

ESSENCE OF PRADHANA TIRTHAS

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Other Scriptures by same Author

Essence of Puranas:-

Maha Bhagavata, Vishnu Purana, Matsya Purana, Varaha Purana, Kurma Purana,

Vamana Purana, Narada Purana, Padma Purana; Shiva Purana, Linga Purana,

Skanda Purana, Markandeya Purana, Devi Bhagavata;Brahma Purana;

Brahma Vaivarta Purana, Agni Purana, Bhavishya Purana, Nilamata Purana;

Shri Kamakshi Vilasa

Dwadasha Divya Sahasranama:

a) Devi Chaturvidha Sahasra naama: Lakshmi, Lalitha, Saraswati, Gayatri;

b) Chaturvidha Shiva Sahasra naama: Linga-Shiva-Brahma Puranas and Maha Bharata;

c) Trividha Vishnu and Yugala Radha-Krishna Sahasra naama; Padma-Skanda-Maha Bharata and Narada Purana.

Stotra Kavacha-A Shield of Prayers

Purana Saaramsha

Select Stories from Puranas

Essence of Dharma Sindhu

Essence of Shiva Sahasra Lingarchana

Essence of Brahma Sutras (awaiting release)

Essence of Amaranatha Yatra

Essence of Paraashara Smriti

[Note: All the above Scriptures released on

<http://www.kamakoti.org/kamakoti/details/puranashome.html> as also on Google by the respective references]

Preface

Bharata Desha and Hindu Dharma are eternal with incredible resilience and forbearance. These entities have magnificent absorptive capacity. Innumerable external influences and internal pulls and pressures notwithstanding, the core of the thought and psyche remains intact. That is why the spirit of Tirtha Yatra is undying. Those who feel that following all of the principles of Dharma in essence may be difficult and even impractical in modern times, Tirtha visits as and when possible and practical could be refreshing escape routes from monotony and alternative means of 'Punya and Purushartha'. Some might also take the Yatra somewhat seriously out of devotion and faith. Even superficial and pseudo sections of Hindus can not resist family influences and have to yield to pressure demands to go on Tirtha visits, if not regularly but in fits and starts at least.

The scope of Tirthas in the present script is rather limited although an attempt is to Pradhana Kshetras on somewhat generalised considerations. Its coverage is on some basis of regions viz. Uttara Bharat, Prachya Bharat, Madhya Bharat, Paschima Bharat, and Dakshina Bharat. The selection of the Tirthas is no doubt subjective but by and large exhaustive enough presumably. Puranic references are somewhat liberal in this Script, especially from the series of 'Essence of Puranas' published vide [www. kamakoti.org/news](http://www.kamakoti.org/news). Where-ever found useful, resort to Legends and Local Beliefs has been made. !

The directive to take up this Project is essentially from that of HH. Vijayendra Saraswati of Kanchi Mutt, who has been consistently providing encouragement and guidance of my endeavors. My Sashtanga Namaskaras to His Holiness.

VDN Rao

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ESSENCE OF PRADHANA TIRTHA MAHIMA

Mudaakaraatta modakam sadaa vimukti sadhakam, Kalaadharaavatamsakam vilaasi lokarakshakam/ Anaayakaika naayakam vinaashitebhadaityakam Nataashubhashu naashakam namaami tam Vinayakam/ (Ganesha Pancha Ratna: Adi Shankara)

Satya Tirtham Kshama Tirtham Tirthamindriya Nigraha, Sarva Bhuta Dayaatirtham Tithanaam Satya-vaaditaa/ Jnaana Tirtham Tapasteertham Kathitam Tirtha saptakam, Sarva Bhuta dayaa Tirtham Vishuddharmanaso bhavet/ Na toyapoota dehasya snaanamityabhidheeyate, Sa snaato yaya vai pumsaha suvishuddam mano matam/ (Skanda Purana Vaishnava Khanda Triteeyodhyaa Shri Ayodhyaa Mahasya)

(There are seven Manasa Tirthas viz. Satya Tirtha representing Truthfulness, Kshama Tirtha or of Forbearance or Tolerance, Indriya Nigraha or Self Control, Sarva Bhuta Daya or Kindness to all Beings in the Creation, Satyavadi Titha or Total Righteousness and Virtue, Jnaana Tirtha or the Symbol of Knowledge and Awareness of Almighty and Tapo Tirtha or of Deep Meditation and Introspection. Mere ‘Bahya Shuchi’ or Physical Cleanliness is not termed as complete but ‘Antassuchi’ or Purity of Heart and Mind are prerequisites of ‘Shuddha Snaana’ which Tirtha is all about)

Introduction

The length and breadth of the oriental form of ‘Akhand Bharata Varsha’ is dotted by every inch of the Sacred Land with Tirthas. In reference to the above Stanza about the Manasa Tirthas, the basic qualifications are: *Daanam Tirtham Damastirtham Santoshastirthamuchyate, Brahmacharyam Param Tirtham Tirthamcha Priyavaaditaa/ Jnaanam Tirtham Dhutistirtham Tapastirthamudaahyatam, Tirthaanaamapi tattirtham Tapastirtha mudaahyatam, Tirthaamaapi tatthirtham vishurddhir manasah paraa/* (Daana or Charity, Mano Samyama or Mental Control, Santosha or of Being Happy, Brahmacharya or Practice of Celibacy, and Priya Vaadita or of Pleasant Mode of Endearment are the prerequisites of Tirtha Darshana; indeed, Jnaana, Dhairya, Tapas, Antahkaana Shuddi and Adhyatmika Swarupa are all denoted as Tirthas by themselves). Padma Purana recommends of the Shastriya Vidhana or the formal manner in which Tirtha Yatras be undertaken as follows: *Vairagyam janayet purvam kalaartaadi kutumbake, Astya bhutam tatjnaatwaa Harim tu manasaa smaret/ Koshan maatram tato gatwaa Rama Rameti cha bruvan, Tarta Tirtaadishu snatwaa khsouram kuryaad vidhanavit/ Manushyaa-naam cha papaani teerthaani prati gacchataam, Keshamaashritya tishthanti tasmaadwapanam chatet/ Tato dandam tu nirgandhim kamandalumathaaginam, Vibhruyaallobha nirmuktah tirtha vesha dharo nara/ Vidhinaa gacchataam nrinaam phalaavaaptirvishesatah, Tasmad Sarvaprayatnena tirtha yatraa-vidhim charet/ Yasya hastou cha paadoucha manaschaiva susamyatam, Vidyaa tapascha keertischa sa tirtha phalam ashrute, pratigrahaadupaa vruttolaghvaahaaro jitendriyah/ Nishpaapas tirtha yaati tu sarva yagna phalam labhet, Anuposhya tri raatrinaa tirthaanyabhi gamyacha/ Adatvaa kaanchanam gaouschaa daridro naama jaayate, Tirthaabhi gamane tatsyaadyhagjnaashyate phalam/* Agni Purana in Tirtha Yatra Mahatmya states: (If only one’s hands, feet and mind are self controlled by way of the hands being utilised for Bhagavan’s worship and service, feet engaged in visiting Tirthas with faith and

dedication, and mind targetted exclusively on that Supreme, that particular Being would derive maximum advantage from Titha Seva. That person's vidya or learning, Tapasya or strength of dedication, and wide fame are well recognised and should be able to reap the fruits of performing Yagnas. That person who had not performed fasts three nights, nor gave away charity of gold and cows, nor even undertaken Tirtha Yatra ought be considered as a 'daridra' or a useless pauper) *Adambhako niraarambho laghvaahaaro jitendriyah, Vimuktah sarvasangaih sa Tirtha phalamashnute/* (Those who are not showy and non controversial, ready to take up fresh tasks, non argumentative, trust worthy, modest eaters and controllers of one's own limbs, do definitely deserve the Tirtha Phala). *Tirthaanyanusanan dheerah shraddhadhaanah samahitah, Krita paapo vishudhhaty kim punah shuddhakarmakrit/* (Those courageous, faithful and perseverant Yatis, even if have a record of past blemishes but now ready to reform are also eligible to secure the yatra phala). However, in the case of those are habitual sinners, the result would be passive or negative: *Ashraddhadhaanah paapatma naastiko cchinna samshayah, Hetunirshthascha panchaite na tirtha phala bhaginah,* says Skanda Purana (Those who are lazy and wavery, prone to sins, confirmed 'nastikas' or nihilists, ever argumentative and negative minded - all suffering from these five syndromes , would never ever be able to reap the fruits of such Yatra). Narada Purana affirms: *Gangaadi tirtheshu vasanti Matsyaa Devalaye pakshiganaascha santi, Bhaavo jigjnaaste na phalam labhante Tirthaancha Devaayatanancha mukhyaat/ Bhaavam tato hritkamale nidhaya tetdhaani sevet samaahitatmaa/* (At highly Sacred Tirthas surrounding Ganges and such other Rivers do reside fishermen after all and so do rows of birds in various temples but indeed these species are totally ineligible to reap the Punya phala! That is why only those could truly open up the lotuses of their hearts and concentrate the Supreme would deserve the reaping of the Yatra phala!)

Uttara Bharata

Mansarovar-Kailasha Yatra

Kailasa parvate Rama! Manasaa nirmitam param, Brahmaana nara shardula tenedam Manasah sarah/ (Vishvamitra addresses Shri Rama to say: 'Rama! Atop Kailasa Mountain, a highly Sacred Sarovara got materialised by the mind and thought of Brahma and thus has come to be renowned as 'Manasa Sara' - Valmiki Ramayana) *Janmouhadhi tapomantra yoga siddharetaraih, Jushtam kinnaragandharvair – apsarobhi vritam sadaa/* (Only blessed persons who are Siddhas and Tapodhanas, Parama Yogis, besides Kinnara, Gandharva, Apsaras and such Celestial Beings could have their abodes at Manasarovara). Hari Vamsha which is a component of Skanda Purana makes a detailed reference to this outstanding Maha Tirtha and an unparalleled Sidhha Kshetra). This Manasaovara Yatra is for sure a far tougher Yatra hardly comparable to Badarinatha, Muktinatha and Kedarnath as the time duration involved in this is far longer; it might well take up some three weeks as it involves halts at Nepal and Tibet and visa restrictions. Yatra to destinations like Manasarovara-Kailasa, Amarnath, Gomukha, Swargarohana and such Tirthas are to be negotiated to heights of minimum twelve thousand feet above Sea level and breathing could be very difficult often having to even carry the weight of oxygen supplies. To reach Manasarovar there could be several routes to be followed such as via Kashmir to Ladakh, Nepal to Muktinath, via Darma Dare and via Gangotri. Some of these approach routes would not only be circuitous, but risky having to negotiate freezing cold, subject to vagaries of rain, slippery, lonely routes and such hardships of slopy climbing, besides hunger and thirst, apart from attacks of animals and tricksters quite apart from the risk of losing the way. This yatra is however not as that death knocking as facilities are indeed available like the help,

vigil and intermittent presence of Army Authorities, periodical shops for provisions and some food, medical assistance, guides for general assistance, availability of hired labour, dharma shalas or resting places, riding by mules or yaks, personal carriers called 'dolies' and so on. The Yatra routes could be normally the Leepu Marg from Tanakpur Railway Station-Pittorgad-Kanaleechina-Askot- Balavakot-Dharchola- Khela-Paangu-Sirakha-Jupati-Malpa-Buddi-Garabyang-Kalapani-Sangchum-Lipu ghati-Pala-Taklakot in Tibet-Mancha-Rakshastal-Gusul on the banks of Mansarovar-Jyukumpha-Barkha-Bangudu Mandi- Darachin. The best time for this *Lipu Marg* is from first to end June and this is perhaps the shortest route. Now the Kailas Parikrama or Circumambulation commences from Darchin/ Lingifu or Nandi Gufa- Gaurikund which is 11, 000 feet high from sea level-Jandalafu-Darchin thus the Parikrama distance totalling 20 km.! Another 'Marg' is called *Jouhar/Jayanti Marg*: From Kathgodam Railway Station to Kapkot -90 km. approx. to Maani-Devibagadh-Shyama-Ramari-Tejam- Kuhati-Girgaon-Rathpaani-Tiksen or Manasyari-Bogadyar -Rilkot-Milam-Pung-Chirchun- Thaaajaang- Manithanga-Gurthang- Tirthapuru- Nandigufa- Derafu Bouddha Mandir-Gauri kunda. The best season for this Jouhar Marg is from 25th June to 15th August and involves less number of ups and downs and is also of nice scenic beauty. Yet another Marg is by way of *Niti Ghat* from Rishikesh Railway station to Joshimutt-Tapovan-Surayi Thota- Jumbha-Manlari-Bamba-Neeti-Hoti Ghati- Hoti- Jyutaal- Iyungul- Amlagtara-Gojeemaru- Dengo- Gurjnaam-Tirthapuri and further way from here to Gaurikund as in the earlier Jouhar Marg. The best time is from end June till mid-August. On this route, Yatris could have the benefit of visiting Haridwar, Rishikesh, Deva Prayag and Badarinath also. It is not necessary that the same route be followed both ways.

Now a days of course, the services of quite a few Travelling Agencies with competing fees and facilities are available and those who could afford are mainly undertaking the Yatra either by Overland or by Air; The former way is less expensive as organised tours over 13 days from Kathmandu, Nepal and the latter comprising a ten days yatra ex Kathmandu is for 10 days and is more expensive (the going rates for the year 2014 are Rs. 80,000 and 135,000 respectively). The overland way for 13 days is: Day 1: Kathmandu- Day 2: Drive to Kodari to Nyalam-Day 3: Nyalam- Day 4: Acclimitasation and rest at Nyalam-Day 5: Nyalam to New Dongba- Day 6: Dongba to Manasarovar-Day 7: Puja/ holy dip at the Lake and drive to Darchen-Day 8: Kailas Kora and outer Parikrama from Darchen and on to Durapuk- Day 9: Parikrama continues and on to Drolma Pass to Zutulpuk-Day 10: Zutulpuk to Donga-Day 11: Donga to Nyalam - Day 12: Nyalam to Kathmandu- Day 13: Transfer to Kathmandu airport. In the overland way there are two packages- one with all facilities and one excluding some facilities; the latter is with three nights at Kathmandu, sight seeing at Kathmandu, coach for China border, Tibet visa, accommodation and coach from Tibet, trekking permit, oxygen cylinders, and all taxi charges but excluding travel insurance, horse riding during parikrama, air ticket to and fro Kathmandu and so on. This package is Rs. 80,000 as of 2014 Yatras during the prescribed timings of May-Sept. On the other hand, the helicopter rate for the 10 days Yatra costing Rs. 135,000 has its itinerary as follows: Day 1: Arrival at Kathmandu and sight seeing-Day 2: Fly Nepalganj-Day 3: Fly to Simikot / Hilsa to Taklakot-Day 4 acclimatisation and excursion, halt overnight at Taklakot- Day 5: Drive to Mansarovar; Day 6: Start for Kailash Kora and commence Outer Parikrama from Darchen to Dirapuk- Day 7: continue Parikrama over Drolmala to Zutulpuk- Day 8: From Zutulpuk monastery , trek back to Darchen and drive to Takrakot- Day 9: fly back to Simikot to Nepal ganj and on to Kathmandu-Day 10: Back to Bharat. After crossing the Himalaya range and entering Tibet on passing some 20 km are two mountain tops one with Raksha Sarovar and another being Manasarovar.

It is a legendary belief that Ravana performed severe 'Tapas' to win over Parameshwara residing on the Kailash Mount. Manasarovar waters are crystal clear of bluish tinge and the Lake is of the shape of an egg stated to have spread over some 15 km. This is one of the Fifty One *Shakti Peethas* where the right wrist bracelets of Devi Sati's 'jeerna sharir' fell as Lord Vishnu's Sudarsham Chakra sliced off the body parts at the Daksha Yagna so that Maha Deva's fury would otherwise have continued at the sight of the body. The Devi at this Shakti Peetha is known as Gayatri and Maha Bhairava is called Sarvanand. In this heavenly Lake, thousands of swans fly along and across, some of crystal white colour stated to be 'Raja Hamsas' or Royal White Compexion and the rest of off-white colour. It is believed that at times, natural pearls too are available in the sweet and none too chilled cold waters of the Celestial Lake with plenty of multi-coloured stones and prism like pebbles. There is not much of greenery on the banks and in fact not many trees and flowers up the Mount. Mount Kailas is about 12 km up the Mansarovara. Even while approaching the Kailash Dham, one can have its darshan from a distance but the Dham becomes clearer from Kungarivingari Shikhar or top of Jouhar Marg if the clouds are not obstructing the view. The people of Tibet are full of devotion to the Dham and swear to complete Parikrama of the 20 km.circumference by 'sashtangas' or prostrations and heartfelt 'namaskaras' all the way. Like Lord Shri Rama at Saketa at the Ayodhya Dham, Goloka's Vajra dhaam of Bhagavan Shri Krishna as described in great detail in Brahma Purana as also Maha Deva delineated vividly in Shiva Purana and Skanda Purana, Parama Shiva's abode is Kailasa Dham on the unique Kailasa Mount; indeed this view among the Himalaya Shikhiras is stated to be unusually distinct and unparalleled! The description of Kailasa Mount is akin to that of the Virat Shiva Linga just as the center of a Lotus with sixteen petals all around as the 'Shikhar Madhya Shringa' or the raised horn of the Mount being the centre of literally counted as fourteen Shringas. In fact the central Shringa commands spontaneous awe, vibration and arresting attentiveness subdued by ecstasy and fullness of fulfillment. As 'abhishakas' or holy baths on the 'Linga Mastaka' are led into Gauri kunda. This Maha Linga Swarupa Maha Deva is of Black Stone and its sides are all covered with layers of iced milk. This mountain alone stands out as black but all the surrounding mountains are raw brownish. Kailasa Parakrama of 20 km. is possible within three days but perhaps reaching Kailasha Shikhir of the height of 19000 ft from Sea level is worthy of endeavour by dare devil- mountaineers! Incidentally, Badarinatha Murti which was brought by Adi Shankaraacharya from Tibet was installed at Badari Mandir. *Adi Badari* in Tibet is of immense significance where at Naani Ghaati Maha Deva's Dhu Linga is stated to be present besides ancient Murtis of ageless primacy!

Amarnath Yatra (Jammu and Kashmir)

Situated some 16000 ft high from Sea level in Himalayas is the Holy Cave of Amarnath sprawling some 60 feet of length, 25-30 feet of width and 15 ft. of height, is the natural formation of awe inspiring Ice Linga of Maha Deva. The general feeling that the Ice formation which would commence from Amavasya the Moon fall day of a month, grows by days till Pournami the full Moon day and completely gets dissolved there after but eye witnesses challenged this that the Linga totally disappears. The cave becomes inaccessible during extreme winters but total extinction is stated not to ever occur.

The land routes to the Holy Cave are either through Baltal or Chandanwadi. Through Baltal the way from Shrinagar to Baltal covering 115 km within 3-4 days viz Sonamarg and from Baltal trekking of about 14 km involving about 12-14 hours. The alternate route is from Srinagar to Pahalgam of about 96 km on the banks of Lidder River covered by road transport. Normally Yatris who intend trekking from Pahalgam

could stay overnight at Jammu/Srinagar. From Pahalgam by trekking or mini bus available upto Chandanwadi, or horse back or human carriers called 'pittus' etc, the route is of some 16 km. There has to be an overnight halt. At Chandanwadi is a *Shakti Peetha* being one the 51 body parts or ornaments of where Sati Devi's self-immolated body at Daksha Yagna; as Maha Deva got furious at the incident created Veerabhadra who was asked to destroy Daksha Yagna and soon followed to the Place and picked up the body of Sati Devi performing Shiva Tandava in frenzy and Vishnu sensing trouble of Maha Pralaya commissioned Sudarshana Chakra to slice off the body of Devi to small parts that numbered over fifty one; the throat of Devi was thrown off at Chandanwadi and is now famed at the Maha Maya Shakti Mandir and the Bhairava Swarupa of Maha Deva is famed as Trisandheshwara at that Mandir. The further route to Amarnatha Linga is as follows: Pissu Top where Bholenath Shiva Mandir is visible and the legend states that Maha Deva killed so many Rakshasas as had formed a mountain with their bodies!- Sesha Naag is the next overnight stop over as this Mountain has seven Peaks resembling seven hoods of the Maha Sarpa Sesha Naag the Sacred bed of Maha Vishnu and the distance of the trekking involved is 12 km from Chandanwadi through Pissu Top to Seshanag; the flowers at Seshanag are of typical nature as the resemble serpents! The picturesque view on way to Seshanag with blue water flowing on the slopes of the Mountain tops is indeed so exhilarating as life time memories; even as the dusk of the day approaches camp fires invite the pilgrims as there is no electricity as moonshine envelops them through till the next day break. From Seshanag to Maghaguna Pass there would be steep climb of 14000 feet down to Panchatarani of about 12000 ft. descent to inviting green pastures but the dizziness of the mountain tops would normally affect even normally healthy persons due to vagaries of climate, lack of oxygen, skin cracks, stomach upsets, nausea, dizziness and as such one has to carry the required medicines and preventives. Panchatarani would be the next night halt before Maha Bhairavanath as Five Most Sacred Flows emerging from His Jatajoota or the coarse head hair clusters descend from the Holy Cave. The final trekking of some five km after a restful night is up towards the Holy Cave itself at the early morning purifying snaana / bathing at the Sangam of Panchatarani and Amaravati and commence the ascent of some 6 km till the steps of the Cave Mouth for the Life Achieving Darshan of Maha Bhairava Amarnath Ice Linga! On way one would have visioned two minor Lingas of Mother Parvati and Ganesha Bhagavan before one joins the Queue of Pilgrims. Incidentally, there are helicopter sorties available from Srinagar/ Baltal taking flat 5mts minus of course the waiting time of hours subject however the variations of clear skies! These sorties are normally available till noon time from early day- breaks. Normally no overnight stay is advised at Amarnath proper for fear of sudden change to ice cold rains and facilities to yatris overnight are few and far between, although ample free and tasty food is available from several munificent agencies!

There is a vivid and detailed description of Amarnath Yatra in the Bhrigu Samhita of Skanda Purana covering the Surya Kshetra of Anatanag Mountain up the ascent enroute to the views of Sarala Narayana Khilya Tirtha, Mamaka Linga and Gananaadha Kshetra, River Lambodari signifying the magnificence of Ganeshwara, Bhrigu Maharshi Tirtha, Nila Ganga Sthaana Ashrama, Peshha Mountain, Sesha Naga Parvata, Vayu Daitya Vibrajana Tirtha, Sushka Sarovara or the Dried up Pond once dominated by Raakshasas but since abandoned following humkara of Maha Deva to let pass the Yatris, River Pancha Tarangini emerging from Maha Deva's Holy Feet, Damarika Shila Garbha Griha, Amara Ganga where Yatris perform holy bath where after finally climaxing the darshan of the mammoth and awe -inspiring Amarnatha Linga! The alternative approach to Amarnath is also available by Baltal up the Linga, where

helicopter services are available too. Skanda Purana further describes the legend of some of the Damaruka Ganas turning into pigeons which are stated to fly aloft the Holy Cave, still visible to fortunate yattris blessed with the darshan of the Amarnath Linga. Disturbing the concentration of Maha Deva in performing his morning meditation, the Damaruka Ganas practising the damaru instruments were cursed to turn into pigeons but on getting merciful asked the concerned Ganas to discharge the duty of showering blessings to those fortunate yattris entering into the huge cave! Indeed those yattris who secure the Amarnatha Linga darshana would certainly have their sins dissolved attain Shiva Sayujya. Besides the Maha Linga, visitors are also blessed by the Idols of Devi Parvati and Maha Ganapati Deva. Inside the cave, one truly feels ecstatic and peacefully tranquil!

Vaishnodevi, Kheer Bhavani and other Tirthas (Jammu and Kashmir)

Vaishnodevi: Off Jammu by some 40 miles is situated Maa Vaishnodevi Cave full of material darkness and yet of unique splendour being the Holy Seat of Three Pinda Swarupas of Maha Kali, Maha Lakshmi and Maha Saraswati some forty yards away from the mouth of the cave. In the past, the approach was somewhat tricky and slippery as the bare feet were washed by the cold and flowing flow of the Sacred 'Banganga' but the exit gate somewhat near the Seat of the Three Pinda Swarupas has now turned to be the two way gate for the convenience of the visitors as the entry and exit hitting directly the raised platform of the Pinda Swarupas on which the priests are seated. In the past again, the ascent of the Mountain had necessarily via Adikumari Sthaan which was the first halt up the mountain from the base township called 'Katra' but now a comfortable paved path leading to pony riders is in place where trekkers could also avail of the facility almost upto the top near the 'Sanctum Sanctorum' or the 'Garbha Sthaan' thus enabling to avoid the somewhat circuitous diversion of Garbha Nivas; it is stated that Maa Vaishnodevi -the combined Shakti of Kali-Lakshmi- Saraswati- hid herself in the womb or Garbha to enable to suddenly pounce and attack the evil 'Asuras' who were invincible to Devatas who meditated to the Devi to exterminate the Potent Asura Chief and his gang. Yattris consider to be a duty to pass through the narrow path of the Garbha of hardly a few feet of crawling through as the ceiling hits the heads otherwise; one gets a sensation of the passing through the cave as though even fat or lean persons or children could just scrape through while the crawl adjusts as per the body size like elastic and stretched rubber. The legend states that Vaishno Devi emerged from this Garbha Nivasa. Lakhs of Yattris visit the Vaishnodevi for she is famed worldwide to bestow boons almost instantly on return from the Cave and soon thereafter. Helicopter services are available too, besides pony rides but pilgrims take vows to ascend by foot disregarding the labour and hardship involved!

Near by Jammu and Kashmir are the Places called Poonch and some fourteen miles away up the high mountains is *Boodhe Amarnath* Mandir in which was installed a White Stone of Maha Deva with wells around the Temple on four sides and the belief is that the Sacred flow of melting Amarnath Linga is constantly deposited in the wells down here. Also, there is Pulastya Maharshi Ashram and Pulastya River too and this Place is considered significant next only to Amarnath further up. In Jammu again, Udhampur and River Devika and on its banks Shuddha Mahadeva Mandir are situated besides Gaurikunda Tirtha where Bhagavan's Trishul with which He terminated Sudhantara Rakshasa; it is in the Devika River Vaishakha Snaan and a Mela are popular locally.

Kheer Bhavani (Holy Spring of Tulla Mulla): Some fourteen miles away from Srinagar in Kashmir in

Tulla Mulla village is situated the popular Mandir of Devi Bhavani called Kheer Bhavani since the traditional offering to her is a rice pudding with sugared milk is 'Kheer. Her popular names are Raganya Bhaghavati adored by Kashmiri Pundits with the prayer: *Namaste Sharada Devi Kashmira Pura Vasini twameham pratrhay nityam vidya daanam cha dehime/* (We offer our sincere prayers to the great Devi Sharada resident of Kashmir to bestow vidya or knowledge and power of concentration). Devi is of the Swarupa of Atma Linga inside a pond of divine spring with varying colours. The Legend described in a Kashmiri Chronicle called Rajatarangini states that Ravanaasura the King of Asuras in Lanka made intense prayers to Bhavani Devi and as result of the latter was pleased to appear in Lanka and settled there but in course of time asked Hanuman to shift herself to Kashmir as she was fed up with his atrocities and immorality. She reappeared in Tulla Mulla villlage in floods there once and settled again in a marshy land since converted as a pond further as a water spring with violet colour but as some time to dark portending events national calamities like assassination of Indira Gandhi. Swami Rama Titha and Swami Viveka - nanda are stated to pay their homages at this holy Tirtha. Jyeshtha Ashtami is famed at this Tirtha drawing thousands of Kashmiri Pandits and Yatis when festivities are adorned with floral rangoli drawings and diyas or earthen lamps are arranged in the Temple and around.

Other Tirtha Yatra Places in Jammu and Kashmir: Shri Raghunatha Mandir is at the *Jammu City Center* which is decorated with gold plated sheet inner walls and many galleries of Shaligrams connected with Ramayana Epic comprising seven shrines with individual towers. The main Shrine is dedicated to Shri Rama-Sita and Lakshmana. Ranbireshwara Shiva Temple in Jammu again has Dwadasha Sphatika Lingas. Peer Kho Cave dedicated to Shiva is the Mandir overlooking River Tawi; this cave is stated to be the same one where Lord Jambavan of Ramayana fame performed his tapasya. Atop *Shankara Hill* some 1100 feet above Sea level in Srinagar is Jyeshtheshwara Temple of Shiva, which attracted Adi Shankaracharya for meditation and a 'must see' of pilgrims. Shaila Putri (Nagabal) Mandir is situated on the left bank of the most eminent Vitasta River at Baramulla, which is known as a miniature of Kheer Bhavani. Sun Temple or Surya Tirthan at Martand Village near Anantanaag known as Mattan, there is a water spring and a rivulet named Chaka where shraddhas and Pitru Karyas are performed; besides great ruins of Marthand Temple are also found at Martand aged some 500 years AD. *Sharada Peetha*, also visited by Adi Shankara in Jammu (since occupied as POK or Pakistan occupied Kashmir), is on the banks of Kishanganga River. Shariraka Devi or Chakreshwari Temple (Hari Parbat) on a hillock in Kashmir is believed in strongly as a *Shakti Peetha* signifying as Cosmic Energy drawn from Sapta Dwipas viz. Jambu, Plaksha, Salmaali, Kusha, Krouncha, Shaka and Pushkala; Sapta Rishis viz. Marichi, atri, Angirasa, Pulastya, Pulaha, Kratu and Vasishtha; Sapta Varnas or Seven colors of Violet, Green, Blue, Red, Indigo, Yellow and White. Padrethan in Srinagar itself is the Shiva-Rilhanesghwara Temple of some 10th AD on the banks of Jheelum River with a pyramidal roof in two parts almost in ruins with two water surrounding it. A Ganapayar Temple too is in Srinagar itself. More popular is Jyeshtha Mata Mandir called Zeeth Ya'r in Srinagar. The legendary belief of this Temple relates to 'Ksheera Saagara Mathana' when Deva-Danavas churned the Ocean of Milk to create Amrit or Nectar with Mandhara Parvata as the churning rod and Vasuki Nagadeva was the string to hold the churning rod, there emerged 'Halahala' or world engulfing poisonous flames and Maha Deva swallowed the fire and retained in his throat to ensure the retention of his own powers reposed in Devi Parwati since when He was called Neelagreeva. Subsequent churning materialised Devi Lakshmi (since she was upset and left Vishnu's chest- when Maharshi Bhrigu's entry into Vaikuntha was obstructed by the Gate Keepers named Jaya and Vijaya and

hence he gave a curse to assume the births of Danavas in connection with Lord Vishnu's Ten Avatars as the latter's enemies- and now reappeared at the Samudra Mathana) . But when Vishnu claimed Lakshmi at her reappearance again, Danavas were upset and hid her some where, Lord Shiva created Jyeshtha Devi as since retained her at the Jyeshtha Mata Mandir in Kashmir though revived as Devi Lakshmi again. Jyeshtha Devi is thus called the sister of Lakshmi-the negative form of Lakshmi- and is revered to bless humanity as the antithesis of Lakshmi by fulfilling desires of one and all as per Shiva's boon. The Place where Lakshmi Devi was hidden is known as Guptagara or Gupgar now and Shiva created Vaitala to conquer the Danavas who hid Lakshmi. All Thursdays of Jyeshtha Month are celebrated as significant and holy still in the Jyeshtha Mata Mandir till date. Besides there is also a Shiva Linga of big size called Avadharya that was added to this Jyeshtha Mata Mandir some ninety years ago; Yatris are stated to fulfill Siddhi, Buddhi and Siddhi in this popular Mandir. Kanchi Kama Koti Peetha do organise frequent homas and Veda congregations at this noted Mandir as well as at Kheer Bhavani Mandir premises. Shankara Gauri Mandir at Patan near Baramulla, Bajaranga Das Mandir, Gautam Nag, Shiva Mandir at Varaha Mula or old Baramulla, Bheda Devi Tirtha, and various Naga Mandirs like Naran Nag, Sesha Nag, Mamaleshwara, Kapala Mochana, Pancha Tarani and so on are significant too.

Apart from the scenic beauty of Pahalgam, Gulmarg and the renowned House Boats on Dal Lake besides the gardens of Chashma shahi, Shalimar bagh and Nishat Bagh , as also Pehalgam, Srinagar-the Venice of the East- is also known for the Adi Shankara and Jaiteshwara Kamakshi Mandir, which in a any case on the regular Tourist Map of Kashmir; it is also known as Pas Pahar venerated by Buddhists.

Attention is drawn to Essence of Nilamatha Purana vide [www. Kamakoti.org/news](http://www.Kamakoti.org/news) as also by Google vividly describing Kashmir and close association of Devi Sati, Kashyapa Maharshi, Naaga-Manava cooperation, Origin of the Holy Vitasta River and other Rivers, signifinace of Dakshinayana in Pousha Month for Pitru Devas, Pujas to Devi Uma on Maagha Shudda Chaturdashi by women for Soubhagya; Shri Rama on Chaitra Shuddha Navami; Maheshwara on Chitra Krishna Chaturdashi; Chaitra Shukla Paksha to various Devas; Pishacha Puja during Chaitra Krishna Paksha; Gautami Buddha on Vaishakha Pournami and Phalguna Shukla Paksha festival to Kashmira Kanyas and so on besides of course like Deepavali, Nava Ratraas in Ashwiyuja month and so on. A quick account of Sacred Places in Kashmir Region besides of Devis, Maha Deva and Vishnu Swarupas already covered above as also of Ganesha, Skanda, Surya Deva, Yama Dharma Raja and scores of Maharshis has been described too. Punya Snanas or bathings and their rewards in various rivers besides Vitasta, like Mahuri, Vishoka, Sindhu, Krishna, Chandrabhaga and so on and famed Tirthas like Kalodakam, Nandikutam, Shankham, Kapila Tirtham, etc. too are described in great detail. Legends connected to the birth of Nandeshwara in human form and finally as a bull to serve Maha Deva, as also of Parashurama's encounter with Ganesha resulting in part abrasion of his right tusk and his unconditional apologies to Deva Parvati and Ganesha have been described too in the Nilamata Purana.

Haridwar-Rishikesh-Gangotri-Yamunotri-Badarinath-Kedarnath

Haridwar: Swarga dwarena tattulyam Gangadwaram na samshayah, Tartaabhishekam kurvita kotitirthe samahitah/ Labhate Pundarikamcha kulam chaiva samudbhavet, Tatraika ratri vasena gosahasraphalam labhet/ Saptagange trigange cha shakraavate cha tarpayan, Devaan pitruscha vidhivat punye lokey maheeyate/ Tatah kankhale snatwaa triratiro poshito narah, Ashwamedhaapnoti Swarga lokam cha

gacchati/ -Padma Purana, Adikhanda, Tirtha Yatra Parva (Haridwara is undoubtedly akin to Swarga Dwara. Those who bathe at the Ganga there are as good as taking bath at Crores of Tirthas, reaping the fruits of performing Pundarika Yagjna and bringing to repute one's own Vamsha. Stayintg at Haridwar over night bestows the return of charities of Sahsa Godaana. Performing Sacred Snanas at the banks of Sapta Ganga, Tri Ganga and Shakravarta and offering Deva Pitru Tarpanas would establish themselves with name and fame in these Lokas; thereafter performing sacred baths at Kankhala and observe fasting for three successive nights shall indeed reap the benefit of Ashwamedha Yagna and after the termination of life shall take to the path of Swarga)

Haridwar is also called Haradwar, Ganga Dwaar and Mayapuri. It is stated to be a combine of Five 'Puris' viz. Mayapuri, Haridwar, Kankhal, Jwalapur and Bhimgoda. It was at this Place that Brahmarshi Narada was enlightened by Sapta Rishis by way of a Maha Bhagavata Saptaah in a large gathering of Munis and Vishnu Bhaktas. The most significant spot in Haridwar is Brahma Kunda or what is popularly known as 'Hari ki Pairi'. Besides Ganga Dwar or Brahma kund or Hari ki paidi are situated in Haridwar another four Tirthas viz. Kushavarta, Bilwakesara, Nila Parvata and Kankhal- *Gangadware Kushavarte Bilwake Nilaparvate, Snaatwa Kankhale Tirthe punarjanma na vidyate/* (Vidhi poorvaka Snaana and Darshana of Bhagawan Vishnu would certainly qualify for no rebirth and Vaikuntha Prapti at each of these.) These Five Sacred Places represent Pouranic Significance as follows:

Brahma Kunda or Hari ki Pairi or Vishnu's foot steps: Chakravarti Bhagirath had the outstanding reputation of bringing down Ganga from Vishnu's feet in Vaikuntha down to Kailasha as absorbed in the 'Jata jootas' or Maha Deva's course head-hair pleats. As Bhagirath further did Tapsya to Maha Deva, the Holy Ganga flowed down to Earth and another King Sweta prayed to Brahma Deva to let parts of the River to flow to his Kingdom and the flows came upto Brahma Kunda. Since Bhartruhari the brother of King Vikramaditya performed penances to Maha Deva on the banks of Brahma Kund and achieved Salvation, Vikramaditya constructed steps of the Kunda famed subsequently as *Hari ki Paidi*. This has come down as the legend of the yore. *Gavu ghat:* The southern side of Brahma Kund has come to acquire the popularity of redeeming Go hatyhad patakas by the Sacred Bathings at the Gavu ghat. *Kushavarta ghat:* Once Dattatreya performed severe 'Tapas' on the banks of Ganga not far from Gavu ghat as he kept his belongings viz. Kusha or the mat of Kusha grass, clothing and kamandalu or the water vessel on the banks of Ganga; one fierce wind blew away these items on the banks in circular fashions and since then the Ghat was then christened as Kushavarta. 'Pitru Karyas' and 'Pinda Danas' especially on Mesha Samkranti days are stated to go a long way resulting in 'Punar janma naasti' or no rebirth again. It is at this Ghat there is the Mandir of Shrivana nath. Vishnu Ghat, Maya Devi Mandir, Ganesh ghat, Narayani Shila, Niladhara and Nileshtar, Kalimandir, Chandi Mandir, Anjani Mandir being that of Hanuman's mother, and Gouri shankar Mandir are all lined up there. *Bilwakeshwar:* Not far from 'Hari ki Paidi' the Bilwakeshwara Mandir is stated to the erstwhile abode of Maha Ashwatara Naga of Patala who frequented it for Maha Deva darshan and 'snaanas' at this Tirtha is stated to bestow the Shiva Tulya status. *Kankhal:* This is the Sacred Tirtha which is the joint flow of Niladhara and Kankhal where nomad Munis used to necessarily halt and wash off all traces of 'Khal' or wickedness. *Daksheshwar Maha Deva* Mandir assumes outstanding significance in view of its Pouranic background of Daksha Prajapatis's Brihaspati Yagna to which his daughter Sati Devi's non invitation due to his hatred to his son-in-law Parama Shiva but still she attended the Yagna and was extremely offended by her father and as such resorted to the extreme step of self immolation in 'Yogaagni' when Maha Deva went berserk with fury,

totally destroyed the yagna and beheaded Daksha Prajapati. With a view to mitigate the unusual fury of Maha Deva, Vishnu had to use his Chakra and quietly sliced off Sati Devi's mortal remains and threw away into fifty one pieces which eventually came to be famed as so many Shakti Peethaas signifying Devi Sati's body parts as are venerated till date with awe and wonder. As Devas prayed to Maha Deva in torrential 'Stutis', He gradually cooled down and being a known embodiment of mercy and forgiveness, relented to the Prayers of Devas and allowed to the beheaded Daksha to replace the latter's head with that of the goat meant for sacrifice at the ruined yagna and revived the Prajapati back to life! That is why this Holy Place is of unsual Mahatmya and yatris to Haridwara and is stated that their yatra would be futile without worship at Daksheshwara Maha Deva! This Holy Tirtha attracts uprecedented yatris on Shiva Rattris for its legendary background! Besides the aboveTirthas, Haridwar has other Tirthas too like Sati Kund, Kapila Sthaana, Bhima Gouda, Sapta Dhara, Satya Narayana Mandir and Veerabhadreshwar each of which has their own background! From Haridwar to approx. forty miles is situated *Shuka taal* where Vyasa Maharshi's son Shuka Deva taught Maha Bhagavata Purana within a week's time to Panadava's descendant King Parikshit on the banks of Ganga. *Devaband* or *Devivan* some 8 km near Mujaffarnagar off Shaharanpur is known for Durga Mandir where *Durga Saptashati* was recited first as believed by 'Vidwamsas' of erudition.

Shakambhari Devi: is some 15 km. from Shahrampur and is famed for 'Shaaka Ahara' or of the Goddess of Vegetarian Food and of Vegetables! *Shakambhariti vikhyaataa trishulokeshu vishrutaa, Divyam varsha sahasram hi shaakena kila Bharata/(Maha Bharata)*. The Murti of Shakambari Devi is stated to be 'Swayambhu' or self generated and Jajad Guru Shankaracharya installed three more Idols viz. Bhima, Bhramari and Shakshi at the Mandir. During 'Nava Ratra Celebrations' in Ashwiyuja Month there is normally heavy rush of devotees for even glimpses of darshan during an on going 'Mela' also.

Rishikesh: Hrishik-isha or Vishnu is the Supreme Lord of senses or alernatively Rishik-isha the Over-Lord of Rishis who controls senses. One view about the origin of this Holy Tirtha is that Rishi Raibhya's severe tapasya culminated in Maha Vishnu's darshan at Kubjamrika or Mango Tree (Skanda Purana) while another legend refers to the Tapasya of Brahmana Devadutta to Maha Vishnu as he had staunch faith in the identiy of Vishnu as distinct from Shiva. Meanwhile, Indra commissioned Apsarasa named Pramlocha to test the Brahmana's ability to control his senses but failed and the result was their daughter named Ruru who on realising the background of her birth pursued Tapasya to 'Shiva Keshava' and Vishnu appeared and blessed. Varaha Purana thus states: *Maamevaavehi Vishnum swam maa pashya-swaantaram mama, Awaamekena bhaavena pashyastvam siddhimaapyasi/ Purvamantara bhavena drishtavaanasi yanmama, Tena vighnobhavad yena galitam swattapo maha/(Do realise that Vishnu and Ishwara are just the same and in order to attain siddhi or Salvation soon, this basic identity be underlined. In the past the severe tapsya performed failed and ended up in obstacles) Another legend about the origin of Rishiksha signifies that once Maha Deva was annoyed about Agni Deva's indiscretions and there were severe flames that destroyed the area; Agni atoned for his sins at this Tirtha and thus resulted in the Agni Tirtha. Popularly known as Muni Reta or the Sands of Rishis, this highly Sacred Land was also the Place where Lord Shri Rama performed penance to achieve the abilities to terminate Ravanaasura and the land marks which enabled Rama Lakshmana to cross the Holy Ganga into deep forests are still existent as hanging concrete bridges converted from jute rope bridges-popularly named as Lashman and Ram jhoolas. This Sacred Kshetra is also acclaimed as the Universal Capital of Yoga.*

Gangotri: Several and detailed references have been made in Brihaddharma Purana, Maha Bhata Vana Parva, Padma Purana, Skanda Purana, Brahma Purana, Vishnu Purana, Devi Bhagavata, BrahmaVaivarta Purana, Agni Purana, Matsya Purana, Brahmanda Purana, Vayu Purana, Skanda Purana and so on. In fact, Skanda Purana has also provided Ganga Sahasra Naama highlighting Devi Ganga Mahatmya. *Na Ganga sadrusham tirtham na Devah Keshavaatparah/* says Padma Purana. Maha Bhagavata describes as follows: *Dhatuh kamandalujalam tadurukamasya paadaavanejana pavitrasya Narendra, Swadhornyana –bhasi saa patati nimaarshi Lokatrayam Bhagavatovishdeva keertih/*(Bhagavati Ganga which originated from the left thumb of the Holy feet of Vishnu's three legs spread over the total universe occupying Earth-Higher and Lower Lokas got materialised to wash off the sins of all beings). From Brahama Loka to Himalayas it appeared in streams called Sita, Alaknanda, Chakshu and Bhadra flowing in four directions; the grand and gigantic flow of Alaknanda jumped down the heights of Hemakuta and other mountains towards the southern direction and finally merges into the Great Oceans. The specific Place where Ganga is originated that is Gangotri, is the ideal Place where tarpanas and upavasas are performed and by observing these duties human beings there stated to have accrued the Vajapeya Yagna phala and acquire Brahma: *Gangodbhedam samaasadya triraatropashito Narah, Vajapeyamaapnoti Brahma bhuto bhavet sadaa/* While Ganga is stated to be pure and hallowed, the three Maha Tirthas are stated to be Gangotri, Prayaga and Ganga Sagara or the exit point of merger with the Seas: *Trishu snaeshu durlabha, Gangodbabhe de Prayage Ganga Saagra sangame/* Talking about the dos and don'ts of Ganga Snana, Brahmada Purana emphasises as follows: Achamana, Shoucha, nirmalya-mala visarjana, gatra samvahana, kreedha, pratigraha, rati, anya tirtha bhaava, anya tirtha prashamsa, samtaara or swimming, malotsarga are the twelve tasks to be avoided in Ganga. But most desirable tasks in Ganga are Pitru tarpana with tila mixed water, dahana samskara, tata nivasa or residing at the banks of Ganga Pravaha, Ganga keertana, darshana-sparsha-jala paana, mantra yukta snaana, upavaasa, Veda pathana, Purana shravana, nitya Ganga Smarana, Ganga Sahasra naama stotra, Ganga Vrataacharana, Indira nigraha, Dana prakriya, homaacharana, Sandhya Vandana, Dharmaacharana, and Bhakti bhava in general. Snaana-Tarpana-Pitru Karyaacharana on Solar and Lunar eclipse timings, janma dina worships, parva dina snaana-daana-homa kriyas are all stated to have far reaching phalas. Conducting Yajnas would fetch outstanding results.

Yamunotri: *Tapanasa sutaa Devi Tripulokeshu vishrutaa, Samaagataa Mahabhaga Yamunaa tatra nimnagaa/ Yenaiva nih suruta Gangaa tenaiva Yamunaa gataa, Yojanaanaam sahasreshu keertanaat papanashani/Tatra snaatwaa cha peetwaa cha yamunaa yatra nishrutaa, Sarva paapaani nirmuktah punaattya saptamam kulam, Praanaamstyajati yastatra sa yati paramaam gatim/* Kurma Purana-Brahmi Samhita (Devi Yamuna the beloved daughter of Surya Bhagavan is renowned all over the Trilokas. She crosses the same path as that of Devi Ganga too. By taking her name even thousand yojanas away would bestow the devotees with destroy their blemishes. Once a person is fortunate to take bath or even drink her Sacred water would not only purify their minds and thoughts but even their entire vamsha for seven generations past would redeem their past births and souls. In case her devotees lose their lives, they would not be subjected to rebirths but would attain Salvation). Towards River Yamuna's southern banks is situated the famed Agni Tirtha and to its western side is the sin destroying 'A-naraka' Tirtha dedicated to Yama Dharma Raja her own elder brother and the progeny of Devi Chhaya the alter ego or shadow of Sandhya Devi the wife of Surya Deva. A-naraka Snana ensures Swarga Nivasa and certain avoidance of Naraka after Mrityu which any way is a certainty. Those who perform Yama Tarpana on any

Krishna Paksha Chaturdashi day after vidhi purvaka snaana shall indeed bestow Maha Paataka Mukti. While human beings irrespective of their varnas or gunas shall reap the Phala of snaanas at Prayaga Tirtha by ten thousand times more of snanas at other Tirthas, those at the A-naraka would fetch thirty crore such snanas at the other ordinary Kshetras.

Badarika Dhaam: Narayanah prabhu Vishnuh shaswatah Purushottamah, Tyasyaatishasah Punyaam vishaalaam Badarimanu, Ashramah khyayate punyastrishu lokeshu vishrutah, Anyatra maranaan mukti sadharma vidhipurvakaat, Badari darshanaadeva mukti pumsaam kare khyaatam/ (Maha Bharata) (Bhagavan Narayana who is eternal and all pervasive Purushottama and is stated to get concentrated in Badari without exaggeration as its Ashramas are stated to be seats of Maha Punya of universal renown; deaths in all other Punya Kshetras are known for bestowing mukti to any human being especially on practice of one's own Varna dharma but Badari Darshana in itself would suffice to achieve the goal.) There is a detailed chapter on Badarikaashrama Mahatmya in Skanda Purana of Vaikuntha khanda. *Harati hridaya bandham karma paashaadimtaanaam virati padamucchairalpa janmaika bhaajaam/ Janana marana karma shranta vishraanta hetu trijagati manujnaanaam durlabhah satprasangah/* (In all the Trilokas 'Satsanga' or Ideal Company of persons of virtue is rare to secure, but once they are fortunate then their KarmaPaasha or shackles of Samsara would free their hard knots of heart get loosened and facilitate the hard screws of the ever rotational wheel of births and deaths get released) This being so, the Parama Tirtha Badari is replete with Maha Sadhus as that indeed is the Seat of Narayana and their 'sahavasa' is certain to get the process of snapping the shackles referred above. Maha Bharata also describes similarly: *Yatra Narayano Devah Paramatmaa sanatanah, Tatra kurustram jagat sarvam tirthonyaayatanaani cha/ Tat punyam paramam Brahma tat Teertham tat tapovanam, Tat param pramam Devam bhutaanaam Parameshwaram/ Shaswatam paramam chaiva dhaataaram paramam padam, Yam vidaditwaa na shochanti vidwamsah shastra drushtyah/* (Where Narayana Himself is, that indeed is the Parama Tirtha or the Outstanding Place in the entire Universe and Tapovana where Parabrahma-Paratpara-Parameshwara who is the Ultimate Spot totally devoid of anguish, anxiety, and everlasting bliss as strongly believed with conviction by Shastra Vettas). Varaha Purana states: *Shri Badarashramam punyam yatra yatra sthitah smaret, Sa yaati Vaishnavam snaanam puraraavritta varjitah/* (From any where any person merely thinks of Badari Kshetra which is the unique Vaishnava sthaana would be redeemed of punarjanma) Reveting back to Badari khanada of Skaanda Purana, Skanda Kumara was enlightened by Maha Deva himself that Agni Deva's curse that he would be sarva bhakshaka as the latter performed intense Tapasya after purifying himself in Ganga snana and on obtaining Vishnu darshana extolled him in a trance and Narayana replied that even on a stay for a while at Badari Kshetra would suffice to demolish patakas and due to his benevolence for sure Agni's curse as Sarva bhakshaka would be negated and further more the Tirtha to be henceforth would qualify human beings taking bath in the Agni Tirtha would also be qualified to demolish his or her patakas too. Bhavagan Narayana further assured that the Pancha Maha Patakas that normally humun beings are subjected to-not to mention of minor blemishes- would be washed off by snanas at Five Shila Swarupas of Narayana himself viz. Naradi-Naara simhi-Vaahni-Gaarudi and Markandeyi; he awarded three boons to humanity viz. to those who who stay put at any one of these Shilas; or who reside there for long; or who would perform darshana- sparsha- snaana and achamana. Besides the afore mentioned Shilas are also famed for performing snana- Narayana puja are Kapala Tirtha, Brahma Tirtha, Vasudhara Tirtha, Pancha Tirtha, Soma Tirtha, Dwasashaaditya Tirtha, Bramha kunda, Meru Tirtha, Dandapushkarini Tirtha, Ganga

sangama, Dharma Kshetra and so on. Besides these Scriptures descriptions on Badari Maha Kshetra are given in Devi Bhagavata, Varahokta and so on. Hardly a few steps down the Main Entrance of Badarinath Mandir is the Adi Shankara Temple in which Linga Murti Shiva is situated and further down is Adi Kedara Mandir; in fact, it is stated that these two be first visited before Badari Narayana beneath which is situated the Tapta Kunda or the Agni Tirtha; right nearby are the famed Pancha Shilas viz. Garuda Shila, Narada Shila, Markandeya Shila, Nara Simha Shila and Varaahi Shila. From Tapta Kunda where Yatris enjoy a refreshing bath in hot water of about 45 degree heat and then reach the most renowned **Brahma Kapala** a fairly large platform signifying Lord Brahma's skull of one of his heads relieved by Lord Shiva as he was annoyed with Brahma as the latter got attracted to the beauty of his own creation Saraswati fit to be his own daughter. It is at this Kapala Vimochana Tirtha where Brahma performed severe Tapasya for atonement of his sin that yatris profer Pitru Shraddhas. From Brahma Kunda as Ganga flows and Alaknanda takes a turn from the mountains alongside Brahma Kapala. Then there are Atri-Anasuya Tirtha, Indrapada Tirtha, Mata Mandir, Nara Narayana Parvata, Chakra Tirtha, Satpatha and so on. From Satpatha upward the mountainous terrain is extremely difficult to ascend and once one could do so would find a circular shaped Soma Tirtha might be visible but probably as a sheet of ice and its vicinity one might find if fortunate the Nara Narayana Mountain. On way from Satpatha to Badarinath occurs Alaknanda's another bank and Vasudhara which is about five miles from Badarinath is the Sangam Place of Sarastati leads to Keshava Prayag and Manaagram where Veda Vyas cave is accessible inside which Vyas scripted Eighteen Maha Puranas; a few meters away is situated Ganesh Guha /cave. *The Legendary background states that while Veda Vyasa was mentally scripting the Puranas, Ganesha agreed to write with his trunk on Taala Patras on the mutual agreement that Vyasa should pronounce in a non stop flow while Ganesha should write down in a non stop manner too simultaneously with no slips or interruptions on either side!* There is also the Muchukunda Guha or cave: here again a legendary background is attributed to it: Muchukunda of Iskshvaku Dynasty helped Devas in a tough battle with Daityas under the commandership of Lord Kartikeya; being pleased with the help, Kartikeya asked Muchukunda for a boon and the latter desired to have long rest. Kartikeya granted long rest which lasted from the then Treta Yuga end to Dwapara Yuga and blessed that Lord Vishnu would assume the Avatara as Krishna and till when he would enjoy uninterrupted sleep and would find Krishna but on opening his eyes a Daitya called Kala Yavana would be burnt to death. Exactly on these lines, Krishna, when faced with a battle with Kala Yavana and Jarasandha, misled Kalayanana to chase Krishna and led into the same mountain Cave near Dwaraka where Muchukunda was sleeping and in darkness of the cave made Kalayavana trample Muchukunda who was disturbed and with vision Kalayavana was burnt to death. On recognising Krishna Muchukunda prayed to him profusely and Krishna instructed Muchukunda to stay at the Cave near Managram near Badari Tirtha!

Deva Prayaga: From Rishikesh to Devaprayag is forty four miles possible by motor cars etc. where River Bhagirathi the Ganga flow from Gangottari and Alaknanda from Badarinath merge together and is just less than a km. ascent away from Lakshmana Jhoola at Rishikesh adjoining three mountains known as Grudrachal, Narasimhachal and Dashyaradachal. This is also called Sudarshana Kshetra popular for offering Pitru shraaddha and Pitru pinda dana. This is the straight run to Badarinath.

Kedarnath: Vamana Purana explained the Origin of Kedara Kshetra vividly: Maha Deva performed deep and extensive tapasya on the top of Himalayas to refresh himself as also for Loka Kalyan or to ensure propitiousness to the entire Universe. During the Tapasya, there were fiery sparks from his 'jatajutas' or

the thick layers of his hair and fell as huge and heavy boulders on Earth. From the boulders that fell, Kedara Tirtha got materialised and Rishis commenced to reside there and by the grace of Mahadeva a Shiva Linga got materialised. Yattris visited the Kshetra atleast for six months a year since it was difficult and unworthy of stay due to heavy snow and cold. Mahadeva blessed and granted fulfillment of devotees who observed fastings, snana, daana, homa, japa and pitru shraddhas and worship and their acts resulted in multiplier returns. In fact Devas came to worship the Shiva Langan after taking holy dips in Kalindi River (Yamuna) the daughter of Surya Deva. There after Maha Deva disappeared deep inside the depths of the River for a very long time and various Lokas and Samudras got disturbed and even Nakshatras dropped down from the Sky. Devas approached Maha Vishnu in Yoga Nidra on Ksheera Sagara. Meanwhile a Danava named Mura, who was the son of Kashyapa Muni and Danu the daughter of Daksha Prajapati, performed such unusual Tapasya to Brahma and secured a peculiar boon that whosoever would touch would die. Deva and all other Celestial Beings like Gandharva, Yakshaadis got rattled and Mura challenged Yama Dharma Raja who in turn directed him to challenge Jagannadha Chatur Murti resting on the Ocean of Milk. Danava Mura reached Jagannadha who asked Mura to enter into a duel. Mura never expected this defiant reply and got confused with Vishnu Maya and muttered: 'how, where and who'. Swiftly enough, Sudarshana Chakra sliced off the neck of Mura thus earning the encomium of Murari. It was at that juncture that Devas arrived at Ksheera Sagara stating that Maha Deva's whereabouts were unknown. Vishnu along Devas enquired of Devi Parvati, Ganesha, Kumara, Nandi and so on. Then he instructed Devas to observe Tapta Kruccha Vrata for three days each by consuming hot water, hot milk, hot ghee and on the last three days only Vahu bhakshana followed each day by Abhishakas to Maha Linga at Kedara Tirtha with sixty five pitchers of curd, thirtytwo pitchers of ghee, sixteen full of pitchers of Pancha gavya, eight ghadas of honey, two hundred pitchers of Kalindi's sacred water, one hundred eight pitchers of Gorochana, Kumkuma, chandana, butter as also puja of Mandara, Harashringara, Agaru, dhupa, naivedyas with the recitation of Rigvedantargata pada krama of Shata Rudreeya. At the end of such severe penances, Indra and Devas visioned a Unified Shiva-Vishnu Swarupa!! Having realised their folly that Shiva and Vishnu were one and the same, Devas and even Brahma moved back to Kurukshetra and discovered Parama Shiva inside the water and hailed the Sthanu Maha Deva and prostrated before him to withdraw from the Tapasya and bless them all and the Lokas!

Most of the Yattris do not invariably halt over at the intermediate places like Gangotri, Yamunotri, Deva Prayag, etc. and after Haridwar and Rishikesh proceed to Badari/Kedar. This is particularly so since there is a motorable road from Jyoshimutt. It is in respect of those Yattris intending to visit Badrinath that halt at Jyoshimutt while those going to Kedar first prefer halting at Rudra Prayag and trek up to Kedar generally. Of course the context differs in respect of trekking from Rishikesh to either of the destinations first. From Deva Prayag to Srinagar-different from Srinagar of Kashmir-there is a Kamaleshwar Maha Deva Mandir and the legend states that Devi Durga terminated a cruel Kolasura with her 'Dhanush' (Bow and arrow) and there still is a bow shaped Dhanush Tirtha; Lord Rama worshipped Devi Durga here with Sahasra Kamalas or thousand lotuses but Shankara hid the thousandth lotus but Rama replaced it with his right eye in the worship unhesitatingly! From Srinagar to Rudra Prayag just away by a mile is the famed and picturesque Sangam of Alaknanda and Mandakini Rivers. It is at this point, that the ways to Badari and Kedar depart from each other where Sage Narada is stated to have eulogised Parama Shiva with his prowess in 'Sangeeta' where a Shiva Mandir is in place. From Rudra Prayag to Kedarnath the path along Mandakini are the places named Chatouli / Suryaprayag or Surya Deva's meditation point- Agastya Muni

Mandir-Chhota Narayana mandir with Rudraksha trees- Chandrapuri with Chandrashekhara-Durga Mandir-Bhiri with Bhim Mandir-Gupta Kashi where King Banasura the son of Bali Chakravarti of Vamanavatara fame and Banasura's daughter Usha signified by Ushimutt nearby and Usha's husband was Aniruddha the son of Lord Krishna and Devi Rukmini. Gupta Kashi is also the abode of Ardha-Nareshwara Shiva seated on Nandi Deva and there is a flow of Kunda or pond nearby stated to be a mix of Ganga and Yamuna. In Nala, Lalitha Devi Mandir is popular and this Devi was worshipped by King Nala. Narayana koti just away by a mile from Nala on the banks of Saraswai River are Narayana Mandir and Kalimutt the latter as worshipped by Kalidas the Scripter of Abhijnana Shakuntala, Kumara Sambhava, Megha sandesa and such immortal classics in Sanskrit. Maikhanda which is two miles from Narayana koti is known for Mahishasura Mardini Mandir. Rampur is the next halt three miles away to the trekkers good for night rest with woollen blankets etc even to carry and return basis to Kedarnath. Up the mountain top at Rampur by a four mile difficult terrain is situated the Mandir of Triyugi Narayana with his two consorts Bhu Devi and Lakshmi Devi; this is right along with River Saraswati with its four Maha Kundas called Brahma Kund, Rudra Kund, Vishnu Kund and Saraswati kund. It is stated that Achamana, Snaana, Marjana, Tarpana be performed at the respective Kundas. At the Triyugi Narayana there is an Akhanda Dhuni or Uninterrupted Fire Place where Homa Prakriyas are continuously performed and twigs are fed in the Agni Kunda. Despite the high significance of this Triguni Narayana Mandir which is very tiring to reach, yattris of normal stamina excuse themselves and avoid the peak height, and proceed further to Soma Prayag and reach *Gouri Kund*. The major halt before the eight and odd mile ascent up to Kedarnath is Gauri Kunda where there is a natural hot water Kund to refresh the yattris, in which, as stated, Devi Parvati who was born here had her baths.

Kedarnath is one of the *Dwadasha Shiva Maha Linga* Abodes as these are as follows: *Kedaro Himavat prushthe Dakinyaam Bhimashankarah, Vaaranaasyaamcha Vishwesraambako Gautami tatey/ Saurashtre Somanathaswa Shrishaille Mallikarjunah, Ujjainaam Maha kaalaa Omkarecha Amareshwarah/ Vaidyanadhascha Bhumo Nagesho Daarukaananey, Setubandhe cha Ramesho Ghrushneshwara Shiva Lingovtara Dwadashashakametcchambo Paramatmana/* (Nandishwara described in Shiva Purana the Most Celebrated Twelve Jyotirlingas of Maha Deva as follows: Kadarnath in Himalayas (Uttaranchal), Bhima Shankar in Dakinya (Near Pune in Maharashtra), Vishwaswara in Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh), Triambika on the banks of River Gautami (Maharashtra), Somanath (Saurashtra / Gujarat), Mallikarjuna in Srishaila, (Andhra Pradesh), Mahakala, Ujjain (Madhya Pradesh), Amareshwara at Omkara (Madhya Pradesh), Vaidyanatha at Deogarah (Bihar)/ Parli (Maharashtra); Nagesha near Dwaraka (Gujarat) or Naganadh (Aoudhya, Maharashtra)/ Jageshwara near Almora, (Uttaraakhanda); Rameshwara (Tamilnadu) and Ghrishneshwara, Aurangabad, Maharashtra). References to the Dwadasha Lingas shall be notified in the following pages ahead at respective Tirthas as relevant). Kedar Linga is known from times immemorial: In Krita or Satya Yuga, Maharshi Upamanyu is stated to have worshipped Kedara Linga and attained salvation; in Dwapara Yuga Pandavas are stated to have performed Tapasya. Bhagavan MahaDeva assumed the form of Mahisha or a Buffalo and confused Pancha Pandavas at the same time as they were engrossed in Tapasya at different locations of Kedar now reputed as Pancha Kedar by displaying different body parts of the Mahisha viz. at Tunganath displaying hands, Rudranath the face of Mahisha, Mada Maheshwara displaying naabhi or middle portion, and Kalpeshwar his 'jataajuta' or the coarse head hair; the Prishtha bhaga or the hind body part is stated to have displayed at Kedar nadha proper. One legendary account states that Bhima of Pandavas in the course of his Tapasya

got disturbed by the appearance of the hind part of the Buffalo, chased it and tried to forcibly hold its tail but the ever potent Maha Deva eluded him and succumbed with severe injuries. Pashupati Nath Temple in Khatmandu in Nepal is stated to have displayed the Maha Mahisha's head portion. In Kedar there is no built up Murti swarupa as such but a raised and reclining dome basically a trikona mountain black stone is worshipped with 'Abhishekas' or oblations with Milk, flowers, fruits, honey, agarbattis or perfumed sticks and so on. Kedar Mandir appears very oriental and typically mountainous with imposing locale surrounded by places like Bhagirathnagar (Ganga), Ksheera ganga called Chota Thal, Vasuki Thal, Gugukund, Bhairava Shila. The Mandir displays Pancha Pandava Murtis, Bhima cave and Bhimashila. The half broken exit gate is fabled as the Sacred Gate from which Adi Shankara bled out and flew up to Kailasa. Beautiful white stone life size idols of Shankaraacharya addressing his disciples in the rear portion hall of the Kedar Mandir is in place. Apart from the Murtis of Pandavas, those of Usha and Aniruddha, Lord Krishna, Shiva Parvati and so on too. Around the Mandir in a Parikrama are noticed Amrita Kund, Ishana Kund, Hamsa kund, Retasa Kund, and such other Tirthas.

Most unfortunate havoc of torrential rains, floods, mountain quakes caused thousands of Pilgrims to perish from all over Bharata Desha recently. Indian Air Force deserves kudos for their endless helicopter sorties and saved countless Yatis and so did yeoman service by various Defence Forces and their Wings to have extended the trekkers. Happily the entire Bharat stood up as one to help the survivors as per one's own resources and sincere assistance. May Bhagavan Shankara who assumed a spurt of momentary fury for whatever was his own reason but essentially of the nature of interminable mercifulness, take the victims in his own fold and bless them as Kailasa Vaasis!

Right on the expanse of Himalayas are *Nanda Devi and Maha Mrityunjaya* in the Gadhwal region. Mountain Nanda Devi's top is the world's highest Mount Everest named Gouri Shankar. Yatras are conducted to Gaurishankar every twelve years and enterprising men and woman do join the yatra coinciding Bhadrapada Sukla Saptami. On way are Nandakesari, Purna, Triveni Deval, Nandaapeeth etc. The Legend states that Bhagavati Nanda Devi uprooted several Asuras and purified herself by bathing in Rupkunda. Maha Mrityunjaya of Gadwal region again which is of some fifteen miles hike from Karna – ganga suffered a massive earth quake in the remote past at the time Adi Shankaraacharya in mid 18th century and a Shivaratri Festival has been celebrated there ever-since.

Nainital's- Bhima Shankar and Jageshwar's Jyotir Lingas and Kangra's Jwalamukhi: From the dizzy heights of Himalayas of Manasaovar, Badari, Kedar, Gangotri and Yamunotri to the gradual decline of Rishikesh and Haridwar of Uttara Bharat to *Nainital*- an important Tourist Spot- where Naina Devi Mandir and Shiva Mandir on one side of Naini Lake and Pashan Devi Mandir on the other side are worship worthy. Hardly a km. away from Nainital is *Bhimtal* on the banks of which is a Bhimeshwar Shiva Mandir and a furlong height therefrom is a Karkotak Shikhar where a Maha Sarpa's famed Great Serpent by the same name is a memorial as also a mountain range of Saptarishi or the Seven Ancient Rishis viz. Marichi, Atri, Angirasa, Pulastya, Pulaha, Kratu, and Vasishtha.

Ujjainak in Kashipur nor far from Nainital there is Bhimashankar Shiva Mandir and a strong local belief prevails that one of the Dwadasha Lingas viz. of Bhima Shankar is here itself and not in Dakshin near Pune in Maharashtra. The Shiva Linga at Ujjainak is so impressive and big that to reach upto the second tier of the Mandir and even both the hands need to be used to worship the Linga Swarupa. On the eastern

side of the Mandir is Bhairava Mandir situated and its outer wing is Shiva Kanga Kund which merges with a stream leading to Kosi River; on the western wing is the Bala Sundari Mandir where Shiva Ratri celebrations are observed on Chaitra Suklashtami and a 'Mela' or Temporary Marketing Bazar is organised too. On the four sides of the Mandir are hundred Rudra Swarupas are arranged as these Idols were dug up in the same area as believed. Also in the dig up at the same place were the Murtis of Jageshar and Harishankar too and these were duly installed. Bhima Shankar Linga is of big build and is therefore named Moteshwar. To the western side of Devi Bala Sundari is an ancient Durga Mandir called 'Khila' where it is believed Dronacharya was famed as having trained Dhanur Vidya to Kauravas and Pandavas and a local belief is that Dronacharya instructed Bhima of Pandavas to organise the Moteshwar Linga. It is further believed that the illustrious Shravan Kumar who was renowned in the history pages of Bharat as the ideal most son for his Matru-Pitru bhakti or of unparalleled devotion to his parents who were not only disabled but blind too served them for long by carrying them on his shoulders in a two seat balance was in the habit of resting them for good time while on Tirtha Yatra intervals near by till King Dasharadha killed by arrows from a distance on the other side of Shiva Ganga Kund near by presuming Shravan Kumar was a deer carrying drinking water for his parents; when the King realised his mistake and brought the dead body of Shavana Kumar to his parents, the latter cursed Dasharatha too to suffer 'Putrashoka' or the anguish of separation from Rama with Sita and Lakshmana while departing from Ayodhya on 'Aranyavaasa' or forest life for fourteen long years.

Uttarakhand's (Almora's) Devi Kaushiki Mandir: From Kathgodam near Almora atop Kashaya Parvat is the Devi Kaushiki Mandir where the notorious demon brothers named Shumbh- Nishumbh were exterminated by Kaushiki Devi who emerged from the Holy Physique of Devi Parvati herself and this is reported in Markandeya Purana and the immortal 'Durga Sapta Shati' too is a part of the Purana which is extracted from Devi Bhagavata. Its recitation is stated to sustain excellent marital relations as also smoothen problems of marital life, if need be.

Jageshwar's Nageshwara Jyotir Linga: Some 15 km. up from Almora in the Kumoa region of 1870 mtrs. height from sea level stated to be of some pre medieval era of some 9th century stands unique the Sacred Nageshwara Linga Dham, situated in the dense forest of Deodar trees in a typically tranquil and picturesque setting with streams of Nandini and Surabhi of Jata Ganga River flowing along near the Dham. This Place was visited and revived by Adi Shankaracharya on his way to Kedar Kshetra. The Jageshwar Maha Deva Dham is a cluster of some 124 large and small Temples: the Jageswar Mandir is protected by the two dwarapakalas named Nandi and Skandi and is bright with Akhanda Jyoti or the everlasting flame. The Shiva Linga is of two parts, the larger portion depicting Mahadeva and the minor portion as Devi Parvati. Mrityunjaya Mandir or the Conquering Lord of Death is unique with an eye shaped opening of the Linga and devotees have immense faith in constantly reciting the Mantra from Shukla Yajurveda viz. *Om Triamibikam yajamahe sugandhim pushtivradhanam, Urvaarukamiva bandhanaan mrityor muksheeya banbhanaat/* (My sincere prostrations and submissions to Maha Deva, the Three Eyed and Omniscient One with abundant grace and fragrant divinity to grant us invigoration and prosperity. May He release us from the shackles and the travails of life and bestow longevity by avoiding untimely and premature death as a ripe fruit falls from the tree of life). Besides the Mrityunjaya Mandir where excellent facilities are in Place for performing 'Namaka Chamaka purvaka Abhisheka' by the devotees themselves as in the case of Shiva Temples in general and Dwadhasha Linga dhams in particular, there are other Temples in the vicinity of Dandeshwara, Kubera, Chandi, Nanda Devi or Nava

Durga, Navagraha and Surya Temple. Some two km by walk in the serene environs is situated the Koti Linga Maha Deva at the ‘Sangam’ or the Merging Point of Jata Ganga and Sama Ganga flows, where Mada Deva himself performed meditation for Loka Kalyan or Universal Auspiciousness. In the vicinity are Vinayak Kshetra, Jhankar SamaMaha Deva, Pushti Bhagavati, Ailavata Caves, Brahma Kunda, Patala Bhuvaneshwari caves and so on are yet other Temples nearby the Dham.

Incidentally *Naina Devi* at Nainital in Himachal Temple up the hill connected by cable car which witnessed a stampede in 2008 Navaratri Nine Day Festival a record crowd of about a lakh visited and several Yatris perished due the break down of hill-cliff! *Shimla*, the Capital of Himachal Pradesh, derives its name from Shyamala Devi, is par excellence with a height up to 8000 ft on Himalayas for its scenic charisma, while Kulu valley-Manali mountain range are famed for Navartra Festival and the Abode of *Hidimba Devi* Mandir -the wife of Bhima of Pandavas respectively

Kangra's Jwalamukhi: From Amritsar to Pathankot and Baijnath Paparola/ Jwalamukhi Rd. Station is situated the Jwamakuhhi Mandir where Devi Sati's body part viz. her tongue; the specific name of Devi is Siddhida/Ambika and Maha Bhairava's corresponding name is Unmatta Bhairava. The upper portion of the Mandir is of Golden make. Its rear portion has a ‘mashaal’ or torched flame originated from Earth from which Devi was supposed to have emerged; apart from the central flame, the wall mosiacs, wall corners, right side and central ‘Kund’ too minor flames emerge always. Behind the Mandir of Jwalamukhi Ambika Devi, there is a small well full of water as also a jala kund from which devotees lift up water. During Navaratras, continous flow of devotees is attracted for Devi darshan and puja besides a Mela.

Kangra from Pathankot of about 90 km is situated Kangra Mandir and Devi Maha Maya, also called Vajreshwari or Vidyeshwari where as per local belief-if not as included in the Puranas-Devi Sati's mouth fell at this Place and there is a Pratima or Image of the Mouth and also of ‘Vaag Yantra’ on a silver base is in position. Maha Peetha Purana has included Kar nat Mandir at Kangra of Himachal Pradesh stating that Sati Devi's both ears fell and the incumbent Devi is named Jaya Durga while Maha Bhairava is named Abhiru. Navaratra Celebrations are organised here too. Not far from Kangra Mandir at Vaijnatha Paparola is Vaidyanath Mandir which again is claimed as one of the popular Dwadasha Shiva Jyotir Lingas. This Holy Mandir celebrates Shiva Ratri and Mela.

