

Ilayatrakkudi Mahatmyam (Ilasai Puranam)



Kalanidhi Vilasamani R.Visvanatha Iyer

Translated from Tamil by
P. R. Kannan, M.Tech

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**Translated from Tamil by
Jagadguru Seva Ratnam, Upanyasa Tilakam
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Preface

Ilayatrakkudi (popularly Ilayathangudi), a kshetra in Ramanathapuram district in Tamil Nadu, became famous during Sri Mahaswamigal's time. Sri Mahaswamigal had stayed in Ilayatrakkudi for two years in 1961/62 along with Pujya Sri Jayendra Saraswathi Swamigal. The first Vyasa Bharata Agama Shilpa Sadas was held at that time in Ilayathangudi. Commemorating the visit of Sri Swamigal and his Anushthanams performed at the temple tank, the residents of the town have constructed a Mantapam with Maha Swamy Murthi in stone on the banks of the temple tank, known as Pralaya Tirtha. The Adhishthanam of 65th Sankaracharya of Sri Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham, Jagadguru Sri Sudarsana Mahadevendra Saraswathi Swamigal is also located in Ilayatrakkudi. The Adhishthanam was renovated recently. Our present Acharya Swamigal visited Ilayatrakkudi in 2019 and again in 2021.

The name Ilayatrakkudi, Sramapanodanapuram in Samskrit as per Brahmanda Puranam, is itself very unique and interesting. It means the city which relieves the devotees of weariness and fatigue. The Sthala Puranam cites at least three instances of the kshetra blessing the devotees with renewed vigour coupled with relief from exhaustion. This book, an abridged prose version of the Sthala Puranam, is a translation of the book in Tamil by Sri R. Visvanatha Iyer, published in 1963. This is a unique Sthala Puranam containing breathtaking accounts of the experiences of many devotees, who obtained the rare grace and direct blessings of Sri Kailasanatha Swamy and Devi Nithyakalyani of Ilayatrakkudi (Sramapanodanapuram). Devotees have attained Siddhis; Devas obtained relief from torture inflicted by Asuras; Sage Kanva was blessed with Gnana and freedom from fear; the traders of Pumpuhar saw a complete U turn in their fortunes.

It has been my great good fortune that I was asked by Jagadguru Sankaracharya Swamigal of Sri Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham to translate this book into English. I place this humble attempt at the Acharya's lotus feet. I am ever indebted to the Acharya.

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Preface by the Original Author in Tamil Edition

Our great ancestors said: “It is rare indeed to get human birth.” The prime reason behind this assertion is that, of all the created beings like plants etc., it is only human being who has the capacity to know himself. This capacity is called spiritual awareness. Those who obtain this knowledge realise the relation of themselves with their master, shake off the incurable disease of samsara by being in the right path and attain the eternal state of bliss. To know the path and to be able to stick to that path, Vedas, Agamas, Puranas, Itihasas, stories of great personalities, their paths and their books offer inestimable help.

Of the paths delineated by great men and books of reference, temple worship is capable of being followed by one and all and offers the best fruit. As if to confirm this, temples abound in every village in our country. It is clear that the light emanating from these temples is indeed the light of the nation. The lilas (sports) of Iswara connected with the temples and the appurtenant Tirthas are countless. Books explaining the lilas are also plenty.

Many of the temples are dedicated to Shiva, where the prime image is Shivalinga. Some of the Lingas are Svayambhu (self-manifest); some are established and worshipped by Devas, Munis and human beings. All these Lingas have much sanctity. In some sthalas Iswara has been very compassionate to those who offered Pujas and has performed lilas to help them. As Bharatadesha is Karmabhumi and karmas done in certain meritorious kshetras bear good fruits, many Devas with the intent of getting rid of curses, and many Munis and others for attaining noble ends, have gone to the kshetras, performed austerity, yagas and charity and reaped good fruits. Tirthas in some kshetras bestow great merit. Kshetras famous for one or all of the three entities - Sthala, Murthy and Tirtha are many in our country. These sthalas have their own sthala Puranas narrated by Munis.

Of such sthalas of merit, there is a divine kshetra called Ilayatrakkudi, or Ilasai (Sramapanodanapuram in Samskrit) in Tamil Nadu in Ramanathapuram district. This book brings out the sthala purana of that kshetra briefly in prose. This city is honoured by being at the centre of the triangle formed by three great kshetras – Halasya (Madurai), Tiruvanaikkaval and Tiruvarankulam. As per Brahmanda Purana, the glories of this kshetra were unfolded first by Brahmadeva to sage Narada in Kailasa in the presence of Shiva, then by sage Agastya to Vasishtha and other Munis in Kashi, and finally by Suta Mahamuni to sages in Naimisharanya. As that Samskrit text was not easily available, Brahmasri Ganesa Panditha, Adina Vidvan of Tiruvannamalai wrote at the behest of Nattukkottai Chettiars, great Shiva bhaktas of this city, in 1895 a Tamil poem of twelve chapters of a total of 1090 verses, corresponding to the twelve chapters of Brahmanda Puranam. He also wrote and published a prose version of the book. Those books are also not easily available now. Hence an abridged prose version of that poem is now being published, without in any way sacrificing the vitality.

We come to know of many rare ideas, truths, morals, rules of conduct and other such teachings through this book. The ancient nature of Ilasai city, the stories of Sri Kailasanatha, Devi Nithyakalyani, Bhairava, Ganesa, Subrahmanya, Lingas worshipped by Nava Siddhas and other

Murthis, their glories, the accounts of their compassion, and the stories of how Subhadra the brahmana, the Devas tortured by Surapadma and sage Kanva got rid of their weariness only in this kshetra and nowhere else are all narrated very beautifully. The reasons for the city acquiring the names of Sramapanodanapuram (Ilayatrakkudi) are covered in at least three ways. The stotra portions in the book are rare. Another special feature of this Purana consists of the narration of the story of Mayuragiri, the account of wealthy Vaisyas from Pumpuhar coming and residing here, and the relationship of two great Acharyas, Aghora Shivacharya and Isana Shivacharya with this city.

Our nation, religion and culture are being preserved from ancient times in our temples alone. It is common knowledge that the Puranas of these temples have been great literature, history, religious works and guides of good conduct; they have served the nation by reforming people, instilling Iswara bhakti in them and raising them to good state. These puranas, having been authored by Rishis, are very pure. To preserve and study them is the duty of all devotees.

By reading this book, the natural glories of Ilasai city are easy to grasp. This small book brings out the fact that Ilasai is the best kshetra for removing the weariness of not just the body, but also the mind and bestowing comfort and bliss. The 65th Sankaracharya of Sri Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham, Jagadguru Mahadevendra Saraswathi (1814-1851) has had his Adhishthanam in this place. This place is also greatly liked by the present 68th Sankaracharya, hailed by one and all as the incarnation of Adi Sankara and his immediate disciple. These facts go to show the sacred glory of Ilasai. It is noteworthy that the Acharya gave out important teachings from this kshetra: 1. In order to protect the world from the ill effects of the combination of eight planets, he instructed that 'Kolaru Padigam' of Sri Gnanasambandha Swamigal be chanted all over the country. 2. In order to see that our temples, which are indeed our treasures, are restored to their past glory and to reignite interest in our Agamas, Shilpa, arts etc. related to temples, he organised seminar with international experts, got many resolutions passed and saw great success. 3. To get rid of troubles by foreign countries and to achieve glorious victory, he evolved ways and means and taught them. This book is published with Srimukham of our Acharya as a sign of the greatness of the sthala of Ilayatrakkudi combined with the glory of the penance of Sri Paramacharya. Our prime duty is to worship his feet.

We pray that Sri Nithyakalyani sametha Sri Kailasanatha Swamy's blessings be always in plenty everywhere.

