

SRI RAMANUJA

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF MANAVALA MAMUNIGAL

BY

SRI S. SATYAMURTHI IYENGAR, GWALIAR

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JAGADACHARYA. P. B. ANNANGARACHARYA SWAMI

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A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF MANAVALA MAMUNIGAL

[An English version of Sri P. B. Anangaracharya Swami's love-laden and awe-inspiring Tamil biography, published in "Sri Ramanujan-190," by Sri S. Satyamurthi Iyengar, Gwalior.]

INTRODUCTION

Of the two distinct realms emprised in the Lord's kingdom, namely, 'Nityavibhuthi' and 'Leelavibhuthi', the latter is looked upon by the realised souls (gnanis) as the land of darkness or nescience. The darkness alluded to here is not its physical aspect, which can be dispelled by luminous bodies like fire, Sun, Moon etc., but the darkness within, the impenetrable age-long mental stupor, which could be blotted out only by that extraordinary Sun, which appeared on the spiritual firmament, in the person of Sri Ramanuja. After vanquishing the athiests, agnostics and heretics, who had brought about a sort of moral paralysis unto the soul-elevating doctrines of the Vedas, through his all-conquering erudition and enlightenment, and resuscitating the Vedas and putting them on their true and legitimate Pedestal, he completed the mission of his Avatar (descent), by ensuring the schematic propagation of the great hymns of the Azhwars and the happy preservation of the Divya Desams (pilgrim centres) hallowed by their songs, before returning to the Supreme Realm, whence he had come. It is against this background, that Sri Ramanuja is extolled as the foster-mother of the Divya Prabandhams, yielded by the Azhwars, but nourished and stabilised by him. However, after some time, the fate, which had earlier befallen the Sanskrit Vedas leading to the advent of Sri Ramanuja, overtook Dramida Vedas (Divya Prabandhams) also. At the Lords's behest, Sri Ramanuja re-incarnated as Manavala Mamunigal and excelled his previous record in many ways and performed the great miracle of transforming this abode, notorious for its ignorance, into one of enlightenment and faith in the Supreme. His unique qualities of head and heart would baffle description even by the thousand-headed 'Adi Sesha', who, incidentally, is but another manifestation of himself,

The illustrious hierarchy of the Vaishnavite preceptors, known in Vaishnavite Parlance as "poorvacharyas" has its happy culmination in

Manavala Mamunigal and none, after him, could join that great panel, however exalted. The personification of sweetness, it was in the fitness of things that Mamunigal completed the great galaxy. This only redounds to the wisdom of the Omniscient Lord. c.f. the dictum. [*மதுரேணஸ்மாபயேத்*]

During His many incarnations, the Lord had the most unenviable experience. As Dasaratha-Rama, he bowed before sage Viswamitra and served him, ever ready to serve still more, and it was only some time later, he came to know from sage Sadanand, in the wake of Ahalya's reclamation from her terrific curse, the life history of Viswamitra, marking him out as a combination of the Rajasic and Tamasic traits. Rama sought refuge in Sugreeva, the monkey king, but was soon driven to the necessity of admonishing him severely through Lakshmana. And then, failure on the part of the king of the ocean to respond to Rama's entreaty to open up a causeway in the sea, chagrined Rama to the extent of threatening complete dehydration of the whole brine.

In the next Avatar as Krishna, He fared no better. He went through the rigours of learning, studying under Sandipani. At the conclusion of the course, the disciple solicited the Guru's choice in regard to the reward (fee) payable by the former for the lessons imparted to him, only to be called upon to regrant his son, swept off by the sea long back. The great Lord in the garb of a human disciple was indeed stung by the remorseful thought of a Guru, longing for such ephemeral wordly gains.

Having met with disappointment, at every turn, during the 'Vibhava Avatars', the Lord was bent upon retrieving the position in 'Archa Avatar', as Ranganatha (enshrined in the temple at Srirangam), through a Guru of the pre-eminence of Mamunigal. A brief sketch of the life-history of Mamunigal of such unique excellence, the stead-fast pillar of Vaishnavism, has been attempted below.

THE BIRTH OF MAMUNIGAL

The line of succession in the hierarchy of the 'Poorvacharyas' from and after Sri Ramanuja runs as follows :-

- | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Sri Ramanuja. | 5. Nampillai. |
| 2. Embar. | 6. Vadakku Thiruveedhi Pillai. |
| 3. Parasara Bhattar. | 7. Pillai Lokacharya. |
| 4. Nanjeeyar. | 8. Tiruvoimozhippillai. |
| 9. Sri Manavala Mamunigal. | |

Note: EMBAR (2): It was, by virtue of his pre-eminence, that he could earn his place, in the line of succession, next to Sri Ramanuja, although there were hundreds of disciples gathered round Sri Ramanuja, during his life-time.

Mamunigal was born as the son of the illustrious Thirunaveerudaiya Piran Dasarannar, in the 4472nd year or Kaliyuga, under the influence of the star ‘Moolam’ in the Tamil month of Aippasi (October—November), at Thirukkurugoor, (Azhwar Tirunagari) in Tirunelvely district, South India, the birth place of saint Nammazwar. It was a red-letter day in the annals of Vaishnavism, which, however, sounded the death-knell of the obstinate, perverse and misdirected logicians, entangled in interminable logomachy and covering the land with a thick gloom of nihilism. The excellence of this day has been proclaimed in the following verse, by his ardent votaries:

“The exalted Manavala Muni of everlasting fame came down to our midst, on the gem-set day in Aippasi, presided by the star ‘Moolam’;

The day of rejoicing of Scholars famed for clarity, well-versed in the Tamil Vedas, sweet and chaste;

The day, when the great Lokacharya’s precious works shone forth, in all their splendour;

The day, which boosted, to the high Heavens, the very duds on earth;

The day, which spurted up the gospel of Savants of immaculate knowledge like Yathiraja (Ramanuja, the Prince among ascetics);

The day, which shed lustre on the hymns of saint Nammazhwar of Kurugoor, surrounded by orchids, full of fragrance;

The day, which feasted the dazzled eyes of the sky-blue Lord of Srirangam.”

