THE TEMPLES OF TAMILNADU
A 16 - Flower - Tamil Poomalai

By
Prof. K.K. Moorthy

Foreword
By
Sri V. Ramadas, I.A.S.,
Commissioner, HREC, Govt. of Tamil Nadu, Madras.

Covers 16 Major Temples of Tamil Nadu situated in
Melmaruvathur, Tiruvannamalai, Tirukkoilur, Chidambaram,
Sirkal, Valdeswaran koil, Tanjore, Kumbhakonam,
Kanjeevaram, Srirangam, Palani, Madurai, Tiruchandur,
Rameswaram, Suchindram and Kanyakumari.

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K.K. Moorthy

K.K. Moorthy was born in a hamlet of Kolar District, Karnataka, bordering on Chittoor Dt., Andhra Pradesh... had his Primary School education at Mulakalacheruvu, Chittoor Dt., studied in Madanapalli, Andhra Pradesh till graduation... a product of Besant Theosophical School and College... graduated from Madras University in 1952.

Entered Govt. Service in 1951... worked as clerk in Registration Department for a year and a half... Joined as Graduate Asst. in Dt. Board High School in 1952... worked for three years at Puttur and Piler... underwent B.Ed. training at Govt. Training College in Kurnool in 1955-56... joined as trained teacher at Kuppam... obtained two Masterate Degrees in the sister disciplines of Literature—English and History from Banaras Hindu University in 1961 and 1965... worked as Special Asst. for 4 years at Z.M.P. Higher Secondary School, Chittoor.

Left for Tamil Nadu College service in 1966... worked as Lecturer at G.T.N. Arts College, Dindigul from 1966 till retirement in 1984... did Research on Byron as part time Research Scholar... submitted thesis for Ph.D. Degree to Madurai–Kamaraj University, Madurai... worked as Prof., and Head of the Department of English at Adhiparasakthi Engineering College, Melmaruvathur, Tamil Nadu... worked in the Publication Department of TTD, Tirupati.

Has been contributing articles, poems, essays, stories etc. to several periodicals both in English and Telugu under different pen names... authored about 40 books in English and Telugu...
THE TEMPLES OF TAMIL NADU
A 16-Flower Tamil Poomalai

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Vaideeswaran Koil, Sirkali, Tanjore, Kumbhaconam,
Kancheepuram, Srirangam, Palani, Madurai, Tiruchendur,
Rameswaram, Suchindram and Kanyakumari.

by
Prof. K.K. Moorthy, M.A.(Eng) M.A.(His), B.Ed.,
Prof. of English(Retd.) TIRUPATI - 517 507.

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by
Sri V. Ramados, IAS.,
Commissioner,
HREC Administration Department,
Government of Tamil Nadu,
Madras.

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Price: Rs.30.00
Sprayed by the holy waters of Cauvery, Vaigai and Parni of high reputation
The land of Tamil Nadu 'been yielding bumper crops of flowers for adoration
Adorning you with the choicy devotees attained beatitude and Sayujyamukti
Accepting this multi-colour Poomalai. O Lord! grant me that besides dheesakti.
Pilgrimage to the sacred shrines is undertaken by the devotees not only for the worship of the deities enshrined therein, but also of spiritual bliss. These sacred temples and tirthas are associated with several legends and myths and they are an integral part of our cultural heritage. The temple is distinguished from a household shrine, not only in its structure and organisation but also in its rituals and forms of worship.

Tamil Nadu has a glorious and continuous heritage of classical literature & Culture that goes back to a period of 2000 years. It is reputed the world over, as a great state for temple builders. Temples are an essential part of every believer’s life and contribute greatly to providing him solace and peace of mind.

Tamil Nadu is undoubtedly one of the most famous among our states for the temples of inimitable charm. No pilgrimage is complete without visiting these temples of great antiquity. A careful study of these temples will suffice to confirm that the Tamil people showed a high sense of beauty and harmony. Most of these temples dating from early Pallava period to the later Pandya period are remarkable for their design, architectural splendour and intricate workmanship.

Prof. K.K. Moorthy, whose facile pen has already produced a number of wondrous books on our temples, has now come out with a lovely book on "The Temples of Tamil Nadu". He meticulously narrated the importance, antiquity and salient features of each temple. Prof. K.K. Moorthy has also gone into the minutest details while describing the sanctity and historicity of the holy centres in Tamil Nadu. I hope the researcher will be benefitted by the valuable information contained in this book and will be able to appreciate the excellent work rendered by the author.

(Sd.) N.S. Ramamurthy.
FOREWORD

V. Ramadoss, I.A.S.,
Commissioner,
Hindu Religious and Charitable
Endowments Admn. Department,
Madras 600 034

"The Temples of Tamil Nadu" by Prof.K.K.Moorthy affords a delightful reading. It presents the spectacles of our glorious heritage in altogether a novel way that satisfies both mind and soul. He deviated from the traditional method of delineating the greatness of temples and the ritualistic worship, characterising each temple. There are many other commendable features in it that demand attention.

His style of writing is quite interesting—he lifts the curtain on the sanctity of temples in the introductory part under the subheading UNIQUENESS, which amply awakens the interest in the devotees and whets the appetite, leading to taking a trip to the temples to see and offer prayers to the presiding deities. He gives in the sub-headings—Antiquity and Historicity, the essential background of the temples, which are quite elaborate and convince the prospective visitor for a visit to those sacred shrines to partaking the divinity pervading therein. He added a list of places of itinerary interest, and also the periodic festivals and prayers services. At the end, the conveyance facilities to reach the shrines are given for the benefit of visitors to avail the darshan of the gods, and also redeem the vows taken to them.

Tamil Nadu is a state renowned for its rare temple culture; manifesting itself in lofty structures, massive prakaras, high towers, sacred thirthas, hoary antiquity of Mulavars, offering of several kinds of prayers and festivals and the like. There are hundreds of temples that beckon indispensable visitation for a wide variety of reasons. Perhaps due to limited space, the author included only sixteen, but the selection is good. Yet I wish for the inclusion of some more major temples, like Thiruttani, Sholingar, Thirukkaikundram, Thiruvaliyar, Srivilliputhur, Srivaikuntham etc.
and it would be a service to the pilgrims, if he focuses light on others also in the similar manner.

As his approach unlocks the treasure-house and sheds adequate light on the hallowed UNIQUENESS of the temples; it helps to catch a full glimpse of their past, and adds to the pleasures of visiting and enjoying of bliss.

Prof. K.K. Moorthy who visited them all several times during his stay in Tamil Nadu for decades has seen them in the right perspective. He imbibed the divinity emanating from each temple to a great satisfaction and so the book turns out a satisfactory one, catering to the needs of ardent devotees and joyous tourists, who feel enthralled at the sculptural marvels and architectural excellences, adorning the age-old temples of Tamil Nadu, when visited. His rich experience and sincere ardour to helping the theistic community deserve praise. Wishing for many more such books, I bless him heartily, anticipating to see more soon.

(Sd) V. Ramados
Commissioner
INTRODUCTION

Now comes Tamil Nadu, the cradle of Dravidian culture, packed to its bounds by temples, temples, temples, and temples, for all gods and goddesses. And of every denomination, as a matter of fact. Of the 25 states of the Indian Union, it is the only state that claims first row, first seat, first merit, first rank etc., if ever the question of number of temples with a wide variety of traditions is mooted for recognition and reward. It is justified. The temples built, patronised and endowed by the mightiest rulers of yore are gigantic in dimensions, stately with sculptural adornments, and splendid in architecture. Rising to enormous heights, they seem engaged in colloquy with the high heavens with their multi-tiered gopuras, to recounting the magnanimity of the patrons’ artistry of the sculptors, and piety of the people. No state in or outside Bharat Khand, in the past or present too has such lofty structures erected, sacred idols installed, traditions followed and agamic rituals practised with due paraphernalia as this state. Although several nastic hydrihas have been raising their ugly heads from time to time and trying their best to breathe out venomous vapours for vitiating the atmosphere and corroding the edifices, they failed miserably, rather were floored outright even by the impregnable bulwark of the citadels, more than the divinity of the adorable deities enshrined therein. For, the roots of theism went so deep into the bowels of the Mother Earth, that nothing can shake them ever. Even the most obnoxiously pernicious and dreadfully antagonistic impact of the science-oriented mod culture too stood and bent its head before that omnipotent, invisible, inexhaustible divine power.

Many shrines, whether in their abject ruins, or well kept state are drawing the theists and tourists alike by their external beauty or interior sublimity. And each has a legend, long; traditions, fantastic; setting, awe-some, and Mulavar, soul-lifting. They are imbued with mystery that lies beyond comprehension and lab experimentation. But the invisible powers of divinity pervading them can easily be accessible and readily comprehensible, if one makes a sincere attempt through proper approach and genuine yearning. Visiting the shrines and seeing the Mulavar-presiding deity with theistic eyes are the only right means to start with. If done, that sincere spade work inaugurates the spiritual regeneration unknown one’s self.

The aim of this book enshrining the legends and traditions of sixteen world famous temples is to shed adequate light on the glory of temples of Tamil Nadu, and I feel, by a mere single glance, say reverent persual, it ignites the slumbering theistic impulses and directs the reader to them for first hand information for better rapport that ensures quick and sure progress. As done to the volumes published already, I strictly followed the format-Uniqueness, antiquity, historicity, traditions, images, festivals etc. again; for, they are found helpful, and appreciated by the devout theists also. Of the sixteen included. The MOTHER of Melmaruvathur comes first, since it is lying close to Andhra Pradesh border, and naturally one thinks of entering into it on completing the visiting of the North Indian, along with Orissan and Andhra Temples. Moreover, it is a standing specimen of the new type of temples, bearing the marks of modernism in customs, traditions etc., although sticking on to the hoary
fundamentals. And with them alone, it has made monumental contribution to religion. And what is no more, they are transforming it into a spiritual light-house of India. All but in a short, negligible period of a quarter century. It has many unique features and novelties. So, let us enter and see for ourselves the distinctions that demarcate it from the age-old shrines.

But a duty legitimate detains me here for a minute - redemption of my debt of gratitude to those instrumental for the release this book: Sri.K.Subba Rao, MA, Editor, Saptagiri, appears first, if the order of preference is given credence. His zeal for dissemination of religion and encouragement to writers are so great that he lets not any worthy cause, serving the augmentation of Sanathana Dharma slip from his grasp. His shrewd examination of the material submitted for AID, and efforts to see it pass through several stages if it is deserving is worthy of adulation. Religion lives and spirituality moves at his touch, hence my whole-hearted gratitude. Mr.V.Sreesan's continued assistance merits gratitude. The Expert Committee headed by the enlightened and religious-minded Executive Officer along with the devout theist members, who give tacit approval are adorable and deserve genuine, instant, whole-hearted thanks. Now comes Shri.V.Ramados, IAS, Commissioner, Hindu Religious and Charitable Administration Department, Government of Tamil Nadu, Madras who richly deserves soulful obeisance. His genuine yearning for the promotion of religion and regeneration of theism are beyond my powers of description. He not only discharges his duties superbly well, but fills his post most fittingly by his highly evolved soul and sublime personality, radiating reverence and affection. In fine, his sincerity to the administering of justice to the theist cause has no seconds, to be true. He blessed me with his scholarly FOREWORD, in addition to commending my books for sales in temple libraries and book stalls in his state. Mr.Ramachandran IAS, Commissioner, Joint I, another gem adorning the same Department of HREC, has timely and ably assisted me from start to finish in all connected with the help sought for. His broad humanism and shrewd insight wanting veneration. I raise my palms. Mr.N.Rama Moorthy, M.A., Sub-Editor, Saptagiri, Tamil Monthly T.T.D, cheerfully and readily helped me with his esteemed opinion. His obligation is humane and estimation superfine. I thank him profusely for both. My daughter Kavitha and son Kiran assisted me in the laborious task of preparation - typing, proof - reading etc., side-tracking their exam work. God blesses them munificently for extending due help, when needed. MOTHER Adiparasakthi, whose compassionate look rained strength physical and wealth mental through out to making it worthy of reading, and Lord Balaji, who timely fuelled the engine to move towards you, standing before my mental eye are blessing for the quick consummation of the ambition. I offer prostrations times unmeeten to both for all I received towards the completion of the work. Expecting your remarks I remain.

(Sd) K.K. Moorthy.
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UNIQUENESS

Among the temples that emerged into floodlight of peerless fame in the down South recently, credit goes to Adiparasakti Koil, whose phenomenal growth spreading all over India, encircled the globe in a very short period of about a quarter century. This is an exciting marvel of supreme significance unknown to temple history of our Punya Bharat, to be precise. As its ministrations covering both the spiritual and secular needs of millions of persons, thirsting for emancipation from the vicious circle of births and deaths, and relief from the incurable maladies are multiplied rapidly to such astonishing degree, it has established a name for itself as a centre of pilgrimage of highest importance for both Indian and alien devotees alike. No soulful supplication of the aspirants, belonging to class and mass of a wide variety of its gradations ever went unrewarded, and so the afflicted reach her feet to worship with unprecedented enthusiasm. They reverentially address her as the Pratyaksha Daivam, for enabling them cross the ocean of life. Moreover, the temple traditions being out and out modern, they are breathing in catholocity and breathing out amity. Though they are refreshingly new and spiritually elevating, they are not contradictory to the ancient practices. Therein lies the temple’s novelty and that accounts for its popularity.

CAUSE OF POPULARITY

With its lofty ideal of "Ore Thai and Ore Kulam" "only one Mother and one Race" it is admitting into its innermost chamber -
garbha griha - all the devotees, regardless of their affiliations to
caste, colour, creed, religion, region, age, sex, language etc. A
novelty, no where practised, though preached always. This
synthesis of divergent faiths makes this Sidhakshetra a
microcosm of the religious life of India. Every festival of major
religions of our sacred land are performed in the Garbha
Griha-Karuvarai. In accordance with the provisions made,
Christians, Jains, Buddhists can enter the sanctum and offer
prayers in the pattern they are accustomed to. Besides, there
are no hereditary priests to harass or brow-beat the devotees,
by mumbling something, only to extract abnormal sums by way of
fees to conducting prayer services. Anyone can offer archana,
abhisekam etc. by himself, guided by some experienced
devotees, whose duration lasts for 24 hours. These and other
similar traditions introduced by the renowned Sakti Upasakar and
dedicated founder Sri Bangaru Naicker, endearingly called
Nadamadum Daivam and Anmeeka Guru have transformed that
a tiny-shed of 1966 into a spiritual light house of India of 1990,
with 2000 branches - Manrams established all over the globe to
the promotion of devotion through poojas and the humanitarian
activities, encompassing educational and medical under the
guidance of the Adi Parasakti Charitable, Medical. Educational
and Cultural Trust, presided over by H.H. Bangaru Adigalar, the
pontiff of the Adiparasakti pitham.

Now turn up to the presiding Deity called Adiparasakti.

ADIPARASAKTI AND HER POWERS

The Archamurthi of this temple is called SriAdiparasakti -
the supreme manifestation of Pranava - the ultimate cause of the
Universe and the ruler of cosmos. And as she combines in
Herself Jnana Sakti - Knowledge, Ichchasakti - desire and
Kriyasakti - action, she is worshipped in three distinct names,
such as Mahalakshmi - standing for wealth, Mahakali -
symbolising strength and Maha Saraswathi representing
knowledge. Little wonder, that the devotees grow vociferous in
their statements - knock, thou art answered; entreat thou art
redeemed; beseech, thou art succoured; implore, thou art

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bestowed, cry, thou art consoled and step in thou art spiritualised. Hence to the pious she is Prema Swarupini - embodiment of love; Papanasini - destroyer of sin, Mokshapradayani - bestower of liberation, Lokasamrakshani - Preserver of the World; Soka Samharini - wiper of Sorrow, Roganivarini - healer of ailments etc. As she is answering every call of the grief-stricken, like granting speech to the dumb; sight to the blind; hearing to the deaf; walking to the lame and recovery from the incurable, besides absolving them from self wrought and preordained abrasions as well, she is adored as the Pratyaksha Daivam. Have a look at that august divinity.

ARCHAMURTHI

The idol of Sri Adiparasakti in Sukhasana - in easeful sitting posture is placed on a black stone shaped into a lotus that serves as pedestal. She reveals herself in Santha Swarupa - the tranquil aspect and accepts only Sativika Puja - absence of animal sacrifices. Right below the idol lies the Swayambhu - the self-manifested lingam-the prime cause of the emergence of Sri Adi Parasakti temple. To the left, adjoining the Karuvarai there is a small shrine called Puthu Mandapam - where according to tradition, Sri Adiparasakti was doing penance in the form of serpent. Next to it lies the Saptakanyakar Mandapam, enshrining the big size images of Saptakanyas with small rectangular stone pieces installed at the base. Behind this lies a huge image of Nagendra-spreading his out spread hood over Durga in sitting posture. To the right of the main shrine there lies a margosa tree held in high esteem; for, it fulfils the desires of those whose marriages are unduly delayed and blesses children to the barren women. The last object of adoration is located in a small shrine right across the Road and just opposite the main temple. It is here installed the image of Adavana Bhadrakali and worshipped to be relieved of the evil effect of sunyam, sorcery etc. Only these few account for the ever growing popularity of this shrine. More than these adorable deities, its traditions deserve special study. Of the many atleast six merit elaboration.
ANGAPRADAKSHANAM

Though circumambulation-walking or rolling round the temple is common in all Hindu temples, here it has acquired special significance. It is a ritual infused with mystery and forms an integral part of worship. Almost all go round rolling the shrines in wet clothes, believing that it fetches manifold blessings. This is a Siddhakshetra where many evolved souls are doing penance in their ethereal forms even now. By making anga pradakshna, one can partake the sanctity fully, as the whole body comes to touch the ground while it goes round the places of worship. It also enkindles vigour, instils self-confidence and cleaness the bowels through the discharge of certain fluids lying in wait for mischief. Above all, it signifies one's insignificance against the omnipotence of the Jaganmata. Hence the advocacy by the Pithadhipathi Sri. H.H. Adigalar.

RED GARB

The temple prescribes red garb both for the personnel, discharging several duties and the visiting devotees. It acts as a passport to reach the Mother's feet. It has a symbolic significance too. The colour of the blood flowing in the veins of all, irrespective of caste, status, nationality, language etc. is red, and it is common. All are the children of the MOTHER, and so are equal to receive her grace. This highly laudable ideal of equality is represented in the uniformity of dress - red coloured sarees and blouses for women and red dothies and shirts for men. It is a symbol of oneness and achieves equality through uniformity of outfit. A good ideal! Better display!! Best means of rapport.

PRAYER SERVICES AND THEIR NOVELTY

The most striking feature that stuns the devotees is the absence hereditary priests. Invariably one sees in the Sanctum
Sanctorum men and women in red garb absorbed in the performance of several types of services. They belong to Manrams of different places and their tenure lasts for 24 hours. This privilege is granted to all the branches. There are no professional priests and gone with them the fraudulent practices of waylying, bullying, fleecing etc., under the guise of fees for pujas. If devotees desire of performing pujas by themselves they are allowed, if red garb is worn. So this has ushered in a new epoch, where God is seen as God without iron certain separating the Creator and the created. Another noblest innovation! Moreover, women are given priority, though they are men either to guiding or assisting them. So the MOTHER is worshipped by the children of her own sex. What a novelty!

**TEMPLE FESTIVALS**

The temple celebrates many festivals round the year. Among them Adipura, Chitra Pournami, Thai Pusam, Varsha Pirappu and Adigalar’s Birthday top the list and rank first. Christmas, Easter, Newyear’s day, Mahavir Jayanthi are also celebrated with fanfare due. Lacks of people attend them, when pity and gaiety view with each another making the temple the Bhuloka Swargam.

**ORE THAI AND ORE KULAM**

Genuine faith is the only qualification demanded for entitlement to the MOTHER’S grace. The traditions have made provision for personal worship. A unique boon! It entitles one to go straight to the MOTHER’S feet and offer every type of puja. And guidance will be given if needed. As all are the children of the MOTHER, all are equal and free - domination by one, or mediation through any is not tolerated. She accepts offerings from all equally and bestows boons impartially. Hence the emergence of the motto - "Ore Thai and Ore Kulam". This is enforced strictly, implemented eternally and adored passionately. This all-acceptable and ever-comforting ideal has indeed raised
the glory of the temple to the Himalayan peaks, to be true. A glittering feather to the organisers!

**SAĐTIMALA & IRUMUDI**

Wearing of Mala and carrying Irumudi to the temple it seems was first introduced in Sabarimalai and has been popularised by its bhaktas elsewhere. Its potentialities are many and the impact tremendous, though the injunctions prescribed for self-purification are rather very hard. It instils numerous covetable virtues, like mutual regard, freedom of worship, self-confidence, steadfast devotion and discipline, but it is limited to men only. This is not fair; women are segregated totally. Certain sections of the Adi Parasakti devotees prayed to the MOTHER to setting right the injustice and granting a boon of equality for offering prayers with Saktimala. The temple felt the appeal reasonable, and so it has extended through Arul Vak to all the people irrespective of age, sex, caste, creed, cult, region, religion, language, nationality etc. - the abnoxious reptiles growing at the vitals of society. Hence every year, nearly a lack of devotees are visiting the temple with Irumudi and offering prayers. This is another commendable tradition that enhanced the prestige of the temple to a great deal.

**ARUL VAK**

It means the divine message or compassionate utterance. This was introduced in the beginning and has been extant till recently thrice a week. This is communicated through H.H. Adigalar, when he goes into trance and acts as medium for the MOTHER Parasakti. It is said that the MOTHER enters his body and gives message, solving the problems relating to diseases, business affairs, Official matters, etc. It was given weekly thrice-Tuesdays, Fridays and Sundays, besides on Full Moon and New Moon days. Thousands of persons were lifted by this divine gift. With the passage of time the number multiplied, though many restrictions were prescribed. So the temple authorities
have since stopped with the announcement that by mere stepping on the problems become problems to this much venerated Siddha Kshetra, one gets liberated and themselves. This was one of the principal factors that brought immense popularity to the temple and filled temple treasures enormously and endlessly too.

ACHARYA ADIGALAR

Arulthiru Bangaru Naicker, the Founder Trustee and Pontiff of Adi Parasakti Pitham is a towering personality, combining in himself many exemplary qualities of head and heart. He is a preceptor-spiritualist-humanist of a rare type and has grown into a great spiritual luminary of international fame by his divine powers, manifested themselves in humanitarian services, prophetic utterances and charitable ministrations. He is a superman striving for the creation of Vasudhaika Kutumbham by his whole-hearted total involvement. He is a Siddhi Purusha moving about in the midst of mankind with the sacred mission of lifting the ill-fated by the god-gifted power and self-acquired influence. On account of his unparalleled humanism and indefatigable industry, he has become the head of a spiritual organisation, working for the moral regeneration of the world. By his magnetic personality and supernatural powers, he turned himself into the defacto Governor of the Trust founded to managing many Charitable and Educational institutions that achieved unprecedented progress to the wonderment intercontinental luminaries of the spiritual world. He is all in all, and all is in him well entrenched since the beginning of the temple history.

THE ORIGIN OF THE TEMPLE

The sacred place where the present shrine is located was a thickly grown forest, where even the cattle were dreaded to go. This and the adjoining land belongs to one Gopal Naicker of considerable means and status. Till 1966, it was not fully
cultivated. In this wood, there was a neem tree exuding milk-white fluid. The cow-herds out of curiosity tasted and found it sweet. And lo! it cured certain ailments. In the devastating cyclone that occurred in 1966, it fell and brought to public notice an invaluable treasure - Swayambhu Linga, which is now found installed just below the image of MOTHER Adiparasakti. More or less at his juncture there heard an aural voice near the house of Sri Gopal Naicker engaged in offering pujas to his house hold deity that the Swayambhu Linga was to be installed in a temple soon, for it was Sri Adiparasakti doing penance since ages in that form. Moreover, Sri Bangaru Naicker is to be entrusted with everything for conducting pujas etc. The divine command was at once honoured by building a shed for the time being and installing it there. In course of time, Bangaru Naicker by virtue of adoption as it were by the MOTHER, metamorphosed himself into the Pithadhipathi of the Adiparasakti Peetham. Due to countless miracles performed by him, the temple emerged as an All-Faith spiritual citadel of universal reputation.

ABOUT THE MANRAMS

As far as the soft, mellowed light kissed the land, there sprouted the Adiparasakti Manrams for the propagation and promotion of devotion through performance of weekly poojas and humanitarian services. They are established in far-off countries in other continents, like Japan, Malas, United States and United Kingdom. They are prototype of the main temple in conducting, celebrating and performing all kinds of pujas either of daily or occasional nature. They give local guidance to the adorers, taking nourishment from the main temple. They also collect funds and feed the main temple to carry on several activities of the Sri Adiparasakti Trust, created for the dissemination of knowledge through educational institutions like Polytechnic, Engineering College, English Medium Schools, Arts Colleges etc., in addition to relieving the sick through Hospitals; helping the deserving down-trodden through gifting of useful articles like sewing machines, iron boxes, agricultural implements etc., and so on. Bicycles etc. to the handicapped and backward people. With ungrudgingly boundless and inestimably perennial assistance—physical and financial, the temple is achieving phenomenal growth vertically and horizontally to an astonishing ree, the like of which is unknown to the history of temples of our land.
Tiruvannamalai Tirukkoil enshrining one of the twelve Jyothirlingas is a reputed Saiva Kshetra of perennial significance of the highest order. Its association with Trimurthis - Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswar, and subsequent habitation by saint-poets, sage-seers, rajadhirajas, British bhaktas, and countless beneficiaries transformed this seemingly a rugged mount into a Saiva yattrasthala of eternal importance. Its attraction for religionists and tourists of all nationals, takes back to ancient times, to be precise, the beginning of Kritayuga. Right from the Vedas down to shalamahatmyams, every genre of literature abounds in evidence of great profusion of Maheswar's sports played on this scared place, and his remaining willingly in the form of hill for lifting mankind, buried in the watery grave of Samsara. The holy shrine adorned with gigantic, stately towers, lofty prakaras with strong rampart walls, magnificent huge mandapas, beautified by matchless sculptural marvels and architectural grandeur, containing numerous shrines for every adorable deity of Hindu Pantheon, covering a very vast area of 25 acres, speak volumes of the glory of temple and omnibenevolence of Bhaktavasankar, the presiding deity.

It is here Lord Maheswar chastited Brahma for lying to him in connection with finding the top of the blazing column - his manifestation; it is here he is remaining in the form of Hill and appearing as Jyoti every year on Karthika Pournami, it is at this place he shared half of his body to Parvathi; it is here the celebrated Manikavachagar composed Tiruvembavai, it is here the world famous Bhagawan Ramana Maharshi immortalised the Lord's glory in 108 verses in ecstatic rhapsody; it is here Davasikamani Desikar demonstrated his yogic powers to bringing back to life the dead horse of a certain Chola King, it is here Isanya Gnana Desikar enabled a European Collector, crossing the flooded river with his spiritual powers; it is here
Guhai Namasivayar and Guru Namasivayar wrote Arunagiri Anthathi and Annamalai Venba; it is in praise of this Lord, Siva Prakasa Swamigal composed Sonasaila Malai; it is here Ellappa Navalar authored the Arunachala puranam; it is with the grace of this deity Vallala Maharaja had the unique honour of his funeral obsequies performed by Lord Siva himself; and it is here several Swamigal attained Siddhi. The miracles of the Lord Siva thus roll into legions and display his unbounded lovers for bhaktas.

**ANTIQUITY**

It has numerous legends and they take us back to the Krita Yuga, when gods descended to this Punyabhumi again and again, either for granting boons to devotees, or establishing dharma. Once, Brahma and Vishnu had a row over their relative superiority -- Brahma claiming the first place of honour for his august job of creating worlds, without which nothing can be done, nor any scope for the existence of anyone, so he was the absolute God, but Vishnu contradicting said that his creation would come to abrupt end, if his protective hand were to be withdrawn, and life of every being including that of the Creator would cease. As the argument was getting heated, there appeared before them a huge column of blazing fire, without top or bottom. They inferred that it was the manifestation of Lord Siva. And rightly too. They then agreed before him that who ever returned first after seeing the head or bottom of that blazing column would be adjudged as greater. Lord Maheswar sealed it with approval. Brahma then assumed the form of swan and went upwards to find out the head, and Vishnu in the form of boar started digging the earth to reach the bottom. Unable to reach the bottom, tried however much, Vishnu returning, confessed his limited might.

Brahma too could not, despite flying higher and higher, but accidentally he saw a ketaki - fragrant flower coming down from a top and requested it to give evidence of his seeing the top. It agreed. So he declared his victory, citing the Ketaki flower as witness. Enraged at the insolence of Brahma, Lord Maheswar cursed that Brahma would not have any separate temple for him.
anywhere in the world, and Ketaki be prohibited for puja. Lord Vishnu was given then the pride of place. The victor and vanquished - then prayed to Maheswar to establish himself here as hill, and to take the form of Jyothirlingam for worshipping by devotees at the foot of hills. Conceding to their request, Lord Maheswar proclaimed his willingness of appearing in the form of Jyoti every year on Karthika Pournami to mark this event. Thus emerged the celebration of the much venerated Karthika Deepam festival every year with unusual devotional fervour. Lacs of persons participate in the Beacon Festival on that auspicious day, illuminating the whole town, and is seen from miles. And for three days it burns unhindered and undiminished.

**KARTHIKA DEEPAM EPISODE**

Yet, there is another legend that accounts for the Karthika deepam atop the hill. It appears, once during the amorous sports of Adidampathis - Siva and Parvathi, Jaganmata shut the eyes of Siva for a nimesha. Anon the whole world plunged into deep darkness causing untold suffering to the world; for, the eyes of Siva were none other than the Sun and the Moon. Life sans light is impossible and is akin to body minus breath. So there was destruction in every field which continued for yugas since that one nimesha there in heaven is many years here, when computed in human calendar. When certain Siddha Purushas acquainted Maheswar with this holocaust, he gave light to the world by opening the thrid eye. Later, the MOTHER resorted to do penance at Kanchipuram as an act of prayaschitta. While she was doing tapas and worshipping Sivalinga made of sand, Lord Siva determined to put her to test by causing heavy floods, which swallowed a huge chunk of land along with Sivalinga. When she moaned in wilderness clinging to the melting Linga, Siva then pacified her with the advice of continuing penance in Maharshi Gautama’s hermitage at Tiruvannamalai. She continued it under the guidance of Gautama. In the course of penance, she was constrained to kill a demon. After killing, she made a pond by cutting the rock with her sword to bathe and clean the sword. The Khadga thirtham found on the hill and the Sivalinga installed
on the bank stand in evidence of this episode. Soon she resumed her tapas with redoubled tenacity. Pleased with it, Siva appeared before her and declared that she was rid of that sin of indiscreet closing of eyes, and she could again share his body as in the past. Parvathi performed Deva yaga - a purificatory ritual commencing on Utharashada Naksharta ending with Karthikapournami for merging in Siva. On the auspicious day of Karthika Pournami she went round Arunachala in the company of Lakshmi, Saraswathi and Indrani accompanied by a host of rishis chanting slokas before occupying half of Siva's body. Siva once again became Ardhanaariswar. That day since then is celebrated as the great Karthikadeepam day every year with great fanfare.

