

[Keeping the Faith](#)

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EDUCATION

Keeping the Faith

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

Kesav Mallia, Chennai

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