Karnataka Ashram Adds Major Conference Center
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Amid Massive Mela Melee, New Facility Expands Service of Adichunchanagiri Mutt

If ever you find yourself tending toward despondency about the future of Hinduism, ever wince under that gut-wrenching worry that maybe it won't survive yet another century, do this. Take a few days off, leave the Big City and lose yourself amid one of the hundreds of regional melas, those prodigious village festivals that are part carnival, part pilgrimage, part family picnic and entirely entertaining. You will never again doubt the power of dharma to endure.

One such annual meal was attended this spring by over 700,000 villagers, joined by a host of dignitaries attending the grand opening of a large teaching and feeding center March 7th in Karnataka State, India. The new Kalabiraweswara Hall is the latest of a long series of remarkable projects by Jagadguru Sri Sir Sri Balagangadharanatha Swami, all designed to serve the religious and practical needs of this impoverished area sixty miles north of Bangalore. Among the many distinguished swamis present were Swami Mahant Avaidyanath of Gorakhpur, Swami Rajamohannath and HINDUISM TODAY'S publisher, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami. Karnataka State Chief Minister Sri Veerappa Moily and Deputy Chief Minister Sri S.M. Krishna attended.

The new conference, teaching, feeding and guest facility rose impressively above the sea of people, pink and yellow in the South Indian sun. Named after the ashram's presiding Deity (a form of Siva) it had taken three years to complete, one for each floor. On the ground floor are the cavernous kitchens, a unique hybrid of old wooden cooking fires and gleaming steam ovens, each capable of cooking 250 gallons of rice at a time. Pantries are stocked ten feet high with staple grains and vegetables, newly-harvested chilies and 20-pound blocks of jaggery, the hard brown sugar made from the juices that drip from the palmyra palm flower.

Also on the first floor are two large dining halls, one reserved for the residents of the ashram. A unique feature of the meals in ashrams of India, here and elsewhere, is the custom of chanting Vedic mantras through the meal. There is no talking, each one eats in silence as the monks take turns chanting the scriptures in Sanskrit.

On the second floor are new guest rooms, copious suites finished in polished white marble, with baths more elegantly appointed then any Hyatt hotel in the world. The third floor is entirely taken up by one giant conference hall, 100 feet wide and 300 feet long, all in alabaster white, with 108 yantras adorning the 18-foot-high ceiling. It was here, in a simple lamp-lighting ceremony, that all the dignitaries gathered - spiritual alongside political - to inaugurate the facility and begin its service to the community.

The spiritual highlight of the three-day mela was a series of rare rites wherein the abbot of the mutt, Sri Sri Sri Balagangadharanatha Swami, ascends a special throne and is worshiped in an elaborate and very moving ceremony. Later, in the early hours of the morning, hundreds of thousands of his devotees took him in procession around the hill, to honor the sage who all year long look after their religious and mundane needs from his abode built 11 centuries ago on a 200-foot high granite outcropping that dominate the plains below.

Serving Others: In just 19 years, Sri Sri Sri Swamiji has reshaped the previously obscure Adi Chunchanagiri Mutt into the single most effective institution of education, social service and religious teaching in this state of 25 million people. The ashram's brochure cites an impressive list of accomplishments: 8,000 needy students given free education, housing, food and clothing; daily feedings at the ashram for 3,000 visiting devotees; free medical camps, community marriage arrangements; free thousand-bed hospital; a mobile clinic; school for the blind; shelter for abused women and programs of job training for them; agricultural camps to educate local farmers in better methods; Veda, Agama and Sanskrit College; and there's more. Tens of thousands of rupees daily pour into the ashram from the local rice, coffee and sugar plantations, businessmen and devotees.

In the last several years Swamiji has branched out nationally and internationally form his base in Karnataka, acquiring land in New Delhi and establishing foundations in America and Germany. He was instrumental in the building of the Paschima Kasi Sri Viswanatha Temple in flint, Michigan, and supplies the priests for

it. He has been invited to the 1993 Parliament of the world's Religions in Chicago, where he will certainly be a prominent representative of Hinduism.

During his March visit, Subramuniyaswami observed, "The most remarkable social service and religious work I've ever seen is carried on by the head of the Adi Chunchanagiri Mutt. He has improved the education and standard of living for tens of thousands through establishing over 120 institutions - an eminent example to be followed by all of the many thousands of monasteries in India."

It is fortunate that Gangaswami has attracted substantial financial support, for government funding of his program is virtually nonexistent. The political influence of this largely illiterate, rural area is simply not strong enough to draw significant government attention and money from its big-city programs. "They had no influence, no lobby, no education, no health care, no roads. That is why Swamiji came to help," explained Hanumanthaiya Marur. Marur, who now lives in Flint, Michigan, is a devotee of the swami hailing from Karnataka.

Swami has inaugurated a Kumbha Mela of the South to be held every four years. Like the great Kumbha Mela of the North - which is the largest gathering humanity ever sees - the one in the South will be held at four different auspicious places in rotation. The first one in 1989 at Narsipur on the Cauvery River attracted 200,000 people, the second in 1993 substantially more. It is likely to develop into a huge attraction.

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