Hindu of the Year
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HINDU RENAISSANCE AWARD

# Hindu of the Year

## Sri Sri Tiruchi Mahaswamigal, trainer and guide of monastics and priests

Choodie Shivaram, Bangalore

Forty-three years ago when Bangalore, the serene garden city, was not bursting at its seams with multinationals and information technology companies, a small hermitage began on the outskirts of the city. Tucked away in the quiet, remote suburbs off Mysore Road was Kailasa Ashrama Maha Samasthanam, built in 1960. In 1978 the Sri Rajarajeshwari temple was dedicated. Commuting to this temple was a demanding task in those days. Public transport was sparse. Unmindful of all these hassles, the faithful regularly visited. Prayers were answered. Some experienced the Mother beckoning. Word spread about the power of Goddess Rajarajeswari and the ashram's founder, Sri Jagadguru Sri Sivarathnapuri Mahaswamigal, popularly known as Tiruchi Swami. Hinduism Today is proud to honor him with the Hindu Renaissance Award as Hindu of the Year 2003.

Swamiji has trained dozens of sannyasins, Hindu monks, who are now in charge of ashrams of their own, and a large number of priests who serve in temples all over the world. He is held in such respect in India that highly-placed spiritual leaders come to him for advice in difficult situations. He is a living embodiment of the Goddess's grace, with even casual devotees able to sense Her blessings radiating from him. He has inspired devotees in many countries during his tours of North America and Europe.

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, "Muniji " of Parmath Niketan ('91), Swami Chinmayananda ('92), Mata Amritanandamayi Ma ('93), Swami Satchidananda ('94), Pramukhswami 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) and Dada Vaswani ('02).

Currently, devotees daily throng the temple and Kailasa Ashrama, the abode of Sri Tiruchi Mahaswamigal. A huge township now surrounds the temple--it is even named Sri Rajarajeshwari Nagar. Well connected today to various parts of the city by public transport, real estate values in the township have skyrocketed.

Sri Tiruchi Mahaswamigal has a large following of devotees from all over the country and abroad. He is well known throughout South India as a spiritual leader and healer. This quiet, compassionate, unassuming savant is an ocean of Divinity, knowledge and wisdom. Being in his presence brings peace and serenity to the mind. He infuses confidence. Sri Tiruchi Mahaswamigal is also an accomplished scholar with exemplary mastery over the Vedas, Upanishads and the scriptures. A complete portrayal is given in his biography, Life and Work of Sri Sivaratnapuri Swamiji by S. V. Krishnaswamy.

Last year, rains failed in Karnataka. The state was under pressure to release reservoir water to its neighbor and there was political unrest. The chief minister, S. M. Krishna, set out on a padayatra (pilgrimage on foot) to propitiate the rain Gods. He started his journey after performing worship at the Rajarajeshwari temple and seeking the blessings of Tiruchi Mahaswamigalji. The very next day heavy rains drenched the state.

One ashram devotee, a jeweler, told me, "I've been visiting the ashram for the last 28 years. A lot of good things have come to us with the blessings of Swamiji. On many occasions we have escaped dangers, and we realized that Swamiji would have forewarned us. Once, I was on my way to Maddur (60 miles from Bangalore) and, en route, I stopped to seek Swamiji's blessings. He warned me to drive carefully. Within an hour, a bus came menacingly from behind me, and there was a major accident. I survived only because of His blessings."

Another confided, "I have been associated with Swamiji for over 45 years, even before he came and settled in Bangalore. I visit the ashram monthly and never do anything without his advice. He can foresee the future and predict what will happen. I admire him for his simplicity. He has only one thought and one goal--serving Mother Rajarajeshwari."

