

Śrīmate Rāmānujāya Namāḥ

Śrī Rāmanuja As Social Emancipator

EXTRACT FROM THE 'STUDIES IN RAAMAANUJA

Papers presented at

THE FIRST ALL INDIA SEMINAR ON
ŚRĪ RĀMANUJA AND HIS SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY
AT ŚRĪPERUMBŪDŪR

on 21st and 22nd July 1979.

Śrī Rāmanuja Vedānta Centre (Regd.)

10, South Maḍa St., Triplicane, Madras-600005.

APRIL 1980

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Śrī Rāmānuja claimed during his life-time to be an orthodox follower of the Vedic philosophy and religion; and that claim was by and large upheld by his contemporaries. However, in Hinduism, orthodoxy itself may be of more than one type. The variety of approaches to values permitted in India from time immemorial is reflected in social attitudes also. But, broadly speaking, two traditions, one conservative and another liberal, may be discerned in them. Each has claims to be orthodox, basing itself on the support of the scriptures and other religious texts and hoary usage. Śrī Rāmānuja was an illustrious exponent of the liberal tradition. Subject to this qualification, he was a follower of tradition, and nothing that he taught or practised was directed against Vedic authority or intended to disrupt contemporary social organisation. If he left behind him enduring social reforms or proved a source of inspiration to other teachers in distant regions and times, if the flood of *bhakti* that overwhelmed North India in the late middle ages could be ultimately traced to him, it is because they were all latent in the tradition of liberal orthodoxy.

A brief indication may be given at the outset of the history of this tradition. The obvious criterion for deciding conservatism and liberalism in the Indian context is the attitude to caste. Accepting as a fact the existence of caste in some form even in the Vedic age, one early protest against some of its implications can be noticed in the story of Viśvāmitra. His name itself suggests universal charity; and the *Gāyatrī* prayer attributed to

him aspires for enlightenment all around. Born a Kṣatriya, he is said to have become a Brahmin by virtue of his penance and austerities. Other incidents in his life relate that he came to the rescue of King Triśanku who had become a *caṇḍāla* on account of a curse and of Sunaśśepa who was about to be offered as the human victim in a sacrifice. His contest was with Vaṣiṣṭha who may be taken to represent conservative ideals.

Whatever the date of the Viśvāmitra story in its present form—and it cannot be later than the final redaction of the *Rāmāyaṇa*¹—it testifies to the possible transcendence of caste barriers through severe spiritual discipline. The exclusion of women and Sūdras from the study of *Vedas* and the cult of sacrifices which grew rigid at one time, became somewhat untenable when the quest for mystical communion and philosophical speculation rose into prominence. In the *Upaniṣads*, women like Gārgi² and Maitreyi³ are engaged in the endeavour of God-realisation. Satyakāma Jābāla⁴ receives instruction about *Brahman* in spite of his inability to specify his parentage; and King Jānaśruti who is taught by Raikva, is addressed as Sūdrā.⁵ In the *Mahābhārata*, Vidura is treated as a seeker after God.⁶

Caste restrictions seemed to have become less important or even irrelevant in the pursuit of the highest. The *Kaṭha* and *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣads* have a text which declares that God reveals Himself only to those whom He chooses. *Yam eva eṣa vṛṇute tena labhyaḥ* (*Kaṭha*, II 23; *Muṇḍaka* III : 2. 3). And perhaps even earlier we have relaxations of the exclusiveness in the case of the *rathakāra* and *niṣādashapati* who are accorded the privilege of performing sacrifices and reciting *mantras*.⁷ A minor *Smṛti* text refers to women being invested with the sacred thread in the fabulous past of a prior *kalpa*.⁸ Some relics of their right to pronounce *mantras* seem to have survived.

All these apparent deviations from the customs, regulations and laws relating to caste are duly taken note of and accounted for by orthodoxy. In doing so, however, a few concessions have to be made, weakening the theory that caste is absolute. One way of reconciling traditional caste with concern for universal spiritual welfare is to provide new approaches to God and new religious texts for the benefit of all, irrespective of caste or sex. The *Itihāsas* (epics) and the *purāṇas* constitute such texts. The new ways of approach to God include *bhakti*, *prapatti* and worship in temples as enjoined by the *Āgamas*, a class of religious works claiming scriptural authority.

The *Mahābhārata* is known as the fifth *Veda*,⁹ authoritative like the other four but distinct from them in being universally accessible.¹⁰ Members of all castes and women are assured of benefits, material and spiritual, through the study of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.¹¹ The *Bhagavadgītā* (IX. 32) declares that the whole-hearted worship of God will lead women, *Sūdras* and even those of sinful birth to the highest goal, as in the case of other castes. And worship in the temples built and maintained according to the *Āgamas* is open to all without any restriction.

