

## Life History of Swami Desika

### Background:

Desika is a Sanskrit word which means “Acharya”. In our srivaishnava sampradayam there are numerous acharyas starting from Nammazhvar to present day acharyas, it is only Swami desika is addressed respectfully as “Desika”. This is like calling srirangam perumal as nam perumal (in English Our Perumal) and addressing shatakopan as nam azhvar.

Sri Desika’s original name was Venkata natha. His parents have chosen this name since Desika was born on a sravanam day, which is the birth star of Thiruppathi perumal, Lord Srinivasa.

Sri Desika was born in the year 1268 CE(Common Era) about 130 years after Bhagavad Ramanuja attained parama padam.His parents were Sri Ananthasuri and Smt Thothaaramba.He was born in a place called Thoopul near Kanchi puram.Swami desika’s parents were childless for long time and one day Lord Srinivasa of Seven Hills,Thiruppathi has ordered them to go for a pilgrimmage to Thiruppathi.

Those days there were no buses or trains to travel so Sri Anatasuri and his wife walked from Kanchipuram to Thiruppathi and climbed the Hills and had the darshan of the Perumal.That night they were resting in a Mandapam near temple. The Lord Srinivasa appeared in their dream as a small vaishanva boy and gave smt Thothaaramba a golden bell and she swallowed the bell in the dream. Next day the archakas did not find the bell in the perumal sannidhi and they were worried and started searching for it. Perumal told in a heavenly voice that the bell has been given to Smt Thothaaramba and she will deliver a son who will be a great scholar like Bhagavad Ramanuja, who will firmly re establish the supremacy of our srivaishnava sampradayam. To remind us this incident, even today there is no bell in the perumal sannidhi.Only the huge bell suspended in the front hall is used while doing thiruvaradanam.

### Birth and Younger days:

After some time sri Desika was born. He was named as Venkatanatha by his maternal uncle Sri Appullar. Sri Appullar is his acharya too. When Sri Desika was a small boy of five years old he was taken to Kanchi Varadarajar Temple where one acharya was giving lecture on Ramanuja’s Sri Bhashyam. Sri Appullar and the young boy desika went and prostrated to this scholar and he has stopped the lecture and blessed them. Sri Appullar and desika was about to leave and the acharya wanted to continue his lecture but he forgot where he has stopped. Although desika was mere a boy of 5 years he reminded Sri Nadadhur Ammal the vaishanva scholar who was giving lecture and every one assembled there were astonished at the brilliance of Desika at this tender age. Sri Nadadhur ammal blessed Sri Desika and he told every one that Sri Desika will be a great scholar who will firmly establish the supremacy of our sampradayam following the footstep of Bhagavad Ramanuja. He also instructed Sri Appullar to teach desika all vedas, divya prabandham and other sastras. Even today we can see a painting in the varadaraja temple reminding us this incident.

At the age of 7, after upanayanam Sri Appullar started teaching the Vedas, Sastras,Sri bhashya and divya prabandham. He was surprised at the brilliance of swami desika as he has grasped in no time what ever taught to him.The elders were wondering whether Sri Desika is the combined re incarnation of earlier acharyas like Ramanuja,Natha muni and Alavandar. At the age of 20, Sri Desika has mastered all the sastras and became a scholar.

At the age of 21, Sri Desika was married to a beautiful girl called Thirumangai or Kanaka valli.Sri Appullar

taught Desika the sacred Garuda mantra. Sri Desika has started his family life as ordered in the Sastras. He was strictly performing all the duties required by a Srivaishnava and living on uncha vritti. ie their daily supply of rice and vegetables will be given by his disciples. A brahmana was supposed to do Veda adhyayanam and teach every one in the village. They will not go to work as we do these days. Their needs will be taken care by his students who learn from him. This is the system which was in place 500 years back in India.

