

Mandapam And Its Environs

SOUVENIR

Edited

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Historical Review of Ramanathapuram

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It is the opinion of geographers that Sri Lanka and India were of the one land mass and the Island of Sri Lanka got separated from mainland of India by geodesic activity. The formation of the islands, the sea erosion at Dhanushkodi and Pamban channel are some of the visible proofs of the action of the tides and waves. The destructive cyclone and the tidal wave which erased from the face of the earth, the busy Dhanushkodi port in 1964 is fresh in the memory of the people. Mandapam peninsula which is separated from the Rameswaram island by the Pamban Pass is flanked by the Palk Bay in the north and Gulf of Mannar in the south. In the Gulf of Mannar, there is a chain of islands extending from off Mandapam to Tuticorin. The land is almost semi-arid supporting only acacias, palmyra and coconut groves. Fishing and fish curing have been the local industry for several decades.

History of this area is traceable to the Ramayana period. According to legends, the ruler of Ramanathapuram was the designated king by Sri Rama himself and was called Sethupathi, meaning the lord of the bridge or pass. Therefore the stone reputed to be the one on which the jungle chieftain Guha was crowned by Sri Rama is placed in the Ramanathapuram Palace and it is being used as a coronation platform by the kings of Ramanathapuram. This being the legend, historians are certain that the Ramanathapuram kingdom was in existence atleast 1000 years before the advent of the reign of Nayaks in Madurai (14th Century AD). It is also pointed out that the Ramanathapuram kingdom is one of the two oldest in India ruled by a single line of rulers for the longest period until independence.

An unkind environment forced the people of this land to strive against the elements of nature for their very existence. So, tilling a soil with little irrigation or seafaring, i. e. braving the elements, naturally made people hardy. This struggle to eke out a living and the intermittent political disturbances have steeled their will; they became great warriors. They were deployed in many battles in southern India rarely as mercenaries but mainly to save the honour of friendly kingdoms threatened by some aliens. There were innumerable small forts all through the present Madurai, Ramanathapuram, Tirunelveli, Pudukottai, Pudukottai, Pasumpon Muthuramalingam and Thanjavur districts where the people of Ramanathapuram lived and protected local people. In fact, the name Ramanathapuram had come to denote a cantonment. The capital and main fort of Ramanathapuram kingdom was itself at Bogalur (Sattirakkudi) which was later deserted and destroyed.

The Ramanathapuram coast has been the centre of great maritime activity. It has been the gateway for trade with Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Burma and China. As there was only one channel near the Adam's Bridge between India and Sri Lanka (the Pamban channel and the islands north of Sri Lanka having been formed gradually, by the action of the sea), the Ramanathapuram coast had attained strategic importance in those days and has been the scene of several battles and political manouvres.

The more ancient and greater Pandian kingdom, of which Ramanathapuram was part and parcel intermittently, has been historically famous for its pearls. The pearls of the Gulf of Mannar have been proverbial for their size and quality. The fishing for pearls has been conducted in the sea off Vedalai upto the year 1927. (Tuticorin has gradually gained prominence as a fishing ground for pearl oysters). The pearl fishing at Vedalai has been described by the great traveller, Marco Polo. Vedalai and Peri-

apattinam have been the two centres where the pearl fishermen gathered their catches and stored them in depots for future sale and export. There is a place called Muthupettai near Periapattinam, which must have been the market for pearls in the olden days.

The Ramanathapuram area has been included in the dominions of the Pallava kingdom of yore. During the period of the Cholas too, this country was part of the Chola dominion for a long period. In 1170 a Sri Lankan army invaded the Ramanathapuram country on a dispute over the Pandian throne between Paragrama Pandian and Kulasekara Pandian. Paragrama Bahu, a general of Sri Lanka, invaded Ramanathapuram and adjacent areas in support of Paragrama Pandian. Though Paragrama Pandian was captured and killed, the commander of the Sri Lankan army, led the army to India and landed at Rameswaram. The footprints at Gandhamadhana Parvatha at Rameswaram, considered to be the footprints of Sri Rama and also as a Sakthi Peetam by devotees, might have been the footprints for establishing a Buddhist shrine. Then the Sri Lankan army took Vedalai, marched to Siruvayal and Devakottai and all the areas en route were taken by them; the whole area was ruled by them for 7 years, but finally ceded to the Chola kings. One beneficial aspect of this rule was the construction of the Rameswaram temple in the name of the ruler of Sri Lanka.

After this period, Malik Kafur, a general of Allauddin Khilji came to the south upto Rameswaram. It is a fact that, after two decades of his raids in the south, there came to be a Muslim kingdom in the Tamil country at Madurai, which lasted for about half a century. Ibn Bhatuta recorded some of the cruelties perpetrated on the local people by the sultanate at Madurai of which the Ramanathapuram country was also part. The sultanate was destroyed by Kampana. However, the Ramanathapuram coast had gained the export trade with the Arabian countries and the influx of Arabian horses and artisans began.

