

# CAPE COMORIN-AN UNKNOWN ASPECT

BY RAO SAHIB M. RAGHAVA AYYANGAR

(Professor of Tamil, University of Travancore.)

## Sacredness to Devi

CAPE Comorin is at the present day known to the world at large as a lovely spot where three seas meet and a temple of Bhagavati doing eternal penance for the love of the Lord, crowns the peninsula jutting into the sea. In the past too, down from recorded history, the Cape has retained its special sanctity to Devi. The Mahabharata includes it in its five *Naritirthas*, calling it

(Here) "came those men who wish to consecrate themselves for the rest of their lives, and bathe and dwell in celibacy; and women also did the same, for it is told that a Goddess once dwelt here and bathed."<sup>3</sup>

## Kumari, the original site of Rama's Bridge

In the early centuries of the Christian era, the Cape seems to have been not merely a bathing ghat sacred to Devi; it enjoyed



Sunrise at Cape Comorin.

*Kannytirtha*,<sup>1</sup> Sangam literature in Tamil speaks of the sea near the Cape as "The sea of the braceleted Goddess."<sup>2</sup> More surprising is the testimony in the Periplus, the account of a traveller of about 60 A. D. in this regard :

1. The Mahabharata—iii - 88. 8339 iii - 118. 10267 (sorensar's index)
2. The Silappadikaram, Chapter 5, Ls. 1 - 2 :  
"தொடியோள் பெளவம்"

an additional prestige—the prestige that Darbhasayanam and Dhanushkodi enjoy today. These two places are now considered to be the sites where Sri Rama commenced his great bridge across the sea to Lanka and thousands of pilgrims go thither for a bath in the sea "performing its priest-like task of pure ablution round earth's human

3. Schoff's Periplus : pp. 219-220.

shores." But a study of Valmiki Ramayana and ancient Tamil works would have us believe that the present greatness of Darbhassayanam and Dhanushkodi once belonged to Kanyakumari, the *Adisetu* or *Setu Mulam*.

