The Homecoming – A Photo Engraving of H.H. Pandurangashram Swamiji (1847-1915)

Jaishankar BondaΙ, Delhi

Saints and spiritual leaders have their own way of communicating and facilitating events. I saw this from personal experience in the recent past, when a series of interconnecting events led me to what the title of this article says.

A series of fortuitous events led to a vintage formal portrait of H.H. Pandurangashram Swamiji coming to my attention from a distant land, doubtless by His Grace! Let me explain. I have, for quite some time now, been in touch with an academic focusing on South Asian History and Civilizations at a European University (Lausanne, Switzerland), Dr.Philippe Bornet, (courtesy Dr. Frank Conlon’s good offices). Dr. Bornet was working on the Malabar area, and we had, as students of history, exchanged notes on maritime trade, inland economic and social developments in peninsular India 18th /19th century, and allied subjects. All these discussions were online, naturally, as this was a time of global lockdowns. With prolonged contact, we became good friends. Somewhere along the line, I recall him asking me if I was a TamiΙ (maybe from the name now made famous in quite another context). In response, I had explained to him my Chitrapur Saraswat origins, mentioning that the successive line of our spiritual leaders was centered at Shirali in North Karnataka. I had also described him the history of community migrations/movements from North India to the coastal South West.

In course of his researches, Dr Bornet had come across a German missionary tract that detailed out religious practices and had accompanying photo-engravings covering different religious practices/religious leaders across the world. This tract, circa 1883, was titled “Bilden Tafeln zur Landen-und Volken-Kunde” (lit) “Image Panels on Geography and Ethnology” with a number of photo engravings of religious figures and practices, with brief commentaries on each. [I will allude to the commentary later in the article] The Church perhaps created this book for their own knowledge and internal education. In this tract, Dr.Bornet had come across a portrait of a religious leader captioned “Der Swami von Schirale (Kanara)”.He asked me if “Schirale” was same as our Shirali.

One look at the portrait, and I knew, to my delight, that it was our Pandurangashram Swamiji!! When I confirmed it was, he spontaneously asked me if I wanted a print of the picture. He said he could get any size printed as they had the equipment. I chose paper of A2 size as appropriate for Swamiji`s portrait, and in due course this photo, beautifully printed and packed, winged its way to Delhi from Lausanne.

I had this portrait framed professionally by a photo framer who works for art exhibitions and was wondering how to send it across to H.H. Sadyojat Shankarashram Swamiji and the Sangrahalaya at Shirali, when behold! H.H. Swamiji`s visit to Delhi enroute Haridwar was announced, and it all seamlessly fell into place. The portrait was handed over personally by me to H.H. Sadyojat Shankarashram Swamiji, (as it happened on June 1, 2022 - the day of H.H. Pandurangashram Swamiji`s Samaradhana and He was very pleased to receive it. The portrait left with Him and the entourage when they proceeded to Mumbai enroute Shirali on 9th June 2022. I understand that this portrait has since been installed in Gallery D at the Shrimat Parijnanashram Vastu Sangrahalaya. A true Homecoming!!

On all counts, Pandurangashram Swamiji was a remarkable figure----the first of our Swamiji-s who had His picture taken so His message and mission could be seen and felt even by those who had never met Him. In an age of difficult communications, (remember it was the 19th century) particularly in the tough Ghat area of North Karnataka, He undertook a long and arduous journey all the way to Prayag, Kashi and Gaya (the Tristhali) taking advantage of newly built rail links (B.B.and C.I.) from South-West coast to the Ganga valley areas. He laid the foundations of a modern settlement at Shirali, expanding the Math, giving it a firm foundation, literally and figuratively. After extensive repairs to the main Math structure, it is surmised that a stone slab bearing the inscription “Shri Krshnashram Prasada” was placed over the portico. This has been there for long; perhaps H.H. Pandurangashram Swamiji may have named the structure after His Guru. Inside the Math too, Samadhi-s of His predecessor Guru-s, as existent, were repaired, as were many subsidiary shrines around, giving Chitrapur the status of a “Kshetra”. The Shivganga Sarovara and Panchavati constructions also came up in this era. Besides, He arranged for a post office, a school and a marketplace (weekly hat) to be set up at Shirali for convenience of residents and visitors. He frequently travelled the Kanara-s, and once even to Calicut (Kozhikode), to maintain close contact with the Math constituents. Presiding over, and taking interest in frequent Mahasabha-s, He was able to put the Math finances on a sound footing, and (very early, 1862) persuaded His Guru, H.H. Krshnashram Swamiji, to inaugurate the Rathotsava for the first time in Math history, which over the years, became a major socio-religious event in the Community calendar, adding to the popularity of the Math. Revived again by H.H. Parijnanashram Swamiji III in the last century, Rathotsava continues to be a major draw for not only our community (both local and abroad) but many non-Amchi-s in the surrounding areas. (vintage KSA journals mention that photographs of Pandurangashram Swamiji (at nominal price) were freely available at the venue of Rathayatra-s even in the 19th century, thus increasing His personal accessibility.) In popular thought, the Swamiji has also been widely revered as an incarnation of Lord Dattatreya.

The Picture installed in Gallery D of the Shrimat Parijnanashram

Vastu Sangrahalaya, Shirali

As the biographer of H.H. Pandurangashram Swamiji, (late) Dr. Gopal S. Hattiangdi, notes in his work “Pandurang,Pandurang”(1965) - “with all these qualities, He (H.H. Pandurangashram Swamiji) can be thought of as “a master mind, a born genius and a great reformer” - the qualities we also see mirrored eminently in His successor (twice removed),H.H. Sadyojat Shankarashram Swamiji.

To revisit the brief commentary that accompanies the vintage portrait of H.H. Pandurangashram Swamiji, the missionary tract says “the person depicted here is the Guru of the famous and rich Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmin Math, Swami Pandurangashram”. It goes on to state that “the Guru was well known for having turned this location (Shirali) into a “modern and widely successful pilgrimage site”.

I recall, with reverence, that the very first book Shantish Nayel and I collaborated to digitise for the website www.ChitrapurEbooks.com a decade ago, bringing a different and refreshing experience to us both, was ‘Pandurang, Pandurang’. The website is still a work in progress, by the abiding Grace of the Guruparampara.

Whenever you visit the Shrimat Parijnanashram Vastu Sangrahalaya at Shirali, do view this vintage portrait and its accompanying description.