Shakti Peethas

Having mentioned of Dwadasha Jyotir Lingas, intermittent references also provide about the Shakti Peethas; here are fuller details of Shakti Peethas at one Place as follows: These facts are given in Maha Peetha Purana in fuller detail with Place-Organ/Ornament-Embodiment name of Devi and name of Maha Bhairava:

- 1) Chandanwadi to Amarnath in J& K- Throat-Maha Maya-Trisandheswara
- 2) Attahas village of Dakshindihi, Bardhaman near Katwa in West Bengal- Left Arm- Lips-Phullara Devi-Vishwesh
- 3) Bahula on the banks of Ajay River at Ketugram near Katwa, Burdwan in West Bengal-Left arm-Bahula Devi-Bhiruk Bhairava
- 4) Bakreshwar on the banks of Paap hara River, District Bhirkhum near Dubrajpur Railway Station, West Bengal-Bhrikuti or the middle part of Eye Brows-Mahishasura Mardini-Vakranath
- 5) Bharava Parvat, near Kshipra River in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh-Upper Lip- Devi Avanti-Lambakana Bhairava
- 6) Bhavanipur Union at Karatoya tata, 28km from Sherpur, Bogra Dist, Bangladesha-Left ankle

ornament-Arpana Devi-Vamana Bhairava 7) Gandaki, Pokra, Muktinatha Mandir, Nepal- Body Part temple on fore head-Gandaki Chandi Devi-Chakrapani Bhairava 8) Saptashringi Mandir at Vani in Nasik, Maharashtra- both chins-Bhramari Devi-Vikritaksha Bhairava 9) Hingula in Southern Baluchistan, some 125 km towards North West from Karachi, Pakistan-Brahma randhra of Sati Devi's head- Devi Kattari-Bhimalochana Bhairava 10) Jayanti at Nartiang village in Jaintiya Hills Dt., locally popular as Nartiang Durga Temple in Meghalaya-Left thigh-Devi Jayanti-Kramadishwar Bhairava 11) Jessoreshwari at Ishwaripur, Shyamnagar in Bangladesh-Palms of hands and soles of the feet-Devi Jessoreshwari-Chanda Bhairava 12) Jwalaji, Kangra, Himachal Pradesh-Tongue-Devi Siddhida (Ambika)-Unmatta Bhairava-13) Kalighat, Kolkata, West Bengal-Right toes-Devi Kalika-Nakuleshwar Bhairava 14) Kalmadhava on the banks of Shon River in a cave over hills near Amarakantak, Madhya Pradesh-Left buttock-Kali Devi-Asitanga Bhairava 15) Kamgiri, Kamakhya in Neelachala hills near Guwahati in Assam-genitals-Devi Kamakhya-Unmaada Bhairava 16) Kankali tala on Kopai River banks north east of Bolpur Station in Birbhum Dt; and locally known as Kankaleshwari Mandir, in West Bengal-Bone is the part of body fallen-Devi Devagarbha-Ruru Bhairava 17) Kanyashram Balambika Bhagavati Temple in Kanyakumari of Tamilnadu / also presumed to be in Chittagong, Bangladesh- back the body part-Devi Sharvani-Nimisha Bhairava 18) Karnat, Kangra, Himachal Pradesh- both ears- Devi Jaya Durga-Abhiru Bhairava 19) Kiteetkona village, Lalbagh Court Rd Station, Murshidabad Dt. West Bengal-Ornament of Kireeta or Crown-Devi Vimla-Sanvart Bhairava 20) Anandamani Temple at Ratnavali on the banks of Ratnakar River at Khanakul-Krishna nagar, Hoogly Dt. West Bengal-Right shoulder-Devi Kumari- Shiva Bhairava 21) Bhramari Devi Temple in Jalpaiguri near Boda Village on the banks of Teesta or Tri-Shrota or the Sangam of three water flows, West Bengal-Left leg- Devi Bhramari-Ambara Bhairava 22) Manas under Tibet at the foot of Mount Kailash in the Lake Manasarovara-Tibet-Right hand-Devi Dakshayani- Amara Bhairava 23) Manibandh at Gayatri hills near Pushkar, Rajasthan-Sati Devi's bracelet ornaments fell off there and the Devi's specific name is Devi Gayatri and Sarvanad Bhairava is Maha Deva's specific name 24) Mithila near Janakpur railway station on the Indian border of Nepal-Left shoulder- Devi Uma-Mahodara Bhairava 25) Nainativu/Manipallavaram, Northern Province of Sri Lanka-Devi's anklets-Indrakshi/ Nagapooshani/ Bhuvaneshwari worshipped by Indra, Rama and Ravana too, besides Garuda and Naga devas too-Rakshasheswar/Nayanair Bhairava 26) Nalhati/ Nalateshwari Temple, Birhum Dt. West Bengal-body part fallen being the Devi Sati's vocal chord-Devi's name is Kalika Devi- Yogesh Bhairava 27) Guhyeshwari Temple, near Pashupatinath Temple, Kathmandu, Nepal- both the knees-Devi Maha shira- Kapali Bhairava 28) On Chandranatha hill in the famed Chandranatha Temple in Chittagong Dt. Bangladesh- Right arm-Devi Bhavani-Chandrashekhara Bhairava 29) Panchasagara near Hardwar, Uttarakhanda-Lower teeth-Devi Varahi-Maharudra Bhairava 30) Prabhasa Kshetra near Veraval and Somnatha Mandir, Gujarat-Stomach- Devi Chandrabhaga- Vakratunda Bhairava 31) Prayag near Sangam at Alhabad, Uttar Pradesh- Finger is the body part fallen-Devi Lalita-Bhava Bhairava 32) Kurukshetra toen or Thaneshwar /Staneshwar, Haryana-Ankle bone, Savitri / Bhadrakali Devi-Sthanu Bhairava 33) Ramgiri at Chitrakuta on Jhansi-Manikpur Railway Line, Uttar Pradesh- right breast-Devi Shivani-Chanda Bhairava 34) Saintiya's Nandikeshwari Temple under a banyan tree, Birbhum Dt. West Bengal- necklace-Devi Nandini-Nandikeshwara Bhairava 35) Kotilingeshwar Temple on the banks of Godavari River, near Rajamundry, Andhra Pradesh- cheeks- Rakini Devi / Vishweswari- Vatsnabh / Dandapani Bhairava 36) Shivaharakaraya nearv Sukkur station from Karachi, Pakistan-Eyes-Mahishasura mardini-Krodhish Bhairava 37) Shondesh at source point of Narmada River in Amarantak, Madhya Pradesh- Right buttock-Narmada Devi- Bhadrasena Bhairava- 38) Shri Parvat, near Ladakh, Jammu and Kashmir or alternatively

believed as Srishailam on Shiva Parvat hills, Karnool Dt. Andhra Pradesh-Right anklet ornament- Devi Sundari- Sunderanada Bhairava 39) Shri Shail, Dakshina surma near Gotatkar, Sylhet Town, Bangladesh- neck got dropped- Devi's name Maha Lakshmi- Sambaranand Bhairava 40) Shuchi, Shuchindram Temple near Kanyakumari, Tamilnadu- Upper teeth- Devi Narayani-Sanhara Bhairava 41) Sugandha, Shikarpur, Barisal town on the banks of Sonda river, Bangladesh- nose- Sugandha Devi- Trayambika Bhairava 42) Tripura Sundari Temple at Udaipur, Tripura- Right leg- Tripura Sundari- Tripuresha Bhairava 43) Ujaani near Guskara, Burdwan Dt. West Bengal- Right wrist- Devi Mangala Chandika- Kapilambara Bhairava 44) Varanasi at Manikarnika Ghat on the banks of Ganga- Ear ring- Devi Vishalaakshi / Manikarni- Kalabhairava 45) Vibhash, Purba Medinipur, West Bengal-Left ankle- Devi Kapalini (Bhima rupa)- Sarvananda Bhairava 46) Virat near Bhratpur, Rajasthan- left toe- Devi Ambika- Amriseswar Bhairava 47) Bhuteswar Mahadev Temple, Katyayani Peeth, Brindavan, Uttar Pradesh- Hair ringlets- Devi Uma- Bhutesha Bhairava 48) Jalandhar's Devi Talaab, Punjab- Left breast- Tripuramalini- Bhutesha Bhairava 49) Baidyanath dhaam, Jarkhand- Heart- Jaya Durga- Baidyanatha bhairava 50) Puri, Biraja in Jagannatha Temple, Odisha- navel- Bimala Devi-Jagannaath Bhairava 51) Burdwan, West Bengal- Great toe- Jugaadya- Kshera Kandaka Bhairava.]

Kurukshetra, Pehva, Gadhamukteshwar:

Kurukshetra: Kurukshetram gamishyaami Kurukshere vasaamyaham, Ya evam satatam bruyat sopi Paapaih pramuchyate/ Paamsavopi Kurukshetre Vaayuna samudiritaah, Api dushkrita karmaanam nayananti paramam gatim/ Dakshinena Saraswatya drushadvidyuttarena cha, ye vasanti Kurukshetre te vasantib trivishtape/Manasaapyabhikaamasya Kurukshetram Yuddhishtara, Paapaani vipranashyanti Brhama lokam cha gacchati/ Gatwaa hi shraddhayaa yuktah Kurukshetram Kurudvah, Phalam prapnoti cha tadaa Rajasuyaasshwamedhayoh/ (Even the mere resolve of visiting and staying at Kurukshetra would demolish sins and the dust carried by the winds from there shall indeed purify sinners and lead them to higher planes of virtue. Kurukshetra sprawls all over the region from Rushadwiti from the north to Saraswati River in the south and blessed are those who reside in this are considered to be in heavenly surroundings. The thoughts of undertaking dutiful yatra to Kurukshetra by themselves evaporate blemishes while those who actually complete the yatra as per the regulations specified would have reaped the fruits of executing Rajasuya and Ashwamedha Yagnas-Shatapata Brahmana Upanishad). It is stated that Maharshis most initially pronounced VedaMantras at this hallowed banks of Saraswati River and it was this very tirtha that Brahma and Devas performed Maha Yagnas and indeed it was this Sacred Land where Maharshis like Vasishtha and Vishwamitra attained Brahma Jnaana. It was this very Place that the Dharma Kshetra of Kurukshetra fought Dharma Yuddha for eighteen long days and Virtue triumphed against Viciousness and vindicated Adharma for good. It was this very Place again where Lord Srikrishna delivered the eternal message of Bhagavad Gita to posterity as the Quintessence of Veda Shastra Purano - panishads put together! The origin of Kurukshetra is vividly described in the Essence of Vamana Purana which appeared vide [www. Kamakoti.Org/](http://www.Kamakoti.Org/) Articles as also on Google as follows:

At the beginning of Satya Yuga, there was a King named Ruksha of Chandra Vamsha who begot King Samvarna. On assuming Kingship, Samvarna entrusted his royal duties to his Guru Vasishtha and moved about carefree. While he was in a Forest named Vibhaja, he met a Deva Kanya called Tapati and both of them got mesmerised with each other. On return, Vasishtha Maharshi learnt of the King's infatuation as the latter was neither eating nor behaving properly. Similar was the situation with the Deva Kanya Tapati.

Vasishtha learnt from his Divadrishti that the Deva Kanya was the daughter of Suryta Deva, entered Surya mandala and requested Surya for the alliance and both of them were happily married to eventually beget a boy called **Kuru** who was eventually married to Devi Soudamini. After Kuru became the King, Kuru tried all possibilities of endearing his Praja and during his ‘Dharma Paalana’ or Virtuous Administration, there were no problems of poverty, thefts, misdirected judgments and health limitations and soon became a popular King. Then he travelled to become more and famous and victorious and entered Daitavana where he saw the Sacred River Sarasvati which was called Brahma Putri, Harijihva and Sudarshana Janani. He derived extreme happiness and satisfaction in the River and towards north of the River and decided to construct a ‘Samanta Panchaka Dharmasthaan’ spread over an Area of five yojanas width and length. It was learnt that there were five such ‘Vedikaas’ where Shambhu Deva performed Pancha Yagnas, of which the Uttara Vedi on the banks of River Sarasvati was known as the most renowned; the Madhya Vedi as popular at Prayaga Kshetra, Purva Vedi was at Gaya Tirtha, Dakshina Vedi was at Jagannatha puri and the Paschima Vedi was at Pushkara Kshetra. King Puru decided to add the Panchama Vedi to be constructed as Samantaka Panchaka Dharmasthana. He procured a golden plough and a pair of animals to commence tilling the land. Indra Deva approached the King Kuru as to what was he desirous of doing and the reply was that he had decided to construct an ‘Ashtaanga Bhumi’ of *Tapah Satyam Ksamaam Damaam Krushaami Shoucham Daanam cha Yiogamcha Brahmachaaritaam/* or Meditation - Truthfulness-Endurance-Mercy-Cleanliness-Charity-Yoga and Celibacy which should be called Ashtanga Farming! Indra further asked: Where would be a number of ploughs and how would you procure seeds from! The reply was that Indra should not make fun of an honest endeavour as Indra left quietly. The King himself commenced tilling some four to five yojanas of land daily. Then Lord Vishnu appeared and asked the same question of Indra as to where would he secure the seeds. The King said convincingly that the seeds would emerge from his body. Vishnu asked the King to extend his hand so that the former could plough and the King could spread the seeds. The King faithfully extended his right hand and at once Bhagavan cut off his hand with his chakra to several pieces! Kuru then extended his left hand and Vishnu sliced off that hand too to thousand pieces. The King offered his thighs one by one which too were cut. Finally King Kuru offered his head and then Vishnu was convinced that the King was very serious in his resolve and asked him to ask for a boon. Kuru replied: *Yaavadetan –mayaa krushtam Dharmaksetram tadastucha, Snaataanaam cha mrutaaaamcha mahapunya phalam twiha/ Upavaasamcha Daanamcha cha snaanam japyam cha Madhava, Homayagna –dikam chaanyacchubham Vaapyashubham Vibho/* (May this Place which I had tilled be declared as Dharma Kshetra; may this Place become a Sacred one where bathing or even dying attain Maha Punya. May the virtuous deeds of Upavaasa-Snaana-Daana- Japa-Havana-Yagna etc be paid for with multiplied fruits!) The King further prayed to Vishnu that he along with Parama Shiva should reside at this Kshetra always. Vishnu not only granted the boons asked by the King but also blessed the Hallowed Place to be called as Kuru Kshetra, that his fame and name would be eternal as long as the Universe would last, that this Kshetra called Kurujaangala would be protected by Chandra naamak Yaksha, Vaasuki naamak Sarpa, Shankukarna naamak Vidyaadhara, Sukeshi naamak Rakshseswara, Ajaavan naamak King, Mahadeva naamak Agni and so on. Some eight thousand arrows-men would ensure that sinners of extreme nature would be prevented to perform bathings in the Kshetra ; there is a ‘paapa vinaashaka’ and Sacred Tirtha known as Pruthuudaka or Pohovaa Tirtha here and Brahma collected the waters of various Maha Samudras, Punya Tirthas, Rivers and Sarovaraas into it! Brahmasara Tirtha: Maharshi Lomaharshana stated that Brahmasara Tirtha was originally spread from Sannihita Sarovar at Rantuk Sthaana to Ojas Sthaana and

further upto Chaturmukha Sthaana; but over passage of time, the Tirtha occupied the space from Viswasvara Shaana to Asthipura and from Vriddha Kanya to Oghavati River. Half way of the Tirtha, it was believed that Rudra attained 'Sthaanutva' or 'Sthiratwa' (Solidification).

Meanwhile, Maha Muni Markandeya prayed to Devi Sarasvati flowing in the form of the illustrious River obliged the Muni to accompany him wherever he wished him to lead and the Muni requested her to link up Brahmasira to Ramahlada to Kurukshetra and thus the latter assumed further significance; In the Kurukshetra Tirtha thus one secures the 'maha phala' of bathing and worshipping in Seven Vanaas viz. Kaamuaka Vana, Aditi Vana, Vyasa Vana, Phalaki Vana, Surya Vana, Madhu Vana, and Sheeta Vana; besides nine Sacred Rivers viz. Sarasvati, Vaitarani, Aapaga, Mandakini Ganga, Madhstra, Vaasu Nadi, Koushiki, Drushdyati or Kaggar, and Hiranyavati. Kurukshetra Thirtha Yatra needs to be initiated by obtaining the permission of the Yaksha called Rastuk, proceed to Aditya Vana where Devi Aditi was stated to have performed her Tapasya in favour of her sons viz. Devataas; proceed to Vishnu Sthaan called 'Savana', visit Vimala Tirtha to worship Vimalaswara to reap the fruit of attaining Rudra Loka; Kaushiki sangama to wash off the blemishes stored thus far; Dharani Tirtha to seek relief for 'Aparadhaas' of devotees; Daksheswara Shiva in Dakshaashrama to attain the fruit of Ashvamedha Yagna; Shalukini Tirtha; then move on to Saptiridadi to thrash up fears of serpents; then worship Rastuk Dwarapal for an overnight stay there for Kshama Prarthana and Abheestha Siddhi; then visit Panchanaada Tirtha, Koti Tirtha, and Jwaala Maheshwara. Pilgrims to Kurukshetra are advised to definitely perform 'Pitru Devaarchana' at the famed Pushkara Tirtha which was constructed by Parashurama Deva and it was believed that worship there would bestow fulfillment of wishes sought by the devotees. Surya Grahana Snaana at the nearby Sarovara called 'Saannihitya' is stated to provide access to Swarga after one's life. Essentially, Brahmasara Sarovara and the adjacent Sannithisara are deemed as Kurukshetra. Puranas clarify that far well before Maha Bharata Battle, King Kuru built Brahmasara and Sanniti sara Sarovaras. However, there is a misconception that Dwaipayana / Parashara Sarovar is Kurukshetra itself as that sarovar was actually where Duryodhana and Bhima fought the last leg of Maha Bharata Battle. Factually speaking, Brahma sara and Sannihitisara are at Thanesara township off Kurukshetra by a mile. Brahmasara Sarovara and the adjacent Sannithi sara are approx. 5 km wide and as much of length each. Parashara Sarovara is approx 13km from Thanesara. Surya grahana snaanas are normally performed at Thanesara Sarovaras or specifically at Jyoti sara where Lord Krishna along with Yaduvamsheeyas arrived from Dwaraka as per the Dashama Skandha of Maha Bhagavata before the Maha Bharata Battle. It is said that apart from Surya Grahana days, Somavati Amavasyas also yield Maha Phala on performing Snaana-Dana-Puja to Surya Deva. Incidentally, portions of Bharata Pita Mahatma Gandhi's ashes were formally immersed in the Kurukshetra Sarovara in 1948. The Sannihita besides Brahmasara has special significance for Pitru Tarpanas: Vishnu Dharmottra script underlines: *Punah Sannihityaam vai Kurukshetre visheshatah, Archayeccha Pitrustatra sa putrastwanrunobhavet/* (At the Sannihita Tirtha inside Kurukshetra, whatever Pitru Tarpana and Shraddhas are dutifully executed are highly fulfilling in reducing 'Pitru Runa' or the indebtedness to Pitru Devatas.) Also Vamana Dwadashi, Krishna Janmashtami, Vijaya Dashami of Navaratra are noteworthy for worship at this Tirtha. Thanesara or Sthaaneshwara Tirtha already referred to in the earlier pages on Kedarnath where Shiva-Vishnu Identity was established is so significant that even sprinkling of water on one's head, let alone a snaana, would demolish bodily ailments; in fact, *King Vena the erstwhile form of Prithu Chakravarti of Dhruva's lineage was cured of his leprosy by such sprinkling of this water! [* King Vena was an evil doer and Maharshis of the day forcibly churned his body to destroy the evil in it and Prithu Chakravarti the epoch

making Conquerer of the entire Universe emerged and eventually he controlled Bhu Devi ran away from his control in the form of a cow but Pruthu subdued her and forced her to yield that kind of milk as various beings ranging from Devas to all celestial beings, Danava-Rakshasa- Daithyas, Rishis, humans, Nagaadi Patala vasis etc in the form that they desired like Devas sought Amrita, Danavadis desired blood, Manushyas asked for foodgrains, Nagas wanted poison and Rishis opted for Tapas! Hence Bhudevi is since named as Prithwi after Pruthu Chakravarthi!] Pandavas worshipped Sthaneshwara before Maha Bharata battle for victory. *Chandra Kupa* (well) is in the midst of Brahmasara Sarovara land where Yudhishtara installed ‘Vijaya Stambha’ after the victory at the Battle. *Bhadra Kali Mandir* not far from Sthanu Tirtha’s Shiva Mandir is one of the 51 Shakti Peethas aforementioned as at Kurukshetra where Devi Sati’s right ankle bone fell. *Bana Ganga Tirtha* some kilometer from Brahmasara is the Place where Arjun of Pandavas hit his arrow to let a flow of water spring from Earth to quench the thirst of Bheeshma Pitamaha the grand father of Kaurava Pandavas. Quite near to Thaneshwar is *Naabhikamal Tirtha* where Brahma was materialised from the Lotus top that emerged from Lord Vishnu’s navel where Brahma’s one of rare temples in Bharat besides a Vishnu Mandir too are situated. From Kurukshetraby a less than a km are *Karna Kheda* where Dana Karma gave away considerable charity to Brahmanas before the Great Battle of Kaurava Pandavas of Maha Bharata. From Karna Kheda is the *Aapaga Tirtha* where Pirtru Tarpanas are performed especially on Bhadrapada Krishna Paksha Chaturdashi afternoon. In the adjacent neighborhood of Kurukshetra are *Narakataari* where Bhishma the grand father of Pandavas ad Kaurava cousins was laid down on Shara Shayya or bed of arrows awaiting the arrival of Uttarayana to end his life as he had the boon of so doing by his mother Ganga Devi. *Kubera Tirtha* is on the banks of Saraswati River where Kubera the Lord of Wealth performed a famed Yagjna. *Markandeya Tirtha* near Kubera Tirtha again on Saraswati River Banks performed worship to Surya Bhagavan and attained final Salvation after living through ‘Yugaantar’ and beyond Kalpas. *Dadhichi Tirtha* near Markandeya Ashram is the Illustrious one where Maharshi Didhichi- the son of Bhrigu Maharshi the Brahma Manasa Putra or the mind born son of Brahma gave away in charity to Deva Chief Lord Indra Deva the Maharshis backbone from which Devas materialised Vajrayudha to destroy Vritrasura the most invincible Demon Son of Vishwarupa Maharshi the son of Twashata in a Brahma Yajna. Dadhicha mastered the Narayana Kavacha. *Aditi Kunda* was the Ashram of Devi Aditi the wife of Maharshi Kashyap the mother of Devas who gave birth to Vamana Deva the Avatar of Vishnu. Besides, there are also Soma Tirtha, Karna Vadha Tirtha, Jayaghara where Arjuna killed Jayadratha who killed the famed Abhimanyu and took his revenge by stopping Sun set as an illusion created by Lord Krishna as Arjuna swore that Jayadratha would be killed before Sunset. *Parashara-father of Veda Vyasa- Hrada* or the Ashram of Parashara and the Sarovara nearby where Duryodhana on the last eighteenth day of Maha Bharata Battle challenged by Bhima, Duryodhana to come out from hiding and entered into a duel or one- to- one -battle and finally got killed by Bhima. *Jyotisara Tirhta* is the Place where the epoch making **Bhagavad Gita** was rendered to Arjuna which is meant for posterity too.

Pehva /Pruthudaka: Punyamaahuh Kurukshetram Kurukshetrat Sarasvati,Saraswatyaaccha Tirthaani Tirthobhyascha Pruthudakam/ Pruthudakaat punyatamam naanyat Tirtham Narottamama/ Agjnaanaatt anajnagaanaato vaapi striyaa vaa purushena vaa, Yat kinchidashubham karmam krutam maanushavridhhinaa/ Tat sarvam nashyate tatra snaatamaatrasya Bharata, Ashwamedhaphalam chaapi labhate swargameva cha/ (Kurukshetra no doubt is a great Punyamnaya Kshetra, but more than that is Saraswati River and the Hallowed Tirthas on its banks most significantly so is the Pruthudaka where mere

bathing to men and women should wash off their sins committed knowingly or unknowingly and would reap the Ashwamedha Maha Phala and Swarga Prapti.) -Padma Purana-Swarga Khanda and Maha Bharata Tirtha Yatra Parva. Pruthu Sarovara or Pehva is situated near Ambala on the Saraswati River banks[the Story of Prithu Chakravarti has already been described detailing Sannihita Tirtha in Kurukshetra Mahima in the earlier Pages. On the banks of Saraswati River besides Pruthudaka are other Sacred Ghats as follows: *Brahmayoni* where Brahma is famed as having initiated Brahma Srishti where reputed Maharshis like Vishwamitra, Sindhu, Arishtishena attained Salvation; *Awakirshani Tirtha* where Yagnopaveeta Samskara is performed by popular faith; *Brihaspati Tirtha*, *Papaantaka Tirtha*, *Yayati Tirtha* where Saraswati River is worshipped by milk-ghee- honey and Pitru Tarpanas performed especially during Chaitra Shukla Pakshas; *Rama Tirtha* where Parashurama is believed to have executed Yagna, one performs Shraddhas in favour of Parents; *Vishwamitra Tirtha* and *Vasishta Tirtha* etc.

Gadhamukteshwar: On the banks of Ganga near Meerut is the popular Gadhamukteshwar where Mukteshwar Shiva Mandir where Ganga Mandirs too are popular where from Delhi too many devotees throng particularly for Kartika Purnima Snaan. A 'Nriga Kup' or a big Well is a special attraction for Kartika Snanas which are stated to be of a great significance. In fact there are several Mandirs in the area like Jharkandeshwar Shiva Linga, Lakshmi Narayan Mandir, Ram mandir, Chandra Mandir to cure Kshaya or Tuberculosis disease, and so on. Hardly some 12 km from Gadhmukteshwara on the banks of Ganga are scores of Mandirs at Puth like Maha Kaleshwara and Raghunath / Radha Krishna; Mandya Rishi's Ashram near Mandakeshwara Mahadeva Mandir at Mayu; Varaha Rupa Vishnu who destroyed several Demons as also Ambikeshwara worshipped on Shiva Ratris at Ahar; Karnavas or Bhrgu Kshetra where Bhagavati Durga is stated to have rested after terminating Shumbha-Nikumbha Demon brothers; Kampil Nagar popular for Rameshwara nath and Kaleshwarnath Mandirs, Rudrayana Sthana popular for Pinda daana Shraaddhas in Ashwiniyuja Month and so on.

Vraja Mandala- Mathura and Brindavana:

Mathura: Puranas signify the Uniqueness of Mathura which is called with varying names like Madhupatra, Madhupuri, Mathura or Madhura as this was described in Itihasas was rid of the torments by Madhu Daitya by Shatrughna the younger brother of Lord Shri Rama of Ramayana and more so as the Sacred Place of Bhagavan Krishna. Varaha Purana describes: *Na vidyate cha Patale nantirikshe na maanushe, Samaanam Mathurayaahi priyam mama Vasundhare/ Saa ramyaa cha sushastaa cha janmabhumistathaa mama/* (There is no other more beloved Tirtha like Mathura for me even better than those in Patala, Antariksha or Bhuloka) *Maha maghyam Prayage tu yat phalam labhate Narah, Tat phalam labhate Devi Madhuraayaam dine dine/* (The same fruitful results that one could reap at Prayaga the Sangama Place of Three Holy Rivers of Ganga-Jamuna-Saraswati on Magha Month's Pournami is normally available each day at Mathura) *Purna Varha sahasram tu Varanasyaam hi yat phalam, Tat phala labhate Devi Madhraayaam kshanamna hi/* (Residing thousand years at Kasi is considered as fruitful as a 'Kshana' or a moment at Mathura). Similarly, the visit to Pushkara Tirtha and stay there on Kartika Pournami is indeed fruitful and that would bless a person to accomplish with Mathura Yatra. Vishnu Purana also describes that snana and darshana of Mathura Krishna on Janmashtami, Yama Dwiteeya, and Jyeshtha Shukla Dwadashi are considered to be of great consequence. Vajramandali has twelve Sacred 'Vanas' viz. Madhunvana, Kumudavana, Kamyakavana, Bahula vana, Bhadravana, Swadiravana, Shrivana, Mahavana, Lohajinghvana, Bilvavana, Bhandiravana, and the most popular

Brindavana. While each of these Vanas have their own significance, indeed Brindavana is of utmost prominence. Padma Purana underlines the special status of Brindavana: *Guhyad guhyatamam ramyam madhyam Brindaavanam Bhuvi, Aksharam Paramanandam Govindasthaanamavyayam/* (Brindavana on Earth indeed is the body of Bhagavan Srikrishna itself and is seat full of joy and even the touch of the dust would pave the way for salvation. When asked about the way to attain ukti, Bhagavan Krishna smilingly replied that let 'Vraja raja' or the dust from Vraja Bhumi may fall on your head! The old name of Madhura was Madhuvana where in the days of yore Swayambhu Manu's grandson Dhruva who sparks on the sky as a Star was directed by Narada Muni to perform severe Tapasya stating *Punyam Madhuvanam yatra saannidhyam nityadaa Hareyh!* and Bhagavan Vishnu blessed him to attain stardom! Madhura on its banks flows Yamuna River and as many as twenty four main 'ghats' are spread out like Vishrama Ghat, Prayaga ghat, Kankhala ghat, Bindu ghat, Bangali ghat, Surya ghat, Chintamani ghat, Dhruva ghat, Rishi ghat, Moksha ghat, Koti ghat, Brahma ghat, Ganesa ghat, Manasa ghat, Dashashwamedha ghat, Chakra tirtha ghat, Krishna ganga ghat, Soma tirtha ghat, Brahma loka ghat, Ghantaabharana ghat, Dharapatana ghat, Sangama Tirtha ghat, Nava Tirtha ghat, and Asikunda ghat Each of these Ghats has an episode to describe such as Vishrama ghat where Krishna and Balarama rested for a while King Kamsa was killed; Asikunda Ghat is renowned as Varaha Kshetra and so on. On all the four sides of Mathura are four Shiva Mandiras viz. Bhuteshwara in the Western side, Pippaleswar on the Eastern side, Rangeswar on the Southern side and on the Northern side is Gokarneshwara. *Dwarakaadheswara* is the most well known Mandir. Besides the other Mandirs are Gatathama Narayana, Vaaraaha, Govinda Mandirs and so on. Mathura Pradakshina or Parikrama is applauded in Varaha Purana: *Mathuraam samanuprapya yastu kuryaat Pradakshinam, Pradakshini kruta tena Sapta Dwipa Vasundhara/* (Those who reach Mathura to perform a parikrama are stated to have performed the same around Sapta Dwipas from Vasundhara or Earth).

Brindavana: About 8 km from Mathura is Brindavan comfortably reachable by motor and on way one could see Gita Mandir. Many perform Parikrama to Brindavan daily too. Brahma Vaivarta Purana details the origin of Brindavan that in the Satya Yuga King Kedar's daughter Brinda performed intense Tapasya to attain Krishna Bhagavan [mortal Krishna was an Incarnation in Dwapara Yuga] and Bhagavan blessed Brinda with his darshan and Brinda Devi was the principal figure in the Rasa Leelas stated to have been performed with Brinda at Brindavana by Lord Krishna the Avatar in Dwapara Yuga. The significant places on the banks of the Sacred Yamuna River are Kaliya Hrada at Nandanavana where Bala Krishna punished Kaliya serpent; Yugala ghat where Yugala Kishora Mandir with Radha Krishna Idols are present; Radhavallabha Mandir with swaambhu Shalagrama shila, Shri Ranga Mandir, Govinda Deva Mandir, Shahji Mandir, Biharji Mandir of Thakur, Krishna Balarama Mandir (Iscon), Madan Mohan (Chaitanya Maha Prabhu) Mandir, Garud Govinda Mandir, Jaipur Mandir, Radha Damodar Mandir, Radha Ras Bihari Ashta Sakhi Mandir, Kesi Ghat where Krishna decimated Kesi demon etc. Not far from Brindavan are Gokula, Mahavana, Baladeva, Nandagaon and Govardhana some 10 km from Mathura. Vraja Desha Parikrama stated to be of 84 kms of distance with a duration of 16 days would witness among others Madhuvan, Talavan, Kumudvan, Danvaktra dhwamsa, Vallabhavana, Radhakund, Govardhana, Paraseeli which Vallabhacharya followers consider this Place as Brindavana, Kamavana, etc.

Naimisharanya, Prayaga, Chitrakut, Kalanjar and Khajuraho:

Naimisharanya: The 41st Adhyaya of Uttarakanda of Kurma Purana makes a detailed reference of

Naimisharanya when Suta Muni in his address to Rishis and Brahmanas said as follows: *Idam Trailokya vikhyatam Teertham Naimishatanyamuttamam, Maha Devapriyakaram mahapaatakanaashanam/* (This Naimisha Tirtha is reputed all over the Trilokas as the most beloved of Maha Deva and the demolisher of all kinds of blemishes and sins.) The Purana further states that Lord Brahma materialised this Tirtha to facilitate the Tapasya of Maha Munis like Marichi, Atri, Vasishtha, Kratu, Bhrigu and Angira and their generations as these Maharshis made express supplication to this effect. Brahma told the Maharshis: *Satram sahasramaasadhwam Vaangmanodosha varjitaah, Deshamcha vah pravakshyaami yasmin desho charishyatha/* (Maharshis! Do perform thousands of Yaginas by sacrificing all kinds of vocal and mental shortcomings; I shall specify a Sanctified spot where you could perform these deeds of virtue) So saying Brahma materialised a Manomaya chakra or Mind borne wheel and asked the Maharshis to follow it soon. He further said: *Yatrasya nemih sheeryet sa Desha Purusharshabhaah, Tatomuvaacha tacchakram te cha tatsamauvrajan, Tyasya vai vrajatah kshipram yatra nemirashershayat, Naimisham tatsmrutam naamna punyam sarvatra pujitam/* (Where-ever the Manomaya chakra's outside circle would break off, that specific spot would indeed be worthy and highly auspicious of executing all deeds of virtue like Yaginas and so on). That Spot indeed has eventually become famed as having been frequented by Deva, Gandharva, Yaksha, Naaga, Rakshasas too besides Maharshis and Brahmanas who all seek Parameshwara. *Anna daanam tapastaptam snaanam japyaadikam cha yat, Ekaikam paavbayet paapam sapta janmakrutam Dwijaah/* (What ever Punya Karyas like Danas, Tapa, Snaana, Japaadis are executed here should indeed root out all types of sins for seven previous births with retrospective effect). In the days of yore, Vaya Deva himself narrated the Brahmanda Purana as scripted by Brahma to Rishis performing yaginas here. Also Rudra Deva along with Pramatha Ganas was in the habit of freely moving about this hallowed Naimisharanya! *Atra praanaan parityajya niyamena Dwijaatayah, Brahma lokam gamishyanti yatra gatwaa na jaayate/* (At the last stages of life the prescribed regulations are to eke one's life and indeed be eligible to pack up for Brahma Loka itself and would not have to have a rebirth!).

Besides Kurma Purana, Chapters of Shiva Purana, Maha Bhagavata, Maha Bharata and so on are devoted about the Naimisharanya Tirtha where Suta Maha Muni rendered discourses to congregations of Sages headed by Shaunaka Muni about the Eighteen Maha Puranas after performing daily Yaginas at this hallowed Naimisharanya where the Kala Chakra's paridhi or the circumference or outer circle called 'nemi' collapsed here and hence the Hallowed Place has been called Naimisha on the banks of Gomati River, off 160 km from Luknow the Capital of Uttar Pradesh. Naimisha is also one of the major 51 Sacred Spots for Pitru Sthaanas and the practice of Somavati Amavasya Tarpanas are still organised. During Dwapara Yuga, Balarama Deva performed Yaginas here, besides Veda Vyasa divided the single Veda to four distinct Vedas, scripted Maha Bharata here too and various other Scriptures. Lalitha Devi's worship is performed at the main Mandir here while Chakra Tirtha is of legendary background. This Tirtha attracts thousands of devotees to perform 'snanas' till date especially on Pournamis and Solar/Lunar eclipse days. *Chakra Tirtham maha Punyam sarva Paapa pranaashanam, Vateete madhya bhage tu prithvyaaah sarvanathakam/ Kurukshetre tu yatpunyam Rahugrassita Divakare, Tat phalam labhate naiva Chakra Tirthasya majjananaat/ Naimishe Chakra tirtheshu snatwa Bharata sattama, Sarvavyaadhi vinirmukto Brahma loka maheeyate/* -Maha Bharata Shanti Parva. (Chakra Tirtha is Maha Punya Prada and Maha Paapa vinashaka; the Tirtha is as significant as that of the Chakra created by Brahma's heart; the maha Phala that is accrued to snanas at Chakra Tirtha is stated to be that one attains at Kurukshetra on Solar Eclipse day when Rahu devours Surya. Snaananas at Chakra Tirtha are such as the unique smasher of all

sins) It is believed that Chakra Tirtha is fathomless and delegations of British swimmers and navigators desirous of disproving the myth organised experiments by diving upto 1000 mts or 30,000 feet depth and gave up for want of oxygen reserves. There is also a 18 ft high Hanunan Idol carrying Rama and Lakshmana on his shoulders as having rescued them from Mahi Ravana hidden in Patala Loka. The local belief is that when Indrajit the son of Ravana was killed in the Ramayana Battle, Ravana asked his brother Mahi Ravana the King of Patala; a conspiracy was hatched to some how abduct Rama Lakshmanas and despatch them to Patala so that the brotheres could be sacrificed to Chandi Devi. Vibhishana now in Rama's camp came to know of the plot and warned Hanuman to be vigilant but assuming Vibhishana Rupa, Ravana succeeded in abducting Rama Lakshmana in deep sleep and despatched them to Patala. Hanuman realised the decept and reached Patala and with the help of Makaradhwaja who was Hanuman's sweat born son helped entry into Patala and destroyed Mahi Ravana and carried them on his shoulders to Chakra Tirtha at Naimisha.

Devi Bhagavata describes the significance of Lalitha Devi Mandira at Naimisha as that of Vishalakshi Mandira at Varanasi: *Varanasyam Vishalaakshi Gauri Mukha nivasini, Kshetre vai Naimishaaranye proktaa saa Linga dharini/* It may be recalled that 51 Shakti Pithas were given in detail in the earlier pages of this Script, but actually 108 Shakti Peethas are stated and the Linga Dharini Lalitha Devi's heart in part [besides at Baidhyanath Dham as Jaya Durga in Jharkhand] also fell of Devi Sati's mortal body at Naimisha. Apart from Vyasa Shukadeva Sthaana afore mentioned, Swayambhu Manu and Devi Shatarupa 'Taposthaana' too is mention worthy as the lineage of Fourteen Manus including the current Vaivaswata Manu got initiated since then. The famed Dashaashwamedha Yagna or the tenth Ashwamedha performed by Shri Rama, Devi Sita and Lakshmanaadi brothers and wives was a memorable success here at Naimisha on Treta Yuga. Annapurna and Vishwanatha mandir at Naimisha is known for devotees executing Pitru Karyas. Dadhichi Kund Snana is stated to be of great importance as that is the Sacred Place where Dadhichi Muni donated his backbone and body with which Indra made Vajrayudha and many other armoury of Devas with which Vritrasura was executed for Loka Kalyan or Universal Relief and Auspiciousness. Suta Muni Gaddi and Pancha Prayaga on the banks of which Akshaya Vata Vriksha are worthy of not missing by yattris. Naimisharanya Parikrama of some 4-5 km covering most of the Sacred Places mentioned is possible. More than this organised tours are conducted from far off Places upto Lucknow for Yajna karyas and Bhagavata Saptahas for week long stays at Naimisha which provides unique spiritual solace and fulfillment. Hardly 5 km from Naimisha is Gomati River known as Dhouta-paapa and Sita kunda Tirthas too, where Devi Janaki was bathing getting ready for participating Ashmamedha Yagnas!

Prayaga (Allhabad): Maha Padma Purana eulogises Prayaga in Uttara Khanda as follows: *Jahnvi Ravisutaa Parameshthiputri Sinndhutrayaabharana Tirthavara Prayaga, Sarvesha maamanugrahaana nayaswa chordhwamantastamo dashavidham dalaya swadhaamnaa/* (Prayaga Tirtha Raja which wears the ornament of three Unique Rivers of Ganga from Vishnu paada-Yamuna the daughter of Surya-Saraswati the daughter of Brahma! Sarveswara! Be very kind to me and lift my stature and demolish the ten folded 'Avidyaandhakara' or the Darkness of Ignorance and enlighten me into knowldge of brilliance!) *Vaageesha Vishnaveesha Purandaraadyaah Paapapranaashaaya Vidaam Vidopi, Bhajanti yatteeramaneela neelam sa Tirtha raajo jayati prayaagah/* (Victory to you Prayaga Tirtha Raja! You are so illustrious that Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva- Indraadi Devas as also Rishi-Maharshis vie with each other to rejoice the Pure White and Blue waters of three Maha Nadis converging together!) *Kaalindajaa*

sangamavaapya yatra pratyagataa swargadhuni dhuneti, Adhyaatma taapatrayam janasya sa TeerthaRaajo jayati Prayagaha/ (Victory to you Prayaga Tirtha Raja! Manushyas on accomplishing the Sangama of Ganga- Kalindini-Yamuna witness themselves the complete destruction of ‘Tapatrayas’ viz. Adhyatmika or Issues of Psychological and Mental nature, Adhi daivika or God made problems and Adhibhoutika or of physical ailments !) Padma Purana further states: Victory to you Prayaga Tirtha! You assume bright blue colour and its varying shades which indeed do pacify human beings from the cyclical tribulations of deaths and births. Victory to you Prayaga Tirtha Raja! Brahma and all the Devatas do frequently take reprieve from their own duties only to enjoy your comforting diversion and even Yama dharma Raja too sometimes frees himself from wielding his ever whipping ‘danda’ just to refresh and rejuvenate himself with the tranquility of the Sangama Raja. Victory to you Prayaga Tirtha Raja! Those persons who dive and bathe in this Sangama of three illustrious Rivers viz. ‘Brahminaputri Tripatha-striveni’ would reap the ‘Akshata Yaga Phala’ and make way to Brahma Loka! *Lokaanaam akshamanaa –naam Makhakritushu Kalou Swargakaamair japastutyaadi shtotrairvachobhih kathamamarapada prapti chintaaturaanaam/ Agnishtomaashwamedha pramukhamara phalam samyagaalocchhya saanga Brahmaadyaisteertha rajobhimatada upadishtoyameva Prayagah/* (In Kaliyuga, human beings no doubt are desirous of attaining Swarga but are unable to execute Yajna-Yaagaas but could resort to Japa-Stuti-Stotra-Paatha and the like; at same time they are desirous of achieving Ashwamedhaadi Yajna phala too; so Brahma and Devatas thought over and materialised Prayaga Tirtha Raja to achieve the similar phala by merely but sincerely observe the bathing regulations and secure Salvation). *Grahaanancha yathaa Suryo Nakshatraanaa yathaa Shashi, Tirthaanaamuttamam tirtham Prayagaasyamanuttamam/* (Just as among the Grahas Surya is the outstanding and among the Stars the Moon, Prayaga indeed the the Unique among the Tirthas) *Prayage tu Naro yastu Maagha snaanam karoti cha, Na tasya phala samkhyasti shrunu Devarshi sattama/* (Those who perform Maagha Snana at Prayaga, they have no measure of Phala sampatti!) To know about the further ‘mahima’ or Unique significance of Prayaga, one might refer to Matsya, Kurma, Agni Maha Puranas also! The very fact that there is a Sangam of three Maha Nadis lends the credential of Prayaga to be the King of Tirthas in Bharat. As there are three distinct river flows have their confluence, this Tirtha rightly designated as Triveni distinguishes itself as Agni Swarupa or of Yajna Vedi; the intermediate region of Ganga-Yamuna is of ‘Garhapatyagni’; where as the region beyond Ganga viz. Pratishtanpur-Jhansi is of ‘Ahavaniyaagni’ and the Region beyond Yamuna ie. Alarkapura and Araila is to be considered as ‘Dakshinaagni’. Hence those who decide to stay at Prayaga for three nights representing the Three Rivers signified as three types of Agni, would derive the benefit of three Sacred Rivers and three forms of Agni! There is a Magha month celebration at Prayaga and those visiting the Maha Tirtha are in this month are designated as Kalpa Vasis! Several such Kalpavasi Yatris residing at the Triveni Sangama make it a point to reside here during Soura Maasa Makara Samkranti upto Kumbha Sankranti and as per Chandramaana stay right up to the end of Maagha Month. Now every twelve years there is a Maha Kumbha at Prayaga when Brihaspati is in Vrishabha Raasi and Surya is in Makara Raasi; every such six years, Ardha Kumbha is observed and then again there is a srting arrival of yatris and a big Mela is organised at Prayaga. Duties at Prayaga: Yatris to Prayaga Tirtha are expected to observe Upavasa or fasting, Japa, Daana, and worship. ‘Mundan’ is a normal duty for males and widows whereas for married women, ‘Veni daana’ or cutting of long head hair edges duly tied together smeared with Mangala Dravyas like turmeric powder and scented sindura powder are to be slashed with scissors and the hair pieces so cut along with recitation of Mantras blessing long marital life with longevity of husbands; there after ‘Mangala Snanas’ or Sacred and auspicious bathings are performed again with

Mantra recitals while leaving the discarded pieces of their hair edges so slashed formally to the flows of Holy Triveni Sangam. The concerned husbands who would have already bathed earlier should once again perform three dips in the flow by holding the shoulders of their wives. There after at the designated Sangama Sthala where the confluence of Ganga and Yamuna waters of brightness and blueish hues and distinct temperatures of coldness and mild warmth-with Saraswati as the under current, puja is to be performed with three dips again possibly or if travelling by boat, by sprinkling of the Sacred Sangam flows on heads. Pinda Puja/ Tarpana and Pinda daana in favour of Pitru Devas would be the next duty to be observed on banks of Prayaga Sangam. Main Devasthaanas at Prayaga: *Trivenim Madhavam Somam Bharadwaajam cha Vaasukim, Vandekshaya vatam Shesham Prayagam Tirtha naamakam/* (Triveni, Bindumadhava, Someshwara, Vaasuki naaga, Akshaya Vata, and Sesha Naaga or Baladeva are the principal Tirthas worthy of including in the Prayaga Yatra itinerary. Veni Madhava is a renowned Vaishnava Peetha nearby Triveni Sangama adjacent to Akshaya Vata. This Bindu Madha in water form comprises twelve Madhavas viz. Shankha Madhava, Chakra Madghava, Gada Madhava, Padma Madhava, Ananta Madhava, Bindu Madhava, Manohara Madhava, Asi Madhava, Sankashtahara Madhava, Adi Venu Mahava, Adi Madhava, Shri Veni Madhava; these Madhavas are either Murtis, or Sacred Rocks or of Jala Swarupa Sthanas. Akshaya Vata is near Patalapura Cave as a dry tree bush on Yamuna River bank where several Murtis are on display like Annapurna, Maha Lakshmi, Gauri Ganesha, Bala Mukund, Maha Deva, Saraswati, Vishnu, Nrisimha, Rama Sita Lakshmana Hanuman etc. Besides these, the other Mandirs are Mankemeshwar Mandir of Shiva and Somanatha reachable by boat, Bindu Madhava already mentioned, Naga Vasuki and Bala Deva or Shesha Mandir, Shiva Kuti or Koti Tirtha, Bharadwaja Ashrama, all on Ganga Banks. Lalitha Devi Mandira as mentioned in ‘Tantra Chudamani’ is one of the Shakti Peethas at Prayaga where Devi Sati’s right hand finger fell following her mortal body parts slicing off by Vishnu Chakra and Devi’s name is called Alop Devi. Prayag’s Antarvedi Parikrama is stated to take a couple of days commencing from Triveni sangama Snaana and Bindu Madhava worship followed by Yamuna bank’s Paapa vimochana Tirtha, Parashurama Tirtha, Govardhana Tirtha, Pischacha mochana Tirtha, Manah Kameshwara Tirtha, Kapila Tirtha, Indreshwara Shiva, Takshaka Kunda, Takshakeshwara Shiva, Kaaliya hrada, Chakra Tirtha, Sindhu Sagara Tirtha near Kakaraghaat, and on the road to Pandava Kupa, Varuna Kupa in Gadhayi Sarai, Kashyapa Tirtha, Dravyeshwara nadha Shiva, Surya Kunda and so on. There after, Hanumam darshana and Triveni Snaana would terminate the Antarvedi Parikrama. Bahir Vedi Parikrama is stated to be taken up about ten days but after this one has to undertake Antar vedi parikrama too. Kurma Purana details an account of Prayaga Mahatmya by narrating of Yudhishtara’s remorse and anguish on the conclusion of the Kurukshetra Battle where not only Kaurava cousins but even Bhishma, Karna his own elder brother, several uncles, Gurus and associates were killed; as he desired to perform ‘Prayaschitta’ or formal atonement/ expiation the Vedic way, Maharshi Markandeya suggested Prayaga Titha darshana and penance., since this Kshetra was protected against Evils by some sixty thousand bows and arrows in favour of Ganga and Sabita Deva riding seven horses protected River Yamuna, while Devi Saraswati flowing under ground has the protection of Brahma himself; Indra and Devas kept constant vigil, Vishnu is ever protective and Maha Deva resides on the Vata Vriksha / banyan tree on the banks of the Sangama. The Purana is quoted: *Prayaagaam smaranaamasya sarvamaayaati sankshamam, Darshanaat tasya Tirthasya mnaamasamkirtinaadapi, Mrittikaa labhanaad vaapi Narah paapaat pramuchyate/* (The very thought of Prayaga would suffice to destroy sins; Prayaga darshana and naama samkirtana or even the touch of Prayaga sand would evaporate all sins). Along with the banks of Yamuna and Ganga are countless Tirthas

each of which has a description; Kurma Purana highlights Yamuna's southern side two Maha Nagas Kambal and Ashwatara who were great devotees of Parama Shiva stayed at that Tirtha and Snaanas there would ward off 'sarpa badha' forever. Another Tirtha named 'Hamsa prapatana' near Pratishtaanapura and the belief is that Apsara landed there by Hamsa/ Swan and bathing there enriches beauty of body and heart; Koti Tirtha bathing and possibly death is stated to ensure Swarga nivasa for crores of years. On Ganga's eastern side is Sarva Samudra Gahvara or Cave and stay there for three days and nights observing fast and celibacy and mental control performing meditation would fetch Ashwamedha Yagna phala. Sangama snaana in Maagha month for three days ensures enormous material fulfillment and at the termination of life the assured passage to higher Lokas. Those who could perform 'karishagni seva' or tapasya within a circles of flames of dried cow dung on the banks of the Sangama Place would bestow and preserve diseaseless body and physical fitness. Yet another Tirtha on the northern side of River Yamuna ensures Runa Vimochana or freedom from indebtedness.

Chitrakut: Most significant fact is that Lord Shri Ram along with Devi Sita and brother Lakshman spent years together at this 'Tapobhumi' or Meditation Land of Sanctity- where Maharshi Atri and his illustrious follower Munis stayed too- during his forest life as per his father Dasharatha's wish. Chitrakut is some 15 km from Karvey Station is on Manikpur-Jhansi Line of Indian Railways. At Chitrakut, the parikrama or circumambulation of Kamadagiri /mountain and Shri Rama Darshan are the significant tasks. The parikrama is to take some five days of some 30 km. Starting from Ragahva Prayaga 'snana' at Sitapur-Koti Tirtha, Sita Devi's Kichen, Hanuman Dhara-Keshavaghar, Pramodavana, Janaki kund, Sirasa vana, Spkatika shila, Anasuya- Gupta Godavari snana, Kailasa Parvata darshana- and from Chabepura to Bharat kupa and Rama Shayya or Rama's bed. On way in the Parikrama occur Mukharavinda where snana is of importance followed by temples of Hanuma, Saakshi Gopala, Lakshmi Narayana, Shri Ramas sthaana, Tulasidasa nivasa, Kaikeyi and Bharata Mandirs, Charana Paduka Mandir. There are three most hallowed 'Charana Chinha' or foot prints of Lord Shri Rama viz. Charana Paduka or His footwear prints, Janaki kunda and 'Sphatika shaala'. The specific Spot where Bharata met Rama for the first time and the molten stone of Rama's footprint is visible still. Among other hallowed Places nearby Charana Paduka are Lakshman Hill and Lakshman Mandir, Janaki Kund, Anasuya-Atri Ashram, Gupta Godavari and so on. Nearby Chitra kut are Ganesha Kund, Valmiki Ashram, Viradha Kunda, Sharabhanga Ashram, Sutikshan Ashram and Rama Vana.

Kaalanjar: Some 80 km from Chitrakut, Kajuraho 130 km and Allhabad 200 km. Kaalanjar literally means 'Kaal' or Time and 'jar' or destruction is famed for Nilakantha Shiva Linga of five feet height with a cave like opening. Both Maha Bharata's Vana Parva and Padma Purana's Srishti Khanda described the Mahatmya or Significance of Kaalanjara Mountain in the context of Chitrakuta Yatra on Manikpur – Jhansi Railway Line some 37 km off Karavi near Kakanjara village and Kalanjara Mountain. *Atra Kaalanjaram naama parvatam loka vishrutam, Tatra Devahrade snaatvaa goshasara phalam labhet/ Yo snaarah snaanapayet tatra girou Kaalanjare Nripa, Swarga loke maheeyet Naro naanyatra samshayah/* This (Tungakaaranya's) Kaalanjara named Mountain is world renowned and those who formally bathe in Devahrada water flows would achieve the fruit of charity of thousand cows; those who are instrumental to bathe likewise would carve out a place in Heaven without doubt). It is possible that there was also a mountain named Hiranyabindu and Agastya Ashram too near by. In any case, the visitors to Kaalanjara would sight a Shiva Mandira; there are seven entry gates through which one would pass through to reach a Fort atop the Mountain and at the fourth gate one would sight a Bhairava Murti Mandir and a cave and

its termination there would be Bhairava Kund and Bhairava Murti. Thereafter there is a gate leading to Hanuman Kunda and Patala ganga which is not accessible through a dark cave. Pandu guha or cave is further on leading to Buddhi Sarovar. Mriga dhara and Kotidhara are through the gate leading to the descending gate followed by Jata Shankara, Ksheera saagara and Tunga Bhairava. In all, there are many Trimurti Idols, but essentially this Tirtha is of Shiva cult. Maha Varaha Purana delineating 'Ishwara Gita' on Shiva Bhakti and Ishwaratwa describes Tirtha Mahima among others of Kaalanjara Tirtha narrates the Story of King Shwata of Kalanjara was a passionate devotee of Lord Rudra and having formally installed a Shiva Linga with high dedication worshipped it for several years. On one auspicious day, Maha Deva granted his appearance but as a scary and dancing figure with a Trishula in his mighty hands with garlands of human skulls and serpents all over his gigantic physique. The Rajashri got startled and held the Shiva Linga tight reciting Shata Rudriya loudly with disbelief and shock. Shiva consoled the King and transformed into a Shanta Swarupa or of peaceful demeanor along with Devi Parvati and the King spontaneously broke out chanting: *Namo Bhavaaya hetawe Haraaya vishwa sambhavey etc.* As the long chanting was over, Mahadeva granted Ganapatya to the King or the Celestial Status of the Chief of Shiva Ganas, vindicating the consequence of Shiva's 'para aradhana'!

Kajuraho Monuments: The Chhatrapur District in Madhya Pradesh literally signify 'Kharjura Vahaka' or Date Palm Carrier is a World Heritage Site of UNESCO, considered as one of the seven Wonders of India, besides Nalanda (Bihar), Konarak Temple (Orissa), Hampi (Karnataka), Taji Mahal (Agra, Uttar Pradesh), Harmandir Sahib or Golden Temple (Amritsar, Punjab) and Gomakeshwara (Shravana belgola, Karnataka). This Place is connected by Air and Railways from Mahoba, as also by road from Chhattarpur and Panna of Diamond Mine fame. Erotic Sculptures crafted by Chandella Artisans depicting explicit sex life as dedicated to Kandariya Maha Deva and Devi Parvati. Made of sand stone, Temples of 64 Yoginis, Brahma, Marthandeshwara Shiva, Lalgun Maha Deva, Varaha, Lakshmana, Parshvanath, Vishwanath, Edevi Jagadambi, Vamana, Adinath Jain and so on are popular and motifs of 'Mithuna' are adorned on the Temple Walls and so on. Essentially known as Kamasutra Temple with explicit sex life on the walls etc. this is the only such Temple in the entire world with variety of motifs on Sex. An outstanding feature of Khajuraho is the annual Dance Artistes from all over India and abroad.

Kashi Mahatmya: *Kashyaam Vidhaatumamarairapi Divya Bhumou satirthalinga gananaarchana to na shakya, yaaneeha gupta vivartaani puraatanani siddhaani yojitakarah pranamaami tebhyah/* (The number of Holy Tirthas and Shiva Lingas in Kashi worthy of worship is impossible to count even by Deva ganas. I can only salute the unending numericals of both explorable and unknowable features of this Unparalleled Siddha Peetha with folded hands and prostrations!) Padma Purana, Uttarakhanda. As per Skanda Purana, Kashi Khanda, Kashi is stated to be identified by twelve main Names: Kashi, Varanaasi, Avimukta, Anandkaanana, Mahashmashana, Rudraavaasa, Kaashika, Tapasthali, Mukti Bhumi and Shri Shiva Puri/ Tripuraari Raajanagari. Skanda Purana describes Kashi Mahatmya in Kashi Khanda as follows: *Bhumishthaapi na yatra Bhumi devatopyuchairathah syaapi yaa, Yaa baddhaa Bhuvimuktidaasyuramritam yasyaam mritaa jantavah/ Yaa nityam Trijagat pavitra tatini teero Suraih sevyate, Saa Kaashi Tripuraariraja nagari Paayaadapaayaajjagat/* (That which is on Earth itself but is even beyond Trilokas, that which is right under Swarga and even higher Lokas, yet still far superior and beyond the reach of Lokas and severed of the hardest shackles of Earth and of higher Lokas, that which is the bestower of moksha, that which is worshipped and served well by Ganga which in turn is served by Devas and that which is saved by Tripurari Maha Deva of the entire Universe and its Creation). Narada

Purana delineates Kashi as follows: *Vaaraanasi tu bhuvanatraya saara bhutaa Ramyaa nrinaam sugatidaa kila sevyamaanaa, Atraagataa vividhadyupkrita kaarinopi paapakshaye virajasah sumabnh prakaashaah/* (Kashi is not only most enchanting but is famed alkl over the Trilokas. If worshipped properly, it bestows the path of Salvation for sure. Several sinners of far reaching consequences too are liberated and attain celestial features). In Kasi khanda of Skanda Purana assures: *Ananyaani Mukti kshetraani Kaashiprapti karaanicha, Kashim prapya vimucchyet naanyat Teertha kotibhih/* (There is no other Mukti Kshetra like Kasi among crores of other Tirthas, and attaining his Kshetra is a sure step to rid of all human blemishes and accomplish Fulfilment) *Kadaa Kaashyaam gamishyaami kadaadrukshyaami Shankaram, Iti shruvaanah satatam Kashivaasa phalam labhet/* (What kind of fear is faced from ‘Samsara’ one one makes up a firm resolve is embedded in mind to worship Shankara in person!) *Yeshaam hridi sadaivaaste Kaashitwaashi vishaamgadah, Samsaaraashivishavisham na teshashaam prabhavet kwachit/* (Whosoever pronounces the two words of Kashi and rejoices the musical sound would never ever have to listen to the discordant notes about the jarring sounds of Samsara). *Shrutam karnaamritam yena Kashityaksharayugmakam, Na samaakarnatyeva sa punarbhaajaam kathaam/* (Even from far off distances, the sonorous sounds of ‘Kashi Kashi’ are heard and meditated upon, they need not exert much to find the path of Salvation).

The region intermediate to the two rivers viz. Varana and Asi is called ‘Varanaasi’, the outstanding Tirtha of Bharata Desha among the Seven Most Distinguished of Tirthas: *Ayodhya Mathura Maya* (Kankhal Haridwar) *Kasi Kaanchi Avantika* (Ujjain) *Dwarika/* Now the famed statement is: *Kashyam hi marananmuktih/* and this Statement draws lakhs of human beings from all over to stay at Kashi till their life’s termination, especially at the threshold of death. This Place is also renowned as the Vidya Peeth or the Seat of Learning and Kashi Vidwans are renowned all over. Kashi is also among the distinguished Dwadasha Shiva Linga Sthanas and the reputed Fifty One Shakti Peethas as Devi Vishalakshi at Manikarnika is the abode of Devi Sati’s right ‘Karnakundala’ or the Ear Ring fell at the Daksha Yajnas destruction. Maha Kaala Bhairava Maha Deva had the unique honour of carrying the skull of Brahma’s fifth head as a begging bowl with which to receive Devi Annapurna at her door step daily to atone retributory penance for Brahma Hatya till he got rid of the sin’s effect in Pataala Loka and finally the begging bowl saga ended. The most significant ‘Ghats’ worthy of Bathing spread out all along the hallowed Ganga banks at Kashi are essentially five viz. Varana Sangama Ghat, Pancha Ganga Ghat, Manikarnika Ghat, Dashaaswamedha Ghat and Asisangama Ghat. Varana sangama Ghat snaana is significant especially on Bhadra Shukla Dwadasha, and worship at Vashishtheshwara and Rutishwara Shiva Mandiras on the left side of the Varana River. Near Varana sangama are also there Chaturbhuj Keshava at the Vishnupadodaka tiretha and also Harihareshwara Shiva, besides Vedeshwara, Nakshatreshwara, and Sweta Dwipeshwara Maha Deva Mandiras. Pancha Ganga ghat is stated to be of the Sangama of Five Sacred Rivers viz. of Yamuna, Saraswati, Kirana and Dhutapaata in Gupta Swarupa or hidden forms as ‘Antarvahinis’ with main Ganga. This is called Vishnu Kanchi Tirtha or Bindu Madhava Tirtha where a Brahmana bhakta called Agnivindu gave Narayana Darshana and the latter directed the brahmana to stay there for good. Pancha Gangeshwara and Bindu Madhava Mandirs are signified for worship especially after Kartika month snaanas. Most significant is the *Manikarnika Snaana* at Veera Tirtha at Manikarnika Kund which is approachable by twenty one steps on all the four sides. Inside this Kund there is a Bhairava Kund Spring and is stated to be the most clean and Sacred. Veereshwara Shiva Puja is stated to be highly fulfilling. Dashashwamedha Ghat is another important Ghat which was the

Unique Place where Lord Brahma performed Ten Ashwamedha Yagnas; bathing in this ghat is stated as special, especially on Jyeshtha Shukla Dashami; besides Dashashwamedheshwara Shiva, veneration to Shula Tankeshwara Shiva and Abhinava Vinayaka are stated to be extremely beneficial. Asi sangama ghat is the Sangama Tirtha of Asi river with main flow of Ganga which is stated as Haridwara Tirtha also reputed for Kartika snanas especially on Krishna Paksha Shashthi. Besides these main Ghats, there are as many as 50-60 Ghats of varying prominence and reputation. Harishchandra Ghat or Smashana Ghat where Smashaneshwara Shiva the Over Lord of Death and Destruction as also the Bestower of Mangal or Auspiciousness is ever present. This Ghat represents Truthfulness and Extreme Faith the two major characteristics of Raja Satya Harischandra. Also there are Prahlad Ghat with Prahladeshwar Shiva Mandir, Trilochana Ghat called Trivishtupa Tirtha with Trilochana Shiva Mandir as also Uddanda Munda Vinayaka, Modakapriya Ganesha and Samhara Bhairava; Mahata Ghat with Naranarayana Mandira known for Pousha Purnima Snanas; Sankata ghat also called Yama Tirtha with Yameshwara Shiva Mandita; Lalitha Ghat known for Ashwiyuja Krishna Dwitiya worship at Lalita Devi Mandira popular with yatri from Nepal; ManMandira Ghat with Dalabhyeshwara, Someshwara, Setubandha Rameshwara and Sthula danta Vinayaka Mandiras in the name of Jaipur Raja Mansingh; Chousatti ghat with 64 Yogini Murtis and Bhadra Kaali Mandira; Mansarovara ghat, Kedar ghat, Hanuman Ghat and Ruru Bhairava nearby; Tulasi ghat in the memory of Goswami Tulasi das where the latter breathed his last and so on.

The most outstanding Mandir of Varanasi indeed is of *Vishwanatha*, decorated with Swarana kalasha or of gold vessel atop the Mandir, dedicated by King Ranjit Singh known as Panjab Kesari. The Sabha Madapa or the outside region of the Most Hallowed ‘Sanctum Sanctorum’ or the ‘Garbha Sthaana’ of Vishweshwara Jyotir Linga are the surrounding Sacred Pratimas of Soubhagya Gauri and Ganesha, Avimukteshwara, Dandapaaneshwara, Satya Narayana, Shaneshchareshwara Maha Deva and a big sized bell. As Shri Vishwanatha is the Over Lord, the attendant Devas are the Minister Hareshwara, Kathaavaachaka Brahmeshwara, Kotwal Bhairava, Dhanaadhksha or Treasurer Tarakeshwara, Dandapaani, Bhandari Veereshwara, Adhikari Dhundiraja, and several Prajapalakas. All the devotees are allowed to perform ‘abhisheka’ of the Jyotir Linga Swarupa of Vishweshwara with Ganga, and Panchamritas. To the Vayavya or North East of the Vishwanadha Mkandira are some hundred fifty Shiva Lingas headed by Dharma -rajeshwara. Moda Vinayaka, Pramoda Vinayaka, Sumukha Vinayaka and Gana Natha Vinayaka Murtis- all comprising the ‘Sabha’. *Jnaanavaapi Kupa*: The Mughal King Aurangzeb who plundered and partly destroyed the original Mandir at Kashi pulled out and threw away the original Vishweshwara Linga and subsequently the original Linga was consecrated once again and restored in the new Mandir; the traces of the original Mandir over which a Masjid was built are still noticed. It is that well from which the Original Linga was restored which continues to be revered and the water from it is still consumed by the Yatri as Sacred. There is a seven feet Nandi facing the Original Linga still unscathed intact. *Akshaya Vata*: As one proceeds from the Main Mandir Gate is the Shanaishwar Mandir to the immediate left and the face of the Lord is made of Silver but has no body but duly clothed and to adjacent to that is a Vata Vriksha or Banyan Tree called Akshaya Vata which is worthy of worshipping on Mondays. *Annapurneshwari* Mandir is not far from the Main Mandir of Lord Vishwanath in which Goddess Annapurneshwari is seated on a silver throne facing the Deities of Kubera, Surya, Ganesha, Vishnu and Hanuman, besides Yantreshwar Linga as also the Murtis of Gangavatarana, Lakshmi Narayana, Shri Rama in his company and so on. Samishthi Kumkumaadi Pujas are conducted especially by Suvasinis and Friday Pujas are indeed of significance. Chaitra Shukla Navami and

Ashviyuja Shukla Ashtami are stated to be of paramount importance. *Dundi Raja Ganeshwara* near Annapurna Mandira is worshipped specially on Magha Shukla Chaturthi. *Kala Bhairava Mandir* has Bhairavanatha with Chaturbhuja is seated on a black Dog on a silver platform which is specially worshipped on Kartika Krishna Ashtami, Margaseersha Krishna Ashtami and Chaturdashi, as also on all Sundays. *Durgaji* is at Durga kund and Durga Mandir near Asisagama ghat and Pushkar Tirtha and the Mandir has Durga, Shiva, Vinayak and the nearby Kukkuteshwara Maha Deva and Chanda Bhairava Murtis. *Krutikeshwara Linga* is some one and half feet high in the Mandir near Alamgiri Masjid near Vriddha Kaal Lane and there itself Mrityunjaya Mandir and of Manidwipeshwar Shiva. *Dhupa Chandi and Vikatadwija Vinayaka Mandirs* are near Chitrakut sarovar. *Kapala mochan Kunda and Mandir* near Bakaiya Kund in Jalaali gaon have a seven feet copper pillar called as Lot Bhirava or Kaala Bhirava. *Tilabhandeshwara* near Bengali Tola School with a four feet high Linga Murti and nearby there is a Kedareshwar Mandir too which attracts large crowds on Mondays and especially on Shiva Ratris. Indeed, Kashi has Mandirs in every Lane and Bylane. It is estimated however that the prominent Idols are some 51 Lingas, 12 Adityas, 56 Vinayakas, 8 Bhairavas, 9 Durgas, 13 Nrisimhas, 16 Keshavas, and so on. Kurma Purana while describing Varanasi Mahatmya quotes Veda Vyasa showing to his desciples about the five famed Lingas viz. Krittivasa Linga, Kapardeshwara Linga, Omkareshwara Linga, Madhymeshwara Linga, and of course Vishweshwara Linga and explained the legendary background of these: Krittivasa Linga was signified as a Daitya who assumed the form of an elephant who used to kill Brahmana devotees in Shiva's meditation and as Shiva was about to kill the Daitya, the latter made a request that Shiva might please wear his skin and since then Shiva is called Krittivasa. Kapardeshwara Linga has the background that a Brahmana named Shankhukarna engaged in Shiva Linga Puja encountered a Pishacha who confessed before killing the Brahmana that he was too a Brahmana before becoming a Pishacha but never did Atithi Puja and never did a good turn in life excepting that he touched a Shiva Linga in imagination and regretted his past misdeeds while dying. Shankhukarna pitied the Pishacha and advised to bathe in a pond near by and touch the Shiva Linga which he was worshipping. The Pishacha did so and flew in a vimana in celestial form and since then the Pond came to be called Pishacha Tirtha! Veda Vyasa explained to his students that outstanding Vidwans explained the Panchaardha' as Pashupati in view of his qualities as Ateetatwa or Bliss-Shanti or Harmony and Equanimity-Vidya or Parama Jnaana- Pratishtha or Unique Fame- and Nivritti or Detachment leading to Liberation. Thus Parama Shiva is the Omkara Swarupa or the Embodiment of Effulgence hence Omkareshwara Linga is another meaning of Nyasa/ Unification of Self with Supreme! Madhyameshwara Linga on the banks of Mandakini an extension of Ganga which was worshipped by Lord Krishna of Dwapara Yuga performed Pashupata Vrata to this very Linga and stayed there for a year by shaving his head, applying ash and wearing Rudraaksha and finally achieved Shambhu darshana. Finally Veda Vyasa along with his followers performed ganga snaana and Vishweshwara Linga abhisheka. As he settled at Kasi for good performing abhisheka thrice a day along with Sishyas by taking Bhiksha or charity, one day he did not receive bhiksha for all, he cursed Kashi vaasis to create daily vighnas or obstacles and Devi Annapurna appeared and asked him and his sishyas to get daily bhiksha but asked him to perform worship to Vishweshwara only on Chaturthis and Ashtamis. Further, Veda Vyasa enlightened his followers about several Punya Tirthas attached to the banks of Ganga such as Vishwarupa Tirtha, Taaa Tirtha, Akasha Tirtha, Gauri Tirtha, Prajapatya Tirtha, Swarga dwaara, Jambukeshwara, Jnaana Tirtha, Yama Tirtha, Agni Tirtha, and Brahma Tirtha. Suta Muni who narrated Kurma Purana to the congregation of Rishis provided an account of Phala Shruti of Varanasi Maha Tirtha concludes: *Yah pathedavimuktasya*

Mahatmyam shrunuyaadapi, Shravayeda vaa Dwijam shaantaan sopi yaati paraam gatim/ Shraaddevaa Devaivike kaarye raatraavahaani vaa dwijaa, Nadinaam chaiva teereshu Devataanaataneshu cha/ Snaatwaa samahita manaa damhamaatsarya varjitaah, Japedisham namaskutya sa yaati Paramam gatim/ (Whosoever would read, hear or narrate about the Avimukta / Varanasi Kshetra would definitely secure Maha Punya; once a person takes bath and is engaged in, Pitru/ Deva Karyas, in the day or night, on the banks of Ganga in Mandirs, devoid of dambha or self-pride and Matsara or narrow mindedness and sincerely meditate Maha Deva is indeed qualified for 'Parama Gati' or the Path of Supreme).

Among the most prominent Yatra Place surrounding Kashi is Saarnath hardly 5-6 km by road where the world renowned Buddhist Pilgrimage Point where Lord Buddha had his foremost Upadesha or 'Initiation' and Dharma Chakra was launched. The Places worthy of visit are Ahoka's Square Faced Pillor, Bhagavan Buddha Mandir which is stated to be the foremost Mandir ever, Dhameka stupa, Choukhandi Stupa, Sarnath Museum, Jai Mandir, Mulagandha kuti and Naveen Vihar. Muhammd Ghori took away the Golden Buddha Idol and destroyed innumerable Pieces of Art and Crafts and the left over valuables are now retained in the Museum. Followers of Maha Vir Jains consider their prime Place of worship as Saarnath as their 'Atishaya Kshetra' and continue to retain valuable Scripts here. Shreyamsa Nath is stated to have been born and meditated at this Sacred Place where there is a Jain Mandir of immense repute with his Pratima and a memorial Pillar. The nearby Chandravati is also the reputed Jain Tirtha where Jainacharya Chandra Pabhu was born and lived here.

Madhya Bharat

Vindhyachala, Ujjain, Bade Ganesha, Kshipra, Omkareshwara, Narmada Mahatya

Vindhyachala Kshetra: Both Devi Bhagavata and Markandeya Purana referred to Devi Ambika referred to her prediction of the birth and destruction of two notorious and powerful Daitya brothers named Shumbhu and Nishkumbha, in the lineage of Hiranyakashipu- in the twenty eighth Vaivaswata Manvantara and stated : *Nandagopa gruhe jaataa Yashoda garbha sambhavaa, Tasmai naashayipyami Vindhyaachala nivasini/* (I shall manifest myself as the baby of Yashoda and as Devi Vindhyachala Vaasini would exterminate the brothers myself). Devi Bhagavata also referred to the deep tapasya of Swayambhuva Manu to Ambika Devi-the first in the series of fourteen Manus, the present Vaivaswata Manu being the eighth one- and not only bestowed to him the boon of Saraswata Mantra and assured that who so ever practised the Mantra with faith and grit would accomplish Salvation and in his/ her on-going life enjoy luxurious living, Jatismarata or memory of past lives, outstanding intelligence and vocal powers. Markandeya Purana describes in detail how Maha Devi was realised by Devas as Kaushiki Devi or Kalika of dark skin but of extraordinary beauty and charm when she bathed afresh in the pure waters of Ganga and approached her to save them from the Shumbha Nishkumbha brothers and she assured Devas of her help; meanwhile Chanda Munda Danavas who were the followers of Kaushiki Devi's stunning beauty and informed their Masters Shumbha and Nishkumbha. The masters sent their emissaries to convey the message of love of theirs but Chanda Munda brothers were killed by Kaushiki Devi. Dhumralochana, Raktabeeja and other followers of Shumbha brothers were despatched but Devi Kaushiki created Chamundi who destroyed them too. Finally, Devi Kaushiki killed the Daitya brothers and brought peace to Devas and the Trilokas. Devi Bhagavata further states that Devi Vindhyaasini or Kaushiki Devi puja would have far reaching benefits: *Pashyatastu manoreva jagaama Vindhya parvatam, Lokeshu prathitaa Vindhya vaasiniiti cha Shounaka/* (Shounaka Muni! Puja of Vindhya vaasini and darshana as

also the hearing of her episode is indeed result in enemy destruction, achievement of success all around and enhancer of knowledge levels, besides fulfillment of desires). The Temple of Vindhyaachala vaasini is hardly a furlong away from the banks of Holy Ganga which is again 3km. from Mirjapur. Vindhyaachala has three Mandirs of Vindhya Vaasini or Kaushiki Devi, Maha Kaali, Ashta Bhuja, all packed as Trikona Yatra. *Vindya vaasini* is standing on the back of a lion with constant recital of Durga Sapta Shati, especially during the Navaratra celebrations. Facing the main Kaushiki Devi Mandira's fore-yard has sides one with the Dwadasha Bhuja or twelve Armed Devi, Sarpareshwara Shiva, Mahakaali and Darmadhwaja Devi. Vindhayachala Vaasini is among the 108 *Shakti Peethas*. Quite near to the Vindhyaavaasini Mandir is the Vindheshwara Mahadeva Mandir. *Maha Kaali* is basically Chamundi devi and this Place is called Kalikoha which is a couple of km away and there are ups and downs of the hill; this Devi pratima is small but has broad face. Near Kaalokoha is the Bhairava Sthaana and some 125 steps of ascent is situated a Krishna Mandir. From Kaalikoha, *Ashta bhuja* is not far and this Devi is known as Devi Sarasvati. In the Vindhyaachala Kshetra are also situated *Markandeya* which is also the Sangama Sthaana of Ganga and Gautami, besides Markandeyeshwar Mahadeva Mandir, popular for Shivaratri worship; *Kauleshwar naatha or Sakalaheeda* also popular for Shiva Ratri celebrations and *Jamadagni Ashram* or popular as Jamania; *Charanadri* which is the Tapo Bhumi of King Bhartrihari- the Philosopher Poet and the elder brother of the famed King Vikramaditya of Ujjain- and the abode of Vallabha sapraya 'Kupa Mandir' of Vitthal nadha also called Gupta Brindavana, besides Hanuman Mandir, and Durga kund. The City of Mirjapur is hardly 12 km away from it.

