



Sri Chakra

The Source of the Cosmos

The Journal of the Sri Rajarajeswari Peetam, Rush, NY



Blossom 13 Petal 3
September 2008

Photo courtesy Kathy Allen

Our Thoughts

Dear Devotees,

If ever there was reassurance and/or absolute proof that a celestial power does indeed exist, it's the overwhelming size and brilliance of all things that are not manmade. It's everything from a family of slugs sitting on the temple house steps first thing in the morning, to the rustle of the wind across the back field in the middle of the night.

We usually group all these occurrences together in convenient words such as "nature" or "the environment," and too often think of them as things that are just there. They're not really relevant to our daily lives in comparison to going to work, cleaning the house, doing the laundry, feeding the kids and squeezing in a little puja... the thing known as "nature" simply sits there in the background of our lives.

It's really too bad that too few of us realize how just observing the physical world around us will tell us endless things about our internal worlds, and eventually offer insights into the astral world. Loving a plant or a tree isn't much different than loving a dog or cat; it simply requires a higher level of sensitivity and the refusal to take one's physical world for granted.

Not noticing Devi's gifts around us reminds me of a funny scene I once saw on a TV show called Joan of Arcadia, about a teenaged girl who had regular conversations with God. When she first started to see God coming to her in the forms of different animals and people she asked Him to show her a miracle. God, in the form of a young man, pointed to a tree. Joan said, "That's not a miracle, it's a tree!" to which God replied, "I'd like you see you make one."

Seeing everyday objects as pieces of divinity is a true gift. More importantly, it's a gift that you don't need to be born with, and can easily develop by focusing your mind. To see the miraculous spirit of a tree or a creek and to be able to identify with it as an extension of yourself and the Mother is a great leap forward in spiritual progress—it is the same as witnessing the untouched evidence of Devi's grace and Her creative force on this Earth.

When the weather is warm, we all like to go outside and eat our lunches on the Ganapathi deck, but how many people go there during the day (or to Kashi for that matter) and really sit in silence when there's no one else around? Not enough. Some of the few who do pay a visit usually only stay for a few minutes, which is a shame because they miss the chance to see and hear things that are truly divine.

Aparna Hasling, who temple regulars lovingly call "the crazy tree lady," has turned this process of observing and appreciating nature into an art form. Her connection to the environment is no less powerful or beautiful than that of a mother's connection to her newborn child. Aiya has even said her work with the temple property translates into spiritual benefits, as "the shovel is her *udhrini* and the wheel-barrow is her *pancha-patram*."

As you'll read in this issue, Aparna has recently alerted several people (including Aiya) about the veritable flow of a tree's blood through its veins. The lucky few who went with her and Aiya down to the temple's wetlands saw and heard for themselves how holy the Earth can be in its natural state. Spending some time sitting amid the trees is not only a return to our basis as a species, but also an exercise in appreciating the long journeys each of souls have made.

Because, as the Nayanmar Maanickavasagar wrote in the *Shivapuramam*, all of us have been blades of grass, shrubs and trees, even before we had animal cells. In that light, connecting to the divine outdoors is nothing more than simultaneously viewing a plethora of different steps in the path of the Atma.

Sri Gurubhyo Namaha!

The *Sri Chakra* staff

September Newsletter

by Kamyā Ramaswamy

Since the last issue...

The first week of June was rife with preparations for the wedding of Abhi and Muralee, which happened without a hitch on June 6. Later that same month, Aiya performed a sashtiabhapurthi, and then headed off to Arizona for a couple of days at the beginning of July.

On the 9th, Aiya spoke at the India Community Camp (ICC), and some of those kids visited the Rajarajeswari Peetam a few days later. After Aiya spoke there again at the end of July, a second batch of kids came to our temple on the 29th.

After Aadi Amavasya on July 31, the temple's Vibhuti Shaivite Immersion took place from August 2 to the 9th. Aadi Puram also happened during that same week, and Sri Shangaranarayanan of the Matangi peetam in Chennai presided over a Chandi homam with Aiya on that day.

August 15 marked Varalakshmi vratam day, and Aiya led several simultaneous pujas at the temple that evening. Four days later, he and Amma left for England for one week, where Aiya performed a wedding as well as a Gowri puja.

Immediately upon returning from Britain, Amma and Aiya left town again to fly to Vancouver, British Columbia. There, they visited two temples—one where the main deity was Murugan, and another where the deity was Durga.

Also in B.C., Aiya presided over the arangetram of a multi-

talented young man named Kowmaran Ranjitanathan. During a single performance, he debuted his skills in both Bharatanatyam and playing the mrudangam!

