CAUVERI

வான் பொய்ப்பினும் தான் பொய்யா மலைத்தலைய
கடல் காவேரி.

—பத்துப்பாட்டு

Even if the rains fail, the Cauveri, springing from the hills and flowing into the sea will not fail you.

Pathupattu

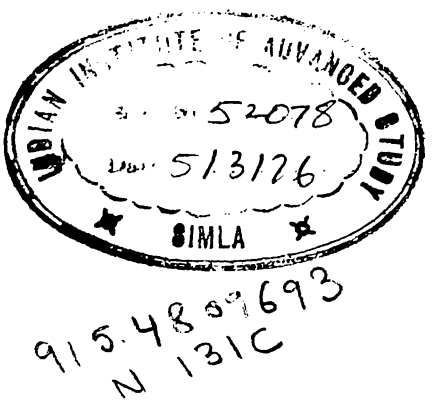
"Sweet Cauveri, runne sweetly till I end my story"
(With apologies to Edmund Spenser)

CAUVERI

FROM SOURCE TO SEA

K. NAGARAJAN

ARNOLD-HEINEMANN



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FOREWORD

India as a country rich in its cultural heritage, opulent in its literary output, artistic talent, aesthetic perception and flights of philosophic thought, has always had a special appeal for connoisseurs from all over the world interested in her kaleidoscopic picture of achievements in every field. In fact the picturesque situation in India amidst the most charming natural surroundings differing in different places according to hill, valley, plain or plateau, desert or swamp as the case may be, has added colour to charm. Mountains of immense height suggesting stature, the ocean with its billows lashing the shore with a deafening roar, starting at a point almost in a trickle, slowly expanding and running on mountain terraces, spreading and sprawling on a vast bed of rock and pebble, shingle and sand, winding zig zag along the plains, fortified by other streams and brooklets coming into them to empty themselves finally into the sea, the vernal beauty of forests and gardens, spluttering rains and overhanging clouds, dark against the sky, with peals of deafening thunder and blinding flashes of lightning, the overflowing banks with turbid water gushing along with threatening devastation, the overpowering scorch of the sun, with the not too unusual hot winds compelling cool and comfortable dips in slow-moving, almost crystal-pure attenuated stream amidst river-bed of burning sands in all the stretch but where the tiny stream struggles along, the trees now bare but now again gathering fresh sprouts assuming dark purplish green within a matter of weeks, the fragrance of a variety of flowers in their seasons, the birds of all occasions all the year round, the cuckoo or the crane, the goose or the peacock or the parrot with sweet warbling, indicative of nature's mood, have in no small measure filled the minds of the Indian with great joy and a sense of comradeship with natural surroundings personified.

Born as an inheritor of such a great culture and connoisseurship,

it is no wonder that Mr. K. Nagarajan, deeply moved by the way of life of the Indian in all aspects, sensitive innately, appreciative of the charms of nature vouchsafed only for those who could be in tune with it, endowed with an expression immaculate, soft-gliding, arresting in its power of narration and inviting in its rare flavour, choice diction and colourful conceptual narration, should have created delightful unforgettable vignettes of characters that he has moulded and episodic events that he has woven into his delightful stories, creations of a genius saturated in life and its charms, its mode and its tenor, particularly in the South. A few gifted writers like him and K.S. Venkataramani, Manjeri S. Iswaran, S.V.V. and R.K. Narayan have made South Indian life a delightful thing in itself to be loved and cherished. Mr. Nagarajan is one of those very few who can paint in words and revel in colour variation, creating characters, that leave a permanent impression on the minds of the readers, as living personalities, not unlike Oliver Twist, Little Nell or Pickwick.

It is a great good fortune that such a writer has chosen to narrate the theme of Kaveri, the river dearest to the South Indian, who believes not only in the motherly form of this nourishing stream, that has made its water-fed areas proverbially fertile, but also as the holy one rendered more sacred by a deep-rooted belief that all the sacred rivers of this vast sub-continent like Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Krishna, Narmada and Sindhu, rush into the stream annually between October 15 and November 15, when the Sun enters the constellation Libra, in the township of Mayuram, and once in twelve years in Kumbakonam, where, when the Sun is in the constellation Leo, the large temple tank, fed by the wàters of Kaveri, that flows not very far away, attracts similar attention. All the sacred rivers of the land are believed to rush from underground to mingle their sacred waters to render more sacred, the Kaveri herself, when an unprecedented gathering of men, women and children renders the surface of the water completely covered by a sea of heads which is all that eye can perceive.

Mr. Nagarajan has described his delightful travels all along the Kaveri, during several years, from the source to the sea, and delightfully recalls not only memories of vision, but also the achievements pertaining to the harnessing of the river itself for the weal of the territory fed by its waters and the architects of such concepts of utilisation. The life on the banks of this river, the beautiful temples, fairs and festivals, the villages and towns that produced distinguished individuals noted for their conspicuous proficiency in different branches of learning and fine arts including music and dance, with a background of the growth or decline of institutions all along its winding path, by an absorbing narration of lively history from

source to the sea, covering various dynasties not only geographically but also chronologically, now picturing the river as a stream, now again as a personified mother and than again as the goddess entitled to a dedicated adoration by all the children of her soil, is the main tenor.

This beautiful book is a delightful taste of the honey-sweet expression and colourful creative imagination in narration of Mr. K. Nagarajan, to whom the English-speaking world all over and particularly that of the southern-most part of the peninsula are beholden for so lovely a treat. It is my great good fortune that I am able to say this as the humblest tribute that I can offer as an admirer of his writings for a lifetime.

National Museum
New Delhi
22nd August, 1974

C. SIVARAMAMURTI

PLATES

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TO

Dr. Sivaramamurti, an authority on South Indian art for the distinction of a Foreword which I greatly prize;
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Mrs. Vinaye Jha, I.A.S., for hints about Coorg and its folk;
B. Natarajan, for help in tying up loose ends.
K. Mahalingam, for willing and efficient typing.

PREFACE

This is not a Tràvel Diary. Nor is it the record of a pilgrimage. It is a bit of both but mainly a collection of random notes of my wanderings up and down the Cauveri in the intervals of a busy life. Nor is it a statistical account of areas under cultivation or irrigation facilities. Very early, the Cauveri cast its spell upon me and it was only when I visited Talaikaveri, among the hills of Coorg, that my enslavement was complete. That visit I paid in the company of Hilton Brown, who too had come under the spell. A Morayshire Scot, who was in the Indian Civil Service and served for three years as Commissioner of Coorg, he knew the terrain. We went up, he and I and Mr. Belliappa of the Forests, an old friend of Hilton Brown. We trudged up the mountain-track from Bhagamandala, at the foot of the hills. Talaikaveri is just a shrine and a pond, with a primitive habitation for the officiating priest. I bathed in the pond—the *kund*—where the baby Cauveri springs to life, and offered the customary oblations of water to the souls of my dead ancestors, while Hilton Brown and Belliappa looked on from an adjacent ridge. They insisted on my breaking my fast with the temple priest in his wigwam of thatch, for which Belliappa had thoughtfully arranged. Good men both, they were keen that, for one day, I should preserve my Brahminism unsullied.

That was the beginning and, with the passing of the years, the river's spell grew on me. In the days which followed, I made it a point to visit interesting spots on the river's course, sometimes alone and sometimes with Hilton Brown or any friend who was prepared to rough it, for it was not always easy to get to some of them and, when you did, the available shelter was primitive. However, there were compensations; it was ground which had echoed to the tread of saints and sages and the trample of soldiery. There were temples and shrines, on plain and beetling cliff, going back several centuries, pulsating with life, if only you were attuned to hear it.

The Cauveri had brought blessings to the south country; her waters had fertilised its fields and, on its banks, doctrinal hairs had been split, and schools of philosophy had flourished, dividing into opposing camps those whom Hinduism had made one. History had been made on her banks and, in her flowing waters, you can hear the music of India's humanity, now still and sad, now cheerful and stimulating.

It was a rewarding experience and I made notes at the time which, it is just possible, may arouse pleasing memories in those who know the river. That is the explanation and excuse for this book which, whether it pleases the reader or fails to please, has given me the greatest pleasure to write.

K. NAGARAJAN

ONE

The month is October and the Sun is about to enter the constellation *Libra;* the north-east monsoon is on but it is the east coast which receives the main share of its benefits and what the more westerly parts of the Deccan receive is negligible. The cold weather is at hand and there is already a tang in the mountain air, which is exhilarating. The *Sahyadris,* one of the more westerly spurs of the Western Ghats, high above which hang a few lazily-drifting banks of cloud, greet the morning sun, whose early beams strike a peak here and a peak there, with leaping shafts of light. The grey dawn soon disappears, and the amphitheatre of the hills is bathed in a soft, limpid light.

There, under the Brahmagiris, an easterly spur, a vast pilgrim throng is collected. And its numbers are growing every minute. Most of them have arrived overnight and there is hardly house-room for them all. They are encamped under overhanging ledges of rock and hastily-improvised shelters, for Talaikaveri itself is little more than a shrine and a pond. The morning brings more contingents who have trudged up from Bhagamandala, at the foot of the hills, five miles below. There is a motorable road now and several bus-loads of pilgrims keep arriving and also buses in every stage of decrepitude, packed tight with pious families longing for spiritual merit by being present at the birth of the baby Cauveri. Quite a few come up in luxury cars, stand round importantly to witness the birth, have a ritual bath and then leave for breakfast down below on the plains. They are the fortunate few but by far the majority of the pilgrims prefer to do it the hard way, for slogging it on foot has the quality of a penance, while to roll around in a limousine hardly makes for spiritual merit.

In the wide pavilion, canopied by the sky, under the gooseberry tree believed to be an arboreal manifestation of *Mahavishnu,* the Preserver among the Hindu Trinity, there is a pond about four feet square, where the

priests and the more important pilgrims stand around in expectation. The priests, who have been so from father to son down the ages, are believed to know almost to the minute when the water will come gurgling up. Is it that their more-than-ordinarily-sensitive ears can hear the faint gurgles down below in the deeper recesses of the pond long in advance, or is it that they receive some esoteric hint denied to their earthier fellow-mortals? Anyway, they predict the time well ahead and pilgrims from far and near flock to the Brahmagiris. And, at the appointed hour, the ears are strained to hear the water come gurgling up and, when it does, exclamations of delight rend the air. And, sooner than it takes to tell, the water fills the pond, overflows into the larger cistern near by and then, in little sharps and trebles, makes its way in an ever-widening stream to the plains below. At Bhagamandala, at the foot of the hills, she is joined by the *Kanya,* little more than a brook, which comes from haunts of snipe and wild fowl, the first recruit to her ranks. The sophisticated modern man is convinced that there is nothing esoteric about the forecast; it is all a piece of arithmetic based on the revolution of the Sun, and the calendar gives the exact moment when the Sun enters the constellation, *Libra.*

Thus is the Cauveri born. The assembled throng of pilgrims hail the advent of the baby Cauveri ecstatically and offer her their adoration even as the wise men of the East hailed the advent of the infant Jesus in the manger at Bethlehem. The look on their faces is beatific.

To the Hindus, their rivers are goddesses. They possess the authentic attributes of divinity. They create, cherish and, when the time comes for it, destroy. Indeed, one could say that the Cauveri is a liquid symbol of the Hindu Trinity rolled into one. And, at the height of their power, they confer blessings without which life on earth cannot go on.

Being goddesses, the rivers of India appear, even as the gods appear, in answer to human prayer. It was the penance of the King Bhagiratha which brought down the Ganges from her abode in the high heavens. She had to descend by the compulsion of the king's penance. She resented the imperious summons and so came down in an angry flood and, as that would have spelt destruction to the world, the Lord Parameswara, to obviate it and, at the same time, teach her a lesson, arrested her in her downward course, emmeshed her in his matted locks and then sent her down in moderated speed. A rebuke which proved a blessing, for ever since her descent she has been accommodated, even as the crescent moon is, on Parameswara's head.

The birth of the Cauveri is a different story. Her birth was less boisterous, almost human. The sage, Kavera, was engaged in penance on the Brahma-

giris, legs crossed, eyes closed and mind turned inward; foodless and waterless, he was lost for months—or, was it years?—in meditation. What boon the sage craved, we can only infer. He must have craved for a daughter, for that was what *Brahma,* the Creator, pleased with the sage's penance, gave him in answer to his prayer and that was none other than his own daughter. She arrived at the sage's hermitage presumably in the shape of a baby, grew up and served him with filial affection and came to be known as *Kavera's* daughter, *Kaveri.*

However, it was not all so simple as it sounds. Kaveri must have had a dual personality, for there was already a part of her, in human shape, known to the world as *Lopamudra,* while Kaveri herself was water personified. The country must have suffered from a severe drought and the Creator must have intended to prevent its recurrence by endowing the sage with a daughter who could fertilise the earth.

For all that she was water, she was earthy enough to enter into wedlock and, when the time came for her to marry, she was espoused by Agastya, the diminutive-sized sage, who reclaimed the forested Deccan table-land. It was a more than ordinarily successful wooing, for he married both the halves, *Lopamudra* and *Kaveri.* One day, the sage left Kaveri in his *kamandulu* (water-jug) and was engaged in meditation. A crow happened to come along, perhaps seeking to slake its thirst, and upset the jug, and the water flowed in a stream, gathering volume as it went along, conferring blessings all along her course. Not far from the *kund* is a shrine to the sage, Agastya, and that is appropriate, for we owe the Cauveri to him.

There is a legend recorded in the Tamil epic, *Silappadikaram,* that a Chola King, Kantaman, seeing the land suffer from drought prayed for relief and that his prayer was answered by a heavenly ordinance that a crow should upset Agastya's water-jug, thus releasing the pent-up waters of the Cauveri. That must have suited the Heavenly Givers for, at one stroke, the prayers of two devotees—Kavera and the Chola King, Kantaman,—were simultaneously answered. A further refinement is that it was the elephant-god, Ganesa, himself, who assumed the form of a crow and upset the jug.

And the grateful people of the south country observe the Cauveri's annually recurring birth as a holy event. They hail her advent, bathe in her purifying waters and offer adoration at her shrine, which is little bigger than a cell. They worship her with gifts of fruit and flowers, frankincense and myrrh. And they do it again, sometime in August, when the Cauveri, having received the full benefit of the south-west monsoon, flows majestically along in full flood. That is known in Tamil as the day of the "eighteenth

increase''* a reminder that, when the Cauveri overflows the eighteenth of the stairs wherever they may have been built on her banks, she is in full flood and at the height of her power. That is a time for picnicking. Those who live on her banks make it into a holiday. The women, fresh-looking after a bath in her waters, in gaily-coloured *saris,* faces aglow with turmeric and saffron, go laden with hampers of rice cooked in cocoanut, tamarind and curds, while school-children carry their used-up class-lessons, laboriously inscribed with a stylus on dried palm-leaves and surrender them to the river as a thank-offering. Some of the lads, in an excess of animal spirits, exclaim, "No more school for us!" Not that they believe that their school-going is at an end but they like to pretend it is!

2

Coorg, where the Cauveri, springs to life, is a land of romance. Tucked away among the high hills, she has been—until very recently—outside the main stream of Indian life. Enbowered in cedar and sandalwood, she is in Kalidasa's lovely phrase, the home of the betel-vine creeper, clambering up the areca-palm and the cardamom-hugged sandalwood tree. Almost every cottage has its betel-vine and areca-nut tree and the Coorg's ideal of post-prandial pleasure is to chew betel and areca-nut fresh from his garden. It cannot be denied that a quid of betel so made has a flavour which one misses in the ingredients purchased in the markets on the plains.

The Coorgs (*Kodagis*) are a well-knit, kindly people. Their traditional costume is the most picturesque that one sees in India. The men, in long black coats which reach down to the knee, and are cut in the shape of a V over the chest, leaving the arms bare below the elbow, with a belt which supports a poniard, carry themselves admirably. A touch of courtliness is given by their turbans of white muslin, bordered with silver—and in the case of the wealthier gold lace. However, a modern—and, if you think of it, incongruously modern—note has crept into their costume; sandals have given place to shoes and stockings while, inside their coats, they wear starched linen shirts, with cuffs, wing-collars and bow-ties.

The women catch the eye in their *saris* of silk, hitched up above the breast and held in position by golden clasps. And thereby hangs a tale. Once Parvati appeared in a dream and told King Devakanta to assemble all his people at Valamburi, which he did; the Cauveri flowed in a great torrent down the valley with such force that the women's *saris* were

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*The eighteenth is also said to refer to the eighteenth day of the Tamil month.

twisted into knots at the back. And in remembrance of it, the women tuck up their *saris* below the nape of the neck. They are fond of flowers, which they wear in abundance, and, when they go about in groups, are a regular flower-garden in motion. Now-a-days they receive a modern education at which they are apt but continue to retain their pleasing ancestral modes of behaviour. They are generous hostesses and very deferential to their elders. A most pleasing sight is of young women bowing to their grown-up friends and relations with folded palms and then touching their ankles—a gesture answered by being stroked on the head by way of blessing. It is something like a healing touch, as in the case of the woman who was cured of her affliction by touching the seams of Jesus' robe. The orthodox explanation is that the blessings of elders are, in effect, a transference of a part of their accumulated merit. Failure to bless results in the flow to them of a portion of the demerits of those who kneel to them. The women are strong in ballad-music and the banks of the river are often the scene of impromptu concerts. They sing of seed-time and harvest, the pleasures of the domestic hearth and the wrench caused when daughters leave the parental roof to join their husbands.

The Coorgs, in their mountain fastnesses, remind one of the Highlanders of Scotland, and have the Highlanders' virtues with very few of their shortcomings. They have a strong spirit of family and clan but are far from clannish. They are brave in war and keen followers of the chase. The jungles abound in panthers, bison and elephants and the Coorgs enjoy hunting them down. Here is an English translation of a hunting-song from Mr. Muthanna's book on Coorg.

> "At Keil Mhurtha my work is done,
> Then to the woods with knife and gun;
> I shoot the tiger, bison, deer
> I am a happy mountaineer!"

The Coorgs held the heroes of the chase in high regard. One who brought down a bison or a panther shot up in the estimation of the public. They praised him high and low, gave him garlands and actually "married" him to the quarry he had brought down. The (Madras) *Mail* not so long ago recalled the case of a tiger-hunt in which two English officers and a Coorg Subhedar tracked down a tiger and killed him. The Subhedar, who bore a name which was to become an honoured one far later, Cariappa,—not the General—shot the tiger at eighty yards and wounded him. The tiger had still some fight left in him. Infuriated, he turned back and was

going to have his revenge which would have been deadly but for one of the officers, Lieutenant Clerk, taking aim and hitting him on the shoulder. The tiger was taken to Mercara with great ceremony and displayed on the Fort walls. According to custom, Cariappa was "married" to the tiger which was brought from the Fort and installed in front of his house. He was arrayed in wedding garments, covered with garlands and ornaments, a sacred lamp was lit, and gifts of flowers and rice were made, some of which the bridegroom strewed on his head. Gifts of money were made with which the bridegroom stood his admiring friends a sumptuous dinner. The wedding festivities were brought to an end by the guests dancing round the tiger *a la Coorg.*

3

For all her inaccessibility Coorg was not left in peace. Her neighbours were always casting covetous eyes on her—she was too beautiful to be left undesired and, like all beautiful things, had to be fought over. Her history is an epitome of all South Indian history. She is rich in archaeological relics, burial urns, cromlechs and cairns. The Gangas, the Cholas, the Hoysalas and the Vijayanagar Kings established their lordship over Coorg for varying periods and left their mark on the country. The Cholas from the Tamil country, which owed its prosperity to the Cauveri, took a hand and sent expeditions. At Periyapatna, Karikala Chola is said to have excavated a tank and built a temple to Mallikarjuna. Periyapatna formed part of the territory of the Chengalava Kings, who accepted the Chola overlordship and were so impressed with it that they called themselves Kulothunga Chola Chengalavas. They captured Talakad—for all its lovely location, now sadly neglected—and conquered Coorg and ruled over it fitfully for over a century. Their rule, so long as it lasted, was by all accounts, a beneficent one. Tamil culture spread to Coorg and temples were built at different points of the river's course. The Lord Vishnu, as Sri Ranganatha, is intimately associated with the Cauveri and the temple at Kushalnagar is Chola in style. Other examples are at Kodlipet and Bhagamandala. Military conquest by the Cholas was commemorated by the planting of pillars of victory, called *virakkals** and many such stones were said to have existed in different parts of Coorg. There are still a few left standing.

Coorg passed under the Vijayanagar Empire and formed part of the dominions of the chieftains of Belur, who were feudatories of Vijayanagar.

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* Stones to commemorate valour.

And when Vijayanagar declined, Coorg came into her own and held it, with intervals of internal discord, till the eighteenth century, when Haider Ali appeared on the scene and began his work of devastation. He seized the Raja of Coorg and forcibly converted him to Islam but the Raja escaped and lived to have his revenge. However, Haider's sky was getting overcast. It was not long before he was involved in a life-and-death struggle with the East India Company, as was his son, Tipu, later. That was Coorg's opportunity. She came to an understanding with the Company and had a spell of ordered administration under her own kings, of whom the best-known and best-liked was Linga Raja II. The spell did not last long; the Imp of Mischief was at work, the affairs of the State were again involved in confusion and the British had to enter and take over the administration. For some time, it was administered by the British Resident at Bangalore but then Mysore's affairs were themselves getting so tangled that it had to have a full-time Resident and so Coorg was constituted a separate administration under a Chief Commissioner. That brought order into the administration.

On the advent of Indian Independence, Coorg came under the Indian Union. And that has secured to both Coorg and the Indian Union advantages which are not negligible. To independent India, Coorg has given at least two outstanding soldiers, General Cariappa and General Thimmaya—both of whom won distinction in the field. They were gallant soldiers and the untimely death of the latter at Cyprus was a blow from which the country will take a long time to recover.

The Cauveri has been Coorg's guardian angel. She has brought prosperity to the country, which is largely under paddy. The hillsides are rich in growing timber and, about the middle of the last century, coffee was introduced and it has prospered ever since.

