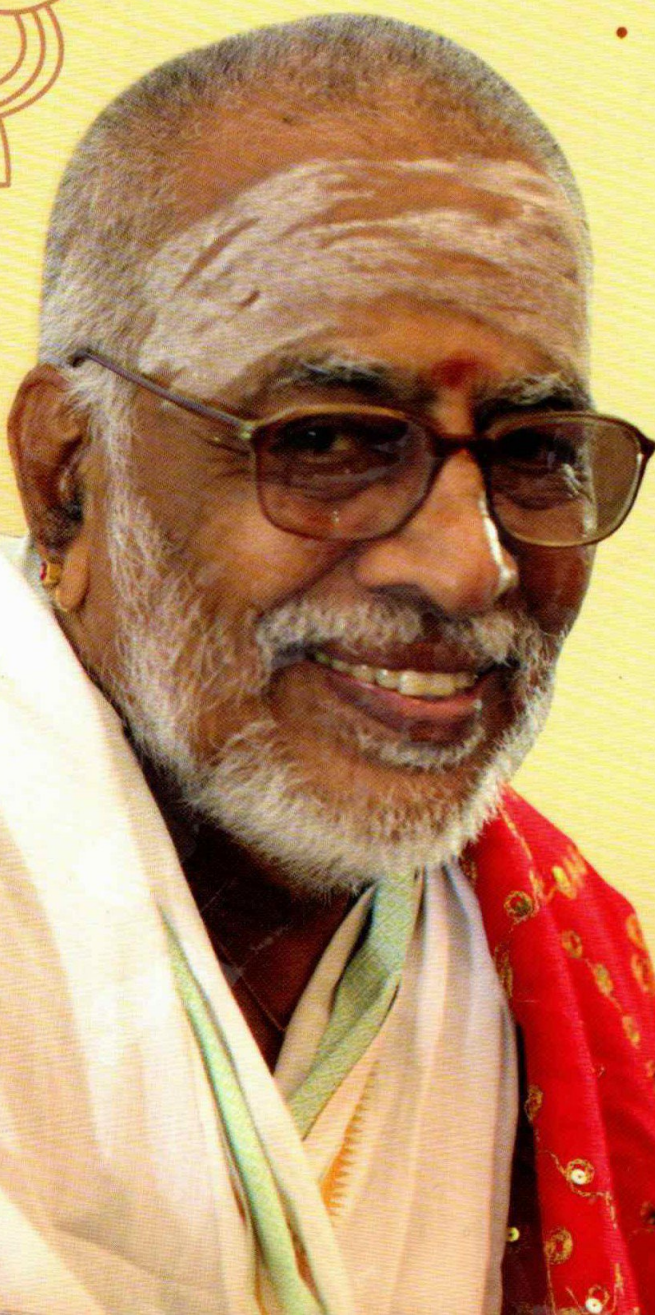


Sarma Sastrigal

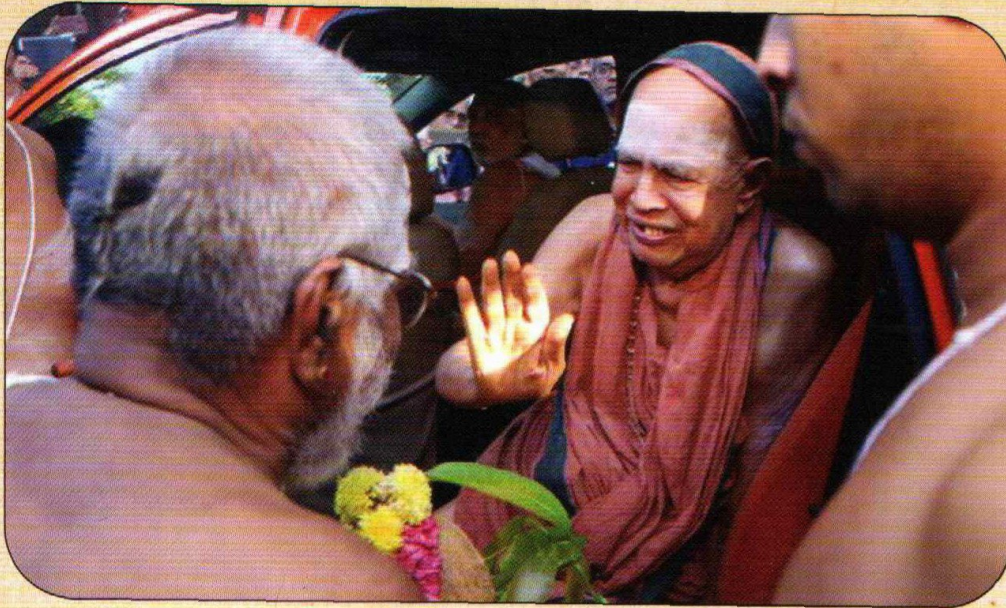
*An inspiring interplay of nationalism,
spirituality and religion*

A MAN ON A MISSION

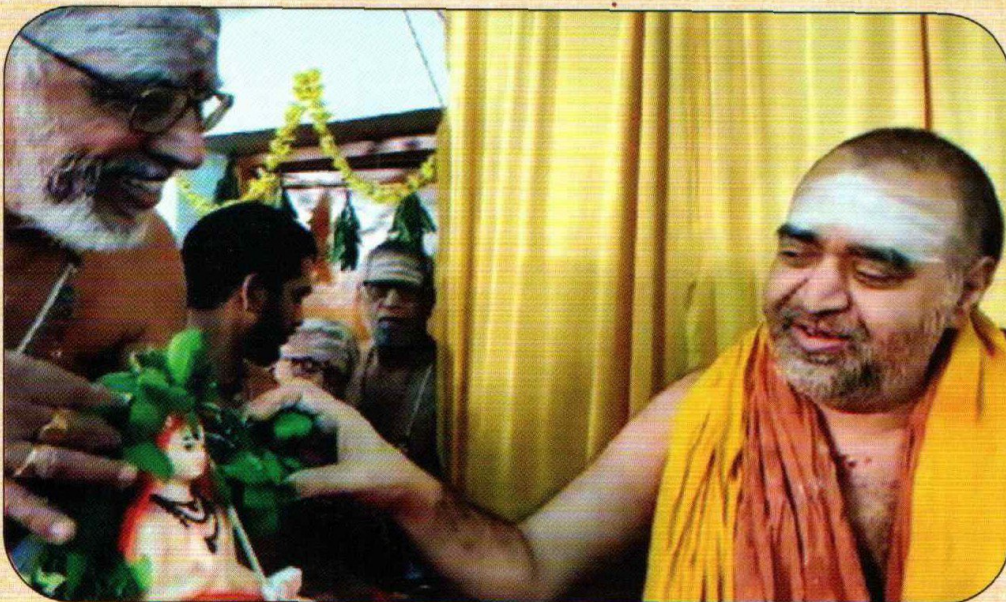


As narrated to

Sudha G Eswaran
V S Kumar



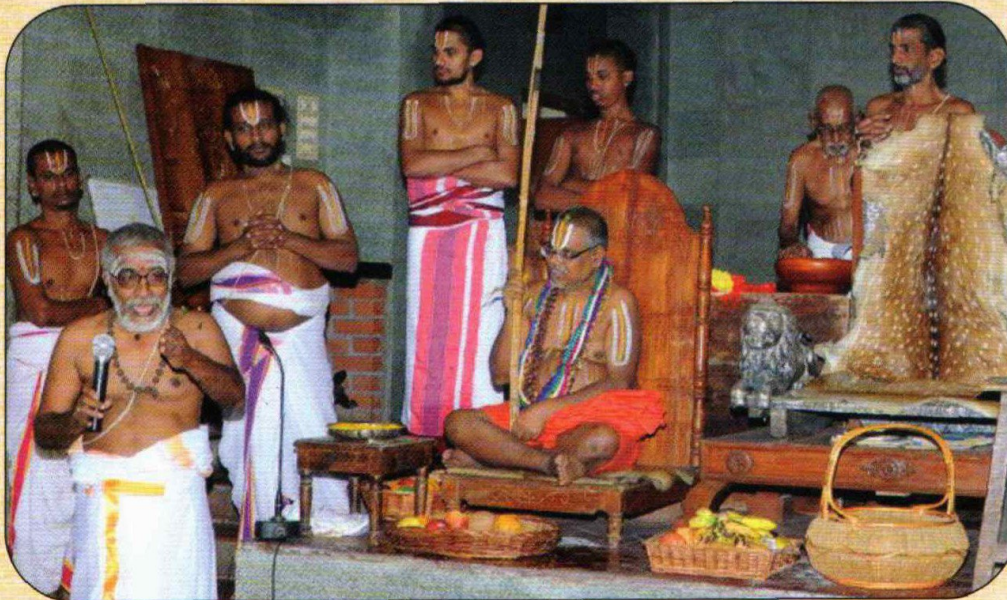
*Kanchi Sage
Sri Jayendra Saraswati Swamigal Blesses*



*Kanchi Sankaracharya
Sri Sri Vijayendra Saraswati Swamigal*



*Ahobila Mutt Senior Jeer Swamigal
Pontiff Blesses*





With Sri Guru Ghanapadigal



*With Adhyapakar and students of Kumbakonam
Sri Mantra Peeteswari Veda Patasala*



Sarma Sastrigal

*An inspiring interplay of nationalism,
spirituality and religion*



A MAN ON A MISSION



As narrated to

Sudha G Eswaran
V S Kumar





Year of Publication: 2021

Any part of this publication may not be reproduced in any form.

Price: ₹ 200/-

Published by: Loka Kshema Seva Samiti, Chennai.

Copies can be had from:

Ramaanadan

A-1, REG Apartments

11/23, Palayakkaran Cross Street

Kodambakkam

Chennai 600 024

Ph: 70109 28853, 98402 75634, 94443 80973

Printed by:





Dedicated to

My parents

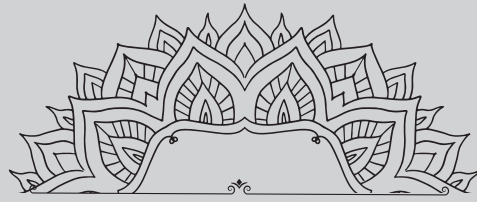
Brahmasri Srinivasa Sastrigal
Smt Subhalakshmi



My eyes well up in tears when I recall the sacrifices my parents had to make in order to bring up their brood of six - two boys and four girls. Whatever I am today and whatever I have been able to do in my life so far are all owing to their blessing.

Sarma Sastrigal





A LIFE TRANSFORMED



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PREFACE

I have always believed that autobiographies are written by famous persons – achievers who would like to share the secrets of their success. Memoirs are strictly not for simple people like me, I thought, and kept shooting down requests from students and other well-wishers who wanted me to publish my reminiscences.

When they persisted, I realized that there were learnings from the small and big things I have been able to do, which could provoke thought and possibly action in others. I'm an educator at heart, and I saw that it was my duty to spread knowledge that could be applied. This book is the result of the same yen that made me reach out to everyone on practical aspects of our Sanatana Dharma.

My life of seventy-plus years has been a roller-coaster ride alternating between despair and exhilaration many times, but I have always been driven by the will to live every moment fully. This book has tried to capture the highs, the lows, the bumps and the hurts, but above all the will that has made every one of my experiences enjoyable.

Social fervour and an abiding commitment to the community have been the paramount driving forces in everything I have done. In rendering service to the nation and to the society, three attributes have constantly anchored and guided me: a sense of purpose, unflinching values and the courage of conviction. I will consider it God's grace if I am able to pass on to the reader these three values of life through the book.

I know I can convey my views with conviction when I am talking, but writing is a different ball game altogether and I have no pretensions of being a writer. So I literally "told my story" to a band of enthusiasts who took great pains to write it up and get it into print. It would be impossible for me to thank these friends who have done all the hard work out of sheer love and affection for me.

In particular Sudha G Eswaran and V S Kumar need special mention. They have had numerous conversations with me and a wide cross-section of my associates, and have painstakingly strung these anecdotes into a lively, beautifully sequenced narrative.

So here you are, with the story of a common man who could do some uncommon things, offered in all humility and hope that it is interesting and useful.

Plava, Chiththirai 1
14/4/2021

SARMA SASTRIGAL





PROLOGUE

“Charaiveti, charaiveti”

*[Don't stop in your tracks, keep going towards your goal]
Aitareya Brahmana, Tritiya Adhyaya, Tritiya Khanda*



There are several ways to write one's memoirs. Some begin at the beginning of their lives and keep going chronologically. Some others focus on relationships, and yet others on the highs and lows of their years.

I will begin the story of my life with the Anugraha bhashanam (gracious speech) by our Kanchi Acharya, Sri Sri Bala Periyava on 30th August 2020, at the peak of the COVID-19 viral threat in India and elsewhere. He delivered the address online. The occasion for the bhashanam was the Bhiksha Vandanam my disciples and I were offering during His Chaturmasyam. We do this every year at Kanchipuram, and were doing it online that year because of the pandemic.

His words were aimed at answering a very important question, a question many of us keep asking ourselves: what is my role in this life as an Indian, as a Hindu, and as a Brahmin if I am one by birth? As you read and reread his speech, I believe you can get the answers.

Here is a translation of Bala Periyava's speech.

Bala Periyava's anugraha bhashanam

Today, at Chinna Kanchipuram in Tenambakkam, the day started with the Surya Namaskaram by the students of the Veda Patasala here. Today is Dwadasi too. There have been two programmes – Tulasi pooja conducted by the students of the Patasala and Prakriti Vandanam organised by the RSS in which vriksha poojanam has taken centre stage.

A lot more attention is being paid to the worship of nature in recent times and various programmes have been organised towards this end. I recall a book – Marangaley Pillaigal – published some time back. It explains what our Hindu Sanatana Dharma says about Mother Nature.

The Sastras have been formulated for the good of society. The society should be a healthy one. It should be governed with intelligence, prudence, responsibility and patience. It should engage in dharmic acts of charity and kindness. It should spread goodwill and happiness.





This is being done by many these days through social media. Many books dealing with Vedic practices are also being published. Spiritual awareness is being offered in small doses so as not to become overwhelming. The strength of social media should be used for such good purposes alone.

Talking about our dharma now and defining it clearly has become necessary as we seem to have forgotten our dharma and our precise roles - as Indians, as Hindus, as Brahmins.

First as Indians, do we know the history of our motherland? For thousands of years ours was a society run with great orderliness and refinement. Hinduism is strong and at the same time tolerant. Despite invasions from all sides - the Portuguese, the French and the British – we have, in the manner we hold our breath while reciting the Gayatri mantra, held on to our culture and managed to preserve it. This is one of the great achievements of Indians as a nation. We must go on doing this.

Secondly Hindus, despite speaking different languages, being engaged in different jobs, and belonging to different communities, have continued to this day to follow old traditions like worshipping Ayyanar, Saptakanni Amman and village deities. We continue to decorate the neem tree with turmeric and vermilion before offering worship and go around the peepal (sacred fig) tree with a Pillayar or Naga placed under, as a mark of obeisance to Mother Nature for all that she gives us in abundance.

The foundation of Hindu tradition stands strong: we still have belief in rebirth, in pilgrimage, in the observance of special days of the month and the celebration of festivals. From Kanyakumari in the south to the banks of the Ganga in the north, daily rituals (anushtanams) are followed by many.

Other auspicious practices too have not been lost over time. The cow continues to be sacred to the Hindus. The practice of ladies wearing tilakam (bindi), and men sandal paste or vibhuti on the forehead continues. Doing Nama Japa (the chanting of God's names) is prevalent everywhere. All these practices of the Hindu religion continue down to the present day with minor differences. And religion is not confined to the temples but has permeated every aspect of day-to-day living.

The beauty of Hindu religion is that it can be seen in everything around us – in a blade of darbhair grass, in an irukam flower, in a neem or peepal tree, in the navadanyam. Hinduism is intrinsically intertwined with nature. Mountains, the sun and the moon are also parts of Hindu tradition. On a full moon day, millions chant Lalita Sahasranamam. Though this is mostly done by individuals in their homes, even this individual display of bhakti binds the Hindu society as a whole.





Surya Namaskaram (the worship of Sun God) is also done by countless people at the time of sunrise and Indians all over the country bond together by this common act. No matter which Veda is followed, no matter which region one lives in, no matter whether one is rich or poor, educated or not, such practices are common denominators that bring Hindus together. Hinduism is a religion based in respect and love for nature, and almost equates it to love for God.

Over time, especially after Independence, other issues have taken centre-stage and the roots of the Hindu tradition have been shaken. Just as a storm uproots a tree, suspicion and other destructive forces have been tempests that Hinduism has had to contend with. If this tree is rooted firmly in the soil one need not fear strong winds or storms. We are today in a situation where threats to Hinduism are coming from different quarters and even countries which border us. It is imperative that we work in unison towards safeguarding our Hindu tradition and spreading its tenets.

Thirdly, I have to talk about our role as Brahmins. Brahmins have to play the role of communicators or coordinators in society. We can even regard them as teachers. Their task is to bring the Hindu society together. Through their expertise in astrology, in Ayurveda, in administration, in finance, in teaching and in being family vadhyaars, they are capable of directing families along the right path by being available to give advice and solutions for problems of all sections of the society.

Brahmins have to think of the whole world as their milieu and not just their little community. Universal brotherhood is their first priority. They occupy a central place, right at the heart of the Hindu community.

But to be available to the whole of humanity one has to first of all stabilise one's own status and stand on firm ground. To Brahmins the Vedas, through the aspects of bhakti, japa, namavali, pooja etc. offer this stability. Brahmins have to follow the religious practices of their forebears including rituals like Panchayatana pooja, to keep alive our hoary traditions and carry them forward to subsequent generations.

In the Bhagavad Gita, the Lord says: Brahmana rakshitena, rakshita Vaidiko dharmanaha (meaning Brahmanatva when protected protects, in turn, the Vedas). Veda rakshanam has to be done both from within and without. The outward expressions of tradition and culture based on our Vedas and Sastras form the heritage of the entire nation.

In 1998 we had gone to Himachal Pradesh with Pudu Periyava. We wanted to have a darshan of the Sri Shankaracharya Hill in Srinagar. In a place called Noolpur, some of the resident Hindi speaking Brahmins requested our presence when they performed a samashti upanayanam. We were happy to note that after the ceremony was performed, the initiated young boys used the





words “bhavati bhikshaam dehi” – the very same words used by Acharya as a young brahmachari in Kaladi. Our Hindu traditions are therefore a tremendous binding force.

The Vedas promote not only the unity of our nation but universal fraternity. Hindu traditions are followed even by those who have separated from us. There are Shakti peetams in our neighbouring countries. Tribal traditions followed in far-away lands like Africa also show some semblance to Vedic traditions.

Brahmins are repositories of all these traditions. Not only do they perform their daily rituals (nitya anushtanams), but they perpetuate among others our karma siddhanta based on the tenet that good actions bear good results. They instil this karya-karana bhava in people and encourage them to do good. Showing love and respect for all and acting in conformity with what is deemed punya karya (good deeds) are some of the belief systems that Brahmins teach the rest to follow.

The Sastras, which form the basis for all the teachings, have to be protected. This is done by studying the Vedas and Sastras, understanding what is stated therein, and experiencing personally the truth of the Sastras. By teaching the Sastras to others, Brahmins protect and propagate dharma in society. This is the duty and responsibility of the Brahmins. They have to organise satsangs to propagate our Sastras. It is their responsibility to do this without expecting anything in return. It is futile to expect the government to undertake such tasks.

The Sanskrit language has to be learnt and protected. Manipravalam, the mixture of Tamil and Sanskrit spoken by the Brahmins has also to be protected. The first step is to speak one’s mother tongue. After that the Sanskrit language and Vedic mantras can be learnt with the correct intonations and by following the correct rituals.

We need Veda Patasalas with students learning and following the correct anushtanams and other necessary practices for the study of Vedas. It does not matter how many students are enrolled. Even if only a few seeds are planted, one can still expect to reap a huge crop if the planting is done in the proper method. Veda vidwans who teach these students should be revered.

Safeguarding of the Vedas involves first learning them, then learning the import of their meaning, doing further studies and then going out and propagating them. In villages today people may be totally unaware of the Vedas, but on occasions like a kumbhabhishekam, a yagasala is constructed and mantras are chanted. Whether or not the village folk understand what is being chanted they instinctively know that these mantras come from their traditions. They feel connected to them and hold them in reverence. This reflects the purity of the mantras themselves.





I am reminded of Ugar Swami (Yati Narayananda Saraswati) of Maharashtra who spent much time with Maha Periyava and who has written many stotras in praise of Him. He was instrumental in initiating many common people in Maharashtra into the chanting of the Gayatri mantra.

Brahmins should remember that their personal acquisition of the wealth of our traditions and going to places of pilgrimage is not enough. They should try and bring more people into the practices, so that all benefit from it. Let us make it our sankalpa to do this on this auspicious day. The country, Sanatana Dharma and the society at large will all stand to benefit from such a sankalpa.

Hara Hara Sankara, Jaya Jaya Sankara





CHAPTER 1

***“We should always feel in our hearts that
we are insignificant, the smallest of the small.”
- Sankaraji, My Guru.***



It's the small things in life that make a big difference.

People born in illustrious families become famous in their own right and get noticed, and this is not unusual. But it's different when a common man with no credentials gets into the public space by doing something for the community and the society at large and makes people sit up and take notice.

This is what I think has happened to me. I am a small speck in the greater scheme of things. There are well-read Vedic scholars who run patasalas, deliver upanyasams on our Sastras and write erudite theses on the Upanishads. I know I am nowhere in their class. But what I bring to the table are two distinct things: one, nationalism and patriotic fervour fuelled by my involvement as a pracharak in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in the 1970's, and two, digestible and practicable Vedic knowledge in my present avatar as a mentor.

I don't take up great big ideas, deep philosophies. My focus is always on basic stuff that relates to the common man's daily spiritual life, little things that he can do to reach nearer God. I believe this is why and how I have made a positive impact on the society around me.

I feel happy that at 70-plus I can still work long hours without a break. I feel blessed that my videos, Veda classes and workshops are able to reach value in the spiritual domain to common people. And I'm particularly delighted that through these years I have built a team of dedicated co-workers who assimilate, practise and implement what I believe in and work for. It's difficult to get sincere followers in the confused field of spirituality and religion and I know I am lucky in this respect.

I have no special identity, no pedigree in this space. Yet if I have been able to inspire people, it is only because of the immense grandeur of our Vedic tradition, and it should be possible for others to do what I'm doing.

My role models are great persons in Indian history who forsook their comfort zones and achieved great things for the society and for our country at significant cost to their personal lives. This is why, when I decided to join social service, I didn't want to feel that I was doing it because I had no option. I donned the role of an RSS pracharak resigning from a good job and forgoing a regular





income that was important to me and my family at that time and was going to be sorely missed. Undoubtedly this added to my zest and commitment to the community service work I was taking up. The sacrifice of individual comfort makes a big difference to your approach when you enter public service.

People often ask me what I would consider as turning points in my life, key decisions of mine that changed the course of my life. I'm not able to respond to this question easily. You see, there are two kinds of people: one set of folks who sketch out clearly what they want to do in their lives, set targets to achieve and go ahead; and the other who go with the flow and take action based on what life offers to them. I belong to the second category.

At no point of time in my life have I planned my moves or strategized and structured my actions. So the watershed moments in my life were not decisive steps I took with a goal in my mind. They were actions that I took which became turning points.

I can recollect three such major happenings in my life so far.

1970 – A national call

The first revolutionary happening in my life was my becoming a pracharak with Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in the year 1970, quitting my lucrative job in an insurance company in Chennai (then Madras). When I look back I realize that it was not a spot decision but more of a natural evolution from my childhood years with the RSS.

An RSS pracharak is the leader of an RSS shakha and guides the group in activities focusing on building national pride and so on. When I told my father “appa, I’m joining the RSS as a pracharak and will work with them for the next five years”, he received the news with trepidation and tried to dissuade me as my earnings at that time would help in getting my sisters married. He suggested that I go later. I was firm in my resolve and stood my ground saying that I might feel differently later and might not have the same passion. I really felt I had to strike while the iron was hot.

The next five years were filled with experiences that a regular Tambram (Tamil Brahmin) would not even dream of. There was little money, the barest of facilities, discomfort and even frustration at times. But the exhilaration of working with great national leaders and the sheer charm of serving Mother India more than made up for all my travails.

The Sarma who emerged through this anubhooti (experience) was a genuine, authentic ‘sevak’.





1995 – A spiritual calling

The second milestone in my life was my resigning my position in Ashok Leyland after 15 years of service to become a vaideeka – taking over my family profession, as it were.

My action of becoming a full-time vadhyar followed three years of intense training under my father, starting with learning the Vedas, extending to training on how to conduct poojas, tarpanams, sraaddhas and other rituals, and concluding with training on not-so-common rituals.

I believe my daily confabulation during that period with my newfound guru Sankaranji was the primary cause of the drastic step I took. His guidance was not direct, mind you. He did not ask me to take up vaideekam. All he told me was that I was spending too little time with my father, who was staying at that time with my elder brother. I should see him more often, he felt.

On the very first day I went over to meet my parents I requested my father to restart teaching me the scriptures, after a break of almost four decades. My education slowly moved from Vedas to the conduct of karmas, with no forethought on my part yet about getting into vaideekam. That happened again by Godly intervention on one Amavasya, when my father was too sick to guide people who had come to perform tarpanam, and asked me to deputise. I did so hesitantly but with great love for what I was doing, and slowly evolved into Sarma Sastrigal, the vaideeka.

2005 – A community cause

The third transformation of mine came about when I was nearing sixty, fully occupied and very busy in my role as a vaideeka, in fact a much sought-after ‘aathu vadhyar’ (family priest).

A thought that kept recurring and bothering me during my days as a vaideeka was: is this all I am going to do for the rest of my life? Doing vaideekam to help laukeekas (lay people) fulfil their religious responsibilities – was that all I was destined to do? Or should I be doing something more meaningful?

A related thought was: Is there some way I can apply my experiential learning as a pracharak and the national dedication I brought into my life during the years with the RSS to my present career as a vaideeka?

The answers to both the questions came to me from a chance query of a friend and his innocent statement of a personal problem that I realized was the problem of many others. It strikes me now that the answers had been staring in my face all along, only I was blind to them.





This friend felt he was doing many rituals either wrongly or not at all, out of sheer ignorance, and he was not happy. He had quite a few questions on observances and worship practices for which he was seeking simple, practical answers.

As I went about clarifying my friend's questions, I realized that this was what I should be doing regularly and professionally. I could see that folks like him would be the target audience, and I started on my next avatar.

I reached my 'customers' individually and in groups to get them the knowledge they needed. I not only helped them comply with their religious duties better, but increased their level of observance of our traditions and customs substantially with workshops and practice sessions live and online. I also sought to tell them why they had to do all these things – to the extent I knew.

Thus was born Sarma the educator, the coach, the trainer in Hindu karmas, poojas and practices. I had become a religious catalyst of sorts.

In all the three roles I have played and am playing I see the distinct presence of the Almighty. It is only Bhagavat sankalpa that has governed and directed each of these roles.

That's my life in a nutshell for you, dear reader. Read on, about a life transformed three times through seven decades, and a life still evolving.





CHAPTER 2

The Carefree Years

“Take up one idea. Make that one idea your life; dream of it; think of it; live on that idea” – Swami Vivekananda



I was born Swaminatha Sarma to my parents, Brahmasri Srinivasa Sastrigal and Smt. Subhalakshmi in Kumbakonam in the year 1949. Chamu was my pet name. We were six children - two boys and four girls. I was the third child to my parents. My elder brother is the eldest amongst us and I have one elder sister and three younger sisters.

My mother was the daughter of Santhanam Sastrigal, a Vaideeka Sreshta and a spiritual guide to many asthikas in Kumbakonam. She was one of his six children. Nagarama Sastrigal, my maternal uncle, was also an eminent vaideeka. She got married to my father when she was 8 and he was 11.

Father lived in Solaiyappan Street and studied in the famous Raja Patasala. His teacher was the great Ootthukkadu Sankara Sastrigal, who besides being a Vedic scholar was a musician as well. His father Vaidyanatha Sastrigal and his elder brother Nagaraja Sastrigal were also Vedic veterans. Another elder brother of my father, T V Narayana Sastrigal was a well-known Bhagavatar in Chennai. He made a name for himself in sampradaya bhajan, and has written several books. He is renowned for bringing abhangs from Maharashtra into the Carnatic music repertoire.

We used to hear occasionally from Appa about his days during 1920s in the Patasala. In the days he was a student, the school was running with sparse resources. The limited food used to be rationed out to the boys and was hardly sufficient. But for him sometimes it would be the only meal of the day, unless they got some rice in the evening from a well-wisher. His mother would save up at night for the next morning, so that she could feed the children with ‘pazhaiyadhu’ before they went to the Patasala. She wanted them to have the energy to study and did not like to send them on an empty stomach.

At night they would typically be eating in the dark, and there was always a possibility of insects falling into the food. “We couldn’t afford to throw away the food just because we found a cockroach”, Appa would say with a laugh. “We would just take it out and eat the food.” This was the fate of most of Veda Vidyarthees, not just my father.

Father completed his Veda adhyayanam and entered the profession at a particularly difficult time. Vaideekam did not get enough encouragement and





was in fact looked down upon, in a way, perhaps because the country was going through the churn of freedom struggle. He had a precarious hand-to-mouth existence even later after India became independent, in fact all along. But this never bothered my father, actually. He was happy with his profession despite the strain he had to make both ends meet.

When my father moved to Renigunta, my elder sister Thangammal and brother Rajamani stayed with our grandparents in Kumbakonam and did their schooling there. My three younger sisters Vasantha, Dhanalakshmi and Padmavathy and I lived with our parents in Renigunta. All of us did our SSLC, the equivalent in my time of 11th standard now. My brother went on to do a Polytechnic course and my last sister went to college. She is the only graduate in our family.

My father was very particular that every one of us got a good education. He worked long hours to make sure that we got schooling in a first-class institution and could pursue higher studies if we wanted to. It was a different matter of course that we had to be interested in studies and academically well-accomplished!

While my elder sister and the second of my three younger sisters got married after SSLC and became homemakers, my immediate younger one was employed with Telephones. My last sister – the graduate – worked in Indian Oil Corporation and retired as a manager.

It was a simple life that my parents lived in Kumbakonam and later on in Renigunta and finally in Chennai. My mother went to a nearby temple every day as part of her daily routine. Her steadfast dedication to the Gods must have played a huge part in seeing her through a challenging role of homemaker on the meagre income that my father was earning despite toiling hard.

Although we led austere lives with no room for any ostentation, our parents made sure we didn't lack anything. They fulfilled all our needs but sacrificed many of their own. An incident comes to my mind that exemplifies this aspect of our childhood.

Every year our parents would take us children to Kumbakonam during the school vacation to stay with our maternal grandparents. My grandfather was a Vaideeka too. When the time came for us to leave, my grandfather would invariably give a small bag to my mother which contained two or three 9x5 veshtis (dhotis).

On returning home, Amma would dye the dhotis in some preferred colours of hers. These were the only saris she wore on normal days. Even now when I think of it, I feel heart-broken that my mother had to make do by converting dyed veshtis into saris.





In fact if Amma wore a ‘proper’ sari on a given day it could only mean that there was a festival or function that day. Her original authentic saris were few and would be brought out only on such occasions and would return to the shelf to await the next one.

All six of us – my brother, my four sisters and I – owe our good lives and wellbeing to the amazing manner in which our parents brought us up. None of us have seen in our individual lives the kind of privation and harsh conditions with which our parents had to battle to bring us up. Of course I personally had to later in my life undergo great financial strain, but that was my own doing and not because of them.

Appa started Veda adhyayanam for me after my upanayanam, and taught me the scriptures for a few years himself instead of sending me to a Patasala. He may have been considering a vaideeka’s career for me, but at one point he decided to put me into the formal education stream. Perhaps the ordeals he had undergone prompted him to do so. The mood swing in the country was also a reason, with English education gaining ascendancy even among Brahmin families. So Appa must have said to himself “let my son not suffer in poverty. I have struggled a lot in my life as an adhyapak and a vaideeka, and the profession of a vadhya is not at all remunerative. Why should my son follow suit and live from hand to mouth?”

So he changed course and got me admitted to a regular school when I think I was nine or ten years old, in the third standard directly. Formal schooling started quite late for me.

Three activities took up all my free time, the time away from school work:

- Learning Veda from my father
- Attending the RSS shakha
- Going to the railway station to sell newspapers and magazines

The Renigunta Railway Station became an integral part of my life in my schooldays. You could find me at the station on all weekday evenings and in the mornings as well during weekends and holidays. I used to do the part-time job of selling newspapers and magazines in the Higginbothams Book Stall to passengers.

The stall manager encouraged me to read Swami Vivekananda’s books. I found Swamiji’s writing tremendously inspiring, and his quotes spoke to the depths of my intellect.

One particular quote that stayed in my mind and was later strengthened during my association with the RSS was his exhortation to Indian youth:





“Take up one idea. Make that one idea your life; dream of it; think of it; live on that idea. Let the brain, the body, muscles, nerves, every part of your body be full of that idea. Leave every other idea alone. This is the way to success, and this is the way great spiritual giants are produced.”

I sincerely believe that behind each of my life’s big moves this saying was a powerful factor.

My father continued to teach me Vedas when he found time but clearly I was not into it. School work apart, I had also got into the RSS and that occupied a large part of my free time. Gradually I drifted away from appa’s profession.

I was only an average student. I found other boys who worked with RSS in their spare time were almost always bright students and excelled in studies, but I was an exception. I remember getting punished by my teachers for shoddy homework and slowness in grasping lessons.

But practically every teacher from elementary school right up to SSLC loved me, and this was both unusual and pleasing to me. Yes! In particular I recall our Headmaster Sri N V Chalapathy had special affection for me. He was also my English teacher and would take me aside whenever he had a free moment and advise me on how to improve my English vocabulary.

Despite all the additional interest bestowed on me, I’m afraid I cleared SSLC with just pass marks.

My classmates were invariably friendly and affectionate to me. I have lost touch with everyone from school except Sadasivam who studied with me all the way till SSLC. He came from a poor family with high values, and I learnt the virtues of simplicity and honesty from him. After finishing school, he got a job in TTD (Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam) as a stenographer, and steadily grew in the establishment to retire as Joint Executive Officer. I’m still in touch with him.

Sadasivam was a good companion to me and somewhat of a guide too. He was not too comfortable about my RSS work and would often advise me to sever ties with them.

At school I was not gregarious and pretty much kept to myself in class and during recess hours. I socialized very little and had few friends. One of the reasons for my aloofness could have been my stammer. I had a distinct stutter when I spoke, and it was an issue all through my schooldays.

I believe children, boys mainly, have the stammering problem between the ages of two and five, and it disappears thereafter in most cases. With some it continues into teenage or even further. But stammering is only a disorder and not a disease, and can be cured. I am a living proof of this.





Stammering in older children and young adults causes social and emotional stress. I was a case in point. In my case the stress would become heightened when people, especially strangers, asked questions. I would run away and hide to escape such situations.

At school I couldn't obviously run and hide when I was asked a question by the teacher. Often the answer would immediately come to my mind but I was unable to verbalize it. Words would tumble out as mumbled syllables, making me confused and forget what I wanted to say.

Once, one of my teachers posed a question to the class. He was usually a genial person, but on that particular day he was in a bad mood for some reason. I raised my hand and stood up in enthusiasm because I knew the answer. His response was "Sit down you stutterer. You will take forever to answer and we do not have so much time". All the children burst out laughing and he joined them.

But he was such a fine gentleman that he came to our house the same evening and sought the forgiveness of my parents for so cruelly putting me down in class.

My maternal uncle, Brahmasri Nagarama Sastrigal had a similar problem with his speech. When he chanted mantras or did his daily rituals everything was just fine. But when he spoke, he had a stammer that was even more pronounced than mine! I discovered this when I went to Kumbakonam to be with my maternal grandparents one year. He was at that time learning the Vedas from my grandfather.

But the great thing was that it never seemed to bother him. Perhaps watching him handle his stutter without becoming self-conscious must have helped me come to terms with my own. He is ninety plus now and a well-known Vedic scholar. His stammer is gone and I don't know how.

On the subject of stammering, my experience as a member of the local RSS shakha was something else altogether. No one in the shakha tormented me. They didn't seem to notice it at all, and this was a relief to me.

Soon after joining I remember going to see my zilla pracharak, Sri Trivikrama Rao. I asked him for advice to get rid of my stammering. He gave me a four-pronged strategy. He said:

1. Go to a maidan – a big open space – and after ensuring no one is around, shout or sing loudly. Use your vocal chords however you want to. Do this every day.
2. Keenly observe and detect which syllables instigate your stammer and repeat these aloud. If people think you are crazy and laugh at you, don't bother.





3. If someone asks a question, concentrate only on the answer. Don't pay any attention to your stammer or be afraid of it, don't even think of it.
4. Stay calm at all times. Feeling flustered will only aggravate the stuttering.

In addition, he asked me to put a small pebble in my mouth and suck on it as one would a sweet.

I followed his advice diligently and after about eight years my stammering all but vanished. When I myself became a pracharak, my stammer was a distant memory. I even became emboldened to ask "who are you calling a stutterer?" if anyone dared to remind me of my problem. Of course, fear would occasionally trigger a stammer but very rarely and temporarily.

At an RSS meeting Guruji Golwalkar asked me something and I panicked and started stuttering. He beckoned me to come and stand next to him and asked the question again. He wanted to reassure me that there was no need to be afraid.

Confidence in oneself and positive thought is all that is required to get over the problem of stammering. It is nothing to be embarrassed about. It is like any other disorder and can easily be sorted out.

Appa kept a close watch on my progress in school, and seeing my involvement in RSS he felt I could join the Armed Forces. He actively tried to get me enrolled into a Sainik School. But I could not get admission in one. My father's love for the country was great and he would have loved it if one of his sons had pursued a military career, but that was not to be.

Another wish of Appa for me was that I should join an engineering college after PUC/(12th Standard now) and become an engineer. But this also remained unfulfilled for the simple reason I could not clear the PUC final exam.

I recall it was a Mathematics paper – trigonometry? When I saw the question paper I went totally blank. It wasn't even as though it was a very difficult paper or that I had not prepared well. To this day it remains a mystery to me as to what happened that day to me in the examination hall. After sitting uncomfortably in my seat for some 30 minutes looking at the question paper with unseeing eyes, I folded the blank answer sheet which had only my roll number on it, submitted it and walked out.

Reading about my schooling days might give you the impression that I was a thick-headed dullard, but that was not the case. This was a big surprise for my teachers too. They found in me a student who could understand what was taught, who was reasonably diligent in class, and who believed in hard work. And yet he always did poorly in exams! They couldn't figure it out. It was no less a puzzle to me.





If you ask me whether I regret not being a brilliant student and doing my graduation and post-grad, I would say no. You may think that I'm saying this in retrospect, but if you had asked me the question then – when my schooling ended with the unfinished PUC and I took up employment – I would still have said 'I have no regrets'.

Pragmatism and the ability to take what came to me stoically have always been there in my makeup. As a result, no failure stumps me for too long. Probably a combination of *poorva janma vaasana* and lessons from my upbringing has given me this great gift.

My upbringing gave me another priceless gift: unshakable faith in religious practices. Appa and amma had great respect for poojas and other rituals. My father performed every ceremony, karma and worship of other forms required by the Sastras dutifully and punctually. I learnt and imbibed these beautiful practices instinctively, as there never was any lecturing to any of us by my father on the importance of prayer, on the necessity to do *nitya karmas* etc. I can see now what a great teacher he was. He taught us in the most powerful manner – by his action, by demonstration.

One more boon the six of us received from our parents, an unusual boon for those times, was independence. My caring and loving parents gave each one of us full liberty to think for ourselves and make our decisions. They only showed the way, and left it to us to select that path or make a new path if we wanted. There would of course be the word of caution coming from their experience, when any of us sought to do something different, something that had not been done before.

This *laissez faire* policy of my parents extended to all aspects of our lives, including the careers we would adopt. We were given the freedom to pursue our dreams. For instance, neither my brother nor I was compelled to take up our father's profession.

Indeed this was extraordinary for our generation, a generation in which the son meekly followed what the father ordered him to do, and stepped into his profession without thinking twice. He would in fact be considered a vagabond if he did not.

In the manner in which my father helped me shape my career, I am able to see how beautifully he had played the role of a coach and a guide, and not that of a dictator. When I look at the way I guide people nowadays on the spiritual path I can see that some of this sterling quality of appa has rubbed off on me. I never insist that my students do this or that, but only point out to them the good in doing it in a particular way. It is up to them, and if they decide not to take my advice, I'm fine with it. This attitude of gentle persuasion endears me to them, and in turn gives me peace and happiness. Thank you, appa.





My eyes well up in tears when I recall the sacrifices my parents had to make in order to bring up their brood of six. Whatever I am today and whatever I've been able to do in my life so far are all owing to their blessings.

My childhood reminds me of a talk I once heard from a psychologist whose name I do not recall. He said:

“Many of us confuse character and personality. The character of a person is made in the first 2-3 years of the person's life, as a child. Personality however keeps evolving endlessly, and changes with time and place. One's personality in a riotous cricket match is vastly different from that in a quiet temple, but one's character is the same in both places. Parents should therefore give their full attention in the initial years to the proper development of the child's character and bother about moulding personality later. In fact the child will have plenty of others to coach him on developing personality traits but parents are the only people in his life who can define his character”.

My parents did exactly that with me and my five siblings. I cannot thank them enough for the way they have moulded all of us to think with feeling and then act.





CHAPTER 3

IN THE SERVICE OF OUR MOTHERLAND 1970-1975

“If a man of thirty has not found any great principle, any great ideal or any great truth for which he will live and if necessary die, he is already dead.” Martin Luther King



Preamble

Let me begin with a preamble. This chapter needs one.

When I was planning to publish the story of my life, I had a nagging doubt about whether this chapter would fit.

You see, the key objective I want to achieve with my book is to reach everyone, irrespective of their political leanings. In this chapter I’m writing about how my decision to join the RSS was a turning point in my life and I’m giving a detailed account of those years. Won’t my talking of this phase of my life in glowing terms impair that objective? Will I not be alienating people who dislike the RSS? Even after all that has happened like Ram Janmabhoomi, Article 370 etc. there are detractors of the RSS. Won’t they be put off? These were questions I asked myself.

In my heart I knew the answers, but asked Ganesh Kumar my Veda Vidyarthi, to get his perspective. His response delighted me.

He said “Sarma mama, I have understood from our chats that the main message you want to give to all your readers through this book is “Every one of us, big or small, rich or poor, illiterate or educated, matters to this country”. In the context of this primary purpose, I think your describing the RSS years is absolutely vital. I say this because it is in this chapter that you are telling us how you got the cue that you had a role to play for your motherland, and how you went about doing it.”

Exactly! Each of us has a role to play in our lives, a role that we have to recognise, take up and carry out effectively and efficiently. It does not matter at all that you are not a leader or a VIP or even a public figure. You still have a duty to the community that you need to understand, flesh out and execute. We can all make a difference and we should, not for our own sake but for the sake of the people around us, the society we inhabit, the country and the world we live in.





In my case, what was behind my uncharacteristic plunge into national service as an RSS pracharak? As you can see, this decision was out of sync with my cultural and family background. So why did I do it? I'll start with the backdrop to my decision.

A major event happened in 1962 which fuelled my desire to do something for the country. This was the India-China war. I was at a very impressionable age then, and the towering personality called Nehruji whom we all admired had been brought to heel by the Chinese.

The war had exposed Delhi in the most precarious fashion. It was then that the RSS stepped in with their full force to protect the capital. When our limited defence forces were in the front fighting, Delhi was managed competently by the RSS. From the traffic to all administrative matters the various cadres of RSS were controlling and making sure life did not come to a halt.

I was overawed by the selfless service of the RSS to the general public. I realized that you didn't have to serve the country only by fighting foreign enemies. You could serve equally well by maintaining the country's internal peace, which was what the RSS cadres were doing so well, so effectively.

The impact of their work during this period was such that Nehru, who till then could never see eye to eye with the RSS, gave them a special invitation and honoured them on Republic Day. The Republic Day parade of 1963 featured the cadets of RSS along with the military. This had never before happened in the history of the nation.

RSS leaders who made a deep impact upon me were the likes of D K Jayaram. An ordinary mill worker, Jayaramji had practically no school education. He had no great oratorical skills but his great soul came through powerfully in his talks and actions. It was he who inspired me in my childhood.

My father was a fan of the RSS and when a shakha opened in our place, he would invite pracharaks to come home. He would also insist that I went there every day after school. This is how the RSS got into my routine. The pracharaks who came to my place after the war became heroes to me. All through my schooldays, I saw Sangha pracharaks sacrificing everything for the cause of the RSS and would think "how I wish I can also become a pracharak and work to unite the Hindus of our nation!"

The disgrace of submission to the Chinese in 1962 was in a way the spur for me. I am confident there is a similar propeller for each and every one of us.

The main purpose of my lengthy prelude and the elaborate coverage I am giving to my RSS innings is to get you, my reader, to search for the same spur, the spark that ignites your mind and sets you firmly on the path of self-discovery. All you have to do is keep looking, and act when your instinct senses it.





If the 1962 war had not happened and channelled my life, there would have been some other indication, some other signal directing me to do what I was born to do.

RSS during My Schooldays

I was introduced to the RSS when I was of school-going age. I attended the daily shakha organised by the Sangh, never missing a day. Though my father was not actively engaged with the RSS, I had both his approval and encouragement to take part in their activities.

Over time, when I was still in school, I became a mukhya shikshak. I must hasten to add that the position was neither something I aspired or worked for, nor one they gave me because I merited it. The authorities were taking a chance on my shaping up and coming good on the job.

RSS shakhas, which last an hour, are conducted all over the country. They are a pivotal part of the functioning of the RSS. Boys and men of all age groups attend the shakhas, which take place in the mornings or evenings depending on where they are held. In the villages, shakhas are held in the late evening after 8 pm since the villagers mostly spend their daytime working in the fields. The pattern of these shakhas is exactly the same from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. Even today this is being maintained. The 2019 RSS Annual Report accounts for 84,877 shakhas.

The activities of the shakha I attended followed a well-structured pattern. For fifteen minutes, games were organised and played. These were geared towards physical fitness. A popular game was kabaddi. The next fifteen minutes were devoted to military-type training like group marches etc. In the third slot of fifteen minutes a topic would be chosen for discussion. It could be stories from the Puranas or our epics or about great historical figures like Shivaji or historical events.

The unity of Hindus was a focal point and what had to be done to keep this unity strong was discussed. Light was thrown upon Hindu traditions too, to make us aware of them. At the end of the hour, a prayer was recited by us all. The songs and speeches took place in the local language of the place, but the prayer alone had to be recited in Sanskrit. The prayer is very moving and the fervour of my childhood returns to me even now when I recite it.

All the activities encouraged civic awareness, social service, community living and patriotism. Volunteers were also trained in yoga, first aid, rescue and rehabilitation operations and community development. We wore khaki shorts, white shirts and black caps as uniforms, and carried wooden batons.

The shakha groups consisted of about ten or fifteen members with a group leader. In bigger cities like Chennai, then called Madras, about a hundred





shakhas would take place in different parts of the city. The total number of people attending these shakhas countrywide therefore ran to several lakhs.

The RSS only expected patriotism as the single outcome of all the activities it organised in the shakhas. National character was given great importance, and there were no vested interests, no hidden agenda.

My growth as an individual has been strongly influenced by the training I received from the RSS. It is no wonder that I apply the RSS model in my Vaideekam now, and stress a disciplined approach in everything.

When I was in the eighth standard I was made a shakha-in-charge. This was a big honour for me at a relatively young age. For one of the shakha's functions, I managed to bring our school headmaster to preside. That was an interesting story.

