

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S VISITS TO ALMORA

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[Mrs. Gertrude E. Sen, who is a well-known writer and author of many valuable books, is living in Almora, and is a very close friend of the Ramakrishna Ashrama there. This illuminating article picturesquely describes the three visits of Swami Vivekananda to that hill station, which is so dear to all connected with the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement.]

From the *Letters* and *Life* of Swami Vivekananda, this account of his three visits to Almora—in 1890, 1897, and 1898—has been pieced together. Almora is a small Himalayan town (present population about 16,000), in the northern part of Uttar Pradesh. It is one of the jumping-off places for pilgrimages to the sacred shrines of Kedarnath and Badrinarayan, and to Mount Kailas, sacred to Śiva, in Tibet. The town itself, which lies at an altitude of just over 5,000 ft., was founded in 1592 as the capital of the Chand Rājās, then ruling this region. Later on, it was conquered by Nepal, but reconquered by the British in 1815. Many of the old houses of Almora have upper storeys finely carved in the Nepalese tradition. The bazar, a single long street paved with stones, which runs along the rest of the ridge for about two miles with houses spilling down on both sides, has been cited as one of the best and most picturesque of the old hill bazars in India.

The surrounding hills and ridges are covered with deodars and pines. The annual rainfall is only some 45 to 50 inches, so that, compared with other hill stations of the western Himalayas such as Naini Tal, Ranikhet, Simla, or Mussoorie, or Darjeeling at the other end of the Himalayan chain, Almora is 'dry'. In fact, it has an almost ideal climate, not too cold in winter, not too hot in summer, not too wet in the rainy season. Apart from its healthful climate, there is the magnificent view to the north of some twenty or more great snow peaks, including Kamet, Nanda Devi, and Trisul—all over twenty thousand feet high and stretching in a jagged line right up to the border of Tibet, ninety miles away.

After the passing of Sri Ramakrishna, in

1886, the young monks of the Baranagore monastery soon scattered in all directions, eager to practise *sādhanā* in some remote and lonely spot, or to go on pilgrimages to the holy places. One of them, Akhandananda, spent three years wandering in the Himalayas and Tibet, and he was the first of Ramakrishna's disciples to visit Almora, where he received hospitable treatment from Lala Badri Shah, a leading citizen of the town. This gentleman was a true devotee, and afterwards showed extraordinary courtesy to all the Swamis of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, many of whom, in later years, started from here on pilgrimages to the holy places, or remained in Almora for a time as his guests.

Like the others, Vivekananda, or Noren (Narendra) as he was then known, also, longed to become a wanderer, to seek out some hidden retreat in the Himalayas, where he could plunge into deep meditation. He left Calcutta in 1888, and got as far as Rishikesh, from where he intended to proceed to Badrinath; but his first disciple, Sadananda, who was then with him and whom he had just initiated at Hathras, suddenly feel ill, and the plan had to be abandoned. Instead, they returned to Hathras, from where Vivekananda was then called back to Baranagore by his brother monks. He remained at Baranagore practically the whole of the next year, confronted with many difficulties and responsibilities, but his mind was restless, and letters from Akhandananda, still wandering about in the Himalayas, made him long even more fervently to shake himself free and follow a life of uninterrupted meditation. There must have been a plan at one time

during this year for him to join Akhandananda somewhere in the Himalayas and proceed to Tibet. An unpublished letter from Akhandananda (Gangadhar) to Badri Shah in Almora, written from Badrinath and dated June 19, 1889, refers to the expected arrival in Almora of Vivekananda, referred to simply as a 'brother monk'.

Badrinath,
19th June, '89

My dear Badri Shah,

A *gurubhāi* of mine is proceeding to Almora. Please receive him warmly and try to accommodate him in a comfortable place and help him in every way so that he may not feel the least trouble during his sojourn at Almora. He is one of my advanced *gurubhāis*, a highly educated gentleman leading a perfect ascetic life since ten or twelve years. He has sacrificed all his worldly prosperities for the sake of Almighty. Now he is in the stage of Paramahansa. He will start tomorrow. I am doing all right; most likely, I will be starting for Lhasa in the coming month. . .

Your well wisher,

Bengali Ganga Dhar

or

Who returned from Tibet

Babajee.

Vivekananda did not, at this time, go to Almora after all. Once more fate intervened. On the very day he was planning to leave Calcutta, the disciple Sadananda, who had taken months to recover from the illness he had contracted in Rishikesh, unexpectedly arrived to join the Baranagore monastery. The departure had to be postponed, but the idea was never given up.

