

## RAMANUJA AND THE REVIVAL OF BHAKTI

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### Abstract

*During the early part of the eleventh century, there appeared a bright star in the Indian philosophical scenario in the form of Bhagavad Rāmānuja. It was a time when Indian Philosophy was at cross roads, because of raging battles among rival schools of philosophy. Buddhism had just started receding from India after having fought brave battles for a long time – a few centuries – with schools like Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika, Mimamsa, etc. Though Buddhism disappeared from the scene, it yet had made deep impact on the orthodox schools. The influence was so much that though particular philosophical schools refuted any allegiance to Buddhism, rival schools did make bitter accusations against them as being Buddhistic, based on their formulating their theories on the lines of Buddhism. For instance the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika was accused as ardhha-vaināśika (half Buddhist) by Śrī Śankara and he himself in turn was accused as pracchanna-bauddha (a concealed Buddhist) by others. One common feature of all these schools was that they all were purely intellectual which was beyond the head of the common man. Though numerous scholars were appearing and composing works under every philosophical school, yet the common laity could not find anything for themselves in any of these schools.*

**Keywords:** *Bhagavad Rāmānuja, Buddhism, philosophical schools, common folk, godly love, bhakti, Alwars*

### The Work of Ālwars and Nāyanmars

But Godly people like Ālwars and Nāyanmars have already appeared and have started making tremendous inroads into the common folk, carrying large number of them along with them making them devotees of God (either of Viṣṇu or Śiva), through their enthralling divine songs which they composed through divine grace.

Basically all of them were great devotees (*bhakṭa*-s) of either Viṣṇu or Śiva, but being too devoted and too immersed in their *bhakti*, they seldom had time for anything else in this world. They all had melting compassion for all beings, especially for mankind, seeing their sufferings, yet their minds being too immersed in godly love and devotion they weren't of that type, to be with people, accepting them as disciples, correcting them, making them *bhakṭa*-s like themselves, etc.

On the contrary, they, out of their extreme love towards their Lord, were pining for His grace and His ultimate union. Till their attaining their fruit of *mukṭi* or union with God,

they were constantly thinking of their Lord, singing songs in His praise or moving from one temple to another, or sitting at one place, praying for His grace. Since they were divine outpourings, these songs were of very high quality, many times reflecting Vedantic truths proclaimed in the *Upaniṣad*-s, sometimes even offering clarifications for some Upaniṣadic concepts.

People were naturally carried by them, but as pointed out earlier, they (the Alvars) were at best, best models for true devotion and *bhakti*. And this was also going on almost during the same period when philosophical debates were raging among various scholars.

### **The Descent of Bhagavad Rāmānuja and his early Tutelage**

Thus the situation was such that it was waiting for an *ācārya*, who would not only be a hard-core *Vedāntin*, but also a true devotee, who would not only engage in tough philosophical debates but also will have a soft heart as a *bhakta*, one who would have infinite compassion for the masses and hence an *ācārya*, who would take the souls to the kingdom of God, like a spiritual engine.

At that time descended Bhagavad Rāmānuja on this earth, who from his childhood days was deeply devoted to the Lord and was doing personal physical *kainkarya*-s. He was a prodigy and learning *sāstra*-s was child's play for him. During his studies under the then famous scholar Yādavaprakāśa, his devotion amazed the teacher, brilliance annoyed him, and a combination of them along with other affable qualities frightened him. He could see in Rāmānuja a future *ācārya*, who would not only lead the world but prove a challenge to his own philosophy.

All this started when Rāmānuja, as a young boy was offering alternative explanations to Upaniṣadic passages, that not only challenged his (Yādava's) own interpretations based on earlier Advaitic interpretations but were more ingenious and seemed more in conformity with the spirit of the passages.

### **Encounters with his Guru**

The first encounter occurred when Yādavaprakāśa was interpreting the *Taittiriyaopaniṣad* passage सत्यं ज्ञानमनन्तं ब्रह्म (*satyam jñānam anantam brahma*). The passage obviously speaks about Brahman as being Truth, Consciousness and Infinite in nature. But Yādava was offering an explanation that was totally opposed to the spirit of the text, making Brahman devoid of those very qualities that the passage seeks to convey<sup>1</sup>.

