Lineages: A Guru's Birthday Event for Everyone
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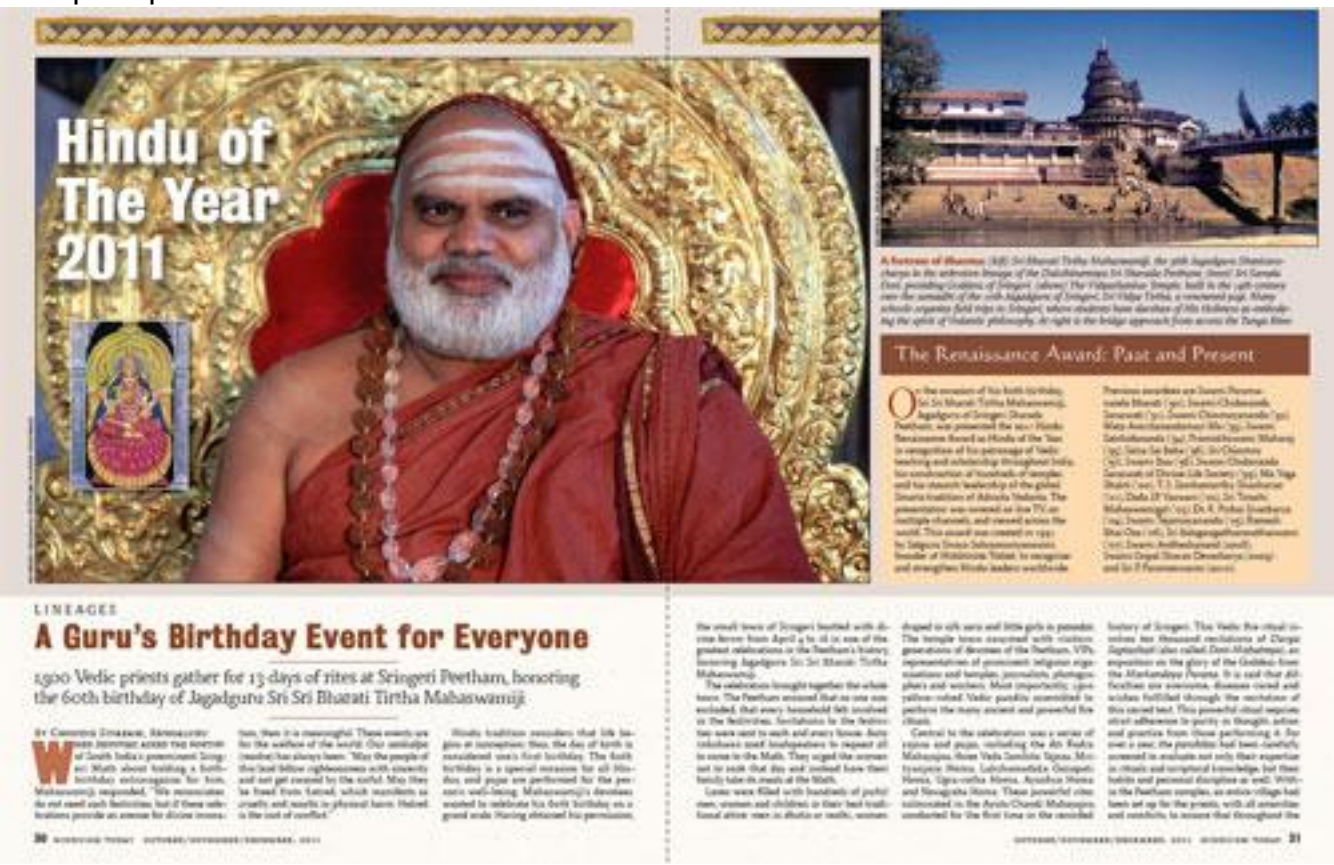
Lineages

A Guru's Birthday Event for Everyone

1,500 Vedic priests gather for 13 days of rites at Sringeri Peetham, honoring the 60th birthday of Jagadguru Sri Sri Bharati Tirtha Mahaswamiji HINDU OF THE YEAR 2011

