

A PILGRIMAGE TO

KANYAKUMARI *and* RAMESHWARAM

A JOURNEY THROUGH
TWO OF INDIA'S MOST
SACRED CENTRES OF
PILGRIMAGE

**PILGRIMAGE TO
KANYAKUMARI
AND
RAMESHWARAM**

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Publisher's Note

Rameshwaram and Kanyakumari are two of the most well-known pilgrimage centres in south India. For centuries, they have been sources of inspiration to countless pilgrims and travellers from different parts of India and even beyond. While describing the geographical boundaries of India, Sanskrit literature speaks of India as a land 'from Kashmir to Kanyakumari' and 'Himalaya to Setubandhana (Rameshwaram)'. This speaks of the deep veneration and importance these places of pilgrimage hold in the Indian cultural tradition. No wonder Swami Vivekananda was so keen on visiting it during his wanderings and was later accorded a royal welcome at Rameshwaram on his triumphal return from the West. Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, Swami Brahmananda, and many other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna have visited Rameshwaram.

The following pages contain a travelogue to these two places of pilgrimage. It is an attempt to put together the details of the legends, religious and historical significance, and the association with Swamiji, Holy Mother and other direct disciples with Kanyakumari and Rameshwaram..

The narrator, Swami Atmashraddhananda, is a monk of the Ramakrishna Order and the present editor of *The Vedanta Kesari*, the cultural and spiritual monthly published from this Math. Both these narratives first appeared in *The Vedanta Kesari* (Kanyakumari: January-February 2009 and Rameshwaram: August-November 2009).

We hope the book will be helpful to the devotees and pilgrims interested in knowing more about these sacred places.

Swami Ramakrishnananda Jayanti
8.8.2010

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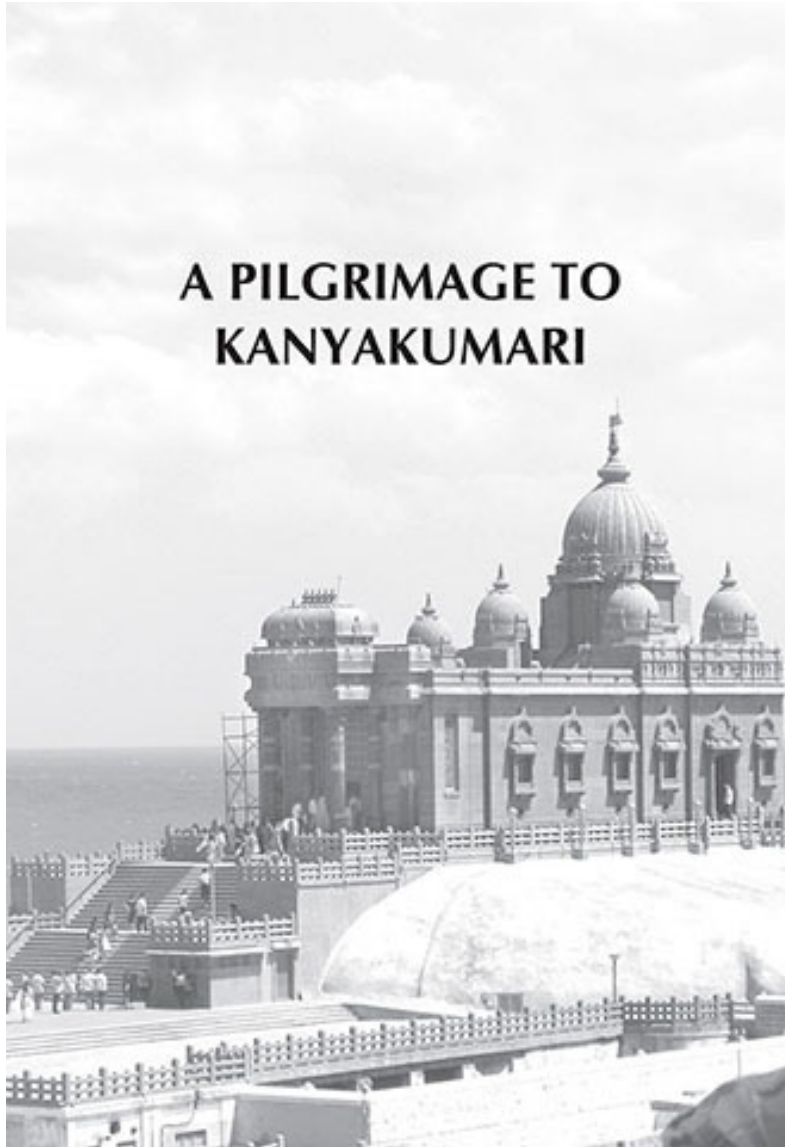
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A PILGRIMAGE TO KANYAKUMARI



KANYAKUMARI

The Pilgrimage

To anyone who has some idea of the place, the very word Kanyakumari brings to mind a place of exquisite beauty of nature—a vast expanse of water where three oceans meet, where one can see a magnificent sunrise and *also* a sunset, and a temple of Mother Goddess and a Vivekananda memorial in the sea.

With this picture in mind, we, a group of about a dozen people hailing from different parts of India but residing at Chennai then, set out on a journey to Kanyakumari—a picturesque place some 700 km from Chennai. Little did we imagine that we were in for a far more enriching and moving experience than what we had visualised.

Before we started, we made it clear to ourselves that we are *not* going on a pleasure trip. Our leader told us that we are going on a pilgrimage. And he made that very clear. Going on a trip requires just a little preparation—taking a leave off from our general schedule, looking for a companion, booking a railway ticket (or whatever other means we can afford), being in a good health and mood—and then pack off. Going on a pilgrimage, however, requires something more: a respectful attitude towards the place and its sacred associations. It is not a pleasure trip though pleasure, nay pure joy, surely forms a part of this journey. It has a spiritual purpose.

We thus prepared ourselves. We tried to gather information about the place from the Internet and books from library, built up our image of the place in our mind, booked necessary tickets and accommodation and decided to go on a *pilgrimage* to Kanyakumari.

Before we describe our visit, let us look at the legends connected with the place.

The Legend

Kanyakumari (Cape Comorin—that is how many foreigners called it) literally means ‘virgin daughter’ (*kumari-kanya*). Generally the term Devi is added to Kanyakumari which refers to the Divine Mother being worshipped as a virgin. The Hindu mind conceives of God in many ways, as a father or mother or as a child or even without any such forms. When it thinks of God as Mother, it conceives of motherhood in all its aspects: Mother as an innocent girl, as yearning for marriage, as a compassionate

mother, and as also the Ultimate Power, the creator, sustainer and the destroyer of all creation. She has so many forms.



One of the earliest photographs of the Sripadha Parai—the Kanyakumari rock—situated at the oceanic confluence

At Kanyakumari, the Divine Mother is a virgin goddess. Like every place of pilgrimage, here too there are many stories about its origin and glory. There are more than a few legends in different Puranas as to why and how Mother assumed this form, but let us mention two of the most popular ones. First is from the *Skanda Purana*:

The young Punyakasi, daughter of Mayasura, once went to Kailasha and worshipped the Lord Shiva. After three yugas [a long measure of time], Shiva appeared before her and asked her what she wanted. She replied that she wanted to be merged in Shiva always. Shiva then asked her to meditate on the south-seas ‘till ten Vishnu deluges’ (equivalent to several millions of years). Then will come the time for the fulfilment of her desire. He further told her that her hermitage would be known as Kanya-kshetra or Tapah-sthala. During her stay there she will have to slay demons like Banasura and so on.

Punyakasi went to the south-seas in the Indian peninsula. With a Japamala in her hands, assuming the name Kanyakumari, she started her *tapas*. Banasura, the all-conquering demon was infatuated when he saw her and demanded that she marry him. He approached her with his wicked servants Durmukha and Durdarsana. But Kanyakumari flatly refused him and his advances and in the battle that ensued, Banasura fell dead by the Chakrayudha (discus) of Devi.¹

Another legend says that Kumari, a form of Divine Mother Parvati, was born in the Kanyakumari region and when in her teens, she took a vow to seek Lord Shiva as her husband. She undertook many austerities to

please the Lord and finally made him agree to marry her. A day was fixed for the wedding but due to some divine plan, Lord Shiva could not reach Kanyakumari during the stipulated *muhurta* [auspicious time] and this made the Kumari Devi anxiously search for him. She could not be married and returned to her place of austerity disappointed. All the variety of food that had been prepared for the wedding feast turned into sand and even today in many places around the areas the sand has different colours indicating the colours of the food preparations.²



A sketch of Devi Kanyakumari

The *Mahabharata* in its Vana Parva, praises Kanyakumari at many places. ‘If any one bathes at this place one will become very famous,’ says the text.³

Besides being a sacred place, Kanyakumari has also attracted the attention of numerous overseas travellers long before Christ. Herodotus who lived in the third century B.C. has written about Kanyakumari in one of his books. Ptolemy, another celebrated traveller who lived two thousand years ago, refers to Kanyakumari in his book as *Komaria Akron*. He had bathed in those waters and worshipped in the Kanyakumari temple. Marco Polo of Venice who had travelled these parts in 1243 A.D. has written of his worshipping in the Kanyakumari temple. He has also recorded having seen thirty miles from Kanyakumari a glittering figure like that of the Pole-star.⁴

The author of *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (60-80 A.D.) has written about the practice of propitiating the deity Kanyakumari thus: ‘There is another place called Comori and a harbour, hither come those men who wish to consecrate themselves for the rest of their lives, and bath and dwell in celibacy and women also do the same; for it is told that a goddess once dwelt here and bathed.’⁵



Devi Kanyakumari's temple—A view from the sea front

Silappathikaram, one among the five ancient Tamil epics of 2 A.D. mentions about a saint named Madalan who took a holy dip in the Kayakumari during his pilgrimage. *Manimekalai*, a subsequent epic mentions about a woman named Sali, the wife of a Brahmin in Varanasi, who came to Kanyakumari on foot in order to expiate herself of the sin of unchastity. She bathed in the sea there and worshipped the Devi

Kanyakumari.⁶ References such as these abound in our ancient literature such as *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Raghuvamsha* of Kalidasa that speaks of the historicity and sanctity of the place.⁷

Apart from Kanyakumari temple, the place is now well-known for one more important landmark— Vivekananda Rock Memorial built in 1970. As to the story of this Memorial, we will have to turn to the life of Swami Vivekananda. Having travelled the length and breadth of India, his beloved Motherland, Swamiji reached Kanyakumari from Nagarcoil, a place near Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of today's Kerala. Here are excerpts from Swamiji's *Life*.⁸

Eager as a child is to be back with its mother, so was the Swami to see the Mother in that seashore temple. Reaching the shrine he fell prostrate in ecstasy before Her image. Some two furlongs out in the ocean from the tip of the mainland, where the Mother's temple is, are two rocks. According to the Puranas, the larger and farther of these two is the one that has been sanctified by the blessed feet (Shripadha) of the Divine Mother; for it was here that, as Devi Kanya, She did Tapasya to win the hand of the Great God, Shiva. Hence the rock has long been considered by Shaktas as a place highly favourable for spiritual practices.

After worshipping the Mother in the temple, it was to this holy rock that the Swami wanted to go for meditation. But how could he go? He had not a single pice for the boatman. Without more ado he plunged into those shark-infested waters and swam across. About him the ocean tossed, but in his mind was greater turbulence.

There, sitting on the last stone of India, he passed into a deep meditation on the present and future of his country. He sought for the root of her downfall. With the vision of a seer he understood why India had been thrown from the pinnacle of glory to the depths of degradation. Where only wind and surf were to be heard, he reflected on the purpose and achievement of the Indian world. He thought not of Bengal, or of Maharashtra, or of the Punjab, but of India and the life of India. The centuries were laid out before him. He perceived the realities and potentialities of Indian culture. He saw India organically and synthetically, as a master-builder might visualize in the concrete an architect's plans. He saw religion to be the life-blood of India's millions. . . . To his mind, the only hope lay in a restatement of the culture of the Rishis. Religion was not the cause of India's downfall; but the fact that

true religion was nowhere followed: for religion, when lived, was the most potent of all forces.

The single-minded monk had become transformed into a reformer, a nation-builder, a world-architect. . . What could he do, a penniless sannyasi? In the midst of despair, inspiration came to him. He had travelled the length and breadth of India: he was sure that in every town he could find at least a dozen young men who would help him in the service of the masses. But where was the money to come from? . . . A ray of light shot across his vision. Yes, he would go to America in the name of India's millions. There he would earn money by the power of his brain. Returning to India, he would devote himself to the regeneration of his countrymen—or die in the attempt. Sri Ramakrishna would show him the way, even if nobody in the world would help the work.

