

Saranagati



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INSERT

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Saranagati



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IN THIS
ISSUE

Dear Devotees,

This month's Saranagati highlights the anniversary of the Ashram Vedapatasala with a short report on the Veda Pariksha on the 9th-11th June (p. 6) as well as a brief look at the life of Vedapatasala teacher Sri Senthilnatha Ghanapatigal (pp. 6-7). Please also see photos and coverage of the *upanayanam* ceremony of Ashram President's grandson, Advait Ramanan, performed just prior to Mahapuja, on the 7th-8th June (p. 5).

The current segment of *In the Kitchen with Bhagavan* takes up the story on the Hill at Virupaksha Cave and looks at the sparse life of begging for food in the early days from 1899.

For videos, photos and further news of events, go to <http://www.sriramanamaharshi.org> or write to us at saranagathi@sriramanamaharshi.org

In Sri Bhagavan,
The Editorial Team

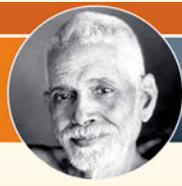
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Calendar of Upcoming Events

1st July (Weds) Full Moon/Sri Chakra Puja
16th July (Thurs) Punarvasu Day
23rd July (Thurs) H.C. Khanna Day
25th July (Sat) Kavya Kantha Ganapati Muni Day
30th July (Thurs) Full Moon/Sri Chakra Puja
31st July (Fri) Guru Purnima
7th August (Fri) Kunjuswami Day
12th August (Weds) Punarvasu Day

29th August (Sat) Full Moon/Sri Chakra Puja
1st September (Tues) Bhagavan's Advent Day
4th September (Fri) Samvatsara Abhishekam
8th September (Tues) Punarvasu Day
12th September (Sat) Muruganar Day
27th September (Sun) Full Moon Day
6th October (Tues) Punarvasu Day
13th October (Tues) Navaratri Commences





In the Kitchen with Bhagavan Part VI: Early Days at Virupaksha

In January 1899 Bhagavan and Palaniswami moved up onto the eastern slope of the Hill. The two found Virupaksha Cave unlocked and unoccupied. The Om-shaped cave had been the home of the 16th-century Karnataka saint, Virupaksha Deva, devotee of Guha Namasivaya. In the modern history of Arunachala, legends abound regarding these two prominent figures. One tells how Virupaksha Deva once drank molten iron as a test before challengers in the town to prove his master's worth. From then onwards he was known as Kayal Virupaksha Deva. Another story tells how Virupaksha Deva attained mahasamadhi by turning to ash in the Cave itself.

When Sri Bhagavan occupied the Cave in 1899 the samadhi of the saint in the form of a pile of ashes was still there, in the shape of a linga, at the centre of the Cave where it lies today.

When the Brahmana Swami and Palaniswami arrived at Virupaksha, administrative control of the Cave was in dispute among members of the Viraasiva community. Since neither of the two disputing parties had a clear

mandate to manage the premises, the cave was left untended which meant that the Brahmana Swami and Palaniswami could simply occupy it without having to seek anyone's permission. Once at Virupaksha, visitors from the town began to stream up the Hill as the Cave was easily accessible, lying about 300 vertical feet above the temple precincts or some 15 minutes climb up the hillside. A couple of years later when the courts settled on the question of jurisdiction, the victorious litigant assumed control of Virupaksha and began charging a 3-paisa levy to each of the now numerous visitors to the Cave, pilgrims intent on having the Brahmana Swami's darshan. When the Swami got wind of this, he moved outside onto a level patch of ground that is now Virupaksha's veranda. When authorities persisted in their solicitations, the Swami moved down to Sadguruswami Cave with pilgrims in tow, leaving Virupaksha completely abandoned. It was not long before the *math* agent recognised the futility of taxing sainthood and so invited the Swami back to Virupaksha to remain without the least intrusion from the Cave's overseers.¹

Life on the Hill

After years of looking for isolated places in which to repose in silence, moving up onto the Hill meant that the Brahmana Swami was in the company of others seeking similar retreat from the noise and distractions of the world. But while they all lived as hermits, they found that they had like interests and needs and thus gradually formed a loose-knit community. Soon existing residents on the Hill began to appreciate the considerable spiritual attainment of the newcomer from Tiruchuli and began to turn to him for guidance. Now Palaniswami, for the first time in their two-and-a-half-year association, was compelled to share Bhagavan with others in an ongoing way.