A series of pujas and different

lectures made up the rest of Amma and Aiya's itinerary in Vancouver.

A few hours after their return flight landed back in Rochester, Aiya and Amma headed straight for the temple, where he performed the wedding of Amma's brother, Saddanathan.

Past Events

Guru Poornima, July 17

This year marked the first time Guru Poornima was celebrated in the new auditorium hall. Aiya and Amma were welcomed in the mid-afternoon, and the festivities included their guru puja, their devotees' puja to them, and their meeting and greeting all the students who came from far and wide for this special day. The evening even held a unique treat for all comers—a Bharatanatyam

dance number that featured the temple girls and which was organized by Devi Suhir. A malar (which is now on the temple's website) was also released, and the night concluded with dinner.



Aiya and Amma watched an elaborate Guru Poornima programme, complete with a dance session put together by Devi Suhir and the temple girls. Photos by Suhir Ponnchamy.

Vibhuti Shaivite Immersion (camp), August 2-9

Devi graced a whopping 95 kids with the chance to attend camp this year, with some coming from as far away as Europe! The new cabin was used for the first time to house most of them.

The week included art, bhajans, stories, an outdoor activity day, question time with Aiya, chanting, and for the first time ever, Bharatanatyam lessons.

By the end of the week, all the children had learned Purusha Suktam, and were initiated into the Chandi and Annapurna mula mantras by Aiya.

Aadi Puram, August 3

This festival marks the day that Devi first became a woman, and it was made doubly special this year by its coinciding with camp,

as well as a Chandi homam and the exalted presence of Sri Shangaranarayanan.

Aiya and Sri Shangaranarayanan told those assembled about the efficacy of the new, gleaming silver *rk* and *srk* (see page 10) that were used for the first time in that day's homam. Later, Devi received abhishekam, alankaram and naivedyam, thereby concluding the festival.



Aiya holds up the jewel-studded *srk* as Sri Shangaranarayana talks about it

Varalakshmi Vratam, August 15

The temple was aglow with the married ladies who visited this evening, as well as the deepams that were at the centre of their puja sets.

Aiya walked them all through the puja to Sri Vara Mahalakshmi and volunteers helped throughout by making sure everyone had all the items they needed.

The end of this evening saw Aiya make a very special announcement—the engagement of Gratus Devanesan and Suba Jeyaratnam, who will be married at the temple next year!



Devi was invoked into a large deepam, and Aiya did puja to Her in the centre of the yajnasala. Photo by Suba Jeyaratnam.

Upcoming Events

Ganesha Chaturthi, Sept. 3

Although this year's Chaturthi puja will fall on a Wednesday, the temple hopes as many people as possible will attend the festivities. Typically, celebrating Ganesha on this day involves a

Vancha-kalpa Ganapathi homam with 1008 laddus or modakams offered into the fire. The Utsa Ganapathi murthi will also be carried around in procession with Siddhalakshmi beside him. Later, the sponsors will carry the festival kalasam around, and the day will conclude with the alankaram of the Lord.

Sharada Navarathri, Sept. 29-Oct. 11

Aiya has already announced that the theme for Navarathri this year will probably be Kubera homams on each day. However, there is always a chance this may change.

Every day of the festival will definitely include a full kalasasthapanam, homam and alankaram for Devi in the morning, as well as a Navavarna puja in the evening. Every third night, Utsa Rajarajeshwari will go around the temple as Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati, respectively. The last two days will consist of the water-cutting ceremony and Kulurthi.

Kedaragowri vratam, Oct. 28

Kedaragowri vratam begins on the day when Navarathri officially ends—Vijayadasami. Married women may observe this three-week vow for the well-bring of their husbands, the same way that

Parvati observed severe penances to merge with Shiva.

The last day is always celebrated on a grand scale, with a final puja done to Lord Ardhanareeshwara, complete with the festival kalasam circling the temple. Prasadam and a *sharadu* (thread to be worn on the wrist) will be given to each woman who sponsored the puja.

Skanda Shashti, Nov. 3

Muruga and his consorts are given abhishekam and puja on each of the six days of this festival. The last day on Nov. 3 will see their procession, final abhishekam and alankaram, and the slaying of Surapadman.

In Three Months

Devi willing, the next issue of the *Sri Chakra* Magazine will be up on the temple's website (www.srividya.org) at the beginning of December 2008.

This magazine cannot keep publishing without contributions from devotees! Articles, poems, stories, and the like about any spiritual topic are welcomed.

