

The Sage of Arunachala

Ramana Maharishi's grace and compassion touched man and animal alike; his eloquent silence made a tremendous impact.

LAKSHMI DEVNATH offers vignettes.

IT WAS Friday, April 14, 1950. At 8.47 p.m., a flash of light blazed a trail in the darkness of the sky. People in several parts of India saw it. It was at that very moment that the great Sage of Arunachala discarded his mortal frame. There was no struggle, no spasm. Ramana Maharishi died of the dreadful disease — sarcoma. But then diseases are only for ordinary mortals. Ramana Maharishi, one of the greatest sages of India, was not a mere life but a manifestation that descended on to this earth on December 30, 1879. It was a Monday and more important the 'Day of the Arudra Darshan', (celebrated as the birthday of Siva).

He was apparently an ordinary baby at birth. What he made out of his life, however, was extraordinary. When he was barely 17 years old and in the summer of 1896, he experienced a feeling of death and life thereafter. The aftermath of the experience left him not scarred or scared but enlightened. The boy Ramana, magnetised by the vibrations of the sacred hill Arunachala at Tiruvannamalai reached there on September 1, 1896. He never moved out again except for his heavenly abode on that fateful day.

Aware that the time of his departure was due, the Maharishi tried to console his devotees and assuage their grief in many words, "Where could I go?" he queried. "The body is itself a disease; when we have finished a meal do we keep the leaf plate on which we have eaten it?" Just as a servant rejoices to lay down his burden at the place of delivery, so does a *Jnani* rejoice at being relieved of the body by death." For a man who gave up just about everything, except his loincloth, the Maharishi did indeed have a large family of



The Maharishi ... realisation at a young age.

devotees. They came in hordes and from all strata of life — queens, princes, ministers, Presidents, philosophers, foreigners, musicians, the ardent seeker, the curious intellectual, the rich zamindar and the pauper. He viewed all of them with the same compassion.

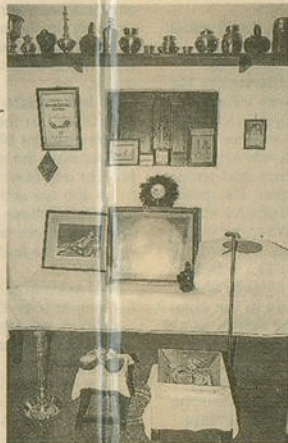
In the early days of the Ashram, there were no special darshan timings. The restrictions and rules came much later to regulate the ever-increasing number of devotees. But the Maharishi was never a party to these mundane decisions nor did he impose any restrictions on anyone. In his heart there was place for all creatures great and small. His demeanour towards the quadruped, the winged and the reptiles is worth pondering over. He never referred to an animal as 'it' but always as "he" or "she". When he said, "Give Lakshmi her rice at once," it was the cow whom he meant. In fact the rules of the Ashram dictated that at mealtime, the dogs be fed

first, then the beggars and only then the devotees. Squirrels used to hop through the window on to his couch and he always kept a little tin of peanuts besides him for them. The animals felt his Grace and once a devotee asked him what it felt to have a snake pass over him and he replied "Cool and soft."

It was a delight to watch very young children run up the hill to be with the Maharishi. Ramani, a nonagenarian fondly recalls with tears in her eyes, "We never knew that he was a Maharishi. He was 'Omachi thatha', to all of us (children). It was Kavyakanta Ganapati Sastri, one of the earliest disciples of Bhagavan, who first addressed him as Maharishi. My father Manavasi Ramaswamy Iyer, was a great Ramana bhakta. He was a poet who composed many songs on 'Bhagavan.' He was popularly referred to as Saranagati Thatha on account of the popular Saranagati song he composed on the Maharishi. But more poignant is the fact that on the day Bhagavan died, Ramaswamy realised that he could compose no more. The stream of songs that gushed out uninterrupted for 40 years dried on the day of the Mahanirvana."