Ujjain (Avantika) on Bhopal/ Agra Lines- near Indore, Madhya Pradesh: *Maha Kaalah saricchipra gatishchaiva sunirmalaa, Ujjainiam Vishalaakshi Vaasah kasya na rochayet/ Snaanam kritwaa nara yastu Mahanadyaam hi durlabham, Mahaa Kaalam namaskrutya Naro mrityum na shochayet/ Mritah Keetah Patango vaa Rudrasyaanucharo bhavet/* Skanda Purana, Avantya Khanda, Avanti Kshetra Mahatmya (Where Mahaakal is there, Kshipra river is there and where nirmala or clean and clear thoughts and conduct and tranquility prevail, that is the most ideal Place for bathing in Kshipra and discard all hardships and prostrate to Maha Kaal Deva leaving far behind the psyche of death and destruction. Indeed, even worms and flies after death are destined to become the Followers and Servants of Rudra Deva Himself!). Skanda Purana describes the conversation of Devi Parvati and Maha Kaala as the latter explains about the Mahatmya of Avanti Kshetra for more than one reason: It is the abode four major rivers, viz. Kshipra, Divya Nava, Nilaganga and Gandhavati; Ashta Matrikas viz. Uma, Chandi, Eshrari, Gauri, Ruddhida, Siddhida, Varayakshini and Veerabhadra; Maha Maya Sati called Kapala Matrika who has Seven Matrika Associates viz. Ambika, Sheetala, Siddhi daayani, Ekaanamsha, Brahmani, Parvati, and Yoga shalini; Chatishshasthi Yoginis, besides of Ekadasha Rudras viz. Kapardi, Kapaali, Kaala naatha, Vrishasan, Triambak, Shulapani, Chiraavaasa, Digambara, Girisha, Kamachari, Sarpabhushana Sharva; Ashta Bhairavas viz. Dandapaani, Vikrant, Maha Bhairava, Batuk, Baalak, Bandi, Shatpancha Shatak, and Apra Kaala Bhairava. There are also ten Vishnu Swarupas viz. Vasudeva, Ananta, Balarama, Janardana, Narayana, Hrishi keshha, Varaaha, Dharanidhara, Vamanarupa and Seshashaayi; Six. Ganeshas viz. Ruddhi Siddhi daata, Kaama daata, Ganapati, Vighna nasshaka, Pramodi and Chaturdhi Vrata Priya; Dwadasha Adityas viz. Aruna, Surya, Vedanga, Bhanu, Indra, Ravi, Anjuman, Suvarna reta, Aha Karta, Mitra, Vishnu and Shanatana. It is the Place for Kapala Vimochana or where Shiva begged of alms in Brahma's skull from Annapurana and the breaking of the skull at the Maha Kaala Vana caused such reverberation that Daityas headed by Haya who utilised Maya and its Illusions in

stealthily attacking and tormaen ting Devaganas were destroyed once for all. *Ujjaini* is the Place where Parama Shiva killed Tripurasuras with his Pashupatastra; *Avantipuri* is another name where Vishnu protected Devas from Danavas as he dragged them from hiding at Meru and terminated them to save Devas and restored Swarga; *Kutasthali* is another name which Brahma selected to preserve creation by throwing Kushagrass on Bhumi and *Padmavati* since Amrita was distributed by Mohini to Devas and Lakshmi was restored to Vishnu. Ujjain is considered as the Naabhi or navel of Prithvi. This indeed is the famed Dwadasha Linga Pradesha by the illustrious presence of *Mahakala Linga*. It is further signified as being one of the 51 *Shakti Peethas* where Devi Sati's (kurpar or 'kehuni') elbow point fell at Harasiddhi Devi Mandir at Rudra Saagar Sarovar. Among the most essential Places not to be missed in Ujjain of course is Mahakala Mandir itself: *Akaashe Taarakam Lingam Pataale Hataleshwaram, Martya loke Mahakaalam Linga Traya namostute!* Maha Kaleshwar Linga Mandira Praangan or Courtyard is quite wide and in the Centre is the 'Garbha' or 'Sanctum sanctorum' where Maha Kaaleshwara Linga is visualised in the Lower Level and Omkareshwara Linga is precisely on the higher plane. The fairly broad Maha Kaal Linga is Naaga Pariveshthita or surrounded by serpents made of silver and a hanging tub with incessant drops of Sacred Water on the top of the Linga, with Ganesha on one side, Devi Parvati on the other and yet another Kartika Deva with Ghee and Oil Lamps ever lit up. On the higher plane of the Southern side is the Mandir are the Anadi Kaleshwar and Vriddha Kaleshwara placed. Nearby the Maha Kaleshwara Mandir's Sabha Mandap is the Koti Tirtha with small Shiva Umbrellas placed and a Dharma shala too. In the Sabha Mandap are Shri Rama Mandir and Avantikapur's Adhishtatri Avantika Devi Murti too. [An interesting facet of Mahakal Linga abhisheka with 'bhasma' or Ash is performed early morning which is indeed a thrilling experience as witnessed by this Script Writer years ago; the belief is that this bhasma is of the burnt remains of a human corpse as sanctified on the banks of the Sacred waters of Kshipra with appropriate Veda mantras but women are barred from visioning the abhisheka except however by the CCTV; since the space in the Sanctom Sanctorum is extremely limited only fortunate men too could possibly witness the 'bhasmaabhisheka' live as executed along with the mix of the cadence of select musical and percussion instruments in tune with the veda mantra pronunciation. The Ritual is followed by Namaka- Chamaka Mantras too with Panchamritas] The Temple Priests enable to let Yattris to participate in Sahasra Lingarchanas to Mrittika Lingas placed in the appropriate positions along with Mananyaasa-Namaka Chamaka Mantras as also Ekadasha Lingarchanas with minimum costs in the premises of the Mandir. Indeed, Mahakaal is the unique Tirtha of Mantra-Maha Tantra-Yantra which generates instant vibration with the pro-active practioners of these Vidyas around.

Bade Ganesha: Even near the Maha Kaal Mandir, is the Big Ganesha Mandir which is indeed very attractive. Nearby the Ganesha is also the Panchamuka Mandir and the idol is made of Sapta Dhatu or of brass, bronze, copper, silver, gold etc. Harasiddhi Devi Mandira: It is stated that King Vikramaditya of Avantika was satisfied by worshipping the original Harasiddhi Devi Shakti Peetha in Saurashtra of Gajarat at Mool Dwarika's mountain top at the Seashore and this replica too has ShriYantra and both the Murtis are alike too. Behind this Mandir of Harasiddhi is Agasteshwara Sthaana. Gadh Kalika on Bhairava Gadh hill is the Maha Kalika Mandir whose worship was performed the Great Poet Kalidaas the famed Scriptor of Abhigjnaana Shakuntalam, Megha Sandesh and such immortal works in Sanskrit and the Renowned Nava Ratnas /Nine Gems of King Vikramaditya a great lover of Arts and Literature. Far more significantly, this renowned Temple is one of the *Shakti Peetha* where Devi Sati's upper lip fell here. Skanda Purana describes the Place as follows: *Ujjainyaam Maha Kaali Maha Kaaleshwreshwari,*

Kshipraa teera sthita Maataa vanchitartha pradaayani/This Devi is also known as Rakta Dantika and Chamundi. Skanda Purana describes the Legend of Andhakasura / Rakta beeja the notorious enemy of Devas and even Maha Deva himself had Brahma's boon that each drop of his blood could create another Asura like himself; Devi Kausiki created Chamundi / Rakta Dantika who assumed an awesome figure and licked up each and every Rakta beeja with unusual swiftness and fury while Maha Deva pierced his Trishula right into the heart of Rakta Beeja once for all enabling the stoppage of further blood. In the Garbha Place of the Temple, Maha kaali appears fearful with her blood red lips and stretched out tongue suppressing Andhakasura under her feet; incidentally, Andhakasura sought refuge from Maha Deva who granted him eventually as Bhringi the head of His Shiva Ganaas. Besides the Maha Kaali Murti are the two Devis Lakshmi and Saraswati as also Hanumanteshwari Linga and Sthira Ganesha. Celebrations are organised during the Ashwiyuja Maasa Nava Ratris and Ashadha month's first nine days of austerities and upavasas as also Japas of Kaama Beejakshari and Navakshari Mantra. The Mandir would then during these celebrations reverberate with the chanting of Shaptashati Stotras! *Bhatruhari Caves*: About half a km from Kalika Mandir is the Bhatruhari Samadhi and Bhatruhari Cave which needs to be entered with care and vigil as it is a zig zag puzzle path inside which many visitors lost their way and could not survive. Bhatruhari was the elder brother of King Vikramaditya and Philosopher- Poet who discarded Kingship in favour of his younger brother Vikramaditya. *Kaala Bhairava* Mandir is on the banks of Kshipra River some two km from the centre of Ujjain, with a black stone Bhairava Deva seen in a Dog Form with an open mouth and hanging tongue from a throat into which liquids - including hard liquors- are fed and magically half of the naivedyas or offerings come out as Tirtha Prasads as exactly half of the quantity offered, apparently the rest of the liquor drenched out into a drain. Bhairavashtami on Ashwiyuja Krishnashtami is worshipped and celebrated on this day. *Siddha Vata* or the or the Hallowed Banyan Tree before Kaala Bhairava on the other side of Kshipra River is considered very significant for Naga Bali and Narayana Bali or Sacrifices under this Tree. *Sandipani Ashram* where Lord Sri Krishna, Bala Rama and Sudama were students of Sandipani Muni. This is also the Seat of Vallabhacharya the Guru of 'Mata' or distinct Hindu Faith with several followers. *Mangalanatha Mandira*: The famed Mandir of Mangala Graha Deva stated to be unique on Earth is in Ujjain and draws large crowds of devotees on all Tuesdays, especially from Uttar Bharat. *Vedha Shaala* is a unique Astronomy Centre of the yore to study the movement of Graha-Nakshatra-Rashis in the ancient Hindu way where an ancient Yantra is still in Place.

Kshipra: It is stated that River Kshipra emerged from Maha Vishnu's body. This Sacred River at Ujjain has organised Ghats on its banks of which Narasimha ghat, Rama ghat, Pischacha mochana Tirtha, Chhatri (Umbrella) Ghat and Gandharva Tirtha are popular. Each of these Ghats have Mandirs dedicated to the respective Deities. Festivities are celebrated at these Ghats and are visited by Yatris from far and near especially on Ganga Dussehra, Kartika Purnima and Vaishakhi Purnima. As Lord Brihaspati the Deva Guru enters Simha Raashi, Kshipra Snaan is innumerable by Yatris. There is a bridge across the Sacred River from Gandharva Tirtha and on the other side of the River are the Places of Kedareshwar and Lord Hanuman. The Smashan Vaati or Burial Ground and Rina Mukta Maha Deva Mandir are famed on that side of the bridge. Organised Yatras are facilitated from Ujjain including Twenty Eight Tirthas like Rudra sarovar, Nrisimha Tirtha, Nila Ganga Sangama, Pishacha vimohana Titha, Gandharva Tirtha, Kedar Tirtha, Chakra Tirtha, Paapa vimochana Tirth, Runa Vimochana Tirtha, Kaala Bhairava, Dwadashaarka Tirtha, Kapilashrama, Angaraka Tirtha, Pretamochana, Danda Paani, Kapala vimochana etc. Similarly, Sapta saagara Yatra like RudraSagara, Pushkara sagara, Maha Bhairava Simhapuri and on.

Also Yatras are organised Dwadasha Yatras of Gupteshwara, Agasteshwara, Dhindheshwara, Damarukeshwara, Anadi Kapileshwara, and so on commencing from Pishachamochana Tirtha. Yatras to Sapta Sagaras viz. Rudra Sagara near Harasiddhi, Pushkara Sagara or Naliya bakhala, Ksheera Sagara or Daabri, Govardhana Sagara or Buddha Vaar, Ratnaakara Sagara or Ungasegaon, Vishnu Sagara and Purushotama Sagara or Ankapaada.

Omkareshwara (Mandhata): Devakhyana samam hotam matprasaadaad bhavuishtati, Anna daanam tapah puja tathaa praana visarjanam, Ye kurvanti Naraasteshaam Shiva Loka nivasanam/

(Omkareshwara Tirtha is indeed unique and celestial and due to the extreme mercy of Maha Deva, and all charity works like Anna daana, tapas and worship to Amareshwara Linga are truly rewarding and in the event of one's Life's termination, Shiva Loka Prapti is assured!)-Skanda Purana, Reva Khanda. Another stanza of the Purana is also relevant: *Amaraanaam shataishcha sevito Amareshwarah, Tathaiva Rishisanghaischa tena punyatamo Mahaan/* (As this outstanding Tirtha of Amareshwara is worshipped relentlessly by thousands of Devatas and Rishis, it has excelled itself in rewarding them wholesomely and keep multiplying to their prayers too to the 'Maha Punya' to add to the faith of the yatri). Omkareshwara Jyotir Linga is situated in the hills in the shape of OM in Sanskrit on the banks of Sacred Narmada; as this is Omkareshwara-Amaleshwara it is mislabeled as Maleshwara. Shiva Purana which gives an account of Dwadasha Maha Lingas reveals the Legend that Sage Narada visited Vindhya Raja as the latter bragged to the Muni of his great height literally and superiority, but Narada provoked that Meru Mountain was taller and magnificent; the hurt Vindhya King executed severe Tapasya and pleased Maha Deva as the King desired that Maha Deva should be present as a Great Linga of repute. Shankara granted the request and thus the background of Omkareshwar. Vindhya King got puffed up and recalling Sage Narad's teasing that Meru was taller, enhanced his height unusually and the path of Surya in the Bhubramana creating days and nights was disturbed creating Universal chaos. Maha Deva instructed Sage Ashtastya then residing at Varanasi to teach a lesson to Vindhya Raja; the Muni along with his wife Lopamudra reached Vindhya Raja and jokingly asked the King whether he would not bend down to pay his reverence. As he did so, Ashtastya never gave his permission to the King to stand up again and Vindhya King remained in that bent position ever since. The Sage told his wife that they would never cross the Vindhya Region later ever again and Vindhya King would be in that position ever. Another legend is of King Mandhata of Ikshvaku Clan- the ancestor of Lord Shri Rama of Ramayana- and the King's glorious sons Ambarisha and Muchukunda did severe Tapasya and pleased Maha Deva to present Himself in the Form of a Holy Shiva Linga and did the homage to their father Mandhata by naming the Linga Pradesha as on Mandhata Mountain; thus of this Holy Place is also named after Mandhata (Shivapuri).

Omkareshwar Linga is situated on the three-tier hill and the Yatri would have to ascend steps on the banks of Narmada; it appears that one has to enter a cave and the entry door is narrow. Yatris are allowed to participate in special Panchamrita-Abhishakas as in Kasi or other Ekadasa Shiva Linga Kshetras at prescribed timings with Namaka Chamaka Parayana etc. Besides the Main Linga, one could also vision Devin Parvati and Pancha Mukha Ganesha. From the first level of the Temple with Omkareshwara Linga, Yatris could take to a few steps to the second level for the darshan of Maha Kaleshwar Linga Murti and further up to the third level the darshan of Vaidyanatheshwar Linga Murti too. After the Darshana of Omkareshwar, it would be worthwhile to cross Narmada and visit Amaleshwara Linga and a 'pradakshina' of it, one could visit Vriddha Kaleshwar, Baneshwar, Mukteshwar, Kardameshwar and Tilabhandeshwar Mandirs too. Around Omkareshwara are the sangama of Kaveri-Narmada and

Choubees Avatars or 24 Manifestations of Pashupatinath, Kuber Bhandari or Kubereshwara Mandir and 'Saat maata' or Sapta Matrika Mandir with Varaahi, Chamunda, Brahmani, Vaishnavi, Indrani, Koumari and Maheshwari. Interestingly, there is a Sita vaatika and Maharshi Valmiiki Ashram where Lav-Kush Kumars of Shri Rama were born as that was where Janaki resided. Besides, 64 Yogini and 12 Bhairava Murtis, as also Sita kund, Rama kund and Lakshman kund are visible too.

Narmada Mahatmya:

Maha Padma Purana in Swarga Khanda quotes Sage Narada to have explained to Yuddhistar the Pandava King : *Punyaa Kankhale Ganga Kurukshetre Saraswati, Graamevaa yadi vaaranye punyaa sarvatra Narmadaa/ Tribhihi Sdarasvatam punyam saptaahena tu Yaamunam, Sadyah punaati Gaangeyam darshan aadeva Naarmadam/* (Ganga in Haridwar and Saraswati in Kurukshetra are indeed 'Punyamais' or fruitful but Narmada River, be it in villages or forests is always replete with Punya. The belief is that Saraswati River dips and 'snaana' for three days, Yamuna snaana for a week and Ganga snaana is instantly fruitful; but the very sight of the Sacred waters of Narmada bestows the same type of Purification and Punya!) Narada continues the explanation that Narmada is known for its worth in all the Lokas to one and all including Devatas, Asuras, Gandharvas and Tapodhana Rishis, especially those who observed continuous Tapas and attained Fulfillment. Those who take formal snaana and observe cleanliness of body and mind engaged in sincere meditation overnight would achieve the far reaching benefit of redeeming his past hundred generations. Those who bathe in the Janeshwar Tirtha with discipline and faith and offer Pinda daana to Pitrus would satisfy their Souls till the end of Pralaya in the world. Once one performs Snaana and Puja by offering flowers, chandana, camphor light, Abhiseka, Naivedya and other such services to Rudra Deva on Amara kank mountain, besides observing celibacy and control of Indriyas as also performing Tarpanas to Devas and Devarshis then again he and seven generations would be redeemed. The Reva Khanda of Skanda Purana quotes the conversation of King Yudhishtar and Agastya Maharshi and describes the origin of Narmada as in the days of yore, King Pururava of Chandra vamsha who ruled over the entire Bhu Loka as Indra was to Swarga. He asked Sages in a Conference as to what should be the singular solution to attain values of Life, fulfillment and happiness besides Salvation as the normal public is not adept in Yagnaadi Karma Kanda etc. Maharshis unanimously suggested that this sinful world, the ordinary 'praja' could be redeemed if only the Holy Narmada was brought down to Earth. King Pururava then performed very severe and sincere Tapas to Maha Deva without food for years together and the latter obliged with his darshan and sought Pururava's wish. Then Maha Deva who was reluctant first but finally asked Devi Narmada to descend from Swarga. Devi Narmada no doubt agreed but wondered as to who could bear the brunt of the fall from Swarga. Maha Deva instructed Vindhya Giri and the latter asked his son Paryanka Mountain to bear the brunt when Mekala Kanya Narmada descended to Earth. She rushed down with tremendous speed and sound as though there was a Pralaya and she submerged forests, hills, villages, Ashrams and land of about 1320 km. of length. The Sacred Narmada is the traditional boundary of Uttara Bharat and Dakshina Bharat between the Satpura and Vindhya ranges of mountains finally merging into Arabian Sea through Kambhat Gulf in Gujarat. The total River basin of nearly 4 lakh sq. Km area benefitting Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. Far more than the material benefits of land fertility, industry and power, the Great Narmada facilitates reaping of Spiritual rewards enabling Snana- Dana-Japa-Homa-Veda paatha- Pitru Pujana- Devaaradhana-Mantropadesha-Ananta Phala by way of rewarding the enhancement of the Spiritual values of Human Life! Skanda Purana prescribes the Spiritual tasks on the most rewarding days, viz. Vaishakha-

Maagha-Kartika Purnimas, Vishuva Yoga timings, Sankranti dinas, Vyatipata and vaidhruti yoga timings, Amavayas, Manvaadi- Yugaadi-KalpaadiTithis, and Maatru-Pitru Tithis. Narmada snaana, daana, japa, homaadi pujas are stated to reap Ashwamedha yagna phala. Agastya Maharshi finally advises King Yudhishtara in Skanda Purana that any human being on early mornings renders the hymns of praise to Narmada would reduce down the brunt of accumulated blemishes of his or hers past sins and indeed the snaana-Baana Linga puja as prescribed shall fortify the path of ascent to Shivadhaama! Skanda Puran's Reva Khand itself quotes two other versions of Markandeya to Yughishthar about the origin of Narmada River. One is that of King Pururava of Chandra Vamsha who did deep Tapasya to Maha Deva who granted to him the boon for the descent of Narmada from Swaraga and Vindhya Giri's son Paryanka undertook the task of bearing the brunt of holding the mighty flow of Narmada Devi, as explained as earlier. Another version is given that King Hiranya Teja again of Chandra Vamsha too did the Tapasya to Maha deva with similar desire of ensuring 'loka kalyan' and the same was granted by Maha Deva who instructed Vindhya Raja and his son Paryanka. A third vesion is being now given that that King Purukutsa the son of King Mandhata of Surya Vamsha did Tapasya to Mahedeva who granted the boon to let Narmada Devi flow downfrom Swarga controlled by Paryanka the son of Vindhya King. Continuing the third version, Markandeya describes that as soon as Narmada landed on the Mount top of Prayanka, where in the past Pruthu Chakravarti performed Ashwamedha Yagnam Deva, Gandharwa, Yaksha, Marud, Ashwani Kumars, Piscacha, Rakshasa, Naga, Tapasvi Maharshis were non-plussed with joy and excitement and profusely thanked Purukutsa for his unforgettable efforts. Devas requested Narmada Devi to shake hands with her so that they too would be purified further. She replied that since she was still unwed she would not to like to shake her hands with any body; Devas replied that the best candidate for the wedding would be King Purukutsa himself as he was actually Lord Samudra himself but due to Brahma deva's 'shaap' or curse, he was born in Martya loka. Narmada who was also aware of King Purukusa's previous background readily expressed her consent to wed him and pushed off making roaring sounds rushing westward like a released arrow submerging deep forests, hill tops and green pastures; on her banks were sprouted Tirthas, Mandirs, and Holy Places as humanity in the concerned streches performed holy dips, baths, tarpanas, and on its banks performed yagnas, homas, Pujas, daanas, 'tapas', japas and such several redeeming punya karyas eversince as the Maha Narmada set the tone of devotees for destroying sins of varying magnitude. Meanwhile, Narmada Devi the sister of Naaga/ Serpent brothers absorbed her after her merger in Samudra respectfully into Rasatala as per the instructions of Vishnu to King Vasuki. Maha Vishnu Purana describing Surya/ Chandra Raja Vamsha details reference to Gandharva-Naaga battle in Rasaatala as six crores of Gandharvas descended there for hunting the priceless 'Ratnas' on the Naaga heads. Naagas prayed for protection in desperation and Lord Vishnu instructed King Purukutsa to destroy the warring Gandharvas and protect Naagas. In turn, Naagas expressed gratitude to Purukutsa to wed Devi Narmada who has already made up her mind to wed him. As a wedding gift, Naagas gave a boon to the newly weds that whosoever bathed in Narmada or even took her name would be saved from the fear of snakes and their poisonous bites: *Narmadaayi namah Pratarnamaadaayi namo nisha, Namostu Narmade tubhya traahimaam visha sarpatah/* (Devi Narmada! My salutations to you in the day time or night; do kindly safeguard me from fear of serpents and their poisonous bites!). This recitation while entering dark or even well-lit places especially while eating food should save from any kinds of poises thanks to Narmada and Purukutsa!

Amarakantaka Tirtha: Padma Purana emphasises the significance of Amarakantaka Tirtha: *Chandra*

Suryoparaagepu gacched yomarakantakam, Ashwamedhaad dasha gunam pravadanti maneeshanah/ Swargalokamavaapnoti tatra drushtwaa Maheshwaram, Tatra Jwaleshwari naama parvatemarakantake/ Tatra snaatwaa divan yaanti ye mrutaastepunarbhavaah, Amaraa naama Devaaste parvate - marakantake, Kotisha Rishi mukhyaaste tapastapyanti Suvrataah/ (Those who reach Amara kanta Parvata at Chandra or Surya grahana times are blessed with ten times of performing Ashwamedha Yagna as is opined by Vidwans! On the Amarakantaka Parvata, Jwaleshwara Baana Linga is manifested and mere vision of this Maha Baana Linga authorises Swarga Loka Nivasa! Those who take snaana at these eclipses would not have re-birth as on this Sacred Mountain, crores of Devatas and principal Rishi ganas keep observing many vratas and tapas constantly). In the Reva Khanda of Skanda Purana Maharshi Markandeya underlines the unique significance of this confidential and most fruitful visit to Amarakanta. In the days of yore, Lord Brahma performed Soutramani Yagna and Lord Indra executed Ashwamedha Yagna. Maharshi Dadhichi and several Devas too organised various Yagnas. It is from these several yagna karyas, Chatur named river flowed into Sacred Narmada and this Sangama too is quite reputed. The intermediate region at the Sangam of these two rivers as also the Parikrama Marga of Siddheshwara and Chaturshkeswara is the outstanding Place for Pitru Shraaddas and Tarpanas as so effective that they accomplish total redemption. Parikrama of the two stated Lingas has unaccountable Mukti and the assurance of Markandeya to Yudhishtara is that Deva- Asura-Naga Kanyas too who are invisible too join the Parikramas! In the Reva Khand of Skanda Purana as summarised in the Essence of Skanda Purana released by Kamakoti.org/news, Sage Suta enlightened a Congregation of Rishis that Narmada ‘Snaans’ at various points of Her Course cutting the Vindhya Mountains and peaks every where on way were not only refreshing and cool but are Sacred and divinely and those who perform the baths, especially of early hours of a day, secure Punya of several Snaans of Ganga! The Sacred Snaans at that time are instant destroyers of sins committed in the current and previous lives. On the northern side of the River is situated Anantapur where Anantasiddhi Linga is popular and is stated to be the hub of Maharshis like Saavarni, Kaushik and Aghamarshan performing Vratas and Tapas. Sage Valmiki is also stated to have lived here for long till attainment of Moksha. Another important Tirth named *Dipeswar* or *Vyasa Tirtha* is known for Vrishabha daan (Charity of a bull) on Kartika Krishna Paksha Chaturdasi bestowing Swargavaas after life. At the *Narmada- Varangana Sangam* is popular to wash off physical ailments and nearby the Sangam is situated the *Siva kshetra* where rituals of „Snaan and Daan“ during Solar Eclipse award the same impact as at Kurukshetra; this is the abode of Narmada, Siva and Vishnu the latter being called Utpalaavarta having thousand heads! It is the belief that even flies and birds here reach Haridhaam, let alone human beings. *Tripuri Kshetra* is noted as a popular and powerful Tirtha where eight Swayambhu Lingas manifested on their own, where any act of Virtue would have manifold fruits of life. Sage Markandeya recalled an interesting happening about the Tripuri Kshetra: Swayambhu Manu-the first Manu-heard at Ayodhya while sleeping the remote sounds of bells and Vasishtha explained to Manu that those sounds were heard from Tripuri on the banks of Sacred Narmada, from the aeroplanes taking off from the roofs of virtuous human beings destined to celestial worlds like Kailasa, Vaikuntha and Indra loka. Swayambhu Manu immediately left for Tripuri and performed several rituals including Aswamedha Yagna and prayed to Devi Narmada who blessed the Manu that in his lineage one famous Bhagirath would be borne in Treta Yuga and would succeed bringing Pavitra Ganga to „Aryavarta“ from the Celestial Worlds! In the Tripuri Kshetra itself, Sage Bhrigu prayed to Trilochan Siva being desirous of the darshan of His Third Eye and as Siva obliged with His appearance, the Sage asked for the boons of obtaining Siddhis, formation of *Bhrigu Tirtha* with His presence always, manifesting Eight Rudras in the

Bhrigu Tirtha named Bhrigu, Shooli, Ved, Chandra, Mukha, Attahaas, Kaal and Karaali; and granting benevolence to visitors of Bhrigu Tirtha as a sin-destroyer. Similarly Bhagavan Soma (Chandra) prayed to Siva to set up *Soma Tirtha* as the Sangam of the three Rivers viz. Ganga, Jamuna and Narmada. *Narmadapuri* on the bank of Narmada was indeed worthy as Sage Jamadagni prayed to Maha Deva and secured a Kama Dhenu and King Kartaveeryarjuna being jealous of the prized possession, took away the Holy Cow by force after killing Jamadagni and the Sage's son Parasurama not only killed the most powerful King of the Time but also uprooted the concept of Kshatriyas and Kings by waging twenty one battles; he set up a Memorial named Devadroni (Kapila Dhenu) where Pinda daanas continued to be performed to Jamadagi and ancestors. Sage Markandeya narrated the renowned happening of a „Nishad“ (Hunter) to Yudhishtar about the formation of *Trinetra Kund* as the high devotee of Siva Linga discovered that the Third Eye was missing on the Linga, cut his own eye as a replacement to it by resisting extreme pain and flow of blood and pasting it on the third eye position of the Siva Linga; Maha Deva appeared before Nishad with blind faith, extreme sense of sacrifice and unnerving devotion and granted him „Siva Sayujyam“ (Attainment of Oneness with Siva). *Sapta Sarasvat Tirtha* came into being since a Gandharva, who was an excellent singer of hymns extolling Parama Siva, got into the habit of drinking and Nandi cursed that the singer be born to a Chandala. The Singer became extremely repentant and entreated Nandi to show a means of reversing the curse; the Chandala had luckily retained the memory of his earlier birth as Gandharva and reached the banks of Narmada and sang hymns of Siva at ‘Shankarasthanil’ or Siva Veda when a Siva Linga appeared by name Sapta Sarasvata and the Chandala regained the earlier life as Gandharva. *Shandileswar Tirtha* was formed after the famous Sage Shandilya (the Founder of the Shandilya Gotra) whose Tapasya to Maheswara in his hermitage on the banks of Narmada was exemplary; along with two other Lingas viz. Pancha Brahmeswar and Pushpeshwar, the Shandileswar was well known as among the ‘Tirtha Traya’ where worship of the Lingas and Pitru Tarpan / Pinda Pradaanas were performed. Markandeya narrated to Yudhishtar the story of Chakravarthi *Mandhata*, who performed Yagnas near Amarakashtak Mountain and prayed to *Omkareswar*. He was a gift of a powerful Yagna by his father, King Yavanashva, who drank by mistake the „Mantra Jala“ meant for his wife. Yuvanashva got pregnant instead and delivered a boy by the opening of his belly. Devas and Indra visited the child and wondered as to who might feed milk to the boy; Indra said: „Esha Maa Dhata“ and fed Amrit-like milk by inserting his middle finger in the baby's mouth and hence the child's name became Mandhata. As the boy grew he became a model King of virtue, valour and justice. Omkareswar appeared in response to Mandhata's prayers and gave the boon of naming the Mountain of Vaidurya as Mandhata. *Jaleswar* or Bana Linga was the manifestation of Siva; Banasura, the son of Bali Chakravarti, meditated to Maha Deva for thousand divine years and obtained the boons of impregnability of his City by any body excepting Mahadeva Himself and also flying mobility along with him and to those whom he chose any where. As Siva gave the boons, Vishnu and Brahma too bestowed the same kind of boons and Banasura thus emerged the Great Mighty King of ‘Tripuras’ or as the dreaded ‘Tripurasura’, who came to attack Deva Lokas and Bhuloka. Sages, Devas, Brahma and Vishnu were all alarmed and approached Siva, who decided to fight the Demon by Himself and smashed him with His Aghora astra which could absorb its heat and force by Narmada only after its attack. Banasura was badly hurt and realising his foolishness prayed to Maha Deva once again. The most lenient and gracious Bhagavan granted that Banasura would not have another birth and that a Siva Linga would be manifested as Bana Linga or Jala Linga. Another instance narrated by Markandeya to Yudhishtar related to the memorable King *Indradyumna* who performed Maha Yagna on the banks of Narmada, had darshan of Omkareswara Linga

and visioned a radiant spectacle of an Inner Linga of Maha Deva in the central portion of the Principal Omkareswar Linga; he also had a special visualization of Bhagavan Vishnu in His full resplendent and ornamented form with four hands with Shankha, Chakra, Gada and Lotus at the top portion of Omkareswara Linga and prayed to Him; the King also invoked various Holy Rivers especially Ganga to join the Mahanadi Narmada at the bottom of the Linga; and to Narmada to manifest Seven Branches from the north to south to facilitate Daanas, Homams, Vratas, Tarpans and Pinda Pradaans to Pitras and other rituals. The King's prayers were all granted adding to the magnificence of the entire Region in which the Sacred River Narmada flowed.

Ayodhya, Gaya, Nalanda and Patna /Sonpur:

Ayodhya: Akaaro Brahmatah proktam Yakaaro Vishnuruchyate, Dhakaaro Rudra rupascha Ahodhyaanaama raajate/ Sarvopa Paatakairiyuktair rahmahatyaadi paataakai, Na yodhyaa shaktate yasmaattaam ayodhyaam tato viduh/ (Skanda Purana, Vaishnava Khanda Ayodhyaa) Ayodhyaa is defined as 'A-kaara is Brahma, Ya-kaara is Vishnu and Dha-kaara is Rudra Swarupa; thus Ayodhya is a composite form of Tri Murthis. Maha Pataakas too are demolished by naming the Name of Ayodhya!) Valmiki Ramayana in Bala kaanda exclaims: *Manunaa Maanavendrena saa Puri nirmिता swayam/* (Manu confirms that he himself constructed Ayodhya himself!) In his opening introduction of Ayodhya Kaanda of Skanda Purana, Maha Muni Suta greets Bhagavan Shri Rama saying: *Namaami Parama-atmanam Ramam rajiva lochanam, Atasikusuma shyamam Ravanaantaka mavyayam /* (My greetings to Lord Shri Rama the Paramatma who is lotus eyed and of blue colour the terminator of the cruel and vile Ravanaasura). Ayodhya puri is so sancrosanct that sinful beings could ever enter it, let alone reside there! From his right foot thumb emerged Ganga and Sarayu river got manifested from left foot thumb. That is why both the Rivers are Sacred and worthy of prostrations and bathing in these rivers is as effective as destroying Brahma hatya sin. Even before the Avatara of Shri Rama, Ayodhya was the Capital of Surya Vamsha Kings of Ikshwaku; the latter was the son of Vaivashwata Manu and to this dynasty belonged to the illustrious Bhagiratha, Ambarisha, Nahusha, Yayati, Nabhaga, Ajan and Dasharatha. Skanda Purana in Vaishnava Khanda, Ayodhya Mahatmya gives the account of Veda Vijnana Vishnu Sharma whose severe Tapasya attracted Maha Vishnu darshana and the Pandita's request to him him the boon of constant Vishnu darshana; in turn Maha Vishnu instructed Sudarshana Chakra to dig up Bhumi and bring up Ganga from Patala Loka and the resultant Sacred Water flow was materialised as *Chakra Tirtha*. Earlier, Brahma himself resided at Ayodhya even before the incarnation of Shri Rama and hence the emergence of *Brahma Kund* . Brahma conveyed to Devas about the significance of this Tirtha -as given in Skanda Purana- would be such as that whoever performed formal snaana at the Kund and gave away daana would have been deemed as securing Ahwamedha yagna phala and blessed to fly as clad in Divya Vastras to Brahma Loka for residing there till the ensuing Pralaya. From Brahma kunda to the not too far Sarayu River is *Runa Vimochana Tirtha* where Muni Lomasha popularised specially among his followers who were delighted as the debts of one's very existence by way of births and deaths to parents and sons and the teacher, quite apart from the material debts of the current and past 'janmas' are cleared by snanas at the Tirtha. To the east of the Runa Vimochana Tirtha is the *Paapa mochana Tirtha*. Skanda Purana narrates the story of Panchala desha Brahmana was Maha Paapi who became conscious of his heaping stocks of sins and casually heard the conversation of a Group of Sadhus visiting Ayodhya. He visited Paapa Vimochana Tirtha along with them and happened to bathe on a Maagha Krishna Chaturdashi and also performed daana karyas and he realised an unusual transformation in his psyche and was surprised to

vision a Viman beckoning him and flew to Vishnu dhaam. Ahead of the glorious Paapa machana Tirtha is the *Sahasra dhaara Tirtha* which is known for demolishing all obstacles in life and overcoming enemies by mere snaana with faith and mental discipline. This indeed was the very Tirtha where after the close of the entire Ramayana, Lord Shri Rama instructed Lakshmana to bathe and by his own Mantra Shakti assume the Form of Adi Sesha! Actually, the background was that when Shri Ram who had once had an important visitor viz. Kaal Devata about which even Lakshman was unaware and instructed Lakshman not to enter and allow any visitor to enter either. Lakshman was faithfully guarding the entry of Rama Nivas by taking sincere rounds up and down the 'dwaar'. Meanwhile Maha Tapaswi Durvasa Maharshi who is noted for his short temper arrived and affectionately asked Lakshmana to let Ram inform of his arrival for Rama darshan. Lakshman being aware of Duravas's shaapa shakti alerted Rama of the Muni's arrival. With a view to protect his own Satya Vak Paripalana of Lakshman's disobedience despite his instruction, Rama had to resort to the extreme step of asking Lakshmana to perform Prana tyaga of Lakshmana. As Lakshmana took the form of Adisesha and visited Indra Loka even as the Sahasra Manis and their luster vanished, the lest the Tirtha place on Sarayu diminish significance, Indra and Devas arrived on the Spot ensured and in fact doubled its glory and sanctity and named it Sahasra Dhaara Tirtha and Lord Shri Rama blessed the title too for the benefit of posterity and Loka Kalyan. *Swarga dwaara dhaara*: Skanda Purana further describes as follows: Every Tirtha darshana has one's own benefits yet Swaga dwaara Tirtha has its own: Pratah kaala snana, japa-tapa-havana-upavasa-darshana-dhyaana-adhyana- daanas have their distinct results and those beings like the Chatur varna humans, mriga-pakshi-jala chara-krimi keetakaadi pranis happen to die at this Tirtha are qualified to direct access to Swarga and Vaikuntha dhaam. Bhagavan Vishnu in his Avatara Swarupas, especially of Shri Rama with his wife and brothers are stated at this Tirtha to select beings for their respective Punya Phalas and decide their 'nirnayas' based on their own past karmas overshadowing their contributions at the Swarga dwaara snaanas and punya karma mix. And so does the presence of Kailasha Vaasi along with Devi Parvati and their followers would oversee the process of selection of Beings for the Higher Loka Prapti, asserts the Skanda Purana. Near Swarga dwaara is the Nageshwara nath Mandir; it is stated that originally this Murti was originally made of Kusha grass but later King Vikramadyta resurrected and re-established the Idol with Veda mantras in a move to revive several 'Praachina' or age old Mandirs in Ayodhya. Yatris perform Pinda daana at Swarga dwaara Ghat with great devotion and bhakti. *Chandra Sahasra Tirtha* where Chandra sahasra vrata Udyapana is performed as also Argha danas are done on every Purnima Tithis to Chandra-Rohini Devis. *Swarna Tirtha* where Maharshi Vishwamitra's sishya Koutsa Muni called on Raghu Rama once and said that he wished for so much of wealth which he desired to give to his Guru which Rama too might not possess. Shri Rama thought for a while and requested the Muni to please stay back in his court of Ayodhya overnight. Then Shri Rama invited Kubera Deva to bring considerable gold and on receiving it gave it away to Koutsa Muni. Next morning, Rama gave away all the gold given by Kubera and kept up his word by redonating the same to the Muni and truly satisfied him. This Swarna Tirtha had thus attained a gold-bestowing reputation and fulfill the material desires of who ever performed worship by way of snaana- daana-Japas with utmost faith. One of Ayodhya's major Mandirs is *Kanak Bhavan* which is quite big and mention worthy which was supposed to be of Shri Ram's 'antahpura' or the interior palace hall where Devi Sita resided too. There are big sized Sita Rama Idols seated on a throne together in the Mandir as also the idols of the very past which were however smaller. From Kanaka Bhavan away is the most famed **Shri Rama Janma Sthaana** which was stated to have been rebuilt as Masjid Babri; this Masjid which became the hot controversy was partially destroyed to make way for the original now albeit

as a small make believe Mandir. Near to Raajma Sthaana are Sita Rasoyi or kitchen, Kopa bhavan or the Place where the love-fight Rama- Sita couple stayed; Ratna Simhasan or the Royal Throne made of jewels, Ananda Bhavan or the Palace of Joy, Ranga Mahal or the Hall of Music and Dance etc. The other Places worthy of visiting in Ayodhya's Sarayu River banks include *Lakshman Ghat* with a five feet Lakhmana Swami in the Mandir exclusively dedicated to him; *Ahalya Ghat* where Lord Rama is stated to have performed Yagna; *Hanuman gadhi* on an elevated sixty steps an Lord Hanuman in seated form; *Darshaneshwar*, *Mani Parvat* with Ashoka Stupa of broken 200 ft; *Dantana Kund* where Rama was stated to have had his mouth wash, where also Gautama Buddha, while in Ayodhya too rested. *Dasharatha kund* was the Place some few km. away on Sarayu River banks where King Dasharatha's 'Antya Dahana' was stated to have been performed. A mini- Parikrama of some 4 km around Ayodhya touches Ramaghat, Raghunadha Das gaddi, Sita kund, Agni Kund, Vidya kund, Mani Parvat, Kubera parvat, Sugriva parvat, Lakshman ghat, Swarga dwaar and back to Ram ghat. While no doubt Shri Rama Navami Celebrations on Chaitra Shukla Navami are famed for several days every year, Shravana Shukla Paksha festivities and Sarayu River snanaas are considered as sacred, especially on Kartika Purnima.

Gaya: A number of Puranas like Padma Purana, Agni Purana, Vayu Purana, besides Maha Bharata's Tirtha Yatra Phala asserted: *Yeshtavyaa bahuvah putraa yadyekopi Gayam vrajet, Yajeta vaashwa – medhena neelam neelam vaa vrushamutsrujet/* (One should aspire for the births of many sons so that atleast one could perform a Horse Sacrifice or at least a ' Blued coloured Vrishabha Visarjana' or a bull's freedom, being desirous of redemption of the Pitru). Maha Bharata's Tirtha Yatra chapter states: *Tato Gayam samasaadya Brahma chari samahitah, Ashwamavaapnoti gamanadeva Bharata/ Atraakshasaya vato naama lokeshu vishrutah, Pitrunaam tatra vai dattamakshayam bhavatiPrabho/ Maha nadyamupa-sprushya tarpayet Pitru Devataah, Akshayaanaapnuyaalokaankurlam chaiva samudbhavet/* (Thus those visiting Gaya Kshetra, observing Brahmacharya or celibacy shall reap the fruits of executing Ashwa - medha Yagna; then at the Akshayaavata there which is reputed in the Three Lokas make what ever offerings to Pitru Devas are made would have everlasting fruits. There itself after performing formal snana in the Maha Nadi and execute Deva-Pitru Tarpanas would fetch access to Akshaya Lokas and redeem the souls of the dead pitrus of their respective 'Kulas'. Vayu Purana in the Chapter relating to Gaya Tirtha Mahatmya asserts: *Gayaayaam nahi tat snaanam yatra Tirtha na vidyate, Saannidhyam sarva tirthaanaam Gayaa tirtham tato varam/ Brahma jnaanena kim saadhyam gogruhe maranena kim, Vaasena kim Kurukshetre yadi putro Gayaam vrajet/* (There is no other Place or Tirtha like Gaya since all the Tirthas are as though so intimate and near to Gaya Tirtha. Among the four major means of Mukti are accomplishment of Brahma Jnaana, Kurukshetra nivasa, termination of one's life in a Cow shed and Pindadaana by one's own sons at Gaya!) The legend of Gaya Tirtha is recalled in Agni Purana in the Tirtha Mahatmya: Gayasura, the King of Rakshasaas did fierce Tapasya to Maha Vishnu as the latter granted him the boon of materialising a Maha Tirtha by Gayasura's name. All the human beings and Asura-Daityaadi had the darshan of Gayasura and reached Vaikuntha as who ever had his darshan did not have to visit none else to achieve Vaikuntha. Devas and Bahma Deva approached Vishnu as the latter advised to approach Gayasura to let Brahma and Devas perform yagna over Gayasura's huge head. Gaya was in deep sleep and did not respond but still Brahma and Devas were in the process of executing the Yagna and could not perform 'Purnaahuti' the grand finale of the Yagna was still pending. Meanwhile when Gayasura woke up and wished to get up but could not. The Asura became shaky and tried hard to wriggle out from the fire pit, Vishnu advised Yama dharma Raja to keep a heavy boulder on Gaya's head

and occupy the Asura's entire body of some eight km. of length till the purnahuti was over. The heavy boulder itself had a background connection: Maharshi Marichi the son of Brahma Deva was once resting in sleep and instructed his wife called Dharmavata to press his legs and not disturb his sleep otherwise she would turn as a boulder. Meanwhile Brahma arrived and the wife faced a dilemma whether she should obey her husband's instruction not to disturb or announce the arrival of Brahma himself. She set aside Marichi's curse even as she faced the eventuality of her turning as a boulder. She gave a return curse to Marichi to have created an awkward situation for her that Marichi would have to face Maha Deva's wrath in some another connection and entered Agni and purified herself performing tapsya for thousand years. Lord Vishnu thus took advantage of the boulder which was blessed with the foot prints of Devas and utilised for Yama Dharma Raja to place it on Gayaasura's head which eventually became famed as Deva Shila-Sarva Deva Swarupa- Sarva Tirtha mayi-and the unique Pujnya Shila. Even after the Shila was placed on his head the Asura was still breathing and hence Vishnu had to place on his 'Gada' or Mace to fully sniff him out by adding his own presence to this Gaya Tirtha. This 'Adi Gada' was the backbone of Gajasura which was eventually turned by Deva's Architect Vishwa karma. The most outstanding PitruTirtha in the Universe, to which the Pitru Loka keeps close attention to look forward to the sons of mankind looks forward to Shraddha karmas and Pinda daanas. These Karmas not only redeem the souls of the ancestors by their performance but equally to collect bags of fulfillment to the Shraddha Kartas as far higher proportions manifold.

The significant Places worthy of visit at Gaya are *Phalgu River* which is filled up only during the monsoon season essentially and is situated under the Gada -dhara Mandira quite adjacent to its sangama with Dakshina Saraswati. Basic Shraddha karmas are performed on the banks of this River. *Vishnupada* is the main Mandira on the banks of Phalgu River where there is an 'Ashta kona' or eight angled Vedi or Platform there is a significant sign of Vishnu Paada. Outside the Mandir, there are two 'Mandapas' where normally visitors perform shraddhas and nearby there is a prominent Mandir of Garuda Pratima as also Jagannatha and Lakshmi Narayana Mandirs. Not far is *Gadadhara Bhagavan* Mandir with his 'chaturbhuja' or of four arms. *Gaya shira sthaana* and *Gaya Kupa* are to the south of Gayadhara Mandir and not far there is the Mandir of *Munda pushta Devi* with eighteen hands. *Adi Gaya* stated to be one of the oldest Places some south west of Munda Pushta is popular for Pinda daanas in a place some few steps down this level. *Surya kunda* is some two hundred yards from Vishnu Pada and the Tirthas of Uduchi , Kanwal and Manasa are present, besides a Mandir of the four armed Murti of Surya narayana called Dakshina Manasa Tirtha. *Jihva lola* is a peepul tree some 80 yards south of Phalgu bank. *Sita Kund* and *Ram Gaya* are the black stone made of King Dashratha by his own hand and Bhatarashrama Vedi or platform also with Matanga Rishi's foot print respectively. *Uttara maanasa Sarovar* where Uttaraarka Surya and Shila Devi Murtis are present and to the North- west of the Sarovar there is a Mouneshwar and Pitamaheshwar Shiva Mandir where yatris performing Shraddhas observe silence and proceed to Surya kunda. *Ram shila* is a hill some one km approx. north to Phalgu under which is the Ram Shila Kund named Sarovar and Shiva Mandir. From Ram Shila some 200 yards south there is a Banyan Tree which is the Place of *Kaaka bali-Yama bali* and *Shwaana bali*. From Ram Shila some two and half km. west are *Preta shila* and *Brahma kund*, the latter being a perfect Sarovar; from Gaya the Pret Parvat is about 4 km approx. Brahma sarovar is what leads a good road and Pret shila is reached by taking some 400 steps ascent. *Vaitarani* is a Sarovar led by the southern 'Phaatak' or road of Gaya; *Bhim Gaya* is at the north-west turning of Vaitarini where there is a Bhimasena Murti. *Bhasma kut-Goprachara* is on a small hillock

of the south west of Bhim gaya where there are Janardana Mandira, Mangala Devi/ Mangaleshwara Linga Mandira and Goprachara Tirtha where Brahma is stated to have performed Go daana still recognised with the wooden rod signage. *Brahma sarovar* near Vaitarini Sarovar is famed for Gada Khanda of Vishnu Bhagavan fell and till date yattris perform parikrama. *Akshaya vata* near Brahma sarovar is within a four walled garden the center of which is a Vata Vriksha and Vateshtara Mahadeva Mandir. *Gadalola Sarovara* near Akshaya vata within which is a Gada swarupa Pillar with which Vishnu after killing Gayasura washed and cleaned up his mace. *Mangala Gauri-Avimukeshwara nath* Mandir on a hill top near Brahma Sarovar is situated some 125 steps; it is stated that any person with none to accompany could alone perform shraaddha by merely keeping three pindas with curd and without tilas in one of the right hands of the Chaturbhuj Bhagavan. Next to Mangala Gauri hill is another such hill where there is a Hanuman Sthaan and Kund which is called *Akasha Ganga* and underneath the hill is *Patala Ganga and Kapila dhaara*. From Vishnu paada Mandir about less than a km. is *Gayatri Ghat and Gayatri Devi Mandir* also Lakshmi narayana Mandir, Prithvishwar Shiva Mandir and Gayaditya naama Chaturbhuj Surya Mandir. Some one km. distance on way to Bodh Gaya is a 'parvata' and some 500 steps above it is *Brahma Yoni and Matru yoni*. From Gaya by 3 km approx. is the Holy *Saraswati River* as also a Saraswati Mandir. *Dharmaranya* has Dharma Raja Mandir with two wells into which pindadanas are performed and those desirous of male progeny are deposited into a 'Rahat Kupa' where Pandavas headed by Yudhishtar performed shraddha there and being desirous of male children deposited the pindas in the wells. From Gaya to *Budha Gaya* is some 7 miles where there is a stone called 'Bouddha Simhasana' where under a Bodhi Vriksha, Buddha was stated to have meditated and attained enlightenment; but now that tree is also stated to have been since replaced by a Peepul vriksha!

While Pitru Karyas at Gaya Tirtha are invariably abridged in the current flow of contemporary life, the prescribed Time Schedule is for a week covering the tasks are as follows: Day One: Having duly bathed in Phalgu River, shraddha karmas including Sankalpa-Agni Homa in favour of Devas-Pitru Tarpana-Pinda Daana-Brahmana bhojana-Dakshinaa Karya krama and Daana are to be accomplished; in the morning Snaana Sandhyas are done at Gayatri Tirtha, Madhyahna Snaana Sandhyas at Savitri Kunda and evening Snaana Sandhyas at Saraswati Kunda. On the second day, one has to visit Preta Shila and perform pinda daanas at Brahma Kunda and Preta shila, from there pinda daanas be done at Rama Shila, and at Kaaka (crow) Bali sthana and swaana(dog) bali sthaana. On the third day after Phalgu snaana, one should visit Uttara Manasa and after tarpan-pinda daana-Uttaraarka darshana, mouna dharana or observance of silence, arrive at Surya kunda, Dakshina Manasa Tirtha-snaana-tarpana-pinda daana and Gadaadhara darshana / puja. On the fourth day after Phalguna snana and pinda daana at Matangavaapi, Dharmeshwara darshana-pinda daana and reach Bodh Gaya and shraddha under or near shraaddha karma. On fifth day after phalguna snaana, Brahma sara-snaana - tarpana- pinda daana; Amrasechana, Brahma sara pradakshina and Kaaka-Yama- swaana bali and snaana again. On the sixth day, after Phalgu snaana, visit Vishnu pada, Rudra pada, Dakshinaagni pada, Garhatya pada, Aavaheena pada, savyaa pada, Apasavya pada, Surya pada, Kartikeya pada, Krouncha pada and Kashyapa pada darshana and shraaddha followed by pitru tarpanas at Vishnu pada and pinda pradana at Gaya shira pada. On the final seventh day, after phalguna snaana, perform Gadalolapara snaana, shraddha and bhojana pradana to three or atleast one Brahmana. This seven day observance is for those who desire to perform only 'sakaama' shraaddha formally. Also during the Ashwin Krishna Paksha, the prescribed schedule is- Pratipada: Shraddha and Kaaka bali at Brahma kunda-Preta shila-Rama kunda and Rama shilaadi; Dwitiya: Pinda daana at Uttara

Manasa, Udichi, Kankhal, Dakshina Manasa, and Jihwa lola; Tiritiya: Sarasvati snana and shradda at Matanga vaapi, Dharmaranya, and Bodha Gaya; Chaturthi: Brahma sarovara shraddha and ‘aamra sechana’ and Kaka bali; Panchami: Pinda Shraddha at Vishnupada Mandira at Rudrapada, Brahma pada and Vishnu para with ‘Ksheera shakraaanna’ Shraadha; from Shashthi to Ashtami, pinda daana be performed in Vishnupada Mandira on a Sixteen Veda Naama Mandapa the names of the sixteen Vedis being Kartikapada, Dakshinaagni, Garha paryagni, Aavagha- niyagni, Suryapada, Chandrapada, Ganeshapada, Dadhichapada, Kanvapada, Matangapada, Krounchapada, Indrapada, Agastyapada, and Kashyapapada; on Ashtami there is a sixteen vedi Mandapa at the same padas there would be a Gaja karna tarpana with milk. On Ashwin Krishna Navami, Shraadha is performed at Rama gaya and pinda daana at Sita Kund for three generations of mother, father’s mother and grand mother pinda daana; on Dashami Pinda daana at Gaya shira and Gaya kupa; on Ekadasi guda or jaggery- pinda daana at Mundapushta, Adigaya, and Dhoutapaada with tils; on Dwadashi, pinda daana be performed at Bhim gaya, Goprachara and Gadaalola; on Trayodashi after Phalgu snaan as usual followed by Ksheera Tarpana at the Tirthas of Gayatri, Savitri and Saraswati respectively in the morning-noon- evening respectively; on Chaturdashi Vaitarini snaana and tarpana be performed; on Amnavasya shaddha and Brahmanbhojana be performed under or near Akshaya Vat and finally, on Ashwin Shukla Pratipada Gaya shradda is concluded on Gayatri ghat with Curd-Akshata Pinda daan. This is the basically designed Gaya Tirtha Pinda daana vidhi!

Nalanda (Rajagriha): Tato Raja griham gacchet Tirtha sevi Naraadhipa, Upaspushya tatatarta kakshiniva modate/ Yakshinyaa naityakam tara praashnita purushah shuchih, Yakshinyastu prasadena muchyate Brahmahatyayaa/ (Thereafter, persons should visit Raja griha and perform snaana to achieve excellent happiness and thereafter eat yakshini naivedya [fruits, sweets and boiled rice] to rid of Brama hatya maha pataka). Both Padma Purana on Tirtha Yatra Mahatmya and Maha Bharata on the same subject are thus quoted as above. From Patna Junction, the Capital citi of Bihar to Barkhityar Station to 33 miles by road is Rajagriha and from there about 20 km. by road. This is a unique Tirtha for Sanatana Dharma Hindus-Jains-and Bouddha followers. For Hindus there are several Prachi Saraswati based Tirthas like Brahma kund, Kedarnath, Sita kund, Vaitarini, Vaanari kund, Sonbhandar, Pancha Parvat and such. There are also several Bouddha Mandirs, Bouddha Tirthas and some eighteen Bouddha Vihars. There are significant Jain Tirthas on Pancha Parvatas viz. Vaibhaar, Vipulachal, Rantnagiri Udaygiri and Swarna giri. *Nalanda* is again one interesting Place where Hindu-Bouddha-Jain Tirtha Sthalas are famed; for eg. This Place is known as many opine the same as Kundinapur the birth place of Rukmini Devi the Front ranking ‘Patta Mahishi’ or Lakshmi Avatara Pradhana Life Patner of Lord Krishna viz. Vidarbha. *Nalanda* however is prominent as the famed Center of Learning and Studies in Bouddha Times where a number of foreign students for serious research till date.

Patna / Sonpur: The Capital City of Bihar now has a hoary past as the erstwhile Pataliputra, the Seat of Learning and Fine Arts and the Capital of Ancient Pataliputra ruled by Magadha-Nanda-Maurya- Sunga- Gupta-Pala dynasties of the yore and the crucible various Hindu Faiths of Buddha-Jaina-Sikhs with the famed Takht of Patna Sahib and Maha Vir Jain Temple right now. Patna is also renowned for Patan Devi Temple of Patneshwari, one of the 51 Siddha Shakti Peethas where Sati Devi’s right thigh fell off as Sudarshana Chakra severed her body; Shitala Devi’s Temple popular to relieve the illnes of Chicken pox and Small pox especially for children which houses the Pindaas of Sapta Matrikas; Devi Bhagavata mentioned that Jwarusura attacked children with pox and Devi Katyayani assumed the swarupa of Shitala

Devi to cure them once or all; Agam kuna was dump well where King Ashok killed in cruelty all his 99 brothers and discarded their bodies so that he would only survive as the King; Agam kuna was also stated to be the place where Jain monk Sudarshana was thrown in the well by King Chand but instead of drowning the monk's body floated on a lotus. Till date, Hindu marriages are performed at this Well as though the new couples are dumped in the Well of Sarovara. Apart from the interesting Mandirs to visit in Patna itself, Sonapur hardly 25 km from Patna approachable by a pretty long bridge across the River Ganges is famed to organise Asia's largest Cattle Fair held from Kartika Purnima in November for some two months at the confluence point of Ganga and River Gandaki; the Fair is for the exhibition and sale of elephants, horses, donkeys, dogs, cows, bulls, buffalos, birds and so on, besides being a huge mela with social and entertainment activities drawing huge turn over of masses from far off places in India. As a major fall out of the Fair is the rush of Yatis paying respects to Hariharnath Temple right on the banks of Gandaki River believed to have been built up Lord Shri Rama the Ramayana Epic Hero when he accompanied Sage Vishwamitra to the Court of King Janaka of Mithila to break the 'Shiva Dhanush' to win the hand of Devi Sita. Another significant legend is related to the Sacred River Gandaki -where the Hariharnath Temple stands near the Cattle Fair Grounds-by Maha Bhagavata Purana, Vamana Purana etc. about Gajendra Moksha; the elephant King Gajendra with his spouses and a massive collection of elephant army went into Gandaki banks and a fierce and huge and powerful crocodile caught in a hold of Gajendra's foot in a biting grip and they fought for years together for Gajendra to get rid of the awful grip. In their earlier births Gajendra was King Indradyumna the King of Pandyas who in similar situation of the King enjoying a river bath with his queens angered Sage Agastya in deep meditation by the noises and Agastya cursed that a crocodile would catch the King becoming an Elephant and torture for years together. Likewise, a Gandharva Chief Huhu was cursed by Devala Muni that in similar circumstances the Gandharva would become a crocodile and torture an elephant king to be finally restored of his original form with the grace of Vasudeva and his Sudarshana Chakra!

Vaidyanath Jyotir Linga (At Deogarh/ Parli?)

The legendary background of Vaidyanath Jyotirlinga is related to Ravana the Epic Villain of Ramayana. The King of Lanka carried out a relentless meditation to Bhagavan Siva at Kailash Mountain for mighty supremacy and indomitability in the Three Worlds. But as Siva was still not responsive, he moved out from Kailasa to Vrikshakandhaka towards south of Kailasa. He dug up a pit and worshipped a Sivalinga even by sacrificing his ten heads, one by one and at the end Lord Siva became visible and gave away boons of supremacy as also to let a Sivalinga to carry to his Kingdom on the condition that he should reach Lanka directly without even a single halt, lest the Linga if kept down would never be pulled out! Devas became afraid that once Ravana turned unquestionable, there would be chaos in the Three Lokas and Dharma would be wiped out. Thus Devas prayed to Devi Parvati and Ganesha to somehow avert the risk of the Sivalinga to reach Lanka. Parvati appeared on way to Ravana in disguise and in collaboration with Varuna, tempted pure waters of major holy Rivers to quench Ravana's thirst. The King's stomach got bloated and he wished to stop over urgently for a relief and luckily for him, there was a lad whose assistance was sought to hold the Linga for a few moments without placing it on the Ground. By the time Ravana returned, the lad- Lord Ganesha-disappeared and the Linga was stuck to the Ground and no force applied by Ravana was a match to Bhagavan's decision. That was the Jyotirlinga of Vaidyanath who was a 'Vaidya' (Physician) and he helped to piece together the slashed heads of Ravana at the time of his sacrificing them one by one.

Baidyanath dham: (Baba dham) at Deogarh (Jharkhand) is some seven km from the Jasidhi Junction on Howrah-Delhi main line. It is 220 km away from Patna. The Baidyanath Shrine attracts lakhs of pilgrims from all over a year normally, but they were in millions during the entire 'Shravan' month (July-August). Several of them carry Ganges water from Sultanganj to Deogarh- a distance of about hundred km-to perform 'Abhishekams' to the Jyotirlinga, and many saffron clad Sadhus carry the Ganges water by walk barefooted covering this distance! Pilgrimage to 'Babadham' is considered incomplete without visiting Basukinath Siva Temple some distance away. A well maintained Nandi Temple edging the Nandan Pahad (hill) faces a beautiful lake on one side and the Siva Temple on the other. Sivaganga is a pond very near the Main Temple, where Ravana desired to wash but since there was no water nearby, he used his fist and hit the Earth and a pond appeared. Other places of interest at Deogarh include Naulakha Mandir, Satsang Ashram of Radha Swami, Tapovan with many caves where Valmiki is said to have stayed for penance, Rikhia Ashram of Yoga, Hamira Jori where Ravana handed over the Holy Linga to Ganesh before his ablutions and Trikut Parvat with a Maha Deva Temple. Inside the huge complex of Babadham itself are situated some 22 Temples viz. Neelkantha and Parvati before Babadham and on either side a cluster of Shrines devoted to Sri Ram, Ananda Bhairavi, Ganga, Gauri Shankar, Tara, Maha Kali, Annapurna, Lakshmi Narayana, Surya Narayan, Bhavani, Sandhya, and so on.

Parli: There is a controversy about the location of Vaidyanatha Jyotirlinga at Parli in Maharashtra called Kantipur (Madhyarekha Vijayanti or Vijayanti), which is some 26 km from Ambejoga in the Beed District. One legend of this Temple often heard in the vicinity was that Amba Yogeshwari of Ambejoga wedded Maha Deva Vaidyanadha and the marriage party arrived late after the 'Muhurtha' (the precise time) for the wedding and Devi was waiting for long; She cursed the members of the Party to turn into stone statues. Another Story was that after the churning of Ocean for Amrit (nectar), fourteen gems emerged among which were Dhanvantari and Amrit which were hidden inside the Shivalinga, but as Demons tried to take them forcibly, huge flames came out and they had to retreat. Till date, devotees have strong faith that Amrit and Dhanvantari or disease killing medicinal flows emerge from the Abhisheka waters. Thus Lord Lingamurthi is called as Amritamurthi and Dhanvantari. In fact, all the devotees- irrespective of caste or creed-are allowed touching the Linga and performing Abhishekas by themselves. Daily Rudra Parayana Mantras are reverberated in the entire Complex. This Sacred Temple is also believed to be the Place where Lord Vishnu as Mohini distributed Amrit to Devas, and hence is called Vijayanti. The other legend associated with the Temple is that of Ravana's carrying the Linga as described above. Incidentally, the surrounding mountains, forests and rivers are stated to abound medicinal sources. Over the last hundred years or so, considerable construction was made around the Swayambhu Linga by way of strong walls, Enclosures, 'Mahadwara' (the Main Gate) and several other Gates, a number of windows (one of which allows morning Sunrays inside one Enclosure by means of which Sun God is worshipped), minarets, lighting and various facilities to lakhs of Visitors. This Temple is a hallowed place particularly to Vira Shaiva Lingayats and devotees of Lord Harihara. There is a Harihara Teertha in the vicinity. Many festivals connected with Siva, Krishna and Bhagavati are celebrated with fervour; Mondays, Fridays, Ekadasis, Chaitra Padava, Dussehras, Tripura Pournami, the entire Kartika month, Sivaratri, Sravana month and so on are observed with reverence. A Pond in the Area is associated with Markandeya's extraordinary devotion to embrace the Linga firmly defying Yamaraja's order of death and Bhagavan's subsequent appearance giving His blessing of immortality to the devotee. A Vateswara Temple reminds the devotees of a 'Vata' or Banyan Tree around which was the Story of Satyavan and

Savitri over Yama's sanction of long- life to the couple.

Praak Bharat

Kolkatta- Ganga Sagara- Navadwipa dhaam- Kokamukha Varaha Kshetra : *Kolkatta:* Apart from being the Capital of West Bengal, Kolkatta is the significant Tirtha Sthaana of AdiKaali, Kali Mandir, Dakshineshwar, Belur Math and Paarashwanath Jain Mandir. Adi Kaali is the most ancient sthaana with the dilapidated and reconstructed Shakti Peetha with Pradhana Mandir and on a raised platform five on one side and five others on the other including a Shiva Linga; in a way it is an Ekadasha Linga or Eleven Rudra Mandir. This is basically a Shakti Peetha. Kolkatta's Kaali Mandir is indeed very popular and many consider this Kaali Ghat Mandir is 'the' Shakti Peetha. On the banks of Ganga is the most famed Dakshineshwar where Saint Ramakrishna Parama Hamsa himself performed worship to Maha Kaali at the Kali Mandir made by Queen Raasamani, besides twelve Shiva Mandiras on raised platform. Outside the Maha Kaali Mandir are the two Samadhis of Sharada Mata the wife of the Parama Hamsa as also that of Queen Raasa mani. Also, there is a Banyan Tree under which the Parama Hamsa performed meditation constantly. The set-up of Belurmath away from Dakshineshwar although elsewhere on the banks of Ganges was the handi-work of Swami Vivenanada himself as the Head Office of Ramakrishna Mission's series all over. The Math has a modern and tastefully constructed Temple of the Parama Hamsa with an alluring mix of oriental and western styles. Also Vivakananda's Samadhi too is there itself overlooking the serene and Sacred Ganga. The Shri Parshvyaya nath Jain Mandir is yet another attraction of the City.

Ganga saagar (Saagara Dwip) is reachable from Kolkatta to the Diamond Harbour Railway Station of about 25 km and from there by boat on Sea or Air, covering a total kilometerage of 50 km from the City. This is the confluence point of Bay of Bengal and Ganges and hence its significance, especially as a crowd puller at the Makara Sankranti and Uttarayana Kaala with a Mela Festival for five days. During the Festival days, Purohits set up a temporary Murti of Kapila Maha Muni is worshipped as it was he who was responsible to have washed off some sixty thousand Sagara Kumars due to the curse of the Sage and that was indeed the origin of Bhagirath's mighty tapas to Ganges to flow from Vishnu's feet and subsequently to Maha Deva to hold it on his head by his twisted hair or Jataajuta so that the redemption of the souls of Sagara putras was secured finally! Kartika Snaan as especially on Kartika Purnima too are considered highly esteemed by the crowds at Ganga saagara who make it a point to carry large cans of the Sacred Ganga Saagara Sangama.

Nava Dwipa Dhaam: Being the Principal Tirtha of Chaitanya Prabhu's birth place, this popular most Gaudiya Vaishnav Maha Tirtha is at Nava Dwipa Dhaam Railway Station on Eastern Howda-Barahava line distanced by 66 miles off Howda, the township being nearly a mile with many facilities of Dharma shalas to stay. The principal Dhaam of visit is Dhameshwar Mandir of Shri Gauranga Maha Prabhu and Vishnupriya Devi. The other Mandiras are of Advaitacharya, Gaura Govinda, Shachi Mataa-Vishnupriya, Jagaayi- Madhaayi Uddhar, Gadaadhara Angana, Nandanacharya, Gupta Brindavana-Pancha Tatwa, and some 40 such Mandirs. From Nava dwipa Dhaam to the Mayapura across the other banks of Ganges has several Mandirs of some twenty Mandirs of Mrittika Murtis of Mukti Vinod Thakur and other types of Chatanya Prabhu followers with varied disciplines.

Kokamukha Varaha Kshetra: Maha Varaha Purana extols the value of Kokhamukha Yatra: Once a fisherman caught a massive fish in a big Lake called Kokamukha Tirtha and a kite lifted the prey but could not hold it properly and as the fish slipped on ground, a handsome prince emerged from the fish. Almost simultaneously the fisherman's wife brought pieces of meat to catch fish and as a kite took away the plate of meat the fisherman killed the kite with his arrows and there emerged a charming Princess claiming that she was from Chandrapur. The Prince and the Princess were married and as both of them had memories of their previous births recalled the strange story, thanks to the sanctity of the Kokamukha Tirtha. [The strong belief is that Kikhamukha was the confluence of Rivers of Koka and Kosi (Kousiki) running from Nepal on the Western District of Purnea in Bihar. The river is known in Nepal as Sun-Kosi (Swarna Kausiki). The ancient Kokamukhi Tirtha or Varaha Kshetra is situated on the banks of Sun Kosi now called Baraha Chhatra or the corrupted form of Varaha Kshetra] Bhagavan Varaha depicted the prominence of Kokamukhi Tirtha to Bhu Devi: An overnight stay on the banks of a River 'Jalabindu' performing fast and worship to Vishnu would fetch the knowledge of previous births! An overnight stay and bath at the 'Vishnudhara' waterfall in the Khoka region would yield the 'Punya' of performing thousand Agnishtomas'. Worship of Vishnu for three days and nights by fasting and Tarpanas at 'Vishnupada Sthan' or area reserved at Krouncha Dweep. Early morning baths in a 'Sarovar' from where Bhu Devi was pulled up by the tusks of Varaha Deva would completely wash off the sins of persons of the current birth. A five night penance near the 'Pancha Shilas' or Five Rocks dedicated to Vishnu would reveal the path to 'Gomed Dwipa'. There was a Thunga-Kut named mountain with four 'Shikars' in the Koka Region and a night long stay and bath would pave the way for Kusha Dwipa. Likewise, there were several Punya Kshetras in and around the holiest Kokamukhi Tirtha; penance, prayers, river bathing and homams etc. would confer various blessings. Termination of life in the Holy Region would bestow life in 'Parama Lokas'. He who reads or hears about the Kokamukha Tirtha also confers effective means of attaining higher lokas. Besides significance of worshipping Varaha Bhagavan's Chaturbhuj Murti in the Kokamukha Mandir on the Dhavalagiri Shikhara at the Varaha Kshetra, especially on Kartika Purnima for three days, there is Surya Kunda where Pitru Tarpanas are performed in the prescribed manner by invoking Adi Varaha.

Kamakhya Devi and two other Shakti Peethas in Assam and Tripura; [Five Shakti Peethas in Bangla desh]

Kamakhya: Kameswarim cha Kamaakhyam Kamarupa nivaasinim, Tasmaat kanchana shamkaashaam taam namaami Sureshwarim/ Devi Purana elaborating the details of Shakti Peethas highlights Devi Kamakhya at Kama rupa (Assam) and signifies the Kamakhya Devi states that she shines like the molten gold colour and salutes her to bestow blessings. *Kamakhyaa paramam Tirtham Kamaakhyaa paramam tirtham Kamaakhyaa paramam tapah, Kamakhyaa paramo dharmah kamakhyaa paramaaa gatih/* (Kamakhya Devi is the Parama Tirtha, Parama Tapas, Parama Dharmam and Parma Gati) Kama Rupi Kamakhya Devi Mandira is the foremost of Shakti Pithas as got materialised on account of Vishnu Chakra's slicing off Devi Sati's Yagna Swarupa as its various mortal remains scattered off in various directions of Bharata Desha and around especially at Kamarupa as her private part. *Yatra sakshaat Bhagavati swayameva vyavasthita, Tatra gatwaa Maha peethe snatwaa lohitya vaarini, Brahmahaapi narah sadyo muchyate bhavabandhanaat/* Bhagavati herself is manifested in this Kamakhya Swarupa Tirtha and hence we should worship Her by reciting the opening Prayer as above. Kamakhya Mandir is on the hill top, presumed as on Nila Parvat. Yantra Scripts of the yore describe Kamarupa is to be considered as a triangular shape of Karatoya River and Brahma putra. Kamakhya Devi's Siddhipeeth is indeed

famed as unique far more significant than even Shri Peeth, Ratna Peeth, Vishnu Peeth, Brahma Peeth and Rudra Peeth. Kamakhya Mandir was rebuilt by Cooch Bihar Kings Vishwa Singh and Shiva Singh as Kaala Mountain got partly destroyed in 1564 AD and the then original Mandir was known as Anandaakhya. Devi Bhagavata Purana in its seventh Skandha- 38th Adhyaya asserted that in the whole Bhu Mandala the Kamakhya Mandir was noted as the Singular Maha Kshetra. Returning from Mountain to Gauhati, yatris travel by dhows or steamers to visit Umananda Murti called locally as Bhairava as the Protector of Kamakhya Devi. In Assam itself, there is Shivasagara township where *Muktinatha Swayambhu Shiva Linga* is popular. *Parashurama Kund* is also well known where Parashurama washed off his 'Matru hatya Paataka' or killing his own mother- Devi Renuka, as advised by his father Jamadagni Maharshi at whose instruction itself Parshurama executed the killing; as Jamadagni who eventually brought Renuka to life by his Mantra Shakti, asked Parashurama: *Tasmaat twam Brahma kundaaya snaatun cha tajjale/* Apparently Brahma putra commenced its travel in Bharat from that Brahma Kunda itself and hence Parashurama washed his Parashu or axe there with which he killed his mother, and thus Brahma Kund got renamed as Parashurama kunda; Brahmaputra basically originates in Tibet. *Shaalabadi* in the Jalpaigudi District in the banks of Tistia River where Devi Satis's left foot fell and is among the *Shakti Peethas!* In Tripura State there is a renowned Tripura Sundari Mandir at Radha kishorepur and this again is a *Shakti Peetha* where Devi Sati's right foot fell. Further at Baavurbhag near Shillong, the left thigh fell at the Jayanti Devi Mandir on the Jakantika Mountain.

[Five Shakti Peethas are also identified in Bangla desh: *Sita Kund*: Near the hill top called Sita kund, near railway station also named by the same name in Chatgaon dt. there is a hot water spring and a km. away on the Chandrasekhar hill the Devi Mandir is a Shakti Peeth where Sati Devi's right hand fell. At *Bhavani pur* near Bogra station, Devi Bhavani Mandir is a Shakti Peetha where Sati Devi's left ear fell. From Khulna Station on the banks of Sugandha River some 9 km away at *Shikarpur* is Ugratara Devi Mandir where Sati Devi's nose fell. In Khulna Dt itself is *Ishwaripur* at Ishwari Mandir Sati Devi's left palm fell. *Yaajpur* on River Vaitarini considered as Naabhi Gaya Kshetra is Viraja Devi Mandir and Devi Viraja seated on a lion at the Mandir and Vidwans consider this as the Shakti Sthaan where Ravana did tapasya at Trilochana Shiva Mandir nearby too, as Sati Devi's navel fell.]