It took a lot of courage for any student those days to go to the headmaster's room. I primed myself and went to his door to make the request to him, but got cold feet when he saw me outside and asked what I was doing there. I replied "nothing, Sir" and went back to class. He summoned me again to his office and demanded to know why I had come to his room. Again I couldn't bring myself to broach the subject.

When the bell rang at the end of that day, the headmaster was waiting outside my classroom, took hold of me and said "Tell me now. Why did you come to my office during the recess?" I hesitated for a moment and then made bold to tell him.

"Sir, the festival of Raksha Bandhan is coming up in a few days and our RSS shakha is putting up a programme. We want you to be the chief guest".

"Oh I see. Where and at what time is it going to be held?" I gave him the details. He patted me and said "sure, I will come."

I went immediately to my Zilla Pracharak, the head of my district, and puffing with pride, informed him of what I had done.

At the programme the headmaster keenly observed me in action. He perhaps saw leadership qualities in me because he later invested time and effort in personally grooming me and supervising my growth.

The Momentous Decision....

After high school my father took me out of schooling and got me trained in shorthand and typewriting. He sent me to my brother who was working as an engineer in the Port Trust in Chennai (Madras then), to place me in a suitable job and carve out a career for me.





After brief stints in a couple of places I got a job with Vanguard Insurance Company (Vanguard), which was later merged into Life Insurance Corporation (LIC). I did well in my job with Vanguard and was recognised. It was a well-paying job too by those days' standards.

Honestly, the only idea in my mind when I went to Madras was to land a job with a decent pay and help our family financially. My father was looking forward to my becoming an earning member and I could think of nothing else. Thoughts of desh seva (serving the country) were non-existent, or so I thought.

How wrong I was! RSS was deeply ingrained in me, you see, and I was a natural fit. So one thing I did as soon as I landed in Chennai was to join the RSS Shakha there. The 9 to 5 job in Vanguard was of course there, but outside of office my energies were devoted to the shakha. It was at this time that my subconscious mind must have influenced me to take a life-changing step.

I was about twenty then, and I became inspired and driven by patriotic fervour after reading a book called 'Bunch of Thoughts' (Vichardhara) by Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, fondly called 'Guruji' by all.

Our country had been under the Mughals and the British for several centuries and the Hindu fabric of our culture was literally in tatters. The main aim of the RSS was to bring back the Hindu tradition and reclaim our past glory. It viewed the whole world as a family – as Vasudaiva kutumbakam. Its mission was to revitalise the Indian value systems based on universality and peace and prosperity for one and all.

In 'Vichardhara' Guruji reiterated strongly, time and again, that the RSS was making determined efforts to stimulate in the people a burning devotion to Bharat and its national ethos. He spoke about kindling in us a 'spirit of dedication and sterling character'. The aim was to arouse social consciousness and mutual goodwill, love and cooperation. Caste, creed and language were secondary to service to the nation. A sense of humility and discipline was important and one had to be strong and robust to shoulder social responsibilities.

Inculcating discipline in all walks of life and bringing people together into a unified and harmonious nation extending from the Himalayas to Kanyakumari was the vision and mission of Golwalkarji. For me, this ideology was inspirational and serving the country seemed an admirable goal to pursue.

I can compare this feeling to that of an army man who gives up his family and near and dear ones to fight at the borders in order to keep the country safe. The RSS has played an important role in the stability of our culture. It was, and is, a great unifying force. Without the RSS we would have lost our moorings.





I would like to share here an inspiring story I had read about Mahatma Gandhi's visit to an RSS camp, which explains my fascination for the RSS.

Place: Jamnalal Bajaj's farm in Wardha

The RSS winter sevaks' camp was on. Close by in Satyagraha Ashram, Mahatma Gandhi was camping. Kamalanayan Bajaj told Appaji Joshi who was conducting the camp that Gandhiji was keen to see the RSS camp. Joshi knew Gandhiji, having been the State Secretary of the Congress party till he left it a few years earlier. Joshiji went and invited Gandhiji.

On 24th Dec 1934, for the first and only time in his life Gandhiji came to an RSS camp. He was accompanied by Miraben, Mahadev Desai and a few others.

Seeing the drills and yoga exercises of the swayamsevaks, Gandhiji was very happy to have come and when the RSS Bhagwa Dhvaj was hoisted he joined the sevaks in the Daksha and Pranam. He then went around the camp talking to the swayamsevaks.

Strangely, he chose to ask some sevaks their caste. One said he was a mahar; the second said he was a thini. A third sevak said 'maratha' and a fourth 'brahmin'.

Surprised, Gandhiji asked Joshi "how are people from many different castes staying, playing and eating together?" Joshiji replied with a smile "they are just sevaks here". Gandhiji got the message that caste has no place in RSS.

He next visited the camp's store and on the wall saw framed photos of Shri Ram, Shri Krishna, Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, Shri Maharana Pratap and Shri Guru Gobind Singh. He asked the sevak in charge of the store, "Why are there no pictures of Siva and Ganapati? Don't you consider them as Gods? The sevak replied "Sir, these are not pictures of God but pictures of our national leaders."

Dr Hedgewar, Appaji Joshi and Bhopatkar met Gandhiji in his ashram the next day. Gandhiji told Dr Hedgewar, "I thought I was the only unifying organizer in the country, now I see you as another". He asked Dr Hedgewar "how is it that your sevaks come to camp spending their own money for travel, uniform and food and yet they are so disciplined, while in other places even when these are given free this discipline is missing?"

Dr Hedgewar said nothing but just smiled.

Strangely the RSS has a reputation for being a closed organisation, but is in fact quite the opposite. Its doors are always open to all. I remember in this context, that Khushwant Singh, the editor of the reputed magazine of yester-years, The Illustrated Weekly, carried two interviews around that time with Guruji.

Singh describes his meeting with M S Golwalkar with a sense of awe. He expected him to be unapproachable because of his status but saw a simple, unassuming and down-to-earth person instead.





All these influences must have simmered inside me and led to my revolutionary decision to quit my job and become an RSS pracharak. It was in the year 1970 when one day Sri Rama Gopalan (Gopalji) asked me to become a Sangha pracharak. I said yes immediately, because right from childhood I had nurtured the desire in my heart to become one. Whenever I had brought up to my father this wish inside me, he would say “you don’t have to become a pracharak to serve the cause. You can pursue a career, get married and lead a normal life and devote your free time to working for the Sangha”. But the longing for working as a pracharak had stayed strong inside me.

At the same time that Gopalji asked me to become a pracharak, an RSS camp was starting in Madurai, and my company transferred me to Madurai. These three things happening together was to me a direct indication of God’s will that I should join the RSS and fulfil my ambition of service to the nation.

I didn’t realize it at first, but my mind had been simultaneously conditioning me for the big change. This was happening subtly inside me, in the form of a constant question I kept asking myself: “should I take unpaid leave to attend the camp and get back to the job, or quit the job altogether and move to the RSS?”

The answer came to me indirectly when Vanguard transferred me to Madurai just before the RSS camp was to begin. My mind was made up. RSS would become my place of work and my home for the next few years.

I told my boss in Vanguard I was leaving the job. My resignation was accepted and I was relieved. I was now free to join the RSS. I would go to Madurai as a Vanguard transferee in the eyes of my brother and family, but in reality I was going there to join the RSS.

.... And the Aftermath

Before I go into the actions I took once I had made the decision, I should tell you what the role of a pracharak demands. Taking up this role requires you to sever all contacts with your family and friends and dedicate yourself to the RSS alone, to the work of unifying Hindus across the nation.

The job is not an eight-hours-a-day, five-days-a-week one but a 24x7 position, a mission in fact. There are no Sundays or public holidays. You have to be a bachelor. You don’t get any salary. The money that is sent by Headquarters is all the resource at your disposal. It is to be used for your official travel and other expenses but nothing else.

You have to work, live and travel as per the need of the organisation. You may be transferred to any part of India by your Headquarters. On paper you may visit your home if you wish but this hardly happened.





A pracharak's role is not therefore something you take on casually. You have to be mentally, physically and emotionally prepared for it. You have to forget all your personal aspirations in deference to the national cause.

It is almost a kind of sanyasa (renunciation) that a person takes when he becomes a pracharak, because he has to give his undivided attention and total commitment to the RSS. I recall Maha Periyava, the then Paramacharya of the Kanchi Kamakoti Matham, saying that instead of wearing the orange robes of a sanyasi, the RSS pracharak wears white, and that's the only difference between them!

Pracharaks lived in the quarters provided by the RSS and ate at RSS members' homes if they got invited. In each district there were ten to fifteen such pracharaks. In bigger cities there were more. For the record, other members of the RSS called swayamsevaks are allowed to marry and have families. The strict code of conduct is only for the pracharaks.

Joining the RSS is such a life-changing thing that the acceptance of your immediate family, and if possible their wholehearted approval, is crucial. I knew I had a huge problem on my hands in this matter of getting the acquiescence of my parents and my brother. I had to figure out a way.

I told my brother about the transfer order and said I had to leave for Madurai. He at once wrote to his friends in Madurai and asked for help in getting me a room and to stay with them in the interim, and arranged everything. I felt terrible about not telling him the truth that my destination was different – it was the RSS Camp. But it was not something I could do then. The whole plan would have come unstuck. He would have to know later and would be livid, and I was looking for ways to soften the blow.

My needs for getting ready for the camp were of course different from what Anna had addressed. I had to have a few pairs of the uniform stitched. There were no readymade garment shops then. I quietly went about buying khaki and white cloth for the shorts and shirts respectively and gave them to a tailor.

There was one snag, though: I couldn't bring the uniforms to the room where I was staying with my brother. He was sure to ask me what they were for, and I had to keep my pracharak plans secret. The solution to my fix came in the form of my friend Ravikumar, who was studying in MIT (Madras Institute of Technology), Chromepet. He was excited about my decision to join the RSS and offered to help, by taking the clothes and other RSS paraphernalia to his hostel room.

On the day of departure Anna told me "I will come and see you off". I knew instantly that it would be a disaster if he came to the Central Station and saw me with the other RSS members. I hastily assured him that my friends were coming to help me out and he should not take the trouble. I was relieved when he agreed.





On alighting from the train in Madurai I walked straight into the RSS camp. A few days later I wrote a postcard to my brother. I sought his pardon for not telling him that I was enlisting in RSS full-time and had resigned my Vanguard job. I explained in the letter that I wanted to give the next five years of my life to community service in RSS, and would come back to the family at the end of the period. I sent a postcard to my father too, with similar content.

I never knew what my brother's reaction to the letter was. I haven't asked him till now. He probably tore up the letter in anger and frustration and forgot all about me. My father was dumbfounded but he couldn't simply shrug his shoulders and write me off. Not only was I his son but someone essential to the financial prospects of the family. He sought the counsel of his younger brother (my chittappa) who was in Defence Services.

Some ten days later they both landed in Madurai and came to the camp with the sole objective of persuading me to go back with them.

My father said "Look, Chamu. Remember that you have four sisters, and my income is meagre. You know I respect the RSS and their ideals greatly and will be happy to see my son doing service under their banner. But your timing is awry. All I am asking you to do is to fulfil your familial responsibilities and then do what you want. We need your income and your presence now. Don't make a move at this time".

But I was stubborn. I told him "appa, it is only for the next 5 years that I want to be a pracharak. I don't know if I will have the same mind-set a few years later about RSS and about serving the nation. I'm also not sure if I will have the mental and physical energy to manage the tough job of a pracharak. My heart tells me to do it now, and so it has to be now, not later. Please try to understand, appa". I could see he was completely upset by my obduracy. He left me brusquely without reply.

I could understand my father's anxiety but was helpless. In retrospect I can see that it was a sensible decision I took that day. It resulted in a tremendously fulfilling period of my life. I could give five prime years of my youth for service to the nation.

I can certainly count those years I spent as pracharak among my best from the standpoint of service to the nation. Despite all the hardships I faced in starting shakas in new places, travelling by bus all over Tamil Nadu, meeting with people of all strata of the society and educating them about RSS, I could find an inner peace, a strong sense that I was doing the right thing.

And what I was doing was by no means exceptional, mind you. This was the life of every pracharak. Some of them probably had even more tortuous schedules and tougher challenges.





Maha Periyava's advice – a reaffirmation, not an aberration

On the morning of my scheduled departure to Madurai in the evening, I decided to go to Kanchi to get the darshan of Maha Periyava and his blessings for the major step I was taking.

As I wended my way from the bus stand to the Srimutt my head was in a whirl of thoughts. Primarily I was feeling elated that I was going to do something that Maha Periyava would be happy to bless. He liked the dedication of youngsters to social causes. He had, in an anugraha bhashanam which I had attended, lauded RSS and the pracharaks in particular.

My turn to meet with Maha Periyava came after two hours or so of waiting. He enquired "what is it?" I told him "Periyava, I have decided to resign my job and join the RSS and be a pracharak for the next five years".

Periyava asked me "isn't your family a big one?" And when I said "yes, we are six children" he said "is it right on your part to resign your job at this stage? Won't it adversely affect your family finances?"

He added "don't forget you have a duty to your family too. Only your elder brother's earnings and your father's meagre income will not be enough. Shouldn't you think of this? I feel you should seriously reconsider your decision". Saying this, he looked at me with the grace and affection for which he is known, and gave me prasadam – his way of indicating that the chat was over. He then went inside.

To say that I was nonplussed by Periyava's reaction would be an understatement. I was dismayed and shaken. In fact if I had had even the slightest of doubts about my decision, I would have taken this as the cue for changing my mind and aborting the program. I would have taken refuge behind Periyava's cautionary words to placate Gopalji for going back on my decision.

And I would have gone to my brother, told him everything and apologised to him for having chucked the job he had got for me in Vanguard. I would have looked for another job actively and landed one soon. It was not too difficult then for a steno-typist to get a job, although the pay would be nothing great.

But my decision on joining RSS had been written in stone. There was no looking back for me, and as far as I was concerned the die had been cast. I boarded the train to Madurai that evening as scheduled.

In my years as a pracharak the thought would occasionally cross my mind that I had disobeyed, of all the people, Maha Periyava whom I revered. I would console myself saying what was meant to happen would happen. But after I returned to Chennai from my innings with RSS the thought vanished totally.





I didn't even remember that I had done something that Maha Periyava had wanted me to re-examine.

The episode came back to my mind one fine morning after I had made Sankaranji my guru. This was in the late 80's and I was with him.

I opened my heart to Sankaranji and said to him, with tears in my eyes and a broken voice "while I feel happy that I was able to give five of my most productive years to the nation's cause, the feeling that I have sinned by not obeying Periyava's order persists. I am troubled by the thought of what I did, and wonder if there is a way to atone for the transgression".

I knew I had come to the right person for a solution. Sankaranji didn't mince words and could be brutally frank – and I wanted his candid assessment.

His reply shocked me. "But you haven't done anything against the command of Periyava. Why are you worried?"

"What! I flouted Periyava's direction to me to rethink my decision, Didn't I?"

"Recall your story minute by minute, Chamu. After he asked you to reconsider, what did he do? He looked at you with great compassion and love for a few minutes, and then gave prasadam. What does it mean? It only means Periyava was testing you! His gaze at you was to see if your decision to join RSS was just an idle thought or a firm resolve. You showed to him that day that you stood by your decision, and you going ahead despite his caution only strengthened his faith in you".

The relief I felt when I heard these words of my guru was stupendous. A misgiving that had been pricking me was gone.

The Pracharak Years in Kanyakumari

The day after Sangha Shiksha Varga in Madurai was over Gopalji called and told me about my posting to Kanyakumari. He said Vishwaketu was the zilla pracharak there, and I said I knew him. I was given charge as pracharak for three taluks, Kuzhiturai, Vilavangod and Thakkalai. My headquarters was Thakkalai.

I first went to Nagercoil and stayed the night. He took me to 'my area' the next day. We went to Brahmapuram, the place of Mr Kumaraswami who was the karyavaha. Mr Vishwaketu introduced me to him and left. My innings had begun.

From my schooldays I had been observing many pracharaks and knew what a pracharak's life was like, and it excited me to think "here I am, actually doing the work!"





The place and people were all new but what was not new, and what made all the difference, was the instant affection and acceptance I got from Mr Kumaraswami and other Sangha karyakarthis as one of them. The friendliness I saw my father show to the pracharaks was coming back to me now!

The next morning I went to a lovely Murugan temple in Brahmapuram and after darshan, left for 'my beat' in Thakkalai. A room for me to stay had been arranged on Market Road.

When I went into the area I realized that I was up against a major hurdle: the whole region was a Communist stronghold and there was stiff resistance to the RSS, even hostility. In addition, there was opposition also from the large Christian community living there.

But fearlessness was part of my DNA. That and my young blood ensured that the greater the antagonism, the more enthusiastically I plunged into my shakha work. I suppose challenges do bring out the best in us.

I started shakhas in Thakkalai, Vilavangod and a place called 'Monday Market'. Ramachandran, zilla karyavaha in Thalakkulam was a huge help and personally took care of many things for me.

In an interesting incident, I faced a threat from a Communist firebrand who dared me to open the shakha, which I had planned to do the next day. When I told Mr Ramachandran he picked up a sickle, and off we went to the area where the person lived.

"Where's the person who said he would take Sarma's life tomorrow?" he thundered. "I have brought him today itself. Come on. Let's see what you can do". Reminds you of a scene from a super-hero movie, doesn't it?

Another episode marked a turning point in my Thakkalai experience. A Christian who was also a communist threatened me one morning saying "when I come here again day after tomorrow you should not be here, else I will kill you". I was unmoved and told him "Sure. Come whenever you want and I will be waiting".

The same evening when I was cycling past a house, I heard noises and shouting from within. I went into the house and found a child in the throes of great agony from some ailment, and its mother was wailing in desperation. I didn't hesitate even for a second. I took the little one to the hospital and arranged treatment at once. After the child was declared to be safe, I found that I had helped out the family of the same man who had warned me of dire consequences that morning!

When the man returned the next morning his wife told him what had happened, and asked him "is this the man you want to murder? He has saved our child's life and you want to take his!" He was truly abashed.





The denouement to this tale was truly miraculous. The next day at our morning shakha the man was there, and not knowing he was from the family of the child I asked, “so you have come here itself to kill me? No waiting till the evening?” He said to me: “Saami (Sir), I will come to the shakha every day hereafter to protect you from anyone who has ideas of hurting you”.

The incident became a harbinger of a transformation not just in him but the entire local community, and a positive feeling towards the Sangha and friendliness to me. I would like to add here that the change in him was not merely because I had done him a good turn. He understood the genuine seva (service) culture of the RSS from the way we had responded to a person in need, and realized that we had neither a political nor a religious agenda. The satvik nature of my reply to his threats was also a point in my favour. I had not raised my voice once or resorted to rousing ‘punch’ dialogues like mass heroes of Tollywood. I had quietly stood my ground, in true RSS fashion.

Nevertheless there was continued opposition to the spread of RSS from communists and we deployed several strategies to overcome the hurdles. Gopalji called up the Kanyakumari karyakartas and said “please coordinate with the Rajapalayam shakha and do a ‘Pada Sanchalan’ to demonstrate our strength. We got together and did it, boosting the stock of the RSS in the district significantly. A Pada Sanchalan is a march-past, with all the RSS members of the prant or the geographical unit marching in a beautiful array on the streets of the place. Organising one such event is quite a task and involves getting permissions and observing strict dos and don’ts.

Thakkalai witnessed good growth and there were articles in Thyagabhoomi about the shakha. I was even called ‘Thakkalai Sarma’! We worked hard to get the Sangha spread right up to Neyyattinkarai.

There was one more Ramachandran in Monday Market who one day said “I know an influential person here who was an MP. He is from the Nadar community and a relative of mine. He may be able to help us. Let’s go and see him”.

The person turned out to be none other than Thanulinga Nadar, who was an elected representative of Travancore Tamil Nadu Congress. After meeting him, I wrote a postcard to Gopalji about him and said “he is an upright gentleman willing to help our cause”.

Gopalji replied “I sent your card to Janaa Krishnamurthi as I felt the gentleman would be very useful for Jana Sangh. He will take this forward”. After a month Janaa came to Kanyakumari. With him I went to meet Thanulinga Nadar. He was a great strength to the Sangha and later became State President of Hindu Munnani.

When I started a shakha in Karuppukkodu (if I remember the name right) near Thakkalai, a very spirited youngster named Velayudhan took charge. I was





fortunate to move closely with him. He went on to become a member of the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly.

Gopalji continued to be a great strength and would come often to my areas. Likewise I got tremendous cooperation from Kanyakumari which was literally on autopilot and didn't need too much tending.

The Kanyakumari experience was for less than a year, after which I became Zilla Pracharak and moved to Ramanathapuram district HQ. But when I reflect, I can see that for me the short tenure there had a distinct edge compared to the subsequent 4 years as zilla pracharak, in terms of the feeling of "something done, something achieved". Don't ask me why.

As Zilla Pracharak in Ramanathapuram District

Normally a pracharak has to work for 3-plus years managing taluk level activities before he can be promoted to the zilla or district level. But in my case, much to the surprise of everyone including me, I was given charge of Ramanathapuram district barely seven months after I joined, and was transferred to the headquarters at Virudhunagar. I spent the next four years and five months – the entire remainder of my innings with the RSS, actually – in this position.

The undivided Ramanathapuram district those days was pretty big, mind you. It stretched from Paramakkudi and Rameswaram on one side to Tiruppathur, Kunrakkudi and Karaikudi on another and Aruppukkottai, Virudhunagar and Rajapalayam on the third side. I travelled across this vast area extensively, moving with people of varied castes and beliefs without showing any bias.

It would be no exaggeration to say that the five years I spent with RSS shaped my whole life.

There was little money in the RSS coffers, and I had to manage with the trickles that would flow from time to time from the head office. In a manner of speaking, you didn't know where your next meal was coming from, and when. You were sometimes lucky and the member to whose house you went around lunch or dinner time offered you food. But in new areas where we started shakhas, and in areas where RSS was less known or unknown, you had to skip a meal quite often. My dinner would at times comprise just peanuts and roasted peas (pattaani) bought for 10 paise, washed down with water from a roadside tap.

In areas like Madurai and Coimbatore, the RSS had grown appreciably and things were relatively easier for pracharaks there. But in my area, Ramanathapuram, the growth had been only average except in a few areas like Paramakkudi. I had therefore to start from scratch and meet new people, talk to perfect strangers all by myself. Friendly invites for meals were hard to come by till I became known.





In a way this was a blessing in disguise for me. I learnt slowly but surely to ignore personal inconveniences and worries about food and shelter. I learnt to focus on understanding and serving the community in which I was working, unifying people and guiding them on the relevance of the RSS to the nation. This strengthened my mental fibre to such an extent that I could look at any hardship or constraint calmly and with an eye for possible solutions, instead of being cowed down by it.

This five-year period was also the time when I interacted with many great persons in the RSS top brass and learnt a great deal from them. Gururji Golwalkar, Balasaheb Deoras, Yadav Rao Joshi, Bhaiyaji Dane, Shivramji Joglekar, Rama Gopalan, Bhaskar Rao, Somayya Garu, 'Annaji' Dakshinamurthy and many others became known to me and gave me many experiences to cherish. Every single person was no less than a tapasvi, an ascetic for whom only the community mattered and personal life had no meaning.

I also had occasion to move with the man on the street: roadside shopkeepers, weavers, other small-time artisans and village folk. The job brought me in touch with the statutory authorities as well – the councillors, MP's and MLA's and the like. I owe a lot to all of them because in their own way each of them taught me something about serving the community.

It was during my zilla pracharak days in Ramanathapuram that I was instrumental in grooming the karyakartas (workers), an experience I recall with fondness. Some of my trainees hold key positions in the Sangha today, and that's a matter of great rejoicing for me.

One such individual is R Vanniyarajan, who was a student of Virudhunagar Arts College doing M Com. After graduation he took to teaching and became a professor in Swami Chidbhavananda College in Tiruppuraithurai and subsequently the Principal. He started out as a Mukhya Shikshak in RSS during my time, and grew steadily, and is today in charge of two large states – Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

Leaders of several political parties including biggies like Congress and DMK, regardless of their ideological differences with the RSS, used to like me and my style of working. If I went to their offices they would welcome me and set aside time to talk with me.

An interesting thing that happened in the initial days of the Emergency in 1975 can give you an idea of the 'high' you get when you work for a national cause. I got word from my periappa (father's elder brother) Sri T V Narayana Sastry that the police had come to his house in Nungambakkam where I had stayed for a while, looking for me. They wanted to arrest me under MISA as I was an RSS Pracharak.





When I heard the news my predominant feeling was not fear but exhilaration. To me it was some kind of recognition from the then government that I was doing enough to be considered a serious threat to the Emergency and so should be put behind bars! What more can a social worker ask for?

Inspirational Sangha Leaders in My Life

During my long active association with the RSS spreading over more than 3 decades from 1960 to the 1990s, I had the opportunity to meet, interact, and exchange views with several pracharaks and leaders who were not only selfless workers but highly original thinkers as well. Some of them have initiated and led many powerful movements and campaigns for the RSS. These great souls sacrificed everything in the service of the nation. It gives me immense pride and joy to write about them.

Alert: You will not see here one of my greatest mentors, Guruji Golwalkar. He is to me and to many of us a saint and I have therefore talked about him in Chapter 9.

Rama Gopalan (Gopalji)

Sri Rama Gopalan, who I addressed as Gopalji, was a great inspiration. He was in charge of the Tamil Nadu RSS Pranta pracharak when I made my entry into the organisation. It was he who bade me go to Kanyakumari as pracharak. I was 22 at that time. My reverence to Gopalji was intact even after my stint as a pracharak was over and I returned to Chennai. He was there, having been deputed to start the Hindu Munnani. Gopalji died in 2020 at the age of 94.

In one of my sojourns I was with Gopalji and asked him a question that had been bothering me. “You know, I eat at all sorts of places, in many homes that Brahmins are not expected to eat at. Am I not doing wrong, committing a sin?”

He said “the answer to this problem is with you, within you. You don’t have to get it from me”. I was puzzled, and he clarified. “All you have to do for such unavoidable deviations in this nation wider cause is a pariharam, some sort of atonement. In your case I would recommend that you get up earlier every day and after ablutions and bath do Sahasra Gayatri (chanting Gayatri mantra 1,008 times). This has the power to remedy any such unintentional wrong”.

And from that day my mind was a free bird. I would do Sahasra Gayatri regularly every morning – and I do it even today.





Ekknath Ranade

Ekknath Ranade was another great human being I was fortunate to meet in my Sangha days. I had read his 'Rousing Call to Hindu Nation' inspired by the epic works of Swami Vivekananda. I had also heard a lot about him and I could hardly believe my luck when I got to work with him.

Whenever I look at the magnificent Vivekananda Memorial Rock, I'm not only reminded of the great saint but Sri Ekknath Ranade also – and the wonderful days I spent in his company in Kanyakumari in the 1970's, because that was also the time when the Vivekananda Memorial was being constructed in Kanyakumari and he was the man in charge of the Vivekananda Rock Memorial Committee.

A great celebration was organised for the inauguration of the Memorial. President Sri V V Giri and many other dignitaries were present at the occasion. I was given some responsibilities in connection with the function and it was then that I had the great fortune of being close to Ekknathji and observe his style of working.

He would entrust key tasks to me and explain patiently what he expected. The fact that I was young and inexperienced never bothered him. My friend Sri R B V S Manian was an infallible guide to me too at that time.

I would like to recount one incident, when I travelled with Ekknathji by road all the way from Kanyakumari to Mandaikkadu, where he was to address a Hindu Conference. He enquired about me briefly and then talked to me as a friend, a father and a teacher about the role of a Sangha pracharak, what he is expected to do for the society, what impediments he has to tackle and how he should face them etc. His language was simple, almost casual, and he clarified his concepts with suitable examples all along. It was nothing short of Gitopadesa for me! He also shared with me his experiences during his Sangha days in its initial years. It was a memorable journey for me.

In a related incident, I was given the job of introducing Ekknath Ranade at the conference he was to address. I showed him what I had prepared and he said "looks OK". I then asked him hesitatingly "can I mention that you have been the Sarkaryavah of the RSS? Can I talk about your Sangha identity?"

His reply gave me goose pimples – "what other identity do I have than that of the Sangha?" That was his level of attachment and identification to the Sangha! It is difficult to think of superlatives for this great human being.

Ekknathji would charm everyone with his simplicity, management skills, ability to lead, briskness and farsighted approach. His fluency in English and Hindi was admirable. The time I was with him was very brief, but the memories of that period are indelible.





Deendayal Upadhyaya

Well-known RSS karyakartha Deendayal Upadhyaya was a life-long RSS pracharak and later the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJP) president. He was assassinated in 1968 in Mughalsarai in Uttar Pradesh. His thesis on integral humanism is famous. It is a set of concepts combining the Gandhian principles of sarvodaya (progress for all), swadeshi ('Make in India') and gram swaraj (village self-rule) with our cultural and national values. The individual's subservience to the nation was paramount here. This was adopted by the Jana Sangh party as its official doctrine.

A story about Deendayal Upadhyaya comes to my mind. Once when Guruji Golwalkar was travelling from Nagpur by first class, Deendayalji accompanied him but was travelling by ordinary class. En route when the train stopped, he went to see Guruji in his compartment. They got talking and their conversation continued even after the train left the station. Deendayalji returned to his compartment a few stations later.

Upon reaching the destination, he took it upon himself to inform the TT that he had travelled by first class for a short period of the journey and he offered to pay the difference in the fare! This was integrity at its exemplary best.

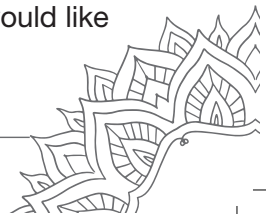
All Sangha pracharaks are like this – our present Prime Minister Modi included.

Bhaskar Rao Kalambi (Raoji)

Another great personality I recall with affection is Bhaskar Rao Kalambi. He was 'prant pracharak' (state in-charge) for Kerala. Raoji was a Maharashtrian who had moved to Kerala sometime in the 30's and made Kerala his home. I knew him earlier when I had been a pracharak in Kanyakumari. I would be with him whenever he came on rounds. He was a mahaan, a great inspiration to me and many other pracharaks. Simplicity and dedication to the task were two things I learnt from him.

It is worth recording an interaction of mine with him in Idinthakarai, a small coastal village near Tirunelveli with a predominantly fisherman population. It was the year 1971, I think. The village witnessed the re-conversion (ghar wapsi) of some 2,000 Christians back to Hinduism. A temple was built to facilitate their prayers and the date for the kumbhabhishekam festival (the consecration of the temple deity) was fixed. Pracharaks from all parts of India were invited to attend the function. It was a two-day program and I was one of the invitees. I was also on the program committee.

On the first night, I had retired to bed when Bhaskar Raoji came over to where I was lying. He said to me "Sarma, tomorrow before daybreak I am going into the sea by boat. A few of the fishermen have offered to take me. I would like you to accompany me. Will you come?" I said "of course".





The boat ride was a mixture of thrill of doing something new, and apprehension when the boat swayed in the waves. Our conversation covered a wide range of subjects.

Out of the blue he asked me: “If you were to be transferred to Idinthakarai tomorrow and asked to live here among the villagers for a year or two, will you accept?” I said I would have no problem. All I needed was two sets of clothes which I already had, so I was ready to leave at any time.

“But wait a minute” Raoji smiled. “Here’s the real issue. You will not get arisi choru (cooked rice) in Idinthakarai. The staple food here is fish in all its forms, since this is an out-and-out fishing community. What will you do?”

Raoji knew I was a staunch Brahmin who took pride in doing all my prescribed daily rituals and would perhaps not even dream of eating anything other than satvik vegetarian food. He was pleasantly surprised when I replied quietly that if my work demanded that I ate fish, I would.

He gave me a big hug. “Sarma, this is what we expect from a swayamsevak. Our work is like being a part of a great yagna. It is a great selfless mission”.

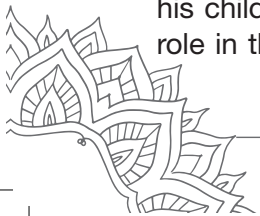
He added “Sarma, a Sangha swayamsevak does many sacrifices. He leaves his family, remains unmarried and so on. But sometimes the biggest sacrifice he has to do is doing what is expected of him even if it goes against his religious credo. That takes a lot of guts, and I am proud to see a young pracharak who has that courage. I’m not sure I will be around to see the day when India forges ahead but I have faith that it will happen because of the selfless work of our swayamsevaks”.

I am mentioning the above incident to express myself on a conundrum many of us face in the changed circumstances in which we live and work today. How does one balance kula dharma (one’s religious dos and don’ts) with bhoomika dharma (the responsibilities of the role one plays)? Every devout Hindu compelled to live in alien environs is beset with this issue in different forms, and has to come up with answers.

In the event I was not transferred to Idinthakarai and so never got an opportunity to test this pledge of mine. But I had issues of a different nature about the food I ate, and Sri Rama Gopalan (Gopalji) was the man who came to my help.

H V Seshadri

An original thinker and an able organiser, Seshadriji was from Bangalore (now Bengaluru) and had a Master’s degree in Chemistry from Bangalore University. Having been inspired by the ideals and principles of the RSS from his childhood, Seshadriji became a pracharak in 1946 and played a pivotal role in the growth of the RSS in Karnataka. He held various responsibilities





such as prant pracharak, kshetra pracharak and finally sar karyavaha in 1987. Due to his failing health, he retired as sar karyavaha in 2000 and became Akhil Bharatiya Pracharak Pramukh, a post he held until his death in 2005.

He was one of the most senior and respected leaders of the Sangha Parivar and inspired thousands of RSS workers. He commanded respect from the entire Sangha spectrum ranging from the top BJP leadership to the field worker.

Seshadriji was a prodigious writer and wrote many books in English and Kannada. One of his works titled 'Torberalu', a collection of essays on social themes, won the Sahitya Akademi award of the Karnataka State in 1982. His role in compiling the thoughts and speeches of Pujya Sri M S Golwalkar is a living testimony to his penmanship. The compilation titled 'Bunch of Thoughts' has seen several editions in English.

He made a major contribution in communicating nationalistic thoughts and RSS ideology to the masses through his speeches and writings. I still remember the thought-provoking speech that he delivered at Chennai in the late 1980s under VIGIL, the public opinion forum of which I was Secretary. The lecture was on 'Hinduism - The Universal Religion'.

In the Sangha Shiksha Varga (Annual Training Camp) in 1973 held in Coimbatore, I was assigned the responsibility of 'Parya-vekshak'. There I had the opportunity to come into close contact with Seshadriji. I had heard his impressive lectures earlier, but this occasion gave me a chance to know up close one of the great Sangha 'adhikaris'. He was at the Camp for three days.

The following incident proves Seshadriji's exemplary character and his unbiased outlook on life. During the 80s when I was the Secretary of VIGIL, an unfortunate misunderstanding developed between me and the then prant pracharak of Tamil Nadu. He cast a serious ideological allegation and demanded that action be taken against me. One of my friends organised a sting operation of sorts to make the correct facts known to Sangha higher-ups and the matter was laid to rest.

Seshadriji learnt about the matter and wrote to me a letter asking me to go to the prant pracharak and offer my apologies to him, as it was against Sangha principles to act in disrespect of one's senior. In that letter Seshadriji said "I know that you were not on the wrong side in this incident, and that you were justified in taking action. Apologising in such a situation requires courage and I know you have it." I carried out his instruction to the letter. I still preserve Seshadriji's letter.

My personal contacts with Seshadriji continued even after my active retirement from the Sangha in 1975. Whenever I travelled to Bangalore those days my trip was never complete without a visit to the Sangha Karyalaya to see him and pay my respects. The practice continued almost till his death in 2005.





Another attraction for me in the Bangalore Karyalaya then was Mananeeya Yadav Rao Joshi, another great icon.

Two Joshis – Jagannatha Rao Joshi and Yadav Rao Joshi

I get goose bumps even as I think about the two Joshis it has been my bhagya to know and move with.

Jagannatha Rao Joshi (1920-1991) (JRji)

JRji was a native of Karnataka but had his education in Pune, the karma bhoomi of Bal Gangadhar Tilak. He joined the Sangha but subsequently became a full-time member of the political party Jana Sangh (the present BJP). As an activist member of the Jana Sangh he travelled across the whole country.

He spearheaded the ‘Goa Liberate’ movement in 1955 and made history by leading thousands of RSS and Jana Sangh workers on a march to release the city from Portuguese rule. BJP Veteran Ramachandra Gowda who worked under him for over 5 decades has written an evocative reminiscence of JRji in the Organiser issue of August 2010.

My association with JRji was brief. I have watched him addressing Sangha meetings and admired his clarity of thought and mastery over the language. The only time I was with him for a considerable length of time was in the Tirupati Railway Station once. With another swayamsevak I had gone to see him off and the train was inordinately delayed. He talked jovially about many things and it was a pleasure listening to him. After a while with impish humour he asked me “haven’t I spoken long enough to deserve a cup of tea?” and ordered tea for all of us!

Yadav Rao Joshi (1914-1992)

With Yadav Raoji I interacted quite a bit and moved closely. He was a great soul and was very affectionate to me. He started as pracharak in Nagpur and was deputed in 1941 at a very young age to do Sangha work in Karnataka by no less a person than Dr Hedgewar himself. In spite of not being a Kannadiga, he not only learnt to read, write and speak the language but mastered it well enough to write poems in Kannada! It was no wonder then that he could get the Sangha entrenched in many parts of the State. His became a role model for pracharaks in the other Southern States.

Yadav Raoji knew the importance of “catching ‘em young”, and endeared himself to school and college students with his easy and engaging manner,





and many bright youngsters were captivated by his national fervour and penchant for experimenting with novel ideas, and became Sangha workers.

I mentioned earlier that Seshadriji compiled Guruji Golwalkar's 'Bunch of Thoughts'. I must add here that the man behind Seshadriji, inspiring and directing him all the way was Yadav Raoji. In the book release function, he gave a sample of his impeccable presence of mind. While presenting the first copy of the book to Golwalkarji, Yadav Raoji recited a sloka which said "this is like a man standing in the river Ganga, taking the Gangajal and offering arghya to the Ganga herself"!

Yadav Raoji was a polyglot and could converse in several languages. He loved the concept and activities of VIGIL and came to a number of VIGIL meetings and functions, to guide us. He is one of the prime architects of the staunch service mentality for which the RSS is known and respected.

Once during a week-long Sangha camp, a vibhag pracharak – a vibhag controls several districts – was reciting the Sangha prayer in the morning (pratasha shakha). The prayer ends with "Bharat Mata ki Jai". You can see the prayer in Appendix 1.

When he finished, Yadav Raoji asked him to chant the last line with a lower intonation. The pracharak recited "Bharat Mata ki Jai" once more and Yadav Raoji said "still lower". After several attempts, Yadav Raoji told him with a smile "you are chanting the last line like a separate ghosha (slogan). Remember that in the prayer it's only one line, the last line. So you shouldn't change sruti and pipe it up. It has to be at the same pitch, in the same volume". His instinct for precision and perfection awed all of us.

He played a stellar role during the Emergency years in keeping up the spirit of the RSS, till he was taken into custody in 1976. It thrills me every time I think of Yadav Raoji, his beautiful smile and his glorious, fiery thoughts. I fervently hope someone will take up the task of compiling the speeches and other public utterances of his into a book and releasing it. It will be worth its weight in gold.

In the late 80s when he came to Chennai once I invited him home for a meal. He had become unwell by then but came. Our house was on the first floor and we had to physically lift him and take him upstairs. He could have refused and I would have understood, but he took the trouble – such was his love for the Sangha and for me.

Both the Joshis suffered from cancer and were victims to the dreaded disease. Come to think of it, cancer seems to have claimed many a Sangha member, including Golwalkarji. And it almost got me too!





Other Luminaries

In my pracharak's life it was my privilege and great honour to meet and work with many more illustrious persons. I will start with A Trivikrama Rao. He was my Zilla Pracharak and my guide and philosopher. Somayya Garu, state-in-charge for Andhra was another great motivator.

Shivramji Joglekar, from Poona (now Pune), who was also nurtured by Dr Hedgewar, came to Tamil Nadu in 1942 and lived there till his last breath. To me, Shivramji was a rishi, no less.

Dattopant Thengadi, who was in charge of the labour wing of the RSS and Ashok Singhal of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad are other names that come to mind when I think about the great men I met and was influenced by. I had the great fortune of moving closely with all these wonderful stalwarts. There are many others -- it's a long list, really. All were Sangha pracharaks and led inspirational lives.

Bharat Ratna Nanaji Deshmukh is another all-time great that comes to mind. Here was a person, a rare gem who turned down an offer to join the cabinet when Janata came to power in 1978 after the Emergency. He said "I am going to devote the rest of my life to the cause of rural development, so please excuse me".

It was my privilege to go to Delhi and invite him to a conference conducted by VIGIL once. The meeting was in Chennai and the legendary Cho Ramaswami was the chief guest. The hall was literally overflowing. Nanaji talks about rural development in his speech. The views he expressed are still ringing in my ears.

He was awarded Padma Vibhushan during Sri Abdul Kalam's presidency. He passed away in 2010 and was awarded the Bharat Ratna in 2020 posthumously. He is the perfect example of how one should lead a public life.

I also interacted with great political leaders like Advaniji, Murli Manohar Joshi and others. All these great souls sacrificed their personal lives for the nation. Their contribution to Hindu unity and national uplift in all walks of life is immense. They led pious lives, attending to their personal needs themselves, and living with bare minimum resources and facilities.

Tailpiece

I will conclude this Chapter with a Tamil poem that beautifully reflects my feelings on the day I quit a job and became a pracharak full time, forgoing not only a handsome pay packet but family connections and all worldly pleasures.

The song is a regular Sangha prayer song and succinctly relates the indescribable bliss of complete surrender.





What I took from this poem is, when you surrender to God you get moksha but getting ready for that final renunciation takes a long time. Till that time, surrender completely to your work and experience the ecstasy!

I believe this quest for ananda was what was driving me.

புனித நன்னாளில் இன்று பூஜை செய்கிறோம்
பூஜையாகிற நல்ல மலர்களாகிறோம்
இந்த நாள் வரை நான் தந்ததோர் பணம் குருவே
உந்தன் பாதத்தில் இன்று நானே அர்ப்பணம்
ஜயஜய பகவா குருவே ஜயஜய பகவா
ஜயஜய பகவா கொடியே ஜயஜய பகவா

என்று தோன்றினை எனவே கூறவும் இயலா
தொன்மை வாய்ந்தவா குருவே தொழுதெழுகின்றோம்
எந்த நாளும் உந்தன் புகழ் ஓங்கி உயர்ந்திட குருவே
உந்தன் பாதத்தில் இன்று நானே அர்ப்பணம்
(ஜயஜய பகவா)

தியாகத்தின் உரு நீ, குருவே தூய்மையின் உரு நீ
தர்மம் காக்கும் போரில் சாட்சி ஆகி நின்றவன் நீ
தர்மம் காக்கவே நாங்கள் அணி திரண்டுள்ளோம் அதனால்
உந்தன் பாதத்தில் இன்று நானே அர்ப்பணம்
(ஜயஜய பகவா)

குருதி சிந்தியே விடுதலைக் கோட்டை கட்டினார் அந்தக்
கோட்டையில் உச்சியில் அழகாய் உன்னை நாட்டினார்
உறுதி கொண்டோம் உலகரங்கில் உன்னை உயர்த்திட அதனால்
உந்தன் பாதத்தில் இன்று நானே அர்ப்பணம்
(ஜயஜய பகவா)

செல்வத்தைத் தந்தேன் உடலின் உழைப்பினைத் தந்தேன்
திறமைகள் அனைத்தும் உனக்கே அர்ப்பணம் செய்தேன்
என்ன தந்த போதும் மனம் அமைதியற்றதால் குருவே
உந்தன் பாதத்தில் இன்று நானே அர்ப்பணம்
(ஜயஜய பகவா)





CHAPTER 4

THE CHENNAI YEARS AND CONTINUANCE WITH NATIONAL CAUSES

“The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others” Mahatma Gandhi



Job, entrepreneurship and marriage

You will recall that my father had pleaded with me to postpone my dream of joining the RSS as a pracharak as he needed me at that time to share his financial responsibilities. I had told him that I would come back in five years and carry the burden.

In sharp contrast to what I had promised, I was the one who became a burden, so to speak, when I returned from the RSS to the family fold in 1976. My sisters had been married off into respectable families during the time I was away. This was good news of course but a disappointment to me because I had done nothing at all to support my father and brother.

When I got back from the RSS I had no clue about what I was going to do next, and till I found a job I was forced to live on the family income. I was already 28 and a white-collar job was quite hard to get even for younger persons. I remember running from pillar to post looking for a job.

And as if all this was not enough my father arranged my marriage soon after my return, thanks to Gopalji's persuasion. Vijayalakshmi walked into my life in 1978 to partner me in my joys and sorrows, my trials and tribulations. I had now become a householder.

For a while I tried doing something on my own. Since I had training as a stenographer and typist, I set up a typewriting institute to see if I could run it profitably. But the idea didn't click. It became painfully clear to me that I did not possess a businessman's mind-set. The life of an entrepreneur was not for me, and I resumed my job hunt.

I preferred a Madras job, but it was not happening. In desperation I applied for overseas postings and landed a lucrative offer from Dubai.

I didn't discuss it with anyone except Sankaran Iyer. Something told me I should ask for his views. He was not my guru at that time and had not become 'Sankaranji'. It was not even as if I was conferring with him regularly, though he was wife's maternal uncle.





I wrote a postcard to him explaining the offer and said I was accepting it and going ahead, and seeking his blessings (and indirectly his permission). I got back his reply – prompt and terse: “Even if I were to get an offer of Rs 1 crore I wouldn’t accept it”.

He himself was undergoing severe financial paucity at that time, and you would have expected him to congratulate his niece’s husband on the opportunity and ask him to jump at it for the sake of his niece’s prosperity. But his traditional values were so entrenched that he was not going to give advice counter to the values he cherished, especially to his own family. So without telling me in so many words, he indicated what I should do. I obeyed his advice and did not take the Dubai job.

Later from his talks and chats with him I realized that he was particular about Brahmins not going abroad for earning money. He advised many people to stay in India and observe achara-anushtanas as prescribed. But I was the first person to get the gnana from him!

Finally I managed to get a job in Lucas TVS. A little later I moved to Ashok Leyland as a steno-typist. Life rolled on, and in time I became the father of two daughters, Sangeetha and Sowmya.

At Ashok Leyland

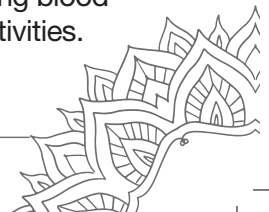
I worked in Ashok Leyland for 15 years, a long stint by today’s standards.

To begin with I was in the Secretarial Department of the company. I was handling the correspondence and paperwork related to shares and debentures issued by the company. Later I was transferred to the Admin section of the Spare Parts Division. I made friends at both places, and I continue to cherish quite a few of those relationships.

Leyland had nearly 10,000 persons working at Ennore, and there must have been more than a hundred people like me who were also RSS members. Irrespective of the section we were in, we would get together at lunch and at other times to discuss initiatives we could implement on behalf of the RSS.

After a while we became a formal group titled ‘Nallor Vattam’ (Good People’s Circle). Both the idea and the name were suggested by Shivramji Joglekar, a senior and respected pracharak in the RSS. Around the factory at Ennore there were many undeveloped villages and Shivramji said we could do social service there as a group.

Sundays and Mondays were weekly holidays, and one weekend every month was devoted to social work in these villages. Under the banner of Nallor Vattam we visited them one by one. Visits would be for medical camps including blood donation and eye care, cultural camps and other rural development activities.





Often we would simply sit with the people and talk to them, play games with them and show that we cared for them. We would tell the farmers how much we respected their contribution to the agricultural economy that India was at that time.

The resources we needed for this initiative came from our contributions. The Personnel Manager of the company was proud of what we were doing, and wanted to extend official help. We got the company vehicle for some medical camps and the company doctors came along. Senior Leyland managers would participate in some functions too.