SOURCES

The glory of Tiruvannamalai is enshrined in almost all scriptures. In many languages too. The Vedas, Upanishads, Samhitas, Puranas, Sthalapuranas, devotional treatises contain such a great corpus of authentic material that it bewilders readers with countless accounts and awe-inspiring episodes. The illustrious Nayanamars, like Appar, Sundarar, Sambandar, Manicavachagar on their visits poured out their souls in sweet verses, some in ecstatic raptures, and others in books recollected in tranquility Arunagirinathar, Guhai Namasivayar and his illustrious Sishya Siva Prakara Swamigal, Ellappa Navalar etc. have eulogised the glory of the kshetra and the deity in such elaborate way that nothing is left for any further composition. Moreover, archives also furnish certain anecdotes occured in the lives of rulers, native and alien, testifying to the historicity of this shrine.

HISTORICITY

Though the shrine claims of Pouranic glory, dating back to the Krita yuga and enshrines certain vestiges of that dim past, its historic past begins only in the eight century. The mighty rulers in their passion for religion and love of arts made endowments to
the temple in several ways, besides erecting tall gopurams and huge mandapams. Inscriptional evidence preserved by the Department of Epigraphy provides the historian adequate data starting only from eighth century onwards. The donors and patrons preferred inscribing their contributions in the languages they held dear, and so scholars find several vernaculars - Tamil, Sanskrit, Kannada etc. and what is more they are both in prose and verse. With Kooperunjuga of Pallava origin on the throne history begins Many inscriptions on the walls of prakarams furnish dates of endowments. Chola kings, Hoyasala rulers, Vijayanagar Rayas, Tanjore Nayakas etc. heightened the religious glory of this temple by their liberal patronage, as evidenced by the architectural beauty and sculptural marvels they added to the temple. The tall eleven-storeyed Eastern tower - Rajagopuram measuring 217 feet in height is the contribution of Vijayanagara Kings started by Krishnadevaraya in 1512, and completed by Sevappa Nayak. In addition, Krishnadevaraya built the thousand pillared mandapam - an all-time wonder in the realm of sculpture. The Sivaganga tank, opposite the mandapam owes its origin to him. The other four high towers were built at different periods by celebrated theists belonging to generous groups of maharanis, amatyas, sevakas, vellalas and vanija pramukhas. The plethora of information inscribed on walls started in the eighth century and this brings the reader to the present times, functioning now under the control of the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department of the Tamil Nadu Government.

THE TEMPLE

This holy temple lies at the foot of Arunachala and occupies a vast area of 25 acres of land. It owes its grandeur to four lofty towers - the eastern one called Rajagopuram is the tallest and measures 217 feet; the western goes by the name Pey gopuram, the southern, Tirumanjuna gopuram and Northern, Armanhi Amma gopuram. It has five prakaras, and the walls are broad and high, resembling the rampart walls of fort. In each of the prakara, there are tanks and many minishrines. Entering through the Rajagopuram, devotees greet Gopura Ganapathi,
whom they worship with rituals due. In this prakara, called the fifth, lies the thousand pillared mandapam and an underground temple enshrining Patala Linga. And it is here Bhagawan Ramana did penance in his Purvasram. Then they enter the fourth prakara passing through Vallaha Maharaja Tower. It is here the famous tank - Brahma thirtham is situated and normally ardent devotees take bath in it, for the prevalent belief that bath purges one of his sins committed since birth onwards. There is an interesting story about this tower, connected with the life of Arunagirinathar. When he desired to end his earthly sojourn by jumping from the high tower, Lord Muruga appearing at the nick of moment saved him for the benefit of devotees. Hence he is called Gopurathilayananar, and he is worshipped in a separate shrine. There are many shrines here dedicated to Kesevar, Kalyaneswarar, Viranmandir etc. in addition to shrines dedicated to the Panchasthalas. Next, they cross Kiligopuram to step into third prakara. This gopuram has another fantastic story relating to Arunagirinathar. It is told that Arunagirinathar utilising the powers of Parakayapravesa vidya entered the body of a parrot to fetch Parijatha flower, but to his misfortune his enemy Sambandan burnt his body in the mean time. In the absence of his body Arunagirinathar settled in the temple tower itself as parrot and sang his famous Kantharanbhati. There is a form of parrot in one of the Sthubis on this tower to testify to this story. In this prakaram there are temples dedicated to Bhimeswar and Vigneswar besides the Mahila trees, held sacred. In the second prakaram the temples of Ganapati and Muruga lie at the entrance on either side. After worshipping them, they enter first prakaram by the east which encloses the garbha griha of Sri Arunachaleswar - the presiding deity of this glorious temple. This Tejolinga feasts them with its huge size and bends their heads in veneration. Offering prayers and uttering Harhar Mahadev, they make a retreat, offering prayers to Tayar too, souls filled, with the form of omnimerciful Siva Sankar. This deity is adored by several awe-inspiring names such as Sonachaleswara, Arunagiriswarar, Vedamurthi, Annamalaiyar, Bhaktavashankar etc.
THE GLORY OF ARUNACHALA

The sthalapurnam eulogises the greatness of this place through several of its seemingly fantastic but true stories linked with both divine and historical personages. As it is soaked in divinity since ages it is the first of the five bhutasthalas and called Tejusthalam, others found at Kanchipuram, called Prithivisthalam; Tiruvanaikaval, Apsthalam; Kalahasti, Vayusthalam and Chidambaram, Akasasthalam. Further it is one of the six Athara Kshetras called Manipooraga kshetra. It is recorded that they are as many as 360 thirthas and 400 lingams in the eight-mile-circuit of this sacred Hill - Arunachala. Around the Hill they are many hermitages inhabited by holy personages of supreme spiritual eminence, like Ramanasram, Seshadri Swamigal Sannidhi, Durvas asram, Goutama asram, Adi Annamalai temple, Manicavachagar temple, Isanya Gnanadesikar Mutt, Durga temple, besides the famous Virupaksha cave, Sadai Swami cave and Mamarathu cave in the central portion of the top. Along with the sanctity attained by its Mulavirats, thrithams and sthalams, the annual beacon festival - Karthikadeepam is raising its importance and contributing much to win global attention to such enviable degree that the mere mention of Tiruvannamalai brings salvation to the religionists, whereas to get the same merit, according to puranas, one has to be born at Tiruvarur, or adore the Lord of Chidambaram, or shuffle off the mortal coils at Kasi. No wonder then that it has been casting an irresistible spell on religionists and saints since its emergence in the Krita yuga. Eminent Nayanmars of Saivism and Alvars of Vaishnavisim not only visited several times, but sang in praise of the Lord extempore, besides composing master pieces. Among the galaxy of spiritual celebrities, Sage Gautama, Pangu Muni, King Brihadatta, demon king Pulakathipa, Appar, Sambandar, Sundarar, Manicavachagar; Arunagirinathar, Guhai Namasivayar, Isanya Gnan Desikar, Virupaksha Devar, Daivasikamani Desikar deserve special mention. They owe their eminence to their association with the Lord Siva alone, and obtained salvation by worshipping him. Ramana Maharshi, Seshadri Swamigal, Jatini
Tyanmuga yogini and Iswara Swamigal adorn the list of modern age mahatmas.

Alien Asthikas

Besides several foreigners are visiting the temple quite often for salvation And tranquility. And lo! There are British Officers too. Among them there is a European Collector, whose devotion merits special mention. The story begins with a great devotee by name Tiruneelakantar Desikar living in Raya Vellore in the last century. His fervent prayers to Lord Siva for a son blessed him with the desired. He named him Kandappan, who delighted one and all by his precocity and austerity from infancy. Setting aside the marriage proposal, when he come of age, he went to Chidambaram. On being initiated by Muruga Swamigal of great fame, he reached Tiruvannamali for meditation. He choose a sublime spot beside Gorakkanathar tank and continued his tapas. He obtained super human powers. By his yogic powers, he helped many people in fulfilling their desire. A certain childless chettiar was blessed with a son and another Udayar pining for the birth of a boy, was directed in dream by Lord Siva himself to seek his blessings of the sage at Isanya thirham. On the same night Lord Siva advised bhakta Kandappa to reside at Isanya thirham thenceforward. The Udayar met Kandappa Desikar as bid by Lord Siva and got the boon. Later, when Kandappa Desikar went on ministering to the wants of sick and suffering, his time spread far and wide. A European Collector suffering from incurable Asthma met him, and was cured miraculously. It cemented his faith in the Desikar, and so he wanted to give him lands. When expressed, Desikar in his inimitable humility said that he could grant as much as he liked to Lord Siva. He did. Once when he was riding fast to Tiruvannamalai for car festival, he was obstructed by heavy floods in the river Pennar. Unmindful of the danger, he rode his horse with implicit faith in God and chanting his Guru's name. Desikar received the telepathic message and stretched his hand to the South and lowered it a little. And lo! it lifted the sinking collector and brought him to his arram, some miles off. The collector meeting him explained, but
for Desikar, he would not have been alive to tell the miracle and acknowledge his gratitude. There are many more such miracles produced by the atmic powers of the worshippers of Lord Siva, whose munificence emancipated millions of adorers. This Arunachala Ardhanariswarar has a passion for pure devotion and so no applicant ever grumbled of disappointment, when prayed soulfully.

PRAYER SERVICES

Traditional pujas start everyday at 7.30 AM., with Ushah Kalapuja followed by Kalasanthi at 9.30 AM. Uchikala puja begins at 11.30 and Sayarakshai at 5.30 PM. Evening pujas start 8.30 PM and the last one at 9.30 called Ardhajamam. Besides, special pujas are offered on the first day of all Tamil months, every Monday, Friday and Saturday; along with Sukla Chaturthi, Sashti, Amavasya and Pournami. In addition many annual festivals, like Chitrai, Ani, Adipuram, Purattasi, Aipasi, Karthigai, Margali, Thai and Panguni and they last for 10 days normally.

THE EPISODE OF KARTHIKA DEEPAM

Above all, Karthigai Deepam - Beacon Festival is celebrated with elaborate rituals and processions lasting for days; devout theists who want to avail this rare opportunity for bliss have to follow certain sastric injunctions. The pilgrim who starts for Tiruvannamalai is ordained to take one meal on the previous day - Bharani, and worship Bharanideepam early in the morning of Karthigai. He must go round the hill walking the entire distance of 8 miles. He should pray at Adi Annamalai temple and see the Karthikai deepam in the night, without meal the whole day. It is only on the next day he has to take meal; for, it is such a sacred and unique darshan that no parallel could be found anywhere in the world. And its mystic significance is explained thus - body is the hill; mind, the vessel; devotion, the wick; meditation, the ghee; breath, the camphor, and wisdom is the
fire. By lighting this flame thus to dispel darkness enveloping soul, the devotee is made to merge in the Paranjyoti - the Lord of Kailas. And this Lord is the personification of compassion, and whoever prays to him with genuine devotion, he grants any thing and everything. Moreover, this Bhaktavasankar takes upon himself all the responsibilities and undergoes any privation in discharging the onerous tasks of his children.

**KING VALLALA EPISODE**

Here is an anecdote of his performing like a son the funeral obsequies of his devotee, King Vallala. It happened King Vallala - a great devotee of Lord Siva was without issues through his two wives - Mallama Devi and Sallama Devi. He performed everything that Sastras prescribed for Santanaprapti. In accordance, with the tenets of, a particular Sastric injunction for child birth, he announced that he would give anything desired by the supplicant when met. He implemented it to the last letter. His devotion moved Siva, but decided to put him to set before fulfilling his wish. Anon he appeared in the guise of a Sanyasi and asked the king to provide him a dancing girl. Vallala in right earnest tried but everyone in the capital was engaged by Maheswar's ganas in accordance with his well laid out scheme.

Finding him broading over and helpless, his second wife Sallama Devi approaching him asked his permission to go to the Sanyasi. The virtuous king nodded. While in the bed room, the Sanyasi pretended sleeping, and when the Queen touched him, he changed himself into a child. She gave the child to the king and reported all that happened. And lo! before the close of narration, the child vanished into air. To the sorrowing couple, Lord Siva recounted all and said that he would perform his funeral obsequies. And disappeared. The cup of joy of the ideal couple overflowed. When he left this world, Lord Siva did obsequies as promised. And this ritual is still observed every year on the Magha Nakshatram day in the month of Masi, when the image of Arunachaleswar is taken of Pallikondapattu with great
devotional fervour. Ah! what a compassion! How fortunate was the King! Lord Maheswar is Bhaktavasankar unparalleled in any place or at any time.

**KARTHIKA DEEPAAM**

It is one of the major annual festivals celebrated in the temple and it draws lakhs of devotees who throng the city and overflow the vast courtyards. It is on this day Mother Parvathi merged in Lord Siva after purificatory function. It is celebrated on a grand scale with rituals due. Of the ritualistic offerings made, the ghee offering to the Deepam merits mention. Devout theists offer ghee on this day for burning the gargantuan deepam atop the hill, which burns for seven days - round the clock. Indeed, the size and capacity of the Deepam stun imagination and it is the only one of its kind in Hindu India, first and last to be brief. The deepam is a gigantic, circular metal vessel that can hold about 2000 litres of ghee. It is five and half foot in height and five feet in diametre. For making wick, 30 metres of ghada cloth is used and is burnt with 2 kilos of camphor on the night of Karthika Pournami. There is a traditional Mirasidhar devout and dedicated who attends to this great sacred ritual. The requisite materials such as tins of ghee, camphor cloth, cotton bags are carried by him by noon, trekking a 8 KM rugged hilly path and burn at the auspicious moment with due chanting to relevent slokas. When once lighted, it burns for a week, if a Rain-God does not descend on it. It can be seen from nearly 10 K M around. A sight of it flashes the whole episode. It is a sight worthy! An occasion mighty! A festivity most rejoicing. Hence the longing and visiting by the theists. The temple authorities and the Mirasidhar attend to this with devotion unique and commendable.
UNIQUENCES

Among the Pancha Krishnarayana Kshetras, Tirukkoilur Sri Trivikramaswami temple occupies a conspicuous place. It is dedicated to Sri Trivikrama - Ulagalantha Perumal, the fifth incarnation of Sri Mahavishnu, and as such is very popular and famous for Vaishnavates in particular and in theists in general. It is situated on the southern bank of Krishnabhadra in South Arcot District of Tamil Nadu. Pride of place goes to this divya kshetra for reasons more than one. It is the unique place, in which the Lord revealed Himself again in the self-same form of Trivikrama at the instance of Mrikanda Maharshi. It is this place that claims the privilege of having one of the tallest temple towers, measuring 192 feet in height, among the towers of our Punya Bharat. It is in this sacred place the reputed Vaishnavate minstrels - Poigai, Boodhath and Peey Alwars met and poured out their souls in sweet verses in praise of Srimannarayana, under extra-ordinary circumstances, started by Poigai Alwar, followed by Boodhath and then Peey Alwars that formed the integral part of the world renowned Nalayira Divya Prabhandam. It is in this holy place, Durga, in the role of custodian of the temple is receiving prayers first. It is here alone, one and the same image is revealing two distinct forms - the front side is adorned by the form of Chakrattalwar with sixteen hands and the back side by Narasimhavatara. And, it is unique as a rare piece of sculpture getting adored by devotees both from fore and rear. It is here Namachu, the pious son of Mahabali is adoring the Lord along with mortals and gods. It is here Lord Mahavishnu out of His infinite compassion is emancipating sinners with His presence in several thrithas in around the temple campus.
Brahma Purana embodies a good deal of information dealing with the unparalleled glory of this Kshetra, due to its association with illustrious divine personages, mighty rulers and celebrated minstrels. Of the many recorded, the Mrikanda Maharshi’s episode is quite interesting, besides being awe-inspiring. It narrates that Mrikanda Maharshi, on returning from his deergha tapas, spreading over several centuries was informed by the asramites of the Vamanavatar of the Lord and relieving Devendra from the unending atrocities of Mahabali, the formidable sworn enemy of devas. They recounted vividly Mahabali’s glorious rule on earth which was unknown to asuras till then. But his irreconcilable enmity with Devendra went beyond endurance and for the deliverance of devas, Lord Maha Vishnu was forced to incarnate as Yamana - a short but potent celibate. This tiny figure approached Mahabali for a gift of three feet of earth. Renowned for gifting away anything and everything, the supplicant desired, he granted the request, through Sukrachari, his Kulaguru intervened and dissuaded; for, it was Sri Mahavishnu who came in the form of dwarf to harm him. The noble Mahabali set aside his plea, saying that if once a word given was given for over and there is no going back on it, come what may. Lord Mahavishnu assuming His viratrupa measured the whole earth with one foot and the sky with the other foot. He than asked the King to account for the third foot, Mahabali showed anon his head and bowed very low. Yamana placed His foot on his head and pressed him to the nether world to rule there permanently thenceforward. Moreover, He magnanimously accepted to be his sentinel to guard him eternally, for having kept up his word, despite warning in advance. When the Devas acquainted Mrikanda Maharshi with the apurva sobha and anatha sakti of Sri Mahavishnu, while measuring the universe with the gigantic size of His foot, he desired to feast his eyes with the Bhagawan’s viratrupa.
Thereupon, he went to Himalayas and did penance for centuries, but to no effect. Chancing to know the intention of the sage and his failure, Narada counselled him to meditate on Brahma for solution. Accordingly, sitting under water, he continued his tapas, Brahma appearing before directed him to prolong it in Krishnaranya - a sacred place dear to Sriman-narayana to fulfilling his ardent wish. Reaching this place and satisfied with its sublimity, he resumed his deergha tapas and it went on for centuries. Pleased, Lord Sri MahaVishnu gave darsan as desired. Elated at his fulfillment, the Maharshi solicited HIM to en:ancipate the pious, when offer prayers at this place to that apurvarupa; and it was granted.

That accounts for the Trivikrama image here raising the right leg above the ground, indicating the measuring of the sky with His foot after measuring the earth first. The Presiding Deity is seen worshipped by Brahma on the right side, and on the left by Mrikanda Maharshi Namachu, Garuda, Ananta, Vishaksvena, and a host of other celebrated saint poets. Another fascinating feature of the Moolavar is, his holding the divine conch in His right hand, normally intended for Sudarsana Chakram. It is said that Mahavishnu in ecstatic joy of pushing down the demon-king, blew His conch lustily proclaiming to the world the necessity of His avatar and also heralding to men and gods that they would enjoy bliss on offering genuine prayers here.

NALAYIRA DIVYAPRABHANDAM EPISODE

The story goes that once when the eminent Vaishnava min strel, Poigai Alwar on his pilgrim tour, visited an asrām; it was night. After extending due hospitality, he was shown but a very small hut for stay. Before going to bed he started singing the glory of the Lord according to his routine. Soon there was unexpected rain, may be due to Varuna's reward for the absolute joy, he experienced at the sweet voice and profound devotion. At this juncture, a stranger drenched to skin sought shelter. Addressing the stranger, the inmate said, "You are most welcome, O venerable brother, but onething I have to inform beforehand; this place is quite small, fit for one's lying, and
enough for two to sit together, please enter and share". Thanking him, the second entered and at once engaged himself in emptying his soul in singing on Sri Mahavishnu with utmost rapture in tone high, and devotion pure. It seemed that Varuna was at wits’ end, and so increased his intensity -- there was heavy downpour. Running helter skelter for refuge another traveller reaching the portal of the hut asked in a low voice, "May I get asylum for the night, Sire". Anon came the reply by the first, "Why doubt, its yours as much as mine, please come in and enjoy what little space is available for all of us, but one thing you have to know now, this being too inadequate and meant for one to sleep, two to equat and three to stand, kindly step in and as there are already two, we can stand for the whole night". Delighted at the offer, he joined them and soon absorbed himself in singing in praise of Srimannarayana in pitch higher than the two. And it was non-stop; and what was more, solo majnly. Poor Varuna was totally lost to himself; the result was unprecedented unendurable rain accompanied by gale in its ferocly. Tearing darkness, as it were, another weather-beaten and helpless man came then and expressed his pathetic plight more through eyes and signs than words and phrases. Paralysed at his miserable agony, the first came out, and explaining the position as before, pushed him into the hut to take his place, preferring to standing outside, bearing the onslaughts of the rainstorm. But the stranger refused to enter, thereby depriving the patron of his comfort. So there was some scuffle. Hearing, the third bumped out from the hut and offered his place, whereas the second was found by then standing behind the first sacrificing his place, for the fourth. Each showed his readiness to lose the warmth and comfort in preference to the other and there was a keen contest among themselves, as a matter of fact. Wonder of wonders, all preferred standing in the open exposing themselves to the ferocity of elements throughout the night. All the four standing outside depleted their souls of their devotion through songs. All but one -- Sri Hari, and the refrain being Sri Mahavishnu. It was a sumptuous royal banquet to the ears of those who were blessed. Neither the pitch of darkness, nor relentless tempest did depress their spirits, Enjoying the spectacle of humanism at its height,
and drinking in the honied cadences, perhaps, Nature lost to itself and forgot its motion

Something phenomenal then occurred, when the fourth who was no other than Srimannarayana desiring to feast His ears with the nectarine melody of songs joined and revealed to them His bhuvana mohanarupa. Literally transported, at the surprisingly unexpected darshan of the Lord of Lords, they sang extempore in praise of Him one hundred pasurams each. All in their rapturous ecstasy-nay devotion dipped delicious sweet sensational state, unknown to any man, nor heard by angels even. But well known to pious souls. These soul-lifting and hypotising pasurams-numbering three hundred are the first three hundred dazzling bright gems woven into the Nalayira Divya Prabhandam, sung by nine other like minded Alwars. These famous verses enshrining the Vaishnavate culture thus took their origin from here and thus deserve to adorn the pendent of the divyabharana of Srimannarayana. Hence the sanctity that beckons a visit unavoidable, if man were to be called man and sincerely desire to shuffle off once for all the earthly attachments before shuffling off the mortal coil to making his Jivatma merge with Paramatma.

THE PATALAKETHU EPISODE

Lured by the divinity pervading the Krishnaranya, there came down once a sage by name Kalava and built an asram on the banks of Krishnabhadra to live permanently with like-minded and his family. Following the austerities, he lived at peace with the sublime surroundings, but was not allowed to be at peace with mind; for, a formidable demon by name Patalakethu, who on obtaining unattainable boons from Brahma started invading the asram from time to time and causing insurmountable grief to the asramites; for, he was a cannibal killing all only for eating. Terrified at his abominable acts, Kalava along with his men ran to the temple and falling at the feet of the Lord implored him for Abhayam. When the Lord pitying assured them protection from the onslaughts of the demon; they returned home. But to their
great consternation, there came then again Patalakethu their Yama with redoubled ardour and pent up indigination.

Then they invoked the compassion of Lord Trivikrama again; and as if an answer to their soul-earing appeal, there came then Kusadvaja a famous king of great prowess. When acquainted with the glory of the place and the predicament they were in, he promised protection. And at this juncture, there appeared in the sky a bright stately horse, and started descending. The sage then told him that it was sent by heaven only to destroy the demon of the underworld. Seeing Patalakethu nearing them disguised as boar, Kusadvaja gave a hot chase and killed him with an arrow. Returning to the asram, he regaled the asramites about the death of their awful enemy. Delighted Kalava requested him to name any boon that he would grant at once. Kusadvaja much to the surprise of the sage begged him to show Muktimarga, disregarding the earthly glory, like Digvijaya yatra or Ekachatradipatya. The sage then recounted the glory of the place with Mrkanda Maharshi episode and the like. Delighted with the uncommon sanctity permeating every inch of the Kshetra, he did penance there and was relieved of the shackles of Punarjanma with the darsan of the Omni-compassionate Lord Trivikarma.

**HISTORICITY**

Though the legendary accounts of the temple date back to the Satayuga, inscriptive evidence fixes its construction, expansion and patronage to the Pallava kings first and Vijayanagara rulers later. The inscriptions preserved give authenticity to several aspects of its construction, like the name of patrons, and the nature of endowments made. The temple administration was passed on to Emperumanar Jeer in the fifties of sixteenth century. It was the Peria Jeer of Tirupathi, who magnanimously appointed one of his disciples Emperumanar by name to minister to the needs of the ever increasing influx of pilgrims. And since then it is being maintained by his successors with due devotional fervour. It is now under the aegis of Venerable Thiru Srinivasa Ramanuja Chariar, the 25th Jeer, and
under his able and efficient Trusteeship, the temple has launched renovation programme, mainly concerning Towers. Philanthropists and theists are generously contributing their mighty mite to celebrating annual Brahmotsavams and festivals. It is now under the supervision of the H.R. & E.C. Administration of Tamil Nadu Govt. and with its timely guidance and munificent provisions, it is striving to keeping up its past glorious name and hoary traditions with the observance of routine pujas and periodical functions.

THE TEMPLE

As many expansion and renovation activities were undertaken by mighty theistic rulers and great philanthropists its size, walls, towers, mandapás etc. are gigantic and impressive in proportions. It has a massively built high compound wall pierced by entrances and high towers on three sides. The tower opposite the Rajagopuram measures 192 feet in height and it is dominating the landscape, and is visible to people off some 15 kms in distance. The intricate sculptural adornment of the towers speak volumes of the builders' patronage and workers' superior craftsmanship. The image of Trivikramaswami in the standing posture with right leg raised to measuring the sky feasts the eyes and fills the souls of the visitors. It size and pose are quite unique. On either side there are many images of illustrious personages - all but in act of praying. The assemblage of such rare divinities in the Garbhagriha itself is another notable marvel accountable for the uniqueness of the temple. Surprising it is to hear that the images are made of neither metal, nor stone, but wood. And according to writings and inscriptions they were installed in the dim past, say some scores of centuries before, but are withstanding the ravages of time, and appearing fresh and bright. Is it not then a marvel of marvels? The fact at once wrings veneration and impresses the visitor's with the divinity pervading the entire area. As they leave the Karuvari-sanctum sanctorum, they mutter audibly, 'What's impossible to the Lord of Lords, when He sent the mighty Mahabali to the neither world with a single, simple thrust? Yugas may come and go, but the Daru Vigraha will stand in its pristine purity, inerasable luminosity and
impregnable stability, proclaiming to the world that God's ways are inscrutable and they are to be adored before implementation for the good of mankind.

The Thayar is called Poongovil, and is installed in a huge mandap, which is a rare, specimen of engineering skill and architectural beauty. Another surprising factor that greets the visitors is the Durga shrine. Usually, Durga is worshipped in Saivite temples, but here she is not only worshipped with utmost devotion, but she is receiving special pujas for willingly accepting the role of the custodian of the temple.

ON THE TOWERS, WATERS AND ABANYAS

THE TOWERS

The temple has two unusually huge and lofty towers visible to miles a far, and the ring of sanctity hovering over them raises the palms of the devout at their mere sight itself. Tradition has that if a darsan of them assures janmahitya. Besides instilling bhakti instincts, they send thrills in the spines by their imposing height and sculptural excellences. Pilgrims utter Bhagawan's name at their sight and it is believed that the darsan of the vimana confers special merits, like relieving devotee from the cycle of births and deaths.

THE THIRTHAMS

As the water of Krishnabhadra, now goes by the name Pennar said to have flowed down from the Kamandal of Brahma, while washing the feet of Lord Trivikrama, they are held very very holy. Several accounts narrate that they are more sacred than the waters of the Ganges, or Triveni, for the main reason that they came down from the Kamandal of Brahma, and moreover trickled down from the lotus feet of Bhagawan Trivikrama. They cure skin diseases, besides purging off the sins accrued from birth. Devout Hindus choose this place for offering pindas to their manes and

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arranging samradhanas on large scale. Feeding made on the sacred banks has special merits and certain months and days are very efficacious. It is said that a touch of the water, or a sprinkle confers merits. They are scores of Thirthas in and around the temple campus imbued with spiritual powers and each has an awe-inspiring tale to narrate. Illustrious persons bathed in them and sipped several times to be relieved of the gross and dross sticking on their bodies, due to living amidst sinful persons and acquiring certain objectionable traits by either forceful cohabitation or unavoidable association with them. Several celebrated Maharshis and celestial denizens were lifted by the infinite compassion of Sri Trivikram on this land. Each thirtha has a story of its own and attracts the pious on certain days auspicious, for several purposes like offering pindas, feeding the poor, observing vratas and celebrating festivals. And they are not far from the main shrine.

CHAKRA THIRTHA

There are many sacred thirthas in this kshetra. Among them, Chakra Thirtha takes precedence over others. It is said that Brahma washed the feet of Trivikrama when he measured the sky with sacred water from kamandal. The water that descended was collected in a pool and that is now called Chakra Thirtha. Another account emphasises the glory of this thirtha. When Devendra was cursed by Durvasa for his indifference, he regained his purva vaibhava and kingdom from asuras only after due prayers to Trivikrama sitting on this bank. And whoever baths on Chitra Pournami in this thirtha is entitled to the merit of the company or devas for ever.

AGASTHYA THIRTHA

According to tradition, Agasthya bathed in this thirtha before the commencement of his dirghatapas to get the darsan of Lord Trivikrama. As his wish was fulfilled instantly, it is deemed very sacred and assures one of Vishnuloka, if bathed. Bathing in
the month of ANI - the Tamil month is considered to very efficacious.

**MRIKANDA THIRTHA**

This has a long tale and holds out many promises. In accordance with the Puranas, those who bathe in this punya thirtha are blessed with health, wealth, strength, money, fame, power and what not. Above all barren will be blessed with sons at it. It imposes certain austerities on the aspirants, like bathing, fasting, offering prayer services etc., and if done with all sincerity, they are assured of Vishnuuloka.

**KALAVA THIRTHA**

It lies to the south-west of the main temple. It has a special charm for the pilgrims. The water is always pure, clear, sweet and sparkle like crystal. It purges off sins instantly, according to the story. So attractive always.

**VARAHA THIRTHA**

It is credited with the association of Bhagawan Parashuram, the sixth incarnation of Lord Mahavishnu. After massacering the Kshetrias to his satisfaction, he came over here and did penance to at one the sin of killing indiscriminately many kings. A dip in it in the Uttarashada nakshatra washes off all sins and takes him to heaven.

