

## [Keeping the Faith](#)

Category : [April/May/June 2003](#)

Published by Anonymous on Apr. 02, 2003

### EDUCATION

## Keeping the Faith

One of South India's finest priest schools rekindles the fires of devotion

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For every ancient Hindu spiritual practice that survived the test of time, there was at least one person like Pichai Sivacharyar who helped make it happen. Today, at the turn of yet another century in Hinduism's near-infinite history, this 53-year-old Hindu priest lives his life for the perpetuation of tradition through the propagation of the Vedas and Agamas. Such work seems simple enough. What else would one expect a good priest to do? Yet Pichai does it well. He does it so well he inspires others to do the same. Pichai is becoming a legend because of the exceptional quality of his work. During my preparation of this story for Hinduism Today, I had the good fortune to make the acquaintance of this fine man. I will never forget it.

In 1980 with only five students and no place but the open air to gather for class, Pichai formed the Sri Karpaga Vinayagar Vedaagama Vidyalaya (SKVVV) to teach young men the meaning of the Vedas, especially the Yajur Veda, and the performance of Agamic temple ceremony. Today the SKVVV is one of South India's most successful priest training schools.

Five years later, in 1985, Pichai formed the Siva Neri Kalagam (SNK), another facility on different property, to provide more housing for the young men and a few more programs for the general public. These institutes together comprise Pichai's padasala, a priest's training center for young boys, located in Pichai's home town Pillaiyarpatti,

Sivagangai, in Tamil Nadu.

Many of Pichai's students are the sons of priests. Just as lawyers send their children to Harvard to study law, many priests send their sons to Pichai to learn their craft from a priest of priests.

Pichai's program is unique in that it accepts nonbrahmins, most of whom come from Malaysia

and Singapore. As I write this article, 70 nonbrahmin students from overseas have passed Pichai's course and 35 more are studying. All together, more than a thousand priests have graduated from the padasala. Many currently serve in temples in Malaysia, Singapore, United Kingdom, Canada, Sri Lanka, USA, Germany, Switzerland, South Africa, Mauritius and France as

well as in India.

Although Pichai's students receive food, lodging, books and training free of charge, they pay for their education in a most interesting way. Working closely together as a mighty

band of apprentice  
pujaris, they assist  
their teacher and his  
staff in performing  
grand ensemble  
pujas, abhishekams  
and homas for local  
Hindu temples and  
homes. For these  
uniquely thespian  
presentations they  
sometimes receive

great sums of money. Although according to the tradition they so meticulously strive to preserve, they never formally charge for their services, they do accept dakshina (donations). And dakshina flows freely and abundantly when well deserved, which

it always is with Pichai and crew. All funds earned in this way go toward the training of the children, as well as the continued development and maintenance of the padasala.



It's a win-win situation from every angle. The students and the teachers are all working— even the youngest among them— and being paid well for it in a most traditional way. Everyone is

learning. The patrons are delightfully happy to be blessed by a sacred chorus. And the tradition they all vow to perpetuate continues in a manner befitting its prestigious

heritage.

This practice is a  
living validation of  
scriptural  
procedure.

According to the  
Vedas, ceremonial

worship can be done in grand style. The number of priests required for any given ceremony is determined by the number of mantra repetitions stipulated in

scripture for that ceremony. For instance, the Vedas say that the proper performance of a traditional Ganapati Homa (See photo pages 50 and 51),

requires 21  
people to  
recite the correct  
number of  
mantras and five  
to perform the  
intricate  
ceremony around  
the homa kundam  
(fire pit). There is

at least one very practical reason for this: Time! With many to intone the myriad mantras, the ceremony can be finished in a single morning.

Here is another example. For the proper execution of the famous Ati Rudra Maha Yajna, in accordance with strict Vedic injunction, there



should be eleven  
priests around  
each of eleven  
homa pits  
chanting the  
sacred Sri  
Rudram mantra  
eleven times  
daily for eleven

days to complete  
the necessary  
14,641 mantra  
repetitions. Since  
Sri Rudram takes  
30 minutes to  
chant once, this  
is only about 60  
hours of real

ceremony time if  
the 121 priests  
are chanting for  
five and a half  
hours a day. By  
comparison, it  
would take one  
person about  
4,393 hours to

complete the same number of repetitions by himself. At five and a half hours a day, this would take a little over two years.

The padasala  
functions in two  
locations; one  
at the  
Pillaiyarpatti  
Temple where  
there are 70  
students, the

other 50 yards  
away at the  
Siva Neri  
Kalagam, a  
one-acre,  
dormitory/school  
complex that  
houses 150

students. Six  
highly qualified  
teachers work  
at both centers.  
Ganesa  
Ganapadigal  
and  
Vydhyanatha

Ganapadigal  
teach the  
ancient Yajur  
Veda.

Jayakumar  
gives  
instruction in  
basic Sanskrit



grammar and  
literature.

Thirumoolanath  
a Gurukkal  
teaches  
astrology and  
the  
performance of

Agamic  
ceremony.  
Oduvar  
Kannayiram and  
Tamil Scholar  
Arumugam lead  
devotional  
singing classes.