Desirous of giving this babe of unique grandeur and excellence, the name of Lord Ranganatha, the parents named him as “Alagiya Manavalan”, alias “Alagiya Manavala Nayanar.” He went through the ritualistic rites of ‘Annaprasana’, ‘Choula’ and ‘Upanayanam’, at the appropriate phases.

EDUCATION

An incarnation of Adishesha, * (ஸ்தோத்ராத்ந ஸ்லோகம்-39) the repository of immense might and knowledge, Nayanar was himself an ocean of knowledge, and yet he learnt at the feet of his erudite father and others, the Vedas and Vedangas and the Shastras, in the same way as Sri Rama and Sri Krishna had, during their stay on earth, gone through a course of studies under sages Vasishtha, Viswamitra, Sandipani etc. In due time, he entered upon the duties of a householder and led an exemplary life in the manner portrayed by Sri Kulasekaha Azhwar in his hymns entitled “Perumal Thirumozhi”, the sparkling gem of true Vaishnavism. *[புரக்ருஷ்டவிஜ்ஞானபலேகதாமநி.]

COURTING A PRECEPTOR

Thirumalai Azhwar, the successor to Pillai Lokacharya. in the chain of the great preceptors (Poorvacharyas), had studied at the feet of that great master, all the Sastras and esoteric texts of Vaishnavism and acquired the name of Thiruvoimozhippillai, by dint of his love of unique intensity for the radiant and refreshing hymns of the Azhwars, in general, and saint Nammazhwar's Thiruvoimozhi, in particular. He was looking out anxiously for his successor in the apostolic line, who would propagate Vaishnavism after his tenure of life on earth. By a strange coincidence, Nayanar also pined for an Acharya (preceptor), like Thiruvoimozhippillai. Prostrating before him the young suppliant prayed, in all humility, that an insignificant and shallow being like himself be enlisted as his disciple and pulled up. The master's joy knew no bounds at the prospect of having a disciple of the excellence and conduct of Nayanar and hugged him close to his bosom. A hot favourite that Nayanar was, the great master imparted to him all that massive learning, transmitted through the unbroken succession of Masters.

THE THRILLING MANDATE FROM THE ACHARYA

(THIRUVOIMOZHI PILLAI)

One day, the great Master (Thiruvoimozhippillai) beckoned Nayanar and addressed him as follows with great feeling and affection:

“O Azhagiya Manavalar! It is my great good fortune that has made me your preceptor, in the same way as Peria Nambi, Thirumalai Andan etc., functioned as teachers for the self-luminous Ramanuja, an incarnation of Adishesha. You stand possessed of perfect knowledge, in all branches. I am sure you are aware of the fact that (Koorathu) Azhwan, Bhattar,

Nampillai and others of that illustrious line, though fully conversant with all the Shastras, had a special predilection for the sweet hymns of the Azhwars and abided in them, all the time. Did not Periyavachan Pillai lay down a clear-cut code, when he commended to his disciples, the example of the great Nampillai, and advised them to get themselves initiated in ‘Dvayam’ the Mantra-Ratna (gem of a mantra), then pass on to an intense study of the Ithihasas (Ramayana and Mahabharatha), thereafter acquire a knowledge of ‘Nyaya’ and ‘Meemamsa’, so as to be able to deal with their religious opponents, suitably in any disquisition, and eke out the rest of their lives in the all-too-absorbing enjoyment, study and discourse of the hymns of the Azhwars (gracefully bequeathed to our parched-up lips)? May you also emulate the illustrious forebears and walk in their footsteps by propagating the Divya Prabandhams’. This is my yearning and I shall rest at peace, when I realise that you have responded and taken up this sacred mission whole-heartedly.”

Well, this was exactly Nayanar’s own bent of mind and now that it received his Acharya’s official sanction, he was overwhelmed with joy and fell at the Master’s feet, like an uprooted tree, declaring, in the name of those blessed feet, his avidity to fulfil the sacred mission and seeking their unfailing grace to get him through. That very moment, the loving Master picked up the disciple, caressed him and showered on him the choicest blessings. Thenceforward, the zealous master poured forth on Nayanar all the accumulated treasures of knowledge and this was gratefully acknowledged by the latter, who exclaimed that he had in his Master, a wholesome combination of mother’s uninhibited love, the father’s chastising care, the preceptor’s grace galore, the means and blissful end rolled into one, God and what not,—the great one, who granted his disciple his very existence. The ingratiating went the whole hog out and the disciple’s mission, whole and sole, was the service of his master, apart from whom he knew no God.

ACQUIRING A NEW NAME, “YATHEENDRA PRAVANAR”

One day, while meditating on the great qualities of Emberumanar (Ramanuja), Thiruvoimozhippillai pondered over those stanzas of Thiruvarangathamudanar, which describe Ramanuja as a staunch devotee of saint Nammazhvar (Maran), who proclaimed to the inhabitants of this wide world, end to end, the great glory of the Azhvar’s hymns and ran riotous with the joy spouting from those hymns, like unto the intoxication of an elephant in rut. This led Thiruvoimozhippillai to think in terms of raising a fitting

memorial for Ramanuja in Thirunagari, the birth place of Nammazhvar. So, a temple was built and an image of Ramanuja installed therein, duly consecrated. The surrounding streets named as "Sri Ramanuja Chaturvedi Mangalam" were permanently inhabited exclusively by the ardent worshippers of Ramanuja and the zealous disciple, Alagia Manavala Nayanar was called upon to stay there and look after the daily routine of the temple. Nayanar's extra-ordinary devotion to this great cause earned the approbation of Thiruvoimozhippillai, who started calling Nayanar as "Yatheendra Pravanar", to signify the enormous love borne by him for Ramanuja, the prince of ascetics, a name which soon gained currency and became wide-spread.

