

## JOURNEY TO SOME HOLY CITIES IN INDIA

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### INTRODUCTION

India has thousands of holy places which are considered to be abodes of the Supreme. The sanctity of these places is glorified in many puranas, legends and traditions and has been a source of inspiration to people through centuries.

In Bhagavadgeeta Lord Krishna says: “Whatever exists as glorious, prosperous or powerful, know that to be born of a fraction of my splendor”—“Yadyad vibhooti matsattvam sreemadoorjitameyva cha; Tattat devaava gachchatvam Mama teyjoemsa sambhavam”

We have therefore in India, included amongst holy places and things, Panchabhoota Kshetras, planets and luminaries, tree shrines, sacred rivers led by Ganga, Chardham (Four holy abodes), Mukti Kshetras, historical places associated with puraanas, Jyotirlinga Kshetras, Famous Siva temples, Vishnu temples, Sakti peethas associated with Devi, other deities like Subramanya, Ganesha etc., cave temples, Kumbhamela sites, birth places of saints and samaadhis of saints.

Holy Rivers--In India, where the rivers take a brief turn towards its source is considered sacred. The sanctity and purification power of the river is strongest at the confluence of rivers. The turn symbolizes, individual’s search for one’s source and the meaning of life. The sources of the sacred rivers as well as certain places along their banks, known as Teerthas (holy water sources) are places of pilgrimage—Gangotri, Yamunotri, Uttararakasi, Haridwar, Talakaveri and others. The confluence of rivers includes Prayag, Devaprayag, Rudraprayag and Nandaprayag. The presiding deities of all the rivers are believed to congregate at Prayag, Nasik, Ujjain and Haridwar during Kumbhamela festival.

Panchbhoota Temples—these are: Chidambaram for Space; Ekamra Temple at Kanchipuram for Earth; Kaalahasti for Air; Tiruvannamalai for Fire; and, Tiruvaanaikkaaval for Water.

Chardhaam—four temples established by Sankaracharya in four corners of India are: Narayana Temple at Badrinath; Krishna Temple at Dwaraka; Jagannatha Temple at Puri; and, Ramanatha Temple at Ramesvaram.

Historic Places—they are: Ayodhya, Mathura, Brindavan, Kurukshetra.

Jyotirlinga Kshetras—These are: Sri Visvanatha at Varanasi; Sri Somanatha in Kathiawad of Prabhakara Kshetra; Sri Mahakaleshvara in Malwa in Ujjain; Sri Omkaaresvara in Malwa on the banks of the River Narmadaa and the nearby Amalesvara; Sri Vaidyanatha near paril village; Sri Bhimasankara in Kamaroopa district of Assam; Sri Ramanatha in Ramesvaram of Tamil Nadu; Sri Naagesvara in Andhra Pradesh; Sri Kedarnath in the Himalayas; Sri Gusmesvara in Andhra Pradesh near Daulatabad; Sri Mallikaarjuna in Srisailam; Sri Trayambakesvara on the banks of the river Godavari.

Vishnu Temples—108 Vishnu temples have been glorified by Tamil saints called Azhwars which include Ranganatha in Srirangam, Venkatesvara in Tirupati, Parthasarathy in Chennai, Narasimha in Ahobilam, and Devarajaswami in Naimisaarinya in Uttar Pradesh.

Sakti Peethas—There are 51 temples dedicated to Goddess Shakti that include, Vaishnodevi Temple, Ksheerabhavani Temple in Kashmir, Jwalamukhi Temple in Himachal Pradesh and Kalighat in Kolkata. Kanchi Kamakshi, Madurai Meenakshi and Kasi Visalakshi are the three famous Devi temples.

Siva Temples—these are innumerable. Nayanmars, the Tamil saints have glorified 274 Siva temples by their hymns in praise of Siva which include Kapalesvarar Temple in Chennai, Sundaresvarar Temple in Madurai and Nataraja Temple in Chidambaram.

Cave Temples—they include Ellora, Mahabalipuram, Vatapi and Kathiavar.

Mukti Kshetras—a pilgrimage to any one of these temples is said to free one from afflictions and sorrow and grant passage to heaven. These are: Ayodhya on Sarayu; Mathura on Yamuna; Mayapuri (Haridwar) on Ganga; Kasi on Ganga; Kancheepuram on Vegavati; Avantika (Ujjain) on Kshipra; and, Dwaraka on Gomati.

Other Deities' Temples—among other deities include Subramanya (Murugan) in Tamil Nadu: Tiruppuram Kundram; Tiruchchendur; Palani; Swamimalai; Tiruttani and Azhagar koil. Lord Aiyappa in Sabarimalai, Hanuman Temple at Sucheendram and Panki near Kanpur, Kali Temple at Dakshinesvar, Sri Krishna Temple at Guruvayur; Krishna Temple at Udupi and, Kumaramman Temple at Kanyakumari are some of the famous temples. Ganesha temples at Trichy and at eight other places in Maharashtra are famous.

Tree Shrines—Vatavriksha at Gaya and Bo tree in Bodh Gaya.

Planets and Luminaries—Saneesvara Temple at Tirunallaru in Tamil Nadu, Sun Temple in Gaya, Sun Temple of Konarak, Sun Temple in Andhra Pradesh, Suryanarayana Temple in Tamil Nadu are quite famous.

Kumbhamela Sites—Lord Dhanvantari appeared with a pot containing the nectar of immortality. The asuras tried to grab the pot to prevent devas from obtaining the nectar. In the process, some of the nectar is said to have spilt in four places. These are: Prayag; Nasik; Ujjain and, Haridwar. At the time of Kumbhamela, the presiding deities of all the rivers are believed to congregate at these four places and bless the devotees who bathe in these rivers.

Saints—birth places of Sri Sankaracharya at Kaladi and Ramanuja at Sri Perambadur, Sri Sai Baba at Shirdi and others. Burial sites: Sri Sadasiva Brahendra at Nerur and Raghvendra at Mantralaya in AP.

Worship in India is expressed through many natural forms, including the elements, trees, rivers and hills. The entire country is pervaded with sanctity due to the association of the creation with the Lord in one form or another. The land on which vedic culture has thrived for several thousands of years is also considered sacred. India is rightly known as *Punya Bhoomi* or the Holy Land.

### HARIDWAR

Haridwar lies at the base of the Shiwalik Hills where the river Ganga passes through its last gorge and begins a 2,000 km journey across the plains. Legend has sanctified it by placing Vishnu's footprint on the river bank, making Haridwar (Vishnu's gate) one of the seven holy cities of Hinduism. Various episodes from the Mahabharata are set in this ancient town. It attracted the attention of Timur who sacked it in 1399. The town on the west bank of the river, centers on Hari-ki-Pairi, where Vishnu is believed to have left his footprint. Near the steps at Hari-ki-Pairi are a modern clock tower and

some temples, none particularly old. There are five bridges to take one across the river, where it is quieter.

Certain towns and rivers are particularly sacred to Hindus. Thus there are seven holy places-- Haridwar, Mathura, Ayodhya, Varanasi, Ujjain, Dwaraka, and Kanchipuram, in the south. In addition to these seven holy places, there are four holy abodes: Badrinath, Puri, and Rameshvaram, with Dwaraka in modern Gujarat having the unique distinction of being both a holy abode and a holy place. There are also seven holy rivers-- Ganga, Yamuna, Indus, the mythical Saraswati in the north, and the Narmada, Godavari, and Kaveri, in the peninsula.

The religious focus in Haridwar is on Hari-ki-Puri ghat. Thousands of the pilgrims visit the city, especially when the birth of the river (Dikhanti) is celebrated in spring. Kumbh Mela, held every 12<sup>th</sup> year (next in Apr 2010), and Ardha Kumbh every 6 years, attract millions of devotees who come to bathe in the confined area near Hari-ki-Pairi. The bountiful Ganga is a river of reverence to all Hindus. On its banks are situated great pilgrimage centers that have always been dear to the gods and mankind.

The water of Ganga is believed to hold magical powers. It is said in religious texts "oushadhihi Jahnavee toyam vaidyoe Narayanoe Harihi"--The medicine for spiritual ills is the Ganges water. The doctor who cures these ills is none other than Lord Vishnu. Also Skandapurana says:"Anichchayaapi samsprishtoe dahanoe hi yatha dahet; anichchayaapi samsnaataa Gangaa paapam tathaa dahet"—just as fire burns on touching it even though one does not want to be burnt, in the same way Ganga washes the sins of mankind even when it is not so intended. Koormapurana glorifies Haridwar as follows "Sarvatra sulabha Ganga trishu Sthaaneshu durlabhaa; Gangaadvaaray Prayaagay cha Gangaasaagarasangamay; Sarveshaameva bhootaanaam papoehatachetasam; gatimanvayshamaanaanaam naasti Gangaasamaa gatihi"—Although accessible everywhere to the common man, Ganga is unique at Haridwar, Prayag and Gangasaagara. Those who desire salvation, including emotionally down-trodden sinners, there is no better place than Ganga.

From sunrise, pilgrims come to the ghat to cleanse themselves of their sins. Religious services are offered by holy men in their huts on the ghat dispensing wisdom to the willing. Some pilgrims do Shraddha ceremony to the departed souls on the banks here. In the evening the priests perform spectacular Ganga aarati at sunset. Hari-ki-Pairi is filled to the brim at that time. The prayer and songs in praise of the Mother Ganges fill the air. Pilgrims worship mother Ganga and float the leaf-boat lit with an oil-lamp using a wick dipped in melted butter and embedded in flowers. It looks as though the stars from the sky have descended down to Mother Ganga to witness the spectacular sight during evening prayers.

Before the holy dip is taken in Mother Ganga, customary Sankalpa (religious resolution to take a dip in the holy waters) is taken with or without the help of the priest, haldi, kumkum, milk and flowers are offered to mother Ganga and prayers are offered in praise of the mother Ganga. After the holy dip leaf-boat with the lamp is floated in the waters as described above. The mantras chanted before the dip is as follows;

"Devi, Suresvari Bhagavati Gangay Tribhuvanataarini taralatarangay; Sankaramouliviharini Vimalay mama matiraastam tava paadakamalay—O Goddess Ganga! You are the ruler of all devataas; you are the one who is endowed with all the glories; you are pure; you are the one who takes one beyond the three worlds; You have pure white waves; you adorn the matted hairs of Lord Siva. May my mind rest at your lotus feet!

"Tava chaynmaatassroetassnaataha punarapi jatharay soepi na jaataha; narikanivaarini Jahnavi Gangay kalushvinaasini mahimoettungay"—O Mother Ganga! Jaahnavi! You are the one who rescue people from hell and destroys the results of their wrong actions. Whoever takes a dip in your waters is never born again in the womb. Your glories stand high.

Kankhal 3km downstream, with the Temple of Dakseshwara is where Siva's wife, Sati, is believed to have burnt herself to death. Daksha, a son of Brahma, gave his daughter Sati in marriage to Siva, but he did not invite Siva to his grand sacrifice. Sati, in anger, burnt her self to death. Siva destroyed the sacrifice and beheaded Daksa, but when the gods praised Siva he restored the sacrifice and gave Daksa the head of a goat. When Siva learned that Sati had killed herself, he took up her body and danced in grief, troubling the world with his dance and his tears until Vishnu cut the corpse into pieces. When the Yoni fell Siva took the form of Linga, and peace was re-established in the universe.

Towards Rishikesh, 5 km from Haridwar are the newer temples: Pawan Dham with a Hanuman temple has spectacular glittering glass interior and the seven- storey Bharat Mata Mandir to Mother India. Manasa Devi Temple is worth visiting for the view. Set on the southernmost Shivalik Hills, it is accessible on foot or by chair-lift. These new temples display the old traditions of temple architecture and sculpting skill of the artisans.

### HRISHIKESH OR RISHIKESH

Rishikesh is 24 km from Haridwar, surrounded by hills on three sides, 356 m above sea level. The Ganga, at this point still astonishingly clear water stream, links all the holy places of one of Hinduism's most sacred regions. Rishikesh also known as Rishikesh stands tight packed on the banks of the river as it runs swiftly through the southernmost ranges of the Shivalik Hills on the way to Gangetic Plains. At Rishikesh the river begins to cut through the low foot hills, which were once more densely forested than today. Those forests offered the prospect of quiet retreat, the original basis of the forest ideal, but today the whole place has become heavily commercialized, full of ashrams, sadhus and visitors attending courses on yoga and meditation. Several ashrams are seats of spiritual learning and meditation, offering also courses. Muniki-Reti is the area along the Chandrabhaga River which has also some temples. Walking north along the river leads to secluded beaches. This is the base for several pilgrimages and treks including Char Dham (Badrinath, Kedarnath, Yamunotri and Gangotri) pilgrimage and pilgrimage to the Hemkund Sahib.

Rishikesh means "Hair of sage". Vishnu is called "Hrishkesh" as he is the governor of all senses. Hrs-Kesha means "one whose hair is made short". In vedic sense, "Hrishka+Isa=Hrishiksha" means Lord of sense organs. In both the meanings the place is associated with Sadhus and Rishis. In the battle field of Kurukshetra we meet Lord Krishna with all his curly hairs rolled up or clipped, that is short haired. Legend has that sage Raibhya Rishi did severe penance, as a reward God appeared before him in the form of Hrishkesh, Lord Krishna. It is a place where Vishnu vanquished the demon Madhu.

The Ganga has two suspension bridges-Ram (Sivanada) Jhula, between Sivananda ashram and Swrga ashram and, Lakshman Jhula. The Lakshman Jhula area is very picturesque with best views. The place is full of rehsus monkeys. Shivananda Nagar is located in Rishikesh. Lakshmana is believed to have crossed the Ganga with the help of the jute rope bridge and went on a penance at Hrishikesh, where the present bridge is built in 1939, hence the name Lakshman Jhula.

