

HIS HOLINESS - - -
SRI SANKARACHARYA SWAMI
OF KAMAKOTI PEETAM -



BY

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PREFACE

INDIA holds an ancient heritage of spiritual thought from its past that stands unparalleled for profundity and unmatched for width. Indians, therefore, should claim this birthright, finding what is worthy and applicable to present needs. They should neither be awed by Western scepticism, nor corrupted by modern materialism, nor stupefied by religious wrangling, but go to their best leaders for guidance. And among the latter, His Holiness Shri Shankara Acharya of Kamakotipeetam, is a note-worthy figure, serving as an exemplar, guiding as a teacher and shining as an incarnation of a lofty soul.

Only when the world will consent to become inspired by spiritual principles can it hope to find the real solution of the multitude of economic, political and social problems that face it. All solutions that lack these principles are but paint and varnish that hide but do not change. Only by raising the public conscience, through the efforts of inspired men and true religious teachers, will real change come about. The almost complete exclusion of higher principles and ethical considerations from the ruling

policies of most modern States is something to deplore, something that is bringing its own Nemesis upon the modern world.

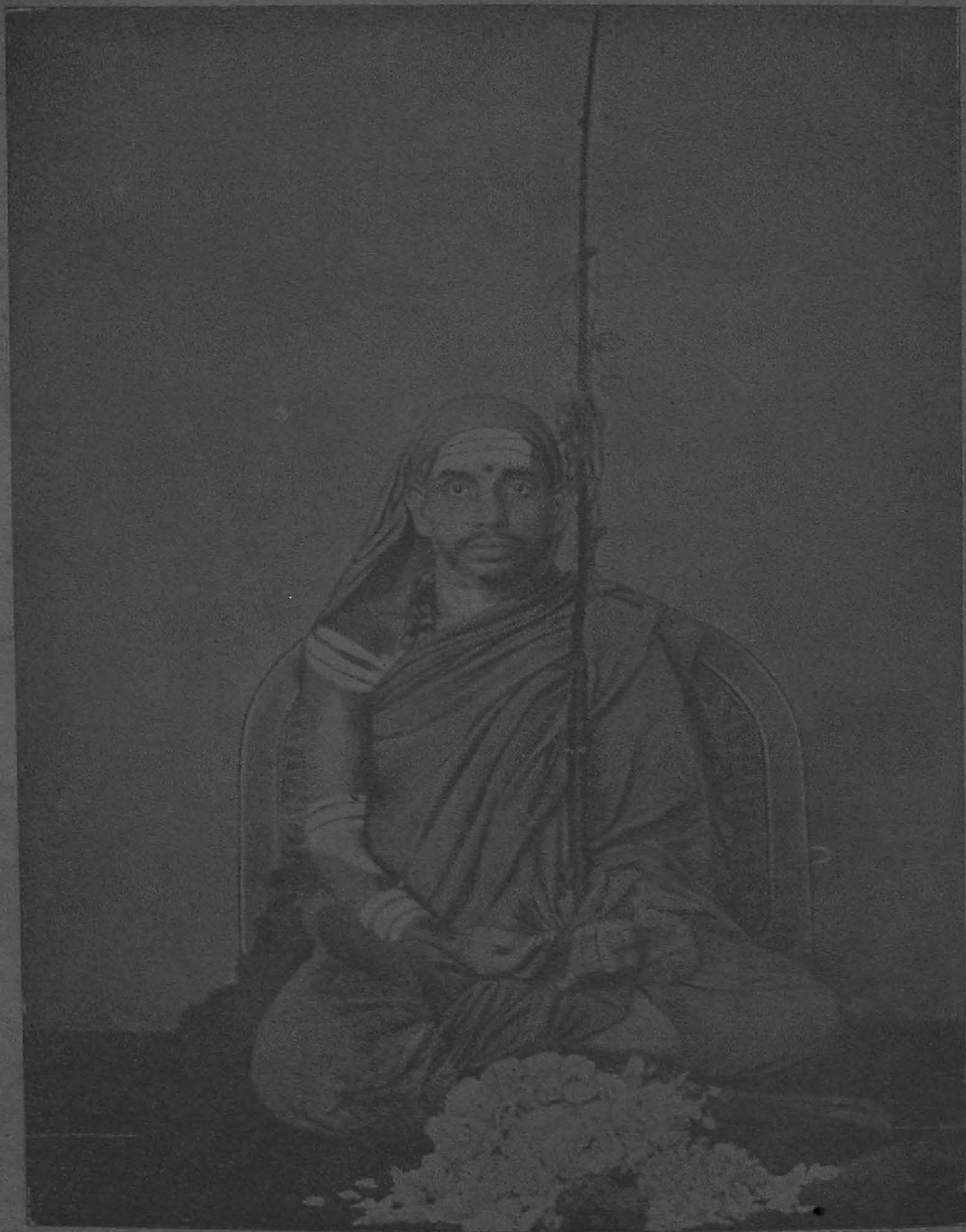
India, from time immemorial, has supplied history with the figures of outstanding spiritual personages, who embodied the highest teachings in themselves. That supply may be diminished today but it has not quite failed. In His Holiness Shri Shankara Acharya the line continues, while in his constant re-assertion of those fundamental truths which are the jewels set upon the casket of Hinduism, the truth is re-proclaimed to the world. His Holiness's own personality and doctrine testify anew to the inalienable human necessity of worship, of reverence, and of trust in that Higher Power Whom men name variously.

