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INDIA WEST

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THIS WEEK

Natwar Singh Steps Aside

\$45M Hindu Temple Opened in Delhi

India's Muslim president, its Sikh prime minister and a Hindu nationalist opposition leader have opened the \$45-million Swaminarayan Akshardham Temple.



A24

Dilip Banerjee's Photo Exhibit Held

An exhibit of photographs by photojournalist Dilip Banerjee opened recently at the Center for South Asia Studies here at the University of



California. Thanks to the Internet, his photograph of a man on a bullock cart talking on a cell phone has traveled the world over, gracing magazines and traveling by email.

A26

'Festival of Lights' At Great America

Families from across the San Francisco Bay Area enjoyed a brilliant fall day at Paramount's Great



America Nov. 5 and celebrated Diwali with music and fireworks at the sixth annual Festival of Lights organized by the Federation of Indo-American Associations of the Bay Area.

B1

Amritraj Scores Another First



Producer Ashok Amritraj scored another first Oct. 21 when two of his films — *Dreamer* and *Shopgirl* —

opened in theaters, the former scoring big at the box office and the latter garnering the best reviews of his 20-plus year career.

C1



India's former Foreign Minister Natwar Singh, seen here Sept. 18 with United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan (r) at the 60th session of the General Assembly at the United Nations. Natwar Singh stepped down following a U.N. inquiry finding that claims that he benefited from the UN's oil-for-food program for Iraq, but will stay in the cabinet. (AFP/Getty Images)

■ Loses position following allegations of profiting in Iraq oil-for-food program

NEW DELHI (AP, PTI) — India's foreign minister has become the first political casualty of the U.N. oil-for-food scandal. Natwar Singh has been stripped of his post over allegations in an independent report that he profited from massive corruption in the effort to help Iraqis suffering under sanctions.

The accusation that Singh was among the thousands of prominent companies and politicians worldwide to illegally benefit from the program has roiled India for days and led to widespread calls for his resignation.

As the issue snowballed into a political crisis, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh ordered two separate investigations into the allegations and on Nov. 7 summoned Natwar Singh for an

[Cont. on page A14]

Spate of Burglaries Hits Silicon Valley Communities

By VIJI SUNDARAM
India-West Staff Reporter

A rash of home burglaries has been hitting the Indian American community in the Silicon Valley in recent months.

Two Indian American homes were burglarized in Sunnyvale, Calif., over the last 10 days, while in the same city, in a span of two months this year, burglaries occurred in a total of 10 Indian American homes.

In Cupertino, an upscale neighboring community, every two weeks, at least one Indian American home has been bur-



Cupertino resident Sri Ram, whose home was burglarized twice in the last six years.

glarized in recent months, according to Raj Abhyankar, who is running for city council in that community and has made the unsolved burglaries a campaign issue.

Indian Americans living in other South Bay cities in the Silicon Valley — Mountain View, Santa Clara, San Jose and Milpitas — have also become victims of burglaries in recent years, with the incidents occurring with numbing frequency.

Whoever is doing it seems to be after one thing only: gold jewelry.

[Cont. on page A34]



Emily D. Gunter, whose conscious breathing classes at an elementary school in North Carolina have come under scrutiny.

Teaching 'New Age' Beliefs Protested

■ N.C. schools asked to stop teaching breathing techniques, meditation

By VIJI SUNDARAM
India-West Staff Reporter

A Christian group has told a North Carolina school district to stop teaching breathing techniques and meditation to its students because those teachings have their roots in Hinduism and Buddhism.

[Cont. on page A33]

Dalit Environmentalist Honored



Seacology director Paul Cox presents a check of \$7,500 to Felix Sugirtharaj (r), an environmentalist. (Furhana Afrid photo)

■ Felix Sugirtharaj has fought to save mangroves

By FURHANAAFRIID
India-West Staff Reporter

SAN FRANCISCO — Sixty-nine-year-old Felix Sugirtharaj has put himself in harm's way, mobilized demonstrations and influenced India's legal system to protect a crucial source of livelihood for poor fishing communities in India — Mangrove forests.

The difference the activist has made in the lives of thousands of people — one mangrove tree at a time — was recognized at a

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Activist Honored for Protecting Mangroves in India

[Cont. from page A1]

gathering of over 100 people here Oct. 25. Sugirtharaj was honored with the first Lifetime Achievement Award by Seacology, a non-profit organization that protects habitats and cultures of islands all over the globe.

Born in an impoverished dalit family in Tamil Nadu, the soft-spoken naturalist told the audience that there is less concern over mangrove forests than the highest peak in the world.

"While many people are concerned about the melting of the glaciers of the Himalayas, very few are concerned about the endangered forests of Andaman Nicobar and other islands." Conserving the environment, its natural resources and all forms of life, is crucial for survival of mankind, Sugirtharaj noted.

Since the 1980s, he has dedicated his life to protecting mangroves in the Bay of Bengal, the Andaman Islands and Pulicut Lake, which is one of several salty water lakes surrounding more than 30 islands on India's eastern coastal belt.