To make all this possible, there must have been something like a working compromise between conservative and liberal trends in religion and social life. Traditional restrictions based on caste were maintained in some matters, but in others they were regarded as not applicable. The area of restriction and the area of freedom tended to be flexible, and debates could take place every now and then, resulting in the constriction or expansion of one or the other. They would vary according to the spirit of the age. The enduring vitality of orthodox tradition is borne out by changes in emphasis among the innovative and consolidating elements.

The rise of mystics in every generation and region helped in fertilising the spirit behind rituals and formalities of observance. Men of God were not regarded as heretics or enemies of an established church. From their own experiences they were allowed to verify and interpret the spiritual realisations recorded in ancient texts. Perhaps belief in the technique of *yoga* as no uncertain means to God-realisation helped to invest mystics with authority.

The protests of Jainism and Buddhism went farther in that they repudiated the *Vedas* and the religious and social tradition based on them. But, in practice, they were unable to overthrow the existing system and replace it by something else. Only some minor achievements were registered such as a fairly successful drive against animal sacrifices and the admission of men of all castes and women to ascetic orders. But the stress on compassion in their ethical codes, their ideals of social service, their comparative freedom from rituals and traditional religious discipline and their opposition to social stratification left an abiding influence on society. The movement of Hindu revival which left them ineffective in India, assimilated some of their values so as to wean prospective converts away from them.

Thus, when Śrī Rāmānuja was born, a revived Hinduism was flourishing both in the north and the south. Kumārila had championed the cause of the much attacked rituals based on the *Vedas*. His writings helped them to regain dignity, but a new age of sacrifices was not inaugurated. Śrī Śaṅkara's successful attack on the philosophical basis of Buddhism and Jainism had evolved a battery of replies to their formidable logic. The epics and the *purāṇas* had more than countered the glamour of Buddha and Mahāvīra with the help of their stories of divine incarnations and the blessings received through grace by devotees of Viṣṇu and Śiva. Temples were becoming more and more

popular, in spite of a supercilious attitude shown towards them by some sections of the intelligentsia.

So far as the spiritual needs of the masses were concerned, the orthodox position was not very encouraging, though room was left for vague hopes and there was a general tendency to recognise and honour authentic mystics, irrespective of their social status. The official theory about eligibility to salvation, according to *Ādvaita Vedānta*, would have been to limit it to such Brahmins as were ascetics and had realised *Brahman*. Others could hope for it only after a series of births bringing them to this position. Such a view was not without logical weakness, as Śrī Rāmānuja points out in the *Srībhāṣya*; and it must have been further undermined by Śrī Śaṅkara's noble acceptance, in his *Maniṣāpañcaka*, of any one, whether Brahmin or outcaste, as his *guru*, if he had authentic experience of *Brahman* as the sole reality. Nevertheless, the orthodox insistence on the way to *Brahman* being through the study of the *Vedas* (including the *Upaniṣads*) with all the restrictions imposed on it, must have left in an inferior position the majority who would not or could not study the *Vedas*. Most of them would have found *Nirguṇa Brahman* unattractive. Satisfaction of their religious needs through listening to the exposition of epics and *purāṇas* and worshipping at the temples might not have helped them to be sure of the highest spiritual good of salvation.

Śrī Śaṅkara having reasserted the claims of the *Vedānta* against Buddhism, his successors had to deal with the problem of consolidating the philosophy of *Advaita* and of providing to the masses spiritual pabulum similar to that of popular Buddhism which had declined to a negligible position. The rigid separation in *Advaita* between *Saguṇa Brahman* and *Nirguṇa Brahman*, between empirical reality and absolute reality,

tended to keep philosophy and religion apart. The beliefs and religious activities of the people were apt to be regarded with condescension as suitable only to less advanced souls.

