

## **IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE**

**Sudharsan S.N.**

Of all the journeys a person travels in an entire lifetime, there are a few which are remembered precisely and a few, that are cherished for eternity. The travelers will recount the wonderful moments that they had spent on a particular journey and share it with their friends, family and generations to come. Journeys to historical places are different but journeys to places that are history, make them glorious in a different sense. A journey to the Nilgiris or to the hill slopes of Kashmir is memorable indeed.

But considering the fact that I was in a place that "WAS" there in 1964, made it, what could possibly be the best journey in my lifetime to come.

This write-up is about my trip to Dhanushkodi, located at the land's end of India, on one side, near the Sri Lankan shores. It was my second trip to this place, but the purpose being very different. . The purpose of my visit was to gather information about the 1964 cyclone, for a book I was writing . But very soon realized that I had become a part of the town. Right since childhood, I've longed to know about that place, every single bit of information sounded to me like manna dew flowing in my ears, and every single snapshot of this place was worth a Mona Lisa's portrait for me. I had the least belief that I would be a part of a place, which was wiped away from the face of the earth in 1964. I also had the privilege of being in a place worth calling, one of the most isolated places on earth.

But truly, of all my sinbad journeys, this would be there in my eyes for the rest of my life. Every breath I took here, every grain of sand that I walked over, and every single drop of water I had tasted here was priceless. There is one more priceless gift that I received - the true friendship of all the people living in one particular community. I will cherish it for ages to come.

NOVEMBER 29,2002:

Tiruchirapalli, the golden rock city can be quite aptly called as the gateway to many towns and villages in southern Tamil Nadu. Buses and trains plied round the clock from this beautiful city. The train that I boarded on November,29th night, took me to Tiruchirapalli on the dawn of November 30th.

What a wonderful feeling it was? 6 in the morning, the Cauvery and the Kollidam, not far off, the golden rock visible at a distance - all spelt poetry. Wordsworth opted for London's beauty in the morning to write his poetry, poor man he missed out Trichy. Such was its beauty. Everything seemed so new and fresh. The cold winter breeze tickled me, and as the tickling went on, I suddenly realized that I had to reach Rameshwaram. I could have just kept on gazing at Trichy in the morning, but anyway I had to leave. I took the bus at 7am and was all set for a 6 hour bus ride. The journey was enjoyable, but I

realized that it wasn't the bus, or the roads that made it enjoyable, but the morning hours that made it a splendor in it. The Sun rising over the Pudukottai plains, spelt absolute beauty. Hours went on and very soon the journey became bumpy, uncomfortable and all that, as the temperature rose, and a change in the surroundings, made it obvious that I was entering the coastal plains. It was 12:45 noon and an engineering marvel shone up - the Indira Gandhi Bridge, a mighty bridge across the Pamban straits, from Mandapam, mainland India to offshore Pamban Island. The railway bridge, which was of the drawbridge architecture that permitted passage of ships, was there to be seen. The deep blue seas, crystal clear noon skies and a fresh smell of sea breeze welcomed me to Rameshwaram. I got myself a hotel room booked, and left immediately to my paradise - Dhanushkodi.

Nothing much has changed in 6 months, I was here on January 14th, and the only notable difference being that it was much cooler in November. The 15-minute bus journey took me to Moonram Chattiram, from where I had to take the hired van, through the mud road to Dhanushkodi 7kms away. I missed it and started walking all the way. A return to this place after quite some time, and treading through my own footsteps gave me a nostalgic feeling. I reach Dhanushkodi at 4:30 in the evening not knowing a single soul there. Even though the town was wiped away in 1964, people numbering about 100 still stay there in thatched huts for their living. It is by far one of the richest fishing belts in India, and the seas provide livelihood to all of them.

The purpose of my visit was to gather information about the 1964 cyclone, for a book I was writing . In the story, the character meets with a cyclone, so my idea was to be a part of history, by sitting in one of the ruins and complete the chapter in which the character gets caught up in the middle of a killer cyclone. for me, it was not a bad idea indeed!! So I moved around the place and caught some snaps, and the Sun set over the Gulf of Mannar in all it's same beauty, as I had seen in the morning.

The town had the ruins and thatched huts numbering somewhere around 50 and a population close to 500, near the place where I was, which was called in 1964 as "setthupadu", meaning the swamp area.