This was one aspect of my career with Ashok Leyland that gave me immense satisfaction.

My Marriage

My father, a stickler for austerity, made it clear that there would be no printed invitations for the wedding. Only 15 persons on each side – of the bride and bridegroom, that is – were present, somewhat like a COVID-time marriage! No mantapam (hall) was hired; the venue was the residence of my wife's sister. Silk was eschewed.

The event was not photographed. The emphasis was on meticulous performance of all the rituals associated with a Brahmin vivaha (wedding). The theme of my wedding was simplicity and religious discipline.

Huge spending on fancy invitations, entertainment and gifts, and waste of food in colossal quantities that I see in many Indian weddings pains me a great deal. And it's literally a double whammy for me when I see that in most weddings the religious rites are glossed over, breezed through mindlessly, and some even skipped.

My Wife

Vijayalakshmi, my wife, comes from a reputed family. She had lost her father very early and was brought up by her mother and two maternal uncles, Sri Sankaran, who later became my guru, and Sri Rama Gopalan, the legendary RSS leader. I've mentioned Sankaranji briefly and talked in some detail about Gopalji in the previous chapters.

Thanks to her upbringing by such stalwarts it was no wonder that my wife was and continues to be a strong woman, full of character. I think she gave me the unspoken courage to leave my comfort zone in quest of complex projects. She wouldn't say a word but the mere fact that she stood by me was enough for me.





My spare time being almost totally devoted to my RSS duties, the responsibility of managing the house and bringing up our daughters was handled almost entirely by Vijayalakshmi. I would of course spend quality time with them when I was around, but this was not often.

I also saw in my wife a person with conviction in national causes and the guts to risk her comforts for them. She saw me off confidently when I went on the Ayodhya 'do or die' mission, and subsequently even accompanied me on a Kar Seva. She later helped me win my battle with cancer unflinchingly and with fortitude.

My daughters

As I said, I left the details of raising and nurturing my daughters Sangeetha and Sowmya almost fully to my wife. When I see the high values that they have imbibed from her I am proud of my wife and contented with the way my daughters have managed their lives.

I was not one to be indulgent to my daughters. My affection never went to the extent of 'spoiling' them – as we say in Tamil 'chellam koduppadhu' was not on my agenda, nor was it my wife's practice. If anything she was even stricter!

Like my parents did with us, we gave our children the freedom to decide what they wanted to do. And like them I would also caution my kids on the pros and cons of any matter in their lives, be it their education, career or marriage.

My wife and daughters are truly God's priceless gifts to me.

My siblings

My elder brother had continued to work with the Madras Port Trust in Chennai (MPT) till he took voluntary retirement as an Assistant Engineer. He has one child.

His life took a sudden, unexpected turn that none of us had been able to predict. Taking early voluntary retirement, and even while he had a family and property, he took a decision one fine morning to become a sanyasi.

He took sanyasa deeksha on the banks of river Ganga at Hardwar and lived at Hardwar for a few years, and had resolved to make it his home. We implored him to come back and be in our midst. He could continue to be a sanyasi, we told him. After much persuasion he returned to Chennai but lived in an outhouse adjoining his home, and eschewed all contact with his family or any of us.

My elder sister has three children and lives in Pudukkottai. Her children are settled in Chennai. My father also got my three younger sisters married off to excellent families and by the grace of God they are all well.





My father continued to be a busy vaideeka and a Veda adhyapak as well, right up to the last days of his life.

My Passion for Writing and the Birth of VIGIL

All through the period of my career with Ashok Leyland, I kept up my community activities in association with the RSS.

I had a great passion for writing and was an active contributor to the 'Letters to the Editor' column of both 'The Hindu' and the 'Indian Express' dailies. I wrote mostly on public affairs and social causes. This was the only platform available those days for expressing one's views.

It was during this time that Shivramji Joglekar suggested that active contributors to the 'Letters to the Editor' column should get together and form a group, as this could lead to concrete action.

It was easy to contact LTTE writers (don't get me wrong, I meant Letters to the Editor writers) because the papers published the residential addresses of the writers below their contributions. Writers like me who were already in touch with some others began visiting their homes across Chennai city, and we slowly expanded our circles guided by Shivramji. We travelled mostly by bus or used our bicycles.

Every one of these meetings was exciting and inspirational. I found all of us had a connect: a deep concern for the country and the society. Shivramji kept in touch with us to learn about our interactions and sometimes visited the writers' homes as well.

A little later, he structured the initiative into a regular weekly meeting of all the writers. A forum thus emerged and Major Vedantam, a retired army officer gave it a name – VIGIL. Sri Vedantam became the President and I was the Secretary. VIGIL took up community causes in a big way with the support of socially conscious persons and philanthropists. As a public opinion forum it became a force to reckon with especially among writers, journalists, the social elite and even the general public. As Founder-Secretary, I received unstinted support from the Founder-President.

VIGIL organised seminars, symposiums and debates on several subjects of public and national concern ranging from secularism to consumer protection to rural economics. We invited eminent personalities from all over the country holding different ideologies and benefited from the distinctive perspectives they brought to the discussions.

VIGIL also dealt with issues like prevention of smoking and alcoholism. Blood donation campaigns were a regular part of this forum. Several programmes related to sanatana dharma were a feature too. The Ayodhya Rama Janma Bhoomi movement also saw its birth under the auspices of VIGIL.





Rama Gopalan (Gopalji)

“Let us live as Hindus and take pride in living as Hindus!” The name that instantly springs to your mind, when you hear this chant, is Gopalji. The credit for spreading this consciousness among Hindus all over India should go entirely to him. Narrow-minded parochial sentiments were anathema to him and he strove to educate people all the time to get rid of them.

I would like to share here an interesting debate we organised at VIGIL that concerns Gopalji.

It was 1986, and as the secretary of VIGIL I thought of a novel topic for discussion: Is Hindi necessary or not in South India? The practice at VIGIL in all such programs was to get people with opposing views on the dais and let them fight it out, like the patti manram programs we see on television these days.

The background to the choice of this unusual subject was a conversation I had with Gopalji a few days before this at the RSS Office in Chetpet. I said to him “Gopalji, the arguments for and against Hindi have again come up with ferocity in Chennai and Tamil Nadu recently”.

“I know. So?”

“I was wondering if you could chair a VIGIL discussion on this. Have you heard of Ma Nannan, the ardent advocate of Pure Tamil movement? Can we have a discussion about the necessity for Hindi between the two of you? I feel it would be a great platform to put forward your views on Hindi.”

Without any hesitation Gopalji said “sure, let’s do it”.

“I suggest one more twist to this program, Gopalji. Before the debate, I want to have an exchange of views between the two of you by correspondence. You put forth your points in a letter to him, and he replies. You respond to his letter and he returns the courtesy. After a few rounds of this, the public debate between you both can happen.”

Gopalji liked the idea. “Ask Sri Nannan if he would be willing to participate in this, Sarma. If he agrees, we can start right away.”

I went to Sri Nannan’s house in Srinagar Colony, Saidapet. I had met him earlier to invite him to be the chief guest at an RSS Blood Donation Camp. He had refused my invite because the RSS was involved. I argued with him. “It is blood donation, which is a noble social cause. How can you refuse it merely because it’s sponsored by the RSS?” He saw my logic and consented. So we became good friends.

Nannan concurred with my proposed exchange of letters followed by discussion on Hindi.





Gopalji kicked off the series with a two-and-a-half page letter that spoke for the inclusion of Hindi and said inclusion should not be equated to imposition. I took it, got a copy made, and handed it over to Sri Nannan. Over the next few months I was the courier between the two, and the correspondence built up steadily.

VIGIL later published the exchange of the letters, copies of which I had preserved, as a book. It is my misfortune that I don't have a copy of the book with me. If anyone reading this has it, please, please lend it to me for making a copy of the treasured piece of great writing. I will surely return it to you!

The book was released at a function that also served as the stage on which the debate took place on the subject between Gopalji and Nannanji. We booked Srinivasa Sastri Hall, Mylapore for the function. People from Hindu Munnani, members and friends from VIGIL as well as Dravida Kazhagam members came to attend the debate.

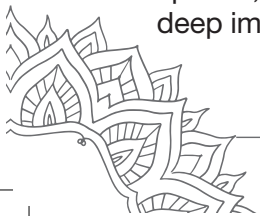
Nannanji wanted to go first and expounded his anti-Hindi views. In response, Gopalji spoke with great force, undeniable logic and national perspective. His speech was a straightforward, blunt statement of the harsh truth that hit the listeners so powerfully that the people from Kazhagam could not refute any of his points with logic. So they resorted to shouting and tried to cow down Gopalji by brute force. Chairs and tables went flying and Gopalji was the target. The RSS discipline forbade us to counterattack, but we formed a wall around Gopalji to protect him from getting injured. The meeting ended in a melee.

We can recount many such instances in the life of Gopalji when he has towered like a lion in the face of opposition. The mere thought that I obeyed him without question in 1970 when he bade me to become a pracharak sends a pleasant thrill through my body.

Anna Hazare

My involvement with the RSS earlier as pracharak and now as VIGIL's secretary got me to know in person some great selfless Indians, one of whom was Sri Anna Hazare. When I heard of Hazareji and what he was doing for a village in Western India, I took leave for a few days in the year 1989 and went with a couple of my friends to Ralegan Siddhi, the village he had adopted and transformed, to see him and the revolution he had brought about. He was a simple man then, not the political figure he later became.

We stayed there for 3 days and saw that he had wrought a remarkable change in Ralegan Siddhi, from an arid and inhospitable place to a model village. I still remember the first time I set eyes on him. Frail-looking, humble and soft spoken, Hazare believed in letting his work speak for him. That trip made a deep impact on my outlook to life.





Actually, you have to see the place to believe it. The houses do not have locks, and shops do not sell cigarettes or beedis. Every aspect of life, including agriculture (which is the main source of livelihood), education, religion and philosophy, is tackled with determination and above all the people seem content.

My impression of Ralegan is etched in my memory forever. Green fields, water bodies everywhere, smiling and courteous people and a sense of peace... it was magical. It was difficult to think that this little hamlet was once poverty-stricken, hit by drought and plagued by illicit liquor trade. Earlier if there was a theft in the neighbouring villages the culprit would invariably be caught in Ralegan. Such was its reputation before Hazareji took charge of it.

On behalf of VIGIL we invited him to come to Chennai and he obliged. We staged an impressive public reception in his honour, chaired by Dr M S Swaminathan, the renowned geneticist from ICAR. Hazareji stayed for three days in Sep'89, and gave a lecture on social responsibility and service to mankind. He also spoke at other forums. He visited a few nearby villages and met residents. A press meet was organised, but sadly very few were present. Nobody cares for an unknown, self-effacing entity, and that's the harsh truth. A time came later when the mere mention of Hazareji's name had reporters scrambling to attention!

I have often wondered why the Ralegan model has not been adopted in other villages. If Ralegan could do it successfully, why have others not followed the example? Isn't this the India we all want?

I should admit, though, that Mr Hazare's comments on Narendra Modi much later, when Modiji was the Chief Minister of Gujarat left me somewhat disenchanted with him. I don't see any more the visionary I saw in Ralegan and later in Chennai in 1989.

Narendra Modi

During my days at VIGIL, a three-day RSS camp was conducted in Nagpur in October 1988 to mark the birth centenary of Dr Keshav Balram Hedgewar. District level workers and former zilla pracharak workers attended this camp.

On one afternoon a young gentleman dressed in kurta pyjama and carrying a jolna bag came in search of me. I vividly remember the scene as if it was yesterday. He was asking around for VIGIL Sarmaji and was brought to me.

He introduced himself as Narendra Modi from Gujarat. He said he was most impressed by VIGIL's activities and asked if I could tour the state of Gujarat for a fortnight talking about the organisation. I said it was impossible for me to get a fortnight's leave from work. If you recall, I was working in Ashok Leyland at the time.





In a manner of haggling, which is familiar to us all in India, he said “How about ten days then?” I said I would ask my manager and see if it was possible. I remember Modiji’s parting words. He said if I could make it to Gujarat, he would make all arrangements. But the onus was on me to inform him – he would not contact me again.

It was a thrilling moment for me, being invited to a big state. It was something I had never experienced before. Thinking about it now in the context of Modiji being our PM makes me experience that excitement again!

That tour of Gujarat did not happen for a variety of reasons. For one thing I had to take leave without pay, and secondly the permission from RSS High Command was getting delayed. To be honest I also did not try too hard to get permission.

But I still remember that meeting and interaction with Modiji with great pride. Many things that seem commonplace to us when they happen turn out to be major events when we recall them later. This was one such. The half-a-day I spent with Modiji was to me at that time one of several such meetings with people, and nothing more. I had even turned down his offer, in a manner of speaking, to tour Gujarat for a fortnight. I wonder sometimes how my life would have changed had I accepted the offer and gone!

I would like to share with readers a return of my fervour for national duty in the year 2014. Narendra Modi, our Prime Minister announced the Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan initiative – his mission for a clean India – on 2nd Oct, Gandhi Jayanti. I was watching his speech live on television that day. He said “I want fellow Indians to join me in this sacred mission and do something, however small, to show that they care for making Bharat clean, a great ideal of Gandhiji”.

This was no politically motivated call, no stunt that the government was trying to pull in order to win votes. I realized that he wanted a symbolic act to be performed and publicised to create awareness among all Indians of the importance of swachhata.

Inspired by his talk, I switched off the TV, took a broom and came out of my house to the street – Thambiah Reddy Street in West Mambalam to clear up some of the mess that lay on the street corner. I posted a photo on social media too.

I knew I wouldn’t be sweeping the road daily, nor for that matter would our dear PM. However, we were not doing it for publicity. My involvement that day in the exercise was a personal tribute as a citizen of India to Gandhiji.

In hindsight I am proud of the fact that the Swachh Bharat mission has succeeded in making our country much cleaner and making every Indian realize that cleanliness is the first step to Godliness.





Role in Safeguarding India's Social Heritage: Joining the Ayodhya Movement

One of the highlights of my life was my involvement in the Ayodhya movement.

The movement has been a long struggle and its story goes back to the demolition of a temple in Babur's times (1526-1530) in Ayodhya, the birthplace of Lord Rama. It was not the only temple Babur demolished – there were many more. And some were rebuilt only to be demolished by him again.

After Independence, efforts were made to rebuild the temples, but in local spurts and not as a determined mass movement. The idea of a unified movement picked up momentum only in the 1980s, with the RSS entering the scene and making a conscious decision to take up the task and make it a movement.

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a wing of the RSS, was entrusted with the responsibility of rebuilding the temple on the sacred grounds of the Ram Janma Bhoomi in Ayodhya. Ashok Singhal who headed the VHP guided the movement organising several small, medium and large-scale rallies throughout the country. In every place several programs were conducted to build awareness.

Bricks were collected from all parts of the country so that a sense of participation would be felt even in small villages. The bricks were taken around the villages or cities from where they were collected, sanctified in a temple of worship and then taken to Ayodhya. The bricks that were taken to Ayodhya are still safely kept there and will be used in the rebuilding of the Ram Mandir that existed in that very place hundreds of years ago. Presently – 2020, the time this book is being written – preparatory work is being done by stonemasons and sculptors.

Apart from drawing enthusiastic participation from all sections of the society, the movement got religious sanction as a number of spiritual leaders, the most eminent being Kanchi Maha Periyava, and other sanyasis blessed the bricks.

The movement was very successful. Another novel initiative in setting the stage for what was planned eventually in Ayodhya was 'Rama Jyoti'. A big lamp was lit in Ayodhya and from it, several little lamps. These were taken to different parts of the country. I feel privileged to have been part of this endeavour, taken up in 1989-90.

For Rama Jyoti, Pudu Periyava and Bala Periyava gave their blessings. I was in charge of the Jyoti that was taken to Kanchipuram. We took it around in a ratha and I addressed a public meeting. I recall my mother accompanying me on this rally.





At that time we had no idea that almost three decades later the Supreme Court would give a judgment in favour of the temple being built. All that we felt earnestly at that time was the urge to fight for what was just, what was true.

In conjunction with the movement I also went to do Kar Seva when Mulayam Singh Yadav was the Chief Minister. We reached Kasi but could not proceed because of heavy security. We then split into several groups and walked on paths and by-paths leading to Ayodhya. We avoided main roads for fear of being stopped by the police, electing to walk through fields and smaller roads to get to the destination.

There were thousands of us. Some were taken into custody but there weren't enough prisons to lock us up. So school buildings and factories were used to detain marchers, keeping students and factory workers at home. Fortunately for us swayamsevaks the security was minimal in many places and we could jump over walls and continue with the mission.

But arrests kept happening. We were treated with contempt and were thrown like bags of grain into enclosures. There were times when we went without any food, but we didn't mind. We looked upon the mission as a tapas, a sacrifice of self-interest for a greater good, and carried on relentlessly.

None of us knew our fate. We weren't even sure of returning home. This Kar Seva was to build awareness throughout the country of the mission of Ram Mandir. The mantra on everyone's lips throughout the Kar Seva was "Mandir banayenge, wahin banayenge" - we will build the temple and we'll build it right there (where it stood earlier)." The dilapidated mosque stood at that place then.

During the second Kar Seva under Chief Minister Kalyan Singh, the mosque was razed to the ground. This happened on December 6, 1992. It didn't take much effort because the mosque, which had been abandoned for a long, long time, was in a derelict and unusable condition.

The irony was that the local Muslims, who were not using the mosque for prayer, supported the movement for the building of the Ram temple but it was Muslims from other states who were instigated to oppose the movement despite knowing fully well that it was a place that was sacred for the Hindus as it was the birthplace of Lord Rama.

I remember vividly every single event during this operation.

The police came in after the mosque had been demolished. We had by then achieved the purpose we had come there for. A small pandal (shamiana) was erected in which we placed an idol of Lord Rama that stands there even today. Earlier some sixty-odd grounds were acquired by the RSS around the mosque and buildings were erected there with the future temple in mind.





The main garbha-griha, the sanctum sanctorum, was to be erected in the place where the mosque stood. The work was started by volunteers coming in from different states for a period of two weeks each, to help with construction and other related activities. When it was the turn of Tamil Nadu, my wife accompanied me. The Kar Seva took place once every two months.

The Ayodhya Movement was a mass movement for which no single person can take full credit. But had it not been for the RSS, it would not have happened at all. When the mosque was brought down, the land did not come under the control of those who set out to get back these sacred grounds of the erstwhile Ram temple because the matter went to court. After a long legal battle, they won the case and a magnificent temple will be built there in the next two years.

I do not expect any further opposition because it is now an accepted fact that the temple will stand where it belongs. Even without a court order a lot was achieved on this land. Now equipped with a court order, progress should be smoother. Both the central and the state government will ensure action.

The earlier Congress government could not openly oppose this movement because they feared losing the polls. In fact they supported the movement twice. When Rajiv Gandhi was prime minister, the RSS had announced that it wanted to conduct bhoomi pooja there. They also announced a date. A plea was made in court to conduct the pooja, not on the disputed site but outside it, on the land that was owned by the Ram Janma Bhoomi Trust. Rajiv Gandhi gave the green signal to them to go ahead. Almost a hundred thousand people gathered there. This happened in the year 1985.

When the huge crowd gathered, the government began to question why the bhoomi pooja was being done. They realized that the temple complex would be constructed on the disputed land and on the land that belonged to the Trust. They therefore took steps to acquire all the land that was registered with the Trust, some of which had been donated by people who approved of the construction of the temple.

All the land that was taken away by the then government has now been returned to previous owners. The disputed plot where the mosque stood over the demolished temple is also the property of the Trust now.

Like Ayodhya, Kasi and Mathura too had witnessed destruction of temples by Muslim rulers. All the three places are kshetras for the Hindus who have fought for the return of the lands to them as the rightful owners. In Ayodhya, it has been proved by archaeological excavations that a temple stood there originally and the mosque was constructed later. These excavations have bolstered the Supreme Court judgment in favour of the Ram Janma Bhoomi Trust. Though Kasi and Mathura are also very important to the Hindus, the fight for Ayodhya has been in focus because the thread of Lord Rama's identity runs through the entire length and breadth of India.





Quite a few lost their lives in this fight. Every volunteer who went to Ayodhya went for just one reason and that was Lord Rama, a name that invariably stirs emotions of oneness in our vast land. No other Godhead, not even Shiva or Krishna has evoked such depth of feeling. The words “Jai Ram, Ram Ram, Jai Sita Ram” echo everywhere in India. Rama’s name is adopted by people in every part of the country, be it Ramamurthy, Ramanathan, Rama Naidu, Ramankutty, Ramakrishna or Ram Lal. Rama-nama is a unifying force, a mantra. No matter how different people are, they are brought together by the chant of Rama’s unique name.

At that time, no one may have thought that we were going to get a prime minister who would make it one of his priorities to undo the wrongs of the past and restore what is rightfully ours. But this has indeed happened. The chant of the past “Mandir banayenge, wahin banayenge” has become a reality now with the temple in the process of being constructed. Our patience and faith have finally paid off.

During the period of twenty-plus years after 1992, work has been going on in the background constantly on the carvings for the future temple. Sadhus, saints and sanyasis all over the land have blessed the movement. It is their joint sankalpa and the desire of all that has yielded a positive result today. Truth has won in the end.

People who have sacrificed their lives for the cause will live in our hearts for ever. A name that deserves special mention is Ashok Singhal, who was the brain behind the movement. Sri Jayendra Saraswati Swamigal of the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam and the Udipi Peetam’s Pejavar also gave the movement their full support and blessings. Though the movement gained a special respect because of the involvement of these great souls, the undeterred dedication of the RSS occupies pride of place.

I feel really emotional when I recall my early visits to Ayodhya. Being part of this movement has been an invaluable gift to me. I remember the first time I left for Kar Seva, I was seen off at the railway station by my wife and my very young daughters. My friend Srinivasan Swamy (popularly known as Sundar) came to the station too.

An announcement had been made that there was bound to be trouble at the destination and there was no guarantee that the volunteers would return safely to their families. There were thousands of people at the station. Sundar held my hands and said “Sarma, don’t worry. Should anything happen to you, your wife and daughters will come to live with my family and I will take care of them as part of my family.” Those were the circumstances in which we went to Ayodhya.





When I look back even today on what I did as a participant of the Ayodhya movement, it gladdens me that I could show such deep involvement in a national-cum-spiritual cause.

We all have an alter ego inside us who can sometimes make us do things that no one would expect us to do. You only have to wake up this sleeping giant within you, on the right cue and at the right time. My life is a good example.



That fear is a necessary
sign that nothing will
stop you from pursuing,
only complacency will
do it, which for me
you will never have

There is no set pattern. It will
appear in any form which makes
us feel that we are better - much better.
than many amongst us - not only
spiritually but also in all other
aspects. Only thing is that we
should always feel in our hearts
that we are insignificant
smallest of the small etc.





CHAPTER 5

THE SPIRITUAL MAKEOVER

“There is meaning in each line and curve.”
Sri Aurobindo



My Search for a Guru

At no time in my life, despite involvement in diverse activities, have I ever forgotten my karma as a Brahmin. I perform my daily religious duties, my nitya anushtanams, with sincerity and fervour.

Earlier in my childhood I had begun to study the Vedas under my father’s tutelage, but I did not pursue and complete it. After quitting Leyland I rejoined my father’s Veda classes which he was conducting in the mornings for office-goers. I would wake up very early and travel from West Mambalam, where I lived those days, all the way to Nanganallur, where my father resided, to attend the classes.

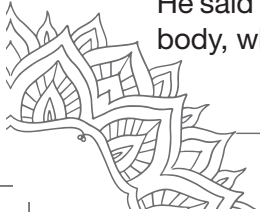
I still felt one void in my life. I longed for the guidance of a guru. Great acharyas like Maha Periyava of the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam were of course there to give direction, but they were, as sanyasis, not in a position to become personal guides. I had many questions in my mind, many doubts and felt a mentor close at hand was crucial.

Sri Rama Gopalan, or Gopalji as he was called, was a very dear friend whom I had known for a long time. I told him one day about my search for a guru. Feigning mock anger, I chided him for doing nothing to help me fulfil the lack of a suitable guide.

Gopalji laughed gently and said: “You are carrying the butter in your hand but looking for ghee”. This is an old saying in Tamil to indicate that if you have butter all you need to do is to clarify it to get ghee.

Gopalji continued “Your guru is right next to you but you are seeking him all over the place”. “Who is it you are referring to?” I queried, to which Gopalji responded, much to my surprise, that it was none other than his elder brother Sri Sankaran Iyer.

Both Gopalji and Sankaranji were my wife’s maternal uncles. I knew Sankaranji for well over twenty years and was meeting and interacting with him regularly. To be told by my trustworthy friend that he was the guru I was seeking was a revelation. Gopalji added that his brother Sankaran was no ordinary person. He said he was a jivan mukta – one who was liberated while still in his physical body, which is indeed a rare phenomenon.





This was no small claim to make. It astounded me. I could have of course chosen to brush aside his words but my instincts told me that he had identified my guru clearly and undoubtedly. I felt I was reaping the benefits of my birth to noble parents and what I was about to do would serve me well in the long run.

With me, to think was to act. I sped immediately on my two-wheeler to Sankaranji's house. My widowed mother-in-law lived with him and it was therefore not unusual for me to visit them from time to time.

Their home had a longish garden path leading to the house. As I approached the house, I saw Sankaranji peering over the gate. It was a Friday, around 6.30 in the evening and the dusk was settling in. I could see that he had spotted me. I then saw him turn quickly and go indoors in a hurry. This was strange because he would normally wait to greet me and walk with me to the house.

In those days, there weren't many TV channels but just one -- Doordarshan. The Tamil version, Podhigai, used to telecast a programme called 'Oliyum oliyum' which was a programme of song and dance sequences from Tamil films. The children of the house were all seated in front of the television watching this programme in rapt attention. Sankaranji had gone into the house and seated himself amidst them. For a moment I was taken aback to see that he of all the people was showing interest in watching TV, especially a programme based on films.

In retrospect I realize that Sankaranji must have known that I was seeing him in a different light and that mine was not a normal visit. Perhaps he even guessed I wanted him to mentor me. To throw me off track he may have acted as someone interested in the mundane things of daily life and so not really fit to be a guru. I was however not put off by this action of his. I knew that Gopalji could never be wrong.

After the program the children left the room and it was just the two of us. Inhaling a pinch of snuff as he often did, Sankaranji asked "Have you come to see my sister?". I replied in the affirmative. He indicated that his sister had made upma. "Shall we eat some?" he asked. I agreed. We sat down in silence to eat. After we finished, he asked me to leave as it was getting rather late.

I couldn't sleep that night. I got out of bed at five the next morning and decided not to go to work. I went instead to Sankaranji's house again, a little later that morning. "Have you taken the day off?" he asked. I remained silent. "Where was the need to take office leave to come here?" he queried again. I continued to remain silent.

"Don't have any foolish notions", he continued. "Don't mistake a crown of thorns for a crown of flowers". I hadn't even uttered a word till then. I had asked him nothing and yet these observations came from him as if he was reading my mind.





By talking about thorns and flowers he implied that I could get only the complication and inconvenience of a thorn from him and not the beauty and simplicity of a flower. “The only thing that matters to us is our Acharya” he added, meaning he would not educate or elucidate, and any learning I wanted had to come from Maha Periyava who was at that time Peetadhipathi of the Kanchi Kamakoti Matham. “You can now leave” he said, not wishing to enter into further conversation with me.

For the next six months I went through the agony of seeking Sankaranji and repeatedly getting rebuffed. Every time I went to him he would put me off and severely discourage me from pursuing this matter further. But I didn’t give up. Gopalji had warned me that his brother would do his utmost to dissuade me from taking him as a guru, and that I was not to be discouraged or to let go.

My relentless pursuit finally paid off and he indicated one day that he would mentor me. That moment of his acceptance was one of indescribable joy for me. I felt a high that I had never before experienced.

Many years later I made bold to ask him why he had not accepted me initially and made me jump through hoops. His response was one that surprised me. “When did I ever let go of you?” he asked. “The reins were always in my hands. I thought I’d just let the ‘cow’ wander around a bit to get rid of his prarabdha karma before I reined him in”. His talk made it clear to me that it wasn’t I who was deciding who my guru should be. It was he who decided when the time was right for me to be his disciple.

I recall that in 1978, when I got married to Vijayalakshmi, and was to return by train to Tirupati from Chennai with my newly-wed wife, it was Sankaranji who carried our bags and saw us off at the railway station. He might have been only doing his bit as the girl’s uncle and guardian, but as a vain bridegroom I had actually let my guru, albeit my future guru, carry my bags! The mere thought sends shivers down my spine now.

The acceptance of a sishya by the guru happens long before the sishya realizes it. This is because the sishya has to reach a certain level of maturity for the guru to reveal himself. In my case my guru very likely accepted me before I attained that maturity, purely because I was persistent and would not let go of him or be shaken off!

The Resignation and Its Consequences

The regular interface with my guru was probably the final trigger for my decision one fine morning to resign my job in Ashok Leyland after 15 years of service.

What was my provocation to resign a good, paying job? Here I was, with a family to take care of and the responsibility of providing for two daughters, and yet I quit without even a plan for my next steps. It was madness if you looked at it clinically, but I could think of it only as destiny.





Did I quit my job because I wanted to get into vaideekam? I would say 'partially'. The thought of getting seriously into my family profession was taking firm root in my mind. My father was also trying to persuade me into vaideekam, and talked to me on several occasions. But it was also a fact that I was not comfortable with my work routine at Ashok Leyland, though my colleagues and higher officials had high regard for my work and were unhappy with my departure.

For a while my placid and relatively uneventful life continued in a mixture of family care, some social service and daily mentorship under Sankaranji. I would be at his house in Ambattur every morning at 5 30 am and go for a walk with him. We would chat. I would have coffee and return home.

My savings and settlement from Leyland gave out after some time and I had to start looking for ways to feed the family and pay the expenses. I tried my hand at some computer-related small-scale business. I toyed a bit with a second round of being an entrepreneur. But things were still in a flux and nothing was working out.

I was hoping for directions from Sankaranji to help alleviate my financial crunch but didn't dare ask him. After all, I had brought it upon myself by chucking a well-paying job when I was nearing fifty.

I didn't tell my parents about my resignation and being jobless. They were living with my brother and I was not visiting them often. I wouldn't have told them anyway as I didn't want to worry them. Besides I was too embarrassed to let them know what I had brought upon myself and my family by my own recklessness. I had my extended family of sisters too, and a number of well-wishers who would have definitely rallied around, but I didn't go to any of them. So no one except Sankaranji had any idea of my troubles.

Troubles there were, and plenty: I had to provide food and basic essentials for our 4-member family, pay rent, look after my daughters' education and meet medical and other contingencies as and when they arose. I found it a very stiff challenge to make ends meet with my paltry bank balance.

Gone were the days of buying fine rice and turning my back on the poor quality ration rice full of worms and stones. Ration rice was Rs 3 per kg and that was all I could afford! Every household would get 10 kg and as we needed 20 kg per month, and I would buy the ration of a more affluent friend who had surrendered it. Sometimes I would not even have that small amount of Rs 30 with me.

Once during this period I got into a bus at Teynampet. The fare to my place was Rs 2.50 and after getting in I realized I had just two half-rupee coins with me. I certainly did not want to be shamed in public by the conductor, and so at the signal I got off the bus and walked all the way home.





In utter vexation I would at times lament to myself “Siva Siva! What have I done to deserve this?” I would at times vent out my frustration to Sankaranji. He would listen, give a half-smile, place a dot of vibhuti on my forehead, bless me and ask me to leave. No monetary or any other kind of physical help would come from him.

But I realize now that he gave me the biggest help by not doing any tantra or mantra to make me tide over my problem. He gave me the spiritual knowledge, gnana that it was better for me to undergo the pains brought about by my prarabdha karma and clear my karma, instead of keeping it unsettled and having to be reborn repeatedly to get rid of it.

When I think of this phase of my life I am reminded of the great saint Srimad Appayya Dikshitar’s story on similar lines. Here it is.

In the last stages of his life, Dikshitar suffered from excruciating stomach ache. The pain made it extremely difficult for him to do his daily Siva Puja. He was a siddha purusha who possessed powers far beyond those of ordinary mortals. He would tie a towel very tightly just above his stomach, take out the stone (‘katti’) from his stomach and place it in a plate filled with water in front of him. The stone would float on the water like elephant yam while he did the puja painlessly. As soon as he finished he would put the stone back into his stomach and start living with the pain.

A student asked him one day ““Guruji, since you have the power to take out the stone, why not just leave it out? Why do you put it back and undergo the pain?” Pat came the reply, humorous yet thought-provoking: “True, I can remove and keep it out for good. But if I do that, this elephant yam-sized stone will grow to the size of a pumpkin. It would be much more difficult to bear then. I would rather put up with the pain in this birth when it is manageable, than allow it to become humongous and torture me much more in my next birth”.

I stress this aspect of the Hindu way of life to all my students and others. When you face bad times, grit your teeth and go through with it. Be happy that you are only getting rid of your prarabdha karma and becoming ‘debt-free’!

The other important lesson for me from this period of suffering was that when you go through difficult times you should seek out one person and one person only, in whom you can confide and to whom you should talk. In my case it was my guru.

Transformation to a Vaideeka

One day as we were walking during the routine ‘morning walk’ Sankaranji asked me a question quite unconnected to what we had been discussing. “How often do you see your parents?” he enquired.





My father and mother were living in Nanganallur. I said “maybe once a week or once in 15 days.... No, I visit them just once a month”.

“I see. And you come to see me every day. Instead why don’t you visit them daily?”

For me my guru’s advice was as good as an order. The very next morning my two-wheeler changed direction and I proceeded to Nanganallur. I had no plans in my head, no notion of why I was going there and what I was going to talk about.

My father’s morning routine was teaching Vedas to laukeeka students, and that was what I saw him doing when I entered. As soon as the class was over he asked me “what brings you here at such an early hour? Is there anything you need?”

My immediate response was “Appa, I would like to restart learning Vedas from you”. The words tumbled out of my mouth as unexpectedly for me as they were for him. This is probably what I call destiny taking over! Sankaranji had not told me, but he knew what I would be telling my father when I met him.

My father was dismissive of my request. I was nearing fifty then and he was perhaps not sure I would be able to learn and absorb Vedas at that age. But my mother intervened. “Here you go teaching all and sundry, but are saying no to your own son! You should be happy he has come around and is doing what you have always wanted him to do. Don’t say no, and make sure you start right away!”

My father turned to me and asked “OK, when would you like to start? At what time can you come?”

“Would 7:30 am or 8 am be convenient for you, appa?”

“I don’t think so. I would be going for vaideekam daily at that time.”

“How about the time I came today?”

“You saw I was already teaching. I can’t disturb the class schedule.”

“Fine, then. I will come at 4 am unless I am disturbing your sleep routine.”

“No, you won’t. I hardly get any sleep after 3:30 am. But isn’t it too early for you? To be here at 4 am you should get up in the wee hours.”

“I’ll manage appa. So it’s 4’o clock tomorrow morning then.”

Looking back on the three subsequent years of my life after starting lessons under my father, I cannot help wondering how I did it. I would kick-start my Hero Honda at 3:45 am and reach my father’s place around 4 am, finish the class by 5:15 am, drink the coffee that my mother lovingly brewed for me, and get back home.





As I went through this routine day on day, my inner voice told me “you have now found your calling. You will presently know what your life’s mission should be”. It was as simple as that. I was on the way to becoming a full-fledged vaideeka.

I am able to see now that it was my guru who had indirectly guided me on what was to be my next station in life. He had pointed the way, and I had only to follow his guidance implicitly. The rest was done by God.

In the beginning I was learning the Vedas but not the prayogas (applications). I didn’t know, for example, how to conduct a ceremony or even a puja for someone. That had to happen soon, and it did.

One day when I came to the class I found my ageing father a bit unwell. He said “today I would like to listen to you chanting what I have taught you”. After I finished, he said in a worried voice “you know, the day after tomorrow is Amavasya and a number of people would be coming to our place to get their tarpanam done with my help. I don’t know what to do if this sickness continues”.

I didn’t know how to do tarpanam because my father was still alive. He thought for a while and said “I will teach you tarpanam mantras and prayogas today and tomorrow. On the day of Amavasya, you conduct the tarpanam for the people who come. I will sit in a chair and watch, to make sure everything is done correctly”.

I said yes. Thus began my next innings, the vaideeka avatar of Swaminatha Sarma. Again, like all my previous change-overs, it was a quiet and unheralded action.

I was so happy with the way I conducted Amavasya tarpanam that day that I asked my father to teach me every other prayoga and learnt all of them over the next few months. My father was ecstatic that his son was now ready to take up his profession.

Believe me, before this happened neither of us had talked of my taking on the role of a vaideeka. Not even once when he was teaching did my father ask me “why are you learning the Vedas? Do you want to practise vaideekam?” For me also the learning was not with the specific intent of becoming a vadhya. It just came together.

I am reminded of a favourite saying of my Guru. He said it often and it was a guiding light for me, and I believe it should be the thought that underlies all our actions. These words have stayed with me and reassert his greatness and my fortune in getting him as my guru.

And what are the words? “Vandha vaelaiya paaru” (“do the job for which you are here”). He followed this with “namma ellorum naama vandha vaelaiya paakkanum” (we should all be focused on the work for which we have come).





When you reflect on the saying, you can sense myriad dimensions and perspectives in them. In my case for instance, God had given me a rare birth in an enviable family with great parents for a specific purpose. It was important that I divined the purpose and made efforts to achieve it.

The beginning of my new life as a vaideeka was as natural and unspectacular as the earlier transformation to an RSS pracharak. It was as if the path was laid out for me and I started walking on it. Does one need any other proof of God?

Financial Distress and the Loan

Of course my financial condition continued to be precarious as I had not still made a name for myself and work was not coming my way. A stage came when I almost gave up. I had run up debts and these were killing me. The struggle appeared way beyond my capacity and I found all avenues closed.

It was then that God smiled at me in the form of Sundar. This great friend of mine sent me Rs.3 lakh – a staggering amount those days – to settle my debts and restart my life. Sundar asked me no questions, wanted no assurances, and sought no collateral for his loan.

As soon as I got the loan, I earmarked every rupee of it for repayment of my debts. I had meticulously noted these down in a diary, and I settled them all. I became debt-free except for the money I owed my dear friend.

I had started vaideekam at this time, and from this point my life began a slow but steady climb back out of the depths to which I had been pushed. I worked hard towards shaping up to meet the exacting standards that my father had set in vaideekam. In the next 3 years I become a sought-after vaideeka and the first option for many families.

Soon after I started my new vocation I went to Kanchipuram to seek the blessings of our Acharyas. I bowed before Pudu Periyava, whom I had met several times on behalf of the RSS and who knew me quite well. He asked me “enna visesham? (What’s new?)”

I told him “I have come into the vaideeka profession, Periyava. I restarted Veda adhyayanam under my father 3 years ago and have now learnt the basic prayogas, and started doing vaideekam”. Pudu Periyava expressed happiness and blessed me.

An Ati Rudram program was scheduled in Kanchipuram Kamakshi Amman temple in the subsequent month under the auspices of the Kanchi Math on the occasion of Maha Periyava’s birth centenary. As I was going out after the meeting, the manager called me and told me that Periyava wanted me to participate in the program and the chanting.





I thus had the privilege of attending the 11-day Ati Rudram festival in the company of eminent Ganapatigals and scholars. It was indeed a rare honour and boosted my stock in the Vaideeka community.

My wife Vijayalakshmi played a stellar role in our revival, managing our finances nimbly and smartly. She would take just one-third of what I brought in as my earnings and run the household with the amount. I was saving up the rest to repay Sundar's loan, and she knew it mattered a lot to me. We therefore continued to live frugally, almost stingily. My two daughters and my wife also suffered with me for no fault of theirs but I never heard them complain at any time. My heart goes out to all the three of them.

The Repayment and the 'Interest'

The process of my financial revival took almost ten years, and throughout this period I studiously avoided contact with Sundar. He must have been hearing about my prolific vaideeka practice and may have wondered why I was not even phoning and updating him as a good friend would. The reason was that I wanted to meet him only with the money in my hand to repay his debt. And that day came.

When I went to meet him at his house with the amount of Rs 3 lakh I was shocked to find that he had had an accident and was in bed. Those were not the days of WhatsApp or Facebook and I had no knowledge of his situation.

We chatted a bit and then I gave the money to him. He looked at it and was silent for a while. He then said "so that's why you have been hiding yourself from me all these years! The debt you owed me made you avoid meeting me, is that it? Is our relationship so fragile that a small loan could have such an impact on you?"

He went on. "Isn't our friendship untouched by that little transaction? You know well enough that I wouldn't have brought it up if we had continued to see each other. Frankly I had even forgotten all about it. Why did you do this agyaata vaasa (self-exile)?"

I told him "I know you Sundar. It wasn't because of fear of words or actions from you that I didn't see you. It was because of me, my character, my personality. I knew I couldn't be relaxed with you as long as the debt was unpaid. I couldn't meet and talk to you normally. So I promised myself that the day I could repay the money was the day on which I will look at your face and talk to you.

"And what I have paid you back is only the money you lent me. What you did for me was far, far more invaluable. You actually returned my life itself to me that day when you gave me the loan. How can I ever repay that debt? It's unthinkable. Still I see that I've unwittingly hurt you. I'm indeed sorry".





Sundar's wife lightened the moment with a lovely twist. She said "you've paid the principal, what about the interest?" I said "tell me how much, and I will organise it". She said "I want something in kind for my husband. You are teaching Veda to people, right? Please enrol him as your student".

I demurred. "No, Sudha. Sundar is a busy person flying all over the place. He is stuck temporarily at home now only because of the accident. When he is up and about he will have no time for learning Vedas. Let him be in peace".

Sundar intervened and said "No, Sarma. I will learn. Start immediately".

I started his lessons promptly. For the next one-and-a-half years I went regularly to his house every evening and taught him what a Vaishnavite should know by way of suktas, Upanishads and ritual practices.

What does this segment of my life teach us? One major takeaway for me was that you should have a guru in whom you should invest unshakeable faith. He will take care of all your problems. He will show you the way out of any difficulty, sometimes transparently and sometimes invisibly, as in my case. As the ancient saying goes, the two aksharas gu-ru are more powerful than saptakoti mantras (seven crore chants).

Father's illness and demise

I would like to talk about my father Brahmasri Srinivasa Sastrigal and his last days.

Appa lived with my brother in Nanganallur. Towards the end of his life – I mean we know now that it was as he neared his end – he wished to move in with me. "I want to shift to Chamu's house" he said, and accordingly we got him and Amma over to my place in West Mambalam.

I was conducting Veda classes at home and people used to come regularly to learn. You should have seen the contentment on his face while hearing the chanting. He was unwell and would mostly lie in his bed. If he heard the slightest mispronunciation he would immediately gesture from his bed and give voice! He would not even wait for me to set it right but make the correction himself.

When I look back I realize that in some way his childlike enthusiasm for what I was doing must have inspired me to increase my student intake and start teaching online to a wider spectrum of students.

One morning he complained of chest pain and we got him admitted in the Primary Health Centre. The doctors said there was no worry but preferred that he stayed under observation for a couple of days. The year was 2004.

I stayed with him in the hospital that night. It was the Karthigai month of the Tamil calendar and the next day was Amavasya. I set the alarm for 3:30 and woke up in the morning as quietly as I could, but he was a light sleeper and woke up too.





“Ennada? What time is it?”

“3:30, Appa”

“Why are you getting up this early? Sleep a bit longer.”

“It is Amavasya today, Appa. I have to go home, finish puja and then go to several people’s places to perform their pitru tarpanam.”

“Oh! But that means I have to do tarpanam too.”

“No, Appa. You need to rest, and it’s perfectly all right if you don’t do tarpanam today as you are sick and in hospital.” I left and sent my daughter Sowmya to attend on him.

When I got back a bit after 1 pm the first thing he told me was “you thought I would skip tarpanam today, didn’t you? For your information I didn’t. I performed it here”.

I found his words bizarre and genuinely thought he was going adrift. He turned to my daughter and said “tell you father how I did it”.

“Around 8 am when I brought kanji for thattha to drink, he asked me to go down and bring some sand. I collected some sand and brought it to him. He got up, took a tambalam (large plate), picked up the water bottle, and did something with the sand and the water for some time. After he was done he asked me to go down and dispose of the mixture.”

I was aghast and started protesting to my father. He said “do you know? The Sastras say that if you are unable to get ellu (sesame seeds) you can still do tarpanam by substituting sand for it”.

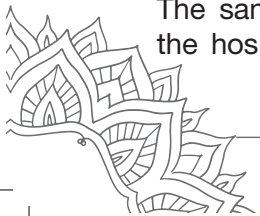
I couldn’t control my emotion. Tears flowed copiously from my eyes. I was seeing a great man here, a person so rooted in his adherence to the essence of our rituals that none of his constraints bothered him.

The place, a hospital, was inappropriate. People were coming and going all the time. His own state was inapt as he had not had a proper bath. The resources required for a standard tarpanam were not available. He was doing the tarpanam on his bed. Last but not least the act was inadvisable from his health standpoint. But he overcame all this asoucha (impurity) with his clear – and pure – intent.

My father’s lesson to me that day, and to all of us, was simple. Your pitrus should be attended to on scheduled dates and you should do your best under the circumstances. The ritual of tarpanam is sacrosanct and cannot be forgone.

It came home to me powerfully that day once again that I was indeed fortunate to have been born as the son of a spiritual colossus.

The same afternoon at 2:30 pm, my father passed away. We completed the hospital paperwork and took the body to my elder brother’s place in





Nanganallur for the last rites. My sisters went to him and said “Anna, please come. Appa has passed away and you are required to do the अपरा कर्मा”. My brother declined, citing his status as a sanyasi as the reason.

The vadhyars and I tried to convince him that he had not obtained ‘danda sanyasa’ but only a form of self-renunciation when he went to Hardwar, and so he was entitled to do the karma. But he stood by his refusal, and it fell upon me to do the 13-day karmas for my father.

What else can I call this except Bhagavat sankalpa (God’s will)? I’m saying this because appa’s antima samskara being done by me represented a marvellous and rare bhagya (boon) both to my father and to me. I will explain.

What we do by way of karma for our parents when they die is known as ‘pitru medha samskara’. But if the person who dies has done Veda adhyayanam in his life, and if his son who does the अपरा कर्मा is also a Veda adhyapaka, the karma is called ‘Brahma medha samskara’ and is a more sanctified ritual.

In our case these conditions were fulfilled, and so my father had the blessing of the Almighty that Brahma medha samskara could be done for him – and done by a son who had been originally written off from a religious perspective but was reclaimed!

It is little wonder that Appa could get this rare honour of an exalted अपरा कर्मा being done for him. He had lived an exemplary spiritual life. He had learnt Vedas at the illustrious Raja Veda Patasala in Kumbakonam, and subsequently from many great Acharyas. He lived his entire life as a Vaideeka Sreshta. For him Veda adhyayanam, parayanam and anushtanam meant everything.

And he was an acharya par excellence. Until his last days he continued to teach laukeekas suktas and other religious chants. I have personally seen him counselling countless people in the 70s and early 80s when I was back in Chennai. In fact for the last decade-plus of his life he was more interested in conducting Veda classes than in vaideekam. When I look at myself, I see a case of history repeating itself – for lately I am spending more time on mentoring than vaideekam.

Many, many astikas learnt nitya karmas and the basic chants from my father. When I started teaching, a few of them came back to me for refresher courses in their advanced age, and would reminisce about Appa’s classes which they had attended!

I can see that Appa has been my model in the Vedic mentoring work I am doing for people. It is to him, apart from the blessings of Maha Periyava, that I should credit the name I have earned in my role as an adhyapaka, as a mentor.

I truly wish I can live up to the lofty standards my father practised throughout his celebrated life.





CHAPTER 6

METAMORPHOSIS INTO A CHANGE AGENT

Ganga river in a way personifies the relentless progress that life is, that life should be. It tells us to keep going regardless of obstacles that will come - especially when we are engaged in community work or social service.



