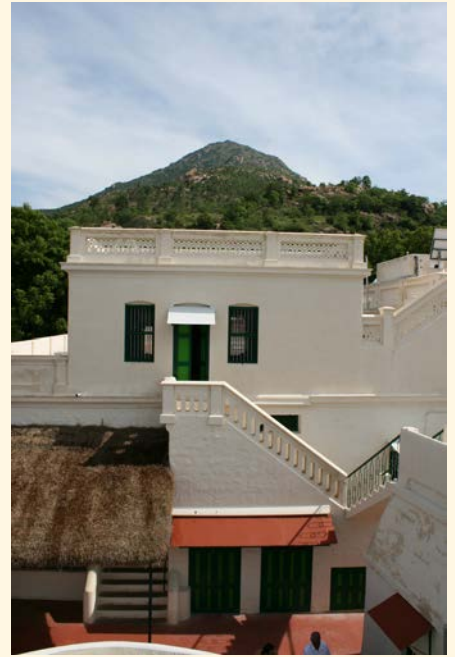


Saranagati



SARANAGATI
SRI RAMANASRAMAM

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IN THIS
ISSUE

Dear Devotees,

Recently we have had Padma Swaminathan staying in Kurangu Thottam. She has been coming to the Ashram for 90 years, her first visit being in 1925 at the age of seven. Now age 98, healthy and cheerful, she still reads Bhagavan's books and listens to recordings of Bhagavan's Tamil verses each morning. You can read her amazing life story on pp. 5-7.

This edition also sees the continuation of the feature series, *In the Kitchen with Bhagavan*, and chronicles Mother's life with Bhagavan and the establishment of an Ashram on the Hill. An account of further tree-planting at Arunachala is also detailed on p. 8.

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

In Sri Bhagavan,
The Editorial Team

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Calendar of Upcoming Events

6th October (Tues) Purnavasu Day
13th October (Tues) Navaratri Commences
21st October (Weds) Saraswati Puja
22nd October (Thurs) Vijaya Dasami
26th October (Mon) Full Moon
2nd November (Mon) Purnavasu
9th November (Mon) Annamalai Swami Day

10th November (Tues) Deepavali
16th November (Mon) Karthigai Festival Begins
25th November (Weds) Karthigai Deepam Day
29th November (Sun) Purnavasu Day
24th December (Thurs) Full Moon Day
27th December (Sun) Bhagavan's 136th Jayanti
31st December (Thurs) Lucy Ma Day





In the Kitchen with Bhagavan

Part IX: Establishing an Ashram on the Hill

When Mother came to live in Tiruvannamalai, there was understandably confusion among Bhagavan's sadhu-devotees. At first she stayed in town with Echammal and climbed the Hill each day to see Bhagavan. But after a couple of weeks, she found the exertions of the climb too much for her aging frame. Echammal appealed directly to the sadhus living with Bhagavan, asking that Mother be allowed to settle permanently in the company of Bhagavan, promising that neither she nor Akhilandammal nor Mudaliar Patti would seek similar favour.

The appeal was reasonable enough but even after assuring them that Mother would be the only exception to the rule of male-only residents, the sadhus rejected the proposal outright, citing traditional practices for monks. After all efforts had been exhausted, a sorrowful Alagammal stood up to leave. Just as she started out, Bhagavan also got up, took her by the arm and said in a soft voice, "Come. Let us go. If not here, we can stay somewhere else." If these words were a soothing balm to Mother's ears, especially recalling her son's cool detachment at Pavalakunru all those years earlier, the very same words were pure dread for the company of sadhus who had enjoyed the privilege

of dwelling alongside Sri Bhagavan. As the two began to leave, the sadhus fell at Bhagavan's feet and begged him, "Please do not go anywhere. Pray do stay here along with Mother."¹