Ramani recalls the day when she and her sisters were regular visitors at the Ashram. The little girls would be engrossed in doing a mock puja with idols of clay and vessels of mud. But what was surprising was that Bhagavan

would volunteer to chant the mantras on their behalf. "I have seen Bhagavan plaiting the hair of my sisters. I remember that one of my daughters, Varalakshmi, even danced before him. On another occasion, at home, my sister put a little bit of wheat husk into her mouth. Finding it very sweet, she immediately ran up the hill to give it to Bhagavan. He not only accepted it, but also mixed it with some sugar and distributed it to all those present. My sister was thrilled. On yet another occasion

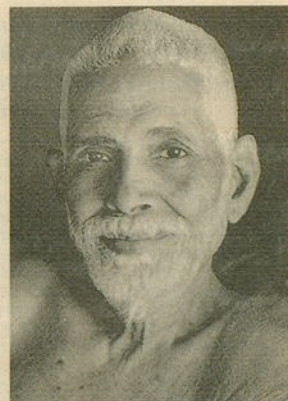


The room where Bhagavan attained nirvana, preserved for posterity.

Bhagavan playfully forced a spicy *puliiodharai* down the throat of my father who was dyspeptic. But surprisingly my father's stomach that would normally revolt even at the very mention of chillies and spices remained placid not only on that day but ever after. Bhagavan was also a very good cook and a very generous host and knock us on our heads if we wasted anything." In fact no wastage was allowed in the ashram and even the parings of vegetables were collected and given to the cows.

Hamsa Ramaiah, another devotee of Ramana, recalls the way Bhagavan would turn himself into a child and play with them. "My mother and her sister would sometimes take tamarind, jaggery, salt and chillies to Bhagavan. He would pound them on a flat stone into a paste, and wrap small balls of it round the heads of small sticks, like a lollipop and suck them along with the kids, to their great joy. Sometimes he would even suggest home medicines for simple ailments like headache, sore throat and so on and believe me, they always worked."

Bhagavan was a simple human being. In everyday life, he was punctual, meticulous to the last detail, and simplicity incarnate. Devotees like Ramani and Hamsa recall that he would never allow privileges of any kind to be shown to him. In the dining hall, if anything extra or special was served to him he would immediately express his displeasure



by refusing to eat the food. On another occasion when a devotee reprimanded a European lady for not crossing her legs, Bhagavan, in spite of his arthritis and rheumatism, crossed his legs that a rule was applicable to all and refused to straighten them till the lesson had been driven home.

On another occasion, he requested his devotees to give him a chance to massage their legs so that he could also get a share of *punya*. It was absolutely touching to see him repair a little child's torn notebook with the greatest care and to listen to the woes of a grief stricken devotee with utmost concern. He shunned ostentation of any kind and refused to be garlanded on any occasion. In the last years of his life, the Ashram authorities commissioned a shpathai to carve a statue of Bhagavan. Hearing the stone being chiselled, Bhagavan jocularly remarked, "The stone God is getting ready to sit upon the stone sofa."

Yet, very rarely did the sage speak. But his silence was more eloquent than a thousand words spoken. F. H. Humphreys, the first European visitor to the Ramanashram penned his experience, of seeing Ramana Maharishi, to a friend in London. "For half an hour I looked into the Maharishi's eyes, which never changed their expression of deep contemplation. I could feel only that his body was not the man: it was the instrument of God." But Humphreys was neither the first nor the last to experience God in the form of Ramana Maharishi. Paul Brunton, who arrived at Tiruvannamalai more a sceptic than a believer records the impact of the eloquent silence of Maharishi: "Before those (eyes) of the Maharishi, I hesitate, puzzled and baffled ... I cannot turn my gaze away from him. I know only that a steady river of quietness seems to be flowing near me ..."

Hamsa recalls the last day of the Maharishi's life. "His jaw remained open because of the morphine. We cried because we had never seen him like that. Even then his face never reflected pain. People were passing across his room. He blessed each one of them with his look. Even in those last hours, I remember the compassion with which he looked at my new-born child."

Scholars came to Bhagavan Ramana Maharishi to get their doubts clarified but his teachings were not theoretical in the least. In fact they were simple and practical. He would constantly urge the process of self-enquiry. His oft-repeated advice to aspirants was, "Constantly introspect — Who am I? That which is peace. All that we need do is to keep quiet. Peace is our real nature." at we