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**Ramana Maharshi and the Battle with Cancer:
Notes on Life, Detachment and Devotees' Accounts**

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Ramana Maharshi and the Battle with Cancer: Notes on Life, Detachment and Devotees' Accounts*

Susan Visvanathan

Sri Ramana Maharshi was born on the night of 29th December, 1879, in Thiruchuruli, a sacred temple town thirty kilometres distant from Madurai. The event of his birth was seen as auspicious. It coincided with a temple festival, when the image of Lord Shiva was garlanded and taken in procession with ritual drumming, conch sound and music. The moment that Shiva entered the temple, was the moment that the child who became one of India's greatest and most revered sages, was born to Sundaram Ayyar and Alagamma.

Sundaram Ayyar was what Arthur Osborne, in his book, *Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self Knowledge* (2004), calls a rural lawyer. He was a man who loved people and was hospitable and generous. His house was always open to guests, not just friends and clients, but also passing strangers. It was perhaps in response to a family legend, that when a *sadhu* knocked at the door of an ancestor's home, he had been sent away without food, and had prophesied that one member of the family would in every generation from then on become a renouncer. (Osborne 2004:3)

*Excerpts from 'Dreams and Death' *Indian Anthropologist* in vol. 38, no. 1, 2006 and *The Children of Nature: The Life and Legacy of Ramana Maharshi*, Roli, 2010.

My grateful thanks to Sri Ramanasramam for allowing me to present the materials gathered from library and archives and bookshop and to my friends for helping me interpret the life of their guru. Many thanks, also, to the Director of NMML, Prof. Mahesh Rangarajan for giving me the opportunity of reading from my published materials and interacting with the audience at Teen Murti Bhavan on 7th March 2012.

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Life was peaceful and happy till Sundaram Ayyar suddenly died, and now bereft, the children Nagaswami, Venkatraman, Nagasundaram and Alamellu struggled with the sudden change in their circumstance. They went to live in Madurai with their father's brother Subbier.

Venkatraman, who was later known as Ramana Maharshi, went to Scott's Middle School and then to American Mission High School. He was bored with his studies, but had the gift of great imagination and a good memory, which allowed him to cope with the demands of school. He was athletic and had many friends. He had one quirk, which was deep sleep. He slept so deeply, that enemies could wreak vengeance for one act or another, and he would never know. He told Devaraja Mudaliar, about an incident that happened in Dindigul,

I was left alone in the house. I was sitting reading in the front room, but after a while I locked the front door and fastened the windows and went to sleep. When they returned from the temple no amount of shouting or banging at the door or window would wake me. At last they managed to open the door with a key from the house opposite, and then they tried to wake me up by beating me. All the boys beat me to their hearts content, and your uncle did too, but without effect. I knew nothing about it till they told me in the morning... the same sort of thing happened to me in Madura also. The boys didn't dare touch me when I was awake but if they had any grudge against me they would come when I was asleep and carry me wherever they liked and beat me as much as they liked and then put me back to bed and I would know nothing about it till they told me next morning. (Cited in Osborne 2004: 4,5).

Ramana Maharshi had had a death experience in mid-July in the year 1896. Sri Sadhu Om writes,

Venkataraman was sitting alone in a small room upstairs. Though there was no sickness in the body, a great fear arose in Him that he was going to die. It

happened not merely as an imaginary or superficial fear, but as an actual experience of death. He was not perturbed by this. He did not even inform anyone of it. He boldly welcomed the forthcoming death and ventured to scrutinize it and find the result of this scrutiny for Himself. "Yes, death has come; let it come. What is death? To whom does it come? To me. Who am I? What is it that is dying? Yes, it is this body that is dying; let it die; deciding thus He lay down stretching His arms and legs. Closing His lip tightly and remaining without speech or breath, He turned his attention very keenly towards Himself. Death was experienced! What did He come to know at that time? (Sadhu Om 1997:4)

Venkatraman was having difficulty in school, and regularly in trouble with his teachers. He was bored and being given useless punishments. Sadhu Om writes,

One day his teacher gave Him an imposition to write three times an English grammar lesson which he had failed to learn.

Next day, it was a Saturday, the 29th of August 1896. Sri Ramana had written the imposition twice when He felt a dejection towards this useless work. Throwing away the pencil and notebook, He sat up and closed his eyes in Self-Absorption (nishta). Nagaswami, who was sitting nearby was saddened at seeing this. (ibid:7).

Hearing his brother rebuke him, (which implied that Venkatraman was enjoying the comforts of home and world while enacting a renunciant's obligations), the boy decided to leave home.

While the imposition from Bain's English Grammar and his brother's criticism might have been the overt catalyst, in Ramana's own reading, it was perhaps the working out of destiny. Destiny and the realisation of the Self were the two basic strands which devotees saw as the clearest indexes of Ramanine teaching.

Venkataraman recognised the truth of the remark and, with that ruthless acceptance of truth (or justice, which is applied truth) that characterised him, he rose to his feet to leave the house there and then and go forth, renouncing everything. For him, that meant Tiruvannamalai and the holy hill, Arunachala.

However he knew that it was necessary to use guile, because authority is very strong in a Hindu household and his uncle and brother would not let him go if they knew. So he said he had to go back to school to attend a special class on electricity.

Unconsciously providing him with funds for the journey, his brother said, "Then take five rupees from the box downstairs and pay my college fees on the way." (Osborne 2004:19).

His aunt gave him his food which he ate hurriedly, and five rupees, which he took for his journey, leaving behind two rupees and a note, saying that he was on a virtuous path, no one need look for him: "I have set out in quest of my Father in accordance with his command." The note, which is exhibited in the Asramam archives, also says that the college fees have not been paid. A seventeen year old boy ostensibly going for a class on electricity in 1879 would encourage much sociological analyses. Emile Durkheim in his *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1917) argues that the origin of scientific thoughts lie in religious ones! "Current" and "power" are terms sharply defined in both fields of discourse. For the young Ramana Maharshi, yet to be acknowledged by the World and his family as to the worth of his dreams, Arunachala represented the culmination of his desire. His father had died, his mother whom he always saw as beautiful and holy, represented the space of indivisible conjugal joy, which death had not divided. In Arunachala, where Shiva and Parvati are conjoined in conjugal bliss, or kalyana, he would find bliss again. Osborne argues that the Ramana whom devotees loved had become one with the father, He was the Father.

For the anthropologist, the tactile quality of popular faith and the intensity of believing is a given. Analysing this, we may have our own models, which may or may not harmonise with “conscious models” but we cannot doubt the significance of faith.

The story of his journey to Tiruvannamalai has been told over and over again. It has the quality that characterises all pilgrimages – mistakes, new encounters, courage and an unceasing desire to reach the goal. He left home at noon for a train that was due to arrive at that hour. Luckily it was late. He raced down the list of stations, having looked at an outdated itinerary at home. He bought a ticket for Tindivanam, though if his eye had just travelled a little further, he would have seen that Tiruvannamalai was already on the railway map!