I am happy to give permission for the reprint of the following chapter from my book, *A Search in Secret India*.

Feb. 1936,
Tiruvannamalai,
South India.

P. B.

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HIS HOLINESS, THE JAGADGURU, SRI CHANDRASEKHARENDRASARASWATI SWAMIGAL OF THE KANCHI KAMAKOTI PEETAM, KUMBAKONAM

AN EXTRACT FROM
A SEARCH IN SECRET INDIA

I

THE SEARCH FOR A SPIRITUAL GURU

ABOUT the time of tiffin, that is, tea and biscuits, the servant announces a visitor. The latter proves to be a fellow member of the ink-stained fraternity, to wit, the writer Venkataramani.

Several letters of introduction lie where I have thrown them, at the bottom of my trunk. I have no desire to use them. This is in response to a curious whim that it might be better to tempt whatever gods there be to do their best or worst. However, I used one in Bombay, preparatory to

beginning my quest, and I used another in Madras because I have been charged to deliver a personal message with it. And thus, this second note has brought Venkataramani to my door.

He is a member of the Senate of Madras University, but he is better known as the author of talented essays and novels of village life. He is the first Hindu writer in Madras Presidency, who uses the medium of English, to be publicly presented with an inscribed ivory shield because of his services to literature. He writes in a delicate style of such merit as to win high commendation from Rabindranath Tagore in India and from the late Lord Haldane in England. His prose is piled with beautiful metaphors, but his stories tell of the melancholy life of neglected villages.

As he enters the room I look at his tall, lean person, his small head with its tiny tuft of hair, his small chin and bespectacled eyes. They are the eyes of a thinker, an

idealist and a poet combined. Yet the sorrows of suffering peasants are reflected in their sad irises.

We soon find ourselves on several paths of common interest. After we have compared notes about most things, after we have pulled politics to pieces and swung the censers of adoration before our favourite authors, I am suddenly impressed to reveal to him the real reason of my Indian visit. I tell him with perfect frankness what my object is; I ask him about the whereabouts of any real Yogis who possess demonstrable attainments; and I warn him that I am not especially interested in meeting dirt-be-smearred ascetics or juggling faqueers.

He bows his head and then shakes it negatively.

“India is no longer the land of such men. With the increasing materialism of our country, its wide degeneration on one hand, and the impact of unspiritual Western culture on the other, the men you are seeking,

the great masters, have all but disappeared. Yet I firmly believe that some exist in retirement, in lonely forests perhaps, but unless you devote a whole life time to the search, you will find them with the greatest difficulty. When my fellow Indians undertake such a quest as yours, they have to roam far and wide nowadays. Then how much harder will it be for a European?"

"Then you hold out little hope?" I ask.

"Well, one cannot say. You may be fortunate."

Something moves me to put a sudden question:

"Have you heard of a Master who lives in the hills of North Arcot?"

He shakes his head.

Our talk wanders back to literary topics.

I offer him a cigarette, but he excuses himself from smoking. I light one for myself and while I inhale the fragrant smoke of the Turkish weed, Venkataramani pours out his heart in passionate praise of the

fast disappearing ideals of old Hindu culture. He makes reference to such ideas as simplicity of living, service of the community, leisurely existence and spiritual aims. He wants to lop off parasitic stupidities which grow on the body of Indian society. The biggest thing in his mind, however, is his vision of saving the half-million villages of India from becoming mere recruiting centres for the slums of large industrialized towns. Though this menace is more remote than real, his prophetic insight and memory of Western industrial history sees this as a certain result of present day trends. Venkataramani tells me that he was born in a family with property near one of the oldest villages of South India, and he greatly laments the cultural decay and material poverty into which village life had fallen. He loves to hatch out schemes for the betterment of the simple village folk, and he refuses to be happy whilst they are unhappy.

I listen quietly in the attempt to understand his view point. Finally, he rises to go and I watch his tall thin form disappear down the road.

Early next morning I am surprised to receive an unexpected visit from him. His carriage rushes hastily to the gate, for he fears that I might be out.

“I received a message late last night that my greatest patron is staying for one day at Chingleput,” he bursts out.

After he has recovered his breath, he continues:

“His Holiness Shri Shankara Acharya of Kumbakonam is the Spiritual Head of South India. Millions of people revere him as one of God’s teachers. It happens that he has taken a great interest in me and has encouraged my literary career, and of course he is the one to whom I look for spiritual advice. I may now tell you what I refrained from mentioning yesterday. We regard him as a master of the highest

spiritual attainment. But he is not a Yogi. He is the Primate of the Southern Hindu world, a true saint and great religious philosopher. Because he is fully aware of most of the spiritual currents of our time, and because of his own attainment, he has probably an exceptional knowledge of the real Yogis. He travels a good deal from village to village and from city to city, so that he is particularly well informed on such matters. Wherever he goes, the holy men come to him to pay their respects. He could probably give you some useful advice. Would you like to visit him?"

"That is extremely kind of you. I shall gladly go. How far is Chingleput?"

"Only thirty-five miles from here. But stay—?"

"Yes?"

"I begin to doubt whether His Holiness would grant you an audience. Of course I shall do my utmost to persuade him. But—"

“I am a European!” I finish the sentence for him. “I understand.”

“You will take the risk of a rebuff?” he asks, a little anxiously.