Coorg is an ideal place to go holidaying in. The Cauveri is her strongest link with the south, both in the realms of spirituality and material prosperity. A pilgrimage to Talaikaveri, is as sacred as a pilgrimage to Benares or Rameswaram. Mr. Muthanna, in his book, records the visit of distinguished men to Coorg, including the Maharaja of Mysore, Srinivasa Sastri and Sivaswami Aiyar, all of whom have rubbed shoulders with the poor man and the peasant on the slopes of the *Sahyadris*. Indian nationalism became a major influence when Gandhiji visited Coorg. The visitors based themselves, doubtless, on Mercara, the headquarters town, its primitive stronghold guarded by two elephants of black-painted brick and lime, a jumping-off place from where to proceed to explore the views and vistas of the hills and dales of Coorg. The country is also the sportsman's Paradise and the

hospitality of the coffee-planters normally limited to men of their race, was proverbial. They were keen followers of the chase and hunted regularly. Hounds came to be kept from about the beginning of the present century and kennelled at Periyapatnam, on the Mysore-Mercara Road. Periyapatnam appears to have been a favourite haunt of tigers, which at one time were the terror of the people. On one occasion they went and took possession of the temples and the fort, and it required the skill and intrepidity of the *shikaris* of Coorg to get rid of them. So Periyapatnam's claim to provide accommodation for the hounds was undeniable. Coorg ranked high as hunting country and life in Coorg—both for the planters and all Indians who loved sport—overflowed with gaiety during the hunting season, which was normally between April and November. Hunting began to languish after the Second World War and one hopes, some day, it may revive. There is a club—the North Kodagu Club—where Sir Winston Churchill is said to have laid his head in the days when he was a subaltern in the Indian Army. To him, as to Viceroys and Governors, sport and shooting must have been the main attraction which the loveliness of the land must have enhanced.*

*Talking of tigers their numbers began to shrink alarmingly. This was referred to at a Conference held in New Delhi in 1970. It is a thousand pities that nothing was done to prevent the destruction. These tigers, it seems, were trapped and poisoned. Lovers of big game were broken hearted over this. It is gratifying to be able to record that a Task Force, as it is called, was set up to devise means to preserve tigers from extinction. That step was the result of an offer made by the Trustees of the World Wild Life Fund to assist India to save the species. It is even more gratifying to be able to record that the steps taken have been effective and the number of tigers is going up.

TWO

Fraserpet, so named after a British Resident of Mysore, on the Coorg-Mysore frontier, is no longer Fraserpet but Kushalnagar, the name bestowed on her by Haider Ali, who was campaigning there. News was brought to him of the birth of a son-and-heir, the Tipu Sultan-to-be, and, in the gladness of his heart, he named the town Kushalnagar, which means the City of Delight. Whether he would have considered the name appropriate, if he could have foreseen the wreck which Tipu was destined to make of the kingdom he had won for him, one may take leave to doubt. However, like the Hindus, Muslims love to have sons to carry on the family inheritance, and Haider's heart was filled with understandable delight when they brought the good news to him.

It was not as if Tipu was lacking in courage; what he lacked was his father's eye to practicalities and his flair for diplomacy. Haider was unrivalled in that way, he could size up his antagonists and, to his undoubted valour, he added the discretion which is its better part. Tipu under-rated the British, played his cards badly and embarked on a career punctuated with nothing but disaster. Easy come, easy go, was illustrated by his career and it could well be said of him that nothing in his life became him so much as the leaving of it.

Fraserpet or, if you prefer, Kushalnagar, like most towns which fringe the course of the Cauveri, is of interest to Hindu pilgrims. Its special distinction, however, lies in its Sun-temple, a sort of South Indian Konarak. The explanation, perhaps, is that it is one of the first to catch the rays of the rising sun in Coorg. There is also a temple to Sri Ranganatha, as the God Vishnu is sometimes known, a deity particularly associated with the Cauveri and who has a temple wherever the river waters divide and re-unite, forming an island.

The Cauveri, when she leaves Coorg, may be said to enter enchanted

ground. Beyond Kushalnagar, she turns east, and almost the first considerable shrine on her course is at Ramnathpur, which has a special claim to sanctity. The legend is that Rama, the hero of the Ramayana, in order to expiate his sin in killing Ravana, the *asura* or demon king, worshipped the phallus symbol of Parameswara at that spot. Rama was the incarnation on earth of Vishnu, the Preserver among the Hindu Trinity, and had chosen to be born of man and woman at the behest of the sages who were engaged in penance in the forests of the Deccan. The *asuras* were getting out of hand; they respected neither sage nor seer and recognised no human authority. The outlook was menacing and the only hope of succour seemed to be in the hands of the Lord Vishnu. The sages sought His help and He readily gave it. It is His declared purpose, when righteousness declines and the wicked get out of hand, to incarnate himself on the earth to punish evil-doers and protect the virtuous. So He was born as Rama, son of Dasaratha, King of Ayodhya. And, in obedience to his father's wish (itself in the redemption of a promise made to his second wife) he went to live in the *Dandakaranya* forest, and while there, Ravana, the *asura* king abducted his wife, Sita, and thus provided him with the opportunity to lead a punitive expedition and punish the ill-doing demon king. He killed Ravana in battle, put the kingdom in the hands of his brother, the righteous Vibhishana, and returned home in triumph. The *asuras* had been taught a lesson they were not likely easily to forget. Very meritorious but Rama had uneasy suspicions whether he had not transgressed the law in killing Ravana and a host of *asuras* and he wished to make expiation for his sin. Very squeamish it might appear; it could never be contended that Rama had exceeded his jurisdiction for, though in a division of functions, he was the Preserver, yet Brahma, Vishnu and Siva, the Hindu Triad, are really Three in one and One in Three, and the division of functions was only an arrangement of convenience! The orthodox explanation of the need for expiation was that what was permissible for a deity was not permissible for a mere man—and that was what Rama was, except to the initiate—and the world of men had to be reminded that vengeance was the prerogative of the gods and that so long as Rama was in human shape he should conform to the law that governed ordinary mortals and, like mortals, who had transgressed the law, was bound to make expiation for it.

No wonder, then, that Ramnathpur is an important religious centre. It has a regular pantheon of deities, Rama, his loyal brother, Lakshmana, his wife, Sita, and Subramania, the warrior-god and commander-in-chief of the celestial forces. An eclectic place, where all the deities are accommodated and impartially worshipped. The Common Man is not interested in

the doctrinal hairs which scholars love to split into finer and finer strands, he believes in all the gods, they are just aspects of the Supreme Deity, and he is not tired of seeking their assisting might.

Almost next door is Salagram, so-called on account of the crystal used for worship in the shrine and which is available in the neighbourhood in large quantities—or were—and has also the distinction of having given asylum to Ramanuja, the Vaishnavite seer and sage, when he was forced to flee the Tamil country.

An interesting link with the Tamil country is Chunchan-katte, at the head of a narrow gorge, named Dhanushkoti, where the Cauveri cascades to a depth of over eighty feet. Rama's wife, Sita, is said to have bathed in the Cauveri at the spot and thus given it a special sanctity.

The name is significant. Dhanushkoti, at the southern tip of the Indian peninsula, was the point from which Rama and his forces crossed over to Lanka, and Sita, doubtless, bestowed that name on this spot to mark her gratitude to the jumping-off place which had proved so auspicious in her husband's quest. A grateful local community has built a shrine to Sita herself and the fisher-folk of the neighbourhood make regular offerings at the shrine. All the denizens of the sea proved dependable allies when Rama led his punitive expedition to Lanka.

2

The scenery from now on is fascinating. High wooded hills, deep gorges alternating with the undulating plains fed by the Cauveri and her tributaries, the Lokapavani and the Lakshmanatirta hold the eye in thrall. The Cauveri, fed by her tributaries, is rich in mineral deposits and a beneficent deity, bringing prosperity to the country. The fields are rich with growing corn and that, doubtless, is because the peasantry are industrious and the ruling powers, whoever they happened to be, did not hesitate to help them to put the waters to the best use. There is a Tamil saying which expresses the same idea as the French tag, *pauvre paysan, pauvre royaume, pauvre royaume, pauvre roi.* The Tamil saying states the same idea from a more positive angle. "Raise the ridges, the fields improve; cultivate the fields and Kings prosper." The Cauveri country illustrates the truth of the saying. Prince and peasant, Chola King and Kannadiga rulers, have co-operated down the ages to harness the waters of the Cauveri and utilise them to the fullest extent, an example which has been followed to the present day—only now we are beginning to wrangle over it. There may have been internal discord and aggression from without but that was not

allowed to interfere with the administration of the river economy. There is no recorded instance of anything in the nature of a scorched earth policy, a feature of military tactics with which the present century has made us familiar.

The Cauveri waters have been impounded at several points along their course and there are at least a dozen dams in the Mysore country. Channels take off from every one of them and carry the waters over wide areas, which otherwise, would have lain waste for lack of water or had to be content with rain-water stored in artificial reservoirs. The best-known of these is the Kannambadi dam, which Mysore owes to the genius and engineering skill of Visweswarayya, who later became Dewan of Mysore.

The Cauveri waters were already being used to generate electric power at Sivasamudram but the supply, it was soon realised, was far from adequate and the need to enlarge it urgent. The hydro-electric plant at Sivasamudram, designed to supply power to the Kolar Gold Fields, was not the success it was anticipated to be. Its working—it was one of the earliest long-distance transmission lines in the world—was watched with interest even beyond the confines of India. The results were encouraging but not satisfactory enough and that was because of the fluctuations in the water supply which impeded its successful working.

Sir M. Visweswarayya (his knighthood was to come later) thought over the matter and came to the conclusion that a reservoir at Kannambadi, which was about a mile above Seringapatam, was the most practicable solution of the twin problem, to ensure an enlarged supply of electric power and fuller facilities for irrigation. He drew up plans, made estimates and elaborated a scheme but then there were the usual disheartening delays. Red-tape went into action and very nearly strangled the scheme, which then went into cold storage. It was a striking illustration of a well-known Madras Civilian's gibe that a Government Secretariat's favourite amusement was "first to start a hare and then split it". The pace or rather, the stoppage, of work very nearly broke Visweswarayya's heart; he hoped for the best but it was not long before he lost all hope, and he decided to quit. That was the signal; the Maharaja, who knew a good man where there was one, intervened and persuaded Visweswarayya to stay and sanctioned the scheme.

Another difficulty loomed up. The Government of Madras had planned to construct a dam at Mettur and they felt that the Kannambadi project would cramp their style. The impounding of the Cauveri waters higher up was bound to result in a considerable reduction of the supply and the Madras Government proceeded to make difficulties. More than one spanner

was thrown into the works but Mysore's case was unanswerable and, if one came to think of it, it was really a case of Madras trying to steal Mysore's thunder. It was Mysore's example and initiative which had fired the Madras Government. The Cauveri's course lay through Mysore and the area which the river served was a little over 115,000 acres but Madras had already 1,225,000 acres fed by the Cauveri.* And yet a large surplus of the Cauveri water was unutilised and emptied itself into the sea. Mysore appealed to the Government of India, the matter was referred to arbitration and ultimately a compromise was reached, satisfactory to both sides. And so, everybody home, as Mr. Samuel Pepys would have said.**

Thus the Kannambadi dam came into being, a saga of high endeavour. It was Visweswarayya's skill, drive and initiative which were responsible for it. It was the poet Southey who referred to a well-known English Engineer, as a Colossus of Roads; one could improve on it and describe Visweswarayya as a Colossus of Roads and River-Valleys. He was a gifted engineer and he had broadened his mind by wide travel, in the course of which he had seen and studied large-scale irrigation works like the Assouan Dam and the Tennessee Valley Scheme. The south country owes him more than it can tell. Of him it may be said, in Winston Churchill's phrase, that there were few others to whom so much was owed by so many. He was one of those men whom God undoubtedly loved but he did not die young. He lived to be over a hundred and died in 1964, and one may be sure that his name would have been inscribed in the Recording Angel's Book of Gold.

One good turn deserves another. Mysore, having won her battle over the impounding of the Cauveri waters, came to Madras' help magnificently by agreeing to supply electric power to the Mettur works, which Madras not long afterwards took in hand. The most striking feature of the Kannambadi scheme was the mile-and-half-long tunnel which has been pierced through a range of hills. The dam's blessings have been incalculable. Over 1,00,000 acres of land have been brought under cultivation and the river waters are used to supply power to the sugar and cotton mills of Mysore. The river has every right to be known in Mysore, as in the Tamil country, by the affectionate name of Ponni (the Golden One). She supplies

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* However, disputes were to arise later and talks have been in progress to reconcile the claims of Tamilnadu, Kerala and Karnataka.

** It is a thousand pities that the friendly spirit in which Mysore and Madras composed their differences was not in evidence in the recent controversy between Mysore, Kerala and Tamilnad over the sharing of the waters of the Cauveri. It is hoped that the acerbity which has crept into their discussions will soon disappear and the spirit of give-and-take be again to the fore.

the required electric power to the Kolar Gold Fields and indeed, can be described with even greater appropriateness than in the Tamil country as the Golden River (*Ponni*).

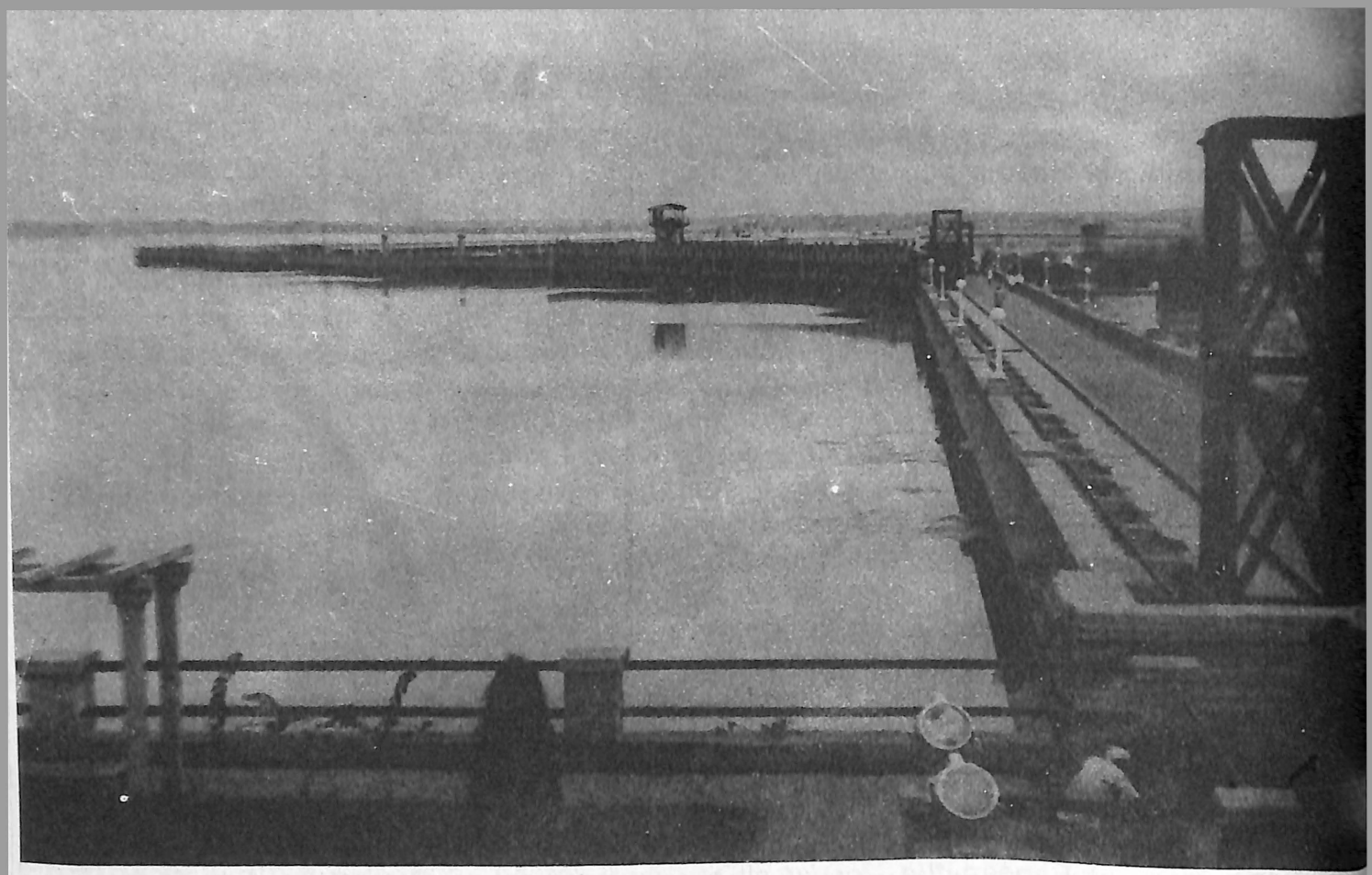
The Krishnarajasagar dam is a scene to visit. The sight and sound of the waters which swirl and eddy and roar their way through the dam is a scene of awe and majesty and, at nightfall, when the stars come overhead and the dam is lit up with electricity, solemnity seems to co-exist with beauty. Now and again, the place is flood-lit, and light in all colours and every conceivable mixture of colours, converts the scene into a fairyland. There is no more delightful way of spending a week-end than by booking a room at the State-run hotel at Brindaban, walking along the dam and sauntering about the neighbouring country-side.*

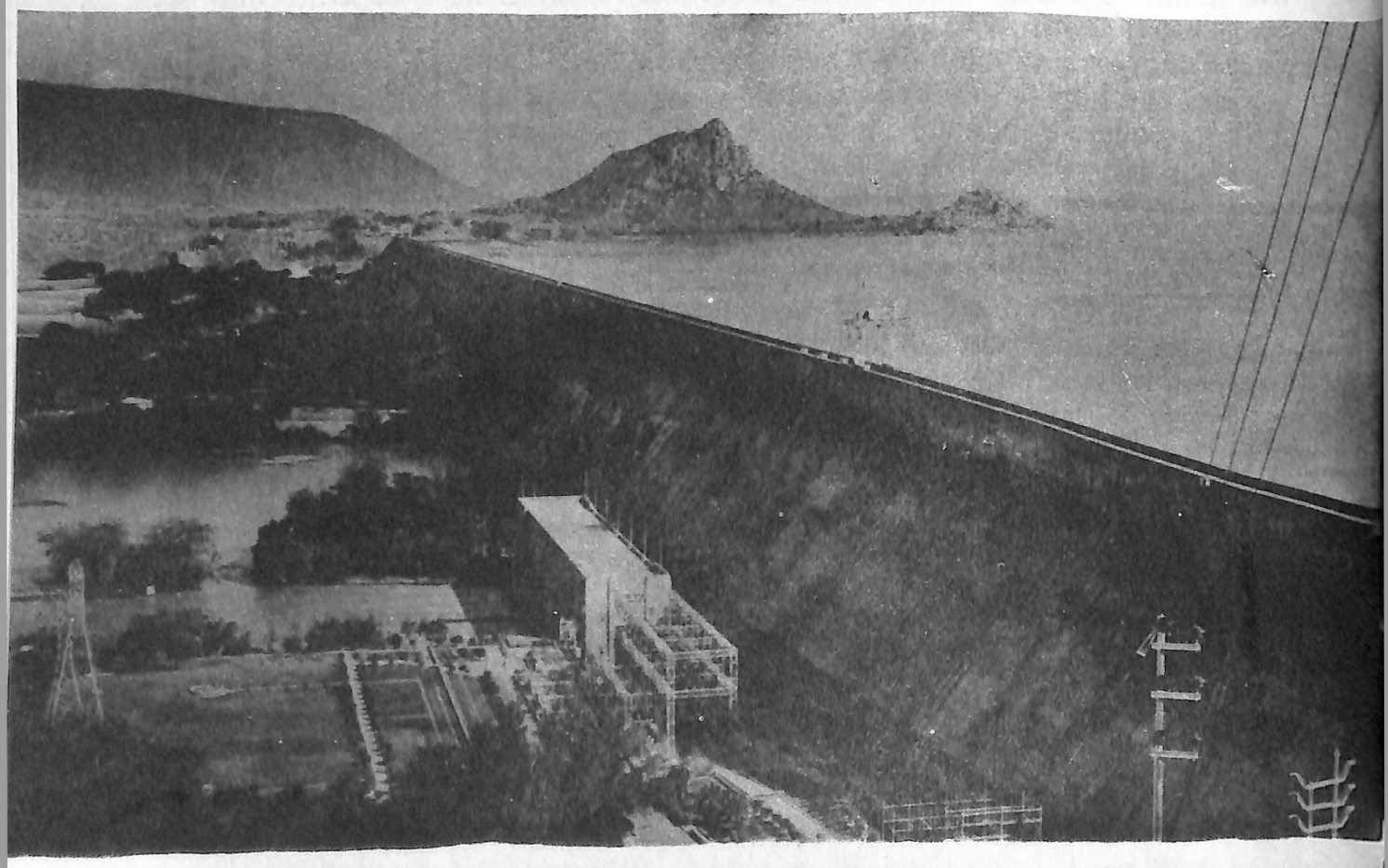
The Cauveri then flows eastward until it reaches Seringapatam. There, she splits into two arms at its north-western end which rejoin in the east forming the island of Seringapatam. That is the English version of Sri Rangapatnam, the city of the Lord Ranganatha, who reclines there in his shrine at full-length on his serpent couch, while *Adisesha,* the cobra-king, who bears the earth on his head, protects the Lord from the wind and the rain with his outspread five hoods. The shrine was sacred even to Tipu who, for all his fanatic Islamic zeal, made ample endowments to it. He craved the grace of Ranganatha—or, at all events behaved as though he did—for Ranganatha's power was accounted great and Tipu couldn't afford to take risks. Also, it might have been a bid for the favour of the Hindus who formed the bulk of the population. For all his devotion, the rot had set in and not even Ranganatha could check it, perhaps Ranganatha did not care. It was within half-a-mile of the shrine that Tipu's forces were defeated and he himself was slain.

