

The path to spiritual communism

TO Suddhananda Bharathi, who passed away in his 97th year on March 7, writing in general and poetry in particular was a tool for propagating his religious philosophy based on universal religion.

A prolific writer, he had published more than 300 books in English, Tamil, French and other languages preaching Yoga as a means for a fuller life. He had been initiated into the Practice of Yoga even in his boyhood by his grand father's brother who was himself looked upon as a saint because of his experience with the sages in the Himalayas and scholars in Varanasi.

Bharathi's family, in Madurai and later in Sivaganga, was deeply religious and the way of life at home supplied the background for his spiritual development. Youngest of a family of four children, three boys and one girl, he was originally named Venkatasubramanian. He frequented temples and joined bhajan groups singing the praise of the Gods. Inspired by the teachings of his grand-uncle Purnananda, the boy declined the offer of adoption by a rich uncle and chose to follow the path of austerity to realise God. At school he neglected his lessons and wrote poetry. Chided by the teacher, the boy left school and wandered about aimlessly when he encountered another teacher who helped his spiritual evolution. This teacher Jnanasiddha explained to the boy that while religions divided mankind, Yoga was common to all and that through Yoga alone one could get at the fundamental truth of life. The boy was struck by the accounts of the life of saints the teacher narrated and determined to know more about them by visiting various places of pilgrimage.

Suddhananda's sojourn at school had one saving grace. He learnt the greatness of the Tamil language and literature at the feet of the Tamil Pandit Deivasikhamani who was a contemporary and colleague of savants like Mahavidwan Meenakshisundaram Pillai and Arumuga Navalar. The Pandit encouraged him in his literary efforts and soon the boy began to compose innumerable

poems which paved the way for his significant contribution to the growth of the Tamil Isai movement later in his life.

The boy himself wanted to become a sanyasin and renounce the world. Consequently he refused to marry and buried himself in the study of religion and philosophy. He was forced to continue his studies though his mind was elsewhere.

After undergoing training in teaching at a Christian missionary institution at Pasumalai near Madurai, Suddhananda was employed as a teacher in Kattuputtur. He liked the job for the place was near Nerur where the samadhi of Sadasiva Brahmendra was situated. He used to visit the samadhi often and spend hours in contemplation. He had the opportunity of meeting many religious persons who visited the samadhi. He spent most of his time composing songs exuding bhakti. He had already imbibed the ideals of Christianity during his training at Pasumalai and sought to identify the common principles which were the basis of various religions. He also studied Islam later, and composed a long poem expounding the greatness of the faith.

Despite his preoccupation with religious life, he did not neglect his profession as teacher. He, however, preferred the open spaces to the classroom and taught the wonders of nature to the students in the open air.

While at Pasumalai he involved himself in the activities of the missionaries and addressed a conference on the teachings of Jesus. He arranged to stage a play on the life of Jesus and also composed a poem on Jesus which the Rev. Popley, who happened to attend the conference, liked very much and arranged for its publication. His interest in Christianity very nearly led to his being converted to the faith.

Happening to listen to the lectures of the Puri Sankaracharya who was visiting Madurai at that time, Suddhananda held fast to his own faith and even engaged himself in a debate where he declared that one could admire Christ without becoming a Christian. He also, disputed the assumption

that India would soon become a Christian country. He used all the experience gained thus in inculcating the principles of higher life in the students in his charge.

Suddhananda's involvement with spiritual life became more intense day by day as he had the opportunity of meeting many saints. Swami Brahmendra, the Avadhuta of Sendamanagalam taught him the meaning of the Brahma Sutra and Vivekachudamani of Adi Sankara. He learnt the more intricate Yogasanas from Swami Anandagiri. He was also attracted to Swami Vedagiri who was a treasure-house of spiritual insight. He had thus mastered the implications of the Vedantic way of life while he was only 27.

A notable turning-point in his life was his meeting Mahatma Gandhi in Madras at the residence of Srinivasa Iyengar. He talked to him and understood the principles on which he stood. The result was his emergence as a nationalist besides being a spiritual Yogi. He took to wearing Khadi which made the school authorities and officials view him with suspicion. He organised processions when the Mahatma was arrested in 1922 and this caused the authorities to regulate his work as a teacher as they felt he was indulging in subversive activities. He refused to abide by the conditions imposed and resigned his job. For a while he wandered about in the Kolli Hills where he again met Swami Brahmendra and Jnanasiddha. He felt as if re-charged with additional spiritual energy by these encounters.

