Special Feature: One Thousand Years of Service
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Special Feature

# One Thousand Years of Service

## A Festive Look at Karnataka's Bastion of Vira Saivism

Surrounded by vast fields of rice, a small village in Karnataka is home to one of Saivism's most dynamic monasteries. It was here, long ago, that a saint founded a lineage dedicated to bringing peace and succor to the people; and it is from here, today, that a guru leads this massive organization. Grounded in the teachings of Basavanna, a fiery reformer and superb poet, Suttur Math has stood the test of time and fulfilled its dharma as the protector of the needy. Shaped by a venerable past and looking into the future, this enterprising Vira Saiva monastery embraces the new in preparation for its next thousand years.

Sample spread from this article

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# The Founder's Festival

With Choodie Shivaram, Suttur

Adi Jagadguru Sri Shivarathreeswara Mahaswami ki jai!--the crowd roars with deafening enthusiasm, chanting the name of Suttur Math's founder. Over and over, this saint's name will be intoned, praised, revered and sung with entrancing repetition, as loudly as his devotees are able, during this annual six-day festival honoring his birthday. It has been happening this way for over a thousand years.

Suttur, one of the oldest maths (monasteries) in South India, is based in its eponymous village, a delightful but usually sleepy outpost in the Karnataka countryside about 17.4 miles from Mysore. It is an area where farmers, anticipating the blessings of the monsoon rains, work the vast acreage of paddy fields, their plows pulled by dutiful bovines whose colorfully painted horns contrast brightly with the dry earth. Here the gentle ways of old India are still the norm, where the serenity of country life grants immunity to the hustle of modern times. Most of the year, the peaceful charm of this tiny community conceals the scope and magnitude of Suttur Math's activities. But for one week each January, a sea of almost a million fervent devotees arrive to celebrate the founder's birthday.

The editors of Hinduism Today arrive on January 19, 2012, on the first day of the festival, with staff reporter Choodie Shivaram of Bengaluru and her husband Nagendra. Welcomed by musicians, local swamis and devotees, acrobats, dancers and the occasional elephants, we soon begin to appreciate the scope and scale of the traditional Suttur Jathra and understand why people travel long distances to attend.

A gathering of this magnitude attracts people from all over the state and beyond. Though India's booming cities get all the press about the country's potential, two thirds of the population still live in the countryside. For farmers and villagers, the jathra (festival) is an opportunity to put on your best clothes, take a break from usual duties, attend a masterfully organized event for free and, on top of it all, get

some blessings--for religion is intrinsically woven into each activity. Culture blends inseparably with art and faith. For those who have little opportunity for entertainment or recreation, every village fair is a social must, an eagerly awaited celebration, and the jathra is entertainment unlimited.

Not only villagers are here. Also joining in and paying their respects are state and national ministers, administrators and politicians, business tycoons, film stars, musicians--the rich, powerful and influential from all walks of life. Many are former students of one of the many educational institutions under the umbrella of Suttur Math, people who have attained a high position in their career and welcome the opportunity to return and offer support to JSS. (The acronym JSS, for Jagadguru Sri Shivarathreeswara, refers to the entire organization--Suttur Math and all its branches--and those three letters mean a lot in Karnataka and South India.)

The spectrum of festivities is overwhelming, with activities taking place simultaneously. Certain events recur several times each day, such as the pujas, abhishekams and small parades honoring Adi Jagadguru and the most recent gurus of the Math. The one-time events are bewildering in number and variety: the rathotsava (car festival), the rangoli competition, a religious meet, a bhajana mela with the best singers in the state, the Karnataka Vaibhava sound-and-light evening show, agricultural conferences to share information and technology pertinent to farming, a seminar on managing natural resources, a wrestling competition, the cattle show with hundreds of well-groomed bovines, an art and drawing contest for children, the sports meet, cultural shows, quiz competitions, a theppotsava (boat parade) for Adi Jagadguru, mass marriages for hundreds of couples and an hour-long, breathtaking fireworks display which stuns our editors and could be seen from miles away.

Attending is good for business, too. Healthy cows and bulls are sold and purchased in large numbers. A cow is a wonderful life-giving asset for country dwellers, providing strength in the fields, milk for food, and blessings for the home. Here at the jathra, the best are sold at lively auctions.

Even in the midst of all this activity, one never feels hurried or uncomfortably hustled as in a big city. Although these events evoke fervor and the human mass is often tightly packed, there is a pervasive sense of small-town courtesy, a natural, flowing pace that harmonizes the chaos. We see no one running or quarreling. The only cars are those of the organization; this is a festival where most people attend

barefoot.

Events like the Jathra Mahotsava help preserve our traditions and cultural identity and foster participation, the sense of belonging to the vast, ancient and vibrantly alive Sanatana Dharma. If one wants to immerse oneself in the landscape of Indian culture and the traditional arts of Karnataka, the annual Jathra Mahotsava at Suttur is the perfect opportunity. Culture, here, is not an aloof intellectual concept, but a pulsating, vibrant way of celebrating. Even before you enter Suttur, the festive excitement fills the air. The countless souls who attend exude a positive sense of pride in their heritage. Above all else, this is a religious celebration, a gathering of faith. At the center of it all is the guru, Sri Shivarathri Deshikendra Mahaswami, a brilliant manager whose incredibly meticulous instructions keep every detail under complete control.