Though this ended any challenges from the resident community to Mother's joining them, still there was demur in the town. Seshadri Swami jokes, as mentioned in an earlier chapter², of the *grihastha* living on the Hill, where the visitor can "get sugar cakes," may have been misunderstood by some. He knew Ramana's worth. But some ordinary people failed to recognise who the Swami from Tiruchuli actually was. Kavyakantha Ganapathi Muni had spoken wisely in 1907 when he said that in as much as the Mouni Swami "proclaims the Truth" and "bestows liberation on those who approach him"³, he must be called *Maharshi* or 'Great Seer'. Indeed it was Nayana who gave Bhagavan the name, Sri Ramana Maharshi, a name that stuck because the denizens of Tiruvannamalai intuited that the Swami was a great sage and no ordinary sadhu. But what they did not immediately grasp is that a Maharishi is beyond the four *asramas*, is not bound by the rules of sannyasa and transcends the entire sphere of monastic discipline. Since the Maharshi is far advanced with respect to any programme directed toward ascent or the gaining of enlightenment, he need not worry about such customs. The great Rishis of old lived in remote settings, on or near mountains or forests and often built Ashrams from which to disseminate their teachings. The guru/shishya tradition had always found its home in Ashrams, which were gurukulas or residential schools, and while *srama* means "striving towards liberation", the Ashrams of the Great Rishis were not intended as schools for their own liberation — which had already been vouchsafed — but rather for the liberation of those who came to seek their guidance. So while during the early years in Tiruvannamalai the locals called the young sage by various names — the Brahmana Swami, Gurumurtham Swami or Mouni Swami — it was Ganapathi Muni who had the depth

¹ *Letter and Recollections from Sri Ramanasramam*, pp. 125-26.

² Part IV of this series in May 2015 issue of *Saranagati*.

³ *Mahatapasvi*, chapters 12 and 18.





of insight to recognise Venkataraman as one in the line of the Rishis of old, the Blessed One — Bhagavan.

Even great Rishis that were householders were simultaneously ascetics, and Gautama Rishi, who in olden days had his Ashram not far from Virupaksha Cave, was living there with his wife and son when Mother Parvati came to do her penance. Though Bhagavan was not a householder, the founding of a kitchen on the Hill and sharing residence with family members is in keeping with the traditions of the Great Ones of old. And so an Ashram was to be built on the Hill to serve as the meeting point for pilgrims and seekers of all walks of life who were destined to come to the Maharshi for counsel.

In 1916, whether Mother knew it or not, she had come to Arunachala in order to train with a Maharshi — her son — and to prepare for the culminating, transformative moment of her life, an event that would greet her just six years thence.

Entering the Ashram

Her arrival was well-timed as construction work on an ashram situated just a short distance up from Virupaksha Cave was nearing completion. The history of the project goes back to 1902 when Bhagavan noticed dampness in the soil above the site and suggested Jadaswami dig there. After only a few feet of earth had been excavated, a spring was unearthed. This would serve as the principal source of water for years to come and would help solve the seasonal drought problem at Virupaksha. But the devotee Kandaswami, from Coimbatore, was pained to see Bhagavan climbing daily up the Hill to fill *kamandalus*. He thus made up his mind to build Bhagavan an Ashram just below the newfound spring. Thus starting in 1906 and for the next ten years, he laboured with ‘almost superhuman effort’ to reduce solid stone to level ground, to fashion the front perimeter container wall, to fill it in with excavated rock and bring in soil by hand for planting fruit-bearing trees such as mango, jackfruit and coconut. Once the buildings and compound wall had come up, he capped his efforts by designing and planting a garden in this first Ashram on Arunachala, which Bhagavan aptly



named *Skandasramam*, in honour of its diligent builder. But the name was apt indeed, for had not Nayana identified Bhagavan as Skanda Himself?