Unable to bear the text being tortured this way and as a consequence, Brahman, the repository of all the finest qualities, made a non-entity, Rāmānuja expresses his

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<sup>1</sup>. According to Yādavaprakāśa, the word *satya* means that which is different from *asatya*, *jñāna* means that which is different from *ajñāna* and *ananta* means that which is free from limitations caused by space, time and objects. But, why this roundabout way of interpreting? Because, that way the text is given a meaning and still Brahman is maintained as being devoid of any attributes.

disagreement. Challenged by his *guru*, he offers his own explanation<sup>2</sup>, that brought out not only his brilliance as an interpretator, but also his true devotion that caused the stir in him on hearing the earlier interpretation, much to the discomfiture of the *guru*.

Another incident soon followed when Rāmānuja was anointing his *guru* for an oil bath as *guru-śūsrūā*, when the *guru* was explaining the text तस्य यथा कप्यासं पुण्डरीकम् एवम् अक्षिणी (*tasya yathā kapyāsam pundarīkam evam aksinī*). Here again the *guru* was offering an explanation that was most repugnant. He was giving the meaning of the word *kapyāsa* as denoting the back part of the monkey (*kapi* – monkey, *āsa* – back part), that is red in colour. He was continuing to say that similarly, the colour of the lotus is red and the divine eyes of the Lord had a red colour similar to that. Rāmānuja found this interpretation most repulsive and was at once much pained at heart, that rolled down as tears that fell on the thigh of his *guru* as hot balls. The devotee in Rāmānuja could not bear this *nīcopamā*, a bad comparison.

And when asked by his *guru* for any alternative interpretation, the genius in Rāmānuja came out. He said the word कपि (*kapi*), here contextually meant 'the sun'<sup>3</sup> and not monkey. The word आस (*āsa*) means 'blooming' (*āsa* – *vikāsa* - blooming). Thus the expression means that the Lord's eyes were red in colour like the colour of '*pundarīka*', a lotus that has been freshly bloomed by the sun<sup>4</sup>.

All these are pointed out just to show how Rāmānuja was a genius and more a *bhakta*, from his very early days. This is what was a precursor for him to convert so many people as *bhakta*-s during his later days and grow the plant of *bhakti* all over the country on a large scale.

### The Guru's Fear and his Plot

The above depicted incidents seems to have caused some panic in the mind of Yadavaprakāśa, the *guru*, who understood that Rāmānuja was going to be a very big challenge to his school of thought, during the later days. Hence he thought of eliminating Rāmānuja, and hence plotted, along with some of his confidants, to kill him. They therefore planned to go to Kāśī, and drown Rāmānuja in the river Ganga, so that

<sup>2</sup>. According to Rāmānuja the text is straight and needs no roundabout way of interpreting. It has the express purpose of portraying the Lord as possessed of these great qualities – *satyatva jñānatva* and *anantatva* which it does, by default. Hence it is totally unjustified to interpret it the other way defeating the very purpose of the text solely to depict Brahman as being devoid of those very qualities the text seeks to convey, feels Rāmānuja.

<sup>3</sup>. कं पिबति इति कपिः - सूर्यः। कं - जलम् (*kam pibati iti kapih - sūryah/ kam - jalam*) [that which drinks (absorbs) water (from the water bodies) – the sun]

<sup>4</sup>. कपिना आस्यते - विकस्यते - स्फुर्यते इति कप्यासम् = पुण्डरीकम् [*kapinā āsyate - vikasyate - sphūryate iti kapyāsam = pundarīkam*] i. e., that which is bloomed by the sun (*kapi*), given as an adjective of *pundarīkam*, meaning that the lotus that has bloomed just then and not a faded one or that which has gloomed at sunset.

they will not incur the sin of *brahmahatyā* – killing a *brahmin*. Accordingly they started their travel also.

### **Revelation of the Plot and Divine Grace**

But the plot got revealed to Rāmānuja mid-way when they were crossing the *Vindhya* hills. It was done by Govinda, Rāmānuja's cousin, who was also studying along with Rāmānuja, who came to know of the plot, but was very carefully kept away from Rāmānuja, by the disciples of Yādava, all these days. He was just looking for an opportunity to reveal the plot to Rāmānuja so that the latter would escape. On a particular day when Rāmānuja woke up, during mid-night, Govinda, who was waiting for the opportune moment, revealed the plot and hinting about the gravity of the situation asking him to leave, at once at the dead of night. Rāmānuja got out immediately from the group at mid-night and was groping in the dark in the wild forest, when he was rescued by Lord Varadarāja and His Consort, of Kāñci, who appeared as a hunter couple and was brought back to Kāñci overnight from the *Vindhya* hills.

This unexpected divine grace greatly enhanced Rāmānuja's devotion to the Lord manifold and he started doing the service of fetching water from a well far away from the temple of Lord Varadarāja, for a long time, till he left for Srirangam<sup>5</sup>.

