



# Sri Subramaniya's Reminiscences of Sri Poondi Swamy

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## Editor's Introduction

A mong the distinguished saints who have resided within the holy precincts of Arunachala, drawn by the ineffable grace of Arunachala's liberating power, perhaps the greatest in modern times apart from Ramana Bhagavan was the fabled *avadhūta*, Sri Poondi Swamy.<sup>1</sup> He took *mahāsamādhi* in 1978 in Poondi, near Kalasapakkam within the sacred 38 km. radius prescribed by the *Śrī Aruṇācala Māhātmyam* in *Skanda Purana* as Siva's sacred home (*Śivabhūmi*), where those who die are guaranteed *mokṣa*.<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note

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<sup>1</sup> *avadhūta*, Skt., lit., 'cast or shaken off'; term for highest order of Hindu ascetics, consisting of *jivanmuktas* who have 'shaken off' all worldly and social conventions to roam the earth homeless and alone, often naked (*digambara*), sunk in the bliss of Self-realization (*ātmabhāva*).

<sup>2</sup> The *Śrī Aruṇācala Māhātmyam* in the *Skanda Purana* states: "The land within a radius of three *yojanas* (38 kms) of Arunachala is renowned as *Sivabhūmi* (Siva's home). Those who reside within this radius of Arunachala will get My *Sayujyam* (absorption into Me), freed of all bonds, even without taking *dīkṣā*. This is my express command." Bhagavan cited this quote in politely declining *dīkṣā* offered

that Arunachala's summit could originally be seen from where Poondi Swamy was sitting, before his view was obstructed by the *dharamsala* now opposite,<sup>3</sup> and that Sri Bhagavan reportedly said there will always be one fully-realized saint living within the sacred 38 km radius of Arunachala.

Poondi Swamy is memorable because his divine state exemplified *ajagarabhāva* ('python-mood'), the rarest form of asceticism, in which descent of divine grace (*śaktipāt samāveśa*) is so intense and all-consuming that its recipient requires nothing further from life, not even movement, only air and light, being nourished within by descent of nectar (*amṛita*) falling from *sahasrāra*. Sri Poondi Swamy lived thus for the last nineteen years of his life, without moving day or night, immersed in unbroken bliss. The historical incidence of such saints is very rare.<sup>4</sup>

Although largely unknown to the outside world during his lifetime, Poondi Swamy was esteemed among his notable peers, themselves *jīvanmukta*-s, who praised him in highest terms. Sri Gnanananda Giri of Tapovanam called him 'topmost of the top', and the Kanchipuram Sankaracharya, Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati, India's leading *ācārya* at the time, paid him this gracious tribute: "If you consider us [saints] as lightbulbs, then he is the giant transmitter behind, giving us current." The profound sense of security found in his presence

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by an acolyte purportedly on behalf of Sri Narasimha Bharati, Pontif of Sringeri Mutt, in a moving incident recorded by many early devotees, and confirmed its truth in his collected Talks (13e rep. 2013), No. 473 (1948), pp.465-466. The best treatment is by Robert Butler in his masterful edition of *Sri Arunachala Puranam* (Sri Ramanasramam, 1e 2015), pp.xxviii-xxx, a work of imposing scholarship.

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Christopher Quilkey for this previously unrecorded fact, derived from personal observation in 1975.

<sup>4</sup> Four other modern examples are known: 1) the guru of Shirdi Sai Baba (Baba's testimony to this effect is cited first-hand by Swami Sai Sharan Anand in his *Sri Sai Baba* (Sterling Publishers, 1998), p.22, and, at greater length, in his *Sri Sai the Superman* (Shirdi: Sai Baba Sansthan 5e 1998), pp.16-17. See also Sri Ekkirala Bharadwaja, [online @SaiBharadwaja.org](http://SaiBharadwaja.org), sub *Sri Sai Baba-A Sketch of His Life* (I); 2) Bhagavan Nityananda of Ganeshpuri, guru of Swami Muktananda; 3) Sharir Maharaj of Chhatrapur, described by the late Swiss Swami, Jnanananda Giri, in his memoirs, *Transcendental Journey* (Dehra Dun: K Publications, 2e 2015), pp.235-239; and 4) the original Balyogi of Mummidivaram, seen by the editor at his annual *darśan* in 1976.

