

Ayya Sri Vaikunda Swamikal's Life and Teachings

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Abstract:

Sri Vaikunda Swamikal contributed a great deal for the modernization of the Hindu society in South Travancore. Ayya Vaikundar is a pioneer of social reform movements in India. The custom-ridden society underwent revolutionary changes by his efforts. He tirelessly strived to remove the inequality based on birth and to establish a casteless society. He preached equality among all the people. He condemned those who divided the society into many groups and considered as “*nisas*”. He wanted to unite all the castes. To attain the object of equality and unity among all the castes, he advocated coordinated and effective measures.

Key words: Ayya Vaikundar, Social Reforms, South Travancore

Birth of Ayya Vaikundar

Vaikundar was born in 1809 CE in a poor Nadar family in the village of Poovandan Thoppu, near the town of Tamaraikkulam, about five miles from Kanyakumari. His parents were Ponnu Nadar and Veyilal Ammaiyar. Vaikunda Swamy's parents were concerned with social welfare. Vaikundar's parents were saddened to find that Nadars and various oppressed castes were degraded by the name of caste. Vaikundar's parents were confident that their son would protect Nadar and other oppressed caste people from caste atrocities. At that time the lower castes were converting to Christianity to escape the atrocities of the upper castes. In Hinduism, there was a situation where one caste subjugated another. Vaikundar's parents are excellent Vishnu devotees. They believed that Vishnu would again incarnate on earth to save the people from cruelty.¹

When Vaikundar was born, divine light shone on his face. Parents were delighted and named ‘Mudi Soodum Perumal’. The oppressed people in Travancore state at that time could not name the kings or their special names. Perumal is a famous name for the kings of Kerala. Parasu Raman parceled out the

¹ . R.Ponnu, Vaikunda swamikal oru Avatar , Madurai, 2002, P-52

newly created land among the Brahmans whom he introduced. For their comfort and direction he made all necessary arrangements, and then departed. The Brahmans at first conducted the government on the principles of a republic, but afterwards a King or Perumal was selected. Eighteen of these are said to have reigned for 216 years previously to the accession of the celebrated Cheraman Perumal, the last of their number. His reign is supposed to have ended in A.D. 352. After his death the Malayalam Empire was divided and portioned off among his descendants.²

Therefore, the upper castes objected to Vaikundar's name being labeled as Mudi Soodum Perumal. They appealed to government officials. Government officials also said that Vaikundar should not be named as Mudi Soodum Perumal. So instead of calling 'Mudi Soodum Perumal', Vaikundar's parents named him the name of 'Muthukutty'. So when Vaikundar was born, he appeared with a rebellion against oppression. The social condition of the Travancore province was so bad that the oppressed people even could not name for their children and themselves at their discretion. Even in naming children, the dominant caste fanatics showed their power. However, none of them knew that this child was going to stop the all kinds of atrocities that existed in Travancore.

Muttukutty's childhood began in a time when there were no public schools. There was the biggest gap between the oppressed caste people and the educational institutions. The children of working class people were denied education. They were not admitted to the school where the children of upper castes were educated. The schools where the upper caste children were educated were often near the temples. So the children of the oppressed people are not even allowed to see the schools. The children of the underprivileged were educated in the *thinnai pallikkoodam*. Muthukutty also learned in the *thinnai pallikkoodam*. He learned the code of ethics and the ethics that man should follow in life through the moral books. He learned epics like Ramayana, Mahabharata, books on the incarnations of Tirumaal(Vishnu), and justice books. Epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata explained to him the purpose of Thirumaal's incarnations. Muthukutty came to know the story of Arichchandran through street concerts.

Muthukutty has clearly learned the justice books and Thirukkural. So the sacred books Akilath thirattu Ammanai and Arul Nool of Muthukutty Swamikal consist a lot of thoughts of justice and morality. The lines found in his books fostered emancipation for the downtrodden and oppressed. Thus Dharma thoughts were dominated in his mind. He also learned how a good government should treat people. Muthukutty regretted the atrocities in the Travancore government. He contemplated about the liberation of the people from slavery and oppression. Akilath thirattu Ammanai and Arulnool, the sacred books of Muthukutty Swamikal were written in palm leaves. Fearing the repressive system of the Travancore government, palm leaves have not been printed as books for long. In 1939 AD, Akilath thirattu Ammanai, which had been preserved in palm leaves for almost a hundred years, was printed.