Osborne says,

The events of the journey are symbolical of the arduous journey of an aspirant (sadhaka) makes to his goal: first there was the favour of Providence in granting the money and allowing the train to be caught, although he started out late; then the provision made was exactly what was needed to reach the destination (ticket to Tiruvannamalai was exactly three rupees) but the heedlessness of the travel lengthened the journey and caused hardships and adventures on the way. (ibid: 22).

While in the train, a kindly Maulvi told him the shortest route to Tiruvannamalai, which was to get off the train at Villipuram. He remained at the station till dawn and then decided to walk to the temple town. At the rest house where he ate his breakfast, the inn keeper told him to keep his money, and informed him that Mambalapattu was on the route to Tiruvannamalai; the young Venkatraman went back to the station, caught a train to this town which he reached in the afternoon. He started walking and reached the temple of Arayaninallur. Here he sat in a pillared hall, and saw a bright light.

Thinking it must be an emanation from the image of the God in the inner sanctuary, he went to look but found that it was not. Nor was it any physical light.

It disappeared and he sat down again in meditation. (ibid: 23).

The boy hoped for food, but there was none. He went to Kilur, with a group of devotees, and by the time the puja was over, he thought he might be fed.

It was nine o'clock by the time the puja was finished and they sat down to supper. Again Venkatraman asked to be fed. It seemed at first that there would be nothing for him, but the temple drummer had been impressed by his appearance and devout manner and gave him his share. He wanted water to drink with it and, holding his leaf-plate with rice, was shown the way to the house of a sastri (pandit) nearby who would give him water. While standing in front of the house, waiting for it, he stumbled on a few paces and then collapsed in sleep or faint. A few minutes later he came round to find a small crowd looking on curiously. He drank the water, gathered it up and ate some of the rice he had spilled, and then lay down on the ground and slept. (ibid: 25).

He was still twenty miles away from Tiruvannamalai on August 31st. It was Gokulashtami, the birth anniversary of Lord Krishna. He arrived at the house of one Muthukrishna Bhagavatar, hoping for food and the chance to exchange his gold ear-rings set with rubies for money. The lady of the house made sure he ate every morsel of the food she served him, and Bhagavatar accepted his story that he was a pilgrim who had lost his luggage, and took the ear-rings for pawn. Venkatraman was given four rupees and the address of the house to which he had come unannounced, so that he could claim them.

As soon as he left the house he tore up the address, having no intention of ever redeeming the earring. Finding that there was no train to Tiruvannamalai till next morning, he slept at the station. No man can end his journey till the allotted time. It was the morning of September 1st 1896, three days after leaving home, when he arrived at Tiruvannamalai station. (ibid: 25).

He entered the temple, all the gates were open, there was no one about, and in that moment of unity with the mountain, the quest was ended.

However, the ordinary things of life would always accompany Ramana Maharshi. People would always call out to him. A barber invited him to shave his hair. After paying him, he threw the remaining money he had from pawning his ear-rings into the temple tank. The wife of Bhagavatar had given him sweets which also he threw into the tank. Then he went into the thousand pillar hall where he meditated ceaselessly.

Venkataraman was known in this period as the Brahmana Swami. Seshadhri Swami, who was one of the most renowned swamis that Tiruvannamalai gave shelter to, and had arrived some years earlier, began to protect the young boy. He himself was a magnetic personality with a reputation for granting miracles and being eccentric in nature. Seshadhri Ashram is adjacent to Ramana Asramam and is well known for providing rooms and board to those who arrive in Tiruvannamalai without prior plan. However, being protected by Seshadhri Swami, who was a mendicant who gave people what they wanted, and who could become divinely possessed, in a moment was not entirely an advantage!

Seshadhri Swami made the impression of being slightly deranged and thereby drew on himself the persecution of schoolboys. They now extended their attentions to his protegee whom they called "Little Seshadhri." They began throwing stones at him, partly out of boyish cruelty, partly because they were intrigued to see one not much older than themselves sitting like a statue and, as one of them put it later, wanted to find out whether he was real or not. (ibid: 29).

Sethu Ramawamy in her work, *They Spoke with God: Saints of Tamilaham* writes of Seshadhri Swami who is even today, considered to be one of the greatest saints of Tiruvannamalai. This is her account of how Seshadhri Swami came to Tiruvannamalai:

...in the middle of 1889 Seshadhri Swami reached Arunachala or Tiruvannamalai. He was then only nineteen years old. He spent forty years in Tiruvannamalai performing innumerable miracles, and by merely looking at a person bestowed his grace on him and transformed him. By a mere touch he could heal. He behaved like a mad man, but the people of Tiruvannamalai knew that he was an extraordinary saint. (Ramawamy 2006:101).

His behaviour which is described as utterly eccentric if not insane was seen to be a view of the world that was divinely inspired.

Swamigal sometimes spoke in conundrums. No one could understand what he meant, but to those who were close to him, the meaning would be clear – they may be prophetic or philosophical, but to hear it one would think it was nonsense. (ibid: 104).

It was this ‘mad’ saint who protected the boy Ramana from intruders and violators, keeping them at bay with sticks.

In the Patala lingam in the Arunachala Temple, Ramana began a period of Samadhi which was so fulfilling that he did not notice anything, neither the darkness nor the heat nor the tormenters who continued to oppress him. He lived his life as if it was a moment in the sight of God, but the people who came protectively to guard him were horrified by the condition they found him in. They carried him out from the underground vault to the Subramania shrine.

For about two months the Brahmana Swami stayed at the Lord Subramania shrine. He would sit motionless in Samadhi (absorption) and sometimes nourishment had to be put into his mouth as he paid no heed when it was offered to him. For some weeks he did not even trouble to tie on a loin cloth. He was looked after by a Mouni Swami (one who observes silence) who also lived at the shrine. (Osborne 2004: 30).

The Mouni Swami would bring for him a glass of milk everyday which was mixed with water, turmeric, sugar, bananas and whatever went into the washing of the shrine of the Goddess Uma. The priest noticed and started to send pure milk for the Brahmana Swami as Venkataraman was known then. Yet all his life, Ramana was not averse to accepting whatever devotees offered him as food, sometimes the frugal offerings of shepherds and old women was smashed into gruel and drunk. He really did not mind. All his life he would communicate that food was Ana, holy, and it should be received with pleasure and redistributed. Even while in the precincts of the temple, hardly aware of his surroundings, he always shared what he received. It was a Malayali sadhu, Palaniswami, known for his austerity and his devotion to Lord Vinayaka who became the first of a loyal band of devotees who would circle Ramana and recognise he was Bhagavan.

One who has attained Union with the Divine is sometimes worshipped in the same manner as a temple idol, with burning camphor, sandal-paste, flowers, libation and chanting. (ibid: 35).