Please e-mail us with your feedback about this issue at sri_chakra_mag@srividya.org by November 9 or talk to Abhi or Kanya at the temple. We want to hear from you!

Sri Gurubhyo Namaha!

A big thank-you to this issue's volunteers: Aiya; Kathy Allen; Corinne Dempsey; Gratus Devanesan; Cristina, Nando and Laxmi Diaz; Suba Jeyaratnam; Aparna Hasling; Suhir Ponnchamy; Sri S. Shangaranarayanan; Dr. A. Somaskanda; Vimalan Anand Sothinathan; Shivani Sritharan and Anita Uthayakumaran.

Vibut hi '08!

The Shaivite Immersion Experience

by Shivani Sritharan



Clockwise from above: The CITs got their hands dirty under Path uncle's dedicated supervision; Pravin anna got the gang ready to move the giant boulder in their way; the beautiful finished product was ready for "CIT"-ting on before the week was over. Page 5-6 photos courtesy of Kathy Allen.

Each year, the first week of August gives me something to look forward to—camp. The Vibhuti Saivaite Immersion provides endless experiences of excitement and enlightenment.

Over the course of the week, we were exposed to a whole new world of opportunities. As CITs (Counselors-in-Training), we took on greater responsibilities than campers as we attempted to learn exactly what it takes to be a counselor.

In addition, we took it upon ourselves to complete three projects: a new bench on the edge of the parking lot, a pathway around the Parasurama Lingam and a tree planting. A major obstacle we overcame as a group was moving the boulder which was in the way of building our bench. We were determined to move this boulder with our own hands.

Although seemingly impossible at first, with the help of some great teamwork, we were successful in moving the giant rock. Not only did this bring the group closer together, it also symbolized our ability to overcome any obstacle as long as we try.

The CITs learned to work together as one, solid, unified group. Rather than finding these as hard tasks, we actually found ourselves wanting to complete them. It was a time for us to have fun while working on a common goal. Many of the things involved in our projects were new to us, but each day we learned and helped others learn.

By the end of the week, we had planted a tree, made a pathway and had built a big bench. We also found ourselves enjoying camp more and more as the days went by. We typically spent our mornings learning to

chant the Purusha Suktam while Aiya taught us about Sri Ramana Maharishi, the Shiva Puranam and more.

This year, from boys to girls, and campers to counselors, everyone at camp learned Bharathanatyam. While some found themselves discovering their hidden talent for the art and others found it to be a rigorous workout, we all had a lot of fun doing it. However, the dancing didn't stop there. Bhajans were a popular event at camp.

With the melody of the bhajans and the beating of the tablas and mridangams, everyone was on their feet dancing the night away. Another favourite was the evening we all did Holi, as the entire crowd was coloured from head to toe after having been hit with colourful powder.

Whether it was sports, chanting, art or bhajans, everything at camp this year was amazing. Most importantly we all felt comfortable in the temple environment and had a great time learning new things about both religion and ourselves. As the week came to an end, it left nearly everyone wishing it had lasted longer. The experience of being at camp is unlike any other. We can all look back on this experience fondly after having learned new things, made great friends and made wonderful memories.



Clockwise from bottom left: The CITs pose in front of the Parasurama lingam where they built a new pathway; Sahana anoints the tree in the centre of the new CIT bench; the CITs with their newly planted tree; the camp kids got to sit in on the Chandi homam on Aadi Puram day; Nemili (age 9-12) kids painted a Ganapathi mural in sections of one square foot each that Priyanga akka and Anita akka later put together; Madhurai (age 13-15) did a Shiva mural during art class; the CITs painted their own camp banner.

I think the error happened because my Sri Lankan relatives all referred to the Sri Vidya Temple as the “Rochester Temple.” Nando and I were looking for a Hindu temple when we moved to New York State. Our cousin Tony said, “Oh, you must go to the Rochester Temple—it’s wonderful. Mrs. Sabaratnam is in charge of just about everything and the priest went to school with my sister in Jaffna.”

And so we Googled “Hindu Temple of Rochester” and even brought our nephew from Mexico to see it. We found a temple located in Pittsford, a suburb of Rochester. We went in the temple and the first thing that struck us was the emptiness. We began to ask some young girls if they knew Mrs. Sabaratnam but they all gave us blank stares.

So then we approached the priest and asked him whether he knew our cousin Tony and his sister in Jaffna. The priest truly must not have wanted to disappoint us, so he just nodded.