Alternatives to *Advaita* began to emerge from the time of Bhāskara. And when we come to Yāmuna, we find an endeavour to harmonise philosophy with popular religion. In his *Siddhitraya*, he interpreted Upaniṣadic texts so as to support a realistic view of the world and to enjoin devotion to a personal God as the means to salvation. He composed a brief summary of the *Gītā*. In his lofty and moving *Stotraratna*, he gave poetic expression to the harmony of philosophy and religion. The *Āgamaprāmāṇyā* was written to make worship in temples a part of the highest religion. He continued his grandfather's efforts to institute the recitation of the Tamil hymns of the Āzhvārs in temples and to deliver discourses on them. Tradition records Śrī Rāmānuja's differences with his views in regard to some stanzas of the *Tiruvāymozhi*.¹²

But one thing he left for his more famous successor, and that was the writing of a commentary on the *Brahmasūtras*, representing the tradition of the theistic interpretation of the *Upaniṣads* and pinpointing the deviations from Śrī Saṅkara's views. While his scholarship was extensive and skill in philosophical polemics outstanding, he perhaps felt that a closer study of the writers of the theistic tradition was needed to make a new commentary on the *Brahmasūtras* take its stand by the side of Śrī Saṅkara's. Anyhow, this work was not undertaken by him, and it is said that it was one of the unfulfilled ambitions of his life. He failed to write a detailed commentary on the *Gītā* also, although his *Gītārthasaṅgraha* shows that he must have carefully studied the entire text and analysed it thoroughly.

Not only by precept but by example also Yāmuna showed that he belonged to the liberal tradition. One of his disciples,

Kāñcīpūrṇa, was a Vaiśya mystic who is said to have been in communion with the Lord as enshrined in the temple at Kāñcī under the name of Varadarāja. Another, Māraneri Nambi, was an untouchable. They were among those who helped Śrī Rāmānuja to determine his code of social behaviour. Disrespect shown to Kāñcīpūrṇa by Śrī Rāmānuja's wife was one of the reasons that led him to *sānnyāsa*. Another reason was her reluctance to give food to a hungry man when food was available in the house.¹³ The performance by Mahāpūrṇa of Māraneri Nambi's funeral as of one who had realised *Brahman* led to an interesting discussion between him and Śrī Rāmānuja where he explained and defended his action.¹⁴

However, the liberal tradition transmitted to Śrī Rāmānuja by the disciples of Yāmuna had to function within the limits of orthodoxy as defined by Vedic authority and *Smārta* tradition. In his *Sribhāṣya*, he upholds the restrictions placed on the quest of *Brahman* by those not entitled to study the *Vedas*. The *Apasūdrādhikaraṇa* (1.3.33-39) takes this view on the ground that the study of the *Vedas* is held to be necessary for the quest, and that this study is not available to the Śūdra according to the *Smṛtis*.

The context requires the clearing up of an incidental doubt that may arise after it is concluded that the gods are qualified to seek *Brahman* because they have the capacity and are suppliants for the quest. The doubt is that all human beings have these two qualifications, and hence the restrictions placed on some of them cannot be valid. Śrī Saṅkara and Śrī Rāmānuja take up more or less the same stand in the matter. The incidents relating to King Jānaśruti who is called a Śūdra by his preceptor and Satyakāma who does not know his lineage, are explained in such a way as to suit this conclusion. Though Jānaśruti is addressed as a Śūdra, the word is to be understood not in its

conventional sense of a member of a particular caste, but in its etymological sense of one fleeing from sorrow. As for Satyakāma, he is taught only after his preceptor infers that he must be a Brahmin. The case of Vidura, however, is exceptional. He must be deemed to remember what he learnt in a previous birth when he was qualified to study the *Vedas*. Instruction in the epics and the *purāṇas* can destroy sin ; but it cannot confer a privilege barred by the *Vedas* from which these works derive their authority. (*Sribhāṣya*, 1.3.33).

However, the argument here makes a serious, an almost fatal concession. It is not denied that those excluded from the study of the *Vedas* can have the desire to seek *Brahman*, and that in this they can benefit from the instruction allowed to them. Śrī Saṅkara indeed admits that the knowledge of *Brahman* must have arisen in Vidura, Dharmavyādha¹⁵ and others like them not entitled to study the *Vedas*, from memory of previous impressions, and that the effects of this knowledge are inevitable. Mention is also made in this connection of the fact that instruction in epics and *purāṇas* is open to the excluded category of persons. The implication here seems to be that Vidura and Dharmavyādha do not exhaust the possibility of the transcendence of caste in the quest of *Brahman*. It is possible that Śrī Rāmānuja has this in mind as well as attacks on him for not being cent per cent orthodox¹⁶, when he suggests that the *adhikaraṇa* is against the *Advaitins*, for the reason that knowledge of *rahman* as the sole reality can arise in many ways and not solely from the study of the *Vedas*. This, however, is no more than a debating point, for Śrī Rāmānuja made it his life's mission to see that the necessary continuance of the prohibition of the study of the *Vedas* in deference to tradition did not bar the majority of the people from treading the path to spiritual progress and from the attainment of God.

