

A JOURNEY THROUGH TIME AND RAMAYANA

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A journey through the Pamban Island, known for its magnificent temples, untouched beaches and friendly people.

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PREFACE: The title might suggest some sort of a time travel of fictional nature or a religious story based upon Ramayana. But this is simply a description of a journey. My journeys often make me feel like the great sailor Sinbad, who ventured out into the wide world to see what lies beyond something what has been untold. The sheer thrill of travel makes traveling one of the most sought after pastimes.

My trip to the island of Rameshwaram, sandwiched between the Palk bay and the Gulf of Mannar, is one of the most wonderful journeys I've ventured on so far. The place does have a lot to do with Ramayana, and in fact the climax of Ramayana is said to have occurred here, but the explanation for my title is that when traveling around this wonderful region-the Ramanathapuram belt, one gets the strange and amazing feeling that you are actually coming face to face with the footprints of god around you. For an atheist these words might sound totally absurd but to those people to whom the words Ramayana and Sri Ram mean something this does make quite some sense.

But the real high point of this journey, after the temple, is the trip to Dhanushkodi, the land's end of India, about 20 kms from Rameshwaram and about 20 kms from the shores of our nearest neighbor: Sri Lanka. This place had been ravaged by the 1964 tornado and a tidal wave washed away the town along with 1,500 people. But the very fact that Rama's bridge started from this place made it quite a mystical place.

Saturday, Jan 12, 2002

My journey begins at 7:00 pm as I board my bus to Rameshwaram. Almost half of the city's population goes to their villages to celebrate pongal and since 95% of the buses were crowded I only managed to find a reservation in the government bus. One gets the feeling that poets like Milton and Shakespeare had missed the 12-hour bus journey from Madras Egmore to Ramanathapuram in a government bus. They might have written a number of sonnets if they had ever traveled in these buses at least for an

hour and if they could somehow manage to sleep in the buses then they might have seen a number of poetic dreams.

Forget the moth-eaten seats, rusty handrests, bumpy roads, the unfriendly conductor, people finding a place to sleep in the aisles, and a loud symphony music inside the bus played in the highest possible decibels permitted for driving standards : the journey was good considering the fact that the destination was a place like Rameshwaram. Ironically this was one of the most beautiful bus rides.

Sunday, Jan 13, 2002

I reach Ramanathapuram in the morning at 6:30 and it was quite delightful to watch the sun rise over the plains, as the bus travelled past the rather arid landscape of Ramanathapuram district. My schedule for that day was to cover Sethukkarai, Thirupullani and Navapashanam. The day was bogi pongal and it was quite obvious from the smoke that wafted in the air. I reached my guesthouse at around 7 and I was welcomed with steaming hot "Idlis" by my guide Shiva.

We caught the bus around 8 am in the morning and reached Thirupullani in half-an- hour`s time. As the Hindu tradition calls for having a bath before entering any temple, we rented a cycle to go to Sethukkarai, about 4 kms from this place and to be honest, the ride was quite calm and beautiful : past the green fields and salt pans and the closed shrimp hatcheries along the roadside.

Sethukkarai is very well known for performing the last rites of dead people, which is supposed to give them moksha. This made some parts of the beach quite dirty, infested with the clothes of the people who come there and my curiosity once made me to jump excitedly at the thought of having found a treasure inside a mud pot only to find later that it was a tharpanam pot with some money and some other articles of the relatives of a dead person.

We then got back to Thirupullani and had a very good darshan. hese two places are supposedly where the climax of Ramayana took place and Seetha Matha and Sri Ram came here after they completed their victorious battle over evil Ravana. We then had the delicious and renowned thirupullani payasam(this is where the payasam done during festivals originated.)

We then left for Ramnad, and boarded the bus to Devipattinam, which housed the mid-sea marvel called Navapashanam. It wasn`t an island but the navagraha statues rose above the water level about a 100 metres from the mainland and is accessible by foot. One had to walk through ankle deep water during low tide and waist high water during high tide. The boatman took us to a place about a kilometre. From the shore where there is dharbai grass in the sea floor supposed to have grown because Sri Ram had performed a puja there. This grass had to be circled around your head and offered to the navagrahams. We also went to the temple near it and the deity here is supposed to have made the sea calm without any waves for the safe puja of Sri Ram. Hence he is called Kadalanaitha perumal(god who dammed the sea), and it is evident even now, as throughout the shore the Palk bay doesn`t have any wave more than 5cm height. We then left back to Ramnad and had a good sleep.

In the evening I boarded the bus to Rameshwaram. My hotel was a very clean hotel, very clean by Rameshwaram standards as the crowds usually flock to this place and make the streets rather dirty. But amidst all this Rameshwaram has remained quite pure, and the very feeling of standing next to a 1000 year old temple and off the shores of the Indian mainland makes one feel excited.

Monday, Jan 15, 2002

PONGAL DAY: The fresh air of Rameshwaram made me wake up at about 6 in the morning and the cold air and the amazing yellow sun rising over the Olaikuda beach simply spelt poetry. Nagasubramaniam, my local guide managed to get me an easy darshan and archanai and it was a magical feeling sitting about a few feet from Ramanathaswamy and the pongal day added to the spirit.

