Dear Devotees,

The month of January began with the final segments of the Global Online Jayanti programme and included Swami Ramanananda’s Day (see p. 5) and the continuation of daily Margazhi pujas. Sivaprakasam Pillai day took place on the 12th and Ramaswamy Pillai day on the 14th. Meanwhile the Ashram dared along with the rest of Tamil Nadu to gradually reopen as the roll-out of vaccines across the nation slowly gets underway (see p. 12). With the ringing in of the New Year, 2021 brings renewed hope.

In this issue, we take a look at the life of Dr G. S. Melkote, the Gandhian freedom fighter who was active in India’s push for independence. Meeting Bhagavan in the 1930s during a time when he suffered a serious medical condition, Dr. Melkote was blessed not only to treat Bhagavan but be treated by him (see p. 3).

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

Calendar of Events Celebrated at Home

24th February (Weds) Punarvasu
26th February (Fri) Full Moon
3rd March (Weds) Sundaram Iyer’s Day
11th March (Thurs) Mahasivaratri
19th March (Fri) Sri Vidya Homa
23rd March (Tues) Punarvasu
28th March (Sun) Full Moon
13th April (Tues) Telugu New Year
14th April (Weds) Tamil New Year
14th April (Weds) Nirvana Room Day
19th April (Mon) Punarvasu
21st April (Weds) Sri Rama Navami
26th April (Mon) Full Moon
9th May (Sun) Sri Bhagavan’s 71st Aradhana

In Profile: Dr G. S. Melkote
Events in Ramanasramam: Sw. Ramanananda Day
Events in Ramanasramam: Pongal Celebrations
Ramana Reflections: The Lever and the Fulcrum
Events in Tiruvannamalai: Samudram Gosala Puja
Events in Ramanasramam: Annamachaleswara’s Pradakshina
Events in Ramanasramam: Thai Krithigai Mattrodal
Events in Ramanasramam: Reopening the Ashram
Events in Ramanasramam: Chinnaswami Day
Dr G. S. Melkote’s was a case of someone who succeeded in the world while never neglecting his spiritual life and service to Bhagavan. If Bhagavan embodied jnana marga, he could also appreciate the karma yogi, a person who could make spiritual advances by virtue of his or her service in the world. Born in Brahmapur, Ganjam, Odisha, Dr Melkote was a gold-medallist in medical school and joined the Hyderabad medical service hospital. He became a freedom fighter in India’s struggle for independence. Later, he became the first finance minister of Hyderabad State and ultimately was elected four times as a Member of the National Parliament from 1957. He presided over nearly fifty associations in the newly formed nation, e.g. Assam Plantation Workers Union, Delhi Transportation Union, Lady Hardinge Medical College in Delhi, etc. In 1973, Indira Gandhi took him along with her to the WHO conference in Geneva called, ‘World Health 2000’ where Dr Melkote gave an address. He founded the Patanjali Yoga Research Institute in Hyderabad representing India in the International Labour Organisation in Geneva.

In the following account of his productive life, we hear how he came to Bhagavan following numerous dramatic incidents in the struggle for Independence.

In the 1930’s, Hyderabad was ruled by the Nizam of Hyderabad and was considered as a ‘Nizam State’. As all political activity was banned, Dr Melkote went to Rajahmundry to attend a meeting where other eminent leaders, including Gandhi and Nehru, were in attendance. During a peaceful rally there was a ‘lathi’ charge. When Pandit Nehru was about to be struck, Dr Melkote interceded and held Panditji to protect him from the blow. In saving him, Dr Melkote was struck on his head and was seriously injured. There was profuse bleeding and he fell unconscious. The crowd dispersed and the British police came in search of people to arrest. A potter who saw Dr Melkote lying unconscious took him to his home and administered first aid. He kept Dr Melkote safe from the British police by keeping him hidden in his pottery shed. When the doctor gained consciousness, he couldn’t remember his name or where he came from. His wife and family were deeply anxious not knowing his whereabouts. He returned home only after a month and was so changed in appearance that no one could even recognize him.