Pilgrims purify themselves by bathing in the Ganga at Triveni Ghat, in the same manner as described under Haridwar doing Sankalpa and pooja to Mother Ganga. It is a sight to see people offering milk to Ganga, feeding the fish at dawn, and floating leaf-boat lamps after sunset for evening aarati. Many ashrams which offer the seeker a spiritual haven are on the east bank of the river. Bharat Mandir, Paramartha Niketan, Ved Niketan Geeta Bhavan and Swargaashram are some of the important ashrams. Some of the ashrams are bizarrely colorful and are architectural curiosities. The mid-day aarati in a peaceful atmosphere at Geeta Bhavan is very ritualistic and elaborate. It has also a large book stall where the publications of Geeta Bhavan are available in various Indian and foreign languages. There are also on sale some interesting curios, photos and religious paintings.

## EN ROUTE TO BADRINATH

The motor road from Rishikesh to Badrinath is very picturesque and awe-inspiring, moving parallel to the Alkananda River, which runs along the foot of the breath-taking Himalayan Ranges. With a little diversion here and there a number of religious centers can be visited en-route.

Dehra Dun-- (dehra=camp; dun=valley) lies in a wooded valley in the Shiwalik Hills. In Hindu legend the Dun Valley was part of Siva's stamping ground. Rama and his brother are said to have done penance for killing Ravana here, and the five Pandavas stopped here on their way to mountains. It makes a pleasant and relaxing stop on the way to the hills and the mild climate has made it a popular town. The Tapakeswara Temple, 5km northwest is in a pleasant setting with cool sulfur springs. Sahasrahara sulfur springs are also within reach. A third century BC Ashoka rock inscription near Kalsi suggests that the area was ruled by the Emperor Ashoka.

Not far from Dehradun, on the way to the mountains is Shivpuri where travellers are greeted with a hot cup of tea and kichadi (mixed lentil rice) free. The town is renowned for its ancient Siva Temple with a giant size crystal Lingam. It is exciting to watch the bathing ceremony (abhishekam) with different materials while the Lingam gets the color of the material poured and also the color of the flower placed on it. All pooja materials are also sold here at a reasonable price.

Rivers are believed to have great purifying power stronger at the source, at their confluence and at the mouth. There are five prayags (confluences) in the Himalayan section of the Ganga: Deo Prayag--confluence of Alkananda and Bhagirati Rivers; Rudra Prayag--confluence of Alkananda and Mandakini Rivers; Nanda Prayag--Confluence of Mandakini and Alkananda Rivers; Karna Prayag--confluence of Alkananda and Pindar Rivers; Vishnu Prayag--confluence of Alkananda and Dauliganga Rivers. Pilgrims take holy dips at all these places. Deo Prayag is the most important of the hill prayags. Gangotri is the source of the Bhagirati River. Below Deo Prayag, Bhagirati becomes the Ganga proper. Deo Prayag town tumbles down the precipitous hillside in the deeply cut 'V' between the junction of the two rivers, with houses almost on top of one another. Where the rivers meet is a pigm's bathing ghat, artificially made into the shape of India.

Govind ghat, 20km from Joshimath which falls on the way, is on the road to Badrinath. A bridle track leads to Gangharia, for the Valley of Flowers and Hemkund Sahib. Hemkund Sahib is 6km from Gangharia. It is the place where Guru Gobind Singh is believed to have sat in meditation during a previous incarnation. It is an important pilgrimage center for Sikhs.

The path from Ghangharia gradually climbs to the Valley of Flowers, glaciers, snow bridges, alpine flowers and wild life appear at intervals. The 6km long and 2km wide U-shaped valley is laced by water falls. It is beautiful during the monsoons, carpeted with alpine flowers.

## BADRINATH

According to Hindu Saastras, no pilgrimage is complete without a visit to Badrinath, the abode of Vishnu. Along Ramesvaram, Dwaraka, and Puri, it is one of the holiest places in India as already stated. Guarding Badrinath, are the Nara and Narayana Ranges and in the distance towers the magnificent pyramid shaped Neelakantha (6558m). A hike to its base takes two hours from Badrinath. Badrinath is near the source of Alkananda River. The town is at an altitude of 3133 meters. It is situated on the west bank of the river Alkananda.

Badri name is derived from a wild berry fruit that Vishnu is said to have lived on when he did his penance at Badrivan, the area which covers all five important temples in the area including Kedarnath. Shankaracharya, the great philosopher of Advaita philosophy, is credited with establishing the four great pilgrimage centers in the early ninth century AD, which date is disputed now by many researchers which throws back the date to at least 1000 years.

The main temple of Badrinath got destroyed several times due to avalanche. The present temple was built two centuries ago by Garhwal kings. It is conical in structure, 15m tall and has a small cupola of gilt bull and spire. The temple is brightly painted in green, blue, pink, yellow, white, silver, and red. The shrine is usually crowded with worshippers. The Rawal, head priest, always comes from a Namboodri village in Kerala, Kaladi, the birth place of Sankaracharya. Badrinath is snowbound over winter, when the images are transferred to Pandukesvar. The temple is therefore open from April to October.

It is customary to bathe in the Taptkund, a hot sulfur spring in which the fire God Agni lives by the kind permission of Vishnu. The temperature of water is around 45 degrees C. Once bath is taken, the cold is never felt even in the month of October. It is customary to do "Shraddha" (ceremony the departed souls) on the banks of the river Alkananda where pilgrims take a holy dip even in the freezing winters.

There are 15 idols in the temple complex sculpted in a special Salagrama black natural stone. The main shrine of Badrinath, Vishnu in pensive mood is flanked by Nara, Narayana, Kubera, Garuda, Narada and Uddhaama. Legend goes back to the prevedic days, and is believed to have been reestablished by Sankaracharya. The temple offers certain special poojas at a premium, when the devotee can sit before the shrines and watch or participate in the religious rituals. Otherwise, pilgrims must move fast before the deity, having a quick Darsan of the Lord. During special pooja it is customary to place few rupee coins before the idol of Kubera, and after being blessed bring back home and distribute among relatives and friends. Worshipping this sanctified coin at home is believed to bring prosperity and good luck. The word 'Salagrama' is one of the names of Vishnu. The origin of this word is traced to a remote village called "Salagrami", near the source of the Gandaki River in Nepal. There Vishnu is known as 'Salagraman'. There in the Gandaki River Salagramas are found as natural formation stones in different forms which are worshipped. Salagramas are distinct from the oval Lingas, in that the former have some sort of a natural cavity drilled into them. Salagrama stones are believed to be divine manifestations of Lord Vishnu cum devas. Lord Siva has glorified Salagrama in his own words thus: "Mallinga kotibhidrshtihi yad phalam poojitaihi stutaihi, salagrama silaamtu ekasyamaeva tad bhavet"--The punya obtained by seeing and worshipping millions of Lingas of mine is equivalent to that obtained by a single Salagrama".

In mythology it is said that after Narasimha Avataara (incarnation), Vishnu got himself split into Nara and Narayana and went on a penance at Badrinath. Not knowing they were avatars of Vishnu, Indra wanted to break their meditation by disturbing elements, and so he sent the divine damsels (apsaras) to seduce them both. Narayana produced Urvashi from his thigh, far in excellence in beauty and grace to the damsels of Indra. Indra was thus vanquished. He then begged Lord Vishnu's pardon, paid his obeisance and worshipped him. According to another version, these sages were sons of Dharma and Ahimsa. They performed severe austerities and successfully, vanquished the demon Sahasrakavacha (one who has thousand armours). These sages were then reborn as Krishna and Arjuna.

Following the Alkananda valley, one can arrive at Mana village (6Km north), with a gentle climb up. Nearby is the cave of Ganesha and further up the cave of Vyasa. Vyasa is said to have dictated Mahabharata from his cave to Ganesha sitting in his own cave and writing it. Though the legend is old, the idols are modern. Vyasa is cosmic entity born in every age to propagate the scriptures. Madhvacharya, the founder of Dvaita philosophy is believed to have met Vedavyasa in Himalayas after visiting Badrinath and received divine inspiration about his new found philosophy according to historic

records. Further up is the source of the River Sarasvati, probably the remaining bit of the historic river that got dried up over aeons (yugas).

### MATHURA

Mathura on the banks of the River Yamuna is one of the most sacred cities of Hinduism, dating back to 600 BC. It assumed the importance of a capital city during Kushan period from first to second century. In 634 AD when the Chinese traveller Huen Tsang visited India, it was a Buddhist center. Mohamud Ghazni sacked the city and desecrated temples in 1017 AD, followed by Sikander Lodi in 1500. The Moghul Emperor Aurangzeb used a local revolt in which his governor was killed as an excuse to destroy main temples. The Katra contains a mosque built by Aurangzeb. This stands over the ruins of one of Mathura's famous temple, the Kesava Deo Mandir. This was in turn built over the ruins of a Buddhist monastery of the Kushan period.

Water of Yamuna appears rather black or dark in color because Siva, overcome by the intense sorrow over the loss of his wife Sati, is said to have jumped into this river once<sup>1</sup>

The above place is considered to be Sri Krishna's Janmabhoomi (birth spot). Here Vasudeva and Devaki, Krishna's parents were imprisoned by Kamsa, where Krishna was born in the jail. This place is now under tight security because of the mosque next to it. This place is most visited and the main idols are particularly serene and attractive.

There are no pre-Muslim monuments of any significance, and some of the finest buildings have been scarred by decay, neglect and misuse. Holy gate through which one enters the city dominates in the center with Jama Masjid, built during Aurangzeb period.

At the rear of the enclosure of Krishna Janmabhoomi there is the New Temple of Kesava built by Singh Orchcha. Nearby is the potara kund, a stepped tank in which Krishna's baby clothes were believed to be washed. It is faced in the familiar red sandstone with access to cattle and horses.

Today, only Yamuna River and the ghats are the focal points for Hindu pilgrims, as the memory of Lord Krishna sanctifies the place. Vishram Ghat rebuilt in 1814 is where Krishna rested after killing Kamsa. Cows, monkeys and turtles are fed when the aarati ceremony is performed during morning and evening times.

The Kamsa khila fort was built by Raja Man Singh of Amber and was rebuilt by Akbar but today only the foundation remains.

Gokul, 2km away is associated with very early Hindu legends, where Vishnu first appeared as Krishna, approached by a long flight of steps from the river. It is the head quarters of Vallabhacharya Sect who have built some large temples. Baldeo, 8km southeast of Mathura, another place of pilgrimage, associated with Krishna's brother Balarama, has a temple and Ksheerasaagara Tank (Sea of Milk).

Though nothing historic has left its traces behind, the legend continues and the memory of Lord Krishna thrills the place with pilgrims constantly flowing throughout the year.

### VRINDAVAN

In Vrindavan, Krishna played with the Gopis (cowgirls) stealing their clothes, while they bathed. Here we enter perhaps the most sacred region of India for Hindu Vaishnavites, where many of the stories surrounding Krishna are set. Vrindavan, meaning Forest of Tulasi (Basil) Plant is the most famous holy site around Mathura. At the entrance of the town is the 19th century Temple of Govinda Deo (1950), the divine cowherd, Lord Krishna. Built by Man Singh during Akbar's regime, it was severely damaged by the intolerant son, Aurangzeb. Nearby is the Dravidian style temple dedicated to Sri Ranganathji (Vishnu Temple) with three gopurams, each nearly 30m in height. The 16th century Madan Mohan Temple stands above ghat on an arm of the river; there is a pavilion decorated with cobra carvings. Siva is believed to have struck Devi here and made it a place for curing snake bites. Other temples include Jugal Kishore Temple (reputedly 1027) near Kesi Ghat and Radha Ballabh Temple, partly damaged by Aurangzeb. Banke Bihari Temple was established by Swami Haridas. He discovered Banke Bihari idol at Nidhivana, where Banke Bihari was originally worshipped. This is the most important temple in Vrindavan and visited by pilgrims especially during Julan Yatra. The curtain before the deity is not left open like in other temples. Every few minutes the curtain is pulled and shut by the priest and then opened again. The temple has mangala aarati only one day in a year. Only one day in a year the lotus feet of the deity can be seen, on Akhiya Triteeya day.

Other important Temples are: Hare Krishna Mandir, Krishna Balarama Mandir, Madan Mohan Temple, Radha shyam Sundar Temple, Gopisvara Mahadeo Temple, Radha Gokulananda Temple and Son Gauranya Temple. ISKCON with Krishna Balaram deities has a modern marble memorial. During the festival of Saradotsava, presentation of Krishna stories to the tune of music, dance and bhajans is a treat to enjoy and participate.

### ALLAHABAD (PRAYAG)

The narrow spit of the land at the confluence of Ganga, Yamuna and the mystic Sarasvati Rivers, an almost deserted river beach of fine sand becomes the home for two weeks once every twelve years to the Kumbha Mela pilgrims, when over 12 million pilgrims converge to bathe in the holy waters. Allahabad has grown around this spot.

Ancient sites of Draupadi Ghat, has revealed signs of extensive habitation dated back to 1100 to 800 BC. Remains of the Kushans were found in the Bharadwaj ashram. The Muslims first conquered it in 1194 and renamed it Allahabad in 1584. It later became the HQ of British Government of the Northwest Province in Oudh, and here the transfer of power from the East India Company to the crown was announced by Lord Canning in 1858. The First National Congress was held in Allahabad in 1885.

The purifying power of a sacred river is strongest at a confluence. Bathing here is auspicious at all times of the year, more so, at the Magh Mela (Jan-Feb) which occurs every year for 15 days and longer at the time of Kumbh Mela when pilgrims bathe at Prayag to wash away a life-time's sins.