### **Desika in Thiruvaheendra puram:**

After the death Sri Appullar Swami desika wanted to chant the garuda mantra taught to him for many days without food and sleep to receive the blessings of the divine bird Garuda on which Sri Narayana travels. It is said in Scriptures that the Garuda is Veda swaroopi. Desika went to Thiruvahendra puram and climbed the small hill there and started chanting the mantra. Garuda was pleased with the devotion of Desika and blessed him with Hayagreeva mantra and instructed him to chant the Hayagreeva mantra continuously to receive the blessings of Haygreeva. Then Lord Hayagreeva appeared before desika and blessed him with the nectar flowing from HIS mouth. Lord Hayagreeva took the seat of Swami Desika's tip of the tounge as prayed by desika. Also Hayagreeva gave an idol of himself for desika's daily worship. This idol or vigraha is still being preserved in the Devanatha temple in Thiruvaheendra puram. Swami desika composed famous Haygreeva stotram, Devanayaka panchashat in sanskrit and achchutha shatakam in Prakriut and Mummanikkovai and Nava mani maalai in Tamil.

Swami desika had a special liking to this divya desam and he came once again after touring to Kanchi, Srirangam, Thiruppathi and other shrines in North India. We will see these incidents later.

### **Desika in Kanchipuram:**

Sri Desika came back to Kanchipuram and composed various stotras explaining the concept of prapatti or surrender. The stotras are Nyasa vimshati, Nyasa dashakam and Nyasa tilakam in sanskrit and Adaikkalappaththu and artha panchakam in Tamil.

Swami desika was mesmerised at the beauty of Varadha raja perumal of Kanchi and composed fifty slokas on HIM. He also wrote stotras of various perumals visiting the temples in and around Kanchi puram.

In the Year 1317CE, in the Tamil month of AvaNi, Sri Varadha raja perumal blessed swami desika with a son who was name as Varadhacharya. His birth star was rohiNi which is the same as that of Lord Krishna. His son followed the footsteps of Swami desika and shined as his father.

Swami desika then went to Thiruppathi and here he composed the beautiful stotra called Daya shatakam. Lord Srinivasa has blessed swami desika conferring the title Vedantaacharya. Then swami desika went to Badri, Ayodhdhi, kaasi, Nepal and other places in North India on foot to visit the temples over there.

### **Sri Desika in Sri rangam:**

All the Srivaishnava acharyas have special love to Srirangam lord Sri Ranganatha. Sri Ramanuja stayed here for long years. Swami desika was asked to come to Sri rangam by other acharyas, for a debate to prove the correctness of Our sampradayam which is strictly in accordance with the scriptures. Swami desika came to Srirangam and on the way he halted at Sri Perumpudhur the birth place of Bhagavad Ramanuja and composed a stotra on Sri ramanuja to seek his blessings to win in the debate. This slokam is called Yatirja saptati which glorifies all our acharyas and Sri Ramanuja in particular.

In Sri rangam the debate with schloars of other sampradayam went for 7 days and finally Sri Desika

demolished every argument of the opponents. The scholars who have debated with Sri Desika have accepted the defeat and become his disciples. This discussion has been compiled as Satha dhudhaNi.

Lord Ranganatha was pleased with their beloved child Sri Desika's intelligence and conferred him the title of "Vedanta Desikan" Sri Ranga naayaki thaayaar conferred the title of "Sarva tantra swatantrar" which means that he is master of all arts, crafts. The other acharyas assembled there were pleased with this and declared that Sri desika is indeed deserved of this honorary titles.

### **Swami's visit to Melkote, Karnataka.**

In the year 1327, Srirangam city was invaded by Muslims. Malik kafur the General of Allauddin, Sultan of Delhi came to Srirangam to rob the temple and kill the satvic devotees. Fear gripped in the minds of every one and they afraid how to preserve the glory of the temple. It was decided that Swami desika will travel to Karnataka along with the manuscripts of Sri Bhashya commentry along with the sons of Sri Sudarshana bhattachar, a great acharya who wrote commentry for Sri Bashya. Other acharyas left to Thiruppathi with the idol of Ranganatha. The temple was closed and many bhagavathas were killed by the brutal invaders and even Swami desika has to hide among the corpses (dead bodies) for one night before travelling to Karnataka.

