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Established 1985

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In 1910, the Second International declared 8 March International Women's Day as a tribute to women workers of the clothing industry, who protested on 8 March in New York City for their rights to be in unions and to have a vote. This was a global commitment to equity in society and the inclusion of women.

21 March is Human Rights Day in South Africa, this year's commemoration coincides with the 25th anniversary of the enactment of the Constitution that enshrines the rights of all people in South Africa and affirms democratic values of human dignity, equality, and freedom.

The focus of this issue is International Women's Day. We share the 2022 theme. In celebrating International Women's Day we pay tribute to the women pioneers in the Arya Samaj in South Africa: the first South African woman Swami, the first woman President and the first five women priests. Their life stories give hope and point to their achievements. We hope that the rich history of equality and leadership by women will inspire you to act to end prejudices.

We sincerely thank Jay Sukram, Romila Sham, Pt Arthi Nanackchand Shanon, Pt Usha Debipersad, and Pt Joitika Niranjana for sharing cherished memories of their mothers with us. We also thank Dr Bisraam Rambhass, Past President of the APS for the tribute to Prof Usha Desai.

The Arya Stree Samaj Raisethorpe turns 50 this year. We salute this vibrant group of women and thank them for sharing their stories with you. The article was produced from material gathered by the current leadership of the Stree Samaj and recognises the legacy and achievements of women leaders.

Veda Jyoti Editorial Committee

Arthi Shanand, Divesh Cassiram, Karuna Mohan, Kirun Satgoor, Nishi Bundhoo, Reshma Badal, Reshma Rambharos, Shoba Singh, Sudhira Sham, Usha Debipersad.



एषा स्या नो दुहिता दिवोजः क्षिजीरुच्छन्ती मानुषीरजीगः। Eṣā syā no duhitā divojaḥ kṣijīruchchhantī mānuṣīrajīgaḥ. Rig Veda 6.65.1.

"This daughter of the sky drives away darkness with bright lustre for us and calls the human beings from their slumber."

As the first light of dawn dispels darkness and birds chirp welcoming the new day, so too our actions and approaches in life must shed the light of truth and awaken those who remain in a sleep of ignorance.

When the barriers of socialisation are broken and exploitation is challenged, the light of truth shines on dark, grim, and unjust social practices. This has been revealed in 20th century whether it is the control of religion to divide society, as in the case of apartheid, or political control using the armed forces as seen in civil wars, conflicts and strife in Africa, Middle East, and Europe or by those who accumulate wealth creating the haves and the have nots in the world. This aspect was recently experienced in the hoarding of Covid vaccines by the developed world. In taking up actions on these issues we awaken those who are asleep.

Women are equal partners in a family, community, and in society. Social practices to bully women into submission, whether it is emotional abuse or rape or even murder

reflects a society that is asleep and in a dark state. Women who break through the barriers that keep them out, who speak out and take their rightful places in society shine brightly as examples for future generations to emulate. They create a new dawn for society.



Message from the President

Namaste Dear Readers

We pay homage to the women of the Arya Samaj who distinguished themselves as leaders. In recognising their roles we hope that women of future generations will continue to develop the path that they set. In this respect the work being done by the Women's Empowerment Forum within the Arya Samaj is commended.

There are abundant references in the Vedas to the prestige, grandeur, and noble position of women and mothers. Mothers personify the attributes of Lakshmi and Sarasvati as they are the symbols of prosperity (*barakat*) and are our first worldly teachers. In Vedic times, women enjoyed equally the loftiest positions and respect in society as men did.

In the Rig Veda 1.113.20: Mother is *Usha* – glorious like the rising sun of dawn, the *usher* of light and hope. She bears and endures, carries and sustains, supports and protects a new life in her womb. She is active and friendly -*mitra* like the setting sun, *aditi*. She is like the earth – *prithivi* – steadfast and tolerant; with depth of love and feelings, all-embracing like the oceans – *varuna sindhu*.

We salute the women who have left us and those who are currently leading society.

Dharma in the first instance means more than religion – it is righteousness, truth, virtue, morality, and playing a role in society. Today many women work and have careers, and many South African women are breadwinners. There is the issue of a call for equality so let us see what our scriptures say.

The dictum *Ardhnaareeshvar* refers to God as having equally the qualities of male and female, as we say *Twam eva Maata cha Pita twam eva; Maata Pita tum mere*. We are expected to see God equally in every being, for the soul has no distinction of gender or status of relationship.

This is our message to the modern woman. Take your rightful place in society. Speak out when you are being bullied and abused.

The Atharva Veda 11.1.17 describes the woman as the mother of society. Atharva Veda 20. 128.2: He who defiles women, who deliberately harms his friend or unwisely insults his elder, meets with doom and downfall.

With the pandemic of gender-based violence we call on all men to give women the respect they deserve.

On 19 March Hindus celebrate Holi, a festival of colours. To move forward on the path of progress, a society needs cohesion. People need solidarity and unity of purpose.

The festival of Holi provides a golden opportunity for the entire society to come together, without any discrimination of caste, creed, colour, or sex. In celebrating Holi with colours one is for all, and all are for one.

Holi is to welcome Spring and rejoice the harvesting of crops in the northern hemisphere. Those of us who are not settled in the northern hemisphere experience the end of Autumn when Holi is celebrated according to the Hindu calendar.

We can use this time to look at food security, those in need of a meal, consider the path of truth and the triumph of good over evil.

Pt Arthi Nanakchand Shanand

International Women's Day

International Women's Day (March 8) is a global day celebrating the social, economic, cultural, and political achievements of women. The day also marks a call to action for accelerating women's equality. International Women's Day has been observed for over a century. The first gathering on March 8 in 1911 was supported by over a million people. Today, March 8 belongs to all groups collectively everywhere, making Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam - we are all one family, a reality.

The theme for International Women's Day 2022 is "Break the Bias". Imagine a gender equal world. A world free of bias, stereotypes, and discrimination. A world that is diverse, equitable, and inclusive. A world where difference is valued and celebrated.¹ A world where all look at each other with an equal and friendly eye, where we meet each other halfway and where we accept that we have common bonds and common fates.

Many of us celebrate the great achievements of women in the upper echelons of society, in business, education and government. There is, however, a vast chasm between women in advantaged communities in developed nations and women in disadvantaged communities in developing nations. This gap too must be closed to a point where all women have the same opportunities to progress and prosper.