Here, then, at Kanyakumari was the culmination of days and months of thought on the problems of the Indian masses; here the longing to find a way by which the wrongs inflicted on them could be righted, was fulfilled. He gazed over the waters through a mist of tears. His heart went out to the Master and to the Mother in prayer. From this moment his life was consecrated to the service of India, but particularly to the service of her outcast Narayanas, her starving Narayanas, her millions of oppressed Narayanas. . . Yes indeed, at Kanyakumari the Swami became the patriot and prophet in one!

It would seem that the Swami meditated on the rock at Kanyakumari for three days. This view is supported by the evidence of two eye-witnesses. One of these was Shri Ramasubba Iyer. In 1919, when Swami Virajananda, a disciple of the Swamiji and a monk who came to be widely known and respected, went on a pilgrimage to Kanyakumari, Shri Iyer told him that he had himself seen the Swami meditating on the rock for hours together, for three days consecutively . . . Years later, another eye-witness, Shri Sadashivam Pillai, told an admirer of Swami Vivekananda that the Swami had remained on the rock for three nights. . . . Being impressed by the monk's personality, Shri Pillai had watched his movements. He had seen him swim over to the rock. When the Swami did not return in the evening,

he became anxious. Next morning Shri Pillai went to the rock with food for the Swami. There he found him meditating; and when Shri Pillai asked him to return to the mainland, he refused. When he offered food to the Swami, the latter asked him not to disturb him. If Shri Pillai wished to give him some food, he could leave some fruit and milk in a hollow of the rock, so that he, the Swami, could take it at will. Shri Pillai was sure that the Swami spent three nights on the rock. . . .Swamiji was on the rock from December 24 to 26 [1892].



Vivekananda Rock Memorial, Kanyakumari

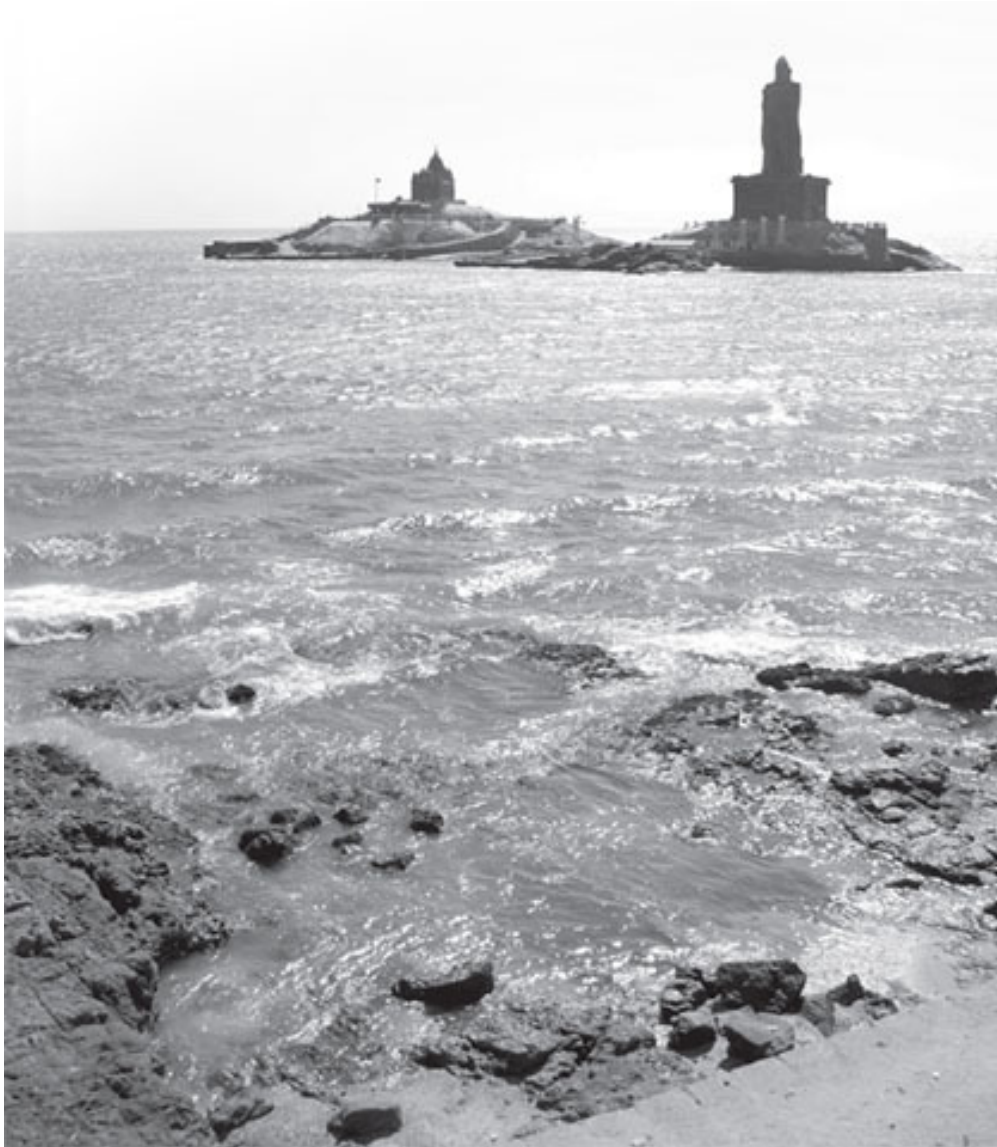
To commemorate Swamiji's great *bharata-dhyanam* at the sacred rock, a decision was taken during Swamiji's birth centenary year (1963) to raise a monument and in September 1970, the Vivekananda Mandapam, built as a magnificent and befitting memorial on the spot on which Swamiji meditated, was consecrated and opened. The work was put through by the Vivekananda Rock Memorial Committee, Madras. The Vivekananda Kendra, the non-monastic service mission, continues to look after its upkeep and maintenance.²

A Journey to the 'Last Bit of Indian Rock'

Having learnt these details, we left Chennai on a moonlit evening in the pleasant January winter of South. Though I thought we would be visiting Kanyakumari, it turned out to be a visit to India's cultural wealth and a spiritually enriching experience.

The train left at 5.30 in the evening. As our train chugged through suburban Chennai, we silently observed the descent of night. Slowly the western horizon turned dim and moon began to ascend. 'Look there!' shouted one of us. The full moon, bright and clear, shone over a wayside large lake. And what a scene it was! The reflection was perfect. 'That is an ideal picture of a pure mind—it reflects the Reality in full, without any distortion,' said our leader. His simile sounded quite apt.

As we travelled we discussed various aspects of India's cultural history and spiritual wealth and how these places of pilgrimage have played an important role. We sang a few Bhajans before having our packed dinner and retired for the night. Next morning we got up at six o' clock and when we looked out, we were delighted to see the green fields and coconut groves all over the place. The gentle light of the dawn was breaking in and one could see spread out all over big boulders, hillocks and a number of soaring windmills (the place was full of strong air). As the train crawled towards Kanyakumari Railway Station, I had a strange feeling as if we were going to the end of south pole!! Perhaps I was partly right because Kanyakumari represents the last bit of Indian land. As the place is shaped like a narrow strip, tapering down into a tail like shape, and after that comes the sea, vast and limitless, one is perhaps justified in having this kind of imagination.



A view of the Rock Memorial and Thiruvalluvar statue

Arrival at Kanyakumari

The Kanyakumari station is a small place—perhaps just two platforms and very little of anything to call it a station (not many trains come there). After everyone got down from the train, we were not sure if we should hire autorickshaws (there were plenty of them) to reach our destination—Vivekananda Kendra. Fortunately, a kindly co-passenger understood our dilemma and suggested that we walk the distance, as the Kendra was less than a km from there. He was right.

We walked with our baggage the rather steep and downhill road without much difficulty. Then, from among the small line of shops and houses, we spotted a large arch and near that a board indicating that we had reached the Kendra. It was a neat and clean place, with Swami Vivekananda's inspiring quotes painted on the wall along the roadside. We felt the change in the landscape and ambience. After walking some 100 meters, we reached the Reception Office. We had already booked our accommodation, and the staff at the Office courteously showed us our rooms. There were several rooms, clean and well-kept, readied for us.

We had a quick bath and then sat down to plan out the day. We also read out information about Kanyakumari that we had downloaded from Internet and had a quick breakfast at the Kendra Canteen. We learnt of the timings of the Divine Mother's temple (which closes by 11 am, and reopens at 5 pm) and that of Vivekananda Rock Memorial which remained open till 4 pm. We decided to visit the Mother's Temple first.

Though there was free bus service from Kendra to the temple (which is near the Memorial; some two km away from the Kendra), it had its own timings. As we were keen to keep to our schedule, we came to the main road and hired two 'shared autorickshaws' and reached the Temple in less than ten minutes.

Divine Mother's Temple

We walked through a medley of shops, eating places and hawkers and reached the entrance. The street was full of shops and pilgrims. One could see people from all parts of India all over. There were whispers of all types of languages—Gujarati, Tamil, Marathi, Hindi, Kannada, English and what not.

The entrance to the Devi Kanyakumari Temple (also called Bhagavathy Amman Temple), we observed, is from its side-gate, the northern side, and not from the main gate which faces the sea in the east. 'Why is it so?' we wondered. 'You see,' our leader explained, 'The Divine Mother in the Temple wears a diamond nose ring. It is so bright that the reflected light of temple lamps falling on it can be seen from a great distance—if the main door, which is in line with the Mother's Image, is

kept open. It is believed that this reflected light created confusion for the navigators and some of the ships faced trouble; they got stuck into the rocky terrain. Hence the eastern entrance is kept closed except on special occasions when the deity is taken out for ceremonial bath.'



Main entrance to the Kanyakumari Temple—facing the sea

As is the custom for all men devotees, before entering the temple, we removed our shirts and banians. Those who had chadders, wrapped them around. To some of us, it was a new experience because this is not followed in other parts of India. We could not figure out the precise reason for it except taking it to be a sort of respect for the Deity and a mark of modesty and cleanliness. [We learnt that this is the practice prevalent in all Hindu temples in Kerala and many temples in the adjoining districts]. One of us stayed back to look after our heap of shirts and bags.



Northern entrance to the Temple

A Pujari of the temple spotted us and came forward to help us. With his help, we made our way through the crowd of devotees and reached the garbha-griha from a side door. And there She was, the Divine Mother with elevating and holy Presence. Mother stood there like a little girl, smiling at all. The image was a combination of innocence, purity and beauty.

We remembered how Swamiji and other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna too visited this place. We were filled with a sense of awe and silence. I remembered Swami Brahmananda's (a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and the first President of Ramakrishna Order) experience at Devi Kanyakumari temple. He saw Her as a little girl giggling. Here is an eye-witness account of his visit, recorded as reminiscences:

The image of the goddess Kanyakumari is carved out of touchstone. In the afternoon the priests cover the face of the image with a thick layer of sandalwood paste. They put red colour on her lips. This makes the deity appear to smile. Her face looks exquisitely beautiful in the evening with the bright lamps shining on it.

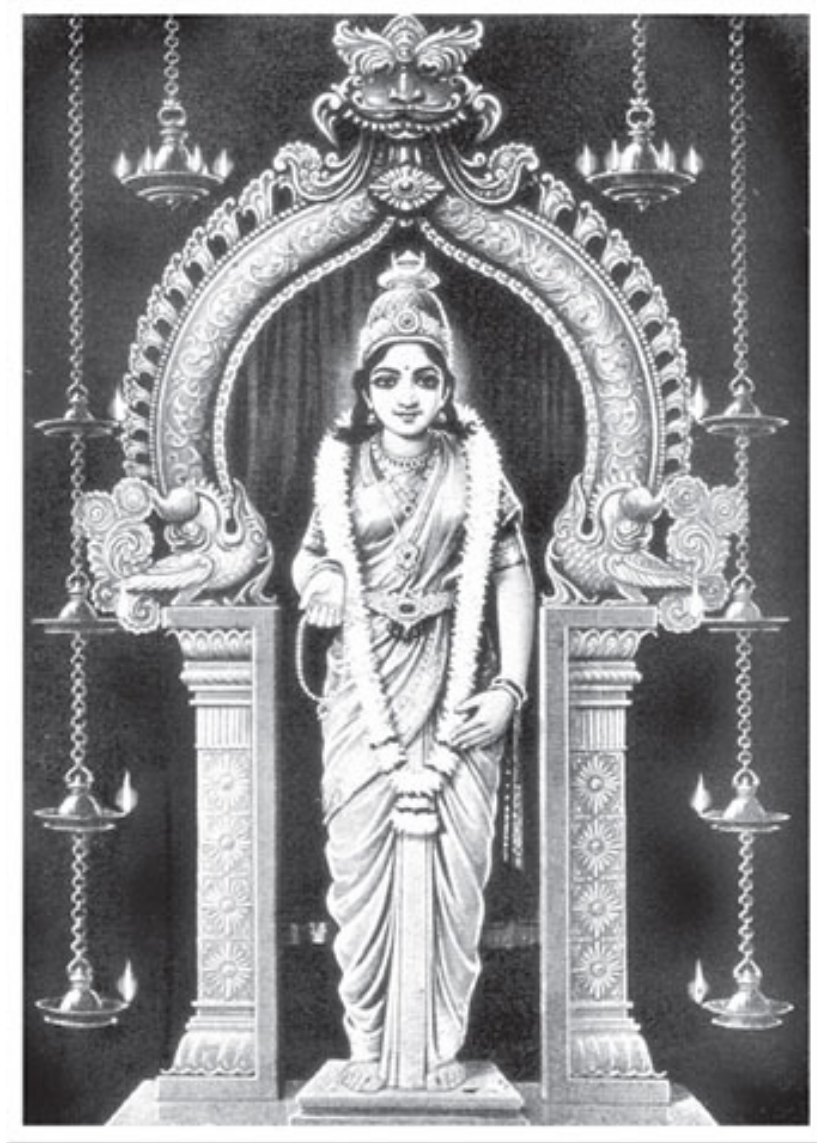
Swami Brahmananda would go to see Her around that time. He would stand and stare intently at the deity. I would stand by his side holding his rosary in my hand. The rosary had 54 beads. Whenever he would stretch out his hand to take the rosary from me, I would give it to him. After telling his beads for a little while, he would return the rosary to me and continue looking at the deity. At that time his lips would quiver, and it appeared from his

facial expression that he was afraid. But I would feel a sudden urge to burst out in laughter. Somehow I would control it externally, while inside I was laughing.