Our nephew from Mexico (who had never been to a Hindu temple in his life) said, “So, this is what a Hindu temple is like?” We couldn’t explain it to him, but we said, “Well, this is *one* Hindu temple and each temple is different.” It was a nice way of explaining to him that we didn’t feel the normal warmth of a Hindu temple.

Much later, we chatted with our cousin Tony, who asked us how we liked the Rochester temple. “Isn’t it wonderful?” he asked. We couldn’t truly use the adjective “wonderful”—it was just alright. “And did they all know Mrs. Sabaratnam?” he asked. “You know, that’s a really strange thing,” we said. “No one seemed to know of her.”

“How about Haran?” cousin Tony asked. “Did you tell him that my sister went to same college in Jaffna?” We said we did, but it was strange that he didn’t seem to acknowledge anything but just nodded. But we *still* did not realize that we had gone to the wrong temple.

The Long Journey Home

One family’s path to the SVTS temple

by Cristina, Nando and Laxmi Diaz

Nando and I felt a bit disillusioned—not to say that they were not gracious at that temple... they were, but it wasn’t the Sri Lankan warmth we are used to.

But of course, Ma Devi knew where we must go. We were thinking once again of going to temple but a feeling deep inside (which we now know was the Divine Mother calling us) told us to Google “Hindu Temple NY State.” It was then that we saw Rush, NY. We did not know where Rush was, but on the map it certainly looked closer than Rochester. When the Divine

Mother showed us the way there, She also showed us that we needed to have a bit more respect. We did not realize that a procession (outdoors) was underway and Aiya kindly asked us to remove our shoes and then She pulled us in to the temple with an embrace that never ended.

Now, this is the temple to which we belong. We did not realize that sometimes Ma Devi tests Her devotees. She tested us in a very subtle way. We have been in financial difficulty for a while with not one but two houses to sell in today’s diminishing real estate market. We kept asking Ma Devi to help us see the houses. Then I read somewhere that we must never give commands and we changed the prayer to say “Please, Ma Devi—lead us out of this darkness as a Mother leads a helpless child to light.” Suddenly we sold one house, which helped us immensely pay off the bills of the other.

Also, we both had vivid dreams in which Ma Devi was telling us to move to either Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania or Houston, Texas. And both places seemed quite logical—better paying jobs, more opportunities for our daughter to learn Indian classical dance and singing... but these were both just tests to see where our loyalty lies.

We also realized that She never wanted us to move away—it was a test of loyalty, and we have decided with all our hearts to stay where we are and remain with the Sri Vidya Temple. We want to continue to appreciate the stories of Aiya and love of Amma, the warmth that is an integral part of Sri Vidya Temple and, most importantly to trust Ma Devi just to lead us out of darkness.

Pratishtha

music review

Concert

by Dr. A. Somaskanda

The 2008 grand and festive annual Prathistapana Utsavam at Sri Rajarajeswari peetam saw the return of the prodigious Carnatic vocalists Shashikiran and Ganesh who gave a thrilling bravura performance on May 17th. The newly constructed hall that can easily seat upwards of 400 people was the venue for this concert.

Endowed with intricately layered and textured compositional voices that meld in harmony and pirouette across the tenor, baritone and bass ranges with effortless ease, the duo held

the audience spellbound for hours by their virtuosity. The concert format was decidedly more informal and interactive, accommodating a number of requests from the audience.

Staunch devotees of their guru Chaithanyananda (Aiya), and his self-effacing consort Gnanamba, the duo averred that the entire concert would be dedicated to Devi and their beloved Aiya and Amma. As is the norm in most Carnatic concerts, they commenced their recital with an elegant varnam

“Chaithanyananda Natha Saraswathi” in Raga Bageshri, extolling Goddess Rajarajeswari, Chaithanyananda and Gnanamba. It was a deeply moving panegyric rhapsody and a delightful musical piece, jointly composed by Suhir Ponnuchamy, Ravikiran, and Shashikiran. To date, I have not heard any varnams in Raga Bageshri. It was a measure of their virtuosity that they could tweak and manipulate a raga that does not readily lend itself to elaborate alapana and swaraprasthara, into a very impressive varnam.

Next was a liltingly cadent composition in Raga Nattai, “Anantha Narthana Ganapathi” by Oothukadu Venkata Subbaiyar. Nattai, a sampoorana audava raga usually sung at the beginning of the concert, creates a highly charged musical ambience and triggers frissons of delight in ceaseless waves.



The Carnatic singers Shashikiran and Ganesh in the middle of their performance at the temple on May 17th. The concert took place in the new auditorium.