When Tambiran (one of the devotees) was at Gurumurtam, (where Ramana had shifted because of the difficulty with sightseers and stone-throwers), he worshipped Ramana in this manner, but the next day Ramana had written in charcoal the words in Tamil, “This is service enough for this”, meaning that the bringing of food was sufficient.

Discovering that the boy could write, the circle around him began to pressurise him for an answer as to who he was. He wrote in English “Venkataraman, Tiruchuzhi.”

His knowing English came as a further surprise, but Venkatrama Iyer was puzzled by the name Thiruchuzhi in English transliteration, especially by the ‘zh’.

The Swami therefore took the book on which the paper had rested to see whether it was in Tamil so that he could point out the letter that is commonly translated as ‘zh’, a letter midway between ‘r’ and ‘l’ in sound.

Finding it to be the Periapuranam, the book which had had so profound an effect on him before the spiritual awakening, he looked up the passage where Tiruchuzhi is mentioned as a town honoured in song by Sundramurti Swami and showed it to Venkatarama Iyer. (ibid: 36).

Over a period of time, friends and family came looking for him. Venkatraman tried to send them away in the time honoured religious tradition of those treading the mystic path. Rangan, who was a fervent devotee, whom Maharshi could never dislodge, although he often reminded him of his obligations to his family, records his mother's visit. They had been neighbours of the Maharshi when he was a boy. David Godman, the British spiritualist, gives us devotees' accounts in his valuable collection of memoirs of devotees, (2002) of which Rangan's witness is one of the most important:

My mother had visited Bhagavan when he was residing in Pavalakundru in the 1890s...

My mother had already told me about her first visit. It seems that on that occasion she had asked Palaniswami whether Bhagavan would eat some fruit if she offered him some. It did not occur to her to address Bhagavan directly because at the time she did not think he was conscious of her presence. However, Bhagavan heard her remark and responded to her query by stretching out his hand. My mother peeled a banana and gave it to him. Bhagavan ate it.

'Does he walk?' she asked Palaniswami.

Bhagavan got up and walked a few steps to demonstrate that he could move about.

'Does he speak?' asked mother, still dealing with Palaniswami.

Bhagavan did occasionally speak, but on this occasion he kept quiet. Many years later Bhagavan told me about this incident.

'In those days,' he told me, 'I was speaking only one or two words with Palaniswami. It was difficult to speak even those few words, so I spoke rarely. I would have spoken to your mother, but I was afraid that if I spoke and my family heard about it, they would drag me back to Madurai. So I kept quiet.

When your mother came for the first time to see me, she was frightened by my ascetic appearance and attire.

'She asked me, "Have your father's philanthropy and charity fructified into this?"

"My hair was all matted, my body was completely covered with dust and I was sitting on the rocks on the mountain. She went away because she could not bear to see me in this state. Also, she felt that she could do nothing to help me." (Godman 2000: 2).

Ramana stayed at Gurumurtam for a year, then moved to a mango orchard in the vicinity owned by one Venkatarama Naicker, who provided shelter to both the sage and his attendant Palaniswami. The latter was interested in ideas and struggled with books, and Ramana could with his photographic memory and his lucid understanding help him with his reading.

His prior spiritual experience enabled him to understand at a glance what was expounded and his wonderful memory retained it when read, so that he became erudite almost without effort. In the same way, he later picked up Sanskrit, Telugu and Malayalam by reading books brought to him in these languages and answering questions in them. (Osborne 2004:36).

I have seen notebooks in the Ramana Archives, where Ramana had copied out sentences over and over again, in Malayalam, in order to learn the language. Entranced by his attention to script and neatness, and the monotony of learning, I asked one of the archivists, how this occurred, and he replied that “Bhagavan slept very little.” This desire to understand the need of devotees by Bhagavan is a very important part of future translation studies.

Meanwhile, his mother was desperately looking for him. In August 1898, at the funeral of Subbier, the uncle with whom Ramana had been staying in Madurai, the family heard from a mourner, that he had heard one Annamalai Tambiran speaking with great reverence of a boy who had achieved great heights of spiritual grace, and was probably Venkatraman. Nellapier, one of the brothers of Ramana’s father went looking for him, was denied admission into the mango orchard by the owner, who said that the boy was a mouni, and so, why disturb him?

Nellapier wrote on a piece of paper that he had with him, “Nellappier, pleader of Manamadura, wishes to see you.”

The Swami showed already that keen perception of mundane affairs coupled with complete detachment from them, which was to characterise him later and which surprised so many devotees. He observed that the paper on which the note was written came from the Registration Department and had some office matter on the back of it in the handwriting of his elder brother Nagaswami, from which he deduced that Nagaswami had become a clerk in the Registration Department. Just the same in later years, he would turn a letter over and examine its address and postmark before opening it. (ibid: 39).

From the mango orchard, he shifted to the Arunagirinathar temple. He had refused to explain himself to Nellappier who took the sad tidings to Alagamma that her son had been found, and was not communicative and had no intention of returning to the family fold. In

fact Ramana tried to shed Palaniswami off as well, saying that he should go begging in one direction, and Palani in the other, and they should not stay together any more. But Palaniswamy was distraught and could not bear the idea of a separation, and thus was found to have returned in the evening to the Arunagirinathar temple, and was allowed to stay. (ibid: 40).

It was during this time that Bhagavan became a familiar sight in Tiruvannamalai, and not one street was left unvisited by him in his search for food! The author Sethu Ramaswamy, (whose nephew, Captain Narayanan, served at the asramam, and whose daughter Vijaya Ramaswamy is an authority on medieval saints and a Ramana devotee), recounts the time that Ramana used to visit her relatives. “He would clap and my aunt would come out and feed him.” (personal communication, April 2005).

When Alagamma found from Nellapier that her son was at Tiruvannamalai, she waited for the Christmas holidays when Nagaswami, her younger son, would be free to accompany her, and then went to Tiruvannamalai. She tried desperately to have him return with her, but he ignored her. She wept. The devotees then persuaded Ramana to communicate with her.

He took the pencil and paper and, in utterly impersonal language, wrote: The Ordainer controls the fate of souls in accordance with their prarabdhakarma (destiny to be worked out in this life, resulting from the balance sheet of actions in past lives). 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. (ibid: 41).

Osborne immediately comments that this is similar to the relationship between Mary and her son, Jesus. He also asserts that Ramana had begun showing signs of ‘normalcy’ and had started once again to be concerned with temporal things such as food and shelter.

The mother returned home and the Swami remained as

before. And yet not quite. During the two and a quarter years that he spent in temples and shrines at Tiruvannamalai the first signs of a return to an outwardly normal life were already appearing. He had already begun to take food daily at a regular hour and then, so as not be dependent on anyone, to go out in search of it. He had spoken a few times. He had begun to respond to devotees, to read books and to expound the essence of their teaching. (ibid: 44).