In legend, Hindu gods and demons (devas and asuras) vied with each other for the pot (Kumbha) that held the nectar of immortality (Amrita). During the twelve days of fight for the possession, Visvakarma spilt four drops of the amrita which fell on the earth, making four sacred places: Prayag, Haridwar, Ujjain and Nasik. Holiest of all is Allahabad the site of Maha Kumbha Mela. This festival moves every three years returning to Allahabad every 12th year (next in 2013). Boats leave from nearby ghats, the nearest being one by the Fort.

Allahabad has few monuments pre-dating Muslim period, of which the Fort is one. It became the capital of Akbar, Marathas, Pathans and finally British. The Fort is closed to visitors including a third century BC Ashoka pillar, moved



there from Kausambi by Akbar. Under the Fort's east wall is the Undying Banyan Tree (Akshayavatu) in Patelpuri, an underground temple from which people threw themselves to achieve salvation in death. Anand Bhavan the former Nehru family home contains several interesting items relating to Motilal Nehru.

To take a dip at the confluence and do pooja at the Sangam, two boats hold together a raised platform on which pilgrims can stand and take a dip. The water at this point is 50 ft deep. But this improvised platform makes the job easy. The local Maths arrange priest services at the Sangam. Many of the pilgrims also do Shraddha (oblations to the departed souls) on the banks of the river or at the chosen Maths and offer to the Ganges pindas (sacred rice or flour balls used during Shraddha ceremony) after the ceremony. Hiring a priest on your own at the Sangam may cost a fortune and there are many fakes too.

### AYODHYA

Ayodhya meaning that which can't be subdued is on the banks of the River Sarayu also called Ghaghara River. Ayodhya is one of the seven Hindu holy cities and is regarded as the birth place of Sri Rama where once he reigned. Historian Romila Thapar stresses there is no evidence for such a belief. Jains regard it as the birthplace of the first Teerthankara and Buddha is also believed to have stayed here. Holy dips are taken by the visiting pilgrims in the Sarayu River celebrated in the Valmiki Ramayana.

The ancient site ruins, which BJP claims as Rama Janmabhoomi have a circumference of 4 to 5 km, rising at some places 10 m, above the ground. The site is believed to have been occupied from at least the seventh century BC, when both copper and iron, were in use. Later finds include a Jain figure from the fourth to third century BC probably the earliest Jain figure found in India. It may be interesting to note here that there exists also a Jaina Ramayana, though having no similarity to either Valmiki or Tulasidas Ramayana, but many characters have the same name including Rama.

Many of the now standing temples in Ayodhya, which are so many, have been erected during the past two centuries only. In accordance with the Muslim practice, here as well as other holy places of Hindus, temples were razed and mosques were built on the site, often using the same building materials.

In recent years Ayodhya has become the focus of intense political activity by the Viswa Hindu Parishad and BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party). They claim that, Ayodhya was the birth place of Rama; the holy site is beneath the remains of Babri Masjid built by Babur but deserted now for many years; according to their findings there during the excavations Vishnu figures were found. On 6 December 1992, the mosque was destroyed by militant Hindus. This was followed by widespread disturbances resulting in over 2500 deaths across the country. Ayodhya remains a potential flash point and there is strictest security around the place of Ramjanmabhoomi and visitors can visit the place under tight security check at several points. An idol of child Rama is now installed at the center point of the mound.

Other sites include Lakshman Ghat where Rama's brother committed suicide; Hanumangarh takes its name from the Hanuman and Sita temple and the massive walls surrounding it; Sita's kitchen, Birla Temple with beautiful marble sculpture of Rama and his family including Hanuman, and Ramacharita Maanasa Temple in commemoration of the saint poet who composed his epic at Ayodhya as directed by Lord Viswanath of Kasi. At the site of Sita's kitchen brisk activity is going on by Sadhus to collect funds for the building materials of the proposed Rama's temple at the site of Ramajanmabhoomi, which is yet to be cleared for construction by the government.

Tulsidas started writing Ramayana in Samskrit language and placing it in the Viswanathji's sanctuary, but to his dismay he found the whole text getting vanished. He was sad and prayed to Sri Rama. Lord Viswanath appeared in his dream

and advised him to write the same in the common language of the masses for their worship and chanting. He then moved to Ayodhya from Varanasi and started composing his epic in Avadh language. He moved to Varanasi after completion of his epic Ramacharit Maanasa to dedicate the same to Lord Viswanath. To commemorate this event, a temple has been built in Ayodhya in recent years.

### SARANATH

Saranath is one of Buddhism's major centers in India. When Buddha got enlightenment at Bodh Gaya he came to the deer park at Saranath and delivered his first sermon, usually referred to as Dharmachakra. Since then the site has become holy.

The Bodhi Tree planted in 1931, is a sapling of the one in Sri Lanka which was grown from a cutting taken there circa 236BC by Mahendra's sister Princess Sanghamitta. Deer park is also holy to Jains because of Sheyaneshanath the 11th Teerthankara. Saranath might have been derived from his name.

Dharmarajike Stupa was built by Ashoka to contain relics of Buddha. It was enlarged on several occasions, but was destroyed by Jagat Singh, Dewan of the Maharaja of Varanasi in 1794, when a green marble casket containing human bones and pearl was found.

The main shrine is a rectangular building 29m by 27m with doubly recessed corners and 5.5 m high. The building marking the place of the Buddha's meditation is attributed to Ashoka and the later Guptas. The concrete path and interior brick walls were added later to reinforce the building. To the rear is the 5m lower portion of a polished sandstone Ashokan column of third century BC. The original 15 m high with a lion capital which is now kept in the archaeological museum sitting back to back with the wheel of law below is now the symbol of the Indian Union. The column was one of many erected by Ashoka to promulgate the faith and this contained a message to the monks and nuns not to create any schisms and to spread the word.

Dhamekh Stupa or Dharma Chakra, is the most imposing monument in Sarnath built where Buddha delivered his first sermon to his five disciples. The Stupa consists of 28 m diameter stone plinth which rises to a height of 13m high cylindrical tower. The upper part was probably unfinished. The central section has elaborate Gupta period design. The Stupa was enlarged six times and the well known figures of a standing Bodhisatva and Buddha teaching were found nearby.

In the museum, there is a well displayed collection of pieces from the site, including the famous lion capital, a Sunga Period, first century stone railing, Kushan Period, second century AD Bodhisatvas, Gupta Period, fifth century AD, figures including the magnificent seated Buddha.

### VARANASI

Varanasi is perhaps the holiest of Indian cities for Hindus. It is a city of highly congested maze of narrow alleys winding behind its water ghats, at once highly sacred yet physically far from clean, like Gaya. As an image, an ideal and symbol of Hinduism's central realities, the city draws pilgrims from around the world, to worship, meditate and above all to bathe.

Koormapurana glorifies Ganga as follows:

“Yaavadastheeni Gangaayam tishtanti purushasya tu; taavad varsha sahasraani sarvalokay maheeyatay; teerthaanam paramam teertha nadeenaam paramaa nadee; Mokshadaa sarvabhootaanam mahaapaataakeenaamapi” ; —Whatever number of years the ashes remain in the Ganges, the departed soul is held in reverence in heaven for thousands of times the number. Of all the pilgrimages and of all the rivers, Ganga is considered most holy. It grants salvation to all, including those that have committed gross sins.

In the Mahabharata Vanaparva it is said: “Yadya –Kaarya- shatam kritvaa kritam Gangaabhishechanam; sarvam tat tasya Gangaabhyoe Dahatyagni-rivendhanam; sarvam Kritiyugay punyam Tretaayaam Pushkaram smritam; Dwaaparoepi Kurukshetram Gangaa Kaliyugay smritaa; punaati keertitaa paapam drishtaa bhadram prayachchhati;avagaadhaa cha peetaa cha punaatyaa saptamam kulam” —Just as fire burns the fuel, in the same way, if one were to bathe in Ganga even after hundreds of forbidden deeds, the water of Ganga would cleanse them all. In Tretaayuga, Pushkar, in Dwaaparayuga, Kurukshetra and in Kaliyuga, Ganga contemplation would be most precious. The very name of Ganga purifies sinner. The sight of it is auspicious. Bathing in it or drinking a few drops purifies seven generations.

There are references to Varanasi in Rigveda, Mahabharata, Bhagavata and Jataka Tales. Kasi name is first mentioned in literature 3000 years ago, where Buddha preached his first sermon. According to puraanas Siva after his marriage with Parvati came and settled in Kasi permanently but for the temporary banishment during the reign of Divodasa. In the age of the gods, when the world was in chaos, Divodasa was appointed king of Kasi by Brahma. He accepted to rule the place on condition that all gods should leave Kasi. Even Siva was forced to leave but Brahma set the test for Divodasa, confident that he would get the complex ceremony wrong, allowing gods back to the city.

Over 350 gods and goddesses including Ganesha form a Mandala or a sacred pattern with Siva as Viswanath at its center. The holy city consists of the above mandala within Varanasi and is called Kasi, the luminous city or the Land of Sacred Light.

The appearance of the Pillar of Light mentioned in the Puranas seems to have taken place at the site of Viswanath Temple. City of Light is the City of Eternal Wisdom. So Kasi is also known as the City of Learning. In 17<sup>th</sup> century Varanasi fell into the hands of the Moghuls when vast destruction took place.

Varanasi is said to combine all the virtues of all other places of pilgrimage and any one dying within the area marked by Pancha Kosi Road is transported straight to heaven. Some devout Hindus move to Varanasi to end their days and have their ashes scattered in the holy Ganges.

Viswanath (the Lord of The Universe) Temple has been the main Siva Temple in Varanasi for over 1000 years. Viswanatha Linga is a stone picked up in an age of untold antiquity from the river bed of Narmada like the Mahaakaala Linga of Ujjain. The original temple, destroyed in 12<sup>th</sup> century was replaced by a mosque. It was rebuilt in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and again destroyed within a century. The present Golden Temple was built by Rani Ahalya Bai of Indore. The Gold plating on the roof was provided by Ranjit Singh in 1835. Its pointed spires are typically North Indian in style and the exterior is finely carved. Viswanatha at Kasi is the most sacred of the twelve Jyotirlingas located in different parts of India. The others are: Sri Somanatha in Kathiawad Of Prabhasa Kshetra; Sri Mahakaaleshwara in Malwa in Ujjain; Omkareshwara in Malwa on the banks of River Narmada and the nearby Amaleshwara; Sri Vaidyanatha near Parli village; Bhimashankara in Kamaroopa district of Assam; Sri Raameshwara in Ramesvaram in Tamilnadu; Sri Naageshwara in Andhra Pradesh; Sri Kedarnath In the Himalayas; Sri Ghusmeshwa in Andhra Pradesh near Daulatabad; Sri Mallikarjuna in Srisailam in Andhra Pradesh; Sri Trayambakeshwara On the banks of the River Godavari. Lord

Viswanath is present in Varanasi with all aspects of Siva of Panchaanana forms—Isana (zenith); Tat purusha (east); Aghora (south); Vaamadeva (north) and Sadyojata (west) and is called the Lord of the Universe. Pilgrims carry holy waters from Ramesvaram and worship the pot together with Ganges water chanting Rudram and bathe the Lord with the sanctified water. This Rudram chanting pooja can be done on any of the Maths located on the ghats of the Ganges. The bathing of the Lord (abhishekam) is done by the pilgrim himself without the help of priest unlike in Ramesvaram.

The next most important temple to be visited is that of Annapoorneshwari (anna=Food; poorna= filled). The 18<sup>th</sup> century Annapoorneshwari Temple built by Balaji Rao I, has shrines dedicate to Siva, Ganesha, Hanuman and Surya. Annapoorna is the possessor and giver of food. Parvati got this name since she served food to Siva when he was roaming about as a mendicant. She is shown serving food from a vessel of ruby. The worship ensures that the household will never lack food. According to a legend Parvati ran away in anger after having an argument with Siva on the subject of Maya (illusion), from Kailasa and settled in Kasi running a large kitchen for all her devotees. It is also said that she herself never consumed food until she was satisfied that everyone was fed. Sankaracharya has composed a beautiful sloka on Annapoorneshwari. The temple runs an Annadaana (food donation) scheme to which pilgrims usually donate.

Other important temples for a hurried visitor are: Bhaironath Temple; Visalakshi Temple in a small building nearby Viswanath Temple); Gopal Mandir; Durga Temple; Kotwali; Sankat Vimochan Temple of Hanuman with beautiful Sita and Rama idols in the complex; Bharatmata Temple; Tulasi Maanas Temple.

Tulasi Maanasa Temple is in commemoration of the medieval poet Tulsidas. It has walls engraved with verses and scenes from Ramcharitmaanas, composed in Avadh language and is open to all. Tulsidas after composing Ramayana in Avadh language presented the same to Lord Viswanath because it is only at his command he composed the epic in local dialect for the benefit of all including illiterates to understand easily in the spoken language instead of literary Samskrit. The book was kept under the feet of the Lord with lock and key. The next morning the book was seen with the words “Satyam Sivam Sundaram” written by the Lord himself. The jealous priests and the authorities of the temple did not believe the same. They again kept the book in the temple keeping it below all other scriptures under strict scrutiny, topped by the Vedas. To their astonishment, the next day they found Ramcharitmaanas at the top of all Holy Scriptures. They were thus humbled and accepted the greatness and divinity of the poet, their religious leader Misra accepting him as the Guru. They all paid their obeisance to him and called him a Sant (saint). Tulsidas gave up his ghost at Assi ghat in Varanasi.

The New Viswanath Temple (1966) one of the tallest in India, is in the University semi circle and was financed by the Birla family. It was planned by Madan Mohan Malaviya (1862-1942), Chancellor of the Banaras Hindu University, who believed in Hinduism without caste distinction. The marble Siva Temple modeled on the basis of old Vishwanath Temple (where non-Hindus are prohibited) is open to all.

The hundred and more ghats on the river Ganga are the main attraction for visitors to Varanasi. Visit to them at first light when Hindu pilgrims come to bathe in the sacred Ganga, facing the rising Sun, or at dusk when leaf-boat lamps are floated down the river, is thrilling and enchanting.

