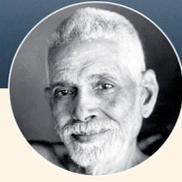
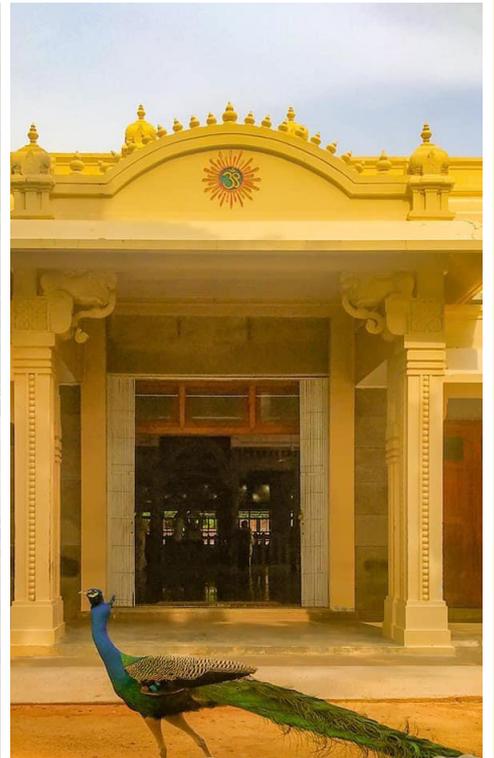
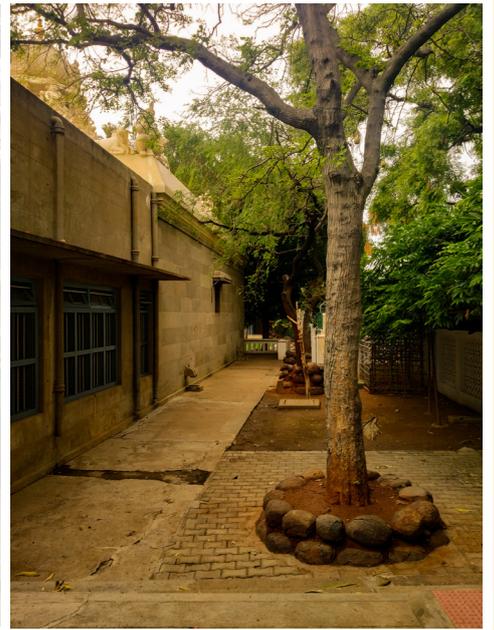


Saranagati



SARANAGATI
SRI RAMANASRAMAM

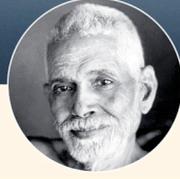
SPECIAL EXTENDED INAUGURATION EDITION
JULY 2020, VOL. 14, NO. 7



D. Thiagarajan



Saranagati



SPECIAL INAUGURATION EDITION
JULY 2020, VOL. 14, NO.7

IN THIS
ISSUE

Dear All,

On 17th June 2020, Dr. Venkat S. Ramanan, son of Sri V. S. Ramanan was inaugurated as Sri Ramanasramam's fourth President. He signed the requisite documents at the auspicious hour of 5.30 am in Bhagavan's Shrine where his Appa used to sit each morning at the same hour and chant *Ramana Gita*.

Given such an occasion only takes place once in thirty or forty years, we are bringing out this extended special July issue a few days early. In it, we take a look at the history of leadership in the Ashram, and offer a feast of photographs, both archival and contemporary, to commemorate the events of recent days and days gone by.

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

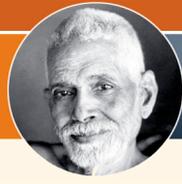
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Calendar of Events Celebrated at Home (for the time being)

2nd July (Thurs) Cow Lakshmi Day
5th July (Sun) Guru Poomima
20th July (Mon) Punarvasu
2nd-3rd August (Sun) Full Moon
16th August (Sun) Punarvasu
1st September (Tues) Advent
2nd September (Wed) Full Moon

13th September (Sun) Punarvasu
2nd October (Fri) Full Moon
10th October (Tues) Punarvasu
17th October (Sat) Navaratri Commences
25th October (Sun) Saraswati Puja
26th October (Mon) Vijayadasami
31st October (Fri) Full Moon





Ashram Leadership in Historical Perspective

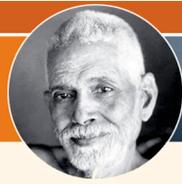
When Bhagavan and devotees lived on the Hill, there was never any question as to who was in charge. Of course, Bhagavan never spoke of himself in that manner. But his word was law simply by the force of his eminent presence. There was never any doubt that he alone was fit to make decisions as to how the community of sadhus should conduct themselves day to day.

With Mother's passing in 1922 and with the interment of her mortal remains at the foot of the Hill, Bhagavan moved down from Skandasramam to be near her samadhi. The community followed and now with Bhagavan more accessible, devotees came in larger numbers. In the coming years, it became clear that there

would be a need for those devoted to administrative functions to manage the mundane affairs of the burgeoning community.