endeared him to local villagers and scores of Tamil devotees, the simple farmers, herders and tradesmen who make up the vast majority of rural India, who had no other way of having their prayers answered, their illness cured, babies born, jobs obtained or problems solved, except by seeking his refuge and blessings. For some, these took the form of miracles that deepened their faith and transformed their lives as can be seen in the reminiscences given below. Like Shirdi Sai Baba, such great masters do not teach, but use their divine powers to confer miraculous outcomes and experiences to devotees as their way of teaching, since miracles confer immediate, tangible experience of grace, requiring no special knowledge or qualification, and thus give ordinary people irrefutable evidence of divine reality and power. Thus, the reminiscences given below by a simple, local villager, drawn to the master's side to become his lifelong, devoted attendant – who cleaned his body and faeces, fed him when he ate (often he did not eat and never fed himself), and served him daily all the years of his public life until his passing (and whose descendants still officiate today at his samadhi) – may be seen as testimony to a mode of communicating divine grace privileged only to exceptional saints favoured by god. Such authentic accounts from reliable witnesses are as uncommon as the miracles they relate.

During his lifetime, Poondi Swamy was visited by saints and sadhus from all over India who had heard of his attainment and wished to have his *darśan*. But his fame outside the Tamil-speaking world grew when a precocious young Telugu saint, barely twenty years old, named Sarath Babuji, visited him in 1974 and had *sākṣātkāra* of his *iṣṭadevatā*, Shirdi Sai Baba, in his presence.<sup>5</sup> Sri Babuji went on to attain fame as an eminent devotee of Shirdi Baba, and to become a renowned Sadguru in his own right with numerous Indian and foreign devotees.

Sri Babuji (1954-2010) had been inspired by reading Sri Bhagavan's life to take up the path. He loved *Marital Garland of Letters* and shared Bhagavan's deep *bhakti* for Arunachala, even taking his early sadhana on its slopes, and writing an insightful, full-

<sup>5</sup> *sākṣātkāra*, lit., 'accomplished with eyes'; the vision of one's chosen deity (*iṣṭadevatā*,) before one's open eyes, considered in Bhakti Vedanta equivalent to Self-realization (*Ātma-darśan*) in Advaita.

length biography of Bhagavan's life, as yet unpublished. His love for Sri Bhagavan and Arunachala brought him often to Tiruvannamalai, where he lived away from public gaze, giving occasional *darśan* and satsang to Indian and foreign devotees. In these, he spoke with reverence of Sri Bhagavan, Shirdi Sai Baba and Sri Poondi Swamy, and periodically visited the latter's samadhi with devotees, enhancing its appreciation within the *saṅgha*. Once, in explaining miracles, Sri Babuji said, "A miracle immediately gives the seeker the experience of faith and confirms the reality of the saint or sage as being one with the whole universe, which is the goal of Realization itself."<sup>6</sup> His fascinating impressions of Poondi Swamy were published in the *Mountain Path*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (Jan.-Mar., 2017).

It is clear that devotion to Arunachala played a unifying role in linking the lives of these three saints, fostering awareness of their lives and teachings among devotees, and effectively broadcasting the inspiration of their lives and attainment to a worldwide audience.

### **Reminiscences of Sri Subramaniya Swamy**

I was doing business selling and stitching clothes. I knew [Poondi] Swamy from the time he was first seen walking around the village [c.1947-1959]. No one knew anything about Swamy's name, his village or his parents. He never disclosed this information to anyone. He never asked anyone for food or water. Those who knew him as a saint would take food to him and feed him when it was time for him to eat. Those who knew him and met him on the way would take him to their house and feed him as well [when he accepted food, often he did not eat for long periods].