Dasavamedha Ghat is named as “the place of Ten-thousand Horse Sacrifices”. Here Brahma performed the Yajna. The ritual was performed flawlessly during the reign of Divodasa and the ghat has become one of the holiest, especially at eclipses. Bathing here is regarded as being meritorious as making Asvamedha Yaaga (Horse-sacrifice). The elaborate evening Aarati to Mother Ganga by a row of priests standing on the ghat facing Mother Ganga is a thrilling sight to the

enjoyment of the melodious music and chanting that fills the air in praise of the Mother Ganga followed by floating of the oil lamp lit embedded in flowers in the leaf boat. One can watch the same better from the boat.

Harischandra Ghat is particularly holy and is dedicated to King Harischandra. It is now the most sacred "smaasan" or cremation ground. Behind the ghat is a gopuram (tower) of a Dravidian Temple.

Manikarnika Ghat is holier than Harischandra Ghat for cremation. Above the Ghat is a well into which Siva's dead wife Sati's ear-ring is supposed to have fallen when Siva was carrying her after she committed suicide at Kankhal (Temple of Daksheshwara in Haridwar). The Brahmins managed to find the jewel from the ear-ring (Manikarnika) and return it to Siva then blessed the place. Offerings of bilva leaves, flowers, milk, sandalwood paste and sweetmeats are thrown into the tank where pilgrims come to bathe. Between the well and the Ghat is Chandrapaduka, a stone with Vishnu's footprint.

Panchaganga Ghat: Water here is very clear and neat. The Ganga, Sarasvati, Gyana, Kirana and Dhutapaapa are the five rivers that are supposed to meet at this point, hence the name. The stone columns here can hold 1000 lamps at festivals. The impressive stone steps run to Alamghir Mosque.

Tulsi Ghat commemorates the great saint-poet Tulsidas who lived here. Farthest upstream is Tulsi Ghat where the River Assi meets Ganga, one of the five ghats where pilgrims should bathe in a day. The order by which bath is taken in a day is Assi, Dasasvamedha, Barn Sangam, Panchaganga and Manikarnika.

An estimated 45000 not -cremated bodies are put in the Ganga each year. Although Ganga may be one of the most polluted rivers, like many tropical rivers, it can cleanse itself quickly. Scientists have discovered the river's exceptional property in the last century. The cholera microbe did not survive three hours in Ganga whereas in distilled water it survived 24 hours. Since bones are constituted of phosphates, the ashes consigned to the river Ganges increase the phosphate content of water that irrigate the fields, an essential plant nutrient. Elements of the human body return faster to nature after death by ashes immersed in water.

Every pilgrim in addition to visiting the holy sites in Varanasi must take a circuit of Pancha Kosi Road which runs outside and round the sacred territory of Varanasi. This starts at Manikarnika Ghat, runs along the water front to Assi Ghat, then round the outskirts in a large semi circle to Barna Ghat. The 58 km route is lined with trees and shrines and the pilgrimage is supposed to take six days, each day's walk finishing in a village, equipped with temples and rest houses(Dharmasaalas).

## GAYA

Gaya on slightly raised ground in the valley between two hills was blessed by Lord Vishnu to absolve all temporal sins. Its many sacred shrines attract Hindus at pitripaksha tarpan (Sept-Oct) when prayers are offered for the dead before pilgrims take a dip in the seasonal Holy River Phalgu. In the center of the town is the Vishnupaada Temple supposed to have been Vishnu's footprint which is imprinted on a rock set in a silver basin. The 30m high temple has eight rows of beautifully carved pillars which support the pavilion (mandapam) which were refurbished in 1787. Hindus only are permitted into the sanctum and temple's grounds which has Akshayavatu (the immortal Banyan tree under which Buddha is believed to have meditated for six years) where the

final Shraaddha for the dead takes place. One km southwest is Brahmayoni Hill with its 1000 steps which leads to a vantage point for viewing both Gaya and Bodhgaya.

It is customary to do pindadaan in Gaya. Knowledgeable priests are available to render service for the ceremony from the reputed Maths in Gaya. It is done on the banks of the River Phalgu near to the Vishnupaada Temple.

The custom of pindadaan dates back to the time when Vedas were written. The word 'pind' means body; daan means charity or giving. It is believed that it is the responsibility of the son to give the deceased a new body. The body is given symbolically to the deceased through pindadaan. It takes ten days of pind daan to create a body. With the body ready the appetite is aroused. On the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> day the food offered at Shraaddha is eaten by the body. It is believed on the 13<sup>th</sup> day the messengers of death usher the deceased into Yama Loka, the abode of Yama. When the religious rites are performed, the deceased enter Yama Loka, happily. It is believed that it was Brahma who first performed pindadaan ceremony in Gaya. Since then, the tradition is continued. Symbolically, pind is a round ball made of a mixture of wheat and rice flour with some sesame seeds mixed with dried milk. Presently, pindadaan is performed at Vishnu temple, Akshayavatu, Phalgu and Punpun River, Ramkund, Sitakund, Brahma Mangala Gowri, and Kagbali. In South Indian practice only rice, ghee and sesame seed is offered as pinda.

In Vayupuraana according to narration titled Gaya Mahaatmyam, when creating mankind Brahma also accidentally created a demon Gayaasura. The demon went atop Kolahala Mountain and offered great penance to Vishnu. Pleased with Gayaasura, Vishnu asked him to seek one blessing. Gayaasura requested that whoever came in touch with him –be it an angel or demon, an insect, a sinner, a saint or sage or an evil spirit—should find salvation after having been purified of all sins. From that day everyone who came in touch with him found salvation and proceeded to Vaikuntha (the abode of Vishnu). Vishnu stood with his right foot on the terribly shaking demon holding a mace in his hand and so he is called Gadaadhara. Another legend tells Darmaratha, a pious lady and wife of sage Mareechi was cursed by her husband to turn into a stone by a mistaken notion that she was flirting. The curse could not be taken back when the reality was realized. Pleased by her penance Vishnu blessed her that whosoever touched her in the stone form, will be relieved of all past sins and reach heaven. She was made holy to all the beings in the three worlds, though she could not be brought back to human form after the curse. Lord Vishnu was also pleased by the prayers of Brahma and devas, and granted the vow that human beings who perform ceremony in Gaya will be able to elevate all souls for all seven generations including friends.

In Gaya it is customary to do three ceremonies to the departed souls on three days. It is possible to do all the three on any chosen day. People of all castes and creeds do Shraaddha here on any day. The Brahmins of Mithila have even authorized women relatives to offer pindadaan, as Sitaadevi did once. The three ceremonies are: a) Phalgu teertha shraaddha; b) Vishnupaada shraaddha; c) Akshayavatu shraaddha. This is done after a holy dip in the River Phalgu.

Koormapuraana as well as Padma Purana say the following about the significance of Gaya shraaddha:

“Gayaateertham param guhyam pitroonaam chaativallbham; Kritvaa pindpradaanam tu na bhooyoe jaayatay naraha; sakrid Gayaabhigamanam kritvaa pindam dadaati yaha; taaritaaha pitarastena yaasyanti paramaam gatim”—All forefathers appreciate a pilgrimage to Gaya by their successors. Once the pindadaan is performed in Gaya, one achieves salvation. One becomes free of rebirth. If one visits Gaya even once and offers pindadaan, the forefathers become free from going to hell and other dreadful destinations and achieve salvation. “Gayayaa Pindapradaanat anyadaanam visishyatay; Aekena pindapradaanena triptaaste moksha bhaaginaha (Padma purana)”—No other offering

is more valuable than the offering of pinda at Gaya to the departed souls. By offering even only one pinda souls desiring moksha are more than satisfied.

River Phalgu never flows with water more than knee deep even in the best season. This is due to a curse from Sitaadevi according to the legends. It is said when Rama, Sita and Lakshmana reached the banks of the River Phalgu in Gaya to offer Pindadaana, Rama and Lakshmana left Sita there so that they could collect the necessary items for the ceremony. When they were away there was a celestial call saying that the auspicious time for the pindadaana was passing away, and that she should proceed with the ceremony.

Considering the situation, Sita proceeded to do pindadaana with cows, Phalgu River, Ketaki flowers, Agni (the fire god) and Vatavriksha. She personally chanted mantras offering balls made out of river sand to Dasaratha. When Rama and Lakshmana returned she told them about what happened. They both found it hard to believe. When Sita asked witnesses to testify about what happened, none except Vatavriksha testified. Sita was enraged. She cursed the cows that they would eat all impure things. She cursed the River Phalgu that it would be dry on the top and water would flow beneath the waterline. She cursed the Ketaki flowers that they would never be used for auspicious occasions. She cursed Agni that whatever came in contact with it will be destroyed. She blessed the Vatavriksha that it would remain evergreen. Lord Krishna has also glorified Vatavriksha in Geeta—"I am the Aswattha among the trees. (Aswatthaha sarva vrikshaanaam....).

## BODH GAYA

Bodh Gaya, a quieter and cleaner village near the River Phalgu, is one of the holiest pilgrim centers to Buddhists since it was under 'Bo'tree here that Gautama, the prince attained enlightenment to become, the Buddha. It is believed that the original Bodhi Tree sprang up on the day Gautama was born. Buddha spent the second week after enlightenment at the Animeshaloechana Stupa from where he gazed at the Bodhi Tree without blinking.

Bodh Gaya was lost for centuries until rediscovered by Buddhists from Burma in 1877 which led to restoration work by the British. Ashoka's original shrine was replaced by Mahaabodhi Temple in the second century which in turn went through several alterations. The temple on a high and broad plinth, with a soaring 54m high pyramidal spire with a square cross section and four smaller spires, houses a golden image of Buddha. An ornately carved stone railing in bas relief surrounds the temple on three sides and several carved Buddhist stupas depict tales of Buddha's early life. The Lotus-pond where Buddha bathed is to the south. To the north in the Chakramana a raised platform (first century) with lotus flowers carved on it which marks consecrated promenade used by Buddha while meditating is located. The original Bodhi Tree was supposedly destroyed by Ashoka before he was converted, and others who replaced it also died. The present tree behind the temple is believed to come from the original stock. Prince Mahindra (Ashoka's son) carried a sapling from the sacred Bo tree to Sri Lanka when he went there to spread Buddhism. This in turn produced a sapling which was brought back to Bodh Gaya. The red sand stone slab, the Vajrasila under the tree marks the place where Gautama used to sit in meditation. Today pilgrims tie pieces of colored cloth on its branches when they come to pray.

Pilgrims from many lands have their own temples. We can start with a giant Buddha 20m high in stone which was installed at the end of the road in 1989. The spotless Japanese temple is a two storied building next door with beautiful polished marble floors that has gold images of Buddha. The Tibetan Temple and monastery next to this (1938) is

ornately painted and has a Dharma Chakra (Wheel of Law) which must be turned three times praying for forgiveness of sins. The Chinese Temple houses enormous, revolving ceremonial drum. The Tai Temple is in glittering pagoda style.

## KOLKATA

To Bengalese Kolkata is the proud intellectual capital of India, with an outstanding contribution to the arts, science, medicine, and social reforms in the past and a rich contemporary cultural life. As the former Imperial capital Kolkata retains some of the country's most striking Colonial buildings, yet at the same time it is truly an Indian City. It is also an important pilgrim center.

Dakshineswar Kali Temple on the opposite side of Belur Math was built in 1847 by Rani Rashmoni. Twelve smaller temples in the court yard are dedicated to Siva, Radha and Krishna. Because of Rani's low caste no priest would serve there until Ramakrishna's elder brother agreed to be the priest. He was succeeded by Ramakrishna Paramahansa himself. Here Ramakrishna had his spiritual vision of the unity of all religions.

The main Temple of Kali in South Kolkata is the patron goddess of Kolkata seen in her blood-thirsty form built in 1809. There was an older temple here where the goddess's little toe is said to have fallen when Siva carried the charred corpse in a frenzied dance mourning and she was cut into pieces by Vishnu's Chakra. Non-Hindus have limited access to this temple. Where once human sacrifices were made, now only goats are offered daily on two wooden blocks to the south of the temple. It needs a deeper study of Kali the patron goddess of Bengalese at this point who is also worshipped in all parts of India in some form of other of Kali in her destructive manifestation.

Of all the forms of Hindu pantheon Kali is perhaps the most enigmatic to the modern generation and children's mind. Who will not recoil in horror and disgust from the form of a dark nude woman wearing a garland of human heads, especially if she is also holding a freshly severed human head and the chopper used in the slaughter, dripping with blood? Throughout its history mankind has been baffled by profound symbolism; more so when it does not conform to its own sweet and refined standards.

The word Kaali comes from the well known word Kaala, Time. As we are all well aware, Time is all destroying, all devouring. That is why Lord Krishna says in Geeta: "Kaaloesmi loekakshaya-kritprvridhdho loekaan-samaahartumiha pravrittaaha"—That He is Time which has grown to infinite proportions and is destroying the Worlds. A power that destroys has got to be depicted as awe-inspiring terror.

We visualize horrifying Kaali in scriptures, picture and icons. The background is a cremation ground or burial ground or a war-field showing the dead bodies including the mutilated ones. She herself is standing in a challenging posture on a dead body which is her own spouse Siva himself. If Siva is pure white, she is deep blue in color bordering on blackness. She is completely naked, except for an apron of human hands. She is wearing a garland of fifty human heads or skulls. Her luxuriant hair is completely disheveled. She has three eyes and four hands. In her upper hands she is holding a freshly severed and bleeding human head, as also the sword used in the carnage. The two lower hands are in the Abhaya and Varada Mudras. Her face is red and the tongue protruding. The background or the setting is in complete harmony with the theme. The severed head and the sword are graphic representation of destruction that has just taken place.