This chapter is all about my gradual evolution into a spiritual catalyst from the beginning of this millennium.

My innings as a sought-after vaideeka

As I went about doing upadhyayam regularly for more and more people, I became quite busy. Besides the clarity of the processes and mantras that I brought in, thanks to my father's assiduous training, the comfort and the sense of fulfilment I gave to the karta (performer of the ceremony) was a major point in my favour.

I would first ask the kartas about their family practice, specific dos and don'ts that their elders used to follow and their own specs if any.

Most people for whom I did upadhyayam were reasonably clear about what their elders were doing and my respect for their family values and their own inclinations made them comfortable. I always tell the kartas that 'aathu vazhakkam' (the family's convention) varies slightly from house to house, and as it has been handed down through several generations it has to be respected by the vadhyar – unless of course it is blatantly wrong.

I would also make allowances for their shortcomings in terms of resources such as space and funds.

If in any of their stipulations I found something grossly against the rules, I would tell them so gently but firmly and propose a change. Almost everyone would switch to my way and thank me for putting them right. Honestly I can't remember a single case where the karta and I could not agree, but if there had been, I would have politely asked to be relieved.

I would also tell them upfront about my own 'rules':

- Pancha kachcham and madisaar have to be worn.
- The amount of time that must be set aside cannot be compromised.
- The lady of the house has to play her part in the ritual as prescribed.
- There must be no scrounging on the sambhavanai (fees) to be paid to the vaideeka or the Brahmanas.





On the last aspect – of spending on religious functions – I wish to clarify my stand. If the karta has limited resources but is keen on conducting the ceremony correctly and fully, I will not only encourage him but support him in doing so. I may forgo my dakshina or keep it down to a token amount. But if the person is well-to-do, I see no reason for him to bargain and negotiate. The karma he is doing is of great significance and he should happily give to the vadhyar and Brahmanas.

I have invariably convinced every karta for whom I have done vaideekam of this belief of mine, using my own mixture of soft persuasion and hard authority. If one does the right thing and explains one's stance clearly, I can assure you that people are willing to listen.

The other thing I hold very dear is the participation of the lady of the house. It is my conviction that in any family where performance of nitya and other karmas is given great importance and pitru and other karyas are done dutifully, it is almost always because the lady is deeply religious.

I have seen some kartas quite ambivalent about the ritual, and left to themselves they may even skip it. But they will do it just because the wife is insistent. You may call it our own Hindu Brahmin version of woman power!

And I have also seen the depressing spectacle in some households where the lady does not care for religious observances, and even if the husband believes in them, sooner or later he follows her example and forsakes them.

The Transformation

Things were going well for me once my vaideeka practice had taken off, and for a while I was a man with not a care in the world. But as they say, "change is the only constant" and life does come up with surprises. The surprise for me was that the change came not from outside but from within.

One day I was attending a function, and there was a lull in the midst. I fell into a reverie, and from within the stillness of my mind a voice asked me: "Are you doing enough? Performing rituals and ceremonies as the 'aathu vadhyar' is all very well, but coming from an illustrious family with great Vedic pedigree shouldn't you look at widening your ambit and making vaideekam sustainable and its glory spread to future generations?"

Why don't you try to establish a connection between the training you did with the RSS and your present avatar as a vaideeka? Can you in some way apply the service mentality, the social consciousness and the discipline you assimilated in those five years as a pracharak to the spiritual work you are now doing?"





I sat up with a jerk. The immediate answer from my heart was “yes, of course! I can, and I should!” But in my head I was not clear about what I was to do and how to do it. The reverie broke as I was called back into the ceremony and I became busy with it. I put the thought on the backburner, knowing it would come back to me, with a solution.

The answer came in the form a chance meeting with Sri Trivikrama Rao, my mentor in Andhra Pradesh during my pracharak days. He told me “I am sure many of us look at you and other vaideekas as our outsourced partners, happy to delegate the ceremonies and poojas to you. But there are many things we should do ourselves, things that we now either miss doing or do faultily. I wonder if there is a way out”.

His innocent talk reignited my quest to do something more, something that took the religious observance that I was doing on behalf of people to a different level, with an important add-on i.e. service orientation.

As I pondered, the details of what I should do became clearer to me. Why not move away from mindless performance of rituals for people who also do it mechanically? Why not instead get the same people to invest time in understanding what they are doing, and get them to do it with devotion?

You can give a hungry man money to buy some food and he can manage the day; but if you give him a livelihood you feed him for life. It struck me forcefully that I should give do-it-yourself kits to people who came to me regularly for getting rituals performed for them, to help them start doing things on their own, happily, consciously and with devotion.

I listed all the small things a Brahmin does like a robot, more often than not wrongly – parishechanam, achamanam, brahma yagnam, sandhya vandanam, pitru tarpanam – and started doing camps on each of these practices. My idea was to get interested people together and not only tell them to do the practice correctly but make them understand the significance of the ritual and the wealth of meaning behind it.

I must admit that in the beginning I was ridiculed, but I pressed on. My camps slowly started attracting attention and to my delight I found truckloads of people who were unhappy with their approach to the karmas and who wanted to do them right. Over time the workshops became hugely successful – so popular that I extended the idea to even lesser known rituals like panchayatana puja.

Simultaneously I worked on another idea of giving a service dimension to religious observances. I began conducting Veda Parayanam camps for loka kshema (chanting of Vedas and the like for universal wellbeing). This was not oriented to making individuals turn towards spirituality but getting across the





power of prayer and the sanctity of our scriptures to the Brahmin community at large.

Around this time a major happening in my family was the marriage of my second daughter to a learned Vaideeka. In association with my son-in-law and with his help I conducted an exhaustive Yajur Veda Parayanam at Naimisaranyam, the place where Sage Veda Vyasa did the four-way codification of Vedas. We took two sankalpams (prayers of good intent) as part of the Parayanam: one, that the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya should come up without any obstacles, and two, no part of our country should ever be starved for water.

My RSS training underlined every single one of these projects and programs. Getting the right people together, making meticulous plans with timelines and responsibilities, and execution as planned – I had imbibed all these learnings in my pracharak days and I applied the learning sincerely.

The power of discipline and careful planning that underscores every activity done in the RSS can be easily evidenced by my success in programs I conducted. How else could we have done events involving hundreds of Ganapatigals in distant places like Hardwar and Pushkar?

I then started working on the third perspective of what I can loosely call ‘religious service’: teaching Vedas to laukeekas at an individual level. I conducted classes at home for people interested in learning the chanting of Vedas. This experiment of mine also was received gleefully. I now conduct classes in several batches, and over the last decade many people have learnt the basic suktas.

These three actions of mine have taken precedence over my vaideeka profession, and I have, over the years, gradually reduced upadhyayam. My entire focus now is on how vaideekam can serve the wellbeing of our society, and what vaideekas can and should do in this regard.

A beautiful sidelight of my gradual switching over to mentoring is that instead of doing vaideekam I am ‘managing it’! Thanks to a strong bonding with fellow vaideekas when I was actively doing adhyapikam, all I do now when any of my old clients calls me to perform a function is to identify from my list of vaideeka friends the right person for the job, ascertain his availability, and connect him to my client. I organise the team of Brahmanas, and advise the karta on what he should keep ready and what he should pay.

This has made it possible for me to continue to be the ‘aathu vadhyar’ for many families – though I personally perform rituals in their houses only occasionally. The continuity of service that they get from me is a great comfort to them, and I’m happy I’m not letting down ‘old customers’!





My Battle with Cancer

In the year 2009 I was faced with what most refer to as the 'Big C' these days. A nodule in my neck area had been bothering me for a while. When I eventually went to the doctor to have it checked out, it turned out to be cancerous.

The word cancer instils fear. The fear aggravates the disease and seems to hasten the growth. I compare this fear to that of a batsman in a game of cricket facing a bowler of repute. In dealing with cancer if one can shed fear and treat the cancer with disdain and say "OK, I have the disease...so what? I will face it", it can be cured.

I had a tumour in my lymph node in the neck area. I could feel it whenever I washed the neck area. It was painless but bothered me, and I decided to consult a doctor. He suggested a biopsy to which I agreed.

When the result was ready, he called me to his clinic. He had the result of the biopsy in his hand but wouldn't talk about it, and I guessed something was amiss. I asked "Shall we talk about my report? Is it bad news?" "Yes, Sarma", he replied, a little downcast. I said "Why do you worry? Tell me what it is". "It's positive for cancer", he replied.

"What next?" I asked. He recommended that I go to the hospital. I returned home and spoke first to my wife. She read the report and without batting an eyelid and showing no sign of fear or distress, she said "Call Sudha (Sundar's wife) and ask her suggestion for a good hospital to go to for treatment".

When I got to Sudha's house I told her with a smile that I had received a divine gift. She was intrigued for a moment. After reading the report, she lost no time in calling Dr Prema and giving her the report scan. A little later, she called the doctor again, and after a brief conversation with her told me there was good news and bad. The bad news was the cancer was confirmed but the good news was that it could be treated.

I later went to the Cancer Institute at Adyar accompanied by my elder daughter Sangeetha. After two days of further testing I was started on a treatment of chemotherapy.

The treatment lasted a whole year. There's no denying that throughout the period I suffered a lot. But I never lost my faith in God. I drew strength also from my family members who stood behind me supporting and cushioning every low moment of mine. The awareness that the end result of the illness could be either way was clear in all our minds.

I also had to have a bone marrow test during this period to confirm the cancer had not turned malignant and spread - something that would have





spelt disaster. The doctor attending on me for this test, a doctor seeing that I was quite calm and composed asked me how I felt no anxiety at all. I asked “Why should I be fearful or worried?” “The result could be anything”, he said, a little provocatively. I replied “Yes, I know. If that is so, so be it”.

I then continued “God has given me sixty whole years of a satisfactory life filled with many great moments. If something were to happen tomorrow, I am not worried. Anything that happens is also His wish.” The doctor gave me a hug holding me close. “Ouch, that hurts” I cried out. He laughed heartily. My positivity seemed to have rubbed off on him too!

After about ten months of treatment, it was finally the day when I was to take leave of Dr Jagannathan who was treating me at the Institute. As I was preparing to leave, Dr Jagannathan asked me to wait for a minute. He asked the attending nurse to leave the room and then taking off his shoes and washing his hands he prostrated in front of me. A namaskaram!

“Why are you prostrating before me?” I asked raising my hands instinctively to bless the doctor. “God has given me this rare privilege of treating you” he said. “I have treated many patients but it was a special joy to be your attending doctor”. I wondered what the doctor knew about me personally as I wasn’t even active on social media at that time. “I need to know nothing about you. I just felt I needed to show you my gratitude and respect”, said the doctor dispelling my curiosity over his show of respect.

I got reaffirmation that my way of handling this illness was indeed the right way, from a dear friend of mine, Mani Sivaswamy, Vice-President of a big pharmaceutical company. He presented me with a book called ‘Love, Medicine and Miracles’, by well-known oncologist Dr Bernie Siegel. Mani said he had gifted me the book because he was struck by the similarity in my approach and that of the book-writer.

Dr Siegel firmly establishes in the book that fear of cancer is unnecessary, though it is all too common. Many of us are even scared to speak or hear the word, and the morbid fear itself could be a killer. But he says let us not forget that miracles do happen. One simply has to have faith in God.

When the illness took hold of me I had absolutely no clue of what it was like to be afflicted or how to deal with it. But I refused to give myself up to panic, as suggested by Dr Siegel.

An instance cited by the doctor in the book is about a patient with a certain type of cancer which is treatable. Despite treatment, her cancer keeps getting worse and she refuses to believe that she can indeed be cured. The doctor then uses a strange method to get rid of her fear. He shaves off his own hair and at the next meeting with her tells her that he too is now afflicted with cancer.





She relates to his loss of hair immediately, having experienced it herself. Another thing that makes an indelible impact on her is the realization that a well-regarded oncologist, who is treating others for the disease is now a victim of it himself. This sense of identification that the doctor creates in the patient makes it easier for him to give her the confidence that the disease is indeed beatable. He uses his own imaginary but successful battle with it, to inspire her.

Coming back to my own experience, I haven't spoken publicly about my illness before but it is time now to give this message to the world: "Cancer is something that need not be feared." I can vouch for this, having experienced it myself. Of course you need your support systems – of family and friends. In my case I got two hundred per cent from my wife, who stood by me like a rock. In fact, she took the burden of it like a foundation takes the weight of a building standing on it. She hadn't an iota of fear. Her approach helped me look at cancer like any other illness.

The main enemy of man is fear. By fearing a problem and its consequences, you only get more muddled, and even if there is a solution it gets blurred. We all know of the havoc wrought by the COVID pandemic; and we also know that a significant number of deaths were on account of the morbidity factor, of the fear psychosis more than the actual disease.

So how does one prevent fear from taking over the mind? If the firm resolve that God's infinite grace will help in tackling every problem is anchored in the mind, there is no room for fear.

A certain stoicism and belief in prarabdha karma also helps in getting rid of fear. A great approach to overcome fear is telling oneself that one is suffering the ill effects of the actions in previous births. One has to invoke the Almighty's name, do one's routine daily duties and put up with the hardships to the best of one's ability.

In the past even great souls like Sri Rama, Harischandra, Bhakta Ramdas and the Pandavas faced many difficulties and challenges. In more recent times, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Ramana Maharishi, Gururji Golwalkar and Sri Jayendra Saraswati Swamigal also faced great adversity. Our problems fade into insignificance when compared to theirs.

To welcome problems and the consequent suffering as a means to expiate for deeds done in our past births is perhaps the best way to weather the storms in our lives. Breaking down under adversity serves no purpose really.





Writing ‘The Great Hindu Tradition’ – A Positive Outcome of My Tryst with Cancer

Cancer treatment was quite archaic a decade ago. It was invasive and there was a lack of sophistication in the treatment.

After each round of chemotherapy I would feel completely exhausted and lie in my room, trapped within the four walls, unable to do anything. In about ten days I would slowly recover from the intensity of the medication and just when I thought I felt a bit better it would be time to go for another round of chemo.

Thus for a whole year I lay huddled in my bed in a state of total inactivity. Through all of this my mind was thankfully very active – in fact working overtime, to compensate perhaps for the lack of physical activity! This was when I decided to publish a book in English on the Hindu way of life and call it ‘The Great Hindu Tradition’.

The book would serve three purposes:

- 1) I had till then published Tamil hand-outs and booklets on a number of specific rituals and my mind was brimming with ideas for writing on many more such karmas. The book would list and describe all these practices.
- 2) I also wanted to debunk a few wrong notions about the Hindu way of life prevalent among many Hindus, and get them the correct facts.
- 3) Finally I planned an extended FAQ section that addressed the doubts expressed by many astikas in the course of their religious observances.

I knew it would mean a lot of writing, and since it was going to be in English I needed someone to translate my Tamil brochures. I first bundled all the slim Tamil volumes of mine and handed it over to a good acquaintance of mine, Kumar. I told him a few more were on the way, in a mixture of English and Tamil, and requested him to translate all these.

I then asked my wife to buy writing pads - the kind with a metallic clip on top of a board for holding sheets of paper. I had twelve such pads for the twelve chapters that I had decided the book would have. I used separate colours to write with on each of the pads, to make it easy for me to do cutting and pasting, something that is now done casually on a computer. While writing, my thoughts came to me in no particular order, so I colour-coded and numbered the paragraphs so that I could later make insertions and edit the text with ease. The process was quite complicated, but it worked for me.

One day, during this period, I had a visit from Sundar. Glancing around the room, Sundar asked about the mess of papers all around. I said I was in the midst of writing a book. Sundar remarked jovially that he had nothing against anyone writing a book, but why create such a mess? He left with a sigh but





promptly sent someone with a desktop computer a few days later. After the computer was installed, I had another visit. This time it was the manager of the Data Processing Unit from Sundar's office.

I knew nothing about how to work with computers and was reluctant to give up the use of my writing pads. The manager said he would teach me to become computer literate, and the time for the lessons could be fixed at my convenience. Whenever I was free, I could give him a call and he would come over and teach me to operate the computer. My experience as a steno-typist in my early years came in handy now. At least, I was not completely put off by the keyboard!

Discovering a whole new world on my desktop was a revelation to me. I promptly got rid of my writing pads and with child-like glee began using the computer.

When I finished writing the book, I sent the entire draft to Kumar, who did a good job of editing the prose and putting it cohesively and in sequence. Sundar assigned a place in his office where Kumar and I worked together. My health had returned to normal by this time.

When my magnum opus was ready, I put it on Sundar's desk rather proudly. The first draft was five hundred pages long. "What is this?" he asked. "My book", I replied. "It looks like a head-rest (pillow) to me. It's way too big", he remarked. He asked me to re-edit the whole thing and bring it down to two hundred pages!

I protested. I said I had worked so diligently for a whole year to produce this work and here he was, asking me to cut it almost to a third! But Sundar was firm. "If this is how you want to publish it, then maybe you will have the satisfaction of seeing your hard labour in print but nobody will actually read it", he said.

So I set off on the task of creating a shorter version of the original book. Again Kumar came to my help. He unflinchingly took my ideas for portions that could be taken out without disturbing the flow, adding his own felicity and aesthetics, and we were able to get it down to under 200 pages.

I still have the original, mind you, tucked away somewhere. Over the last few years I think I have published the discarded material through short video lectures on YouTube and write-ups on Facebook and other media.

The 'Great Hindu Tradition' was released in 2010, and I am indeed glad that I heeded Sundar's advice. I'm even gladder that Kumar gave me a lot of his time for the difficult revision work. The book was blessed and launched by Swami Dayananda Saraswati at a grand function. 'The Great Hindu Tradition' has seen multiple editions, and is in good demand both in India and abroad.





My Work in Social Media

Today, my main occupation is the sharing of knowledge on Vedic and related spiritual subjects. My talk videos happen largely as a result of a student's question or religious event that spurs a thought in my mind.

I use my home and public spaces for teaching the Vedas and conducting programmes to help Hindus return to their cultural roots, while extensively using Facebook and YouTube for the purpose of reaching out to a larger audience not just in Chennai and India but all over the world.

I would like to make one thing clear about my speeches. By God's grace all that I have said has been received warmly by readers and in many homes they have become regular reference points. But what they contain is only the wisdom of our scriptures that I have learnt from my father and other great Acharyas and that I continue to learn from what I read and hear. None of it can be attributed to any vidwat (scholarliness) on my part.

My objective is to pass on to future generations Vedic knowledge, spiritual wisdom that made our country very great in the days of yore, and not allow it to die.

I speak in simple Tamil or English that can be easily understood. I refrain from quoting extensively from texts or getting into technicalities as my target audience is the lay person and not the well-read man highly educated in the Vedas. And my purpose is not to debate but to educate. My messages are invariably on one topic at a time, and given in small doses that can be easily digested.

My niche target is Hindus in their thirties and forties. I see these men and women as a strong bridge to connect to the next generation. By reaching out to them and getting them interested in passing on the knowledge to their children, I want to perpetuate the cycle – the cycle of disseminating knowledge of our Vedic treasure that has been handed down to us from the Rishi-Munis of yore.

The good thing is that I'm always able to strike an immediate rapport with them. They see me as an approachable and dependable reference point for their doubts and questions on many aspects of the practice of Sanatana Dharma. The fact that I give solutions that are practicable and workable also makes a difference.

I am happy to have been able to create and sustain this large extended family of regular students, active communicators and a large body of silent listeners and viewers – and followers. I think I have succeeded in generating a great deal of interest in our traditions, our religious practices and rituals. My answers to queries are straightforward and to the point and leave little room for confusion. And I also avoid dogmatism to the extent possible. Let me explain.





A 'bouncer' I sometimes face from agnostics is, "how can I be sure that the way prescribed by you is correct? I have seen the same thing being done differently in some other places. There are in fact so many manmade variations that I see no spiritual sanctity". As a provider of spiritual advice, I should not duck this bouncer but hook it. This is how I do it.

I tell them "our religious practices thrive on multiplicity. The core of any ritual is strong and unchanged, but many minor alterations and adjustments have taken place in the processes over several millennia, and these variations differ from family to family. But when I hold a camp, I cannot be saying 'you can do it however you feel like'. I have to give clear, unambiguous steps for the student to understand and implement.

"So I give you my method or process for the ritual. If it differs from what you have heard elsewhere or from your family elders, please clarify it with your house priest (aathu vadhyar) and do as he directs. I would in fact like you to share with me his instructions. I am always glad to learn something new."

I welcome such controversies but generally dislike taking tough stands. In our religion we have many debatable, even contentious topics that often result in arguments. I avoid debate mainly because you are none the wiser at the end of it, and each person holds on to his point of view. The faith in what you are doing is so deep-rooted that I feel it would be better not to discuss the process as long as the end result is devotion to the Supreme Power and adherence to Sanatana Dharma.

But if there is a controversy or argument on the basics of Hindu dharma you can expect me to stand up and be counted. One such incident that comes to my mind is when I was called to speak at what might be called an inter-religious meet in November 2014.

It was a symposium held at Anna Nagar, Chennai on behalf of the Department of Ayush, Ministry of Human Resources, Government of India. The function took place in the premises of the Siddha Medical Hospital and was attended by people from all religious faiths. Orators representing Christianity and Islam spoke before me about India being a secular country and the need for Hindus to be receptive to all religions.

I started my speech with the question "do you need torchlight to show someone the Sun? Telling Hindus to show tolerance and understanding of other religions is like flashing a torch on the Sun. Hindus are by nature open-minded about the observance of other paths followed by people in their spiritual quest. It is in the DNA of a Hindu not to despise or denigrate any other religion. He is taught right from childhood days that God's blessings can be sought in myriad ways. The holy texts of Hinduism also stress this".





I then quoted the Subhashita:

'Sarve bhavantu sukhinaha, sarve santu niraamayaa

Sarve bhadrani pashyantu, maa kaschit dukha bhag bhavet

On Shanti Shanti Shanti"

In simple words I explained the meaning of this beautiful sloka, which emphasises universal welfare and peace as the only goal of our religion. I added that in Hinduism we believe we can reach the abode of the Almighty by worshipping a huge multitude of Gods, and even formless worship is accepted. We in fact consider it a sin to decry or abuse other religions.

"But at the same time a Hindu does not believe in thrusting his belief on someone else, or changing him to the Hindu way of life. We are not here to convert anyone. The world history has not even a single instance of a Hindu conquest of an alien land and conversion of people of that land to Hinduism", I pointed out. "Our approach is inclusive but not intrusive".

I turned to my fellow-speakers on the dais, brought my palms together in a 'namaste' gesture, and said "it would be far more beneficial and helpful if the advice you are giving to Hindus is instead directed to people of your own religion. And I am not saying this out of arrogance, friends, but as a supplication".

No doubt what I was saying would have been unpleasant to them, but I could see that my words were like whiplash and had made them think.

I published a video talk six years after this event, in which I talked about it. In this video I refer to a film clip. A farmer in a remote village with his family and co-workers is offering a prayer to the Gods at the start of the season, just before sowing. The prayer asks for an abundant crop, not just for the farmer and his family but to feed the entire village. This holistic approach of Hindu dharma is my message in the video talk.

Concepts like this jump out of the blue at me, and give rise to a video talk or an article – or sometimes a seminar!

Many persons who were my critics, some of them from my own Vedic community, have become friends and admirers of the steady transformation I am trying to bring about in spiritual thought and action among Hindus, notably Hindu Brahmins.

When I think about the prime motive behind the work I am doing today, I am reminded of my craze as a youngster for securing autographs of important people, and of one particular autograph. At the time of leaving school I sought the autograph of my school principal. What he wrote made a deep impression on me even at that young age, and it is something that





I contemplate on even today. I apply it to my daily life and find great solace in it. His wise words were ‘People are at liberty to criticise you but you too are at perfect liberty to be indifferent to their words’.

If you have doubts on the benefits of this approach, I would only ask you to try it once. If your path is right and if the benevolent gaze of your guru is upon you, unfair criticism can do nothing to you.

The key to developing this attitude is patience. I’ve seen harsh critics of mine making a complete U-turn and becoming my adherents when I don’t rebut them but patiently carry on doing my job. I know that if I had instead become impulsive and started a war with them, I may have won an argument but I would have lost the main purpose of my work and also lost a relationship. Fortunately it’s in my nature to avoid conflicts, and this has paid off.

My use of social media has, I believe, created an impact on viewers not only in India but around the world. But the popularity has come at a price. About four or five years ago I felt suffocated by all the attention I was getting, and started to ignore the incessant ringing of the phone. I tried to become unavailable, in a manner of speaking.

But the stage passed. It soon dawned on me that people were making a sincere effort to reach me – how could I be indifferent to them? I began taking calls again and responding to the enthusiasm of my correspondents. We all learn by our mistakes, I suppose.

At public functions I am often requested to pose for pictures and selfies. I seem to have become a minor celebrity, though I am not sure I deserve the attention! Sometimes on my morning walks, I encounter people who stop to ask whether it is indeed me, Sarma Sastrigal, whose videos they love watching. Their excitement in meeting me in person is heart-warming.

A few years back, a friend’s wife recounted an incident which I found funny. She said she was going past Ayodhya Mandapam on her scooter. On a narrow by-lane she was blocked by a gentleman on his two-wheeler who would not move, and whom she couldn’t overtake. He had stopped his vehicle and was looking for something on his person. She heard him muttering in Tamil “All this trouble is because of Sarma Sastrigal.”

Since she knew me well, she felt compelled to ask him why he was blaming Sarma Sastrigal. He said “Till recently I would always wear a shirt and pant. But after seeing his YouTube video about our traditional dress I’ve switched to wearing pancha kachcham. Look at my plight now – I’m wearing a pocket-less shirt and I don’t know where I kept the house key!”

Behind this light-hearted incident I see a quiet transformation taking place, of people wanting to go back to traditional ways of living and dressing. Whether or not it is my YouTube video persuading them to do so, I am delighted.





My use of social media for matters related to the Vedic idiom faced opposition from some vaideekas who felt the sanctity of Vedas was being compromised by me. Instead of arguing with them, I pointed out that it was the duty of a vaideeka to keep alive our spiritual traditions and help take them forward to the coming generations. Most of my detractors are convinced now and join me in my endeavours.

Many other vaideekas have followed my example and have begun using social media to try and bring to the attention of people the importance of Hindu culture and tradition. I see this not as competition but as a way to accelerate positive change in society towards Sanatana Dharma.

I have many people to thank for my ease in using the computer and felicity with the Web. My second daughter Sowmya introduced me to Facebook and set up my page. Today I have many thousand followers. YouTube too has been a powerful tool for my work. I give short and succinct messages on spiritual and culture-related topics mainly to ignite interest among viewers, especially the youth. These videos are quick to produce and post; and people are drawn to them because the videos are usually just a few minutes long, the language simple, and the message direct and specific.

I have a student of Vedas living in the United States, called Sridhar Bharat. He has been a long-time student and his son Omkar, also a student of mine, was the first one to suggest that I use YouTube to upload my thoughts on various subjects. I was reluctant but he won me over. All Omkar did was to record our chat, upload it on YouTube and send the link to me on WhatsApp to view it. It happened in minutes and I was convinced that this was the way to go forward.

I can recall the thrill of my first-ever post. Omkar asked me to record the sloka, 'Paritranaaya sadhunam' from the Bhagavad Gita, and guided me through the steps of recording and posting it on YouTube. In just a few minutes after posting it, I received many views and likes.

My friend Sriram provided me with a stand to place a camera on and record my videos. Presently I use my smart phone to do recordings. I send these recordings and attachments to Sriram who puts the videos together. Sriram has created the montage of the opening shot of Om and the style of presentation. And when there are attachments like video clips and insertions to make, he lends an invaluable hand.

My introduction to Sriram will read like a fairy tale to you. Two years ago I saw one of his videos and was impressed. I noticed a phone number at the end of the video and called him. Sriram gave his name in the traditional Smartha way of tracing his lineage and gotram (abhivaadaye). In the conversation that followed it turned out that Sriram had been a long-time follower of my videos and lived in the same locality (T. Nagar)! I asked if Sriram could help edit my





video presentations, and he said he would only be too glad. The rest, as they say, is history.

For all the work I am doing, like conducting workshops and camps and releasing books, I receive tremendous support from many individuals, who now make up my team. I have about a hundred students. All of them are ever-ready to help me. Among them there are fifteen or so who form my 'executive team'. They remind me of a saying in Sanskrit – devasya durlabham – that even for the Devas it would be rare to find such a team. In the past ten to twelve years I have been able to do so much only thanks to their help. It would not have been possible to do any of it single-handedly.

One of the trailblazing events that was conceived and conducted by my team was the honouring of parents who have placed their children in Veda Patasalas to pursue Vedic studies in traditional gurukulams, braving raised eyebrows from the society around them. We identified three hundred families from the southern states of India. At Kuchalambal Kalyana Mandapam in Chennai which was the venue for the event, the families that were invited were gifted saris and veshtis and a purse plus a gold coin each. The gold coins were given by a kind-hearted student of mine who shuns publicity.

My team has several such self-effacing men and women who work wonders behind the screen. They are like the foundations of a temple gopuram. We only see and admire the gopuram but not the foundation that holds it firmly in place. I liken myself to the kalasam (ornamental casket atop the tower) on the gopuram. I don't do very much myself, but am visible to all while my hard-working students remain unseen.

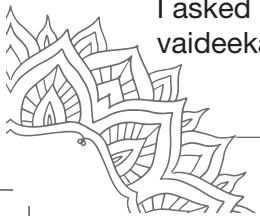
In Appendix 2 to this book I have talked about my approach to students learning Vedas etc. from me, and included write-ups by some of them about how they came to me and what their experience has been. I am closing this chapter with a lively tale that is an interesting reflection of the vaideeka phase of my life in my new avatar as a teacher.

An unusual student

It is about ten years ago that this happened. Venkatasubramaniam, a leading advocate in Chennai who lived in Triplicane, sought me out and requested me to bring out a booklet on Aparā karma or Antyeshti – the rituals to be performed for a person after his death. "I would like to gift it to some of my friends and relatives", he added.

Now this gentleman was, apart from being a professional lawyer, a community conscious person who involved himself in a number of social causes.

I asked him "wouldn't it be better for you to get this done by a more learned vaideeka, a ganapatigal level person with in-depth knowledge of the subject?"





As a public figure you are close to a number of leading pouraniks and experts in Vedas, so it should be easy for you to approach one of them, shouldn't it?"

"Mama, I agree that it's easy for me to go to a learned Veda exponent and get it done, but what draws me to you is the simplicity and directness in your writing. You make every subject you take up easy to understand and a joy to read. That's why I am a great fan of your books and booklets, and why I want you to do this for me".

"OK, I will do it. But there's a price tag."

This conversation was taking place in his house, and just as I said this, his wife came from inside and said "pardon me for interrupting, mama. I should tell you about my husband. Once he decides to do a job he won't be worried about the cost or any other constraints. He will gladly pay what you want". He turned to her and said "thank you dear". And to me he reiterated what she had just said.

I told them "but I haven't told you yet what I meant when I used the term 'price tag'. So don't draw your own inferences. What I am setting as my condition – which I called the price tag – is that starting now you should do trikala sandhya vandanam daily (sandhya vandanam three times a day as prescribed)".

Venkatasubramaniam was flabbergasted. He immediately changed into a veshti and uttareeyam and called his wife. Both of them did sashtanga namaskaram (prostrated before me in obeisance).

It was my turn to be astonished. When he got up from the namaskaram, tears were flowing freely from his eyes. "This is the first time a vadhyar has specifically asked me if I do sandhya vandanam and directed me to do it daily. I will be honest with you, mama. I don't know how to perform sandhya vandanam. Probably the only time I did it was on the day of my Upanayanam. I am 50 now. What should I do?"

"Don't worry, I will teach you. I know you are a very busy person, so I'll come to your house daily at 5 am from tomorrow onwards and teach you. You have to set aside an hour for this." He agreed.

The next morning I got up at 3:30 am to be able to finish my pujas and then go from West Mambalam to Triplicane, where he lived. As I got ready I saw to my dismay that the skies had opened up and there was a heavy downpour. I was not deterred, however. I put on my raincoat and kick-started my two-wheeler. My wife protested: "you shouldn't go out in this weather". I said "I've given my word and it's already 4:30 am. It will take me 20-odd minutes as I have to drive slowly. Don't worry". And I was off, astride my Hero Honda.





I reached his house and pressed the bell, which was probably not audible as the rain was coming down real hard. Finally an elderly man opened the door.

When I told him – he was the advocate’s father-in-law, I learnt later – that I had to see the advocate, he retorted “What? Is this any time to see him? His office will be open from 9:30 am and you can come then. Please go now”.

I insisted that I had to see him right away. “He knows I’m coming to see him at this time today” I added.

He reluctantly went up the stairs and in a little while I saw the advocate coming down, muttering to himself “but who did I agree to see at this early hour? I can’t remember...”

When he saw it was me he was surprised. “Come in, mama. God, you are wet” he said., He went in and brought a towel for me to dry myself. He then asked me “what brings you here at this early hour? Is there anything I can do for you?”

I reminded him of our talk the previous evening. “I told you I would teach you sandhya vandanam from today and I have come at the appointed hour of 5 am.”

He was stunned, but not as stunned as I was when I heard his next words. “What! You took my words to you yesterday seriously?” I looked at him in total disbelief but composed myself quickly and said “Yes, I did take it seriously. No matter. Go and wash your hands, legs and face, take your pancha-patra-uddarini and come. We’ll start.”

“Mama, don’t I have to take a bath first?”

“Not necessary. Just do as I say. Come as soon as you can and let us get started.” From that day I regularly went to his house every morning and taught him sandhya vandanam.

Light-hearted as his reaction on the first morning may have sounded, he was sincere and devoted both to learning sandhya vandanam and its practice. Some months later his wife told me “mama, when he leaves for his office every day he may forget his case files at home but he never forgets to carry pancha-patra-uddarini and tambalam”. The advocate added “I do the madhyahnika when time permits during the recess, mama”. My joy knew no bounds when I heard these words.

Venkatasubramaniam didn’t stop there. He asked me to teach aupasana vidhi and when I told him that his wife had to be with him for the ritual, his wife said she considered it a blessing to have a husband who wished to do this karma. My son-in-law guided him on doing aupasanam.





This incident proves that we can make the effort to accommodate daily anushtanams at any point in our lives. It does not matter that we are retired and past 60, or that we are not familiar with the rituals. I have countless examples of this kind that have enriched my vaideeka innings. Persons like Sri Venkatasubramaniam are the people who have been my inspiration for conducting camps for sandhya vandanam and pitru tarpanam – unheard-of things till then.

I can attribute all these uplifting experiences only to Bhagavat sankalpam (God's will) and my parents' blessings.





CHAPTER 7

REVIVING BRAHMANATVA

“I keep talking about a number of anushtanams we need to do. When you hear me, decide how many of these you can do, and start doing them. And feel genuinely sorry if you are unable to do all of them.” Maha Periyava



I am dividing this chapter into three distinct segments.

In the first segment I talk about the plethora of programs that we have done for reviving and fostering Brahmanatva. In the second segment I talk about the journeys to holy places we have done in the last decade again with the objective of promoting a religious revitalisation. Let me make one thing clear: all these have been conducted by an ebullient group of men under my guidance.

In the third section I talk about the books and talks I have published on Hindu traditions, practices and pilgrimage centres.

At the outset it would be sensible on my part to clarify the two expressions I have used above – Brahmanatva and religious revitalisation. The quote I have given above, just below the title of this chapter succinctly defines what I mean. I will elaborate.

As Maha Periyava has said, each Brahmin is expected to perform certain rituals daily, monthly, annually and at specific times as the occasion demands. The path to moksha or salvation that is laid out before us begins with karma yoga or the observance of these karmas with faith and devotion.

Two other paths are also prescribed for all Hindus – bhakti yoga and gnana yoga. In bhakti yoga, the path of devotion, you surrender to the Almighty unconditionally and reach Him; and in gnana yoga you attain God by assimilating the knowledge in the huge treasure of scriptures i.e. Vedas and Upanishads we have been blessed with.

Over the last century there has been a serious depletion of religious faith and a drastic fall in the observance level of karmas. Much has been done and is being done to stem the rot and bring people back on track, and make them recognise and appreciate their religious duty.

A great amount of work in this endeavour has been through pravachanas (discourses) on our holy books including Bhagavad Gita. A lot of awareness





has been created by Acharyas addressing lay people and showing them the bhakti marga and encouraging them to read the Bhagavad Gita and other texts and follow the principles contained in them.

My contribution to this effort has been in two distinct areas.

- Karma yoga: organising programs to make people familiar with the karmas and doing them regularly, and
- Bhakti yoga: conducting teerth yatra, or pilgrimages in medium-size groups to holy Hindu shrines to experience the sanctity of the sthalam and soak in bhakti rasa.

Camps, Workshops and Symposia

Objective, Strategy and Structure Of The Programs

You need the perspective of a reformist when you decide to make radical changes in the mind-set of people in matters of religion and spirituality. But in India this does not translate to making grandiose plans with a huge splash and fanfare. The Indian approach to community and social work is “start small”: first do what you can personally for the betterment of society and do it without massive targets and lavish PR. Your next steps, further action to expand your horizon will automatically evolve. We don’t buy into the Western or American philosophy of “think big”.

This was the strategy I adopted when I started gradually reducing my vaideeka practice and devoting more time to becoming a torch-bearer for Hindu dharma and karma. I didn’t stop to figure out how big it can become in the years to come. All I said to myself was, “I am taking my knowledge about our hoary tradition to people who are willing to listen, understand and act upon the learning”.

Over the last 15 years I have stuck to this policy, and I see no change in the future. My strong linkage to the RSS and my deep-rooted belief in its values make it easy for me to say “this is a task I am performing without looking for gain or publicity. Let’s see how far I can go”.

Two more distinct aspects of my work ethic are a complete lack of personal agenda, and carving out my own path and not following the herd. In every video I air on YouTube and elsewhere I talk about a topic briefly with the sole aim of educating the listener. I take care not to project myself.

Knowledge about Sanatana Dharma and the Hindu traditions is now available aplenty, and many learned people continue to provide information on religious practices to their niche groups of family and friends. My compass is much broader. I want to bring in as many people as possible, especially from the





next generation, and make it a movement for a spiritual awakening and a reform that can endure.

People from our generation with a serious spiritual bent are inclined to bemoan how everything has become so decadent and hopeless and how very few of the rich traditional values are being passed on to the next generation. My question is, can we instead not ask ourselves “what can I do to make a change, however small it may be?” So rather than compare the past with the present and rue the fall in numbers of people doing nitya karma, I busy myself bringing as many people into proper religious practice as I can.

You may have read of Mr Jadav Payeng from Majuli, popularly known as the ‘forest man of India’. He received the Padma Shri this year for his path-breaking work in increasing the green cover in and around his territory by the simple act of planting a tree or two every day and gradually spreading the word and creating a virtual forest! He was not wasting time lamenting on social media or holding conferences. He simply did what he could.

I’ve done precisely that. I didn’t look for resources or hire people to do my bidding. I started with what I had, and took baby steps. As my ideas took hold people began to associate themselves with my work, became volunteers in my taskforce and have made it the huge thing it is today.

All the right-minded people around me saw an honourable intent in my programs, were drawn to them and wanted to help with funds and other resources. When the programs multiplied as the demand went up, people close to me said “OK, I will sponsor breakfast for this program” or “I’ll organise the veshtis”. I never asked anyone for contribution, believe me, and never will. My benefactors come of their own accord as they can see a lot of good happening.

All our programs are free for the participants. This is to drive home the point that the objective is social good and not commercial gain. We don’t even collect a token fee. On the contrary the attendees get free booklets and in some cases observance-related items, since I want to ensure continuity of action.

The theme of our programs hinges on three philosophies or tatvas – awareness, action and beneficial result. People should be aware of our traditional values, they should take action to get back these values for themselves and their next of kin, and the community at large should reap the rich benefits of this steady conversion. And behind these three tatvas is my unshakeable faith in our Hindu culture, Sanatana Dharma.

My awesome team of volunteers, my A-Team, has so far done a variety of programs in many cities and towns of India. On analysis I see a distinct scientific pattern in the planning, delivery and post-function work we do for each program. We guarantee success by following a tried-and-tested





pattern, and I am happy to share it here for the benefit of anyone who may want to do such programs.

Planning and scheduling the programs

First – the focus is always on reaching value to the participants. How many people come to the event does not matter to me; if even one person goes away happy to have learnt something and wanting to practise what he learnt, I feel my purpose has been achieved.

Second – the process is always action-oriented and is not limited to speech. There are people who do pravachanas stressing the importance of religious observances. No doubt they are doing a good job, but I have a different approach. I want my audience to get the excitement of action. When a person actually does a task after learning how to do it, and sees the result, he is hooked for good. This is my strategy to get a permanent buy-in to our karmas.

So I'm not content with "sollik koduththa vaarthai" (the spoken word). We go the whole nine yards – by demonstrating the process to the people, making them do it and learning the A to Z of the karma. They will then have no excuse for not making it a routine. I firmly believe this approach of ours is what has made performance of nitya karmas and other crucial rituals a habit for many participants.

Third – we literally go after target audience and get them to come for the workshops. In the initial days I have gone flat to flat and told people about a forthcoming samashti sandhya vandanam or samita danam camp to seek participation. If they didn't turn up I wouldn't mind, and would go to them again the next time I announced a program. To some seniors who have practical issues in coming, I would say "no worry. I will come to your flat one of these days and teach you". Our team does the same thing now. Our volunteers publicise the event and seek attendance by visiting and talking to people.

Fourth – we try to package the delivery to precisely suit the target audience. We give the assembly a simple, distilled version of the topic without frills. I am aware of the fact that in teaching concepts, ambivalence is highly avoidable. So instructions are always to the point and leave no room for doubt. Of course we have the question hour at the end of every session to satisfy the invariable few with doubts and counterpoints.

About the question-answer session – none of the programs ends without a 60 or 90-minute segment for questions. It's a pleasure to see people smiling happily when their doubts are cleared. Once in a while the debate threatens to become heated, but I turn it around with all the tact and diplomacy I can muster and generally manage to avoid fracas.





Fifth – I take time getting my message across. I have heard people seeing the pamphlet and wondering “why does he spend a whole day teaching sandhya vandanam? At best it will take an hour to explain”. They should come and see for themselves the effect of driving the lesson home strongly and indelibly. The impact on the participants is such that they become practitioners for good and in fact get others to start doing it. And that’s my only purpose!

Sixth – we are thorough, almost finicky, with preparation for the program. I take pains to plan each program even if it’s a repeat. The hall has to be of the right size, notice has to be given, and registration for the program done meticulously. The program should start on time. I make no exceptions on any of these four requirements.

Attention to detail has to be extraordinary, I feel, if you want to make a difference and not become an also-ran. So we arrange to get the name of each person attending, his gotra, where he comes from and other particulars relevant to the program. We estimate the number of people who may attend to a reasonable degree of accuracy and this helps to decide the number of volunteers needed, the auditorium size, the number of people to be fed etc.

We hold meetings with volunteers – to use the RSS jargon, ‘baithaks’ – in which we set clear action points to each one based on their individual strengths on what they should do before, during and after the program. Sound system, computer file backup, lighting and seating, who should sit where...everything is discussed and decided. Nothing is left to chance including where the banner should be placed and what it should display!

Consequently, the comfort level for participants is excellent. Airy, well-lit halls, cosy chairs and healthy distancing, clean eating places and chaste food, and special care for outstation visitors are integral features of every program.

The flyer that goes to participants clearly tells them what to expect, what he or she should bring and other dos and don’ts. What should be worn and more importantly what should not be worn are spelt out. One thing that has always heartened me is that there is total compliance to the specs I lay down. Far from resenting my dicta, participants do what I ask willingly and without question. It is a victory of self-discipline over enforced discipline.

The beauty is this discipline extends also to the people coming together to conduct the program. For instance, in a Pitru tarpanam camp I get vadhyars from different schools – Krishna Yajur, Sukla Yajur, Sama, Rig and so on. Each of them takes pains to know how many students he will handle, when to start, when to finish etc.

I see evidence of the adherence of everyone to timings laid down during actions done separately by subgroups. It thrills me no end when I see the





break-out teams getting back to the main function at the same moment, as if they had rehearsed it!

This automatically brings to the function a regimen that makes it almost holy and not a general free-for-all meeting. The conditions attendees are required to follow also weed out casual walk-ins, people who have no serious interest but want to have fun, or people whose purpose in coming is purely to heckle the speakers or disturb the proceedings.

Seventh – my approach is usually all-inclusive and we try not to omit any of the sects. Thus, our sandhya vandanam camps cover all the Vedas and not just Yajur; and Telugu and Tamil Brahmins are invited. We get the appropriate vaideekas for every workshop.

The diversity in the age range of attendees is another exceptional feature of the inclusivity, and I welcome and insist on this. I make sure no one will suffer a loss of face by participating, and so you can see seniors older than me coming to even basic camps and sitting next to their grandsons happily and cheerfully!

Roughly 50% of the assembly is young, in a manner of speaking – aged below 40. This always excites me as I see our traditional values going safely into the next generation. But there is a distinct bunch of older, retired men who regret having missed out so far and want to make amends. All are welcome and no one is too old or too young.

Eighth – the supporting and administrative aspects of the program are, in my view, crucial to its success. We give conscious attention to these details. We ensure that participants get phone numbers of contact persons, registration numbers and identity indicators. They are clearly told what the schedule is, where to leave the footwear, where breakfast or lunch will be served etc. We try to leave no room for speculation.

Food is an integral part of every all-day program as I don't want that to be an excuse for not attending.

I insist that except for old people or people with a handicap, everyone will sit cross-legged on the floor and eat, for that's the healthy way to eat. The interesting thing is that no one ever complains. It has after all become their program by that time and they take pride in doing what they are asked to do!

Conducting the programs and post-program work

Now I will talk about the crux of every program – the content. As a rule, we get the function off to a great start with a kriti-based prayer or a clip from Veda chanting. A volunteer then spells out the agenda. I usually reserve my speech for the end of the program.





The light and heavy portions, the concept and practice portions, and the add-ons for diversion are mixed sensitively. We don't allow proceedings to sag or lag, and people often wonder how the whole day passed so swiftly. For example the sandhya vandanam camp starts with the vadhyars explaining the process step by step from the first achamanam to the final samarpanam and raksha. I am very careful to see that there is no overload of any kind, but that at the same time the vital aspects are not glossed over.

In my oration in the concluding stages of the workshop, I recap the highlights of the program that should be remembered, of course. But I also use the space to send out socio-religious messages relevant to the day's theme and to the audience. There are many things we need to do and to avoid, and it is worth stressing these any number of times, and I do just that.

This sometimes leads to my talking about taboo subjects like inadvisability of inter-caste marriages or about bahishta dharma (restrictions on ladies during their monthly cycles). Thanks to the rapport with the audience that I have by that time, I'm able to make my point without reprisal or unpleasantness. I make it a point never to talk for more than 10-12 minutes.

Throughout the program we keep checking and reassuring that the content offered is being ingested by most, if not all, of the participants. We pause from time to time for quick recaps especially in ritual-related camps. I'm always ready to make mid-course amendments to the content if I recognise the need for it.

We get subject matter experts to augment the learning at every camp. I request them to keep their points on the topic for the day clear and their instructions on rituals simple. The objective is that participants should leave the camp fully confident of doing the ritual on their own from the next day without help.

I give the participants at every ritual-related camp an unequivocal message: you should start doing it right away, and dawdling will not be allowed. Some people come up with one problem after another and plead inability in doing it regularly, which I don't accept. I patiently take each objection of theirs and we find answers together. By far this is the sweetest fruit of my camps.

As part of the workshop, we equip the participants with what they need on an ongoing basis to do the karma. We follow up with participants relentlessly to see if they are doing the karma and doing it right. Everyone has starting trouble when making a break from past practices and doing something new. Very often we assert to ourselves "I will start from tomorrow" but come the morning our moods – and priorities – change, and the intended start keeps getting put off. I recognise this weakness in all of us, and don't allow it to take hold.