## Parading Adi Jagadguru

Fireworks explode in the sky with a deafening boom just before the auspicious yatra parading the murti of the founder down the streets. A flock of gigantic birds circle above us, disoriented by the bone-rattling noise. But no--those are bats, enormous black bats, awe-worthy and creepy. As the hapless confused animals flee the area, we are reminded that loud fireworks are used in many cultures to scare away evil spirits, demons of mischief and darkness--and perhaps a few innocent bats, to symbolize the fleeing forces of ignorant evil.

The way thus cleared for the saint's parade, we are asked to be among the first group to tug on the giant ropes. We take our turn then soon yield to stalwart devotees who pull the utsava murti through the streets, stopping at temples and entering nearby villages. The giant car would return 10 hours later, having given darshan everyone in the neighborhood. The joyful crowd's frenzied chanting expresses an outpouring of devotion. Our kindly hosts take care that we are at their side every moment, safe from trampling.

Following the murti is a grand parade with dozens of floats, each based on a spiritual theme, enacting a story or showcasing a precept. The amateur actors on the brightly colored floats, mostly children, are gorgeous in their meticulously prepared costumes and makeup. The colors of the floats and costumes are vivid in the sun. A bull passes by decorated with money and a rudraksha halter, similar to Basava, the sacred bull featured in an article in the April/May/June 2009 issue of Hinduism Today. The event goes on and on, with amazing performances of popular

dancers, acrobats, fire-eaters, nadaswara players, drummers and anyone else capable of making noise. New York's Labor Day parade? Venice's carnival? Rio? No, Suttur is much more cool.

## Food and Lodging

Organizing such a festival is a mammoth effort. Over ten thousand volunteers, mostly teachers and students of the math's institutions, are engaged in the smooth conduct of the jathra to ensure that all basic needs are met. Camps provide ample space for devotees to sleep, keep their belongings and bathe, while three meals each day are provided to all, free of charge.

The mass feeding, or daasoha, is one of the most impressive features of this festival. It is a core demonstration of the Lingayat tradition, in which service to all is one of the highest tenets. We ask to see the kitchens that feed the 250,000 pilgrims who are present at any one moment in the jathra. (The total count of those who visit during the week-long event is estimated at over a million.) We expect a building--how naive of us! The "kitchen," a two-acre complex, is a roofed but open-air structure where six-foot-high mounds of colorful, fresh vegetables are being chopped, diced, minced, cut and prepared in bucketloads by dozens of volunteers and workers.

We walk a long row of unbelievably huge 800-gallon vats; these are heated over burning wood, day and night, to cook three meals a day for each pilgrim. As the cooks work, the vats, filled with sambar and other delights, make for a tantalizing mix of smells and colors.

In one corner, protected from the wind by straw walls, a large room stores tons of fully cooked rice. This is moved from pile to pile by strong men with big shovels. It is easier and more efficient to prepare the rice in advance, we are told. An ingenious, inexpensive system allows it to be stored, without spoiling, for a day or more: the cooked rice is laid on a bed of straw, which provides just the right amount of ventilation to keep its moisture level low.

Entering a large building, we walk past thousands of 80lb. rice sacks, hundreds of cases of ghee and great piles of aromatic spices. All these provisions have been donated in bulk by generous devotees.

The entire operation is run with precision and efficiency, from the cooking to the serving of food, with no chaos, no rush and no complaints.

## Exciting Performances

The third day of the festival begins with a flag-raising ceremony--just a small, inconsequential affair, if you can manage to disregard a few trifling details such as the twenty nadaswara players, the five acrobats doing bicycle stunts, the five actors dressed up as warriors with play swords, the eight female drummers, the countless male drummers, the security officers mounted on horses, the ocean of people attending and, of course, the elephant.

The streets reverberate to the drums accompanying the veeragase, a highly spirited, folk dance. Viragase Kunitha dancers representing Siva's ganas, their heads adorned in plumed crowns, wield sword and shield, dancing with regal ferocity.

There is so much to see, learn and do. Along the roadside are over 500 stalls, ranging from arts, crafts and clothes to renowned scientific organizations. Families can buy tasty foods, gadgets and even some home essentials. As the sun sets after a long and exciting day, the crowds gravitate to all-night plays based on Hindu epics, any sleepiness kept at bay by the enthralling and sometimes humorous storylines, and the stamina of the actors.

The worldly film music that dominates many other festivals is conspicuously absent; here the traditional Indian musical offerings rule. No incongruous sounds or lyrics detract from the street shows of native acrobats, traditional dances and folk song competitions that showcase, preserve and propagate the rare and ancient skills and music.

## Firewalk

As night darkens the paddy fields, the Hinduism Today team are escorted to the night's big event, a firewalk. Off we drive through a throng of people--think of a crowd walking shoulder to shoulder down an eight-lane freeway--all heading for the

firepit.