Offerings

The Brahmana Swami insisted that whatever food was available should be shared equally among all and none should be left out. Even if admirers and pilgrims regularly came bearing offerings of sweets, milk and fruit, with the increase in mouths to be fed, providing food for all was at times challenging. So Palaniswami felt it necessary to lead a regular party to town for bhiksha whereby they went forth from Virupaksha calling upon

¹ *Self-Realisation*, Chapter XII.





the name of the Lord, sounding the conch and receiving alms in silence but, as per the Swami's wish, never actually asking for specific food items but only graciously receiving whatever was given. When they returned, various items which they brought with them would be mixed together. The Brahmana Swami would add hot water to the entire mixture, turning it into a gruel to be distributed among them. When it was suggested that salt be added, the Brahmana Swami inquired, "Who will give us salt without being asked? If once we relax our rule of [not requesting specific food items] in order to get salt, the palate that craves salt will next cry out for *sambhar*, then for *rasam*, buttermilk, *payasam* and so on. Its cravings will thus grow endlessly. Hence, the best thing is to confine ourselves to our rule of [not asking]."²

The Beginning of an Ashram Kitchen

When visitors came to see the Brahmana Swami, they had to drink water from an earthen mug. It was suggested to Palaniswami that he keep a proper tumbler for the sake of those who did not like to drink from earthen mugs. But Palaniswami, in the spirit of maintaining a life of simplicity, ignored the suggestion, even refusing to accept offers of a tumbler.³

For these first many years at Virupaksha, they had nothing to cook with apart from one or two mud pots. One day a woman-devotee brought the Brahmana Swami some food offerings in a small patched-up

² *The Call Divine*, vol. 7, 1st February, 1959, pp. 181-183.

³ Kunjuswami's *Reminiscences*, pp. 23-24.

cooking vessel. When they returned the vessel to her, she said: "It might be of some use for drinking water. Please keep it." Thus the first beginnings of the Ashram kitchen resided solely in this leaky, tattered metal vessel generously donated by one who had so little herself.⁴

Bhiksha By-laws

The Brahmana Swami would not allow any discrimination in matters of food. He played down the pleasurable dimension of eating not only as a practical measure to help negotiate the primitive conditions the sadhus on the Hill were living under but also as a way of helping them fulfil one of the vows required of sadhus, in this instance, to gain control of their sense of taste.

No fixed hours for meals was observed and the Brahmana Swami and his followers sat down for food when it was available. The Swami felt that direct appeals for food should not be made. Offerings from devotees should be received as given, should be considered prasad and treated with the greatest respect and never wasted.

One festival day, Virupaksha residents were setting about to avail themselves of sweets brought by devotees when an old widow known to the Brahmana Swami came with boiled *ragi* (millet) and placed it before him. Since losing her husband, she regularly gave *kanji* (gruel) to the poor and to sadhus. Since the time the Brahmana Swami once told her that *ragi* caused chill in the body and should be mixed with some ground wheat like *suji*, she had prepared it accordingly. On this festival day, therefore, she prepared

⁴ *Day by Day*, 9-4-46.

Wordwise: Punya

पुण्य

Punya (from *pu*=to cleanse, purify; *pun*=to act piously or virtuously): auspicious, propitious, fair, pleasant, good, right, virtuous, meritorious, pure, holy, sacred; the good or right, virtue, karmic merit, purity, good work, meritorious act, moral or religious merit, bearing a good name, famous, celebrated. (*Punya* is the antonym of *papa*=sinful, inauspicious.)