By Choodie Sivaram, Bengaluru

Sample spread from this article



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When devotees asked the pontiff of South India's preeminent Sringeri Math about holding a 60th-birthday extravaganza for him, Mahaswamiji responded, "We renunciates do not need such festivities; but if these celebrations provide an avenue for divine invocation, then it is meaningful. These events are for the welfare of the world. Our sankalpa (resolve) has always been: "May the people of this land follow righteousness with sincerity and not get swayed by the sinful. May they be freed from hatred, which manifests as cruelty and results in physical harm. Hatred is the root of conflict."

Hindu tradition considers that life begins at conception; thus, the day of birth is considered one's first birthday. The 60th birthday is a special occasion for all Hindus, and pujas are performed for the person's well-being. Mahaswamiji's devotees wanted to celebrate his 60th birthday on a grand scale. Having obtained his permission, the small town of Sringeri bustled with divine fervor from April 4 to 16 in one of the greatest celebrations in the Peetham's history, honoring Jagadguru Sri Sri Bharati Tirtha Mahaswamiji.

The celebration brought together the whole town. The Peetham ensured that no one was excluded, that every household felt involved in the festivities. Invitations to the festivities were sent to each and every house. Auto rickshaws used loudspeakers to request all to come to the Math. They urged the women not to cook that day and instead have their family take its meals at the Math.

Lanes were filled with hundreds of joyful men, women and children in their best traditional attire: men in dhotis or vesthi, women draped in silk saris and little girls in pavadas. The temple town swarmed with visitors: generations of devotees of the Peetham, VIPs, representatives of prominent religious organizations and temples, journalists, photographers and workers. Most importantly, 1,500 yellow-robed Vedic pandits assembled to perform the many ancient and powerful fire rituals.

Central to the celebration was a series of yajnas and pujas, including the Ati Rudra Mahayajna, three Veda Samhita Yajnas, Mrityunjaya Homa, Lakshamodaka Ganapati Homa, Ugra-ratha Homa, Ayushya Homa and Navagraha Homa. These powerful rites culminated in the Ayuta Chandi Mahayajna, conducted for the first time in the recorded history of Sringeri. This Vedic fire ritual involves ten thousand recitations of Durga Saptashati (also called Devi-Mahatmya), an exposition on the glory of the Goddess from the Markandeya Purana. It is said that difficulties are overcome, diseases cured and wishes fulfilled through the recitation of this sacred

text. This powerful ritual requires strict adherence to purity in thought, action and practice from those performing it. For over a year, the purohitas had been carefully screened to evaluate not only their expertise in rituals and scriptural knowledge, but their habits and personal discipline as well. Within the Peetham complex, an entire village had been set up for the priests, with all amenities and comforts, to ensure that throughout the 13 days of celebrations they would not leave the sanctified area.

The atmosphere reverberated with sonorous chants as one thousand Vedic scholars recited the Chandi Paatha in unison. Devotees joined in the chanting of the Durga Saptashati. The Jagadguru's presence charged the air with Godliness.

On the dawn of the Vardhanti day, April 9, thousands of devotees gathered for Anhika Darshana, the sight of Jagadguru in meditation. This is a rare blessing, as acharyas normally perform their sadhanas in private. Sri Narasimhamurthy explains, "The Anhika Darshana is special and powerful since, during japa, the guru will be in communion with God. Having his darshan at this time connects us to the Divine; and if the guru's glance falls on us, it augurs well and removes our karma."

On the evening before the finale, heavy rains lashed Sringeri for three hours, bringing down portions of the yajnashala. No laborers or volunteers could be allowed inside the now consecrated space, so priests and trainees worked through the night to repair and restore the temporary structure.

Dr. V. R. Gowrishankar, the administrator of Sringeri Math and its properties, estimated, "In all, about half a million people attended. On April 9, Jagadguru's birthday, 70,000 people received His blessings." The 60th birthday is also called the 61st Vardhanti, from a Sanskrit root meaning "to grow, as the 61st year starts growing on this day.

