

patrika

the voice of the Hindu Centre, Singapore



Hindu Centre
Jnana - Bhakti - Seva

December 2013- February 2014

President's Message

Namaste Friends and Supporters of Hindu Centre!



Hindu Centre has now taken on many new initiatives this year. Recently, we completed the very first Hindu Marriage Preparation course for Hindus, together with HEB and Marriage Central. Over 4 weekends, six couples who had planned to get wedded, spent their Saturday afternoons with our two facilitators going through a well-planned workshop. At the end of the 4 sessions, there was a mock wedding generously arranged at Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple by HEB and SSPT, where all the mantras and proceedings were explained.

Now the next initiative is a Holy *Yatra* (pilgrimage) to holy sites in North India for ten days from end-May. This issue of Patrika is dedicated to this upcoming event. You can read not only about the proposed pilgrimage but also some interesting information about the places to be visited.

So come and register to join us on this wonderful spiritual journey, which will include talks, yoga and meditation as we travel to various ashrams and temples.

Enjoy reading!

N Varaprasad
President, HC

In Focus

Interview with Prof A N Rao

In this interview, Prof. A N Rao, a founder member of the Hindu Centre, shared with us some fascinating stories about the conceptualization of Hindu Centre and its early years. Among other things, he spoke of the overwhelming enthusiasm of the Indian community in those years to explore and communicate the meaning of Hindu way of life to all who were interested, particularly to the younger generation.

What was the main idea behind forming a religious centre for Hindus in Singapore?

I came to Singapore in 1960 and met a local Indian who was struggling to get a job. He had a doctoral degree from London but could not get a job here. After years of struggle, he joined the education service and gradually rose to become a school principal. He was the one who attracted me to do something for the Hindus in Singapore.

During this time, I was interested in the talks of Swamijis who came to Singapore. In November 1962, Swami Chinmayananda came to Singapore. At that time, part of Chinmaya Mission was in Norris Road. It had a good library. I attended his talk. I was a volunteer, and helped out with

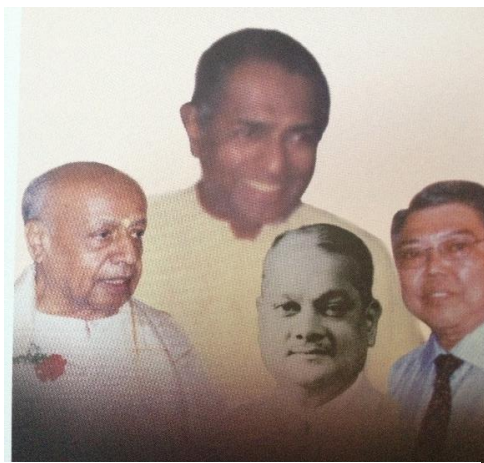
organizing talks, arranging meetings.

We used to type the information about talks and cyclostyle them for distribution. We could also use the space for our discussions about Hinduism. My active association with Hinduism started around this time.

In the 1960s and 70s, there were lots of Christian activities going on. Our Hindu boys and girls were drawn towards it, because Hinduism as projected by the temples focussed on rituals, and did not answer the questions that they had. When they were confronted by questions that they couldn't answer, the youth were frustrated. So, they were more or less pleased to join Christianity rather than challenge it. This was the starting point.



Prof A N Rao and Mrs. Shyamala Rao



Some founder members of Hindu Centre

We thought we should give some suitable suggestions to address the issue. From 1973 to 1976, we discussed this issue many times and finally, in 1977, we thought of establishing a Centre. The first meeting of the founders to form an organization was held at my place. It was attended by Dr V K Pillay, Prof R Kanagasuntheram, Prof P N Natarajan, Mr A Krishnamoorthy, Mr V Krishna, Dr V S Rajan, Dr T P Paran, Dr. P N Unni, Mr Sachinthanathan and myself.