Two more thirthas situated on the north and south sides of the temple are deservedly famous for offering pindas to the manes. They are called Pindasthanam and Runavimochanam. Taking a bath in them during Adi and Revathi nakshatras, and gifting an amalaka fruit to brahmins relieve one of his debt to his manes. Anyone bathing in this continuously for five days and praying to the Lord will enjoy Vishnu Sannidhya. Another holy thirtha by name Akasaganga is attracting pilgrims due to the fact
of Brahma doing penance here once and getting the darsan of Trivikrama thereby. There are some more thirthas and each is connected with some celebrity who acquired merit, either by bathing in them, or doing penance on their banks. Devout pilgrims visit them all.

THE KRISHNARANYA

In the days of yore, this primeval forest was deemed to be the most ideal place for penance, and it gave asylum to scores of sages and seers of interplanetary reputation. Its serenity together with sublimity drew many celestials too for meditation purposes. It possesses all the necessary conditions—climate etc. for penance and ascetic living. Hence the attraction for both celestials and terrestrials.
Say Chidambaram and look! There emerges then on the mental screen the rhythmic footwork and graceful movements of that cosmic dancer - Nataraja, lost in the demonstration of Bhujanga Trasa to the accompaniment of orchestral music to serving a royal banquet to the ears and eyes of the viewers, from his favourite seat of Chitsabha. Holy is the sight! Holier is the feat!! Holiest is that seat!!! And the most holiest is that expert!!!! This Chidambaram thus emerged occupies the most conspicuous place in legends, as the seat of cosmic dance from time immemorial. Besides, this divya kshetra enshrines the much-venerated Akasalinga, one of the five exalted lingas and is worshipped with utmost reverence since ages. It is to this shrine the four great Saiva Samaya Acharyas - Appar, Sambandar, Sundarar and Manikkavacakkar are intimately connected and produced master pieces eulogising their respective paths - Charya, Kriya, Yoga and Gnana; it is on this temple towers the entire dance history through 108 modes of dance are carved with descriptions as given in the Bharata Natya Sastra; it is this kshetra, that gave liberation to several hundreds of devotees, like Sage Nanda and Tirunilakandananayar, Vyagrapada, Patanjali etc., it is to this temple Chola Kings made liberal endowments, like adorning the roof with god plates; it is here according to inscriptions Hiranya Varma Chakravarthi of Kashmir was cured of his leprosy with a single bath in temple Pushkarini as back as in 500 A.D; it is to this temple Nattukotti Chettiar's vied with the royal families to making endowments, such as covering the ceiling with gold etc., it is this presiding Lord that was ardently worshipped by imperial monarchs as the family deity; it is here the King
dancer - Nataraja propounded the theory and function of dance forms, representing energy, rhythm, harmony and orderliness; for, he treats the world as his stage and dance, representing the Primeral rhythmic energy. And he dances to keeping up the life of cosmos, and it is to this temple, donors deemed it a great privilege to employing master builders, whose craftsmanship left it a sculptural treasure house and architectural museum.

Emerged thus as a monumental piece of superb art, and a spiritual haven of supreme significance, it is lifting the devout from the abyss of grief by releasing them from the vicious circle of births and deaths, since the Vedic times.

SOURCES

Devotional literature is rich in its corpus and almost all premier Saivite poet-singers and theist poets have produced master-pieces focussing more light on Natya Sasthra for exposition of which Nataraja, the chief-deity is worshipped most. Besides, the inscriptions of the temple walls bear eloquent testimony to the endowments made by royal families and aristocratic aradhakas. The archives too furnish elaborate accounts of the kings and their donations.

ANTIQUITY

Legends embody the life histories of great Siva bhaktas who on realising the glory of the Lord served Him life long, and on whom the Lord bestowed salvation. Among such devout bhaktas, Vyagrapada's episode merits narration for emulation. Vyagrapada was a great Siva bhakta. Not satisfied with mere mental prayers, he decided to make Pushpa Kainkaryam everyday. And throughout his life at it. In pursuance of his ideal, he used to go to far off flower gardens for collection. In his frenzy to offer the best and most in quality and quantity, he was hurrying, as it were, from tree to tree and creeper to creeper early in the mornings. As physical strength has limitations, he was
feeling tired with his collection for making garlands grand and abundant superfluous and charming. To quench his spiritual thirst, he developed the practice of running during the gathering of flowers of different kinds and shapes. Number of garlands increased, yet his ambition did not touch the target. So he sighed often and cried now and then. Pleased with this genuine adoration, Lord Siva blessed him with the feet of tiger supposed to run 60 or 70 mph, so that he could roam and run everywhere and anywhere without fatigue. He named him Vyagrapada. What an appropriate name! How kind was the Lord!! Is not Lord Siva called Bhaktavasankar? That Vyagrapada then collected the choicest and adored Him best, say to his heart’s content till death. Another is a sage by name Patanjali also was blessed by the Lord to fulfilling his desire of adoring him always. The chief sabha of the temple enshrines their images for veneration by the viewers by emulation.

NANDANAR EPISODE

The devotion of Nanda is another brilliant example of Lord’s boundless compassion for his adorers. Nanda was a paria by birth, but by bhakti he was the god’s favourite son. He lived in a village near Tiruppagur. In those days, the high caste Brahmins never allowed them into temple precincts. Yet he was worshipping the Lord of Tiruppagur, visiting daily. This practice he continued for long. He was satisfied in adoring the Lord standing at the entrance and particularly unseen by those arrogant, superstitious spiritual bankrupts - brahmin priests. This practice he continued for long, yet his heart yearned for full darshan of the Lord in his resplendent form. Having been pleased with his adoration, the Lord one day asked his sentinel to bid his mount Nandi, sitting straight opposite move a little aside for giving darshan to him. Nandi moved further and Nanda enjoyed the sight and fulfilled his life’s ambition. And he was then advised to go to Chidambaram for emancipation. He reached it, adored Him and attained Sayujyam - merging his soul in the Lord at the end. His statue is placed in the temple. And moreover the Tiruppagur temple is treasuring up this evidence here the Nandi is not sitting
opposite the Lord as seen in Siva temples, but a few feet aside from the Lord. Further, the sentinel - Dwarapalaka is sculptured in the pose of bending his head leftwards to listening to the bidding of the Lord. This paria was cannonised, and he is one of the 64 Nayanmars - the adorers of Siva with a great difference. There are many more, rather hundreds of such striking real examples of adorers who were lifted, liberated and made to live in the form of images in Siva temples for correction by the erring. The Nayanmars, in fact, heightened the glory of the Lord by their personal privation. They are standing specimens of pure devotion. Hence forming the first line of the horde of adorers.

HISTORICITY

The temple - this magnificent auditorium - though was in vogue in the vedic age, its known glory in records begins with the visit of Hiranya Chakravathi of Kashmir around 500 A.D. His mention of the curative effects of the waters of Pushkarini called here Sivaganga Thirtham gives credence to the fame of this great Saivate shrine. It was then called by different names, like Thillai, Perumpathapuliyur, Pundarikapuram, Vyagrapuram etc.

Historical evidence is copious, but it begins only with the early 10th century, when the Chola King Parantaka I made rich endowments to the temple, besides providing golden roof to the Karuvarai. Later, the Lord being the house hold deity of Cholas, they improved it from time to time. Krishna Deva Raya built the North gopuram, and the east gopuram by Sundara Pandya. Later in the 10th century when it was under jurisdiction of Hyderali and French its importance declined, rather being Mlechchas, they converted the holy shrine into military barracks, as evidenced by Shri Eyre Coote, who tried to break the walls with cannon in 1781, but could not, and so was driven out in the end. This establishes the truth that the spiritual might is greater than physical. Later it was brought under the control of the commissioner for Endowments of Government of the Tamil Nadu
THE TEMPLE

This temple covering an area of 39 acres is in the heart of the city. Its courtyard is quite spacious accommodating several shrines and mini-shrines built in it. It is surrounded by massive walls with four big tall gopurams in four directions and a big tank called Sivaganga tank measuring 175 x 100 feet towards the North with a nice colonnade around, beautifying with minishrines. Of the gopurams, two - the North and the South ones are of 160 feet high and have the carvings of the 108 dance poses. A unique feature! A great honour to Natya Sastra!! Their sculptural beauty too is of high quality. It has five principal sabhas-halls, and are called by different and appropriate names, such as Kanakasabha, Chit Sabha, Nritya Sabha, Deva Sabha and Raja Sabha. The highly venerated image of Nataraja is enshrined in Chit Sabha and it is the garbha griha in common parlance. It is here the Lord performed his Cosmic Dance first and behind the idol and separated from it by a black screen, there is found the Akasa lingam. To be true there is no Sivalinga at all, but we are made to believe that there is one invisible linga called Akasa linga. This is the real secret of this place - i.e., making people believing that nothing has something in it. According to tradition Nataraja emerged from this place. Hence sanctity. The sanctum of Devi Sivakarna Sundari lies to the left of Nataraja's icon. The beauty of the Murthis in glittering jewels and gorgeous robes feast the eyes. Behind the image of Nataraja, there is a chakra. The stone steps built to ascend the Chit Sabha are five in number and mystically represent the five letters of the Panchakshara mantra - Om Na ma si va ya. The doors bear the embossed representation of the Sages-Vyagrapada and Patanjali. Adjacent to it lies the Kanaka Sabha, where pujas are offered. The ceiling and roofs of these two are covered with gold plates and go by the name of Ponnambalam.

The Raja Sabha measuring 103 metres by 58 metres is housed in 1000 pillared hall. It is here Sekkilar recited his Periapuranam, according to tradition. The Nritya Sabha comes next and it is richly sculptured. It houses the image of Nataraja in
Urdhava Tandahava pose. Here the stones are pulsiting with rhythm and life. It is fitted with wheels and horses resembling a chariot. There is a big shrine here for Govindaraja Perumal and it is grand, and rich in sculptural adornments. The last is the DevaSabha - a spacious hall meant for the celebration important festivals.

In addition to these, there are many adorable deities installed at several places in the corridors. They are the representations of many famous Siva lingams associated with the names of different temples in India. Among them there is a stone representation of Kalpavriksha too. Another! Vinayaka, is another odd image seen here, blowing conch and it draws attention. The Navagraha Mandapam is well built and deserves veneration. There is a huge Ganesh image in a grand shrine in the outer prakara deemed to the one of the biggest in India. And the temple of Sivakami Amman lying in the outer prakara has a beautiful arch and it has many sculptural beauties. The Subrahmanya temple lies next to Ambal temple. It is also a piece of superb art. Adjacent to this lies the Durga temple. All are extremely superb both in architectural and sculptural points of view.

GLORY OF THE DANCE

Chidambaram, the seat of cosmic dance has adorned the pages of our sacred scriptures and become a great pilgrim centre for art experts and theists of all nations as well. The fascination it casts on the art connoisseurs wafted its fragrance across the seas. Foreign art lovers spent days in studying, and months in writing dissertations. Their Verdict-scientific offers rich tributes to the indeogenous sculpture in a masterly way. That is equally heightening the glory of his temple culture along with the ecstatic rhapsodies of Saint Poets, who in raptures clothed the presiding deity in such sublime phrases that a mere reading transports anyone to ethereal words. Soma Stavaraja appreciating the role of Siva says that the three worlds are but the dancing Hall of God Siva. The King of dancers is the supreme Siva himself. The audience, actors and the stage are all evolved
and elaborated by the Lord from is ownself in association with his consort - Sakti or Uma. Here is an example in appreciation of Tandava Nritya and it is from Pushpadanta’s Mahimna stotra: It describes the dance of Siva, enveloping the entire universe.

"By the pressure of your feet when you dance, the earth begins to strike. By the impact of your circling long hands moving like iron beams, the firmament with its stars and planets is overtaken with fear. The heavenly region is struck by the whirling locks of your matted hair, And yet you are dancing for the protection of the Universe! How strange and extra-ordinary seem the ways of this supreme sovereign".

This ecstatic account applauds the purport of dance and the glory of the Lord. Another appreciation from an art critic:- "Creation arises from the drum; protection proceeds from the hand of hope, from fire proceeds destruction; the foot held aloft gives release and fourth hand points to the lifted foot, the refuge of the soul".

Needless to emphasise that the paths are two, but the goal is same. Hence Tirumular says "Chidambaram is everywhere, everywhere his dance". Siva abides in every individual soul and destroys the pasas or fetters, which bind each individual soul like a Pasa. The burning ground or the Samsara where the Lord dances is the heart and what is burnt is the ego, illusion and Karma.

IN CHIDAMBARAM

ANNAVAMALAI UNIVERSITY: In addition to the famous shrine, there are several worth-seeing places in and around the city. Among them Annamalai University deserves mention. It is one of the best Residential Universities in the country, renowned as a great centre of Tamil learning and Carnatic music. It was founded by a great philanthropist Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar and boasts of covering several acres of land, packed to its bounds several excellent buildings, spacious class-rooms, best hostels, lush green lawns, clean roads etc. It lies on the eastern outskirts of the town and is adding cultural luminosity to the spiritual glory of the town. A visit pays.

KALI TEMPLE: It is located at the Northern end of the town. It is popular as Thillai Kali Amman Koil and the deity is quite awe- some. A look at the image recalls to the memory the superiority of the Universal dancer - Nataraja along with her defeat in the battle of guts. When vanquished, Mother Kali unable to digest the humiliation left her abode - the temple and came to this place. Adorers started turning up in large numbers, may be to console her or exact choicy boons from her disconcerting mood, when she started granting indiscriminately - over and above the deserving. Kopperunjingam - a famous Chola king built a beautiful edifice in the 13th century. It is drawing Saketayas more. The special Prayer Services are akin to the temples dedicated to the Saketiyas. A miss not shrine of great sublimity.
Heard you ever of the highest divinity descending in doctor’s robes straight into war theatre, to hurrying hither and thither for dressing the wounds of war victims, assisted by the celestial nymphs, donned in the immaculate white gowns, making enquires with soft words, while removing the spears and arrows lodged in their bodies, debilitated by profuse bleeding, yet found smiling at the fortune of being attended by the kindest among the Highests? Or seen you ever the pleasantest sight of the divine Mother, the affection incarnate handing over a cup of nectarine milk, while the parents bathing in the nearby tank, before entering the sanctum only to rip open their hearts, torn to shreds by demoralising poverty in front of the benevolent deities for mercy?

If not, sure a visit to Vaideeswaran Koil and Sirkali unties the knot and makes you prostrate before those august deities unknown to yourself, while tears streaming down your cheeks, indicate your inexplicable joy emerging out of the overflowing heart. The protagonist of these two awe-inspiring episodes are none but Uma and Maheswar, the Adidampatis, who but have one heart though possessing two different and distinct bodies, perhaps to justify the name Ardhanariswar given, when two became one. These two reveal their all-merciful attitude towards the grief-stricken, for which both of them are the bywords for kindness. The sports played by them are countless, and the devotees lifted by them too are numberless. Amongst them, these two stand out as outstanding in publishing to the worlds that their sole concern is nothing but making the miserable less
miserable by their timely ministrations in every conceivable form. Always!

Now visit the Vaideeswaran Koil first, and know the śthala-pranam, before entering that holy temple.

**BACKGROUND**

Surapadama, the awful demon created a new hell in heaven and subjected the amarapurvavasis to innumerable and insurmountable troubles, besides unending problems given to the pious innocent on earth. When the afflicted prayed to Lord Maha-Vishnu for intervention, he advised that none but the valorous son of Gowrishankar could bring them relief by killing that ruthless Surapadman and his brothers Taraka and Singamukha. Devendra māngāed to get Lord Siva united in wedlock with Parvathi with the assistance Manmatha, and the son Shanmuga born to them embarked upon military campaign against Surapadma. Being an exceptional danava blessed with special boons, he built his impregnable fort in the ocean and met the onslaught using his asura sakti. His brothers and the powerful army fought on land, under the sea and in the air causing irreparable loss to the Devasena, although Lord Shanmuga ably and expertly guided his army in the operations, proving more than a match to the danavas from the start to finish. Lord Shanmuga won the battle. Yet countless fell victims. The battle ground presented a ghastly sight with the mutilated heads, mangled limbs, maimed hands, severed trunks and disfigured faces—many soldiers appeared beyond identification. Moreover, their agonised wails, painful yells, fearful screams reverberating the whole earth went up and deafened the ears of gods. The blood drenched battle field appeared like a burial ground. Though the wounded desired death most, but could not die. Haven’t they drunk amrita? In their living death, they made supplication for instant help. Who could but Lord Siva, the Omnicompassionate help? Isn’t he the compassion in motion? When the heart-rending cries fell on his ears, he at once metamorphosed himself into a doctor and launched the relief programme putting on the Physician’s robe and ordering the
Pramadaganas to follow and assist the angels in their first-aid activities first. They obeyed. He descended at the same spot, where the present Vaideeswaran Koil stands. Needless to continue: all the wound recovered at the mere touch of that all-merciful Maheswar. In recognition of that momentous act, Lord Maheswar was adored then there both by gods and humans. At the humble request of humanist sages, the Lord accepted to abide in this place for ever to liberate the genuine adorers. Since then the place started growing in importance and many sports of the Lord came to light in every yuga. This sacred shrine finds a coveted place in several scriptures, and is called by different names in different times. It is familiar as Pullirukkuvelur. Seems strange in combination, isn’t it? It is a combination of FOUR Tamil words, each standing for a glorious episode that occurred here, besides the temporary First-Aid shed. It can be split up into four words - pul + Irukku + vel + oor And they mean-Pul + =bird, Irukku = Rigveda; Vel = Murugan and oor = planet. It is here, according to legends, Jatayu, the bird who informed Sri Rama of the abduction of Sita by Ravana received funeral obsequies from Sri Rama; it is here Lord Shanmuga received Vel - lance from his father Maheswar; it is here the Rigveda offered prayers to the Mulavirat, and finally it is here the planet Angarakha was cured of his leprosy. They all prayed and praised the Lord for his infinite compassion and unequalled vatsalya. So this was also popular as Jatayupuri, Vedapuri, Angarakapuri etc., each denoting an anecdote rare and great occurred here. The holy tank lying in the southern prakara is called Jatayu Kundam - the place of Jatayu’s death.

THE LORD AS DOCTOR

There is a belief current in this region that Lord Maheswar cures as many as 4480 different and distinct diseases preying on humans and in every kind of the treatment he administers, Goddess Parvathi assists him with oil vessel carefully carrying along with Amrit Sanjivini and Vilvanthandu. So she is affectionately called Thayyalanayaki. The neem tree lying near the eastern gopura is said to murmur and chant eternally through
its fluttering leaves, the glory of the divine healer and the efficacy of treatment. Every disease is cured and each patient goes home singing in praise of the Lord. There is another belief that those possessed by evil spirits too get cured and redeemed once for all by offering prayers to this compassionate All-powerful Vaidyanath. Scores of supreme Siddhas offered Amritabhisheka to the Lord and the nectar that overflowed formed into a tank now called Siddhamrita kund. A bath in it cures all kinds of skin disease and it is located in the first prakara. Every visitor normally bathes in it first and then enters the temple. One peculiar feature of the tank is - it is free from aquatic creatures, like frogs, fish and snakes. It is due to saint Sadananda, who observing the menace caused by the water creatures, drove them out once for all by his yogic power.

The temple priests sell small medicinal pallets, compounded with mud of the holy tank and they cure any kind of disease. They act as Sarvaroganiwarini pills and relieve the ailing from diseases - mental, physical and spiritual. Belief itself is a sure relief to any one! At any time!! The Prasadams-Netrapidichandanam, and Tiruchandurundai given to the visitors are said to cure many ailments. Moreover, the bilva and neem leaves along with sandal paste, if taken in with the water of the Siddhamrita, every disease disappears without leaving a trace of its visitation, since everything here in the sacred Sannidhi is potent, sacred and auspicious. The All-benevolent Maheswar desires to see that no devotee goes home disappointed or unconsold. Any true bhakta suffering, brought to his holy feet in vehicles, goes home dancing and singing. All but due to the healing touch of the Lord. Visit it for realisation! Pray to him for emancipation!! And then start propagation of his glory for spiritual regeneration that ensures your salvation!!

THE TEMPLE

This holy place sanctified by that humanitarian doctor Vaideeswaran - greatest among the Vaidyas, is enshrining the Swayambhu Sivalinga of that Bhaktavasankar. Thelst monarchs built many vast Mandapams, enclosures, mini-shrines later and
made it a yatrasthala of great importance. It emerged as an architectural marvel of high order, with the benign touch of royalty. The Pallava architectural pattern predominates. It is quite spacious surrounded by two high sturdy prakarams and four tall towers. And it stands exceedingly majestic, heightening the beauty of the landscape. It faces West. It has two tanks called Siddhamritha Thirtham and Jayayukundam inside the prakara. And a bath in them cures all the skin diseases. There are many mini shrines housing the august deities, like Vinayaka, Muthukumarar, Balambal called Thaiyalmayak etc. It contains many shining bronze statues of deities, like Angaraka, Nataraja, Jayayu, Somaskandhar, Sangaravel, Bikshadanar etc. According to tradition it is here Sri Rama performed the last rites for Jayayu. Moreover, Angaraka, Surya, Sampathu, Jayayu etc. worshipped the Moolavar - Maheswar with great veneration. Hence deemed a most visit-worthy place.

Lord Subrahmanya here goes by the name of Muthakumarar and the idol is very big in size and attracts most due to the stone-cutter's excellent craftsmanship. As the story goes Lord Muruga got his powerful vel from here. Krithigai festival is celebrated with great eclat. Another plus point temple claims is, it is here alone the Planet Mars - Angaraka is worshipped and nowhere in India such significance is given to him. Weekly pujas are performed with utmost enthusiasm. His bronze statue is extremely beautiful and wrings veneration by its size, lusture and decoration. It is here he was cured of his disease too.

Another outstanding feature that the temple embodies is the design and position of the western tower, which allows the rays of the Sun fall on the Sivalinga for a few days every year. The sanctity attached to this is drawing thousands of pilgrims every year. Theists fail not to avail this rare opportunity of seeing the Sun God worshipping the All-benevolent Lord Siva. By joining him on that auspicious moment, they also receive the merit along with the Sun God Vembadimal - Sthala vriksham is another object of attraction for the visitors. This sacred temple tree has been existing since the Kritayuga and is called by various names. It was known as Kadamba in the Kritayuga, Bilva, during the
Tretayuga, Vakula in the Dwaraparayuga and Neem in the Kaliyuga. With such meritorious back ground, the Presiding Deity - Maheswar famous for his compassion is lifting the bhaktas by fulfilling their desires. A worth- visiting shrine!! A sacred spot!! An adoration worthy Lord!!! Visit it anon! Be lifted boon!!

**AROUND THE VAITHEESWARANKOIL – TIRUPPANGUR**

It is a Saiva kshetra of great importance, situated at a distance of 5 Km from here. It is the birth place the famous Nayanmar called Nandanar, who being a Panchama fell victim to caste-conscious orthodox brahminism. But his piety moved Lord Siva, who bade the Dwarapalaka to instruct Nandi - his vehicle to move a little further for the full darshan of his linga to him, who always was adoring, standing in the compound, opposite the Mulavirat. He obeyed and that bhakta enjoyed the darshan for the first time. The temple bears testimony to the many episodes connected with that Immortal bhakta and hence a visit-worthy place. Among them, the temple pond supposed to have been dug by that bhakta single-handed in a single night is found full of clear water always and attracts the visitors for a bath at a mere sight. Legend says that he was assisted by Gangapathi during the digging operations.

Among the uniqueness to be seen here is the Siva linga which is made of neither stone nor metal. It is an ant-hill and the priests apply cowdung every Monday to preserve it from decay. Sakti is adored in an imposing small shrine. There is an image of a celestial beating a five-faced drum-Pancha mukha vathiyam in the hall. Many gods, like Brahma, Surya Chandra Agni, Indra, sages like Agasthya, Vyagrapada and Srirama along with monarchs and Nayanmars worshipped the Lord and were blessed here by the Lord. The periyapuranam narrates the Lord’s sports with many episodes.
Now remains the scene spectacular that brings out Mother Uma's infinite compassion for the devotees. Her boundless compassion transformed, but an ordinary lad into an interplanetary luminary, whose rare devotion and principal preachings are acting as the Polestar for those, lost in the ocean of samsara. The Jaganmatha's compassionate act of giving milk to that child took place at a spot now called Sirkali, lying 6 km off the famous Vaideswaran Koil. It is also the scene of many thrilling events linking the lives of HariHaras. It is here, Lord Mahavishnu's pride was humbled by Lord Siva; it was here Lord Siva is abiding in the first floor with Parvathi going by name of Uma Maheswar and in the second floor, Sattanathar in a separate niche like mandap; it is this shrine built in the form of a boat and so this kshetra is called Tiruthonimalai.

BACKGROUND

There lived in the vicinity of the present temple a brahmin couple-poor, yet very devout, in the serventh century AD. They had a child, but he was mute-a born dumb, unfortunately. So was deemed an nail driven into the coffin of the parents' daily dreary existence. They wanted to bring him up well and give the best education but where was the wherewithal. They starved and so too the child. It appears one day the parents went to the temple with him. Leaving the child on the flight of stairs of the tank, they started the bathing ritual. The child who was without food for sometime let out a piteous wail for food. It was indeed heart-rending. both in its pitch and purport. There were many in the mandapam there, but none heard its agony. Doesn't the world turn deaf ear to the genuine peals of agony? Will the heaven too? Haven't the gods move at the piercing cries of mortals? The boy's painful yell was heard by Mother Uma. It
stirred and touched the chord of her sensitive heart. At once she handed over a cup of divine milk to him. The boy drank to his bellyful well. The parents, who found the signs of his drinking milk wondered at the occurrence. Elated at this unexpected fortune, they entered the shrine. And lo, the boy in ecstatic rapture sang the glory of the Lord, all on a sudden. His poetic effusions are found to be the best specimens of literary pieces. Could he be otherwise? He drank gnamamrit given by Mother Uma. He can’t but outstep others. His life from then formed a glittering chapter in the Nayanmar’s history. Alas! he lived only for 16 years, but left such a rich treasure, the world will not “willingly let it die”. This child prodigy became guru to many Nayanmars including Appar, perhaps, for the gnamamrit given by the merciful Mother. Hasn’t she shared half the body of Lord Siva, the Omnibenevolent Lord? Hence that exemplary affection. Later, this place was consecrated by a separate temple built to commemorate this event of that Salviite prodigy. And is given importance in offering all kinds of pujas along with the august deities.

**SIVA AS A HUNTER**

This shrine is an integral part of the Siva temple built to perpetuate another great event, enhancing the glory of Lord Siva. According to tradition, Lord Mahavishnu after sending Bali Chakravarti to the nether world grew a little bit arrogant and moved about with pride. Not commendable in way! Does this bring honour to him? No. It is unbecoming to a person of his status and powers. Apprehending unpleasant consequences, Lord Siva assuming the form of hunter humbled his pride with an arrow. It worked. Later penitent Vishnu requested the Lord to settle down here and wear the skin as mantie and bone as mace in token of the episode occurred; for they symbolize egoism and maya, which were subdued by his arrow. He agreed. So Lord Siva is called Sattanathar - Lord of the Skin coat. As this happened here, it was deemed holy, and so a temple was constructed. It is called Brahmapureeswarar temple. By royal patronage, it grew up into a major shrine of great importance. The Chola emperor
Vira Rajendra and Venkatadevaraya of Vijayanagara emperor emptied their treasures to glorify it. It contains in its compound besides this, the famous Sambandar's shrine. And Uma Maheswar shrine in the first floor. It too has a long legend.

**UMA MAHESWAR SHRINE**

The legend narrates - Kalavittu, a virtuous king who ruled over the country was without issues. He performed several types of pujas and sacrifices for santanaprapati, but to no effect. A certain reputed sage by name Romesa, pitying advised him to go to Kailasa and worship Lord Maheswar. Weighed down by unending mental anguish, he expressed his inability to do so. Then the sage himself prayed to Lord Maheswar to come down to the south along with Umadevi to bless the king. Maheswar then said that his prayer would be fulfilled shortly, when Vayu, the Wind God and Serpent God - Adisesha enter into contest to decide, who between them was stronger. They waited with anxiety.

It was at this juncture Adisesha and Vayu desired to test their might. And according to conditions laid down, if Wind-god blows off Adisesha, covering Meruparvatha, he becomes the winner, else Adisesha declares his victory over him. When the trial of strength commenced, the whole world shook terribly due to the velocity and vitality displayed by the Wind-god to blowing off his opponent, yet Adisesha remained unperturbed. Repitition of the same went on, but none was found tired, nor willing to give up further attempts. Then the gods requested Adisesha to lift his head a little as a concession to Vayudeva. When lifted, the Wind-god blew fast with redoubled vigour and force, then a part of Kailas came off and was borne to the South on the wings of twenty big birds. The waiting sages and the king enjoyed the darsan, and forthwith it disappeared. The king had his long pending desire fulfilled, and to mark of this great episode, he built a grand temple and installed the images of Uma and Maheswar with figures of birds on the terrace of Brahmeeswara temple. The
images thus installed are extremely grand and wring veneration by the exquisite sculpture, exuding from them.

THE MAIN TEMPLE

This Sattanathaswamy temple enshrining a Swayambhu linga lies in the heart of town. The spacious courtyards housing the three different shrines are enclosed by a high compound wall with four entrances. The principal deities adored are Brahmapureeswar, Tirugnana Sambandar and Tirunilai Nayaki, and they are enshrined in three separate temples, each with a prakara and many Mandapams. Muthu Sattainathar’s shrine houses on the terrace, the beautiful statues of Uma and Maheswar are sculptured masterly. And they are extremely impressive. The image of Sattanathar is installed in a separate narrow niche and to avail the darsan, one has to go bending head. There is a staircase in the Northern side taking the devotees to the top for darsan. The terrace is called Tiruthonimalai, named, perhaps for its boatshape.

THE BOAT CITY

This sacred place is also called Thonipuram - The Boat city. It has a legend and a queer one at it. During the Mahapralaya, the whole earth was submerged under water, except this region, which for mysterious reasons was dry and unaffected by the fury of the flood. Lord Maheswar accompanied by Parvathi rowed to this place, then standing high above the flood Charmed by its sanctity, he made it his abode. And so this was given the name of the boat city. And Sirkali the present name it bears is due to Kali’s offering prayers to the Lord with great fervour. It was also called Sri Kalipuram, and Sirkali is a shortened one and it is now popularly known by this only. To its North-West, lie the other two shrines named already.
FESTIVALS

Of the important festivals celebrated here, Tirumalaippal is given the highest importance. It falls on the 2nd of Chitra. And it is on that auspicious day, Mother Uma fed Sambandar and made him the much renowned Tirugnana Sambandar. Hence the attraction. Festivals during Adi and Navaratri have a great attraction. This Lord was worshipped by gods, sages, singers, saints and emperors of great eminence. Brahma appeared to have descended several times to offer prayers to the Lord, so the holy place was called Brahmapuram for long. Siva is worshipped here in his three forms- Guru, Linga and Sangama. Uma Maheswar worship represents Guru Moorthi, Sri Brahmapureeswara stands for Linga Moorthi and Sattainathaswamy symbolises the Sangana Moorthi. The goddess is popularly known as Sthira Sundari.

