

# SAHASRACHANDI – AN EVENT TO REMEMBER



*Dedicated to my Guru Shri Raghu Ranganathan,*

*My Guru Matha Smt Akhila Ranganathan*

*And above else*

*To*

*Bhagvan Sri Sri Satya Sai Baba*

*Who abides eternally in Puttaparthi*

*And*

*Who holds all the strings of this puppet*

**Sri Ranganathan Ramasubramanian**



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श्री गुरुभ्योः नमः

வேலும் மயிலும் துணை

ஓம் ஸ்ரீ சாயி ராம்

Many people have written about their experiences about the Sahasra Chandi Maha Yagnam organized by Bhaskara Prakasha Ashram ([www.bhaskaraprakasha.com](http://www.bhaskaraprakasha.com)) between July 17 – 26, 2015 in Toronto, Canada and I wanted to add my bit. But how far I will succeed, in putting into words my thoughts and feelings about it, is hard to say. Normally I am never at a loss for words as my friends and family would attest to but now I find myself floundering. I admit it is a novel experience. I shall however do my best and forgive me if I sometimes seem incoherent. It must be remembered that I am trying to express the inexpressible! However, I am determined to muddle my way ahead. Another reason why it has taken so long in coming!

I dare say this Yagnam has meant different things to different people. What did it mean to me? What was the Sahasra Chandi Yagnam? How would one classify it? Was it a phenomenon? In that case the Aurora Borealis is a phenomenon too and with a little difficulty for us who dwell in Canada (by travelling up north for about 1500 km), we can witness this celestial phenomenon. No trouble at all wouldn't you say?

I am inclined however, to categorize the Sahasra Chandi Yagnam as a mighty force much akin to the biblical flood of yore (although in a positive sense) which has swept all evil out of its path and which has brought with it an ocean of grace and blessing. Talking of 'the flood', it is curious to note that nearly all cultures in the world (including obscure tribes in the remotest regions of the Amazon rain forests in South America) have their own flood stories passed down by word of mouth and in some, in the written form as well. At the point of this telling, over 500 flood stories are on record. The immediate source of the biblical flood story featuring the patriarch Noah seems to be the Epic of Gilgamesh, the flood story of the Sumerian civilization which thrived near present day Iraq, as deciphered by the biblical scholar, linguist and polyglot, Zechariah Sitchin, in the clay tablets unearthed at site. We have our own flood story, as told in the Srimad Bhagvatham featuring the Matsya Avathaaram of Lord Vishnu.

But ah! I have digressed far from the point.

This is a story of my own personal transformation which culminated at the yagnam and I am afraid I have to tell it in my own muddled way. I believe I did warn you beforehand. We have ways to go and so I suggest you take a coffee break before you continue to read.

Now that you have fortified yourself I am sure you are ready to continue with this saga.

So here goes....

I want to dwell on the metaphor of the 'flood' just for a moment longer. Please bear with me. The flood of yore was caused by divine will in answer to mankind's perfidy and at the end of it, the world as it was known then, was entirely destroyed and a new order of things was established, whereas the flood of grace that the Sahasra Chandi Yagnam engendered was set in motion by some really remarkable people. I will talk about them all a little later.

To properly delineate what this yagnam meant to me, I must acquaint you with the long path I have traversed to get to the point I find myself today. I must tell you about the belief systems I went through and also the discarding of them. In other words I must define what has made me tick so far and also highlight as it were the future 'me' as I envisage myself. Else it would be difficult to truly comprehend the extent of transformation of yours truly. There are thus two distinct phases of my life; the pre-Sahasrachandi phase and the post-Sahasrachandi phase and these two phases are strangers to each other!

I can hear you groaning...I promise to keep it as short as possible.

