yoga and meditation have their origins in the Vedic system, which some call Hinduism.

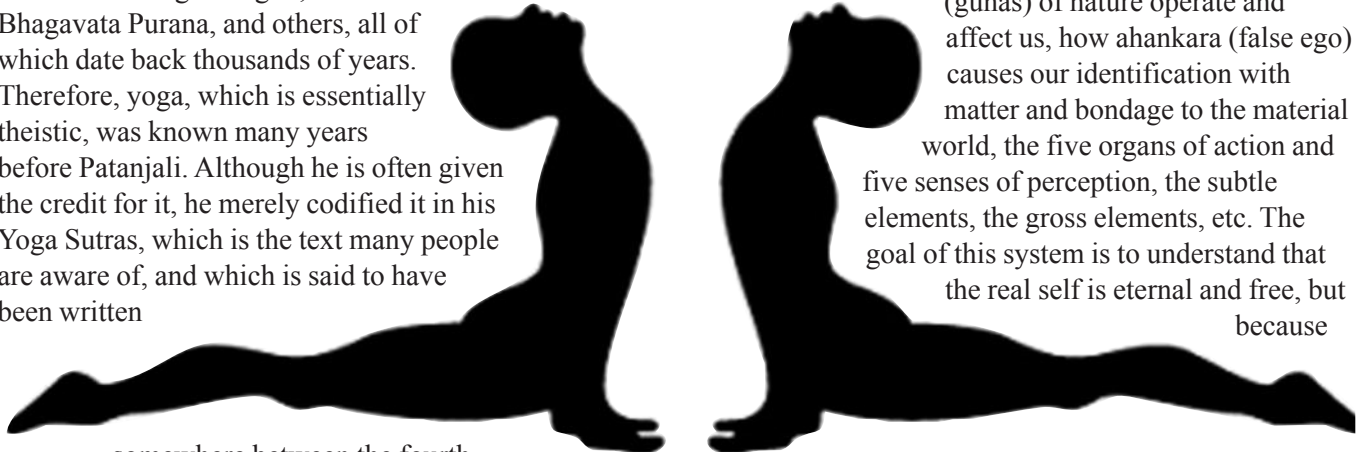
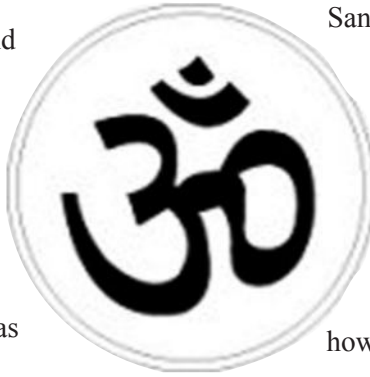
Furthermore, hatha yoga is described in such early texts as the Hatha Yoga Pradipika by Yogi Swatmarama, the Gheranda Samhita by the sage Gherand, and the Shiva Samhita. Lord Shiva is said to be the originator of the system found in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika. This is highly regarded by the Nath tradition founded by Gorakshnath and his teacher Matsyendranath, who was accepted to be a disciple of Lord Shiva. Yogi Gorakshnath wrote the Goraksha Samhita. A later text on yoga is known as the Hatharatnavali by SrinivasabhataMahayogindra. Thus, without this ancient culture, there would be no yoga process as we know it today.

In the Vedic tradition, yoga is the system which is the application of the Sankhya system. The Sankhya Philosophy is another of the Vedic systems. The original Sankhya system, as explained in Srimad-Bhagavatam by Lord Kapila, acknowledges matter and spirit as two separate principles of reality. Sankhya analyzed such factors as purusha and prakriti (spirit and matter), the creation and development of matter through excitation of the purusha, how the world evolved, how the modes (gunas) of nature operate and affect us, how ahankara (false ego) causes our identification with matter and bondage to the material world, the five organs of action and five senses of perception, the subtle elements, the gross elements, etc. The goal of this system is to understand that the real self is eternal and free, but because

of ignorance the soul identifies with what is temporary and, therefore, suffers. Through this kind of analysis of the material world it is expected that one will realize the difference between matter and spirit and attain freedom from false identification. After this stage is attained, release from existence in the material world is reached through spiritual training, meditation on the real self and Super-self, and the practice of yoga.

In this way, Sankhya is the theory, while yoga is the practice. The complete system of yoga is very complex and has many steps to it, each of which must be perfected before one can go on to the next step.

Hatha yoga is one of the first types of yoga with which people become acquainted. However, it is not a separate system of yoga as many people seem to think. It is one of the eight steps of raja or astanga yoga. Nonetheless, it can be used separately if only for helping



keep the body and mind fit and in shape.

The word hatha consists of two bija or seed mantras, namely ha (prana) and tha (the mind or mental energy). Ha means the prana or energy flowing within the body and that associated with the sun, while tha means the mind or mental energy, or that associated with the moon. Thus, hatha means to bring in balance the energies of the sun and moon, or unify the vital energy of the body with the mental. This opens the door to higher consciousness, which culminates in samadhi during meditation, if one continues to develop it to that stage. With the use of hatha yoga, the body can become more subtle, or what is called a yoga body.

The purpose of yoga is to suspend the flickering nature and internal dictations of the mind. Being free of the dictates and influence of the mind would allow one at least a glimpse into the spiritual reality that was discussed in the Sankhya system. Yoga is also to attain relief from the pain that exists from such things as ignorance, which brings attachment, which then leads the way to fear and hatred, as well as the fear of death. The practice of yoga and renunciation is for bringing freedom from such pains and suffering, and allowing us to enter our natural state of never-ending happiness and bliss, which is the normal condition of the soul, our real identity. Although the basis of the yoga system may be quite popular, few people can actually reach the higher levels of self-realization through this process in this day and age.

The Sanskrit root of the word yoga is yuj, which means to bind, link, or unite with the object of our meditation. Thus, it is to unite the mind, intellect, the will, body, and soul to God, or the jivatma to the Paramatma, the individual soul to the Supersoul, through the discipline of yoga. Furthermore, the word religion comes from the Latin word religio, which also means to bring back or bind to God. Thus, there is no difference between the goal of yoga and the deeper goal of religion.

Religion as we know it today, however, often deals with externals, such as how we act, what we do, and customs and rituals. Spirituality, on the other hand, may also use rituals and practices, but is focused on our



internal changes and development, and is, thus, more personal and individualistic. It does not depend on a church or our connection with an institution, though that may help and is recommended in particular situations. Neither does it depend on a strict dogma, but it goes beyond all that. This is the Vedic system. The goal of religion may be to reach heaven, but the goal of Vedic spirituality, from which originates the yoga system, is moksha, or liberation from all forms of materialistic limitations, a reawakening of our real spiritual identity, and even entrance into the spiritual dimension.

The purpose of any true spiritual path is to raise our consciousness to the point of allowing us to directly perceive the spiritual strata. Being spiritual means to recognize one's spiritual identity and practically see the transcendental essence of all others. It also means to see that we are all parts and parcels of God and to respect each other in that light. That is one of the higher goals of yoga.

To proceed in this way, we need to understand that all things that are spiritual function on a higher plane of existence, one that is hardly perceptible by our mind, intelligence, or senses. The spiritual dimension can only be detected when our consciousness reaches a higher level of awareness, beyond the influence of the mind and senses. It is similar to radio and television waves. These are not perceptible by our mind or senses. They remain invisible, yet they are all around us. In our base level of awareness, or unawareness, we may think that such things as radio waves and television frequencies are not real. Of course, we may be viewed as quite



uneducated by those who are familiar with their existence. So the thing is, even if you cannot perceive them, if you have a receiver that can detect or even utilize such subtle waves or frequencies, then you will know that radio and television waves are not only a fact, but can be used for many practical purposes.