We park nearby. Our host takes our hand and we follow on his heels as he deftly opens a portal in the wall of bodies. We find ourselves at the pit's exit, our cheeks baking, just 20 feet from the coals which have been burning since ten in the morning. Ten men are tending the pit, flattening the coals with long iron shovels and fanning them to a still fiercer heat. As the workers clean off their shovels, hissing clouds of steam testify to the coals' heat.

Drummers are beating their instruments, creating a hypnotic rhythm. Viragase Kunitha performers dance in their warrior garb, frenzied, shouting, spinning. A man approaches in trance, his eyes wide and absent, guided by several others--he is to be the first across the coals. Another man comes, with a pink cloth on his head, holding a water pot. He, too, is in a trance, barely of this world, aided by a team that hold him up and keep his direction. He is to walk second. A brief puja is performed, and we all throw flowers into the pit. Drums roll, crowds cry for action and the dancers ready themselves. The firewalkers run! Two remain serene, though most grimace with pain. In less than a single minute it is done, and done well. They came to do penance, or to fulfill a vow spoken to God; and they have fulfilled it.

We drive back to our guesthouse, three horsemen riding ahead to part the mass of people. The celebrations will continue long into the night.

## Mass Marriage

The next morning features a mass wedding. Some 250 couples and their extended families are assembled under a giant tent pavilion. For the poor, such an event is a great boon. A proper religious wedding, with at least some appropriate garb and celebration, is a social requirement before a couple forms their own family; but the expenses of an individual wedding ceremony, if even remotely possible, could bankrupt the family. Without the help of organizations like Suttur Math to organize mass marriages, poverty can postpone a marriage far too long, leading to stress or even infidelity of groom or bride. If healthy families are the fabric which create a wholesome community, marriage is the essential thread.

As in the other events of this six-day festival, the list of dignitaries arriving to preside over the mass wedding is impressive, testimony to the tremendous

influence and respect so well earned by Suttur Math. Ministers and politicians vie to sit near the current guru of the Math, Sri Shivarathri Deshikendra Mahaswami, a well-beloved saint, hoping perhaps to obtain some of the goodwill that the locals feel toward the guru and JSS. Many speeches are given at the beginning of each event.

But it is the spiritual leaders, not the politicians, that attract the devotion and attention of the people. Swamis and pandits have come from near and far, and many of them run their own mammoth institutions. The names are impressive, a long list including Sri Shivalingendra Swamiji, Sri Yatheeswara Shivacharya, Sri Chidananda Swamiji of Mysore, Sri Rudramuni Swamiji of Tiptur and many other luminaries of the Hindu Renaissance, such as the Hindu of the Year for 2008, Dr. Sri Balagangadharanatha Mahaswamiji. The display of devotion is overwhelming: people flock in droves to respectfully touch the feet of these holy men, regardless of theological differences. Only the presence of security staff allows the swamis to reach the stage.

The marriages are performed by pandits in the Vedic style, with the blessings of Sri Shivarathri Mahaswami. True to the philosophy of Lingayatism, each union is blessed irrespective of caste or social standing. All aspects of the wedding are taken care of to ensure that the couples don't have to spend money on an expensive extravaganza.

## Education

The Suttur jathra is about much more than entertainment. The huge crowds, consisting largely of village folk and farmers, provide an ideal opportunity for mass education, and Suttur Math helps provide training that is otherwise unavailable to most of these people. Experts from all fields have been invited, and educational sessions have been carefully organized for farmers, women and children. The opportunities are inspirational for young and old alike.

In cities, a similar adult education event usually finds almost no audience, even when people are specially invited and goaded to come; but at the Suttur jathra, even esoteric discussions receive active participation from villagers. They listen, participate, understand and immerse themselves in the sessions.

An agricultural exhibition showcases the latest in farming technology and methods, promoting new crops and a pricing index for produce, even while explaining the importance of preserving traditional farming. Over 70 agricultural experts conduct lectures and workshops for farmers on the most effective methods of farming. Also offered are sessions on animal husbandry, health care and other vocational activities.

India's premier space organization showcases its programs with models of spacecraft, and its researchers explain the value of science to eager young minds. Other educational stalls share specialized knowledge: India's leading defense research organizations, food labs, technology organizations, manufacturers of cutting-edge machinery, medical research organizations and hospitals. Students of JSS schools and institutions confidently display their talent through science and social studies projects. The jathra also acts as a lightning rod for spiritual discussion and activities among hundreds of Lingayat monks, saints and religious leaders. Here spiritual leaders from different faiths and sects are participating in an all-faith meet, a colloquy on religion and spirituality like those which have shaped Hinduism through time immemorial. The varied theological viewpoints are not regarded as any sort of barrier: unity in diversity is the resounding motto.

