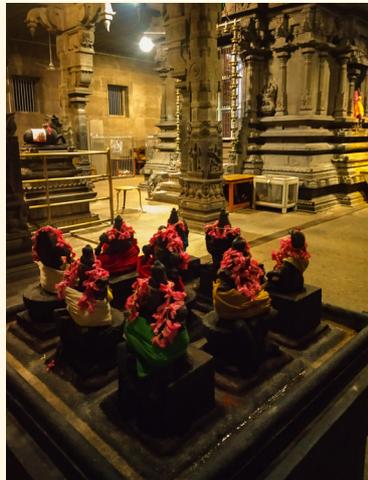
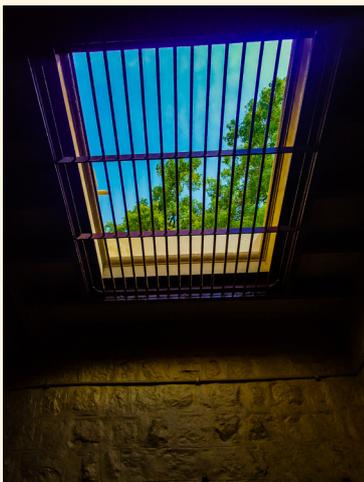


# Saranagati



SARANAGATI  
SRI RAMANASRAMAM

OCTOBER 2020  
VOL. 14, NO. 10



Photos by D. Thiyagarajan



## Saranagati



OCTOBER 2020  
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IN THIS  
ISSUE

Dear Devotees,

In this issue of *Saranagati*, we remember the life of Madhava Swami who had the great blessing to be in Bhagavan's presence for long years starting in the early 1930s. We also look at the impact of the increasing Covid-19 spread in India and Tamil Nadu and the prospects of eventual relief from the pandemic here locally.

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

In Sri Bhagavan,  
The Editorial Team

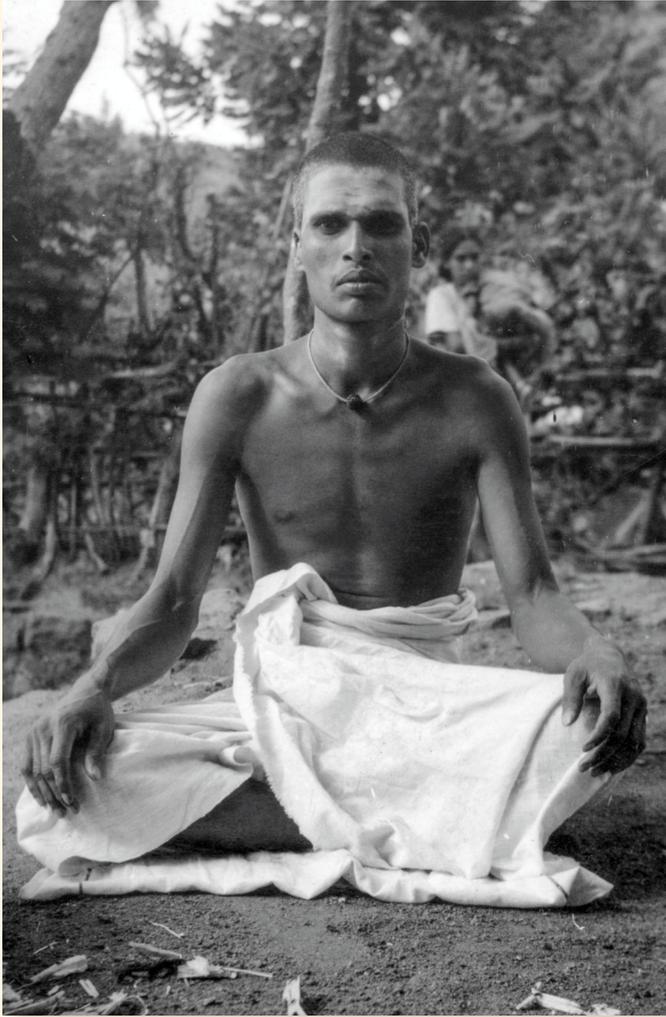
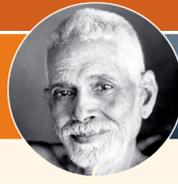
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## Calendar of Events Celebrated at Home (for the time being)

