

Saranagati



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IN THIS
ISSUE

Dear Devotees,

As one of the great events of recent times, we devote this special extended issue of *Saranagati* to Mahakumbhabhishekam 2013 in hopes of touching upon some of its key moments. For those who have never attended Mahakumbhabhishekam or for those unfamiliar with the particulars of this great rite, a brief summary appears on pages 4-5 with further details in the excerpts of a letter from the chief-in-charge of renovations, Sthapati Sri R. Selvanathan on page 8. A brief review of renovations undertaken at the Ashram in recent months appears on page 6-7 and the short history of Ashram kumbhabhishekams on page 2 looks at five previous kumbhabhishekams beginning in 1949.

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

In Sri Bhagavan,
The Editorial Team

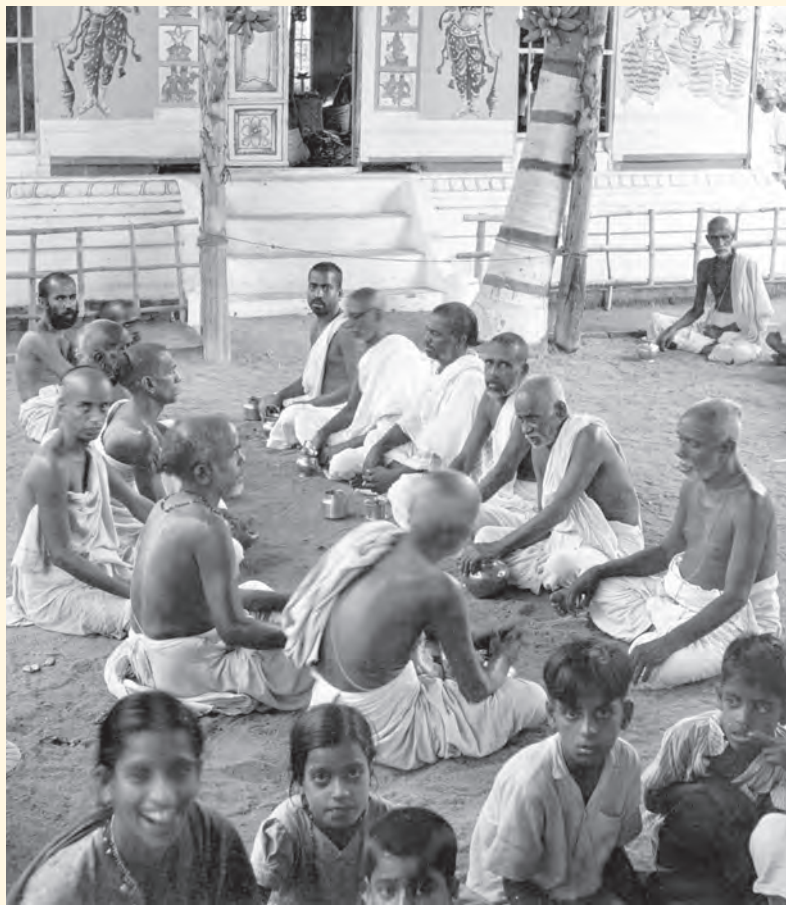
<i>Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi: The Sense of Doing</i>	1
<i>The History of Kumbhabhishekam at the Ashram</i>	2
<i>Reality in Forty Verses (v. 26)</i>	3
<i>What is Kumbhabhishekam and Why is It Performed?</i>	4
<i>Mahakumbhabhishekam 2013: Preparations and Renovations</i>	6
<i>Mahakumbhabhishekam 2013: Chanting and Music</i>	7
<i>A Letter from Sthapati Sri R. Selvanathan</i>	8
<i>From the Periapuranam: Poosalar's Kumbhabhishekam</i>	9
<i>Wordwise: Kumbhabhishekam</i>	9
<i>Mahakumbhabhishekam 2013: Morning of 25th August</i>	10
<i>Mahakumbhabhishekam 2013: The Four Vedas</i>	11
<i>Calendar of Upcoming Events</i>	11
<i>Obituary: Sri Vasant Kothari</i>	11

Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi: The Sense of Doing

M.: The present difficulty is that the man thinks that he is the doer. But it is a mistake. It is the Higher Power which does everything and the man is only a tool. If he accepts that position, he is free from troubles. Take, for instance, the figure on a gopuram (temple tower), that is made to appear to bear the burden of the tower on its shoulders. Its posture and look is a picture of great strain, bearing the very heavy burden of the tower. But think, the tower is built on the earth and it rests on its foundations. The figure (like Atlas bearing the earth) is a part of the tower, but is made to look as if it bore the tower. Is it not funny? So is the man who takes on himself the sense of doing.

