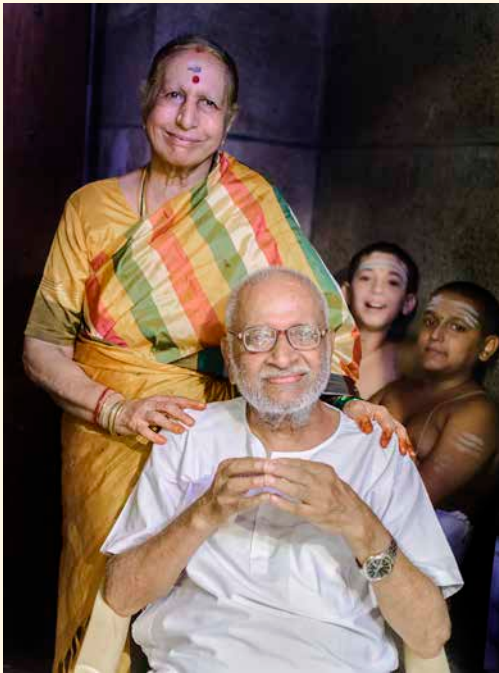


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ISSUE

Dear Devotees,

The atmosphere in the Ashram has been blissfully festive during these ten days of Navaratri and Mother's grace abounds.

This issue takes up the life of service of Echammal who came to Bhagavan in 1906 when she took a vow never to eat until she had first fed Bhagavan. She kept the vow for nearly 40 years until her death in 1945. Her gripping story begins on page 3.

Navaratri coverage can be found with photos by Dev Gogoi on page 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

5th October (Thur) Full Moon
13th October (Fri) Punarvasu Day
18th October (Weds) Deepavali
3rd November (Fri) Full Moon
8th November (Weds) Mastan Swami Day
9th November (Thur) Punarvasu/Annamalai Swami Day

23rd November (Thur) Kartigai Deepam Flag-raising
2nd December (Sat) Kartigai Deepam
3rd December (Sun) Full Moon Day
6th December (Weds) Punarvasu Day
31st December (Sun) Lucy-ma Day
3rd January (Weds) Bhagavan's Jayanthi Day





Echammal's Lifetime of Selfless Service

Echammal grew up in Mandakolathur, about 45 kms north of Tiruvannamalai and came to Bhagavan in 1906. Known as Lakshmiammal, she lived at Karedu village in Nellore district where her husband had been posted.¹ She came to Bhagavan in a state of utter brokenness after losing her husband, her only son and her only daughter, one after the other, in what had been till then a happy family life.

Her time of trial began around the time she had a dream of a young ascetic with a clean-shaven head, clad in a cod piece, who placed something in her hand. He seemed to come to assist her but in what way was not clear. She consulted someone knowledgeable in omens, who said that the boy was Kumaraswami, the family deity of her in-laws. She concluded that what he had given her was *prasadam*.

¹ *Ramana Leela*, p. 86.

When her husband was transferred to Kandukuru, the same figure appeared in another dream and this time gave her a letter written in Devanagari. She told him that she could not read Devanagari but the young ascetic advised her to consult a certain Sanskrit pandit who lived in the town. When she went to the pandit, he said that the dream was Subrahmanya's *prasadam* and initiated her with the appropriate mantra. It was just after this that disaster struck. Both her husband and not long afterward, her son, died suddenly. She returned to her native village with her daughter. When the girl was about ten years old, Echammal arranged her marriage. But just a few days before the wedding was to take place, the girl fell ill with a high fever. A third dream came and this time the boy said, "Three births of yours are over. Viswanatha is calling you. Come to the Hill." A few days later, her daughter passed away.²

Now alone in the world, Echammal was inconsolable and suffered a grief so debilitating that she was unable to function normally, or even to speak. Her village home became a place of torment. Her family supported her wish to go on pilgrimage and she thus went to Gokarna to seek solace and guidance and to search for places where she might serve saints and holy men. But all efforts to ease the bitter taste of sorrow met in failure. When she returned home, a relative advised her to go to Arunachala where 'Brahmana Swami' lived. "He is only twenty-five years old but has extraordinary powers. He will be able to help you in your distress." The relative further predicted that if she went there, she would not return.³

Echammal left the next day. When she arrived in Tiruvannamalai, she avoided contacting family relations there, loathe to reignite the waves of sorrow. Instead she sought the help of a friend. The two went up the Hill in search of the Swami. When at last they found him, Echammal stood in silence before him with tears rolling down her cheeks. A miracle that seemed impossible began to unfold even in this very first encounter where no words were exchanged.

