

21. Periyavaal and We

jaya jaya shankara -- hara hara shankara
jaya jaya shankara -- hara hara shankara
kanchi shankara -- kamakshi shankara
kaladi shankara -- kamakoti shankara

These chantings are heard from some distance. Just the noise with no clear words or meanings initially. Going near, they become clear, and the tiny hairs of the body stand erect. There comes a large crowd, progressing slowly, like an army of ants. No pomp, no decorations, no shouts. People of different castes, speaking different languages, village folks, urbanites, men, women, children--everyone singing a bhajan in their familiar language; different namAvalis back and forth in the same procession.

A good sunshine of a four-o'-clock sun. Does the sun play a hide and seek game? A little cloudiness, seen here and there. A small cycle rickshaw in the middle of the crowd. As if it's from a circus. Torn jute blankets on and above it; a mat, an umbrella made of screw pine flowers; plus some sundry items.

With someone dragging the vehicle, behind it, holding the vehicle--You! (Nee!--the author uses a singular form of address throughout). As we see you nearby, we fall down and prostrate on the road itself, our hands and body shaking. You do not stop or wait, but bless with your eyes, as you continue to walk. Are they your eyes? No no, they are oceans of mercy!

I was thinking for countless years to see you, to have your darshan. That yearning in the heart, whenever I hear about you, or read about you. It occurred to look for what is written about you, whichever magazine is taken. An apprehension that perhaps it may not be possible to see you. In those times, you were near Kanchi. Countless number of times we have come to Madras. I have requested to come over to Kanchi and see you at least once. I have begged. We are all ordinary people. Trifles. Thinking that only food, sleep, unnecessary pomp and gossip are the primary things. We will go wherever we like to go, spend whatever we like to spend. But then it is not possible to come over and see you.

Every day, when I light the Swami lamp and look at your portrait, I would feel the twirl of distress in the mind that it would not be possible to see you with human efforts, unless you called. I never spoke my wish in words. Did you hear it,

anyhow? If the child gets hungry, it need not cry to show its hunger The mother would understand it herself. Like that, my pain has been understood by you.

Is it because of my yearning that I couldn't see you that you are coming all the way to see me? What do you have, a car or a railway coach? You come walking on this tar road, your feet aching. Worn on those feet, torn rubber slippers, repaired with manji naar.

Was it a mile, or two? How long you have walked! Appa! You are coming walking all the way, over thousands of miles. This place we live in, this Hubli city, whatever puNyam it had accumulated, to have your footprints. We never thought even in dream that you would come. But then you are coming, it's a reality. Torn saffron vastram. Some covering over it made of the fibres of a tree-bark. Rudrakshas on your neck and head.

A minute's doubt when we look at you. Is it a human figure? No, no. It is only that Lord Parameswara who is walking on, wearing a tiger-skin! A moment's satisfaction of having had darshan of bhagavan. bhagavan is appearing to us in your figure!

That day you took bath several times for your Ashrama dharma. With the result, you had intense cold and fever, people who were with you tell us. If it is just a human body primarily meant to take food, it would necessitate in seeking treatments, care and comforts, lying down.

But then in your 86th year of age, without proper food or any sort of comforts, you are walking on with fever. That is the strength of your tapas. Solid power. You appear as a mixture of man and God. Human body, divine energy. Goddess Shakti is residing in you. That is why you appear as God, as Shiva. People say that on that day you had already walked for eighteen kilometers, so you should not strain further. It is only we who strain you. We invite you to come here and there and everywhere.

As the sun had started going down, you are received in a roadside village, to a garden, near a cattle shed, in a small hut, its roof woven with straw. Like a small child, sometimes you too listen to everybody and give your consent.

Did not you feel tired, walking so much distance? Did not you have thirst and hunger? At this hour, when the light is fading, you are sitting in a small hut, not knowing any fatigue, giving darshan to thousands of people; isn't it a great thing?

Only when a king is sitting in his palace, he has thousands of worries. Here, before a pauper, is sitting on the sand and dust, the Maharaja of Sandur, with his family-- and so much joy in his mind!

On the next day, since you wanted to go on pattina pravesam, we prostrate and take leave of you and unwillingly leave you at the village border and get back. My husband is given the responsibility to repair the crystal garland of yours that got severed. What puNyam did we do, to have in our hands the garland that adorned your body? We repeatedly touch and see it with excitement.

