

## [Nondualism is Alive and Well at Sringeri](#)

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### MOVEMENTS

## Nondualism is Alive and Well at Sringeri

At fifty, Sri Bharati Tirtha Swami continues the resurgence of the great Sringeri Peetham

Choodie Shivaram, Bangalore, India

Cradled amidst the mesmerizing Shringa Giri hills of the Western Ghats, on the banks of River Tunga, tower the imposing ancient temples of Sri Sharadamba and Sri Vidyashankara. They mark the center of Sringeri Peetham, foremost of the theological centers founded by Adi Sankara in the 9th century ce. Unmatched serenity surrounds this holy place. "Sacred vibrations of this place awaken your dormant spiritual nature," say devotees who visit Sringeri regularly. I could experience it. Located 192 miles from Bangalore in Karnataka, it is an exhilarating drive through the areca, coffee, tea and pepper plantations. Nature's bountiful greenery is a perfect prelude to a spiritual destination.

My childhood is filled with memories of visits to Sringeri--the reluctant early morning bath in the cold waters of the Tunga, the waiting with folded hands to get the blessings of His Holiness, Sri Abhinava Vidya Theertha. My mother elaborately tutored me on how I ought to conduct myself in the presence

of this great guru and receive his blessings. I would stutter when the swamiji asked me a question, despite the gentle, warm, friendly smile that would adorn His Holiness' glowing face. When I grew up, I realized that it was the aura around him that shook me.

As you enter the Sringeri temple complex arch, you are led to a spacious span of tiled open-space housing on one side and the temples of Sri Sankara, Goddess Sharadamba and an exquisitely carved masterpiece of architecture--the Vidyashankara temple [see inside front cover] on the other. The Goddess is sometimes regarded as a form of Saraswati, sometimes as a form of Parvati. Walking past the temple leads you to the Tunga River where a bathing ghat has been constructed for the convenience of pilgrims. The mutt has nurtured huge fish, which are a great attraction to young and old alike. A bridge across the river leads to Narasimhavan--the abode of the Jagadguru and the burial shrines of the previous pontiffs. Sringeri gets its name from a sage Vrishya Shrunga who lived here. To many, Sringeri is a source of divine inspiration and casts tremendous influence on their lives.

A German couple touring India knew nothing about Sringeri till they saw the Jagadguru on television. They took a detour to the center and stayed on for a month. On returning to Germany, they sent contributions to the mutt requesting that a pilgrim's accommodation be built in their name. The professor, who had a cardiac ailment and was almost written off, had here miraculously regained his health. "There is a certain peace and tranquility one gets in their interaction with the guru. It's very personal. It is beyond visualizing ability. One feels inspired," says Mr. Narasimhan, a retired engineer and

ardent follower of the mutt.

Millions of devotees of Sringeri Mutt have grown up under its strong influence and message of Sanatana Dharma. Many vouch that their lives have been transformed for the better, that they have even seen miracles happen. "Just the darshan of the presiding Deity, Goddess Sharadamba, and blessings from His Holiness instills a sense of confidence and relieves us of so many troubles," said Mr. Narayan, a businessman of Chennai who frequently pilgrimages to Sringeri.

For many, their association with the Sringeri Mutt has paved the way for a religious life. Mrs. Seetalakshmi, who owns a coffee-curing industry near Sringeri, is one such person. Widowed early in life, Seetalakshmi sought the essence in life through spirituality. She spends all her time spreading the message of Sanatana Dharma. "Right from my childhood, my life has been shaped by the teachings of the great Jagadgurus of Sringeri. I am able to see life with detachment and serve people selflessly. The nitty gritty of life don't affect me," she says.

Origins and history: Sringeri, regarded as the "seat of learning," was the first advaita mutt that Adi Sankara founded in the ninth century. A mutt is more than an ashram. It is the home of a preeminent spiritual leader, a theological seminary and training school for priests, a library of rare texts and often, as in the case of Sringeri, includes several ancient famed temples. Advaita here refers to the nondualist teachings of Adi Sankara

Twelve centuries ago during his odyssey across India, Sankara was struck by an unusual sight. Under the scorching heat of noon, a cobra had spread out its hood to give shade to a frog in labor pain. This came as a divine inspiration to Sankara. On inquiring from a sage nearby, he was told this place was sanctified with the rare phenomenon of all species of animals living in perfect harmony, shedding their natural enmities. Sankara intuited this must be the home of Goddess Sri Sharadamba. An institution was born, and Sringeri became South India's western seat of advaita philosophy.