While on the Hill, Perumalswami had played a significant role in daily life as had Dandapani Swami. Dandapani Swami took charge of the community purse, acting as an unofficial treasurer, and looked after food preparation which became more involved when the community moved down the Hill. As for Perumalswami, a spirited and energetic fellow among those living on the Hill, he had been the one to brick-in Mulaipal Tirtham. He also assisted Kandaswami in the demanding work of cutting into the mountain to build a foundation for Skandasramam. On the day of Mother's burial, he led the charge in constructing a samadhi pit for the shrine. By the force of his personality, he began to see himself as a natural leader and eventually declared himself Sarvadhikari. For a multitude of reasons this was not





meant to be. Perumalswami soon left the Ashram but was slow to give up the idea that he was the Ashram's official Sarvadhikari.

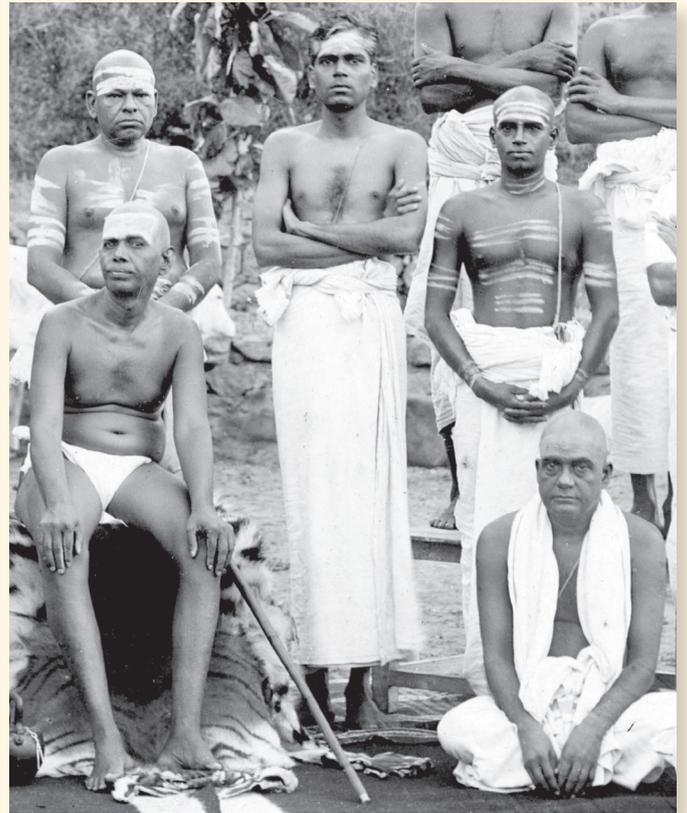
Bhagavan's brother, Sri Niranjanananda Swami was appointed as Secretary and then as Sarvadhikari by a General Power of Attorney executed by Sri Bhagavan in May 1933. But Perumalswami contested it in the District Munsif's Court. Chinnaswami, Yogi Ramiah and T. S. Rajagopala Iyer went to Salem to consult former High Court Judge, Justice Sundaram Chettiar as to who should be called on to counter the efforts of Perumalswami. A hearing took place in 1936 and the matter was finally resolved. But the ordeal was demanding and left Chinnaswami and others with a strong desire to protect the Ashram from similar threats in future.

Justice Sundaram Chettiar and S. Doraiswamy Iyer convinced Bhagavan of the necessity of drawing up a *Last Will and Testament*, a legal instrument that makes known a person's final wishes pertaining to assets and dependents, for the future protection of the Ashram. The document was drafted and executed in March 1938 in the presence of six witnesses, among them, T. S. Rajagopala Iyer.

Sambasiva Rao

Of the legal worthies supporting the Ashram in this effort was Sambasiva Rao, a reputed lawyer of Nellore whose entire family was devoted to Bhagavan. After Bhagavan's will was drafted, devotees gathered for the signing. Bhagavan signed only with a simple line and asked Sambasiva Rao to sign on his behalf. The words in the document expressed not only the Maharshi's wishes as to who should manage the Ashram, but also served as a mandate for the chief duties and responsibilities of managers, present and future:

I have after mature consideration resolved to execute this Will, the terms of which will come into operation after I attain Siddhi (demise). All the properties hereunder described and comprised in what is called "Sri Ramanasramam" are dedicated by me to the Idol already installed and consecrated therein, viz., Sri Mathrubhuteswara Swami and also to the Idol or Statue as my symbol to be installed and consecrated after my demise on my Samadhi at a suitable place in the Asramam itself. The Properties will accordingly form an endowment for the aforesaid two Idols or Images. As for the proper conduct of their pooja and worship and for the due management of



Bhagavan with Sambasiva Rao seated at his far left, 1930s

the endowed properties and the future accretions thereto, I appoint my brother, Niranjananada Swamy, as the sole manager. After him his son, T.N. Venkatarama Iyer, will be the sole manager. This right of management or trusteeship will vest as a hereditary right in the latter's family so as to devolve successively on his lineal male descendants from generation to generation.