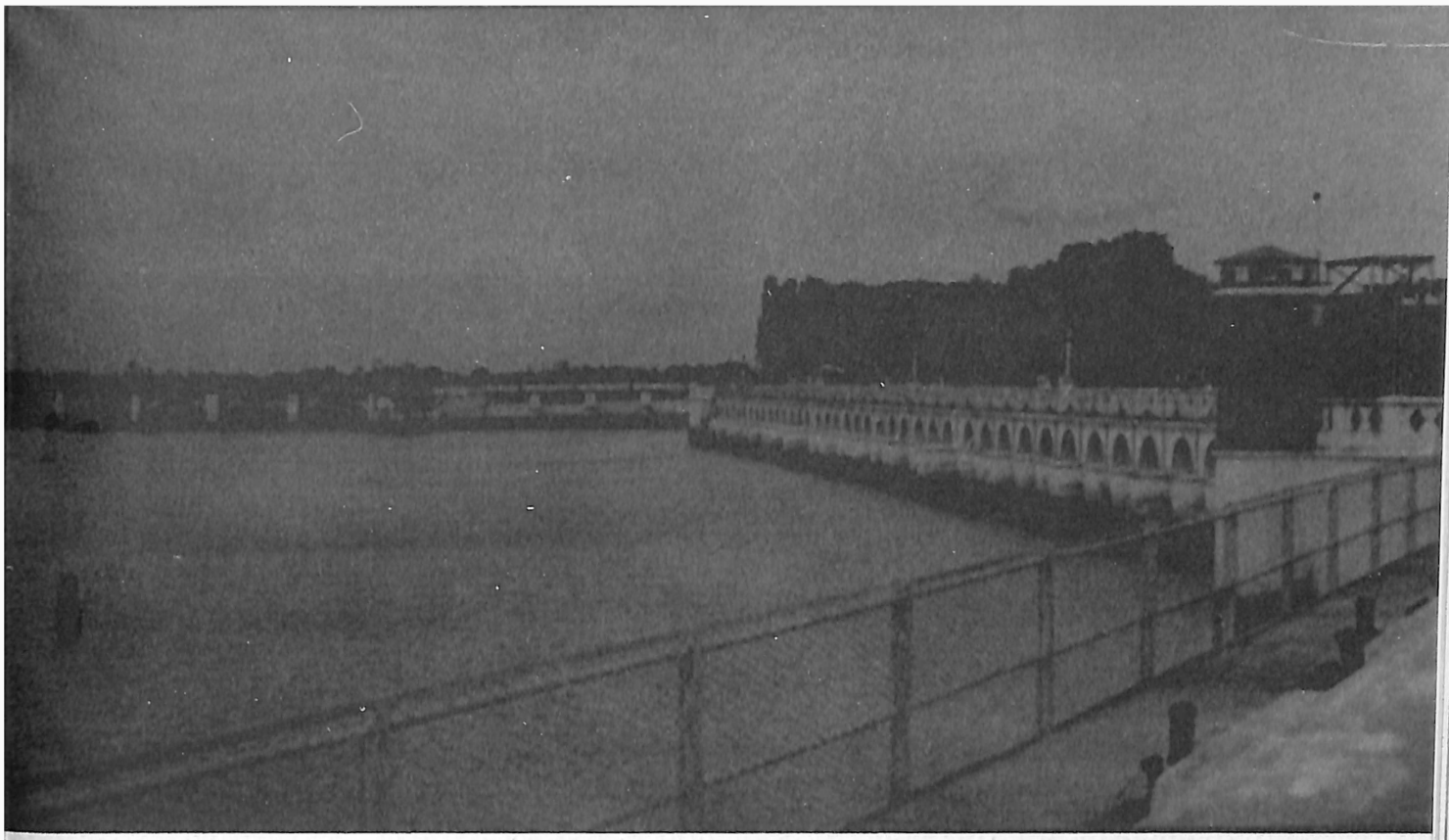
At the point where the Cauveri divides herself into two arms lay the hermitage of Gautama. Whether he was the sage mentioned in the Ramayana or a different Gautama is open to doubt but certainly he had an eye for *locale.* A serener spot for contemplation cannot be imagined though, at present, nobody goes there except an occasional pilgrim who pays it a duty visit.

The Cauveri no doubt brought prosperity to Mysore but it could hardly be said to have brought peace. Raids and invasions by hostile powers were frequent but, in retired nooks and on high hills, temples were built to serve as havens of rest and peace and, incidentally, as a warning

* Ramanuja, when he fleo the Chola country on account of the hostility of the current Chola ruler, who had no use for Vaishnavites, found sanctuary in Mysore, where he succeeded in converting Bitti Deva a confirmed Jain to *vaishnavism.*







to wrong-doers that at some point they should desist, if for nothing else, for fear of the Lord. An example of the former was at Tonnur, north of Seringapatam, at the foot of the Chinkarab hills. It was supposed to be haunted by demons which the *Vaishnava* sage, Ramanuja, is believed to have cast out. He is also believed to have put the Jains in their place, there is no tangible evidence that he did, but his residence in the Melkote neighbourhood may have resulted in a lessening of Jain influence.

Tonnur was a prosperous and populous place and the Hoysalas, early in the fourteenth century, made it their capital. It was rich in temples, massive structures with the usual complement of *mantapams*. No wonder it provided shelter to Sri Ramanuja who, even if he did not reside there for any length of time, doubtless made frequent visits to it. The best way to get to Tonnur would be to proceed to French Rocks and go through Pandavapura (by no means an attractive town) but renowned in legend as the very spot at which Bhima, the Pandava stalwart, slew the ill-doing demon, *Bakasura*.

One striking feature of Tonnur at the present day is the tomb of Masaud, a Muslim Saint, who is said to have been a camp-follower of Mohamad of Ghazni. Another attraction is the Moti Talab, a lovely sheet of water, very like the Rambha in Ganjam and, maiden-like, it hides itself behind the Chinkurli hills. To get a proper view of it, one has to climb up a steep hill.

More prosperous, at all events, more renowned, was Melkote, the scene of Ramanuja's labours. It is built on a longish ridge of rock which Hilton Brown, to whom I owed my introduction to it, aptly compared to an upturned ship. Ramanuja is said to have recovered a number of missing idols, a feat accounted miraculous in his day. Idols seem to disappear in larger numbers at the present day. They seem to take wings and establish themselves in foreign strands. No wonder they do, they seem to yield rich dividends in the field of art. One hopes that a miracle-worker may appear soon, if not to effect recoveries, at least, to prevent further disappearances.

There was a peculiar appropriateness in Ramanuja spreading the cult of devotion from Melkote. That was the birthplace of Ramananda, who spread the Vaishnavite movement in the north country. Like Kabirdas,* Nanak and Tukaram, he was one of the chief apostles of the creed.

Ramanuja's supreme claim to remembrance lay in his broad-mindedness and humanity. Steeped in the lore of the vedas, he was quick to realise that the abode of God should be accessible to all men and women and was

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* Kabir's conception of God was expressed in terms of familiar intimacy.

able to persuade the Hoysala kings to permit all Hindus, unmindful of caste, to enter temples. Even a greater claim to remembrance was his bold broadcasting of the sacred teaching, in the teeth of opposition, from the parapet of a famous *Vaishnava* shrine* in the south country. The story goes that his teacher warned him that if he should broadcast the sacred teaching, he would have to go to Hell and Ramanuja said, in reply, that he would not mind going to Hell if he could help his fellowmen to go to Heaven. His example died with him and it was much later, only the other day, that his example came to be followed. Ramanuja believed in the grace of God; a dry philosophy was not to his taste; and it should be said that his teaching appealed to the average man and woman. He did not find favour with the current Chola king and so, as already stated, had to flee the country. He took refuge in the Mysore country and when the climate of religious opinion changed he returned to the south.

French Rocks, really Hirod, came to be so named as the French forces happened to occupy it during the Mysore wars. They are just an outcrop of rock on a flat terrain and should have been a good observation point in war-time.

* Tirukoshtiyur in the Ramnad District.

THREE

Tamilnad is the Cauveri's next port of call. Where she enters it she is just a few yards wide and flows through gorgeous country. She flows along the western boundary of the Hosur and Kollegal *taluqs.*

As she moves on, legends and marvels accumulate. Bhavani, not far from Erode, is an inconspicuous township but, at one time, its merit was accounted great. It stands at the confluence of three rivers, the Bhavani, the Cauveri and an underground stream which bubbles up from below and joins its waters to theirs—a repetition in the south country of the triple confluence at *Prayag* (modern Allahabad) where the waters of the Ganges and the Jumna are joined by the waters of the Saraswati, invisible (at all events, at the present day) to the naked eye but which, according to scriptural authority, comes up from down below. The parallelism was so striking that the confluent waters here came to be known as *dakshina prayag* (Southern *Prayag*).

Bhavani has another claim to distinction. It was at this spot that the sage, *Parasara,* the Father of Astrology, was engaged in a long and severe penance, in appreciation of which Lord Vishnu gave him a share of the nectar which was churned out of the Ocean of Milk where he reclines in state. The sage kept it in his jug but the ill-doing *asuras* were after it but they were foiled by the intervention of Lord Siva, and the sage, in order to keep if safe, buried it underground. Some time later, when he went to look for it, it wasn't there but, in its place, there was a *linga,* the phallus symbol of Siva and, when he tried to lift it, a stream of water gushed out; the Cauveri and the Bhavani turned in their courses and came towards the *linga* and the triple confluence was effected. Parasara called the *linga* Sangameswara, the Lord of the Confluence and a temple was erected to Sangameswara and, his consort, Vedanayaki. No wonder the sanctity of the spot rose to heights. A peculiar feature is the *gayatri lingam.*

Marvels never cease. One occurred in the opening years of the last century, the authenticity of which has not been questioned. Bhavani was the headquarters of the area now comprised by the larger part of the present districts of Salem and Coimbatore, selected, doubtless, on account of its situation, which was central. The Collector of the district was an Englishman of the name of Garrow—Edmund Garrow—a God-fearing man, free from sectarian bias. He liked his charge and the people committed to his care, and the people, in their turn, held him in high regard. He was impressed by the ecstatic devotion of the pilgrims who used to gather at the *sangam* for a sanctifying bath and it is said he used to look on from his bungalow with joined palms, as Hindus do. The people were struck by his devotion to a Hindu deity and they wished that their Collector should be admitted to a sight of Sangameswara, but as none except Hindus could go into the sacred precincts, they arranged for two holes to be bored in the temple wall, through which he could gaze on the deity. The gratified Collector installed an image of the deity in his own private pantheon, he must have done so as, otherwise, the miracle which occurred cannot be explained. One sweltering afternoon in midsummer, he went to sleep and, in a dream, he saw the goddess, Vedanayaki, warning him to get up and out into the open without a moment's delay, which he did. No sooner had he come out than the room in which he had been sleeping came down with a deafening roar, all bricks and *chunam** and rubble. If ever a man had a providential escape from imminent death, it was when Collector Garrow came out of his house because of the warning dream. It was Vedanayaki who did it,—so did everybody believe—the goddess whom he is said to have regularly worshipped thereafter. To mark his gratitude, Garrow made a gift to Sangameswara of a costly and finely-wrought ivory cradle with his name inscribed on it.

However, Bhavani, for all its sanctity, fell from its high estate; the headquarters of the district was shifted to Coimbatore and the Collector's bungalow became a Traveller's Rest-house. Perhaps it was all for the best; it is good for the sanctity of a sacred place that it is left in obscurity and peace. From a worldly point of view, Bhavani may have gone down but as a place where the seared soul and the wounded heart can find consolation and peace, its reputation is as high as ever.

The Cauveri sometimes takes the bit between her teeth and bolts and then it is quite a job to coax her back to sedateness. She dries up completely and refuses to flow and that is probably because people fall

* Mortar.

off from righteousness; the only way to woo her back into conferring her favours is to repent and make atonment. As happened once at Hoganaikal, about thirty miles from Dharmapuri, Hoganaikal is in thickly-wooded country and the Cauveri waters come tumbling down from various heights with a tremendous crash and roar. Hoganaikal* is the most impressive of those falls. They leap down from about a height of eighty feet and when the waters strike the boulders, huge volumes of spray go up like a sheet of smoke and that explains the name, Hoganaikal, which means "smoking rock". The particular spot is known as *Brahmakundam* and that is because, at one time, the Cauveri had completely dried up and nothing could induce her to flow, not even when the sages engaged in penance beseeched her to relent. In their extremity, they pleaded with *Brahma*, the Creator, who organised a great sacrifice and that had the desired effect. The river relented, recovered her good humour and flowed again. Her further course is through a narrow gorge, so narrow that at one point a goat can leap from one side to the other. It is known as the Goat's Leap.

I have referred to the Kannambadi dam and other dams and it was not long before Madras followed Mysore's example. Enormous quantities of the Cauveri waters were being drained away along the Coleroon, in consequence of the rise in levels of the deltaic channels, and a way had to be devised to conserve the waters and turn them to good account. But one could not hustle the Government, any more than one could, as used to be said, 'hustle the East'. A century had to elapse between the conception of the idea and its translation into fact. Arthur Cotton, a captain of engineers, later to achieve distinction in his particular field, went into the question and made proposals, which seemed to meet the need, but, however, went into a pigeon-hole and stayed there, like a bug in a rug, as official proposals often do. Early in the present century the position became so alarming that some remedy had to be devised. The thing to do was to abate the intensity of the recurring floods, store the water in the higher reaches and ensure a uniform supply. The wheels of Government started to move, tardily at first, then gathered momentum, and, at long last, the Mettur dam came into being. A large army of workers laboured on the job, captains of tens and captains of hundreds, but the man who coaxed the wheels into motion and saw to the completion of the project was Sir C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar, not an Engineer himself, but an administrator of ability and drive.

They say, one marriage makes many. So apparently do dams and

*The dam is constructed in a gorge where the river enters the plains. It took nine years to build and was formally opened in 1934. The Salem Gazetteer records it is 176 feet high, that 26 villages were submerged in the process and that the waterspread is 59.65 square miles.

reservoirs of water. Shortly after the Mettur Project was completed, came into being, the Bhavani Sagar dam, at the point where the river Bhavani joins the Cauvery, a little distance below Mettur, another delectable spot which relieves the tired eye as one comes down the ghats from Ootacamund.

In the words of Sir Alfred Chatterton, the Mettur Dam may be regarded as "the coping-stone of the engineering work which was started by the *Chola* kings of Tanjore at some unknown date, but probably in the fourth century, when an engineer of genius constructed an *anicut*, a dam across the Coleroon river, which is the main arm of the deltaic system of channels by which the flood-waters of the Cauveri reach the sea."

Another saga of high endeavour. If you want details of how the work was conceived and carried out, of difficulties met and surmounted, you can do worse than read Mr. S.Y. Krishnaswami's* carefully documented report on the Project.**

All the same, man has to fight a constant rearguard action against Nature which keeps setting him problems. Where water has to be carried over long distances, vast quantities are lost by seepage and by the indiscriminate use of engines and pumps to lift water. This is a problem which has to be faced and, if the job is tackled in a determined spirit, the Cauveri will readily respond on the principle that gods (which term includes goddesses) help those who help themselves.

2

From now on, the Cauveri runs south-east and her course is studded with shrines which go back several centuries. They are of every shade and variety, designed to meet the spiritual needs of men and women at all levels. Besides the authentic gods of the Hindu pantheon, there are animistic deities, anthropomorphic conceptions of the forces of Nature, *Ayyanar, Karuppan, Pidari, Mariamman* and others, in their primitive habitations, a tree or a small mud platform at its foot or, sometimes a rudimentary cell of brick and mortar. Marks of saffron powder, and a few flowers, chrysanthemums for choice, placed there by the rustic poor, indicate their sacred character. *Ayyanar* is the most popular among them; fierce-looking, with upturned moustachios, he is gentle at heart and ever watchful of his flock. He loves horses and there is an imposing array of them in front of his

* Mr. S.Y. Krishnaswami, I.C.S. (since retired) was on special duty on the Project.

** There were heavy floods in June 1961 and extensive damage was caused and steps were taken to conserve the water. In the unprecedented drought of this year (1975), the dam site stands revealed as a waterless tract, in which a submerged shrine of the days of the Pandyas has emerged from its obscurity.

shrine, a regular regiment of Horse Guards, prancing steeds of mud, which he bestrides with something of an air. Then there are wayside shrines to *Ganesa,* elephant-faced and round-bellied, a jolly figure, ever ready to remove obstacles at a devotee's behest, *Subramania,* the war-god, *Murugan* to the Tamils and, here and there, *Kali,* the dread goddess of destruction.

And there are many others, shadowy deities, indistinctly conceived, not unlike those irresponsible fairies and fauns with which the Greeks loved to people their woods and hill-tops and river-valleys. Above them all, in their High Heavens, rule the Hindu Trinity, *Brahma,* the Creator, *Vishnu,* the Preserver and *Siva,* the Destroyer, really one in essence but conceived as three in consequence of a division of functions. They are concepts reached as the result of intensive meditation by sages and seers and other evolved personalities who, renouncing the world, sought to pierce the veil and understand the mystery of life and death and life, if there be any, after death.

Religion, in India, more than anywhere else, is deeply involved in the life of the people. It is, as anthropoligists allow, as much a part of life as is sex. If, as Freud has demonstrated, the roots of psychology lie in sex, religion provides the means to avoid getting entangled in them. In the natural history of man, the part which religion has played in his evolution is a great deal more than appears at first sight.

Thus it was that shrines of every description came to be built on the banks of the Cauveri. To build temples along the course of a sacred river is considered particularly meritorious. Rivers make for ceremonial purity, especially when they possess the attributes of divinity. Thus it is no wonder that the Chola king, Aditya I, built a number of shrines on the banks of the Cauveri. Forty-eight of them have been identified and studied in greater or less detail and, apart from their spiritual efficacy, they possess high artistic merit.

Temples were built for a variety of reasons. Often they were a bid for divine favour. Sometimes they were intended to commemorate some outstanding instance of divine intervention. Tirukkadayur furnishes an instance. *Markandeya,* a spiritually-minded youth, who had been allotted a brief life-span of sixteen years, was at the temple, praying to Siva to save him from death. *Yama,* the God of Death, appeared at the appointed hour, the death-noose in his hand, which he threw round the neck of Markandeya. That was *lese majeste* in the very House of God, to interfere with a devotee engaged in prayer. Siva was enraged and he took Yama to task for his presumption. Rather unfair, it appears to the sophisticated mind, Yama was only doing his duty; however, one supposes the House of God is an

asylum even against death. The orthodox explanation is a piece of fine hair-splitting; Markandeya had been given sixteen years but nothing more had been said; Siva clarified it by saying Markandeya would be sixteen for ever, he had the gift of perpetual youth.

Another instance of divine arbitrariness was the cutting away of Brahma's fifth head by Siva for some minor transgression. It is all so puzzling; Brahma is the first in the Hindu Trinity, creation is his jurisdiction. It was only an apportionment of portfolios and so the difference between Brahma, Vishnu and Siva is only notional, so the punishment of Brahma by Siva amounted only to punishing himself and Vishnu. The basic idea is that even gods should abide by the laws they have made. But will a god be a god if he transgresses his own law? Why not, one may demur. Cannot one who makes a law also unmake it? Circumstances, even in the case of gods, one supposes, alter cases.

Temples were built for other reasons as well. They were sometimes a *quid pro quo* for divine aid in a crisis, sometimes for success in arms or for cures of bodily and mental ills, and not unoften, a salve to the conscience.

Temples were invariably centres of social and communal activity. Local concerns were debated there and agreed conclusions reached. They were also schools of religious instruction. Endowments to temples and for pious purposes of all descriptions were administered there. They were a sort of people's court where disputes, lay and religious, were heard and decided. There is an interesting inscription at the temple at Tiruvanaikavu—otherwise Jambukeswaram—which records a dispute between two warring sects within the fold on what was a matter of ritual. In point of sober fact, the life of the community revolved round the temple which put the fear of God and man in the minds of the people.

No body can deny that the temples which stud the banks of the Cauveri, in every case, have contributed to the well-being of the Tamils. The Tamils believe, like all Hindus, that in the care of the sick, prayer, incantations and medicine have all to be employed and that, often, where medicine fails, the gods take a hand and effect cures which are little short of miraculous. The unbelieving may scoff but they are sure to shed their distrust if they listen to the legends and the authenticated accounts of cures which were inexplicable except on the basis of divine intervention "There are more things in Heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy". Gunasilam, for instance, about twelve miles from Tiruchirapalli, is a case in point. People believed to be possessed of the devil are taken there for a month or two's stay in the temple precincts

and sometimes for longer spells and they have been known to recover their mental balance. Warlocks and witches get short shrift at the hands of the kindly gods. Almost every temple has a claim for efficacy in the cure of a particular ailment and quite a few have a reputation for removing impediments to child-bearing.

Some temples are held in special veneration as having been the scene of the labours of religious teachers or, as in the case of Tirunarayanapuram, which possesses a lovely shrine, for having given asylum to the persecuted. Sri Ramanuja, the *Vaishnavite* sage, is said to have stayed at Tirunarayanapuram for some time when he fled the country because of an irate *Chola* king who was thirsting for his blood. It was all what one may call a virtuous circle, a temple built as a thank-offering, an increase of faith and a consequent increase in its reputation, followed by vows by others involved in similar crises, whose prayer is answered, resulting in further temple-building or endowments to temples. The temples are massive evidence of unshakeable faith and piety and on their building the best care was bestowed. The temples of the Chola period and, especially, those built by Aditya I possess artistic merit of a high order. They were schools of art and a powerful incentive for the development of art.

Talking of art, temples specialised not only in architecture. Sculpture in stone and bronze-casting flourished under their auspices. At Tirupacchil, on the northern bank of the Cauveri, in a very attractive shrine, is an unusual image of Nataraja, in a dancing pose suggestive of the wriggling motions of a serpent. At *Srinivasanallur,* rather neglected, I am afraid, there are some fine bronzes. The temples are perfect in line, lintel, corbel and in those panels of friezes depicting the exploits or the sports of the deities, which have been enshrined in story and song. They have all contributed to nourish and sustain the faith of the Tamils through the ages. They are regular museums of art, the homes of music and dance. Religion has thus been in the case of the Tamils not just dry doctrine or arid philosophy but a means by which men and women have been in almost close personal touch with the gods who govern their destinies. They have helped to nourish and sustain the faith of the Tamils, through the ages, in themselves and their gods.

After leaving the district of Salem the river flows past the Kulitalai and Musiri *taluqs* of Tiruchirapalli district, draining an area of about 26,000 square miles.*

* Here she is at her widest and flows gaily along, carpeted by green fields on either side, her waters glinting in the sunshine and shimmering with moon-and-star diamonds at night. She is known as the *akhanda Kaveri*, on account of her width, till she divides into two arms above Srirangam, where engineering skill has expressed itself in the construction of the Upper Anicut.

FOUR

And so we come to Tiruchirapalli, than which there can be no more admirable introduction to the Cauveri. According to legend it was the scene of the destruction of an ill-doing ogre, *Trisiras,* which means a three-headed being. Since then it has been known as Tiruchirapalli, the place where the *rakshasa* was destroyed. It is historic ground. The Cholas had there their capital and that was in the first and second centuries. There was a time when they had held their heads high but then there were invasions by hostile chieftains, and they fell from their high estate. They went into obscurity but the wheel went full circle and in the ninth century, with Vijayalaya, they came into their own and ushered in an era of material prosperity and artistic achievement not paralleled since.