In the year 1604 AD, a Sethupathi ruler was formally installed in Ramanathapuram as a subordinate of the Nayakkar empire with liability to protect the route to Rameswaram temple, a pilgrimage centre of all - India repute.

The disputes over the succession to the Ramanathapuram throne led to a war at Pamban between the Nayak rulers and the Sethupathi, where the Sethupathi took the help of the Portuguese who had come from Ceylon and Cochin. The war and regicide resulted in the division of the Ramanathapuram kingdom. The kingdom was united again when the rulers of the divided portions died.

When the Mysore army invaded Madurai, the ruler of Ramanathapuram went for the help of the Nayakkar ruler, Thirumalai Nayakkar with 25,000 soldiers and saved the Nayakkar ruler. As a reward, the raja of Ramanathapuram was granted suzerainty over the Ramanathapuram area. The Navarathri festival was introduced in the Ramanathapuram kingdom and is celebrated with great enthusiasm even now in Ramanathapuram (in October) every year. The family deity of the raja of Ramanathapuram has been Durga. The Nayakkar ruler presented the raja of Ramanathapuram with an idol of Durga made of gold which is kept in the Ramanathapuram Palace even now and worshipped. During this period, as a measure of co-operation with the Nayakkars, Telugu was made the alternate official language of the Ramanathapuram kingdom. Worship of Durga gained more encouragement and the temples of Raja Mariamman and Vana Sankari-amman were constructed in Ramanathapuram.

The most valiant of the rulers of Ramanathapuram was Kilavan Sethupathi (1674-1710). His growing power and influence in this part of the country even gave room for the Nayakkar ruler of that time, Rani Mangammal, under whom the raja of Ramanathapuram was a vassal, to become jealous culminating in a war. But Kilavan Sethupathi won the war. Later, he had to face a war with

the Maratta King of Thanjavur in which the ruler of Madurai also joined the Marattas. Kilavan won again and declared the independence of the Ramanathapuram kingdom after several centuries of subjugation. He shifted his capital from Bogalur to Ramanathapuram. He constructed a palace in 100 acres of land with walls 27 feet high and a moat. This palace remains intact even to-day and a part of the palace, known as Ramalinga Vilasam, is the place of the historical meeting between the Collector Jackson of the British East India Company and Veerapandia Kattabommu Nayakkar later. There is also a place in Ramanathapuram where the 47 wives of Kilavan Sethupathi performed 'Sati' on his death. It was during the reign of Kilavan Sethupathi that Pudukottai became an independent kingdom from Ramanathapuram and remained so until the year 1947.

Kilavan Sethupathi was succeeded by Thiru Udaya Devar who was an able administrator. He was very pious too. He constructed several irrigation tanks for the development of agriculture and roads and choultries for the development of agriculture and road choultries for the convenience of the pilgrims to Rameswaram. He appointed his son-in-law as the Officer-in-charge of pilgrim welfare. The son-in-law levied an unauthorised tax on the pilgrims and constructed the road between Rameswaram and Pamban with the money. On knowing about this, the king ordered to execute his son-in-law. His two daughters who pleaded for their husband's life but failed, performed 'Sati' on his death. Later, two choultries were constructed over their ashes; these choultries stand to-day as 'Akka Madam' and 'Thangachi Madam', near Rameswaram.

One of the successors of Kilavan Sethupathi had to fight with the British colonial forces over the throne of Madurai and defeated them in the 19th century. However the Madurai kingdom was overrun by Muslims. The raja of Ramanathapuram subdued them and made them vassals of Ramanathapuram. The raja of Ramanathapuram again intervened in the dispute of the Carnatic Nawab and came into contact with British East India Company and the Dutch merchants.

The Carnatic Nawab, who became ruler of Madurai also, wanted to assert his power over Ramanathapuram and urged the British to attack Ramanathapuram and Sivaganga kingdoms. The raja of Ramanathapuram was defeated in this war and became a tributary of the Nawab first, and later of the English. Col. Martinz of the British army became the resident representative at Ramanathapuram. The building in which he stayed is now called Sankara Vilas but the street on which the building stands is still known as Colonel Bungalow Road.

The eighteenth century witnessed the decline of the native rulers in India; there were no strong kingdoms like the Cholas and Pandias in the Tamil country. Apart from the Nayakkars and Maratta Kingdoms, the Ramanathapuram kingdom was politically important and powerful in south India. The English did not like the independent spirit of the Tamil rulers and Palayakkarars in Tamil Nadu. They intervened in the disputes amongst them and tried to demonstrate their might and overlordship. The year 1798 saw the rise of Veera Pandia Kattabommu Nayakkar who was against the British army in 1799. In the year 1801, the Marudu brothers and Ommaldurai were captured and executed with the help of some other native kingdoms. Gradually, the Ramanathapuram kingdom was also taken over. Mandapam and Pamban, being the gateway to Sri Lanka, came under the English rule. The people of the area lost all their political power and glory but not their valour, cultural heritage and literary eminence.