The text goes on to urge managers to "ensure the smooth working of the institution, and, as far as possible, make Sri Ramanasramam a centre for the diffusion of spiritual knowledge and a place of sanctity". The document is appended with the following:

In token of my execution of this document, I affix my mark and authorise G. Sambasiva Rao to sign for me in my presence as I have not been in the habit of affixing my signature.

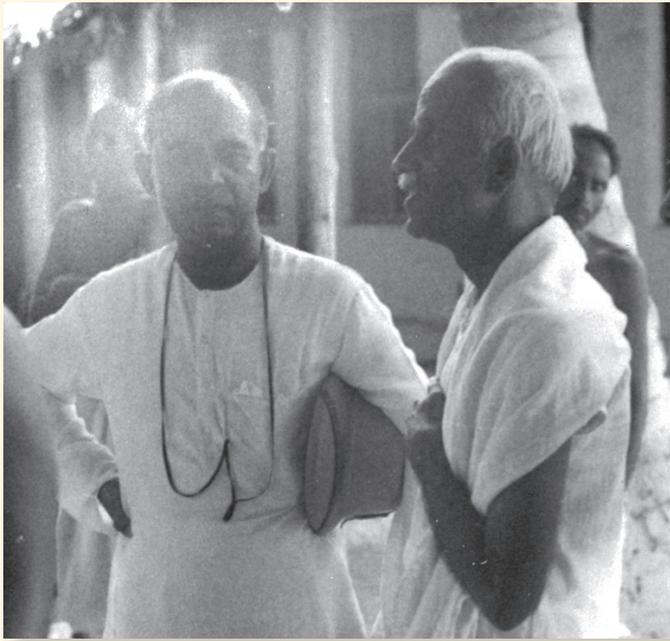
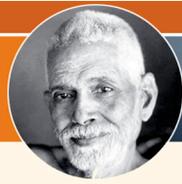
When someone complained to Chadwick that a Rishi could not be attached to property, he quipped: Was Janaka attached?

Interlocutor: Of course not!

Chadwick: Yet he owned an entire kingdom while Maharshi, only a few acres of land.

Of course neither Chadwick's nor any other opinion on the matter was of any consequence. The legitimacy





O.P. Ramaswamy Reddiar, the first Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, with Aravind Bose in the Ashram ca. 1950

of the Will was a legal question for the courts to decide. The matter was brought to the High Court which accepted the genuineness and validity of the Will, giving the Ashram a legally binding, court-tested document establishing Ashram leadership for future generations.

Bhagavan's Mahasamadhi

When Bhagavan left the body on 14th April 1950, none could have imagined the trials that lay ahead. Even the day before Bhagavan's departure, some misguided people started giving trouble and wanted to establish the Ashram elsewhere. They even went so far as to make an appeal to the former premier of the Madras Presidency, O.P. Ramaswamy Reddiar, asking for his support. Reddiar, a long-time devotee of Bhagavan, chided them saying, "Look here, these are the last moments of life on earth of a great Being, the likes of whom comes once in thousands of years. Is this solemn moment the time for such ugly behaviour?" He then sent them away.

Groups and factions from every quarter were intent on getting their fingers in the pie. As a security measure, O.P. Ramaswamy Reddiar posted police trucks at various locations, two at the Big Temple, one near Agni lingam and another near the Arts College.

The months that followed brought court cases filed

in Tiruvannamalai, Cheyyar, Chengam and Vellore in an attempt to wrest control of the Ashram from its rightful overseers. Meanwhile, in their despondency over Bhagavan's physical departure, devotees sold off their properties and left Tiruvannamalai, leaving a small, financially strained core of devotees to negotiate countless hurdles on their own.

Already before Bhagavan's Mahanirvana, the Hindu Religious Endowment Board, a government institution designed to oversee and regulate Hindu shrines, temples and schools, moved toward obtaining legal jurisdiction over Matrubhuteswara Temple. When they approached Bhagavan with the idea, he simply asked them: "[But] is this like any other [Hindu] temple?"

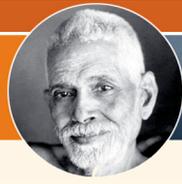
The representatives had no ready response and, perhaps noting the unique circumstances of the Ashram temple, left off with any further inquiries. But now in Bhagavan's physical absence, the Board made fresh appeals.

The Sarvadhikari's son, T. N. Venkataraman, who had no formal training in law, had to learn legal process from scratch and fought tooth and nail in court year by year. But even with the formidable experience he gained in his countless days in court sifting through deeds, affidavits and case papers, and nights sleeping on advocates' verandas, still, the Ashram lost case after case. Finally, in 1956, with a big



From left: Nagalakshmi, TNV, Athai (with baby Mani), Pichu Iyer (with young Ganesan), and Sundaranna standing at left, 1939





T.N. Venkataraman at his desk in the Ashram office, 1983

showdown in the lower court at Vellore, it seemed all was lost. Jurisdiction of the Ashram was to fall into the hands of the government.

