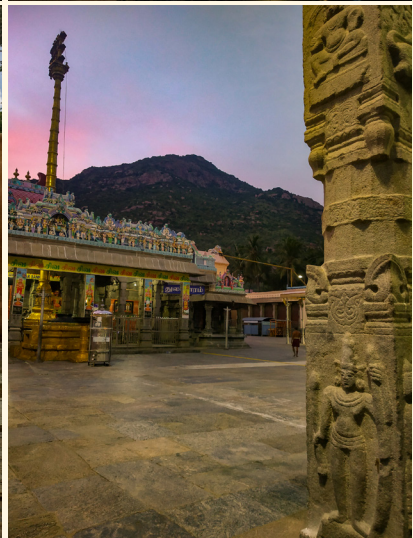


Saranagati



SARANAGATI
SRI RAMANASRAMAM

NOVEMBER 2020
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Photos: D. Thiyagarajan



Saranagati



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IN THIS
ISSUE

Dear Devotees,

In this issue of *Saranagati*, we look at the making of murthis at the time of the construction of the Mother's Shrine and New Hall from 1939-1949. Among the icons and statues made at Sri Ramanasramam at the time were likenesses of Bhagavan, including the black granite stone image in the New Hall.

We also look briefly at the Navaratri celebrations this year which were slightly muted owing to pandemic protocols which prevented public participation, but nevertheless were filled with Devi's abundant blessings and grace.

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

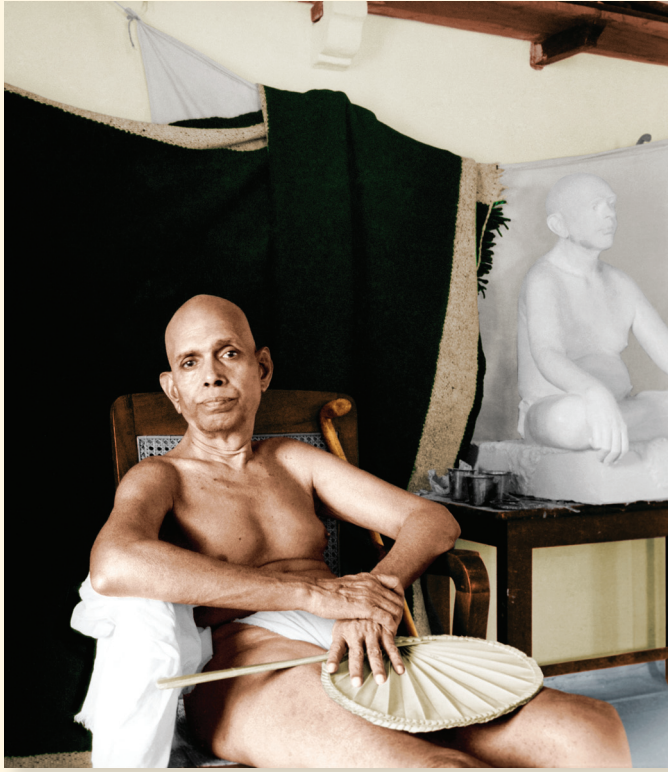
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Calendar of Events Celebrated at Home (for the time being)

6th November (Fri) Punarvasu
14th November (Sat) Deepavali
20th November (Fri) Deepam Festival Commences
29th November (Sun) Kartigai Deepam Day/Full Moon
4th December (Fri) Punarvasu
29th December (Tues) Full Moon

31st December (Thurs) Bhagavan's Jayanti
27th January (Weds) Punarvasu
28th January (Thurs) Full Moon
24th February (Weds) Punarvasu
26th February (Fri) Full Moon
11th March (Thurs) Mahasivaratri





Murthis, Deities and the New Hall Statue of Sri Bhagavan

Chinnaswami planned for long years to build a proper Shrine over Mother's Samadhi but the Ashram lacked the requisite funds. By the mid-1930s the Ashram began to receive donations and in 1936 Chinnaswami went to Burma to purchase teak wood to be used as doors, windows and other furnishings for Ashram building projects which included a shrine to Mother. The original plan was to build the Shrine alone but in September 1946 as the project was nearing completion, the decision was taken to expand the complex and build the New Hall. This is why the gopuram for Matrubhuteswara is not established at the entrance of the New Hall but above the entrance to the Shrine itself.

The auspicious beginning for Matrubhuteswara came in an unexpected way. Chinnaswami was enroute by train to Madurai and found himself sitting opposite an elderly gentleman, a temple architect by the name of Mahizhavana Sthapati. As the two introduced

themselves, both perceived that this chance meeting would prove providential. No doubt Bhagavan's hand was in it, for even before reaching Madurai, Chinnaswami and the Sthapati had fixed a date for the stone-laying ceremony and commencement of work on the Mother's Shrine.