The same thing goes for yoga, or a genuine spiritual path. It is meant to bring our consciousness up to a higher level of awareness, to fine tune it so that we can receive or perceive the higher vibrations of the spiritual strata. As we practice such a genuine spiritual tradition, our consciousness can become refined and focused enough so we can receive the subtle frequencies and perceive the reality of the spiritual domain. Then we can have our own spiritual experiences. The point is that the more spiritual we become, the more we can perceive that which is spiritual. As we develop and grow in this way, the questions about spiritual life no longer remain a mystery to solve, but become a reality to experience. It becomes a practical part of our lives. And how to reach

that level of perception is supplied in the Vedic methodologies that have been preserved and handed to us by the previous sages who have also used them for their own development and spiritual experience. And that is what the Vedic process has been giving to humanity for thousands of years.

The Vedic system is practically non-denominational. It is not for any one culture or ethnic group. It is for all of humanity and is called Sanatana-dharma. Sanatana-dharma is both a path and a state of being. It means, essentially, the eternal nature of the soul, that which always exists, and our eternal duty, which is to attain that spiritual perception. We are all spiritual beings within material bodies, so the goal and our main duty in human existence is to regain that spiritual identity. This is attained by a reawakening of our higher consciousness and the direct perception of our spiritual identity. It is through the process of yoga and the path of Sanatana-dharma that we can reach this higher awareness and perceive exactly who we are. This is precisely the ultimate purpose of yoga.

Nowadays people often practice yoga merely for improving their physical fitness, or for their mental and overall well-being. There is nothing wrong with that, and yoga can do that most efficiently. But there is also a higher aspect of yoga, which for some has been forgotten. The great rishis of old in India gave it for our preparation to reach higher states of consciousness. And such training was performed for years to attain more developed states of being. Thus, the process of hatha yoga was given to prepare one for entering the elevated stages of meditation. Hatha yoga is a beginning process for preparing the body and mind for spiritual awakening through the practice of raja or astanga yoga. Thus, it is also quite effective in reducing any diseases, physical defects, or mental disturbances. And this is why some people use it as a preventative medical therapy. It is the imbalance in the energy system that contributes much of the psychic or mental diseases that people suffer. Hatha yoga, along with breathing exercises, pranayama, can eliminate many such problems. However, it is not enough to use only particular asanas or yoga postures to remedy certain problems. It must be used holistically to treat the whole person so the student, or the sadhaka, can rise to a higher level of being. The person's character, thought processes, mind, senses, and physical nature, must all rise to a more refined level of existence. That is what is needed, otherwise the goal of yoga remains incomplete. This, it seems, is what has been forgotten by many modern yoga teachers.

In order for the mind to be purified, the body also has





to be purified, or prepared spiritually. Hatha yoga is that preliminary process by which we prepare the body, nervous system, mind, lungs or breathing, and nadi channels so the energy within can flow most efficiently for states of deep meditation. This is the objective of hatha yoga.

The benefits of yoga are various and numerous. On the mental level it strengthens concentration, determination, and builds a stronger character that can more easily sustain various tensions in the materialistic world. The assortment of asanas or postures also provide stronger health and keeps ills such as diabetes, high and low blood pressure, etc., away or in check. It improves physical strength, endurance, flexibility, back pain, digestive disorders, and arthritis. It promotes detoxification of the body, toning of muscles, and relief from stress and anxiety. Certain diseases can be prevented or improved by performing yoga on a daily basis.

Students also use yoga to find relief from the stress of study, tests, homework, and pressure to keep up good grades. Yoga has been shown to provide an increase of

energy, so students can use that toward school work and improve their academic performance.

With the practice of pranayama and asanas, the glands and muscles also increase in capability, which helps cure or prevent various diseases caused by bad food habits and irregular lifestyle. Problems such as constipation, cardiovascular and respiratory difficulties are examples of this. Yoga also strengthens the heart and keeps the veins healthy. It improves the entire digestion process, making every part of the body healthy, light, and active. Yogic exercises also work to dissolve fat, which makes the body light, healthy, fit, and attractive.

It is understood that physical growth or the anabolic process continues to the age of 18. From 18 to 35 there is a balance or neutral stage between the anabolic and catabolic or degenerative processes. But from 35 onward the catabolic or deteriorating process sets in. Yoga and meditation can significantly reduce that decline caused by the catabolic process. That is because our body's cells, organs, and nerves are affected by the attitude or energy we send through the body. They have their own consciousness and are influenced by the



collective consciousness we create, that we live in by our thoughts, desires, words, and deeds. Thus, positive thoughts and spiritual practices bring uplifting results to the body. Since yoga and meditation can help establish a prolonged state of mind and body that is positive and progressive, it naturally helps rejuvenate the body and sustains life and good health, besides leads us to spiritual consciousness.

In the changes that the body undergoes through a serious practice of hatha yoga, the body can become more subtle, flexible, and balanced so that the effects of old age are greatly reduced. However, those who practice yoga seriously and not merely for outer beautification and health reasons can progress to the higher forms of yoga. They can develop or feel the superior indwelling pleasure and peace that is attainable through the full progression of yoga, which leads to self-realization, the real goal of yoga. Nonetheless, a person will still feel benefits from whatever practice they make. Even on an elementary level, a higher state of peace, tranquility, and even meditation can be attained.

Even if yoga is performed only for good health, the higher brain centers are still activated to varying degrees and can become further opened with steady practice in preparation for higher consciousness.

As one progresses through hatha yoga and engages in meditation, a person can taste a mental calm that is experienced when the mind becomes stable and steady, and more closely connected with our real spiritual identity. Thus, a person becomes attracted to the meditation sessions, and other outer or sensual forms of pleasure or happiness become less significant. As one's self-fulfillment increases, it becomes easier to naturally avoid those activities that are not conducive to peaceful living and healthy well-being.

In the preliminary stages, yoga is, essentially, for

controlling the flickering nature of the mind, and for developing one's finer qualities and expanding one's consciousness from material to spiritual awareness. It is explained that yoga is the process of completely calming the movements of the mind, which include perceived knowledge, misconception, imagination, sleep, and memory. When these are stabilized, then it can be called yoga, which offers the opportunity for the seer to become established in his own essential and fundamental nature, full of bliss and light. Further than this, yoga is the attempt and the process to realign ourselves with the Supreme Self, God.

When you progress in yoga in this way, you can feel the unwanted burdens of the mind fall away, such as anxiety, anger, greed, envy, hate, discontent, etc. Then other qualities like peacefulness, tranquility, contentment, and blissfulness will be felt. These are the natural qualities of the soul which everyone is trying to find and are some of the many things that can be accomplished with yoga.

As we continue to develop in yoga, we separate ourselves from the general vibrations of selfishness, greed, and anger that often pervade this planet. But we also contribute to the uplifting vibrations in the social or mass consciousness that this world so much needs these days. If we all can continue to work in this way, there could be a major shift in planetary consciousness for the upliftment of humanity for the greater good. Thus, our own spiritual progress becomes a positive influence on the whole planet.