I then boarded the bus to Moonram Chatiram, the nearest point to Dhanushkodi upto which the road exists and the remaining 10kms has been ravaged and eaten away by the cyclone. To go to Dhanushkodi one has to pay a sum of Rs.20 (US 40c) to go in the Matador van, which takes you through the barren and desolate coastline full of bumps and sand patches. Our driver took us to the south-eastern tip of the Indian peninsula, where the seas converge and this is the same place called Ratnagaram where Sri Ram had a holy bath and started constructing the bridge to Sri Lanka.

I then returned back to Ramesharam after seeing the devastation of the town which once prospered as a trade route between the two nations but now had no more than a few thatched huts under the burning sun and a strong odor of fish, called karuvadhu. But even now god had gifted this place and it boasts of itself as, one of the richest fishing shelf in the world and also holds another title as, one of the loneliest spots on earth.

In the evening an auto-rickshaw man took me around Rameshwaram. He took me to gandhamadhana parvatham also called as Ramar padham. This two-storey temple is on a small hilltop, about 2.5km northwest of the Ramananthaswami Temple. There is a set of Lord Rama's footprints on a Chakra here, and the small Ramjharoka Temple besides a good view of the island.

It is said that Hanuman made his great leap to Lanka from here. In fact, the area is teeming with links to Ramayana. There is a temple near the bridge that you cross to enter Rameshwaram where there is a floating rock. When Lord Rama went to Lanka with the monkey army, they crossed the ocean on a bridge of floating rocks and this bridge started from Dhanushkodi. The floating rock in this temple proves that floating rocks exist. Near this temple, close to the bridge, are Laksman Teertham and Rama Teertham. Lord Rama is said to have bathed in these two tanks. Kodi Teertham is a spring that Lord Rama is said to have created by shooting an arrow into the ground. My day ends with a walk to the beach in the evening and it was a pleasure to see the sun set over the town jetty in all its golden glory.

Tuesday, Jan 16, 2002

MATTU PONGAL DAY MY day begins early in the morning at 6. I left to have a bath in the 22 Teertham(tanks) : a traditional bath for pilgrims before seeing the deities. Each tank is said to give a different benefit. Many pilgrims bathe in all 22 tanks before seeing the deity. the 23rd theertham is the sea itself, which is the first in the hierarchical order so I immediately went to have a dip in the rather crowded beach. Then the tanks: it was amazing that each tank had a different chemical composition and temperature, and you can feel it when the guide pours water over your head, standing precariously perched over the edge of the well. Then after having a good darshan I had enough time to sing a few songs in the sanctum sanctorum praising Shiva.

Then I once again left for Dhanushkodi. The magnetism of this place made me go there again but this time on a different pursuit : to know more about the cyclone and get a first hand report from its survivors. This pursuit had grown so much in me that I started walking all the way from Moonram Chatiram to the town of Dhanushkodi - about 10kms and I covered this distance in about an hour`s time. At one place I turned back around and to my surprise found that the only living things within a 2km radius were the fishes, the eagles and dogs along with the crabs.

There was no human existence but I wasn`t going to be stopped as my urge drove me further. Then at last the town: for many eyes it might look like a ghost town. But it simply reminded me of the fall of Pompeii, or Atlantis. Though it might not be a continent of the magnitude of Atlantis, the very fact that this was a town bigger than many other contemporaries and a single night`s fury of nature had changed the way of life of about 3,000 people who had lived there and had ended the life of 1,500 people made it quite a different place.

The ruins welcomed me and the sorrow was to be seen in the eyes of all the people(temporary residents of about 300 odd people). For them the cyclones were a way of life and the only thing that made them stay there was the marine wealth. It is also very well known for repatriate landings from Sri Lanka (the so called refugees, whom I call repatriates)and also for LTTE landings in small boats of the size of catamarans. I took my van back to Chatiram and got down at Kothandaramar temple, which is an island inside an island, surrounded by the waters of the Olaikuda lagoon all around it. The 1964 cyclone wiped out everything in the surrounding area. The only thing left standing was this temple. It is located about 8 km from Rameshwaram, or about 6 km from the southernmost tip of the island going toward Dhanushkodi. It is ironical that even god had to face the fury of nature.

My journey is almost over. I boarded the air-bus(!) back home, which was extremely comfortable. I bid farewell to the shores of this beautiful island as the bus drove past one of the engineering marvels of India-the Indira Gandhi Bridge or Pamban Bridge. It connects the mainland with the shores of the island about 2~2.5kms away.

FROM THE AUTHOR: This work of mine is inspired by some of R.K.Lakshman`s, on some of his travels in and around India and the mystical charm of the island itself. The mystical Dhanushkodi, in total isolation

from the rest of the world is a reminder that not everyone`s world is small and the buzzword to stay connected isn`t meant for everybody. It is also meant to show that world progress is complete only when the lives of people of Dhanushkodi and other similar places changes.

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