Following a pleasing kriti “Arula Vendum” in Saramathy raga by Dandapani Desikar, the duo sang a Kamakshi Navavarna Kriti, “Sakala Loka Nayaki,” in Raga Arabhi, by Oothukadu Venkata Kavi. A popular Janya raga, Arabhi is an Audava Sampoorana raga with Ri, Ma, Dha as the Jeeva and Raga chaya swaras. The architecture of the Navavarna Kriti is incredibly complex and dauntingly elaborate, requiring superior vocal culture and virtuosity possible only for the most accomplished artistes. I think the duo more than proved their mettle in this beautiful rendition.

For the ragam, thana, pallavi (RTP), they chose Raga Saraswati and the composition was in praise of, and dedicated to, Sri Rajarajeswari and Chaitanyananda. Lasting close to 70 minutes, this composition entailed a spirited exploration of the dizzying labyrinths of this ornate raga strewn with sizzling prathyahata gamakas. RTP also gave scope for a brilliant thaniavarthanam by the teenage mridangam prodigy Rajna Swaminathan.

The 17-year-old from Maryland is the student of Sri Umayalpuram K. Sivaraman, and the only female percussionist to share the stage with him. She is also one of few female mridangam players in the world,

and has played in several places in the US and abroad. In addition to performing with Shashikiran and Ganesh today, she has accompanied other famed artists such as the flutist Shashank and Dr. N. Ramani.

In this concert, I think the group’s rendition of the “Maname Ganamum Maravade” by Papanasam Sivan in Raga Bhimplas lost some of its luster due to their choice of a slower tempo (vilambita kala). Most musicians that I have listened to, render it in a much faster, stirring tempo.

Their essay of the very popular “Bho Shambo” by Dayananda Saraswati in Raga Revati and “Nagumomu” by Thyagaraja in Abheri, was outstanding. Their Thillana in Raga Bhindu Malini by Ravikiran was a delightful

surprise. Having come into prominence through the compositions of Saint Thyagaraja, this upanga raga admits of enchanting sallies of tristhayi swara sancharas.

HK Narasimmamoorthy on the violin was graceful in his bowing and provided excellent but unobtrusive support to the musicians. His swara ripostes and solo versions were very well executed. Percussive support by the budding prodigy Rajna Swaminathan was a stand-out all the way.

Clockwise from bottom left: Rajna Swaminathan is among only a handful of female mridangam artists in the world; the full group plays in the concert hall; Shashikiran and Ganesh later perform the *jadhi* before Devi’s chariot makes its procession.



The *Rk* and *Sk* Intention & Integration

by Sri S. Shangaranarayanan

The use of the *Rk* in any yagna has a specific purpose. Generally, *rks* are made from Athi, Pala, Arasu and Purasu, which are all milk bearing trees. Different measurements are prescribed for different types of *rks*.

For the first time ever, a *rk* made in pure silver and studded with gems, was used in the Chandi Homam held at the Rajarajeswari Peetam on Aug. 3, 2008.

The mouth is designed with the face of a gaja (elephant), yazhi or Nandi, as one might desire. The Nandi face is the most appropriate one, because it has its own inherent values and communicates the means and methods to merge with the Ultimate God. Below are some of the salient points one should ponder and try to become a Nandi in respect of interaction for integration with the Lord.

1. The breathing of Nandi is very powerful and soothing to the Lord. It is always continuous, soft, melodious, and purely filled with the power of all aksharas (letters/sounds).

2. Nandi offers his breathing to Lord Shiva and Parvathi seated on a jula (swing), always facing the Lord, and by the force of its breathing the jula is made to go forward and backward.

3. When the jula comes forward there is a feeling of nearness and when its goes backward the

feeling of separation sets in. But by Nandi's offering his own breathing to the Lord, he always remains in continuous soul-to-soul contact with the Lord.

4. The Lord out of his compassion, always accepts the breathing of Nandi and takes it as an offering without any motives or expectations. He merges the same with His own soul and breathes back to Nandi. This process is called interaction.

5. By this process of exchange of breathing, the Lord and Nandi becomes one. That is why everyone visiting Kailas, irrespective of status, is expected to take the permission of Nandi to visit Lord Shiva. Shiva is in turn latent energy and always in communion with Nandi Bhagwan. It is therefore ordained that this state of "Being" and "Becoming" should not be disturbed by anyone, unless Nandi Bhagwan wishes so.

