



●●● CHANGEMAKER

Walking the talk

A spiritual man to saunter from Kanyakumari to Kashmir

BY NAVIN J. ANTONY

For a person who begins his autobiography with a reference to himself in the third person, Sri M of Madanapalle in Andhra Pradesh comes across as rather unassuming. Clean-cut, clean shaven and often clad in white *dhoti* and *kurta*, he does not have the paraphernalia one associates with a spiritual guru. Listen to him talk, and you would know Sri M is the odd man out in the spiritual bandwagon.

Born Mumtaz Ali Khan in Thiruvananthapuram, the suave and soft-spoken Sri M is the founder of The Satsang Foundation, an organisa-



drawer, he discovered two books—*Japa Yoga and Gayatri* and an illustrated yoga guide—written by Swami Chinmayananda.

Sri M says his home was a golden cage, from where he wanted to break free. Before he left home for good, he made “trial runs” to Kanyakumari and Tirunelveli when he was 16. His parents were not impressed. “I had a strange and irresistible urge to go to the Himalayas. My parents knew I was different. My father, who was liberal, accepted it grudgingly, although he

Offbeat guru: Sri M with his followers

sounds of temple music and chanting. My children, too, are spiritual in their own way. They are good people, who put up with my eccentricities,” he says.

How did Mumtaz Ali Khan become Sri M? “I was initiated in the Nath tradition and was named Madhukarnath. M is for Madhukarnath, Mumtaz, *manush*... even my guru’s name is Maheshwarnath. My followers started calling me M, and later Mr M. But Mr M was too western-sounding. It

tion working for spiritual and educational uplift of people. The foundation runs two schools, one of which provides free, multi-lingual education to children from tribal areas in Andhra Pradesh. Some of his followers refer to him as 'sir' or 'guru', but he likes to be called a yogi and spiritual guide. "I help people who are in search of truth. Others, I would like to filter out," he says.

'Filtering out' is how Sri M lets go of followers who blindly believe in him. "I do things to tick them off. For instance, I come out of a bar while they are watching. Inquiring minds would wonder, and then investigate, why I went to the bar. They would find that I went there not to drink, but to talk with an alcoholic. Others would begin to doubt you and stop believing," he says.

Even as a child, Sri M seems to have had a phenomenally inquiring mind. While rummaging through his father's

was disappointed that I did not follow him in his business [of contract building]. My mother, who was orthodox, did not," says Sri M.

He left for the Himalayas when he was 19. There he met Swami Maheshwarnath Babaji, "who transformed his consciousness totally". Sri M says Babaji, with whom he lived for more than three years, was both practical and matter-of-fact—he did not believe in bathing in the freezing waters of the Alaknanda before meditation. You would get pneumonia, he told Sri M once, and there were no good hospitals close by.

Practicality is the trait that differentiates Sri M from other gurus. Perhaps, it owes a great deal to the fact that he is married and has two children. His wife, Sunanda, is a Saraswat Brahmin whose likes differ from him in many ways. For one, she does not like to visit temples. "I, on the other hand, love to hear the

was later changed to Sri M. So I, too, accepted it," he says.

He says the idea of a supreme being ties all religions together. Yet, the rituals of each religion have built barriers. To bring about peace, harmony and tolerance across India, Sri M is embarking on an epic *padayatra*. Called Walk of Hope, it will start from Kanyakumari on January 12 and end in Kashmir in 2015. It will cover eleven states and, Sri M hopes, dissolve religious and cultural barriers. "We will walk some 15km every day, stop at towns and villages and interact with people of diverse faiths," says Sri M. "The mission is to bring synergy between religions, cultures and communities. A hundred years ago, another spiritual master, Swami Vivekananda, undertook a similar journey. I am not comparing myself to him. But hopefully, I will be able to bring in some change with the help of likeminded people." ●



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PREVIOUS NEXT

65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76

Go to: 65/76 ▼

Previous Issues: Select ▼