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Published by Anonymous on May. 02, 2000

LEADERS

What to Do After 72?

Renowned printer embarks upon the renunciate life

Nachiappan was born May 29, 1923, in the small village of Managiri, Tamil Nadu, South India. He was in the direct line of Koviloor Andavar, who established the Koviloor Aadheenam (monastery) in the area two centuries ago. Seventy-two years later, in 1995, following the family tradition, this same Nachiappan renounced worldly life and took charge of Koviloor. One might suppose the successful businessman would retire to a quiet life of contemplation and spiritual teaching in the remote village. But to anyone who knows Nachiappan--and the Hinduism Today staff has known him for the past 31 years--this would be very out of character. Sri la Sri Nachiappan Swamigal has big plans for Koviloor, ranging from the promotion of the traditional temple musical arts of the tavil and nagasvara, to the publication of all known Saiva Agama scriptures in original Sanskrit with modern Tamil and English translations, to sponsoring new investigations into the ancient archeology of India.

For a very traditional Hindu, who while in India has worn nothing but dhoti and kurta shirt, Nachiappan has had a singularly untraditional life. His mother died when he was quite young, leaving him "more or less an orphan," as he would later

recount. He was sent to Chennai (then Madras) and enrolled in a Montessori school associated with the Theosophical Society. Rukmini Devi, founder of Kalakshetra International Arts Centre in 1935, befriended the hardworking boy, assisted with his school expenses and introduced him to a Dutch artist, Conrad Woldring, who was staying at the Theosophical Society. The then 15-year-old Nachiappan learned art, photography and even furniture design from the talented Woldring. He next attended Presidency College in Madras, majoring in zoology and botany.

But Nachiappan's education had really just begun, and for the next several decades he lived at the cutting edge of both technological and artistic development, learning color film work from the Kodak company in New York, engraving machines from German experts, theater lighting in New York, and photography from none other than Ansel Adams. He opened the first professional film processing laboratory in India in 1953, befriending the entire crew of Magnum Group, the foremost photography company of the day. Back at Kalakshetra he traded jests with friend J. Krishnamurthi, designed books for poet Alan Ginsberg and generally moved among the movers and shakers.

Of the Chettiar business caste, Nachiappan started Kalakshetra Publications with Dr. Maria Montessori, the innovative educator. He eventually became the principal producer of her books. Kalakshetra Publications also found a profitable niche in the creation of quality hand-made art books, some now in the collections of major museums.

But through all this Nachiappan maintained a studied aloofness from the worldly activities around him. Upon reaching 72, five years ago, the traditional age of retirement from ordinary life and entrance to full-time spiritual life, the life-long bachelor accepted the post which was his by heredity. He became Sri la Sri Nachiappan Swamigal, 12th pontiff of Koviloor Aadheenam.

The monastery's tradition goes back to Erumbur Tatvaraya Swamigal, who lived 900 years ago and expounded Vedanta in Tamil in five great works, namely Nana Jeevavada Kattalai, Sasivanna Potham, Aiyavathai Parani, Paduthurai and Kaivalliya Navaneetham. These works were the basis of Vedanta in Tamil in Tamil Nadu and came 300 years after the passing of Adi Sankara. The Aadheenam accepted the Vairagyasatakam, composed by Santalinga Swamigal of Perur Mutt in Coimbatore 500 years ago. These were the predecessors of Sri la Sri Muthuramalinga Gnana Desikar, popularly known as Andavar of Koviloor, who founded the present Koviloor Aadheenam 200 years ago. Koviloor is in the Sankara lineage and attached to Sringeri and Kanchi Mutts. It does not promulgate Saiva Siddhanta philosophy as do many aadheenams in South India.

Nachiappaswami brings to his post not only a vast technical and business expertise, but also considerable personal resources from a lifetime of successful business and fortuitous investments. The combination has attracted additional support from the traditional followers of the monastery, the Chettiar caste and many others around the world. His stated aim is to see that the Hindu culture--social evolution, music, dance, sculpture, painting, architecture, Tamil and Sanskrit

literature--is not forgotten. Toward this aim he has established the Institute of Indology and the World University of Traditional Science, Technology and Culture of India at Karaikkudi with extensions in Chennai and New York.

The institutions have an enormous agenda focused on preserving and maintaining the essential sources and instrumental factors of Dravidian South India traditions and the traditional streams of Sanatana Dharma. One prime goal is to commission authoritative translations of the Vedas and Agamas, and to train priests in temple worship. A second focus is on the art of temple construction, city planning and engineering; a third upon music and dance and a fourth on historical studies.

What makes Nachiappaswami most notable is not so much all these plans and projects, but the personal example he has set. Hindu scriptures say that at age 72 one should retire from worldly life and take up spiritual life full-time. Hardly anyone does this anymore. But now we can see the benefit when someone embarks upon such a path, bringing with him all his years of experience, knowledge and resources to be applied for the benefit of the religion and its people.

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