No cement buildings, no water system, no power supply, not so comfortable mode of accessibility and the fact that the nearest phone line was 20kms. away made this place truly isolated. For the first time in all my lifetime, I was there in a place, which was broken away from the rest of the world, totally. The people had to come to the Indian side only, as any attempt to cross international border on the other side would result in a simple shoot-out operation by the Sri Lankan Navy. The security was very tight because a few months back, mass illegal repatriation from the Sri Lankan side had caused the Indians and the Sri Lankan to beef up their security.

All these added up to convey the real meaning of the expression "..in the middle of nowhere..". I get back to Rameshwaram, as it got quite late. so my info querying had to be postponed by a day.

NOVEMBER 30, 2002:

True indeed, there is something about the mornings that make them magical, and a morning by the sea makes it mystical. Is it the Sun, is it the cool morning breeze, is it the fresh atmosphere which made everything appear as if everything was born only a few minutes back, or is it my dear old Rameshwaram? Well, whatever it was the dawn added beauty to my journey. first stop was the temple and after having a bath in all the 23 wells in the temple, I was enjoying my presence in a 2000-year-old temple. All divinity summed up to the glory of nature there. All the wells which are inside the temple, were meant to have healing properties and one well was meant to have quite an interesting thing to offer - any person having a bath there would get married before the next time he would come there. I knew it was superstition indeed, but as far as the results are concerned, I would have to wait and see.

Now it was Dhanushkodi time, and I was off to Dhanushkodi in a jiffy. this time, I got the van, so I did not have to walk all the way to land's end. It was around 11:30am when I reached Dhanushkodi, and this time I was very clear of my plan there, collect all information precisely, and try if I could stay there. I knew none there, but some feeling, some inner intuition told me that I would have the best possible time in Dhanushkodi.

I went straight to a teashop, a number of people were seated in dhotis and apparently had come back after a morning catch in the sea. Teashops, form a part of the culture of Tamil Nadu. and have everything in them except for the commodities available in the super malls. They have all sorts of eatables, and this one being on one end of the offshore Indian island - had tea, biscuits and lots and lots of information. one can get information just about anything in the tea shops, right from politics, current affairs and while one is there in these kiosks one forgets everything and gets involved in it. I was no exception, I was talking to an man aged 58, named sethuraman, and he was giving me all details of the Dhanushkodi cyclone of 1964. He was an 18-year-old young man, when the cyclone had struck and he offered more details than many as he could narrate everything. He was a blessed man because he had not lost anybody in his family in the cyclone. I considered him as a person playing his second innings, an innings in which he has been given life. The cyclone took away about 1500 lives and he was one amongst the survivors.

I saw two emotions in his eyes. one, the happiness of being alive after the killer cyclone and the other being the fact that he had witnessed his friends dying before his very own eyes. I made him my unofficial guide, and he took me around the place and showed me the ruins and told me what they were. Had Dhanushkodi been there today, it would have possibly been the biggest town in southern Tamil Nadu, but sadly it's now history. After a walk around the place, we came and sat down in the shade behind the teashop, and what went on for an hour after that, made me forget myself.

The very fact of a young man, who had come all alone to gather information about a long forgotten town fascinated many and my presence had attracted many family members of the fishermen too. Jeeva(28), had come along with his family, and other fishermen numbering 20 came and it started off as

a formal introduction session, but soon turned out like the TV program "Whose line is it anyway?". We cracked jokes, talked about each other, pulling each other's legs and everybody was enjoying it. It is often said that only those moments stay with us forever, when we forget ourselves and involve in something deeply. I forgot myself totally, I had forgotten the fact that I had come 650kms away from home alone and that I was sitting amidst a fishermen community in Dhanushkodi, which as far as I knew was possibly one of the most isolated locations on earth. Fun talks happen everyday in college, but these are the ones I would remember for eternity.

Nobody had any intention of leaving, they were so friendly and truly.

I felt something there amidst the wonderful people that I had never experienced before. the feeling was indescribable but to sum it up I would say, it was the feeling of being in "God's own land" amidst "God's own people". God was present there in those smiling hospitable hearts than being locked in the temples. I was not a person interested in this 'God' concept, which has been carefully formulated by all religions, to me, this was 'Godliness' and their lives were my religion. My right hand just flipped over and I saw my watch, which showed that an hour and fifteen minutes had passed by, without a trace of remembrance of myself. It was bliss, which narrowed down to that moment. these moments make anyone realize the true meaning of life and joy. Everyone there had problems. I had the problem of clearing my exams, the fishermen had the problem of fishing safely in the turbulent waters. But the time when all of us were there, we forgot ourselves and I felt hollow for some time. Nothing went on in my mind. I was just listening to each other's talks. The content of our talk was not of any significance but the presence was of immense significance, with the fact that the only thing common between all of us was our language - Tamil.