Like his parents, Muthukutty was an excellent Tirumal(Vishnu) devotee. He was fascinated with Hindu religious literature. He worshiped the God Tirumal in his home. He excelled not only in spirituality but also in fitness and wrestling. He lived with a high principle of labor. He loved the relatives and society. He treated the poor with love. He was passionate about alleviating their poverty. He was very fond of charity. He did charities as part of his small income. He also excelled in philosophical research.

"He is mighty in word"

"He's also great at wrestling"

"Great at royal tricks"

"Ascend to the throne"

"He will rule the world"

"His popularity spreads throughout the land"

² . Rev Samuel Mateer, The Land of Charity, 1871, London, P-14

“He will emerge stronger than anyone”³

Ayya Vaikundar Avatar

Muthukutty attained the qualities of a great leader in society. He emerged as a leader among his relatives and in the Shanar community. Muthukutty was married to Parathevathai at the age of seventeen.⁴ Muthukutty was diagnosed with dermatitis at the age of 22. Various treatments did not cure him. He spent a year in sickness. Thus Muthukutty's mother was in great pain. One day, Lord Vishnu appeared in the dream of Vaikundar's mother and said that if she brought his son to the Thiruchendur Masi festival, he would cure the disease.⁵ The Masi Festival at the Thiruchendur Murugan Temple started in March, 1833 AD (Kollam year 1008, Masi). At that time Nadars had no right to enter the Thiruchendur temple and worship. One can only come around the temple and worship. When the festival started, Muthukutty's parents placed him in a cradle and took him to Tiruchendur temple on pilgrimage. Muthukutty's parents accompanied with relatives and took him to the festival. They carried a large number of goods for to do charity on the way. Little did they know that this event was going to change the history of Travancore.

In the festival Muthukutty went down to sea on the first day of March and took a holy bath. Then a wave came and dragged him into the sea.⁶ Muthukutty's mother wept as her son did not return to the shore from the sea. Three days later, on March 3, Muthukutty reappeared on the sea and performed a miracle. Muthukutty, who was blessed by God Narayana in the sea, incarnated as Vaikundar.⁷ In the Kali Yuga, Lord Narayana incarnated as Vaikundar to save people from the *kali*.⁸ The Vaikundar incarnation took place to destroy the lie and establish the truth. To enrich Dharma and Patience, Vaikundar incarnation occurred. In the sea, Lord Narayana gave enlightenment (*Vinjai*) to Muthukutty. To learn all the art of the world is called wisdom or *vinjai*. Muthukutty represents the Vaikundar avatar to eliminate atrocities in the Travancore government for the people of *Sanar* and other oppressed people. Ayya Vaikundar poses the spiritual experience which is received from sea, as a weapon, against social atrocities. In the 19th century when religious dominance prevailed, his realism was accepted by society.⁹

Masi Magam is a Tamil festival that occurs during the Tamil month of Masi (February – March) on the day when the Purnima (full moon day) aligns with the Magha star. While Masi Magam is celebrated year on year, the festival of Maha Magam comes once in twelve years when the Jupiter transits to the zodiac sign Leo on the Masi Magam day. The essence of all the rituals, holy dip and worship on this day is spiritual purification. Magha star is the birth star of kings and royal personages. When moon comes in alignment with this star on the full moon day of Masi Magam, a heavenly consciousness pervades the entire earth from above. It is believed that on this day, the celestial beings and *pitrus* come down to the earth in their astral forms and take a holy dip in the sacred waters to wash their sins and also the sins of the human race. Holy rivers are endowed with more powers on this day and therefore millions of pilgrims gather at the designated places like Kumbakonam (a temple town in Tamil Nadu) to take a dip in the sacred wells. It was on such a special Masi Magam Day that Ayya Vaikundar holy dip in the sea and took up a new incarnation.

The first *yuga* is called *Kritha-yuga*, to which they assign 1,728,000 years. The second, which they call *Tretha-yuga*, lasted about 1,296,000 years. The third, called *Dwaparayuga*, lasted about 864,000 years. And the last, in which we are now living, is called *Kali-yuga*, or the Age of Misery. It should last about 432,000 years.¹⁰ The present year of the Christian era (2020) corresponds to the year 5,121 of the *Kali-yuga*. 1. Matsya-avatar, in the form of a fish ; 2. Varaha-avatar, in the form of a pig ; 3. Kurma-avatar, in the form of a tortoise ; 4. Narasimha-avatar, in the form of a monster, half man and half lion ; 5.