## The Guru at the Center

At the heart of everything that Suttur Math does is the guru, heir to a thousand-year-old tradition of selfless service. He embodies and manifests the spiritual power of this long and venerated lineage. His life is dedicated to Siva, following the precepts of Adi Jagadguru, the founder of Suttur Math, and Saint Basavanna, the foremost expounder of Lingayat Saivism. Beyond doubt, he is the most popular attraction of this gigantic convention. Hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands of people flock to see him and touch his feet, asking for blessings. Ten hours a day and more, throughout the whole jathra, Swami untiringly sits on a simple chair on a porch near the temple, graciously giving darshan and blessing his devotees. A human tide comes to prostrate, never abating, ceaseless as waves against a seaside cliff. They are men, women and children of all walks of life, some wealthy and influential, some poor and humble. There are those who touch Swami's feet with respectful detachment, perhaps with a tinge of religious doubt. Others cling to his feet as if they were the mast in a storm, their pathway to salvation, asking for blessings they need not voice. In their shining faces, in their deep eyes, we see devotion and love, we see gratitude. Smiles abound, often showing more than one missing tooth.

The message is clear: because of the guru of Suttur Math, they are closer to God.

And in the eyes of Sri Shivarathri Deshikendra Mahaswami, a true Lingayat leader, these humble people are God Siva Himself.

As the event winds down with a stunning display of fireworks lasting more than one hour, with the serene waters of the Kapila River reflecting the illuminated boat-shrine for Adi Jagadguru, one can only think how fortunate it is that such a great yogi, one day long ago, initiated the spark that created all the wonders we see.

## Lingayats and the History of Suttur Math

By Choodie Shivaram, Suttur

The very existence of Suttur Math is due to its strategic location at the border between two great ancient kingdoms. A millennium ago, the region was mired in conflict between the powerful Ganga and Chola dynasties. Their armies were massing for battle. The Chola king had ridden out to inspect his troops, when suddenly his horse stopped short at a hill called Siddhara Betta. Despite the monarch's urgings, it refused to go further. Intrigued by the steed's strange behavior, the king explored and found a tapasvi (a yogi performing austerities) meditating in a cave. The sight of the yogi provoked a deep experience in the Chola monarch, who heard inwardly the divine sound of Pranava Aum.

Learning about the impending strife, the saint met with the warring kings and convinced them of the futility of battle, the transience of victory, the brevity of human existence and the higher purpose of life. He thereby brought about a peace accord, and the opposing monarchs did not clash.

Seeking a stable peace, both kings requested that the mendicant saint stay in Suttur. In order to inspire the yogi to not wander away, the Chola king built a small Siva temple, which still stands today. (This temple was renovated in 1988 by Ganapati Sthapati, the same master architect who designed Iraivan Temple in Hawaii).

The devotion of both the Cholas and Gangas led to the founding of Suttur Math. Soon, surrounding kingdoms also came under the guru's influence, and their kings became his disciples and generous patrons to the math. "There are inscriptions citing these incidents. The birth of Suttur Math is well documented," says octogenarian Gangadharan, a prominent Lingayat and devotee of Suttur Math.

Even the name "Suttur" is tied to the saint and the king's horse. One day the Chola king was preparing to visit his capital at Kanchi. He requested the saint to not leave; but on his return, he was distressed because he could not find the sage. Once more, his steed was more perceptive. The horse jumped into the Kapila river, which was in spate, and performed three pradakshinas (circumambulations) of a particular spot. Investigating, the king found the sage there in deep meditation amid the turbulent waters. Thus was the village given its present name: in the local Kannada language, suttu means circumambulation and ooru means place. The original name has long since been forgotten.

This great yogi was none other than Adi Jagadguru Shivarathreeswara Swamiji. Like many wandering monks, he had stopped temporarily in a peaceful spot to perform penance. It is no wonder he had not wished his meditations disturbed by the territorial wars of two great empires!

Having created a stronghold of peace and devotion to God, and longing for complete union with Lord Siva, Adi Jagadguru was determined to relinquish his worldly responsibilities and return to his meditations. As his successor he nominated Sri Eshaneshwara Wodeyar, a scholar from Kashi, initiating the lineage that continues to this day.

In line with its Vira Saiva philosophy, service to the needy was central to the activities of the math. The young organization began to provide shelter and food to travelers, especially those who were traveling to temple fairs, and Suttur Math soon became popular among pilgrims from far and wide. The Someshwara temple nearby is said to have been constructed by the Chola kings in accordance with the wishes of Sri Eshaneshwara. This event is recorded in a stone inscription dated October 23, 1032.

## Lineage

Suttur Math follows the virakta method of succession, in which the next guru is chosen from among the family members of the current guru, those descended from a sibling or another close relative. This differs from the more common sannyasa succession, pattada, in which a guru chooses one of his monastic disciples as his successor or a brahmachari from the coummunity. The third guru of Suttur Math was a relative of the second guru, Eeshaneshwara Swamiji. This appointment established Suttur's unbroken tradition of familial succession.

According to custom, the guru gives diksha, or initiation, to his successor when he feels the time is appropriate. The disciple's head is shaved and the senior guru performs abhishekam (ritual ablution) to him; then a document of nomination is inscribed on silver foil and tied to his forehead. In the presence of a huge assemblage of monks from other maths, seniors and devotees, the junior guru ascends the spiritual throne and (in most recent decades) is adorned with a diamond-studded crown. Renowned guests and heads of various maths sign a document declaring his nomination as successor, and he is then taken in procession around the town.

