

Swami Vivekananda In Kerala

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Synopsis- Swami Vivekananda's epoch making visit to Kerala in the early 1890's has to be studied in detail. A chance meeting with Dr.Palpu at Bangalore made then change his itinery and plan a visit to Kerala. This visit culminated in the historic three day meditation on 'the last bit of Indian rock' in the sea at Kanyakumari.

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Introduction-

Swami Vivekananda's epoch making visit to Kerala in the early 1890's has to be studied in detail. A chance meeting with Dr.Palpu at Bangalore made him change his itinerary and plan a visit to Kerala. This visit culminated in the historic three day meditation on 'the last bit of Indian rock' in the sea at Kanyakumari.

Dr.Palpu (1863-1950) had faced a list of caste discrimination in Travancore. He had to shift to Madras Presidency to get higher education. Dr.Palpu met Swami Vivekananda in Bangalore and told him about the caste-situation in Travancore. The lower castes there were subject to the worst form of caste discrimination.

The caste-driven society of Kerala was divided into two sections – 'savarnas' (upper caste) and 'avarnas' comprising the lower castes. Life, for the lower castes, was unimaginably harsh.

Hearing this, Swamiji decided to visit Kerala then and there, instead of going to Rameswaram, as planned. Vivekananda landed in Bangalore on October 27, 1892. At Bangalore, he became acquainted, with the Mysore Dewan K.Seshadri Iyer, a Tamil Brahmin from Palakkad who purchased a ticket for him to Shoranur and a letter of introduction to the acting Devon of Cochin, Sankara Iyer.

Swami Vivekananda alighted at Olavakkode Railway Station near Palakkad on November 27, 1892. While proceeding to Ernakulam, Swamiji broke the journey midway and spent three days at Kodungalloor, where he was denied entry into the temple on the basis of caste. Some women from noble families had met him while he was resting at the foot of a banyan tree in the temple premises. They spoke in chaste Sanskrit. The fluency and scholarship of the woman young and old, surprised him a great deal.

At Ernakulam, Ramaiah, Principal of a college and secretary to the Dewan of Cochin, met Swamiji. With the help of Ramaiah, Swamiji stayed for a few days in a building belonging in the Thirumala Devaswom at Amaravathi. He interacted with Sanskrit scholars in the Sanskrit school there. T.R.Ananthakorup, a devotee of Chattampi Swamikal, writes "At a dawn in the year 1892, an open boat berthed at the Ernakulam jiffy. A young monk got out of the boat and stood there. Two men, Cochin Dewan's Secretary Ramaiah and Police Superintendent Chandulal, also came there as part of their morning walk At first sight itself they liked the radiant young monk and were attracted towards him. " (Chattampi Swami Century Volume p.36-30). They were astonished at the eloquence and scholarship of the monk. After the chat, Ramaiah sang 'Gopika Geetam". Swamiji enjoyed the song. He sang a Bengali Bhajan and everyone present was simply overwhelmed (T.S.Isma, Swami Vivekananda and Cochin, Janmabhoomi weekend edition, May 22, 2005).

Swami Vivekananda met the great social reformer of Kerala, Chattampi Swamikal in Ernakulam. They discussed spiritual matters. As desired by Swamiji, Chattampi Swamikal explained to him the inner meaning of chin mudra. Rajeev Iringalakuda in his book *Swami Vivekananda in Kerala* states: "A great scholar in Tamil, Chattampi Swamikal had based his observations on certain Tamil texts. The conversation between the two was in Sanskrit ... Chattampi Swamikal told them that while the fame of Sree Sankaracharya extended from the Himalayas in the north to Sethusamudram in the South, that of Vivekananda was 'universal in extent' (25-26).

Vivekananda and Chattampi Swamikal would converse for whole nights. Swamiji wrote in his diary, "In Malabar (Kerala) I found a real man" (Iringalakuda, 27). Chattampi Swamikal had great respect for Vivekananda. "If he is a Garuda, I am just a flea. That is the difference between the two of us, 'he used to say. (Vivekananda Centenary Souvenir, p.168).

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Swami Vivekananda traveled to Thiruvananthapuram from Ernakulam by boat and reached on December 13, 1892. While seeing off Swamiji, Ramaiah had handed over him a letter addressed to Prof.Sundararama Iyer, tutor to the Elayaraja Aswathi Thirumal Marthanda Varma (Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda, p.57).

On reaching Thiruvananthapuram (throughout the 4 days journey he had taken only milk) he (Swamiji) asked Prof.Sundararama Iyer to provide food to the attendant accompanying him (a Muslim). He condescended to eat only after his attendant was provided food. “What will Swamiji eat? Asked the Professor. “Anything will do. Sanyasis are not bothered about taste, was his reply (Renaissances of Swami Vivekananda, p.57).

Swamiji stayed at the residence of Prof.Sundararama Iyer. Prof.Sundararama Iyer and his son K.S.Ramaswamy Shastri interacted with Swamiji not only in Thiruvananthapuram but also in Madras when he returned from Chicago after attending the Parliament of Religions. In his article in Vedanta Kesari (January-February 1923) titled “My Second Navarathri with Swamiji, Prof.Sundararama Iyer had narrated the memorable nine days he spent with Swamiji. His son also had written about his own experiences in an article in Prabuddha Bharatham (Sep-Oct.1953). Prof.Sundararama Iyer had taken Swamiji to meet Elayaraja of Travancore, Aswathy Thirumal who took a photograph of the Swamiji was in awe of his knowledge. Everyone who met Swamiji was astounded with his scholarship.

Shailendrath Dhar in his *Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda* mentions Manomaniam Sundaram Pillai stating that he was a Dravida and outside the Hindu society. Swamiji expressed regret and said that people like Sundaram Pillai were divisive (p.365).

Swami Vivekananda criticized the casteism of Kerala, but praised the Malabar women for their scholarship in Sanskrit. This experience in Kerala made a profound impression on Swami Viv ekananda. It must also be emphasized here that Kanyakumari was also part of then Travancore Empire.

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