The significance of mangroves for the fishing community is just a tip of the iceberg, explained Sugirtharaj. "Mangroves in In-

dia are a treasure and said to be water bowls for fishermen, because it is in the mangrove forest you see fish aggregate."

These woody trees not only provide a source of income for fishermen, but also are used for medicinal purposes, firewood and building homes.

The importance of the forests was largely ignored when much of the mangrove forests were destroyed by the shrimp farming industry. Even the Indian government eradicated some forest areas at Pulicut Lake to build a missile station.

By organizing campaigns at a grassroots level, the environmentalist took the plight of the fishing community to India's Supreme Court, urging it to take action against those who were destroying the habitat.

As a result of his efforts, actions were taken including banning of new shrimp farms and blocking expansion of existing farms. The Indian government and the Forest Department also took steps to work with the fishing community on conservation issues. All mangroves of the Andaman Islands, which cover 12 percent of the land, have been declared conservation areas.



Felix Sugirtharaj, who received the Seacology Lifetime Achievement Award from Seacology executive director Paul Cox, seen with Patrick Danaya Pate of Papua New Guinea, another prize recipient, at a ceremony in the San Francisco Bay Area (Furhana Afrid photo)

While positive steps have been taken at a federal level to protect mangroves, Sugirtharaj said much more still needs to be done as other trees are still perceived

to be more valuable than mangroves.

"The Department of Environmental Forest in Andaman does not consider mangroves as im-

portant because it is more interested in other forests for the best teak and padauk. They'd rather protect those trees than mangroves," he said.

One of Sugirtharaj's recent projects has been the establishment of a mangrove resource center on the Andaman Islands. It was created, in part, to educate the younger generation by introducing mangrove science education in schools. Even though the Supreme Court has ordered that environmental education must be taught in schools, he stated that it is not being taken seriously. As a result, the center has been working on a syllabus that will be used in schools and colleges.

The center has also been instrumental in providing a source of income for many fishermen who lost their homes and boats in last year's tsunami, and a biological garden was created to train the local people to plant mangroves.

"We have asked the Forest Department to buy mangrove trees from us so they can plant them in areas where mangroves have been destroyed," Sugirtharaj said.

The activist, who received a \$7,500 monetary prize, backed his earlier statement of commitment to serving the people of the Andaman Islands for the rest of his life by making an announcement that would impact the lives of women there.

"In Andaman Islands, (there are) 900 widows whose husbands died in the tsunami. I have decided to offer a part of my prize to their empowerment and development."

Christian Group Demands School Stop Proselytizing 'New Age' Beliefs

[Cont. from page A1]

Teaching them in a public school was a violation of the First Amendment, the group maintained.

Called2Action, a Christian activist organization in North Carolina, has sent a letter to Wake County Schools superintendent Bill McNeal asking him to make sure that such a "spiritual and religious program" is terminated because it amounted to proselytizing the children in "New Age" beliefs.

The group said it received complaints from a mother whose children were attending Partnership Elementary in Raleigh, N.C., where Emily Diane Gunter, founder of the Durham, N.C.-based Rites of Passage Youth Empowerment Foundation, had offered the students a stress-reduction class.

In the classes she is contracted to teach, "I give students a whole new paradigm for learning," Gunter told *India-West* by telephone.

Her mission, her Web site says, "is to bring peace to our world through the personal empowerment and spiritual development of all people."

She said she bases her classroom teaching on the notion that when students' thoughts and emotions are in harmony and at ease, they can learn better. That can be achieved through conscious breathing, she said.

"Be willing to flow. Surrender to the flow. . . . Open yourself to receive miracles," are some of the instructions Gunter generally intones in her classes to children and adults, whose ages, she said, range from five to 85.

In this particular class at the elementary school, Gunter told *India-West* by telephone, she was mostly telling the children to love themselves and to live in the present moment.

"I was teaching the children about learning empowerment," Gunter said. "There was no meditation, no closing of the eyes."

But when one of the children returned home that day and repeated the words "batio bati"

which, Gunter said, is Swahili for "please become present," the child's mother grew alarmed and complained to the school, suggesting that Gunter may be indoctrinating the children.

Following the complaint, some parents of the elementary school reportedly said they would prefer that their children used prayer and the Bible to combat stress.

Bill Poston, a Wake County Public School System spokesman, told *India-West* by telephone that their attorneys were investigating a complaint from a community group against "a meditation moment in one of our schools." Poston declined to elaborate.

Gunter's Web site notes that she just returned from a spiritual pilgrimage to Tibet and Nepal.

Gunter said that for the last 16 years, she has been making a living by teaching relaxation classes to children and adults all over the

U.S. The Chicago public school system is among the many school districts she teaches at. She has a book out called, "Super Learning 2000."

In the past, transcendental meditation and yoga have also been protested and subsequently removed from public schools in other parts of the U.S.

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