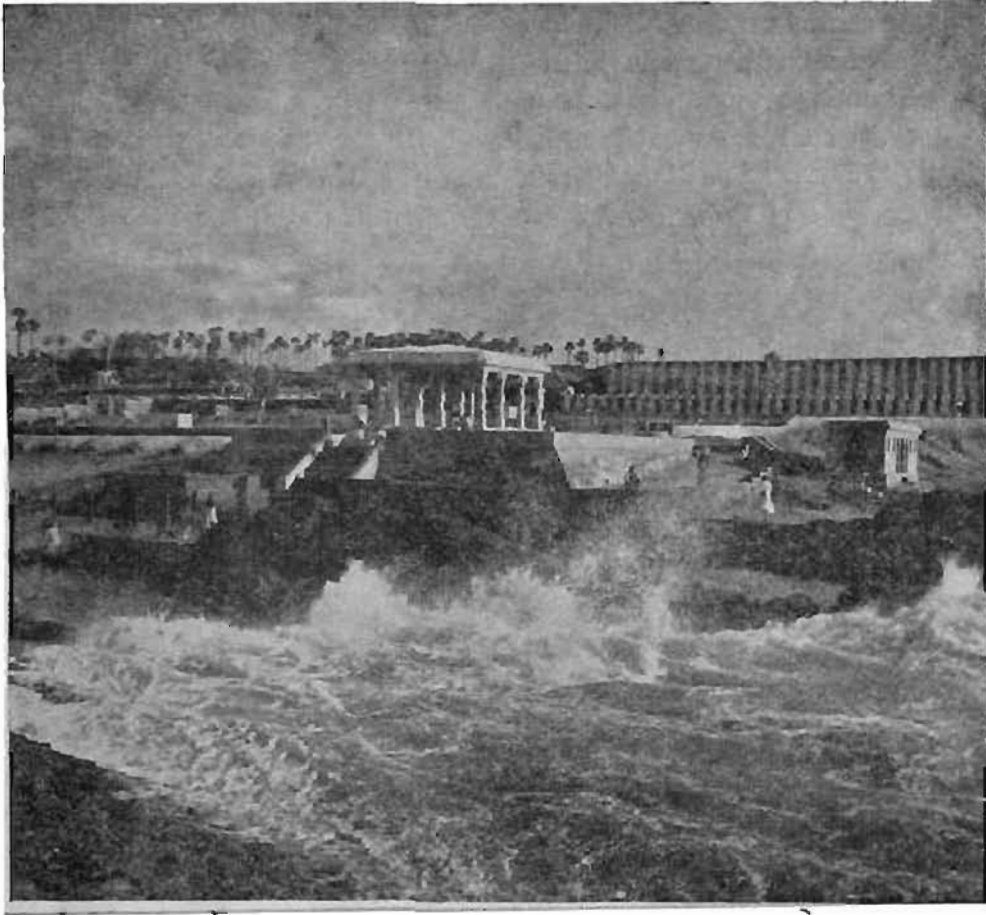
### The evidence of the Stalapuranam

The sanskrit *Sthalapuranam* of Kanya Kumari (also rendered in Tamil verse by

account—which we might reject as un-historical, if unconfirmed by other evidence—is substantially strengthened by other definitely reliable sources.

### Accounts in Sangam Literature and Valmiki Ramayana

The *Manimekbala*, a classical work of the poet *Sittalai Sattanar* of the Sangam period, refers to "the beautiful bathing ghat



sacred bathing ghat at The Cape Comorin.

*Sankara Navalar* circa sixteenth century A. D.) says that Sri Rama, in his search for Sita, came to the Cape and got a boon from Devi that she would help in the construction of the bridge to Lanka across the sea and also stand sentinel over it. The Kumari is thus the source of *Rama Setu* (near Dhanushkodi).<sup>4</sup> The authenticity of this

4 "ஆங்குள இராமசே நகக் காநியாஞ்சேது முலம் ஈங்கிது." (Chap. vi, verse 10.)

of the Kumari in the sea where monkeys toiled *i. e.* built a bridge).<sup>5</sup> This line means that people of those days knew and believed that Rama commenced his bridge to Lanka from the Cape. The truth of this belief is also borne in upon us from the highest authority on the Avathar of Rama—the Valmiki Ramayana. This epic tells us

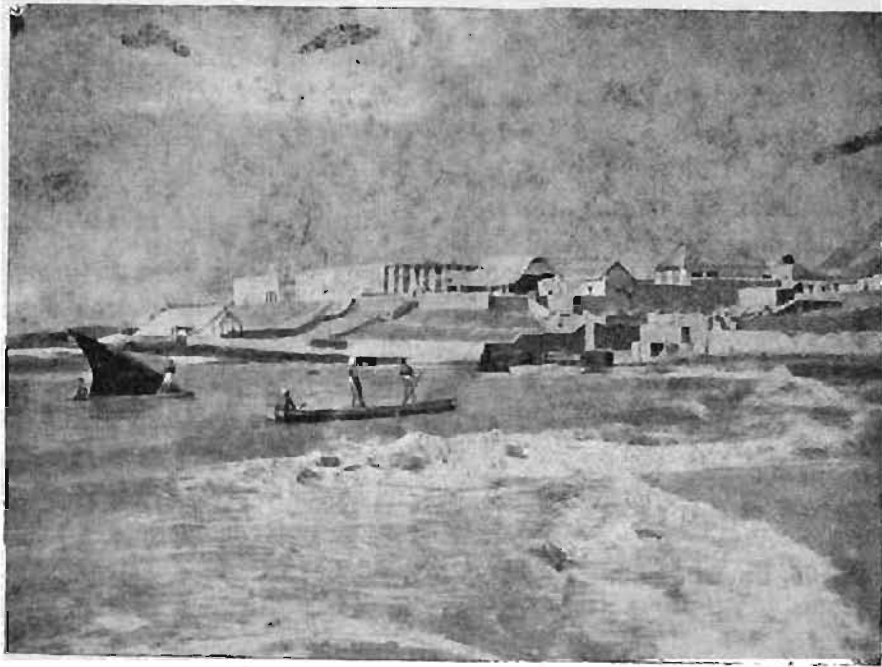
5. "சுரங்குசெய்நடந் குமரியம் பெருந் துறை." (Chapter 5, Line 37.)

that Sri Rama, after viewing the southern sea from the top of the Mahendragiri (a peak of the Western Ghats lying in South Travancore) came down to the seashore<sup>6</sup>. Reaching the sea he had seen from on high, he took counsel with his followers about the means of approach to the island of Lanka. The deliberations of Rama were therefore begun near the sea adjoining the Mahendra-

of the origin of Rama's 'bridge from the Kumari.<sup>7</sup>

This fact is further underlined by the Sanskrit *Sankalpam* which every Hindu chants before his bath in the auspicious Kumari ghat :