Early in 1890, Vivekananda started out again, stopping off in Ghazipur to see Pavhari Baba, a saint living in an underground cave surrounded by a high wall, from whom he hoped to learn something about *rāja-yoga*. From Ghazipur, he wrote to Akhandananda, requesting him to come down to the plains immediately, so that the two might make preparations to depart for Nepal, Tibet, and

possibly, China. But the illness of a brother monk took him to Varanasi, and there he had news of the death of Balaram Bose, the great householder disciple of Ramakrishna, and returned to Calcutta. Finally, on July 6, he wrote to two of the brothers already in Almora, Saradananda and Vaikunthanath: 'I intend shortly, as soon as I can get a portion of my fare, to go up to Almora, and thence to some place in Garhwal on the Gaṅgā where I can settle down for a long meditation. Gangadhar is accompanying me. . . This time I shall not go to Pavhari Baba or any other saint—they divert one from one's highest purpose. Straight up!' Before leaving, he told his *gurubhāis*: 'I shall not return until I acquire such realization that my very touch will transform a man.'

Today, a fine motor road brings the traveller from Kathgodam, the railway terminus at the foot of the hills, to Almora within a few hours. In 1890, travellers had to come by horse back, palanquin, or on foot, along a rough bridle-path. Vivekananda, accompanied by Akhandananda, set out, carrying only staff and *kamandalu* (waterpot used by *sādhus*). From Kathgodam, they walked on to Naini Tal, and after spending a few days there, set out for Almora, begging their food along the way. On the third day, they reached a place called Kakrighat, on the Kosi River. 'What a delightful spot for meditation!' Vivekananda remarked, sitting down under a great peepul-tree. Almost immediately, his body became stiff and motionless, as if all the life had gone out of it, and for a long time, he remained in that state. On returning to normal consciousness, he exclaimed: 'Oh, Gangadhar, I have just passed through one of the greatest moments of my life. I have found the oneness between the macrocosm and the microcosm. I have seen the whole universe within an atom!' Overwhelmed by this experience, he could think and talk of nothing else as they continued on their way to Almora.

When they were climbing the last steep

slope leading to the town, having had nothing to eat all day, Vivekananda suddenly sank down, almost fainting in sheer exhaustion, opposite a small Muslim graveyard. Akhandananda went off in search of water. Meanwhile, the fakir in charge of the cemetery, Zulfikar Ali by name, seeing his plight, offered Vivekananda a cucumber. Too tired even to lift his hand, Vivekananda asked the man to put it in his mouth! When the latter held back, saying that he was a Mussulman, Vivekananda characteristically replied: 'What does that matter? Are we not all brothers?'

This story was to have an unexpected sequel. Seven years later, on his next visit to Almora in 1897, no longer as an unknown, starving *sannyāsin*, but as the world-famous Swami Vivekananda, he was met on the way and conducted in a big procession to the town. Suddenly, he caught sight of that same Muslim fakir in the crowd and stopped to thank him publicly for his former service. 'The man really saved my life. Never had I felt so exhausted', Vivekananda explained.

It was in late August or September 1890 that Vivekananda first arrived in Almora. There he and Akhandananda joined the two monks, already staying as guests of Badri Shah. While he was staying at the house of Badri Shah, a curious incident happened. A man became 'possessed', and Badri Shah was asked to come and see him. Vivekananda went along, and the crowd, seeing his ochre cloth, begged him to cure the sick man. 'Who am I, my brothers?' he said. 'I am only a *sannyāsin*. The Lord will take care of him.' Yet since he was pressed to do so, he laid his hand on the head of the sick man tossing in a frenzy and frothing at the mouth. Almost instantly he grew quiet and, in a short time, became quite normal again.

After remaining a few days with his kind host, Vivekananda felt an irresistible urge to be alone, to plunge into that deep meditation for which his soul thirsted. He walked out to a solitary cave overhanging a small moun-

tain village. The exact location of this cave has never been determined, since there are several answering its general description around Almora, but very possibly, it was a large well-known cave on Kasar Devi, a forested spur five miles to the north-east of Almora town. This cave now has a built-up entrance to make it into a sort of hermitage for *sādhus*. In the cave, Vivekananda then practised an intense *sāadhanā*, determined to reach that ultimate realization which he held to be the goal of his life.