UTKAL REGION: Puri Jagannadha, Bhubhaneshwar, Konarak, Sakshi Gopal : Shri Jagannadh is among the foremost four 'Dhaams' of Bharata Varsha, viz. Badarinath in Satya Yuga, Rameshwar in Treta Yuga, Dwaraka in Dwapar Yuga and Jagannadha in Kali Yuga. This Dhaam is called with several names such as Shri Kshetra, Purushottama Puri, Shankha Kshetra as it has the outline of Conch shell or Vishnu Bhagavan's 'Panchajanya' as also as Shakteyas call it as Uddiyan Peeth since the navel of Devi Sati's Yagjna Swarup fell here as one of the major Shakti Peethas. The legendary belief is that in the distant past, there was the worship of Neelachal and on its top there was Nila Madhava Temple and as the Mountain eventually came down to the ground level as the Nilachala Chhatra where Jagannadha Puri exists now. Skanda Purana gives the origin of this Purushottama Kshetra in details as follows from the Essence of Skanda Purana published vide www.Kamakoti.Org/ news: Sage Jaimini told the Munis at Naimisharanya that King Indradyumna, an ardent devotee of Vishnu was keen in having a 'darshan' of the Idol of Neela Madhava at the Temple situated in the Nilachal Mountain's cave, on the coastal side of East Bharatavarsha, in the Utkal Region. The King asked his Priest to ascertain the route and arrange for the trip. One of the Pilgrims who returned from the famed Temple in the foothills of Nilachal Mountain (who perhaps was Bhagavan Jagannatha Himself) described the route to the Royal Priest that the Temple

was in Purushottama Kshetra near a holy pond known as Rohin adjacent to a place called Odhra and that there was a Temple of Vasudeva besides which there was a hermitage called 'Shabardeep' leading to the path of Jagannath Temple. The Royal Priest's younger brother *Vidyapati* was approved by the King to make an initial trip so that the King would perform the 'Yatra' (expedition) subsequently. Vidyapati and party undertook a tedious and tiring journey to the Ekamvaran forests at the foothills of Mountain and at the Shabardeep hermitage met *Vishvvasu*. Both Vidyapati and Vishvvasu visited the Place after a steep ascent of the Mountain and finally reached the Rohin Pond and after a bath had Darshan of Neela Madhava. Vidyapati was overwhelmed by the thrilling experience of Jagannatha's darshan and prayed to Him to his heart's content. Vidyapati was told by Shabar Vishvvasu that several Devas frequented the Temple and brought expensive gifts and garlands to the Lord; when Vidyapati returned back to King Indradyumna the former showed the flowers which never withered as they were celestial! But Vishvvasu gave the disheartening news to Vidyapati that the latter would not be able to have a darshan of Neela Madhava, although something better might happen! Vidyapati was advised not to disclose this fact to the King on his return to the Kingdom as the King might be highly discouraged. Even as Vidyapati returned and was describing the rapturous darshan that he had of Neela Madhava, Sage Narada appeared and desired to accompany the King on his way to the Purushottama Kshetra. The King and his large entourage set for the journey and reached the banks of River Mahanadi for an overnight stay before proceeding to the Jagannatha Temple next morning. The King of Utkal informed the senior King Indradyumna that there was a very heavy sand storm and the Idol of Neela Madhava was underneath a huge heap of debris. Luckily Sage Narada was with Indradyumna and consoled the latter and assured him that Lord Jagannatha was extremely merciful and that something memorable would happen! Next morning the King's full entourage crossed River Mahanadi, worshipped Lord Purushottama at 'Eakaamrechhetra' and further proceeded to Kotishwar Mahalaya to perform Puja to 'Tribhuvaneswara'. The latter appeared before Sage Narada and instructed that King Indradyumna should perform hundred Yagyas; that Lord Jagannatha would manifest Himself from under the debris; that a Vata Tree with four branches would have to be carved out by Viswakarma the Celestial Artist as Four Idols of Lord Jagannatha, Balabhadra, Devi Subhadra the sister of the former brothers and 'Sudarshan Chakra'; that He (Tribhuneswara) along with Devi Durga would be present at the top entry of the conchshell shaped Purusha Kshetra; that Lord Brahma would install and consecrate the Holy Idols for the everlasting benefit of generations ahead and the dream and perseverance of King Indradyumna would become fruitful. Sage Narada assured that Lord Tribhuvaneswara's instructions would be followed in full letter and spirit. From there the caravan moved to Nilakantha Mahadeva and worshipped Mahadeva and Durga. The King was anxious to reach the Place where Lord Jagannatha was under sand; he prayed to Him as though he could visualise the Idol and there emerged a voice from the rubble assuring the King that he would soon have His appearance. Since the first task to be performed was to organise the hundred Yagnas as directed by Tribhuvaneswara, Narad was anxious to take up the construction of the Temple of Lord Nrisimha as that was the Place to complete the Yagnas. Sughat, the son of Viswakarma completed the construction of the Temple within five days, while Vishwakarma made the Idol of Nrisimha which was installed by Narada. Thereafter the task of carving wood for the four major Idols of Jagannath, Balabhadra, Subhadra and Sudarshan Chakra was taken up and a Celestial voice came saying that the Idols would emerge on their own, that the oldest worker be sent inside the Main Gate which should be closed till the job was over, that the sound of drums be kept on continuously till the job was going on inside to cover up the sounds from there, that if somebody heard the sounds from inside he would be irrevocably deaf, and that somebody saw what was

happening inside that person would be blind for ever. On the fifteenth day, a Celestial Voice emerged that all the Idols were manifested. Thereafter the heavenly voices kept on giving instructions about the colour schemes of the Idols (Deep blue like clouds for Jagannatha, white for Balabhadra, red like rising Sun for Subhadra and deep red for Sudarshan), the ornament details and so on. As the Idols were getting ready with all finishing touches, Indradyumna was in trance and asked Jagannatha for nothing excepting salvation from the mortal life. Narada, the King and the entire entourage entered the Sanctum Sanctorium chanting 'Dwadasaakshara Mantra' (Om Namoh Vasudevaya) in praise of the Lord Jagannatha, 'Purusha Suktam' addressed to Balabhadra, 'Sri Suktam' for Subhadra and appropriate Vedic Mantras for Sudarshana Chakra. Narada visualised the various articles required for the Consecration Ceremony and were secured by the King. A Palace was built for Brahma and three Chariots were readied for the three Deities; the required number of horses-sixteen to Jagannatha, fourteen to Balabhadra and twelve to Subhadra-were readied too. The mast on top of the Chariot of Jagannatha was made with Garuda Vahan (The Lord's Carrier), that of Balabhadra had a plough, and of Subhadra's chariot was a Lotus. Indeed the King was so fortunate that the wherewithall for the Function was instantly procured by Sages and Devas! Finally, at the 'Muhurat' time, Lord Brahma performed the Consecration on Suddha Visakha Ashtami on Thursday with Pushyami as the Nakshatra, as witnessed by Devas, Yakshas, Kinnaras and Maharshis! The famous nine day **Ratha Yatra** commenced on Suddha Ashadha Vidiya and returned from the banks of Bindu Tirtha on the eighth day. Sage Jaimini explained that Lord Brahma clarified to Raja Indradyumna about a doubt as to *why Jagannath assumed the Wooden Form of Idols*. The 'Daru' (Wooden) Idols represent 'Duhkha vidarana' or destroying of distress and bestowing of endless happiness; as Srihari is 'Darumaya'. He therefore manifested in wooden form. At the time of 'Srishti' (Creation) following Pralaya, Parabrahma (The Supreme Being) manifested in the Form of Vedas or the mix of 'Sabda Brahma' and 'Artha Brahma'. Bhagavan Balabhadra is of Rig Veda Swarup, while Subhadra is of Yajur Veda Swarup. Nrisimha is of Sama Veda Swarup and Sudarshan is of Atharva Veda Swarup. If a composite view is taken, the Deities thus represented all the Veda Swarupas and Jagannatha is the sum total and likewise all these forms are Jagannatha Himself. The 'Vata Vriksha' on the Sea Bed at the time of Pralaya was thus the depiction of Bhagavan and the Wooden Idols made out of the Tree are His Symbols! The Sacred Jagannatha Mandir is very wide and large within a courtyard with four major gates, the principal Mandir with four gates comprising three portions, one being the 'Sri Mandir' with its minaret which is the highest in which Jagannatha is set up with three huge and most impressive semi ready Vighras of Jagannatha in the middle, Devi Subhadra the sister and Baabhadra to the extreme left with their half carved hands shown up as though blessing the Universe; the second portion devoted to Jagan Mohana Mandir and the third portion as Mukha shaala including a Bhog Mandap. The Main Mandir has the Simha Dwara in the Eastern side, Ashwadwaar in the Southern side, Vyaghra dwaar in the Western side and Hasti Dwaar in the Northern side. Facing right outside the Basic Mandir or the Sanctum is the Aruna Sthambha and having performed a Pradakshina or circumambulation of the Pillar, one enters the right side of the gate into the Sanctum to vision of the most thrilling experience of Jagannatha Tri-Vighras. Opposite the Sanctum, there is a small Vishwanatha Linga; to signify the Linga, the story narrated in the Jagannatha Temple is that a Brahmana had a dream that only after performing Vishweshwara Lingaarchana at Kasi only that Puri Jagannatha darshana and puja would become fruitful. Outside the Pradhana Mandir, an ascent by 25 stepped ladder would lead to a 25 divisioned view of Prakriti or Nature. From the second 'Praakaara' of the Main Temple Dwara one could view the Prasada Market within the Temple itself. Further in the Temple are Agajanana Natha ganesh, Vatera Maha Deva,

Pata Mangala Devi, Satyanarayana Bhagavan, and Vata Vriksha famed as Kalpa Vriksha, Bala Mukunda Vatapatra shaayi, Ganesha Mandir called Siddha Ganesha, Sarva Mangala Devi and so on. In front of the Jagannatha Nija Mandir is a Mukti Mandala with a Simhasana or Throne where Brahma himself used to be seated. Behind the Mukti Mandap is the Mukta Nrisimha Mandir and most significantly Vimala Devi Mandira, the Shakti Peetha of the Kshetra, followed by Sarasvati, Lakshmi Mandiras and in between that of Nila Madhava Mandir and many such other Temples. Special Festivals are organised from Vaishakha Shukla Tritiya to Jyeshtha Krishna Ashtami when Vighrahas of Madan Mohan, Rama Krishna, Lakshmi-Sarasvati, Pancha Mahadevas viz. Nila kantheshwar, Markandeshwar, Lokanatha, Kapala Lochana, and Jammeshwara Utsava Vighrahas are taken to Chandana Tataka or Sarovara for bathing and later on for Nooka Vihara or boat sail. On Jyeshtha Shukla Ekadashi, Rukmini harana by Lord Krishna is enacted in the Mandir itself. On Jyeshtha Purnima day, the Vighrahas of Jagannatha, Subhadra and Balarama are duly bathed and brought to Snaana Mandapa where 108 ghadas of Sacred waters are engaged to bathe the Vighrahas; it is stated that after the bathing ceremony, Bhagavan Jagannatha gives the Swarupa as Lord Ganesha only for a fortnight the Mandir is re-opened. *The famed Annual Ratha Yatra of Lord Jagannatha* is scheduled to take place on *Ashaadha Shukla Dwiteeya*/ Three chariots which are large and roomy and the first one is to install Lord Bala Rama, the second one to accommodate Subhadra Devi and Sudarshana Chakra and the third one exclusively for Lord Jagannaatha himself. By the evening the Chariots reach the Gundicha Mandir. On the second day the Idols are placed in the Mandir and provide darshan to the masses for seven days till Dashami and return. These nine days are called that Jagannatha and other Murtis provide what is called 'Aadapadarshana' and this darshan in a year is considered as most significant. On Shravan Amavasya, Jagannath's 'Sevik Utsav' or Services Festival is celebrated. On Shravan Shukla Paksha Dashami 'Jhoolan Yatra' or Swing Travel Festival is celebrated. On Janmashtami the Lord's Birth day is performed with great pomp and show. On Bhadrapada Krishna Ekadashi the Kaliya Serpent's Damana is observed. Like wise, Bhadrapada Shukla Ekadashi for Parshwa Parivartanotsava, Vamana Dwadashi; Sudarshana Vijayotsava on Ashwini Purnima, Navaratri Festivities and Vimala Devi Utsava and so on are observed, besides on all significant days concerned. Incidentally, Jagannaatha Maha Prasad Mahima is universally reputed as it is blemishless and consumed without restrictions of 'Ucchittashtata dosha' or eating of the remains of what others already ate or handled by others etc and hence the adage of *Sarvam Jagannaatham!* As regards the 'Snaana prakriya' or bathing at this Tirtha, major Places for the purpose are Mahodadhi or Samudra itself especially at Swarga Dwaara or the Sea Shore which is walking distance of a km. or so from the Main Dwara of the Mandir itself, besides Rohini Kund, Indradyumna Sarovar, Markandeya Sarovar, Shweta Ganga, Chandana Taalaab, Lokanaatha Sarovar, and Chakra Tirtha, all not very distant. Other important Mandirs in Puri are Gundicha Mandir already referred to above in the context of the Ratha Yatra about a Km. plus; Kapala Mochana in the South West of the Main Mandir; *Sakshi Gopal Mandir* (see the reference of Sakshi Gopal Mandir later); Amaramuth right before the Simha Dwaara or the Main Gate of the Main Mandir; Gambhira Math / Radhakanta Math on way to Swarga daara of the Sea, where Chaitanya Maha Prabhu lived for 18 long years; Siddha Bakul where Haridasa Bhajana Sthal is active; Govardhana Peeth or one of the Four Maths established by Adi Shankaraacharya viz. Kanchi Kama Koti, Shringeri Sharadamba, Dwaraka Math, and now the Puri Math, besides of course Badari; Kabira Math at Swarga Dwara on the Sea shore where Patala Ganga Kupa or Well is and where Sant Kabir stayed for some time; Lokanatha Mahadeva Linga Mandir within water also called Shiva Ganga and Chakra Tirtha and Chakra Narayana Mandir opposite Bedi Hanuman Mandir or shackled Hanuman since once Hanuman left for Shri Rama Navami

Celebrations to Ayodhya and returned and thus is chained ever since! Indeed this Purushottama Kshetra is distinct as *Shankha Kshetra* since it has the Form and Shape of a Conchshell like 'Pancha janya'. This Shape is explained and represented by Maha Deva since on the Western side is Vrishabhadrhaja, Eastern side is Neeka Kantha, Centre is Kapala Mochana and Arthaasani Devi on the North. This is also the Abode of Eight Devi Peethas: Vata Moola of Jagannatha Mandir is Mangala Devi, on the western side is Vimala Devi, Shankhaakara Prishtha or the Rear Form of Shankha is Sarva Mangala Devi, Eastern side is Marichi, Northern Side is Ardhaasani and Lamba Devi, and Dakshina is represented by Kala Ratri and Chandika. Also, Vateshwara, Kapalamochana, Kshetrapaala, Yameshwara, Markandeshwara, Ishana, Vishwesha and Neela kantha on the eight places of the Shankha is another explanation.

Bhuvaneshwar: It is stated that like Kasi, Bhuvaneshwar the Capital City of Odisha State is the Temple City-the Cathedral City-in Bharat with some countless active Temples, besides being the hub of Industry and Commerce and of course, the City of Power and Governance as also of Fine Arts of Music and Dance. The most significant Temple of the City is the *LingarajaMandir*, and Lingaraj himself is Bhuvaneshwar. This massive Temple has four dwaras and the Simha dwaara or the Main Door entrance itself is the welcoming Ganesha in his Mandir. Ahead of this is the Nandi Stambha or the Pillar and further the Bhog Mandir where the Lingaraj Bhog Prasad blessed with Hari-Hara Mantras is distributed. After the Bhog Mandir is the Natya Mandir of Jagmohan and Mush shala the south of which is the door leading to Viman or Shri Mandir, the Nija Mandir the architectural beauty is indeed readily arresting one's attention. Inside is the Shila or stone swarupa 'Budbud Linga' which being of Chakraakaara or wheel formed shape is signified as Hariharatmaka and venerated with the chanting of Harharatmaka Mantra. Yatis can by themselves perform worship and since the Linga is of the wheel form the Shiva swarupa of the Linga assumes form of accompanying a Pinaki or of a bow and arrow rather than of a Trishula or a Trident. Besides the Main Mandir are three auxiliary Mandirs of significance viz. Ganesha Mandir in the Southern side, Parvati Mandir bedingb the Man Mandir and of Kartikeya northwards; in the Linga Raja Mandir itself are the Vighras of Kirti Mukha, Nityeshwara, and Dasha Dikpalakaas. Outside the Sanctom are many Deva-Devi Mandirs mainly of Maha Kaleshwara, Lakshmi-Nrisimha, Yameshwara, Vishwakarma, Bhuvaneshwari, Gopaalini (Parvati) etc. *Shri Mukteshwara Mandir* is infact older than Linga Raja Mandir built in 11th century as the former was of 10th century but is no less popular as the former is an excellent piece of stone architecture depicting the Saga of Pancha Tantra carvings. The *Rajarani Temple* is a fantastic place for floral, animal and human figures, but has no Deity! Near Mukteshwar Mandir is the Parashurama Temple with decorated shrine of Lord Shiva built as far back as 7th century featuring amorous couples, animals and floral motifs and *Swarna Jaleshwar Temple* not far from Parashurama Temple has depictions from Ramayana. *Vaital Temple* is not only rich in architectural Art but also is the famed Chamunda / Kapali Temple with considerable Tantric influence. A *Yogini Temple* off 15km from Bhuvaneshwar at Hapur is one of the four famed Temple complexes of the kind has Yogins carved and worshipped too from black stone. An interesting *Ashokan Rock Edict* at Dhauli-Giri Hills some 8 km south of Bhuvaneshwar is seen in serene surroundings under Daya River; this Rock carving as an Edict signifies Emperor Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism. On the Dhaulagiri Hills, the Vishwa Shani Stupa signifying Aksoka's repentance of mass killings and hence the conversion. Located some 20 km from Bhuvaneshwar is the Nandan Kaanan Zoo and a thrilling Lions Safari as also of ferocious White Tigers, driven by the Zoo vehicles as groups of the wild animals literally cross the roads right before the visitors very near. Yet another attraction of Bhuvaneshwar is the *Atri Hot Water Sulphur*

Spring, some 42 km from Bhuvaneshwar. Boating in *Chilka Lake* and swimming in would indeed be very fulfilling too not too far from Bhuvaneshwar.

Konarak: which is some 35 km from Bhuvaneshwar is the Abode of the famed Surya Temple supported by the legendary background referred to by both Bhavishya Purana and Samba Purana. The fact clearly brought out by Bhavishya Purana is that Bhagavan Surya cured leprosy as suffered by Sambu the son of Lord Krishna under the advice of Sage Kataka and Sambu underwent penance for twelve years in Mitravana on the banks of Chandrabhaga River some 3 km away from the beaches of Sea at Konark and pleased by the devotion and worship Surya Deva cured Sambu's leprosy the faith that Chandrabhaga snaana cures the disease continues till date. Apparently, Sambu out of gratitude was responsible to build the foremost Sun Temple at Konark on the banks of Chandrabhaga near the shores of the Sea. Now, Samba Purana describes the infatuation of Chandrabhaga with Surya Deva who also reciprocated the passion, apparently reflected in the erotic sculptures at Konark, traditionally as one of the concepts handed down in the repeated constructions from age to age depending on the themes as now followed by the changing Royalties. The sculpture as of now has the Kalinga imprint. As it stands Konark is indeed a huge piece of Art in black stone! Konark is listed among the World Heritage Sites in India, considered as one of India's Seven Wonders. Kona literally means angle and Arka is Sun thus signifying both this Sun Temple and Jagannatha Temple in Puri, as the pride of Kalinga. This Sun Temple built in 13th century AD is basically designed as the huge and seven feet high Surya Deva's Chariot with twelve pairs of ornamented wheels drawn by seven horses. Unfortunately, only six horses are in position as Mughal King Jehangir's men destroyed it in 17th century. The audience hall Jaganmohana still stands and the roof of Natya Madir fell off, but despite the ruins and damages as also the ravages of wind and rains, the glory of Konark, its grand majesty and imposing awe do still sustain. Konark is still considered as the Soura Sampradaya's / or traditional symbol and Maagha Shukla Saptami is considered as the Ratha Saptami Day and on that morning, preferably in the Chandrabhaga River, Arunodaya snaana is performed by reciting the Mantra: *Yadaa janma kritam paapam mayaa Janma janmasu, Tanme rogamcha shokam cha maakari hantu Saptami/ Yetat janmakritam paapam yaccha janmaantararjitam, Manovaakkaayajam yaccha jnaataa jnaatecha ye punah/ Iti saptavidhamn paapam snaanaanme sapta saptike, Sapta vyaadhi samaa yuktam haramaakari Saptami/* Bhagavati Temple and Ramachandi Temple darshana-all not too far from Konark are significant but tourists flock in large gatherings only to vision the priceless thrill of Sunrise early morning on the Sea beaches nearby.

Sakshi Gopal is hardly 4-5 km away from Puri and that is why yattris normally worship at Jagannantha Mndir and proceed to Sakshi Gopal and nearby Radhika Mandir too. One should normally perform snaana and then seek Gapala Darshana and puja offering Tulasi dala maalas to the Deity and fragrant flowers like jasmines to Devi Radha. There is an interesting legendary back ground stated in connection to the Sakshi Gopal Mandir: once an old Brahmana desirous of walking up to Sakshi Gopala Mandir from Puri and as in olden days there were neither buses or trains and not even proper roads. On way, the old Brahmana met a Brahmana youth and he too was desirous of Gopala darshana. The youth took great care to the Old companion and became friendly. In fact, the youth took excellent care and service to the aged Brahmana. They both had very fulfilling darshana and spent enjoyable time on the return to Puri. The old Brahmana was well to do while the youth was not only poor but an orphan too. On the return journey itself the old man decided to marry off his daughter to the youth and conveyed so on the way back. On arrival at Puri both reached the house and conveyed the wedding news to the daughter who readily felt

happy, but the sons had other plans of a rich boy in the neighbourhood and even proposed to the boy and parents awaiting the father's final return and consent. There came a tussle between the two families and the matter was referred to the King. The latter asked the Brahmana youth to whom the promise was made asked whether there was any evidence when the old man conveyed the wish to do so. The youth replied that Sakshi Gopala himself was the evidence. The youth went back to the Mandir and in great faith asked the Deity in privacy. A voice was heard that the youth should return and Gopala would follow the youth, but should not look back at any cost, lest only the Gopala Pratima would follow but not Gopala himself. The jingling sound of Lord Gopala's anklets continued all the way back and the youth was happy to have really brought Gopala himself. The King and his court's men besides the family members heard the jingling sounds and when the youth turned back finally the King and all concerned as also the youth were amazed to witness the Sakshi Gopala's Idol standing stilled. The King then performed the wedding of the youth with great pomp and show. He also made elaborate plans for installing the new Vighraha of Sakshi Gopal in a Vijaya Yatra in the premises of Jagannatha Mandir itself. In fact, the 'Naivedya bhog' daily offered to Jagannatha used to be first offered to Sakshi Gopal in the Main Mandir premises. But Lord Jagannath appeared in the dreams of the King that this new Vighraha had actually entered the Satya narayana Idol at a Mandir some 5-6 km away from Jagannatha Mandir; the King then worshipped that Satya narayana Temple very often and that Temple got intensified in its popularity. Meanwhile the Sakshi Gopala in the premises of Jagannatha Temple lost its sheen as the latter was dejected without the company of Devi Radha. In course of time, the Mahapatra or the Head Purohit of Jagannatha Temple gave birth to a female child with the 'Amsa' of Vrshabheswari Kumari and she was called Lakshmi. She came of age gradually but her father Bilveshwar Mahapatra started noticing that the Mala or garland of flowers as decorated around the Sakshi Gopal's neck in the previous night was reappearing on Lakshmi's bed; this coincidence came to be the talk of the town. The King installed a Radha Mandir in the premises of Sakshi Gopal and Mahapatra decided to marry off his daughter Lakshmi at the same Muhurat of Devi Radha's installation. But Lakshmi passed away at the very same time of Radha's installation! As all these events happened on Kartika Shukla Navami, this day of the year is celebrated with the Darshan of Sakshi Gopal and Devi Radha as exist in the premises of Jagannatha Temple as also at the original Sakshi Gopal Temple off Puri!

Paschima Bharat

Pushkar (Rajasthan): Kurma Maha Purana in its 24th chapter on Tirtha Mahatmya narrates: *Tirtham Tri-Loka vikhyatam Brahmaanah Parameshthinah, Pushkaram Sarva paapaghnam mritaanaam Brahma lokadam/ Manasaa sasmared yastu Pushkaram vai dwijottamah, Puyare paatakaaih sarvaih Shakrena saha modate/ Tatra Devaah sugandharvaah sayakshoragaa raakshasaah, Upasate siddha sankhaa Brahmaanam Padma sambhavam/ Tatra snaatvaa bhavedchudro brahmaanam parameshthinam, Pujayitwaa dwijavaraan Brahmaanam samprapashyati/ Tatraabhigamya Devesham Puruhutam - anininditam, Sarupo jaayate martyah sarvaan kaamaanavaapnuyaat/* (Parameshthi Brahma's Pushkara named Tirtha is popular all over the Tri-Lokas, as that outstanding Tirtha is at once sin destroying and to those who die there bestows Brahma Loka. Those Dwijottamas sincerely memorise the name of Pushkar are blessed with instant relief of blemishes and enjoy celestial happiness along with Indra the King of Devas. This Pushkar Tirtha is such as worshipped by Gandharva-Yaksha- Naaga-Rakshasa-Siddha companies worship the Lotus seated Brahma directly and to the distinguished Brahmanas who sincerely venerate him so in his presence with Bahyaantara Shuchi or Internal and External cleanliness, 'Brahma

Saakshatkaara' does happen in reality. Having undertaken a sincere and faithful Yatra to this Pushkara and secure the celestial vision of blemishless Indra too, then fulfillment of one's desires and aspirations is very easy to obtain indeed.) Both Padma Maha Purana and Maha Bharata asserted: *Dushkaram Pushkaram gantum Pushkare tapah, Dushkaram Pushkare daanam vastum chaiva sudushkaram/ Treeni shringaani shubhraani treeniprasavanaani cha, Pushkaraanyaadi siddhhaani na vidyastatra kaaranam/* (Pushkar Yatra is indeed troublesome and is available by one's own good luck; Residing-giving away daana-performing meditation etc. at Pushkar too are rather difficult to accomplish. Yet visit to Pushkar the enlightening 'Tirtha Traya' where Sarasvati River too flows is indeed a Siddha Maha Tirtha for reasons yet unknown) *Yathaa Suraanaam sarveshaamaadistu Purushottamah, Tathaiva Pushkaram Raajastirthaanaamaadirupyate/ Yastu Varsha shatam Purnamaadagnihotramupaacharet, Kartikaam vaa vasedekaam Pushkare samameva tat/* (Just as among Devas Purushottama Vasudeva is the most superior, Pushkara is the unique among all the Tirthas. [Pushkar, Kurukshetra, Gaya, Ganga, Prabhasa are the Pancha Tirthas and Manasarovara in Tibet, Pushkar, Bindu Sarovara in Siddhapur, Narayana Sarovar in Kutch Region and Pampa sarovara near Hospet are the Pancha Sarovaras]. The outcome of hundred years of Agnihotra Upasna on the one hand and residing and worshipping at Pushkara Tirtha on a Kartika Purnima night are near equivalent.) Padma Purana explains the legendary background of the Pushkara Tirtha: At very beginning of 'Vishwa Srishti' of Universal Creation, there was a Rakshasa named Vajra naabha who was engaged in the most cruel and wreckless activities; Brahma meanwhile emerged from the Naabhi (Navel) of Vishnu and the latter's first wish was to perform Yagna and landed at Pushkar even with a part of the stem of the Padma / Lotus with which he killed Vajra naabha. As the lotus was discarded by him, there got a Lake manifested on the banks of which Brahma performed the first ever Yagnya. He carved out a Yagna Vedi in the vacant plot between three Holy Areas viz. Sarasvati in the west, Chandra nadi in the North and Nandana sthaan in the East and the region in between as the Yagna Vedi; he created three Pushkar Tirthas viz. Jyeshtha-Madhyama-Kanishtha. All the Maharshis who made their Ashrams and Devas arrived and Bhagavan Shankar as Kapaladhari too arrived. But Devi Savitri delayed and since the Muhurta to commence the Yagna was round the corner, Brahma created Devi Gayatri and married her as meanwhile on noticing Gayatri left in an angry huff to a nearby mountain and performed another Yagna on the mountain top. It was stated that Lord Varaaha got manifested from Brahma's nostril top. Thus, at the present Pushkar Tirtha, besides Brahma, Gayatri, Varaha Bhagavan, Kapaleshwara Shiva, Savitri on the Mountain top, and Agastya Maharshi continue to stay at Pushkar Tirtha till date.

Pushkar's cynosure is the Brahma Temple, not far from Pushkar Tirtha, and Brahma's right side is Savitri Mandir and to the left is the Gayatri Mandir; besides the Chaturmukha Brahma are the Idols of Sanakaadi Munis; in a small Mandir is Narada and in another small Mandir are the idols of Kubera seated on elephant. Another Mandir of Pushkar is dedicated to Badari Narayana, but an ancient Varaha Mandir was destroyed and since got re-built. Yet another Mandir of the Tirtha is that of Atmeshwar Maha deva, also called Kapaleshwar or Atapateshwara Maha deva. Near by Pushkar there is a Shuddha vaapi named Gaya Kund where Pitru shraddas are performed. There is a Savitri Devi Mandir on a nearby mountain top. Yet on another hill top is the famed *Gayatri Mandir reckoned as one of the Shakti Peethas* where Devi Sati's Manibandha or wrist ornament fell. In Pushkar Tirtha, there is also 'Yagna Parvata' where Brahma performed his illustrious Yagna; there is also the Agastya Ashram and Agastya Tirtha; it is stated that besides Pushkara Snaan, the snaana of Agastya Kunda would only complete Pushkar Yatra, since the Kunda snaan is a total wash off of one's sins. The most essential snaana of Pushkar is in any case is that

of Sarasvati River which is called 'Praachi Saraswati' also addressed by five names viz. Suprabha, Kanchana, Praachi, Nanda and Vaishalika. Pushkara's bathing on Kartika Pournami is stated to be of paramount significance. Some 8 km. away from Pushkar Tirtha is the Sangama of Praachi Sarasvati and Nandaa River. Near by the Sangama, the Naga Parvat has several caves including Bhartruhari Cave and Shila named after him.

Incidentally, the most popular among Muslim Yatris not only in Bharat but among the visitors from the Muslim World, especially in West Asia, Indonesia, the neighbouring countries is the Darga of Md. Chishti at *Ajmir*, which is a few Km away from Pushkar.

Khatu Shyam, Salasar, Lohargala, Keshavarai, Karani Devi, and Nathadwara : Rajasthan's *Khatu Shyama* is quite popular from far off places to Ringal, Palsana for darshan of Shamji Bhagavan, as the Mandir draws unusual but orderly crowd patiently waiting for the same, especially on Jyeshtha Shukla Dwadashi, Kartika Shukla Dwadashi and Phalguna Shukla Dwadashi and in any case on all Dwadasis. The legendary background is that Bhima of Pandavas had an affair with Hidimba Devi during Pandava 'Vanavasa' or forest life for twelve years and begot Ghatotkacha whose son was Barbarika. Even before the Maha Bharata battle, Lord Krishna sliced off the head of Barbarika but granted the boon of manifesting as Lord Shyama himself in Kali Yuga and would be venerated by his devotees bestowing them of fulfilling all their wishes, especially on Dwadashis, the days of special significance for Bhagavan Krishna. *Saalar* is another Sacred and Unique and exclusive Anjaneya Mandir of Rajasthan approachable from Seekar Raiway Station on South West Railways, pulsating especially with floating but fast moving crowds from dawn till near midnight on all Tuesdays and Saturdays. The Temple known for its spick and span appearance of enlightened Yatris seeking favours for fulfillment; decent facilities for stay overnights are assured to distant yatris. This Place is well known for safety and high marks for decency and any evil doing is instantly punished by Lord Hanuman Himself! *Lohargala* or 'Loha garji' is one of Rajasthan's popular Tirthas near Navalghad Raiway Station off some 12 km being the unique place for 'Asthi-Visarjana' or immersion of mortal ashes brought in pots to 'Brahma Tirtha' and its seven water way branches. The legendary background states that since Devatas were greatly fond of Brahma hlada, they requested Lord Brahma to hide it, lest sinners in Kaliyuga would gradually erode into its sanctity with their sins and blemishes. But Himalaya Mountain despatched his son to Lord Brahma called Ketu and in response to the supplications Brahma agreed that although Brahma hlada would be invisible, its tributaries would flow as Sapta dharas. After the battle of Maha Bharata, Bhima desired to sanitise his mace from the sin of killing his grand father Bhishma, Gurus, cousin brothers, uncles, and such close relatives. On way to Pushkar Tirtha, Bhima and Pandavas decided to leave behind their arms and armoury and proceed to Pushkara Tirtha. On their return, they discovered their arms were dissolved with the flows of Brahma-hlada and thus the Flows of the invisible Brahma Hlada are since named Lohargalas or the purified throats of the loha or metal! Thus the pots containing the ashes or mortal remains of the dead bodies are instant purifiers of the sins left behind of the departed souls after the 'asthi visarjana'! At this place of piety and purity, there are special days of Chaitra Somavat Amavasyas and Bhadrapada Amavasyaas when Melas are organised but otherwise each arrival of 'asthis' is denoted as a Day of Liberation! At Lohargal, Surya Deva is the Principal Araadhya Devata or the Principal Deity for it is He who is the Prime Link or Chief Messenger between the departed Soul and the Pirtu Loka! Thus there is a Surya Mandir and not far from there is a Surya Kunda, besides some 45 Mandirs in the vicinity, including a Tapakeshwar Mandir since the mountain water constantly drops water on the Shiva Murti!

Keshava Raya Pattana: This Tirtha falls in the Kota Division of Rajasthan and is renowned for its Kartika Purnima Mela and festivities. On the banks of Charmanvati or Chambal River, there is an ancient Kshetra named, Jambukaranya and Jambumargeshwara and Vishnu Tirtha; on the hill top there is this Keshava Raaya Murti with four hands ahead of the idol being a ‘Garuda stambha’ / pillar. The legend about this Holy Tirtha relates to ‘Agjnaana Vaasa’ or the hiding place in the safe hands of Keshava raaya and in the vicinity of Vishnu Tirtha where Pandavas were performing Yagjna Karyas and the old Yagna shaala is still intact. Pandavas installed four Shiva Lingas more in addition to Jambumargeshwara viz, Gupteshwara, Kedareshwara, Sahasra Lingeswara and so on. After this first phase of Agjnata vaasa in the care of Keshavaraya himself, Pandavas proceeded to Virat nagar by assuming the changed Forms in the court of King Virat ie Yuddhishtar as Kanku Bhat, Bhima as the Royal cook, Arjun as Brihannala the Eunuch Dance Teacher of the Princess Uttara Devi, Nakula as Horse Doctor at the Royal Stable, Saha Deva as the Physician of Royal Cows and Devi Draupadi as Sairandhri, the Queen’s Maid! Another legend about the Mandir of Keshavaraya Bhagavan was that the Past King of the Area named Ranti Deva once had a dream that in the jungles on the banks of Charmangavati River, there were two Idols of Keshava raya with four hands in white stone and also another Shyama varna chaturbhuja in black stone would be dug up. Accordingly, the King commenced systematic digging by his soldiers and finally succeeded securing the same and installed both the idols separately as per Sacred Mantras formally. Yet another story related to this Tirtha was that even before this Mandir was built up, Lord Parashu Rama having waged 21 battles to eradicate the Kshatriya clan finally retired to forest life for ‘tapas’.

Karani Devi Mandir of Miracles: Right at the Bikaner Station is the Mandir of Karani Devi the manifestation of Maya Devi. The story of the Temple is that some 500 years ago, there was a great devotee of Devi Maya named Mehoji who had six daughters but not blessed with a son. A few months ahead of the arrival of the next baby she moved out to Devi Mandir at Hingalaj and performed pujas at a Temple of Maha Maya Devi with utmost devotion and faith seeking the fulfillment of her wish. One night in deep sleep, Devi appeared in her dream and conveyed that she-Devi herself- would give birth to her but not as a boy! Mehoji was thrilled and non-plussed! She conveyed this news to all family members and neighbours as well with confidence and pride. Indeed the baby arrived at a very auspicious time and was named Rithubai or in course of time as Karani Devi who since from childhood was performing miracles; her every word and action was helpful to one and all and became famed as the ‘one who does’ without fail! The word went round and the Marwad King who was suffering from an incurable boil on his back which could not be cured by teams of top medical doctors was cured by merely touching his back. In course of time she left her mortal body; the King got a Pratima and installed amid celebrations, Anna Danas to the poor and charities besides Yagnas and religious activities. She was declared as Kula Devata and her acts of miracles continue till date attracting huge following and crowds. Karani Devi seated on a golden throne blesses fulfilling desires of all who seek her darshan and worship. *One significant feature of this Mandir is that this is the haven for sheltering and protecting mice which too are believed to grant one’s wishes!* The Mandir of Karani Maya is now popular as Jaisalmir Devi of miracles!

Nathadwara : Not far from Marwad and not even from Ahmedabad is the most famed and highly popular Tirtha on Ahmedabad-Delhi line at Marwad Junction of Western Railways with excellent road connections. Also there are decent and comfortable places to stay at Nathdwara. The most important Mandir which is ever crowded is of Shri Nathji, reckoned as one of Bharat’s outstanding Vaishnava Peethas run by Vallabhacharya Vamsha Tilakaayata. Shrinathji’s miracles are described as many: Once

when there was an apprehension of Muslim Rulers invading Vraja Bhumi, the Pratima of Shri Natha was taken to a safer place in Mewar and when was being moved out, the bullock cart by which it was being brought, broke its axis and gave way at the Bilwara Village. It was then presumed by those responsible for the shift decided to install the Pratima there itself; since its installation, the miracles displayed were so many that today, mere darshan with faith of the yatri has proved as definite fulfillments. Shri Nath's puja is performed with great 'Nishtha' or purity of body and soul at the Temple. In fact, the visitors get moved being replete with joy and vibration of body and heart! As the darshan is provided in intervals of time, many devotees are desirous of repeat darshans in spite of waiting their turns in meandering queues. The Mandir affords to spend fortunes on its upkeep thanks to its rapidly increasing income and assets. The Prashad at the Temple is as delicious and sacred as at Jagannatha Mandir at Puri, as here too the Prashad is fully devoid of 'sparsha dosha' or the blemish of touch! Nearby in the vicinity of the Mandir are the Idols of Navanita Laala, Vithalnatha, Kalyana kaaraya, Madanmohana, and Vanamaali at their Mandirs. In one Temple Devi Meera bai is also seated blissfully. Kankaroli's Dwarakaadheesha and the Chaturbhuj Rupanarayana Mandirs are also not too distant from Nathdwara.

Dwaraka, Bet Dwaraka, Nageshwara Jyori Linga, Porbandar and Somnath:

Dwaraka: Skanda Purana in its Prabhasa Khanda describes in detail Dwaraka Dhaam's Mahatmya. *Api keetapatangaadyaah Pashavoya sarisrupaah, Vimuktaah Paapinah sarvey Dwarakaayaah prabhavatah/ Kim punarmanavaa nityam Dwarakaayaam vasantite, Yaa gatih sarva jantunaam Dwarakaa pura vaasinaam saa gatirdurlabha nyunam Muninaamuttheretasam/ Dwarakaa vaasinam drushtwaa sprushtaa chaiva viseshatah, Mahaa paapa viniirmuktaah swartga loke vasantite/ Paamsavo Dwarakaaya vai vaayunaa samudiritaah, Paapinaam muktidaah proktaah kim punardwaaraabhuvi/* (By the grace of Dwaraka, all kinds of sinners born as krimi keetakas or flies, pashu pakshis or serpents- all attain salvation; what else one has to say about those who visit or reside there and become surfeit with Bhagavan Shri Krishna's darshan and worship! Those residents of Dwaraka should attain such kind of salvation as even illustrious Maha Munis with extraordinary control of physical organs and senses might possess! Dwaraka vasi's darshana or sparshana or mere touch, would destroy human's gravest sins and bestow long stay in Swarga. Even the sand flown by the wind of Dwaraka would destroy all the sins; why talk of residence in Dwaraka itself!) Such is the narration by Markandeya Maharshi in this Purana! He further describes that those persons who spend time at Lord Krishna's idol at Dwaraka are blessed and fulfilled deserving to be saluted and prostrated to. Further those devotees of Shri Krishna have the opportunity of bathing his sacred head with milk should reap the fruits performing Ashwamedha Yagna. But those devotees who, with no return favour from the Lord, perform affectionate yet devotional bathing to him should be blessed with Moksha. After the snaana, those who dry and wipe his body with a clean cloth would have his or her past and present sins. Those after bathing and dressing up, decoration of him with a fresh fragrant flower garland while the sound of conch shell is rendered and recite his sahasra naama with faith and dedication, then each word of the 'namaavali' would fetch him the fruit of giving away the daana of a kapila cow per each stanza of it. Additionally the recital of Gita, Gajendra moksha, Bhishma stava, or any of the Stotras by Maharshis would have the same benefit: *Yoga Shastraani Vedantaan yoginah Krishna sannidhou, Pathanti Ravi bimbam tu mithwaayaanti layam Hareyh/ Gitaa Naama shasram tu stavaraajastavanu smritih, Gajendra mokshanam chaapi Krishnasyaa staviya durlabham/* (Those Yogis recite Yoga shastra and Vedanta in the presence of Krishna shall break the barriers of Surya mandala and enter right into Vishnu Dhaam. The Five Maha Stotras viz. Shrimad

Bhagavad Gita, Vishnu Sahasra naama, Bhishma Stava Raja, Anusmriti and Gajendra Moksha are indeed the dearmost Stotras of Bhagavan Shri Krishna. As briefly narrated the Mahatmya of Dwaraka from Skanda Purana, the basic and immediate cause for Lord Krishna headed by Yadavas is explained in Maha Bhagavata Purana, Vishnu Purana, Maha Bharata etc. Maha Bhagavata describes as follows: Pursuant to the termination of Kamsa, the tyrant King of Mathura -who had the discredit of imprisoning his own father Ugrasena out of ill justified ambition as well as his own sister Devaki and brother in law Vasudeva out of fear that their son Krishna, yet unborn might kill him- the two Queens of Kamsa, named Asti and Prapti, approached their father Jarasandha the evil Monarch of Magadha. Jarasandha attacked Mathura with some twenty three 'akshouhinies' of infantry, cavalry and elephantry and challenged Krishna and Balarama. But as Krishna was to fight with massive opponents even with a minor number of Army basically with Kamsa's carry-forward loyalties, he called for his (Vishnu's) Saaranaga Dhanush with limitless arrows or his mace/ gada named Koumudi while Balarama's Hala or Plough and Musala. Thus Jarasandha despite his huge Army was no match and ran away from the battle. But he regrouped and strengthened his army again and again, each time getting routed. There were such attacks by some seventeen times. When Jarasandha was expected to attack for the eighteenth time, his allies viz, the alien mlechha forces called Yavanas headed by Kalayavana attacked Mathura with a massive thirty million barbarians of desperation and cruelty. Then Krishna and Balarama calculated that no doubt they could face the combined Army of Jarasandha and Kalayavana too but discretion being the better part of valour, especially since Yadava Army should not be hurt at all even in small number, they thought of a Master Stroke: one to eliminate Kalayavana by tricking him and another to shift their Capital of Yadavas from Mathura to Dwaraka. They planned to build a new Capital City named Dwaraka on the West Coast, a modern City with 12 gates and all amenities and asked Vishwakarma, the Architect-cum-Builder; the latter created a beautiful and well structured fortress touching the western Sea. By means of His mystic Yoga Maya or the power of Illusion, the citizens of Mathura got transferred lock-stock and barrel, over night to Dwaraka and found themselves in their own luxurious Palaces. Even as Balarama was defending Mathura, Lord Krishna attracted the attention of Kalayavana, passing singly by foot, by the main gate of Mathura; Kalayavana followed Krishna closely but always unreachable with some distance apart and led the Mleccha into a Mountain Cave. Thinking that Krishna known for his tricks had himself assumed a new form as an old and haggardly man inside the dark cave kicked him forcefully as the old man was fast asleep. Indeed, the old man was none other than Muchukunda, the son of Mandhata of Ishvaaku dynasty. He was the defender of Demi-Gods from Daityas for long in Treta Yuga and Lord Kartikeya the Commander-in-Chief appreciated Muchukunda's efforts and granted him rest and sleep till Lord Vishnu Himself as his Avatara named Krishna would bless him at a later date in Dwapara Yuga. As Kalayavana forcibly kicked Muchukunda, the former burnt off Kalayavana by his angry looks and realised Krishna as his Saviour when Krishna instructed Muchukunda to perform Tapasya. Thus Krishna got rid of Kalayavana even all the Mathura resident Yadavas got nicely transported to their new Capital Dwaraka! Incidentally, Jarasandha finally got killed by Bhimasena, thanks to Krishna's finger-sign advice to Bhima to tear Jarasandha's body into two and throw the two parts apart topse-turvey; after Bhima killed Jarasandha some thousands of Kings defeated in wars besides countless youthful girls kidnapped were liberated. Skanda Purana prescribes the method of Yatra to Dwaraka Dhaam; after satisfying with wholesome meals to good Vaishnava Bhaktas, the yatris need to sleep on the ground peacefully observing Celibacy and while travelling keep reciting Vishnu Sahasra naama, Purusha Sukta, Shrimad Bhagavatam etc. Then having taken bath in Gomati Nadi, Chakra Tirtha etc. enter the Dham with extreme devotion

and total faith. The then Dwaraka township got drowned in the Sea anyway as soon as Lord Krishna disappeared and assiduous researches over considerable time reveal- though contradictory- that the ancient Dwaraka is perhaps under Arabian Sea at Kathiawad. The newly constructed Dwaraka- some 450 km from Ahmedabad- is stated to be on the banks of Gomati River but one version is that this is not Gomati but an extended body of Sea water, and that is why some call Dwaraka as Gomati Mukha where nine ghats have been constructed viz. Sangama Ghat, Narayana Ghat, Vaasudeva Ghat, Go ghat, Parvati ghat, Pandava ghat, Brahma ghat, Suravana ghat and Sarkari ghat. The Main Mandir called Dwarakaadheesh (also called Ranchodrai Mandir but one of the devotees was stated to have transferred the earlier Shama Sundara Chaturbhuj Murti took it away to Dhakor and another similar Murti appeared in a Well at a Ladwa village and thus got replaced here); this Mandir is said to have been built in 6th or 7th century. As it stands now has a shikhar height of 170 ft. its entry gate named Swarga Dwar and exit gate as Moksha Dwaar. Besides other Mandirs around Dwarakaadheesha Main Mandir, near Moksha dwaar there is Kusheswar Shiva Mandir which is significant as the legend prescribes that in case the Yatris not obtaining the Darshan of Kusheswara Linga, half of the Dwaraka Yatra Phala is taken away by Daityas. Sharada Mandir is another highlight of Dwaraka as Adi Shankaracharya established one of the Main Peethas as at Puri, Badari, Shringeri and Kanchi.

Bet (Island) Dwaraka/ Shankho dwar: is some 15 km from Dwaraka which in the past was a full-fledged Port before the development of Ohka Port. On way from Dwaraka to the Bet is the famed Rukmini Devi Mandir some 2 km near the Main Temple stated to have been built in the 12th century. In the 'Bet' itself is the old Shamkho Narayan Mandir and the Idols of the Queens of the Lord viz. Lakshmi, Radha, Satyabhama and Jambavati. Shri Krishna Mahal also earlier called Pradyumna Mandir, besides Rancchod and Trivikrama Mandir are there too on the Bet. In fact, there are Shivalayas, Vaishnava Temples, Hanuman and Devi Mandirs are scattered all over. The well known Gopi Talaab is nearby where Gopikas were stated to bathe often.

Nageshwara Jyotir Linga: Not distant from Bet Dwara is Nageshwar Jyotir Linga, while there have been claims on the location of this specific Jyotir Linga at Jageshwar Daruva vana near Nainital in Kumaon region as also on Naganatha in Maharashtra. In any case, the legendary background of Nageshwara Linga is as follows: A demon couple named Daruka and Daruki secured a boon from Devi Parvati that wherever they moved about they would carry forests with them; they then got into the habit of destroying Yagnas and all spiritual tasks and there were loud protests from Brahmanas who approached Sage Ourva. The Muni cursed the demons that they would not survive any where on earth. The demons then moved into the Sea and resorted to harass sailors in ships on high Seas by resorting to pirating activities. One of the prisoners on a ship named Supriya a Vaishya and an ardent devotee of Shiva was along with co-accused associates sentenced by a King and was sailing off to another destination of the ship. Supriya was indeed innocent and made sincere prayers to the Lord who not only killed the Demon-Pirates but got pardoned by the King for mistaken identity of the offenders. Even in the prisoner cell while during the ecstatic worship and stotras, there was a Swayambhu Shiva Linga manifested. Commemorating this joyous moment the released Supriya and associates installed a swayambhu Nageshwara Linga on the Sea coast itself at Bet Dwaraka since got popular as a Maha Jyotir Nageshwara Linga. Shiva Purana states: *Etad yayh shrunuyaannityam Nageshodbhavamaadaraat, Sarvan kaamaaniyaad dheeman maha pataka naasha- naan/* (Whoever listens this account of how this Swayambhu Nageshwara Linga got manifested on its own faithfully, they would most certainly attain fulfillment of their desires and have their gravest

sins uprooted.). Stated to have been originally consecrated during the early Kayuga, the Jyotir Linga Mandir has been renovated anew recently and is well maintained. It is inside a spacious hall supported by eight pillars and the Jyotir Linga is located underneath the ground level. The Sanctum or the 'Garbha sthana' is distinct although the Linga is visible from outside. Opposite the Linga is overseen by Nandi Deva outside the Sanctum, although there is a separate Mandir in the rear side of the Garbha for Nandikeshwara. The Linga is small in stature of some 40cm height and 30cm dia. Devotees are allowed to touch and perform Abhisheka by Rudra Mantras by themselves. The Jyotir Linga looks South from its original direction since there was the background story of once Maha Bhakta of Vitthal at Pandaripura of Maharashtra visited the Linga and started bhajan along with his disciples rather loudly in ecstasy and this caused disturbance to the 'Namaka-Chamaka Mantra paaraayana' by the Temple priests who objected as he was facing right before the Linga and forced him to carry on the bhajan behind the Linga. But as though in response to the heartfelt bhajan singing of Namdeva, the Linga faced him and turned into the opposite direction ever since. It is stated that live serpents surround the Maha Linga and play around in the nights when the Mandir is closed; as a standing proof milk in cups is stated to remain empty over the night inside the locked out gates. Nagas or serpents symbolise the nerve system of human body and Naganatha indicates the Sushumna Nadi which constitutes the energy channel of human spine. The vital power of Kundalini which is latent and dormant in the Muladhara Chakra at the bottom of the vertebral column named Naganatha and snake like Kundalini Shakti resembles the splendour of the Soul which is Bhagavan Shiva himself this the Jyotir Linga symbolises spiritual splendour. The same explanation is applicable to the other Nageshwara/Naga naatha Jyotir Linga claims elsewhere too! There is a huge Shiva Idol in the outside area of the Sanctum as though beckoning the Yatris to enter the Mandir for Salvation!

Porbandar/ Sudama Puri: Besides being the Janmabhumi or birth place of Mahatma Gandhi the Father of the Nation affectionately known as 'Bapu' in the memory of whom Porbandar is rightly proud of, the latter has the legendary fame for being the Sudama puri and a Mandir in the precincts of Porbandar in the Gardens of Rana Sahib is present with the Pratimas of Sudama and his wife were installed. Maha Bhagavata Purana describes the genuine marvel as to why, when and how the Supreme Power of Universe would reach out everywhere and anywhere to motivate actions of each particle to act or not to act. Suka Muni narrated a Story to King Parikshit when the latter got a curse from Muni's son that a flying snake would kill the King within a week's time, since the King felt humiliated as the Muni did not welcome him when he entered the Muni's Ashram; the King picked up a dead snake and 'garlanded' around the Muni's neck in deep Tapasya and as the Muni's son on return found this ugly sight, he gave the 'shaap'. King Parikshith had a genuine marvel as to why, when and how the Supreme Power of Universe reaches out everywhere and anywhere to motivate the actions of each particle of Creation critically and objectively. Hereagain, the motive force of the 'particle' to act or not to act is provided by the Supreme Force Itself! In reply, Suka Muni narrated a story to exemplify as to how, each action of an entity is conditioned by the Supreme Force and why the entity concerned receives its reward or punishment as the case might be. A boyhood friend of Krishna, named Sudama was a poverty stricken Brahmana with genuine vedic knowledge and piety and his faithful wife had for years dinned into his ears that he should call on the famed Ruler of Bhojas, Vrishnis and Andhakas at Dwaraka, viz. Krishna who was also popular for His actions of charity. When extreme poverty hurt him so much that it ignored false notions of shyness or shame, one day Sudama decided to visit Krishna finally. His wife borrowed a fistful of flat rice from neighbours that was hidden in a dirty cloth. In the City of Dwaraka, Sudama felt it was

impossible to reach Krishna, but the latter found Sudama easily and took him home. Krishna and Rukmini- God and Goddess Lakshmi-provided a dreamlike treat of services to him, which by itself was tantamount to abundant Spiritual Bliss. Krishna took away forcefully the dirty cloth hidden with the handful of flat rice as a gift to the Lord who ate half but Rukmini prevented eating the second half, presumably concerned of exceeding the benediction contemplated. Barring the display of friendship and exchange of nostalgic memories, Sudama returned back with empty hands and on way back felt satisfied fully with the experience, although was apprehensive of his wife's possible reaction that he missed a golden opportunity! On reaching his home, Sudama was taken aback at the miracle that his wretched hut was transformed into a fullfledged Palace with heavenly luxuries! Muni Suka's explanation that the story of Sudama amply clarified the motivation of Super Force for every action. His extreme poverty would have been a result of his previous karma or action, his piety and high dedication to Almighty was his action, and the end result was a fruit of his action too; in all these cases the subtle motivation was received by Almighty and none else. In the vast expanse of the Sudama Mandir are the smaller Mandirs of Jagannatha, Bilweswar Mandir, Gayatri Mandir, Hingalaj Bhavani Mandir and Girdhari nath Mandir too. There is also Kedarnath Kund where yattris perform snaanas. Among the other Tirhas some distances away from Porbandar are Mula Dwaraka, Harshad Devi or Hara siddhi Mandir, Madhava Tirtha and Kamitela.

Somanath-Prabhasa Kshetra: Maha Shiva Purana in Koti Rudra chapter extols the Mahatmya of Somanatha Jyotirlinga: *Somalingam Naro drushtaa sarva paapat pramuchyate, Labdghwaa phalam manobheeshtam mritah Swargam samihate/ Yadyad phalam sanmuddhishya kurute Teerthamuttamam tathat phalamavapnoti sarvathaa naatra samshayah/Prabhaasamcha pariikrutya Prithvi krama sambhavam, Phalam prapnoti shuddhatmaa mritah swarge mahiyate/* (By merely visioning the Somnatha Maha Jyotirlinga, Bhaktas are able to destroy their sins instantly and having attained their deaths do qualify for Swarga Papti. Those yattris who have a definite objective to fulfill as a fall out of their yattras would indeed fructify their wishes without any doubt. On concluding a Parikrama of the Prabhasa yatra, especially of Somnatha Jyotirlinga darshana and worship reap the fruits of Prithvi Parikrama and on the termination of their lives shall undoubtedly reach heavens.) This Jyotirlinga in Prabhasa Kshetra at Somnath is the Center of the Lakulisha Pashpata Shaivaites. It at this Place only that Jara named hunter hit his arrow at Lord Krishna's foot and hence this Sacred Kshetra is therefore considered as a Maha Tirtha. This Place is called Veravala, Somnath paatan and Prabhasa. Unfortunately, this Somnath Mandir being a very prosperous and rich Place and very popular over ages became the target of plundering by the alien Rulers several times right from Muhammad Ghazani times and witnessed series of destructions and reconstructions; the latest reconstruction on the ruins of the earlier ones was at the instance of Sardar Vallabhai Patel who was the Deputy Prime Minister of Free India. The specific part of the Mandir on Ocean banks touching the Mandir is called Agni Kunda but of late bathing is disallowed in view of several yattris doing so are reported missing. Linga Abhishekas are performed by Yattris in organised groups. In the morning, afternoon and evening timings, the Temple rings with the chantings of Namaka-Chamaka Parayana choruses of pandits and the atmosphere is charged in surfiet with the thoughts and expressions of Maha Deva among the crowds. On one side of the new constructin of Somnatha Linga are the depictions of all the Dwadasha Jyotirlingas are installed with descriptions all over Bharat in picturesque greenery. In none distant area the original Somnath Maha Shiva Linga is literally under ground called Ahalyabai's Mandir which is a few meters away from the new Mandir and is partly dark

and the Linga is surrounded by Murtis of Devi Parawati, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Ganga and Nandi. Nearby the Ahalya Mandir are the Temples of Maha Kaali, Ganesha and Daitya Sudan Vishnu. At the Nagar Dwaar, Gauri Kund is a Sarovara. Praachi Triveni is the merger point of three rivers named Hiranya, Saraswati and Kapila merging further with the Sea. A little distance away from the Prachi Triveni are a Surya Mandir, and within a cave are Hingalaja Bhavani and Siddha naath Mandirs. Another Bala Rama Mandir and a Peepul Tree and the legend states that Bala Rama Deva assumed Sesha Swarupa and left for Patala after the decimation of Yadava Kula. *Bhalak Tirtha* is popular for the Moksha Peepul Tree under which is stated that Jara the Hunter shot an arrow on Lord Krishna's foot and caused Krishna Nirvana. Somnath Mandir is noted for its legendary background: Prajapati Daksha and his wife Prasuti had sixty daughters ten of whom were given in charity to Dhama, seventeen to Kashyapa Muni, twenty seven to Chandra Deva and two each to Rishis Angira, Krasaswa and Bhuta. Chandra Deva had extreme infatuation for Rohini Devi and neglected others. Daksha warned Chandra several times and finally gave a shaap / curse that the latter would cease to be bright and become dark for ever. Chandra appealed to Brahma but to no avail. Then finally Chandra Deva performed extreme Tapasya to Maha Deva who called the aggrieved parties viz. Daksha and Brahma in the presence of Chandra and sorted out the problem with a compromise that Chandra would henceforth become brighter day by day during one fortnight of each month ie. during Shukla Paksha and like wise get darker by the day in another fortnight of each month called Krishna Paksha. He also blessed Chandra to be near to him and Devi Parvati, at least in a semi-form. He further blessed Chandra Deva to let the Universe be aware that Maha Deva be designated as Somashekhara and *even a mere touch of any Shiva Linga would demolish all physical ailments prone to humanity like tuberculosis and leprosy that Chandra causes*. Maha Deva was so further pleased with Chandra's tapasya that a waterbody near the Swayambhu Jyotir Linga to be named Chandra Kund would for sure provide total immunity from all kinds of sins to all who bathe in it.

Dakor, Mahi Sagara Sangama, Abu, Siddha pur, Shyamalaji, Bhima Shankara:

Dakor: Some 90 km off Ahmedabad the Capital City of Gujarat Dakor is a great attraction to Yatris, most essentially the Rancchodraya Mandir. As to how Rancchod Krishna was transferred from Dwaraka to this Place has already been explained in describing the Dwaraka refernece above. Dakor's extraordinary devotees named Vijaysingh Bodaana and his wife Gangu bhai always used to literally measure the miles of distance from Dakor to Dwaraka back twice a year to bring 'Tulasi Dala' to place at the feet of Dwarakaadheesh earlier called Rancchod Bhagavan twice a year for 82 years. As the couple became too old still persisting the yatras, Bhagavan had extreme compassion and told them that then onward there was no need to visit him but would himself come to Dakor. Then Bhagavan Rancchod travelled by a bullock cart and the royal couple installed the Pratima at Dakor itself to facilitate them to worship eversince till their final departure and absorbed them into Vaikuntha! This appears to have occurred in 1212 AD. and eversince then Kartika Purnima celebrations have never stopped there after. Meanwhile the Bodana Murti of Rancchod was stolen and was hidden locally. Once the Dwaraka Pujari visited once to Dakor and identified the Murti there but out of avarice agreed to exchange it against that much of gold in weight even as it actually weight to a Tulasi Leaf and the nose jewel of the wife of Bodana Chief's wife; simultaneously the Dwarakaadheesha appeared in the dreams of the Dwaraka Pujari and summoned him to return to Dwaraka forthwith and some six months later the Murti was recovered from a well in Dwaraka itself and that Murti was finally installed in Dwaraka Kshetra! Besides on all the Purnima days of the year, Sharad Purnima celebrations at Dakor are so significant and crowded that special buses and

ralways have to be organised especially from important cities, towns and villages of Gujarat, Rashastan and Maharashtra. Besides Rancchod Mandir, the other important Places to be visited are Gautami Sarovar, Maakhani Aaro where the Bodani Chief's wife used to tender with her own hands butter balls to Bhagavan and even now the processions from Dakor are halted at this place and naivedya is offered with sweetened butter and distributed! The processions are also necessarily halted at Lakshmi Mandir on the banks of Gomati Talaab. *Galteshwar* is some 15-16 km away from Dakor and its 'Shikhar' fell down long ago and is approachable by broken roads but the Mandir as such is full of life with a sparkling Shiva Linga and now the abode of several Sadhus and yogis with wall paintings of Murtis facing a canal called Galti merging into Mahi River. This was the famed Galva Maharshi's Ashram, referred to in Puranas. Many visitors from not only Dakor but Anand the big township called the Milk City of India.

Mahi Sagara Sangama: The unique importance of this Maha Tirtha -near Vadodra in Gujarat State- is vividly described in Skanda Maha Purana's Koumara Khanda. The Purana describes its legendary background as follows: Lord Brahma convened a Conference of various Tirthas which were well known by Devotees from all over Bharat. Skanda Deva was also present and so did Dharma Deva. Brahma said that it might not be fair for Him to unilaterally decide on the Supremacy of a particular Tirtha and hence the invitees could air their special features considering the Sacredness, Boons secured by the Devotees from the respective Gods, and the general popularity and the turnover of the devotees at their respective Tirthas. The Mahi Sagara Tirtha Representative said that his Tirtha was unparalleled; in the past King Indradyumna did such Tapasya that Prithvi who was the 'Sarva Tirthamayi' (the bearer of all the Tirthas) herself acknowledged the Supremacy of Mahi Sagara and none else could make a claim over the Maha Tirtha! Dharma Deva, the elder son of Brahma Deva, reacted sharply against what Mahi Sagara said and condemned the highly self-opinionated views; he said that virtuous persons never made statements like that since that tantamounted to boasting, ego and a blatant display of 'Ahamkar' which was against the established norms of morality, especially referring to the merits of others. So saying, Dharma Deva gave a curse that the Tirtha be destroyed! On witnessing the proceedings at the Conference, there were 'Hahakars' or Great Commotions. Skanda Deva objected to Dharma's 'Shaapa' (Curse) and defended the fact that there was indeed no other Tirtha in the Universe that was comparable to Mahi Sagara. In turn, Dharma Deva became ready to resign, which meant that the entire World would become irreligious, full of Adharma and lawless! Narad intervened at this juncture that on the one hand, Dharma Deva's role was outstanding in upholding virtues while Skanda Deva was actually the Son of Bhagavan Ishvar and the Commander-in- Chief of Deva Sena. Any friction between these two illustrious personalities might jeopardise Universal balance and as such the compromise formula suggested was that Mahi Sagara Tirtha be declared as a Gupta (Secret) Kshetra and as an Unknown Destination; but any devotee observing fast and worship on Amavasya falling on Saturdays in the name of the Mahi Tirtha would be reaping worth ten times more of Prabhasa Tirtha, Seven times of Pushkar Tirtha Yatras, and eight times of Prayag. This was also acceptable to Brahma, Dharma and Skanda and all the Sacred Deities represented at Mahi Sagara including Paramatma Vishnu, Maha Deva and Maha Devis. Mahi River flows from Maalava mountain still its merger into the Western Arabian Sea till a 'Vijaya Stambha' or Victory Column as Devas requested Skanda Kumara to celebrate and set it up to signify the termination of Tarakasura by the valour of Skanda. Skanda experienced extreme remorse to have killed Tarakasura a Brahmana by birth. Then Lord Vishnu advised that the only Prayaschitta or Purification would be to set up a Kumarswar Complex containing Three Vishuddha Shiva Lingas viz. Pratigneshwar, Kapileshwar and Pancha

Mukheshwar-Tatpurusha, Aghora, Sadyojata, Vaama Deva and Ishana-all in the presence of Brahma and Devas. As Kartikeya after the Linga Pratishtha, he recited Shata Rudreeyam and an ever pleased Maha Deva appeared and demolished the former's Brahma Hatya Maha Pataka on the termination of Tarakasura. Since Kumareswar Complex was set up already, Skanda Deva agreed to the request of Devas to put up a Victory Tower named „Viswanandak“ and before it a Siva Linga. Skanda put in His 'Shakti' and created 'Patala Ganga' in a Well atop the Victory Tower, where on Magha Krishna Paksha Chaturdasi, human beings would take bath in that Well, offer 'Pitru Tarpan' and worship to Vijaya Sthambheswar with Flowers and Sandal Paste; these acts would be as significant as Gaya Shraddh and Vajapeya Yagna Phal respectively. In fact, the Tarpan and Worship could as well be repeated every Pournima and Amavasya in the Mahi Sagar Sangam for similar results. When this Victory Tower and Procedure were announced, Indra, Brahma and Vishnu were highly enthusiastic and appreciative. Meanwhile, a Demon named Pralambasura, who ran away from the army of Tarakasura, hid himself in Patalaloka and tormented the Devotees of the Siva Lingas set up by Skanda as a Prayawschitta of Brahmahathya Sin; this information was given by Kumud, the son of Sesha Nag, the Deva Serpent to Skanda who utilised the Shakti named arrow, tore apart a line through Prithvi and smashed the Demon Pralamba and his associates. As a follow up, Brahma and others set up a 'Siddheswar Linga' and Devatas themselves dug up a Sarovar and Skanda named it as 'Siddha Kupa' (which incidentally was the route through which Pralamba and company were killed in Patalaloka); they all prayed to Shakti Siddhamba to be present and bless devotees, especially on Ashtamis and Chaturdasis. Again, in the Siddheswara Tirtha, Devas requested Lord Ganesh too to stay at the Siddha Kshetra in the form of Siddha Vinayaka. In fact, Devas and Brahma set up Seven Siddha Entities viz. Siddheswar, Siddh Vat (Vriksha), Siddhambika, Siddhi Vinayak, Siddha Kshetraadhipathi, Siddheswar Tirtha and Siddha Kupa.

Abu (Arbudachala): Both Maha Bharata in Vana-Tirtha Yatra Prakarana and Maha Padma Purana in Adi Parva extolled the Arbudaachala Mahatmya or Abu Kshetra: *Tato gacchet Dharmanjna Himavatsuta-madbhutam, Prithivyam yatra vai cchidram purvamaaseed Yudhishtara/ Tatraashramo Visishthasya tripu-lokeshu vishrutah, Tatrepya rajanimekaam gosahasra phalam labhet/* (Dharmagjna Yudhishtara, then if you visit Himalaya Putra Arbudaachala (Abu), there there is a cave mouth where there is the most illustrious Vasishtha Ashram famed all over the three lokas; if a human being could manage even a night's stay then he or she would be eligible for the MahaPhala of thousand Go daana!) Abu mountain-peak of some 9 km length and 4 km width is some 225 km from Ahmedabad where Bhagavan Shri Krishna halted at Maharshi Vasishtha's Ashram en route Mathura to Dwaraka at Hrishikesha Mandir seen in the old way known as Dwarka Dwaar up to the peak. King Ambarisha performed his tapasya near that Mandir. Among the notable Places at Mount Abu are Suya Kunda with the adjoining Kanweshwara Shiva Mandir, Manikarnika Tirtha, Maharshi Gautama Ashrama where Naga Kunda is stated to be popular especially on Naaga Panchami celebrations are organised as also the popular *Delwada Jain Mandirs* including those of Adinath, Vastu paala, Teja paala, Parshava natha and Deva Rani Jethani; Yagneshwara, Agnin Tirtha, Kankhal Tirtha, *Guru Dattatrya Sthana on the Mountain top*, Achaleshwara ShivaMandira, Bhriugu Ashram, Achala gadha Jai Mandira, and *Arbuda Devi Mandira* atop mountain top.

Ambaji: Arasuri Mata Temple of Vedic times considered as one of Shakti Peethas-as per 'Tantra Chudamani' where a part of Devi Sati's mortal body's severed heart piece fell as sliced off by Vishnu Chakra; the body part is stated to have fallen and is retained with Gupta Vishwa Sri Yantra which is situated atop Gabbar Hills at a height of 1600 ft. -also connected by ropeway- popular as Ambaji, some

185 km from Ahmedabad while Ambaji Mandir down the hill is as popular as the original Shakti Peetha. The Shakti Peetha is stated to be eternally lighted up with an Akhanda Jyoti or an everlasting flame. Both the Mandir and the Temple up the hill attract thousands of visitors turning up for worship each day; the rush becomes unbearable during Nava Ratras in Aswiyuja Month as also on all Purnima Days. Besides, Satyanarayana Pujas are performed on Shudda Ekadasi evenings and special worships and organised services on all 'Parva dinas' coinciding Dussera, Deepavali, Krishna Ashtami Rama Navami, etc. as notified in advance. Large crowds are attracted on week ends and there is frenzied but organised activity throughout the year. Visit to this Tirtha is indeed significant and worthwhile. Nearby to Ambaji are Kamakshi Mandir, Kaiasha Hill Sunset, and Koteswar Shiva Linga. Of the two main routes from Ahmedabad to Ambaji, one way leads to Mount Abu, Siddhapur, Modhera and Becharaji while beyond Mount Abu is another route leading to Udaipur and Nathdwara. From Nathdwara and Udaipur back to Ahmedabad there is yet another route is Shamlaji.

Siddhapur: Maha Bharata as also Maha Padma Purana describing the Tirtha Mahima make a special mention of Dharmaranya Mahatmya: *Dharmaranyam hi tatpunyamaadyam cha Bharatarshabha, Yatravishvatha matre vaui sarva paapaih pramuchyate/ Archayitwa pitrun Devaan niyato niyataashanah, Sarva kaama samriddhasya Yagnasya phalamashnute*/(Bharata sreshtha! This Dharmaranya is an Adi Tirtha of distinction and by even entering it all kinds of sins are demolished; if a person be being a limited eater and observer of Dharmic restrictions performs sincere worship to Pitru Devas and Devas shall indeed reap the fruits of performing Yagna karyas). The Center of Dharmaranya is Siddhapur which indeed is the Matru Gaya Kshetra or the Siddha Raja Kshetra, where the desires of yatriis and devotees are fulfilled forthwith by not only the grace of Siddha Purushas like Maharshi Kardama and Kapila Maha Muni whose Ashrams are in position as also of Aoudichya Brahmanas whose centers are aplenty besides of their Kula Devata viz. Govinda Madhava. Siddhapur is on the Mt. Abu Road from 5-6 km en route Modhera and Ahmedabad. The Tirthas near by are of Saraswati and of Saraswati Mandira as also Brahmandeshwara Shiva Mandir where Matru Shraddhas are performed; Bindu Sagara on the banks of Saraswati River where Govinda and Madhava Mandirs are worthy of worship. It is locally believed that Sindu Sagara was indeed the place where Samudra Mathana took place here by Deva Danavas and Devi Lakshmi appeared here itself! *Modhera:* Is the ancient Abode of Matanga Devi who was believed to have terminated a Daitya named Karnata and is settled as Modheshwari; Matanga Devi is an Ashtadasha Hasta Murti or manifested as with eighteen hands each with weapons as also of a book, Aksha Mala, and Veena.

Shyamalaji: is a Krishna Bhagavan's Mandir of fame. This Tirtha is on the banks of Meshwa River. Besides the Main Murti of Krishna Bhagavan, in the same premises are the Temples of Rancchod, Girdhari Lala, and of Kashi Vishwanath facing which is a large Sarovara. In fact, Kashi Vishwanath Mandir is under ground. It is stated that Raja Harischandra performed a Putra Kameshthi Yagna at the behest of Vasishttha Maha Muni and the Yagna was performed under the supervision of Oudumbara Rishi. Shamlaji was first named as Chaturbhuja Gadadhara Bhagavan installed by Harischandra himself. The present Shamlaji is worshipped by Brahmana an Vaishya Vaishnavites mainly. The celebrations at this Mandir continue from Kartika Shukla Ekadashi upto Margaseersha Shukla Dwiteeya.

Bhimashankar: Located some 110 km from Pune in Maharashtra State in the Ghat region of Sahyadri Hills near the head of Bhima River which merges with Krishna River too, the fifth Jyotirlinga Bhima

Shankar is the appearance Maha Siva who exterminated Demon Bhima, son of Kumbhakarna (Ravan's brother). Demon Bhima on knowing from his mother Kartaki wanted to avenge the death of his father by Lord Rama, who was Maha Vishnu's incarnation and performed penance to Lord Brahma to receive boons to conquer even mighty opponents. He defeated Indra and Devas and what provoked Lord Siva most was the tormenting of a great Siva Bhakta King Kamarupeshwara insisting that the latter should pray to himself rather than Siva Linga. As the Demon was about to destroy the Sivalinga by his sword, Lord Siva appeared and destroyed the Demon and His mighty anger caused sweat which flowed as River Bhima. The Jyotirlinga thus manifested is a powerful representation of 'Ardhanariswara' in the Temple provides proof of instant fulfillment of all desires thus attracting thousands of devotees, especially on all Mondays and definitely on Sivaratri festivals. As in certain other cases like at Ujjain, the Swayambhu Jyotirlinga is set at a level lower than the normal Ground; also there is a speciality here that there is a constant flow of water from the Linga! The Bhima Shankar Temple is also associated with the killing of Demon brothers Tripurasuras along with Devi Parvati in Her manifestation as Kamalaja whose temple is also nearby the main Temple. Devi Kamalaja was worshipped by Brahma and hence She was called so. Sakini and Dakini were among those whose contribution was significant in the battle against Tripurasuras and their worship too is performed at the Temple. 'Mokshakund Tirtha', the Holy Waterbody adjacent the Bhimashankar Temple is associated with Sage Kausika. [Maratha Rulers especially Nana Phadnavis who built the Temple 'Sikhara' and Sivaji who made donations to its maintenance were intensely associated with the progress of this illustrious Temple].

While the above version of the location of Bhimashankar is convincing, Siva Purana which is relevant in the context of the current source states in Rudra Samhita: 'Dakininam Bhimashankara' while outlining the broad references of the Dwadasa Jyotirlingas; more clearly the Koti Rudra Samhita states: *Bhimashankara sanjnaastu Shashtha Shambho Maha Prabho/ Avataro Maha leeloBhimasuravinashanah/ Sudakshinabhida Bhaktam Kamarupeshwaram vrisham / yoraraakshasadbhutam hatvasaram tha bhakta duhkhadam/Bhimashankara naamaa sa daakinyam samsthitaha swayam/ Jyotirlinga Siva rupena prarthesena Sankarah/* The sixth incarnation of Shambu and His 'Leela' (miracle) was the killing of Bhimasura and saving of King Sudakshina of Kamarup whose grateful prayers resulted in the manifestation of Siva at Dakini. The belief is the Bhimashankar Temple at Bhimapur Hill near **Guwahati** in Assam is the one where the King Sudakshina was saved and the Jyotirlinga was consecrated. Sivaratris are celebrated with pomp and Show in this Temple. Yet another version relates that the Temple of Bhimashankar Jyotirlinga at Kashipur near **Nainital** which was noted as a Dakini Country in the past is the one where the Jyotirlinga appeared. The legend in the Region was that Bhima of Pandava brothers married a Dakini woman named Hidimba and that Lord Siva appeared in that Place as a Swayambhu Jyotirlinga in that Temple area. In this Temple too, there are Idols of Bhairavanath and Devi Bhagavati as also a Temple Tank, called Sivaganga. Siva Ratri Jagarans and Worship are observed with religious fervour and devotion in this Temple too.