There are twenty two tirthas in the town and two in the temple itself - Brahma Thirtha and Parachara Thirtha. Bathing in them is efficacious and liberates the sinners. Eminent Naganamars Jike Tirunaukkarasu, Sundarar and Manickavachakar sang in praise of this Lord. And the songs are preserved with honour due.

It is a place of emancipation and exemplifies the glories of Lord Maheshwar and Mother Uma to a degree of utmost significance, and the spiritual solace it confers is indeed equal to none but to itself. Visit it for emancipation! Adore now for instant solace!!

AROUND SIRKALI – POOMPUNAR

Lying at about 15 km off the temple of Sirkali, this once world famous sea port is occupying a conspicuous place in the history of India. And literature too. Known to foreigners like Ptolemy and Pliny as Puhar, this harbour city is situated at the confluence of river Cauvery with the Bay of Bengal. It was the Principal port of the imperial Cholas and the seat of the immortal characters - Kannaki and Kovalan whose exemplary life portrayed masterly by Ilango in Silappadhikaram, is passing for a master piece of all times. But that city was submerged long ago. In 1973, its ancient glory was revived by Tamil Nadu Government by constructing a fittingly superb Art Gallery that depicts the major scenes of the Silappadhikaram. Other monuments raised then - Pavai Manram, Ilango Manram, Negungal Manram, Kotha Pandal are equally grand anduring the tourists and pilgrims alike. For the students of history and scholars who desire to wander amidst the excavations, it affords a rich experience for strolling through time. On the way the visitors halt at Tivuvanga, famous Saivakshethra dedicated to Aamarthi. These two have eternal attraction to asthiikas and Paryatakas.
The word 'Tanjore' conjures up a vision of a series of multicoloured pictures of mighty rulers, who by their matchless valour and benign administration brought undying fame to South-India - that is Dakshinapatha. It has been the seat of power for scores of dynasties that ruled it from time immemorial. It was a capital city with a difference. Situated in a fertile delta and surrounded by rich alluvial soil - the gift of ever-smiling Cauvery, it is rightly called the rice-bowl of the South by reason of producing paddy twice a year in bumper crops to feeding sumptuously millions of hungry mouths, with a great variety of grains and pulses, besides several kinds of luscious fruits. It has had a splendid past. In and around it were born many an illustrious god-man, who heightened the glory of our sacred Ind, by establishing and propagating the diverse creeds of our all-adorable Hindu Dharma. It was the centre of enlightening forums, famous for holding a several remarkable mellifluent concerts and literary contests. Ascended here upon, several reputed saint-composer-singers, who poured down their souls in melodious strains, the divine sports of our gods and goddesses. And god-gifted poets and writers who gave literary banquets to both royalty and commonalty under the munificent patronage of enlightened rulers.

To be concise and specific, this historic place is consecrated by the appearance of multitudinous towering personalities, who enriched every field of human activity by their mighty contribution, like Rajaraja Chola I, Ranganath Naick and Sarfoji II as kings, Appar and Mangai Alwar as propounders of our Sanathana Dharma. Thiagaraja, Sama Sastrv and Dhikhitar
as divine musicians, Sivananda Sekharan and Vijaya Raghava Naick as poets, Kunjara Mallan and Nitha Vinothan as sculptors etc.

It is thus rich in history and famous in legends and so has been occupying a coveted place among the quartet of temple towns - Madurai, Rameswaram, Tiruchirapalli and Tanjavur of great antiquity and spiritual sublimity. There are several versions interpreting its derivation and origin. It was called Thanjai connoting a place, surrounded by evergreen paddy fields and blooming orchards. It was deemed to be on par with Ayodhya and Kancheepuram in sanctity and popularity. It was also called Alagaapuri, Kuberapuri, Thanjapuri and Vijayapuri on account of its beauty, wealth, prosperity and success. Tanjore, if viewed in the right perspective, owes its greatness to the Rajarajeswaram temple, but the temple in fact rises in splendour due to the predominant theistic instincts of the mighty rulers. They are interdependent and inseparable. One compliments the other and lives only to bring out the glory of its indispensably, inseparable constituent. So a comprehensive, thorough study of both is a necessity at this stage

SOURCES

Bhavishyotharapurana is the principal source that embodies a great deal of literature connected with the origin, growth, patronage and administration of this temple, deemed to be possessing the grandest pagoda among the temples of India. Brihadeswara Mahatyaa, in a series of interesting legends throws adequate light on this great temple Rajeswaranataka - a play in Tamil also helps to reconstruct the greatness of the builder and his patronage to the temple. There are hundreds of inscriptions, besides abundant devotional literature that testifies to the magnanimity of the rulers associated with this temple.
Going to origin, one discerns it occupying a coveted place in Varahapuranam as Sameevana Kshetra. It was known as Thanjasuram then. Its derivation is quite interesting. The story goes that it was the capital of a domineering wicked demon by name Thanjasuran. While being slain for his mis-deeds by Anandavalli the Mother of Universe, he implored her for the boon of naming the place of his birth and region as Thanjasuram, obviously to perpetuate his memory. It was readily granted then, and hence the name Thanjasuram. But later, it came to be known as Thanjapuram, a corrupt form of Thanjasuram undoubtedly.

According to another version, it was called Alakai, due to the fact of Kubera’s worshipping the Lord Siva here, and it was equal to Kurberapuri in wealth and beauty. In the dim past it was the dearest spot of Sage Parasara, who lived and did penance here, attracted by the serenity of the place, but was in constant fear by the atrocious acts of Thanjan, Taraka and Dandaka belonging to Asuraka tribes of demons. They struck terror in the minds of harmless people living in the region. When their danava kritayas went beyond the stage of endurance, the sage and the aggrieved went to Sri Mahavishnu and Durga and implored them for instant intervention to killing them and making their existence blissful. Moved by their pathetic conditions Lord Maha Vishnu descending anon killed Thanjan and Dandaka, while Durga killed Taraka. Before he breathed his last, Thanjan pleaded with his slayer to name the place of his region after him. It was instantly granted. Since then it is called Thanjavur, which means the place of Thanja. Its previous name Alakai in course of time was totally forgotten. Yet, there is another account that traces its origin. It was once called Thanjan meaning refuge; for the main reason of the magnanimity of its rulers, who were offering asylum to the terror-stricken people, and many were benefitted by the city’s munificence of ready shelter. So the city Thanjavur was called the city of refuge.
HISTORICITY

With the dawn of the seventh century, its history unfolds itself commencing with the reign of Mutharai Kings that ruled it for nearly two centuries. A glittering chapter was opened in 846 A.D. with the accession of Chola Kings to the imperial throne, whose fame reached the zenith under Rajaraja Chola I. By his unparalleled military prowess and inextinguishable thirst for expansion, he conquered Chera, Pandian and Elam Kings, who were formidably gallant and equally dauntless, and so he was equated with Lord Siva, otherwise known as Thiripuranthaka for slaying the most dreadfully perfidious demons ruling the three cities. Consequently, his dominion swelled upto Kalinga in the North, parts of Malaya peninsula, the Archipelago, Nicobar islands and Ceylon in the deep south, and from shore to shore across the sub-continent, why, he practically brought the whole of South India under his imperial umbrella. He ruled for 29 years; and it was the golden age of Cholas, judged by any standard; for, peace and prosperity made his kingdom their permanent home. In consequence, trade and commerce prospered and ventured across the seas; architecture and painting soared higher than the highest; while poetry, dancing, singing and the allied arts scaled new heights. Above all, religious toleration touched the meridian of sublime harmony, as evidenced by the peaceful co-existence of Buddhism, Jainism, along with Vaishnavism and Saivism, the then state religions. Naicks who ruled it later after two centuries imparted fresh valour and vitality to the effete traditions and out-dated conventions. Novelty peeped out from every walk of life. During the Maratha rule that ensued the Vijayanagara Naicks, the region made further conquests in realms of fine arts. Thus, Chola culture when blended harmoniously with Maratha and Andhra cultures it became instrumental in raising the dignity of the capital and integrity of people. By reason of this especial blend, it is hailed as a cradle of multiplicity of diverse, yet distinct cultures.

Tanjore thus, enjoyed prosperity through diversity and solidarity amidst multiplicity of cultures and creeds that
culminated in gaining a pride of place in the history of India. Undoubtedly, it carved out an enviable niche in the temple that the history of India is.

Alas! its glory departed with the passage of time, leaving its peerless splendour in ruins, but one feels, rightly too that it can recreate its glorious past, if only one begins colloquy with them through the immortal works and inscriptions aided and abetted by specs sans coloured glasses.

THE BRIHADISWARA TEMPLE

Let us now enter that imposing temple to acquaint ourselves with the rich heritage, those historical luminaries have bequeathed to us and asses how best we can live up to their expectations by implementing in toto, if not atleast a few of their lofty ideals and unsurpassable humanist thoughts.

This magnificent temple is called Brihadeswaralayam and is dedicated to Lord Siva, the most compassionate among the Trio of the Hindu gods. It has several names testifying to the enormity of its dimensions and immensity of sanctity. It is called Rajarajeswaram, Perivudayar Koil, Peria Koil, Adavallan Koil, the Tanjore temple, beside Brihadiswaralayam to mention only a few, all but tell that it is a big temple enshrining a very big linga in it. It is appropriately called the Dhaikshina Meru, suggesting thereby, that it is the Himalayas of the South; needless to say, for its gigantic size and imposing vastness of the tower. Its spectacular appearance and awe-inspiring eminence keep us exclaiming: "Sure, it is not wrought by mortals, but it is the work of superhuman beings". Credit goes to Rajaraja I, the master builder whose magnitude of patronage and enormity of expenditure materialised this super monument; mark it, in a very short period of six years only. Another colourful feather to his glittering cap; for the craftsmanship of the sculptor touched the meridian of excellence, and it can be said without any trace of doubt that it is the touch-stone of Dravidian style of architecture and sculptural arts. And a splendid relic of their genius. Hence the unqualified praise by exert critics like Fergusson, who said, "It is a perfect
gem of carved stone work, the tooling of the stone in the most elaborate patterns, remaining as clear and sharp as the day it left the sculptor's hands. A little background helps adequate understanding of this monumental monument.

**BACKGROUND OF CONSTRUCTION**

Brihadiswara Mahatmya narrates that King Raja Raja I suffered from black leprosy in the early period of his reign. He learnt, on referring this with his Guru Haradatta that he had brought misery to the animals in his previous birth as hunter. The Guru, out of compassion for his noble ward, recommended him to build a great temple with a tall gopuram and dedicate it to the Lord of Kailas. Accordingly, a gigantic temple with a great pagoda considered by far the greatest in India, built with a stately, and well-defined plan, unknown to the temple history till then. Its massive grandeur wrings homage from the theists all over the world. Moreover it was built in a very short period of six years. This Herculean task was accomplished with the infinite mercy of Lord Maheswara, whose image linga was brought from the river Narmada with the help of 64 mighty merchants and thousands of labourers, taking six months time for transport. After the celebration of Kumbhabhishek with rich and liberal grants, the king stepped into the tank for bath and emerged as lustrous and bright as the moon, rid of black leprosy that marred his magnetic dignified personality. Inscription bear witness to the truth of this account. And it is by far, the most invaluable relic of Chola genius, whose artists conceived it as giants and finished like jewellers', according to Fergusson.

Look at that impressive, grand, huge pyramidal tower called Vimana according to Silpa Sastra. Its commanding height makes us straighten and throw our heads backwards to catch a glimpse of the shiny brass kalasams atop the tower, tapering into the aqurie high sky. It dominates the landscape rising perpendicularly to a height of 216 feet, and embellished with 14 storeys. What a height! How majestic is its exterior!!

The sikhara built in accordance with silpa sastra is crowned with a massive dome consisting of a single stone that
weighs 80 tons. And, over it placed an octagon shaped stupa and a 12 foot high kalasa. To lift and carry this gigantic stone to the top, an inclined road about 6 miles long was laid out for this purpose emulating the model technique used to the pyramid builders of ancient Egypt. And lacks of labourers, both skilled and unskilled worked ceaselessly for its completion. Elaborate sculptural images drawn from Hindu pantheon decorate this Vimana from top to bottom. It is occupying the centre of court yard and dominating the area for miles by its spectacular size and beauty. As observed by Fergusson it lends dignity to the whole edifice and heightens the sanctity of the presiding deity. It is the first temple built of granite stone and second to none in immensity of its vimana. Its intricate sculptural elegance defies description, but certainly yields to scholar to several doctoral theses. Though the Dravidian architect predominates all over it, a discriminating on-looker discerns in it a harmonious blend of the Nagara, Vesara and Dravidian styles.

The visitors enter through the arch away near the first entrance called Kerlanthakan gate way, rising to a height of 90 feet. Next comes the grand gate called Raja Raja vasal embellished with exquisitely carved figures. Beyond this lies the sculptural wealth studded in the courtyard, measuring about 500 long and 250 feet broad, and is surrounded by a high compound wall with a deep most to its eastern and western sides. In fact, the temple is occupying a large portion of a fort built for strategic purpose in the past.

On crossing this, we enter the temple only to be petrified at the multiplicity of minishrines, mandapams, mahamandapams, Prakarams, Simhadwarams built for several purposes like Ardhamandapa, Sthapnamandapa, Nataraja Mandapa, Vadya Mandapa enshrining statues, paintings etc. As we go round from one end to another, we come across many types of imposing statues exuding sculptural excellence, as it were. These shrines are dedicated to Vinayaka, Subramanya, Parvathi and many other adorable personages, like Dwarapalakas and Jain saints along with a fair sprinkling of the emancipated demons and Nandi. Of the highlights of this superb shrine, grand frescoes in the inner courtyard deserve mention and indispensable attention,
since they are reminiscent of the splendid Ajanta cave paintings of eternal reputation.

THE GODDESSES OF PERIANAYAKI

The shrine dedicated to Parvathi goes by a special name. Originally this deity called Periyanayaki was in a garden lying to the north of temple. During the Naiek regime, it was transferred to this grand shrine built in the first prakara. The huge idol facing the south has unusual charm and it bends the heads in reverence at its first sight. The sculptural adornments of the walls, pillars ceiling are extremely grand and speak of the patron's devotion and dedication to arts.

MURUGAN SHRINE

It is located at the northern end of the west quadrangle. It is an architectural marvel praised by experts. The six faced idol of Murugan mounted on peacock is carved out of a single rock. Many saint singers poured out their souls in song and they are recited with great devotion on important occasions. The visual appeal of the image is quite in passive.

THE GREAT NANDI

Our March comes to a sudden stop at the unusually big sized status of Nandi - the divine vehicle of Lord Maheswara. This enormous monolithic black statue measuring 19 1/2 feet in length; 8 1/4 in breadth; 12 feet in height weighs 25 tons. It is installed in a high pavillion right in front of the Garbha griha. It indeed stuns and keeps us in silence for a while, by its excellent workmanship, and alerts us later only to guess as to what kind of sumptuous feast the main deity - Siva Linga would soon serve to our eyes. It has an interesting story to tell. This is carved out of a single rock and deemed the second biggest in India, the first being in Lepakshi. As it was growing day after day in all
directions imperceptibly due to God’s grace a nail was driven in its back. And lo! the growth stopped abruptly and since then is remaining stationary.

On entering into the sanctum sanctorum, we are greeted by an overwhelming sight. It is the fascinating spectacle of an enormous monolithic, black Siva Linga. Understand, it is biggest of its kind in India and measures 9 feet in height and 23 1/2 feet in circumference. Its extraordinary grandeur is heightened by its superb finish and dazzling surface. It is adorned on the forehead by three rectangular strips of shining silver with a ruby in the middle, standing for ash marks and vermillion. This remarkable dignified Siva Linga is installed on a high flat dias called Avudayar measuring 54" in circumference and 6 feet in height. The beauty of the ornament on forehead and white cloth adorning the Linga are beyond description. And according to belief Gods worship it at nights in their ethereal forms. On account of its abnormal size and exceptional height, an elevated platform is specially built for the priests to stand and perform archana, harati abhishekan etc. This Sivalinga has many other august names such as Adavallan, Dakshinameruvitankan, Peruvidayar etc. It is unique in every respect.

As we stand agape at its stupendous size and ethereal splendour, the sublime figure of Rajaraja Chola I, flashes across our mind and beckons us to offer our soulful prayers for universal progress and perpetual bliss. Instantly we close our eyes and pay obeisance to Lord Siva-the All-merciful. Sure our homage goes to both the builder and the built; for, Rajaraja I equally deserves our respectable thanks for having created and bequeathed this monumental monument; and Lord Siva for creating such a priceless gem as ruler, who strove for the liberation of mankind by creating an exceptionally enormous, outstandingly dignified and structurally perfect sacred Siva Linga that instils pure devotion and commands whole hearted dedication at its mere sight. Before we step out, our lips are tempted to let out involuntarily, HARA'HARA MAHADEV testifying to the miraculous change brought out by that living Siva Linga, the sacred manifestation of Sadasiva-the All-merciful.
Kumbhakonam. What a name? With its drum like sounds, it offers at once a grand feast to the ears and sets the mind thinking next, as to what is connotation would be. Its fantastic past is packed with legendary episodes of a rare kind that merits reverent study and instant adoration.

It is indeed a marvellous city renowned for commendable catholocity-breathing in diversity and breathing out unity. Look! what a strange juxaposition of Siva temples and Vishnu shrines on the same street! Its rich history embodies such an admirable spirit of unparalleled universality that it recalls to mind the sublimity pervading the ancient paranasalas - the abodes of sages whose tapassakti made the wild lionesses suckle mild deers. Sure, the religious homogenity, social amicability and cultural unity that have been existing since ages, are no doubt enviable triats that man craves for, but realises not. "Does this not afford an exciting topic for animating discussion and an interesting theme for dissertation?" Scholars ask after a visit. It is a temple city consecrated by the holy waters of Cauvery, flowing nearby. It has many august associations with divinities that even the Trimurthis were pleased to abide in this divya kshetra permanently for releasing humanity from the thraldom. As it turned out a favourite habitat of the celestials, descended to bless the deserving devotees, it acquainted special sanctity worthy of full grasp and honest craving for visiting, to cleansing from sins clinging to body due to living amidst santanic elements.

Its plus points are many and varied. And they encompass mortals and immortals, whose joint ventures ended in lokakalyana. Scriptural evidence to the glory of this sacred place is astonishing in quantity and begins form the Satyayuga, and as the current passes through the ages it gains momentum and opulence. For it was at this punyakshetra found the celestial kumbha filled to the brim with Amrita and the seed of species
used for creating universe after the great deluge - Pralaya, when the whole universe was submerged in furious floods; it was to this tapobhumi, Vishnu descended in his chariot to bless Sage Hemarishi, who desired to see the Lord with Saranga in his hand; it is this land that is honoured with Amrit collected in a tank, when Lord Siva broke the divine Kumbha; it is here the broken Kumbha was made into a Sivalinga and installed by none but Lord Siva himself; it is here Sri Rama gave darshan to his devotees in his coronation robes; it is this place, where the Sun-god was humbled by Sri Maha Vishnu; it is to this holy place the Head Quarters of the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham was shifted; it is to this holy place theists reach for Maghasnana, the most potent to purge their papas; it is here Mundana - the ritual of the shaving of hair on the head to offering it to gods is held sacred and raised to the level of Tirupati, Ayodhya, Prayaga etc. in sanctity and merit; it is this place that served as the capital city of Chola kings for some time; it is this city that claims the honour of having a Brahma temple, not fallen the fortune of world famous temple towns and it is this Phynya Bhum that celebrates Mahamaham festival once in 12 years on a scale resembling the renowned Kumbha Mela. Sanctified by scores of such outstanding events this ancient temple city is attracting lakhs of people of all sects of Hinduism since the Vedic time onwards along with different sects other major religions.

**ANTiquity**

Though scores of temples are studded to the gates of the city and every shrine merits visiting atleast once for darshan, only a few are visited and frequented by the bhaktas. They include twelve chief temples for Siva, four temples for Vishnu, and one solitary temple for Brahma. And each has a legend, why more in some cases that is awe-inspiring due to participation by the Trio as protagonists in the plays enacted for the sake of Jagadodharana. If the narration is given full reins, pages roll in book after book, and books overflow several stacks. Hence the limit and that alone sustains interest and enkinds devotion preparing for a visit. Judicious selection yields right solution.
ADI KUMBHESWARA TEMPLE

Let us begin with Kumbheswarar Koil; for the city owes its life and name to Siva. The much-hallowed Sivalingam is in the shape of kumbha - pot, made of Earth mixed with Amrit and water by Brahma himself on the advice of Lord Siva. Just below this much exalted lingam, the idol of Nataraja is installed. According to the Periapuranam of Sekkizhar, with the approach the great Deluge - Mahapralaya, Lord Brahma was terribly upset and totally paralysed at the very thought of total destruction to the universe. And if everything including the seed were to be destroyed, how would the universe be recreated? How to protect the seed? Who could save this? Perturbed with this puzzling problem, he approached Lord Siva for solution. Lord Siva then advised him to make a pot with earth and water along with Amrit and to decorate it with thread before keeping a coconut over the mango leaves and Kusagrass placed on the pot; this sacred Kumbha filled with Amrit to be kept hanging from a net, tied to a tree on the Meru Mountain. It must be worshipped with bilwa leaves. Done this, recreation problem would be solved. Though implemented, it was carried away and broken, though mango leaves, coconut, Kusa grass etc., fell at different places and became sacred thirthas later. When Brahma made an intensive search for it, he found it where the present Kumbheswar temple stands.

Then began Lord Siva's part. Assuming the form of hunter, he broke the Kumbham with an arrow. The Amrit that fell from the pot spread out on the ground extending t 10 miles. But at two places it stagnated and became the most sacred thirthas possessing great powers. One was Mahamagha thirtha and the other Pottramaraiakkulam. Many thirthas emerged from the places where drops of Amrit fell. Later a Siva linga was made out of the broken pieces of the Kumbha and he installed at the same place where he found. It is the very same Sivalinga that is adored at Kumbheswarar temple today. The place became very famous due to the stopping of Kumbha at this place and it is named after it by the Lord itself. As Siva, the presiding Deity started showering blessings lavishly on his bhaktas, it became one of the premier pilgrimage centres of India. With the passage of time, many more miracles happened in this land making it all the more popular and famous for granting boons by gods, installed in several temples, that came up from time to time.
The Kumbheswarar temple is situated in the centre of the city. It has four Prakarams and scores of minishrines with big Mandapams. The main tower is 128 feet high and it dominates the city with its height and beauty. And is seen for miles around. The famous Sthalaavriksha - Vanni tree is found in the third prakaram, which houses a beautiful shrine with a huge icon of Vinayaka. It is locally known as Adi Vinayaka here, perhaps for the reason, similar ones in other places came only next to it in point of time. The temple contains many worth - seeing sculptural marvels bearing the stamp of Dravidian style. Of them, the Navagraha mandapam treasures up a master piece. A single stone adorned with the carvings of the 27 Nakshtras and 12 Rasis is the biggest draw of this temple. Another, the Subrahmanya image with six heads but six hands, and stone cut Nandaswarams - done artistically attract the visitors and receive due veneration.

The Pujas and Festivals are performed according to Agamic injunctions. And they are performed with devotion due.

**SARANGAPANI TEMPLE**

The temple is dedicated to Vishnu and it is richly ornamented. The twelve - tiered tower rises to a height of 147 feet is quite imposing. The temple contains several ornamental figures and two big chariots of supreme craftsmanship. It was built by Nayak Kings, whose munificent patronage bewilders the viewers. It has two majestic entrances - one on the Southern, and the other to the Northen sides. Strange to observe the practice that the visitors are made to enter the temple through the Southern during the Uttaranyana months - 14th Jan to 15th July, and through Northern during the Dakshinayan period - 16th July to 13th Jan. It is a big temple covering an area of about 3 acres with two prakaras. The fore and the rear of the sanctum sanctorum is so sculptured to resemble a chariot fitted with wheels and horses and they seem ready for an aerial flight. The stone-cutters workmanship is worthy of appreciation. This chariot shaped garbha griha has a strange legend and publishes to the world that Lord Sri Mahavishnu is bhaktaparadeena and grants the desires, if properly invoked. According to legend, Sage Hemarishi of great spiritual standing desired to see Sri Mahavishnu with Saranga in his hand. He did penance here and when the Lord was pleased, he descended in his chariot direct to the spot where the sage was doing penance. Hence the chariot
shaped sanctum. There is a sculptural representation of this fascinating legend in the temple. Among the others deserving an indispensable darshan is the Aravamudar image installed in a separate beautiful shrine. The special feature of the icon of Aravamudar is that he is in the posture of rising in hurry to giving darshan to Saint Tirumalaisai Alwar. Ah what a kingship! How benign is the Lord!! And how much power the devotion embodies!!!

**SRI NAGESWARA TEMPLE**

This fine temple lies in the heart of the city too. It has many plus points, and is attracting devotees more. According to tradition, Adi Sesha - Sri Mahavishnu's couch and Surya Bhagawan worshipped here the presiding deity Nageswarar for getting rid of the curses. It is a big temple with vast courtyards and many subsidiary shrines. It abounds in many architectural marvels. The stone chariot of Nataraja done artistically can be singled out as the best specimen of the sculptors' artistry. The construction of the temple is so designed that the rays of the Sun enter into the garbha griha through the openings of the tower thrice a year - on 12th, 13th and 14th of Chaitra month and fall right on the lingam. According to legend, it signifies the act of Sun-god's worshipping the presiding deity. On these three days thousands of people crowd to witness the rare spectacle and enjoying the privilege of seeing Lord Siva along with Surya Bhagawan. This belief and oddity are on the increase though science quashes off the popular belief.

**SRI RAMASWAMI TEMPLE**

This temple his very near the to the Adi Kubheswarar shrine. It is an old one but very attractive and possesses many architectural adornments and sculptural embellishments. The Dasavatara representation on stone and the brightly coloured frescoes on the walls and ceiling are a feast to the eyes. The images of the Moolavar - Sri Rama is giving darshan here in his coronation robes. Strange to find here Hanumarr in the pose of singing to the accompaniment of Veena, sitting before his istadaivams - Rama and Sita. This temple celebrates Navaratri festival with great eclat. Prayer services are offered according to
Vaikhanasa Agama. For Rama bhaktas, a darsan is elevating and visit unburdens them off their bundle of cares.

**SRI CHAKRAPANI TEMPLE**

This small but sublime shrine built near the river Cauvery is dedicated to Sri Chakrapani. He is, of course, Srimannarayan with a difference. The image of Chakrapani has eight arms and three eyes. Hence the attraction. The artistic carving of images and pillars with beautiful adornments are worth-seeing. Another marvel! The image of Hanuman has six faces and it is excellently done. So he beckons veneration and appreciation.

The lone Brahma temple that Kumbhakonam boasts of is also worth-seeing and it is well maintained. As temples dedicated to Brahma are rare, except one at Pushkar in the North, this one is largely attended and devoutly worshipped.

**MAHAMAGHAM TANK**

This much-hallowed tank is situated almost in the heart of city, and covers an area of 20 acres. It has sixteen Mandapams along the four banks, and they contain minishrines housing many deities. A bath in the sacred month of Magha, according to tradition is quite efficacious and hence pouring in lacks of people during the festival, celebrated once in 12 years. Bhaktas from hundreds of miles travel to this city and avail this rare opportunity. According to legend, all the sacred thirthas of our Akhanda Bharat coming underground enter into it and make it most holiest, due to their confluence on the auspicious hour of the conjunction of the Moon with Magha Nakshatra and Jupiter on the Full Moon day in the month of Magha. The particular date on which the Moon in the month of Magha conjoins with Jupiter is considered specially auspicious, and sacred. On this occasion according to belief; this tank receives fresh supplies of water from the Ganges and eight other equally holy rivers. A bath at this hour washes off sins and ensures merit. Besides, all the august deities of Hindu pantheon are said to be present in this thirtha then making it skill more sacred, nay the most sacred. Moreover, a great fair is held during this period. No wonder, lakhs of people visit, and it becomes extremely difficult to the government to cater to the needs of the visiting public. It is celebrated in the honour of Kumbheswara Swamy. This alone of the South Indian
festivals ranks with the Kumbha Mela of the North. In addition to this 12-year-Mela of All-India importance, a mini-festival is held every year in the month of Magha, when the image of Lord Kumbheswara is brought to this place for the ceremonial bath called Avabhritha Utsav. This also has great pull, but less in pomp. With many more shrines - small and in scores, this holy thirtha kshetra has been attracting theists since yugas. Staying for a week and visiting each one confers great merit worthy of craving.

AROUND KUMBHAKONAM

SWAMMALAI. It is situated on the other side of the river Cauvery. It is a hill temple dedicated to Lord Subrahmanya, the Field marshal of Devasena. As it is deemed one of the six abodes - arupadi veedus of the Lord, it is visited by a steady influx of devotees throughout the year. According to legends, it is here, the Bala Muruga taught ‘Pranava mantra’ and its efficacy to his father Lord Siva, the Omni-compassionate God among the TRIO. The temple is a superb architectural piece adorned with sculptural marvels. It enshrines atop and at the base many adorable deities in mini-shrines and pavilions. The statue of the Mulavar is quite attractive and soul-lifting. It is one of the Yatrashalas for the Saivites and a miss not item in their itinerary list. Town buses ply from Kumbhakonam and their frequency enables large members visit this from early morning to the late night.

OPPLIAPPAN KOIL: Famous in legends as Dakshina Tirupathi - Tiruvannagaram, this Arulmigu Venkatachalpathy Swamy Koil lies at a distance of 7 Km to the South east of Kumbhakonam. It is one of the 108 divya desas of Vaishnavates and has been drawing thousands of all classes of people over several centuries. This beautiful temple is enshrining many other adorable deities like Yennappan, Ponnappan, Maniyappan and Muthappan. The image of Mulavar in standing posture bears many resemblances to the image of Tirupathi Balaji, the Lord of Seven Hills. Many similar traditions are followed besides preforming several rituals. It goes by many other names such as Bhuloka Vaikuntham, Tulssivanam and Markandeya kshetram.

According to legend, the illustrious sage Markandeya brought up Bhudevi here and Lord Mahavishnu sought her hand and was wedded here for blessing the devotees. The image of Bhudevi in sitting posture is seated at the feet of here Lord along with Sridevi too on the other side. As the story goes the sage, Markandeya requested the Lord to accept food without salt. The Lord agreed. Hence the practice of preparing Naivedyam without salt. So the lord is called Lavana varjita Venkateswara Oppilappan. The temple tank is called Ahoratra Pushkarini supposed to contain Ganga water and so called Dakshina Ganga.