In the first edition of *The Life of the Swami Vivekananda*, written by his Eastern and Western disciples, a remarkable account of his experience in the cave is given, which is strangely omitted from later editions. 'Here in that cave, overhanging a mountain-village', the account reads, 'he practised austerities day and night. He determined to find Truth. And there in the silence, with not even a single soul to disturb his meditation, he had experience after experience in the way of illumination, until his face shone with a celestial fire. And then, at the very climax of all his spiritual exercises, instead of abiding in the ultimatum of personal bliss which he expected to do, he felt the impetus to work, and this seemed to force him out, as it were, from his *sāadhanā*.'

This was, indeed, a strange time for him. The monk Akhandananda has spoken of it thus: 'It seemed as if every time the Swami desired to retire into the life of silence and pure monasticism, he was compelled to give it up by the pressure of circumstance. He had a Mission to fulfil, and the very essence of his nature would force him into the realization of this line of work.' He himself, referring to his strange experience in the cave, said later: 'Nothing in my whole life ever so filled me with the sense of work to be done. It was as if I were *thrown out* from that life of solitude, to wander to and fro in the plains below.' And so he came back again to his brother disciples and his host in Almora. There he found a telegram awaiting him,

announcing the suicide of his widowed sister, and a letter soon followed with all the harrowing details. He suffered a great shock, and then and there, was rudely awakened to some of the special problems confronting Hindu women, particularly widows, and he made up his mind to fight their cause in the face of orthodox tradition.

The four monks now decided to continue on their way to Badrinath. They had travelled on foot some 120 miles when the illness of one, and then another, compelled them to abandon the idea of their pilgrimage. It was already intensely cold, with winter approaching. They made their way down to Rishikesh, beloved of *sādhus*, where the Gaṅgā enters the plains of India. A little later, at Meerut, Vivekananda suddenly decided to separate from his brothers. He must go alone, seeking to understand this India he now knew he had been born to serve. For the next two and a half years he wandered on, now and then encountering, by chance, some *gurubhāṅ* at an out-of-the-way place or passing one at a railway station. Then he completely disappeared. Somehow, in Madras, he had heard of a forthcoming Parliament of Religions to be held at Chicago in 1893, and young men of Madras raised the money to pay for his passage to the United States. Only the Holy Mother was told of his new plan, and she gave him her blessings. When next heard of, he had become the famous Swami Vivekananda who had taken the Parliament of Religions by storm.

Vivekananda returned from America and Europe in January 1897. With him came J. J. Goodwin, an English disciple and expert court stenographer, whom he had first met in New York, and an English couple, Captain and Mrs. Sevier, who had become his warm followers in London and were coming to India to help found an Advaita Ashrama in the Himalayas—a dream Vivekananda had first spoken about to them in Switzerland. The strenuous work of lecturing and holding classes abroad, undertaken with the combined

hope of raising funds for starving India and spreading the message of Vedānta in the West, had had its effect on his health. The tumultuous welcome he received on his homecoming, in Ceylon and Madras, right up to Calcutta—the vast crowds, the processions, the public addresses, the innumerable interviews—added to his exhaustion. He wanted to fly to Almora for rest, but he felt that two major tasks awaited him in Bengal. The first was to organize the Ramakrishna Mission, for service to the poor, the down-trodden, and the needy among his countrymen, and the second was to plan immediate voluntary relief work by the monks in the famine, then sweeping several districts of Bengal. His fiery command to his brother monks and disciples was to forget their own salvation for the sake of others. Finally, in early May 1897, he left Calcutta, on the doctor's insistence, for Almora. Some of his *gurubhāṅs* and disciples also went with him. Goodwin and another English follower, Miss Müller, had already preceded him.

This time, Goodwin and other admirers went all the way down to Kathgodam to receive him. As the party was approaching the town by the old bridle-path, they were met on the way by a large crowd, and Vivekananda was made to mount a gaily decorated horse. The triumphant procession proceeded to the bazar, where three thousand people were waiting to give him a public welcome. All along the way, women gathered on the roof-tops, showered him with flowers and auspicious rice. Decorative awnings were strung across the street in front of Badri Shah's house, to form a *pandāl*, and all the houses were lighted up as if for a festival.

