

# Saranagati



SARANAGATI  
SRI RAMANASRAMAM

MARCH 2020  
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Chris James Dade



## Saranagati



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IN THIS  
ISSUE

Dear Devotees,

Late February is the time of the South Indian spring and Ashram trees and flowers are in full bloom.

Following Mahasivaratri, the season drops off a little and there is some relief for Ashram staff in respect of crowds and meeting the demands of large numbers of visitors.

In this March issue, we take up the life-story of Sujata Sen who was the first foreign woman to come and live in Tiruvannamalai and be at the feet of Bhagavan (see p. 3).

For videos, photos and other news of events, go to <http://www.sriramanamaharshi.org> or write to us at [saranagathi@gururamana.org](mailto:saranagathi@gururamana.org)

In Sri Bhagavan,  
The Editorial Team

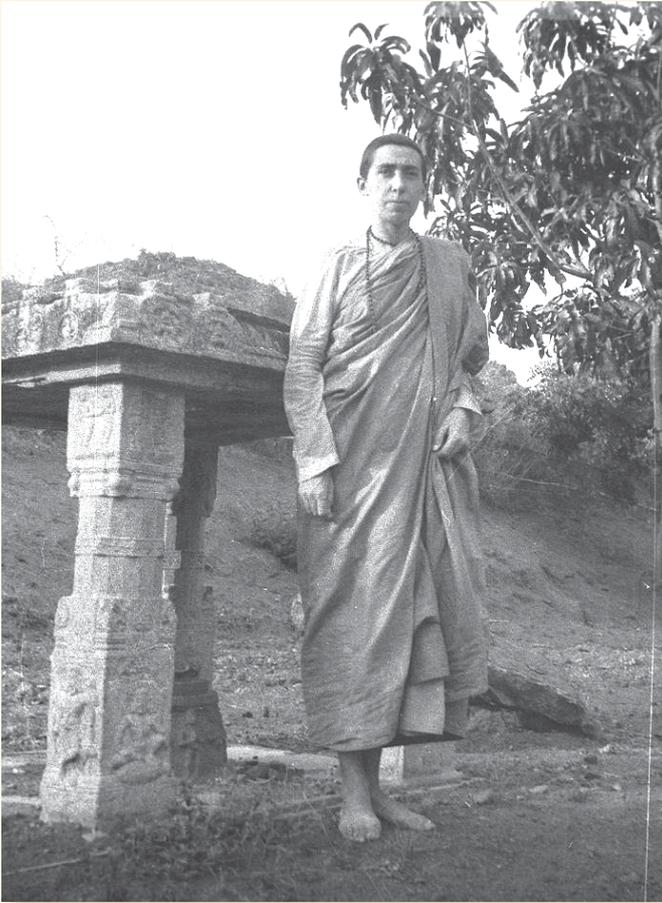
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## Calendar of Upcoming Events

5th March (Fri) Punarvasu  
9th March (Mon) Full Moon  
20th March (Fri) Sri Vidya Homa  
25th March (Weds) Telugu New Year  
2nd April (Thurs) Sri Rama Navami/Punarvasu  
7th April (Tues) Full Moon

14th April (Tues) Tamil New Year/Nirvana Room  
20th April (Mon) Sri Bhagavan's 70th Aradhana  
29th April (Weds) Punarvasu  
6th May (Weds) Full Moon  
16th May (Sat) Maha Puja  
26th May (Tues) Punarvasu





## IN PROFILE

### Sujata Sen (part I)

*[Dr. Suzanne Alexandra Curtil Sen, a French lady-doctor with a medical degree from the Sorbonne, was among the first foreign women to settle at Ramanasramam. She arrived as a Buddhist nun from Ceylon in 1936 having taken the monastic name, Sujata, and became a devotee of Sri Bhagavan. In the course of time, her life led her down various roads that women were usually barred from. And while in Tiruvannamalai, she used her formidable medical acumen to help the village poor on the outskirts of town, all the while seeking Bhagavan's guidance and instruction for the inner journey she had taken up in her youth.]*

Sujata Sen was born Suzanne Alexandra Curtil in Paris on 13th December 1896 to Jeanne Curtil and her father, Gabriel Sursock, the son of a prominent

banking family in Beirut. In Suzanne's youth, she was thought to be tongue-tied because she spoke so little. Her parents feared a speech impediment and sought medical intervention. At the age of six, Suzanne was operated on, though the surgery did nothing to remedy the silence of her early years. Although she rarely spoke, she demonstrated a gift for languages and would go on to become fluent in five languages.