6. The *Rk* is also designed to allow the ghee to flow continuously as "dhara," which is pleasing to the Lord. What further testifies to the process of interaction for integration, is the fact that the sacred fire where God is invoked in havan (yajna) also becomes God itself. The homam therefore sheds its identity as a carrier—this is why the flow of ghee is continuous, as is one's breathing.

7. Keeping all these factors in mind the *Rk* has been designed with the lovely face of Nandi



Aiya gets ready for the final purnahuti of the Chandi homam, where a continuous stream of ghee is required to pour out of the *Rk*, through the mouth of Nandi.

Bhagwan, with Chandra and Surya inscribed on his forehead, representing the Ida and Pingala naadis. These details are used for interaction and integration in the process of offering one's soul (breathing) to the Lord (Guru) and the hamsa mantra "Ham" and "Saha" are inscribed as such. When Nandi breathes out, the sound of "Ham" emanates and when he inhales the sound of "Saha" emanates—it represents when "I" and "you" became "we" and we become "I." The devotee always becomes the Lord by this process of merger.

8. Furthermore, the 51 matruka aksharas which are the total combination of all the mantras in the universe, are also inscribed on the body of the *Rk*, and represent the fact that Nandi Bhagwan is an epitome of all mantras and his entire body always vibrates with ecstasy. In other words, Nandi Bhagawan always offers all the mantras and its results to Lord Shiva and His consort.

9. To enhance the beauty of the *Rk* it is studded with selected gems to represent the pancha boothas (the five elements).

It is to be acknowledged by everyone, that but for the blessings of Haranji, this could not have become a reality. Loka Samasta Sukhino Bhavanthu.



Ghee pours in a unbroken stream from the jewel-studded *Rk*, which is designed with Nandi's face because it is the form that is most appropriate for the worship of Lord Shiva and Devi. Photos by Vimalan Anand Sothinathan.



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Thirukuripputhondar Nayanmar

by Gratuz Devanesan

“On a really clean table cloth, the smallest speck of dirt annoys the eye.”

In Kanchi once lived a washerman of great devotion to Siva, called Thirukuripputhondar. Sri G. Vanmikanathan points out that, *“Pride in craftsmanship is one thing, vanity in one’s craftsmanship is another.”* It would seem that Thirukuripputhondar, during the years of his excellent service as a washerman, had developed a sense of vanity about his skills. Shiva, ever watchful of his devotees, saw that this would most surely be an obstacle to realization and decided it was time for an intervention.

During a severe cold season, Shiva approached, disguised as a poor man in a very dirty garment. Seeing the touch of sacred ash smeared atop his forehead, Thirukuripputhondar immediately approached, hands folded, head lowered out of respect and love, hoping that he could do this Shiva-bhakta a service by washing his garment the way only he could do.

Shiva, always playing his role ever so well, hesitated, claiming that the extreme cold would not be a good time for him to be separated from his garment. He further claimed that he was getting old and that this garment was absolutely necessary for his health.

Thirukuripputhondar, however, pleaded with him, that he would not only clean this garment, but also that he would have it ready before sunset.

Shiva reluctantly relinquished the garment, having obtained Thondar’s word that it would be returned to him, cleaned and dried later that same day.

Thondar then went off with great haste to the washing ghat. He washed it, beat the dirt out of it and was about to begin the second round of washing, when clouds filled the sky. Thondar looked at the sky and saw the clouds fill the blue sky, and he began to fear the he would not be able to uphold his word. No sooner had the clouds approached did the rain begin.

Still he hoped that the unceasing rain may stop, the clouds clear and the sun appear again – but as

time went on and nothing but rain was seen, soon tears formed on his eyes and he began crying about the solemn promise he had given a poor Shiva-bhakta, which he could no longer uphold. All he could see in his mind was the Shiva-bhakta, who told him that the cold would hurt his old bones, and all he could feel was extreme sadness for having disappointed this bhakta so deeply.

Meanwhile, the sun had set, although the rain did not subside and Thondar lost all hope. He declared, *“On this stony slab on which I smite the clothes to rid them of their dirt, my head I shall smite to smithereens.”*

As he was about to hit his head against the rock the rain shower transformed into a shower of flowers, while the Lord riding on the Bull ever accompanied by the Mother of the Universe, stood above him. Thondar, eyes in tears, joined palms and worshipped him dearly.

The Lord spoke: *“We have made known your status to the three worlds; from now on do you unpartingly dwell in the age-old eternal world.”*

Having said this, the Lord vanished into Ekambaram. And so, Thirukuripputhondar’s vanity was slain, leaving nothing but a spotless devotee.



