



JUL/AUG 2007

VOL. 17, NO. 4

Gandhi and Bhagavan

*In the book, The Story of Militant but Non-violent Trade Unionism - A Biographical and Historical Study, by M. V. Kamath and V. B. Kher, an account of India's militant, non-violent trade union is given. It was organized in the 1920s following Gandhiji's ideals. **Shankarlal Banker** was an active participant in this movement and his exploits are chronicled therein. At that time he was also the publisher of the monthly Young India and was imprisoned with Gandhiji for printing the latter's controversial articles in 1922.*

In the following article, Shankarlal's dialogues with Gandhiji and Bhagavan and his impressions have been extracted from the above book. His notes and recollections present an insight into the mutual respect and understanding that the Mahatma and the Maharshi had for each other. The story begins with the events preceding Shankarlal's first meeting with Bhagavan.

As we have seen, Gandhi had asked Shankarlal to involve himself in the propagation of khadi, but at one stage he began to have serious doubts about what his role should be in the scheme of things. It was at that stage that he received guidance from an altogether unexpected source: Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi! And this came about in the unlikeliest way.

In 1934, Shankarlal was living at Mirjapur in Ahmedabad where he met a high-ranking officer of the German Air Force and a member, besides, of the German aristocracy. The officer was staying as a guest of Ambalal Sarabhai but took the occasion to call on Shankarlal and Anasuya. In the course of their conversation the officer happened to mention his interest in matters spiritual and philosophical and wondered whether either of them had heard of Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi. To their embarrassment neither Anasuya nor Shankarlal had heard of that saint of Tiruvannamalai. Somewhat surprised, the German

officer said: "Do go and see him and get his *darshan*. He is a rare personality!" The fact that a member of the German nobility, a Baron and an officer of the German Air Force should have made that suggestion intrigued Anasuya, and she asked Shankarlal the next time he was down south on his regular tours, to find out more about Ramana Maharshi.

In the summer of 1935, Shankarlal was at Ootacamund (Ooty), and after he spent a few days there he started his round of visits of khadi centres. It was his practice to look into the affairs of such centres in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh and then move on to Wardha to report to Gandhi. He reached Madras via Tirupur. At Tirupur he invariably dropped in on an old friend, Mohanlal Purohit, manager of the Jeevanlal Aluminium Company. Purohit not only took a great deal of interest in khadi, but was a great admirer of Gandhi and utilized Shankarlal's regular visits to discuss Gandhian philosophy with him.

Indeed, it was at Purohit's suggestion that Gandhi had cut an HMV disc on the nature of God and was so taken by it that he learnt Gandhi's brief talk by heart! It was at Purohit's residence that Shankarlal first heard the disc played.

As luck would have it, on the day he called on Purohit he chanced to meet the editor of the Madras-based *Sunday Times*, Mr. M. S. Kamath. Kamath was a great devotee of Ramana Maharshi and Shankarlal promptly started to ply him with questions. Kamath thereupon suggested that Shankarlal should accompany him to Tiruvannamalai, and Purohit equally promptly lent his car for the journey.

The journey from Tirupur to Tiruvannamalai took four hours and the party reached there around 7 p.m. At dinnertime Shankarlal saw the Maharshi for the first time and noticed that the latter had a "lustre in his eyes". Kamath wanted to introduce Shankarlal to the Maharshi during meditation time but Shankarlal excused Himself. Kamath did not press him.

The next morning Shankarlal joined other guests and visitors in the prayer hall where Maharshi was present. He had plenty of things on his mind. As an inspector of khadi centres he had all sorts of problems to handle, but here, in the prayer hall, all anxieties seemed to vanish. As he later recorded:

"Suddenly I began to experience a strange feeling of peace!... All the unrest appeared to vanish.... I remembered the line from the *sloka* Gandhiji used to recite to me in jail in 1922, that ended with '*tad brahma nishkalamahavi na cha bhoolasangah*' (I am that pure Brahman and not this body made up of *panchabhootas* or five elements). I had the feeling that I was that 'pure Brahman' and the words 'Sivoham, Sivoham' raced through my mind. I was astonished at this phenomenon."

