Pilgrims Returning from Odyssey in India and Sri Lanka Share Experiences
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On the 14-hour flight from Singapore to Honolulu the pilgrims who had just returned were asked to write a few paragraphs about their experiences for publication in the "New Saivite World," giving a few highlights of the five-week journey they were just that day concluding. Here are excerpts from their informal diary.

GAYATRI ANANTA DEVI

One of the greatest experiences for me was the walk from the Ganesha temple in Colombo to Saraswati Hall in which at every house along the way the householders greeted Gurudeva with pujas and garlands and emblems of auspiciousness; it was the first time that I had witnessed Gurudeva receiving the public recognition he deserved, and it was truly gratifying.

Another peak experience was the wonderful classes in Saiva philosophy with the swamis, a long-awaited sharing of insights that was deeply gratifying.

I found the Meenakshi temple in Madurai very wonderful - it seemed to me that we had all been together here in a previous incarnation, perhaps during the time of the Tamil Sangam, and I found it fascinating to be able to experience the Siva and Sakti darshans side by side and to compare them - the vibrant, dynamic electrifying Shakti darshan and the Siva darshan like the inbreath - refined, cool, very quiet.

The next high point for me was Chidambaram. Whereas on my solitary pilgrimage

last year, my emphasis was on Muruga, Muruga, Muruga - this year seemed to be the time for Siva/Shakti, and for the first time I had the real experience of Satchidananda.

I think one great realization for the whole group during the pilgrimage especially in Sri Lanka, was that you do not have to be stiff and rigid to be orthodox - that orthodox is simply and outer expression of the way the soul really is, without worldliness, and is natural and unpretentious. And the feeling of being a close family was a new one, in a way, because whereas other pilgrimages may have ended with the same feeling, this was the first one consisting of Saivites only and those of the Subramuniya Gotra.

Connected to this feeling of closeness was the realization of the true relationship between men and women in the Saiva culture - how pure and natural it is and free of the "chauvinism" that Westerners attribute to it. When I first experienced this it was akin to moksha. In fact, even though I was physically strictly restricted during my long stay in Sri Lanka last year, I experienced a mental freedom, and an opportunity to be myself, that had been unknown to me in the West. This freedom exists for everyone in the East, because life is lived naturally, according to the law, the universal dharma.

I thank Gurudeva and swamis for making this pilgrimage one wonderful experience after another, for the privilege of travelling with them and for the beautiful Catechism and Creed which are truly treasures.

DEVA RAJAN

We look and work for a new and old Saivite World which is unified by the same beliefs, philosophy and religious practices. It's a great task, yet perhaps not so difficult, for while travelling in Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and India we made a most important discovery: the Eastern Saivite World is already unified in its almost desperate ripeness for its own religious revival.

Throughout our pilgrimage we saw this maturity of need. We saw a great

receptivity for a concise statement of Saivite theology and philosophy, current and relevant to the modern age. In villages and major cities we saw our Gurudeva awarded the highest spiritual authority, esteemed and honored by all: children, village, elders, scholars, Pundits, brahmin priests, wealthy businessmen, swamis, Aadheenam Kartars, and vibrant leaders of South India's young adults.

There is indeed a unified Old Saivite World. They may at this point in time lack philosophical clarity in their beliefs and their 'house may lack order' in a dozen ways: they need Hindu schools, immigrant Indians in the West need religious leadership from their native country...and more. But deep in the hearts of sincere Saivites everywhere is a strong, well-founded pride of their great religion.

There is an increased longing for the greatness of Saivism in times past. One can not be born and raised around enormous temple ruins without knowing that a flourishing religious epoch was somehow lost. It might be said that every sincere Saivite that we met in Malaysia, Sri Lanka and India is unified in this one respect: they are looking to discover the richness and power of the religion of their ancestors. We are as well.

What astounds and simultaneously pleases the East somehow, is that the definition, inspiration and leadership for this religious revival comes now from the West.

SAROJ SELVAN

For me the pilgrimage began when I arrived at Sivashram on December 31st as an unfoldment of understanding and fantastic inner and outer world experiences. You have asked for a singular highlight so this is one of many hills on the road of hills and valleys.