One day in May of 1943,<sup>7</sup> Swamy was sitting on the banks of the Cheyyar River in Kalasapakkam when there was a huge flash flood due to heavy, unexpected rains. Everyone thought that Swamy had been swept away in the flood. When the waters receded, people went to the place where Swamy was sitting and saw strands of his hair visible above the sand. Everyone got together and removed the sand.

<sup>6</sup> *Rose Petals: Select English Satsangs of Sri Babuji*, Vol. 5, p. xxix.

<sup>7</sup> The exact date of this celebrated incident, 26th May 1943, is provided by Sri Annadurai Mudaliar, a devotee of Swamy who was present and recorded the incident in his diary. He related it in an interview with Sainathuni Gunasekhar in Poondi, in 2005, when Sri Rao was compiling his research for these reminiscences.

Poondi Swamy with Subramaniya Swamy



To their surprise, Swamy got up unfazed and walked away as though he had been awakened from sleep. Persons who until then thought that Swamy was a mad man realized that he was a great saint, of unknown name or place.

In those early days, a lady devotee from Chennai came to see Swamy, and on the way thieves waylaid her, threatened her, and robbed her of her gold jewelry. She went to the Kalasapakkam River where Swamy was sitting. She had his *darśan* and related to him with sadness all that had happened on the way, and cried. Swamy took mercy on her and asked her to go to Kalasapakkam, get a piece of iron, then go to Manickam Nainar's house. She got the iron, went to Manickam Nainar's house, and gave it to the Swamy. Swamy's merciful grace fell on that piece of iron and it turned into gold! Swamy gave it to the lady and said, "Here, take this and live well".

After taking Swamy's blessing, the lady left. However Manickam Nainar, who was hiding and watching all this, demanded that Swamy make gold for him also. Even though Swamy warned, "If you seek gold, you'll be ruined", the fool did not heed him and tried to coerce Swamy.

Nainar told his friends what Swamy had done. They became angry that Swamy did not make gold for them and took Swamy to Mallavadi forest, where they hurt him and injured his hands. According to various versions, what happened next is as follows: It was as if Nature herself rose up in fury: foxes howled, tigers growled, birds and peacocks attacked and pecked at them. Frightened out of their wits, Nainar and his friends then ran away.

In the middle of the night, with bleeding hands, Swamy came to Dimal Chettiyār's grocery shop in Poondi. Dimal Chettiyār came running to me in fear and told me what happened. I went to Swamy and asked him, "What happened Swamy, your hands are full of blood!" Swamy said, "Yes, yes. There, my hands got injured!", and did not say anything more, but kept quiet. I cleaned and bathed Swamy's hands, then put some medicine on the cuts and bandaged them. Ever since then, Swamy has stayed in Poondi. Many devotees from Kalasapakkam came and entreated Swamy to come back to Kalasapakkam, but he never returned. It is said that the family of those who hurt Swamy was ruined and no one remained to carry on their family lineage.

A few days after Swamy started sitting on the pyal<sup>8</sup> of a house in Poondi, I went to see him on a Makara Sankranti day. I gave him new clothes, put a flower garland around his neck, lit a lamp, touched his feet, and was standing aside, worshiping him. "Tell me, what you would like?" asked Sri Poondi Swamy. I stood quietly and did not respond. He asked me again, and again I did not respond. When he asked me a third time, I said, "Swamy, please grant me the boon that I will be in your presence always and not leave you." It may be a bond of love with him from a previous birth which impelled me to seek that blessing.

