

Sri KARAPPANGADU VENKATACHARIAR SWAMI

Professor V.V. RAMANUJAM, M.A., Ph.D.

We are presently celebrating the 70th Birthday of a great savant and a man of exemplary qualities who, though not: physically with us, is enshrined in our hearts as a revered memory and shines as an illustrious example of scholarship, devotion and simplicity. I am happy to present a short biography of our Swami and attempt an appraisal of his inestimable qualities.

KARAPPANGADU - Around Mannargudi, hallowed by the temple of Sri Rajagopala swami in Tanjavur district are situated a group of five villages (panchagrama) noted for the learned and devout Srivaishnavas whom they housed. Among these the village of Karappangadu (lit. the forest of the darkhued Lord) was founded by a group of brahmin pilgrims from Kancheepuram, who also built a temple for their patron deity Sri Varadaraja there. This village has produced generations of great Srivaishnava scholars out of whom some who lived within living memory were outstanding.

SRI SINGAPERUMAL SWAMI - In the latter half of the last Century, there thrived in this village the famed Singaperumal Swami who was literally a "lion" in scholarship, forceful and at the same time simple in the exposition of the philosophy and religion of Sri Ramanuja. A noted junior contemporary of the great savant was Sri Desika Varadachariar Swami who later held the office of Sriranga Narayana Jeeyar in the Srirangam temple and is well-known for his kainkaryams such as the renovation of the goldplated Sriranga Vimanam, the construction of the Thiruppalliarai mirror room at Srirangam and the Thayar Mandapam in the Sriperumbudur temple. Both these great men were well known for their erudition and anushtanam all over Tamil Nadu and outside too. They had captivated the enlightened audiences in Madras and other centres of learning by the depth of their scholarship and ability to put across most lucidly the tersest aspects of philosophy and religion. Singaperumal Swami is still referred to by the affectionate and reverent appellation "Thatha"

VENKATACHARYA - Singaperumal Swami had two daughters but no son. Being an intuitive and well-informed astrologer, he easily foresaw the potentialities of his grand son by his younger daughter Lakshmi Amma and decided to adopt the child as his son. His son-in-law Thiruvengadathiengar gladly acquiesced and the boy was named Venkatacharya after the adopted father's father. Venkatacharya, who was born under the star Punarvasu in the month of Panguni

of the year Viswavasu (1906 A.D) in the Bharadwaja gothra went into the Athreya gothra and was brought up under the affectionate care of Thatha.

EARLY EDUCATION - After the usual samskaras of Choula and Upanayana, Venkatacharya was instructed at home for sometime and joined the Samskrit Patasala at Thiruvaiyaru, well-known as Raja's College. Thatha had decided and strictly enjoined that his son should not under any circumstances come under the influence of English education lest he should get lured into government or commercial service and get lost to the service of our Emberumanar Darsanam. The Thiruvaiyaru college was a famed seat of learning then, being staffed by intellectual giants like Villakkudi Srinivasachariar, Vennatrankarai Srinivasachariar and Vijayeendrachari. Here he had his instruction in the Samskrit and Tamil languages, and Samskrit Grammar (Vyakarana) Nyaya, Tarka and Vedanta. He was a diligent student and was quick to grasp the intricacies of the subjects taught and could ably teach them to juniors to the satisfaction of the elders.

ORTHODOX EDUCATION - After graduation from the Raja's college, our Swami had a course of instruction in Sri Bashyam, Bagavath Vishayam and Rahasya texts like Mumukshupadi and Thathvathrayam at the feet of his (adopted) father Sri Singaperumal Swami in the traditional kalakshepam style. He had further instruction in Sri Bashyam (with Srutaprakasikai) and other rahasya texts - Srivachana Bushanum, Acharya Hridayam, etc. from Sri Desika Varadachariar Swami. Our Swami had thus the unique benefit of learning at the feet of two of the greatest savants of his time and inherited the valuable characteristics of these masters in the depth of learning, powers of clear analytical thinking and synthesis of exposition in clear, lucid and unambiguous terms easily understandable to even the uninitiated and at the same time appealing to the scholarly among the audience. Our Swami had acharya SAMASRAYANAM (manthropadesam and initiation as a Srivaishnava) from the family acharya Sri U.Ve. Thirunarayanapuram Govindappangarswami of the Thirumalai Ananthanpillai line of acharyas. It is characteristic of the training imparted to our Swami by his mentor Singaperumal Swami that he was strictly prohibited from learning the alien tongue (English) A missionary zeal was inculcated towards a pure life of complete dedication to the propagation of the ubayavedanta philosophy and religion of Sri Ramanuja.