God is said to have created this Universe and entered into it. (Taittareeya Upanishad 2.61). So the Universe becomes a veil (Maaya), a cloak for the divinity. When that is destroyed the divinity remains unveiled. This is the meaning of Kaali being naked. She is hence termed (digambari) clad in space having vast limitless space itself as her only vesture.

Being the embodiment of Tamas, the aspect of energy responsible for dispersion ad infinitum producing limitless void, a void that has swallowed up everything, she is black. She represents a state where time, space and causation have disappeared without any trace as it were. Hence she is black. The hand represents the capacity for work. Hence apron of severed hands can signify that she is pleased with the offerings of our works and fruits thereof that she wears them on her own body. The hands can also stand for kinetic energy. Therefore severed hands can stand for potential energy, the energy that has stopped all outward manifestation, and yet is tremendously powerful, ready to manifest when desired. The disheveled hair, for which she is called "Muktakesi" bespeaks of her untrammelled freedom.

And then, the garland of skulls or heads which number fifty, represent fifty letters of the alphabet, the manifest state of sound, or sabda in general from which the entire creation has proceeded. To show that manifest creation has been withdrawn, she is wearing the garland on her body. The skulls or severed heads indicate the state of destruction. Since she is the supreme energy responsible for the dissolution of who creates and she is a mother as well. Hence, she is reassuring fear stricken children through the Abhaya Mudra, saying, "Don't be afraid, I am your own dear Mother". Simultaneously she is also exhibiting the Varada Mudra.

So far so good! But how do we explain Siva being trampled under her feet? According to one of the mythological accounts, Kaali once destroyed all the demons in a battle and then started a terrific dance out of the sheer joy of victory. All the worlds began to tremble and give way under impact. At the request of all the gods Siva himself asked her to desist from it. She was too intoxicated to desist from it. Hence Siva lay like a corpse among the corpses on which she was dancing in order to absorb its shock himself. When she stepped upon Siva she suddenly realized her mistake and put out her tongue in shame!

Siva is Brahman, the Absolute which is beyond all names, forms and activities. Hence he is shown in a lying prostrate like Sava, corpse. Kaali represents his Sakti, energy. The energy however can never exist apart from its source or act independently on it. It can manifest itself and act only when it is based firmly on the source. It is exactly this that is meant while showing Kaali standing on the chest of Siva.

From all this one should not jump to the conclusion that Kaali represents only destructive aspect of God's power. What exists when Time is transcended, the eternal night of limitless peace and joy, is also Kaali (Maharaatri). Again it is she who prods Siva into the next cycle of creation. In short, she is the power of God in all His aspects.

This is the explanation of Ramakrishna Math and this is what prompted Ramakrishna Paramahansa to spend his entire life in steadfast devotion to Mother Kali while educating the masses. Paramahansa means one who has attained Samaadhi (super-conscious state of mind).

North of the city some 16 km across the Hoogly River is the Belur Math, the International Headquarters of Ramakrishna Mission founded in 1899 by Swami Vivekananda. Vivekananda preached the unity of all religions and to symbolize this, this monastery synthesizes Hindu, Islamic Christian architectural styles in a peaceful meditative atmosphere. The lifelike sculpture of Ramakrishna Paramahansa is very impressive. There are also the Samadhis of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Sarada devi and the first president of the Ramakrishna Mission. Beautiful sculptures and wall murals and paintings around the library which is located on the banks of the River Hoogly calmly flowing, are astonishing.

## PURI

Puri is a city on the sea shore of Bay of Bengal in East India. The Temple of Jagannath is the major attraction. The fact that in the eyes of Lord of the Universe (Jagannath) there are no caste distinctions, has made Puri, a popular destination for a pilgrimage with the devout. The wooden figures of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra stand in the Sanctuary garlanded and decorated by the priests. Abhishekaha or the bathing ceremony here is done to the mirror images of the deities as wooden idols can't be soaked daily.

The extra-ordinary form that Jagannath takes is believed to be the unfinished work of the craftsman God Visvakarma who in anger left this portrayal of Lord Vishnu incomplete. The tradition continues to make the deities periodically in the same form as Visvakarma left and worship.

The temple is referred to by some as the "white Pagoda", the Konarak being the "Black Pagoda". It was completed at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD by Chodaganga. The original temple built in Kalinga style consisted of the sanctuary (Duel) and Audience Hall (Jagmohana). It was only in 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century that the Nata Mandir (hall of dancing) and Bhogmandir (hall of offerings) were added in alignment with the style of Orissa temples. The Natamandir is unusual in that it has 16 pillars in four rows to support the large ceiling. The temple dominates the landscape for several kilometers around, 65 meters in height. It is one of the magnificent monuments in India. In front of the main gates stand the 16 sided monolithic pillar, 11 meters high called Aruna Sthamba which formally stood in front of the Sun Temple at Konarak and was brought to Puri during the 18<sup>th</sup> century AD. Eastern main gate is guarded by two stone lions and is called the Lion Gate. There is a pillar crowned by an image of Garuda (Dwajasthamba typical to Vishnu Temples). The gates on other sides are flanked by statues of men on horseback, tigers and elephants respectively. Hence, they are called Tiger and Elephant Gates.

The temple is virtually 200m square enclosed within an outer wall 6m high. Within is another concentric wall which may have acted as fortification, inside which stands the tallest temple in Orissa 65m high crowned by the Wheel of Vishnu and flag. On the higher ground there are 120 small shrines in different enclosures much in the Buddha Stupa tradition, dedicated to various aspects of God like Siva, Lakshmi, Surya and others. Pilgrims are expected to have the vision (Darsan) of at least three deities before proceeding to the main shrines. Invariably every pilgrim visits the lonely Jagannatha shrine installed exclusively in a separate enclosure. They hug and embrace Lord Jagannath here, which is not possible with the main shrine, but of course you have to grease the palms of the priest nearby, higher the value of currency, longer and closer is the embrace. Lord Jagannath is more pleased with the embrace by the ladies reminding one of the romantic boy hood days of Krishna in the company of the Gopis (cowgirls) of Vrindavan.

Orissan Temples are graced by a tall curvilinear tower, the Duel or Rekdeul and a much lower, more open structured porch in front of the tower, the Jagmohana. The dark interior or the Sanctuary is designed to allow only a glimpse of the presiding deity and to enable priest to conduct ritual worship. Worshippers may meditate or simply wait in the more open porch. A dancing hall called Natamandir and a hall of offering called Bhogmandir were often added in later temples. Natamandir is the place where artists dance before the deity on special occasions and festivals, traditionally done by Devadasis earlier who had dedicated their lives and their art exclusively to the service of God. Some Orissan architects likened the temple to that of the human body. The names given to the vertical sections correspond to the parts of the human body--The platform (pishta); the lower storey (bada); The upper storey (Gandi or human trunk); the head (mastaka) with crowning features; the neck (beki) a recessed cylindrical portion. This is surmounted by the skull

called "amla", a symbolic fruit "Amlaka". On the amla, rests the water pot or Kalasa, an auspicious symbol. On the top of all, the sacred weapon of the deity like Sudarsana Chakra stands.

The Sabras, an adivasi tribal group who predated Dravidians and Aryans, were believed to have inhabited the thickly wooded area around Puri. Its elevated positions gives it added eminence and led some to believe that this was Dantapura, which once held the holy Buddhist Tooth relic. In Japan and Sri Lanka, the Tooth Festival of Buddha was earlier celebrated, with three chariots and the similarity with Rath Yatra at Puri further strengthens the theory that the deities in Puri Temple might have evolved from Buddhist symbols.

Jagannatha is a form of Vishnu also known as "Purushoettama", who is worshipped in the famous temple on the sea shore at Puri, Purushoettama Kshetra. The original installation of the shrine is ascribed to the ancient monarch of Puri, Indradyumamna. Brahma Vaivasvata Puraana, Prakriti Khanda and Utkala Khanda have mentioned about the same. The pious king is stated to have performed a penance, as a result of which Vishnu appeared in his dream (or vision) in a four-fold form: Purushottama (Vasudeva); Balabhadra (Sankarshana); Subhadra (Katyayini) and Sudarsana. As he contemplated getting his vision translated into iconic representations, a huge log of muddier-red (manjishta) color came floating on the sea and there also arrived on the scene an old carpenter (Vardhaki) who volunteered to carve out of the log the images as the king saw them. The wooden images, he carved, working in seclusion for fifteen days, were installed on a stone platform called Ratna-vedi and a temple was built in due course.

The four images now seen in the temple are all on a common stone platform known as Ratna-vedi. Apart from these main images, the platform also accommodates small metallic images of Lakshmi to the right of Jagannath and Visvadhatri (Bhu-devi) to the left and a wooden replica of Jagannath, representing Neela Madhva. All the images face the eastern direction.

There are rigid specifications for carving out the images. New idols are made every 12 years. The image making is governed by many traditions. The images must be carved from the trunk of a neem tree that grows at a cross road; there should be no mark on it; no bird's nest built on it; and there should be a snake-hole at the foot of the tree. The wood for the Jagannatha image must be dark red (manjishta) in color and the tree must have four main branches and also marks of conch and discus. The wood for Balabhadra image must be light brown or white in color and the tree must have seven main branches, and mark of plough and pestle. The wood for the Subhadra image must have a yellowish tinge, and the tree must have five main branches, and the mark of a lotus with petals. When a log from such a tree is brought to Puri, the heads of the families bearing the surnames Visravasu, Vidyapati and Viswakarma (celebrated personalities whose contribution to King Indradyumna's quest were invaluable) symbolically strike the wood with axes of gold, silver and iron. After this the image is carved out. The images are not merely wooden in nature. Although wood forms the basic material, it is covered with several layers of resins (niryaasa) of the saala tree, sandal wood paste (chandana), musk (Kasturi) and sandal tree. Red cloth known as Netra-pata, is wound round all the parts of the images; they are also painted. Thus the image is coated with many pastes (bahu lepa vilepita). Each of the four images has a cavity in it and a mysterious substance called "Brahma Padaartha" is hidden inside it in a sacred ritual at the time of the installation of the images during the "Nava Kalevara" ceremony (renewal of the images). Some believe that this is a casket containing the ashes of the mortal remains of Lord Krishna. The insertion of ancient relic into the new image is said to provide spiritual continuity for the deities despite the periodical changes of the images.

The original images enshrined in the Temple were consecrated by Brahma himself with whom Indradyumna spent a day of Brahma (4.32 million years=1 Mahayuga; 2000 Mahayugas= one day of Brahma). Brahma having been pleased with

Indradyumna's gesture that no one should claim ownership of this temple declared that this shrine should be known as "Jagannatha", as "The Lord Of The Universe". Indradyumna is remembered even to this day in Orissa. Those, who helped him in his efforts are not forgotten either. Memories of Gundicha Devi, Vidyapati, Visvvasu and Lalita still live on, in the magnificent car festival of Jagannatha Ratha Yatra.

Wood is one of the materials prescribed in Silpasastra for making of the idols. The original idol of Varadarajaswami at Kancheepuram was carved out of wood. It now lies in the temple tank, which is taken out periodically for consecration and worship.

To the left of the main entrance is the temple kitchen which daily prepares 56 varieties of food making up the Bhogas which are offered to the deity (as naivedya) five times a day. The Mahaprasad is then distributed from the Ananda Bazaar to thousands. On festival days, as many as 25000 are served daily.

The temple is supposed to be self sufficient community served by 6000 priests and over 10000 others who depend on it for their livelihood. But still there is lot of chaos and confusion at the time of aarati, every one rushing to have a vision of the Lord which on festive days results in stampede and even deaths quite often, and this also happens during Rath Yatra, people being caught under the giant wheels.

The four sacred tanks in Puri provide thousands of pilgrims with the opportunity to take a holy dip in this Purushoettama Kshetra. The Narendra Tank is particularly famous since the deities are taken there during Snaana Yatra (journey for the bathing ceremony).

The annual festival of the Temple is called Ratha Yatra or Gundicha Yatra, in which the three idols are taken out in chariots in a large procession. New chariots are built every year. Lord Jagannatha's car festival commemorates Krishna's journey from Gokul to Mathura. After the festival, the Rathes are broken up and bits are sold to pilgrims as relics. Symbolically, the ratha or chariot is supposed to be the human body; the horse, human desires; and the charioteer, judgement.

The long stretch of Puri's golden beach is shallow enough to walk a long distance. Sunrise at the beach is particularly striking. Good Hotels are located on the sea shore. The water current can be very treacherous at times. The fishing village along the coast is worth visiting. But the beach is sadly polluted and gets unpleasant underfoot away from the resort hotels.

The legends of the unusual deities and customs of the Jagannathapuri Temple has a long history and tradition. Puri is the short nickname for Jagannathapuri. It is corruptly pronounced as Poori, perhaps after the more favoured Poori from the 56 food varieties offered to Lord Jagannath during Bhog ceremony.

### KONARK

It is one of the most vivid architectural treasures of Hindu India and is a world heritage site. It no longer stands as a landmark on the sea since the land has risen and the sea is now 3kms away. Much of it lies in ruins but the porch is still magnificent. It is a 35km drive from Puri through attractive scenery.

The Sun Temple was built by King Langula Narasimha Deva in the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD although there might have been the old temple of ninth century before it on the site. It is built from Khondalite. It is said to have taken 1200 masons for 16 years to complete. There has been substantial renovation and some replacing of the fallen structures and sculptures. The Surya Temple is set back 180m from the road. The sanctuary is no longer regarded as a holy place and no worship takes place. At the eastern entrance is the Bhoga Mandira (refractory), an isolated hall with pillars raised on a richly decorated platform. It looks like a Natamandira. To its west is an open space leading to the porch (jagamohana) which rises magnificently to its original height of 39m. To its east is a massive lower section of the massive sanctuary (deul), once over 60m tall.

