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Year-long Program Will Honor Head of Kanchi Peetham and Promote Vedic Scholarship

On May 7th 1993, His Holiness, Sri Chandrasekharendra Sarasvati, the Sankaracharya of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham of South India, commences his 100th year. He is on the threshold of a century of distilled piety and unremitting selfless service in the cause of Sanatana Dharma. A year of programs to honor the saint and advance causes dear to him during his 68 years as head of the prominent spiritual center have been organized under the patronship of Sri R. Venkataraman, the past President of India. Ghadikhastan International Center for Sanskrit Research and Study is to be founded in Kanchipuram, fulfilling the vision of Adi Sankara himself for such a university.

India's Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, will inaugurate the celebrations on May 7th, as the pontiff begins his 100th year. The government is also planning to issue a commemorative stamp and coin. Seminars, pujas and celebrations are scheduled for every village in Tamil Nadu and many major cities of India. At Kanchipuram itself will be performed a kanakabhishekam, in which Chandrasekharendra will be showered with gold coins. The coins will then be used to goldplate the vimanam (main roof) of the shrine of Adi Sankar at the Kamakshi temple in Kanchi to enhance its sanctity and power. The Association for Hindu Dharma of Madras is endowing a permanent chair in Advaita at Madras University in Sankaracharya's name.

The position of a Sankaracharya has to be understood properly. It is different from that of an ascetic steeped in his own life of exaltation, blissfully sequestered from

the madding crowd with its strifes and sorrows, passions and clamors. Sankaracharyas are not anchorites. They have to mix with the world, guide, comfort, instruct, exhort, rebuke and reward the community. They are, and have to be more concerned with the fostering and perpetuation of the ageless Sanatana Dharma than with their individual salvation.

Chandrasekharendra once explained his life thusly: "I am said to be a sarvajna [omniscient], knowing all the subjects thoroughly. In reality, I can lay claim to thorough knowledge in only one subject. Lending ear to the prayers and petitions of all kinds of people, round the clock, year upon year, I have come to know, as none other perhaps, the endless afflictions of humanity."

Chandrasekharendra became head of Kanchi Mutt as a boy of 13 on February 13th, 1907. Then known as Swaminathan, he had been chosen by the 66th Sankaracharya to be the next pontiff. However, before the initiation could be given, the 66th Sankaracharya's death became imminent and, rather than leave the seat unoccupied, a maternal cousin of Swaminathan was installed. He too suddenly took ill and died eight days later. Swaminathan's mother was hesitant to let her son take on the life of a renunciate, but he declared, "Why do you demur? I enjoy the Guru's blessings in full. I'll safeguard this mutt. Give your unreserved consent."

Some of the finest intellects of the day imparted lessons to the pontiff between 1911 to 1913. They would fall at his feet before and after the sessions. He took lessons in English, French, Marathi and showed remarkable interest in Tamil devotional literature - a rare thing in those days when a Sankaracharya's education consisted almost exclusively of Sanskrit literature. He was deeply immersed in the Mutt's Smarta tradition.

In his earlier days, Chandrasekharendra made a series of reforms aimed at reducing the impact of the anti-brahmin movements in Tamil Nadu and lessening the distinction between castes. He abolished the use of the palanquin which was the traditional mode of transport for the Sankaracharyas. It was always carried by non-brahmins. Also early in his tenure the mutt began distributing free meals to the untouchables. He refused, however, to outright condemn the caste system, despite the entreaties of both Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru.

In the mid-sixties a large portrait of the Sankaracharya was paraded through the streets of Kumbakonam with a garland of sandals by a frenzied throng of Dravida Kazakam followers. This ultimate insult made many devotees' blood boil. The sage did not as much as comment. He did, however, voice his opposition to the move by the members of the Hindu Mahasabha to stage a black flag demonstration to protest Christian conversion campaigns when the head of the Roman Catholic Church visited Bombay in 1964. He told reporters, "We should do nothing disrespectful to the pope. Concerted attempts at conversion have to be met and resisted by spiritual discipline. We should not take it out on the spiritual heads of other religions."

