Temple and the Swami
Category : September/October 2000
Published by Anonymous on Sep. 02, 2000

TEMPLES

Temple and the Swami

When this antiquated South Indian temple came back to life. A Physicist-turned-swami came to meditate worship and live here

Anandhi Ramachandran, Chennai

South India's Tanjavur district is well known for its great temples, especially those along the banks of the Kaveri River. Here, every village, known or unknown, used to be a holy place of worship. Yet in the past hundred years many, perhaps most, of these temples have become dilapidated. One reason is the exodus of brahmins to cities and overseas. Only a few priests remain, trying to light a lamp and tend to the temple rituals as best as they can. Their sons and daughters have gone to find a living. Like the old parents in India who live alone after their children have dispersed, many temple Deities in India also lead a lonely life.

But things have begun to turn around. Village temples have been renovated by the third or forth generation of the Tamil family that left for greener pastures. A grandson or great grandson of a mirasudar (land owner) longs to find his roots and comes back to his village. He feels he should give something back to his family Gods. In recent years,

renovations have surged, and Deities are once again worshiped according to the Agama shastras. Suddenly there is a demand for priests. It is now important to support Veda padasalas (school of temple arts) and train youth in the priestcraft. It is heartening when these ancient village temples are resurrected, and also when the trustees have a sure plan for future development.

Karuveli is one such temple. Six years back it would have been impossible to imagine the beautiful setting that is now found near its temple tank. Though the walls had once fallen, thorny bushes had grown and snakes had slithered in the hollows, the temple has risen again. The Siva Linga and the Devi image were intact even after long neglect, and the temple is now well maintained by the trustees.

Yama, the God of death, worshiped the Deity Sarguneswara here (the name "Karuveli" means "no rebirth"). The Siva Linga is also famous, and the temple must have had some power. The popular sixth century Tamil saint Tirunavukarasu sung the praise of Sri Sarguneswara. He tells devotees, "Go to Kottittai before Yama comes, and worship Sarguneswara." Kottittai was the name of the village in those times. The Sthala Purana says that because a king named Sarguna worshiped here, the Lord is called Sarguneswara. The temple is situated about 20 kilometers from Kumbakonam and about 250km from Chennai.

As we enter Lord Sarguneswara Temple we are able to feel a definite but inexplicable divine force. The temple is clean and well maintained. The Goddess enshrined, Devi Sarvangasundari (beauty incarnate), is more than five feet tall,

and Hers is an electrifying presence. Who would expect power like this in such a small village?

The Karuveli Temple priest does the standard pujas and special offerings. But a unique Swami, named Sachidananda, has come to reside here after a lifetime of soul searching. The swami also takes turns doing the pujas, and it is easy to see his devotion and care. We don't usually see a sannyasin doing the puja in a temple. The acharyas do private pujas to their personal Deities in their mathas, as their tradition requires, but they do not offer worship in temples. So I was intrigued to know the story behind this 64-year-old swami.

At first Swami Sachidananda was reluctant to talk about himself. He simply smiled away my questions. But after I told him I was writing for Hinduism Today, he consented. He told me about his experiences and how he came to run a temple in the remote village of Karuveli in the Tanjavur District of South India.

I was born into a Smarta brahmin family in a village near Mayiladuthurai in Tamil Nadu in 1936. I had a happy childhood, though I lost my father at the age of four. After completing school I went to Chennai and joined a college. My interest was only in physics but my mentors chose chemistry for me, and I did reasonably well. I was like any of the other boys in the village. My upanayana [sacred thread ceremony] was performed, but I was not particularly interested in religion at that time. I was deeply attached to my mother.

Around the time I was 18 I had a serious problem. It was a kind of pain in my chest, an anguish, an existential problem of living with ego as a separative consciousness. I even considered suicide as a way out of this pain, but my love for my mother and feeling of responsibility prevented me from doing that. I wandered about for nearly 20 years without any guidance.