#### Life and Death

At the age of seven, Suzanne fell ill with diphtheria and nearly succumbed to the disease. While convalescing, her little brother Gabriel came down with the same disease. When meningitis additionally set in, the doctors gave up and the boy's mother could only take him to the Church, place him before the image of the Madonna and pray to Mary to save her son. But later that night he died. Suzanne was taken to the room where the body of her brother lay. When the veil was lifted, she saw death for the first time.

The family's tragedy did not end here, however. Soon afterward, Suzanne's father en route to Vienna to take up a diplomatic post, fell sick on the train and had to be taken off at a small station. A local doctor diagnosed his condition as acute appendicitis and performed an emergency surgery in the station waiting room. Lacking proper antiseptic conditions, her father died from infection a few days later. Amidst such suffering at a young age, Suzanne was confronted with deep existential questions regarding life and death and the purpose of this earthly journey.

#### Education

Though Suzanne's mother Jeanne was descended from French nobility, no money remained in the family, and she went to work to support her daughter's education. The girl was discovered to have multiple talents, chief among them, her gift for dance. Her mother worked to support her training in dance and at the age of eight, Suzanne was accepted as a pupil at the prestigious Ballet School of the Paris Opera House. This became her greatest joy, but her mother feared the economic viability of life as a dancer and steered Suzanne toward medical studies instead. Suzanne did not dare revolt but followed her mother's





wishes and by her late teens she had enrolled in pre-medical school, standing first in her class.

### Theosophy

Though her mother had been a devout Catholic in her youth, she had been alienated from the Church by her divorce from an abusive man she had been briefly married to prior to meeting Suzanne's father. Hence Suzanne's exposure to the Church was limited. But already demonstrating a keen searching spirit for the things beyond this world, in her teen years, she sought succour with the Theosophists. The organisation's guiding principle, *there is no religion higher than truth*, suited her rationalist bent and the quest from her youth to understand why we were on this earth.

In 1917, the Countess of Prozor, a prominent Theosophist and a patroness of the arts, sought to assist Suzanne at a critical time and to encourage her in pursuing dance. She wrote to her: 'You are a true artist. By studying are you not wasting precious time? You are already twenty. You should know what you want to do and devote yourself to it entirely.'

### Medical School

In medical school at the Sorbonne, Suzanne's sensitivity to suffering prompted her to side with the anti-vivisectionist students protesting the cruelty of live animal dissection in the classroom. It was during these years that she began to advocate for the disenfranchised, i.e. the poor, women and the socially marginalised.

In 1923 she was awarded an M.D., dedicating her doctoral dissertation to her mother who had worked so hard to finance her schooling. Suzanne did her post-graduate work in tropical medicine, already thrilled by the mystique of the East through her Theosophical experiences and attracted by the idea of going to live in India. As it turned out, the opportunity would come the following year. Having befriended two eminent Theosophists, George Arundale and his Brahmin wife, Rukmini Devi, Suzanne was invited to the Jubilee Convention of the Society to be held at Adyar in December 1925. At the Star Camp of 1924, Suzanne got to hear J. Krishnamurti for the first time in a talk that impacted her so profoundly that she was convinced she should join the convention in India the following year.



### Journey to India

In early November 1925, Suzanne sailed for India on the Pilsna to attend the Jubilee Convention at Adyar. Here she made important contacts and began to experience the richness of her newfound home. She stayed on after the convention. The following month, she met a High Priest of the Theravada order of Buddhist monks from Sri Lanka who had come to inaugurate a small Buddhist temple in the Theosophical Society's compound. Sri Jinawansaswamy, known as Swamiji, had been sent to India by the Maha Sangha Raja Sabha of the United Buddhist World and impressed Suzanne as someone of spiritual attainment.

### Monastic Vows

Suzanne already had exposure to Buddhist ideas through Theosophical writings but Swamiji opened a whole new world for her. He began to see her not only as a convert to Buddhism but potentially as a nun in the Buddhist order. This was no small thing since women had not been allowed to enter the Sri Lankan Theravada Order for eight hundred years. When Suzanne expressed interest, a formal proposal was made to the order's authorities in Ceylon and





the response was positive. This seemed to highlight for Swamiji a point he regularly made in his public dharma discourses: there was no discrimination of any kind in Buddhism based on caste, race or gender.

