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A Daily Round of Rituals For Boys Becoming Priests

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By Rama Lakshmi
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[NEW DELHI](#)

Hidden in a tightly packed neighborhood of middle-class condominiums, cheap Chinese restaurants and garment sweatshops is a thriving 3,500-year-old Hindu tradition. It is a residential school that teaches young boys the art of chanting Hindu verses in classical Sanskrit and trains them to become Hindu priests. For eight years, they study religious rituals without material distractions.

The day begins for these 27 boys at 4:45 a.m., when the lights are switched on in the basement, where they sleep on jute floor mats. When a supervisor calls out, they uncurl lazily under the sheets and stretch. Some go back to sleep, while others stare at the floor vacantly for a few minutes.

Sriram Sharma, a thin 13-year-old with large eyes and a shy smile, folds his sheet and mat and stacks them on the open stone shelf on the wall. He then steps tentatively into the cold shower and comes out shivering and chanting under his breath.

Sriram has lived at the school for more than two years, memorizing and reciting the hymns from the Hindu religion's oldest texts, called the Vedas. After six more years of training at the School of Vedas, he will become a Hindu priest who can perform prayer rituals involving fire worship and rhythmic incantations. He also studies math, English and Hindi for an hour each day.

"The Vedas contain the sacred knowledge of Hindu religion and were passed down orally by sages," Sriram says, standing in front of a mirror hung on a fading pink wall. He wears a white wraparound but is bare-chested and barefoot. In his palm, he grinds fragrant sandalwood, with which he cautiously draws a long U-shape on his forehead in a sign of devotion.

"I have to get the shape right. It is an important tradition," he explains as he drags his thumb up his forehead. Then he takes red vermilion powder and stamps a dot between his brows.

White threads hang diagonally from his bare shoulder like a sash, and a tiny tuft of hair is knotted at the back of his shaved head. Sriram is part of the old, unbroken chanting tradition that [UNESCO](#), in 2003, proclaimed a masterpiece of "the oral and intangible heritage of humanity."

"Learning the Vedas is hard," Sriram says, massaging his tuft with coconut oil before sitting down to chant the first prayer of the day, around 6:30 a.m. "At first, the school felt like a jail. I missed my mother and cried for weeks, but now this is home."

Soon the hall resounds with chanting, loud enough to wake the neighborhood. The boys cannot understand what they chant because the meaning of the hymns will be taught only after eight years of memorizing the procedures of Hindu rituals.

A little boy sitting next to Sriram is having a bad start. He is seized by a bout of hiccups during the chanting but refuses to take a break.

The boys follow a grueling routine of do's and don'ts -- they cook and eat only vegetarian food, wash their own clothes by hand, cannot call or visit their families, cannot take medicine except for a physical injury, and cannot watch television. Parents cannot bring any gifts.

The teacher, a bearded middle-age man who set up the school 11 years ago, walks in to inspect their performance. He pauses in front of each boy, listens carefully and nods.

"The boys are not allowed to go out. I keep them away from the world of illusions and desires. They lead pure, austere lives," says G.K. Sitaraman, respectfully called "Guru ji." "This school runs in an orthodox way, like thousands of years ago. The only difference is that we are no longer in the jungles."

Each class begins with the students prostrate on the floor before the teacher. Sitaraman turns to the boys and says: "The knowledge of the Vedas is the only education that cannot be erased. Everything else is impermanent in this world."

But the mood is not always somber; the boys have fun even while chanting the divine revelations. They give one another sidelong looks, sharing an unspoken joke about a plump student who is washing a black stone idol of a Hindu deity in milk.

"We call him 'Tummy' because he is fat," Sriram explains between chanting sessions. "Every boy has a nickname here -- 'Snake,' 'Mouse,' 'Chili,' 'Bucktooth.' I am 'All-[India](#) Radio.' They say I talk nonstop."

Shortly before 11, as the boys gather around a ceremonial wood fire and dot their chests with ash, they speak in conspiratorial whispers. The topic is their daily game of cricket.

"Did you hear that they will not let us play cricket in the park anymore?" says Kedarnath Dave, 12. "It is basement cricket for us from now on. The people living in the apartments do not want us mixing with their children anymore."

The older boys say they are eager to start their work in the real world and earn the social status that comes with knowledge of the Vedas. Hari Ramachandran says his father was a personal driver for a family and did not want his son to end up doing something similar.

"Even doctors and engineers respect priests who know the Vedas," says Hari, 16. "They would speak to us humbly. If I was a driver, they would bark at me and say, 'Go, get the car out of the garage quickly.'"

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