Swami desika while at Karnataka composed a stotra called "abhithi sthava" praying to Sri Ranganatha to restore the glory of Sri rangam. Swami was crying for the death of many acharyas and bhagavathas by the ruthless invaders. We can even see the place where he stayed in Karnataka and here the vigraham of Swami desika is unique as he is in standing posture as if he was on his toes ever ready to travel back to Srirangam.

After 12 years when the muslims were thrown out of Srirangam Swami desika came back to Srirangam.

### **Back at Srirangam:**

Swami came to srirangam and it was time for yearly utsavams when the entire divya prabandham will be recited in 20 days. The first ten days the utsavam is in the day and the next 10 days in the night. Since this utsavam was stopped for many years due to Muslim invasion, the orthodox people objected to recitation of Divya prabandham since it is in Tamil and only Sanskrit vedas should be recited. They also objected to install vighrahas of Azhvars because they were just human beings and many of them were not even Brahmins. Swami desika argued with them at length proving that the divya prabandham is nothing but the essence of Vedas and Upanishads and the Azhvars are great devotees of Sriman Narayana and they are fit to be worshipped in side the temple. Finally the orthodox devotees agreed with Sri Desika and the utsavam has been celebrated in a grand manner. Swami was pained to see the objections and to make sure no such problems in the future he has got the details of the utsavam written in a stone and installed in the temple. Sri Ranganatha was pleased with this and commended that the Thaniyan glorifying swami desika "Ramanuja daya patram.." should be recited every day in the temple before starting the prabandham recitation.

While at Sri rangam swami has composed the famous Bhagavad dyana sopanam glorifying the beauty of the Sriranganatha from the feet to the head. This stotra is like Amalanaadhi piran of Thiruppaanaazhvar.

Some vidhwans challenged that whether swami desika can compose 1000 hymns in praise of Lord Ranganatha in one day. Swami has accepted the challenge and he prayed to Ranganatha to bless him to compose 1000 stotras and the Lord has commended that sri Desika should compose the stotra on the Divine Sandals (padhukas). Swami did not write anything in the day as he was busy in teaching etc and in the night also he slept till 4 O'clock in the morning. Then he started writting down the stotras and in less than 3 hours he has composed 1008 stotras on the padhukas. Even a fast recital of the entire stotras will take more than 6 hours and swami has composed them in such a short time since he was "Kavitarkika simham" which means

lion among the poets.

### **Swami at Srivilliputtur:**

Swami desika went on a pilgrimage to South and visited many divya desams in Kerala and Madurai and while he was at Srivilliputtur he has composed the famous Godha sthuthi. Swami had special bhakthi to Andal and this stotram glorifies Andal. She has commended that this stotra should be recited during her utsavam along with divya prabandham.

### **Swami's Vairagyam:**

Some of the local people in Kachipuram felt bad that a great master like Sri Desika is doing uncha vrutti ie begging for grains. They thought of mixing gold coins along with rice and offered him since Desika won't accept money or Gold if given separately. Sri Desika did not notice this trick and came home and gave the rice to his wife for making prasadam. She is also a simple maiden and never seen gold coins in her life. She called Desika and asked what the glittering coins are. Swami desika was surprised at this and told her that they are vermins and separated them by a dharpa grass, as he did not even want to touch the gold coins.

One of Swami desika's friend (Vidyaranya) during their school days became the minister of Vijayanagara kingdom. He heard about the poverty of Sri Desika and wanted to help him. So he has sent in a message asking desika to come to the Kingdom to receive gifts from the king. Swami desika has refused to this request and sent him the reply in a poem called Vairagya panchakam.

### **Swami's bhakthi:**

Once a young boy wanted some money for his marriage and approached the wealthy people in Kanchipuram. They were jealous of Sri desika's simplicity and not seeking any financial help from them. Just to embarrass our swami they have told that only desika can give lots of money because he is rich. The boy did not know the evil intention of the jealous people and went to swami desika for financial help. We all know that desika is not having any money but he took the young boy to the Thayar sannidhi and started reciting Sri Stuthi and lo and behold..