Punya has been traditionally thought to accrue by giving charity, performing sacrifices and undergoing various forms of sadhana including fasting, pilgrimage and reciting the name of the Lord. Bhagavan points out, however, that *punya* on its own is not enough. In *Ulladu Narpadu Anubandam* (v.2), he quotes *Yoga Vasishtha*, "Neither by study of books nor by meritorious deeds...can one attain that supreme state, which is attainable only through association with sages and the quest for the Self. [*Yoga Vasish.*, 5-12, v.17.]





the food according to Swami's suggestion, offered it to him and went away. Bhagavan told those serving that they might eat the *laddus*, *jilebis* and other sweets while he began to eat the simple *ragi* with great relish. A devotee protested, "When there are such nice preparations available why are you filling your stomach with *ragi*?" The Swami said, "Like all the other items, this food has also been donated. What am I to do? Do you want me to throw it away?" The devotee replied, "If all of us eat a little, it will be finished. We can eat it in the afternoon." Bhagavan asked, "Will it not spoil by then? On the other hand, the sweets will not spoil if kept over and besides, people will eat them without needing any persuasion. When she has brought her offering with such devotion, can we carelessly waste it?"⁵

Bhiksha from the Seven Virgins

The burden of 'swamihood' was evident on various occasions, not least of all when food offerings came in excess. Bhagavan once told the following story: "One day I had overeaten as I had to eat what two or three devotees had brought. Planning to skip lunch, I started on my usual walk at 7am. Without telling anyone, I went through the jungle path toward Sona Thirtham when some women met me and asked, 'Swami! Is there a tank here? Is there any water here?' I showed them Sona Thirtham and was about to leave when they said, 'Swami! It is our good fortune to find you here. Please eat something.' Each one put something on a leaf until it was full. I ate it all. Like the 'Seven Virgins', they were also seven in number. Then I went into the forest and took rest. Between noon and 1pm I went on further around the Hill and stopped at a nearby tank to drink water where, to my surprise, I saw them again. Again they asked, 'Swami! Can we get

⁵ Letters 6th March, 1949.



The Brahmana Swami with devotees at Virupaksha, 1913

drinking water here?' I showed them the tank and was about to leave when they asked me to eat a little rice. They competed with each other to give me more and more rice. I thought it was a just punishment for me. They said that they had come to the forest to collect leaves to make mealplates but their gunny sacks contained no leaves but only food. I left them and went and slept in the *Ezhuthu* mantapam. Around 5pm I came out of the mantapam to go back to Virupakshi Cave. The moment I stepped out I saw Manavasi Ramaswami Iyer coming in reverse pradakshina. His joy at seeing me was unbounded. He had cooked fine mangoes in *rasam*, as he thought I would like them, and had brought them to me. What could I do? He had prepared something especially for me. So I ate two mangoes. It is like the story of a man who fled the town of mice and found himself in the land of tigers! I reached Virupaksha in evening after having had sumptuous food three times in the course of the day. I thought I would go without food that day. But this is how it ended."⁶

(to be continued)

⁶ Adapted from Kunjuswami's *Reminiscences*, pp. 142-43 and Devaraj Mudaliar's *My Recollections*, Chap III.

Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi: Punya and What One Really Is

M.: Some say that those who after death pass into the path of light are not reborn, whereas those who after death take the path of darkness are reborn after they have enjoyed the fruits of karma in their subtle bodies. If one's merits and demerits are equal, they are directly reborn here. Merits outweighing demerits, the subtle bodies go to heavens and are then reborn here; demerits outweighing merits, they go to hells and are afterwards reborn here. A *yogabhrashta* is said to fare in the same manner. All these are described in the sastras. But in fact, there is neither birth nor death. One remains only as what one really is. This is the only Truth.. — Talks §573





Events at Sri Ramanasramam: Upanayanam 7-8th June

On the 7th-8th June, the *upanayana* ceremony for Advait Ramanan, son of Drs. Anand and Nitya Ramanan and grandson of Ashram President, V.S. Ramanan and Susila Ramanan, took place in the New Library Auditorium and the Ashram Veda Patasala.

Upanayanam is a rite of passage (*samskara*) that marks the transition from boyhood to student life (*brahmacharya*) when, traditionally, the youngster was placed in the care of a guru or teacher. The rite consists principally of investiture with the sacred thread (*yajnopavita*), hung over the left shoulder, and learning the *Gayatri* mantra, whispered into the initiate's ear by his father. It is most often performed



between the ages of seven and twelve though when circumstances dictate, it can be performed later, even up to the age of 24. *Upanayana* (from *upa*: 'near' + *nayan*: 'leading') means 'leading the child near' to the guru who in turn 'leads him near' to the sastras which in turn 'lead him near' to God.