2nd October (Fri) Full Moon  
10th October (Tues) Punarvasu  
17th October (Sat) Navaratri Commences  
25th October (Sun) Saraswati Puja  
26th October (Mon) Vijayadasami  
31st October (Fri) Full Moon

6th November (Fri) Punarvasu  
14th November (Sat) Deepavali  
20th November (Fri) Deepam Festival Commences  
29th November (Sun) Kartigai Deepam Day/Full Moon  
4th December (Fri) Punarvasu  
31st December (Thurs) Bhagavan's Jayanti





## IN PROFILE

### Madhava Swami

In 1932, after attending on Bhagavan for twelve years, including the last two years that Bhagavan was at Skandasramam, Kunju Swami wanted to find a graceful way to ask Bhagavan's permission to retire from his work duties and devote himself completely to sadhana. His chance came when he heard Bhagavan explaining to devotees in the Hall that real service to the guru did not mean attending to his physical needs but practicing his teachings. A few days later, he heard Bhagavan say, "The best service to the guru is engaging in Self-enquiry, meditation and other spiritual practices

with a purity of body, speech and mind." Bhagavan repeated this theme in the space of a few days and Kunju thus took it as a sign that it was time to raise his question with Bhagavan.

All was arranged and Kunju would now take up residence in Palakotthu. Since Ramakrishna Swami was to continue assisting Chinnaswami in Ashram management, Kunju brought Madhava Swami to serve Bhagavan.

A Keralite from a village near Palghat, Madhava Swami came to Ramanasramam in the late 1920s and was known for being very quiet and withdrawn.

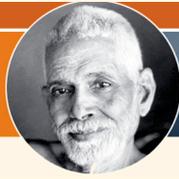
From the outset of his service to Bhagavan, Madhava began to experience a burning sensation all over his body, unable to withstand the intensity of Bhagavan's presence. But as a sadhu with no outside interests, Madhava Swami focused all his energies on serving Bhagavan even as he underwent an adjustment period. Numerous photos of Bhagavan moving about in the Ashram or up on the Hill, reveal that wherever Bhagavan went, Madhava Swami faithfully followed behind him with Bhagavan's *kamandalu* in hand. In the course of time, Madhava Swami's service became very attuned and devotees were fascinated to observe that if Bhagavan ever wanted anything, Madhava Swami would perceive Bhagavan's wish in advance and produce the desired item without even a single word being exchanged between them.

#### Changing Jobs with Bhagavan

Madhava Swami remained ever at Bhagavan's side in the Hall. He was diligent in taking care of the Ashram library books which stood on the shelves next to Bhagavan's sofa. One day, while Madhava was binding a book, a devotee asked Bhagavan if he could borrow a book from the library. Bhagavan asked Madhava Swami to get it saying, "You do my work and I will do yours." Bhagavan thus took Madhava's binding work and continued the binding while Madhava Swami searched for the requested book. A devotee seeing this commented openly:

*'My work' means looking after the needs that arise in the minds of devotees for anything from Bhagavan. 'Your work' is to get liberation, which is not possible without Bhagavan's grace and help.' Hearing this comment, Bhagavan indicated his agreement: 'Hum! That is indeed how it is.'"*





### Offerings in the Hall

When devotees came for Bhagavan's darshan, they regularly made offerings before Bhagavan, a ceremony that Madhava Swami was happy to assist with when needed. When Subbalakshmiamma came with a friend and placed offerings of cashew nuts and sugar candy on the stool before Bhagavan, Cow Lakshmi happened to be lying near Bhagavan's sofa. She promptly got up, moved toward the offering stool and began to feast on the precious offerings. Bhagavan quietly looked on in silence while Madhava Swami did not even seem to notice. The two devotees, not wanting to disturb the silence in the Hall, sat quietly by, exerting every effort to contain their exasperation. But soon enough they could not hold it any longer and the one said, "Please remove the cow!" Madhava Swami replied: "Why? I thought you offered those sweets to Lakshmi!"

