

Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi ---- a viewpoint on His life and method of Atma Vichara or self enquiry

Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi of Thiruvannamalai was the greatest sage of India in the last two centuries...that is 19th and 20th centuries

I must first add that though he was born and lived in India, his message and his method are universal---in fact , goes beyond Hinduism as such.

My aim in this article is to emphasize certain aspects of Bhagavan's life and teachings in the broader context of spirituality in the modern times and the unique contribution of Bhagavan for a sincere seeker.

Bhagavan Ramana was, however, rooted in Hinduism, and in the sacred tradition of Saivites...Lord Shiva worshippers--- of South India. He acknowledged and endorsed the Advaita philosophy, eloquently exposed by the Acharya ---Adi Shanka --of 8th century [788-820 AD, according to most scholars]. Bhagavan Ramana was considered by all modern scholars as the most recent exponent of Advaita philosophy.

He, in fact , translated in prose form in Tamil the well known text of Adi Sankara—"Vivekachudamani" [Crown-jewel of knowledge/discrimination]. He mentioned or explained during the course of nearly 40 years of daily discussion many texts of Advaita literature.

But Bhagavan Ramana was above narrow sectarian dogmas of philosopher-saints and pontiffs of mathas who were most prominent in his time. As a self-realized master, he accepted the value of devotion and surrender as valid path for liberation or moksha. He told in clear terms: "Follow self-enquiry; if you cannot, submit " ..For many sincere seekers, he took pains to explain the path of self-surrender. He also quoted from the works of Alvars --the Vaishnava saints of pre-Sankara days --roughly 5th to 8th centuries. He would , however, extol self-enquiry as the "direct method" for self realization.

It is needless for me to elaborate or even mention the biographical details of Bhagavan Ramana...Excellent books have been written---you may refer to B V Narasimhaswami's ' Self-realization" and Arthur Osborne's biography. Bhagavan's first death experience, his realization at the age of sixteen, his arrival in Thiruvannamalai have all been described in many books.

The greatest contribution of Bhagavan Ramana was that he taught [literally day after day] by silence and by words --- patiently answering many questions put to him....on 'atma vichara', self enquiry and approach to self-realization with love and compassion to thousands of seekers from India and abroad....He never turned down any one who approached him for spiritual illumination and instruction on Vedanta. Countless foreigners, many during the years 1935 to 1945... the war years--- came to him from afar. Several, including many of Jewish faith, chose to remain in India or in Thiruvannamalai or Arunachala attracted by the sublime atmosphere of Bhagavan's immediate presence.

He never showed the caste prejudices ---especially of devout Brahmins of South India---keeping people of other castes at some distance and refusing admission into their company or discussion...As a matter of fact, such prejudices and obnoxious customs relating to pollution or defilement of Brahmins at the hands of other castes had reached a peak in the early 20th century---that is, the generation of my father... Bhagavan Ramana cut asunder all those prejudices and customs of orthodox upper caste Hindus....He ate food offered by other caste people, accepted their affections and freely discussed and moved with them. Many became his ardent disciples, ready to learn from "Brahmana Swami"—as Bhagavan was called by local people. They , in fact ,recorded his teachings and conversations ---men like Sivaprakasam Pillai and Devaraja Mudaliar .He invited all to take lunch with him in the common hall. He walked with them and talked to them.

While Bhagavan taught and extolled the Advaitic methods of spiritual endeavor---with 'Atma vichara' as the main plank---he did show the inclinations of a devotee—worshipping Arunachaleswara, talking of the lives of great devotees and -saints and singing their hymns and so on.. He had the markings of a true bhakta –in the Saivite tradition---including smearing of sacred ash or vibhuti on his person and accepted the veneration shown to a Saiva saint by local admirers and disciples....He was not averse to the many rituals of a devout Hindu...in fact rituals were performed by priests and others in his presence and in His mother's temple—a temple built by him and consecrated a year before his Samadhi. Some of these might be shocking or unacceptable or at least disturbing to a pure or strict Advaitin or non-dualist , hooked on to the concept of Brahman—One without a second—beyond name and form and with no attributes.....

Bhagavan Ramana was a sannyasi though he did not go through a Viraga pooja or ceremonies with a formal guru. --- he did not need these things---he was a realized Jnani from the age of sixteen...He was not initiated in the formal manner, though one would presume that he had been initiated by Lord Arunachaleswara, the presiding deity in the temple of Arunachala or Thiruvannamalai, when he entered and paid his obeisance at the temple....

