

Swami Dayananda Saraswati

His Life and Work

By Br. Ramaswamy¹

Swami Dayananda Saraswati was born in Manjakkudi, a small village on the banks of the river Kaveri in Tamil Nadu. His parents, Gopala Iyer and Balambal, named him Natarajan. His date of birth is given as August 15, 1930. He is the eldest of four living brothers. Life in an orthodox Brahmin family gave him the advantage of learning Vedic chants and of being exposed at a very early age to religious values.

Natarajan's aunt once told him a story about his paternal grandfather, the impact of which has remained with him all his life, though Natarajan himself had never seen his grandfather. He was a rich man and was well respected, though misunderstood, by the villagers. He was considered to be too simple if not impractical.

'His sense of justice amazed me,' recalls Swami Dayananda. 'It is said in the Hindu tradition, "Do not go empty handed to see your teacher or the king." Since my grandfather was the richest man in town, the villagers came to see him to pay their respects. In general, they were poor. A villager would pluck from his only plant a tender pumpkin and offer it to my grandfather on a visit. My grandfather would ask his servant to bring one bag of paddy (100 pounds of rice) from the granary to be given to the villager who had given him merely one tender pumpkin! When others protested this disproportionate compensation, the grandfather's reply was, "I know that one pumpkin is not equal to a

bag of paddy. But when that poor man plucks the pumpkin from the only creeper in his garden he feels a sense of loss. I compensate for that sense of loss, not for the value of the pumpkin.'" 'This sense of justice went deep into me,' recalls Swami Dayananda. 'It made me appreciate always the attitudes and sense of loss of others.'

Natarajan's maternal grandfather was a great devotee of Lord Siva. He always uttered the word *Paramasiva* (Supreme Siva) whenever he was called or took food or began a conversation. Natarajan was deeply affected. 'His devotion to the Lord struck me at that age, and I developed a similar sense of devotion myself.'

The Tamil verses that Natarajan learned while very young had a profound influence on him. One related to death: 'Though lone may roll over and cry for years, will the dead return? Natarajan thought about the verse and knew it to be true. 'So that when my father died when I was eight, I could not cry. I felt it was silly to cry. He would not come back. I tried telling others, but they would not listen, so I went out to play. My uncle came searching for me and landed a few blows on me for playing when my father had just died!"

In 1939, Natarajan was initiated into the *Gayatri* mantra by Manjakkudi Rajagopala Sastrigal, a famous *pauranikar* (one who narrates stories of epics, interspersed with wit and music). In those days, Natarajan

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used to perform *Saraswati puja* (worship of the goddess of learning) every Friday. 'I do not know why I did it,' Swami Dayananda admits now. 'Perhaps I wanted to make up for not studying!'

Natarajan was an enigma to his people. They found him loving, compassionate and fearless, but at the same time mischievous, adventurous and ever playful. No one in the village could size him up. They always felt that he was different from the other children. Later, when they heard that Natarajan became a renunciate, their reactions were mixed. Some were not surprised; however, a few felt he could have been successful in life but had instead chosen to 'renounce life'.

Education:

At the elementary school level, Natarajan studied at Manjakkudi, now the site of a high school named after him ('Swami Dayananda Saraswati'). He went to Madras for his higher education but had to return owing to the war and bomb threats by the Japanese. He then joined the high school at Kodavasal.

In his sixth grade he had to choose a second language for study—Sanskrit or Tamil. Tamil, his mother tongue, would have been easy, but the language of the scriptures is Sanskrit. His mother could not make the choice; she left it to her son. At that time, a growing atheistic movement led by E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker was conducting a hate campaign against the Vedas, the Hindu rituals, God, religious orthodoxy, Brahmins and Sanskrit. It was a difficult time for Sanskrit students, both in and out of school. Natarajan spent some sleepless nights, both in and out of school. Natarajan spent some sleepless nights brooding over the problem. When the teacher asked him to make his choice, Natarajan opted for Sanskrit, being one of only five students to make that choice. He did very well in his Sanskrit studies, continuing them for six years.