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Ilayatrakkudi Mahatmyam (Ilasai Puranam)

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1. Puranic Account **Ilayatrakkudi Introduced**

At the foot of the northern boundary of our meritorious country Bharat, the Himalayas, on the banks of the river Ganga, there is a forest called Naimisharanya, established by Brahmadeva as the place suitable for Munis to penance, where traditionally Munis have stayed and conducted austerities. Once the Munis, who assembled there, started to perform Satrayaga, a yaga that would continue for many years. When the great Muni Suta arrived there, the Munis of Naimisharanya prayed to him: “O great Muni, the very form of Bhagavan’s Grace! You have kindly recounted to us on many occasions the stories of Shiva; but we are not satiated. The more we listen to them, the greater is the detachment in mind, growth of divine knowledge and devotion to Shiva. Hence we are eager to listen to more of such accounts from you. Now we wish to listen about the most favoured kshetra of Shiva and its glories.” Suta was thrilled at the grace of Shiva and, meditating on his Guru Bhagavan Vyasa, he started to speak: “O learned Munis, who have got rid of the three faults! ¹ The greatest wealth is certainly the ardent desire to listen to Shiva’s stories. There is no greater wealth available on this earth. This divine wealth is present in you in a very nice manner. That is what prompts you to listen more and more to Shiva’s stories. Please listen now with love to what I shall recount.

1. The three faults referred here are those of thought, word and deed.

The most glorious of kshetras favoured by Shiva on earth is ‘Ilayatrakkudi’, meaning ‘city which removes weariness’. Its glory is highly secret; it is capable of destroying all kinds of sins. To one who listens to the account of this kshetra, unparalleled auspiciousness will gather; all good things will accrue; the fruits of here and hereafter will surface. This glory was told in earlier times by sage Agastya to Munis including Vasishtha. This account has been covered in detail in Brahmanda Puranam. I shall now narrate that to you; please listen.

Once upon a time Maharishis including Vasishtha gathered in the great kshetra of Kashi, bathed in the ghats of Ganga and Gnanavapis, capable of granting Siddhis, worshipped and chanted Stotras in praise of Sri Viswanatha, and assembled in Mukti Mandapa, conversing of the glories of Shiva. At that time, they paid obeisance to sage Agastya who was with them and pleaded: “O great one, equal to Parameswara! The prime position among the devotees of Subrahmanya is yours alone. How can we enumerate your glories? We suffer from a paucity; you alone can rid us of it. You are aware of all places on earth, where Svayambhu (self-manifest) Lingas shine. We wish to know as to which of those Svayambhu Lingas is the greatest, details of that Lingam, the kshetra and the Tirtha.”

On hearing this, Kumbhasambhava (Agastya, the pitcherborn) became very pleased, focussed his mind, meditated on Sri Visveswara and Shanmukha, the glory of their lotus feet, worshipped in his mind Sri Kailasanatha Swami and Sri Nityakalyani Amba giving darshan in ‘Ilasai’ (Ilayatrakkudi) city in Purathana Vana, and also Sri Bhairava there, who removes all the dangers of devotees, chanted Sri Panchakshara mantra, immersed in the grace of the Lord, and said,

looking at the divine faces of sages like Vasishtha: “O sages! The account you wish to listen was once told to sage Narada by Brahmadeva. I shall now recount that to you.” All the sages asked Agastya: “How did Brahma tell Narada?”

Agastya said: “Kailasa is the very solidified form of all merits of the world. Its very form is Gnana; it shines in the minds of Gnanis; it destroys all diseases; it bestows everything. At all times one can hear there the chant of Vedas, the thud of divine Dundhubhis (drums), the incantation of Stotras by Munis, the prayers of Devas, and the noise of Bhutas. The rows of peaks of the mountain, the Vimanas and the formations of Pramathaganas shine at all times.

In the midst of Kailasa mountain, there exists a golden temple, like the seed inside a lotus. In that temple Shiva, the solidified light of Sachchidananda, shines as Srikantha like thousands of crores of Suns shedding radiance simultaneously, seated for the redemption of Jivas on a brilliant divine throne, with matted tresses shining with the Moon, single face, three eyes, four hands holding deer, Agni, and Abhaya (freedom from fear) and Varada (granting boon) Mudras (hand gestures), blue throat, and red coloured form with Umadevi on the left half. Bhutas play many musical instruments there, and Munis praise Shiva with chant of Upanishads, the crest of Vedas, with Tumburu and others playing on lute. One day Indra and other Devas, led by Vishnu and Brahma, came there for darshan of Shiva. They took permission from Nandi, who stands guard at the entrance, went inside, lovingly worshipped Srikantha Paramashiva, the Deva of Devas and the head of all the worlds, chanted Panchakshara mantra and waited for Shiva to express his mind.

Narada, at that time, taking the hint of Shiva, paid obeisance to Vishnu and Brahma and said to Brahma: “O Lord! Please deign to listen to my request. I wish to know as to which of the kshetras, Tirthas and Lingas on earth are the best in bestowing merit. For Jivas to cross the ocean of samsara, which is the best kshetra, the best Tirtha, the best Murtham? Which are capable of granting the full fruits of virtuous deeds done through body, mind and speech? Kindly tell.”

Brahmadeva, understanding the hint of Shiva, said to Narada in reply: “O my dear, your question is aimed at redemption of the entire world. Listen carefully. **The sthala shining as the best in Murthy, Sthala and Tirtha is Ilayatrakkudi (known as Ilasai). The Svayambhu Linga there known as Kailasanatha is none other than Kailasapati shining here in Kailasa. There is no sthala on earth equal to Ilasai, and no Tirtha of merit equal to Siddha Tirtha.**”

Narada became very elated to hear this and said: “O lord, father of all the worlds! A very rare piece of information has just been revealed by you. You have succinctly brought out the glories of Ilasai city. I wish to know those glories in detail; kindly bless.” Brahmadeva then started to narrate the glories within the hearing of all those assembled in Parameswara’s presence; so said Bhagavan Agastya to the Munis in Kashi.

2. Glory of Sthala and Tirtha Subhadra's Story

In the kshetra of Kashi, Agastya addressed great Munis including Vasishtha: "O great men with concentrated minds! I shall try to tell you the glories of Ilayatrakkudi, known as Bhuloka Kailasa (Kailasa on earth).

Before the kshetras of merit on earth appeared, Ilayatrakkudi was created by Shiva. Shastras say that Gnana in Kritayuga, Yaga in Tretayuga, and Danam (ritual charity) in Dvapara and Kali yugas are the means of attaining Moksha (Liberation). Great men say that Shiva Puja is greatly fruitful in all Yugas and that there is no better means for Moksha. Those who perform such Shiva Puja in the sthala of Ilayatrakkudi will attain all the rare fruits very quickly. By just hearing the name of this Sthala, one reaps Dharma; by thinking of this sthala, one attains wealth; by having darshan he gets pleasure; by staying here for three days, he attains Moksha; this is certain. **This sthala is fire for the cotton of great sins; those who wish to destroy the previous karmas would love to reach this sthala. If even beings like ants cross the ocean of samsara (cycle of births and deaths) by the only reason of living here, is it necessary to explain the glory of this sthala any more? Danams performed here grant fruit a crore of times the normal. This sthala has many names: Shivapuram, Bhukailasam, Kamaprapurnapuram, Siddhapuram, Puratanavanam, Nityakalyanipuram and Sramapanodanapuram (Ilayatrakkudi).**

Now listen to the glories of Siddha Tirtham there, the meritorious Tirtha, also known as Shiva Tirtha; there is an ancient story conveying its glory.

Once there was a brahmana named Subhadra in a village called Subhadrakam on the banks of river Godavari. He was a master of Vedas and Vedangas. He was a perfect practitioner of Srouta as well as Smartha karmas. He was handsome and was engaged well in Grihastha dharma with his wife Bhadrata. They worshipped Vignanamba sametha Virupaksha Swamy in that village every day. With the grace of Shiva, nine sons were born to them. Subhadra felt happy that he had acquired nine Nidhis (Sankha, padma etc.) in the form of sons; he performed all Vedic rituals for them in due time; he brought them up well by making them masters in Vedas and all arts. He sought out suitable brides and got his sons married in time and lived happily with them.