Tiruchirapalli was the scene of many a conflict between the Cholas and those who wished to humble them and they were the Pallavas and the Pandyas and, in-between, those chieftains who trimmed their sails to the current wind. Here were fought the Wars of the Carnatic in the eighteenth century. Tiruchirapalli has echoed to the tread of English and French soldiery, the war-cries of the Nawab's army and Mahratta horsemen led by that matchless leader of men, Sivaji, the Grand Rebel as Dennis Kincaid calls him. Saunter round the *Fakir's tope* to the south of the city or climb to the top of the Golden Rock or ascend the Rock Fort, while a half-moon rides overhead or prowl amid the purlieus of the city and, if you have an ear attuned to hear eerie voices floating down the corridors of time, you can hear the clash of arms, artillery duels and even the swish of the Tondaman's crossbowmen. Clive and Major Lawrence can be seen in conversation with Mohamad Ali, the Nawab of the Carnatic, and you can hear the French laying down the boulevards and giving them the French name which has stuck on. These and allied sounds you may hear and, if you do, their impact would be fleeting; not so, the voices raised in prayer in the

temples, huge fanes with their colonnaded halls and spacious enclosures, where centuries-old Sanskrit and Tamil hymns were chanted and, still are, in the very mode and scale employed by their inspired composers who have, for that very reason, here attained a semi-divine status in the minds of the Tamils.

Tiruchirapalli, an important Junction on the South Indian Railway, has historical interest for us. Kings have held sway there, religion has flourished and battles have been fought in its neighbourhood. From whichever side you approach the city, you see the Rock Fort with the Ganesa shrine on top of it; dominating the entire countryside. The beautiful spire of St. Joseph's Church by the side of the St. Joseph's College next catches your eye. There are other colleges in the city, Bishop Heber's, an equally old foundation but more humbly housed. The National College, which has moved to a spacious building and those relatively newcomers, the Jamal Mohamad College and the E.V.R. Naicker College, all in modern buildings, are engaged in the dissemination of education. In fact, there is a leisured and cultured air about the city which in no small measure is due to these Houses of Learning.

The Christian Schools and Colleges have played no mean part in South Indian education. Staffed by men of piety and learning, they have disseminated learning among the Tamil youth and, for all their religious bias, have played fair and never tried to unfairly influence the religious beliefs of their students. It is a remarkable testimony to their fairness that none who has passed through their Colleges has anything but the liveliest affection for their teachers.

Just two miles above Tiruchirapalli is Srirangam, one of the holiest of shrines, on an island formed by the Cauveri dividing herself into two arms which rejoin further east. There is a temple to Sri Ranganatha, a deity to whose close association with the Cauveri reference has already been made. According to legend, an image of Sri Ranganatha was presented by Sri Rama to Vibhishana, in appreciation of his services in the campaign against Ravana. Vibhishana stopped at the island on his way back to Lanka, and Ranganatha was so taken up with the place that he expressed a wish to be left there and left there he was. It must have been meant for, since that day long past, Srirangam's sanctity has been accounted great.

Srirangam has attracted pilgrims from far and near. They come in their thousands from all over the country, from the foothills of the Himalayas down to Cape Comorin, from Calcutta to Kathiawar and Kutch, all the castes and tribes out of Edgar Thurston. Srirangam grew and prospered, till it is now one of India's more important temple-cities. A temple was

built in the authentic South Indian tradition with forecourts, colonnades, *gopurams* and subsidiary shrines in some of which Ranganatha is worshipped in one or other of his different aspects. There are also little chapels where his devotees—the more important of them—like Nathamuni, Nammalwar and Ramanuja are enshrined. There is also a little cell to the memory of a Muslim princess, whose devotion to Sri Ranganatha was as profound as that of any one who was born in the faith. She is known as *thulukka nachiar,* the Muslim matron, and every morning an offering is made of *chappathis* (unleavened bread) *a la* Mussalman, butter and milk and green gram to Sri Ranganatha, and a portion of it is placed in the cell before the picture of the *Nachiar.* This is only one instance of the concord which often marked the relations between Muslims and Hindus and of their mutual tolerance and appreciation.

The Cauveri has nourished the arts and letters. The temples on her banks have been to a large extent schools of learning. Kamban, the celebrated Tamil poet, to use a modern expression, released his monumental epic, the *Kamba Ramayana,* in a colonnaded hall at Srirangam which still goes by his name. Many of the religious preceptors of Tamilnad spread the light from her banks.

The temple grew and grew till it assumed its present size. It has fanned out from its innermost shrine, the Holy of Holies, a dark cell, where Ranganatha reclines on his serpent couch, absorbed in the sleep of intense meditation (*yoganidra*) while a large cobra with its five hoods outspread mounts guard over him. Ranganatha's dark un-ornamented cell, one supposes, is a reminder that all the grandeur and state which surrounds him are unimportant; they are but the expression of the piety of his flock; he himself is above the trappings of state, a super-ascetic, withdrawn from the world but watching over it and keeping it from harm.

Kings and princes and men of lesser degree have vied with one another in making endowments to the temple. Perhaps the most lavish of them were made by Achutappa Naik, a chieftain of Tanjore. He provided the golden cupola (*vimana*) which adorns the sanctum, added a few turrets and gave a diadem of gold to the deity. His piety had a practical side to it. He built flights of stairs to the Cauveri at Tiruvaiyaru, Kumbakonam, Mayuram and other places. More important and of greater practical utility, was the dam which he threw across the river at Tiruvayyaru which helped to conserve the water for irrigation.

Achutappa's was a life of active benevolence. He had a prime minister of unusual ability, Govinda Dikshitar, who was also a scholar of the finest vintage and served his ruler with loyalty and zeal and a sole eye to the good

of the people. Achutappa loved the company of scholars and divines and to listen to their debates and discourses. It was to Srirangam that he went whenever he wished to rest and relax from the labours of state.

There can be no doubt that Achutappa was essentially unworldly. When his son, Viswanatha, was of an age to succeed him, he abdicated in his favour. Perfectly proper that, to make over the cares of state to a qualified son and retire to some suitable spot for contemplation, peace and rest. However, his end was not in keeping with the way he had lived his life. What secret grief weighed on his mind, one cannot guess; however, it was a gruesome end which he sought and that was nothing less than immolation on the flames. It is a remarkable testimony to wifely loyalty that his seventy-two wives (or, was it seventy-nine?) also burnt themselves to death on the same pyre.

I would like to refer to one shrine in particular and that is the one of Sri Ramanuja, who spent his last days at Srirangam. Ramanuja was the most colourful of the *vaishnavite* teachers. He had guts and was inspired by a flaming faith. He braved the Chola ruler, who pursued him relentlessly, went to Mysore, where he spread the faith and came back to Srirangam where he spent the rest of his life and re-organised the temple administration. His shrine stands in the south-east corner of the third enclosure and regular worship is conducted there.

Srirangam's rarefied atmosphere has not prevented outbreaks of religious dissension, the bones of contention being little more than matters of ritual. There are two sects among the *vaishnavas,* the *thengalais,* which means, the southern sect, and the *vadagalais,* the northern sect. The former believe that salvation is a matter of grace, the gift of a gratified Mahavishnu, which falls like gentle rain upon the fortunate elect, while the latter hold it must be striven for and is the reward for righteousness. Not so very long ago, matters came to a head and there was a long-drawn litigation in court. It provided the protagonists of either side with occupation for their spare time. A compromise was ultimately reached which could have been reached far earlier without all that expenditure of heat, time and money. The explanation was, one supposes, that to quite a few, litigation has all the attraction of sport. All the same, Ranganatha confers his blessings impartially on both; now, the parties live in peace, at all events they seem to, each side being at liberty to follow its particular ritual without interference from the other.

Sri Ranganatha's assistance has never been invoked in vain. Once in a way the Cauvery gets out of hand, breaks her bounds and threatens to spell destruction. Within the last half-century it has happened twice.

Once in 1924 and again in 1930. The floods of 1924 were worse than those of 1930. The sky was suddenly overcast, huge banks of cloud blotted out the sun, and the rain fell in solid sheets all day long and all night long and gave no signs of stopping. Such a continuous and frightening downpour had not occurred within human memory. The Cauveri rose to unprecedented heights; the bridge which spanned it began to crack alarmingly, it sounded like the crack of doom, the voices of the frightened inhabitants rose in agonised prayer; then at long last the gods relented, Ranganatha took a hand and the waters were stilled, the rains ceased and the people breathed again. The threat and its subsidence pointed to a decline in righteousness and the way Ranganatha acts to remind people of their duty.

One interesting point is that the primitive bridge stood up to the test and showed that flood regulation and the precautionary damming of rivers are as much a matter of inherited instinct and experience, as of nice arithmetical calculation, if not more. The South Indian ryot knows his river and its moods and the havoc which it can work when it takes the bit between its teeth and bolts and his defences were just *ad hoc,* but adequate, just an arrangement of rubbles, dried silt and grass and twigs—*parambus*—renewed from time to time. The villagers could, in an emergency, forget their factions and co-operate in a common effort.

Srirangam, for all her piety, is full of animation and bustle, it is the scene of a perpetual holiday. The *Prakarams*—and there are seven of them—walled enclosures, built one behind another, around the innermost shrine. They are all lined with shops and booths, filled with flowers and fruit, camphor, frankincense, toys of wood and plastic and brass, which hold the children captive, groceries, household utensils, plastic ware and—such are the times—cosmetics! It is refreshing to see women in gay-coloured *saris,* bearing trays of fruit and flowers to offer to Ranganatha and their favourite deities, trying to restrain their children who clamour for this toy or that or exchanging gossip with friends and relations from Srirangam itself or from elsewhere. The towering coconut-palms, which rear their heads in vain emulation of the temple-towers, refresh the eye and give a grateful sense of coolness and, in the bright fortnight, the moon sailing overhead and bathing the landscape in her l'ght is a vision of beauty. Near at hand, the Cauveri flows majestically along on the south, and the Coleroon on the north, and all these go to make up the *milieu* which is the Srirangam one lovingly cherishes.

Every month has its particular festival, when the gods are taken out in procession in the huge temple cars, those moving museums of Tamil art, while the temple-priests, who have been so mostly from father to son, in

flowing *dhoties,* their arms, chest and foreheads, gleaming with the trident mark, painted in white and vermilion streaks, walk with hands linked, chanting in measured cadences those paeons of praise, which have come down the ages in the very accent and mode in which they were composed. While the mind and spirit are thus nourished, there is no overlooking of the claims of the flesh. There is an ample supply of food from temple choultries and private houses to meet different tastes. One, for instance, is the endowment by the Guzarati family of Gopaldas, for the feeding of twenty-four pilgrims, worship at the shrine and a lamp to be kept perpetually burning.

The most important festival occurs at the end of the year and lasts up to the middle of January, an affair of a month, when the Sun is in *Sagittarius.* Attendance at daily worship, particularly, on the eleventh day of the bright fortnight is believed to open the gates of Heaven to the Faithful.

Srirangam holds a good deal of attraction to tourists from abroad. They come from all over the world, if not from China to Peru, at all events from California to Cambodia in every conceivable costume, the western visitor trekking it in scanty, shabby-looking but serviceable clothes, with hair uncut and haversack on back, the hippies and the beatles and other varieties of modern Western youth, going about in a glorious release from the trammels of convention. To them, the past is so much dead wood, something to be shaken off like the Old Man of the Sea; their nostalgia is for the present and even more for the future; they are said to be out to make a new world, fit for heroes and near-heroes to live in. One can only hope they may be able to make it invoking, if they care, Sri Ranganatha's grace. They also add to the fun of the fair.

The UNESCO is taking a hand in renovating the temple. Modern Indian renovators appear to have lost the touch. Their idea of re-painting is largely splashing a liverish-looking blue or green paints all over the temple-walls, towers and frescoes. The effect is to bring one's bile out. One hopes that the UNESCO will go to work in a more artistic and understanding spirit and recover for us the mellow beauty of the centuries-old temple.

The temple did not escape the ravages of war. The idol was once stolen by the Muslims and was miraculously recovered and the *thulukka nachiar* (Muslim Matron) is said to have had a hand in the recovery. English and French troops were in occupation of the sacred precincts during the Carnatic Wars of the eighteenth century. It should be said to their credit that they were not guilty of any desecration.

Little more than a mile to the east of Srirangam is the Siva temple at Jambukeswaram, architecturally more imposing, with five walled en-

closures, broad and scrupulously well-kept. It does not sprawl, is aristocratic and aloof, unlike Srirangam, next-door, which is colourful and gay. Its origin, according to legend was, that a sage sat meditating under a tree for years and years and that the tree's roots struck into him and grew overhead but the sage continued in undisturbed absorption in contemplation of the divine, till Parameswara struck by the intensity of the sage's devotional surrender took him into favour and gave him a place in the high heavens. The *lingam* (phallus) is below ground level and when the Cauveri is in flood, it is surrounded by water which stands steady at the level of the lingam known, in consequence as *appulingam* (water phallus).*

Another interesting legend is that an elephant and a spider were simultaneously worshipping the lingam at the same place, each in his own way, unknown to the other. The elephant every day brought water from the Cauveri in his trunk and bathed the lingam and, in doing so, daily wrecked the web which the spider was weaving above the head of the *lingam* to protect it from the Sun. Enraged at the daily destruction, the spider, in order to teach the elephant a lesson and also to put him out of action, made its way into his trunk and stung him so hard that he fell down dead at the Lord's feet. Such devotion merited the Lord's grace and both elephant and spider got it.**

As for the Rock Fort of Tiruchirapalli, which dominates the countryside, at the summit is a shrine to Sri Ganesa, the elephant-faced son of Parameswara, reputed to help in the removal of obstacles which may loom up in the way of those who love the Lord. From the summit one gets a magnificent view of the surrounding country for miles, all green with groves and rows of the towering coconut-palm and ribboned by the Cauveri which flows majestically along the delta, till she reaches the sea. Half-way up the rock is a temple carved out of it to *Matrubhuteswar,* the patron deity of child-bearing women. The famous Tamil saint, Thayumanavar,*** is worshipped there.

In the cave-temple there are two inscriptions. King Mahendra (Pallava) is said to have contemplated the power of the *Cholas* from there. The rock is referred to as "the diadem of the *Chola* province" and the Cauveri as the "beloved of the Pallava". No doubt she was.

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*There are 5 species of phallus—Earth, Water, Light, Air and Ether.

**Such devotion could not go unrewarded. A gratified God willed it that the spider be born again in the house of the reigning *Chola* king and so it came about. That was Kochengannan (Red-eyed-king) who, it is said, built no less than seventy temples in his time. It was his inbred sense of piety which followed him from one existence to another (*jananantara sowhirdam* as Kalidasa terms, it). The redness of the eyes was said to have been due to the compulsion of his prolonged stay in the womb awaiting the auspicious hour.

***His verses on *Sivan Seyal* are an impassioned confession of sins committed and appeal for succour.

Old names persisted. The river on its northern bank was in *Rajaraja Valanadu* while, on its southern bank, it was in Rajagambira Valanadu.

Another temple, Bikshandarkoil, has played its part in local history and legend. The Trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Siva, have shrines to themselves within the precincts, and the English and the French lay encamped there during the War of the Carnatic.

Another temple which figured in the war was the one at Samayavaram. Mariamman, the deity one propitiates to be free of the small-pox is worshipped there, as also *Bogiswara*. There is supposed to be a treasure hidden in the vicinity, of untold quantities of gold. A regular Colossus of a figure looms up there, with a finger pointing to the site of the treasure which, so far, no one has dared to unearth. Everything in its time; the true heir must appear!

Nearby is a mosque which the village owes to the bounty of Queen Minakshi, who was cured by a *fakir* of a fell disease. In gratitude, she built and endowed the temple.

Of these temples Jambukeswaram is the most lavishly endowed. One grant worth mentioning was that made by a Naik chieftain, Vijaya Ranga Chokkanatha, a grandson of Queen Mangammal of Madurai fame. The grant was made out in the name of the Head of the Kamakoti *mutt*, described as *Lokaguru* Sri Sankaracharya, detailing the lands endowed for pious purposes connected with the temple *annadana* (feeding-charity), and *neivedyam*, daily offerings to the deity at the time of worship of four measures of cooked rice, *dosais* (pancakes), *atirasam* (sweet cake) and *sugiyan*, (flour sweetened with jaggery), and *dipachamaru* (oil for lamps). To keep the light burning is a more than ordinarily pious duty. Tolls collected on either bank of the Cauveri were also assigned for the purpose.

There are numerous copper-plate grants and they contain valuable information about the way of life of the Tamils and the things they held sacred.

One could amuse oneself trying to reconstruct the place as it was at the time of the grant. It is not always rewarding. Some spots are unidentifiable as, for instance, *Ponvasikonda* Street, apparently a street occupied by gold and silver smiths.

For all its sanctity, the temple did not escape desecration. During the Carnatic Wars it was occupied by English and by French troops. However, the desecration was only notional, the troops did not cause serious damage to the temple or the deities.

One other place deserves reference and that is Tiruvellarai, about twelve miles from Tiruchirapalli. It is interesting for two reasons; one, it

has a Pallava temple endowed by Dantivarman, two, there is a swastika-shaped well, locally known as *mamiyar kinaru* (mother-in-law's well)—why it is so called is anybody's guess. One explanation which has been given is that a daughter-in-law, discovered gossiping by her mother-in-law, hid behind an angle of two arms of the *swastik* so that she could not see or be seen by the mother-in-law who stood at the opposite angle. Amusing but not unlikely; apparently, in those days relations between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law were no better than they are now. Tiruvellerai is in a retired neighbourhood, dominated by the temple's white stone battlements at the head of the delta.

An interesting spot on the Cauveri, about twelve miles north of Tiruchirapalli, is Tiruparaithurai. It has links with Bengal. The candle which Ramakrishna Paramahamsa lit has spread its beams to this remote spot. There has been a school with several years of good work to its credit. More recent and more enterprising is a school for poor and derelict children, conceived and conducted by one individual who has made it his life's mission. The *kutil,* as it is called, is set in spacious grounds, with mango and coconut trees standing in serried ranks, one vast umbrella which shields you from the Sun. There the children are taught to read and write—and, to thank God, for His mercies—squatting on the bare floor, in unpretentious but adequate huts or in the tree-shade. Teacher and taught labour in the fields (*the kutil's*), sow and reap, cook their own meals and eat together. It is a school, with a spiritual base where the teacher may be said to hold a "cure of souls". Here one learns while one is engaged in useful manual labour, a method of education which is all the rage—if not an achievement—at the present day. If one wishes to refresh one's tired limbs and mind, one could do worse than wangle an invitation from the Founder-Manager, Ramaswami and spend a few days in those "Groves of Academe".

FIVE

If you leave Madras at about seven in the evening by the Rameswaram Express, you will arrive at Tanjore at the witching hour of dawn, than which there can be no finer hour to arrive in. You will find the city just waking from sleep, waking, one may say, from her dreams of the storied past, when the Cholas held sway and Kaviripoompattinam or Puhar, as it used to be called for short, was a flourishing emporium of trade, to which came ships carrying the wares of Greece and Rome and the Far East.

Kipling compared Madras to a lady "in faded silks, dreaming of ancient renown". That will not be true of present day Madras, but the comparison will apply to Tanjore. Go round her streets, her narrow lanes and market-places, you will find the past re-shaping itself before your mind's eye. The battlements of the Palace—no longer the abode of kings—the spire of the temple of Brihadiswara, the large expanse of ground on the south of the city, until recently an unfilled moat, the humble shrines to wayside deities at street-corners and secluded nooks, all testify to the glories of a bygone age.

It is in the Tanjore country that the Cauveri is extolled in story and song. She is the source of Tamilnad's fertility, the Giver of gifts and the scene of the merry making of the masses. The *Ahananuru** refers in ecstatic terms to the water-sports on her banks. The Cauveri is deeply involved in the life of the Tamils; she is enthroned in the hearts of kings. Princes and poets have sung in praise of her, hailed her as *alma mater* (nourishing mother). Sekkhizhar** has sung of the close connection between her waters and the spirit of devotion of the Tamils. Local patriotism, it goes without saying, must have inspired much of the ecstacy of the verse;

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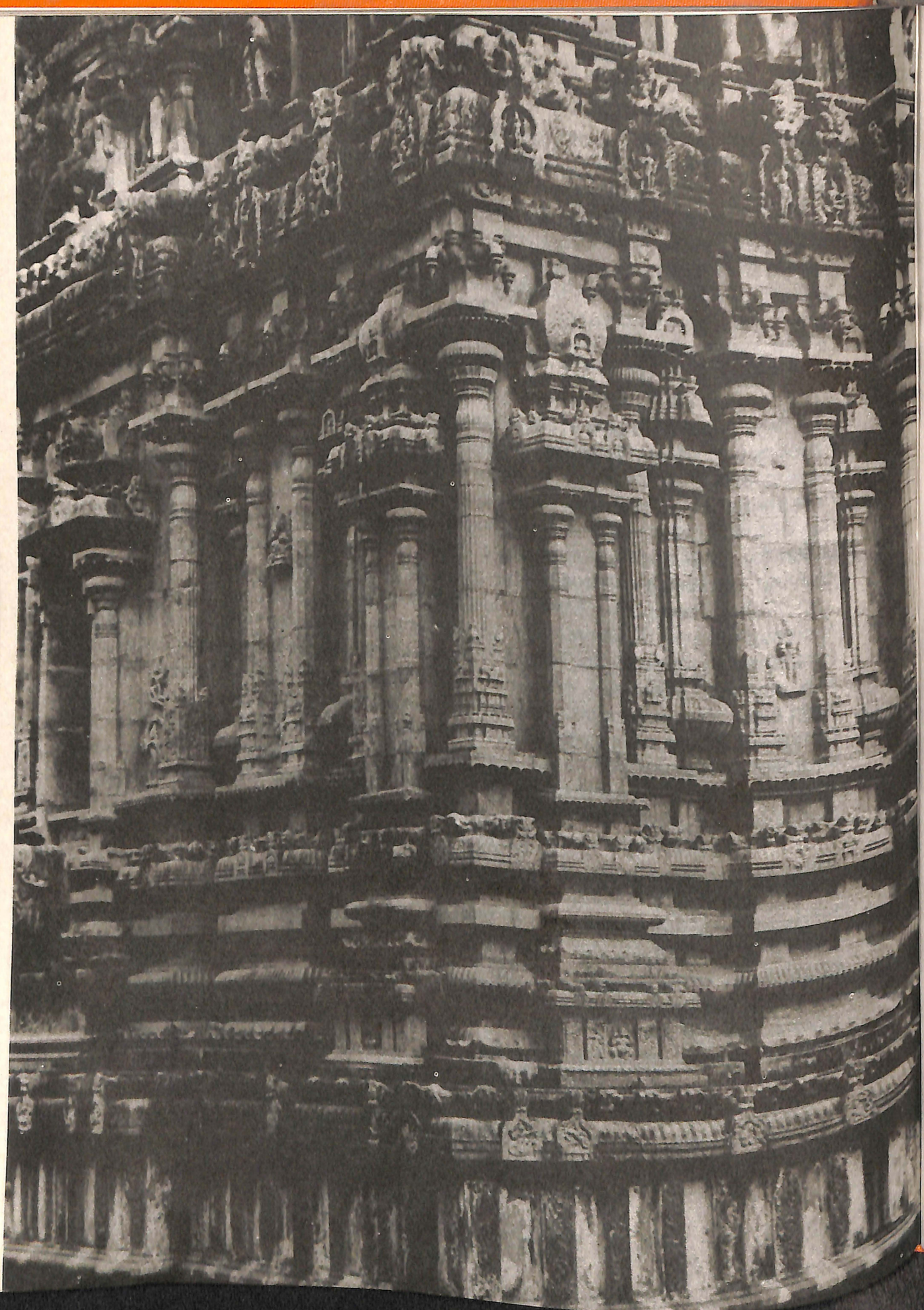
*A Tamil work of the Sangam age.