I have never been drawn towards rituals. That's the truth of it. As long as I remember, I have always been more contemplative by nature (read severely introverted) and rituals per se did not mean anything to me. My parents were also, if my memory serves me right, not overly religious or spiritual (understood that at that age, the distinction was fairly unknown I dare say) and this of course did not help matters any if you know what I mean. Rituals were restricted to faithfully following all the religious injunctions during festival days. (psst...my brothers and I were more interested in the goodies that were made for the naivedyam). It is not that we were totally unexposed to the finer rituals of our culture. During our annual sojourn (during summer holidays) at Tenkasi (a small and quaint town in southwestern Tamil Nadu bordering Kerala, nestling at the foothills of the Western Ghats Mountain Range) where my grandfather lived, I was exposed to an overabundance of rituals. Grandpa was a family physician and a deeply religious man. He started his day with an elaborate puja lasting several hours before he started seeing his patients. There were all kinds of pictures, shaligramams, small vigrahams of our family deity Sri Renganatha Swami and Thaayaar in his puja room. The memory of him sitting for his puja resplendent with the 12 customary thirumans all over his body is still very vivid in my mind. In my young mind I probably thought that rituals demand a lot from you and that I can never measure up to it. This apprehension kept me off rituals in general I think. Even the rituals of the sandhyavandanam were abandoned after only a few months after my yagnopaveedam. (This kind of bears out when I learnt much later that grandpa was indeed a Sri Vidya Upasagar and at some point in his life he let go all the paraphernalia of his Sri Vidya upasana like his Sri Chakra yantram into the Tamarabharani River probably in despair that none of his descendants would carry the tradition forward). And after my grandfather's passing when I was 13, even that little exposure to rituals vanished from my life.

The adage, "Catch them young", is a truism. Unfortunately I was not caught young and so I grew up if not a typical Bombay brat but far removed from the picture of a typical slokam reciting South Indian Brahmin boy.

There was a brief period (4 months precisely) however during my high school days when during the chaturmasya camp of the venerable Sringeri Acharya Sri Sri Maha Sannidhanam Swamigal at the Tamil Sangham Hall near our house in erstwhile Bombay, a few friends and I faithfully repaired to the hall every evening and witnessed the daily puja with the inevitable chanting of the Sri Rudram etc. We even bought a copy of the Rudram Chamakam book and tried to follow along as the stalwarts

chanted. But then again, once the Acharyaal departed at the end of his Holiness's chaturmasya vradham, interest waned and that was the end of it.

In my college days I was fired by Swami Chinmayanandaji's talks on Advaita in general and the Bhagvad Gita in particular (expounded with the advaitic viewpoint of course) and later I became convinced enough to become an ardent follower of Swami Dayananda Saraswati and under his ordained Brahmachari teacher Sri Ram Mohan, a group of us actually studied Vedanta for some years. It may have initially satisfied my innate contemplative nature, but it never really took hold. I did not understand then as I do now, that Advaitam is a state of mind and is in fact the culmination of one's spiritual sadhana and no amount of learning is going to get you there as J. Krishnamoorthi rightly said. I guess I was at the bottommost rung of the ladder of spiritual evolution. I realize now that I may have been just going through the motions, in my constant search for something which I could not name. Was Ambal toying with me?

The next phase of my spiritual life started when I moved to Chennai for a couple of years.

When I was in Chennai I used to frequent the local ISKCON temple and slowly became part of that community. I was convinced that the spiritual path plotted by the founder Acharya of the movement, Srila Prabhupada was the one most suited to my spiritual progress. As they say, a new convert to a faith is its most vociferous proponent and not surprisingly I gradually came to the stage where I was determined that the ISKCON way was the true path for all and sundry!

This was the mind set when I immigrated to Canada.

Then I met Ramesh and Gayathri. ....

Our meeting was one of those serendipitous events which turned the whole course of my life!

Ramesh and Gayathri bought the house in the basement of which we were living (and where we continued to live) and our association started. Quite early in our relationship I came to know that both of them were adept at chanting the Sri Rudram. My wife Vimala used to regularly chant the Lalitha Sahasranamam and do archanai every Friday. Ramesh began to participate regularly in these Friday events. I continue to be fascinated by his chanting and his demeanor in general. I was especially enthralled when he told me the story of his spiritual flowering after a Sundara Kaandam chanting.

Remember it was the ISKCON phase of my existence and I recall with fondness my vociferous arguments with Ramesh on the philosophy of the Hare Krishna Movement on many occasions! But this charming couple had inadvertently sown a seed in me which in due time sprouted!

It was not long before Ramesh started performing formal pujas at our home, like Satyanarayana Puja, Purataasi Saturday Puja and even Ganapathi Homam. Gradually the desire to learn some basic Vedic mantras peeped into my mind.

The roof of the edifice of my belief system had just sprung a leak.

Rituals came back into my life albeit in a small way. I started attending the Pournami Paduka puja regularly conducted by Uma and Murali though not frequently. But it was a beginning. From that stage it was but a short hop skip and jump to meet people involved in the chanting of Devi Mahatmyam.