Sri Mahizhiavana Sthapati was the father of Shilpakala Sagaram Sri Vaidyanatha Sthapati, a master of *vasthusilpa shastram*, who would head up the project. Being of the 36th generation in a long line of temple architects whose forbearers had to their credit the designing and construction of the Brihadeeshwara Temple of Tanjore in the 11th century, Vaidyanatha's architectural know-how and expertise in *vastu*, *silpa* and the *agamas* was not in doubt. As for skilled labourers, Vaidyanatha Sthapati's team of granite stone craftsmen, fifty in all, were the most highly-skilled temple stone masons operating in South India at the time. Because of Vaidyanatha Sthapati's great reverence for Bhagavan, the architect did not view the Mother's Shrine project as a commercial venture but rather as a spiritual undertaking, and was thus willing to work with Chinnaswami in helping to solve the Ashram's most pressing concern, namely, meeting the project's financial requirements which precluded large sums of money being paid out in advance.

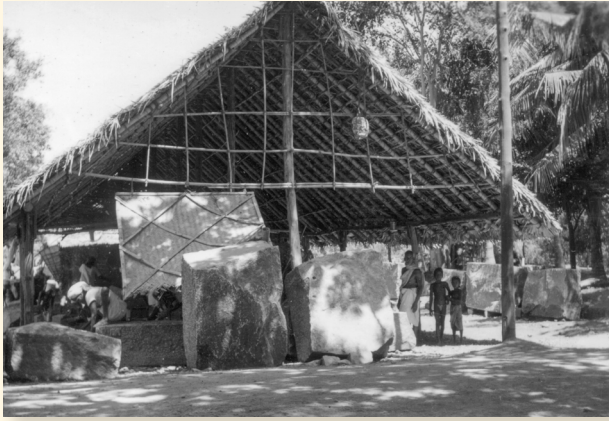
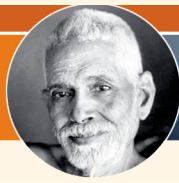
The foundation stone for the Mother's Shrine was laid on Friday, 1st September, 1939, Bhagavan's Advent Day. As it would turn out, later that day, war broke out in Europe. The simultaneity of this event with Bhagavan's Advent and inaugurating this Shrine to Mother would suggest that Bhagavan and Mother would be the compensation for the darkness and chaos that lay ahead.

Bhagavan showed interest in every detail of the work and all major decisions were taken to him for his approval. Vaidyanatha Sthapati felt privileged to have the opportunity to be in proximity with Bhagavan, divulging the particulars of the construction work each day. Bhagavan gave him the needed confidence for each stage of the operation as work progressed.¹

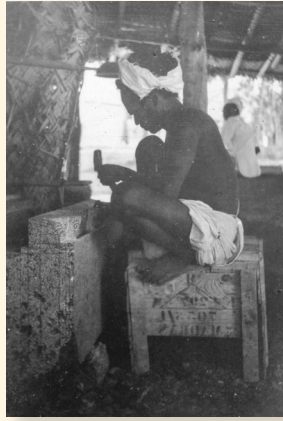
Large granite stones were cut to size on site at Vaira Kunru, a small hillock about one kilometre from the

¹ *Saranagati*, May 2012, pp. 5-6.

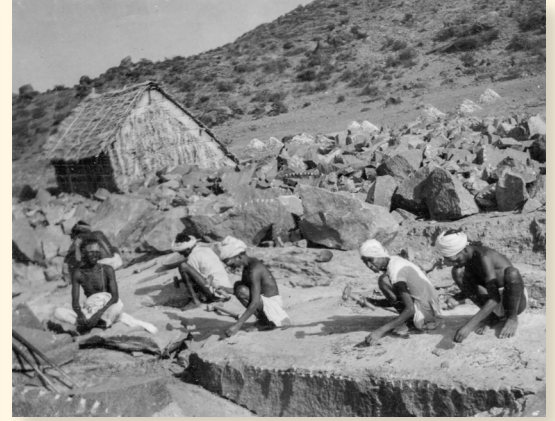




Hut for Vaidyanatha Sthapati's team



One of Sthapati's team members



Stone carvers at work behind the Ashram

Ashram, and then transported by bullock carts to the Ashram, where they were hewn and fashioned under Sthapati's close scrutiny. The stone carving took place at the back of the Ashram where today's Granthalaya (Library) sits including the area at the rear of the gosala. K. K. Nambiar, an engineer by profession, worked alongside Sthapati and was able to be of service in spite of his lack of experience in traditional temple architecture. Seeing them both working together and noting the Western-style training Nambiar had received, Bhagavan affectionately named him the "English Sthapati".²

Ten years passed, years of hard work and trying moments, especially for Chinnaswami, who struggled to surmount the ever-present financial challenge. Bhagavan attended all the functions related to the project and could sometimes be seen at night, when few were around, walking around the site, inspecting it. Chadwick writes:

[Bhagavan] took a personal interest in the cutting of the Sri Chakra Meru in granite which was installed in the completed temple. This is about one and a half feet square and proportionately high. At the time of the Kumbhabhishekam, on the penultimate night before the sacred water was poured over the images, he personally superintended the installation in the inner shrine. It was an extremely hot night and with three charcoal retorts for melting the cement adding to the heat, it must have been intolerable inside the airless cave of the inner shrine, but for about an hour and a half Bhagavan sat there telling the workmen what to do. On the final night of the function Bhagavan went in procession, opening the doors of the New Hall and temple and passing straight up into the Inner Shrine, where he stood for some five minutes with both hands laid on the Sri Chakra in blessing.³

² "Nambiar: In Memoriam", *The Mountain Path*, Oct 1986, p. 238.

