



# CONTRIBUTION OF SETHUPATHIS TO RAMANATHASWAMY TEMPLE – A STUDY

**Dr. G. Jancy Rani**

*Assistant Professor*

*Department of Historical Studies*

*Bharathi Women's College (A)*

*Chennai – 600 108.*

## ABSTRACT

Sri Ramanathaswamy temple is a popular temple situated in Rameshwaram, which is a small island linked to the mainland through Pamban Bridge. It's far absolutely the maximum vital part of any religious tour package. Regarded for its architectural works, majestic towers, and corridors this temple is a satisfactory instance of structural excellence. The spiritual importance of this temple can be seen from the famous notion according to which a visit to pilgrimage Kashi is incomplete without a visit to Rameshwaram temple. Considering that ancient times, devotees would walk and spend months and years on travel for touring both the shrines. The Sethupathis, who were rulers of Ramnad, did tremendous service to the Ramanathaswamy temple. The Sethupathis of Ramnad were religiously and emotionally so attached to the temple that they donated a village as paathakanikai during their coronation. They also donated the revenue collected from certain villages for the maintenance of the temple. This article is an attempt to throw light on the contributions made by the Sethupathi rulers to the development of the Ramanathaswamy temple.

**Keywords:** *Ramnad, Kilavan Sethupathi, Thirukonamalai, Raghunatha Sethupathi, Ramanathaswamy temple, Sivaganga.*

## Introduction

Temples are not only places of worship, they showcase the power, wealth, and devotion of their patrons. Temples also speak about the architectural and technical resources and skills of the period it was built. That is why kings showed keen interest in constructing beautiful temples. It stands as a symbol throwing light on the values and beliefs of the Indian culture. Temples are the embodiment of art and architecture of the period to which they belong. Generally, these temples are patronized generously by their rulers as they are the sign of their regal power and might. Hence, they are one of the targets when

kings attack each other. One such magnifying temple is the Ramanathaswamy Temple, situated in Ramanathapuram, which gives enormous information about its patrons, the Sethupathis of Ramnad.

## Rameshwaram

Rameshwaram is one of the most prominent pilgrimage centres in India. It is one among the 12



*Rameshwaram - The Holy Land of the Hindus*

Jyotirlinga. Rameshwaram is an island and it is connected to the mainland by the Pamban bridge. According to the great epic Ramayana, the seventh incarnation of God Vishnu, Rama, in order to absolve the sin of killing a brahman in the war between him and the demon king Ravana in Sri Lanka, wanted to pray to Lord Shiva in Rameshwaram. Hence, he asked Hanuman to bring the lingam from the Himalayas. But Hanuman took a longer period to bring the lingam and so Sita made a lingam out of the sand from the seashore for Rama to worship, which is believed to be the lingam in the sanctum of

the Ramanathaswamy temple. This holy land has been ruled by various dynasties. It also acted as a busy harbour as there is historic evidence which says that various types of conches and pearls were exported to different countries like China, Arabia, Egypt, Rome, etc. Though the Cholas and the Pandyas rulers have contributed to a great extent in constructing various temples during their reign, their contribution to the establishment of the Ramanathaswamy temple in Rameshwaram is found to be very little. It was the Sethupathi rulers of Ramnad who played a major role in constructing the Ramanathaswamy temple as we see it now. A tourist to Rameshwaram does not only get a spiritual aura but also enjoys excellent scenic beauty.