“Certainly. Let us go.”

After a light meal we set out for Chingleput. I ply my literary companion with questions about the man I hope to see this day. I learn that Shri Shankara lives a life of almost ascetic plainness as regards food and clothing, but the dignity of his high office requires him to move in regal panoply when travelling. He is followed then by a retinue of mounted elephants and camels, pundits and their pupils, heralds and camp followers generally. Wherever he goes he becomes the magnet for crowds of visitors from the surrounding localities. They come for spiritual, mental, physical and financial assistance. Thousands of rupees are daily laid at his feet by the rich, but because he has taken the vow of poverty, this income is applied to worthy pur-

poses. He relieves the poor, assists education, repairs decaying temples and improves the condition of those artificial rain-fed pools which are so useful in the riverless tracts of South India. His mission, however, is primarily spiritual. At every stopping-place he endeavours to inspire the people to a deeper understanding of their heritage of Hinduism, as well as to elevate their hearts and minds. He usually gives a discourse at the local temple and then privately answers the multitude of querents who flock to him.

I learn that Shri Shankara is the sixty-sixth bearer of the title in direct line of succession from the original Shankara. To get his office and power into the right perspective within my mind, I am forced to ask Venkataramani several questions about the founder of the line. It appears that the first Shankara flourished over two thousand years ago, and that he was one of the greatest of the historical Brahmin sages.

He might be described as a rational mystic, and as a philosopher of the first rank. He found the Hinduism of his time in a disordered and decrepit state, with its spiritual vitality fast fading. It seems that he was born for a mission. From the age of eighteen he wandered throughout India on foot, arguing with the intelligentsia and the priests of every district through which he passed, teaching the doctrines of his own creation, and acquiring a considerable following. His intellect was so acute that, usually, he was more than a match for those he met. He was fortunate enough to be accepted and honoured as a prophet during his lifetime, and not after the life had flickered out of his throat.

He was a man with many purposes. Although he championed the chief religion of his country, he strongly condemned the pernicious practices which had grown up under its cloak. He tried to bring people into the way of virtue and exposed the

futility of mere reliance on ornate rituals, unaccompanied by personal effort. He broke the rules of caste by performing the obsequies at the death of his own mother, for which the priests excommunicated him. This fearless young man was a worthy successor to Buddha, the first famous caste breaker. In opposition to the priests he taught that every human being, irrespective of caste or colour, could attain to the grace of God and to knowledge of the highest Truth. He founded no special creed but held that every religion was a path to God, if sincerely held and followed into its mystic inwardness. He elaborated a complete and subtle system of philosophy in order to prove his points. He has left a large literary legacy which is honoured in every city of sacred learning throughout the country. The pundits greatly treasure his philosophical and religious bequest, although they naturally quibble and quarrel over its meaning.

Adi Shankara travelled throughout India wearing an ochre robe and carrying a pilgrim's staff. As a clever piece of strategy, he established four great institutions at the four points of the compass. There was one at Badrinath in the North, at Puri in the East, and so on. The central headquarters, together with a temple and monastery, were established in the South where he began his work. To this day the South has remained the holy of the holies of Hinduism. From these institutions there would emerge, when the rainy seasons over, trained bands of monks who travelled the country to carry Shankara's message. This remarkable man died at the early age of thirty-two, though one legend has it that he simply disappeared.

The value of this information becomes apparent when I learn that his successor, whom I am to see this day, carries on the same work and the same teaching. In this connection, there exists a strange tradition.

The first Shankara promised his disciples that he would still abide with them in spirit, and that he would accomplish this by the mysterious process of "overshadowing" his successors. A somewhat similar theory is attached to the office of the Grand Lama of Tibet. The predecessor in office, during his last dying moments, names the one worthy to follow him. The selected person is usually a lad of tender years, who is then taken in hand by the best teachers available and given a thorough training to fit him for his exalted post. His training is not only religious and intellectual, but also along the lines of higher yoga and meditation practices. This training is then followed by a life of great activity in the service of his people. It is a singular fact that through all the many centuries this line has been established, not a single holder of the title has ever been known to have other than the highest and the most selfless character.

Venkataramani embellishes his narrative

with stories of the remarkable gifts which Shri Shankara the sixty-sixth possesses. There is an account of the miraculous healing of his own cousin. The latter has been crippled by rheumatism and confined to his bed for many years. Shri Shankara visits him, touches his body, and within three hours the invalid is so far better that he gets out of bed; soon, he is completely cured.

There is the further assertion that His Holiness is credited with the power of reading the thoughts of other persons; at any rate, Venkataramani fully believes this to be true.

II

WITH THE SPIRITUAL HEAD OF SOUTH INDIA

WE enter Chingleput through a palm-fringed highway and find it a tangle of white-washed houses, huddled red roofs and

narrow lanes. We get down and walk into the centre of the city where large crowds are gathered together. I am taken into a house where a group of secretaries are busily engaged handling the huge correspondence which follows His Holiness from his headquarters at Kumbakonam. I wait in a chairless anti-room while Venkataramani sends one of the secretaries with a message to Shri Shankara. More than half an hour passes before the man returns with the reply that the audience I seek cannot be granted. His Holiness does not see his way to receiving a European; moreover, there are two hundred people waiting for interviews already. Many persons have been staying in the town overnight in order to secure their interviews. The secretary is profuse in his apologies.