In time he recovered from his wounds and returned to his medical practice in Hyderabad which continued to flourish. Among his patients was the Nizam of Hyderabad. He was introduced to Sir Nizamath Jung Bahadur, who was the Nizam’s translator. After being treated by Dr Melkote, Nizamath Jung, requested Dr Melkote to move into a large house next to his in order to take care of him. Nizamath Jung almost adopted Dr Melkote as his son. Madina Bagh, with 44 rooms, came with palatial grounds in the middle of the city. Dr Melkote put the ample space to good use by accommodating sixteen students and hosting a number of guests who were involved in India’s freedom struggle including Pandit Nehru, Rajendra Prasad, Sardar Patel, Jai Prakash Narayan and Aruna Asaf Ali.

1 A lathi is a baton like a cricket bat.
Amid all this activity and work, Dr Melkote developed severe discomfort in his stomach. Being a doctor, he consulted colleagues and got treated but no treatment seemed to help. The eventual recommendation was to go to England to get further treatment. But opposing British occupation of India, he refused to travel to England. One of his friends performed an investigative surgery. He opened him up and found nothing wrong. Unfortunately, the sutures from the surgery got infected and the incision developed gangrene. In those years before antibiotics, Dr Melkote was told that his days were limited and that he would succumb to the infection soon. At that stage his elder brother, A.G. Ramachandra Rao of Bangalore, visited his ailing sibling in Hyderabad. The elder suggested that they go and see Sri Ramana Maharshi. But Dr Melkote was a strong believer in science and rationality and promptly rebuked his brother by questioning how a saint could help and what he would know about medicine. His brother persisted as did the doctor’s wife and at last he agreed and came to the ashram. They reached the ashram in the evening, made their pranams to Bhagavan, had dinner and took rest.

Early the next morning they went for darshan. As they were standing at the back of the hall, a magnetic attraction drew the doctor to a space that opened up close to Bhagavan. The doctor moved closer and sat down and became mesmerized by Bhagavan. He continued to stare at him and Bhagavan reciprocated by looking intently back at him. No words were shared between them. After lunch the two brothers returned once again to have darshan. Dr Melkote approached Bhagavan, bowed and shared the story regarding his physical ailment and Bhagavan listened quietly. Dr Melkote didn’t think much about it, but the next morning he realized that there was a subtle shift in his health and well-being. He had more energy and his stomach discomfort had reduced considerably.

It was during this visit that Dr Melkote was blessed to treat Bhagavan who was suffering from eczema on both legs and on his back. The doctor applied various balms and ointments and kept Bhagavan’s legs in bandages. One day Bhagavan referred to them as kal kattu, punning on the word, which in Tamil means both literally something ‘tied to the leg’, and figuratively ‘dependents’, ‘obligations’ or ‘responsibilities’. Dr Melkote replied, ‘We are here always, your dependants, tied to your legs.’

Though the doctor had come in a precarious condition, he was now improving while enjoying the privilege of treating Bhagavan. This reciprocal connection between Guru and disciple was a grace for Dr Melkote, and the reader is reminded of what Bhagavan told Kitty Osbourne when she was a small girl: ‘If you don’t forget Bhagavan, Bhagavan won’t forget you.’

After a fortnight, the disease seemed to be under control. The doctor was happy and congratulated himself that he had had the opportunity to treat Bhagavan. But, alas, his elation was short lived. The disease burst out again in redoubled vigour. The doctor said it was a lesson to him to curb his ego and he continued the treatment with humility, praying to Bhagavan that he must effect the cure himself and that he, Dr Melkote was but his instrument. T.K. Sundaresa Iyer writes:

Dr Melkote in 1930 following an injury during a demonstration
He oscillated between elation and curbing his ego according to the disease as it decreased or increased. All along this course of treatment and from the time he arrived at the Ashram, I had the pleasure of his acquaintance and of talking to him about Bhagavan. We used to sit until late in the night and talk about Bhagavan, so absorbed in our conversation that we had no sense of space or time. I used to talk to my doctor friend about the significance of darshan on special occasions. Bhagavan had a special glow of light about him and his starry eyes shed an unusual lustre and those around experienced the ambrosia. It is for experiencing this light or bliss of being that devotees flocked to him from near and far. Though this experience was obtained on normal days too, it was very intense on occasions like Jayanti, Mahapuja and Karthikai days, so also it was when great souls met him.