I mentioned this to the other monks who were present with him at the time. They said that they also had had similar experiences. After Swami Brahmananda came to Madras from Kanyakumari, he said, 'I was able to visit Kamakhya and Kanyakumari by the Divine Mother's infinite grace. While visiting the shrine of Kanyakumari I felt like I was bursting with laughter. I saw Mother Kanyakumari as an eight or ten year old young girl who was laughing out loud. Her image was exquisitely beautiful and I felt that it was living.'

When we heard Swami Brahmananda that day, we realized that it was the laughter inside him that had been transmitted to our minds.^{[10](#)}

Kanyakumari temple, like many old temples, though inadequately lit, has a wonderful atmosphere of holiness and purity. As we entered the sanctum, our leader offered to chant the *Durga Suktam* (ending with *katyayanaya vidmahe kanyakumari dhi mahi, tanno durgi prachodayat* — 'May we know Katyayana. For that, may we meditate upon Kanyakumari. May Durga impel us towards it') standing before the image with a flower garland in his hand. The image was much more beautiful and spiritually vibrant than the popular pictures that I had seen. The Mother stood with a rosary in one hand as if in prayer. After the chanting, we watched the arati, received the *kumkum* and *tirtham* and, led by the Pujari, went around the temple.



Mother Kanyakumari

Someone told us that Parasurama installed the Mother's Image which is made of blue stone. The temple has two *prakaras* ('surrounding walls' enclosing a Hindu temple; made of stone or bricks, it often has the main entrance gate to the temple and also small shrines to the attendant deities of the main deity of the temple) with the image of Devi facing the east. In the south-western corner of the inner prakara is located a shrine dedicated to Lord Vinayaka and Surya, besides many other small shrines. As in many South Indian temples, this temple also has *sabha mantapam* and *mani mantapam*—resting on many beautifully carved stone pillars—for

conducting temple rituals and religious functions and a *dhwajastambha* (the temple flag post).^{[11](#)}

The present structure of the temple was built by three great dynasties that ruled Tamilnadu and Kerala— Chera-Chola-Pandiya—at different times, we were told. From an inscription in the temple, one learns of the fact that Devi Kanyakumari was the family deity of Pandiyan rulers. For centuries the temple was under the care of King of Travancore (southern Kerala) until, after the Independence of India, at the time of reorganization of states in 1957, Kanyakumari area was included in Tamilnadu and made into a district. The daily puja at the temple, however, follows the Kerala tradition.

The temple is now under the Tamilnadu Devasthanam Board. In Tamil, Kanyakumari is also known as *alaivay tirtham* (the ‘wavy pilgrim centre’) or *sangili tirtham* (‘conch pilgrim centre’).^{[12](#)}

The Vivekananda Rock

After we came out of the Temple and dressed up, we went near the closed main gate of the Temple. Right in front of the closed gate, beyond the small road, were steps leading into the Bay of Bengal. There was a *stone-mantapam* (hall/ resting place). Mighty waves seemed to hit hard the rocks, drenching them repeatedly.

It was here that we had our first glimpse of the Vivekananda Rock Memorial flanked by a tall statue of Thiruvalluvar on an adjoining rock. It looked so impressive and captivating. We walked to the jetty to catch a steamer to reach the place. We purchased the tickets and rushed to the waiting steamer.



By the steamer to the Vivekananda Rock

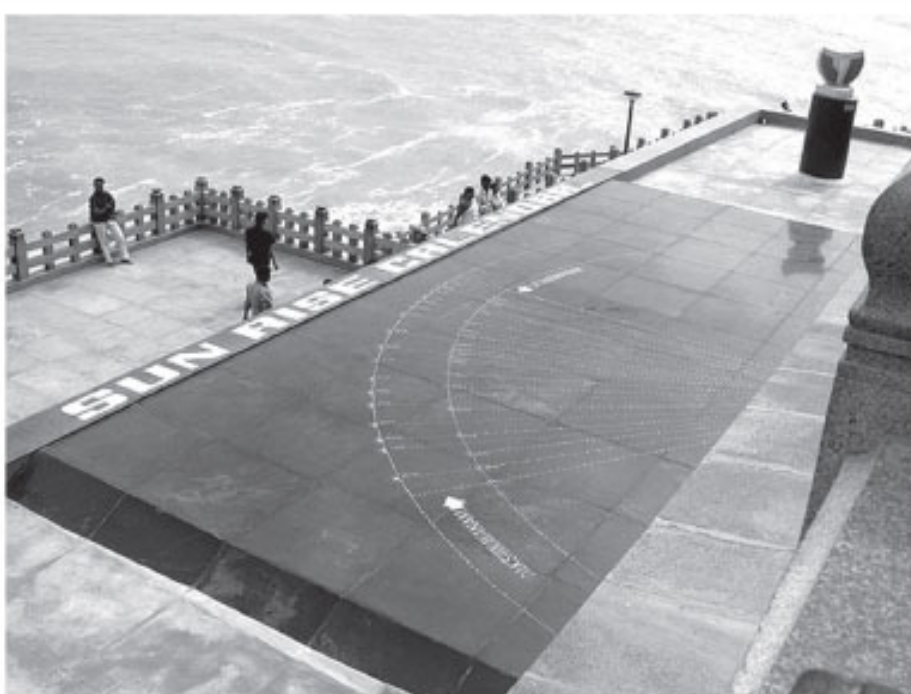




The magnificent Vivekananda Rock Memorial



Sri Padma Mantapam



Sun Rise Calendar behind the Rock Memorial

The waves were indeed turbulent and the steamer was tossed a few times. We wondered how Swamiji could swim through these turbulent waters and were awed by his courage. The distance between the shore and the Rock is around 500 meters. Finally we reached at the Rock. It was all so very orderly there. We deposited our shoes in the shoe-keeping counter and walked up the Rock. First we visited the *Shripadha Mantapam*—the stone hall enshrining the holy footprints of Mother Kanyakumari. On the rock is a projection similar in form to a human foot and a little brownish in complexion, which has traditionally been venerated as a symbol of Shripadham. According to legend, it was on this rock that Devi Kumari performed austerity. The Mandapam is an impressive, square shaped structure, with a veranda around it. We entered the sanctum, paid our respects at the glass covered rock encasing the sacred footprints, came out to the front veranda, and sat for sometime admiring the place and looking at the mainland which is dotted with numerous concrete structures.

Then we turned to Swamiji's magnificent temple. With two black stone elephants welcoming on either side of the flight of steps, we climbed up and entered the temple. One could see the impressive *ashtadhatu* (made up of eight metals) image of Swamiji, in his *parivrajaka* pose, mounted on

a high pedestal. We felt awed and transported to a different plane. We requested the Kendra staff to allow us to sit near his image for a few minutes, which he kindly obliged. We all sat in a corner, like children, looking at his face, respectfully.



Swamiji's image in the Rock Memorial

After bowing down to Swamiji and two smaller shrines at the entrance of the temple (dedicated to Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi), we came out of the side door and stood at the rear portion, admiring the vast expanse of the ocean. Then one of us drew our attention to the variations in sunrise timings and the exact directions in which the sun

rises, all indicated on a maplike shape (Sun Rise Calendar) outlined on the stone gallery. It was so educative and delightful to observe how the sun rise timings undergo change throughout the year. Then we climbed down and entered the meditation hall in the rear of the Rock. It had only OM (Sanskrit) inscribed on the stone-altar. A low drone of Om that is played on a sound system added charm to the atmosphere. Quite a few people seemed to enjoy meditating there.

As we came out, we saw some small bookshops where books on Swamiji were available for sale. We then got on to the waiting steamer that took us to the adjoining rock where a tall statue of Thiruvalluvar has recently been erected. Though it was a wonderful experience to visit the place, climb up the steps, watch the sea and sit in the benign shadow of the great Tamil saint who composed *Thirukkural*, the celebrated book of moral precepts, the place needed better care. At the Rock Memorial, one felt elevated and deeply moved but here things were different. Perhaps the dedication of the Kendra workers is one of the contributing factors.

The Sunset *and* then the Sunrise

Kanyakumari is a place of confluence. Three seas, the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal meet here. A small stone Mandapam on the western shore near Mother's Temple, called Sangam Mandapam, indicates this meeting of the three seas. On the seashore hundreds, nay thousands, of people had gathered to watch the sun set. One could see the Gandhi Mandapam (where Gandhiji's ashes were kept before immersion in the sea) and a water tank at the far end. On the shore there are a few small shrines dedicated to various deities and saints; some people went around visiting these temples and chatted their way to sandy beach where the Nature was to paint a spectacular scene on its infinite canvas.

One unique feature of Kanyakumari is that one can witness *both* the sunset and the sunrise here. Accordingly in the evening, we sat on the beach near Sangam Mandapam, along with hundreds of other pilgrims, to watch the spectacle of sunset. It was a remarkable scene. Slowly, gradually the sun merged into the depths of the sea. There was a hushing of the mind though the sound of revelling travellers, many of whom were college students, was a bit jarring and irritating. Many of us, having lived in crowded cities all

our lives, did not have the chance of seeing such a splendid sight before. (Another phenomenon that occurs in Kanyakumari, we were told, is rising of the moon and the setting of the sun simultaneously in the same sea on a full moon day!)

We chanted some Sanskrit prayers before returning to the Kendra. We also saw the illuminated Rock Memorial and Thiruvalluvar statue. Before returning, we visited an exhibition on the wandering days of Swami Vivekananda—put up by the Vivekananda Kendra. The elegant display has some rare photos of Swamiji's wandering days. It was a great experience to relive Swamiji's wandering days by going through the aesthetically designed panels. The exhibition is housed in a specially designed red-brick structure and is located at the Cape junction. It is called *Wandering Monk Exhibition*.

Next morning, as planned, we walked down the road in the green campus of the Kendra to watch the sunrise. It was still dark when we started from our rooms but by the time we reached the end of the 2 km road, we could see streaks of light in the eastern sky. The Kendra has excellent spot for viewing the sunrise. The sandy place called the Sunrise Point, however, had a lot many people. There was a group of people doing *yogasanas* on their carpets. We spotted a narrow gate in the Kendra boundary wall, leading to the seashore. The gate was open and there were quite a few people there too! But we decided to go that way. We walked on the shore and then onto the large stone barrier which extended right into the sea. We sat on various spots on the stone-barrier, waiting for the sun's emergence. It was a bit cloudy but the scene was unforgettable. The whole picture turned from blue to crimson and then to bright yellow. Again, it was a sight which many of us had never seen. As during the sunset on the previous day, we chanted some Sanskrit verses in adoration and prayer and left the place.



Sangam Mantapam—signifying the confluence of three seas



Sunset at Kanyakumari —in the Arabian Sea

We returned to our rooms and prepared for our departure. On the way, we visited another magnificent Mandapam (near Kendra-founder Sri Eknath Ranade's Samadhi) adorning a tall statue of Swamiji, situated amidst a well-laid out garden and a pond. The ambience of the Kendra Campus, its Museum on Swamiji's life and its other activities, were all impressive, and we wished we could spend more time admiring them.