We didn't have an office for our organization. Dr V K Pillai, a leading orthopaedic surgeon, took the initiative. We used his clinic as a venue to meet and discuss our ideas. Soon, Mr. Satpal Khattar, Mr. Rajendran, myself and some other people decided that we should have a formal inaugural meeting. I arranged for a meeting at the National University of Singapore where I taught. I remember the meeting was in LT 4 at the Bukit Timah Campus. Late Senior Minister, Mr. Rajaratnam, gave a talk to a gathering of around 100 people. We outlined the objectives of our organization. About thirty to forty people became members that very day and donated to the organization. Dr T P Paran became the first Chairman. We used to meet every month to discuss the possible activities of the Centre. Much of what we did can be found in the older issues of Omkara, the magazine that we started and published for about ten years. Omkara ceased publication in the 1990s due to lack of finance.

Where did the finances for the Centre come from?

Dr. Pillai was the main man. He would go around collecting money from established foundations like Shaw Foundation and Lee Foundation. We had the moral support of Mr Rajaratnam. We had a small subscription fee. We didn't have an office. All of us were volunteers. We didn't have many expenses. It was started and managed due to the overwhelming support of like-minded people.

What were some of the early highlights of the Centre?

The international conference on Hinduism in 1988 organized by Hindu Centre in Singapore. The topic was "Hinduism in Changing Societies". It was attended by over 400 people. Swami Chinmayananda was the keynote speaker. Former President of Singapore, Mr Devan Nair, was also one of the speakers.



The Centre was the focal organization that supported the activities of organizations like Chinmaya Mission, Sadu Vaswani centre, Gita Jayanthi Celebrations, Mata Amritanandamayi, Krishna our Guide and some others. Lee foundation gave us \$ 200,000 and we gave \$ 50,000 to Krishna our Guide with which they bought a small place. We also had scholarship money of \$6000 to \$8000 per year. Once in a year, we used to announce available scholarships for uniforms, books, and transport for school going children. We used to give away 30 to 40 scholarships. At that time, Singapore Indian Education Society also gave scholarships. We transferred part of our scholarship money to them. Later we gave the money to SINDA for the same purpose.



Hindu Centre was also the significant agency to organize lectures by various Swamijis and spiritual leaders. Swami Chimayananda, Dada Vaswani, Mata Amritanandamayi,



Moraridas Prabhudas Hariyani, Satguru Ganapati Sachidananda were some well-known spiritual leaders invited during this time.



We also had bhajans, celebrations of festivals and other cultural activities.

The main purpose was to propagate Hinduism in a co-ordinated way. The focus was always on education. We wanted a centre place for all Hindus.

Did it happen?

No. There is a sectarian attitude amongst us. We have the temple, pooja, the priest. Many don't want to go beyond this.

We have never emphasized the ritualistic aspect of Hinduism. There are a very few people who can understand the essence of Hinduism. Of the three essences of Hinduism-*gnana*, *bhakti*, *seva*-the last one is easier to understand. It involves participation and action.

Gnana-how many people can we attract with 'I am Brahmasmi'? What is the highest thing? God is there. We don't know his personality, his address. In Hinduism, there were only five gods before-the natural elements. They made the sixth one. Indra. He was the highest. Rudram's third section reminds us of his higher position.

Today, there are fifty thousand gods.

Bhakti- we attend rituals of pooja. We keep kalasam, do abishegam. Why? What is special about it? Ask anyone, and we may not get an answer.

The Centre is in a difficult position. At present, it is difficult to gather people. In those days, we were the only religious centre. Now it has become extremely difficult.

We should get people who are really interested in understanding the essence of Hinduism. What is the concept of God in Hinduism? What are the implications of so many practices we have got? We should try to analyse the idealistic aspects of these practices.

Is the Centre not already doing this?

Yes, but in a small way. We have to devise something to inspire more people into understanding the significance of our customs and practices. Begin at the beginning. Why do we worship? This is the starting point. Foundation has to be strong.

We live in the age of the internet. Without the internet we cannot breathe. Soon we will begin to do pooja on the internet. It had become more and more mechanical. Doing without understanding. There is no communication taking place.

