

SRI RÂMÂNUJACHARYA

Glimpses of His Life and Times



INTRODUCTION: THE ACHARYAS

To adapt Thomas Carlyle famous dictum, Hinduism (*Sanatana Dharma*) can be termed as a chronicle of the biographies of India's great religious teachers/Acharyas.

The triumvirate of the most eminent Acharyas, Adhi Sankara, Râmânuja, and Madhva synthesized and formulated the Advaita, Vishishtâdvaita, and Dvaita philosophy, as Non-dualism, Qualified non-dualism, and Dualism respectively. Key source texts for the three, main Hindu philosophical schools of Vedanta are referred to as the *Prasthanathrayi*--canonical texts of the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gîtà, and the Brahmasutras --they are thought of as the link between the individual and cosmic soul, and as conduits to Lord's grace

Sri Sankaracharya (788-820) was the foremost Acharya, the first torch-bearer of Hinduism, to put forward a cogent and clear analysis and interpretation of the Vedantha texts. He enunciated the Advaita philosophy of Absolute Oneness, defined as non-dualism or monism. Everything in this universe is but a manifestation of the Supreme One..Advaita has been defined as signifying the only One absolute reality called

Brahman, who is supreme, infinite and omnipresent. Brahman alone is real and non-dual in nature. Advaita signifies the negative of two, i.e., 'non- two'

Sri Râmânujacharya (1017-1137) came three centuries after Sankaracharya.. He formulated and gave shape and content to the Visishtadvaita school of Vedanta (Qualified Non-dualism/Monism). Sri Nathamuni, Sri Yamunacharya and Sri Râmânujar were the three oracles or mentors of Vaishnavism, Nathamuni being the *eminence gris*.. He had obtained the secret knowledge from Nammalvar who bequeathed it to his grandson Yamunacharya, known as Alavandar also.

Râmânujar too, like Sankara, believed that whatever is, is Brahman but Brahman is not of a homogenous nature. It contains within itself elements of plurality owing to which it truly manifests itself in a diversified world

Sri Madhvacharya initiated Dvaita Vedanta, espousing Dualism. Dvaita indicates 'two'. . He says that the first and the more important reality is that of Vishnu or Brahman. And “the second reality is that of dependent but equally real universe that exists with its own separate essence“

Rajaji in his Tamil book '*Bhakthi Neri*' says that Adhi Sankara who had touched the sublime summit in elucidating Vedantha, had advocated chanting the names of the supreme Lord in his composition "Bhaja Govindam". He says 'There are no devotional songs superior to the stotra-s of *Sankara Bhagavath pAdha*'. There is congruity as well as palpable differences, between Advaita and Visishtadvaita.

For devotees trying to comprehend the texts and the nuances of Vedantha, guidance of Acharyas is required “just as the lotus requires the sun's rays to blossom”

The teachings of three great shining lights of *Sanatana dharma* have had a ripple effect, spreading the tenets of Hinduism wide and far. They take devotees along the right path, the righteous path to get released from the coils of Samsara, to attain salvation-*Moksha*.

Information on the life of Râmânujar is based primarily on chronicles/legends handed down through the thick mist of centuries and propagated through books and discourses. During this process they may have seen differences in perspectives and even factual discrepancies. Prof..V.V. Râmânujam, learned Vaishnava scholar and writer has in a well-researched article published in a Râmânujar Commemoration volume edited by Sri M.A.Venkatakrishnan Swamy, drawn attention to the deviations in dates, identities of persons, and some seeming facts --an analysis of which calls for separate treatment.

Râmânuja's Early Days—Youth and Marriage

Râmânuja was born to Asuri Kesava Perumal Somayaji and Kanthimathi Ammal at Sriperumpudur, Tamil Nadu --in an orthodox Vaishnava family. He was christened Ilaya Perumal/Lakshmana by his uncle --Periya Thirumalai Nambi. He went through a deeply religious apprenticeship under his father. He was in the swim, young and eager to learn. The orthodox milieu in which Râmânujar lived was conducive to spiritual pursuits.

At the age of 17, he married RakshakaambaaL (ThanjammaL in Tamil). His father Keshav Somayaji was a formidable Vedic Scholar, well-versed in the nuanced meanings of the Veda texts and rituals. A humanitarian at heart, he inculcated in his son enduring spiritual values, ensuring that he matured into a well-rounded person. He was of the firm conviction that his son was "like the Tulasi plant which emits a fragrance even as a seedling", and was cut out to be a great spiritual leader of Vaishnavism. However, his father who was a tower of strength to him, died a little after Râmânujar's marriage. Deeply affected by this tragedy, he along with his wife and mother moved to Kancheepuram where he was able to plumb the Vedas under Yadavaprakasa, a renowned scholar of Advaita philosophy.