Shankarlal wondered whence came those thoughts, considering that he was not a very spiritually inclined person. He attributed it to the environment he found himself in. To his surprise Shankarlal experienced a feeling of "extraordinary self-confidence" and felt that the experience was real. As he took leave of Maharshi he felt a great deal of peace and encouragement. When later that month he called on Gandhi, he narrated his experience to the Mahatma who not only expressed his joy but also suggested to Shankarlal that on the next occasion he should stay longer at Ramanashram.

In the summer of 1936, Shankarlal once again found himself at Tiruvannamalai and in the presence of Maharshi. This time he made bold to ask the Maharshi: "What books should I read for spiritual progress?" The reply startled Shankarlal.

"Books? Why books?" Maharshi queried and repeated the words: "Why books?" Then Maharshi added: "Make your heart pure and you are bound to see the light!"

That was to make a lasting impression on Shankarlal's mind and he kept thinking over it during his entire day's stay at the Ashram.

On the train that was to take him to Madras, Shankarlal later recorded that around 4 a.m. he suddenly woke up and saw the picture of Bhagavan floating before his eyes! As he wrote: "I opened my eyes fully, rubbed them, and wonder of wonders, I felt as if he was standing before me.... I had a continuous feeling of exultation and joy as if there was no need to think or have any anxiety about anything in the world!"

Shankarlal again reported this experience to Gandhi who recommended that Shankarlal visit Tiruvannamalai more often. "After listening to you," Gandhi told Shankarlal, "I have suggested to Rajendra Babu and Jamnalalji also to go there!" [They visited Sri Ramanasramam in August 1938]

Shankarlal was back in Tiruvannamalai in the summer of 1937. This time he took with him pictures of famine-stricken people in Tirupur. He was seated in the prayer hall along with others as Bhagavan was talking of Self-realization and the bliss of the soul. This distressed Shankarlal who had seen starving people in Tirupur. How, he wondered aloud to his friend Dr. Syed, of the Oriental Research Institute, Allahabad, who was sitting next to him, how could one reconcile misery with the bliss of the soul? And he showed him the pictures of starvation he had brought with him.

Dr Syed did the unexpected thing. He went over to Bhagavan and placing the pictures in his lap said: "This gentleman here says when there is so much misery in the world, how can we think of the bliss of the soul?"

Instead of being fazed by the question Ramana Maharshi replied gently that while all effort should be made to help those in distress, one should not take individual credit for the act. The Lord alone was the saviour of the people. Maharshi said that he often saw people who had not eaten for two or three days and yet

they seemed to glow with some inner joy. “Where did that joy come from? Only the Almighty could give it to them!”

When Shankarlal retrieved the snapshots and looked at them again, he was to observe what he had not noticed before! Those poor starving people engaged in breaking stones seemed to have smiles on their faces! For Shankarlal it was a revelation.

Shankarlal met Maharshi the next day quite unexpectedly. This time he wondered how marvellous it would be if Maharshi and Gandhi met. To which Maharshi replied with a soft smile: “Distance does not exist!”

When Shankarlal next visited Wardha, he repeated this conversation to Gandhi who said: “Haven’t you understood? Distance does not exist the way we think. I have written on the subject only three days ago!”

Gandhi called for that article and read out to Shankarlal what he had written:

“And since thought is the root of speech and action, the quality of the latter corresponds to that of the former. Hence, perfectly controlled thought is itself the power of the highest

potency and can become self-acting. That seems to me to be the meaning of the silent prayer of the heart. If a man is after the image of God, he has but to will a thing in the limited sphere allotted to him and it becomes. Such power is impossible in one who dissipates his energy in any way whatsoever even as steam kept in a leaky pipe yields no power....

“In any one who has to organise vast masses of mankind for non-violent action, the full control described by me has to be attempted and virtually achieved. This control is unattainable save by the grace of God....”

In the summer of 1939 Shankarlal’s health was affected and he tendered his resignation as Secretary of the All India Spinners’ Association. He now turned his mind to spiritual matters. He was advised by Swami

Atmanandaji and Swami Ramanandaji to devote himself to a life of *manan* and *chintan* - meditation and contemplation. He took to reading works like Shankara’s *Viveka Chudamani*. The swamis advised Shankarlal to withdraw his mind from all mundane activities and concentrate on spiritual study. So, after resigning from the AISA, Shankarlal was free from day-to-day work though he continued to take interest in the labour movement. But should he indulge even in that activity? This bothered him.