At the Nallur Temple, Jaffna, Sri Lanka, surrounded by local people we experienced the puja to the Golden Arumugam, a riot of light, color, aroma and sound. In the midst of this nearly overpowering crush of sensations I became aware of the presence of the Deity. Much large than the physical image and much

brighter than the golden metal. He filled my whole being with His sparkling radiance, emanating simultaneously from the inner sanctum and within myself. As the pujaris chanted, the devas joined in and as the lamps were held up and passed around, Arumugam began to rotate, shooting out His powerful Shakti. His warm darshan poured out like thick etheric honey enveloping us in a food of great strength, purpose and love.

DEVANANDA TANDAVAN

At the height of disgust with the dirt, fifth and commercial aspect of some temples, I was reacting very adversely to my entire "homecoming." As the main sanctuary at Trichendur while the pujaris were chanting the names of God, I saw - or thought I saw - the image of Muruga wink His left eye. This was followed by seeing this mouth chant along with the pujaris. I did not believe what I saw - looked away - shook my head, looked back and He winked and chanted again. This happened several times. When I finally accepted the vision as reality. He winked His right eye and continued chanting.

During the recitation of the oath for Confirmed Members at Chidambaram, I was overcome with emotional and intense feelings of "belonging," "peace" and "satisfaction."

PRASHAD SHANMUGA

For a long while I've wanted to experience the fifth shakti. We had some archanais at Tiruchendur (individual). Not during mine but during the abhishekam prior to mine I witnessed a family's special abhishekam and I really felt God's love and by God's love I mean a combined love from Lords Ganesha and the main deity Lord Muruga since the Murthis are very close there and you go to Ganesha first then Muruga just like you should. It's like Ganesha appreciates your going to Him first and He sends love and blessing and He opens Muruga's door so you get to feel the Muruga darshan too. I felt this and it made me happy.

VEL SELVAN

The search is on...The reality of man is not found outside of man. Rather, man is located on the outside of reality. The Guru can go into any area of the mind that is available to me, but I cannot go with him into the areas of mind open to him - this is the problem!

We casually talk about three worlds - but what grand news this really is! The knowledge of one three worlds is the good news of all time.

If you match wits with the Guru, he will outwit you. If you love the Guru with all your heart, he will outlove you.

AMALA SEYON

As time passed and we as a group had gotten to know each other and started to become very sensitive to the needs of each other, I had an experience that stands out in my mind, although there is so much that happens on a pilgrimage, I could write forever.

It happened when we stayed at the Raja's Palace. We had arrived there late and tired and they had been waiting for us at the temple (Tiruvarur) to perform a special puja, so they rushed us off and down a dark road walking to the temple. My husband and I noticed Indivar running back for her camera (which was a very important part of our trip). We reached the corner and waited for her as the group disappeared. When the got to the corner, we felt our way to where the temple might be and found it. As we walked through the first gopuram, a light flashed across the sky right over the temple. Indivar and I saw it, then a second light flashed across the sky (when the sky was very clear) and my husband saw it. I felt it to be a blessing from the Gods to the three of us.

As I'm riding in the plane after a tremendous pilgrimage to our Holy Land, I feel I'm coming home with a vibration that is a very natural state in a women's dharma. In India I found a cultural refinement that seems very natural to an old religious country, a culture that is created to protect the purity of the soul. To me to refine or purify ourselves through our religion we also refine and purify our culture. I

found that patterns in India regarding a woman's dharma are not rigid or imposed - but a natural expression of life coming out of a pure dharma. In India I felt no pretense, everything just came from the heart.

At the end of the pilgrimage, Master said in a talk one evening that he had asked one of the Deities at a Shakti temple, "What can the women do?" The Deity said, "Take care of her man." Master explained that we should be sure our husband is well cared for, well fed and loved. Make sure he is dressed nice. Keep him spiritual., Keep his mind in the highest area of the mind. Make him a success in the world. He is more important to you than your children. You raise your children, but you take care of your man. I now feel I have a strong foundation to live upon, to live my dharma as a woman in a culture that has lost the protection and value of purity and can now put my shoulder to the wheel of dharma.