Nasik, Shirdi, Shani Shingapura, Triambikeshwara: *Nasik*: Basically Nasik and Panchavati are the same since the southern side of River Godavari is Nasik and the northern banks of Godavari is called Panchavati. On both the sides of Godavari are Temples and Tirthas. Again it is easy to identify the Tirthas on Godavari banks and at Tapodhana. On the Southern side of Govavari are Rama Kunda, Sita Kunda, Lakshman Kunda, Dhanush Kunda, Hanuman Kunda and so on. Among Deva Mandirs are of Kapaleshwar, Kaala Ram etc. On the Panchavati side are Five Vata Vrikhas, Sita Cave, and Mandirs of

Sharada Chandramouleshwar, Sundara Narayana, Rameshrara, Uma Maheshwara, Neela Kantheshwara, Pancha Ratneshwara, Goraarama, Muralidhara, Tila bhandeshwara, and Bhadra Kaali. At Tapovana some half km. from Panchavati, is the sangaa of Godavri and Kapila Tirtha and Kapila Maharshi Ashram, besides eight other Tirthas named Brahma, Shiva, Vishnu, Agni, Sita, Mukti, Kapila and Sangama. By a few km. away from Nasik are Tirthas named Gangapura prapaat, and Sita Sarovara; Dakali Village where Bhakta Samartha Ramdas built some Mandirs of Rama, Sita and other Rama Parivara; Ramashayya on a hill top where Ravanaasura is stated to have kidnapped Devi Sita; Pandava Cave, Jatayu Kshetra and Agastyashrama.

Shirdi: From Nasik is the most renowned and glorious Shirdi Sai Baba Mandir by some 6 km away, 15km from Kopergaon, and 300 km from Mumbai, which is of one of the richest Pilgrimage Centers in Bharat, drawing some 50000 devotees a day and lakhs of them on holidays and week ends. Sai Baba was perhaps born in 1838 AD but got immortalised in 1918. His early life was shrouded in mystery but his entry in Shirdi and settling in a Masjid named by himself as Dwaraka may happened in 1858 practising Muslim and Hindu rituals alike gifted with natural mastery of Scriptures of both and many other religious faiths. He taught the slogans and mottos of ‘Sabka Malik Ek’ or God is One and ‘Alla Malik’ or God is the Supreme King. His miracles are innumerable especially experienced by those who come to know of him. His teachings have universal appeal based on ‘Love all and ignore none’ in the true spirit of Advaita or Monism.

Shani Shinga pur: Some 70 km away from Shirdi is an exclusive Kshetra dedicated to Shani Deva where there is a Swayambhu or Self originated black stone with powers signifying the Lord Saturn among the Nine Planets. The powers range from retribution to rewards, hastening the process of fructification in either of extremes but elongating the period of positive or negative occurrences for long period of time—say two years and half in the House of each planet and seven years in his own, attracting the Title of ‘Manda Gati’ or of slow realisation of transformation in one’s life period; the process of change is tardy and long drawn either in poverty or prosperity! The local belief is that in this Place of Shani worship the result of retribution is instant and almost immediate and extreme; that is why pilferages and thefts are mortally afraid of and thus scrupulously avoided; little wonder there are no locks and doors at this place and neighbourhood for the sheer fears of instant results of returns! Tailaabhikaas or oil baths to the Sacred Stone signifying instant returns are regular and those performing oil abhishekas on their own leave their vastraas discarded after the worship.

Triambakeshwara: Located thirty kilometers away from Nasik in Maharashtra, the renowned Jyotirlinga of Lord Siva’s materialization called Tryambakeswar attracts thousands of Pilgrims round the year providing boons of material and spiritual nature. The ‘Punyakshetra’ or the Hallowed Land is the source point of the Holy River Godavari basically owing to the Bhagiradh-like efforts of Sage Gautama and his highly pious wife Ahalya. By virtue of the Sage’s penance and prayers, Lord Varuna was pleased to supply water and food grains in abundance but this boon turned out as a basis of jealousy of co-Sages and their spouses who created a cow to plunder the grains. Sage Gautama destroyed the cow, but as a result of a sin in killing the cow, the Sage-couple was banished to a hermitage on the mountain of Brahmagiri. Gautama Muni made relentless ‘Tapasya’ to Bhagavan Siva who endowed Gautama with the double desires of bringing River Ganga near his hermitage and also stay on its banks along with Bhagavati in the form of a Jyotirlinga. Lord Siva granted both the wishes that Ganga was brought near Gautama’s

hermitage as River Godavari and His manifestation as Tryambakeswara Jyotirlinga in the vicinity of the River Godavari / Gautami. In parallel to this, another legend related to the formation of a Jyotirlinga at Brahmagiri was the interface of Lords Brahma and Vishnu vis-à-vis an appearance of a Fire Column whose height and depth could not be ascertained by both of them; Brahma's cover-up story was that he found out the height of the Column and cited a Ketaki flower as a witness. Bhagavan Siva gave a curse to Brahma that there would not be worship of the former and Brahma gave a return curse that Lord Siva would be pushed underground. Hence the manifestation of Tryambakeswara under the Brahmagiri. The Jyotirlinga is of a small size in a depression on the floor with water oozing out constantly from the top. The force of waves of the River appears to be as per the intensity of the prayers of Sage Gautama according to the conviction of devotees in the Temple! Major Tirthas (Tanks) in the Temple are named Gangadwara representing the source of Ganga (Godavari), Varaha Tirtha where Lord Vishnu had a bath in the River in Varaha Rupa (appearance as Boar) and Kushvartha Tirtha considered as the most significant as Sage Gauthama spread across Kusha or Darbha Grass while securing the waters of Ganga. There are also other Tirthas like Gangasagara, Bilva Tirtha, Indra Tirtha, Vishwanath Tirtha, Mukund Tirtha, Prayag Tirtha, Rama Kund, Lakshmana Kund and so on. Chakra Tirtha, which is some 2-3 km away from Triambakeswara near Kushavarta is the precise origin of Sacred Godavari's 'pratyaksha udgama' or readily visible origin of Godavari that flows into Nasik. Among the Shrines at Triyamakeshwara Mandir are of Kedarnath, Rameshwar, Gauthameshwar, Kasi Viswanatha, Jareswar, Kanchaneswar, Tribhuneswar, Venkateshwar, and Hanuman. There are daily worships at the Main Temple thrice and the nightly 'arthies' are special. On Mondays there are special 'abhishekas' and 'arthies' as also 'Parikramas'. Kartika month worships are important, especially Kartika Purnima. Gangavatarana is celebrated in the month of Magha. Simhastha Parvati is held once in twelve years.

Gautami (Godavari) Mahatmya, Naganatha, Grishneshwara : *Tato Gadaavarim praapya nitya siddha nishevitaam, Rajasuya- maapnoti Vayu Lokam cha gacchati/* (Maha Bharata extols the Mahatmya of Gautami River as the everlasting provider of Siddhis besides the maha phala of performing Raja suya Yagna and bestowing the Vayu Loka prapti). Brahma Purana explains further: *Amritam Jahnavi toyam swarnamuchyate, Amritam gobhavam chaajyamamritam Soma yevacha, Gangaayaa vaarinaajyena hiranyena tathaiva cha, Sarvebhyopyaadrikam divyamaritam Goutami jala./* (It is stated that Ganges water is like gold, it is also said that pancha gavyas, Soma Yagnas are more valuable, but far more than Ganges water or gold, or even the pancha gavyas and Soma Yagnas, Godavari water is the best Amritam ever). *Sapta Godavarim snaatwaa niyato niyataashanah, Maha punyamavaapnoti Devalokam cha gacchati/* (Those who bathe in and drink the waters of 'Sapta Godavari dhaaras' - comprising Vasishta, Kaushiki, Vriddha Goutami, Goutami, Bharadwaaji, Atreyi and Tulya- are indeed blessed with Maha Punya and attain Deva Lokas).

Details of Gautami Ganga (Godavari River) and its magnificence are detailed in Brahma Purana in a full chapter as Maharshi Gautam was indeed responsible to have meditated intensely for several years and pleased the ever merciful Maha Deva to let the flows of the celestial water come down to Earth in the form of Godavari as narrated here under: As Bali Chakravarti's some of the Sankalpa Jala to donate the proverbial Three Feet to Vamana Deva fell on Shiva's jataajuta, there were too recipients of that Sacred Water on Earth viz. a Maharshi called Gautama and King Bhagiratha of Surya Vamsha. Thus Ganga from Shiva Jataajuta took two manifestations, one as Ganga and another as Gautami. While Bhagirathi Ganga's origin as was materialized by King Sagara's descendant Bhagiratha and his tenacious efforts by

meditation to Vishnu, Ganga Devi and Parameswara was well described in various Puranas, detailed account was provided in Brahma Purana about Gautami Ganga or the Dakshina Ganga. When Gautama reached atop Kailasha Mountain, he extolled Parama Shiva and the latter was pleased with the Maharshi's Tapasya, Bhakti, Vrata and Stuti and gave Darshan to Gautama. As Mahadeva asked the Maharshi as to what was his wish, Gautama requested Bhagavan that a part of Ganga that was absorbed in Shiva jatajuta be please spared to fall on Brahmagiri so that in the interest of devotees who crave for a Sacred River, Ganga the Great Purifier should flow at least before enter the Sea and the Public would get a chance to sanitise themselves of their sins atleast at that Place. Shiva readily agreed to Gautami's request in Public interest in that Region and affirmed that Gautami Ganga would most certainly be a very popular and Sacred River; as the prayed to Parama Paavani Ganga to descend from Maha Deva's jataajuta, he first took her to wash Bhagavan Traimbekeswara's feet and requested Bhagavan to prescribe the Puja Vidhi of Bhagavan. At the outset a devotee was required to perform Nandimukha Shraddha, satisfy Brahmanas with Bhojana Dakshinas, and take holy bath in Godavari, distribute Vastras and cash to Sadhus and the Poor and practice japa- homa- Puja as prescribed and thus complete the Tirtha Yatra with the Parama Mantra OM Namassivaaya with veneration and faith. Also perform Snaana and Puja at the Confluence Points of Trishna, Bhimarathi and Tungabhadra. Maha Deva blessed the sprawling Gautami and hailed it as his personal favourite with several names such as Maheswari, Ganga, Gautami, Vaishnavi, Godavari, Nanda, Sunanda, Kamadayani, Brahma Teja Samaaneeta and Sarva Paapa Pranashini. Brahma described to Narada Muni about various Sacred Tirthas that came up on the banks of the long Gautami Ganga : *Vaaraahi Tirtha* at Triamabaka Kshetra was the gift of Varaahaavatara of Vishnu who killed a Raakhasa named Sindhusena who defeated Indra and other Devas and obstructed the performance of Yagnas-the life line of Devas, the fruits of which were discarded in Rasatala; the blood of the Daityas, Danavas and Rakshasas headed by Sindhusena was washed in the Rasatala Ganga and Maha Yagnas were conducted again where Vaaraaha Titha was originated. Another Tirtha called *Kushaavarta* came to be formed in Triambaka to enable worship to Pitra Shraarthas and Tarpanas that emerged from Nilaparvatas in the Region popularly known as Nila Ganga. *Kapota Tirtha* had the back- ground of a hunter who was in the habit of killing several animals and caged many birds for his food daily; once he was caught badly in severe rain and rested under a Banyan Tree when he saw a male bird on the tree recognized a female bird in the hunter's net; as the male bird found that the hunter was shivering with cond and suffering the pangs of hunger. The female bird inside the net requested the male bird on the tree to collect figs and some fire from a distance by its beak holding a fig and thus producing a fig-lit fire to jump in and satisfy his hunger and warm up his body- shiver from the fire! The hunter was ashamed of his past killings and was taught a lesson as he prayed to Mahadeva to absolve him of his past sins and converted himself as a saint eventually. Later on as he died, Bhagavan granted the Kapota, the Kapoti and the Hunter-converted as Saint and a Sacred Titha came up as a Symbol of Sacrifice by the Kapota birds and the penance of the Hunter! The Kapota Tirtha snaan is till date known as a Provider of Ashwamedha Yagna Phala and Salvation. The origin of *Dashaashwametha Tirtha* was that a King called Bhuvan desired to perform Ten Ashwamedha Yagnas simultaneously and engaged Kashyapa Muni for the purpose but there were some hurdles or other although tried many Tirthas like Prayaga and Kashyapa made an appeal to Brahma who recommended Gautami banks in Dakshina Bharata and finally succeeded performing the Ten Yagnaas side by side and after successful completion organized Anna daanaas to lakhs of poor persons and gave away Brahamana daanaas. It is stated that till date the Tirtha continued to be famed for Yagnas and Annadaanas and those who performed sacred bathings at the Tirtha would secure Yagna Phalas. The

background of *Paishacha Tirtha* on the banks of Godavari related to Kesari the illustrious follower of Shri Rama along with other Vaanaraas of Kishkindha headed by Sugriva. Kesari had two wives viz. Anjana and Adri, both being Apsaras cursed by Indra to become a female monkey and a female cat respectively in the form of Mountains. But for their faces both the women had attractive physiques. As both the Devis approached Agastya Muni the latter blessed them and Devi Anjana gave birth to Hanuman Deva with the blessings and Amsha of Vaayu Deva and Devi Adri gave birth to a King of Piscachaas with the blessings and of Nirruti Deva. The Paishacha Tirtha thus came to name and fame and not far from it known as Hanuma Tirtha and Vrishakapi Tirthaa which enjoyed considerable popularity as Hanuman had been a symbol of intrepidity, invincibility and unflinching loyalty who continued to be an Ever-living and legend in the Immortal Epic of Ramayana. Brahma affirmed that *Pancha Tirtha* was the Point of Confluence of his own progeny viz. Savitri, Gayatri, Shraddhaa, Medhaa and Saraswati and these were all connected to Bhagavati Ganga; snaanaas in Pancha Tirtha, followed by Pujas and Daanaas would fully relieve several problems and insurmountable difficulties are overcome as though those never existed. All along the banks of Gautami Ganga were dotted several Tirthas of renown due their association of Devas, human beings, Maharshis and of Rakshasaas, Apsaras, who were all the Great Devotees of the Almighty despite their erstwhile past or because of it. Such Tirthas included Kshudhaa Tirtha, Ahalya Tirtha, Ashva Tirtha, Bhanu Tirtha, Aruna-Varuna sangama, Garuda Tirtha, Govardhana Tirtha, IndraTirtha, Rumna Vimochana Tirtha, Chakra / Dadhichi Muni Tirtha, Pancha Tirtha, Pururava Tirtha, Naga Tirtha, Maatru Tirtha, Avighna Tirtha, Sesha Tirtha, Shanaishchara Tirtha, Soma Tirtha, Dhanya Tirtha, Vidarbha Sangama and Revati Sangama Tirthas, Shri Rama Tirtha and so on. All these Tirthas provide multiple benefits of self-confidence, courage, knowledge and sin-demolishing. While the various Tirthas have been described as above in Brahma Purana, those mentioned in Maharashtra are identified include: Panchavati cluster or Rama Temples, Naroshankar Temple, Sundar Narayana Temple, Modakeshwara Temple, Gangeshwara Veda Mandir and Mukti dhaam Temple all in Nashik itself; besides Ekanatha Shrine in Paithan etc. In Andhra Pradesh, the Tirthas on the banks of Godavari are the famed Annavaram Satya Narayan a Temple, Dwaraka Tirumala, Draksha Rama, Kotilinga Pushkara, exclusive Shani Temple in Konaseema, Bhadrachala Rama Mandir etc.

Naganatha: Bhagavan's tenth manifestation (of Jyotirlinga) is popular in save His devotees; a Demon named Daruka who obstructed virtue was destroyed to save His devotee Vaishya Supriya. While this was the Statement of Siva Purana's 'Koti Rudra Samhita' establishing that Nageswara Jyotirlinga was no doubt evident but there are atleast three claimants of Its Location viz. Nageswara Temple at Dwaraka, Gujarat; Naganath Temple at Aoudhya, Maharashta; and Jagasewara Temple at Almora, Uttarakhand. Happily, all are winners! The legend was that there a demon couple named Daruka and Daruki and the latter secured a grant from Devi Parvathi that wherever the Demoness went, the entire forest would accompany her. The Demons were spoiling Yagnas and all Spiritual tasks, there were protests from the harassed Brahmanas to Sage Ourva and the Sage cursed the demons and followers that they would all be destroyed on earth; the Demons had thus no alternative excepting to move into the Sea. Daruki's boon from Parvati became ineffective since the forests were all submerged in the Sea. The Demons thus restricted only in the Sea and resorted to pirating the Ships moving in the Seas and one of extremely devoted Bhakta of Lord Siva named Supriya-a Vaiasya- was thrown into a prison on the ship. Bhakta Supriya who was a staunch devotee of Lord Shiva made sincere prayers and Bhagavan appeared, killed all the Demons and released the prisoners especially Supriya. Commemorating this joyous moment, the

Lord blessed that a Swayambhu Nageswara Jyotirlinga be manifested on the Sea Coast as the memorable Nageswara Jyotirlinga. Situated at Aoudha in Prabhasa Kshetra [Prabhasa Railway Station on Manmad-Nanded Line] Naganath Jyotirlinga was referred to as follows by Adi Shankaracharya: *Yame (South) Sadanga (Old name of Audh) / Vibhushitangam vividhaischa bhoga bhogai / Satbhakti muktipradameesa mekam / Sri Naganatham saranam prapadye /*

The legend of Aoudha Naganatha Temple is that during 'Aranya Vasa' (Forest life of twelve years) by Pandavas pursuant to their defeat in a Game of Dice with Kauravas lived in a hermitage and their cows taking water from a river nearby were automatically giving milk back into the same river and finding this miracle act, Bhima found that the middle part of the River was hot compared to the rest of water. Bhima with his mace broke the middle portion of the River seeking to find out as to how had this happened; there was blood gushing out and when dug up to the great surprise Pandavas discovered a Jyotirlinga full of radiance. The Story of Demons Daruka and Daruki as also of Supriya the great Devotee of Bhagavan was also ascribed to Nageswara Temple at Dwaraka in Gujarat was referred to Naganath Temple at Audh in Maharashtra also. The architectural beauty of the Audha Temple of Prabhasa is distinctive, as was stated to have been built by Pandavas originally with heavy stones and spacious corridors and halls. The Court Hall is oval shaped supported by strong pillars and the Jyotirlinga of Naganatha Deva is in a Garbhagriha which is in a small internal area. While there is no Idol of Nandi before the Main Deity, there is a separate Shrine for him behind the Main Temple. On all the four sides of the Main Temple are separate shrines dedicated to Twelve Jyotirlingas, besides Vedavyasa linga, Bhadreswara, Nilakantheswara, Ganapati, Dattatreya, Murali Manohar, and Dasavataras- totalling 108 Shiva Temples and 68 Shrines, interestingly including Mothers in law and Daughters in law! Also interestingly, there is a picturisation of a Scene depicting a sulking Devi Parvati and a pacifying Lord Siva! It is said that Aurangzeb ordered to plunder the Temple and swarms of bees drove away the soldiers.

Ghrishneshwar: On a mountain called Devagiri, there was a pious Brahmana named Sudharma and his wife Sudeha but she was barren and had no child. Sudeha proposed that her younger sister, Ghushma or Kusuma who was a staunch devotee of Parameswara be wedded to Sudharma. Sudharma agreed and in course of time, they had a male child due to Lord Siva's blessings. Ghushma was in the habit of daily worship by creating Sivalingas of clay and immerse them after Puja and Abhisheka in a pond nearby. Sudeha got jealous of her younger sister as she was blessed with a son. One night Sudeha killed the child out of jealousy and threw away the child in the same pond where the Sivalingas were immersed by her. The latter no doubt wept over the tragedy but continued her daily worship of Siva none-the-less. The dead body of the child floated in the pond where Ghushma used to immerse the lingas and there was commotion in the family and indeed in the village. Ghushma still continued her prayers to Lord Shankara who finally stood before her and desired to kill Sudharma, but she requested not to do so out of her extreme kindness. Lord Siva brought back the child from death and also asked Ghushma for any boon and she requested Him to stay in pond and the Lord agreed to do so and hence the formation of Ghrishneshwara as a Jyotirlinga. Alternative names of the Place are Ghushmeswar or Kusumeswar. This Temple is situated in the Village of Verul or Yelur where River Yala flows and is some 30 km from Aurangabad.

From Aurangabad, Ellora is 30 km, Ajanta is 106 km and Shirdi is 130 km. The Temple Complex is quite spacious (240 X 185 feet) enclosed by strong outer walls and the Garbha griha (Sanctum) admeasuring 17

feet X 17 feet are the Jyotirlinga of Lord Ghrishnaswara and Idol of Goddess Ghrishneswari; a Nandikeswara is facing the Deities in the Court Hall of the Sanctum. It is believed that long ago, the Patel of the Village discovered a treasure in a snake pit and the amount was spent on the basic construction of the original Temple and the Holkar Royal family renovated with Dasavataras and various other carvings in red stone were added besides a lake named Sikharashingarapur. [Ellora and Ajanta caves which are World Heritage Sites are firmed up on the Tourist map of India].

Kolhapur Maha Lakshmi, Tiuljapur Bhavani, Maha Baleshwar, Wavi /Krishna, Pandaripura, Gokarna:

Kolhapur: Described as Kollamma in Kollapura in Devi Gita of Devi Bhagavata Purana, Maha Lakshmi is settled at the Karavira Kshetra and is famed as the instant provider of propesrity of all types that Ashta Lakshmis would provide viz. Adi Lakshmi or Primeaval Shakti, Dhana Lakshmi (wealth), Dhanya Lakshmi (Food), Gaja Lakshmi (Manifestation of Elephants or of Huge Magnitude), Santana Lakshmi (Excellent Progeny), Veera Lakshmi (Courage and Intrepidity), Vijaya Lakshmi (Victory), Vidya Lashmi (Knowledge), Aishwarya (Opulence and Luxury), Rajya Lakshmi (Royalty) and Vara Lakshmi or the Priovider of all kinds of boons). Skanda Maha Purana states: *Yojanam Dasha he putra Kaaraashtro Desha durdharah, Tanmadhye Pancha koshaascha Kashyaadhikam Bhuvi/ Kshetram vai Mahat Punyam darshanaat paapa naashanam/ Tatkshetre Rushayah sarve Brahmana Vedapaaragah, Teshaam darshana maatrena sarva paapa kshayo bhavet/* (Karashtatra Desha's length and breadth is ten yojanas and is difficult to achieve it without faith and devotion. In this Karavira Kshetra the singular Tirtha which is the destroyer of all kinds of blemishes even by its visit and vision; Veda Brahmanas and Rishi ganas assure that by its mere look itself the sins are dissolved). This memorable Kolha puri Kshetra is the permanent abode of Maha Lakshmi and is also believed to be one among the many Shakti Peethas where Devi Sati's three netras fell down. The principal attraction at Kolhapuri of course is theMaha Lakshmi Mandir, nearby which are Pancha Ganga, Padma Sarovar, Kaashi Tirtha and Jagannatha Mandir. The Sanctum is readily approachable for worship by all males with dedication but females are forbidden to cross the threshold of the Shrine. Amba bai or Maha Lakshmi of one of the famed four *Shakti Peethas* in Maharashtra viz. Ambabai whose both sensitive organs viz. eyes of Sati Devi fell here, besides as Hingula or Tulja Devi, Renuka at Mahur, and Jwala Mukhi at Saptashiringi at Matrupattana/ Mahur. The legend of Maha Lakshmi Temple is also described as once SageBhrigu visited Vaikuntha and Vishnu ignored his arrival and coninued to romance with Lakshmi; the enraged Bhrigu kicked Vishnu at his chest the abode of Lakshmi; instead of reprimanding the Sage, Vishnu apologised to Bhrigu and enquired whether the Sage's feet were hurt by the kick; as Vishnu's aplogy enraged Lakshmi and left him in anger to Kolahapura for long Tapasya even meanwhile she learnt that Vishnu assumed the Swarupa of Venkateshwara and married Padmavati, Lakshmi's alternate form; it was only far later that there was the combined effort of Devas and Danavas to secure Amrit and in the process Lakshmi got re-incarnated and finally Lakshmi-Vishnu union became possible!The Statue of Maha Lakshmi at the Kolhapuri Kshetra is stated to be of 5th century AD, as adorned by precious stones of great antiquity; She has four arms, the right lower holds a Matulunga fruit of the specie of a large lemon, her right upper hand holds a shield; the lower left hand a mace, and the lower right hand a bowl to provide boons. She wears a cobra hooded crown and a Shiva linga, while behind her is a lion. The window of the western wall of her sanctum is kept open through which morning Sunrays fall on the Idol. The Temple celebrates KiranUtsavas on January 31 and November 9 when the Sunrays fall on the feet o the Idol, on February 1 and November 10 the rays fall at the feet of Maha Lakshmi and on Feb 2 and Nov. 11 the rays fall on the entire body of

Lakshmi. Ratha Saptami festival for three days in January is celebrated with awe and piety.

Tuljapura Bhavani: Mother Bhavani is the Benefactor of Life, the Goddess of Power and Energy and at the same time the embodiment of boon providing mercifulness. Bhavani at Tuljapur is the traditional Deity of Chhatrapati Shivaji the most powerful and popular Ruler of Marathas in Western India of the 12th Century AD who adored the Devi with to a Pratima of a meter high stature with a golden sword at the Bhavani Mandir; the Idol is made with eight arms each of these equipped with weapons while holding the head of a slain demon named Mahishasura. The Mandir which is situated on a hill called Yamunachala on the slopes of Sahyadri mountain range is the residing place of Devi who is stated to have slain two Rakshasas viz Matanga and of course Mahishasura the latter being in the deceptive form a buffalo. This Mandir attracts thousands of yatriis every day and the crowds are indeed orderly and with patience in queues awaiting darshan and worship. Festivals are organised and jostling crowds are visible at the Mandir on all Tuesdays, and on all festival days like Gudi Padwa in Chaitra month, Lalitha Panchami, Ratha Saptami, Sankranti and Nava Ratri Festivals from Aswini Shukla Prathama up to Dashami and so on with online Seva bookings in advance. Ritualistic worship with mantra-tantra is organised by priests on behalf of the bhaktas. The Mandir has elaborate arrangements for CCTV and online facilities for communications and advance worship and darshan facilities.

Mahabaleshwara: This Kshetra which is some 120 km from Pune in Maharashtra is an important Tirtha Sthan for several reasons: it is the most ancient Place where Trimurtis viz. Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara performed long tapasya before Srishti or Creation of the Universe; it was the most sacrosanct Place where Lord Brahma performed Yagna before he was authorised to do so by Vishnu and Maheshwara on the understanding that the Universe hence to be created by Brahma would be preserved till periodical interregnums between one period viz. Yuga to another and get destroyed by Rudra Deva; it was also the Place where two Daityas named Ati Bal and Maha Bal attacked Vishnu but though Ati Bala was destroyed Maha Bala had the boon of invincibility by any male power. But this limitation was finally resolved as Devas headed by Brahma and Vishnu prayed to Adi Maya who in turn killed Maha Bal too; yet another qualification of Maha Baleshwara pertains to the fact that the famed Krishna River as originated as a part of the Pancha Nadis viz. Krishna, Savitri, Venya, Kakuji or Koyana and Gayatri Nadi; Krishna is of Vishnu Swarupa, Venya is of Shankara Swarupa and Kakuji as also Gayatri were of Brahma Swarupas. Such was then legendary magnificence of Maha Baleshwara. At the Maha Baleshwar Mandir, the Shiva Linga is in the form of a Rudraksha as split at places and is full of water always oozing out from the Linga and it is strongly believed that this water flows out from all the five rivers mentioned. The Place where Lord Brahma performed the Yagna is some two km away from the Mandir and from there the forest really looks fearful as it is infested with wild animals and serpents. There is a cave inside which is stated to be a Yagna Vedi. In Maha Baleshwar, there are also two other ancient Mandirs of Ati Baleshwara and Koteswar too which are older than the Maha Baleshwar itself. Nearby there are also Krishnabai Mandir where there is a Brahma Kund which not only collects the water from the five rivers mentioned above but also of Saraswati River. The Swayambhu Shiva Maha Linga at Maha Baleshwara is one of the most Sacred Spots. Quite apart from being one of the Sacred Places, Maha Baleshwar is an ideal and excellent holiday resort hill station of some 5 hour drive of 180 km from Mumbai and 120 km from Pune, bound by green valleys and high peaks of 5000 ft. popularly called by

tourists as Wilson Sun Rise Point as also known for Arthur Seat Point, Kate Point, Needle Hole Point and Three Monkey Point of Three Natural Stone Formations akin to Three Monkeys signifying Mahatma Gandhi's sayings of: Do no evil, speak no evil and hear no evil!

Waavi (Sacred Krihna River): On way from Pune to Mahabaleshwar, almost near the latter, is Waayi is am famed Tirtha Sthaana is Waayi is right on the Sacred *Krishna River which actually originates from Jor Village* near Waayi, ie.Wai Taluk, Satara District, near Mahabaleshwar. Just as when Brihaspati (the Deva Guru) enters Simha Raasi, that period is supposed to be extremely auspicious for bathing in River Godavari, in the similar way, the period when Brihaspati enters Kanya Raashi is considered most propitious for Snaanas at this Vairaja Kshetra of Waayi for the year. On the banks of Krishna River at Waayi are the noted Mandirs of Yagnewshwara Shiva, Maruti, Shyama Varna Rama, and Bhanu Ghat, Joshi Ghat and several other Mandirs like Soneswar, Hatakeswar, Badreshwar, Menavaleshwar in Nana Phaphadnaveshwar Village, and so on. This Sacred Tirtha on the banks of River Krishna, history reveals that Bhagavan Shri Rama along with Devi Sita and Lakshman took baths and Pandavas during Vana Vaasa too had their dips in the Holy Krishna. This Illustrious River Krishna passes through Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh finally merging at Hamsala Divi into the Bay of Bengal Sea and as it passes there are fertile lands causing rich fields of food grains and greeneries. River Krishna has large Tributaries such as Tunga Bhadra Rivers, Kudarli River, Venna, Koyna, Bhima, Mala prabha, Ghata prabha, Yerla, Varna, Dindi, Palera, Moosi, Tarli, Dugdha Ganga, and so on. Among the popular Mandirs on the Sacred Krishna are Yalguresha near Sangli, Amaravati, Kanaka Durga near Vijayawada, Shrishaila Maha Jyotir Linga at Srishailam, Lord Narasimha Swami at Mattapalli in Nalgonda and Vedapalli near Jaggayyapet and Dattateya Temples at Makal all in Andhra Pradesh and Raichur in Karnataka.

Pandaripura: Another very auspicious and popular Tirthas in Maharashtra is Pandarpur which is keenly worshipped and frequently visited by Bhaktas and by Yatris especially on Ekadashis, more so as this happens to be the Dham of Vithoba and Rakhumayi (Devi Rukmini) besides the permanent Places of Tukaram, Namdeo, Ranka banka, Narahari and such other illustrious Sants. Maha Bhakta Pundareeka was originally responsible for the installation of the Idols on the Sacred banks of River Bhima also called Chandrabhaga. The installed Idol Vithoba carved in black stone stands on the legendary stone which Maha Bhakta Pundarika threw at Bhagavan to stall his entry into his room where his beloved parents were about to sleep, even with his full knowledge that Bhagavan himself was waiting the Bhakta's door step! The Idol is standstill with both Bhagavan's hands resting on his 'kamar' or both sides of his back. Devi Rakhu mayi is installed in a separate Mandir in the vicinity. Mandirs of Balaram, Satyabhama, Jambavati and Radha Devi are outside nearby. On the banks of Chandra bhaga River are the Chandra bhaga Tirtha, Soma Tirtha and so on as also Narada Mandira and Ten Shiva Lingas, besides Vishnu Pada Imprint besides the Mandirs of Gapalji, Janabai, Ekanath, Namdev, Jnaneeshwar and Tukaram. The legendary background of Pundareeka's installation of Vithoba is as follows briefly: A youth named Pundarika was living in a forest village with his aged parents named Janudeva and Satyavati and originally he was quite an obedient son but after wedding, he started ill treating them to a point that they decided to leave for Kasi even till their death. Pundarika came to know of the plan and he too decided to accompany the parents along his wife. On way to Kasi, he harassed the parents to their great discomfort. In a village on way, they were too tired and halted for a few days at an Ashram, even as Pundarika intensified his mal treatment to his parents. One night he dreamt that two maidens named Ganga and Jamuna provided great service at the Ashram; but after all it was not dream but reality. Pundarika tried next morning to talk to

them and indeed their names were as per the dream. They gave him a curt talk and said that a person who treated his parents ill were like worse than animals as even beasts would not treat the parents as he did. Pundarika felt a shock and suddenly realised that parents were like Gods and since then there was a sea change in him. His bhakti to parents as well as to Vishnu got intensified; he had since treated the parents like Gods and Lord Vishnu was so pleased that he appeared at Pundarika's door step. Even while the latter realised that Vishnu himself was standing out, he did not want to disturb the parents who were about to sleep after their meals so affectionately and devotedly he gave to them just then. To ensure that Vishnu should not enter the hermitage, he threw a brick outside to let the Lord know that the parents be better not disturbed! The Lord correctly got Pundarika's message and waited at the door step. After the parents slept off peacefully, Pundarika came out and aplogisingly fell at the feet of Vishnu and mumbled 'Oh Lord, I did not want to leave on your arrival as I was just putting my parents to sleep! Do pardon me! The Lord was so moved that he offered to grant a boon to him and rightly Pundarika asked that he be near to the Lord for ever! The latter agreed to do so and said that by he be henceforth known as Vittoba since Pundarika addressed the Lord by that very name and the Place wherever the bhakta would install his Idol be known as Pundari pura!

Gokarna Kshetra: Atha Gokarnamaasaadya Trishu lokeshu vishrutam, Samudra madhye Rajendra Sarva loka namaskrutam/ Yatra Brahmaadayo Devaa Manushyascha tapodhanaah, Bhuta Yakshaah Pishasas - cha Kinnraah samagoragaah/ Siddha Chaarana Gandhharvaa Maanushaah Pannagaastathadhaa, Saritah Saagarah shailaa upaasita Umapatim/ Tareshaanam samabhyarcha Tri raatroposhito narah, Dashaaswedhaamaapnoti Gaanapatyam cha vindati/ Uposhya dwaadashaa raatram krutaartho jaayate narah, Tasminneva tu Gayatryaah sthaanam trilokya vishrutam/ Triraatramushitastatra gosahasra phalam labhet/ (The fame of Gokarna is well known all over the Trilokaas, as greeted to all the Lokaas in the Sumudras. All the Loka are greeted to Maha Deva Shankara to whom Brahmaadi Devas, Tapodhan Rishis, Bhuta-Yaksha-Pishcacha-Kinnara-Naaga-Siddha-Chaarana-Gandharva-Manushya-Saagara-Sarita-Parvataadis do always prostrate and worship. Among all these species who observe fasting for three nights at a stretch are stated to secure the performance of ten Ashwamedha Yajna phala and a senior member of Shiva ganas and in the case of fasting twelve nights accomplish Shiva Sayuja itself! At Gokarna , the Place of Devi Gayatri who is the most revered and the most popular Deity among the three lokas and here if ove performs fasting for three nights continuously is stated to be eligible for achieving thousand Go-danaas!) The Gokarna Kshetra-one of the Mukti Kshetras acclaimed by Parashurama- which is situated in North Karnataka near Mangalore in Western India along with Karwar coast of Arabian Sea and Western Ghats, literally meaning the Cow's ear, is the abode of Mahabaleshwar the Maha Deva of Physical strength. Lord Shiva emerged from the cow likened to Mother Earth and the shape of the Kshetra is of a ear too at the confluence of two rivers viz. Gangavali Aghanashani. Varaha Purana describes that Bhagavan Shankara assumed the form of a deer and moved around freely once; Brahma Deva, Indra and other Devas searched for Maha Deva but could not till they realised finally that Shiva assumed the swarupa of a deer. They tried to seize the horns but Shiva as the deer disappeared though the horns were caught. One horn was established at Gokarna, another at Bhagalpur, Bihar as Shringeshwara and the third at Indra Loka. Some other accounts of Puranas describe the legend that Sahyadri range of mountans at the reclaimed Sea shores lured Parashu Rama the Avatara of Vishnu from the Vindhya Range of mountains in central India after weilding his mighty axe killed Kshatriya Kings during some twenty one battles as the then Kings were ruthless disregard of the established norms of law and justice and harassed the elements

of virtue and tolerance viz. their own common subjects and public. The tired Parashu Rama landed at Gokarna to rest after the bloody encounters and rested at Gokarna. Maha Bhagavata describes that Ravana, the Epic Villain of Ramayana, pleased Maha Deva and secured the boon of Shiva's Atma Linga and desired to carry the Linga to his Kingdom in Lanka; Sage Narada scented about the boon given by Shiva to Ravana and got worried that the Asura would become immortal by worshipping the Atma Linga daily; he alerted Lord Vishnu who spread the net of Vishnu Maya and Ravana felt that evening was nearing for his Snaana-Sandhya Puja Vidhi; he beckoned a passer by cow herd boy to hold the Atma Linga just for a while but the boy- who actually was Lord Ganesha who was prewarned by Narada-replied that he was in a great hurry and could not wait but would call Ravana by his name thrice; even while Ganesha in disguise shouted Ravana's name thrice, the latter just returned but the Atma Linga was kept on ground and the boy disappeared. He made all his efforts to lift up the Linga but to no avail. In the process of the struggle, only the top portion of the Linga fell at Gokarna and the rest of the pieces of the Linga were thrown away at Suratkal where Sadashiva Temple was built and other pieces fell on Sajjeshwara, Guneshwara and Dhareshwara some kms. of distances away, while the cloth covering the Atma Linga fell off at Mrideshwara now called Marudeshwara at Kanduka Hill surrounded by three sides by Arabian Sea. Mahabaleshwara at Gokarna Kshetra has established great significance-even as other places like Sajjeshwara.

Marudeshwara Temple, which is some 85 km from Gokarna, has gained reputation as much of Gokarna with its 20 storied and 340 feet high Raja Gopura besides a huge 130 ft high Shiva statue. At Gokarna, besides Mahabaleshwar which is famed and heavily popular visited by thousands of pilgrims in connection with Shivaratri festivals and daily Kartika Month austerities, Maha Ganapati Temple which is some thousands of years old signifying Bala Ganapati who deceived Ravana, Uma Maheswara and Bhadra Kali Temples as also Kotitirtha are significant while Om Beach and Nirvana Beach are world renowned.

Yana some 60 km away from Gokarna has two massive black stone rocks with Bhairava Shikhira of 400 ft high and Mohini Shikhira of 300 ft high. The Bhairava Shikhira has the abode of the awe-inspiring Swayambhu Bhairaweshwara Linga within a ten feet opening Cave with water drops ever dripping on the Linga sustaining the eternal sanctity of the Linga. The Purana based mythology stated that Bhasmasura performed intense and long Tapasya to Maha Deva and secured the boon from the latter that whom so ever's head that the Asura would touch should turn into Bhasma or ashes; having secured this boon, the Asura wished to touch Maha Deva's head itself! And Maha Deva ran for Vishnu for help and instantly Vishnu assumed the Swarupa of Devi Mohini and lured the Asura into a dance competition and made him touch his own head in the 'natya' and the boon caused a self-head burning curse to the Asura himself!

Dakshina Bharata Kshetra

Mangalore, Kasaragod, Dharmasthala and Subrahmanya Kshetra: *Mangalore:* The Port Town of Mangalore is literally a Gate Way to many important places to Goa and Gokarna on one side and several Tirtha Places to Dharma Sthala, Subramanya, Mookambika, Shringeri, Bangalore and Mysore as also various Places in Kerala's Guruvayur and further down to the west coast right up to Rameshwaram. More significantly this is the erstwhile Mangal pur the abode of Mangala Devi and this Mandir has a claim to be one of the Siddhi Peethas.

Kasargod which is the nearest Railway Station on this side towards Kerala is the residing Place of Pandaripura Vithoba's reputed Sants like Samartha Ramadas , Purandara Das etc. More importantly Kasargod is famed for Swayambhu Maha Ganapati Pratima of over three feet height which was suddenly tumbled by a Harijan woman labourer while clearing an over growth of waste forest land cutting bushes! This indeed was the incident of some 800 years! This illustrious Ganesha Temple worshipped by thousand Yatris apart, Kasargod is known of other ancient temples of Lakshmi Venkateshwara, Mallikarjuna, Katyayani- all popular and worshipped attracting crowds with great faith and devotion.

Dharmasthala: Situated on the banks of River Netravali originating from the Western Ghats and merging into the Arabian Sea is the Dharmam Kshetra the abode of Manjunatheswara which is some 45 km from Mangalore. Adi Shankaracharya installed Manjunatheswara Shiva Linga originally but subsequently an ardent disciple of Udipi's Madhvacharya who shifted from Udipi influenced the methodology of Dwaita Dharma in the various rituals and ever since the Worship procedure got transformed. In connection with the festival on Kartika Krishna Dashami through Amavasya, a LakshaDeepa danotsava is celebrated attracting Shiva Baktas in the Dwaita Siddhanta in thousands as also a Sarva Dharma Sammelan is organised too. Coinciding with Mesha Sankramana day festivities, Manjunatha Ratha Yatra is celebrated.

Subrahmanya Kshetra: Within the State of Karnataka in South Kanara District is the renowned Koumara Kshetra where Parashu Rama established a Mukti Kshetra like Mookambika, Udipi, Gokarna etc. Mangalore is the nearest Railway Station from where Subrahmanya is some 40 km although the roads are through forests and dusty and rather difficult to reach in rainy season but recommended from November till May. Main Mandir is of Lord Subrahmanya as seated on a Mayuraasana or on a Peacock. On the platform up at the Temple He is a Shadaanana Murti or of Six Heads, with a Pratima of Sarparaja Vasuki in the middle and at the bottom is Sesha Bhagavan and facing the Temple is a Garuda Dhwaja stated to offset the impact of poisonous flames emitted by the Sarpas. There is a Bhairava Mandir to the South, a Mandir for Uma Maheshwara in the northern side, a Veda Vyasa Samputa Nrisimha Mandir in the Southern side of the Main Mandir, besides a Parashurama Mandir again in South.

Harihar, Belur, Halebid, Jog Falls, Mookambika, Shringeri, Udipi, Shravanabelgola

Harihar: On the line of Pune to Bangalore and the banks of Tungabhadra River is the ancient Harihara Kshetra known as Guharanya. In the past there was a Demon named Guha danava who used to often visit from the near by forests and harass and kill several cattle and men. The villagers and townsmen around in their daily worship to either Vishnu or Shiva as per their own faiths intensified their daily prayers since there were increasing killings of domestic animals and residents; a combined Swarupa of Hari and Hara named Harihara appeared at the specific request of Devas and Brahma and terminated the Danava to the great relief of the residents who raised a Temple at the Place with the Sacred Idol named Hari- hara was installed and observed 'Rathotsava' or Chariot Festival on every Magha Purnima, having bathed the Murti with Tunga bhadra waters as per appropriate Abhishka-Puja Vidhana in the midst of Veda Chantings. The Idol was prepared as per the Harihara swarupa that killed the demon viz. on the right side ashuiva with Rudraksha Makuta or head gear with hals naked Gaja Chama or elephant skin around the waist and the left side as of Vishnu Swarupa with two hands as a raised hand adorned by chakra and on the hand below with an 'abhaya' mudra. On the banks of Tunga bhadra are as many as eleven Tirthas like those of Brahma, Bhargava, Nrisimha, Gaalawa, Chakra, Rudra paada, Papanaashana etc.

Belur is situated on Harihara and Bangalore with the famed Chenna Keshava Mandir set up by Vishnuvardhana Hoysala King with a shape of a Nakshatra or Star on the sky but with a squarish open 'Mandapa' before the Main Deity of Chenna Keshava of some seven feet height with Bhudevi on his right side and Lakshmi Dev on his left of appropriate sizes and heights and the Lord has four hands adorned with Shankh- Chakra-Gada- Padmas. Besides the Main Mandir is that of Five Murtis viz. Ganesha, Sarasvati, Lakshmi Narayana, Lashmi Sridhar, and Mahashasuramardini.

Halebid Mandir or by its old name Dwara Samudra where on an elevated hill top, there is an awe inspiring, raised platform with a gigantic structure of 170 feet high, 122 feet width containing two Temple complexes dedicated to Hoyasaleshwara and Kedareshwara standing on pedestals of five feet height. The exterior walls of the structures have exquisite carvings of endless variety of depictions of Hindu mythology of animals, birds and dancing damsels. Before the Hoyasaleshwara Temple are two monolithic statues of Nandi of small size and a few steps down to the right is an Idol of Surya Deva inside a beautifully laid stone carvings on side walls of a semi-closed chamber. Some two furlongs of distance down the hillock with steps and sliding rock floor of shine are three Jain Mandirs of Parshava nath and 23 Tirtha Murtis; the second Mandir being of Adi natha and the third one being of Jai Tirthakar Shanti nath. Additionally on the hill of Yeneguda are Karikala Rudra and of Veerabhadra Mandir. From a less than km. of distance in north west direction is a Bucheswar / Vishnu Pratimas as also a Narasimha Mandir, in North East is a Chatteshwar Mandir and so on.

Ambu Tirtha or the Jog Falls of great renown distanced by 30 km approx. from Shimoga, stated to have been caused by Shri Rama's arrow to provide water to a Rameshwara Linga established him underneath the water flows for ever and thus named as such ie. The water flow from an arrow! At Jog Falls, thousands of Yattris arrive at this Place aptly called Abhisheka Sarovara at the period coinciding with Chaitra Navami celebrations of Shri Rama Navami, besides also Kartika Month's Shukla Paksha clamaxing on Kartika Purnima. Stated to be the Largest Water Falls of the World. Originated from the Sharavati River, Jog Falls have the dimension of 160 ft.of height falling in a 132 feet of depth kunda, perhaps even th Niagara Water Falls of USA too in not of such dimensions. The falls are at four places the first one being the biggest, while the second one makes big sounds, the third one named as a rocket like of arrows throwing forceful waters and the fourth one like the soothing flow nice to look at and feel too. All these Falls are in the jungles only even as wild animals of deep forests too are scared of. Tala Kund is another water body where Pranaweshwara Shiva Mandir is stated to be the most ancient Mandir ever in the Mysore area.

Mookambika (Kollur): From Kundapur or Chikmagalur by some 20 km is the popular Siddhi Peetha and Shakti Peetha named Mookaambika Devi Mandir. It is also acclaimed as one of the Mukti Kshetras by Parashu Rama, besides Gokarna, Udipi, Subramanya and so on. The legendary background was that there was a demon named Kaumasura who spread terror in the region on the banks of River Souparnika and even Devas could not suppress his misdeeds harassing Rishis and obstructing them to perform Yagnas which indeed were the providers of Amrit as he was puffed up by the boons of Shiva and was invincible except by a woman. Devas approached Devi Parvati for help and realising that the Asura drew his strength from his loud stotras to Maha Deva daily, she made him dumb to start with and eventually killed him, thus acquiring the Title of Mookambika or Devi with the power of tongue. After the installation of her by Devas as Mookabmika, there was also a Swambhu Shiva Linga even as Devi resided in a Moola Chakra.

Way back in the 12th century AD, Mookambika Temple was set up at the instance of Rani Chennamma and was further patronised by many Hindu Kings. Adi Shankara stopped over at Kollur to rejuvenate the powers of the Shri Chakra in which Devi Mookambika resides. The architectural beauty of the vast original Lakshmi Mandapa supported with four strong pillars of some 135 feet high are embellished with sculptures of figurines of Deities like Ganesha, Kumara, Mahishasura Mardini, Naga Devatas etc. A huge pillar called 'Deepasthambha' with hollow circulars with lit up lamps present a fantastic picture from a distance. In the Garbha Sthana or the Santum, Devi Mookambika is seated in Padmasana pose with Shankha and Chakra in hands, before the Shri Chakra and the Swayambu Shiva Linga. Navaratri Festival for the Nine Days draws unmanageable crowds and even other wise there are Trikaala Pujas performed formally with recitations of Veda Mantras attracting devotees with orderly manner and lot of faith and devotion, some holding the signs of Sarpas to ward off Naga Doshas. The collection of invaluable ornaments gifted from ages right from Rani Chennamma who presented a priceless emerald which is ornamented to the Deity till date on special puja days, from Vijayanagar's Monarch Krishna Deva Raya a golden mask, the earlier Chief Minister of Karnataka a silver sword, the earlier Chief Minister of Tamilnadu M.G. Ramachandran a golden sword and so on is indeed noteworthy.

Shringeri: Situated right on the banks of River Tunga and set up as a country wide chain of Shankara Mutts by Adi Shankaracharya who also built the Sharadamba and Vidya Tirtha Maheshwara Mandirs in the premises of the Mutt itself, Shringeri has come to be recognised prominently; the present Matha Chief too is the resident of the Mutt Complex connected with the other bank of the Temple Complex and regular Pujas of Chandramouliswar are performed in the Mutt Complex. There is also a hillock at Shringeri with steps to reach a beautiful Shiva Mandir which was built by the father of Shringi Rishi named Vibhandak Rishi and it is said that the latter installed the Shiva Linga. From Shringeri within 5-6 km there is a Shringa Giri- its earlier name being Varaha Parvat- and that was the birth place of Shringi Rishi. This Parvat is the union or Sangama of four rivers viz. Tunga, Bhadra, Netravati and Vaarahi; actually, both Tunga and Bhadra Rivers at Shimoga itself. The above was the background of Shringeri Mutt and today, the Samsthana is a vibrant complex of promoting Sanatana Vaidika Dharma with several branches and Temples all over Bharat under the control of the umbrella of the Main Shringeri Mutt Authority.

Udipi: Inside the long stretch of Parashurama Kshetra right from Western Ghats of Bharat coastline down to the Arabian Sea, covering Gokarna to Kanyakumari, Udipi is also an important insider of the Kshetra where Chandradeva himself performed long Tapasya to Maha Deva and the latter granted his darshan in the form of Chandra sekhar Shiva Swarupa as at Udipi of the present day as Rajatapeetha pura, Roupya pitha pura and Shivali being nearest big Tirtha from Mangalore Railway station; from Mangalore to Udipi is of a distance of 25 km approx. Udipi is the illustrious Place of Madhvacharya Matha in the Ananteshwara Mandir as Achyutaprakashacharya the preceptor of Madhvacharya instructed the latter to be the Head of the Matha. Just as Adi Shankaracharya propounded the Advaita Discipline of Hindu Thought that Paramatma is just One and Absolutely Singular, Madhvacharya deviated from that thought and distinguished Paramatma from Jeevatma or the Atma Within viz. the Soul inside a Being with a Life-Span or a perishable Entity without being ever Permanent which Paramatma is. The Madhva Matha is thus the nucleus of the Dwaita Thought essentially existent in the premises of the Ananteshwara Mandir. *Krishna Matha* is in the same premises being the North east of Ananteshwara Mandira. On the ceiling of Krishna Mandir are the hanging decorations of silver leaves and golden flowers in garland forms. As one

enters, there is an Idol of Madhvacharya and before that is Lord Krishna's Shalagrama Shila as also of Garuda, besides the same brass vessels with which Madhwacharya performed puja himself. On the four sides of Krishna Mandir are eight Mutts of the Sishyas of Madhvacharya; the core sishyas of the Acharya are in what is called 'Atyokrishta' parampara or the lineage at Palimar Matha, while Admar Matha is for the sishyas of Nrisimha Tirtha and so on. Abjaranya Titha is significant as that was the Sacred Place where Chandra Deva achieved Maha Deva's darshan as Chandra sekhar. Indrani Tirtha on a hill top some 2km from Udipi is stated as the Place where Shachi Devi secured the Darshan of the Five Faced Durga as a Swayambhu Shala grama and a Mandir was set up eventually. Also there is a chain of Durga Mandirs in four directions of Udipi at Belur in South, Kaanarpadi in west, at Puttur in North, and at Kadiyali in South- all within a range of 1-3 km. Similarly there are four Subramanya Temples in the precincts of Udipi as Mangoidu, Tangodu, Mricchila kodu and Ariyodu- all being of repute. On the banks of Arabian Sea nearby, Madhvacharya also set up Badaa Bhandeshwara Bala Rama where Samudra snaanas are performed at the timings of Surya- Chandra Grahanas, Amavasyas, and other festival days. It is stated that Parashu Rama set up Seven Mukti Kshetras on the banks of Arabian Sea at Rajhatapeeth, Kumaraadri, Kumbhha Kashi, Dhvajeshwara, Shankara Narayana, Gokarna and Mookambika.

Shravanabelgola: From Hasan some 20 km, Mysore some 40 km and Bangalore 65km, the most famed Jain Tirtha is Shravanbelgola called Gommut Kshetra where there are motor bus connections are available to other important Jain Kshetras like Mula Badari, Halebid, Venur and Karakal. This Kshetra is the 'samaadhi' of Shrutakevali Bhadra bahun Swami called Baahubali where there is a huge Memorial Murti of 57 feet high on a mountain peak which is visible from a mile distance, which is situated besides two other mountains named Indragiri and Chandragiri. To facilitate to reach of the huge Idol, some 500 stone steps are laid and one can come across a Mandir before reaching the mountain top and the Murti. On reaching the top of the mountain there is a partition wall and behind the partition there are many Mandirs like of Chandranath, Adinath, Neminath etc. Indeed the Bahubali/ Bhadra bahu as a Digambara Murti is world famous; on further ascent of the Mountain his foot prints are recorded in stone and so are the foot prints of other Jain Munis as well signified on rock; indeed the architectural excellence at the Mountain Top is to be seen to be believed!

Mysore, Shiva Samudra, Srirangapattana, Nanjangud and Melkote: *Mysore:* the city named after Mahishura the most dreaded Demon named Mahisharura who was destroyed by Devi Chamundeshwari on Chamundi Hills, is indeed the City of Culture, Arts and Music and the City of Palaces, the largest City in Karnataka next only to Bangalore and Mangalore. It was the erstwhile Vasal State of Wodiyars under the Vijaya nagar empire and subsequently under Hyder Ali the son of Tipu Sultan in 18th century. As the City of Palaces, Mysore is known for Amba Vilas or Mysore Palace where the popular Dassera Nava Ratri Festival is celebrated, Jaj Mohan Palace an Art Museum, Lalita Mahal now a 5 star Hotel etc. The sprawling Brindavan Gardens adjacent to Krishna Raja Sagar Dam is another attraction with its 'Son et Lumeir' Shows of Light and Music. More importantly, the Chamundeshwari Mandir on the Chamundi hills is famed as a significant draw for the Devi Bhaktas, especially during 'Nava Ratra' festivities.

Shiva Samudra: From Mysore of about 20 km via Maddur are 'Shiva Samudra Falls' as two powerful flows of River Kaveri fall down by 200 feet and merge together! This Place is also called Madhya-Rangam. Interestingly there is a bridge in between the two powerful and roaring flows of Kaveri which are spread out. That Place down the bridge is known as Sapta Dhara Tirtha. At Shiva Samudra there is a

Sacred Mandir of Shri Ranga(Bhagavan Narayana) as Seshashayi in lying down posture. From Shiva Samudra Island about a km. or so on Vidigiriranga Mountain in Chakraranya Kshetra, there is also another Mandir of Chaturbhuj Srinivasa and nearby there is a River named Bhargavi, where Parashrama is stated to have performed Tapasya for long.

Sriranga pattana: Some 6 km away from Mysore is Srirangapattana where Gautami Maharshi installed Sriranga Murti. It is stated that River Kaveri's three 'Dhaaras' or Flows of Kaveri are united as Adi Rangam, the second flow as Madhya Ranga and the third one as the Antima Ranga and the combined flow as Shriranga where Sesha Saayi Shri Ranga is installed. Opposite the Shri Ranga Mandir is that of Lakshmi Nrisimha.

Nanjanguda: From Mysore some 10 km away Nanjungud has a fairly big Mandir isdedicated to Nanjudeshwara or Nila kantha Deva which is considered as among 108 Shiva Kshetras in Bharat and is called Garal puri or Dakshina Kasi situated on the banks of Kavyani and Gundal Rivers, which is quite nera to the Chamundi Hills, where on every Purnima threre is a Ratha Yatra Utsava, and on Chitra and Margasirsha Purnima Ratha Yatras are special festivities. Besides the Shiva Linga Murti of Nanjudeshwara, there is a Devi Parvati Mandir besides other Murtis.

Melukote/ Yadavagiri is considered as one of the most important Vaishnava Kshetras in Dakshina Bharat, besides Shri Rangam and Kanchi puram in Tamil nadu, Tirupati Balaji in Andhra Pradesh. Of the 108 Vaishnava Kshetras all over Bharat, Yadavagiri's Narayana Mandira is reckoned among the essential one. The utmost significance of this Tirtha is mainly due to Guru Ramanujacharya's long assoiciation with and residence for about sixteen years. He was also responsible of 'Punaruddharana' or revival and reconstruction of this Kshetra. Besides the Main Temple of Narayana and the Utsava Murti of Parikrama- the original Sampatkumara Swami, there is a Panchatarani Tirtha also called Veda Pushkarini. Besides on the Mountain nearby threre is also a Yoga Nrisimha Mandir. Paridhana shila is reputed as the Rock where *Bhagavan Dattatreya* took to Sanyasa; Ramanujacharya too is stated to have repeated his Sanyasa once again by assuming the Dhama again with a fresh set of Kamandalu, Kashaya vastra etc. after bathing at Panchatarani. Even the practice is followed by several Sanyasis of Vaishnava Faith. There is an inteteresting story popular in the Area: when once Ramanujacharya experienced shortage of 'Tirumana' or the 'Sweta mrittika' or white earth paste with which Vaishnavites decorate their foreheads with 'Tilaka' and kept on worrying in his night sleep; at an early morning dream, Bhagavan Narayana appeared and told that there was a plentiful stock of Tirumani available with Him and directed the Acharya to reach a specific Tulasi Vana in the Mountain garden. After his snaana and daily 'Anussthana', Mahatma Ramanuja ascended the mountain with his close associates and reached a Tulasi Garden as directed; he dug up down a foot underneath and discovered a Narayana Pratima along with Tirumani. The Acharya built a Mandir and installed the Idol formally with Veda Mantras! Another interesting story is in circulation about Ramanujaacharya in the Temple premises. When the Acharya arrived at the Melukote Mandir there was no Mula Vighraha of Narayana was missing and the Parikrana Vighraha named Sampat Kumara Swami was installed instead since the Soldiers of Delhi Badsha plundered the Yadavagiri Temple and took away the Narayana Vighraha and presumably gifted to Delhi Badsha. On realising the background, the Acharya visited Delhi and approached the Durbar; the Acharya was asked to approach the Princess as the Vighraha was gifted to her and she kept it as a menento! She not only agreed to return but also desired to accompany it to witness its re-installation at Yadaagiri. But alas! On her way itself she

succumbed to a heart attack and died as though there was a dispensation of divine justice!

Trichur / Trissur, Guruvayur, Kaaladi, Tiruvananthapuram, Tiruvattar, Janardana and Tripunittara:

Trissur: Trichi at British times and now as Trissur is titled as the Cultural Capital of Kerala which itself is called ‘God’s own Country’ and is the abode of Temples, varied religious faiths, Palaces, Churches, beaches, water falls, wild life sanctuaries and forts. Built as a hill city around an area of 65 acres, this historic Place around the famed Tukkinnadu Maidan is proud of renowned Temples especially of Vadakkunathan, Parmekkuva Devi, Tirumambadi Sri Krishna, Guruvayur Temple, Shri Rama Temple, Koodalmanikkam Temple, Kodurgallur Bhagavati, Mammiyur Temple, Tirukkur Maha deva, Tiruvallakkuvu Shri Dharma Shaasta, Tiruvanchikulam Temple, Arupathu Puzha Temple etc. The most significant of these are however are the three mentioned of these:- Vadakkunathan Temple was referred to in Brahmanda Purana in the context of Parashuramas many battles to uproot Kshatriya Kings in view of their sustained evil acts and performed a Maha Yagna to purge his killings and as a dakshina to the Brahmins to have performed the Sacrifice so sincerely desired to reward them with land; he prayed to Varuna Deva to carve the land from the Sea and as advised him threw his axe into the Sea and Varuna allotted a piece of Land which now is Kerala the God’s own country! Of this massive area he carved for his Tapasya as also to worship Maha Deva, Devi Parvati and the Shiva Parivara where Vadakkunathan Temple viz. Vrishabhachala got materialised. Adi Shankaracharya’s parents Shiva Guru and Aryamba meditated for long for an excellent son to be bestowed and Vrishabhadheesha in their dreams gave the option to them to choose for a short lived but epoch creating Pandita Gyani as against or a dull and very ordinary son with unduly long life. The parents opted for a Gyani and named him Shankara! This magnificent Valakkunathan / Vrishabheshwara Temple to day stands despite ravages of time and onslaughts of aliens today as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, albeit with the evolution of modernisation, rebuilt as time evolved, in typical Kerala Architecture with Towers and wall mural paintings depicting legends of Maha Bharata. The Sanctum (Garbha Sthana) displays a Big Shiva Linga covered by a huge mould of ghee of some 16 feet as collected from years of daily Abhishakas of ghee with three serpent hoods stuck on the mould and thus the Shiva Linga is invisible. The shrines outside the Garbha of Vadakkunatha Linga include a Maha Ganapati, Vattekan (Hunter) Shiva, Nandeeshwara, Nandi Keshava, Krishna as a Cow herd, Parashurama, Adi Shankara etc. The biggest festival in Kerala is the ‘Trissur Puram’/ Festival held during the period between mid-April-mid May with the massive display and procession of some 50 elephants colourfully decorated along with ‘Pancha Vadyams’ - a symphony of five musical instruments of drums and pipe music sounds drawing surging crowds passing through the Vadakkunathan Temple and climaxing in the Tukkunadu Maidan. ‘Pulikali folk art festival’ in the fourth day of Onam Celebrations in Kerala, and ‘Annayottu’ Gaja Puja and Elephant Feeding to invoke Ganesha’s blessings are two other popular festivals of Trissur. This City is also popular for excellent masterpiece architectural wonders of Churches like the Asia’s tallest Syro Malabar Catholic Basilica, the renowned underground Christian Cathedral, Assyrian Church of the East and so on.

Guruvayur: Some 30 km. away from Trissur is the most celebrated Krishna/ Vishnu Temple in Bharat, counted among the Pancha Maha Keshava Mandirs or the Five Outstanding Vishnu Temples viz. Jagannatha of Puri on Orissa; Dwarakadheshwari in Dwaraka, Gujarat; Nathwara Krishna in Rajasthan; and Venkateshwara Balaji in Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh and now the Guruvayur Ayyappan in Kerala. Guru-Vayu are the two Devas viz. Deva Guru Brihaspati and Vayu Deva were invoked by Sage Uddhava

the close associate of Lord Krishna, at the time of destruction of the City of Maha Dwaraka as Yadava vamsha was destroyed and Lord Krishna too terminated his 'Avatara'. Uddhava was shocked at the tide of events and more so the ancestral Pratima of Vishnu at his Dwaraka abode was found missing from his worship chamber. He was somehow able to salvage the Idol and prayed to Guru and Vayu. As per Bhakta Uddhava's supplication they carried it along the coastal line and on way stopped over to witness the Shiv-Parvati Nritya which was mesmerising even as they had the obligation to safe deposit the Vishnu Pratima some where properly. After the Tandava of Shiva Parvati, they prostrated to them who asked them of the purpose for which there halted there. On knowing the purpose, Bhagavan Shiva heartily recommended that place where they themselves spent their sojourn at Rudratirtham the northern side of the Place they suggested the 'Guru Vayu' Place for the proposed Krishna Mandir suggested for installing Uddhava's Vishnu Idol! Meanwhile Parashu Rama after witnessing the installation of Vadakkunatha Shiva Linga at Trissur was in search of a further Place for his Tapasya appeared and after prostrating Shiva Parvatis also endorsed the precise spot for the Guruvayur Krishna Temple. Rudra Tirtham eventually got dried up in parts and extended upto Mammiyur where there stands as Mammiyurappan Temple some 3 km distance away. This was because Prachetas the ten sons of King Prajinarahi and Suvarna sang Rudra Gita a hymn in praise of Lord Vishnu and thus the Rudra Tirtham got extended till Mammiyurappan Shiva Temple. Guru and Vayu consulted Vishwakarma who created the original Guruvayur Temple. The Temple eventually became the nucleus of Dharma and magnificence of Vaishnava Karyas to such an extent that Narada Purana made elaborate references to the last days of Dwapara Yuga and Maha Bharata events: As King Parikshit died of Taksha Sarpa Raja and King Janamejaya performed Sarpa Yagna to avenge his father's death in which thousands of serpents were called up and sacrificed till Brahmana Astika stopped the Yagna and Takshaka was saved, Janamejaya became a victim of incurable leprosy. Then Sage Atreya, the illustrious son of Atri Maharshi, counselled to visit Guruvayoor and worship Lord Krishna in the form of Guruvayurappan and fall on his feet till his cure; King Janamejaya rushed to that Temple and worshipped him for ten years. Finally he was cured of leprosy and called up Sage Atreya who showed signs of snake bite as that bite proved ineffective due to his saving the King by Ananta Maha Sarpa / Bala Rama, the brother of Lord Krishna! In course of time, the Temple was totally dilapidated and was in ruins. The King of Pandya desha was stated to have been cursed by Sarpa dosha and went on a Tirtha Yatra awaiting a specific day and time for his death. As he saw the ruins of Guruvayur, he decided to re-build trying to follow the original architectural grandeur and got involved so much that the day and time of what was suggested for the curse to happen was over and the Brahmanas who made the calculations earlier for his death suggested that the impact of the curse was totally washed out by the fruits gained from the reconstruction of the Temple! It is also stated that Adi Shankara stayed at Guruvayur Krishna Temple for long and established the Puja Rituals since followed till date! The legend is that Adi Shankara and Sage Narada were travelling by the Sky on every Ekadashi in the Prabhata time well before sunrise and on one occasion Adi Shankara overshot and was about to miss the Temple, but the Lord pulled down the Acharya by his ears and the surprised Acharya found himself at the feet of Guruvayurappan's feet and the Acharya broke down into the recital of 'Govindashtakam'. Indeed the Principles and details of Rituals laid down by Adi Shankaracharya are valid till date. The day starts with the waking of the Lord with the melodious notes of Nadaswara followed by Nirmalya Darshana or the clearance of 'Nirmalya' of the previous night's puja at 3am. Sriveli or taking the Utsava Vighraha around the Temple premises on decorated elephant is performed every day thrice. Dress code to seek darshan inside the Temple and the Sanctum is strictly enforced. Guruvayur Utsavas are for 10 days in the month of

Kumbham (Feb-Mar) when Elephant race is a special draw; the Devassom maintains 45 andodd elephants donated by devotees. Guruvayur Ekadashi of Vrischika (Nov-Dec) is significant too. In fact, every Ekadashi is special, especially for Vilakku (Lighting) Puja.

Kaladi: ‘Kaal adi’ in Malayalam and Tamil literally means ‘Foot Step’ or ‘Foot Print’. The original name of Kaaladi was Shiva Rahasyam on the banks of River Purna now named Periyar. From the important Shornoor Railway Junction, Kaaladi is some 30 km via Angamaali Station, where a ‘Shrotriya’ or Vedic Brahmana couple called Shiva Guru and Aryamba. To recall a reference from Trissur Kshetra in this Script, the couple worshipped Vadukunatha Shiva Linga and prayed for an excellent son who would be an erudite Veda-Shastra Pandita; in their dreams Maha Deva gave an option of either a ‘Murkha’ or a useless and ignorant son with long life span or a very short lived but brilliant Vedic Brahmana and the combined desire was to grant the latter option. Thus was born Shankara but even at a very age, the father died even as the son’s knowledge was just flowering. The mother some how dragged a life of want and misery in bringing up Shankara against odds. One day she returned back home in fetching drinking water for the house from Purna River some distance away and fainted on return. The hapless boy Shankara prayed to Krishna, his favorite God of Miracles, whose Idol that he kept for his daily prayers and recited ‘Achyuta Ashtakam’. Lord Krishna was too pleased to slightly change the course and direction of the River whispering to the boy that Purna would be at your foot step, Shankara! And since then indeed the mother had no difficulty in collecting water as the flow touched the back yard of their house garden! Today Shankara Temple with the Pratima of Adi Shankaracharya as also of Goddess Sharada Devi at Kaaladi is run by Shringeri Mutt and manned by Smarta Brahmin from the Main Shringeri and not Nambodirs. There is also the Samadhi of Aryamba, the mother of Shankaracharya whose last rites were performed by himself! Adi Shankara Kirti Stambha Mandapa with eight sides is also erected not far from the Shankara Temple. Both Shringeri and Kamakoti Mutts too are adjacent to the Keerti Stambha. The Temples near Kaaladi are of Manikyamangalam Katyayani, referred to in Soundarya Lahari, Vellamman Thuli Shiva, Shankara Narayana etc. The famed two Ghats at Periyar are Kaaladi Kadavu where the course of the Purna River changed direction and Muthala Kadavu or Crocodile Ghat where young Shankara threatened to be killed by a crocodile if she did not consent to take to sanyasa. The two major festivals are Shankaara Jayanti for five days (April-May) and Navaratri climaxed with ‘Rathotsava’ or the Chariot Festival.

Tiruvananthapuram: Trivendram, the Capital of Kerala State, is better known as the Unique Tirtha Sthana being the Abode of Ananta Padma Swami in ‘Anantavanam’ mentioned in Maha Bharata and Brahma Purana. Lord Padmanabha as relaxing in Yoga Nidra on the soft bed of of Ananta the celestial Serpent bestows the fulfillment of desires of Deva-Danavas, Yogi-Rishi Ganas and sarva charaachara jeevas, especially human beings. The legendary background of this manifestation of Maha Vishnu the singular Preserver of ‘Srishti’/ Creation as known through Puranas and Epics was that Maha Vishnu disguised as a mischievous boy, who wantonly spoilt a Sacred ‘Salagrama’-representing Bhagavan Himself-which a Sage worshipped and out of anger he chased the boy. As the Swami found the boy subsequently wandering on the Sea Beaches, a fisher woman heard a shouting at a boy whom the Swami identified ; she was threatening to throw the boy into the forest near Anantankadu Nagaraja Temple ie the place infested with poisonous serpents. Having got a clue, the Swami discovered the mischievous boy at the Temple forest; as expected the boy was hanging on the top of a ‘Illuppa’ Tree; even as he saw the boy, the tree branch got broken and suddenly he manifested himself as huge figure of Anantashayana Murti the Vishnu Swarupa with Ananta as his head at Tiru Vollom, nabhi at Tiruvananthapuram and lotus feet at

Tiruppadapuram! Swami was dazed as he never even in dreams was that boy full of pranks! He broke down in a trance and having recovered somewhat, prayed to the Lord in ecstasy and beseeched him to shorten his alarmingly big swarupa to that of thrice his 'danda' or staff. Even so, the figure got shortened in three parts viz. *Tiru mukham*, *Tiru vudal* and *Tiruppaadam*- that is: Mangala Muhka-Mangala Deha-Mangala Paada or Lotus Feet of Auspiciousness. The Swami offered Naivedya of Rice Kanji, Uppu manga or Salted Raw Mango pieces in a coconut shell. The huge Swarupa of Ananta Padma naabha was installed in a Temple after anointing with chandana kasturi etc. and so on in an appropriate new Temple with the assistance of the King, Brahmanas and Bhaktas on a single massive stone platform with carved embellishments. The Swami is reclining on the Maha Sarpa Ananta / Adi Sesha with hoods facing inwards signifying contemplation. Down his right hand is a Shiva Linga while the Swami has her consorts Sri Devi representing prosperity and Bhu devi representing Patience and Power are seated nearby even as Lord Brahma seated on a Lotus emerges from the Swami's navel. He is surrounded by some 1200 shaligrams from Nepal's Gandaki River banks. Over the Samadhi of the Sadhu Mahatma who discovered the Swami was arranged to the west of the Main Temple, and subsequently the Bilwa Mangala Krishna Mandir stood up over the Samadhi. Two major Shrines inside the Temple are of Ugra Narasimha and Krishna Swami. Ekadashi days are special. Two major Festivals are Alpashy in Oct- Nov and Phanguni in Mar- Apr each for 10 days; besides every Navaratra is celebrated when Alankaras change daily. Also Laksha Deepam festival is celebrated for 56 days once in every 6 years, the latest being in Jan 2014 when the atmosphere is simply celestial with Veda Pathanas, Cultural and other activities are continuous and full of faith. Dress code is compulsory and entry restrictions are strictly enforced. The Temple is indeed very opulent with considerable gold, jewellery and liquid cash. Besides this glorious Temple, Tiruvananthapuram is proud of very many other illustrious Temples of repute and faith venerated by thousands of yatis through out the year despite the Seasonal aberrations.

Tiruvattar Adi Keshava: From Trivendram to Tiruvattar the distance is some 7 km where on the banks of River Tamraparni, the Temple of Adikeshava is popular. The height of the idol of Adi Keshava as Sesha shaayi Adi Keshava. is as of some 16 feet; from one 'Dwar' or gate, the Bhagavan who is in a lying posture is visible with his Shri Mukha or propitious Face, the second 'dwar' displaying his 'Vakshasthala' or the region of his heart, and the third dwar displays his lotus feet, with his body crushing a Rakshasa. The legendary belief is that the Demon prayed to Brahma and in his liberal mood, allowed free access to a 'Kadali phala vana' / banyan fruit garden to assuage his hunger; but the demon started harassing the Brahmanas and Rishis interfering in their 'Dharma Karyas' and the latter appealed to Vishnu who suppressed the demon; the latter appealed to Vishnu to always be under his body in that posture.

Janardana: From Trivendrum to Varkala is some 16 km where Janardana Temple is famed for ever-emerging 'dhup' or the scented smoke of 'Sambrani' or Agarbatti made of scented crystals called 'mengruk' a by-product of bamboo. In fact yatis collect the raw material of dhup from the Temple as that wards off diseases of skin as also a 'drishti' to children and garbhinis or pregnant women. Yatis bathe in a water fall collected from the Arabian Sea merging into a local sub-river and this Tirtha has sweet water called locally as Paapa Mochan or Rinamohan, Savitri, Gayatri and Saraswati; in fact persons observing Samudra Snaanans invariably take their baths at this Sacred Tirtha and then seek the darshan of Janardana whose Temple is at a height after ascending a few steps and washing their feet at a Chakra Tirtha near the entrance of the Temple. In the Center of an open area is the Temple surrounded by smaller Mandirs of Shasta Kumara, and Shankaa beside a Varta Vriksha, in which the main Deity Lord with a

four handed Form of Shyama Janardnaa. The story of the Temple is recalled that once Brahma was performing a holy yagna and during this austerity period, a Sadhu who was moving about at the yagna premises asked for food and as food was served, the Sadhu expressed at the disappointment at the variety and quality of food served. Brahma being the host apologised for the quality. Brahma realised that the principal host Vishnu himself was the Sadhu and prostrated to Janardana who displayed his own form as Brahma requested him to be in same form for ever as the latter consented and ever since the miracle of the Vighraha emitting the scented smoke of Agarbattis always with the scented crystals available plenty!