Bhagavan did take his own [widowed] mother as a resident of his ashram .Later his brother with his son also moved into the Skandashramam on the hill..later his borther became a sannyasin. Such things are definitely not in keeping with the strict traditions of Sannyas in Hindu faith. .But then Ramana was giving a new dispensation from his own perspective...He could form his own yuga dharma. He maintained many 'human' qualities ,though he was a divine personage. He was at once human and divine!

Bhagavan was also writing and editing many things relating to Hindu philosophy and the method of self-enquiry. 'The collected works of Ramana Maharshi' edited by Arthur Osborne gives the complete picture of Bhagavan's interests and skills in this respect. A Jnani engaging himself in literary works is not new. But Bhagavan did all these prompted by certain events ;for instance, the devotees wanted to sing hymns while going round the hill..For that purpose Bhagavan gave "Akshara Mana malai"—marital garland of verses"Bhagavan distilled his message in "Forty verses on Reality" [Ulladu narpadu] and Upadesa saram, both originally written in Tamil...Bhagavan was keen [from our standpoint] to preserve his teachings in a definitive form.

He referred to numerous books , mostly Tamil works...he did not need this learning aspect from books...this was intended to teach his ardent devotees. A few book shelves were kept near his couch for quick reference. Though he had realized the Truth , he did quote from other saints, puranas [mythologies] and numerous stories to elucidate a point to his devotees.

One would understand that Bhagavan did all these not in a ego-centric fashion for he had no ego, but as service to humanity;he had no sankalpa or intention of his own.

Bhagavan was quite a normal person in the ashram activities. For many years, he used assisted in the kitchen – cutting vegetables, grinding spicy stuff--towards preparing meals for visitors—both Indian and foreign. He did proof reading and editing ,and also undertook book binding at odd moments... He took as his duty such tasks and wanted to set an example for others.

Bhagwan was very intimate with many animals---goat,cow, monkeys,squirrel,deer and peacock;he fed them and played with them and showed concern for their welfare. Some animals attained moksha with his grace.

His teachings

Bhagavan gave a simple, and not so simple ,means for 'atma vichara'. The basic thought in our mind is the "I-thought". Only after the " I" thought arises, other thoughts assail our mind. Almost all thoughts are referenced with the 'I' thought. We relate to the world only through the "I" thought. Thoughts of 'me' and 'mine" are based on the "I" thought....**What is the source of "I" thought? --- Bhagavan entreats us to reflect on this source.**

In pure Advaita, the world does not exist as such, though for transactional purpose the mundane world exists .The thought of world is a concept in our mind , supported by the various sense impressions. Therefore the world as such is dependent on our five senses and the mind. When the thoughts are stilled, when the mind is extinguished, 'manonasa' occurs--- the mind does not exist [the world does not exist] and the Self is revealed or shines forth.'

Bhagavan repeatedly explained this as seen in the two compilations:

1 Talks by M Venkataramaiah 2 Day by day with Bhagavan by Devaraja Mudaliar .

His teachings are rooted in the Vedanta—that is Upanishads , and also in the Bhagavad Gita.The concepts are not new. But Bhagavan gave a practical method for self-realization which was buried in the doctrinal debris of Hindu literature for several centuries.---the self-enquiry with the deep question: "Who am I?"

It is safe to say that after the great Adi Sankara, it was Bhagvan Ramana who gave a practical approach to Advaita.! He did this without recourse to polemics and doctrinal framework of earlier acharyas or preceptors... he did reconstruct the approach for the modern man ---not only of Hinduism but of all faiths in the world .

As many had pointed out, he had opened up the Vedantic approach/Advaita for a wider audience---seekers from all over the world without the restrictions of formal religion or caste barriers within the Hindu fold or without the sectarian basis among the Brahmins.

The Ashram Life

With the founding of a single thatched shed for the ashram at the foot of the holy hill of Arunachala near his Mother's tomb, Bhagavan Ramana laid the foundation for a great ashram or hermitage . That was in the year 1922.This ashram would attract thousands of devotees and spiritual seekers of different faiths –to stay for a few days or a few weeks in the quiet of a tropical jungle setting, in the immediate presence of the master....it would indeed be a typical Rishi ashram like in the Upanishadic days...except ,perhaps, for less vegetation.

The ashram soon acquired a large kitchen and dining hall for about hundred persons. Devotees, along with Bhagavan, sat on the floor and ate substantial vegetarian food in South Indian style—spread on a banana leaf or stitched leaf. [The practice is continuing to this day..]

