

Sri Rāmānujācārya (III)

(In Honour of His 1,000th Birth Anniversary)

PRAVRAJIKA SHUDDHATMAPRANA

Rāmānuja then resumed giving regular classes in the temple on the hymns of the Ālvārs, but unfortunately no notes of them were left. However, one of Rāmānuja’s disciples, Tirukkurukaippiran Pillan (generally known as Pillan, or Kurukesā), who was a cousin of Rāmānuja, was asked by ‘all the preceptors’ to request Rāmānuja to write a commentary on the works of the Ālvārs ‘so that the inner meaning is made manifest’. Accordingly, Pillan humbly approached Rāmānuja at an assembly one day and said:

You have graciously [composed] the *Sri-bhāshya*, and after a victorious expedition the philosophy (*darshana*) has been firmly established. Could you now comment on the *Tiruvaimoli* and other divine works (*divya-prabandham*) of the Ālvārs and thus protect them? Utaiyavar [Rāmānuja] thought about this and then commanded Pillan, If we [meaning, himself] do a commentary on the ‘graciously said words,’ those of dull intellect may think that there is only this [limited] meaning. This is improper; the songs of the Ālvārs will increase according to the understanding of each person. Therefore it may seem as if I have created a boundary for the ‘graciously said words.’ You [referring to Pillan] do a commentary in the same manner [or in some way] on the *Tiruvaimoli*.⁴²

In this way, the first commentary on Nammālvār’s *Tiruvaimoli* was written, thus

fulfilling the second of the promises Rāmānuja made to Yāmuna. In this commentary, generally referred to as *The Six Thousand*, Pillan ‘records the interpretations of several *ācāryas*, including Rāmānuja. It includes several stories connecting the verse with Rāmānuja or an incident involving him.’⁴³ Moreover, ‘in many places he [Pillan] also interweaves long phrases of devotion from Rāmānuja’s works.’⁴⁴ Most of the later commentators based their commentaries on Pillan’s.

There is a beautiful story that explains how Pillan became known as the spiritual son of Rāmānuja: ‘Once Yatisvara [Rāmānuja] was near the monastery, contemplating the meaning of the *Prabandha* [ie, the works of the Ālvārs—most likely a verse from the *Prabandha*]. Purna’s son [Pillan] was thinking of the [same] meaning and, seeing Yatisvara, told him about it. Yatisa was startled that [Pillan] knew the meaning he was thinking about. Then he said, “This is the greatness of Nātha’s clan!” He embraced [Pillan] and said, “You are my spiritual son [*jnāna-putra*].”’⁴⁵ In other places Pillan is known as Rāmānuja’s *mānasa-putra*, his son of the mind, and his sandals [servant].

Rāmānuja’s third promise made to Yāmuna at his death—that is, to honour the memory of the sages Parāshara and Vyāsa—was fulfilled through Kuresha and Andāl.

According to the *Koil Olugu*: Once it was raining heavily all day and night, and Kuresha could not go out to beg for alms, as he normally did then. That night, when his wife, Andāl, heard the temple bell ring, indicating that the Lord's night food was being offered in the temple, she mentally complained to the Lord, saying that while He was eating, Kuresha was starving. Soon after, a temple servant came to their door with offered food from the temple. Kuresha suspected that Andāl had something to do with this, and he asked her about it. Andāl then admitted she had mentally complained to the Lord. '[Kuresha] gave two parts of the prasadam to his wife and took one part himself. As a result Andāl conceived and after ten months gave birth to two male children.'⁴⁶ For the rest of their lives, the two boys were honoured as Lord Ranganātha's own sons.

Rāmānuja was delighted to hear the news, and when it was time for the babies to be named, he came to Kuresha's house with Embar and gave them the names Parāshara Bhattar and Vedavyāsa Bhattar (also known as Srirama Pillai). Parāshara Bhattar (usually referred to as Bhattar) later became, according to the Tengelais Srivaishnavite branch, the leader of the Srivaishnavas after Rāmānuja's and Embar's passing away. (According to the Vadagalais branch, Pillan became the next leader.)