I philosophically accept the situation, but Venkataramani says that he will try to get into the presence of His Holiness as a privileged disciple, and then plead my

cause. Several members of the crowd murmur unpleasantly when they become aware of his intention to pass into the coveted house out of his turn. After much talk and babbling explanations, he wins through. He returns eventually, smiling and victorious.

“His Holiness will make a special exception in your case. He will see you in about one hour’s time.”

I fill the time with some idle wandering in the picturesque lanes which run down to the chief temple. I meet some servants who are leading a train of grey elephants and big buff-brown camels to a drinking-place. Some one points out to me the magnificent animal which carries the Spiritual Head of South India on his travels. He rides in regal fashion, borne aloft in an opulent howdah on the back of a tall elephant. It is finely covered with ornate, trappings, rich cloths and gold embroideries. I watch the dignified old creature step forward

along the street. Its trunk coils up and comes down again as it passes.

Remembering the time-worn custom which requires one to bring a little offering of fruits, flowers or sweetmeats when visiting a spiritual personage, I procure a gift to place before my august host. Oranges and flowers are the only things in sight and I collect as much as I can conveniently carry.

In the crowd which presses outside His Holiness's temporary residence, I forget another important custom. "Remove your shoes," Venkataramani reminds me promptly. I take them off and leave them out in the street, hoping that they will still be there when I return!

We pass through a tiny door-way and enter a bare ante-room. At the far end there is a dimly lit enclosure, where I behold a short figure standing in the shadows. I approach closer to him, put down my little offering and bow low in salutation.

There is an artistic value in this ceremony which greatly appeals to me, apart from its necessity as an expression of respect and as a harmless courtesy. I know well that Shri Shankara is no Pope, for there is no such thing in Hinduism, but he is teacher and inspirer of a religious flock of vast dimensions. Nearly the whole of South India bows to his tutelage.

I look at him in silence. This short man is clad in the ochre-coloured robe of a monk and leans his weight on a friar's staff. I have been told that he is on the right side of forty, hence I am surprised to find his hair quite grey.

His noble face, pictured in grey and brown, takes an honoured place in the long portrait gallery of my memory. That elusive element which the French aptly term *spirituel* is present in his face. His expression is modest and mild, the large dark eyes being extraordinarily tranquil and beautiful. The nose is short, straight and classical-

ly regular. There is a rugged little beard on his chin, and the gravity of his mouth is most noticeable. Such a face might have belonged to one of the saints who graced the Christian Church during the Middle Ages, except that this one possesses the added quality of intellectuality. I suppose we of the practical West would say that he has the eyes of a dreamer. Somehow, I feel in an inexplicable way that there is something more than mere dreams behind those heavy lids.

“Your Holiness has been very kind to receive me,” I remark, by way of introduction.

He turns to my companion, the writer, and says something in the vernacular. I guess its meaning correctly.

“His Holiness understands your English, but he is too afraid that you will not understand his own. So he prefers to have me translate his answers,” says Venkataramani.

I shall sweep through the earlier phases

of this interview, because they are more concerned with myself than with this Hindu Primate. He asks about my personal experiences in the country; he is very interested in ascertaining the exact impressions which Indian people and institutions make upon a foreigner. I give him my candid impressions, mixing praise and criticism freely and frankly.

The conversation then flows into wider channels and I am much surprised to find that he regularly reads English newspapers, and that he is well informed upon current affairs in the outside world. Indeed, he is not unaware of what the latest noise at Westminster is about, and he knows also through what painful travail the troublous infant of democracy is passing in Europe.

I remember Venkataramani's firm belief that Shri Shankara possesses prophetic insight. It touches my fancy to press for some opinion about the world's future.

“When do you think that the political and economic conditions everywhere will begin to improve?”

“A change for the better is not easy to come by quickly,” he replies. “It is a process which must needs take some time. How can things improve when the nations spend more each year on the weapons of death?”

“There is nevertheless much talk of disarmament today. Does that count?”

“If you scrap your battleships and let your cannons rust, that will not stop war. People will continue to fight, even if they have to use sticks!”

“But what can be done to help matters?”

“Nothing but spiritual understanding between one nation and another, and between rich and poor, will produce goodwill and thus bring real peace and prosperity.”

“That seems far off. Our outlook is hardly cheerful, then.”

His Holiness rests his arm a little more heavily upon his staff.

“There is still God,” he remarks gently.

“If there is, He seems very far away,” I boldly protest.

“God has nothing but love towards mankind,” comes the soft answer.

“Judging by the unhappiness and wretchedness which afflict the world today, He has nothing but indifference,” I break out impulsively, unable to keep the bitter force of irony out of my voice. His Holiness looks at me strangely. Immediately I regret my hasty words.

“The eyes of a patient man see deeper. God will use human instruments to adjust matters at the appointed hour. The turmoil among nations, the moral wickedness among people and the suffering of miserable millions will provoke, as a reaction, some great divinely-inspired man to come to the rescue. In this sense, every country has its own saviour. The process works

like a law of physics. The greater the wretchedness caused by spiritual ignorance, materialism, the greater will be the man who will arise to help the world."

"Then do you expect some one to arise in our time, too?"

"In our country," he corrects. "Assuredly, the need of the world is so great and its spiritual darkness is so thick that an inspired man of God will surely arise."

"Is it your opinion, then, that men are becoming more degraded?" I query.

"No, I do not think so," he replied tolerantly. "There is an indwelling divine soul in man which, in the end, must bring him back to God."