The edifice of my 'Belief-system' continued to weaken with its wallpaper beginning to flake off!

I must state here that I was no stranger to Devi Mahatmyam but I knew it as Saptashathi Stotram. Many years ago I was given a copy of the same, but in Prakrit language by a great Siddha Purusha in Mumbai and told to recite one chapter every day. I used to dutifully do the parayanam every navarathri but there was neither real understanding nor involvement with it. I never attempted to even get familiar with the original Sanskrit version; because there were conflicting opinions expressed when I asked. In fact there were as many opinions as the number of people asked ranging from, "you cannot chant this unless initiated" to "you can chant this like any other Shloka". In other words I was not sufficiently motivated to take it any further. I feel now that Ambal was probably giving me a tongue in the cheek smile when I received the book in Prakrit and mouthing the words, "let me see how long you think you can avoid me!"

As my association with that sweet couple Uma and Murali deepened, it was inevitable that I be hit by occasional sprays of the rain of Devi Mahatmyam chanting!



The next phase in Ambal's on-going drama was the advent of Shri Raghu and Akhila into my life. Although I feel now as if I've known them all my life, their coming into my life was rather insidious. I

deliberately use the term insidious because of the fact that I cannot precisely pinpoint that exact moment in time. A brief glimpse here and there and the occasional snatches of conversations mostly during some puja or the other was how it started. Again I must only thank Uma and Murali for this for it was mostly in their home that they transpired.

In retrospect I realize that my life had been reset somehow even from my first unconscious meeting with them. Like the fragrance of the incense, their presence wafted into my life making my life sweet-smelling. My first active encounter with them that I remember well however, was during a Chandi Homam again at Uma Murali's home. That day I also formally met his revered father Shri Yegnaratnam mama and had his blessing. I had been in awe of him ever since I first saw him during some puja at Ramesh's home. And that day at Uma's home a great affection and love developed for this awesome person! We will talk more about him in a while.

Slowly but surely Devi Mahatmyam was becoming a part of my psyche albeit a passive one. Anon I was trying to read the text to myself at odd mornings along with my other prayers. But then the turning point came when Ramesh was kind enough to invite me to accompany the chanters for a Chandi Homam being conducted at the ashram of Shri Shri Ravishankarji of Art of Living, at Montreal. I accompanied Uma, Murali, Rajam, Vidya Krishnan and Shri Kalyan Subramaniam and family. It was an unforgettable trip. They actually made me sit with the chanters around the Homa Kundam as one of them!!!! I was aware of my உப்புக்கு சப்பாணி status at all times but it was an overwhelming honor. I shall be forever grateful to Ramesh and Uma for this.

It was akin to a D Day for me since after that day, the yearning to actually become an acolyte in Sri Vidya Worship became real. It led me to entreat in front of Devi Raja Rajeswari at Rochester to arrange for my initiation if it be Her will! I had done my part. I am sure Mother must have sat back with a smile of satisfaction on Her face saying, "There you are child! I thought you will never ask!"

Are you surprised that She soon set the ball rolling?

My memory is rather fuzzy around the edges with regard to the time which elapsed until the next significant event in the on-going drama that my Divine Mother was enacting in my life but it must not have been long after my trip to Rochester. I believe it was the second Chandi Homam in Uma's house in 2014. Shri Raghu of course was conducting it and after its culmination, while partaking of the sumptuous prasadam, I approached Shri Raghu and formally requested him to initiate me. He was pleased and readily agreed. I was deeply contented knowing full well that it will happen at the proper time as ordained by the Divine Mother.

We now enter the portals of the world or dimension of the Sahasra Chandi Yegnam.....

When the project was mooted there was excitement all round which of course was not surprising. As for me, I was thrilled beyond words and the decision to take as active a part as possible was automatically arrived at. Only when we attended the first meeting at the Hindu Heritage Centre (the site of the Sahasra Chandi) did the magnitude of what we were planning struck our collective consciousness. Truly the sheer number of things that had to be organized in meticulous detail was

awe inspiring. Several committees were formed, to take care of the various aspects of the Sahasra Chandi like Hospitality Committee, Food Committee, Procurement Committee, and Religious Committee with an appropriate person(s) heading each one of them.