Tripunattarai: Being a suburb of Kochi, the then Capital of Cochin kingdom, in the banks of River Purna and the Palace Township of the King, Tripunittara is known in olden days as the Purna Veda puri or the Place of all Vedas; it was also called as the Pooneeram or the quiver to keep arrows in which Arjuna kept an Idol of Vishnu which Lord Krishna gifted to Arjuna and as the Place identified for the installation of the Idol, Arjuna was asked 'Pooneeram terai' or open the quiver! 'Terai' also denotes harbour or the mouth of the Sea, is Tripunattarai happens to be the Gate of the back waters of the Sea at the harbour! Being the Palace Hill Town, Tripunattari is also the erstwhile Capital of the Kingdom and continues still as the Culture Capital hosting the major dance forms of Kathakali, Mohini Attam and Fine Arts especially of percussion instruments etc. all developed and sustained for long under the Royal patronage. But more importantly as the Tirtha Place with famed Temples, like Poornataresha Temple with Santana Gopala Moorti as the central attraction, Dharma Sasta-Ayyappan Temple and several Bhagavati Temples, Rama, Shiva and other Devi Temples. Santana Gopala Poornaantaresha Temple is indeed outstanding as is referred to in Maha Bhavagta Purana: a pious Brahmana lost his child even soon after it was born; he accused the King Ugrasena of Mathura as a Brahmana Dweshi, Vishaya maanasa, and Kshatriya bandhu - all typical disqualifications of an Ideal King as in the earlier ages there were kings like Prithvi, Harishchandra and Rama whose main concern was 'Praja kshema' and none else. Unfortunately, the Brahmana couple lost their children in succession and the frustrated Brahmana attempted suicide in the Royal Court when Arjuna and Krishna were also present as Ugrasena was the grandfather of Krishna. Arjuna felt very bad at the tragedy befallen to the Brahmana and announced that he would bring back the dead kids from any part of the Sapta Dwipas, as he had the boon of entering all the Dwipas. He then explored Jambu-Plaksha-Salmaali-Kusha-Krouncha-Shaka and Pushkala Lokas and as a desperation decided to offer his life by jumping into Homagni. Being his best friend and devotee Krishna prevented Arjuna to do so and together they searched the higher lokas like Vaayu-Agni-Varuna- Yama Lokas and even Brahma Loka. They then launched the search for Vaikuntha but the path to that Loka was of pitch darkness; Krishna accompanied by Arjuna with the help of the lustrous radiance of Sudarshana Chakra ahead landed with difficulty at Vaikuntha where Maha Vishnu welcomed them as Nara and Narayana and blessed them with the boon of returning the Souls of the children of the Brahmana. It was at that time that Maha Vishnu himself gifted an Idol of himself to Arjuna and install it at an appropriate Kshetra and with an appropriate name; Lord Ganesha was commissioned by Maha Vishnu to assist Arjuna in this Mission. Ganesha discovered the suitable place at Poorna Vedapuri on the banks of Poorna River and at the Sacred Time of installing the Vishnu Idol, Ganesha asked Arjuna saying 'Poornam terai' to enable the Vishnu Vighraha to be installed and both of them named the Vighraha as Poornataresha Santana Gopala since who so ever worships the Lord in that form would indeed be blessed with auspicious and illustrious children! Tripunattarai is also famed for the Shiva Temple where Bhagavan Shiva is displayed as in the form of a Kirata or a hunter when Maha Deva once again sought to test Arjuna's prowess of archery or

Dhanurvidya of which the latter was rightfully proud of since he had the distinction of destroying ‘Matsya Yantra’ to win the hand of Devi Draupadi and even giving a historic twist of destiny in landing Draupadi to the dilemma of having to wed all the Pancha Pandavas simultaneously! Hence the test that Maha Deva gave to Arjuna the opportunity to examine whether his Kirata Swarupa’s arrow could just strike the wildpig at the same speed and finesse that would kill by Arjuna’s arrow as that of Maha Deva in Kirata form! As a gift of appreciation, Maha Deva gave the boon of ‘Paaashupataastra’ to Arjuna. Such indeed was the mercifullness and magnanimity of Maha Deva, instead of Arjuna’s claiming the fame of equalling Arjuna’s equality! Shiva Swarupa is thus extolled: *Dharaadhara shyamalaankam chhurikaa chaapa dhaarinam, Kirata vapusham vande Paraatmaanameshwaram!* (To Maha Shankara, with the body manifestation of blue sky like unique splendour and as in the Swarupa of a Forest Hunter, my sincere and faithful prostrations to you!)

Shabarimala, Sucheendram, Kanyakumari and Rameshwaram:

Shabarimala: Attracting perhaps then largest crowd ever in the world annually is the Hindu pilgrimage of an estimated 100 million undertaking the toughest journey in typical mountainous and thick forest range involving trekking of some 50 km - worse than even the Yatras to Badari, Kedar, Gangotri etc. as also Amarnath, Manasarovar of Himalayas for which some aids of trekking are in place- is that of Shabarimala Yatra! Shabarimala is at Perunad Village atop the mountain of Western Ghats in the State of Kerala at an altitude of 1535 ft where Lord Ayyappan Temple beckons. The traditional route is from Erumaly-Aludha River and the mountain range to Karivalam and Pamba River followed by trekking of Neelimala. But now one can reach Pamba River by road and take to trekking by Neelimala to Ganesh bettam, Shri Rama betta paa dam, Aranmula kottam and on to what is called ‘Tiruva bharana khosha yatra’ to reach the Ayyappan Temple. Shabarimala Pilgrimage is possible under restrictions and conditions: It bars entry of women from puberty to menopause ie 10-50 years ; yatris are required to observe Brahma charya or celibacy; the penance period of 41 days or as required; during the penance period, wearing a ‘maala’ or garland of Rudrakshas or Tulasi beads announcing the yatra well in advance; observing eating, drinking, smoking restrictions; restrictions of dress by wearing black/ saffron cloth; sleeping on floor; frequent visit to temples; reciting the name, hymn and mantra of Ayyappan and basically living like a monk during the period of penance. The Temple is open during Nov. 15-Dec.26 excepting the days of festivals of Mandala Puja on Jan 14 and Makara Samkranti, Vishu on April 14 and first days of Malayalam months- on each occasion for 6 days. Bhagavan Ayyappa Sannidhanam or darshan is by alighting the proverbial 18 steps on the staircase. Stampedes of yatri crowds are normal feature but when it is beyond the tolerable limits, casualties are not uncommon as happened in Jan. 2011, there were 100 died with above that number were grievously injured. The legend of the Tirtha was that Shabari an ascetic woman in the epic of Ramayana received Shri Rama, Devi Sita and Lakshmana at her hermitage and offered fruits in ecstasy the half bitten to ensure that those were sweet and ripe enough and the Lord accepted gladly. After this, Rama noticed a hazy figure of a Yogi and asked Shabari as to who was he; she replied that he was an occasional visitor to the Ashram and he was known by the name of ‘Shasta’. Then Rama went near him who said that he was in the habit of meeting and blessings to his devotees during intervals of his Tapasya and he blessed the King and family stating that their mission be fulfilled despite hurdles! Shasta was of the ‘Amsha’ of Skanda and the Deposit of Dharma and Nyaya or virtue and justice; he also announces the Mantra viz. *Aham Brahmasmi* or ‘I am Paramatma myself’ the high point of Advaita Thinking. It was at this moment of mythological Meeting that ‘Makara Vilakku’ is celebrated when Ayyappan would

terminate his periodical spells of his Tapasya only to bless his devotees.

Shucheendram: From Kanyakumari to Sucheendram is some 5 km and this Place is known as Jnaana Kshetra, where Indra got purified by Sage Gautami's curse and hence called Shuchi to Indra. This is also famed for no emphasis of Gunas of Satvika-Raajasika-Taamasika nature and that is why there is a Shivan Mandir with a Sthaanu Linga along with a Shiva Face with Nandi there before; a Chaturbhuj Vishnu with Sri Devi and Bhudevi by either sides and a Guruda with good size before Vishnu Idol and of Brahma Mandir too. A significant feature of the Temple is of a huge and impressive Swarupa of Lord Hanuman with accompanying Mandirs in the same area are Vishnu with Lakshmi pratimas; Shiva with Parvati, Nataraja, Subrahmanya and Ganesha Pratimas. *Among the 51, Shakti Peethas, Devi Narayani is prominently mentioned as Shuchi in the Shiva Temple at Suchindram where the Maha deva is presejntas Samhara and the body part stated to have fallen was the teeth of Sati Devi.*

Kanyakumari: Tatatsteere Samudrasya Kanyaa tritha mapushrayet, Tattoyam sprushya Rajendra Sarva paapaih pramuchyate/ (After performing Snaana in the Sacred Kaveri, Yatris should proceed to the Sea and bathe in Kanya kumari Tirtha to ensure that they should purify themselves of their sins.) Thus emphasize both Maha Bharata and Padma Purana in their Tirtha Yatra Chapters. From Pannagudi where Chotey Narayan's Shiva Mandir with Ramalingeswara Shiva Linga set up by Gautama Maharshi along with Devi Parvati, besides Chotey Narayan Mandir withv Shri Devi and Bhudevis is Kanya Kumari by 6 km. Equally distant is Kanya Kumari from Tirukkalamkudi where ironically situated is Lambe Narayan referred in MahaVaraha Purana as 'Paripurna Sundara Narayana'; these places are to distinguish the Narayana Swarupas in the same vicinity of Graamas or small townships. Kanyakumari is the last point of Bharat and the sangama of three Seas viz. Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal and Hind Maha Sagara where Yatris perform Shraddhas. On Chaitra Purnima evening if the Sky is clear then the Place where Bay of Bengal merges with the other Seas, the sight of Moon rise is picturesque and on the following morning when Sun rises at the same shores of the Bay, the sight is unbelievably divine! Even other wise the sights of late evenings and early mornings of Moon rise and Sun rise respectively are memorable and throngs of visitors make it a point to witness the fantastic sights! Into the Bay of Bengal, quite a few rivers like Savitri, Gayatri, Sarswati, Kanya vinayaka Tirthas merge into. From the Temple of Kanyakumari, the southern side are situated the Matru Tirtha, the Pitru Tirtha and Bhima Tirtha; towards the west of the Temple a little distance away is the Swarna Tirtha On the shores of the Bay of Bengal, normally yatris take their 'snaanas' and after worshipping the small Mandir of Ganesha enter into the Kanya Kumari Darshan. After the woship to the main Idol, at the exit point there is a prominent Indrakanta Vinayaka Mandir, which is stated to have been installed by Lord Indra himself. Devi Kanyakumari's Idol is indeed very attractive with the shine of chasteful jewellery, especially her noseling diamond, which as stated is the powerful guiding radiance to the navigators and boatsmen in the darkness of nights! From the Mandir of Kanya kumari towards its North is the Bhadra Kali Mandir, the dear friend of Kanya Kumari. *Also stated as one of the 51 Shakti Peethas is the Kanyashram of Baalambika Bhagavati Tempe at Shicheendram itself as Devi Sharvaani where Devi Sati's back portion fell off while Maha deva is named as Nimisha.* There is however a controversy that the same back portion fell off as Devi Shaarvani in a Temple at Chittagong of Bangla desh! From Kanyakumari Temple some distance away, there is a significant Tirtha named 'Paapashanam' Pushkarini where the taste of water is surprisingly sweet which is also called as Manduka Tirtha. Interestingly the colour of sand is different from that under the Bay of Bengal which is of normal sea land colour, but the sand from that under Arabian Seab is disdtinly red

and that of Hindu Sagar is somewhat bluish; there are hawkers selling sea land of varying colours at a price as a souneir item; in fact, there is also a belief that showering the sands of the mixed colours would provide immediate prospects of wedding to long standing spinsters! There is a legendary background of the thev Temple of Kanya kumari metioned in Maha Bharata and Puranas: There was a demon named Banasura who performed intense ‘Tapas’ for a number of years to Maha Deva and a pleased Shiva granted to him Amaratwa or Permanent Life. The Asura went berserk and destroyed mankind and Rishis disallowing the latter to perform yagnas- the life line to Devas, who appealed to Lord Vishnu. The latter stood by the Rishis to commence yagnas again and from out of the Sacred flames at the yagna, emerged Devi Katyayani another form of Durga Devi. Soon after her emergence she performed tapasya to Shankara to let her marry him and the merciful Maha Deva accepted her request and the date and auspicious ‘muhurta’ were fixed by Brahma himself. Just as the bride groom’s party was about to arrive, Devas were frustrated that if the wedding of Katyayani and Shiva were performed then the plan of killing Banasura would be a far cry and as such they made the plan of delaying the movement of the bridegroom party not moving forward from Sucheendram till the Holy Place of Sagara sangama called Kanyakumari as Sage Narada who was the musician for the wedding from the side of the bride groom. While waiting for Narada at Suchindram, the muhurta fixed for the wedding just elapsed and Maha Deva refused to oblige Kanya kumari and the wedding got postponed till the end of Kaliyuga. Meanwhile Devi Katyayani destroyed the Demon. The Akshatas were discarded in the vast ocean was the Seas merging at that point assumed varying hues! Devi Kanya Kumari continues to bless the humanity, especially the just married or those awaiting weddings, apart from lo Besides the Main Mandir, are of course the Indrakanta Vinayaka as afore mentioned and not far away on the Seashore is also a Kashi Vishwanatha Mandir where Chakra Tirtha is situated. The significant Fetsivals celebrated at Kanya Kumari are mainly the Navatrtras in early Shukla paksha of Aswiyuja month, besides Chaitra Purnima, Ashadha Amavasya, Ashwiyuja Amavasya and Shiva Ratri. Across the ocean, there is a picturesque Vivekanada Shila where Sage Vivenaanda meditated after swimming the Seas and a beautiful Memorial was built drawing increasing tourist flows; visitors are carried by ferries to and fro the Memorial/There is also the famed Tiruvallar Statue of 133 ft height installed in the Sea, another tourist attraction. Valmiki Ramayana describes the power of ‘Mrita Sanjeevani’ herbal medicine to revive the dying as brought by Lord Hanuman from Himalayas to Lanka to save Lakshmana’s life as a result of Indrajit’s- the son of Ravanaasura- one to one attack of Naagastra and a part of the mountian fell near Kanyakumari area as the ‘Marundu Malai’ or the Mountain of Medicine. Agastya Muni who stayed at Agastiswara Ashram up the Marutuval Mallai Hill not distant from Kanya Kumari for long spell of years was himself an expert in herbal medicines.

Setu Tirtha-Rameshwara Kshetra: Asti Rameshwaram naama Rama setou pavitrataam, Kshetranaamapi sarveshaam Tirthanaamapi chottamam/ Drishta maatre Rama setou muktih samsaara saagaraat, Hare Harou cha bhaktih syaattayaa punya sanrudditaa, Karmanaastrividhasyaapi siddhihsyaannaatra Samshayah! (This Setu which Bhagavan Shri Rama himself constructed is indeed the most Sacred and illustrious as also the Rameshara Tirtha which is the most outstanding of all the Tirthas. Even the sight of the Setu is such as would comfortably navigate through the Ocean of Samsara and enhance the faith and devotion about the unified identity of Shiva and Vishnu alike; at the same time, it ensures the fructification of the three types of Karmas or viz. Kaayika-Vaachika- Maanasika ie. Physical-Vocal- and Mental based actions, most emphatically!). *Setum Rameshwaram Lingam Ghandhamaadana parvatam, Chintayan Manujah Satyam Sarva paapaih pramuchyate/* (Those persons who sincerely cogitate about

the most auspicious entities of Setu, Shri Rameshwara Linga and Gandhamaadana parvata are by themselves would demolish the totality of sins!) In the Brahma Khanda of Skanda Purana, Suta Maha Muni addressed a Conclave of Rishis and narrated the significance of Setu Bandhan/ Tirtha as also of Rameswara Kshetra which were visualised and built by Sri Rama; even visioning these Places would bestow Mukti from Samsara. Emphasising the Unity of Vishnu and Siva, the Three Sacred Places viz. Setu (bridge), Rameswara Linga and Gandhamadan Mountain constitute the composite identity. If one lies down on Setu's banks and sticks the sand on the body, the number of as many sand particles would absolve as many Brahmahatya sins! The touch of the wind on one's body from the mid-banks of Setu would pardon ten thousand 'Surapanaas' (drinking intoxicants). If one does 'Snaan' at the Tirtha and seeks relief on somebody else's favour, then too the sins of the proxy beneficiaries are washed off. The Five Brahmahatya sinners, who spoil the roads, prepare food for them only, abuse Brahmanas and Sanyasis, accept the food of a Chandala and sell Vedas are also excused by the holy bath at Setu Tirtha. Those who offer charity but deny in reality, those who teach Dharma (Virtue) but hate and ridicule the teachers, who obstruct cows from drinking water from public places, abandon 'Upasana' (deep meditation), steals food meant for Devas, drink wine from women who too drink and consume food from fallen and poverty stricken women also secure reprieve as the Setu and Ramalingeswra Snaan and worship are very powerful. Those who steal Kanda-Moolas (earth sprouted / underneathed vegetables) and fruits, Kasturi, silk materials, milk, Chandan, Camphor, honey, ghee, glass and copper material and Rudrakshas are considered as sinful as those who steal gold; but even such deplorable persons are forgiven by visiting Setu Kshetra. Incest of all kinds which is as abhorable as sleeping with Guru's wife is also exonerated by the Setu Kshetra. If for any reason, one is unable to visit the Setu / Ramalinga Temple, he or she could depute a trustworthy person on his behalf by bearing the expenses. As Lord Sri Ram, Devi Sita and Lakshman were consigned to the forest, Dandakaranya, for twelve years following His father's instruction and resided at a hermitage called 'Panchavati', the Demon Ravana tricked Devi Sita with a Golden Deer in the disguise of another Demon Maricha and forcibly abducted her to his kingdom of Lanka. Rama and Lakshmana were in futile search of Sita and made friends with Hanuman and Sugriva. The latter was helped by Rama to kill Vali and made him the King of Kishkintha. Hanuman crossed the Ocean, met Devi Sita by raising confidence in her about him as a Bhakta of Sri Ram by giving her 'chudamani' (jewellery of hers brought from Rama) and gave a taste of his prowess to Ravana by destroying the forests and major parts of Lanka's Capital City. Hanuman returned back to Rama and gave the news of Sita's whereabouts. Rama, Lakshmana, Sugriva, Hanuman, Jambavan and other great warriors of Vanara Sena (the monkey army) travelled many Kingdoms en route to Mahendra Mountain. Vibhishan, younger brother of Ravana joined Rama as he did not approve of Ravana's evil policies. Rama decided to cross the Ocean but only the mighty Hanuman could perform the great leap to Lanka and others would not be able to do so. It was also not possible to navigate as several boats were not available in such short time. Rama therefore prayed to Samudra Deva, the God of Ocean, for three days but the Deva did not respond. Rama grew angry and took his Dhanush (bow and arrow) to punish the Ocean. Samudra Deva appeared and agreed to help Rama; there were only two ways of reaching Lanka viz. by drying up the Ocean which might not be a plausible solution or by asking 'Nala' of the army of Sugriva who like his father Viswakarma was an adept to prepare a Setu (Bridge). The monkey brigade could throw any thing like boulders, stones or even pebbles, Samudra on his part would hold of whatever is thrown into the waters and Nala could shape up a bridge in view of his inborn talent. Thus commenced the 'Setu Bandhana' with the help of any material including trees, plants, flowers, and even grass thrown

into the deep waters by Nala and soon enough a remarkable bridge was planned right across the Ocean which was of a huge dimension of ten Yojanas width and hundred yojanas length. Lord Sri Rama determined an excellent ‘Muhurat’ (auspicious time) for Ganesh Puja and Maheswara Puja at the Devipatthan Nagar. The Setubandhan Mantra recited by all those involved in the mammoth task stated: *Raghuvira padanyasa Pavitrikruta Pamsavey, Dasakantha siraccheda hetavey Setavey namah / Ketavey Ramachandrasya Moksha maargonka hetavey, Sitaayaa Maanasambhoja bhaanavey Setava namah* (This Place has become sacred with the dust of Sri Ram’s feet; this Setu is the one being constructed to devastate the ten heads of Ravana; this is the Ketu (dhwaja or flag symbol) being built as the proof of ‘Moksha Sadhana’ or the Route to Salvation, Sri Rama’s universal distinction and Devi Sita’s happiness like the opening of her lotus like heart with Surya Deva’s high radiance. Our Greetings to this immortal Setu! Starting the task of Setu Bandhan, the construction was accomplished within five days!) There are several Tirthas on either side of the Setu, but most significant are twenty four. The most important ones are Chakra Tirtha, Betala varada Tirtha, and Paapavinashana Tirtha which were famous. Then there are Sitasarovar Tirtha, Mangala Tirtha and Amritavaapika. Again, there are Brahmakund, Hanumakund, Agasthya Tirtha, Rama Tirtha, Lakshmana Tirtha, Jaya Tirtha, Lakshmi Tirtha, Agni Tirtha, Chakra Tirtha, Siva Tirtha, Shankha Tirtha, Yamuna Tirtha, Ganga Tirtha, Gaya Tirtha, Koti Tirtha, Saadhyamrita Tirtha, Maanasa Tirtha and Dhanushkodi Tirtha. These are only illustrative Tirthas which are all Sin demolishers. Chakra Tirtha is known as the foremost and original one where a Vaishnava Mahatma called Galava resided. He performed rigorous Tapasya for several years without any human contact by eating leaves, then water and subsequently with only Vayu (air), ignoring the harshness of summer, winter and rains. He had targetted Lord Vishnu and disregarded every thing else in the World. Bhagavan was pleased with the determination of the Vaishnava’s devotion and gave His ‘Darshan’. Galava was indeed extremely happy but requested Bhagavan to save him from Devils known as Hunger, thirst and physical disability experienced during the course of his Tapasya; he was obsessed about his scare and Bhagavan asked His Sudarshan Chakra to throw away the Devils and keep one of the Chakra’s ‘Amsas’ (features) there which would be immortalised as Chakra Tirtha bestowing fearlessness and Mukti. Sita Kund was the Place where Devi Sita was asked by Rama to enter an ‘Agni Kunda’ and came out to vindicate her chastity although she stayed in Ravana’s custody for long and there were doubts raised by a handful of citizens of Ayodhya. After taking Snaan at Sita Kund which bestows purity of thought and action, devotees visit Mangala Tirtha to signify the virtues of altruism, selflessness and nonviolence as were taught to King Manojaya by fate who taxed Brahmanas, never gave charity and was unscrupulous with his Subjects, eventually lost his Kingdom, suffered the worst poverty and hunger in forests but was saved by Sage Parasara who advised the King to visit Mangala Tirtha and eventually regained his Kingdom. Ekantaramanatha was the Confidential Place where after crossing Sethu Rama was engrossed with Lakshman, Sugriva, Vibhishana, Hanuman and Jambavan in planning the Battle with Ravana and the Sea was peaceful, less noisy and conducive for mental ability. Amritavati was next to Ekantaramanatha which was like nectar providing contentment and great enthusiasm. Brahma Kund was a sin destroyer, fulfiller of human desires and most auspicious after performing Snaan and charities. Hanuma Kund Snaan blesses childless parents of highly virtuous and brave sons. Rama Tirtha is known for securing innumerable Siddhis like ability to fly on the sky, excellence in various ‘Kalaas’ or Art Forms, free mobility among various Deva lokas and capacity to converse with Devatas. The Tirtha Snaan yields many noble traits which Sri Rama Chandra stood for like Truthfulness, extraordinary courage, invincibility and obeying the orders of His father in letter and spirit. Worship at Lakshmana Tirtha

confers faith in virtue, bravery, conviction and loyalty. Koti Tirtha was the source of Holy Waters of Ganga, Yamuna and several other Rivers which were materialised by Sri Rama to perform the 'Abhisheka' or Sacred Bathing of the Rameswara Linga at the time of 'Pratishtha' (installation or Setting up) to undertake 'Prayaschitta' or Self-Purification of Sri Rama to demolish the 'Brahmahatya Pataka' which was among the Five Greatest Sins, ie.killing of Brahmanas like Ravana, Kumbhakarna and Indrajit. Sage Narada advised Sri Krishna to take Snaan at Koti Tirtha after assassination of his maternal uncle, the merciless King Kamsa. Dhanush Tirtha was materialised as Ravana was killed and Vibhishana was made the King; the latter entreated Rama to destroy the Setu as all the Vanaras returned to Gandhamadan Mountain from Lanka and since any enterprising King from Bharat might walk across easily and attack the Lanka Kingdom in future. Setu was destroyed by Rama and Snaan / Daan and worship at Dhanush Tirtha became a Sin-destroyer, the Place of Pitru Karyas and for Salvation.

Rameshwara Maha Linga is the most hallowed Parameswara Linga established by Rama and Sita for the twin reasons of Prayaschitta to atone from Brahma Patakas as also by way of gratitude and veneration to Maha Deva. In consultation with Maha Munis, Sri Ram decided to perform the 'Pratishtha' of Rameswara Linga at the most auspicious 'Muhurat' and commissioned Hanuman to bring the Linga from Maha Deva at Kailasa Mountain. Hanuman raced to Kailasa by the Sky route in a record time but could not secure Siva Darshana fast and had to meditate Maha Deva for days together. Finally, Maha Deva blessed Rameswara Linga and without loss of time Hanuman sought to return to Gandhamaadana where the Consecration was planned. Unfortunately however Hanuman could not meet the deadline of the Muhurat for the Consecration of the Linga and Devi Sita had to perforce prepare a Sand Linga that was set up as a temporary stop-gap but in reality that became the real Linga virtually. Later a Nandisewara Linga too was set up and Ahishekas were performed amid recitals of Vedas and other appropriate Mantras by the Holy Waters from Koti Tirtha. Meanwhile Hanuman returned from Kailasa but was highly disappointed and felt that all his efforts proved futile. Sri Rama assuaged Hanuma's hurt feelings and told him that he was a Great Tatva Gyani himself and that he knew well that Atma was eternal and human body was ephemeral subject to emotions like anger, desire, envy, infatuation and disappointment. Having said that Rama did the Pratishtha of the Hanumadishwara Linga and announced that devotees should have the Darshan of this Linga even before the worship of Rameswar Linga as the former which was gifted by Siva Himself bestowed courage, enterprise, loyalty and great devotion. As regards Rameswara Linga, devotees who secure darshan; perform worship, Abhishek, Veda Pathana, Charities, Kirtanas, and so on are among the top Bhaktas whose sins perish like Agni would do to flies! The kinds of Bhakti to Siva Linga are basically eight-fold: Devotees of Rameswara should display devotion and kindness; they should worship the Devotees of the Linga and satisfy them; perform worship to Siva without reservations; their each and every action, emotion and feelings ought to be reflected in the devotee's physique, mind and Inner Consciousness; listen carefully to the Sacred Stories of Rameswara Mahatmya; their love and attachment to Rameswara should result in their voices full of emotions, eyes full of tears, their instant reactions in terms of hair rising incidents when related to them; remembering the name of Ramesewara and perform Japa always by reciting the Mantra: *Ramanatha Mahadeva maam Raksha Karunanithey, Iti Yaha Satatam bruyat Kalinasow na bandhyatey*; and taking refuge in Him, carry on one's life! [The list of Major Tirthas at Rameswaram includes: Chakra Tirtham at Darbhhashayanam; Vetala Varada at South of Chakra Tirtha; Wells inside Rathna Swami Temple: Lakshmi Tirtha, Chakra Tirtha, Siva Tirtha, Yamuna Tirtha, Ganga Tirtha, Gaya Tirtha, Koti Tirtha, Sadhyamrita Tirtha, Jambava Tirtha, Angada Tirtha, Sarva Tirtha, Chandra Tirtha, Surya Tirtha, Brahmahatti Vimochana Tirtha, Madhava Tirtha, Nala Tirtha, Nila Tirtha, Gavaya Tirtha, Gavaska Tirtha, Gandhamaadana Tirtha, Savitri Tirtha, Sarasvati Tirtha and Gayatri Tirtha; Near Ekantarama Temple: Amrita vapi, Mangala Tirtha, Runa Vimochana Tirtha and Pancha Pandava Tirtha; At Gandhamaadana Mountain, there is Paapa Vinaasana, and on way there are Nakula

Tirtha, Sahadeva Tirtha, Bhima Tirtha, Draupadi Tirtha, Arjuna Tirtha, and Sugriva Tirtha; at Pamban the Tirthas are of Kapila, Bhairava and Amrita; Nearby Ratna Swami Temple are Hanuma Kunda, Agasthya Tirtham and Lashmana Kundam; Agni Tirtha at the East beach of the Sea and Dhanushkodi at the Sea etc.] The Procedure for Sethu Tirtha is to greet Samudra first, offer Arghya daan, recite the Mantra saying 'Hey Sagara, Swami of Rivers, allow me to take bath and wash off my sins just as a snake rejects its old skin'; thus one takes three dips; offers Tarpanas to Devas, Rishis and Pitras; takes bath at Chakra Tirtha, Kapila Tirtha, Sita kund, Runa Vimochana Tirtha, Rama Tirtha, Lakshmana Tirtha, Papanashana Tirtha, Brahma Tirtha, Dhanush kodi, Agni Tirtha and so on.

Maha Shiva Purana too describes that the Temple town Rameshwaram was indeed Bhagavan Siva's emergence of the penultimate Jyotirlinga of Ramalingesa and it happened to be the high celebration point of Lord Rama's glorious victory over Ravana and paying Rama's dutiful homage to Bhagavan. Having crossed 'Setu Bandhan' across the Sea on the triumphant return journey from Lanka en route Ayodhya, Lord Rama despatched Hanuman to visit Varanasi to pray Viswesvara and bring a replica of the Linga from Kasi for consecrating it on the Sea coast but since Hanuman could not return by the appointed auspicious time, Sita Devi improvised a Sand Linga and installed it formally amid Vedic Mantras. Hanuman was upset and wished that the Linga blessed at Kasi Viswanadha be substituted instead and tried hard to pull it out but the so called temporary Sand Linga was ever lasting, blessing millions of devotees ever since. The Kasilinga or Hanumanlinga too was installed nearby which too is worshipped by devotees. It would be appropriate therefore that worship to Rameswara or Rathnaswami be performed after the homage to the Kasilinga or Hanumanlinga. Spread over some 15 acres of land, the Temple could boast of rich architectural heritage of high Raja- Gopurams on the East (126 feet high) and the West side, massive walls, a huge Nandi (18 feet tall and 22 feet long) and a 4000 feet long Corridor with 4000 carved granite pillars on raised platforms on either side- perhaps the longest in the World. [It is gathered that in the initial stages, the Rameswara Jyotirlinga was kept in a thatched abode till the 12th Century but royal patronage of passing centuries of the Kings of Travancore, Ramanadha -puram, Nagercoil and Pudukkottai helped improve the Temple Complex.] The thirty six Teerthas (Water Springs) with considerable medicinal and mineral properties - twenty of them being in the Temple Complex itself- most of the devotees bathing bucketfuls in all the twenty two Wells dotted all over the surroundings and walking along into the Sanctum drenched and then only perform the worship to the Jyotirlinga in queues! Festivals at the Rameswara Temple are celebrated in 'Ani' Masa (June 15- July 15) signifying Lord Rama's victory worship to Bhagavan Siva and two 'Brahmotsavas' or Annual Principal Celebrations are observed in 'Adi' and 'Masi' months as per local customs. Six worships commence from 5 am each day and Special worships are on Fridays. [Among the experiences include a memorable journey approaching or leaving Rameshwaram across the Ocean preferably by train or by a road journey over a high bridge and a commanding view of Area atop the Gandhamadan Hill where a Shrine and Rama's revered foot- prints are witnessed as also a Place in the vicinity of the Temple a heavy mineral-laden stone floating on water, apparently due to its high phosphatic content; the stone was a sample with which Setu bridge was constructed by Vanara Sena or Monkey Brigade!]

Dhanushkoti , Darbha Shayana, Devi Pattana: *Dhanushkoti:* Skanda Purana in Setu Mahatmya describes Dhanushkoti Mahatmya as follows: *Dakshinaambunidhou punye Rama Setou vimuktade, Dhanushkotiriti khyatam Tirthamasti vimuktidam/ Brahma hatya suraapaana swarnasteya vinaashanam, Gurutalpaga*

samsarga doshanaapi naashanam/ Kailaasaadi pada praapti kaaranam paramaarthadam, Sarvakaama - midam pumsaam runa daaridra naashanam/ Dhanurkotirdhanishkotirdhanushkotiriteeranaat, Swargaapavardam pumsaa mahaa punya phalapradam/(On the shores of the Southern Seas is the most sacred and boon-bestowing Dhanushkodi which is also the high point for destroying ‘Maha Patakas’ or the severest sins like Brahma hatya, Suraapaana, Swarna harana, Guru-Sishyaadi gamana etc. This is also the provider of plentiful prosperity and Kailasa moksha prada. It uproots indebtedness and poverty for ever. Those who repeatedly take the auspicious name of Dhanushkoti repeatedly or atleast thrice shall attain all times of fulfillment.) Dhanushkoti partially got submerged into Sea owing to recent cyclonic devastation and partly ascribed to Shri Rama’s own action of removing parts of ‘Rama- Setu’ by His arrows. This historic meeting point of three high Seas of Hindu Sagara, Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea is the hallowed Tirtha for bathing and performing Shraddha-Pindapradana and Swarna daana; it is stated that there are as many as thirty six ways of Vedic Snaana Prakriyas but since so many snaanas are not possible to perform at the sametime, and hence one might perform at least thrice and taking the Pindas in the right hand with Pavitra or kusha grass around the ring finger along with black tilas uttering the word: ‘kityaa’ or ‘Daana is thus being performed’ while simultaneously handing over to a Brahmana along with ‘dakshina’; this procedure is to be followed thrice to redeem the souls of three generations of the forefathers. Therafter the Karta needs to perform the purificatory snanas by way of three dives atleast. Before providing Bhojana to the Brahmana (s), worship to a near the Ram mandir with the Idols of Rama-Sita-Lakshmana-Anjaneya is worthy of devotion. The legend about the Dhanushkoti is recalled: When Rama after installing the Rameshwara Linga Pratishtha Celebrations he and followers were about to take off by his Pushpaka Vimana to Ayodhya, when Vibhishana who was already installed as the King of Lanka, the latter prayed to Rama to destroy the Rama Setu, lest enemies from Bharat might attack Lanka at a later time and the Setu should be a facility to them to cross the Sea and bring Armies from Bharat to Lanka. On appreciating Vibhishana’s view point, Rama came out of the Vimana and destroyed Sama Setu partially at least!

Darbha shayana: The next Railway Station from Raeshwaram is Ramanatha puram where Darbha Shayana Mandir is distinct and popular in which before launching the program of Ravana Samhara Samudra Setu bandhana was the very first step and thus the worship to Samudra Deva ; the latter was requested by Rama by spreading a bed of Darbha grass and since there was no response from the former, Rama lied on the bed conveying his protest. Finally he had to threat the Samudradeva that he would destroy the Seas as Samudra appeared and aplogised to Rama and as a result, the high tides subsided and the Sea waters lost their pounding speed and roar. Thus the fame of the Darbha shayana Kshetra and the importance of the Mandir with the big Idol of Kodanda Rama with his Dhanush! This Place too is worthy of snaanam dana and puja. Tirupulani is also situated where Rama inclined as a ‘Darbhasayi’ (lying on a Darbha mat) soliciting Varuna Deva to facilitate smooth cross-over of the Sea to reach Lanka; Shrines of ‘Nava Grahas’ whom Rama prayed to remove obstacles during the ensuing Rama-Ravana battle. *Devipattana* is where barren women are blessed with progeny as also Jagannadha Shrine where Ravana’s brother Vibhishana surrendered to Rama and was made the King of Lanka later on. Skanda Purana refers to this Place as that for hiding the remaining followeres of Mahishasura killed by Durga Devi, as they drank the waters of Dharma Pushkarini where Rama performed puja to Nava Grahas but Shri Rama pulled them out and destroyed them at Chakra Tirtha since Sudarshana pulled the Asuras out and terminated. Devi pattana is also called Nava Pashayana a Stone Pillar signifying Nava Grahas.

Madurai, Sundara Raja Perumal, Tiruppuramkunnam, Alagar Koil, and Shiva Kashi:

Madurai: Situated on the banks of River Vaigai with historical links with the Kings of Pandyas and Cholas and with illustrious architecture and monuments, Madurai is the famed Abode of Devi Meenakshi and Sundareshwara the alternate forms of Shiva and Parvati. This City which is also known 'Naandamada Kudam' or the Assembly of Scholars, and the Centre of Four Towers viz. the Temple, is well connected by Road, Railway and Air. Meenakshi Temple is ancient in modern setting with Four Entry Gates, 14 Gopurams (Towers) of 175-180 ft. of height plus besides 27 smaller Gopurams and an estimated 35000 Sculptures, nominated for the Seven Wonders of the Modern World, possessing two principal Sanctums or Garbha sthalas with two golden vimanas or Shrines. Although there are four Dwaaras, normally the Eastern side though popular, is stated by Puranas as somewhat inauspicious since there is a concern of Brahma Hatya Paataka, as that mighty sin was committed by Indra who killed Vritrasura, a Brahmana and Deva Raja had to hide himself in a lotus stem at Mansarovar Lake and finally emerged from a non-Southern side of the stem latter with the redemption from Brahma to qualify for scrapping the sin; this is why an alternate gate was since made for entry-exit! At the entry point itself there is a Ashta Shakti Mandapa called Nagaar Mandapa which is supported by eight pillars on which are painted on the ceilings the sketches of Ashta Lakshmis. To the right side of the Mandapa, there are the Murtis of Ganesha and Subrahmanya where shops are placed and behind it are the idols of Shiva, Brahma, Vishnu's Mohini Swarupa and Anasuya. Further to a Dark Mandapa not open to visitors is the Swarna Pushkarini Sarovara around which are the Pancha Pandava Murtis, beyond which is the Purusha Mriga Mandapa or half man and half animal images. Just opposite that is the Meenakshi Mandir, before which is a small Subrahmanya Mandir with his two Devis. While performing Parikrama of Meenakshi Devi's celestial Idol which is well ornamented and beautifully dressed are the Murtis of Jnaana Shakti, Kriya Shakti and Bala Shakti as also Subramanya Mandir and Tirumala Balaji with his two consorts on either side. Sundareshwara Temple with dwara palakas before, and on entering it one encounters with silveren Nataraja with his right foot up (as compared to Nataraja at Chidambaram kshetra's Vighraha of Nataraja whose left foot was raised). Opposite to Sundareshwara Swami Mandir is a Swarna Shikhara and there beyond is Swayambhu Sundareshwara Maha Linga with golden 'Tripundra' decorated on the countenance. Outside the Mandir are wonderfully looking Eight Pillars with 'Shankara Leelas' depicted along with the figures of Veerabhadra and other Shiva Ganas. In the Mandapa, Shiva Bhakta 'Kaaraikalamma' is also depicted. In the Navagraha Mandapa, the Navagraha Murtis are presented.. While performing Parikrama around the Sundareshwara Mandir, one would find the darshan of Hanuman, Ganapati, Dandapani, Saraswati, Dakshina Murti, Subrahmanya and so on. There is a small Mandir of Devi Durga seperately around an old root of Kadamba vriksha still preserved and it is stated that it was under this tree that Meenakshi and Sundaresha were wedded! To the south-west of the Main Temples, are kept the Utsava Vighrahas or the Temple Parikrama Idols, besides Ganga-Parvati Idols made of Gold and on the western side there is a Chandanamaya Maha Linga. Right before the Main Temple of Sundaresha is installed Nandi Deva from where the Sahasra Stambha Mandapa is situated, before which are the Murtis of Deva- Devis and Shiva Bhaktas among whom there is a highly attractive and artistic Murti of Veenadhari Saraswati too. At this Mandapa itself, there is a peaceful looking Shyamala Sundara Nataraja installed; here again Shiva Bhakta Kannappa's Idol is arranged. Right opposite the Meenakshi Mandir is built a Shata Stambha Mandapa with 120 pillar on which are portrayed the Raja-Rani Vighrahas of those in Authority then. At the eastern side of the main Temples is a Meenakshi- Sundaresha Kalyana Mandapa called the New Mandapa named

Vasanta Mandapa where every Chaitra Month, the Kalyana Mahotsavas are celebrated and the Vighrahas of the Deities at the 'Panigrahana' Function are displayed. These Kalyana Celebrations are observed for Ten days as these are known as Utsava Nagari Festivals. During Vaishakha Shukla Panchmi, celebrations for eight days are observed too. Ashadha-Shravana Months are full of festivals since special pujas are organised for Devi Meenakshi while Shravana Month is dedicated to 'Shankara Leela Smaranotsavas' of 64 types are depicted with corresponding picturisations. Besides Bhadrapada-Ashvini Nava Ratra Mahotsavas are popular too. Amavasya and Purnima days are special. Nataraja Abhishekas are done in Margaseersha 'Ardra Nakshatra' while Kala Bhairava Ratha Yatra on that Ashtami is organised too. Pousha Purnima is noted for Meenakshi Rathotsavas and Maagha Smaranotsava by Shiva Bhaktas and Phalguna Madana Dahanotsava are too executed. The legendary aspect of the two famed Temples of Sundaresha and Meenakshi at Madurai is as known as follows. At the Temple site now there was a 'Kadambavana' at the times of Pandya King Malayadhwaja and his wife was Kanchanamala. The King noticed that there was Swayambhu Shiva Linga which as believed by the Public had proofs of Devas worshipping unvisioned to any. Once Bhagavan Shankara appeared repeatedly in the dreams of the King and instructed him to build a Temple; one evening a serpent made the King follow to a specific place and stopped with hissings of its hood several times and disappeared. The King then decided to build a model Temple naming Bhagavan Shankara as Sundaresha and appointed Pandits for regular worship and Abhishekas as per Scriptures and gradually Bhaktas poured in. The King who turned himself a fulfilled Shiva bhakta took to long meditation and a hazy profile of Shankara appeared. Then King got confused and made a request to that Figure to bless him with a noble child as he had none. Kanchanamala became pregnant and a girl child named Meenakshi was born. But soon enough the King died and the Queen took over the role of a Queen Mother on behalf of the daughter. Meenakshi grew up as a Parama Bhakta of Sundaresha and spent all the time in the Temple itself. The Queen decided to wed Meenakshi with the Celestial Figure of Sundaresha and within days Meenakshi really merged into the Lord and eventually a separate Mandir was constructed by the Pandyan line of Kings as Meenakshi!

Sundar Raja Perumal: In Madurai itself is the Sundar Raja Perumal Mandir where Lord Vishnu's Sundara Bahu or of Pretty Hands Swarupa is installed with four hands seated on a throne along with Sri Devi and Bhudevi, while on top of the Mandir connected by stairs are Surya Narayana and Nrisimha Murtis are installed; there is a separate Lakshmi Mandir also in the same premises and this beautiful Idol of Devi Lakshmi is named as 'Madhuvalli' or the Deposit of Honey / 'Amrit'. On the way from Meenakshi Mandir to this Sundar Raja Perumal one could sight a Sri Krishna Mandir in which a large Idol of Sri Krishnachandra is attractive. From Madurai to about 3 km is *Tiruppuramkkundam* and nearby there is a small mountain and up there is a cave inside which a Sarovar and a fairly big Mandir with a high rise gopura dedicated to Lord Subramanya, besides Murtis of Shiva-Parvati-Ganesha Idols; the belief is that Kumara's wedding was celebrated here and a row of Peacocks with Shiva-Parvati-Ganesha Murtis present as the audience! This is one of the six Subramanya sthalas of Dakshina Bharat. Passing by near the southern side of Vaigai river, one encounters a large Sarovara where the Ratha Yatra of Meenakshi-Sundareshwara Parikrama terminates at the Maryamman Koil. *Palamoodicholai* hardly 2km from Alagar Koyil up the Mountain and this too is one another six Abodes of Lord Kumara as a Tiruppuruk kundam. This too is one of the six Subramanya sthalas of Dakshina Bharata.

Vrishabhadri or Tirumaliruncholai is some 8km from Madurai is the famous *Alagar Koil*. References to this Mandir are made in a number of Puranas including Varaha Purana, Vamana Purana, Brahmada Purana and Agni Purana! Yama Dharma Raja performed Tapasya to Maha Vishnu by assuming the form of a Vrishabha or a bull and secured his Darshan and thus this Mountain is known as Vrishabhaadri. When in his ecstasy as Maha Vishnu appeared before Yama, the latter danced and from the 'nripura maala' or a string of trinket bells tied around his feet fell out a bell that materialised a water spring called Nripu Ganga, stated to be a wash out of sins by taking bath in it. One needs to purify by the body bath and enter the Temple of Bhagavan Alagar and the original installation of Sundara Raja Narayana / Kalagar along with Sridevi and Bhudevis on either side was performed by Yama Dharma Raja himself. None knows as to when the construction of the Temple was made but the belief is that Shri Poigai Alwar, Bhutattalwar and Payalvar are traced back to have venerated the Idols even during Dwapara Yuga times as given in Vaishnava Scriptures. Even Pandavas along with Draupadi Devi visited the Temple and stayed in the cave of the Mountain worshipping Alagar Bhagavan and till date there is a Pandava Shayya or the bed rocks in the cave during their 'Agnata Vaasa' or Living In-cognito following their agreement with Kauravas as they lost the bet in a dice game. The daily abhisheka of the Main Deity continues to be performed by the Nripura Sarovara water only since any other type tends to discolour the Deity. Karuppu Swami is venerated with daily pujas as he is the guardian of the entire establishment at the Temple. A grand festival is celebrated now for five days on Chaitra Shukla Chaturdashi as Bhagavan Sunderraja on the Purnima day commences his Yatra from Madurai reaching Nanduiyur after crossing Vegavati River, rest overnights there, reach Tenur, Ramaraya Mandapa, Mysore Raja Mandapa and return to Vrishabhadri on the fifth day. Another such festival for five days is also organised from Ashadha Shukla Purnima.

Shivakashi : This 'Tirtha Sthala' distant from Madurai by 16 km where there is a Sri Krishna Mandir with four arms carrying shankha, chakra, gadaa, padma is stated to be the Capital of Banaasura whose daughter Usha was wedded to Aniruddha, the grandson of Lord Krishna. The story of the wedding is interesting: The grandson of Bali Chakravarti of Patala Loka of Vamanavatara fame, Banasura had a daughter Usha who fell in love with Aniruddha the son of Pradyumna, whose father was Lord Krishna and Devi Rukmini. On her insistence to invite Aniruddha to her Palace, Banasura finally agreed but Aniruddha was imprisoned by Banasura. This led to a big battle with Krishna, Balarama and Yadavas against Asuras. Krishna severed Banasura's head by Sudarshana Chakra but Banasura got saved as he was a great devotee of Shiva, besides Usha was an exceptional devotee of Devi Parvati too; the dispute was amicably resolved by Banasura's consenting to the wedding of Usha and 'Aniruddha'!

Srivilliputtur, Shankaranayanar koil, Tenkashi, Kutralam, Tirunalveli, Tiruchendur and Totadri:

Srivilliputtur: Famed for Rangamannar Mandir, this Place is some 16 km from Viruddhunagar the birthplace of Perialwar Vishnuchitta Swami, whose daughter Andal or Godamba, stated to be of Devi Lakshmi's Manifestation. This hallowed Place is the abode of Ranganatha / Ranga Mannar as affectionately popular. The Ranganatha Mandir is known for wall paintings depicting Bhagavat Leelas and Incidents of Maha Bharata. At the Sanctum of the Temple are the Idols of Ranganatha and Godamba. At this Temple itself is situated another Mandir underneath which is the Murti of Bhagavan Nrisimha and on the upper level is Seshashayi Vishnu with Devi Lakshmi at his feet, besides Vatapatrashayi Murti in

the company of Garuda Deva and of Maharhis like Durvasa. Nearby the Rangmannar Temple is a Sarovar where Andal Devi used to bathe. Some distance away is Shiva Linga Vishwanatha and a separate Parvati Mandir, where Shiva Ratri Festival is observed. Further to the Shiva Temple is situated a Lord Venkateshwara Mandir with Sridevi and Bhudevis. *Shankarnarayana Koil* is a unique presentation of Shankara and Narayana as half body parts as in the concept of Arthanareeshvara of Shiva- Parvati; interestingly the Hari-Hara Deva Idol is installed in between the two separate Murtis of Shankara and Narayana!

Tenkashi: is some 50 km from Virudhnagar, known as Dakshina Kashi, where there is Kashinatha Linga is installed; unfortunately, the gopura of the central part of the Temple was hit by a lightning since reconstructed; the Mandapa outside the Gopura displays Idols of Veerabhadra, Bhairava, Kamadeva, Devi Rati, Venugopala, Nataraja, Shiva Tandava, etc. are on display as these Idols are large in size attracting ready attention. Besides the Shiva Linga, there is a big Mandir of Devi Parvati separately. From Tenkashi within about a km are the well -known *Kutralam Water Falls* among the picturesque settings of Western Ghats, especially the pride of Tirunalveli Dt. in Tamilnadu. The Water Falls are plenty but the major ones of a maximum height are of some 520 ft and they all originate from Tambaraparani River besides many seasonal rivers. The best months to enjoy the visits are from June-September as the climate changes with excessive rains and floods. The falls classified are the major, medium and minor ones and those major ones approachable are of the heights mentioned. A number of yatris are attracted by several temples and worship places but tourists with families have facilities of boat houses, snake parks, aquaria, children parks and resorts.

Tirunelveli: On the banks of Tamraparni is a Place of significant Temples, mainly the Nilappaleshwara Shankara Mandir, Varadaraja Mandir, Subramanya Mandir, and Kantimati Amba (Devi Parvati) Mandir. Actually, the Shankara Mandir is the prime Temple comprising the Nilappaleshwara Swayambhu Maha Linga and its second part is Parvati Mandir. Yatris first perform snaanas first at Tamraparni and worship Shankara and then into the Parvati mandir, where after the Subramanya. Outside this Temple complex is the Teppakullam Sarovara, Sahasra Stambha Mandapa; right opposite the Main Temple are two golden pillars and a big Nandi Murti. Indeed the Prime Temple Complex is the dominating factor in the Township. From Tirunalveli to Amba Samudra Station of about 18-20 km is *Paapa nashana Tirtha* where Tamaraparna falls by 50 feet approx from mountains and that Kund indeed is Paapannashana. Shiva Purana and Kurma Purana both eulogize the Mahatmmy of this Tirtha is the destroyer of all sins after taking dipsj in this Tirtha.

Tiruchendur is among the Five most famous and Sacred Subrahmanya Tirthas in Bharat, viz. *Swami Malai, Tiruttani, Tiru- chendur, Palani and Tirukundram*. Tiruchendur is on the shores of the Sea and normally yatris perform Samudra Snana before entering this Sacred Kshetra, which has a large Mandapa after crossing which only the Main Temple unfolds the Lord's darshan. The Golden Murti of the Lord Swami Kartikeya is indeed brilliant both in terms readily arresting features and shape as also the artistic attraction readily experiencing inner vibration of feelings.

Tothadri / Nanganeri: From Tirunalveli to one of this extraordinary Vaishnva Kshetras of Dakshia Bharata, near to the heart of Ramanujacharya is Tothadri which is some 12-13 km. This is one of the prime Moola Peethas of Ramanujacharya whose Upa danda, Kashthasana or the Seat on which he sat, the Shankha-Chakra Mudras as always cherished by him are still preserved. The legendary belief is that at the Pushkarini Tirthan at this Place, devotees while performing snaana-anushthaana discovered the Sri Murti of Bhagavan. The Vighraha of Vishnu Bhagavan as seated under the care of 'Sesha phana Chhatra' or the Umbrella of Sesha Naaga hoods along with the Murtis of Sri Devi and Bhu Devi was then installed and regular 'Tailabhishekas' are performed and half the oils so used is deposited in the Pushkarni which is taken by bhaktas for curing several incurable skin and other diseases borne by wind and indigestion since the waters of Pushkarini have herbal values added to the oil from the Abhishekas.

Pillaiyar patti, Bhirava patti, Tirukoshtam: Eleven km from Karaikudi located at Tirupattur known for Tiruttalli Nathar Tevara Temple in Shivaganga Dt. the famous *Pilliyarpati* rock-cut cave Temple of Karpaga Vinayaka of 6 ft with his trunk hurled to the right side rather uncommonly, built by Pandya Kings in some 4th century; this ancient but excellently organised Temple is hailed as the Seat of Fulfillment drawing devotees from far of Places, also especially to the Naga Linga Parameshwara and Devi Katyayani desirous of 'Santana' or progeny and 'Vivaha' respectively. Besides a ten day long festival coinciding with the Ganapati Chaturthi, all the Chaturthi Tithis year long are the major attractions at the Temple with fasts, special pujas and austerities, besides the Shiva Ratri and Nava Ratri Celebrations, apart from organising marriages in the presence of Katyayani Devi. *Bhairava patti* in a exclusive Temple to worship Lord Bhairava with daily Abhishekas and worships. This indeed is an uncommon feature where Lord Bhairava is worshipped not as an accompaniment to Shivalayas but with exclusive attention like at Ujjain and Kashi, where Bhairavopasakas are specialists!

Tirukoshtam: Some 10km from Tirupattur on Trichy-Shiva Ganga highway, 50 km from Shiva Ganga and hadly 15-16 km from Karaikudi is Tirukoshtam where Tri Murtis conferred each other as to how to exterminate Hiranyakashipu and was also the birthplace of Nambi Andar the Preceptor of Ramanuja Acharya. More so, this hots the famed Tirukoshtur Temple where Lord Perumal is worshipped in a four tier structure in distinct postures as Bhagavan Ktishna in dance form, Soumya Narayana as in shayana / reclining posture, Adheeshta Narayana and the final one as Paramapada natha. It was at the top tier that Ramanujacharya was administerd the Ashtakshari Mantra *Namo Narayanaya namah* by his Guru Nambi Adar in the presence of Swami Narasimmha. To learn this mantra, Ramaujacharya is stated to have visited 17 times from Srirangam but the Guru declined to meet him each time; as and when he knocked at the Guru's door, he introduced himself as 'Ramanuja has arrived' but there was no response and finally on the 18th time he announced saying ' your beloved Ramanuja has arrived and the Guru opened the door. The legend is recalled that having conferred like wise at Ahobilam another famed Vaishnava Sthala for planning the termination of Hiranyaaksha by Vishnu's 'Varahavataara' in the past, this would be another 'Goshti' or serious discussion since Hiranyakshpu achieved the boon of non execution of a species of neither a man nor animal and not even a Deva. At the Goshti finally it was decided that the Asura could be killed by a special species viz. Nara + Simha or Narasimha! Hence the solution arrived was that Hiranyakashipu could be killed despite the boon received by the demon. The festivals observed at the

Temple are Chitrai Tiruvila (April-May), Maasi Magham (Feb-March) and Adipooram (July-Aug) each for 10 days.

Chidambaram and Tirthas nearby and Tiruvayur:

Chidambaram: Located from some 150km from Chennai, Chidambaram-‘Chit Ambara’ - is the reputed Shiva Sthaana hosting the unique Nata Raja manifestation of Maha Deva and the Akasha Linga, being one of the Pancha Bhutas viz. Prithivi-Aapas-Tejas-Vayu-Akasha. As Akasha (Sky) is represented here, Prithvi Linga is at the Ekambareshwara Temple at Kanchi pura, Aapas or Jala Linga at Tiruvanaikkaaval, Agni Linga at Annamalai- all in Tamilnadu and Vayu Linga at Kalahasti in Andhra Pradesh; as to why Chidambaram is the Abode of Nata Raja as also of the Shiva Linga the legend explains as follows: Once Parama Shiva decided to test the efficacy of the Mantras, Nitya Karmas, Homa Karyas, and austerities being observed steadfastly and in extremities by Sages, even non-disregarding the ultimate objective of accomplishing the Supreme Paramatma. He donned the form of a Bhikshu or mendicant and asked Vishnu to assume the forms of two damsels of extraordinary beauty and grace of Mohini the Enchantress. The disturbed Sages from their rituals used Mantras to create poisonous snakes and released them but Maha Deva wore them all over his body as ornaments. The Sages materialised cruel animals like tigers but Shiva donned as tiger skins around his waist. They created fierce wild elephants and like killing Gajasura he smashed all the wild elephants and wore elephant skins around. As a last resort, the enraged Munis created a huge devil called Muyalakan with all their Mantra Shakti but Shiva immobilised him and having assuming a mild smile performed Tandava Dance by filling up the Sky when the Sages prostrated and realised the excessive and limitless rituals would be counter productive for Realisation. Historical references of the Chidambara Temple as evidenced in Tamil literature date back 7th century AD and available inscriptions establish that CholaKings were the active builders of the Temple complex over a sprawling 40 acre area in the heart of the City. The main Mandir is of Nataraja Shiva inside the fifth enclosure; at the third enclosure after the entrance has Ganesh Mandir and at the end of the fourth enclosure is large Nandi as also a few smaller Mandirs also. Facing the Main Mandir and within the fourth enclosure itself is a Sabha Mandapa around which are smaller temples and ahead of the Mandapa is a gold coloured pillar; the high rise Main Mandir’s entry gate lead one to the Golden Murti of ‘Natya bhangima’ Nataraja or dance posed Shiva, with his right foot raised posturing typical ‘tandava natya mudra’ surrounded by golden idols of Parvati also of celestial music experts Tumbura, Naradaadis. To the side of the Nataraja there is a block of Yantra and on it a blue coloured Akasha Lingas which are visible clearly at the timings of Abhisheka on the mornings and nights, one being of Sphatika and another of Nila Mani, besides which is southward Shankha: the *Sphatikamani Murti is called Chandra- mouleeswara and the Neelamani Murti is named Ratnasabhapati/* As one climbs down steps at the exit and secures darshan of Nataraja, one finds Govindaraja Mandir in which Narayana is as of sesha shayi posture, besides Lakshmi and other Parikrama Idols; there is also a separate Lakshmi Mandir in which the Idol is named Pundarikavalli. In the fourth enclosure are the Murtis of Bhagavan Shankara with Parvati seated on his lap. Besides, Hanuman’s silver Murti, Nava Grahas and 64 Yoginis are placed. There is an independent Mandir of Devi Parvati in the south west of the fourth enclosure. To the north of the fourth enclosure there is another Mandir of Nataraj, before which is the Sabha Mandapa, as also many Shankara maya Linga vigrahas and among these is the Moola Vighraha of Chidambara, whose side are placed the Murtis of

Sages Vyagrahapaada and Patanjali whose deep veneration led to Shankar's appearance and the performance of Tandava Nritya or the dance of ecstasy, besides the gifting of Tandava Nataraja, since installed as the Adi Deva Shankara! Outside the two enclosures of the main Mandir is the Shiva Ganga sarovara called Hema Pushkarini and Shiva Kaami Sundari Parvati Mandir, opposite which is the Subrahmanya Mandira where the Lord is known as Mayura Swai Kartikeya. Crossing the Shiva Ganga Sarovara is the Sabha Mandapa called Sahasra Stambha Mandapa. The nearby Tirtha places are *Tiruvetkalam* where Arjuna secured Pashupatastra from Maha Deva a two Temples of Shankara and Parvati are in Position; *Varemaadevi* with Varema Devi with Veda Narayana Mandiras; *Vridhachalam* where Vibhoshita Rishi worshipped Maha Deva and a Shiva Linga-Parvati Temple was built; *Shiyali* where Brahma Purishwara Shiva Mandir where Brahmapureshwara Shiva Linga and Tripurasundari Devi Mandir are in position, where the illustrious Shaivacharya named Tirujnaana Sambandha worshipped and drank Devi Parvati's breast milk and Maha Deva himself administered Inaanopadesha; *Vaideeshwara Koel* where Vaidyanatha Linga, Bhagavati Parvati, Swami Kartika Mandirs are in position and this Place is noted for Bala Mundana Samskara for which parents from far and near take their children for the same. *Tiruvengkadu* also called Swetaranya where Aghora Murti Mandira presents Maha Deva's Roudra Swarupa is the Main Deity; Marutwasura the son of Jalandhaasura harassed Devas who prayed to Mahadeva and the latter commissioned Nandiswara who in turn lifted up and threw away the Asura into the High Seas; the cowardly and schemy Asura made an appeal to Maha Deva without the knowledge of Nandeeshwara and the merciful Parama Shiva gifted a Trishula to him. But the wily Asura attacked Nandi with the Trishula thus gifted by Shiva receded and brought the fact of Trishula being used against Nandi himself but meanwhile Nandi found his own tail was damaged by the Trishula! On knowing of this, Shiva was infuriated on knowing this and having assumed the Swarupa of Aghora Swarupa and instantly killed the Asura. As this legendary background was dug up in the form of an ancient rock in Tamil, a Chola King raised a Mandir of Aghora Roudra Shiva and gifted a golden vessel for regular worship besides a Padmaraaga Mani chain to the Lord. *Mayavaram* which is about 15 km from Chidambaram also known locally as Tirumayilaaduturai is known for Mayureshwara Shiva Linga Mandir and Abhayamba Devi Parvati also called Anchala Devi. The Story believed locally is that at the time of Daksha Yagna when Rudra Ganas were devastating the Yagna, a Female Peacock got frightened and requested for the protection of Devi Sati. The latter while jumping into the Homa Kunda recalled the request of the bird and assumed the form of Mayuri or Peacock and worshipped Maha Deva. Subsequently the Mayuri assumed the form of Devi Parvati. Since Parvati had earlier assumed the form of Mayuri and provided Abhaya or Fearlessness Devi Parvati had since been known as Abhayambika.

Tiruvaarur: Some 15 km from Mayavaram or 22 km from Tanjore, is the highly famous *Thyagaraja Mandir*, which incidentally has the widest of Gopurams in Southern India; and as the Thyagaraja - Araadhana Kshetra. As Shiva Murti is aptly called in his Mandir, the Vighraha of Devi Parvati is known as Neelotpalaambika. Outside the Temple are the Vighrahas of Ganesha and Kartikeya, besides the Nandi Swarupa which is acclaimed as a Sarva Pashu roga nivarini or the Insant Curer of cattle diseases. Ahead of Nandi is the Tapaswini Swarupi Parvati named as Kamalambal with four hands carrying Varamudra or the sign of refuge, Maala or garland, Paasha, and Kamala and this Murti is locally believed as one of the Para Shakti Peethas called Akshara Peethas. This hallowed Place is not only the birth place of Thyagaraja, but also of Muttu Swami Dikshitar and Shyama Shastri the other illustrious names popular for eternal Art of singing, poetry and lyrics. At Achaleshwara it is stated tat the Shadow of Shiva Limtga falls only in the

Eastern side and no other side; there are also Mandirs of Hatakeswara, Anandeswara, Siddheswara etc. Two interesting features of The Tyagarajeshwara Mandir are of the Chariot at the Shiva Mandir with several small Mandirs such as of Dandapani, Neelakantha, etc. as also a Sarovara with many Lotus ponds and as many as 64 Ghats!

Kumbakonam and Nava Graha Kshetras nearby: Kumbhakonam is some 40 km from Tanjore and 275 km from Chennai and it literally denotes the Kona of Kumbha or the nozzle corner of the giant jar or container named Universe within which the seeds of Charaachara Srishti or Creation of all Living Beings are enveloped and preserved by Brahma the Supreme Creator, at the time of Pralaya the Great Dissolution with a view to resume Creation thereafter! This Mystic City of Dakshina Bharat is aptly called the City of Temples and is bound by two Rivers viz. Cauvery and Arasalar, celebrating Maha Magha once in twelve years in the Maha Magha Sarovara right in the heart of the City. *Kumbheshwara Temple* is stated to be the foremost one in the City with a high rise gopura and large area around with Kumbheshwara Linga as the center piece of the shape of a Kumbha or a Pot and within this Main Temple itself is enclosed another Mandir of Devi Parvati with the name of Mangalambika, while the Murtis of Ganesha, Subrahmanya and other Shiva Parivara are also in the Parikrama or Pradakshina. *Nageswara Temple* is situated even on the way from Maha Magha Sarovara to Kumbheshwara Temple where again is the Shiva Linga named Nageshwara besides a separate Devi Parvati Mandir. There is a prominent Mandir of Surya Narayana who is an ardent devotee of Lord Shiva and it is stated that on certain days in a year the Sun Rays directly fall on the Nageshwara Linga. Another significant Temple in the City of Kumbhakonam is that of *Rama Swami* some distance away from Kumbheshwara Temple where as stated the Murtis that appeared in a water pond of a nearby village called Daraasuram were installed. This Temple is known for the artistic excellence of wall paintings depicting from the birth of Shri Rama till Sita Rama Kalyana. *Sharangapani Temple* with Chaturbhuja Seshashaayi Narayana with Sri Devi-Bhudevi at his feet as the Main Temple and also an independent Lakshmi Mandir are the attractions apart from a Chariot drawn by an elephant as an indication that Sharangapani Bhagavan landed from Vaikuntha down to the Temple. The episode behind this stated as follows: Bhrigu Maharshi visited Vaikuntha once but Vishnu was engrossed with Lakshmi Devi and feigned that Bhrigu arrived as Bhrigu felt hurt and banged his feet on Vishnu's chest the abode of Lakshmi; despite the fact that Lakshmi would be annoyed with the incident, Vishnu apologised to Bhrigu what it was his mistake that he did not receive Bhrigu properly; Lakshmi felt that this was an insult to her and came down to Bhu Loka assuming the form of a Rishi Kanya. Vishnu could not bear Lakshmi's absence and landed by a chariot to Bhu Loka from Vaikuntha. Then the wedding of Rishi Kanya with Vishnu as Saarangapaani got consummated! Thus the separate Mandirs at this Temple too! *Veda Narayana Temple* near Kumbhakonam recalls the definition of Kumbha in the Introductory part of the Script above on Kumbhakonam: Brahma performed Yagna at the beginning of Srishti and Veda Narayana Bhagavan appeared and blessed Brahma to initiate Creation after the Pralaya since he preserved the seeds of all Beings in the Kumbha before the Pralaya. Within Kumbhakonam City itself, there are quite a few other Temples of significance such as Kashi Vishwanatha and Vishakalakshi Temple opposite Maha Magha Tank; Chakrapani Temple and Varaha Perumal Temple near Ramaswami Temple and so on.

Nava Graha Temples near Kumbhakonam: *Japaa kusuma sankasham Kaashyapeyam mahaa dyutim Tamorim, sarva paapagham pranatosmi Divakaram/* This is how one prays to Surya Narayana at one's first darshan of Sun early morning as Divakara the Day long Deity and the proud son of Kashyapa Muni who shines day long with the brightness of the hues of Japakuksma flowers demolishing darkness and all kinds of sins. **Surya Narayana Koyil** which is near Kumbhakonam by 18 km is famed for the Sun-worshipping Chola Kings in 10th century built with stone as Surya depicted in a seven horse drawn flying chariot faced west, along with other shrines of Kasi Vishwanatha, Devi Visalakshi, Brihaspati and Kol Tirtha Vinayaka in the vicinity demanding nine Pradakshinas of the complex. It is stated that before paying respects at the Suryanarayana Kovil, one is required to pay homage at Tirumangalakkudi Shiva sthalam near Mayladutturai at Pranateshwara and Mangala Nayaki as Devi Parvati was rid of a curse to become a parrot and got re-wedded as Mangala on Makara Sankranti day and hence the Place known as Mangala Kshetra celebrating festival there. Makara Saptami / Ratha Saptami in Maagha Month-coinciding with Tamil Thai month-is an important festival at the Suryanarayana Koil.

Tingalur Chandra/ Kailasa natha Temple some 18 km away from Kumbhakonam, where the main Idol Shiva as Kaisasha natha but is basically dedicated to Chanda Deva. *Dadhi shankha tushaaraabham ksheeraarnava samudbhavam, Namaami Sashinam Somam Shambhor makuta bhushanam/* Materialised from the Ocean of Milk and adorned as Maha Deva's shining headgear ornament, Chandra Deva is hereby venerated; indeed Chandra is the Lord of Health and Medicines as also of Peace and Tranquility. There is a separate Shrine of the Lord Chandra at the Kalasha natha Temple. The legend of this Chandra Kshetra reveals that a Nayanar was a great devotee of Appaar viz. Parama Shiva and one day he decided to worship at his residence with piety and pomp by calling his friends, associates and neighbours at an appropriate function. Unfortunately, the son of the Nayanar was bitten by a poisonous snake during the puja. The Nayanar family was shattered at the misfortune but instead of blaming Appan for the misfortune, intensified his prayers undaunted even while the son was almost dying. Appar directed Chandra the God of Medicines and Good Health to cure the child and reverse his condition of sinking due to the effect of poison. The ever grateful Nayanar broke into tearful prayers and in the company of the co-devotees sang praises of Chandra Deva and the Adi Deva Appar and celebrated the devotional function.

Vaitheeswara Koil of Angaraka: *Dharani garbhasambhutam Vidyurkanti sama prabham, Kumaram Shakti hastam tam Mangalam pranamaamyaham/* Being the son of Bhu Devi Mangala Deva is of the flashy brightness of a Lightning and he too like Lord Subrahmanya the embodiment of Power and Courage ever worthy of worship. The Temple of Lord Vaideeswaran the Supreme Deity of Healing and of Medical Treatment as the key to Arogya or Health is situated some 27 km of Chidambaram and 52km from Kumbhakonam. Built by Kulottunga Chola of 11th century, Vaideeswaran Temple encompasses large precincts with a 5tier Gopuram with its principal Sanctum dedicated to Vaideeswara Linga and a metal image of Muttukumara Subramanya, besides those of Nataraja, Soma Skanda, Angaraka as also stone sculptures of Durga, Dakshina murti, Surya, Jatayu, Vedas and Sampatti. Temples of Taila Nayaki standing with medical oils to cure diseases and another of Dhanvantari and Angaraka are in Place, besides a Vriksha Sthala with medicinal properties in the vicinity. Nadi Jyotisha written in Tamil Script is practised in Vaideeswaran extensively and near the Temple. Brahmotsavas during January- February,

Kartigai Festival during November and Kanti Shashtis at Muttukumara Temple are big draws besides on Tuesdays.

Swetaarayaneshwara-Brahma Vidya Devi Temple at Tiruvengadu , some 10 km from Sirkali and 60 km from Kumbhakonam is essentially a **Budha Temple: Priyangu kalikaa Shyamam rupenaa pratimam Budham, Soumyam Soumya gunopetam tam Budham pranamaamyaham**/To you the ever lovable and pleasing faced Budha Deva with placid and cool temperament, as the blessed son of Chandra Deva, our warm Salutations! Agora Murti the placid and tranquil manifestation of the usually angry antithesis of the Tamasika Swarupa of Maha Deva; like Budha among the Nava Grahas, Maha Deva assumes a form of High Learning and Unparalleled Maturity. Yet, even of smooth and suave temperament, He like Budha Graha, deals with the evil with coolness and unmistakable precision. This was how like of Aghora qualities eliminated Padmasura who unnecessarily clashed with Rishis and the virtuous Brahmanas and interfered with their yagnas and acts of virtue as puffed up by egoism and selfishness. The Chariot Festival at this Aghora Shiva Temple, is a natural phenomenon of the determination of Maha Deva to punish the evil but with the composed temperament typical of Budha, notwithstanding the fact that Agora a Swarupa of Veerabhadra still sustains maturity with a purpose!

Alangudi **Guru Sthalam: Devanaamcha Risheenamcha Gurum kanchana sannibham, Buddhi bhutam Trilokesham tam namaami Brihaspatim**/ (I salute Brihaspati the Grand Guide and Mentor to Devas and Rishis who is like the molten gold with which to create Celestial Ornaments of Virtue and Existence; he is the One who leads to Knowledge and Mental Sharpness with which to lead to Supreme Realisation). Well within a distance of 18 km. the Apat Sahayeswara Temple of Parama Shiva who was the ‘Garala Kantha’ or the Singular Devourer of Deadly Poisonous Flames called ‘Haalaahala’ that engulfed the Universe and saved the very Existence or Creation as Deva Danavas ventured to materialise Amrit! Indeed He is the Saviour of Dangers and Obstacles in human life! Besides the Temple of Apat kaala Sahaaya or the Unique Refuge Point to Devotees, Alangudi Guru Sthala is also the Abode of Dakshina Murti the Unparalleled Advisor of Virtue and Righteousness viz. Brihaspati. Indeed the Illustrious Nayanars or Shaivite Poet Saints were never tired of the glories of Maha Deva.

Shukra as Agnishwara Temple at Kanjanor some 20 km. from Kumbhakonam is popular since Shukra is identified as Parama Shiva himself in the Linga Swarupa which is omnipresent and all-pervading: *Himakunda tushaaraabham daityaanaam paramam gurum, Sarva shastra pravaktaaram Bhargavam pranamaamyaham*/ Built by late Chola Kings and renovated by Krishna deva Raya of Vijayanagar Empire, this famed Shukra Temple is stated as Shukra within Maha Deva. Maha Deva represents both the virtuous and vicious aspects of Srishti and seeks to balance shades of darkness and brightness alike. Universe as created by the Supreme is indeed a mix of Satwa-Rajasika-Tamo Gunas and if there were a Deva Guru, there ought to be a representation of a Shukra too as the Danava-Daithya-Rakshasa Guru and between the two, transgression of limits neither way is permitted; after all in the scheme of events complete perfection is not possible and to err is human but the playful Almighty ensures that the frontiers of Good and Bad are ably guarded with built-in checks and balances! The legendary belief of Agnishwarar Temple at Kanjanor is that Shiva obliged Parashara Muni the father of Veda Vyasa with a

performance of Cosmic Dance at this Temple, bringing amply out about this aspect of Srishti to balance the impulses of life!

Shaneshwara Temple at Tirunallar is 55 km away from Kumbhakonam called Darbhaaranyam in the past or the Forest of Darbhas or kusha grass, utilised in all Sacred Acts or Deva- Pitru Karyas.

Darbhaaranyeshwara Linga is the Prime Dety worshipped at thus Temple which is essentially of Shaneshwara or Shiva as Shani Deva. *Neelaanjana samaabhaasam Ravi putram Yamaagrajam Chaayaa Martaandasambhutam tam namaami Shanaishacharam/* (My salutations to you Shani Devata! You are of the splendour of blue saffires and as the illustrious son of Surya Deva and elder brother of Lord Yama Dharma Raja; you are also the son of Chhaya Devi, the alter form of Sanjana Devi).[Sanjana Devi the daughter of Vishwakarma was unable to withstand the oppressive heat and radiance of Surya Deva and could see him excepting wobbly and unsteady eyes. Their union gave birth to Vaivaswata Manu and Yama Dharma Raja. But the annoyed Surya cursed Sanjana that she would give birth to a female as a river whose course was uneven and unsteady. Then Sanjana created a Chhaya Sanjana (her shadow), briefed her and left for his father and since the latter too was upset, assumed the form of a mare to perform Tapasya to reduce the severity of Surya. Then meanwhile Shanaischara was born to Chhaya Devi. Surya on knowing the truth assumed the form of a horse and their mating led to the birth of Revanta. Later on the Sanjana-Chhaya combine gave Surya the blessing of the birth of Ashwini Kumars, the physicians of Devas]. The Shaneshwara Temple at Tirunallar mainly displays the Darbhaaranyeshwara stated to have been made of Darbhas and is essentially embodied as Shaneshwara. Worship and Abhishekas to Darbheshwara are learnt to represent those of Shaneshwara as Maha Deva represents the aspects of Lord Shaneshwara as well. Both the Temples of this and that of the neighbouring Tiruvallur's Temple- as built in 7th century by Chola Kings- highlight two principal aspects of retribution-reward of Shanaischara and of Sangita-Natya of Fine Arts represented by at Nataraja do signify indeed the two features of Maha Deva!

Rahu Sthala or Tiru Nageswaram is the Sacred and widely acclaimed Abode of Rahu Graha as embodied in the Maha Naga Natha Linga is hardly 6 km away from Kumbhakonam right on the banks of Kaveri River prayed to as follows: *Artha kaayam Maha Veeram Chandraditya vimardanam Simhika garbha sambhutam tam Rahum pranamaamyaham/* (Rahu Deva! You possess half divine and half serpent physical form. You are the son of Simhika Devi the daughter of Hiranya kashipu; a valiant and resourceful champion of Ksheera Sagara Mathana leading to the emergence of Amrita and the punisher of Surya and Chandra even! My sincere salutations to you!) This Rahu Sthala is also called earlier as Sanbagaranya or the wild forest of Senbaga Trees infested by poisonous serpents. This is thus the habitat of Naganatha Linga and Devi Parvati as Giri Gujambal to whose Swarupas that Indra performed deep Tapasya to, to absolve a curse by Maharshi Gautami since he tricked and molested Ahalya the latter's wife. Tiru Nageshwara is also distinguished as the hallowed Place where the illustrious Maha Sarpas like Adi Sesha, Karkotaka and Takshaka lined up for Tapasya to Maha Deva and secured their blessings. The Temple complex is a master piece of typical Cholan Architecture stated to have been built in 10th Century with excellent campus of four gates, with the Main Naga natha Linga, and separate shrines for Piramani Parvati, Giri Gujamba Parvati, Rahu Deva with his spouses, Vinayaka with Ganesha Yantra as per inscription, and of course Nandi before Naga natha. The Rituals are regular six times daily and

highly crowded daily Rahu Abhishakas as per respective Rahu Kala Prathamas; holiday Rahu Kaala Abhishekas are extraordinary. *A fantastic feature of the Rahu kaala Abhishakas is the clearly visible sight of white milk turning blue and crowds crave to see the same!* The easy and traditional way of learning one-and half duration of daily Rahu Kaala is on the basis of the following viz. *Mother Saw Father Wearing The Two Socks* to count 7.30 to 9 Am, 9-10 .30 Am, 10.30 to noon, 12 to 1.30 pm, 1.30 pm-3 pm, 3 pm- 4. 30 pm and 4.30-6 pm.

