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Tradition-bending U.S. Tour and Sharp Establishment Reaction Leads to 26-Year-Old's Hasty Departure

India's conservative Madhva Sampradaya community has been shaken by the sudden and emotional departure of a prominent swami. He is Sri Vishva Vijaya Theertha of the Pejawar Mutt, Udupi town, Karnataka, South India, the designated successor ("junior") to the present abbot, 56-year-old Sri Swami Vishvesha Thirtha. At issue is the junior's 1987 tour of America and Canada in violation of Madhva shastric rules forbidding head swamis (or their juniors) to "cross the seas." After his return to India, the junior swami refused to undergo the purification rites requested by the Madhva establishment.

At stake was the right to worship at Udupi's famed Lord Krishna Temple. Seven hundred years ago, the renowned Vaishnavaita Saint Madhvachariya apportioned control of the temple and its daily pujas to his eight Udupi mutts, or monasteries. These mutts continue to take 2-year turns at being fully responsible for the temple's 14 daily pujas.

Presently the Palimar Mutt is in control, and its head swami, Sri Vidyamanya Thirtha, forbade Vijaya Tirtha from doing puja at the temple until he had atoned for his "misdeeds." It was this verdict that provoked Vijaya Tirtha's strongly worded telegram, "I am disgusted with the narrow-mindedness and selfishness of the orthodoxy around the mutt and the sacred temple and with their politics. I know I am right and cannot and will not compromise and yield to their meaningless demands." Closing with an unkind reference to the Mutt's "cancerous and deadly superstitions," the junior Swamiji burned his bridges behind him.

The Madhva community both in India and America is scandalized by the entire affair. Nearly all are disappointed in the junior swami's resignation. Not only did it follow too closely on the heels of Sri Jayendra Saraswati's even more shocking abdication as Shankarachariya of the Smarta Sampradaya's Kanchi Peetham

[Hinduism Today, October, 1987], but Swami Vijaya Thirtha is the third junior swami of the mutts to abdicate his seat since 1970.

Go West, Young Man

It all began when, needing money to build a medical college in India, Vijaya Tirtha decided to come to America and solicit funds from the wealthy Madhva community. Immediately the question of crossing the ocean arose. The junior swami offered to debate scholars on the matter. The results are variously reported: one says he convinced two out of three pundits; another says he silenced a dozen. Whatever the outcome of those debates, it is agreed that his senior swami, Vishvesha Thirtha, did ultimately give his blessings (plus some expense money) for the trip and the youth left with official approval.

Vijaya Thirtha charmed America's Madhva community. N.V. Shyamsunder of Phoenix, Arizona, the swami's host for several days, effused, "Swamiji is a very attractive young man who spoke well and was very friendly with everyone." Other devotees in the USA added, "People were very pleased with his visit, even feeling the impossible had happened."

The success of his visit can be gauged from the offer - mentioned in Indian news reports and confirmed by American sources - of a millionaire in Michigan to build a Krishna temple for the swami in America. Not a personal offer to the junior swami, the plan was canceled after the abdication.

But Hanuman Leapt the Sea

The central issue here is samudrayana, "crossing of the seas," traditionally forbidden to Madhva Sampradaya brahmins, including the swamis among them. Many other Sannyasi orders do not have such restrictions. To modern Hindus accustomed to a 24-hour flight from New Delhi to New York, this may appear antiquated. Historically, it arose at a time when crossing the ocean was possible only by ship, and orthodox persons could not maintain their daily worship and other personal disciplines. However, even in Madhvachariya's time, the rule was not

strictly followed. The Chola empire of South India had established large empires by ship all the way to Indonesia, built temples and sent brahmins to manage them.

Vijaya Tirtha's senior, Sri Vishvesha Tirtha, is no hide-bound traditionalist himself. Eighteen years ago he visited a Harijan colony, previously off-limits to brahmins. Not only did he weather the reaction of the orthodox, but he has since expanded his work with the lower caste. The senior told the press, "The present crisis is nothing compared to the commotion after I paid a visit to a Harijan colony 18 years ago. I explained to [my junior] that things could be sorted out in due course. I told him, 'It is not desirable to take the path of confrontation on this issue. You have absolutely no difficulty in continuing as the junior swamiji of the Pejavar Mutt. None can snatch from you your right to offer puja to Lord Krishna [during the 2-year turn of the Pejavar Mutt]. Therefore, join me and participate in religious and social work.' His hasty decision [to quit] shocked me immensely."

"The Position, Not the Man"

The Indian newspaper reports after the abdication are unanimous in stating that the swamiji went back to America. If he has, no one in America is letting on about it. One sympathizer, Dr. Sadananda of Washington, D.C., says the swami is in New Delhi with friends. Other reports place him variously in Haridwar, Singapore and Los Angeles.

The general reception the swamiji might receive if he returned to the USA is shown in this statement from one Madhva devotee living in the American Midwest: "We don't respect the person, we respect the position he is holding. Tomorrow he [Vijaya Tirtha] might come to this country, but he would not come to this house as a mutt head. He will not be treated as he was earlier. Once he is out of the mutt, that's it."

The situation in America was summarized by another Madhva devotee on the East Coast, "The abdication has angered and even caused resentment against him by a large section of the community over here. He should have followed through and stuck with being part of the establishment or not come here to America at all. This has certainly come as a surprise and caused a lot of mixed feelings."

Without doubt, the traditional restrictions on "crossing the sea" for these brahmin sannyasins will come under increasing fire as international travel becomes more common for all the world's people.

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