As you make further progress, you may enter into the deeper levels of understanding and transcending the mind and gradually go so far as to attain realizations as to what your own spiritual identity is and what your relationship is with the Absolute. Becoming free from material life and regaining one's spiritual identity is the superior goal of all yoga.

The process for attaining a closer attunement or relationship with God is further introduced in my article "The Secrets of Bhakti Yoga", and a more full explanation of the yoga processes is provided in my book, "Yoga and Meditation: Their Real Purpose and How to Get Started," both of which can be found at: [www.stephen-knapp.com](http://www.stephen-knapp.com). ■

# Yoga and Kirtan Increases Memory Better Than Brainy Mind Games: Study



A team of US neuroscientists from University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) found that a three-month course of yoga and meditation practice helped minimize the cognitive and emotional problems that often precede Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia - and that it was even more effective than the memory enhancement exercises that have been considered the gold standard for managing mild cognitive impairment.

The medical health study, which appeared on May 10 in the *Journal of Alzheimer's Disease*, is the first to compare outcomes from yoga and meditation with those from memory training. Nowadays, there is a common trend to download 'Brainy Mind Game' apps for your phone or iPad to help keep your brain sharp. However, the study shows that doing spiritual yoga can be more helpful in many ways such as relieving depression and anxiety.

"Memory training was comparable to yoga with meditation in terms of improving memory, but yoga provided a broader benefit than memory training because it also helped with mood, anxiety and coping skills," said Helen Lavretsky, the study's senior author and a professor in residence in UCLA's department of psychiatry.

"Historically and anecdotally, yoga has been thought to be beneficial in aging well, but this is the scientific demonstration of that benefit," said Harris Eyre, the study's lead author, a doctoral candidate at Australia's University of Adelaide and a former Fulbright scholar at UCLA's Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior. "We're converting historical wisdom into the high level of evidence required for doctors to recommend therapy to their patients."

Lavretsky and Eyre studied participants who had reported issues with their memory, such as tendencies to



forget names, faces or appointments or to misplace things. Subjects underwent memory tests and brain scans at the beginning and end of the study.

The study was funded by the Alzheimer's Research and Prevention Foundation and involved 25 participants over the age of 55. Eleven participants received one hour a week of memory enhancement training and spent 20 minutes a day performing memory exercises - verbal and visual association and other practical strategies for improving memory, based on research-backed techniques with things like crossword puzzles & digital games.

The other 14 participants took a one-hour class once a week in *Kundalini yoga*, in addition a 20-minute spiritual Hindu-based *Kirtan Kriya* meditation to practice at home each day over 12 weeks. *Kirtan Kriya*, which involves chanting, hand movements and visualization of light, has been practiced for hundreds of years in India as a way to prevent cognitive decline in older adults, Lavretsky said.

After 12 weeks, the researchers saw similar improvements among participants in both groups in verbal memory skills - which come into play for remembering names and lists of words. But those who had practiced yoga and meditation had better improvements than the other subjects in visual-spatial memory skills, which come into play for recalling locations and navigating while walking or driving.

The yoga-meditation group also had better results in terms of reducing depression and anxiety and improving coping skills and resilience to stress. That's important because coming to terms with cognitive impairment can be emotionally difficult.

"When you have memory loss, you can get quite anxious about that and it can lead to depression," said Lavretsky, who is also a researcher at the Semel Institute.

The researchers report that the participants' outward improvements in memory corresponded with perceptible changes in their brain activity. Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), they showed that subjects in both groups had changes in the way the brain cells connect with each other, but the changes among the yoga group were statistically significant, whereas the changes in the memory group were not. At the end of the 12-week study, participants showed similar verbal memory improvements, but the yoga study group improved the most with visual-spatial memory.

The researchers attribute the positive "brain fitness" effects of mindful exercise to several factors, including its abilities to reduce stress and inflammation, improve mood and resilience, and enhance production of brain-derived neurotrophic growth factor, a protein that stimulates connections between neurons and kick-start telomerase activity, a process that replaces lost or damaged genetic material.

"If you or your relatives are trying to improve your memory or offset the risk for developing memory loss or dementia, a regular practice of yoga and meditation could be a simple, safe and low-cost solution to improving your brain fitness," Lavretsky said.

What's maybe a most interesting part of this study is the type of yoga they chose. *Kundalini yoga* incorporates movement, breath, sound (*mantra*) and meditation and is not your typical asana or vinyasa practice, but rather a series of invigorating *kriyas* that will sometimes have you flapping your arms or donkey-kicking your feet for several minutes at a time to stir the *Kundalini* energy, the primal serpent energy, at the base of our spine.

According to US National Institutes of Health, yoga may help one to feel more relaxed, be more flexible, improve posture, breathe deeply, and get rid of stress. According to a recently released "2016 Yoga in America Study", about 37 million Americans (which included many celebrities) now practice yoga; and yoga is strongly correlated with having a positive self-image.

The Alzheimer's Research and Prevention Foundation also recommends *Kirtan Kriya*-chanting the sounds *Sa, Ta, Na, Ma*-for better memory. "Clinical research has shown that practicing *Kirtan Kriya* for just 12 minutes a day can improve cognition and activate parts of the brain that are central to memory," according to the *Kirtan Kriya* website.

People with mild cognitive impairment are two-and-a-half times more likely to develop Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia. ■

# The Confabulated Murder of Saint Thomas

By *Koenraad Elst*

On 21 Dec. 2015, the Israeli newspaper Haaretz published an article by David Green propagating the Christian claim that "Thomas the Apostle was murdered in India".

(<http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/this-day-in-jewish-history/1.692829?date=1457643796561>).

In the brief letter below, published on 11 March 2016, Koenraad set the record straight with below rebuttal:

So source of the above is "common Christian tradition"? Fortunately, we are past the stage where we believe a story just because "tradition" says so. Therefore, we don't believe the blood libel against the Jewish people anymore, even though for centuries it has been supported by "common Christian tradition". Likewise, we don't believe the loud libel against the "priests of Kali" either.

Nothing of this legend is proven. The only written source for it is already some 50 years younger than this Thomas's supposed martyrdom: the apocryphal "Acts of Thomas". There, he is presented as coming to 'India', then a very large term (when Columbus landed in what he thought was Zipangu/Japan, he called the natives 'Indians', meaning Asians), in a part that was desert-like and where the people had Persian names. This describes Afghanistan or

western Pakistan well, but not the lush and rich tropical landscape of South India. When he has committed several crimes against society, the king asks him to leave, and only when he refuses this diplomatic solution does the king have him executed.

I first learned about the hollow mythical nature of the Saint Thomas story while studying in Leuven Catholic University, from a Jesuit Professor of Comparative Religion, Frank de Graeve. Not exactly a "fanatical Hindu" source. More recently, Pope Benedict XIV publicly declared that St Thomas had come to Western India, and that from there, after an unspecified amount of time, Christianity (not Thomas) reached South India. I am aware that Indian Christians have raised hell against this scholarly assessment, and have pressured the Vatican into removing this statement from its website. But that is not going to alter the verdict of scholarly historiography: there is no evidence at all to support this story.