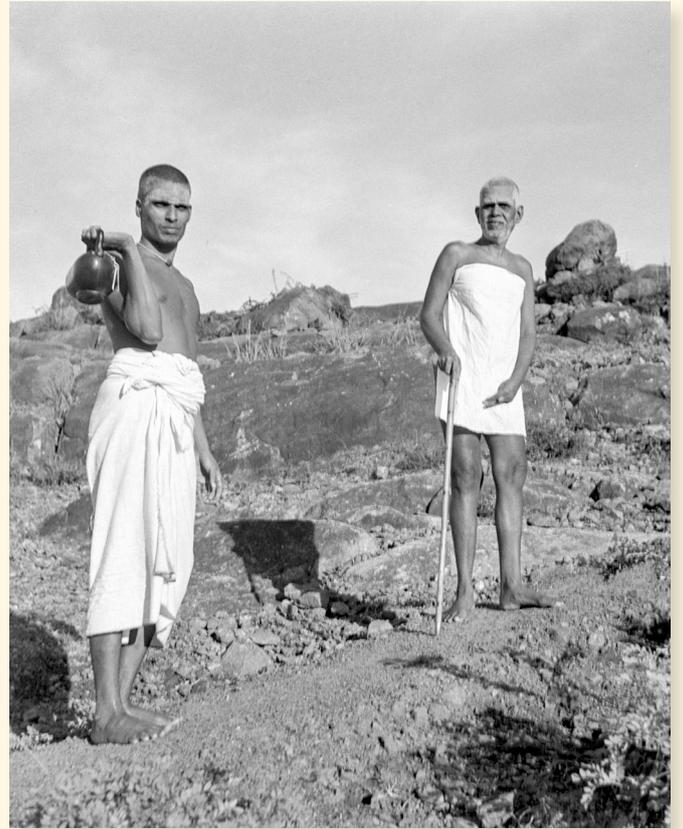
### Madhava and the Sparrow

Animals came to be near Bhagavan and Madhava Swami saw it as his duty to regulate and control their actions so that Bhagavan suffered no inconvenience. Readers will have heard or read the following oft-told story, but it is worth repeating in this context.

A sparrow once tried to build a nest over Bhagavan's sofa, but Madhava Swami kept destroying the nest with his long stick. After several failed attempts, the sparrow flew to the top of the entrance doors and repeatedly chirped loudly at Bhagavan. To the people in the Hall it sounded like ordinary bird noises but Bhagavan heard that it was making a complaint. He turned to Madhava Swami and asked, "Who has destroyed her nest? She's complaining about it." "I did," replied Madhava Swami. "If she builds her nest on any of the other beams there will be no problem. But there will be trouble if she constructs it directly over the sofa and allows grass and other debris to fall on Bhagavan's head."

Bhagavan accepted this explanation and arranged for two wooden boards to be nailed to the beams in a different corner of the Hall. The sparrow was somehow persuaded to rebuild her nest there. In the absence of further disturbances, the sparrow settled in, laid some eggs, and raised a family there in the Hall.

There were other instances involving animals as



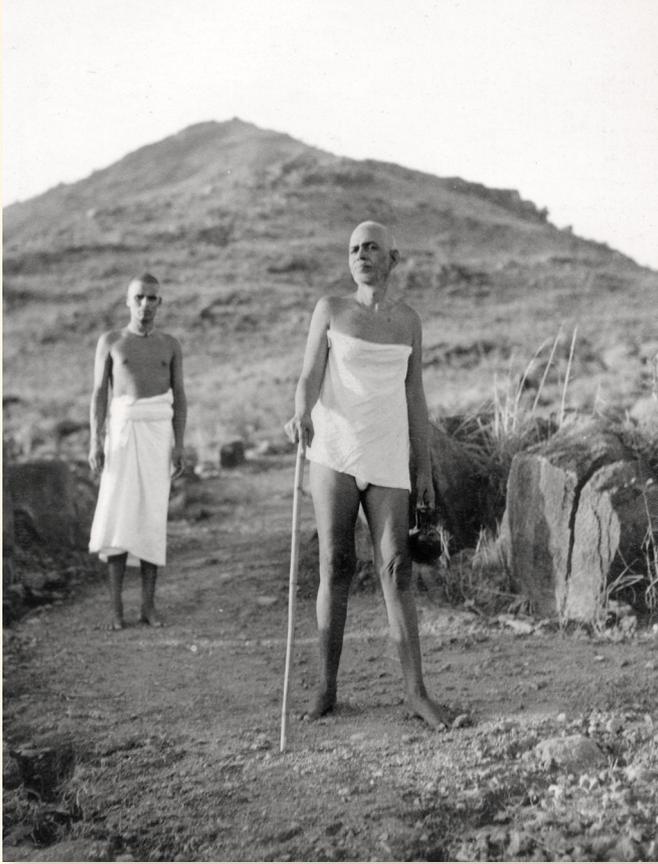
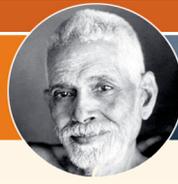
part of the life in the Hall. Madhava Swami kept his long stick near to him to control the monkeys who came in the Hall. Whenever Madhava waved his stick menacingly at the monkeys, Bhagavan always seemed to side with the monkeys, keen that they get away with the loot. Once, when one of the creatures managed to outwit Madhava and make off with some fruit, Bhagavan rejoiced out loud, "He got it, he got it!"