It is difficult not to digress from chronological arrangement here and there while dealing with a biography of a spiritual luminary whose life was packed with a whole chain of anecdotes and happenings specially in Kanchipuram, Srirangam and Melkote. The principal players are referred to in both Tamil and Sanskrit by-names:

Alavandhar (Yamunacharya)	Thirukachi Nambi (Kanchi Purna)
Thirukoshtiyur Nambi (Goshti Purna)	Kurath alvar (Kuresar)
Periya Thirumalai Nambi(Srisaila Purna)	Periya Nambi (Mahapurna)
Vadugur Nambi (Andhra Purna)	Yadava Prakasa (Govinda-jeeyar)

TUTELAGE UNDER YADAVAPRAKASA IN TIRUPUTKUZHI

In Tiruputkuzhi, a place about 12 km from Kanchipuram, and one of the 108 Divya Desam-s, Yadavaprakasa, a renowned scholar, trained Râmânujar in Advaita Sastra of Vedanta. From his guru the disciple imbibed the significance of Vedic-texts, conceiving Brahman as a combination of Transcendence and Immanence. He was able to plumb the Vedas with his guru's guidance.

Râmânujar mastered the Vedas and Sastras and even as a young student showed scholarly precocity and hall-marks of greatness.. He embarked on his studies with zeal and reverence and proved himself to be a committed and brilliant scholar. The teacher was highly impressed by Râmânuja's analytical ability but, he had a bloated ego, and was vainglorious about his own erudition. He was annoyed with Râmânujar who had shown vital signs of catholicity, displaying a certain enquiring mind. The more Râmânujar learnt the more he learnt to doubt; and did not hesitate to ask questions of his guru. We shall come to that in a moment.

DIFFERENCES WITH GURU—VOICE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Master and disciple had frequent differences and wordy skirmishes over interpretation of the Veda texts. Râmânuja did not hesitate to point out what he felt were aberrations in the Guru's interpretation. In one instance Râmânuja was taken aback by his master's interpretation of a particular segment of the Veda.

The passage from Chandagya Upanishad beginning "*Kapyasam pundarika aevkam akshini.....*" (describing the eyes of Lord Vishnu), for which the churlish guru gave a

blasphemous interpretation as “monkey’s *brushtam*” (nate/rear end). Râmânûja, however, thought that the meaning was "The eyes of that Supreme Person are as lovely and tender like the lotuses blossomed by sun’s rays”.Yadavaprakasa was piqued by Râmânûja’s growing independence of thinking and did not like being crossed.. He felt that his disciple was becoming off-key and too much of a threat and challenge to him. He is said to have even plotted to drown Râmânûja while on their pilgrimage to Benares. But Râmânûja's cousin Govinda Bhattar came to know about the plot and alerted him.

WHO WERE THE HUNTERCOUPLE ?

To forestall the guru’s fiendish plan, Râmânûjar broke away from the group on their journey to Varanasi and escaped into the forest at dead of night. But he lost his way. Miraculously, an aged hunter couple appeared and guided him out of the woods. Râmânûja was in a sort of daze, when he opened his eyes, and found himself at the outskirts of Kanchipuram. The couple had vanished. He realized that there was a divine intercession behind it and that it was Lord Varadaraja and Perundevi Thayar who had come in the guise of the hunter couple to help him out.He rejoined the other disciples of Yadava Prakasa for some time, but only for some time, till the guru unable to bring round Râmânûjar to his ways ended their chequered relationship.

After his final break with Guru Yadava Prakasa, he went back to his childhood guide Tirukachi Nambi (Kanchi Purna) who taught him by example the import of *Bhakthi*—unwavering devotion. He continued his stay in Kanchi assisting Tirukkachi Nambi in his daily chores of Godly service. Tirukachi Nambi was a very pious person, suckled in the Vishnu creed and was even-tempered. He is reputed even to have had conversations with the deity, Kanchi Varadaraja,. The principal form of lay worship that he performed daily was carrying water for use in the sanctum and making flower garlands for the deity and performing the daily task of fanning the deity Lord Varadaraja with *chamaram* (hand-held whisk). Râmânûjar had an inner affection and respect for him though he was of a lower caste.

YAMUNACHARYA

The Visishtadvaita system of philosophy had grown roots in Southern India. Important Vaishnavite temples were in Kancheepuram, Srirangam, Tirumalai-Tirupathi and Melkote. This has been immortalized in a prayerful sloka invoked by Râmânûjar. These four shrines viz., Srirangam,Tirumalai-tirupathi,Kanchipuram and Melkote are among the prominent Divya Desam-s

“Sri Ranga Mangalanidhim karuNa nivasam. Sri Venkatadri sikharalayaalaya KALa meghamSri Hasthi saila sikharojhvala pArijAtham,Srisham namAMi yadhu saila deepam.