In exile

Some time after Kuresha's sons were born, Rāmānuja was forced to flee Srirangam with a few disciples and live in exile for twelve years. According to the *Koil Olugu* and other biographies, a fanatical Shaivite king of the time, Kulothunga I (known as Krimikantha, the 'worm-necked', by the Srivaishnavas), feared Rāmānuja's

influence, and wanted to force him to convert to Shaivism. As this incident happened around 1100 AD, Kulothunga I would have been the only possible Chola king at that time. However, records from the Srirangam temple show that the Chola kings, including Kulothunga I, gave many gifts and endowments to the Srirangam temple and other Vishnu temples, as well as to Shiva temples. And so did some of Kulothunga I's own officers. Thus, the story of his extreme fanaticism is cast in doubt. But there seems to be no doubt that Rāmānuja was forced to flee at this time for some reason. According to Hari Rao: 'The Chola monarchs of this period were, as a rule, tolerant and they extended their patronage to Shaiva and Vaishnava shrines. However, the possibility of this general rule of toleration having been broken on a particular occasion need not be ruled out.'⁴⁷ It is said that the family deity of the Chola kings was Natarāja Shiva.

There is a clue, however, in one event that happened right after the king's death. Apparently, immediately after Rāmānuja fled Srirangam, Kulothunga I took control of the Srirangam temple. Then, according to the *Koil Olugu*, after Kulothunga I's death, his son and successor Vikrama Chola, with the approval of the Chera and Pāndya kings, came to Srirangam and returned the control of the temple back to Rāmānuja. The *Koil Olugu* states:

The Chola made consultations with the Chera and the Pandya [kings] in the following manner: 'The ancients, with the idea that lords and kings should not investigate into the temple endowments and the like, had left them under the control of the brahmins. Even now we have witnessed the sufferings which my father underwent having become a bad old man. Now I shall call back Udayavar [Rāmānuja], and in your

presence, shall give away the management of the temple to him, severing my connection with it.' . . .

[After sending a messenger to bring Rāmānuja back,] Kulottunga Chola [actually, Vikrama Chola] came to Srirangam and, making obeisance to Emberumanar [Rāmānuja], entirely parted with his authority over the temple in his [Rāmānuja's] favour, giving him the deed of gift and sanctifying it with 'pouring of water.' He then begged that he be enlisted among the shishyas of Udayavar, who willingly attached him to Andan [Dāsharathi] and made him execute a deed of gift giving away the sacred shrine of Srirangam to Andan and caused these details to be inscribed on the Aryabhattachal gateway.⁴⁸

First of all, we should note that the said inscription on 'the Aryabhattachal gateway' has never been found, so historians have doubted this story. However, they also concede that it could have been destroyed, or removed later while making repairs. Here we should also note that major repairs and renovation work had to be done all over the temple after the destruction and occupation of the temple by Muslim troops in the 14th century, and also after the occupation of the temple and damage done by the French troops in the 18th century. If this story of the Aryabhattachal gateway is true, it could possibly give an explanation as to why Kulothunga I, who made gifts to the Srirangam temple, would want to remove Rāmānuja.

It seems, according to this story, that the king wanted control over this particular temple. But there must have been something the king thought he would gain thereby. After all, if he was actually a fanatical Shaivite, why would he take control of a Vishnu temple and keep it functioning? And

it does not seem that he did this to any other Vaishnava temple. It seems more likely that the king had a personal grudge against Rāmānuja. Perhaps Rāmānuja offended him in some way, so he wanted to take revenge by removing him. These are just some thoughts I am throwing out. After a thousand years, it is anybody's guess as to what really happened. But there is no doubt that Rāmānuja had to flee and live in exile for twelve years.

With a few minor differences, the following is the story according to most accounts: When some messengers from the king came to Srirangam to meet Rāmānuja, Kuresha suspected something was wrong. He sent word to Rāmānuja to leave, and he himself put on the ochre robes of a monk and told the men he was Rāmānuja. There was no doubt that it was in the interest of the whole Srivaishnava community that Rāmānuja remain safe, so he was at last persuaded to flee. As the messengers took Kuresha away to see the king, Mahāpurna decided to go with him.

When they arrived at the palace, Kuresha's disciple Naluran was there as an officer of the court, and he informed the king that the man in the ochre robes was actually Kuresha, and not Rāmānuja. Some say that Naluran was a spy when he became a disciple of Kuresha. But whether or not this is true, Kuresha understood that Naluran was in on the plot to bring Rāmānuja to the court, and this pained him deeply. Except for his terrible grief over his separation from Rāmānuja, this betrayal by Naluran would pain Kuresha more than anything else that was to follow—not because of what happened later, but because of the great sin that the disciple had committed.

