

He communicated through silence

The 125th birth anniversary of Sri Ramana Maharishi will be celebrated on December 28. LAKSHMI DEVNATH underlines the essence of Bhagavan's philosophy.

“IT IS an ancient theory of mine that one can take the inventory of a man's soul from his eyes. But before those of the Maharishi I hesitate, puzzled and baffled... I look at the Sage himself. He sits there on Olympian heights and watches the panorama of life as one apart. There is a mysterious property in this man, which differentiates him from all others I have met. I feel, somehow, that he does not belong to us, the human race, so much as he belongs to Nature, to the solitary peak which rises abruptly behind the hermitage...” Thus wrote British philosopher Paul Brunton in the 1930s, after his historical first meeting with the Sage of Arunachala — Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharishi. Brun-

ton, with uncanny accuracy, had arrived at the truth on both counts. For, the sage was a unique manifestation of the divine, the likes of whom history, in its endless flow of time, rarely witnesses. His chosen abode, the sacred hill of Arunachala or Tiruvannamalai was not just another on the earth's vast landscape but a vibrant living presence, indeed the Sage's very soul. Years later, talking about the hill, Bhagavan remarked, “Someone from abroad has written asking for a stone from the most sacred part of the hill. He does not know that the whole hill is sacred. It is Siva Himself. Just as we identify ourselves with a body, so Siva has chosen

to identify Himself with the hill. Arunachala is pure wisdom in the form of a hill... The seeker will obtain guidance and solace by staying near it.” The Maharishi was convinced that Arunachala was the spiritual centre of the universe and paid his respects to it in the form of several verses that he composed in later years. In the course of a conversation, the Maharishi once remarked to Brunton, “I was literally charmed here” (Tiruvannamalai).

A divine child

Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharishi was born 125 years ago, at 1 a.m. on December 29, 1879, in the small village of Tiruchuzhi in South India to Sundaram Iyer and Alagammal. It was the sacred day of Arudra Darshan when Siva manifested himself to his devotees as Nataraja. Apart from this, there were no other indications that his was a divine birth. Venkataraman, like other boys of his age was also sent to school and life proceeded on a mundane plane till his sixteenth year. It was in Madurai, where the family shifted after his father's death, that he felt the first suggestions of spirituality. The causal factor was the word Arunachala uttered by a relative. Something stirred within him and he blurted out, “Where is that?” The relative, nonplussed by the boy's ignorance of geography, nevertheless politely explained that Arunachala was the same as Tiruvannamalai.

Subsequently Venkataraman chanced to read a copy of the Periyapuranam, the spiritual vibrations in him intensified and reached a crescendo with the by-now oft-retold famous ‘death experience.’ In the later years, the Maharishi described this experience thus: “Fear of death had vanished once and for all. Absorption in the Self continued from that time on.”

The aftermath of that experience witnessed a revolutionary change in young Venkataraman, which can more accurately be described as a rebirth. There was a marked shift in his behaviour that displayed a withdrawal from the activities of everyday

life. This other-worldly attitude irked his brother Nagaswamy who remarked caustically, “What use is all this to such a one?”

Realising that his brother was hinting that an ascetic had no rights to enjoy the privileges of home life and appreciating the validity of this rebuke, 17-year-old Venkataraman left home for good on August 29, 1896, and arrived at Tiruvannamalai on September 1. Before that he penned a letter that read, “...it is on a virtuous enterprise that this has embarked, therefore let none grieve over this act and let no money be spent in search of this...” Not only did he refer to himself as ‘this,’ he also did not sign his name. The ego had vanished completely and with its death was born Brahmana Swami, as the Maharishi was known in his early years at Tiruvannamalai. Never again did the Swami write a letter or sign a name though, in later years, he twice wrote in response to situations, what his name had originally been. In later years when a Chinese visitor insisted that he autograph a book, the Maharishi simply wrote the Sanskrit symbol for the mystic sound, OM.

Eternal eloquence

Uncompromising austerity and spiritual disciplines were the young Swami's bywords. His only possession was a small loin-cloth that he wore and his sole activity ceaseless meditation. At the dark and desolate basement of the temple called Patala Linga, where the Swami sat engrossed in meditation food was put into his mouth and his body thus kept alive. For the next few years, dictated solely by circumstances and “propelled by shakti” as he called it, he moved to various locations at Tiruvannamalai and finally stayed at Virupaksha cave for 16 years. From there he moved to a place called Skandashram and finally in 1922 to the site of the present Ramanashram at the foot of the hill. The radiant glow of the young Swami attracted the attention of several people.