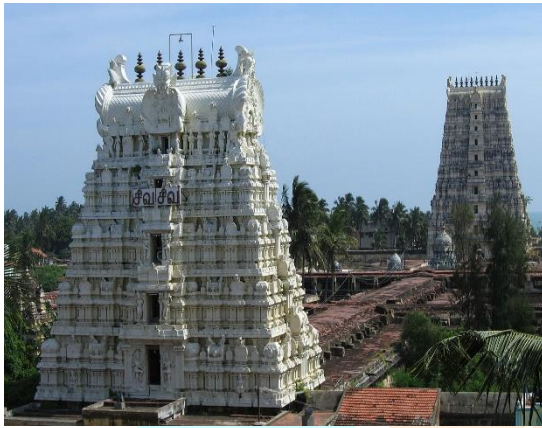
## Sethupathis of Ramnad

The Sethupathis of Ramnad had their land between 9 degrees 6' and 10 degrees 6'N latitude and 77 degrees 56' and 79 degrees 19'E longitude. It included the entire Bay of Bengal coast of Madurai district, as well as the Southern and Eastern portions of the district. It was one of the Madras Presidency's largest and most populous Zamindari Estates. Nearly two centuries from 1605 to 1795, the Sethupathis of Ramnad ruled over the areas of Sethunadu. They played a significant role in developing the socio-political, economic and cultural life of the people of that region and even the entire South India. They were a traditional chieftain from the Marava caste who were recognized as the Chieftains of Ramnad by the Nayaks of Madurai during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Sadaikka Thevar acknowledged the Nayak ruler's sovereignty over his lands. The Sethupathis of Ramnad asserted their independence after the power of the Nayak rulers of Madurai began to wane in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, Raghunatha Kilavan Sethupathi crowned himself the king of Ramnad. He also shifted his seat from Pogalur to Ramnad. Later on, as a reward for his service during the Ramnad Civil War, the Thanjavur king claimed the northern part of the Ramnad kingdom up the Pambar river. In the same way a vassal of Ramnad,

who was one among the victors of the Civil War, also took over the western region of Sivagangai, thereby leaving Ramnad with just three-fifths of the Kingdom to the Sethupathis.

### The Sethupathis and the Ramanathaswamy Temple

The Ramanathaswamy temple also referred to as the Rameswaram temple may be a great example of the perfection and elegance of Dravidian Architecture. As mentioned earlier Ramanathaswamy temple is devoted to Lord Shiva. The Holy abode of the Hindu God, Shri Rama may be a virtual paradise for the



*Ramanathaswamy Temple*

devout. No Hindu's journey is complete without a pilgrimage for both Varanasi and Rameswaram for the culmination of his go after salvation and is hallowed by the epic 'Ramayana'. Lord Rama may be additionally believed to have sanctified this place by worshipping and glorifying Lord Shiva and hence marks the confluence of Shaivism and Vaishnavism and is thus revered by both Shaivites and Vaishnavites alike and thus there's a robust belief that bathing within the '22 Theerthams' or natural springs is a breakthrough in enlightenment.

As for the temple itself, the first structure is recorded to have been a thatched hut. In the centuries that followed, diverse parts of the temple were commissioned and created by the rulers of the island. During the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the sanctum around the Ramanathaswamy temple was designed by Parakramabahu I, a king of Polonnaruwa (located in modern-day Sri Lanka). One of the most significant dynasties in the history of the Ramanathaswamy temple, however, was the Sethupathi Dynasty, which ruled over Ramnad and Sivaganga during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. During their period temples and the celebrations narrating to it gained much importance. The Sethupathis of Ramnad did great service to the Ramanathaswamy temple. Sadaikka Thevar (1590-1621) and his son Koothan Sethupathi (1621-1637) extended protection to the pilgrims who visited Rameshwaram.

Stone bars were typically employed in the construction of temples in ancient times, and they were brought to the site and cut into the needed shape of the sculptures. In contrast to this custom, the Raja Sethupathis dispatched stone cutters and artisans to Thirukonamalai with the requisite plans to carve the required pillars, load-bearing, and cutting site. He stayed in Ramanathapuram to monitor the work and set up a base. While there are various architectural aspects worth noticing in the Ramanathaswamy temple, none are as impressive as the temple's corridors. For starters, there are three sets of corridors in the temple. The outer group of the temple's passageway is nearly 7 meters high and extends for about 120 meters in both the eastern and western directions. On the other side, the passageways to the north and south are roughly 195 metres long. It is widely believed that this is the world's longest series of temple corridors. The outer corridor is notable not just for its length but also for the number of pillars that support it, which totals over 1200. Furthermore, beautiful carvings adorn several of these pillars. It's

worth noting that the temple is one of 12 Jyotirlinga temples dedicated to Shiva, who is worshipped as a Jyotirlinga, or "pillar of light." At Ramanathapuram, Raja Sethupathi Dalavai (1635-1646), alias Sadaiakka Thevar II, built a temple for Chokalinga Swami. During his reign, he built the east Gopuram at the Ramanathaswamy temple.