Members of my volunteer force and I visit each house the following day or week to see if the ritual taught is being done, to ask if they have any issues, and to give them necessary assistance. When you see this kind of supportive post-audit by someone else for your own good, you cannot but start doing the karma in real earnest, right?

I keep the focus and attention of participants wholly on the subject matter of the camp and not on me. In fact, I try not to be seen except when I have to say or do something. You won't see me bustling around, asking questions or driving volunteers. They know their job and will come to me if they need any clarification. I like to stand apart, welcome people and exchange pleasantries with the guest of honour.

Even when the program begins it is the emcee who takes over, and I appear when he asks me to. Corporations set a great value for the leader becoming dispensable, and I firmly believe in this concept. The program should go on even if I am absent.

But my core team makes sure that the corporate-level professionalism is confined only to the smooth conduct of the program. The program is not allowed to become dry, and the personal touch is never lost. Every attendee is made to feel that it is his own family function. Camaraderie and genuine goodwill are visibly exhibited and carried home by all participants.

I have not kept count of the number of programs we have done or the number of people that have participated. I suppose it would be more than 150 programs on varied aspects of Hindu Dharma in general and the rituals in particular. I have been told that workshops on nitya karmas alone would have benefited ten to fifteen thousand people. The multiplier effect of these people on others around them would also be significant.

A unique program I remember with great affection was the one we did on 'Stree dharma'. We laid out a detailed agenda of what the ladies could and should do for preservation of the great Hindu tradition, carefully explained each aspect in the course of the program, and issued a free booklet to serve as a reference guide. Ladies from all walks of life attended the program that day – senior executives, working women, home-makers, even grandmothers. I was inundated with enquiries after the program from Chennai as to when the next program would be, and from outside Chennai as to when I could hold it in their place.

The running thread in all our programs is that a Brahmin can bring about universal wellbeing through steadfast practice of his religious duty. The huge appeal of this common theme plus total lack of personal publicity have made sure that people attend in large numbers and benefit from the programs. Many of the participants have become willing transmitters of their learning to many others.





Teerth Yatras

The Spiritual Value of Teerth Yatras

Teerth yatra or as we say in Tamil 'theertha yaaththirai' is much, much more than a trip to a holy place and even the English word 'pilgrimage' does not evoke the full power of this spiritual activity that all devout Hindus undertake at some time during their lives.

Teerth Yatra is a Vedic tradition, no less. The Avani Avittam sankalpam is dedicated to many teerthas and kshetras. Teerth Yatra is mentioned in all major scriptures. Vedas have mantras like 'imamme gange yamune...' and 'devaanaam pUr Ayodhya'. In Ramayana, Sitadevi actually looks forward to her sojourn in the forests with Rama because she equates it to a teerth yatra. In Kamba Ramayana also, the Kavi refers to 'punniya pulangaLaadi...' meaning "travel to holy places". In the Mahabharata, the teerth yatra of the Pandavas is elaborately described and has a whole parva dedicated to it.

All Puranas contain sections on kshetra mahatmiyam or significance of holy places. In particular, Skanda Purana includes several Sthala Puranas on kshetras like Kasi, Ramasetu, Venkatachala and so on.

The importance given by all our sages and mahatmas is another powerful indicator of the role of teerth yatra in a Hindu's life. Shankaracharya walked the length and breadth of Bharata 'Punya Bhoomi'. Ramanujacharya, Madvacharya, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Sri Vallabha and many others have travelled to all holy places of our great country. Kanchi Maha Periyava did several Pada yatras and walked all the way to Kasi, and Sri Jayendra Saraswati Swamigal traversed the nation entirely by foot three times.

Teerth yatras expose us to different cultures and brings diverse people together with one motive. Though India was divided into 46 desas (Chola, Chera, Pandya, Saurashtra, Utkala and so on you could see integration, with people travelling from Kasi to Rameswaram and several sthalas in between. India has remained a single country for thousands and thousands of years purely by the process of teerth yatra and the preeminent place it occupies in every Hindu's calendar.

Salient Features of Teerth Yatras We Have Done

The teerth yatras organised under my guidance have been for the sole purpose of loka kshema (universal wellness) and propagation of Vaideeka Dharma. The tour parties have invariably comprised leading Ganapatigals, my students and their families. We have so far done trips to Naimisaranyam, Rishikesh, Amarkantak, Tiruvannamalai, Adayappalam, Surutappalli, Srisailam and Pushkar.





The plan for the yatra starts with my proposing the destination. I always try to link the tour with some major religious happening around that time at that place. For instance, the Pushkar yatra was timed to coincide with the Pushkar Mela.

The scriptural content of each yatra is very important to me, and I take special effort to analyse and decide what we should do at the shrine by way of religious offering. At Rishikesh we did a Maha Rudra Parayanam. In Pushkar we did the sampoorana Yajur Veda parayanam. In Amarkantak we did Agnihotram and Rudra Parayanam. In Srisailam we did Narmada Parikrama and Parayanam.

After the place and time are decided, my team of volunteers gets down to work. In the first baithak I outline the vision and purpose of the yatra, who should be invited and what we should do during the tour. Notice of the proposed yatra is sent to all my students. A detailed schedule is prepared on various aspects including travel, food, stay, temples to visit, karmas to be done, Ganapatigals and other religious persons to be invited, the approximate cost of the program etc.

Travel arrangements are planned with the agencies involved. Almost every time I have noted that the travel is multi-modal and reservations especially for air travel have to be carefully handled. It becomes a challenge when people come from different places to the tour and their individual constraints have to be accommodated.

Once the basic ground work is done, I sometimes visit the place with one or two volunteers to get the details on the nitty-gritty. This was done for Pushkar, Rishikesh and Amarkantak as we were going to have 200+ devotees in the group, and we couldn't afford to have unpleasant surprises.

For instance, Pushkar is a desert with the Brahma temple being its only attraction. Boarding and lodging could pose challenges. Thanks to our 'survey' visit, we were able to find a compact Rajasthani temple with rooms to accommodate all the devotees, and got caterers from Delhi to cook traditional South Indian food!

In Rishikesh, Parmarth Niketan Ashram was selected as the venue and we spoke to their management. We could convince them to accommodate a large group of almost 250+ devotees. At Srisailam there were Chathrams around the temple where the devotees could be housed. In Tiruvannamalai we stayed at the Kanchi Math premises.

A highlight of the Rishikesh yatra was that we did the entire program with the Ganga flowing alongside, a divine sight that elated everyone. When we went to Amarkantak, we visited the Ashram of Bilaspur Swamigal and went by bus from there, to see the Narmada. All this could have been difficult if we had not planned ahead and got the arrangements firmed up.





After the program is finalised, I make it a point to visit Kanchi math for the Acharya's blessings. Invariably the Acharya gives an anugraha bhashanam blessing the trip and also highlighting the key aspects and highlights of each location. I make sure all the yatris listen to the bhashanam and get the divine blessings of Periyava.

I am particular that everyone must be well fed, and go the extra mile to plan the menu, the timings to serve the food, the way it is served, the caterers to be employed etc. with my team. We try to make sure that the local delicacy – vegetarian of course – is a part of the menu. I must acknowledge the great support in the matter of food that I have received from excellent caterers all over India. They have spared no effort in giving us chaste food to suit the age and taste of the group and add-on services like packed food during travel.

An important aspect of all the yatras is doing anna danam or donation of food. Anna danam is done on a large scale to the poor and needy of the area. I exhort all the devotees to take part and explain to them the Vedic significance of anna danam. At Rishikesh we went one step further and did Go Danam (the gifting of a cow) as well.

The performance of religious karmas like poojas, parayanams etc. is a sight to behold. In Pushkar, we had more than fifteen Ganapatigals travelling from Chennai to Rajasthan for a Sampoorana Yajur Veda parayanam. They were excited as it is the only place where we have a temple for Brahma in India. In Rishikesh, we took Sivacharyas from Chennai in addition to twelve Ganapatigals under the able leadership of Sri Gururama Ganapatigal. The holy bath in the Ganges and Narmada, with comprehensive sankalpa for loka kshema was a feature many trippers talked about for a long time.

Visits to nearby temples and places of significance are a must. For instance we visited Shivaji Maharaj's Museum in Srisailam, the Annamalaiyar Temple and Ramana Maharishi's ashram in Tiruvannamalai, the Goddess Narmada temple in Amarkantak and the Shankaracharya cave In Rishikesh. On our Rishikesh tour a few members went to Hardwar too.

Talking of centres of importance adjoining the place of pilgrimage, I have to mention Naimisaranyam. The number of culturally vital spots our group could manage in this trip was a rich haul. We saw the Ahobila Math, Pujari Mutt (Nepali Mandir), Srinivasa Perumal Temple and Hanuman Gaddi. Likewise in Prayag we made sure we saw the following spots: Bharadwaja Ashram, Veni Madhava temple, Akshaya Vata, Adi Sankara temple (Kanchi math) and Hanuman temple.

The extras (thukkadas as we call them in Carnatic music concerts) are a crucial aspect of any tour. So I give time for everyone to do some sightseeing, shop or try the local popular activity if there is one.





Discipline in all actions and perfect time management are the hallmark of all our trips. Everyone adheres without question to the schedule. Systems to be followed for each small and big action like removing footwear, proper seating at mealtimes, seating arrangements for the parayanam etc. are set down by my team and ensured by the volunteers.

It is very important to me that every member is involved in every aspect of the yatra and participates actively. I am also particular that the Ganapatigals and vadhyars are duly honoured and that utmost respect is given to them. Here again, my competent team has delivered on every occasion, and I am grateful to each member of the volunteer corps.

Yatras – The Takeaways

The key takeaway from a teerth yatra is the revitalisation of our spiritual self. A pilgrimage to Gaya and performing Gaya sraaddha for example reinforces strongly our faith in the existence of pitrus and our ability to communicate with them and seek their blessings. Gaya sraaddha helps us view pitrus as our friends and facilitators for leading the Brahmin's life as ordained, to the extent feasible in today's world.

The next vital benefit is the re-education in our Hindu way of life, our Sanatana Dharma. What does Ganga Mata teach us by her relentless and powerful torrential flow at Hardwar? She crosses many obstacles but surmounts them all to reach us. The message to us is that the path to spiritual salvation is tough and is strewn with many difficulties. But we should not lose heart, we should not give up.

A third and crucial takeaway is humility. Every teerth yatra reminds the participants of the hallowed tradition we Hindus have inherited. The triviality of what we do in our daily lives is brought home forcefully, but we are happy that the realization has at least come as a result of the yatra.

Fourthly, we get to see true bhakti, and expressions of total surrender to God by a myriad variety of people from all parts of India. The sincerity and complete adherence to the procedure shown by North Indians in the Ganga snana is fascinating to watch. There is no show, no put-on, no small talk. The river is kept clean too – no use of soap or tooth paste, no rinsing into the river – these are instinctively avoided by everyone considering the purity of Ganga.

Fifth, your mind switches to the philosophical mode and your thoughts become rarefied. I will take Kasi / Varanasi by way of illustration. Despite seeing death and karmas for departed souls all around you, you never feel the heaviness or trepidation that death usually evokes. Instead the inevitability of death reasserts itself and you ponder about how you can realign your lifestyle for a safe passage for your soul after death. This is a truly defining moment in one's life.





Sixth, we learn to adjust, to make allowances. Tithi and paksha no longer matter. You make exceptions in regard to kala (time), madi (personal sanctity) and ahara (food) as well. None of these are entirely in your control during the trip and so it would be best not to be too finicky. You may end up eating at all odd hours, but this shouldn't worry you unduly.

Finally, a teerth yatra with the right bunch of people can make it a spiritual, dharmic experience. We try our best at every shrine, in every action, at all times to visualise the Bhakti marga of our ancestors and get into it. The sordid reality of everyday life awaits us with all its vanities and foibles when we return – so why not eschew it at least for the few days of the yatra? I have been singularly fortunate in this respect, and I think I can speak for my entire entourage that in each of our yatra's we have had a sublime union with God.

My Books

When I got busy with conducting workshops and seminars on our karmas, a thought that passed through my mind was, “why not use the written word to reach the same awareness and knowledge to thousands of others who cannot take part in my programs?” Sarma the writer emerged from this churn.

I have always loved to write, and with a subject like the glorious Hindu tradition, writing becomes easy as there is so much to say. Every aspect of our Sanatana Dharma is worth writing about, not only for the sheer joy of capturing the beautiful practices and the depth of meaning in each of them, but carrying forward to the next generation the vast treasure of our Vedas, Upanishads and Puranas.

This is why I get excited whenever I start on a book. The subject occurs to me or gets suggested by a friend or a disciple. It has been also my great fortune that once or twice I have been commanded by my Acharyas like Bala Periyava or Pudu Periyava to write on a certain topic. In case of travelogues I write the book soon after I get back from the tour.

When I look at the fifteen or so titles written and published, three aspects of my style and format occur to me as worth sharing.

1. Most of them are bilingual. Many of the people I want to reach through my books cannot read Tamil – even though quite a few of them are Tamilians. And I say this without any rancour; this is to be expected in the global milieu we live in.
2. I try to keep the writing simple, easy-flowing and devoid of any serious theological dissertations. My purpose is to simplify observances and other religious actions, not to delve into their inner meaning. I am not qualified to write at that level. Highly respected gurus and acharyas have written bashyams and commentaries that an enlightened reader on the path of Gnana Yoga can benefit from. My target reader is not this erudite





reader but a layman keen on a religious transformation but unaware of what to do. I aim to get him on the spiritual path slowly but firmly, teaching him the baby steps first and then proceeding to bigger things.

3. The topics covered fall in two broad categories – rituals and holy destinations. Between these two aspects of our religion we pretty much cover the essence of the Hindu way of life, at least the gist of what a lay person should know.

The following books of mine are on diverse aspects of observances, both regular karmas and occasion-driven ones, required of a Hindu to fulfil his dharmic duties:

- Antyeshti – Aparā Karma
- Nitya Panchayatana Pooja
- Yagnopaveetam / Poonaal
- Samita daanam
- Brahma Yagnam – Why? What for? How?
- Achamanam

On holy destinations, I have written

- Kshethradanam – A Journey through Holy Places
- Gaya Sraaddha

My omnibus editions are books that combine a variety of topics.

- The Great Hindu Tradition, of which I have written in Chapter 6
- Vedhamum PaNbaadum, Tamil translation of 'The Great Hindu Tradition'
- Ahnika Deepika, comprising Yagnopaveetam, Samita daanam, Parishechanam, Brahma Yagnam and Achamanam

Of these, I would count 'The Great Hindu tradition' and its Tamil translation 'Vedhamum PaNbaadum' as reference manuals on a host of religious observances, rituals and other forms of prayer that tell you what you are expected to do and how to do it. They are easily the most defining works of mine to date and have already seen several editions and reprints.

There are three exceptions to the two broad themes of rituals and pilgrimage places. These are books I have written on special subjects that are close to my heart.

- Kumkuma Tilaka Dharana Mahimai – Significance of Kumkuma tilak on the forehead
- Bahishta Dharmaha
- Vaideeka Maargaththil StreegaL Dharmam

It wouldn't be far wrong to classify these three books into the 'sensitive subjects' category. The first book talks about the vermilion dot (pottu). This





adornment is shunned even by Brahmin girls nowadays for fear of being treated as outcasts in a fashion-prone world. I have tried to explain why the tilaka on a woman's forehead makes sense even today, especially today.

'Bahishta dharma' deals with the usually avoided topic of menstrual periods and how Hindu religion looks at it.

The last title lists and discusses the responsibilities of women in guiding their families into the spiritual path.

Apart from the foregoing titles, I have written

- Sri Subrahmanya Bhujangam
- Mahaan Sri Appayya Dikshitar (with Atmaarpana Stuti)

Sri Subrahmanya Bhujangam is an anthology of the verses in praise of Lord Muruga written by Adi Shankara Bhagavat Pada. The compilation has been conceived by me not only as a helpful text for chanting (the verses are written in Sanskrit, Tamil and grantha lipi), but getting across to the reader the meaning of each verse with a simple translation. I wasn't sure how this particular book would be received, and was delighted when it went into its second edition in barely 3 months!

The book on Appayya Dikshitar is a biographical sketch of the great man and all that he has done for Hindu Dharma. It is a matter of regret that many such magnificent men are unknown to most Hindus, and more and more of them should be written about.

In every book I write, I avoid argumentation and debating of any kind. Even while tackling delicate issues like Arya-Dravida race theory, I stick to facts and quote from eminent writers and, above all, base my conclusions on logic.

At no time do I engage in diatribe against people with views in opposition to my own. I only plead with them to see reason. Ours is a free country, after all, and everyone is free to express his opinion.

Apart from the books listed above, my prolific writing in social media, and my responses to mailed queries and in debates cover a large number of crucial topics as well.

The reception to my books and videos reflects the growing interest in many a young Hindu today in our traditions and customs, and in bringing back and keeping alive our hoary practices that have great spiritual significance. The spark has to be fanned to become a flame that can glow brightly and bring universal wellness.

In the end, I must share one anxiety with the readers. When I do talks these days, I sometimes wonder if I have covered the topic earlier and it is a repeat.





Some friends of mine volunteered to list the talks I have so far done from the Net, arrange them subject-wise and add it as an Appendix. I cannot thank them enough. Of course the anthology has to be updated as I keep talking all the time!

My Volunteer Corps

I have talked about my 'A' Team at the beginning of this chapter. This is my trusted body of highly talented and committed persons who rally around every time I conceive a program, function or workshop, and take over all the hard work that I have described in the foregoing paragraphs. I marvel at God's kindness to me in giving me this willing and capable team that makes sure that what I plan to achieve in each program is realised.

My volunteers are truly masters of their individual crafts, and work behind the scenes all the time, even at the program venue. Sudden alterations in the agenda don't faze them, and any quick fix needed is done so effortlessly that you don't even see it happening.

And despite doing all the great work they remain faceless and nameless. These are the people who take selflessness to a much higher level than anyone else, including me. It matters very little to them that none of them is in the forefront, no one is honouring them. The success of each program is their success. They have cast off the shackles of ahankaram (ego) and mamakaram (selfishness) casually while most people have to do years of spiritual studies to overcome these affectations!

Take for example this chapter and how it came about. A member of my team suggested that we write about the programs we have done and I liked the idea. On my request, another volunteer sent to me over 75 minutes of recordings on how each program is conceived and executed.

I heard the recordings and was impressed by his elaborate description of every single thing that happens in conducting a program. But – as could be expected – it had a lot of laudatory references to me that had to be avoided because I couldn't be seen talking big about my own work.

All I did was call upon another member. He recast the entire material into first person singular, carefully took out the adulation appearing in the original and presented it back to me. Thus, three volunteers brought their special skills to the table for this chapter, and all I did was ask them.

With such people in my team, it is no wonder that my programs and religious tours are massive sell-outs. It is the presence of this strong workforce, comprising a think-tank and an execution squad with me that makes me envision projects that would otherwise look daunting. Thank you, my friends! Keep them coming!






CHAPTER 8

TRADITION BECKONS – A RETURN TO GURUKULA SRI MANTRA PEETESWARI VEDA PATASALA

*“Vedo Nityam Adheeyatam
Taduditam Karma Swanushteeyatam” – Adi Sankaracharya*
*Study the Vedas daily, perform duties
ordained by them diligently .*



Introduction

I would like to begin with an extract of a news item that was published in 2020 about the Sri Mantra Peeteswari Veda Patasala. The article effectively captures the evolution of the idea, the men behind it, and the relevance of both the Gurukula method of teaching and the Patasala.

Brahmasri Gururama Ganapatigal (Gururamji) is the principal of the Sri Mantra Peeteswari Veda Patasala. He can be described alternatively as a ‘ghanaanta vidwan’ and a ‘salakshana ganapatigal’. He has great expertise in ‘varna krama’ as well.

Gururamji hails from Oonjalur. His father was a school headmaster, and a model educationist. His uncle (father’s elder brother) is the famous archaeologist and historian, Dr R Nagaswami. Gururamji was doing Veda Parayanam in Chennai and could be seen at many gatherings of vidwans.

In 2016 he realized – probably because God willed him to – that for greater fulfilment in his spiritual work and for effective teaching of Vedas and Upanishads he should go back to the traditional Gurukula paddhati and teach the boys in a separate school away from all distractions. The idea seized him and he did not hesitate. He quit Chennai, took a house on rent in a town near Kumbakonam and relocated with his family. Such was the intensity of his passion for the Veda Patasala.

No praise can be too high for the missionary zeal of Gururamji. The exalted thought process that has made him do this great work is without doubt a result of his parents’ blessings and the benevolent gaze of his guru.

Initially he had just a couple of boys in training in his house in Solaiyappan Street on the banks of Kaveri. A few of his friends and admirers however did not want this to be a minor, inconsequential affair. They sought the advice





of Sarma Sastrigal (Sarmaji), an active pioneer in the revival of our Hindu tradition and Gururamji's father-in-law.

Under Sarmaji's leadership a team of committed enthusiasts set up a Trust, bought a piece of land and got a school building constructed. Gururamji started training children in the new facility from April'17. The inauguration of the new premises took place on April 23, 2017.

With the infinite grace of God the Patasala has grown substantially since then: it has 20 students now. Four of the students have also gone in for higher education.

Thanks to Gururamji's effective administration of pedagogy, syllabus, routines and resources, the small seed he sowed four years ago has shown its potential to become a prodigious Veda Patasala in the years to come.

As for Gururamji himself, he continues to be a simple person with no pride of achievement but only a fervent prayer that more and more boys should get interested in Veda Adhyayanam and come to learn at the Patasala.

Sarmaji has played a vital role in the conceptualisation and expansion of Sri Mantra Peeteswari Veda Patasala by getting the school built and supporting Gururamji in student enrolment, financial management and administration.

Sri Mantra Peeteswari Veda Patasala – The Beginnings

My daughter Sowmya's marriage

The seeds of my participation in the commissioning of a Veda Patasala were sown, even without my realizing it, when an inner voice urged me to give my second daughter Sowmya in marriage to a vaideeka. I did not reveal my thoughts to my wife but she must have known – she could read me like a book.

Sowmya was 23 at that time and had completed graduation and an IT course. After she gave assent to our looking for a bridegroom for her, we went to Pudu Periyava at Kanchipuram with her horoscope, and sought his blessings.

Pudu Periyava gazed at my daughter and asked "Will you marry a vaideeka?" She nodded and we were then given prasadam and took our leave. Just as I was about to get into the car to return home, one of the staff at the Matham came running to me and said Pudu Periyava wanted to see me again, alone. I rushed back inside. With the greatest compassion and almost as if he was a concerned family member, he said he had just light-heartedly suggested that my daughter be given in marriage to a vaideeka. "Because of my saying so, don't go in search of such an alliance. Your daughter is formally educated and may wish to be married to someone with a regular job."





Back in Chennai I asked Sowmya again, and she was quite clear. “Appa, you choose and I will abide. I have full faith in you”. The first and only alliance we saw was that of Gururama Ghanapadigal (For the sake of continuity I will call him Gururamji for the rest of this piece.) The horoscopes matched, and Sowmya and Gururamji liked each other.

Gururamji was at that time a Veda adhyapak in a Patasala run by a Trust in Chromepet with a salary of Rs 5,000. He was living in a rented house with his parents. The family’s only other income was his father’s pension.

I asked Sowmya “are you OK with this?” Her answer again was “You decide”. What a girl! Who would have said this in the 21st century? We went ahead with her marriage to Gururamji with a happy mind.

The wedding took place in 2004. My father was alive then, and you should have seen the excitement with which he involved himself actively in the wedding – mind you, he was eighty-plus! You see, he had harboured the hope that his granddaughter would marry a vaideeka, and his desire was coming true. He was ecstatic and planned and personally executed every religious aspect of the wedding. At times my wife Vijayalakshmi and I were reduced to mere bystanders!

I am sure that the joyful participation of my father in Sowmya’s wedding and his benign blessings as a celebrated acharya would have played a significant role in the realization of my son-in-law’s dream – and my dream too – for a Patasala in the Gurukula style.

My Keynote Address at Raja Veda Kavya Patasala in 2015

The occasion was the 473rd Annual Day celebration of the highly revered Raja Veda Patasala in Kumbakonam, and I was invited to deliver the keynote address. My father did his schooling in this Patasala in the mid-1920s, and so there was a strong emotional connect for me with the school. Almost a century later his son was a Chief Guest at the same Patasala, and this would have been a proud moment for Appa had he been alive. My son-in-law was at that time still in Chennai and had not firmed up his decision to relocate, but that day at Raja Veda Kavya Patasala must have been a subconscious trigger for me to embrace his decision without a second of hesitation.

What I went through that day – August 6, 2015 – was a divine experience. Meeting the children learning our Vedas from eminent acharyas, speaking to their parents who had made the fantastic choice of education for them, exchanging ideas with the gurus and just absorbing the consecrated environment were all happenings that made me realize for the thousandth time the glory of Sanatana Dharma and the marvel of our Vedas. In my





speech I equated the Vedic lore of Hinduism to the biggest wonder that the world has seen – considering the fact that it has travelled down over three Yugas purely by shravanam (hearing)! It became powerfully clear to me that any venture to establish institutions to continue the propagation of this treasure to future generations should not only be welcomed but should be undertaken by people in the domain like me.

I must admit though, that when I got back to Chennai the thought and intention got submerged in my regular commitments to classes and programs. But my destiny had already laid out clear plans for me, through the medium of Gururamji, my son-in-law.

Gururama Ghanapadigal's dream

Gururamji was teaching Vedas to students in the apartment he lived in, but was not happy with this mode of teaching. He felt the correct way to teach was in the Gurukula tradition. But city environs are not conducive to the Gurukula method because proper Veda adhyayanam lays down strict rules on acharam (hygiene), aharam (food) and vyavaharam (social behaviour). The daily routine of the students involving washing and drying their own clothes and performing their nitya anushtanams like sandhya vandanam, samita danam etc. required much more space than would be available in a flat in a crowded city.

One day in 2016, my son-in-law and Sowmya visited us. He said “I have this urge to start a Veda Patasala in the Gurukula paddhati. I would like to go to Kumbakonam to start it, as Chennai is unsuitable for such a format. Two boys are learning under me now, and we will take them with us”. Sowmya appeared to be in perfect consonance with his decision. I applauded the selfless and spiritual drive in his ambitious plan and resolved to help in whatever manner I could.

A bit later Gururamji packed his belongings and left Chennai for Kumbakonam with Sowmya and their daughter Sheetala and his two students. He rented a place in Kumbakonam for Rs.3,000 per month after ensuring that it would give him adequate space. They were managing the expenses of the household and of the students with a grant from the TTD scheme and the small pension drawn by his mother who lived with him. My wife and I visited them often during their settling-in period. Even at this stage none of us had the idea of starting a Veda Patasala.

Construction of the Patasala

Gururamji's reputation as a good teacher slowly began to draw more children from families residing nearby who were keen to place their children in a good





patasala, and space was becoming a constraint. The idea of starting a proper Veda Patasala was born.

Initially Gururamji was not in favour of the idea. He felt it was way beyond his means, but I was firm. I told him “this is a God-sent opportunity to us to continue the great tradition of Veda adhyayanam in the Gurukula mode, and we should not lose it”. I advised him to look for a plot of land where he could build a small ‘kutir’ (cottage).

Upon returning to Chennai I spoke to a few of my friends. They warmed to the idea at once and said they would help. We formed the Mantra Peeteswari Trust, prepared the financial plan for construction of the Patasala, and reached out to benefactors to garner the funds. Gururamji pitched in with his entire life’s savings for the project.

When we had accumulated the requisite amount, we acquired a plot of land in Kumbakonam on the banks of Kaveri. The name for the Patasala was decided as Sri Mantra Peeteswari Veda Patasala. The building was completed and commissioned in 2017 and as of Nov’20 it is home to as many as twenty students.

The name Sri Mantra Peeteswari is the name of the ‘Thayar’ (Mother Goddess) of the Kumbeswara temple.

The Patasala

The main aim of the Patasala is to provide Vedic education under the gurukulam system for promoting the spiritual ethos of India and for the preservation of the Vedas. The goal is to produce renowned Vedic scholars in the years to come, to sustain and bring back the glory of Sanatana Dharma. The Mantra Peeteswari Trust manages the Patasala at the strategic level, and Gururamji runs the operations.

With gradual increase in strength and the introduction of courses in various branches of Vedas and Veda Bhashya courses, Mantra Peeteswari Veda Patasala is envisioned to become a holistic gurukulam.

The Goshala

The Karthikeya Goshala is located within the Patasala premises. The goshala emphasises the spiritual importance of the cow and works for Gosamrakshana (protection of cows from being slaughtered).

It also serves to provide milk for consumption, gomaya and cow dung for making vibhuti and for keeping the Patasala clean.





A Typical Day at Sri Mantra Peeteswari Veda Patasala

Gururamji's day starts at five-thirty in the morning and ends only at ten in the night. He personally teaches all the children, dividing them into groups in line with their individual level of grasp. Exhausting? Not for him, since it is his chosen path, his life's mission. He enjoys every moment of it.

In Sri Mantra Peeteswari there are children studying at the beginner, middle and higher levels. It takes about six to seven years to complete the basics – the Samhitas and the Brahmanas. The method of teaching is by shravanam and punarukti (hearing and repeating). This unique way followed by forefathers of the Vedic tradition continues till today. Not only does the method enable one to learn and imbibe the pronunciation and swara precisely, but it gives one the undeniable pleasure of listening to and chanting the Vedas.

The children wake up at around 5 am and after washing themselves, they study till about 6:30 am. They then bathe and do their sandhya vandanam and samita danam. After drinking a glass of milk, they are given time to wash their clothes and rest briefly. The next study session starts at 8:30 am and goes on till noon. At noon they do madhyahnika and then have lunch. They take turns to serve each other at lunch. This fosters bonding and builds their friendship and closeness.

They return to their studies after lunch and continue till about 5 pm, with a little snack break in between. From 5 to 6 pm they play indoor and outdoor games. Soon after sunset, at about 6:30 pm they have a quick wash and settle down to do saayam sandhya and samita danam. This is followed by the chanting of Vishnu Sahasranamam. On special days they chant pertinent stotras and slokas in addition. It is study time after this till dinner is served at 8:30 pm. After dinner the boys retire to bed.

On days like pournami and amavasya (full moon and new moon) no new lessons are taught, and the students use these days for revising their old lessons. Pratama tithi, the first day after both pournami and amavasya, are free days. I often go to Kumbakonam on these days to spend time with the children.

The People behind the Patasala

It is Gururama Ganapatigal who should be the first name in the list of people who have made Sri Mantra Peeteswari Veda Patasala a reality.

Gururamji could have lived comfortably in Chennai and made a decent living as a vaideeka. But he chose to become an adhyapak, a guru with no financial expectations. This is his dream project and I feel blessed to have done what I could for it.





I should thank Providence for my daughter agreeing to marry a vaideeka. I would not have had the privilege otherwise of being associated with a noble soul like Gururamji.

The next person to whom I have to give credit for the success of the project is my daughter Sowmya for her enthusiastic, wholehearted cooperation. Sowmya is a city bred girl and has never lived in a small town ever. The concept of a Veda Patasala was totally alien to her but she has transformed herself for its sake and has accepted all the changes in her lifestyle that have become necessary. She is playing a laudable role now in the management of the Patasala. The children regard her as a foster mother and Gururamji as a godfather.

The Patasala is also a testimony to my most valuable possession in this life – if I may use the word: the virtual army of devoted and dedicated men who have imbibed my passion for religious renaissance that is urgently needed in India. It is heart-warming to see that the idea has been implemented with skill and fervour by my unofficial corps. So in the matter of giving credit for the Patasala a sizable chunk belongs to my ‘A’ team.

Finally I bow in reverence to all the benefactors who came forward to donate for the construction of the Patasala and the team of engineers and workmen who toiled hard to make sure that the facility was built exactly as envisioned by Gururamji.

Closing Thoughts

Whenever I think of the Patasala, it comes home forcefully to me that the ways of God are wondrous. I had never thought of running a Veda Patasala or being instrumental in establishing one. Mind you, this was the phase of my life when I was fully involved in taking Sanatana Dharma to audiences world-wide and working on reviving our ancient culture. But reviving the concept of gurukulam and starting a Veda Patasala had never entered my head. And here I am, at the apex of a Trust Board running such an institution!

I know of Veda Patasalas with funds but no students, and others with students but no funding. Sri Mantra Peeteswari is singularly blessed on both counts – very likely because of the direct blessings of Bhagavat Pada.

It is a rare coincidence that the Patasala is located on Solaiyappan Theru, the very street that I grew up in, and my father, grandfather and great grandfather before me. When the project was initiated, we even tried to buy back the property of my parents on that street but we could not, and had to be content with being in its vicinity. But even this is a great blessing indeed.





I feel that with Sri Mantra Peeteswari my life has come full circle and that I have returned to the banks of the Kaveri where my forefathers lived.

My inspiration for the Patasala is Adi Shankara Bhagavat Pada's Sopana (Sadhana) Panchakam, which lays great stress on the duty of every Brahmin to do what he can for Veda samrakshanam (preservation and propagation of the Vedas). This and this alone can ensure all-round prosperity of not just one community but the whole world (loka kshema).

I must confess that in this birth, two things that I have been able to do have made me exceedingly happy. One is my serving as pracharak in the RSS in my younger days and the other is my founding and being a trustee for Sri Mantra Peeteswari Veda Patasala. It is God's grace that I have achieved both the milestones – especially the Patasala.

I have been asked about future plans for the Patasala. Apart from the growth in the number of student admissions which we will work for, the Trust Board and Gururamji will keep reinventing fresh strategies and new projects to fulfil two crucial goals:

- Making the education wholesome and high-quality, and
- Broadening the enviable spiritual base of our country





CHAPTER 9

THE MASTER-SAINTS WHO HAVE ILLUMINATED MY PATH

*Whatever an ideal person does and the standards he sets are
followed by others in the same manner.*

Bhagavad Gita Chapter 3, Verse 21



Kanchi Kamakoti Matham Acharyas

Maha Peiava Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati Swamigal

I saw Maha Periyava first when I was really young. My parents had received him with poorna kumbham in Suryanarayanapuram (Renigunta) near Tirupati, the place where we lived then and where Maha Periyava was camping for three or four days. At that age, I was unable to understand His greatness. To be quite honest, I used to mainly look forward to the prasadam of sugar candy from Him at the end of the pooja.

When Maha Periyava was camping at our home town he would bathe in the lake every day. Others bathed in the vicinity considering it to be a big blessing. I was unaware of this of course but as I watched him, I felt like doing as the others did and asked my mother whether I could bathe too in the same waters. My mother permitted me to, asking me to remove my shirt and to be very careful in the water. Thinking about this today, I realise it was such a great blessing for me to have bathed in those waters which were sanctified by the sage's physical presence!

Another instance involving Maha Swamigal comes to mind. I had gone to attend an RSS training camp (Sangh shiksha varga) which was on for forty-five days at Hyderabad. The trainees had to stay at the camp for that period of time. RSS members had to complete three years of training – the first two at the place where the member lived and the third at Nagpur.

At this particular Hyderabad camp, Maha Periyava delivered a talk (anugraha bhashanam). He spoke in flawless Telugu.

I remember clearly his question “Who was the first ever swayamsevak?” Being RSS members, our response was naturally “our founder Doctorji (Dr Keshav Baliram Hedgewar).” To our surprise, Maha Periyava said “No,





it isn't him". Who then could it be, we wondered. I was seated in the fifth or sixth row, staring keenly at him. To me he appeared as an elder family member. "The first swayamsevak was Hanuman", he said. "His inspiration and strength came from within himself as it should for a true swayamsevak."

The word swayam means "oneself". Anjaneya served Rama and through him Dharma itself. Therefore Hanuman had the distinction of being the very first swayamsevak. Maha Swamigal then said he would tell the trainees assembled there something about their own Doctorji that they may not be aware of. Doctorji did not do any special poojas or rituals but he did do a daily upasana. He carried a small Hanuman idol with him and worshipped the idol every day, Hanuman being his ishta devata.

After Maha Periyava had left, some of us went to our pranta pracharak to ask about Doctorji's Hanuman idol. This was indeed true, confirmed our pracharak. How Maha Periyava knew about this was a complete mystery. This incident really woke me up to Maha Periyava's unique presence, his omniscience. I suddenly realized how very special the Sage of Kanchi was.

After this incident my earlier memories of seeing him as a child became even more precious to me. I had the privilege of having many darshans of Maha Periyava subsequently, and the last one remains etched in my memory. It was a divine and blissful experience.

It was in the last week of Dec'93 or early Jan'94 – roughly 2 weeks before Maha Periyava attained siddhi. I had a call from Sri Rama Gopalan (Gopalji) asking if I could go with him to the Sri Matham in Kanchipuram. I said "Yes, certainly". Getting the darshan of Maha Periyava was a great boon for which I was ever ready. I did not know however that I had a greater boon waiting for me at Kanchi.

I called a friend and arranged for a car to take us there. Those were the days when I didn't even have a cycle. We proceeded to Kanchipuram.

Gopalji went off to see Pudu Periyava to discuss some social issues. I had the darshan of Bala Periyava and Pudu Periyava. We both then sought the darshan of Maha Periyava. I recall him lying with eyes closed on his large chair drifting in and out of consciousness – or so it seemed to us. His health was extremely fragile then.

There was the usual queue of devotees bringing him invitations to weddings or upanayanams of their children to be blessed by him, each one being presented by name by someone from the Matham standing close to the reclining Periyava. It was like a scene at a temple - devotees standing before God, seeking his blessings.

Gopalji and I joined the queue waiting our turn for darshan. Gopalji was known to almost everyone doing kainkaryam at the Matham, and very soon





someone spotted him and asked him to step out of the queue. He took Gopalji close to Maha Periyava, but I remained where I was. He leaned close and said “Periyava, Gopalji from Hindu Munnani Chennai has come for darshan”.

The words made Maha Periyava stir ever so slightly. He gestured for the Matham person to come closer and whispered something. The person asked Gopalji “Someone has come with you from Chennai, has he not? Periyava asks what his name is.” Gopalji turned around trying to spot me. When he did, he beckoned to me to move up. I did, feeling a little shaken. “Introduce yourself”, said Gopalji to me. In my nervousness, I was struck dumb and could not utter my own name!

In retrospect, I believe my blanking out was because I had the same name as Periyava’s in his previous ashrama – Swaminathan – and I hadn’t the courage to speak out that name out of awe and the greatest respect for the godly Sage of Kanchi. Gopalji filled in for me and told Periyava my name. Maha Periyava opened his eyes one last time and then closed them in deep meditation again.

We were then told to prostrate before Maha Periyava and seek his blessings and we did. That was my last darshan of the holy sage. His grace was so profound that even an insignificant person like me was able to experience it. I cannot thank Gopalji enough for having made this possible.

At that time though I believed that I had gone to Kanchipuram because of Gopalji, I feel now that it was Paramacharya’s call that took me there. From the tender age of seven till my mid-forties I was blessed by Him, time and again, in myriad ways.

Pudu Periyava

With Jayendra Saraswati Swamigal – Pudu Periyava - I had the fortune of much more interaction.

In all honesty, I have to admit that I did not carry out one wish of Pudu Periyava. I was like a disobedient son in this respect and it rode on my conscience for a long time though Pudu Periyava, like Maha Periyava, was full of compassion for me.

He was camping at a school in Mylapore and I had gone for darshan. He asked that I see him between four and five-thirty in the morning. I went to see him at the appointed time and was summoned inside. There was no one else there. He said “Will you do something that I ask you to do?” I replied “As is your wish”. He said “You say that now but let me see if indeed you carry out my wish”. I remained silent not knowing how to respond. “I need someone to take care of the work at the Matham”, he continued, adding “You must leave





your vaideekam and come to Kanchipuram. I need you to be completely in charge of everything there. I would like to hand over administrative charge to you”.

At that time, I had already married off my elder daughter. Pudu Periyava was asking me to come to Kanchipuram with my wife and younger daughter. He said all arrangements would be made for my stay. A house, a monthly remuneration and a job for my second daughter would be arranged. I was stunned to hear this. I just gazed at him, unable to respond. Then I prostrated before him. “What is the meaning of this namaskaram?”, he asked. My silence prompted him to say “Oh, you have to ask for permission from your gurunathar, do you not?” I nodded ever so slightly. “Ok, do that” he said, gave me prasadam and permitted me to leave.

I rushed back home and immediately left to see Sankaranji. Before I could say anything about my morning visit to see Pudu Periyava, my guru said “It will not be suitable for you. Just let it be”. So I had the answer even without asking him my question. I expected to have a long discussion but there was none of that. His brief answer was final, and delivered in less than a minute.

A few months later I was diagnosed with cancer. I understood then that my guru had perhaps foreseen my illness and did not feel it was appropriate for me to take up responsibilities at the Sri Matham.

After this meeting with Pudu Periyava and my inability to take up responsibilities at the Matham, I felt awkward and avoided going for a personal one-to-one darshan with Him for a long time. I felt like a prodigal son. A long while later I went with my family for darshan. Pudu Periyava sensed I was there for a reason and asked me about it. I said I was looking for an alliance for my second daughter and sought his blessings. That was when He asked her to consider marrying a Vaideeka, but emphasised to me that it was to be her decision alone.

The blessings of Mahaans like Pudu Periyava can never fail. My daughter got engaged to a Ganapatigal.

After her engagement, when I had gone to Kanchipuram with the family with the wedding invitation, He gave his blessings with great happiness because he saw that my daughter was indeed going to marry a vaideeka. I was then summoned again to see him alone. I remember it being a particularly difficult period for me at that time. Though I had boldly arranged the marriage of my daughter, I had very little, in terms of savings, with which to conduct the marriage. My father had most generously offered to help me out. Still I was worried about how I was going to manage all the expenses.

When I went in on being summoned, Pudu Periyava asked me to accept what he was going to give me. I thought it was prasadam of akshadai and





held out my cupped palm. To my utter amazement, what he placed in my palm were eight-gram gold coins, five or six of them! I cried out in joy and gratitude. Pudu Periyava smiled and said “Now go and conduct the wedding well”.

Pudu Periyava has been a rock of strength for me both in my personal struggles and achievements. He had offered me guidance even in my RSS days. My book “The Great Hindu Tradition” brought out both in Tamil and English was released with Pudu Periyava’s blessings.

Another unforgettable encounter with Pudu Periyava took place in the nineties when I was working in Ashok Leyland and not yet a practising vaideeka. This visit too was along with Gopalji. As we entered the Matham, which in those days was just a simple thatched building, Pudu Periyava was just going for his bath. He asked us to wait for him to return. Gopalji had something else to attend to and said he would have to leave early. Pudu Periyava told us to accompany him to the bathing tank where Gopalji and he could talk.

When Pudu Periyava was ready to go back to the Matham, Gopalji and I prostrated before him and sought his permission to leave. He told Gopalji to go but asked me why I was in a rush to leave. Before I could say anything Gopalji discreetly stepped on my foot and asked me to remain silent.

I stayed on with Pudu Periyava. After he performed the daily pooja, I took tirtham from him and then waited for him to say what he wanted to tell me. But he said nothing at all, and after finishing the pooja he got up and went inside. After waiting for a while in vain I decided to leave then but discovered, to my horror, that I had no money at all. I had come with Gopalji in his car, with an empty pocket!

I looked around to see if I could spot somebody familiar from whom I could borrow the bus fare, when a couple of vans arrived and suddenly the Matham began to buzz with activity. I enquired what the bustle was all about and was told that Pudu Periyava was leaving on a yatra to North India. It was a Tuesday and Pudu Periyava would be leaving before Rahu kalam. It was already late and there were just about fifteen minutes to Rahu kalam. I thought I would have another darshan of him from afar and then leave.

Meanwhile someone came outside and asked for a Sarma. I said my name was Sarma. “Did you arrive with Gopalji?” he asked. I said yes. He said Pudu Periyava was asking for me. I rushed back inside.

Pudu Periyava showed me into one of the inner chambers. “Do you have a paper and pen?” he asked. I was carrying nothing with me. He called out to someone and when there was no response, he himself got up and picked up a notebook that was there, tore off a page and handed it to me. He dropped a pen too by my side and said “Now write this down”. He gave me mantropadesam and asked me to chant the mantra three times.





Mantropadesam is something that a guru gives to a sishya when he deems that the time is right. The sishya cannot ask for it. For me this was an unforgettable and thrilling experience. I felt deep gratitude and fulfilment that my Acharya thought I was ready to receive his mantropadesam.

After receiving this unexpected gift I went back, first to my parents' home and after getting their blessings I went to my guru's home. He was a jnani too, so he already knew what had happened. He instructed me to prostrate before God before I prostrated before him, my guru.

Bala Periyava

My involvement with the Matham continues even now with added vigour under the benevolent guidance of Sri Vijayendra Saraswati Swamigal, still fondly referred to as Bala Periyava. He has been most happy with my involvement in social causes especially because I am a practising vaideeka. This is a unique combination and I am both elated and humbled that he approves of and endorses my journey in these two spheres.

In the Prologue I have presented Bala Periyava's anugraha bhashanam at the annual Bhiksha Vandanam, which my disciples and I performed online in Aug'20 as we could not do it at Kanchi physically because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On Aug 30 in the morning we offered the vandanam from our respective homes and got His blessings. The surprise bonus from Periyava was the bhashanam that he gave online to my disciples, to the students and the Acharya of Sri Mantra Peeteswari Veda Patasala and to me.

We had a double delight when Bala Periyava opened his anugraha bhashanam with his blessings to the vidyarthi. Very early in his bhashanam he also lauded the work that my team and I were doing to propagate spiritual knowledge with focus on our traditional rituals. Such indeed is his magnanimity.

One incident told rather reluctantly to me by one of my students for fear of causing me pain brings tears to my eyes even today because it illustrates Bala Periyava's large-heartedness and his deep compassion.

This particular student of my Veda class, who does a lot of kainkaryam at the Sri Matham, was in Kanchipuram along with a big group of vaideekas in the presence of Periyava. There was some whispering and murmuring among them and the Acharya raised his eyebrow to ask what the matter was. One vaideeka then said that some of them felt too much importance was being given of late by the Matham to Sarma Sastrigal.

Periyava, who had got up in preparation to leave the room made the comment "That's really not so. The work that should be done by Sri Matham is being shouldered by Sarma Sastrigal". He then left the room.





The matter did not end there. As they were leaving a few of them approached my student and said “Don’t take Periyava’s comment seriously. Sarma Sastrigal doesn’t know enough to be able to do the Matham’s work. Bala Periyava is simply being kind to him”. Their jealousy was evident.

My student narrated the incident to me and expected me – in fact wanted me – to counter the remarks. I told him: “The comment made by the vaideekas to Bala Periyava and then to you don’t matter at all. In fact it teaches me a great lesson, which is this: We should work for a cause solely to achieve it and not for being recognised. Recognition will come on its own, or may not come at all in our lifetime. When we adopt this approach, criticism will neither upset nor daunt us”.

My student was struck by my composure and wondered how I could take such an easy attitude to unfair criticism. I responded “look, I know my area of work is the right one. It is the little things in life that are of the greatest importance. The vaideekas criticise me for conducting camps for commonplace things like sandhya vandanam, samita danam, aachamanam, parishechanam etc. And from their perspective, they are right.

“But these are the foundations and building blocks of our dharma, our samskara. I know these little things matter a lot, and when done with shraddha can make one go a long way on the spiritual path. So I focus on this segment. I have neither the willingness nor the ability to impart high-level gyana on our Vedas and Upanishads. Periyava knows this, and that’s why he blesses my actions.”

My life has taught me that when you set out to do something, there will first be people who laugh at you. If you do not let that upset you, they will step up their attack and criticise you. If this also doesn’t bother you they will begin opposing you in all possible ways. If you cross this third hurdle unscathed, the same people who were against you will join you.

