

An Article on Sri Nannagaru by Roger Adams



There could hardly be two people more different than Poonja and Nannagaru though both of them ascribe their awakening to the grace of Ramana Maharshi. Nannagaru has spent much of his life as a farmer in a village of Andhra Pradesh in the region of the Godavari River.

Some twenty years ago, a saint came to him in a dream and kissed him on the cheek. Sometime later, he saw an advertisement in the newspaper for a book on spirituality. The advert caught his eye, and he sent off for the book. When he opened it, he found the photo of the same saint who had kissed him. It was Ramana Maharishi, whom he had never heard of before.

He made a pilgrimage to Ramanas ashram at Arunachala, and returned frequently over the ensuing years, though Ramana had died some fifteen years previously. His whole life began to turn on Ramanas teachings, and he began to preach Ramanas message in his neighbourhood. Then, some years later, he was in Ramanashram when in the morning between sleeping and waking, he 'as he put it to me' felt his mind falling once and for all into his heart.

From then on he was a changed man. It was as if he was living by a force other than the ordinary personality, which had gone into abeyance. People began to see him as their guru instead of a preacher, and his name quickly spread throughout Andhra Pradesh.

Today, he travels throughout South India, staying at the home of one or another of his disciples for a few days and then moving on. Whenever he arrives somewhere, people from that area come all day long with their problems and pleas for help. He listens to them all with deep attention, blesses them, sits in silence with them, and gives a talk sometimes to the gathered assembly. He is the archetype of the traditional Indian guru a soul doctor, a counsellor, a friend, a wise guide in the affairs of life and for those few who want it, a spiritual presence and teacher.

I first came across Nannagaru in Ramanashram, at Tiruvannamalai, in the last days of 1993. A friend had told me that a guru was giving darshan near the library that evening. Arunachala and Ramanas cave were sufficient for me, I thought; I felt no particular attraction for the darshan of yet another guru. It happened that the library was next to my room, however and as I returned from the cave that evening I saw a crowd of Westerns

outside sitting in silence before a man in his early 60s who was sitting on a chair. At his feet were a bevy of well-dressed Indian women. They were all gazing at the man intently. The man's eyes were drifting slowly from one person to another. I couldn't help feeling that he looked like the corner shop grocer. Every now and then he let out a prolonged belch and rubbed his stomach.



I sat down, intending to stay until the first mosquito arrived. In moments I was aware of the depth of the silence in the group around me. Nannagaru kept gazing at one individual after another, sometimes resting his eyes on a person for minutes on end. At the same time he would raise his right hand in an open palm blessing. My body became as still as a stone. All thought of going anywhere vanished. All thoughts of any kind vanished. His look was one of the most tender compassion, of a love to his beloved; yet there was no sense of anybody doing anything, wanting anything, trying to create same effect; just the innocent and empty gaze of love, available to all, and yet intensely personal, it seemed, with each individual. His body seemed to carry no tension at all, his whole being flowed unobstructed out of his eyes. After half an hour or

so he silently bowed, and got up to go to his room. Nobody moved, and the silence continued for several more minutes.

When I did finally move, I made my way without forethought to Nannagaru's door. It was half open, and one of his disciples was standing in the entrance. I asked if I could see Nannagaru, and the disciple ushered me in. Nannagaru was sitting on his bed. He had just picked up a newspaper.

'Which country?' he asked. When I told him, he asked me if I read The Times. When I told him I didn't he asked me about other good newspapers in England. I responded briefly and then came to my point: I was deeply touched by the silence you led us into just now,; I said. But what I really want is to be that silence myself, wherever I am. I cannot always be in India with someone like you.

'You like the silence?' he asked, leaning forward like a delighted child. Come to Veerupaksha Cave with me tomorrow, and I shall answer your question.



I agreed to meet him at 3 pm the next afternoon, when he would take me to the cave in his car.

The next day at the appointed time, I piled into an Ambassador car along with half a dozen of Nannagaru's Indian devotees. Nannagaru himself led the way in another car. We drove into town and climbed the short path up to the cave, whose entrance was already packed with expectant faces. Nannagaru went into the cave, paid his respects to the place, and returned to sit under the tree outside. He then proceeded to speak to his Indian audience in his native Telugu for the next half hour, while I

and the other Westerners sat in the silence. The silence was tangible, even when he was speaking, and it didn't matter that he never returned to my question. That evening he was on the floor in the ashram dining hall along with everyone else, quite, inconspicuous, in an ordinary dhoti, without any special attentions or favours. The man seemed to glide rather than walk through the day.