³ . Akilath thirattu Ammanai, P-206

⁴ .Ibid, P-206

⁵ . Ibid, P-208

⁶ .Arulnool, P-23

⁷ .Ibid, P-24

⁸ . Akilath thirattu Ammanai, p-238

⁹ . R.Ponnu, Ayya Vaikundar a Avatar, Madurai, 2002, P-59

¹⁰ . Abbe J.A. Dubois, Hindu Manners, Custom and Ceremonies , Madras, 1906, P-415

Vamana-avatar, in the form of a Brahmin dwarf, named Vamana ; 6. Parasurama-avatar, in the form of Parasurama ;

7. Rama-avatar, in the form of the famous hero known as Rama ; 8. In the form of Bala-rama ;9. Bouddha-avatar, in the form of Buddha; 10. Kalki-avatar, in the form of a horse.

The Kalki-avatar, or horse incarnation, has not yet occurred, but it is expected, although the time and place where it will happen are not known. It will put an end to the kingdom of sin, which began with the Kali-yuga. Ayya Vaikundar incarnation occurred at such a time. In Kaliyuga, the *kali* is on the people's mind. Therefore, *Kali* cannot be destroyed by weapons. It is the belief of the Ayya vazhi devotees that the *Kali* can be destroyed only by the enlightened Vaikunda. Ayya Vaikundar is considered the tenth incarnation of Vishnu by his followers. Ayya Vaikundar's ambition and life is to destroy *Kali* and make the Dharma Earth a caste-free and peaceful people.¹¹

Vaikundar, who enlightened in the sea from the Lord Narayana told the assembled people, "From today I am Narayanan," and also said that I would not accept any offerings, stooge and *kavadi*. Vaikundar explained to the assembled people the advice given by Narayana during his enlightenment in the sea. Embarked on his social reform journey from Thiruchendur to free people from slavery and create spiritual awareness. A large number of people followed him. They regarded Vaikundar as the leader who seemed to free themselves from social oppression. Ayya Vaikundar taught self-respect thoughts for the first time on Indian soil.

*"If you live decently with self respect,
Kali will automatically be destroyed"*¹²

Teachings and Social Reforms

Ayya Vaikundar was a pioneer of Indian society reform. Ayya Vaikundar was the first person to lead religious and social reform as a people's movement. He did not engage in any religious conversion. He spearheaded the reform without distorting the culture and culture of the communities. The teachings of Ayya Vaikundar are described in Akilath thirattu Ammanai and Arulnool which is the holy books of Ayya vazhi followers. Ayya Vaikundar sermon the text of these holy books and his disciple Hari Gopalar wrote that.¹³ Ayya Vaikundar appeared as the incarnation of Lord Narayana on earth to destroy the *Kali* and protect *Dharma*.¹⁴ At the period of the birth of Ayya Vaikundar, atrocities were held in Travancore in the name of caste and religion. Eighteen Category castes including Shanar, Ezhava, Paraiyar, Pulaiyar the ancient inhabitants of Travancore were treated as untouchable. The Travancore government also entertained the slavery of selling human beings like cattle. The people were as very poor because of the bad policies of the state. Their hard work was exploited. The lower caste people were refused permission to enter the temple and courts. Many taxes were imposed on the people. He dispelled the mistrust and fear that prevailed among the oppressed people. He insisted on abandoning the superstitions that prevailed in the name of religion.

“You all live in unity
Don't give offerings to temple
And carry *kavadi* to pilgrim centre
Don't waste your money on irrelevant rituals
Fear not anyone”

¹¹ . Akilath Thirattu Ammanai, P-220-221

¹² .Ibid, p-224

¹³ Akilath thirattu Ammanai, pp-4-5

¹⁴ Ibid,p-200

Ayya Vaikundar created a new sect Ayya vazhi(The way of Father) for the suppressed people. He created new temples (Pathis and Nizhal Thankals) for those who were denied permission to enter the temple. The following lines are considered as the crown of the Akilath Thirattu Ammanai:

“Be merciful to the simple (Poor) people, my son

Don’t cheerful on the mighty people, my son

Dharma is to protect the degraded and suppressed people

The arrogant people will perish”¹⁵

Ayya Vaikundar thinks that the most benevolent charity is that the most underprivileged people to be attain the strength to defend themselves. The above lines explain the same thing. Vaikundar lovingly calls his followers as his son and also *Kannu makkaal* (eye lids). Vaikundar grew up with the qualities of a leader in his early teens. He learned all kinds of professions. He gave charity to the poor. He also excelled in philosophical research.¹⁶ Parents and relatives thought that Ayya Vaikundar, who grew up with great virtues and heroism, would rule the world. Vaikundar wanted to set up a ‘Dharma Boomi’ without *kali* for which he had to spend 6 years in penance.