The Virupaksha Cave still emanates a sense of radiant peace, while the internal cloister where Bhagavan meditated has an intense and heavy laden vibration. It has a density which is apparent to the viewer, and there is a juxtaposition of light and ephemerality, where the sky is the only roof, and then inside, the vividness of being closed inside a cave or womb.

Nagaraja Rao writes,

The Maharshi spent about twenty four years in caves on Arunachala, speaking little and rather resisting than welcoming fame. After that he lived for about twenty-eight years as a world-famous figure in the Ashram that grew up around him at the foot of the hill. Throughout this long period there was absolutely no change in him or his teaching. This was because he was not expressing ideas but voicing realized truth. (The Mountain Path, 1966 Jan, p. 29).

It was in the Virupaksha Cave, in 1903 that the great scholar, Ganapati Muni came to visit him. And a lifelong friendship, with differences, arose. Virupaksha Cave, while being a masculine and renunciatory space was open to seekers, who came looking for Ramana's advice or blessing. Even today, it carries a euphoria of sunshine and peacefulness.

Virupaksha Cave was where the woman who used to cook for Bhagavan would turn up with her offerings. Echammal was pursued

by misfortune, but still believed in the goodness of existence, and the love of the Sage for her. He wept with her over the many deaths which were to afflict her.

His own mother, Alagamma, who had been tested in a similar fire of loss, returned to Tiruvannamalai in 1916, fell ill with typhoid, recovered by the beseeching prayers of Ramana Maharshi. She went back to Manamadura, where sadly, her younger son Nagasundaram's wife died. Then, renouncing everything, she went to live with Ramana. (Osborne 2004: 77). This is a complex series of events, and to decode Alagamma's suffering we must also remember that she had now no home, for her brother-in-law Nelliaapier had also died, leaving the family in some difficulty, and the house in Thiruchuzhi had been sold to pay debts. (ibid: 77).

Where was Tiruchuzhi? It is an important pilgrimage site for devotees of Ramana Maharshi.

Tiruchuzhi, Ramana's birthplace was well known for its temple, dedicated to Bhuminathar and Sahayavalli.

Legend has it that the town was named Tiruchuzhi because Lord Shiva protected it from being submerged by making circular holds (chuzhi) in the land to serve as outlets for the waters to be drained out, when the whole world was inundated during the Pralay (universal floods)...

It was visited by ancient Tamil saints famous for their devotion – Sri Appar, Sri Sundarar, Sri Manickavachagar and Sri Vageesar. (N.N.Rajan 1966:13).

Madurai too, has its famous temple, and in this town Ramana Maharshi had his death experience in Chockappa Naicken Street. In returning to Tiruvannamalai, again, Alagamma hoped to live with her son. She must have been reflective, in the nature of her destiny. This heroic woman later became the centre of a cult, the deified mother, the

manifestation of divinity as a representation of Ambika, Sahayavalli, Bhuminatha. The resolution of nondualism in everyday practice is the substance of tantric pujas at Ramanamaharshi Asramam.

Devotees were afraid that Maharshi would leave the place when his mother returned. Osborne writes,

However there was a great difference, for now it was she who had renounced home, not he who was detained there. (Osborne 2000: 78).

She stayed in the beginning with Echammal. Soon, the Skanda asramam was established for it was more conducive to Alagamma's needs. It was on an overhanging rock crop, and directly above the Virupaksha Cave.

Devaraja Mudaliar chronicles in his book, *Day by Day with Bhagavan* (2002), how this happened.

Bhagavan said that the old disciple Kandaswami was anxious to build a separate asramam for Bhagavan. He inspected various places on the hill and in the forests to select a site, and finally suggested the present Skandasramam site and then Bhagavan also approved of it. Thereupon Kandaswami began converting what was a thick forest of prickly pear on the mountain slope. The result of his labours, unaided by any at the time, is the asramam we see now. He added, "You cannot imagine the state the site was in originally. Kandaswami worked with almost superhuman effort, achieved by his own hands what even four people together could not have done. He removed all the prickly pear, reduced stone and boulder to level ground, created a garden and raised the asramam." (Mudaliar 2002: 66).

Skandasramam continues to be one of the loveliest sites on the hill. It is maintained by Ramanasramam in much the same way as during the time of habitation by Bhagavan and his mother. Her room is narrow and overlooks the great Siva temple. The sounds from the temple, and

horns from the traffic and music from the megaphones come across echoing up the hill. A breeze always blows, the plants are always well watered, and the drinking water is sweet. Bhagavan's chamber and meditation rooms communicate the aura of a still and beatific spirit. The pilgrims come and go, hoping to return, and the garden and the rooms where Ramana lived till the time of his mother's death are sanctified by memory and ritual.

After the mother's death, Ramana moved to where her body had been interred, as she was according to him, a realised soul, and therefore was buried not cremated. It is there that the present asramam is situated.

Having provided a biographical description, I shall now go on to describe the Maharshi's battle with cancer, which is one of the most detailed of stories since it applies to our understanding of death even today. The great sage of the Annamalais provides us with a sense of how calm and detachment are significant aspects of understanding suffering, one's own as much of others.

Susan Sontag, who suffered from cancer herself, and described it as a metaphor of the "encroachment" of modernism, writes that the task of the writer or artist is to make the recipient believe that the unanswered questions are not significant, and in this "highly manipulated quest for knowledge" what they don't know, "they can't know or shouldn't care about knowing." In a narrative of this sort, opacity and multiplicity are legitimate, and sense is not lost by the narrative being porous or intermittent, clumsy or concealing. "The use of displacements are valid" and it is the intention that must be honoured. Problematic though such a reading is, it has its worth because it means taking the artist's intention at face value. (Sontag 1976: 133).

I have argued in an earlier work that Ramana Maharshi communicated that dying was only dreaming without the body. (Visvanathan, 1998, 2007). He took away the mortal fear of dying by showing how the body was separate from the Self, and that we are the Self and therefore we never die. Dreaming is thus essential to Ramanian theology. Because we are trapped in the plane of dualism, we see the opposition between the 'gross' body and the subtle body.

Shri Sadhu Om, in an interesting representation of Bhagavan's teaching, says, following Ramana,

What happens to the body of an ordinary person when it is left behind as a corpse? It loses its form by being decomposed into the five elements of which it was originally composed. That is the body is left in one of the elements, whether in fire, in the earth, in water, or in the open air, and that one element gradually separates the other elements in the body, thereby merging them into the surrounding elements. Since the body anyway has to lose its form and disappear, what does it matter how it loses it? (Sadhu Om 1997: 29, 30).

If death is a dream, then how can we imagine it? Salomon Resnik in the *Theatre of the Dream* (1987) describes the nature of interiority as poetry. Love and mysticism are both aspects of such poetry. The darkness of night is illuminated by the dream. "All experiences that are out of the ordinary, whatever is extraordinary, amazes or frightens us. Hence the need to name, to represent, to symbolise." (Resnik, 1987: 171). What we will see in the writings of witnesses and devotees is just this. Resnik further informs us very perceptively that,

The loss of the loved object is always the representation of the drama that has already been presented. Analytical work tries to bring to light a sense of absence, helps us to become familiar with darkness, absence, mourning, with everything that comes to us from our secret, hidden dimension, the unconscious. The experience of discovery is a way of unmasking the unknown, of illuminating darkness: an experience that is expressed through the sense of amazement. (ibid: 171).

