

DARK DAYS FOR A GURU

B Y C L E O P A S K A L

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The most famous alleged murderer in India speaks quietly, almost in a whisper, which in the still evening air sounds more like the muted rustle of leaves than a human voice. Until he giggles, which is often. Even by Indian political soapopera standards, the case of Sri Jayendra Saraswathi is remarkable. As the 69th Acharya (religious leader) of Kanchi Mutt — a 2,500-year-old temple complex in the southern state of Tamil Nadu — he is the closest thing Hinduism has to a pope. He has hundreds of millions of followers worldwide, including in Canada. And he has been charged in connection with the scandalous murder case of a manager from another temple. Other elements of the bizarre convoluted case include an ex-film-star-turnedpolitico and her live-in same-sex companion. Many believe the links in the case stretch all the way up to Sonia Gandhi, the Italian-born widow of assassinated Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Out of jail on bail, Sri Jayendra Saraswathi has agreed to talk to me, his first formal audience with a journalist. We can't talk about his case, so we cover politics and, of course, religion.

“It's not just religion that needs to grow, but morality as well,” says the Hindu guru. “Morality is not restricted to religion alone, it pervades all your life. You have to educate children. And bring a moral dimension to the media. As long as there is a commercial aspect to the media, we can't expect the truth. If the youth and the media change, then politics change.”

Sri Jayendra Saraswathi was chosen as a child to be the 69th Acharya, and grew up in the rarified air of the temple. The modest compound where he now lives, with white-washed walls and pilgrims in white wrap-around leg coverings, has a free clinic, a school for the physically challenged and a nursing home for the elderly. Dr. V., who guided me around the temple and is my interpreter, is a London-trained neurologist. Like many of the temple workers, he volunteers out of religious conviction.

As the leader of 860 million Indian Hindus, Sri Jayendra Saraswathi is revered as much for his modern ways as he is by dint of ancient tradition. One of his most influential moves was to open the temples and centres of Hindu learning to everyone — all castes, women, Muslims, Christians and anyone else who was interested. The wider he opened the gates, the larger his following grew — and his influence. That influence has also been felt socially and politically. Sri Jayendra Saraswathi became a powerful ally to the Hindu nationalists and their political party, the BJP. And he became a threat to other centres of political power. It is said, albeit in hushed whispers, that one of his biggest enemies is

the powerful Sonia Gandhi, who leads the BJP's political rival, the Congress Party.

The top politician in the state of Tamil Nadu is chief minister Dr. Jayalalithaa, a flamboyant former actress who calls herself "Puratchi Thalaivi" (Revolutionary Leader). She had a famously difficult adolescence growing up in the adult world of film before she finally made the switch to the real stage, in politics. As her power grew, Jayalalithaa started calling herself "Amma" or mother, to better distance herself from her sultry past. In her early days in political office, she implemented much-needed social and education programs and was highly regarded. But soon, there were mutterings about the undue influence of her live-in "best friend," Ms. Sasikala. Most of the whispers were about the sudden prosperity of Ms. Sasikala's friends and family.

Amma started courting the Hindu vote. She passed an anticonversion bill aimed at slowing the progress of Evangelical conversions. She began a program to feed children at temples, rather than at school. But she was a Brahmin in a state with a small Brahmin population. And she was losing popularity. Then, on Sept. 3, 2004, at approximately 5:45 p.m., the manager of another religious complex in the state, not the Acharya's, was attacked and left dead on the floor of his temple. It was a shock. No one was sure who had killed him. Or why. He had been a strident man, complaining about myriad perceived improprieties, including ones allegedly committed by the Kanchi Mutt hierarchy itself. But strident people are not uncommon, especially in a temple town.

Two months later, on Nov. 11, the eve of Diwali, one of the biggest Hindu holidays of the year, the police showed up at a religious centre in the Congress Party-run state of Andhra Pradesh and dragged Sri Jayendra Saraswathi off to jail. Over the next couple of months, he was followed by 24 co-accused. Although official charges had yet to be laid, the hundreds of pages of accusations boiled down to one against the Acharya: that he had abetted or masterminded the murder. No one was saying that the renowned guru had wielded the fatal dagger himself. Thousands, not all of them Hindus, were outraged at his arrest. One person self-immolated in protest. **The Hindu Conference of Canada condemned the arrest.** Meanwhile, much of the world press, including the BBC, claimed that the incident showed that finally, Indians were getting over their reverence for religious leaders.

It took months for official charges to be filed — March 31, 2005. People began to suspect that perhaps something else was going on. It is doubtful such a high-profile arrest could occur in the state without the involvement of Amma. And an election was approaching. But could Amma make such a brazen move without the approval of Sonia Gandhi?

Gandhi has consolidated her power at the national level by taking control of the ruling Congress party. However, she has been shrewd enough to not take on the

public responsibility of being prime minister. Such an arrest would suit her very well. Gandhi is propping up rival Hindu religious leader Swami Swaroopanand who, unlike the Acharya, supports her and her Congress Party.

However, the tide is turning against the two ladies. There is a palpable anger on the street, much of it directed against Gandhi's religious meddling. Amma's popularity is also plummeting. As well, a petition has recently been presented to the Indian Supreme Court to move the case out of Tamil Nadu. And this week, the Indian High Court ordered 11 of Sri Jayendra Saraswathi's co-accused released unless other charges were brought against them. Sitting on a simple plastic chair in a bare concrete room with an open roof, the Acharya's gestures are elegant but child-like. Periodically, he gazes over my shoulder, as if he sees something there that reassures him. He is relaxed, comfortable, at peace. Despite the storm surrounding him, here, there is a calm. He gently chides me for thinking in terms of India versus the West. "Aren't we all one?" The Hindu pope certainly appears to be a wise and good man. But in a politically volatile India, that may be the most dangerous kind of man there is.

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