



Ra. Ganapati

Writer, Scholar, Sadhak and Mystic

CHRISTOPHER QUILKEY

Sri Ramachandran Ganapati or as he was better known, Ra. Ganapati, was a remarkable writer on spiritual subjects in Tamil and English. He was absorbed in Arunachala around 7:30 pm at his residence in Chennai on the auspicious Mahasivaratri evening, February the 20th 2012. He was well aware that the end was near and indicated as much in his last few days to those close to him. Even though his food intake had become mainly liquid in his last years, in the last few days, it was barely a few spoonfuls, and even then he would not always take them. Mentally sharp as ever, he wrote a few notes and long letters. It was reported that on the last day, he wrote a note in Tamil, saying, "The Goddess of Salvation is waiting to welcome me with a carpet of jewels." His family has stated that he was fully conscious and aware at the moment of his passing. He had begun chanting (*japam*) as the end came that night of Sivaratri, at around ten minutes past seven.

Christopher Quilkey is a member of the magazine's editorial board.

MOUNTAIN PATH

"It is said he sat and fixed his gaze on the calendar picture of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi. And leaving the body, he became One with that Light!

"The next day, adorned by a garland, his body was taken on its final journey to the cremation ground. That garland was a special one. It was one that had adorned the Ramaneshwara Mahalinga on the night of Sivaratri! A devotee had brought it from Arunachala. The 'pen of God' was united with the *akshara-mana-malai* (Marital Garland of Letters) of Bhagavan Sri Ramana!"¹

His Career and Relationship to the Paramacharya

Over a long career first as a journalist and then as an independent writer he composed around thirty five books and other articles on the *sanatana dharma* with particular emphasis on the great saints and sages notably AdiSankara, His Holiness Chandrasekharendra Saraswathi, the Paramacharya of Kanchipuram, Sri Ramana Maharshi, Ramakrishna Paramahansa-Sri Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Satya Sai Baba, Bhakta Meerabai to name but a few.

He was born on the first September, 1935, which was Vinayaka Chaturthi, the day on which Lord Ganapati is celebrated each year. His father Sri C.V. Ramachandran was originally from Chidambaram, and his mother Jayalakshmi was from nearby Cuddalore. He was a sensitive child and suffered from an ulcer and asthma. Sometime during his final school years he came under the influence of Vada Palani Murugan. After his graduation, he became a journalist and worked for the evening paper from Madras, *The Mail*.

He acquired the necessary skills as a reporter. After sometime, an odd incident occurred when due to an asthma attack he was unable to file a report on an election where he should have been present. He left the burden in the hands of Lord Murugan. The next morning he was surprised at the office to learn the file had been submitted and

¹ Kameshwar, G. 'Ra. Ganapati: The Pen of God' in *The Ramana Way*, April 2012. p.33-6.

his job was not at risk. He realised that with his talents he was meant for a higher purpose.

His true calling as a professional writer began with *Jaya Jaya Shankara* in 1962, a biography of AdiSankara, which was published as a serial in the influential and popular Tamil weekly *Kalki* and was later published as a book. He spent ten years at *Kalki*, and then another twenty five years as a freelance writer.

He was also a gifted musician, specializing in composition and some of his *kritis* and *bhajans* have been sung by well known Carnatic musicians.

Ra. Ganapati was a frugal man and was known never to touch money. He sought neither fame nor material possessions and long before he had acquired any general recognition for his saintly qualities, his basic needs were miraculously met. He had implicit faith in God.

Ra. Ganapati was unusual in that he did not follow the traditional path of a spiritually dedicated person who was not married. Though he did not attach himself specifically to an ashram nor did he take *sannyas*, yet he was close to the Paramacharaya² and took his words as *upadesa*. The discernible modesty that marked his life was in accord with the Paramacharya's own humble demeanour. As a bachelor he earned a sufficient living for his minimal needs and was not dependent on anyone. He lived in a small apartment in T Nagar, a district of Chennai which was sparse with a minimum of essentials; a bed, a few books and a small table to hold medicines. There were a few photographs of sages on the walls of the house and nothing else. It could have been a cave for all its simplicity.

