

My Varkala Visit

My visit to Varkala in Kerala on the occasion of the centenary celebration of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore's visit to SIVAGIRI Mutt has been an absolutely transcendent experience—a true pilgrimage. Tagore came to Thiruvananthapuram on 15 November 1922 to meet the ruler of the princely state of Travancore, as part of his mission to raise funds for Visva-Bharati. There, he came to know about Swami Narayanguru of SIVAGIRI Mutt, a social reformer whose reputation went beyond the shores of Travancore. As soon as Tagore expressed his desire to visit the Swami, it was immediately arranged. Since SIVAGIRI Mutt is forty kilometers away from Thiruvananthapuram, Tagore came by car, arriving an hour later than the time scheduled for the meeting. Swami Narayanguru was meditating in his room then, and although he had not been informed of the poet's arrival, his door swung open as soon as Tagore reached the doorstep. To this day, the event is inexplicable.

For me, this trip to Varkala was a godsend, since I had wanted to visit Kerala for a long time. Prominent my reasons for wanting this was my scholarly fascination with the fact that West Bengal and Kerala possess a strikingly similar set of socio-cultural values and political priorities. Both these states boast of a flourishing humanistic tradition. A major factor behind West Bengal's progressive politics was the influence of the Communist Party of India (CPI), which was the only Communist party that, following the 1947 partition, meaningfully addressed the difficulties of the refugees from East Bengal (later known as East Pakistan). By contrast, Kerala's humanistic culture may, in large part, be attributed to its struggles against the caste system. For millennia, the "lower" caste Ezhava community in Kerala had been brutalized by the "upper" castes. In response, many social reformers in the state took up cudgels against caste atrocities, organizing campaigns and building institutions to help them with their mission. As an Ezhava, Swami Narayanguru was one of the main figures championing the cause of the "lower" castes. He attracted many supporters, who joined as soldiers for this humanistic enterprise. Like many of his contemporaries, Swami Narayanguru worked hard to propagate the idea that human beings were born free, but were divided by the worldly designs of selfish, partisan individuals. Those wielding caste privilege exercised hegemonic control over society, in collaboration with the local ruler. Once social reform campaigns acquired momentum, however, the power of *savarna* Hindus was severely challenged. Several such sustained battles against caste prejudice cemented Kerala's progressive

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character. In a nutshell, then, three factors provide a plausible explanation as to why Kerala was different from the other southern provinces: first, there were social reformers like Swami Narayanguru who, despite their religious identity, were committed to building a mindset that drew on the values of universal humanism; second, these social reformers, by creating a solid base among the socio-culturally underprivileged and denigrated sections of humanity, emerged as key players in society despite the opposition of caste Hindus, who, despite being a numerical minority, had enjoyed social power for millennia; and third, institutional authorities in Kerala did not appear to be as ruthless those in other parts of India when it came to containing movements against the divisive caste system.

Tagore's desire to see Swami Narayanguru was governed by his respect for a man who had devoted himself to human wellbeing, amidst adverse circumstances. The poet's political writings and his activist record reveal that he shared the Swami's commitment to universal humanism. So, the meeting between these two illustrious sons of India was also a union of two great minds with identical politico-ideological goals. However, while the Swami had comrades scattered throughout Travancore, Tagore's battle was a lonely one. The Brahmo Samaj, of which the poet was a leading exponent, lacked the social base that Swami and his compatriots had successfully evolved in Kerala. In Bengal, caste Hindus continued to have the upper hand, despite the Brahmo Samaj's valiant efforts against caste hierarchy. Tagore's steadfast pursuit of radical social transformation was helped along, however, by the support of his British friends and admirers. In working for the Samaj, therefore, Tagore may be said to have followed in the footsteps of his social reformer predecessors, Rammohun Roy and Ishvarchandra Vidyasagar, who had, with the aid of the colonial government, successfully launched campaigns to abolish *sati* in 1835 and legalize the age of consent bill in 1856, respectively. In other words, the voices of these three reformist figures against certain horrifying elements of Hindu culture were strengthened by the support of progressive British liberals.

Swami Narayanguru expressed his views on social issues in his speeches to his disciples, which he later codified in Sanskrit, Tamil, and Malayalam texts. His disciples also published commentaries on his writings. Similarly, Tagore wrote many essays highlighting his opposition to a number of socio-cultural prejudices; in many of his literary texts too, he represented and critically interrogated such noxious socio-

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cultural mindsets. Cases in point are his novel *Gora* (1910) and dance-drama *Chandalika* (1938), both of which contained scathing critiques of caste division and religious segregation. Tagore thus fought a battle for human dignity at two levels: at the activist level, with the help of his British supporters who were driven by Enlightenment principles, and at the conceptual level, through his widely-perused writings in the vernacular.