**A renowned poet, the author of the lives of the Tamil Saints (Periapuranam).



however, it cannot be denied, there is a considerable amount of truth in it. Think of Tanjore, and the vision which arises in your mind is of the Cauveri, a baby no longer, but matronly and mature, which is to Tanjore what the Nile is to Egypt and the Rhine to Germany—the giver of life—of a land studded with temples, whose tapering towers seem to pierce the sky, green paddy-fields, the colour of emerald, and dense groves of banana and the coconut-palm. A land which once flowed with coconut-and-cow's milk and honey.

Two things stand out in the city. The temple built by Rajaraja Chola, so finely proportioned in breadth and height that you cannot see the shadow of its finial fall on the ground. In front of the shrine reposes in state, on a high stone plinth, Siva's favourite mount, *Nandi*, a massive granite bull. The temple, airy, cool and spacious, standing rather aloof in extensive grounds, is not only a place of worship but a treasure-house of art. The friezes in stone, the sculptures and mural paintings seem to pulsate with the life and movement of a bygone age. Recently were brought to light certain paintings on the temple walls which for life-likeness cannot be rivalled. Variations in mood are depicted with such delicacy that the figures seem to move and dance and caracole in front of you. Lucky it is that they were discovered.

Go to the Palace and saunter along its halls and corridors, its recesses and subterranean passages—it wouldn't be a palace without them, would it?—you will hear ghost voices float down the corridors of Time but do not waste your time trying to piece them but make your way to the library—the Saraswati Mahal Library and the Art Gallery and you will never cease to thank God for those gifts. In the library, the nucleus of which was provided by the Naiks who ruled over the country from about the middle of the sixteenth century for nearly a century and a half, you will see ancient manuscripts which will delight the heart of the most fastidious antiquary, lovingly collected and, what is more, lovingly preserved, as they have done, for example, the Book of Kells in Trinity College, Dublin, and the *Grosse Heidelberger Liederhandschrift* at Heidelberg all old-time songs of troubadours and knights, in the library at Heidelberg. In the Art Gallery, there is a statue by Flaxman, of the Maharajah Serfoji, a king among kings and an unrivalled patron of arts and letters. The statue stands on a massive plinth, which was originally intended to be hauled up to the top of the temple tower but about which apparently the engineers' second thoughts prevailed. The job may not have been beyond folk who were able to trundle massive boulders of stone to the top of the temple, along scaffolding which stretched from the quarries four miles away, rolled along an inclined plane

to the *gopuram.* Think of the labour that went to the making of the Pyramids!*

2

Tanjore was the heart of the Chola country. The earlier *Cholas* had their capital at Worayur, now a suburb of Tiruchirapalli, and sometimes at Gangaikonda Cholapuram, but Tanjore was the real centre of affairs. To the south, the Chola country extended up to the Vellar, the traditional boundary between the *Pandya* and the *Chola* kingdom, which is four miles from the former princely state of Pudukkottai. It took in the Arcot region in the north and north-west. The *Cheras* ruled over what is now Kerala and the districts of Coimbatore and Salem. Border fights there were in plenty but none of a particularly sanguinary character. The three kingdoms seemed to have lived more or less in peace and amity, with an occasional frontier skirmish. Art and literature found discerning patrons in king and noble and there was that flourishing academy, the Tamil Sangam, with its headquarters at Madurai, the Pandyan capital, whose *imprimatur* was coveted by poets and writers all over the Tamil country. Scholars and poets frequently crossed the border for a wider recognition or for earning a patronage denied to them at home. They were sometimes unofficial ambassadors of good-will.

The greatest of the early Cholas was Karikala—the black-footed Prince—whose supreme service to the State was the damming of the Cauveri and the harnessing of its waters to agriculture. He put up an embankment on its right bank. He is also credited with having built the Grand Anicut; whether it was built by him or not, it was certainly repaired by a later Chola ruler, Virarajendra, also called Karikala, after his more distinguished ancestor. Thereby hangs a tale. The Chola king tried to build an anicut but as often as he tried it he failed and that was because, it was said, there was an image of Rama's faithful servitor, Hanuman, under the retaining walls. Hanuman had to be propitiated before the *anicut* could be constructed. Accordingly, a shrine was built to him and his regular worship arranged for. It was only then that the *anicut* stood firm.

The region between here and Tiruvaiyyaru is another magnificent expanse of water, motoring alongside of which is very exhilarating. There is another dam lower down (the Lower Anicut, on the Coleroon) with a comfortable rest-house, set in a shady grove nearby.

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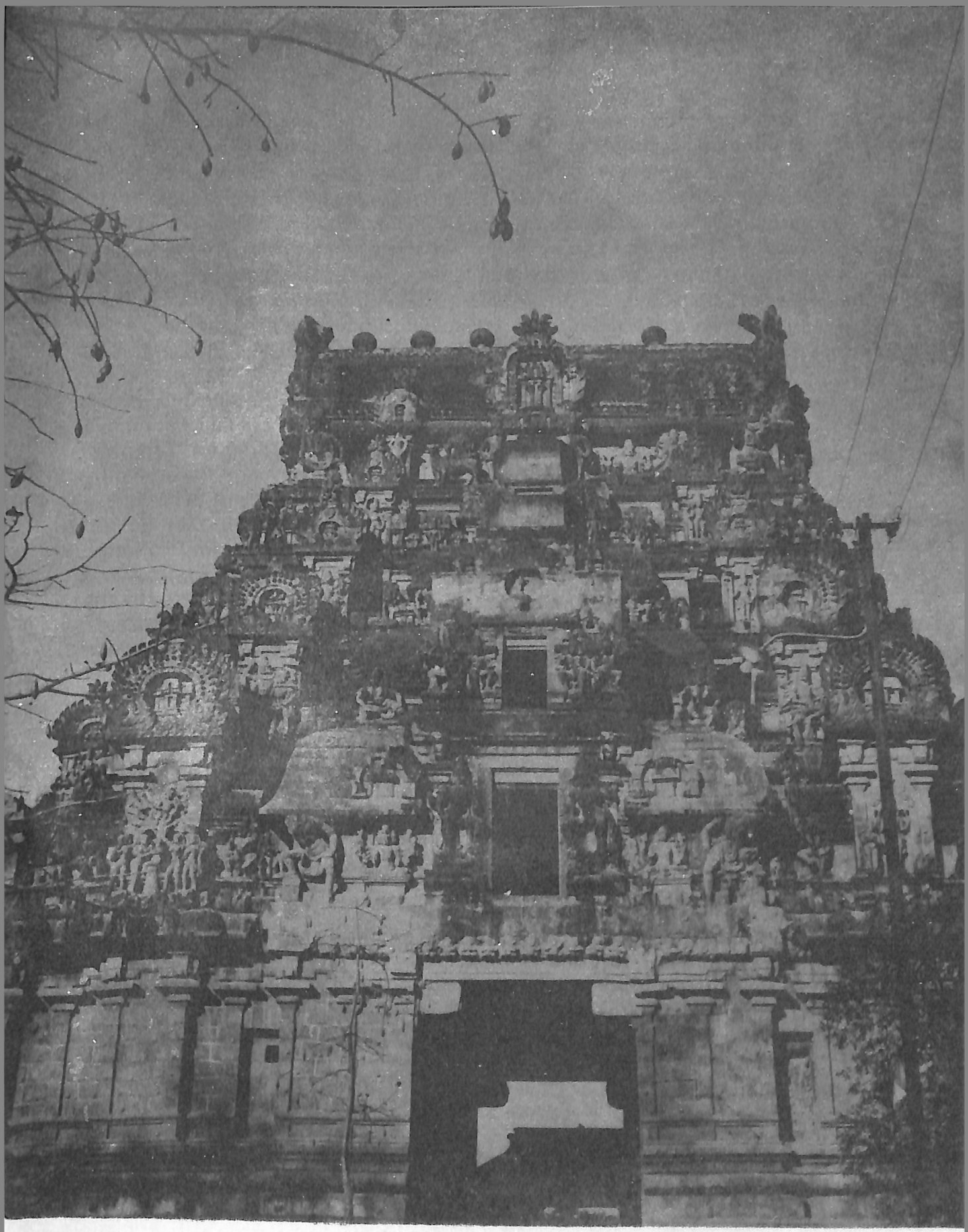
*It used to be tended and kept clean but now the trees are bare and the premises unkempt. Some kind of office is now located in the bungalow and, like most offices, is nobody's particular care.

The Cauveri was the country's Guardian Angel, the bringer of prosperity and hence known as *Ponni,* and the Chola king was known as *Ponni Nadan* or the Ruler of the Land of the *Golden River.*

As the years advanced the Chola power declined. The Pandyas overcame the Chola country which then lay under a long eclipse and there was "none so poor as to do her reverence". It was in the latter part of the ninth century that Vijayalaya Chola set himself to restore the Chola hegemony. He was the hero of a hundred battles, (literally, the valiant bearer of a hundred and six scars received in battle) but he did not live to see his task accomplished. That was left to his son to do, to Aditya I, a more than pious Aeneas, in whom the sense of filial obligation burned lustily till long after his father's death. All his energies were bent to the realisation of his father's ambition and he did not rest till he had routed the Pandya, the ancestral foe, who had his capital at Madurai, and shaken off the hold of the Pallavas on the north and the north-west.

Having re-secured for the Chola country her place under the sun, he set about fostering the arts of peace. It was at Tanjore that the Cholas held sway during their second efflorescence. Art and architecture revived and poetry and music flourished under Aditya's patronage. He is said to have erected temples on either bank of the Cauveri, quite a garland of them, most appropriate tribute to the river which has nourished the minds and bodies of the people who lived all along her course—the zeal of the researcher credits him with forty-eight of them—and his successors carried on the good work, building nearly two hundred temples, large and small and middle-sized, which sent their bells pealing, morning and evening, till their sounds mingled with those of the breakers of the Bay of Bengal.

The Cholas were not content with building temples, they filled them with beautiful sculptures and panels and friezes of stone. Their temple-building activity began round about the year 850. The experts are agreed on that. It is about the *terminus ad quem* that they differ and debate. M. Jonveau-Dubreuil places it in 1350, while Dr. Gravely and Sivaramamurti favour 1070; S.R. Balasubramanyam makes a long jump and takes it forward by two centuries. Rather confusing to the Common Man, who, fortunately, does not bother about dates. What matters is that the temples were the centres of a vigorous community life; they made for social well-being, the common pursuit of the common good, a way of life which had a broad human base. There they met and frolicked at fairs and festivals. The path of the Tamils to salvation may not be paved with gold, certainly it is paved with gaiety. There is a lovely temple at Kilayur, on the Tiruchirapalli-Ariyalur road, which is said to represent the high watermark of early



Chola temple architecture. It is interesting to learn from a verse of the Tamil hymnist, Sambandar, that the officiating priests (*archakas*) came from Malabar on the west coast and there were matrimonial alliances between the chieftains of Malabar and the Cholas. At the other end of the Chola country—at Melakadambur, near Chidambaram, is another equally beautiful temple built of stone, with a chariot-shaped dome (*vimana*) and a slanting phallus (*lingam,* the emblem of Siva). The explanation of the slant is that the god in the *linga* gallantly leaned to one side to screen from the vulgar gaze a devotee of his, whose *sari* slipped off her body while she was engaged in worshipping him with flowers and fruit—a pleasing Lady Godiva touch.

If you wish to know more of Chola temples and the rich bronzes in them, you could do worse than read S.R. Balasubramanyam's attractive booklet "Four Chola Temples" and his works on Early Chola art. The most distinctive fact about the Chola temples was that they made for a healthy intellectual activity. They inspired speculations on the nature of the universe and the forces controlling it, the problems of pain and suffering, of life and death and what preceded and followed them. Tamil thought and literature were enriched in the hymns of the mediaeval saints, Appar, Sundarar and Sambandar who, with Manikkavachagar, sometime Prime Minister to the Pandyan King, were the exponents of the *Saiva Siddhanta,* the bed-rock of the philosophy of the Tamils. They were tireless in spreading the *bhakti* cult and inculcating reverence to the Maker as the only way to obtain relief from earthly ills and release from re-birth. They were peripatetic teachers who toured the south country and the most convincing proof of the sanctity of a temple was that it was the subject of one or more of their hymns. These being in Tamil helped to bring the deity nearer to the people and to fashion a philosophy of hope on the one hand and of resignation on the other.

3

When the Chola power declined—a decline that was accepted by the Tamils as only illustrating the turn of the wheel, the time-honoured metaphor which is believed to symbolise life with its ups and downs—the Nayaks established themselves at Tanjore. They were only governors, appointed by the suzerain power at Vijayanagar but when the hold of that power slackened—again, the turn of the wheel—they set up as independent rulers. At first, there was one governor for the Pandya and the Chola country. Viswanatha Naik, with his capital at Madurai, was administering both the

territories and he took vigorous measures to put down the robber gangs who were a menace to the peace of the province. There were jungles on both sides of the Cauveri, where the robbers found secure shelters and hide-outs. Viswanatha had the jungles cleared and enabled pilgrims to go about unmolested. Soon it was clear that it was too heavy a charge for one and the Chola country was placed under a separate governor. One suspects it was not the size of the charge that was the governing consideration. Too big a charge swelled the heads of the governors, made them restive and wisdom lay in obviating trouble by reducing the size of the charge and employing two governors in place of one. The Tanjore Nayak shook off his suzerain's hold, all the same the feudal spirit was strong in him, while it burned very low in his opposite number at Madurai. The latter never hesitated to take advantage of his suzerain's troubles and to take sides with his enemies; not so the Tanjore Nayak, who always hastened to his aid in a crisis.

As he did, for instance, when the Vijayanagar ruler, Venkatapati Raju, went to war with a misbehaving governor of Madurai. That was Virappa Naik, who was ruling over the Madurai country in the last quarter of the sixteenth century. Achyutappa Naik, who was in control at Tanjore, went to the assistance of his overloard and took part in a battle which was fought at Vallam, which lies in the south on the outskirts of Tanjore city. Little bigger than a village, it stands on a wide plain and in the days of the British, the District Collector used to reside there in a spacious garden-house* which has since fallen from its high estate.

The Nayakas gave a good account of themselves on the battle-field and, like the Cholas, patronised the arts of peace. Achyutappa Nayak ruled longest—fifty-four years—and was an excellent ruler but the most famous of them was his son, Raghunatha. Both father and son loved learning and the society of learned men. They were fortunate in their Minister—*pradhan,* as he was commonly called—Govinda Dikshit, a scholar of the finest vintage. His career was an unmitigated romance. Born in the Canara country, of humble parentage, bright-eyed and bright-minded, he captured the fancy of Achyutappa Nayak, who entertained him in his service in which he went up and up and up, rising in the estimation of the ruler and the ruled. He was the least of a self-seeker that ever was, the public good was

*There used to be another garden-house for the use of the Superintendent of Police. That was said to have been haunted, the unhappy spirit manifesting itself at the heàd of the stairs. The haunting is undeniable for I have heard on good authority that a dog which belonged to Mr. Skinner, a Superintendent of Police who once lived in it, used to stop as it reached the landing and turn on its heels, until somebody went and carried it upstairs. No body could convince the servants that it was all a bogey of the imagination.

his only concern. He was soaked in the philosophy of the *upanishads,* was a connoisseur of music and devoted to the spread of scholarship. In his time, learned Brahmins were settled in *agraharams* and given endowments in land which enabled them to pursue their studies in peace. That was the Indian equivalent of the endowments made in the Universities of the West for the preservation of the ancient learning. Govinda Dikshit's name is still held in affectionate remembrance by the people of the Tamil country.

He is said to have been an ancestor of the present head of the Kamakoti *mutt*. His Holiness, as is well-known, hails from the Canara country though he speaks Tamil in the very idiom of the Cauveri delta. It is obvious there is a strain of renunciation in the family. His Holiness has abjured the world altogether but Govinda Dikshit remained in it almost to the end of his life. He then took to a life of contemplation and spent his time mostly in the shrine at Kumbakonam.

His prince, Achyutappa Nayak, was cast in a similar mould. At one stage, as already noticed, he abdicated in favour of his son, Raghunatha, and betook himself to Srirangam where he spent his time in philosophical discussion with scholars.

4

The Mahrattas were the next in succession. They had been called in to help, they came, saw and stayed on. The Nayaks had spent themselves out and it was easy for the Mahrattas to enter and take possession. The great warrior, Sivaji, was in the Arcot region, and he sent his brother, Ekoji, to Tanjore, who dug his toes in there. The Mahrattas soon naturalised themselves in the Tamil country. They were good mixers and soon captured the affections of the people, which was rendered all the easier by the prestige of Sivaji who had been giving the Moguls a run for their lives. They carried on the good work of the Nayaks and were no mean patrons of art. The best known was the Maharajah Serfoji, a ripe scholar, a born ruler of men and a tireless patron of the arts. His statue by Flaxman is a worthy memorial to a ruler who was every inch a prince.*

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* The Maharajah Serfoji was a scholar and a patron of the arts. Also he was devoted to the East India Company. In 1814—one full year before the event—he constructed Manora, a miniature Kutb-Minar—to celebrate the triumph of the British arms and the downfall of Napoleon, an anticipation of coming events pointing to unusual prescience or exceptional optimism. It is on the pilgrim way to Rameswaram, at the tip of the peninsula, incongruously set up on the mud flats of Setubavasatram, which an English friend of mine preferred to describe as Serfoji's Folly. A Saracenic building, in the heart of the Tamil country, to commemorate the success of the British arms before it had occurred. It is not far from Tanjore and is well worth a visit.

That is Tanjore but not all of it. It is the gate-way to the delta country and is rich in legend. Take the road north and you pass along country of which the Tamil hymnists have sung. "It is rather like sailing through an archipelago" says Douglas Barrett, "except that, in place of islands, there are occasional groves of trees, each denoting a village or hamlet, which dot the great sea of rice of the Kaveri plain". It is just a succession of groves, one lengthening stretch of garden-country. Groves of coconut-palms, the wide-branching *banyan** unmatched for shade and shelter and the tamarind-tree, with its pretty flowers, meet one at every turn. The *margosa* (*neem*)is very common, prized for its medicinal qualities and it is also believed to keep away evil spirits. Now and again, one comes across the *Perumaram,* which means, big tree, which it is *not*. Its boughs run horizontally and then turn upright, which makes them look like candelabra. To the English, it was known as the Tree of Heaven. I asked an English friend, whose hobby was Botany, why it was so called, and he replied "Heaven knows!" There is no lack of colour. All along the line there are gold-mohur trees, nothing to do with gold, being just *gul mohar* which means, the rose-peacock tree, known colloquially, as the "flame of the forest" on account of its beautiful flowers. It is said to be more a denizen of garden-houses in towns and cities than of the forest. One should not forget the sacred *pipal* tree, to go round which ceremonially a hundred and eight times after a bath in the river is believed to be a specific for many ills, especially childlessness.

The trees also provide refreshment for the tired way-farer. The milk of the coconut is a delicious drink, especially if drunk in the orthodox way, right from the nut through a hole bored in it. In the hot weather, the fruit of the palmyra is much in request, sponge-like and cool. But the drink which never fails, you, whatever the season, is buttermilk—the *yogurt* of the West—which, with a dash of pepper and coriander, is a most grateful drink. And, at evening, when the sun goes down in the West and the stars mass themselves overhead, and the temple bells peal at every turn, summoning the people to worship, one feels it is good to be alive.

To resume, you pass Ayyampet, named after Govinda Dikshit, and Pullamangai with its wonderful temple: That is a temple about which lovers of Chola temples grow lyrical. It is early Chola, a fine specimen of the

* Milton has described the banyan tree in Paradise Lost, thus

"The Fig. tree, not that kind for fruit renowned. But such as at this day to Indians known. In Malabar or Deccan spreads her Armes Braunching so broad and long, that in the ground. The bended twigs take root, and Daughters grow About the Mother tree, a Pillard shade High overarch't and echoing Walks between; There oft the Indian Herdsman shunning heate Shelters in coole, and tends his panting heards. At loopholes cut through thickest shade."

temple architecture of that period and its sculptures are full of verve, grace and executed in a variety of styles. They are a rather motley assemblage of saints and sages, and here and there, *kinnaras* and *kimpurushas*, rather like those fauns of Greek mythology.