SERVICE IN INSTITUTIONS - Our Swami joined the staff of the Sriperumbudur Samskrit college in 1930 and served there for an year during which period he had the benefit of learning NYAYA BHASKARAM from another great contemporary savant, Sri Asuri Peria Ramanujachariar Swami, This was followed by service on

the Sanskrit faculty of Annamalai University for a couple of years where he won the affection and admiration of colleagues both in the department and outside for his qualities of head and heart. Career as an institution - bound teacher did not somehow appeal to him and he went back home to become a full-time preacher in the service of our Darasanam.

MIGRATION TO MADRAS - It was in 1937 that our Swami permanently migrated to the City of Madras. He had already, captivated the learned people in Madras by his earlier discourses, arranged for short periods, under the auspices of Sri Veda Vedanta Vardhini of Triplicane. After settling down in Madras he began giving serial discourses in the orthodox Kalakshepam style on important texts like Bagavath Geetha and Bagavath Vishayam. This type of discourse which is more difficult than the Upanyasam, requires going through a given text with commentary line by line and explaining in detail the ideas presented. The Upanyasam on the other hand is a free lecture where the lecturer has the freedom to choose the portions of the text he would like to present and can avoid the more difficult parts if necessary, and also digress as he pleases. The Kalakshepam style of discourse is fast disappearing from our midst. For our Swami even upanyasams were kalakshepams but without books. He never digressed from the text unnecessarily, nor did he omit any portion for his convenience.

KALAKSHEPAMS - Our Swami used to give about ten public discourses a week each lasting about 90 minutes some in the kalakshepam and some in the upanyasam style. In addition, he used to teach individuals or small groups at his residence. Some texts took several years to complete, but all who had the privilege of listening to his lectures eagerly looked forward to hear him again. The Mahabharatham (1,25,000 verses) was once covered verse by verse in Triplicane. Sri Vishnu Sahasranamam and Bagavath Geetha were dealt with in greater detail as part of the Bharatham. It took some six years to complete the Bharatham. Similarly he has covered the Sri Ramayanam verse by verse twice, once in George Town and once in Thyagarayanagar. He has covered the Sri Ramayanam in a set number of lectures many times in many places.

It is in the exposition of the Bagavath Geetha that our Swami was at his best. He covered the Geetha verse by verse with the commentary of Sri Ramanuja and Sri Vedanta Desika a dozen times, He has covered the same in a set number of lectures with the aid of Sri Alavandar's Geethartha Sangraha a large number of times in various places besides the City of Madras.

Bagavath Vishayam (Nammalwar's Thiruvoimozhi with the Eadu 36,000

commentary) was discoursed upon with the text thrice. Sri Bashyam was taught to pupils with the Sruthaprakasika once, and later lectured upon in Upanyasam for several times.

Sri Bagavatham and Sri Vishnupuranam were likewise discoursed upon with commentaries twice. Sri Vishnu Sahasranamam with Bhattar's commentary was covered in detail thrice.

The Rahasya texts-Mumukshupadi, Sri Vachana Bhushanam, Thatvathrayam and the Acharya Hridayam were covered with Sri Manavalamamugals's commentary several times.

Portions of 4000 Divyaprabandam were covered in detail in several places. Nachiar Thirumozhi, Thirunedunthandagam, Amalanadhipiran and Thiruvirutham are some of the prabandams he covered with the commentaries of Periaavachan Pillai and others. His Thiruppavai lectures were an annual feature and were given in more than one place during the month of Margazhi.

He has given discourses whenever his health and convenience permitted in the districts and also in cities like Bombay and Delhi.

