

NRI Shibir 2016

A transformative experience connecting the past, present and future

The Sanskriti Prachara Shibir a.k.a the NRI Shibir was something we had been waiting for since our move to Boston in 2012. When it was finally announced we leapt at the opportunity, excited at the prospect of going back to Shirali and reconnecting with our roots. We waited with growing anticipation and overcame some anxious moments when things came in the way and we almost did not make it.

Make it, we finally did, as we found ourselves in front of the Math late evening on December 22nd, 2016. We arrived bedraggled, and jet lagged, after jumping many hoops through cancelled and delayed flights and a journey which took us two days, four flights and six airports! But all the tiredness almost instantly vanished at the sight of the ethereally lit Math. It felt like a homecoming.

We were welcomed warmly by Kuttimam and his team of sanchalaks but we had missed the registration and introductory session...or so we thought. Little did we know that we were in for a life changing experience which would be orchestrated with thoughtful precision where every need, said or unsaid, would be met and nothing would be missed... not even those introductions. We would soon get introduced and become part of a new family of 27 people who had come from different parts of USA and Australia and the 23 sanchalaks (organizers) who had come from Pune, Bangalore, Mumbai.

The agenda, at the outset, for the Shibir looked innocuous and in fact felt a bit light. It would turn out to be the most intense 4 days where the days would start in the crisp, cool and stimulating pre-dawn air, go through a relentless set of activities in the day reaching into the night, meticulously planned and executed flawlessly by the team of Sanchalaks right upto the daily wake up knock on our door –gentle but persistent.

We came to the Shibir thinking it would be a place to connect to our past but we left with seeing the future – the future of a new India – vibrant, hopeful, and living in harmony. What we experienced was a microcosm of a country that has women leading the change from the front, where school children from even a small and little known place like Shirali can make waves in academic, sports, dramatics at the state level, where self-help and self-regulation are creating new sustainable models of economic development .

It was an enthralling ride as we would spend a part of the day gazing at the visage of a 3rd century sculpture in the thoughtfully organized Math museum and spend another part marveling at a 21st century solar power generation facility which would light up an entire farm. We would listen to the impeccable rendition of Chapter 15 of the Bhagavad Gita by the students of Srivali High School while listening to how they excelled at the contemporary subjects of science and mathematics. We marveled at the creativity and diligence of the women at Samvit Sudha as they make 60 different types of handmade products while also building what promises to become an iconic brand for women's empowerment. We would ramble through the 88 acres expanse of Kembre farms learning about crop cycles, gape in visceral fascination at a perfectly intact snake skin shed on the path to the two ponds

that feed the farm, get to know the cows in the goshala by name and temperament (actually I found a namesake and given his reputation may have to seriously reconsider mine !)

We would be taken on a guided tour through more than three centuries of unbroken lineage of our gurus, learn how every little stone in the temple complex had meaning. The parikrama of the Math complex was like taking a parikrama of our own history and tracing the journey of our ancestors all the way to the present. Through playful quizzes, we would learn the meaning, significance and relevance of many terms and rituals that are a part of our heritage.

All of this was under the watchful and loving gaze of our Param Pujya Swamiji, who blessed us with much more time than we ever expected. The sessions with Swamiji ranged from spiritual inquiry to guided meditation always accompanied with bhajans in his mellifluous voice. Swamiji's new pranayama technique- Ninaad and the guided meditation conducted in the serene and tranquil environment of Panchavati created new additions in the toolkit of our spiritual development.

We Amchis are foodies,...and here again we were in for a treat – at every single meal. The morning tea/coffee would add as much to the spring in our step as the pristine air outside. The Amchi food was cooked to perfection – varied as it always is in its fare – from breakfast to dinner. In fact on one of the days, the delectable poha sent us into raptures and inspired Sarita Ragadepacchi to write a song which became the anthem of our Shibir – 'Love you Shirali...Love you Swamiji'. It will soon be on Youtube and will take you through our entire journey of this Shibir.

There is so much to write...each session has enough to fill pages and we had more than five to six per day. I will restrict this to be a synopsis and hopefully have others share their experiences too.

As the Shibir came to a close, ending on a rousing note with a 'Shibirarthis Have Talent' kind of show of dance, songs and lots of joy we realized what an enthralling experience this Shibir had been. The vision of a new India – where sustainable development economic, social and environmental - are firmly rooted in the spiritual foundation which is the bedrock of our civilization and has helped us outlast every other one on this planet – was here to see and experience in our very own Shirali.

The Math and the Guru parampara are our treasures, our shared inheritance that we cannot afford to lose - in a world where so much of what is familiar is disappearing. This treasure is expanding rapidly through the many new projects undertaken as was evidenced in an excellent presentation made by our Standing Committee President, Praveen Kadle mam and Dilip Mavinkurve mam. But the key to unlocking this treasure for us is - engagement. We need to get engaged and partake in this treasure. Engaged in any which way – participate, volunteer, contribute.

Swamiji's special connection with the youth keeps the Math current and in step with the times. During the Shibir, it was the young shibarthis who stole the show – in the vimarsh with their simple yet soul searching questions – in the talent show where we musical talent in Siya's melodious flute, the argentram ready performance of young Vrinda, the capable anchoring of Veda and Shruti, the artistic contributions of Anushri and the playful comments of little Richa.

In Param Pujya Swamiji we have a great leader who not only guides our spiritual development but also reconnects us to the exciting transformation taking place in this country. Swamiji's unconditional love for us changes us in ways that we could never possibly imagine and all for the better.

We bade fond farewells to each other and most importantly to the sanchalaks, all highly accomplished professionals who had left their day jobs and their families to be with us through these four days. We will be forever in their debt for having taken such good care of us and lived up to the Math tradition of making it our 'Kulaar' (our mother's home).

While not all of us can be like Sharad and Seema Hemmady, who have left Silicon Valley to come and work in rural India, we definitely can spare a week to invest in ourselves and the future of our next generation.

Mark the next Shibir in your calendars and please don't miss it. You will come back enriched and inspired in more ways than one!

...Nandkishore Kalambi, Boston, USA