Indeed, the scale of the event was massive. Many yajnas, homas and pujas were carried out simultaneously. The amount of raw materials required was astounding. Dr. Gowrishankar explained, "From the beginning, we had planned for half a million people. This meant, for example, having on hand 150,000 liters of mineral water, 10,000 plates for eating at one time, and another 10,000 for the next group; along with 200,000 banana leaves, also for feeding people. With our detailed planning, we

didn't encounter any major problems." Truckloads of wood for the homas were offered by the surrounding villages. In return, the Peetham has planted 100 saplings for every tree that was felled.

Guruvandana

On the eve of the Vardhanti, following time-honored tradition, Jagadguru personally performed puja at the shrine of Lord Malahanikareshwara (Siva) after praying at the temples of Sharadamba and Ganapati. Devotees were then given the opportunity to offer personal salutations to Jagadguru, an event called Guruvandanda. Thousands of people offered obeisance--devotees from Sringeri, from across India, and hundreds who had traveled from Australia, US, Canada, Middle East and other parts of the world. Offerings were also made by representatives from the Kashi Vishwanath Temple, Thirumala Tirupati Devasthnam, Dharmasthala, Kollur Mookambika, BGS and other religious institutions. Dr. Gowrishankar expressed the prevailing mood: "Devotees feel they have received so much by just uttering his name, by his grace, that we must give something as an expression of our devotion and bhakti. Twenty-two years after his ascending the Peetham, this was an occasion to express their gratitude to their guru and benefactor."

That auspicious Vardhanti evening also saw the release of a documentary film on the Jagadguru, "Life and Teachings of an Inspiring Saint;" a pictorial souvenir, Jagadguru Darshanam; and a commemoration volume, Jagadguru Vaibhavam, containing tributes by eminent scholars and dignitaries.

Serving the Satguru

Being constantly in the company of such a divine presence is a blessing. Those who closely interact with Jagadguru are quick to speak of his grace and mystical powers.

Krishnamoorthy says, "I joined the pathashala in 1983. The pontiffs went on an all-India tour, and we went as volunteers. I was thrilled that I could see the various places. In 1987 I was offered the chance to serve Jagadguru as his personal secretary. I got this opportunity because of the accumulation of punya [merit] from my past lives and the devotion of my forefathers."

Now Krishnamoorthy is always by the guru's side as his close confidante, having served him for 25 years. "From the beginning, I decided to remain a brahmachari. The job did not require me to remain a bachelor, but it was my choice. I knew that if I married, my time would be split and I would not be able to dedicate myself completely to my guru. I wanted to devote every minute of my life to him, and I have found bliss in doing so."

Narasimhamurthy narrates many incidents which illustrate the blessings Jagadguru has bestowed upon him and other devotees. He offered, "Gurugalu has vaak siddhi. His words are prophetic." Pt. Krishna Bhat added, "I've seen a lot of miracles. The way my life has turned out is itself a miracle; whatever work I do for guru is always successful." Another devotee, Ramachandra Sastrigalu, shared, "I lost my parents, property, everything very early. I did not know a single word of the Vedas till I was ten. My uncle taught me the Vedas and brought me here. Living here, I have found everything. Guru kripa and Devi's grace is essential. I am a happy man."

Divine Anecdotes

Shyamsundar Polishetty, a devotee since 1991, affirms, "I don't know how my life began, but I know it will end with Jagadguru. I graduated from college and had gone off track. Father threatened to throw me out of the house if I did not mend my ways. My aunt brought me to Jagadguru. Guruji asked me to prostrate before him. As I did, I don't know what happened, but a profound change came over me. I'm overpowered by Jagadguru and seek his grace for every breath I take. Whenever I travel out of the country, even if it is for a day, I come and seek his blessings. I have seen so many miracles happen in my life."