Several festivals in accordance with Vaikanasas Agama and Vadakalai Sri Vaishnava Sampradaya are celebrated, Brahmostaiva in purattasi tops the list. There are a wide variety of sevas akin to the Balaji temple, and through out the year, there is heavy rush for darsan and sevas.

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KANCHIPURAM

UNIQUENESS

Kanchi enjoys the rare privilege of treasuring up a unique temple culture that none but Kanchi alone could claim equality with it in matters of spiritual height in scaled, commercial superiority it established and political might it displayed. It has been enriching the glory of our much-venerated Hinduism by its spectacular political achievements, remarkable spiritual associations, and unparalleled literary eminence, since the Vedic times. Its unprecedented renown springing from more than one segment of national life carved out for itself a meritorious niche in the cultural history of our Akhanda Bharatha Khanda. Its religious tolerance and political stability were applauded by the incarnations of the august divinities. And the inscriptionsal evidence available speaks volumes of its former glory. So it is a temple city with a speciality of high order.

It is to this self-same place, Parvathi was directed to descend for doing penance to purge of the sin of insulting her own Pati; it is this city that was deemed by Lord Siva as one of his two eyes, the other being Kasi; it is this holy Kshetra that enshrines the Prithvilinga representing one of the five elements; it is this Punya Kshetra that was on par with Kasi - the much-hallowed thirtha Kshetra, and also adorns the list of five indispensable pilgrimage centres; it is this Punya Kshetra that was chosen by Sankara Bhagavatpada for establishing one of the KamāKoti Peethhas for spreading Vedic Dharma; it is this august place that set limits to the presiding deity - Kamakshi Ambika by none but a mortal - Sri Sankaracharya; it is this place that was visited by Bhagawan Buddha and has the honour of listening to his amogha Dharma; it is this city that enjoyed the status of capital city of Tondaimandalam for centuries; it was here during the Sangam period the literatures thrilled the scholars with royal banquets; it is here Dharmapala Bodhisatya was born and
Buddhist logician Dinnaga lived; it is to this city the imperial monarchs vied with one another to empty their treasures to building of temples for both Siva and Vishnu; it is this city that was visited by foreign travellers, like Hieun Tsang, who recorded its eminence, with rich, Fributes, it is this city than gave asylum to several religions like Jainism, Buddhism, Vaishnavism, Saivism that flourished with unenviable amity; it was here the reputed Poet Bharavi, the Sanskrit luminary lived and authored the renowned Kiratarjuniyam, and also the well-known Sanskrit scholar Dandi lived; it is the city that was ruled by the illustrious monarchs from every celebrated dynasty like Pallavas, Cholas, Rastrakutas, Vijayanagara Nayaks; Pandyas; Kakatiyas, Marathas together with Muslims and Britishers; it is to this town’s chief temple Robert Clive presented a necklace, when convinced with its divine power; it is this city despite divided geographically into two parts called Vishnu Kanchi and Siva Kanchi, is enjoying religious tolerance of supereme adorable type. Its very name has a ring of imperial majesty and spiritual aroma.

Endowed with such merits and achievements, this holy city has been attracting pilgrims, tourists since the Satyayuga. Very few cities of India claim such spirit of catholocity as this holy city, now contented with the status of a District Headquarters town of some little importance.

ANTiquity

Known reputation of this premier city, as recorded in the scriptures begins with an amorous quarrel between Adi dampathis - Uma and Maheswar. When playing the game of dice as pasttime, Uma turned frivolous and insulted Maheswar. Despite known for his placability - the divine quality of forgiveness, he took the insult serious and cursed her to turn ugly and ungraceful. When she made a tearful appeal for mercy, he said that she would be given her rightful place only on doing penance under a single mango tree at Kanchi. Leaving Kailas, Parvathi came down to Kanchi and started tapas to get reinstatement with her Lord. As directed, she prayed to Lord Vishnu first for grace. Satisfied with her resolution, Maha Vishnu
blessed her with former enhancing form together a pair of captivating broad, dark eyes that enhanced her beauty a million fold. She then acquired the hallowed name of Kamakshi meaning there by, she bless her adorers, for fulfilment of desires by looking through her lovely eyes. Though she got the boons thus, she continued her meditation. Siva desiring to test her steadfastness, released and diverted the flow of Ganga waters to the place, where she was doing penance under the mango tree. Freighted by the unexpected onrush of torrential floods, she clung to Siva’s image and prayed soulfully for protection. Pleased with her devotion, Siva admitted her back into Kailas and granted the boon of reunion. At the request of Parvathi, he agreed to stay permanently with the name of Ekambaranath under mango tree, where she did penance. That sacred tree is found existing even today receiving due worship by theists and tourists too. No visitor misses to include this in the itinerary list.

**HISTORICITY**

Though archeological evidence testifies to the existence of thousand shrines and Sangharamas built in the days of Buddha, or even earlier period the recorded historicity, with inscriptions dates back to sixth century, when king Mahendra Varman of Pallava dynasty was on the throne, with the title of Chettikari, which means builder of temples. He built innumerable temples both for Vishnu and Siva after conversion to Saivism by the Saint Appar. The new found faith held such grip on him that he destroyed a Jain monastery, though he was an ardent Jain previously. His son Narasimhavarman preserved the legacy by constructing many temples at Kanchi and monolithic shrines at Mahabalipuram. The Kaillasanatha temple, a perfect gem in the elegant Pallava style existing now is the contribution of Narasimhavarman II. Mukteswar temple and Vaikunta Perumal temple at Vishnu Kanchi are the gifts of Nandi Varman II: The Cholas who followed next also continued building of temples. The Rastrakutas, Kakatiyas and Pandyan Kings who succeeded them built in their own way. Then came the rule of Vijayanagara, who not only honoured the practice but added many
architectural marvels. The temples of Pandava Perumal temple, Vilakkotai etc. are their contribution to list down a few. Then appeared on the scene Marathas, Mohammadan and Britishers. Instead of construction, destruction followed and hence the observance of ruins now everywhere in the famous city.

SOURCES

Regarding the sources, literary evidence vies with inscriptive testimony and establishes that it played a spectacular part in the past. The scriptures embody a great corpus. Puranas like Vaman Purana, Brahmanda Purana, Epics like Mahabaratam, devotional literature of Alwars and Nayanmars pour out in torrents, if tapped at right places. To add to this, the inscriptions on the temple walls bear eloquent testimony to the patronage of kings with dates. The travellers account also help to reconstruct the history of this temple with commendable exactitude.

THE TEMPLE

This temple city is divided into two parts, but they are one and one only for all practical purposes, like the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad. These parts are called Siva Kanchi and Vishnu Kanchi, popularly known as Big Kanchi and Little Kanchi respectively. The Kamakshi Amman Temple is located in Big Kanchi and it is in the heart of city. It is an ancient temple with an imposing tower facing the east. It enshrines the famous Chakra representing Mother Parvathi called here Kamakshi. The Chakra is placed in front but not below the image as found in other places, where the yatra receives prayers. It also houses the image of Sankaracharya of Kamakoti Pita.

It has reason and there is a story. According to legend, Sri Sankaracharya was an ardent worshipper of Mother Kamakshi addressing her as Kamakoti Ambika and the Mother too was pleased with his devotion. It appears that this Ambika was assuming the form of Kali at nights and was moving about in that
area causing unpleasant disturbances by her dreadful forms. People were in great terror and spent sleepless nights. When they sought his help, he implored the Mother to stop her nocturnal rounds for people's safety. Moved by his humanism, she agreed not to stir out at nights. Not satisfied with the agreement, he extracted a promise from her not to go out of the temple without his permission. She smilingly assured him of her implementation and she did. Accordingly, whenever the procession of the Mother is taken out, the Utsava murthi halts before the image of Sankaracharya to taking permission in accordance with promise given. How strange! The immortal halting for the permission from a mortal!! Aren't the ways of Gods' inscrutable?

**THE EKAMBARESWARAR TEMPLE**

It is the biggest and the most impressive temple in Kanchi enshrining the Prithvi lingam representing the Earth. It is a huge temple with five Prakars and elaborately decorated towers. It is in this place where Mother Parvathi did penance and obtained her former glory. The same mango tree under which she performed tapas is seen even today. Almost all visitors pay obeisance to it due to its sanctity and antiquity. The sculptural wealth of this temple offers a feast to the theists and connoisseurs.

**KAILASANATH TEMPLE**

Another Saivite temple that attracts crowds more is Kailasanatha temple built during the reign of Pallavas. Credit goes to Rajasimha. And it was his monumental contribution to art and religion. The image of Ardhanareeswar has the greatest attraction. Beautifully drawn murals adorn the alcoves around the perimeter walls. Its sculptural excellence delights the viewers. Visitors direct their steps next to Kachapeswara temple. It has beautiful images. It is here Lord Maha Vishnu worshipped Siva in the form of tortoise. It is a worthy sight and wrings veneration. There is another famous temple dedicated to Subrahmanya and
it goes by the name of Kumarakottam. One more oddity that the visitors come across in the city is the temple for Chitragupta; the trust-worthy Recorder of Yama, the God of Death. As it is only one of its kind in the entire Bharat, it draws the visitors and receives veneration. Seeing this marvels and also the Buddhist Sangharamams now in ruins, the visitors go to Vishnu Kanchi - and integral part of Kanchi.

**SRI VARADARAJA TEMPLE**

Of the temples built for Vaishnavate gods, the Varadaraja temple comes first. It is built on a hillock. It has several architectural excellences and was built by Vijayanagara Kings. Of the many picturesque celebrations of this holy temple, the Garudotsavam celebrated in Vaisakha Masam is the best and receives priority. The rituals performed and decoration made are awe-some and thousands of persons from far and near visit on this gala festival day. The temple contains a hundred Pillared Hall adorned with excellent sculptural representations.

Among the marvels that deserve appreciation here is the double pillars beautified with figures of riders on horse back, and stone chains cut in a single granite stone. It has nother attraction. The carving of a lizard on the ceiling of a big hall draws Hindu pilgrims most to venerate it by touching, under the belief that evil will affect not them, even if that abnoxious creature falls on them by accident. The Vijayanagara Kings who built all these temples left a rich heritage serving both to devotees and art lovers.

The Vaikunta Perumal temple is another grand shrine that is visit worthy. It contains adorable images displaying the exquisite workmanship of the stone-cutters. The image of Lord Vishnu in his different incarnations enhances the thrill of visiting and enjoying sculptural art. The history of Pallava is represented here by a series of carvings and they depict many main episodes that brought credit to their rule.

There are some vestiges of Buddhist Sangharamamas, built in the past for monks and supposed to have been inhabitated by some 10,000 Buddhist Priests; and they were applauded by Hiuen Tsang in his Travologue. With the advent of
Saivism, the Jainism and Buddhism paled into insignificance. This place at its heyday was more than the swarga. According to Varahapurana-“Kanchi was held in high esteem and deemed as the best among the towns, like Jati among flowers, Rambha among women, Grihastasram among four asramś, Dwarka among cities and Madhyadesa among countries”. And it enjoyed the reputation of many towering palaces, high forts, deep moats, big streets, life overflowing with bliss. And hence the prevalence of belief than it is always festival time at Kanchi. Many celebrated Nayanmars and early Vaishnava saints and Ālvars, like Poygai, Pudat, Pey, Tirumalisai visited and eulogised the sacredness of this place in their works, hence

the twelve hundred year old temple city was regarded as one of the seven most sacred places, the others being Ayodhya, Mathura, Haridwar, kasi, Ujjain and Dwarka.

AROUND KANCHIPURĀM

MAMALLAPURĀM : Mention Mamallapuram - a marvellous open-air museum, studded to its bounds with abundant sculptural wealth of Pallavas, manifested in rock-cut temples, monolithic pachyderms, magnificent rathas, giant-sized statues and a thousand year old light-house appears before the mind’s eye and backcons you for an instant visit. It recreates the glories of once flourishing port of Pallavas, throbbing with life as the trading ships docked with exotic merchandise from far-off continents. Sauntering along the shore, you feel elated at the sight of huge boulders with bas relief work on one side and the breath-taking view of the turquoise waters of Bay of Bengal rushing towards the exequate Siva and Vishnu temples, adjoined with pyramid shaped spires. These fine 8th Century temples are the work of Nandivarman II, the illustrious Pallava King. The panel work of the nine rock cut temples excavated out of huge rocks delight both laymen and art-lovers. Among them, Mahishasura Mardini, Durga and Abantisayanee detain you long. The five rathis named after Pandava heroes and the excellent bas relief carved on the huge 27x9 metre rock offers a grand feast to the eyes. A visit lifts the soul and fills the heart. It is about 25 km off Kancheepuram.

THRIKKAUNDRĀM : Lying between Kancheepuram and Habalipuram, this Saivakshetra has a fantastic legend that is drawing the devotees and tourists in large numbers through out the year. The two temples dedicated to Lord Siva, one up above the hill and another down below it, take back us to the past and narrate fascinating tales. Once, according to priests, two sages did penance, for centuries propitiating Lord Siva. Descending, the Omni-benevolent Lord asked them to name their desires. They jointly expressed to worship him at noon everyday for ever. It was granted. After their death, they took the form of eagles and are visiting everyday at noon. The priest then offers prasad to them. Tasting a little, they depart in opposite directions—one to Kasi and another to Rameswaram since the belong to those holy places. Whatever may be veracity or the authenticity of his narration, their coming regularly since ages is certain. Anxious public are assembling here at that moment to avail that sight and partake prasad distributed by the priest. It is a pilgrimage centre of great importance.
Srirangam - the El Dorado of Vaishnavates, enshrining the celebrated image of Lord Ranganatha, is one of the most hallowed, and largely visited centres of pilgrimage of our sacred Ind, since the Tretayuga. As the presiding deity is easily and readily accessible by simple, yet sublime means of bhakti and prapatti and showering boons of infinite variety, besides Sayuja Prapti along with admitting Panchamas into the sanctum, this mokshapuri is attracting millions of devotees from all parts of India. It is a thirtha kshetra of special significance for Vaishnavates; for, it is from here the Vaishnava Sampradaya wafted its potent glory and spread to all corners of the world. As it is the august citadel of Vaishnavism, the Vaishnavates proclaim loudly on hearing it. It is our Sakshatwargam and Ranganatha is our Pratyaksha daivam. They deem the presiding deity as their life breath, god of gods, the much coveted Chintamani, the inner light, the Kalpavriksha, why, it is the be-all and end-all of their earthly existence. Practically speaking, there is no Vaishnavate without knowing or uttering this istadaivam, or craving for a visit to this Bhuloka Vaikuntam.

Mention it to any Vaishnavate, at once 'Ranganatha' leaps out from his lips with folding of hands and raising of head upwards simultaneously; for, it is this kshetra that was visited by the luminaries of Vaishnavism down the ages. It is to this shrine royal families poured their souls and emptied their treasures; it is this deity alone that blesses the merging of the adorer with him; it is this city that gave permanent refuge to the Vaishnavate minstrels and saint-poets; it is this kshetra that is surrounded by the holy Cauvery to making it the Nandanavana of endless charm.
and peerless fascination; it is this temple that is glorified by its tallest and best towers in India; it is here Ramanuja, the avatar of Lakshmana lived a glorious life in codifying and composing the immortal Vaishnava lore; it is this deity that was made to disappear and reappear during the Muslim invasion; it is this city that broadcast the greatest and easiest means for salvation - Prapati and bhakti by the world-renowned Acharyas, like Nathamuni, Alayandar and Ramanuja; it is from one of the temple’s Mandapams wafted the poetical fragrance of Kambarayana that snaps the Rama bhaktas of their earthly mornings; it is from the Karuvarai of this temple heard the universal truth of equality among humanity and segregation of men on grounds of religion is the greatest sin; it is to this temple portals, Kulasekhara Alwar desired to turn into a stone, it is from here Vaishnavism started its digvijaya mahayatra and reached the portals of common people through 58 Maths, established by Ramanuja to capture their imagination and turn people God-ward. Enshrined with such meritorious plus points, this Kshetra is occupying an enviable place in the history of our land. foremost seat among the Vaishnava Kshetras of our puja Bhāra tavani.

ANTQUITY

The legendary account of this place transports us to Brahmaloka, when Brahma was worshipping this self-same idol in the distant past Brahma’s faith in the Omnipotence of this Lord was so boundless that he was worshipping him with utmost fervour regularly. King Ikhshvaku, when on his visit to Brahmaloka heard of its mahima. On listening to the efficacy of worship to this Lord, he prayed to Brahma for granting it as gift to utilising its grace for Viswakalayana. Convinced with the ideal, Brahma gave it to him. Installing it in Ayodhya - his capital city he was offering daily prayers for bliss. He enjoyed it. It became the family deity later on and generation after generation offered prayers with faith infinite and ardour exemplary. When Rama, the Seventh incarnation of Sri Maha Vishnu ascended the throne he continued the regular worship with redoubled zeal. After Ravanasaamuha,
he brought to Ayodhya. Vibhishana, Hanuma, Sugriva, his principal allies during the war in Lanka. Before going back, Vibhishana humbly implored Rama to present that invaluable Vigraha as memento to introducing this cult in Lanka Rajya for Lokasanti. The last word Lokasanti moved him deep and so he accepted to part with it on one condition that it should not be placed on the ground anywhere anytime on the way. Vibhishana nodded and promised to abide by the condition.

But on the way, tempted by the enhancing beauty of the island formed by the two branches of Cauvery, he desired to feast his eyes for a while enjoying its ethereal beauty. He forget then, the promise made to Rama. Placing it on the ground he moved about for some time. Returning, he tried to lift it but could not. He used all his energy and powers, but failed. Moreover it grew in size at his attempt to raise it from the ground. Leaving it there with instructions to the locals to worship it for emancipation, he left. There is another version of the same with of concrete proof atop the Rockfort, situated in the heart of the city. According to it, Vibhishan entrusted the image to a boy to hold it in his hands till he returned from answering the calls of nature. Though accepted, the boy placed it on the ground shouting that it was too heavy to bear it in his hands. Later Vibhishana’s trials to lift it failed. He grew angry and hit the boy on head. That boy was, in fact, Ganapathy now adored in the temple atop the Rockfort, who only obeyed the bidding of the highest gods. The despaired Vibhishan consoled himself praying from his Lankanrajya regularly. And it is for this, the entrance is facing the south. Since then it is being worshipped with unprecedented enthusiasm, for this Lord began showering boons on his adorers lavishly. The ruling class endowed it in several ways and made it a great Vaishnavate pilgrimage centre, the like of which is not found anywhere in India. Hence their pronouncement with pride that a sacred shrine of this eminence popularly known as Bhuvaikuntam did not exist in the past, nor future will succeed in creating a similar one of its magnitude. To be true, what Jerusalem is to Christians, Srirangam is to Vaishnavates.
HISTORICITY

From the inscriptions well preserved, it can be adduced that it enjoyed the patronage of almost all the famous dynasties that ruled South India from time to time. Temple walls bear abundant evidence of the endowments made to the temple by the Pallavas, Cholas, Pandyas, Hoyasalas, Vijayanagar nayaks and Marathas. Archives give enough information with dates and facts.

SOURCES

Sacred scriptures like the Ramayana, and many Puranas like Padma Purana and Bhagavatha embody several reference to the glory of this thirthakshetra. There is no book on Vaishnavism without mentioning its glorious role played in the past. Devotional literature is replete with the Alvars, among whom Yammunacharya, Mahapurna Ramanuja, Nathamuni form the nucleus, who produced authoritative works on Vaishnavism. The illustrious Chera king, Kulasekara in his master piece Mukundamala eulogised the greatness of this Lord. Ramanuja's principal works like Sribhashya, Vedanta sara, Vedanta Deepa, Gadyatraya, Vedantha Sangraha enshrine many spots of this august deity for worshipping whom he settled down in Srirangam. Venkatanatha another celebrated Vaishnavate wrote Padya Sahasram in praise of Ranganatha and they bring out vividly his glory.

THE TEMPLES

This holy shrine of Srirangam, called Antyarangam along with the other two - Adirangam at Srirangapattna, near Mysore and Madyarangam at Sivasamudra near Maddur lies on the
banks of river Cauvery. It is located in the picturesque island of palm and plantain trees, grown thick to fringes on all sides. It occupies with its seven prakaras, fifteen gopurams, several mandapams and scores of mini-shrines tens of acres of fertile island, making it a terrestrial paradise. Its amazing vastness makes one feel that it is a world within the world commanding every facility for devout life. The recently built majestic tower, highest of its kind in India seems piercing into heavens to recount its glories to the denizens of amaraloka. It is the most outstanding landmark seen from miles off and makes the devotees bend their heads in Prayer at its very sight. The vimana over the garbhagriha is built in the shape of Omkar, which recalls the glory of Hinduism at a mere look. Among the six prominent features of this yugasold shrine, like Vedasringa sikhara, Chandrapushkarini, Ponnavriksha, Bhujangasayana, Dahkshinastrimukha mandapa, the Pranavakrita tower tops the list and by its loftiness and majesty it is broadcasting to the world its sanctity unique and sublimity pre-eminent.

The main shrine is surrounded by seven prakaras and the outer most measures 3072 feet by 2521 feet. It is called Adaiyavaliam prakara and it contains many streets and lanes. It has certain shrines dedicated to adorable deities. The temple enshrining the images of Dasavataras and a few donated and endowed by Telugu devotees, like Alluri Venkadrishwamy and a host of other shrines adorned with Vijayanagara style of construction appeal to the eye, and are visit worthy. The sixth prakara measuring 2180 x 1846, ear marked for the car festival is broad and has many rows of houses. It contains the great Samadhi of Manavalamamuni, besides post office, Ahobila Mutt etc. The fifth prakara measuring by 1958x1270, an architectural marvel is housing famous shrines, like Kudal Vanamamalai Mutts, RamanujaKutam along with choultries to accommodating the bhaktas of several denominations of Hinduism. The fourth one going by the name of Alwar Tiruchi, measures 1235 x 849. It has three towers and four gates. It contains the famous thousand pillared hall measuring 450 x 130. It contains Seshasayana mantap, Ramanujacharya samadhi, Krishna sannidhi,
Parthasarthi shrine, Chakravarthalwar Kovil, Tayar Temple, Sri Ranganachar Koll, Sriranga vilas Audience Hall etc. It enshrines the famous Kambar Mantap, besides housing the temple office, shopping complex, gosala, library, museum and many important establishments. Some shrines are adorned with sculptural marvels, like the siukas on Rama, Varaha etc are fashioned into idols. A fine job! And a grand sight!! It is worth visiting and each has a speciality that pleases the senses. The third parkara measuring 767x295 enshrines in it many lakes and temples, like Kodandaramalaya, Suryapushksini along with the sublime residence of Ramanujacharya. Another plus point it has, is the Delhi Tower, which has a legend. The belief is current that Sri Ranganatha image was brought from Delhi with jewels and diamonds including Kohinoor. Hence greater pull. The second parakara measuring by 503x240, called Virajarati contains many shrines. Its northern door becomes extremely pious and infinitely popular due to the Utsavamurthi is brought and adored here during the Vaikutna Ekadasi, when lakhs of devotees enter the sanctum sanctorum after prayer to it normally. Moreover, it houses the much-visited Dolotsava Hall, kitchen - Srivari potu etc. And then comes the first prakara going by the name of Tirupagude and measures 240 x 181. It is in this Lord Ranganatha lying in the recumbent pose gives darshan to the devotees and showers benedictions to their satisfaction. It has many unique features and legends. This garbha built in the Pranavakarahas gold plated silver doors. This grand Karuvarai was built by King Taturaparmana of Madura in 1260 AD. Just opposite this lies Chandana mantapa. It houses several gold images, like Kanakasita, Chokkanathanyaka etc. Another one called Alwar Sannidhi here, houses Revati mantap. Among the several mandapas, Garuda mandapa, Kamba Mandapa deserve visit. The finest architectural beauty adorning the thousand pillared Hill is a feast of the art-lovers. The dome of the Karuvarai is made of gold and its glitter sends thrills in the spines of the viewers. With such unique wealth, both spiritual and sculptural, it has been holding a special grip on the thiistes since the Tretayuga and with the passage of time it is growing in all directions.
THE ARCHAMURTHI

The image of Archamurthi – Ranganathaswami is made of black stone and it is very huge. He is giving dārsan lying recurrent on the Adisesha with his consorts Bhudevi and Niladevi at his feet. The dazzling jewels, shimmering Vāstras, and multi-coloured garlands adorning him indeed offers a grand feast of the eyes. So the genuine devotees feel that the gift of sight blessed by the Almighty God is justified in seeing this Lord in his resplendent beauty. The glue their eyes to the enchanting image and start muttering some verses or hymns in praise of him. A few great Ālvars preferred to transform themselves into some objects to adorning this divya sannidhi for eternal adoration; for this Lord had granted Sayujyamukti to several of his genuine adorers. Strangely enough, there are installed here the idols of Alavandar, Nathamuni and Ramanujacharya. The image of Venkata Desika is found on the tower.

POOJAS

The Ramanuja Sampradaya is followed to every letter in everything done here from management of temple to the different kinds of Prayer Services offered to deity. Credit goes to Ramanuja for having codified and modified several kinds of nitya naimithika pujas to suit the conditions prevailing then. Moreover, being ideal and exemplary, they are followed in every Vaishnava temple to the letter. Rituals like Abhishekam, Archana etc. are offered strictly following his procedure. Times changed but traditions are still observed as they were built up centuries before.
VAIKUNTA EKADASI

Vaikunta Ekadasi tops the list of festivals celebrated with infinite ardour. It is a gala festival celebrated for 11 days starting from Pausha Sukla Padyami to Ekadasi. No doubt all the Ekadasi days numbering 24 in a year are given importance and celebrated with due rituals, but this Vaikunta Ekadasi sees its best and reaches the apex of its glory. Bhaktas in their lacks visit then, making journeys from hundreds of miles. For Vaishnavates, it is an indispensable occasion not to be missed. It is a red letter day which they look for and avail. It has a great background imbued with piety emerging from mysticism.

MURA EPISODE

Padma purana embodies an episode that illustrates the greatness of this day. The story goes that once Mura, the son of Talajangha became a terror to the pious and caused grief in several ways. Even the august Trio were not spared. At times they used to take to heels to places of safety. It happened to Sri Maha Vishnu too. Harassed by his asura krityas, Vishnu went to Badarikasram for temporary relief. He selected Simhavathi Cave for rest. Before entering it, he gave word to his yogamaya to keep guard the Cave. Mura searching for him reached this spot. Seeing Mura approaching in his terrific expect, yogamaya created one goddess called Ekadasi Devi as powerful as, nay more powerful than Mura. In the encounter, the dreadful demon was destroyed. Vishnu learnt on waking up all that happened during the period of his rest. Gratified with her powers and devotion, he blessed her with a boon the ability to destroy the sins of people, who observe fast and offer prayers on that day called Ekadasi Day. Since then the adorers of Vishnu observe fast on this day and offer soulful prayers.
Hence the attraction and sanctity for this annual festival falling on the eleventh of Pausha masa. Many other festivals are celebrated too, but in comparison with this Ekadasi Festival, all glimmer like fireflies before the Sun that Vaikuntha Ekadasi is.

Moreover, this thirtha kshetra became very popular and famous on account of the miracles that emanated from the Karuvarai itself; for Sri Ranganatha instructs, guides and chastises the erring, even if they are priests from time to time, talking in human tongue. Alwars are kept in perfect and constant touch with the presiding deity. The episode of an outcaste Tiruppani Alwar born by a semi-evolved priest and taken to the Sannidhi; and the Sayujya Prapti of Andal are standing illustrations of the God’s ever watchful look on the deserving for granting emancipation. With occurrence of such spectacular awe-inspiring events, the city Srirangam is throbbing with spiritual activity that very few Vaishnavate shrines claim this honour, or come nearer to this glory AROUND SRIRANGAM.

JAMBUKESWAR TEMPLE: it is one of the well known five Saiva kshetras of the South, famous in legend and history. It is here lies the renowned Jalalingam submerged in water, which rises from a subterranean spring. According to legend, Lord Siva taking the form of linga is dwelling under Jambhu Vriksha as desired by a sage. It is a very big temple with vast courtyards and several mandaps, adorned with superb sculptural adornments. The Thayar temple inside is equally embellished with excellent sculptural pieces. The presiding deity is called Jambukeswarar and the temple is very popular as Tiruvannalkaval after the legendary elephant that worshipped the linga with exceptional fervour that pleased the Lord. A worth-seeing, Saiva Kshetra.

UCHARAPILLAYAR KOIL: This tiny but pretty popular shrine situated atop the Rock Fort is the main attraction for all kinds of peregrinations, parayakas, sthanikabhaktas etc. From the foot at the hill an ascent of 437 steps takes us to the feet of this Pillayar, who according to legend receiving a blow from Vibishan for having placed the Ranganatha image on the ground, rested here for some time and then lured by the spectacular colourful scenery in and around the Srirangam island settled down here for ever. Half way up lies the famous Thayumanavar shrine dedicated to Lord Siva. The 100-pillar hall and its sculptural marvels are worth-seeing. The beautifully Rock-cut cave temples built by Pallavas, lying on the southern face of the rock deserve a reverential visit. These are heightening the glory of Trichy, the ancient Cauvery delta town, which played a decisive role during the Carnatic wars in the 18th century. This Rock Fort bears many marks of the monumental achievements made by natives rulers - Cholas and particularly Nayakas of Madurai, and with its rich history detains the sight-seekers for hours. The tank pavilion - the venue of the temple's float festival, celebrated during the month of March every year is the biggest draw of the city.

SAMAYAPURAM: it is a famous centre of pilgrimage. The Samayapuram Mahamayi is a very powerful Goddess with a long legend. Thousands of pilgrims visit every day and the deity is extremely awe-inspiring with her enormous size. And by showering boons like the Kalpa Vriksha is lifting millions of devotees. A miss not spot of great spiritual splendour.
Palani, the trisyllabled word that treasures up several legends and myths is a combination of two meaningful words - Pala-Ni. It means 'Thou art the fruit' -- you are the fruit of knowledge, as the context goes. This sacred word dropped from the holy lips of Lord Siva, when Subrahmanya, his pet son abused the parents for giving the fruit to Vinayaka as prize for making a mere single round of the parents, amounting to Bhupradakshina according to sastras, whereas he actually went round the world mounted on his peacock, according to conditions laid down for winning the prize. The word thus came into existence subsequently became the august seat of Subrahmanya, popularly called Muruga, and acquired such immense spiritual significance that it became one of the most visit-worthy pilgrimage centres of our Bharat. As his glory started spreading so fast and great through miracles, he has been performing ever since he made this sacred hill as his eternal abode, that it totally eclipsed the importance of the centuries-old shrines, and in certain cases many paled into insignificance. Nay they are shining like glow-worms before the sun the temple is. To be precise, he became the darling god of both class and mass, that there is no home in Tamil Nadu without knowing or adoring him with utmost veneration.