The sacred thread consists of three cotton fibers symbolizing variably, according to region, Parvati, Lakshmi and Saraswati or Brahma, Vishnu and Siva or in some cases, the three gunas. The holy thread serves as a reminder to the wearer that his first duty in life is to follow dharma. It also binds him with a promise to regularly recite the *Gayatri* for the rest of his natural life. —





In Focus: Vedapatasala Teacher Sri Senthilnatha Ghanapatigal

[Since early 2003, devotees have regularly commented on the growing vitality of Vedic recitation at the Ashram. In the last twelve and a half years, the Ashram Vedic school has grown from four students to twenty today and an unprecedented ardency of Vedapatasala student participation at Ashram functions has provided a palpable robustness to the Ashram's liturgical life. Such a favourable turn of events with respect to Vedic learning at the Ashram is attributable to one fact, namely, the arrival in October 2002 of a new Vedapatasala teacher.]

This segment of In Focus takes a look at the circumstances leading up to the arrival of Ashram Vedapatasala teacher Sri Brahmashri Senthilnatha Ghanapatigal.]

Great personages figure in the eighty-year history of the Ashram Vedic school. Sri Krishna Ghanapatigal, the devoted orthodox pundit who directed the school for forty years since its earliest days as a small thatched shed on the site of the Old

Dispensary and Major Chadwick, who single-handedly had the school reopened in 1953 following Bhagavan's Mahanirvana, are but two examples of luminaries who helped the school survive over the decades.

In early 2002, however, the school was suffering from a leadership crisis. A search was made for a new Vedapatasala teacher and Ashram President V.S. Ramanan, acting on advice from devotees, made a phone call to one Gowri Shankar, a Tamil devotee living in Kolkata, about the possibility of bringing his son Senthilnatha Ghanapatigal to Tiruvannamalai. When Senthilnathan, then directing the Vedic school at Palghat, got news of the plan, he took the opportunity to coax his father, living the previous forty years in Kolkata, to come back to his native Tiruvannamalai¹. Finally toward the end of 2002 all was agreed upon and the family took up residence at the Ashram and Senthil took up the task of reorganising the school.

Humbly opining that the school's progress in recent years has not been his doing, Senthil gives credit to assistant teachers and the caring support of the Ashram management. Behind the scenes, the motherly affection of Senthil's wife, Akhila, has been a support for the younger students, especially those far from home. But more significant, he says, is the resurgence of Vedic study in S. India that has been underway the last fifteen or twenty years, momentum established by the Kanchi Math Paramacharya, H. H. Chandrasekharendra Saraswati Swamigal² before his Mahasamadhi in 1994. It was none other than the Paramacharya who was the inspiration for Senthil's own entry into Vedic life.

The story goes back to the early 1980s when the then nine-year old Senthil was to undergo *upanayanam*. Having gone for Mahaswami's darshan and blessing, the Paramacharya asked Gowri Shankar if he "would be willing to spare the boy." Gowri Shankar was at a loss to know what service his nine-year old son could realistically render such a great saint as the Paramacharya. But as he marveled at the thought, the Maha Periyavaal stated plainly that "the Vedas should be chanted for the benefit of the world" and that he wanted Senthil to enter

¹ Though Gowri Shankar grew up in a village 40 kms from Tirukovillur, he was born in Tiruvannamalai, his mother's native place, and in January 1941 was blessed to receive his name from Sri Bhagavan.

² The 68th Jagadguru in the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham.





Vedic life. Without the least hesitation the boy's father assented. Thus after the thread ceremony in 1982, young Senthilnathan was sent to the Kanchi Math Vedapatasala in Bangalore where he took up formal study in the Veda. For the next eight years, he studied up through Kramam. Upon completion, Mahaswami had the youngster travel to Tirupati for advanced studies in Jata and Ghanam. After completing these most coveted of all attainments in the Vedic world, Senthilnatha got the position as Veda Patasala teacher in Palghat where he remained eight years before coming to Ramanasramam.