The *Gītā* comes to his aid in this mission. K. T. Telang, in his introduction to his translation in the Sacred Books of the East series, reaches the conclusion that the *Gītā*, while not rejecting caste, undermines it. This is mentioned only to indicate the flexible stand of the *Gītā* on this issue. Śrī Kṛṣṇa declares that He created the system of four castes in accordance with the qualities of men and the functions appropriate to them and that He is not only the maker, but also the non-maker of the system (IV. 13). Women, Śūdras and even men of sinful birth can reach the supreme goal by finding refuge in Śrī Kṛṣṇa. Sinners, once they developed devotion to Him, would become righteous very soon (IX. 30-32). Members of all the four castes are assured of the attainment of supreme beatitude by the performance of such duties as are determined by their qualities (XVIII. 41, 45-6).

Apart from these plain statements about the extension of spiritual franchise to all men and women, there are others in the *Gītā* which, according to Śrī Rāmaṇuja, imply that all persons, without distinction of caste or sex, can follow certain kinds of *karma-yoga* and *bhakti-yoga*. In IV. 28, a variety of *karma-yogins* are called *yoga-yajñas*, those who perform the sacrifice of union. According to Śrī Rāmaṇuja, they are those who undertake pilgrimages to sacred rivers and tanks and holy places. Yamuna has earlier defined *karma-yoga* as resorting to penance, sacred rivers, alms-giving, performance of sacrifices and such other things (*Gītārtha-saṅgraha*, 23). The definition is wide enough to accomodate activities for which a study of the *Vedas* is not an essential preliminary. Similarly, it is held that in XII. 10 when Śrī Kṛṣṇa speaks of '*mat-karma*', He refers to such activities as building temples, making gardens for them, sweeping, sprinkling water over and plastering the floor of the temples, placing lights in the shrines, gathering flowers for worship, uttering God's names, circumambulating temples,

praising God and prostrating before the shrines. These are deemed to be the sprout of *bhakti-yoga*.¹⁷

Against this background, it is amusing to find some Western scholars showing obvious reluctance to admit any liberal or humanitarian teaching in the *Gītā*. Dr. van Buitenen suspects that the salvation promised to women, Śūdras and persons of sinful birth in IX. 32 has to be attained in the distant future through a series of births. Eligibility to the final freedom of the soul is, according to him, held by Hinduism to be the prerogative of the higher castes. Dr. Zaehner protests against the humanitarian twist given by Śrī Saṅkara and Śrī Rāmānuja to the statement in VI. 32 that the *yogin* looks upon the joys and sorrows of others as his own. He also lays down that eternal damnation is taught in the sixteenth chapter. A great tradition like the Hindu *dharma* and teachers like Śrī Rāmānuja cannot be put into the straight jackets devised for them by Western critics.

The 'humanitarian twist', the conviction that final release is available universally and the realisation that all are equal in the eyes of God, formed part of the daily staple of religious instruction among the followers of Śrī Rāmānuja. A commentary on the *Tiruvāymozhi* of Nammāzhvār which should be dated within a hundred years of Śrī Rāmānuja,¹⁸ relates that Nañjīyar said that one could make a simple test to see whether one was a true Vaiṣṇava or not. If he felt pity and sympathy at the sufferings of others, he was a Vaiṣṇava. If he felt indifferent or perversely happy, he was not (*Īdu*, 1.2.1). This Nañjīyar was a disciple of Parāśara Bhaṭṭa, a son of Śrīvatsānka Miśra (or Kūreśa) who was the favourite disciple of Śrī Rāmānuja. Nañjīyar must have been passing on a traditional definition of the Vaiṣṇava. After all, we have in the *purāṇas* cases like the universal charity of Rantideva or Prahlāda's inability to think of anyone as an enemy.¹⁹

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In Śrī Rāmānuja's life the most memorable instance of the identification of others' miseries as his own is his proclaiming a secret teaching, after promising to pass it on only to a few deserving pupils. Reprimanded by the preceptor for breaking his promise, he said that he deliberately sought hell in order to help in the redemption of so many others. Amazed by the wide inclusiveness of Śrī Rāmānuja's sympathies, the preceptor called him "Emberumānar", a word which can be roughly translated as "our greater Lord". This was intended to show that Śrī Rāmānuja's compassion seemed to exceed that of God, blasphemous though the thought might appear at first sight.