"But there are ruffians in our Western cities who behave as though there were indwelling demons in them," I counter, thinking of the modern gangster.

"Do not blame people so much as the environments into which they are born. Their surroundings and circumstances

force them to become worse than they really are. That is true of both the East and West. Society must be brought into tune with a higher note. Materialism must be balanced by idealism; there is no other real cure for the world's difficulties. The troubles into which countries are everywhere being plunged are really the agonies which will force this change, just as failure is frequently a sign-post pointing to another road."

"You would like people to introduce spiritual principles into their worldly dealings, then?"

"Quite so. It is not impracticable, because it is the only way to bring about results which will satisfy everyone in the end, and which will not speedily disappear. And if there were more men who had found spiritual light in the world it would spread more quickly. India, to its honour, supports and respects its spiritual men, though less so than in former times. If all the

world were to do the same, and to take its guidance from men of spiritual vision, then all the world would soon find peace and grow prosperous.”

Our conversation trails on. I am quick to notice, that Shri Shankara does not decry the West in order to exalt the East, as so many in his land do. He admits that each half of the globe possesses its own set of virtues and vices, and that in this way they are roughly equal! He hopes that a wiser generation will fuse the best points of Asiatic and European civilizations into a higher and balanced social scheme.

I drop the subject and ask permission for some personal questions. It is granted without difficulty.

“How long has your Holiness held this title?”

“Since 1907. At that time I was about twelve years old.”

“You rarely remain at your headquarters in Kumbakonam, I take it?”

“Yes, I’ve been travelling for 15 years from village to village in these districts. But I am slowly moving North towards Benares. But during all these years I have not been able to advance more than a few hundred miles because a tradition of my office requires that I stay in every village and town which I pass on the route or which invites me, if it is not too far off. I must give a spiritual discourse in the local temple and some teaching to the inhabitants.”

I broach the matter of my quest and His Holiness questions me about the different Yogis or holy men I have so far met. After that, I frankly tell him:

“I would like to meet some one who has high attainments in Yoga and can give some sort of proof or demonstration of them. There are many of your holy men who can only give one more talk when they are asked for this proof. Am I asking too much?”

The tranquil eyes meet mine.

There is a pause for a whole minute. His Holiness fingers his beard.

“If you are seeking initiation into real Yoga of the higher kind, then you are not seeking too much. Your earnestness will help you, while I can perceive the strength of your determination; but a light is beginning to awaken within you which will guide you to what you want, without doubt.”

I am not sure whether I correctly understand him.

“So far I have depended on myself for guidance. Even some of your ancient sages say that there is no other god than that which is within ourselves,” I hazard.

And the answer swiftly comes;

“God is everywhere. How can one limit Him to one’s own self? He supports the entire universe.”

I feel that I am getting out of my depth and immediately turn the talk away from this semi-theological strain.

“What is the most practical course for me to take?”

“Go on with your travels. When you have finished them, think of the various Yogis and holy men you have met; then pick out the one who makes most appeal to you. Return to him, and he will surely bestow his initiation upon you.”

I look at his calm profile and admire its singular serenity.

“But suppose, Your Holiness, that none of them makes sufficient appeal to me. What then?”

“In that case you will have to go on alone until God Himself initiates you. Practise meditation regularly; contemplate the higher things with love in your heart; think often of the soul and that will help to bring you to it. The best time to practise is the hour of waking; the next best time is the hour of twilight. The world is calmer at those times and will disturb your meditations less.”

He gazes benevolently at me. I begin to envy the saintly peace which dwells on his bearded face. Surely, his heart has never known the devastating upheavals which have scarred mine? I am stirred to ask him impulsively:

“If I fail, may I then turn to you for assistance?”

Shri Shankara gently shakes his head.

“I am at the head of a public institution, a man whose time no longer belongs to himself. My activities demand almost all my time. For years I have spent only three hours in sleep each night. How can I take personal pupils? You must find a master who devotes his time to them,”

“But I am told that real masters are rare, and that a European is unlikely to find them.”

He nods his assent to my statement, but adds;

“Truth exists. It can be found.”

“Can you not direct me to such a master,

one who you know is competent to give me proofs of the reality of higher Yoga?"

His Holiness does not reply till after an interval of protracted silence.

"Yes. I know of only two masters in India who could give you what you wish. One of them lives far away in the South, hidden away in deep jungle. He is observing the vow of silence. Few people obtain access to him; certainly, no European has yet been able to intrude upon his seclusion. I could send you to him. But I fear that he may refuse to admit a European."

"And the other—?" My interest is strangely stirred.

"The other man lives in the interior. I know him to be a high master. I recommend that you go to him."

"Who is he?"

"He is called the Maharishee. His abode is on Arunachala the Hill of the Holy Beacon, which is near the town of Tiruvannamalai, in the district of North Arcot.

Shall I provide you with full instructions, so that you may discover him?"

A picture flashes suddenly before my mind's eyes.

I see the yellow robed friar, who has vainly persuaded me to accompany him to his teacher. I hear him murmuring the name of a hill. It is; "The Hill of the Holy Beacon."

"Many thanks, your Holiness" I rejoin, "But I have a guide who comes from the place."

"Then you will go there?"

I hesitate.

"All arrangements have been made for my departure from the South tomorrow," I mutter uncertainly.

"In that case I have a request to make."