Ignorant of the spiritual path, not knowing about Ramana Maharshi, who had found a way to solve this problem that I thought was unbearable, I tried to lose myself in physics. Science is also a search for truth. After a brief stint in Mumbai, I proceeded to the US and obtained a doctorate in physics. All the while I was grappling with this agonizing problem--ego. I was suffering intensely. I tried to lose myself in studies and research, trying to ignore this pain.

The effort to transcend the ego by plunging into research in physics was futile, because that vocation rests on a strong ego sense and is ego-intensive when successful. But I didn't give up. Due to lack of spiritual common sense and an absence of bold, independent thinking in the secular field, I moved on to marriage and children, all the while silently suffering from this mental dread of ego sense.

Around the age of 40, I casually experimented with meditation along the lines of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. This immediately brought a dramatic change in the level of poise and essentially prepared me for serious sadhana (spiritual practice). In a short while I was totally and irreversibly impacted by Sri Satya Sai Baba. I was jolted out of my reverie, and in a few days

discovered Sri Ramana Maharshi. It was Ramana's total lack of interest in the phenomenal world and his inner stillness that perfectly resonated in my consciousness.

Ramana Maharshi's meditation technique of following the 'i' sense to its source chokes, disperses and dissolves it in the hridayam [swami touches his heart with his fingers and is lost in himself]. Hridayam is the Atman. It has to be pursued patiently to its end. Ramana's method involutes the mind-stuff (of which the 'i' sense is the last straw) in the hridayam along the atma nadi that runs from the ajna chakra [third eye] to two digits to the right of the center of the chest. The mind slows down rapidly. That is, random uncontrolled thoughts decrease and the subtle manifestations of the ego are clearly seen and effortlessly reflected. It is no wonder that Ramana taught this untiringly for over five decades.

Shortly after this dawning I came into the fold of Mata Amritananda Ma (Ammachi). It was her wisdom that enabled me to leave the US for India to pursue full time sadhana at her ashram in Kerala. Only after I assured and convinced her that I had fulfilled my duties to my family did she allow me to come into her ashram. She gave me shelter and encouraged me, but the bhakti (devotional) path at her ashram did not suit me. My approach was of jnana and dhyana, yogic knowledge and meditation. I was preoccupied with the teachings of Ramana Maharshi.

After nearly six years with Ammachi, she reluctantly gave permission for me to leave. I went to Thiruvannamalai Hills. The vibration at that holy place suited my dhyana path. But

after about three years the meditations seemed to reach a plateau and any further penetration along the atma nadi appeared impossible.

The trustees of Karuveli Temple took me to Karuveli. They knew me from my childhood and knew about my sadhana. When my meditations proceeded smoothly, in gratitude I began spending some time helping as a priest. I had training at Ammachi's ashram. I had working knowledge of Sanskrit, and I had no hesitation whatsoever to enter the sanctum sanctorum of Sri Sarguneswara and offer puja to Him. There was some objection from the local village elders, but after a while they accepted my priesthood. I started wearing saffron robes a few days after I came to India. That is all I want to say about it. My family now lives in the US, and they are not interested in my spiritual pursuits. Disinterested, I may say.

The Siva Lingam here was installed about 3,000 years ago. Most visitors to the temple with no experience in dhyana comment on the unusual peace they feel here. It is only those who are adept at dhyana who can take full advantage of the power of this place. We want this place to be an uplifting spiritual experience for devotees who come with their problems, with their worries, to find peace and solace. It is reasonable to expect in the near future the availability of a resting place which the trustees are planning. This temple will become an oasis for serious sadhakas (aspirants) parched by the heat of samsara, the cycle of birth and death in the world.

What is most needed for temples in the villages of Tamil Nadu is the commitment of one or more spiritually mature

individuals with the desire and power to transform a temple into a temple-ashram. Also, the priest who enters the sanctum sanctorum should be totally dedicated to worship and be a few cuts above average. He should surrender to the power of worship. In the absence of that, he only demoralizes the devotees' faith.

Sri Sarguneswara Temple, Karuveli, Sarguneswarapuram P.O., via Eravancheri, Thiruvarur District, Tamil Nadu 609501 India. tel: 91.43.66.73800