Next time he was in Tiruvannamalai he had the privilege, in the very early hours of the morning, to watch Ramana Maharshi engaged in cleaning and chopping vegetables in the kitchen. He noticed that Maharshi was going about his work with remarkable expertise. He even heard Maharshi telling a devotee how to slice a pumpkin

skillfully! It was, thought Shankarlal, a lesson for him, too. Do a job, do it well, and do it with complete detachment!

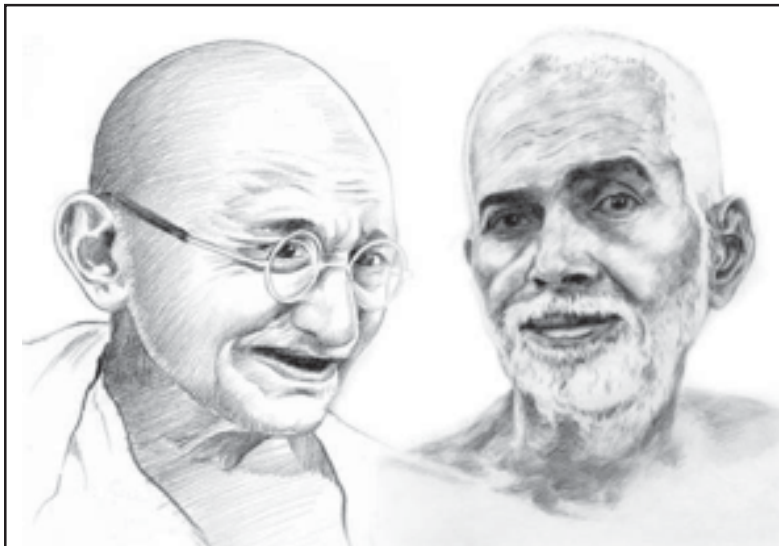
He could not resist waking up the next day at 4 a.m. to go to the kitchen. This time he heard Bhagavan asking someone in Tamil: “Is Banker there?” When he was told that Banker was present and sitting

outside, Ramana Maharshi came out with a ladle full of cooked lentils and looking quizzically at Shankarlal, invited him to taste it. “It is a bit hot. But I cooked it myself,” said Maharshi by way of explanation.

Shankarlal tasted it and exclaimed: “Why, it is very tasty!” At that Maharshi broke into laughter and went back to the kitchen.

At that point in time, Shankarlal was later to write, he had got the answer to the problem that was bothering him, about engaging himself in some activity even while engaged in spiritual pursuits. Wasn’t Maharshi telling him by example, that to be working actively was as important as searching for spiritual bliss?

Cleared were his doubts. He was never again to be bothered by them.



SRI N. SUBRAMANIAN (APPACHI MAMA)

On Monday, July 2, Appachi Mama, the head priest of Sri Ramanasramam, passed away at a Vellore hospital due to a sudden stroke. He was 80 years old and had served in Sri Ramanasramam since his youth. His departure has saddened all those who have benefited by his devotion and service all these decades.

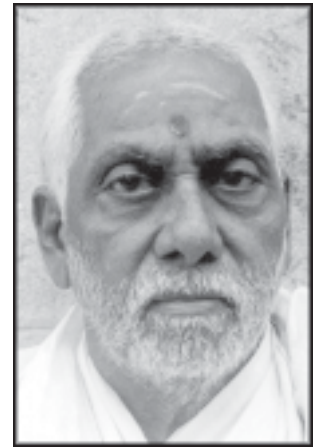
In his usual modest manner, Appachi Mama briefly described his life in a recent video interview. The following text has been extracted from this interview.

I joined the Ashram Vedapatasala on January 8, 1942 and finished my course in 1950. During those years the Patasala boys had to perform most of the Ashram chores. This included assisting the priest in the Mother's temple, cleaning the kitchen after every meal, grinding the coffee beans every evening, shifting huge vessels from the fire, spreading rice for mixing at the poor feeding, serving the devotees and the servants. The rest of the time we had our Veda lessons.