By the time she returned to her friend's house, Echammal said that for the first time since the loss of her children and husband, the overpowering sadness that

² *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.





had gripped her heart unceasingly began to lift. Only then did she begin to understand who the young ascetic was that had appeared in her dreams.

Echammal returned each day to the young Swami at Virupaksha Cave and in a short time was able to give voice to the events of her life and spoke openly about her deceased children. She began to find some solace and by his grace, found out what she had to do. Vowing never to leave him, she began bringing food up the hill and took a second vow: that she would not take food on any given day till she had first fed the Swami. “I revere, I adore, I worship this Swami,” was all she could say.⁴

Echammal took up intensive spiritual work under Bhagavan’s guidance. She had learned ashtanga yoga when in Gokarna from a North Indian who instructed her in various yogic concentration practices, among them a practice that involved focusing the attention on the end of the nose. Devotees observed her falling into deep states of absorption for long periods of time, totally oblivious to the body. But when she reported seeing a blissful light in such states, Bhagavan counselled her with the following words: “Those objective lights you see are not your real goal. You should aim at realising your Self and nothing short of it.”⁵ Bhagavan told her, “Just meditate.” Ever obedient to the master, she discontinued her former practices and from that day onward, took up self-inquiry and practiced meditation under Bhagavan’s supervision. Her resolve in service, meditation and especially her constant remembrance of Bhagavan brought an unmistakable intensity of focus to her life.

Bhagavan helped her see that all her grief, worries and anxieties were due to erroneously identifying herself with the body, the senses and the mind. He made her see

4 *Self-Realisation*, Chapter XVI.

5 *Ibid.*, Chapter XVI.

that clinging to the false self only leads to attachments which would include husband, son and daughter. He urged her to discover through introspection who the real “I” is. He told her that the Lord deprives the one on whom He wants to shower His grace. Echammal took Bhagavan’s advice seriously and within a short period of time was able to find peace.⁶

Though having surmounted her grief, the mothering instinct nevertheless remained, and with the young Swami’s permission, Echammal adopted her brother’s daughter Chellammal. She raised the girl in Tiruvannamalai and often sent her up the Hill to deliver food to Bhagavan. One day, when taking food to Bhagavan, Chellammal found a piece of paper with a Sanskrit text written on it and took it to Bhagavan. When devotees sat to eat, the girl refused any food saying, “No, no, today is *ekadasi*, I cannot eat, the vow of fasting must be observed. My mother said none of us should eat on *ekadasi*.”

Bhagavan casually asked her what she had in her hand. She gave him the paper which contained a sloka from *Srimad Bhagavatam*. It said:

When one has learned to love the company of sages and satsang, why follow rules of discipline? When a cool southern breeze is blowing, what need is there for a fan?

Explaining it to Chellammal, Bhagavan told her, “When you are in satsang, no ritualistic injunctions need to be followed”. Thus, he persuaded Chellammal to eat.⁷

When Chellamma was of age, Echammal arranged her marriage and in November 1921, Echammal was given a grandson who got the name “Ramana”. But rejoicing soon turned to sorrow. Echammal received a telegram that informed her that Chellamma had died of complications from childbirth. Echammal ran up the

6 *The Call Divine*, vol. 5, pp. 506-507.

7 *Ramana Periya Puranam* (Unpublished Manuscript), p. 42.

Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi: Service to the Guru and Realising the Self

D.: It is said in *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*: “Realise the Self with pure intellect and also by service to the Guru and by enquiry.” How are they to be reconciled?

M.: *Iswaro Gururatmeti* - Iswara, Guru and Self are identical. So long as the sense of duality persists in you, you seek a Guru considering that he stands apart. He however teaches you the truth and you gain the insight.