Some women employed in the formal economy face gender bias in the workplace (the lack of opportunities to progress at the same rate as men). Women in informal sectors – the domestic workers, home-based workers, sex workers, waste pickers and street vendors - face a far more debilitating bias. Today 61% of the world's workers are in the informal sector and almost half of them are women. In poorer developing countries 92% of women are employed in the informal sector.²

These women do not have the protection of the law, nor do they have economic security for their old age in the form of pension funds or savings. They also are most likely to be living in informal settlements without the benefit of water, sanitation, electricity and easy access to health care facilities, affordable food, and transport. Childcare is also a major concern as many mothers are

unable to afford good, safe childcare facilities that would give them peace of mind while at work.



Gender based violence (GBV) in South Africa is the most prominent bias that women face. The horrific situation is reflected in the following report in the Mail and Guardian on 4 December 2020:

- 51% of women in South Africa have experienced GBV, with 76% of men reporting having perpetrated GBV at one stage in their lives (2010 Gauteng sample). A similar study revealed that one in five women reported that they have experienced violence at the hands of a partner.
- In 2019/20, 53 293 sexual offences were reported, an average of 146 per day, up from 52 420 in 2018/19. Most of these were cases of rape. Of this the police recorded 42 289 rapes in 2019/20, up from 41 583 in 2018/19, an average of 116 rapes each day (SAPS Crime Stats).
- In 2019/20, a total of 2 695 women were murdered in South Africa. This means a woman is murdered every three hours.
- Femicide is five times higher in South Africa than the global average, with South Africa having the fourth-highest female interpersonal violence death rate out of the 183 countries listed by the WHO in 2016.
- At the start of level 3 lockdown, 21 women and children were murdered in two weeks, leading the State President to cite "...two devastating epidemics: Covid-19 and GBV".

¹ International Women's Day Website.

² WIEGO. Counting the world's informal workers: A Global Snapshot

Vedic Priesthood in South Africa Adopts Equality

The trafficking of women into slavery in the sex trade is the worst form of exploitation of women. The networks dealing in trafficking rely on the ignorance of young women and teenagers of the dangers that they face when trusting strangers. These strangers make promises of wonderful job opportunities. They ply the victims with drugs and then, when they are addicted, force them into prostitution to pay for their newly acquired habit.

Women are also subject to gender bias generated by religious belief systems, in most countries. However, in Africa and Asia the girl child is denied an education equal to that of the male. Islamic countries are notorious for these oppressive practices. The case in point is Afghanistan. This leads to higher rates of illiteracy among women and thus greater disadvantages in every aspect of their lives.

Despite laws to protect women, the will and ability to enforce them is lacking as old prejudices prevail. Less educated women are less likely to know and stand up for their rights and easily become victims of fear and abuse.

Many women need adult literacy, skills development, and financial skills education to help them to gain economic independence. The need far out-weighs the efforts by government and NGOs to eradicate the problem. While poverty alleviation programmes can be followed easily, the empowerment of women in all strata of society is often neglected.

The Arya Samaj Women's Forum has on-going programmes in skills development. Their Leadership Development and Small Business Development programmes take us into the 21st Century and lay the foundation for activism and empowerment.

Moving forward in the 21st Century requires a shift in our way of thinking and embracing technology despite our reservations. We must recognise the fact that women can face the same challenges as men and succeed in whatever they do.

Together we can forge women's equality.

Collectively we can all #BreakTheBias.

Celebrate women's achievement.

Raise awareness against bias.

Act for equality.

The United Nations Decade for Women (1975 to 1985) followed on from the advent of the women's movement in the western world. The rise of feminist ideologies espoused equal pay for equal work, recognition and respect for the role women played in society on domestic chores and rearing of children, and an end to sexist discrimination. The decade therefore focused on the policies and issues that impact women such as equity, the right to land holding, and other human rights. A key focus was an end to gendered violence such as rape, wife abuse, and patriarchal control of women.

In 1975, the Arya Samaj Movement turned one hundred years with a full 50 years of organised existence in South Africa. In line with the Arya Samaj being a modern reformist movement, the Arya Samaj in South Africa demonstrated the practise of equality for women through taking a ground-breaking step demonstrating that Arya Samaj women could uphold the Vedic principles and engage in the performance of religious rites. The Vedic Priest Academy under the leadership of Pandit Nardev Vedalankar deemed it fit that woman also receive the necessary training in the field of performance of sanskaars.

During 1975, fifteen candidates wrote the examinations to become Vedic Priests and were successful. Five in this group were women. At the Arya Samaj Movement's 100th anniversary and the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha (APS) of South Africa's Golden Jubilee, the newly ordained priests were initiated by Shri Acharya Krishnaji of India, a specialist in the performance of Vedic rituals. He returned to South Africa in 1978 as Swami Deekshananad and was able to rekindle the interest of the local Hindu community in their ancient Vedic heritage.

The Arya Samaj South Africa is proud of its achievement. It is the first institution in the diaspora that took a bold step to ordain women as priests and was thus a trail blazer. At that time orthodox Hindus still did not allow women to read the scriptures or become priests, and debates within Christianity were raging about whether to accept women into priesthood, while Islam did not even entertain the notion of women priests. The Arya Samaj has since produced several women priests of calibre. The first batch of women who became Vedic Priests were:

Mrs C. Padarat, Mrs D. Sewpaul, Mrs G. Sukhnundan, Mrs D. Sukram and Mrs P. Nanackchand.

As women living under apartheid bearing the burdens of triple oppression: at a political level without the vote, having limited economic opportunities, and legally under the control of their spouses and male members of their families, they were supported by their husbands, families, and the Arya Samaj to improve their education and enter the world of public life. Three were housewives and two were widows. Within the safe spaces available to them all were engaged in teaching Hindi. In addition to the duties of rearing children and teaching they found the time to learn, study, recite and teach the Vedas. They took public transport for classes and were pioneers in the community.

We pay tribute to them for the stand they took. We appreciate the special care they took to train and develop our children in dharma and culture. We salute them for making it possible for women to tread on the path they took and become priests. The daughters of four of the first five women priests in South Africa have followed in their footsteps and studied the Vedas and Sanskaars through the APS. Three daughters of the humble trail blazers are also Vedic purohits, one is currently the President of the APS, and another is the chairperson of Veda Niketan standing committee.

We share short biographies of the first five priests who set a trend for the Arya Samaj movement by demonstrating that equality can be practiced in all spheres of life, including spiritual ministry. Let us remember that they had to overcome prejudices to perform sanskaars whether it was weddings or funerals. They struggled against odds to contribute to society. They ensured that they educated themselves to become leaders in society. They are no longer with us but have left us with a new path that of women being Vedic Priests.



