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Biography

Devotion, Sadhana, Study & Service

Despite onerous responsibilities, Jagadguru maintains a simple monk's life

By Choodie Sivaram, Bengaluru

Sri sri bharati tirtha was born on April 11, 1951, into a traditional Smarta family in the village of Alugumallepadu, near Guntur, Andhra Pradesh. His father, Venkateshwara Avadhani, a Vedic scholar, and his mother had prayed to Lord Siva to bless them with a son. For one year, every day the pious couple performed Ekadasha Rudrabhishekha at Bhavanishankara Temple in their village.

Gurumaa Ananthalakshamma, Jagadguru's mother, lives in a small room in the Peetham complex, eternally immersed in Rama-nama japa. She considered herself blessed to have witnessed the 61st Vardhanti celebration. With tears of joy, she shared her thoughts during the event: "I feel this place is like Manidweepa, the abode of the Goddess as described in Soundarya Lahiri."

Wandering briefly down memory lane, she shared. "His father was a Rama devotee and wanted to name his son Sitarama. I am a devotee of Hanuman and wanted to name him Anjaneya. So we named him Sitarama Anjaneyulu."

Did she know that her son would one day ascend the throne of transcendental wisdom? "I knew from the beginning that he was a divine child. When I first saw him, there was a bright light and radiance in his face. From childhood he was distanced from worldly habits and attractions. He would always be reciting God's name. His toys were idols of God, and his games were God-centric. He is the child of the Goddess, not my child. I am only an instrument. She is taking care of everything according to Her wish."

At 15 the young boy traveled to Ujjain and prostrated to Sri Sri Abhinava Vidyatirtha (Sri Mahasannidhanam), expressing his desire to learn the Shastras from him. The great saint agreed. The lessons commenced the next day, with the elder personally teaching the young seeker the Tarka Sangraha, an exposition on logic which Jagadguru delights in teaching now. The boy soon became proficient in the Shastras and Vedas. He was a flawless and focused student. Pandit Krishna Bhat, principal of the Math's gurukula, was a fellow student in those days. Bhat narrates, "He was only concerned about the Shastras and his studies. He would never discuss worldly matters. Ever helpful, even while talking to his fellow students, he would only ask about their studies and discuss the lessons."

In November 1974, Sitarama Anjaneyulu was anointed by Mahasannidhanam as his successor and given the monastic name Bharati Tirtha. In 1989, when his guru attained mahasamadhi, Bharati Tirtha Mahaswamiji was crowned the 36th Peethadhipathi of the Sringeri Peetham.

During the Guruvandhana, His Holiness explained how he copes with the heavy duties of his position: "When I was ordained by my Guru as the Peethadhipathi, respecting his wish, I had to accept the duties that it entailed. But my nature doesn't agree with anything beyond my spiritual duties and scriptural study. Understanding my limitations, Goddess Sharadamba herself gave me Gowrishankar, who could take over the Math's administrative responsibilities and leave me undisturbed to continue my meditation and study. Because of Gowrishankar, the Math's activities could continue unhindered."

Fluent in many languages, Mahaswamiji guides people throughout India and the world, but he is oblivious to worldly goings-on. Gowrishankar and Krishnamoorthy inform him of important events or developments they feel he should know about. Sri Krishnamoorthy relates, "He tells us, 'Don't give me unnecessary news and information. It intrudes the space in my mind where God should be.' As regards political happenings or anything material, he shuts himself off completely."

Jagadguru follows a rigorous routine. Krishnamoorthy says, "He doesn't sleep or rest through the day; relaxation is a word that does not exist for him. He is constantly reading whenever he has time."

Dr. Gowrishankar offered this summary of a typical day in Mahaswamiji's life:

"At 4am Guruji arises. At 4:30: first bath, followed by anusthana, a routine of worship and meditation which includes puja to the padukas (sandals) of his guru and paramaguru, then parayana (recitation) of Sri Adi Shankara's Brahma Sutra Bhashya. At 7:00 he visits the samadhi temples of his gurus, then visits the goshala and feeds the cows under his personal care. At 8:00 he conducts class for the students of the Shastras (Vedanta or Tarka). At 9:30 he guides religious observances in the Peetham, which may include granting darshan (audience) to visiting heads of others Maths (or ashrams) seeking guidance. At 10:30 he gives darshan to devotees. This may continue until noon, depending on the number of people. If it is a Friday, he goes to the temple of Goddess Sharada to offer prayers. At noon, after a second bath, he performs midday prayers and meditation. Biksha (lunch) is at 2pm. At 3:00 the Jagadguru teaches a class for scholars and guides research activities related to unpublished manuscripts. These are brainstorming, intellectual sessions on various subjects. At 5:30 he gives darshan to devotees, and at 6:30 he discusses Math affairs with the administrator. At 7:30 he bathes and performs his evening worship and meditations. At 8:15 he performs puja to Chandramouliswara and other Deities traditionally worshiped by all previous Jagadgurus stretching back to Sri Adi Shankaracharya. On Fridays he additionally performs the Sri Chakra puja. At 10pm Jagadguru retires to his chamber and continues his personal study."

Even when traveling, Mahaswamiji strictly adheres to his worship and meditation routines. It therefore takes three to four days even to reach Bangalore (192 miles) because he travels no more than two to three hours in a day, to ensure that his routine is not upset. Even VIP meetings are fixed during his regular meeting time in the evening, not during any other slot which may come in the way of his Anushthana and religious duties.

Jagadguru follows a strict regimen in food, too: a glass of milk in the morning and night and just one meal a day, at lunchtime. No fruits, snacks or other food. On ekadashi, he observes silence and does not even partake of water.

Jagadguru is a passionate and enthusiastic teacher of advaita philosophy and Sanskrit. The eagerness and delight he shows in clarifying doubts of devotees,

young and old, is illuminating. He never compromises on teaching time.

Dr. Gowrishankar shared: "The Jagadguru is considered by prominent scholars to be one of the greatest ever exponents of Sanskrit and Sanatana Dharma. His love for the language is so deep that the Mahaswamiji's guru used to joke: 'You just need to tell Swamiji that you love Sanskrit and will immediately become fond of you!' In fact, the first time the Mahaswamiji had the darshan of his Guru (when he was 10 years old), his Guru was thrilled with his command of Sanskrit and recitation of Vedic chants."

The new documentary, "Life and Teachings of an Inspiring Saint," features Mahaswamiji speaking entirely in Sanskrit. Gowrishankar notes, "One of the most common feedbacks I get on the film is: 'I have not studied Sanskrit formally but it is interesting that when the Mahaswamiji speaks, it seems so simple that I seem to understand a lot.'"

Gowrishankar adds, "The Mahaswamiji has edited many critical Sanskrit texts that are valuable resources both to students and advanced scholars. Under Mahaswamiji's direct guidance, the Peetham conducts Sanskrit examinations, for entry level to advanced students, and provides a certification of their skills. More than half a million students have completed and obtained certification through this program."