³ *A Sadhu's Reminiscences*, pp. 54-55.

Yogambika

As the building work reached a more advanced stage, deities for the Shrine were forged on the Ashram grounds, first among them, the statue of Yogambika. A Shilpin or expert in Shilparatna and Manasara, i.e. ancient texts governing and teaching about religious arts and crafts, was called in for the purpose of forging the icon. A kiln was set up at the rear of the Ashram next to the Old Dispensary where the Goddess would be fashioned on site in *panchadhatu*, or five metals, i.e. zinc, tin, copper, silver and gold. The first step in the process was shaping the image in wax over which a plaster of paris mould was to be poured. The clay was then fired in the kiln to harden it as well as causing the wax within to melt and drain out from a small aperture made for that purpose.

As the metals were heated by the intense flames, Bhagavan came to see for himself. Within one or two minutes of his observing the process, the metals began to melt and were poured into the mould. The following day, the sculptor chipped away the mould to uncover a flawless piece.

This was one of several deities that would be fashioned in Ramanasramam, all to be 'brought to life' in the upcoming Mahakumbhabhishekam which would inaugurate the new Matrubhuteswara Temple. A ceremonial rope of natural fibres was to be extended from the *yagasala kalasas* to the newly fashioned temple murthis, transferring power from the mantras, homas and pujas conducted over the *kalasas* into the deities. Purohits would enter the





shrine with the wooden offering ladles used for the homas, and touch each of the deities six times infusing the murthis with Divine power. The *kalasas* would then be transported in procession (*yatra dhanam*), to the vimana above the temple for Kumbhabhishekam and others to the murthis within for Mahabhishekam. The elaborate ceremony was to take place during an auspicious *muburtha* occurring in mid-March of 1949.⁴

Among the images that were fashioned during this time period was an image of Bhagavan's likeness. This icon had not come about by any wish of Sri Bhagavan nor even necessarily that of the Sthapati but of a strong desire of devotees. The reader may remember how Bhagavan responded in 1912 at Virupaksha Cave, when devotees wanted to celebrate his birthday:

*Ye who wish to celebrate the birthday, seek ye first whence was your birth. That indeed is one's birthday on which one is born as the birthless and deathless Eternal Being. At least on one's birthday one should mourn one's entry into this world, samsara. To glorify and celebrate it instead is like delighting in decorating a corpse. To seek one's Self and merge in the Self, that is wisdom.*⁵

Bhagavan saw the outward signs of things as a deflection from the true inner meaning of the spiritual search, not that such signs were wrong in themselves but that they could mislead the seeker. He relented, however, when Perumalswami and other devotees were keen to make a life-size bronze-statue of him. The statue was made at a terrific expense by the artist, Nagappa.

In 1946 when a clay model for a future statue of Bhagavan was suggested, it was pointed out that his Last Will and Testament stipulated that such an image should be installed on the Ashram premises. One segment of the document, drafted ten years earlier, reads:

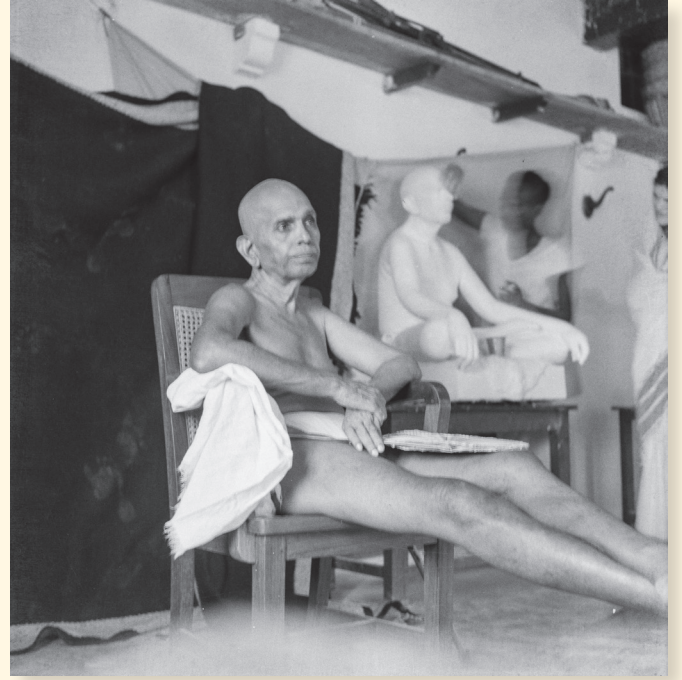
*All the properties hereunder described and comprised in what is called "Sri Ramanasramam" are dedicated by me to the Idol already installed and consecrated therein, viz., Sri Mathrubhuteswara Swami and also to the Idol or Statue as my symbol to be installed and consecrated after my demise on my Samadhi at a suitable place in the Asramam itself.*⁶

'My symbol' may well refer to a *lingam* (*lingam* means 'sign' or 'symbol') and not to an actual likeness of Bhagavan's physical form. But the project was taken up nonetheless.

4 Sthapati Sri R. Selvanathan in *Saranagati*, September 2013, p. 5.

5 *Self-Realisation*, Chapter XXIV, "A Day At The Ashram".