*'Wandering Monk Exhibition' maintained by the Vivekananda Kendra
near Kanyakumari temple*

Thus came to a close our pilgrimage to Kanyakumari. Was it an end or the beginning—beginning of a new love for Swamiji, for India's remarkable places of pilgrimage centres, for appreciating Nature's silent magnificence that we miss all too often? As we left the place, we felt grateful for the rich experience. I was reminded of the fascinating observation Gandhiji made when he visited Kanyakumari on 15 January 1937. He wrote:^{[13](#)}



Swamiji's statue near the Kendra beach

I am writing this at the Cape, in front of the sea where three waters meet, and furnishes a sight unequalled in the world, for this is no port of call for vessels; like the Goddess, the waters around are virgin This place is eminently suited for contemplation. I wish I were to stay here for ever. □



*A panoramic view of the Rock Memorial
and Thiruvalluvar statue*

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RAMESHWARAM

Getting Ready

Should young, or do young, go on a *tirtha yatra*? Generally speaking they go on an outing or on a picnic. Tirtha yatra is an assignment left for the old and the devout! Tirtha yatra, roughly translated as pilgrimage in English, is an integral part of all religions and Hinduism is no exception. Unfortunately, it has become an ‘after-I-get-old’ event with many people.

But then, if anyone wishes to know India and its religious traditions, its spiritual and cultural life, the best way is to go on a pilgrimage. It gives a firsthand experience not only of the facts and legends related to the place of pilgrimage but also of the un-recordable, intangible power of faith or *shraddha* which permeates a place. It makes you feel, or experience, the ambience and holiness and ‘the order in midst of disorder’ that usually marks a Hindu place of pilgrimage. And to do all this, why wait for the old age? Why not do it when we are in the best of our health and spirits? Why wait for the old age what should be done while in youth?

Thus was decided our [a group of young undergraduates from Chennai] tirtha yatra to the famed and ancient temple of Rameshwaram. Of course, it took a lot of planning and working out the details regarding the dates, the places to be visited, food and accommodation. That we could work out all these with meticulous care and attention was one of the reasons the whole yatra went on to become a memorable experience. Another reason that contributed to the smooth conduct of our yatra was the selection of yatris. Only the genuinely interested people, not mere curious and let-us-try-it kind of people were invited to join the yatra. No wonder there was perfect harmony and understanding among all the tirtha yatris. Finally, there was the ‘x-factor’ (or the prime factor!) called the Will of the Divine, which made our yatra such a beautiful experience. And we are grateful for that.

The Journey

Our three-day journey began from the Egmore Railway Station, the older of the two main railway stations of Chennai. (Egmore station reminds one of Swami Vivekananda, who was received here in 1897 after his triumphal return from the West; he came by a train from Kumbakonam and some 3000 people were present at the Station to welcome him!)

Our train left at 8 pm. Soon after our train left, we began our long preferred discussions on various aspects of a tirtha yatra, Indian Culture and living a spiritual life. We read from a chapter from Swami Vivekananda's *Lectures from Colombo to Almora*. One of us read aloud the Welcome Address presented by the Raja of Ramnad to Swamiji on his return to the mainland of India after his successful 'conquest of the West'. Swamiji's reply to the address was also read out, after which the discussion went on to various related issues. By the time we wound up the discussion and proceeded to sleep, it was already near midnight.

Next morning, around 8 am, came Ramanathapuram, some 70 km ahead of Rameshwaram. And soon after we saw our train slowly dragging itself over the ancient rail bridge (it is more than 100 years old!) on the Pamban strait which connects Rameshwaram to the mainland. We ran across the compartment to get the best views of the shallow waters, the submerged stones and the scenery in general. It was so refreshing to see the submerged stones in the transparent water, boats plying in the sea and the cool breeze that came through our windows—we seemed to enter into a new world.



*The 100-plus years old railway bridge from mainland to Rameshwaram
—a view from the road bridge*

After we reached the Rameshwaram railway station (it was 9.15 am by then), we looked for the auto rickshaws to reach the Ramakrishna Matam—the place where we were to stay for the next 2 days. Some of us could get the autos, others preferred jutka or the horse carriage to reach the place. Matam (the Tamil for Matham or Math; Matam is a branch of Ramakrishna Tapovanam, an independent organization with its headquarters in Thirupparaithurai) is about 15 minutes ride from the Rameshwaram railway station. [It is believed that the building—called Venketaraya Chhatram—in which the Matam is located was the only such place of its kind where orthodox pilgrims used to stay in early 1800s; possibly Kshudiram Chattopadhyaya, Sri Ramakrishna’s father, might have stayed here when he visited Rameshwaram in 1830s, though there is no documentary evidence to attest it.]

In about half an hour, we started off to Rameshwaram Temple—the famed Ramanathaswamy Temple. As we had been briefed earlier, we carried our towels and an extra set of clothes in plastic covers and set out for the temple which is located just opposite the Matam.

The Great Bathing Experience!

Pilgrimage to Rameshwaram has a unique custom: before one enters the temple precincts, one has to take bath in 22 tirthas or holy water bodies. Most of these tirthas are actually fresh water wells, except two—one is sea itself and the other, a pond. Each of these tirthas has a name (like *agni tirtham*, *mahalakshmi tirtham*, *savitri tirtham*, *sethu madhava tirtham*, *gandhamadana tirtham*, *nala tirtham* and so on). As is the custom, we had hired a person (most of whom are fishermen who do this work to supplement their meagre income) outside the temple gate. He carried a small iron bucket, climbed up the parapet wall of every well, skilfully threw the bucket inside and drew the water. We all stood in a queue before every well, waiting for him to pour the sacred water on our heads—one by one. It was truly refreshing.



*Pilgrims bathing in the Agni Tirtham—
opposite the Rameshwaram temple*

We began from the Agni Tirtham, the stretch of ocean a few metres from the temple. We went through all the 22 baths inside the temple

premises which is by any measure, huge and majestic. Every well has fresh water in it and quite a large supply since thousands bathe here daily and yet the water is available. With innumerable pilgrims moving around in the outer courtyard of the temple in their dripping clothes, the whole place looked a little messy but it also created a holy atmosphere soaked in shraddha of millions who have followed this custom for centuries.



Pilgrims bathing at one of the wells inside the temple precinct

It took us about two hours to finish our *tirtha-snan*, after which we all put on fresh clothes before getting into the queue for darshan.

Rameshwaram Temple

Before we describe our darshan-experience, let us recall here that of all the famous Hindu temples situated in the four corners of India (such as Badrinath in the North, the Puri Sri Jagannatha in the East, Dwaraka in the West), Sri Ramanathaswamy Temple in Rameshwaram in the South is the most well known and revered.

The Rameshwaram temple is the only Shiva Temple among these four. The other three are Vaishnava Temples. The most distinct feature of Sri Rameshwaram Temple is that here Sri Rama (whom Vaishnavas adore and worship) himself worshipped Lord Shiva (which is the object of worship of Shaivas). Hence it is sacred both to Vaishnavas and Shaivas. Moreover, Rameshwaram is also one of the twelve Jyotirlingam Shrines. The Shivalingam here is called Ramalingam.

Rameshwaram is an Island, having the shape of a conch shell (*shankha*), one of the two instruments in the hands of Sri Vishnu who took the avatar of Sri Rama.

Rameshwaram is also the name given to the island where Rameshwar Shiva is worshipped. Rameshwaram is as old as the Ramayana. Its importance as a place of pilgrimage is equalled by only that of Kashi or Varanasi. It is believed that the pilgrimage to Kashi becomes complete only after one worships at Rameshwaram and has a holy bath in Dhanushkodi (Setu) which is located at the confluence of *Mahodadhi* (the Sanskrit name of Bay of Bengal) and *Ratnakara* (the Sanskrit name of Indian Ocean).



The eastern Gopuram of Ramanathaswamy Temple

Rameshwaram, as its very name implies, is the holy place of Rameshwara —the Iswara (Shiva) installed by Rama. The presiding deity is known variously as Rameswara, Ramalinga or Ramanatha. According to Puranas, after Rama killed Ravana, Agastya Rishi happened to meet Rama who, along with Sita and Lakshmana, just returned to the mainland (present Rameshwaram Island). Agastya told Rama that though he had to kill Ravana for his unrighteous acts, it still amounted to Brahma-hatya (the sin accrued for killing of a Brahmin; Ravana was a Brahmin, being the great grandson of Brahma himself). Hence Rama was asked to worship Shiva by

installing a Shivalingam to expiate the sin of Brahmahatya. Rama then fixed an auspicious time (*muhurta*) for installation and sent his faithful devotee Hanuman to Mount Kailas to bring a Lingam from there. But as Hanuman could not return in time, Mother Sita herself made a Lingam of sand and the worship was done. Soon after the worship, Hanuman returned with a Lingam from Mount Kailas. Hanuman was unhappy that the worship was over. In order to appease Hanuman, Rama then worshipped the Lingam which Hanuman had brought. Sita told Hanuman to remove the Lingam of sand which she had made. Hanuman wrapped up his tail around the Lingam to pull out the Lingam but in vain. It then dawned on Hanuman that this must have been the play of Lord Rama, and he fell at Rama's feet.

It is believed that Rama then ordained that both the Lingams (sand Lingam which Sita made— called Ramalingam—and the one which Hanuman brought—called Visvalingam) should be installed side by side. He also ordered that all worships (Pujas) should first be performed for Vishvalingam brought by Hanuman.

The Darshan

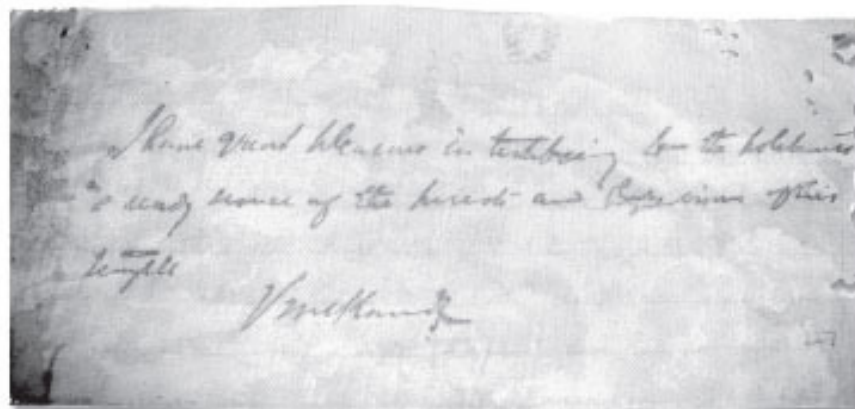
It was past noon when we had the darshan of Sri Ramanatha Swami, or Shiva, who is the main deity of the Rameshwaram temple. What awaited us, however, were the large stone plaques on either side of the main entrance, with Swamiji's famous Rameshwaram lecture inscribed on it. Beside the English plaque, on the left wall, was its Tamil translation. On the right wall was the other plaque with Swamiji's remarks in the Visitors' Book when he visited the temple second time in 1897. [Later, through the help of a monk of the Ramakrishna Order, we could obtain a photograph of the original remarks of Swamiji preserved in the Rameshwaram Temple].¹ Swamiji had written:

I have great pleasure in testifying to the politeness and ready service of the priests and supervisors of this temple.

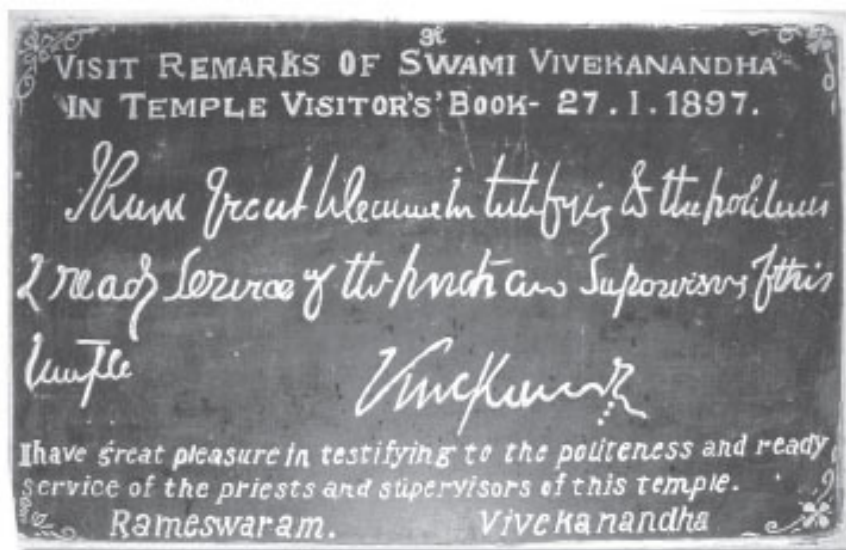
Vivekananda

We all had gone by the special queue and sat in front of the garbha griha for sometime. The Maharashtrian Brahmin priests, who traditionally perform the pujas in this temple, were quite kind and helpful. We

remembered that Swamiji, the Holy Mother and several direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna had visited this place and offered puja.