### The Betel Chew

Madhava Swami's daily routine was bound to that of Bhagavan which included regular walks up the Hill, either going up past the back gate or via Palakotthu.

Madhava was prompt and punctual in attending on Bhagavan and rarely slipped up on Bhagavan's rhythm and timings. But one day, Madhava Swami either got distracted by some work or simply forgot to prepare at the appointed time the betel chew which was taken as an aid to digestion. Just when he remembered it, he hurriedly prepared the *areca* nut, wrapped it in betel leaves and brought it to Bhagavan, though slightly later than usual. Bhagavan declined the offering and declared that he did not want betel





thereafter. Madhava Swami felt sorry for the infraction and begged Bhagavan to accept the betel as a sign of Bhagavan's forgiveness. Bhagavan assured him there was nothing to forgive but insisted that now was the time to discontinue betel use. G.V. Subbaramaiah heard about the incident and composed Telugu verses entitled *Tambula Vilapam* ("The Lament of the Betel") wherein the Betel claims to have been serving Bhagavan like other devotees and laments that it has now been cast aside by no fault of its own. The Betel prays that Madhava Swami be forgiven and that the Betel might be allowed to continue its devoted service. GVS writes:

*Bhagavan had a hearty laugh over the poem and explained its meaning to the Ashramites with evident pleasure. But neither this poem nor any other appeal had the least effect on Sri Bhagavan's decision. Sri Bhagavan declared: "I have been waiting for a pretext to discontinue this habit of betel-chewing, and now it has come. I have nothing against Madhava. It was really no fault of his. It had to happen like this. Everything occurs for our good. If, as you say, you all feel like stopping the use of Betel yourselves, by all means do it. I would welcome the change.*

Sri Bhagavan never touched betel again.

### Treating Piles Communally

Another time, Bhagavan was suffering from piles and did not bother to inform anyone. When it came to light, medically inclined devotees prepared a treatment and gave it to Madhava Swami, requesting that he give it to Bhagavan twice daily. But when Madhava Swami offered Bhagavan the medicine, Bhagavan refused it, saying, "Taking medicine only increases the disease. As "the donkey", i.e. the disease, came, so it will go. Let me put up with it till it goes away. You need not make further recommendations."

After this, Bhagavan would not even look at the medicine. Madhava gently persisted and Bhagavan finally assented, under the condition that his rule of sharing all offerings equally was followed. This meant he would take the medicine if all the devotees in the Hall were given an equal share. Since devotees wanted Bhagavan to get well, all agreed to undergo the treatment.

### GVS's Bewilderment

One day in the late 1930s when G.V. Subbaramaiah entered the Hall, Sri Bhagavan and Madhava Swami exchanged glances and laughed to each other. GVS was puzzled by their jovial greeting and Bhagavan asked Madhava Swami to explain:

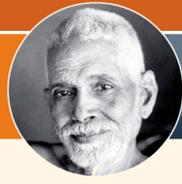
*Sri Bhagavan was preparing the "contents" for your Telugu edition of Sri Ramana Gita and remarked that its author might himself come and fix it up. Just as Bhagavan finished writing the last word, lo and behold, you appeared on the scene!*

GVS writes, "I then realised as never before that it is Sri Bhagavan's will and not mine that brings me to the Ashram."

### Warrant for Bhagavan's Arrest

It is known that Bhagavan liked to get off his sofa on occasion and take walks or inspect building sites in the Ashram. He felt beholden to devotees coming for darshan but lamented being pinned to the couch which he sometimes, tongue-in-cheek, called his "jail". In the early years, when Bhagavan moved out and about quite frequently, he would only return to the Hall if devotees came for darshan. At such times Madhava Swami would come and notify him and Bhagavan would go back to his sofa.





Once when Bhagavan and a devotee were working elsewhere, they both saw Madhava Swami walking towards them. Bhagavan sighed and said, “Here comes a new warrant for my arrest. I have to go back to [my] jail!”