Trees please!



GARDEN



The end of summer marks a special time at the temple that not a lot of people know about—harvest time. There’s a patch of land right beside the temple house that has a wealth of hidden treasures, a few of which are pictured on the opposite page. All of these containers of cherry and plum tomatoes were picked over a period of just two days! Our squashes and pumpkins grow as large and ripe as can be found in any supermarket or farm. And as you can see, Devi’s bell peppers, green chilis and capsicums can grow past the length of an average adult’s hand.

Shiva akka is the one who does the bulk of the work in the garden’s regular upkeep. Most of the veggies on the next page were picked at the end of August. Later in the fall, we’ll be going back for the spinach, collards, pumpkins, squash and eggplants. Not to mention waaaay more tomatoes and peppers!



Melody and Harmony in Nature

by Anita Uthayakumaran

It is an open secret among those of us who make up the community of Temple volunteers that Aparna Akka is someone totally wedded to the splendour of nature. We all understand very well her total devotion to the trees and shrubs and birds and bees. I have always listened with amazement and amusement to a few of her stories about hearing the tree-sap flowing up and down the tree trunk and many other ones in the similar vein; and I have admired the way she describes the symphony of music arising from the multitude of trees in that

forest on the outskirts of our Temple property.

Yet, none of us were quite prepared for what we were to experience on that quiet Friday afternoon in July. It was on a totally different plane! That is the day Aparna Akka took us all, including Aiya, on a trip of exploration (or should I call it a pilgrimage!) through the length and breadth of the property.

The enthusiasm was boundless. And why not? We were all going to meet the trees that talk to us (at least, that is what they were supposed to do in the parlance of Aparna Akka). Little Dhanya who isn't even five years old yet was holding my hand fast. I could detect the same enthusiasm and expectation brimming in her eyes as was the case with everyone else.

The trip started auspiciously enough through a well-

demarcated trail, the sides of which were lined up with colossal pine trees that seemed to be saluting us in an honor guard formation as we briskly marched past. But that didn't last long—there were those little shrubs to jump over that brought out the innate child in all of us! There were those drooping little branches of trees that were ready to smack us in the back if we didn't talk to them the way Aparna Akka did!

We walked and walked, we turned right and walked, we turned left and walked, and then we walked and we continued to walk. But then again, it wasn't a typical boring walk at all. We had those mosquitoes singing in our ears and telling us little things about caring and sharing. There were those little insects under the grass and under the shrubs trying to warn us in their chirpy voice not to trust the cunning mosquitoes!



Most of the people on Aparna's nature walk had never visited the temple wetlands before, even after years of coming to the temple. The walk was both fun and educational for all. Thanks to Corinne Dempsey for these photos.

All along, there was plenty to see, there was plenty to enjoy, there was plenty to grasp and we were picking up plenty by way of the rudiments of that language—yes, that language Aparna Akka uses in her everyday conversation with nature, which we were prepared to learn now for the first time. Finally, we reached the wetlands. It was indeed a sight to behold! So green and so fresh! Finally, I began to understand what keeps Aparna Akka ticking!

Now that we were at the place where we were supposed to be, Aparna Akka went up to a tree, soothingly petted it and put her ear against the moist bark. As her face radiated with a smile, we could figure out that something lively was happening inside that tree! Then she stared straight into our expectant eyes and invited us all to experience the same!

The next thing I noticed was that everyone had already fallen into a nice little queue. There we were—for the next little while—tapping the trees and hearing the juice of life running up and down the xylem and phloem. For the information of those who may not yet be initiated into the world

of Aparna Akka, water and dissolved minerals travel up a tree through something called the xylem. Dissolved food substances, which take the form of sugary fluids, travel down a tree through the phloem. Even little Dhanya was very busy listening to the trees. Admiring all that was around us, I was wondering how we were able to ignore so much for so long.

Finally we all returned to the Temple with our Dhanya in the lead. Her eyes were filled with amazement. I could swear that even though she was physically

present at the temple, her heart and soul had been left behind in the wetlands—and who can blame her? It's not everyday that a young child will have the chance to listen to the trees and hear the life running through them. As for me, I was awestruck by all that I had been witnessing all around me; and I am sure that by the end of the day, all of us had developed a new respect for the splendor of nature.