At Suttur, a successor is identified early on and announced to the community; there is no secrecy. He is trained systematically and takes over when the senior feels the time is appropriate. If the guru dies without nominating a successor, the elders and other senior gurus nominate a successor and give him diksha.

It is a challenge to ensure that external influences do not affect the personality of the successor, since he lives in a non-monastic world in his early years, attending school and college before formally ascending his spiritual position. To counter worldly influences, the guru maintains a close influence on the nominee, engaging him closely in the math's activities and programs. The 22nd guru of Suttur, Sri Mantra Maharishi, nominated his successor, Rajendra, when the boy was six months old. He kept the youth under his watchful gaze at all times.

Sri Shivarathri Deshikendra Mahaswami, the present guru, earned a masters degree from Karnatak University. He became the leader of the spiritual lineage in 1986, when he was 29 years old, after the passing of his uncle, Sri Rajendra Swamigal.

## Philosophy

Suttur is a Vira Saiva monastery-temple complex following an ancient line of theology that was greatly redefined and reinvigorated by Basava, a 12th-century saint. Vira Saivism's chief philosophical principle, Shakti Vishishtadvaita, accepts both difference and non-difference between soul and God. Like the sun and its rays, Siva and the cosmic force are one; yet Siva is beyond His creation. God is both efficient and material cause, and His creation is real, not illusory.

Great spiritual leaders teach compassion and respect for others in ways that often result in social change. In the South Indian state of Karnataka, these efforts were spearheaded by the revolutionary and often radical life of Basava, also known as Basava Anna (elder brother Basava) or Basavanna. Fervently opposed to all social barriers to God realization, he urged people to seek oneness with Siva and treat all other men and women as equals.

The main tenets of Basavanna's teachings are simple enough to be understood by anyone: ardent love for God Siva only (rejecting other Deities); fierce support of social equality; and constant affirmation that Siva is everywhere, in everyone. He wrote verses in Kannada in a format known as vachana, or structured prose (see sidebar). One of these declares, "I'm the only devotee in this world, for all others are Siva."

Basava is believed to have been born to a Brahmin family in a village called Bagewadi, in the Bijapur district of Northern Karnataka. From a young age, as a student at the Saivite religious center of Kudalasangama, he rebelled against the divisions and rigid barriers of the prevailing caste system, which violated the principle of universalism pervading the stories of great saints. As an adult, he joined the court of the Saiva King Bijjala (1157-1167 ce), who ruled from Kalyana (now called Basavakalyan), about 37 miles from Gulbarga in northern Karnataka. He married the daughter of a wealthy man and, through his own merit and formidable intellect, became a chief minister and financial advisor to the king.

One of Basavanna's chief innovations was the personal worship of the Linga as Lord Siva. The adherents called Lingayats are by far the main Vira Saiva group today. The name is derived from the Kannada word Lingavantha (one who adorns the Linga). By advocating personal, daily worship of the Lord, he broke with the established idea that priests were essential for a true communion with the Divine. If anyone, whether brahmin or Dalit, could wear a Sivalinga, lower castes felt empowered even if barred from attending temple services.

Basavanna began expounding his philosophy while at court in Kalyana. He preached that the devotion of people to God is a direct relationship that does not require priests as middlemen. He banned untouchability for those initiated into Ishtalinga worship. He rejected the social caste system but embraced the principle of duty and reincarnation. Karma, he explained, was not fate. One's place in society should be determined more by kayaka (the kind of work one performs) than by one's social position at birth. In Basava's philosophy, all people are born equal and gain or lose standing according to their actions in the present life.

He was a fiery poet, often writing vachanas which boldly clashed with the established order (see sidebar). Many people have been burned at the stake in Europe for lesser heresies, showing how tolerant Hinduism can be of dissenters. And there was much for him to lose. By allowing untouchables to have lunch at his residence and praising the unheard-of marriage of a Brahmin woman and an untouchable man, Basava raised the ire of local nobles. Under pressure, King Bijjala ordered the mismatched married couple to be harshly punished. Basavanna strongly protested, and the king ordered him to either be silent or leave. He left.

He wandered the countryside, preaching about humanity, morality, honesty, simplicity, the dignity of labor and equality among all humans. He left his body a few months later, on September 30, 1196, at age 62.

The pithy wisdom and reformist messages of Basavanna's teachings attracted followers from far and wide, and the movement grew. Other saints joined, male and female, reformers who carried on his message. They are known as Siva Sharanas (those who seek refuge in Siva): Allama Prabhu, Akka Mahadevi and Channabasavanna, Basavanna's nephew. They formed the nucleus of the Lingayat faith, which soon spread and flourished.

Even though Basavanna was born many decades after Suttur Math was founded, his theology and philosophy shaped the practices of Suttur, which today is completely a Lingayat monastery. This was not a rift, just a greater emphasis on service to all and personal daily worship.