Invited by the founder of the National High School at Devakottai, Suddhananda spent a few years there engaging himself in rural service on the lines of the Mahatma's teachings. Meanwhile he completed his work on Yoga in couplets on the pattern of the Kural. This Tamil work was later translated into English by the author.

When Suddhananda was thinking of starting a new school on the gurukula pattern where he could teach the students Yoga and meditation, V. V. S. Ayyar invited him to join his Gurukulam at Shermadevi as its educational adviser.

Suddhananda dedicated himself to the service of the Ashram and spent many fruitful days with Ayyar when they used to discuss great writers like Kamban, Valmiki, Kalidasa, Homer and others. Suddhananda also helped Ayyar to edit his journal *Balabharathi*. He had meanwhile completed his epic in Tamil, *Bharatha Sakthi Mahakavyam*, excerpts from which he used to read out to Ayyar. This happened even on the day Ayyar and his daughter left for the Kalyan falls never to return in 1925. Ayyar felt that the work could be published soon and even an English version also be brought out.

This long poem occupies the pride of place among the Yogi's numerous works. He was awarded the Rajaraja Cholan prize of a lakh of rupees by the Thanjavur Tamil University for it when he was 91. This magnum opus consists of five cantos in nearly five thousand stanzas with a total of more than 25000 lines. The composition is in various metrical patterns most of them four-line stanzas. It envisages a spiritual utopia expounding the entire range of the Indian cultural heritage from the ancient Vedic age to the strife-torn times of the present day. It seeks to spell out a scheme for the resurgence of spiritual socialism for humanity. The narration begins with the Supreme Power creating a new world. A man-woman pair of Manu and Mati are the progenitors of a new race of human beings among whom both good and evil forces arise.

Prince Suddhan who is taught the principles of governance by Bharatha Rishi is sought to be duped and killed by Kali, his jealous uncle. In the ensuing battle Suddhan defeats Kali's forces and restores Peace. More trouble is in store for Suddhan as Kali intermittently succeeds in disrupting life in the kingdom. Suddhan loses Gowri, his wife in an encounter with the enemy. Despite his victories, Suddhan desires to forsake mundane life. Declaring, "No political creed or religious dogma has saved humanity from wars. A universalised soul-life, a Yogic life, is the remedy and to fulfil this I shall do Tapasya on the Himalayas," he leaves the kingdom and wanders about

looking for saints, searching for Truth and gaining knowledge and Yogic experience from the great men he meets. He visits places of pilgrimage connected with all the religions of the world and learns the basic truth underlying devotion to God. Meanwhile, the kingdom is assailed by insurgency. Kali with his evil forces conquers the country. A set of Yogis raise the flag of rebellion and peace is restored. Thereafter the affairs of the kingdom are managed by Yogis who, under Suddhan, who is brought back, spread the gospel of perfect life in tune with the inner spirit.

The people hail victorious Suddhan who proclaims his future plans to create a world without divisions and strife.

The lives of great men and their teachings are interwoven into the main narration in the form of stories told by Bharatha Rishi to Suddhan. Epics like the Ramayana are expounded to enable Suddhan to choose the righteous path in life. Swami Sivananda Saraswathi, conferring the title of Maharishi on Suddhananda Bharathi, wrote, "We find in it the life and teachings of all saints, prophets, heroes; the essence of all religions and Yogas set in an allegorical background. Bharatha Sakthi is indeed the new Bible of regenerated humanity. Gandhiji calls it another Mahabharatha and Sri Aurobindo, the Voice of India. It is a guide for all nations, a book for all ages which every seeker must study." The first complete edition of this Tamil epic was brought out in 1948 on the 55th birthday of the Kavyiyogi as he came to be known thereafter.

As a writer, Suddhananda Bharathi experimented with every literary form though poetry was his forte. He has written several novels in Tamil and has translated the works of Victor Hugo, notably *Les Misérables* and *The Man Who Laughs*. Among the famous English poems he has rendered into Tamil is Francis Thompson's *Hound of Heaven*. Individual discipline detestation towards God, patriotism and many attributes of a morally superior life form the theme of his novel *Anbu Niayam*.

His songs published under

the title *Sangeethanjali* provided the repertoire for many a musician. He has also written a book on dance entitled *Natananjali*. Seventy-two compositions in the 72 Melakrtha ragas add a new dimension to his contribution to music.