And when Christians did reach the coastal area of South India, probably as 4th-century refugees from the Persian Empire that had turned hostile after the Christianization of its Roman rival, they were welcomed rather more cordially than any



treatment given by Christians to Pagans. Far from being "murdered by the priests of Kali", they were given hospitality and integrated into Hindu society, without any questions asked about the contents of their religion. Hindus have extended their hospitality more recently to Parsis, Armenians and Tibetan Buddhists; and more anciently to the Jews. That glorious record is the target of gross injustice in the fictional story of Saint Thomas. ■

## About the Author



*Koenraad Elst, a renowned Belgian Indologist, has written several books on Indian history and culture. He is best known for his writings on controversies in Indian history.*

Source: [koenraadelst.blogspot.com/2016/03/the-confabulated-murder-of-saint-thomas.html](http://koenraadelst.blogspot.com/2016/03/the-confabulated-murder-of-saint-thomas.html)



# Why We Must Worship Goddess Kali?

*By Dr. David Frawley (Pandit Vamadeva Shastri)*

Ma Kali is the most misunderstood of all Hindu Goddesses, though she is often regarded as the most powerful. Kali's dark and fierce form is certainly intimidating and hard to fathom, unless one is willing to look with discernment behind the veil of sensational images about her.

Ma Kali was first introduced to the modern world by Ramakrishna Paramahansa as the Supreme Mother of the Universe. Through Ramakrishna - an avatar for many - the inspiration of Ma Kali awoke India to its ancient spiritual heritage and brought the unifying message of yoga to the world.

This was at a time in which the world was dominated by colonial powers and the idea of a Universal Mother was not accepted - much less a World Mother who was dark in color and fierce in demeanor from a backward country like India!

Yet instead of following Ramakrishna's yogic teachings about Kali, most scholars today look at Kali in an alien and diminished light. What psychologists tell us about Kali often reveals more about their own fascinations with the subconscious mind, rather than the Great Goddess who looks over all of us with wisdom and compassion.

Yogic deities can be best understood according to meditation practices. They relate to energies of higher consciousness beyond the dualities of the mind and the urges of the body. As such, their appearances are dramatic and paradoxical - mind-blowing as it were, and intentionally so.

## **Nature of Ma Kali**

Ma Kali is *kala shakti* or the power of time. She indicates the impermanence of all things, which is why she wears a garland of skulls. Yet she is also the ultimate transforming power of time, which is to take us from death to immortality. Along with endless time, Kali is boundless space, the limitless void, indicated by her dark blue color. Her magical dance of transformation is all existence.



Kali holds the *vidyut shakti*, the lightning or electrical force of consciousness that is the supreme power. All the goddesses and the entire universe manifests from her indomitable force. Kali's seed mantra is 'kreem,' which is the *kriya shakti* or power of transformation behind the vast movement of life.

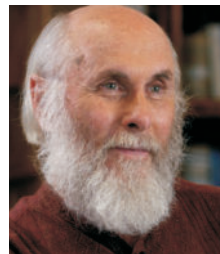
Kali is not the goddess of death and destruction as some see her but, on the contrary, represents the complete victory of the Divine over all death and destruction. Her warrior goddess form removes all the illusions of the mind and reveals the undying presence of our inmost Self that is one with all.

## **Ma Kali as the yoga shakti**

Kali is the inner power of yoga or *yoga shakti*. Yoga in the true sense is a practice of mergence and return to the Divine source of existence. Yoga rests upon *nirodha*, the full concentration of the mind and dissolution of the ego. Kali is the *nirodha shakti*, the power of negation, *neti-neti*, not this, not that, of the Upanishads. *Kundalini shakti*, the secret yogic power of transformation within us, works through Kali's grace and motivation. *Kundalini* ascends and dissolves all the chakras, or energy centers within us, back into the state of pure unity consciousness that is Ma Kali's ultimate abode.

Kali is the Shakti inherent in Shiva as *Mahakala*, the great lord of eternity. She dances on Shiva in a prone form, showing the Divine life and joy that manifests out of absolute stillness and transcendence. ■

## *About the Author*



### **Dr. David Frawley (Pandit Vamadeva Shastri)**

*D. Litt., author of several books, is a western born teacher or guru in the Vedic tradition. In India, Vamadeva is recognized as a Vedacharya (Vedic teacher), and includes in his scope of studies Ayurveda, Yoga, Vedanta and Vedic astrology, as well as the ancient Vedic teachings going back to the oldest Rigveda. Vamadeva is a recipient of the prestigious Padma Bhushan award, one of the highest civilian awards by the government of India, "for distinguished service of a higher order to the nation," honoring his work and writings as a Vedic teacher, which he received in March 2015.*



## Seventh Hindu American VANaprasthi Network Conference Held in Allentown

Over 100 adult and youth delegates representing various Hindu organizations, from across the country, attended the seventh annual Hindu American Vanaprasthi Network (HAVAN) conference held on June 4th, 2016 in Allentown, Pennsylvania. The conference was co-hosted by the Hindu Temple Society, Allentown, PA, VRAJ Hindu Temple, Schuylkill Haven, PA, Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Saylorsburg, PA, and Indian American Association of Lehigh Valley (IAALV). The theme of the conference was: "Harnessing Collective Experiences of Hindu American Vanaprasthis."

The program consisted of six sessions covering topics such as Creating a Social Capital, Engaging Vanaprasthi Women, Vanaprasthis & Youth: Bridging the Gap, Health care proxy and living will, Life planning Guide: A coordinated Solution and Holistic health and Collective psychology of family members.

It was wonderful & inspirational, meaningful & fulfilling.... more importantly it was really enjoyable event. It was all possible because of whole-hearted & focused leadership with a team of hardworking organizers said Dr. Chandra Reddy from Indianapolis.

Jayanti Patel of Indian Circle for Caring, Boston, MA, praised the efforts by saying, "Thanks for your efforts to make very successful HAVAN Conference. It was really full of information. Enjoyed and met many new friends with new Ideas."

The seventh HAVAN conference passed the following resolutions:

**1.** Form a task force to develop plan and strategy for strengthening the HAVAN (Networks) to share resources

among each other and create resource libraries and other repositories across North America (NA) and worldwide.

**a.** Create a library containing the history of establishment of first generation Hindu immigrants in North America

**b.** Build publications that are comprehensible and relatable to second and future generations

**c.** Build a Hindu social structure (based on NA life style) that our future generations can easily lean on.

**2.** Send a delegation of HAVAN members to Bharat to discuss their participation in variety of projects initiated by the Government initiatives such as Save the Ganga, Swatchh Bharat and Ram Janma Bhoomi Mandir.

One of the highlights of the conference was visits to Arsha Vidya Gurukulam and VRAJ Dham Mandir after the conference, which all the participants fully enjoyed. Swami Viditmananda of Arsha Vidya Gurukulam and Shri Pramod Amin of VRAJ blessed the effort and praised VHPA's role in bringing together Hindus from various sampradayas.

Gopal Kris Kapoor, Trustee, Hindu Temple Allentown PA, thanked for bringing the conference to Hindu Temple, summarized his experience, "I learnt a lot. Thank you for inviting me." ■

*HAVAN is an initiative of World Hindu Council (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) of America focused strongly on the needs of the future generation of Hindus to nourish the tree of Hindu Dharma in this adopted land (karma bhoomi). Vanaprasthis, with their hard earned experiences, can create a legacy of Dharmic traditions that spans future generations in North America.*

# Hindu Americans Make Strides in Improving California Textbooks

**THE HINDU AMERICAN COMMUNITY HAS MADE PROGRESS IN BID FOR CULTURAL COMPETENCY AND EQUITY IN THE WAY HINDUISM AND INDIA ARE PORTRAYED IN CA TEXTBOOKS**

*By Samir Kalra,*

**San Francisco, CA (May 20, 2016)** - The Hindu American community has made progress in its effort to ensure Hinduism and Indian history are accurately and equitably represented in the Social Science and History Framework put forth by the California Department of Education.