It has started raining and rain of gold coins from the sky. Swami desika thanked the thayar for her mercy and told the boy to take as much he wants and he did not take any coin for himself. The jealous people were shocked at this incident and came running to seek the pardon of swami desika.

Once a snake charmer came and challenged desika that whether he can control his poisonous snakes and sri desika drew a chalk line on the ground and recited some mantra. None of the snake could cross over the line drawn by swami but one ferocious snake crossed over to harm swami. Sri Desika recited the Garuda mantra and instantly Garuda came and took away all the snakes. The Snake Charmer begged to swami desika to give back his snakes since it is the only lively hood of him. Swami desika again prayed to Garuda and it brought the snakes again.

One magician confronted with swami and drank the water from the pond. With his magic he made swami's stomach to bulge as the magician drank water from the pond. Swami was feeling extreme pain and understood the reason quickly. Desika just scratched the pillar near by with his fingernails and the water flowed out of the pillar. The magician was astonished with the super magic of Desika and begged his pardon.

### **Swami Desika as Sarva tantra (Master of all arts, crafts):**

There are many incidents in Swami desika's life which prove that he is not just an acharya or poet. He was well versed with many other crafts and the following three incidents prove this point.

Once a mason challenged swami desika whether he can construct a well with the bricks supplied by him. Swami desika accepted the challenge and the mason gave broken and irregular shaped bricks to swami but he nicely arranged them and finished the well construction. This well is still existing in Thiruvahendrapuram.

Once a sculptor challenged swami whether he can make an idol of himself and fitted in the pedastal that was made by the sculptor. Swami made an idol and the sculptor tried to fix it in the pedastal and could not do so. He thought that the idol was wrong and tried to chisel some part of the idol to fix it. Blood flowed out of desika's corresponding part of the body where he chiseled out. The sculptor accepted that the pedastal is of wrong size and then swami desika corrected the pedastal and installed the idol on it. This image is even today available in Thiruvahendara puram.

Once a shoe maker challenged that whether desika can mend his sandal and swami accepted this challenge and to every one's surprise he made the sandal quickly as if he was a original shoe maker. People are astonished at swami desika's knowledge in various crafts.

### **Swami's last days:**

Swami desika lived 101 years and he felt the time has come for him to go the spritual abode of Narayana. He went to Sriranganatha and took his permission. His disciples and his son were feeling the pain of his separation and cried. Swami desika consoled them and instructed them to continue their divine works and follow the ramanuja dharshanam. In the year 1369 he kept his head in the lap of his son Kumara varadhachariar and left his mortal coil while listening to the chanting of thiruvaymozhi and Upanishads.

Later Sri Ranganayaki thayar ordered that a sannidhi should be made for Swami desika close to her sannidhi inside the temple. Also it is believed that she ordered that no other acharya sannidhi will be made hereafter inside the temple as a mark of respect to this great acharya, which is being followed to this day. One can see the desikan sannidhi in front of the thaayaar sannidhi in Srirangam.

### **Thaniyans on Swami desika:**

A number of 'Thanians ' (laudatory dedication verses) were dedicated to him.

(1) His son Kumara Varadacharya has composed a thaniyan on swami desika. We are reciting this thaniyan before reciting any sanskrit stotra of swami desikan.

"Sriman Venkata Natharyah Kavitarika Kesari |  
Vedantacharya Varyo Mey Sannidhattam Sadaa Hridhi ||"

The meaning of this verse is "the great lion of poets and the great preceptor of Vedanta (that Swami Venkatanatha was) should reside in his heart always."