I can vouch for this because I have seen that many who criticised my writing in social media on ‘trivial’ subjects have now begun to use the media themselves to publish messages on the same or aligned subjects. I am very happy about this. I don’t claim that I am saying anything new. I have no copyright on any of the content that I share. It is knowledge that has come down to us over many millennia. So why should I grudge people who are sharing my platform and following my example?

I suppose I can take genuine credit – along with my team of selfless volunteers – only for my approach, of presenting things in clear, concise and easy-to-follow capsules. My vaideeka camps, for instance, are novel and much sought-after. Such camps have never been organised before.





My motto appears in the Rig Veda saying “Charaiveti charaiveti” - Go forward, go forward. This is my mantra. For all that I am doing, I owe a great debt of gratitude to Bala Periyava for his unstinted encouragement and support.

I have indeed been most fortunate to have had the anugraha of all three Acharyas of the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham.

My interactions with other spiritual giants

Even though my long association with the RSS needed me to stand with my Hindu brothers shoulder to shoulder, with no distinctions or differences, I never for a moment forgot or forsook my persona as a Hindu Brahmin. Through all these years of devotion to the cause of national pride and integration, the one thing I kept intact was my religious individuality. Apart from sticking to my anushtanams in all environments and at all times, I made efforts to get the darshan and ashirwada of great saints and acharyas whenever an opportunity presented itself.

It is in this context that I talk about great spiritual leaders whom I have met in my life.

Yogi Ram Surat Kumar

I went to Tiruvannamalai once as part of a team to conduct a programme for the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). It was a two-day event open to the public held in a large ground. This was some time in the 80's, and Krishna Kumar, who was chairman of the Arya Vaidya Pharmacy in Coimbatore and Prema Pandurang, a spiritual guide, were the other team members.

After the first morning session we were free for a few hours in the afternoon. I proposed that we go to the Arunachaleswara temple at least for a darshan of the Lord, since we did not have the time to do Girivalam (walk around the hill). They agreed and we set off.

As we were walking around the prakaram of the temple, I spotted someone lying in a corner in what could only be described as a beggar's garb. After taking a few steps past him I retracted, beckoning to my team members too to come back. It was Yogi Ram Surat Kumar.

To be quite honest, till then I had never heard of him, nor was he very well known in those days. But something drew me to his presence and I sensed he was no ordinary person. He laughed aloud when we went near and sat beside him. He looked at Prema and asked if she could sing a Meera bhajan. She did. He sat up keeping beat with his hands. There was a coconut shell and a fan next to him.





Time passed so quickly in his presence that when I glanced at my watch I realized it was too late to go into the temple. We had just enough time to return to the grounds for the evening session. We decided to go back, content with the darshan of the yogi.

When we stood up to leave, the yogi said “Sit down” in a loud commanding voice. We were perplexed about what to do next. Time was ticking by and we really had to get back. I said softly to the yogi that we had to leave to be at the programme for which we had travelled to Tiruvannamalai from Chennai. We then prostrated before him and started to leave.

Just as we neared the outer gate, there was a burst of heavy rain accompanied by thunder and lightning. It was as if the heavens had opened up all of a sudden. We ducked under a roof as there was no way to leave. The irony was that till that moment, the sun had been out and there had been no premonition of rain. I told Krishna Kumar and Prema that we had better get back to the yogi.

We ran back in great haste and stood again in his presence. He cackled again, with great mirth. I sought his pardon by the gesture of patting the sides of my face. He regarded me briefly and said “Now you can go”. This may be hard to believe, but what we experienced next was nothing short of a miracle. Like a switch had been flicked off, the downpour stopped completely and the sun shone again in all its glory.

The next morning, as I was packing my bag and getting ready to leave, there was a knock on my hotel room door. Yogi Ram Surat Kumar with his coconut shell and fan in hand stood there, much to my surprise. I welcomed him into the room.

My friends joined me in a while. The yogi asked if we had had breakfast. When we said we had not, he said: “Call the bell-boy”. The boy turned up and was asked to bring two idlis, one vadai and one dosa each for the three of us.

A crowd had gathered by then in the hotel because the yogi was there. He ordered us to eat while he looked on. It was an uncomfortable feeling to be watched while we ate but we somehow managed to gulp the food down. The yogi called for the boy again. “Now four coffees” he roared at the nervous and frightened lad.

The coffee arrived in stainless steel tumblers and dabaras. What the yogi did next was most intriguing. He drew the tray of coffees towards him and then stroked his unkempt beard with his hand which had long nails that hadn't seen water for quite a while! He dipped his fingers in all the three tumblers of coffee. “Come on, take this”, he ordered pushing the tray towards us. We picked up our tumblers of coffee in stunned silence and drank as we were





ordered to do. I was awed to find that the coffee tasted like divine nectar! Yogi Ram Surat Kumar drank his coffee out of his coconut shell saying “My master will bless you all”.

Siddha purushas often present themselves and behave in a way that may seem strange to ordinary folk. I feel they do this in order to avoid attention. They use their unkempt physical appearance to escape being disturbed, and to exist in their blissful state of consciousness. Yogi Ram Surat Kumar seeking us out that day was indeed a divine blessing for me.

The yogi later got caught up in the limelight, so to speak. As long as he shunned that light, he remained largely unnoticed but once he became known, he found it hard to remain incognito. Becoming ‘public property’ is a risk that I suppose all great souls and yogis have to face.

In my own journey through the years of service at the RSS and now as a vaideeka, I too feel sometimes that I have lost some of my privacy. I draw attention wherever I go, with well-meaning persons coming to me and telling me that they follow my YouTube videos or pages on Facebook and how grateful they are for my advice. I have to constantly remind myself that this recognition, this name and fame is Maya, a kind of illusion. If I let the praise go to my head it will cause undesirable side-effects.

It’s important for all of us to recognise that the accolades one gets are for the work one does and its impact, and not for oneself. In my case I believe I earn the praise and love of others for the knowledge I share with them ungrudgingly. Sarma Sastrigal, the person, should never be swayed by the praise that his work is accorded.

Swami Dayananda Saraswati

I met Swami Dayananda Saraswati for the first time through my friend Sundar of R K SWAMY BBDO Pvt. Ltd. Sundar had arranged for Swamiji to release my book ‘The Great Hindu Tradition’ in 2010. At the release function Swamiji openly expressed his happiness, saying the book was a useful handbook for today’s younger generation. The manuscript of the book had been sent to Swamiji to read while he was still in America, so he had a good idea of its contents.

His was an inspiring talk.

A year and a half later I met Swamiji again at Manjakudi, near Kumbakonam. Swamiji hailed from an orthodox Brahmin family and his knowledge of the Vedas was extensive. There is a Trust which runs a college in Manjakudi. Sundar was asked to deliver the convocation lecture and I accompanied him there. We reached Manjakudi the previous night and





were invited by Swamiji to dine with him. We spent a few hours with him. As he wasn't a sanyasi in the traditional sense, it was possible to interact with him informally.

Swamiji's amazing knowledge of Vedanta kept us enthralled. I could understand how he was so successful in taking Vedanta to the common man. He had the gift of explaining even the most difficult concepts in the simplest way. Only those with comprehensive knowledge can do this. This meeting with Swamiji kindled my interest to go through his writings. When I started reading him, I discovered that his written language was also simple to understand.

In a way I found I was following in his footsteps, as it was his mission too to take religion and spirituality to the common man.

Ahobila Math Jeer

I was under the impression at one time that the Ahobila Math Jeer would not entertain the presence of a Smartha like me, and so I never sought his darshan. It was again because of Sundar that I met the Jeer and corrected this wrong impression of mine.

The meeting came about after I did a yatra of Gaya in 2011 and wrote a small bilingual (Tamil and English) travelogue about the yatra. I had sent a pre-publication copy to Sundar. Swamy was impressed with the book and suggested a book release function for it. He suggested taking it to the Jeer of his Matham and requesting him to release it.

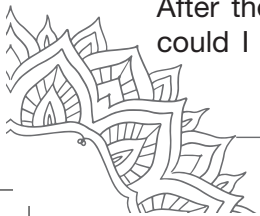
I said that would mean I wouldn't be present at the release of my own book. "Why do say that?" Sundar asked. I replied matter-of-factly "How will I be allowed inside your Math?"

Sundar asked to be excused. After about fifteen minutes he called back and said he had phoned the Ahobila Math in Selaiyur and had fixed a meeting with the Jeers. The book, he said, would be released by the Senior Pontiff, and I would obviously be present.

I left for Selaiyur with Sundar with a sense of trepidation. My wife accompanied me on this occasion. Sundar had sent copies to the two Jeers in advance.

At the Ahobila Math, the Senior Pontiff himself honoured me with a shawl. A Smartha being honoured at an Iyengar Math is indeed a rarity. My meeting with the Jeers and the recognition I got from the Math was truly a great blessing for me.

After the book was released, I was asked to speak. I was hesitant. What could I say in the presence of these eminent persons? The younger Jeer





insisted, and I addressed a gathering of staunch Iyengars with namams adorning their foreheads, while I myself was, in accordance to the Smartha tradition, adorned with vibhuti and a rudraksha mala around my neck! I went there as myself and wanted to be accepted for who I was, and they took me in with love and affection. Nothing can be more fulfilling.

I have since then gone many times to the Math and every single time I have been received with great affection and respect. When the older Jeer attained siddhi, his Jayanti was celebrated in Srirangam on a grand scale and Sundar invited me to go along with him to the function.

There were about ten thousand people in the audience. In Vaishnava tradition devotees are blessed at a temple or at a function by a silver crown being placed on their heads. Usually Vaishnavas are attended upon first and only then non-Vaishnavas get their turn. In this instance I was asked to join the very first set of devotees and blessed by the Jeer. I could see quite a few stunned faces in the crowd. I myself found this honour extra special!

Other sagely persons whom I have interacted with include the Pejavar of the Udipi Math and Sivan Sir (Maha Periyava's Poorva Ashram younger brother).

Only one's strong destiny and the blessings of one's elders and guru can make such associations possible. I would attribute every such fortune that I have received to the goodness of my parents and to God's grace. Of course friends like Sundar deserve all the credit too for making these darshans happen.

Kunrakkudi Adigalar

Kunrakkudi Adigalar was another great sage whom I was fortunate to meet during 1970s and move closely with. The Kunrakkudi Adheenam which is situated near Tiruppatthur near Karaikudi is a powerful place, out-of-bounds for commoners like me. As a matter of fact Adigalar was opposed to the RSS and did not endorse its work.

I tried to get a face-to-face with the Adigalar for quite a while without success. I didn't give up and it happened some time later. The reception at the Adheenam and by him was not very warm though, as I represented the RSS.

It was a regular practice of mine to go to his Adheenam whenever I toured his place. I would get down at the Kunrakkudi bust station and take his darshan before proceeding with my work. My unconditional affection must have thawed him, for after a while he became friendly and I would even get special audience when I went to the Math.

I got a taste of the remarkable positive change in Adigalar's attitude to me when I once went to him with a request to be chief guest at the Vijaya Dasami





function in our Tiruppatthur shakha. I fully expected him to say no, and was preparing myself for a lengthy attempt to convince him. To my utter surprise he immediately said “yes, I will come”!

I contacted our Chennai office and asked for a senior RSS leader to come to the function for delivering the keynote address. To match a man of Adigalar’s stature there had to be an eminent presence from our side too. We got Sri K Suryanarayana Rao, a very senior pracharak at the HQ to come.

Further evidence of the saint’s change of stance towards the RSS was seen post 1975, when he sided with us in our resistance against the Emergency declared by Mrs Indira Gandhi. The transformation of Kunrakkudi Adigalar reminded me of the confident statement Dr Keshav Baliram Hedgewar used to make about the RSS: “There are only two kinds of people in our country: people who are swayamsevaks and people who will become swayamsevaks in due course”.

Swami Chidbhavananda

Another great saint I met during my pracharak innings in 1970s was Swami Chidbhavananda, a great tapasvi. I met Swamiji when I was the zilla pracharak at Virudhunagar. He was well-known and deeply respected in that area. His ashram was at Tirupparayathurai near Tiruchi. He established one more equally big ashram and a famous college in Tiruvedagam, close to Madurai. He would visit Virudhunagar and surrounding places often.

Swami Chidbhavananda brought many positive changes in the spiritual approach of common folks in and around Madurai. He took our religion and its simple yet powerful principles to the underprivileged and economically challenged people in the area.

His spoken language was simple and easy to follow; and his books are a joy to read. He has published many, many books, one of the foremost among them being his commentary on Bhagavad Gita. His books were sold at less than throw-away prices because he wanted the message to reach the poorest of the poor. Simple and elegant, the Swamiji was a truly enlightened soul.

I learnt many things from the Swamiji, sitting at his feet when he visited the area and held camps at Sivakasi, Thenkasi, Srivilliputthur and Virudhunagar. The daylong camps would include meditation, Q-A sessions on spiritual subjects and focused lectures on religious topics. I remember the sessions went by the name ‘Antaryogam’. I would adjust my schedule to his lecture tours to our place and make sure I didn’t miss any of them! His programs were a lively amalgam of talk, practice and discussions. The participants were almost always simple common folk. I am sure my one-day workshops have taken quite a few ideas from the camps of Swami Chidbhavananda.





Later in Chennai during my active days at VIGIL, we had instituted an annual lecture in the memory of Swami Chidbhavananda. The two best lectures were given awards too, called 'Panchajanyam Awards'.

An interesting sidelight: Swamiji in his poorvasrama was the paternal uncle of the renowned Congress-wadi and Central Minister Sri C Subramaniam.

M S Golwalkar (Guruji)

Surprised by the inclusion of a laukeeka in the list of saints? I assure you it's not a mistake. To me and to all who have met and moved with him, Madhav Sadashiv (M S) Golwalkar was every inch a tapasvi, a yogi. The sight of Guruji – as he was known – would automatically invoke a sense of devotion, bhakti, in you.

I deem it a rare honour to be able to write about him here.

Dr K B Hedgewar, founder of the RSS named Sri Golwalkar as his successor. Guruji took over the reins as the Chief of the RSS after the death of Dr Hedgewar in 1940. He held the post till his own death in 1973.

Guruji's original surname was Padhye. Padhye means a practicing priest. The Padhyes belong to an area known as Golwali. Out of the surname Golwalkar Padhye, only Golwalkar remained in due course.

After completing his education he spent a number of years in the Ramakrishna Ashram. Swami Akhandananda, a direct disciple of Swami Vivekananda, was his spiritual Guru. Sri Golwalkar had received deeksha from Swami Akhandananda, as he had decided to lead a life of tapas in the Himalayas in search of the Brahman. He stayed with the Swamiji and served him for a number of years.

One day Swami Akhandananda called Sri Golwalkar and told him to go back home, take up employment that suited his education, and lead a laukeeka's life. The disciple was in shock: he had received mantropadesa from the Swamiji and was awaiting sanyasa deeksha, and instead he was being asked to go back to grhasthashrama! He humbly asked Swamiji why.

Swami Akhandananda told him that his destiny lay elsewhere, that he had crucial tasks to perform in the society, and that by and by it would become clear to him as to what he should do. Swamiji asked him to go to Varanasi and get a job.

Sri Golwalkar accordingly went to Kasi and became a Professor in the Benares Hindu University (BHU). It was here that he got the affectionate and revered epithet 'Guruji'. BHU was also the place where he came in contact with Dr Hedgewar. In his association with him and the RSS, Guruji got his answers on the course of action to pursue. He resigned his position at the





BHU and joined the RSS as full-time pracharak. Subsequently as the Chief of the organisation he did a great deal for the RSS and for our country.

Despite his 24/7 schedule, Guruji was regular in performing sandhya vandanam. I had the fortune of interacting with this great soul several times from 1964 to 1975 when I was actively associated with RSS, and receiving his blessings. I recollect one occasion when the Acharyas of Kanchi, Sri Sri Maha Swamigal and Sri Sri Jayendra Saraswati Swamigal addressed and blessed the cadres. This was at a training camp of the RSS conducted by Guruji in Hyderabad in 1967.

Much later in my life I heard from my guru, Sankaranji, about an incident in the life of Sri Golwalkar that underscores his saintliness and proclaims that he was not an ordinary mortal. Sankaranji told me that Guruji was a Devi Upasaka, and could converse with the Devi whenever he wanted to. “He would talk to the Paradevata casually just as we talk to one another”, he said and this moved me profoundly.

“This was confirmed by Maha Periyava as well”, he added. “Guruji never failed to pay a visit to the Kanchi Matt and take Maha Swami’s ashirwada when he came to Tamil Nadu. He was in close contact with the Math throughout his life”.

He had suffered terribly from cancer in the last few years of his life before he expired in 1973. The crowning glory was when Sri Golwalkar was on his death bed. Pudu Periyava, Sri Jayendra Saraswati Swamigal, went all the way to Nagpur, walked into the RSS office unannounced, went up to the first floor where Guruji was lying, gave him darshan and blessed him.

Imagine the affection Pudu Periyava had for this great bhakta, this yogi, to personally go and see him as Guruji could not travel! I believe Guruji shed tears of great joy at this benign act of Pudu Periyava. “You should have received the honour of poorna kumbham and been worshipped by me, but instead you came up to see me! What have I done to deserve this! Please forgive me.” Evidently Periyava did this for Guruji as he saw Godly qualities in him.

Guruji was a seer, thinker, organiser and an everlasting source of inspiration. His thoughts on various issues concerning Hindu Society are relevant even today. To know more about this great man, you may read ‘Bunch of Thoughts’, a compilation of his ideas that gives you a resplendent vision of our nation, dimmed and almost lost through mental muddling and intellectual delusion over several centuries.

My Invisible Acharyas

Now I talk about one great mahaan, siddhar – a spiritual soul who has given me guidance and knowledge on my spiritual path indirectly, in a subliminal way through His grace. Yes, I never met. Only had the darshan of his





adhishtanam at Sirkazhi. Heard a lot about his tapas and spiritual power from my Guru Sri Sankarji.

Kadhirgama Swamigal

Kadhirgama Swamigal came to India with Tapovanam Gnanananda to lead people onto the gnana marga. Kadhirgamam is a Murugan kshetram in Sri Lanka.

Swamigal guided me once in his own, subtle manner in an unusual way. I had a problem and approached my guru Sankaranji for guidance. He however skirted my question. I could sense that he did not want to directly answer me.

When I persisted, he finally said “Kadhirgama Swamigal often used to say “sugaththil sugam illai. Kashtaththil sugam irukku”. This Tamil saying was a great favourite of his. It means that in happiness there is no true happiness, while in difficulty and distress there is real comfort and happiness.”

Sankaranji then took twenty minutes to explain this to me after which my mind cleared beautifully. I realized that one has to undergo the difficulties one is faced with. There is no point trying to escape them. Nor do solutions come overnight. Difficulties should be viewed as opportunities to cleanse oneself of one’s prarabdha karma.

Kadhirgama Swamigal’s advice reminds me of the exalted words of Vemana, a great siddha purusha who led the life of a commoner in Nellore Zilla, Andhra Pradesh. His poems, like Tiruvalluvar’s Tirukkural, are simple but pregnant with philosophical meaning. A Vemana padyam says “Enta noppiyaite anta manchidagaada neeku? This translates as “aren’t the biggest of difficulties in your best interests?”

Kadhirgama Swamigal adhishtanam set up is near Seergazhi, the birthplace of Tirugnana Sambandhar. It is situated on the banks of the river Uppanatrnam in Chattanadhapuram, which lies en route from Seergazhi to Mayiladudhurai. The Swamigal attained Nirvikalpa Samadhi here on November 19, 1962.

A word about Rajaji

An illustrious luminary who has influenced me is the legendary Chakravarti Rajagopalachari aka Rajaji. I had the occasion to see him during the centenary celebration of the evening newspaper ‘The Mail’ in the late 1960’s – I think 1968. The newspaper closed down in 1982 or thereabouts.

Higginbothams and The Mail were part of the Amalgamations Group. I was working at a Higginbothams bookstall and we got the invitation for the program. The manager asked me if I would like to go, and I was only too





glad. He bought a return ticket for me to Madras (Chennai's name then), gave me some money and bade me to go.

I remember the program took place in a huge lawn. Dignitaries like M S Subbalakshmi Amma had come, and I saw the person I had been longing to have a darshan of – Rajaji. I don't recall the speeches of any of the invitees, but I am able to bring to mind one thing Rajaji said in the course of his oration.

He said: "There are two things I have always liked about your newspaper. One is that your content is reliable and straightforward. The other is that you issue it in the evening, so I am spared the pain of reading all the bad news in the morning and carrying it with me throughout the day. Thanks to 'The Mail' I have started preferring to read news only in the evening!"

An incident in Rajaji's life that is connected to the RSS is worth recalling. The RSS was organising a fundraising event and the Committee members wanted Rajaji to be a member on the Committee. Sri Rangaswamy Thevar from Chennai went to see Rajaji and ask him for his approval to be included. Rajaji told him "I have never in my life lent my name to any fundraising initiative. But I am making an exception in your case because I see the name of Sri M S Golwalkar in the Committee. When Golwalkar is promoting a cause it has to be right". That was his confidence in Guruji and in the RSS!

Rajaji's writings in Tamil and English are great sources of knowledge and I have enjoyed reading his books. I would like to end with two of his sayings.

1. "We cannot succeed in anything if we act in fear of other people's opinions."
2. "Gnana (knowledge) when it becomes fully mature is Bhakti (devotion). To believe that Gnana and Bhakti are different from each other is ignorance."





CHAPTER 10

AND MILES TO GO BEFORE I SLEEP....

Whatever an ideal person does and the standards he sets are followed by others in the same manner.

Bhagavad Gita Chapter 3, Verse 21



In Closing

In this concluding chapter on reminiscences about my life so far, I'm going to ask you, dear reader, to permit me to ramble a bit. The idea was thrown up to me in December 2019 to share with the reading public the highs and lows of the seven decades plus I have seen. All the way from Brussels, Belgium, Sudha G Eswaran took up the job of putting together the essentials for the book, and did a great job of calling, talking to me and taking notes extensively, interviewing people, picking up stuff from print and other media, and creating the structure for the story. My friends and students pitched in enthusiastically with ideas, inputs and interesting sidelights. The book began to evolve.

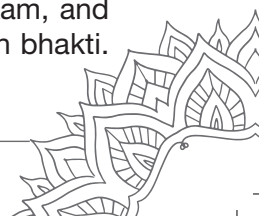
Corona struck in early 2020 and while this was a disaster for the world it had its uses as far as this book was concerned, as it could be fleshed out carefully and with greater attention to detail. What you see as the finished product has behind it months of hard work by my loving friends. I see in every word of the book the immense affection for me and for what I stand for, expressed by everyone involved in bringing it out.

As I warned you at the start, what I propose to do in these last few pages is to ramble. Nothing can capture the essence of my life better than talking about the many, many influences that have played a role in my life, in no particular order – and see if an order emerges from the rambling!

God's Largesse

I am amazed by the number of twists and turns my life has seen. Yet, through all these vicissitudes I see a running thread of benignity, a divine blessing that has kept me going, and going happily. God continues to bestow his largesse on me in the form of goals, ideas and resources that enable and empower me.

I was born to great parents and spent my formative years in an atmosphere soaked in spirituality because of my father's profession of vaideekam, and imbued with national fervour because of my father's immense desh bhakti.





He didn't express it in so many words but his patriotism was there to see and admire for all of us, his six children.

He encouraged me to join the RSS very early in my schooldays. What I got from him was not just a passive endorsement. He kept in touch with what I was doing at the shakha. If I was at home any evening he would ask "why have you not gone to the shakha?" He knew that at the RSS I was getting the kind of education that would be invaluable to me later in life. The bookstall manager whom my father introduced me to was another person who spurred my strong love for Mother India.

Another piece of luck for me was my marrying Vijayalakshmi, a girl from a highly respectable family. Her family gave me not only a great wife but later a venerable guru – Sankaranji, her maternal uncle – who guided me at many crucial junctures. Many people in Vijayalakshmi's family have done schooling in Veda Patasala and done adhyayanam. Her other uncle Gopalji was a revered RSS leader.

My two daughters have also given me every reason to be content and happy with life. The elder one Sangeetha lives in Chennai and is married to a Chartered Accountant. The younger one, Sowmya is the wife of Gururama Ganapatigal, a Vedic scholar who now runs Sri Mantra Peeteswari Veda Patasala. Sangeetha's son is a student at the Patasala. What more can I ask from my children?

When I look at the brief period during which I did adhyapikam and officiated as aathu vadhyar for many families, I realize it was only a stepping stone for me to start doing what I really wanted to. An inner voice kept telling me "do something more, something distinct" and so vaideekam would never have been my life's permanent calling. It was simply a matter of time before I branched out into spiritual training and mentorship in several ways – teaching Vedas and suktas, conducting workshops and camps for rituals and other religious activities, and writing and talking about our glorious spiritual tradition.

The Future

From 8 am to 8 pm now every day I am devoted to teaching several batches of students of all ages – school children, college-going teenagers, office-going laukeekas and retired men.

I try to focus on hoary religious practices in our Sanatana Dharma that are in danger of vanishing as a result of non-performance. An instance is the Panchayatana pooja, which had very few takers some years ago but is now being done daily in many a home.

How do I think of these things? Believe me, I don't plan any of these events – they simply happen. A hint here, a chance remark there and my mind grabs it





and converts it into a program or a religious initiative. And this is my answer also to the big question many people ask me “what are you going to do next, Sarmaji?” My matter-of-fact reply: “I don’t know”.

The only thing I know is that I am 72 and may not have a great deal of life left, and so I would like to double my speed and do much more in every waking minute that remains. “Niraiya seyyanum” (I should do a lot) is my recurring thought. On what I have to do there is no clear plan – but I know it will occur to me and get done. Sri Sri Bala Periyava has given His blessings to me and His anugraha has been regularly guiding me in this regard.

Through the last two decades a silent revolution of sorts is taking place in South India in the matter of religious observances and the conscious effort on the part of many Hindus to understand Sanatana Dharma, and I am happy to have been able to fuel this fire to some extent. This is a matter for rejoicing, no doubt, but the work has to be kept up, and much more has to be done. It is reassuring to me that my choice of this path a decade and a half back has proven correct and has paid rich dividends.

I often check with myself to see if I am becoming consciously or unconsciously proud of the work I have done and am doing, for that’s something I don’t want to do. I keep constantly reminding myself that God does everything and I am but his tool, and so there’s no room for conceit.

An immediate task before me is to conduct many programs based on Adi Sankara Bhagavat Pada and His teachings. This stems from my concern that we have not given the rightful place, the deserved recognition to Him. I would like to identify the temples in which His sannidhi (shrine) is located and conduct Veda Parayanams in every one of those temples. Starting in Chennai, I would like to cover Tamil Nadu first and then the rest of India. I know that in many ancient temples His idol has been consecrated. This project would require a year, maybe two years.

The Objective of This Book

My dear reader, this life story of mine that you are about to finish reading is not that of a great person or an inspirational leader. It’s the story of an ordinary man, a nondescript person – but nevertheless someone who has made a difference to the society he lives in, to the religious group he is a member of. I would like you to consider the fact that I could do many things despite my limitations, and see if this inspires you to invoke that public-spirited person, that socially conscious individual inside you to come out and start doing similar things. You will probably achieve far, far more than I have: all it takes is passion and focus.

There is much that needs to be done to cleanse the community, and simple humans like us should not waste time waiting for that elusive Kalki avatar,





or look for that non-existent ‘thalaivan’ (mass hero) to reform society. My message to you is, let each of us take a small part of the problem and work on it, and we will soon find a paradise that is our own creation. If my life story has provoked this thought in you, it has done its job and I have fulfilled the purpose of publishing my memoirs.

To my friend V S Kumar should go the credit for putting into words all my experiences, my dreams and my visions. At each stage of this book he has channelled my thoughts, asked me provoking questions that made me think and dig out rare truths from within me. My inputs to him have been largely recordings in answer to his prescient questions, and records of my chats with friends. I know Kumar only for some 14 years but when I read each chapter he sent to me to review it looked like we had been together from birth! It seems as if he transmogrified into Sarma when he wrote each line. He will in fact be even more delighted than me with the final output, and for valid reasons.

It will be impossible for me to thank Kumar for the work he has done in putting together this book with an awesome combination of analysis, collation and editing.

A confession I would like to record here is that kama and krodha – desire and anger respectively – are two features in my makeup that I am trying very hard to get rid of completely, but have not been able to.

I thought that desire and anger were functions of age and that as I grew older they would reduce and disappear– especially anger. But that doesn’t seem to be the case. At times I see myself getting upset on small issues and wonder if I have become more irritable over the years!

Short temper is easily one of the most dreadful failings of mankind, and it hurts us first before it hurts the opponent. I realize therefore that the sooner I am rid of this, the better for me, and I am making a determined effort. I know I am a dogged fighter, and don’t give up easily. So I am confident I will overcome these two shortcomings soon

I would also like to make a submission to all those people whom I have knowingly or unknowingly hurt with my actions or words. In some cases I may have been justified acting the way I did, but that doesn’t absolve me. The truth is that I erred in hurting a fellow human being and I sincerely regret the action. I seek the pardon of each and every person who has been injured by my words or actions, and would request each of them to accept my sincere apology.





Some Home Truths

Think, then Act

Looking back at my life I see that thoughts are very powerful in channelling our actions properly and helping us complete what we visualise. Enthusiasm comes from harnessing the power of the mind. Enthusiasm and belief in oneself should never be lost. A defeatist attitude harms not only you but everyone around you too.

This is well illustrated in the incident in Ramayana when Hanuman is looking for Sita. Just as he is about to give up, he thinks of Rama who sent him on this mission. He realizes that if he gave up, it would not be only his personal loss but would reflect badly on Rama choosing him, Hanuman, to do the job. He is energised again, and eventually locates Sita in the Ashoka Vana. This attitude of Hanuman is often my inspiration.

The Bhagavad Gita has a pithy verse (no. 31, Chapter 4) which says: “Those who know the secret of sacrifice, and engaging in it, partake of its remnants that are like nectar, advance toward the Absolute Truth. O Best of the Kurus, those who perform no sacrifice find no happiness either in this world or the next”.

Krishna is talking of sacrifice of inaction, of inertia here. You need to act to find a foothold even in this world. Naturally, the other worlds remain out of bounds for those who follow inaction. Put simply, Krishna says “don’t stay too long in comfort”. Especially when the action desired of you is painful and requires exertion, you try to defer it, put it off as much as you can. Nothing can be more detrimental to your long-term interests.

Give the Required Time for Everything, and Keep Working

The moth doesn’t become a beautiful butterfly in a jiffy. The makeover is slow, even tedious. Time sets us a series of tests and we need patience and forbearance to pass each of these tests in the process of becoming better persons and in achieving our goals. Nothing comes easy – and this is especially true of good things, for which we have to necessarily struggle.

The Sun does not rise early just because we awake before dawn. It has its schedule and works in perfect consonance with that schedule. We should learn this crucial lesson from sunrise and other natural happenings, and bide our time.

Likewise, duty and all the usual terms associated with it like work, karma, karya etc. are irksome and we are tempted to find ways to escape doing our duty. This approach is deplorable. There is intrinsic beauty in ‘doing our





duty' and we have to realize and internalize this beauty. Adopting avoidance as an approach will hurt us severely in the long run. Search and find the inner beauty of karma yoga, and you will be a winner.

“Que sera sera” or “what will be, will be” doesn’t mean “what’s the point in my exerting myself endlessly? If God has willed it, I am sure to get it”. It means “do what you have to do, without looking at the result all the time. Have faith that God will give you what you deserve”.

The oft-repeated sloka in the Bhagavad Gita, “karmanyeva adhikaraste ma phaleshu kadaachana”, is interpreted in many different ways. For me at the highest level it means “Do your duty without consciously looking for the fruits of your action, for these are but worldly goals. Your aim should be moksha and not these transient pleasures rooted in maya (illusion)”.

When we attain this level in thought and action we are truly liberated souls.

Deal with Unwarranted Criticism

“Sarma mama what is your response to people who criticise you and your work? I sometimes hear unfair comments about your selfless service for the Brahmin community and feel hurt by these unsavoury and disparaging remarks.”

Whether criticism about me deserves a rejoinder or not, the above comment from my sincere sishya surely requires one.

My response to any critique about my work is to see whether it is justified, whether there is any substance in it. If there is, I make an effort at once to correct myself and thank the person for setting me right.

If the comment is unwarranted, I look at who is making it. If the person is a member of my entourage, like a close friend or co-worker or a family member, I will explain to him or her why the comment is incorrect. In 90% of the cases it happens that the person realizes the error, goes home satisfied and all is well. In a few cases of course it takes a long time to get my standpoint clear, but I never give up because the relationship is important to me.

But if the person making the comment is unknown to me and the criticism is also invalid, I simply ignore it. Why bother about it and spoil my mood? I know I’m right, and my people believe I’m doing good work. Isn’t that enough? If I go about correcting wrong impressions of everyone I will be doing only that. I will be wasting time and energy that can be spent better in doing something useful. Often the commenters understand their error one day and change their minds themselves. If they don’t, the loss is theirs, not mine.

I read a story years ago that the renowned Indian batsman, Sehwag, was asked for the secret of his success. Do you know what he said? “The reason why I’m so successful is that out in the middle I can’t hear all the wayward





comments being made about me and my batting techniques, my swing, stance etc. So I'm able to think out my strategies and act on them without bothering about all these noises".

We should all develop this aptitude in handling unfair and sometimes motivated criticism. Fortunately God has given me this talent and I've used it well!

Manu Smriti – Boon or Bane?

Manu was a Maharishi, a very great Tapasvi and people who have read the Ramayana will know that Bhagavan Rama Himself is born in the vamsa (dynasty) of Manu.

Manu Smriti is the grantha (holy book) Manu has given to the world. The word 'Smriti' can be roughly translated as rules and regulations, dos and don'ts that you have to follow in leading a good life. Manu Smriti is a compilation of desirable aspects of good living. Like the Vedas, Manu Smriti is also ageless, in the sense that no one can correctly point out how old it is. Even Max Mueller in his treatise on the Vedas concedes that there is no authentic record of how far back Vedas and Upanishads go, or when they were written.

The contents of Manu Smriti are frequently criticised in arguments, debates and fractious disputes. But if you look carefully you will find that Manu Smriti is not referred to or its quotes used anywhere in our day-to-day karmas and anushtanams. Our rituals are all based upon processes and related mantras from the Sutras of Apasthamba, Yagyavalkya, Bodhayana and other Rishis.

The life of a laukeeka Indian is also defined by our Constitution, which has no citations from Manu Smriti. So why do we unnecessarily drag Manu into 'patti manrams'?

I would also like to submit that before you comment on something you should be qualified to do so. A person who knows the particular branch of Sanskrit in which it is written, and who can read and understand Manu Smriti, and who has thoroughly read the original, has this qualification, but not someone who has read a loose and unauthentic English translation of the grantha and holds forth on its content and calls it unacceptable.

The battles fought on the systems and procedures laid down in Manu Smriti are about how they are very harsh, severe and impracticable in today's world. Let me ask you: if a child makes a mess, does not the mother reprimand him strongly? If a son adopts wayward habits does not the father use force to bring him in line? What is the writing style used in Tirukkural, the legendary Tamil Manual on Life and Living? Isn't it very strident and hard-hitting in many places? Likewise if you violate Dharmic principles in your life, how do you expect a rule-book like Manu Smriti to be kind and lenient?





Especially on the subject of women, what Manu Smriti contains becomes a matter of contention every now and then in our country. I would like to quote one particular verse (Verse no. 3.56) about women, and allow you to decide whether the injunctions on women contained in the Manu Smriti are objectionable.

The verse goes:

Yatra naaryastu poojyante ramante tatra devataaha

Yatraitaastu na poojyante sarvaastra aphalaaha kriyaaha

Meaning: Where women are respected, the Gods reside. And where women are not treated with reverence, any deed done will be fruitless and unsuccessful.

The Smriti goes on to say: “Women must be honoured and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands and brothers-in-law who desire welfare. When the female relatives live in grief, the family soon perishes, but that family in which they are happy prospers forever. A house in which female relatives who are not duly honoured and on which they pronounce a curse perishes utterly as if by magic”.

I can say with authority that no other holy text gives this level of regard and status to women. In our worship of the Gods too, the Devi gets first place and the Deva only after. We always say “Alamelu Manga sameta Venkatachalapati”, ‘Bhramaramba sameta Mallikarjuna Swami’, ‘Mangalamba sameta Adi Kumbeswara Swami’ and ‘Srivalli Devasena sameta Subrahmanya Swami’. Our Itihasas and Puranas also stress the preeminent status of women in the Hindu dharma. Children are taught “matrudevo bhava” before “pitrudevo bhava”.

“There is plenty of time now”

In my 30s, 40s and early 50s I would often hear people say “sorry, no time” when they were asked to do nitya karma daily or perform pujas as prescribed. In the rush-and-tumble of earning a livelihood and coping with the stresses and strains of domestic life, they could not allot time for sandhya vandanam and other forms of worship.

This has changed slowly but steadily through the first 20 years of the new millennium. Everyone finds time now to do Sandhi, even Panchayatana puja and saligrama aradhana daily. Poojas are done punctually and comprehensively on festival days. Many people have located gurus from whom to learn the Vedas, suktas and other chants. For many people the first item on the agenda for alternate Sundays is doing Sahasra Gayatri. Retired persons do even better.





In particular, persons in the age band of 30-45 have significantly increased their time share for spiritual activities, with no adverse impact on their other activities. The rapidly dwindling numbers of men who continue to plead lack of time are clearly in the Rip Van Winkle category and need to wake up soon.

The monumental increase in sraddha (devotion) I see in observances among Hindus makes me ecstatic. It has been a tremendous leap from the days in the 1980s and 90s when hardly anyone would do even Sandhi regularly. I now see high-powered executives in MNC's assigning slots in their schedules comfortably for regular and on-time religious compliances. What this tells me is that the earlier shortage of time was only an excuse for taking the easy way out.

It thrills me to see vaideekas being asked questions on the correct observances during pooja. The queries are for the sake of knowledge and not argumentation. Aachamanam is no longer a casual water-sprinkling routine but done carefully. 'Madi' and 'patthu-echchal' (sanctity of food items and clothes worn) are consciously observed. Quite a few people eat at least one meal squatting on the floor despite having a dining table.

What more can I ask for? The rapture I experience when I see dedicated attendance in ritual workshops conducted by me and others is indescribable. We are moving towards a phase in Hinduism in which a huge number of us are reconnecting to our traditions not as a show-off but in genuine spiritual quest.





EPILOGUE

***“Saints and sages are still alive. Great masters are still operating.
It is up to you to find where they are.”***

Krishnananda Saraswati



Connecting the dots

I started this book with a prologue in which we saw Sri Sri Bala Periyava blessing us and giving his views on our spiritual roles as Indians, as Hindus and as Brahmins. The speech was made in August 2020.

Almost exactly 57 years earlier, in August 1963, His Holiness Jagadguru Chandrashekarendra Saraswati, the then Kanchi Acharya, our Maha Periyava, was interviewed by Sri A S Raman for The Illustrated Weekly of India, a popular magazine those days. Over four hours Maha Periyava responded to over a dozen questions on the same subject – the spiritual outlook for all of us as Indians, Hindus and Brahmins. The Acharya spoke with his usual incomparable clarity and abundant benevolence.

What I have tried to do here is to present excerpts from Maha Periyava’s answers that have links to the topics covered by Bala Periyava’s speech in the Prologue, and to the spiritual happenings in my life that I have written about in the preceding ten chapters. I shall first present the interview as it appeared, and then talk about the linkages to me and my work.

Excerpts from Maha Periyava’s Interview

1. What are Your Holiness’s views on the religious basis for life in modern India? Are we Indians not basically more materialistic than the Europeans and the Americans despite our preoccupation with rites and rituals?”

Religion can never cease to be a force in our country. Superficially, we may be materialistic. But we are religious to the core. Even our politicians need religion for their secular purposes. In the name of religion, you can make our simple folks to do anything. Try a surprise visit to any of our places of pilgrimage on any day. Take some of your foreign friends also with you. You will see a perpetual carnival. A similar spectacle awaits you on the banks of our sacred rivers throughout the year. You know how the prospect of a mere bath can move millions in this country. The Kumbha Mela can continue to take place only in India. Religion has great mass appeal in our land even today in spite of our increasing interest in materialistic activities. It lies dormant in every one of us.”





2. By placing too much emphasis on secularism and socialism our leaders are, in my opinion, sowing seeds of scepticism among our masses. Don't you think so? A sort of vacuum is being created in their lives.

Our Governments, both Central and State, are, I am afraid, not avowedly secular but aggressively so where Hinduism is concerned. They are anxious to protect the interests of the religious minorities, not those of the majority community, against whom all discriminatory legislation in regard to marriage, divorce, succession, worship in temples and so on is directed. Frankly our legislators are always ready to demolish the very base of Hinduism.

Every Asian country has a state religion - Ceylon, Burma, Pakistan, Malaya. Only India has none. The secularism of our politicians is clearly directed against the Hindus who, being dangerously divided, lack strength. They have no leadership, no spokesman. Whenever the Hindus try to organise themselves, they are branded as communalists and their organisations are banned. Thus the majority community remains irredeemably demoralised. Our leaders have a policy of appeasement for the religious minorities, and a policy of victimisation for the Hindus. I cannot understand them. Naturally, the influence of Hinduism on the lives of our masses is waning. But they can never forsake religion.

3. What, according to Your Holiness, is the justification for the existence of the caste system? Does this dangerous anachronism lend itself to any reform or modification?

The caste system has its strengths as well as its weaknesses. It represents the world's oldest way of life and it remains well preserved to this day because of its vitality. Selfishness is the root cause of the decline of all civilisations. For it leads to competition, encroachment, exploitation and eventually annihilation - the poor give way to the rich, the ignorant to the learned, the simple to the sophisticated, and the believer to the non-believer. But the Hindu caste system, as originally conceived, encourages none of these disruptive tendencies. On the contrary, it combats them most effectively. Otherwise it would not have been able to survive the tempestuous ups and downs spread over a period of 5,000 years. Its guiding principle is: "Live and let live." The emphasis is on creative cohesion and co-operative co-existence. Each part strengthens itself as much for its own sake as for the ultimate good of the whole Hindu society. Unity through division: this is what we have achieved through the caste system.

Naturally, even today, the ageless pattern of life continues throughout the country. Language changes from State to State, sometimes from district to district. But the Hindus all over the country share a common way of life based on caste, and this has helped them in their spiritual evolution down the centuries.





The caste system - in its original form, I repeat - inculcates the spirit of tolerance in every Hindu. Each caste is preoccupied not with the grabbing of what belongs to the other three castes but with the preservation of its own integrity—its swadharma. For example, the Brahmin may be very poor. But he has no evil designs on the riches of Vaisya. Similarly, the Vaisya, however wealthy he may be, never aspires to the throne of the Kshatriya. The inspiration behind the greatest achievements in our religion, philosophy, art and literature is to be traced to the caste system.

But today the Hindu caste system exists only in form, not in spirit, and hence the conflict. Division, which was once the main source of its strength, has become a disintegrating factor. It has been the cause of compartmentalisation of a most sinister kind. The result is tragic: all the four castes are mutually not merely exclusive but destructive. No wonder that those outside the caste system are jubilant. They can attack each caste separately, you see.

In the past, the Brahmin was the spiritual leader of the Hindus. Actually, the term then in vogue was Brahminism, not Hinduism. Nowadays, those down the ladder of the caste system are eager to usurp spiritual leadership from the Brahmin. Jealousy, arrogance and intolerance have begun to gnaw at the vitals of every caste.

The Brahmin himself, if you ask me, is the main cause of the disintegration of the caste system. For he no longer commands respect from the other castes. He does not inspire confidence in them. He is not at all competent to lead the community on this spiritual plane. Once he symbolised not only the lowest rung of the economic ladder but the summit of spiritual and intellectual achievement. He was the epitome of plain living and high thinking. He was universally revered, despite his poverty. His absence, however brief, used to be acutely felt in his village. His house had the look and feel of a hermitage. He lived in the most exemplary manner possible, because he knew that he was being watched by the whole world. Being the spiritual leader of the community, he was always ready to make the maximum sacrifice in order to exert a healthy influence on the other castes.

But the present-day Brahmin has no awareness of his responsibilities. He is not qualified even to preach the ideals practiced by his ancestors. Naturally people of other castes feel justified in agitating for equality with the Brahmin. They will all eventually dissect, not merely distort, the caste system beyond recognition.

Is a casteless society the remedy? A very facile solution, if you ask me. The antidote to the ills of the caste system lies within the structure itself. The Brahmin alone can resuscitate the institution and restore it to its original splendour.





All that I have to say to him is this: “Live like a good Brahmin so that the other castes emulate your example. See that they follow your virtues, not your vices. Mind-control, self-control, voluntary poverty: these are some of the sacred ideals cherished by your ancestors. Practice them as they did. It is only then that you can inspire the other castes and thus achieve unity within the Hindu fold.”

Where spiritual values are concerned, he should make no concessions or compromises, whatever the circumstances. Of course, he has to make great sacrifices. It is time he realised that the leadership has not only its rewards but its responsibilities too. The inherent strength of the caste system lies in the Brahmin’s spirit of sacrifice and self-denial. Otherwise how can we justify the exacting and elaborate code of moral conduct that our religion imposes on him? The Brahmin alone can save the situation.

4. What is the method by which the present lost generation of Hindus can be reclaimed in terms of religion?

What is most important is the raising of the moral standards of the people. In the absence of an inner urge in us to follow the path of virtue and righteousness, all legislation is bound to remain trivial and inconsequential. The children should, at school and at home, receive moral instruction in a form that makes powerful impact on their impressionable minds. Training in medicine or engineering can follow later. The pupil’s manners and morals should be treated as Priority Number One.

When education becomes purposive and spiritually satisfying as it was in my younger days, legal enactments for social or moral reform of the people become unnecessary. The present tendency on the part of our rulers, to promote morals through legislation will result in chaotic, futile Acts which will only add to the bulk of the statute book and swell the pockets of lawyers. In the past, moral text-books used to be compulsory for students. Prizes used to be awarded for students who did not steal, who did not tell lies and who followed the precepts of their elders. Nowadays the school offer prizes for proficiency in subjects which have no influence on the pupil’s moral development. Career has become more important than character and conduct.

It is necessary that the noble ideals expounded in our religious books and not Acts of Parliament should regulate the behaviour of our boys.

5. What is the place of rituals in the religious life of an individual? Do they, for example, have any influence in the sense of right and wrong? Is it imperative that we believe in God in order to be virtuous? Is a good man necessarily a religious man? I am particularly interested in Your Holiness’s views on the relation between religion and morality, between fear of God and love of humanity. Even dacoits and debauchees invoke





the blessings of their favourite deities in order to be successful in their anti-social activities.

Rituals are not essential for one's inner realisation. But then it all depends on the spiritual stature of a particular individual. It is desirable that the ordinary devotee observe all the prescribed rituals as scrupulously as possible, for they enable him to achieve one-pointedness. Concentration, discipline, willpower, austerity: all these provide the necessary base for one's spiritual experience.

Religion and morality are not interdependent. The Buddha and Mahavira were non-believers, but they followed the path of virtue and righteousness. Even within the Vedic fold we have atheists - the exponents of the Samkhya philosophy. Perfect morality is possible only when an individual has an ideal before him. He surrenders himself to that ideal and then begins the transformation of his life.

God represents the conventional goal of one's inner struggle. There have been more saints in India than in any other country. Just think of the richness of our religious literature. Man cannot serve as man's ideal because of his imperfections. Naturally, he turns to a superior force in the interests of his moral uplift and spiritual advancement.

Without a perfect ideal before him, such as God, man cannot achieve moral perfection. For a nation, if not for an individual, God as an ideal is absolutely necessary. As to the two types of anti-social characters you mentioned, for an individual's failure in his spiritual struggle, we have to blame not the ideal before him but his own imperfections.

6. What will be according to Your Holiness, the impact of the recent spectacular achievements of science on man's faith in religion?