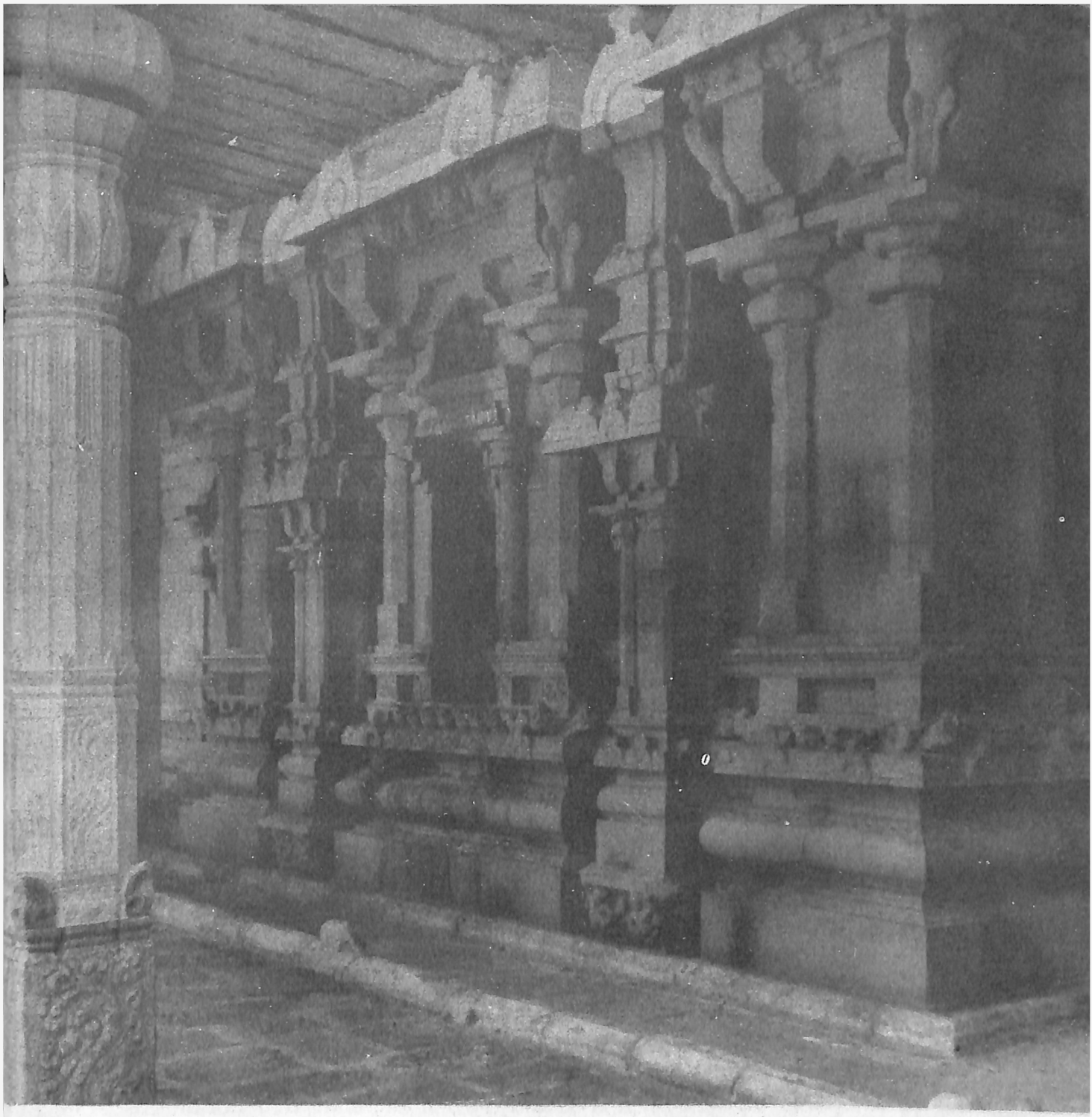
Birds of all varieties add to the fun of the fair. There is the *myna*, prettily-coloured, the singer among birds, a dependable watchman. When the predatory monkeys hove in sight it gives the alarm to the tribe which quickly disappear into their hide-outs. Another pleasing warbler is the cuckoo-bird. Kingfishers are a common sight and they come swooping down on the fishes and carry them off in their bills. The river tern, slim and pigeon-like and the Purple Moorhen with long red legs and toes are plentiful.

The Seven Sisters are an interesting group which stick together and make a lot of noise with their chattering.

It is all so peaceful and pleasant. Woodland in effect, the freshening breeze of eve, so tonic and aromatic, the chime of the temple-bells, as a signal that worship is on, and running water, all exalt and exhilarate and make one forget one's cares and one's toil.

Darasuram on the outskirts of Kumbakonam, has a temple which has seen better days. It was built by the Chola King, Rajaraja II, and is rich in inscriptions. The temple is a lordly structure and, apart from its colonnaded halls and corridors, has a covered court, in the form of a chariot, with chariot-wheels and horses to drag it—rather like the Sun temple at Konarak, without any of its erotic carvings. It has spacious outer courts and the sculptures seem to pulsate with life. There is a hall, very much a Buddhist *vihar* which seems to point to Buddhist influence at an early date. It is far from the madding crowd and its current worshippers are far fewer in number than visitors. Among the crowds which collect there, you will find fewer worshippers than tourists, not all of whom possess antiquarian tastes, in spite of the reputation it once had—and perhaps still has—that worship at the temple saves a sinner from the tortures of Hell. Temples like systems have their day; they are *a la mode* for a time and then yield ground to new aspirants to the popular favour.

Near by, within a stone's throw, is Pattiswaram, to which village Govinda Dikshit, the famous Minister of the Nayaks, retired to spend his last days. That, however, he was not allowed to do; he was far too wise and experienced a man of affairs to be allowed to "rust unburnished, not in use". Not infrequently he was summoned to the Palace at Tanjore for consultations on affairs of State. He did not assume the ochre-coloured robes of the ascetic but he did achieve a considerable detachment from



earthly cares and ambitions.*

Close at hand is where the Cholas once had their capital. There are tiny hamlets with names which recall the days of its glory. It must have been a cantonment town; there were areas allotted to what we may describe as different regiments; barracks for the Pampa regiment, for the New Regiment and so on. The Chola's mansions must have been a Royal enclosure. Stray mounds, crumbling ruins and local tradition indicate the sites of the vanished palaces and market-places. It is all so like what one sees near the *purana-kila* and the Gujjar habitation of Tughlakhabad near Delhi.

Swamimalai is almost next door with its lovely shrine on a hill-top to Subramania, Muruga to the Tamils.

Kumbakonam is the second largest city in the Tanjore district and it has more than one claim to the reverence of the Hindus. It is intimately connected with the Cauveri, on whose banks a *mela* is held every twelve years. It is the spiritual centre of the south country and the seat of the Kamakoti *mutt*, one of the main strongholds of the *advaita* school of philosophy, of which Sri Sankaracharya was the first and foremost exponent. He is said to have lived in the seventh century and had one of the acutest minds; his perception of spiritual Truth was a brilliant piece of intuition; it has an appeal to the intellect which is irresistible. It is not just dry intellectualism but is instinct with a message of hope to perplexed men. Its central teaching is that man is of the same substance as his Maker and that his salvation lies in himself. The individual soul is just a fragment of the Universal Oversoul, into which it will be re-absorbed if one should turn one's thoughts inward and clear one's mind of dross. It echoes the clarion call of the *upanishads* that one should seek a worshipful teacher and, under his guidance, cross the razor's edge** of life. In right knowledge lies salvation. Stripped of doctrinal jargon, the teaching may be explained in the poet Henley's phrase that man is the Master of his Fate, the Captain of his Soul, in a profounder sense than the poet intended.

Sankara established monastic houses in different parts of India, under selected disciples of his, to spread the light. One of them was at Kancheepuram, from where the head-quarters was said to have been shifted to Kumbakonam, on the banks of the Cauveri in the disturbed conditions

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*Another outstanding instance of a man of affairs renouncing the world and taking to a life of contemplation was Gaurisankara. Dewan of Bhavanagar, known as the Good Old Man. He was perhaps the prototype of Puran Bhagat in fiction (Kipling's).

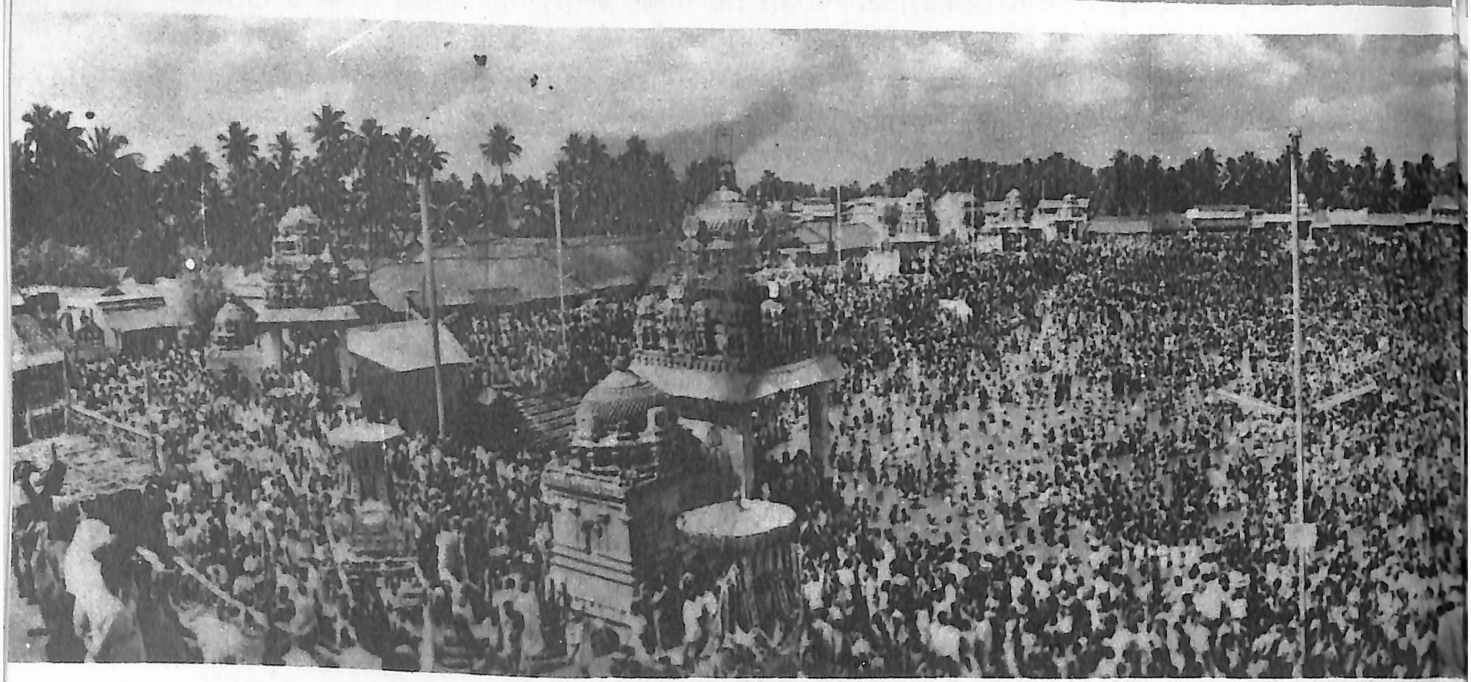
**Razor's Edge is the name which Somerset Maughan has given to a novel of his, in which he has admirably summarised the *Upanishad* teaching. It is a translation of a phrase in the *Kathopanishad*.

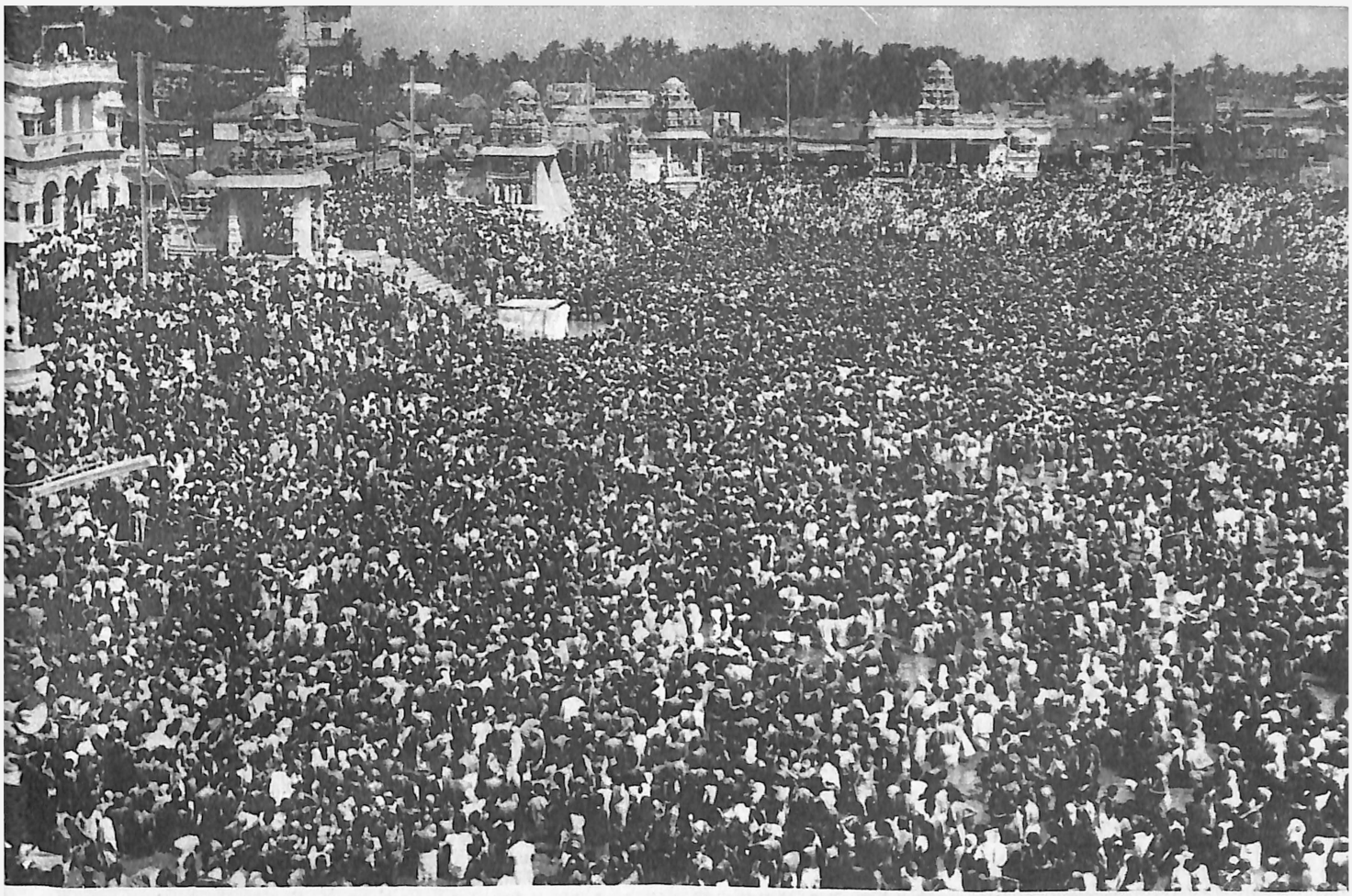
which followed the Mohamedan menace. There are those who assert that the Kanchi Kamakoti *mutt* was a late-comer, which has tried to steal the thunder of an earlier and authentic foundation, the Sringeri Mutt, on the banks of the Tungabhadra, in the Mysore country. *Per contra,* there are others who maintain that Kamakoti has existed in its own right and is as old and as authentic as the Sringeri *mutt*. Both do battle for their theories with a fanatic fierceness worthy of a better cause. Doctrinal hairs, however finely split, have no attraction for the Common Man. Doctrine to him, has no more attraction than History had to the Common Man in that screaming farce "1066 and all That" who, when urged by his learning-loving wife, to study history when they visited the wax-works at Madame Tussaud's retorted, "What use is history to me? Look at Henry, he had eight wives, how many have I?" The Common Man does not go by history or the record of the ages but by visible sanctity, and it matters two "hoots" to him whether the institution in question is hoary with age or is bursting with the bloom of youth. The devout Hindu is capable of a multiple allegiance. He readily concedes respect to the head of any *mutt,* or any religious teacher, who lives a life of renunciation and contemplative serenity. Sanctity—the genuine article and not faked—is what he goes by. The present head of the Kamakoti *mutt,* with which we are now concerned, admittedly, is an ascetic of the first order. That does not mean he lives with his head in the clouds. He is close to his flock, is unassuming in his ways, abstemious—lives on a little more than a handful of parched rice, soaked in buttermilk, taken late in the afternoon—and carries a smile which has the quality of a benediction. In a storm-tossed world, he is an anchor to hold on to.

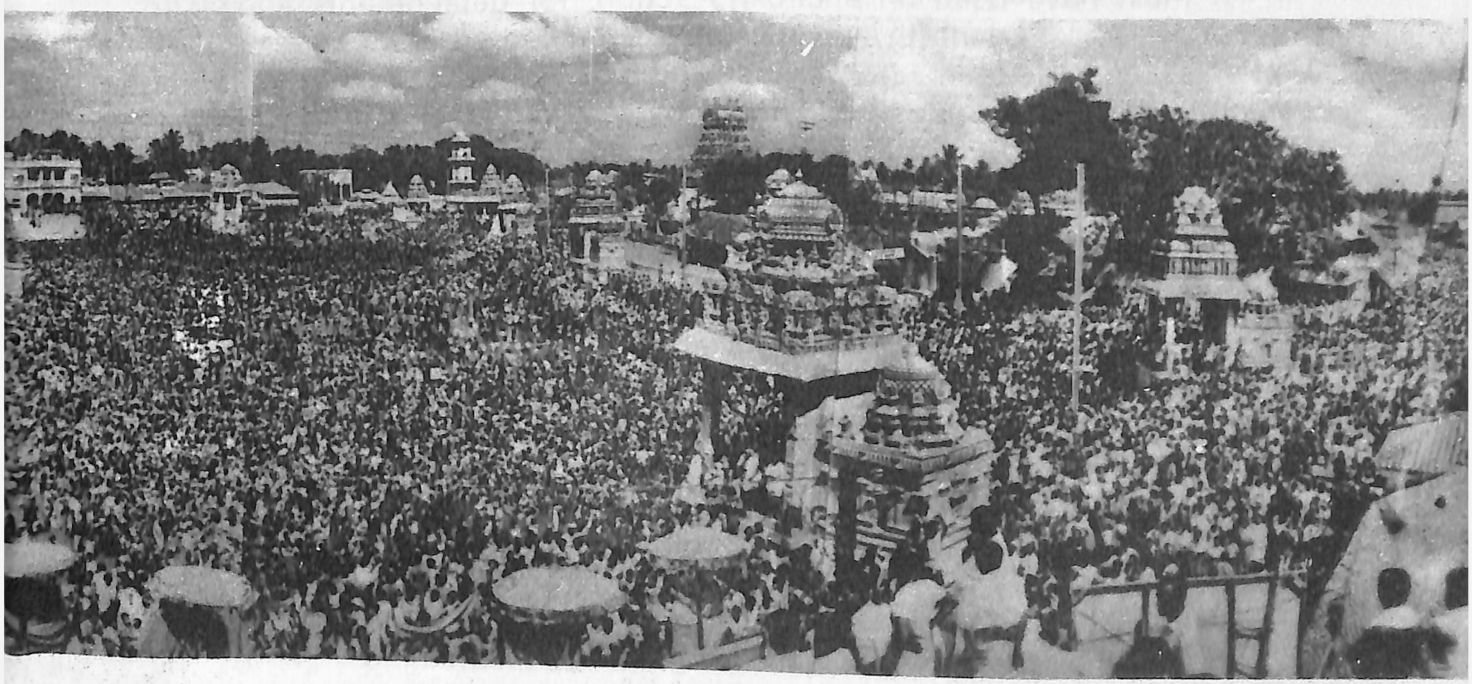
In the eighteenth century, Kumbakonam was laid waste by Haider's hosts and, later by Tipu's. Unprecedented damage was càused but the invaders were driven back and they did not show their faces again. Among those who helped to throw out the invader was the Ruler of Pudukkottai, whose archers and crossbowmen gave an excellent account of themselves on the field.

Kumbakonam is a populous and prosperous city but she had her share of war and blood-shed. In the ninth century a big battle was fought there in which the Pandyan king, Sri Vallabh, routed the combined forces of the Cholas, Gangas and Pallavas. That was a time when the Chola fortunes were at their lowest ebb. The Chola rulers were hiding their "diminished heads" at Pazhaiarai as petty chieftains. Events were to show that the Kodamooki battle was only the dark hour before dawn. It was not long before the Cholas had their revenge.

In 1862, near the stream Arisilar, not far from the scene of the Pandya







victory, the Pallava ruler, Nripatunga Varma, with the help of the King of Ceylon, inflicted a crushing defeat on the Pandyas and, in this battle, Vijayalaya, whose reign marked the beginning of the Chola revival, is believed to have taken part. The tide had now turned and the feet of the Cholas had been set on a promenade of victory. The most decisive engagement in which the Pandyas were routed was fought at Tiruparambiyam, a village little bigger than a hamlet, about five miles to the west of Kumbakonam. It lay at the meeting point of three jurisdictions, Pallava, Chola and Ganga. On one side ran the Manniyar, a tributary of the Cauveri, and on the other ran the Coleroon, while the Cauveri turned northward at this point and hence came to be known as *uttara-vahini* until she changed her course again a little higher up. The Pandya frontier post was at Govindaputhoor to the north of the Coleroon.

The main action was fought at Udirapatti, about a mile to the west of the shrine. The Ganga leader, Pritivipati, fought gallantly but he fell in battle. A shrine was built on the spot, known to future ages as the Bhagavati Aiyanar temple, and a stone-emblem of victory was set up—a *virakkal*—in the form of a small *linga* (phallus) broad at base and tapering to a point at the top. A piece of rock, not unlike Cumberland Stone, in the field of Culloden, marks the site and was doubtless a vantage point from which the battle was directed.

It must have been an encircling action, for detachments appear to have moved east by north and met at a spot known as *Kachiappankoil*, which is little more than a *banyan* tree and a steel trident or two planted on the grounds. The shrine is not known by any particular name. However, the tridents seem to point to Subramania, or Muruga, as the tutelory deity of the place—appropriate too, as Subramania is a War-God. Here, again, is a *virakkal*, dug into the ground, similar to the one at *Udirapatti*. The actual scene of the engagement is an area known as the Bhujangarayan *pathai*. To judge by the name, Bhujanga Rao must have come from the Pallava country and settled in the village.

The *banyan* tree is obviously old, and the tall shoots indicate that it is the successor of a parent stem which flourished there long ago. The tree and the tridents and a few mud-houses constitute the shrine.

The explanation of the name *Kachiappankoil* probably is it was a thank-offering to Kachiappan, the presiding deity at Kancheepuram, the Pallava capital.

The Tiruparambiyam temple is an architectural gem. It is in the true Pallava tradition and around it have arisen a few interesting legends. The deity is called *Sakshinathan* (Divine Witness) because the deity gave evid-

ence on behalf of a young Chetti, who was persuaded to marry a cousin, as desired by his maternal uncle in his dying moments. The uncle was a wealthy man and lived at Poompuhar but he had no son and there was none to look after his only daughter. He wished his nephew to marry the girl and take his property. The nephew lived in Madurai and was married already. He came over to Puhar, assumed control of the properties and took the girl with him, but he was disinclined to marry her. On their way, they stayed at Tiruperambiyam, where the nephew was stung by a serpent and he died (or was believed to have). The Saint Sambandar brought him back to life and he and the rest of the village prevailed on him to marry the girl. When he reached Madurai with the bride, there was a rumpus. His senior wife did not believe his story, till he called upon the Tiruperambiyam deity to bear witness, when a voice was heard from somewhere up in the ether, that the young man's story was true in every detail. Peace was made and the husband and his wives are said to have lived happily ever afterwards. One may daresay they did. Gods do sometimes bear witness in human affairs. *Sakshi Gopal,* near Puri in Orissa, is another instance.