Certificate of Succession

By the time of Chinnaswami's demise in late January 1953, the Ashram was in debt and TN Venkataraman was completely alone. He found himself saddled with no less than thirty court cases and formidable financial worries. The endless litigation required repeated trips to lawyers and court rooms. Given the sad reality that Bhagavan and Chinnaswami were no longer present, TNV had to obtain a 'certificate of succession' in order to legally administer the Ashram. A case challenging the issue of a succession certificate had already been filed in September 1950 and was pending since that time. Of necessity, owing to Chinnaswami's ill-health, TNV had taken up the reins in this endeavour when on 3rd January 1953, just two weeks before Chinnaswami's demise, Bhagavan's sister, Alamelu, passed away. TNV was to perform the funeral rites and cremation knowing that a hearing with the Joint Commissioner had been scheduled for that day. Appeals to postpone the hearing were flatly refused. This meant that TNV had to race to the Commission immediately following the cremation of the remains of Athai, the only mother he ever knew, without even having time to change out of

his wet clothes. Though having arrived in time for the hearing, alas, the Commission's decision went against the Ashram.

Finally, in August 1954, on the strength of Bhagavan's Will, the court declared TNV's right to manage the Ashram. But the battle was far from over. A subsequent case petitioning the court to bring the Ashram under the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Act was filed and when the Vellore ruling came on 30th August 1956, it decided against the Ashram.

Appealing to the Madras High Court

The only remaining course of action was an appeal to the Madras High Court. As it would turn out, by Bhagavan's grace, the presiding judge, Justice M. Ananthanarayanan, I.C.S., just that year appointed to the Madras High Court, came up with a novel solution: make the Ashram a Public Religious Trust. As Matrubhuteswara was the central feature of Ramanasramam and as it was supported by a community of devotees from all over India and the world which included non-Hindus, it could be argued that it was not strictly speaking a Hindu temple. If successful, then the temple and its adjunct buildings could not be brought under the control of the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Act. By the Ashram having declared itself a Public Religious Trust in 1959, legal pressures eased, and the Ashram had its sovereignty restored.

Ashram Debt

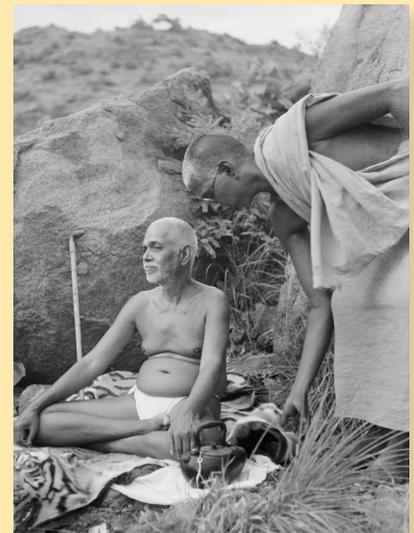
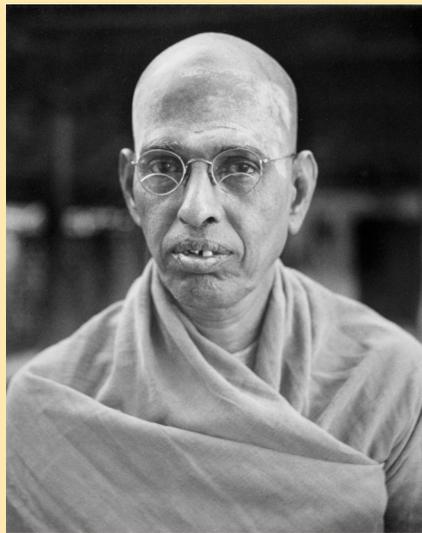
If the Ashram's legal woes seemed to have a respite, Venkatoo still had to contend with mounting debt. Just when he was beside himself with worry, he had an insight, namely, that the Ashram's delivery would come from nowhere else than Bhagavan's devotees, its single greatest asset. He took the decision to make a tour of the country in order to re-establish contact with old devotees who had departed following Bhagavan's Mahanirvana. The two-month trip doubled as a pilgrimage to holy sites and included visits to Calcutta, Gaya, Banaras, Gorakhpur, Lucknow, Delhi, Ahmedabad, Bombay, Poona, and Bangalore. This marked a change in fortunes where TNV's prodigious social gifts proved providential. Subsequent trips





helped him renew contact with Prof. K. Swaminathan, hard at work on Gandhi's collected works in Delhi, in whom he found not only wise counsel and moral support but a person of influence. A.R. Natarajan also proved influential in dealing with government matters and raising funds. At home, TNV turned to Maj. Chadwick, Dr. T.N. Krishnaswamy, K.K. Nambiar, Framji Dorabji, S.S. Cohen, Arthur Osborne and Balarama Reddiar who were invaluable in their service and suggestions during these difficult years. He was also blessed to have the steady and consistent support of his second son, Ganesan who stood by his father all these years. To boot, his youngest son, V. S. Mani, possessing keen managerial instincts, returned to the Ashram in 1985 following his retirement.