Once, while serving Bhagavan and others, Bhagavan asked for some more buttermilk. I went to the kitchen and took the bucket containing the buttermilk and served Bhagavan, not knowing that this was the sour buttermilk which was put aside for the servants. Bhagavan drank the buttermilk and never said anything. But the kitchen staff took me to task. I was shocked to know that inadvertently I served sour buttermilk to Bhagavan. I was too shy and frightened to face him. Even during the morning and evening Veda Parayana in the hall I sat at a distance from him and at meals avoided serving him. However, after two days had passed and finding that he did not mention anything about

the incident I took courage and started serving him again.

In 1950 after Bhagavan's Maha Nirvana, I joined a secondary school and after finishing the eighth standard I took a teachers training course. I then served as a teacher for three years in Tirukoilur and Tanjore. At the time my pay was 45 rupees per month. Krishnamurthy (Kittu), who



was working as a priest in the Ashram, wrote to me and asked me to return to serve in the Ashram with a salary of only 15 rupees per month. Though the pay was low, I thought it was a call from Bhagavan himself to serve him, and heeding this call resigned my job, came and settled at the Ashram.

In those days the Ashram income was insufficient and irregular. Consequently, we used to be paid only when there were enough funds. These days, of course, even before the end of the month we get our pay. Things have changed considerably.

As the electrician and plumber would not come to the Ashram when called, I also took up that work. I did most of the electrification and plumbing to the newly built cottages. I also had to prepare *naivedya*, do the grinding work for the temple, go to the town for collecting papers, get signatures from the trustees maintaining accounts, etc. All these responsibilities devolved on me. Later on the situation improved and the Ashram had its own plumber and electrician, and the other jobs were taken over by the office staff.

In this manner, I have been at the service of Bhagavan for more than 50 years.

“We Must Find A Guru”

The questioner asked again, “But first of all we must find a Guru who can give us sufficient practice and thereby enable us to get rid of these *gunas*, mustn't we?”

“If we have the earnestness to get rid of these qualities can we not find a Guru? We must first have the desire to get rid of them. When once we have this the Guru will himself come, searching for us, or he will somehow manage to draw us to himself. The Guru will always be on the alert and keep an eye on us; *Ishwara* himself will show us the Guru. Who else will look after the welfare of the children except the father himself? He is always with us, surrounding us. He protects us, as a bird protects its eggs by hatching them under the shelter of its wings. But we must have wholehearted faith in Him,” said Bhagavan.

—*Letters From Sri Ramanasramam, No. 91*

A NEW WEBSITE FOR SRI RAMANASRAMAM, INDIA

www.sriramanamaharshi.org

Sri Ramanasramam, India has launched a new website: “www.sriramanamaharshi.org”

Though it is still in the developmental stage, it is loaded with relevant information for seekers and devotees. First of all, it contains a detailed description of the Ashram, its history and activities, illustrated with photos (on the Home Page click “Visiting Us” and “Sri Ramanasramam”).

You will find an interesting, illustrated life sketch of Sri Ramana by clicking on “Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi”. You will also find a link to his “Teachings” and a general description of the holy Arunachala Mountain. The latter includes a topographical map of the hill with the Giripradakshina shrines listed.

This new website also includes a “Contact Us” link, a “Get Involved” link, a “Centres” link, and under “eServices”, a complete list of English publications with 39 of the books available for free downloading. Along with this, there will be regular postings of invitations for events taking place in Sri Ramanasramam and a photo gallery providing pictures of the events.

The **[sriramanamaharshi.org](http://www.sriramanamaharshi.org)** website will continue to be updated and improved as time passes.

ARUNACHALA ASHRAMA WEBSITE

As a service to visually impaired readers, and those who would rather listen than read, some articles from issues in our bimonthly *MAHARSHI* newsletter can now be heard on our website by clicking the “MP3” icon at the beginning of the articles.