From the south wall, it can be seen that the temple was built in the form of a chariot. 12 pairs of great wheels are sculpted on either side of the temple platform. In front of the eastern entrance a team of seven horses are shown struggling to pull the chariot towards the dawn. The twelve pairs of wheels symbolize 12 months (24 fortnights) of Hindu calendar. The eight spokes on the wheel, symbolize the divisions of the day into eight Praharas. Each wheel also functions as a working sun-dial. The Sun God's chariot also represents seven days of the week and twenty-four hours of the day in its concept.

The walls of the Bhogamandira are richly carved. The sculptures draw aspects of life—dancers, musicians, figures from mythology, scenes of love and war, hunting, elephant fights etc. Significant sections of sculptures are erotic depicting Mithuna, union of Love like Khajuraho.

Climbing up the outer walls and then down into the sanctuary itself one can have close look of chlorite statues of Surya on the outer south walls and also see the inside of the temple sanctuary in full daylight. One can also see larger than life size Surya of grey-green chlorite. He stands on a chariot drawn by seven horses lashed by his charioteer, Aruna surrounded by two four armed Gods, a pot bellied Brahmin on the right and possibly Vishnu on the left. Below them are possibly the four wives of Surya. Some carvings almost certainly show the King, the donor of the temple accompanied by the priests. There are huge lion sculptures in front of the eastern steps to Bhoga mandir near the entrance, typical of Orissan temples. There are three images of the Sun God positioned at the top to catch the rays of the Sun at dawn, noon, and sunset.

## BHUVANESVAR

Set on the edge of the lush green rice fields of the Mahanadi Delta, the pleasantly broad streets of the planned city of Bhuvaneshwar offers a striking contrast to the architectural legacy of its period of greatness over one thousand years ago. The graceful towers of those early temples, complemented by the extraordinary fineness of the stone carving make Bhuvaneshwar one of the most rewarding destinations for an East Indian visit. Named after the "Lord of the Universe", Bhuvaneshwar has some 500 temples out of the original 7000 temples that once surrounded Bindusagar Tank. The important temples in Bhuvaneshwar are: Parasuramesvara Temple, Muktesvara Temple, Siddhesvara Temple, Rajarani Temple, Brahmesvara Temple, Satrugnesvara Group of Temples consisting of Mohini, Uttaresvara, Gauri-Sankara, Ganesha and Paschimesvara Temple. If on a short visit, it is worth at least seeing in detail Lingaraj Temple.

Lingaraja Temple: Along with the Jagannatha Temple at Puri the Lingaraja Temple (1000 AD), built 100 years earlier, of the Nagara style, represents the peak of achievement of the Orissa's middle period. Even from a distance the sanctuary's 54m high tower (the Sri Mandir) dominates the landscape. It is one of the four main buildings in the temple complex, amidst a cluster of 65 shrines, in a spacious compound of about 530 ft by 460 ft. To the left of the tower is the

Jagmohana (pillared porch, then the Natamandira (dancing hall) and finally the Bhogamandira (hall of Offerings). The latter two were added a century after the sanctuary and the porch.

The monumental tower which rises in a distinctive curve, is 17 sq m in plan with projecting faces. The amla head with a pot-shaped pinnacle carrying a trident of Siva is supported by four mythical gryphons. The middle section has vertical lines of miniature towers sculpted in sharp relief on a background of horizontal moldings. The massive protruding sculpture of a lion crushing an elephant on each side is a common symbol in Orissan architecture.

Lingaraja Temple is mainly dedicated to Lord Tribhuvaneshvara (Lord of Three Worlds). The image of Siva is a huge uncarved block of granite, about 8 ft in diameter surrounded by rim of black chloride. The image itself is called "Lingaraja", 'Tribhuvaneshvara', or 'Krittikavasa'. Here the Lord is bathed in water, milk and bhang. Though called Lingaraja Temple, the Temple is dedicated to both Siva and Vishnu. The legend goes back to King Indradyumna of the Aeons (yugas) who sought the help of Visvakarma to complete 100 temples in a specified period. The work did not finish in time and therefore Indradyumna lost the chance of building a Vishnu Temple in Bhuvaneshwar. To pacify the frustrated and dejected king, Vishnu decided to remain in the Salagrama form beside Siva. Here both Linga and Salagrama are worshipped together. Both are self-revealed (udbhavamurti). In the temple flag-post both Nandi and Garuda are seen. There are also other icons in the tower depicting that the temple is dedicated to both Siva and Vishnu. Indradyumna was also advised to build a Vishnu Temple in Puri on the sea shore. There is also a temple dedicated to Lord Visvakarma in the complex. The complex has a Hanuman shrine handcuffed. The story goes that Hanuman tried to go to Ayodhya stealthily and so he was hand-cuffed and retained. There are also other shrines, Parvati and Yoganarasimha besides many Lingas in the complex, that are visited before visiting the main shrines.

The road from Bhuvaneshwar to Cuttack, the medieval capital, passes Nandan Kanan after 20km where the zoo and botanical garden is surrounded by dense forests. There are rare white tigers, a lion safari, rhinos, panthers, leopards, orangutans, and a variety of wild fowls in their natural surroundings.

### DHAULI HILLS

Buddhism and Jainism thrived along with Hinduism in Orissa for more than 2000 years. There are many interesting places of spiritual and religious interest around Bhuvaneshwar.

The horrors of Kalinga War at Dhauli led Ashoka to acknowledge the value of Buddhist teachings. The two 'Kalinga Edicts' differ from others which expound Buddhist principles. The rock edicts at the bottom of the hill (circa 260 BC) give detailed instructions to Ashoka's administration to rule his subjects with gentleness and fairness--"...You are in charge of many thousand living beings. You should gain the affection of men. All men are my children, and as I desire for my children that they obtain welfare and happiness both in this world and next, the same do I desire for all men...". Above the inscription there is a front part of the elephant carved out of an enormous rock. On the top of the hill there is a Buddhist Pagoda. It is known as the Viswa Shanti stupa. This was built in early 1970s by the Japan and Kalinga Nippon Buddha Sanghas. Seven hundred years ago Mahabikshu of Japan conceived the idea that got materialized later. This Stupa symbolizes peace for the future generation based on the deeds of Emperor Ashoka and speaks against men's inhuman craze for nuclear weapons, which might end the world. Fuji Guruji Dr Radhanatha Ratha, Editor of Samaj had also contributed to this effort. The old Hindu Temple of Dhavaleswar, which was reconstructed in 1972 is also at the top of the hill. The place includes beautiful Buddha statues in sleeping and meditating postures. Below the Dhaulagiri hills, River Daya flows calmly and peacefully.

### UDAYAGIRI AND KHANDAGIRI HILLS

These hills, 6km from Bhuvaneshvar have easy access to Udayagiri and Khandagiri caves. The caves on the Udayagiri and Khandagiri hills date back to the time of Jain and Buddhist occupation of the region, at least second century BC. A narrow valley winds between the hills, the route of an early Buddhist pilgrimage track leading to a stupa, which probably stood on the present site of Bhuvaneshvar.

The coarse grained sandstone which forms Khandagiri (broken hill) and Udayagiri (hill of sunrise) rises nearly 40m above the surrounding lateritic and infertile plain. The crumbling nature of the sandstone into which the caves were dug has exposed them to severe damage, moderately repaired by the Archaeological Survey of India.

The Jain caves are among the earliest in India. Furthermore, some of the rock inscriptions found above the Haati Gumpha (Elephant Caves) and elsewhere speak of the Chedi Dynasty who ruled over Kalinga from their capital, probably at Sisupalgarh, 9km southeast of Khandagiri.

Udayagiri and Khandagiri, probably all the caves now visible were constructed during the 150 years before Christ. Designed for the ascetic life of Jain monks, they simply provided dry shelter, with no concessions to any form of comfort. Too low to stand in, the cells are no more than cramped sleeping compartments. Although the Jains did not enjoy royal patronage after the fall of Kharvela's Dynasty, Jain occupation was continuous throughout successive Buddhist and Hindu periods in the region as is evident from the inscriptions. Kharvela extended his rule across a large part of North, Central and South India. At home he made great efforts to improve canals, rebuild his capital of Kalinganagara, and also to excavate some of the caves at Udayagiri and Khandagiri. The Parsavanath temple on top of Khandagiri was built in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, while the Hindu Temple dates from 1970s. Some of the important caves are; Rani Gumpha; Ganesh Gumpha; Bagha Gumpha and Hati Gumpha on the Udayagiri Hills. Iconographic works describe Yamuna as black in color, standing upon a black tortoise and wearing a garland of blue lotuses. Her sculptured images are seen in the Udayagiri caves. Tatwa Gumpha; Ananta Gumpha; Navamuni Gumpha are on Khandagiri Hills.

Clear view of both Udayagiri and of the plains surrounding Bhuvaneshvar can be had from the top of the Jain Temple on top of the hill built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The modern Peace Pagoda at Dhauli Hills is also clearly visible from here about 10 km away built on hillock next to one of Ashoka's rock edicts.

### MADURAI

Spread along the banks of the rocky bed of the Vaigai River, the modern industrial city, Madurai 's main claim to fame is as an ancient temple town. It is one of Tamil culture's most vital centers also. It is famous for its majestic temples, especially those of Meenakshi (an aspect of Divine Mother Parvati ) and Sundaresvarar (Siva). The city itself is very ancient and the rulers of the Pandya Dynasty, who are mentioned even in the edicts Ashoka (circa 272- 232 BC), had business contacts with the Roman Empire and ancient Greece. They made Madurai their capital. They remained here for 300 years though they were subservient to Cholas, for some period till they came back to power. For a short period it became a Sultanate after Malik Kafur completely destroyed the city in 1310. In 1364 it was captured by Vijaya Nagara kings, who remained until 1565, after which the Nayakas asserted their independence. It was also an ancient seat of Tamil learning with 48 poets adorning the Sangam or college hall. Tamil is the most ancient of the living Indian languages. However, the modern Madurai attained the present state of progress under the Nayaka kings.

Meenakshi Temple is an outstanding example of Vijayanagara temple architecture. Meenakshi, the fish-eyed goddess, and the consort of Siva, has a temple to the south and Sundareswarar (Siva) to the west. Since she is the presiding deity ceremonies are first performed in her shrine and, unlike in other places, Sundareswarar plays a secondary role. The temple's nine towering gopurams stand with their colorful stucco image of gods and goddesses and animals which are renewed and painted every 12 years. There are about 4000 granite sculptures on the lower levels. In addition to the Golden Lotus Tank and various pillared halls, there are five Vimanams over the sanctuaries.

The main entrance is through a small door of the Ashta Sakti Mandapa (porch of the eight goddesses) which project from the wall, south of the eastern gopuram. Inside, to the left is the sacred Tank of the Golden Lotus, with the lamp in the center surrounded by pillared cloisters and steps down to the waters. The Sangam legend speaks of the test that ancient manuscripts had to undergo--they were thrown into the tank, if they sank they were worthless, if they floated they were considered worthy. The north gallery has 17th century murals, relating 64 miracles said to have been performed by Siva, and the southern has marble inscriptions of the 1330 couplets of the Tamil Book of Ethics. To the west of the tank is the Oonjal Mandapam, the pavilion leading to the Meenaakshi shrine. Here the pillars are carved in the form of the mythical beast Yali, which recurs in temples throughout the region. Bronze images of Meenaakshi and Sundareswarar are brought to the Oonjal or Swing every Friday evening for worship. Cages with parrots (Meenaakshi's green birds which bring luck) are hung from the ceiling of the neighboring Kilikkoodu Mandapaapam which is flanked by finely carved columns. The Meenaakshi shrine with the principal image of the Goddess, stands on its own enclosure with smaller shrines around it. To the north of the tank is another enclosure with smaller gopurams on four sides within which is the Sundareswarar shrine guarded by two tall Dwarapalakas. In the northeast corner, the superb sculpture of the divine marriage of Meenaakshi with Sundareswarar being blessed by Vishnu and Brahma, and Siva in his 24 forms, are in the 19th century Kambatthadi Mandapam, around the golden flagstaff.

The thousand pillared Hall (mid 16th century) is in the northeast corner of the complex. Near the entrance, the sculpted ceiling has a wheel showing the 60 Tamil years. The 985 exquisitely carved columns include a lady playing the Veena, a dancing Ganesha, and a gypsy leading a monkey. The art museum here exhibits its temple art and architecture, fine bronze and stone images, friezes and photos. Just inside the museum to the right is a cluster of five musical pillars carved out of a single stone. Each pillar produces a different musical note which vibrates when tapped. Nayaka musicians could play these as an instrument.

The Nandi pavilion is to the east. The long Pudu Mandapa (new pavilion) with its beautiful sculptures of Yalis and Nayaka rulers and their ministers is outside the enclosure wall, between the east tower and the base of the unfinished Raya Gopuram which was planned to be the tallest in the country.

According to the legend (local lore) drops of nectar fell from Siva's locks here, so it was named "Madhuram" or "Madurai". The King of the Gods, Indra after his defeat at the hands of Vritraasura, was roaming about in a forest. At a particular spot he felt great peace and happiness. There, he found a Sivalinga and worshipped Lord Siva through it. He immediately had a vision of Siva and got back his royal throne through Siva's grace. It is at this spot that the local king built his capital city and named it Madurai as per the wonderful dream he had in which he saw amrita or nectar being poured over the place.

Regarding the goddess Meenaakshi there is another interesting story. She was the daughter of of the Pandyan King Malayadhwaja. Since her eyes resembled a meena (fish) she was given the name "Meenaakshi"(one whose eyes resemble a fish). She succeeded him, as the ruler of the kingdom, routed all the enemies and established her supremacy. She fell in love with Sundareswarar (Siva, born as a human being) and was married to him. Vishnu himself



acted as the brother of Meenaakshi in this marriage. He is known as "Azhagar". His temple is at the foot of the hillock, at a distance of 13 miles from Madurai.