Some of them had to proceed on with their work, so all of them left slowly and reluctantly. I was left with only Sethuraman and Mayandi(35). Mayandi, myself and one more fisherman left to Arichamunai, meaning the "eroded corner", and that was where the seas converged, the Gulf of Mannar and the Palk bay - "Sangamam" as they call it in Tamil. It was quite late in the evening, and the walk also took 1 hour from Dhanushkodi till the land's end, which was another 5kms from here. It was getting late and we had to leave immediately. we reached the place and that was another very lonely spot. the narrow strip of land a few meters apart and surrounded on all other sides by the seas.

The expression which came to my mind there was "..so near, yet so far". I was at a point closest to the international border of Sri Lanka, but considering the fact that I can never make the 20km journey to the other side alive, it was really far.

I jumped in the seas out of sheer excitement, and it wasn't so deep. Then we returned back and for the first time I realized the true meaning of the term "pitch black". I couldn't believe my eyes, what took me back to Dhanushkodi were only my feet. the moon shone, not so brightly. at a long distance, I saw the shrimp trawlers, but that was a long, long distance. to say it in simple words, the nearest accessible electric bulb which Edison had discovered was about 35 kms away from me, as there was no power in the town either. mayandi, the other man and myself walked back the 5kms, with only our feet and

senses guiding us. A few meters on this side there was Gulf of Mannar and the other side was palk bay and behind me was the Adam's bridge. It was a feeling of being cornered by the seas. only one-way to go, that was back to Dhanushkodi amidst the pitch darkness through the silver sands.

I had what could be called as the best sleep of my life, in a thatched hut, with the fishing nets as my bed, amidst fishermen folk. What could have been uncomfortable for any other orthodox man, spelt poetry for me. It was in a way equivalent to business class of British airways, in which I had traveled from New York to London when I was 11 years old. There I flied through the air, and here I slept by the seas. The shore was a few meters away from my bed, on both sides. Till late night music continued, not with bass guitars but our vocal sitars. All of us sang and it became late night when we slept. Poor chaps, the fishermen could sleep only a few hours, as they had to leave for fishing the very next day morning at 3am. The only thing I knew, was that I closed my eyes and I fell into a deep slumber like a sloth.

DECEMBER 1 - 2002:

This morning was also special indeed, considering many special reasons. One, I had got up before the Sun had risen. Two, I was in Dhanushkodi and three, I was by the sea watching the Sunrise exactly from the horizon. Usually in our beach sunrises, we see the Sun rising not above the seas but above a blue cloud. but here in Dhanushkodi, because of the geography and the climate the Sun rose exactly 180 degrees from the shores of Arichamunai. This was more of an enthralling experience seeing the sun rise here. It was more poetic than the sunrise over the Cauvery in Trichy, better than the Sun rising over the awadh plains in Uttar Pradesh and more beautiful than the sunrise over the North Carolina Mountains. It was the same Sun and the same phenomenon we see everyday, but the climate and the location added glamour and awe-inspiring beauty to the Sun.

The sound of the waves, roaring and dashing on the shores, the cold seaside climate, fresh passing breeze caressing me and the feeling of being in a very isolated spot, all spelt absolute magic. I don't know how far it might be enjoyable to any other traveler, but to me it was sheer thrill.

I was a fisherman for a day. I was moving all around the town in the dawn, with the Sun rising, and everything seemed fresh. Even the dead, ruined building seemed to echo something. If it had not been for that nature's fury of 1964, this whole place would have been in a different situation altogether. With a drop of tear in my eyes, I move on to the fishing boats, and found that they were pulling the nets from the seas. Bingo!! it was a rich catch indeed, the fish cart was ready and the estimated worth of that load was somewhere around 3000rs. the catch consisted of tiny fishes, long thin fishes, a sting ray and a big black fish which suddenly shot out black poisonous ink, with it's bulging stomach. They had warned me already, so no fear then onwards. The day progressed and the fishing went on as usual.

My urge to see the land's end during noon, made me to go once again, but this time in the van. The sight that welcomed me would remain in my eyes till my last breath.

The land ended at the place where I stood and there was this marvel before me that brightened my eyes. It was the seas on all the three sides that surrounded me, sparkling in a beautiful brilliant blue color. The Sun was directly overhead and so I did not had to look at the watch, the shallow seas ended a few meters before me and a deep trench was about a few steps before me. I realized that I was standing on the Adam's bridge, the bridge of coral reefs and shallow waters that served as a natural bridge between India and the Sri Lankan. It was 22 miles long and connected Dhanushkodi and Thalaimannar, Sri Lanka.