In course of time all the nine sons, who were great scholars and of virtuous conduct, developed the desire to attain Mukti. One day when they approached their father and apprised him of their idea, he became very happy and said: "Your desire is highly sacred; though I have lived long on earth, I have not developed such dispassion as you have. That this has arisen in you at such a young age is nothing but the result of the great fortune of our ancestors. Many are the means for Mukti; each of them is difficult to adopt. Hence let us all start on a pilgrimage tour now. At whichever place we get suitable clue for progress, let us stay there and make attempts."

The sons agreed; Subhadra gathered adequate resources and means and set out on a long pilgrimage tour, along with his wife, sons and daughters-in-law, looking forward to Shiva's grace. They crossed many places, went to Shiva Sthalas on both banks of river Kaveri, took holy bath in sacred Tirthas and had darshan of Shiva and Umadevi. Walking long distances, they had darshan

of Akhilandeswari sametha Jambukeswara at Tiruvanaikkaval, known for worship by sage Jambu and by spider and elephant. Subhadra prayed to Jambukeswara for direction for his onward journey. He also consulted elders there. Not getting proper response, they proceeded south. They worshipped Periyanaayaki sametha Uthamanathaswamy at Keeranur, where Indrani had worshipped and been blessed. They then prayed to Mangalambika sametha Talaneswara in Tiruppanangadu on the banks of river Agnananashini. They reached Tiruvarankulam, took holy bath in the Tirtha there and had darshan of Shiva and Periyamma. They then went west and reached Tirugokarnam, worshipped by all Devas, Yogis, sages and animals like cow etc., had bath in Mangala Tirtha and worshipped Bhuvaneswari sametha Gokarneswara and prayed for direction, having become very exhausted by then after long walks and did penance there.

Mangana, a great Yogi, living in Tirugokarnam, took pity on the weary Subhadra and his family and made enquiries. Subhadra explained the cause of their exhaustion. A surprised Mangana meditated for two nazhigais (48 minutes). Not having found a proper answer, he blessed that Bhuvaneswari and Gokarneswara, the parents of the universe, would only protect them. Gathering his wits, Subhadra decided to leave everything in the hands of Devi and along with Mangana, did penance for a few days in the Sannidhi of Bhuvaneswari. One day a divine voice was heard: "O dear, the time has come for fruition of your good effort. South of this sthala, there is a kshetra called Sathyagiri (also called Tirumeyyam) at a distance of one yojana (13 km). Southwest of that place and very near from there is a kshetra called Ilayatrakkudi, beloved of us. There we shine for ever as Svayambhu. Mother of Universe shines there with the name of Nithyakalyani. There is also a highly sacred Tirtha in my Sannidhi there, known as Sivatirtham. Once you all take bath in that Tirtha, all your long standing doubts will be cleared like mist in presence of Sun." So said Agastya to sages in Kashi; so said Suta to sages in Naimisharanya.

3. Subhadra and his sons attain Siddhis

Suta continued: “Vasishtha and other sages were thrilled and said to sage Agastya: “O great one, who subdued the conceit of Vindhya mountain! This story is very wonderful. We are eager to know what happened further to Subhadra and his sons; please bless.” Agastya continued with enthusiasm.

“O great sages! I shall continue to recount the story as told by Brahmadeva to Narada in Kailasa. On hearing the divine voice, Subhadra and his sons were greatly amazed and delighted; they worshipped Gokarneswara and Bhuvaneshwari again and again along with sage Mangana and left for Tirumeyyam. They bathed in Sathya Pushkarini there and worshipped Sathyagirisha and Devi and also prayed to Sri Sarangapani. They then entered the large forest on the southwest of that place and kept walking a long distance; they became very weary and thirsty. Still, having faith in the divine voice, they trudged along. At that time, as Bhagavan’s grace was near at hand, they sighted Siva Tirtham at a short distance; it bestows strength of mind on mere darshan,. Very happily they got in and bathed in the sacred water, performed all rituals, drank the water, got rid of exhaustion and stayed on its bank.

At that time Shiva and Umadevi came there in the guise of Siddhas. The Siddha’s matted tresses shone like coral; the Yogapatta on his chest shone beautifully; the tiger skin on his waist was shaking; Vibhuti shone on his entire form; Garlands of Rudraksha beads adorned his limbs; a smile radiated from his moon-like face; the brilliance from his form, which resembled a crore of Manmathas having taken a form together, illuminated the entire forest. Near him Umadevi was coming as if beauty had incarnated.

Subhadra and his party did not recognise Parameshwara, who was by nature proactively protective of those who approach him, in that form. Subhadra had a doubt as to how one, who was accompanied by a woman, would grant him Gnana. His sons too thought on the same lines. Knowing this, Shiva said to Devi loudly: “Though they have not known us, we will go to them on our own, protect them and clear their doubts.” Subhadra prayed: “If our doubt is known to you, kindly clear that doubt and bless.”

Shiva in the form of Siddha said: “Now we shall clarify to you the final purport of works like Vedas, full of substance. Of the four Purusharthas (objectives of human life), three – dharma, wealth and desire - are perishable. Gnana is the means of the imperishable Moksha. The means of attaining that Gnana, as defined by Shastras are Karma, Bhakti and Yoga.

Brahman is of the form of Sachchidananda ²; beyond the reach of thought, word and deed; formless; attributeless; actionless; full of Gnana. That Parabrahman, with the help of the power of Maya, the very form of grace, assumes attributes, names and forms, suitable for worship by one and all and blesses living beings. Bhakti is praising that Parameswara; Yoga is union of mind with that Parasiva form; Karmas are those stipulated in Vedas and explained in Smritis. Through Bhakti, Yoga and Karma, purity of mind results; purity of

mind leads to dispassion; dispassion leads to peace; peace to knowledge of Truth. This Gnana is the means of Mukti. Gnana is indeed cognition of reality; that state is Mukti. But that Gnana is much hidden by three impurities; to recognise and remove those impurities through dispassion is the fruit of Gnana.

2. Sachchidananda – Sat, Existence; Chit, Consciousness, and Ananda, Bliss.

Bhakti arises from the company of the virtuous; this company results from Sraddha (faith in Vedas, Shastras and the instructions of Guru, and persistent practice); Sraddha comes from Karmas, both Sroutha and Smartha; the proper knowledge of these Karmas arises from Vedas; Vedas depend on the conduct of the great. Hence good conduct is vital; man of virtuous conduct alone attains Siddhis; he alone reaps the fruits here and hereafter. Hence one should adopt the mutually dependent means of Karma, Bhakti and Yoga, cultivate the company of the great, grasp the blissful knowledge of Reality and attain Mukti, the state of non-return to birth.”

Subhadra and his nine sons, who listened to these teachings, got relieved of the doubts plaguing them for a long time and said to the Siddha couple: “O Lord, we roamed in many places for a long time; we asked many great persons; the doubts, which were not dispelled then were cleared in no time through your sidelong glance and sweet words. You are our master from now on. O great one! Pray, who are you? From where did you come? You do not appear to be human, nor the Amrita-consuming Deva; you appear to be none other than Shiva, who grants Siddhis, helpful to the world. Kindly grace us with the truth.” The Siddha kept silent, smiled at the accompanying Parashakti, and both vanished into the Linga opposite.

The greatly astonished Subhadra realised that it was indeed the highly compassionate Parameswara, who had come in the form of Siddha in order to redeem him. He went near the Linga and looking closely, saw the matted tresses and Rudrakshas. He was wonder struck. He performed special Pujas and Archanas to Shiva and Devi as per Agama rules and offered worship. He then erected Vimana etc. as laid down in Shilpa Shastras and stayed there for some time, performing special Pujas to Shiva and Devi every day and singing their praise through Stotras. On one of those days, Subhadra, after completing his Pujas, stood with his sons before the Linga and prayed: “O Lord! You redeemed this poor me; O omniscient, prime force of all the worlds, please accept my prayer. Owing to the glory of the Tirtha, we attained Siddhi; hence this kshetra should be known as Siddhakshetra, this Mahalinga as Siddhapati, and this Tirtha as Siddhatirtha.” This prayer was replied with a resounding sound of ‘Om’ (conveying acceptance) arising from the sky.