Nature's Choir

The Navarath-tree Miracle

by Aparna Hasling

While researching the 2004 Navarathri malar, I discovered a link between Sri Vidya and Nature. I started to appreciate the sacred act of identifying and collecting plants for ritual use. And when I finished the malar and offered it at Aiya's feet, he informed me that Mother was pleased and I would experience divine consciousness through the trees. It was at that time that-I became affectionately known as the crazy tree lady. I often skipped puja and explored the 64 acres of temple property, climbed trees, followed the creek, identified invasive species, tracked deer prints in the snow, and sat meditating near fox holes.

When I learned that the temple owned a state-protected forested/meadow wetland, I blazed a trail through the spruce forest, the land linking the temple grasslands to the wetlands, and I visited there in all seasons, to photograph and observe. The cattail and sounds of the aspen trees led me step by step. I lost my way in a field of goldenrod and brush, and I imagined being an explorer like Lewis and Clark before civilized man obliterated the untouched forests of America. But eventually, the Devi led me to the singing trees.

"Have you even gone outside after a rainstorm to hear water flow up through the roots of a tree?" When my physical mother asked me this question, I was not sure if such a thing were possible, or if this was just another one of her idiosyncrasies. But as I



These pictures of the temple wetlands were taken by Aparna during colder weather, when the trees had already exfoliated and the grass had lost its colour. But those who visit the area in the spring and summer will see nothing but acres of greenery. Photos by Aparna Hasling.

hugged more trees, I took time to listen, waiting to hear their rhythmic life-affirming sound. I asked many people about their experiences with trees, and only a handful confirmed it was possible to hear the sap without a stethoscope.

So one sunny afternoon, after a rainstorm during Navarathri 2006, I journeyed to the wetlands. I leaned against a tall tree, in a

grove of red and silver maples, ironwoods and swamp oaks. I sat on a fallen snag, comforted by the green blanket of shrubs and stared into a small pond of stagnant water. I did not see Blanding turtles or salamanders... but I did hear my first tree grumble. It was like water running through large pipes.

The Devi was revealing the pulsating life of nature in the abandoned jungle, proof that trees are living beings, and their heartbeat is not so secret after all.

Biologically, it is difficult for the tall slender trees to live in the standing water of wetlands. And so after a rainstorm, they must work overtime to bring nutrients up the trunk and dry some of the water. But under the right circumstances, this photosynthetic process creates a symphony of sound.

At first I thought it was a fluke to hear it in just one tree, but with incredible excitement I jumped from one tree to the next, pressing my ear against each tree—

they were ALL singing! I was standing in the middle of nature's symphony! This was my Navarathri epiphany! Just at that moment I heard the sound of the conch announcing the end of the puja, I ran back to the temple to share my discovery.

But for some reason, it took another year for me to clear the trail enough for others to follow. And it wasn't until the weekend after Guru Poornima 2008 that Aiya and a group of devotees finally heard this for themselves and realized that my tree whispering gift was not unique after all. They were awed. Aiya was excited. Hearing the vibrant flow and the feeling of the vibration of the flow is a unique experience.

While many people may theoretically understand the function of the xylem and phloem (see the bottom of Anita's article on page 13), it is a natural wonder which must be heard firsthand to fathom the implications of the living nature. A tree is not an inanimate block of wood; it is living tissue. The ground we walk upon is not impenetrably dense; it is the foundation of our existence, constantly giving up minerals needed to sustain life. Our own physical body is not solid; it is mostly water, part of a cosmic pulsating vibration—and Mother Nature is in charge of it all.

Aiya says that if you meditate on this sound, you can go more deeply within. And so with this spiritual encouragement, we invite you to walk to the wetlands. However, when you arrive, please be

respectful of the habitats of unseen creatures. Stay on the trail and beware of poison ivy. Try not to walk through the wetlands unnecessarily—the weight of our feet destroys the magic, and there is danger of getting stuck in the mud.

Let this space be an extension of the temple, a traditional sacred grove. Let the trees initiate you into the rhythm of nature, and allow their wisdom to influence you as you make daily choices in the world regarding food, shelter, travel and commerce. It is all connected. Sri Vidya is the knowledge that unites the heavens and the earth—and teaches us to live in harmony with nature. Walk gently on the earth, honor the trees, and smile.



An aerial view of much of the temple property, including parts of the wetland area and how to get there:

1. Temple
2. Ganapati deck
3. Bhairava tree
4. Kashi
5. Pratyangira homam pit
6. Entrance to trail
7. Meadow wetlands (no need to walk through there)
8. Entrance to forested wetlands and SINGING TREES
9. Wetlands pond (only partially on temple property — telephone lines are property line)
10. Highest peak on property for great view
11. Railroad creek



Sri Gurubhyo Namaha