

[BORN FOR BALAJI](#)

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INTERVIEW

BORN FOR BALAJI

A priest talks about the Agamas, the heritage of his forefathers and why he and his sons chose to honor their family tradition

Dr. A.V. Ramana dikshitulu is the head priest at the Balaji temple in Tirumala, one of India's most respected pilgrimage destinations (see Hinduism Today, January/February/March 2006). He is deeply respected by his peers for honoring his family tradition. Ramana holds a doctorate in molecular biology and is an inimitable authority on the Agamas, abstruse but crucially important Hindu scriptures. Hinduism Today's Rajiv Malik had the rare opportunity to interview this distinguished Hindu cleric.

Can you please describe the Vaikhanasa Agama and explain why it is important? The Agamas in general are revered along with the Vedas as primary Hindu scripture. All of the Agamas elucidate the science of ritual, but the Vaikhanasa Agama is unique in that it gives more detail concerning the performance of ritual, both in the temple and in the home. The Vaikhanasa Agama, written by Sage Vikhanasa, is one of four main Vaishnava Agamas. It was spread around the world by his four famous disciples: Marichi, Bhrigu, Kashyapa and Atri. It includes procedures for the consecration of a temple and its Deity of worship, as well as explanations for how this consecration absorbs the primal power from the universe to bring it into the main sanctum of the temple.

The message of the Agamas is that the essence of ritual is power--spiritual power. Through ritual, the great, universal essence of life itself is brought into a temple Deity, where it then must be maintained without dilution or pollution.

Can you give us more detail on the contents of the Vaikhanasa Agama? The

Vaikhasana Agama exists in two parts. The first part deals with rituals that are done in the temple and to the Deity. The second part deals with purification ceremonies that a priest must undergo in order to qualify to serve in the temple.

The temple rituals are designed to keep the laymen's physical senses satisfied. This is done by making the process personal. All of this is laid out in the Vaikhasana Agama. It describes how the Deity is treated as we would like to be treated ourselves. He is put to sleep at night and awakened in the morning. He is given a bath and dressed in fine silks, jewelled ornaments and fragrant flowers. He is fed a variety of fine foods. Finally, he is carried in grand procession around the temple. As we all know, the dearest thing to man is man. We know God will be happy if we do for Him what we would do for ourselves.

Can anyone study the Vaikhanasa Agama? Although the Vaikhanasa Agama is available to be read by anyone who knows Sanskrit, it is not easily understood, even by Sanskrit scholars, because of its coded language. The verses have double meanings. The valuable inner meanings can only be perceived by those who meditate deeply upon the verses. Even then, only those at a certain level of spiritual evolution can grasp the deepest meaning. We conduct workshops to stimulate this understanding in our priests.

Does the Vaikhanasa Agama delineate the training of priests? Yes, it does. It deals with how a priest should be brought up and how a priest should be purified by rituals even while he is in the womb of his mother. For the unborn priest, the training and purification process begins from the mother's eighth month of pregnancy. At this time, a ceremony called the shanka chakra ankita is performed. The purpose of this ceremony is to sanctify the unborn child to become a priest after birth. We do this ritual in the home of the mother. It is not a public event.

Are the principles of the Vaikhanasa Agama to be implemented only by priests? This Agama is for people who have no other purpose on Earth but to worship Lord Vishnu. Yes, it is for priests--priests who will take up no other vocation. Take me, for example. I am a doctor in molecular biology. Yet, I am a priest. My elder son is an expert in computers and has a college degree in finance and marketing. My second son is an electrical engineer, and my third son is a bio-chemist. Yet they are also priests. Like me, they serve here in the Balaji temple in Tirumala. Our education is simply a matter of interest--like a hobby. We are priests by profession, and will be so until we die.

Is this priesthood in Tirumala hereditary only? Yes, our tradition must be maintained hereditarily. Conversions are not allowed. Vaikanasas are from South India, but they can migrate to other places. In Rishikesh we have our own TTD (Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams) temple. There are nearly 2,000 temples around the world where our priests can and do work. All of these temples were set up later than this temple here in Tirumala.

Can you please tell us more about the training of your priests? In our families, the priests get training from their parents, who are also priests. From their earliest childhood they are going to the temple. According to the Vaikhanasa Agama, all of the rituals conducted in the temples are also performed in the home. Every priest's home has a shrine room of its own, with sacred murtis (Deities) inherited from ancestors. The father gives both the theoretical and the practical training to the children.