Lingayatism is a development of the original Vira Saiva theology. Lingayat philosophy urges seekers towards a true union of the soul with Siva, described as sunya, void or nothingness, through a progressive six-stage path of devotion and surrender, until soul and God are fused in a final state of perpetual God consciousness. To attain this and stay on the right path, seekers follow a fivefold code of conduct (panchachara): lingachara (daily worship of the personal Sivalinga), sadachara (duty and work), sivachara (acknowledging Siva as the one God who is equally in all people), bhrityachara (humanity towards all creatures) and dasoha (nurturing and caring for the community).

The progressiveness of Lingayat philosophy and culture played a significant role during India's freedom struggle, when new national leaders advocated new values--abjuration of caste, women's empowerment and suffrage--which had been central pillars of Lingayatism for centuries. The Times of India, in its issue dated May 17, 1918, paid a glowing tribute: "Basava sketched and boldly tried to work out a large and comprehensive programme of social reform with the elevation and independence of womanhood as its guiding point. Neither social conferences which are usually held in these days in several parts of India, nor Indian social reformers can improve upon that programme as to the essentials. The present-day social reformer in India is but speaking the language and seeking to enforce the mind of Basava."

Though temple worship was de-emphasized by Basavanna, it was not prohibited. Vira Saivism's tradition of devotion includes temple worship, and Suttur Math is recognized for preserving and protecting several temples. Recently, it renovated several ancient dilapidated places of worship under the guidance of Ganapati Sthapati, India's late Vastu temple-building expert.

Ascetics, saints, yogis and swamis of all traditions are revered by Lingayats and awarded distinguished respect. The jangamas (literally "on the move"), renunciates who move from place to place spreading the message of Vira Saivism, are the guardians of the faith, reinvigorating it and correcting deviations anywhere they go. These days, they are few, but of legendary dedication.

Initiated Lingayats are staunch vegetarians, teetotalers, and non-smokers. They eschew any habits that might sully the sanctity of the God who is with them.

## Ishtalinga Puja

The wearing and daily worship of the Ishtalinga--a tiny personal Sivalinga, worn by the devotee at all times--is a unique aspect of Lingayatism. This special Linga is made from stone, with all the proper Agamic proportions. It is then enveloped in a a protective sheath concocted of 57 herbs, minerals and wax and skillfully shaped by craftsmen to resemble a black oviod Sivalinga without its base. This is encased in a small wood or silver casket called karadige with a string attached for wearing around the neck.

Lingadharane, the ceremony of initiation among Lingayats, can be performed at any age, but it is usually done before birth, in the seventh month of pregnancy. The family guru performs puja and gives the Linga to the mother, who then ties it to her own Ishtalinga until birth. At birth, the mother immediately secures the new Ishtalinga to her child. At around eight to eleven years old, the child receives diksha to perform personal puja. Nandeesh, a senior devotee and volunteer, explains the signficance: "With Ishtalinga puja, the person's confidence level soars. He knows God is with him, within him, and he does not have to look elsewhere. The realization that God is part of him prevents him from taking to bad ways and indulging in unethical practices."

From birth to death, the child wears the Linga on the chest, over the heart. After death the person is buried with the Ishtalinga in the left hand, just as for the daily puja. (Lingayat tradition mandates burial, not cremation.) Every Lingayat who wears the Ishtalinga literally holds God in his palm.

Puja to the Ishtalinga consists of offering water, milk, honey, curd, sugar, banana, fruits, vibhuti, flowers, bilva leaves and more, along with the chanting of mantras and vachanas in Kannada. Properly performed, the ritual takes over an hour, through which the Linga is continuously held still on the left palm, which is quite a strenuous discipline.

Sadly, observing this daily personal worship is not universal among Lingayats anymore. "All Lingayats, whether sannyasis or householders, are obligated to perform this puja religiously. But things have changed with the advent of modern living and globalization. Very few, especially among the young, adhere to this. They wear the Ishtalinga, but pujas have become shortened and many don't find the time for worship," laments Gangadharan, a prominent Lingayat and devotee of Suttur

Math.

As in any religion, not all followers embrace all the principles of the faith. Basavanna's ideals have not yet completely erased the caste system among Lingayats. Especially regarding marriages, an older mentality still exists, though usually concealed.

## Inside a Vast Organization

By Choodie Shivaram, Suttur

Suttur Math is a nexus of social activities. A pivotal figure in this development was the 22nd guru, Sri Pattada Shivarathreeshwara Swami. In his mid-forties, Swamiji fell critically ill. All treatments failed to improve his condition. He remained unconscious, and there was little hope of his recovery. Swamiji's successor, young Rajendra, anxiously rushed to Mysore and brought the Mysore Palace pandit, Gowrishankar, widely respected for his knowledge and insights. The pandit bid the unconscious sage to get up, saying there was much work ahead of him. Swamiji got up. Handing him a pen and book the Pandit directed him to begin writing the panchakshara mantra, "Aum Namasivaya." That was his cure, and that became his mission.