In the meantime, though he maintained strict silence, his identity was also established and word spread that “there was a revered swami called Venkataraman staying at Tiruvannamalai.” It reached the ears of his mother Alagammal who promptly arrived at his doorstep at a place called Pavazhakundru,

in 1898. In response to her pleadings to return, the young Swami replied with a written message that read: “The ordainer controls the fate of souls in accordance with their *prarabdha karma* (deeds performed in earlier births). Whatever is destined not to happen will not happen, try as you may. Whatever is destined to happen will happen, do what you may to prevent it. This is certain. The best course therefore, is to remain silent. Silence is eternal eloquence. Inactivity is constant activity.”

It was at the Virupaksha cave that Nayana, more popularly known as Kavyakanta Ganapati Muni, a poet and spiritual seeker met him. The Swami's grace dispelled the spiritual doubts that had tormented him for long. Nayana, deeply impressed by his master's spiritual excellence spontaneously described him first as Ramana, one who sports in the self, then as Rishi Ramana and still further as Maharishi Ramana. Yet Nayana was not satisfied. He felt he had described the Swami inadequately for he was convinced that the Brahmana Swami was the epitome of perfection like the Almighty Lord — Bhagavan.

Nayana declared that from that day onwards Brahmana Swami must be known as Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharishi. During his early years on the hill the Maharishi remained silent. But at the Virupaksha cave, out of compassion for disciples who approached him in considerable numbers seeking spiritual guidance, he wrote down his answers on small slips of paper. The scraps of paper preserved by them were later published as small booklets with the titles, Self Enquiry and Who am I? They contain the core essence of the teachings of the Maharishi: “Do you know what you are now? You do not know what you were before birth, yet you want to know what you will be after death. If the form is transcended one will know that the one Self is eternal. There is no death nor birth. That which is born is only the body. Let the sensible man consider if he knew his body in deep sleep. Self-enquiry is the one infallible means, the only direct one, to realise the unconditioned, absolute Being that you really are.” In general, Bhagavan preferred to communicate through silence rather than words. In his own words, “Does preaching consist in mounting a

platform and haranguing to the people around? Preaching is simple communication of knowledge. It may be done in Silence too.”

Bhagavan was not a philosopher who propounded doctrines and theories. He founded no organisation nor did he ostensibly and actively initiate people. His was a knowledge gleaned not from books but realised by experience. In his own words: “I did not yet know that there was an Essence or Impersonal Real underlying everything and that God and I were both identical with it. Later at Tiruvannamalai, as I listened to the Ribhu Gita and other sacred books, I learnt all this and found that they were analysing and naming what I had felt intuitively without analysis or name.” He also discouraged pedantic discussions on theories of philosophy as also useless speculations on the after-life though he did write a few books.

Remarkably, despite his very basic formal education, knowledge of the scriptures as well as of languages like Sanskrit and Telugu made themselves available to him. Disciples flocked to him from all walks of life and from different corners of the

globe plagued with fears and tormented with doubts. For those who were deluded by the impressions that their sufferings would cease if they too renounced the world he said, “solitude is in the mind of man. A man attached to desire cannot get solitude wherever he may be; a detached man is always in solitude.”