Since then, Sri Swamy has showered his grace on me, and I became very close to him. I started serving him with love and devotion. From the time he got up in the morning, just like cleaning a child, I would clean his stool and urine, then give him a shower and change his clothes. I would wash the place around him, decorate him, do pooja and arati to him, and get him ready for devotees' *darśan*. I would feed him on time [when he was taking food] and put him to sleep. Every day I had the blessing and privilege of serving him intimately in this manner until Swamy attained *mahāsamādhi* [in November, 1978]. Even after he left his body, Sri Swamy graced me with the privilege to construct his temple, and install his *murti* [statue] there. I am blessed to live in his memory and his service to the end of my life, by worshiping him at the temple, doing *abhiṣekam*, *pūjā*, and offering *naivedyam* to him in his *arca-mūrti* form every day.

During the time when Sri Swamy was in his body, I had many experiences of his divine grace and powers. Once, a few persons from our village were getting ready to go to Tirupati. "Swamy, every year I used go with these village people to Tirupati. They are all getting ready to go now, but I cannot go," I said sadly. "You don't have to go, you stay here," said Swamy. Disappointed that I could not go to Tirupati, I slept by Swamy's pyal that night. That night Sri Poondi Swamy appeared as Sri Venkateswara Swamy (Tirupati Balaji) and said, "There (in Tirupati) is me and here (in Poondi) is also me. Everything is one and the same." He made me realize that all forms of the Gods and Goddesses are not different from him.

<sup>8</sup> A pyal is a kind of roofed-in verandah, open on three sides at street level, common to the one-storey, old-style, tiled-roof houses typical of Poondi and Kalasappakam.

Every year at Kartigai Deepam on Silver Chariot Day, people from Poondi would go to Tiruvannamalai for the Arunachaleswara festival. The deities are taken around the temple in procession, and at night there are special poojas. I went to Swamy's place and pleaded, "Swamy, all these people are going to the festival, can I please go also?", I asked humbly. "If you go, who is going to be here?", replied Sri Swamy. "You don't have to go. Stay here and sleep," commanded Swamy.