There is ambiguity about the secret teaching broadcast by Śrī Rāmānuja. The *Guruparamparā* account makes it out to be the *aṣṭākṣari mantra*, while Vara Vara Muni's commentary on Lokācārya's *Mumukṣupaṇḍi* seems to identify it with the *caramaśloka* (*Gītā* XVIII. 66, regarded as Śrī Kṛṣṇa's last words on His teachings). It has to be borne in mind that both of them are included in the *rahasyatraya*, the triad of 'mysteries' of which the other constituent unit is the *dvaya mantra*. Instruction in all the three is an essential part of the system of religious and spiritual education organised by Śrī Rāmānuja. It is given to all without distinction of caste or sex, along with an initiation.²⁰ In thus broadcasting secret teachings, Śrī Rāmānuja made a revolutionary innovation. The only qualification he prescribed for receiving instruction (or initiation) was a desire to be taught. Vara Vara Muni, writing about 1400 in his *Upadeśartanamālai* (37), refers to Śrī Rāmānuja breaking traditional bounds and regulations.

Śrī Rāmānuja's strenuous efforts to make the masses realise that God is as easily accessible to them as to the hermit, ascetic, *yogin* or scholar, are in conformity with scriptural dicta and sanctioned usage. Forms of worship involving the

study of the *Vedas* or the recitation of Vedic *mantras* may be restricted to a few. But they are not the only way of approach to God. The *Upaniṣads* refer to *prapatti* directly and indirectly. It is a term which is generally taken to mean 'self-surrender (to God)' or 'seeking refuge (in God)'. In effect, this is reliance on the grace of God, making God Himself the means of attainment. He is both the means and the object to be attained, both the way and the goal. His freedom of choice in bestowing grace cannot be questioned. This need not be taken to be a denial of the moral law or relegating it to irrelevance ; but it is supplementing and completing ethics. God's compassion cannot be treated as an evil or anti-moral attribute. Behind such *Upaniṣad* dicta as "The *Ātman* is attainable by him who is chosen" and "Desirous of final freedom, I seek refuge" (*Kaṭhōpaniṣad*, II. 23., *Svetāśvatara*, IV. 15), there lies an assertion of the omnipotence of grace. When God becomes the means, nothing can stand in the way of attainment. If the burden of sin weighs upon an aspirant or a feeling of unworthiness afflicts him, as it ought to do, he can take hope from the limitlessness of grace. The obligation of becoming worthy of divine grace rests upon every one, but this cannot affect the fact that grace is unconditioned. The efforts of the finite to attain the Infinite can never be adequate; but the Infinite can save, of its own accord.

Even this summary of the doctrine of salvation through grace bristles with the logical conundrums that have led to subtle polemics. That Śrī Rāmaṇuja taught it both by precept and example as a message of hope and cheer to all men cannot be questioned. His prose prayers (*Gādyas*) show the practice of *prapatti*. In them he throws himself at God's mercy after representing himself as burdened by innumerable sins of commission and omission, and at the end declares that he has received an assurance of redemption through grace. Some

recent attempts to question Śrī Rāmānuja's authorship of these prayers can be—and have been—shown to be untenable.²¹

Just as there has been a tradition about *karma*, *jñāna* and *bhakti*, there has been one about *prapatti* too. Its development and elaboration from its Vedic roots can be seen in the epics, the *purāṇas*, the *Āgamas* and the hymns of the Āzhvārs. Rāma and Kṛṣṇa are shown as incarnations of God, descending to the world through compassion and exercising grace freely. The *Āgamas* elaborately analyse *prapatti* and recommend seeking refuge with God, particularly in temples. The Āzhvārs sing of the glory of grace and surrender themselves to His incarnations in various shrines. Yāmuna in his *Stotra-ratna* offers the model of an aspirant throwing himself at the feet of God, and Śrī Rāmānuja in his own way follows that precedent.

In its social implications, the doctrine of *prapatti* erased caste distinctions in the quest for God. Lokacārya in his *Srīvacanabhūṣaṇa* points out that no one is disqualified from *prapatti*. The epics and the *purāṇas* mention a crow and an elephant being saved by grace, not to speak of a Rākṣasa like Vibhiṣaṇa. In the *Gītā*, (X. 30) Śrī Kṛṣṇa declares that He is Prahlāda among the demonic Daityas. The Āzhvārs belonged to all castes from the Brahmin to the untouchable. The observance of ritualistic purity is shown to be irrelevant. And thus we come to the conclusion that there is no distinction between high and low, between touchable and untouchable, in the need for the quest for divine grace.

