

**LIFE AND PHILOSOPHY**  
**OF**  
**ŚRĪ VENKTANTHA**

Śrī Venkatanātha, the most important thinker of the Viśtādvaita School of Philosophy after Śrī Rāmānuja, was born at Tūppal, a suburb of Kanchi (modern conjeevaram), in the Tamil month of Purattāśi of the year Vibhuva corresponding to the 17<sup>th</sup> September 1268 A.D. As Śrī Venkatanātha was born under the asterism Sravana, the asterism of Śrī Venkatesa of the famous Tirumalai shrine, he was named after him. Tradition has it that Śrī Venkatanath's father Ananta Suri and mother Totaramma visited the shrine some time before their illustrious son was born to them, and that one night they dreamt that the Lord of the shrine sent his bell to incarnate as their son. The story is testified to by Śrī Venkatanātha himself in his drama *Sankalpasuryodaya*.

Śrī Venkatanātha had a heritage suited to his genius. He was a lineal descendant of a personal disciple of Śrī Rāmānuja through his father. Through his mother he was related to Śrī Rāmānuja's personal disciple and nephew Pranatārtihara, otherwise known as the Vedānta Udayanacarya. Pranatatihara had a grandson and grand daughter, the former was the famous author of Nyāya Kulisa, Rāmānuja, and the latter was the mother of Śrī Venkatanātha. Thus from his infancy, he grew up in the midst of the tradition of Śrī Rāmānuja's philosophy.

Śrī Venkatanātha was brought up by his uncle, Atreya Rāmānuja familiarly known as Appullār. Śrī Venkatanātha manifested signs of being a genius. His memory was very keen and he required no second reading. His extraordinary retentive powers in this respect were displayed, it seems, on more than one occasion. Whey very young and yet a child, his remarkable memory was manifested when he assisted in giving the cue to the Great Nadādūr Vātsya Varadacarya in one of his discourses. The manner he seems to have done this was still more remarkable, as he seems to have done this was still more remarkable, as he seems to have done this without violating the injunction of the

scriptures not to repeat the scriptural text without proper instruction from a Guru. When he reached the appropriate age he was initiated into spiritual life by his uncle and he continued to study everything under him. He completed all his studies by his twentieth year. His knowledge was encyclopaedic and this fundamental equipment of his studies is displayed in his very early works too.

He married about his twentieth year. His married life seems to have been very fortunate. He shows none of those conflicts that so much marred the life of Śrī Rāmānuja. On the contrary he was excellently married, and his life as a householder was in ideal one. Happy nations as a rule have no history to leave behind them, so too happy couples. When Śrī Venkatanātha pleads for the life of a householder as more befitting to man than the more arduous sanyāsin's, one can infer that married life is a life of responsibility to oneself and to one's community and race, which, provided it is lived properly, will yield the highest bliss possible to the human being on this planet. We cannot say exactly how long it lasted or how long his wife lived. We only know that he was father of a son about his forty-seventh year of life, nearly twenty eight years after his marriage (1316 A.D.).

Soon after his marriage Śrī Venkatanātha went to Tiruvahindrapuram (near modern Cuddalore, Sough Arcot district), a beautiful hamlet situated on the banks of the river Garuda (Gadilam). This was the period of perfect preparation and meditation and penance. He attained in the course of his first two years three miraculous powers from Śrī Hayagriva (Śrī Visnu of the form of Jayagriva) and also from Garuda. Perhaps it is through their blessings he turned to melodious versification and produced hymns in praise of Devanayaka and Hayagriva. It was also during this period he began his discourses on the Śrī Bhasya, Bhagavad – Gītā and on the secret doctrines of the Viśtādvaita. He also became a master of arts and crafts, and attained such proficiency as to be called *Sarvatantra-svatantra*.<sup>1</sup>

His life at Tiruvahindrapuram seems to have lasted about twenty years. He exemplified in himself the profoundest wisdom of the Upanisads and Prabandham. For him, ordinary life regulated and governed by total surrender to the Lord is no menace to spiritual communion and development. All actions prescribed by the scripture have to be performed, for there is no way open to man other than service of the Divine. A life of renunciation (*vairagy*) can go along with the human conditions of love and possession of children. He seems to have

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<sup>1</sup>A well that Śrī Venkatanātha constructed can even now be seen at Tiruvahindrapuram, as also the image cast of him by himself.

followed *lincha-vriti* the profession of begging for rice for his daily needs, thus typifying utter dependency for maintenance on God to whose service he had consecrated himself.