The necessary hurdles were overcome, and Suzanne took monastic initiation, having her head shaved, receiving the robe and bowl and the novice name, Sujata. She took the ten precepts, among them the following: "I vow to abstain from the thought of taking the life of any living being. I vow to abstain from the thought of taking anything with thievish intent. I vow to abstain from the thought of sexual misconduct and any kind of impurity. I vow to abstain from the thought of telling lies and of slander. I vow to abstain from the thought of taking intoxicating drinks or any other intoxicating substance which might hinder the perfection of wisdom. I shall live with a concentrated mind enlightened with intuitive powers. I shall live a supreme life such as the saints and Arahantas."

With the completion of the Pabbaja ceremony, Sujata became a fully ordained Buddhist nun. Following her induction into the order, Swamiji taught her Pali as well as traditional techniques in meditation. She likewise learned to beg for food, accepting whatever was put into her bowl.

### **Mission to Tibet**

Very soon after her ordination, Swamiji sent her as a representative of the Maha Sangha Raja Sabha to

petition for unity among various Buddhist orders, first to the Indian Himalayan District and then, to His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Tibet. She was to request the Dalai Lama to be Joint Patron with His Holiness, Thathanabaing Sayadow of the Maha Sangha Raja Sabha.

Sujata thus hoped to join a caravan that was due to leave for Tibet three weeks later. This gave her very little time to organise permits. For this, she called on her Theosophist contacts who were on friendly terms with the Governor of Bengal in order to seek help in obtaining an official permit.

However, the time available was too short to secure the valid permission. To get underway before the end of the travelling season, she would not even have time to consult Ceylon or Swamiji, so she took an executive decision: she would travel incognito disguised as a young Nepali man.

In the early summer of 1926, the caravan set off, and on 27th May, reached Kalimpong. Thereafter, they climbed for four days up a difficult path into the mountains, culminating with a near vertical ascent. Having reached Nathu-la, a high, narrow pass that links Tibet with Sikkim, they crossed into Tibet and set a course for Lhasa.

In the highlands of the Tibetan plateau, Suzanne fell sick and had to be left behind in a small village where a devout Tibetan family took care of her. During the ordeal, even though she was a physician, she was helpless to effect a cure, and one night, she felt sure that she would not make it till the morning. But at sunrise the dangerous fever had subsided, and she was sure of her recovery. By the time she was strong enough to travel, it had become late in the season and if she were to travel further toward Lhasa, the return journey would no longer be viable, owing not least of all to mountain passes blocked with snow. Thus, still weak in her recovery, she took another executive decision: to abandon the pledged mission and return to India.

### **Further Medical Studies**

Once back in India, she was inspired by the bodhisattvas she had met on her journey and wanted to make herself more relevant in the quest to be of service to others.





She did not return immediately to Swamiji but availed herself of a medical training opportunity in Madras and enrolled in a four-month course in obstetrics and gynaecology at the Government Maternity Hospital, Egmore. When she informed her preceptor about her plan, he was indignant at not having been consulted in advance, and thus asked her to return her robe and bowl.

It is not uncommon in Theravada Buddhist orders that an ordained monk return the robe and bowl and resume life in the world, nor is there any shame in doing so. But Suzanne had no intention of disrobing and reminded Swamiji that she had carried her robe and bowl across the Tibetan plateau. She wrote to him: “You cannot separate me from what is more precious to me than anything else, more than a part of myself .... to do so would be separating me from everything and breaking a special religious link between us.”

#### Captain Ranjit Sen

With these words, the trust between them was restored. But while her commitment to Swamiji remained strong, something unexpected took place at Egmore Maternity Hospital. She met a Bengali army surgeon who had come to attend the course from his posting in the Sialkot Cantonment in the Punjab. Captain Ranjit Sen, IMS, was a physician who shared her aspirations. She wrote home with bodhisattva enthusiasm: “I hope to be able to help Ranjit in his

work as we are both doctors. Together we shall strive and fight and help others.”

Her mother and Swamiji knew of her decision to get married and over time, accepted the idea. But they had reservations about the haste with which the alliance had been agreed upon.

#### Married Life

Following their marriage in April 1927, Sujata was faced with a huge adjustment. She was to take part in the club life of an army physician, so unlike the monasteries of Tibet where all were devoted to the work of spiritual fulfilment. The couple danced at army functions and even won first prize in a ballroom dancing competition. Sujata applied to the military authorities for permission to start a charitable dispensary in the Cantonment. She also initiated, on behalf of Swamiji, the establishment of a Buddhist Centre for the Maha Sangha Raja Sabha. But all this was too good to be true and soon she learned that her husband was continuing his affairs with women he had known prior to their marriage. Suzanne felt humiliated and the birth of their daughter did not relieve the tension.

In 1929, Suzanne accompanied Ranjit to Vienna where he underwent further medical training while Suzanne lectured on Buddhism at the University. But Suzanne eventually left her husband owing to his infidelity, though they remained husband and wife for the rest of their lives.

