

Secrets Lost
By Keshav Srinivasan

It was a solemn day in Sri Rangam. Everyone on the island waited on pins and needles to hear the news. It would not be long now until a great man would be departing the Earth. Rama Mishra, or Manakkal Nambi as he was affectionately known in Tamil, was not the chief priest of the Ranganatha temple which made Sri Rangam famous. Nor was he the mighty Chola emperor who ruled Sri Rangam. Yet to the people on the island and the surrounding area, he was even more important. He was the leader of a tiny religious community known as the Sri Vaishnavas. The first Sri Vaishnava Acharya, Nathamuni, had only come to Sri Rangam a century ago, and yet in that short time the entire population of the island including the priests of the Ranganatha temple themselves had become devout followers of the sect. And now their beloved leader Rama Mishra was leaving them.

The pain of Rama Mishra's imminent departure afflicted no one as deeply as it did Yamuna, Rama Mishra's chief disciple who was sitting in the Ranganatha temple, praying intensely as his master's head lay in his lap. Yamuna could tell his master was only sleeping, but was keenly aware that that could change at any moment. For a moment he heard a pause in his master's breathing, which startled him, but his mind was set at ease when he saw Rama Mishra opening his eyes and beginning to speak. "Yamuna," Rama Mishra said. "I am so close to Paramapadam that I can already feel Sriman Narayana's feet on my head. Soon your inheritance will be yours," he said with a faint smile. That line carried special meaning for Yamuna. "And I have full faith that you will guard it well. But I must tell you something. There is something that you must do, something which I could not in all my years as Acharya." "What is it, Gurudeva?" Yamuna asked. Rama Mishra took a deep breath and started to speak.

"Yamuna, your grandfather Nathamuni, who started the mighty Sri Vaishnava sect, did not just publish a book of poetry as you might have thought. He also wrote philosophical works, of such beauty as the world has never seen. One of them was the Yoga Rahasya, which teaches secret techniques of attaining Moksha through meditating on Vishnu." Yamuna was stunned; how did he not know of his own grandfather's work? "Why did you not teach it to me, Gurudeva?" he said. "Yamuna, I do not even know it myself. Your grandfather was going to teach it to my master Pundarikaksha, but Pundarikaksha refused to learn it, saying 'When there is a corpse, how can there be a marriage?'" "What does that mean, Gurudeva?" Yamunacharya asked, confused. Rama Mishra explained, "It means 'When there is so much tragedy of souls suffering in Samsara, how can I alone unite with Vishnu and attain Moksha?' That is how compassionate my master was, willing to forego Moksha himself just to help other achieve it. Your grandfather applauded him for his noble heart, and taught him the poems of the Alwars instead, that way Pundarikaksha could get Moksha not only for himself but also for all those who heard the poems from him. These divine poems are what Pundarikaksha taught me, and what I have taught you." "And you have taught me well," Yamunacharya said with a smile. "But Yamuna, there is still something left out of your education: the Yoga Rahasya. My master Pundarikaksha never regretted his decision to learn the Alwars' poems, but in his deathbed, he worried that the Yoga Rahasya might be lost forever. So he instructed me to learn the Yoga Rahasya somehow, so that it is preserved for future generations of Sri Vaishnavas. And so now the responsibility falls on you to learn your grandfather's work." "But Gurudeva, if Pundarikaksha never learnt it from Nathamuni, how could the Yoga Rahasya possibility still exist?" "Yamuna, Pundarikaksha was not your grandfather's only disciple, though he was certainly his chief disciple. But when Pundarikaksha refused to learn the Yoga Rahasya, Nathamuni did not give up. Instead he

taught it to a minor disciple of his, Kurukadhipa. You must find Kurukadhipa and learn the Yoga Rahasya from him, both for the sake of future Sri Vaishnavas and for the sake of preserving your grandfather's legacy. I tried to do it myself, but I failed for some reason. Perhaps there are other plans in the mind of Sriman Narayana."

With the word "Narayana", Rama Mishra let out his last breath. Yamuna gasped as he looked upon the serene face of his master on his lap. Acchi, the young disciple of Rama Mishra who had been holding up his feet, started sobbing uncontrollably. Yamuna slowly got up and turned to face the magnificent Ranganatha statue. He recalled the line Rama Mishra had said earlier: "Soon your inheritance will be yours." Yamuna thought back to his younger days. His grandfather Nathamuni had been a Sri Vaishnava Acharya, but through a strange twist of fate Yamuna had become king of half the Pandya empire, and lived his life with no memory of the glories of the Sri Vaishnava sect. But then one day, a kind-hearted Sanyasi came to his court, saying "My name is Rama Mishra, and I am your grandfather Nathamuni's disciple's disciple. Nathamuni left you a large inheritance, and I wanted to give it to you." At this point in his life Yamuna loved nothing more than gold, and he demanded to see it immediately. Rama Mishra told him the treasure was too big to carry, but offered to take him to it. Yamuna agreed, and Rama Mishra took him to the beautiful island of Sri Rangam, in the middle of the Kaveri river, and showed him the Ranganatha statue. "This is your inheritance," Rama Mishra said, and at that moment everything changed for Yamuna. Seeing the beauty of Vishnu lying down on the serpent Adishesha, Yamuna saw realized that nothing in the entire world was more meaningful than the service of Vishnu. He immediately gave up all desire for being king and became a faithful disciple of Rama Mishra.