This theoretical statement was followed in practice. Yāmuna's untouchable disciple, Māraneri Nambi, visited a newly constructed hall to be used for religious discourses: it was deemed equivalent to consecration. And his funeral, as already mentioned, was conducted by a Brahmin disciple of

Yāmuna in the manner prescribed for those who have experienced God. In the temples, all castes freely mixed, though the untouchables could only worship the idol from a distance when taken in procession. The *Āgamas* lay down that it is sinful to observe 'touch pollution' during visits to temples and participation in the temple festivals.²² It may also be added that Śrī Rāmānuja threw open the doors of the Nārāyaṇa temple at Melkote (constructed by a Hoysala King at his instance) to untouchables for three days in a year.²³ They are given the name of 'Tirukkulattār' (men of noble lineage), and other castes are enjoined to mix with them during these three days. In the temples, again, commensality is insisted on at the time of the distribution of food offered to God.

Thus, Śrī Rāmānuja, on the authority of the *Vedas*, *Upaniṣads*, *epiś*, *purāṇas*, hymns of the Āzhvārs and the usage of distinguished teachers of the past, established the irrelevance of caste in the case of one having spiritual illumination. Caste is also treated as having only a limited application in the quest for grace. Among the later teachers owing allegiance to Śrī Rāmānuja, Lokācārya held that caste became extinct with the advent of enlightenment ;²⁴ while Vedānta Deśika thought that it persisted even then to a limited extent.²⁵

These theoretical differences did not affect the affirmation of the spiritual equality of all men and women, though caste rules and traditions in regard to the study of the *Vedas*, inter-marriages, interdining and other such matters were regarded as binding. But the sting was taken out of the social distinctions by the organisation of Śrī Rāmānuja's followers as a brotherhood of *Bhūgavatas* (devotees of God) who were equal to one another in the temple, in receiving religious initiation from preceptors, in studying the hymns of the Āzhvārs which were judged to be the *Vedas* in Tamil, and in offering and receiving service from one

another. Social service was specially stressed by Śrī Rāmānuja as a fulfilment of devotion to God.²⁶

Institutionally, Śrī Rāmānuja completed a task begun by Śrī Saṅkara and furthered by Yāmuna—harmonising temple worship with orthodoxy. Śrī Saṅkara upheld (*Brahma Sūtras* II. 2.42) the teachings of the *Pāñcarātra Āgama* governing the usages in temples, except in regard to a doctrine attributed to it about the individual self being created.²⁷ Yāmuna denied in his *Āgamaprāmāṇyā* that this doctrine was held: he further took note of the calumnies and criticisms against the *Āgama* and refuted them thoroughly. Śrī Rāmānuja's *Śrībhāṣya* (II.2.39-42) shows the *Pāñcarātra* to have the approval of Vyāsa.

Śrī Rāmānuja also instituted regular courses on the epics, *purāṇas* and the hymns of the Āzhvārs to spread spiritual education. All were welcome to listen and to question. For giving initiation, he authorised 74 disciples most of whom were householders.²⁸ He made it clear that while he himself was a *sannyāsin*, that *āśrama* was not necessary to be a teacher of religion and to offer initiation. He provided immense scope through such institutions for the growth of piety and zeal.

It may thus be seen that Śrī Rāmānuja's concern for social amelioration rose from his felt conviction that all men are embodied souls with God within as the *Antaryāmin*, the Internal Controller. The Vaiṣṇavas were asked to prostrate before one another because God was within everyone of them. The economic status of the different castes could have evoked only marginal interest from Śrī Rāmānuja. In his days, the Brahmins were vowed to poverty and the Vaiśyas alone were expected to amass wealth. But the rich were bidden to give alms and gifts generously. And the village economy tried hard to eliminate starvation. Free food available in temples also helped.²⁹ The emoluments of temple servants, most of whom

belonged to the lower castes, also improved under Śrī Rāmānuja's guidance.³⁰

Śrī Rāmānuja's approach to social inequality was radical in that it was based on the vision of the presence of God in every one. Once this realisation became widespread, there could be no room for pride of birth or ill-treatment of those supposed to be of inferior lineage. In fact, Lokacārya states that high birth may be a hindrance rather than a help in the pilgrimage to Heaven, as it encourages the vice of egoism.³¹ Vedānta Deśika's teaching that *prapatti* is for those who feel unequal to the practice of other means of realising God, is only academically different. For he makes it clear that, except for a few possible exceptions, all men are unfit and that they are fit only for the practice of *prapatti*.