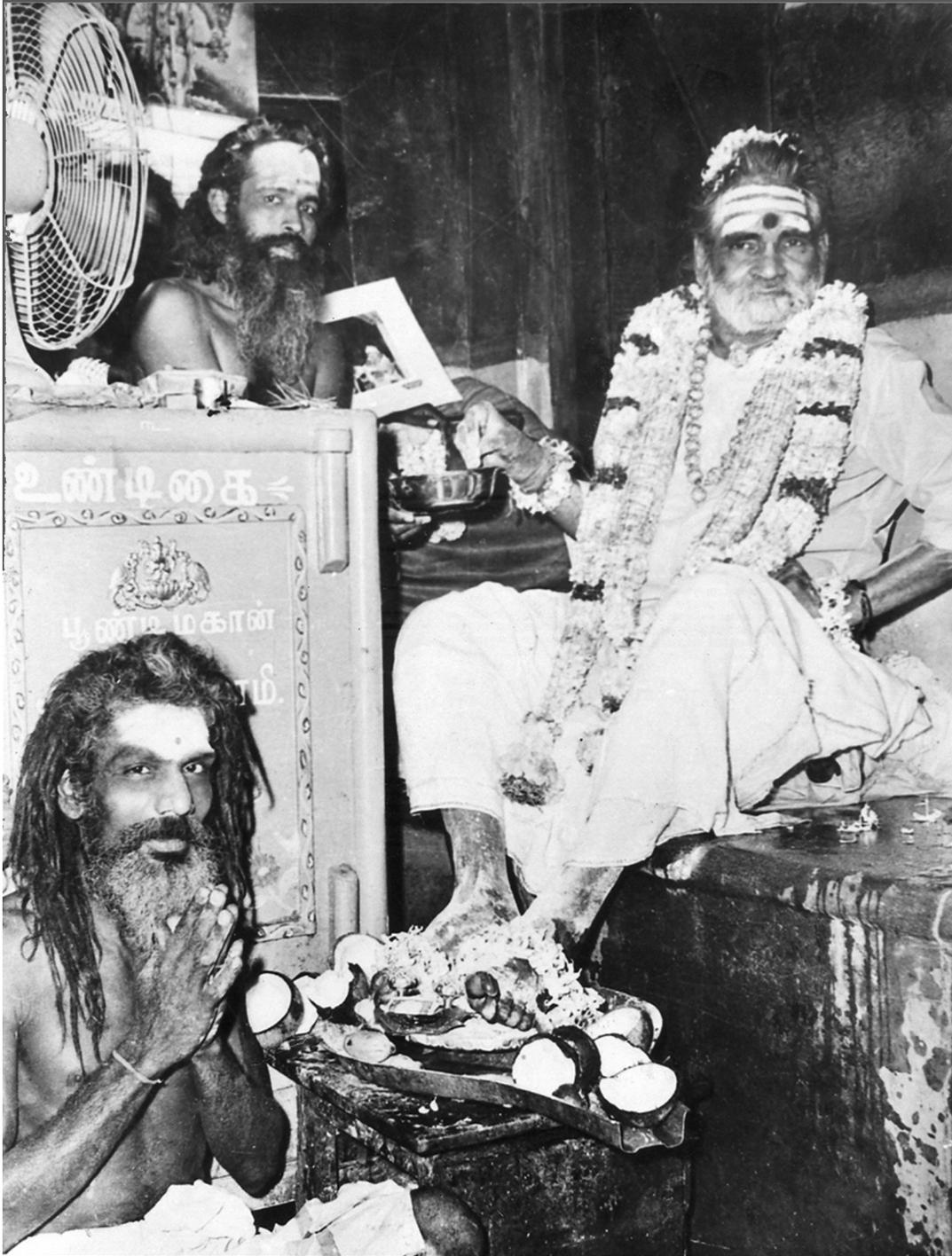
I did not dare to disobey Swamy and so slept by the pyal as usual. That night Sri Swamy placed me like a child on his shoulder and transported me to the festival. People from my village who went to the festival saw me and stood in awe, seeing Swamy carrying me on his shoulder and showing me around the festivities. Swamy also took me to the temple of Arunachaleswara. There also a few devotees saw us and stood in wonder. Everything was like a dream for me. At last, Swamy said, "Come, let's go back." I felt as if I had directly seen everything in person. Next day people from the village told me that they saw Sri Swamy carrying me to the temple and going around the festival. I was awestruck. No one can describe in words the wonders and miracles of Sri Poondi Swamy.

One night when I was sleeping near Sri Poondi Mahan, I woke up in the middle of the night and saw all of Swamy's limbs severed and lying disjointed as though someone had murdered him. I shook in fear, afraid Swamy had been killed. Then, in the next moment, I beheld Swamy sitting calmly on the pyal as usual. I consoled myself with the thought that maybe Swamy had been doing *Khanda Yoga*.<sup>9</sup>

When devotees brought a new shirt to Swamy he would wear it on top of the old one that he already had on. He never removed the old shirts. Since he was wearing shirts upon shirts, the old ones became stuck to his body. When I requested him, "Swamy! Can I please cut these old shirts with scissors and remove them?" Swamy said, "Let

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<sup>9</sup> A rare form of yoga in which the limbs are dis-membered so the subtle body floats free of *prāṇa*-s governing bodily functions, yielding deep ecstasy. Sri Babuji once characterized it ironically as 'the best form of relaxation'. Sai Baba of Shirdi was seen to perform this yoga by reliable witnesses, but ceased doing so when it attracted undue attention. Cf. G.R. Dabholkar, *Sri Sai Satcharita* (Tr. Kher), Ch. 7, verses 60-68.