— Talks §63





Mahakumbhabhishekam, 14-17th March, 1949

The History of Kumbhabhishekam at the Ashram

The first kumbhabhishekam at Sri Ramanasramam took place in Bhagavan's presence on 17th March, 1949 for the purposes of consecrating the newly completed Sri Matrubhuteswara Temple. Even with the ever-present dearth of funds that was a nagging worry to Chinnaswami, more than a decade of diligent exertions made a dream into reality. Finally in the spring of 1949, in preparations for the inaugural event set to cost Rs 50,000, only at the last minute did generous donations come forth from devotees. Pandals were erected in the field opposite the Ashram as thousands poured in from all over S. India. Rice rations were in place that year and it was only by extensive efforts G.V. Subbaramaya and other devotees that bags of rice to feed throngs of

devotees finally reached the Ashram on the morning of the second day. By then the crowd had swelled to 10,000 and on the evening of the third night, visitors numbered 15,000. The Sanakaracharya of Puri presided at the four days of yagasala pujas and kumbhabhishekam took place on the evening of the fourth day with dignitaries in attendance. Bhagavan who felt weak, did not climb the vimanam platform but viewed the rite from below.

A year later in April 1950 Bhagavan left the body and his remains were interred at a location between the Mother's Shrine and the Old Hall. In the absence of Bhagavan's physical form, the Ashram suffered its worst crisis. Resources even for just surviving were not available much less the funds needed to erect a proper mantapam over Bhagavan's Samadhi. The construction of the shrine, mantapam and the front hall took place in successive stages with foundation stones for the complex laid by Sri Anandamayi Ma in 1952. Work progressed slowly owing principally to lack





17th March, 1949



18th June, 1967



22nd November, 1979



7th July, 1995



3rd November, 2004

of funds. By July 1964 the central structure of the shrine with polished black granite pillars was in place. By August 1966 the vimanam above the Samadhi and a second granite exterior around the Samadhi were inaugurated. During the years of renovation, the New Hall had been functioning as Bhagavan's Shrine for daily Vedaparayana and puja, and thus it proved necessary to 'transfer the shakti' back to Bhagavan's Samadhi proper. For this reason and by virtue of the fact that the permitted gap of twelve years had long since elapsed, kumbhabhishekam was performed on the 18th of June, 1967, to inaugurate the newly completed mantapam and vimanam and to rededicate the Mother's Shrine.

Work on the final stage of the original vision to have a hall built over Bhagavan's Samadhi still remained. In 1969 just two years after kumbhabhishekam, a final effort was undertaken. With funds graciously donated by devotees, work proceeded right up to 1970 when, on the 3rd May, coinciding with the 20th Anniversary of Bhagavan's Brahma Nirvana, the Samadhi Hall

was inaugurated with minor rites. By 1979, the centenary year of Sri Bhagavan's birth, it had been exactly twelve years since the last kumbhabhishekam and so the rite was scheduled and yagasala pujas commenced on the 19th of November. The kalasas on Bhagavan's and Mother's vimanas were for the first time plated in gold and kumbhabhishekam took place on the 22nd of November, 1979.

Fifteen years elapsed till plans for a kumbhabhishekam of five days were laid. On the 3rd of July, 1995 the celebrations began and kumbhabhishekam took place at Bhagavan's and Mother's vimanas on 7th of July, just after 9am. The function concluded that night with devotees taking a mounted photo of Bhagavan on giri valam.

On the 3rd November, 2004, at precisely 11:18am, an eagle believed to be Garuda circled above the Ashram indicating the propitious moment to initiate the anointing of Rajagopuram and the vimanas over Bhagavan's and Mother's Shrine in this fifth and most recent kumbhabhishekam at Sri Ramanasramam. —

Reality in Forty Verses

26. When ego arises, all things arise with it. When ego is not, there is nothing else. Since the ego is everything, to inquire, 'What is this thing?' is the extinction of all things.