Now with legal worries behind him, with the Ashram in better financial circumstances and with the establishment of a large audience hall over Bhagavan's samadhi, Venkatoo could breathe a sigh of relief for the first time since Chinnaswami's demise. By the time of his *Shashtiabdapurti* celebrations (60th birthday) in May 1974, he had earned the love and respect of devotees everywhere. Among his accomplishments were educating his children while tending the many demands of the Ashram. This included, among other things, stabilising the Ashram's income, protecting it from encroachment by outside forces—legal or otherwise—and keeping the Ashram in sync with the mandate expressed in Bhagavan's Will to make it a centre for the advancement of spirituality. —



Chinnaswami's Parting Words

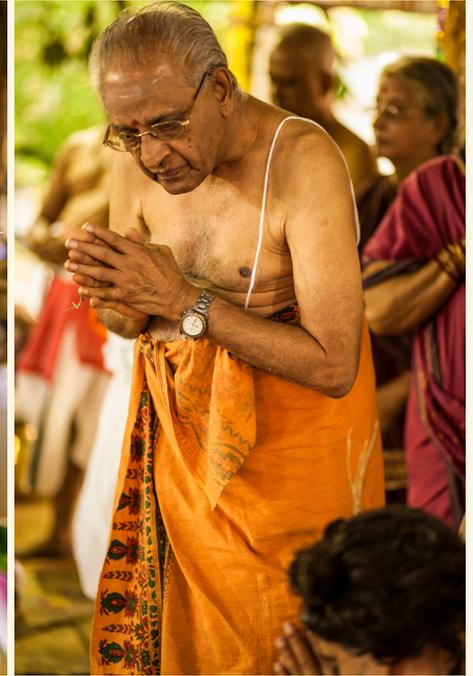
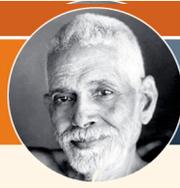
Chinnaswami, sad and wearied in the aftermath of Bhagavan's departure, suffered in the face of numerous challenges that he must surmount without the aid of Bhagavan. He formed the 14-member Executive Committee, a panel created as a support during this difficult time. Heart disease forced him to take complete bed rest for six-months and finally, on 28th January, 1953 lying in

his bed in the Ashram dispensary, he summoned Venkatoo and family as well as key staff members to his bedside and gave a parting blessing:

I am leaving you with clean hands and heart. Not a single pie of the Ashram was used for my personal needs. All the property of the Ashram belongs to Bhagavan. It is to be safeguarded with due care. Put your heart and soul into his service and his grace is sure to follow. Righteousness and straightforwardness are the only real ornaments for us.

On the evening of the following day, which was purnima, Chinnaswami peacefully left the body. —





Sundaranna celebrating Ashram Kumbhabhishekam, 23rd-25th August, 2013

The Inauguration of V.S. Ramanan as Ashram President

In 1985, T.N. Venkataraman's youngest son, V.S. Mani took early retirement and came to assist his father and brother, Ganesan. Seven years later, their elder brother, V.S. Ramanan, followed suit and returned to Tiruvannamalai to help. Following his *Satabhishekam* (80th birthday) in May 1994, TNV made his way to North India, not telling family and friends what he was up to. By this time, V.

S. Ramanan was acting President and shouldering the responsibility of Ashram management with the assistance of his two brothers. But V. S. Ramanan got a shock when his father rang from Rishikesh one day in August, making the formal request—as per tradition—that his eldest son grant him permission to take sannyas. Once given, Swami Chidananda, President of the Divine Life Society, Sivanandashram, Rishikesh, gave the Ramanasramam President T.N. Venkataraman *sannyasa diksha*. This took place on 12th August, 1994 and thenceforth, TNV became known as Swami Ramanananda Saraswati. 'Swamiji' returned to Ramanasramam on 19th August



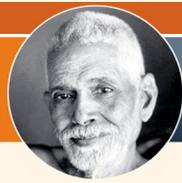
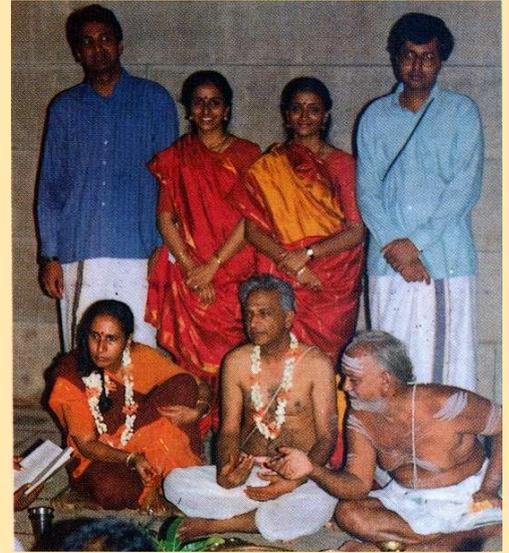


Photo on left: Sundaranna at his 60th birthday, with his wife, father, brothers, sons and daughters-in-law, summer 1994



and took up residence in Rm. A-19. In his new station as a renunciate, administrative affairs were precluded, thus he resigned as President, leaving the Ashram management in the capable hands of his son: “I, T.N. Venkataraman, President of Sri Ramanasramam, hand over the Presidentship of Sri Ramanasramam to my

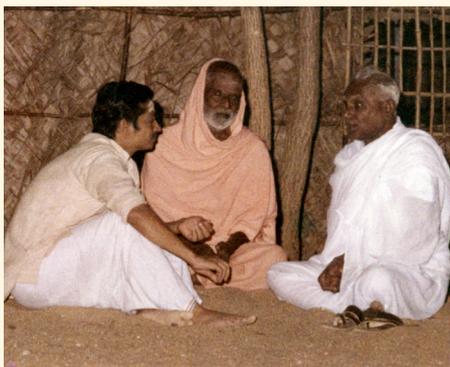
eldest son, V. Sundara Ramanan, also known as V. S. Ramanan, who retired as the General Manager of M/S. Indian Petrochemicals Corporation, Baroda, from 1992”.