The *jeeyar* (Pontiff) of the important Srirangam shrine (venerated as Bhooloka Vaikuntam) was Yamunacharya (Alavandar), a great sage and scholar.

WORDLESS MESSAGE—THREE FURLED FINGERS

Yamunacharya was pleased to hear from various quarters about Râmânujacharya's spade-work in promoting and re-vitalizing Vaishnavism and about his devoted service to Lord Vardaraja Perumal in Kancheepuram. He was looking for a successor who would interpret, articulate and spread the tenets of the creed and was impressed by Râmânujar's potential as *Darsana Pravartaka*, to propagate the *Vaishnava Sanatana Dharma* and uphold *vaishnava sampradaya*. He had seen in Râmânujar the makings of the mutt chief to succeed him and thought his prayers answered when he heard that Râmânujar had broken off with Yadava..

He visited Tirupputkuzhi near Kanchipuram but had to return to Srirangam without getting an opportunity to meet him. Later, after coming to know about Râmânujacharya's parting of ways with Yadava Prakasa, he deputed Periya Nambi (Mahapurna) to go to Kancheepuram and invite Râmânuja to join him. A sense of elation swelled up in Râmânujar. He went with Periya Nambi to Srirangam with much anticipation.. But before they could meet him, they received the sad news that Yamunacharya, who was of a ripe age and ailing, had passed away. Râmânuja was so disenchanted in not having met with Yamunacharya that he decided to return to Kanchi without even having darshan of deity in the temple at Srirangam

While performing the last rites for the departed Chief, his adherents noticed that three fingers of Yamunacharya remained furled up.

Prof. V.V. Râmânujan, noted Vaishnava scholar has commented on it thus : “ By intuitive interpretation Râmânuja felt that the three fingers signified the guru's three unfulfilled wishes. Taking a cue from his adherents, Râmânujar said that he was determined to write Sri Bhashya, a detailed commentary on Veda Vyasa's Brahma Sutra and that he would perpetuate the memory of Parasara, author of Vishnu Purana and also popularize the Alvars' Tamil expositions in the *Divya Prabhandham* to make them part of regular worship in Vaishnava temples. Alavandhar's clenched three fingers unfurled one by one as though confirming that these were his last wishes”.

Râmânujar then set upon the task of spreading Yamunacharya's message, fulfilling the wishes of one whom he had accepted as his *Manasika Acharya*. He spent six months getting inducted by Periya Nambi into Yamunacharya's philosophy. (*Periya Nambi is not to be confused with Periya Tirumalai Nambi who was Râmânujar's uncle*) He wrote the Sri Bhashya (to get background sources for which he went to Kashmir with Kuresar his disciple to study Bodhayana vritti at Saradha Peetam,)—(*referred to later in the article*)) He mentored his disciples to expound the Nalayiram Divya Prabhandham to make the Tamil Veda of the Alvars an essential component of poojas in temples .

RIGHTEOUS TIRUKACHI NAMBI--

Râmânuja wanted to honor his spiritual adviser, Tirukachi Nambi for whom he had an inner affection and high regard. He had invited him to have repast in his house, so that he could have the privilege of eating the *sesha prasadam* (left-over food) after the guest

had eaten –an act considered to ensure the guru’s ‘sacramental grace’. Tirukachi Nambi came to his house when Râmânûja was not there. His wife Kanthimathi was an orthodox lady brought up in the traditional groove of puritanial exclusiveness and inflexible convictions. She was very conscious of differences in rank. Though she entertained the guest by serving food and treating him with reverence, she cleaned up the place after the guest had left because TirukachiNambi was from a lower caste. She even took her bath for a second time as though to purify herself. Râmânûja who was looking forward to have the *sesha prasadam*, was shocked to learn, on return, about her action. He and his wife had frequent conflicts because the lady was possessed of her own entrenched ideas of traditional orthodoxy with its rigorous strictures.

FAMOUS SIX WORDS

Tirukkachi Nambi had obtained from Lord Varadaraja the famous 'Six Words' of benediction and passed them on to Râmânûjar as guidelines to be followed by him. “The six words, started with *Aham aeva Param thathvam* (meaning ‘I --Narayana-- am the first Supreme Being’) Another was that individual jeevathmas are distinct from the Supreme Brahman but are a part of the Brahman. Prapatti or Surrender is the sole and only means of obtaining moksha. Also that Râmânûja should take refuge at the feet of Periya Nambi as his spiritual preceptor”.