A variety of drugs and ointments had been collected from all parts of India, but they had no effect. Dr Melkote was quite ashamed of himself, that being such an eminent doctor he could do nothing for Bhagavan.

On the eve of Maha Puja, which fell on 11th June in the year 1939, Sri Bhagavan insisted upon the bandages being removed. Indeed, how could he give darshan with them on? Dr Melkote was nervous about Bhagavan’s blemished skin being visible on the important day. He worried aloud to TKS: ‘Mr. Iyer, how will Bhagavan give special darshan to his devotees with these white patches on him? I am sorry that I shall not have the fortune of having his condition instead. Why should he have this disease at this time when I am visiting him?’

TKS responded saying, ‘Wait and see if he will be Bhagavan your patient, or the Bhagavan of special grace on this unique occasion.’

As it turned out, on Mahapuja day there was such a glow of health around Sri Bhagavan’s body that no one would suspect any skin disease. The following day, Dr Melkote resumed the treatment and replaced the bandages. TKS continues:

3 TKS remembers the event as Jayanti 1935, after the fact, but G.V. Subbaramayya first came to Bhagavan in 1936 and was chronicling life at the Ashram each day during the period of Dr Melkote’s visit. He tells the story in detail leading up to Mahapuja in June 1939. Devaraj Mudaliar would seem to confirm the latter date when he writes: ‘I was once spending my summer vacation at the Ashram, I think, about 1939. Dr Melkote of Hyderabad was also staying at the time in one of the houses opposite the Ashram.’

**Events in Sri Ramanasramam: Swami Ramanananda Day**

On the morning of 1st January, family members and Ashram staff gathered at Swami Ramanananda’s Shrine to celebrate his life and service to the Ashram in the difficult years following Bhagavan’s Mahanirvana.
One day he received an urgent call and had to leave for his native place. It irked him that he had to leave Bhagavan in this condition. We were staying in the same room and he told me how perplexed he was. I just laughed: ‘So you imagine that Bhagavan is your patient and that you can cure him! His eczema cannot be cured unless he wants it to be cured. If you are unable to leave him in his present condition, pray to him to change it so that you may have some peace of mind.’ That night he prayed. Next day, when we went into the hall, Bhagavan said: ‘This eczema seems to be getting much better.’ There were tears of joy in the doctor’s eyes. When we came out, he hugged me. ...

Dr Melkote said to me, ‘Mr. Sundaresh, I have lived to see this great marvel. Who would say he is like any of us? He condescends to be one of us and that is our great fortune. My patient is my darling and God’.


5 Bhagavan puns on the Sanskrit bandha which is cognate with the English words ‘bandage’ and ‘bondage’ but means the latter.

6 *Sri Ramana Reminiscences*, GVS, pp. 51-52.

7 *My Recollections of Bhagavan*, Devaraj Mudaliar, Chapter 2.

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Pongal celebrations at the Ashram began with *uttarayana* puja on Thursday, 14th January, marking the day when the Sun ‘crosses over’ (*sankramana*) into Capricorn. It also marks the end of the special days of Margazhi month. The 15th was Mattu Pongal which is dedicated to cattle in appreciation of their patient service. Nandi puja was followed by puja at Cow Lakshmi’s samadhi. The morning celebrations culminated with gosala puja and feeding bananas, pongal and *agathi keerai* to the Ashram gosala cows with limited attendance owing to pandemic restrictions. —
The COVID lock down gives us a chance to dialogue about Bhagavan in new and meaningful ways. For much of the lock down, devotees were at leisure to connect with one another and support each other in recalling what is most important in our lives. Recently, in one exchange, a devotee worried that we were becoming too relaxed in our understanding of Bhagavan, that we were, in her words, ‘institutionalizing Bhagavan’. It was a curious choice of words but I shared her concern and recalled how I had noticed the same impulse in myself in recent years, namely, my habit of paring down Bhagavan’s teaching into short simple phrases in my conversations with others. I always feel a little tinge of remorse whenever I do that, as if I were betraying Bhagavan.