It is just possible that Śrī Venkatanātha became conscious of his mission in life about this time. It is one of those recurring facts of psychological consciousness of a sect or community, religious or secular, to seek to endow its chief teacher or messiah, who had brought unity and solace to that community, with all the glory of a son of God. Supernatural claims have always been made on behalf of almost all great personalities. It has great value and evangelical force during the period of the mission. The Leaders themselves because of their sincere and abiding consciousness of their duty to their God, accept the mantle of this great responsibility. Śrī Venkatanātha was no exception to this. The dream prophecy was there. He had to accept the mantle that God had destined him for. His abiding concern seems to have been to dispel the darkness and demoniac fury of unspiritual forces encircling his community, whilst himself increasing the spiritual light and power of his own community. This twofold purpose of destruction of anti-spiritual forces and increasing of spiritual forces, or in the words of the Isavasyopahisad, increasing the birth-forces whilst destroying the death forces seems to have been his main concern. It is this consciousness, tri-

polar as it is, that pervades like the perfume eternal, the entire conduct of Śrī Venkatanātha. In all his works there is mastery as well as complete surrender to the Divine: in all his dealings there is the sacred presence of divine humility. It is this that has made him the most relentless opponent of all that is trash and an admirer of all that is noble and lofty and godly.

His life of preparation for the great mission having been over, he started on a pilgrimage tour to the famous shrines sprinkled all over India, this being one of the most important duties of every Hindu. He left for Kāñci, and on the way, he visited the famous Tirukoilur temple where he composed the Dehalisa-stuti, on the Lord Dehalisa who manifested Himself to the first three Alvars, Poygai, Bhuta and Pey.

His stay at Kāñci was short. Like the Alvars he composed a hymn on the most important shrines he visited in South India. He composed a hymn at Kāñci on varadaraja—the *Varadaraja-pancasat*. His next halt was at Tirupati, where he composed the magnificent *Daya sataka* on his patron Deity. From Tirupati he seems to have visited Śrīsaila, Ahobilam and other places. He proceeded to the north visiting the famous places of History of Rama and Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Badari and Jagannath Puri. On his return journey he seems to have visited Tirupati and then Kāñci. This Pilgrimage seems to have lasted about five years. We do not have any detailed account about this itinerary. There are no compositions or praises of any deity in Northern India.

No sooner than he returned to Kāñci, he was invited to Śrīrangam to take part in a debate with an advaitic scholar in the year 1310 A.D. The leaders at Śrīrangam were unable to meet the arguments advanced by the advaitic scholar, and as Śrī Venkatanātha inherited the mantles of Śrī-Bhāṣya-simhasanadhipati and Prabandha-simhasanadhipati after the demise of his uncle Atreya Rāmānuja, he was invited to refute those arguments. Śrī Venkatanātha successfully refuted the arguments of the advaitic teacher<sup>1</sup> and thus won for himself laurels and esteem. He was given the title of Vedāntacarya – the

master teacher or Vedānta<sup>2</sup>. He was now the acknowledged leader of the Philosophy of Vistadvaita. The two divisions of the Śrī Vaisnava thought, the northern and southern, which Śrī Rāmānuja had unified on his person after Yamunacarya, tended to fall asunder, as the seat of the Chief of Śrī Vaisnavism had to be at two capitals. Kāñci had always been the seat of great literary activity not merely of Viśtādvaita but also of all other schools of thought. The literary fulcrum thus was at Kāñci. Śrīrangam was the shrine of Prabandha- literature- that is, its main interest was in the devotional poetry of the Alvars. The chiefs who followed Śrī Rāmānuja seem to have followed the principle of living in both capitals by turns. But when old age overtook them they could not undertake the task of moving between one place and the other. Thus there grew up two schools, one which was at Kāñci under the difficult inspiration and presence of the Chief, and another that found chiefs at Śrīrangam itself to cater to the needs of the devotees there. But this divergency seems to have been overcome in the year 1310 when Śrī Venkatanātha who resided at Tiruvhindrapuram, which is midway between the two places, decided to spend his days at Śrīrangam.

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<sup>1</sup>It appears that the Advaitic teacher was one Krsna Misra. We are not able to state definitely whether this was the author of the *Prabodhacandrodaya*. But it is likely.

<sup>2</sup> *Adhikrana Saravali*, opening verse.