In a hearing held on May 19, 2016, the Instructional Quality Commission heard testimony from scholars, Hindu organizations, and members of the Hindu American community about the importance of equity and cultural competency in California textbooks. Many important decisions were made in favor of their proposed edits, including the decision not to replace mentions of India with “South Asia” and the reintroduction of two sages of diverse backgrounds.

“For years, the American perception of Hinduism and India has been overly simplistic and inaccurate, in part due to the content of California textbooks,” said Samir Kalra, Esq., Senior Director for the Hindu American Foundation. “This CDE textbook revision process has

been a protracted effort to correct these inaccuracies. While we have voiced concerns about irregularities in the process, we also deeply appreciate the way this issue has engaged the Hindu American community in the civic process. There are nearly a million Indian and Hindu Americans who call California home. So it’s important for them to see their cultural and religious heritage represented with accuracy and parity.”

## **About the process**

Since 2014, efforts by the Hindu American community have been underway to update the textbook framework put forth by the CDE, which currently reinforces cultural stereotypes and historical inaccuracies about Hinduism and India. This effort, supported by leading social science and religious scholars, is motivated by a desire for cultural competency and a fair, accurate portrayal of Hinduism and Indian history. However, a different faction of scholars disagreed with the proposed changes and redacted some of them.

On May 19, 2016 the CDE’s Instructional Quality Commission (IQC) held a hearing during which it considered the edits line by line. The IQC ruled largely in





favor of the Hindu American community's edits. In July, a final decision will be reached, and a final draft of the framework will be created.

"Hinduism should be represented in California K-12 textbooks in a manner comparable to other religions fairly, accurately and equitably," said Barbara A. McGraw, J.D., Ph.D., Director, Center for Engaged Religious Pluralism, Saint Mary's College of California. "This debate concerns a teaching document for K-12 teachers. It should not create unnecessary obstacles for a more constructive understanding of the Indian subcontinent and the world's third largest religion.

In this regard, ironically, the South Asia Faculty Group's attempt to nuance Indian history caused the opposite effect. Robust academic debate about the politics of India are welcome, but that debate is not appropriately addressed in a K-12 textbook Framework narrative in California. Luckily, some of yesterday's decisions reflect that thinking."

Testimony was emotionally charged at times, with Hindu students testifying about feeling like their identities and heritage were under attack; Dalits shared the pain of being victims of caste-based discrimination.

We have nothing but the utmost sympathy and respect for the victims of caste discrimination who spoke about their experiences at the hearing," added Murali Balaji, the Hindu American Foundation's Director of Education. "The Foundation respects the right for Dalits to self-define."

Hindu organizations and scholar groups were particularly critical of the South Asia Faculty Group's recommendation to remove mention of two of Hinduism's most respected sages, Valmiki and Vyasa, who hailed from disadvantaged communities.

"As a *Shudra* [disadvantaged community], I am really proud that our collective efforts were able to bring the contributions of Sage Vyasa and Sage Valmiki back into the Framework," said Sandeep Dedage, California Coordinator for the Hindu Education Foundation. "We're also pleased that the academically questionable recommendation of the South Asia Faculty Group to replace 'India' with 'South Asia' was also rejected." A final decision on this matter will be reached in July, and a final draft of the framework will be created. ■

Source: <http://www.hafsite.org/media/pr/hindu-americans-make-strides-improving-california-textbook>

## US Scholars Decry Plan to Change India to South Asia in Books

By Lalit K Jha

**Washington, May 17 (PTI)** A group of 41 prominent scholars, including several Indian-Americans from across the US have written to the California Department of Education opposing proposals to change 'India' to 'South Asia' in the state text books.

Signed by distinguished academics such as Barbara McGraw of Saint Mary's College of California, Diana Eck of Harvard University and Gerald James Larson of Indiana University, the letter called for a "representation of India and Hinduism that is consistent with the manner in which other cultures and religions are portrayed, and one which avoids Eurocentric biases".

In the letter dated May 5, this group of academicians under the name Social Science and Religion Faculty Group (SSRFG) termed the recommendations to use 'South Asia' in place of ancient India 'anachronistic' and 'not historical'.

A copy of the letter accompanied a statement. The group argued that the term

'South Asia' is a post-World War II geopolitical designation to account for the breakup of British India.

The academics pointed out that textbook narrative refers to all other ancient geographical areas by their ancestral terms China, Japan, Egypt, Greece, etc. Only 'India' is recommended for a change".

Earlier this year, the California Department of Education (CDE) Instructional Quality Commission (IQC) had proposed to accept several changes to the textbook framework suggested by another group of academics named South Asia Faculty Group (SAFG), the statement said.

The suggestions included replacing references to India before 1947 with "South Asia" and "Hinduism" with "ancient Indian religions".

The group was led by academics Kamala Visweswaran of University of California, San Diego, and Robert Goldman of University of California, Berkeley, it added.

In its seven-page letter, SSRFG



Harvard scholar  
Nathan Glazer

questioned these edits and said that SAFG's views did not constitute scholarly consensus as claimed by the latter.

The academics of SSRFG while welcoming "robust academic debate about the politics of India" in the academia cautioned

that the debate is not "appropriately addressed in a K-12 textbook Framework narrative in California". Calling into question the suggestion to replace the word "Hinduism" with "ancient Indian religions" the letter said, "if anyone were to argue that Hinduism did not exist then as what we today refer to as "Hinduism", that would be an unfounded erasure of history on the grounds of semantics," said a statement issued on behalf of SSRFG.

Meanwhile, Harvard scholar Nathan Glazer has also called for using the term "India" for ancient Indian civilization. ■

Source: <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/us-scholars-decry-plan-to-change-india-to-south-asia-in-books/1/670722.html>

# Harappa-like Site Surfaces in Tamil Nadu; 3,000 Ancient Artifacts Found

*By Arockiaraj John bosco*

**MADURAI:** With structure after structure surfacing from under the soil, the massive scale of an ancient urban center that lies buried at PallisanthaiThidal in Sivaganga district of Tamil Nadu is emerging. The second phase of the work undertaken by excavation branch VI, Bangalore, of the Archaeological Survey of India suggests that the settlement at Keeladi village could be as large as the ones in Harappa and Mohenjo Daro. The excavations reveal a well-built urban center with many amenities.

After exploration works on the Vaigai riverbed in 2013-14, the office of the superintending archaeologist, excavation branch VI in Bangalore, shortlisted Keeladi village for excavation. The first phase of the study carried out in 2015 unearthed various antiquities, iron implements and earthenware, both foreign and locally made. The pot shreds of Arretine dating back to Third century BC proved foreign trade existed in the region during the period.



As the phase I study concluded that this was an ancient urban habitation site, the ASI went for the next phase of excavation at Keeladi. According to archaeologists working at the site, the results of phase II





in 53 excavation trenches are overwhelming. "The mound where we are excavating is of 3.5 km circumference in 80 acres of private agricultural land. We are finding structure after structure of the habitation site, the first of its kind in Tamil Nadu. It could be a huge urban settlement of independent civilization on the banks of the Vaigai," said K Amarnath Ramakrishna, superintending archaeologist.

The current excavation works will go on till September this year. The excavation is lending much credence to the narrative in Sangam literature that throws

light on the ancient Tamil way of life. The literature speaks volumes about the public and personal lives of rulers and the people of Tamil Nadu some 2000 or more years ago. However, there had been no solid evidence in archaeology to support the Sangam way of life.