This new service is available at the HTML (web-page) newsletter site:

<http://www.arunachala.org/newsletters/web-pages>

The following articles are now available for listening:

- 1997 jan-feb, 1 article
- 1998 jan-feb, 1 article
- 2006 nov-dec, 1 article
- 2007 mar-apr, 1 article
- 2007 may-jun, 4 articles

UPCOMING EVENTS AT ARUNACHALA ASHRAMA NEW YORK

Guru Purnima

You are cordially invited to attend the
Mahanyasa Purvaka
Rudrabhishekam in honor of Guru Purnima
led by Sri Vishnubhatla Murthy
and held on:

**Sunday 29 July
from 7:30 AM to 2:30 PM**

7:30 - 9:30 AM: Taittiriya and Mahanarayana
Upanishad Parayanam

10:00 - 11:00 AM: Mahanyasa Parayanam

11:00 AM - 2:30 PM: Rudrabhishekam with
Ekadasha Rudra Parayanam

For more information, please call the Ashrama at (718) 560-3196. Contact Savitri Ramaswami at (718) 896-7370 if you would like to contribute to the meal preparations.

Advent at Arunachala

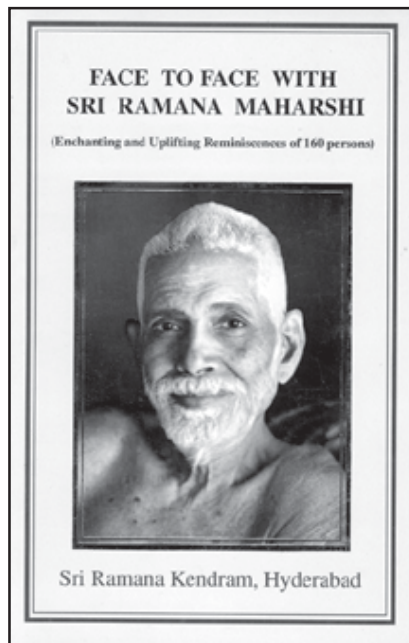
You, your family and friends are cordially
invited to join us in celebrating the 111th
anniversary of Sri Ramana Maharshi's arrival
at Arunachala

**Saturday 8 September
11:00 a.m.**

The program will include recitations, bhajans,
talks and puja, followed by prasad (lunch).

ARUNACHALA ASHRAMA
86-06 EDGERTON BOULEVARD
JAMAICA ESTATES, QUEENS, NEW YORK 11432

For more information call: (718) 560-3196



Face to Face with Sri Ramana Maharshi contains the largest collection of Reminiscences — 160, of which 28 are foreigners — gathered together under one volume.

Published by the Sri Ramana Kendram in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, this new publication contains 400 pages of instructive and inspiring accounts from seekers from all walks of life, the world over.

A useful Glossary of non-English words, Index and Anexures have also been added.

Price: \$12.00

Postage: USA \$3.50 / Canada \$6.50

No. 118, Face to Face with Sri Ramana Maharshi: Prof. Pryns Hopkins (1885-1970) was an American social psychologist who authored many books. He visited Sri Ramana after reading about him in Paul Brunton's *A Search in Secret India*.

I was requested to take my seat in the front row and an interpreter sat next to me. The Maharshi was saying that we only know the object through sensation derived from it remotely. Physicists have shown that in place of what we thought to be a solid object there are only dancing electrons and protons.

I asked, "If the outer phenomena which I perceive have no reality apart from my ego, how is it that someone else also perceived them? For example, not only do I lift my foot higher to avoid tripping over that stool yonder, but you also raise your foot higher to avoid tripping over it. Is it a mere coincidence that each of us independently has come to the conclusion that a stool is there?"

The Maharshi replied, "The stool and our two egos were created by one another mutually. While one is asleep, one may dream of a stool and of persons who avoided tripping over it just as persons in waking life did, yet did that prove that the dream stool is any more real?" And so we had it back and forth for an hour, the gathering feeling amused.

The Maharshi went on to say that the essential thing is to divorce our sense of self from what our ego and body are feeling or doing. We should think, 'Feelings are going on, this body is acting in such and such a manner,' but never, 'I feel, I act.'

I objected, "You have told us that all the animal propensities are attributes of the ego. If when a man attains *jivanmukti* he ceases to feel responsibility for the behavior of his ego and body, won't they run amok completely?"