It was about this time he began writing his great commentaries on the Śrī Bhasya, Gītā bhasya and wrote down his *rahsys*. Śrī Venkatanatha was a synthetic thinker and a provisional realist. His aim had been to create the conditions of a reascent Hinduism, which did not belittle anything of the former heritage of the Vedas, Upanisads, Smrtis, Purānas and the Mīmāmsā. His method of interpretation always aimed at the synthesis of the entire content of the traditional knowledge and lore. It was not, as he himself said, a new methodology, but rather it was the rejuvenation of the ancient methodology that marked the Vedānta-sūtra-kara, Jaimini, Bodhayana, Rāmānuja and his own

teachers Nadādūr Ammal and Atreya Ramanuja. It is the perfecting of this methodology that earned for him the unique title of Desika or Acarya.

It is one of the most important features of Viśtādvaitic thought that it exemplified the truth, that truth in whatever language expressed is truth, provided it stands the test of criticism. The great contribution which Śrī Venkatanātha made to Viśtādvaita literature was to explain the unity of the teaching of the alvars and the Upanisads, Three streams of thought flowed into the river of Viśtādvaita, the Vedas, Upanisads. Including the smṛti and itihāsas and purānas, and the tantras represented by the Pāñcarātra, and the Tamil compositions of the Alvars. It is the confluence of these three streams that culminated in the writings of Śrī Venkatanātha who composed with equal facility in both Sanskrit and Tamil, and stamped Viśtādvaita. With the austere thought of Vedānta, the worship of the worship of the Agama, and the beauty of the Alvars wisdom, Viśtādvaita awaited the arrival of a genius to do this task and it got the seer to do it in Śrī Venkatanātha. No surprise then that Śrī Venkatanātha was affectionately and admiringly called the Acarya. To speak about Desika is to speak about Viśtādvaita. The dream and wish of Yamuncarya got its fullest realization in the person of Śrī Venkatanātha.

This was the peak of his life. His mission was started under excellent auspices. Everywhere there was admiration for the master. In 1316 A.D. Śrī Venkatanātha was the proud father of a boy who, it appears, possessed all the great qualities of his illustrious father. It was as if the life of completest happiness was vouchsafed for Śrī Venkatanātha.

But the life that promised such a luminous future was assailed by petty jealousies. The tendentious activities of rival schools began to manifest uncomfortable forebodings of a disruption. Unfortunately it began to center round the person of Śrī Venkatanātha. Personal insults slights and even severe manhandling seem to have taken place. Began to refuse co-operation to him in the performance of oblations to his manes; a row of sandals was hung at the door-

step of his residence so that it could strike him when he came out. These trials on his patience made him understand that despite all that he could do to soothe the embittered feelings, and despite his willingness to treat them as of no serious concern, and despite his general sense of humour, he was not wanted at Śrīrangam. Thus he left Śrīrangam about the year 1319 A D. for Satyamangalam on the borders of Mysore unwilling to be the cause of serious cleavage in the community. It was perhaps during this period between 1510 and 1319 AD. He was challenged to compose in one night a poem on the sandals of Śrī ranganatha by a member of the rival community, which he did, on the completion of which his superior mastery in composition was acknowledged by the grant of the title “Kavitar-kikasimha” to him by the learned assembly of Judges. That work is known as *Paduka-Sahasram*. It is also probable that Śrī Venkatanātha composed the *Sankalpasuryodaya* about this time.

After a few years, lasting about five years, he seems to have been once again called upon to refute another Advaitic scholar at Śrīrangam. Śrī Venkatanātha returned to Śrīrangam and defeated the opponent through the offices of his disciple *Brahma-tantra-swami*. It is presumably as a result of these series of debates that Śrī Venkatanātha composed the *Satadusani* so as to be helpful to the students and teachers of Viśtādvaita to refute the opposing schools. It is also likely that the *Paramata-bhanga* was composed with the same intention.

It appeared that after the cloud of mistrust and jealousy that marred his life between 1319 AD. And 1325 A.D., there had come after all the bright sunshine. But this was not to be. Scarcely a year afterwards the invading hordes of Malik Kafur were pressing downwards into South India carrying with them the flames of relentless persecution and massacre and vandalism. Idol-worship or rather Pratima-worship, which is one of the most important elements of Śrī Vaisnava religion, was assailed. Idols of worship were removed from the sanctuaries to

interior places for fear of desecration and spoliation and mutilation. Śrīrangam underwent this fiery ordeal in 1326 A.D. Śrī Vedānta Desika, Śrī Pillai Lokācārya and other eminent leaders of Vaisnavism had to flee. People numbering ten thousand staunch devotees, were massacred in attempting to stem the onslaught of the Moslem leader, whilst Śrī Vedānta Desika and Śrī Pillai Lokācārya hurried away from the city in possession of the Sruta-prakasika, commentary on the Śrī-Bhasya and the Image of Śrīrangānātha. After some arduous journey Śrī Venkatanātha went to Mysore. It is likely that his son and wife were living at Satyamangalam at this time or were sent to that place just previous to the invasion apprehending danger. So much so, there is no mention of them in this escapade from Śrīrangam.