You won't eat anything. You have no hunger or thirst. No fatigue. But then aren't your assistants just ordinary people? They have their hunger and thirst. On that night they say that they do not have the strength even to prepare their food. But you wouldn't let them go to sleep with hunger and thirst. You would demand to be shown at least some uppuma (kitchadi) or rava porridge. I say that I will send them some food. And they say that they would prepare a little of uppuma and show it to you. What to do? To satisfy you, they need to sometimes deceive you.

It was a Saturday. The entire city is abuzz, since you are arriving there on the next day. We know that you wouldn't enter houses. Still, festoons in every house; Kolam designs on the floor, made with flour. We have decorated everything with flowers. The look and feel of a wedding ceremony everywhere. Everyone is excited. Happy. Immense joy in everybody's heart. Our home is full of holy articles and grocery.

Why so much joy and happiness on your arrival? Are you a king, or a big politician? A millionaire? Or a cinema or drama actor? You are just a pauper with nothing on hand. A sanyAsin. A sanyAsin of sanyAsins. At least a sanyAsin will have a maTham. You don't have even that. Such a bhAgyaM for us?

We were considering where to house you when you consented to visit us. The worry was that we did not have a river bed, a pond or a well that is required for you. By chance, we had dug a well in our garden, and it was full of water. The remaining work on the well was completed in haste and a holy worship was performed to it. A small hut was built, touching the fence of our house and a shed was erected near it. Vacating the outhouses of our home, it was arranged to house your people and facilitate their cooking.

Henceforth, no mention as 'you'; only 'Periyavaa'!

On the next day, a Sunday, on 13-5-79, it is the 86th jayanti of PeriyavaaL. We have the fortune to celebrate it in Hubli. Under his (Gurusankar, my husband) leadership a committee comprising the people of Dharwar assembled. The VIPs held counsel among them and collected money from the people. Everyone was given a specific job in the arrangements to receive PeriyavaaL and celebrate his jayanti. The arrangements were made under the supervision of Sri Balachandra Sastri, a vedic pundit in Dharwar. Whenever we think about the name mentioned above, we remember what PeriyavaaL said: "You should pronounce the name as Phalachandra, not Balachandra. It means one with a forehead that resembled the moon."

On the Sunday morning, after having our bath, with pUrna kumbhA and holy music we all go at the time of dawn, to the place where PeriyavaaL was staying, to receive him and get his blessings. PeriyavaaL is brought into the city in a procession along the Gadag Road, with bhajans, namAvalis and nAdaswara music. Some of us leave the procession, come back home and wait at the gate to receive PeriyavaaL with Arati. The cottage meant for PeriyavaaL has been erected in the golf course near our compound wall. Green grounds as far as eye can see. A railway line on the opposite side of the cottage. Beyond that the Udipi Krishnan temple and the Raghavendra Brindavan. Since it was a large ground we thought we could manage the crowd, but we faced much difficulty as the crowd that assembled was far larger.

At some distance from our home, say about three kilometers away, the jayanti arrangements have been made in a Hanuman temple. AyuSya Homa, Navagraha Homa and many others, done by 121 brahmins with the chanting of mantras was a sight that eyes could not accommodate. As requested by the city notables, my husband and I acted as kArya kartAs, maintaining ceremonial purity (madi) and observing the dharmic and vaidik regulations, and went to the Hanuman temple to honour Perivaal. We haven't seen such arrangements and divine presence so far. Shastrokta puja and vaidik acts are begun. Vaidikas from different parts of the South have assembled.

The homas begun in the morning go up to nearly three in the afternoon. PeriyavaaL is brought in a procession to the Hanuman temple. A heavy rush of people. PeriyavaaL is sitting on a small stage opposite the homa gundam. The buzz of people everywhere.

In the vasodara homam performed, my husband and I pour ghee during pUrNAhutI. PeriyavaaL sitting opposite us. After the homa is completed, we take

the prasAda and tIrtha, go to PeriyavaaL, and prostrate, with the rush of people surging behind us. PeriyavaaL accepts the prasAda. Somebody gives a bilva garland to my husband asking him to offer it to PeriyavaaL, who accepts the garland taking it from my husband's hands and wearing it himself. This same garland is given back to us as prasAda. I could not control the tears of joy and my body is shaking. Such a bhAgyaM for us! Whose puNya is this? Ordinarily, one gets countless fortunes in life. But then the bhAgyaM of honouring a mahAn to whose feet the world prostrates--how can I term it? Only the fruits of earlier births. It only occurs to us to pray 'Hey bhagavan! Make us the best people in this life and give us this same fortune, birth after birth!'