## A Chastening from Bhagavan

Madhava Swami was a student of Bhagavan and received spiritual instruction like any other devotee. Bhagavan knew him well and did not permit any excess in his attendant.

Once when Madhava Swami was singing in Tamil in the Hall, Madhava broke off mid-way and asked, “Why doesn’t Krishnayya sing along with me?” Bhagavan said sternly, “Go on with your singing. Don’t worry about Krishnayya”. But when Madhava Swami tried to continue, he could not sing properly and made mistakes at every turn, evidently feeling the pinch of his wounded pride following this mild chastening from Bhagavan.

## Ananda

Madhava Swami attended on Bhagavan during his morning bath. One day when he and another devotee gave Bhagavan the usual oil bath and massage, Madhava Swami asked: “Bhagavan, the people who take *ganja lehiyam* (an ayurvedic preparation whose principal ingredient is *cannabis*) experience some kind of ananda or bliss. What is the nature of this ananda? Is it the same ananda that the scriptures speak of?”

Bhagavan responded, “Eating ganja is a very bad habit”. Then, laughing loudly, he came over and hugged the devotee accompanying Madhava Swami and called out, “Ananda! Ananda! This is how these ganja-taking people behave!”

After the first few seconds the devotee lost awareness of his body and the world. Initially, there was a feeling of happiness and bliss, but this soon gave way to a state in which there were neither feelings nor experiences. The devotee said:

*I did not lose consciousness; I just ceased to be aware of anything that was going on around me. I remained in this state for about fifteen minutes. When I recovered my usual consciousness, I was standing alone in the bathroom. Madhava Swami and Bhagavan had long since departed for breakfast. I had not seen them open the door and leave, nor had I heard the breakfast bell.*

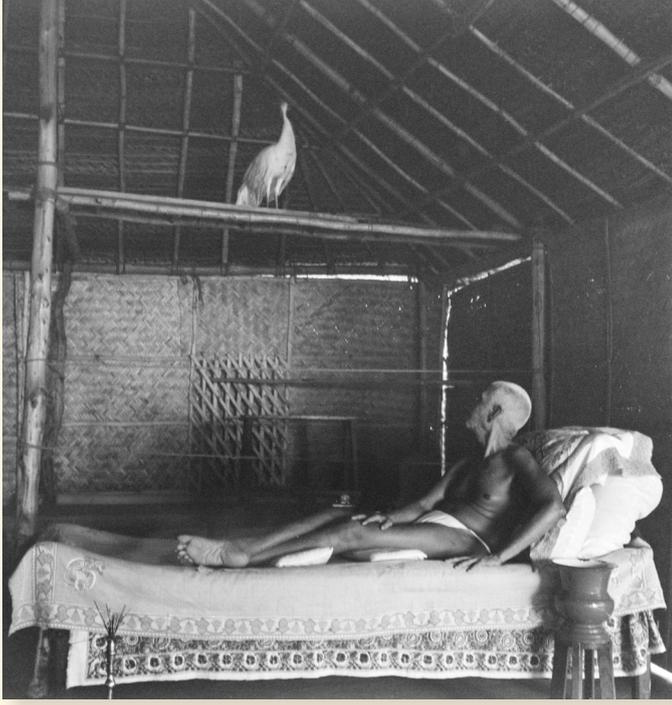


## Departing the Ashram

In the early 1940s, Madhava began to feel the pull towards sadhana and renunciation and wanted to take leave of his duties as Kunju Swami had done those many years before. On the one hand this makes some sense as Madhava was a sadhaka, but most devotees were surprised that Madhava Swami would want to leave Bhagavan’s presence. Indeed, they were envious of his being constantly in Bhagavan’s presence, being privy to the spiritual counsel Bhagavan gave to devotees and having the opportunity to live and move with Bhagavan one on one, day in and day out. Madhava Swami felt his duties and full-time work obstructed his meditation and decided to leave the Ashram in spite of Bhagavan’s guidance to the contrary. He began wandering about here and there during his pilgrimage, but the peace he had hoped to find in his wandering eluded him, and the joy he had experienced at Bhagavan’s feet slowly faded away.

In 1946 Madhava Swami joined a Math in Kumbakonam and, not long after that, the Ashram received a message from the Math that Madhava Swami was in need of help. Kunju Swami went to investigate and was saddened to discover that Madhava had deteriorated in health and was very low in spirit.