² The various titles by which Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswathi, the 68th Sankaracharya of Kanchipuram is known may be confusing for non-Tamils. He was born in 1894 and from his ascension to the *gaddi* (throne) of the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham in 1907 to the latter quarter of the 20th Century, he was principally known as the Sankaracharya. After his retirement as head of the *peetham* in the early 70s, he was increasingly called the Paramacharya, or the supreme teacher. In his final years the affection and reverence felt for him throughout Tamil Nadu was such that he was given the sobriquet, *Periyava*, the great swami. He attained *mahasamadhi* in 1994 at Kanchipuram.

He was a *naishthika brahmachari* (sworn lifelong celibate) and it showed in his eyes which glowed with a deep radiance of *tejas*. Mentally quick and alert, he spoke with direct and fearless honesty. Quiet and attentive, he listened with care. His writing reveals a vast erudition but he was more a mystic than an academic scholar. He wanted to live the truths of Vedanta and the bhakti schools not just comment on them.

Ra. Ganapati is best known for his *Deivattin Kural* (known in English as 'Voice of God') which is a compilation in seven large volumes of talks given by Jagadguru Paramacharya of Kanchipuram, beginning in the 1930s and spanning several decades. Each of these seven volumes is a thousand pages or more. If it weren't for him the prodigious scholarship and acumen of the Paramacharya or Periyava (Maha-Swami) as he is more commonly known among Tamils, would have been lost. He noted down Periyava's talks which he attended and to which he made cross-references. He spoke to those who attended other talks and made use of their notes. He consulted those who knew the subjects on which Periyava spoke and got the required clarifications. Periyava would speak briefly on a topic in one place and would leave it at that. He then again would take up the subject at another venue usually in a temple and elaborate it further.

The challenge for Ra. Ganapati was to maintain the flow and cohesion on the subject. He had a sharp memory and was vigilant in observing Periyava's low-key observations and insights into the *dharma* in all its aspects. Ra. Ganapati would then give final shape to each article which was as close to the original speech as a person could possibly get without a tape recorder, so that there would be no ambiguity. One Periyava devotee G. Vaidyanathan, Secretary, Sankara Bhakta Jana Sabha, noted that, "He used the same language that Periyava used so that the reader would feel as if he was listening to Periyava!"

It says much about Ra. Ganapati that he as the 'author' is not anywhere in evidence in the volumes of *Deivattin Kural*. We are brought the uplifting wisdom of the Paramacharya in all its purity free of any colouring or ambiguity unrefracted by the compiler. This shows his humility and strict adherence to the truth. The former President of



The young Mahaperiyava Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswathi Swamigal

India, R. Venkataraman, a devotee of the Periyava, accurately described *Deivattin Kural* as the *Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswathi Upanishad*.

Bhagavan and the Paramacharya

Ra. Ganapati was graced with several *darshans* of Bhagavan Ramana as a boy and later had a long relationship with Sri Ramanasramam when his father was a sub-magistrate at Tiruvannamalai. He wrote extensively on Bhagavan Ramana including some twelve articles in the *Mountain Path* from 1977 to 1988 plus two volumes that have been published in Tamil titled *Ramana Manam* (Ramana Fragrance). His valuable suggestions were accepted while editing the Tamil translation of Suri Nagamma's Telugu classic *Lekhalu* ('Letters from Sri Ramanasramam').

For devotees of Bhagavan among the most interesting of his articles is a long piece published in a Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham Souvenir about the relationship of respect between the Paramacharya of Kanchipuram and Sri Ramana Maharshi.

During Bhagavan's physical lifetime, the Paramacharya twice visited Tiruvannamalai, once in 1929 and again in 1944, for the Karthikai Deepam festival in November-December. On both the occasions he made the customary *giri pradakshina* of Arunachala. As we all know Sri Ramanasramam lies on the route.

Ra. Ganapati wrote that the Sankaracharya in a discourse in Madras in the early nineteen thirties, had indicated that the Maharishi, whom he referred to as Ramana Swamigal, was a *jivan-mukta*, that is, liberated even while living in a body. For the revered head of a strictly orthodox Sankara Math, to give such praise to the Maharishi in public was unusual.