(2) Another one was by his disciple Brahma Tantra Swatantra which says:-

"Ramanuja Daya Patram Gnana Vairaghya Bushanam |  
Srimad Venkata Natharyam Vande Vedanta Desikam ||"

We recite this taniyan before starting divya prabandham. The meaning of this taniyan is "I salute the great Venkata Natha also called Vedanta Acharya and Lion among poets and logicians and who was well adorned

by both Knowledge and discretion and who well deserved the grace of Srimad Ramanuja":

(3) There is another taniyan on Swami Desika which is recited before reciting any of the desika prabandham

"Seeronru Tooppul Thiruvengkata mudaiyan  
par onra chonna pazhamozhiyul- OronRu  
thane amaiyadhO Dharaniyil Vazhvorkku  
Vanerap PomaLavum Vazhvu ||"

The meaning of this taniyan is " For a person who desires to ascend up to the Heavens, even a single statement of the great Acharya, Tooppul Tiuvenkadamudaiyan (Vedanta Desika) uttered by him for the benefit of humanity would be sufficient to lift him up to his desired goal

### **Conclusion:**

Swami desika was a poet, philosopher, logician and he took the task of upholding the concepts preached by Sri.Ramanuja. It is because of him the Ramanuja dharshanam is being recognised by the world. Even the critics of Swami desika have suprised at his knowledge and logical reasoning and praise him for his mastery in every form of work be it drama, poetry or commentry in either Tamil, Sanskrit and Mani pravala.It is told that he was proficient in 8 languages.

No acharya among the followers of Sri Ramanuja fought for the rightful place for Divya prabandham as did swami desika. It was he who re established the recitation of divya prabanhdam in Srirangam and other temples.

Swami desika has composed more than 100 works and even if one wants to read all of them it will take more than 100 years. His Sanskrit is considered to be most sweet only after to Maha kavi Kalidasa.

His Tamil prabandhams are equally sweet and he has brough the essence of Vedas to his simple Tamil prabandhams and translated the tamil pranbadham Tiruvaymozhi to sanskrit.

Let us pray to this great acharya and seek his blessings to read and understand his works/Storas, which will be the most pleasing kaimkaryam to Perumal and Thayar.

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### Annexure I

#### **Swami Desika's works:**

A: DEVOTIONAL POEMS (STOTRAS)- (in alphabetical order)- 29

1. Abheeti Sthavam
2. Achyuta Sathakam
3. Ashtabuja Ashtakam
4. Bhagavad Dhyaana Sopaanam
5. Bhoo Sthuthi
6. Dasaavataara Stotram
7. Dayaa Sathakam
8. Dehaleesa Sthuthi
9. Devanaayaka Panchaasath
10. Garuda Dhandakam
11. Garuda Panchaasath

12. Godhaa Sthuthi
13. Gopaala Vimsathi
14. Hayagriva Stotram
15. Kaamaasika Ashtakam
16. Nyaasa Dasakam
17. Nyaasa Tilakam
18. Nyaasa Vimsathi
19. Paramaatha Sthuthi
20. Raghu Veera Gadhyam (aka) Mahaveera Vaibhavam
21. Saranaagathi Deepikai
22. Shodasa Aayudha Stotram
23. Sree Sthuthi
24. Sudharsana Ashtakam
25. Vairaaghya Panchakam
26. Varadaraaja Panchaasath
27. Vegaa Sethu Stotram
28. Yathiraaja Sapthadhi

**B: KAAVYA GRANTHAS -5**

1. SUBHASHITHAANIVI
2. YAADHAVVAABHYUDHAYAM
3. PAADUKAA SAHASRAM
4. HANSA SANDHESAM
5. Samasya Sahasri (Luptham-Lost)

**C: DRAMA -1**

1. SANKALPA SURYODHAYAM

**D: RAHASYA GRANTHAS (ESOTERIC WORKS) -32**

1. Sat Sampradaaya Pari Suddhi
2. Tattva Padhavi
3. Rahasya Padhavi
4. Tattva Navaneetham
5. Rahasya Navaneetham
6. Tattva Maatrukai
7. Rahasya Maatrukai
8. Tattva Sandhesam
9. Rahasya Sandhesam
10. Rahasya Sandhesa Vivaranam
11. Tattva Ratnaavali
12. Tattva Ratnaavali Prathipaadhya Sangraham
13. Rahasya Ratnaavali
14. Rahasya Ratnaavali Hridhayam
15. Tattva Thraya Sulakam
16. Rahasya Thraya Sulakam
17. ABHAYA PRADHAANA SAARAM
18. Rahasya Sikhaamani
19. ANJALI VAIBHAVAM