Instructing Mother

It was at this key juncture that Mother appeared. Hers would be an important role, not only in being the one to initiate cooking and serve Bhagavan’s many visitors — a tradition that has continued and grown to the present day — but she would be the first to demonstrate for all, by Bhagavan’s grace, the path to awakening and its completion in his capable hands. To fulfil this role, much work would be required of her and the Master wasted no time in getting started. Right from the start, he sought to wean her of any lingering notions she might have about family ties earning her special privileges. She was expected to make sacrifices like everyone else regarding food and the comforts of daily life. She would have to learn to settle for what was given and avoid the temptation to seek special items for her own comfort. But what came most unexpectedly was being compelled to put aside revered customs from her upbringing regarding caste purity and food pollution. Bhagavan would urge her to a transcendent understanding regarding the nature of the Divine which on occasion would invariably rub up against social norms. He did not deplore orthodoxy but even respected it. But he was keen that she should live a truly spiritual life than mere conformity with societal conventions. He made use of light-hearted humour to free her up from habitual patterns of living: “O see, your cloth has been touched by someone — *madi* (kosher) is gone, polluted. O religion is gone”. Or when she resisted making use of non-kosher





Bhagavan with Mother and devotees
in front of the kitchen at Skandasramam

food items that had been donated, he would chide her: “Yes, this onion, a great obstruction to *moksha*!”⁴

Though Bhagavan never resorted to coercion, he was nevertheless at times stern: “No one will be considered an untouchable here. Those who do not like it may eat elsewhere.”⁵

Once when a woodcutter came, Mother would not give him food till Bhagavan had eaten, after which she herself would eat and only then would the guest be given food. Bhagavan recalling the event later said:

“I refused to eat till the man had been decently fed. She would not yield at first but wept and fasted, but I was adamant too. She finally saw that she could not have her way in this matter. What is the difference between man and man! Is it not correct to see God in all?”⁶

⁴ *The Call Divine*, 1st January 1960, p. 212.

⁵ *Ramana Smriti*, pp. 163-44.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 163-44.

Another time Sabhapathiswamy, a strict vegetarian and a very learned man for whom Mother had great affection, came to Skandasramam with Narayanaswami after the lunch was over. Seeing the leaf plates, they collected them and started eating the leftovers. Just then Bhagavan appeared on the scene. While pleased with their detachment and their spirit of renunciation, he made use of the opportunity to prod Mother in a good-humoured manner. He called to her and pointed at the two banqueters: “See here, look at your sons’ orthodox behaviour!”⁷

Kunjuswami told of another time when grass-cutters had arrived and Bhagavan offered them *kanji*. Kunjuswami knew that Mother had not yet eaten and if the grass-cutters ate first, she would not be able—according to tradition—to take any of the food herself. He quietly mentioned it to Bhagavan but Bhagavan only repeated the request, asking Kunjuswami to have her bring out the food for the grass-cutters. When Mother at last came out and lodged a gentle complaint, Bhagavan pointed to the perspiring men and women and said to her with great emotion, “Do you know who these people are? They are Lord Arunachala Himself.”

Moved by his words, with tears in her eyes, she obligingly served the meals to the cutters and from that time onward never invoked this custom again but freely shared her food with all.⁸

(to be continued)

⁷ Kunjuswami’s *Reminiscences*, in the chapter called ‘Absolute Renunciation’.

⁸ Nochur Venkataraman recounting a personal interview with Kunjuswami.

Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi: Vasanas

D.: What are the obstacles which hinder realisation of the Self?