It has been said that the soul of one who serves a *siddha purusha* will be attached to the Mahatma and that if he leaves the company of the Mahatma, the body will not survive long. Madhava Swami had wanted to return to Arunachala one more time but hesitated, having imagined that he would not be allowed to leave again. In late June 1946, he sat in *padmasana* and breathed his last on 7th July.

There are varying accounts as to what happened exactly but Bhagavan sent Kunju Swami to perform the

funeral rites. Devaraja Mudaliar reproduces his account:

*It seems that about twenty days before his death Madhava Swami left Kumbakonam saying he was coming here, but actually he took a ticket to Pazhani. After some time, he seems to have gone to Palghat and to his home village. Then he went to Trichy and stayed a few days with our Tirumala Chetty and from there returned to Kumbakonam about a week before his death. It seems that the whole of this week he was saying, "Wherever I go I feel wretched. I don't feel at ease anywhere. If I go to Ramanasramam they may not allow me there, but after having had the privilege of serving Bhagavan for so long I can no longer bear the burden of this body anywhere else. I must throw it off."*

*It seems that this thought was constantly with him and he went about moody and morose. The day before he died, he complained of indigestion, but for a whole week his digestion had not been good." Bhagavan asked what gave him indigestion. Kunju Swami said, "It seems to have been due to eating a mango. They never agreed with him.*

At about four on Sunday afternoon, the 7th, Madhava Swami was offered lunch but refused it and asked for a bottle of soda water. Soon after that he perspired all over and left his body, sitting in the *padmasana* posture.

Upon getting the news the following day, Bhagavan reflected on death:

*Deathlessness is our real nature, and we falsely ascribe it to the body, imagining that it will live forever and losing sight of what is really immortal, simply because we identify ourselves with the body. It says in the Upanishads that the jnani looks forward eagerly to the time when he can throw off the body, just as a labourer carrying a heavy load looks forward to reaching his destination and laying it down.*

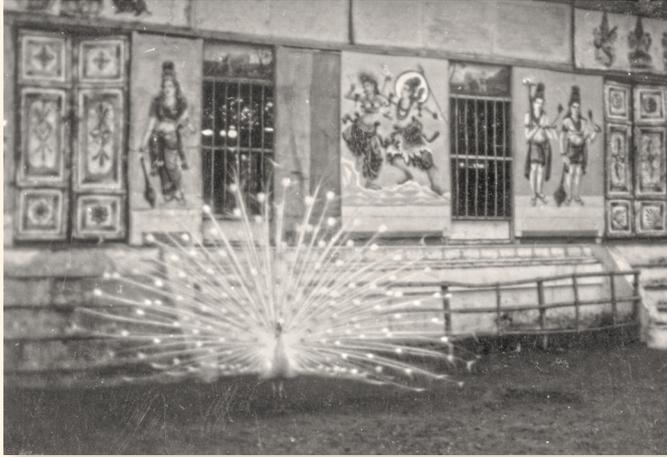
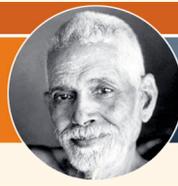
## Sri Muruganar's Irai Pani Nitral, §8

பெய்யும் கருணைப் பெருமுகிலே  
பிறவிப் பெருநீர்க் கரையேறி  
உய்யும் படிக்குஓர் உபாயம்எனக்கு  
உள்ள படிக்கே உரைக்கென்றேன்  
மெய்யும் பொய்யும் விழையாதே  
வெறாதே நடுநின்று இறைவன்அருள்  
செய்யும் படிக்கே செய்கென்றான்  
சேம ரமணச் சின்மயனே

I cried:

'O rain cloud with compassion big!  
Teach me truly the trick  
Of escaping alive from the flood of births.'  
Said Ramana, Lord of Wisdom and Welfare,  
'Loathe not, like not, true or false.  
Stand in the centre and be  
Impelled by the grace of the Lord.'





## The White Peacock

Not long after Madhava Swami's death, the Maharani of Baroda presented Bhagavan with a young white peacock. The peacock stayed just next to Bhagavan, as Madhava had done, and would daily visit the temple construction going on in the Ashram at the time. He would enter the Dining Hall and move about among devotees seated at meals. Seeing his inspection rounds, Bhagavan conferred on him the title "Assistant Sarvadhikari". All observed the peacock's unusual habits which included pecking at the books from Bhagavan's library which had been repaired by Madhava Swami. Over time, devotees started to feel that Madhava Swami had been reborn as this white peacock. Even Bhagavan began to address the bird as Madhava. One sadhu in Palakotthu remarked that when the white peacock came to his hut, he stood in the very place where Madhava Swami used to sit when visiting.

