

TIRUMALAI—TIRUPATI AND ŚRĪNIVASA-VENKATESWARA

Among the most important and ancient shrines of India. Tirumalai-Tirupati , otherwise known as Tiruvengadam, occupies a very unique position. It is where the northern and southern cultures meet. Indeed in a special sense, this is a place of cultural synthesis.

The holy hills of Vengadam a but Tirupati, a township founded by Śrī Rāmānuja, called also Govindarajapatnam (on the railway line connecting Renigunta , on the Bombay-Madras main line, with Pakala). It is about 91 miles from Madras. Tirupati is now the seat of Śrī Venkateswara University (founded in 1954), and is a growing town, having other educational institutions. An ancient seat of culture, it is now becoming important for the same reason.

'*Tirupati*' is the name usually given to sacred shrines of the South, especially by Śrī Vaisnavas. There are said to be 108 shrines or *tirupatis*. Among these 108, four are said to be most important, namely, Śrīrangam, Vengadam, Kanchi, and Melkote Tirunarayana. The first two, however, are pre-eminently important among these four.

Tirumalai , known as Vengadam, has been the seat of Yogins, sages and saints. Its glory has been sung by the great devotees or Alvars from the very early times. About the sanctity of this place, *Cialppadikaram*, a Tamil classic of the second century (sic), has spoken in glowing terms. This place has also been referred to as the place of liberation (Vengadam means the place where sins get burnt up, and thus the place of liberation or moksa ; vidu in Tamil). Though there are innumerable local traditions in the Sthalapurana, one fact stands out clearly, namely, that from the earliest times till today it has immense spiritual power. The greatness this place as conferring liberation has been well recognized by Kamban, Annamacarya, Tarigonda Venkamma, and others. This is the place where Vishnu, with other forms of Brahma, Lakshmi, and Rudra imbedded in His person, stands receiving surrender of all. Indeed, we get a very important point when we consider the significance of the unique image of Hanuman, bound hand and foot, standing opposite the shrine of Śrīnivasa. He is said to have come for final stay on earth after Śrī Rama had left for heaven. The

greatness of this Hanuman or Anjaneya shrine has been sung by the untouchable saint Tirup-pan –alvar (sixth century) (sic) in the third verse beginning with ‘mandipay’ in his magnificent *Amalanadipiran*.

The main icon of the place is called Śrīnivasa, since Śrī nivasa, since Śrī (Sreyas-Karinai) adorns the chest of Vishnu. The iconic pose is unusual, in so far as it does not possess sankha and cakra in the upper two hands, through the hands appear to have had them at one stage ; and it was only during the period of Śrī Rāmānuja that they were restored to the icon. The unusual character of the lower two also has to be noticed. The right hand has the pose pointing to the feet, intending that the devotee should surrender at His feet. The left hand is in the pose of katirvarti or showing , as it were , that to one who surrenders to Him the ocean of samsarsa is only knee deep, or by suggestion not deep at all, in which one does not get caught up, as in clay. It is clear that this unique icon shows with characteristic quality Śrī Krishna teaching of surrender as contained in the most famous verse of the Gita : ‘Surrender all dharmsa to Me and seek refuge in Me alone. I shall save you from all sins. Do not grieve’ (XVIII.66).

It is Śrī Rāmānuja, again, who has given Him the name ‘Śrīnivasa’, for prior to Śrī Rāmānuja , He was known only as Vengadam or Vengadanathan or Venkatanatha. This is to demonstrate that the Brahman of the Upanisads is , indeed, the Godhead who is Śrīyahpati ; who has the nature of creator , sustainer, and destroyer of the universe; who was vowed to seve all those who have taken the right decision to surrender to Him and to lead the good life; and, indeed, the One Being who can turn our knowledge into devotion. Thus the opeinig verse of the Śrī Bhāsyā runs :