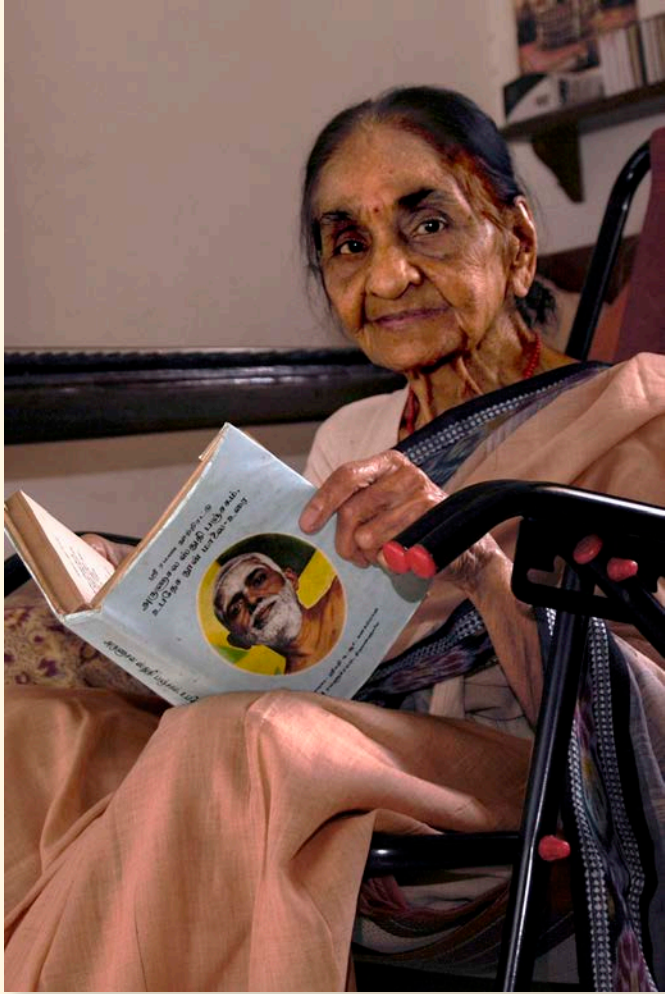
M.: The habits of mind (*vasanas*).

D.: How to overcome mental habits (*vasanas*)?

M.: By realising the Self. [...] It is the ego which raises difficulties, creating obstacles and then suffers from the perplexity of apparent paradoxes. Find out who makes the enquiries and the Self will be found. [...] The Self is ever there, there is nothing without it. Be the Self and desires and doubts will disappear.

— Talks §13





Coming to Bhagavan: Padma Swaminathan

Just recently, in mid-September 2015, the Ashram hosted a devotee who has been visiting Sri Ramanasramam for 90 years. Padma Swaminathan, now 98 years old, first came to Bhagavan in 1925 as a girl of seven with her father, F. G. Natesa Iyer. But when questioning her about her long life, one would get the impression that her near 100 years have been quite ordinary, perhaps comprising the simple life of a housewife. Yet history paints a different picture and the modest reminiscences born of Padma's humble, unassuming nature, need supplementing, for indeed the circumstances of her life have been anything but ordinary.

Padma's Father, Natesa Iyer

When Padmamma was born at the end of 1917, her father had just represented Trichinopoly as delegate to the annual Indian National Congress where he served as an elected member of the All-India Congress Committee and the Subjects Committee. Just two years earlier, he had founded the Trichy-based *Rasika Ranjana Sabha*, (later earning him the respectful title, "Father of Modern Tamil Drama"). In the years of Padma's early life, her father produced plays and performed leading roles in the dramas of Shakespeare, all the while serving as the first Indian officer in the *Southern Railways* (and later as District Traffic Superintendent). Yet his greatest gifts were revealed only later in spotting young talent for the stage, cinema and concert hall. He is credited with having brought up the first 'superstar of South Indian cinema', M. K. Thyagaraja Bhagavathar who he discovered as a ten-year old boy singing bhajans. Padma's father later spotted the talent of K. B. Sundarambal, who as a child earned her living by singing in trains around Trichy. It was none other than Natesa Iyer who in 1927 organised the first public concert for the eleven-year old M.S. Subbulakshmi in Rockfort Temple's hundred-pillar hall. Being of the same age, Padma and Subbulakshmi became close friends from an early age. Eleven years after her first concert, Subbulakshmi made her debut in cinema with the leading role opposite Padma's father, Natesa Iyer, in the acclaimed 1938 film, *Seva Sadanam*.