6 For a fuller extract of Bhagavan's Will, see *Saranagati*, July 2020.



Clay Model for the Statue of Bhagavan

No sculptor had been deemed adequate to the task. Indeed, how would it ever be possible to bring Bhagavan's physical features to life in metal or stone? In April 1946, a clay statue of Sri Bhagavan was made in order to serve as a model for future images of Sri Bhagavan. The Sarvadhikari invited devotees to study the clay model. When Narayanaswami Iyer saw it, he communicated his feelings unequivocally, saying that the model was not up to the mark. When he asked Bhagavan what he thought, Bhagavan only said:

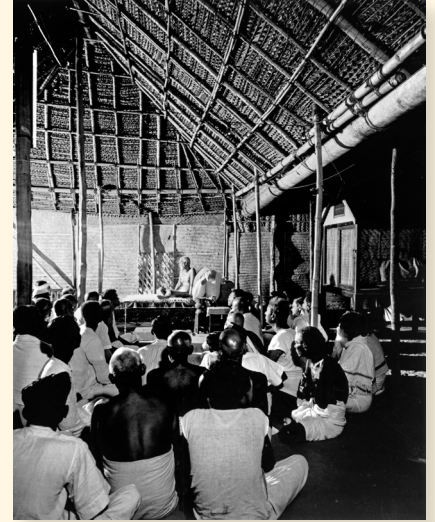
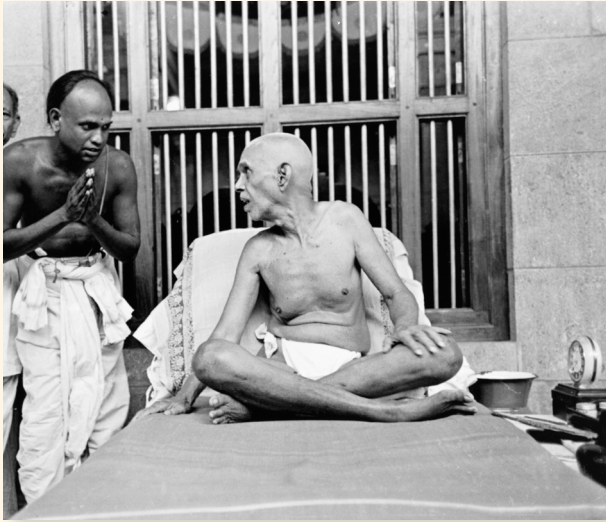
Don't ask me. How can one know one's own face? How can I judge this clay model? ... Each person has a different opinion. Rangaswami says the nose is too big, and the sculptor actually measures it and shows it is correct. But Rangaswami says, the nose looks too big. What are we to do? Supposing someone produces the most exact possible likeness, I wonder whether even then if all those who look at the result will give the same unanimous verdict.

Narayanaswami offered to produce two large mirrors so that Bhagavan could first study his face standing between the mirrors and then judge the clay model and thereby give an informed opinion. Bhagavan refused to participate in this exercise.⁷

Not long after this, a lady devotee expressed her surprise at seeing this statue in the old hall:

7 *Day by Day* with Bhagavan, 24-4-46 Afternoon.





Vaidyanatha Sthapati with Bhagavan on the veranda at the north wall of the New Hall

Devotees gathered in the Golden Jubilee Hall around the time of Mahakumbhabhishekam

After prostrating to Bhagavan, I saw a statue of Bhagavan which was beside him. I had not seen this statue earlier and surprised, I stared at the statue and wondered whose face it was, since the face of the statue did not resemble that of Bhagavan. Then, I turned to Bhagavan and asked who it was. Bhagavan said that it was a stone swami and it would not speak. I concluded from the reply that Bhagavan did not cherish the idea of people making a statue of him.⁸

Meanwhile work on Sri Matrubhuteswara Temple, made of granite stone up to the roof level and beyond that, of brick and lime mortar⁹, proceeded uninterrupted. By early 1949, the foundation stone for the Sri Chakra was laid.

During this period, Bhagavan gave darshan in the Jubilee Hall or on the veranda of the northern side of the newly constructed New Hall. As devotees sat in meditation, work was going on each day. Once when someone complained of the constant hammering in their midst, Bhagavan politely made the following suggestion: “Just focus on the spaces between the blows.”

Once the work was completed, final preparations were made for Mahakumbhabhishekam. Tens of thousands arrived in March 1949, so many that extra trains from Madras and Madurai had to be scheduled and a special bus service arranged from the local railway station. The Shankaracharya of Puri oversaw the rites and supervised more than two hundred

⁸ Rajalaksmi in *The Mountain Path*, Oct 2008, p. 32.