Swamiji's original remarks preserved in the Rameshwaram Temple (photo taken in March 2009)



The stone plaque at the temple entrance

Here is Swamiji's famous speech given at Rameshwaram Temple as recorded in the 3rd volume of the *Complete Works*, p.141:

It is in love that religion exists and not in ceremony, in the pure and sincere love in the heart. Unless a man is pure in body and mind, his coming into a temple and worshipping Shiva is useless. The prayers of those that are pure in mind and body will be answered by Shiva, and those that are impure and yet try to teach religion to others will fail in the end.

External worship is only a symbol of internal worship; but internal worship and purity are the real things. Without them, external worship would be of no avail. Therefore you must all try to remember this.

People have become so degraded in this Kali Yuga that they think they can do anything, and then they can go to a holy place, and their sins will be forgiven. If a man goes with an impure mind into a temple, he adds to the sins that he had already, and goes home a worse man than when he left it. Tirtha (place of pilgrimage) is a place which is full of holy things and holy men. But if holy people live in a certain place, and if there is no temple there, even that is a Tirtha. If unholy people live in a place where there may be a hundred temples, the Tirtha has vanished from that place. And it is most difficult to live in a Tirtha; for if sin is committed in any ordinary place it can easily be removed, but sin committed in a Tirtha cannot be removed. This is the gist of all worship - to be pure and to do good to others.



Swamiji's Rameshwaram lecture inscribed on a stone slab and affixed on either side of the inside entrance of the Temple. The Tamil version is on the left sidewall; and the Swamiji's remarks are on the right wall.

There is no documentary record of where —exact spot—Swamiji gave this speech. The general belief, however, is that most likely Swamiji delivered this speech in the Vasanta Mandapam [the hall-like place in south Indian temples where music concerts, special pujas and devotees' gatherings are held] situated opposite Ambal's Sannidhi (Divine Mother's Shrine).

In addition to the main deity, the temple also has many other deities, including Sri Viswanatha, Parvati, Ashta Lakshmi, Ganapati and Saptamatas. Also visible was the yoganidra posture of Vishnu, which depicts Sri Rama appearing as Vishnu before Vibhishana. We went around all the shrines and then arrived at the famed outer corridor of Rameshwaram Temple.

After the darshan of the main shrine and other deities in the Temple, we now arrived at the famed outer corridor of Rameshwaram Temple. And what a majestic sight it was! Lined on either side with the simple but impressively carved row of pillars, the corridor is the longest of any Hindu temple in the world. It was built around 1740-1770 AD.

Temple History: Some Facts

Before we narrate the next part of our pilgrimage, let us recall here some interesting facts related to the Rameshwaram Temple.²

In ancient times, the temple of Rameshwaram was originally housed in a thatched hut of a hermit. The present structure is due to the efforts of many Kings and other generous persons over the centuries. The pride of place, of course, goes to the Sethupathis of Ramnad.

The existing records show that in the twelfth century, Parakrama Bahu, the King of Ceylon, constructed the sanctum sanctorum around the Moolalinga (Sri Ramanathaswamy), Sri Viswanath and the Ambal (Mother Parvati) shrine.

In the 15th century, Udayan Sethupathi of Ramnad and a Vaishya of Nagoor (near Nagapattinam) built the western stone-tower (about 78 feet high) and the compound wall. A wealthy devotee from Madurai was responsible for constructing the Ambal Prakaram and some other renovation work.



A view of the Vasanta Mantapam

In the 16th century, Tirumalai Sethupathi built a portion of the southern second corridor. His statue and that of his son Ragunatha Sethupathi are found by the side of the southern entrance to the Ambal temple. They are honoured with flowers every Friday night. Later, in the same century, Chinna Udayan Sethupathi, Katta Thevar (a feudal lord under Viswanatha Naicker of Madurai) made some additions including the Nandi Mandapam. This huge Nandi, measuring 22' x 12' x 17', is made of *sudai* (lime and mortar) work, traditionally used in many temples.

In the 17th century Dalavai Sethupathi built a portion of the main eastern Gopuram. In the eighteenth century, the world famous third corridor of the temple was constructed by Muthuramalinga Sethupathi. His statue, and those of his two ministers, are found in the western entrance to the third

corridor. This highly acclaimed third corridor of the temple is 22 feet high, having 1212 pillars, with its outer wing measuring (east-west) 690 feet and (north-south) 435 feet. The inner wing of the Corridor measures (east-west) 649 feet and (north-south) 395 feet. What a scale of construction!



Sethupathi Mantapam in the Ramanathaswami temple

Between 1897 and 1904, the Alar family of Devakottai (near Rameshwaram) completed the imposing eastern tower of nine tiers—126 feet in height. Between 1907 and 1925 they renovated the Sanctum Sanctorum and the Prakaram (the innermost corridor) by replacing the lime stones with black granite making adequate provisions for light and ventilation, and also arranged for the performance of Kumbhabishekam in 1925.



*The statue of Bhaskara Sethupathi
at the entrance of the Rameshwaram temple*

During the renovation of first corridor, it was decided to renovate the second corridor also. The lime stone structure in second corridor was dismantled and granite stone work started. But later only the compound wall in west side and one portion of the north side of western wing in south gate was renovated. Finally, between 1961 and 1985, the western side of second corridor and a portion in north and south sides were renovated. All this was done through the Temple Renovation Fund.

The Sethupathi Mandapam in front of the Temple's Raja Gopuram (main tower) was constructed by Ramanatha Sethupathi, a descendant of Ramnad Raja dynasty, with his own donation of nearly 3 lakhs and was opened in 1974.

Continuing the Pilgrimage

Having walked through the impressive outer corridor, we visited the shrine of Sabhapathi (a form of Shiva), at a corner, which had its walls covered with thousands of Rudraksha beads. In front of the shrine, on either side, the statues of Patanjali and Vyaghrapadha Maharshis were present, and on the side (outside the Pradakshina path), Lord Vishnu, in the Anantashayana (sleeping posture), was also visible.

On the rear side of this shrine was a charming little enclosure which is held to be the Samadhi of the great Patanjali Maharshi, the great teacher of Yoga and the compiler of the principles of Yoga (yogasutras). This shrine came as a surprise to us—we had never thought of encountering the samadhi of sage Patanjali.

We walked through the corridors, admiring and enjoying the grandeur of the architecture and the whole ambience. It was so exhilarating to walk through the majestic corridors which run into nearly two km.

Before leaving the Rameshwaram temple, we also visited Sri Hanuman temple at the entrance. It was around 1 o' clock by the time we reached the Matam for food and rest.



The longest corridor of Ramanathaswami temple

At around 2.30 pm, thanks to the kindness of the Matam authorities, we were given a van to visit other places on the Rameshwaram Island.



The samadhi-shrine dedicated to sage Patanjali, located behind the Natarajar shrine in the Rameshwaram temple

Vivekananda Bhaskaram and other Places

First we briefly visited the Vivekananda Bhaskaram.

Vivekananda Bhaskaram was, originally, the guesthouse of the Maharaja of Ramnad, where Swamiji stayed for a night in 1897. It is located just a few metres from the eastern entrance to the Ramanathaswamy temple.

The building was made into a memorial several decades ago but over the years, it had run down and become unusable. It was hence thoroughly renovated and opened to visitors in January 2009. Inside there are statues of

Swamiji and Bhaskara Sethupathi. There is also a small photo exhibition on Swamiji in the adjacent rooms and is open to visitors. The memorial is under the management of Ramakrishna Tapovanam.

Our next destination was Ramar Padham (the temple of the Holy Feet of Rama). The temple is located atop Gandhamadana hill (which marks the spot where Sri Rama is believed to have stood to inspect the Rameshwaram Island in order to build the Sethu). The hill is also supposed to be the spot from which Sri Hanuman took off to Lanka in search of Sita Devi. There is no deity in the temple, except a pair of foot-prints (of Rama) carved in stone in the garbhagriha. On the top floor canopy of the temple which commands a panoramic view of the back waters and other parts of the Rameshwaram Island, we took shelter from the blazing sun and briefly discussed the spiritual and cultural significance of such places.



Vivekananda Bhaskaram, the place where Swamiji stayed in 1897



The writing at the entrance of the Vivekananda Bhaskaram



Ramarpadham temple atop Gandhamandana hill



A view from the Ramarpadham temple

We then drove to Kunthukaal, a place on the western side of the Rameshwaram Island. On the way we visited a small Hanuman temple on the road side where some stones had been kept in a small pond, with a grill over it. These were floating over the surface and we were told that they were a specimen of the stones which were used to build the bridge across the ocean by Lord Rama. The stones looked like corals or pumice stone. We just touched them with devotion like other pilgrims, not concerned with their historicity.

A Vist to Kunthukaal

When Swamiji returned from the West in 1897, he came to India from Jaffna by a steamer (incidentally he arrived here exactly on 26 January—now observed as India’s Republic Day!). While his steamer was nearing Rameshwaram, where he was to land, the Raja of Ramnad, Bhaskara Sethupathi, came rushing in a State Boat to welcome him.³ The Raja had been informed through a last-minute telegram sent from Jaffna. After meeting Swamiji, he requested that since Swamiji was to land on the sacred land of India after his historic success in the West, let him do so by keeping

his foot on Raja's head, and the Raja offered to bend down, with his knees half-folded (that is what the name of the place means—*Kundhu-kaal*, 'the bent leg or foot'). Though moved by the Raja's humility, Swamiji declined to do so by saying that since Bhaskara Sethupathi was a King, it would be improper to do so. Finally he got into Raja's boat and landed ashore.

Describing this event, Swamiji's *Life* says,

To mark the place where the Swami first set foot on Indian soil after his triumph in the West, the Raja planned to erect a victory monument, forty feet in height, bearing the following inscription:



Vivekananda Memorial Hall, Kunthukaal

Satyameva Jayate

The monument erected by Bhaskara Sethupathi, the Raja of Ramnad, marks the sacred spot, where His Holiness Swami Vivekananda's blessed feet first

trod on Indian soil, together with the Swami's English disciples, on His Holiness's return from the Western Hemisphere, where glorious and unprecedented success attended His Holiness's philanthropic labours to spread the religion of the Vedanta.

—January 27, 1897



*An artist's view of Swamiji being received by
Bhaskara Sethupathi, the Raja of Ramnad, at Kunthukaal*

The Indian Mirror, on February 7, gave this report of the Swami's reception at Pamban and Rameshwaram: As intimated to us by a telegram from Jaffna, Swami Vivekananda, accompanied by Swami Niranjanananda, Mr. and Mrs. Sevier, Mr. Goodwin, and Mr. Harrison of Ceylon, arrived here [Pamban] about 3 pm, by a special vessel chartered for the purpose. On the arrival of the vessel, a few respectable gentlemen of the place went on board the vessel, and, after ministering to the needs of the party, requested Swami Vivekananda to defer landing till 5 o'clock as the Rajah of Ramnad was expected to arrive to receive him. Punctual to the hour, the Rajah arrived in a nice, neatly decorated boat, specially prepared for the occasion, and reached the vessel in which Swami Vivekananda was, and landed him amidst much acclamation. At the landing place, there was a grand pandal erected, and a temporary jetty was put up, an immense crowd having gathered there.

Swami Vivekananda was conducted to a beautiful platform in the pandal by the Rajah, who, after delivering a speech of welcome, asked Mr. Nagalingam Pillai, Agent, C.S.S. Co., to read the address of welcome on behalf of the public. That being done, Swami Vivekananda made a suitable reply, the whole of which was taken down in shorthand by the reporters of the Madras and Madurai newspapers.

But over the years, the pillar fell off and finally, due to ravages of nature, disappeared. No one could tell us precisely where the commemorative pillar might have existed.

As per the records, the Kunthukaal area functioned as a small harbour earlier. In 2005, as a part of initiatives taken for promoting tourism, the Government of Tamilnadu and Ramakrishna Tapovanam jointly decided to build a memorial in honour of Swamiji. Accordingly, it was decided to convert an abandoned marine workshop on the seashore into a hall. Thus came into existence *Vivekananda Memorial Hall*, Kunthukaal. It was formally inaugurated in February 2009.

The structure was, hence, constructed under the public-private participation concept by the contributions made by the Department of Tourism and Sri Ramakrishna Tapovanam. Located at the fringes of the Rameshwaram Island, in the Pamban Strait, with deep, blue water, and almost without any waves, the Hall is a place of much significance and importance.