After some years spent in the old place of exile of Śrī Rāmānuja, Tirunarayanaapuram, he seems to have returned to his old haunt Satyamangalam in 1335 A.D. It is recounted that during this period of exile, his old friend Śrī Vidyaranya Swamin, the minister of king Bukka I, the founder of the Vijayanagar, the capital of the great empire of Vijayanagar invited Śrī Venkatanātha to reside at the Court of Vijayanagar, obviously moved by the impecunious circumstances of Śrī Venkatanātha. It appears that though moved by this offer, Śrī Venkatanātha courteously declined this honour and help, with five verses breathing rare beauty and humility. He was content to enjoy the wrath that God had infinitely given him, the wealth of knowledge. For him there was no place for compromise in religious life just as there was no compromise with falsity<sup>1</sup>.

Śrī Vedānta Desika continued to live a quiet and peaceful life delivering lectures and discourses on the many points of the doctrine. He had already written innumerable hymns, controversial works and commentaries, and composed original kavyas. It was in every sense a peaceful period. As usual his disciples flocked to him at this new shrine of power. There was only one dark cloud. The cloud that darkened the sky of Hindu Religion. It was only about thirty years afterwards that the Hindu Empire founded at Vijayanagar grew sufficiently powerful to drive out the invaders. It is stated that sorely grieved Śrī



Venkatanātha composed the *Abhiti stava* about this time. Almost in response to this play of the devotes, God seems to have, through the instrumentality of one Gopanarya, a General stationed at Gingee, driven out the last of the invaders from Śrīrangam and installed the Idol of Śrīranganatha who had been moved from place to place during three thirty years. This was in 1361 A.D. Knowing this fact Śrī Venkatanātha returned to Śrīrangam rejoicing in this answer to his prayers. The two verses that he wrote praising the services of Gopanarya are even today to be seen incised on the wall t Śrīrangam.

Having lived a full life o service (kainkarya) in the cause of the philosophy of Śrī Rāmānuja, Śrī Vedānta Desika passed away in the month of Karthigai Saumya year1369 A.D. Thus came to an end a great epoch in Visistaadvaita.

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. The ideal of the Isa, 1 & cf. Janaka's famous couplet "Anantam bta me vittam."

### **THE PHILOSOPHY OF ŚRĪ VENKATNATHA**

The philosophy of Śrī Venkatanātha cannot be summarized within the short compass of an introduction. But certain general outlines can be drawn. The Philosophy of Śrī Venkatanātha is identical with that of Śrī Rāmānuja, and it is considered that the great merit of Śrī Venkatanātha's writings lies in the synthesis and correlation that he has made between the several thinkers who preceded him. He has referred to almost all his predecessors and has criticized them or supplemented their views with arguments revealing wealth of understanding altogether unsurpassed. His life was on the philosophical side consecrated to unraveling he intricate points of philosophical value which might lead to a synthetic understanding of the Vedic and Upanisadic literature and Prabandhic thought. This of course was necessitated by the tendency of many followers of the central thought of Śrī Rāmānuja to interpret one-sidedly. On the other hand, the constant revival of philosophical disputations between rival sects

or philosophies imposed on the philosopher the obligation to substantiate his subtle Organistic viewpoint. It is more easy to accept a materialistic monism or pluralism or a spiritualistic monism or pluralism, but it is difficult to tread the path of synthesis that orders all existence or reality on the basis of a central principle of Organic relationship. This difficult and persistent attention to details. It is usual for most philosophers to take a very comprehensive view without entering into the manifold details of the scheme or order adumbrated. That satisfies superficial souls or believers but that cannot satisfy the carping critic who would insist upon the manifold details being filled in. this was the task imposed on the leader, and Śrī Venkatanātha, the giant he was, undertook the working out of the innumerable details of the system not only on its philosophical side, but also whether the philosophical passed into praxis and ethics, and all this without losing the fundamental basis of spiritual consciousness of the One All-abiding Divine. This radiant man, spurning all pomp, and power and pelf, tenacious and zealous in the cause of promoting a better understanding of the relation between God and man and the world, confident about himself, trusting God, ever at the service of truth, deeply learned in the thought and knowledge of all the literature, whether sanskrit or tamil or prakrit, a venerable teacher and fierce antagonist, compelling absolute obedience of his disciples, a patient craftsman and rigid follower of the sastraic injunctions, - Śrī Venkatanātha- was the embodiment of the spirit of Viśtādvaita. We find that his main desire has been to show the good life, the life that God has imposed or has ordered in the world. The path of realization is not through mere intellectual understanding nor mere works, but through Devotion, Bhakti, which includes the performance of works as well as understanding. The cognitive and conative faculties of man should be directed by the power of devotion to the highest reality, the self of all, and become the Vision of integral Unity. This devotion can be manifested fully and integrally through the understanding of the integral or organic unity of dependence on the Supreme Being, the Lord, who is the final Object of our life (*parama purusartha*). The love of God, faith in His wisdom, in His being our only means of salvation, faith in His perfect love for man and His anxiety to lead man to His own transcendent

