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On November 15, 1981, Mrs. S. Vinayagamurthy of Alaveddy, Sri Lanka, stepped off the plane in New York City, New York, and was warmly welcomed by members of the New York Dharmsala. This began her six-month visit to the U.S., graciously sponsored by the Flushing, New York, and San Francisco, California, Dharmasalas (local family missions of Saiva Siddhanta Church), Mrs. Tara Katir shares with us some impressions of Amma's stay in New York:

"While in New York, she stayed with the Church families living around the Ganesha Temple in Flushing. She inspired all of us, not only with her delicious cooking, but with many stories of the Deities, of Paramaguru Siva Yogaswami, of our Gurudeva, and by being such a fine example of orthodox Tamil culture.

"While Amma was here, Deepavali and Skanda Shasti were celebrated in our homes and in the Temple. This offered us a fine opportunity to talk with her about our Saivite festivals, and how they are traditionally celebrated in Jaffna. Many details and insights were gained from her.

"Gurudeva requested that Amma see some of the more famous New York sights during her visit. She was able to visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art on a field trip outing with the Indo-American Saivite School. She also visited the Empire State Building, Rockefeller Center and the 100th-floor observation deck of the World Trade Center. One of her weekends was spent with the Suntharalingam family, formerly of Jaffna. Even though the Suntharalingams have not lived in Jaffna since 1949, they found that Amma knows many of their relatives who live in the area around Alaveddy.

"Some of Amma's finest stories were those about Gurudeva and his first visit to

Alaveddy, in 1949. It was with Amma's husband's family that Master lived during his stay. Amma said she remembered her husband receiving a letter from his father in Colombo telling about an American young man he had met at the Y.M.C.A. They were both staying there, in adjacent rooms. She said Gurudeva's attention was drawn to her father-in-law because of his devotions, which were overheard every morning. Kandiah Chettiar finally wrote to his family in Alaveddy that he was bringing his American friend home with him. Amma said they were horrified at the prospect of an American coming as a guest, it was decided that the family would move out of the house and give it entirely to their guest for his stay. Upon his arrival, they were astonished to see his great height. He was so tall he couldn't stand upright except in the very center of the house!"

Amma explained: "After some hours, he was very close with us - like a brother to my husband. That evening, my father-in-law took him to the Ganesha Temple. That time he first wore the verthi. The priest in the Temple asked his name, and Kandiah said, 'Thamby.' We had all just called him 'Thamby,' 'my son.'

"Every day my father-in-law took him to the temple. After coming home, Master would bring the prasadam and give it to my mother-in-law. He enjoyed with us like a family - very close with us. We were not thinking he was American." Amma can even remember Gurudeva's first meal in their home - "I made stringhoppers and sodi, with tomatoes from the garden. He appreciated that. He loved our food." Soon after that, Amma explained, came Gurudeva's first meeting with Paramaguru, Siva Yogaswami, for which he and her father-in-law traveled to Columbuthurai by bullock cart. Later, after a stay in Alaveddy of about a week, Kandiah and Gurudeva went to Colombo. Two or three months later, they returned to Alaveddy. This time, Amma recalled, Gurudeva insisted on doing everything himself, drawing his own water from the well for his bath, and even helping in the garden. Gurudeva, of course, refused to let the family move out and give him their house, but slept on the veranda. Amma can remember his retiring there after lunch to rest, then setting to work - "He sat down and typed all the time." A few months later, Gurudeva returned to the U.S., but, Amma explained, he never failed to write to Kandiah Chettiar and his family every month.

In 1969, The Chettiar family saw Gurudeva again, this time as a Sat Guru accompanied by sixty five devotees. By this time, Amma's mother-in-law had passed away, and it was up to Amma to manage the cooking for this large group. She recalls wondering how she would possibly manage, but that everything went fine. "When Master first entered the Ashram, I saw in his face a bright sun rising. It was at night. I have never forgotten that."

In the years that followed, Amma recalls a succession of pilgrims from the West to the Ashram, which was also the Chettiar home. Brahmacharis, brahmacharinis, sannyasins and a family came in turn, and Amma fed them and taught them cooking, encouraged their spiritual endeavors, nursed them in illness, taught them how to conduct themselves in the Tamil culture. Among the Church family community now, many of us remember her wonderful example of the Saiva dharma. Amma recalls her husband's words, "We must help bring Saivism to the West; we must help Master teach Tamil culture and all the things."

What differences does Amma see in Gurudeva's devotees since 1969? "It's very different from the early days. They have Saivism very strong in their minds. Every family wants to know everything about how the Saiva family lives. The families are bringing Saivism very strongly to the West." While in New York, Amma commented to Ramya Kumara, "Outside I see New York people, but in the homes I see only Tamils...You are all like my children."

Amma's impression of the American people is that they are very hard-working. She said that the people back home wouldn't work so hard - but she was surprised at the way Americans spend their money, "like water." She was impressed by the vitality of silence, business and the arts in America, the country's cleanliness, and the kindness and friendliness of strangers - waiters, people on the airplanes who helped her, and other the she came in contact with.

When asked what areas we Western Saivites could improve in, Amma was reluctant to comment. She said, "You are brining everything in very good condition. Even in our place no one is doing what you are doing. Everyone is working very hard for Saivism. Ganesha will bless everyone." However, when pressed, she did mentioned that the children in our communities should conduct themselves more respectfully to the adults, not calling them by their first names, but by title, such as "teacher" or "Auntie." This observance was put into practice in our school in Flushing. Amma also observed that it is preferable for the wife not to address her husband by his first name. She commended the wives for not holding jobs. Her final comment was. "The Tamil culture will come very strong and brave in the West."

Tara Katir writes, "All of us here in New York, as her American sons and daughters, remember Amma's visit with fond memories. There are so many subtle and private moments she made us all aware of, concerning the beauty and grandeur of Tamil culture. We all sincerely hope the remainder of her visit to the United States will be

as pleasant for her as it has been for us."