There is a Ganesa image at the entrance to the temple, not of stone but of shingle. The story is that the river-waters rose in wrath and advanced to within a few yards of Tiruperambiyam which was in danger of being washed away. The villagers prayed aloud for succour and the God Ganesa came to their rescue. The waves receded, Tiruperambiyam was saved and the grateful villagers set up Ganesa in a little cell, where he has been worshipped ever since. Ganesa must have wrought to some purpose for his form shows it, all blotched and shingly from the maniac mixture of the elements on that day of threatened doom.

In the face of all that evidence, how can one deny that the gods used to come down to the earth at the call of the true devotee? There are so many examples of such divine intervention.

With the gods, caste counts for nothing. It is merit which weighs with them. Kalabingan was a low-born fire-wood-seller and he was a true devotee. Everyday, fair or foul, he used to carry a load of firewood to the Aditteswaran temple but one day the Coleroon was in flood and he could not cross it. He was in deep distress but the God cleared a path for him in the surging waters. The incident points a moral which, however, the people do not appear to have laid to heart. For caste distinctions continue to hold the field.

Shrines abound in Kumbakonam. The city stands on the Cauveri, which flows to the north of it in a broad stream, its banks studded with temples and smaller shrines, *mutts* and houses of learning. The Sarangapani

temple* serves the needs of the followers of Vishnu, the second of the Hindu Trinity, while the Kumbheswara temple is for the followers of Siva. The division does not mean that the two cults are exclusive, it is only a difference in emphasis. Wise men of old worshipped the Deity in three aspects, as Brahma, the Creator, as Vishnu, the Preserver and Siva, the Destroyer, not in the sense of a sadistic blood-sucker but as one who brings all things created to a destined end. There is a third school of philosophy—the *dvaita,* of which Sri Madhwacharya was the founder, which holds that the individual soul is different from the Universal Oversoul. Its most popular exponent was Venkanna Bhatta who spent his early life at Kumbakonam and was later canonised as *Raghavendraswami* who established a *mutt* at Mantralaya on the banks of the Tungabhadra on land given to the Swami by Nawab Siddi Masud Khan who was impressed by his saintliness. The three schools represent only different lines of philosophic thought which do not interfere with the worship of the Deity, or with the reverence due to Kamakoti mutt and its head. And for all the tenacity with which the three schools stick to and swear by their tenets, it is remarkable that the fair face of Kumbakonam has not been defaced by religious controversy.

There was, for instance, Agnihotram Tatachariar, who died not long ago, a profound scholar, deeply versed in visishtadvaita, a qualified version of Sankara's Monism. He carried his learning lightly and realised that, in God's mansion, there are many rooms. A more devoted adherent of the Kamakoti *mutt* would be difficult to find. Followers of the three schools may go into battle over their differing dogmas elsewhere but not at Kumbakonam. Perhaps it is the cooling waters of the Cauveri or, perhaps it is something in the air of the place, the voice of controversy is stilled at Kumbakonam.

There is another shrine at Kumbakonam well worth visiting and that is the temple to Sri Rama, the hero of the Ramayana, who is believed to have come down to the world in the guise of man, in order to right wrongs, succour the virtuous and punish the wicked. The sculptured stone images of Rama and his *entourage,* composed of his consort, Sita, his brother, Lakshmana and his faithful servitor, Hanuman, are perfect pieces of workmanship in bronze.

Talking of *mutts* they are a feature of the Cauveri country. They were really monastaries presided over by monks who spread the true doctrine and helped to preserve the ancient learning. The *mutts* were almost all of them extremely well-endowed; the presiding abbots, learned and hospit-

* Lovers of the ribald will get their fill of it by gazing on a few panels at the top of the *gopuram* in Sarangapani temple. Certainly one cannot say that men in the old days were just sanctimonious and smug.

able, who made scholars welcome. Some of the presiding monks were revered for their renunciation and piety and the *mutts* are all retreats from a storm-tossed world. Equally important, perhaps even more, in the life of the Tamils are the Tiruvavaduthurai mutt, the Tirupanandal *mutt*, Dharmapuram *mutt* and others one could mention. In the apostolic succession of heads who presided over the *mutts* there were quite a few who are remembered with affection. A good example is the present head of the Tirupanandal mutt, Sri-la-Sri Arulnandi Tambiran, whose endowments for the promotion and preservation of Tamil literature, religion and language flow in a never-ending stream.

Once in twelve years, when the Sun is in the constellation *Leo*, Kumbakonam spreads herself and gives herself over to a religious jamboree. A great *mela*, as they would call it in the north of India, is held there and it is known as the *mahamakam* festival. On that occasion, all the sacred rivers of India are believed to travel underground and mingle their waters with those of the Cauveri, which thereby acquires an extra and exceptional sanctity. Pilgrim crowds throng to the *mahamakam* tank, as the extensive pond is called, where the waters are believed to meet and merge, and bathe in it, as a certain means of acquiring spiritual merit. His Holiness Sri Sankaracharya comes there at dawn, gets in first, worships the waters and takes a plunge in them and the rest follow suit. It is an impressive sight, all India joining in adoration of the river-goddess; one cannot see the water for the dense mass of men and women and children, including infants-in-arms, which fill the pond to overflowing. One wonders if, in these days of increasing splits and factions, observances like this cannot help to emphasise the essential unity of India and remind the people that whom God has joined politicians should not sunder. But that is to assume that politicians will continue to retain their ancestral faith in religion—an assumption not easy to make at the present day. When splits are used to serve political ends, institutions which stand in the way are sought to be scrapped.

Kumbakonam's reputation for sanctity is such that Brahmins who perform their ablutions in the river at dawn and perform their Scripture-ordained duties punctiliously are a class apart. That, at all events, was the view of Krisanu but his travelling companion, Viswavasu, had no opinion of them. The two did an extended tour of India on foot, observing men and manners, like a pair of "chiels, takin' notes". Very quick and shrewd in appraisement, one of them offered a thesis, drawing attention to the amiable characteristics of a given region and its inhabitants, while the other looked on the darker side and maintained the anti-thesis. These they recorded in the *Viswagunadarsa champu*, composed in the seventeenth

century, an amusing work in Sanskrit, which incidentally illustrates the fact that there are always two sides to a question.

The city's reputation appears to have sustained an eclipse sometime in the last century and the name acquired an unsavoury connotation. It came to be used as a synonym for double-dealing which, I have no doubt, was undeserved. Which person or body of persons was responsible for this blot on the city's escutcheon is not clear but the blot did exist but happily has disappeared. On one occasion, a member of the Madras Legislature used the term in an offensive sense and Kumbakonam's representative rose instantly in his seat to nail the lie to the counter. He rose to a point of order and there was thunder in the air. The offending member re-assured the House saying that he did not mean to use the word in a derogatory sense. Rather Pickwickian that, anyway, honour was satisfied, the lightning ceased to play and the thunder faded into a distant growl.

Kumbakonam for all its congestion is well laid-out and proud of the Cauveri which the residents claim peculiarly as their own. She flows past the city in a broad stream, punctuated by bathing-ghats, like those in Benares. On the left bank, stands the Kumbakonam College, which earned such a reputation in the closing decades of the last century that she came to be known as the Cambridge of South India, Cambridge because it was believed to provide instruction in advanced mathematics. It had a succession of scholarly Professors and Principals. The names of Porter and Gopal Rao were household words, and so was that of Vidwan Minakshisundaram Pillai, whose most distinguished pupil was U.V. Swaminatha Aiyar, whose work in the resuscitation of Tamil works earned him the respect of the Tamil world and the title of *Mahamahopadhyaya.* The statue which stands in front of the Presidency College, Madras, is a measure of the regard in which he was held by the Tamil-speaking world. Students of Kumbakonam College used to refer to their professors in the reverential accents of those who spoke of Dr. Jowett, Mark Pattison or Dr. Arnold.

The air of Kumbakonam is apparently very congenial to those who possess mathematical talent. Ramanujam was a poor student who was not able to pass his examinations. However, in him lay the seeds of mathematical genius and this was discovered by Professor Hardy, who then arranged for Ramanujam's being sent over to Cambridge on a Government scholarship. But the jealous gods willed otherwise. Ramanujam went and, whether it was his wasted frame or whether it was the cold which he could not endure, he died before his time. It was only the other day that some recognition of Ramanujam's worth was made by an endowment in his name.

For all its reputation for sanctity, Kumbakonam is a lively city. It is a

"Woman's Paradise". When the mating season is on, matrons and maidens come from all the country round to make purchases for the wedding and for setting up houses for brides and bridegrooms. *Saris,* in every shade of the rainbow, gleaming silverware, vessels of brass, bronze and copper fascinate the eye and the fact that prices soar to giddy levels does not deter them from throwing their money about. For once they forget to calculate the cost and go in for an orgy of buying. But the day of reckoning comes soon and it is then that the harassed householder starts calculating his losses. But, after all, it is not every day that a wedding takes place!

A few years ago, Kumbakonam stood alone as an emporium of household goods but other competitors have entered the field but Kumbakonam's primacy has not gone.

It is not only the mathematical-minded that the waters of the Cauveri fertilise. Music flourishes wherever the river flows and the Tanjore district has always been the home of music. The Rajas of Tanjore were patrons of art and learning, and musicians of talent were made welcome at Court. Tyagaraja, the most renowned singer of the last century, spent his adult life at Tiruvayyar, a place of particular sanctity. It is not the meeting-place of five rivers as the name literally means; the name has a subtler meaning, that an austere and contemplative life spent there leads to the purification of the soul. The Cauveri, at that spot, is, considered particularly efficacious in washing away the sins of the mind and the body. Running water has a medicinal effect. It refreshes and invigorates. The brain is quickened and solves problems effortlessly. Body, mind and soul are fused into one harmonious whole. Tyagaraja lived a life of austerity and devotion.* He was a musical genius. An inspired composer, his songs, in every known musical mode, are the cherished possessions of many a South Indian home. Tyagaraja was not a professional musician; music was the language in which he held converse with the gods and particularly with his favourite deity, Sri Rama. Tyagaraja's music, though devotional, was not just a solemn series of cadences, his songs were light, diaphanous and often playful in mood, for Rama, to him, was not a distant deity but one who was almost a tangible Presence.

Tiruvayyar was once a place of beauty; the Cauveri sweeps along majestically, past the wide-stepped bathing-ghats which popular and princely piety has erected all along the riverside. The little village has grown into a sizeable township where men and mosquitos—of a deadly variety—abound. The local deity is Panchanadeswara—the Lord of the Five Rivers—and his consort is *Dharmasam vardhani* and they are housed in a magnificent

*A temple has been erected over his grave.

temple, with spacious corridors and halls and airy outer courts, filled with stone sculptures of exquisite beauty. For all its teeming crowds and murderous lorries, Tiruvayyar has preserved its sanctity and, at the river-side, you can still come across men and women, who have retired from the world and move about with a beatific look on their faces. The temple has seven enclosures of which the outermost is lined by a grove of coconut trees whose dense foliage provides a grateful shade in the hot weather. If one stands at the north-western corner and gives a shout, echo takes it up and sends it back in five successive waves of diminishing intensity, the last being the feeblest of all. The beauty of sanctity is not always realised, not even its contribution to health. There is a small pond from out of which the Tamil sage, Appar, is said to have emerged purified and spiritually exalted. The tradition is that he dipped into it and emerged even purer than before and the pond was thereafter believed to possess miraculous efficacy in curing the sick in mind and body.* However, familiarity must have lessened its appeal, the pond was neglected and is now little better than a stinking pool of filthy water. One hopes that the Hindu Religious Endowment Board will take the matter in hand, clean up the pond and preserve it unsullied.

The highlight of Tiruvayyar is provided in January, soon after the Sun enters the constellation, Aquarius, when the annual *aradhana* or ceremonial worship of the canonised Tyagaraja is celebrated. It is the heart of the South Indian cold weather when the abundant rainfall fills the Cauveri to overflowing. Lovers of music and well-known practitioners of it gather there in full strength. If you wish to gorge yourself with first-rate music, discoursed by first-rate performers without paying for it, it is to Tiruvayyar you should go in January, and you can get enough music to last you for a year. Food and lodging are no problem. The citizens of Tiruvayyar are hospitable folk and, if you are squeamish, and do not care to inflict yourself on friend or relative, you can obtain sustenance—substantial at that—in the spacious sheds where a thoughtful committee provide it. We cherish Tyagaraja as Bonn cherishes Beethoven. Bonn's tribute has taken the practical form of a Hall, named after him, so acoustically perfect that it catches and saves from dispersion the undertones of Beethoven's symphonies. Our most talented musicians have given concerts in Tinivayyar. I, for one, remember and cherish performances of M.S.** whose rich sopran

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*The tradition is that Appar was incurably sick and that he prayed to Heaven that his ailment might be cured and himself taken to *Kailas* and that a heavenly voice directed him to have his bath in the pond, which he did; whereupon he was favoured with a vision of God Shiva and his consort.

**M.S. is Padma Vibhushan M.S. Subbalakshmi whose fame has spread to the Far East and the Far West. Other well-known performers at the shrine included Semmangudi Srinivasa Aiyar, Palghat Mani Aiyar, M.L. Vasantakumari recently honoured.

voice seems to lift one on the wings of sound to an ampler ether. The well known stalwarts of South Indian music deem it an act of piety to perform there.

Tyagaraja lived the life of a *vedic* Brahmin. He was an Andhra who, like many Andhras, had made his home in Tamilnad. His songs were in Telugu, whose mellifluous accents lent themselves to musical compositions. His days were spent in worship or philosophic studies. Up before the dawn, he bathed in the Cauveri, performed his ablutions, worshipped the household gods, led prayer-parties along the village streets and collected the handfuls of rice which the devout gave him, before breaking his fast at midday. It was not just praying and eating and resting; he had pupils to whom he gave lessons in music with no thought of reward or payment. His pupils accompanied him on his rounds or purchased his meagre requirements from the market. If they paid anything in the nature of a fee to their preceptor, it must have been just a token one, *nam ke vaste*, like the sage Varatantu's disciple. Money had not then become the obsession which it has since done with all classes, including musicians.

There are some lovely stories which have grown about the name of Tyagaraja. His reputation for saintliness was such that he was credited with miraculous powers. He must certainly have had the healing touch. On one occasion, somewhere near Tirupati, it is said, he happened to pass through a village, where he saw a crowd of men and women loudly bewailing the death of a child who was believed to have met its death by drowning. It had been just taken out of a well into which it had slipped and fallen. Tyagaraja looked at the child and, overcome by pity and the grief of its parents, burst into the song *Najivadhara*.* In the air, *Bilahiri*, appropriate to the early morning, he appealed to the Giver of All Life to restore the child to life and its grieving parents. In about ten minutes, the child showed signs of returning consciousness and the delighted villagers attributed the recovery to Tyagaraja's magical powers. It did not strike them, as it might have struck a sophisticated modern man, that the child could not have died but should have been only in a state of suspended animation, that Tyagaraja happened to arrive at the psychological moment and offered a prayer which had no more to do with the child's recovery than the grief of its parents a little earlier.

On another occasion, Tyagaraja was travelling in a *palanquin*, on his way back from Kovur, near Madras, with a gift of money which a local magnate, perhaps, the Zamindar, had given him. Their way lay through a

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* *Najivadhara* means the "support of my life".

well-known haunt of robbers, it was late at night and the palanquin bearers were in a state of alarm, and they beseeched Tyagaraja to halt at the next village for the night. Tyagaraja himself had no misgivings and wished to proceed to his original destination; however, in order to reassure his bearers or, perhaps, their fears had communicated themselves to him, he invoked his favourite deity to come to his aid and to lead the party in safety. "In front and on both sides, come as my help" *mundu venaga irupakamulu thodaina rara* was the opening gambit. In less than a minute, as though in answer to his prayer, a radiant being appeared and marched at the head of the *palanquin* and by its side in response to the very terms of the prayer. When they reached the intended halt, it disappeared. It is a lovely little piece, in *darbar,* a Northern Indian air, as its very name indicates. In those days, north or south made no difference to us; the north was just what was north of the south and the south was just what was south of the north; they were not closed, self-contained pockets which glared fiercely at each other across the border.

When genius co-exists with generous impulses, it accords instant recognition to genius in others. Once a famous musician from the Malabar country, Govinda Marar, paid a visit to Tiruvayyar and took the opportunity to pay his respects to Tyagaraja. Marar sang to the master, who was so charmed that he broke into praise and expressed it in the well-known piece, *"Entaro mahanubavu"** in *Sriraga.* He that has no music in him may be accursed in the way Shakespeare has described but it is not all that have it in them that are free from pettiness. Govinda Marar was introduced to Tyagaraja by Vadivelu, a gifted Tamil composer in the Court of the Maharajah of Travancore whose *padavarnams*** were said to have charmed Tyagaraja.

Tyagaraja was poor but he bent his knee to no man. With the saint Appar he might have said. "I am nobody's slave: I fear no man". On one occasion, the reigning Maharajah of Tanjore wished to meet the musician-saint and sent for him to his Court. Tyagaraja was too busy to comply or it was just that he wasn't interested, red baize and green carpet were not in his line—and he excused himself—and when the emissaries warned him that his attitude might lend itself to misconstruction, answered in song that to be in the audience-hall of Sri Rama was far more rewarding than seeking wealth or a king's favour. The song was in the air, *Kalyani,* appropriate to the evening and a hot favourite with lovers of music. One of the emissaries

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*There are so many great souls.

**Verses.

caught the air and the tune and when he rendered it, the Maharajah was pleased and waited for another opportunity to bring about a meeting between himself and Tyagaraja. It speaks volumes for the princeliness of the prince that he bore Tyagaraja no malice but that his regard for the man went up.

That was *noblesse oblige* at its best, in the true princely tradition. The kings and princes of those times treated the learned and the wise with very great consideration.

The region around Tiruvayyar is consecrated ground. It is the centre of a group of seven shrines with a special claim to sanctity which, in combination are a storehouse of spiritual power. Annually, in the month of April-May a great concourse of people collects at Tiruvayyar and after worship at the shrine of Panchanadeswara, carry the deity in a gaily-decorated palanquin, borne on the shoulders of the Faithful, who take their turn at it. From Tiruvayyar the procession goes to Tirupazhanam, where the local deity, similarly mounted, joins it and the two deities march along to the next shrine which is at Tiruchotruthurai and so on, to Tiruvenugudy, Tirukandayur, Tirupoonthuruthi and Thillaisthanam. The Tamils have humanised their gods, and the gods, by all accounts, like it. Wasn't it Tukaram who exclaimed: Oh God: You are God because we have made you so?

It is all a hilarious crowd. The participants feel as though they have established almost physical contact with the several deities, who cease to be beings apart, at all events, for the time being. The crowd do not mind the heat and burden of the day or the strain of carrying the deities but the deities apparently, do. For, all along the line of march, they are shaded from the sun under the silken canopies and zealously fanned with *chowries** by their human attendants to keep off the flies and the heat.

The crowd has no time to feel tired. The Tamils do not take their pleasures austerely. A festival is a time for merrymaking and the very gods join in the fun of the fair. Hunger and thirst have no chance to assert themselves, for refreshment booths at frequent intervals provide, if not food, delicious drinks—coconut milk, water sweetened with lemon and jaggery, or buttermilk, flavoured with lemon and coriander leaves and asafoetida. Nowadays, I am sorry to say, more sophisticated beverages are available and often preferred—aerated waters, coffee and tea and *ad hoc* concoctions, described as syrup, which one takes on trust.

At the different halts, food is supplied by the pious villagers, breakfast

* fans.

and lunch and supper, according to the time of the day. In every village, worship is offered to the assembled gods, before they pass on to the next. It is generally past midnight when the different deities are taken back to their shrines and the day-long festival comes to an end.

Villages have their factions, which sometimes just smoulder and, on occasion, burst into flames; that, however, never interfere with the joint celebrations of the *saptasthanam* festival, when factions subside for the duration and all join in conducting it with perfect good-will and without any hint of a hitch.

One of the *saptasthanam* villages has become a figure of speech, Tirupanthuruthi has become a synonym for invitations given with the tongue in the cheek. The invitation may be politely phrased but has a rider added to it, which is almost a hint that it is not seriously meant. From this Thirupanthuruthi courtesy has come to mean an invitation to meals which is not seriously meant—It came about in this way. When the procession reaches Tirupanthuruthi it is almost evening and the processionists have had a succession of eats and drinks and it is too early for supper. So, the good people offer refreshments accompanied by an expression "Would you like something to eat? I know you will decline, however." Of course, the offerees decline with thanks, saying they have already fed to repletion.

I have no hesitation in saying that it is an altogether undeserved slur on the good people of Tirupanthuruthi, whose generous hospitality I have enjoyed more than once.

One lesson borne in by the spectacle of the *sapthasthanam* is the immense capacity for joint action which is available in villages, which if turned to account in the secular field, can produce results far beyond what laymen, officials and politicians and soap-box orators can ever hope to achieve.

If one wishes to re-capture the lives the Tamils lived in the old days, one can do worse than saunter along the banks of the Cauveri, savour the worship in the temples which stud its course, listen to their folk-lore and folk-songs and to the stories of the *alwars* and *acharyas,* who went about singing their hymns of praise. They had sinned and suffered, and had sought and seen the light. Theirs was a flaming faith in God who was not a radiant, far-off being, but one near at hand, ready to respond to the call of the devout. The village-folk caught their fervour and developed a stead-fastness of Faith which sustained them in their reverses. The "Sea of Faith" in the words of Mathew Arnold,

"Was one at the full and round earth's shore,

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd
But now I only hear
The melancholy, long, withdrawing roar
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind down the vast edges dread
And naked shingles of the World".

There is a pretty little shrine at Bapurajapuram, one of the tiniest of the villages in the delta and the name of the presiding deity recalls his interference on behalf of a devotee whose chastity her husband suspected. He had been away and the wife had to earn her own living. She made it her business to keep the temple premises clean by sweeping them every morning and, at the end of her labours, she always found a silver coin of small value on the platform of the temple-well and that sufficed to procure her the food she needed. The husband, on his return home, thought her story too good to be true and suspected a *liaison* with some local Lothario. He subjected her to an ordeal as a test of her virtue. He placed a slab of wax on her outstretched palm and set it alight. It burst into flame and immediately a radiant figure in cloth of gold appeared and placing his palm over the woman's, held the wax till it burnt itself out and then disappeared. It was obviously the local deity who had appeared in human form to clear the calumny and, from then on, was known as "He that bore the Burning Wax".

The story which the lesson enforces is that unmerited slander often overtakes the virtuous and when that happens God intervenes and helps to dispel suspicion.

It is also a reminder to men not to be hasty in their judgments. "Judge not lest ye be judged".