— Talks §284





hill to Bhagavan and showed him the telegram which brought tears to his eyes. Echammal hastened to her son-in-law's village for the funeral. When she returned, she brought the newborn baby 'Ramana' with her and placed him in the arms of Bhagavan. Bhagavan commiserated with Echammal for whom fate had been so stern, and even wept with her, feeling intensely her loss.

No doubt it was Bhagavan's empathy and the duties associated with Echammal's *vratam* of serving him each day that gave her the strength to come through this latest and last ordeal. By his presence, Echammal weathered the storm and did not linger in her grief. She managed the loneliness of life without a family by feeding Bhagavan and making his devotees her family instead.⁸ As her father had left her some money when he died, with it, she converted her house into a choultry for Bhagavan's devotees and welcomed them with warm hospitality.

Stories from the Hill

When devotees came to her house, they not only got a hot meal but, if they pressed her, they could get her to tell stories from the early days on the Hill.

Echammal once narrated an anecdote of when enroute up to Virupaksha Cave, she noticed a crow attacking a parrot up in the treetop. The parrot suddenly fell to the ground. Echammal picked it up and took it to Bhagavan. Despite Bhagavan's tender care, however, the parrot died a few days later. Bhagavan arranged for its burial and predicted that a building would come up over the gravesite. Sure enough, a building was later constructed and the adjacent cave got the name *Kiliguha* or "Parrot Cave".⁹

Another time when Echammal was carrying food up the Hill in the middle of a heavy downpour, she took shelter just before reaching Virupaksha Cave. She was close enough to espy Bhagavan sitting outdoors. As she sat and waited, she noticed that the area around Bhagavan was completely dry whereas in the areas a little distant to either side of him, the rain came down in buckets.¹⁰

One time a pundit from North India was talking with Sri Bhagavan at Virupaksha Cave when Echammal arrived with food, looking startled. Asked what was the matter,

⁸ *Self-Realisation*, Chapter XVI; *Ramana Leela*, pp. 88-89.

⁹ *Ramana Leela*, pp. 90-91.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 90.



Young Chellamma with Bhagavan at Virupaksha (ca. 1913)

she said that when she was passing Sadguruswami Cave (Banyan Tree Cave) she thought she saw Bhagavan standing with someone on the path. She continued on her way but heard a voice say, "Why go farther up when I am here?" She turned to look but no one was there. She then hurried to the Ashram in a panic.

The pundit remonstrated with Bhagavan saying, "What, Swami, while sitting here with me, you manifest yourself before this lady but do not deign to show any similar mark of your grace to me?" Bhagavan defended himself saying that Echammal's visions were due to her constant concentration on him.¹¹

¹¹ *Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self-Knowledge*, pp. 55-56.





Echammal on the Hill with Bhagavan and Vasudeva Sastri (ca. 1915)

Bandits

Once when Bhagavan was attacked by bandits, Echammal was away. On hearing the news, she hastened to the Ashram and seeing Bhagavan, burst into tears. Bhagavan made light of the affair and told her, “Why are you excited? This is nothing unusual. Just as you serve me with eatables, these robbers have served me with blows. They are also my devotees!”¹²

Offerings to Bhagavan

When Bhagavan was still at Virupakshi Cave, Echammal installed photos of Bhagavan and Seshadri Swami in her house. She took a vow to do puja offering 100,000 tender *vilva* leaves. After informing Bhagavan, she began collecting the leaves of the sacred *vilva* tree. But as summer closed in, the leaves became scarce. She

¹² *Sri Ramana Reminiscences*, G.V. Subbaramayya, p.16.

only managed half of her pledge before discovering that no *vilva* leaves were to be found anywhere. She narrated her plight to Bhagavan. “I wanted to complete this ritual, but I could only manage to find fifty thousand leaves.” “Did you try all the trees?” Bhagavan asked. “Yes, Bhagavan. I tried all the trees but I could pluck only fifty thousand.” Bhagavan said, “Why don’t you pinch your own body as many times as the number of leaves required, and complete the puja that way?” he asked. Echammal was taken aback. “Oh! But that would be painful, Bhagavan!” she replied. “I see,” Bhagavan said, “then will it not be painful for the trees, too, when you pluck their leaves one by one?” “How could I know that?” she replied. “When you know that pinching your own body is painful, why do you not recognize that the tree will be equally pained if you rob it of its leaves? Do I have to tell you that?” She took the words to heart and gave up the *vratham*.¹³