However, the king did not seem to mind the impersonation, as Kuresha was known to

be Rāmānuja's right hand. He then gave a palm leaf to Kuresha which stated, '*Shivāt parataram nāsti*'—that is, 'There is no God greater than Shiva.' The king told him to sign it, in effect, giving his approval. Kuresha pretended to agree, but when he signed it, he added the line, '*Dronamasti tathāparam*'—meaning, 'There are measures bigger than that.' (The word Shiva also meant a measure of weight, as did the word *drona*.) Seeing this, the king became furious and ordered his men to take out the eyes of Kuresha and Mahāpurna. (Some say that Kuresha then plucked out his own eyes for the sin of having seen the king.) A few men (possibly disciples who had accompanied Kuresha and Mahāpurna) were asked to guide them back to Srirangam. But before they could reach there, Mahāpurna, Rāmānuja's beloved guru, died from the trauma and was cremated by Kuresha.

When Kuresha reached Srirangam, he tried to go inside the temple, but he was stopped by a temple servant. The temple was now under the control of the king, and the servant would not allow him to enter unless he renounced his connection with Rāmānuja. Though another servant protested that Kuresha should be allowed to enter, as he was 'a great and virtuous person', Kuresha himself refused to enter. He put his hands over his ears, with the thought: 'What! Should my personal qualifications serve to dissociate me from my Ācārya!'⁴⁹ He turned away and went to his house.

The next day Kuresha left Srirangam with Andāl and their sons to go to Tirumaliruncolai, a holy place in a forest near Madurai that is sacred to Vishnu. They remained there, worshipping Lord Alagar, till Rāmānuja's return to Srirangam. But it was a painful separation for Kuresha. At least one of his *stotras* was written here—

the *Sundarabahu Stava* in praise of the 'Beautiful-armed Lord' (Lord Alagar at Tirumaliruncolai). At the end of this *stotra* one can feel his great grief when he says:

O Lord at Vanagiri!
O Ocean of Compassion!
Please assent to my sincere [request]!
May I [once again] be in one corner of
the Abode of Srirangam
absolutely subject to
Rāmānuja the Noble
just like before!

O Creator of Brahma! O Lord at Vanadri!
O Lord! O Sundara!
Looking to your position
as the bestower of boons,
by all means hear [my request].
Enhancing day-after-day
the glory of Srirangam
and expressly refusing
the request of our adversaries,
accomplish [things] in such a manner
that [life there] becomes ever enjoyable
for Your devotees!

O Nectar-ocean of Pity!
O Lord of the *dharma*!
O You of truthful intent!
O Possessor of Sri!
O Lord!
O Sundara!
O One Who has motherly affection
for good people!
Drive away all the worthless ones and
forgiving in the twinkling of an eye
all the offenses committed by good
people
make the glory of the Srirangam Abode
ever enjoyable [for Your devotees]!⁵⁰

Love and service of the untouchables

Meanwhile, Rāmānuja had left the Chola territory with a group of disciples and entered a part of what is now Karnataka, which was then under the control of the Hoysala dynasty. On their arrival in one

area, exhausted and hungry, they were helped very much by a group of untouchables. Rāmānuja was deeply touched by their unselfish and loving service to them. The king of the Mysore territory was named Vittaladeva and was a Jain. But when he heard that Rāmānuja had come, he invited him to his court. After hearing Rāmānuja speak in an assembly on Vaishnavism, Vittaladeva converted to Vaishnavism, and Rāmānuja gave him the name Vishnuvardhana. With the patronage of this king, Rāmānuja moved about in this area until he came to Yadavdri (or Tirunarayanapuram, now known as Melkote).

One night Rāmānuja had a dream that Vishnu was asking him to serve Him there. The next day, as Rāmānuja was walking by some *tulsi* plants, he noticed part of an image in the ground under an anthill. The villagers helped him dig it up, and he found it to be a beautiful image of Vishnu. The villagers immediately built a temporary thatched structure so they could worship the image, and gradually a permanent stone temple was built and the Lord was installed there.⁵¹ Rāmānuja also had a tank built so the water could be used for the Lord's worship. He loved this place so much that he decided to have his headquarters here until he could return to Srirangam. Besides having the temple built, Rāmānuja also established a monastery and gathered many disciples around him. One of these disciples was Andhrapurna, who became one of Rāmānuja's attendants. To Andhrapurna, Rāmānuja was his God and his all-in-all.