Accordingly, Râmânûjar was going to Srirangam to meet him but midway at Madurantakam he met Periya Nambi who was himself on his way to meet Râmânûjar. There itself under the shade of Vakula tree, Periya Nambi performed *Pancha Samskara* to Râmânûja, inncluding branding of the sangu-chakra on his upper-arms for the *SamashrayaNam* ceremony. Both returned to Srirangam and did Kalakshepams for some time. It was at this time that Lord Ranganatha is said to have called him "*Namm Udayavar*" (One of Us) --of which *Udayavar* (Râmânûja’s other appellation) was a derivation.

ANOTHER UPSETTING INCIDENT

He received proper induction and introduction from Periya Nambi (Maha Purna) who had come with his wife to stay and instruct Râmânûjar on the Divya Prabhandham and VaishNava Sampradaya. But there were incidents of discord at the well while drawing water. This again was due to errant attitude of Râmânûjar’s wife toward Nambi’s wife. This too had its root-cause in the differences based on presumed superiority because she was a Brahmin of a lower sub-sect.. PeriyaNambi took this as a signal and decided that the best thing would be to leave Râmânûjar’s house. He did that.

Râmânûjar was shaken by these incidents. Weary of the matromonial tether caused by his wife’s puritanical make-up that was becoming a drag on his own spiritual pursuits, Râmânûja sent Kanthimathi his wife to her parents' house and took to a monastic life, adopting *Sanyasa Ashram* after which he came to be called *YathiRaja* (King among Ascetics) an honorific invested by Lord Devaraja of Kanchipuram on him..

SECRET MANTRA

After Yamunacharya's demise, the seat of Acharya at Srirangam was lying vacant without a successor to take over. Râmânujar was prevailed upon to assume charge. But, before ascension to the mutt leadership, Râmânujar wanted to get primed and prepared. In a nearby place called Thirukoshtiyur, (one of the 108 Divya Desam-s) there lived a learned scholar Thirukoshtiyur Nambi (Goshti Purna) who knew the meaning of the most central, sacred mantra of Vaishnavism and Râmânujar was advised to get it from him. Râmânujar walked 18 times to Thirukoshtiyur in order to learn the secret significance of the Ashtakshari Mantra. Nambi agreed to part with the *Rahasya thraya* -that taught the sublime eight-syllabled **Om-Na-Mo-Na-Ra-Ya-Na-Ya** considered the core and substance of Vaishnavism. It contained three *rahasya-s viz Thirumantra, Dwaya and Charamasloka* learning which helped one to work out his salvation. (*Moksha*).

TRADITION MEETS DISSENT

Thirukoshtiyur Temple is one of the 108 Divya Desams of Lord Vishnu, extolled by the Alvars. Sowmiya Narayana Perumal is the presiding deity along with his divine consort Thirumagal Nachiyar. The temple has a Santhana Krishnan idol in the main sanctum sanctorum. Thirukoshtiyur is revered as the southern Badrinath." The most noteworthy feature of the shrine is that the deity can be found in all three postures -standing, sitting and sleeping. In Ground floor as Krishna in dancing posture -depicting Bhoologam. In the next level he is in Sayana Thirukolam a posture resting on Adhishesha - depicting Devalogam. Directly above this the Lord is in Iruntha Kolam - depicting Indralogam. And top most level in standing posture as Sri Sowmya Narayana Perumal - depicting Vaikuntam". This form of the idol of Sri Narayana in three postures has been described in an Alvar verse as the Supreme God *Nindran* (He stood), *Kidanthan* , (He was prone), *AadinAn* (He Danced).

COMETH THE MOMENT, COMETH THE MAN—

We now advert to the following highly-charged episode which stands at the apex of the Râmânujar chronicles, a famous one that has been frequently cited to show Râmânujar's catholicity of views and his passion to build bridges. Before initiating Râmânujar, Thirukoshtiyur Nambi, a strait-laced traditionalist, told him that the *Rahasya-thraya* mantra which was verbalization of the act of surrender - the path to Moksha --and that he should treat it as secret and any violation would land him in hell.

The dramatized scenario in the words of Annie Beasant -- a compact recapitulation without padding -- is cited by Alkondavalli Govindacharya in his book *Divine Wisdom of Dravida Saints*.

“ Râmânujar asked his guru what would happen if he revealed the secret mantra ?

“Thou wilt die” said his guru .

“What would happen to the one who hears it?

“He will be liberated” said Nambi.

