

## Arsha Vidya UK Vedanta Retreat Conducted at Manjakkudi, 26 Jan-3rd Feb 2015



Last year, Pujya Swamiji invited the students who had been unable to meet him in January, due to his illness, to join him in his home village of Manjakkudi in early 2015. Many of us were able to do so and he treated us to several days of illuminating talks, took us to many events in his schedule and showed us various aspects of local village life.

The group was formed of Swamini Atmaprakashanandaji's students, mostly from the UK, but also from Australia. By 26th January all had arrived and that evening the village reverberated to the trumpets and drums of a festival in which the temple deity was paraded down the main street – a very loud, joyous and propitious beginning to our stay!

Each morning began with Pujya Swamiji conducting meditation in his ancestral home in Manjakkudi village, followed by the first of two daily classes by Swamini Atmaprakashananda on a Prakarana

Grantha. This advanced work was handled brilliantly by her, much to everyone's delight and inspiration. Only a teacher of her calibre could unfold a text this obscure, and so convincingly reveal its intended and proper meaning and vision.

Later the same morning, Pujya Swamiji began his classes speaking with typical eloquence, weight and matchless logic – all delivered in that rich, deep voice. Most of his eight classes were varied in theme but consistently insightful and memorable. Afterwards, we often had the privilege of meeting him informally after lunch and again after dinner for satsang.

On many occasions, Pujya Swamiji combined this daily programme with that of his own, taking us with him when, for example, he addressed the 1700 students of the Swami Dayananda Secondary School or visited a nearby Veda Patashala that his educational trust supports. One such visit was to his boyhood school where we saw not only his classroom but the original paper record of his Register of Admission, and also his Register of Attendance from 1944-5 – any record of boyish misdemeanours having long been mislaid or forgotten! Naturally, the present-day boys were excited by his presence and competed for the touch of his outstretched hand upon their heads from the open window of his car.



There are over 6,000 students on the Manjakkudi campus, in various schools and colleges, all institutions of his creation. With so many students and so much talent, there was much to applaud: one evening we were, again as his guests, treated to a dance performance that was of a magical standard; another time we heard him speak to the students of his English school and later to the teachers of all the schools.

On another occasion, he eagerly showed us a magnificent lotus pond in full bloom at the edge of his mother's village and ensured that we each received a freshly picked lotus from his own hand. His mother's house is simple and modest, a single-storey building occupied now by a teacher at one of his many Manjakkudi schools. The interior is impressively spartan: completely devoid of luxuries.

The final event to which we accompanied him was a chariot festival on February 2nd. It was a very hot day and a very, very huge chariot (well over 40m high) so big and

heavy that a JCB was needed at the rear to give the many hundreds pulling on the massive ropes some help moving it. The head of the local mutt had invited him and shared the dignitaries' vantage point with him.

At the end of the retreat, Pujya Swamiji congratulated Swamini Atmaprakashanandaji for inspiring many students by her teaching and counsel.

Naturally, there is much more to tell – the Sesame seed press, the pada puja, the meals, the meeting with pupils – all contributed to our many happy memories of the visit. We are, however, especially grateful to Mrs Sheela Balaji whose generosity and superb organising skills provided us with accommodation of 5-star standard and whose efficiency and care ensured that everything ran happily and smoothly. Most of all, though, our deepest thanks must go to Pujya Swamiji for the time and attention he unsparingly gave us.