Poondi Swamy with Attendants in the 1970s

them be. We will see after two days”. Again and again I requested him, but every time he would say, “Ok, we’ll see.” Then finally after many days he accepted my requests. When I was cutting the old shirts little by little with the scissors and removing them, the skin that was stuck to the shirt also came off. Even Swamy’s bones were visible! I fainted dead away and fell over Swamy. After a while I came back to my senses and looked at Swamy. There was not a trace of any wound. It took me three to four days to cut and remove all the old shirts.

When Swamy was sitting on the pyal he had used one of his hands as a support. No one knew for how many days he had had his hand fixed in this way; the skin of the palm was stuck to the pyal floor. After requesting and praying to Swamy, we forcibly pulled his hand off the floor. The skin of his palm stuck to the pyal and separated from his hand, and the hand was bleeding. But, in a few days the wound healed.

After putting Swamy to sleep on the pyal, I would sleep on the floor. But often, when Swamy would ‘go outside’ [bilocate, a well-authenticated feature of his life], he would remain on the pyal manifesting a different form. He assumed various forms during those ‘outside visits’. Once, I saw him as a leopard and prayed to him with folded hands saying, “Swamy, why are you testing me?” The leopard disappeared and Sri Swamy appeared in its place. Then I sat Him down and did Pooja. Once, he even appeared as Lord Shiva.

Near the pyal where Sri Swamy sat, there was a chai shop. Every day, in the early morning, the owner would offer Swamy the first cup of tea he made and then start his business. He would bring the tea, stand outside, then call Swamy, and after he got permission would slip the curtain aside and go inside. Once, he ventured inside without asking Swamy’s permission and was terrified to see a huge Boa constrictor lying in the place where the Swamy was. He dropped the tea tumbler and retreated in haste, screaming. The shock sent him into delirium and he had fever. He was brought to Swamy, who blessed him and applied holy ash, warning him not to open the curtain and come in again without his permission. After this he got well.

The pyal graced by Sri Poondi Mahan was always filled with devotees. The rich and the poor were all treated alike. There was no discrimination based on caste, creed or religion. The poor daily wage earners would come for Swamy’s *darśan* and would give him a quarter

or half Anna [former Indian coin, worth 1/16 of a rupee] as an offering. Sri Swamy would accept them with love and hold the coins tight in his palm. On the other hand, when the rich gave him a fifty or one-hundred rupee note, he would throw them away into the back room. Later on, all those bills were put in a ditch and buried in the earth.

There was a Chennai gentleman by the name of Vishwanathan who was working as a Revenue Board Officer. He had a cancerous tumour on his forehead. Doctors had examined him and advised him that surgery might be fatal. He went to America for treatment and could not get healed. Film actor S. V. Subbiah brought Vishwanathan to Poondi. Vishwanathan prostrated at Sri Poondi Mahan's feet and requested him to cure him. "Nothing is necessary", said the Master and applied some *vibhūti* [holy ash] on the tumour. After that Vishwanathan came three times to see Swamy, got Swamy's *vibhūti* applied to his tumour, and became completely healed. Vishwanathan prayed to Mahan (Tamil for Swamy) and said, "You saved my life, what can I give you?" Swamy said, "Give me a title to the land nearby and nothing else." Immediately, Mr. Viswanathan brought the District Collector and got the title for the land made out in Poondi Swamy's name.

A person in the next village was bitten by a snake. Medical treatment was of no use. At last they came to Swamy and asked, "Swamy, he has been bitten by a snake. Will he survive?" Swamy replied, "It has been cut asunder by a sword and chopped by an axe. Go away." When they went back to the village, the man was dead.

A lady devotee by the name of Margamma [Subramaniya's wife] used to come for Swamy's *darśan*. She had been delivered of a baby boy. On the third day after delivery the baby died of a scorpion bite. Around 10 pm that night, Margamma's eldest daughter brought the dead baby to Swamy and prayed, "Swamy, this baby is dead", and placed it on his lap. "Leave it here and go," said Swamy. Around 12 midnight, Swamy turned his gaze towards the baby. Then the baby was heard crying. "Take it back now, the baby is alive, nothing to fear anymore", said Swamy. They were very happy, and, after worshipping Swamy, went away with the baby.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The baby was Subramaniya Swamy's son who succeeded him as *pujari* in Swamy's Samadhi.