Madurai Kanchi, Nedunalvadayi and Paripadal in the literature speak about the Madurai and Pandya kingdoms in the region. "These books talk about the personal lives of kings and queens, their palaces and their way of life. But we could not know exactly where the city mentioned in these texts existed," says Vedachalam. ■



**Source:** [http://www.indiadinivine.org/harappa-like-site-surfaces-tamil-nadu-3000-ancient-artifacts-found/?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=all&utm\\_campaign=keeladi](http://www.indiadinivine.org/harappa-like-site-surfaces-tamil-nadu-3000-ancient-artifacts-found/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=all&utm_campaign=keeladi)

# Indus Era 8,000 Years Old, not 5,500; Ended Because of Weaker Monsoon

**KOLKATA:** It may be time to rewrite history textbooks. Scientists from IIT-Kharagpur and Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) have uncovered evidence that the Indus Valley Civilization is at least 8,000 years old, and not 5,500 years old, taking root well before the Egyptian (7000 BC to 3000 BC) and Mesopotamian (6500 BC to 3100 BC) civilizations. What's more, the researchers have found evidence of a pre-Harappan civilization that existed for at least 1,000 years before this.

The discovery, published in the prestigious 'Nature' journal on May 25, may force a global rethink on the timelines of the so-called 'cradles of civilization'. The scientists believe they also know why the civilization ended about 3,000 years ago - climate change.

"We have recovered perhaps the oldest pottery from the civilization. We used a technique called 'optically stimulated luminescence' to date pottery shards of the Early Mature Harappan time to nearly 6,000 years ago and the cultural levels of pre-Harappan Hakra phase as far back as 8,000 years," said Anindya Sarkar, head of the department of geology and geophysics at IIT-KGP.

The team had actually set out to prove that the civilization proliferated to other Indian sites like Bhirrana and Rakhigarrhi in Haryana, apart from the known locations of Harappa and Mohenjo Daro in India (now in Pakistan) and Lothal, Dholavira and Kalibangan in India. They took their dig to an unexplored site, Bhirrana - and ended up unearthing something much bigger. The excavation also yielded large quantities of animal remains like bones, teeth, horn cores of cow, goat, deer and antelope, which were put through Carbon 14 analysis to decipher antiquity and the climatic conditions in which the civilization flourished, said Arati Deshpande Mukherjee of Deccan College, which helped analyze the finds along with Physical Research Laboratory, Ahmedabad.

The researchers believe that the Indus Valley Civilization spread over a vast expanse of India - stretching to the banks of the now "lost" Saraswati river or the Ghaggar-Hakra river - but this has not been studied enough because what we know so far is based on British excavations. "At the excavation sites, we saw preservation of all cultural levels right from the pre-Indus Valley Civilization phase (9000-8000 BC) through what we have categorized as Early Harappan (8000-7000BC) to the Mature Harappan times," said Sarkar.

While the earlier phases were represented by pastoral

and early village farming communities, the mature Harappan settlements were highly urbanized with organized cities, and a much developed material and craft culture. They also had regular trade with Arabia and Mesopotamia. The Late Harappan phase witnessed large-scale de-urbanization, drop in population, abandonment of



established settlements, lack of basic amenities, violence and even the disappearance of the Harappan script, the researchers say.

"We analyzed the oxygen isotope composition in the bone and tooth phosphates of these remains to unravel the climate pattern. The oxygen isotope in mammal bones and teeth preserve the signature of ancient meteoric water and in turn the intensity of monsoon rainfall. Our study shows that the pre-Harappan humans started inhabiting this area along the Ghaggar-Hakra rivers in a climate that was favorable for human settlement and agriculture. The monsoon was much stronger between 9000 years and 7000 years from now and probably fed these rivers making them mightier with vast floodplains," explained Deshpande Mukherjee.

## Indus Valley evolved even as monsoon declined

The study revealed that monsoon started weakening 7,000 years ago but, surprisingly, the civilization did not disappear.

The Indus Valley people were very resolute and flexible and continued to evolve even in the face of declining monsoon. The people shifted their crop patterns from large-grained cereals like wheat and barley during the early part of intensified monsoon to drought-resistant species like rice in the latter part. As the yield diminished, the organized large storage system of the Mature Harappan period gave way to more individual household-based crop processing and storage systems that acted as a catalyst for the de-urbanization of the civilization rather than an abrupt collapse, they say. ■



## Role of women in Society: I

By Ashani Sharma

# Women in the Middle East

*Throughout history, women have faced discrimination in various ways solely based on their gender. The world has greatly progressed since the dark ages to where women now have equal rights under the law...Right? Things are not quite what they seem, and this is only partially true. In fact, even in the U.S., women still continue to face hardships in comparison to men in the workplace and even on the street. This article is the first part of a three part series written by young women in high school exploring the role of women in various parts of the world. Part I focuses on the lives of women in the Middle East.*

To the Western world, all the countries in the Middle East oppress their women and treat them in an inhumane manner. Some people even believe that Islam and the Qur'an are the root of this hatred. The truth is a little more complicated than this stark narrative however. Despite what the media often shows, there is so much more to the lives of Middle Eastern women than the Western eye can see, especially in terms of education, underlying tradition, and gender inequality.

The region has a rich and diverse history that predates the introduction of Islam. Not too long ago, women had equal access to education. In fact the first modern university, the University of Al-Karaouine, was founded by Fatima al-Fihiri, a Muslim woman. The prophet Muhammad himself respected women and laid out the guidelines for a society where women could be educated, earn a living, and own property by themselves. This is what we now know as the Golden Age of Islam where several female scholars, poets, and physicians emerged and could be respected members of society. The Middle East as a whole was a place where science and mathematics flourished even as the Western world was

still mired in the Dark Ages. One may then ask what happened to this progressive society.

The decline can be traced to the invasions in the 11th century by the Turks that were further exacerbated by the Mongol invasion in the 13th century. The rich cultures and traditions of the Arabs went into decline, and the region lapsed into a tribal society where women disappeared from the public eye and became largely home bound. Boys, on the other hand, continued to be educated, but the focus shifted from science and math to religion and the Qur'an. This transformation continued till the 19th century when American missionaries started their forays into current day Egypt, Lebanon, and Palestine to spread

Christianity as well as educate the population. This led to relatively progressive societies in these countries where women were educated and enjoyed freedoms that were not available to their counterparts in more traditional Islamic societies.

Coming to the 21st century, the disparity continues to exist in the Arab world. For example, on one end of the spectrum lies Saudi Arabia, where gender segregation is the norm and males and females attend segregated schools all the way from kindergarten to college. While women make up 60% of the college enrollment in Saudi Arabia, they are mainly restricted to the area of education. Along with this, they are required to wear burkas and niqabs and not allowed to drive or go about the town without a male relative escorting them.

Women in Tunisia on the other hand, can attend mixed colleges and generally adopt a Western style of dress. This kind of diversity within the region has led to a very interesting dichotomy that defies the simplistic generalization of all Middle Eastern women being backward. As a whole, a higher percentage of women in the Middle East are pursuing degrees in the area of science and engineering than in the U.S. This information challenges the paradigm of women being homemakers. Educated women are steadily stepping up to their male counterparts forcing them to reevaluate their traditional roles. Frustratingly however, many of these women have trouble finding husbands as several men still prefer less educated women who will take care of the home and bear children. They also face discrimination for jobs and in the workplace.