Such was the charged atmosphere of Padma Swaminathan's upbringing, a world bristling with artistic fervour and seemingly boundless opportunities for study and progress in the arts where she learned classical voice and the veena from the most gifted performers of her day. She also earned a diploma from the Central College of Carnatic Music in Chennai under the principalship of Musiri Subramaniya Iyer. For more than 40 years, she was a performer for *All India Radio*.

But thanks to her father, Padma's youth was infused with a still more important element, namely, spiritual instruction. In spite of her father's multiple and varied endeavours, Natesa Iyer always made it a point to take

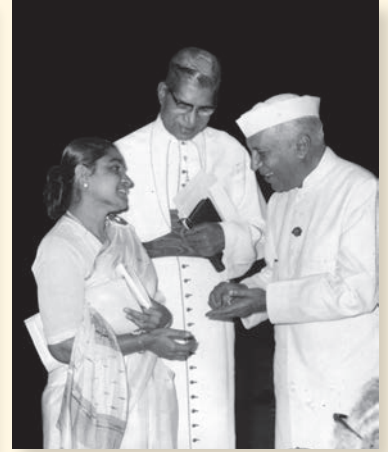




Padma with daughters in a concert during the Jayanti celebrations at the Ramana Kendra, Mumbai (ca. 1958)



With Lady Premilla Thackersey, Vice-chancellor of SNDT (1968)



With Pandit Nehru, Cardinal Gracias (1963)

the opportunity to look after the family’s spiritual needs. As destiny would have it, even his professional duties led him to intimate encounters with saintly figures. For example, one time after Natesa Iyer had been elected Mayor of Trichy, he was nominated Chairman of the Reception Committee for the Acharya of Sri Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam. It had been the Paramacharya that had given Natesa Iyer priceless spiritual guidance as a young man. The reception involved a procession seven miles long, with seven groups of nadaswaram players, three band groups, four elephants, horses and camels, bhajan singers and Seva Samitis—a feat of administrative coordination but one that did not distract Natesa Iyer from the saint’s presence. Blessed to hold the frontside of the ivory palanquin where Sri Sankaracharya Swamigal was seated, Natesa Iyer had the opportunity to spend the entire day in close proximity with the Mahaswami who during the 16-hour darshan appeared to him “as Lord Siva Himself”.

At the Feet of Bhagavan

By the mid-1920s, Natesa Iyer had found his way to Bhagavan and brought the whole family to Sri Ramanasramam. On an early visit, Natesa Iyer prompted the little child Padma to move up closer to Bhagavan on a stone bench in the early days of the Mother’s Samadhi. She inched her way up to him and stood near Bhagavan with her chin resting on the railing that stood there, staring into Bhagavan’s soft, well-like eyes as the sage sat motionless in deep

absorption. “It was a vivid experience”, she later recalled. But Padma remembers with special fondness an incident that occurred on a subsequent visit at the age of twelve. The year was 1930 and she had come to the Ashram with her father:

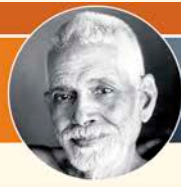
“Chinnaswami welcomed us warmly and informed my father that Bhagavan had gone up the Hill. He asked us to wait at the back side of the Ashram in order to meet Bhagavan as soon as he came down from the Hill. As we stood waiting, Bhagavan descended the Hill with his staff in hand. Against the backdrop of Arunachala and the sky Bhagavan looked gigantic to my eyes. He invited us to have food with him.