It may not be exaggeration to say that atleast five out of ten in Tamil Nadu, particularly feel highly honoured in bearing his name in a wide variety of its ramifications, like Gnanapanditha, Guhane Saravanan, Alagar, Kadirvel, Kumaran, Velan, Vadivelan, Dandayadapani, Subramanya, Skanda, Karthikeya, Shanmuga,
Muruga, Palani, Arumuga, Sivakumara etc. He is indescribably glorified to the extent, that there is no village or town without his temple; no street without his icon fixed in some corner or the other; no house without his portrait; no auspicious occasion begins without mentioning his name; no public institution that does not declare a holiday on any one of the days dear to him like Krithikai, Kandasasti etc.; no Kalakshepanm that does not make a reference to his exploits overtly or covertly, and no venture or business becomes complete without mentioning his name at one stage or together. Thus grown in fame and sanctity, he adorned and has been adorning literature in every genre that no singer or saint, writer or reporter ever earns a living or fame; if he does not claim his adoration with that Muruga; for it is this deity that is deemed Gnana Panditha, the custodian of Tamil Culture; the indomitable war-lord; the enchanting prince charming that enkindles devotion and assures abhaya to everyone, regardless of caste, religion, creed, region etc., it is this Muruga that established his sway over people to the astonishment of his own father and proved more popular than that great Lord, known for infinite compassion; it is to this Lord Parvathi, Lakshmi, Agni and Surya worshipped at this abode; it is this temple that has a winch service enabling the aged and infirm to reach his feet; it is this deity considered as the infant aspect of Lord Siva; and it is this abode - Palani deemed the best among his arupadiveedus - six favourite abodes, in terms of the number of visiting devotees, hundi collections, performance of a wide range of Prayer Services etc. Moreover, with the passage of time, the fame of this temple’s deity popularly known as Dandayudhapani is growing in dasadisas, and on the basis of this unprecedented fame, one can infer that many shrines of once global importance may likely go without adorers. What then is the cause of that popularity? Who is responsible for that phenomenal growth? A look at his birth and growth lifts and curtain on the mystery. So turn the pages of legends for illumination.
There are several legends embodying the birth of Subrahmanya - the Commander-in-chief of Devasana, and the necessity of his presence, when the Devas were feeling every second a living death due to the atrocious acts of danavas. And the authors too are of no mean distinction. According to one legend, he was the son of Uma and Maheswar. He was born only to put an end to the atrocities of Taraka, a cruel demon, who perpetrated countless wicked acts on devas for years. When the entire amarakula was totally debilitated, they sought the advice of Lord Srimannarayanan, who counselled that the son born to Lord Siva alone would kill that remorseless Danava. But Siva was doing penance after the self-immolation of Sati, reborn as Parvathi. And she was offering worship to Lord Siva at the behest of her father Himavan. They utilised the services of Manmatha to awaken his love instincts: Poor Manmatha was burnt to ashes, when the Lord opened his third eye as punishment for disturbing his tapas, yet in the end Siva was wedded to Parvathi and the son begotten to them became the Chief-Marshal of Amarasena, who vanquished Taraka; and the devas breathed freely. Devendra gave his daughter Devasena to the valorous Subrahmanya in wedding then. This legend was immortalised by Kalidas in his Kumarasambhava.

The Balkanda of Ramayana has a different version, though Karthikeya in his role of Army-General killed Taraka. According to it, Gods wanted Siva to preserve his energy for danavasamhara. Though Siva applauded the request, he admitted that he had already discharged his seed. Gods then requested the Earth,
Agni and Vayu to receive the seed and enter it. Agni at once entered the seed which turned into a white mountain from which Karthikeya was born. He was the aspect of Siva and so inherited invincibility that destroyed the Asurakula.

**VYASAS' VERSION**

The Vanaparva of Mahabharatha has yet another legend. It narrated that once Devasena was put to route by Kesin a dreadful demon of unusual powers. And he carried the Devasena personified as lady. Devasena had a sister called Daityasena. They were Prajapati's daughters. When Brahma was invoked for help by Devendra, he said that Subrahmanya alone could kill that Danava and promised a valorous life partner for Devasena, who would become War Lord of the Devaloka. The later story - Subramanya was born to Uma, and Maheswar and killing etc. is same as above, and need not be repeated.

**AGNI EPISODE**

It happened that once the Saptarishis performed a great yagna. Agni then had the occasion of seeing the Munipatnis closely. And for long, since he was carrying the ablations to the gods. Their sublime charm enkindled love in him. He could not fulfil his lust due to the chastity strictly practised by them. So he was found despaired now and then. Just during his period, Swaha, the lovely daughter of Daksha, who was in deep love for Agni contrived a plan to marry him by fulfilling his desire. Accordingly, she assumed the forms of the wives of the Rishis and consorted with Agni, who ignorant of the trick felt elated. Except Arundhati, she took the forms of the six rishipatnis and pleased him, and was pleased too. Every time she consorted with him, she used to keep the seed in a golden receptacle on a white mountain. This happened six times. The child thus born to them was called Skanda since he came into the world with the seed of Agni. He had six heads and twelve arms, but one neck and a
belly. Agni and Swaha later brought up their child. On account of taking birth with the seed of that powerful all-consuming Fire god, he was exceptionally strong and invincible. He was chosen as the general by Devendra, when he fought against Danavas. He proved a remarkable War-Chief and won every war. Devendra then gave his daughter Devasena to him in marriage.

**KRITIKAS EPISODE**

Yet one more! Another fantastic legend narrates that once Agni appeared before Siva and Parvathi, when they were consorting. The sudden appearance of Agni made Siva discharge his seed abruptly. Angry Parvathi asked Agni to bear that seed. He humbly accepted, in fear of severe consequences, but he could not bear it longer. He threw it into the River Ganges and the later transferred it to the six Kritikas, who were bathing in the Ganges. They gave birth to children, each one. All the six were combined into one with six heads and twelve arms but with one neck and one belly. Later his peerless career crowned him with the generalship of celestial army along with Devendra’s daughter as wife. So he was called Karthikeya, Shadanana, Agnibhu etc. He was also called Saravanabhava due to the fact of the seed of Siva thrown into the forest of Sara of reeds, where he was born according to another story.

Whatever may be his origin, he was undoubtedly the most courageous among the celestials, and with his help alone Devendra killed Taraka, Surapadma, Mahisha etc. Moreover, he is represented as a Kumara of great beauty and immense attraction. He is the Prince charming among gods. He accepted the cock to adorn his banner and Mayura as his mount, the two forms of Surapadma at the time of his death at his hands.

There are several other myths and legends finding coveted places in the scriptures. They bring out the glory of this War Lord, but strange to find that his worship or popularity is little known in the North India; rather he is not given wide publicity as found in the South, especially Tamil Nadu, which if termed Muruga Nadu, justifiers selection.
THE LEGEND OF SIVAGIRI HILL

Next comes the cause of his taking seat on the hill now called Palani or Sivagiri hill. Once Narada, the manasaputra of Brahma gave a fruit to Lord Siva during his darbar and said that it was a rare phal imbued with gnana, and Siva was the only fit person to eat it. And wholly at it. Sooner than handing over, there were heard claims by Vinayaka and Muruga for it. Siva decided to present it to the fittest alone. So he said, "It is a prize to any, who completes the Bhupradakshina first, and he alone will get it" Subrahmanya sitting on his mount peacock started, but Vinayaka went round his parents with folded hands and said that father and mother are gods and going round them amounts to going round the world. So he was entitled to the prize. His argument being reasonable and acceptable to the scriptures and celestials, Lord Siva gave the fruit to him. Arriving at this juncture, and seeing the fruit with Vinayaka, Shanmuga abused the audience and parents for their wrong verdict. He left the place much against the heart-rending appeals of his Mother. Siva tried to pacify him that he was himself Gnanphal and there was no need for him to have another.

Setting aside every plea he left saying that he would never dwell in Kailas, but create a world soon and secure adorers of his own. He then forsook all and turned a recluse-satisfied with a loin-cloth and a staff.

He arrived at this called Sivagiri then created by the Sage Agasthya along with another bearing the name of Edumbhu Malai. Agasthya perfomed penance here for some time, due to its extra ordinary sublimity and sanctity. Before moving further down, he asked his powerful demon servant to follow him carrying the two hills with him tying them on to a Kavadi. He did. While walking, he found the Edumbu Malai going up into air. He placed two heavy stones on the lighter Edumbu Hills to equalise the weight, but could not balance it however much he tried. He stopped to find out the cause. When scrutinised, he found Subrahmanya on the hill then found lower. In the exchange of
words, followed by fighting, the demon was killed. At the intervention of Agasthya, he was given life. Moreover, the compassionate Muruga ordered the first worship to him in the temple in addition to making him his dvarapalaka at his request, as his loyalty pleased him. And the practice of offering pujas first is being followed since then.

The carrying of Kavadi started by that demon servant of Agasthya first was given a fresh lease of life by Muruga. He allowed the practice to continue by his bhaktas thence onwards. It is of many kinds - Paal Kavādi, Paneer Kavadi, Pushpa Kavadi, Chandana Kavadi etc. It is said that even if the cooked or fried fish is brought in sealed vessels or sealed tins in the Kavadi to the temple, it turns live fish. That is Murugan's mahatya. The Muruga bhaktas are in millions in Tamil Nadu, and all over the globe. Their number is waxing due to the liberal grant of boons on the adorers including Muslims and Chirstians too.

THE TEMPLE

The celebrated temple lying on Sivagiri hill has many plus points to the jealousy of many hill temples dedicated to Subrahmanya. It is supposed to have been built by a Chera King, whose image is seen on the northern wall. Besides enjoying a well-built flight of stairs, numbering 1001 steps from foot of hill to the top, it has a Winch Service catering to the needs of ever increasing infirm and old, or aristocrats. The well-laid out stairs with Manadapams on the way relieve the fatigue of the climbers. On the way, there are many beautiful big size representations of Muruga in the company of parents and also his consorts - Valli and Devasena. The central shrine is very spacious and has two prakaras and four grand towers over the imposing entrances. The main entrance is on the west and has a majestic gopuram. Many facilities are provided to the visiting bhaktas, like restaurants, cloak rooms etc a top the hills and choultries and rest houses with all amenities down below. Behind the garbha griha in the first prakara, there are installed beautiful images of
Sakti, Muruga etc., whose visual appeal is great and detain the devotees for hours.

THE MULAVAR

The presiding deity is called Dandayudhapani. The image about four feet in height is made of Navapashana. And is supposed to have been made by sage Bhoga. Hence any substance that comes into contact with it acquires miraculous powers. To availing that rare benefit, devotees offer many types of abhishekam - bathe the icon with paneer, paal, sandal paste, coconut water, pancharitmam and take them home as prasad. Every visitor takes home invariably pancharamitham, a speciality here. There are several types of Prayer Services to the deity. There are many minishrines and mandapamas adorned with several gods, like Eswara, Parvathi etc.

FESTIVALS

Among the festivals celebrated, Thai Pusam in January takes precedence over others. Lacks of devotees arrive from all parts of India, particularly from Kerala besides Tamil Nadu, which of course has the greatest pull. Next comes Panguni Uttaram that falls in April followed by Skandasasti in November and Vaisakam in June. Above all, the Adi Kritika - the yearly festival, and monthly Kritika are also important. Kritika Nakshatram is considered to be the most propitious time for worshipping Muruga, since he was brought up by Kritis. All these are celebrated on a scale quite impressive and grand. Moreover, the golden Chariot drawn on Sunday nights normally is a special feature here and draws several thousands in addition to regular visitors. The Illumination sound and colour are extremely grand and make the Hill Southern Kailas, a sight of which lifts the souls and showers inexplicable bliss. Experience elevates and adoration emancipates. Visit first! And get blessed next!!.
Pronounce the word MADURAI, uprises anon Mother MEENAKSHI ready to announce that it is her august seat, held dear to heart since time immemorial, and will live there eternally beside her Lord Sundareswar, enshrined in a bigger shrine, but an integral part of her spacious and beautifully sculptured mandir. The words - Madurai and Meenakshi are so inextricably blended that they bear no separation. They are not two in ONE, but ONE and one WHOLE only that can never yield division, nor desire living in isolation. They are like Lord Maheswar in Ardhanarishwar combination, resenting segregation and preferring enviable union for ever. So, shere rememberance of Madurai flashes across our minds the enchanting, sublime figure of Goddess Meenakshi in standing posture, adorned with resplendent dazzling jewellery and shimmering colourful fabrics, with a lovely green parrot perching on the bouquet held in her right hand, and left hand gracefully hanging down below her alluring hip. This life-size well-chiselled image radiates love and compassion through her large black enchanting eyes, formed like fishes to look upon her admirers with full gaze for showering munificence, just as the mother fish feeds her progeny with mere sight. Her compassionate dark eyes are like fish, nay fishes heightening the beauty of her rightly proportioned round face with broad forehead, resting on fully grown checks, separated by well-cut nose, lit by red lips, standing on beautiful cone like chin. The name Meenakshi given at her christening ceremony is quite appropriate, say she was named so, on account of the fish shaped eyes that thrilled her parents at first sight.
This Mother was brought up as son and she ruled, warred and felled several emperors before encountering Maheswar and getting united with him in wedlock. So the land and her rule became doubly sacred; for it was this region, converted by Lord Maheswar into auditorium for enacting his 64 plays to lifting the Saranagathas; it is to this temple several illustrious monarchs endowed lavishly in all forms and made it the formost temple of unparalleled beauty and glory; it is this shrine that stands unsurpassed in sculptural adornments and architectural marvels covering an area of 847 x 792 feet, encircled by massive outer walls with four tall towers; it is this place deemed as a great centre of Tamil culture; it is this place visited by almost all spiritual dignitaries; it is this region drenched by the waters of river Vaigai blessing the people with bumper crops, sumptuous verdure and colourful landscapes; it is this holy place reputed as one of the Saktipitas; it is this hallowed place that was the capital of Pandyan Kingdom for centuries; it was here a warrior Pandiyan Emperor performed Aswamedhya under the august aegies of Agasthya; it was this holy land that went by the name of Kadamba Vana during the Pouranic age; it was here Indra worshipped Maheswar and got back his throne; it was here alone Nataraja danced with his right leg at the solicitation of King Rajasekhara Pandya; it was this place, where goddess Saraswathi bestowed her lustrue on 48 poets, who formed the much-renowned Sangam; it is this place that witnessed the rule of Muruga under the name of Ugra Pandya; it is this pilgrimage centre that can be rightly called Harihara kshetra on account of several temples built both for Siva and Vishnu. Numerous are the marvels that this Mokshapuri demonstrated to the world with Siva as the protagonist of every piece. And very few cities in the world can claim a tradition as old as Madurai and due to glorious history it made and exemplary culture it nurtured it is considered as the Athens of the East. Illustrious Roman and Greek emperors established commercial links with it and glorified their nations with the good-will of the enlightened Pandyan rulers of this city, when talent flowered and spread its fragrance to the four corners of the world. By and large, it was and is deemed as the thriving
centre of Tamil culture. And the pulse of South India.

ANTIQUE

Halasya Mahatmya in Sanskrit and Thiruvilayadal in Tamil deal elaborately with the sanctity of this place inhabited by gods and goddesses from the Vedic period onwards. In the pouranic age it was a primeval forest, outgrown with Kadamba trees and was the habitat of the Goddess Parvathi, so was adored as Kadamba Vana Vasini. The Pandyan Kings who ruled this region were valorous and brought under their banner the entire Dakshinapatha. During the reign of Kulasekbara Pandya, a merchant by name Dhanunjai on his way back home found Indra worshipping a Swayambhu Sivalinga at the spot of the present temple; and when reported to the king, he decided to locate it. And on the very same night, he was advised by Lord Siva himself to build a temple there for worship. With implicit faith and unbounded devotion he started his quest for the Swayambhu linga and found it at last. And he saw there a serpent near Sivalinga too. Deeming it as the correct location, he installed the Sivalinga on the spot, where the tail and the mouth of the serpent joined after crawling over a long area. The temple that was built then, occupied the entire area of the serpent moved, while the king observed. It was so planned and laid out that it resembles a lotus flower in design with the temple in the centre. Besides, he named the town that came up around the temple, Madhura or Madurai, due to the fact of drops of the nectar falling from Maheswar's matter hair, while advising to build the temple in his dream.

THE LEGEND OF MEENAKSHI

Now begins the legend of Mother Meenakshi. Malayadwaja who succeeded to the throne after an illustrious ruler was a brave
king, but was without issues. He performed a great yagna along with his Dharmapatni Kanchanmala for Santhana prapti. And at the end of it, a three-year-old girl rose up from the sacrificial pit. She was lovely and attractive with a difference. She had three breasts instead of two, common to females. To the despairing couple, a divine voice informed that the third breast would disappear, when she would be seen by her life partner. Comforted parents brought her up fondly as prince and taught all the arts of warfare. She grew up as an unusual princess, with exceptional heroism peeping from every pore of her body. Her charms too were of rare type. She was christened Thadathagai and became dear to her subjects. She ascended the throne after the demise of her parents. She then began her digvijaya yatra which was a topic perennial fascination, since crown after crown fell at her feet, when she marched her armies against the Aryavarta kings. She extended her conquest upto the Himalayas, the abode of Lord Siva. When Kailas was besieged, Siva appeared on war theatre along with Pramadaganas. Ah! what a miracle! When her eyes met with that of Siva, miraculously her third breast disappeared. It gladdened her heart; for she met her Lord at long last. Soon arms were thrown down, and garlands exchanged. After the marriage, Siva came down to Madurai and lived with his queen-consort for some time. Later making Ugra Pandyan, the incarnation of Shanmuga as king, they vanished leaving their murthis - Sundareswarar and Meenakshi for adoration by the devout public. In the ages that followed, Madurai flourished well in all directions under the mighty rulers, who patronised arts and crafts, besides extending cultural dominions across the seas.

HISTORICITY

The origin of the city and its reputed temple dates back to legendary times. Of course, till the seventh century, a temple of modest size existed. Its expansion started during the reign of Sundarapandydan in the 12th century. The big towers rose up
between 13th and 16th centuries. The celebrated Nayaka rulers made innumerable additions, like Ashta Sakti Mandapam, Thousand Pillared Mandapam, Puthu Mandapam, Vandiyoor Teppakulam, Nayakkar Mahal etc, during their period lasting for 200 long years. In the year 1877, the wealthy Nagarthar families took up the mission of renovation. And beautified it with impressive structures besides completing the incomplete ones. Later in 1960-63, a committee worked under the aegies of PT Rajan and attended to the repairs of the towers and painted them artistically making it majestic and imposing. It added a new Mandapam and dedicated it to Mangayarkarasi. To be true, seeing the old art pieces treasured up in the Art Museum is itself a soul-lifting experience, and according to experts they are master-pieces made to last for all times, unsurpassed in exquisite craftsmanship and superb finish.

This Meenakshi-Sundaeswar Temple one of the biggest temple complexes in India is a twin temple. The shrine in the southern side is dedicated to Mother Meenakshi and the adjoining one is to Lord Sundaeswar. In size and sculpture, it is second to none but to itself.

THE TEMPLE

Normally devotees enter through the Astha Sakthi Mandapam, facing the east. The sculptural representation of the wedding of Meenakshi Sundaeswar adorning the entrance affords a grand sight and promises many more marvels inside. Just below are seen the images of Ganesh and Muruga. As the much-adored eight Sakthis adorn the pillars on two sides, it is called the Ashtasakti Mandapam. The walls are beautified with the paintings and images of several gods. Crossing this, they step into the Meenakshi Naicker Mandapam. The idols of Siva and Parvathi in their hunting attire installed in the hall beckon their attention invariably. Then they enter the Mudali Pillai Mandapam. Among the beautiful carvings found here, the images of Muruga, Vinayaka, and the builder Kandanathath Mudaliar.
deserve attention. Next comes the Golden Lotus tank called Potramaraikulam. It is in this tank Lord Devendra bathed and worshipped the deities with the golden lotuses, for purification. It has a fascinating fast, and tradition attributes it to having the powers of judgement. It was used as legends say, to judge the literary works. Manuscripts when thrown into it, meritorious works used to float on its discerning waters, while the inferior ones were sinking like stones. Ah! what a tank! How grand was its verdict, ‘! This is surrounded by long corridors. The pillars of the Northern corridor are adorned with the figures of 24 poets of the third Tamil Sangam. Along with them, the figures of Dhanunjai, the merchant who discovered the linga in the Kadambavana and Kulasekhara Pandyan responsible for building the temple and city are found. They merit reverence. On the walls of the southern corridor there are marble slabs with inscriptions of Tirukkural on them. The sacred Unjal Mandapam lies to the west of the golden tank. On Fridays the gold images of Meenakshi and Sundareswar are brought here and worshipped. In the balcony of the western side, there are figures of Queen Mangamma and her Minister Ramappan. Adjacent to this is the Kilikothu Mandapam, where the parrots are kept. The pillars are adorned with the well chiselled figures of Panchapandavas, Vali, Sugriva, Droupadi. The mural paintings on the walls and ceiling are worth seeing.

They enter now the much hallowed Mother Meenakshi’s abode. At the entrance stands the three-storeyed tower and in the outer prakaram there are huge images of sentinels, Tirumala Nayakar etc. Thiruppugal stanzas are inscribed on the walls of the Koodal Kumarar shrine. The Mother’s Karuvarai lies to the west and the lifesize image in standing posture adorned with dazzling jewels enthrals the viewers. The stone-cutter’s artistry is a standing tribute to the sculptural art and an invaluable gift to the idolaters. The charms of the fish-eyed goddess are so captivating that the viewers rivet their gaze on her long. Leaving the mandir, they walk towards the Sundareswarar Mandir. On their way the image of Mukkuruni Vinayakar arrest their attention with his unusual proportions. It is eight feet in height and pleasant
to look at. According to temple history it was found by Thirumala-Nayakar, while digging the Vandiyoor Teppakulam. In the outer prakaram they are many mini-shrines enshrining the images of adorable personages. Among them are found the images of Gnanasambandar, Natarajar along with the poets of the Third Tamil Sangam. Now comes the Kambathadi Mandapam containing so much sculptural wealth that none but the Lord could estimate its worth, much less appreciate. The status are the best specimens of Dravidian art, and even the connoisseurs gape and gaze at them for hours, but devotees simply join their palms at each piece. The eight prominent pillars heightening the grandeur of this Mandapam embody the different manifestations of Siva, conspicuous among them are the images of Lord Mahavishnu in his ten incarnations. Strange to find such Vaishnava representations in Saiva shrine! It is but due to builder's religious toleration that deserves homage. Aren't the evolved souls always transcend petty distinctions? This truth is stranger than fiction. The colosal statues of Agni, Veerabhadra, Ahora Veerabhadhra, Natârajar in Thandava pose and the scene depicting the wedding of Meenakshi Sundareswarar detain the viewers for hours.

Leaving this sculptural Museum behind, the visitors enter the spiritual world to feast their eyes with the sublime sight of the Omni Compassionate Lord sîva. The outer prakaram is studded with scores of adorable divinities - each is a piece of art and enhances the sanctity of the place. Among them, the huge statues of Saraswathi, Durgai, Siddhar, Lakshmi, Kasi viswanathar, Lingodbhava Murthi, Nayanmars are deservedly famous and paying homage to each is to be considered a MUST. It also preserves the holy Kadamba tree in addition to having a big yagasala, Kanakasabha and Arukal Peedam, where the Thiruvilayadal Puranam was inaugurated. Offering obeisance to each Murthi, they enter Valliamballam, where they greet first Lord Nataraja in the dancing pose to the right side. It is said that Lord Nataraja danced with the right leg at the request of King Rajasekhara Pandya in contravention to the usual practice of the left leg. This representation stands an eloquent testimony of
Lord's All-benevolence - Bahktavasankar is Bhaktavasankar. Always! And out beaten too!! They enter next the garbha griha of Lord Sundareswar giving darsan in the form of Linga. This holy abode of his is consecrated and supported by 64 bhootaganas, 32 lions and 8 elephants. This august phallus is called by several names such as Chokkanathar, Karpurachokkar, Sundareswar, Siva, Maheswara and adored with great fervour.

After this they enter the Aierkala Mandapam - thousand pillared Mandapam - the treasure house of sculpture. Each pillar seems alive with beautiful carvings. At the entrance, the patronAryanatha Mudaliar mounted on horse greets them, flanked by the big statues of Kannappar, Bikshadanar, Chandramati, Kuravan and Kuruthi - each is a master piece of high order. The images of Rati-Manmada, Kalipurusha, Mohini, Arjuna are done artistically and it contains many antiques and pieces of art. The biggest draw is the musical pillars, each making a different musical note when tapped. A superb marvel! To the South of this lies the Mangayarkarasi Mandapam treasuring up beautiful statues of Mangayarkarasi, Koon Pandian, Gnanasambandar and a Lingam. Servaikar Mandapam built by Marutha Pandyas lies next.

Last is the grand 333 x 150 feet Vasantha Mandapam built by the Nayakas. It is adorned with excellent sculptural pieces suiting the purpose of construction. It goes by the name of Pudu Mandapam or New gallery. It is the Spring Resort of the presiding deities. It is here on a granite pedestal the deities are placed during all the festivals. It is adorned with several attractive images of Thadathagai, Ravana's lifting Kailas Mount etc, besides the Nayakars who breathed life into many worn-out and dilapidated portions of this grand temple, the like of which is not found anywhere in India. The visitors carry with them indelible impressions to treasure up in their minds to be cherished for ever and ever and ever.

The entire complex is surrounded by a sturdy high prakara with four gigantic nine-storeyed towers on four sides. It is about 254 metres is length and 214 metres in breadth. Of the four, South is the tallest and stands majestic, rising to a height of 160
feet with parabolic curves at the sides. It was the gift of Sevanth Chettiar, built in the 16th Century. Its sculptural adornments are of high order. The North tower is called Mottai, and others - East and West are equally grand and rich in sculptural excellences. Besides these there are smaller ones built over both entrances and garbha grihas of main shrines, adding grace and charm to the entire city.

**FESTIVALS**

The temple celebrates several festivals, almost one in each month. The colour and sound emanating from the temple complex and precincts during the festivals waft sanctity to dasadisas and lull the viewers immensely. Everything done is gigantic and sublime, and everywhere it leaves an aroma of sweet memories that admit neither similarity nor equality anywhere. Among the best, the Chitrai Pournami Car Festival takes precedence over all.

**THE LEGEND OF CAR FESTIVAL**

It has a special reason and awe-some backdrop that heightens its glory. Once, it appears Devendra incurred displeasure to Brihaspathi - the Devaguru. In consequence, he was defeated by Vritra with the support of Nahusha. Nahusha, in his power lust dethroned Vrithra and became King. And he went to the extent of claiming Indrani as his property. Chaste Indrani restored to a device to get rid of that lustful beast - asked him to visit her in Palanquin borne by the Saptarishis. The egoistic Nahausha insulted them while carrying. They cursed him to turn into a serpent. In the mean time, Indra realising the glory Kadambavana -- the abode of Siva descended and worshipped him. Pleased with his ardour, Siva giving back his kingdom, blessed him with the privilege of worshipping him on the auspicious Chitra Pournami for success and bliss. He did. And
since then this festival has gained special significance, and confers bliss, if Siva is worshipped on this auspicious day. This ten-day festival recreates the marriage of goddess Meenakshi to Lord Siva, when the charming deities are taken out in carved and exotically decorated wooden chariot pulled along the main streets by thousands of devotees. Devout bhaktas feel their life attains charithartha, if avail the sight of that grand chariot and worship the gods then.

AROUND MADURAI

ALAGARKOIL: Built atop the hill, this favourite Vaishnava shrine is drawing pilgrims and tourists throughout the year. It is 20 km off the Meenakshi temple. This temple is dedicated to Sundararajan, popular as Alagar. Legend has that he is the brother of Meenakshi and is adored with unbounded reverence both by Vaishnavates and Saivates. The reason is not far to seek. It is here in this temple alone the Moolavar is found in three postures - standing, reclining and sitting. A unique feature, found nowhere in Hindu India. Elaborate prayer services in accordance with agamas are offered and there is perennial attraction for all classes of devotees. Another unique feature that enthral the asthikas is that he is taken in procession with unparalleled favour from here to Madurai on the Chitra Pournami Day which is a star attraction. when people in millions participate in this grand festival; for it was on this day his sister Meenakshi married Sundareswar. This festival lasting for 10 days is celebrated at both the places - Madurai and Alagarkoil.

The temple is a sculptural marvel as it is lavishly endowed and adorned with architectural and sculptural embellishments. Many festivals are celebrated simultaneously here and at Madurai. Of the oddities of this rituals, of the temple from a spring lying at 3 km of atop the hill the water is brought, for the abhisheka purpe, since water from many source blackens the bronze icons. Mystery of divinities is only to be venerated rather than probed.

A few miles of this hill temple, there is another dedicated to Murugan. It is called Palamudircholai, one of the Arupadiveedus - six important temples held dear to Murugan. It is visited by all throughout the year. Its legends are many and sanctity, great.

THIRUPARAKUNDRAM: It is the venue of Lord Muruga's wedding with Devayani - the lovely daughter of Devendra, the king of gods. It lies at about 8 km to the south of Madurai and is accessible by all kinds of vehicles. It is a hill temple deemed the best among the six favourite abodes - Arupadaiveedus at the Lord, since his ace martial career and spiritual eminence were honoured here with a prize that none but he deserved and obtained - the favourite daughter of Trilokadhish Panthi - Devendra, for killing the formidable demon - Surapadman - a throne in the flesh and causing terrible nightmares to them though they were immortals.

It is a grand shrine beautified with tall gopurams and huge mandapams - the best specimens of Dravadian style of architecture. The Kalyana Mandapam is adorned with a large number of statues of great beauty adding to the splendour of the temple, carved out of a giant rock of unusual dimensions. The murals narrate many episodes of Murugan's exploits and wedding scenes. The unique feature of the temple is that abhisheka is performed to the Veil - the potent weapon of the Lord instead to the idol. The well chiselled form of Muruga feast the eyes of the adorers, as he is considered the prince charming among the gods.

On the summit of this pretty hill, there is grand shrine dedicated to Kasi Viswanathar. Another that lures the viewers is the statue of the famous poet Nakeerat of the Sangam period's reputation.