More recently in the pandemic era when there is so much uncertainty, it is understandable that we would want to make Bhagavan accessible. We need a way of reaching Bhagavan and capturing the spirit of his teaching with simple language. But might we inadvertently be putting Bhagavan in a box?

Historically, we can see religious traditions centred on an enlightened being often fall prey to some form of routinising or packaging, simplifying the original insights in order to make them available to a larger audience.

In the digital era, such a trend could be a natural reflex to the busyness of our lives, not to mention the low-grade anxiety circulating through the collective since the pandemic began. We could be forgiven for wanting to reduce complexity as much as possible given increasing demands on our time and energy. In the contemporary world it may be that we no longer have time for the transformation that Bhagavan was pointing us to. To make time, we would have to give up a lot, and herein lies our dilemma.

Devotees may recall the scene just prior to Bhagavan’s Golden Jubilee celebrations in 1946 when Bhagavan first glimpsed the new pandal. He said to a disciple: ‘Just fancy, they insist on erecting this for me when all I need is the shade of a tree to sit under.’

The giant Golden Jubilee pandal was intended to honour Bhagavan on a special occasion. It is completely natural that devotees would want to do this. But from Bhagavan’s point of view, where does the need to add something come from?

The reader may recall when devotees were pressing him about his wishes for the upcoming celebrations. Bhagavan gets annoyed and says something like, ‘If you really want to know what I want, it is that all of you would sit quietly and practice looking within to know the Self. That is how I would like you to celebrate. But you are not going to do that, are you, so why ask me?’

The impulse to package Bhagavan in neat nifty phrases is similar to worship at a safe distance. It insulates us from the vulnerability we may feel when face to face with what Bhagavan is proposing. Again, this is understandable because he was talking about bringing down the whole edifice, while we are unwittingly trying to keep it standing. Sure, we would like to transcend the small self, but only so long as we do not have to give up the life we have come to know or have to make major changes.

1 The Mountain Path, January 1980, p. 17.
The dilemma we find ourselves in seventy years after Bhagavan’s Mahanirvana reminds us of the 2nd century BC Greek mathematician, Archimedes, who once said: *Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the earth.*

The problem in this declaration, of course, centres on the place to stand. Archimedes would need a second earth from which to perform the operation. It need not be added that the earth doesn’t really need moving anyway since, astronomers tell us, it is already moving at a good clip in its orbit around the Sun—about 30 km per second. But that is not the real point. Archimedes’ declaration raises a deeper problem, one that is analogous to the impulse to systematize Bhagavan. Archimedes’ phrase is a sleight of hand, like picking yourself up by your bootstraps. He cannot have such influence over the earth for his feet are firmly planted on the earth and there is no other earth from which to employ his lever.

Systematization involves a similar excess: the external ground from which we might manipulate Bhagavan’s teaching, make it into something graspable and possessable, is rooted in unravelling that very impulse, namely, the impulse to domesticate, contain or possess Bhagavan or the Self. Bhagavan’s teaching not only resists such a move, but in fact is the cause of the disappearance of the (egoic) ground once for all.

System-thinking gives us a little boost and we trick ourselves into thinking that an improved, spiritualized ego-self is the way to go. Before, we had an ego that said ‘I’; now we have an ego that says ‘I know’. But the knowing that Bhagavan is trying to lead us to, by contrast, is the knowing wherein the ‘I’ is removed altogether. Arguably there is a great distance between being the one that knows and being free of the one that knows. How nice it would be to have our cake and eat it too, the ultimate dream of ego, to be free without having to give up anything. It’s not that different from Archimedes wanting to move the earth while standing on the earth.

The *jñani* knows that systems cannot help precisely because what most needs to be left behind is what is all the while being tenaciously clung to. It is like seeking to free ourselves from our suffering while clinging to the very causes of it. Bhagavan knows that the mind cannot take us there. If we cling to systems, it is because we like their handles.