Although the illiteracy rates for women are still higher in some areas than others, we must keep in mind that these numbers take into account rural, nomadic, and



*One of the first modern university, Al-Karaouine was founded by Fatima al Fihiri, a Muslim woman.*

impoverished societies where women lack the opportunity for education. Slowly but surely, this gap is narrowing as more women are setting up systems that will help and allow other women to receive an education. Such efforts are gathering support from the population and progressive leaders in the region. As a whole, education is the key to improving the gender gap by providing women information and tools for sustenance.

Poverty greatly influences this gap between males and females. A poor family when faced with limited resources and a choice of educating their son or daughter, will inevitably and logically choose to educate the male. While the males will continue on with their education, it is not uncommon for a girl to already be cooking, washing the dishes and clothes and taking care of younger siblings by the time she is in her teens. These males will then go on to work and support their families while the girls will just end up getting married and providing for her husband's family and parents in such poorer, nomadic regions see less cause for celebration when they have a daughter instead of the son they crave.

Several traditional and rural families even hold the idea that if a woman is just going to grow up, have kids and cook and clean then she really does not need an education. While this is different from prevailing Western norms, we must respect their viewpoint. In our rush to judge, we must not forget that different does not necessarily mean deficient. Women themselves might not want to deviate from their traditional roles and while some might crave a different life style, others might be very contented with their current status.

This also applies to cultural practices like wearing a burka, which the Qur'an does not clearly advocate. In fact,

covering women has been traditional in other societies as well in the past. The

Qur'an calls for both men and women to lower their gaze and preserve their modesty. The practice of Islam also varies greatly within the religion and is open to interpretation by scholars who run the gamut from liberal to extremely conservative.

Oftentimes, more conservative Middle Eastern people believe that the reason for the prevalence of societal issues such as divorce and adultery in Western society is the freedom and such free will of those women. In their view, if women listened and obeyed their male relatives such issues would not arise. An example of such inequality would be how in Yemen, women are only considered 'half' a witness in court, not even counted as a whole person when compared

to a man which is absolutely absurd. In areas such as Saudi Arabia and Morocco, the tables are sometimes turned on rape victims and result in them being charged with the crime of adultery while the man goes scot free. Recently, in Saudi Arabia, a 16 year old Amina Filali was ordered by the judge to marry her rapist. She saw no recourse to save herself from this fate and committed suicide.

Looking at what goes on in some of these countries one cannot help but wonder, "What year is it?" The backward ideas of some Middle Eastern countries impact their economic and social development drastically. How can any country progress while holding back half its population? With the Arab Spring however, change is coming to even the most restrictive societies. Just last year, women won the right to vote in Saudi Arabia, leaving Vatican City to be the last country where women do not have the right to vote. In fact, the majority of countries in the Middle East are improving greatly in terms of education, forming more equal societies. This gives way for the start of a new, more equal, unprejudiced era while providing everlasting hope of change to the millions of women stuck in societies of the past. ■

### *About the Author*

**Ashani Sharma**

*is a 15 year old rising 10th grader from Woodward Academy. This paper was originally written for her Modern World History term paper. Ashani enjoys writing about current issues such as this and would hope to continue with her writing in the near future. She also has a passion for music and loves to sing and write in that field as well. The original paper has been edited to fit the format of this publication.*



# Refutation of Sheldon Pollock on Sanskrit and *sanskriti* by Rajiv Malhotra

*By Shrinivas Tilak*

In my review of *The Battle For Sanskrit* (HarperCollins 2015) in *Hindu Vishva* (January-March 2016), I discussed author Rajiv Malhotra's fair and faithful presentation and rigorous examination (*Purvapaksha*) of Professor Sheldon Pollock's allegations that Sanskrit is dead, politically motivated, and socially oppressive. In this follow up article I present Rajiv Malhotra's (hereafter RM) spirited and energetic refutation (*Uttara paksha*) of Professor Pollock (hereafter Pollock) in the form of *nirnyas* (considered verdicts or decisions) delivered on points of order pertaining to Sanskrit and *sanskriti* raised in Pollock's various writings: *Nirnaya* on Sanskrit and *Prakrit*, *Nirnaya* on *Shruti*, *Nirnaya* on *Kavya* and *Shastra*, *Nirnaya* on Sanskrit and *Sanskriti*, *Nirnaya* on American Orientalism.

## **Nirnaya on Sanskrit and Prakrit**

Agreeing with Pollock that Vedic Sanskrit was used mainly for ritual purposes, RM explains in his 'The Battle For Sanskrit' (hereafter TBFS) that a simplified form of Sanskrit nevertheless served as a basis for languages derived from *Prakrit* and spoken by ordinary people. Sanskrit has always functioned as a meta-language for these languages (RM rejects Pollock's use of 'vernaculars' for languages derived from *Prakrit*) facilitating a bi-directional flow between the two. This interaction has



remained a continued source of decentralized and open architecture encompassing unity and diversity in India. Sanskrit has also acted as the template of *sanskriti* with its various *angas* (limbs)--architecture, dance, theatre, sculpture, poetry, etc. Rejecting them in favor of modern, westernized cultural practices as demanded by

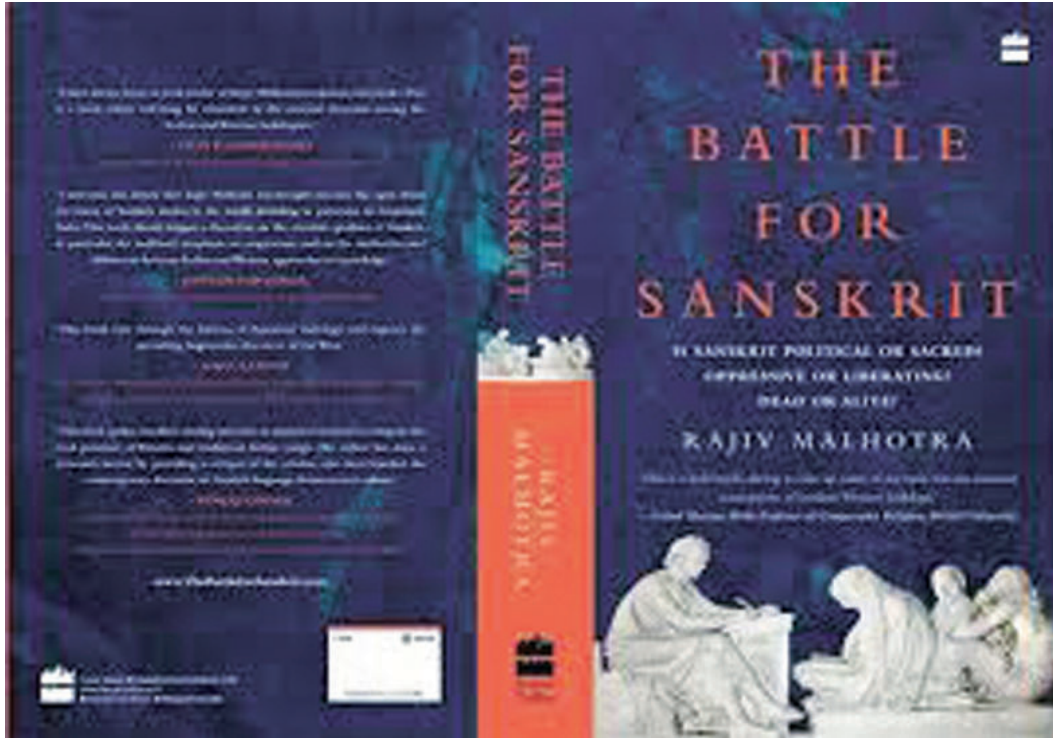
Pollock would alienate Hindus/ Indians from their traditional roots. Furthermore, Sanskrit has made available its rich vocabulary for engaging in discourse in sciences and in other fields that are meaningful and necessary in everyday life activities (natural sciences, mathematics, linguistics, medicine, ethics, and political thought). RM laments that Pollock fails to acknowledge this power and potential of Sanskrit. Merchants and monks who travelled long distances for trade and commerce were able to engage in conversations, debates, and lectures with locals spreading in the process Sanskrit (and

often some *Prakrit*-derived languages) across India and beyond. Since Vedic metaphysics held a deeper place in the lives of people it was replicated in different places with local geographies and kingdoms substituted in place of those mentioned in such source texts as the *Ramayana*.