Let me give you in a nut-shell the aims and activities of the various committees;

**The Hospitality Committee** headed by Prakash and Mani was to handle the transportation and accommodation of the hundreds of guests expected from USA and quite a few from India. I must say that Prakash and Mani had their work cut out for them. Let me tell you a little of what these two people accomplished. It was Akhila who compiled a list of people who were attending the event mostly from the United States but a few from India too. Much akin to the matching of Residency applicants to their respective programmes, careful matching had to be done. There was macro matching and micro matching if I may call them that. Macro matching involved accommodating let us say a Telugu family with a host family who was either Telugu speaking or at least someone who was familiar with the lingo. Micro matching was more complicated. There were hosts who were willing to accommodate but had no bedding or cots for the guests. There were guests who wanted to attend every event in a day but the hosts were selective and so transportation had to be organized for the same. It was also true if it were the other way around. This was just an example. Guests were expected at all odd times and they had to be picked up from the airport/ bus-stations. I guess you are beginning to realize the enormity of the planning that was required. But Prakash and Mani rose to the occasion ably assisted by Babu and Murali Arunachalam and did a truly wonderful job.

During the inaugural volunteer meeting in March, Raghu mentioned that in olden times when religious or other ceremonies were conducted, guests from outside the village were always accommodated in people's homes since there were no hotels or inns in those days. Something similar happened here. Visitors were so impressed with the arrangements that a precedent was established by us Torontonians so says Akhila. Isn't that something? All kudos go to Prakash and Mani.



The **Procurement Committee** headed by Rajkumar Sundaram and ably aided by R. Krishnamurthy was responsible for the procurement and storing of all the materials required for the occasion. The requirements for the various rituals were to be garnered which involved having regular meetings



with the Heads of the Religious Committee, putting them all in an Excel Sheet, short listing the sources by taking quotations from three or more sellers etc etc and many more etc!

**The Food Committee** was to organize the catering for the feeding of literally thousands of people who were expected to attend the event for a period of 10 days, right from arranging for breakfast right up to dinner. It must be remembered that the Ritwicks who were to participate in the Homams and other rituals had stricter dietary requirements. Already feeling faint aren't you! You haven't heard the half of it! But with Jayshree Bala, Vimala Jaikumar and Shanthi Sati Mami at the helm, there was nothing to worry about. But I am sure these three wonderful people never slept for the duration of the event!

**The Religious Committee** headed by Uma Murali was responsible for arranging all the puja and homam items. Her team made sure all the puja items and Naivedyams were ready before Sundaram chittappa started the puja and all homam items were ready in front of homam ritwicks before the commencement of homam. Uma Murali was ably assisted by more than 100 volunteers. Ladies of almost every household brought food and naivedyams all through those 10 days in spite of spending the whole day at the venue.



Before I introduce you to **the Movers and Shakers** of this event, I must tell you about the groundwork that was set into motion much before the event. Here I must add that much of the details that I am now about to describe and the little nuggets of information that I have given

previously, were gleaned from talks I had with Shri Raghu and Smt Akhila and I am grateful to them for sharing many intricate details that were hidden from the ken of most people.

At this juncture I must tell you a little about the bamboo plant. I assure you it is relevant to this saga.

When you plant the bamboo seeds in the ground, you have to regularly water them. One year goes by.....nothing happens.....

Two years go by.....nope...no indications whatsoever that anything indeed is happening down there....

Four years now have elapsed since you planted those seeds and still no difference...the soil presents as smooth an appearance as on the first day that you planted those seeds!

Five years after the event, a small shoot appears which rapidly grows to awesome heights (it has been said that at a particular stage of its growth, bamboo can grow up to 3 feet in a day!). But if you dig a little and view its roots, you will be amazed to note that the bamboo has bored its roots deep into the ground often to 60 feet and more and also buttressing its sides with a very strong support system which is never visible above ground. It is obvious that the plant is laying the groundwork for its subsequent mighty growth.

A similar thing was happening prior to the Sahasra Chandi. So many things were happening in the background unbeknownst to the general public or to even many people involved with the event. So many intricate details were being worked out. I will speak about some of them in a bit. But as I muddle along with my narrative, the reader will have no difficulty in identifying the places where such background work is being described.

It must be remembered that Sahasra Chandi Yegnam involves the chanting of the Devi Mahatmyam a thousand times and performance of a hundred Chandi Homams. I am mentioning this for the sake of people who are totally new to this like yours truly.

