

## [Swamini Steers Two Chinmaya Mission Ashrams Into Youth Training and Ecological Recovery](#)

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# Swamini Steers Two Chinmaya Mission Ashrams Into Youth Training and Ecological Recovery

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Why would anyone in this age of greed and need, of credit cards and wealth, choose to give up creature comforts and live in poverty? Why are many young people sacrificing material ease to live in Chinmayaranyam in kutir huts of mud and thatched roofs, just like the poorest of poor villagers? "Our aim is to prove to the poor strata of society that a decent and spiritual life does not depend upon money but on the way of living. You may call it an experiment in poverty," said Swamini Saradapriyananda, the force behind this novel delving into dearth's hidden dignity.

The Swamini, "Amma" to all who know her, is a senior monk of the Chinmaya Mission in Andhra Pradesh. In the various sequences of her life, each episode seems to have brought her closer to the spiritual. Born in 1927 in Masulipatam, her father was a teacher, and her mother established the first Mahila Seva Madali in Andhra Pradesh.

After studying law, she became an attorney and practiced for seven years. Having been weaned on service to others, she soon joined the Social Welfare Advisory Board and served for almost nine years in Hyderabad. Around this time, she started attending Swami Chinmaya's discourses, and in 1965 she joined his ashram. As she adjusted to ashram life, she began helping the Chinmaya Mission's worldwide goal of spreading the knowledge of Vedanta. Swami Chinmayananda himself taught the wisdom of Vedanta-an intellectual philosophy inquiring into the illusory state of the world and individual existence-to large educated audiences in India. By translating the Sanskrit texts into English, he made Vedanta accessible to

many more people. Today the Chinmaya Mission has centers around the world.

After several years of training, Swamini Saradapriyananda received sannyasa diksha from Swami Chinmayananda. All over India she has conducted Gnana Yagnas (sacred knowledge gatherings) on the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads and other spiritual texts for the past 20 years. She has written commentaries on the Upanishads and made the text easier to comprehend in her book Vedanta in Day to Day Life. The bhajans and poems composed by her, the songs she sings and the discourses she gives on the Upanishads all bring the listener a little closer to God.

Last year the Hindu world felt deeply the loss of Swami Chinmayananda. Asked by Hinduism Today how the Mission is faring without his presence, she observed: "Poojya Gurudev's vision and training of us was such that we consider it our privilege and sacred duty to carry on the torch so brilliantly lit by him. Swami Tejomayananda has been unanimously chosen by us to serve as the Chief of the Chinmaya Mission. We are sure that the Mission will grow stronger and wider as time passes." An International School-a long cherished dream of Swami Chinmayananda-is shaping into reality in Chinmaya Garden Ashram in Coimbatore.

Amma has also ventured, with Swami Chinmayandanda's blessings, into starting two ashrams, Chinmayaranyam Ellayapalle and Chinmayaranyam Trikoota. It was in Ellayapalle that a barren tract was turned into a flourishing, liveable village in 1982. Earlier it was an arid land without water or electricity. With the aid of the Chinmaya Ashram it now has wells and improved agriculture.

She remembered the transformation of the drought-stricken village: "We drilled borewells to a depth of 200 to 450 feet during these 13 years. We also helped the villagers in getting four government borewells. Becoming bold, the villagers came together to pool their resources and started drilling their own borewells. Now there are about 24 borewells in the village and most of the land has been brought under cultivation."

The ashram inmates live in clean, modest mud huts and also conduct classes in this sanctuary. The bramcharis here go through a spiritual program which is also

service-oriented. They are also given missionary training in both English and Telegu. Once they have finished, they are sent out to do Gnana Yagnas. There are also three temples where regular worship is done by the brahmacharis in training. Vedic chanting is taught. They also teach the Chinmayananda correspondence tuition course which has been translated into Telegu.