Pt Chunderwathee Devi Debipersad Padarat (1927-1997) the youngest of four siblings from Riverside had four children. She was a remarkable woman who displayed a keen interest in her personal upliftment and the progress of her four children. Having good education was of paramount importance to her and the key to all doors. An avid

reader, she set a perfect example for her children to emulate.

Her personal upliftment journey began with studying English through correspondence. She then added to her academic qualification by learning Hindi at the ML Sultan Technical College under the tutorship of Pandit Nardev Vedalankar. She successfully completed her Kovid (matriculation) under the auspices of the Rastra Bhasha Samithi based in Wardha in India. She also pursued her studies in the Hindi language at the then University of Durban- Westville (now University of KwaZulu Natal) and successfully completed Hindi III and its prerequisite Sanskrit under the tutorship of Dr B Rambilass. Her love for Vedic scriptures led to studies in Hindu religion. She completed the Higher Diploma in Hinduism under Veda Niketan and enrolled for the priest course. In 1975 she was ordained as a Vedic Priest.

She taught Hindi at the Durwest Primary School and the Arya Mitra Mandal Hindi Paatshala where she prepared her students to write the Hindi exams under the banner of the Hindi Shiksha Sangh of South Africa and to participate in the Hindi Eisteddfods. She fulfilled her role as a priest by performing sanskaars for people who engaged her services. She taught the children of her neighborhood to perform the yajna every Friday afternoon. Apart from spending her leisure time to read and study the Vedic literature, she had a great passion for travelling and toured extensively locally and abroad.



Pt Draupadi Sewpaul (1923-2002) was a unique individual whose talents included speaking Hindi fluently as a first language from a very early age and completing a high level of education in Hindi.

Although she went to English medium school at a much later age than other children, she was able to catch up with her peer group by receiving double promotions because of her intellectual ability.

After her marriage and move to Stanger, her interest in Hindi was supported by her husband, Pt B. Sewpaul who encouraged her to teach Hindi, first to children and later to adults. This required her to prepare students for examinations and eisteddfods and her students results were a testament to her fine skill as a teacher. As a student of Hindi and Vedic studies, she made huge sacrifices to travel to Durban regularly to attend classes run by Pt Nardev Vedalankar. When the opportunity

arose for her to become a purohit, she had the advantage of being able to read the Sanskrit mantras easily because of her expertise with Hindi. She was also an accomplished singer and often created Hindi songs for special occasions relating to religious and cultural celebrations. She had the honour of performing a wedding in India as well as being interviewed on air in Mauritius.

On retirement the Sewpaul's moved to Ottawa and then to Verulam where they were actively engaged in the promotion of Hindi as well as the ideals of the Arya Samaj by establishing classes, setting up schools and satsangh groups and supporting existing structures.

The communities of Stanger, Ottawa and Verulam remember the dedication and enthusiasm of both Pt Sewpaul and her husband and appreciate their contribution to their religious and cultural progress.

Pt Gurudevi Sukhnundan (1933-2017) grew up in



Nonoti, Stanger. She was married in 1950 and had three daughters and a son. In 1968 she began to teach Hindi and joined the ML Sultan Technical College to further her education in Hindi. She was a pupil of the late Pt Nardev Vedalankar. She joined the APS and studied to become a Vedic priest. She was inducted as a priest in

1975. She shared her knowledge and taught many families and recited the Ramayan at many funerals.

Her efforts to promote the Hindi language began in the garage of her home in 1968. In 1974 she began to teach Hindi at the Everest Heights primary school after formal school hours. This was arranged by the Hindi Centre run by her husband and parents of pupils. Later the Hindi Center became the VDS Verulam. She was the head of the VDS Verulam Hindi Paatshala. As a Hindi teacher she prepared her students to participate in the Hindi Eisteddfods and for Hindi examinations from grades Prathma and Pravesh. Many of her pupils excelled in Hindi and in formal studies and have now become professionals.

Once land was secured for a building, she placed her efforts in raising funds for the Verulam VDS learning centre. The teaching of Hindi was her passion and she taught her last lesson on the 4th of August 2017. On 14 August 2017 she passed away.

Pt Dhamyanthie Sukram, (1943-1994) as a mother fought her way through life's demands in caring for her

children and serving the community. Widowed at an early age with three children, she served the community voluntarily with Hindi classes at the Riseford Arya Samaj in Chatsworth for many years, until her demise in 1994. She served the community with her knowledge and love for Vedic Dharma. She studied under the guidance of the late Pandit Ramdutt and in 1975 together with four other Panditas became one of the first female priests in South Africa.



Late Pandita Dhamyanthie Sukram ordained by Late Acharya Krishanji who later become Swami Deekshanand of India together with Late Pandit Nardev and Late Pandit Ramdutt in 1975 at the Vedic Mandir in Carlisle Street, Durban.

Pt Prabhawathie Nanackchand (1924-2006) hailed from a family that had roots in the struggle for liberation. Born in Tongaat in 1924, her attendance at the local primary school at Maidstone was short lived due to the social practices of patriarchy at that time. To fulfil her aspirations for higher learning, she fortuitously become a pupil of the late SNC Vardacharayallu, a Telugu speaking Sanskrit scholar from India who was later to become not only her Guru but together with Pandit Nardev Vedalankar, her mentors

She successfully completed the requirements for the Hindi Parichay (Vardha, India). She also passed the Hindi Kovid (matriculation) examinations, and followed this with the Religious Examination Pravesh, Prakash, and Praveen as well as the Prabhakar Higher Diploma of the Veda Niketan, Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, South Africa. She also furthered her studies on religion through an examination of the College of Vedic Studies of the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha and completed Sanskrit 1 at the University of Durban-Westville.

Her selfless devotion to public service matured at the death of her husband. Her marriage to Nanackchand had produced five children. Combined with the responsibilities of raising her children, she taught Hindi at

the Shree Ramayam Sabha and she was also a member of the Hindi Shiksha Sangh of South Africa.

In 1975 she was ordained into Vedic priesthood. In 1983 she travelled to India to receive the International Arya Ratna Award in Ajmer at the Dayanand Nirvana Centenary. She served as secretary of the Vedic Purohit Mandal from 1975 to 1989. In 1989 she was elected chairperson of the Purohit Mandal. Pandita Nanackchand served on the Executive Council of the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha and the Aryan Benevolent Home. She also served the Arya Stree Samaj as a member and official for more than 25 years. She established the Overport branch of the Arya Stree Samaj and served as its chairperson.