DENOUEMENT COMES

Unafraid of the predicted reckoning of doom, Râmânujar went up the steps of the temple and revealed to the congregation of the learned (*Vidwat goshti*) as well as the throng of lay devotees of different stripes to this highly potent mantra. He had a command presence and was possessed of an ardent desire to spread the auspicious secret formula—golden key to *Moksha* (salvation) to all.

Thirukoshtiyur Nambi was upset when he came to know of Râmânujar’s wanton flouting of his direction, and became furious. He demanded an explanation. What Râmânujar gave in reply in a spirit of humility, was that if he had transgressed the specific warning of the Guru, eternal damnation in hell will catch only his soul but the multitude of humanity who listened to this Mantra would be saved spiritually. It was portentous, stand-out moment being a distinct break from a long-held tradition. With that one touch of humanity Râmânujar made the world his kin and took tradition from static to dynamic. Bringing a slew of new adherents to Vaishnavism.

Thirukoshtiyur Nambi pondered over this reply and was not only mollified but he saw the loftiness of Râmânujar’s moral stand, his candor and his view of it all as a human issue. It was as if a veil had been lifted. He was overwhelmed by the self-less outlook of his disciple. He started looking at Râmânujar, with new understanding and as a spiritual force. He hailed him as "*EMBERUMANAR*". (My Supreme Lord)-and declared that Srivaishnavism would thenceforth be known as "*Râmânujar Darsanam*".

THE EGALITARIAN

We observe that Râmânujar’s life had its own egalitarian theme of equality of all. He wanted the path to Moksha to be open to everyone, and should be based on worth and not birth. The restrictive caveat and the inflexible rules of tradition and their irrationality, fermented in his doughty spirit. After initiation, Râmânujar came to the decision that such a worthy mantra should not remain the monopoly of a privileged few and should be squashed. Divinity should be unconfined and this secret formula should be available to all. Moksha cannot be the privilege of a few partisans of tradition. He felt that all are equal but in the orthodox world of his days, all were not. Blind conventions that were becoming cob-webs in the mind cried to be brushed away.

Why not let lay people too, irrespective of caste, benefit by it to attain *Moksha* and bring them to the open sunshine of God’s love? His concept of God was *Paratva* and *Saulabhya*- supremacy and accessibility. And he was for overcoming restrictions that run against the doctrine of *Saulabhya*. The well-known Vedantin, Swamy Vivekananda wrote of Râmânujar’s brilliance, the greatness of his heart, and lauded his “most practical philosophy, his denial of birthrights before spiritual attainments.”

VICTORIOUS IN DEBATE

Râmânûja traveled throughout the country spreading the message of Visishtadvaita. During his travels, Yagna Murthi, a great Advaitin scholar and seasoned debator, challenged him for a debate. They met and argued till there was a stalemate after the long debate in endless arguments and counter arguments that lasted for over 16 days). . Râmânûjar, at his wit's end, prayed to Lord Varada and on His advice, which was to use the clinching arguments of Yamunacharya on the doctrine of illusoriness. He went to the debate refreshed and radiant with *thejas* (divine glow) His opponent yielded victory to him without much ado.

RÂMÂNUJAR'S 'SRIBASHYA'

Râmânûja was a teacher down to his bones and his penetrative philosophy enlightened all truth seekers. The Bhakthi movement promoted by the twelve Alvars, got a further impetus from Râmânûja. He gave persuasive and analysed explanations to the Vedic texts. Above and beneath all, he was a pragmatist. When Râmânûjar visited Saraswati Peetam, Goddess Saraswati is said to have been so impressed with his commentary on Brahma Sutra that she named it "*SriBashya*" and conferred on him the title of "*BashyakAarar*".

Râmânûjar codified and specified tenets and rituals to be observed in temples. His main attempt was "to combine into a harmonious whole the social duties, religious rites and the higher reaches of meditation and devotion". He let in daylight into the dark corners of ignorance based on tradition, and to make religion more acceptable to more and more. Râmânûjar is considered an *Amsa* of the Vishnu's *panchcayudha* and incarnation of Adishesha, the multi-tasking serpent-couch of Sri Narayana. Some believe that Râmânûja re-incarnated as Manavala Ma Muni, (the last of the preceptors to occupy the pontiff's seat in Srirangam) who helped inspire, raise, train and lead a dedicated bunch of eight disciples called *Ashta dig-gaja*-s to carry on the work of Râmânûja

RÂMÂNUJAR'S TIRELESS MISSIONARY WORK

Râmânûjar settled down in Srirangam after visiting all Vaishnava shrines in south India. He spent his time preaching the Vishtadvaita philosophy and in writing books. He attracted many adherents to the path of bhakthi. His special *Divyagnya* (Commandments) and his final message (*Charama Sandaesa*) are held in high esteem by Vaishnava-s and taken as guidelines to be adhered to in their daily recitals.