The Maharshi replied, "When you have attained *jivanmukti* you will know the answer to this question. Your task now is not to worry about it, but to know the Self."

I said, "Here before us is the Maharshi who has attained *jivanmukti*, and so has withdrawn from all responsibility for the conduct of his ego and the body. But though he declares them to be the seat of all evil propensities, his ego and body continue to behave quite decorously instead of running wild."

He retorted, "Let the Maharshi deal with that problem if it arises and let Mr. Hopkins deal with who is Mr. Hopkins."

DEVOTEE'S HOMAGE

2nd March, 1949

5-15 p.m. The very aged Ashram stapati, the master sculptor [father of Vaidyanathan stapati], who has been absent since a long time, probably due to old age ailments, came in tottering, carrying fruit offerings. As the Maharshi saw him approach, his eyes opened widely and shone with extreme delight, as if he had seen a long-missed friend, which the old stapati observed. Stapati was so touched by these signs of Bhagavan's affection that his whole body shook. He wanted to give expression to his love and adoration for Sri Bhagavan, but he did not know how to do it. Finally he yielded to his impulse and, contravening the Ashram rule which forbade the touch of the Master's body, fell flat on Maharshi's feet and legs and bathed them with tears. Two attendants gently helped him to rise and gave him a seat very near Bhagavan's couch. After he calmed down Sri Maharshi enquired after his health, the cause of his absence and all his other news. It was a sight to see Sri Bhagavan so deeply moved in meeting again an old Ashram worker, who had taken a leading part in the architectural designs of his Mother's temple according to the rules prescribed by the Hindu Shastras.

— *Guru Ramana, by S. S. Cohen*

SADHANA IS ONLY TO GET RID OF THIS ILLUSION

Though Bhagavan was teaching us so clearly that *sakshatkaram* means only the good state and the good ideas beyond the owner's thoughts, I felt it a great pity that we were not able to understand it. While I was thus thinking, someone asked, "That state of exalted thought and existence which is above the owner's mental plane is natural and possible only for people like Bhagavan, but is it possible for ordinary people like us without *sadhana*?"

Bhagavan said, "Certainly it is! *Sadhana* is necessary but for what purpose? His Self is there at all times and at all places. So there is no need to try and get it from somewhere else. *Sadhana* is only to get rid of the bodily and other illusions which are in the way of the self standing up as Self. This delusion arises only by thinking that this bodily world is real, instead of looking at the Self, which is real. *Sadhana* is only to get rid of this illusion. Otherwise, why should there be *sadhana* for the Self to attain its own Self? He who has realised his own Self does not recognize anything else."

"All *sadhanas* are for getting rid of the delusion that you are the body."

— *Letters From Sri Ramanasramam, No. 68 & 63*

Ramana Satsangs

Satsangs with recitations, songs, readings and meditation have been going on in a few places near or in large cities. Some of them are weekly. If you would like to attend any of these, please contact the individuals below for more information.

Atlanta Area — Mangalam Kalyanam (678-423-7324 / smoothcutter@hotmail.com)

Ann Arbor, MI — Mohan & Gayatri (734-623-7199 / cedararbor@yahoo.com)

Connecticut Area — Prashanth & Shobana (860-691-1862 / vprashanth@msn.com)

Dublin, Ohio — Abilash & Madhavi (614-789-9058 / mungamuru@hotmail.com)

Miami, Ft. Lauderdale Area — David & Janet Robinson (954-755-4758 / arunahill@earthlink.net)

San Francisco Area — Karthik & Sunita (510-656-2752 / sunita_parasuraman@yahoo.com)

Los Angeles, CA — Natarajan and Indira Venkatesan (310-473-9441 / nvenky30@yahoo.com)

Washington, D.C. Area — Prakash & Mamtha Adiseshan (703-257-5589 / adiseshan@worldnet.att.net)

Ottawa, Canada — Anantha Padmanabhan (613-733-8250 / padmanabhan_ananth@hotmail.com)

Toronto, Canada — Krishnan & Padma Sastri (905-849-6005 / psastri@hotmail.com)

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