Pattada Swamiji wrote the mantra relentlessly, 12 hours each day, without fail, for ten years. Because of this tapas, he came to be known as Mantra Maharishi.

During Hinduism Today's visit to Suttur Math, the team visited a series of shrines for the last three gurus of the parampara (lineage). The shrine for the Mantra Maharishi radiated an unusually intense shakti. One of the Suttur swamis went to the shrine and brought out the source of that tangible spiritual power--a book the guru had filled with the Aum Namasivaya mantra, in handwriting so perfect it seemed almost like print. By the end of his life, Mantra Maharishi had written the mantra 22 million times, filling hundreds of such books, creating artifacts of spiritual power and devotion which are now spread throughout the math.

## Focus on Education

Under the guidance of Mantra Maharishi and his tireless successor, Suttur focused its gaze on education as a means to transform society, and the math itself. Maharishi had not received a formal education, but he recognized its value and importance. Determined that his successor be educated, he sent Rajendra to Mysore to study Sanskrit. While still a teenager, in 1928 Rajendra Swamiji set up the first hostel at Mysore to share educational facilities with poor students. In the 1930s Mantra Maharishi constructed a primary school for deprived children who would normally not receive an education.

Hostels for poor children were started in surrounding villages. High schools were founded in Mysore, Chamarajnagar and Nanjangud. Success encouraged the guru to start a college in Mysore, where he was closely associated with the roal family, as devotee Gangadharan points out. Further, "He utilized donations and resources well and invested in agriculture."

Today Suttur's educational system counts 310 schools from kindergartens to post-graduate centres, spread across the country. Gangadharan reflects, "All this happened with intuition and blessings of the gurus. Rajendra Swamiji would sit in dhyana at Adi Jagadguru's samadhi shrine and seek permission before embarking on any project. Only after receiving a sign of approval would he proceed. [Belief is that if a garland or flower drops from the Deity's right side, it is a sign of blessing; falling from the left side--signifies disapproval.] Every project or action has been undertaken with Adi Jagadguru's consent, even to this day."

Gangadharan continues. "I came to this institution in 1943 as an orphan with empty hands, without any resources or support. Because of Mantra Maharishi I received education enabling me to acquire three degrees, including a law degree. Ever since, I have been involved in serving all the JSS organizations and institutions."

The JSS Mahavidyapeetha (JSS MVP, the educational branch of Suttur Math) has over 50,000 students at any given point in time. The institutions include nurseries for toddlers of working rural women, schools to impart primary and secondary education in both local language and English, colleges, polytechnics, institutes of technology, medicine colleges and gurukulas. JSS MVP is now present in almost every sphere of education. Colleges have been established even in far-off places, such as United States, Mauritius, Dubai and South Africa. Shrewd management and keen and continued watchful supervision from the gurus have ensured ongoing

success and sustainability.

## A Continued Leadership

The current guru, Sri Shivarathri Mahaswami, who ascended to the pitham (spiritual seat of authority) even before his 30th birthday, had big sandals to fill. Judging by the results, he never flinched. A laconic man, Sri Shivarathri Mahaswami has a keen eye for detail and a unique method of communication, often speaking in sharp silence with his eyes, directing with a glance or a wave of hand, making Spartan use of spoken words. "He has the ability to identify talent and to rope in the right people for his organization. He also has a vision and is willing to synergize this with the vision of others if there is scope for development. He has a progressive mind," says Dr. V. Prakash, India's leading nutritionist and food technologist.

Suttur Math's branches are led by able administrators, Mahaswamiji's brothers, other immediate family and loyalists who have grown under the benevolence of the math. The guru himself is in complete command and control of every activity. After his personal daily worship, his routine is packed with discussions with religious leaders, visits to temples and villages across the state and reviewing the math's educational institutions and activities. Amidst all this, he still finds time make himself available to devotees and visitors, and to travel abroad.

## Education As Service

The imposing JSS School at Suttur, has an inspiring story, which Mahadevappa, one of the teachers, narrates: "In 2001, there was a stone quarry near Mysore where workers were being forced to work 18 hours a day as bonded laborers. Some had been chained. Swamiji wanted to give their children a better education. The math took all the workers' children under its care. Swami later traveled in the interior of North Karnataka and found that there, too, the children of the extremely poor were deprived of education. He announced that whoever wanted their child to receive education could bring them to Suttur, and the math would take care of them! In a few days, lorry loads of children arrived. We were not geared up for such a response. So overnight, the plans to make this an international school were shelved. The children were accommodated in this palatial building, and the school was started."

The school now has 3,700 children from the first to tenth grades. They belong to various religions and regions. Their boarding and lodging and all other needs are

provided at no charge. The math has assigned village women as their caretakers, to ensure they receive the warmth and care of being in a home. "We have not compromised on the quality of education just because it is free," says Mahadevappa.

Village women are also employed to roll 10,000 chapattis every day and cut vegetables. "Instead of mechanizing the system, Swamiji felt this would not only provide employment to the village women and keep them engaged, the food would also have a personal touch," says Nandeesh.