Swami Dayananda recalls of that time, 'The atheistic movement used to bother me a lot.

Students used to read that literature and come prepared with questions. I was ill equipped to argue with them, using only my wits. But my love for mathematics and my logical mind helped me. Even belief must rest on a logical basis, and I created such a basis in my mind about religion and God.'

Employment:

After his education, Natarajan went to Madras to stay with his aunt. His first job was on a weekly magazine called Dharmika Hindu, a newspaper opposing the atheistic movement then very popular in Tamil Nadu. Natarajan worked for that magazine for one year and learned some aspects of journalism.

Natarajan's spirit of adventure did not leave him. He wanted to be different. He decided to be a fighter pilot and joined the Indian Air Force. 'I was a popular guy,' he recalls, but I could not stay for long, as I valued free thinking and felt regimented there.' He left the air force after six months.

He then joined a news agency which gave supplementary news to newspapers all over India. He liked the job of a journalist, as it afforded him the opportunity to learn many things from sports to politics. He learned news selection, editing and presentation so well that his employer asked him to find another job!

Natarajan was promised a sub-editorship with a popular newspaper, but his services were used instead by the Jail Reforms Commission in the preparation of its final report. He also worked as a voluntary agent for a candidate for the Madras Assembly in the first general election in India.

Meeting Swami Chinmayananda:

At this point in life, Natarajan met Swami Chinmayananda, during Swamiji's upanishadic discourses in Madras in 1953. 'I found his talks fascinating. I had heard Puranic talks and read Swami Vivekananda's books and some portions of the Geeta, but I

had never studied the Upanishads nor heard about them, though I was brought up in an orthodox and learned atmosphere. The Upanishads were a great revelation to me.

After Swami Chinmayananda left for the Himalayas after the Madras talks, some of those who had attended his discourses formed a group to have regular *satsangs* and called it the Chinmaya Mission. Natarajan became active in the Mission and later acted as its Secretary in Madras. At one point, Swami Chinmayananda sent him to Madurai to organize a Mission centre there, which marked a very successful beginning for this type of organizational work.

For Natarjan, the meeting with Swami Chinmayananda marked the beginning of a period of intense study. He joined Sanskrit classes held by P.S. Subramania Iyer, a retired Professor of English. Iyer introduced a mode of chanting Gita that is still followed by Chinmaya Mission members. After some time, Natarajan started teaching Gita chanting classes under the auspices of the Chinmaya Mission. These classes became very popular.

Meeting Swami Tapovanam:

Swami Chinmayananda asked Natarajan to accompany him on one of his trips to Uttarkasi to help him prepare a Gita manuscript for publication. Swami Chinmayananda dictated while Natarajan typed. Thus they completed ten chapters during a two-month stay.

In Uttarakasi, Natarajan met Swami Chinmayananda's Guru, Swami Tapovanam. When Natarajan was ready to return to Madras, Swami Tapovanam asked him why he was going. He wanted Natarajan to stay and study. Natarajan liked the place and wanted to spend his time in study, but he knew that his family would be shocked if they came to know that he wanted to lead such a life. 'A life of sannyasa is not liked by those close to you,' he explains. 'It represents a complete break from the family.'

I wanted to prepare them slowly for that, but I did not want to describe all this to Swamiji. So I said that I had some duty to the family. He laughed. "You have a duty to yourself which is also important. Stay here. Do japa, meditate and study." I told him that I would return the next year. That was in April 1955. In January 1956 Swami Tapovanam passed away."

Full Time Study, Sadhana and Problems:

Natarajan returned to Madras and took up the editorship of *Tyagi*, a fortnightly magazine of Chinmaya Mission. When he heard of the demise of Swami Tapovanam, he wrote to Swami Chinmayananda about his intention to leave his job and Madras for good, mentioning Swami Tapovanam's advice to him and his own promise to the aged master. Swami Chinmayananda asked him to shift the *Tyagi* office to Bangalore and to move to that city, which he did in March 1956.