SANSKRIT HYMNS ON RAMANUJA, ENTITLED "YATHIRAJA VIMSATI"

At the behest of Thiruvoimozhippillai, Nayanar composed twenty Sanskrit Slokas in adoration of Ramanuja, known as 'Yathiraja Vimsati'. In one of these Slokas, "Sriman Yateendra! Tava Divya Padabja Sevam", he has referred to the devotional services of his Acharya (Thiruvoimozhippillai) at the lotus-feet of Ramanuja, which again is an expression of his gratitude to the Master. Nayanar's co-disciples composed a verse to commemorate the birth of these twenty Slokas, eulogising the author and his hymns, which would sustain the entire horde of devotees and make them flourish. As regards the sweetness and grace of these Slokas, the reader has only to refer to Anna's 'Varavaramuni Satakam' where he has paid glowing tributes to these Slokas. Some might question the propriety of Nayanar, himself an incarnation of Ramanuja, extolling Ramanuja and reducing himself to abject humility. The answer to this is, that this is quite in keeping with any Avatar; c. f. Sri Rama, an incarnation of Bhagwan Narayana, who worshipped the idols of Narayana, i.e. Lord Ranganatha.

GETTING A SON

A son was born to the Swami (Nayanar) like unto a moon shining against the expansive milky ocean and was named "Ramanujappillai", as advised by Thiruvoimozhippillai. It was Ramanujappillai's son, Jeeyar Nayanar, who flourished as a celebrated scholar and author.

THIRUVOIMOZHIPPILLAI RETURNS TO THE CELESTIAL ABODE

The mortal coils of the great Master were withering with age and he prayed intensively to his Acharya (Pillai Lokacharya) for the early release from

bondage, The Acharya did respond and appearing before the devout disciple in a dream, one night, commanded that he shall repair to the land of interminable bliss (heaven). Thiruvoimozhippillai at once got up from bed and jubilantly pored over the stanzas of Nammazhvar referring to his ascent to heaven through the Lord's grace. The next morning, he summoned all his disciples and told the gathering that his Acharya having been pleased to take him to his (Acharya's) glorious feet in heaven, they should thenceforward pay obeisance to Alagiya Manavala Nayanar, regarding him as none other than a re-incarnation of Ramanuja and take refuge in him. Right then, he installed Nayanar in the Master's Gadi, exclaiming that all his hopes for the glorious expansion and propagation of Vaishnavism were pinned on him, even as king Janaka had set all hopes on Sita and bade her bring undying fame to the family of her origin, through her wedding with Dasaratha-Rama. Pillai added that there was little more for him to tell a true and trusted lieutenant of proven mettle and devotion, like Nayanar, but, at the same time, the Acharya's parting desire was that Nayanar should take up his residence at Srirangam, the hallowed land, where the Azhvars and Acharyas had concentrated most lovingly and propagated Vaishnavism, and persevere in the good old activities of his previous Avatar as Ramanuja, namely eradicating, root and branch, the other pernicious systems of philosophy, preservation of the wealth of Tennarangar (the glory and traditional worship of Lord Ranganatha) in its pristine purity, clear-cut exegesis of the Vedas through the media of the works of Nammazhvar, thereby raising a golden age on earth, transforming this land of gloom and darkness into a veritable heaven, famed for its unalloyed bliss and beatitude. After the due worship of the deity enshrined in the local temple, "Polindu Ninra Piran" and of Nammazhvar, Pillai passed away, meditating intently upon the blissful feet of his master (Pillai Lokacharya). All the disciples headed by Nayanar performed the obsequies with the utmost devotion.

SRI VANAMAMALAI JEEYAR SEEKS SWAMI'S TUTELAGE

The Swami's aura, emanating from his full-fledged learning and implicit obedience to his Acharya's directions, attracted several great persons, from far and wide, to Thirunagari and they sought refuge at his feet. Important among them was Sri Ramanuja Jeeyar of Vanamamalai (a great scholar, by name, Azhagiya Varadar, turned ascetic, in renunciation of wordly pleasures), known also as Ponnadikkal Jeeyar, an inseparable associate of the Swami.

PROCEEDING TO SRIRANGAM, AFTER TAKING LEAVE OF NAMMAZHVAR AT HIS SHRINE

While chanting Ramanuja's 'Gadya Thrayam' on a Thiruvadirai day (the day when the moon transited the star Thiruvadirai, the birth-star of Ramanuja), the Swami came upon the line therein, which ordains Sri Ramanuja (and through him every Vaishnavite) to reside in Srirangam till the end of his life, which at once reminded him of his Acharya's own mandate to this effect. Thereafter, the Swami lost no time in implementing it and begged leave of Nammazhvar at his shrine, to proceed to Srirangam. The requisite permission coupled with the sweet blessings of the Azhvar having been granted for the happy consummation of his life's mission at the feet of Lord Ranganatha, the Swami left Thirunagari for Srirangam.

PILGRIMAGE TO SRIRANGAM

A recipient of the sweet benedictions of Nammazhvar, Nayanar was jubilant over the certain prospect of Lord Ranganatha focussing His Grace on him and set out on his pilgrimage to Srirangam, in high spirits. He, along with his disciples, visited, enroute, Srivilliputhur, the birth place of Sri Andal, where nature has lavished her bounty and the swans strut about with gentle grace, full of yearning for the sight of the golden feet of the Lord, enshrined in the local temple (Vatapatra Sayi) and worshipped at that shrine, as well as the shrines of Periazhvar and Andal. After staying there for a few days, in response to the requests of the local residents, edifying those who gathered around and solicited his grace, Nayanar proceeded to Thirumalirumsolai, near Mathurai and worshipped the famous Azhagar, enshrined in the temple at the foot of the hill, after bathing in the waterfall at the top of the hill, which attracts even the angelic damsels from their celestial abodes, their anklets jingling musically. At the very place, where Koorathazhvan had stayed and composed his panegyric, entitled 'Sundarbahu Sthava', in adoration of the local deity with handsome shoulders, the Swami discoursed on this laudation, before resuming his journey to Srirangam. As the party wended its way to Srirangam, the members regaled themselves with the sweet recital of the hymns of the Azhvars and the slokas sung by the great devotees of yore, in adoration of the glorious setting of Srirangam, the Lord enshrined there, and the sacred river, Cauvery, girdling it. On reaching the destination, Nayanar had the supreme satisfaction of being then, at the very feet of the Godliest of Gods. After finishing his daily ablutions, he got along inside the temple and was

delighted to see the seven sets of streets, one behind the other, encircling the shrine of Lord Ranganatha and proclaiming the piety of the kings of old.

