In January, 2009, I visited CPS Ashram (Christa Prema Seva) in the Shivanjinagar district of Pune as part of a two week pilgrimage to south India. I was given some fascinating chapter minutes spanning the 1920's and 30's which revealed much of the character of this ashram where the Principles later adopted by SSF were first drafted.

The evolution of our Society of St Francis is well documented. It grew as a kind of hybrid of very particular strands, with the prior influence of both CPS in India and SDC (Society of the Divine Compassion) in East London, both representing seeds of future growth. Visiting our ashram at Pune served to remind me that before the SSF ever spread overseas to England, a major part of its ethos and underlay had been first formed in India.

More particularly this happened within two mixed-race communities of Indian and English brothers and sisters living an equal life under the leadership of Jack Winslow and W.Q. Lash along Indian lines. This was unique at the time of the British rule when Christian missionaries tended to live above the Indians with little understanding of Indian culture and religious practices. The members of the Christa Seva Sangha as the first foundation in Pune was known, and of the Christa Prema Seva Sangha as it was later re-named were involved in the movement for an independent India. Here priests like Swamiji Algy Robertson (as he was there known) and other priests, mostly graduates from Oxford and Cambridge, were saying a mass each month for the emancipation of India.

These Christian ashramites became known for controversially wearing "Khadi" or "Gandhi caps" - the white coloured cap Gandhi had adopted and popularized which symbolized the struggle for self-reliance and independence from British rule. During a Chapter meeting (Sabha) "A letter from the Rev'd. Ashley Brown to the Upacharaya (superior Jack Winslow) was read regarding English Brother Sachidananda's wearing of a Gandhi cap in public. The Chapter passed a vote of congratulation on Br Sachidananda's wearing of a Gandhi cap in public". (A quotation from the Community Chapter minutes).

An Ashram traditionally was a place where men would study the Vedas and Indian spirituality. The Indian and English brothers at the Pune Ashram (the parent CSS ashram moved 4 miles to the north of Pune when the Pune set up was re-named Christa Prema Seva Sangha under the leadership of W.Q. Lash) aimed to live in great simplicity as Christian Sanyasi (one who has renounced all). In the chapter minutes in 1923 Brother Yeshuda is tasked with investigating "the cost of installing electricity for the ashram".

They had a similar outlook to the "Advaitan Christians" of Shantivanam where Abishiktananda and Bede Griffiths would live a Christian Camoldolese Benedictine life informed by the Hindu philosophy of Advaita (non-duality) and meditation practice. But our Brothers at CSS and CPS were engaging with God in this openhearted way 40 years before Vatican II. "On Fridays, at evening Sandhya (prayer) the priest with cross in hand will bless the four directions, following an ancient Eastern Church and Buddhist custom" (a quotation from the chapter decisions of CPS ashram).
Several of the English brothers took Indian names allying themselves to the deep oriental spirituality for which they had a great reverence and in which they had sincere interest as "adopted children of India". The community's daily offices were prayed and sung in Marathi, the local language, and Sanskrit, and bhajans (hymns) were sung to the accompaniment of Indian musical instruments. Morning and evening meditation was made facing the rising and setting sun. The brothers wore saffron girdles, or entirely saffron robes, went barefoot outdoors and took on strict vegetarianism. The brothers at an annual general chapter (Sabha) decided all ashramites would "spin for a minimum of 15 minutes each day". Mahatma Gandhi visited and stayed in Guest Room 1 for about a week, while Nehru and the Viceroy had been frequent visitors.

Pune is today a large city, lying north-west of Mumbai, about 3 hours by train over the Western Ghats. It is a growing centre in India for information technology. My friends Ram and Kala, devout Hindus with whom we were staying (with their vegetarian dog), came along with us to see this ashram and were likewise impressed to learn of the close connection to Gandhi and his freedom movement of non-co-operation with the British rule. Bill Lash the superior (or Acharaya) was asked by Gandhi to send him a Christian hymnal while he was imprisoned at the Agar Khan Palace, and, when in 1947 Bill Lash became Bishop of Mumbai, Gandhi attended the service of consecration in Mumbai Cathedral, in his homespun and sandals.

What I had not quite fully appreciated is just what a place of subversion CPS had been. On one occasion Jack Winslow, the superior, had written a letter to secure the release from prison of two young students who were living in the multi-faith hostel which Fr Algy had founded for local students. These students had climbed a British government building and put up a Free India flag on the top of it. Mr Santosh Salvi is now the warden of both this hostel and full-time administrator of CPS ashram, the Anglican Sisters of CSMV having recently moved out to more suitable premises. He is in fact the last remaining Ashramite of CPS, having been there over 53 years. He formerly was a First Order Indian Brother who married and stayed on as warden of the hostel. As administrator he has had to fight to save the 3.27 acre property being disposed of and going to Pune land sharks.

CPS is meanwhile still used as a place of retreat, and ecumenical and inter-ashram conferences are hosted there. It remains a place of historical importance for India (not least via the Gandhi connection) though this is not broadcast to keep the peace of the ashram intact. It also remains highly significant for SSF having bequeathed its own Principles to us which we still read daily in our communities and friaries. Jack Winslow also wrote some fine hymns which can be found in many hymnals. Meanwhile, the hostel in the Ashram grounds continues to accommodate Pune University students. Now, as then, the resident students are comprised of Hindus, Christians and Muslims, and now as then they can spend their holidays in inter-religious dialogues.

Mr Santosh Salvi works hard for the place and is concerned for its future, but remains as enthusiastic now about what the Ashram stands for, as in the days of its founders. 

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