puissant place, are real and urgently necessary for man's progress. The ideal of the Īśāvāsyopanisad which is herein presented in translation and the Bhagavad Gītā-teaching mingle harmoniously with the central meaning of the ecstasies of the Alvars. It is no wonder therefore Śrī Venkatanātha finding that a final and absorbing synthesis of Upanisadic thought is presented only in the Īśāvāsyopanisad, commented on this Upanisad only.

In all the works that this master has written, there is a unity of purpose, the central purpose, of representing the system of thought for which he stood, of which he was the most important representative evangel for nearly a century. He has written a masterpiece of logic and dialectic such as the *Tattva-mukta-kalapa* with his own commentary *Sarvarthasiddhi*. This, in his own words, stands as a testimony to his omniscient understanding and grasp of all systems of thought. His renovating efforts in the sphere of logic are illustrated by his *Nyāya-Pariśuddhi*, *Nyāya-siddhanjanam* and *Sesvaramimamsa*. His controversial works and commentaries are the *Satadusani* and his *Paramatabhanga*, and *Vaditrayakhandana*. His expository works and commentaries are the *Satadusani* and his *Paramatabhanga*, and *Vaditraya-khandana*. His expository works and commentaries are the *Satadusani* and his *Paramatabhanga*, and *Vaditrayakhandana*. His expository works and commentaries are the *Tattvatika* on the Śrī Bhasya, *Tatparya-candrika* on the Gītā Bhasya, *Adhikrana-saravali* on the Śrī Bhasya, *Isavasyopanisad-bhasya* on the Upanisad, *Pāñcarātra-raksa* and others. His poetic talent and mastery of composition are displayed in his *Yadavabhyudaya* (modeled on the Raghuvamsa) *Hamsasandesha* modeled on the Meghaduta, *Sankalpa-suryodaya* as a counterblast to the Prabodha candrodaya, and his *Subhasitanivi* modeled perhaps on the Bhartrhari's Satakas and the *Padukasahasra*. In addition he has composed 30 hymns on the several deities. He has written extensively on the inner secret doctrines of the Śrī Vaisnavas. On the whole he seems to have composed 118 works, a prodigious output of literary and philosophical value. His works have been acclaimed as of the highest quality by his contemporaries as well as his successors. The famous

Appayya diksita has written the commentary on his *Yadavabhudaya* –which shows the high esteem in which that famous Advaitic scholar held Śrī Venkatanātha.

Despite the fact that his logical and philosophical thought had not been paid attention to as much as it deserves by monistic idealists such as Prof.S.N. Dasgupta<sup>1</sup> and others, he requires to be studied as a careful thinker in logic who seeks to supplant the mere ideological theories of idealism by a more profound understanding of the intuitive logic which corresponds most closely to Organistic conception. The instrument of thought must be of the same order as the metaphysical system in which it finds place. Logical theories cannot be sundered apart from their metaphysical bases. It is true that an inductive study of thought will not be able to overstep its own shadow or presuppositions. It must start with the experience it finds, rather than seek to transplant itself elsewhere. It is this demand of realistic thought that happens to be the safest level of experience. Thought, building itself upon such foundations, will finally construct its edifice of knowledge on the surest bases of science and human experience not excluding

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<sup>1</sup>History of Indian Philosophy, Vol.III

any experience of which the human being may be capable. Religious and mystical consciousness and even the realization of the Divine fall within this scheme of understanding. It is this that Śrī Venkatanatha seeks to achieve through his logical works. In organistic hypothesis, thus, the foundations of thought are well-laid and are capable of being intuitive and intellectual, pragmatic and ethical.

To have laid the foundations of this kind of logic is the greatest contribution of Śrī Venkatanātha. It is unfortunately true however that this great work has not been continued after him as splendidly as may be desired.