At Sringeri, Sankaracharya worshiped an icon of Goddess Sharadamba carved in sandalwood on a Srichakra, a mystical diagram. After twelve years here, Sankara installed his disciple Sri Sureshwaracharya to head the center and continued on his mission to establish centers at the three other corners of India. Thus, on his journey Sankara established mutts at Badrinath, Dwarka and Puri, all still prominent today. A fifth prominent advaita mutt, at Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu, also traces its lineage to Adi Sankara.

From the time of Sankara, Sringeri became a rejuvenating source for Sanatana Dharma, integrating various Hindu sects. This center has seen an unbroken succession of gurus, each one a scholar of repute and a philosopher with a high degree of spiritual attainment. The mutt holds a strong influence on other mutts and has played a major role in providing scholarly and traditional input. "There are so many mutts and gurus who come and interact with the Jagadguru and seek advice," says Sri Gowrishankar, administrator of the Sringeri Peetham. March 25 to 30, 2001, marks the 50th birthday celebrations of the present pontiff, Sri Bharathi Theertha Swamiji, the 36th in this

lineage.

Sringeri Mutt was patronized and protected not only by the regional kings and rulers, but also by those from far off, irrespective of their religion and political leanings. They generously gifted precious ornaments and lands, which provide a major source of income to the mutt. The mutt was granted the privilege to collect taxes from certain villages. The Muslim ruler Tipu Sultan once wrote to the pontiff of Sringeri asking him to return from his pilgrimage away from the area as a drought had struck after the pontiff's departure. "We need your Divine presence for our lands to prosper with timely rains and harvest, and for the good health of people," wrote Tipu. The center was also supported by other non-Hindu rulers, including the Adil Shahis of Bijapur, Hyder Ali and Nizam, and later the British commissioners Lord Cubbon and Bowring.

In 1791 when the mutt was pillaged by the Peshwa's Maratha army, a number of priests sacrificed their lives trying to save the mutt. The mutt's valuable antique treasures were looted. Tipu Sultan helped to resurrect the mutt and presented the Pontiff with a spatika [crystal] Siva Lingam, known as Chandramouleswar, which the successive gurus worship every day [photo next page]. The Lingam is believed to have been bestowed by Lord Siva upon Sri Sankara.

After independence, the mutt saw its revenues decline. It went through difficult times. Gowrishankar explained, "In 1959, the Jahagir [dedicated land act] was abolished and we could no longer collect taxes from the villages we were entitled to. The mutt also had to surrender some of its land holdings. The mutt

underwent a lot of problems from 50s to 80s."

I myself recall my grandfather mentioning an incident from this period. "The 34th pontiff, Sri Chandrasekhara Bharati, once asked the temple administrator to organize a mass feeding. The administrator declined, owing to lack of funds. Though this news saddened the swamiji, he told the administrator to go ahead with preparations for mass feeding and said, 'Goddess Sharadamba will take care of everything.' A few minutes later, a postman brought a money order, a princely sum remitted by a devotee."

Gowrishankar said, "We were not able to do a lot of work that we wanted to. But the 35th pontiff, Sri Abhinava Vidya Teertha, toured India three times and brought in a lot of devotees, and donations increased. For the past 10 to 12 years we have been doing well and are able to take up projects which are in the interest of the common man."

The Current Pontiff: Sri Jagadguru Bharati Tirtha very kindly agreed to my interview in the midst of his busy schedule. In the course of it, he explained how he came to be a disciple of the 35th pontiff, Sri Abhinava Vidya Thirtha. "I was always very interested in the Vedas and shastras. In 1961 my guru visited my hometown in Andhra Pradesh. I was ten years old then. I was conversant in Sanskrit even as a five-year-old. The pundit who taught me took me to meet Sri Abhinava Vidya Theertha and told him that I could converse in Sanskrit. Guruji was amazed on hearing this. He asked me questions in Sanskrit and was very impressed with my replies. Later he told me he was very struck by my knowledge. I was equally struck by him.