Pichai Gurukkal  
himself spends  
as much time  
as possible with  
the young men  
in all areas of  
study.

Many of the  
foreign  
students can  
only get  
two-year visas  
into India. To  
accommodate  
this

restriction,  
Pichai has  
designed his  
teaching  
program so  
that one  
certificate of  
completion

may be  
received after  
two years of  
intensive  
study while  
another may  
be obtained  
for further

accomplishment  
after the  
five-year  
course has  
been  
completed.

The first four  
years of  
Pichai's  
five-year  
program are  
dedicated to  
detail. During



this time,  
students  
learn the  
building  
blocks of  
their craft.  
These are

auspiciously  
impressionabl  
e years when  
young minds  
are fresh and  
open. It is  
now that

great priests  
are built from  
the ground  
up. Quickly,  
thoroughly  
and easily  
they

comprehend  
and commit  
to memory  
great  
volumes of  
information  
to be

assembled  
and used  
later. The  
fifth year is  
spent putting  
all of these  
details

together in  
practice and  
learning the  
flawless  
execution of  
the  
ceremonies

they will be  
performing  
the rest of  
their lives.  
Those who  
finish two  
years are

given the title  
Sivachariyar.  
Those who  
finish the  
five-year  
course are  
called Siva



# Agama Ratnam.

# Training occurs ten

months out  
of a year. Of  
the four  
Vedas, the  
Yajur Veda  
comprises  
the primary

study, as it  
contains  
most of the  
important  
mantras  
required for  
temple puja

and homa.

At the

conclusion of

the study,

students

must

perform a

number of  
intricate  
ceremonies  
in the  
presence  
and to the  
satisfaction

of qualified  
scholars.

This is quite  
an ordeal,  
but one  
which must  
be endured

successfully  
for the  
completion  
of training  
with Pichai.

The  
students  
dress  
according to  
ancient  
tradition,



wearing a  
single  
rudraksha  
bead on a  
thread, a  
cotton

veshti (a  
wrap-around  
waist robe)  
and a shawl  
to cover the  
upper torso.

Their given  
names are  
not used  
while they  
are being  
trained.

Instead,  
they are  
called by  
the name of  
the place  
from which

they have  
come. They  
are not  
allowed to  
watch TV  
and are

taught  
cooking,  
which  
includes  
cutting  
vegetables,

dish  
washing and  
serving food  
with grace  
and  
humility.

Austerity is  
a  
fundamenta  
l part of  
their  
training.



"[Pichai] has  
taught us  
that we  
should be  
ready even  
to starve,"

says

Tirupppuvana  
m Rajesh, a  
graduate of  
the  
program.

All  
ceremonies  
at the very  
popular  
local  
Pillaiyarpatt

i Temple  
are  
exclusively  
performed  
by Pichai,  
his staff

and  
students.  
Ganapati  
Homa,  
which I  
personally

witnessed  
and will  
never  
forget, is a  
greatly  
favored

ceremony  
there.

When he

was 12,  
Pichai  
began  
serving as  
a priest's  
assistant.



His father,  
Krishna  
Gurukkal,  
was his  
teacher.  
Although

he founded  
his  
padasala  
at the age  
of 30, he  
spent

much time  
serving as  
a priest in  
England,  
Malaysia,  
Mauritius,

Canada,  
Germany  
and  
France. To  
date he  
has

performed  
Kumbhabhi  
shekams, a  
ceremony  
which  
takes

several  
days to  
complete,  
in over  
1,300  
temples

around the  
world.

Pichai and

his wife,  
Saroja,  
have three  
children.  
Sridhar,  
their son,



helps with  
the school.  
Sudha, the  
oldest  
daughter,  
lives in

London  
with her  
husband  
Ganesa  
Gurukkal,  
who was

one of  
Pichai's  
students.  
Ganesa  
serves as  
a priest in

the  
Mariamma  
n temple  
there.  
Karpagam,  
the other

daughter,  
is a  
computer  
science  
student.

Although  
Pichai  
Gurukkal  
is  
relatively

young in a  
sage's  
world of  
slowly  
earned

respect,  
his  
reputation  
is  
saintlike. |



found this  
to be true,  
even after  
deep  
investigati

on for this  
article.

Not one  
person I  
talked to

had an  
unkind  
word to  
say about  
him.

Certainly,  
as I sat in  
his  
presence,  
I could

feel what  
others  
felt. That  
he is  
special.

He lives in  
benign  
peace,  
proceedin  
g day by

day into a  
future  
apparentl  
y  
untainted

by even  
the  
faintest  
thought of  
failure.



Even his  
greatest  
adversary  
, that so  
frequently

denounce

d

materialis

m of our

technologi

cal age,  
seems to  
step aside  
as he  
passes by.

For

further  
informati  
on write:

Dr. K.  
Pichai  
Sivachari  
yar,  
Pillaiyarp

atti,  
Sivagang  
ai, Tamil  
Nadu,  
India