Subhadra wondered at the remarkable compassion of Parameswara. He called his sons near and said: “O my intelligent sons, my ambition in this life stands fulfilled. I shall fix in my heart-lotus the name of the omniscient and compassionate Mahadeva, meditate, attain the feeling of ‘Shivoham’ (I am Shiva) and be immersed in uninterrupted bliss. You also strictly follow the path of dharma and act as required for the life in the next world.” He took leave of them and immersed himself in intense penance on the bank of Siddha tirtha in that kshetra itself. His sons, who had obtained all knowledge from their father, also did penance at the same place and attained Siddhis as desired. The eldest son Uddaala came to be known as Hatha Siddha; the second son Saalanga

as Karma Siddha; the third son Sumanaska as Bhakti Siddha; the fourth son Khagola as Veda Siddha; the fifth son Susantha as Gnana Siddha; the sixth son Sannidhi as Nama Siddha; the seventh son Kuleswara as Laya Siddha; the eighth son Pasakirna as Kama Siddha; the last son Naataayana as Tarayogi.

Thus owing to the grace of the Supreme Siddha Lord shining in Ilayatrakkudi, all the nine sons of Subhadra became Nava Siddhas, and, by use of many herbs, became masters of Akarshana (attraction), Stambhana (making someone immobile like a pillar), Nigraha (subduing), Anugraha (blessing) etc. For a long time they had the power to travel wherever they liked and do whatever they wished to do. Subhadra with concentrated mind stood firm in penance and attained Shiva Sayujya.

From then onwards the Tirtha in Ilayatrakkudi came to be known as Siddha Tirtha. Mahalinga, who was Kailasanatha, got the name of Siddheswara. The place came to be called Siddhavana. To one, who lives for one year in that supreme Sthala, there is no rebirth. Those, who bathe with faith in Siddha Tirtha on special auspicious days like Karthika Somavara, Shani Pradosham, Shivaratri, birth star and Vyatipatam, will attain all their desires by the grace of Sri Nithyakalyani sametha Sri Kailasanatha.

4. Surapadma in search of Devas

The Munis in Kashi were wonder-struck at the story recounted by sage Agastya and said: “O lord, we are very happy to know of the glory of Siddha Tirtha. We wish to know the reason for Siddhavana acquiring the name of Ilayatrakkudi; please deign to tell us.”

Agastya, the Muni of Podigai hill, said: “Once upon a time the cruellest Asura Surapadma ruled from a prosperous city called Mayapuram. His son Bhanukopa mounted aggression on Devaloka, defeated Indra and Devas and captured Devaloka. Devas, unable to bear the torture of Asuras, bolted to earth. Afraid of living in their normal forms on earth, they changed into birds and animals. They stayed in Shiva Sthalas on both banks of Kaveri, the most meritorious of rivers.

One day they all gathered in Tiruvanaikkaval kshetra surreptitiously and discussed their condition. Indra said to them: “We alone are responsible for the current suffering that we are passing through. Was it not our crime to participate in the yaga of Daksha, where Shiva had been ignored? Who else will reap the fruit of that action but us? Now our only refuge is that same Shiva. There is no offence more heinous than offence to Shiva. It is only his grace that will protect us from its evil effect. We should all recognise this truth well. Hence let us visit all Shiva temples, worship him and seek his compassion.” Devas decided accordingly.

In the meantime Surapadma convened his assembly in Mayapuram to find out where Devas, who left Swarga, had gone. His ministers, brothers Taraka and Simhamukha, son Bhanukopa and Purohita Shukracharya, who were seated, waited for the king’s orders. Surapadma addressed them: “It is not clear as to where Devas, defeated by us, went. My emissaries sent to all the three worlds searched for them vigorously; but have returned without success. What is the means of finding them?” Bhanukopa said: “Devas might have been dead”. Surapadma did not believe so, as Devas had consumed Amrita (nectar). He therefore ordered the assembly to find out and inform him of the whereabouts of Devas. Shukracharya, realising his duty to share with the king his knowledge, said: “O king, Devas have very sharp intellect. I feel that they are on earth in the form of animals and birds in Shiva kshetras seeking his grace.”

Surapadma, happy to know this, called his army men Vajradamshttra, Mahadamshttra and Kumbhanda and said: “You go to forests and temples with huge armies, set fire to Munis’ ashramas and temples, and catch the birds and animals living there. Also find out intently the whereabouts of Indrani.” Countless Asura army regiments started off immediately. The dust raised by them hit the sky. The sound caused by their infantry, cavalry, elephants and chariots suppressed the sound of the sea. Devaguru Brihaspati, who saw the cruel Asuras advancing, met Indra secretly in Tiruvanaikkaval and warned him of the advancing Asuras. He told him to keep shifting their place of stay every day till they obtain Shiva’s grace and blessed that the grace would descend on them soon.

Indra listened to Brihaspati’s words. The blare of Asuras’ trumpets also reached his ears. He immediately warned Devas of the developments, advised them to seek intently Shiva’s blessings and proceeded ahead with them. He met Indrani en route at Keeranur, where she was worshipping

Shiva, took her and reached Tirumeyyam with the party. Realising that the Asuras were on their trail even there, he quickly left that place and went ahead. But all were very tired; unable to walk or fly any more, they surrendered to Shiva's will and started to chant Stotras in praise of Shiva. They recalled Shiva's compassion in destroying cruel Asuras like Andhaka and Tripura in earlier times and wept and prayed for removal of their extreme weariness. In this pitiable condition they slowly moved ahead and entered the boundary of Puratanavana by chance. The moment they stepped in, their weariness and fatigue vanished like snow in presence of Sun. They developed renewed enthusiasm and courage; their happiness and wonder knew no bounds.

5. Asuras' Entry into Puratanavana

Indra and the other Devas were amazed at the sudden recouping of their strength and thought: “Is this because of the greatness of this place? Or the grace of Bhagavan Brihaspati? Or the compassion of the omnipresent Shiva?” As they were talking among themselves on these lines, a divine voice informed them: “Devas including Vasava (Indra)! Listen. The moment you reached this sthala, your evil karmas have ended. Pleased with your Stotras, we brought you here; close to where you are, we are shining as Svayambhu Linga. By darshan of that Linga, known as Kailasanatha and Siddhapati, your sins will be destroyed like cotton in contact with fire. If your enemies the Asuras come here, they will lose their strength. If anyone chants Stotra similar to yours with molten heart, his miseries will disappear then and there.”

Devas were thrilled to hear this divine voice; their eyes shed streams of tears of joy; they cherished the unparalleled compassion of Shiva. They went on all sides without loss of time in search of the Shiva Linga. They immediately spotted the Svayambhu Linga, shedding cool light like a crore of Moons. In the Sannidhi of the Shiva Linga they found a sacred pond called Shiva Tirtha and Siddha Tirtha; it looked like Shiva Punya (merit) incarnate. Indra with Indrani and other Devas bathed in that pond after performing ‘Sankalpa’ as per rules and chanted Aghamarshana Suktam. When they reached the bank after bath, they were astonished to find that their forms of birds and animals had gone and that they were shining in their original forms of Devas.

Realising that the cause of the sudden turn in their fortune was none other than Iswara, they were determined to perform Puja to the Shiva Linga in a suitable manner; wearing Vibhuti and Rudrakshas, they gathered materials for Abhishekam, Shodashopachara Puja, Archana etc. from the forest, they performed Puja as per Agama rules with great devotion, doing Panchakshara Japa, Dhyana and Stotra.

They stayed in Siddhavana and kept performing Puja for Kailasanatha every day. One day Indra called Visvakarma and asked him to erect a good temple for Shiva and a beautiful city around it. Visvakarma, the divine architect, accordingly erected a beautiful city, two yojanas (26 km) wide, belittling in beauty even Amaravathi, the capital of Swarga, now occupied by Surapadma. In the middle of the city he built temples for Kailasanatha, Nithyakalyani, Vinayaka, Kumaresha, and other Parivara Devatas, various Mandapas, corridors, boundary wall etc. as per rules of Shilpa Shastra. He developed the city by providing avenues, roads for chariots, food courts, shelters for Tapas, schools for Vedas and Agamas, resthouses, tanks, ponds, groves, flower gardens, cow shelters etc. The city was such that those who saw it would wonder if it was the city of Brahma, the creator, or Vishnu, the protector of the universe, or Shiva, the bestower of Gnana. As the city was the cause of removal of weariness of Indra and other Devas, it came to be known by the celebrated name of ‘Ilayatrakkudi’ (which in Tamil means the city which removes weariness; in Samskrit it is called ‘Sramapanodanapuram’).