Science and spirituality are coming closer together. Today the scientist maintains that all matter can be reduced to energy which I call Parasakti. He thus finds himself unconsciously in the company of Advaitins. His conviction that energy is the absolute power despite the multiplicity of its manifestations such as heat, electricity, and so on is bound to lead him to Sankara's religio-philosophy. The perceiver—that is, the soul - and the perceivable will eventually become one. Science in its destructive aspect is of course a different matter.

7. What is the essential difference between the Western conception of God and the Indian?

How can there be any diversity in the conception of God? But in attitudes towards Him, yes. In the West, one tries to approach God through religion. In India, we follow the path of philosophy. All our rituals, ceremonies, and observances are meant to serve only as a prelude to this arduous journey. Their purpose will have been fulfilled the moment a devotee feels that his mind is attuned to its new role, the role of a seeker.





The Linkages

As I reflect on all the religious initiatives I have so far taken in my life, I cannot but marvel at the kindness and grace of God in fashioning my life almost exactly in sync with the advice of Maha Periyava in 1963 and redoubled by Bala Periyava in 2020.

I started life with introduction to the Vedas and karmas in a vaideeka's family, being born in one. After a chequered life as an office-goer I came back to vaideekam in my early fifties when I adopted it as a profession. Some years later I took to propagating our religious dharma as I knew it to as many people as I could, as a free service to my community. That's what I do now every minute of my thinking time, and hopefully will continue doing till my last breath. When I see this path of my spiritual existence in the backdrop of the two speeches of our Acharyas, a few things stand out distinctly:

- The Hindu dharma is not a religion but a philosophy of life, and is seamlessly fused both with the society and with nature. It is crucial for every Hindu to see this perspective of Hinduism and to play his or her role accordingly.
- Sensitive moral education during childhood and relentless communication is the key to protecting our Vedas and Sastras. The concept of God and a spiritual acharya are vital elements in the life of a Hindu. Without the teacher to guide you and without the goal of perfection – which can only be God – you will likely get lost.
- The Brahmin is at the centre of this crucial project. If we have failed in sustaining the glory of Hinduism it is primarily because the Brahmin has not done his job for several generations. He has to reassume the role of the coach to all other Hindus – and others too – in educating them on correct principles and practices. And he has to do this with a spirit of sacrifice and self-denial.
- The beliefs and practices that underline Hindu tradition have travelled with us from time immemorial right down to this day, naturally with modifications, and have been our binding force, the powerful bond among young and old, poor and rich, and North and South Indians. We – each of us -- need to do our bit to safeguard this institution and ensure all these are carried to the future generations.

Maha Periyava talked about these essential values in his speech and six decades later Bala Periyava's speech is not one syllable at variance! Both the anugraha bhashanams stress the need for revitalisation of Brahmanatva not from the narrow standpoint of that one community but for the welfare of our whole nation, in fact for universal wellness. Both the Acharyas also point out that this is the responsibility of every Brahmin, not just our Mathas and religious heads. Everyone has a role to play.





And my life can show you that all it needs is your determination and passion. The modus operandi will become clear to you as you proceed, and resources – money, materials, men, time and energy – will become available to you in plenty when you need them.

So what are you waiting for? As Swami Vivekananda said, “arise, awake and do not stop until the goal is reached”!

Good luck and Godspeed to you.



APPENDIX 1

THE RSS SHAKHA PRAYER

The prayer of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh was composed by Sri Narahari Narayana Bhide. He wrote it in February 1939 and presented it for the first time in a Sangha Shiksha Varga held in Pune.

नमस्ते सदा वत्सले मातृभूमे त्वया हिन्दुभूमे सुखं वर्धितोऽहम् ।
महामङ्गले पुण्यभूमे त्वदर्थे पतत्वेष कायो नमस्ते नमस्ते ॥१॥

प्रभो शक्तिमन् हिन्दु राष्ट्राङ्गभूता इमे सादरं त्वां नमामो वयम्
त्वदीयाय कार्याय बद्धा कटीयं शुभामाशिषं देहि तत्पूर्तये।

अजय्यां च विश्वस्य देहीश शक्तिं सुशीलं जगद्येन नम्रं भवेत्
श्रुतं चैव यत्कण्टकाकीर्ण मार्गं स्वयं स्वीकृतं नः सुगं कारयेत् ॥२॥

समुत्कर्ष निःश्रेयसस्यैकमुग्रं परं साधनं नाम वीरं व्रतम्
तदन्तः स्फुरत्वक्षया ध्येयनिष्ठा हृदन्तः प्रजागर्तु तीव्राऽनिशम् ।

विजेत्री च नः संहता कार्यशक्तिर् विधायास्य धर्मस्य संरक्षणम् ।
परं वैभवं नेतुमेतत् स्वराष्ट्रं समर्था भवत्वाशिषाते भृशम् ॥३॥

॥ भारत माता की जय ॥

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The meaning of the prayer is:

FOREVER I BOW TO THEE, O LOVING MOTHERLAND! THOU, THE LAND OF HINDUS, HAST BROUGHT ME UP IN HAPPINESS.

O GREAT AND BLESSED HOLY LAND! IN THY CAUSE MAY MY BODY BE SACRIFICED! OBEISANCE TO THEE, AGAIN AND AGAIN! (1)

O ALMIGHTY! WE, CHILDREN OF THIS HINDU NATION, BOW TO THEE IN REVERENCE.

FOR THY WORK, WE HAVE GIRDED UP OUR LOINS; CONFER ON US THY BLESSINGS FOR ITS FULFILMENT.

GRANT US INVINCIBLE STRENGTH, AND PURITY OF CHARACTER AS WOULD COMMAND THE RESPECT OF THE WHOLE WORLD;

AND SUCH KNOWLEDGE THAT WOULD MAKE EASY THE THORNY PATH WE HAVE VOLUNTARILY CHOSEN. (2)

MAY WE BE INSPIRED WITH THE SPIRIT OF STERN HEROISM, THE SOLE AND ULTIMATE MEANS OF ATTAINING THE HIGHEST SPIRITUAL BLISS, WITH THE GREATEST TEMPORAL PROSPERITY.

MAY INTENSE AND EVERLASTING DEVOTION TO OUR IDEAL EVER INSPIRE OUR HEARTS!

MAY OUR VICTORIOUS ORGANISED POWER OF ACTION, BY THY GRACE, FULLY PROTECT OUR DHARMA AND LEAD THIS NATION OF OURS TO THE HIGHEST PINNACLE OF GLORY. (3)

Victory to Mother India

The prayer sung by Akshay Pandya can be heard in the YouTube link given here.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WeiXoUh9fVU>





APPENDIX 2

MY STUDENTS SPEAK

*“The best teachers are those who show you where
o look but don’t tell you what to see”*

Alexandra K Trenfor



This Appendix consists of the views expressed by some of my students about what I have been teaching them, how they see me as a mentor, and the difference I have made to their spiritual quest.

A word to the writers who have given your contributions to my team: you may not find here all that you said, as similar views had to be edited out and repetition avoided.

Before I give the floor to them, I would like to say something about this fairly large and growing contingent of people who mean a lot to me and who have given a meaning to my life.

As a teacher, all I have done is bridge the gap between Brahmins who are practising their varnasrama dharma and Brahmins who have either not been initiated into their swadharma at all, or have given up practising it. I am delighted to see that there are a large number of young and middle-aged Brahmins looking for guidance in doing what the Sastras prescribe, within the constraints of their current life-styles. I teach them little things that can be easily incorporated into their daily routine.

Loka Kshema Seva Samiti (LKSS), the Trust I have set up organises programs reaching out to all Hindus. Apart from nitya anushtanam for Brahmins, vilakku poojas and daily recitation of slokas are taught to non-Brahmins. The Trust also organises programs exclusively for women offering guidance on the dharma that they are meant to follow (Stree dharma). We also conduct outreach programs to help village and small-town children. I always try to be inclusive and benefit all classes of people, but my main emphasis is on bringing back to the Vedic fold the laukeeka Brahmin who has lost his spiritual bearings.

Thanks to tech-savvy friends – and disciples – willing to teach me, technology has become my friend, and I have turned a YouTube guru now!

I lean heavily on Vedic knowledge and its application, as I believe there is no aspect of life that the Vedas do not deal with. The recent onslaught of the





Corona virus is a case in point. While giving people practical tips for handling the virus, I teach them to chant specific slokas from our Vedic lore that address viral illnesses. The therapeutic value of such guidance is invaluable as it serves to build mental strength and a positive attitude.

Traditional dress and performance of daily sandhya vandanam are prerequisites that I lay down for every student of mine. Doing this nitya karma alone can qualify a person for doing all other rituals and learning of the Vedas.

Now over to my students! (I have used alphabetical order to sequence the write-ups.)

Aravind Hariharan

a senior executive working in the US

I will start with the transcription of a 3-minute video talk I aired on YouTube in August 2018 that can give you an idea of how I see Sarmaji and his momentous contribution to Hindus in general and Brahmins in particular.

“The Brahmin community is broadly classified into two – the vaideeka segment and the laukeeka segment. The vaideekas are responsible for six laid-down Vedic practices such as Yajnam, Yajnam etc. The laukeekas do not do any of these but pursue lay professions.

Nevertheless, the laukeekas have religious duties to perform and practices to observe. A great danger is that if there is no effective, strong bridge between vaideekas and laukeekas, the laukeekas will slowly but surely abandon their duties and lose their Brahmanatva altogether. This threat to Hinduism is very real.

Recently I heard an old speech by one of our great Acharyas voicing the concern expressed above, and the first person I thought of was our Sarma Sastrigal (Sarmaji). Sarmaji is one person who tirelessly organizes programs to unite these two distinct parts of the community and to tell laukeekas about their dharmic responsibilities. He is doing yeoman service for the cause of Sanatana Dharma by persuading laukeeka Brahmins to do what they should do for attaining their spiritual goals.”

Every word I said in the video clip then is relevant even today.

Sarmaji’s methodology of teaching is customised to the needs of his students. While his group classes in Chennai attract more than a hundred students of all ages from young boys to retired men, his online classes on Skype that he started giving from the early 2000’s are one-to-one instructions. Typically, two lessons are given every week. He teaches for instance a panchadi of fifty words in one class and it has to be perfected by the students by the next class.





Even in his online classes Sarmaji creates the atmosphere of a real class by insisting that the students should have bathed and should present themselves in traditional attire.

I will close with a mantra that Sarmaji asks his students to follow. This is from Sloka 17 in the sixth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita. It says “those who are moderate in eating and recreation, balanced in work, and regulated in sleep will be able to mitigate all sorrows”.

S Bhaskaran

a retired bank employee

Though born in a Brahmin family, I never led a Brahmin's life except having deep faith in God and being an absolute vegetarian. An inner voice kept telling me to learn Vedas for over 40 years, but I studiously ignored it till I met Sarma Mama in 2016 and started learning Vedas from him.

Mama has made me realize that being a Brahmin means more than chanting suktas. There are many more aspects of Sanatana Dharma that I have to learn and imbibe. My guru has come rather late in my life but he has helped me make good ground in the four years I have been his disciple.

The most inspiring thing about Mama is his uncompromising expectation of discipline from each of us in leading a true Brahmin's life. And the parental affection with which he has inculcated this discipline in me has to be experienced to be believed.

He is compassion and friendliness personified to us – but not during the class hours! He is genuinely concerned about his students and their families, and makes sure we vidyarthi meet up with him at least once in three months. He takes us on yatras and organises parayanams at the kshetras to help us experience the spiritual grandeur of our nation.

The atma-trupti that Sarma mama has given me is indescribable. He is truly God's gift to me in this janma.

'Delhi' Srinivasan

Senior VP, Pharmaceutical industry

I connected with Sarma mama through Facebook in 2015 when I was in Delhi. I met him in Rajasthan Pushkar in 2016 when he came with his students for Sampoorana Yajur Veda Parayanam. It was late evening and he had been travelling the whole day but he was bubbling with energy.

Even with no connect he transformed my lifestyle completely from that moment. I learnt to wear pancha kachham for poojas and samskaras.





I carry the pancha patram for doing sandhya vandanam when I go on tour. In 2018 I got a job in Chennai and became a regular weekend student in his house.

I am amazed by the way he teaches. Making elders unlearn wrong practices that they have been used to for years is tough, and an even bigger challenge is changing pronunciation mistakes. Mama does this with a single weapon – patience, mixed with humour.

I love driving and it has been my privilege to drive Mama to places like Kanchipuram, Tiruvannamalai, Amarkantak, Kumbakonam and so on, and enjoy his exalted company. It's a pleasure to observe his clarity of thought on every topic he talks about.

A secret I would like to share is that nowadays when I take a sankalpa, I do it in the name of my guru, and it gets fulfilled. A related incident comes to my mind.

Once I was on an official trip to the US and it was the weekend. I was feeling bad that I was missing my weekend class, which I would have attended had I been in Chennai. Then it occurred to me to go to a nearby temple. To my delight and surprise a Veda parayanam was going on there! Not only was I able to chant along, but I got the bonus of an exceptionally good lunch!

Mama's bhakti towards Paramacharya and his Gurus is worth noting and emulating. He is as much a model disciple as he is a model tutor. He follows his Guru's directions without any deviation. He has done many challenging programs just because his guru asked him to. An instance is his seeking out brahmachari boys in Chennai and teaching samita danam – a task calling for substantial physical and financial resources.

Sri Sri Bala Periyava once asked him to go to Gaya to check the facilities prior to a yatra. I was lucky to accompany him. For three days we travelled across Bihar. He researched the ins and outs of Gaya, and even met the state minister and submitted his memorandum on improvements needed at the Gaya temple.

On another occasion in Tiruvannamalai he was sick and slept in the car, all through the journey. But the moment he reached the venue he was his energetic self!

For Sarma mama loka seva (community service) and swadharma (one's religious duty) are the two major principles that should guide one's life. Krishna emphasises the same to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita. And mama does not merely preach this holistic truth but demonstrates it on every occasion.

Sarma mama is a veritable role model. The credit for my becoming his student should go to the piety of my parents.





Gurunatha Subramaniam **a student at Anna University**

I am one of Sarma mama's weekend Veda class students. My schooling was done in Oman, and after I joined college my father was keen that I learn the Vedas. Srinivasan Sir from KK Nagar, a family friend, told us about Sarma mama's classes and I joined.

Mama is very knowledgeable about our Hindu culture and tradition, and apart from learning you also get the enthusiasm from him to strictly follow the religious practices required of you.

A great thing about mama's teaching style is the personal touch he brings in. It's not merely "here, chant this, practise it and come back". You become his family member, literally. He will ask me "did you rehearse the anuvaakam I taught in the last class?" and with an impish smile he will pat me on the back and say "of course you would have!" How can a student treated thus take his lessons lightly?

The genuine concern he has for you extends to his caring for your personal health and happiness. I live in a hostel not far from the IIT Madras campus, and when mama saw the news about Corona infections there he called and asked me about my welfare, and urged me to take utmost care. To me it was like my own appa or thatha talking! Such love and affection from anyone is hard to come by.

Another sterling quality of mama is that he treats everyone equally, irrespective of age, social status etc. He gives no special privileges to anyone. I have consciously learnt this important attitude from him.

But there is much, much more that I have to learn from Sarma mama and I pray God to give him longevity and give me the capacity to absorb the rich lore of our scriptures from him.

Karthikeyan V **a freelance yoga trainer from KK Nagar, Chennai**

I chanced to see a post in Facebook in early 2016 about the Veda classes of Sarma mama and joined. It has been a great journey ever since.

At the time of joining mama's classes I was doing nitya karmas and was considering learning Vedas as the next step. But after attending the classes I identified many shortcomings in my anushtanams. It was therefore a double bonanza for me, of learning Vedas and in parallel refining my anushtanams.

Mama works on his students like a diamond cutter works on raw stone by cleaving and sawing and eventually making it a diamond. This happens by tips he gives on various anushtanams in between the lessons, and also through





the day-camps that he organises regularly. His energy and enthusiasm belie his age.

Mama gives us a long rope in assimilating his lessons, but on the basic qualifications for being a student of his, he does not permit any leeway: being punctual, adherence to dress code, regularity and correctness in karma anushtanam etc.

Life's demands on a laukeeka are like heavy currents in which a boat gets tossed about in the river. Satsang with mama is the anchor that steadies your life's journey and directs you to your spiritual goal. Thank you, mama!

Lakshminarayanan Sabarigirieesan (Sabari)

My introduction to Sarma Sastrigal was interesting. My father who was everything to me died and I was very depressed. At that time, I saw an unusual advertisement for a sandhya vandanam camp.

I was doing sandhi once a day routinely, so I wondered what they could teach me. I went for the program and discovered a big gap between the correct process of sandhya vandanam and how I was doing it. That was a turning point in my life.

As a corporate executive in an MNC I had convinced myself that I didn't have the time for the learning of scriptures, doing pooja etc. But I had read 'Deivaththin Kural' where Maha Periyava strongly urges us to get back to the spiritual path. I asked Sarmaji how I could, given my long working hours.

He gently asked me to find time for all the observances commended by Maha Periyava. He first got me to do trikala sandhya vandanam, then made me add on brahmayagnam. He then taught me to chant Rudra-Chamakam and a few Suktas, and finally do Panchayatana pooja.

I have undergone a miraculous transformation. Not only can I find time for every single one of these activities but perform my official duties perhaps more efficiently than I used to!

Even after I moved out of Chennai I continue to regularly participate in many of his programs. I have often wondered how his events are so successful and what his formula is. I share my thoughts here:

- Sarmaji believes that inside every one of us the DNA of Veda dharma resides, and he evokes interest in us to realise this, and stimulate and nurture it by consistent practice.
- He never rushes his students but takes them along a carefully planned path.
- Sarmaji's strategy is a beautiful blend of praachinam and naveenam (the ancient and the modern). I am reminded of the sayings of Sri Sri Bala Periyava on how we should use new tools to get back to our old traditions!





The greatest thing about Sarmaji is that every rupee collected for his programs and events goes towards the function only, and he touches no part of it. His simplicity and focus on the return of every Hindu to the spiritual path are great virtues that we should try to imbibe from him.

V S Mohan

Advertising professional, Chennai

Sarma Mama has an eye for detail, great regard to the finer aspects of any subject, and a keen sense of the 'traditional'. Some reflections of these three qualities of his are:

- He is a stickler for neatness and professionalism in his meetings and programs.
- While making sandalwood paste on the occasion of annual ceremonies, he insists that the sandalwood is placed separately and not on the stone.
- He requests all married students in his Veda class to wear the pancha kachcham. The uttareeyam is not to be forgotten too.
- He advocates the traditional dress at least while visiting temples, going for a darshan of Acharyas or visiting one's 'aathu vadhyar' (house priest).
- He is particular about ladies observing 'bahishtai'.
- He would demur if women wished to chant Vedas, as this practice is not blessed by the Sastras.
- Sandhya vandanam during travel is a strict no-no for him, as he considers cleanliness as a part of godliness.
- The seat used in rituals is not to be pushed by foot but only moved by hand.
- He often reminds us that a grhasta should never wear saffron robes (kaavi).
- He has taught many of us that brahmayagnam is a daily karma and not a tarpanam ritual.

Sayeeram Subramanian

a senior IT manager, Chennai

I have been an online student of Sarma mama all along. I started learning Vedas online from him when I was working abroad and have continued with virtual classes even after returning to India. Mama is very flexible in adjusting his timings to suit my schedule changes. He never says no to a class even in tough situations.

As to why I joined his classes, rather than any individual objective I would say Mama kindled our responsibility to learn Vedas and gave us the platform to do the learning.





In my case a difference was I had been reciting Vedas using YouTube videos. Mama saw that I was unknowingly making many swara mistakes. He first stopped me seeing the videos and then made me see the necessity for the physical presence of a guru. He then took on the tiring task of correcting my errors. He persevered till I got everything right, and he did it without berating me.

Thanks to mama, many of us now listen to and chant Vedas instead of hearing and singing movie songs at home. This involuntarily influences the next generation of youngsters and children who are growing in this atmosphere.

Shankar Ganesh

Director in an MNC, Chennai

I moved to Chennai about five years ago from Mumbai, where I was born and brought up. I had a brief introduction to portions of the Vedas in my youth.

After coming to Chennai I wanted to rekindle my Vedic learning and came to know of Sarma mama's classes by a stroke of luck. It was deiva sankalpam (God's will), surely. I joined mama's classes and my lifestyle underwent far-reaching changes and would never be the same again. Although I was not new to chanting of Vedas and suktas, what came as a breath of fresh air, a completely new perspective to me was mama's focus and insistence on basics and his patient guidance.

This marked a phenomenal shift from superficial learning to a deeper understanding of Vedic living, including small details like the dress code, manner of eating at home and outside (in a wedding hall for instance), abhivaadanam etc.

Mama has carved a niche for himself in the domain of spiritual education, not by teaching esoteric Vedanta but sticking to basics that a laukeeka should know and do. And since that is the need of the hour for a generation of Brahmins which has gone astray, he has earned a special place not only in my heart but in the hearts of all his students.

Srinivasan Swamy

CMD, R K SWAMY BBDO

I must be among Sarma's earliest students, if not the first, having started to learn Pancha Suktas in 2005 from him. Since we had known each other for two decades then, we were more friends than a teacher-student pair. I was already 50 then and I had no idea of learning any of our ancient texts. I was not competent to read the scriptures either in Sanskrit or Tamil. He boldly volunteered to teach me!





With enormous patience, he taught me the Suktas, Taitriya Upanishad, Nakshatra Veda Mantra, Punyahavachanam and a few other important oft-used chants. We were not using on-line technology those days, and he would therefore come all the way to my house a few days every week. You could set the watch by the time he arrived – such was his punctuality!

After class, we would engage on other subjects of common interest and he would always show keen interest in all of them. I regard him as a man of extraordinary knowledge, with a gifted memory and the wisdom to match. His views would always be those of a true Hindu nationalist. This was reflected in his first book published in 2010 ‘The Great Hindu Tradition – an insight into Vedic Principles, Sastras and Heritage’ and several books thereafter.

Today he uses technology and social media like a veteran, and his speed and grip would surprise even a twenty-year-old. He has now emerged as a popular teacher and the go-to man to seek clarification on our religious practices.

I am privileged that he considers me his friend, while I can’t forget that he continues to be my guru.

Dr Sundar Swaminathan **a nephrologist in the US**

We were fortunate to get connected to Sarma mama around 2014, when we were in Virginia, through a common friend who was learning Vedas from him. We had known about mama before that through his book ‘The Great Hindu Tradition’. I joined his class, and both my sons Ashwin and Sanjay are also learning from him.

Mama’s method and commitment are amazing. He teaches with passion and with a personal touch. He genuinely cares for his students. Mama has taken personal interest in our family, and has gone out of the way many times to help organise religious events in our family. A case in point is a ritual that needed to happen recently, which mama organized despite the COVID constraints.

Through his monumental efforts, mama has created a major impact on the society, awakening those who were dormant, rekindling their interest and making them realize the importance of our Vedic roots and culture. The impact of his work will last for generations to come.

Venkatachalam **AVP, Cognizant Technologies**

Sarma mama is not concerned with his identity or visibility in what he sets out to do. His sole intent is the passing down of Hindu dharma to succeeding





generations. For the past twenty-plus years he has been campaigning door-to-door, trying to motivate people to return to their traditional value systems. Sarma mama must have transformed at least ten thousand families. He is a brand in himself now and even though his work involves many personal sacrifices, he marches on like an untiring crusader.

Alathur Venkataraman

I am a student of Mama since Jul'18. Mr Bhaskar is our batch coordinator. Before Corona struck, our classes were live, on fixed dates and at fixed times. Each batch would have a coordinator and Mama would convey information through him.

Being a retired person I never missed a session. Now the classes are online and I continue to attend them. The learning has inculcated in me some discipline in my daily routine. The chanting of Rudram, Chamakam and other Suktas gives me great mental solace.

I see Mama's posts on FB and YouTube. I get inspired by his explanations and direct enforcement of our rich culture in our day-to-day life. He explains everything in such a way that a layman can understand and follow.

V K Raman, Mumbai

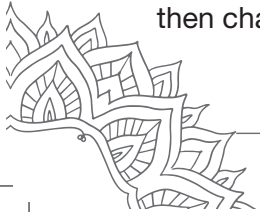
I had the good fortune of noticing Brahmasri Sarma Sastrigal on Facebook a few years back. I was attracted by his efforts to inculcate spirituality in ordinary people.

The trigger for me to learn the Vedas was a nagging concern of mine while reciting Abhivaadaye at the time of doing namaskaram. We state during the chant that we have learnt the Veda we are born into – in my case Yajur Veda. I did not know Yajur Veda, and this was bothering me. Sometime in early 2017 I met Sarmaji at his home. I told him of my interest in learning the Vedas and he instantly agreed to teach me over Skype.

I live in Mumbai, so my classes have been online both before and after Corona. But when I visit Chennai I join the classes in person.

When I come to Mama's classes I feel like a child being given playtime. I love the feeling of a Guru holding my hand like a mother and walking me through difficult portions. I find the passages amazingly easy when I am with my Guru.

I started arranging my schedules for all other activities to suit Mama's class timings. I give first priority to Veda classes and practice. For instance, I had a meeting at 9 am one day at my office. My Veda class was at 7:30 am and I knew I couldn't finish it and travel to the office in time for the meeting. So I reached office at about 7 am, attended the class in traditional dress, and then changed to office attire well in time for the meeting.





Learning the Vedas has given my life a sense of purpose. I have become more time-conscious as I have to complete portions allotted for practice every day. This has led to my cutting out time-wasting activities. I have also become regular in performing Sandhya vandanam and Brahma yagnam.

My mind is more at peace. My family life has become more harmonious. I am able to grasp various issues comprehensively and clearly. This has made me more effective in both official and personal interactions. My actions are with much less ego and fewer expectations. This has helped me become pleasant and more useful to others. My outlook on wealth has changed significantly, and I now think more about how to put it to good use as opposed to ways to accumulate more of it.

I have spoken about my experience with everyone who I feel will appreciate it, in office and to my relatives and friends. I wear this badge of honour with pride. Whenever someone asks me whether he can join I introduce him to Mama.

Concluding Note from Me

There you are, friends. With students like these and many more whose views I could not add for want of space, how can the teacher fail? My mission of making religious observance a way of life for Brahmins and getting them excited about learning the Vedas could not have succeeded but for the presence of such discerning disciples.

I must add an important piece of information. Venkatachalam, one of the contributors above, also gave the team that worked on this book a fantastic recording on the planning and execution of programs we conduct. The description in detail is in Chapter 7 under 'Camps, workshops and symposia'. Thanks a lot, Venkatachalam!





APPENDIX 3

MY FAMILY AND I – STRENGTH FROM THE WINGS

“They also serve who only stand and wait”
- John Milton



Let me begin with a clarification. By family here I don't mean my extended family of siblings, uncles, aunts and so on. I am keeping this part short, and am referring only to my wife and daughters.

Whatever I say about my family would be inadequate. My wife Vijayalakshmi rallied round whenever I needed her support. My elder daughter Sangeetha was with me at the Cancer Institute when I underwent treatment for cancer. The younger girl Sowmya fulfilled a dream of mine by marrying a vaideeka.

About my wife I must add one vital point Sudha shared with me: “All your students whom I asked about Mami have this to say about her – she is simplicity personified and a woman of high ideals.”

I am indeed blessed.

And as I look at the next generation, I find great cheer too. My grandson Nrusimha Raghavan (Sangeetha and Sudarsan's son) is studying Vedas. My granddaughter Sheethala (Sowmya and Gururamji's daughter) studying in the tenth standard is growing in a spiritually chaste atmosphere at the Veda Patasala. Sangeetha has a daughter Hiranmayee studying in the third standard.

I certainly don't want to impose my ambitions on any of my grandchildren, and would like them to decide what they should do in their lives, but the auguries are excellent.

I have talked briefly in Chapter 3 about Vijayalakshmi, Sangeetha and Sowmya, the three wonderful women in my life. They have shared their thoughts about me with Sudha and I am, like you dear readers, eager to know what they have to say!

Vijayalakshmi speaks about her husband

We have been married for over 42 years, and not unlike many women of my generation I stand quietly in the shadow of my husband. I try to be a source of strength to him and to all that he is engaged in, so much so that the saying “behind every successful man there stands a woman” may be justified in our case!





I come from a very reputed family of Chennai. I lost my father when I was very young, and was brought up by my mother and two uncles (mamas). Both my mamas have been strong influences in moulding me as a strong, silent woman.

One of them, Sankaran Mama, led a life deeply influenced and guided by the Sastras which later gave him the status of a realized being – a jivan mukta. He became my husband's guru. The other, Ramagopalan Mama, who passed away in October 2020 at the age of 94, will be forever remembered for his trailblazing work in the RSS from the forties all the way till his death. His deep devotion for the motherland was awe-inspiring to me and to all of us when we were growing up.

My two daughters Sangeetha and Sowmya were my main focus of attention before they were married off. This was not only because I was their mother but also because my husband's involvement with the RSS took him away on frequent calls for service to the nation, and I had to hold fort at home.

The most notable of these were the Kar Sevas for the Ram temple in Ayodhya. I realized that I had to show my solidarity and alignment to what was precious to him. It was my good fortune that I could accompany him on one of the Kar Sevas and help transporting bricks to the site of the temple! I could afford to go because Sangeetha and Sowmya could more or less take care of themselves by then.

My severest period of trial was when my husband took seriously ill in 2009. I summoned all my reserve strength to be able to provide him assurance and comfort. You can imagine that I was deeply worried for him but it would have been wrong on my part to let my husband catch a whiff of my anxiety. God was with me in overcoming the ordeal with success.

I continue to be a silent source of support to my husband's vaideekam and his extensive spiritual mentoring activities. While he is teaching, I do my duties around the house mostly staying out of his way so as to allow him to carry on undisturbed in his efforts to educate a number of students in the Vedic way of life. I don't involve myself in his work.

His lessons have influenced my life as well, and the prescriptions of our Sastras mean a lot to me. For instance, I do all the housework myself as it is hard to find a housemaid who will abide by rules of womanly cleanliness especially at times of their monthly cycles. My husband travels to places of pilgrimage with his band of students quite frequently. I do not usually join because these travels take a toll on me physically and I don't want to become a nuisance. I therefore prefer to remain in my own space.





Sangeetha about her father

In our growing years Appa was a wonderful father to us and he continues to be one. Owing to his long hours on VIGIL work he spent very little time with us, but showered love on both of us. Appa's hectic schedules would sometimes mean that we would not see him for days on end, but we never missed him. The brief interactions we had were imbued with affection and care for our education, our growth concerns and later our career and marriage.

I remember my grandmother (Appa's mother) telling us "A kid is a kid till three years of age". After that age responsibilities had to be inculcated slowly and steadily in the child. This was the disciplined approach in our family when it came to bringing up kids, and 'achu-pichu chellam' (doting on the child to the extent of spoiling him or her) was strictly a no-no.

Only the best was given to us in everything. Good homemade food, nice neighbourhood with sharing cousins and loving grandparents combined to make our childhood truly magical. Appa was always focused on our good health, hygiene, good habits and the right kind of exposure.

When we were very young, appa had a big bicycle that had a baby seat in it. Sowmya and I would love to sit on that and go for rounds with appa. When we went to high school he would attend parent-teacher meetings and hear our teachers talk about us, but he never pressured us for marks.

We were never afraid of admitting our mistakes to appa. We were given full liberty to express contrary views on a subject and argue our side. Once appa scolded me for something he found wrong or missing, I don't remember precisely what it was. Amma clarified to him that it was not my doing. Appa did not hesitate to say sorry to me for the misunderstanding. These are in my view incomparable values to teach your children.

One day amma made delicious, soft idlis that Sowmya and I loved and kept hogging. After finishing the meal I went proudly to appa and told him how many idlis I had eaten. He didn't like it and said gently "it's wrong to measure how much you eat. Please don't do it again" and explained the reason. I learnt a valuable lesson that day.

Appa's spiritual foundation and ethos are very strong. We had been to Tirupati once 30 years ago and an incident that happened during the visit will give you an idea. It gives me goose pimples even now when I recollect the incident.

Sadasivam uncle, appa's close friend who was the Deputy Executive Officer of TTD, had organised our visit. We had completed the darshan and were coming back. Adjacent to the Yoga Narasimha there is a pillar with Anjaneya on it. Everyone makes a pradakshina (circumambulation) of the pillar. Uncle





asked us to sit at the Yoga Narasimha graha and wait for him to finish some work and return to take us. Appa sat down in front of the Yoga Narasimha and started doing puja. There was no one in the vicinity except me, and I was sitting two feet away. Amma and Sowmya were also not there.

Suddenly a tulsi mala (garland of basil) fell on Appa's lap. We didn't know where it fell from. No one could have thrown it as there was none nearby. I went to appa and asked him to give me a few leaves from the mala.

Some people who were doing the Anjaneya pradakshina saw me extending my palm to receive the tulsi and came with outstretched palms and soon a queue formed. Many of them were saying "Narasimha has given the tulsi to us" and were in a bhakti trance. The icing on the cake was that amma and Sowmya also joined the queue!

A memorable event highlighting his patriotism is his going for Kar Seva in Ayodhya in the 1990s. Amma, Sowmya and I went to the railway station to see him off, and saw there hundreds of men and women with whom he was going. We knew it was a dangerous expedition but none of us were sad, there were no emotional outbursts. The knowledge that appa was going for a great cause overrode personal concerns even at that young age for both me and Sowmya! I am narrating this as an example of the stoic approach to life Appa instilled in us.

After forty days or so, appa returned home on a rainy night, without notice. That was when we all cried with joy on seeing him. The rasagulla tin in his hand – the family's favourite sweet – doubled our jubilation.

I had adolescence issues in my teen years. I was a scaredy-cat when it came to talking to boys, for example. Appa patiently taught me how to face up to frightening situations, and how to take a firm stand while being civil and polite.

It was perhaps the grooming by Appa and Amma that made me and my husband take what many consider a mature, tough decision regarding our son's education. I have sent him to learn Vedas in the Gurukula tradition at the Veda Patasala run by my brother-in-law in Kumbakonam. Appa's farsighted decisions in his life must have been working in my mind to decide that Veda education was important to my son, and that I should not be swayed by the 'here-and-now' compulsions of the society around me.

I would conclude by saying that appa gave us his time and energy unconditionally. He moulded us with his thoughts and ideas. He gave his best to us. He stands tall.





Sowmya about her father

Appa has given us some great memories to cherish our childhood. Whenever our public exams approached appa would arrange for extra tuitions to rid us of anxieties. He even tried to teach us Telugu himself. I recall how we both – Sangeetha and I – were playful and would try to dodge him and the tutors!

As regards my present life as a Vaideeka's wife, and my additional role of a 'mother' to 20 children in the Veda Patasala, I can only say it is very fulfilling. My husband has taken on the tough challenge of imparting Vedic education in today's world, and it is my duty to support his selfless work in every way I can. To keep the education relevant and interesting to the children, he regularly discusses with pundits and Acharyas and makes modifications as required. His impressive array of references has made it possible for him to not only reach great value to the boys learning now but excite interest in many other parents who are keen to enrol their children.

My daughter Sheethala wants to add here that her grandfather is a huge influence on her and that while he is very loving, he is very strict at times. But she says with great maturity that it's for her own betterment, so she doesn't mind. Wise words from a young girl! Proud of you, my baby!





APPENDIX 4

MY FRIENDS SPEAK

“Good friends are hard to find, harder to leave and impossible to forget” G Randolph



This section profiles me as seen by some friends who have been close to me for many years. Sundar’s write-up as my student appears in Appendix 2; and here he talks as a friend.

I will start with a beautiful message from my Headmaster of the school in Renigunta in which I had my education. You may be surprised that I am listing him as a friend – he was a friend to all students and a special friend to me, so my classification is justified!

My Student

N V Chalapathi

Headmaster, Zilla Parishad High School, Renigunta

I am very happy to take my memory fifty years back and reflect on those days when Sarma was a student coming in shorts to the school at Renigunta near Tirupati.

In my service as a teacher for more than four decades, I have come across many students but only some of them are fresh in my memory because of the close attachment at that time. Sarma is one such. As a student he was very quiet and obedient in school.

Since I am with a spiritual bent of mind I felt very happy when I came to know that Sarma at Chennai is very much transformed. Doing purohityam is really a valuable service. A popular Telugu poem gives four requisites for one to live in a place: a moneylender, a doctor, a perennial river and a Brahmin purohit.

I felt extremely happy when I learnt that he brought out a book on Hindu Dharma. I went through the book and felt that his writings with Vedic authority will surely satisfy the need for such information at a time when people are forgetting religious traditions.

Recently I learnt about his new project and I am sure he will be successful in this field of activity too. I pray God to shower his blessings and grace on Sarma and his friend.





Swaminatha Sarma - A Kaarana Janma
Dr Padma Subrahmanyam, Managing Trustee,
Bharata Ilango Foundation for Asian Culture

Sri Swaminatha Sarma Sastri was known to me as Sarmaji of the RSS and more so of VIGIL (a public opinion forum in mid 80s and early 90s). In 1992, our television serial 'Bharatiya Natyasastra' was telecast in Doordarshan, the national network. It was produced by our Nrithyodaya and directed by my brother V Balakrishnan. I had written the script and appeared in it.

I had no idea about the functioning of the RSS or VIGIL but my research on Natyasastra revealed the true history of our country and the integration that was immanent through the common Hindu cultural precepts. This was what our TV serial projected. I had used the song 'Vande Mataram' as thematic background music, whenever I was establishing the truth of having common roots of grammar for all the performing arts of Bharat.

We received a letter one day from VIGIL that Bharatiya Natyasastra had been awarded the 'Panchajanya' Award for propagating National Integration. It was from that time that my family came into close contact with Sarmaji. He was referred to as 'Vigil' Sarma.

In February 1999, Balakrishnan and I attended a VIGIL meeting on Demography, and I found the lectures thought-provoking. I decided to get all the Hindu Matadhipathis on one platform and make them speak out against religious conversion in one voice. That historic event in July 1999 termed as Dharma Rakshana Sammelan turned out to be a force to reckon with. I was the convenor of that ambitious project and Sri S Gurumurthy helped and guided me. Sarmaji worked tirelessly for the event. The Sammelan later evolved as Dharma Rakshana Samiti under the patronage and blessings of Pujyasri Swami Dayananda Saraswati.

VIGIL invited writers, scholars, thinkers and political analysts for thought and action on the future of Bharat, and created a stir in the society at various levels - social, political and religious. Sarmaji was its sheet anchor.

I understand Sarmaji has become a full time vaideeka, teaching and writing on traditional texts and processes. His short videos on YouTube have been creating awareness about the significance of many day-to-day Hindu customs. People like Sarmaji are chosen by God to come into the world as Kaarana Janmas and dispense their duties as nishkamya karma.

My hearty wishes to Sarma Sastri for many more decades of selfless service to Sanatana Dharma! May Veda Mata bless him with aayur-aarogya-soukhyam (age, health and happiness) to guide many more into Desa Bhakti and Deiva Bhakti.





Knowing Sarma in his Many Avatars

Srinivasan Swamy, CMD, R K SWAMY BBDO

I have known Sarma from the early eighties when he was running a public opinion building forum called VIGIL. At that time, I just saw him as a very spirited person involved in public affairs. I did not know that he was a functionary of the RSS or that he had led many protests during the emergency imposed in the mid-seventies.

His endearing qualities, combined with his enthusiasm inspired me to get involved in many of the events that he hosted under the VIGIL banner. The abrogation of Article 370 and the Ayodhya temple dispute were subjects of serious debate. He conducted many seminars on various topical issues of the time and one that comes to mind is the National Seminar on Water Management. This was for the linking of all rivers and canals. Water harvesting, which became a buzz word in later years, was discussed in detail back then.

From 1980 I was in touch with him off and on till 2005, when I rediscovered him in his new avatar as Sarma Sastrigal. I took the opportunity to pursue some instruction in the Vedas from him for a few years. In 2009, I had the pleasure of encouraging him to write a book on Hindu tradition. The book was released by the revered Swami Dayananda Saraswati in front of a packed audience in Chennai. The book, 'The Great Hindu Tradition', has seen multiple reprints and has been translated into Tamil as well.

Sarma started the Loka Kshema Seva Samiti, a Trust to propagate Hindu thought and scriptures. This has brought about a surge of people following his guidance and making him their 'guruji' in social and spiritual matters.

Sarma Mama - A Multi-Faceted Personality

Mani Sivaswamy, a long-time family friend

Sarma mama is our family vadhyar. My personal contact with him started when my father passed away in Oct 2008. He offered great comfort to my mother, my brother and me and guided us through all the rituals.

Sarma mama's patriotic zeal, passion for national integration and in his earlier life his staunch devotion to RSS duties, are legendary. His years of youth were not without adventure. He once travelled all the way to Vietnam to conduct a friend's wedding – not something I can believe of the Sarma Sastrigal I know today! Over the last decade-plus he has returned to traditional moorings and politely declines situations that demand his veering away from cultural roots.

As a vadhyar, Sarma mama was particular about making sure that whatever he earned was shared with the others who aided him and keeping only a





small part for himself. He continues to live in a rented place. He respects the caste system because he sees it as a tool for carrying out varnasrama dharma as prescribed in the framework of Hindu sanatana dharma. Sometimes this is mistaken as favouring caste distinctions; but in reality, it is respect for classification of people based on their individual duties in order to keep society functioning optimally.

In his new avatar as a spiritual guide on social media, he has been able to reach out to a large audience world over with his fluency in Tamil and English. His forthright thoughts and outspokenness have disturbed the more conservative Vaideekas who probably see him as too outgoing. This is also perhaps a minor reason for his gradually giving up practising Vaideekam and concentrating on teaching.

In 2009, Sarma mama was diagnosed with cancer. I presented to him a book called 'Love, Medicine and Miracles' by Dr Bernie Siegel, hoping it would help him understand his condition better. I was amazed to see how well he recovered, thanks to his bold determination and matter-of-fact way of handling the serious situation.

During his illness Sarma mama compiled his now well-known compendium 'The Great Hindu Tradition'. He has an uncanny talent for identifying the right person for a task, and I saw this quality of his during this project.

I accompanied Sarma mama to Sankara Matham in Kanchipuram a few times. He was close to Pujyasri Jayendra Saraswati Swamigal (Pudu Periyava), whose interaction with the masses regardless of their status had a strong influence on him. You can see this approach reflected in the talks Sarma mama delivers on his YouTube channel.

His organisation skills are exemplary. Once, at a meeting, we left our footwear strewn near the entrance. Sarma mama came in after us and finding the scattered footwear gave us all a solid round of firing. He said if we could not even keep our footwear properly there was little chance of our doing the bigger task effectively. I learnt an important lesson that day: Little things are also important for a project's success.

When Sarma mama's son-in-law took a tough and courageous decision to relocate to Kumbakonam with his family to teach the Vedas in the Gurukula style, Sarma mama rose to the occasion and handled the situation with dignity, patience and clarity.

Sarma mama's life is an evolving one and has seen many changes, but his strong convictions and his determination to work for the greater good of society are never-changing constants.





Sarmaji's Service to the Nation

H Raja, Politician, BJP Member and erstwhile RSS Pracharak

I know Sarma Sastrigal from the time he was simply Sarmaji. I was a Shiksharthi (trainee) in Rajapalayam in 1970, and one day Sarmaji who was functioning as pracharak in Kanyakumari came for a boudhik (lecture session in the RSS intellectual program) in one of our ITC's (Instructors' Training Camps). I still remember what he said that day.

"A mere eleven Muslims came on horseback and destroyed the entire Nalanda University with its 10,000 students and 1,000 teachers. That happened because each of the 11,000 people thought "they are 11 people and I am just one". If they had instead thought "we are 11,000 and they are just 11", Nalanda University would not have been razed to the ground. In fact even if each of them had remembered that they had two hands, 32 teeth and 20 nails they could have said "I have enough ammunition to fight". This is the strength of mind, the kshatriya bhava that we should create in each one of us swayamsevaks".

The words and the passion they carried could arouse even the dullest.

Later Sarmaji took over as zilla pracharak in our district itself and worked with Rajapalayam as HQ.

We should take Sarmaji as a role model and strengthen his hand in the exemplary work he is doing for propagation of the Hindu dharma.

Sarmaji As I Know Him

V S Kumar, long-time associate in book-writing ventures

Sarmaji came into my life in early 2010, coming home with a bunch of booklets on diverse topics related to the Hindu religion that he had written in Tamil. He wanted me to translate these into English. "Many Tamilians, especially Brahmins, cannot read Tamil and so I thought my booklets needed to be translated into English", he said, continuing, "A compendium on our traditional values, rituals and samskaras would serve to answer a number of frequently asked questions about our religious practices."

Then began an eight-month journey with him during which we compiled the book, 'The Great Hindu Tradition'. During this period, I remember being in constant admiration and awe of this simple human being with a passion for propagating the greatness of the Hindu way of life to as many Hindus, particularly youngsters, as he could. The unusual thing was that he showed the passion only in his work and not by making fiery speeches or doing acrid debates or 'patti manrams'.





Simplicity is Sarmaji's middle name. There is no fanfare, no bombast in anything he does. And yet the results are breathtaking. What he has done by way of spreading knowledge about the Hindu way of life is the equivalent of a yaga. Take my case: a few months before I turned sixty, I told Sarmaji that my sixtieth birthday was approaching. I asked him how I should qualify myself to be eligible to celebrate my sashtiabda poorthi.

He said there were two things I had to be aware of from the perspective of Sanatana Dharma. "Sashtiabda poorthi is not merely a festive celebration but a 'shanti'. You offer your gratitude to God for all the good years he has given you. And as for your eligibility, do you do sandhya vandanam regularly?" he asked. When I said I was quite irregular, he suggested that I perform the trikala ritual every day without missing a single time. "That would be a good starting point to get qualified", he said with a twinkle in his eye. I am happy to say that I am one among the many he has persuaded to practise nitya karmas consistently.

Sarmaji has achieved enviable success in demystifying our religious duties to lay people and in transforming many of us in this current day and age. His method has five key elements:

- Perspicacity: He sizes up the person quickly and understands his touch-points i.e. what resources can be tapped.
- Patience: He is never in a hurry, and takes one on the path at a gentle pace.
- Promotion: He constantly reminds us, in small but significant doses, of the importance of what we are doing and have to do.
- Persuasion: There is no dogmatism in Sarmaji's advice. This makes his suggestions convincing and we feel like trying them out.
- Persistence: He never gives up. If he encounters a dead-end, he digs up an alternative path in no time.

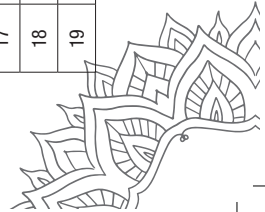
Hats off to this remarkable spiritual mentor and his ceaseless vigil in preserving the great Hindu tradition!