“In the dining hall, I sat opposite Bhagavan. By chance when I lifted my head, I saw that he was looking directly and intently at me. I started to blush—young girl that I was—as his gaze fell steadily upon me. Once my glance was locked on his, I did not lower my gaze. Time passed. All the others had gotten up and gone out of the dining hall. My hand had dried up completely. Yet neither of us moved from our seats. Bhagavan was still sitting there and looking at me. I became conscious of this only later when Bhagavan shifted his gaze and got up. How can I explain this *nayana diksha*? I saw him so close. His eyes were jet-black like black beetles (*karuvandu*). It is impossible to forget that gaze.”¹

On Wednesday, 12th April 1950, just two days before Bhagavan’s Mahanirvana, her sister notified

¹ *The Ramana Way*, March 2015, pp. 33-36.





her of Bhagavan's condition and she rushed with her children from Madras for what would be her last darshan. When they arrived, Janaki Mata was having a group of children dance to *Aksharamanamalai* under a tree in the open space before the Nirvana Room where people waited patiently in a queue to have Bhagavan's darshan. Padma and her children were asked to join the queue and were blessed to have Bhagavan's darshan, alas, for the last time.

Two days later in Chennai, something prompted her to look up at the nighttime sky and she beheld the famed shooting star, large and luminous, that arched across the South Indian heavens announcing the departure of a great light.

Married Life

During her adolescence, Padma became a Gandhian like her father, learned to use the *charḡa* and chose to wear only *khadhi* for the rest of her life. She served in the Congress Seva Dal, where she headed up a group of 200 volunteers in *Srinivasa Gandhi Nilayam*, Chennai. She was married in 1935 to T.S. Swaminathan, an ardent Gandhian and freedom fighter who in 1930 spent four months of rigorous imprisonment in Multan Jail, (where Bhagat

Singh was lodged), for taking part in the Quit India movement.²

The marriage, blessed through a note sent by Bhagavan, was a happy one, brought forth three sons and three daughters and lasted 72 years until her husband's death in 2007 at the age of 98.

Today at Age 98

When asked about her and her husband's longevity and good health, Padma attributes it to "God's blessing and *Nature Cure*", the system of diet and health care that she learned directly from Sri K. Lakshmana Sharma as one of his chief disciples. She and her husband followed its dietary restrictions all their lives and Padma continues to do so till today. Even now at 98, without a single grey hair, she moves about freely on her own in her residence in Coimbatore where she now lives, speaks with clarity and enthusiasm and needs no assistance in her daily activities. She begins every day listening to recordings of Bhagavan's *Aksharamanamalai* and reading from the Ashram literature.

May Bhagavan bless her with many more years of healthy living and continued visits to Sri Ramanasramam. —

² He had been in charge of organising volunteers to prevent the movement of foreign goods from Chandni Chowk in Delhi.

Wordwise: Vasana

वासना

Vasana (from *vas*, 'living' or 'remaining'): impression, subconscious inclination, karmic imprint, conditioning, latent tendency, karmic residue, disposition, habit formation, predisposition, propensity, habitual patterning, mental proclivity.

Vasanas are impressions in the mind born of past perception and derived from memory, predispositions or habits, circumscribing future actions and forming the basis of personality. They are born ultimately of actions in previous births. Bhagavan says, "Rebirth is due to the *vasanas* which are binding but these are destroyed in the state of Self-realisation. The Realised cannot be reborn." (*Talks*, §317).





Further Tree-Planting and Improvements on Arunachala



Between 9-15th September, under the supervision of Skandasramam care-taker Swami Brahmananda, Ashram workers planted 100 additional trees along the path up to Skandasramam. Among the trees were evergreens, seven varieties in all, donated by the nearby Govinda Nursery run by Arun and Govinda. The donated trees are native to the area and have the innate strength to endure the harsh climate extremes on the Hill between the flashfloods of the monsoon months and the intense heat of April-May. In addition to the planting, repairs were made to the path up to Skandasramam and extra steps were added. Stone meditation seats were also put in place along the path for the benefit of pilgrims visiting Skandasramam and Virupaksha Cave.

Events at Sri Ramanasramam: Muruganar Day



On 12th September, Ashram devotees gathered at the samadhi of Sri Muruganar and chanted verses from *Sri Ramana Sannidhi Murai* and *Aksharamanamalai* while abhishekam was underway, followed by puja and prasad.

Saranagati's Suggestion Box

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

<saranagati.suggestionbox@gmail.com>