In our next village gypsies had set up tents and were settling down. A pregnant woman was in labour pain. Her husband could not get money for medical expenses. He was returning in disappointment and happened to see Sri Poondi Mahan sitting on the pyal, he appeared to him like a Deva [God] ready to give refuge. Immediately, he went near Swamy and said humbly, “Swamy, I tried to borrow money and I could not get a loan from anyone”. “Come here”, called Poondi Mahatma. He gave him some *vibhūti* [holy ash] and said, “Take this and apply it on her abdomen and everything will be fine.” Then Swamy blessed him. By the time he reached home his wife had had a safe delivery. He thanked Swamy mentally, applied the holy ash, and came back happily to give him the news.

Once in our village a thief had stolen six cows and took them away. One of the stolen cows was ours. I went to Sri Poondi Swamy and said, “Swamy, at night thieves have stolen our cows.” “They have not gone anywhere, they are near Pennathur. Go and see”, said Swamy. We all went to Pennathur and found the cows. We beat up the thief and brought him to Poondi, then let him go. Everyone got their cows back.

One time out of the blue, the Master said, “They gave me number 9 lock with number 11 key and all the responsibilities. I was tired of taking care of everything, couldn’t do it anymore, so I gave all that back and left.” I couldn’t make out anything and asked Swamy again for an explanation. Swamy stated that he was working as a manager for the chief of a Mutt in Tiruporur near Chennai, and didn’t like it and left. A few devotees went to that Mutt and examined their records. Even though they went back seven or eight hundred years, they couldn’t find any authentication.

Swamy said that long ago when they were building Sri Arunachaleshwara temple in Tiruvannamalai, there were only forests around and the temple was very small. Swamy further said that he carried stones for the *sanctum sanctorum* of the temple. “My grandfather gave me one Anna for carrying the stones and I would buy roasted peas and peanuts.”

In August 1974, during the time Poondi Mahan was settled on the pyal, Sri Sarath Babuji came and got *sākṣātkāra* with Mahan. He would worship Swamy, sit by the side of the pyal, and meditate for

a while.<sup>11</sup> At that time, Swamy would raise his hands in protective blessing and say, "All that happens will be good." Many times Swamy blessed Sarath Babuji in this way. Sri Swamy showered his complete grace on him. After Sri Poondi Deva attained *mahāsamādhi*, Sri Sarath Babuji came many times late at night to the *mandir*. He would go around Swamy's *Samadhi* and worship him. If I happened to see him I would give him the *āratī* plate. He would go inside the temple and do *āratī* for the Swamy. Sometimes he would wake me from sleep and sometimes not. Then he would be seen walking to the outer entrance and disappear.

A devotee by the name of Arumugam used to come from Chennai, pray at Sri Poondi Mahatma's *Samadhi*, then go to Parvatha hill. Once, he gave me a wedding invitation and asked me to send Sri Swamy to the wedding. On the day of the wedding, when everyone was having a feast, Swamy appeared as a mad mendicant. Arumugam recognized him as Sri Poondi Swamy and gave him food. He came out and announced that Sri Poondi Mahatma had come. At that time the mendicant disappeared mysteriously. Even after a long search they couldn't find him. This happened just four years ago, in 2001, 23 years after Swamy attained *mahāsamādhi*. ▲

[Excerpted with permission from *Purna Avadhuta Poondi Swami: Devotees' Experiences* by Sainathuni Gunasekhar (Chennai: Poondi Swami Publications, 2011), Ch. 2. ([gunasekhar@saimail.com](mailto:gunasekhar@saimail.com))].

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<sup>11</sup> For *sākṣātkāra*, v.n.3, *supra*.