A careful study of the meeting between the Swami and Gurudev reveals that there are ideas which are universally valid, regardless of the location or background of their adherents. In other words, ideas supportive of humanity have no spatial roots; they are espoused by those committed to human welfare without fear of consequences. Swami confronted the caste Hindus' wrath while Gurudev Tagore risked similar social censure, although his chances of ostracism were low, given the global reputation that he attained after winning the Nobel Prize in literature in 1913—the first Asian to have received such a global accolade. What legacies did Tagore and Swami leave for posterity? Undoubtedly, they helped build awareness, among the people of Bengal and Kerala respectively, of the artificial division of humanity around the axes of religion and caste. The partition of Bengal in 1947 is illustrative of how the Hindu-Muslim divide had acted decisively in this regard. Kerala was not partitioned like Bengal was, but communal prejudice pitting Hindus and Muslims against each other exists there as well. Similarly, caste identities continued to be relevant in both Bengal and West Bengal. What is striking, however, is the fact that neither in Kerala and nor in Bengal do people generally openly associate pride with their caste identity, although caste continues to exercise a strong, if subtle, material influence in the marital realm, given that inter-caste marriages are exceptions to the norm. Implicit here is the tragic fact that well-entrenched customs have lasting power. Nonetheless, Tagore and Swami Nayanguru's noble endeavours were part of a historical process that resulted in the steady consolidation of an oppositional voice. It does not seem thus exaggerated to claim that their initiatives were certainly effective in motivating a section of the Indian masses to question caste division and religious division, and to challenge the authority of social institutions that alienate human beings from each other and from their common humanity.

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The meeting between Tagore and Swami lasted for more than two hours. It was reported in contemporary newspapers that they hardly talked for almost an hour because of the language barrier. A famous Malayali poet, Kumaran Ashan, acted as interpreter during their conversation. Apart from spiritual issues, what attracted their attention most was education, since both the Swami and Gurudev felt that education was an effective means to combat superstitious beliefs. The two minds met, in other words, on issues which had directly to do with human empowerment. By 1915, Swami Narayanguru had established schools in Varkali and its vicinity, while Tagore had started Patha Bhavana in 1901 to establish new modes of learning. Like the Swami, who insisted that development would remain elusive as long as the villagers were deprived of their livelihood, Tagore was committed to the material empowerment of India's villagers, and articulated this commitment in the form of adopting five villages with the foundation of Visva-Bharati in 1922. Both Swami and the poet believed in inclusive development, contrary to the lopsided development that the colonial rulers had encouraged in order to retain the hierarchical imbalances in Indian society. In valuing education, both these great men demonstrated their commitment to the inculcation of the idea of common humanity in each and every individual. For both Tagore and Swami Narayanguru, education was, above all, a call to responsibility, in that every person was to be entrusted with the task of contributing to human betterment, instead of focusing narrowly on issues of caste, creed, and ethnicity. Instead of a mere passport to white collar jobs advancing the colonial regime, education was, for the poet and the Swami, a means to develop human capacities. Another crucial element of both their pedagogical systems was their focus on the protection of the natural realm. Children had to be taught, they argued, that the survival of humanity is entwined with the preservation of the Earth's ecosystem, and that the latter's destruction would entail the destruction of the former.

There is, however, a striking difference between the systems of education that the Swami and Tagore developed. The system of education that prospered at the Swami's behest focused primarily on core religious and spiritual texts such as the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*. By contrast, having been raised in a cosmopolitan milieu and thereby introduced to Western intellectual discourse at an early stage, Tagore's pedagogical system struck a balance between Western and indigenous knowledge. Hence, the curricula

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of Patha Bhavan and Visva-Bharati contained both Indian and Western texts, and students were taught both traditions.

The meeting of the poet-activist Rabindranath Tagore with the ascetic-activist Swami Narayanguru was thus not an ordinary one; it was a communion of two great minds at a point of India's nationalist history when Western discourses hegemonized Indian minds to a threatening extent. What Tagore pursued in undivided Bengal, Swami Narayanguru, in his own distinct way, did too, far away from Santiniketan in the princely state of Travancore. Both these figures shared a definite socio-cultural objective: the wellbeing of humanity. Through their work, Tagore and Swami Narayanguru ushered in an era of hope by upholding the importance of indigenous intellectual resources, in contrast to the slavish mindset prevalent among colonial loyalists.

The significance of Swami Narayanguru and Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore's meeting in the early part of the nineteenth century lies in the fact that it represented the convergence of two fertile traditions of anti-authoritarian activism. Varkala witnessed a radical socio-cultural transformation at the initiative of Swami Narayanguru, whose disciples continue to implement his vision for humanity. So also goes the story of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. His schools—Patha Bhavan and Siksha Satra—and his university, Visva-Bharati, continue to instill in young minds a commitment to human welfare.