When we started, some of the founder members did not know anything about Hinduism. They came to learn, understand and propagate. At present, the community is going away from the basics of Hinduism. The community must come to the Centre, not go away.

You are a Botanist. Tell us something about the relation between Science and Religion.

There are many things Science is unable to explain. There is something above rational understanding and it must be given a name. For example, the idea of reincarnation has been challenged but not proved wrong.





“Indriya gnanam is agyanam”: what we know through our organs is limited. Einstein we thought was God. But years later, his theories were proved wrong. The Absolute is something else. Scientific knowledge is limited. To understand God, we need to go beyond. Meditation can bring us closer to God. Sit quietly and think about it.

What is Atma? For Buddha, there was no God. Only Shunya. Consciousness. But for many people, Buddha became the form through which this Consciousness can be seen. Bhakti Yoga is the beginning. But the main point lies beyond that. Understand this.

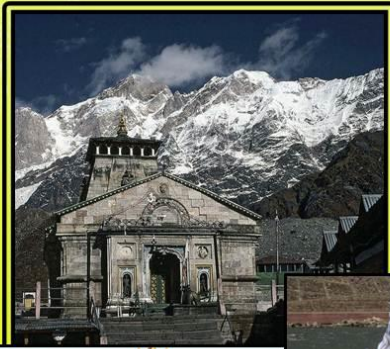
Mark your calendar

North India Himalaya Yatra in June 2014

The Hindu Centre is organizing a pilgrimage tour of the four prime spots for pilgrims in North India:

-  Haridwar,
-  Rishikesh,
-  Badrinath
-  Kedarnath

DEPARTING 1ST JUNE 2014 (12 DAYS)



North India Himalaya Yatra


Organised by
HINDU CENTRE SINGAPORE

Once in a life time trip
to Devbhumi: Rishikesh,
Haridwar, Badrinath &
Kedarnath!



**Approx \$2,400*
per person**

Register your interest
with the Hindu Centre
today!

Email: edu@hinducentre.org.sg
Find us at www.hinducentre.org.sg &
www.facebook.com/hinducentresg



* Final cost may change depending on air fares



Read More about Haridwar and Rishikesh in this issue!

Highlights of Yatra

- International Flight + Domestic India Flight + Helicopter plus food and accomodation included in unbeatable price!
- Visits to Rishikesh/Haridwar & it's famous temples/ashrams & aarti ceremonies!
- Visit legendary Kedarnath(helicopter) & Badrinath
- Sight seeing of Badri vicinity associated with Mahabharata!
- Experience a stay in a traditional ashram
- Visit the Northern Adi Shankara Math of Joshimath
- River rafting in the Ganges
- Hindu learnings along the trip
- Shopping in Delhi

Haridwar literally means the doorway to God!

Situated on the banks of the Holy Ganges, Haridwar is home to many temples and ghats.

Amongst the prime spots, there is Bharat Mata temple, which houses pictures of great men from Hindu mythology.

Chandi Devi temple and Mansa Devi temple are situated on hilltops and can be accessed through '*udan khatola*' (the rope carriages)



Udan Khatola or the Rope Carriage

Saptarishi Ashram



Saptharishi Ashram is an enchanting ashram situated on the very spot from where the Holy Ganges diverges into seven separate streams.

Shanti Kunj ashram is another hotspot for pilgrims. This ashram is dedicated to Yoga and Naturopathy.

Rishikesh is the gateway to the Himalayan shrines of Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri and Yamunotri. It is from Rishikesh that the Holy Ganges leaves the mountainous terrains and enters the vast plains of Northern India.

Rishikesh is the spot where millions of pilgrims come to renounce their material desires.



Holy Dip in the Ganges

Many believe that a dip in the Ganges will wash away sins committed knowingly or unknowingly.

Over the years, Rishikesh has also become well-known for schools for yoga and meditation.



