

Saint Ramanuja- The Great Social Reformer Born in 1000 years back

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Albert Einstein is supposed to have told ‘Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth. (said of Mahatma Gandhi)’

I hope every one would agree with this but if they know more about Saint Ramanuja who lived 1000 years back in India, I am sure they would say ‘How can anyone like this, with thoughts belonging to twenty second century lived and preached in our India, one thousand years back?’

One thousand years back India was pervaded by an orthodox religious crisis that was sweeping India. Untouchability and caste differentiation was a normal practice. The Hindu religious lingua was Sanskrit which was considered as the languages of Gods. The new religions Jainism and Budhism were trying to convert as many Hindus as possible to their religion. Two great Bhakthi movements in Tamil called Vaishnavism and Shaivism were sweeping across Tamil Nadu. Both these movements had great Saints as their sentinels. Though a few Brahmins joined these Bhakthi movements, the saints of these movements were mainly people from other castes. A great philosophy movement lead by Adhi Sankara had just got over. It was at this time that Saint Ramanuja was born in a village called Sriperum Pudur to Kesava Somayaji and Kanthimathi. Kesava Somayaji was great Vedic scholar as well as a professional priest. Once when Saint Ramanuja was still a boy, a young boy of a

caste lower than Brahmins was prevented from entering the temple . Though as a young kid, he could not do much, he saw to it that he gave the Prasada of the temple to that boy daily. Since Kesava Somayaji was a Vaishnavite, he was a great follower of the Tamil Vaishnavism as propagated by the 12 minstrels called Azhvars. Most of their preachings were in the form of Tamil songs and Poems. The young Ramanuja was attracted by this and started teaching these to young boys all around, who were not Brahmins. When Ramanuja attained his teens, he was put to learn Vedas in an Advathic school run by one Yadhava Prakasha. Ramanuja who was already a scholar could not agree with what he was taught by Yadhava Prakasha and so he chose to learn religion from one Kanchipoorna (Thirukachi nambi), a non Brahmin devotee of Lord Varada of Kanchi.

Much before this time, once a great devotee of Lord Vishnu called Nathamuni started collecting Tamil devotional works of all the Azhvars and the entire collected work was called as Nalayira Divya prabandham (The collection of four thousand divine verses). This collection was inherited by one of his disciples called Yamunacharya, who had been told about the impending arrival of a great saint who would take it from him. But as per God’s will Ramanuja could not meet him when he was alive. However, as per his wishes Ramanuja got trained by great Vaishnavite scholars. From then

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on it was his mission to put Vaishnavism and its philosophical basis in firm footings. He travelled all over India for that and reached the feet of God Vishnu (passed away) when he was 120 years old.

Saint Ramanuja differed with Adhi Sankara in the philosophical approach to God. He is the creator of Visishtadvaita philosophy. In essence, Visishtadvaita says 'Brahman is one without second, but this Brahman is qualified as a soul (paramatma) and a body (jivatma) and a mind (chith). They are not different in the sense of how a wave is not different from the ocean (but at the same time it is not identical). He also evolved the Saranagathi Thattwa (Principle of absolute surrender) through which the Antharathma can merge with the Paramathma. Two schools of thought differentiated later on the Saranagathi. One school believed that the Saranagathi does not need an effort on your part and is a passive surrender (Marjara Saranagathi-kitten like surrender) and the other school believed that your effort is very much needed even after the surrender and is an active surrender (Markata Saranagathi- the surrender of baby monkey). Unlike Adhi Sankara Saint Ramanuja made the tamil Bhakthi movement as a part of his philosophy. In fact, even today Tamil is used in pooja and rituals by his followers. Saint Ramanuja also travelled all over India and conversed with all scholars. But due to Tamil becoming a part of his school, his school is mainly confined to Tamil Nadu and neighbouring states

Saint Ramanuja apart from his being a religious reformer was also a great social reformer with ideas which are not being accepted even today by Hindu religious people.