N. Sreenivasan, whose association with the Peetham began in the 80s, is India's biggest cement tycoon. He also sits atop India's famous cricket empire. Even in the middle of the crucial IPL cricket season, he participated for two days in the Vardhanti festivities. "Devotion brings me to Sringeri. Jagadguru is an embodiment of abundant love and grace and is an incarnation of Shankara for us. There is never an important festival or event which I miss. I come here to recharge my spiritual account. Every day, I worship Jagadguru's padukas (sandals). His benign gaze is sufficient; we should be worthy of his blessings. I derive my strength from Sri Sannidhanam. Whenever there is a crisis, I know He is with me." Cricket legend Anil Kumble seeks divine intervention through Sri Sannidhanam's blessings. "Whenever I come here and seek his blessings, I find peace. He is a guiding force."

Even other monastic orders revere Jagadguru and the Peetham and look to him for guidance. Swami Japananda of Sri Ramakrishna Sevashrama of Pavagada tells us: "The Ramakrishna Order of monks traces its roots to the Math through Paramahansa Ramakrishna's guru, Sri Tota Puri, who carried the Math's legacy. For this reason, even to this day, the Ramakrishna Math monks pay their highest tributes to the Dakshinamnaya Sharada Peetham."

Swami Dayananda Saraswati of Arsha Vidya Gurukulam opines, "Sometimes the acharyas gain stature because of their peethams. In other cases, a peetham gains stature because of its acharyas. Sringeri Peetham enjoys the glory of the heritage and also the glory of an exalted acharya."

No Distinctions

The number of devotees visiting Sringeri Math has increased steadily over the decades. The concept that Sringeri Math is a Brahminical institution, not open to outsiders, changes instantly when one observes and interacts closely with it. Over 95 percent of present-day visitors are of the non-traditional, non-Brahmin classes. Pandit Krishna Bhat observes, "Earlier, people who came were mainly the traditional parampara (lineage) devotees. Now the crowds have increased manifold, and people from all sects and places come to take darshan, often seeking the blessings of good education and intelligence for their offspring. Many vouch that their lives have been transformed through Jagadguru's blessings. They have been spiritualized, and wishes have been fulfilled."

Shyamsundar Polishetty, who hails from the business community, says, "Swamiji named both my children. We sought his blessings for the Anna Prashnam ceremony (first solid food). Guruji asked us to bring the child to the Adhistana temple, where he himself fed the child and performed the Anna Prashna. Would this have been possible if the Math was purely brahminical? We have never ever felt discrimination by the guru or administration."

Sringeri's auto rickshaw drivers echo similar sentiments. "We are proud to belong here. This is a divine land, and we have Jagadguru protecting us. To us, he is the visible God, and we seek his blessings in everything we do. We have never felt alienated because of our caste. He has been most benevolent towards us; he lends an ear to our difficulties, guides and helps us. We abide by his every word. Every member of this town is treated with warmth and care. Look at the number of people who flock to have darshan and his blessings. This proves that the Peetham is open

and fair to all."

Dr. Gowrishankar elaborates, "Eighty percent of our followers are non-brahmins. Even our donations are mostly from non-brahmins. We are an institution meant for human beings. All are welcome here. There are even many Christians who come to our Math and stay here and seek what they want. People from all sects come here, and all are treated equally, without discrimination. Anyone can walk in and have darshan of Goddess Sharada or the Jagadguru. There are no separate queues, entry fees or discrimination. Representatives from many institutions from different communities come to us to learn, seek guidance and set up their own religious maths." He adds, "Jagadguru dislikes caste discrimination. He believes there is only one creed, and that is the human race."

The Institution

The Peetham is dedicated to promoting nondualism and Vedic learning, upholding the Smarta traditions and advaita philosophy. Priests and scholars trained in the Sringeri method at the Peetham's gurukula are globally respected. Graduates serve at the Kathmandu Pasupathinath Temple and other ancient shrines.

While holding fast to the strength of tradition, the Peetham has kept pace with modern trends and technology. Its website is promptly updated with Jagadguru's latest discourses and current news of Math activities. The research center boasts a state-of-the-art digital knowledge database. Construction activities continue to expand, building new guest houses for devotees. The large dining hall is served by a highly efficient kitchen, feeding 10,000 people every day.