"With pleasure."

"Promise me that you will not leave South India before you have met the Maharishee."

I read in his eyes a sincere desire to help me. The promise is given.

A benignant smile crosses his face.

“Do not be anxious. You shall discover that which you seek.”

A murmur from the crowd which is in the street penetrates the house.

“I have taken up too much of your valuable time,” I apologize.” I am indeed sorry.”

Shri Shankara's grave mouth relaxes. He follows me into the anti-room and whispers something into the ear of my companion. I catch my name in the sentence.

At the door I turn to bow in farewell salutation. His Holiness calls me back to receive a parting message;

“You shall always remember me, and I shall always remember you;”

And so, hearing these cryptic and puzzling words, I reluctantly withdraw from this interesting man, whose entire life has been dedicated to God from childhood. He

is a pontiff who cares not for worldly power, because he has renounced all and resigned all. Whatever material things are given to him, he at once gives again to those who need them. His beautiful and gentle personality will surely linger in my memory.

I wander about Chingleput till evening, exploring its artistic, old world beauty, and then seek a final glimpse of His Holiness before returning home.

I find him in the largest temple of the city. The slim, modest, yellow-robed figure, is addressing a huge concourse, of men, women and children. Utter silence prevails among the large audience. I cannot understand his vernacular words, but I can understand that he is holding the deep attention of all present, from the intellectual Brahmin to the illiterate peasant. I do not know, but I hazard the guess that he speaks on the profoundest topics in the

simplest manner, for such is the character I read in him.

And yet, though I appreciate his beautiful soul, I envy the simple faith of his vast audience. Life, apparently, never brings them deep moods of doubt. God is; and there the matter ends. They do not appear to know what it means to go through dark nights of the soul when the world seems like the grim scene of jungle-like struggle; when God recedes into shadowy nothingness; and when man's own existence seems nothing more than a fitful passage across this small, transient fragment of the universe which we call Earth.

We drive out of Chingleput under an indigo sky gemmed with stars. I listen to palms majestically waving their branches over the water's edge in an unexpected breeze.

My companion suddenly breaks the silence between us.

“You are indeed lucky;”

“Why?”

“Because this is the first interview which His Holiness has granted to a European writer.”

“Well— — ?”

“That brings his blessing upon you.”

It is nearly midnight when I return home. I take a last glimpse overhead. The stars stud the vast dome of the sky in countless myriads. Nowhere in Europe can one see them in such overwhelming numbers. I run up the steps leading to the verandah, flashing my pocket torch.

Out of the darkness, a crouching figure rises and greets me.

“Subramaniya!” I exclaim, startled. “What are you doing here?” The ochre-robed Yogi indulges in one of his tremendous grins.

“Did I not promise to visit you, Sir,?” He reminds me reproachfully.

“Of course!”

In the large room, I fire a question at him.

“Your master—is he called the Maharishee?”

It is now his turn to draw back, astonished.

“How do you know, Sir? Where could you have learnt this?”

“Never mind. To-morrow we both start for his place. I shall change my plans.”

“This is joyful news, Sir,”

“But I shall not stay there long, though. A few days may be.”

I fling a few more questions at him during the next half hour, and then, thoroughly tired, go to bed. Subramanya is quite content to sleep on a piece of palm matting which lies on the floor. He wraps himself up in a thin cotton cloth, which serves at once as a mattress, sheet and blanket, and disdains my offer of more comfortable bedding.

The next thing of which I am aware is

suddenly awakening. The room is totally dark. I feel my nerves strangely tense. The atmosphere around me seems like electrified air. I pull my watch under the pillow and, by the glow of its radium-lit dial, discover the time to be a quarter to three. It is then that I become conscious of some bright object at the foot of the bed. I immediately sit up and look straight at it.

My astounded gaze meets the face and form of His Holiness Shri Shankara. It is clearly and unmistakably visible. He does not appear to be some ethereal ghost, but rather a solid human being. There is a mysterious luminosity around the figure which separates it from the surrounding darkness.

Surely the vision is an impossible one? Have I not left him at Chingleput? I close my eyes tightly in an effort to test the matter. There is no difference and I still see him quite plainly!

Let it suffice that I receive the sense of a

benign and friendly presence. I open my eyes and regard the kindly figure in the loose yellow robe.

The face alters, for the lips smile and seem to say:

“Be humble and then you shall find what you seek!”

Why do I feel that a living human being is thus addressing me? Why do I not regard it as a ghost, at least?

The vision disappears as mysteriously as it has come. It leaves me feeling exalted, happy and unperturbed by its supernormal nature. Shall I dismiss it as a dream? What matters it?

There is no more sleep for me this night. I lie awake pondering over the day's meeting, over the memorable interview with His Holiness Shri Shankara of Kumbakonam, the Hierarch of God to the simple people of South India.

APPENDIX

THE KAMAKOTI PEETAM

BY K. S. VENKATARAMANI, M.A., B.L.

OUR Adi Jagat Guru, or our first World Teacher, is the great Sankara. He was the Saviour of Hinduism at a critical moment of religious unrest and decay, and its most virile and combative exponent. We reckon him an *avatar*, with an exceedingly intellectual and practical mission in an age of all-round decadence. He is our greatest thinker. His memory is more sacred to us than the Ganges and the Cauvery, or even the sages who laid the foundations of the Hindu polity. Great in the achievements of his own life, he is still greater in the legacy of thought and institutions he founded for world service and knowledge. So grateful is the memory of man for his remarkable deeds, that to this day, his institutions flourish in their popular religious appeal. They are the seats of purity, culture and philosophy.

