

# Vivekananda's Lankan connection

**As the country celebrates the 150th birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda, PRIYADARSHI DUTTA takes a look at an forgotten aspect of his life: His 10-day visit to Sri Lanka in January 1897, soon after his successful journey to the West**

"This is the *punya bhoomi*, the land of *karma*. Today I stand here and say, with the conviction of truth, that it is so. If there is any land on this earth that can lay claim to be the blessed *punya bhoomi*, to be the land to which souls on this earth must come to account for *karma*, the land to which every soul that is wending its way towards God must come to attain its last home, the land where humanity has attained its highest towards gentleness, towards generosity, towards purity, towards calmness, above all, the land of introspection and spirituality — it is India”.

This is an extract from Swami Vivekananda's first public lecture in the East. Delivered soon after his return from the West (1893-1896), it was his first speech advocating India to recognise its spiritual mission. Such idolisation of India inspired the nationalist movement that broke out within a decade. Curiously, this speech was delivered neither on India's territory nor addressed to the Indians. It was delivered in the Floral Hall of Colombo, Sri Lanka, on January 16, 1897, where the Lankan Tamils comprised the audience.

Against popular misconceptions, Sri Lanka (unlike Burma) was never part of British India. The island had become a British Crown colony in 1802, with its separate legislative council, chief justice, military service, civil service and a governor who reported to the secretary for colonies rather than the secretary for India in London.

Vivekananda's exploits in Sri Lanka is a little known chapter. En route India, he plodded through the island for 10 days between January 15 and January 25, 1897. He came there on the invitation of Tamil Hindus who had keenly followed his great feat in the West. Tamils were in midst of a 'Hindu Renaissance' initiated by the Saivite reformer of Jaffna, Arumuga Navalar (1822-1879), and Vivekananda's visit gave it a big push in that direction.

The Swami reached Colombo on January 15. Thousands of Tamils came out to welcome him. In fact throughout his entire stay, a large number of Tamils from all walks of life accompanied him. He was respectfully called the '*Swamigal*' by the welcoming devotees. Being immensely touched by this, Vivekananda said that this roaring welcome was not in honour of a military general, a great politician or a millionaire but a monk attested to the spiritual bent of Hindu mind.

Vivekananda stayed in a bungalow in Barnes Street in the outskirts of Colombo. It was later renamed as Vivekananda Lodge. On January 16, he delivered his speech at Floral Hall. Its most striking part was that Vivekananda spoke with the confidence as if standing on the soil of India amidst Indians. He referred to India as *punya bhoomi* (sacred land) and made the audience feel as if they were living in this *punya bhoomi*. He betrayed no awareness of standing upon the soil of a Buddhist-majority country.

Vivekananda had to shelve his plan of sailing for Madras (Chennai) from Colombo as he was receiving numerous telegrams from various Tamil-inhabited towns of Sri Lanka to visit them. On January 19, he took the train to Kandy — the hill station inhabited by tea plantation workers from Tamil Nadu. He

was welcomed at the Kandy railway station by a traditional band and temple insignia amid loud cheers.

After delivering a brief speech, Vivekananda set out for a long, arduous journey to Jaffna by a stagecoach as there were no railway line linking Kandy and Jaffna in those days. It was during this 200-mile journey that an outrageous incident happened. After nearly 50 miles, the coach broke down near Dambulla, known for its famous cave temple complex. This forced him to take a bullock-cart to reach Anuradhapuram, the ancient capital of Sri Lanka and the largest 'buried city' of the world.

Anuradhapuram hosts the Bo-tree, offshoot of the Bo-tree of Bodh Gaya, under which Buddha had received enlightenment. On seeing Vivekananda, a huge crowd of Tamils and Sinhalese gathered, and he was compelled to deliver a lecture. He was speaking on the subject of *bhakti*, which was being translated into Tamil and Sinhalese.

Suddenly, a huge crowd of Buddhist *bhikshus* (monks) gathered around him and began beating drum and gongs in order to stop the lecture. The Swami had to stop his speech abruptly.

Then, after a journey of two nights, Vivekananda reached Vavuniya, in the northern part of Sri Lanka, another place of Tamil predominance. On January 24, 1897, the Swami crossed the Elephant Pass to step into Jaffna Peninsula. Jaffna, Tamil heartland, was the principal centre of Hinduism in Sri Lanka. He was received by a delegation of leading Hindus 12 miles outside the city, and brought in a triumphant procession.

But the real spectacle was in the evening. A torchlight procession, accompanied by Carnatic music and attended by an estimated 15,000 people, began. On the way, the Swami worshipped at Siva and Kathirasan temples. After the procession, his carriage reached the Jaffna Hindu College, where a huge crowd awaited him. Vivekananda delivered his keynote address on 'Vedantism'.

The theme was interesting, considering the fact that Jaffna has always been the centre of Saiva Siddhanta, which does not subscribe to the Vedantic model. After delivering an enlightened lecture, Vivekananda sailed from Jaffna by steamship by the midnight. After a journey of 50 miles on Palk Strait, he arrived at Pamban on January 26.

We remember how Indian Tamils were instrumental in Vivekananda's visit to the US to address the Parliament of Religion. But it is forgotten how the Lankan Tamils were the first to welcome him in the subcontinent. Vivekananda visited Sri Lanka briefly again in 1899, en route Europe.

The Tamils of that country never forgot him. The world's first — and still surviving — 'Vivekananda Society' was established in Colombo in 1902 within nine days of the Swami's death. The Jaffna Tamil immigrants to British Malaya (Malaysia) established a Vivekananda Ashram in Kuala Lumpur in 1904. Today, there is the Vivekananda College in Colombo and Orr's Hill Vivekananda College in Trincomalee.

Lankan Tamils still remember the Swami fondly, but do we?