V.S. Ramanan was duly appointed as the Ashram’s third President, an office he would hold and faithfully execute for the next 25 years. —

Assisting the President: V. Ganesan and V. Subramanian



V. Ganesan



Ganesan, Kunju Sw. and Balaram Reddy



V. S. Mani and V.S. Ramanan

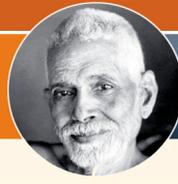


V. S. Mani, TNV and Kunju Sw.

In the difficult early days, TNV’s second son, Ganesan was there at his father’s side to assist and support him. After earning an MA in philosophy, he returned to the Ashram and helped establish the *Mountain Path* in 1964 for which he later became chief editor. Following Bhagavan’s Mahanirvana, Ganesan assisted his father in convincing old devotees to return and take up residence in the Ashram, bringing renewed life to the community in the absence of key devotees.

In 1985, Ganesan’s younger brother, V. Subramanian, affectionately known as Mani, took voluntary retirement as project manager in ACC-Vickers Babcock Ltd., Bombay, and returned to Tiruvannamalai to assist his father in Ashram administration. Already trained and experienced in management, he proved invaluable as an administrator as well as a devoted advocate and supporter of Bhagavan’s devotees, near and far. —



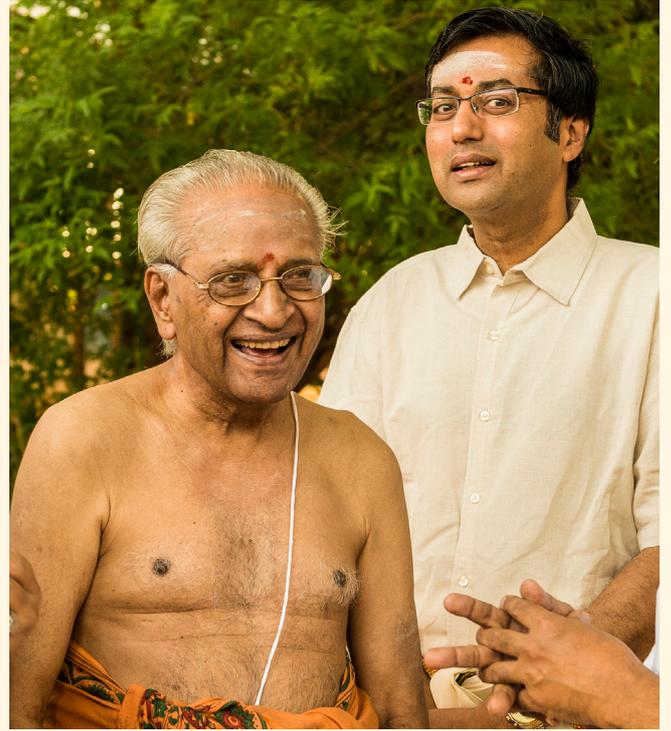


President V.S. Ramanan's Tenure in Brief

In 1994, President V. S. Ramanan took charge of the Ashram and set about fortifying Ashram publications. He urged translators, editors and writers to bring to light the many works about Bhagavan that lay in obscurity, untranslated. An avid reader of Bhagavan's books, he directly made corrections of proofs for publication.

His tenure would also engender a steady, measured expansion of the Ashram, both in its physical plant, and in promoting Bhagavan's greatness throughout the world via the dissemination of his photographs and teachings. He supervised digitisation in the Ashram that served to link devotees worldwide.

In 2010 the President suffered a major personal setback with the loss of his youngest son. He continued his active service in the Ashram another eight years. In 2018, citing health reasons, he informed the Board of Trustees that according to Bhagavan's Will, which designated the male lineal descendant as the legitimate



V. S. Ramanan with eldest son, Dr. Venkat S. Ramanan, August 2013

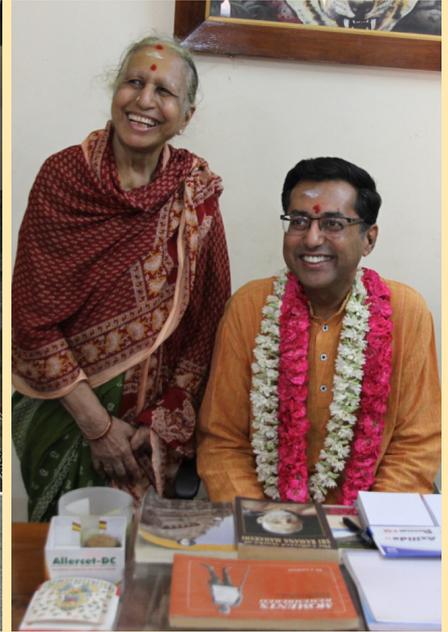
successor to the Presidentship, he was nominating his only surviving son, Dr. Venkat S. Ramanan to take over as President. Other lineal male descendants, namely, the President's brothers, V. Ganesan and V. Subramanian, both now in their eighties, conveyed no objection to his son being nominated for the office of President. —