They are the centres of conservative yet enlightened Hinduism.

At any rate such is the *Kamakoti Peetam*, nestling on the Cauvery, which has nourished in its deltaic bosom five dynasties of kings from the third century B. C. It is now located at Kumbhakonam, the centre of Tamil culture and refinement. The great Sankara originally founded the *Kamakoti Peetam* at Conjeevaram, the noblest of ancient cities, where it prospered down to the eighteenth century. But in the early days of the East India Company and the unsettled times of the Moghuls, Conjeevaram was the storm centre of the Carnatic wars. Then the *Kamakoti Peetam* was changed for ever from Conjeevaram to Kumbhakonam at the invitation of the Tanjore kings. Ever since, it has thriven well indeed in the peaceful, sheltered home of the Cauvery Delta.

The *Kamakoti Peetam* signifies the End of all Desires. It aims at an enduring code of values. It stands for strenuous, desireless action in daily life. Human activity gains its true focus of peace only from a real knowledge of the self. Therefore the best rules of self-expression are just the rules for self-realisation. This gives us *Sanatana Dharma*, an impersonal and eternal code of action.

Desire is the fuel that feeds the fires of the body

and keeps alive the illusion of duality. The *Kamakoti Peetam* strives to end all desire, at the same time keeping action in its original strength and purity. Nay, it strives to free the body itself that imprisons the soul in an endless cycle of births and deaths, and become one with the self.

The *Kamakoti Peetam* is the most comprehensive definition of the mind and mood of man. It takes in the Heaven and the Earth in one view. It bridges the void. It names and guides all the higher impulses of creation. It is a full-blooded gospel. It resolves into harmony the dualities of life by revealing to you the true nature of Reality. It converges into the white ray of light the myriad hues of life. On the wings of a sublime philosophy of work, work unburdened with the desire to enjoy its fruits, it seeks to carry you to heights wherefrom you catch a glimpse of the nature of Reality.

The *Kamakoti Peetam* is the seat of self-realisation. By worship, surrender and self-experience it seeks to show the Divine Path liberating the true Self from the transient bondage and tyranny of the mind. Like a cloud that can only cloud the sun, mind befores the Absolute. Still it by worship, self-enquiry and surrender of the ego, and self-experience the supreme *ananda*. This is the message of the *Kamakoti Peetam*.

The *Kamakoti Peetam* is a rare place on earth. Every inheritor of its proud name for over thirty generations has, for each generation, been the living symbol and exponent of a great and moving faith. Strong and strenuous in the day's work, simple in habits, high in culture and fervid in temper, calm and impersonal in action and pure in personal life, they have preserved the tradition and record and the glory of the *Kamakoti Peetam*—a gentle and even flow of work in the crowded midst of every uneven and conflicting man.

Such is the inheritance to which he may be called who is by birth a Brahmin. And only a Brahmacharin, yet in the liquid glow and plastic mould of pure youth, is eligible for ascension to the *Kamakoti Peetam*. The moment he is nominated and ordained by his predecessor-in-office, usually in his last dying moments, he becomes the Acharyaswami, or the Jagat Guru, to whom all Hindus render homage more royal than the allegiance they owe to their sovereign.

The first five years after ascension are usually allotted for the training and education of the young Acharyaswami. It is a period of study and meditation in an inspiring environment, and he is aided in the task by some of the best Sanskrit pandits of Southern India, and the blessings of *Kamakshi*.

The qualities of the World Teacher are naturally developed in the isolation of his exalted office and in the daily worship of Chandramouliswar. Worship releases the consciousness in its purest and noblest form. Work in worship sublimates man like celestial fire. No wonder my Acharyaswami easily becomes the centre of learning and the final arbiter of the first problems of life. He lives the life he preaches. Words and deeds gain in him the crowning unity that is *Advaita*.

The personal life of the Acharyaswami is one of the plainest living and the highest thinking. He is the hardest worked of all the workers yet the most harmonious in this painfully toiling world. Early morning he bathes in flowing water. Then the prescribed ceremonies and the meditations occupy more than three hours of the busy and solemn forenoon. Then he bathes again and begins the *puja* of Chandramouliswar, the radiant pebble Lingam, anointed and dedicated by the great Sankara himself as the secret and the inspiration of the *Kamakoti Peetam*. So the *puja* of Chandramouliswar is the very soul of the *peetam*. The devotional mind of man these countless years has gathered and poured without stint or economy at the feet of the radiant pebble Lingam, herbs and flowers, milk and

honey, and every rare and precious spice in the world. It is sacrifice at the highest. Because it is motiveless; it is impersonal; it is absolute.

The *puja* takes more than two hours, and is performed to music, before a large concourse of devotees who wait for a spoonful of *abhishekam* water that has dripped over Chandramouliswar which incidentally enfranchises one for a hearty dinner at the expense of the Jagat Guru.

The sun has already declined in the west, and my Acharyaswami retires for his single meal a day, which is itself considered a 'limb' of the *puja* of God Chandramouliswar. After dinner he again sets to work. The afternoon is taken up with disquisitions and the reception of visitors, learned and rich, from distant parts. And what a thronging variety, from fascinating excellence to madding boredom! And what a child-like laugh greeting all—the laugh of the saint.