“Don't get too close to the liars”

“Love and live with the people who are truthfulness”

“I have come to eradicate poverty, my son”

“Charity is great, my son”¹⁷

Apart from the mythical phenomena, the *Akilath Thirattu Ammanai* is the best moral book for all people. There are plenty of teachings in this book that say to Vaikundar by Lord Narayana.¹⁸ These ideas are moral considerations that all people should follow.

“Do not hate the one who is in poverty”

“Even if they are enemies, we should not hate them to the extent that they leave us”

“Should not be adjudicated on behalf of one party”

“Explore and say anything”

“Do not do anything that will spoil charity”

“Dharma should be maintained” “Patience is the highest virtue”¹⁹

“By practicing patience, your mind is be assured”

¹⁵ Ibid,p-221

¹⁶ .ipid, p-206

¹⁷ . Akilath thirattu Ammanai,p-216

¹⁸ .Akilam,p-219

¹⁹ .ibid,p-223

Patience and Charity

War and extremism and unrest are prevailing in the world due to impatience and failure of morality. Impatience is the main cause of world wars, terrorism in the name of religion and racism. So Vaikundar labored for a lifetime of maintaining patience and charity. He told that tolerance claims to rule the earth. Vaikundar says that if you can be patient, you can rule the earth. Patience and charity are the greatest of all. All good people should come together and worship the same God. Respond patiently to the wicked as much as you can.²⁰ The beauty of the drumstick flower lasts its beauty only three days, while the life of the bad ones lasts for a while. But the good people live with pride. *Akilath thirattu ammanai* is a great book on simple Tamil writing. Moral ideas are described in this book such as those stated in various books such as *Thirukkural*, *Naladiyar*, *Muthurai*, *Athichudi*.

Tiruvalluvar wrote “self discipline will place (a man) among the Gods; arrogance will drive (him) into the thickest darkness (of hell).²¹ Ayya says that “Modesty is the great, My son”

“Don't avoid the scholars”

“Don't ignore justice”

“Be gratitude, and don't think I am only great”

“Do not think of leaving those who depend on you”

“Don't show your anger to anyone”

“Do not curse anyone, even though you are very much suffering”

“If you find poor people, you should help them with kindness”

“Do not think about the destruction of any things or any men”

“Do not walk away from morality in life”

“Don't miss out the best morals in your life”²²

Spiritual Awareness

Vaikundar has clearly explained in his two sacred books, the practice of charity and the ways in which justice is practiced in life. These experiments were illustrated in the *Nizhalthankals* and *Pathis*. He also spread his teachings through the disciples to all followers. Thus the oppressed community, including the Shanar and eighteen caste people gained spiritual awareness. He explained to the people the lofty philosophy that God is within you. Vaikundar introduced the people to a simple religious way called “Ayya vazhi”. His followers affectionately called him Ayya. Thus the religious way established by Vaikundar is given as “Ayya vazhi”.

“Realise the greatness of Dharma”

²⁰ .ibid,p-221-222

²¹ .Thirukkural, Kural-121

²² .ibid,p-224

“ You are Siva, You are Natha, and you are Thirumal”

“Everyone should not be advocated as a kind of justice for the high class people and a kind of justice for the simple people”

“Eroticism like as property and women, should not be considered a pleasure”

“The world will bow to you if you don't count eroticism ”

“Like the water and the lotus leaf, we have to live in this world”

“Be Serene with the enemy”

“You should always talk good things with your children”

“You have to give what you can to those who love you, to those who don't like you”

“Dharma will flourish if it is given to everyone”

“Your charity will punish those who wish to destroy you”

“Dharma is the sword and the wheels for you”²³

Ayya Vaikundar says that everyone to be remember one God with same thought. In Travancore, the oppressed people lived in fear of the upper caste people. People were shedding tears every day because of the atrocities of the upper castes. The people were severely hit by government repression and heavy taxation. All the wealth that the people sought was exhausted by paying taxes to the state. So Vaikundar says that everyone should be afraid of God (Lord Narayana), but no one should fear for anyone except God.²⁴ Also he says no one should be afraid of anyone. Ayya Vaikundar says we will rule ourselves in this world. This is democratic philosophy. He also believed that oppressed people will rule the earth.

Ayya says that people living in despair will have a better life. He assured that they will rule the earth.