Events in Sri Ramanasramam: Maha Puja



One day in 1916, Mother Alagammal went up the Hill to visit her son but had no intention of coming down. What started as motherly longing developed into a deep spiritual thirst that initiated an inner journey toward self-hood, culminating in her full release on 19th May, 1922 under her son's active supervision. The first Mahapuja took place the following day at the foot of the Mountain at the site of her samadhi which was, as it turned out, the first construction in what would become Sri Ramanasramam. Mahapuja celebrations have taken place every year since then. This year's celebration commenced on the morning of 14th June with mahanyasa japa in the Mother's Shrine and concluding with Deeparadhana around 10.30 am. —



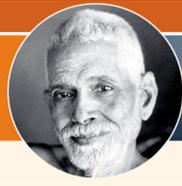


With masks removed for photographing purposes, family members gathered for the small inauguration on the morning of 17th June

Inaugural Ceremony for Venkat S. Ramanan, Ramanasramam's Fourth President

In the midst of a global pandemic, duty called and Dr. Venkat S. Ramanan traveled to India to administrate the Ashram and look after his ailing father. After testing negative for COVID 19 both in the US and in India, as per public health requirements, Anand made the journey to Tiruvannamalai. On the morning of the 17th June, he was installed as Sri Ramanasramam's fourth President. The requisite papers were signed at 5.30 am in Bhagavan's Shrine in the exact place where his father used to sit each morning at the same hour to chant *Ramana Gita*. Later that morning, a brief ceremony in the presence of his mother and two uncles took place under the venerable iluppai tree. In honour of the newly ordained President, on the following day, 18th June, a homa was performed with social distancing in the New Hall. —





Events in Tiruvannamalai: Local Coronavirus Update



With nearly 450,000 reported Corona virus cases, India now ranks fourth in the world in number of documented cases. Not all states are equally affected and some have even been able to relax lock-down measures. In Tamil Nadu, however, the numbers are growing and temples remain closed as the state crossed

62,000 documented cases. With as many as 2,700 new cases registered in a single day, the state government on Monday announced a complete lockdown in four districts, including Chennai, Kanchipuram, Chengalpattu and Tiruvallur from 19th to 30th June. Essential services will be allowed including vegetable vendors and grocery shops who will be allowed to be open from 6 am to 2 pm.

Testing in Tamil Nadu has been extensive and on Friday, the state government released data on testing per million population which currently stands at 8,666, about double the national average of 4,657.

Tiruvannamalai is imposing the 6 am to 2 pm rule starting Tues, 23rd June and enforcing mandatory mask-use under penalty of fine. Sri Ramanasramam remains without guests or visitors, inhabited only by a skeleton crew of staff looking after basic Ashram functions. Devotees isolated in their homes in Ramana Nagar for three months now, relish brief exchanges with other devotees when out shopping. —

Sri Muruganar's Irai Pani Nitral, §5

மயக்குந் தீய வல்வினையை
மாயச் செகுக்கு நல்வினைமேல்
பயக்கும் பரிசேது எங்கள்பரம்
பரனே எனக்குப் பகர்கென்றேன்
நயக்கும் கயக்கும் நலிவின்றி
நடுவே நின்றுஅவ் இறைவன்அருள்
இயக்கும் படிக்கே இயங்கென்றான்
எந்தை ரமண இனியோனே

I cried:
'Lord and Master, tell me how
To make good deeds prevail
Against deluding evil deeds!
My Father dear, my Ramana, said:
'Untroubled in the centre standing,
Move only as you may be moved
By the grace of the Lord.'

Ensure the smooth working of the institution, and, as far as possible, make Sri Ramanasramam a centre for the diffusion of spiritual knowledge and a place of sanctity by affording scope for the fulfilment of objects germane to the advancement of spirituality. ~ Sri Bhagavan's Last Will and Testament





Obituary: Sri K. Chandrasekharan (Chandru Mama)



At the Pavala Kunru Kumbhabhishekam, 2004

A devotee of the Vedas, Arunachala and his chosen guru, Sri Ramana Maharshi, Sri K. Chandrasekharan, affectionately known to Ramana devotees as ‘Chandru Mama’, conducted the annual Karthikai Deepam Veda Parayana for ten days in Tiruvannamalai town. His brother K. Natesan was close to Kavyakantha Ganapati Muni and both were related to Echammal, who daily prepared and served food to Bhagavan for forty years.

In 1883, a centre to house Vedic pandits and conduct Veda Parayana was established on Ayyankulam Street, Tiruvannamalai. This became Chandru Mama’s home in the 1960s and he, along with a few dedicated followers of the Vedas, conducted this yearly Veda Parayana yagna during the ten-day Karthikai Deepam festival. Chandru Mama was the chief overseer of this yearly event and with his managerial skills, conducted it in an exemplary manner.