When we reached the place, it was around 4 pm. First we visited the temple (which houses in addition to the statues of Swamiji and Bhaskara Sethupathi, an exhibition on the life and teachings of Swamiji). Then we proceeded to the nearby thatched hut to escape the scorching sun. Some of the yattris were so tired that they simply slept for half an hour. The Matam Swamiji had kindly organized tea and it was indeed refreshing.

By about 5 in the evening, we walked on the beach enjoying the natural beauty of the place. Except us, there was hardly anyone there. We then sat down on a halfsubmerged piece of stone/concrete slab, and chanted the *Hanuman Chalisa* together. Then one of us read out Swamiji's Lecture given in the Pamban [CW, 3: 136-143]: Our sacred motherland is a land of religion and philosophy — the birthplace of spiritual giants — the land of renunciation, where and where alone, from the most ancient to the most modern times, there has been the highest ideal of life open to man.



Front view of the Vivekananda Hall, Kunthukal

I have been in the countries of the West — have travelled through many lands of many races; and each race and each nation appears to me to have a particular ideal — a prominent ideal running through its whole life; and this ideal is the backbone of the national life. Not politics nor military power, nor commercial supremacy nor mechanical genius furnishes India with that backbone, but religion; and religion alone is all that we have and mean to have. Spirituality has been always in India.



Statues of Swamiji and the Raja of Ramnad inside the Hall

Great indeed are the manifestations of muscular power, and marvellous the manifestations of intellect expressing themselves through machines by the appliances of science; yet none of these is more potent than the influence which spirit exerts upon the world.

As we finished our reading, Nature treated us with an extraordinary sight. The sun was setting, casting its gentle rays over the vast ocean before us. It turned the whole wavy surface into molten gold sheet, as it were. The reflected twilight, then, turned, into light purple, and Swamiji's memorial temple reflected in the enchanting luminosity of the setting sun. The setting was indeed ideal for calming the mind and fuelling spiritual thoughts. We returned to Matam and after a quick supper, retired to bed by 10 pm.

A Morning at the Rameshwaram Beach

Though the sun-rise view at Kanyakumari is well-known, the sun-rise at Rameshwaram is no less attractive. We had an experience of this next morning.

We rose early to have the darshan of the sphatikalingam puja at the temple (which takes place between 4.30 to 6.00 am). Even though it was

still dark, there were hundreds of devotees present for the special darshan in the garbha-griha. After the darshan, we proceeded to the beach to watch the sun rise.

The beach was crowded with the pilgrims, thousands of them, taking bath in the sea. Many buses, cars and other vehicles were parked nearby. We sat quietly on two stone benches on the far end of the small pavements that lines the beach road.

As we gazed at the reddening eastern sky, we could spot a few fishing boats, soaring up and down on the sea waves. Some of us chanted some Sanskrit verses we knew, others chatted among themselves in low whispers. 'Look there', shouted one of us, pointing to the tip of the golden orb that was rising from the mass of water. And soon, in just few moments, the sun was shining in its gentle glory, and in minutes, in all its brilliance. The sun had risen!

After offering our salutations to the God of Light, we returned to the Matam, had our breakfast, and started off to Dhanushkodi.

A Visit to Dhanushkodi

Dhanushkodi is the name of the tip of a narrow strip of sandy stretch of about 8-10 km, and some 2 km wide. On the either side of the sandy stretch is the sea. It is towards the eastern side of the Rameshwaram Island. The famed Rama Sethu is believed to have been built from here. Parts of a submerged structure can be seen even now, we were told.

Hindu tradition says that at the request of Vibhishana, Rama broke the Sethu with one end of his bow and hence the name Dhanushkodi, *Dhanu* meaning bow and *Kodi* meaning end. It is also said that Rama marked this spot for Sethu with one end of his famous bow.



Sun-rise at Rameshwaram beach

A bath in the Dhanushkodi is considered to be particularly meritorious and normally precedes the pilgrimage to Rameshwaram. Many Sanskrit books describe Bharat-bhumi or India as a landmass from Himalaya to Setu (*hima setu paryantam*). According to *Shiva Puranam*, *Anjaneya Puranam*, *Padma Puranam* and *Ramayanam*, Rama installed Shiva Linga here before Sethu bandhanam and showed the shrine to Sita when the Pushpaka Vimanam (which carried them from Lanka to Ayodhya) was flying over this area.

We started to Dhanushkodi by a van and after reaching the Naval Base at the Mukundaraya-cchatram (*cchatram* means a resting place, sometimes with facilities for free meals; Mukundaraya-cchatram is a cchatram built and managed by one Mukundaraya, a wealthy devotee from Madurai), we shifted to a mini-truck having a four-wheel drive. This is necessitated due to the fact that there is no regular road in that area and the vehicle has to negotiate its way through the sandy surface. There is always a risk of getting stuck in the sand.

As our truck moved, through the dry sand dunes all around, with an occasional sea water pool, we were struck by the simple beauty of the place. Dhanushkodi used to have a small settlement, with a small railway station.

The devastating cyclone of 1964, we were told, destroyed the whole place. The unprecedented havoc it had caused forced the people abandon it, though a few fishermen-villages can be seen spotted here and there. Bereft of electricity, running water, schools, medical facilities, balanced on sandy dunes by the sea, well, how do the inhabitants of these little settlements live remains a mystery to us.

After some 30 minutes we reached Dhanushkodi by about 10 am. We were moved by the pristine beauty of nature at the place—sand, wind and sun and nothing else! An occasional flight of birds and a passing fishing boat were the only other things present there. Sri Lanka, we were told, is just 14 km from there. We could see some sand dunes emerging from the sea surface here and there. There is submerged bridge there and one can actually get to touch it in some place, if one goes into the deep sea. Some Indian military ships, we were told, had been guarding the place after some distance from the shoreline and no one was permitted to get into the sea except fishing boats.



The sandy 'road' to Dhanushkodi (photo taken from the jeep)

We waded through the water for nearly 40 feet and it was just knee deep, and stood there for some time. Then we returned to the shore and

made some sand Shivalingams (we saw some groups of devotees and a sadhu from north India doing it and just imitated them) and offered sea water over them with the chanting of *om namah shivaya* a few times. Then we boarded our truck, and went to a stone Shivalinga and Hanuman images housed in a ramshackle thatched structure at some distance in the sandy dunes, and offered puja.



A stretch of the Dhanushkodi beach

After coming to Mukundaraya-cchatram, we shifted to a hired van and went to Kothandarama temple, situated about five miles from Rameshwaram temple. The temple is believed to be built to commemorate Vibhishana's surrender to Sri Rama and that his preliminary Pattabhishekam [coronation] as the future King of Lanka by Lakshmana was also performed here.

The Kothandarama [also spelt as Kodandarama] temple is built on a small rock. This temple too was destroyed in the devastating cyclone of 1964, and was rebuilt after some years by a business family from Bombay. Located in a solitary area, with hundreds of sea birds around it, the temple has images of Rama along with Vibhishana as the main deity of worship. There are many impressive paintings (neatly framed and hung on walls in the *nat-mandir*) depicting some of the events from Ramayana supposed to have happened here. We were told that during the Ramalinga Pratishta

festival at Rameshwaram in May-June the festival-image (*ustav murty*) of Rama from Rameshwaram is brought here for Vibhishna's coronation after 'Ravana-vadham' at Thittakudi in Rameshwaram bazaar on the previous day. On the following day of the coronation, the Ramalinga Pratishta festival is celebrated at Rameshwaram.



A view of the sea front—Mukundaraya-cchatram

Near the flight of steps to the temple, we saw a young vaishnava sadhu, with beard and long namam on his forehead, bare-bodied, intently reading some religious text. He never even once took notice of us or other pilgrims. His total unawareness of himself and others, in that lonely, otherwise vacant place, spoke of his deep devotion and was very impressive.



Kothandarama temple

*Portraits of the Events described in the Ramayana
(These paintings are hung on the walls in both Rameshwaram
and Kothandarama temples; the picture postcards are available with
street hawkers in Rameshwaram.)*



Sage Agastya (short in height) telling Rama to worship Shiva



Mother Sita preparing the sand Shivalingam

After the visit to this historic temple, as planned, we drove to Vivekananda Kudil, a private centre run by Swami Pranavananda, extensively working for the welfare of fishermen community. We were served sumptuous lunch there and took some rest before proceeding to Jata Tirtham.

Jata Tirtham and More

In the afternoon, we visited the Jata Tirtham—a sacred pond situated at about three and half km from Rameshwaram temple on the Rameshwaram-Dhanushkodi road. The greatness of this place has been described in the 20th chapter of the ‘Sanat Kumara Samhita’ of the *Skanda-Purana* thus:

Sri Ramachandra, after killing Ravana, while returning to Ayodhya wanted to worship Sri Ramalinga in Rameshwaram and before doing so, he washed his hairs in this Tirtham and made himself pure. From that time onwards, the place was called ‘Jata-Tirtham’.⁴

It is also believed that whosoever gives the *Kshetra Pinda* on the bank of Jata Tirtham gets the same result as that of giving *shraddha* in

Gaya. Right at the periphery of the tirtham there is small temple with a Shivalinga and a stone image of Ganesha.

We had a refreshing bath at the tirtham, with some of us unwilling to come out of the water! After an arati at the Ganesha and Shiva temples, we sat quietly for sometime in the front open hall and returned to Matam for an early dinner.

Drawn by the Rameswaram temple, we went to the place at around 8 pm and watched the shayanaarati, or the arati just before the lord is ritualistically put to bed. We sat with other devotees and watched the whole ritual— bringing of a golden idol of Lord Shiva in a palanquin, with a nadaswaram [a shehnai like wind instrument] and mridangam [drum used in south India] playing some tunes. Then the pujari took the idol out, and respectfully carried it to the shayana-mandiram and arati was done. This takes place in Parvathi Amman's temple, adjacent to the Ramanathaswamy temple, everyday.

There are many more places in the Rameshwaram Island connected with Ramayana and other Pauranic texts such as Lakshmana Tirtham, Agasthiya Tirtham, Sugreeva Tirtham, Bhairava Tirtham and so on (according to one source there are some 31 Tirthams on the Island). We did not try to locate or visit these Tirthams and contented ourselves with what we had seen.



An overview of Jata Tirtham

In Retrospect

Rameshwaram is a place of great significance. No wonder Swamiji was so keen to come here. In his letter of June 15 1892, to Haridasbhai, the Dewan of Junagadh, he wrote from Pune,

I came down with the Thakore Saheb from Maha-baleshwar, and am living with him. I would remain here a week or two more and then proceed to Rameshwaram via Hyderabad.⁵

Again at Khandwa (an ancient town located in today's Madhya Pradesh), when Haridasbabu, a devotee, entreated Swamiji to stay longer at Khandwa, Swamiji said:

I wish I could do so. Everyone is so kind, but I must be on my way to Rameshwaram, to do the pilgrimage I have in mind. But if I go on in this way, halting for weeks in each town, it will never be done.⁶

While at Belgaum, one day, when they were alone, Swamiji told his host that he intended to sail for America to attend the Parliament of Religions to be held at Chicago. He spoke so fervently that his soul became aglow with the fire of the Rishis, and prophecy was in his words. His host, carried away with enthusiasm, proposed then and there that he raise a

subscription in Belgaum for the purpose; but Swamiji did not agree to the proposal. He said,

Not yet, my son; not yet. Now I must be off for Rameshwaram. I have made a vow to visit that holy place.⁷

Swamiji visited Rameshwaram in 1892, but the details—where he stayed and with whom and if any significant event took place during his visit and so on— are lost to antiquity. Swamiji's *Life* says:

The pilgrimage to Rameswaram was the fulfilment of a cherished desire of the Swami. It was also the completion of his pilgrim journey through India, or, as we might say, of his pilgrimage to India herself. He had gone up into the Himalayas; had gone west to Dwarka; and now had come to Rameswaram, the southern of the four Dhamas, (sacred places at the four 'corners' of India). He had not in fact reached Badrinath in the far north; and though he had started out east of Puri, he had not gone there: but what he had not traversed physically he had traversed in spirit by his self identification with the past and present conditions of India and her people, and by his self-surrender to the cause of her future progress.⁸



Pilgrims thronging the Rameshwaram temple

The second visit of Swamiji in 1897 is of course better recorded. The *Life* says:

On Tuesday, January 26, about 3 p.m., the steamer carrying the Swami and his European disciples arrived in Pamban Roads. The Swami had been invited by the Raja of Ramnad to Rameswaram, and was about to land and proceed to that place when he heard that the Raja was coming in person to meet him at Pamban. On the Raja's arrival, the Swami and party transferred from the vessel in which they had come to the state boat. As soon as he entered it, the Raja and all his staff prostrated themselves before him. The meeting between the prince and the monk was a touching one. The Swami feelingly said that, as the Raja had been one of the first to conceive the idea of his going to the West, and had encouraged and helped him to do so, it was apt that he should meet the Raja first on returning to Indian soil. When the state-boat reached the shore, he was given a tremendous ovation by the people of Pamban. Under a decorated pandal, an address of welcome was read and presented to him. The Raja added to this a brief personal welcome which was remarkable for its depth of feeling. Then the Swami gave a short reply, pointing out that the backbone of the Indian national life was neither politics nor military power, neither commercial supremacy nor mechanical genius, but religion and religion alone; that it was this that India alone could give to the world. He concluded by thanking the people of Pamban for their kind reception, and expressed his gratitude to the Raja of Ramnad for all that he had done for him.