**Grasping and Intuiting**

Modern neurology offers some help in shedding light on the confusion between these two modes of knowing, between the impulse to system and the spiritual aspiration to *jñana*.

The denotative discursive mind often thought of as the left-hemisphere, relishes detail and imagines that its ability to name things constitutes higher knowledge. We cling to systems because we like their handles. Neuroanatomists have pointed out that the ability to manipulate objects with the hands (what are called manipulospatial functions) may have helped bring about human language. The ability to manipulate objects with the hands requires similar neural mechanisms as is required for referential language.\(^2\) In other words, grasping, whether in the sense of a physical object or a mental concept, originates in the same area of the brain, and the abilities to perform these functions are thought to have developed together over evolutionary time. It is not a coincidence, neuroanatomists argue, that the word ‘grasping’ in various Indo-European languages means ‘to seize’ or ‘to possess a thing’. Indeed, they argue,

\(^2\) *The Master and his Emissary*, Iain McGilchrist, p. 348.
the very rules of language may derive from gesture. This link is reflected in idiomatic English with phrases like ‘to put our finger on it’, or more colloquially, ‘to get it’, phrases which mean ‘to understand’, reflecting the relationship between possessing—as in a physical object—and cognitive understanding.

How is this relevant in the present discussion? Bhagavan is trying to lead us to a different sort of knowing. If system-thinking is sequential, i.e. content knowledge centred in the strategic mind of the left brain, by contrast, jnana or wisdom is spiritual knowledge i.e. intuition and sensing, the global awareness centred in the right. Of course, both are needed and the distinction between the two hemispheres is really only modal more than spatial. But we often confuse the two and think that knowing means grasping in the mode of concepts, whereas Bhagavan’s knowing means intuitive sensing beyond words and labels. If devotees very often resist Bhagavan’s vichara or surrender, this may be the reason: practicing them demands we give up the grasping aspect of the strategic mind.

How to better understand this contrast? One neuroscientist proposed the following image of a mother-bird that goes to the tree and begins to peck at the bark to retrieve a worm. The denotative awareness of the bird’s left hemisphere (focused attention) is activated in studying how to get at the worm. Simultaneously, the right hemisphere’s panoramic awareness (open attention) surveys the surroundings, listening passively for potential threats or the cries of her chicks. Both hemispheres are active but while the right brain’s global awareness is aware of all its surroundings including the pecking at the bark, the strategic mind’s retrieval work is only aware of the work itself and has no real knowledge of the right brain’s objectless awareness. It is this detail orientation that makes left-brain strategic awareness salient. It is visual, lucid and clear while the right brain’s panoramic awareness is subtle and indistinct.

Over the centuries, spiritual traditions have sought to cultivate the right hemisphere’s intuitive awareness, one of the aims of religious life. If, as has been said, science teaches us how to take things apart so that we can understand how they work (denotative consciousness), religion teaches us how to put things together to understand what they mean (connotative consciousness). The digital revolution has magnified the quantitative axis of these two poles and the trend in the 21st century is toward exchanging the obscurity of faith (religion) for the certitude of data (science). If we have lost sight of the sacred in favour of strategic functions, it is born of prioritizing the how of life over the why of life. Denotative consciousness is linear, sequential, analytic, abstract, explicit and known, but it is also static, isolated and decontextualized. By contrast, connotative consciousness, though never fully graspable, is interconnected, implicit, embodied, intuitive and broad-based; it knows the place of living beings in a complex world and has a sense of the meaning of that world. Again, both are required. A neuroscientist describes the two modes like this:

> The knowledge that is mediated by the left hemisphere is knowledge within a closed system. It has the advantage of perfection, but such perfection is bought ultimately at the price of self-reference. It can mediate knowledge only in terms of a mechanical rearrangement of other things already known. It can never really ‘break out’ to know anything new, because its

3 Ibid., p. 348.
4 Experts tell us that the two hemispheres in a healthy brain are lateralized (i.e. in communication) and that the neural correlates of brain and body functions are distributed throughout the brain, thus strict topographical mapping in terms of two hemispheres is oversimplified. The language of left and right hemispheres is perhaps still useful in distinguishing these two contrasting modes from an explanatory point of view.

