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Opponents Use Courts in Failed Attempt to Remove Head of Madurai's Oldest Monastery

For the past several months, the youthful Guru of the Madurai Aadheenam, one block away from the breathtaking Meenakshi temple, has been embroiled in fierce criticism from government and community leaders proclaiming that his recent behavior does not befit the head of the 1,100-year old Saivite monastery/temple complex. His Holiness, Sri Arunagirinatha Gnanasambandhar Paramachariya Desikar, just in his mid-thirties and having been ordained a few short years ago, has defended controversial public actions for which he has been criticized, and denied allegations about his personal behavior, which, if true, run counter to the strict vows of Sannyas.

Attempts to discipline His Holiness by his accusors went as far as writ petitions filed at the Madras High Court to have him removed from his religious office and criminal charges of illegal possession of firearms.

Four individuals, newspapers stated, formally petitioned Madras High Court to direct the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Commission to file suit to remove the Swami from his office and appoint a receiver to manage the aadheenam. The charges presented in the petition included "leading an immoral life with one Rajamani Ammal," diversion and mismanagement of mutt funds, demolishing a large mandapam on aadheenam property and erecting trading shops in its place, gifting to Miss Ammal a gold necklace meant for the Thirujnanasambandar icon and throwing down his gold rudraksha mala (symbol of his spiritual office) at a public gathering. The individuals who filed were former secretary of the aadheenam, Mr. M Subramania Pillai, K.K. Sheyam, R. Sridhar and R. Pannerselvam.

On March 27th of this year, the Madras High Court dismissed the petition of Mr. Shayam, and directed him to approach the civil courts if he wished to pursue the

charges. According to legal experts in Madras, such removal of religious heads is not tenable, though there is some, latitude whereby "the present approach of Madurai Aadheenakartar and his involvement with political groups can be curbed with the request that he concentrate on the religious functions as head of a famous Saiva Mutt."

Denial: In a cable and subsequent letter to The New Saivite World, His Holiness categorically denied the allegations as "baseless" and part of a "false frameup against him." In specific response to the matter of throwing down his gold rudraksha mala, which many Saivites had taken to indicate an abdigation of his religious duties, he stated in his cable that this was only meant as a gesture: "Sri Lanka Tamils [are] relentlessly persecuted even now. We, a Tamil Saivite mutt (ashram) head by tradition sworn to solve their tragedy,...were ready to sacrifice anything. Our golden rudraksha mala ceasing to be a mere ornament,...we took it off in a gesture yet not to be mistaken. Daily, we wear it during puja and continue our worship. But you have published Chockalingam's interview in a hurried manner without confirming it from us..." In the interview (NSW Winter edition, 1984), Mr. K.S. Chockalingam, wealthy Saivite businessman of Madurai, stated that His Holiness had thrown down his rudraksha mala, stopped doing puja and discontinued many of the Aadheenam's religious services.

In addition to the suit filed by Mr. Sheyam and other, a firearms charge was brought against His Holiness for brandishing a revolver at a public lecture. The swami claimed that his gesture with the revolver, like the throwing down of the rudraksha mala, had a beneficent purpose. His Holiness explained in an interview with Mr. M. Jailani, published in Newswind weekly on January 28: "While an ethnic massacre [in Sri Lanka] was ruthlessly going on, it had been imperatively necessary to make a halt of it For this, creating and arousing emotion among the people had been necessitated. So also, taking out a revolver and making it a show had been necessitated. As such, the showing of a revolver was neither with an intention of shooting anyone in this part, nor for scaring the government here."

His Holiness was apparently not the only one who thought the firearms charges were unjust and part of a scheme to malign him. The Hindu reported was while 62 people were cited as witnesses for the prosecution, 316 lawyers, from all political parties, paraded into the Magistrate's Court to file memos of appearance saying that they were representing the Madurai Aadheenam. It was move to expose the Government's malafide action in foisting a case" on the aadheenam, present were told by Mr. Veeramani, General Secretary of the Dravida Kazhagam who added that 700 more attorneys would be making their appearance soon.

Earlier, in mid-January, His Holiness filed a petition of his own in the Madras High Court, asking that Mr. Veerappan be dismissed as HRCE Minister. "Tamil Nadu has grown very tired of Mr. Veerappan's misrule," the Karthar wrote to the court, "His harmful and ruthless manners should be brought to the notice of the HRCE Minister, Mr. M. Verappan, who had instigated police to "foist" the firearms charges public." Angry public debates between the swami and the minister had set the stage. His Holiness alleged in the telegram to the court, which constituted his petition, that it was the honorable against him. Because no legal case was presented beyond the simple allegation of "misrule," the petition was rejected by the court as being our side its juridiction.

Explaining his view of the role of Hindu monks, and providing a window into why a swami would be "brandishing a revolver" at a public lecture, His Holiness told Mr. Jailani, "Other religious leaders are of that wrong deliberation that their duties are just to offer pujas, manage the mutt, visit a temple of importance where there may be kumbabhishekam and worship the Deity alone. They remain reclined upon the duty, responsibility and the right to work for the advancement of Tamil, to protect the society of Tamils, to benedict those in the political arena and to guide them with good counsel, as well as to make advice to the government and manipulate so as it could carry on its rule and see to it that the people carry on their life in an atmosphere of humanity, peace and unity..."

Though many have thus shown their support for His Holiness regarding the firearms charges, the allegations of personal breaches of the dharma of a Saivite religious leader are still a matter of controversy. Beyond the allegations and the denial, The New Saivite World was unable to obtain further information to date. Both sides are adamant in their position. Those who are not closely connected with the Aadheenam, however but who have heard of the matter express their great concern that it be resolved, rectified if needed, so that the venerable Madurai Aadheenam may flourish in its service to the Tamil Saivites of South India, upholding its dharma in a manner befitting the hoary traditions of Saivism.