⁹ *Saranagati*, September 2013, p. 8.

priests in the yagasala where the four Vedas were chanted in the presence of kalasas filled with holy water from the Ganga and other great rivers of India. A crowning moment of twenty-seven years since Sri Ramanasramam’s founding had at long last arrived. Remembering the Ashram’s inception at the time of his mother’s passing away at Skandasramam in May 1922, Bhagavan remarked:

I suggested that the body be buried silently before dawn [at the foot of the Hill]. But things happened the way they had to happen. See how many buildings have now come up on the site where a body was silently buried!”¹⁰

Carving the Black Granite Statue

When construction of the New Hall was over, some devotees felt that the Golden Jubilee Hall would be more comfortable for Bhagavan and communicated this to the office. The Sarvadhikari, however, wanted Bhagavan to sit in the New Hall in front of the newly consecrated Mother’s Shrine. He thus sought the permission of Bhagavan that on Jyeshtha Suddha, 1st June, at 10 a.m., he be allowed to shift Bhagavan to the Yogasana i.e. the couch in the New Hall. Bhagavan said: “What have I to say in the matter? I will sit wherever all of you want me to sit.”

On the appointed morning, *rangoli* adorned the floors of the New Hall and festoons were hung above the doors and windows. On the couch, carved from a

¹⁰ *The Mountain Path*, Jayanti 2000, p. 187.





single block of black granite, a mattress of silk cotton with a covering of satin cloth was spread and at the back a broad pillow was laid. A silk bed sheet covered the mattress:

*Abhishekam and pujas were performed in the temple, the bells were ringing, arati with camphor was being waved, when at 9.45 am, Bhagavan, returning from the gosala, was led with kalasa and with priests chanting the Vedas, to the front hall and was requested to sit on the Yogasana. After the 'Nakarmana' and other mantras, and the waving of camphor lights, and after all the devotees had prostrated before him, Bhagavan sat on the couch arranged for him.*¹¹

Nagamma continues:

*The Sthapati and others came with a plate containing fruits, flowers and other auspicious articles and got them touched by Bhagavan; they then went out through the southern doorway. I did not understand what it was all about. Bhagavan was looking with steadfastness in that direction. Wanting to know what it was about, I went out the doorway facing the road and saw in the open courtyard a huge stone. When I asked what it was, I was told that it was for making a statue of Bhagavan. My heart throbbed with misgivings. You may ask, why? I felt disturbed because it is known to all of us that Bhagavan is sick. Under these circumstances, I began to wonder why a statue was being thought of. Comforting myself with several explanations, I came to Bhagavan's presence and sat down. Bhagavan noticed my troubled mind.*¹²

A hut had been constructed outside the southern entrance to the New Hall for use by Vaidyanatha

¹¹ Letters, 3rd June, 1949.

¹² Ibid, 3rd June, 1949.



Block of granite for Bhagavan's statue situated outside the southern entrance to the New Hall

Stapathi's team. The big block of granite stone, covered with turmeric and vermilion, was in the line of sight of the stone sofa that was to be Bhagavan's sitting place. Arati was performed before it by Vaidyanatha Sthapati, who then made the first ceremonial chippings of the stone with his hammer and chisel.¹³

¹³ Guru Ramana, 1st June.

Sri Muruganar's Irai Pani Nitral, §9

பார்க்கும் எல்லாப் படிவமும்நின்
படிவ மாயும் பண்ணவர்க்கும்
யார்க்கும் அறிதற்கு அரியோனே
எனக்கோர் உறுதி இசைக்கென்றேன்
ஈர்க்கும் பிறவிக் கடல்முழ்காது
ஏறற்கு உபாயம் இறைவன்அருள்
சேர்க்கும் படிக்கே சேர்கென்றான்
சேம ரமணச் சின்மயனே

I cried: 'All forms I see are forms of you.
Yet none of the gods know you aright,
Tell me firmly what to do.'
Said Ramana, Lord of Wisdom and Welfare:
'A way there is to escape
The hungry current of births,
To reach the shore and be safe.
Join and be one with the grace of the Lord.'





That evening a long-time elderly devotee prostrated before Bhagavan. He had a gauze bandage round his left elbow and it looked as if he were imitating Sri Bhagavan. Just then Bhagavan laughingly remarked: “Hoho! you are competing with me. You have the wound in the same place as myself.” Everybody laughed, except the elderly man himself, whose sense of humour seemed to have deserted him at the moment.¹⁴

Meanwhile Bhagavan struggled with the silk cotton mattress which was slippery. Sitting on the mattress and pressing it with his hand, he looked at his attendants, “See how this mattress slips from one side to another! People think that it will be comfortable for Bhagavan if there is a costly mattress. It is, however, not possible to sit on this restfully. It would be much more comfortable if I sit on the stone seat itself. Truly, I do not find even the slightest happiness on these mattresses and pillows, compared with the happiness I had when I was sitting or sleeping on the raised platform of stone and mud in Virupaksha Cave”.¹⁵

Bhagavan gave several indications that he neither wanted to sit in the New Hall much less live there. He complained that if he stayed there, monkeys and squirrels would no longer have access to him. When urged to seat himself on the large stone sofa carved from a single block of black granite, Bhagavan said, “Why don’t you get the stone Swami to sit on the stone sofa?”¹⁶

Bhagavan was not interested in worldly majesty. His majesty was born of silence and inner dignity. He did not need marble or granite to confirm him, no matter how well-executed the artistry. That Bhagavan was

¹⁴ Ibid., 1st June.

¹⁵ *Letters*, 3rd June, 1949.

¹⁶ *Ramana Smrti*, p. 187.