At that time, there lived in Srirangam an august person by name ‘Annar’. When Nayanar called on ‘Annar’, the latter received the former with all honours, having already heard about his greatness. After conversing with Nayanar for a short while, Annar was convinced beyond doubt about the supremacy of Nayanar’s learning and equipment and, therefore, he decided to have him received at the temple with due honours. The in-charge, Thirumalai Thantha Perumal Bhattar was sent for, who arrived and soon realised and averred before all present there, that Nayanar was none other than Ramanuja re-incarnate, and saw to it that he was received inside the temple with all honours and given all facilities for worship.

WORSHIP AT SRIRANGAM TEMPLES

Accompanied by his disciples and several others, Nayanar began his round of worship at the shrine of Srirangam, by entering the shrine of Saint Ramanuja (Emperumanar), where, enthralled by the exquisite beauty of the Image, he exclaimed that all the images of Ramanuja, worshipped by him at the various places, were no doubt sweet, but he had his heart’s fill only on seeing this marvel of an Image at Srirangam. Thereafter, Nayanar worshipped Lord Ranganatha, surrounded by His celestial paraphernalia, reciting with intense feeling and devotion the Prabandhams—‘Thirumalai’, ‘Amalanadipiran’ etc. and Stotras like ‘Sri Rangaraja Sthavam’. Great was the delight of the Lord, who spake thus, through the temple priest:—

“We have at long last, got the very person We were after, all along: Our reputation for being absolutely full and perfect, free from desire of any kind, acquires a meaning only today”.

The priest lavished all honours on Nayanar, who, however, ascribed all that glory to his blessed contact with the great ones like Annar and Bhattar, referred to earlier.

Nayanar then visited the residence of Pillai Lokacharya. Prostrating at the door-step, the Swami kissed the very earth, sanctified by the birth of the esoteric tenets of Vaishnavism. His devotion didn’t stop there. He visited that hallowed spot, every day and discoursed on the secret texts, both for his own edification, as well as that of his audience.

PILGRIMAGE TO THE DIVYA DESAMS (PLACES HALLOWED BY THEIR MENTION IN THE HYMNS OF THE AZHVARS)

Nayanar, desirous of visiting all the Thirupathis (important pilgrim centres of the Vaishnavites) in Chola kingdom and Tondaimandalam region, obtained from Lord Ranganatha, the requisite permission and started on the pilgrimage, along with his disciples. In the course of their itinerary, the party reached the Thirupathi Hills (Thiruvenkatam) in the Tamil month of Purattasi, on the eve of the annual festival of the Deity. After partaking of the blissful experience in that great pilgrim centre, Nayanar and party set out for Kancheepuram (Perumal Koil, in Vaishnavite parlance).

PROPITIATION OF PERARULALAN (DEVARAJA)

After offering worship at all the Vaishnavite shrines around Kancheepuram, Nayanar worshipped Lord Varadaraja and His divine Consort Perundevi. Deeply absorbed in the nectarine charm of the Image of Varadaraja, he readily responded to the request of his disciples and sang the hymns entitled "Sri Devaraja Mangalam", in adoration of that Deity. The elders have it that, on this occasion, Nayanar also composed two Slokas, in praise of all the Deities (Vishnu) in that region.

THE SWAMI'S INITIAL ROLE AS A STUDENT, AND THEN AS AN EXPONENT, OF 'SRI BHASHYAM'

Out of deference to his Acharya's wish, the Swami studied, under the illustrious Kidambi Nayanar at Kanchi, 'Sri Bhashyam', the famous commentary on the Brahma Sutras of Badarayana or Vyasa, by Sri Ramanuja (the previous Avatar of the Swami). Before embarking on the study in question, the Swami went to Sriperumbudur, the birth place of Ramanuja, to secure his blessings and permission. History has it that the Swami melted into ecstasy at the mere sight of that place and exclaimed as follows:—

"Is this that Sriperumbudur, where Yathiraja (the king of ascetics) was born, to rid us of all our miseries ?

Indeed, this place is just as famous as Thirunagari, where Saint Nammazhvar was born and where the limpid waters of the river Porunal (Thamraparni) flow.

Have I actually reached the hallowed Sriperumbudur, where my Lord Yathiraja took birth, to redeem us all? Is it a mere hallucination or a real bliss flowing from the sweet grace of Saint Nammazhvar, whose chest is adorned by a garland of narcissus?”

After completing the study of Sri Bashyam, Nayanar, the erstwhile pupil, taught Sri Bashyam for a whole year in the temple of Yathoktakari, in response to the requests from several scholars. To this day Mamunigal's image in the said temple bears only a 'Vyakhyana Mudra' (i. e.) the posture of discoursing, instead of the normal Anjali Mudra (palms joined in worship), as in other temples.

SWAMI'S EXTRA-ORDINARY COMMAND OVER THE SASTRAS

Both as a student of 'Sri Bhashya' and later, as an exponent thereof, the Swami's intimate knowledge of Nyaya, Mimamsa and all other Sastras was very much in evidence. That he was head and shoulders above several others well-versed in these Sastras, is reflected in every word of his works (the commentaries). The cream and essence of the Sastras run through every line of these and one can't but marvel at his extra-ordinary proficiency in every one of the subjects dealt with, and exclaim whether that was the 'be-all' and 'end-all' of his studies, thereby enabling him to secure such a high degree of specialisation in that subject. It is no exaggeration to say that Sri Tirumangai Azhvar's allusion to 'the combined eloquence in chaste Tamil and Sanskrit' could refer only to the Swami and none else, in this world.

RETURN TO SRIRANGAM

After a year's illumining stay at Kanchi, the Swami returned to Srirangam. Flooded by the grace of Lord Ranganatha, the Swami delighted his disciples with his splendid discourses, the elixir, which banished all ills and evils and brought instead, an inexhaustible fund of felicity, transforming this harrowing land into a veritable heaven (Nityavibhuti).