Akhilabhuvana janmasthema bhangadilile

Vinata vividha bhuta vrata

It is also to reveal the 'di-unity' of Divine Nature – ubhaya-linga concept of the Divine that reveals both his. Saguna (*kalyanagunaparipurnatva*) and nirguna (*heyagunarahitatva*) or transcendent nature- that the name Śrīnivasa was given to Venkatanatha. The purpose of the avatara is to save those who seek refuge in Him ; it is the act of Divine mercy or daya. And the very function of the iconic worship is to bring God near to man - as a clear pool near at hand rather than a vast river afar or the ocean of Bliss beyond the worlds and inaccessible. The icon represents the grace of God near and ready at hand a siddhopaya. Thus Śrīnivasa is said to be the icon of daya par excellence -one who grants Himself to His devotees and by a play of the word 'da' (to give) here, one who makes one give up oneself to Him.

The vicissitude of history have not much touched this shrine, as they have done with other shrines even in South India. The Mohammedan rulers were content to get large sums of money from the temple, which was, of course, much better than to make all income impossible by destroying it. It was a useful institution for getting money. Thus the Carnatic Nawabs and others did not interfere with the temple and its usefulness, despite their alleged fanaticism and opposition to idolatry. As a matter of fact, this policy was also continued by the East India Company till the mahantas came to be trustees of the temple during the second quarter of the last century. It had royal patronage in the days of the Vijayanagar kings ; especially Krisnadevaraya and Acyutadevaraya were devotees of the shrine, and even today an image of that great personality adorns the compound of the temple, along with those of Krsnadevaraya and his royal queens.

The temple itself is not comparable at all to the great works of art that can be seen in many South Indian temples. That grandeur is not here ; but a different kind of grandeur marks this quiet spot, lovely in every sense-scenery, climate, and rich associations of spiritual personalities. It is here that all the Vedantas meet. Śrī Sankara seems to have visited the place, and some believe that he installed a Śrī cakra here. It is sacred to the Dvaita Vedantins in a double way, because it is the place where the great Hanuman had come to rest finally for the entire kalpa (being a cirañjivi) who is very

important to them, and also because other great bhaktas had sung about Venkataramana. Quite fully, it is the shrine of greatest importance to the Ubhaya-Vedanta of Śrī Rāmānuja- a two foldness which had been achieved in respect of the nature of godhead, in the nature of Scripture (the Vedas and Divyaprabandha of Alvars, in language (Sanskrit and Tamil so cleverly interlocked as to be called manipravala), and in realization (as freedom in God and service of God). There is thus a full synthesis in the very icon of the deity here, as in the philosophy that speaks through the language and grammar of religion.

The North Indian tradition about this Godhead started undoubtedly when Visistadvaita religion or bhakti-prapatti-marga began to spread. This deity came to be known as Balaji or Balakrishna obviously because the stage of the deity is youthful, without a spouse by His side in the sanctum. It is Krsna, so to speak, before His marriage who can be loved. But this is all mere speculation. In this article, we are not concerned with the several stories or mythological or Puranic accounts as such. Suffice to say that the deity stands for the supreme purpose of saving the souls and granting them liberation, and incidentally removing all obstacles to divine evolution.

In its form of worship the temple is following the Vedic pattern as it has been coming to us through one Vaikhana Rsi, who was said to have been the Vedic worshipper of icons. Modern scholars think- some of them at least- that Vedic seers did not worship icons, maybe on grounds of studies of what religion ought to have been. There are, of course, points in the Vedic literature which show that there was symbolic or pratika worship of a temporary nature. The Vaikhanasas seem to have developed it as of more durable nature. This seems to have been also true of another sect called a-vedic, but which claims to interpret the Vedic spirit to which Śrī Krsna Himself belonged, namely, the Pancaratra Agama. Śrī Vaisnava theologians (Śrī Yamunacarya, Śrī Rāmānuja, and Vedanta Desika) had shown that the two forms of iconic worship were not contradictory or even complementary, but identical with such slight differences as arise out of certain modifications that creep in during the adaptations to different kinds of worshippers. This is a further synthesis here, and the daily worship of the deity also

includes the use of Tamil pasurams or hymns of the leading Alvars, and chanting of them along with the Vedas during the festivals and processions of the deity in the streets of Tirumalai.

