Promoting the Saivite Religion
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LINEAGES

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One of Tamil Nadu's oldest monasteries brings new life to its temples, schools and mission

Kesav, Chennai

One of South India's oldest ashrams is gearing up for something new. Under the leadership of two pontiffs Sivaprakasa Desika Paramacharya Swamigal and his successor, Kasi Viswanatha Swami the 600-year-old Thiruvavaduthurai Aadheenam will soon be aggressively propagating the teachings of Saivite Hinduism through the addition of English books and audio/video cassettes. They've already developed forty-three Saiva Siddhanta Centers which offer courses in religious study on Saivite worship and philosophy. About 5,000 people have graduated from these courses in the last ten years and some 3,400 are currently enrolled. Plans are also in the making to reach an English-speaking audience with the Hindu philosophy of Siva worship, for which more books and cassettes will be released. In the Saivite tradition, an aadheenam is a monastery-temple complex and not an ashram in the usual sense. Thiruvavaduthurai is one of the five most prominent aadheenams in South India. These monasteries, under the leadership of a guru, have traditionally managed large parcels

of land and dozens of temples in the surrounding area.

The Pontiff

Sivaprakasa Swamigal, the current pontiff of Thiruvavaduthurai, is affable, accessible and unassuming. Swamiji has given diksha, spiritual initiation, to many seekers, including harijans. In the last three years, 200 Christians embraced Hinduism under his guidance. In his Saiva Siddhanta Centers both Christians and Muslims have enrolled as students. "Liberation of the soul is our aim," explains Sivaprakasa Desika. "It is a matter of Realization for myself and those in the aadheenam. For others, I am like a guide, a person who helps to elevate life so that God is close always. Our avowed aim on a larger scale is the regeneration of mankind."

From a young age, Sivaprakasa Desika was "God-intoxicated." He was fond of pujas, ceremonial worship, and read scripture daily. Today, though he loves solitude, he also enjoys interacting daily with the many saints, sages, swamis, scholars and writers who visit the monastery. He is active in reaching out to the lowest sections of society.

For the last several years, Sivaprakasa Swami has been increasingly active in the printing and publishing of religious literature. His monastery printing press, which is exclusively

dedicated to religious work, has produced a total of 478 books (mostly in the Tamil language), for the purpose of teaching the different philosophical doctrines of Saivism. Meykandar, a Tamil monthly, has also been published there for the last 19 years. Swamiji oversees the daily religious discourses given by the monastery. These classes are conducted in the monastery and broadcast on loudspeakers out to the public.

Swamiji starts his day at 4:00 AM with a one-hour meditation followed by a long walk. After a morning puja, he receives devotees, has a light breakfast and attends to office work before returning to his room for serious study and a short meeting with his ashram staff just before lunch. Early afternoon is devoted to light reading and meditation, then he is back in his office at 4:00 pm. During the half hour prior to sunset, he meditates in the garden, performs yoga and takes a short walk. The day closes with an hour-long puja ending at 8:30 pm. Before he retires at about 10:00 pm, he takes a light meal of food blessed at the temple and has one last meeting with his staff to finalize the next day's program.

Swamiji's message to the world is: "Shun violence. It is okay to have different opinions. But fighting and quarelling in the name of religion must be avoided totally. A peaceful atmosphere must be ensured by respecting other religions. Patience and tolerance are the qualities that God-seekers and every devotee of Siva should try to possess."

History in the Making

The monastery is 175 miles southwest of Chennai, Tamil Nadu, South India. According to ancient legends, 90 million sages lived, worshiped and meditated at this place. These grounds were sanctified by the worship and hymns of the Tamil Saivite saints, known as Nayanars. Sambandar, Tamil Nadu's renowned child saint, sang his most famous song here. It is also said that Saint Tirumular, founder of Saiva Siddhanta, one of the six main sub-sects of Saivism, lived here in continued meditation and composed the Tirumantiram, 3,000 verses on Saiva mysticism and philosophy. Today, many worship at a shrine to Tirumular on monastery grounds. The Hindu Heritage Endowment (HHE) has established an endowment for the care of this shrine and invites contributions. For more information email: hhe@hindu.org or see www.hheonline.org.

The monastery was founded by Sri Namasivayamurthy in the 15th century during the reign of King Virupaksha II of Vijayanagar for the purpose of perpetuating Sivajnana Bodham Saiva Siddhanta, a specific form of Saivite Hinduism, based on the work of Meykandar. Muthuvirappa Nayak, the 17th century ruler of Madurai, was the first to give additional lands to the monastery. Later many followed this gesture. The monastery soon

became a center of Tamil and Sanskrit learning. The monastery library opened in 1895 and remains an important facility today. It houses an irreplaceable collection of 1,200 sets of palm leaves. Until recent times, scriptures were inscribed on these flat, oblong leaves using a stylus and lampblack. Most are in Tamil orSanskrit, with a few in Telegu and Malayalam. There is also a collection of 200 ancient copper plates (see photo above) inscribed in Tamil, Telegu and Nandinagari languages. Valuable paper manuscripts, books on Tamil and temple history, Saiva literature, Vedas, Agamas, art and epigraphy are also here. The monastery offers free accommodations to visiting scholars.

Past Pontiffs

Most gurus of Thiruvavaduthurai have been learned preceptors, versatile teachers, writers, multi-linguists, scholars and proficient commentators. The ninth pontiff, Ramalinga Desikar (1658-78 ce), was an accomplished scholar of ancient Tamil scripture and music. During his period of authority, othuvars, specially trained temple singers, were appointed for singing

the hymns of the Tamil saints in the monastery for the first time. All the pontiffs patronized scholars and writers. Some of them also impressed the kings with their mystical powers. They all won the hearts of the existing society with their oratorical skills, benevolent deeds and acts of service.

More recently, the 20th pontiff, Ambalavana Desikar, wanted all the aadheenams to work together. It was during this time that India's Prime Minister Nehru visited Thiruvavaduthurai. The 21st pontiff, Subramania Desikar (1951-67) pioneered the use of motor cars instead of palanquins for travel and held large religious conferences. Ambalavana Desikar, the 22nd pontiff (1967-83), organized seminars on Saiva scriptures. The monastery's current pontiff, Sivaprakasa Desika Paramacharya Swamigal, was initiated in 1984 and is 23rd in the succession. Kasi Viswanatha Swamigal, age 33, has been chosen to succeed Swamiji. According to tradition, a successor is selected from the best of the disciples. Devotion to God and an inclination toward service are tendencies that are sought for in making the choice. Family lineage, personal charisma and prior training

The 600-year-old temple at Thiruvavaduthurai Aadheenam was built during the reign of King Virupaksha II of Vijayanagar

Kasi Viswanatha Swami, 33, will succeed Sivaprakasa Swami as the next pontiff