Râmânûjar introduced the *Pancharathra* Agama system of worship in temples, the notable one being Srirangam where the *Vaikhanasa* system was in vogue, The Agamas accept the authority of Vedas., i.e they are Vedic in character and prescribe modes of worship. Some Vaishnava temples follow Pancharatra Agama and some temples follow Vaikhanasa Agama, by tradition and custom. The Bhakti movement of Alvars and the ritualistic worship of Pancharatrans were given special boost by Râmânûjar..

RÂMÂNUJAR GOES TO KASHMIR

For fulfilling the unfinished tasks of Yamunacharya he had to study Vrithi Grantha of Sage Vyasa by Maharishi Bhodayana. There was only one dog-eared copy of Vrithi grantha. So he went to Kashmir to learn and adapt it for his own work on Brahmasutra and Sri Bashyam. Accompanying him was his disciple Koorathalvan (Kuresar) who had given up a princely life to join Râmânujar. He had remarkable retentive powers and was able to absorb and remember the contents and Râmânujar used his services to write a detailed commentary of the Sri Bashya, magnum opus of Srivaishnavite literature. In approval and admiration of this work, Goddess Saraswathi, it is said, conferred on Râmânujar the title “*BhashyakArar*”

ACTION SHIFTS TO MELKOTE

Râmânujar had to leave his beloved Srirangam because the ruler Kulothunga (who later acquired the epithet of Kirumikantha) was a fanatic. He started relentless persecution of Vaishnavas, and wanted to snuff out Râmânujar because his spiritual activism ran counter to his own faith. He invited Râmânujar to his court to confront him. Followers of Râmânujar prevailed upon him to move away from Srirangam and he decided to do that. His trusted disciple Kuresar donned the teacher’s *kAshayam* (hermit garb) and went to the court impersonating Râmânujar at the Ruler’s court, but had to suffer the cruel punishment of losing both his eyes.

IN MYSORE

Râmânujar had spent a crowded twelve years of his life in exile in Mysore, away from his beloved Srirangam, where the ruler was a ruthless Advaitin. He steadily established himself as preceptor *par excellence*. The Ruler of Mysore, Bhatti Deva of the Hoysala dynasty, was impressed by Râmânujar’s sapient interpretation of the Veda-s and was delighted to have Râmânujar in his kingdom and readily became his disciple. He was allowed to construct Vishnu temples the most notable one being the temple in Melkote for Lord Thirunarayana. His spiritual followers grew by leaps and bounds in the Mysore kingdom. He got constructed a temple at Melkote for deity ThiruNArayana and created an active and vibrant Vaisnava community who have come to be known as Mandayam Iyengars. Râmânujar’s labors were successful and his followers grew, numbering thousands in the Mysore kingdom.

ON TO DELHI TO RECOVER SELVA PILLAI IDOL

In Thirunarayanapuram he learnt that the Utsavamurthy had been taken away to Delhi by the daughter of the Muslim Ruler. She had taken a fancy for this idol and loved it as a toy to play with. Râmânujar went to Delhi to recover the idol. The Muslim leader who first did not yield to his appeal, agreed to part with it only after Râmânujar endearingly hailed the utsava murthy in Tamil chanting *varuga, varuga..*’, ‘*Selva Pillaiyae Vaarum*’, (“Come, Come on! O, my dear blessed child”) and the idol miraculously came to his lap. Râmânujar brought it back and reinstalled it in the temple.

It is said that the Sultan's daughter Bibi Lachimar, loved that idol so much that she followed it to Melkote and lived there for many years to be near that idol. When she passed away, the SriVaishnava's impressed by her love, made a statue of her. The idol of Lachimar is revered as Bibi Nachhiar

Râmânújar appreciated the help rendered by the local people who had till then debarred being classed as of lower caste. He arranged for special entry for these people into the temple. There was a bar on temple entry for them earlier. He took them to an era of new hope and also called those who were treated as of low caste as “*ThirukkulatthAr*” (*Sacred / Holy class*)

PRINCESS EXORCISED

There are many anecdotes relating to Râmânúja that have come through the thick mist of time. According to historian Alkandavilli Govind ch rya, Bitti Deva and his chief queen Shantala Devi had a sick daughter. She was possessed of an evil spirit and Râmânúja exorcised the devil and cured her. After this episode it is said that Bitti Deva embraced Vaishnavism. Meanwhile some events that augured well for Râmânúja happened. Kulothunga Chozhan the bigoted ruler who persecuted Râmânúja, had died. The followers of Râmânúja requested him to come back to Srirangam.. But his new disciples and followers at Melkote and other places in Mysore would not let him go. So he got made his own image for worship by his disciples and followers, and left the place for Srirangam.The ‘*Archa moorthi*’ of Râmânújar known as “*Thaan Ugantha Tirumeni*” was installed in Tirunarayanapuram.