The Tirumala Naayakar Palace (called the Mahal), Temple of Azhagar, the Mariamman Teppakulam are some other interesting places to visit while in Madurai.

### RAMESVARAM

Ramesvaram is one of the foremost important pilgrim centers--the other three being Badrinatha, Dvaraka and Puri, as also one of the twelve Jyotirlingas which every Hindu aspire to visit in his life time. Siva's spirit, his radiance, jyoti is said to be locked in twelve different Lingas located in different parts of India. The Linga located at Purulia in Bengal, known as Baijyanatha is also considered as Jyotirlinga by some, as Lord Siva himself has blessed Biju, the wood cutter who reverently thumped every day the neglected Linga there with his Axe.

The town Ramesvaram is situated on a small island which is in the shape of a conch (sankha), 34 miles by 7.5 miles between the Pak Straits and the Gulf of Mannar. It is connected with the main land (the small town of Mandapam) by a railway bridge, one kilometer long. The railway line is now damaged and the town is linked by a new bridge where buses ply.

The Ramayana tells how the monkey king Hanuman and others under the direction of Nala built the bridge linking Ramnad to Pamban and Dhanushkodi (a spot where Rama is believed to have bathed) in order to help rescue Sita from the demon king Ravana. Nala built the bridge with the help of floating stones. When Nala inscribed the words "Sri Rama" on stones, the stones started floating instead of sinking. The sand particles acted as cementing substances. Even the squirrels provided the necessary cementing substances by way of sand. They took a dip in the sea, rolled themselves on dry sand, and shook off the same in between the stone crevices. Sri Rama appreciated their reverence and valuable service and in appreciation patted them on their backs with his three fingers. The three stripes that we commonly see on the back of the squirrels are believed to be the finger marks created by Rama while patting them with a gentle stroke. When Rama returned from Lanka, he was told by the rishis that he must purify himself for committing the sin of murdering a Brahmin, for Ravana was the son of Pulastya, a Brahmin. To do this he was advised to set up a Lingam and worship Siva. The red image of Hanuman north of the main East Gate illustrates this story. The original Linga shrine predates the present.

The present structure of the Temple which is massive, has taken several centuries to take this shape. Even a king of Sri Lanka, apart from the local kings, is said to have contributed to its growth and development. It was founded by the Cholas but most of the Temple was built during Nayaka period (16th to 17th centuries). The temple benefited from enormous donations from the 17th century Setupatis ('guardians of the causeway'), who derived their wealth from the right to levy taxes on crossing the island. The temple stands on slightly higher ground, surrounded by a fresh water lake.

The architecture of Ramesvaram Temple stands out typical Dravidian. The specialty of this temple is its three corridors, about 4000 ft long, with massive sculptured pillars, rectangular in shape. Being the longest corridors, they are among the wonders of the world. On both sides of the corridors are platform of 5 ft high on which stand stone pillars of 25 ft high. The pillars, nearly 4 m tall, are raised on molded bases and the shafts decorated with scrollwork and lotus motifs. The temple Mandapam (porch) is supported by 1200 giant pillars and has withstood all rough weathers on the sea coast over several hundred years. The outermost is 3700 ft. in total length, the width of the path being 19 ft. and the average inner

height 30 ft. They give an impression of almost unending perspective, those in the north and south particularly striking. The ceiling is supported by stone beams of 49 ft long. The temple is 865 ft long 657 ft in width. The sanctum sanctorum is built of polished granite stones. The temple has two gopurams of 138 ft and 85 ft on eastern and western side respectively. Both are embellished with miniature figures. The other two gopurams on south and north are incomplete and were built by Keerana Rayar of the Deccan around 1420 AD.

As one enters the temple from the main entrance in the east one comes across a huge Nandi (the bull-mount of Siva) made of lime mortar, 12ft long and 9ft high, facing the shrine. It is one amongst other 4 great Nandis-- Lepakshi in Andhra Pradesh; Brihadeesvarar temple, Tanjore; Chamundi Hills, Mysore and Bull Temple, Bangalore. On its left is the shrine of Parvati (known as Parvatavardhini). There is also a shrine of Vishnu called Pallikonda Perumal (Ranganatha).

The Linga worshipped in the great temple of Ramesvaram is hardened heap of sand (saikata). Near the main shrine are also located two subsidiary shrines dedicated to Visalakshi (an aspect of Parvati) and Visvalinga (the Linga Hanuman brought). Rama desiring to consecrate a Linga here, rushed to his ardent disciple Hanuman to fetch a Lingam from Mount Kailasa. Since Hanuman did not return in time, Sitadevi prepared a Lingam out of sand which later became compact and concrete due to her divine touch. However, Hanuman also returned with a Lingam from Kailasa, though arrived late. He was disappointed to see the already installed Lingam of sand. He tried to uproot the same with all his might, but failed. Hanuman was disappointed and sad. Rama pacified Hanuman and installed the Lingam besides Sitadevi's and ordained that all poojas and rituals should first be performed to Hanuman's Lingam. The Lingam brought by Hanuman is called "Viswa Llingam" and Lingam made of sand by Sita is called "Ramalingam".

Behind Ramanatha shrine there is another small shrine dedicated to Vishnu, known as Setumadhava. by the side of Madhava teertha located inside the temple complex. On entering the East Gate, statue of Hanuman then the Nandi flanked by the statues of Nayaka kings of Madurai, Viswanatha and Krishnamma can be seen. Along with the main shrine of Ramanatha a Sphatika Linga is seen. Abhishekam (bathing) for this Lingam takes place every morning at 5.00 a.m. The shrine of Santana Ganapati is on the southwestern corner of the Devi shrine. Sayanagriha (sleeping room) where the golden images of the Lord and Devi are placed in the cradle (oonjal) after the night worship is in the north eastern corner of the Praakaaram (circumambulation path) around the Visalaakshi shrine.

In the campus, there are 24 Teerthas (holy tanks) where the pilgrims are expected to take bath, before visiting the main shrine. The first one is Madhava Teertha which looks like a small lake. Most of the other Teerthas are small wells from which water is to be drawn, for bathing. Each of the Teertha is said to possess some special power to destroy sins or bestow extra-ordinary benefits here or hereafter. About 650 ft to the east of the temple, the sea in front of Sankara Math is called Agniteertha where the pilgrims take bath before entering the main temple for taking bath in the other Teerthas. One of the 24 ponds where the pilgrims have their bath is called Chakrateertha. The local legend states that the Sudarsana-chakra which was pursuing the sage Durvaasa who had offended King Ambareesha, a great devotee of Lord Vishnu, entered into the pond here and disappeared. The other Teerthas are: Mahalakshmi; Savitri; Gayatri; Sarasvati; Gandamaadhana; Kavacha; Gavaya; Neela; Nala; Sankha (conch); Sakkara; Bramha-hatya Vimoechana; Soorya; Chandra; Ganga; Yamuna; Gaya; Siva; Satyamrita; Saiva Kodi.

It is the life-time ambition of every pious Hindu, seeking salvation in this lif, to bathe in the Ganges at Varanasi, bring with him the Ganga water to Ramesvaram and do Abhishekam to Ramanatha at Ramesvaram after chanting Rudram. Pilgrims who visit Ramesvaram first carry the sand from Ramesvaram beach to Kasi and after offering the same to Mother Ganga with prayers take a holy dip at Kasi Ghats.

About a mile and a half from Ramesvaram is located Gandhamaadana Parvatam (fragrant smelling mountain), a sandy elevation. The place is commemorated with the symbolic footprints of Sri Rama, before his departure to Lanka. A beautiful view of the town can be had from the top of the hill.

There is a temple dedicated to Rama situated about 5 miles from Ramesvaram, called Kodandarama Temple. It is said that Vibhishana's surrender to Rama was accepted at this place and also his initial coronation ceremony took place at this spot. There is an annual festival conducted here to commemorate this occasion.

Lakshmana Teertham, Seeta Teertham and Anjaneya-Sri Rama Temple where floating stones used in building the bridge by Nala can be seen, Sankara Math and Pamban Bridge are some other interesting places to visit while in Ramesvaram.

#### DHANUSHKODI

Dhanushkodi is an important place of pilgrimage of hoary antiquity, contiguous with the land-mass of Ramesvaram. It got its name from the ancient legend that Rama, at the request of the King Vibheeshana, destroyed the bridge he had got built by the monkey-army, with the Kodi (=extremity) of his Dhanus (=bow), so that there would be no future invasions of Lanka, after being handed over to Vibheeshana.

This small, but beautiful, temple- town situated at a distance of 11 miles of Ramesvaram was almost totally devastated by the fierce cyclone in 1964 AD. Miraculously, only the Temple of Kodanda Ramasvami survived. It is standing there in its place even today as already described above. Dhanushkodi can be approached by any four-wheeler for a distance of 6 miles, the rest of the distance being traversed on foot, since it is laden with sand.

Where the Kodandaramasvami temple stands at present, 8 km from Ramesvaram is said to be the place of surrender of Vibheeshana. The temple itself is of Dravidian architecture and contains the images of Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, Hanuman and Vibheeshana.

At Dhanushkodi, the Bay of Bengal meets the Indian Ocean. This confluence is called Ratnaakara. Pilgrims take a bath here and perform shraddhas (obsequies rites).

There are a number of boulders in shallow waters up to Sri Lanka. This --though called "Adams Bridge"-- may be the remnant of the famous bridge which Rama got built during the invasion of Lanka. A recent satellite picture seems to indicate the remnants of a very old bridge of boulders here.

At the edge of the island, there is a range of sand-dunes called "floating stones".

#### MELUKOTE-- THIRUNARAYANAPURAM

The ancient temple of Narayana in Melukote, a small town in Mandya district of Karnataka State has the unique distinction of the location of the famous temple for Vaishnavites and its intimate association with Ramanuja (1017AD-1137AD), the doyen among the Visishtadvaita Vedanta school, over twelve years. There are 107 divya kshetras (holy places) for Vaishnavites visited as well organized by Ramanuja in south India and one in Naimisaaranya in the North. Melukote temple is one of the important temples among the 108 which runs a vedic school and a Samskrit Paathasaala (school), for long.

Melukote is situated 48km north-west of Mysore, perched on a small hillock of pink granite, that raises about 150 meters above the surrounding plains. Known variously, over the centuries, as Melukote, Yadavagiri, Tirunarayanapuram, Bhuloka Vaikuntha and Dakshina Badarikaasrama, its political control had changed hands several times, due to the vicissitudes of history. The Gangas (8th century), the Cholas (10 and 11th centuries) and the Hoysalas (12th century) were the main dynasties that ruled over Melukote before Ramanuja's arrival. Rulers of Vijayanagara Empire and Wodeyars of Mysore controlled it in later times.

It is on a Punarvasu day about nine centuries before Ramanuja discovered the idol of Lord Tirunarayana in an anthill at Melukote. It is on this day he performed the Abhisheka (bathing ceremony) of the Lord with milk and gifted the shrine to the world. It was a time when Ramanuja came to Thondanur and sought the protection of the Hoysala king Bittideva, when he was persecuted by the Chola king, who was against Vaishnavites and the propagation of Vaishnavism. Ramanuja's disciple Kuresha's eyes were plucked instead, by mistake by the Chola king thinking him to be Ramanuja which plunged Ramanuja in deep sorrow when he learnt about the same later.

Ramanuja was running short with the supply of china clay which he used for making and wearing naamam (Vaishnavite's religious symbol) in his daily rituals. It is then he had a dream in which the Lord Narayana revealed to him his hiding place at Melukote.

Bittideva, the Hoysala King, who was a Jain, was worried about his daughter possessed of evil spirits, and all his efforts to cure her had failed. Nambi, a local priest and an ardent devotee of Ramanuja at Tondanur advised the king to seek the help of Ramanuja. Ramanuja advised her to take a holy dip in the tank nearby and touched her with a holy wand, praying to Thirunarayana which cured her completely of her trouble. The wand is still kept in the temple shrine of Ramanuja though stripped of the original crowning. Devotees are blessed with the same who seek relief from incurable diseases. Astonished by the recovery, Bittideva, who was a staunch Jain, embraced Vaishnavism and became an ardent disciple of Ramanuja. He was also renamed as Vishnuvardhana. He helped Ramanuja in building several Vaishnava shrines of which Melukote is one.

Ramanuja's next worry was to find an idol for procession as the stone idol, once consecrated, cannot be taken out of the sanctum sanctorum. His worry was soon answered by the Lord. He had a dream that the brass icon was with the daughter of Sultan of Delhi who loved the same very much and was fondling it all the time. Ramanuja took the trouble of going all the way to Delhi and made a request of Delhi Sultan that it is the desire of the devotees to have it back in the temple at Melukote. Sultan jocularly told, Ramanuja should prove that the idol is willing to go with him leaving his daughter. Ramanuja sat before the Sultan and begged the Lord to come to him. To the astonishment of the Sultan, the idol moved into the hands of Ramanuja. The king parted with the idol, knowing that he cannot hold it any longer. Thus the mission was complete.

Ramanuja built the temple with the help of Vishnuvardhana in the classic Hoysala style of architecture and consecrate the idols at the temple. He also arranged for the pooja of the shrines, thrice a day. The main shrine then on came to be popularly called also as "Cheluva Narayana" (beautiful Narayana) and the brass idol as "Sampatkumara" (wealthy son). In his attempt to bring the icon from Delhi, Ramanuja was helped by some Harijans. As a gesture of good will, he kept the temple open to Harijans, one day in a year, against stiff opposition from orthodox Brahmins, which practice is being continued even today.

Ramanuja administered "Ashtakshari Mantra", "Om Namoh Narayanaya" to the general public as a Guru, in spite of the protest and threats from the vedic group. The Mantra which was administered to him, in secrecy by his Guru was not to

be parted with, to undeserving people according to the religious orders, to non-Vaishnavites. Such a person will be cursed to go to hell according to the religious authorities. Ramanuja preferred hell to heaven in doing so, as in his opinion he was serving a noble cause of imparting the mantra to one and all without any reservation. In his opinion all are equal and deserved the grace of Lord Narayana. Vedic groups much later appreciated his benevolent gesture.