Raghunatha Sethupathi (1645 AD to 1670 AD) alias Thirumalai Sethupathi decided to build a second corridor to complement the temple's appearance and raise it. Because the temple was surrounded on four sides by the sea, it necessitated the transportation of stones from Madurai, Nellai, and Trichi via Mandabam and the Pamban canal to Rameshwaram, which proved to be extremely difficult. Finally, he had the notion that instead of bringing the stones from Tamil Nadu's hilly parts, he should bring them from Sri Lanka's mountainous regions, and he received permission from the Raja of Sri Lanka to carve the stones at Kindy. The second set of corridors is located within the outer corridor region. The construction of this complex of passageways began some seven centuries ago, when the area was under the dominion of the Vijayanagar empire, according to historical accounts.

The oldest of the three sets of corridors is the one on the inside. Despite the fact that these passageways were built in the 12th century, they have been rebuilt numerous times over the ages. Unfortunately, the work was never finished, and the unfinished corridors have remained unfinished till now. It is here that the Ramanathaswamy temple's sanctum may be discovered. The major deity of the temple, the sacred lingam, is kept in the sanctum, along with Amman Parvathavarthini. More recently, in 2017, a team of experts examined the set of corridors, which may allow the corridors to be finished in the future. Nonetheless, these corridors are famous for their 108 lingams and Mahaganapati (one of the 32 manifestations of Lord Ganesha).



*Vijaya Raghunatha Swamy*



*Magnificent Corridors of Ramanathswamy Temple*

Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathi governed Sethu Nadu from 1710 to 1725. On the last day of the Vijayadasami festivals, he ascended to the throne hence, he went by the name Vijaya. During his reign, he lay the groundwork for the Ramanathaswamy temple's world-famous third Corridor, also known as Chokkatan Mandapam. He also provided the Goddess Swamy Andal with a silver cradle fashioned of 18,000 Varagans. The third corridor of Ramanathaswamy temple at Rameshwaram was constructed under the reign of Muthuramalinga Sethupathi in 1769 with 1212 pillars each pillar measuring 30 feet. The first Prathani Muthu Irulappa Pillai and the Junior Padhani Krishna Ayyangar became extremely vital for the management and monitoring of the third corridor's completion. A monument of Muthu Irulappa Pillai could be found in the third corridor, near the eastern Gopuraval.

Aside from the great temples, the Sethupathis built mandapas, praharas, and gopuras. Sadaika Thevar, the first monarch of the Sethupathis, donated a number of villages to be used for pujas at the Ramanthar Thirukoil. The Sadaika Thevar's eldest son, Koothan Sethupathi, just like his father, built Artha Mandapam and Nadana Maligai at the Ramanathaswamy temple's first praharam. In the Artha mandapam, abhisheka platform, and upachara medai of 36 feet square and Vinayagar on the left and Sri Valli Devasena Subramaniam at the sanctum's entrance can be seen. Dwarapalakas with korai teeth can also be seen near the entrance of Moolavar Sanandhi. Koothan Sethupathi also built a temple for the Koori Sastha Ayyanar at Ramanathapuram on the Mandapam's southern side. In addition to Raja Sethupathi's Pogaloor headquarters, he built an Iyanarkovil near Vinayagar kovil. The majority of the people in Sethupathis' realm worshipped Ayyanar as their Kaval Gods. Puravi Eduppu, a temple festival, is held at many temples even today.