Rāmānuja was so impressed by the devotion and help that he received from the untouchables in this place that he allowed them to enter the temple, a privilege that was

denied to them in other temples. He also gave them the title 'Tirukulattar', which means 'people of noble descent'. His own guru Mahāpurna had once been persecuted by other brahmins for helping an untouchable, and it grieved Rāmānuja that this type of discrimination should go on. Though he tried to bring about reforms in this regard in the Srirangam temple, he was not able to do so because of caste prejudices. But in Melkote he was relieved to be able to do something to honour the help that the untouchables gave. It was not, in fact, until the 20th century before untouchability was banned, and those who had been so designated were able to enter Hindu temples in India.

After twelve years, when Rāmānuja heard that Kulottunga I had died, he decided to return to Srirangam. Naturally the people in Melkote were deeply distressed at this news. At their request, Rāmānuja agreed to have an image of himself installed in the temple after breathing life into it. Only then did the villagers agree to his departure. This image is still worshipped today in a shrine inside the Melkote temple.

According to some accounts, Rāmānuja went on a tour of some pilgrimage places before he returned to Srirangam. First he went to Tirumaliruncolai, where he must have met Kuresha and his family. There he fulfilled a vow that the poet-saint Āndāl had made long before in one of her poems. In her *Nacchiyar Tirumoli* (9. 6-7) she pledged that if the Lord would come to her she would offer thousands of pots of sweetened milk and rice, and thousands of pots of butter. But as she was united with the Lord without this pledge having been fulfilled, Rāmānuja decided to make the offering for her. For this reason, he became known as Āndāl's elder brother (Godagraja, or Koilannan). From

Tirumaliruncolai he went to Āndāl's birthplace, Srivilliputtur, to offer his worship, and then went to worship at Nammālvār's birthplace, Alvar Tirunagari. After this he finally returned to Srirangam, where he worshipped Lord Ranganātha and returned to his monastery.

Kuresha's prayer

While he was in exile, Rāmānuja had heard the news of Mahāpurna's death and Kuresha's blinding, and he had been deeply distressed. He could not forget the sacrifice they had made. Soon after his return to Srirangam, he called Kuresha to him and asked him to compose and recite a hymn to Lord Varadārāja in Kanchi in order to get the Lord's favour so that his sight would be restored. As it was the command of his guru, Kuresha agreed. According to one version, Rāmānuja and some disciples accompanied him to Kanchi for this. As Kuresha was singing the hymn, Varadārāja (whose name means 'the Giver of Boons') spoke through the priest, saying, 'My child, name thy wish.' Kuresha had never gotten over his anxiety about Naluran, the disciple who had betrayed him to the king, and without any further thought he replied, 'My Lord, make Naluran the object of your supreme grace.' 'Be it so . . .' said the Lord.

Everyone stood there in shock. Then Rāmānuja said: 'Can there be anyone equal to you, my son? You have prayed for the welfare of your enemy at the cost of your eyes. This is the day for the Vaishnavas to rejoice.' He then asked Kuresha to pray again. So Kuresha said to the Lord, 'Give me back my sight if only to see your bewitching beauty.' The Lord replied, 'I grant your wish and you will not see any other material object.' Rāmānuja embraced

Kuresha and addressed the disciples thus: "It is a triumph for our religion that we have Kuresha as one belonging to us. He has secured *moksha* for his enemies and through him I can seek the liberation of one and all."⁵²

However, in a separate story, Kuresha asked for another boon from Lord Ranganātha. Whether this was in addition to the two previous boons, or was a separate boon is unclear. At any rate, he asked the Lord to let him go 'at once to Paramapada, Lord Vishnu's Supreme Heaven'. According to the *Prapannāmritam*:

Distressed at the coming separation from his beloved disciple, Rāmānuja slowly returned to his *matha* with his eyes full of tears. In contrast, [Kuresha's wife] Antal responded to the news of her impending widowhood with a surprising equanimity: '[On being told by Kuresha of his choice of Paramapada as a boon, she] declared herself in agreement with his idea, and bowing down to her husband's feet, stood near him with her hands in the position of supplication, without any kind of [inner] disturbance.'⁵³

