Meet the Youthfully Dynamic Pontiff of South India's 1,400-Year-Old Monastery
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Tucked between two shops on an incredibly crowded street, the narrow entrance to Madurai Aadheenam is just two blocks from the huge Madurai Meenakshi temple, one of the most famous Siva-Sakti shrines in the world. This temple/monastery complex labored under relative obscurity since 1865 when the British divested it of control of not only the Meenakshi temple but also Ramesvaram Siva temple, two of the largest and richest in South India. In the last decade the winds of change have blown through its 1,400-year-old halls, and it seems poised again to become an influential center for the propagation of Saiva Siddhanta philosophy and Tamil language.

Madurai Aadheenam is the oldest of the major aadheenams of South India, which include Dharmapura, Tiruvavaduthurai and Kunrakuddi [to be covered in subsequent issues of Hinduism Today]. An aadheenamis a specifically South Indian Saivite form of temple/monastery complex. The aadheenamis headed by a pontiff called the guru mahasannidhanam. The guru is responsible for the running of the aadheenam,training of sannyasis attached to it and the oversight of temples and endowment lands under its control.

Under the Tamil kings, each of these centers owned and managed numerous temples, as well as received income from extensive land endowments. Today many of those temples have come under state government control and land endowments have been lost or the revenues effectively uncollectible.

Each aadheenam has been forced to adapt to its altered and decidedly poorer circumstances. When H.H. Sri-la-Sri Arunagirinatha Sri Gnanasambanda Desika Paramachariya, the 292nd abbot of the monastery, ascended the peetham in 1981 at the age of 35, the monthly income was just Rs.8,000/month [US$235]. Today it has passed Rs.100,000 a month [$3,000]. This has been accomplished through increased donations and improved collection of rent on land still under aadheenam control. The increased income has allowed the investment of Rs.2.5 lakh [$7,500] in interest-bearing savings accounts.

A visit to the Aadheenam for the daily puja is an unusual and uplifting experience. The puja is performed at high speed by the Guru Mahasannidhanam himself, aided by an extremely agile assistant. Dozens of arati lamps are elaborately shown to the deity, then tossed to the assistant who not only catches them without difficulty, but simultaneously hands over the next, already lit, lamp. The overall impact of this energetic puja is quite unforgettable.

Sri Gnanasambanda Desika had spent four years in training under his predecessor, H.H. Sri-la-Sri Somasundara Paramachariya, who attained samadhi at the age of 78 after thirty years of service. The institution he inherited has several

branches in Tamil Nadu including a fine facility in Madras and is hereditary trustee for four temples in Tanjavur District of Tamil Nadu.

In addition to augmenting and stabilizing the income of the aadheenam, the present kartar has been active in the spreading of Saiva Siddhanta philosophy (including through radio programs), interreligious tolerance and to some extent social service. In 1981 and 1982, there were Hindu-Christian riots in Kanyakumari. The kartar personally went to the area and spent four months fearlessly visiting different places--several noted for their criminal lawlessness even before the riots--to give talks on religious harmony.

At about this time, the aadheenam was involved in programs of reconversion to Hinduism of those who had converted to other faiths. The outbreak of riots in Sri Lanka between Hindus and Buddhists had a great impact on the young kartar. "In 1983 we gave up our proselytizing work [begun under his predecessor]," he told Hinduism Today. "The orgy of violence in Sri Lanka fueled by religious bigotry did not spare even places of worship of Hindus. I was very anguished and all fired up. I expressed my protest by undertaking a dawn to dusk fast in public on the North Masi street [adjacent to the Meenakshi temple] where some 15 centuries back walked the great saint Sambandar, founder of our monastery, who revived Saivism when the Sanatana Dharma was faced with a big crisis."

"Afterwards," the Guru Mahasannidhanam went on, "I gave up conversion activities when I saw plainly in the Lankan situation 'do not do unto others what you do not want done to you.' The

religion of an individual is the will and pleasure of the Almighty God. We are following Saivism. It is the order of the Almighty God. Some people are following Islam, or the impersonal God. Nobody should go to any other religion from their original religion. This, of course, applies to mass scale proselytizing. Change of tag without change of heart can only help swell numbers. Our previous mass efforts did not yield the desired results. But when they want to come voluntarily to a religion, we can do reconversion. Granting diksha to genuine seekers of truth may be done."

In 1984 he made a world tour to America, Europe and the United Kingdom. In 1987 he traveled to Malaysia, giving diksha and introducing a simplified form of Siva puja which was enthusiastically accepted by many Hindus. He speaks articulately in Tamil and English.

In 1982 His Holiness said, "The Hindu religion, which gives the whole world the richness of spirituality, cannot be destroyed by anyone. All the holy temples and madams in this country are not built of mere stone. They are monuments, with religion as the foundation and culture as the walls. The credit for building these monuments goes to the Almighty Himself. The other religions have men as their founders. Hinduism, however, did not come as anyone's baby. Because Hinduism is the mother of all religions, even people from the foreign countries come here to get peace of mind, like small children who run to their mother for love and affection. Our religion gives everyone that happiness."