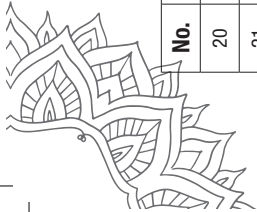


APPENDIX 5

A CLASSIFIED LIST OF SELECTED VIDEOS PUBLISHED BY SARMA SASTRIGAL

No.	Title of video	Subject	Topic	Link
1	உத்தனி மூலமாகத்தான் ஜலத்தை எடுத்து உபயோகப்படுத்த வேண்டுமா?	Achara	Toya sesham	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYdEugfGK-Q
2	மடியாக இருப்பது மற்றும் மடி வஸ்தர் தாரண அனுஷ்டானம்	Achara	About madi observance and madi clothes	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QA7Mqql1xgo
3	இல்லங்களில் நாம் எச்சபண்ணி குடிக்க வேண்டாமே	Achara	The correct way to drink	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XULsaiCKbIU
4	பூணூல், யக்ஞோபவீதம் பற்றி ஒரு சில விவரங்கள்	Achara	What needs to be known about Yagnopaveetam	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0CR8QN4W6-Y
5	சகோதரர்கள் ஒரே நாளில் கடிவரம் செப்துக்கொள்ளலாமா?	Achara	Can brothers have haircut on the same day?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RsaMFAAVK6o
6	மடி என்றால் என்ன?	Achara	What is 'Madi'?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQM5SchjW_RY
7	அபத்தத்தின் உச்சகட்டம் - ரொடமேட் பஞ்சகச்சம்	Achara	Readymade Panchakachcham	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJGsR4Q06S4
8	வைதிக தர்ம அனுஷ்டானத்தில் மடிசார் புடவையின் மகத்துவம்	Achara	Importance of madisar in Vedic anushthanams	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTUMwwxEhXA
9	காஞ்சலில் ஸ்ரீ மஹா பெரியவா சாதூர்மால்ய விரதம்	Acharyas	Chaturmasyam by Maha Periyava in Kurnool	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07066hi7B8g
10	மஹா பெரியவா - குருஜி கோல்வல்கர் சந்திப்பு	Acharyas	Meeting of Maha Periyava with Gururji Golwalkar	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_Y3R6zAfIg
11	ஜீவன்முகத்த்களும், சித்தர்களும் தொடர்ந்து அருள்கின்றனர்	Acharyas	Jivannuktas and Siddhas continue to grace our land	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U90MHZBCjUl
12	குரு பரம்பரை: காஞ்சி மடத்தின் ஸ்ரீநாதபதிகள் பொக்கிஷம்	Acharyas	A great reference book on Peetadhipatis of Kanchi Math	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_FH5wh6B-NY
13	எல்லாம் பெரியவா கருணை	Acharyas	About my father	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sve6WypQ0s
14	ஸ்ரீ ஸ்ரீ கதிர்காம ஸ்வாமிகள்	Acharyas	Sri Sri Kadirikama Swamigal	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KvF9Pfk_nk
15	யோகி ராம் குந்தாமா: 1984-ல் திருவண்ணாமலையில் தெப்பிக தர்ஸம்	Acharyas	Darshan of Yogi Ram Surat Kumar in Tiruvannamalai	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4YhWnmz8M
16	காஞ்சி ஆச்சார்யாள் ஸ்ரீ ஸ்ரீ புது தெருபெரியவாளுக்கு சமர்ப்பணம்	Acharyas	Pudu Periyava's Samadhi	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdSJ_kA6-wE
17	நமது கோவில் குருக்கள், சிவாச்சார்யார்கள்	Acharyas	Shivacharyas and Gurukkals in temples	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z0dbMsV2iXM
18	பண்டித் தீனதாயன் உபாத்யாய அவர்களை பற்றி ஒரு வார்த்தை	Acharyas	A word about Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABURnqJ01KE
19	கோபால்ஜி, ஸ்ரீ இராமகோபாலன், அவர்களை பற்றி ஒரு வார்த்தை	Acharyas	A word about Gopalji (Sri Ramagopalan)	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_71fy6Zz7JM

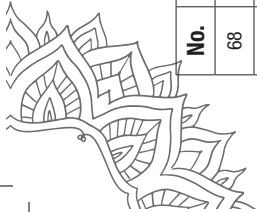




No.	Title of video	Subject	Topic	Link
20	ஸ்ரீவதேவ நமஸ்காரம் கேசவம் பிரதிகச்சதி	Acharyas	Sarvadeva namaskaram Kesavam pratigachhati	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qzOv85B7Rc
21	தர்ப்பணத்தில் சில விஷயங்கள் மறுபடும்	Apara karma	Changes in Tarpanam process as per family tradition	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oMSfkozt4GQ
22	கிருஷ்ண யக்ஞம் என்று சொல்லக்கூடிய சுப ஸ்ரீகார்த்தை பற்றி	Apara karma	About Subhssweekaram, the 13th day apara kariyam	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPXPo0RvKy8
23	சபிண்சுரணம் - 12-ம் நாள்: அபர கர்மா/ அந்தியேஷ்டி	Apara karma	Sapindikaranam, 12th day of Apara karma	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oCKAJE0S34
24	கயா ச்ரார்த்தமும், வஞ்சாவருஷம் செய்யவேண்டிய ச்ரார்த்தமும்	Apara karma	Gaya sraaddha and the annual pratyabdika sraaddha	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xEXpXG004
25	அபர கர்மாவில் தானது இல்லத்தில் தீட்டு இல்லாதவர்கள் சாப்பிடலாமா?	Apara karma	Can non-tainted people eat on dasastu day?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MF4hk_Yx-D4
26	புத்திரர்கள் தனித்தனியாக ச்ரார்த்தம் செய்வது சிறந்ததா அல்லது சேர்ந்தா?	Apara karma	Should brothers do sraaddha together or individually?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=He0TZta0-c
27	தர்ப்பணத்தில் என்றும் ஜலமும்	Apara karma	Use of ellu and water during a tarpanam	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3gDlpV7j3Ng
28	அபராமாவில் சோதகுப்ப, மாகிகிதிகளின் முக்கியத்துவத்தை பற்றி	Apara karma	Importance of maasika, sodakumba	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQRRyLbaWo
29	சிரார்த்தத்தில் பிரம்மண போஜன மஹிமை	Apara karma	Brahmana bhojanam during sraaddha	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGS2ZTgIPlo
30	'பித்ருக்கள்', 'பித்ரு சாபம்', 'பித்ரு தோஷம்' : ஒரு விளக்கம்	Apara karma	Pitrus are benevolence personified	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUeP4NUH7U
31	ஞாயனுக்கு யாராவது டார்ச் கைட் அடித்து வெளிக் காட்டுவார்களா?	Hinduism	Recall of speech at an inter-religious meet in 2014	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0KQ0Rl8s4&-feature=youtu.be
32	"தீ வந்த வேலையைப் பாரு. எல்லோரும் வந்த வேலையைப் பார்க்கணும்"	Hinduism	My Guru Sankaranji's words	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZr1_BluUjeZM
33	அத்தவதம் சத்யம், ஜகத்குரு ஆதி சங்கரா சாக்ஷாத் ஈஸ்வர ஸ்வரூபம்	Hinduism	Advaita is truth, Adi Sankara is an incarnation	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Zr1_BluUjeZM
34	கடவுளை ரூபமாகவும் வழிபடலாம் அரூபமாகவும்	Hinduism	God can be worshipped with and without form	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6JwgMR5WBKg
35	நித்ய கர்மா, நைமித்திக கர்மா மற்றும் காம்ய கர்மாக்கள்	Hinduism	Nitya, naimittika and kaamya karmas	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L5S9XYDKUE
36	ஆன்மீகத்தில் நான் முன்னேறும் அடைந்ததை எப்படி தெரிவது?	Hinduism	How do I know if I am progressing in my spiritual quest?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUeP4NUH7U
37	அபராமாவில் மதிரி ஃபண்ட்டில் வசிப்பவர்கள் அனுஷ்டானம் செய்வது	Hinduism	Doing arushthanams in flats and apartments	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d3iakbTPsmk
38	நற்புது சம்ஸ்காரங்களை பற்றிய விவரங்கள்	Hinduism	The 40 samskaras	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aSkdvz4A_wg
39	தோமங்கலின் மஹிமை: தனிப்பட்டவரின் நன்மை, உலக நன்மை	Homas	The power of homams	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPv9IubWw
40	தோமம் சனாதன வைதிக தர்மத்தில் விசேஷமான அம்சம்	Homas	Significance of Homams in Sanatana Dharma	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38Mr3BgFVY
41	ஆலஹந்தீ தோமம்	Homas	Aavahanti homam	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohBQaZLPco
42	பலகாரண தோமம்: கடுகு கலந்த மாவின்னல் தோமம்	Homas	How to do balikarana homam?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7_AGMJmLMI
43	Kushmanda Homam - கூஷ்மாண்ட தோமம்	Homas	Kushmanda Homam	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ly9m6Pm-K4

No.	Title of video	Subject	Topic	Link
44	முருகாருருகா கந்தா ஸ்கந்தா வேலாவேலா	Japas, bhajans	A sloka on Lord Muruga that can be chanted	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3sxiwsFidkM
45	ஸ்திரீகன் பழகனை போது கைகளை தோள்க்குமேலே தூக்கி பாடலாம?	Japas, bhajans	Can ladies do bhajan with hands raised above shoulder?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ml.nhUdC8Hg
46	தினசரி சொல்லக்கூடிய கலப்பமான மகத்துவம் வாய்ந்த ஸ்லோகம்	Japas, bhajans	A simple, powerful sloka you can chant daily	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mutkk6qcdh8
47	ஜபாதிகள் செல்வத்திற்காக நாம் உபயோகப்படுத்தும் ஆஸனத்தை பற்றி	Japas, bhajans	About the asana we use for doing japa etc.	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2SEW0AprUic
48	சனாதன தர்மத்தில் ஸ்திரீகளுக்கு சொல்லப்பட்டுள்ள ஜபாதி விரதங்கள்	Japas, bhajans	Japas and viradhams for ladies as per Sanatana Dharma	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gSWqj3ThOfs
49	சனி, ஞாயிறு	Japas, bhajans	Parayanams recommended for weekends	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00isO3jMhZA
50	நானாஜி தேஷ்முக்	Nation	About Nanaji Deshmukh being awarded Bharat Ratna	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfe-il_-SGY
51	கனயாகுமரி விவேகானந்தா நினைவு மண்டப வரலாறு	Nation	Vivekananda Memorial, Kanyakumari - the story	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WwSeSbYnZUoc
52	அயோத்யா ராம ஜன்மபூமி இயக்க வரலாறு 1528 - 2019	Nation	Ram Janma Bhoomi Campaign	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5nYC5cobtY
53	ஆர்ஸெஸ் ஷாகாவில் ஸ்வயம்சேவகர்கள் கற்கும் விஷயங்கள்	Nation	What swayamsevakas learn at the RSS shakha	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BasQF4BHMWW
54	டாக்டர் ஹெட்கெவாரை பற்றி ஒரு வார்த்தை	Nation	A word about Dr Hedgewar	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mywZGnzTCSw
55	'விஜில்', நல்லோர் வட்டம் மூலம் 1980 - 90-களில் சமுதாய பணி	Nation	Social work done through VIGIL	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PeiN2L_OKJ0
56	நம்மவர்கள் வெளிநாட்டு குடியரிமை பெற்றுக்கொள்ளுவது சரியா?	Nation	Is it right to obtain foreign citizenship?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A2XBTfZsBE
57	அமாவாசை அன்று பிரஹம் யக்ஞம் எப்போது செய்ய வேண்டும்?	Nityakarma	When to do Brahma Yagnam on Amavasya days	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmAGhub6Bac
58	ஓளபாஸனம், கிருஹஸ்தர்களுக்கு ஒரு நித்ய அக்னி ஆராதனை.	Nityakarma	Aupasanam, a crucial nitya karma for ghrasthas	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_3USh_qPVU
59	சந்த்யாவந்தனம் ஏன் செய்ய வேண்டும்?	Nityakarma	Why should we do sandhya vandanam?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0larfsULvw
60	வியாஸர்-நாரதர் சம்பாஷணையில் சந்த்யாவந்தனம்	Nityakarma	Maha Periyava talks about sandhya vandanam	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhriSBWakxs
61	அக்னிஹோத்ரிகள் மஹனீயர்கள் தபஸ்விகள்	Nityakarma	Doing aghnihotram is the equivalent of tapas	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DjH7IZ_DMSQ
62	பிரணயாமம்-உபநயனம் ஆளவர்கள் மந்திர சூழிதமாக செய்யும் விதம்	Nityakarma	The way to do pranayamam correctly with mantras	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5CIBR95xrc
63	காயத்ரி ஜபம் செய்யும் விதமும் விரல்களால் எண்ணும் முறையும்	Nityakarma	The way to do Gayatri Japam and keep the count	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L-u-Wu0wJJA
64	அக்னிஹோத்ரம் எனும் மஹத்தான அக்னி ஆராதனை	Nityakarma	Aghnihotram, a great worship of the Fire God	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKHsgmobWgM
65	மஹாளய பக்ஷம்: ஒரு வார்த்தை	Nityakarma	Mahalaya paksham - a word	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EM0xQ0kXZgQ
66	சந்த்யாவந்தனமும், நாம ஜப மஹிமையும்	Nityakarma	Sandhya vandanam and Japa mahima	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NzdREKY2DL4
67	காயத்ரி ஜபம் செய்யப்போது பூணூலை பிடித்துக் கொள்ள தேவையில்லை	Nityakarma	No need to hold the poonai while doing Gayatri japam	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrhwMzNZm4

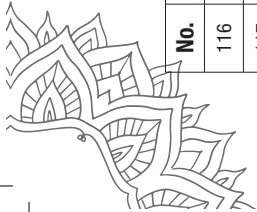




No.	Title of video	Subject	Topic	Link
68	உபநயனமும் அதன் முக்கியத்துவமும்	Nityakarma	Upanayanam and its significance	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atOyVxwpu3E
69	ஆசமனத்தை பற்றி ஒரு வார்த்தை	Nityakarma	Aachamanam - a word	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TgBtmGkzKwA
70	நித்ய கர்மனானுஷ்டானங்களும், ராகு காலமும், எம கண்டமும்	Nityakarma	Do rahukalam and yamakandam affect nitya karmas?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fDTLqjXWJC8
71	வைதிக கர்மாக்களில் எல்லா தீபை பவித்ரமும் ஒன்றல்ல	Nityakarma	All darbhai pavitrams are not the same	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jXE2ZkshvY
72	பூணூல் மற்றும் தர்ப்பை இல்லங்களில் எப்போதும் ஸ்டாக் வேண்டும்	Nityakarma	Always have stock of darbhai and poonal at home	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UmPIbzyHABc
73	சமித்: சரிததானம், பக்ஷயாகாதிகள், பூர்வ, அபர வைதிக கர்மங்களில்	Nityakarma	Samit - its importance in many vaideeka practices	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ec5qe0QXYA
74	அபிவாதயே சொல்லுவது எப்படி?	Nityakarma	How is abhivaadaye to be told?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ao9HcZhnwW0
75	ப்ரஹ்மயங்கும் சக்தி வாய்ந்த கலயமாக செய்யக்கூடிய ஒரு நித்ய கர்மா	Nityakarma	Brahma yagna is a powerful and simple nityakarma	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FaTxWgXDh0k
76	சாயரணைக்கு சந்த்யாவந்தனம் - திசைகள்	Nityakarma	Directions for the evening sandhya vandanam	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1cJ7QB0-tew
77	உபநயனம்: 4வது நாள்தான் நீர் எனச் சொல்லப்படும் விசேஷ பஸை கர்மா	Nityakarma	A special function during Upanayanam (4th day)	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S2MKoka7TM
78	பிரஹ்மச்சரி முயற்சிகள் சமீபத்தானம் செய்வது ரொம்பவும் சலப்பம்	Nityakarma	Samita danam, a simple and powerful nityakarma	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rDYOCLa1ycl
79	உபநயனத்தை, பிரஹ்மோபதேசத்தை தள்ளிப்போடக்கூடாது	Nityakarma	Upanayanam and Brahmapadesam shouldn't be delayed	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I0yWGU5B_V8
80	சந்த்யாவந்தனத்தில் கடைசியில் வரும் 'அத்யா நோ தேவ ஸவித்:'	Nityakarma	"Adhyano deva savitaha"	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JYru0zLg1U
81	ஆதானம், யாகாதிகளுக்கு ஆதாரமாக விளங்கும் விசேஷ கர்மா	Other karmas	Aadhanam, a special karma	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8x8NajfG8
82	ஸமாவர்த்தனம், சமாசர்வநா: ஒரு வார்த்தை	Other karmas	About Samaavaratanam	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8PJYL1DhSw
83	சஷ்டியப்த பூர்த்தி போன்ற வைதிக அனுஷ்டானங்களை தவிர்க்கலாமா?	Other karmas	Can we skip vaideeka karmas like Sashtiabapoorthi?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fs3kyqRBPys
84	பீமாத சாந்தி வைபவம்	Other karmas	Bheemaratha Shanti	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sg3MTAEjaS4
85	ஷட் கர்மாக்கள்: அத்தியான, யஜ்ன, யாஜ்ஞ, தான, பிரதிக்ஷணம்	Other karmas	The shat-karmas (six rituals)	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0915K8ALPk
86	வைஸ்வதேவம் - கிருஷ்ணந்தனங்களுக்கு எடுத்துள்ள ஸ்ரேஷ்டமான கர்மா	Other karmas	Vaisvadevam, a sreshtha karma	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-0Z75mAuQY
87	முயற்சி பிறந்ததும் அனுஷ்டிக்க வேண்டிய (ஜ்ஞன) விருத்தி	Other karmas	Janana vridhi to be performed when a child is born	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TwidHeP90aLE
88	போதாபான மகரிஷிமினால சொல்லப் பட்ட உதக சாந்தியை பற்றி	Other karmas	Bodhayana Maharishi's words about Udaaga shanti	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DI4V5DWPbgo
89	40, 50 வினாடிகளே ஆகும் இந்த அனுஷ்டானத்தை தினமும் செய்யலாமே.	Other karmas	A great practice for piltrus as part of parishechanam	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXjuiJ6opc
90	திக்குவாய் என்பது வியாதி அல்ல. குணப்படுத்த முடியும். நானே உதாரணம்	Philosophies	My stammering and how I got rid of it	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15-lAgc6nFA
91	இதுவும் கடந்து போகும். Let's spread positive vibration around us	Philosophies	How to conduct oneself in trying times	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUIjo-9JXHPU

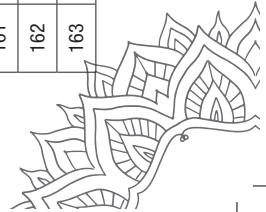
No.	Title of video	Subject	Topic	Link
92	Fight against cancer: கேள்வர் விபரதீபம் நாளும்.	Philosophies	My fight against cancer	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9PwifFXW34
93	ஆத்மாந்த்மமாக செய்யவேண்டிய பூஜை புனஸ்காரங்கள்	Philosophies	Do poojas sincerely and not to show off	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qz8KU1dXj48
94	சந்திர கானடம் - 'உத்தராவத்யே எப்போதும் துண்டு கோல்'	Philosophies	Sundara kandan: enthusiasm is a must for winning	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qxufIMgXnHl
95	நர்க்கை அதாவது, உணவு மற்றும் பேச்சை, கட்டுப்படுத்துதல்	Philosophies	Controlling the tongue	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzSPF92H874
96	ஆங்கிலம் என்பது ஒரு மொழி. புத்திசாலித்தனத்தின் அளவுகோல் ஆகாது	Philosophies	Merely speaking English doesn't make you intelligent	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oNvN2UWHjGy
97	கஷ்டத்துல சகம் இருக்கு, சுகத்தில் சகம் இல்லை	Philosophies	The reality of pain and pleasure	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tshXDS6HmEw
98	பொறுமை காப்போம்	Philosophies	Patience is the key	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ySv_JCFBDM
99	பிரதீபமண தர்மம்: "நேரம் இல்லை" என்று சொன்ன கலம் போயே போச்சு	Philosophies	Finding time to do rituals	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITSA4e4H22l
100	கர்மாக்கள் வினைப் பயன்கள்	Philosophies	Karmas and their effects	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1Wui3ZHpvc
101	"இந்த கேஷத்ரம் அந்த கேஷத்ரத்துக்கு சமம்" இது எந்த அளவு உண்மை?	Pilgrimages	"This kshetra is on par with that one" - how valid?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39LR1UIBQ0M
102	ஸ்வாமி நிருசிம்ஹம், ஸகலம் நிருஸிம்ஹம், தஸ்மான் நிருஸிம்ஹ சாணம்	Pilgrimages	A divine experience in Tirumala	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUsZyUceXk
103	கீழாம்பி: காஞ்சி காமகோடி 60வது அதிஷ்டாணம்	Pilgrimages	Keezhambi: Kanchi 60th Matachipathi Adhishtanam	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zp6ZPHhDnw8
104	திரிவேணி சங்கமம் வரலாற்றுப் பின்னணி	Pilgrimages	Historical background of Triveni Sangamam	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uo3mbyFeM8g
105	ஒருவருக்கு பதிலாக வேறு ஒருவர் புண்யதீர்த்த யாத்திரை செய்யலாமா?	Pilgrimages	Can you do Punyatirtha yatra on behalf of someone else?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VF2e1DQPo0w
106	கயாவில் ஆத்ம பிண்டம் - ஒரு வார்த்தை	Pilgrimages	The atma pindam in Gaya	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a0SZhDuQm-8
107	பூஜை ஜபம் சயங்கனில் மனஸ் அலை பாபந்தால் என்ன செய்வது?	Pooja-related	Controlling the mind during poojas and karma's	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=114dByINDI0
108	வெளி நாட்டில் வாழும் நம்மவர்கள் பூஜை சங்கல்பத்தை பற்றி	Pooja-related	Pooja sankalpam by Hindus living abroad	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWZqX_MXS9k
109	ஸ்வாமி அர்ச்சனைக்கு புஷ்பம்	Pooja-related	Flowers for archana to Swami	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pq25Q3_j2Cl
110	சௌபாங்கத்தை அளிக்கும் லக்ஷம் மஞ்சள் தானம்	Pooja-related	Benefits of Laksha Manjal Daanam	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X8IAOWutCA
111	நைவேத்தியத்தில் அமுக்கல் தேங்காயாக இருந்து விட்டால் குற்றமா?	Pooja-related	If coconut offered in naivedya has gone bad...?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z7hKGCpZy9o
112	இடதுகையில் புஷ்பத்தை வைத்துக்கொண்டு வலது கையால் அர்ச்சனை?	Pooja-related	Can we keep flowers on the left hand during archana?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0qmianbTg
113	நவராத்திரி மஹிமை, ஸரஸ்வதி மஹிமை, ஓரு வார்த்தை.	Pooja-related	Importance of Navaratri celebration	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrgtSig_Vps
114	குங்குமத்தை பிரசீன பத்தத்தியில் இல்லங்களிலேயே செய்யலாம்	Pooja-related	How to make kumkumam at home the traditional way	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cikt2udYs
115	பூஜை புனஸ்காரத்திலேபோது ஸ்திரீகள் கவனிக்க வேண்டிய விஷயம்	Pooja-related	Points to be noted by ladies during poojas	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDemyHqSAU

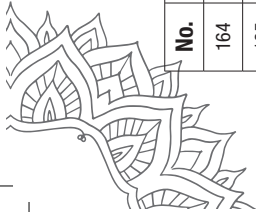




No.	Title of video	Subject	Topic	Link
116	மோதிர விரலை பற்றி ஒரு வார்த்தை	Pooja-related	A word about the ring finger	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qp6Ma2PU408
117	கற்பூர ஹாரதி, துளசி தளம்	Pooja-related	Karpura haarati	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TnP30dFHEOM
118	வேல் - பஞ்சாயதன பூஜை	Pooja-related	Vel - panchayatana pooja	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hKqm8KKGqas
119	புழங்கலரிசி சாத்தத்தை ஸ்வாமிக்கு தைவேத்யம் செய்யலாமா?	Pooja-related	Can we do naivedya with boiled rice?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BqqsZ0hKeM
120	இல்லங்களில் ஸ்வாமி பூஜைக்கு சர்த்தனம் உபயோகப்படுத்துதல்போது	Pooja-related	Use of sandalwood in pujas	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSD-nPwIRHg
121	பூஜை மணியை பற்றி ஒரு வார்த்தை	Pooja-related	A word about the bell used in pooja	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4crJfWuSC4
122	பஞ்சாயதன பூஜை - ஸ்ரீ ஸ்ரீ ஜெயேந்தர் சரஸ்வதி ஸ்வாமிகள்	Pooja-related	Panchayatana pooja - Pudu Periyava's words	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EYVudKSmU_Y
123	இல்லத்தில் நியத பூஜையின்போது நிரம்பிய புஷ்பங்கள்	Pooja-related	Worshipping with nirmalya flowers	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luah9PVK68
124	பால் நைவேத்யத்தின் போது காய்ச்சின பாலா?	Pooja-related	Milk abhishekam - with boiled milk or fresh milk?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDKF7ra0nkQ
125	மஹாநயஸம் - ஒரு வார்த்தை	Scriptures	A word about Mahanyasam	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=saTneyMgqeE
126	பெண்கள் எங்கு மதிக்கப்படுகின்றார்களோ அங்கே இறைவன் குடியிருந்து	Scriptures	Manu Smriti and the respect it gives to women	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B9zq2eNbh_A
127	வேதாரம்பம் குருகுலமாக அனுஷ்டானம் செய்ய வேண்டும்	Scriptures	Vedarambham during Yajur Upakama	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANOCbCbn39M
128	IS UPAKARMA, AVANI AVITTAM, JUST FOR CHANGING THE POONAL?	Scriptures	The purpose of Avani Avittam (in English)	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yX4750_KF3I
129	கந்த சஷ்டி கவசம் மஹிமைகள்	Scriptures	Importance of Kanda Sashti Kavacham	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1xfCvXNw-k
130	வேத சமர்க்குணம்	Scriptures	Families that work for sustenance of the Vedas	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hx8RYQaZKMU
131	திரிஸுபாண மந்திரம் (யஜுர் வேதம்): ஒரு சிறிய விளக்கம்	Scriptures	Trisuparna mantra in Mahanarayanaopanishad	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RHoy-QUgJlg
132	விதுர நீதி - சத்சங்கத்தின் அவசியம்.	Scriptures	Vidura Neeti and its relevance	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gypbKzex_T8
133	கிருஷ்ண பகவும், கல் பகவும் என்றால் என்ன? விளக்கம்	Scriptures	Meaning of Krishna and Sukla Pakshams	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5NRt1r6eE
134	திருக்குறள் ஹிந்து சமய நூலாகும். திருவள்ளூர் ஒரு ஆன்மீகவாதிதான்	Scriptures	Tirukkural is a spiritual text, Tirukkural a spiritual guru	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_RpkXxmWU
135	வேத பாடசாலைகள்: ஒரு சிந்தனை	Scriptures	Veda Patasalas - a thought	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fo6yNvabedU
136	Sri Mantra Peeteswari Veda Patasala, Kumbakonam	Scriptures	Sri Mantra Peeteswari Veda Patasala, Kumbakonam	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIDwSoyC91w
137	"குதிரம்" என்றால் என்ன? குதிரத்தை பற்றி ஒரு வார்த்தை	Scriptures	What is 'Sutra'? A word	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3YKm_ahYP0
138	பகவத் கீதையிலிருந்து 5 ஸ்லோகங்கள்: குல தர்மம் - வர்ண ஸங்கர:	Scriptures	5 Shlokas from Bhagavad Gita on varna sankaraha	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPrIQT7Nv3Cs
139	ஆன்மிகமும் பக்தியும் தொண்டும் ஒருசேர அமைந்த பெரிய புராணம்	Scriptures	Periya Puranam - treasure house of spirituality & service	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6vIBzHsVc

No.	Title of video	Subject	Topic	Link
140	ஸ்ரீ ருத்ரமும், அதன் மகிமைமும்	Scriptures	Sri Rudram and its powers	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QlhoWF9Br3s
141	ஆவணி அவிட்டம் புது பூனூல் மாரற்றிக்கொள்ளுவதற்காக அல்ல	Scriptures	The purpose of Avani Avittam (in Tamil)	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x74Wpusw07o
142	வேதத்திற்கு பிரசித்தமான பெயர் ச்ருதி என்பதாலும்	Scriptures	Veda is known famously as 'sruti' and by 2 other names	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p10QpsSWGs8
143	நமது வைவ சித்தார்த்தத்தில் பெக்கிஷுவன பன்னிரு திருமுறையை பற்றி	Scriptures	About Panniru Thirumurai	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5FvVIAes5Us
144	"ஹிரண்ய கப்பகப்ஸ்தம் தோம ஸ்ரீம் விபாவலோப..." - இதன் அர்த்தம்	Scriptures	Meaning of "Hiranya garbha garbhashtam..."	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LIEysApo8B4
145	காயத்ரி மந்திரத்தை பதாவிதிபாகத்தான் செய்ய வேண்டும்	Scriptures	Gayatri mantra to be chanted only as prescribed	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11hc3ZbeA5o
146	சங்கல்பமும் அதன் விளக்கமும், ஹிந்து காலக்கணக்கீடு - கடவுளின் நேரம்	Scriptures	Explanation of Sankalpam and the Hindu calendar	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVx30gKL4mg
147	கோ ஸஞ்சிதம் கேளுங்கள்	Scriptures	About Go suktam	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rebTYfzi4
148	நாம் கற்ற வேதம் மறக்காமல் இருப்பதற்கு	Scriptures	To ensure we don't forget the Vedas we learn	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmn8Ksl0nMs
149	சாஸ்வதமான வேதத்தில் உள்ள அறிவுரைகள்	Scriptures	The advice offered in our Vedas	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t4HH_NgAk2s
150	ஆங்கில புத்தாண்டுக்கு ஹிந்து ஆன்மீக முக்கியத்துவம் சரியா?	Social practices	Is it OK to give religious status for English New Year Day?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0R56M_z7Zw
151	Digital Heroin குழந்தைகளை அழிக்கும் அசுரன்	Social practices	Are mobile games destroying children?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFzKflkxP0
152	கல்யாண மண்டபங்களில் கூட தரையில் உட்கார்ந்து சாப்பிடும் பழக்கம்	Social practices	Eating in public functions squatting on the floor	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zj2luR_dIDo
153	குலதெய்வத்தின் அல்லது முன்னோர்களின் பெயரை வைப்பது ஸ்மேஷ்டம்	Social practices	Naming the child using name of kuladeivam/forefather	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ww9vPgg0wY
154	வாழைப்பழத்தில் ஊதுவத்தி ஏற்றலாமா?	Social practices	Setting up joss sticks on a banana	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LB9A_v2dDW0
155	சர்வ நதி ரஜஸ்வலை: அந்த மூன்று நாட்கள்	Social practices	Sarva nadi rajasvalai - 3 days to avoid going to a river	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0yrgvcmED_M
156	கல்யாணம் மாதிரி வைதிக விசேஷங்களில் வீடியோ மற்றும் ஃபோட்டோ	Social practices	Video/photographing during vaideeka events	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jaZk4EP4XY0
157	கோலமும் அதன் முக்கியத்துவமும்	Social practices	Kolam and its importance	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9BAIU60G2N4
158	நமது பாரம்பரிய உடை	Social practices	Our traditional dress	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swtkYhTuw4
159	ஆபிரே பிரபோகம் - ஒரு வார்த்தை	Social practices	Aabichara pryoga aka billi sooniyaam	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMf5RqR1oGw
160	அர்த்த புஷ்யபுள்ள நமது சமஸ்காரங்களின் பெயர்கள்	Social practices	Why change names of our religious practices?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YFqP7YcqDbQ
161	அஷ்டய திருதியை பற்றி ஒரு வார்த்தை	Social practices	Is buying Gold good on Akshaya Tritiya?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3fsdT2021M
162	சம்ஸ்கிருதத்தை எல்லோரும் கற்றுக் கொள்ளலாம்	Social practices	Sanskrit may be learnt by everyone	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fmal01Hmwio
163	இந்த "பரத் தே பார்டுகள்" நம்மை படுத்தும பாடு	Social practices	The trouble with birthday parties	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwO_vJKP81k





No.	Title of video	Subject	Topic	Link
164	சமையல் அறையில் பத்துபாத்ராங்கள் கத்தும் செய்தல்	Social practices	Cleaning pattu-patram in the kitchen	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aY2df0Pv4E8
165	சித்ரங்களின் மேல் பதிந்துள்ள தூசி தட்டும்போது கவனிக்க வேண்டியது	Social practices	Points to note while dusting pictures of Gods	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yu9KjwNZ-pA
166	Using SOAPS & OTHER TOILETRIES in the sacred river is a sin	Social practices	Using SOAPS & OTHER TOILETRIES in the sacred river is a sin	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUJy2nlsnEE
167	பெரியவர்களுக்கு நமஸ்காரம் செய்வதில் நியமங்கள்	Social practices	Dos and don'ts in doing namaskaram to elders	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f9EG9qzn3_o
168	மோசமான ட்ரெண்ட் குழந்தைகள் எச்சில் உணவை பகிர்ந்து சாப்பிடுவது	Social practices	It's wrong for children to eat from the same container	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzeHw21WWg
169	கோவிலுக்கு செல்லும்போது நமது பாரம்பரிய உடைமின் அவசியம்	Social practices	Traditional dress is a must when going to temples	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJ6tHPvWnTM
170	ஆண்கள் சந்தனத்தை இட்டுக்கொள்ளும் பத்தி	Social practices	How should men apply sandhanam on their bodies?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k62P8PR8qeY
171	காவி கலர் வேஷ்டியை கிருஹஸ்தர்கள் அணிவது உசிதம் அல்ல	Social practices	Kaavi vestiti is not to be worn by ghrasthanas	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELXKSZrME
172	தானம், தர்மம் - இவைகள் இரண்டும் ஒன்றா? அல்லது வித்யாசம் உள்ளதா?	Social practices	Are dana and dharma the same?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gBlnv/cvhlLO
173	வீழ்தியை குழைந்து இட்டுக்கொள்ளுவது ஸ்லாக்யமா, குழைக்காமலா?	Social practices	How to apply the vibhuti on your forehead	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wuY0vbcijw
174	நமது ஹிந்து தர்மத்தில் திலக தாரணத்திற்கு முக்கியத்துவம்	Social practices	Importance of (ladies) adorning tilak	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_N4PPvP6NU
175	டைனியம் டேபிரும், நாரும்	Social practices	The dining table	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gi-uFPzW878
176	குழந்தை பேறு	Social practices	Begetting children	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vvolUG0HkGo
177	சார்த்தத்திகள் போன்ற பித்ரு கார்யங்கள் ஃபோட்டோ எடுப்பது உசிதமா?	Social practices	Photography of Pitru karyam - is it correct?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1r9g97CsKRg
178	'நல்லது செய்கின்றோம்' என நினைத்து பலர் ஏற்படுத்தும் தர்ம சங்கடம்	Social practices	Pictures being given as gift	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L7qq95Ba1l
179	PRE & WEDDING VIDEO CAMERA SHOOTs are against Hindu culture	Social practices	PRE-WEDDING VIDEO CAMERA SHOOTs (in English)	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2f5y0GGeEY
180	ஆசெசம் என்றால் தீட்டு, தீட்டு எப்பதும் ஒரு புண்ணியமான காரியம்தான்	Social practices	The concept of taint	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PcxW6y2UVec
181	உபந்யாஸம், பிரவசனம் - மதுரிமை	Social practices	Power of upanyasa and pravachana	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h0FZL2SQvg
182	"புரீ-வெட்டிங் வீடியோ/கேமரா ஷூட்" என ஒரு கத்து ஆரம்பித்துள்ளது	Social practices	PRE-WEDDING VIDEO CAMERA SHOOTs (in Tamil)	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=de32f1s_o
183	இன்றைய காலகட்டத்தில் பல இல்லங்களில் "தனிமை" படுத்தும் பாடு	Social practices	The travails of loneliness in many a home these days	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DblmBK80MBo
184	சமங்கலி பிரார்த்தனை வெள்ளி அல்ல திங்கட்கிழமைதான் விசேஷம்	Social practices	The best day for a Sumangali Prarthana	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rcn2b2U11go
185	இந்த என்ருண்ணை, அதிர்சம், வடை சமாராரம், சார்த்தம்	Social practices	Eatables prepared for a sraaddha	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8P11XKcUwMk
186	நமது பண்டிகைகளை கொண்டாடுவோம், சந்திமினருக்கு முன்னுதரணமாக	Social practices	Please celebrate festivals to set precedent for next gen	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mbbs70Q75Ho
187	காலையில் ஸ்த்ரீகள் வாசல்படியை ஜலம் தெளித்து அலம்புவது லக்ஷியமாக	Social practices	Water-wash of the porch every morning by ladies	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1t0YHGZ6Gf8

A CLASSIFIED LIST OF SELECTED VIDEOS ON SARMA SASTRIGAL AND HIS WORK

No.	Title of video	Subject	Topic	Link
188	ரொடிமேட்ட பஞ்சகச்ச வேங்குடி வேண்டாமே	Social practices	Readymade panchakachcham? No please	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAsQVzNmiOU
189	விவாஹ நிலையதார்த்த நிகழ்ச்சியில் தவிர்க்கப்பட வேண்டிய விஷயம்	Social practices	To be avoided in nichchayathartha functions	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXA2HBCjgs
190	சகாத்சி வரதம் பற்றி ஒரு வார்த்தை	Viradhams	A word about Ekadasi viradham	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsfFrsA73w

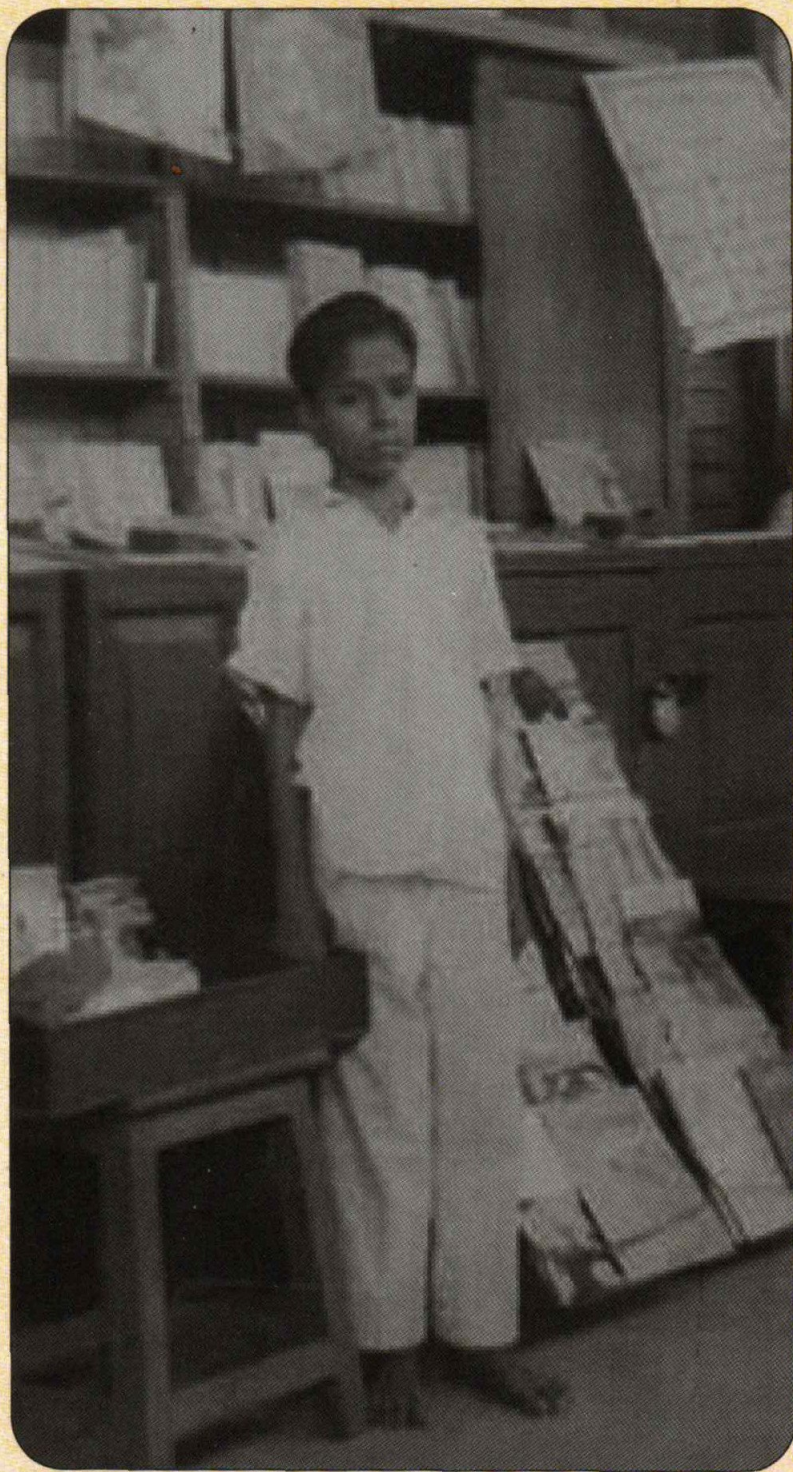
No.	Title of video	Subject	Topic	Link
1	Wonderful Video presentation by vidyarthies who learn Veda	Classes	Teaching of Vedas	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDPPUzTVxo
2	சமஷ்டி சமிதாதானம் முகாம் சென்னையில் 5 மே 2019	Events	Samita danam workshop	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NV9Pnll_pPw
3	Samashti Panchayatana Puja vaibhavam in Chennai, 29/5/16	Events	Panchayatana Puja	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYBOHIZMSQ&feature=youtu.be
4	2019 Amarkandak Veda Vaibhavam, Madhya Pradesh	Events	Veda Parayanam	https://www.facebook.com/Sarmasasthigal/videos/2702908959831524
5	ஸ்ரீசைத்தில் மே 2019ல் நடைபெற்ற மஹா பெரியவா ஜயந்தி	Events	Mahta Periyava Jayanti	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTte-X8Gso
6	Simply Divine Bliss: Veda Vaibhavam on the banks of Ganga river in Rishikesh	Events	Veda Parayanam	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WuVmNol_zQv8
7	ராஜஸ்தான் புஷ்கர் க்ஷேத்ரத்தில் சம்பூர்ண யஜுர்வேத பாராயணம்	Events	Veda Parayanam	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=taZrHdXM34
8	Keynote address on the 473rd Annual Day of Raja Veda Patasala	Events	Annual Day at Raja Veda Patasala	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DD-t7JcGjY8
9	Modi hits back at Farooq Abdullah	Hinduism	Narendra Modi on Secularism	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LD32c2P-sW8
10	சர்மார சாஸ்திரிகள் அவர்களின் வாழ்க்கை பயணம் 1970-களில்	Nation	Pracharak days with the RSS 1970-75	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NL_daxLpNIM&feature=youtu.be
11	1970 - களையாகுமரி ஜில்லா தக்கலை பகுதியில் நடைபெற்ற நிகழ்வு	Nation	Takkalai incident narrated to Bala Periyava	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=004cAGmIOD0





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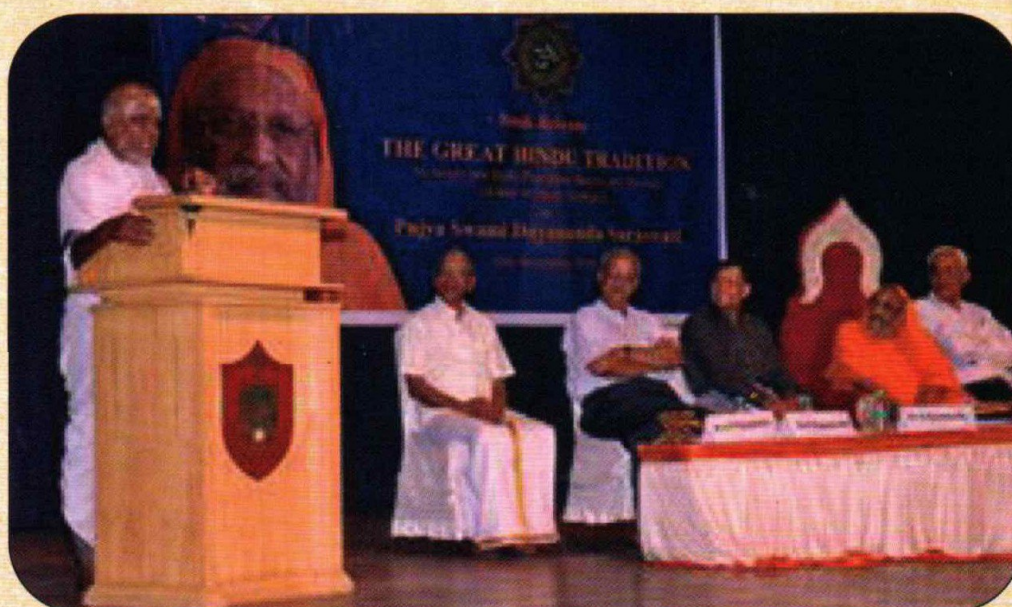




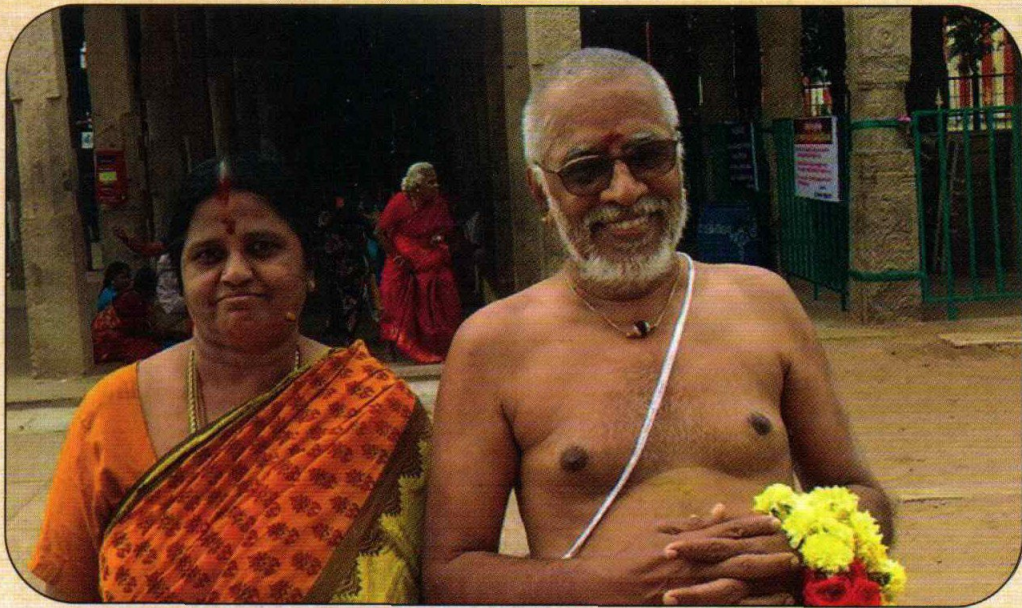
*During school days, Sarma selling newspapers
at the Railway Station, Renigunta*



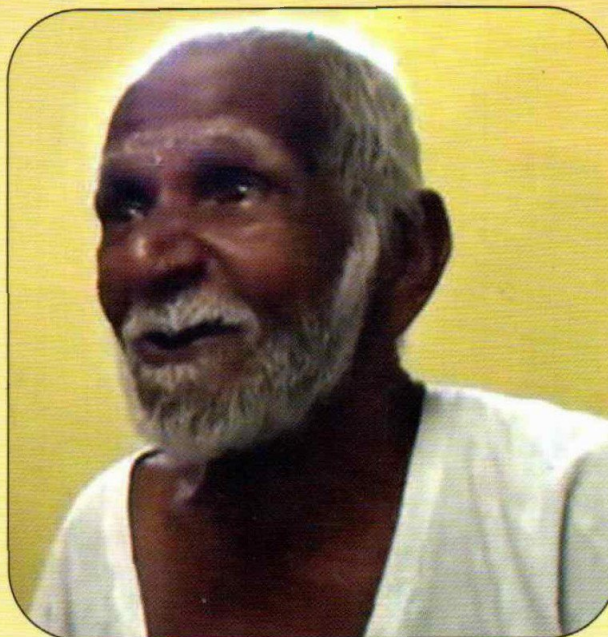
*VIGIL days. Swaminatha Sarma
addressing a gathering*



*'The Great Hindu Tradition' Book Launch function.
Swami Dayananda Saraswati blesses*



*Family photo taken during Sarma Sastrigal's
Bheema Rata Shanti function in 2019*



“

Complacency will appear in any form which makes us feel that we are better, much better than many amongst us, not only spiritually but also in other aspects. Only thing is we should always feel in our heart that we are insignificant, smallest of the small.

”

Sri Sankarji, Sarma Sastrigal's Gurunathar