Devotees were taken by the bird when it danced with its long train of 150 white feathers in full display, mesmerizing onlookers as it glistened in the morning sun. But even more remarkable was the creature's

behaviour, not least of all, its affinity for humans and avoiding those of his own species. Madhava the peacock did not seem to see itself as a bird but rather as a man. If Madhava the attendant ended his life only wanting to be back in the presence of Bhagavan, the peacock had fulfilled this wish. If Madhava the attendant ended his life in despair, the purification he underwent during his many years of service in Bhagavan's presence now revealed itself in the splendour of this great white bird.

G.V. Subbaramaiah was struck by the relationship between Bhagavan and the peacock, so much so that he composed eight verses entitled *Svetha Mayura Ashtakam* in *mayura vrittam* ("the peacock metre"). The uniqueness of this relationship would seem to be confirmed in part by some of the last words Bhagavan uttered in 1950 only a few hours before the end. When he heard the white peacock trumpeting, he asked: "Have the peacocks been given their nuts?"

On June 20, 1947, one year after Madhava Swami passed away, Bhagavan read the stanzas to devotees, then gave the poem to Lalitha Venkataraman and asked her to sing them with her veena. Lalitha studied the verses and set them to music. GVS comments:

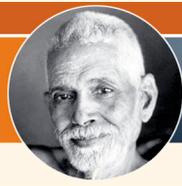
*Within half an hour she brought her veena and got ready to sing. Just then the white peacock was absent. Bhagavan said, "But the hero must be present to hear his praises sung! Where are you, Madhava? Come." Lo! At once the white peacock jumped down from the roof of the pandal; and while Lalitha sang, he spread out his tail feathers and danced as Bhagavan sat and watched him with beaming eyes. When the singing concluded, the peacock walked to the veena and pecked at its strings with his beak. Thereupon Bhagavan told the singer, "Madhava wants you to repeat the song." So, she sang once more, and the peacock danced again. It was a sight for the gods. —*

## Events in Sri Ramanasramam: Samvatsara Abhishekam



The seventh anniversary of the Mahakum-bhabhishekam of Sri Rameswara and Matru-bhuteswara Shrines was observed on Punarvasu Day, Sunday 13th September. Owing to pandemic restrictions, the celebration was kept small and the usual homa was not performed. *Sankalpa* and *mahanyasa* japa were followed by an elaborate *kalasa abhishekam* and puja at 9am. —





## Local Coronavirus Update



With relaxation of restrictions as part of the Unlock 4.0 phase in Tamil Nadu at the beginning of September, many locals took the policy change to mean that the danger of SARS-COV-2 spread had passed, and thus stopped wearing face masks and began to congregate in groups. People are suggestive and with reduced measures, can quickly forget vitally important non-pharmaceutical interventions such as mask-use.

With the world reporting 100 lakhs of COVID deaths and 3.4 crore number of cases, Europe is experiencing a second wave of new cases that rival that of the early summer. The trend is everywhere, and in India as well, which currently has the world's fastest growing number of COVID-19 cases according to WHO (see *The Lancet*, Sept issue). With 86,000 new cases per day, the crisis in India is not over. The government has done its level best to balance the three main objectives that challenge every nation battling this pandemic, namely: 1) to reduce SARS-COV-2 transmission rates, 2) to keep the economy going and, 3) to prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed.

The strict lockdown in India over the last six months was effective in stabilising SARS-COV-2 spread, but it inevitably took a toll on the nation's economy. Policy makers had no choice but to relax restrictions lest

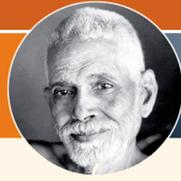
the economy sustain long-term damage. Nations everywhere have been caught off-guard.