— Sri Bhagavan





What is Kumbhabhishekam and Why is it Performed?

According to Agamic tradition, maintenance of the divine power in any temple is assured by regular renovation, consecration and rededication in what is known as *jeernoddhara kumbhabhishekam*. As shrines are sacred places, the range of activity in or near sacred sites is limited to prescribed forms of worship. Regular cleaning and ritual bathing is part and parcel of the life of the temple but repairs involving extensive work, specialised equipment and craftsman may only be done at times set aside for such activity. When kumbhabhishekam is forthcoming, the temple priests hand over the temple to *sthapatis* (temple architects) who set about making repairs. Periods of such renovation are not firmly fixed but should generally take place once every twelve years.

During renovation, the spiritual functioning of the temple is effectively forestalled and work goes on in an intensive way for weeks, months, or in some cases, years, and involves large numbers of workers and volunteers.

Installed within, at the base of any deity or linga, is a yantra which is considered to be integral to the spiritual efficacy of a shrine. In the event of erosion or damage caused by leakage from daily worship, the *bijaksharamantra* inscriptions on the yantras within may become sullied, losing their spiritual potency. In such cases cleaning or replacing the yantras and reinstalling the icon or linga is called for. The process of fastening an icon to its *peetham* or base is called *ashthabandhanam* ('eight' + 'binding'). This is the same name of the adhesive used in the process, a natural paste prepared in a ritually prescribed manner and composed of eight herbs mixed with beeswax, limestone powder, tree resins, ochre dye and butter. The paste is applied at the base of the icon or lingam in order to make it impermeable to liquid.

At Ramanasramam all murthis must be resealed at least once in twelve years according to agamic demands as the ashthabandha material over time may become brittle and cracked, allowing *dravyams* or offerings to percolate to the base of the icon. Ramaneswara Mahalinga, by contrast, received *swarnabandhanam*, a seal of gold, which is more durable and is, according to the agamas, valid up to one hundred years.

Other key points are the *gopura* (temple towers) and *vimanas* (the domes above central shrines). Vimanas are especially crucial to the vital functioning of a temple as the divine power of the deity or linga below is said to emanate through these domes. When the temple is viewed as a human form, the vimanam is the head. Vimanas are crowned with special coronal 'pots' called *kalasa* which require periodic care. A vimana without its sacred kalasa



Pounding of ashthabandha cakes just before heating and application; Mother's Shrine Vinayaka with newly applied seal.





Transferring Power from Ramaneswara Mahalinga

Mahakumbhabhishekam Yagasala

Entering the Yagasala

signals a temple that is defunct and thus powerless to function efficaciously. Thus proper care and protection of a temple's vimanam and its kalasa is critical.

Kalasa may become tarnished over time and thus will be in need of polishing. Repairs are made to the stucco iconography on the four facets and corners of the vimana followed by painting. Once repairs are completed, the temple grounds are handed over to the temple priest and purohits, who then carry out agamic and Vedic rites in the yagasala, the hall constructed for the performance of yagnas, pujas and other rites for the rededication. Rites commence with *mangala vadyam* and with *anujna*, where formal permission is taken from assembled purohits to perform the rites. Puja to Ganesha, the initiator of enterprises, and to Vastu Purusha, the Lord of construction, are then performed. *Rakshokhana homam* is performed to dispel asuric forces.

As it is the generative power of the earth that produces and sustains all creation, this creative aspect is worshipped by putting earth in nine clay pots dedicated to nine *griha-devatas*, in which the seeds of nine *dhanyas* (grains) are sprouted.

Brass pots placed on the altars in the yagasala are filled with water sanctified by the power of the mantras performed during the days of yagasala pujas. Before each altar is a *homa kunda* (fire pit) where agni is worshipped by offering various items to the devas.

After planting the nine seeds, transference of the spiritual power of the *bimba* (murthis) in the temple to

the pots is performed in a rite called *kalakarshanam*. The water-filled brass pots which usually contain sacred water from holy rivers like the Ganga, Yamuna, and Kaveri or Manasrovar Lake, are placed near each murthi within the temple. Their power is ceremonially 'transferred' by purohits repeatedly touching alternately the deity and pot with a ceremonial grass fiber wand. The pots are then moved to the yagasala in procession (*ghatasthapana*). Now all is ready to begin the first of a series of *kaala* yagasala pujas and the homa fire is lit by natural means through the friction generated by a spinning spindle of wood.