5 Ibid., p. 74.; also, from a talk by Iain McGilchrist at Oxford University, 10 February 2011.
6 Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Oxford University, 12 Feb 2012.
7 Indeed altruism studies show device use activates left hemisphere, denotative consciousness and diminishes altruistic sensibilities which draw largely from the right.
8 The Master and his Emissary, Iain McGilchrist, p. 547.
knowledge is only of its own representations. Where the thing itself is ‘present’ to the right hemisphere, it is only ‘represented’ by the left hemisphere. Where the right hemisphere is conscious of the Other, the left hemisphere is only conscious of itself.9

This contrast helps us map the Self/ego distinction, namely, global all-encompassing awareness vs. the representational mind that names and identifies objects. We see here why Bhagavan urges us to inquire into the ego-self because strategic mind by its nature cannot, neurologically or neuroanatomically, know about its surroundings and cannot know that it doesn’t know; it naturally assumes that the task before it is all there is. In other words, it misses the forest for the trees.

Self-knowing, conversely, arises in the connotative awareness of the right hemisphere. Inquiry exposes the illusion of the systematiser which imagines itself as the master. But, in truth, it is only master of that which is outside of itself, i.e. objects, forms, ideas, labels, concepts, systems, etc. The potency of vichara lies in exposing the phantom through inquiry, namely, bringing the light of all-encompassing awareness to bear on the issue.

The reader may recall abundant scenes in the darshan hall when a devotee would ask Bhagavan about the meaning of a given philosophical problem, and Bhagavan would reply: ‘Find out who you are first, then ask that question.’ In other words, rather than attempt to solve the problem with the strategic mind of the left-hemisphere, cultivate the all-encompassing awareness of the right. If Bhagavan keenly knew that Self-knowledge does not come about through adding anything to ourselves, he was emphatic about taking something away, namely, the impulse to system-thinking. Just as the earth cannot be moved by a lever, the Self cannot be known by a conceptual mind. The Self does not lend itself to systematization because it is not an object. Indeed, whatever or however we visualize It, It cannot be that. The mind that seeks to view the Self is itself contained within the Self. When asked about the witness, Bhagavan gives this interesting reply:

‘Witness’ is applicable when there is an object to be seen. Then it is duality. The Truth lies beyond both. Subject, object and perception [...] appear and disappear, whereas the truth is eternal.10

This is where ontological humility is called for. Like Archimedes’ lever, systems tend to lose sight of the fulcrum. The fulcrum of any system is the knower of it, the ground on which all knowing rests. It’s not that Bhagavan’s ‘system’ is unknowable, but rather, that Bhagavan’s is not a system at all, and in fact, intrinsically resists systems, is by its very nature beyond systems. In short, words trap us in the division which only pure awareness can overcome.

Readers may remember hearing about Muruganar following Bhagavan’s Mahanirvana, when on various occasions, a devotee would approach him and ask him to say something about Bhagavan. Muruganar would

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9 Ibid., p. 548.
10 Talks §466, §376 and §146.

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**Events in Sri Ramanasramam: Samudram Gosala Puja**

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On Friday, 15th January, a handful of devotees gathered at the Nallavan Palayam or Samudram Gosala, the retirement home for the Ashram gosala cows. About a dozen animals live on several acres of land in a pastoral setting on the banks of the Samudram lake. The animals are honoured each year on Mattu Pongal Day with special decorations, puja and feeding of pongal, bananas, and other treats.—
take the request to heart and would slowly prepare to say something about Bhagavan. He would start out very carefully with, ‘Bhagavan…’ and then he would trail off. He would pause and redouble his efforts, and begin a second time, ‘Bhagavan…, Bhagavan…’ and then he would fall silent again. In the struggle to form a single coherent sentence about his Master, tears would begin to well up in his eyes. Finally, he would just give up. After all, what words could ever capture the vastness and mystery of Bhagavan, of the Self?