1. Unlike Saint Ramanuja his wife was very orthodox. One day Ramanuja had invited one of his Gurus (Thirukachi Nambi) who was a non Brahmin devotee, for lunch in his home. Unfortunately he could not reach on time and the Guru arrived. His wife Thanjamambal fed the Guru outside the house,

and after he went away took bath and washed the place where he took food. Ramanuja arrived at that time. He was so pained by her orthodox behaviour and her insulting his guru that he took a decision to go away from his wife and took Sanyasa. He was perhaps the first orthodox Brahmin who did not give any importance to caste. Those times, the present day Dalits were called "Theru kulam" - ie "Street people" and he changed it to "thiru kulam" i.e "Divine people". Much much later almost after 900 years Mahathma Gandhi decided to call them, "Harijans" - "People of Lord Hari"

2. Ramanuja was directed to one Guru called Thirukoshtiyur Nambi to get initiation. But every time he went, he was sent back saying that the time was not ripe and on the seventeenth time Thirukoshtiyur Nambi taught him the eight lettered mantra "Om Namo Narayanaya" and warned him that if he teaches that Manthra to anybody else it would not be effective for him but to the one who learnt it from him. Immediately Ramanuja climbed on the top of the temple tower, managed to draw huge crowd and Taught the Manthra to all of them. When his Guru got angry, he told him that if by the act of his teaching, thousand of devotees were benefitted but he alone is not benefitted, it was a good act and worth doing again and again.

3. Yamuacharya had an ardent non brahmin follower called Mareneri Nimbi. After the death of Yamunacharya that Maraneri Nambi became a great follower of Ramanuja and his Guru Mahaparna. One day Mareneri Nambi breathed his last and Mahaparna performed his funeral rites as per Brahmin custom. When other people objected Ramanuja drew their attention to the fact that Jatayus funeral was done by Sri Rama and thus defended his Guru's action,

4. One Mohamedan princes in Delhi was given the pretty idol of Krishna taken away from Karnataka. She fell in love with that Vighraha. Ramanuja went to the palace and called out the

God, who came out. Later not only Ramanuja performed the marriage of that princess with Lord Ranganatha but also built a temple for her in Sri Ranganam temple. Even today Pooja is performed at this temple of that princess (Thulukka Nachiar) according to Hindu rites. He also modified regular worship at Srirangam temple, the presiding deity, Ranganatha, and offered him a daily offering of rotis, sweet with a heady scent of ghee – made with wheat (in contrast to the orthodox rice meal) and made him even wear colored lungis (not the white cloth worn by Hindus) to please a Thulukka Nachiar.

temple as well as rituals like marriage. This was great reform because even till today, majority of the devotees believe that worship should be done only using Sanskrit, as it is the language of Gods. In all temples maintained by followers of Ramanuja, the worship would not be complete without recital of verses from Thiruppavai, a Tamil prayer composed by Aandal.

At the time of Ramanuja a social reform based on Bakthi was already sweeping over Tamil Nadu and all that he did was to become a member of that Bhakthi group and fortified it with philosophy as well as religious beliefs.

5. Another great reform brought by Ramanuja was the inclusion of Tamil in worship methods in



Profounders of modern theory of knowledge as expounded in Vedic texts



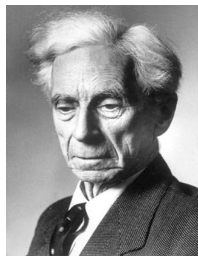
Shankaracharya



Ramanujacharya

Ancient Western Knowledge Theorists

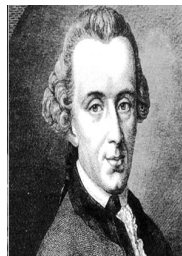
Many great Western philosophers starting from **Socrates** a few centuries BC (Before Christ) have propounded explanations about the Theory of Knowledge in man. However, the modern explanations were started in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by some of the great Western philosophers like **Bertrand Russell** (a renowned British philosopher), **David Hume** (Scottish philosopher, historian and economist), **Immanuel Kant** (German philosopher who pronounced much of modern philosophy), **St. Thomas Aquinas** (Italian Catholic Priest of an earlier era), **René Descartes** (French philosopher) and others.



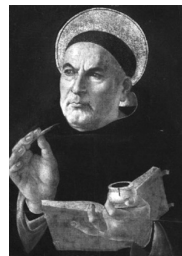
Bertrand Russell



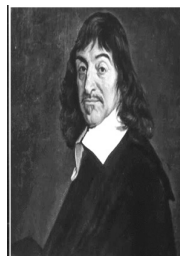
David Hume



Immanuel Kant



St. Thomas Aquinas



René Descartes