

A History of Sri Vaishnavas in the US

The Sri Vaishnava Sampradaya, as propagated by Sri Ramanuja, has stood unchallenged for thousands of years. From Parasara Muni to Valmiki, to Badarayana (of Brahma Sutra fame), to the 12 Azhvars and Udayavar, and the innumerable acharyas that fall under the umbrella of Ramanuja siddhantam. It should come as no surprise then, that this unflinching sampradayam, this parampara has proliferated abroad as well, to many countries outside of Bharata desa.

If it can be said that the Sri Vaishnava community in the US is flourishing and even stands as a beacon for the next generation in India, then it is due to the great kainkaryam of a select few Bhagavatas. Adiyen has highlighted a few of their experiences and anubhavams, and will attempt to paint a greater picture of the last 3 decades of Vaishnava presence in the US. Additionally, adiyen will ponder the current state of Sri Vaishnavism, and will question what needs to be done to ensure its infallibility for our future generations. As a disclaimer, this is merely adiyen's humble attempt at documenting an often overlooked but fairly recent history. This kainkaryam is solely an opportunity for adiyen to extol the greatness of our purvacharyas and the great mahans who have shaped the community we know today.

It is fairly difficult to pinpoint when exactly the Sri Vaishnava community came into existence, or when our 'ghosti' congregated. Generally, it seems the mid 90's is an approximate starting point for various Bhagavatas in Denver, Bay Area, Chicago, etc, and when various moving parts began to fit into place. According to Sri Mohan Sagar Swami, who was brought up in Denver, it was a bit of a "right place at the right time" sort of situation. Growing up in the 70's and 80's, Swami was not privy to our sat sampradayic specifics, and the 'iyengars' of his day were far less concerned with these sorts of intentions. Instead, Swami was surrounded by other Indians, and as such, partook in other bhajans, ISKON, etc. It wasn't until much later that Mohan Swami became fascinated with the dissertation of Srimati Vasudha Narayanan, a seminal text on the early Sri Vaishnava philosophy and traditions. At this point, resources existed to very quickly connect like-minded individuals, namely the 'Bhakti' listserv and various Yahoo groups. It became easy to network with others, and Swami very quickly connected with TA Varadhan Swami and a few others located right in Denver. The rest, as they say, is history. Swami's anubhavam is almost exactly replicated by others that adiyen has spoken to, thus speaking to the vital contribution of these internet forums in allowing Bhagavatas to connect with each other and slowly, perhaps inadvertently, form the tenets of a national Sri Vaishnava movement and thought. Of course, for Sri Mani Varadarajan Swami, who created the 'Bhakti' alias 'Prapatti' mailing list in 1993, the original intent was to simply connect with others and make new like-minded friends. Like Mohan Swami, Mani Swami grew up in the States (California) and was more tuned into the Carnatic music circles and a larger Kannada community. Coincidentally, he was also greatly influenced by the books of Vasudha Narayanan, along with a plethora of other philosophical works during his undergraduate studies at Berkeley. What started as a forum among friends to share tidbits and engage in debate, quickly caught on through word-of-mouth, eventually ballooning to over

1500 members at its peak. The group took on more of a rigorous, academic tone, with Bhagavatas sharing grantha chatustaya, arulicheyal vyakhyanam, etc. Perhaps recognizing this shift, Mani Swami in 1997 began archiving many of these postings on a separate domain, Ramanuja.org- a kainkaryam he is continuing to this day. Eventually others began to form their own specific mailing lists and groups for various purposes, but nevertheless, this forum truly marked the beginning of a greater Vaishnava 'consciousness', a mobilization of sorts for the national movement to come.

For whatever reason, the year 1996 must be bookmarked as a significant turning point. Various ongoing kainkaryams began to come to fruition at this point, almost as if written in writing.

Here it is worth noting the very significant contribution made by HH Chinna Jeeyar Swami in helping to propagate the sampradayam abroad. While he is currently best known for the 'Statue of Equality', Swami has been a mainstay presence in the US since 1996, and his influence on bringing us together cannot be understated. His extensive sancharam across the US became a focal point of sorts for activity- the various moving pieces that may have existed on a virtual sphere quickly became actualized, with Bhagavatas taking great initiative to organize events, draw up plans, and outreach to others /other cities. As such, it became commonplace for Bhagavatas to host national events for Acharya thirunakshatrams, inviting one and all through the various email groups and listservs.