There was the case of that other peripatetic husband, whose suspicions of his wife's fidelity were dispelled by another miracle. The two were out in the fields and parched with thirst and they went about in search of drink. The husband could find none and when he came back, the wife told him that she had had a drink of coconut-milk supplied by an obliging coconut-palm tree, of which she held the remnants in a leaf-cup for her husband. The unbelieving husband proceeded to inflict chastisement on her when, behold, in answer to the wife's prayers, a nearby tree bent gracefully in the breeze till its fruit was within her reach. The tree then swung back to its normal position. The hamlet, since then, has been known by the name of The Place of the Northern Monkey.*

* *Vadakorangaduthurai*

I have not been able to get any explanation of the name; perhaps monkeys flourished in the neighbourhood once and that is very likely, for not very far from there is Kapisthalam, another particularly sacred spot. Kapisthalam means 'Monkey's Place' and its claim to sanctity is based on the legend of the God Siva appearing to save a temple elephant from being devoured by a crocodile. The elephant had gone into the river for a drink of water when its right foreleg was seized by a crocodile, which drew it into its capacious jaw and the elephant sent up an agonised cry for help to the God Siva, who came out of the blue and saved it and simultaneously destroyed the cruel crocodile. The Hindus believe that God incarnates Himself in the world of men, when injustice gets rampant, to protect the virtuous and destroy the wicked! That does not happen every day but only when things on earth get out of hand and drastic measures are called for. Ordinarily, however, God makes a brief appearance* on earth to right individual wrongs, as is attested by local legends.

There are villages in the delta which have acquired renown as the home of saintly or scholarly men. One such is Ganapati Agraharam, where the presiding deity is Ganapati or Ganesa, whom one propitiates before embarking on any important or hazardous venture. He blesses beginnings and removes obstacles. Ignore Him and you meet hurdles all along the line. As his younger brother, Subramania, is said to have done when he espoused Valli, the daughter of the hunter-king, Nambi. Not too late he realised that he hadn't called in aid his elephant-faced and pot-bellied elder brother. When he realised the lapse, Ganesa, himself a bachelor, came gallantly to his aid, rampaging like an elephant gone *masth*** compelling Valli to seek the protection of Subramania's arms. A legend for which there is no scriptural authority but which the Tamils like to believe. The village has another claim to veneration; three particularly holy *acharyas* of the Kamakoti mutt lie buried there:

Tirukodikaval is famous in legend as the site of a homily preached to Durvasa by the sage, Agastya. He is said to have preached to him that the salvation which men seek elsewhere and fail to attain, can be had almost for the asking at Tirukodikaval. All that he has to do is to bathe in the Cauveri, which flows through the village, under the name of the *Uttaravahini* and go round the local sacred *peepul* tree a number of times and the trick is done. Durvasa was a hot-tempered saint,—his name has become a synonym for anger—his temper was his worst enemy and one wonders

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*That is the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Song Celestial (as translated by Sir Edwin Arnold).

**To get wild and run amok.

whether the remedy suggested by the sage Agastya was not meant to cool the heated brain and bring the ungovernable temper under control, by reverent circumambulation of the *peepul* tree. My mother had an aunt who had married into a Ganapati Agraharam family and whenever anyone of our family flew into a rage, she would vow to take the offender to the village for a bath in the Cauveri. However, our transient rages never went to the length of requiring a pilgrimage to Ganapati Agraharam, though all of us have had baths there on the rare occasions when we visited the place, without any thought of expiation for lost tempers.

It is not an attractive village but in recent years it acquired fame as the home of a renowned violinist, Tirukodikaval Krishna Aiyar. A big-made, hard-favoured, rugged man, he played the violin divinely and I do not think that he has been excelled since. Were he alive now, he would be earning fabulous sums but in those days one could get him rather appropriately almost for a song. I remember one instance when that came literally true. One hot April night, Krishna Aiyar who was passing through Pudukkottai, on his way back from Chettinad, where he had been for a concert, stayed on the outer verandah of a house just across the road, right opposite to ours. The next house belonged to one Kannuswami Rao, the son of a former Dewan of the State, who had come down in the world. He could hardly make ends meet but he played on the flute marvellously. It used to be said that his sense of time was poor, but for sweetness and mellifluousness, he was unsurpassed. He used to stand about in his house, leaning against a pillar and playing on his flute, such tune or air as took his fancy at the moment. Usually, it was the air appropriate to the time of the day, *Bilahari* at dawn, *Saveri* in the early forenoon, *Sriraga* and *Madhyamavati* at noon, *Kalyani* and its variants at evening or lamp-lighting time, *Sahana* and *Atana* at night, ending with *Nilambari,* which was believed to induce slumber. Often, when he was restless, he would sit up on his bed and play other tunes, which were supposed to go with late hours. Kannusami Rao, as usual, was playing on his flute in his house and this caught Krishna Aiyar's attention, who unceremoniously sent for him. Kannuswami Rao learnt who the visitor was, came readily and obliged Krishna Aiyar by playing on the flute. Krishna Aiyar returned the compliment and for two hours he kept us all spell-bound by his inspired playing.

A crowd collected, not a crowd as crowds go nowadays, just a score or two of men and women from adjoining houses. I sat very near him and asked him to play my favourite air, *Sahana*, and he instantly obliged and followed it up with an air I did not then know, *Simhendra Madhyama,* which he told me, in a gruff voice, would, if properly played, suggest the

wind blowing through a wood in the early hours of a cold winter day. I have asked experts since whether there was any such quality attributed to it in the books or treatises on music and they have not been able to enlighten me but when Krishna Aiyar played it on his violin, it seemed to me to produce the very effect he described.

At the end of the benefit performance, he asked who I was and was told that I was the son of the Chief of the Police and he instantly turned it to account. There was only one bus in Pudukkottai in those days, a derelict ramshackle affair, which you got into on trust. Could I get my father to book a seat for him by the bus which left for Tanjore at four in the morning? Nothing was easier than that. My father had been listening with my mother to Krishna Aiyar's violin-playing all the time from the outer verandah of our house and enjoying it. I told him and he instantly told our orderly to go and book a berth for the musician and, I remember, my mother brought a tumbler of milk and a couple of bananas to Krishna Aiyar, who drank the milk with relish and kept the fruit for use the next morning.

What we had was an unexpected stroke of luck. Krishna Aiyar was not an expensive *artiste,* but, as a rule, he never gave violin recitals just for the asking (unless, of course he did so to please himself). Whenever he came to Pudukkottai—which he used to do once or twice a year—he used to stay with Principal Radhakrishna Aiyar of Arithmetic fame and an all-round scholar, and his brother, Narayanaswami Aiyar, a connoisseur of music. He used to stay for a couple of days or three. One day, Narayanaswami Aiyar asked Krishna Aiyar if he would give a recital that evening in his house. "Certainly" replied Krishna Aiyar. "How much will you pay me?" Narayanaswami Aiyar was taken aback at the curt demand and asked him if he could not oblige an old friend with a free recital. Of course, he was willing, replied Krishna Aiyar and added that it would be difficult to get the violin tuned up if there was to be no payment. And he meant it. Narayanaswami Aiyar promised to pay and there was a recital that evening, as usual a delightful one, and Narayanaswami Aiyar handed twenty-five rupees on a tray to Krishna Aiyar, and that was just a fourth of what he usually got for his recitals. He had shown a concession and to him the size of the sum, ten rupees or twenty-five or two hundred and fifty (which he never got except at the hands of ruling princes) made no difference. Some play and some payment earned for him peace of mind and pleasure and a night's repose.

For all his love of money, Krishna Aiyar was a man of the highest probity, simple in his ways, and he never crossed anybody's path. So long as he was alive, he used to come regularly to Pudukkottai for the Rajah's

birthday and entertain the town-folk with his recitals.

Near Kumbakonam are two shrines which deserve mention. One is Suryanarkoil, a shrine to the Sun-God—the only one in these parts, like the one at Konarak, but without its inebriating carvings. The nine planets (*navagrahas*), whose control over human destiny no pious Hindu will dare deny have also shrines to themselves in the precincts.

The other is the shrine at Tirucherai, about 10 miles from Kumbakonam, where there is a statue to the goddess Cauveri (reproduced on p. 5). It has an interesting legend—like the Greek legend as to the contest between three goddesses, Hera, Pallas Athene and Aphrodite, as to which of them was the fairest. At Tirucherai, the contest was only between two—the river-goddesses Ganga and Cauveri. Brahma, the creator, gave an award that both were equally adorable but Cauveri, not content, wished to be more adorable than Ganga. Brahma declined on a point of jurisdiction and directed her to perform penance to Mahavishnu, under the sacred *Sara* tree in the precincts, which she did with complete success. It was, of course, as lawyers say, a judgment rendered *ex parte,* but Cauveri was satisfied. She also craved for a boon that any one seeking Mahavishnu's grace at Tirucherai should get it. When the local residents relate the story one notices a lively gleam coming into their eyes.

The Tiruvayyar, Kumbakonam, Tiruvarur triangle has been the nursery of all that is best in the music traditions of the Tamil country: It was the home of dance (Bharata Natyam) and the *nadasvaram.*

About seven miles to the west of Kumbakonam lies the village of Sathimutham, little better than a hamlet though it has seen better days. It has one claim to fame and that is that it was the home of a Tamil poet who wrote first-rate familiar poetry. We do not know what name his parents gave him but he is known to posterity as Sathi-muthra Pulavar, after his village. He was a gifted poet but all his gifts could not keep the wolf from his cottage door. The times were hard and patrons of literature were in short supply, so his wife, who had a practical turn, suggested that he should go to Madurai, the capital of the Pandya kingdom and try his luck at Court. Sathimutra felt he could do worse than follow his wife's advice and set out to walk the distance which was no less than a round hundred and fifty miles. It was late one evening when he reached the outskirts of the city and as he was foot-sore and weary, he lay down to rest in the forecourt of a shrine by the side of a sacred pond. It was the cold weather and the night was chill. The Pulavar's clothes were little better than rags and he lay shivering. Some-where towards midnight he saw a pair of storks shambling northward and

he composed a message in verse to his wife. It was addressed to the red-lipped storks who he asked "on their trek a northward, after their ceremonial bath in the sea at Cape Comorin, to halt for a minute at his house and tell his wife, sitting with eyes fixed on the rain-soaked wall, for a hopeful sign from the lizard resting on it, that her Lord and Master was at Madurai, lying in the cold, knees to chin and hands clasping the body, panting like a serpent confined in a basket". Lizards were regarded as harbingers of tidings to come, whose quality could be judged from the direction from which they clucked.

Even in his extremity the *pulavar* kept his end up and referred to himself as his wife's king and God of Love. It must have been a lucky inspiration, that message of his, for, unbeknown to him, stood near by, the current Pandya King listening to him. The Pandya, like other kings of his time, had the Haroun-al-Raschid touch and often went about in disguise at night to ascertain the state of his people. He was struck by the *pulavar's* felicity of phrase and pawky humour. He left a jewel wrapped up in a piece of cloth by the *pulavar's* side, returned to the Palace and issued directions for the apprehension of the *pulavar* as a thief. The *pulavar,* accordingly, was seized and brought to the king. The *pulavar* was sure in his own mind that it was all up with him and internally cursed the hour he had left home in and the wife who had sent him on his ill-fated expedition. He had no doubts that his end was near and may have consoled himself with the thought that it would not be a worse fate than the penury to which he was condemned at home.

Arrived at the palace, he discovered that the Pandya king had only meant to give him a fright—that was his princely humour, one supposes—and that his own lucky star had risen. The Pandya was more than kind, kept the *pulavar* in his court for some time, loaded him with gifts and sent him home to his waiting wife.

We lose track of the *pulavar* after that. Perhaps unwonted opulence spelt ruin to his poesy or, perhaps, nobody bothered to preserve his compositions. A pity, for he had the light touch, and his fame rests on that one message in verse which he composed on the river bank at Madurai.

Learning was held in high regard on the banks of the Cauveri. Princes and nobles were tireless patrons of art and literature. Kambar was a poet whom kings delighted to honour. He belonged to Therezhundur, about 20 miles from Kumbakonam. His poetic genius was recognised by a wealthy landholder, Sadayappa Mudaliar, to whom the poet has referred handsomely in his works. His *magnum opus* was the Ramayana, in Tamil verse, in which his analysis of human character and description of Nature and the ways

of men and women qualify him for a place among the greatest poets of the world.

Kambar for all his genius must have been "gey ill to live wi". He is said to have been overbearing and his store of the milk of human kindness limited. There was a courtesan, named Silambi, who had no pretensions to beauty. Life to her was a perpetual struggle to make ends meet. The outlook was depressing and it was then that she had an idea. Kambar was believed to possess something in the nature of the Midas touch. Laudatory verses by him brought blessings to the belauded. Kambar traded on his reputation. He charged a fee of a thousand sovereigns for every poem in which, expressly or by implication, he invoked the aid of Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth. Silambi slaved and starved, put by five hundred sovereigns and one day when the poet happened to pass by her house, she pleaded with him to make an exception in her favour. Kambar went to her house, accepted the proffered fee and wrote half-a-verse on the outer wall. It was just two lines in which he acclaimed the Cauveri as the best of rivers, Chola as the best of kings and the Coromandel as the best of countries. That hardly helped The poor woman had parted with all her savings and had nothing to show for it. However, the gods were kind. One hot afternoon, the poetess Avvai, the kindest-hearted lady in the world and a writer of verse unsurpassed for simplicity of diction and for practical wisdom, went to rest on Silambi's outer verandah. Silambi made her welcome and shared her exiguous meal with the poetess who was refreshed and happy. Avvai then happened to read the half-verse chalked on the wall and asked who had written it. Silambi told the poetess her piteous story. Avvai then called for a piece of chalk and completed the verse which then read:

> The Cauveri is the best of rivers
> The Chola is the best of kings
> The Coromandel is the best of countries;
> And lotus-footed Silambi's anklet of beaten gold
> is the anklet of anklets.

That did the trick. Silambi's fortunes rose and in a very short time her store of gold was such that she was reckoned one of the wealthiest of women.

High-hatted, Kambar may have been, certainly he was not hail-fellow—well-met with everybody. Taciturn, perhaps, and did not suffer fools gladly. He is said to have been increasingly cheeky to the Tamil country's beloved poetess, Avvai, who gave it back to him. Such stories are doubtless baseless. Once he is said to have fallen out with his patron,

Kulothunga Chola, in whose court he was the brightest star. He appears to have made some remark which the Chola took as a slight. The Chola was seriously annoyed. His favourite courtesan was Ponni and she offered to teach Kambar a lesson. She sent for him and, in apparent playfulness begged him, as a favour, to write on a sheet of paper "Kambar is the bondsman and slave of the courtesan Ponni". Without a moment's hesitation, Kambar complied and went on his way. The Chola was delighted. He promised himself the pleasure of abasing Kambar in front of all his courtiers. Shortly afterwards, he held a *darbar* and, handing the piece of paper to Kambar, asked him if it was in his hand. Of course, it was, replied Kambar, who sensed what was coming. There was a titter in court, and the king asked him if it was not amazing that a poet of his quality should write himself down as a courtesan's bondsman and slave. "Not at all" replied the poet, "All that I have stated is that I am the bondsman and slave of the Auspicious Mother, the Golden One and that is Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth of whom we are all bondsmen and slaves." It was a play on the words, *dasi** and *Ponni*. The laugh was now on the other side but nobody dared laugh. The Chola was red with rage and straightaway banished Kambar. Kambar carried a stiff upper lip and is said to have left with his nose in the air, observing that the Chola country did not encircle the earth and that there were other lands where he would receive a respectful welcome. He might go out as a beggar but he would come back with a king greater than the Chola as his *valet*.

And Kambar was as good as his word. He made his way to the Court of the Chera king and served there in a humble capacity, without disclosing who he was. Sometime afterwards he had a chance to display his scholarship and one thing led to another, till his real identity was disclosed. And he stayed in Chera's court, an honoured poet for quite a while.

Meanwhile, the Chola was languishing for Kambar's return and Kambar was longing to go back. He asked his new patron leave to go which he reluctantly gave. The Chera wanted to load Kambar with presents which Kambar declined. The Chera was insistent and the two compromised by agreeing that the king should accompany Kambar to the Chola court, disguised as his *valet* which the King, who knew the whole story, was ready to do. The two went and Kambar received an affectionate welcome. And, one day, in public *darbar,* the Chera ruler stood behind Kambar, as his body-servant and after a while left at a sign from his employer *pro tem.* It was only when he was well on his way home that the Chola learned who the *valet* was.

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*'*dasi*' he explained, is '*that Sri*' which means "auspicious mother"

The story, whatever basis it might have had in fact, is related attractively in a book of Arumuga Navalar's and is a favourite with Tamil lovers. Therezhundur is now little more than a hamlet and one or two mounds are all that remain to mark the site of Kambar's house.

The river is now nearing the end of her career. Near at hand is Sirkazhi, celebrated, in devotional literature, as the home of the Tamil Saint Sambandar and, a little higher up is the famous shrine of Sri Nataraja, the Lord of the Cosmic Dance,* a magnificent pile, with spacious corridors and colonnaded halls, friezes in stone, 108 in all, depicting Bharata Natya poses, which seem to leap to life and the thousand-pillared *mantapam* with its arched roof over what has been called the 'nave' of the building. Here was released (to use a modern phrase) in a specially-convened assembly of the learned and the devout, the Lives of the Tamil Saints (Periyapuranam)—a treasured possession of the Tamils—by Sekkizhar, who composed it at the behest of the Chola King, who signified his appreciation by accommodating the poet on his own elephant-mount and taking him in procession to the Golden Assembly, as it was called. Chidambaram stands on the left bank of the Coleroon, which is really the Cauveri, which branched off at Srirangam.

Close at hand is Mayuram, where the Cauveri is particularly sacred and a few miles off east it joins the sea. The Sun is back again in the constellation, Libra, and the month, October 15 to November 15, is particularly sacred. Those who love and adore the Cauveri collect there in their thousands for a sanctifying bath on the last day, which is really the day after the last. Thereby hangs a tale. A devotee, advanced in years and lame of leg, came trudging along but could not make it. However, the kindly gods held up proceedings and added a day of grace, to enable him to have his bath. A reminder that God is near at hand to the true devotee, to grant his prayer and assign him a place in Heaven.

And so she runs her course, "stained with the variation of every soil", scattering benefits all along the line, beloved and blessed and rooted in the affections of the people, Kannadiga and Tamil. At Poom-puhar, just a few miles off Mayuram, she joins the sea. In the old days it was a boisterous joining, an eager daughter rushing into her mother's arms and received with exuberant affection. But the sea has receded since, leaving a track of sand behind, and the billows of the Bay of Bengal, now rise and fall much further east. In monsoon time, the sand becomes a stretch of water over which the Cauveri flows. For the rest of the year, it is little more than a trickle which holds no hint of its one-time grandeur.

* B. Natarajan describes Chidambaram in his recent book "The City of the Cosmic Dance"

It is all in keeping with the destruction which has been wrought on the land. At the confluence (*sangam*) once stood the might city of Kaveri-poompatnam—Puhar, for short—to which regularly came argosies laden with merchandise from the Meditteranean littoral and the Aegean Sea, the handicrafts of Greece and Rome and the cedars of Lebanon, in return for the spices and silks of the East. Now, it is a ghost city, and the sensitive ear can hear, if properly attuned, the faint echoes of its wharves and trading-houses, of royal processions on the backs of stately elephants swaying to the tinkle of the bells, which announced their approach, and the bartering and chaffering of the market-place. It was a city where music and dance flourished, and music and dance it was that did for Kovalan, the heir to vast possessions, who succumbed to the charms of Madhavi, a celebrated courtesan, who wrecked his career, leaving his wife, Kannaki, chastest of women, to languish at home, and eat her heart out in grief. Reduced to penury, Kovalan and Kannaki made their way to Madurai. Misfortune marked them out for its own, and on a false charge of theft, Kovalan was produced before the Pandya King, who had him executed. The unjustice of it all seared Kannaki's soul. Was that her reward for all her virtue? Was an innocent man to be sacrificed because evil men bear false witness? Was there no justice in the land? When a virtuous woman bares her anguished soul, the Gods take notice. Kannaki laid a curse on the land and that brought ruin to the Pandyan King and his capital. Never was retribution so quick and shattering. And, the legend is that, Kannaki was transported to Heaven by angels in an air-borne chariot. A temple was erected to her memory and to this day she remains the model of wifely chastity and a warning to those who break their marriage vows and seek to sunder those whom God has joined. In *Silappadikaram,* the Tamil epic, the story is related in verse with a wealth of imagery and detail which re-creates for us the glories and the every-day life of Kaveripoompatnam and the Tamil country along the coast of Coromandel. It was composed by a scholarly Chera prince, Ilango Adigal who, born to great possessions, turned his back on them, assumed the robes of an ascetic and gave himself up to a life of contemplation.

It is nearly two thousand years since the city was swallowed but the memory of its might lingered on, gradually fading with the passing of the years. Gone is that 'great and gay' city.

"Where its prince,
Ages since
Held his court in, gathered councils, wielding far
Peace or War

leaving nothing to remind subsequent generations of its glory, except a diminutive shrine at Chayavanam. Parts of the city were spared and lasted till about the eighth century. In the Madras Museum, there is a beautiful image of Maitreya, which had survived the deluge and was discovered not long ago in the locality. Piety is now to the fore to rescue the city from complete oblivion. A statue to Kannaki was erected a few years ago on the sands in sight of the lovely blue waters of the Bengal Bay. The present Government of Tamil Nadu has caught the fervour and set to work with a will and made the story of *Silappadikaram* come to life. They have put up statues of Ilango Adigal (the Chera Prince who was its author) and Karikala Chola. They have erected a Museum, so to speak, on the walls of which are panels of statuary, representing the incidents related in *Silappadikaram.* One cannot but be struck by their artistic excellence. A comfortable Guest House is an amenity which adds to the attractions of the place.

Science is taking a hand too; Hopes are entertained that the present Government of Tamil Nadu will soon be able to wrest some of the secrets of the city from the bowels of the sea. Fairs and festivals are under contemplation and one may look forward to see the life of the Tamils two thousand years ago represented on stage and screen.

Kaveri poompatnam may have vanished and the sea may have receded, but the Cauveri, with ritual regularity, completes her career at Puhar, joining her waters with the sea. However, it is not an end, it is only the prelude to a fresh beginning, a recommencement of her career of blessing and benediction. For, lo and behold! even as her waters mingle with the sea, there among the western hills, high above the pine-forests, which lead up from Bhagamandala, overlooking a bewitching vista of hill and dale, sea-board and rice-fields, under the little shrine, in the little pond, no larger than a man's hand, the baby Cauveri springs back to life while, in the east the Sun, rising in triumph over wind and weather, seems to join in the greeting of the jubilant crowds, in the very accents of adoration of the infancy of the world. It is a welling-up of fresh hopes and renewed aspirations, in the joyous notes of Tennyson's Throstle, of "light again, life again, love again, young again".