Bhagavan talked and answered questions and gave silent diksha or initiation by look to thousands during the course of next 28 years---that is from 1922 to 1950. [before 1922, several devotees approached him in the cave residences Bhagwan lived in---particularly at Virupaksha cave and Skandashramam.] Maharajas and mendicants, children and sadhus, office assistants and teachers--- sought his counsel or just came there to have darshan of Bhagavan . Many sat there and meditated. Many foreigners found answers to their troubling questions or felt a sense of peace which had eluded them all along.

This was also the place where many great savants and writers –Paul Brunton, Chadwick, Maurice Frydman, S S

Cohen, Arthur Osborne, Mouni Sadhu, Lucy Carlessen, Mrs Merston, Eleanor Noye, F M Taleyarkhan, Duncan Ainsle, Duncan Greenlees and others ---found their spiritual insights and inspiration. Somerset Maugham, Paramahansa Yogananda, Narayana Guru , Swami Ramdas, Rajendra Prasad and many others visited him.They would spread the message of the Maharishi in their own ways around the globe.

Other structures were added in due course—a library, a cow shed, a dormitory , a medical dispensary and all that. Over the years, the rituals conducted in the ashram, both at the Mother’s temple and at the Samadhi of Bhagavan had increased---a factor common to many religious institutions in India.

Bhagwan getting surrounded by a small ashram is perfectly natural and in India we have many such ashrams built by realized masters..for instance,Swami Sivananda at Rishikesh by the banks of the Ganges, Swami Ramdas at Kanhangad [Kerala], Ananda Moyi Ma [Banaras and Haridwar].These masters started monastic orders.. ..The senior monk of the order became the head of the ashram... This has been the convention in almost all ashrams in India---for instance, Ramakrishna Mission and Divine Life Society of Swami Sivananda, Rishikesh. .

Bhagavan Ramana, however, did not start a monastic order or lineage after him. [A few devotees did take sannyas later on their own].

[Those who claim lineage are simply those who have studied his teachings and are ardent devotees. Bhagavan did not annoint any one as his successor or start a lineage after him.]

Bhagavan’s younger brother [later Swami Niranjanananda] looked after the daily activities of the ashram, dubbed : ‘Sarvadhikari’ [literally it means ‘dictator’ or supreme head] during Bhagavan’s time.. After the mahasamadhi of Bhagwan in 1950, the sarvadhikari took over the

administration of the ashram as its president...later his son T N Venkatraman became the second President of the ashram..Thus a hereditary system of administration was established for the ashram.

In Bhagavan's time, Niranjanananda Swami framed several rules for conduct of the devotees in the ashram. Bhagavan was strict in following these rules---thus he submitted himself to the rules of his younger brother---a situation quite contrary to the Hindu family tradition where the elder brother sets the conduct rules!

It is a moot point whether Bhagavan, Jnani and realized master that he was, should get entangled in the process of building an ashram, and a temple at all with the assistance of his brother.... Bhagavan had no formal attachment for family members...In fact he treated even perfect strangers with love and compassion....Bhagavan was impelled on some human sentiments which is part of the role he had to play in this life on earth. He did show emotion while listening to the tragedies and sufferings of his close devotees.

Further Information:

Sri Ramana Ashram had grown to great heights in the last two decades, attracting lot of foreign visitors as well—partly due to improved air links to Chennai [Madras].

It has a well-developed publication department with large number of titles ,producing books at low cost even though it does not have a printing press of its own.

The ashram library [across the road] is well maintained.The book stall is convenient.

The Ashram publishes a quarterly journal “the Mountain Path” started in the 1960's with Arthur Osborne as its first editor.

The ashram offers poor feeding at the Ashram entrance for the sadhus and mendicants. As far as I know, it does not have any charitable or public relief works in its programs.

Many devotees have built cottages or small houses near the ashram or in the town and visit the ashram for meditation and attending to the worship or rituals.

The Ashram has retained its traditional ways of practices ; the physical environs have remained as it was in Bhagavan's time.

[The town of Thiruvannamalai has grown big and the traffic is heavy in the road [Chengam road] leading to the ashram [the Bangalore highway] with the plying of buses and trucks and high noise levels.

The ashram is at a distance of 200 km from Chennai and about 300 km from Bangalore.]

Bibliography

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[Note: There are several books narrating the reminiscences
of devotees available from the asramam.]

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