PERSONALITY AND CHARACTERISTICS - Our Swami was blessed with an arresting personality. He was endowed with handsome features and a fair complexion. He used to come dressed in pure white clothes. He did not like show of any kind. He did not wear any gold not even a ring nor did he use ornamented shawls and such other things. His modesty forbade even the wearing of the Dwadasa Urdwapundra. A prominent TIRUMANKAPPU adorned his face and lighted it up. Though he deliberately avoided some of the outer embellishments like garland of lotus beads and the like, he was a true Sri Vaishnava at heart. He was a personification of modesty and humility though fully conscious of his worth and popularity as a scholar and upanyasaka. He always prostrated in return when any Srivaishnava even if a boy - prostrated before him. Salutations were always returned with a smile and he always had a kind word to say to any individual who approached him.

He was against collection of money during his lectures by passing round the plate. Voluntary contributions were received but otherwise he was utterly unmindful of the financial return. He never indulged in praising the rich or those in power with a view to flatter them.

Sri Swamy never came for a lecture without previously studying the appropriate texts and ruminating over the material for some time, however familiar the subject matter may be to him. He always sat in meditation of his acharyas for a few minutes chanting invocatory verses - not audibly. He would briefly explain the scope of the day's lecture in the first few minutes or go over the material covered in the previous lecture if it was a series. After the brief introduction the subject matter was dwelt upon with utmost lucidity and clarity carrying the entire audience consisting of people of varying levels of intellectual awakening with him. He used homely analogies to drive home difficult points. Cheap or vulgar jokes were never resorted to. The last few minutes were spent in a masterly summing up in an inimitable manner. He left a deep impression on the members of his audience. Everybody felt the satisfaction of hearing and learning and could recall the sentences easily.

His tone was uniformly gentle and soft and yet clearly audible. He used to administer admonitions to the public in a mild but unmistakably firm manner for degenerating morals and deterioration of sanathana dharma, harmful changes in social customs and deviation from the sastric Srivaishnava way of life. He had firm convictions and was never afraid of speaking out his views which always conformed to the teaching of our acharyas and the rishis of yore. Though people of different sectarian beliefs attended his lectures he presented the view points of Sri Emberumanar Darshanam and Thennacharya Sampradayam in an acceptable though uncompromising manner which gave no offence to any of his listeners. It was as much a treat to watch him speak as it was to hear him. His very presence was ennobling.

One was reminded of the eloquent descriptions found in guruparampara works of Manavalamamunigal when watching our Swami delivering a discourse. It was truly a blessing to be among the audience.

DEVOTION TO SRI PARTHASATHI - SWAMI He was deeply devoted to the Lord of his native area Sri Rajagoplaswami of Mannargudi and to the Lord of his area of adoption, Sri Parthasarathi Swami of Triplicane, It was most touching whenever he referred to Sri Parthasarathi. He used most familiar and endearing terms like Charioteer who stands facing east, He, who by this very appearance is the Lord of the entire Universe, He who invites and showers His Grace on people (miHaj thÉajt-) in referring to Sri Parthasarathi. We hear that there was a special fervour of devotion and spontaneous affection when Bhattar pronounced the name of Namburumal and when Ananthalwan referred to Sri Venkateswara.

We could well understand what it would have been like when we heard our Swami eulogise Sri Parthasarathi. In the early years of his life in Madras, he was a resident of Triplicane. He then organised and conducted the Thiruppavadai festival for Sri Parthasarathi Swami. One could see his organising ability and attention to detail, the latter clearly demonstrating the devotional fervour which motivated him. What was being offered was to the Lord - King of Kings - father, mother, beloved all put in one to whom only THE BEST of materials should be offered in the largest possible measure befitting HIS greatness and demonstrative, to the extent possible of our feeling of duty and devotion to HIM. Once, much latter, when the Swami had settled down in Mylapore, Sri Parthasarathi showered his grace by visiting his residence on his way to Eekattu Thangal. It was not just a mandapapadi; It was touching and thrilling experience to witness the way our Swami received the lord with an endless offering of plates of the best fruits available reminiscent of what Sabari did, and the joy that was written on his face, and that of the Lord too! His ability in organising and conducting large functions was amply demonstrated when the Prathista and Samprokshanam of Sri Kothanda Ramaswami Temple at Pullacheru (A.P.) was performed under his leadership. Here the pooja was not only to the Lord but also to the guests - His devotees and servants whose comforts were attended to in the best possible way.