Pt Nanackchand greeting Nelson Mandela with the Late IC Meer

Past president of the APS, Late Shishupal Rambharos had this to say about Pt Nanackchand: "When the story of the Indians in South Africa is carried forward into a new chapter, the freedom from subjugation of women and the hypocrisy surrounding their status would inevitably focus on the struggle of those like Pandita Nanackchand who chose to overcome such prejudices and widespread opposition to women's rights.

Determined to challenge the double standards and bigotry regarding women's rights, she defied the authority of her male elders by attending education tutorials at night. This underscored her persistence to compensate for the setbacks resulting from her curtailed formal academic programme.

Although not compelled to surrender her convictions about the advancement of women, Pandita Nanackchand dedicated herself equally with her husband to the service of a good cause. If a lasting impression lies in the

combination of character, intellect, and service; if it is to be measured by the lasting value of solid work done in the fields of thought and action, then Pandita Nanackchand had excelled."

Her commitment to society is evidenced in her membership of the Natal Indian Congress. She also served the Women's League of the Congress as its secretary. In 1991, Pandita Nanackchand together with a group of women tied Rakhees for Nelson Mandela, Joe Slovo and other ANC leaders. On 18 July 1998, she was one of the priests at the multi faith wedding ceremony of Graca Machel and Nelson Mandela.



Nelson Mandela and Graca Machel with Pt Nanackchand



The forerunners among women in Arya Samaj South Africa

From 1875 onwards the Arya Samaj promoted equality for women and worked to educate women. This enabled women to be equal partners in society. The Arya Samaj also contributed to bringing an end to social discrimination based on caste. In the 20th century the role of women in leadership positions came to the fore. Women assumed positions to lead countries and companies and became leading professionals and academics.

We pay tribute to two outstanding women members of the Arya Samaj South Africa, who set trends and were role models.

Swami Vidya Saraswati (1910-1994): The First South African Woman Swami in the Arya Samaj

Born in Frere in Northern Natal in 1910, she was a pioneer among women in the Arya Samaj in South Africa. She was a long-standing member of the Arya Yuvuk Sabha, the Aryan Benevolent Home Council, the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha South Africa, (APS) the Vedic Purohit Mandal, and the Arya Stree Samaj Durban of which she was the President for over 43 years. She was also a member of the Durban Indian Women's Association. This organisation was set up in the 1920's by Kunwarani Maharaj Singh, wife of India's Agent General, to improve the social lives of women as Indians became a settler community in South Africa.

In 1975, Vidyawathi attended the 100th anniversary celebrations of the Arya Samaj in Delhi and was the spokesperson for women of the Arya Samaj South Africa during the visits to all Arya Samaj organisations across India. In 1983 she attended an Arya Samaj Conference at Ajmer in India and was ordained into the order of Sannyas. She is the first South African born female member of the Arya Samaj movement to become a Sannyasin.



Late Swami Vidya Saraswati second left to right in front row with women of the Arya Samaj at the NJVC

As the first woman Sannyasin, she devoted two days a week at Dayanand Gardens and at the Westsun Home run by the Aryan Benevolent Home to comfort the aged and the handicapped and offered bedside prayers for the mentally and physically sick residents and chatted to them.

The late Sishupal Rambharos, Past President of the APS said: "Her saffron garb and calm demeanour provided relief to those who needed spiritual ministering. She made the residents and all those afflicted feel that they still had people around who cared for them."

During her childhood her father Gangadeen Maharaj and her mother Bilmaya introduced her to the Vedic ideals as articulated by Swami Dayanand Saraswati. The strong influence of her father led to her perform the Sandhya daily. She read about the Vedic Dharma and kindled in her siblings an interest in religion. Swami Bhawani Dayal spent time with her family during his visits to Northern Natal and had a profound influence on her.

There were no Indian schools in the area. Vidyawathi went to a "Bantu" School where most of the children were Zulus. She learnt to speak and write in Zulu as that was the only medium of communication at school. The spoken language at home was Hindi.

In 1941 she married Lall Singh and moved to Durban. Here her public life commenced. She was appointed as a locum teacher on the staff of Candella Girls' School. She was unqualified then and undertook part-time studies to obtain her Teacher's Certificate. She rose in her teaching career to be a principal.

Her strong leaning towards the Arya Samaj led her to become a member of the Aryan Benevolent Home in 1942. She was a resident of Cato Manor, where the Aryan

Benevolent Home was, and worked closely with Mr & Mrs S.L.Singh, Pt. Nayanarajh and Mr & Mrs D.G.Satyadeva.

Although she was transferred to different schools during her teaching career, she remained a member of the Aryan Benevolent Home and Arya Pratinidhi Sabha. She also she served the committees of the Blind and the Child Welfare Societies but her service to the Aryan Benevolent Home was her priority.

She was elected on the Working Committee of the Aryan Benevolent Home to raise funds. The Late Shishupal Rambharos said this of Vidyawathi and her work on fund raising and her selfless service: "This she did by going with a group to collect items for a jumble sale held annually at the premises of the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, in Carlisle Street, Durban. These sales had become an important fund-raising activity. Another feature of this event was that it brought together many people who worked as volunteers for a common cause. At times when there was a shortage of staff to manage the Aryan Benevolent Home, she spontaneously volunteered to give her services. The aged and the children, both needed personal attention."

After the death of her husband in 1954 she studied and successfully wrote the Purohit examination but was not ordained as a priest. Her understanding of the Vedic Sanskaars led to her being part of the Vedic Purohit Mandal. To get an insight into the Sanskaars she studied Sanskrit at Durban-Westville University (now University of KwaZulu Natal) and later at Benares University in India. She gave her services willingly for the promotion of the Vedic Dharma.

Swamiji passed away on 14 June 1994 and was cremated on 16 June 1994. She will always be remembered as an outstanding woman who promoted and demonstrated equality as it is meant to be. She loved children and encouraged young women to enter the public domain. She demonstrated to young women through her activities that participation in society was possible. She lived and served the Arya Samaj ideals.



Usha Desai (1945 - 2021): The First Woman President of the Arya Samaj South Africa



Usha Desai was the eldest child of Pt Nardev Vedalankar and his wife. Born on 20th November 1945 in India she immigrated to South Africa with her parents. She lived in South Africa since 1949 and was a naturalised

South African citizen.