When Indra and other Devas were in Ilayatrakkudi, worshipping happily Nithyakalyani sametha Kailasanatha, Surapadma's armies burnt away forests, villages and Munis' asramas, torturing birds, animals and virtuous people. Though they searched every nook and corner of the country, they could not find Devas. Highly disappointed, they did not know what to do and halted at one place. At that time sage Narada appeared there and informed them of Devas' having erected the city of Ilasai (Ilayatrakkudi) and living happily there by the grace of Shiva. Asuras felt very cheerful to get this information and proceeded to Ilasai with great fervour and enthusiasm. As they neared the city, they cut trees, filled ditches and advanced with the four arms of the army making loud noises. Devas, who sensed this, were very much afraid and prayed to Shiva in the temple: "O Shiva, the refuge of even powerful Devas like Vishnu! Please protect us. O Primary source of everything, performing the three great acts (creation, sustenance and absorption)! Please protect us. O Shiva who gave his left half to Devi! O treasure house of compassion! We have no other refuge. Your lotus feet are our refuge, only refuge. Sura's men are approaching us. We have no place to protect ourselves. Please protect us." So they wailed. Shiva, who is compassionate specially to the distressed, took pity on the Devas and thought: "We will now take Bhairava's form, kill the cruel Asuras and protect the poor Devas." He immediately appeared there in the form of Bhsirava.

Bhairava's red matted tresses shone like fire; three shining eyes frightened everyone; terrible canine teeth were seen on both sides of the lips; his tongue was seen licking them on both sides; earrings in the two ears beautified the face; armlets shone in the arms huge like hills; Trisula (trident), sword, skull and Yogadanda (staff of Yoga) adorned the four hands; fingernails in the hands shone like Vajrayudha; Yagnopavita (sacred thread) of serpent and garland shone in the chest; the mount Veda Vyala (Yali) appeared powerful; many ornaments decorated his form; the radiance of his form was like Agni at the time of the great Dissolution (Pralaya) and suppressed the light from the sky; goblins, ghosts and evil planets ran away on merely seeing him; the wind appeared to blow more fiercely; there was unbearable sound of thunder; Bhairava appeared to have conquered all enemies already; he shed affectionate grace on his devotees appearing to eradicate all their miseries; he looked like Lingodbhava, who appeared in earlier times before Vishnu and Brahma, who had fought among themselves to determine who of them was greater. Bhairava cast his sidelong glance at the Devas and said "O Devas, who have taken refuge under us! Fear not! We will dispel in a moment your fear wrought by Asuras. You stay here for some more time. Subrahmanya has appeared for the sake of good of the world. He will exterminate Surapadma and his associates and bless you with relief."

Bhairava then travelled two krosas (6 km) on his mount Vyala, accompanied by his son Vinayaka, surrounded by Devas to the southeast part of the city and saw the army of Asuras. Bhairava asked Vinayaka to destroy the Asura army. Ganapati, accompanied by Indra, went ahead and, after intense battle, killed the Asuras. Bhairava too, by his mere sight, killed the left over Asuras. Thus the Asura army was exterminated; Devas became victorious.

Those, who read and listen to this sacred story, will get rid of all diseases, obtain wealth and fulfilment of all desires, and, by the grace of Bhairavamurthy, attain Moksha at the end; this is true.

6. Masacre of Asuras

Listening to the account of the battle, the Munis said to sage Agastya: “O great sage, with intellect and power of Bhagavan! If Bhagavan Bhairava and his son Vinayaka fought with the Asuras, it must have been a great battle; we wish to know its nature.” Agastya responded.

“Kumbhanda, who saw Vinayaka advancing in support of Indra against him, lined up crores of Asura soldiers and fought. They flung on him various weapons. Standing alone, Vinayaka rendered all those weapons useless. On the Asura’s side, eighty thousand elephants, a lakh of chariots and a lakh of horses were destroyed. Kumbhanda employed all the Maya he had at his command and fought. At the end Vinayaka despatched his Ankusa (goad) on him; it killed Kumbhanda in a moment and returned to Vinayaka’s hand.

As the rest of Asura warriors started running away, Vajradamshttra and Mahadamshttra stopped them and fought against Vinayaka along with those Asuras, who were sixtysix crores in number. The battle was intense. Once all Asuras surrounded Vinayaka. Bhairava noticed that and materialised four great warriors Ayakala, Romaka, Agnimukha and Kalavega and asked them to mount attack on the Asura army on all the four sides. He also entered the battlefield and killed innumerable enemies with his Trisula. Vajradamshttra came running at that time towards Vinayaka with a hill in his hands. Vinayaka broke away that hill with his Ankusa. The Asura lobbed his staff at him, which he picked up with his trunk and threw back at him and which killed him. Bhairava killed Mahadamshttra with his Trisula. Thus when the three commanders were killed, the rest of the army ran away to protect their lives and went and reported the matter to Surapadma.

Devas cherished Bhairava and Vinayaka and worshipped them. Vinayaka and Bhairava then established two Tirthas in their names and erected two cities on their banks, known as Vinayakanagara and Bhairavanagara. On the banks of Vinayakatirtha, a cave in the hill thrown at him by Vajradamshttra became his abode, from where he is protecting this world. Bhairava too has his abode on the banks of Bhairavatirtha; facing south, he blesses Devas and humans with desired boons. Those who bathe in these two Tirthas and have darshan in the two temples will live long, with no fear of enemies, all sins destroyed, and with good progeny.” So said Agastya to Vasishtha and other Munis.

7. The Origin of Mayuragiri

Listening to the account narrated by Agastya, the sages were thrilled to think again and again of the miseries suffered by those who commit offences to Shiva and the compassion shown by Shiva to those who seek him as their only refuge; they experienced horripilation; tears of happiness flowed from their eyes. They said to the great sage: “O lord! We heard of the great blessing extended to Indra by Vinayaka and Bhairava; once the Asuras were extinguished, we wish to know of what happened further; please grace.” Agastya said in reply.

“After the Asura heads were killed and the rest took to their heels, Devas headed by Indra went inside the Kailasanatha Swamy temple and worshipped Shiva and praised him by chanting many Stotras in gratitude for protecting them from the Asuras. Shiva at that time appeared before them along with Devi Nithyakalyani, mounted on the bull. Shiva had his matted tresses adorned by Ganga and the crescent Moon; his four hands had deer, fire, Abhaya and Varada Mudras; throat shone like blue gem; his form radiated the cool shine of a crore of Moons; his left side was adorned by Devi Nityakalyani of parrot-green complexion; the aura of his form, which was beyond the reach of thought and speech, captured the senses, mind and soul of those who had darshan; the four Vedas in incarnate forms praised Shiva on all the four sides. Devas, on seeing Kailasanatha Swamy, felt overwhelmed with emotion, fell down and prostrated many times; danced and sang.

Devas then said to Shiva: “O lord! By your grace Bhairava and Vinayaka destroyed the Asura crowds who came to attack us. How can we praise you for all this compassion? Now we have one desire; we think it would be our great fortune to stay in Ilasai for ever and have your darshan. But Surapadma will not let us live in peace. Kindly remove our fear and bless.” Shiva said: “Fear not. It is our responsibility to protect those who have surrendered to us. Shanmukha has appeared in Saravana pond in order to destroy Surapadma and others. We shall get him here now. You make him your army commander.” Shiva thought of Shanmukha. At that very moment Kartikeya, mounted on his peacock looking like an emerald hill, came to Ilasai on aerial route; Mother Nityakalyani’s bosom secreted milk on seeing the child. Subrahmanya dismounted the peacock and prostrated to his father and mother; they lifted him, embraced and smelled his head; they took him and placed him in the middle of themselves. **Devas were delighted to have darshan of Somaskanda Murthy; between Sat, who is Shiva, Chit, who is Mother, was seated Shanmukha, who is Bliss.** They fell down and prostrated again and again; with tears flowing from eyes, speech faltered, they praised the three Divinities.