Ra. Ganapati was therefore eager to find out what actually transpired, and spoke to two knowledgeable people associated with Ramanasramam, Kunju Swami and Suri Nagamma. Kunju Svami was present on both the occasions and Suri Nagamma on the latter one.

For those who are not aware of the background a short explanation is required concerning the Mother's samadhi in the light of the strict orthodox tradition, which the Paramacharya in his official

position as pontiff of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham was obliged to maintain. First of all, opinion was divided among the orthodoxy on the very question of the eligibility of women for *sannyasa*; and secondly, even if that was accepted, the mother of Maharshi was not initiated to that order in the formal, scriptural way. Hence her place of burial was regarded as just a grave-yard and therefore according to the strict tenets of the Brahmin code of conduct, pollutes any who enter the area.

Bhagavan had no quarrel with this attitude since Kanchipuram is an orthodox *peetham* (centre of a tradition or lineage, with a person of spiritual authority presiding) while Ramanasramam was an independent ashram, for so long as the Sankaracharya is the head of that *peetham* he must only follow or 'demonstrate' the ways and rules of the *peetham*. The Paramacharya therefore was obliged to issue a directive that as entering Ramanasramam would cause pollution, it had to be avoided.

Bhagavan had already prepared the ashramites not to be offended if the Sankaracharya, did not enter into the Ashram to see him. Because not only due to the question of pollution but also according to one tradition, the Sankaracharya or holder of the Jagadguru Peetham (Seat of the World-teacher) should not visit another holy man on his own. Bhagavan then explained that since he had no desire or need to see anybody or anything, though he did not say it, he would not extend an invitation to anyone. As for the ashramites, he gave his blessing that they could gather outside the ashram gates and receive the darshan of the Sankaracharya as he passed by on *giripradakshina*. Most of them did just that.

By the time of the Sankaracharya's second visit to Tiruvannamalai his stature had grown considerably, and respect for him was widespread throughout Tamil Nadu, both for his austerity, adherence to the spirit as well as the law of *sannyas* and just as important, his quiet and dignified defence of the *sanatana dharma* in the face of virulent attacks by Tamil atheists. The ashramites also kept in mind that it was the Sankaracharya who through his yogic vision saw the greatness of Bhagavan and urged Paul Brunton to come to Tiruvannamalai.

MOUNTAIN PATH

Brunton then became the instrument that opened up the way for others both in India and abroad to know that a living sage was available for all who aspired to deeper spiritual knowledge. Brunton's account in *Search in Secret India* clearly revealed that the Sankaracharya considered Bhagavan a realised master who could give initiation into the higher levels of yoga.

On both the occasions of his visit to Tiruvannamalai, the Sankaracharya turned his eyes towards the entrance of the Ashram, stopped for a few seconds looked around and continued to walk along the *pradakshina* route.

Suri Nagamma was present in the ashram during the second visit in 1944. Because she was a widow she did not go out with the others and wait at the gate for His Holiness, and was left alone with Bhagavan. He asked her why she did not go out with the others and she replied that the Sankaracharya did not see widows who had not shaved their heads.

Ra. Ganapati wrote: "Though mature and tolerant not to denounce the orthodox custom, she felt a tinge of sadness. The Maharishi just nodded his head and looked at her with compassion, the compassion assuaged her sadness. The simple nod too conveyed a lot to the discerning disciple. It signified the Maharishi's acceptance of both the Acharya's adherence to the institutional customs, and Nagamma's wisdom in not following the other such widows who used to peep at the Acharya from a hidden place."

He also quotes Suri Nagama as saying to him that the very same night the Sankaracharya gave a public discourse in which he spoke at great length that "every head of a religious organisation has to observe established traditions while one who is an *athyasrami* (one transcending the four stages of life prescribed by the *dharma sastras*) has no such inhibitions... (To) attain that state is very difficult and that had been possible only for a great soul like Ramana Maharishi."