As soon as we got PeriyavaaL's prasAda, the women there touched our feet and said one after another we were so much fortunate. I went very emotional and cried. And then, saris and blouses were distributed to 27 sumangalis, and skirts to spinster girls who sat for the kanya girls' puja. It was nearly five o' clock when everything was over and we took our food. By then PeriyavaaL had started from there, and walking a dirty way we thought he should not happen to walk through, reached his cottage.

When we see the news that PeriyavaaL is staying in a place called Hagari near Bellary, we couldn't contain our joy. This is an episode of 14 or 15 months back before he arrived at Hubli. At that time my mother-in-law, father-in-law and sisters-in-law have all come over to our home at Hubli.

We all start and go to the river banks of Hagari where we are presently sitting. PeriyavaaL is in his japa inside the cottage. Suddenly a flame of light at the entrance to the cottage. As if there is no difference between the tender morning sunlight and his saffron clothes, everything looking the same color, as a flame of light, he gives us a sudden darshan. Then was our first darshan of PeriyavaaL. We look at him, filling our eyes with the sight, as if it was a vindication of this birth of ours. But then they say that PeriyavaaL observes kASTa maunam on that day. We also remain there till evening and then get back. Like cats that have tasted milk, we go back to him for darshan, again and again.

It was evening when we went to Hagari the next time. PeriyavaaL is sitting in a new Shiva temple whose construction is in progress. It is more or less dark. A standing brass lamp and a hurricane lamp are burning steadily. We prostrate to him with our children. When my husband told him his name (Gurusankar) he asked, "Who gave you this name? And what for did they give you this name?" My husband said that it was his grandfather who gave the name and that he did not

know the reason for this particular name. PeriyavaaL called an assistant and asked him to write down the name on the floor and show him. He then inquired about our native place and family and asked if the names Vedic School Krishnaiyer and Divan Seshaiyer had ever fallen on our ears. We said no. (Later, when we made inquiries, it was known that they were our ancestors). He asked if we had come by the Railway First Class or Saloon. And he told my husband, "Till this date, electrical engineers have not been posted in this railway post? How did you get it? Mostly, only those from the operating department are posted as D.S."

PeriyavaaL inquired my husband about the extent of his jurisdiction. He asked, "Do you know that a road goes parallel to the railway line from Raichur to Poona?" This man (ivar) said that he did not know. He asked about Poly Vaidhyanath. We were then worrying that our son Sankar was not able to secure a seat of admission in any of the colleges. I thought within my mind that he should get an admission and come up well in life. I did not even tell this to PeriyavaaL. But my son got a seat in a college due to PeriyavaaL's grace and also studied well. He had PeriyavaaL's anugraham in many respects.

I have narrated this episode to tell how PeriyavaaL asked us about our ancestors. Nearly a year after this happened, did he come to Hubli. He stayed at Hampi and Hospet for a long time.

Let us now continue PeriyavaaL's jayanti at Hubli. About ten o' clock in the night after the jayanti vaibhavam was over. We were all with PeriyavaaL. On that day, devotees continued to arrive from different parts of India. They came in special buses and cars. Since we had no accommodation even in that large house of ours, we made arrangements for them to sleep in the portico, car shed and other such places.

PeriyavaaL is sitting in the light of the standing brass lamp. The hut is otherwise dark. Even people who were standing were not properly visible. He called us inside suddenly and asked, "Here, the one who is standing isn't she your relative?" We couldn't understand instantly who or what. The woman's voice from behind replied, "Yes, yes." When we came to know it, it was Parvathi, who was standing then, the daughter of Mysore Chottappa's elder brother. Only then was it known that she was a relative. Periyavaa asked again, "On that day I asked you about Krishnaiyer, Seshaiyer. You said you did not know them. So later on you asked someone to know about them. Whom did you ask? May be you asked some elder person in the home," and replied to his question himself. He also asked us about the children's education. Then he inquired about the arrangements made on that

day for the jayanti including details such as how many persons dined. Then he started narrating himself that on that day someone brought Ganga jalam for his bath, that a mango fruit he had in his hand slipped and fell in the water pot and that later when he tasted the water it was very sweet.

Chuckling to himself like a child he said that he himself couldn't understand, 'Did Ganga become sweet because of the mango fruit? Or, because of Ganga the mango fruit became sweet?' and laughed. He ate a little of that mango fruit and sent the remaining fruit to us. We also received the Ganga jalam. Both were very sweet. The reason why Ganga tasted as if sugar was added to it was not clear.