She was friendly, humble, steadfast, and listened carefully to your points in a conversation. She rose from humble beginnings to make a decisive contribution to society in the fields of language, culture, and Dharma.

Usha Desai was the first woman to be elected president of the Arya Samaj in South Africa. During her tenure as President she steered the organisation to take the difficult decision to move the headquarters away from central Durban.

In a press interview she had this to say: "Costly maintenance of the ageing building has become an issue with vandalism and illegal squatting adding to the threats...the building was a landmark due to its popularity as a cultural centre and its strong links with the liberation struggle.

Swami Bhawani Dayal, founding father of the APS, served as the Natal Indian Congress president in the 1920s. The late Gopal Hurbans, S L Singh, J N Singh, Vishwaprea Suparsad and their families were stalwarts of the struggle. The K Badal family, Karuna Mohan and even the late I C Meer and Fatima Meer among others, shared

a close association with the APS. The building was constantly under the surveillance and scrutiny of the Security Branch of the apartheid regime.

Many weddings, funerals, major functions, prayer services, concerts and conferences took place in the building. The vision to create an establishment with income generating flats, a Vedic Temple, Aryan Hall, dining facility and offices was a very ambitious project at that time, and our elders and learned ones were fired with sheer determination and a commitment to create a sustainable model which has served the community so well over four decades.

It is a very emotional experience for many who proudly call themselves members of the APS family. Our senior members... toiled so hard and lovingly to create something bigger and more significant than themselves. (It) will be sad as a chapter of the history of the APS ends..."³



The final havan... APS members, including Usha Desai, Bisraam Rambilass and KwaZulu-Natal Judge-President Chiman Patel, gather to mark the end of an era as published in Sunday Tribune.

Usha lived to see the APS headquarters permanently relocated at their new premises in Overport kindly donated by the Shree Ramayan Sabha.

In 1980 Usha graduated with Ratna or BA Hons in Hindi through the Rashtrabasha Prachar Samiti, Wardha (India). In 1989 she completed BA Hons, by 1992 she was awarded her MA and in 1997 she achieved her D.Litt degree at the University of Durban Westville (UDW) (now University of KwaZulu Natal). In 2003 she was appointed Associate Professor at the university.

During the decade of the 1970's Usha was a part-time Lecturer in Hindi at the M L Sultan Technical College. She

was also part-time teacher and principal of the Surat Hindu Gujarati School from 1981-1985. In 1986 she began her career in lecturing at UDW. This career spanned just under 20 years. She rose to become a full-time senior lecturer in Academic Literacy and Sociolinguistics and earned the title of Professor.

Prof Desai was an expert in the Hindi and Gujarati languages. Her research work focussed on the maintenance and shift of language amongst first, second and subsequent generations of migrants with a special focus on how this manifested with the Gujarati language in South Africa. Her MA thesis researched the Gujarati Language amongst Gujarati speaking Hindus in Natal, and her doctoral thesis researched the factors influencing the maintenance and shift of the Gujarati language in South Africa.

As an expert in the Gujarati language she served as a Moderator for the Gujarati Senior Certificate Examination for the Department of Education, Kwa-Zulu Natal from 1995 to 2007. She also served as a member of the Gujarati Subject Committee as well as the Hindu Studies Syllabi Committee in the Department of Education, KwaZulu Natal.

Prof Usha Desai was recognised for Hindi and Gujarati language propagation with the Vidya Ratna award from the Hindi Shiksha Sangh and an Honorary Award from the Vishwa Gujarati Parishad.

In 1988 when Pandit Nardev Vedalankar set up the Pandit Nardev Hindu Dharma Prachar Trust, Usha was appointed as a Trustee. Her leadership in organisations took off from this point. Prior to this point she was involved in the Surat Hindu Association and the Surat Hindu Educational Society.

She served on Arya Pratinidhi Sabha (APS) Executive Committee from 1997 to 2009, she was the chairperson of the Veda Niketan Standing Committee 2007 to 2008. From 2009-2011 she was the Deputy President of the APS and was elected President in 2011. Until her demise she served on the Veda Jyoti Editorial Committee.

She was appointed to the Hindu Advisory Board of the South African Defence Force and South African Police Services in 1997 and chaired the committee from 1998 to 2011.

Prof Desai was the President of Gujarati Education Board from 1992 to 2008 and a management committee

³ Sunday Tribune 21 September 2014

member of the Gujarati Hindu Sanskruti Kendra, the secretary of the Natal Gujarati Parishad from 1990 to 2006 and its President in 2006 and Vice President from 2010 to 11. She was the Secretary of the Institute of Indian Languages from 1996 to 2009.

In 2009 she was invited by the Legal Aids Board in New Zealand to translate and transcribe audio files at the Auckland High Court in a child abuse case. The translation was from the Hindi, Urdu, and Gujarati languages into English.

Prof Desai was a remarkable, caring leader and an academic of note. We share some of tributes on record following her sudden death on 13 January 2021.

"Prof. Ushaben Desai was a staunch Arya Samajist and a visionary leader. She served the Aryan Community with utmost dedication and zeal. She was a remarkable leader who devoted her whole life to the welfare of the Arya Samaj."

Mr. Swaran Varma, Chairman General, Arya Pratinidhi Sabha East Africa

"She has worked for many years in academic circles and has also worked tirelessly serving the Hindu community to uplift our society and to guide them in terms of spiritual and moral development. I remember her fondly at the University of Durban-Westville many years ago. She was indeed a true heroine of the people."

Yashika Singh, Head of Genre: Religion, TV Content, SABC

"Ushabhen's magnanimous contributions to the Arya Samaj South Africa and to Hinduism are greatly appreciated. Being a stalwart and the first woman president of the Arya Samaj South Africa, she has left an indelible mark on the organization, its members, and the Hindu community."

Kumarasen Naicker, Secretary - Divine Life Society of South Africa

"...Prof Desai was not only the head of the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha of South Africa, but also a noted scholar and influential leader of the Arya Samaj. She was the daughter of the famous Aryan scholar Pt. Nardev Vedalankar ji. The Name of Pt. Nardev ji comes in those famous Arya Samaj scholars and leaders who

worked with a dedicated spirit for the propagation of Arya Samaj and Vedic Principles in a country like South Africa.

Prof Usha Desai also handled the legacy of her reverend father Pt. Nardev Vedalankar ji with great loyalty and perseverance and led the Arya Samaj in South Africa for years. Prof Usha Desai became the first woman to lead an Arya Pratinidhi Sabha as president for years due to her ability, hard work and skill.