From a policy point of view, the difficulty in battling the COVID pandemic is simply the level of complexity involved. Among the administrative challenges nations are facing are key differences in rural and urban populations, rendering centrally drafted containment strategies less effective. Another challenge is born of the information-laden digital era, where amidst the flood of data, opinions form around information that may have been wrongly interpreted. Just a few decades ago, media outlets around the world relied on public health experts to interpret data and give their assessments to be reported at large. But in the digital age everyone has access to data while not necessarily having the requisite training to interpret it. Laypersons and journalists may be blinded by the sheer volume of information available. This phenomenon can negatively impact the quality of data and distort scientific language, not only in the popular media but even in official reporting. A simple example is the epidemiological term 'case' which in the context of viral spread has always meant 'viral infection requiring hospitalization or medical care'. 'Case' has always been distinguished from 'infection' which meant someone who gets a positive test result, though not presenting symptoms. In the COVID era, this distinction seems to have collapsed in the English-speaking world, and there is confusion about when such terminology is being deployed in its technical sense and when it is being used casually. This is significant in terms of ensuring the quality of data in graphs, charts and comparative models across countries and regions. ([www.peakprosperity.com](http://www.peakprosperity.com))

Policy makers need reliable information to make informed decisions about when and where to implement lockdown measures and when and where to relax them. The fact is that all of us are participants in a collective

*The greatest error of a man is to think that he is weak or evil by nature. Every man is divine and strong in his real nature. What are weak and evil are his habits, desires and thoughts, but not himself. ~ A Search in Secret India*





global cause and are forced to make decisions day in and day out but may be doing so based on wrong assumptions. National governments, state governments, municipal authorities and leaders of small businesses and institutions around the world are trying to avoid implementing restrictions unnecessarily. However, relaxing restrictions

too early or doing so without emphasizing mask use, frequent proper handwashing and social distancing protocols has proven counter-productive. National governments everywhere are experiencing the same challenge, i.e. to continue with a soft lockdown while getting the economy back on its feet as safely as possible.

## Local Coronavirus Update: On When Sri Ramanasramam Might Reopen

Municipal authorities in Tamil Nadu and the leadership of Sri Ramanasramam are daily evaluating the latest data, operating on the assumption that the best decision is an informed one. It had been hoped to reopen Ramanasramam in a limited way for the Navaratri celebrations beginning in mid-October. But in light of reports of increased spread in India and second waves in Europe, there is apprehension about doing so. Additionally, the North-East monsoon (Oct-Dec) typically marks the beginning of the flu season which is not projected to combine well with increasing infections.

At present there have been more than six lakh reported infections in Tamil Nadu and 15,000 in Tiruvannamalai, one of the hardest hit districts in the state. Schools remain closed locally and around the state, though railway and bus services are running on a limited basis. The ban on international commercial flights operating to and from India was to be lifted on 30th September but on the same day, the Director of Civil Aviation issued a circular extending the ban till 31st October.

Naturally, devotees locally and elsewhere are eager to spend time in Bhagavan's Sannidhi and everyone

had gotten their hopes up with recent social media speculation about the Ashram's plans to reopen.

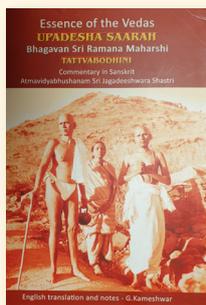
On 1st October, the central government's Unlock 5.0 phase began and includes this general precaution in all its recommendations, namely, that *pregnant women and persons over 65 and under age 10 remain at home*.

In the spirit of *one-for-all-and-all-for-one* that has characterized the Ashram's inclusive pluralism down through the decades, the Ashram management is loath to discriminate against visiting devotees based on age or any other criteria. Thus, to follow the abovementioned guidelines, the Ashram management has decided to apply them to all devotees, irrespective of age or gender.

As we go to press, the Ashram is taking a wait-and-see approach and will continue to monitor the situation. Devotees will be kept informed about any prospective re-opening date.

Like administrators everywhere, Sri Ramanasramam management faces difficult choices and thus needs our patient cooperation. In the meantime, we can take solace in the reasonable hope for a viable and safe vaccine by next spring, if not sooner. —

## Events in Sri Ramanasramam: New Book Release



An English translation of the commentary on Bhagavan's *Upadesa Sara* by Jagadeeshwara Sastri (Atmavidyabhushanam Brahmasri) was released on Punarvasu Day in Bhagavan's Sannidhi on the morning of 13th September. Translated from the Sanskrit by G. Kameshwar and published by the Ramana Maharshi Centre for Learning, this is the first time this erudite Sanskrit commentary may be perused and read by those not having a firm grasp of Sanskrit. Called 'Tattvabodhini', the commentary seeks to uncover and elucidate the deeper meaning of Bhagavan's thirty verses. —