THE SWAMI TAKES TO SANYASA

The frequent incidence of pollution as a Grihastha with several consanguinous relations, due to births and deaths, occurring in their households, very badly interfered with the Swami's daily worship of Lord Ranganatha and discourses, and drove him to the sheer necessity of

entering the ascetic order. Taking advantage of the presence at that time, in Srirangam, of an ascetic by name Satakopa Jeeyar, of sterling qualities, a happy combination of sound learning and a perfect code of conduct, the Swami got himself initiated into the holy order by the Jeeyar, and presented himself before Lord Ranganatha. The Lord was pleased to grant the new ascetic, His very name, Azhagiya Manavala Mamunigal, and also gifted away to him the Mutt, known as Pallavarayan Mantapam. Mamunigal, greatly elated by the Lord's torrential grace, occupied the Mutt. and his fame spread far and wide, attracting many a person from the different corners of the country to his sweet fold. The votaries did feel that in Mamunigal, they had easily the aggregate of all the Acharyas, who had gone before him, Nathamunigal, Alavandar, Ramanuja etc., a happy combination and consummation of them all.

SETTING UP AN AUDITORIUM, NAMED 'THIRUMALAI AZHVAR MANTAP' (THE VENUE OF THE SWAMI'S DISCOURSES)

Mamunigal set apart a hall in the Mutt, for delivering discourses and named it after his Acharya (Thiruvoimozhippillai), as "Thirumalai Azhvar Mantap", to give it a special halo. As a further step in imparting additional sanctity to the place, it was smeared with the earth, from which sprouted the secret tenets of Vaishnavism (the earth picked up from the residence of Pillai Lokacharya, the great exponent of the esoteric tenets of Vaishnavism). Mamunigal's devotion to his Acharya was so great and intense, that he regarded the Mantap as a 'Guru Kula', whence he disseminated the 'Grand Elixir', eagerly sought out by the God-bound, his fame radiating in all directions.

PATTAR PIRAN JEEYAR BECOMES THE SWAMI'S DISCIPLE

Mamunigal's scintillating discourses cast their spell over the entire length and breadth of the country. Finding that he was a preceptor of rare and incomparable excellence, people flocked to him in large numbers every day and sought refuge at his feet. Noteworthy among them was an ascetic by name Govinda Dasarappan, better known as Pattarpiran Jeeyar, who became a close associate of Mamunigal, a part and parcel of the Swami, at it were, like unto Embar for Ramanuja.

KOIL KANDAI ANNAN ALSO BECOMES SWAMI'S DISCIPLE

Kandadai Annan, an Acharya of Srirangam, installed on one of the traditional Gadis set up by Ramanuja, also felt a sincere urge to become a

disciple of Mamunigal. After seeking the permission of Lord Ranganatha, he and his followers sought spiritual asylum at the feet of Mamunigal. Thenceforward Annan functioned as a confidant of the Swami and grew grey in the Swami's service.

THE SWAMI SEEKS OUT PRATIVADI-BHAYANKARAM ANNAN.

While in quest of a suitable propagator of Vaishnavism after him, the Swami had comforting news about the great qualities of head and heart of Prativadi Bhayankaram Annan, who had settled down in Thirumalai Hills with his family, rendering unblemished and unremitting service to Lord Venkatesa. Blessing Annan inwardly with all the fervour at his command, the Swami sent out a letter to Annan through two Vaishnavites, specially commissioned to go to Thirumalai Hills and escort him to Srirangam.

THE MEETING GROUND OF MUTUAL LONGING

Sri Annan, known as 'Anna', to distinguish him from koil Annan, referred to earlier, had studied Vedanta under Nayana Varadachariar Swami of Kancheepuram and earned the title of 'Prativadi Bhayankarar.' Intent upon staying at the Thiruvengkata Hills and eking out his existence through service to the Lord, he went there and got himself absorbed in the sacred task of fetching water from 'Akasa Ganga', the water falls, about three miles further up the hill, for the daily puja and ritualistic bath of the Deity.

One of these days, a great devotee of Mamunigal, who visited the Thirumalai Hills from Srirangam, was most lovingly entertained by Anna. Anna went into raptures over the account rendered by the distinguished visitor, of the great Saint at Srirangam, his attainments and achievements, and longed to hear more and more of these. It so happened that the very next evening after the arrival of the guest from Srirangam, Anna, accompanied by his guest, went to Akasa Ganga, did his customary ablutions and returned with the water-pot intended for the Deity's puja. However, instead of spicing the water with the flavouring materials, then and there and carrying the pot to the temple, Anna just lost count of time and was so deeply engrossed in the new-comer's delightful description of the great Master, that he invited the wrath of the temple priest, who badly missed Anna at the appropriate moment, rushed out and literally snatched from Anna the water pot, still remaining unspiced, and ran back to the sanctum. The

penitent Anna went post haste to the temple with the spices, only to find the puja, already commenced, and in progress. with great mental pangs, Anna got near the priest, handed over the spices to him and retreated outside the sanctum, ashamed of his hopeless dereliction of duty. The Lord, Who is all love for His sincere devotees, at once placated Anna and established the greatness of Manavala Mamunigal, through the following stimulating words, delivered through the priest:

“Come ye Anna! We find the water brought by you, this morning, the most exhilarating so far, abounding in exceptional sweetness and fragrance. What is the fun of your sinking into dejection, when in fact, We are extremely pleased with your devotion?”

Anna, his deep gloom thus shaken off, realised at once that this extra-ordinary phenomenon of the water acquiring a natural auroma of such a high degree, bespoke the greatness of Mamunigal, about whom he was hearing and meditating, all the time. This only whetted the appetite, already aroused in him, to be at the feet of Mamunigal at the earliest possible moment. The urge became irresistible and Anna took leave of Thirumalai Appan, the Deity of Thirumalai and set out for Srirangam, followed by his entire family. They reached Kanchi enroute and stayed there for a couple of days, revelling at the feet of Lord Devaraja. The two emissaries, sent after Anna by Mamunigal, also arrived at Kanchi, just then. They overjoyed at meeting Anna nearer home and delivered Mamunigal's note to him. Need it be said that Anna grew hysterical over such a happy turn of events, being sent for by the very person he was after, a thrilling experience reminiscent only of the bliss enjoyed by the Azhvars? Anna recited with deep feeling the lines from Divya Prabandham recounting a similar experience of the Azhvars. Anna gloated over the redemptive grace of Mamunigal and left for Srirangam the next morning along with the two escorts.