This radical approach of Śrī Rāmānuja made itself felt far and wide. He rehabilitated devotion to God as philosophically valid and further showed that God's grace alone mattered. Other children of light felt the impact of the message directly or indirectly. It is significant that Rāmānanda who started religious and social reform on a large scale in North India in the Middle Ages, had been originally a member of Śrī Rāmānuja's sect. And through him the message of spiritual equality, of the efficacy of *bhakti* and *prapatti*, spread far and wide. It produced a ferment which had far-reaching consequences and has not still exhausted itself of its powers to uplift.

Śrī Rāmānuja's reforms have endured, because they did not seek to destroy tradition and to write on a non-existent clean slate. Tradition was not in need of destruction, he would have said, but only of fulfilment. In simplifying rituals and teachings, he was not only innovating, but also recalling the example of an earlier age with no complex rules or ceremonies. His great achievement lies in making a creative use of tradition for

bringing about social harmony through the recognition of spiritual equality and without undermining religion. Service to God and fellow men was what he preached and practised. And we need not hesitate to join in the chorus of his followers in temples who chant every day, "May the divine message of Rāmānuja spread to all quarters. For it is intended for the good of all the world."³²

NOTES

1. Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* I. 51-63.
2. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, III. 8.
3. *Ibid.* IV. 5.
4. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, IV. 4.
5. *Ibid.* IV. 1-3.
6. See *Mahābhārata*, IV. 28. Also, V. 11, 34-40 ; XII. 165 etc.
7. See Jaimini's *Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā Sūtras*, VI. I. 44-50 ; VI. 1. 51-2.
8. *purā kalpe tu nārīṇām māuñjibandhanam ucyate.*
9. *vedān adhyāpayāmāsa mahābhārata-pañcamān.* In the epic itself there are statements claiming that it is equal to or superior to the *Vedas*. Such eulogy is given by other *purāṇas* also.
10. *śrāvayeccaturo varṇān kṛtvā brāhmaṇam agrataḥ* (*Mahābhārata*, XII. 335.48).
11. *Rāmāyaṇa*, I, i ; VI. 131.
12. *Guruparaṃparā-prābhāvā* of Pinbazhhiya Perumāl. Jiyar : various places in *Iḍu* (commentary on *Tiruvāymozhi*).
13. *Guruparaṃparā-prābhāvā.*
14. *Ibid.*, also Lokācārya's *Śrīvacanabhūṣaṇa*, 234.
15. Though a member of a hunting tribe he was famous for his spiritual wisdom. (*Mahābhārata*, *Vanaparvan*, cex, ff.) Śrī Saṅkara's *bhāṣya* on *Brahmasūtrās* (I. 3.38) brackets him with Vidura as having knowledge of

Brahman. Lokācārya describes him as one at whose doors sages waited to have their doubts cleared (*Śrīvacanabhūṣaṇa*, 231.)

16. Criticism of this kind asserts that Śrī Rāmānuja's system has little or no support in the *Upaniṣads* and that it is based primarily on works of inferior authority like the *Gītā*, the epics and the *pūrāṇas*—not to speak of the Tamil hymns of Āzhvārs which are not accepted outside the circle of Śrīvaiṣṇavas as having any sanctity of the kind attached to the *Vedas*. A recent illustration is a small book, written by an Advaitic Pandit, Sri Polaham Rāma Sāstrigal, seeking to prove the untenable thesis that the Dramiḍācārya quoted by Śrī Rāmānuja was none other than Nammāzhvār and not the ancient *ācārya* recognized by Śrī Saṅkara.
17. *Gītābhāṣya* (XII. 11).
18. The *Idu* contains the exposition of *Tiruvāymozhi* by Nambillai as taken down by his disciple, Vaḍakku-t-tiruvidi Pillai. Nambillai was taught by Nañjīyar. The line of succession of teachers will run thus: Rāmānuja—Parāśara Bhaṭṭa—Nañjīyar—Nambillai—Vaḍakku-t-tiruvidi Pillai.
19. King Rantideva, giving away the last morsel of food and last drop of water to guests, prays :

na kāmaye' haṁ gatim iśvarāt parām aṣṭarḍdhiyuktām
apunarbhavam vā: ārtim prāpadye'kḥiladehabhājām
antaḥsthito yena bhavanty aduḥkāḥ.

(*Bhāgavata*, IX. 21.12.) He does not seek celestial glory or wealth or *mokṣa*, he prays that he may relieve the miseries of all by entering their hearts to experience them. Prahlāda, the son of Hiranyakaśipu, the *Asura* emperor, is questioned by his father as to what he has learnt from studies in statecraft as to how to behave towards friends, foes and neutrals. He rejects the instruction given thereon and asks :

sarva-bhūtātmake tāta jagannāthe jaganmaye,
paramātmani govinde mitrāmitra-kathā kutaḥ ?