Sringeri Math has branches across India and abroad. New temples are being built in many cities in the US through the initiative of devotees there. Dr. S. Yegnasubramanian, founder of Vidya Bharathi Foundation, has been pivotal in expanding the Math's activities in US and Canada.

Dr. Gowrishankar travels to the US and other countries to oversee the Peetham's initiatives and to help bring the devotees together. He has also represented the Peetham at the UN General Assembly. The Jagadguru himself travels regularly across the country. The objective is to spread tradition and the universal truths of Adi Shankara's message. Across India and abroad, the Peetham's affiliate

organizations and branches are involved in a wide gamut of socio-cultural activities.

The Gurukula is a place for students and scholars from across the country to learn the Shastras and Vedas in their purest form and with authentic scholarly rigor. These initiatives are augmented by the Sanskrit Research Centre, which conducts research on ancient scriptures and has helped with reviving, digitizing and printing many rare and lost manuscripts.

For the Peetham, Jagadguru's Vardhanti was an opportunity to re-energize and catalyze all these activities. Dr. Gowrishankar says with a smile: "When we are working under the Guru, we become a part of the family. We all are one. When that sort of closeness exists, everything we ask for happens. We all are happy and smiling, and everything we want, we receive."PIpi

The Renaissance Award: Past and Present

On the occasion of his 60th birthday, Sri Sri Bharati Tirtha Mahaswamiji, Jagadguru of Sringeri Sharada Peetham, was presented the 2011 Hindu Renaissance Award as Hindu of the Year in recognition of his patronage of Vedic teaching and scholarship throughout India, his construction of hundreds of temples and his staunch leadership of the global Smarta tradition of Advaita Vedanta. The presentation was covered on live TV, on multiple channels, and viewed across the world. This award was created in 1991 by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, founder of Hinduism Today, to recognize and strengthen Hindu leaders worldwide. Previous awardees are Swami Paramananda Bharati ('90), Swami Chidananda Saraswati ('91), Swami Chinmayananda ('92), Mata Amritanandamayi Ma ('93), Swami Satchidananda ('94), Pramukhswami Maharaj ('95), Satya Sai Baba ('96), Sri Chinmoy ('97), Swami Bua ('98), Swami Chidananda Saraswati of Divine Life Society ('99), Ma Yoga Shakti ('00), T. S. Sambamurthy Sivachariar ('01), Dada J.P. Vaswani ('02), Sri Tiruchi Mahaswamigal ('03), Dr. K. Pichai Sivacharya ('04), Swami Tejomayananda ('05), Ramesh Bhai Oza ('06), Sri Balagangadharanathaswami ('07), Swami Avdheshanand (2008), Swami Gopal Sharan Devacharya (2009) and Sri P. Parameswaran (2010).

Venerated Founder of the Lineage, Sri Adi Shankaracharya

Twelve centuries ago, a young man, having mastered the Vedas and Shastras by the age of sixteen, traversed India twice, spreading the message of Advaita. One day he came to Sringeri, on the banks of the Tunga River in South India. Here he

witnessed a miracle: a cobra spreading its hood to shelter a frog from the scorching sun. Recognizing the power of this place which could transform mortal enemies into protective allies, the monk resolved to start a center of learning here to promote nondualism and universal peace. This young man was Sri Adi Shankaracharya. He spent 12 years in the riverside town, establishing the first of his four chief monastic centers, consecrating a temple to Goddess Sharadamba and anointing Sri Sureshvaracharya as the first Mathadhipati (spiritual head).

Their successors continued to spread the message of Advaita. The 12th guru, Sri Vidyaranya, was instrumental in establishing the mighty Vijayanagara Empire. The 34th Mathadhipati, Sri Chandreshekhara Bharati, had among his devotees the King of Nepal, the president of India and stalwarts from all walks of life.