On reaching Srirangam, Anna went through his daily ritualistic routine and then reached the Mutt of Mamunigal, like unto the calf seeking the mother-cow, and fell prostrate at his feet, like an uprooted tree, and remained insensate for a while, swayed by emotion. Mamunigal affectionately gathered Anna up in his sweet embrace and made solicitous enquiries of Anna's welfare. All this happened during the currency of a discourse by Mamunigal on the hymns of Nammazhvar in the fourth centum, tenth decade of Thiruvoimozhi. The Swami, resuming the discourse, expounded the meanings

of the stanzas in all their ramifications, bringing to bear upon the subject his superb learning and mastery of the Shastras, in lucid style, flowing with the grandeur and majesty of the mighty river Ganga, full and flooding. Anna was so overwhelmed by the masterly exposition of the ‘Divine Wisdom’ (Bhagavat Vishayam), that he praised the Swami profusely (precisely what a pupil should do in respect of his Guru), wondering whether he (Anna) had not seen in the Swami, a perfect blending of all the Azhvars and Poorvacharyas. When Anna begged that he be also admitted into the Swami’s fold, the very thing the Swami was pining for, the Swami pointed out slyly, with a graceful smile, the *Prima Facie* incompatibility of the two of them getting together, Anna, the ‘Prativadi Bhayankarar’ and himself, a Sadhu (a soft and gentle ascetic). This was too much for Anna to bear and he cried out that the appellation, ‘Prativadi Bhayankarar’ only signified that he was to be dreaded only by the enemies of the faith while, in respect of Sri Vaishnavas, he was the humblest servant of them all, and added, with tears rolling down his cheeks, that his salvation lay only at the feet of the Swami. There upon, Mamunigal was deeply moved by the remarkable soul-force of Anna and accepted him as a disciple. Anna, who went through the five purificatory rituals (Panca Samskaras) at the hands of the illustrious Master and got from him also the sacramental name ‘Sri Vaishnava Dasan’—the servant of Sri Vaishnavas, poured out his gratitude, to the Master, in a series of Tamil verses, entitled ‘Amalanathipiran’ and a hundred Sanskrit Slokas in adoration of the Swami, entitled ‘Vara Vara Muni Satakam’. In the opening stanza of the Tamil verses, Anna throws out the great challenge, born of the new-born robust faith, as follows:—

“What is there for me to fear, having sighted the lotus feet of Manavala Yogi (Saint Manavala), nectarine and blissful, an antidote for all ills and evils?”

Thenceforth, Anna, a close confidant of the Swami, studied at his holy feet the commentaries of the Divya Prabandams, secret texts, etc., and remained blissfully happy.

MAMUNIGAL GOES AGAIN ON A PILGRIMAGE

Desirous of visiting, once more, the shrines at Azhvar Thirunagari and elsewhere, Mamunigal took leave of Lord Ranganatha and reached Azhvar Thirunagari, where he stayed for some time, delivering discourses.

Thereafter, he returned to Srirangam, propitiating the Deities in the Vaishnavite shrines in Pandya Nad (Mathurai and around) enroute.

YERUMBI APPA BECOMES SWAMI'S DISCIPLE

One Devarajachariar, otherwise known as Yerumbi Appa, a famous Vidvan of Yerumbi, a village near the pilgrim centre 'Thirukkadigai' (Chola Simhapuram) went to Srirangam to worship Lord Ranganatha (Namperumal) and was the guest of Koil Annan. During his stay in Srirangam, the visitor had the extra-ordinary fortune of listening to the discourses of Mamunigal, in the company of Koil Annan. Although he (Yerumbi Appa) felt very much delighted at Mamunigal's extensive knowledge and depth of learning, he (Appa) was not fortunate enough, then, to feel the urge to seek refuge in the Saint and returned to his village, without even partaking of the holy water and the dedicated offerings at the Mutt. But what happened to him on the very day of his arrival at his place? The door of the shrine housing his tutelary God, refused to open, when he attempted to go about his usual routine of a puja. All attempts to have it opened having proved abortive, Appa was completely non-plussed and at the end of a care-worn day without food, he had a dream that night, in which the household God appeared and severely admonished him for his impudence in having come away from Srirangam, without seeking spiritual asylum at the feet of "Our most beloved Mamunigal of unrivalled excellence". It was further made known to Appa that Mamunigal was an incarnation of Adi-Sesha (Anantha), ranking first among the three celestial chiefs (Anantha, Garuda and Vishvaksena), and that unless Appa went back to Srirangam and got purified by enlisting himself as Mamunigal's disciple, there was no hope of his ever resuming the worship of his household God. With this clarification, Appa got up from bed, disclosed the contents of his dream to all his well-wishers and set out for Srirangam then and then, alone.

When Appa reached the Mutt of Mamunigal, the latter was about to leave for the temple. Appa fell at his feet and sought refuge in him, after narrating all that had happened in the intervening period. A new vista opened up before Appa, the new votary, who was the recipient of the Swami's full-fledged grace and unremitting attention. The spiritually rejuvenated Yerumbi Appa's overwhelming devotion to Mamunigal found its natural outlet in several laudations, in praise of Mamunigal, in various styles, Kavya, Nataka, Champu and so on.

To cut a long story short, there were many others, who flocked to Mamunigal and reaped such rich harvests, perfect bliss, here, there and everywhere.