“Let us rule ourselves and live better”

“We shall rule over this great earth, son”

“Your fate is good”²⁵

Ayya says that her followers on earth should live happily with family and relatives ever after without any downhill. Also he told that his scepter and justice are extended when people live happily with prosperity. Thus while you live with happily I will rule the scepter to enable you to be righteous and disciplined. There is no doubt that if you live a life of righteousness, you can rule yourself and live better.²⁶ If someone thinks about you of being great in their mind, you should think of their as greater than you. So you who think of me will be bigger than me(Lord Narayana). I am thinking of all of you, so I am

²³ .ibid,P-225

²⁴ N.Vivekananthan, Akilath Thirattu Ammanai, Moolamum uraiyum, Part II, Nagercoil, Page-174

²⁵ .Akilath Thirattu Ammanai, p-290

²⁶ . N.Vivekananthan, Akilath Thirattu Ammanai, Moolamum uraiyum, Part II, Nagercoil, Page-466

above all of you.²⁷ You must live with your spouse and family for as long as you wish. Childhood and all kinds of wealth must be lived. You can live a long life by following the Dharma and the moral code if you live without removing the thought of 'Shivam', you can reach the feet of the Lord.

Struggle against oppression

Ayya Vaikundar says that he will bring down the crown of the king of Travancore, who is performing various atrocities. Also he says that he will rule the *Dharma earth*.²⁸ Ayya Vaikundar calls the king of the Travancore government as *Neesan* because of the severe taxation, caste atrocities and slavery in the Travancore state in the 19th century. Due to Vaikundar enlightened in the month of Masi, bad period started to Travancore tyrant. So Ayya Vaikundar advises the kingdom in the Book of Truth to follow the truth and charity. So Ayya Vaikundar advice in the Book Arul Nool to the kingdom to follow the truth and charity. Ayya says that if he knows himself, he can know his leader too. He says that the way to do so is through the wisdom of the mind.²⁹ Ayya says in the book Arulnool that I came to the world to work for you (people). Ayya Vaikundar told that, charity to the poor is equal to charity to the Lord.

“I came to the world to work for you”

“Give food to those who are begging you”

“Give clothes to the poor”

“Service to the poor is like service to the Lord in the temple”³⁰

This lines are expresses Vaikundar's best progressive thoughts. Also he was a pioneer in the reform of Hinduism, which was fostered by occult practices.

When providing food to others, should not provide less, the food should be sufficient of their stomach. Those who give alms can attain the position of attaining the feet of the Lord. Give food and support to anyone who comes and tell my name. If you do, I will save you whatever you are suffering.³¹ Ayya Vaikundar lived for the benefit of working people, oppressed people in the name of caste and poor people. He emphasized that they should do charity and live the good life. Akilath thirattu Ammanai and Arulnool contains of the religious Concepts of all religious Books.

“Don't forget the truth, do no injustice”

“Don't reduce wages for workers”

“Give wage immediately to the labors for the work done”³²

Ayya Vaikundar says should not reduce wages for workers, and should be paid immediately for their work. It shows his best thinking about the working class.

²⁷ .ibid,p-466

²⁸ .Arulnool, P-20

²⁹ .ibid,P-52

³⁰ .ibid,p-58

³¹ .Arulnool, p-58

³² .ibid,p-58

Man makes many mistakes because of anger. Vaikundar says anger is the weapon to destroy the family. Lust on other women besides wife, murder, theft and guile will ruin you, say Vaikundar. Also he says the desire for soil, the desire for women, and the desire for gold should be avoided. Ayya Vaikundar describes the lust on women as a poisonous snake. Ayya says that “I will keep on preaching until you are overcome from adversity”.³³ Tolerance known as patience is one of the best theories taught by Ayya Vaikundar.

“Patience are great, you will rule the earth, my son”

“Patience are great, people with patience are great people, my son”

“The best people in patience should live around the world”

“Be patient with the wicked people”

“My house (Pathi- Ayya vazhi temple) is the Temple of Patience”³⁴

Conclusion

Ayya's Dharma Earth (Dharma Yuga) is a peaceful earth free from wars and quarrels. Therefore Ayya urges his followers to practice tolerance and patience. It is noteworthy that Mahatma Gandhi who led the Indian independence movement also liberated the country by the weapon of tolerance. Ayya Vaikundar's teachings created a sense of self respect among the enslaved people in Travancore. *Ayya Vazhi*, a religion introduced by Vaikundar, taught the virtue of non-violence, charity, tolerance and love among the people. The teachings of Ayya Vaikundar created religious awareness among the people. His teachings are essential not only for the present but also for the future world.

³³ .IBID,P-62

³⁴ .N.Vivekananthan, Arulnool Vilakkavurai, Nagercoil, Page-92