Ketu Sthala: is 57 km from Kumbhakonam and just 2 km from Pompuhar at Keela perumalpaalam as the Temple of Naganatha Swami and Soundarya Nayaki ie. Shiva and Parvati Swarupas. *Palasha pushpa sankasham taarakagraha mastakam, Roudram Roudratmakam ghoram tam Ketum pranamaamyaham/ Iti Vyasa mukod geetam yah pathetsu samaahitam Divaavaa yadivaa ratrou avighna shantir bhavishyati/* (Our salutations to you Ketu Deva! You are of the brightness of Palasa flowers placed on your hood which is at the top of Stars and Grahas. You are indeed frightening, breathtaking and spiteful. Do kindly pardon my shortcomings and be forgiving! If one recites the entire Navagraha Stotra from Surya Deva onward to all the Nava Grahas sincerely as Scripted by Veda Vyasa himself day and night then there would never be obstacles in daily life but would get fulfillment of wishes and contentment). At this Temple, ‘vidhi poorvaka snanas’ in the Naaga Tirtha would indeed bestow happiness and peace of mind with the blessings of Naga natha and Soundarya Naayaki well settled in this Temple.

Tanjavur, Trichi/ Srirangam, Jambukeshwara, Swami Malai, Palani and Tiruttani: From Kumbhakonam to Tanjavur is 15km on the banks of Kaveri is the abode of *Brihadeeshwara* Temple built in a Fort. Chola King Raja Rajeshwar dreamt once that Maha Deva instructed him to bring a huge Brihadeeshwara Linga be brought from Narmada River and accordingly this Sand Linga was brought and got installed. But then the King wondered as to where a matching Vighra of large size of Nandi be fetched from and Maha Deva again provided a hint about the Place distant by 250 km therefrom. This massive Nandi cut from solid stone is 13 feet high, 16 feet long and six feet of thickness, brought immense problem of transport! Opposite to the Nandi is the Huge Linga installed within 200 feet high Shikhara or tower on top of which was placed a Golden Kalasha which was a major task to lift atop as the kalasha was kept on a stone slab weighing 2200 maunds! Indeed there was no aid of cranes or other kinds of mechanical equipmen during those times and what was more there was no supply of mountain rock in the distant vicinity! Till date, thousands of architects and engineers overseas to witness these marvels of heavy stone work difficult even now! To the South -West of the Brihadeeshwara Linga is a Ganeswara Idol and on the western side is a beautiful Subrahmanya Mandir while at the North East is a Chandi Mandir. Towards the north of the high pedestal of Nandi is a Parvati Mandir while a pradakshina of the Maha Linga one would encounter a row of Shiva Lingas placed. Tanjavur is known for Paintings and a Saraswati Pustakaalaya or Library houses more than 25,000 collection of manuscripts of books in various languages which is stated to be exceptional in Bharat. The legendary background of Tanjavur was that this original name was Parashara Kshetra but a Demon named Tanja and many of his co -demons harassed Maharshis and the Public and a fierce battle with Devas broke out and Bhagavan Vishnu appeared on the sky as a morale booster to Devas and as the demons were all decimated, Tanja requested Vishnu as a dying wish that his name be immortalised with the Territory and as approved the name of Tanjapura sustained ! *Trichinapalli/ Shrirangam:* Like Nashik and Panchavati Godavari divides the Places, Kaveri divides Trichinapalli and

Shrirangam by 5 km. The legend of this twin city states that Rananasura's brothers Trishira and his brothers Khara-Dushaka ruled this Place as great Shiva Bhaktas and Lord Shri Rama killed them all 'en route' Sri Lanka in search of Devi Sita. There is a huge stone-built Nandi of 235 ft height overlooking the twin city which is popular as Dakshin Kailas. Trichinapalli's Main Mandir of Ganesha on a foot hill is the major attraction. A dilapidated SahasraMandapa, partly destroyed in an explosion in 1882 AD, is on hill approachable by 86 steps with Shiva and Parvati Mandiras. The Shiva Temple is famed as 'Taa Maanavar' as Parama Bhakta old man on travel along with his young pregnant daughter ripe for delivery faced the river Kaveri in spate having to halt overnight and intensely prayed to Maha Deva who appeared as an old woman and nursed the daughter through out the night as in the early hours of the next day delivered a boy. Hence the name of Taa maanvar or the Saving God as a Mother

Shriranagam: Descending from the Ganesha Temple on foot hills, across the bridge of Kaveri, one enters the way towards the renowned Shriranga Temple -Town occupying one of the largest areas in Bharat with several enclosures containing roads and shops; in the fourth enclosure itself is a Mandapa called Sahasra Stambha with literally 960 pillars. In the fifth enclosure is a Garuda Mandapa with a large sized Gududa Deva Idol as also Chandra Pushkarini where devotees take their bath; a Kalpa Vrisha, a Lakshmi Mandir, and Kamba Mandap where the immortal Tamil Poet Kamba who sang Kamba Ramayana to devoted audiences. Crossing the sixth enclosure and within the seventh enclosure to the Southern side is the golden 'shikhira' and inside the large hall is the much awaited sanctum of Bhagavan Shri Ranga, behind which are arranged Deva Murtis of Lakshmana, Vibhishana, Hanuma etc. Ranga natha is in the posture of lying on the bed of Adisesha and has four arms in bright blue colour and is under the several hoods of Adi Sesha; in front of Bhagavan are the seated Murtis of Devi Lakshmi and Vibheeshana, as also of the idols of Shri Devi and Bhudevi. A magnificent festival is celebrated from Pousha Prtatipada to Ekadashi called Vakuntha Ekadashi and crossing the Vaikuntha dwara on Ekadash is deemed as a golden opportunity to the bhaktas.

Jambukeshwara : Of the Pancha Bhuta Lingas of Maha Deva viz. Chidambara, Tirivunnamalai, Ekambareshwara, Kalahasti is Jambukeshwara representing 'Aapas' or water. Almost near Shrirangam, Jambukeshwara Linga facing a Mandapa of four hundred pillars, besides which is the 'Teppaakula Sarovara, amid which another Mandapa is there and at the Festival of Vaikuntha Ekadashi, the Utsava Viraha of Lord Shri Ranga is taken out and seated at this Jaa Madhya Mandapa. Jambukeshwara Linga within the fifth enclosure of the Temple is installed under incessant flow of water often streaming outside the Sanctum and one could then sight only the top portion of the Jala Linga. Behind the Sanctum there is a very aged Jamun Tree and hence the Prefix Title of 'Jambu' to Ishwara Linga. It is stated that Adi-Shankaraacharya performed Puja-Aaraathana to the Tree and in recent years Maha Swami of Kanchi Mutt who stayed at the Temple and on finding that this ancient tree was dried up badly, recited continuous Rudra Parayana for days and nights and ensured that the totally dried up tree gradually with small leaves and buds! Outside the Main Temple there is a Mandapa where several Murtis are kept as of Nataraja, Sumdrahmanya, Dakshina Murti. There is a separate Temple of Subrahmanya too. Around the Main Temple there are also quite a few Mandapas like of Shulana, Shata stambha, Sahasra Stambha, Navaratri, Vasanta, Dhawaja stambha, Soma Skanda, Nataraja, Tri Murti, etc. Outside the Temple is a Jagadamba Mandira in which the Devi's name is Akhilandeswari and right before it is a Ganesha Mandir. As the looks of Amba Devi were originally were so powerful and fierce earlier, Adi Shankaracharya during his visit here sought to lessen the looks of her by installing a Shri Yantra and install Ganesha Idol too. About

the old Jamun tree at the temple, there was a legend of an elephant and a spider both of which were silent devotees of the Jambu Linga; every morning the elephant showered water on the Linga with its trunk and overnight the spider used to weave a web around the Linga Swarupa as its decoration around it. The enraged elephant tried to kill the spider but the latter entered the trunk and bit it so badly that the elephant died too. The ever merciful Jambukeshwara bestowed kailasa prapti to both the ardent devotees as both the affected parties were justified in their own ways! This story is scripted in Tamil on a pillar near tree!

Swami Malai: One of significant six Subrahmanya Kshetras worthy of visit in Dakshina Bharat viz. Tiruttani, Palani, Tiruchendur, Tiruppuramkunnam and Palamudircholai is Swami Malai-literally meaning God's Hill- some 30 km near Kumbhakonam at an elevation of 82 ft. totally dedicated to Swami Nathan, called locally as 'Tagapan Swami' or Father God! The legendary background was that the Lord taught the true meaning of OM or Pranava to Maha Deva himself! As Brahma Deva failed to interpret the word adequately to Kumara Swami, he chided him; when Maha Deva asked Kumara to explain in a convincing manner, he analysed the depth of the meaning he did so even as the father learnt it intently as though a Teacher to a Vidyarthi! The Swami Malai Temple performs 'shat kaala dainika puja' or six worships a day round the year, besides celebrates many festivals like Krittikai every month, Rathotsava in April, Vishakha in May, Navaratri in May, Kanda Shashthi in October, Kartikai Utsav in November, Taipuccham in January and so on. The Golden Chariot utilised for all the festivals are made of 7 kg of gold and 85 kg of silver-copper alloy with sparkling illumination. There is a Sweta Vinayaka Temple made of white foam of Sea representing Ksheera sagara that created Amrit!

Palani: Some 38 km from Trichy and 100 km near Coimbatore is another Subrahmanya Kshetra of the reputed Six as mentioned above, the Abode of Dandayudhapani. There are two mythological references to this Temple; one is that since this Palani Hill was of the 'amsha' or of relationship with the highest mountain of the Universe viz. Meru, Sage Narada provoked Vindhya that the latter was, after all, not taller than Meru; this hurt Vindhya and tried to grow even taller as one side of the Universe was bright but the other side remained dark for ever since Sun became unreachable to the side at all. Parama Shiva asked Agastya Muni who was a resident of Kashi to teach a lesson to Vindhya; the Muni reached Vindhya who as a reverent to the Muni bent down and the Muni asked Vindhya never to stand. Agastya then moved to Dakshina Bharat to stay at Palani Hills for long before moving down further down to other Southern parts of Bharat. Another explanation about Palani Hills was that Sage Narada visited Kailasa to pay respects to Shiva and Parvati and gifted a Fruit of Jnana or Knowledge; he requested to conduct a test between Ganesha and Kartikeya viz. pradakshina or circumambulation of the Universe. Kartikeya instantly flew by his Peacock Vehicle while Ganesha performed a pradakshina and was rewarded with the Fruit. Kumara on return got furious and made Palani his abode as an ascetic assuming danda or a staff and 'koupeena' or loin cloth. Subsequently the parents Shiva and Parvati reached Palani to cajole the Dandayudhapani saying: *Gnaana paam nee Appa!* Or 'Indeed you are the personification of the fruit of Knowledge yourself, darling son!' There are daily worships including Kaala and Kaala Shanti Pujas- Alankaras-Aariti-Deepa- Swarna Raratha/ Golden Chariot Darshana. Festivals like Thai-Poosam/ Purnima, Tirtha Kavadi Yatras, Diamond Vel or Shula (javelin) yatras, Pankhuni Uttiram, Vaishakhas, Soora samhara etc. all drawing very large crowds, especially due to the rope way facility up the hill, although many climb by steps owing to vows with or without foot wear or by Kavadi slung on shoulders!

Tiruttani: Yet another among the six Subrahmanya Tirthas is of Murugan Temple at Tiruttani, near by the border of Andhra Pradesh and distant by 84 km from Chennai up a hill of 250 ft elevation connected by good hill motorable road. Besides the Sanctum of Muruga, there are Temples of Mkahashasura Mardini, Veera Anjaneya, Arumuga

Swami, Narasimha Swami, Mangaleshwara Shiva and so on. Beides Trikala Pujas and Deepa-aradhanas, festivals as observed at other Subrahmanya Tirthas as at Swami Malai are celebrated, especially Kanda Shashti, Nava Ratras, Kritikas and Vishakhas as also Shiva Ratri penances.

Tiruvannamalai / Arunaachalam: *Asti Dakshidirbhaage Dravideshu Tapodhana, Arunaakhyaam Maha Kshetram tyarunedu shikha manaih/ Yojanaatraya visteerna mupaasyam Shiva yogibhih, Tad Bhume hridayam viddhi Shivasya hridayangamam/ Tatra Devah swayam Shambhuh parvataakaara taam gatah, Arunaachala sangjnaavaanasti Lokahitaavahah/ Sumerorapi Kailaasaadpayasou mandaraadapi, Maaa niyo Maharshaanaam yah swayam Parameshwarah/* (Skanda Puraana Mahenda Khanda-Arunaa Mahatmyam) (Tapodhana! In the Southern direction of Bharaa Desha, Dravida Region, there is an outstanding Maha Kshetra of Bhagavan Chandra Shekhara called Arunaachala with a stretch of three yojanas, which must to be worshipped by Shiva bhaktas as this be considered as of their own heart. Bhagavan Shankara himself had materialised in the form of a Mountain range as Arunachala. As this range of Mountains had been created by Shankara himself, it should be considered as superior to Sumeru, Kailasa and Mandarachala!) Indeed , this Mountain range representing the Five Faces of Parama Shiva viz. *Tatpurusha, Aghora, Sadyojaata, Vaama Deva and Ishaana!* The essence of Arunachala Matatmya as detailed in Skanda Purana is as follows: Both Brahma and Vishnu witnessed one ‘Agni Sthumbh’ (Pillar of Fire) which was dazzling to eyes and emanating extraordinary heat, without beginning or end. Brahma’s Four faces recited Vedas and He performed ‘Manasik Puja’ (Worship by mind) and so did Lord Vishnu. Bhagavan Siva appeared and was pleased by their eulogies; they requested that His huge Form of Fire of unbearable radiance and heat be please reduced as a Siva Linga so that worship became possible to all including themselves, Devas and human beings. The gigantic form of the Fire Pillar then got converted as a ‘Sthavara Linga’ at Arunachal. Most interestingly, even at the time of ‘Pralaya’ (Great Dissolution), the entire Universe was submerged in water and there was no trace of Earth visible, the Land of Arunachala was never even touched! This Place is in the South of Bharat and Arunachal (Tiruvannamalai) is in the form of Mountain Range comprising the ‘Pancha Mukhas’ or the Five Faces of Lord Rudra viz. ‘Tatpurusha’, ‘Aghora’, ‘Sadyojata’, ‘Vamadeva’, ‘Eshana’ which are visible till date. Nandikeswara told Markandeya that this Sacred Region is like the heart of Devi Prithvi. This Arunachal is expected to be Parameswar Himself and a fourteen kilometre distance surrounding the Mountain is as good as a complete ‘Pradakshina’ (Circumambulation) of Lord Siva. A large number of persons perform the Pradakshina on every full moon night barefooted and Pournami of Chaitra Month is a very special day as over hundreds of thousands throng the Temple and the Mountain displaying sincere devotion from all over the World. A ten day long celebration culminating on the day of Karthika Deepam or lights day is a massive crowd puller; on that evening a huge lamp is lit in an open vessel with three tons of ghee from the mountain top. Among the ‘Pancha Bhutas’ (Five Elements), viz. Earth, Water, Fire, Wind and Sky, the Fire is the symbol of Arunachaleswar as a corollary of the Agni Stumbh referred to as above. (The ‘Tiruvannaikavil’/ ‘Jalakantheswara’ Linga represents Water, Kancheepuram / Ekambareswara Linga the Earth, Kalahasti represents Vayu and Chidambaram represents Akash or Sky). Nandikeswar told Markandeya that at the commencement of ‘Ayanas’ (Fortnights) or Vishuvyog times, worship to Arunachal Linga would be very propitious. Early morning puja is performed with ‘Tulasi’ leaves, the mid-day puja with ‘Amalataasa’ and Bel flowers in the evening. By chanting the ‘Aghora Mantra’ viz. *Aghorebhyothaghorebhyo Namasthey Asthu Rudra rupebhyaha/Tat Purushaaya Vidmahe Maha Devaaya dhimahi, tanno Rudrah Prachodayat/* a devotee performs ‘Abishekam’ (bath) with thousand ‘Kalasas’

(vessels) full of water. On 'Sivaratri', special puja is done with Bilvapatras by chanting 'Shata Rudreeyam', observe 'Jaagaran' (night long worship) and Puja with lotus, Ganera and such flowers as well as please the Lord with hymns, instrumental / vocal music and 'Tandava' (dance). The same kind of Puja is performed on birthdays, House warming, travel and such other Special occasions. Nandikeswara informed Markandeya further about Devi Parvathi's Tapasya to wed Lord Siva, their happy union and the birth of Ganesh and Skanda. Meanwhile, a demon duo named **Shumbh and Nikumbh** obtained the boon of invincibility from Brahma Deva and distressed Devas, Sages and virtuous human beings. Vishnu accompanied by Devas approached Maha Deva and He assured quick action against the demons. Parvati who was of dark complexion, desired to please Siva, discarded her dark skin and assumed the form of Kali Kaushiki. As she was doing penance at Vindhya Mountain, the demon brothers desired to marry her and she killed both of them. Subsequently, she was attracted by the scenic beauty of Arunachala and performed Tapasya at the Ashram of Sage Gautama. She kept Devi Durga to stand guard and also appointed Subhaga and Dhundhukumari to watch in all directions while she was in penance. At the same time, Demon **Mahishasur** created havoc in Devaloka and dethroned Indra and Devas. He heard about her beauty and sent an emissary to propose a match with her and Devi Parvati's representative had literally thrown him out. Mahishasur declared war. Powerful Danavas like Karaal, Dhurthar, Vichasunu, Vikaraal, Durmukh, Chanda, Prachanda, Mahamouli, Vikatekshan and Jwalasya were among the mighty demons that were lined up in offence. As there was considerable sound and confusion, Parvati Devi's Tapasya was disturbed and instructed Durga Devi to terminate the demons. Being in a lonely cave on Arunachal Mountain Durga Devi seated on a Lion and jumped onto Earth like Kalika and made frightening sounds. She created from her body crores of 'Matruka -ganas' who made such mayhem and slaughter of the Demons. Chamundi Devi slashed the heads of Chamunda and associates and finally Mahishasura entered the fray. Durga Herself jumped down from the Lion and by her several hands killed Prachanda with Her Plough head; Bindipipal with chamara; Mahamoulika with her knife, Mahahunu with her kirpaan; Ugravakta with her Kuthar, Vikatakshak with Shakti, Jwalamukh with her mudgar and so on. As Mahishasura made his last bid on Durga Devi, the former looked to have controlled her for a while as he was changing his forms as a lion, tiger, Varaha, Elephant or Mahisha and his Original form. Finally however, Devi Durga overpowered and destroyed the Devil 'Mahishasur' who was felled with a huge sound of a thud and there were innumerable cries of joy and relief world wide. Devi Durga held the Demon's head in one hand, sword in another and greeted Devi Parvati who praised the Vindhyanivasini Durga. Gauri asked Durga to wash off her hands with blood and Durga broke a mountain boulder with her powerful hands to create water reciting the Mantra, 'Namah Shonadrinathaya' and the waterbody so formed had become popular as 'Papanashini' Tirtha ever since. Thereafter an extraordinary 'Jyoti' came to be viewed from the top of the Arunachala Mountain on every Kartika Pournami Sandhya (evening) without any oil, cotton, and firewood and thus the tradition had been carried on (on a man-made basis, of course) to signify this Holy Happening and the Maha Deep continued to be viewed by devotees doing 'Giri Pradakshinas'. While doing the circumambulation, devotees are advised to recite: "My Namaskars (Greetings) to Siva who stays at Merugiri and Kailasa; to Siva who is the son-in-law of Himachal; to the merciful Arunachalanatha who is worshipped by Siva the mid-day like Sun, besides various Devatas like Varuna and Vayu; to Siva on whose head are positioned Ganga and Chandra as ornaments; to Siva whose 'Maya' makes us feel that your Swarup is confused as that of Narayana; to Siva who performs the magnificent Siva 'Thandava' (Dance) and creates ripples of happiness all over the Universe; to you Shambho, Siva, Eshana, who is worshipped by Devas, Gandharvas, Siddhas and Vidyadharas; to Siva the

‘Janmadata’ of Ganesha and Kartikeya; to Siva who is the husband of Devi Parvati; We are beholden to You to bless us and relieve us of all our physical, mental and ‘Daivika’ problems beyond our control.” Siva blessed Parvati to be present at Arunachal by the name of *Apeethastani* since she left Kartikeya to perform Tapasya without feeding milk to him! Nandikeswar narrated to Marandeya the background of **Vrajangada** the King of Pandyadesha and how he became a staunch devotee of Arunachaleswara. The King was pious, charitable and Siva worshipper. Once he went by his horse for hunting deep inside the Arunachala forest and ran after a ‘Kasturi Mriga’ (Deer like animal), without being aware that the King had made a ‘Pradakshina’ of Arunachal. As Kasturi Mrig ran fast and was untraceable, the King stopped for quenching his thirst at a nearby pond; on return, he found the horse missing. He saw however a strange happening as two Celestial Beings came down from the Sky and recounted that they were two Vidyadharas, named **Kanthishali and Kaladhara** who were cursed by Sage Durvasa as they plucked flowers from the Sage’s garden and became the Kasturi Mrig and the King’s horse; the Sage was merciful to relieve them of the curse subsequently that a King would ride one of the accused as a horse and chase another as Kasturi and when a full Pradakshina was performed by the King, the horse and Kasturi animal, then the accused would get back their original positions as Vidyadharas. On hearing the entire background, the King became such a strong devotee of Arunachaleswara that he did considerable works in the Temple Complex and was wholly devoted to the promotional tasks of the Arunachalapathi. Once when Sage Agasthya and his wife Lopamudra visited the Arunachala Tirtha, they complimented the devotion of the King. Considering the dedication to the Tirtha, Bhagavan Siva gave darshan to the King and informed him that he was in his earlier birth Lord Indra but since he did an indiscretion on Kailasa top out of egoism he was cursed but since he was sincerely dedicated as Siva Bhakta, He was pleased to secure Indra’s original position. Thus Nandikeswar commended the unparalleled ‘Mahatmya’ of Arunachala Tirtha. The ‘Gopuram’ of Arunachaleshwara Temple at Tirunannamalai is stated to be of the largest expanse of any Temple in Dakshina Bharat; the ten levels of this high rise Temple has four gopuras at the four entrances of this huge complex, besides other gopuras too. The Sanctum is placed within the fourth enclosure and right at the first enclosure itself, there is a Sarovara in which yattris take their ‘snaanas’ or bathing where there is a Subrahmanya Mandir too. It is in the third enclosure crossing the fifth gate that Arunachala Maha Linga representing Agni among the Pancha Bhutas or the Five Elements of the Universe of mentioned as above. In the Parikrama of the Sanctum are the Idols of Devi Parvati, Ganesha, Nava Grahas, Dakshina Murti, Shiva Bhaktas, Nata Raja and so on. *Ramana Ashram*: is the renowned and quite impressive premises of Maharshi Ramana, an ascetic from childhood -who in fact lived in forests and later in the Arunachal Temple complex itself as a ‘Bala Sanyasi’ - where his body too got cremated as a Memorial; the Maharshi has huge following of devotees drawing extensive reach from all over Bharat and overseas as they have good facilities of comfortable living and food and large halls for prayers at the Gardens of the Ashram, as maintained by liberal donations. Ramana Maharshi was an ardent devotee of Arunachaleshwara and of Advaita Siddhantas closely followed by Shaivism and an admirer of Adi Shankara and his country wide following. *Aroubinda Ashram at Pondichery*: Like Ramana Maharshi of Tiruvannamalai / Arunachala Kshetra is the Arabindo Ashram of Pondichery, a Centre administered erst-while French colony near Tamil Nadu on the shores of Bay of Bengal where the co-influence of ‘Mother’ of French Origin and Arabindo of West Bengal is predominant, fundamentally of course is of Hindu Monism; Intense Meditation of the Supreme on the express principles of Dharma and Nyaya or Virtue and Justice constitutes the basis of the Followings of Arabindo-Mother Combine.

Kanchipura Mahatmya: Brahmanda Purana, in the Chapter of Lalitopakhayana is quoted as follows: *Rahasyam sampravakshyami Lopamudraa pate shrunu, Netra dwayam Maheshasya Kaashi Kanchipuri dwayam/ Vikhyatam Vaishnavam kshetram Shiva sannidhya kaarakam, Kanchi kshetre Pura Dhataa Sarva loka Pitaamahah/Shri Devi darshanaarthaaya tapastepe sudushkaram, Praaduraasa Puro Lakshmih Padmahasta purassaraa/ Padmaasane cha tishthantee Vishnunaa saha, Sarva shrigaara - veshaadhya sarvaabharana bhushitaa/* (Bhagavan Hayagriva told Agastya Maharshi, the husband of Devi Lopamudra as follows: ‘ May I reveal a secret to you: Shankara always considers that his two eyes are two unique Kshetras viz. Kashi and Kanchipura since they represent a Shiva Kshetra and Vaishnava Kshetrta respectively. Once Lord Brahma performed a very difficult Tapasya to Maha Devi and as a result Devi Lakshmi appeared before him as seated on a Lotus along with Bhagavan Vishnu and decorated with golden jewellery with abounding grace!’) The Purana further proceeds that Hayagriva then confirms to Agastya that Lalitha Devi whom Lakshmi-Gauri-and Saraswati worshipped had the re-appeared as **Devi Kamakshi!** Hayagriva then proceeds to describe Kamakshi as follows further: ‘ Devi Kamakshi is Adi Devata: *Adyanta-anutaraa saasyaat Chitparaatva- adi karanam Ananta—*(Adi Devata Kamakshi is smaller than Atom, Chit Swarupini, Adi Kaarana or the Primary Cause and also the Ananta or the Endless). Kamakshi has a Second Form which has two hands, one with a Book and another with Yoga Mudra or the Symbol of Yoga. Her third Form was pure like snow, a jasmine flower, Chandra and a white pearl; her fourth Swarupa was that of a thousand Rising Suryas with a Chandra Rekha on her head; She is ParaTripura with four hands carrying a paasha, ankusha, Ikshu or Sugarcane and Kodanda: all in the Swarupa of Kamakshi as meditated by Saraswati-Lakshmi and Gauri; She is Maha Devi’s two eyes: one as Shiva Kanchi and another as Vishnu Kanchi. Bhagavan Hayagriva further informed Agastya Muni: ‘All the Shaktis are Kamakshi’s creation. She improvised three eggs and created Tri Murtis entrusting them the duties of Srishti- Sthiti-Samhara to Brahma- Vishnu -Shiva respectively and created Satya Loka-Vaikuntha-Kailasha as also their respective Devis of Saraswati-Lakshmi-Parvati. Vishnu felt that he was the Supreme and as Brahma sat atop the Lotus stem sprouted from Vishnu’s navel and resting on Ksheera Samudra, Brahma claimed superiority and the ensuing fight up as a third entity emerged as a huge Shiva Linga without beginning or end. As Maheswara made his appearance, Brahma still claimed his seniority and out of anger Shiva emerged as Bhairava and snipped Brahma’s fifth head but as Brahma Kapala was not leaving Shiva, he had to undergo the Brahma hatya sin and during his Tirtha Yatra landed at Kanchipura. As he was on a ‘Bhikshatana’ or begging door-to-door with Brahma Kapala as his begging bowl, he encountered Devi Kamakshi who offered Jyotirmaya Bhiksha and Shiva finally got rid of Brahma Kapala that rolled down on earth. The ever grateful Shiva prostrated for her unique benevolence. Kanchi Kshetra is one of the foremost Moksha dayani Sapta puris : *Ayodhya Mathura Maaya Kaashi Kaanchiihyavantika, Puri Dwaavati chaiva saptaitaah Moksha daayani/* viz. Ayodhya, Mathura, Maya/ Haridwar, Kashi, Kanchi and Avantika / Ujjain, Puri and Dwaravati. Kanchi is Hari-Haraatmika comprising Shiva Kanchi and Vishnu Kanchi. Shiva Kanchi is stated to be one of the Shakti Peethas as Kamakshi Temple where Devi Sati’s ‘Asthi Panjara’ or skeleton fell down here. Also Ekambareshwara Linga is among the ‘Pancha Tatwas’ viz. of Bhumi besides . As a part of Markandeya Purana’s Vidya Khanda as quoted in the Essence of Kamakshi Vilasa released by website of Kamakoti.org/news, Maharshi Markandeya explains that there are Three Outstanding Peethas or Seats of Beeja Mantras in Bharata Desha viz. Kamaraja Peetha called Vaakbhava Kutaa or of Vaakbhava Beeja-Aim, which was worshipped by Bhagavan Hayagriva at Kanchi; the second one named Jaalandhara Peetha being the Madhya Kuta or of Manmadha Beeja-kleem, which was worshipped by Bhrgu Maharshi

called as at Jwalamukhi Kshetra at Assam[or Mannur near Ongole in Andhra Pradesh?) and the third named Odyana Peetha as Shakti Kuta of Shakti Beeja-*Souh*, as worshipped by Veda Vyasa in Kamarupa stated in Assam. Kanchi Kshetra is indeed the hallowed place where Bhagavan Vishnu stayed and Bhagavan Shiva too resided. However Maha Shakti's prominence is predominant; *Maha Shaktipraabhavaadhyam Shakti praadhanya vaibhavaat, Vinasha rahitam kshetram tasmaat satyavrataahvayam/* (As Shakti's influence is paramount, the Kshetra is indestructible and as such is of Eternal Truth and is thus replete with Satya Vrata). Referring to Tripura Dhaarini Kamakshi, a legend explained in Kamakshi Vilasa that Brahma performed Tapasya and Yagna to Devi Kamakshi to secure a boon of reviving the dead beings to life and to prevent death to those who lived and the hole of privacy viz.the 'Bilwa'surrounded by the Chatur Vedita as trifurcated with the Gayatri Mantra signifying Aa+Vu+M called Gayatri Mandapa as also Kakaara-Akaara-Makaara or Kamakshi. In order to avoid disturbance and to safeguard the Chakra or the Place of intense concentration, he materialised two Daityas viz. Madhu and Kaitabha from Narayana's ears.After some time, Devi Kamakshi got annoyed with the behaviour of the Daityas and assuming the Form of Narayana nipped their heads. On learning of this development, Brahma got enraged and suspected Vishnu to have killed Madhu-Kaitabhas. Vishnu denied the allegation of his involvement and pointed his fingers at Rudra.Brahma approached Rudra with great anger and the latter looked to release Pashupatastra at Brahma but Rudra meanwhile disappeared and Hari stood there instead. Brahma got utterly confused and left the Place in awe and bewilderment. Then there was an 'Ayakta Jyoti Swarupa' of Shiva assuming 'Chuta Beejaakriti' or of the Form of a Mango Seed with the Symbol of 'Ekaamra', while Vishnu too manifested himself as Varada from the Agni of the Yagna being executed by Brahma as the personification of Fulfillment! Thus Brahma realised as also the posterity that Shiva and Keshava were both of the same Para Shakti Swarupa as asserted by Markandeya; hence that Para Shakti materialised Kanchipura as the Abode of Ekaamra, Varada Raja and Kamakshi as Tripura Dharini! As to the paramount significance of Sri Chakra Puja, Markandeya Maharshi observed that the Worshippers should first pray to one's Guru and initiate the Puja targetting the 'Trikona Poorvaagra' or the top of the encircled Triangle and recite Sri Vidya or Pancha Dashi Mantra at least thousand times. Those who might not be fortunate to visit and possibly approach the Kamaraja Peetha at Kanchi, and even if Anna Daanas etc. are not executed, one might seek pardon from Kamakshi but performing the worship without reciting Sri Vidya is counter productive and derive negative effects! Successful execution of Sri Vidya Chakra Puja offered solution to Brahma's sudden blindness once as he crossed the Kamakoshta where Gayatri Mandapa beneath which Shiva built a Kundalini Griha without performing Shri Chakra Puja; Devi Saraswati explained about this lapse and Brahma made amends by visiting the Kama Koshta and performed Shri Chakra Pua; he then had a glimpse of Hema Kamakshi and restored his eye sight. In the past, Shri Vidya Chakra puja was executed by Devi Lakshmi, Hayagriva, Manu, Dasharatha, Tunda, Kaantaara Vikrama Chola, and so on. At the time of Samudra Mathana, Vishnu who was of a naturally fair complexion turned blue and Lakshmi joked with Vishnu that she would not be fit to be her husband as she was of golden complexion; Vishnu gave a repartee to her that she was old and cursed her to turn of 'Anjana Neela' complexion. Then Lakshmi did 'Shri Vidyopaasana' and regained her natural colour. HayagrivaMuni was engaged in continuous meditation of Shri Vidya of Devi Kamakshi when once a Rakshasa named Padma sat on the Muni and forced him to travel to Pataala Loka as a horse; Devi Kamakshi appeared in Pataala to save the Muni by killing the Asura. Hahagreeva assumed Vishnu Swarupa and tricked Rakshasa Guru Shukraachaarya and took away the 'Akshaya Kumbha of Mrita Sanjeevani' kept with the Acharya for the revival of dead Asuras and performed

Abhisheka of the Sanjeevini to Devi Kamakshi. Vaivaswa Manu assumed Manvatwa as bestowed by his father Surya Deva but he had no knowledge what so ever about the fine distinctions of Paapa-Punyas and as advised by Vasishtha Muni and visited Kama Koshta; Durvasa Maharshni provided the 'Upadesha' or instruction of Shri Vidya Mantra and the Manu did Dhyana and Tapas to Devi Kamakshi for hundred years. Then Kamakshi arrived near Manu in the Form of a Brahmana Woman and performed Abhishka to Manu with the Sacred Waters of Pancha Tirtha as a mark of declaring him as a Chakravarti and imparted the Knowledge of Ideal Administration; till date the 'Dharma Smriti' continues as the Guide of Dharma. King Dasharatha was advised by Vasishtha Muni to visit Kama Koshta to perform Shri Chakra Puja and there was a Celestial Voice assuring the birth of Epoch making sons of Shri Rama and others. In the days of yore, King Aakasha joined some followers of Boudha Guru and as directed by the latter stole considerable money of the Kingdom and mis-spent for wrong purposes and due to this sin became childless. He repented and abandoned the Boudha Guru and approached Gorakshanadha Muni who directed him to worship Kamakshi and taught Shri Vidya. He was then blessed with a boy like Vighneshwara as his son. As the King and Queen continued Devi worship daily, one day after the conclusion of the Puja-Homa-Dampati Puja-'Brahmana Samaaradhana', there was a miracle of Suvarna Varsha / Rain of Gold! Although the Brahmanas and Munis at the Bhojanam were unable to explain, the twelve year old son of Akaasha explained the reason: in the meals that were normally served at the daily 'Samaaraadhana', there was a golden pebble in the greengram which was also cooked and served from the Bhojan consumed by an elderly 'Sumangali' woman who was Kamakshi herself and hence the Rain of Gold! The King's son ate a portion of the left over remnant of what the Suvasini ate, then he became a 'Sarva Tantra Visharada' or an expert of 'Tantra Gyana'; he was considered as Ganeshwara by those present and was named Tunda and was named the King of Kanchi Kshetra. In the Agneya direction of Kamakshi Temple there was an Idol of King Tunda that called for a Pradakshina lest the Devi Darshana Phala would reach to King Tunda's account! King Vikrama Chola was dethroned by his younger brother Shalya Chola aided by his schemy friend Parjanya. Vikrama Chola and his wife roamed about aimlessly and luckily reached Kama Koshta and organised a flower garden and supplied excellent garlands to Devi Kamakshi daily. Pleased by their service and devotion, Devi blessed them a female child. As the daughter grew of marriageable age, Kamakshi appeared in a dream to the Pandya King Uddhaajit and asked him to defeat a battle with Shalya Chola and marry the daughter of the latter's elder brother who presently was supplying flower garlands to her. The Pandya King followed Devi's instructions and with passage of time King Vikrama Chola retired in favour of his son and devoted his time in the service of Kamakshi. Among various deeds of virtue, he developed gardens by extending them into forests thus securing the epithet of Kaantara Chola. While he was working in the forests, he had a serpent bite and he as well as the serpent attained Moksha by the grace of Devi. In the large expanse of Kamakshi Temple, just before the Main Idol is the Kamakoti Yantra in which are invoked with Nyasa the Ashta Laksmis viz. Adya Lakshmi, Vidya Lakshmi, Santana Lakshmi, Soubhagya Lakshmi, Dhana Lakshmi, Dhanya Lakshmi, Veerya Lakshmi, and Vijaya Lakshmi. Adi Shankaracharya is stated to have revived the Temple. Besides Shasta, Ganapati, Vishnu, Lakshmi and Arupa Devi the precincts of Kamakshi are highlighted.

Ekamreshara Temple: Near Sarva Tirtha Sarovara is the Ekamreshwara Maha Linga being the representation of Bhumi among Pancha Bhuta Lingas within two large enclosures within which the first enclosure itself is the main gopura of ten levels and right before it are the mandirs of Lords Ganesha and Surahmanya. In the second enclosure is the Shiva Ganga Sarovara where Jyeshtha Utsavas are celebrated

with the Utsava Vighras are engaged in jala vihara and to the south of the sarovra is Smashana Linga. It is in this enclosure itself is the dwaara of the Sanctum where the Linga Murti is of Shyama Varna and behind it is the yugala murti of Gourishankara. Over the Ekamrehwara Linga abhishekas are not performed with water but with oils of chameli Sugandha. Every Monday there is a 'Purapadu' of Utsava Vighras. In the Pradakshina of the first enclosure of the Main Temple are Shiva Bhakta Ganas, Ganesha, 108 Shiva Lingas, Nandeshwara Linga and Chandeshwara Linga; in the second enclosure are Kaliuka Devi, Koti Linga, and Kailasa Mandira besides Utsava Murtis of Shiva Parvati, 64 yoginis, Swarna Kamakshi and Lord Sumbrahmnya with Devi's Valli and Devasena. Near about the Temple is situated ancient Ekaamra / Mango Tree commended as the Rasaatala Vriksha that was sprouted from Shiva Rupa Beeja or the Seed of Shiva and vivified by the branches of Vedas. At this Rudra Sthala of what is known as Pandava Tirtha the Ekaamra Vana was maintained by Devi Parvati herself, the daily upkeep safeguarded by Markandeya Maharshi where Sixty Four crores of Shiva Shaktis whom Bhagavan himself was fond of existed; in course of time these Shaktis claimed equality to Devi Parvati herself! Shiva smiled and instantly their clothes slid down and to hide their nudity, Parvati closed Shiva's eyes and even while the Shaktis were trying to dress again, the time of a Muhurta elapsed and Surya Chandraagni perished, Universe vanished and Charachara Jagat or the Moving and Immobile Beings became extinct and the ensuing darkness led to Maha Pralaya, although Markandeya Maharshi was getting breathless yet surviving! Maha Deva apparently decided to materialise a Mango seed which germinated instantly as Maha Deva assumed the form of a 'Choota Vriksha' or a mango tree; seated on a peacock Shanmukha Skanda atop the tree enjoying ripe mango fruits. When Markandeya was precariously hanging down the tree amid deep waters in darkness, he asked the Six headed boy as who was he, he replied that whenever there was a pralaya likewise situation, he manifests himself by the grace of Maha Tripura Sundari at Kanchipura since named 'Pralaya Jit' or the Conqueror of Pralayas! To signify the unique magnificence of this celestial Tree, Maharshi Markandeya in Kamakshi Vilasa of Markandeya Purana narrated the simple legend of a Vipra named Krouncha who stole a Golden Shiva Linga and made his life by cheating Shiva Bhaktas by performing Abhishekas and eking his life. He begot as many as sixteen sons but they were all without male qualities. The worried parents made a Tirtha Yatra along with the sons and on way rested under the shade of the Rasatala Vriksha for a while and experienced instant miracle of the sons to gain masculinity and after concluding the Yatra returned the stolen Linga to the original Place! Such was the grandeur of the fabled Mango Tree! Markandeya recalled that after the Pralaya, Devi Parvati installed a Shiva Linga and by assuming the form of a 'Tapas Bala Kamakshi'. Maha Muni Katyayana took affectionate care of the Bala Kamakshi till she attained eight years and after his Moksha, Bala Kamakshi acquired the Maharshi's Yoga Danda / stick, japamala or counting beads deepas, chamaras or hand fans used for worship, Pustakas or Books of Scriptures, Vyaghraasana or Tiger skin to sit on, Ganga Tirtha and sand and umbrella for meditation to proceed to Koasi and having acquired the epithet of Annapuana Devi travelled and settled at Kanchipura under the Mango Tree. Sage Narada on a Tirtha Yatra reached Bala Tapas Kamakshi and taught her 'Pancha Baana Mantra' and as she practised with great penance the severity created Kaamagni targeted to Shiva which could not be endured by him who instructed Ganga and as Ganga arrived at fury, sound and speed, even Gauri started shouting 'Kampa, Kampa' since the arrival of river groups of Ganga disturbed the Bala Tapaswini; her companions Maha Kali and Durga Devi stood against the Pralaya Pravaha or the Flow of the nature of Great Extermination of Pralaya; Maha Kaali displayed a 'Kapaala' with 'Vishwa Bhakshana Sangjna' or the Signal of Universal Extinction which Gauri appreciated with an encomium of Maha Pralaya Bandhini. But the offended Shiva with anger

throw a piece of his 'jatajuta' or the coarsed hair. As the situation was reaching climactic, Gauri prayed to Narayana who responded by assuming a gigantic Swarupa on the Sky wearing Chanda as his necklace named Chandra Kantakya; Gauri shivered with fright as Shiva appeared instead of Narayana; the huge figure of Shiva asked her not to be astonished but he was pleased with the intense Tapasya of Bala Tapaswini even as Gauri got into ecstasy embraced Maha Deva and declared by closing her eyes that after all she was her ultimate point of refuge. Meanwhile Narayana as Chandrakantaaya again appeared in a much smaller form and assured her that she would continue to reside ever before along with Maha Deva, after all the drama of the crores of Shaktis leading to the circle of events from their nudity to her closing Parvati's childish prank of her closing Maha Deva's eyes, the Pralaya, Bala Kamakshi and her tapasya! The momentous Muhurta of Krita Yuga-Bhava naamaka vatsara-Chaitra Shukla Pouranami-Uttara Phalguni Nakshatra Triteeya padaarambha coinciding with the glorious birth of Kumara Swami was chosen for Shiva-Bala Kamakshi Kalyana at Ekambareshwara Temple!

Varada Raja Temple: Encircled by three broad enclosures with its east facing eleven storied gopura with the west facing main entrance, the sanctum of Varada Raja Swami Temple. Its passage from the gopura gate to the sanctum is from the Shata stambha mandapa where the procession of the Utsava Vighrahas commences. Near to the Mandapa is the Koti Tirtha Sarovara also called 'Anantasara' leading to a bridge and a Madapa and the Temples of Bhagavan Varaha, Sudarshana and Yoga Nara Simha on one side and on the other side is the Ramanujacharya Vighraha and the Vaishnava Peetha Complex, being renowned Eight Maha Peethas like Shri Rangam, Tirukoshti, Melkote, Udipi and so on. Ahead the Guruda Stumbha in the second enclosure is the Lakshmi Mandira of Sri Perum Devi and Vishnu Vahanas like Hanuman, Elephant, Horse, Garuda, Mayura, Tiger, Lion, Sharabha etc. In is in the third enclosure is the Varada Raja Temple within a high rise platform called Hastagiri like 'Iravata' as also Yoga Nrisimha, Vishwakshena. Varada Raja Swami is in the posture of a Sesa Shaayi even as lying on a float of water as presumed. The Sanctum of Varada Raja is called Vimana approachable by a staircase of 24 steps and inside the dwara he is Shyama Varna Chaturbhuja with shalagramas as his garland along with his Utsava Murti also. Having had their darshan, yatri take down the staircase and down the sanctum in a parikrama sight the Idols of Andal, Dhanvantari, Ganesha and others. Detailing the Varada Raja Mahatmya, Maharshi Markandeya recalls in Kamakshi Vilasa that Lord Brahma after the conclusion of his Ashwamedha Yagna at the Hari Kshetra on the Hasti Shaila Shikhira extolled Varada Raja Swami as 'Jagan Mohanaakara' or the Universal Mesmoriser with his 'Chaturbahu' Shankha-Chakra- Gadaa-Padma Mudra with his appearance as 'Jagadarakshra'. Markandeya then narrated a legend about the origin of Varada Raja as quoted: Lakshmi and Saraswati asked Brahma to give his honest opinion as to the superiority between them and almost immediately Brahma favoured Lakshmi Devi. Saraswati was highly disappointed and even annoyed with Brahma and took away the 'danda' or an Insignia that Vishnu once gave to her which was the power of Brahma enabling the latter to undertake Srishti or Creation of 'Charaachara Jagat' or of the Moveable and Immovable Beings. Thus the action of Brahma to create was disabled. Brahma did not wish to entreat Saraswati to return the Srishti Danda but left for Himalayas to perform penance to Vishnu to request for an Emblem with Vishnu Amsha to Create instead of a Saraswati-oriented Crest. Vishnu was pleased with Brahma's Tapas and directed Brahma to perform hundred Ashwamedha Yagnas. Brahma then decided that instead of performing hundred such Yagnas it would be sufficient to execute one Yagna at the Hari Kshetra and asked Vishwakarma the Architect cum Builder of Devas to construct a huge Yagna Shaala right opposite the Idol of Narasimha; he discarded

Saraswati as his partner at the Yagna but preferred Buddhi Devi as his ‘Yagna Patni’ to share the duties of a wife as prescribed. Brahma invited Devas, Devarshis like Narada, besides Gandharva-Yaksha- Kinnara- Apsara; Siddha- Saadhya-Muniganaas and decided to perform a Year- long Yagna; he worshipped Ganeshwara first to facilitate the Yagna without obstacles and then worshipped Yoga Narasimha Swami and initiated the Yagna with formal Mantras by appointing Kumara Swami as Adhavarvu, Maheswara as Udagaata, Varuna as Prastota, Yama Dharma Raja as Hota and Indra who performed hundred such Yagnas in the past as the Yagna Brahma. Since Brahma did not invite Saraswati to participate, she was furious and created powerful flames with her Maya Shakti with a view to destroy the Yagna but the Saviour of the Hari Kshetra viz. Vishnu arrested the Maya Shakti’s both the hands and disabled her. Saraswati took it as a challenge and released Kapalika Shakti but Vishnu in the Form of Nara Simha destroyed the Shakti. Enraged by her discomfiture, Devi Saraswati released ‘Daithyaastra’ but Daityaari Narayana made the Astra futile. Vagdevi then created ‘Karaala Vadana Kalika’ and instructed the Maha Shakti to demolish the Yagna but Vishnu assumed an Eight-Hand Swarupa and having suppressed the Shakti sat firm on her shoulders. Finally with all her powers being overcome, Saraswati was humiliated and swooned out of anger and frustration and took the Form of ‘Pralaya Swarupi’ called Vegavati River with disastrous speed from Brahmaloaka down to Earth heading towards the Hari Shaila. Vishnu sensed the impending danger and decided to resort to her ‘maanabhanga’ or assault her physically; having become nude he stood before the lightning flash of gushing waters and like a Huge Log lied across against the flow. Saraswati having visioned Narayana’s nudity was thus put to shame and without being able to face him entered a ‘Bhu bila’ or a big fissure of Earth and escaped. Then the Yagna commenced without any hindrance; the Yagna Pashu or the Sacrificial Horse was let loose and returned invincible and at the successful completion of the year long Yagna, the ‘Purnaahuti’ or the Ultimate Offering to Agni as the climactic Homa of Cow’s ghee was accomplished and Brahma visioned a Massive Flood of Illumination on the Eastern Sky and offered wide and palmy of concentrated homage to that Spendor . That was the most awaited Moment of Sweta Varaha Kalpa’s Vaivasva Manvantara- Krita Yuga- Nrisimha Bhagavatmika Samvatsara- Vaishakha -Shukla Paksha- Chaturdashi’s Hasta Nakshatra Suryodaya when Devadhi Deva the Supreme Lord of the Universe manifested himself from the Yagna Homaagni’ as **Varada Raja Swami** and handed over the Insignia of Srishti to Brahma Deva. The latter went into raptures and placed the Insignia on his chest with tears of joy and got non-plussed momentarily. After recovering from the pleasant shock, Brahma Deva installed Bhagavan on the Hasti Shaila on a ‘Suvarna Simhasana’ or a Golden Throne in the presence of Devas and other Celestial Beings and Maharshis; in order to cool down the charged and excited atmosphere as also to supposedly quench the thirst of Narayana who was just manifested from Agni, Brahma performed ‘Abhisheka Snaana’ to Varadaraja with potful thousands of Kamadhenu’s ghee with chantings of Sacred Veda Mantras and offered ‘Shodashopacharaas’ or the traditional Sixteen Services such as Aasana- Vastra-Yagnopaveeta- Gandha-Dhupa- Deepa-Pushpa- Phala-Naivedya- Tambula-Mantra Pushpa-Sangeeta-Veda Pathana- Tambula-Chhatra-Chaamaraas. The formal Pujas was followed by bhojanas (Hearty Meals) served to Special Invitees with Bakshya- Bhojya-Lehya- Chokshya-Paneenias to all concerned in the Maha Yagna. Also Anna Santarpana or Free Meals were organised to the entire citizens of Kanchipura. Vishwakarma made a ‘Pratibimba Swarupa’ or Replica of ‘Aalaya’; and ‘Nagara’ Pradakshinas or Temple wise and Nagari wise Pradakshinaas or circumambulations were done on Elephant-back; in fact daily worships, Bhojanas and ‘Gajotsavas’ were also organised ever since. Pleased by all these arrangements, Varada Swami addressed ‘Brahmaadidevaas’ and Munis : *Yathaaham Virajaa teerey mama Vaikuntha pattaney,*

Jagadvyaapana sheelaavaad Vishnurityabhidhaayutah/ Prasiddho nivasaamyatra tathaa Kaanchi-purottamey, Harikshetram samaashritya Sarvaabheeshta pradaanatah/ Varadaabhidhayaa khyaat nivasaami niranntaram, Sarvey bhavanto madbhaktaassada maddarshaney rataah/ Sarvadaattraiva tishthantu Vaikunthaadati paavaney, Varshey Varshey Meshamaasi mama Janmadiney Shubhey/ Ghritadhaaraa sahasraabhishechanam mama pujanam, Utsavamcha prakurut Viprabhojana purvakam/ (My Bhaktaas! Just as I had settled in Vaikuntha on the banks of River Viraja and got spread all over the Universe as Vishnu, I will now reside in the Hari Kshetra of Kancheepura; hence those desirous of visioning me could do so with my name as Varada or he who would be the Bestower. In fact I will stay here for good thus making Hari Kshetra as significant as Vaikuntha if not even better! You may therefore even reside at this Kshetra. Every year on my birthday during Mesha month you should all therefore perform ‘Goghrittha dhaaraa sahasra -abhishekaa’ or thousand Abhishekaas of Cow Ghee (bathing) of my Murti and celebrate this day as a Festival and of ‘Brahmana Bhojana.’) Then Brahma Deva addressed all the Invitees of the Yagna to follow the instruction of Varadaraja Swami and assured that those who would participate in the Festival on the lines as instructed would secure ‘Maha Phala’. Maharshi Markandeya narrated to King Suratha one telling instance about a devotee who actually experienced this kind of Maha Phala : In the past, one Vaadaadhyaayi Vipra named Bhanuvarna of Gokula on the banks of River Yamuna visited Kanchipura and happened to perform ‘Ghritaabhisheka’ most coincidentally on the ‘Janma dina’ of Varadaraja Swami at the Hari Kshetra and on return to Gokula after some time passed away; Bhanu varna was being flown to Swarloka by Devaganaas to honour him with the status of Indra but ‘Haridootaas’ intercepted his Soul and took it away to the Everlasting Vishnupada; such indeed was the graceful gesture of Varadaraja Swami! Whoever recites the above account of Varadaraja Swami would certainly secure Varadaraja Darshana, as assured by Maharshi Markandeya.

Vamana Temple/ Ulaganatha Perumal koil : Quite near to the Kamakshi Temple in Shiva Kanchi Kshetra itself is a fairly large area in Kanjeevaram is perhaps the largest representation in a Temple of Maha Vishnu’s Avatar of Vamana Bhagavan, hitting literally the Temple ceiling with one his Sacred Feet lifted up. Ulga Natha displays his foot up to the ceiling and is accompanied with Devi Lakshmi as Amudavalli. This Vaishnava Temple in Kanchi’s Shiva Kshetra celebrates all the Vaishnava festivals.

Chennai, Tiruvallur, Perumbadur, Pakshi Tirtham, Mahabalipuram and Madurantakam *Chennai:* Kapaleswara Temple with Maha Kapaleshwara Linga is a large complex with separate Mandirs of Devi Parvati and Lord Subrahmanya is most popular in the City and in the Pradakshina are Nataraja, Nayanars / Shiva Bhaktas, Ganesha, Dakshina Murti, Nava Graha Complex and significantly enough Mayureshwara Linga where Devi Parvati by assuming the form of a Mayura worshipped the Shiva Linga and hence the name of Mylapura where this Temple is situated; Partha Sarathi Temple again with a huge complex is the Murti of Bhagavan Shri Krishna’s fairly big Murti as the Charioteer of Arjuna in Maha Bharata battle and delivered the Immortal Exhortation of Bhagavad Gita; Bhagavan Partha Sarathi is accompanied with the Idols of Devi Rukmini, Balarama, Satyaki, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha as also of Nrisimha and Balaji. Nearby are the Idols of Rama, Lakshmana, Janaki Vighrahas in a different Mandira. There is also a distinct Balaji Temple with a highly impressive Vighraha of Lord Venkateshwara drawing huge crowds on week ends and festival days. Besides the notable week-end attractions are Ashta Lakshmi Temple, Ayyapan Temple complex, Madhya Kailasa Temple and so on besides two Sai Baba Temples in

the City and on the outskirts. The less known private family Mandir Sri Lakshmi Kamakshi Nivasa in the heart of the City with very select yet committed devotees, as blessed by Paramacharya Shri Chandrashekhara Swami of Kanchi Mutt is what this Script Writer intensely devoted to! The Inaugural Kumbhabhisheka of this Mandir in February 1990 was celebrated on behalf of the Paramacharya of Kanchi Mutt by HH Jayendra and Vijayayendra Saraswatis; the owner of the Mandir the late Shri Chavali S. Sastri a reputed Chartered Accountant and an ardent devotee of Paramacharya was blessed by Ramana Maharshi of Tiruvallamalai with an Idol of 'Ashwattha Ganapati' and was appropriately installed under a Peepul Tree which was the initial construction of this Mandir. *Tiruvallur*: Away by 15 km is the lesser known but legendary Varadaraja Temple of Veera Raghava Swami as Sesha saayi with his right hand kept on the head of Maharshi Shalihotra; this Temple also has a Lakshmi Mandir with her name as Kanakavalli or Vasumati. In the premises of the Temple is a Sarovar called Hutashana Tirtha and two other Mandirs of Shiva Linga and of Devi Parvati. The background of this Temple was that the two notorious Madhu-Kaitabha Daityas hid themselves in a dense forest then known as Veeksharananya and Bhagavan Vishnu came to know about this and landed himself in the Ashram of a Rishi named Shalihotra who was always in the habit of providing help to guests of virtue. He took extra care for the new Atithi as he was impressed by his conduct and Dharma readily participating in Agni Karyas and Karma kanda along with the Rishi. As time elapsed the guest one after their meals gave the biggest surprise to the Muni that he himself was Vishnu with the mission of killing the two daityas! After his mission was fulfilled Bhagavan blessed the Maharshi and bestowed him Vaikuntha Sthaana. Further miracles at this Place followed: Veekshanaranya King called Dharmasena was blessed with a daughter named Vasumati was of Lakshmi Swarupa and she came of age and got her married to a Prince Veeraagava and visited the Temple of Veeraraghava; both of them intensely identified with the Vighnas and got absorbed into them; since then Kanakavalli and Vasumati came to be addressed by either name while the Prince's name continued for ever! The Pousha Month's Bhadrapada nakshatra is thus celebrated at this Temple every year ever since. There was a King named Pradyumna in Satya Yuga who prayed to Narayana for long time and eventually had his darshan of Bhagavan who granted his wish to secure a male child; besides he also blessed that the significance this Kshetra be intensified and there appeared a Hutaashana Sarovara to wash off the sins of Yatis. *Sriperumbudur*: This is the Sanctified birth place of Shriramanujacharya, where the Temple of Lord Rama with Devi Sita has been ancient existence as Bhutapuri. This Kshetra is also the Abode of Keshava in Yoga nidra as Sesha shaayi as also a separate Mandir of Devi Lakshmi. More over the Temple of Bhuteshwar Maha Deva has been in existence even in more ancient ages. Maha Deva excelled in natya and performed Tandava Nritya in total ecstasy when Parshada Bhutas laughed and made fun of him; the angry Maha Deva stripped them of Parshatwa and the latter approached Brahma. Brahma directed them to worship Narayana. After very long and deep worship, Narayana suggested to the Bhutas that Maha Deva was ever merciful and their refuge to him should be rewarding and eternal. They then bathed in the Ananta Sarovara and after purifying themselves begged Maha Deva of mercy and after securing it got trained in the Tandava Natya Siksha ever since! Thus Perambudur is as much a Vishnu Kshetra as a Maha Deva Kshetra! Now, at the adjoining highway is the Memorial of the Past Prime Minister of Bharat, Rajiv Gandhi. *Pakshi Tirtha*: Some 35 km off Chennai is Pakshi Tirtha on the top of the Vedagiri mountain. Down the mountain of Vedagiri itself, there is a Sarovara called Shankara Tirtha which attracts large crowds once in 12 years when the Guru Graha enters Kanya Raashi when a Shankha or conchshell emerges and festivities take place. Quite near to the Shankha Tirtha is an ancient Mandir of Rudrakoti Shiva Linga and Devi Parvati's name is Abhirama Nayaki. Up the Vedagiri mountain are 500

steps enabling to ascend and find a Shiva Linga named Dakshina Murti which looks like a Plantain Tree trunk and is stated as a Swayambhu or self-generated. Besides the Linga is Soma Skanda. Nearby is a Devi Parvati Mandir inside a cave. From the top Shikhara of the Mountain down a small staircase is the most popular Pakshi Tirtha or the Place of receiving Griddhas or White Kites to pick up cooked food or the 'Prashad' offered to the Deities by a Pandit of the Temples; this phenomenon is age old as at the appointed duration of time of afternoon the Holy Birds arrive in twosomes from destinations unknown; the belief is that these birds were Rishis cursed to turn into birds and perform Tapasya at far off places some where in Uttar Bharata Kshetras. One belief is that Lord Brahma cursed his own sons to turn as birds as far back as the Satya Yuga till the end of Kali yuga and accept food daily from a Temple Priest who himself was a Muni in his repetitive mortal births! It is further believed that Maha Deva instructed Nandi Deva to install three most Sacred Tirthas at Srishaila as Mallikarjuna, Kalahasti as Kalahasteshwara and here at Vedagiri as Dakshina Murti. *Mahabalipuram*: Some 5, 6 km further to Pakshi Tirtha to Mahabalipuram which is on Seashore is basically a Cave Town. Countless of neglected sculptures like Devi Durga and seven other Devi Murtis, a very prominent four and half feet high Shiva Linga in rather bad shape as also a Nandi all in spoilt stage covered by Sea Sand beckon the visitors. On the Seashore are several dilapidated sculptures of Shiva Parvati Yugala Murtis, Ashtha Bhujas Murtis, a sand filled Shiva Mandir, Vishnu Idol of eleven feet height, excellent sculptures struggling to survive, a Ganesha Cave Mandir, Murtis atop elephant tops, a Group of Murtis with the full Pandava Parivar, Mahishasura Mardini alighted on a lion and such innumerable pieces of Master Craft in stone are all standing proofs of ancient skills. Notwithstanding the efforts of the successive Central Govts, further decadence might perhaps be slowed down but there are sure signs of non restoration of age old treasures. Thus Mahabalipuram stands sad proof of age old mastery of unbelievable golden ages. At the most, the Place is but a beautiful picnic spot away from the din and drudgery of modern life! *Madurantakam*: Considered as significant by Yatris, especially the followers of Ramanujacharya who assumed 'diksha' as a Sanyasin at this Vakula Kshetra where a Vakula Vriksha is still in place, Madurantakam is proud of its legendary past. In this erstwhile form of Vakularanya, there was a hermitage of Vibhandaka Rishi from where interesting references were obtained: in Satya Yuga, Lord Vishnu directed Brahma putras to worship him and get identified with himself at this Sacred Sthala. During Treta Yuga, Lord Rama after killing Ravana and installing Rameshwar Maha Linga passed through Vakularanya and instructed Hanuman to set up a Rama Temple with his parivar for worship by posterity. Eventually, Ramanujacharya's diksha followed near the Rama Mandir under the Vakula Tree by way of Pancha Samskara of 'Taapa' (Sapta samudrankana), 'Pundra' or Tilaka, 'Namadheya' or assigning a suitable name, 'Mantradaana' or according 'Mantrapadesha' and finally 'Yagna' / Viraja homa and so on. There are interesting references in Tamil/ Telugu books kept in the well preserved Library at the Kondada Rama- Janaki Temple of date about an 'Anikut' built across a violent water body creating floods in paddy fields causing enormous losses in the adjoining rural economies. A British Expert named Mr. Place for Flood Control was commissioned for constructing a strong and expensive bridge and as plodded by local engineers called on the then Vaishvanava Head of Madurantakam who advised to build a Janaki Mandir; jokingly the British Expert replied that most certainly he would do so in case the new bridge could withstand the powerful spate during the next flood season. The bridge got ready in time and the floods too were round the corner. One fateful night, the spate was so severe that Mr. Place had no sleep in the other side of the most powerful spate ever and floods at both sides were certain to submerge including the fairly distant places

where he was staying himself; next morning he resolved to initiate the construction of Janaki Temple which is now in position!

Shri Kalahasti and Tiruchanur: Some 25 km away from Tirupati on the banks of River Swarnamukhi is Kalahasti, one of the three most Sacred Shiva Linga Kshetras installed by Nandeshwara under the express instructions stated to have given by Maha Deva as at Shrishaila and Vedapuri under Vindhya. The Kalahasteshwara Linga is also one of the Pancha bhuta Tatwa Lingas representing Vayu, besides Ekamreshwara at Kanchi representing Prithvi, Jambukeshwara near Shriranga representing Apotatwa or of water, Tiruvannamalai representing Agni and Chidambara representing Akasha Tatwa. Interestingly even Pujaris do not like to touch the Vayu Linga which is ornamented with three Swarna Rekhas or golden lines that are clear on the forehead with three insignia of Shri for Spider, Kaala for Serpent and Hasti for Elephant-all the three creatures in Srishti as their unique devotion by way of offering services to clean, fan / hiss, and wash the Shiva Linga which is so appropriately nomenclatured! Bhagavati Parvati has her own Mandir for undertaking special pujas. There is a fantastic Dakshina Murti Vighraha drawing special attention to devotees where before is Kala Bhairava; also during 'parikrama' are Ganesha, four other Shiva Lingas, Kartikeya, Sahasra Lingas, Chitra gupta, Yama Dharma Raja, Chandikeshwar, and several other representations of Deities and Shiva Bhaktas. In the Temple itself there is a representation of Gandeeda dhari Arjun and of Kirata the hunter of a wild boar chaser when Maha Deva in the form of a hunter tested Arjuna's 'dhanu vidya' or expertise in archery and granted 'Pashupatastra'! Another interpretation of this vighraha is that of the Bhakta Kannappa who was tested of his Shiva bhakti when tears trickled down the Shiva Linga's ornamented eyes and in his devotional ecstasy tried to pull out his own eye and replace the eye of Shiva Linga itself! Special Rahu -Ketu pujas are organised in the huge Temple complex to safeguard against Sapra doshas to overcome lack of progeny, employment opportunities and such other family limitations. In the pradakshina of this boon fulfilling visits to the Temple, one also encounters an underground 'Maniganiya ghattam' or a rock-cave entry down a rather precarious stair- case where devotees bend down to the low lying Shiva Linga to possibly hear a whisper being the Upadesha of Taraka Mantra by Maha Deva himself as was stated to have been rendered to a dying female devotee at the time of her death as a parting blessing! Recalling the fable of Bhakta Kannappa the hunter, there is a nearby hill which could be negotiated without much difficulty where Kannappeshwara Linga Mandir is situated. In ancient times, a hunter was in the habit of hunting wild deer and such animals for livelihood during nights in the forest up the hill and per chance entered a shattered Temple with a Shiva Linga inside. The Shiva Linga readily attracted his attention and felt that animals entering the Temple might not spoil the Linga and during his hunting spree during several nights that followed spent more and more time in the Temple itself. He developed devotion to the Linga and offered grape wine and fresh raw meat as offerings and as both of his hands were occupied by carrying the dead animals, sword and the sheath of arrows, carried mouthful of water and quenched the thirst of the Linga while enjoying its meal of raw meat. On each subsequent mornings a Pujari of the Temple used to arrive for Puja-Abhisheka-Naivedya and witness the daily overnight havoc in the Sanctum with the odours of country wine and raw meat and wash and purify the Place afresh before the daily pujas. One night Kannappa the hunter noticed blood oozing out of one of the eye holes of the Linga and as understood in his village huts felt that foul skin of the affected body part of a victim if replaced by the fresh skin of another healthy person would be instantly revitalised, cut his own eyes skin and attached to that of the Linga! Then the other eye of the Linga too started oozing blood out and similarly the innocent Kannappa repeated the act; Maha Deva appeared

instantly and after replacing his original eye sight embraced Kannappa and took him along to Kailasa! Hence the famed Shiva Linga acquired a new title as that of a Kaanappeshwara! Adi Shankaracharya after visiting the Temple exclaimed in his Scripture titled 'Shivananda Lahari' as follows: *Margavartita paadukaa Pasupaterangasya kurchaayate, Gandushaabu nishechaam puraripor divyaabhishekaayate/ Kinchidbhakshita maamsa sheshakabalam navyopa –haaraayate Bhaktih kim nakaroyaho vanacharo bhaktaavatamsaayate!* (Even the wayward footwear as used for rough walking in jungles be used for wiping the dirt on the body of the Shiva Linga, the mouthful water retained and carried to wash as 'Achamana' and 'Divyaabhisheka' unto it, and the raw meat pieces offered as naivedya to it are indeed the major components of worship! Aha, what all faithful and dedicated devotion could not achieve, even as a hunter with total lack of principles could not!) *Tiruchanur*, the Sacred Temple of Devi Padmavati down the Seven Hills of Lord Venkateshwara popularly named as Alavelu Mangapuram is less than two km from the outstanding 'Kali Yuga Vaikuntham'! Even as ever Maha Devi Lakshmi is the Premier Partner of Maha Vishnu through Yugas and Kalpas, he commenced residing along with her at Tirumala. Meanwhile, Devi Padmavati assumed the form of an Avatar of Lakshmi as the daughter of King Akashraja who found her on a Lotus Flower in a Sarovara and brought her up as his daughter. The King subsequently dedicated her as the Life Partner of Lord Venkateshrara Balaji ever since. Till the other day, the stream of visitors has been large enough and manageable but of late, especially the Brahmotsavas, the constant stream has assumed alarming proportions, more so the flood of yattris up and down the Seven Hills has become formidable to even accomplish a passing glimpse of the Lord's towering figure! The Sanctum of Devi Padmavati is possible to enter up to the interior entrance as of now, if lucky as of now.

