At Home in the Holy Land
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Excerpts from a Sri Lanka Diary

Gayatri Ananta Devi, one of Brahmacharini members of the Church, lived in the Jaffna/Alaveddy area of Northern Sri Lanka for 10 months in 1979. She enjoyed fully being a guest in a traditional Saivite village and just before her return to America in December of last year she wrote the following letter for The New Saivite World sharing a few highlights of her stay:

"The Tamil mind expresses a great tenderness and holds unshakably to the knowledge of the Second and Third World. Little things in everyday life reveal this. Any taxi you get into in Jaffna will have several pictures of Deities on the dashboard. Most of the local shops bear the name and picture of one of the gods, like Vel Murugan, Stores, Lakshmi Sarees or Ambal Cafe (Ambal is a name of Sakti). Even the wrappers that papadams come in bear a picture of Lord Muruga with His Vel. Everywhere there are temples and shrines, from the most elaborate to a simple rock. Lingam or trident beneath a tree with a fresh offering of flowers before it. In the very first grammar books the schoolchildren learn to read from we find sentences like. 'Speak the truth.' 'Worship God.' 'Think before you act.' When people pass a temple while riding on the bus they do namaskaram pressing the palms together in salutation, or place one or both hands over their heart or knock thrice on their forehead - all devotional gestures that alert and awaken the mind to the presence of the Deity.

"I was blessed to be at Nallur Temple on the day someone was having a special puja done called an Arumugam Archana. This powerful ceremony is performed amid the clamor of ringing bells, nagaswara horns, drums and conch. In the shrine of Arumugam, the six-faced form of Lord Muruga, a group of six Brahmin priests circled the Deity who is elevated about two feet above them. Each pujari did arati before one of the God's six faces with a seven-tiered camphor burner, moving clockwise around the Deity, chanting in unison in a slow, graceful dance of moving lights, the paused at each face of the Deity in turn until each Brahmin had offered arati to each face. The darshan built and built until at last the Brahmins filed out of the shrine and placed the camphor burners on the floor for the worshippers to take

the flame. The colors, scents and sounds and the beautiful intense darshan made it an unforgettable inner experience.

"At the village temples the villagers are very active participants and during festival times they work even harder. The Brahmins work mostly in the inner sanctum and outside of that it is the men, women and children of the village who light the oil lamps, sweep the floors, ring the bells and blow of the conch shell. The love and devotion that they shower upon the Deity is very moving to witness. Every possible pleasing thing is offered and he is treated in a most human way. In each temple there is a special image of the God to be used when the Deity is paraded outside the temple The image in the main shrine is never moved. At the Ganesha Temple in Alaveddy the parade Deity is of copper and He is seated under a finely worked silver arch. On different days He will ride in different types of Temple carts or palanquins carried on the shoulders of several of the men. He is exquisitely adorned with glittering cloths, brightly jewelry, flowers and leaves. At the flag-raising ceremony this image of Lord Ganesha is brought around to watch and the men stand bearing him up during the long ceremony while camphor is burned before him and he receives the beautiful offerings. The offerings are put at the base of a silver pillar at the center of the temple from which is hung the temple flag with pictures of Lord Ganesha and His different symbols. Every kind of fruit is presented, sugarcane juice, rosewater, water with vibuthi and sandalwood, young coconut milk, cow's milk, different kinds of incense and lights are all offered in turn by the chief priest. The Sanskrit chanting is so beautiful to hear. One priest will do a long monotonal type of chant, punctuated occasionally by a short devotional song by another Brahmin who stands with hands in namaskaram and eyes closed. An especially lovely chant was done by a priest who sings in the Carnatic style very beautifully and precisely. He sang long melodic phrases and the nagaswara horn repeated them. At the end of each verse there was another arati.