Shiva said to Subrahmanya: “Kumara! These Devas are shattered out of fear of Surapadma and have taken refuge in me. I called you here for their sake. Hence you become their army commander, kill the Asuras and protect the worlds.” Devas chose a suitable place and performed coronation of Subrahmanya as their commander. Shiva blessed Subrahmanya with the weapon called “Shakti” (Lance – Vel in Tamil). Subrahmanya left immediately for Mayapuram on aerial route, with his army following him. He destroyed Taraka, Simhamukha and finally, Surapadma, who fought intense battles with him there. He returned to Ilayatrakkudi with the Devas and worshipped his parents. Sri Kailasanatha Swamy and Devi Nithyakalyani eulogised Kumara for

the cleansing of the world of evil. Owing to the grace of Subrahmanya, Indra obtained lordship of Swarga again.

Devas, happy at the onset of auspiciousness, fell at the feet of Sri Kailasanatha Swamy and said: “O lord! We pray to you to grant our desire. Through Subrahmanya’s grace we regained our lost position. He was anointed as our commander at Mayuragiri, the hillock near here in southeast corner. We wish that he should reside there permanently.” Iswara, Mother and Subrahmanya agreed. Subrahmanya went to Mayuragiri with Devas and established a Tirtha called Saravana pond, where all of them bathed. Subrahmanya took his abode along with his two Devis – Valli and Devasena in a temple on the hill, erected by Indra.

Shanmukha shone with six red lotus like faces, six gem studded crowns, eighteen eyes shedding grace to devotees, twelve ears with gem studded earrings adorning them, twelve hands holding Shakti and other weapons, shoulders carrying golden upper cloth, chest adorned with necklace and Yagnopavita, waist on which golden dress shone, feet radiating like gold, mounted on the beautiful peacock, with the Devis on both sides. Devas were exhilarated to have darshan of Shanmukha who appeared there for the redemption of the world; they fell at his feet, prostrated and cherished by praising him: “O Best among warriors! O Glorious One! O One with form pleasing to Shiva! O Jyoti (Light) Embodied! O One with inestimable strength! O Six-faced Lord! O Remover of devotees’ miseries! O Shiva’s dear child! O One born in Ganga! Kartikeya! O Deva blessing from abode in Mayuragiri! O Embodiment of Blessing! Praise be to you, our eye of eye! O lord of Valli and Devasena! Prostrations to you. O Ocean of Compassion! Praise be unto you.” Singing paeans of praise thus, Devas took leave of Shanmukha and went to Devaloka.

O sages! We told you in the same way as was told to Narada by Brahmadeva about the glory of Sri Kailasanatha Swamy, the reason how Ilayatrakkudi got its name, the story of the origin of Bhairavanagara and Vinayakanagara. This story is very purifying; it will cleanse one of all sins. In the house of one, who bathes in Siddha Tirtha, has darshan of Kailasanatha Swamy and listens to this story, Mahalakshmi will always reside with pleasure.” So said the great Muni Agastya in Kashi to the sages; so said Suta Pouranika to Munis in Naimisharanya at the time of Satrayaga.

8. Misery of Sage Kanva

The curiosity of Vasishtha and other sages was roused further after listening to the account of Agastya; they said: “The story of Kailasanatha Swamy is wonderful like insatiable nectar. We wish to listen to even more of such accounts.” Agastya, adept of all arts, responded: “O masters of Vedas! You are indeed very fortunate in that your minds are engrossed in the glory of Kailasanatha Swamy. I shall now recount the second reason how Ilayatrakudi got its name.

Once upon a time sage Kanva was doing penance on the bank of river Ganga. He was the son of sage Purukutsa; brother of Trasadasyu; husband of Parananda. He was a master of Veda, Dharmashastra, Puranas etc.; expert in Yogashastra. He wore matted tresses, abandoned food, controlled the five sense-organs, adopted mudra of silence, Chinmudra, stopped breathing, and meditated on and merged in his heart-lotus with Paramashiva as Light, Supreme Wonder, Supreme Akasa (Space), Awareness, Supreme Bliss, life of life, the Supreme. He had no movement, was like a post. Reckoning his body to be stone, forest animals started to scratch themselves on him; birds built nests in his locks. He directed life-breath to move in Sushumna nadi without allowing it to move along Ida and Pingala nadis. He directed the vision of both his eyes on the tip of his nose and focussed his thought only on Shiva. From his head leapt up flames of penance, which reached Devaloka.

Indra was afraid that if his penance was not stopped immediately, his own position would be in danger. Considering for a long time the means of stopping Kanva’s penance, he came to a conclusion. He placed a sword in front of the sage and acted as if he were an old brahmana, out to be attacked by a tiger; the tiger was also his own illusionary creation. The brahmana, old and infirm, unable to walk, dropped in front of sage Kanva and said: O Sage! A cruel tiger is chasing me and has come here to kill me. Please use this sword and kill the tiger. Please save me; I have surrendered to you” and wept miserably. Kanva’s mind, on seeing the condition of the brahmana, who shone with adornment of Vibhuti and Rudrakshas, started to waver a little. By that time the tiger also arrived there. The sage explained to the tiger the evil of killing a life and asked it to leave the brahmana alone. The tiger said: “O sage! Merit and sin are for people like you. Human being is my normal food. I have hunted him and established my right over him. By stopping this, sin will accrue to you alone.” So saying, the tiger pulled the brahmana and hid inside a bush. The brahmana vanished from the sage’s eyes, wailing loudly.

This heart-rending scene shook Kanva thoroughly. His penance was disturbed; he held himself responsible for the brahmana’s death. He took leave of his father and brother and decided to go on pilgrimage to kshetras of religious merit and Tirthas for holy bath till he would get peace of mind. Accordingly he started off from the bank of Ganga along with his wife and, visiting many kshetras over a period of five years, he reached the banks of river Kaveri. He visited Jambukeswaram (Tiruvanaikkaval) and proceeded to Rameswaram and Gandhamadana hill and other kshetras and returned. He had darshan at Gokarnam, Tirumeyyam and other kshetras and prayed to Shiva for peace of mind. He was not relieved of his misery. At the end he reached Puratanavana when the time for Shiva’s grace dawned.

9. Kanva was blessed

As soon as sage Kanva stepped into Puratanavana precincts, the gnawing burden of his mind disappeared like snow in presence of Sun. He felt rejuvenated; his weariness had vanished. His wonder knew no bounds. He told his wife about the sudden change in him and said: “Which is this place? What is its glory? The affliction which had caught me for many years has disappeared in a moment; what is this magic? The sin which did not go away in so many Tirthas and kshetras has gone away; what to say of the greatness of this place?” He then heard a divine voice from the sky: “O Kanva, the great sage! As soon as you entered this Vana, your restlessness of mind has gone away. Now listen to what you should do. There is a Svayambhu Linga near here; the very sacred Siddha Tirtha is also located there; you bathe there and worship Mahalinga.” The sage was thrilled beyond measure; with horripilation, tears rolling down his eyes, he prostrated many times in the direction of the divine voice. He saw Ilasai city, built by Indra and was amazed at the temples and roads there. He bathed in Siddha Tirtha with his wife as per Vedic procedure; he performed Shodasopachara Puja to Shiva and Devi as per Agama rules; he chanted Panchakshara and Devi mantras eleven thousand times each. He went to Vnayaka Tirtham and Bhairava Tirtham and bathed and worshipped the divinities. He spent one year in Ilasai offering worship to Sri Kailasanatha Swamy in this manner.