On another occasion he told Hinduism Today, "We will educate

the Tamils in the relationship between God and the human being. This will propagate the Saiva Siddhanta philosophy of immortality. We have brought the Sivalinga into prominence so people will understand the reality of Sivalinga. Like ether, God Siva is everywhere. He is omnipotent and all pervasive. He is above us, beneath us and around us with a watchful eye."

Asked about his possible successor, His Holiness said, "It has been our practice to select the successors out of persons intimately associated with the mutt and persons who strike us as of a natural spiritual bent of mind and who live impeccable lives. But above all, we let tiruvarul,divine instinct, guide our choice. For after all, it is only Lord Siva's will that is paramount and shapes the destiny of the entire creation, not just that of humans."

Address: H.H. Sri-la-Sri Arunagirinatha Sri Gnanasambanda Desika Paramachariya Swamigal, Madurai Aadheenam, 70 South Avani Moola Street, Mathurai, 625001, India.

With reports from V. Gowri Shankar, Madras

Sidebar: Sambandar, Founder of Madurai Aadheenam

Tirujnana Sambandar is the precocious 7th century child saint who lived only 16 years yet authored the first three books of the noble Tirumurai scriptures in Tamil. He toured the South to sing the glories of God Siva and revive the waning spirit of Saivism, then threatened by Jainism which enjoyed royal support. After miraculously curing the ailing Pandyan king, who

had become a Jain, Sambandar converted him and all of Madurai back to Saivism.

Sambandar's enchanted life began at age three when, separated from his father at a temple, he cried out in fright. Immediately Lord Siva and Goddess Parvati appeared. Parvati fed him divine milk, and Siva gave him a pair of gold cymbals. When his father found the child, he demanded to know who fed him the milk. Sambandar pointed to the sky and replied in elegant song that it was none other than the Goddess Herself.

Sambandar traveled all over South India, eventually teaming up with the much older Saint Appar. Hundreds of eloquent songs by Sambandar are sung to this day. The reconversion of the Pandyan king (whose queen had requested Sambandar's intercession) was the most important of his miracles. It marked the end of Jain dominance in South India and had wide social, religious and political ramifications. Madurai Aadheenam's founding and management of the Madurai Meenakshi Temple were probably set up at this time by the king himself under the direction of the saint.

Sambamdar's father insisted upon the child saint's marriage at age 16. When the wedding party was assembled, Sambandar took the hand of his bride and entered a huge Divine Effulgence along with those assembled, all of whom attained final moksha,release from rebirth.

Sidebar: In Conversation

At the beginning of January 1996 Satguru Sivaya

Subramuniyaswami and 45 devotees paid their respects at Madurai Aadheenam while on pilgrimage to the major temples of South India. The following is excerpted from the discourse by H.H. Sri Gnanasambanda Desika Paramachariya Swamigal to his visitors from eight nations. After the discourse he personally distributed luncheon prasadam to all.

My choicest blessings to you all. This Aadheenam was established in the 7th century by the Saint Tirujnana Sambandar who got the milk of wisdom from Lord Siva and Goddess Parvati. Madurai Aadheenam is propagating Saiva Siddhanta philosophy to the world. We feel the Saiva Siddhanta philosophy should be presented very simply, very humbly, in one book which can be propagated all over the world.

Lord Siva is our eternal father in heaven. He is always watching over us. For example, when we watch TV, we have a remote control. Lord Siva is an eternalremote control for all 500 crores of people in the world. According to Saiva Siddhanta philosophy, Lord Siva is the only One. He's the Ultimate of ultimates, the Engineer of engineers. Lord Siva is the Professor of professors, He is the Guru of gurus, the Prime Minister of prime ministers. He is the Doctor of doctors--we call Lord Siva as Vidyanathan. Vidyameans doctor, nathanmeans chief. Therefore He is the president of all doctors in world.

We do not advocate or approve of Hari Hara Bedam--discrimination against Siva or Vishnu. The Sivalingam we all regard as the supremely sacred manifestation of Sivaperuman contains in itself Siva in the crown as Jothi,

Vishnu in the middle signifying water, and Brahma, the Maker, at the base representing the earth.

It is to be borne in mind that every person who offers puja to a Sivalingam whether he or she is aware of it or not, wishes it or not, also worships Vishnu. In fact that person worships all the Trimurthis (Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheswaran).

The Sivalingam is a symbol of holiness, a symbol of consciousness and wisdom. It is a symbol of Hinduism and all fine humanitarian qualities. Whenever we pour water on the Lingam, these things are propagating. Therefore, you must partake of the holy water from the worship of Lord Siva.

According to Saiva Siddhanta philosophy, you must be initiated, given dikshaby a guru maha sannidhanam--from Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, from Dharmapura Aadheenam, from Tiruvavaduthurai. We must educate our children in this way.

Another thing I must tell you about is holy ash. Whenever you wear the holy ash, your whole body is blessed and purified. We must wear it when we get up in the morning, our children must, too.

The day will definitely come when all in the world will recite the mantra "Aum Namasivaya."