It is in this context that the diary of Suri Nagamma is to be read, for it is both an official document, as well as a contested site of authority and dissent, as it is spelt out in a woman's record. We will see here both marginalization as well as legitimacy, and structurally therefore,

the connotations of life and sustenance in the domain of death and intimations of immortality.

Suri Nagamma is one of the most interesting of writers. She was encouraged to keep a diary by her brother to record the days that she spent at the Ramanashramam. She found it a medium that she was not comfortable with, so she resorted to writing letters instead. These were so communicative that they were read out to Bhagavan and those devotees who were present. They were also published and found an immediate audience. Suri Nagamma described Ramana's struggle with cancer in a manner which we may benefit from, since it describes not only the nature of physical agony but also the miraculous axes of detachment and coping, which still remains in the 21st century, the only way by which we may understand this marauding disease and its violent appearance.

Nagamma writes that at the beginning of 1949, a small tumour appeared above Bhagavan's left elbow, and soon grew as big as a marble. Shankar Rao, who was the ashram doctor, and Srinivasa Rao told Bhagavan that it should be operated on. He was unwilling, and said "It does not give me any pain. Let it be as it is. Why meddle with it?" (Nagamma, 1993: 73).

After that first operation, Bhagavan appeared looking tired, covering his bandaged arm with a towel, and sat on the stone sofa, which was a throne built for him. Blood began to ooze and drop on the ground, which Nagamma saw as a sign of great disaster. By mid-March the tumour had resurfaced. After speaking with the ashram doctors and the office, Nagamma hoped that Ayurveda could be started as a line of treatment, some plasters were used and discontinued, ayurvedic medicines were received but not used. By the end of March surgery was again confirmed, and Ramana said "Yes. Whatever is to happen does happen. It will not stop even if we want it to. Alright. Let things take their own course." (ibid: 81).

Nagamma records here that, "Having learnt that the operation would be performed without anaesthesia we all sat down in the Jubilee hall anxiously looking towards the hospital. Ramana came back from

the ashram hospital looking fatigued. He was spending day and night on the sofa, and was available for darshan. “the daily routine was going on as usual, and there was no limit to the questions.” (ibid: 81). In a conversation with Mahalakshmi Suryanandan, (May 5th 2006) the daughter of K. Swaminathan (editor of Gandhiji’s collected works in 100 volumes and who was a devotee of Maharshi,) I came to know that Mahalakshmi’s sister, at that time a medical student, was present as a witness, during one of the bandage changes. She came back saying “Only God could have borne the pain of those bandages being ripped off.”

One of Ramana’s relatives came to visit him, and when he noticed that she had a growth like his on her arm, he gifted her medicine that had been earlier brought for him. She took it with veneration and applied the plasters with some green leaves and cotton dipped in milk and the tumour disappeared. In Maharshi’s case, the tumour grew and bled continuously. He described it as a cobra hissing, a cobra which had been disturbed from its habitat. On one occasion, Murgunar the poet, and Nagamma began to weep, begging him to save himself, and the master looked at them with compassion, but remained silent. (ibid: 85).

Like Christ, Ramana is lost in the wonder of god, remains in the temple, devotees gather to hear his stories, his mother constantly follows him, the suffering at the end may not be, (like the bitter cup which it is), taken away from him.

Radium treatment had begun, and Ramana told Dr Anantanarayana Rao that the Jnani always looks forward to the time when his bodily karma comes to an end. (ibid: 86). He compared it also to the leaf which is thrown away. He had said that he had no desire for a miraculous cure. “There must be something called mind to create a desire but there is no such thing,” he had said. “How then can a desire be got? That which is non-existent, how can it be secured, developed and retained?” (ibid: 87).

Bhagavan refused the suggestion of amputation, accepted the ministrations of an Ayurved, called Valiavan Thatha who had treated him for a broken arm in 1943, (and had cured that fracture in three

days!) but this time, the old man said the cancer was too far gone, and Bhagavan should cure himself.

Fever had set in, and Ramana called it Nataraja's dance, *tandava darshan*.

In spite of pain and fever, Maharshi continued to be present for darshan and ate at the dining hall. Following the withdrawal of Valiyavan Thatha's leaves because of the fever they had caused, Dr Guruswami Mudaliar prescribed homeopathy and *suryanamaskaram*. Devotees started circumambulating the hill and to perform *suryanamaskaram*, but since there was no cure for cancer, Bhagavan's condition worsened and his arm had to be bandaged twice a day. (ibid: 95). On July 31st 1947, ten doctors arrived to examine Bhagavan. They confirmed the diagnosis as cancerous. Nagamma records,

On August 5th the Morvi guest house was cleaned up for the doctors who were coming the next day. With the government's permission, x-ray and other electrical equipments for the operation were transported from the Royapettah Hospital, Madras, in a lorry. Everything else necessary was brought in the cars of the doctors. With a desire to make use of this opportunity to serve Bhagavan, a total of 30 medical men came with Dr Raghavachari. It seems there was never an occasion when the equipment of a government hospital had thus been permitted to be taken out of the hospital premises. Moreover no charges were levied for the use of the equipment. Actual expenses for transport were met by a devotee. (ibid: 96).

Namma records that Bhagavan was kept on a liquid diet for fear of vomiting after the operation, x-rays were taken which confirmed that the cancer had not spread. Present was an electrical engineer Mr Narayana Rao who made sure that there was uninterrupted electrical supply by telephoning to Mettur and arranging this for the operation. (ibid: 97). Bhagavan insisted on being accessible to his devotees after the operation. On August 7th, after being operated upon, Bhagavan

sat in the verandah, and the next day as soon as the doctors left, Bhagavan came walking to the new hall saying that “if he stayed in the hospital, devotees would be inconvenienced as also the patients coming for treatment.” (ibid: 99). All his devotees, including Nagamma, were always desperate for darshan, and continuously communicated their longing to see Bhagavan. Meanwhile, the tumour rebounded back, and another operation was scheduled for November 19th. In spite of it, by February 9th, the tumour was visible again. Prayers to Goddess Lalitha were offered, and on February 15th Dr Raghavachari, the chief surgeon said that nothing else could be done, “and that the patient should not henceforth be troubled by being given all sorts of medicines and strict dieting.” (ibid: 109). Doctors now came and went, so did astrologers. In the face of continual panic, Bhagavan remained calm saying, “What if it has sprouted again? It comes and goes,” (ibid: 109).