Another important initiative is NAMA, spearheaded by Nagalakshmi Satyan Mami and others in 1995-1996 to initially serve a more 'social' purpose- bringing Sri Vaishnavas together with the goal of encouraging networking, fundraising for temples, and outreaching to the youth, among other things. NAMA was the first 'national' Sri Vaishnava organization, with coordinators from each major city coming together to foster community in any shape or form, ranging from youth activities to matrimonial services. On the religious side, NAMA helped to fill a crucial role in those early years before temples- a gathering point for local Bhagavatas to celebrate acharya thirunakshatrams and other holidays, not only the national events.

The 1996 Sri Vaishnava Conference in Buffalo NY, partly organized by NAMA, was a pivotal moment in our recent history, bringing one and all together to experience seminars, talks, arulicheyal ghosti, etc. This highly-successful conference became a yearly occasion, jumping to Denver, then Dallas, then continuing for a few more years. Crucially, many youth partook in those days, and Nagu Mami notes that these events helped to create lasting friendships and bonding, besides the educational and spiritual aspect. Also in 1996, Sri Ahobila Mutt USA was established by Vimala Mami and Rajaji Swamin, Jagan Bharadwaj and others, under the auspices of the 45th Srimad Azhagiyasingar.

The late 90's and early 2000s brought about rapid Indian American population growth in America, and our community was no exception. New temples sprung up (with a clear South Indian/Vaishnava focus), encouraging all to partake in local kainkaryams and thereby growing the localized community, not merely the national one. Mohan Swami quips that at the time, Chicago would have easily had the largest ghosti in America, with the Aurora Temple

attracting 50 or more Bhagavatas on a weekend- perhaps reminiscent of a Thiruvallikeni Ghosti sort of crowd. The 1998 Adhyayanotsavam in particular harkens such memories for Mani Swami and others.

In the early 2000s, adiyen notices a shift in focus from a national perspective to a more local ghosti, an obvious result of the changing dynamics and the need for kainkaryam support for the various temples and local events. One such example is the Ranganatha Temple Samprokshanam in Pomona, NY in the year 2001, with great support from many East Coast Bhagavatas such as Sri Vaikuntavasi Oppiliappan Koil Sadagopan. Swami was instrumental from the start in this kainkaryam and many others, and truly warrants a separate forum for discussion, for adiyen cannot do him any justice here. 2001 was also the first year of Sri Dolai Kannan pratishta from India, thereby beginning His now 25 years of sancharam. Bhagavatas like Sri TCA Venkatesan Swami, perhaps best known for his acharya.org domain and his digitization of arulicheyal in various languages, rendering accessibility for all, took it upon themselves to help further their local community, organizing sevakalams and taking on students for daily santhai. Like others, Swami initially began connecting with others through the 'Bhakti' email groups, and only connected with the local ghosti by around 2002 or so. While there were no true Sri Vaishnava temples in Detroit at the time, TCA Swami along with others such as Giri Varadhan Swami, Shridar Varadachari Swami, etc. helped to foster the burgeoning community and outreach in various ways. Also in 2002, TCA Swami was instrumental in helping create Vedics Foundation, based in the DC area, eventually bringing Sri Velukkudi Krishnan Swamin to the US for his first-ever tour in 2004. Around this time, the SV Lotus Temple had just been consecrated in DC, allowing Vedics to host events there in those initial years. Similarly, the initial iterations of 'Acharya Day' (of Ahobila Matam) were hosted at the Pomona temple, from 2004 to 2006.

The changes in technology in this period are also worth mentioning, as the internet and home-computers became more accessible. The now-famous 'Kanninun Sirutthambu' upanyasam given by Srimad Villivalam Azhagiyasingar from 2003 to 2005 is perhaps the first instance in history of the 'tele-upanyasam'. While now hundreds of upanyasams are freely available online, at the time, this may have been a groundbreaking innovation, and speaks volumes as to that acharya's magnanimity. Every Bhagavata adiyen has spoken to speaks fondly of this upanyasam-series, serving as testament to how influential it must have been to Bhagavatas living abroad. Now however, Mani Swami notes that all forms of content hold far lesser value, as everything is freely available. A photo of Kanchi Varadhar during Brahmotsavam would be priceless in those days, whereas now, we are able to virtually travel to any divya desam every single day! The unfortunate consequence of this is information overload- there are a million resources available, all at once, and as such we struggle to decipher conflicting opinions and cling to what is valuable.