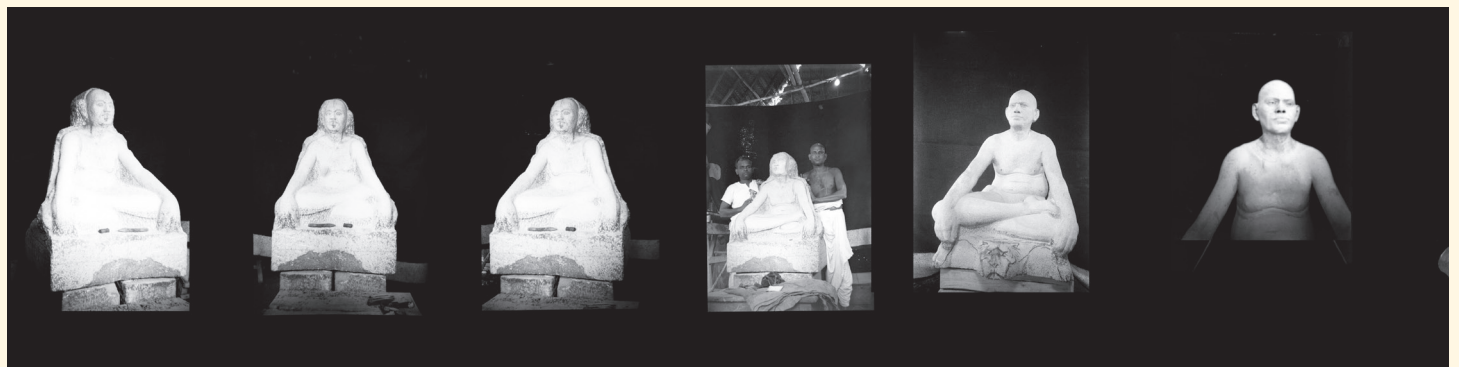
Bhagavan in the New Hall on the new mattress on the stone sofa

even less enthusiastic about the new stone statue than he was about the stone sofa could have been foreseen simply by reading verse five of *Ulladu Narpadu Anubbandam*.

*Holy rivers, which are only water, and idols, which are made of stone and clay, are not as mighty as the sages. For while they make one pure in course of countless days, the sage’s eyes by a mere glance purify at once.*¹⁷

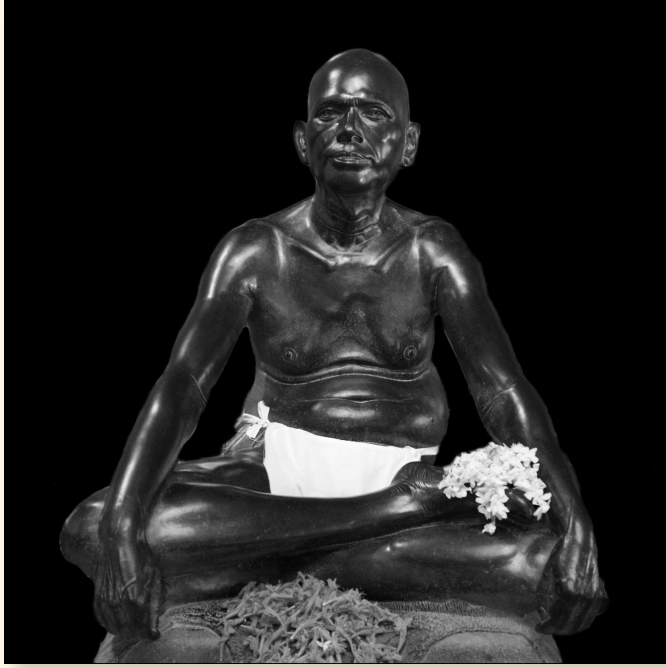
The gist of the verse is echoed in an exchange in the Hall as Bhagavan’s illness progressed. A lady devotee with her two children prostrated before him: “Bhagavan, you must not leave the body. You must continue to give us darshan.” Bhagavan smiled and said: “Yes, yes, see there.” He pointed to the sculptor at work on the

¹⁷ Bhagavan quoting *Srimad Bhagavatam*, chapter 48, v. 31, tenth canto. See verse 5 of *Reality in Forty Verses Supplement*, in the *Collected Works*, p. 123.



Stages of cutting and chiselling of the stone statue





Final Version of the stone statue

stone statue. “They are chiseling a Bhagavan who will give you darshan forever.”

Then he turned to the others and said: “Now people have become my gurus. I have been telling them to give up their I-am-the-body idea (*debatmabuddhi*) but instead they want me to cling to the body. I should not leave this body in order that I am able to give them darshan forever. To have darshan forever, she too must never die. Nor her children. They must have darshan forever. So, none shall ever die.”