Trikoota, the second of the swamini's two ashrams, is built on four acres of donated land in Guntur district. From the monastery the charming Lord Trikooteswara shrine on top of a short hill is viewed. At Trikoota the Swamini and inmates give Dharma Veer (heroic spirituality) training to guide the youth in righteous living. Clad in ochre robes, Swamini Saradapriyananda is dedicated to the life of the spirit but part of her missionary work is to also see to the needs of the less fortunate. Her day begins at 4am and by 5am the inmates of the ashram gather for an hour-long morning satsang. Her days are filled with spiritual matters and those pertaining to the ashram. She observed: "Our dates and engagements are with Him who is a relentless task master. The more you give, the greater are His demands."

Among these atman demands are several programs of social welfare handled by the Chinmaya Mission. There is Satyakama Mandir, an orphanage with 42 children who the Mission is committed to getting on their feet. Five girls have been married, and two boys were admitted to college. There are several schools including Harihar Vocational School where, besides training, poor village children get midday meals and evening dinner. The Mission has a library and a homeopathy clinic serving the neighborhood.

Both the frail elderly and our ravaged environment need nurturing, and the Chinmaya Mission tends to both: Hari Seva feeds and clothes 125 aged destitute villagers. The Mission also has the "Save a Tree, Save a Man" program addressing environmental concerns. "We have been given 86 acres of hillock land by the Government to create a forest," enthuses Swamini. "Now 120 trees are growing there and in the coming rainy season we plan to plant 300-400 more."

Asked if the Mission addresses India's myriad problems such as child labor, domestic violence and abuse of women, the Swamini offered: "The social problems exist in one shape or the other as long as society exists. We are philosophers enough to know that there will be no time when the society will be without any problems. That does not mean we do not do anything to help the situation, but we

do not despair when the problems rise up in another shape."

We inquired about the source of these problems and she elaborated: "Wife abuse and child labor are both based on greed and the needs of men which are naturally in him. Hence the Dharma Sastras and the scriptures give the dos and don'ts. If a man follows these rules, then the greed and need will remain in control and the abuse will be lessened."

What did she think about the rapid influx of westernization in India through foreign videos, films and TV? Would it be harder to maintain basic values? According to the Swamini, "The price of civilization is a society without values. It need not be so, but the ignorant man does not know how to keep his morals with the rosy life that is seen in cinemas and TV. It can't be helped."

Can there be a wise solution for Ayodhya? Swamini observes, "Ayodhya means 'a place of no strife.' If the members of the society change their way of thinking, it will be solved. If not, any solution serves as the womb of future trouble. A claim less than 500 years old cannot stand in view of the age-old traditional worship. All trouble there now is political. If politicians get out of it, ordinary people will live forever amicably. Even if there are one or two flare-ups, simple folk forget and get friendly once more."

The Swamini has strong opinions on poverty which continues to mar the future of India's children: "There is enough in the world to serve the need of every one but not enough to serve the greed of any. Human beings, until they realize their true nature of Self, continue to be ignorant and greedy. The past greed gives the present suffering as poverty. The greedy man of the present day is exacting his bleak future life of suffering by his own actions."

Recently Swamini Saradapriyananda spent three months in America, giving spiritual discourses. Asked if she thought Indian-Americans were holding on to their culture, and passing it on to the younger generation, she observed that while the Indian-Americans she met were spiritual and anxious to know the traditions and culture of Hinduism, their everyday lives were in keeping with the traditions of America. The younger generation, born and bred in America, have little opportunity to be exposed to the Hindu atmosphere as in India.

She noted: "They grow up only as American children and know only that culture. Some parents who are very deeply involved in Indian cultural life are able to inspire their children to follow and know their culture. But most of the parents feel helpless because they are unable to clarify the doubts of their children regarding the Hindu way of life."

What suggestions would she have for helping young people maintain their true values in a fast-changing modern world? She said: "The religious way of living, as based on the philosophy of the Upanishads, which is the most logical, should be explained to them. Once the logic is understood, they will themselves change their way of life."

She believes the most important principle to guide people through life can be summed in four words: "Be true to yourselves."

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