

[Karnataka: Chitrapur's Innovative Leader](#)

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Carrying on 300-year-old traditions: Swami performs Vyasa puja on Guru Purnima.



KARNATAKA

Chitrapur's Innovative Leader

Sadyojat Shankarashram Swamiji sets new patterns for passing dharma to the next generation and service to his community



BY SHAILAJA GANGULY, MUMBAI

AT THE AGE OF 35, A YOUNG SWAMI from the Saraswat brahmin community was immersed in his sadhanas at Mount Abu, Rajasthan, when an emissary of his community approached him regarding the spiritual leadership of the Chitrapur Math in Karnataka. The head of the math, His Holiness Parijnanashram III Swamiji, had just passed away without naming his successor. The emissary's request: that Swamiji take over the math. Thus did His Holiness Shrimat Sadyojat

Shankarashrama Swamiji become the eleventh guru of this lineage. He is notably publicity shy; only after three years of polite requests did he finally grant me the interview for this article.

There are approximately 25,000 Saraswat brahmins today. Many live in Karnataka, but they are also found across northern India, from Kashmir to Bengal, and now in other countries, including the US. They trace their origins to the Saraswati River civilization and find mention in the Vedas. Prior to 1700, some of them—Smarta Saraswats, who follow the teachings of Adi Shankara—migrated from the Goa area to Karnataka, without a spiritual leader. This was a period when a number of Hindu communities were fleeing the persecution and atrocities then common in the Portuguese colony.



Shri Chitrapur Math, Shirali, Karnataka



Around 1700, a sannyasin of the Ashram order (one of the Dasanami orders of sadhus) came to Karnataka from Kashmir. He became Shrimat Parijnanashram I Swamiji (the “I” differentiating him from subsequent heads of the same name) and established the first math in Gokarna. His successor, Swami Shankarashram I (of the same name as the current head), firmly established the math’s spiritual authority in the Saraswat community. Upon his passing in 1757, the Chitrapur Math was founded at the site of his samadhi (burial) in the seaside village of Shirali. In a pattern oddly frequent to this lineage, he left no designated successor, so one had to be chosen from the community, as was the case in 1997 with the ordination of our Swami Shankarashram.

Capturing the Next Generation

A natural teacher and lecturer, Swamiji has developed innovative programs with a particular focus on engaging the community's youth. With the help of about 75 young adults trained as workers and leaders, Swamiji established eight prarthana centers in 2007 for children of ages 5-15. Now there are 41 schools, including five in the US and one in the UK.

Swami explained, "Many parents felt guilty and helpless. Their children were not getting value-based education, even in the best of schools. If both parents work or do not know enough and there are no grandparents, children have no one to tell them stories or anecdotes and make them aware of their glorious heritage. Our leaders have also helped children who are unwilling to share problems with their parents or whose problems have actually been compounded by the parents. They are now keen to participate regularly and take part in interactive discussions and all the creative and cultural activities."



Swamiji holds a interactive discussion during a camp for young adults

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In addition to the prarthana centers there are 23 yuvadhara centers for some 700 young adults, actively involved in various projects such as cleaning, tree-planting, festivals, PowerPoint presentations of the math's work and more. "They sense a growing identification with something good and worthy," Swamiji says. "Here the youth have opportunities to express themselves and their potential in ways not available in the classrooms."

The math has produced a well-made video ( [bit.ly/ChitrapurYouth](http://bit.ly/ChitrapurYouth)) on one of their 2012 youth camps. Two camps are held each year, one in Pune and one in Bengaluru, engaging city-raised children in a wide range of activities—puja, garland making, worship, spreading manure in fields, cleaning reservoir ponds,

meditating and even martial arts. Judging by the video, it is an exemplary program.

The math also runs a small Veda pathashala (priest training school) with twelve boys in residence. When trained, they will serve either in their home community or in Chitrapur and its related maths.

In 2002, to encourage the use of Sanskrit, Swami created an educational program called Girvaana Pratishtha, which now has 18 centers in India and three abroad. Sixty devotees have completed the teacher's training, 1,500 have passed the conversation test and 1,000 have passed the theory exam.

Through the Srivali Trust, Chitrapur Math has established Srivali High School with 352 students and Mallapur High School with 250. A second agency, the Parijnan Foundation, funds a 45-seat program of vocational training for 45 underprivileged young women. So far, Swamiji reports, "Over 500 have graduated and many have started their own businesses."

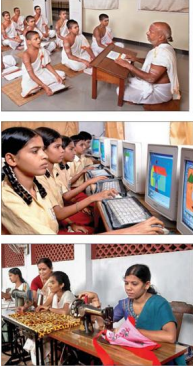
A museum at the math displays books and sculptures, some quite ancient, to inspire the younger generation. "Volunteers help clean and preserve our vast collection of palm-leaf manuscripts, which are then photographed and preserved for posterity," says Swamiji.

## Life at Chitrapur Math

The math has a 35-acre campus with an additional 25 acres of farm land. Worship, bhajana and cultural events are attended by 150 to 200 visitors daily and as many as two thousand on festival days. When in residence, Swamiji gives discourses and holds guided meditations.

Every day at 6 am brahmin priests conduct an hour-long puja, with Swamiji doing the abhishekam to the six Sivalingams at the six samadhi shrines of earlier gurus and other shrines. At midday there is arati for the main Deity, Lord Bhavanishankar,

and Swamiji's predecessor. From 4 pm to 7 pm, Swamiji is available to visitors. The main puja and abhishekam of the day, for Lord Bhavanishankar, begins at 7 pm. Swami sets aside one or two days a week for a personal silent retreat.



Upliftment programs: Classical Sanskrit study for boys at the math's Veda Pathasala; computer literacy is part of the Srivali High School syllabus; young ladies' vocational training sponsored by the Parijnan Foundation offers them financial independence

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During the rainy season, July through September, Swamiji observes the Chaturmasya Vrata tradition by remaining in one of the lineage's other maths—Shirali, Gokarna, Mallapur, Mangalore, Bengaluru, Pune or Karla—and his resident center becomes the parent math during that time. He has taken devotees on pilgrimage to Mount Kailas, Chardham, Amarnath, Vaishnodevi, and two journeys to trace the course of the ancient River Sarasvati.

Swamiji reaches the global Saraswat community through his books on meditation, monthly math newsletter, audio CDs and the Internet. For more information, go to [www.chitrapurmath.net](http://www.chitrapurmath.net) or listen to Swamiji on YouTube at [bit.ly/chitrapur](http://bit.ly/chitrapur)

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