The period of rule of Raja Bhaskara Sethupathi (1889-1903) witnessed the return of Ramanathapuram and Rameswaram to the limelight in the history of our nation. The Raja himself was a Tamil scholar and was well read in English too. Great artists, musicians and poets of those days adorned the darbar, especially during the annual Navarathri festival in October, which is continued to be celebrated to the present day. The Raja of Ramanathapuram, Bhaskara Sethupathi, was the inspir-

ation behind and instrumental to the visit of Swami Vivekananda to Chicago, U.S.A to attend the World Congress of Religions. The Swami was given a royal welcome by the Raja at Pamban on his return from Chicago. There are monuments in Ramanathapuram commemorating the visit of the Swamiji.

The rule of the English did not help much the economic uplift of the people of this area; but it helped the development of English education, transport and communication. Ramanathapuram was made a separate district in 1910 and the British collectors administered the district from Madurai. Some hospitals and educational institutions were established in the district; the Schwartz High School in Ramanathapuram was established in the year 1785 and continues to be a good educational institution. Some of the British administrators took keen interest in surveying the lands and exploring the natural resources. The Madurai Mandapam railway was formed in 1901 followed by Pamban - Rameswaram railway in 1906. The stone bridge over the Pamban channel constructed in the 15th century became inoperative by erosion. Therefore, construction of a railway bridge across the channel (length 2km) was begun in 1914, and a railway line from Pamban to Dhanushkodi was formed. As Sri Lanka was also under the rule of the British, a ferry service from Dhanushkodi in India to Talaimannar in Sri Lanka was started in the year 1916. The emigration of Tamil labourers to the plantations in Sri Lanka commenced on a very large scale. A centre for conducting marine biological research was established in Krusadai Island near Mandapam in the year 1927. From the year 1932 till the independence of the country in the 1947, the administration of the district was completely taken over and run directly by the British Government. A marine workshop was started in Mandapam for maintaining the ferry plying between India and Sri Lanka; the workshop was leased to a private company later. During the time of the second world war, a vast building complex was constructed for housing a naval hospital and for the garrison on the Palk Bay side near Mandapam Camp. The garrison and shooting ranges have been abandoned but the naval hospital building was handed over to the Government of India in 1949. The Central Marine Fisheries Research institute is functioning now at the buildings constructed for the naval hospital. The other connected buildings, abandoned since the war, could be scene; a visit to the abandoned naval workshop near Kundugal Point near Pamban or to the other buildings would create mixed feelings in the minds of the veterans of the war. This place was the scene of the fleeing of the Tamil from Sri Lanka after the ethnic disturbances in that country.

Looking back, one would see that this part of the coastal region of Tamilnadu has been famous for its fishery and trade in pearls. The flag of the Pandian king itself had fish on it. Poets have sung in praise of the lustre of the pearls of the Pandian kingdom. The Rameswaram temple, which is one of the oldest in the country, was built with the stones brought from Trincomlee (1710 pillars) on the orders of the Sinhalese noble Paragrama Bahu. It draws pilgrims from all over the country and also from other eastern countries. There is also a tomb in Rameswaram which is stated to be that of Abil-Kabi (Abel and Cain?) sons of Adam, the first man. Pamban was the pathway for entry to the southern part of India. The district has been an example of religious harmony. The coast of the district had been a rich pearl fishing ground and the Dutch and Portuguese have vied with each other for the pearl fishing rights here. The kings of Ramanathapuram have encouraged the influx of tourists and pilgrims from everywhere and have donated villages and royalties for dargahs and churches in the district apart from Hindu temples. Some religious relics of the Roman Catholic church have been found near Thonithurai, which are being studied by scholars. The missionary John De Britto (1647-1693) lived in this region and constructed several churches; he died perhaps due to political intrigues and not because of religious intolerance. The Hindu saint Thayumanavar (1706-1742) came to Ramanathapuram from Tiruchirapalli and died here. His Samadhi is in a place called Lakshmipuram near Ramanathapuram. The ascetic Pamban Swamikal belongs to Pamban. He has sung thousands of verses in praise of God Murugan. The swami has thousands of followers in Tamilnadu.

Recently the Tamilnadu Government has trifurcated the district and established the Headquarters of the Ramanathapuram District at Ramanathapuram itself. It is hoped that this will accelerate the development of the area. The development of the industries based on the mineral wealth, the development of the fishing and pearl culturing industries in this area, the establishment of a National Marine Park and tourist centres are some bright proposals for the immediate future. The execution of the legendary Sethusamudram Project of creating a shipping channel via the Rameswaram Island will go a long way in the improvement of the economic condition of the people here.

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