Swami Chidanand
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Fast-paced Swami Heads Huge Ganges Complex & Hindu Encyclopedia

Swami Chidanand Saraswati carries printed schedules of his kinetic travel engagements - not to impress visitors. But just so you will know where he is on planet Earth on any given day. If he had pockets, you'd expect that he carried a small date-log computer, like a business executive. No pockets, but he is installing computers at the sprawling Parmarth Niketan monastery/pilgrimage hostel complex that rises off the Rishikesh Ganges bank. This past spring Swami Chidanand publicly became the president of the Parmarth Niketan Trust when his guru, Swami Dharmananda, died in February. Swami told HINDUISM TODAY in an interview that he has actually been serving as the president for six years now, appointed by Swami Dharmananda. Three years ago, the swami took on the left-brain, organizing side of the historic Encyclopedia of Hinduism project, the right-brain, creative side overseen by Professor Seshagiri Rao of the University of Virginia. To develop a fund-raising and research network, Chidanand founded the India Heritage Research Foundation. In January, 1990. Swami Chidananda was a Hindu delegate to the Global Forum for Human Survival in Moscow. He won many friends through his wit and story-telling, and commented, "The Russian people are now open to our teachings."

We talked to the swami in both the eastern and western hemispheres: one interview in New Delhi as he was on his way back to the US where he is the founder/swami of the Hindu Jain-Temple in Pittsburgh, and one 20-minute interview at the Cultural Festival of India in Edison, New Jersey. He was on his way back to New Delhi.

To his devotees and friends, the swami is Muniji. Swami Chidanand tells us that Dr. Karan Singh (Kashmir maharaj, former India cabinet member and ambassador to the US) affectionately calls him "mini-swami," a humorous aside to his height. He is now about 32 years old, and tells us he left home at age 8 on a spiritual quest into the vanishing forests above Rishikesh. He lived in the wilderness until he was 17. With a wave of his hand, he is humbly vague about his solo sadhanae. He jokes he was taken care of by "the Divine Insurance Co."

Thousands of pilgrims wend their way from all over India to the Parmarth Niketan ashram, often booking a room months in advance, perhaps one that overlooks the Ganga. There are one thousand rooms available, six thousand people can be accommodated. Set up in 1942 by Swami Sukadevanandji Maharaj, the center has a word-of-mouth reputation among foreigners wanting to taste India's spirituality in holy and clean surroundings. Hundreds arrive each year. Swami Chidanand plans to make the ashram more comfortable and attractive for visitors.

The ashram is known for organizing programs for the poor and providing welfare education and medicine. Counselling programs are available. Spiritual and moral value seminars are routine and the ashram swamis conduct conferences and symposiums wherever they can be arranged. The ashram emphasizes the need for every individual cultivating the art of practising all forms of yoga: bhakti, karma, dhyana (meditation) and jnana.

An impressive program of bhajan and kirtan is held at Parmarth Niketan from early morning to late evening every day. Recitations of the Srimad Bhagavat and Ramcharitmanas are done in the summer.

Swami describes the encyclopedia project as comparable to the Encyclopedia Britannica. It is currently projected to be complete by 1994 with sixteen volumes. Macmillan publishing company is bringing the set out. The price tag will run about US$1500.

One other program has developed under the roof of the India Heritage Research Foundation, the propagation of Sanskriti, "Hindu culture," among Indians living abroad. From July 24th to August 9th, he staged anti-drug yagnas across England, and held a free public feast at Hyde Park in London. Next year, in April, the swami

plans to hold a massive tree planting ceremony in Australia. He is inviting 1,000 children from all communities to donate $251 each and plant a tree. Swami Chidanand sums up, "My special effort is to see that every Indian abroad is able to devote at least a day every month to the service of the Sanskriti."

HT: When were you appointed the successor of Parmarth?

SC: Officially in February, when my Gurudev, Swami Dharmananda, died. Six years ago the previous president died, and Swami Dharmananda, who was the managing trustee, appointed me as the president then. But since he was my guru I didn't want to stand in front of him, so the presidency was done as a humble service to him, with no official show. When he died, everything was made legally over to me. Now, it is my duty to appoint someone else who can be the main trustee in the future. There are five swamis on the Trust Board, and one layman.

HT: Is there a specific philosophical tradition you follow?

SC: Advaita. And bhakti both. I say love God is bhakti, serve God is karma yoga, know God is jnana yoga.

HT: How many ashrams are you now the head of?

SC: We have 26 ashrams, and Rishikesh is the head office. We have appointed a swami as a president who is in charge of each ashram. In the summer they all come to Parmarth and stay there for meetings.

HT: Do you plan to stay in the US, at Pittsburgh?

SC: I will be back and forth. I have no plans, if you ask me honestly. But three or four times a year I go back to India. Before I used to stay in the US about 8 or 9

months, but now I have to be there every other month.

HT: Having lived in the West, are you introducing Western technology or systems into your work?

SC: Yes, we bring computers and such things. If helps. There are good qualities. I want to have those good qualities. Whatever is good in America, I want to take it. But not Western values. No Western impact in that sense.

HT: How many swamis are in your Order?

SC: We have fifteen in Rishikesh and one swami per the 26 ashrams. Any one of our swamis can give initiation to devotees. I am not the head guru to the swamis.

HT: How do you train a potential swami?

SC: It is like a peacock. We can't color the peacock. It is colored by God. Similarly, the aspirant is already trained by God. The more they come to the ashram, the more they learn.

HT: How long are they with you before receiving sannyas?

SC: It does not take time. It takes dedication. If the dedication is there, right away the sannyas is there. We give right away If the dedication is there. No-time schedule.

HT: In Tamil Nadu, there have been long-term efforts by the government to take over the monasteries. Has that ever happened to Parmarth?

SC: Never. Actually (laughing), it is better that they do that. Come and take it over. If they want to do it, that is better.

Shankaracharya Celebrates #98

Like so many of the ancient traditions of Hindu India, the sannyasin seems to be fading away from the roads and by-lanes. Only twenty years ago the bright orange color of the swami used to glow like beacons among any crowd. Now, one rarely sees these stately figures moving in the countryside.

One of the great sages, the supernatural swamis, however still remains, an exemplar of the ancient concept. He is the senior shankaracharya of the Kamakoti Peetam (Kanchi, northern Tamil Nadu), Sri Chandrasekerendra Saraswathi. He began life as a dilettante of math, its conceptual abstractness yet rigorous logic appealing to his mind. Advaita Vedanta had the same impact on the teenage lad when he was selected to become the next Shankaracharya seven decades ago. In the mid-term of his reign he became famous in the West's mystic circles through Paul Brunton's classic, "In Search of Secret India." Brunton noted that he used to take about 90 seconds pause before answering any question. Now, his skin is like parchment, weathered with wisdom, papery thin. This past May 28th, he turned 98.

He offered this message to the Hindu world on his birthday: "A disciplined and ordered life is what is taught in the Vedas.

The main Vedic disciplines are performance of one's duties; cultivation of the cardinal virtues, worship of the deity, and acquisition of wisdom. To live like an animal - eating, sleeping and begetting - is to prostitute the precious human birth. Earning and hoarding should not become the ends of life. A career-oriented education is no education. What should be first inculcated in young minds is respect for dharma. There is no point in me asking people to increase their standard of living. What should be aimed at is improvement in quality of life. It is by bathing in the holy waters of meditation that the mind gets cleansed of its impurities. The mind thus cleansed develops the power of discrimination; it gains the ability to distinguish the real from the unreal, which paves the way for the dawn of wisdom."

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