EXPOUNDING ‘EADU’, THE INSPIRED COMMENTARY (OF PROFOUND EXCELLENCE) ON ‘THIRUVOIMOZHI’ IN THE DIVINE PRESENCE (BEFORE LORD RANGANATHA)

When Mamunigal was shedding his unique lustre all around, in the manner described in the earlier paragraphs, Lord Ranganatha was pleased to beckon him one day and command that he should expound, from the next day onwards, Nammazhvar’s Thiruvoimozhi, in the light of that copious commentary, the inspired outpourings of Nampillai, known as ‘Eadu’, recorded faithfully by his disciple, Vadakku Thiruveethi Pillai (father of Pillai Lokacharya), in the spacious Mantap of the temple, known as Periya (Big) Mantap. Taking it as the supreme Grace descended from the Great Lord, Mamunigal, started off his torrential discourses in the said Mantap, the very next day, as scheduled. The audience remained spell-bound, amazed at the Swami’s vast repertory of knowledge and masterly exposition and wondered whether they should compare his speech with the on-rush of the Gangetic waters, or the still purer Kaveri, in spate. Included in the audience were, of course, Lord Ranganatha, and His Divine Consorts, seated on splendid thrones, surrounded by Thiruvananthazhvan (Adi-Sesha), Garuda, Vishvaksena (Senapathi or Commander-in-Chief) and other parivaras (celestial retinue), the Azhvars etc., as it was at the Lord’s behest that the discourses were commenced. This august assembly of unprecedented grandeur and dimensions was in session for a whole year, uninterruptedly. Mamunigal’s discourses, initiated by Lord Ranganatha Himself, naturally took precedence over all other festivals, diurnal, weekly, fortnightly, monthly, annual etc., all of which were suspended during that particular year. Lord Ranganatha, the convener, wishing to provide a fitting finale to this illuminating series, pondered within Himself, as follows:-

“During Our Avatars, We did study, in keeping with the spirit of the Avataras, under some teachers, but that none of them had all the traits of a perfect Guru, full and complete, has been a matter of lurking regret and frustration for Us. What a mighty recompense, these days, with Mamunigal, the very acme of perfection! Shall We not proclaim our appreciation and acknowledgment of this fact, in the shape of a ‘Thanian’ (invocation), before this august assembly, at a suitable moment and immortalise that event and thus discharge Our paramount duty as a disciple?”

THE ADVENT OF 'SRI SAILESA TIRUMANTRAM'

The last stanza in the last decad of the last centum of 'Thiruvoimozhi' had just been expounded by the Great Master and the further ceremonial proceedings marking the conclusion of the year-long discourses were to be gone through. Just then, the great wonder of wonders came off. Lord Ranganatha, assuming the form of a four year old boy, pierced through the gathering, in great haste, unmindful of the opposition offered by the elders, stood before Mamunigal with joined palms and recited, in clear-accent and a resonant voice, the following invocation:-

“Srisailesa-daya-patram Dheebhakthyadi-gunarnavam;
Yatindra-pravanam Vande Ramyajamataram Munim.”

and disappeared instantly, leaving the assemblage agape, with wonder.

This verse with such a divine background, regarded as a holy mantra, was recorded then and there on a palm-leaf and consecrated with turmeric paste. The sacred document was then placed at the feet of Lord Ranganatha and kept in a plate. The event was celebrated with great eclat. This Sloka has since then been accorded the same stature as 'Pranava' and even as the latter is chanted both while commencing and ending the recital of the Sanskrit Vedas, this sloka is sung, both at the commencement and at the end of the recitations of the Dramida Vedas, viz. the Divya Prabandhams of Azhvars.

The disciples of Mamunigal also compiled, under the orders of Lord Ranganatha, certain Tamil verses, beginning with "Blessed be Manavala Mamunigal, who thrives on the grace of Thiruvoimozhippillai" and the convention was set up that these verses shall also be recited in continuation of the 'Srisailesa' mantra, to mark a finale of the recitation of the Divya Prabandhams.

Thereafter, Lord Ranganatha drew Mamunigal nearer, inside the sanctum Sanctorium, and flooded him with honours and then had him escorted to the Mutt with temple honours and paraphernalia, in a resounding procession round the streets. It was only then, that God Ranganatha derived the satisfaction of having fulfilled His mission. (c. f) Kritakrityas Tada Ramo Vijwarah pramumoda ha!

MAMUNIGAL'S WORKS.

As revealed by himself, in the 28th stanza of his hymns entitled 'Aarthi Prabandham', Mamunigal's chief aim was to propagate the works and teachings of the earlier Acharyas and it was far from his intention to bring out original

works, or commentaries of his own. And yet, he produced the following works, excelling the combined sweetness of honey, milk and sugar-candy. This is ascribable to the divine command and the solicitous prayers of his disciples, coupled with our great good fortune.

(1) *Commentaries on:*

(a) Three most important works out of the eighteen esoteric treatises of Pillai Lokacharya— ‘*Sri Vachana Bhushanam*’, ‘*Tatvatrayam*’ and ‘*Mumukshupadi*’;

(b) ‘*Acharya Hridayam*’, a gem of a *Rahasya Grantha* (esoteric text) by Alagiya Manavala Perumal Nayanar, the illustrious younger brother of Pillai Lockacharya;

(c) ‘*Periya Azhvar Thirumozhi*’ up to and inclusive of the first stanza, in the first decad of the fifth section, (i.e.) 421 stanzas, in all, the palm-leaves containing the relative commentaries of Periyavachan Pillai, who had written up his commentaries, on all the four thousand stanzas of the *Divya Prabandhams*, having been ravaged by white ants. Mamunigal’s commentaries, supplying just the missing gap, are so sweet and lucid that scholars pine for his commentaries on all the remaining stanzas of the *Divya Prabandham* also and even go to the extent of wishing that the fate, which befell the commentaries of the 421 stanzas, referred to above, had over-taken the rest of the earlier commentaries, too, so that Mamunigal could have made good the deficiency, in its entirety. This should not detract from the greatness of Periyavachan Pillai, who has the reputation of being the ‘*Vyakhyana Chakravarti*’, but only emphasise the excellence of Mamunigal’s writings.

(d) ‘*Ramanuja Nootrandadi*’, the lyrical outpouring of Amudanar, (also called *Tiruvarangattamudanar*), on Ramanuja.

(e) ‘*Gita Thathparya Deepa*’, on *Bhagavat Gita*. This is, however, not extant, having been lost at some stage and lost for ever.

(2) *Original Works:*

(a) *Yathiraja Vimsathi*
(b) *Devaraja Mangalam* } referred to earlier, in this book.

[c] *Upadesa Rathnamalai*
[d] *Thiruvoimozhi Nootrandadi*
[e] *Aarthi Prabandham* } Tamil

[f] A compendium of quotations, occurring in the commentary on *Thiruvoimozhi*, known as ‘*Eadu, Thirty Six thousand*’,

and [g] Added to "Gnana Saram" and 'Prameya Saram' (the works of Arulala Perumal Emberumanar), the appropriate Purana Slokas.