By March 1950, the Ayurved from Kerala who had been called in, felt disheartened and composed a hymn in praise of Ramana and gave it to him. He arranged for the *Vishnu Sahasranama* (repeating of the thousand names of Lord Vishnu) and some devotees began reciting the *Mritunjaya japam*. According to Nagamma, the Maharshi was detached, since he was a jnani, and rituals were unnecessary to him. A woman who was present told Ramana that there was a man in her village who had the power of *mantras* and she said, “He will first offer you a hundred and eight coconuts and later break them throughout the ashram.” (ibid: 113).

Suri Nagama records that Bhagavan smiled and said “He breaks only coconuts? Does he not also slay hens and spill the blood all over the ashram? Will he not also tie an amulet and smear *vibhuti*? (Holy ashes)”.

By this time, the asramam was bustling with what Nagamma calls *japam*, *homam*, *stotras*, and on March 16th an astrologer said that Bhagavan would pass away in a couple of days. “If that was really the case, I felt would not Bhagavan tell me about it in some manner or other although it was a foolish sentiment, it somehow persisted in my mind.” (ibid: 113).

On 18th March, the eve of the Telugu Lunar New Year, called *Ugadi*, she presented Bhagavan with the new towel and loin cloth for his personal use, as she always did. He said, “Oho! *Ugadi* is come?” in such an ominous way that her heart felt ripped apart (ibid: 114). She asked him, “I was wondering whether I should stop this practice of offering clothes and so on to Bhagavan, but felt it would be a grave error on my part to do so. I did not know what to do. I have merely brought these clothes.”

As with other times, she kept asking him how he felt, and pleaded to cure himself of the cancer, and then exclaimed, “How can you be that indifferent?” (ibid: 115). To this Bhagavan remarked (clearly and unambiguously) and with compassion, “How can there be a cure at this stage?” She wanted him to ask a crucial question, (“How would devotees manage?”), but before she could find her voice or wipe away the tears which were blinding her,

people from the office rushed in to have some differences of opinion amongst themselves settled by the Sage. That was my misfortune. Like a deer frightened by the sudden appearance of tigers, I was horrified by the way they all entered. I could not ask what I wanted to and left to go home with profound grief. (ibid: 115).

It is interesting, that inspite of Suri Nagamma’s profound irritation with the management of Ramanasramam, her diaries have been reprinted and are available to us! The account is continually poignant, respectful, intimate, and it gives us a rare glimpse of Maharshi’s life from the pen of an erudite woman who was fearless.

On the morning of the Telugu New Year Day, I went to the ashram early with the chutney of neem flower and a copy of the new panchangam. I served the chutney to the devotees and to Bhagavan with their breakfast and waited on the verandah of the new hall with an idea of giving the new panchangam (calendar) to Bhagavan personally. Bhagavan had put on the new koupeenam and towel but while he was about to enter the bathroom,

stumbled over the doorsteps and fell down. Shouting that Bhagavan had fallen down, I rushed to the place where he was. The attendant who was close behind him was trying to lift him up but Bhagavan was shouting at him not to do so. I was too afraid what Bhagavan would say if I touched him and so stood by the side, stricken with fear. His koupeenam and towel were blood stained. Hearing my shouts, a close devotee rushed along and tried to lift Bhagavan up. However he did not allow the devotee to touch him and keeping one hand as support, got up by himself. It seems there was some small fracture of the backbone but the attendants were strictly instructed not to tell anyone about it. Furthermore, pus had formed at the bruise and gave immense pain to Bhagavan but this was not allowed to be disclosed till the very end. (ibid: 116.)

Though he had fallen down and hurt himself, Bhagavan went to the water closet as usual, came out and sat on the verandah by 9 a.m. I then offered the panchangam. That is all! My going to Bhagavan and hearing his nectar-like voice was over forever on that day. His asking me in surprise whether the Ugadi had come was perhaps to indicate the abrupt end of the wonderful time I had in the past few years been listening to his sweet voice. It was as if he had said gently: "With this new year my conversations with you will come to an end."(ibid: 117).

From then to his death on April 14th, the Tamil New Year, Bhagavan could not meet devotees as he did previously, they filed past him for darshan in queues.

A respondent to my queries during the anniversary of Samadhi on 14 April 2006 said that someone she knew would keep going back to stand in the queue because no one was allowed to stand in front of Bhagavan for more than a moment!

We had to content ourselves with having darshan from

a distance. Anyway, I did ask my brother and others to go to Bhagavan and obtain from him a last message but they did not succeed. Somehow they found themselves unable to open their mouths in the august presence of the sick sage. I was standing at the gate and was watching them. When I asked them what happened, they said nothing. (ibid: 117).

In an extremely perceptive essay called *The Maha Nirvana*, Christopher Quilkey, editor of *The Mountain Path* (Ramanasramam's official journal) describes the last days of Bhagavan Sri Ramana. "One of the many treatments which Bhagavan patiently submitted to was a herbal remedy that started on 18th July. The green paste actually aggravated the disease and sepsis set in. At some point during these months the failures to contain the spread of the tumour led to the spread of the cancer cells through the blood stream and lymphomatic system....During all this time Bhagavan gave no indication of pain or discomfort." T.N. Krishnaswami, who was an eye witness, describes it as a kind of detachment. " 'There is severe intolerable headache,' he said as he was going into a slow uraemia and his kidneys were failing. The Maharshi never described the symptoms in a subjective manner." (cited in Quilkey 2004:11).

II

In an imaginative reading of Freud, the great theologian philosopher Paul Ricoeur in the Terry Lectures (published as *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, 1978) discusses the relationship between Eros, Thanatos and Ananke (Love, Death and Work). These are the titans, the great struggling heroes of existence. In my reading of archival materials, Ramana Maharshi put all of them to good use in his life, and provided his devotees a stability of vision from where they could view their lives and actions. These three principles also contribute, as we can see from the Thiruvannamalai and Arunachala sacred tales, signifying the unification of the trinity, (Shiva, Visnu and Brahma) and the transcendence of dualism, (the conjunction of Shiva and Parvati) simultaneously. (See *Ramana's Arunachala*, for a legendary and devotional history of Tiruvannamalai,

2004).

The syndrome of anxiety runs through mortals when they cannot accept that Thanatos has the final word, but love and wisdom work as restraining and creative principles in order to regulate anxiety. Ricoeur asks, “What is the death instinct and how is it connected with negativity? What is pleasure and how is it connected with satisfaction? What is reality and how is it connected with necessity?” (Ricoeur 1978:311). I have chosen a feminist text for the representation of the tussle between mortality and immortality, although many such narratives are available such as that of devotees like Kanakkammal, Cohen and Mudaliar. The risks involved in reading the intense and personal voice of afflicted woman’s record is deep subjectivity, but that is where narrative becomes as analyzable as dream. It is a method which Ricoeur endorses, when he argues that fiction or biography can reflect the subconscious as sharply as dream narrative. Ricoeur writes. “No reader can be insensible to the uncertain, winding, and even “limping” character of the speculation and its set of heuristic hypothesis”(ibid: 311). We apply the method to myth when we accept the play of biology.