I insist to our younger generation of priests that they have their full Agama training in addition to whatever other education they choose to receive in college. With this preparation, they are qualified to become full-fledged priests. I also insist that they honor their commitment to their priesthood so that they can pass that heritage on to their children. This includes leading a pure life and following the dress code and food restrictions set down in the Agamas.

Is the younger generation willingly following your lead in maintaining this time-honored tradition? There are some problems, but not because of a lack of sincerity. If our smart, young, qualified priests are not receiving payment and respect matching that which they might find in other professions for which they could qualify due to extensive college education, we can expect them to be tempted to forego their heritage. All of the senior priests of Tirumala recently sat together to discuss this very matter, and we came to the conclusion that we must insist to all of our young people that they work in our temple as priests, regardless of what they are paid. Money must be secondary. We have already told them this. We now have around sixty priests working in the temple, and every one is happy.

From your perspective as a priest, how may devotees receive their greatest benefit from a pilgrimage to Tirumala? If we pray to such a powerful Lord as Balaji for minor things like a promotion, a transfer, a seat in medical college or a marriage proposal, it is possible that these wishes will be granted. But making such requests is like asking for a spoonful of water from an ocean. There is something so much greater

to be had here: spiritual evolution. Through the ages, man has evolved both technically and spiritually. However, further spiritual evolution must now take place, for man is still spiritually primitive. It is natural during this Kali Yuga (age of darkness) that we be more attracted to worldly pleasures and ignore spiritual pursuits. To have even a preliminary understanding of the spiritual path during these difficult times depends largely upon one's personal karmas. These are karmas brought over from previous births.

Should everyone hear about the spiritual path, even if some are not yet ready to follow it? Yes, and we can do more to spread this message here at Tirupati. We can and we should do more. Many believe that just coming to the temple, receiving the Lord's darshan (sight) and getting a few pieces of the prasadam (food sacraments) is the main target of a pilgrimage. Of course, they take this approach because they have not been taught anything else. We have to convey the proper attitudes of worship here at the TTD. First we must teach the spiritual importance of this sacred place.

Can you give an example that illustrates the power of Tirumala? A woman from Bangalore came to this temple and asked me to bless her sister in London who was very ill with what had been described by doctors as the final stages of cancer. She said that the doctors had given her only 90 days to live. This woman was crying as she told me all this. She pleaded with me to do something. I told her that I couldn't do anything myself, but perhaps Lord Balaji might be able to. I gave a little prasadam from the temple, along with some holy water and a small picture of Balaji. I told her to send that picture to London immediately. Today that girl in London, who was given only ninety days to live, has been alive and well for more than two years, and her condition is steadily improving.

Can you tell us a little about your own experience here at the temple? Every instant is precious to me. For every moment that I have spent here, I thank the Lord and pray that He keeps me in this place until my dying breath. To touch the Deity and to worship Him, to give Him His sacred bath, to feed Him, to dress Him and to decorate Him--for all of this, I am so very grateful. I am grateful to my ancestors who prayed that their progeny should live in the service of the Lord, and I am grateful to God.

For me, religion is also a science of a higher order. Unfortunately, there are no scientific instruments yet created that can measure the power of religion. However, in the Agamas--particularly in the Vaikhanasa Agama--there are ways to measure

spiritual energy. Everything that happens in the temple can be explained Agamically. The study of the Agamas also comprises a great part of my personal experience in this temple. For the Agamas, I am also grateful.

What is your message to the Hindu Community around the world? The Vedas say, "Let us live together, let us eat together and let us seek the truth together." This ancient scripture invites all human beings--regardless of creed, caste, age or sex--to live harmoniously and seek the truth. It is the duty of every human being, at least every Hindu, to obey this message, to try and live in peace with one another.

Lord Balaji, with His left hand folded over the left knee and His right hand pointing down, conveys the unspoken message that if you come and surrender at His feet and leave everything to Him, He will make the ocean of life only knee deep for you so that you can easily walk through it to the bank of salvation on the other side. That is the message of Lord Balaji. Let us surrender at His holy feet for the sake of salvation.

Balaji tells us that there is a power greater than human power. When a devotee steps into the temple, he can feel this power emanating from Balaji's own self-manifested image. Through time, so many sages and seers have come here to worship this God. The spiritual vibrations of these great souls remain here. They are so strong that anyone can feel them. When we personally feel this permanent spiritual bliss of Balaji, we do not need to be told that the physical plane is not permanent. We know this truth as a fact that requires no proof. "