Kailasa Ashrama runs a pathasala school that provides thorough religious training. A steady stream of proficient priests who graduated from here have become renunciate monks, noted for their training and dedication. Some have stayed back to serve Kailasa Ashrama, and some have joined other ashrams. Prominent among these are Jagadguru Sri Sri Sri Balagangadharanatha Swami of Adi Chunchanagiri Mutt in Belur, Swami Sivananda Bharati, head of Siddharudanatha Math, and Kumaraswamy, head of the Thiruchi Swami Math. Kailasa Ashrama, staffed by Swamiji's monks and administrated by Sri Jayendra Puri Swami, has spawned a number of subsidiary spiritual centers in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu states.

Sri Tiruchi Mahaswamigal was destined to be a monk. While traveling in Kanya Kumari in South India, his parents were informed by a stranger near the Devi temple, "By the grace of the Divine Mother and Lord Subramanya, a glorious son will be born to you. He will be a teacher and benefactor for all mankind." Born in 1929, young Palaniswami was drawn to religious life right from his childhood. While in his twenties, he traveled to Nepal and was initiated as Jagadguru Sri Sivarathnapuri Bhagawath.

Sri Tiruchi Mahaswamigal was ordained by his guru, Shivapuri Baba, to return to India, propagate dharma and build a temple. Before returning, Swamiji went to Mount Kailash. There, he had a vision of Goddesses Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati, who told him, "Proceed south and establish an ashram there." While traveling south, Swamiji had a divine inspiration to start the ashram and temple near Bangalore.

A devotee approaching Kailasa Ashrama passes through two towering, ornately decorated wrought-iron gates 30 feet tall and 20 feet wide. Inside, the massive Rajarajeswari Temple complex, with its new Sri Yantra Shrine, spans a full six city blocks. To the left, a three-story assembly hall, constructed to accommodate thousands during major festivals and temple celebrations, beckons from just beyond a long bed of bright red and yellow flowers where cool shade trees shelter three elite guest apartments. Just inside the second gate of the twelve-acre

monastery complex, adobe shrines to Ganesha and Muniswara stand in a wide courtyard, a giant, open well nearby. Straight ahead some 50 yards, the impressive Devi Hall, the main monastery building, towers up four stories, a pastel pink jewel in the tropical sun. To the right of Devi Hall, a newly-constructed kitchen and dining room sparkle with fresh paint. To the left, Trichyswami's ever-so-simple personal quarters stand, partially hidden in the foliage of trees and bright flowers. It is in the front room of this unimposing dwelling that the swami greets guests, who sit on the cool stone floor as he gives darshan from a carved wooden chair, with pictures of many saints and sages on the walls above. Behind Devi Hall, a large cow shed, expansive food gardens and fruit-tree groves stretch back several acres. Deep within these gardens, Sanskrit pundits meet every day with youthful students in a dormitory-style pathasala.

Seated on a simple chair in his long-time living quarters known as "Kuteeram, " Sri Swamiji is a man of few words. In this room, perhaps 15 by 35 feet, he has met people from all walks of life. He dislikes indulging in worldly affairs and refuses to comment on matters of current developments. Yet politicians, bureaucrats, professionals and layman alike have immense faith in him. He is the benign reliever of their troubles. Every morning, if his health permits, Swamiji tours the grounds, taking interest in the minutest detail. Around the ashram has developed a 1,000-child school and a charitable hospital.

In His Own Words

Tiruchi Mahaswamigal patiently shared his wisdom by answering a barrage of questions posed by Hinduism Today:

HT: How can one who is not a practicing yogi achieve good concentration during meditation?

Swamiji: Anusthana, worship, brings ekagratha, or concentration, just as when a person has a bath, he becomes clean. So, also, by worship one can develop concentration and meditation, whether he is a yogi or not. The simplest method is prayer.

HT: Why should we go to temples?