So it was by the grace of the Kanchi Paramacharya that a most significant change in the Vedapatasala teacher's own personal life came about and it was by the Mahaswami's grace that the Vedas are thriving in South India today, even in the face of the pressures and challenges posed by modernization and the information age. It was none other than the Paramacharya who saved from utter extinction the most exalted of all Vedic recitation modes,



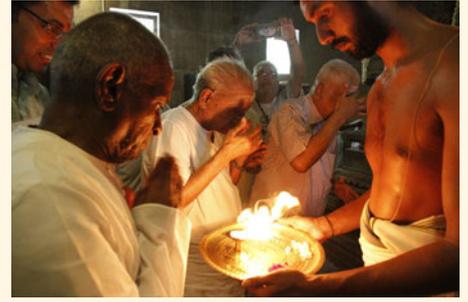
namely, Ghana Patha which dates back at least 2,800 years. Senthilnathan points out that just thirty years ago, not long before he studied Ghana Patha, only a handful even knew it. Today hundreds have completed Ghanam study and Senthilnathan regularly brings these scholars to the Ashram to perform at special functions including Ghanaparayana and Athi Rudram.—



Events at Sri Ramanasramam: Veda Pariksha

Sri Ramanasramam joins company with Sringeri, Kanchipuram and Mysore as one of only a handful of Vedic Pariksha centres in South India. Following the Upanayana ceremonies on the 7-8th of June, some sixty students from all over South India came to undergo three days of examinations (9th-11th) in Krishna Yajur Veda, Rig Veda and Sama Veda. Mulam, Kramam, Samhita, Padam, Kramam in Krishna Yajur Veda; Purvabhagam and Uttarabhagam in Sama Veda; and Padam and Kramam in Rig Veda were among the examinations given. The Rishis of ancient times sought ways to ensure preservation of the purity and sanctity of the *sastra* and thus devised various *pathas* or modes of recitation to guarantee accurate transmission down through the generations. Pariksha is yet another measure to ensure that the various *pathas* are transmitted faithfully. In all, nearly 60 certificates were awarded at Sri Ramanasramam in this first pariksha attended by Vedic scholars from around South India. For next year's pariksha it is hoped to include Atharvana Veda and Shukla Yajur Veda as well as Krishna Yajur Veda Jata Patha ("mesh recitation") and Ghana Patha ("cube recitation").—





Events at Sri Ramanasramam: Mahapuja

Mahapuja festivities commenced on the evening of the 8th June with songs from Bhagavan, Muruganar, Ganapathi Muni, Sivaprakasham Pillai and others, performed by Ramananjali in the Library Auditorium in this, their 505th performance. Main day celebrations started in the early morning hours of the 10th with flower decorating in the Mother's Shrine and New Hall to the sounds of Mananasya Japa. Abhishekam began around 9am and was followed by arati and songs from Susilamma and other lady devotees. On the evenings of 9th and 10th in Bhagavan's Shrine, newly released videos depicting sites important in Bhagavan's life with accompanying music were shown to large gatherings of devotees. — For Mahapuja arati video: <https://youtu.be/KzuzD7e8fYg>





Events at Sri Ramanasramam: Lakshmi the Cow

On the 18th June, 1948, Cow Lakshmi attained liberation in Bhagavan's hands. For 67 years since the Ashram has remembered her on her samadhi day each year with special puja. This year's observance fell on the 28th June before a large gathering of devotees who sang the praises of this great devotee. For Cow Lakshmi video: <https://youtu.be/tu8EwXlbSlQ>

Obituary: Balu Mama



Balu Mama came to the Ashram in the early 1970s when he was working as a cook at a hotel in Vellore. Ganapathi Raman, employed in a nearby bank in Vellore, took Balu Mama with him on one of his regular trips to Tiruvannamalai. At the time there was a need for cooks in the Ashram kitchen and Balu took up the task with fervour and served in the Ashram for the next 40 years. Viswanathaswami spoke with great affection about him, pointing out how he "loved to serve devotees". And he always did so with a smile. On Tuesday 16th June, Balu Mama returned from Pondicherry hospital. The next day at 7.30pm the 17th June, he merged peacefully at the Feet of Bhagavan. He is survived by his wife, one son and two daughters.

Saranagati's Suggestion Box

Please send your comments and suggestions for *Saranagati Magazine*, Sri Ramanasramam's official e-monthly, to:

<saranagati.suggestionbox@gmail.com>