That evening, when I arrived for his darshan, he motioned me to come and sit by his side. Every few minutes, he would look down with an innocent tenderness, and stroke my head. To begin with, I felt a certain self-consciousness at receiving such undivided attention in public; but my awkwardness soon gave way to a tranquillity and ease that was to remain with me for weeks afterwards. The next day, Nannagaru was leaving. I was among the crowd that had gathered to see him off, and as he made his way to his car he came over to me and held me in his arms. 'Roger', he smiled. 'Roger', like some lover taking his leave. I have since witnessed him act in the same way with many people, treating each one as if they were the only person in the world. I have never seen such a living example of the way Krishna must have acted with the gopis.

Some months later, I went to stay with Nannagaru at his village, and accompany him for a few days on his rounds through Andhra Pradesh. It was a journey into the heart of rural India. The village was built in traditional style. The houses were not unlike Spanish haciendas, with verandahs supported by carved wooden posts and red-tiled roofs. Nannagaru would sit on his verandah, read the newspaper, and receive the trickle of people who came to see him. He put me up in a house next door, which belonged to a devotee who had gone away on business. On my first morning, there was a knock at the door, and I opened it to find Nannagaru there with a cup of coffee. In the evening, he brought me into the kitchen of his house and stood over me as I made my way through the food his wife had prepared for me.

'Nice food?' he enquired in his rudimentary English 'Very nice food?'

When I confirmed my pleasure, he beamed, insisting an offering me more. 'Very nice food', he repeated, 'Very nice food'.

Over the next week or so we went to several different homes over an area of perhaps a hundred miles, accompanied by one of his few male devotees who took charge of all the arrangements. At each stop, he and I were ushered to the table first, while the women hovered around watching us eat, as he had watched me. Then the men of the family ate, and finally the women and children sat down. During the day dozens of people would come and sit at his feet while he would give them a talk on some aspect of Ramans



teaching, respond to their problems, or occasionally sit in silence. We went to three weddings, blessed the foundations of a new house, visited a paper factory, and a temple that someone had recently built in his honour. Nannagaru was the same still presence wherever we went. He flowed at the same slow pace, and never showed any trace of a reactive mind. In the car, as we

went from one place to the next, he would gaze at a tiny picture of Raman that he held in his lap, apparently lost to us and the journey were on. Yet as soon as we stopped, he would be totally present to whatever situation we walked into.

A number of Westerners have now accompanied him in this way, some for much longer periods than I. Everyone that I have meet confirms that same experience of prolonged inner silence in his presence, and nothing but an undemanding simplicity on his part. One, a seventy-year-old man from New York, told me that he has watched Nannagaru weep for an hour while an old woman told him her story. He himself had not been aware of anything special happening to him while he was with Nannagaru, although it was a warm, if uneventful time. Then, a few days after his departure, he realized that a sadness, which had been with him all his life, had completely vanished.

Since his own awakening was not the result of any specific sadhana, other than a spontaneous love for Ramana Maharshi, it is not surprising that Nannagaru recommends no particular method or technique himself. His own way of working with people I see clearly to have them in his presence while going about the business of everyday life. Being

a householder himself, he does not separate the spiritual from the secular. Much of his day is spent dealing with people; everyday concerns, and playing his part in the life of his community. He will talk for hours to his Indian devotees on various aspects of Advaita teaching, but with Westerners, he is invariably silent - except when he asks about their country and their national press. His economy with words is partly because of his English, but also because he knows that many Westerners unlike most of the Indians around him seem to value his silence more. Westerners are already full of concepts and theories and are usually grateful to experience what lies beyond them.



People come and go from his without any mention of a relationship of guru and disciple. He responds spontaneously to a person's openness, but his response carries no weight or demand. It seems to represent an invitation to fall into the inner heart, where all differences, formed relations and emotional needs dissolve. Silence was also the teaching method of Ramana Maharshi, who considered it the only real form of communication. Yet Nannagaru's presence naturally draws people, and his Indian followers, being culturally attuned to the guru - disciple relationship, treat him accordingly.

Nannagaru's followers have recently built a small retreat centre near Raman ashram, in Tiruvannamalai, which they have called Andhra Ashram, Nannagaru plans to be resident there some months of each year, so he seems certain to become far more widely known than he is at present.

Courtesy: Roger