

A century of Vedic chanting

"There was no death then, nor yet deathlessness; of night or day there was not any sign; the One breathed without breath, by its own impulse; other than that there was nothing at all."

THUS DECLARES the Naasadiya Sukta or the hymn of creation, found in the Rig Veda. Centuries later, the devotional outpourings of the Azhwars, the Sri Vaishnava saints of South India had a tremendous impact on the people. They were

in Tamil, contained the essence of Vedic thought, unequivocally established the supremacy of Lord Narayana and preached the doctrine of surrender to Him.

Most important, they were recognised as the Tamil Vedas. It was to preserve such profound knowledge, encapsulated in Vedic chants in Sanskrit and Azhwar pasurams in Tamil, that a group of Sri Vaishnavas from Mylapore, joined hands in the

early part of the twentieth century to form an organisation devoted to Vedic studies.

The Vedaparayana Sabha was inaugurated in 1905 under the auspices of the Sri Vedanta Desika Devasthanam, Mylapore, Chennai. Its objectives were the study and propagation of the Vedas that included the Divya Prabandham of the Azhwars, the philosophy of Visishtadvaita propagated by the great Vaishnava teacher and philosopher Sri Ramanuja, the teachings of his noble descendant, Sri Vedanta Desika and other related subjects.

These were to be achieved by the publication of books and discourses by learned scholars. The Sabha included honouring of Vedic scholars in its activities. It is now gearing itself to celebrate its centenary. It goes to the credit of the Sabha that, in the last hundred years, it has assiduously ensured the daily recitation of both the Sanskrit and Tamil Vedas at the Devasthanam.

This is no mean achievement. For, the hurdles and obstacles the sabha faced were not few and it overcame the challenges showing commitment. A devotee, when he enters the temple, in the early hours of the morning, can most certainly witness and hear scores of young boys being taught Divya Prabandham. Vedas are taught when there are enough number of students. The tutoring is absolutely



Sri Vedanta Desika

free and the only thing expected of the student is dedication. One of the factors contributing to the success of the Sabha has been its parent organisation, Sri Vedanta Desika Devasthanam. This is a rare example of a temple built in honour of an acharya with Lord Srinivasa and other deities entering its precincts much later. Today, this temple is popularly known as the Mylapore Srinivasa Perumal temple.

From days of yore, the Vaishnavite tradition has been strong in Mylapore. It was the birthplace (avatara sthalam) of Pey Azhwar and also finds mention in the hymns of Tirumazhisai Azhwar and Tirumangai Azhwar.

The Vedaparayana Sabha, rendering service under the auspices of the Sri Vedanta Desika Devasthanam, Mylapore, will celebrate its centenary next month.

LAKSHMI DEVNATH talks about its origin and the glory of the deities.

In 1832, Damal Villivalam Veeraghavachariar donated some land to build a structure that would house the idols of Sri Vedanta Desika and Lord Hayagriva, the acharya's patron-deity. Sri Vedanta Desika (1268-1369), one of the greatest philosophers and Vaishnava litterateur in the post-Ramanuja period, was considered to be an incarnation of the Divine Bell (Ghanta) of Lord Venkateswara of Tirupati. Thus, in 1924, when the decision was taken to install a deity in the Desika Devasthanam, the choice was unanimously — Lord Srinivasa!

At this time, a Sathari belonging to Devaraja Perumal of Kan-

chipuram was brought here. This Sathari is used only on the closing day ceremony of the annual Desika utsavam. As in Tirupati, the Srinivasa Perumal in the Mylapore temple is Sthanaka (standing). He has four arms. The upper right arm holds the discus — Sudarshana. The upper left arm holds the Sankha — Panchajanya.

The lower right hand is the Varada Hasta. The fingers of the left hand rest on the left thigh with the thumb of the hand almost parallel to the waistline. This is called the Katyavalambita pose which indicates that the Lord is ever ready to protect his devotees. Another interpretation of this is that the ocean of worldly existence is only waist-deep to those devoted to His feet.

It was in 1997 that the Lord's jewels were stolen. The stunned devotees, rose as one man and proceeded to replace the entire collection and completed the task. Remarkably, on the very day the new set of jewels was offered to the Lord, news came that all the stolen ornaments had been retrieved.

The pujas conducted here strictly follow Agamic injunctions and the archakas (priests) conduct them with devotion and dedication. The temple is unostentatious with no exquisite sculptures. On its walls are engraved verses of Sri Vedanta Desika and a few other acharyas.

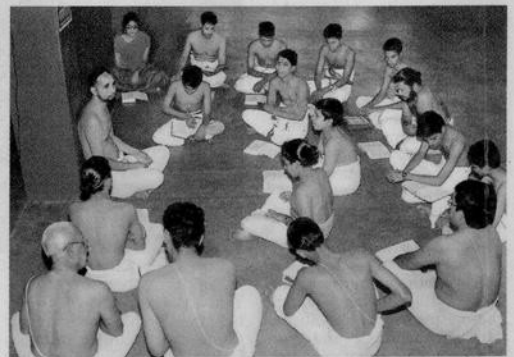
The principal festivals celebrated here are the annual Brahmotsavam and Desika utsavam. Other shrines, in the temple, include separate ones for Alarmelmanga Thayar and Pey Azhwar. The Vedaparayana Sabha undertakes the service of thadeeyaradhana and Sambhavana (serving of food and offering monetary gifts to Vedic scholars and it has been doing this ever since its inception for a hundred years now).

The centenary celebrations of the Sabha will take place between March 4 and 8. The Sabha has planned a grand five-day festival befitting the occasion. The pujas to be conducted during these days include special

Tirumanjanam to Perumal, Thayar and Sri Desika; Veda, Divya Prabandha and Grantha Parayanam on all the five days laksharchana to Perumal and Thayar; discourses by eminent scholars and thadeeyaradhana.

On the concluding day, the Lord and His consort and Sri Desika will be taken out in procession. A commemorative souvenir comprising articles by eminent scholars is due for release during the festival.

Donations are welcome. Cheques in favour of Vedaparayana Sabha Centenary Celebration Committee should be sent to Sri Vedanta Desika Devasthanam, K.P. Sannidhi Street, Mylapore, Chennai - 600 004.



A familiar scene at the Srinivasa temple, Mylapore, where scriptures are taught.



The utsavar under floral umbrella.