## Other Activities

The educational empire initiated during the time of Shivarathreeshwara Swami is just one part of Suttur Math's social programs. The math now employs over 15,000 personnel. Nearly 300,000 patients receive treatment at their hospitals and health centers. A hi-tech 3,000-bed hospital has just opened at Suttur, catering to the wealthy but also providing state-of-the-art medical treatment to the poor, free of charge. Many of the JSS institutions are commercially operated, charging for their services. But the fees charged of those who can afford payment are widely transmuted into free services for those who cannot.

"Equal focus is placed on religious activities," says Gangadharan. Suttur Math runs gurukulas at Mysore and Suttur, training 150 children in traditional knowledge and rituals. They are later sent to various Lingayat maths in villages and towns that are under the cover of Suttur Math. The gurukula at Suttur, established in 2000, offers residential training to deserving disciples. Discourses on Agamas and the Vedas are held at the gurukula for disciples. The students also partake in religion camps.

The math also has mobile vans in which a monk goes into villages and gives an Ishtalinga to Lingayats who have not been initiated and perform Lingadharane for those who wish to join the Lingayat faith.

For elderly retirees who wish to live a simple, religious life close to holy temples, the math has created the Hiriyara Mane, an old-age home, with qualified care staff who provide essential care and comfort.

Farming is by no means forgotten, as many, if not most, Suttur devotees are farmers. The JSS Krishi Vigyan Kendra project uses biotechnology to empower the farming community. It has trained over 10,000 farmers in scientific methods such as soil testing, composting, and creating a seed processing unit and a composting facility.

## The Community

Community ties are a large part of the math's activities. Apart from education, the Math is involved in providing healthcare, employment, empowerment opportunities for women, vocational training, while reviving folk arts and traditional ways of life.

Suttur's philosophy and activities are highlighted most visibly each year during the dazzling jathra festival. That great annual confluence of humanity provides an opportunity for celebration and renewal of faith and brings together professionals with the uneducated, those who are empowered with those who seek empowerment. But every day of the year, every year, Suttur Math works quietly, steadily and efficiently to uphold the ideals of Adi Jagadguru and Basava. This has been the way of the Vira Saiva Suttur Math for centuries, under the keen administration and profound devotion of its gurus.  PIpi

## A Guru's Amazing Rites of Worship

The room is white, its walls and floors smooth marble. in one corner sits a quiet swami, a devoted man who dedicates his life to serving Siva and helping thousands. In front of him is a small table with dozens of precious utensils of gleaming silver and a tray of flowers; on his right, a tiny statue of Adi Jagadguru, the founder of his lineage; on his left, three priests are chanting. The sound of prayers and mantras is full and melodious, reverberating in the small room. A few guests are attending his daily private worship. The sun has not yet risen.

Methodically, Sri Shivarathri Deshikendra Mahaswami offers flowers to Adi Jagadguru, arranging the offerings around the murti with deft perfection. Monks of all ages come and go continuously, helping him light camphor, fill ghee lamps and remove trays. Not a word is spoken; Swami waves his fingers subtly, gestures with his eyes and whatever he needs is supplied by his well-trained disciples. No flower petal remains on the floor, no spilled drop goes unattended.

From a large silver pendant hanging from his neck he produces a round, black Sivalinga, the form of formless God. It is a sight to behold, a personal artifact rarely exposed to outsiders.

With evident joy, he handles the stone as his personal temple, as a precious treasure, as God. He pours water on it from a silver container. Then, drawing from a tray with dozens of minuscule pots filled with myriad substances, he pours liquids on the stone, one by one, then rinses it, anointing the artifact with vibhuti after each ablution. The chanting has never stopped. When the priests' voices lose luster, Swami spurs them on with his strong, booming voice.

Throughout the puja, he holds the Linga on his outstretched left palm. He makes offerings with his right hand, now and again concealing it under a simple cloth embroidered with arcane symbols, while twisting his fingers in mystic mudras which are rahasya--secret.

A few monks come and prostrate, the open their own sacred capsules, and sit in a semi-circle beside their guru. holding their Sivalingas under swami's hand, one underneath the other. As liquid that is poured over the guru's personal Sivalinga, it cascades down, bathing in succession all of their Lingas. The monks take turns, allowing others to also come and receive the grace. Swami holds his Sivalinga on his hand for a long time as his shishyas come and go, his seemingly untiring arm steady, strengthened by years of daily ritual. With the fingers of his right hand he holds a specially shaped silver vessel with an orifice at the bottom, from which water slowly bathes the stone.

Finally, monks finally bring him a silver lotus flower with a hole in the center, which he fits around the linga to make his hand a tray for flowers. His palm still touches the stone, in intimate contact with Divinity. Everyone in the room chants the 108 names of Siva with enraptured devotion. The guru invites his monks and guests to also offer flowers to the altar that is his hand.

Seated close together, Swami and the Hinduism Today team wave lamps of burning camphor and ghee in circles. At the height of the ceremony, blessings seem to fill the room like infinite inner light. God is in all, all is God.

The sun has risen. The day may now begin for the head of Suttur Math.