But, how are we to reconcile the conflicting tradition now current that *Darbasayanam*, together with *Dhanushkodi* is the



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giri mountain that is, the sea of the Cape. A sloka in Kalidas' Raghuvamsa describing the view of the Setu stretching up to the Malaya mountain gives additional evidence

6. Yudhakand, Sarga Four, Slokas 95, 96, 99, & 100.

यथा कलमेकेदारैः पक्वैरिव वसुन्धरा ।  
महेन्द्रमथ संप्राप्य रामो राजीवलोचनः ॥  
अध्यारोहन्महाबाहुः शिखरं दुमभूषितम् ।  
... .. ॥  
वेलासाय विपुलां रामो वचनमब्रवीत् ।  
... .. ॥

old Setu ? The same tradition also tells us that the Setu of the east coast begins somewhere westwards and warrants therefore the assumption that Rama's Setu commenced from the Kumari and embraced Dhanushkodi also in its way.

“आदिसेतोः कन्याकुमारिक्षेत्रे मातुर्पितृतीर्थे”

### Pilgrimage to the Cape, a Dharma-yatra

One more unassailable proof in favour of the identification of the ancient Setu with the Kumari is the complete silence of works of Tamil literature on Dhanushkodi, save

7. Raghuvamsa, canto XIII, sloka 2.

for a solitary reference in *Agananaru*<sup>8</sup> stating that Sri Rama deliberated here about his plans to invade Lanka. On the other hand, the Cape is celebrated time and again in the Tamil classics as the ghat, where men and women, tainted with sins washed them off in the purifying waters. Surely, this unique importance could not have come to it without great and moving associations with Divinity. The *Perumkathai*—the counterpart in Tamil verse of the “*Brihat-katha*,” speaks of the pilgrimage to the Kumari as a *Dharma-yathra*<sup>9</sup> while other long poems—The Chintamani,<sup>10</sup> Silappadikaram<sup>11</sup> and Manimekhalai<sup>12</sup> refer to the universal habit of journeying to Kumari. So widespread and common was this habit of pilgrimage to the Cape that the commentaries to Tolkappiam give the following

8. Agam, 70.

वैदेहि पर्यामलयाद्भिभक्तं  
मत्सेतुना फेनिलमम्बुराशिम् ।

9. Book 2, canto 36, lines 286 - 3.

“இமயப் பொருப் டகத்தீராண்டுறைந்  
தபின்  
குமரித்தீர்த்த மரீயவேட்கையின்  
தருமயாத் திரையெணத் தக்கணம்  
போந்தாழி”

Book 12, cants 20 lines 82 - 3.

குண்டுநீர்க்குமரித் தெண்டிரையாடிய  
.....

10. Verse 2020, சிந்தை நலிகின்றதிருநீர்  
குமரியாட

11. Maduraikkandam—chapter 15, lines 12-16;  
Vanjikkantam—chapter 27 lines 68-9.

12. Chapter 5, lines 86-8 ; chapter 13 lines 5-7,  
lines 80-84.

as illustrative of one of its grammatical rules :<sup>13</sup>

“Give me food—I am returning from a  
visit to the Kumari”.

This reminds us of the prayer of pilgrim-mendicants of today bound for Dhanushkodi and Rameswaram : “I go to Rameswaram ; will you not oblige me with alms?” Going to the Kumari was then a great religious duty even as going to Rameshwaram and Dhanushkodi is today. And people regarded it also their bounden duty to do acts of charity to travellers on their pilgrim route.

### Kumari, sacred as the Ganges

The commonest forms of oaths in Tamil inscriptions is the statement that if one fails to do the appointed task, one would be cursed with the curse of sins committed on the Ganges and the Kumari.<sup>14</sup> The Kumari was thus sacred as the Ganges nay even more sacred, as the Manimekhalai hints.<sup>15</sup> Even people of Benares on the banks of the Ganges came to the Kumari for the upliftment of their soul.

The holy Cape is thus sacred in a special sense as the site of the old Setu. And the famous Sanskrit phrase, “*Asetu Himuchalam*.” (असेतुहिमाचलम्) gains a new meaning in our eyes : “From the Kumari to the Himalayas.”

13. குமரியாடிப் போந்தேன், சோறுதம்  
மின் (தொல். சொல். கிளவி. 15)

14. “கங்கையிடைகுமரியிடைச் செய்த  
பாஸத்திற் படுவா—ராகவும்  
(Inscriptions)

15. Chapter 13, lines 8-7, 78-83.