My Acharyaswami is royal and urbane, dignified and courteous, calm, shining and free. Sits lofty the spiritual glow and eminence of Sankara on his brow. Lambent beams the light of cosmic intelligence on his face. He is full of knowledge. Such is the acquisitive power of the meditative mind in worship, he knows everything—from the imperial craft

of British statesmanship to the travail agonies of Soviet Russia, from the scientific method of agriculture in modern Japan to the most trivial sartorial fashions of the day at Paris.

My Acharyaswami is always open and ready for philosophical discussion, and commands the speech of classic Sanskrit with ease and terseness. The afternoon is one of intellectual combat with every variety of men, from the graduate fresh from the University to the orthodox pundit with his camel load of learning. He goes through the task, unwearied by ignorance and undismayed by talent, stating and re-stating the grand concept of the Oneness of Life and the infinite grace and bliss of self-realisation. The conference goes on animated and lively, till the evening calls my Acharyaswami to the calm of meditations, and the evening worship of Chandra-mouliswar which take well-nigh over two hours. Then he retires, calm and free, to a sleep that itself is a *yogic* reverie.

But my Acharyaswami is at his very best while he journeys administering spiritual solace to the country people. Whenever he feels a call to go out and stir the religious consciousness and advance the power and blessing of the *peetam*, he moves out in his antique palanquin with utter stateliness and

pomp, accompanied by horses, camels and elephants, trumpets and fanfares, and a large concourse of people with shops, sweetmeats and sundries. His Holiness is then a moving city and the talk and sight of the neighbourhood. He visits every sacred place and temple, and bathes in all the holy waters of the village. He evokes the religious zeal of the people, and every one dressed in flawless Indian Aryan style, is in full evidence around. At the bidding of my Acharyaswami, the miser willingly parts with his gold and the voluptuary restrains himself for a day from the call of pleasure. Then rural life is inspired with a true religious fervour that seeks a higher aim in life.

The visit of my Acharyaswami is a godly event to every Indian village. It spells prosperity, at least for a quinquennium. Every one does his best to make the short stay of His Holiness a success. Everything else is forgotten. All activities, even agricultural, are suspended; and the whole village, men, women and children, are literally at his feet. All pay their tribute in coin and kind as they can afford. But there is a standard minimum. The recognised *padakanikkai* (tribute at the feet) is one hundred and eight coins, gold or silver. For one hundred and eight is a weird number in Hindu

rituals. It has a mysterious sanction and power. From the chanting of the *Gayatri* to the entertainment of the Acharyaswami, one hundred and eight is our standard number. There is yet a super number—one thousand and eight. Its efficacy is naturally even greater. Therefore the tribute of a rich man is one thousand and eight, which my Swami collects and spends promptly on religious and Sanskrit education.

My Acharyaswami belongs to the most ancient and selfless order of monks in the world. He is the holiest of Brahmanas, but transcends the distinctions of caste and creed. The poor and the panchama are as dear to his heart for social and spiritual reclamation. His temper and outlook are most democratic, though the ritual would seem exclusive. He is the rallying-point of Hinduism and undying hope of its strength and purity in its darkest hour of need.

Wherever my Acharyaswami is, men, women and children gather round him with home-feeling and adoration, and each sits with patience and watches with eager eyes for his or her turn of the spoonful of *abhishekam* water that has dripped over God Chandramouliswar, a sign of devotion that helps to still the mind and free it on the path of self-enquiry.

Wherever my Acharyaswami is, there you find

burning steady and pure, the lamp of life and knowledge. He has surrendered everything at a tender age—youth, wealth and all the civic pleasures—for the service of man and continuance of a mission. He is dear to us, even as the rolling sea is to the land-soiled air. Passionate and deep-rooted is our attachment to Sankara. He is our greatest birth and our Adi Jagat Guru.

His Holiness Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati Swamigal sits now on this ancient throne of Peace and Wisdom. His Holiness is the sixty-sixth in a long line of long-lived succession to the *Kamakoti Peetham*, ever since its consecration by the Great Sankara himself in the fullness and transcendental maturity of his closing years.

His Holiness Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati Swamigal is one of the most dynamic personalities of modern India. He has a magnetic presence. Thirty years ago as a boy of ten he ascended this throne over the unstable empire of man's mind, before which even kings kneel with pleasure in pursuit of the Divine. Ever since, this illustrious saint of modern India has been carrying on with sleepless vigil, unremitting labour and loving courage an ancient and hallowed tradition that is most supreme as a way of life to self-realisation.

Look at His Holiness for a moment. From top to toe there is the tenderness of austerity and the glow of purity radiating in the atmosphere of his presence. The innocence of the child and the freshness of the morning dew live on his ever smiling face. There is the divine ache of compassion in the timbre of his voice. The throb of ethereal love and the soft glow of spreading sunlight are in the gleam of his eyes. His Holiness, in the utter rhythm of his dynamic nature, is a reservoir of peace which, like a lake among the valleys, lashes no restless wave or ripple to the shore for all its depth and plenty. But Nature, in her infinite pity for the plains, bows a little even amidst craggy hills and lets down the fresh water at one trailing end of the reservoir, which in its dynamic course fertilises and renews all it touches even once. The Grace of Adi Sankara has truly descended on His Holiness Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati, to make again a New India, and thus vitalise the original purpose of the *Kamakoti Peetam*.

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