20. PRADHAANA SATHAKAM
21. UPAKAARA SANGRAHAM
22. Saara Sangraham
23. Muni Vaahana Bhogam
24. Madhura Kavi Hridhayam (Luptham- Lost)
25. PARAMA PADA SOPAANAM
26. PARA MATHA BHANGAM
27. HASTHIGIRI MAHAATHMYAM
28. RAHASYA THRAYA SAARAM
29. Saara Saaram
30. Virodha Parihaaram
31. Nigama Parimalam (Lutham-Lost)
32. Thiru Mudi Adaivu (Luptham- Lost)

E: VEDANTHA GRANTHAS -

11 Group 1:

1. Tattva Mukthaa Kalaapam
2. Adhikarana Saaraavali
3. SATHA DHUSHANI (aka) Satha Doshaani)
4. Nyaaya Parisuddhi
5. Seswara Mimaamsa
6. Mimaamsa Paaduka

Group 2:

7. Nikshepa Raksha
8. Sat Charitha Raksha- containing-?  
(i) Sudharsana Paancha Janya Vidhi ?  
(ii) Oordhva Pundra Dhaarana Vidhi  
? (iii) Bhagavan Nivedhitha Upayoga Vidhi
9. Rahasya Rakshaa

Group 3:

10. DRAMIDOPANISHAD TAATPARYA RATNAAVALI ( A commentary on Nammalwar's Tiruvoimozhi)
11. Dramidopanishad Saara ( A shorter version of above)

F: VYAAKHYAANA GRANTHAS ( Commentaries) -10

1. Sarvaartha Siddhi
2. Tattva Teekha
3. Chatus Slokee Bhashya
4. Stotra Ratna Bhashya
5. Gitaartha Sangraha Raksha
6. Taatparya Chandrika
7. Isaavaasyopanishad
8. Vedaartha Sangraha (Luptam-Lost)
9. Rahasya Raksha (aka) Gadhya Thraya Bhashya)
10. Adhikarana Darpanam

G: ANUSHTAANA GRANTHAS -4



1. Bhagavad Aaraadhana Vidhi
2. Yagnopaveetha Prathishta
3. Hari Dina Tilakam
4. Vaishnava Dinasari

H: MISCELLANEOUS GRANTHAS -13

1. Bhoogola Nirnayam
2. Silpaartha Saaram
3. Stheya Virodham
4. Chakaara Samarthanam
5. Vaadhi Thraya Khandanam
6. Vaisvadeva Kaarika
7. Guru Paramparaa Saaram
8. Dathi Panchakam
9. Yamaka Ratnaakaram
10. Daasa Deepikaa Nigantu
11. Vedaartha Sangraha Vyaakhyaanam
12. Saara Dheepam
13. Tattva Sikhaamani (Luptham-Lost)

I: TAMIL PRABHANDHAMS -24

1. Amrita Ranjani
2. Adhikaara Sangraham
3. Amritaaswaadhini
4. Parama Padha Sopaanam
5. Para Matha Bhangam
6. Mei Vratha Maanmiyam
7. Adaikkalap Pathu
8. Artha Panchakam
9. Sri Vaishnava Dhinasari
10. Tiruchchinna Maalai
11. Panniru Naamam
12. Tiru Mantira Churukku
13. Dvaya Churukku
14. Charma Sloka Churukku
15. Gitaartha Sangraham
16. MumManik Kovai
17. Navaratna (aka Navamani) Maalai
18. Prabhandha Saaram
19. Aahaara Niyamam
20. Pandhu (Luptham-Lost)
21. Kazhal (Luptham-lost)
22. Ammaanai (Luptam-Lost)
23. Oosal (luptham-Lost)
24. Yesal (Luptham-Lost)