Soon after receiving these boons, Kuresha passed away. Rāmānuja then put his cousin Govinda in charge of instructing Kuresha's two sons. Some say that Rāmānuja never left Srirangam after this. But according to Hari Rao, when Kulottunga II (Kulottunga I's grandson) removed the image of Govindarāja from a shrine at the Cidambaram Shiva temple, the Vaishnavas there took the image to the Tirupati temple. Rāmānuja then went and formally installed the image in a shrine in Tirupati. The desecration of the Vaishnava shrine in Cidambaram is well documented, and the tradition of Rāmānuja's reconsecration of it in Tirupati is also strong.⁵⁴

According to some, Rāmānuja lived another sixty years after Kuresha’s passing away; others say twenty years. Rāmānuja is said to have lived 120 years, and the traditional dates given for him are 1017 to 1137 AD. However, there are several problems with these dates—not least of all the fact that his cousin Embar, plus Kuresha’s wife, Andāl, and other disciples, must have had similarly long lives—or even longer. Also, the removal of the Govindarāja image in Cidambaram is said to have happened around 1140 AD. In Swami Tapasyananda’s biography of Rāmānuja, he quotes the dates given by John B. Carman as 1077-1157. This seems more reasonable, and it also accommodates the documented story of the Govindarāja image. Other dates proposed are 1056-1136 or 37.⁵⁵ Hari Rao believes he passed away in 1150.⁵⁶

Rāmānuja’s last message

When Rāmānuja knew he was about to pass away, he called all his disciples to him and gave them his last message, exhorting them to honour and serve the gurus, Srivaishnavas, and the sacred images in the temples; to study the sacred texts, especially the songs of the Ālvārs and the Āchāryas; to cultivate love for the names of God; and to avoid worldly influences. Again, he especially urged them to be firm in their self-surrender to the Lord, and to be humble.

Rāmānuja’s standard for self-surrender was very high. Regarding this, he said: ‘He who has truly surrendered himself at the feet of God should not bestow any thought on his future, which is entirely at His disposal; for the least anxiety felt in that connection betrays the hypocrisy in his self-surrender.’⁵⁷

The type of humility he stressed can be

seen in stories of the lives of later Āchāryas of the tradition. We can give one example here: Nampillai, who became a leader of the Srivaishnavas a couple of generations later, was once walking with a disciple when they came across a Srivaishnava lying on the ground. When this Srivaishnava did not get up as they passed, the disciple scolded him for not showing proper respect to Nampillai. The Master immediately left the disciple’s side and hurried on. The disciple then ran to Nampillai and asked if he had offended him in any way. ““Yes,” said Nampillai. “An insult to a fellow-being is an insult to me. . . . All of us are His creatures and I do not think I am in any way superior to that Srivaishnavite whom you have insulted. You have not imbibed the spirit of true Vaishnavism, my boy.””⁵⁸

Before Rāmānuja passed away, two more images of him were made and installed (in addition to the one at Melkote). One was at his birthplace in Sriperumbudur, and the other was in Srirangam itself. As with the one in Melkote, these images are still worshipped today in special shrines. In fact, besides the image of him at Srirangam, Rāmānuja’s own body is also installed in the shrine dedicated to him there.

Though Rāmānuja is known to have given his discourses in the Srirangam temple in Tamil, his written works are all in Sanskrit. These works, he knew, would have more influence outside of the Tamil-speaking area if they were in Sanskrit. He left his disciple Pillan to present his thoughts on Nammālvār’s *Tiruvaimoli*, which Pillan did in a commentary written in Manipravāla—that is, a mixture of Tamil (*mani*, or jewel) and Sanskrit (*pravāla*, or pearl). In the years following Rāmānuja, this style of writing became increasingly popular with the ācāryas.

Rāmānuja's Sanskrit works

Rāmānuja's Sanskrit works are said to be:

1. *Sribhāshya*, his commentary on the *Brahma-sutras*. This was his major work, and the main one that he used to present his arguments for the Vishishtādvaita view of God and His creation. According to some scholars, this commentary is the one most faithful to the intent of the author of the *Brahma-sutras*. This is not to say that Advaita Vedānta is 'wrong'. Rather, it seems, according to some scholars, that the author of the *Brahma-sutras* held a similar opinion as Rāmānuja did on these issues.