After all yagasala pujas are completed, a ceremonial rope of natural fibers, the 'silver wire', is extended from the temple murthis out to the yagasala altars, transferring power from the pots to the deities. Purohits enter the shrines with the wooden offering ladles used for the homas, and touch each of the temple deities six times. Thus the power of the numerous offerings, prayers and mantras infuse the murthis. All pots are then transported in procession (*yatra dhanam*), some to the vimana above the temple for kumbhabhishekam and others to the murthis within for mahabhishekam. On the final evening, ladies immerse the *nava dhanya* sprouts in a pot of water and dance around it in song.

After the great event, special daily puja is performed for one mandala (40-48 days). On the last day of this period, a special rite called *mandala abhishekam* is performed. Mahakumbhabhishekam may be marked each year for several years by the annual *samvatsara abhishekam*. —





Mahakumbhabhishekam 2013: Preparations and Renovations

The Ashram was a beehive of activity in the weeks leading up to kumbhabhishekam and all were engaged in one or another task, even, in some cases, throughout the night. Originally sthapatis had only intended doing minor renovations to the gopuram and vimanam above Mother's and Bhagavan's Shrine. But there turned out to be extensive cracks and fissures in the lime-mortar stucco surfacing. While brick substructures had suffered no significant weathering, surfaces were in need of being stripped and refurbished. While all original iconography was preserved, the original lime-mortar was in need of replacement, for which purpose weather-durable cement was employed to give added longevity. Gold plating on the kalasa crowns of





Mahakumbhabhishekam 2013: Preparations and Renovations (cont.)



Bhagavan's Statue



Ornamental Rainwater Drains



Repairs on the Nirvana Room Grillwork



Pali Tirtham Project



Vimanam Kalasala Crown

the domes was restored in a lengthy process involving extensive polishing and electrolysis, executed by specialists from Kumbakonam. Some of the internal wooden support poles for the kalasa were replaced. The kalasa atop Rajagopuram were, for the first time, plated in gold. On the eastern and southern portions of the Samadhi Hall-New Hall complex, rooftop drains were cloaked with six lifelike sculpted crocodiles typical in Saivite and Vaishnavite temples. These ornamental rainwater drains conceal water pipes which travel down through the center of their tails and discharge through open jaws dauntingly replete with large fangs.

Carpenters replaced woodwork on the ventilation windows above the New Hall as well as the screen door and windows of the Old Hall. Grill work in front of the Nirvana Room underwent minor repairs. Bhagavan's Samadhi got a full makeover with painting inside and out, and the entire surface of the white marble platform of the Samadhi was replaced with smooth grey granite. Patina tarnish on the panchaloka icon of Bhagavan at the rear of the Samadhi was removed. To prevent further tarnishing, a polyurethane coat was applied to protect the icon from future oxidation, thus preserving the natural golden hue of the 'five metals'. The black granite facing of the base of the image was also refitted. The drains of the Samadhi Shrine were caulked. Ashtabandha, the traditional sealant of eight herbs used for temples and shrines, was obtained from a mutt in Tiruppanandal (Tanjavur) in order to seal the footing of lingas and deities in both shrines, according to custom.

Meanwhile, groundbreaking ceremonies for the yagasala took place on the 16th August and work immediately got underway, using mud and unfired bricks to erect the temporary structure just northeast of the main entrance to the Samadhi Hall. Three fire pits were constructed utilizing natural materials and coated in the traditional way with cow dung. Painting went on everywhere including the Old Hall, the Ashram Well, the Samadhis of Swamis Niranjanananda and Ramanananda as well as on all the rooftop fixtures. Pali Tirtham got an overhaul with extensive dredging, increasing the depth of the innermost tank. The stone structures at the bottom of the tank were rebuilt to provide protection for reservoirs when low. —

Mahakumbhabhishekam 2013: Chanting and Music



With the four Vedas reverberating throughout the Samadhi Hall, Tamil verse could be heard as well, with devotees chanting *Ramana Sannidhi Murai* in the dispensary, odhuvans chanting *Thevaram* in the yagasala and various Carnatic music programmes taking place in the Granthalaya Auditorium.