## **Nirnaya on Shruti**

RM vigorously contests Pollock's

suggestion that *mantras*, being in some cases meaningless in the conventional sense, could be discarded because such action would amount to rejecting the important place the concept of *vaccum* has in Hindu cosmology. Such a step would entail loss of a key



*adhyatmika* (inner science of self) resource. Chanting of mantras has also been an integral part in the performance of *yajna*, which plays a significant role in social cohesion. Discarding the practice of chanting mantras in *yajna* or in meditation as demanded by Pollock would result in loss of the integrative power of traditional rituals of Hindus rendering them more intellectually dependent on (and subservient to) the West.

RM further clarifies that chanting of *mantras* from the *Shrutis*, as part of meditative practices, serves a useful purpose for the sound vibrations (*spanda* or *spandana*) that are produced are beyond (or above) the limited literal or conceptual meanings Pollock associates with them. *Spanda* is the dynamic aspect of *shakti*, the energy of Shiva, the supreme Self. In Hinduism *spanda* is not a fantasy or a merely philosophical concept, it can be experienced and felt directly as expounded in the *SpandaKarikas*, a classic text of Kashmir Shaivism, from the 10th century CE attributed to Vasugupta.

#### Nirnaya on Kavya and Shastra

While Pollock deliberately breaks *shastras* from *kavya* in his deliberations, RM takes them together following the traditional convention. While acknowledging that the *kavya* and *shastra* are two distinct types of works he insists that this distinction is only a heuristic device and not a clear-cut or absolute boundary as posited by Pollock. Indeed, many *kavyas*

demonstrate keen awareness of knowledge of various types from *shastras*. Conversely, *shastras* are often expressed in a poetic format and often display an excellent literary quality. Indeed, Sanskrit spread through its cultural applications via such *shastras* as ayurveda, astrology, philosophy, mathematics, and performing arts. Pollock selectively quotes from one chapter of Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* as an example of the politicization of Sanskrit *kavya*. Had he added the traditional Indic lens to his gaze, observes RM, Pollock would have recognized that Hindus appreciate such works for their aesthetics independently of (or in addition to) any political motive or framework. Pollock talks about Bilhana's *Vikram Ankadevacarita*, in the eleventh century, as another example of political *kavya*. But he does not mention Bilhana's *Caurapanchashika* (The Love Thief), which is appreciated for its romantic aesthetic. One should also consider the reproduction of Ramayana in Tamil (twelfth century, by Kamban) and in Avadhi (sixteenth century, by Tulsidas) as non-political *kavyas* expressive of *bhakti* (TBFS endnote # 263).

#### Nirnaya on Sanskrit and Sanskriti

RM allocates key chapters of TBFS to controvert Pollock and company's sinister attempts to break Sanskrit away from *sanskriti*. Sanskrit is better studied, he argues, using traditional methods and models that are compatible with its function both as a language of rituals and sacred discourses as well as worldly matters. He denies Pollock's charge that traditional Sanskrit



scholars are averse to the critical study of Sanskrit or to using tools of philology, cognitive science and history developed for this purpose.

People of India or Southeast Asia did not approach Sanskrit exclusively through the lens of politics; rather, they saw it in the context of cultural practices and spiritual realization. This is in conformity with ongoing Indic ethos-an interconnected network of Sanskrit, *sanskriti*, and *dharma*. As to Pollock's charge that women in India are/were denied access to Sanskrit; the fact is that women have internalized Sanskrit, and for many of them, the intimacy with it is based on oral culture rather than written materials. While Pollock et al think of Sanskrit as a 'religious' language, it is fascinating to find out that Indian women have preserved the oral and worldly dimension of Sanskrit to this day.

In Chapter seven of TBFS ('The Web of *Sanskriti* as a Potential Alternative Hypothesis') RM presents the 'web of *sanskriti*' as an alternative approach to the notion of Sanskrit cosmopolis put forth by Pollock in order to demonstrate how grass-roots spirituality can play a meaningful role in the spread of languages and culture. In Chapter ten ('The Re-colonization of Indian Minds') RM suggests ways of correcting the distorted perceptions of Sanskrit, *sanskriti*, and *dharma* that have spread beyond academia into media, industry leadership, government, and even among many traditional centers of Sanskrit learning (*pithas*) in contemporary India.

After foiling Pollock's attempt to divide and set the people of India against each other through agency of the caste system RM is at pains to point out that select elements of Vedic metaphysics, the web of *sanskriti*, and the Sanskrit language could be replicated in different places because they enjoyed a deep place of respect in the hearts and lives of local populations. Sanskrit and its texts expressed the fabric of cosmic reality and Indians (kings, brahmins, merchants, or farmers) were naturally drawn and inspired to explore, discover, share, and celebrate the manifestation of this reality in their personal and social lives.

#### **Nirnaya on American Orientalism**

Pollock's call to 'liberation philology' (designed on the lines of a movement called 'liberation theology' that challenged Roman Catholic collusion with oppression in the nineteen-sixties and seventies) for secularizing Sanskrit is an important plank of American orientalism. RM strenuously objects to this allusion because it obscures a significant difference between Pollock's 'liberation philology' and liberation theology, which was

a movement internal to Christianity and fully accepting of its fundamental principles. Indeed, this latter was largely a call for a return to these principles. However, Pollock rejects the Vedic roots of the Sanskrit tradition altogether and regards them as no more than relics of primitive thinking or attempts to blind people to their oppression. Furthermore, his liberation philology seriously misrepresents the texts it purports to illuminate, and distorts both the evidence and the function of these texts in the lives of real people, both in the past and the present.

As an alternative to Pollock's 'liberation philology,' RM proposes what he calls a 'sacred philology,' [I would prefer to call it 'sadhana philology'] a philology rooted in the conviction that Sanskrit cannot be divorced from its matrix in the Vedas and Upanishads or from its orientation towards the transcendent realm. RM's proposed alternative is quite different from the stance of the Western, secular academy that Pollock represents because sacred philology would involve a respect for and a practice of *tapasya* and meditation that constitutes the basis of all four *dharmic* pathways to liberation originating in India (i.e. Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism) (TBFS282-283).

After a fair and faithful depiction and scrutiny of Professor Pollock's views on Sanskrit, i.e. *Purvapaksha* without bias (*puravgraha* or *pakshapata*) and their refutation (*Uttara paksha*) Rajiv Malhotra provides his own well thought out and crafted plan to preserve and promote Sanskrit and *sanskriti* (to be discussed in a subsequent issue of Hindu Vishva). ■

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