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HINDU RENAISSANCE AWARD

Our Hindu of the Year

Dr. K. Pichai Sivacharya is honored for advancing and expanding priest education

You may not know who Dr. K. Pichai Sivacharya is, but if you're a temple-going Hindu, you may have well encountered one of his thousand students. As reported in Hinduism Today's April/May/June, 2003, issue, Dr. Pichai, age 53, has accomplished a significant revolution among the priests of the South Indian traditions. His two schools, both in Pillaiyarpatti, Tamil Nadu, are turning out highly trained priests who undergo a stringent five-year study program. They are so knowledgeable, especially in the Agamas, that they have raised the standards of every temple in which they serve. And in a real innovation, Dr. Pichai opened his school to non-brahmins. For his exemplary service to Hinduism by reinvigorating the priesthood and extending the gurukula system to Hindus born in other lands and of other castes, Dr. K. Pichai Sivacharya is honored with Hinduism Today's Hindu Renaissance Award as "Hindu of the Year 2004."

Starting in 1990, Hinduism Today has honored one eminent Hindu each year who has most impacted the faith and spread its values, compassion and profundity across the globe. Past renaissance winners are: Swami Paramananda Bharati ('90), Swami Chidananda Saraswati, "Mu-niji " of Parmath Niketan ('91), Swami Chin-mayananda ('92), Mata Amritananda-ma-yi Ma ('93), Swami Satchidananda ('94), Pra-mukhswami Maharaj ('95), Sri Satya Sai Baba ('96), Sri Chinmoy ('97), Swami Bua ('98), Swami Chidananda Saraswati of Divine Life Society ('99), Ma Yoga Shakti ('00), priest Sri T. S. Sambamurthy Sivachariar ('01), Dada Vaswani ('02) and Sri Tiruchi Ma-haswamigal ('03).

The Hindu priesthood, like that of all the world's religions, has suffered in recent times. Especially, the temples lost their traditional land endowments, leading to deteriorating infrastructure and impoverished priests. Faced with a bleak future,

many priest families made the decision to send their brightest children for higher education and leave the less skilled to the family profession.

But a greater destiny was at work here, and when those doctors, among many other well-educated Hindus, went to the West to make their fortunes, they could not live without temples. They founded hundreds across the West, then sent to India for priests to serve in them. Temple work in the West was hardly high-paying by Western standards, but it was good compared to India and carried with it rather more respect. Those Western temples, too, wanted grand ceremony, and started bringing priests by the dozens for their events.

This was a big change, and where Dr. Pichai's work, begun in 1980, began to show real promise. Good priests were in high demand, and he was an expert at turning them out. Discipline at the school is exemplary, as any visitor can attest. Students regard him not only as a skilled teacher, but as their spiritual master and guru, an inspiring, powerfully motivated leader. Dr. Pichai discovered that performance of grand yagnas (fire ceremonies) and like rituals, involving dozens of his students at a time, were very popular in India and a significant source of income for his school, which now boasts 220 students. Such events were also held in the temples in the West, with the temple trustees demanding the quality seen in India. The graduates of Dr. Pichai's school are providing that highest quality worldwide, with a resulting backwash of not only prestige but a concerted effort on the part of many temples in India to improve their own ritual observances.

His students don't just memorize chants and learn the motions of puja. They are trained as well in the mystical arts of opening a door from this world to the higher worlds through which the blessings of God and Gods pour out upon the devotees. For turning out such well and broadly trained priests by the dozens, we honor Dr. Pichai as "Hindu of the Year 2004."

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Text of plaque:

Presented by Hinduism Today to Hindu of the Year, 2004, Dr. K. Pichai Sivacharya, for his exemplary resurrection of the gurukulam system of priest training resulting in more than a thousand skilled priests serving Hindu around the world, strengthening the temples, inspiring the devotees and helping usher in the age of the Hindu Renaissance.