Today the temple is being administered by a Board of Trustees appointed by the Government of Andhra Pradesh. A number of amenities are being provided for all the pilgrims by the Management, such as spacious rest houses, adequate water supply and other sanitary arrangements, and opportunities for worship, and even transport, which is of great use. The number of pilgrims visiting this shrine is becoming greater and greater. Of course, from the point of view of help and personal experience received by the pilgrims of the Godhead, there are innumerable incidents which speak of the unique spiritual nature of the shrine. The deity is a living deity as they call Him, *pratyaksadaiva*. And they consider Him to be the only deity of the Age of Kali- '*kalau Venkatanayakah*'. Last year, the temple was renovated, and the central tower of the main shrine, called *anandanilaya*, was goldgilt at great cost.

The future prospect of the religious life of the country is undoubtedly tied up with the institutions of religion and spiritual life. Thanks to the world-vision of the Alvars, who had inspired the Acaryas of Visistadvaita, the intellectual philosophy that pleaded for non-sensual intuition came to be associated with the sensual and supersensual and intuitive perception of God-and His work in the world of common men. But it was not mere formal religion, or even the secular religion of the modern man, which looks up to religion as an institution to serve man by socializing the deity also. It was mystical religion that urged the individual to grow into divine nature by purifying his appetites and sublimating his aspirations for mystic religion, then, cannot adequately be fulfilled by the secularization of the functions of God-Himself

This warning seems to be necessary in an age when the service of God seems to be substituted by the platitude of socialistic service of man. For man is a creature seeking freedom from the misery of birth and death and sinfulness, which is typified by the word 'ven' in Tamil, and this is sought to be transcended, 'kada' in

Tamil. It is not the attempt to get rid of small miseries (ksudra) that is the main function of religion, though some enthusiasts hold that religious fervour will increase if man were to feel that God is really looking after his physical and material wants as well (yoga ksema). That is to say, men find reasons for the diversion of temple funds for all sorts of modern conceptions. However, discernment will surely show that there must be limits for this reasoning, and spiritual people will be very happy if the main lines of such diversions are in accord with the development solely of spiritual life and culture in the people.

The hope is not without foundation, and is bound to be realized, provided the faith in the living deity of Tirupati grows more and more, for it is not mere idolatry at any rate, but a living testimony to the descent of Godhead Himself in the form of arca (luminous presence). Religion becomes real, and spirituality a mystic force, only when men dedicate themselves to realise the best and highest virtue in themselves to realise the best and highest virtue in themselves and all around. Moral rearmament is really a daily living in touch with God, and it is this that spirituality can offer, and it alone can offer. Śrīnivasa is not merely a symbol and a heritage for harmony and unity of all. He is also the goal, as the Alvar said where gods and men meet for mutual glory and liberation.

To conclude, the shrine of Śrīnivasa is an experiment in synthesis of all religions, to bring a harmony for the world. Where there is harmony, there is peace. The world of the common man and the philosopher's world are not opposites, nor can the realities of the ordinary man be illusions of the saint utterly. It may be that the idol can lead to the vision of hearty, and the vision of the Divine in the heart may lead to transcendent experience of the Godhead. However that may be, it is a fact that, thanks to the spiritual love of the saints, God had condescended to show Himself even in this form, so as to serve man to rise to higher levels of wisdom and transcendent liberation. It shows the immense power of God that He can not only be in heaven, but also be on earth without being bound by it. It is not a transitory miracle, but a perpetual miracle of

His illimitable power that is testified to by this unique icon, which today is attracting more worshippers than ever.