Vishnu carved out of a single Saligrama

Rishikesh is also home to the twelfth-century Bharat Mandir, believed to have been built by the Aadiguru Shankaracharya. This temple is dedicated to Vishnu, the preserver of life, whose form is carved out of a single Saligrama in this shrine.



Saligrama stone

Triveni Ghat is another famous spot in Rishikesh. Known as a site for the confluence of the rivers, Ganga, Jamuna and Saraswati, it attracts many pilgrims who take a dip in the holy waters.



Triveni Ghat



Ganga Aarthi at this Ghat is very popular!

Ganga Aarthi at Triveni Ghat

Geetha Bhavan, a very old temple complex in Rishikesh is a very famous site because stories from The Ramayana and The Mahabharatha are inscribed on its walls!

Another significant place is the Raghunath temple dedicated to Lord Rama and his wife Sita. The temple is situated next to a pond that is believed to be holy. The reflection of the temple in the pond is a breath-taking sight!



Lakshman Jhoola –The suspension bridge built in 1839.

Read the next Patrika for features on Badrinath and Kedarnath...

Mitra: Religious Counselling

**THE HINDU
COMMUNITY
NEEDS YOU!
YOU CAN
MAKE A
DIFFERENCE.**

Hindu Centre MITRA Programme

The Hindu Centre Mitra programme is recruiting volunteers for its Hindu religious counselling programme. The focus at this point is on penal and juvenile institutions.

A briefing for those interested to volunteer in the programme was held on 22nd February and 1st March, 2014.

Due to overwhelming response to the programme, a third briefing has been fixed for **5th April, 2014, 2.30 pm at the Centre.**

If you are Singapore Citizen or Permanent Resident, over twenty-five years of age, and interested in attending the briefing, please email to mitra@hinducentre.org.sg by 2 April 2014.

Forum on Hinduism

Have you always had many unanswered questions on the numerous gods and goddesses Hinduism speaks of?

Are you confused about how and to what extent rituals should form a part of our daily prayers? Are you keen to know more about teachings of revered gurus of Hinduism?

Mark your calendar for the following event @ Hindu Centre. Date: **29th March, 2014.**

The image displays three vertical posters for a forum on Hinduism. The left poster, titled 'Misconceptions of Hinduism', discusses common misunderstandings about the religion and includes a decorative Om symbol. The middle poster, titled 'The Burning Questions!', lists several common queries about Hinduism, such as the number of gods, the role of gurus, and the future of the religion. The right poster, titled 'IDOLS, RITUALS & GURUS Is that it?', invites people to bring a friend and spend a Saturday evening discussing these topics. All three posters provide contact information for the Hindu Centre, including a telephone number, email, website, and physical address in Singapore.

Misconceptions of Hinduism

All of us have so many questions about Hinduism, a religion which is claimed to be confusing, complex, ritualistic and not for modern times.

The truth about Hinduism is far from this perception. Instead, it is a complete religion which makes sense of everything. From God to the Universe to Who I really am!

Come and ask your questions and have all your doubts cleared!

The Burning Questions!

Are you confused by the many gods and goddesses in Hinduism?

Why are there so many gurus and swamis? Which one should I follow?

Are Hindus being converted?

How do I reply to my non-Hindu friends?

Is Hinduism the religion of the future or the past?

IDOLS, RITUALS & GURUS Is that it?

Bring a friend, spend a Saturday evening with us talking about Hinduism!

**29Mar14
6.30pm@Hindu Centre
ALL ARE WELCOME**

Hindu Centre
Jnana • Bhakti • Seva

Telephone 62918540
Email: hinducentre@singnet.com.sg
<https://www.facebook.com/hinducentre.sg>

132 Owen Road Singapore 218935
(Near Farrer Park MRT)

For updates on the Centre's regular programmes and activities, please visit Hindu Centre's website.

Update of Centre Activities

Educom: Marriage Workshop

The Hindu Endowments Board (HEB) and the Hindu Centre (HC) came together in partnership to conduct a Marriage Preparation Program for Hindus. This program was supported by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF).