When we call this scene to mind, we lament the loss of a simpler time when devotion to Bhagavan was devotion indeed. We lament the onrush of terrifically novel circumstances, not just the COVID pandemic and its attendant concerns, but the digital infusion and colonisation of our life-world in recent decades which, while offering myriad benefits, may be simultaneously thwarting our capacity for cultivating the intuitive wisdom needed for the path that Bhagavan laid out for us.

If studies show that intensive device use in the 21st century causes overstimulation of the strategic mind and diminishment of right hemispheric functions, and if altruism studies in recent years are devastatingly dark simply because altruism, empathy and compassion belong to the atrophied right hemisphere, then we feel overwhelmed. We ask ourselves, ‘Was not pre-digital samsara already enough to contend with?’

But the outlook may not be so bleak. Even with the passing of a generation, we should also have access to Bhagavan, to the Self, not so?

Our ace in the hole is Bhagavan himself, and his teaching, which provides us with a map at just the needed time, one that, if followed, can lead us out of any predicament.

What form this map might take will be the subject of the next segment in the upcoming March issue. —

(to be continued)

Events in Sri Ramanasramam: Arunachaleswar Pradakshina

Early on 16th, Lord Arunachaleswar made a circuit of the Mountain, stopping at the Ashram where devotees eagerly received Him with dhotis, saris and garlands. It had been expected that the entourage would proceed without making any stops whatsoever owing to COVID protocols. But at the last minute the decision was taken to make brief stops for the benefit of devotees. —

Events in Sri Ramanasramam: Thai Krithigai Ramana Purana Muttrodal

Thai Krithigai falls in the month of Thai on Krithigai nakshatra and is considered auspicious for Lord Murugan. Ramana Puranam was first debuted on Thai Kritikai in the year 1938 and since then ashram has been celebrating the event on a regular basis. This year, the text was chanted seven times by a handful of devotees gathered at Muruganar's Samadhi near the Ashram hillside gate. —
Significant drops in the rate of COVID infections in Tamil Nadu and across India have prompted the Government to take the bold step of moving towards reopening. The Times of India reports that India is experiencing 12,000 new cases per day, a marked reduction from the peak period last September of 90,000 new cases per day. Positivity rates and fatality rates have likewise fallen and are at their lowest since April 2020 while hospital beds are mostly empty. The development suggests that pre-existing cross-reactive immune memory to SARS-CoV-2 may be a factor in this unexpected and welcome change. Already last August, the Berlin Charite, a group of 30 scientists led by Andre Thiel, published their research on the presence of ‘cross-reactive T cells in about 34% of the population of Berlin’. The study concluded that cross immunity among the populace of Berlin originates from previous exposure to circulating common cold coronaviruses. The team speculated that similar cross-immunity effects would likely be found elsewhere. (See the September issue of Saranagathi). In India, the rate of (asymptomatic) infections may have been higher than previously known bolstering the collective defence against further spread. The Guardian reports that India’s low mortality rate may be attributable to the fact that 50% of the population is under the age of 25, and that ‘the prevalence of communicable diseases such as typhoid and tuberculosis may make the immune system more resilient to coronavirus.’

Even if the signs are hopeful, the Government is exercising caution. Some public health officials still fear a second wave following the relaxation of containment measures, citing COVID’s erratic and unpredictable behaviour. In Manaus, Brazil, for example, which had almost reached herd immunity in October with 76% of its population having been exposed, is now experiencing a punishing second wave. The Government of India is maintaining vigilance in respect of possible future mutations, new strains and ongoing infections. Mask use is still being strongly recommended as are social distancing protocols until vaccines can bring India to herd immunity. Covishield (the Oxford/Astra Zeneca vaccine) and Covaxin both from Bharat Biotech are being deployed and it is hoped that 30 crores of citizens may be inoculated by October.

Given these positive developments, Sri Ramanasramam reopened in the first week of January with limited visiting hours (from 9.15 am-12 noon and 2-4 pm). Devotees are exercising caution and avoiding congested peak periods.

On 28th morning, following Thai poosam puja, a small puja was performed at Swami Niranjanananda’s Samadhi shrine. Sushilamma and KVS performed a song he wrote in honour of the Ashram’s first President.