### **Rāmānuja and the Divine Songs of the Alvars**

Later, after going to Srirangam, he was introduced to the divine songs of Ālwars through his *ācārya* Tiruvaraṅga Perumal Arayar, who was the disciple of Yāmunacārya, Rāmānuja's grand preceptor. These songs made a great impact on Rāmānuja, revealing newer dimensions of *bhakti* to him. Further he also found keys from them to some vexing problems in interpreting some of the Vedāntic passages and some of the *brahma-sūtra*-s that looked apparently contradictory.

Later in his life he made *Tiruvāimozhi*, the song divine of Nammālwar on par with the Upanisads, getting a boon from Lord Ranganātha to that effect, and also composed his commentary Śrībhāsyā on the *Brahmasūtra*-s, based on this.

He also felt that the divine songs of the Ālwars were so greatly charged with *bhakti* that they could evoke devotion even in the dry hearts of ordinary mortals like us. Hence he took steps to see to it that these songs were recited in the temples during all occasions and also at homes every day during daily worship of the Lord, called

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<sup>5</sup>. This he was doing because on that night when he was rescued from the *Vindhya* hills and brought back to Kāñci, the hunter's wife, i.e., the Consort of Lord Varada, was asking for some water, who was asked by the hunter to bear with till dawn. Rāmānuja was feeling bad that he could not help them who were helping him at that time, not knowing about their true identity and decided to fetch water very early in the morning as soon as there was some light at dawn. He slept and when he woke up, to his surprise, he could not find the couple and instead found himself near a well at Kāñci, far away from the *Vindhya* forests. From then on he was doing the service of fetching water from that particular well.

*Tiruvārādhana*. Thus he was looking for every opportunity to evoke *bhakti* in the minds of the people at large, so that every soul could taste the bliss of God-experience.

After his coming over to Śrīrangam and taking charge, his popularity was growing leaps and bounds and people from all walks of life including *sannyāsins* and kings were becoming his disciples. But, all the while he was concerned about the spiritual well being of the ordinary folks. His infinite compassion for them knew no bounds.

### **Getting the meaning of *Tirumantra***

He was to now get the meaning of a great *mantra* from one of his *ācārya*-s, which was sure to take one to the abode of God, if practiced diligently. But that was not to come so easily from his *ācārya*, the great Tirukkottiyūr Nambi. Though Nambi has been instructed by his *ācārya*, Yāmuna to deliver it to Rāmānuja, though Lord Ranganātha Himself has issued His commandment to that effect, on an occasion when Nambi had come to worship the Lord, and to top it all, Nambi himself was worshipping the idol of Sri Rāmānuja, which got manifested to Sri Nāthamuni (even before the birth of Sri Rāmānuja)<sup>6</sup>, from whom it had gone into the hands of Tirukkottiyūr Nambi, Nambi did not instruct the meaning at once but simply asked Rāmānuja to come to his place, Tirukkottiyūr, to get the same.

### **The Several Visits**

Waiting for just that moment, Rāmānuja took the earliest opportunity to go to Tirukkottiyūr, from Śrīrangam with great expectations. His heart was filled with melting compassion for the masses and knew that once he got it, he could make many souls attain *mokṣa* but alas, in spite of his *guru*'s command and Lord's command and in spite of himself having asked Rāmānuja to come over there, Tirukkottiyūr Nambi did not give it at that time. He just asked Rāmānuja to come again after sometime.

Rāmānuja returned and went for the second time, but again without success. And he was asked to come again, again, again and again. Not and just twice, thrice, four times but eighteen times. Anybody else would have given up easily. But not Rāmānuja. Each time when he was unsuccessful, it only increased his resolve to get it at any cost.

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<sup>6</sup>. The great *ācārya* Nāthamuni, through his unfathomable yogic practices got the 4000 divine songs and their meanings, which have disappeared from this world, from Nammalwar, in a state of yogic trance. Moved by the songs, he wanted to have a *vigraha* (image) of Nammalwar his *ācārya*, for his daily worship, for which he prayed to the Alwar. The boon was granted by the Alwar, and Nāthamuni was instructed to take the help of a sculptor there and make a *vigraha* boiling the waters of river Tambararani. They were doing this and first there emerged an image with a staff (*tridanda*) in the right hand, which did not resemble Nammalwar. When Nāthamuni requested Nammalwar in his yogic trance about this, he was told that it was the image a great *ācārya* who was to descend shortly in this world. That was the image of Rāmānuja, which Nāthamuni was worshipping, and then gave to his grandson Yamuna. He had given it to Tirukkottiyūr Nambi, who had been instructed by Yamuna about Rāmānuja. Hence Nambi knew full well about Rāmānuja and still was hesitating to give the meaning of the *mantra*, for a long time.

