

# INDIA New England

---

## Mystical mountains

Scholar links Hindu temples to Himalayas

*By Mark Pickering*

October 1, 2002

LEXINGTON, Mass. — In many cultures around the world, mountains are seen as both physical and spiritual entities — the wellsprings of life, a place of refuge or a place for revelations.

The Himalayas and the Hindu temples of India were the topic for the final lecture in a series organized by the newly formed Meru Foundation. Kapila Vatsyayan, the founder and director of the Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts, spoke and showed slides on “Meru: The Cosmic Mountain and its Universal Significance.”

It was Vatsyayan who suggested the name when the husband-and-wife team of Vanita and Shekhar Shastri recently started the Massachusetts-based Meru Foundation.

The event, held at the National Heritage Museum in Lexington, also served as the graduation for Camp Meru, the children’s side of the foundation’s summer program. The foundation seeks to bring Indian languages, arts and culture to children and adults.

Young Nitish Mehta’s answer to that famous back-to-school question — what did you do this summer vacation — could include this: “I learned that people in India carved complete temples out of solid rock.”

That’s part of what he had to say to a crowd of about 90 as 20 children and teens were honored for completing their Camp Meru studies.

As part of her lecture, Vatsyayan, 73, talked about the Kailasha Temple in Elura, Maharashtra — which is carved out of solid rock. This feat includes not only the elaborately sculptured exterior, but also an interior that has been cut into the rock itself.

“In those hills and among those rocks, suddenly someone had a vision of Mount Kailasha,” said Vatsyayan. “It is one of the greatest wonders.”

While the Maharashtra building is carved from the stone itself, other Hindu temples imitate the grand works of nature, Vatsyayan said. “The sacredness of mountains has dominated” Indian architecture and sculpture, she said.

Mount Kailasha in Tibet “is a geological, material mountain analogous to Mount Meru — uniting heaven and earth,” she said.

The first example of Indian architecture recreating Mount Kailasha is in the seventh century with the Papnath Temple in Karnataka, Vatsyayan said.

In Tamil Nadu, the Brihadeshwara Temple is “one of the most masterful statements of the concept of Mount Kailasha,” she added.

Turning to Himachal Pradesh, Vatsyayan showed slides of a multiplicity of temples there — even some at 11,000 feet high that are “simple, humble, but clearly stated recreations of Mount Kailasha.”



Mount Kailasha in Tibet unites heaven and earth, says Kapila Vatsyayan, founder and director of the Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts.



Kailasha Temple, carved out of solid rock, is shown. Both photos are part of the “Sacred Places” exhibit of the work of Kenro Izu. The exhibit was recently on display at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Mass.

In Hindu mythology, the Himalayas “are the abode of the gods — particularly Shiva,” said Vatsyayan. For the last 400 years, she said, the Himalayas have been “the sacred places in all three streams” of the key religious traditions flowing from the subcontinent — Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism.

For religious pilgrims, going to Mount Kailasha is a journey in the physical world and the mythical — or Mount Meru — one, she said.

In her other two lectures, held at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, Vatsyayan looked at music, dance and the arts in general.

“The arts enable us to have an eye of perception and sensibility, not only to our own culture which we are brought up in, but all the other cultures of the world,” she said.

Vanita Shastri said the foundation’s three-week summer program, while it had seemed ambitious, came off “very well.”

At Camp Meru, children ages 10 to 17 were introduced to such things as Sanskrit and Hindi, music theory, literature and the ecology of ancient and contemporary India. The adult programs, termed Summit Meru, featured top scholars.

The other speakers were Subhash Kak, a Louisiana State University professor and Vedic scholar; Vempati Kutumb Sastry, director of the National Sanskrit Institutes in India; and Mukund Lath, a professor of history and Indian culture at the University of Jaipur in Rajasthan.

Lath, a trained singer, introduced participants to the melodic and rhythmic structures of Indian music and its possible influences on Western classical music.

Shastri said the goal was to have the scholars teach so the uninitiated could understand.

“Many of us are trained engineers or from a science background,” commented Brij Masand, talking about the audience.

Masand, who helped out as a volunteer, is a friend of Shekhar Shastri, a high-tech entrepreneur.

“The program opened doors on the traditions and spirituality of India,” said Masand.

The Meru Foundation was born after the Shastris returned from a yearlong sabbatical in India.