The present beacon of this illustrious tradition is Sri Sri Bharati Tirtha Mahaswamiji. Ordained into sannyasa in 1974, he has been Jagadguru of Sringeri Math since 1989, when his guru, Sri Sri Abhinava Vidyatirtha Mahaswamiji, attained mahasamadhi.

Math Administrator, the Adroit, Adept Dr. V.R.Gowrishankar

The name Gowrishankar is synonymous with the Sringeri Peetham. He is the administrator and CEO of Sringeri Math and its properties. Equipped with a degree in management and science, Gowrishankar was carved for a corporate career: "I never dreamt I would become part of the Math. I belonged to a cosmopolitan world. It's a miracle and a blessing that the Goddess and Jagadguru have taken me into their fold." Our interview:

What is the secret of your success at managing the Math and its branches? Maybe my background of having come from a family that has been devoted to the Math for over 150 years and my exposure to the outside world have helped me in doing things this way. I consider that God and Guruji have given me an opportunity to serve society and the Math. For all the Grace that my family has received from the Math, this is one way of repaying it.

The day His Holiness gave me the Power of Attorney, he told me that if you want to be successful in this post, you will need to have the mental makeup to meet the

Prime Minister of this country, speak to him as the administrator of this Math and my representative, and maybe the same day go to a village in a bullock cart and meet people. Both you must be able to do with the same sense of commitment. This strength has come to me only through Goddess Sharada.

Have other maths benefitted from your experience? In the last 10 years, many maths have been incorporating what we do. We have a leadership role in this sense, and we take this as a responsibility to ensure that we do good things. For example, in 1987, with the blessings of His Holiness, I took a decision that the hundi (donation box) in the Math would be counted only by the bank and not by Math staff. There was a lot of opposition initially, but people accepted it. It has now become a common practice among almost every other institution, to show transparency and accountability.

What have been the new milestones achieved by the Math in the last 10 years? "The greatest achievement has been the consecration of the Adi Shankara Temple (in Sringeri), built in granite. Throughout India, there is no other separate temple for Adi Shankara.

Then there is the temple at Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, US, and two other temples coming up in the US.

We have many educational institutions, including colleges of engineering, medicine and management, and we have a very good hospital in Bangalore.

We also have a hostel for the children of convicts, which is home to 150 children, 90 boys and 60 girls. All of them are doing well; we are seeing to their education completely.

In every institution we support, we make a point of ensuring that its members spend some time in prayers and spiritual development. Bhagavad Gita chanting is a common thing. The students of our institutions fare well in society because they are spiritually attuned.

What is the Peetham's greatest strength? The greatest strength of the Sringeri Math is the guru parampara. The spiritual head of the Math never transgresses the boundaries set up by Adi Shankara. Today, whoever who can follow that code commands respect. In the process, we also carry out social work. We know our limitations, and we work to achieve what we can within them. The amount of money we spend annually on charity runs to several million dollars. But we eschew publicity.

What do you see as the role of the Peetham in the 21st century? The biggest challenge is to maintain the heights that we have attained. We have an untarnished 1,200-year-old history, and that must be protected. We must also guide people away from the unwanted, harmful influences that exist in society today. We must convince people of the importance of maintaining our traditional values.

What is your advice to administrators of other religious institutions? The person in charge of the institution should have and uphold high values. Only then will people who come to that institution start liking it. For example, if we collect a certain sum for a certain purpose, we use that money only for that purpose. Thus, the donors know that their money is being used properly. When they recognize this and feel a sense of belonging, they are inspired to do more.

That sort of involvement with devotees is the core from which you can build an institution. Otherwise, religious institutions which depend on donations won't survive for long. Most institutions today try to manage with a scheme to collect money, put it into a trust and use it later for various purposes. The author of each trust created it with certain aims and pushed those aims during his time. The next generation might try to continue with those aims as much as possible, with some changes. But within 50 years, with the third generation, new objectives replace the original goals. Whoever has access to the funds spends them according to his own ideals and aims.

If any institution is to continue in the future the way it is now, it needs the continuity a leader can provide. In our case, we have a guru whom we follow, who continues the original aims from generation to generation.