A brilliant commentary on Rāmānuja's commentary—the *Shrutaprakashikā*—was written a few generations later by Sudarshanasuri, the grandson of Vedavyāsa Bhattar (the second of Kuresha's twin sons). The only manuscript of this was saved by the Āchārya Vedānta Deshika from certain destruction when Malik Kafur and his troops sacked the Srirangam temple in 1323. In a dramatic escape, Vedānta Deshika grabbed the manuscript from the temple (after walling up the inner shrine) and fled with Sudarshanasuri's two young sons. But Sudarshanasuri himself was killed.

2. *Gītābhāshya*, a commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā*. This must have been written when Rāmānuja's commentary on the *Brahma-sutras* was well-established, as here he does not go into so many arguments to establish a philosophy. It is based on his philosophy, but is much more simple in style and content than his commentary on the *Brahma-sutras*. Though some scholars object that he did not present any strong views on self-surrender—especially in verse 18.66 of the *Gītā*, where it would seem to be called for in the Srivaishnava context—it is

apparent that this commentary was written for a different audience, a broader audience. Rāmānuja did not intend it to be instructions for those following the devotional path of Srivaishnavism. For Srivaishnavas, especially at that time, instructions on this subject were very sacred—and perhaps secret.

3. *Vedārtha-sangraha*, a treatise on the philosophy of the Upanishads. Rāmānuja did not write separate commentaries on the major Upanishads, as Shankara did. But in his *Sribhāshya* he quoted from many Upanishads and also commented on these quotes. In this short treatise also he quoted from some Upanishads and gave comments on them based on Vishishtādvaita.

4. *Vedānta-dīpa*, an abbreviated commentary on the *Brahma-sutras*.

5. *Vedānta-sāra*, also an abbreviated commentary on the *Brahma-sutras*, but intended for beginners.

6. *Nitya-grantha*, a manual for Srivaishnavas with instructions on daily duties related to the worship and remembrance of the Lord.

7, 8, and 9. The *Gadyatraya*, three devotional hymns:

a. *Sharanāgati-gadya*, a prayer on surrender to the Lord. According to Francis X. Clooney, ' . . . [this hymn] may be understood as a fulsome reflection on the Dvaya mantra [a mantra that Srivaishnavas repeat every day, taking refuge in the Lord] and as a dramatic enactment of it, just as the Dvaya Mantra is a kind of distillation of the much longer work by Rāmānuja.'⁵⁹ Here Rāmānuja, in an emotional prayer, first to Sri and then to Nārāyana, surrenders himself fully to the Lord, and the Lord also responds in a beautiful passage. The hymn is said to be an actual conversation that Rāmānuja had with the Lord while in an ecstatic state. As

M. Yāmunāchārya says: ‘There is a sense of certainty, an atmosphere of utter serenity, that prevails in the Sharanāgati Gadya, the hymn of self-surrender which is said to have poured forth from Rāmānuja’s heart on seeing a beatific vision of the Lord on the occasion of a temple festival.’⁶⁰

b. *Sriranga-gadya*, also is a song of surrender to Lord Ranganātha, the Lord of Srirangam. ‘Here [Rāmānuja] expresses the common denominator of all *prapannas* [those who take refuge]: professed inability to practise the *yoga* that will give one the direct mental vision of the Lord in *dhyāna*, coupled with confidence that the Lord is nevertheless one’s protector—a confidence that comes from taking refuge at his feet.’⁶¹

c. *Vaikuntha-gadya* describes the heavenly region of Vishnu, known as Vaikuntha, or *Paramapada*. It is ‘the abode of all that is beautiful, good, and true, where the Lord abides in a community of free souls.’⁶²

Objections have been raised by Western scholars that the devotional *Gadyatraya* could not have been written by Rāmānuja, as these hymns are so different in style from his philosophical works. These objections have been thoroughly refuted—linguistically, stylistically, etc., etc.—and, we believe, finally laid to rest by Vasudha Narayanan in her book, *The Way and the Goal*.⁶³ Similar objections were made about Shankara’s hymns. The fact is that in India, philosophers and philosophy have never been divorced from religion and devotion, as has been the case in the West. And Western scholars are only beginning to understand this.

There is no doubt that Rāmānuja was both a product and a proponent of Ālvār/Tamil devotion. No one reading the hymns of the Ālvārs—and especially Nammālvār’s

hymns—can doubt that they are the basis and foundation of the Vishishtādvaita philosophy. Rāmānuja’s philosophy is steeped in Ālvār devotion, even when it is not presented in devotional terminology. Moreover, Rāmānuja’s commentaries were not meant for Srivaishnavas, though Rāmānuja encouraged his followers to read the *Sribhāshya*. Rather, the commentaries were meant for Sanskrit scholars who did not know Tamil. This was the audience he wanted to reach. But the commentaries basically said in philosophical terms what Nammālvār and other Ālvārs said in devotional terms. The Srivaishnavas understood all this.