At eleven o' clock in the night, some people came in a car from Kanchipuram, carrying the prasAdams of the puja done for PeriyavaaL. We made way for them and came out.

Those who arrived slipped a large garland around PeriyavaaL's neck as Kamakshi's prasAdam. And they tied Kamakshi's rose-coloured silk vastram as a holy scarf around PeriyavaaL's head (parivattam). Periyavaa asked, pointing to his head "Is there a golden lace in this?" They replied in the affirmative. He asked, "The lace is a dotted one?" They said yes. He touched the cloth and asked, "Is this silk or fibrous silk? It feels like silk to touch." "Yes, silk only." "O they have brought and tied silk to my head!"

In two coconut halves were Kamakshi's prasAdams: the arcanA kuN^kumam and homa bhasmam. He took both of them and applied them profusely to his forehead. It was a sight that our eyes couldn't accommodate. Then as he started talking to those who had come, about the MaTham and such things, we left the room and were standing outside. Soon he asked, "Where is she? Gurusankar's bhAryA? Call her." We were somewhat apprehensive as he called us all of a sudden. We both go inside and prostrate. He took both the coconut halves along with the prasAdams and dropped them in my hands. Nothing was immediately intelligible to me. The greatness of the act was understood only when we were told, "what amount of puNya should you have accumulated to receive Kamakshi prasAdam from Periyavaa's hands!"

In this manner, PeriyavaaL darshan for four days and nights. Days of happiness. Inexpressible joy. The most puNya-filled days of our life.

House full of people. What name? What place? What ancestry? What status? Nothing we knew. Everyone looks very close to us. Seems we can talk to everyone

in an AtmArta way. All seem to be part of a large family. Everyone of the PeriyavaaL family, which was filled only with devotion and love. We met different kinds of people; and were delighted sharing the experiences of each other.

Fourth day. Suddenly he comes out of his cottage and checks the air in the rickshaw tyres by pressing them. Does he hint at his departure from here? The disciples confirm it. "Periyavaa knows that after many days we are comfortable in your house, so he would leave now" they say. We prostrate to him that night and tell him that it was our wish that Periyavaa should come to our garden and sit for sometime. He does not reply. A long silence. The people around us jeer at us. 'Must be fortunate to have Periyavaa come such a long distance. Still is he needed to come inside the garden?' they laugh.

We go to PeriyavaaL early the next morning. We are taken aback at the news he tells us. Periyavaa says that he went round our garden at two in the night and we did not see him as we were fast asleep! An inexpressible sadness and disappointment in our hearts. We stand in silence, with tears in our eyes. We do not know if our asking him to come inside was right or wrong.

PeriyavaaL is doing japam. Suddenly he got up and looked around, his japam disturbed. As he suddenly ascended the stairs to our garden and slowly went round our house, one of his wooden sandals broke. Just the knob was found between the digits of his toe. He did not stop because of that. Wearing a sandal on one foot and just a knob on the other he started walking. His assistants ran and brought another pair of sandals. What a compassion! Knowing that the moment we learned about his night trip to our garden we would feel immensely distressed, for our peace and joy, to make another trip to our house in our presence--what to tell of that mercy? What to compare it with? Only an ocean of mercy.

His sudden departure for another place gave us pains. Everyone started following PeriyavaaL from our house. Suddenly the house became empty. It was like a theatre after the play was over. It seemed that all relatives have left us in a single day. But then Periyavaa, who is everyone's relative, coming and staying with us, blessing us and giving measureless anugraham -- it is something to reminisce repeatedly with joy throughout this birth.

After we had darshan of PeriyavaaL, the anugraham and anubhavam we got can't be expressed in words. He has made us happy telling things like a grandfather, a close relative, a mother would tell us. To say that sugar is sweet is not enough;

only when we put it in our mouth could we know about its taste. In the same way, it might be difficult for others to understand the extent of our experiences with PeriyavaaL if we talk or write about them. The greatness and rarity of it could be known only when a person actually experiences it in an AtmArta manner.

Author: Kamala Gurusankar (in Tamil)

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(The author uses the second person singular 'nee' in Tamil to refer to Paramacharya. She also switches back and forth in the three tenses in this wonderful narration of her experiences. The poetic flow of her thoughts and emotions are maintained as it was.)