In current times, programmes about marriage are available for the Christian and Muslim communities, and the couples who have attended these sessions have shared the many experiences and benefits that have surfaced in strengthening their relationships both before and after marriage. With the current trend of more couples across the board eager to gain insights into enhancing their marriages through upstream platforms, both the HEB and the HC created a program that supports MSF's "Love Notes," with the infusion of Hinduism.



Marriage workshop

The marriage of Love Notes (a secular program) and Hindu perspectives allowed the couples to venture further into developing and enriching their marital journey.

The programme was a part of Educom and was held in the month of February @ Indian Association, Balestier Road.

All persons involved in volunteers who had the heart and wanted to embarking on their



this programme were best interest of Community at give a jump start to couples marital journey.

The program comprised 4 sessions (1.5hrs) and there was a 5th optional session where couples witnessed a mock wedding to better understand the rituals in a Hindu wedding. This was conducted at a Hindu Endowment Board temple.

Shivarathiri Celebrations

The Hindu Centre celebrated Maha Shivaratri on February 27-February 28 (7 pm Thursday - 6 am Friday).

The night's line-up included bhajans, group activities, and the observations of the four kaala pujas. There was also a talk on the "Glory of the Sacred Ash".



Vibhuti (Holy Ash) abhishegam

There were special prayers for the sick and those recovering from illnesses after every kaala puja.

Festive Season: special article on *Thai Pongal*

‘Thai pirandhaal vazhi pirakkum’ is a saying in Tamil which when paraphrased means, the birth of the Tamil month, *‘Thai’*, brings prosperity, peace and happiness in everyone’s lives. The first day of that month is celebrated as *Pongal*, which is an occasion for thanksgiving to the Sun God, *Surya*, and the Rain God, *Varuna*, for blessing all the farmers with a bountiful harvest and also praying for the same in the coming year.

Pongal is a harvest festival which is of great significance in an agricultural country like India. It is the most important festival in the southern state of Tamil Nadu although it is celebrated all over the country on the same day. There are slight regional differences in the way it is called or celebrated across the country, but the factors which remain common to the festivities in all parts of the country are the bonfires and the feasts.

Pongal in Tamil Nadu

Pongal is a word derived from the Tamil word *pongu* which means 'boiling over'. The significance of which is the belief that, just like the pot boiling over, happiness and prosperity will also swell and boil over in everyone's lives. It is celebrated for four days, starting from the last day of the Tamil month of *Margazhi* and ending on the third day of the month of *Thai*.



The first day of the festival is called *Bhogi*, and is dedicated to Lord *Indra*. It is an occasion when the whole house is cleaned up and all old and useless things are discarded and a bonfire is lit signifying getting rid of the old and welcoming a new beginning from that day. Homes are decorated with '*Kolam*' and '*Rangoli*' art forms done with rice powder and multi-colour powders which are believed to bring prosperity to the household.

The second day is called *Thai Pongal* and is the first day of the Tamil month '*Thai*'. Early on this day, milk and rice cooked together is allowed to overflow to signify the literal meaning of the word Pongal. When the rice and milk overflow everyone in the household chants '*Pongalo Pongal*' three times. *Sarkkarai Pongal*, a rice pudding made with milk and jaggery is the special dish prepared on this day.

The third day of the festival is called *Maattu Pongal*, when the cattle are worshipped for playing a significant role in the farmers' lives. On this day the horns of cows and bulls are painted in bright colors, and decorated with ribbons and flowers. The decorated cattle is then taken in a procession.

Another important feature of this day would be the '*jalli kattu*' which is the South Indian version of a bullfight. It is an occasion for young men to show off their strength by wrestling with bulls and pinning them to the ground. The winners take the prize money tied to their horns.

The fourth day is *Kanum Pongal* and traditionally on this day people visit their relatives and pay their respects to the elders in the family circle. Many also go sight-seeing to have fun and relaxation on this day.