SATYA PALANI

On the first part of our Odyssey in Malaysia, we worshiped at the Siddhi Vinayaga Temple. The puja that took place was five or more hours long and will remain a part of me forever. I had the wonderful experience of recognizing many of the people at the temple, though I had never seen them before in this life. The pujari and priests that assisted him felt to me like neighbors in my home town they were so familiar. Here I had the blessing of meeting Lord Ganesha. About three or four hours into the puja, after experiencing many aspects of puja that I had never experienced before, Lord Vinayaga was bathed with holy water from 108 conch shells that the pujaris had been chanting to and blessing all during the puja. I was sitting directly at the front of the sanctum some ten feet from the Holy Feet of Lord Ganesha. When I turned around, some two hundred people were behind me looking and worshipping. On either side of me bells were ringing as well as in other parts of the temple. I had the incredible feeling of being pulled into the Deity. It was like when two mirrors are held to each other, the image is repeated, and I was on a bobsled going into the next mirror and then the next, and the next, moving closer - yet the Diety was always in the next mirror. At this point I felt the shakti of Lord Ganesha hit me in the chest and I saw rays of light coming out of the inner sanctum to the people. To even recount this causes my heart to tingle and vibrate. I left the temple with the blessings of Lord Ganesha.

JOTHI KANDIAH

I was propelled into the Odyssey by Lord Ganesha and did not really know what to expect. So there was really only one surprise on the trip and that was finding a sink in my room in Anuradhapura. At the start of the pilgrimage my mind was confused, tense and causing me all sorts of pain. I learned along the way the great importance of praying to the Gods especially in the temple. Consequently, now at the end of the trip, my mind is clear and calm.

Always previously, when I visited a temple in America, I would go home and go through a bunch of wonderful changes. I can hardly wait for changes that I know are coming up because of the Odyssey.

LILA SHAKTI DEVI

I feel slightly overwhelmed. The majesty and strength of the temples spoken of an ancient time, the most esoteric knowledge there to be discovered - the smoothness and efficiency of the swamis, their fine training shining through, our new responsibility of being a Confirmed Member, holding the vibration of the highest truth our planet has to offer - the dharma and challenge of being a brahmacharini in the Kali Yuga.

RAVI PERUMAN

It was an exercise, the 1981 Indian Odyssey. It was an exercise of the mind, of our bhakti, of physical endurance, of patience, and mostly of our hearts. All of us came on this journey, as Palaniswami mentioned our last night together in Singapore, for various individual reasons, and we all came away enriched, revitalized, strong in faith and dedication, and renewed in spirit. I know this is only natural after being in the homes of the Gods as much as well all were, as close to the sanctum sanctorum as we all were in so many temples, and in the holy presence of our Gurudeva as we were for 35 days.

Highlights and sadhana merge in retrospect to become for me one very long and incredible experience, the fulfillment of a dream, and the reserve of spiritual energy from which I will draw strength and find solace for years, for lives to come.

To be in common with Gurudeva and witness his receptions, the words of welcome, and the heartfelt appreciation for his guidance, has to be of paramount importance as I recall the past month. Next must come the change of mind and adjustment of the spirit I experienced at the pujas and celebrations. The distinct shakti and vibration of each individual temple was as much fascinating as educational. At the Meenakshi Temple in Madurai, at the Siva Lingam shrine, I experienced a clarity of the unity of God Siva's three perfections as Parasivam, Satchidananda and Lord Nataraja in a vast, moving and dynamic way. To say that I am changed within is an understatement of the obvious. Palani Hills was where I came to know Lord Muruga more closely; and at Chidamabaram, the center of the Universe, Lord Siva's manifestations as Nataraja and Sat Guru captured and made a slave of my heart and mind and love for all time.