He was an early critic of the dowry system and refused to sanction the practice among those seeking his blessings. He continues to promote traditional Hindu values and customs such as the wearing of traditional tuft, rudraksha, dhoti and holy ash. He stated, "People have given up a lot of the shastric rules. If I myself were to relax them, how much more lax will the people become? Wanting me to change tradition to suit the present generation is like wanting the finance minister to change the tax laws because few pay honestly."

Kanchi Mutt is regarded as the "fifth" monastic center established by Adi Sankara in the 7th century CE. The first four are: Dwarka in the West of India, Puri in the East, Badrikashram in the North and Sringeri in the South. The followers of the Kanchi Mutt believe Adi Sankara established it just before he died in Kanchi. Others say it is a later off shoot of the Sringeri Mutt. Whatever the case, Kanchi Mutt is likely the richest and most influential of the five with an estimated wealth in jewels given by the ancient kings of US$ 13,000,000 and an annual income from 900 acres of endowment lands of perhaps $750,000/year. With this income the center supports several pathasalas (schools for the training of Vedic priest) in the Rig, Yajur and Sama Vedas to perpetuate the Smarta traditions. The center is involved in the renovation of temples, research in advaita philosophy, annual conferences, donations of the mangala sutra (wedding pendant) to poor brides, free medical services and more. A program whereby devotees set aside one handful of rice daily feeds hundreds of people.

Personal anecdotes submitted by a number of devotees at the request of HINDUISM TODAY do much to reveal the personality and wisdom of this great sage. The first recounts how, many years ago, he was camping in Tiruvannamalai as part of an all-India tour from 1919-1939. Suddenly he went on a fast. Days slid by. To the consternation and anguish of his intimate followers he refused to touch food. Viswanathan, in charge of the mutt administration, was desolate and extremely

perplexed. He pleaded with the Jagatguru. The usually serene sage thundered, "How do I look? Hey! How do I look? Am I not handsome?" For once, the robust official, known for his testiness, ferocious loyalty and aplomb, quailed. Viswanathan could only reply that the young brahmachari, "was luminous like molten gold." Then Chandrasekharendra replied, "How could you ever permit a young woman to my solitary presence? She may have been utterly desolate and richly deserved your sympathy. But then, ought you not to have taken the precaution (against slander) of ensuring the presence of an elderly person, for instance her father, before sending her to me? If I were just a sannyasin without being the head of a great order. I shouldn't mind. But what is at stake is the reputation of one of the exalted peethams founded by Adi Sankara. Don't ever repeat it." The fast he had undertaken in protest to the oversight then ended.

Many tales of miracles cluster around him. When a blind lady her vision restored, gleefully thanked him, he dismissed it instantly. "It is Goddess Kamakshi who has done it! I simply recommended a few slokas. Only, she faithfully recited them."

When the European journalist, Paul Brunton, met with Chandrasekharendra (probably in the 1940s) the subject of disarmament was raised. The sage said. "If you scrap your battleships and let your cannons rust, that will not stop war. People will continue to fight, even if they have to use sticks. Nothing but spiritual understanding between one nation and another, and between rich and poor, will produce goodwill and thus bring real peace and prosperity."

Politicians often visited the Sankaracharya, though not all may have received the blunt assessment recounted in the following story. At the height of emergency rule proclaimed by Indira Gandhi, the embattled prime minister of India sought the sage's counsel. According to mutt officials present at the meeting, after an hour of attempts to defend her widely reviled assumption of emergency powers. Chandrasekharendra asked a single question. "If you say that whatever you have done is for the good of the country, then why are even your own partymen opposed to you?"

Chandrasekharendra's life has been a marvelous vindication of the faith reposed in a 13-year-old boy by his master. It is a saga of consummate integrity in fulfillment of his youthful promise, "I'll safeguard this mutt."

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