(*Viśṇupurāṇa* I. 19. 37). When the Lord pervades the universe and is the soul of all souls, he wonders, what is the point in talking about friends and enemies ?

20. "The *pañcasamskāra* is open to all those who wish to become Śrivaishnavas, not excluding the *pañcamas*" (Dr. N. Jagadisan, *History of Sri Vaishnavism in the Tamil Country*, p. 332). The *pañca-samskāra* consists of five rituals constituting initiation. It includes the teaching of the *mantras* referred to. Whether or not these rites were widely practised in regard to the *Pañcamas*, they were open to women and members of all castes.
21. Prof. S. S. Raghavachar, in a contribution to the *Sri Venkateswara University Journal* entitled, "Dr. J. A. van Buitenen and Dr. Lester on the *Gītā*", has demonstrated these doubts to be utterly without foundation. The present writer has also dealt with the subject in an essay on '*Rāmānuja and Prapatti*' in "Dr. V. Raghavan 61st Birthday Commemoration Volume".
22. Vedānta Deśika quotes *Āgama* texts which denounce the observance of 'touch' pollution in temples :
 śvapaçān patitān vāpi spr̥ṣṭvā na snānam ācaret
 It is declared that such observance will throw into hell the souls of the ancestors of the persons observing it :
 Yat snāti śparśa-śaṅkhayā svargasthāḥ pitaras
 tasya patanti narake kṣaṇāt.
23. *Guruparamparā-prabhāva*; *Sthalapurāṇa* of Tirunārāyaṇapuram. One of the 108 names of Sampatkumāra worshipped at the temple is *ā-caṇḍāla-vimuktidaḥ*. It testifies to the custom of allowing *Pañcamas* to enter the temple during the last three days of the annual *Brahmotsava*. Even now, members of this caste make an annual pilgrimage to Melkote at this time of the year, even though their disabilities have been removed from 1940's.
24. *Śrīvacanabhūṣaṇa*, 199-220.
25. "The qualities of caste pertaining to the body which are due to some special qualities of the body arise even at the time of birth and remain till death. The Brahmin-like qualities which arise out of the preponderance of *sattva* in the mind may be present in all castes...Owing to the Brahmin-like qualities (of the mind) and the like, the attainment of the supreme

end of life and the *upāyas* therefor and also such things as eulogy may be found in all castes". (*Rahasyatrayasāra*, ch : 25, p : 306, M. R. Rajagopala Iyengar's translation, 1956).

26. Service to the *Bhāgavatas* or devotees of God is stressed by the Āzhvārs as the fulfilment of devotion to God. Vide, for example, Nammāzhvār's *Tiruvāymozhi*, (VIII. X). Śrī Rāmānuja's *Gādyas* refer to this. The teaching was further developed by teachers of both the southern and northern schools among the followers of Śrī Rāmānuja.
27. Śrī Śaṅkara delivers his verdict on the *Pāñcarātra* system under *Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya* (II. 2. 42) :
 yattad ucyate yo'sau Nārāyaṇaḥ paro' vyaktāt
 prasiddhaḥ paramātmā sarvātmā sa ātmanātmānam
 anekadhā vyūhyavasthīta itī, tanna nirākriyate :...
 yadapī tasya bhagavato ' bhigamanādīlakṣaṇam
 ārādhānam ajasram ananyacittatayā abhipreyate,
 tadapī na pratiṣidyate...na Vāsudeva-samjñakāt
 paramātmanaḥ Śaṅkarsaṇa-samjñakasya
 jīvasyotpattiḥ sambhavatī...asangataiṣā kalpanā.
28. *Guruparamparā-prabhāva*.
29. The temple had an important economic and social role, when it served as the granary, the bank, the theatre and the club, in addition to providing satisfaction to religious needs. Its festivals attracted people from far and wide and stimulated economic activities. From the food offerings made daily, a portion was set apart for free distribution. Even now, there are lingering traces of provision for food to people from other places. The staff of the temple also sell at a cheap price their shares of the offerings.
30. *Kovil Ozhuhu* gives details of the reforms in temple administration carried out by Śrī Rāmānuja at Śrīrangam.
31. *Śrīvacanabhūṣana* (212-16).
32. One of the verses used in the temples after the recital of the *prabandha* is concluded for the day, runs thus :
 Rāmānujārya-divyājñā pratīvāsaram ujjvalā,
 diganta-vyāpinī bhūyāt, sā hi lokahitaiṣiṇī.