R. Narayana Iyer commented: *The truth [of the statement] was grimly portentous, and [stated] in Bhagavan’s own unique way.*¹⁸

Conclusion

Bhagavan was appeasing and would go along with devotees. While he did not need the material treasures and offerings devotees sought to heap on him, he also knew that they somehow needed to give them, needed to show in an outward way how much he meant to them. He also knew that while he was not the body, his physical form was a reminder to them of the Self which they strived to attain. This point is brought home by the fact that Bhagavan sat on numerous occasions in the Ashram store while the sthapati fashioned the clay

18 R. Narayana Iyer, *The Mountain Path*, April 1969, p. 91

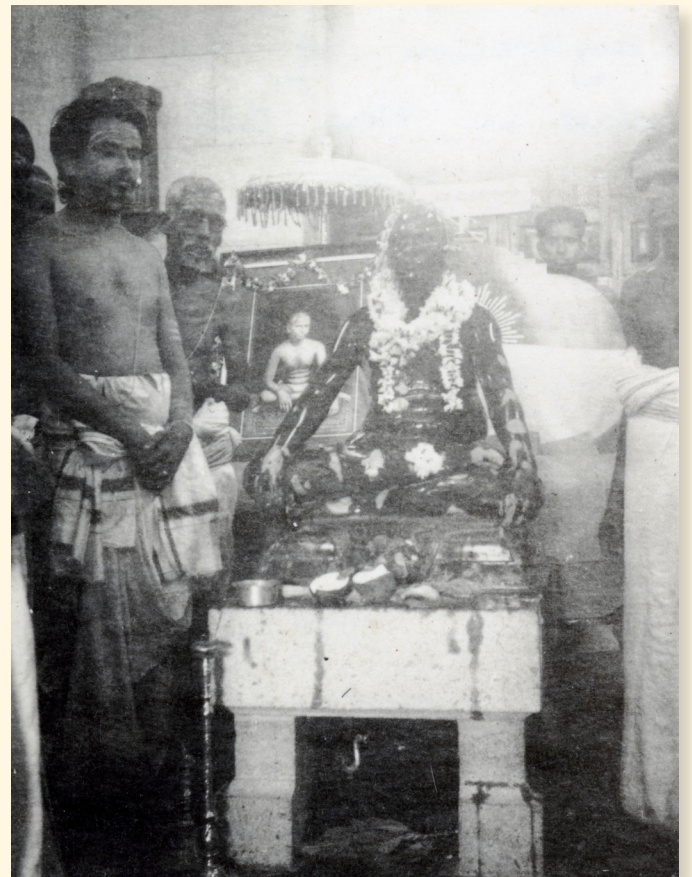
model of Bhagavan (see photos on pages 3 and 5). In general, Bhagavan went along with whatever proposals were made to him in earnest.

One day when the black granite stone statue was nearing completion, Vaidyanatha Sthapati was making adjustments with his hammer and chisel. Bhagavan looked at the statue and remarked with enthusiasm: “Ah, see, your Bhagavan has now come forth”. Vaidyanatha Sthapati stopped what he was doing. Taking these words as a blessing from the Master that the statue was ready, the Sthapati laid down his chisel and hammer, and made no further alterations. —

Postscript

One *panchaloha* statue made of Bhagavan is said to have had engraved upon it the following *sloka* from the *Ramana Gita*.

In the midst of the cave of the heart, in the form of the I, in the form of the Self, unique and solitary, Brahman’s glory shines directly from Himself on Himself. Penetrate deep within, your thought piercing to its source, your mind having plunged into itself, with breath and sense held close in the depths, your whole self fixed in yourself, and there, simply BE!



Installation Ceremony of Bhagavan’s statue in the New Hall





RAMANA REFLECTIONS

Lemon Seeds and the Mango Tree

Devotees may recall the moment in December 1898 when after twenty-eight months had passed since their separation, Bhagavan's mother set eyes on her son at Pavala Kunru. She was certain that she would be able to persuade him to return home with her but found that he would not even utter a word to her. She tried cooking his favourite dishes but without effect. The sadhus living with Bhagavan sensed her pain and took pity on her. Finally, Pachaiyappa Pillai said to Bhagavan, "Your mother is weeping and praying, why do you not at least give her an answer? Whether it is 'yes' or 'no', you can reply to her. Swami need not break his vow of silence. Here are pencil and paper. Swami can write down what he has to say."¹

¹ *In the Kitchen with Bhagavan*, pp. 45.

Taking the pencil and paper and in utterly impersonal language, Bhagavan wrote:

*The Ordainer controls the fate of souls in accordance with their prarabdhakarma. Whatever is destined not to happen will not happen, try as you may. Whatever is destined to happen will happen, do what you may to prevent it. This is certain. The best course, therefore, is to remain silent.*²

Over the decades since, many of us have taken this perfectly true statement as the kernel and essence of Bhagavan's teaching. Many of us assume that if the Ordainer controls the fate of souls in accordance with their prarabdhakarma, it means that all things are controlled—absolutely. This interpretation has advantages in that it helps us to be free of the idea of being in control of our lives and of taking on too much responsibility for the conditions of our lives. This is useful in that it can help us to surrender identification with being the doer. But is this the interpretation that Bhagavan intended?

The Ordainer controls the fate of souls according to its prarabdhakarma. How could it be otherwise? The Ordainer ordains, and that which is ordained *must* come to pass—that is what 'ordained' means. This is an *a priori* statement, true in any world and in any historical time period simply by virtue of the meaning of the words. In other words, it is inherently true. Prarabdha means 'already begun' and is that portion of (*sanchita*) karma from the past that is already being worked out. Bhagavan is saying that what is determined will take place according to deterministic laws. But this does not mean he is saying that *all* things are strictly determined.