Now looking at the same Ranganatha statue all these years later, Yamuna saw the required course of action clearly. First he consoled Acchi, who was still holding the feet of Rama Mishra and sobbing. "Cry not, Achi, for this is not an occasion for mourning. Our beloved master has gone to Paramapadam, and is paving a way for us to join him there. We must rejoice at that. You must show strength to the people of Sri Rangam to help them through this time, especially in my absence." Acchi wiped away his tears and said "Absence? Where are you going at a time like this, Yamuna? We must conduct his last rites, and then we must install as you as the next Sri Vaishnava Acharya." "All of that can wait, Acchi. Our master's wishes take priority over such formalities. I am going to find Kurukadhipa and learn the Yoga Rahasya immediately." "But how will you ever find Kurukadhipa, if he is even still alive? It has been so many years." Yamunacharya paused for a moment, and then said "Acchi, do you not know how my grandfather Nathamuni departed the Earth? The Chola king once visited Sri Rangam, and my grandfather somehow confused the Chola king and his retinue for Rama, Lakshmana, Sita, and Hanuman. So he ran after the Chola king, following him all the way to his capital of Gangaikonda Cholapuram. That is where Nathamuni finally collapsed and departed the Earth." "Yes, I have heard that beautiful story, which illustrates just how much your grandfather's thoughts revolved around Sriman Narayana. But what does it have to do with finding Kurukadhipa?" "Kurukadhipa accompanied Nathamuni as he ran after the Chola king. In fact he is the one who performed last rites for my grandfather. And then he never returned to Sri Rangam. So I am going to Gangaikonda Cholapuram to find out what happened to Kurukadhipa. Someone at the court of the Chola king may know where he went after that."

Before Acchi could raise any more objections, Yamuna rushed out of the temple. That left Acchi with a solemn task. He went to the temple courtyard, where the people of Sri Rangam had assembled anxious to find out the fate of their leader. Acchi began with a heavy heart. "I must

announce to you all today that Rama Mishra, whom you all know as Manakkal Nambi, has gone to Paramapadam. This is not an occasion for mourning, but a time to rejoice," he said, trying to parrot what Yamuna had told him. The townspeople let out an audible gasp. "And who will be Manakkal Nambi's replacement?" Asked the chief priest of the temple, tears running down his face. "It will be Yamuna", Acchi said. "And where is Yamuna?" a woman shouted. "He will be back soon," Acchi said with a gulp as he watched Yamuna riding away in the distance.

Yamuna rode to Gangaikonda Cholapuram as quickly as his horse would allow. Time was of the essence, as he needed to get back to Sri Rangam as soon as possible to deal with the townspeople and the rituals. He rode all day and all night, until he reached the grove on the outskirts of Gangaikonda Cholapuram where Nathamuni had departed the Earth. He had just stopped there to pay his respects to his grandfather, before proceeding to the Chola court, but he was shocked to notice an ancient Yogi who was sitting deep in meditation in the exact spot where his grandfather had departed the Earth. Curious, Yamuna quietly approached the Yogi, but then he was startled when the Yogi suddenly started to speak. "Someone from Sottai Kulam is here," the Yogi said, without even opening his eyes. Yamuna was shocked. Sottai Kulam was the name of Nathamuni's family. "How could you know what family I am from without even opening your eyes?" Yamunacharya asked, incredulous. "Because when I meditate upon Vishnu, he stays with me no matter what. Even if Lakshmi herself comes, Vishnu never leaves myself. But when you came, Vishnu left me and went to you. And I know of only one person in all the worlds who has such pure devotion that not only him but all his descendants are dearer to Vishnu than Lakshmi herself. And that is Nathamuni, whose devotion is not directed to Moksha or any other goal, and whose thoughts revolves so much around Sriman Narayana that he mistook a Chola king for Rama. It is that Nathamuni whom I followed until he attained Paramapadam in this place, after which I performed last rites for that great soul, and since then I have been meditating upon Vishnu here. You must be his descendant." Yamuna responded, "Yes, I am Yamuna, grandson of Nathamuni, and I am here to learn my grandfather's Yoga Rahasya." Kurukadhipa replied, "I would be more than happy to teach you the Yoga Rahasya, for it is your birthright as a descendant of Nathamuni. But I can only teach it at a very auspicious time. That is the time right before I leave my body." Yamuna was confused "Am I to wait here until then?" Kurukadhipa laughed and said "No, I shall leave my body many years from now. I have already planned the exact time and date. Come back at that time and your grandfather's teaching shall be yours." Yamuna wrote down the time and date on a palm leaf, bowed down before Kurukadhipa, and then rushed back to Sri Rangam to fulfill his impending duties.