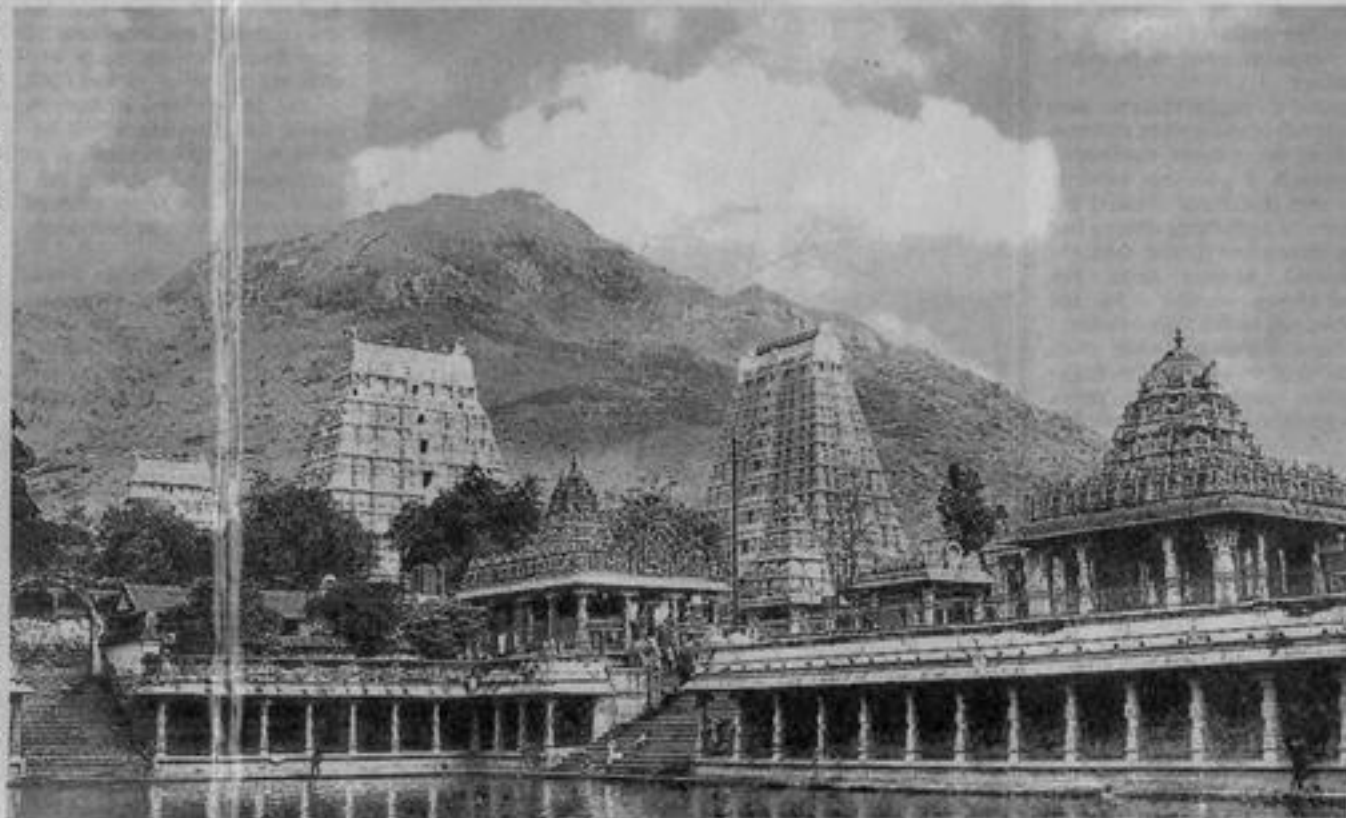
Divine and humane

Bhagavan was unquestionably divine yet intensely human and humane to all living creatures. In sharp contrast to his utter indifference to his body and its needs, he responded compassionately to those who approached him for help in handling their physical ailments. A little known fact is that he suggested various herbal remedies and even gave their recipes. Some of these have been published in the Ashram's journals. Animals and children flocked to him. Arthur Osborne, an ardent devotee of the Maharishi and the founder-editor of the *Mountain Path*, the spiritual journal of Sri Ramanasramam, describes him thus, “His face was like the face of water, always changing and yet always the same. He would be laughing

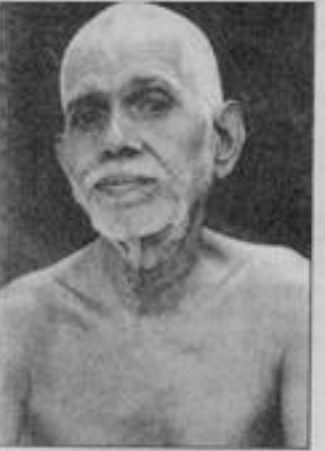
and talking and then he would turn graciously to a small child or hand a nut to a squirrel that hopped on to his couch from the window, or his radiant, wide-open eyes would shine with love upon some devotee who had just arrived or was taking leave. And then, in silence, a moment later, his face would be rock-like, eternal in its grandeur. The love that shone in his eyes, the luminous understanding cannot be described.”

Bhagavan led by example. Meticulously exact in the execution of even the smallest of chores, he preferred to do his own work though clearly aware that his devotees were constantly on the watch out for any small wish that he may express. Yet never did he demand anything. He was humorous, generous, consistently affable and never known to have any mood swings irrespective of whether he was stung by hornets, attacked by thieves or in the middle of a plague. On the contrary, if at all he got upset on rare occasions, it was when he inferred that special privileges were being accorded to him. Constantly living in the Self, he was totally devoid of preferences and prejudices. He maintained this attitude throughout his life in all matters and even in the face of the disease, sarcoma. That this serenity stemmed not from brutal courage or unrelenting stoicism but from supreme compassion and boundless love is indeed remarkable. He continued to give darshan to his devotees till the last evening of his stay on earth.

On Friday, April 14, 1950, 8:47 p.m. the Mahanirvana took place. An effulgent light blazed a luminous trail across the skies. Around the globe people witnessed the phenomenon. It marked the end of a magnificent era dominated by a person who combined grandeur with simplicity. Sri Ramana Maharishi was not an enigma yet beyond all description.



Tiruvannamalai ... where the hill is worshipped as Siva.



Sri Ramana Maharishi