It is instructive to observe how each of these great souls acted according to their *dharma* when faced with complex issues fraught with possible misunderstanding. The Sankaracharya as the upholder in south India



of the *sanatana dharma* strictly observed all the distinction laid out by the *dharma sastras* and orthodox traditions, whereas Bhagavan who exemplified the *ativarnasramin* (beyond the rules of caste and stages of life) was the very paragon of *samadrshiti* (equal vision). Both understood each other's position perfectly.

According to Ra. Ganapati the orthodox interpretation of the Paramacharya changed later on. For nearly a decade from the early seventies Ra. Ganapati often felt a strong urge to pay his respects at the samadhi of Bhagavan.

"At that time I had asked the *Periyava* (Maha-Swami) about my going to what was said to be the Mother's temple there. He said with a smile, 'I think you say "what is said to be" because you have heard about my pronouncement (*uttaravu*).' He continued, 'That was before the *kumbhabhishekam* (formal consecration of the structure as a temple) was elaborately performed there.' The Maha-Swami indicated that with the full paraphernalia of rites performed at the *kumbhabhishekam* in 1949 for the Mathrubhuteswara Temple raised over the samadhi of The Mother, it had attained the status of a temple and there was no further question of pollution.

Lastly, when in the 1970s Ra. Ganapati felt an increasing urge to visit Ramanasramam, he wrote that "it is a fact that the Maha-Swami permitted me, who may be said to be on the side of the orthodox, to visit the place as a temple. That applies to all others of the same persuasion."

Mountain Path articles on Bhagavan

His articles in *The Mountain Path* both Ra. Ganapati's deep knowledge and profound love for Bhagavan shines through. His articles are potent with insights gained from his remarkable understanding of the *sanatana dharma*. It is obvious that his knowledge was not learned by rote but came from his own intimate experience. In this sense he will perhaps be recognized in time as a modern sage who was in the world but not of it.

It is not possible in the confines of this article to comment on all his articles in *The Mountain Path* but I would like to elaborate on just one section where he writes about Bhagavan as a poet for it is a subject dear to him for he too was a poet at heart. It is in the article *Maharshi The Poet* in the January 1987 issue.

He discusses the meaning of *rshi* (seer) and *kavi* (poet) and writes that "In our hoary and holy culture, where poetry was the expression of the highest spiritual aspirations and attainments, the *rshi* and *kavi* (poet) were one and the same. There is, in fact, an adage, *naan-rshih kurute kaavyam*, 'None save a *rshi* creates poetry'. The very words *rshi* and *kavi* signify the same role and goal.

"*Rshi*, in its primary [*mukhya*] sense, denotes the *mantra drashta*, the one who has seen the mantras, i.e., the one who has discovered [to whom have been revealed and disclosed] the vocable-equivalents of the divine vibrations in the etheric expanse. These mantras have the power to confer on those that chant them various spiritual benefits by the potency of their very sounds and accents."

How then does Bhagavan qualify as a *rishi* if he is immersed in the silence of the Self?

"He was the embodiment of *drkdrsyaiviveka*, the realisation of the truth that the seer, seen and seeing are all illusory. Does it not seem strange to call Him a *mantra drashta* [seer] or a *kraanta darshan* [poet]? Does it not appear incongruous to call him, who was established in what is beyond words, a *rshi* or *kavi*?"

For Ra. Ganapati, "Sri Ramana's was not the silence of the void, but the silence of the plenum from where emerge all sounds, mantras [and also all sights]. More so because Ramana himself gave him [Ganapati Muni] what he considered a *maha mantra* touching this: "*If attention is directed to the source whence mantra-sound is produced, the mind is absorbed in that. That is Tapas.*"

"...Ganapati Muni found that this 'teaching was quite original and nothing like what had ever been found in any book.' So it was a new great revelation of a spiritual truth and that too, given as vocal Instruction and therefore entitled to the status of a *mahamantra*. He who discovered the *mahamantra* was undoubtedly *Maharshi*."³

From this we gain some idea of Ra. Ganapati's range and originality. He both instructs and inspires with his flights of learning and poetic imagination. His legacy is a bountiful one, which will enthuse all who cherish his memory and value his profuse, wise and incisive writings. ▲

³ Maharshi. The Poet, *The Mountain Path*, January 1987, p.42-44.