Three Generations of Gurus Reigning at Kanchi Peetam
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With the annointing of the 15-yearold Shankaracharya designate, Sri Sankaranandendra Saraswati, last May the Kanchipuram Kamakoti Peetam set a Guiness Book of Records-type historical record. Unprecedented in the millenium-long history of the Peetam, there are now three living Jagadgurus.

This past February 5th, after a six-year walking tour of Andra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra, the 92-year old Senior Acharya, Sri Chandrasekarendra Saraswathi Swamigal, accompanied by the presiding and designate Acharyas crossed the border into the Peetam's home state of Tamil Nadu where a State red-carpet reception and huge crowds greeted them. With the senior Acharya's return, fears were quelled that he would pass away before coming back to Tamil Nadu, and a controversy was unleashed by political rabble-rousers over the government's staging of the reception.

Four days after the senior Acharya briskly tread into Tamil Nadu, it was business as usual for the Peetam. On February 9th the presiding Acharya, Sri Jayendra Saraswathi Swamigal, announced the formation of a state-level committee to oversee a massive temple renovation project. Mr. N., Mahalingam, well-know industrialist, was appointed chairman of the committee. Kanchi Peetam will provide guidance, technical assistance and financial support for the project with the committee itself seeking public contributions both in cash and kind. Other objectives include establishing "patasalas" in Siva temples for teaching Devaram of the Nayanars, providing sheds for cows and medical centers started to treat the underprivileged.

That same day, a writ of petition of filed in the Madras High Court by Mr. V. Anaimuthu, of the anti-religion political party Dravida Kazhagam, seeking an order prohibiting the state government from according official receptions to the Kanchi Shankaracharyas.

Jointly picked by the residing and senior Acharyas, the teenage designate Shankaracharya, Sri Sankaranandendra Saraswathi Swamigal, is now fully engrossed in training for the pontifical seat he will one day assume. With the senior Acharya's return the three Acharyas are together touring Tamil Nadu allowing the senior Acharya to personally train the youngest as he gains seasoning out the roads and cowpaths of South India. As the years proceed, he will become intimately familiar with enough detail on Hinduism to fill a computer data bank.

Between these 68th, 69th and 70th successive Acharyas, there is a total age of 157 years, from the senior Acharya's 92 years to the junior's 15. Some years ago the senior Acharya formally turned over the official seat of the Peetam to H.H. Sri Jayendra Sarasati (who is celebrating his 50th birthday this year), retiring to a life of semi-reclusive sadhana. The total period they have been spiritually guiding the renowned Shankara Mutt is about 78 years. The resulting unbroken chain of stewardship of these long-lived Shankaracharyas has empowered the Peetam with unrivaled strength and authority. Indeed, as a matter of record, the 3rd Kanchi Kamakoti Shankaracharya, who lived over a thousand years ago, reigned for 112 years

Established about 1,200 years ago (the Peetam's traditional chronolgy states 2,500 years ago) by Adi Shankaracharya on one of his tours in Southern India, the Kanchi Peetam is considered as the fifth of Shankara's four cardinal maths (monasteries - used interchangeably with mutt): Badrinath in the north, Puri in the east, Dwarka in the west and Sringeri in the south of India.

Following the traditional pattern of the Shankara Mutts, the Kanchi Peetam has established several branch mutts throughout its territory. With this infrastructure the Peetam manages a large array of religious, educational and social service institutions and events. The Peetam's projects include two Advaita and Vedanta research trusts, temple renovation, dozens of annual conferences, degree course training in Hinduism, free medical service, and the acclaimed 'pidi arisi' plan, where thousands of housewives daily set aside one handful of rice that is collected on a weekly basis to be cooked for the poor and disabled.

Adi Shankara, some 1,200 years ago, crisscrossed the dust, sands and forests of India several times on years-long walking tours. It is the same today. As their special discipline the Acharyas eschew the use of motorized conveyances, moving about only by foot and cart. The Kanchi Shankaracharya spends most of his time

walking from village to village, from village to town, from town to city - always on foot. The senior Acharya, early in his incumbency, went on a 'tour of victory' that kept him away from the home monastery for 20 years. A whole generation had been born and raised by the time he re-entered the Peetam compound.

The walks give an immediate, intimate contact between the Shankaracharya and millions of South Indian Hindus, from beggars to brahmin priests and dressed-for-success urbanites. By reputation the Acharyas were generally considered to be the spiritual leaders of the brahmins and higher castes, but in recent years they have been moving among and more accessible to the general public, a practice that many of the Hindu math heads have been promising to do for years, but few have actually undertaken.

Unlike the ornate opulence of the roman Catholic Church's Vatican city, the Shankara monasteries are small, austere, a little run down with age. Kanchi Peetam is unpretentious in appearance. It is not often that the Shankaracharya actually resides there. It is the holy men, the Shankaracharyas, that are the life blood of the Peetam. The facilities are the supportive skeleton. Known for their strict sannyas and unswerving sadhana towards mumukshatva (spiritual liberation) the Shankaracharya's mere darshan (sighting of) is popularly held to a rare and true blessing.