The New Dining Hall

Echammal continued to feed Bhagavan even after he came down from the Hill. But as the years went by and the Ashram dining hall became well-established, there was little need for her to continue cooking and making food offerings. Thus, the Ashram management informed her that she need not bring food anymore. Disappointed, Echammal complained before her Master: “Bhagavan, I have grown grey. I have given everything of mine to serve you. Is this the reward I get? Like Arunachala, have you too turned to stone? What can I do but go back?” Saying this, she went home.

When they rang the bell for lunch, however, Bhagavan simply remained seated on his sofa as those in the dining hall waited. Five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes, but still Bhagavan did not get up and go to the dining hall but just sat smiling. One of the more astute attendants figured out what was going on and informed the office. They went to Echammal’s house and begged her forgiveness. When she refused to accompany them to the Ashram, they told her that Bhagavan would not eat without her. Hearing this, Echammal ran back to Bhagavan immediately.¹⁴

¹³ *Letters*, 20th April 1946; *Cherished Memories*, p. 194.

¹⁴ *Ramana Periya Puranam* (Unpublished Manuscript), p. 42.





Waiting for Echammal's Offering

One day, Echammal sent food through someone else. The cooks, however, forgot to serve it. When all the other food items cooked in the Ashram had been served, Bhagavan, who usually signalled with a nod of his head to start the eating, just sat motionless. People looked at each other and the kitchen staff began whispering to one another. Suddenly they remembered that the food sent by Echammal had not yet been served. Once done, Bhagavan gave the signal for the meal to begin.¹⁵

Echammal's Final Days

Echammal's forty years of selfless service to Bhagavan earned her the respect of devotees who regularly bowed to this senior devotee whose heart shone with love for the

¹⁵ *Letters*, 21st January 1946.

Master. At the end of her life in 1945, she fell unconscious for two days and struggled to breathe. Bhagavan sat for long hours in samadhi on his sofa. Many remarked that they had never seen Bhagavan sit like that.

The next day when Echammal was to relinquish her body, the ladies of the house wanted to test her. In a loud voice, one of them said, "It appears that food has not reached Bhagavan." Suddenly Echammal opened her eyes. She could not speak, but her eyes questioned, "What happened?" They replied, "No, no! We were joking. The food has already reached Bhagavan." Hearing this, she smiled, closed her eyes and left the body.

When Bhagavan was informed, he said, "Echammal has shuffled her whole load, but my load still remains."¹⁶ —

¹⁶ *Ramana Periya Puranam* (Unpublished Manuscript), p. 43.



Events at Sri Ramanasramam: Inauguration of the Samudram Gosala

The Ashram Gosala has grown and now houses some 200 milking cows. But with its rising population, there is increasingly a need for a place of retirement for aging cows. Considering that bovine lifespans extend to about age twenty-four and that cows usually only give milk between the ages of three and sixteen, the Ashram's Samudram Gosala has been developed to serve as a facility for retired cows after their long years of service in the Ashram. The 2.5-acre Samudram Gosala is situated just beyond the Samudram Lake spillway with a spectacular view of the Hill and in eyeshot of the Big Temple. More than that, it is an area that once upon a time received the touch of Bhagavan's feet. (Devotees may remember reading about the lake overflowing and Bhagavan and devotees walking down to the spillway to have a look).

The new facility is manned by gosala workers and provides abundant ambling area, fields of fodder and water from a large well 45 feet deep. Fifteen elderly cows have been selected to take up residence at the new site bordering the upcoming bypass road. Inauguration with puja took place on 1st October 2017 with devotees in attendance. —





Navaratri Celebrations

In the *Ramayana*, Lord Rama sought Durga's blessings before going into battle with Ravana and in the *Mahabharata*, Lord Krishna instructed Arjuna to worship Goddess Durga to assure a favourable outcome in the battle of Kurukshetra. Various scriptures and epics tell of the fierce encounter between Durga and Mahishasura, the demon who went about the world menacing Devas and humans.