During her tenure, while she was the head of the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, South Africa, I also had the opportunity to visit South Africa every year continuously for 3 years and I had the privilege to promot(e) and propagate Arya Samaj. There she had a special affinity towards me which impressed me a lot. The sudden departure of such a sister and leader from among us is an irreparable loss and profound shock to the Arya Samaj organization. But in front of the law of God, we all have no choice but to bow down..."

Swami Aryavesh, President, Sarvadeshik Arya Pratinidhi Sabha (World Council of Arya Samaj)



Usha Desai (1945-2021)

Tribute to Usha Desai

*"Patā nahiñ yadoñ me dube dube din
kaise bīt gaye*

*Bas sochte sochte samay ki smṛti smaran
rah gaye"*

Dr B Rambilass

On 13 January 2021 Ushaben tragically departed from our midst. When her father Pt Nardev arrived in South Africa, brought down by the Surat Hindu Association, to teach Gujarati. As the eldest daughter she, helped her mother with the household chores and nurturing her siblings. It is not surprising then that Ushaben grew into a mature, loving, and adorable elder sister (Motiben) whom her family and the larger extended family of the Samaj looked up to with the greatest admiration and respect.

She grew into a lovely young lady and married Kantibhai Desai. Usha and Kantibhai with their two children Manoj and Tripti became a close-knit family always remaining an inseparable limb of the Nardev Vedalankar joint family. All of us, members, friends, and officials were warmly received at their home and our interactions were a special bond that went beyond any call of duty.

Ushaben was the apple of Panditji's caring eye. She took an interest in Gujarati and Hindi languages, attending part time classes with her celebrated father as her tutor and mentor. She continued her studies after her marriage, completing her Honours, Masters and finally her PhD in Gujarati. She also concurrently taught Gujarati at the University of Durban Westville (now University of KwaZulu Natal). Her academic achievements, presentation of papers at local and international conferences and her excellent publications earned her the well-deserved and distinguished title of Professor conferred on her by the University in recognition of her singular contribution to Gujarati.

Learning Hindi and Gujarati was woven into the very fabric of Ushaben and her siblings' daily lives and routine. Even as children and youth they would jaunt along merrily accompanying Panditji as he walked daily from his flat in Cross Street to the M L Sultan Technical College where he conducted part time classes in the afternoons. Ushaben assisted Panditji in getting the students from

the Gujarati classes to participate in the Hindi Eisteddfod and of course, capture all the awards.



Late Usha Desai with Veena Lutchman

She was committed and dedicated to the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha and Hindi Shiksha Sangh. Despite her hectic schedule as an academic and an affectionate mother, she remained interested and concerned, serving as a caring custodian of our cultural, linguistic, and religious values. The Arya Samaj was always deeply impressed by her loving concern, and this resulted in her being elected as the first female President of the Arya Samaj in South Africa and perhaps the first female President of any Arya Samaj institution in the world. She regularly attended the meetings of the South African Hindu Maha Sabha representing the APS and actively engaging on issues of mutual concern.

For all her efforts in promoting Indian languages and culture, it is only proper and fitting that we reflect on her work and attempt to evaluate how best we can implement the outcomes of her studies and research. Her thesis, for example, was a socio linguistic evaluation of the status of the Gujarati language in the Gujarati community. It would be a gross injustice if we are unable to table the results of her diagnosis and attempt to remedy the situation.

Ushaben was keen to fulfill Pt Nardev Ji's dream of publishing literature on Hinduism in the African Languages. Panditji prepared the material in Hindi for a Five Part Series; of these the first and second parts have been translated into isiZulu and published. Parts Three to Five need to be completed. We need to look at continuing the Pandit Nardev Dharma Prachar Trust work. This will be a significant step in honouring her deep love for her culture which she in turn had nurtured in both her immediate and extended family.

The Arya Samaj will always treasure the fond memories and wise counsel with which Ushaben graced our meetings and events. Members of the Nardev Family have sincerely lived up to Panditji's expectations in maintaining and further strengthening their ties with the Samaj and we are ever grateful to Ushaben for being the Motiben that always inspired the Family to continue this dedication and commitment.

We will cherish all the fond memories of the wonderful times we have shared together. Ushaben's wise counsel and well-tempered advice will be sorely missed. Her words of wisdom will always serve as a beacon as we continue our journey.

Arya Stree Samaj Raisethorpe Celebrates 50 years



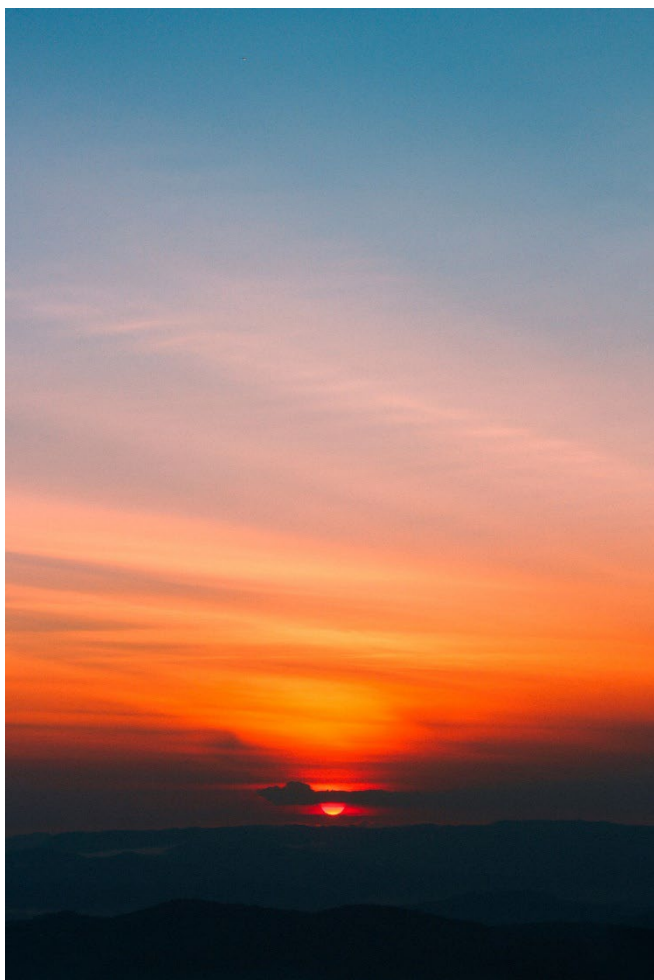
Members of Arya Stree Samaj Raisethorpe in 2013