As time went on, the role of the temple began to wane. With a few notable exceptions (Sri Balaji Temple of Great Lakes comes to mind :)), at many temples, ghostis were no longer allowed to enter the Sannidhi, recite arulicheyal etc, at the behest of the 'temple board'. Certain vested interests, perhaps with the goal of becoming profitable or drawing more

crowds, added other sannidhis and cut back on Sri Vaishnava rituals and practices. It's also worth noting, the general quantity of temples soared, making it difficult for one to support and consistently perform kinkaryam. Thus it is not surprising that the strong temple ghosti is nearly non-existent in many places, with Bhagavatas preferring to host events in the comfort of their home, free from unwanted obstruction or interference.

The national-level conferences, acharya thirunakshatrams, etc. also began to decline. While NAMA and Vedics Foundation continue to exist (with the latter organizing a yearly utsavam in more recent years), we find that the concept as a whole is simply forgotten. The reason is purely a numerical one, as the large quantity of Bhagavatas in each city and ghosti size would make it unreasonably difficult to execute. In other words, we have all become absorbed into the kinkaryams of our local region and Bhagavatas, and trying to spread our wings beyond that is simply no longer a consideration. Of course, technology has played a large role in this decline as well, as all sampradayaic resources are freely available online, from eminent scholars and vidwans. Perhaps there is no longer a need for a 'conference' of sorts anymore, if the community in America is thriving, with our children deeply engrossed in this sat vishayam. Does that mean that these earlier efforts were successful, and are now no longer necessary? It is adiyen's hope however, that this is a conversation to be had amongst the many great Bhagavatas who continue to excel in their kinkaryam, and perhaps something that could still be beneficial for the next generation in whatever shape or form. As Mani Swami suggests, perhaps greater introspection is required from us to better understand the kinkaryam we are fortunate to perform, and what the broader implications may be for our growing community and the next generation.

Now, how must we outreach to the next generation, given this history and these lasting kinkaryams? The best person to answer this is Mohan Swami, having grown up in the States. He believes it must obviously start with the parents and the impression they leave on their children. It is not simply sufficient to be 'weekend warriors' as he puts it, for it can only lead to more confusion for young children about their identity inside and outside the house. Instead, the culture of Sri Vaishnavism must be so deeply rooted in the house and immediate community that one could not even begin to question it- it is simply natural. And, according to TCA Swami, when children do begin to question things, they must not simply be dismissed or responded to with a 'because I told you so' sort of attitude. We have all experienced that sort of response from parents or elders when asking supposedly 'dumb' questions, but frankly, the onus is on elders to respond earnestly, and if unknown, to learn and educate their children. From a practical perspective, Vimala Mami opines that the kids growing up here do not have the same connection to the 'motherland' and the various temples that the adults may have had. So, it is unreasonable to expect them to continue to maintain these various temples if that is unfamiliar to them to begin with. Thus, we must propagate to them in other ways, such as Dolai kinkaryam, frequent ghostis or sevakalams, classes, etc. With that being said, purely ritual obligation or compulsion is not sustainable either- for Mani Swami, children (and adults) must be exposed to scholarship of a certain rigor yet in a modern lens, so that the valuable lessons learned from kinkaryam and 'ritualism' do not go to waste in later years.

After all, the purpose of anushtanam is to enhance our atma gunas and make us better people. That fundamental lesson cannot go awry.

It would be unsurprising if, given all the above, one begins to lose hope. However, adiyen has seen many young children growing up with Bhagavad Bhagavata sambandham, and it is clearly reflected in their growing knowledge and appreciation for this sampradayam. On a personal note, having grown up here and having the great bhagyam to interact with these Bhagavatas then and now, adiyen sees clearly how impactful their work has been towards propagating this Ramanuja Siddhanta forward. So, it is no doubt in my mind that our community will only continue to flourish like a well-oiled machine, with the next generation taking it forward as our parents once did. Adiyen also owes a great deal of gratitude to them for agreeing to speak on their kainkaryam and their thoughts for the future of our sat sampradayam. It is adiyen's hope that these lessons will be internalized by those tasked with carrying the torch forward, and our community will continue to flourish for many years to come.

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