SAND AS HOLY PRASAD

Sri Govindacharya relates one more instance of “God being everywhere to seeing saints” “In one of his begging trips (*Uncha vrithi*) Râmânúja came across a number of boys who were going through the motions of play-acting the rituals that elders did in the Great Temple of Ranganatha. They had drawn the temple in the sand with a separate altar for God and His consort, Sri Lakshmi. The emulated ceremony had progressed till it came to offering *prasad*. The boys had gathered a handful of sand and after offering to the Deity reverentially, presented it to Râmânúja as holy food (*Prasad*). Râmânúja at once prostrated on the ground and received the offered food in his bowl. Such was his blind reverence for Sri Ranganatha.

RÂMÂNUJA AND SOODI KODUTHA NACHIYAR

After twelve years in Melkote, Râmânúja and his followers returned to Srirangam, the persecution of Vaishnavas having been stopped. It is believed that he was greatly influenced by the evangelist Alvars/ bards who chanted celestial lays from whom he had drawn much inspiration. Of particular influence was Andal whom he considered as a warbler of divine, poetic prose and whose mellifluous, honey-tongued pasurams he admired and chanted. Râmânúja was deeply involved in the ThiruppAvai, the thirty stanza poem being the saga of gopis to get *parai*.. To make true an unfulfilled wish of Andal, he arranged for 1000 vats of *AkkAra vadisal* and butter *Naivedyam* to be offered to the ThirumAl irum solai deity.

It was the practice among *Yathis* (ascetics) to eat food by “–*Uncha Vrithi*”, (begging for food in the raw, like rice, vegetables). Once When Sri Râmânûja was going round the main streets he went near, Thirukoshtiyur Nambi’s house and when he recited the concluding portion of Andal’s Thiruppavai *pAsuram* (18th) *SenthAmarai kaiyAl seerAr vaLai olippa Vandhu thiravai* Nambi’s daughter opened the door with bangles tinkling as if in response, to offer Bhiksha .He was so much absorbed in the pasuram, that in his mind’s eye he saw Andal Nachiyaar standing before him, and prostrated before her.

TIRUMALAI LORD— CLAIM REBUTTED

He went to Thirumalai to establish the Vaishnava character of the temple, to counter the claim of the Savites of Kalahasti as to the identity of the idol.. Râmânûja suggested that the best way to find out would be to leave the symbols by of the two deities inside the temple and seal the place, and let the divine Lord to decide. Accordingly, arrangements were made. The next morning the temple doors were opened and the deity shone wearing the Vaishnava symbols of Shankha and Chakra, a divine adjudgement that the deity was of Vishnu. Râmânûja was given the mandate to oversee the worship arrangements and the puja procedures.

IN SRIRANGAM

Râmânûjar systematized the administration and worship procedures in Sri Rangnatha shrine and managed the temple’s financial affairs .

“YadavaprakAsa who was earlier tutor of Sri Râmânûja was persuaded by his mother and others to realise the greatness of SriRâmânûja and to become his disciple.” Soothed and purged of his superior airs, the rueful Yadava Prakasa swallowed his pride and became his disciple and amended his life in a spirit of humility. and became Râmânûjar’s disciple to be known as Govinda Jeeyar.

Râmânûjar, the reformer through and through, brought about many a reform to bring unity among all classes and creeds through his revolutionary step by taking Harijans into the temple at Melkote. “After twelve years in Melkote, Râmânûja finally returned to Srirangam where he got settled permanently and continued to preach and write. Daily hundreds of people flocked to him to hear his lectures. By now he had a following of over 700 sannyasis and thousands of followers, who revered him as their guru. In his prodigious career, he was able to persuade thousands of people to turn to Bhakthi/ devotion. In the whole compass of Râmânûjar’s works there is no commentary in classical Tamil or Sanskritized Tamil (manipravala).

CONDUIT TO LORD’S GRACE

Ramauja, as the fountainhead of the Visihtadvaita philosophy had attracted a large coterie of disciples 64 of whom Râmânûja nominated as *Simahasanaadhipathis* to carry on his message. He is famous for propagating the significance of Bhakti, or devotion to God. Vaishnavism is based on a two fold heritage of Sanskrit and Tamil—referred to as *Ubhaya Vedantha*. There is no written work in Tamil language attributed to Râmânûja

which some have found surprising. Though he wrote only in Sanskrit he drew inspiration from the Divya Prabhadham pasurams which were in Tamil. He was a *Brahma Gnani* (realized soul) who reformed and systematized the deity worship in all the temples, especially in Srirangam considered as *Bhooloka Vaikuntam* – Vaikuntam is the transcendental abode of Sri Narayana..