Sthapati Sri R. Selvanathan pictured with Sri V.S. Mani (Pres. Sri V.S. Ramanan's brother), at the installation of the *vimana kalasa* on 24th August.

A Letter from Sthapati Sri R. Selvanathan

Grandson of Vaidyanatha Sthapati, the architect and builder of the Mother's Shrine, Sri R. Selvanathan ('Mathu') traces his lineage back to Kunjaramallan Rajaraja Perunthachan, the sthapati responsible for the construction of the celebrated Brihadeeshwara Temple of Tanjore in 1010 CE. The following is an excerpt from his letter to the Ashram concerning Mahakumbhabhishekam 2013 and recent repairs to the Ashram shrines.

A Hindu temple is not a congregational structure or prayer hall but a meaningful structure that gives spiritual experience in visual form. We all believe that a temple is the home of God. But the *vasthushilpa* shastram indicates that a temple structure enclosing a portion of empty space is treated as a living organism. This is like a human body enclosing an energetic space inside the body known as the soul. The temple structure, thus, is the form of God and the statue residing within it, the soul. So the temple is considered the *form* of God and not the *home* of God. Hence the kumbhabhishekam's holy water first anoints the temple vimana and then only the Lord *moola bimba* housed within.

The Vedas, Agamas, Upanishads and *vasthushilpa* shastras confirm the above statement in the following canto: *Deho devalayah prokto jeevo devah sanatanaha*, meaning the temple structure is considered as human form and the space enclosed inside it, the divine spirit.

A sthapati should produce a sacred form or structure, be it a temple or statue, with a prescribed technical grammar from the *vasthushilpa* shastra that brings out its divine beauty. The aesthetics involved in a sthapati's architectural and sculptural form and its prescribed grammar is an orderly and rhythmic arrangement that gives the temple its divine atmosphere.

Sri Matrubhuteswara Temple was constructed by Shilpakala Sagaram Sri M. Vaidyanatha Sthapati in the 1940's. Up to roof level, it is composed of granite stone; above roof level, of brick and lime mortar.

The present renovation is taken up for Thayar's and Bhagavan's vimana, Rajagopuram and other exterior architectural elements. All damaged parts on these structures were treated newly with architectural brick, ornamental plastering and ornamental embellishment. Stucco images were refashioned as originally designed. A team of 90 shilpis was engaged for this work.

Ashram President V. S. Ramanan gave me and my team a great opportunity. The temple complex of the Ashram of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi is endowed with physical harmony and spiritual power which one notices immediately upon entering its sacred precincts. —





From the *Periapuranam*: Poosalar's Kumbhabhishekam



Illustration courtesy of Ramalingar Pani Mandram

Poosalar of Ninravoor was versed in the Vedas and devoted to Lord Siva. His life's longing had been to build a temple to the Lord. He roamed far and wide in the effort to raise funds but, alas, all in vain. Finally he made up his mind that he would erect the sacred edifice in his own heart. He immediately gathered and stored in his mind all that was required: artisans, workers and the many specialised tools. After laying the foundation stone with the appropriate rites, he began the construction—in his mind. With love and care, unknown to anyone, he strove with all his might day and night to raise the temple little by little, by the power of his imagination. He carefully constructed the tower of stones carved with great skill, the rounded dome at the top, the ancillary pavilions, the holy tank, stucco on the sides of the vimanam and gopuram, high walls encompassing the site as prakarams. Finally when all was completed, he consulted the *panchangam* (almanac) for an auspicious day for mahakumbhabhishekam. Meanwhile, the king of the Pallavas had built a temple of brick and stone at Kanchipuram, lavish and splendid, the famous Kailasanatha Temple. Royal astrologers selected a *muhurtham* during which to install the Lord. The night before, however, the Lord spoke to the king in a dream: "Tomorrow, I intend to enter the shrine built by my devotee, Poosalar of Ninravoor. You had better fix another date for your kumbhabhishekam". Waking from the dream, the king was eager to meet the devotee spoken of by the Lord and set out immediately

for Ninravoor. Once there he inquired about a newly constructed temple, but no one seemed to know about it. When the king asked of Poosalar, they directed him to a little hut nearby, where the king fell prostrate to the ground: "Where is the great shrine you have built, so highly praised? The three-eyed Lord directed me here telling me that this is the day of mahakumbhabhishekam". The blessed devotee then explained that the shrine which had evidently found favour with the Lord was raised only in his generous heart. At these words, the king discovered the secret of true devotion: all outward exertions must be complemented with an inward purity of intention. —

Wordwise: Kumbhabhishekam

Kumbha: 'pot' + *abhi*: 'upon' + *shekam*: 'to sprinkle', 'to pour' = 'pouring water onto' (the icon), 'flowing from a pot'.