Chandru Mama was also part and parcel of Sri Ramanasramam. He assisted in building Bhagavan’s Samadhi after his Mahanirvana in April 1950. He also helped in constructing the Samadhi for the Sarvadhikari Niranjanananda Swami upon his passing away in January 1953. He knew everyone in the local government and there was nothing that he could not get done in government circles. If there was any problem with a wing of the government, the only mantra in

the Ashram was, ‘Call Chandru Mama’. In a few minutes, the ‘external affairs minister’ would appear at the Ashram office and ask, ‘What happened?’ As he listened to the problem, he would just say, ‘We’ll solve it, don’t worry!’ And, sure enough, the problem would be solved.

Chandru Mama was a rock of support to the two Presidents he served, T. N. Venkataraman and V. S. Ramanan, especially during the court cases that had to be fought on behalf of the Ashram. Invariably, whenever TNV had to go to court, Chandru Mama accompanied him, versed as he was in legalese and able to lucidly explain complicated legal matters in clear, simple language.

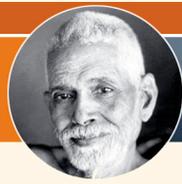
Active nearly up to the age of 90, he assisted the Ashram in every imaginable way. He also helped in personal matters. For decades, it was Chandru Mama who recommended school and college graduates to the Ashram to serve as typists, clerks and attendants. Until they obtained gainful employment outside, the boys would be housed and fed at Ramanasramam. Some of them would go on to become permanent inmates of the Ashram.

Chandru Mama lived for 99 years plus one day. Born on 21st June 1921, he merged peacefully at the Feet of Bhagavan the day after his 99th birthday at around 10 pm on 22nd June 2020. He is survived by his son, Suresh and two daughters, Renuka and Parashakti. —



Bhagavan with TNV, Chandru Mama and his brother, K. Natesan





Obituary: Air Marshall Gian Dev Sharma



Air Marshal Gian Dev Sharma PVSM, AVSM (born 8th September 1921) was one of the first Indians to be directly commissioned as an officer and pilot in the R.I.A.F. He made repeated trips to the UK to collect planes to be stationed on the subcontinent and fly them to India. In the Second World War he was a bomber in Burma. When asked how he had felt when carrying out a bombing raid during the war, he said, “I didn’t feel [anything] — it was a job to be done!”

He was nicknamed ‘Panditji’, meaning ‘priest’, not because he was a Brahmin, but because he succeeded in remaining a vegetarian and a teetotaler amid the hard-drinking, meat-eating culture of soldiers during the war. When he got posted to Udampur from Srinagar, on promotion, a new staff car came to transport him there with star-plate, flag and all. But he had the family bundle up in their old Vauxhall car because he insisted that the official vehicle ought to be used by him only after he had assumed his new appointment.

As squadron wing commander he sometimes had to discipline his juniors. One time an airman was caught red-handed pilfering aviation fuel. Wing Commander Sharma penalized him and struck him off the roster for the courier flights to the UK. But this fellow had contacts and Wing Commander Sharma was pressured to reinstate him. Instead he put in his resignation, stating that if they thought he was incapable of commanding

his squadron, then he should no longer be in command. His resignation was naturally ignored. He was subsequently drafted by the V.I.P. squadron and flew dignitaries including India’s first Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, on a state visit to Afghanistan. He continued to rise in rank until he became Air Marshal. As the senior-most in the air force, he was then nominated to take over as the Air Force Chief. The then Defence Minister Jagjivan Ram congratulated him on his forthcoming promotion. But at the last minute, a political twist resulted in the appointment of somebody else.

In the midst of tremendous career success, Air Marshal Sharma had quietly cultivated his spiritual interest all the while. In 1949 when posted in Bangalore, he read Paul Brunton’s *A Search in Secret India*. He was inspired by the book and got in touch with the author through his publishers in the U.K. The two corresponded and arranged to meet in London on the pilot’s forthcoming visit. But when the latter reached London, Brunton was out of town. Finally, just after the Maharshi left his body in 1950, Brunton wrote to Air Marshal Sharma that he would be visiting Bangalore and that they should drive to Ramanasramam together. They stayed in Mr. Bose’s house and on this first visit, Air Marshal Sharma climbed the peak of the Holy Hill.

Together with his wife, Kamala, Air Marshal Sharma made it a point to drive to Tiruvannamalai each year all the way from Delhi and Dehradun, even right up into their 80s, regularly accompanied by Mahabir, his faithful attendant. Even if other holy centres were closer, the pull of Arunachala, Bhagavan’s teachings and the beloved Ashram always proved stronger. From 1950, the Air Marshal came to the Ashram each year for 65 years until five years back when at the age of 95, he could no longer travel.

Air Marshal Gian Dev Sharma merged peacefully at the Feet of Sri Bhagavan at 10 pm on 14th June just after dinner in his home in Delhi. In September, he would have been 100 years old. The Air Force gave him a funeral with state honours. Air Marshal Sharma is survived by his two daughters, Rekha Butalia and Neelam Deewan. —