Râmânujar is revered as a reincarnation of Adishesha, the multi-tasking aide of Sri Narayana, functioning as His couch, umbrella, throne and sandals. It is also believed that the Five Weapons (*Panchayudha*) of Lord Narayana have come into this world as Râmânujar,

AUGURY OF THINGS TO COME

Nammalvar, one of the twelve Ministrels, known for his prescience speaks in his *Tiruvaymoli* (5.2.1),(a section of the *Divya-prabandham*) about a vision. This has been interpreted by Pundits and commentators that intuitively Nammalvar was prophesying the appearance of Râmânujar on the scene and the beneficial after effects.

poliga poliga poliga! poyitru valluyir ccapam
naliyum naragamum nainda namanukkingu yadonrum illai
kaliyum kedum kandu kolmin kadavannan budangal manmel
maliya ppugundisai padi adi ulidara kkandom

“Glory be, Scintillate, Bloom! Gone is the curse of existence. Gone too is Hell’s curse. Yamaraja has nothing more left to do. The kArmic effects and sins of the decadent Kali yuga have vanished. We saw everywhere more and more devotees of the sea-coloured Lord Vishnu in the earth are singing his names, dancing and reveling and playing musical instruments fervently.”

RÂMÂNUJAR’S COMMANDMENTS (*divYAGnya*)

Râmânujar had left my behind guidelines to his adherents to follow the well- defined order of the Vedas and other Dharmashastras, to observe all prescribed rituals in a spirit of surrender and dedication to the Supreme Being; He desired that devotees-s should keep reciting Dwaya at all times and try to understand its significance, to study religious scriptures and teach the meaning and significance to receptive persons, follow the well-defined order of the veda-s and Sastra-s, observe rituals prescribed in a spirit of humility

Râmânujar has written nine Sanskrit books, known as (Navarathna-s-- the nine precious gems. They are:

Sri Bhashya (Commentary on Brahmasutra), **Gadhya-thraya*, (3 Prose poems of surrender) *Vaikunta gadhya*, *Sriranga gadhya*, *Saranagathi gadhya* **Vedanta sara* (essence of the Veda-s), **Vedantha Sangraha* (summary of the meaning of the veda-s), **Vedanta Deepa* (Light of Vedantha) * *Gita bhashya* (Commentary on Bhagavad Gita), **Nithya Grantha* (Guide to Nitya Karma-s)

ACHARYA’S TRIBUTE

Both Manavala Ma Muni and Swamy Desikan have paid their tributes to Râmânujar in their scholarly works: Two have been noted here: *Yathiraja vimsathi* and *Yathiraja sapthadhi* respectively, which are useful sources for reflection. They are eulogistic prayers. There are other works of great depth by the two Acharya-s.

KOORATHA ALVAN’S THANIAN

Yo nithyam Achyutha padAmbuja yugma rugma

*VyAmohathas thathiraNi thruN aya maenae
Asmath guroar bhagavathOsya dhayaika sindhO
Râmânujarsya charaNow sharaNam prapadhyae*

I pay obeisance to the feet of my kind and merciful Acharya (guru) Sri Râmânujar, who has countless auspicious attributes, and who everyday, worshipped the golden lotus feet of the merciful Achyutha and who considers worldly attachments as trivial as grass, and who is an ocean of compassion, responding readily to the prayers of his devotees

Bhagavad Râmânuja who had led an eventful life has left his foot-prints on the sands of Time and will live forever in the hearts of his devotees!

A Tail-piece:

Karunanidhi’s Compliments

The spiritual deeds of Râmânujar’s and his message of inclusivity have made a great impression even on the indefatigable atheist, Mr. Karunanidhi, former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. He has agreed to pen the script of the TV series on Sri Râmânujar produced by actress, Kutty Padmini, and shown on Kalaigarnar TV and some other channels.. It raised eyebrows because his tributes to a theistic guru was huge volte-face by him being the authentic face of Dravidian politics with his atheisist view questioning faith in non-existent god.

When questioned by pressmen he said “. I know that Râmânuja is one among the great men who engineered revolution in religion. When a request was made that I narrate those incidents, which sowed the seeds of change and that it would nourish the thinking of viewers, I came forward and took it up. It does not mean that I am accepting theism”