I felt he was the Ultimate, and if I have to learn shastras from anyone it will be only under his tutelage. There is none equal to him. The impact of this meeting kept working on my mind continuously. I was not interested in English education. My mind was constantly drawn towards this great guru. But at ten I could not take decisions on my own."

"In 1966," the pontiff continued, "my guru was on retreat at Ujjain. I headed straight to this destination. I was 16 then and had decided to go to my guru. I told Swami that I had come to learn shastras under his tutelage. All that he said was an affirmative, 'Yes,' and that moment began my relationship with the mutt. It was only divine grace. Had he questioned me if I had come with the permission of my parents, why I had come alone or sent me back, life would have taken a different course altogether. I came to Sringeri in April, 1968, with my guru. I never aspired to become the successor of this mutt. My only ambition was to study the shastras under this Guruji, who was the ultimate on this Earth to me. I was never attached to worldly affairs. After eight years of teaching me, Guruji felt I should be his successor, but I felt I was not ready for such a great responsibility--my ambition was only to learn. But my guru ordained that I should take over. All that I can say is it is the divine grace of Sharadamba." [For more interview see sidebar, page 21.]

Sringeri today: It was the last day of Divali, a Friday, when I visited Sringeri. I had the opportunity of witnessing a special evening puja at the Goddess Sharadamba temple which was conducted with high decorum. The highlight was the presentation of an array of grand silk saris to the Goddess as gifts from the Maharajas of Gwalior, Pawars, Mysore Wodeyars,

Indore's Holkar, Bhavnagar, etc. It was a long list. In the old days, these ruling families made the gifts from their kingdom's treasuries; now endowments provide the funds.

The Sringeri Shankar Mutt now has over 130 branches all over India. It has seen a lot of improvements over the years. A dining hall considered one of the best in Asia can feed up to 3,000 pilgrims at a time. Nearly three to six thousand devotees are fed every day. The decade-old Sri Sharada Dhanvantari Charitable hospital run by the mutt is reputedly one of the best-equipped in the country. With over 100 staff members, including several renowned doctors, the hospital is a boon to the people of the surrounding areas where medical care has been poor. "It's a good feeling working in this hospital. The hospital staff undertakes their job with an attitude of selfless service," says Dr. Mahesh Jain, who was an intern here.

Sringeri Mutt is a treasure house of unedited scriptures in the form of palm leaf manuscripts, or kaditas. Soon the mutt will open the International Advaita Research Centre with the aim of having at least one or two volumes printed every year. "This is a major project. It's an important role of the mutt in preserving its history, heritage and tradition. Scholars are handpicked to decipher and edit these works. We are not looking at it as a commercial venture. Our intention is to retain, preserve and propagate these valuable works of the advaita philosophy, which is more than 1,200 years old" says Gowrishankar.

Education: Sringeri Mutt runs over 100 traditional patasalas, providing free education and facilities for students along with a stipend of <sup>US</sup>\$22 per month. The center runs a few schools in



and around Sringeri itself, a school for the mentally retarded in Noida, Delhi, and a polytechnic college in Karnataka. The Sri Sharada Institute of Management in New Delhi, which incorporates Indian ethos into managerial studies, was lauded by Business India magazine.

Sringeri maintains traditional scholars whose numbers are dwindling with the advent of modern thinking and culture. About 250 Vedic scholars and 100 shastric scholars receive an honorarium of \$11 every month along with other benefits. "They don't have to do anything for us. This is in recognition of their contribution towards maintaining tradition, " explains Gowrishankar. Nearly 500 out of every 1,000 active Vedic pundits in India were trained in Sringeri, temple sources claim.

The mutt has been providing financial assistance to needy persons and organizations for marriages, religious functions, medical needs and building temples, irrespective of their caste or religion. In a year, nearly 500 marriages are blessed by the mutt by providing wedding clothes for the bride and groom and the sacred wedding pendant.