Two addresses in English and one in Sanskrit were read out, and to these, in view of the lateness of the hour, Vivekananda made a brief but moving reply, in English. He referred to the Himalayas as the land of their forefathers' dreams, 'the holy land where every ardent soul in India wants to come at the end of his life, to close the last chapter of

his mortal career here'. And he went on: 'This is the land which, since my very boyhood, I have been dreaming of. . . . I have attempted again and again to live here for ever, and although the time was not ripe, and I had work to do and was whirled away outside of this holy place, . . . yet I sincerely pray and hope, and almost believe, my last days will be here, of all places on earth. . . . These Himalayas stand for renunciation, and as our forefathers used to be attracted to it in the latter days of their life, so strong souls from all quarters of this earth, in time to come, will be attracted to this father of mountains, when all this fight between sects, and all these differences in dogmas, will not be remembered any more and quarrels between your religion and my religion will have vanished altogether, when mankind will understand that there is but one eternal religion, and that is the perception of the Divine within, and the rest is mere froth. Such ardent souls will come here, knowing that the world is but vanity of vanities, knowing that everything is useless except the worship of the Lord and the Lord alone. . . . These mountains are associated with the best memories of our race. Here, therefore, must be one of those centres, not merely of activity, but more of calmness, of meditation, and of peace, and I hope some day to realize it.'

This time Vivekananda remained in Almora two and half months, again as the guest of his old friend Badri Shah. Yet, sometimes, he felt that even Almora was not far enough away, not quiet enough. Twice he retreated to Dewaldhar, an estate some twenty miles to the north. There he rode horseback and enjoyed the delightful climate and magnificent scenery, especially the sunrise over the mighty snow peaks. Gradually his health improved, and he wrote to his doctor in Calcutta that he had not felt so well since he was a boy. Miss Müller, who undertook to feed him 'three square meals a day, European-style', no doubt, helped to hasten his recovery. But he would not give himself a longer rest

than was absolutely necessary. By the end of July, he was ready to leave Almora.

Before he left, the English residents of the station invited him to give a lecture at the English Club. He chose for his subject the different approaches of West and East in the search for a solution of the vital questions confronting the soul—the Western method, which seeks for a solution in the outside world, the Eastern method, which, finding no answer in nature, turns its enquiry within. He also gave two lectures at the Almora inter-College. Here, in response to the public request, he gave his first talk in Hindi, his subject being 'Vedic Teaching in Theory and Practice'.

The third visit of Vivekananda to Almora took place the following year. By this time, more of his foreign disciples had followed him to India. Nivedita (Miss Margaret Noble) arrived at Calcutta, from England, in January, 1898, and Mrs. Ole Bull and Miss Josephine MacLeod from America, in February. Captain and Mrs. Sevier, as the heat of the plains increased, left for Almora, where they rented a large house, then known as 'Thompson House' and belonging to Badri Shah, at the western end of the ridge. They were still concerned with the question of finding a suitable location for the proposed Advaita Ashrama. Vivekananda was urged to come and stay with them as their guest, and fearing that the newly arrived Westerners would fall ill during the burning heat of the advancing summer, Vivekananda and the rest left Calcutta for Almora on May 11, 1898. The party included Nivedita, Mrs. Ole Bull, Miss MacLeod, Mrs. Patterson, wife of the American Consul-General in Calcutta, who had met and befriended Vivekananda in the early days in America, two of his brother monks, Niranjanananda and Turiyananda, and two of his personal disciples, Sadananda and Swarupananda. When they all reached Almora, Vivekananda and the monks became the guests of Captain and Mrs. Sevier at

'Thompson House', while the Western friends and Nivedita, now an initiated disciple, lived at 'Oakley House'.

The weeks that followed must have been almost a repetition of the wonderful days of Thousand Island Park on the St. Lawrence, back in the summer of 1895, when there gathered around him an ardent little group of seekers, one of whom, afterwards known as Sister Christine, became a life-long disciple and devoted the rest of her life to serving India. Vivekananda set himself the task of training these Western followers, of breaking down instinctive prejudices, of explaining strange Indian customs, myths, symbols, history. Every morning, after an early walk with the monks, he went on to 'Oakley House' for breakfast, and spent several hours in vivid talks ranging over an infinite variety of subjects. Sister Nivedita has left an inspiring account of these talks in her little book entitled '*Notes of Some Wanderings with the Swami Vivekananda*'. There were, also, discussions and interviews with many who came to see him. One day Mrs. Annie Besant, then leader of the Theosophical Movement in India, was entertained at tea at 'Thompson House'. On another occasion, a saintly Bengali patriot, Aswini Datta, who had met Vivekananda years ago as 'Narendra', saw him out riding horseback and followed him back to his door. In the ensuing conversation, Vivekananda made clear his own idea of how India's salvation was to be attained. 'Do you think merely passing a few resolutions will bring freedom?' he thundered. 'I have no faith in that. The masses must be awakened first. Let them have full meals, and they will work out their own salvation.'