I had never seen the world before, never been any far there from the U.S. mainland than Hawaii. So to experience the lifestyle of few conveniences, concrete for a bed, beggars, and the odors of outdoor plumbing and congested cities was as much an education for my mind as for my senses. It also led me to profound appreciation of the simple luxuries of life, and of the city of Singapore, which was like a jewel, clean and orderly, after our journey through Malaysia, Sri Lanka and South India.

We all discovered aspects of our being which were, if not new, little used or dormant. In my case I discovered I could adapt, endure and enjoy under conditions I could not have imagined. That was the exercise of the soul which leaves each of us new, stronger than before, and so very grateful for our religion, or Gurudeva, and the grace of the Gods.

The anticipation, experience, and retrospection leaves me with a new approach to my involvement with my religion, my church, and my Self: I came as an individual and saw what it was to be a member of the Saivite Hindu religion, and returned confirmed with faith, just another servant of God Siva.

RAVI NADESAN

Heading home - though it seems as if we had just left a place so close to being like home, our current destination is as vague and mysterious as our original was, not

so long ago.

Essentially it was the reception by which we and most especially our Gurudeva, were greeted by all the Saivite communities wherever we stopped, that inspired me the most.

Through this seemingly outer show of congeniality and love towards fellowship and support of common-thinking peoples, I personally experienced, as all must have shared, the internal reassurance, fortification and clarity of our own individual perception of a religious life.

How religion and Saivism in particular permeates every aspect of our daily life; the path, the goal and the endeavor to be that which we truly are, to stand strong for what we believe and know to be true, to enjoy the multiplicity of the world we live in and still find, through common worship and devotion, the single source by which we and all that we encounter exist.

I return to the New Saivite World more deeply established within my religion. With feelings of fulfillment and heartfelt acceptance within that religion by those who are the religion. I carry home memories of experiences that were as comfortable as coming home.

God does exist, not only in my mind, or in the temple sanctum, but ever more so in my very own heart Om Tat Sat.

SAKTI NADESAN

As we entered the inner sanctum, the Golden Hall at the Siva Temple in Chidambaram, I saw a radiant, light-filled being, shining in the darkness in pure golden white and pale blue. The eyes met mine in an instant of complete love and recognition. I looked away for a second, into the shrine, where the image of Nataraja danced - then looked back at the Being again, and this time saw the first

world body of the saintly, white haired man who was a brahmin priest standing there.

ASITA NADESAN

As Innersearch 1981 began, I was made acutely aware of the feeling of the close relationship of everyone; like the family coming together again after a long separation. Many hours of travel, then we landed in Malaysia to be greeted with Nadaswaram and drum music at the Sri Rajarajeshwari Temple followed by puja then dinner. Such greetings we were given everywhere; Gurudeva was garlanded and greeted with great enthusiasm. Each place seemed to build in energy and the showing of love toward Gurudeva. Alaveddy brought a flower-strewn path, and a never-ending stream of smiling faces and love. Then came our "return" to Mother India.

Kanya Kumari - morning sunrise of our first day - very special and powerful greeting from Lord Suriya - the drawn of new and renewed life. Visiting Vivekananda Memorial at the southern tip of India where three seas meet - the bay of Bengal, Indian Ocean and South China Sea - looking north toward India. I felt a feeling so strong it nearly was impossible to resist jumping into the sea and running North on the land which seems so much home to my soul. We moved onward to the sea temple at Tiruchendur and there was no longer any doubt that I had at last returned home. At one of the many pujas we attended there, Lord Muruga was bedecked with jewels and gold which were brought out for our benefit. And as the 1008 names of the Lord were chanted His face changed appearance and expression with each one. His blessings were wondrous and we all left there enriched. Each temple had its own character and beauty and the power of these ancient temples of Saivism must be experienced to even begin to be appreciated. Each of us were given much by this experience, one we will not forget; and we will all look forward to the next opportunity to join Gurudeva and the swamis in this mission to the Saivites of our Holy Land.

DEV SEYON

Among the many wonderful temples we visited in India, Tiruchendur was for me the temple of my dreams. It fulfilled everything I had imagined or hoped a temple

might be, and I felt my soul had walked this sanctified ground before.