TRAINING OF DISCIPLES - Our Swami hailed from a noble family which provided learned Srinivaishnava vidwans to the community. He used to express his unhappiness that none of his sons continued this heritage. Still he has amply repaid the debt he felt he owed to his acharyas by training many of his disciples to carry the torch and keep it burning bright. Prominent among them may be mentioned - the first batch of vidwans who graduated with honours from this one-man university - Sri U.Ve Velukudi Varadacharya Swami, Sri U.Ve. Sathabhishekam Govindanarasimhachariar Swami, Sri U. Ve. Pillailokam Bashyakar Swami and Sri U.Ve. Karappankadu Desika Rangaramanujaiyengar Swami. Though not a prolific writer, he has written several books, and numerous articles in special numbers of publications, souvenirs etc. which carry the stamp of his deep scholarship.

SHASHTIABDAPURTHY - Our Swami's sixtyfirst birthday was celebrated on 30-3-1966 over a period of five days from the 26th by his admirers and disciples. A Committee headed by Sri Mukkala Nammalwar Chetty looked after the arrangements. Honours were received from a large number of temples as also felicitations from prominent madathipathis. News media prominently featured the happy occasion. The occasion was celebrated in a fitting and grand manner. Later, in a public meeting presided over by the then Chief Minister Thiru M. Bhakthavathsalam a commemoration volume containing scholarly articles on our

Darsanam and tributes to the fine qualities of head and heart of our Swami was released and his admirers paid their grateful tributes to the services rendered by him to our Sampradayam.

THE CLOSING YEARS - Our Swami was not blessed with very good health and he was keeping tolerably fit by leading a disciplined life and observing strict dietary control. Death of younger members in the family and added responsibilities added to his troubles after the Shastiabdapoorthy. His health began to deteriorate rapidly. He still continued his discourses and found consolation in that service. He had to be hospitalised for several months and the end came rather suddenly on 7-8-1971 at his residence. A great luminary set leaving his family, wife, five sons, four daughters, many grand children and innumerable disciples and admirers in gloom to mourn his loss. But the light he shed on the lives of these people will keep shining for a long time to come. The Brahmameda Samskaram of the mortal remains and the Thiruvadayanam were performed in a manner befitting the great soul under the able and devoted leadership of Sri K. Varadachariar Swami.

VEDA VEDANTA VARDHINI - Our Swami took an active interest in the Veda Vedanta Vardhini under whose auspices he gave his earliest discourses in Triplicane. Invariably he gave the first Lecture in the anniversary series every year, inaugurating the same. I had the unique privilege of organising a series of twenty discourses over a ten day period celebrating the centenary of the Vardhini in 1969, depending mainly on the advice and suggestions of our Swamy on the choice of the topics and the upanyasakas. The first and inaugural lecture was given by our Swamy under the Chairmanship of a great rasika, the late Sri V Rajagopalachari. He also presided over the vakyarthasadas in sanskrit held on this occasion. I can never forget his advice based on basic principles and deep convictions he gave me. I had also the benefit of his thoughtful advice and guidance in planning and celebrating the 600th birth centenary of Manavalamamunigal in Triplicane. The great success of this as well as the one mentioned earlier were in no small measure due to the swami's detailed suggestions and generous advice. In spite of his poor health he spent a couple of hours with me discussing and giving notes on the material for a fascinating article on Sri Manavalamamunigal for the commemoration volume published on the occasion. He confidently entrusted to me the actual writing of the article and gladly approved the same when I read it back to him at the proof stage. In his demise the Vardhini suffered a big loss. A condolence meeting was organised by the Vardhini under the Chairmanship of The Honourable Justice Ramaprasada Rao. Glowing tributes to the ourstanding qualities of head and heart of our swami were paid by his leading disciples and some of his warm admirers.