Describing Freud’s stand, Ricoeur says “Further, do we not feel that we are listening to one of the pre-Socratics when Eros is called that “which holds all living things together, “the preserver of things” (ibid: 312). Ramana Maharshi, while being the greatest devotee of Siva, in the form of Arunachala is seen to be like Vishnu, a preserver and lover of the peacock, and unutterably desirable to both men and women. The principle of non-dualism however also demands that the trinity and it’s manifestations be assimilated in the historically profound presence of Bhagavan.

For Ricoeur the negation associated with death instinct is derived from the character of substitution. For him substitution is about play, about aesthetic – creation, which is the stuff of myth, and what he calls reality testing itself. Theoretically he puts it thus, “The death instinct is not closed in upon destructiveness which is, we said, it’s clamor; perhaps it opens out onto other aspects of the “work of the negative”, which remains “silent” like itself. (ibid: 318).

The death instinct for Freud is the principle of constancy, the

pleasure principle arouses the categories of restraint and satisfaction, which Freud calls the Nirvana principle. The Nirvana Principle, a term borrowed by the pioneer from Barbara Low, is the tendency to remain calm in the face of danger, and is described as *the effort to reduce, to keep constant or to remove internal tension due to stimuli*. (ibid: 319). Freud also understands the death of the self in order to integrate with the collective body as an erotic sacrifice. Ricoeur reads this to mean that,

If Eros is the “preserver of all things,” it is because it “unites all things” But this enterprise runs counter to the death instinct: Union with the living substance of a different individual increases those tensions, introducing what may be described as fresh ‘vital differences’ which must then be lived off.

Paul Ricoeur’s reading is useful because it unites the triptych of Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu, and it also explains why the death of the ego submerges the self into the calm of the Universe. This is the essence of Ramana’s worldview.

Freud himself suffered from fatal cancers of the mouth, which terrible journey was recorded by his physician Dr Schur. In his chronicle, Schur presents a letter that Freud wrote to his intellectual partner Fleiss, about fear of death in one of their patients,

From your description poor S reminds me of one of the most vexing aspects of our modern medicine. The art of deceiving a patient is certainly not highly desirable. But what has the individual come to, how negligible must be the influence of the relation of science, which presumably has replaced the old religion, if one no longer dares disclose that this or that man now must die... The Christian at least has the last sacraments administered to him a few hours beforehand. Shakespeare says: “thou owest Nature a death.” I hope that when my time comes I shall find someone who will treat me with more respect and tell me when to be ready. My father knew it clearly, said nothing about it, and retained his beautiful

composure to the end. (Schur 1972:192).

The manner of dying, the composure and the gracious comfort offered to the mourners is the clearest indication of Ramana's belief that there was no death, only the active and unified cosmic spirit remains in harmony with the universe. This equilibrium is probably the greatest lesson for mourners. For Freud, hunger and love were the two most motivating elements of human action. (ibid: 195). In his own journey, he was accompanied by a loving crowd of family and friends. But the physical torment was vivid. Schur writes,

Freud's physical state, which varied only from severe discomfort to real torment, persisted more or less constantly over the next 16 years. Pain and discomfort were of course more intense during the first year after the radical surgery until the wound was finally covered by a combination of newly formed mucous membrane and scar tissue, the prosthesis was gradually adjusted to the remaining anatomical structures, and Freud adjusted to the prostheses. It took a long time for him to learn how to take it out and put it in again. I vividly remember what a complex manoeuvre this occasionally required even after years of use.

Freud also had to learn gradually how to eat, smoke and talk. (ibid: 365).

Schur quotes Freud to show how his suffering helped him to elucidate the Nirvana principle as a pleasure principle. The libido was the representation of the pleasure principle, but when it unites a life instinct with death instinct it appears as the Nirvana principle... the Nirvana principle (and the pleasure principle which is supposedly identical with it) would be entirely in the service of the death instincts, whose aim is to conduct the restlessness of life into the stability of the organic state, and it would have the function of giving warnings against the demands of the life instincts – the libido – which try to disturb the intended course of life. (cited in Schur 1972 :371).

Freud argues that we do not have a physiological understanding

of how the death instinct is tamed by the life instinct, but that there is, *A very extensive fusion and amalgamation, in varying proportions, of the two classes of instincts takes place, so that we never have to deal with pure life instincts but only with mixtures of them in different amounts.* (cited in Schur 1972: 372).

Schur's argument that the work that reveals these insights could only have been written while Freud was suffering with cancer, "the wish to die and not suffer any longer could be in a precarious balance with the wish to live and carry on the struggle. It is generally known that the wish to live plays an important role in the course of any serious illness." (ibid: 373). Wish however is different from instinct, and Thanatos and Eros are part of Freud's delight in dualism, mediated by Ananke as destiny or Moira.

On his 68th birthday, according to Dr Schur, Freud writes to his confidant Lou Andreas-Salome,

I have admired your art more than ever this time. Here is a person who instead of working hard into old age...and then dying without preliminaries, contracts a horrible disease in middle age, has to be treated and operated on, squanders his hard-earned bit of money, generates and enjoys discontent, and then crawls about for an indefinite time as an invalid.... And you can still praise me for bearing my suffering so well. Actually, it isn't quite like this, although I have weathered the awful realities fairly well, it is the possibilities that I find hard to bear; I cannot get accustomed to life under sentence. It is now six months since my operation and the attitude of my surgeon, who allows me to travel far afield in summer, ought to lull me into something like security – so far as such a feeling is admissible, considering the doman non c' e certezza (of tomorrow there is no certainty) which affects us all.

Six hours of psychoanalysis, this is all I have retained

of my capacity for work. Everything else, especially social contact, I keep at bay. Of course Romain Rolland, who has announced himself for tomorrow, I cannot refuse.... (cited in Schur 1972: 380).

To another friend, Marie Bonaparte, Freud wrote in 1926, just before his 70th birthday,

I must continue my morning drives in the Viennese spring, and find it truly beautiful. What a pity that one has to become old and sick to make this discovery. How fortunate that you did not have to wait for so long in your garden...

He then quotes a poem by Uhland to her,

*The world grows lovelier each day,
We do not know what still may come,
The flowering will not end,
The farthest, deepest valley is abloom.
Now, dear heart, forget your torment,
Now everything, everything must change. (cited in Schur 1972: 392).*

III

When Ramana Maharshi comforts his followers by saying at his death bed, “Where can I go? I am always with you,” he is actually conveying what he had always believed that he and the God head are one, and that there would indeed be no change in that. The calmness of his garden is an assertion of that belief; it is a palpable and tactile aura of contentment and joy. One of the Ramana asramam residents said to me that “For those of us who are believers it is another domain, which we do not question, for our faith is such. We are believers.”

In this section I will describe the rituals of Samadhi and of New Beginnings (*Aradhna*) or Liberation as these are known to the devotees.