Swamiji: Worship is very essential for any human life. Concentration cannot be achieved at home, because of domestic distractions. Domestic environs do not

provide the right atmosphere for worship. Vibrations are very strong in a temple because of the form, the place and the congregational get-together. At a temple, inspiration is more, and concentration is better. Temple building is essential because a temple is necessary for public worship. It provides an opportunity for celebration. One has to celebrate life and not lead a mechanical life. When one involves in praising the Supreme and does not indulge in oneself, this celebration becomes unique. A temple provides opportunity for celebration for the less fortunate, like the handicapped and the poor, who cannot afford it otherwise. They can participate where there is no discrimination between the rich and the poor. A temple provides strong community feelings.

HT: What is Swami's advice for the young people of today?

Swamiji: Work very hard. Earn your living and lead a devoted life. You can see it in the ashram, everyone has to work. In earlier days, one person had to stand at the main entrance of the ashram and shout three times, "There is no place for lazy people in Kailash Ashram." Total discipline and work for a living is most important in life.

HT: We see a breakdown of the family, especially both parents working. Is Swami concerned about this trend? What do you tell couples who say they cannot live on the husband's salary alone?

Swamiji: If we go on increasing our wants, money will be necessary. The more money is necessary, the feeling that another person will have to work will come. If wants are reduced, automatically the earning will be sufficient. The mother aspect of the house can be saved. This will keep the balance in the family. The root of the problem is materialism.

HT: What is the most important thing in keeping a happy marriage?

Swamiji: Reducing wants. Collectively, when all the people in the family understand the value of money and the value of happiness, they will reduce their wants and automatically create a cordial atmosphere in the family.

HT: Can Swami say a few words about his work abroad, outside of India?

Swamiji: Whenever I go abroad, I tell people, "Devotion is mentioned in all religions, but forcible conversion has never been mentioned anywhere. A person should be free to choose his own path." As far as Hinduism is concerned, it is an ocean where one can get all the benefits of having a bath in all the rivers of the world by having a bath in one place--that is Hinduism.

HT: Please speak to the Hindu world about the importance of an order of monks in the perpetuation of dharma.

Swamiji: An order of monks has to be according to the traditions and customs of the community. The main intention in propagating dharma is to propagate virtuous living. We should consider the individual way of life. One aspect of dharma to one person may not be applicable to the other. It has to be coupled with the way of life. Disciples of Kailasa Ashrama have been made heads of institutions of particular communities so that they may propagate dharma more effectively in their own way.

HT: A current issue in medical ethics is stem cell research. Scientists are harvesting stem cells from fertilized human eggs and doing experiments to develop medical cures. What are the moral implications?

Swamiji: Life should be taken practically. Just as birth is inevitable, so also is old age, disease and death. We have to accept what is inevitable and not go out of the way to protect this frail body, which is definitely perishable. We have to allow it to go according to the dictates of nature and find happiness there. I am totally against this research. It is a waste of money and effort. It increases population. We will do great service to nature in allowing it to maintain the balance and not interfere with it.

HT: What motivated you towards sannyas? As an only child, how did your parents react to your decision?

Swamiji: From childhood I had listened so much to the saints, I was convinced that loka seva, service to humanity, is the greatest purpose of life. That is why I took sannyas. If I was a grihastha (married person), I may not have been able to do this. When we are holding a pot of hot water and cannot hold it any longer, we drop it without worrying what happens to the pot. The fingers have to be protected. Similarly, I left home without thinking about what would be my parents' reaction. A ripe fruit does not think of the tree when it drops down.

HT: More and more children are unhesitatingly sending their parents to old-age homes. What is your opinion?

Swamiji: In olden days, when the son came of age, the parents would hand over the responsibilities and go to the forest--vanaprastha ashrama. As recently as fifty years ago, too, people went away on pilgrimage, handing over responsibility to the son once he came of age. However, today parents do neither. Even when the son is old enough to shoulder responsibility, they go on interfering, demand attention and make a nuisance of themselves. This is one aspect. More important is how we bring up our children. Children with good upbringing will never send their parents away in old age. There are so many youngsters taking good care of their old parents. It's all in the way we inculcate the right values in our children.

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