Durga was called in to help and succeeded in vanquishing the demon on the ninth day of the battle. On the tenth day, her victory over evil was celebrated all around and is observed by tradition on the tenth tithi of shukla paksha as 'Vijayadasami'.

Ashram celebrations of Navaratri ('Nine Nights') this year commenced on the 20th when Goddess Yogambika was ceremoniously taken out in procession and installed in the Mantapam. The festival began in earnest on the evening of the 21st with the alankaram of Meenakshi, followed on succeeding nights by the alankarams of





Gajalakshmi, Tapas (the Goddess performing penance), Linga Puja (the Goddess worshipping the Siva Linga), Rishaba Vahanam (the Goddess on the Bull Mount), Sesa Sayanam (the Goddess reclining on the serpent bed as Lord Ranganatha), Venuganam (the Goddess dressed as Lord Krishna playing the flute), Saraswati (the Goddess of wisdom and learning), and Mahishasura Mardini (the destroyer of the demon Mahisha). On Vijayadasami, Saturday the 30th, Goddess Yogambika was taken around in procession and returned to the Grabhagriham.

Other Activities

During the nine days of the festival, Laksharchana was performed with recitals of *Lalita Sahasranamam* and the reading of the *Devi Mahatmyam*. Mahanyasa japa and abhishekam were performed at both shrines and prasadam distributed to Ashram devotees. For the nine days, twelve verses of *Aksharamanamalai* were sung each day in a different raga at the morning puja in Bhagavan's Shrine. Carnatic music concerts took place on the first four nights. —





Stories from Sri Bhagavan Sita's Silence and the Rishipatnis

[Sri Bhagavan narrated this story in the course of a conversation: Sri Ramanasmaranamrutam, p. 94.]

For a mind rendered mute, the only available language is silence. When does the mind go mute? It is muted when it realizes its own nature. Why does it go mute? This question cannot be

answered. The enlightened say that it can only be experienced.

The Vedas themselves, confronted by assertions of *neti, neti* (“not this, not this”), were rendered mute when they attempted to describe the nature of the Self. When the supreme teacher Dakshinamurthy Himself adopted silence, can anyone else venture to explain the nature of the Self? Silence without speech forms the best response in certain situations. Sri Bhagavan described some such situations.

One illustrative incident occurred when Lord Rama and Mother Sita were in the forest during their *vanavaasa*. The Rishipatnis (wives of the sages) living there, revered as the very manifestations of chastity, wanted to enjoy a moment of levity with Mother Sita. With the power of their penance, they made their own spouses resemble Lord Rama and surrounded Him with them. So, there was Lord Rama and his ten look-alikes in the room.

They challenged the Mother to identify Her husband. She stood there quietly without speaking. The wives of the sages then made each look-alike ‘Rama’ stand one by one before Her and asked Her whether he was Her spouse. She said ‘No’ to every imposter. When Her own Lord stood before Her, she smiled, lowered Her face and kept silent. The Rishipatnis understood Her heart and united Her with the Lord.

The silence of the Mother was eloquent in its response. —

[There is a similar story in *Kaivalyanavaneetam* about a pair of lovers. Another incident is mentioned about Mother Meenakshi and Lord Sundareswara.]

Announcements: YouTube Channel and Facebook Page

Sri Ramanasramam has its own YouTube channel and is regularly posting videos of events. Please see Navaratri video footage on the channel at: <<https://www.youtube.com/c/sriramanasramam>>. Also follow Ashram activities in various languages on Facebook @<https://www.facebook.com/SriRamanaMaharshi>, <https://www.facebook.com/SriRamanaTamil>, <https://www.facebook.com/SriRamanaTelugu>, <https://www.facebook.com/Sriramanaspanish/>, <https://www.facebook.com/Ramanamaharshirussian/> <https://www.facebook.com/ramanamaharshifrench/>