(The reader may please add to this list, other works, if any, of Mamunigal, within his knowledge)

THE EXCELLENCE OF MAMUNIGAL'S WORKS

The works of Mamunigal stand on a pedestal of their own and excel those of other Acharyas, by reason of their exceptional mellifluence, dignity of style, depth of meaning and elegance, unique feel and flavour, all of which constitute a class by themselves. His commentaries closely follow the original, shorn of all extraneous matter, not germane to the theme commented upon. It will not amount to a hyperbole, if it is said that no other author has ever acquired the art of bringing out commentaries in a like manner. In his commentaries on 'Tatva Trayam', the triple entities (viz) Jeeva (chit), matter (Achit), and God (Easwara), Mamunigal has, no doubt, refuted the differing doctrines of other religions and even so, he has studiously refrained from heat and passion, that might give a jar or jolt to any one, derision and ridicule, which the disputants generally resort to, as a matter of course. On the other hand, it will be crystal-clear to any one, who turns over the pages of Mamunigal's works, that he is expounding, all the time, only the Shastraic trends and that, with remarkable ease, which at once reveals the profundity of his knowledge of the Shastras and makes one confidently assert that he is the one and only one, in the whole universe, who has such a thorough mastery over the entire range of the Shastras. And then, his works are absolutely free from the faults noticeable in other commentaries, namely, skipping over abstruse and knotty passages in the original texts, equivocation, quibbling, mis-interpretation, over-interpretation etc. His illuminating preambles to the esoteric aphorisms of Pillai Lokacharya, his wonderful presentation of the meanings of the texts, in a clear and analytical style, resolving, in an admirable manner, the apparent contradictions and inconsistencies with other parts of the same text, as well as other texts, are bound to send the discerning reader into raptures and melt down, in ecstasy.

Literally speaking, he who has gone through Mamunigal's works, will hardly turn his love and attention to the works of others, and if he did, it would be just as unnatural as the honey-gathering bee, going after the dry thorny flower, in preference to the lotus flower bursting with honey c. f. the line in Alavandar's Stotra Ratna—(Sthithe Aravinde Makarandanirbhare Madhuvratho Nekshurakam hi Veekshathe). Why beat about the bush?

When we go through the writings of others, we are quite in a position to gauge the depth of their learning. But, when we pore over the commentaries of Manavala Mamunigal, we have only to think of Sri Rama's glowing reference to Hanuman's attainments. In the Adi-Kavya of Valmiki, it has been exclaimed by Rama that only a person, who is well-versed in all the three Vedas, Rig, Yajur and Sama, who has mastered the Sanskrit grammar, in its entirety, and who has studied it all, from many angles and many sources, could speak such immaculate and beautiful language as Hanuman. The Tamil poet, Kamban has embellished it still further, in his inimitable style, in his immortal Ramayana, through the following posers:-

“You, my younger brother with great prowess in archery! Is there any one including Brahma and Siva mounted on his bull, who can excel Hanuman in speech? When Hanuman speaks, there springs a melody, unheard of any where else and at any time before, and his words create a veritable ocean of knowledge and bring to the fore many an untaught art.”

The dispassionate among us, free from the pangs of jealousy, are bound to agree that these words of praise apply most aptly to Mamunigal.

THE “ASHTA DIGGAJAS” (THE EIGHT ELEPHANTS DEFENDING THE VAISHNAVITE FAITH IN THE EIGHT DIRECTIONS)

Of the several thousands of disciples, who enjoyed bliss and happiness at the feet of Mamunigal, the following eight persons (three Sanyasis and five Grihasthas), known as “Ashta Diggajas” were the most prominent:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| (1) Vanamamalai Jeeyar, | (5) Prativadi Bhayankaram Annan, |
| (2) Pattarpiran Jeeyar, | (6) Yerumbi Appa, |
| (3) Thiruvenkata Ramanuja Jeeyar, | (7) Appillai, and |
| (4) Koil Annan, | (8) Appullar. |

CONCLUSION

The author of this brief biographical sketch is fully aware that the historical record of the life, teachings and achievements of Mamunigal was just as expansive and extensive as that of his great precursor, Sri Ramanuja and yet he (author) has deemed this short sketch adequate for the daily musing by the Bhaktas (devotees). It is significant that the author has not included within the compass of this treatise, Mamunigal's return to the Supreme Realm, whence he had come to this abode of ours. This is not an omission and even

if it were to be so construed, it is a deliberate omission, fully justified by our invocation at the temples, praying unto Manavala Mamunigal every time, to stay in this land of exhilarating bliss, favoured by the cool fragrance of the hymns of Satakopa (Nammazvar) surrounded on all sides by the seas, for a hundred years more, to make the devotees thrive and the city of Arangam (or the city enshrining Arangan (i.e.) Lord Ranganatha) flourish.

The historically-minded can easily appreciate the value and authenticity of internal evidence. Even as Nammazhvar has revealed his virtues through his hymns "Thuvalil Mamanimadam" (Thiruvoimozhi 6-5), Mamunigal has also given a clear picture of his own ideals, view and way of life, in a stanza occurring in his work "Aarthi Prabandham", the gist of which is given below. It will be appreciated that this song is by-no-means for the Swami's self-glorification, but is meant for constant meditation by us, so that we may strive after the ideal set therein and attain purity and salvation.

" Oh! what a bliss !

Bestowed unto us is the sweet grace of Lord Ranganatha;

(As a result thereof)

We have secured our dwelling in Srirangam;

Food, *We have* in plenty - the hymns of the exalted Maran
(Nammazhvar);

Anchored in *us* are Madura-Kavi's words of steadfast devotion to
the Acharya;

We have for our meditation the vast treasures of knowledge,
bequeathed to us by the great galaxy of Acharyas;

We have it in us that we shall revel all the time in the said
treasures of knowledge;

We have also the gift of a mind firm, not straying elsewhere;
and above all, *We have* acquired the greatness of not being
jealous over the affluence of others!

[We seek refuge in the Jecyar's blissful feet.]

[Manavalamamunigal Thiruvadigale Saranam.]