That was because if it was going to be so difficult for himself to get it, what to speak of the plight of ordinary mortals. So he decided to get it for the sake of humanity at large.

### **The Following at Tirukkottiyūr**

Even when Rāmānuja visited Tirukkottiyūr Nambi for the first time, he (Rāmānuja) was a popular *ācārya*, having a big following and lecturing and discoursing at so many places turning ordinary people devoted to worldly pleasures, to become devotees of God. He was a known *ācārya* there at Tirukkottiyūr, where he had a following, whereas Nambi was not known as an *ācārya* at all there, and it was a great surprise for the people there that the great Rāmānuja was seeking Nambi. And as he was visiting Tirukkottiyūr again and again his following there was becoming bigger and bigger.

Each time he visited that place, people of Tirukkottiyūr used to pray to him to share the great *rahasya* meaning, if at all he would get it from Nambi, for if it was going to be so difficult even for the great Rāmānuja, what to speak of ordinary people.

In his heart of hearts Rāmānuja's thought was that whoever had a burning desire to attain the Lord, was eligible to get the great secretive meaning that was sure to liberate one from *samsāra*, and no other criteria were required.

### **Mantra Granted**

At last the *guru's* heart melted and he condescended to reveal it to Rāmānuja during the latter's eighteenth visit. But this was not to come free. He (Rāmānuja) was to make a promise. Unless he tests any disciple at least for a year, he was not to reveal the secret to him. And Rāmānuja was asked to swear that he will abide by this vow, failing which, he would straight go to hell. Rāmānuja made the vow and got the secretive meaning of the *mantra*.

### **Rāmānuja's Transgression**

All people accompanying Rāmānuja each time, he visited Tirukkottiyūr, were awaiting this time too, with great expectations, not knowing about the vow Rāmānuja had to make inside.

After getting the esoteric meaning, Rāmānuja, paying due respects to his *guru*, emerged out with his face bright like never before. People immediately could infer that he had got it this time and were eager to get it at once. Rāmānuja, knowing their deep desire, signaled them to go along with him to the temple nearby, took them to the first floor of the *gopura*, which has a mini hall kind of place, where he revealed the meaning of the secretive *mantra*, giving a detailed discourse on it to all those who have assembled<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup>. Not that he climbed the top of the *gopura* and called all and sundry and blurted out the *mantra* foolishly to them, which would have been of no use at all to anybody, had it been done that way. The *mantra* and the meaning would be useful only for those who crave for it and practice it diligently with utmost faith. Rāmānuja found these qualities in those who followed him each time he visited there, because of which he instructed them and not all and sundry, as is now portrayed, without knowing facts.

### Nambi's Anger and Rāmānuja's Greatness

Meanwhile word reached Nambi about this disobedience of Rāmānuja. He (Nambi) rushed immediately to the temple with a sense of disbelief, and rage. Ascertaining that it had happened that way, Nambi asks Rāmānuja what would be the consequence of his disobeying the words of his ācārya, that too after making a specific vow, just then.

To this Rāmānuja calmly replies "*Naraka-prapti*" (hell). "Knowing this, why did you do it" asks Nambi. Again Rāmānuja replies, "I know I'll go to *naraka*, but so many will go to *mokṣa*. So I thought if only one, i.e., myself, going to *naraka* will enable so many souls going to *mokṣa*, I'd rather prefer *naraka*."

Nambi was dumb stuck at this reply. What a large heart! What a melting compassion! He replies: "All that I could say is I am ashamed that I do not have such a large heart". Then absolving Rāmānuja of this apparent sin he confers the title "*Emberumānār*" – one who is greater than "*Emberumān*" (God) Himself.

This was Rāmānuja, who lived in this world to cultivate *bhakti* in the hearts of people, that grew leaps and bounds. He was one who travelled the length and breadth of this country ceaselessly enabling countless souls to reach the kingdom of God through the vehicle of *bhakti*.

Because of his tireless efforts, *bhakti* spread all over the country and subsequently several spiritual leaders followed his footsteps and spread Godly love and devotion in the minds of people.

Thus Rāmānuja's life truly saw the revival of *bhakti* to a great extent, which definitely was not a task that could have been accomplished by lesser mortals.

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