## Sri Muruganar's Irai Pani Nitral, §2

இடந்தும் பறந்தும் எத்துணையும்  
இறையோர் இருவர்க்கு எய்தரியாய்  
நடந்து நடந்து பல்கதிக்கே  
நலிந்தேன் அந்தோ உயிர்ஞானம்  
கடந்த பொருளாம் கழலுக்கே  
கலக்கும் உபாயம் கழறுஎன்றேன்  
கிடந்த படிக்கே கிடஎன்றான்  
கேம ரமணக் கேவலனே

Digging and soaring Vishnu and Brahma  
Could not find you at all. And I  
Trudging towards diverse goals  
was worn thin.  
I cried: 'Tell me how to merge in the feet  
Beyond the knowledge of life!  
Said Ramana, pure, secure,  
'Be still. Rest as you are.'





### New Directions

In time, Suzanne went back to Swamiiji and resumed her life as a nun. For the following three years she strictly observed the ten precepts, feeling that if her commitment to her husband would not be respected in kind, then Buddha dharma would not betray her. She took the yellow robe once again, shaved her head, begged for her food and took up the life of renunciation, studying Pali and the sutras. She

also resumed Swamiiji's mission of uniting disparate Buddhist orders. She continued this work with diligence for the following three years.

In 1936, however, she found herself gravitating once again to the Theosophical Society's headquarters in Adyar, the place where her life in India had begun eleven years earlier. It was a time for taking stock of her life while her daughter was in the care of Suzanne's mother back in Europe. Daughter and mother came

## Events in Sri Ramanasramam: Mahasivaratri



The 'Great Night of Siva' follows the event in the month of Margazhi when the Lord saved the world from the darkness of ignorance by revealing his true form as pure light. The Lord manifested as a column of fire to resolve a dispute between Vishnu and Brahma, who, realising their foolishness, begged Lord Siva to cool his brightness and take the form of a mountain in order that all might worship and receive his blessing. The night when Lord Vishnu and the Devas bowed down in worship of the Lord was *chaturdasi* (the fourteenth day) of the dark fortnight of the month of Masi (mid-February to mid-March). Parvati named it *Mahasivaratri*. The Puranic verse explaining the significance of Sivaratri was selected by Bhagavan: *The first day on which Lord Siva took the form of the Mountain-Linga called Lord Arunachala, was Arudra in month of Margazhi. And that day when Lord Vishnu and the Devas worshipped Him, from out of the effulgence taking birth, was Sivaratri in the month of Masi.*

Mahasivaratri in 2020 was celebrated at the Ashram on the night of 21st February with *jagaran*, an all-night vigil of puja, recitation, meditation and pradakshina. Vedapatasala students chanted Rudram throughout the night, rousing and invigorating devotees at prayer. —





regularly to see her in India. But now she felt she was at a crossroads and needed to know with greater clarity the course her life was to take.

Just at this time of discernment, unclear as to how she was being called, she came across a newspaper article about Sri Ramana Maharshi. The article revealed that the Maharshi was the great sage at the Holy Mountain of Arunachala only some 170 kms from Madras. Seeing the sage's photo inspired her to go and see him

at once. Accompanied by two European ladies from the Theosophical Society, the three set off by train to Tiruvannamalai in December 1936.

Arriving by train from Madras, the newcomers took a bullock cart from Tiruvannamalai station. Upon reaching Ramanasramam, Chinnaswami, Bhagavan's younger brother and the Ashram manager, was on hand to greet them and welcomed them with small packets of vibhuti as prasadam. He called on Raja Iyer,

## Events in Sri Ramanasramam: Swami Niranjanananda Day



Chinnaswami was born Nagasundaram in 1886. In August 1917 at the age of 30, he arrived in Tiruvannamalai with the intention of surrendering to Bhagavan. A year later, he took *sannyasa diksha*, receiving the name Niranjananandaswami. For the next thirty-five years he served Bhagavan and devotees unceasingly. After Bhagavan's Mahanirvana, many left the Ashram with only a few such as Muruganar and Osborne staying on to keep the flame of Bhagavan's teaching alive. Swami Niranjanananda laboured to keep the Ashram afloat during these hard times, but the strain finally broke his health. In late 1952, suffering intestinal disease and heart pain, he called relatives and devotees to hear his last instructions: "I am going away with stainless hands and a fulfilled heart. I have never touched a *paisa* of the Ashram for my personal possession. Everything here, every stick and stone, belongs to Bhagavan. You have to treat them with devotion. You must give your heart and mind to Bhagavan and he will shower you with grace. Be truthful and honest. In doing your Ashram duties, you must uphold the virtue of your lineage."