Decades passed, and Yamuna, now known as Yamunacharya, grew into a great leader. He expanded the Sri Vaishnava community far beyond the environs of Sri Rangam, and he composed many great poems and philosophical works to impart guidance and wisdom to the people. But he never lost sight of his first love, Sriman Narayana. Every morning, Yamunacharya would wake up and sit in front of the Ranganatha statue, watching as his now-grown son do his job in singing the divine poems of the Alwars. That was as close as he ever got to his son, for as a Sanyasi, he had to eschew contact with the family he had built in his deluded years as king. Still, as he watched his son melodiously sing poem of Nammalwar this morning, Yamunacharya could not help but feel a glimmer of warmth. "Vishnu, father of Kama," his son was singing, "is staying permanently at the divine place of Thiruvananthapuram. He is reclining on his serpent bed of Adishesha here." Yamunacharya knew the poem well, though he had never been to Thiruvananthapuram. His son continued "My dear ones, proceed toward this place." And then again he said with emphasis, "Proceed toward this place!" Yamunacharya

looked up, surprised. The poem did not contain a repetition of this line. What was going on? Did his son make a mistake? Or did something else happen at that moment.

This thought continued nagging Yamunacharya after the performance was over, but he did not want to speak to his son directly, as it would violate his Sanyasa. So instead he spoke to his son's master Devavari, the chief priest of the Ranganatha temple who was also a disciple of Yamunacharya. "I noticed something odd in the performance this morning," Yamunacharya began, but Devavari cut him off. "I noticed the same thing, Alavandar," Devavari said, using the old Tamil title Yamunacharya had been known by as king. "A line was sung twice in a poem of Nammalwar. Your son never makes a mistake in his singing, so I asked him about it afterwards. He said that he could not help himself, that he was not in control of his voice at that moment. He likened it to Saraswati taking over the voice of Kumbhakarna, forcing him to say something he did not intend to." Yamunacharya looked up at the Ranganatha statue and knew what he need to do. "Sriman Narayana is sending us a message," he said "For some reason he wants me to go to Thiruvananthapuram immediately. He just used my son as a messenger. So I shall leave for Kerala at once." "Then let me come with you." "No, Devavari, you are chief priest of the Ranganatha temple. Your work here is too important. You must stay here while I go to Kerala." Devavari began to cry. "But Alavandar," Devavari said, "I cannot bear being apart from you. You are my mother, father, master, and god. How can you leave me here?" "Worry not, Devavari," Yamunacharya said. "I shall be back soon enough."

Yamunacharya was gone before Devavari could say anything else, taking a retinue of followers with him as he set out for Kerala. It took them almost a week before they reached the glorious city of Thiruvananthapuram. Yamunacharya hurried into the majestic Padmanabhaswami temple, where he was greeted by the chief priest of the temple. "Welcome, king Alavandar," the priest said, before Yamunacharya corrected him. "I have not been a king for many years now. On the contrary, I have come here to follow the orders of the king of all kings, Sriman Narayana." The priest was perplexed, and said "And what does Sriman Narayana want you to do here?" It was a good question, and Yamunacharya began to ponder it, looking to the Padmabhaswami statue for guidance. It was a glorious statue, depicting Vishnu lying down on Adishesha just as his depicted in Sri Rangam. Suddenly a strange suspicion arose in Yamunacharya's mind, and he took out an old palm leaf he had kept in his robes for decades. Reading the time and date written on it, Yamunacharya came to a startling realization. It was now the exact time and date that Kurukadhipa was supposed to leave the Earth! Yamunacharya became distraught. Why would Sriman Narayana send him all the way to Kerala when he should be in Gangaikonda Cholapuram learning the Yoga Rahasya? "If I only had Rama's Pushpaksha Vimana," Yamunacharya exclaimed, his voice reverberating across the temple walls "I would fly to Gangaikonda Cholapuram immediately." With the vehicles he had at his disposal, though, there was nothing to be done. Kurukadhipa's body would be a week old before he could ever reach there. Why did Sriman Narayana send him to such a distant location?

Before he could ponder the matter further, a young boy barged into the temple. Yamunacharya recognized him as the son of his old friend Acchi. "Alavandar," the boy said, "My father sent me on horseback to deliver an urgent message to you. Your disciple Devavari is almost at the point of death. He has become inconsolable ever since you left Sri Rangam." Yamunacharya's chief disciple Mahapurna turned to his master and asked "What shall we do know, Gurudeva? Where shall we go?" Yamunacharya looked up the Padmanabhaswami statue again, and suddenly all became clear to him. He remembered his master Rama Mishra's last words: "Perhaps there are

other plans in the mind of Srīman Narayana." Yamunacharya now realized what that meant, thinking about his loyal disciple Devavari. There were so many people in need of help, struggling to get out of the ocean of Samsara, that Srīman Narayana did not want the wisest men to just meditate upon him and attain Moksha in isolation. Yamunacharya instructed Mahapurna, "Get the chariots read. We are going back to Sri Rangam immediately." "But Gurudeva, what about going to Gangaikonda Cholapuram? What about your birthright?" "We would never get there in time. And besides," Yamunacharya said, recollecting the Pundarikaksha "when there is a corpse, how can there be a marriage?"