To mark the 50th birthday of the present pontiff, the mutt has adopted a few villages in and around Sringeri. With the help of the government, they will provide basic amenities, like water, health care, primary education and training in hygiene.

Non-brahmin followers: Sringeri Mutt has been criticized for its strong brahmanical leanings. "This is a wrong notion among people not exposed to the mutt," Gowrishankar explained. "More than 60% of funds come from non-brahmins. Most of the devotees who come here are non-brahmins; 90% of the people who take food here are non-brahmins. They perform various religious work and offer worship to the guru's feet. Some communities, such as the fishermen on the west coast, even to this day, will not cast a net before seeking the blessings of Jagadguru. Some sects like Ramakshatriyas and Marathas will not start any of their community activity without the blessings of the guru. We get contributions from foreigners who are neither brahmins nor Hindus, seeking some puja or religious work to be performed. It is false to say that the Sringeri mutt is a sectarian institution."

According to temple officials, a number of devotees, mostly non-brahmins, come from Kerala, Andhra and Tamil Nadu and take part in the pujas and religious work. Even a number of Muslims come to the mutt for the blessing of His Holiness.

Vedic priest school: The patasala at Sringeri admits only brahmins. "If I want a job done by a goldsmith, I have to go to a goldsmith only, and not to a carpenter. Some traditions have been handed down over the ages. You may call them by any name, but traditional professions remain," explained Gowrishankar in defense of this practice. "I cannot construct a temple--only a sthapati can do it. Our golden chariot was made by a local goldsmith who was associated with the mutt for three to four generations." Children of all ages, starting from eight onwards, study at the school. Presently there are 150 taking a six-year course in which they study all aspects of Sanatana Dharma, advaita philosophy and Sanskrit. The ambiance is one of respect for tradition, and of spirituality. The school building is set deep inside the precincts of the mutt, near where the Swamiji resides. The building itself received an

international award four years ago for its traditional aesthetics. A staff of pundits teach here, as well as the pontiff himself, who gives a class each morning. Potential students, necessarily from brahmin families, are put through an entrance test, and only those who prove promising are selected. The students also assist in the worship at the mutt's temples on special occasions.

The future: A significant tradition of the Sringeri Mutt is that the ruling pontiff gives initiation, sannyas diksha, to only one disciple in his lifetime, who then becomes the successor designate. The present pontiff has not yet given sannyas diksha to anyone. "This is one of the reasons why the Sringeri Mutt has been able to keep away from controversies and continue with traditions. People claiming to have diksha from the Sringeri Swamiji are false. What he gives to aspiring devotees is mantra diksha and even this is not given to all," says Gowrishankar. In other words, the pontiff gives sannyas diksha to only one person in his lifetime, his successor. There are no other sannyasin monks ordained by the pontiff, and no resident sannyasins aside from the pontiff at

Sringeri, though many monks do visit. The sannyasins of the Saraswati, Puri and Bharati orders, which are traditionally attached to Sringeri, are initiated by others of those orders.

While a number of religious institutions have succumbed to political pressures, the Sringeri Mutt has the reputation of being apolitical. "We have never asked for any favors from any political party or person. Politicians visit us to seek blessings from the Jagadguru. Even when the government has tried to enforce legislation adverse to the mutt, we have been the first to abide by these rules. When the Jahagir Abolition Act, taking away the temple's gifted lands, came into force, His Holiness said, 'take away anything, but only leave my Sharadamba and the temple for us,'" said Gowrishankar.

The Sringeri mutt is also criticized--from its own community and from devotees--for not starting engineering and medical colleges, which are so much in demand and which other religious institutions are running. "People have felt that the Sringeri mutt has been complacent about it. But

an engineering or medical college can be started by anybody. The role of Sringeri Peetham is to preserve and propagate the valuable works it has in its custody, to sustain and uphold advaita philosophy. Our strength lies in sustaining Sanatana Dharma, which has existed for centuries. This was the purpose with which Adi Sankara started this mutt," states Gowrishankar.