Here for the first time in this life I observed the temple in full bloom at the core of Hindu Culture, ever accommodating and feeding humanity. The pilgrims were the learned and the beggar. From the sanctum and the great corridors they sprawled out onto the steps by the sea. The temple was bigger than life, ever accepting, every beyond the taint or influence of the world.

I had a wonderful experience while sitting on the balcony of our guest house in Chidambaram overlooking the village street. In a moment of pure observation I watched the caste system of India walk by in a dance of life that was rich and meaningful. The brahmin, the vaisya, the sudra and the untouchable were walking by and as I watched them closely a great insight, understanding and appreciation came forth as each fulfilled the evolution of the soul young and old, together yet identified, segregated and pure.

NITYA NADESAN

I had so many great inner experiences that it is really hard to set one into writing, I guess the most vivid occurred at the Muruga temple at Tiruchendur. This temple was the first really big temple we had visited and it was really electric. We were taken to our guest cottage where we washed up and prepared for our visit to the temple. As we walked into the temple it was magnificent, the brahmins led us right into the inner sanctum sanctorum of the temple where a lovely puja was performed for us.

I could feel the Muruga darshan like I had never experienced it before, very scintillating, very moving, right inside your nerve currents. After the puja we walked around the temple and the after glow of the puja really lingered in me, although my real experience came when I lay down to go to sleep in the devasthanam. Every time I closed my eyes Muruga appeared to me in all His radient splendor, and not in just one way. First He would be Bala Muruga with His peacock and Vel: then He would be King Muruga all radiant and shining; then Palani the renunciate and on and on. This lasted until I fell asleep and I dreamt of Muruga. In the morning I awoke early for puja so refreshed and full of energy and ready to face the day.

JOTHI KUMARA

For me Innersearch India '81 will be remembered as the time I got to know Lord Muruga. Lord Ganesha I had come to know and understand rather well at the Hindu Temple in Flushing. He felt close to me. Lord Muruga I had been introduced by Gurudeva and the Flushing temple, but Tiruchendur - I will never forget Tiruchendur - I just felt that closeness to Lord Muruga. I felt His power in the busy sanctums to the cries of "haro - Hara." I felt that powerful Muruga devotion in His shaven-headed devotees dancing around the temple behind a golden chariot. I fell in love with that feeling. And I think I understand Him now and how much He loves me and my family and how much we love Him. I carried the feeling to Madurai and to Palani where I prayed for health and devotion. But, somehow, looking back, that beautiful ancient temple on the Bay of Bengal stands out above all. Yes, I will never forget Tiruchendur - where I first felt close to Lord Muruga.

KRIYA HARAN

Certainly, and I am sure all will agree, the temples were the highlight of our journey. But I think that what will remain in my mind for a while is the effect the temples had on us and on all the people. Especially in Sri Lanka.

As far as I am concerned, the journey could have ended in Sri Lanka. Why? Because I was home. This was my experience. It came like a breath of wind; soft and gentle it came. I felt that my soul had finally found its place, as if the search was over. Perhaps I had spent a lifetime there or two perhaps. But I didn't care. It was so familiar to me.

The faces of the people, the bicycles they rode. The bullock carts, the dirt roads, water wells and the ancient way of bathing at the well by pouring a bucket of water over your body before sunrise. Sleeping on the floor. Tea with rice and curry. The inner calm of so ancient a culture. It was right. It was real. It was simple. It was the Sanatana Dharma being lived almost forgotten, almost lost and unknown to the outer world. I was looking for a Crash, Boom, Story Book Lightning Bolt experience. But it wasn't that way at all!

Maybe it came in a temple puja or on a long bus ride. I don't know. And I can't tell you if something happened or not. But I feel a part of everything I saw, everything I touched, everything I smelled. And it is a part of me. I became the beggar, the rich man, the temple priest, the black Hindu man, the woman, the child. I was one with it all. I felt strangely at rest. Need I go further, I thought. But where? My heart was so full of love. All I could see was love. Heart and soul had found their place. I was home.

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