IV

While Samadhi Day was celebrated on 14 April 2006 very quietly, in the evening, with the recitation of the work known as Marital Garland, Aradhana or New Beginnings is much more flamboyant. It is the announcement that Bhagavan is always with his followers. The hall was decked with flowers, all the workers wore new clothes. The asramam was abuzz with activity. At 7 a.m, the hall was bright with streamers, and devotees packed the grounds. Flowers were used to decorate the main hall, long trailers of jasmine (white) and kanakambram (orange) and mint (green) were linked together and the effect was delicate and pretty. Musicians, *nageswaram* and tabla players were announcing the start of a new day. A thousand people sat for breakfast which was elaborate and filling. Twenty additional cooks called for the occasion ran about busily serving the guests, *venn pongal*, (rice cooked in butter) *uppumav* (a savory made of fine cereal) and strong coffee.

The priests recited prayers all morning. The linga was washed over and over again with water, milk, curd, ashes. It was decked with fine cloth and flowers. Ornate silver utensils with mango leaves, celebrating the New Year commemorating Maharshi having left his body but promising the devotees he would always be here, were the dominant aspect of the ritual. He had said, "Where else can I go?" and the silver seshadhri (cobra) is placed on the lingam. A large and elaborate circle of flowers like an arch is placed behind the *lingam*. Above the streamers made of jasmine (white), *kanakambaram* (orange) and mint (green) merge in a lovely nationalist hue. Everything looks tasteful and pretty and quite grand. People swirl around the Samadhi like a colourful stream. Little children laugh and play. The asramam looks scrubbed and clean and shiny.

Lunch is served on the cowdung floor outside the dining room.

I had watched the floor being prepared. Six women had covered the red gravel with diluted cow dung water. One woman mixed the water with the cow dung, another threw bucket upon bucket of this thin brown water on the gravel, covering it slowly. As it dried, the

remaining women swept it and fashioned it with their broom. Back breaking labour, but so carefully done. Layer after layer is fashioned like this, and it quickly dries and forms a hard beaten floor.

One of the trustees passes by. When I say, “These women are such perfectionists!” he nods and laughs and says. “Yes, it’s interesting isn’t it!” Then next moment, he goes and shouts at them in a loud patriarchal tone for not raising the floor saying, “If the edge is not higher, the rain can wash it away.” The tone is authoritative, the blasting is typical of male behaviour in relation to women workers. They take it in their stride and continue their work.

Two upper caste women sit on the steps, composing and singing a song for Ramanamaharshi. They practice over and over again, compulsively and loudly, prettily and perfectly. The workers with cow dung stop to stare. Then they return to their work. The class differences among the two sets are evident. The workers however are happy and comfortable in their hitched-to-the-knees sarees, and their bright but wrongly matched blouses. The upper caste women are gorgeously dressed. They were quite impervious of the women labourers, only their music matters to them. They are going to be singing the hymn to Bhagavan at his shrine in the main hall.

On Aradhana day, 200 of us sit on the earthen floor, the rest have been accommodated in the dining hall. The cooks have energy we cannot imagine, running with heavy buckets here and there in a manner that makes it certain that they believe everyone’s appetite must be fully satisfied.

The whole day goes by in great and fulfilling joy. Those who have arrived to spend the day are expressive in their ardour of emotion. In the night a woman sings. She is in her thirties and is very beautiful. She is accompanied by a violinist and a *mridangam* player. She is a recipient of a state title, and when she suddenly smiles, she is transformed. She comes from a family of Ramana devotees.

The following day the makeshift shelters are taken down as are the flowers and streamers from the previous day. It took days to get

everything ready for the thronging pilgrims. The dismantling is fairly quick. The boys who take down the temporary shed work very fast. The day is hot, but they work unprotected from the heat, seemingly comfortable astride the poles like acrobats. They have to unravel each knot which keeps the poles together. They are young boys working almost absent-mindedly and tranquil in the glare of the afternoon sun. Each pole is unraveled and then slid out.

May Day, culminating a fortnight of ritual, is celebrated enthusiastically in the Ramanasramam with the conch ceremonies. 108 conches with water are passed down by a series of priests to the main priest who uses the sacred water to wash the *lingam*. The mango leaves and hibiscus flowers which accompany the ritual provide colour and beauty to the delicacy and pale translucence of the shells. No one asks any questions about wages and rights, a benevolent paternalism envelops everyone. Workers receive new clothes and food on festival days, but the work of looking after larger and larger number of pilgrims is beginning to show in exhausted faces.

On 3rd May 2006, Bhagavan's monthly *Nakshatram* birthday or Punarvasu is celebrated, and thus the creativity of a new ritual year is inaugurated. Mahalakshmi Suryanandan whose father K. Swaminathan, was a pillar of Ramanasramam, comes to sing for two hours, though now she is in her 80s herself, and is frail. By sustaining these rituals the idea that we share in immortality, and that Bhagavan shows the believers the transcendence of here and now, life and death is clearly annunciated...the moment of *sahaja* or happiness is compounded by understanding the ritual.

Mallika and her mother Sugandha who are from Bombay explain the importance of rituals to me, as we walk the 14 km stretch in moonlight around the sacred mountain, Arunachala. "It is a grammar. Without the grammar we would be quite lost!" Between styles of devotion and practice is a line as thin as that between language and speech, complicated in Ramanine theology by a call to silence.

One of the methods of analyses, is to use memory, mine as well as that of other writers and devotees in general, to come to an

understanding of a way of life which survives institutionally. Is there a way in which one can understand the charisma of the mystic, when the forms of routinisation are not embodied in one successor, but is found in the witnessing of hundreds of individuals.

In his seminal collection of essays, *Towards an Anthropology of the Body* (1976), John Blacking summarises the work of Silvan Tomkins to assert that affectuality can be analysed, that it is not “obscure” or “internal” but a primary human response that can be understood, through gestures, signs and facial responses. He argues that these can be read and analysed, primarily because the signaling between human beings is more understood than misunderstood. Affectuality is reflected in action and cognition, and vice-versa. Feelings are the mediator between body and mind, because they impact on individual behaviour and the selection of what shall be shared and conceptualized from what remains “private”. Blacking draws substantially from Max Weber’s Sociology, from questions of empathy, identification with the other, rational analyses of shared subjectivities. He provides us insights into the analyses of religious experience. In all societies there is a great emphasis on “transcendental somatic states and experiences of bodily communication, the oneness of true fellow feeling. It is that loss of self which becomes most eagerly sought – the flowing along, the sharing, the *communitas*.”

In Ramana’s life (which we may describe as a living theology) the preoccupation with non-thought on the intellectualist plane, and with everyday matters in a practical sense is pre-eminent. For the devotee there is the call to submit, to destiny (*prarabdha*) and to the love of God, but in *advaita*, God is present in the Self, and we find God by seeking within ourselves. The devotee is thus asked to surrender to that “I” which is more significant than personal egoism.

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