The Sethupathis issued Kattalais, or orders, and donated various forms of offerings so that poojas may be performed at the Ramanathaswamy temple on a regular basis without interruption. Sadaika Thevar alias Udaiyan Sethupathis granted lands to the Brahmins at Ramanathaswamy temple from 1605 to 1621 by forcing them to work in order to meet their requirements. Through Ramanatha Pandaram, the kovil administrator, he also contributed five villages and the tax earned to conduct daily pujas such as abhishegam and ghee, as well as lighting and offering pujas at Ramanathaswamy temple and Parvadhavarthini temple in Rameshwaram. Silugavayal village near Rajasingamangalam was gifted to the Ramanathaswamy temple by Kilavan Sethupathi. Kilavan Sethupathi's second wife, Kathali Natchiyar, donated the Melaseethai village to conduct the pujas at Rameshwaram temple. During their coronation to the kingdom, Sethupathi Rajas used to present a village to the Ramanathaswamy temple as paathakanikai. This shows the religious sentiment they had towards the Ramanathaswamy temple.

### **Administration of the Ramanathaswamy Temple**

There is no source of information on the administration of the temple until the advent of the Nayak rule. The Nayaks had control over the temple is evident from a copper plate deed which is signed by Thirumalai Nayak and his subordinate Dalavay Sethupathi on one side of the plate and the Gurukkal of the Rameshwaram temple. This deed says that the priest agreed to conduct religious service, failing which they will pay a fine and resign from office. In 1609 AD, during the period of Dalavay Sethupathi, he gave the right to manage the temple to a person called Ramanathapandaram. The administration of the temple was managed by the successions of Pandarams. Often there were disputes between the Sethupathi Rajas and these Pandarams regarding the administration of the temple.

On one occasion, Rani Mangalaeswari Nachchiyar had made a complaint that the Pandarams were not performing the poojas and religious ceremonies regularly. Later on, due to the mismanagement of the Pandarams, the management of the temple was given to the Tahsildar of Ramnad and then to the Sub-collector until Ramaswamy Sethupathi was given possession of the Ramnad Zamindari. The Zamindari office claimed the right to appoint Pandarams to administer the temple and felt that the Pandarams were not fit for the duty assigned to them. The administration of the temple came to Baskara Sethupathi in

AD1893, since then the Sethupathis of Ramnad became the hereditary Trustees of the Rameswaram temple. In 1912 AD the administration of the temple was vested to a committee that had five members as its trustees. Currently, the temple is managed and administered by the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department, according to the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment Act of 1959.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the seaside town of Rameshwaram, located on Pamban Island in the Gulf of Munnar, is a popular Hindu pilgrimage site. The Hindus consider this town to be one of the holy Char Dhams. This place is also known for Ramanathaswamy Temple is a Hindu holy site, which is noted for its huge sculpted pillars and long corridors. The Ramanathaswamy Temple also magnetizes millions of pilgrims every year, especially during the Maha Shivaratri festival. It is also one among the 275 Padal Petra Stahlam, where the three of the most revered Nayanars, Appar, Sundarar, and Tirugnana Sambandar have glorified the temple with their musical compositions. The temple also houses 22 teerthams in the form of tanks and wells. The Sethupathis of Ramnad had contributed to the socio-economic and cultural life of the people of that region to a great extent. The Sethupathis were the rulers of Ramnad and Sivaganga in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. During the reign of Muthukrishnappa Nayak, Sadaikkathevar was appointed guardian and protector of pilgrims visiting Rameshwaram. Since then the Sethupathi rulers not only protected the pilgrims but also took a keen interest in the development of the Ramanathaswamy Temple. The cultural excellence of the Sethupathis with specific connection with their contribution inside the subject of temple artwork, structure, sculpture, portray, fairs, and festivals gave them a prominent place in the history of India. As a result of the contributions made by the Sethupathi rulers, the Ramanathaswamy temple stands magnificently speaking volumes about its glorious past.

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