In addition to his involvement in Mission activities and the editorship of *Tyagi*, Natarajan also studied Sanskrit and the *bhashya* of the Upanishads with Professor Vijayaraghavachariar. He also studied the *Sama Veda* for some time as well as all the books available on *sadhana*. I thought that I could figure things out all by myself by reading books. I wanted to gain self-realisation by doing things—by breathing exercises, fasting, yoga practices, meditation—but in spite of trying for two years, spending little time in sleep, I got nowhere! I lost trust even in Vedanta. I gave away my entire collection of books on Vedanta. I did not talk to anybody about my problem, including Swamiji'.

At that time Natarajan met Sri Yajnaramayya, a disciple of Ramana Maharishi. Yajnaramayya was helpful, giving Natarajan some hints and discussing with him the 'Who am I' enquiry. Still Natarajan was not satisfied.

Swami Chinmayananda came to know of his confusions. ‘Swamiji felt that the problems I had could be solved if I was exposed to some traditional teaching of Vedanta. He sent me to study with Swami Pranavananda at Gudivada, near Vijayawada. Swami Pranavananda influenced me profoundly and solved all my problems. This was a great blessing to me. During my stay I learned one thing clearly: Vedanta is a *pramana* (means of knowledge). I saw the Swami giving direct knowledge to the people he was teaching. This resolved all my conflicts. My problems with Vedanta had been my mistaken notion that it was a system. I had an excellent time with Swami Pranavananda and he, too, liked me.

‘Even while I had conflicts, I had *sradha* (faith based on conviction) in the teacher and the teaching. I had great respect for Swamiji as my guru and was ready to serve him always. It is the grace of the guru that helped me. I did get the right type of help at the right time.’

Sannyasa and More Study:

On Mahasivaratri day of 1962, Natarajan was given *sannyasa* and the name Dayananda Saraswati. After *sannyasa* Swami Dayananda spent some time in the Himalayas and then returned to give talks on Vedanta at various places in India.

In September 1963, Sandeepany Sadhanalaya, an academy for Vedantic learning, was founded in Bombay by Swami Chinmayananda. Swami Dayananda settled in Bombay to look after the publication of *Tapovan Prasad*, the new monthly journal of the Chinmaya Mission. In 1965 he went to Rishikesh in the Himalayas, where he stayed for three years at the Kailas Ashram under Swami Tarananda, a disciple of Swami Vishnudevananda.

While at Rishikesh, Swami Dayananda stayed at Purani Jhadi, a place noted for

highly disciplined ascetics. The mahatmas who stayed there at that time would not let anyone live there whom they did not consider fit. Swami Dayananda was well respected by the sadhu community, and while continuing his own study, he taught classes for other sadhus and guests who were able to brave the place! During this time Swami Dayananda wrote detailed work on the *Sutra Bhashya*, but his manuscript burned along with all of Swamiji’s books when his cottage went up in flames.

In 1968 Swami Dayananda returned to Bombay and started conducting yagnas. At that time plans were afoot to hand over the Sandeepany Sadhanalaya to a cultural organization. As Swami Chinmayananda had started the ashram for training teachers of Vedanta so that the knowledge could be made available to all the interested seekers, Swami Dayananda was asked to start a new programme of training brahmacharis at Sandeepany. The first course started on September 14, 1972. It was successfully completed in April 1975, and the brahmacharis who finished the study are now teaching Vedanta in various parts of the world. The second two-and-a-half year course began January 1976 with 65 students, 25 of whom came from the West. The students completed this course are also teaching Vedanta in India and other countries. ‘At Sandeepany the teaching is traditional and rigorous,’ explains Swami Dayananda. What would take a sadhu in the Himalayas nine years to learn, the brahmacharis at Sandeepany learned in two and a half years.’

Swami Dayananda taught Vedanta at Sandeepany West, California, a traditional Vedantic School run along the same lines as Sandeepany Sadhanalaya in India. Meanwhile he continued to unfold the teaching of Vedanta in lecture series around the world, inspiring thousands with the vision of the Truth of themselves.