Lord Muruga seated atop the hill, with his comely pose is looking afar down at the sacred feet of his illustrious parents - Meenakshi and Sundareswar, who are looking up at him eternally, enjoying the spectacle of the glory of their valorous sons marriage and sports. It is always crowded, as it is considered very auspicious for celebrating marriages and the like.
Of the six sacred abodes -- Arupadi Veedus of Shanmuga, the Chief-Field-Marshal of the celestial army, Tiruchendur enjoys the unique honour of a highly cherished pilgrim centre of eternal significance, for both Savites and Shanmugites. Its history is bristled with many a spectacular episode that won for Shanmuga immortal glory as a formidable warrior of matchless strategy, and a peerless antagonist of inimitable humanism. And being the seashore temple dedicated to both father and son - Siva and Shanmuga renowned for infinite mercy, it is drawing thousands of yatris and tourists everyday. And throughout the year at it. Several legends of this thirtha kshetra shed adequate light on Shanmuga’s role as a supreme marshal, who wielded the power of his generalship to such astonishing magnitude that out-beat the diabolical manoeuvres of the ruthless danavas, renowned for special gifts of sub standard war-craft. And it is here, the benevolent Shanmuga showed his cosmic form to his dreadful foe, and acquired mayura as his vehicle and cock for the banner. It is here Shanmuga used Devendra as his vehicle, during the war with Surapadma and his brothers; it is here in this divya kshetra, Maya the celestial architect built a temple for Siva at the bidding of Shanmuga to worship him before and after that war. It is in this holy land, the Lord brought Patalaganga by piercing his lance into the sand bed; it is to the building of this sacred temple tower, the Lord performed miracles of changing ashes and salt into gold coins to making payment to the labourers; it is this temple’s Moolavar that was robbed by the Dutch and dropped into sea, when storms broke out signalling danger to their existence; it is at this place, and to this presiding deity, prominent Savite saints like Nakkirar, Arunagirinathar and Kumaraguruparar composed verses eulogising the valour of Shanmuga; it is this mokshapuri that cured Adi Sankara of his illness after prayers, and here he composed Subrahmanya Bhujiangam.

Sanctified with many more of such awe-inspiring epidoses, this divya kshetra is exuding divinity and blessing the devotees
from the Kritayuga onwards. Hence the perennial attraction for theists of every sect and denomination, besides tourists of all nationals.

**ANTIQUEITY**

According to legend, Surapadman a powerful demon aided and abetted by his brothers Taraka and Singamukha subjected devas to insurmountable grief by his wicked acts. He was a terror to the living in the three worlds - heaven, earth and Patala-his very name was a harbinger of misery to devas. When they were humbled- divested of their dignity, driven out of kingdom, and tortured in and out of homes, they sought the presence of Lord Maheswar, and implored him for deliverance. Moved by their pathos, Maheswar then opened his eye of mercy to ward off their grief. There came out then six fire balls that reached the Saravana tank carried by the Fire-God. They changed themselves at once into enticing tiny tots and started floating on the lotuses grown there in abundance. Attracted by the bewitching beauty of the babes, the six celestial nymphs - Karthik Kanyas nourished them with rare care and deep veneration. When Goddess Parvathi hugged them fondly, seeing their alluring forms, the six became one with six faces and twelve hands. He was named Shanmuga. Sooner than becoming the six-faced God, Shanmuga hastened to Tiruchendur to put an end to asurakrithyas of Surapadma, who had his built fortress there amidst the sea to making impregnanable for mortals. Before the dreadful combat, he worshipped Siva, his compassionate father in a grand temple built at his behest by Maya, the celestial architect, for total Victory.

As the battle went on, the asuras assumed several dreadful forms and utilised all the skills of war fare. To the last. Moreover, they fought on land, in the air and under water uninterrupted. For six long days it went on. Shanmuga, being a Karanajanamma daringly encountered every strategy from time to time and proved more than a match to the demonic acts of Taraka and Singamukha and atlast killed them. When the entire army fell down dead, Surapadma rose up from the surging waves in the
form of a mango tree and hurried fast like a hurricane towards Shanmuga to smash him to pieces. Using Devendra as his mount, Shanmuga gave him a taste of the divine valour by dashing into his island fortress. In the dreaded collision that ensued, Shanmuga cleft him into two with his potent lance. Though cut into two, Surapadma taking the forms of cock and peacock continued the struggle. But how long! And to what effect! Would the amoeba stand against the might of the Almighty Shanmuga, born only to killing him? He fell, yet before his death he 'tearfully, prayed for pardon. Moved as he was, Shanmuga showed his cosmic form and accepted to make use of his peacock form as his permanent vehicle, and the cock to adorn his banner. Since then, though dead, Surapadma has been serving the Lord thus, with devotion unparalleled and obedience inimitable. Does this not establish that Shanmuga is a redoubtable Commander-in-chief of all times? And all worlds too. Is not his compassion for the genuine penitent is also peerless? So it is no wonder that Devendra offered his lovely blossoms-Devayani in marriage to him. A fitting reward! A befitting match!! And the most subtlest honour too!!! To commemorate this splendidly heroic and resplendently magnificent victory, Kandashati festival is celebrated every year in the temple on a scale unheard of in pomp and grandeur.

THE TEMPLE

An imposing tall tower adorned with the divine lance at the top, dominating the landscape for miles around comes into the view of the approaching devotees first. Anon it lifts the souls and prepares them for a full grasp of the sanctity pervading the entire locale-surging sea on the east, and busy commercial establishments on the other three sides. The sculptural grandeur of this broad, tall tower has an interesting tale to tell and it stuns everyone with its awe-inspiring episode, occurred during its construction.
THE RAJAGOPURAM AND ITS LEGEND

The nine-storeyed Rajagopuram built over the western entrance is by far the best and stands as a superb specimen of sculptural craftsmanship. This was built by an ardent devotee named Desikamurthiswamy belonging to Mahasannidhanum of Tiruvavaduthurai Mutt. Though poor financially, he was very rich is soul. So the Lord entrusted him with the noble task of building this, appearing before him one day in dream. How can he accomplish that onerous task, when he was struggling hard to make the both ends meet? But it was the Lord's bidding! So he commenced the work with faith in the Lord. When the workers approached him in the evenings for wages, he began giving ashes of the Lord, but no sooner did the labourers cross the Thoondukai Vinayakar shrine, the ashes were turning themselves into gold coins. A great miracle! Alas this did not continue longer. With the completion of the sixth storey, the miracle abruptly stopped. So he ripped open his devout heart before the Lord with streaming years. The Lord then directed him to approach a certain devotee- Seethakathai Maraikkar, living in a 'nearby village. Listening to his tale, he gave him a basket of salt. Though disappointed, he reached home, but to his great surprise he found the salt turned into gold coins. And wonder of wonders! They were enough to complete the tower. This happened some 300 years ago. Its oddity evokes devotion in all. Rose up thus into high skies, it beckons million looks and bends the heads of devotees in prayer.

The beautiful arch through which devotees pass springs a surprise next; for, from here for about a mile around the temple there exists a shaded shelter facilitating easy pradakshana for the visitors. This unique feature enkindles curiosity, and as they walk along circumambulating, they come across the Vinayakar shrine called by a special name Thoondukai Vinayakar. On the way they visit Valli cave lying to the North of the temple. It is an impressive small shrine dedicated to Valli and Dattatreya. In the rear, there is yet another smaller one carved out of sandstone inside. The image of Valli placed in the niche is quite pleasing and
commands veneration. Emerging, they reach the eastern side washed by the roaring waves. Sooner than seeing, they hurry down to the shore for sea bath. An indispensable ritual for the theists for bliss, and a jolly pastime for the tourists.

THE MIRACLE OF WELL IN A WELL

After battling with waves and enjoying sea bath, they move towards a sacred mini-step-well lying at about 200 yards off the temple. As the story goes this came into existence due to Lord’s boundless mercy for devotees. It has another small well containing sweet water in contrast to the bigger one with sulphurous water. A bath confers merits, and it is indeed amazing that it never dries up, though hundreds of visitors take bath everyday. Since it has curative effect, there is heavy rush round the clock. After bath they enter the temple facing the South through the huge Shanmuga Vilasa Mandapam beautified with 124 pillars. Next comes the Srivalli Mandapam and to the west of it lies the Dakshinamurthi shrine. It is here in this spacious Mandapam, the annual Tirukalyanam of Valli is celebrated on Panguni uthiram. The idol Lord Subrahmanya sitting astride his mount, peacock lying next greets them. Next comes the Arunagirinathar shrine. A unique honour to the composer of Tirupugal. On the outer side of this portal there is installed a huge image of Lord Ganesh, called here Mukkuruni Pillaiyar. Sri Venkatesa temple cut out of a rock is situated on the northern portal. In the adjacent temple are installed Sridevi, Bhudevi, Neeladevi, pallikonda Ranganatha, Gajalakshmi and the reputed Alwars, testifying to the catholicy of the builders. And they represent that Hari and Hara are ONE only. A tall copper plated Dwajasthambam lying at the centre of eastern portal greets them. This second prakara contains all the images of Nayanmars along with Saint Manickavachagar and the Thogai Adiyars. Opposite this long row lie the life size figures of Mounaswamy, Kasiswamy and Desikamurthi Swamy, who anthored the temple Tiruppani. There are separate shrines for Bhairava, Saneeswara and Nataraja in this northern portal.
THE SANCTUM SANCTORUM

The charming idol of Balasubrahmanya with four hands and one face adorns the girbha griha and it is the replica of the beautiful form, he assumed before war with Surapadma. The processional deities of the Lord are placed in the Senthil Nayagar shrine lying to the left of this Moolavar. The Shanmuga shrine, an architectural marvel facing south lies next to it and it is sanctified with the Adi Sankara's Bhujangam written on the walls. This enchanting life-size stature holding the various weapons in his twelve hands, indeed transports the visitors to other world for a moment. Next to it lies a mini-shrine containing the bronze status of Nataraja, Sambandar, Appar, Sundarar, Manickavachagar, Saint Cheraman, the Chera King of great fame. This assembly of gods of all major 'ISMS' of Hinduism lying side by side impresses everyone that it is a Harihar Kshetra of supreme type, made accessible to one and all without exception or division.

THE PRAYER SERVICES

There are several kinds of poojas performed to the deities, from early dawn to late in the night, and they are offered in strict accordance with the Kumara Tantra. They begin with Viswaroopam at 5.30 A.M. followed by Udayamarthanadam at 6 A.M. Between 8 A.M and 12.30 P.M., the regular poojas, like Modal Kala Sandhi, Sirukala Sandhi, Peria Kala Sandhi and Uchaikala Pooja are offered, and after that the doors are closed. In the evening they are opened at 5 P.M with Sayaratchi puja and closed by 9.35 P.M. with Ekantham. Though this routine is followed everyday, the month of Margazhi brings some alterations in timings to accommodate specials, when Nityapuja begins at 3 A.M. and ends at 8.30 P.M. Another interesting feature observed here is that all the poojas are offered both to Siva and Shanmuga alternately. There is one more pooja called Rahasya Deeparadhana which is made to Lord Shanmuga behind curtain
first and then to Subrahmanya, for the prevalent belief that Subrahmanya gives his Atmasakti to Shanmuga.

FESTIVALS

The town and its temple are thronged with devotees every day, coming from far and near, but on two occasions, they overflow and exceed lacks when special bandobust arrangements are made to enabling easy darshan to one and all. The entire town goes gay during these days with pomp splendour dominating the whole temple complex and its activities. The month of Avani lends unusual charms to the temple, with its annual festival celebrated with great religious fervour and it lasts for 12 days. The Brahmostsavam falling in Feb-Mar also lasts for 12 days during which hectic activities emerge from every segment of temple life. The Vasanthsavam falling in Apr-May is equally a gala affair. It is in this festival Senthil Nayakar is brought to Vasanta Mandapam decorated fittingly and tastefully for the occasion. It is a feast to the eyes. The Kandashasti falling on Oct-Nov and Tirukalyanam in May-June celebrated with great fanfare have great attraction for devout people. They visit invariably with their kith and kin and participate lustily, spending lavishly on decoration of deities. On feeding of the poor also.

THE MIRACLE OF THE SHANMUGA IMAGE

The principal image of Shanmuga worshipped now in the temple has surprisingly a fascinating tale to narrate. It happened around 1648, when Europeans were trying to entrench themselves in this land. Being aliens, physically and spiritually too, they under estimated the divinity abiding in holy images, and sanctity pervading the places of worship. A certain Dutch plunderer presuming the charming image of Shanmuga made of gold managed to dismantle and carry it with him in his ship. But how far! Before the temple tower vanished into the horizon, there arose a hurricane which soon developed into a dreadful storm. All on a sudden at it. And look, that frightful one tossed the ship terribly and threatened to sink it at once. Attributing it to the
sacrilege done to the holy statue, he ordered it to be hurled into the sea. Miraculously, the storm receded as it broke out. The Dutch despoiler though went home down in spirits, he was unhurt. When the theft was reported duly to the local Chieftain, Thiru Vadomalappa pillai, he managed to instal one made of Panchalasha in its place. Meanwhile, the Lord appeared to him in dream and directed him to go to sea to securing the original idol at a place, where a lemon would be seen floating and over it a Garuda, the divine vehicle of Lord Srimannarayana circling. He left for it anon in a boat and found it at the very place as said. With strict Agamic injunctions and spending generously he installed it and later built a Mandapam to perpetuate this astounding incident. He made adequate endowments to offer annual poojas in the months of Masi and Avani. They are continued even to this day. What else can one utter on listening to it except -- Inscrutable are the ways of God, and to attain salvation there is no other way than surrendering absolutely to that Omnipotent HIM. In full and all at once. That alone gives consolation and makes one fit for upward journey.

[**KAVADI**]

As visitors go round the temple, they see invariably groups of people in saffron robes, each bearing on shoulders a semi circular wooden frame, bedecked with divine offerings and uttering -- 'Harohara' loudly as they pass. It is called Kavadi, and it is of different kinds, lie Paal Kavadi, Panneer Kavadi, Pushpa Kavadi, Chandana Kavadi etc. This ritual is performed in persuance of vows taken by the devotees, and it marks their redemption, on offering several poojas. Normally, the devotees come from distant places, walking all the way to the accompaniment of musical instruments and singing of hymns. This feature is a common observance here and it goes on throughout the year, but on Fridays it swells in large numbers adding colour and sound to the holy precincts. This belief is gaining ground even among the intelligentsia for whom the lab tests must precede the acceptance of such truths. This indeed is Indianness. In true spirit and action!!
UNIQUENESS

The island temple of Lord Siva called Ramanathaswamy Alayam - embodies a kind of charm irresistible; glory ineffable; and appeal inexhaustible that very few temples come nearer to it either in spiritual wealth or cultural opulence. Situated at the extreme south eastern point of the Indian peninsula, this temple of Rameswaram occupies geographically, culturally and spiritually a much-coveted place among the temples of our Punya Bharat. It is the only Saivate temple, among the four reputed Dhams - Badari, Puri, Dwaraka and Rameswaram, the first three being Vaishnavate temples dedicated to the incarnations of Lord Maha Vishnu. It is one of the most highly venerated pilgrimage centres of India for numerous reasons - it possesses one of the twelve Jyotirlingas installed here by Sri Rama, the seventh incarnation of Lord Vishnu and worshipped to purge off the sin of killing Ravana - King of Srilanka, just 45 Km away: it contains the Sethu Madhav Shrine inside the precincts, testifying to the spirit of universality permeating in the thirtha kshetra; it is encircled by the holy waters of Ratnakara - Indian Ocean and Mahodathi - Bay of Bengal, blessing it with ever green verture and gorgeous scenery in addition to enshrining sacred thirthas famous for purging off sins; its visit alone, as tradition says, rounds off the arc of pilgrimage; it is from here the historic Sethu bridge was constructed to linking up to Lanka for conveying the Vanarasana; it is in this Mokshapuri, the Kailasa linga brought by Hanuman is installed beside the Sand Lingam made by Mother Sita; it is here the Gangas water is used for the daily abhisheka of the presiding deities; it is in this temple precincts alone there are 22 famous thirthas, a mere bath in them ensures salvation; it is with a mere
darsan of the Moolavar - Ramalingeswaraswamy one is relieved from the sin of Brahmahatya; it is here Sri Rama was cleaned of the sin of Brahmahatya - killing of Ravana in the war, it is here Kalabhairava bathed in the Sivathirtha to be redeemed of the sin of cutting off the fifth head of Brahma; it is this shrine that rose up from the munificent donations of the Rajas of Ramnad and shot up into fame by the endowments from time to time; it is to this temple the Ceylonese Prince Pararaja Sekhara made large donations and helped Udaivan Sethupathu in the expansion and renovation activities; it is this temple that enshrines the status of Sea-gods - Ratnakara and Mahodathi; It is this temple that has the unique honour of having the most magnificent and longest corridors measuring nearly 400 feet in length 21 feet in height flanked by ornate pillars. This 1220 metre long pillared corridor of breath taking beauty is the longest and stands as a fine symbol and the best specimen of Indian spiritual unity

Abounding in such glorious episodes and meritorious deeds this holy pilgrimage centre has been attracting millions of theists down the ages, particularly from the Tretayuga onwards. One account of its glorious antiquity rich cultural back ground, if turned out to be as holy as Jerusalem to Christians. Hence the belief - Rameswaram is to Hindus, what Mecca to Muslims and Jerusalem to Christians. Pilgrimage becomes complete and perfect with a bath in Agnithirtham here as the Ganges there in Aryavatha. It is called the unchanging city due to no drastic changes it embodies due to impact of used culture.

**SOURCES**

There is no dearth of authentic information about this famous thirtha kshetra. Right from the Vedic period to the present times, there are hundreds of books enshrining its sanctity. Besides the devotional literature, Government records bear eloquent testimony to its sacredness. There are several references in the Rig Veda about this. Epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharatha, Smrithi - like manu Smrithi, parasara Smrithi have devoted hundreds of pages eulogising its importance. Saint
poets and minstrel - musicians, like Gnanasambandar, Tirunavukkarasur, Sekkizhar, Kambar, Arunagirinathar, Thayumanavar poured out their souls in song shedding light on the spiritual heights of this mighty kshetra.

ANTQUITY

Though this sacred region has been abounding in famous thirthas and sacred spots right from the down of creation, it is only from the Tretayuga its fame started spreading far and near. In the dim past it was a primeval forest overgrown with rich verdure. Abduction of Mother Sita by the ten - headed demon - Ravana brought Ayodhyapati Rama to this end of sacred Ind. On reaching the Dhanushkodi, Rama propitiated the Sea-god with fast for three days to give in for the conveyance of Monkey Brigade, but to no effect. Finding him unyielding, Rama threatened to dry up the entire jalarasi with his powerful missiles. Appearing before Rama shivering, he pleaded that he was law bound and it was against the laws of Nature to give up his inherent quality of impenetrability, but would certainly cooperate in the construction of bridge, if proposed. Argument being righteous and based on sound logic, Rama forgiving him, embarked upon the plan of building 100 yojan - long bridge across the sea. Anon he called for the services of Nala, the son of Viswakarma, who utilising the divine engineering skill made everything - wood or stone float, when thrown into sea and constructed the bridge to the wonderment of all worlds. It was during then this region gradually rose up in prominence; for its association with the august dignitaries and heaven - born celebrities like Rama, Lakshmana, Hanuma, Sugriva, Angada etc. It was then Rama made the first Siva linga with sand for offering prayer to Lord Maheswar; for, on landing tired, he was about to drink water, when Lakshman reminded him of his regular practice of taking in anything after the darsan of Maheswar. At once, he made Sivalinga with sand and offered his usual prayers. Thus the land acquired for the first time a Siva Linga made with the divine hands Sri Rama.
After Ravana Samhara, when Rama alighted here, he was advised by venerable sages headed by Agasthya to perform an expiatory rite for destroying Ravana - the grandson of Sage Pulastya. This performance requires a Sivalinga and that alone absolves one with the sin of Brahmahatya. So Rama bade Hanuman to fetch Jyothirlinga from Kailasa from Lord Siva himself. Hanuman reached, but could not obtain it as proposed. He then started penance atop the Himalayas to please Siva, then down below at the extreme end, Rama was hastened to propitiate Lord Siva, at the right moment. Hanuman did not turn up. In order to perform that sacred rite in the auspicious moment, Agasthya advised Sita to prepare a Sivalinga out of sand. With due rights, and in the right time it was installed on the Jyesta-sukladsami, when the MOON was in Hasta and the Sun in Vrishabha. Just then Hanuman returned with Sivalinga obtaining from Lord Siva. Seeing the installation completed he was disappointed and went red in face. To appease him Rama asked Hanuman to pluck out the one installed by him and install his brought from Kailas. Tried however much, he could not shake it. He courted a failure. Rama then consoled him by establishing his linga beside the one already installed and announced that all pujas must be offered first to Hanuman’s linga, to be called thereafter as Kasi Viswanatha and then to the linga installed by him called Rameswara. Approbation of the audience at once rent the air heralding, that both are equal and each must be worshipped for gaining merit. This sublime union is honoured even today - Kasi Viswanatha first, Rameswar next. How judicious was Rama! And what compassion for his dependents!!

Another episode also illustrates his priceless mercy for the trusted, and it happened here. As the legends go, Vibhishana, is supposed to have expressed his fear to Rama that his kingdom would be vulnerable, if the Sethu were to be in tact and transport continued along the bridge. To make his kingdom secure and life peaceful, Rama destroyed the Sethu with one arrow shot. Thus disappeared the Sethu built by Vanarasena. And this shot lights Rama’s matchless vatsalya for his asritajana
The Sivalingas thus installed were in an unimpressive shed for long. But with the dawn of 12th century a bright career was inaugurated when the Rajas of Ramnad popularly known as Sethupathis entered the scene. It was due to their indefatigable industry and inestimable patronage that the temple stands as the brightest gem among the pilgrim centres of India, and even luring the intercontinental crowds either in the form of tourists or thiests. Among the notable personages who entered and carved out safe niches in the history of India, the names of Udayan Sethupati, Tirumalai Sethu pathi, Ranganatha Sethupathi deserve special mention. The grateful public honoured them with grand gaint-sized statues installed in the temple. The entire temple construction inclusive of renovation from time to time extends over a period of 350 years, carried out mainly by Sethupathis of Ramanathapuram, of course aided by the theistic minded kings like Ceylonese Prince Pararaja Sekhara and Kiran Rayar of Deccan. The Sethupathi generously endowed 72 villages for the upkeep of temple and performance of nityamanimithika pujas.

The temple situated on the eastern coast of the island is a marvel of Dravidian art. The sanctum covers an area of 15 acres about 865 feet from east to west and 657 feet from North to South and is surrounded by high walls on all four sides with tall imposing gopurams on three sides - east, west and south, and the one on the North is yet to be finished. It has three prakaras containing the most beautiful corridors a spell binding the like of which the world has yet to produce and likely may not, due to theisin given a decent farewell by rationalism. There are several mandapams housing many minishrines with spacious halls infront for celebrating occasional pujas and are adorned with rare sculptures to attract both theists and connoisseurs alike. As the
visitors enter through the eastern gate after bath in Agnithirtham-part of Mahodati, they are greeted by Anjaneya enshrined in a beautiful minishrine. The statue painted in red is in the North Indian type. As they move further, they are bewildered at the rows of gigantic statues of Sethupathis - mounted on high pedestals forming the lower part of massive pillars of the Mandapam. Next object that arrests their attention is the huge image of Nandi, measuring 12 feet in length, 9 feet in height, flanked by the beautiful figures of Viswanatha Naicker and Krishnama Naicker. To the left of Nandi there is a Mandapam of modest size housing the Navagrahas. In front of the Nandi towards the entrance are situated the shrines for Ganapathi and Subrahmanya. Praying homage to them, they enter the Ramanathaswamy shrine to avail the darsan of the august lingam installed by Sri Rama. As it is installed by Rama it is called Ramanthaswamy and it is one of the twelve jyothishringas. The serenity prevailing there bends the hearts involuntarily. A sight of the Lord destroys a sin as grave as Brahmanahaty. Offering soulful prayers, the next move to the Parvathamardini shrine located to the right of Sanctum Sanctorum. The beautiful image of the Mother decorated with diamond jewellery and flower garlands lifts the soul. In front of the Mandapam there are figures of Rama, Sita, Lakshman, Hanuman and Sugriva, the principal characters in the epic and they beckon attention and veneration. To its north lies the Kasi Viswanatha shrine in which the lingam brought by Hanuman from Kailas is installed. The Valsalaksi Mandir lies adjacent to it. Daily prayers are offered to these deities first and then to Ramanathaswamy and Mother Parvatthi Vardhini.

After feasting eyes with the darsan of these august Murthis, the visitors go to Perumal shrine lying to the North West of the Devi Mandir. The broad Jong statue of palli Konda Perumal is a bewitching sight which they esteem most. Another important darsan which they avail is the Sayanagriha located in the North eastern corner. It is here the gold image of the Lord is placed in the Unjal along with the Devi's golden idol every night and offered Sayanapuja. It is a sight worth availing. The Sukra Vara Mandapam infront of the Main mandir enshrines the huge idols of Ashta Lakshmis. Their size and posture detain the visitors long. Next they visit the Sethu Madhava shrine lying behind the main
shrine between the second and third corridors. As the idol is made of white marble it goes by the name of Svetamadhava swamy. Its beauty is arresting. Paying homage, they move to the Nataraja shrine situated in the North Eastern corner of the outer corridor. The size and decoration are quite attractive.

More than the Mandapams and different images representing the adorable deities, there are 22 thirthas in different parts of the temple campus itself each with a characteristic taste of its own - a unique feature not found anywhere in India. A bath in them is quite efficacious, showering peace and bliss to the bathers. Hence, every visitor invariably starts this ritual after taking bath in the Agnithirtham before entering the principal shrines. The medicinal properties of the thirthas cure skin diseases, according to belief. Among them, Madhav, Chakra, Amrita, Ganga, Saraswati, Parvati, Lakshmi, Siva, Sarva, Koti thirthams are famous.

**FESTIVALS**

There are several festivals celebrated in the temple from time to time. Among them Mahasivaratri falling in Feb-Mar, Ramalinga Pratishta in June-July Tirukalyanam in July-Aug and Float Festival on Taipusam night in Jan-Feb are very important and they attract lacks of bhaktas. Vaikunta Ekadasi and Navaratri are also celebrated with fanfare due.

**PUJAS AND TIMINGS**

The temple is kept open by 5 A.M. with Sayanagriha Deeparradhana. At 5.30 A.M. the Spatikalinga puja begins. Next comes at 7 A.M. Viswa puja followed by Kalasanthipuja at 10 A.M. and Utkikala puja at 12 A.M., and it marks the end of morning pujas when the doors of the shrine are closed. And at 6 P.M. they are opened with Sayarathi puja. At 9 A.M. Ardhajamapiuja followed by Sayanagriha puja at 9.30 P.M. with this the days activities his same to a close.
this sacred place is 4 km off the Mandir. It is a hillock with a
two storeyed temple. On the top there is a chakra bearing the
Rama's foot prints. And it is believed that Hanuman started his
aerial trip to Lanka from this point. As it is the highest point on the
island: Visitors enjoy the panoramic view of the entire island of
61.8 sqkm surrounded by a blue translucent sea, shining
sand dunes amidst trees and green tufted tall palms. It goes
by another name - Ram jiruka, which menas Srirams resting here
before and after embanking upon war with Daskantha. A visit is a
MUST to this and the experience remains in mind for ever.

KOTHANDARAMASWAMY TEMPLE

This reputed shrine situated at the southern west tip of
Dhanushkodi amidst denable lies at a distance of 7 kms from
Rameswaram. It has awe-some association and so held in great
esteem. It contains serene images Rama, Sita and Lakshman
flanked by Vhibishan in apological pose and Hanuman in
triumphant moed. Tradition says that it is at this place Rama gave
Abhayam to Vibishnan, when he earne-ly sought Rama's
protection and tendered apology for his brothers criminal
abduction of other sita. His surrender was accepted and
Lakshmana performed preliminary Pattabhishakam to
Vibhishena. This episode is portrayed through beautiful mural
paintings. To mark this great event and commeorate it on grand
scale with all honours due, every year during the Ramalinga
Pratishta, Rama's idol is brought from Rameswaram for
Vibhishna's coronation ceremony. It is worth attending and the
sanctity attached to it remains evergreen. casuarina trees.
RAMA THIRTHAM

It lies just at a kilometres distance from the temple. The shrine enshrines a huge image of idol of Rama sculputured to perfection. In front of it lies a small tank called Rama Thirtham.

SITA THIRTHAM

A few metres away to this lies Sita thirtham. It is a step well tank and the head of the stairs in a small shrine is installed the image of Sita. It is on the road side.

LAKSHMANA THIRTHAM

About half a kilometre to this lies Lakshmana thirtham and there lies a shrine on its bank. Thist tank is bigger in size and has greater pull; for many yatris take bath here. It contains millions of fish of all sizes, and they move about listessly. They enjoy eating certain eatbales thrown into the tank. It is a lovely pastime to feed them. Many spend hours at this thirtham.

AGNI THIRTHAM

It is an integral part of Bay of bengal and has rich association with divinities. A bath in this thirtham is believed to wash off all sins. It is at about 100 metres from the main-Eastern entrance and it is preferred for offering pindaṣ to the means. As it is the principal bathims ghat it is busy with bathers almost round the clock, and so the biggest draw too the visitors next to the temple. It is believed that its turbulence was calmed on Srirama’s stepping here after Ravanashara; and turned so traquil full that it has no second anywhere among sea scores of India. would not volcanoes freeze at the holy pādasparsa of Bhagawans Srirama?
Suchindram means 'the purifier of Indra', but it connotes a place imbued with the divine power of converting papa into punya, sin into merit, base into pure, depraved into divine being etc. In common parlance, it signifies now a small town with a big temple situated on the bank of Palayar in the Kanyakumari Dt. of Tamilnadu, but once an integral part of the princely state of Travancore Cochin. It has a splendid past and carved out for itself an enviable niche in the temple history of India, due to its association and habitation by many divine celebrities like Brahma, Vishnu, Maheswar, Indra and spiritual personages like Atri, Goutama along with their illustrious life-partners. Its legendary name was Jnanaranyam, reputed for its hermitages reverberating with Vedagosha. It is this sacred land that was famous for the ordeal known as Suchindram Pratyayam, whose very name was tolling death-knell to the culprits, frauds, swindlers, pilfers, crooks, dacoits and a wide variety of their incarnations in multiplicity of colourful dominations thriving only by theliving. It is here in this Sodhana Kshetra that Indra regained his original pleasant form. It is this Mokshapuri that delivered the verdict of prayaschitta for Saraswathi, Lakshmi, Parvathi on expressing paschattapa. It is here the Trimurthis assumed the form of Mahalinga called Dharmasamvardhini. According to scriptures with Brahma in the middle, Vishnu at the bottom and Siva at the top after blessing the immortal couple Anasuya and Atri with three children - Chandra, Durvasa and Dattatreya and are being worshipped as Sthanumalayapperumal. And it is to this deity, Devendra is doing Ardhajamapuja everyday even today. It is here Adi Sankara was given the Pranavamanantropadesa by Siva
himself. It is the abhishek waters of this chief deity that sink in the temple itself and emerge at Kanyakumari. On account of such meritorious plus points, this mahakshetra, a repository of art treasure and a haven of heavenly celebrities is claimed by both Saivates, Vaishnavates and Brahmapasakas as their own and hence drawing thousands of devotees throughout the year, since the Satyayuga.