Rāmānuja, the great steamship

What if Rāmānuja had not lived? What if he had not done all that he did? Perhaps the Ālvār devotional movement would have slowly faded away. After all, it was presented in Tamil, a language known only to one section of the Indian subcontinent. It would most likely have been considered merely a local movement and not taken seriously. Perhaps this movement would have eventually died out even in Tamil Nadu.

But thanks to Rāmānuja, an extraordinary devotional movement gradually spread all over India. The waves went on and on, eventually sweeping the whole country—from Tamil Nadu to Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, then to Kerala and Maharashtra, then further north, then eventually east to Bengal and Orissa—then, beyond. The movement changed its character somewhat in different areas, but the rich devotion remained the same. And a thousand years later it is still with us, having spread all over the world.

Just as Lakshmana became like a mother

to Rāma and Sitā when they were in the forest, looking after them in every way, so also Rāmānuja became like a mother to the Ālvār and Srivaishnava movement by nurturing it and enabling it to grow. As Bhattar wrote, regarding Nammālvār's *Tiruvaimoli*:

The *Veda* of Tamil [ie, the *Tiruvaimoli*] in 1000 (stanzas) which are composed on the great fame of Ranganātha, who is at the place where are a number of gardens and rampart walls, has for its first and natural mother, Satakopa [Nammālvār]; those hymns are nursed by Rāmānuja as a loving foster-mother.⁶⁴

Ramakrishna used to compare some spiritual teachers to small fishing boats that could only take a few passengers. But other

teachers were like huge steamships that could carry thousands across the ocean. Rāmānuja was such a steamship. In this connection, Vedānta Deshika wrote:

Mutaliyantān [Dāsharathi—a nephew and disciple of Rāmānuja] said, 'When a lion leaps from one hill to another, the little insects on its body are transported with him. Similarly, when Bhāshyakāra [Rāmānuja] leaped over the cycle of birth and death, we were saved because of our connection with him.'⁶⁵

Now we understand that Rāmānuja's saving grace did not end with his disciples. He is still taking people across the ocean of this world. Moreover, how much he has enriched our lives in doing so. The debt we owe him can never be repaid. ■

NOTES AND REFERENCES

42 *The Way and the Goal*, p. 213.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 116.

45 *Ibid.*, pp. 113-14.

46 *Koila Olugu*, p. 103.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 110 fn.

48 *Ibid.*, pp. 107-08.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 106.

50 *Praise-Poems to Visnu and Sri: The Stotras of Rāmānuja's Immediate Disciples*, trans. by Nancy Ann Nayar (Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, 1994), pp. 122-23. *Sundarabahu Stava*, shlokas 129-131. In this last shloka (shloka 131), it is believed that Kuresha is referring to his disciple Naluran, when he speaks of 'offences committed by good people'.

51 There is often a story related here about a Muslim princess in Delhi who had in her possession the second image of Vishnu for this temple, and about how Rāmānuja and his followers went there to retrieve it. However, as the Muslims were not ruling in Delhi at that time, it does not seem credible.

Moreover, there is an almost identical story connected with the Srirangam temple.

52 Parthasarathy, pp. 45-46. But according to Swami Ramakrishnananda's biography, Kuresha fully regained his eyesight.

53 'The "Other" Antal', p. 217.

54 see *History*, pp. 62-63.

55 see *Cult of Jagannāth*, pp. 22 & 144.

56 *History*, p. 63.

57 *Bhakti Schools of Vedānta*, by Swami Tapasyananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1990), p. 22.

58 Parthasarathy, p. 47.

59 *Beyond Compare*, by Francis X. Clooney, SJ (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008), p. 150.

60 *Rāmānuja's Teachings*, p. 128.

61 *The Way and the Goal*, p. 93.

62 *Rāmānuja's Teachings*, p. 131.

63 see *The Way and the Goal*, pp. 88-92.

64 *Srivaisnavism: An Insight*, by K. K. A. Venkatachari (Mumbai: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, 2006), p. 18.

65 *The Way and the Goal*, pp. 151-52.