Now and then, he was again overwhelmed by the old mood to be utterly alone. On one such occasion, he departed for Shya Devi, a forested peak some miles west of Almora. Here he remained for three days. When he returned—because even there people hunted him out to ask questions—he had at least made one worth-while discovery. He was

still, he claimed, 'the old-time *sannyāsin*, able to go barefoot and endure heat or cold and scanty fare, unspoilt by the West'. Back in Almora, however, a new shock awaited him. A wire brought news of the death of the faithful Goodwin in Ootacamund, in South India. When the telegram announcing Goodwin's death was handed to him, he stood in front of 'Thompson House', according to Miss MacLeod, gazing off to the distant snow peaks in absolute silence for a long time. Then he remarked very quietly: 'The days of my public utterance are over.' That night he composed a poem, 'Requiescat in Pace', which he sent to Goodwin's mother, and in feeling words, he paid tribute to his friend and disciple. 'The debt of gratitude I owe him can never be repaid, and those who think they have been helped by any thought of mine ought to know that almost every word of it was published through the untiring and most unselfish exertions of Mr. Goodwin.'

Once more, the time had come to move on, and Vivekananda decided to proceed to Kashmir with the Western disciples. Before they left Almora—Vivekananda for the last time—on June 11, 1898, an important step was taken. The editor of *Prabuddha Bharata* or 'Awakened India', the English journal originally started in Madras, had suddenly died, and it was decided to restart the journal in Almora. The young disciple Swami Swarupananda became its new editor, Captain Sevier offered to pay all the expenses for bringing up a hand-press, paper, etc., and to act as manager, and until the publication centre was finally removed in March 1899, to Mayavati, fifty-five miles from Almora—the site ultimately selected by the Seviers and Swarupananda for the Advaita Ashrama in the Himalayas—the journal continued to be brought out from Almora.

The three visits of Swami Vivekananda, and the many more from monks of the Ramakrishna Math and Missiou in years to follow, have made Almora a place of special signifi-

cance for the followers of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, both of East and West. On the steep western end of the ridge on which the town itself is built, perches the Ashrama (familiarily known as the Ramakrishna Kutir), founded by Swami Turiyananda in 1916. It has grown to comprise several buildings, and anything from five monks in winter to twenty or more in the hot weather, may be found in residence here. The Ashrama is a living symbol of the place of retreat and

meditation that Vivekananda loved. Not far off is also the Vivekananda Laboratory, organized to carry on fundamental research work in plant physiology and agriculture by my husband Boshi Sen, a disciple of Vivekananda's first disciple Sadananda. In between the two still stands 'Thompson House', now belonging to a new owner and renamed 'The Avocado', almost exactly as the old house stood when Vivekananda lived there sixty-five years ago.

In Swamiji's presence, the whole mind would remain absorbed in him alone; while talking with him, one would perforce do so with the fullest attention. His words were wonderful, and so were his actions. One never knows where to stop, when one starts talking about him. I never came across any other versatile genius like him. His foresight was all-comprehensive. His ideas and his expressions would lift one up to a very high plane. I never found such bliss and happiness in any one else's company or talk as in his. One can never forget that experience, nor express it in words. His words were as divine command to us. And we loved him so much that any separation from him caused the greatest pain. Although I missed his company during the last two or three years of his life, the thought that he is really not dead but still alive would fill me with hope that one day I shall meet him again and talk to him. When the news of his passing away reached me, I was greatly shocked. I always felt that his words and actions were not of this world. Swamiji told me: 'Haribhai, whatever I have done is the Master's work, it is the Mother's work. He forcibly got it done through me. I had planned to do this and that, but, finally, I could do only what he willed. These are not Vivekananda's achievement, these are just what he forced him to do. I was merely a tool in his hand, and had simply to obey his command. Even though I wished my plans to prevail, I never succeeded. But I am happy at what has been achieved; and I am happy, too, after retiring from work. Whatever you are doing is also his works. Let things go on thus for the present!'

SWAMI TURIYANANDA