It is said that pilgrims who come to visit Melukote should first see the shrine of Lord Badrinarayana at Melukote before visiting the Temple of Thirunarayana. It is also believed that one will complete his pilgrimage of Badrinath only when he completes his visit to Badrinarayana in the South at Melukote to derive the full benefits of his pilgrimage to Badrinath in the North.

Lord Badarinarayana's shrine at Melukote is the shrine of Vishnu with Lakshmi sitting on his lap. One can notice the conch, the disc and the hand that shows the sign of protection (Abhaya Hasta). Lord Badrinath in the North preached to Nara and Narayana and Badarinarayana in the South, to Lakshmi, his consort. There is a big Badri fruit tree in the upper portion of the temple from which it derives its name. The mystery is that no one knows from where this tree takes its root to be perennial. The temple is in front of the main shrine of Melukote facing the North. His consort Lakshmi is known by the name "Aravindavalli". She is sitting on his lap and in the receiving posture of Ashtaakshari Mantra. Here, Devi Lakshmi is seen with a lotus in her hand and looks as though the lotus is being offered in reverence to receive the Mantra Ashtaksari.

Lord Badarinarayana gave way to Lord Thirunarayana and occupied the present place, just as Lord Varaha did to Lord Venkatesvara in Tirupati. It is not known exactly when this temple came into existence or lime light before the present modern temple. It is glorified in Yadugiri Mahaatmya that if a person stops even for a moment in Yadagiri he attains the status to stay in Vaikuntha permanently.

Thondanur is a small town near Melukote where Ramanuja spent 12 years of his time spreading Vaishnavism, building temples and establishing religious orders. There is a shrine of his in the Yoganarasimha Temple complex in Thondanur which is not very far from Melukote. A serpent hood covers the head of the Ramanuja shrine, reminding us of the fact that he is believed to be the incarnation of Adishesha. It seems, he once addressed one thousand of his audience who came to belittle him questioning him on Vishishtadvaita from behind a screen. When the screen was opened the audience witnessed a serpent with its thousand hoods hovering over his head. At the end of the debate they all embraced Vaishnavism. Nearby there are other temples of Narayana and Parthasarathy. Parthasarathy temple is called Sri Krishna Temple. Here Lord Krishna can be seen with his legs crossed in an unusual twist. Usually the right leg is always seen in front in the crossed position, but here it is the left that crosses over right foot. He is also seen in the company of Rukmini, satyabhama, Sridevi and Bhudevi together.

## CHENNAI

Tiruvallikkeni (Triplicane) in Chennai is one of the important Divyakshetras from among the 108. The oldest Temple structure of Parthasarathy in Chennai was built in the 8th century AD by Pallava kings and later renovated in the 16th century by Vijayanagara rulers. Dedicated to Sri Krishna as the royal charioteer, it houses five of Vishnu's incarnations. The oldest shrine is that of Narasimha, who is believed to have given place to Lord Krishna, when he returned after the Mahabharata war quite exhausted, turning West leaving the Eastern Wing for Krishna. The bronze procession idol's face

is all etched reminding us of the Mahabharata War and the innumerable pricks Krishna received from the shooting arrows and bows. Lord Krishna here is flanked by Rukmini, Balarama, Aniruddha and Pradyumna. The main idols of Krishna and Rukmini are quite tall and impressive with pronounced moustaches of Krishna.

Chennai is also famous for its Siva Temple in Mylapore (City of Peacocks). Kapalesvarar Temple is quite imposing with its 40 meters gopuram (temple tower) built after the original temple which was destroyed by Portuguese in 1566. The Temple is very sacred to Saivites. It is believed Parvati in the guise of Peahen allured the nomadic Siva roaming with Brahma's severed skull in his hand and ultimately succeeded in winning his hands. Here she is known as Karpakaambal. Thirugnana Sambandar, the famous saivite poet-saint resurrected Poompaavai from the ashes by singing his favorite composition "Poompaavai Thiruppadhikam" at this Temple by the grace of Kapaali, as he is popularly called. There are several bronze statues which can be seen by visitors in the outer courtyard including those of 63 Naayanmaars, well known saints, not all of them are Brahmins and some among them are from scheduled castes. Once a year a grand procession of all the 63 idols around the four streets surrounding the temple (maada veedi) takes place in Chennai.

### TIRUMALA--TIRUPATI

Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh is the richest temple in India attracting crowds of all ages, faiths and nationalities. Lord Venkateswara, the Lord of this temple has been casting hypnotic spell on millions of devotees over centuries. His ability to answer prayers and perform the most improbable miracles is well known. Sir Thomas Munroe and Lord Williams were staunch devotees of the temple, although as non-Hindus they were never permitted to enter. Both were cured of their incurable diseases, their prayers being answered by Lord Venkateswara.

Tirumala is the range of seven hills forming a part of the Eastern Ghats in India. The hill which is supposed to be a piece of the Meruparvata has a cluster of seven hills, namely: Seshachala; Vrishbhachala; Garudachala; Anjanadri; Narayanadri; Simhachala and Venkatadri. The main temple is on the seventh hill, Venkatadri at a height of 2800 ft above the sea level.

The original name of Venkateswara was Vengada, a Tamil word. In course of time it was samskritized to Venkata. And, the god on this hill became Venkatesa or Venkatachalapati or Venkatanatha. Venkata means destroyer of sins and the giver of prosperity. Another name by which he is revered is Srinivasa, in whom the Goddess of Prosperity Sri or Lakshmi dwells. Since the hill was also known as Srigiri the lord of the hill became Srigirivaasa or Srinivaasa. In the North of India, he is known as Balaji because when the world was immersed under waters, Vishnu as a newborn child floated on a leaf on the waters. Another meaning for Balaji is Universal Mother.

The stone image of Lord Venkateswara is believed to be Svayamvyakta or self manifested and not man-made. A great devotee of God, Rangadasa by name and Gopinatha, another devotee are said to have discovered this image which has been partially buried under the earth and redeemed it. The idol of Venkateswara does not conform to any of the rules laid in the works of Hindu Iconography (Silpasastra) or the descriptions given in the meditation verses (Dhyana slokas) of the various aspects of Vishnu; this strengthens the belief that it is self manifested. Guesses galore have made it an image of Vishnu, Siva, Devi, Subrahmanya or Harihara. Certain aspects of the image like long hair, the peculiar conical crown, snake shaped ornament (naagavalaya) and also certain ritual procedures like offering of Bilva leaves and decorating with a Saree on Fridays have given rise to doubts regarding the deity it represents. It is Ramanuja who is said

to have finally settled the disputes by declaring that it is that of Vishnu with convincing proofs to the learned audience. But the controversies crop up now and then even today.

Carved out of black granite, Venkateswara stands on a high lotus pedestal. The image is about nine feet tall from the base of the pedestal to the tip of the crown. Every Friday the deity is given the ceremonial bath (abhisheka), when he is visible without his jewels or the huge Vaishnava caste mark (naamam) on his forehead. His crown or Mukuta, also sculptured in stone as a part of the image, is over twenty inches high. His flowing hair or jata juta is curled and rests on his shoulders. The image is four armed: two arms at the back are held up and curled into fists, ready to hold weapons. The conch and discus are attached separately. This is being done as per the decisions of Ramanuja who settled the idol as Vishnu. The front right hand is varada mudra (boon giving hand posture), while the front left hand rests lightly on the hip in the katya vilambita hasta indicating that the Lord protects his true devotees. A seated Lakshmi is carved on the right side of his chest. The sacred thread (yagnopavita), four necklaces, a thick girdle around the waist, snake shaped armlets and a pair of anklets adorn the figure. On his shoulders, there are marks resembling the scars made from carrying a bow. The deity is typical image of the Pallava or pre-Pallava period.

Balaji is covered with gold plate which replicates, in elaborate detail, the carvings on the stone. His crown, conch, discus, his two hands in the varada and katya vilambita pose and various other ornaments are studded with diamonds and other precious stones. He is decorated with emerald 3-inches in diameter which is said to be the world's largest. His gem studded gold crown is believed to be a gift from Akashaya Raja. It is believed to be the most precious single ornament in the world. His gold earrings are crocodile-shaped (makara kundalas). One of his necklaces consists of a pair of gold-encased tiger claws; the other is a garland with the image of Goddess Lakshmi carved out on each pendant. He wears a necklace consisting of Salagramas mounted in gold and engraved with the Sahasranama, the thousand names of Vishnu, and another necklace of Tulasi seeds. His armlets are shaped like two hooded cobras. Venkatesha's sword is known as the Suryakata and hangs from his belt, which is decorated from the ten avatars of incarnation. Truly, his ornaments are unique and wonderful. On his chest Venkateswara bears two sculptured plaques of gold: the four armed lotus bearing Goddess Lakshmi seated on a lotus adorns the right side, while Padmavati adorns the left. The image of Balaji is wonderful and awesome. Even an atheist refuses to criticize as he approaches the idol as it inspires intense devotion and faith, love and veneration.

Sri Venkateswara Temple occupies the second place amongst the 108 Vaishnava holy shrines (divya kshetras). Venkatachala is glorified in several Puranas of which the most important are Varaha Purana, Vayu Purana and Bhavishyottara Purana. Sri Venkateswara Temple dates from the 10th century with later additions. There are three enclosures. The first, there are portraits and sculptures of the Vijayanagara patrons including Krishna Deva Raya, his queen and gold covered pillar. The outer colonnade is in the Vijayanagara style. The gateway leading to the inner enclosure may be of Chola origin. The second enclosure has more shrines, a sacred wall and the kitchen. The inner enclosure is opened only once a year. The main temple and shrine is at the west side of the inner enclosure.

The sanctuary, 9th and 10th centuries, known as Ananda Nilayam (Abode of Bliss) has a domed Vimana entirely covered with gold plate and gold covered gates. The Vimana tower above the sanctum stands on a square base of each side, 27 ft and has two tiers; it rises to a height 37 feet. Ramanuja established the images of Varaha (boar incarnation), Narasimha (lion-man incarnation), Vaikunthanaatha and Venkatesa on all the four corners of the Vimana above the sanctum (garbhagriha).

According to Vayu Purana, Adi Varaha (Boar Incarnation) manifested himself on the western bank of the holy pond (swami pushkarani) while Vishnu, after being neglected by Lakshmi being insulted by the sage Bhrigu while he kicked

Vishnu on the chest and was born as Padmavati, in the form of Venkatachalpati came to reside on the southern bank of the holy pond. Hence, Tirumalai is also called Varaha Kshetra (Holy abode of Varaha).

In the current Kali Yuga, Akshayaraja came to rule over Tondaimandalam (the area located in the interior of South India). His daughter Lakshmi born as Padmavati was married to Venkateswara after an exciting love affair. The marriage officiated by Brahma, was celebrated with great pomp and splendor.

The King Tondaman constructed a prakaram and Dwara gopuram, the basic structures of a Dravidian temple, and arranged for the worship of the Lord. During the 11th century, Sri Ramanuja clarified several controversies that existed over the idol, declared the idol to be Vishnu, fixed the conch and discus on its receiving mode, and systematized the worship and the religious orders.

There are other images in the sanctum as follows: Manavalapperumal (silver image presented by queen Saamavai, also called Bhoga Srinivasa); Ugra-Srinivasa with the images of Sridevi and Bhudevi; Malayappa, a bigger image of Venkateswara used for professional purposes; Koluvu Srinivasa (used ceremonially like a king, everyday, before whom accounts of the day have to be given); Krishna; Rama; Sudarsana (discus deity). Inside the temple there are small shrines dedicated to Varadaraja and Narasimha, Rama as well as Ramanuja.

At Tirumalai, there is an interesting collection of Indian musical instruments at the entrance of the temple.

Other places of interest in Tirumalai are--apart from the Swamipushkarani tank, and the Varaha Temple, The Akasaganga falls, Papanasam Teertha, Kumaaradhara and few other sources of holy waters.

At the foot of the hills is Tirupati, the main city. The temples of Govindaraja, Kodandarama and Kapaleeswara (AD 1480) are located here. Majestic Venkateswara shrine at Srinivasamangapuram is believed to be older than the main shrine of Balaji on the top of the hill. Another important temple included in the pilgrimage is the Padmavati (consort of Lord Venkateswara) temple at Tiruchanur, 5 km away from the Tirupati town.

"The Tirumala-Tirupati-Devasthanams" (TTD for short) is a huge establishment entrusted with the management of the main temples, allied temples and associated institutions. The fabulous rich income of the temple, next only to the Vatican in Rome, is being utilized properly for the welfare of the pilgrims by providing many facilities like rest-houses, free food and Prasadam (consecrated food) as also transportation. It is also running a University with several academic institutions affiliated to it, including an Oriental Research Institute. Other Institutions run by TTD are: Sri Venkateswara Nithya Annadanam Trust; The Dharma Prachaara Parishad; Two Veda Pathasalas; Five institutions for Sanskrit and Vedic learning; two for the Fine Arts; Training center for sculpture; one Ayurvedic college; One Institute for Yoga and Allied Sciences; ten schools in Tirupati; Oriental Manuscripts Library; Two Museums; several wedding halls at various places made available at low rates; Forest Department; Garden Department; hospitals, several clinics and dispensaries to provide free medical aid to pilgrims; Venkateswara Institute of Medical Sciences etc. Every pilgrim who visits Tirumalai and puts money in the Hundi or collection box can be satisfied that he is contributing to helping the poor and the needy, the young and the handicapped, thus virtually serving the God, for "serving the Society is serving God" (Jana Seva is Janaardhana Seva). Their prayers will not go unheeded".

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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