Venkataachala Mahatmya: Being the Outstanding and World famed Tirupati-Tirumala Divya Kshetra, the most Sprawling Temple Town of Balaji literally elevates the yattris to heights of Sacrifice and Faith on the bedrock of Dharma. Magnetising devotees from far and wide, the torrential flood of yattris is perennial here. Indeed Lord Venkateshwara is the wealthiest God of the World, crossing the hopes of the Pope in the Vatican City! *Shrinivasapuraa Vedaah Shri Nivasaparaa makhaah, Shrinivasa paraah sarvey tasmaadanyatra vidyate/ Sarva Yagna Tapodaana tirtha snaane tu yat phalam, Tat plalam koti gunitam Srinivaasasya sevayaa/ Venkataadri nivasam tam chintayan ghatikaadwayam, Kulaikavimshatim dhutwaa Vishnu loka maheeyate!* (All the Vedas do merely propose Bhagavan Shrinivasa only exclusively. All the yagna karyas do target Shrinivasa only. Indeed, all kinds of Bhakti or devotion merge into and identify with Shrinivasa alone. The totality of Yajna, Tapa, Daana, Anushthaana and Tirtha Snaanas falls far short of Shrinivasa seva! Those residents of Venkatachala engrossed in the true service of Venkateshwara shall liberate the souls of the previous twenty one generations and qualify themselves too to Vishnu Loka). The yattris invariably halt over at Tirupati down the Tirumala's Seven Hills where Govinda Raja Temple set up by Ramanujacharya with the Shesha saayi Narayana is the Main Attraction with some 15 smaller Deva Mandiras in and around the Sanctum. One of the Ashta Peethas of Ramajucharya is also significance here. Tirupati is also the Abode of Kodandra Rama, Devi Sita, Lakshmana and Hanuman. Once up the Seven Hills, the prime destination no doubt is that of Lord's Divya darshana, yet the primaries are the Kalyana gattaa for the Hair Sacrifice, Swami Pushkarini followed by Varaha Swami darshana and then to the Q complex to Vaikuntha for the climactic experience of bliss. Most significant Tirthas up the Hills are Akasha Ganga, Paapa nashana Tirtha, Vaikuntha Guha dhara, Pandava Tirtha, and Jaabali Tirtha. In the 'Vaishnava Khanda' of Skanda (Kartika) Purana, Varaha Deva gave 'Upadesha' (instruction) of the Sacred Mantra *Om Namah Shri Varahaya Dharanyu*

Uddharanaya Swaha to Bhu Devi and its significance; the Mantra fulfills all desires and leads to liberation. A Manu called Dharma recited the Mantra persistently and attained Moksha; Indra chanted it and regained his throne that was occupied by demons therebefore and Anantha the Chief of Serpents secured such extraordinary strength as to hold the weight of Prithvi (Earth) on his hoods. Bhu Devi expressed her gratitude to Varaha Deva to have saved from the grip of Demon Hiranyakasipu as also taught the Great Mantra. She admired Varaha Deva for providing the power and perseverance to hold the weight of huge mountains and desired Him to describe to her the names of some of the illustrious Mountains the weight of which was borne by her. These include Sumeru, Himachal, Vindhya, Mandarachal, Gandhamadhan, Chitrakoot, Malyavan, Pariyatrik, Mahendra, Malay, Sahya, Simhachal, Raivat and Anjana; in the South of Bharat the most significant are Arunachal, Hasthiparvat, Grudhrachal, Ghatikachal and most importantly the Narayana Giri or Venkatachala which possesses the Seven Tirthas in the Mountain Range viz. Chakra Tirth, Daiva Tirth, Akasha Ganga, Kumaradhari Kartikeya, Papanashani, Pandava Tirtha, and Swami Pushkarini. Varaha Deva affirmed that in Krita Yuga, the most important Mountain Range was that of Anjanagiri; in Treta Yuga it was Narayana Giri; in Dwapar Yuga was Simhachal and in Kali Yuga again the most sacred mountain range is Venkatachala. In Magha month when Surya Deva is in Kumbha Rasi on Purnima day coinciding with the Makha Star, Skanda worships Venkateswara on the banks of Swami Pushkarini Tirtha at the noon time and devotees performing 'Snaan' and Puja as also 'Annadaan' are blessed by the Lord. Similarly, Snaans, worships and charities at Venkatachala are highly beneficial on the auspicious timings when Surya is in Meena Rasi on Purnima with Uttaraphalguni in Thumbha Tirtha; when Surya is in Mesha Rasi on Purnima with Chitra Star in Akasha Ganga at early mornings; when Surya is in Vrishabha Rasi in Visakha Shukla / Krishna fortnights on Dwadasi Sunday / Tuesday at Pandava Tirtha on evenings; on Sundays of Shukla / Krishna fortnights, coinciding Saptami at Papanashana Tirtha; on Brihaspati / Vyakteeta Yogya, Star Pushya / Sravana Mondays etc; Varaha Deva described to Bhu Devi that Emperor Akash decided to perform a Grand Yagna on the banks of Arani and while tilling, he found a girl child and as he was issueless, brought her up as their own, named as Padmavati. Once Sage Narad met Padmavati as she was grown up as an eligible bride and predicted that she would be the wife of Lord Srinivasa of Venkatachala. Almost immediately she met a Stranger in the Royal Garden and introduced himself as Ananta or Veerapati from Venkatachala Mountain and that he was hunting a wolf. Padmavati's companions rebuffed Ananta Deva that hunting was prohibited in their garden. Ananta returned but desired intensely that Padmavati should become His life partner and sent Vakulamala to the court of Emperor Akash to negotiate their wedding. The Emperor had no bounds of joy and the holy wedding of Lord Venkateswara and Padmavati took place in style and grandeur when Devi Lakshmi was present to make Padmavati happy and comfortable, whereafter they all resided in Tirumala bestowing boons to lakhs of Devotees till date. Varaha Deva narrated the background of Padmavati's earlier birth as Vedavati to Bhu Devi. Vedavati was a companion of Devi Lakshmi and when the latter became Rama's spouse as Sita, she left for forests to perform Tapasya, but demon Ravana misbehaved with her and she ended her life by jumping into fire and cursed Ravana that his entire clan would be wiped out because of a woman. Sita was abducted by Ravana by creating such circumstances that Maricha was converted as a Golden Deer; Sita took fancy for it and prevailed Sri Rama to chase the animal which deceitfully wailed as though Rama was in trouble and Lakshmana had to leave Sita alone even by drawing a Lakshmana Rekha that none could cross. The vile Ravana dressed as a Tapsvi revealed his real form as soon as she was prevailed to cross the fiery Lakshmana Rekha and forcibly took her to Lanka. After Rama killed Ravana, there was 'Agni-Pariksha'

(Proof of Purity / by Fire), Sita came out unscathed. But the real fact was that Agni Deva hid real Sita in Patala and Agni's wife Swaha assumed the role of Maya Sita; in fact Vedavati's earlier birth was of Swaha Devi! Thus, Vedavati / Swaha turned to Maya Sita was Padmavati. Devi Prithvi enquired of Bhagavan Varaha as to where and how to secure the 'Darshan' (Vision) of Lord Venkateswara and the former replied that He would mention of those future happenings as recorded in the past. There was a Nishad (Hunter) in Shyamak Jungle named Vasu and his wife Chitravati and Son Vira. Nishad was the Chief of his clan living honestly and peacefully by eating cooked rice and honey. Both his wife and he decided one day to a nearby forest to search for additional stock of honey and entrusted the responsibility of looking after his followers and daily chores to Vira, their son. The daily practice was that the family cooked rice and mixed with honey, offered the same as Naivedya to Venkatachalapati and ate the Prashad. But, Vira in their absence for the day offered some portion of the honeyed rice into Agni, some to tree bushes and the rest was consumed. On return from the other forest, Vasu became furious to learn that no offer of the honeyed rice was made to Venkatachalapati but gave it away as described above. Vasu felt agitated and remorsefully guilty and even tried to kill his son for what was considered as Sacrilege. Lord Venkatachal appeared before Nishad in full glory with His four hands, fully ornamented and armed and stopped Vasu from harming his son; he was completely taken aback. The Lord said that the acts of his son Vira were in fact worth emulation and not condemnation for he did a homam (Offering to Agni); homage to Nature and only the remainder was consumed with dedication as 'prashad'. Nishad was so happy that he heard this from Bhagavan Himself! Varaha Deva also narrated an incident related to King Tondaman and Nishad. As an ideal Prince, he imbibed all the qualities required of a King, viz. of nobility, intellect, valour and devotion to Almighty. Once he took King's permission for hunting in Venkatachal forests, chased an elephant, crossed the River Swarnamukhi and reached the Ashram of Brahmarshi Suka and an Idol of Goddess Renuka nearby. As he proceeded further, he found a 'Pancharangi' (Five Coloured) Parrot screeching the name of 'Srinivasa, Srinivasa' and followed the bird till the mountain top. There he met Nishad who informed that the parrot was very dear to Suka Muni as also to Bhagavan Srihari and hovered around the Pushkarini Tirtha; by so saying the Nishad desired to have a Darshan of the Lord and the Prince too accompanied him. Thondaman was indeed thrilled with the Darshan and witnessed the 'Naivedya' of Cooked rice and honey performed by Vasu Nishad. He was overpowered by the magnificent experience of the Lord and thereafter met Suka Muni and secured his blessings that soon he would become a King after his father's retirement and serve Srinivasa for long time to come. A few days after Thondaman's return to his Capital, he was made the King and started settling in his throne. Suddenly after a few months, Vasu the Nishad approached the Palace in an agitated manner and told the King that he dreamt chasing a 'Varaha' which entered a thick bush, that he started digging up and swooned, that his son was also near him, that the Varaha entered his mind and body and made him say the following: 'Nishada! You must reach King Tondaman and ask him to perform 'Abhishek' with lots of milk to a 'Shila' (Stone) underneath this thick bush, pull it out and ask a 'Shilpi' (Sculptor) to prepare an Idol of my features with Bhu Devi on my left lap, set up plants of Tamarind and Champa as are loved by Vishnu and Lakshmi respectively and invite learned Sages and Brahmanas to attend a grand function to be hosted by Tondaman and wait for my further instructions. The King followed the instructions as conveyed by Nishad and called Sages and Brahmanas to a Grand Puja of Varaha Deva and Bhu Devi through an underground passage and continued the daily practice of taking bath, worshipping the Murthis of Varaha and Bhu Devi and arranging 'Prashad' or the left-behinds of Naivedya to Brahmanas and visitors. As this practice got routinised and the interest of Bhaktas snow-balled gradually,

a Brahmana stranger approached the King that he was on way to Kasi, Prayaga and a few prominent Tirthas but his wife was unable to travel as she was in the family way; he requested the King to provide accommodation and food to his wife and generally supervise her welfare. The Brahmana returned very late after several months but unfortunately the wife had a miscarriage and died just a couple of days before the return of the Brahmana after visiting several Pilgrimage Centers and Tirthas. The King got frightened at the tragedy as he gave a surety to the Brahmana's wife and approached Srinisasa, who instructed that the Queens as well as the body of the Brahman's wife should be made to take bath in the Asthi Sarovar Tirtha and as the queens took dips in the holy water and came out, the Brahmana's wife too would emerge. The Brahmana was thrilled at the miracle witnessed by co-devotees! Raja Tadarman followed the practice of worshipping Srinivasa with golden lotuses daily. He found one day some Tulasi leaves pulled out from muddy plants and wondered how this indiscretion happened. As the King was wondering about this, there emerged a voice saying: "There is a pot maker (Kumhara) who also did daily Puja to me with the muddy Tulasi leaves from his house and that I have accepted his worship too!" The King reached Kurmapuri in search of the Kumhara, who replied to the King that he never ever did any puja to Srinivasa! But when the King said that there was a voice which said these words, the Kumahara and his wife recalled the voice of Srinivasa in their earlier births that as and when a King would knock their hut, and then a Pushpa Viman would arrive to pick them to Vishnuloka! Indeed that had just happened! The King returned to Venkateswara Temple to perform worship again after this unusual happening and Srinivasa appeared before Tondaman and bestowed him the blessing of a lasting Abode of bliss. Parikshit, son of Abhimanyu of Pandavas, was no doubt a noble and virtuous King, but unfortunately did the unpardonable sin of hanging a dead serpent around the neck of Samika Muni who was in deep Tapasya and his son Shringi cursed Parikshit that he would be dead within a week as a result of a snake bite. Takshak was assigned the task of killing Parikshit but Brahmana Kashyap who could indeed have prevented the tragedy and even demonstrated his ability to do so, was won over by dubious means by Takshak and Kashyap who did the sin was sought to be washed off by a bath in Swami Pushkarini and worship to Srinivasa, as advised by Shakalya Muni. Indeed the sin of Kashyap was eradicated by the Grace of Lord Venkateswara. Another illustration of the Sanctity of Snaan in Swami Pushkarini was given by Sutha Maha Muni to Rishis at a Congregation at Naimisharanya (The forest of Naimisha). A King of Chandravamsa called Dharmagupta was a rare example of nobility and virtue. He went hunting and by the evening desired to perform the Puja of Gayatri and was delayed to late hours and had to stay back on a tree. A lion came running after a wolf and ascended the same tree; it asked the King not to worry and would not hurt him in any way. It asked the King to come to an understanding that it would sleep off half night and he might sleep off the other half. The lion tempted the wolf to drop the King down and share a good portion of the King. The wolf rejected the proposal outright as ingratitude was a far heinous sin than the 'Panchapatakas' or the Five known major sins. During the other half of the night when the King was to guard the wolf, the lion gave a similar proposal to him; he accepted and tried to drop the sleeping wolf. But luckily, the wolf was saved and preached the King against ingratitude and gave a curse to the King to become a mad man. It said that he was a Sage, named Dhyanakashtha, who could take any form and told the lion that in his earlier birth he was a Minister in the Court of Kubera and was cursed by Gautama Muni to become a lion as he was standing naked in the Sage's garden with his woman. As regards Dharmagupta's curse for ingratitude, Sage Jaimini suggested a bath in the Sacred 'Swami Pushkarini' on Venkatadri on the banks of River Suvarnamukhi, followed by worship of Lord Venkateswara. Suta Maha Muni described that those who purify themselves in the Pushkarini would

surely avoid hells named Tamisra, Andhamisra, Rourav, Maha Rourav, Kumbhipak, Kaalsutra, Asipatravan and such others. On the other hand, the devotees attain the 'Punya' of performing Aswamedha Yagna and achieve Buddhi (Intellect), Lakshmi (Wealth), Kirti (Fame), Sampatthi (Prosperity), Gyan (wisdom), Dharma (Virtue), Manoshuddhi (Purity of mind) and Vairagya (Other Worldliness). Krishna Tirtha is a Tirtha named after a deeply devoted Brahmana whose Tapasya was so severe and extensive that his body developed mole-hills (Valmikas) and Indra rained forcefully to wash off the mud. Lord Srinivasa was impressed by the relentless and highly dedicated devotion and blessed him with His Darshan, created a Tirtha after his name, declared that those who have the fortune of bathing in it would become as learned and focussed and bestowed Salvation to him. Paapanaasha Tirtha is such a powerful place that even merely uttering its name, sins of the past and present get vanished. There was a Brahmana named Bhadrhamati who had enormous knowledge of Vedas and Scriptures but was acutely impoverished having six wives and several children. His each day was a harrowing experience of poverty with several mouths to feed. One of his wives named Kamini told him one day that her father met Sage Narada who described Tirtha called Papanashana lying on the Venkateswar Mountain cluster was a big draw and a bath, preferably after giving away a small token 'bhudaan' to a deserving Brahmana followed by a darshan of the Lord would abolish poverty, and fulfil all human desires. This emboldened Bhadrhamati to travel along with his family to the Srinivasa Mountain. He was fortunate to obtain on way a token of five feet of land. The entire family took bath in the Papanashana Tirtha and gave away charity of the five feet of land to a deserving Brahmana. Bhagavan Vishnu had instantly appeared before Bhadrhamati; the latter was extremely thrilled at the darshan and eulogised Him as follows: 'Namoh Namasthekhila karanaaya, Namoh namasthekhila paalakaya/ Namoh Namastheyemara nayakaya Namoh Namoh Daithya vimardanaya/ Namoh Namoh Bhakthajanapriyaya, Namoh Namoh Paapavidaaranaya/ Namoh Namoh Durjananashakaya, Namasthesthu Tasmai Jagadeeshvaraya/ Namoh namoh Karanavamayaya, Naraayanaathivikramaya/ Shri Shankha chakraasi gadaadharaaya, Namasthesthu tasmai Purushottamaya/ Namoh payoraasi nivaasakaaya, Namasthesthu Lakshmi pathayavyaya/ Namasthesthu Suryadyamitha-prabhaaya, Namoh Namoh Punyagathaagathaaya/ Namoh Namokyenduivilochanaya, Namasthesthudey Yagna phalapraadaaya/ Namasthesthu Yagnaangavilochanaya, Namasthesthu thye Sajjanavallabhaaya/ Namoh namoh Kaarana Kaaranaaya, Namasthesthu Shabdaadi vivarjitaaya/ Namasthesthuthyebhheshta sukhahpradaaya, Namoh Namoh Bhakta -manoramaaya/ Namoh namasthedbhuta karanaaya, Namasthesthuthy Manda radhaarakaya/ Namasthesthuthy Yagnavarrahanaagney, Namoh Hiranyakshavidarakaaya/ Namasthesthuthy Vaamana rupabhaaje, Namasthesthuthy Kshatrakulaanthakaaya/ Namasthesthuthy Ravana mardanaaya, Namasthesthuthy Nanda sutaagrajaaya, Namasthey kamalaakaantha Namasthey Sukha daayiney, Ashritarthi nashiney tubhyam bhuyo bhuyo Namoh namah/'. As Bhadrhamati praised Lord Srinivasa, He blessed him to enjoy full-swing prosperity to him and family and attain Moksha to him thereafter. 'Akasha ganga Tirtha' was well known for bestowing boons to the highly erudite and dedicated Brahmana called Ramanuja. He did Tapasya of rigorous nature on the banks of Akashganga by standing with 'Panchagni' (Five flames) around him during the hot summer mid-days and under the sky in heavy rains fully exposed chanting the Ashtakshari Mantra 'Om Namoh Narayanaya'; he ate dry leaves fallen from trees for years together, for some years by drinking water and many other years by consuming air only. Finally, Bhagavan appeared and Ramanuja who was almost dying with the severity of his Tapasya became fully normal and healthy instantly. He received the boons that the Place of Akasha Ganga where Ramanuja had the fortune of discovering Vishnu in person would be an Eternal water-spring and those who performed 'Snaan' would change his entire life style and become an ideal Bhakta and at the end

they would have no other birth and would get salvation. In another context, Akash Ganga was immortalised as the Tirtha where Devi Anjana executed penance, since she and her husband Vayu Deva were not blessed with a son. Vishnu Bhakta Sage Matangi directed Anjana Devi to reach River Suvarnamukhi, far south of Vindhya Mountain, reach Vrishabhachal on whose top was situated the famous Swami Pushkarini, worship Varaha Deva and Venkateswara, proceed to north, find Akashaganga and perform Snaan in a formal manner along with Vayu Deva. The Sage confirmed that if the couple did so, a Son of unparalleled prowess and 'Swami Bhakti' (Loyalty to the Master) would be born, to be called Hanuman who was invincible by Devas, Rakshasas, Sages, Brahmanas, Celestial and human beings. As Anjana Devi followed the instructions to the last letter and spirit, Bhagavan Venkateswara appeared before her and blessed that such a Son would be born that his parents would indeed be proud of and play a pivotal role in Treta Yuga as the most powerful personality of 'Siva Amsa'. Besides the above, Venkatachala has quite a few other Tirthas like Chakra Tirtha where a Maha Muni Padmanabha prayed to Srinivasa to chase away the dread of Rakshasas and Bhagavan stationed His Sudarshan Chakra known for dispelling the fear of Evil Spirits; Varaha Tirtha, Pandu Tirtha, Tumba Tirtha, Kapila Tirtha, Kumara Tirtha, Jaraharaadi Tirtha Traya, Phalguni Tirtha, Deva Tirtha, Jabaali Tirtha, Sanaka Sanandana Tirtha, Asthi Sarovara Tirtha, Kataha Tirtha and Manvadyashtottara Tirtha. Thus the outstanding significance of Tirupati-Tirumala Deva's unparalleled magnificence of Lord Venkateswara!

Srishaila Mallikarjuna, Lepakshi, Ahobila Simhachala: *Shrishaila:* Some 230 km from Hyderabad is the Maha Kshetra of Srishaila Mallikarjuna, called Dakshina Kailasa on the banks of River Krishna is described in detail in Shiva Purana, Padma Purana, and Maha Bharata; the oft-repeated truism about *Srishaila shikharam drushtwa punarjanma na vidyate! Duhkham hi doorato yaat shubhamaatyantikam labhet, Janani garbha sambhutam kashtam naapnoti vai punah/* (Mere darshana of Srishaila Shikhira/tower, all the difficulties of Life are smashed and such devotees have no rebirth indeed. Their concerns of life are dissolved and happy tidings are set in at once; the congenital issues of life are resolved for ever too. Shiva Purana is quoted: *Mallikarjuna sanjnah cha avataarah Shankarasya vai, Dwiteeyah Shri Girou taatha bhaktaa- bheeshtah phala pradah/ Samstuto Linga rupena Suta darshana hetutah, Gatastatra Mahapreetyaasa Shivah swagire mune Jyotirlinga dwiteetadarshana atpMuneh, Mahasuk hakaramchante muktidam naatrashamshaya/* (Bhagavan Shiva's second incarnation is that of Srishaila to fulfill the wishes of devotees. As Skanda prayed to Maha Deva with devotion, filial duty and respect, the latter agreed to move himself to Srishaila. Munis! This second Avatar of mine should help generate joy and contentment and finally bestow Moksha !) Stated to be the Second in the Series of Jyotirlingas on the Sri Parvat, Lord Siva's manifestation as Mallikarjuna along His Spouse Devi Bhramaramba is famed mythologically as the place of penance when Kartikeya was unhappy and felt cheated as Ganesha was wedded earlier despite the Agreement that whoever arrived first after full 'Bhu Pradakshina' (circumambulation of the World) would win, but Ganesha took advantage of a Provision of the Scriptures and performed a 'Pradakshina' of his parents and attained the advantage of the Pradakshina. Siva and Parvati visited the Krouncha Mountain to pacify Kartikeya but to no avail and thus moved over to the Mountain from Kailasa. As Vrishabha Deva –Siva Parvati's Carrier-did Tapasya to the Maha Devas, they appeared as Mallikarjuna and Bhramaramba at this Holy Spot. Lord Rama is said to have installed a Sahasralinga and Pandavas set up Pancha Pandava Lingas in the Temple surroundings. In a tiny hole inside the temple of Devi Bhramaramba, one could still hear the buzz of bees as the Devi assumed the form of bees all over Her Body and killed Mahishasura. Adi Shankara is reputed to have scripted his well

known Work named ‘Soundarya Lahari’ at this Temple. Inside the Main Temple of Mallikarjuna, the Shiva Linga Murti is of a small eight inches size sprushya Linga which could be touched and performed Abhishekham to. Behind the Main Temple is a separate Devi Parvati Temple and the name of the Devi is specified as Mallika. The entry of the Main Mandir is on the eastern side and opposite the Mandir is a small idol of Nandi Deva. On Shiva Ratris, Shiva Parvati wedding is celebrated. From the Srishaila Temple near the eastern side is the path leading to Patala Ganga some km or even less but the path is difficult to negotiate and from there there are 850 steps of depth; River Krishna water is collected from this place to be taken away by yattris. Some 4km away from the Temple on a hill top is Shikhareshwar or Hatakeshwara Temple. It is from that height that Srishaila Shikhara Darshan is secured as *Shri shaila shikharam drustwa punarjanma na vidyate!* Bhramaramba Temple is stated to be one of the *Shakti Peethas* on the Shri Parvata at Shrishaila, where the neck of Devi Sati fell; there is however a controversy that the Temple of Shri Sundari near Shri Parvat, near Ladakh, in Jammu and Kashmir is appropriate where the right anklet ornament of Devi fell and Shiva Linga of Sundaranand is in Place nearby. The legend of Anunasura at Shri Shaila Bhramaramba is popular; the Asura prayed to Brahma with the constant recital of Gayatri Mantra which reverberated the hills and a Brahma appeared finally the Asura requested that no two legged or four legged species of Beings could kill him. As even Vishnu or Shiva failed to respond to kill the Asura, Devi Bhagavati wondered as to how to counter the power of Gayatri Mantra; Brihaspati the Deva Guru was commissioned to approach the Asura to whom Deva Guru asked to not to worship Gayatri since Devas worship her always. As Arunasura ceased to pray Gaatri any further, Devi Bhagavati assumed the mighty form of Bhramara or a huge bee and engaging a large army of bees, terminated Arunasura and his army instantly as Devi Bhramarambika! *Lepakshi:* Some 120km away from Bangalore of Karnataka and actually located in the Anantapur District at Hindupur (Andhra Pradesh) by 15 km is the magnificent Place of architectural work in rock sculpture of Vijayanagar Kings. Lepakshi is justly proud of a huge Nandi bull made of single granite stone of 4.5 mts. of height and 8 mts plus of length positioned just before the Temple complex facing an open air Shiva Linga shielded under a massive rock serpent of five hood rock structure while the Shiva Linga is surrounded by a three rounded coil formation. This Nandi is a unique specimen in Bharat, next only that of Gomateshwara. Another significant aspect of the Nandi is a massive ‘Kasu mala’ or a necklace, a bell chain of earrings and jewellery all in rock. More importantly are three Temples of Shiva/ Virupaksha, Vishnu and Veerabhadra, the best of them perhaps is that of Veerabhadra on a hillock named ‘Kurma shila’ of tortoise shaped rock. The fantastic creations of these master pieces of art in stone were created by the courtesy of Amara Jakkanna and his followers of Vijaya Nagar Empire. Besides the highlights of art on rock at the Temple already mentioned are the Hanging Pillars, Print of Durga Paadam, typical designs of Lepakshi sarees etc. The depictions on the pillars of the halls are exquisite with scenes of Ramayana and Maha Bharata. An interesting story at the Temple pertains to one of the Master Sculptors annoyed the King who instructed to pull out his eyes; even before the instruction was carried out, the Sculptor himself pulled out his own eyes and the blood marks spilt out on the walls and the blots are seen even now. *Ahobila: Aho veeryam aho shouryam aho bahu parakramam, Narasimham para daivam aho bilam aho balam/* Ahobila Kshetra is a popular Vaishnava (Vadakala) Kshetra split at two levels called in the Telugu local language as ‘Eguva’ and ‘Diguva’ or Upper and Lower levels- in the ‘nallamala’ forests of Kurnool District of Andhra Pradesh at the distance of 40 km from Nandyala or 150 km from Hyderabad at the Nallamala forest range at an altitude of 1000 ft. plus. That is the fabled Abode of Lord Narasimha or Prahlada Varada, the fourth incarnation of Maha Vishnu to terminate Hiranya Kashipu the demon who rescued

Prahlada the illustrious Vishnu Bhakta. Amrita Valli is the corresponding Devi Lakshmi of the Goddess. Ahobila Kshetra opposite the Akshaya Tirtha where devotees purify themselves with snanas, before entering the Sacred Place portrays nine forms of Narasimha spread among nine Temples viz. Bhargava Nrisimha bestowing Lakshmikara siddhi or excellent prosperity as incarnate at the lower level of Ahobila, Yogananda Nrisimha also at the lower level signifying the aspect of compassion and overcoming problems of one's life; Chatravata Narasimha representing Ketu Graha bestowing comforts of Life and expertise in Fine Arts; Ugra Nrisimha Temple at the upper level along with Chenchu Lakshmi or a Goddess as of a local Tribe Leader's daughter who sought to cool down the fierce form of the Lord and eventually married to her representing Dei Lakshmi herself and teaching devotees the qualities of courage and timeliness yet of maturity; Varaha Narasimha Swami at the upper level again along with his consort of Lakshmi; Malaava Vara Nrisimha along with Shri Lakshmi at Lakshmi Hill granting total fulfillment and auspiciousness to devotees; Jwala Nrisimha as had just annihilated Hiranya kashipu since a pond of brick colour with which the Lord had just washed his hands with the blood of the demon called Rakta gunta Tirtham; Paavana Nrisimha or Kshetra Ratna Nrisimha or Pamulati Nrisimha Swami who provides safety and succor to devotees and finally Karanja Nrisimha or He who represents Shadvidha or six types of austerities and purities viz. those of 'Kara- charana- vaak- kaaya-karma- shravana- nayana' or by hands, legs, tongue, mouth, body, actions and mind- borne nature! At the Ahobila Complex, the significant Festivities are Phalguna Month celebrations, Janma Nakshatra (Swati) Mahotsavas, Gramotsavas, Monthly Celebrations and Tirumanjana Sevas. *Simhachala Tirtha*: Some 16 km near Vishakapattanam in Andhra Pradesh is another significant Nrisimha Kshetra in Bharat is at Simhachala or the Lion Giri viz. Varaha Lakshmi Nrisimha of 15th century built by Gajapati Raja of Kalinga, the present part of Odisha State and King Krishnadeva Raya of Vijayanagara also attended the Opening Ceremony Brahmotsavas as given in available Inscriptions. The Legend about this incarnation of Nrisimha is due to the curse to the Gate keepers to Maha Vishnu's Vaikuntha by Brahma Manasa Putras viz. Sanaka Sanandana Sanat Sanatana Kumaras who were stopped entry; the respective Danavas were Harayaksha in Varaha; Ravanaasura and Kumbhakarna in Shri Rama Avatara, and Kamsa and Shishupalain Krishnavatara, besides Hiranya kashipu in Nrisimha Avatara. The Bhakta saved from Hiranya kashipu in the Nrisimha Avatara was Prahlada. Special Festivals at Simhachala are of Akshaya Tritieya with Chandana Lepana or Alankara with Gandha and during Vaishakha Month. The main attractions at the Temple are a fantastic Stone Ratha and a 16 pillored Mandapa depicting Dashawataras and many Nrisimha Swarupas.

Annaram, Pithapuram, Pancharama Kshetras, Rajamundry, Ryali, Mandapalli and Bhadrachalam

Annaram: Distant by 80 km from Rajamundry and 125 km from Vishakhapatnam on Ratna giri hills on the banks of Pampa River, 'Anna varam' literally meaning 'The Boon of whatever one wishes for' is the Temple of Veera Venkata Satya Narayana and Devi Ananta Lakshmi Satyavati- both as the Symbols of the Supreme Deity of Satya or Truth. To reach the Temple up by the hill are some 428 steps and it was conceived as of the form of a Chariot with four wheels at the corners; in front of the entrance there is a Kalyana Mandapa leading to the Sanctum up by stairs is the Main Idol and the two shrines of Vana Durga and Kanaka Durga. While the ground level presents 'Pada darshana' or the vision of the Feet of the Lord, the upper portion is the upper part of body part of the Lord with an impressive moustache. The legendary background of the Temple is that both Meru the tallest mountain in the Universe and his wife Menaka performed unusual penance to Lord Vishnu and the latter was pleased and granted the benediction of two

sons viz. Bhadra and Ratnakara. Both the sons in turn performed Tapasya and by the grace of Bhagavan Vishnu Bhadrachalam took the form of Bhadrachalam as the personification of Shri Rama and Ratnakara as Satya Narayana. To day Annavaram has come to pick up ever growing visitorship with year round Kalyanas, Special Kalyanas in May, Devi Navaratra Festival in September, Shravana Shuddha Ekadashi celebrations, Prabha and Teppa Utsavas, and Jala torana festivity.

Pithapura: Nearly 8km from Annavaram is Pithapuram which is famed for two reasons - as Pada Gaya and as Shakti Peetha; as Pada Gaya this is enlisted as Bharat's Five noted Pitru Tirthas viz. Gaya shira Kshetra in Bihar, Yajapura Vaitarini in Odisha, Siddapur in Gajarat's Matru Gaya Kshetra, Badari's Brahma Kapala and this Paada Gaya Kshetra at Pithapura. The Shakti Peetha is at Puruhuta Devi Mandir where the left hand of Sati Devi's body fell in the Temple of Kukuteshwara Shiva and Raja Rajeswari Devi. *Ryali:* Connected with the legend of 'Kshira Sagara Mathana' the Temple of Jagan Mohini Keshava Swami at Ryali some 25km from Rajamandry which is well known for bestowing the devotees various boons of promotions and instant transfers of employment in Service. Right opposite the Temple of Jaganmohini is the Temple of Uma Maheswara Swami which is also related to the legend of Samudra mathana as Maha Deva retained the 'halahala' in his throat! *Pancharamas:* The legendary background of the Pancha-Aaramaas is Unique: Pursuant to Daksha Yagna which basically was performed out of hatred and envy of Daksha Prajapati for Parama Shiva who was indeed his son-in-law being the husband of Sati Devi, the latter unfortunately was uninvited but still attended the Yagna despite Shiva's reluctance. As Daksha ignored her presence and worse still criticised her dear husband by her own father openly, Sati Devi could not bear it and immolated herself in the homa kunda. On knowing about this disaster, Maha Deva went in such rage that he instantly threw a piece of his 'jatajuta' and created Veerabhadra and asked him to accompany Chandika Devi to totally devastate Daksha Yagna and kill Daksha too; he made his appearance later at the scene of havoc and having pulled out the body remains of Sati Devi danced in dreadful frenzy when Vishnu realised that there would then be Pralaya or the Great Termination of the Universe, pulled up his Sudarshana Chakra and sliced pieces of the body to ensure that the pieces are scattered all over in indiscriminate direction far and wide. All the Devas, Dikpatis, Rishis and so on then endeavoured to calm down Maha Deva by intense prayers to him. Time had healed his anger and he left for Tapasya for many, many gaps of years. Meanwhile a very dangerous Asura named Taraka secured a Shiva Linga that he always carried and meditated to it so passionately that he secured magnificent powers of invincibility. As the Asura intensified his tragic destruction of Devas and Maharshis, they approached Lord Vishnu who felt that only a son of Maha Deva could annihilate and this could happen only with his remarriage of Devi Parvati. Indra and Devas created several situations of their wedding possible including the efforts of Manmatha and Rati Devi but all failed and most fortunately finally the wedding succeeded and Kumara Swami was born and eventually attacked Tarakasura. Kumara used his Shakti weapon and as per the continued counsel of Vishnu broke the body of the Asura into pieces. But each time Kumara did so, the pieces kept on grouping together and the Asura came alive again and again. Vishnu then advised that the Shiva Linga which the Asura carried round his neck would have to be broken into pieces too. As Kumara did accordingly by using 'Agneyastra', the Shiva Linga no doubt went into pieces but they got together by making loud sounds of 'Namassivaya'. Kumara got frustrated and Vishnu asked him for forbearance; he then instructed Indra, Surya, Chandra and Kumara too to collect the pieces of the Shiva Linga so broken again in four directions at once and straightaway and install them at the same places as they would fall so that the Asura would lose all his powers of invincibility! That was the origin of

‘Panchaaraamas’ as follows: 1) Amareshwara installed by Indra at Amaravati in Guntur on the banks of River Krishna- all others being on the banks of River Godavari- as Amareshwara Linga with Bala Chamundika as Devi Parvati; 2) Daksharama installed by Surya as Bhimeshwara Linga is one of the largest Shiva Lingas of as much as 2.5 mtrs. height and Manikyamba (East Godavari Dt. here Godavari is called as Sapta Godavari Tirtha). Manikyamba is also stated as one of the 108 Shakti Peethas. It was at this Daksharama where Surya and Indra prayed at this doubly famed Tirtha. Telugu Poet Vemulawada Bheema kavi prayed too. 3) Somarama was installed by Chandra Deva as Someswara Linga as Devi Rajarajeswari his consort at Bhimavaram (W. Godavari Dt.); the Shiva Linga here turns white on Pournamis and black on Amavasyas. 4) Ksheeranamam was installed by Lord Vishnu himself as Ksheera Rama Lingeshwara and Devi Parvati at Palakol (W. Godavari Dt.) where Upamanyu Muni did Abhishekas here with milk and hence this name. 5) Bhimarama was set up by Kumara Swami himself as Kumara Bhimeshwara Linga and Bala Tripura Sundari at Samalkota (East Godavari Dt.), some 20 km. from Kakinada the Port Town.

Rajamandry: Hailed as the Cultural Capital of Andhra Pradesh with the Adi Kavis of Nannaya, Tikkana and Yerrana who translated the massive Maha Bharata from Sanskrit into Telugu, Rajamandry is also a City of Three Long Bridges across River Godavari. It is a Punya Kshetra celebrating Godavari Pushkaras, reputed as the Koti Linga Tirtha, Sapta Godavari Tirtha being the merging Point of Tulyabhaga, Atreyi, Goutami, Vriddha Gautami, Bharadwaja, Koushiki, and Vasishta. This is a Key City for Political Movements before and after Independence, the city of Fine Arts, Dance, Drama, Films well connected by road, Railways, Airways and Waterways with Kakinada as the near by harbor.

Ryali: Connected with the legend of ‘Kshira Sagara Mathana’ of securing Amrit, the Avatar of Jagan Mohini is well known; the Temple of Jagan Mohini Keshava Swami at this place near Kakinada and Rajamandry is popular for bestowing promotions and instant transfers in Service. On one side of the Vighraha is the romantic face of Keshava and on the rear side is the enchanting countenance and profile of Devi Jagan Mohini!

Mandapalli Shaneshwara: The famed Mandeshwara (Shaneshwara) Temple which is 24 km from Rajamandry is quite popular in Andhra Pradesh and several groups arrive here to ward off the ill-effects of Saturn Period passing through the astrological phases of the Seven Year retrograde period in one’s life. Mandeshwara Shiva Linga is appeased by ‘Tailaabishekas’ or Til Oil Abhishekas accompanied by Namaka-Chamaka Paraayanams with Shuchi and Shraddha or Cleanliness and Faith; after the Abhishekas are over and receiving the blessings, the devotees are normally advised to discard the clothes to ensure that the traces of ‘Shani’ are left behind as the Mandeshwara Linga absorbs the ill-effects and washes the karma back to the stages of purity. The legend of this Mandeshwara Linga is traced back to Sage Dadhichi’s unique sacrifice of donating his own backbone with which Indra materialised ‘Vajrayudha’ to kill Vritrasura and subsequently Kartabha daitya of this area. To avenge their father’s death the demon sons of Kartabha, viz. Aswartha and Pippala tormented the residents of the area especially the Sages engaged in Tapasya and yagnas on the banks of Godavari who approached Agastya Maharshi; the Maharshi in turn worshipped Mandeshwara Shaneshwara; the latter hesitated as his own powers were perhaps might fall short of the combined strength of the dense up evil forces of all the Daityas. Agastya readily agreed to supplement the Taposhakti of the Sages and thus Shani spearheaded the battle and destroyed the enemies what is more continues till date the warding off of the obstacles of his own devotees!

Bhadrachalam: Based on a dream by a female devotee of Lord Shri Rama named Pokala Dammakka that three Swayambhu or self manifested Vighrahas of Shri Rama, Devi Sita and Lakshmana were lying in the jungles of Bhadrachalam hills, Bhakta Rama Das viz. Kancherla Gopanna- the nephew of Akkanna the Financial Controller of the Court of Nawab Tanisha-built a Grand Temple in 1620 AD partly financed by donations and largely out of a loan from the Treasury of Tanisha which could be repaid and thus got imprisoned and subsequently repaid to Tanisha by two youthful Princes presumed as Rama and Lakshmana themselves. The Temple faces west to the banks of River Godavari at Bhadrachalam, some 35 km from Kottagudem, 120 km from Khammam, 160 km from Rajamahendravaram and 325 km from Hyderabad in the Telangana Region of Andhra Pradesh. The Deity is seated in Padmasana posture with legs crossed carrying in four arms the Shankha-Chakra-Gada-Sarangas with Devi Sita and Lakshmana on either side. The Temple stands on a three pillar structure with inscriptions from Ramayana written by Ramadas. There are two Kshetra Palakas of the Temple viz. Yogananda Jwala Lakshmi Narasimha and Anna Purna sahita Vishweshwara Shiva. There are also the Shrines of Vinayaka and of Nava Grahas. Annual Kalyanotsavas on the eve of Shri Rama Navami in March-April and Vaikuntha Ekadashi Mukkoti celebrations in Dec- Jan when the darshan is through 'Vaikuntha dwaara' are such huge draws of visitorship comparable only at Tirupati-Tirumala. In Bhadrachalam itself are the other important Temples of Abhaya Anjaneya, Raja Rajeswari, Ayyappa, Sai Baba, Harnath Baba, Venkateswara and Govinda Raja. At Places nearby by a distance of 35 km is the Parna shala where Maricha enticed Devi Sita asking Rama to follow and Ravana kidnaped her. Two other Places to visit are Jatayu paaka some 2km away where the giant bird Jatayu recognised Sita being abducted and Rekka palli some 55 km far where Ravana killed Jatayu in a fierce fight. In essence, Bhadrachalam is as significant a Kshetra of Shri Rama as Tirumala is for Lord Venkateshwara in terms of crowd pulling and Temple prosperity.

Mantralaya, Basar, Vemulawada, Chilukur, Jogulamba, Yadagirigutta: *Mantralaya:* The Mutt of renowned Raghavendra Swami, an ardent follower of Madhwacharya is at Brindavana on the banks of Tungabhadra and near Mantralaya Road connected to Indian Railways besides road net work to Adoni by 50 km; Kurnool by 100 km and Hyderabad by 250 km. Raghavendra Mutt and Samadhi are near the Mangalamma Temple, and normally devotees worship there first and then enter the Raghavendra Swamy Temple which attracts lakhs of visitors every year. The famed Panchamukha Anjaneya Temple from Brindavan is apart by 23 km. There were severe floods of the River in 2009 at Mantralaya and Raghavendra Mutt at Brindavan was submerged but normalcy got recovered soon later. *Basar:* Originally named Vasara later on turned as Basar is the Abode of Jnana Saraswati Temple popular as the Goddess of Vidya and Knowledge on the banks of Godavari in Andhra Pradesh some 40 km. from Nizamabad and 200 km from Hyderabad. It is mentioned both in Brahmanda Purana and Maha Bharata that Veda Vyasa once performed Tapasya on the banks of Godavari at this Place and made three heaps of sand and created three Murtis of Lakshmi, Saraswati and Kali and accorded special concentration on Devi Saraswati as the Supreme Symbol of Vidya and Knowledge. A King of Karnataka with Nanded as the Capital built the Temple of Saraswati during the sixth century at 'Vaasara' or originally materialised and adored by the name of Jnana Saraswati by Vyasa and hence the name Vyaasara. Over the years, this Place of Worship has gained reputation as the unique Center for Aksharabhyas especially on Vasanta Panchami and four days as also during Devi Navaratri. There is a Lakshmi Pratima besides Devi Saraswati and a shrine of Devi Kali on the first floor in the premises of Jnana Saraswati itself. Devotees visit a separate Temple of Saraswati up a nearby mountain by steps. *Vemulawada:* Situated some 35 km. from Karimnagar, Andhra

Pradesh the Raja Rajeswara Shiva Linga Kshetra popular as Dakshina Kashi has a huge Temple Complex. The Nilalohita Linga has Devi Raja Rajeswari on one side and Lakshmi Ganapati on the other and faced by Nandeeshwara. In the surrounding areas this Temple is called Rajanna Temple affectionately and devotion. The Temple complex also has separate Temples of Ananta Padma Swami, Bhimeshwara, Kodanda Rama, Nageswara Swami etc. Constructed by Chalukya Kings in 8th century, it was stated that Raja Narendra the great grand son of King Parikshit of Pandava Fame was cured of leprosy by bathing in Dharma gundam (Pushkarini) and had a dream to install a Shiva Linga at this Place. Bhavishya Purana mentions that Surya Deva worshipped at the Kshetra and when as he once had a problem of movement, he overcame by his worship to the Shiva Linga here and thus has come to be named Bhaskara Kshetra ever since. Indra too got over his Btarma Hatya dosha once by worshipping Raja Rajeshwara Linga here. The renowned Vemulawada Bhima Kavi was closely associated with this Temple. It is a Harahara Kshetra too as is with prominent Vaishnava Temples of significance as mentioned above and both Shaivite and Vaishnavite festivals are celebrated with fervor and faith. Indeed the record draw however is for Shivaratri Festival for days together each year drawing some 5 lakhs with no exaggeration.

Chilkur: Balaji Temple on the banks of Osmania Sagar in Hyderabad itself popular as Visa Balaji the bestower of boons especially foreign visits attracts millions of visitors every year. The Temple is a rare example of those exceptional few in Bharat which is neither under Government control nor accepts donations in 'hundis' as all Temples in Bharat do and also dis-allows Special Treatment to select public personalities. The legend behind this Temple is as follows: Lord Venkateshwara at Tirumalai Hills near Tirupati appeared in their dreams to an old couple devotees- who were regular visitors from the jungles of Andhrapradesh to Balaji all along for their lifetime but since unable to do any further- and assured that they need not do so as Balaji and his consorts Sri Devi and Bhudevi would arrive there itself near a specific mole hill area in the jungles! The couple organised search teams and dug up while they discovered to their amazement and shock of their life time hit a solid single rock which carried a Stone Idol of Lord Venkateshwara with Sri Devi and Bhudevi on either side; but there was oozing of blood near the chin and chest but the blood flow subsided gradually and the idols were installed in a thatched hut as the villagers found the miracle of blood coming out of rock! The word went around the villages and reached the Akkanna Bukkanna brothers, the uncles of Bharachala Rama Das and they installed the idols in proper and befitting vedic manner in a large temple complex. Ever since then, the popularity of the Temple gained rapid momentum and as of now some thousands of visitors-reaching beyond the level of lakh plus, by weekends, get attracted. The devotees thronging the Temple usually perform 11 pradakshinas for the fulfillment of their specific desires ranging for travel overseas for higher studies and employment opportunity, matrimonials, improvement of health and so on. Once their vows are fulfilled then the visitors perform 108 circumambulations by way of thanks giving and asking for fresh favours. The numerical 11 at the request stage signifies: 1 for Soul and another 1 for Body and Soul Fullment; on achievement of the desires concerned the 108 figure signifies as follows: 1 for the blessing desired- 0 or Zero signifying Maya of human existence and the numerical 8 denotes the eight body parts. While performing 108 pradikshinas the respective Mantras to be recited are as follows: *Om Namō Venkateshaya Namah* for success in business; *Om Namō Aksharaaya Namah* for success in studies; *Om Bhuta Bhavyaya Namah* for good health; and *Om Prathamaya Namah* for Self- Improvement and Contentment.

Jogulamba: The Temple of Jogubamba at Alampur is indeed awe- inspiring in Andhra Pradesh which is some 27 km from Kurnool and 200 km from Hyderabad and is on the holy Sangama Sthaana of Rivers and Tungabhadra enclosing Nallamalla hills. This hallowed Kshetra is reckoned as one of the select 18

Shakti Peethas and the associated Shiva Swarupa is called Bala Brahmeshwara. It is stated that the upper jaw with the connected teeth got dropped at this very place. Devi Jogulamba is protected by the two Shaktis viz. Chandi and Mundi and is basically an Ugra Swarupa difficult to be pleased by ordinary kind of worship. She is seated as a figure of frightfulness with large and dishevelled hair punctuated with lizard, scorpion, bat and a human skull. The Vighraha which by itself is awe inspiring has accompanying Shaktis of Sapta Matrikas viz. Brahmi, Vaishnavi, Maheshwari, Kaumari, Varahi, Chamudi and Narasimhi besides Veenapani Veerabhadra and Vighneshwara. The total atmosphere is thus charged with awe and density. The Temple has other independent Mandirs of Kanchi Kamakshi, Bala Brahmeshwara Swami, and Nava Brahma Temples of Taraka, Swarga, Padma, Bala, Vishwa, Garuda, Kumara, Arka, Veera Brahma Swarupas. *Yadairigutta* is some 60 km from Hyderabad with the famed Lakshmi Narasimha cut out in a cave, mentioned in Skanda Purana as Rishi Aradhana Sthala popular as Vaidya Narasimha to cure chronic diseases due to adverse planetary effects. The legend states that Yadarishi, the son of Rishyashringa Maharshi did penances and the Lord appeared in five forms as Jwala, Yogananda, Gandabherunda and Ugra Swami and thus this Place is known as Pancha Nrisimha Kshetra!

Vijayawada Kanaka Durga, Panaka Nrisimha, Kuchipudi, Movva, Keera Pandaripura: *Kanaka Durga:* Sage Indrakila was stated to have performed severe Tapasya to Devi Durga to ward off the obstacles for his regular penances by demons and she responded positively by dwelling at the hill top as ‘swayambhu’ and eventually killed even Mahishasura and followers. Subsequently Arjuna of Pandavas did tapasya on Indrakiladri to Maha Deva for accomplishing Pashpatastra which he succeeded. In response to the locals of the typically rocky surroundings, Maha Deva directed the hills to move over somewhat and the river Krishna likewise and as a result the entire region has become a land of fertility and greenery. To day, Kanaka Durga as an eight-armed Goddess of prowess and victory carrying weapons of defence with pleasant and cool face assuring protection and security as a four feet high Idol, bedecked with glittering jewellery of Kanaka or gold stands atop the Indrakiladri, ready to fulfill the desires of thousands of devotees every day, especially during Nava Ratri and other festival days. During different days, she is portrayed in different manifestations as Swarna Kavacha Durga, Bala Tripura Sundari, Annapurna, Lalitha Tripura Sundari, Saraswati, Maha Lakshmi, Kanka Durga, Mahishasura Mardini, and Raja Rajeswari- all to bestow auspiciousness and fulfillment. *Panaka Nrisimha:* Some 8 km from Guntur on a hill top connected by 450 steps lead to Rama Kshetra, popularly known as Panaka Nrisimha worshipped by coconut breaking, fruits, flowers and Tulasi leaves or garlands but what is special is to offer Tirtha of jaggery mixed sugarcane juice to drink, as half of the quantity offered as Naivedya is poured into his throat which is a Sacred Salagram. The pujari administers the offering into the salagram and half of whatever quantity of the Tirtha is poured in half of the quantity is returned as ‘Prashad’. Most intriguingly, there is not even a sign of an ant or fly anywhere around in remote corners of the Temple! *Kuchipudi:* The small township of Kuchipudi some 35km from Vijayawada is the mother of one of the world renowned classical dance forms popularised by Kuchipudi Classical Dance Academy; just as Bharatanatyam is famed from Tamilnadu, Odissi in Odisha, and Kathak from Varanasi, Kathakali in Kerala, Mohini Attam in deep South, the classical dance form specialising in Andhra has the stamp of world wide renown. *Movva:* In the Divi Taluk of Krishna Dt. Movva is not only the birth place of the immortal Lyricist named Kshetrappa specialising on Lord Krishna’s romance with Devi Radha and on the subject of Krishna Rasa Leelas, but is more importantly the popular Movva Gopala Temple where devotees throng during Vasanta Nava Rathas and during Krishna Janmashtami Celebrations.

Keera Pandari pura: Right on the shores of Bay of Bengal at Machilipatnam is the Temple of Keera Pandari Pandu Vithala. An intensely devoted Pandaripura Bhakta of Pandaripura in Maha Rashtra named Narasimha Daasa who was a native of the town got the inspiration of building a sprawling Temple on the then marshy shore of the Sea which has since emerged as a Pandari Kshetra with the assistance of like minded devotees by raising door-to-door individual donations and of large contributions from educational and industrial all over Bharat especially of the then combined Madras and Bombay. The Sanctum is a fantastic and life-like prototype figure of Pandaripura. In the huge Hall extending some hundred metres plus at the very end as a Lord Anjaneya Temple and around the built up expanse are 108 Shrines of Deva-Devis in two corridors; an independent Mandir of Sahasra Shiva Lingas installed was added subsequently. Bi-annual Utsavas at the Complex attract lakhs of visitors from nearby villages and town -ships in the massive surroundings of the beach area with tented accommodation and free dining facilities with day-night congregations of bhajans and spiritual entertainment of dramas, Hari Kathas, Musical and dance concerts and Pravachanas, enlivening the township with shops and shows. Not far from the Keera Pandari pura in the large Township which is also the Krishna district Hqs of the harbour town- some 60 km from Vijayawada- has a Temple named Nageswara Swamy with a large Nageshwara Linga stated as a Swayambhu and this township happens to be the native of this Script writer.

Conclusion

In the Introduction, it is mentioned that resorting to Tirtha visits is in quest of Almighty and incidentally as means of diversion and fulfillment of family joy. Once taken in the perspective of Dharma, indeed it would be one of the principal means of Self Realisation and seeking Truth vis-a-vis the glorification of materialism manifested in kaleidoscopic manner. Thus this effective means of Dharma would somewhat mitigate the adverse impact of the pulls and pressures of human existence.

As one mentions of Tirthas, the Yatris are invariably engaged in spot worships of Deities, Shiva Lingaabishekas, Salagrama Pujas; participation of Melas and Temple Festivities; Punya Snanas in Samudras, Sacred Rivers, Sarovaras and even Kupas as at Rameshwara or Jala Prapatas or water falls; Daana Dharmas; Shraddha Karmas; Yajna-homa karyas; Pavitra Guha darshanas; mountain climbs and shikhara darshanas; journeys by foot-road-rail-waterways and by Air; temporary stays with families and companies and the attendant inconveniences and above all physical- mental and psychological stresses and strains on own's purses! There are also risks involved to the self, family and friends especially at crowded Melas like Kumbh Melas as at Haridwar, Prayaga, Ujjain, Nashika and down South at Ayyappa Temple, Maha Maagha at Kumbhalonam and at Samudra Snanas! But of course, the compensations of Tirtha Yatras are multi-sided, especially from the view point of 'Iham' and 'Param', not quite withstanding the risks involved.

But indeed the final goal is Enlightenment and hence the Stanza that asserts: *Sarva Tirtheshu yat punyam sarva kaaryeshu yat phalam tatphalam Purushaapnoti Stutwa Devam Janardanam, Stutwa Devam Janardanamiti!* (What all one might achieve by undertaking Tirtha Yatras and performing Dharmik Karyas is attainable by Janardana Stuti or deep concentration on seeking what Janardana is all about!). In the final analysis, while human life automatically gets attracted to ephemeral material contentment, the other more significant purpose has to yield to the everlasting Fulfillment!

ANNEXTURES

TWENTY ONE GANESHWARA KSHETRAS

Moreshwara: Mayuresha Ganesha 25 km from Pune; Prayaga: Omkara Ganapati; Kashi:Dundhi Raja Ganesha; Kalamba Ganesha at Chintamani Khsetra at Kakambapura near Baraar's Yavatamala; Adosha Ganapati on Nagpur-Chindwada Railway Line at Samner Station; Pali Ganesha at Pallipura at Ballal Kshetra in Kulaba Dt. Maharashtra; Mangala Ganapati at Pariner on Narmada River banks; Phala chandra Ganesha at Vigjnana Ganesha Kshetra, Parbhani, on Kachiguda-Manmad Railway Line, Maharashtra; Evura Avighna Ganesha near Pune, Maharashtra; Siddhateka Ganesha at Boribyal on Bhima River bed on Mumbai- Rayachur Railway Line set up by Vishnu before killing Madhhu-Kaitabha Demons; Manipura Ganesha at Rajani Gaon, near Pune installed by Shiva before killing Tripurasura; Analasura Naasha Ganapati at Vijayapura at Vijaya Mangala Station near Erode, Tamilnadu; Kashyapa Ganesha at Kashyapashrama as described in Shastras but location unknown; Jaleshapura Ganesha built by Maya Danava-location unknown; Lohadri Ganesha at Juvar near Pune, Maharashtra where Devi Parvati worshipped Maha Deva to beget Ganesha as son; Berol Ganesha at Ghrishneshwar Jyotir Linga Temple near Ellra , Aurangabad, Maharashtra where Maha Deva worshipped before killing Tarakasura; Padmalaya Ganesha at Pravala Kshetra at Pachora Junction on Mumbai-Bhusaval Railway Line as worshipped by Kartaveeryarjuna ; Subhuddhi Ganesha at Namalgaon, Jalna Station on Kachiguda-Manmad Railway Line where Yama Dharma Raja worshipped; Ganapati Rajor near Jalna Station, Maharashtra where Ganesha made his Upadesha of Ganesha Gita to King Varenya after Ganesha helped him to kill Sindhurasura; and Sudha Ganesha at Kumbhakonam, Tamilnadu where Devas worshipped Ganesha before 'Amrita Mathana'.

SHIVA KSHETRAS

Maha Shiva Temples (108): Ashtottara Shatam Bhumou Sthitam Kshetram vadamyaham, Kaivalya shaile Shrikanthah Kedaro Himavatyapi/ (Lalitagama, Jnaanapaada, Shiva Linga Pradurbhava Pathala).It is explained that there are 108 Maha Shiva Kshetras in Bharat as follows: Shrikantha Shaila Kshetra on Kaivalya Mountain; Kedara Shiva at Kedarnath; Vishwa natha at Kashi Kshetra; Mallikarjuna at Shri Shaila; Nilakanthesha at Prayaga; Rudra at Gaya; Nilakantheshwara at Kaalanjar; Bhimeshwara ad Draksharama among Pancharamas; Ambikeshwara at Mayavara; Deva Linga at Brahmavarta; Shashibhushana at Prabhasa Kshetra; Vrishadhwaja at Shweta Hastipura; Gokarneshwara at Gokarna Kshetra; Someshwara at Somanatha; Shri Rupa at Tyaga Raja; Vedapureshwara at Vedapura; Bhimeshwara at Bhimarama; Kalikeshwara at Manthana; Chokkanatha at Madura; Madaweshwara at Manasarovara; Champakeshwara at Shri Vanchaka; Vateshwara at Panchavati; Vaidyanatha at Ghagaranya; Tirtheshwara at Tirthachala; Kumbhakewsha at Kumbhakonam; Papanashana at Lepakshi; Kanvesha at Kanvapura; Madhyarjuneshwara at Madhya Kailasha; Shankara Narayaneshwara at Hariharapura; Margesha at Virinjavura in Kerala; Girishwara at Panchanada; Virupaksha at Pampapura; Mallikarjuna at Somagiripara; Agasteshwara at Trimakutha; Ahipeshwara at Subramanya; Mahabaleshwara at Mahabala Parvata; Ankeshwara at Dakshinavarta; Vedaranyeshwara at Vedaranya; Someshwara at Somnath; Rama Lingeshwara at Ujjain; Vijayeshwara at Kashmira; Mahanandipuresheara at Maha nandipura; Koteshwara at Koti Tirtha; Vriddhachaleshwara at Vriddhachala Kshetra;

Gangadhareshwara at Kakurda Parvata; Chamarajeshwara at Chamarajanagara; Nandeshwara at Nandi Parvata; Chandeshwara at Badhirachachala; Nanjundeshwara at Garapura; Adhipeshwara at Shatashringa Parvata; Someshwara at Ghanaanda Parvata; Namaleshwara at Nallur; Needanatheshwara at Needanathapura; Ramalingeshwara at Ekanta; Kundaleshwara at Shri Naaga; Tribhangeshwara at Shri Kanya; Raghaveshwara at Utsunga; Tirtheshwara at Matsya Tirtha; Tandaveshwara at Trikuta Parvata; Marga sahayeshwara at Prasannapura; Shiva naabha at Gandaki; Shripateshwara at Shripata; Dharma linga at Dharmapuri; Kaladhara at Kanyakubja; Veereshwara at Vanigrama; Nakulshwara at Nepal; Markandeshwara at Jagannatha; Swayambhu at NarmadaTata; Manjunatjha at Dharmasthala; Vyaseshwara at Trirupaka; Pannageshwara at Nirmal; Jaimineshwara at Pundarika; Madhureshwara at Ayodhya; Siddeshwara at Siddavati; Tripurantaka at Shri Kurmachala; Manimukta nadeshwara at Manikundala Kshetra; Krittivaseshwara at Vatavi; Sangameshwara at Triveni Tata; Malleshwara at Stanika tirtha; Arjuneshwara at Indrakila Parvata; Kapileshwara at Seshachala near Tirupati; Pushpagireshwara at Pushpagiri; Bhuvaneshwaran at Chitrakuta; Mahakala or Kalikeshwara at Ujjain; Shulakantaka at Jwalamukhi; Sangameshwara at Magali; Brihadeshwara at Tanjapura; Ramshwara at Pushkara; Matseshwara at Sri Lanka; Klurmeshwara at Gandhamadana Parvata; Varaheshwara at Vindhya Parvata; Nrisimheshwara at Ahobila; VamanaSwarupa Vishwanatha at Kurukshetra; Parashurameshwara at Kapilaa Tirtha; Rameshwara at Setubandha; Balaramewshwara at Saketa; Bouddeshwara at Vaaranavata; Kalikeshwara at Tatwa Kshetra and Krishneshwara at Mahendrachala.

Dwadasha Jyotirlingas (12):*Sourashtre Somanathaamcha Shishaile Mallikarjunam, Ujjayinyaam Mahakaleshwaram Parameshwaram/ Kedaram Himavatpushte Daakinyaam Bhimashankaram, Varanasyam cha Vishwesham Trayambikam Gautami tatey/ Vaidyanatham Chitaabhumou Nagesham Daarukaavane, Sethu bandhecha Ramesham Ghushmesham cha Shivalaye/ Dwadashaitani naaani pratarutthaaya yah pathet/* (Following are the most reputed Twelve Jyotirlingsas viz. Somnath, Shishaila Mallikarjuna, Maha Kaleshwara, Omkareshwara, Kedarnatha, Bhimashnakara, Kashi Vishweshwara, Traimbakeshwara, Vaihanatjha, Nageshwara and Rameshwara; detailed references are provided in the previous pages. Pancha Bhuta Shiva Lingas(5) : Kshiti Linga representing Prithvi at Ekamreshwara at Kanchipura-Aapa Linga representing water at Jambukshwara near Trichinaapalli-Tejo Linga at Tiruvannamalai- Vaayu Linga at Kalahasteshwara, nearTirupati and finally Akasha Linga at Chidambaram. Other Reputed Shiva Lingas (24)Pashupati natha Temple at Kathmandu, Nepal which claims to be the only Hindu Country, is actually not described as a Linga Swarupa but as an Idol shaped from above the waist; Sundareshwara Linga at Madurai; Kmbheshwara Linga at Kumbhakonam; Brihadeeshwara Linga at Tanjavur; Pakshi Tirtha at Chengalput; Mahabalweshwara near Pune; Amaranatha Linga at Kamshmir; Vaidyanatha Linga at Kangada; Tarakeshwara at West Bengal; Bhuvaneshwara in Odisha; Kangaiya Shiva Linga at Khajuraho; Eka Linga at Udaipur, Rajasthan; Gauri Shankara Linga at Jabalpore; Hareshwara near Manasarovara; Vyaseshwara near Kashi; Madhyameshwara at Kashi again; Hatakeshwara at Vadanagaru; Muktaparameshwara at Aruonachala Pradesh; Pragineshwara on Krouncha Mountaian; Kapaleshwara on Krouncha Parvata again; Sarveshwara near Chittoudh, Rajastan; Stamkbheshwara again near Chittoudh; Ajay Amareshwara on Mahendra Parvata.

VISHNU KSHETRAS

Ashtottattara Shata Vishnu Sthaanas: *Ashtottara shatastaaneshaavirbhutam Jagatpatim, Naami Jagataameesham Naraayanamananya dheeh/* Narayana is as Vaasudeva in Vaikuntha, Sankarshana at Aamoda; Pradyumna at Pramoda, Aniruddha at Sammoda; Vishnu in Satyaloka; Padmaksha at Surya Mandala; Shesha shayi in Ksheera Saagara; Taaraka in Shweta Dwipa; Narayana at Badarikashrama; Avinashi Hari at Naimisharanya; Shalagrama at Harikshetra; Rahavendra Shri Ramabhadra at Ayodhya; Bala Krishna at Mathura; Madhusudana at Mayapuri; Bhogashayana at Kashi; Avanipat at Avantika; Yadavendra at Dwaraka; Gopijana Vallabha at Vraja Bhumi; Nandanandana at Brindavana; Govinda at Kaliya hrada; Bhava nashaka at Govardhana; Shouri at Gomanta Parvata; Jagatpati at Haridwaara; Veni Madhava at Prayaga; Gadadhara at Gaya; Vishnu at Ganga Sagara Sangama; Raghava at Chitrakuta; Rakshasa hanta at Nuanda grama; Vishwa rupa at Prabhasa; Achala Kurma at Shri Kurma; Purushottama at Neelachala Jagannaatha; Paana Nri-Simha at Simhachala; Gadapani at Tulasivana; Paapahara at Ghrita shaila; Simhaswarupa at Shwetachala; Yogananda at Dharmapuri; Andhra Nayaka at Shri Kaakula; Hiranyantaka at Ahobila; Panduranga Vithala at Pandaripura; Srinivasa Balaji at Tirumala Venkatachala; Narayana at Melkote; Nrisimha at Ghatikachala; Varadaraja Kamala lochana at Kanchipura; Yathotkari at Shiva Kaanchi; in Kanchi itself there are as many as eighteen Vishnu Swarupas; Vijaya Raghava at Grudhra Sarovara thata; Veeraraghava at Vikshaarany; Tangashayi at Totadri; Gajarti nashaka at Gajasthala; Maha Bali at Balipura; Jagatpati at Bhakti saara; Maha Varaha at Shri Mushna; Padmalochana at Mahindra; Ranga natha at Sriranga; Janaki vallabha at Shridhama; Saranatha at Sara Kshetra; Harachapa bhanjaka at Khandana; Purna at Shrinivasa Sthala; Suvarna at Swarna Mandira; Maha Vishnu at Vyaghrapuri; Bhakti daata at Bhakti sthaana; Shanta Murti at Shweta hrada; Bharga at Bhargava Sthala; Madhava at Vaikuntha; Bhakta sakha at Purushottama; Sudarshana at Chakra Tirtha; Chakrapani at Kumbhakona; Sharangadhara at Bhutapuri; Gajartihara at Kapisthala; Govinda at Chitrakuta; Anuttama at Uttama; Padmalochana at Shwetachala; Parabrahma at Parthasthala; Madhusudana at Krishna koti; Mahananda at Nandapuri, Vrishaashraya at Vriddhapuri; Asanga at Sangamagrama; Shri Sharana at Sharanya; Jagatpati Gopala at Dakshina Dwaraka; Maha Simha at Simha Kshetra; Mallari at Manimandapa; Nibidakara at Nibida; Jagadishwara at Dhanushkoti; Kalamegha at Mouhura; Sundara at Madurai; Parama Swami at Vrishabhachala; Shri Natha at Varagna; Ramapriya at Kuruka; Goshthipati at Goshthipura; Darbha shayi at Darbha shayana; Shouri at Dhanvi Mangala; Baladhya at Bhramara sthala; Purna at Kurangapura; Srikrishna at Vata sthala; Achyuta at Kshudra Nati pranta and Padmanabha at Anantapura. It is firmly believed that among the above Kshetras, Bhagavan's Vighrahas were self generated at Eight Places viz. Sriranga, Srimusha, Venkatashala, Shalagrama of Hari Kshetra, Naimisha, Thotadri, Pushkara and Badarikashrama.

Ashtottata Shata Divya / Vishnu Kshetras: It is likely that quite a few of the following Kshetras are repeats of the above list and hence clarification is given the new and older names are mentioned within brackets: Kshira Sagara (Tiruppalkadal); Shriranga is near Tiruchirapalli; Koliyur or Oraiyur almost a part of Trichinapalli; Shwetagiri is Tiruvallur near Shrirangam; Dhanvinahpura near Lalgudi/ Trichinapalli with Nambi Sundararaja and Sundaravali Deities; Tiruppera/Shri Ramanagar near Tanjavor where Pupapriya Ranganathag and Ranga nayaki Lakshmi are the Deities; Karambanor or Kadabapur near Sriranga / Tiruvallarai with Purushottama and Purva Devi are the Deities; Tanjaimamani koil (Sharanya Nagar) near Tanjavur with three Temples of Neela megha Bhagavan and Arunakamala Nayaki; Nrisimha and Tajjai nayaki Lakshmi; and Manikundala Perumal and Ambujavali; Tirukkandiyur (Khanda Nagar) near Shartanuya Nagar with Harashapa vimochana Narayana and Devi Lakshmi;

Cuddalore (Sangama Pura) and Tituvayyar where Vishnu and Kamkala Valli Lakshmi are present; Kapisthala near Cuddalore and River Kaveri from where Gajendra Varada and Lakshmi hastened to rescue Gajendra to Gandaki River near Bihar and thus there is a Gajendra Pushkarini in place here; this is also place where Hanuman had Sakshat kar of Shri Rama as Bhagavan Vishnu himself!; Pullabhudamokudi (Grudhra Tirtha) where Jatayu realised Rama as ‘Sesha shaayi’ Narayana himself; Adanor or Gopuri where Kamadhenu and Alwar Shriparakaal realised Rama as Maha Vishnu; Tirukkandnadai (Kumbakonam); Tiruvinnagaram (Akashnagar); Tirunaaraiyur (Sugandhagiri); Tiruccherai (Saara Kshetra); Nandan Koel; Tiruvelliyankudi (Bhargavapuri); Tirullundur (Rathapaata Shtala); Tiruvandilurn (Indrapura); Shirupuliyur (Vyaghrapura); Tiruvannampuram (Kanvapura); Tirunnamangai (Krishna Mangalapura); Tirukkannankudi (Krishna Kuti); Tiruvannagai (Nagapattanam); Kalahasti; Tiruvali Tirunagari (Parirambhapura); Manimadakkoyil (Tirunagur-Nagapuri) ; Vaikunthavinnagaram (Vaikunthapura); Arimeyavinnagaram (Nabhapura); Vanpurushottamam (Purushottama); Semponseya Koil (Swarna Mandira); Tiruttontriyambalam (Lakshmi Ranganatha); Tirumanikkutam (Manikuta); Tirukkalam padi (Talavana); Tiruddevanaar Tokai (Keelai –cchalai Devanagara); Tiruvellakkullam (Shwetahrada or AppanKoil); Parthanpalli (Parthasthala); Talaicchankaamadim-Tallaicchenkadu (Shankhapura); Tallai Tiruchitra Kutam (Chidambaram); Tirukkundal (Madurai);Tiru mohur (Maahur); Vrishabhadri or Alagar Koil; Tirummeyyam (Satyagiri); Tirukkoshtiyur (Goshithi pura);Tiruppullani (Darbha shayana);Tiruttankaalore (Sheetodyana pura); Shri Villuputtur; Totadri; Tirukkurunkudi; Tirukkurukur; Tiruvallimangalam; Shri Vaikuntham; Varagunimangai (Varaguna); Tiruppulingkudi (Chimchakuti); Tirukkalandai (Perunguklam-Brihattadaag); Tirupperai (Shrinampura); Tirukkollur (Mahanidhipura); Tiruvananta puram (Ananta shayanam/Trivendram); Tiruvattaru (Partashutrama Kshetra); Tiruvanparisaaram (Ramya shtala); Tirucchankanur (Trichur); Kuttunadu or Tiruppuliyur/ Shardulanagar; Tiruvannavandur; Tiruvallavaal (Keralpura); Tirukkadittanam (Gandha nagar); Tiruvaranbalai Aranmulai (Samruddhisthala); Maruttata; Shri Mulidhama; Vidytpura; Navapura; Ateendrapura; Dehalipura; Vrindaranya Kshetra; Tinnanur; Veeksjharanya;Ghatikachala; Toyadri; Vaaraaha Kshetra; Tirunkkagmalai; Hastigiri; Tiruvekka (Yatthottakari); Ashtabhujam; Tiruttanka (Deepa prakasha); Velukkai (Kaamasiki); Uragam (Trivikrama); Neeraakaara; Kaarakam; Kaarvanam; Tirukkalvanore; Patakam(Pandava doota); Chandra chooda, Pravala varna; Pacchaivarnayurt; Parameshwara vinnagaram; Gruddhra Kshetra; Tiruvenkatam or Tirupati/ Tiruvenkatadri; Singavellukutram; Dwaraka; Ayodhya; Naimisharanya; Mathura; Tiruvayippadi; Deva Prayaga; Jyotishpeetha; Badarikashrama; and Mukti Narayana.

Pradhana Devi Sthalas:

Kanchipuretu Kamkakshi Malaye Bhramari tathaa, Keraletu Kumari saa Ambaanteshu sankthitaa/ Kara veere Maha Lakshmih Kalika Maalavesu saa, Prayage Lalita Devi Vindhya Vindhyanivashini/ Vaaranaasyaam Vikshalakshi Gayaayam Mangalaavati,vangeshu Sundari Devi Nepale Guhyakeshwari/ Iti Dwadasha Rupena Samthita Bharate Shivaa, Etamsaa Darshana Deva Sarva Paapaih pramuchyate/ Ashakto darshane nityam smaret pratah samahitah, Tathaapuypasakah sarvyairaparaadhair vimuchyatey/ (Maha Bhagavati Swarupas are highly popular and worshipped by the Divya namas and the sthalas as follows: Devi Kamakshi at Kanchipura; Devi Bhramaramba at Shrishaila; Devi Kanya Kumari at the Kanyakumari Kshetra; Devi Aanarta Amba at Ambaji in Gujarat; Bhagavati Karaveera Maha Lakshmi at Kolhapuri; Bhagavati Kalika at Ujjain; Devi Lalitamba at Prayaga; and Devi Vindhyavasini at Vindhyagiri ; also renowned are Devi Vishalakshi at Varanasi; Bhagavati Mangalavati at Gaya; Devi

Sundari in Bengal; and Devi Guhyeshwari in Nepal. By the darshan of these Devi Vighrahas, the devotees are sure to have their blemishes demolished; in the event of their inability to visit these Kshetras, thier faithful regular prayers in the early mornings should suffice to put them on to the path of realisation of the Devi's Magnificence!)

51 Siddha Kshetras:

The Maha Kshetras in Bharat where darshana-pujas become possible are enumerated as follows: Kurukshetra; Badari; Narayana Kshetra or Badarikashrama; Gaya Kshetra; Purushottama / Jagannatha Kshetra; Varanasi; Varaha Kshetra near Ayodhya; Pushkara; Naimisharanya; Prabhasa Kshetra; Shookara Kshetra; Muktinath; Rishikesh; Dwaraka; Mathura; Kedara; Pampa Kshetra at Hospet; Bindusara or Siddhapur; Trina Brindavana; Dashapur/ Mandasor of Madhya Pradesh of Maha Bharata fame as also of Pashupati natha ; Ganga-Sagara Sangama; Tejovana; Vishakha Surya or Vikshapatnam; Ujjaini; Dandaka (Nasik); Manasaovara; Nanda Kshetra or Nanda Devi Parvata; Sithaasrama or Bithur near Kanpur stated to be the birthplace of Luv and Kusha, sons of Shri Rama; Kokamukha; Mandara (Bhagalpur); Mahendra or Mandsa near Srikakulam , Andhra Pradesh famed for ancient Vasudeva Temple; Rishabha-son of Naabhi and father of Bharata after whom Bharata Desha is named ; Skanda Purana mentions of the King; Shalagrama Kshetra / Damodara Kund near Girnar, Gujarat famed for Shivaratri festival attracting lakhs of devotees to Junagad; also famed for Swami Narayan Temple; Go nishkramana; Sahyadri Mountain Range / western ghats covering the entire paschima and Dakshina seacoast of Bharata; Pandya or the Kingship of Pandyas who fought Kurukshetra of Maha Bharata fame closely connected to Madurai; Chitrauta; Gandhamadana or Rameshwar; Haridra; Brindavana; Hastinapura; Lohargula; Devashala; Kumara Kshetra (Tamil nadu and Kerala); Devadaruvana /Assam; Lingasphota related to Sage Patanjali And his School of Yoga Practice; Ayodhya; Kundina; Trikuta; and Mahishmati.

Some other Tirthas: Pancha Kedaras: *Kedar nath, Amarnath, Tunganath* on way from Kedarnath to Badarinath, Rudranatha from Tunganath and Kapileshwara on crossing Alaknanda there 2km hence. Sapta Badaris: *Badari Narayana, Adi Badari* in Uragam Village some 2 km hence Kumhara chatti also called Dhanya Badari; *Bhavishya Badari*, some 7km from Jyoshimutt; *Yoga Badari* also called Dhyana Badari at Pandukeshwara; another Adi Badari from Kailasa to Thulinga Mutt and *Nrisimha Badari* at Jyoshi mutt itself. Sapta Naths: *Badari natha, Kedarnatha, Amar natha, Ranga natha, Dwaraka natha, Shri Natha, Govarthana nath.* Sapta Saraswatis: *Suprabha at Pushkar, Kanchanakshi at Naimisha, Manorama in North Koshala, Odhavati at Kurukshetra, Surenu at Haridwar and Vimalodaka on Himalayas;* Sapta Ganga: *Bhagirathi, Vriddha Ganga, Kalindi, Saraswati, Kaveri, Narmada and Veni.* Sapta Punya Nadis: *Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Kaveri, Narmada, and Sindhu.* Sapta Kshetras: *Kurukshetra, Harhara Kshetra at Sonpur, Prabhasa Kshetra at Veraval, Renuka Kshetra near Mathura, Bhrigu Kshetra at Broach, Gujarat; Purushottama Kshetra at Puri Jagannatha and Sookara Kshetra at Sorome.* Pancha Sarovara: *Bindu Sarovara at Siddhapur, Narayana Sarovara at Kutch, Gujarat, Pampa Sarovara in Karnataka, Pushkara Sarovara in Rajasthan, and Manasa Sarovara in Tibet.* Navaaranyas: *Dandakaranya, Saindhavaranya, Pushkaraaranya, Naimisharanya, Kururaranya, Utpalaavartakaranya, Jambukaranya, Himavadaranya and Arbudaranya.* Chaturdasha Prayagas: *Prayagaraj, Deva Prayaga: Alaknanda-Bhagirathi; Rudra Prayaga: Alaknanda-Mandakini; Karna Prayaga: Pindara Ganga-Alaknanda; Nada Prayaga: Alaknanda-Nanda; Vishnu Prayaga: Vishnu Ganga-Alaknanda; Surya Prayaga: Alasatarangi-Mandakini; Indra Prayaga: Bhagirathi-Vyasa*

Ganga;Somaprayaga:Soma Nadi-Mandakini;Bhaskara Prayaga:Bhatavari-Mallahatti; Hari Prayaga: Hariganga-Bhagirathi; Gupta Prayaga: Nila ganga-Bhagirathi; Syama Prayaga: Shyama Ganga-Bhagirathi; and Keshava Prayaga: Alaknanda-Sarasvati/

Pradhana Melas: Kumbha Melas: *Haridwar:* coinciding with Guru in Kumbha Raashi and Surya in Mesha Raashi; *Prayaga:* with the entry of Guru in Vrisha Raashi, and Surya in Makara Raashi; *Ujjain:* Guru in Simha Raashi, and Surya in Mesha; *Nasika:* Guru in Simha and Surya in Simha. Other Melas: *Amarnath:* Ashwiyuja Purnima; *Haridwar:* Twelve yearly Kumbha, Shiva ratri and Chaitra; *Jwalamukhi:* Chaitra Ashwiyuja Nava Ratras; *Vaidyanath:* Shivaratri; *Kurukshetra:* Every Amavasya and a Solar Eclipses; *Pe hva:* Kartika and Vaishakhi Amavasyas; *Gadha Mukteshwara:* Kartika Purnimas; *Mathura:* Yama dwiteeyan (Kartika Shukla Dwiteeya and Kartika Purnima; *Vraja mandala:* Bhadra Shukla Ekadasi onward; *Nanda gaon, Gokula, Brindavana :* Janmashtami-Bhadrpada Krishnashtami; *Naimisharanya:* Every Amavasya, full Phalguna month, Maagha Amavasya and Purnima; *Prayaga:* Kumbha Mela every twelfth year, every Maagha month and Makara Samkranti; *Chitra kuta, Ayodhya:* Rama Navami and Solar eclipse; *Devi Paatana:* Chaitra Navaratri; *Sonpur:* Kartika Purnima; *Khatmandu, Nepal:* Maha Shivaratri; *Kolkatta and all over in West Bengal:* Ashwiyuja Navaratri; *Kamakhya:* Navaratri in Chaitra and Asviyuja; *Puri:* Ahadha Ratha Yatras, Maha Shiva Ratri; *Bhuvaneshwara:* Vyashakha Month; *Konarak:* Maagha Shukla Paksha; *Ujjain:* Dwadasha Kumbha and Maha Shivaratra; *Nashika:* Besides the twelve yearly Kumbha, Ramanavami, Shravana Month, Navaratri, Makara Sankranti, Maha Shiva Ratri, Grahana timings, and Ahika Maasa; *Bhima shankar:* Maha Shiva Ratri; *Pandari pura:* Ahadha, Kartika and Chaitra Months; *Saalaasara:* Hanumajjyayanti; *Lohargala:* Bhadra Amavasya; *Naata dwaara:* entire Kartika month; *Gokarna:* Maha Shiva ratri; *Shrishaila:* Maha Shiva ratri; *Bhadrachala:* Shri Rama Navami; *Tirupati:* All festivals as also Brahmotsavas; *Kalahasti:* Maha Shiva Ratri; *Kanchi:* Jyeshtha month; *Kumbhakonam:* Maagha month; and Magha Kumbha mela; *Trichi:* Bhadrpada; *Shrirangam:* Pousha and Maagha months; *Rameshwaram:* Maha Shiva Ratri, Shravana, Jyeshtha and Ashadha months; *Dhanushkodi:* Solar and Lunar eclipses, Ashadha Purnima; *Tiruvantapuram:* Padmanabha Ananta Chaturdashi; *Siddhapur:* Saraswati River's Kartika and Vaishakha Purnimas; *Ambaji:* Bhadra Purnima; *Girnar:* Maha Shivaratri; *Shamlaji:* Kartika Purnima; *Dakor:* Ashwiyuja and Kartika Purnimas; also at Parli Vaidyanath, Tulja Bhavani, Kolhapur, Maha Baleshwar, Rajamahendri, Mahabalipuram, Krishna River, Tiruvayur, Pakshi Tirtha, Chidambaram, Nagapattanam, Tanjore, Jambukeshwar, Kanyakumari, Gokarna, Mysore, Dwaraka, Nanded, Shringeri, Kanchi, Srirangapattana and so on.

Pradhana Shradda Tirthas (42) : Deva Prayaga at Alaknanda-Ganga Sangama; Tri Yugi Narayana (Saraswati Kund); Madhymeshwara; Rudranatha; Barai Brahma Kapala Shila; Haridwara (Hari-ki paidi); Kurukshetra-Pehova; Pindaraka Tirtha; Madhura-Dhruva Ghat); Naimisharanya; Dhoyuta Paapa-Hatyaharana Tirtha); Bithoor (Brahama -varta); Prayaga; Kashi-Manikarnika; Ayodhya; Gaya; Bodh Gaya; Raja Griha; Parashurama Kunda, 165 km. from Tinsukhia, Arunachala Pradesh on the banks of Brahmaputra; Yajapur; Bhuvaneshwar; Jagannatha Puri; Ujjain; Amarakanthak; Nasik; Triambakeshwar; Pandaripura(Chandra bhaga); Lohargala; Pushkar; Tirupati Balaji; Shiva Kanchi (NarayanaTirtha Sarovara); Kumbhakonam; Srirangam- Kaveri banks); Rameshwaram-Lakshmana Tirtha; Dhanushkoti; Darbha shayana; Siddhapur; Dwaraka; Narayana Sara; Prabhasa-Veraval; Shulapani-Surapaneshwar; Chanoda. Source of Annexures: Tirthanka, Gita Press, Gorakhpur.