The meeting over, the Swami was seated in the state-carriage and driven towards the Raj bungalow, the Raja himself walking with his court officials. Then, at the Raja's command, the horses were unharnessed, and the people, with the Raja himself, drew the state-carriage through the town. For three days the Swami remained at Pamban, to everybody's delight. On the day following his arrival he paid a visit to the great temple of Rameswaram. He recalled his visit there five years before, when, as an unknown sannyasi, footsore and weary, he had gone there and with that had brought to a close his pilgrimage through India. He was touched to think how different were the circumstances under which he now visited it. As the state-carriage, with the Swami in it, neared the temple, it was met by a procession which included elephants, camels, and horses. The temple insignia were brought out, and, to the accompaniment of the traditional music, those honours that the Hindu accords to a Mahatma were accorded to him. The temple jewels were shown to him and his disciples; and after they had been conducted through the building and shown its architectural wonders—particularly the galleries supported by a thousand pillars—the Swami was asked to address the people who had assembled.

Standing there on the sacred ground of that famous temple of Shiva, he spoke on the significance of a place of pilgrimage, and on the essential nature of worship, charging his eager listeners, and through them all his coreligionists, to worship Shiva not in images alone, but in the poor, in the weak, and in the diseased. S. Nagalingam Pillai translated his words into Tamil. The Raja of Ramnad was beside himself with the spirit of the occasion, and the very next day fed and clothed thousands of poor people.⁹



Our stay at Rameshwaram had thus almost come to a close. Before returning to Chennai, next day, we were to go to Ramnad, a town some 70

km from Rameshwaram. Besides some important temples there, there are quite a few places and monuments connected with Swamiji's visit to Ramnad. We will conclude this narrative with a description of some of these places we visited in and around Ramnad town.

Towards Ramnad

We left Rameshwaram by about 9.30 in the morning in a private vehicle. Our destination was Ramnad town (also called Ramanathapuram), the district headquarters of Ramnad district. Ramnad town is some 70 kms from Rameshwaram. The road to Ramnad has a sea-side view at the beginning and a rural setting later. After crossing the Pamban bridge, we passed through Mandapam. It is a small village, almost at the edge of the mainland. Mandapam means a canopy. It could also mean a temporary shelter or an inn (dharmshala/choultry). Over the centuries, the Sethupathy Rajas have built a number of such Mandapams in many parts of Tamilnadu for the pilgrims coming from various parts of India to Rameshwaram. In these Mandapams there used to be facilities for providing accommodation and cooked food or provisions for cooking for the pilgrims. A good part of coastal Tamilnadu around Rameshwaram is traditionally called as Sethu Bhumi or Sethunadu (the land of Sethu or Rama's Bridge).

After an hour's drive, we reached Ramnad town. Despite a bumpy drive in some places, it was a pleasant experience. We had our host, Sri Gokul Kannan, awaiting us with a better vehicle for visiting various places in and around Ramnad. He and his friend happily accompanied us to all places.



The fringe of Rameshwaram Island as seen from the sea-bridge

Visit to the Ramnad Palace

Our first destination in Ramnad town was Ramnad Palace, the palace belonging to Sethupathis, the dynasty that ruled Rameshwaram area for centuries. Ramalinga Vilas Palace, as it is called, is located in a rather busy stretch of the Ramnad town. According to an old tradition, pilgrims to Rameshwaram would consider their pilgrimage incomplete unless they visited the Ramalinga Vilasam Palace—a kind of tribute paid to the Kings who looked after the Rameshwaram temple.



*A view from the road-bridge over the sea—
on the way to Ramnad*

At the Palace, we first met, as planned earlier, Sri Raja Kumaran Sethupathi, the scion of the Sethupathis. We had fixed an appointment with him a week before we started our journey. Rani Lakshmi Nachiar, the wife of Sri Kumaran Sethupathi, had invited us to join her for the lunch. We met Sri Kumaran Sethupathi in the big hall in their living quarters. He received us cordially and recalled his family's association with Swamiji. During the course of our conversations, he told us that as he is associated with the Rameshwaram Temple Trust, he had tried to locate the golden leaves with which the Holy Mother had worshipped in the Rameshwaram Temple but could not find them. It is quite difficult to say anything, he opined, about their whereabouts now. Sri Kumaran Sethupathi then sent a person with us to show us around the adjacent Ramalinga Vilasam Palace, or the old Durbar Hall.

Built some three centuries ago, during the reign of Kizhavan Sethupathi, Ramalinga Vilasam Palace consists of a Durbar Hall and an impressive dwelling area (where the present royal family resides). The murals found in the building reflect the times of the Sethupathi Kings, scenes depicting their battles with the Maratha Kings of Thanjavur, and their European contacts are quite exquisite.^{[10](#)}

Swamiji visited the Palace in 1897, and also, perhaps, earlier in 1892/3 [there is no record of it, although]. While passing by Rameshwaram in June 1899 in a ship, Swamiji wrote in his *Memoirs of European Travels*:^{[11](#)}

In front of us is Colombo. Here we have Sinhal—Lanka. Sri Ramachandra crossed over to Lanka by building a bridge across and conquered Ravana, her King. Well, I have seen the bridge, and also, in the palace of the Setupati Maharaja of Ramnad, the stone slab on which Bhagavan Ramachandra installed his ancestor as Setupati for the first time. But the Buddhist Ceylonese of these sophisticated times will not admit this. They say that in their country there is not even a tradition to indicate it. But what matters their denial? Are not our old books' authorities enough?

As to 'the stone slab' which Swamiji refers to, we did see a stone slab, throne-like, in the corner of the Palace, but whether it is the same thing which Swamiji mentions, could not be confirmed. We were told that the slab was used during the coronation and other important events connected with the royal family.^{[12](#)}



Ramalinga Vilasam Palace

The Ramnad Palace is a two-storied building, with a large courtyard in the front. The Durbar Hall has a row of circular pillars in the centre. On either side are displayed the portraits and photographs of Sethupathi Kings,

their weapons and other memorabilia. After the main hall, one gets into a small hall like place where the Rajas used to sit. Beneath the royal canopy, now are placed small figurines of Lord Rama, Sita, Lakshmana and Hanuman. On the walls of the Palace are many paintings and colourful murals, with a generous use of red colour. The same can be seen on the first floor of the Palace. The Sethupathis were great lovers of art and music, and, it is believed that they tried to replicate the Konark art in their Palace paintings. The entrance arch of the Palace is a huge structure, big enough for elephants and chariots to enter freely.¹³ The Palace is under the care of Archaeological Survey of India who carried out extensive repairs and restoration work after taking it over in 1970s.



Interior of the Ramalinga Vilasam (rear side)

In passing we may recall an interesting anecdote connected with Holy Mother's visit to Rameshwaram in 1911:

We went to Rameswar. Shashi [Swami Ramakrishnananda] had made all arrangements for the puja—he had made one hundred and eight golden bilva leaves for me to worship. I did the puja with those leaves. The Raja of Ramnad had sent a wire: 'The Guru of Gurus, Parama Guru, is coming, make all arrangements. Open the treasury and show.' What a wonderful thing it was! A dim light was there. The whole room was shining. The Raja had given instructions to the effect that if Mother needed anything from the Treasury, it should be given to her immediately as a present. Mother was embarrassed at this. Lest the Raja or his people feel offended, she told, 'I don't need anything. If Radhu wants, she can take.'

Looking at everything, Radhu said, ‘What can I take? I have lost my pencil, please get me one!’ Mother had prayed to Thakur that no desire should arise in Radhu’s mind. [14](#)

Devipatnam

After lunch, we took leave of Sri Kumaran Sethupathy, and proceeded to Devipatnam—a 40 minutes’ drive from Ramnad town. Devipatnam is a small seaside village known for its shrine of *nava-pashanams* [‘nine stones’] or *nava-grahas* [nine planets], located in the shallow sea waters. Here there are no regular statues of the nava-grahas but they are represented by nine stones (*nava pashanams*), and one offers *nava-dhanyam* (nine-types of grains). The legend has it that these stones were installed and worshipped by Lord Rama himself.



Entrance to Ramalinga Vilasam Palace premises



Vasantha Mantapam courtyard in Ramnad Palace



Painting in the Ramalinga Vilasam—The Setupati in durbar

To reach the place, one has to walk over a small concrete bridge-like structure over the sea which leads to a diagonal-shaped platform around the submerged nine-stones. Devotees offer flowers and grains to the deities standing on the platform. Though the place requires better upkeep, it commands a beautiful view. We could see a number of fishing boats on the

horizon. Scorching midday sun did not come in our way of enjoying the scene.



Devotees praying at Navapashanam enclosure, Devipatnam

We were happy to see a nearby high school run by Ramakrishna Tapovanam with hundreds of bright students moving in its vicinity. In that remote place, too, Sri Ramakrishna is a known name!

Sethukarai

From Devipatnam, we proceeded to Sethukarai [‘the periphery of the bridge built by Lord Rama’), which is around 30 minutes’ drive from Ramnad town. It is almost an hour’s journey from Devipatnam. Sethukarai, our guide told us, is supposed to be the place from where Rama Sethu starts, reaches Dhanushkodi and then to Lanka. We had never heard or known this earlier. There is lonely Hanuman temple on the seashore here and a few hutments nearby. We were told that there is a submerged bridge a kilo-meter or two inside the sea. The beach, lined with trees and shrubs, presents a beautiful view.



A view of the shore line at the eastern side of Sethukarai

Thirupullany Temple

We, then, proceeded to Thirupullany temple.

On our way, we observed a large water tank on the right side of the road, commanding a panoramic view. Locally called *Chakre Kottai Kanmaye*, it extends to nearly 600 acres. Swamiji's *Life*, quoting a newspaper report, says,^{[15](#)}

The Swami left this place [Pamban] for Ramnad via Tiruppullam in a boat belonging to the Rajah at 4 a.m. on Friday [January 29] and will probably arrive at Ramnad at 6 p.m.

The short trip from Pamban to the mainland was made in the early morning and breakfast taken in one of the rest-houses provided by the Raja for wayfarers. At Tiruppullam [Tiruppalani?] an informal reception was given to the Swami. It was almost evening when Ramnad came in sight. The journey from the coast proper was made by bullock-cart; but on nearing Ramnad the Swami and party entered the state-boat, which bore them across one of those large tanks that abound in South India.



A view of chakre-kottai-kanmaye, the large water tank through which Swamiji travelled by boat in 1897

Also called Darbha-shayanam (‘sleeping on *darbha* grass’), this large temple is one of the 108 divya-deshams (‘the divine places’ sacred to a *Srivaishnavait*s). The main shrine is of course devoted to Lord Vishnu (called here Adi Jaganatha Perumal), but the temple also has a shrine dedicated Lord Rama. The legend has it that Lord Rama, before building the Sethu, rested here on the darbha grass—hence the name *darbha-shayanam*. In Lord Rama’s shrine, one sees a large black image of Sri Rama, sleeping, as if resting and contemplating the construction of bridge to Lanka, with Seshnag or Ananta (who incarnated as Lakshmana) spreading his mighty hood over him. Some other gods such as Brahma and Shiva, emerging from out of his *nabhi* (navel), are also seen. The temple is a large place, with a huge water tank in front of it.

The Uttara-Kosa-Mangai Temple

Urged by our guide-friends, we next hastened to make an unscheduled visit to an ancient temple named Uttara-kosa-mangai, some 20 minutes drive from Thirupullany. The legend says that it is here that Lord Shiva explained Pranava (Om) to Mother Parvati. Besides, the sanctum sanctorum, there is a small shrine on the periphery, with a 6-foot tall

Nataraja statue made of emerald. The image is always covered with sandal paste which is removed only once in a year.



A panoramic view of Thirupullani temple with water tank in front

We also saw in the front hall of the temple several statues of Sethupathi Kings, placed along the stone-carved pillars.

The temple also has the shrine of the great 9th century Shaiva saint Manikkavasagar [also spelt as Manikkavacagar], author of the celebrated *Thiruvempavai*, popular Tamil composition in praise of Lord Shiva. He also authored Thiruvasagam, a highly acclaimed composition in Tamil, overflowing with devotional and philosophical ideas. The shrine of the sage Manikka-vasagar is so located that one can see (or that the sage is ever seeing!) the image of the Lord Shiva from there.