Maharashtra

In Maharashtra, January 14 is celebrated as a festival of *Makar Sankranti*, and is marked by the flying of kites. On this day, people exchange homemade delicacies like til (sesame seeds) and *gur* (jaggery) laddoos.



Gujarat

Gujarat too celebrates Pongal as *Makar Sankranti* and here too kite-flying is a major event on this day. Kites of numerous colours, shapes and sizes adorn the skies of Gujarat during this festival. The International Kite Festival is held at the capital city Ahmedabad on January 14 usually to coincide with the festival of *Uttarayan* or Makar Sankranti.

Uttar Pradesh

Uttar Pradesh celebrates Makar Sankranti with a big *mela* or fair organized at the Triveni Sangam in Allahabad. Many kite-flying competitions are also held across the state as part of the festivities.

Andhra Pradesh

Andhra Pradesh celebrates Bhogi the day preceding Sankranti and Kanumu the day after, quite similar to Tamil Nadu. Pongal made with rice, milk and jaggery is an important dish in the festival here as well.

Karnataka

In the state of Karnataka too the festival is called 'Sankranti' and the sweet rice pudding 'Pongal' is made and shared among families and friends.

Kerala

Makar Sankranti is a very important day for many in Kerala but especially so for the *Sabarimala* pilgrims. On this day during the evening pooja, a multitude of pilgrims arrive at this hill temple just to watch the divine occurrence of a bright light on the horizon known as the *Makara Jothi*.

Pongal in Singapore



Pongal is an important festival in Singapore, which has a large South Indian population. Although it is celebrated with splendor by mostly the Tamils here, many from other nationalities also look forward to the various fun activities associated with this festival.

Festive look in Campbell lane

During this period of celebrations, Little India sparkles with colourful lights and ornamental decorations adorning the whole area and giving it a festive ambience. The *Pongal Sandhai* (Pongal village bazaar) which is set up along Campbell Lane is an integral part of the celebrations every year during this festival. Stalls displaying everything related to the festival of Pongal, like mud pots, Rangoli colour powders, turmeric and ginger roots, sweets and savouries, flowers, jewellery and so on, can be seen throughout the stretch of this lane.



Little India during Pongal celebrations

There are also various cultural activities organized in this area, both to entertain as well as educate people about the festival of Pongal. Cows and calves are brought from the Zoo and there is photo taking with them. Kolam-drawing and Pongal-making competitions and also dances and dramas are put up to celebrate this festival every year.

Rashmi Sundar

VolunteerSpeak



Ambiga Ganesan

I have been a volunteer with the Hindu Centre since 2007. I first got introduced to the centre by Deva, the then youth wing president, when I sought his advice on a project related to Hinduism.

The first activity I was involved in was the youth camp and thereafter, I took on the Diploma in Hinduism. My seven years in the centre have been nothing short of life changing. I have learnt much more in these seven years than I have in all my years as a Hindu and have found that much more meaning in all that I do.

I hope to now reach out to the Hindu youths in Singapore through Balagurukulam classes so that more can benefit the way I have.

For Enquiries/Registration:

Tel: 62918540 (Hindu Centre)

SMS Registration: 8533 0667

edu@hinducentre.org.sg

Please visit our website (<http://www.hinducentre.org.sg/>) or

Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/hinducentresg>)
for further details.

The Hindu Centre, Singapore, is dedicated to the spiritual progress of Hindus through the three pillars of **Jnana**, **Bhakti**, and **Seva**. The Centre's vision is to become an institution of authority on Hinduism in the region by teaching the core values of Hinduism, creating a strong hub of devotional activities with a good outreach of attendees, and through strong and sustainable Seva initiatives. The Centre hopes to strengthen the induction and management of youth volunteers by creating a greater sense of ownership and engagement at different levels in the management of these programmes.

Drop us a note to patrika@hinducentre.org.sg if you want to tell us what more you would like to see in your "Patrika"!

Please forward this newsletter to all your friends and relatives!