

Mandapam And Its Environs

SOUVENIR

Edited

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Martyr Of Vedalai

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As the saffron light of the evening sun bathed the fan fringed leaves of the surrounding palmyra groves of Vedalai, a gleaming new and beautiful Church in memory of Fr. Antony Criminalli was blessed on April 29, 1984 by the Arch Bishop of Madurai, witnessed by more than a thousand devotees. The new Church has replaced the ruined chapel built in 1895 by Darrietutort in honour of St. Vincent on the very spot where stood the Church used by Criminalli in the year of his martyrdom.

True, down the centuries Vedalai was famed for the glorious martyr, Antonio Criminalli. It was yet more famous for the naval battle in 1536 between the Portuguese and the Moors whose naval supremacy in the Indian Ocean was shattered once for all resulting in the liberation of 20,000 Paravas whose ancient right of pearl fishing has been snatched from them by the Moors and in their embracing Christianity in 1537. The village of Vedalai lies some three miles West of the Pamban canal on the narrow tongue of land that separate the isle of Rameswaram from the Indian mainland. It is here the road from Ramnad to Rameswaram passed West-East.

After the battle of Vedalai, the Portuguese built a mud walled fortress surrounded by a palladed redoubt on the north flank of the road. The ancient settlement of the Karaiya Christians with Criminalli's Church lay on the Southern side of the road. The fortress thus commanded tightly the pilgrim way to Rameswaram. In 1547, Captain John Correa with his forty soldiers started to levy a pilgrim tax on all the road users and allowed them only during the day. So deprived of large income for their temple, Brahmins petitioned to Vital Raja of Vijayanagar who was then in Madurai with his great army. Moreover, the Captain destroyed the Wooden bridge which connects Rameswaram and Mandapam. Hence, the Raja of Vijayanagar sent a huge contingent of 8000 jawans to drive out the intruders. It is a known story how unable to oppose them the Portuguese along with the Christian community took boats to an anchored ship, refusing to take the women and children telling Fr. Antonio Criminalli to escape with them, if he liked. But Criminalli preferred to stay with his spiritual children and face the martyr's death.