Sri Sringeri Mutt, Sringeri, Karnataka 577 139  
India

Choodie Shivaram has been a journalist for 18 years. She holds a BA degree and a full law degree. She resides in Bangalore with her husband and two children.

## Sringeri's Able Administrator

How Gowrishankar came to serve his guru

Any visitor to Sringeri Mutt comes immediately to appreciate its chief administrator, Sri Gowrishankar. Since India's independence, successive laws have deprived the mutt of most of its traditional forms of income. Now, after 15 years of service, Gowrishankar has succeeded at putting the mutt on new, firm, financial footing, garnering support from all around the world. New construction in the last decade, including a huge

dining hall and hospital for the local community, are noted by pilgrims who earlier witnessed the mutt's bad shape.

"We in the mutt believe that with the blessings of Jagadguru anything is possible and all obstacles will be cleared. We are only an instrument," says Gowrishankar. In addition to being administrator, he trebles up as general power of attorney and the private secretary to the Jagadguru, positions normally held by three people. "The Jagadguru has placed immense faith in me, and we enjoy a good rapport. The three positions merged into one has helped in effective coordination of work," he explained. His responsibilities include not only the Sringeri complex, but more than 100 institutions, schools and colleges.

It is not an easy job. He has worked for years to eliminate unwanted elements, corruption and practices unhealthy to the organization. When public controversy comes up involving the mutt, he serves as whipping boy of choice, for South India's atheistic leftist press dares not attack the pontiff for justified fear of public wrath.

Gowrishankar's family has been closely associated with the mutt for 125 years. His father and grandfathers were tutors to the 34th and 35th pontiffs before each took sannyas. He was trained as an engineer and had a good job with a multinational corporation. But when Sri Abhinava Vidya Theertha suggested he join the mutt, he jumped at the chance. "At that instant, I took this decision. Ever since, I have not looked back or had regrets. My family thought I would not survive in this job for more than two years. I knew I would face a lot of hardship, but I was able to do a lot of work and fulfill His Holiness's desire of improving this mutt."

### A Day in the Life of a Pontiff

Mutt administrator Gowrishankar offered this summary of a typical day in the life of the Pontiff. The Jagadguru has only one meal each the day and nothing else in-between. Occasionally, he may take a glass of milk in the morning after worship. He regularly practices yoga. Even when he is travelling, he does not stop the routine worship, meditations and pujas. It therefore takes three to four days even to reach Bangalore (192 miles) because he does not travel for more than



two to three hours in a day, to ensure that this routine is not upset. Even VIP meetings are fixed during his regular meeting time in the evening and not during any other slot which may come in the way of religious duties.

4:30 am: Guruji arises

5:00: First bath

5:15: Morning observances, anusthana, a routine of worship and meditation

7:30: Offers puja worship to the sandals of his guru

8:00: Conducts class for the students of the priest training school. In October, 2000, he was teaching tarka, the science of Vedic reasoning, his favorite subject.

9:00: Personal studies

9.30: Comes out to give darshan, audience with devotees. This may continue until noon, depending on the number of people. If it is a Friday, he goes to the temple during this period to worship Goddess Sharada.

noon: Second bath, midday prayers and meditation.

1:30 pm: Visits the samadhi temples of his gurus, then goes for his lunch

2:30: Short break

3:00: The Jagadguru teaches class for the scholars and pundits. These are brainstorming, intellectual sessions on various subjects.

4:15: He attends personally to the letters he has received in his name

5:00: Swamiji comes out to give audience to devotees.

6:30 Meets with the Mutt's administrator to discuss the day's business

7:00: Short break

7:30: Bathes and performs his evening worship and meditations.

8.15: Performs puja to Chandramouleswara and other Deities which have been traditionally worshiped by all previous Jagadgurus back to Adi Sankara. Done without fail every day.

