

Spiritual quest with a difference

DISCOURSE Joseph broke barriers to find the answers.

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D.A. Joseph's calendar is full, a lecture on Visishtadvaita lined up for each day of the week. Joseph's spiritual quest began when he was just nine. He had many questions, to which he found no satisfactory answers.

The answers came some years later, through Veeraraghava Iyengar, a Sanskrit and Tamil scholar, who became his Tamil teacher, when Joseph was in class ten, in St. Mary's school in Madurai.

The curious Joseph's first questions to his teacher, were not about his lessons, but about why Veeraraghava Iyengar wore his dhoti differently, why he had a tuft, and why he sported the Vaishnavite mark on his forehead. The teacher explained the significance of these to the inquisitive student. One thing led to another, and soon Joseph began to question his teacher about his religious beliefs.

Joseph's father arranged for private tuitions for his son with Veeraraghava Iyengar. Little did he know that while the boy studied his lessons diligently, he also plied his teacher with questions on philosophy. Gradually Joseph was drawn towards Visishtadvaita and he was convinced

that he now had answers to all the spiritual questions that had been nagging him.

Joseph was lucky in his marriage. The girl Fatima Mary, whom his family had chosen for him, was also inclined towards Vaishnavism. A Ph.D in Marine Biology, she gives him valuable inputs for his lectures.

Joseph, who has Master's degrees in Sanskrit, Tamil and English, has been lecturing on Visishtadvaita for many years. His son is also a practising Vaishnavite.

What has he gained by being a steadfast believer in Vaishnavism? "My spiritual thirst was quenched when I understood Ramanuja's Visishtadvaita. And I've gained the friendship

and affection of erudite Vaishnavite scholars and math heads."

Joseph has switched religions, but hasn't changed his name. A Vaishnavite preceptor told him not to. An Iyengar speaking on Visishtadvaita was not likely to draw attention. But a Joseph espousing Visishtadvaita would make people sit up and take notice.

Voices of criticism

Joseph was in Chennai recently, to speak at the Triplicane Parthasarathy Swami temple, on 'Ramanuja and Koorathazhvan.' When the lecture was arranged, voices of criticism were heard. Why should a Joseph speak on Koorathazhvan? Was there no one

else available? This criticism is nothing new as far as Joseph is concerned. Even his guru Veeraraghava Iyengar had been criticised for teaching a Christian boy. But Veeraraghava Iyengar had weathered the storm of protests and argued that Ramanuja was one of the first social reformers, long before such reform was even thought of. How could those who swore by him, reject a student, simply because he happened to be born in a non-Vaishnavite family?

Criticism, however, has followed Joseph all his life, but in the end he has always won over his critics through his writings and his knowledge of Visishtadvaita.



SCHOLAR: D.A. Joseph. **PHOTO:** K.V. SRINIVASAN

Once, Joseph's lecture had been arranged in Srivilliputtur. When news got round that a man with a Christian name was going to speak on Andal, Hindu right wing organisations threatened to disrupt the proceedings. Riot police had to be called in. Sriperumbudur Varada Ethiraja Jeer happened to be in Srivilliputtur at the time. He went to the venue, and said to the protestors, "If Joseph is not a Vaishnavite, then who is? Attacking him is like attacking me." Joseph then gave his discourse, and even those who had threatened him conceded that Joseph had indeed spoken well on Visishtadvaita.

Joseph points to the huge audience in the Triplicane temple, some of whom are orthodox, as proof that voices of criticism are fewer these days and not so loud. His lecture at the temple is not in

the usual style of discourses. It's in very simple Tamil. He says he deliberately keeps it that way, in order to reach more people.

He's also unconventionally dressed, unlike the usual tufted speaker. To dress in an orthodox style would put off youngsters, Joseph argues. Why the special concern about the response of youngsters? "They aren't aware of what a rich heritage they've inherited, whether in terms of philosophy, literature, art, science or logic." He mentions a student of engineering, who asked him if Vedanta Desika and Ramanuja were the same person!

People may go to Joseph's lectures drawn by curiosity. But at the Triplicane temple, they did not stay on till the end only out of curiosity. They stayed and applauded because of the content of the lecture.

Nuggets from the lecture

When Peria Nambi lay dying, he put his head on Koorathazhvan's lap. This was more pleasing to him than dying in Srirangam.

When Kidambi Achan went to Koorathazhvan to learn a verse from Nammazhvar's Thiruvaimozhi, Koorathazhvan could not proceed with the verse, because every time he

thought of Lord Krishna's simplicity, he dissolved into tears.

Compassion is the defining quality of a Sri Vaishnavite, and Koorathazhvan was second to none in this respect. He became lachrymose when he saw a snake swallow a frog.

S.K.