Several French works are part of the considerable corpus of his creative effort. No attempt seems to have been made so far to prepare a detailed bibliography of his output.

After the passing away of V.V.S. Ayyar, Suddhananda moved over to Thanjavur where he busied himself in constructive rural work while editing a journal *Samarasa Bodhini*. His close association with national leaders and freedom fighters in the course of his work in the villages often led to his being under the surveillance of the authorities for imagined offences of sedition. He took an active part in the Madras Congress session in 1927 where he sang some national songs composed by him for the occasion. Soon he lost interest in politics and determined to devote his life for the institution of a yoga samaj. His speech at the Tirunelveli district conference where he shared the platform with Satyamurti and V.O. Chidambaram Pillai was the last political one.

The Yogi studied Buddhism and Jainism for a while and went to have darshan of Ramana Maharishi at Tiruvannamalai. His sojourn at the Ashram gave him spiritual impetus. From Ramanashram to Pondicherry was a natural transition. His life as a Yogi found fulfilment under Sri Aurobindo and The Mother about whom he has written in many of his works. Twentytwo years of stay in Aurobindo Ashram saw the efflorescence of the poet as a Yogi. A meeting with Sivananda Saraswathi completed the process. Swami Sivananda invited him to preside over several conferences of the Divine Life Society.

He visited several foreign countries to give lectures. He was one of the representatives to the World Peace Conference in Berlin. He broadcast many talks over the radio in the Soviet Union. At a reception in Geneva, he answered

Reflections

IT is but natural for us to seek help and be helped in difficult situations. While it is some people's second nature to go out of the way to help others, we have at the other end of the continuum those who are hell bent on being indifferent to other's suffering and pleas for assistance. It is, of course, true that the type of assistance and the person who needs such assistance should fulfil several criteria if help has to be meaningful and fruitful.

This leads us to the question whether any help given should fetch return or gain for the person's generosity and magnanimity.

It may be strange to find that some think it is a weakness to assume that anyone is purely dependent only on us and that we alone can do good to him/her. They argue that this belief is the cause of all attachment, and due to attachment comes the pangs of loss and separation. To condition ourselves to the thinking that no one depends on us absolutely; not one soul on our kindness; not one living being on our help; is not an easy task and one way to achieve this is to become convinced all the time that all are helped by Nature or some unseen force and will be so helped even though we were not there. It is a blessed privilege that in helping others, we are allowed to educate ourselves. If anybody thinks that he is born to help the world, it is simply pride, selfishness impersonating as virtue.

If you render some help to a man and expect nothing - do not even expect the man to be grateful (because the possibility of his showing ingratitude cannot be ruled out), his ingratitude will not upset you because you never expected any favour from him, "never thought you had any right to anything in the way of a quid pro quo; you just gave him what he deserved." It has been rightly said that misery comes through attachment.

Seek no reward, no praise for anything you do. No sooner do people give money for some charity than they want to see their names engraved in polished granite stones or blazoned in newspapers. Why don't they think of the hundreds of great men who have lived before us working silently for others and passing away silently, without craving for publicity and permanent remembrance by us. With the growing satiation of the outer man, our society must pay greater attention to the needs of the inner man. We must not fail to realise the resilience, the possibilities of spontaneity, and responsibility in human beings.

many questions and concluded, "Man spoke to mankind. The voice of man did not touch human hearts. Prophets spoke; but man made religions around their names and lived a divided life of oppositions. With all his moon-hitting, attempts, man cries for peace and peace!" After the world tour, the Yogi retired to the Himalayas for contemplation for a while.

Vadalur beckoned him and inspired by the ideals of Saint Ramalinga, he consented to head the Suddha Sanmarga Nilayam. After a year or two he left the place to found Sama Yoga Samaj, his dream for many years.

He organised the Samaj in

Madras at Adyar to "train pure Yogis for the spiritual, cultural and humanitarian services, to build up a collective life of souls dedicated to purity, unity and divinity, to spread the gospel of perfect life and to cultivate Bharatha Sakthi which is the dynamic force of sages and saints, and to establish spiritual socialism."

After nearly a decade of this penultimate experiment, Suddhananda Bharathi returned to his native place Sivaganga near which at Sozhavaram he established another ashram which he called Thavakudil. He was very active till a few months before he breathed his last.

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