10:00 Jagadguru retires to his chambers and

continues his personal study

11:30: Rest

On Dharma, the Pope, Kids and More  
Views from Sri Sri Bharati Tirtha

On Hinduism In The Present World

There is gradual erosion of dharma among people. The influence of other cultures has increased and the effects of this are very visible. For instance, the son of a Vedic scholar will not study the Vedas and pursue a career in it. He moves away to seek a living outside, rather than carry forward the rich tradition of his forefathers. Thus he also moves away from that environment and culture. We are losing out on a rich heritage and tradition by getting caught in these peculiar compulsions. I have no idea at this moment where all this will lead to or end. But this is a wheel of evolution; things are bound to look up when the wheel starts moving up. Changes are imminent, but when and how we cannot say.

On Politics and Religion

Political parties' involvement in religion--as long as the intentions are good--is good for the nation, the world and for Hinduism. When the intentions are not good and there are ulterior motives lurking behind, then it is detrimental to religion. Our mutt has always maintained neutrality to all political parties without favoring or aligning itself to any of them. Many politicians come here for blessing. We do not discuss politics with them. To bless them is our duty, which we do. Why do we need political involvement? We don't ask for any favors. In 1978, when Mrs. Indira Gandhi contested the Lok Sabha elections from Chickmagalur, she came here to seek blessings from my guru. The next day, her opponent, Veerendra Patil, also came to my guru for blessings.

## The Threat from Other Religions

We lack the religious dogmatism and discipline of the other religions who are posing a threat to the very fabric of our religion. But no, we are not heading towards a situation that spells doom. We have enough people who can propagate dharma. Any amount of opposing forces can be withstood without any harm to

Hinduism. Hinduism has such innate strength, there is great hope for the religion. The objections to the pope's visit to India are silly. How can we tell a visitor not to come? Similarly asking him to apologize for some misdeeds perpetuated by his predecessors is meaningless. In my opinion, there is no sense in apologies if the mistakes are going to be repeated. We must emphasize on telling the pope to stop all conversions. There has been a misuse of our broadmindedness, and we must find a way out. Most of these are politicizing tactics. Stop conversions. Then there can be harmony and peace in this world. This can be a fruitful approach.

## On Conversion to Hinduism

When some foreigners approached my guru's guru, Sri Chandrasekhara Bharati, seeking conversion to Hinduism, he advised them to "become better Christians, that is the essence of Hinduism. If you cannot find solace in your religion, you will never be able to find it in any other religion." On the issue of children of marriages between Hindus and non-Hindus, it is difficult to give a blanket reply. We will have to see each of these in its context and act

accordingly within the circumstances and on the matter of bringing them into Hinduism.

### On Corporal Punishment of Children

I have always said, if children are out of control, the parents have to blame themselves for it. We allow them to grow as they like without correcting them. Then, when they later err, we complain that they have gone bad. We must bring up children with discipline according to dharma. I'm against corporal punishment. Hitting children does not help in any way. Parents must exercise control over their children in a positive way. It is the duty of parents to teach children the basic tenets of Hinduism from a very young age. They must be brought up with pride in their religion. Every Hindu must follow this. Only then will it auger well for the religion.

### On Adapting to Changing Times

The mutt has adopted changes from time to time. But there are certain things that cannot change with time, come what may. There are other things that need to change for practical reasons. Our earlier Jagadguru, Sri Narasimha

Bharati, never sat in a car, train or motor transport. From my guru's time, we travel by car. These are changes that come with times. I cannot say I will not travel by car. But if I say times have changed, I will wear white instead of saffron robes, no, this is not accepted. I cannot compromise on doing three anusthanas [periods of meditation and worship] every day regularly. One has to take to sannyas vows as a renunciate monk from brahmacharya [celibate studenthood]. I cannot stop or take shortcuts to worshiping Goddess Chandramouleeshwara. There are certain things that just cannot change even if hundreds of years roll by. Anything that alters or affects the norms and traditions of the mutt cannot change at any cost. Long ago, people who went abroad, who had crossed the seas, never came before the Swamiji. But now, people come seeking blessings saying they are going abroad or have just returned.

### His Message to the People

Every person must pay attention to two important aspects--harm none and help another to the best of your ability. If every human being follows these two, there will be peace in this



world. There is no peace today because of violence, hatred, jealousy and a retaliatory attitude. One should not forget God. Call Him by any name, irrespective of religion, but we must accept that there is a supreme power above us. We must bow to this power and seek its grace.