It had existed there for ages together and even now it does, but in the present context, the human boundaries make it a bridge of death. Twelve nautical miles down the bridge, would result in a simple shootout operation by the Navy.

The two seas on the either side converged where I stood and the feeling of being in the middle of such an amazing location, overwhelmed me with sheer joy. The waves dashed me from both the sides, and I felt like a child caressed by his mother.

This is also the place where the ashes of Indian leaders are dissolved. Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru have all come here in the form of bottled ash. A few meters away was the 2 feet tall statue of Hanuman enclosed in the shade of a small hut. Nature had to offer something more than saltiness of the seas.

A small hole was dug near the statue and there was another amazing thing to be witnessed or more appropriately "tasted" The seas, are a few meters away from this spot. 2 meters on either side were the extremely salty waters of the seas and in the middle of this was an oasis of extremely tasty fresh water. It was a fresh water spring amidst the salt desert on the either side, in the seas. It was a miracle and all these things forced me to think beyond scientific reasoning. The great people, the fishing belt, the beauty of the vast emptiness all make it divine. The only exception being the cyclone, but nothing to do about it than pitying. Nature sometimes plays spoilsport with itself.

It became noon and I moved on to one of the ruins, back at Dhanushkodi, which supposedly was the railway retiring room canteen before 1964. I sat there in the roofless room and started writing and compiling some of the information I had obtained about Dhanushkodi from Sethuraman. My work was over in an hour's time. It was 1`0` clock. Most of the town had their afternoon nap, and the only sound I heard all around me was that of the seas.

There was something so different I noted about this place, which had caught my fascination.

Dhanushkodi, seemed timeless. everything seemed to go on without bothering the least for any schedule. The birds stealing the dried fishes, the fishermen going to the seas, then Sun rising and everything seemed so timeless. There wasn't anything unusual but considering the fact that there was no town in the first case made it significantly time immemorial. The silence was there to be felt, and the feeling was something that could not be described in words. For me, I felt that the trip was something more than a information-collecting trip. It was like an educational pilgrimage.

A pilgrimage that told me about the differences in the way the people live. People in cities and metropolises talk about the "shrinking" world and technological advancements. people talk about sending e-mails, within a flash of a second and about the whole world knit together within a small community where we all had to live as an e-world. But for Dhanushkodi, it meant nothing. even now, on the verge of the Internet age, a person in Dhanushkodi who wants to make a phone call had to walk many kilometers. All that he knew is his life and his way of survival to live tomorrow. He goes into the seas for a rich fishing hunt, not knowing the sea might hunt him. Every time he goes into the seas, he wishes his family a big farewell and lives in the seas, thinking about his family in the shore. He risks his life for a livelihood and to him the sea is more than just a large body of water. To him it was his mother who has given him a life and a livelihood. without the seas, he is nothing and Dhanushkodi would have been just another abandoned, dilapidated town. Every man there owed credit to the blessed land. He is the most natural man, living the present fully, having the least expectations about the long-term future. every moment I had spent in Dhanushkodi mattered more to me than anything and what I learnt about the people, about fighting nature and surviving was more than what Harvard business school would teach me.

As the train of thoughts went on, I realized that it was time for me to leave to catch the late evening train back to Madras. I had to leave. I bade farewell to Dhanushkodi leaving as a satisfied young man. I got information about what I wanted, second is that I had lived a very different and wonderful life for two days. Three, being the fact that I had received the love and affection of all the people of Dhanushkodi. Unconditional love and ever smiling hospitality mad me bow down before them for all what they meant to me. I could boast of a huge community of families who would welcome me forever, with all their heart, expecting nothing, but just the true love they had showered on me. I have passed their test of love and I will remain in their hearts forever and Dhanushkodi with it's wonderful people, has given me a second home. - Sudharsan.S.N.

FROM THE AUTHOR:

The mystical Dhanushkodi, in total isolation from the rest of the world is a reminder that not everyone`s world is small and the buzzword to stay connected isn`t meant for everybody. It is also meant to show that world progress is complete only when the lives of people of Dhanushkodi and other similar places changes. Till then the fire for progress amidst the minds of all has to be burning.

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sudharsansn@gmail.com , [www.sudharsansn.com](http://www.sudharsansn.com)

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