The pots of the yagasala altars containing sanctified water and the 'transferred power' of the deities of the temple are called *kumbha*. The kalasa of the vimanam crown above the lingas and deities are also called pots. *Kumbhabhishekam* refers specifically to the anointing of the kalasa atop the vimana while the abhishekam that takes place at the lingas and deities of the shrines themselves is called *mahabhishekam*.





Mahakumbhabhishekam 2013: Morning of 25th August

During these most remarkable days, devotees wondered how the run-up to mahakumbhabhishekam went so smoothly. Neither extensive security measures nor intensively coordinated communications were in place, yet, day by day, the celebrations unfolded magically, beautifully, by the grace of Bhagavan. While a peacock danced in full glory above the New Hall and the Ashram atmosphere was electrified with Vedic recitation, Tamil hymns, sacred mantra and *nadaswaram* music, Bhagavan's gracious silent presence could be palpably felt.

At 9am on 25th August, President V. S. Ramanan and purohiths bearing the sacred kumbhas went in procession up to the roof of Bhagavan's Shrine, where sanctified waters bathed the golden-bright kalasas of Rajagopuram and Mother's & Bhagavan's vimanas. Immediately following, an unprecedented crowd quietly entered Bhagavan's Shrine at 9.30am for Mahabhishekam. Later, successive lunch batches in the dining hall and adjoining pandal flowed effortlessly one after the other as visitors partook of Bhagavan's prasada. That evening devotees had a unique darshan of Sri Ramaneswara Mahalingam with the most elaborate and finely crafted floral *alankara* in recent memory.





Mahakumbhabhishekam 2013: The Four Vedas



Each of the four Vedas were recited during the celebrations. Krishna Yajur Veda was chanted before Bhagavan's Samadhi Shrine with pundits nearby chanting Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Atharvana Veda and Shukla Yajur Veda.

Mahakumbhabhishekam 2013 Concluding Rites: Nava Dhanya

Mahakumbhabhishekam concluded Sunday evening with *nava dhanya* rites. Ladies ceremonially immersed the nine grains in water and sang *Kummi Paattu* as they circumambulated the container of sprouts. Sowing seeds for continued blessings invoked by kumbhabhishekam and symbolising the ongoing regenerative power contained in all of creation, a procession led all gathered to Pali Tirtham where the holy grains were at last immersed.



Calendar of Upcoming Events

1st Sept (Sun) Advent/Punarvasu/Bhuminatha Kovil Kumbhabhishekam
 5th September (Thursday) Muruganar Samadhi Day
 18th September (Wednesday) Full Moon
 28th September (Sunday) Punarvasu
 5th October (Saturday) Navratri Begins

13th Oct (Sun) Saraswati Puja/Vijaya Dasami
 17th October (Thursday) Manadalabhishekam
 18th October (Friday) Full Moon
 22nd Oct (Tues) Viswanathaswami Samadhi Day
 26th October (Saturday) Punarvasu

Obituary: Sri Vasant Kothari



Sri Vasant Kothari, son of Kalidas and Subhadra Kothari, was born and brought up in Mumbai. He was originally a disciple of Janardana Swami, a great adept in hatha yoga. After the swami left his body, Kothari taught yoga at Kanyakumari, where he learned of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi. He became a devotee and subsequently introduced many to Bhagavan.

He helped with the Gujarati publications of Bhagavan's works and translated the Gujarati portions of *The Power of the Presence*. He admonished devotees who wandered in search of religious experiences saying "for us there is only Bhagavan". While in recent months he endured challenging physical conditions, he did so in a stoic reliance on Bhagavan's grace, which was abundantly granted. This was exemplified by the fulfillment of his final vow, in defiance of friendly counsel, to leave the body in the vicinity of Arunachala. Lucid and conscious till the last moment, Kothari shrugged off his mortal coil at his small flat in Sadhu Om Compound on the 21st August, 2013 at 12:52 AM during the auspicious Savan Purnima.