Women have been active members and participated as equals in the Raisethorpe Arya Samaj in Pietermaritzburg which was established in 1935. This article pays tribute to the women who shaped the role of women in the Arya Samaj in South Africa. We remember the late Mrs T. Baijoo, the first female to be the president of the Raisethorpe Arya Samaj elected in 1964, who was a women leader, and philanthropist, a woman ahead of her time. Later Mrs R.R. Singh was the first female secretary. In 1999 Mrs S.D. Harichandparsadh was the first female treasurer. From the 1960's women were already playing a leading role in the Arya Samaj. We salute these women pioneers for creating the pathway for women of future generations. Many women worked alongside their husbands to build the Samaj. One notable woman was Mrs Maney from a pioneer family in Raisethorpe who assisted in keeping the Samaj together.

On 18th September 1972 the late Mrs R Dookran called a meeting of women at the Baijoo and Maharaj School.



Late Mrs R Dookran founder of Arya Stree Samaj Raisethorpe



Although women were active in the Arya Samaj, she was of the view that if women organized separately, they would reach out to more women, influence more families, and gain the experience of being independent. The Arya Stree Samaj Raisethorpe (ASSR) was formed at this meeting. As founder she did not take any official positions but was a strong guiding force in the organisation developing the layers of leadership.

Between 1974 to 1976 the ASSR staged the shows "Sita Haran" and "Shrawan Kumar" in Pietermaritzburg, Port Shepstone and Greytown. Although the show was directed by late Dasarath Bhundoo assisted by Chandrapal Maikoo and had late George Surajbally performing Hanuman, women members of the Arya Stree Samaj Raisethorpe were the cast and crew of the production.

These women took the bold step of being in the public space in performances and at the same time raised funds for the organisation. From the decade of the 1970's women not only gave selfless service to society but also entered the work-space as professionals while rearing their families.

We share short biographies of these outstanding women who broke barriers, overcame bias, and built the Arya Samaj. They reignited the practice of promoting Dharma through cultural shows that was prevalent in the early days of the Arya Samaj in Pietermaritzburg. During the 1980's this group of women participated in adult Hindi Eisteddfods and took many of the prizes.



Late Mrs Rajpathy Bridgelall was the treasurer of the Stree Samaj. She served with great dedication for twenty-five years, keeping meticulous records of all financial transactions.



Late Mrs R.R Singh (Vanitha) was born to late Atwari and Ganga Singh in a small village in Vleilands close to Greytown. She married Ranjith Singh in 1954 and they had four children.

The Singh family regularly attended satsangh and became members of the Raisethorpe Arya Samaj. She was the first female secretary of the Raisethorpe Arya Samaj.

When the Samaj was in dire need of funds, she went along with her husband appealing for donations. Bazaars were held annually, and movies were shown at Roxy cinema to raise funds.

Her acting out the role of Ravaana in the play Sita Haran was commended. She instilled culture and values in her children to keep the flag of the Vedic Dharma flag flying.



Mrs Savithree Lutchman is the daughter of late Mr and Mrs Jairam Soorju. She qualified as a Registered Nursing Sister and Midwife. She was a member of the South African Nursing College Council.

Mr and Mrs Lutchman attended conferences in Mauritius, India, New York, and the USA. Her husband Rammy Lutchman has passed on. She has seven daughters.

She is an ordained Yajaka and attended Purohit classes under the tutorship of Pt. Kirun Satgoor. As the first president of the ASSR she was able to carry out meetings and create synergy among the women to carry out various activities.



Late Mrs Chandra Budree was widowed at a young age. She was involved in promoting Hindu Dharma by assisting students train for eisteddfods in song and dance items. She was an ordained Yajika and was the narrator of Sita Haran and Shrawan Kumar.

She attended Hindu conferences in 1973 in Mauritius, 1995 in Delhi, India and represented the Samaj at the meetings of the Midlands Hindu Society. She served as the President of the ASSR in 1976 to 1977.



Mrs Nalini Mungal married Mr John Mungal in 1960 and joined the Raisethorpe Arya Samaj as her husband was already a member of the organization. Along with her husband she was involved in fundraising activities including door to door work for contributions. She organised weekly cake sales to maintain the upkeep of the Hindi School.

She was fortunate to work under the guidance with of strong women, namely the late Mrs T. Baijoo, late Mrs Dookran and the late Shobana Bridgelall. She completed the Yajaka course and has written the Veda Niketan examinations, rendered cottage services at many homes of needy families and participated in the play Sita Haran.

She continues to promote Hindu Dharma. She presently holds the position of Life Vice President in the ASSR.



Mrs Sabitha Harichandparsadh, is the president of the Raisethorpe Arya Samaj from 2004. She qualified as an educator and taught at various schools in the Midlands area. She participated in eisteddfods and shows, served Veda Niketan as examiner and was ordained as a Yajika in 2004. She was chairperson of the Veer Dal and Bal Samaj between 1992 to 2004, and treasurer of the Raisethorpe Arya Samaj 1999-2004.

She is actively involved in counselling breast cancer patients, both in hospitals and at home. She is continuously engaged in charity projects, social upliftment programs and promoting Hindu Dharma.

She shares this message:

“The Strength of women lies in confronting the problems of the world and not turning your back on them. Women have the capacity to progress and live in harmony with the rest of the world.”

By the end of the decade of the 1980’s there were five Vedic female priests in Pietermaritzburg. Four of the five priests were members of the Arya Stree Samaj Raisethorpe. They took equality and spiritual and cultural activism to another level as they entered the domain of spiritual ministry.



Pts: Shoodha Seeth, Urmila Hanuman (late), Kanthee Beekarun, Sumithra Sukkhu, Vidya Satgar

Pt. Shoodha Seeth is the daughter of the late Mr and Mrs Gokul Ramburan Singh of Pentrich in Pietermaritzburg. She has three sons. She obtained a first-class pass in the Parichey examination, written under the guidance of the late Pt S.Dookran. She taught Hindi at Mount Partridge Hindi School and Lenasia South Hindi School.

She recited the Ramayan and Gita at various venues and brought honour to the organization. She tutored many students in reciting the Ramayan and Gita and her students achieved Gold Medals at Regional Hindi eisteddfods. She also recited the Ramayan on Maritzburg Radio and presented discourses on Hinduism and composed songs for festivals. She participated in Vedic Speech contests and spoke at the Midlands Hindu Conference.