About the origin of this region, legends are many and anecdotes are odd and awe-inspiring. This kshetra was known as Jnanaranya in the dim past. During the time of Parasuram, the valorous son of Sage Jamadagni, it was the favourite retreat of several sages. All on a sudden, the sea advanced and submerged it. Afflicted munis approached Parasuram, doing a great yaga then to expiate the sin of killing ksatriyas, and prayed piteously for intervention. Parasuram threatened the sea-god to release Agneyastra, if he did not concede to his bidding. Shivering all over, the sea agreed to recede to the extent of land covered by his axe, when hurled into sea. The axe when hurled covered the area from Gokarnam to Cape comorin. Anon the sea receded from Goa - Gokarnam to the Cape. The sages returned to their retreats and spent a care free life. So Parasuram is closely associated with the present Kerala for its existence and prosperity and venerated as Agastya in Tamil Nadu.

In this Jnanaranya lived many celebrated Maharishis doing penance and spreading education. Among them, Sage Atri occupied a predominant place, and his devoted wife Anasuya was so famous for pativratyamatrimonial fidelity that even the celestials were envious of her position and power. She was performing many miracles, like bringing rains during the periods of severe drought; boiling the steel pieces into edible gram, purging off the sins of mahapapis, controlling the movements of heavenly planets etc. All with by mere sprinkling of her husband's Peda thirtha only. When news travelled to high heavens, the Trimurthinis - Saraswathi, Lakshmi and Parvathi were visibly upset. Bitten by jealousy they sent their husbands to
put her to test and bring dishonour even by nefarious ways. The Trio desiring to teach lessons of humility and fidelity to their wives went to Anasuya disguised as old brahmins in the absence of Atri and asked for alms. While she was about to serve food, they said in chorus that they vowed to take food only when served by woman naked. She atonce sprinkled her Pati’s padathirtha on them. And lo! they turned into suckling toddlers. Hearing the heart-rending tale, the Trimurthinis descended and prayed for Mangalayabiksha with streaming eyes, quivering frames and repenting hearts. Moved as she was, she sprinkled the Padathirtha over the babes, who instantly regained original forms. Before vanishing they blessed the couple with three children at their request. No sooner did they disappear than there sprouted three Swayambhu lingas one over other at the feet of Konrai tree with Vishnu forming the base, Brahma in the centre and Siva at the top. This is seen even today and is worshipped with utmost veneration.

AHALYA’S EPISODE

The episode stands out in absolute proof of the kshetra’s glory as Dharmapitha—a divine spot that delivers judgements to such perfection that none but Nyaya Devatha alone could stand on Par with it. As the verdicts proved correct they caused terror to the double dealers, even the celestials who passed through the ordeal approved of its perfect justice. And in course of time it went by the name of Suchindram prayayam and was continuing till the beginning of this century. It is second to none, rather nowhere it is practised in the world ancient or present.

- The story begins with Devendra. Though he was the King of Gods, he was not king of morals. He was amoral, though not out and out immoral. This lowered his status, when he satisfied his abnormal amorous instincts with but a mortal that pushed him to subnormal level. Ahalya, the wife of Sage Goutama was an engrossing piece of beauty, and she must be as she was, since she was the Manasaputri of Brahma, who created her to be ’Sundari’ seen from any angle, and judged by any standard. Such ravishing enchantress enkindled love in Devendra, whose
laxity in morals necessitated him to restoring to a strategy. When his hopeless passion touched the nadir, he contrived a device to gratify his sensual urge. So, one dark mid-night he assumed the form of cock and crowed, heralding the approach of Brahmamuhurtha, the time, when sages go for bath in rivers nearby. Sage Goutama waking up at the cock’s crow, left for ablutions. That was the right time for Devendra to fulfil his desire and also the ripe moment for moral degradation. He entered the asram disguised as Goutama and did what he desired. Unsuspecting Ahalya thus fell from grace. In the meanwhile Goutama returned realising that it was not proper time for bath, and the cock’s crow was rather feigned. His sudden return exposed the deceit of Devendra by revealing his identity. Gautama cursed them both - Ahalya to become a stone and Devendra lose all lusture and turn ugly. When asked for forgiveness he was advised to do penance in the Jnanaranya and worship, Sthanumalayapperumal at Suchindram. For expiation of sin, he had to pass through boiling ghee. He did this first, and when meditated later, he got his original form and as the belief goes he is doing Ardhajama puja even now. Thus this kshetra acquired the name for purification. As Indra secured purification and redemption here, it was called Suchindram then. It is reverentially called Sodhana Kshetra as it holds scales even always. In all cases too.

HISTORICITY

It is beyond human ingenuity to fix the date of this much-hallowed temple. The Konnyadi tree at the foot of which the three lingas sprouted at the disappearance of Trimurtthis after blessing couple supplies a semblance of clue: The experts who tested its parts pushed its existence to some thousands of years back. So the temple was existing when history did not make its appearance. Available evidence in the form of inscriptions starts from 10th century A.D. Many rulers of the South belonging to the illustrious dynasties of Pandyas, Cholas, Cheras and Nayaks endowed the temple lavishly, besides constructing and renovating it from time to time. After 1811 A.D. it was managed
by the State, and from 1950 onwards it is controlled by the
Devasvom Board of Kerala invested with powers for proper
maintainance under the supervision of the Commissioner for
Religious Endowments, and later by Tamil Nadu Government.

THE TEMPLE

This reputed thirtha kshetra located amidst green fields
and palm grooves bounded by ranges of hills against the back
drop of blue sky, enthrals one and all even from miles around. It
beckons the visitors with its lofty tower measuring 134 feet in
height. This broad tower is emblazoned in the fore with beautiful
images of the Trimurthhis with Siva in the centre. Its architectural
grandeur deserves careful study, since many adorables deities of
Hindu pantheon are artistically made and placed at prominent
place. In and out of this temple too there are many worth-
seeing and breath-taking sculptural beauties that detain the
aesthetes for hours. The magnificently carved images are so
artistically made that even the veins on the hands and feet are
visible. Devotees enter through the main porch called
Natakasala, whose massive pillars and imposing ceiling are
beautified with figures of Lakshmi, Saraswathi and Gouri.
Crossing the main entrance they reach Unjal Mandapa
decorated with soul-lifting sculptured figures of Manmatha, Rati,
Arjuna, Karna on the pillars. Brihaspathi, the Deva guru greets
them next in the shrine dedicated to Dakshinamurthi. Then
comes the Vasantha Mandapam, another exquisite piece of
sculpture. It springs a surprise, since the Navagrahas are carved
here on the ceiling and to worship them one has to raise his head
and throw it back. These planets are surrounded by twelve rishis.
Down below, on the pedestal will be placed the utsavamurthis of
Suchindra Perumal and Umadevi, when Vasanthsotsavam is
celebrated.

After this, the visitors worship Nilakanta Vinayakar called
by another name of Mukkuruni Pillayar.

Then they enter the largest southern corridor, appearing to
be the largest, but it is next to Rameswaram only. Kankalanathar,
another name of Siva here is seen with a begging bowl in his
hand, resembling to that of Maheswar standing near Mata Annapurna at Kasi. Then comes the mini-shrine adorning with the beautiful images of Rama and Sita in sitting posture with Lakshmanan at the entrance in the company of Hanuman with folded hands. Near the Northern entrance a big statue of Kalabhairava is installed and in a separate mini-shrine, beautiful images of Lord Muruga with Valli and Devayani on either side are seen here. Here are seen at the entrance, two big statues of Nanjil Kurava, the chief of this region and two of Davadasis, who practically donated all their wealth to the temple in token of their renunciation of material world. Behind, there are minishrines dedicated to Mahadeva, Narayana, Rameswara, Krishna, Durga, Muruga etc. This group goes by the name of Jayantheeswar temple group. This group is also known as Pancha Pandava temples And it is believed that Pandavas visited and worshipped the deities during their vanavasa period. Next comes the Alankara mandapam. This superb piece of sculptural art is carved out of a single rock. The four pillars adorning it have many subsidiary pillars within its frame work. When struck with a piece of hard material, they produce different and distinct melodious tunes of various musical instruments. There lies next, another shrine dedicated to Dharmasamvardini Devi Its origin is interesting and bears semblance to the glory of Andal.

It happened that a Vellal girl developed great devotion to the Moolavar. She was brought up from infancy, and when she was thirteen, she was visiting the temple everyday along with her mother. One day she miraculously disappeared while praying with her mother. The afflicted mother wailed before the Lord to such an extent that an aerial voice then consoled her, stating that she had merged in the Lord in response to her soul-stirring supplication. The grief-striken family installed a life-size bronze statue here and every year in the month of Masi, tirukalyanam - a festival is celebrated with great pomp and splendour.

There appears then the 18 foot-high statue of Hanuma, the synonym for Prabhubhakti. It is an exquisite piece of superb art and evokes reverence at its very sight with the special feature of his long tail rising above his head. It is delivered that he appeared before Sita in Asoka Van in the self-same form and convinced her of his mission. He is the highly esteemed divinity here and people
from far and near pour into the temple to propitiate for success and blessings. The hopelost and dejected get rejuvenated by offering soulful prayers. He is held in highest veneration and worshipped with unparalleled ardour. This God is the biggest 'draw of this shrine next to the Moolavar. Chitra Sabha is the next one that draws the attention of the devotees. It is studded with several images of both Saiva and Vaishnava gods. Kankalanathar, Venugopal, Saktiganapathi and Bala Subramanya are prominently placed. Inside the Sabha, peculiarly besides Sakti and Nataraja in Urdhavathandava pose, the images of Sage Patanjali Arjun, Bhima, Vyagrabahandar and Hanuma are seen testifying to the cathocility of the temple. And a standing example of Harihara Kshetra by and large. Another remarkable object found here is a big size mirror that reflects our own image reminding the eternal truth that God is with in us and to attain salvation, we have to worship ardently Siva. To the eastern side, there is a 12 feet high Nandi. It is called Makkalai. Adjacent to it lies the Konnayadi shrine. Here lies in the hollow of a tree, Konnayadinathar, where three lingas are placed one over the other. In the Garuda Mandapam lying next are found the images of Tirumala Nayak, Garuda etc. the gift of stone-cutter, displaying the supreme heights the sculpture could reach. One of the statues is so superbly sculptured that a piece of wire when inserted through the right nostril, comes out of the left ear, and if it is made to pass through the right ear, it comes out of the left. Haven't the sculptors out-grown their celestial counterparts-Viswakarma and Maya?

In the Champalaraman Mandapam, many more stone-cutters' sports are in store. It is in fact a museum of architecture and sculpture. This pavilion contains 32 massive and grandly decorated pillars, each narrates an interesting episode from Siva and Vishnu puranams.

Finally they enter the Karuvarai or brightly illumined by the shining brass lamps. The principal deity is Siva linga of about a foot and a half covered with gold Kavacha. The serenity of the spot, divinity of the linga and austerity of the archakas in performing Prayer services draw out devotion to the fullest measure from every devotee and they offer soulful prayer with palms joined and eyes closed. Next to this lies
another shrine known as Thakkedam dedicated to Sri MahaVishnu. The statue is 7 feet high and covered with dazzling silver Kavacham. His consorts Sridevi and Bhudevi are placed in front. The entire sight recalls to the memory the Balaji Vigraha of Tirupathi. Behind this shrine are installed Amarabhujiangaperumal and Suchindrapermanmal in separate niches. Indeed there are as many as thirty mini-shrines inside the prakara, and it takes hours to visit them all for worshipping. It becomes quite a rewarding experience to see the paintings on the inner walls of the goupram. Many episodes that occurred in this place are painted with minute details, and as such they recreate the glory of this divya kshetra.

FESTIVALS

Among the several festivals celebrated in the temple, the Margali Utsav falling in Dec-Jan ranks first. It ends with Arudra Darsanam, when the Utsava murthis are taken out in procession. The Car festival falling on the ninth day is a gala day, when religious ardour reaches the zenith. The Chitrai festival falling in April-May too is a grand affair and celebrated on similar lines, but with a little difference. On the ninth day, the principal deities are taken round the tank in a well-decorated float. The last one is Avani Utsav falling in Sep-Oct, they are worth seeing and the impression they leave on the minds of the people are indelible and will remain evergreen beckoning further visits on and again, both for spiritual elevation and mental recreation.

SUCHINDRAM PRATYAYAM

The visit becomes incomplete and purpose unfulfilled, if the significance and procedure of Suchindram Pratyayam is not properly understood. The ordeal is conducted with an elaborate procedure and that too in full public gaze. The accused to prove his innocence has to obtain a letter of authorisation from the highest authority for undergoing the ordeal at Suchindram. The yogakkar-the official in charge, on receiving it fixes the time and
intimates to the concerned parties. They are certain ceremonies to be observed before commencement. The accused along with servants have to observe fast on that day. The parties and spectators assemble at the Udaya Marthanda Mandapam. After several rituals to God, ghee is boiled to such a high pitch that the bark and leaf of the Konnayadi tree makes cracking sound when thrown into the boiling ghee vessel. The accused is made to dip his hand in the boiling ghee and take out the seal kept in it. If on the third day there are no wounds or blisters on hand, the accused is acquitted else he is guilty and becomes social outcast.

AROUND SUCHINDRAM

Nagerkoil The up-coming mini-city - Nagerkoil takes its name from the mighty shrine Nagerkoil a temple of snakes and is dedicated to the King of Serpents as its name connotes. It owes its glory mainly to the temple, but not the otherway round. It is a centuries-old temple, bearing the vestiges of Pre-Christian era, as evidenced by the presence of several images of Jain deities, like Mahavira, Parswanath etc., on the pillars of the temple halls. As Hinduism gives a pre-eminent place to Nagapuja, its fame is on the increase. And lo! it never waned on any count in the past. All sections of Hindus - Vaishnavates, Saivates, Sakteyas adore Nagaraja with unbounded zeal and remarkable piety.

The temple has certain unique features - the garbhagriha is surrounded by mud walls and has a thatched roof over it. Behind it lie anthills, where live cobras move about freely at all times but within the fence as a matter of fact. No case of death by serpent - bite in the precincts is recorded so far. nor fear of moving about is the campus is entertained by any. Secondly, sand is the only prasadam fed to the adorers, and it is scooped out from the ground, where the image of the deity is enthroned. Elaborate prayers with several rituals are offered every day and there is heavy rush always. On sundays, the spacious courtyards and campus are seen with flowing with zealous adorers coming from far off places too. Milk offering is very common and it is invariably done by the visiting devotees. Avani month attracts thousands of devotees, and from among them women form majority. There are mini-shrines for Krishna and Siva inside the temple. The annual festival celebrated in the month of Thai is a big draw when the whole town goes gay for days. There is a big garden in the compound with many trees and shrubs where Naga flowers - symbolic representation of Naraga are grown in abundance.

It lies just at 7 Km from Suchindram situated on the main road to Kanyakumari, it commands conveyance facilities round the clock. Hence visitation by large numbers.
KANYAKUMARI

UNIQUENESS

Kanyakumari, the abode of the Virgin Goddess Parvathi, situated at the southern tip of India, the Land’s End occupies pride of place amongst the premier pilgrimage centres of our Punya Bharat. And with the recent addition of the splendid Vivekananda Rock Memorial, built to perpetuate the glory of the sacred spot of meditation of that remarkable parivrajaka, it has transformed itself into an inter-continental tourist centre of perennial importance. Moreover, being the only spot on the sub-continent blessed with the unique spectacle sunset and moonrise simultaneously— the grand scenes of great universal drama on fullmoon evenings, along with the splendid sight of the sun and the moon facing each other on the Chitra pournami day in April, it has become an inexhaustible source of eternal fascination for God-seekers. And Nature lovers too, who visit only to watch this rare sight to savour an experience of a life time. And by virtue of its geographical location as the confluence of three seas - the Arabian sea, Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal, seem adoring the Mother Kanyakumari, it has been attracting orthodox holy bathers in lakhs during auspicious occasions, since time immemorial. To add to these, the legendary account of falling of lumps of earth in this region—from the Sanjivini Mount, when carried by mighty Hanuman to Lanka to saving Lakshmana’s life, it turned out to be the fertile soil for the sumptuous growth of priceless medicinal plants. Besides, the folk-lore embodies many references to Sage Agasthya’s preference for settlement here due to abundant availability of herbs, shrubs etc. and as such its importance is on the increase.
with the passage of time. Above all, it is here, on the off-shore rock the Virgin Goddess did penance to gaining powers for asurasamhara. Abounding in many more such odd and awe-inspiring excellences, this Cape Comorin - scared region gained one of the most coveted places in the history and legend of our Akhand Bharat.

ANTiquity

Legends take us back to the Satya Yuga, when Bana, the dreadful demon King exercised his sovereignty over this region. On obtaining boons from the Lord of Vishnu, he changed himself into a prototype of Yama to the righteous people - he tortured the devout and innocent day in and day out. The hermitages - his principal targets were converted into dreary deserts and burial grounds. On account of desecrating Yagnagundas, abducting of women, mutilating of children and burning of Parnasalás together with hindering of meditation, the sages and their followers never lived in peace. In short, life became a curse for them. Were the Devas spared? Devendra was driven out of his kingdom and the astadikpalakas were made his henchmen. The Mother Earth, as it were quivered with his asura krityas, and wailed before Lord MahaVishnu, along with devas. Pitying, He then advised the afflicted Bhumata to propitiate Parasakti to bringing destruction on him. And added that she alone could do; for, he received such powerful boons that none can destroy him, muchless subdue, at any time. Devas lost not time in implementing the Lord's counsel, and they performed yagas with all austerity due, to win the favours of Parasakti. Pleased with their ardour, she assured them of immediate action on him. Realising Bana's invincibility by virtue of potent boons, she descended to the Land's End, considered to be holy and strategic to do penance for gaining extra-ordinary powers, before entering the arena to combat with that formidable demon.

It so coincided that Lord Maheswar was attracted by her unearthly glamour and blooming beauty. Soon consultations etc.
were initiated, and they ended in fixing the alliance. When everything was going on smooth towards the happy solemnisation, Narada, the celestial trouble-shooter entered the scene to frustrate that divine union; for, that demon could be killed by a Virgin only. It was the boon he got, and that was his plus point. And if the wedding were to take place as proposed, neither the Mother Earth would be relived of her anguish, nor the purpose of Parasakti’s assuming the form of Virgin would be accomplished. Keeping Lokakalyana in mind, he approached both the parties in the role of well-wisher and fixed a certain midnight as auspicious hour for solemnisation. Convinced with the planetary position, all agreed. Extremely jubilant at the prospect of getting united with Parvathi, Lord Siva started with pramadaganas etc. for Kanyakumari, the bride’s place. When he was half-way, he heard the crowing of cock, heralding the break of dawn. It was Narada’s play, who taking the cock’s form crowed, only to stop the wedding and enabling the Virgin to kill Bana. Missing the opportunity of marrying, dejected Maheswar, settled down at Suchidram. And the dispirited Parvathi took a vow then to remain as Virgin for ever. The several kinds of delicious dishes made for the wedding party were then thrown on the shores and they turned into colourful sands. This accounts for the multicoloured pebbles and soft, velvety sand found in abundance on the shore even today. On deciding to remain celibate, Kumari took rosary again for medication at once. But Banasura bitten by lust, when heard about her unparalleled beauty approached the Virgin with his marriage proposal. Enraged at his audacity, she flew into uncontrollable anger and sent him out unceremoniously. The debased demon asserted and tried to win her by force. When he ran towards her with his drawn sword, the Virgin Goddess unsheathed her potent sword. Then ensued a dreadful battle. In the end, the asuradharma fell down dead with the Chakrayudha hurled at him by the Virgin. The grateful devas with Bhumata expressed their soulful gratitude to Parasakthi for having released them from the clutches of the remorseless danava.
After the Lokodharma, Parasakthi resumed her penance in the self-same form of Virgin as she descended to the earth. Hence the darsan of the Virgin with rosary in her right hand in the same place.

THE MANDIR

The sacred shrine of Kumari Parvathi is situated at the exact place of the merging of three seas, and so it is washed by their holy waters. It has two prakaras and two entrances. The main entrance, facing the North is adorned with a modest tower. The other gate facing the East is always closed, but opens on special occasions, for bathing the idol during festival seasons. This has an odd story. It is recorded that the unexceptional brilliance of the gem, set in the nose-screw adorning the idol was drawing many a ship in the nights, like the shaft of light of modern lighthouse towards the shore leading to disastrous consequence of thier dashing against the rocks and smashing into pieces. To safeguard the interests of the ill-fated mariners, the eastern gate was closed long back. There is a belief that the English sailors entering through the East gate stole the jewelled nose-ring of the virgin goddess. It has a story. According to it - the nose-ring was a Nagariani extracted from a cobra; it dazzled brilliant as that of shaft of light coming from a light-house. The sailors mistook the temple to be light-house and sailed in that direction. Alas! they were ship-wrecked off the present Vivekananda Rock. Many died, but a few survivors-vultures as they were plucked out the sparkling nose-ring and vanished into pitch darkness. So the Eastern gate was closed anon to prevent further loss. So admission to the sanctum is now made through North gate only. As the devotees pass through the corridor of the inner Prakara, they come across Navarathri Mandapam of huge dimensions, capable of holding thousands of persons normally congregated on special occasions.

At the entrance of the inner prakara there is installed the statue of the Kalabhairava and adjacent to it lies the Patala
Ganga Thirtha. Then comes the Dwajasthambha. It is from here the unearthly splendour of the Virgin Goddess gleams into sight

ARCHA MURTI

The five-foot-high granite image of the Virgin Goddess is a sculptural piece of supreme craftsmanship. The captivating visage of Kumari Parvathi in standing posture, enhanced by the sparkle of the nose-jewel, with rosary in right hand affords a grand feast to the mortal eyes. Her sublime slim frame beautified with sandal paste make-up sends a thrill into the spines of the devout viewers as they look. standing at close quarters. The floral decoration, lighted up by the numerous brass lamps, hung around enhances her loveliness to a million fold, and beckons trillion looks. No wonder her fascinating, sublime, smiling countenance invokes instant veneration in the God-intoxicated at the first sight itself and hastens to making prostration at once, although priests make loud protests; but it can be asserted that everyone with out exception commit it mentally. The two dazzling diamond nose-rings donated by the Maharaja of Trivandrum glow like twinkling stars through the maze of the flaming brass lamps. Such is the majestic aura of the sanctity about the goddess, whose glorious beauty and invincible might are being sung in prose and verse by hundreds of poets right from the dawn of creative faculty.

This sublime archamurthi was installed by Sage Parasuram, the sixth incarnation of Mahavishnu. Unwillingly leaving her presence due to pressure by the archakas, the devotees step into the adjacent chamber to worship Indra Vinayaka. Tyaga Sundari is another adoration worthy statue that draws the attention of the bhaktas. There are somemore worshipful deities at the eastern prakaram of the temple near the wall. The sculptural wealth of the temple, or its huge halls is comparatively modest. So, the sight-seers direct their steps out side to saunter along the sea-shore, treasuring up several eye-catching sights, like Light House, Patial Building, Rest
houses, Adi Sankara shrine etc. and finally sit atop the rocks till the siren heralds the sunset to enjoy the glamorised spectacles of the setting sun in myraid colours.

**THE FESTIVALS AND TIMINGS**

The temple celebrates several festivals during the year. Of them, the Vaisaka festival tops the list and it lasts for 10 days. It falls in May-June and it is then the ātsavamurthi is taken out in procession through the main streets. Both in morning and nights. On the nineth day, the Car Festival is celebrated on a grand scale and participated by devotees in thousands coming from far and near. The Float Festival, another star attraction marks the conclusion of this Vaisāka Festival.

To commemorate the death of the demon Bana, Navarathri festival is celebrated. It is equally important, or rather more glamorous than the first one. It is celebrated during September-October every year. The festival reaches the apex of gaiety, when the antique-spirit of antiquity appear on the scene. Everything in the township then wears a new look and turns out colourful with several rituals performed throughout. The deity is taken out in procession to Mahadanapuram, away 4 km from the temple. The priests re-enact the Banasura Vadha is such splendour that it draws several thousands every year, who lustily partake in all the activities of the temple. There are many other festivals celebrated throughout the year as done in Saktipithas of fame.

**DARSAN TIMINGS**

The temple is kept open to the public from as early as at 4.30 AM and is closed at 11.45 AM, after several kinds of pujas. In the evenings, pujas start from 5.30 and last at 8.45 PM. Evenings are normally crowded heavily, since the tourists who visit to avail
the sunset and moonrise spectacle invariably proceed towards the temple for the darsan of the Goddess.

PLACES OF ITINERARY INTEREST

MAHATMA GANDHI MEMORIAL

This is a grand architectural beauty built in the Oriyan style in 1956 as a fitting memorial to Pujya Bapuji. And it is on the shore, behind the temple. It lies on the same site, where the urn containing the ashes of Bapuji was kept for public view before immersion on 12.1.1948. It is so fashioned that the rays of the sun at the noon fall through a tiny operature and illumine the pedestal, where the urn was kept for public view on every October second. It is an ace engineering feat worthy of attention. So it is deemed as a boon for the patriots to visit this place. Moreover, it was exultantly praised by Bapuji as the ideal place for spiritual bliss.

SRI PADA AND ROCK MEMORIAL

The mid-sea rock lying at a distance of about 600 metres off the temple boasts of two imposing shrines, built to commemorate two great events of global significance. It is an irregularly shaped rock with uneven surface. On the lower portion stands a modern edifice built in the architectural design of Cholas. It is called the 'Sri Pada Mandapam' enshrining the holy imprints of the Virgin Goddess. It has three Prakarams and an impressive Vimanam. The flag staff holding aloft the triangular saffron flag with symbol AUM in the centre seems beckoning the sight-seers to reach the MOTHER's sannidhi by its constant fluttering. There is a projection on surface of the stone resembling human foot and it is surrounded by a Prakara. It is venerated as 'Sripad'. According to legend, it is here the Virgin

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Goddess performed penance for gaining extraordinary powers. There is a belief current in these parts that the original temple was built on this rock, but it was abandoned due to the encroachment of sea in courses of centuries. The present temple on the main land was built by some ruler of great fame in the dim past. Impressed by the puranic account, or rather prompted by theistic urge, Swami Vivekananda ventured to reach it across the sea, thundering with turbulent waves and infested with crocodiles by swimming. All alone! He had nothing with him then to pay for the ferry-man. On reaching, he did penance for three days sans food and was inspired to go to the west for spiritual conquest. He did. He owes his spectacular victory, needless to say to the MOTHER’S blessings. That remarkable feat brought undying fame both to him and the country that gave birth to such illustrious son.

VIVEKANANDA MEMORIAL

Just a few feet above, at a distance of 60 feet lies the grandiose Vivekananda Memorial built in 1970 by the indefatigable efforts of Sri Eknath Ranade, on the occasion marking the 77th Anniversary of Swamiji’s historical speech at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. This modern architectural marvel combines in itself many styles of craftsmanship, like Pallava, Ajanthan, Pandyan etc. It has several parts, like Mukha Mandapam, Sabha Mandapam, Dhyana Mandapam, 6ikharmas etc. all are done according to Silpha sastra - following injunctions of Agamas at every stage of construction.

An imposing life size bronze status of Swami Vivekananda draped in Parivrajak costume in standing posture is installed on a high pedestal in the Sabha Mandapam. A wide variety of floral designs on the ornamental columns and ceiling lifts the viewers to blissful world for a while. The two well-decorated niches built near the entrance facing the East are enshrining the life-like portraits of Sri Rama Krishna Paramahamsa and Sri Sarada Devi.
flooring is made of well-published red granite slabs, and its spick and span along with divinity pervading the entire Mandapam bends heads in veneration. The mirror like radiance reflects the imposing statue and compels veneration. The whole Memorial resembles the holy Ramakrishna Temple at Belur. By its peculiar location and sanctity, it is held in highest esteem as an indispensable visit-worthy place both for commoners and followers of Ramakrishna Order living all over the globe. Next to it lies the spacious Dhyana Mandapam adorned with the symbol of AUM inscribed on a mirror glass inset in the lighted rear wall of the Pranava pitham. Its tranquility and serenity make the visitors squat for a while meditating on AUM. Down below, there are about half a dozen stalls selling books, photos, dollars etc. to the desiring adorers. Around the temple on that spacious Rock arrangements are made to stand and stare at the infinite charms of the Blue-god, who seems rising, falling, racing and dashing against the massive Rock, perhaps due to unbounded joy at the merging of seas, or at the inexplicable joy of making Jalabishekam to the feet of the Virgin Goddess. It is indeed a sight for aesthetes that keep them for hours, particularly at the Dawn and Dusk. In the evenings, the beauty of the sights around like the light-house sweeping bright shafts of light over the shores, the Lady Ransom Church piercing into the blue sky with its tall white steeples amidst the greenary and lovely broad shores with congregations of bathers afford delightful sights.

This magnificent Rock Memorial on the mid-sea is connected with main land by ferry service, run by Tamil Nadu Government. It collects a fee of Rs.3/- for to and fro, and works between 7 AM to 11 AM and 2 PM to 5 PM. This exhilarating experience of the visit remains locked up in memory to be cherished for ever.

VIVEKANANDAPURAM

The head-quarters of Vivekananda Kendra and allied centres of many activities of the type of Ramakrishna Mutt are
housed in a sprawling campus of 90 acres. It is very near to Railway station and about 2 Km from the temple. It offers free Bus Service to the visiting public. It is maintaining a beautiful pictorial Exhibition and a Library, besides a free dispensary, Bank, Book Stalls, School, Canteen and tailoring centre. Moreovver, it is providing decent accommodation and food at nomal cost. It is a visit-worthy place for mental peace, physical rest and spiritual bliss.

CONVEYANCE

Trivandrum is the nearest Airport connecting all major airports. From there, State Transport Buses of Kerala and Tamil Nadu take the visitors round the clock. It is on the metre gauge line and it is a rail head by itself. Tamil Nadu and Kerala Transport Buses are available from Trinelveli, Madurai, Tuticorin, Trivandrum. Tourist organisations ply several types of buses at all hours.

ACCOMODATION

It is a well developed Tourist centre of International reputation. So Hotels, Restuarants, Rest Houses are available in plenty and also cater to every type of food suitable to all pay packets.
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Mother Adiparasakti

Gateway to the Mother's Inn.

Tiruvannamalai Temple Complex
Rock Fort Trichy

Sri Ranganatha Temple Towers – Srirangam

Uchehaipillayar Kovil
Tiruppengur

Anuraka. Worshiping Lord Siva.

Vaideeswaram Koon
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