The front Gopuram of Uttara-kosa-mangai Temple

On the left side of the main temple, in the open courtyard, is a small shrine built around an ancient tree (claimed to be 3000 years old). This is held to be the samadhi shrine of the sage Kakabhushundi, the famous crow-saint mentioned in the Ramayana. We were told that legendary sage Vyasa also meditated under the tree. There is a large pond of sparkling clear water in front of the samadhi-shrine. The tall Gopuram of the temple, the spacious and gorgeously built temple corridors, the serenity of the late afternoon, with no crowd of people shouting or jostling around, well, the elevating temple atmosphere threw a sublime charm on us.



*Built around an ancient tree (in Uttara-kosa-mangai temple),
the samadhi-shrine dedicated to sage Kakabhushundi*

Our guide-devotee's friend, Sri Mangalnath Sethupathy who had accompanied us, added to our experience by fluently chanting from his memory several Thevarams (the Tamil verses in praise of Lord Shiva) in a mellifluous tone.

Three Important Places

As we were to board the train to Chennai in the evening, we rushed back to Ramanathapuram town, in order to visit three more places connected with Swamiji.



One of the corridors in Uttara-kosa-mangai temple

1. We first visited **Shankar Vilasam**, the guest house of the Raja of Ramnad, located behind the Palace, where Swamiji stayed for three days. Swamiji wrote one letter to Mary Hale from this place which can be found in the 6th volume of the *Complete Works* [p.387]. The guesthouse is now under a private organisation that has acquired and rebuilt the whole structure. Renamed as Vivekananda Bhaskaram, it consists of a shrine, some living quarters and provision for conducting some service activities.

2. Next was the shore of the **large tank** located behind the Palace, where Swamiji was accorded a public welcome.

Now let us look at the vivid description of the event which Swamiji's *Life* gives:^{[16](#)}

Thus the reception at Ramnad took place on the shore of a lake, heightening the dramatic effect of the occasion. The Raja, it goes without saying, took the leading part in the ceremony of welcome, and introduced the Swami to the elite of Ramnad.

The firing of cannon announced to the waiting thousands the arrival of the Swami. At the time of landing, and during the procession, rockets shot into the air. There was rejoicing everywhere. The Swami was driven in the state-carriage, accompanied by a bodyguard commanded by the Raja's brother, while the Raja himself, on foot, directed the procession. Torches flared on either side of the road. Both Indian and European music added life to the already lively proceedings. 'See the Conquering Hero Comes' was played on landing, and as the Swami approached the state capital proper. When half the distance had been covered,

he alighted at the request of the Raja and took his seat in the state-palanquin. Attended with all pomp, he reached the Shankara Villa.



Shankar Vilasam—renamed as Vivekananda Bhaskaram



The lake (now encircled by houses) behind the Ramnad Palace. On the shore of this lake Swamiji was honoured by the Raja of Ramnad

After a short rest, he was led into the audience hall where many had gathered to hear his reply to their welcome. As he entered, the hall resounded with shouts of triumph and joy. The Raja opened the meeting with a speech in high praise of the Swami. His brother, Raja Dinakara Sethupathi, then read the address of welcome, which was presented in a massive, gold casket of exquisite workmanship.

The Swami began his reply with words that have taken their place in the history of India. To hear them spoken in his thrilling voice is not given to us, but even to read them, they have a thrilling quality:

‘The longest night seems to be passing away, the sorest trouble seems to be coming to an end at last, the seeming corpse appears to be awaking and a voice is coming to us—away back where history and even tradition fails to peep into the gloom of the past, coming down from there, reflected as it were from peak to peak of the infinite Himalayas of knowledge, and of love, and of work, India, this motherland of ours—a voice is coming unto us, gentle, firm, and yet unmistakable in its utterances, and is gaining volume as days pass by, and behold, the sleeper is awakening! Like a breeze from the Himalayas, it is bringing life into the almost dead bones and muscles, the lethargy is passing away, and only the blind cannot see, or the perverted will not see, that she is awakening, this motherland of ours, from her deep long sleep. None can resist her any more; never is she going to sleep any more; no outward powers can hold her back any more; for the infinite giant is rising to her feet.

Your Highness, and gentlemen of Ramnad, accept my heartfelt thanks ‘

Each nation, he said, has its own part to play in the harmony of nations. Spirituality is the special strength of India. Let her be true to that, and a glorious future lies before her.

In closing the proceedings, the Raja announced that the Swami’s visit would be commemorated by a public subscription to the Madras Famine Relief Fund.

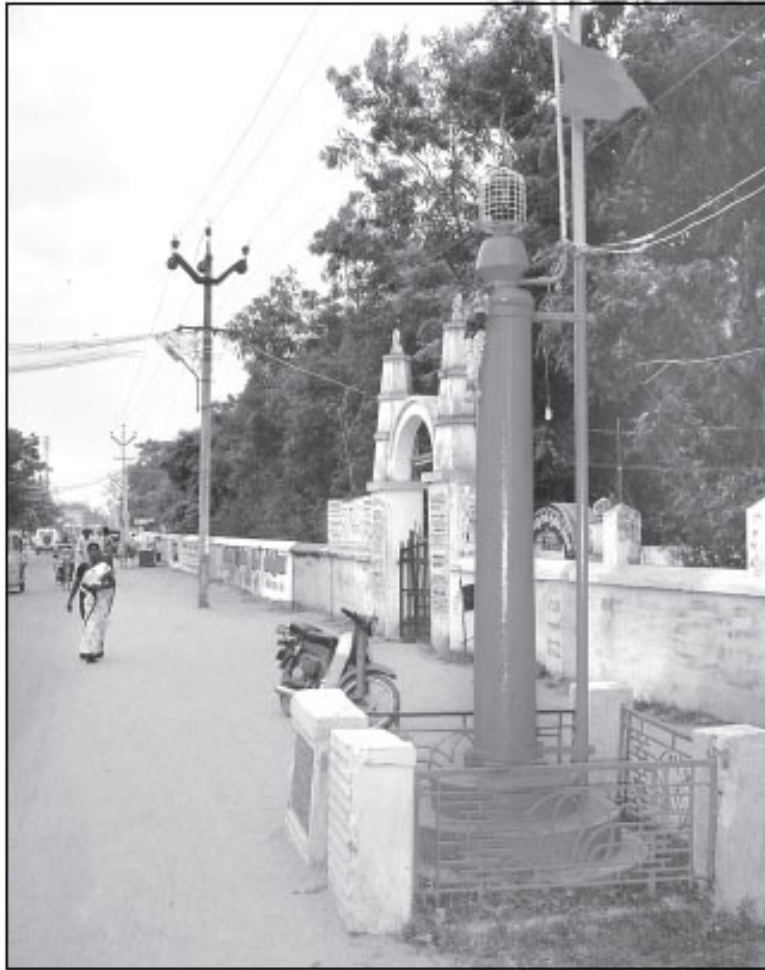
About the Pamban, Rameshwaram, and Ramnad receptions, J. J. Goodwin wrote to Mrs. Bull on January 31 as follows:

‘At Ramnad the rejoicing was tremendous.... The cheering and shouting of ‘Hara Hara Mahadev’ was terrific. It made us very proud of our Swami, and we realized what he is to India. Everyone says that his work in the West has caused a tremendous spiritual revival ‘

At Ramnad there were, as usual, many who came to meet the Swami personally. In the Christian Missionary School, lent for the purpose, he gave a lecture. And he attended a durbar at the palace held in his honour. The durbar hall was brilliantly lighted, and the Raja’s own band playing. Here he received further addresses in Tamil and Sanskrit to which he replied. During the course of the function he conferred on the Raja the title ‘Rajarshi’, meaning that the Raja was both a ruler (Raja) and a sage (Rishi). At the latter’s request the Swami gave a short address into a phonograph on the need of Shakti-worship in India.

Presently, the lake mentioned in the above account is surrounded by numerous constructions and houses. It is covered with lilies and other water plants, and needs greater attention. There is no memorial of any kind to

commemorate the great event that took place on its shores. How we wish some devotees of Swamiji take some initiative to do this!



Commemorative Lamp-post, Ramnad town

3. Our last visit was to the **Commemorative Lamp Post** in the Ramnad town. Situated in the Raja Veedhi ('the Royal Road'), the Lamp Post is fenced on all four sides by iron railings. It is located in an open space between the road and the wall of a burial ground. Presently the Lamp Post is under the care of Municipal Corporation of Ramanathapuram City. The Lamp Post, painted red and some eight feet tall, definitely needs some attention from the Corporation and better maintenance. Raja Veedhi is a busy street, with many shops lined on the opposite side and has a constant flow of traffic.

Following is a free translation of the plaque in Tamil that has been put near the Lamp Post:

Swami Vivekanandar

Soon after Swamiji returned from Chicago Conferences, he first arrived at Mughavai. This is the spot where he was accorded public reception on 25 January 1897.

This Commemorative Lamp Post having been renovated by the local Municipal Corporation.

Ramanatha Sethupathi lighted the Commemorative Lamp Post on 5-11-1968.

Sitaraman, Commissioner, S Bhupati, Municipal Chairman.^{[17](#)}

Departure to Chennai

Before leaving we visited the samadhi-shrine of Thaayum-anavar, the great Tamil saint [1706-1744], known for his numerous compositions focusing on honest living, meditation and dispassion. Located in the Ramakrishna Tapovanam's Ramnad branch, the place exudes holiness and calmness.

As we boarded our train to Chennai, in that twilight hour when the sun was setting, we pondered over the significance of the places we visited. How many temples and historic places we visited! Though the last leg of our trip was rather hurried, we were glad that we could see, at least once, these places. As is clear, the story of Ramayana is a tangible part of the Ramnad area. May be there are many more places about which we do not know. Nor did we have even the faintest idea that we would be visiting the places about which we had only read or heard. It was so educative and enriching to visit these ancient temples and Ramayana spots. Away from the heat and speed of a city life, it was indeed a refreshing experience. Reliving Swamiji's visit to Ramnad was the greatest reward of our pilgrimage.

Let us conclude our narrative by quoting and contemplating on a *Thevara Unjal* [traditional Tamil prayer song sung during the swing festival to Lord Shiva at Rameshwaram temple]:

The Mandara and Sundara-giri mountains are the two pillars for suspending the swing of the Lord. Mahameru and Ponmalai are the beams. The Sesha Naga becomes the cord.

Jnana or wisdom is the plank. Vishnu and Brahma hold the cord and sway the swing of the Lord. Learned Brahmins chant the Vedas with due rites. The Goddess Parvatavardhini sits by His side. Let us rock the swing of the Lord [and rejoice].¹⁸ □

References:

1. Our thanks to Smt. Bhanumathi Nachiar and Sri Narayan Chettiar, Trustees, Ramanathaswamy Temple, for arranging a photograph of Swamiji's original remarks preserved at the temple. Courtesy: Swami Gitasarananda, Ramakrishna Math, Madurai.
2. *A Guide Book of Rameswaram - Dhanushkodi*, published by Arulmigu Ramanathaswamy Temple, Rameshwaram, 2000, Pp.23-27.
3. *Life of Swami Vivekananda, by His Eastern and Western Disciples*, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, Pp.177-180.
4. *A Guide Book of Rameswaram - Dhanushkodi*, Pp.48-52.
5. *Life*, 1: 302.
6. *Life*, 1: 304.
7. *Life*, 1: 317.
8. *Life*, 1: 346.
9. *Life*, 2: 178.
10. Cf. Booklet by Department of Archaeology, Government of Tamilnadu.
11. CW, 7. 335-36.
12. Bhaskara Sethupathi passed away on 27 December 1903. His son, Rajeswara Sethupathi, was born on 3 June 1889 and died in 1928. When the Holy Mother visited Rameshwaram in 1911, Rajeswara Sethupathi was the King, and not Bhaskara Sethupathi as mentioned in the Mother's biographies. [cf, *Prabuddha Bharata*, June 2001, p.312-316].
13. For a detailed account of Ramnad Palace, town, kingdom and the paintings, see *The Courts of Pre-Colonial South India* (Material Culture and Kingship) by Jennifer Howes, 2003, Routledge Curzon, Taylor & Francis, 11, New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE, p.71-225.
14. *The Compassionate Mother*—Sri Sri Sarada Devi, pp. 262-264, published by Ramakrishna Mission, Malaysia.
15. *Life*, 2.180-182.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Ramanatha Sethupathi was the erstwhile King of Ramnad then. Mughavai is the popular Tamil name for Ramanathapuram.
18. *Immortal India*, J H Dave, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai, (3rd edition 1991, p.14).