Towards the end of that period, one day when Kanva was immersed in Japa of Devi’s mantra, Ambika emerged from the image in a very radiant form, lifted Kanva by holding his hand and took him to Shiva’s Sannidhi and said to Shiva: “O lord, This Kanva did severe penance for a very long time to please us. O auspiciousness incarnate, O omnipotent one, please bless this sage with all auspiciousness.” She repeated her prayer three times. Immediately Shiva emerged from the Linga, with matted locks shining with Ganga and crescent Moon, his form adorned with Vibhuti and Rudraksha garlands, Naga Yagnopavita, with tigerskin dress in his waist, shedding radiance of a crore of Suns and beauty of a crore of Manmathas. He held Devi’s hand and stood before the sage.

Kanva saw Shiva and Devi; all his bonds were rent asunder. He raised his hands, which had been touched by Devi’s sacred hand, folded them, with eyes shedding copious tears of bliss and spoke in faltered voice: “O lord of Siddhavana! O Eternal, Supreme, Fruit of the four Vedas, the Pure, Brahman, creator and protector and father of universe! Your holy feet are ever worshipped. O lord of Siddhavana, witness, life of life, glory of glories, bestower of Mukti to Jivas! O lord of endless power, with sacred feet adored by all Agamas! Your Padukas (holy sandals) are ever worshipped. Your feet are ever worshipped as the Known, Knowledge (Gnana), Knower, Light not attainable even to Brahma, Abode of blessed sports, Light worshipped by Munis like Sanaka, Timeless, Annihilator of Tripuras, Fear of Yama, Wearer of Crescent Moon, Ever with nature of Auspiciousness, bestower of good results, Svayambhu, worshipped by greatly virtuous people, Benefactor granting all desires of worshippers, Power embodied, Sacred remover of all impurities.”

Sage Kanva then turned to Ambika and praised: “O Mother! You are worshipped by the virtuous people as the One and only One, Prakriti, Purani (Ancient one), Vidyas of many hues, Highly Pure, with Feet worshipped by Devas. Prostrations to you. Your form is of real knowledge and bliss; Supreme Vidya; Stainfree; Paramatma; Omnipresent, pervading the entire universe; Mother! Prostrations. You alone create all worlds covered in bondage in many kalpas (days of Brahma), protect them and end them. You stand alone, away from your creation, with loving blessing as your form, Light. O Parasivaa! Prostrations at your feet. You are Mother full of glory, great leadership, all power, compassion to living beings. All Munis worship you alone. All worlds are your creation; they shine because of you; they exist under your care. O Mother full of eternal Bliss! Devi of Kailasanatha! O Benefactor granting all desires! O blessing incarnate for me!” Chanting Stotras, with horripilation, with tears rolling down the eyes, he danced.

Shiva took pity and said to Kanva: “O dear, fear not for anything. On seeing your penance, Indra, afraid of danger to his position, came to you himself in both forms of tiger and brahmana. As killing a living being is a terrible sin under all circumstances, you contracted the sin of having seen the brahmana being pulled by the tiger. Coming to this vana, bathing in this Tirtha and having our darshan, you got rid of all sins; may all auspiciousness come to you. Ask for boons you desire.”

The sage said: “Having had darshan of Mother and Father, do I have anything more to desire? However, in deference to your order, I shall now seek. As I had prayed for my ‘Kalyanam’ (auspiciousness), I pray that Mother should be known hereafter as Nithyakalyani. As my weariness (Ilaippu in Tamil) got removed here, this city should be known as ‘Ilaiyatrakkudi’ (Sramapanodanapuram). I had stayed on the bank of Ganga for long and bathed in that holy river; during my pilgrimage tour, I had stayed for some time in Sethu (Ramasethu); now I do not feel like going to those places; hence kindly get Ganga and Sethu here itself.” Sri Kailasanatha Swamy granted the prayers.

From then onwards, on the west of Siddha Tirtha, a tank called Sethuganga came up. The sage lived in Ilayatrakkudi, bathing in the Tirthas and worshipping in austerity Sri Kailasanatha Swamy and Nithyakalyani with the feeling of ‘Soham’ (I am That).

10. Vaisyas of Pumpuhar

In Chola country there was a big city called Kavirippumpattinam at the place where river Kaveri joined the sea, close to the divine kshetra of Tiruvenkadu (Svetaranya). It was full of wealthy people. Many Vaisyas, engaged prosperously in agriculture and trade, were there. They were noted for devotion and service to Shiva and unparalleled in humility, patience, truth, munificence and compassion. In course of time when they swerved from the path of devotion to Shiva, their wealth got depleted and they faced poverty. Where devotion and service to Iswara are absent, will not Mahalakshmi go away, yielding place to Jyeshtha? Fields lost fertility; trade and commerce waned; the Vaisyas could not continue to live there.

They therefore left and roamed about the country in a group. Having bathed in many sacred Tirthas and having had darshan at many Shiva kshetras in South India, they came to Chidambaram, the heart centre of Virat Purusha. They bathed in Shivaganga and had blissful darshan of Eternal Ananda Nataraja in the golden Sabha, worshipped and came out. Having gone without food for many days and having walked long distances, they were trudging along wearily on the road, when they saw a great Shivayogi called Aghora Shivacharya. Shivacharya was a brahmana, master of Vedas, had controlled inner and outer sense organs and possessed the virtuous conduct of old. He had mastered all works on Shiva; was established in austerity; was compassionate to all; was a brahmachari, a celibate by will; had the unitary feeling of 'Shivoham' (I am Shiva); treated gold and clay pot alike.

When Aghora Shivacharya saw the Vaisya group of men, women and children hungry and weary, he took pity on them and fed them sumptuously through his disciples. The Vaisyas prayed to him to bless them with a good prosperous time. He in turn told them that the cause of their suffering was indeed their having forgotten Shiva. He taught them the Panchakshara mantra and told them about Shiva dharmas and blessed that if they perform Shiva dharmas properly, their wealth would multiply; he gave them Vibhuti Prasadam. The Vaisyas then returned to Kavirippumpattinam with their families; followed the instructions of the Shivacharya; their lost wealth started to come back.

11. Story of Aghora Shivacharya

The sages, who heard this story from sage Agastya were wonder struck and said: “O best among Munis, celebrated for the incredible act of drinking the ocean! It gives us pride to know that Aghora Shivacharya restored prosperity to the entire Vaisya community of Kavirippumpattinam. Who was that great soul? What are the details of his birth? What are his glories? Please bless us with these details. We are not satiated with the nectar you have been feeding us through these stories.” Agastya responded.

“Parameswara in his ‘bhoga’ (enjoyer) form blesses devotees with ‘bhogas’ (enjoyments); in his ‘Yoga’ form, he gets them to do Yoga; in his ‘Ugra’ (terrible) form, he drives away karmas; he performs such sports constantly for the redemption of Jivas, whom he has created. One day when he descended from his throne in Kailasa and watched some beautiful scenes in the mountain peaks there along with Uma Devi, a drop of sweat appeared in one of his five faces, the south facing one, known as Aghora face. Ambika took that drop of sweat in her hand and left it in Ganga. By Shiva’s will, it became a child.

At that time, on the bank of Ganga, near Kashi, an austere man called Govindaswamy lived with his wife Sushila in a hut of leaves; he was performing Shiva dharmas and studying books on Shiva. Early one morning, when he went for bath in Ganga, he saw a male child, beautiful like Moon, lying on a sandy mound. On seeing the child’s fish-like eyes, pearl-like teeth, bimba fruit-like red mouth, conch-like neck and plantain stem-like shoulders, Govindaswamy wondered that this could not be a mere human child. The baby was tasting his toe-thumb by putting it in his mouth at times and crying sweetly with sound like that of the Vina at other times. Sushila, taking her husband’s hint, embraced and lifted the baby, kept him on her lap, looked at his face many times, smelt his head, wiped his body clean with her sari edge. At that time, her bosom secreted milk; she was amazed; she suckled the baby.

A divine voice from the sky was heard at that time saying: “O brahmana! This child is born of us. As you prayed for long for a son, we give this child to you. Name him Aghora Shiva; you will attain great fame through him.” Govindaswamy and Sushila felt much grateful to Shiva at the sudden great fortune they reaped, brought up that boy well and performed all Samskaras (purificatory rituals) for him in due time. Aghora Shiva’s mastery of Vedas, Vedangas and other streams of knowledge was matchless in due course. Sanatkumara, the great mind-born son of Brahmadeva and the chief among Gnanis, came and taught him Shaiva Agamas including Kamika etc.