One of the arguments in formal logic is inferring the particular from the general. If the two following statements are true: 1) "All boys like x", and 2) "Kumar is a boy", then the statement, "Kumar likes x" is by necessity also true. But the inverse is not likewise valid: 1) "Kumar is a boy" and 2) "Kumar likes x", therefore, "All boys like x". This conclusion constitutes an inferential fallacy.

When we look out at the natural world, we see deterministic scenarios. For example, not every

² *Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self-Knowledge*, pp. 39-40.





lemon seed brings forth a tree, but every lemon tree comes forth from a lemon seed. Similarly, no lemon seed, even if we plant ten crores of them and pray for them steadfastly, will ever bring forth a mango tree. There are deterministic forces at work (not least of all, mitochondrial DNA) that guarantee no mango tree can come from a lemon seed.

As for the centuries-old *free-will vs determinism* debate, what makes it so curious is that from the beginning it was assumed that there could only be the one or the other of these two possibilities whereas, in reality, freedom and deterministic causes are at work in nature simultaneously.

There is a scene in Copenhagen in the early 1920s when Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg sat and talked after the day's conference on quantum probability. The two renowned physicists talked till midnight and when they parted, Bohr could not go home immediately but walked the streets pondering the implications of the conversation. Just when it became clear to him that reality at its most fundamental level is not governed by mechanistic laws—as the Newtonian worldview presupposed—but is probabilistic, he looked up and noticed that the sun was rising and realised that in his reverie and bewilderment, he had walked the whole night long.

A subsequent thought experiment that came to be known as Schrödinger's Cat revealed that quantum-scale probability can have macro-scale consequences and the life or death of the proverbial cat hangs in the balance on purely probabilistic grounds.

But even if such developments in 20th century physics are interesting, even earth-shaking, we don't need science to help us read Bhagavan or to understand the implications of his letter to his mother. That Bhagavan was not a strict determinist is made clear by his admonitions to devotees to seek the Self and to practice *atma vichara*. If the universe and all human life were strictly determined, no sadhana or seeking would really be meaningful as all outcomes of our efforts to purify the mind and body and be free of delusion would already be determined in advance. Key in understanding Bhagavan's letter to his mother is seeing that his use of the word "soul"



does not refer to "The Self" but rather to the jiva which includes the ego. The ego, we could say, is born of conditioned responses, born of karmic forces. But the Self is beyond all such forces:

If the agent, upon whom the Karma depends, namely the ego, which has come into existence between the body and the Self, merges in its source and loses its form, how can the Karma, which depends upon it, survive? When there is no 'I' there is no Karma.³

In this understanding, we are ultimately free. But then, we should have to be quick to point out that it is not clear what this "we" is, or what "free" is. Bhagavan would answer that the Self is not bound by conditions. The Self is unconditional while the conditioned is bound by conditions and is thus not ultimately free. Arguably, the interface between the conditional and the unconditional—between matter and spirit, the manifest and the unmanifest—is a mystery and cannot ultimately be elucidated in words. If science tends to see the mind as only a neural correlate in the brain, tradition says that matter is only an appearance in the mind. Yet such philosophical questions need not be pondered to excess by devotees of Bhagavan. If Bhagavan for his part never got bogged down in such debates, we need not penetrate this riddle in

³ "Spiritual Instructions" from *Collected Works*, p. 68.





order to know the Self. We need only acknowledge the fact that, in part, our make-up is born of causes and conditions, but the deeper part of our Self is beyond the effects of past actions.

In the first and third verses of *Upadesa Saram*, Bhagavan writes:

Action yields fruit, for so the Lord ordains it. How can action be the Lord? It is insentient. ... Disinterested action surrendered to the Lord purifies the mind and points the way to moksha.

We do not need to solve the free-will/determinism debate but instead become free of the limiting

beliefs we have about our capacity to act. To be sure, withdrawing from a strict deterministic view has the downside of becoming responsible for our lives, but this is precisely the move Bhagavan is calling us to make when he urges us to practise *atma vichara*. If it has been said that *destiny is a tightly bound bundle of habits—change the habits and you change the destiny*, herein lies the potential power of sadhana, changing and purifying what can be changed and purified, and surrendering to what cannot be changed. —

(to be continued)



Events in Sri Ramanasramam: Navaratri Celebrations

Since the previous Tamil month began with Amavasya and ended with Amavasya, the muhurtha rule that the festival should begin on the second of the two Amavasyas applied this year. Navaratri began as late as it can according to liturgical calendar guidelines with the first night puja taking place on the 17th October. It is on Amavasya day that the deity normally comes out and goes in procession around the Ashram with the first of nine alankaras taking place on the following day. But this year, owing to the pandemic lockdown, there was no procession and Yogambika remained in quarantine much like many around the world experiencing second waves of the virus. Though Yogambika never left her station in the inner sanctum, Ashram Navaratri went on nonetheless with a handful of staff in attendance. Meanwhile, at the Big Temple, Navaratri *alankaras* took place each night in the Kalyana Mantapam but were closed to the public. A similar programme is projected for Karthigai Deepam in view of pandemic protocols and will most likely be closed to the public. —

[For videos of the nightly pujas, please see the Ashram YouTube channel at: <<https://www.youtube.com/c/sriramanasramam>>]