This great karma yogi left the body on *Thai Poosam*, the full moon day, 29th January, 1953. (*Thai Poosam* is the day when Parvati gave the spear to Murugan to vanquish the demon, Soorapadman). Interred in front of the Mother's temple for which he had laboured so hard to construct, a lingam was consecrated, and pujas performed.

This year, Swami Niranjanananda's samadhi day fell on the 8th February with participation of family members and Ashram devotees. —





the Ashram postmaster, to take them to Bhagavan. Thus their first steps in Ramanasramam were from the front gate directly to the entrance to the darshan hall wherein sat the Master. They entered the hall with some apprehension, daunted by the prospects of what such an encounter might entail. But when they entered the hall, they found the embodiment of peace and tranquillity seated on a sofa before them:

*Suzanne described seeing a slender, golden-skinned man in his late fifties. Except for a loincloth, he was completely bare. She thought that his face was very beautiful, not only because of the Brahmin fineness of his features, but above all, because it had the highest expression of awareness that she had ever*

*seen. There was about him a certain indefinable quality, the splendour of Realization. She saw how the psychological labels which the modern mind tended to affix to spiritual experience turned out to be irrelevant when one was confronted with true achievement. When Raja Iyer introduced them to the Maharshi, the latter nodded in acknowledgement and for a moment gave them his bare unwavering attention—though he did not speak. Suzanne was so engrossed in her contemplation of him that at first, she did not hear it when one of the attendants invited them to take a seat among the women. \* —*

*(to be continued)*

\* This article is freely adapted from, *The Hill of Fire* (2004), by Sujata's Sen's daughter, Monica Bose.



## Events in Sri Ramanasramam: Maharudram

More than 75 young purohiths and pundits convened in the New Grantalaya Auditorium on the morning of 28th February to lead a two-day Maharudram. The event often follows Sivaratri and culminates with homa which took place this year on the morning of Saturday the 29th in the New Hall and concludes with a procession of the sacred kalasas followed by abhishekam of Sri Ramaneswara Mahalingam and Matrubhuteswara. Sri Rudram, one of the most sacred hymn praising Lord Siva, is found in the fourth kanda of the Krishna Yajur Veda's Taittirīya samhita and comprises two parts: Namakam and Chamakam.—





## Events in Sri Ramanasramam Gardens: *Caparis Zeylanica*



The Indian caper or Ceylon caper (*caparis zeylanica*, Linn., *adbandankaai* in Tamil, *aradanda* in Hindi) is a large climbing shrub found in the forests of the Indian subcontinent. Traditionally used as a *rasayana* drug in Ayurveda, there is a proverb in Tamil which says that its fried seed eaten with fermented rice bestows divine wealth.

Possessing anti-helminthic, anti-microbial and anti-inflammatory properties, *caparis zeylanica* is used as a counter-irritant, an antidote to snake bite and for reducing fever. It is also used for curing smallpox, cholera, colic, partial paralysis (hemiplegia), neuralgia, sores and pleurisy. When steeped in vinegar, it is used for treating ulcers and when made into a poultice, for treating boils, swelling and piles. A decoction of the plant's root-bark serves as an emetic.

Recently the creeper, which is becoming increasingly rare, had climbed the heights of one of the trees in the Ashram archives garden burst into full bloom (see photos above). —

## Obituary: Smt. Nagu (Padma)



Griddalur Sambasiva Rao, an advocate from Nellore, was instrumental in getting Bhagavan's will drawn-up and registered. He had the rare privilege of signing the will in Ramana Maharshi's stead. During Bhagavan's time and, more so, after Bhagavan shed the body, Griddalur Sambasiva Rao was of great help in stabilising Ashram management. He was blessed with a granddaughter, Nagu, through his only son. (She had been named Nagu after Vekatoo's wife but got the name Padma after her marriage). Nagu had been a regular visitor to Ashram from childhood. She and her late husband Sriramulu took keen interest in conducting Ramana Satsang in the western suburbs of Mumbai.

Nagu passed away peacefully on 24th January in Mumbai and her remains were cremated the following day. On the evening of the cremation day, the Ashram lit Moksha Deepam at Bhagavan's shrine in her honour. She is survived by her son and three daughters. —

## Ashram YouTube Channel

Sri Ramanasramam has its own YouTube channel and is regularly posting videos of events. Please visit the channel at:

<<https://www.youtube.com/c/sriramanasramam>>