Aghora Shiva, who had thus gathered fame as master of all arts, developed a desire to live for some time in Chidambaram, hailed as Bhuloka Kailasa; he took his parents’ leave and went there and lived in an abode prepared for himself. He never swerved from the rules of daily and periodic conduct of brahmanas; he shone as a master of Yogic disciplines including Mantrayoga, Hathayoga, Tarayoga, Nadayoga, Layayoga, Rajayoga etc. Those who had his darshan with his three-lined (Tripundra) Vibhuti, Rudraksha garlands adorning his limbs, the magnificent Shiva Pujas performed by him, and his austerity marked by the feeling of ‘Shivoham’ (I am Shiva)

could not but be carried away in wonder. He was hailed as a powerful force in Upanishads (Veda Shiras – the head of Vedas) and Jyotisha (astrology/ astronomy), with capacity to dive into all three time periods – past, present and future, and with great compassion to all beings and with helpful bearing.

The Vaisyas, who had returned to Kavirippumpattinam (also known as Pumpuhar) and had regained ample wealth by following Shiva dharmas, were, at one time, subjected to extortion by the king, when there was a severe famine in the Chola country, depriving the king of income. The Vaisyas knew no way out but to go again with families to Chidambaram, have darshan of their Guru, apprise him of their miseries and pray for redemption.

Aghora Shivacharya consulted Sthala Puranas of various Shiva Sthalas. When the Vaisyas heard him reading about the glory of Ilasai, they said: “O lord, if there is a sacred sthala, which removes the weariness of all those who take refuge in there, can there be a better place for us to inhabit? Where is that Ilasai city? Who is the ruler there? We wish to stay there; please help.” The Guru, pleased to hear these words, said: “O dear, the decision you have taken is a good one. Ilasai city is in Pandya country. The Pandya king is a descendant of Universal Mother Minakshi; great devotee of Shiva. His Guru is Isana Sivacharya, the treasure of Gnana; he is also a good friend of mine. We can go there.”

With their Guru in a palanquin, the Vaisyas travelled to Madurai, which they reached in a few days’ time. There they took their Guru to the Srimatham of Sri Isana Shivacharya, where the sound of Vedas, Agamas and Puranas reverberated and which served as the refuge of all those who experienced Reality. The Vaisyas entered the traders’ street in Madurai; they were entertained by them and they stayed on.

12. Isana Shivacharya

The sages, who heard Agastya's narration were amazed and asked: "O lord, Who was Isana Shivacharya? What are his glories?" Agastya replied: "When Dvaparayuga ended and Kaliyuga started, all dharmas faced decline. Many people disliked Vibhuti and Rudrakshas; Chanting of Panchakshara mantra discontinued; Shiva dharmas were criticised. People were not available for services in temples. Digging of common wells, tanks etc., construction of choultries, Aparakriya centres etc., performance of Annadanam etc. were abandoned. Compassionate attitude to living beings was given up. Umadevi, Mother Supreme and the motivator of dharmas, saw all this and felt sad that people are paving their way for Naraka. She said to Shiva: "Should our children wallow in ignorance (Agnana) like this? Please re-establish the tradition of Shiva bhakti on earth." The compassionate Shiva then sent out to earth a spark from his Isana face.

That spark took the shape of a child of a brahmana in Mandavya Gotra in Bodhayana Sutra, who meditated always on Shiva's lotus feet. That child grew up like the moon of Shukla paksha; as soon as he reached Brahmacharya stage, he acquired unmatched mastery of Vedas and Agamas, and was keenly interested in Shiva Puja. He sported Urdhvasikha (tuft of hair pointing towards top) to let the world know of his origin from the upward Isana face of Shiva.

The Pandya king, on hearing of the greatness of Isana Shivacharya, had darshan of the Acharya, prostrated at his feet and prayed to him to take him as his disciple, in order to forestall possible decline of dharma in his country owing to presence of Kaliyuga. The Acharya agreed. The king took him as Rajaguru and arranged for a suitable Matham in Madurai for him and his disciples to stay and also for necessary workers to assist them. As it is said 'Yatha Raja tatha Praja:', the people followed the king in becoming disciples of the great Acharya; the Pandya country thus barred the entry of Naraka.

When Aghora Shivacharya and Isana Shivacharya met in Madurai, the joy of the Pandya king and citizens knew no bounds. The two Acharyas graciously accepted their adoration and blessed them. When the two Acharyas were alone, Aghora apprised Isana of the reason of his visit along with the traders of Pumpuhar; he himself wished to get back to Chidambaram, do penance and attain the holy feet of Kunchitapada Nataraja; Isana should kindly accept the Pumpuhar traders as his disciples and bless them for stay in Ilasai as desired by them. Isana agreed. The king also accepted this proposal whole-heartedly. The king, with the two Acharyas at the head, went to Ilasai city with the Vaisyas. There was festival going on at Ilasai at that time and hence the city shone brightly. The king felt elated at the scenes he saw there and the roaring atmosphere of mirth. The Vaisyas were delighted at the prosperity of Ilasai, which was superior to their own earlier city's and felt grateful to the Acharyas. That day was the day of Rishabha Vahana darshan. It was a beautiful and blissful sight to see the Murthis on their mounts.

The Vaisyas watched all this with joy throughout the night, bathed before dawn in Siddha Tirtha and prostrated to Aghora Shivacharya, who had blessed them with this state. The Acharya said to them: "By the darshan of Sri Kailasanatha Swamy, the Deva of Devas, our birth has become fruitful. We attained Gnana today. We had the wonderful darshan of Sri Kailasanatha Swamy

towards the close of the festival being held on Vaisakha Pournami, coinciding with Visakha star. There is nothing greater than this sthala and this Tirtha. Knowers of Vedas say that those, who take holy bath along with Iswara in Siddha Tirtha during festival time, would reap the fruit of a hundred Asvamedha yagas. Hearing this, the Vaisyas entered the temple along with the two Acharyas. They performed Abhishekam etc. as per Agama rules to Devi Nithyakalyani, Sri Kailasanatah Swamy, other Murthis and the nine Lingas worshipped by the nine Siddhas, and concluded with feeding of brahmanas. They then fell at the feet of Aghora Shivacharya and said: “O lord, knower of past, present and future, and benefactor of beings! Acharya who has subdued the hunters known as five sense organs! Kindly let us know as to what we should do now. You led us here to this unmatched sacred sthala after leaving our own city and country. You have also engaged us in service at the lotus feet of the glorious Isana Shivacharya. Can we ever repay this blessing? Please instruct us on how we should live.”

The Acharya thought for a while and said: “O dear, Worship with love the sacred feet of Sri Kailasanatha. Pray also at the Lingas worshipped by the nine Siddhas and at the Tirthas. Worship Isana Shivacharya as if he were Shiva himself. Honouring his instructions would only grow your wealth. When we entered this city, we found all auspicious things; it is indeed a good sign. I now wish to go to Chidambaram. You stay in this city and, acting as per the instructions of Isana Shivacharya, you will attain good state.” He gave Vibhuti to all and walked towards Chidambaram.

With the assistance of the king, the Vaisyas built their homes in Ilasai and erected a Matham for the Acharya too. The king entrusted all the temples worshipped by the nine Siddhas to their care and returned to his capital Madurai. With the blessings of their Acharya, the Vaisyas engaged themselves in their trade as well as Shiva dharmas, acquired wealth including religious merit and led very auspicious lives.”

So said sage Agastya to Vasishtha and other sages in Kashi; so said Suta Muni to the sages in Naimisharanya; the sages worshipped Suta Pauranika.

Those who read and listen to this Purana will find their Shiva bhakti, wealth, glory, happiness and health ever growing. This is Truth. Those who wish for sons will be blessed with sons; those aspiring for wealth will get wealth; to those desiring fame, fame will come on its own; those who yearn for relief from weariness will obtain relief the moment they think of this sthala.

Thus ends Ilayatrakkudi Mahatmyam (or Ilasai Puranam).