She considers reciting the Dharam Balidadaan as the highlight of her career that she learnt from her late dad. She graduated as a priest in 1989 under the tutorship of the late Pt. Dookran. She has mentored other younger priests in the organization and continues to share her knowledge with others.

Pt Urmilla Hanuman (late) joined the organization as a young lady with clear vision of promoting the Vedic Dharma. She served as Arya Stree Samaj Raisethorpe joint secretary from 1985 to 1990. She participated in Sita Haran, and in adult eisteddfods and was a recipient of certificates and trophies.

From 1972 she was a council member and the Vice Chair of the Arya Stree Samaj. She graduated as a pandit under the tutorship of late Pt. Cheddie. She taught Hindi at various schools in Pietermaritzburg, she was a member of the South African Hindi Teachers Association and the Vedic Purohit Mandal of South Africa.

Pt Kanthee Beekarun born in Thornville in 1936, attended Baijoo and Maharaj State-Aided Indian School and completed her secondary schooling at Indian Girls High in Pietermaritzburg. She studied Hindi under the late Mr K.R. Singh. She wrote Warda Hindi Exams successfully completed until Parichay level.

She joined the Raisethorpe Arya Samaj at the age of 18 years. She trained students to participate in eisteddfods and prepared them to write Hindi exams. She also participated in Adult Eisteddfod, both regional and finals.

She is proud to have been involved in all the activities of the organization such as bhajan groups, fundraising, shows, street collections, outings, picnics as well as rendering cottage services at the homes of bereaving families. Pt Kanthee Beekarun shares this message on the 50th Anniversary of the Arya Stree Samaj Raisethorpe.

“Keep the flag of the Arya Samaj flying by carrying out your duties in life through hard work and follow the religious path in life.”

Pt Sumintra Sukkhu furthered her studies in Hindi and Sanskrit under the leadership of Swami Deekshanand and was ordained as a Vedic Priest under the guidance of late Pt.R. Cheddie in 1989. She taught Hindi for 11 years from 1984 to 1995 and was honoured by the Hindi Shiksha Sangh South Africa.

She formed the Raisethorpe Arya Veer Dal and Bal Samaj in 1992. She trained youth to play the harmonium and majira and render bhajans at satsanghs. She continues to attend satsangh and plays the harmonium at Sunday service and festivals.

She led prayers at meetings in the early 1990's where our former Presidents Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki as well as late Chris Hani were present.

She is a member of the Cancer Support group and the Raisethorpe Senior Citizens group. She played the part of Shrawan Kumar's father in the play Shrawan Kumar. She continues to work towards the upliftment of youth in society and promotes religion and culture.

Pt Vidya Satgar is the daughter of Late Pt and late Mrs Dookran from Plesislaer and the widow of the late Sewmungal Satgar (past president of the Veda Dharma Sabha, Pietermaritzburg).

She went to Springfield Teacher Training College where she obtained a Teachers Diploma. She taught at many schools in Pietermaritzburg. She has three sons and a daughter.

She successfully completed the Veda Niketan examinations up to Dharma Praveen. She wrote the Purohit examinations and was ordained as a Vedic Priest in 1988.

She served as Chairperson, Secretary, council member and Vice President of the Arya Stree Samaj Raisethorpe. She is a past Vice President and President of the Veda Dharma Sabha of Pietermaritzburg and Chairperson of Pietermaritzburg Hindu Stree Samaj. She participated in adult eisteddfods, speech contests and in the Hindi Essay writing competition which she was the winner.

She hosted many visiting Priests, Swamis, and religious leaders from abroad. She was also a member of Natal Indian Congress Women's committee in Pietermaritzburg and supported mothers when their children were detained by the security police.

Her message for International Women's Day is:

"Be positive, promote culture and religious values in youth to ensure that they are equipped for a better future, and they are able work to end prejudice in society."

Sanskrit words explained

आश्रम

āshram

A place where effort is made.

The word is derived from *śram* to exert, to labour.

Etymologically (an explanation of where the word originates from) ashram means a stage in which one exerts oneself.

An ashram is a hermitage - an abode of spiritual practice, study, and meditation.

In the Dharmasāstras the word ashram refers to a stage of life designed to provide fulfilment of social, moral, and spiritual aspects leading to harmony and balance in the society.

The four āśramas are: Brahmacharya the stage of studentship, Gṛhastha stage of the householder, Vānaprastha, life in seclusion and Sannyāsa (Sannyāsin) renunciation.

In the first āśrama a student learns and develops and is prepared to engage in society. The second āśrama, is about marriage and being a householder, where both men and women contribute to the progress of society in intellectual, economic, and political aspects.

Today all countries conduct a census of households to count the population, understand the age ranges, income levels, employment status and other important statistics.

Please send your comments and suggestions to admin@aryasamajsa.org

Announcements

You are invited to send articles to the editorial committee for publication. Please email your submissions to admin@aryasamajsa.org

Acceptance conditions:

1. All submissions must be in word for the attention of the editorial committee.
2. All Sanskrit words must be in italics.
3. Photographs submitted must be in high resolution.
4. All references must be cited.
5. The limits for articles will be as follows:
 - 5.1. Short articles & messages 300 words
 - 5.2. Current issues and social justice 900 words
 - 5.3. Feature articles up to 3000 words
 - 5.4. Secondary articles up to 1500 words
6. The acceptance of articles will be considered based on the following criteria:
 - 6.1. Vedic teachings
 - 6.2. Principles of the Arya Samaj
 - 6.3. Social justice and social action
 - 6.4. Relevance to current issues

To contribute to projects of the Arya Samaj contact admin@aryasamajsa.org

कृण्वन्तो विश्वमार्यम् "Krinvanto Vishwam Aaryam"

(Rig Veda 9.63.5) Make the World Noble

मित्रस्याहम् चक्षुषा सर्वाणि भूतानि समीक्षे mitrasyāham
chakṣuṣā sarvāṇi bhūtāni samīkṣe (Yajur Veda
36.18) May we all live in friendly cooperation and
mutual trust

मित्रस्य चक्षुषा समीक्षामहे

"Mitrasya chakshusha samiikshaamahe" (Yujar
Veda 36.18) May we look at all with an Equal and
Friendly Eye

Veda Jyoti Founding Editors were Pt Nardev Vedalankar (1913-1994) and the late Manohar Somera



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