The first Parayanam of the Devi Mahatmyam for the big event was performed at Ramesh and Gayathri's house. Sri Raghu and Akhila Ranganathan, performed the Sri Vidya Navavarana puja and initiated more than 50 disciples with the Chandi Navakshari Mantra to make them eligible to be a Ritwik for the Sahasra Chandi homam.

Following this, Chandi Parayanam, in the presence of Sri Yegnarathnam mama, was performed in New Jersey in April 2015 organized by Shri Sivakumar and Vidya Sivakumar. On this day, Sri Vidya Navavarana Puja was performed by Shri Raghu and many disciples were initiated with mantra Deeksha by Shri Raghu. Shri Shivkumar, helped Smt. Akhila to start online Durga Saptasathi classes by setting up google hangout sessions and co-ordinating students in New Jersey area. He was instrumental in arranging practice sessions of Devi Mahatmyam for New Jersey devotees who later flocked to Toronto to participate in the Sahasra Chandi. In fact it was also Shri Shivkumar who organized the bus for the trip from New Jersey to Toronto for the event! Special mention must be made of the sterling work done by Sri **Guruvayoorappan mama of the Kanchi Kamakoti Seva**

**Foundation** (KKSF, USA) who guided and helped the events to go forward. Thank you mama for all your help.



From New Jersey, Yegnarathnam mama, Raghu and Akhila and the team from Toronto which included Uma Murali, Rajkumar Sundaram, Uma Raghu, Nathan Iyer and Srividya Nathan along with New Jersey devotees proceeded to Washington DC to perform Chandi homam in Daya and Ravi's (of Gnanananda Seva Samajam, USA fame) house and Chandi Paarayanam at Ravishankar Krishnamoorthys's house. From Washington DC, Sri Yegnarathnam mama visited many cities in USA like Denver, Columbus, Atlanta, Austin, Houston and San Francisco to perform Chandi homam and rest of the team returned to Toronto.

Meanwhile back in Canada was where the mother lode of activities lay! While on the one hand, meeting after meeting of the various committees were taking place over the weeks, to thrash out a thousand and one things and side by side the chanting of Devi Mahatmyam along with Sri Vidya and Chandi Avarana pujas was being conducted starting March 2015 itself, on weekends across GTA! And there were several individuals who were active in both chanting (some weekends there were back to back continuous sessions!) as well as actively involved in various committees, a mind boggling feat I tell you. I humbly salute all of them.

There was tremendous enthusiasm all around and the clamoring to host the Devi Mahatmyam Parayanam at their respective homes was immense and it is not astonishing that dates were booked far in advance. This was the state of affairs when one day out of the blue Uma called to ask if we

would host the chanting on Saturday April 18<sup>th</sup>. This was just a fortnight before the requested date. What was happening here? Did Mother think we were really worthy? Of course we tearfully and joyfully accepted.

We shall never forget that fateful day. We were on tenterhooks right from the day we accepted and we frantically started getting things ready. Shri Raghu and Akhila, officiated and many others joined in the blessed gathering at our home. Right at the outset, Shri Raghu asked me to don the Panchakaccham and then the realization struck me like a gong in my head! God bless our souls! Vimala and I were to be initiated!! We could hardly believe it. But then it happened. We were initiated with the Panchadas!

My connection to my Divine Mother went live!

I have no words to express my gratitude to Shri Raghu and Akhila except to say, "Thank you". That I am now a bonafide member of the glorious tradition of the Bhaskara Prakasha Ashram is so awesome that I have yet to come to terms with it. But I shall strive all my life to be worthy of it.

The chanting of Devi Mahatmyam continued with great fervor over the days. There was one session organized at Detroit, Michigan and they even organized a bus for the trip. Regrettably we could not attend many of the sessions due to various reasons.

As July approached the various preparations intensified. Meetings of the various committees were more frequent. Then there was this unforgettable day when we all assembled at Jayshree Bala's house and spent almost the whole day categorizing and packing the various items procured for the event, in shippers, marking them etc. While this was going on, other groups were engaged in making sweetmeats for the event whereas other groups were engaged in organizing other stuff relevant to their respective committees. There was much camaraderie, leg pulling etc and all of us thoroughly enjoyed the day. What was significant however is that unwittingly we had coalesced into one family much before the event!

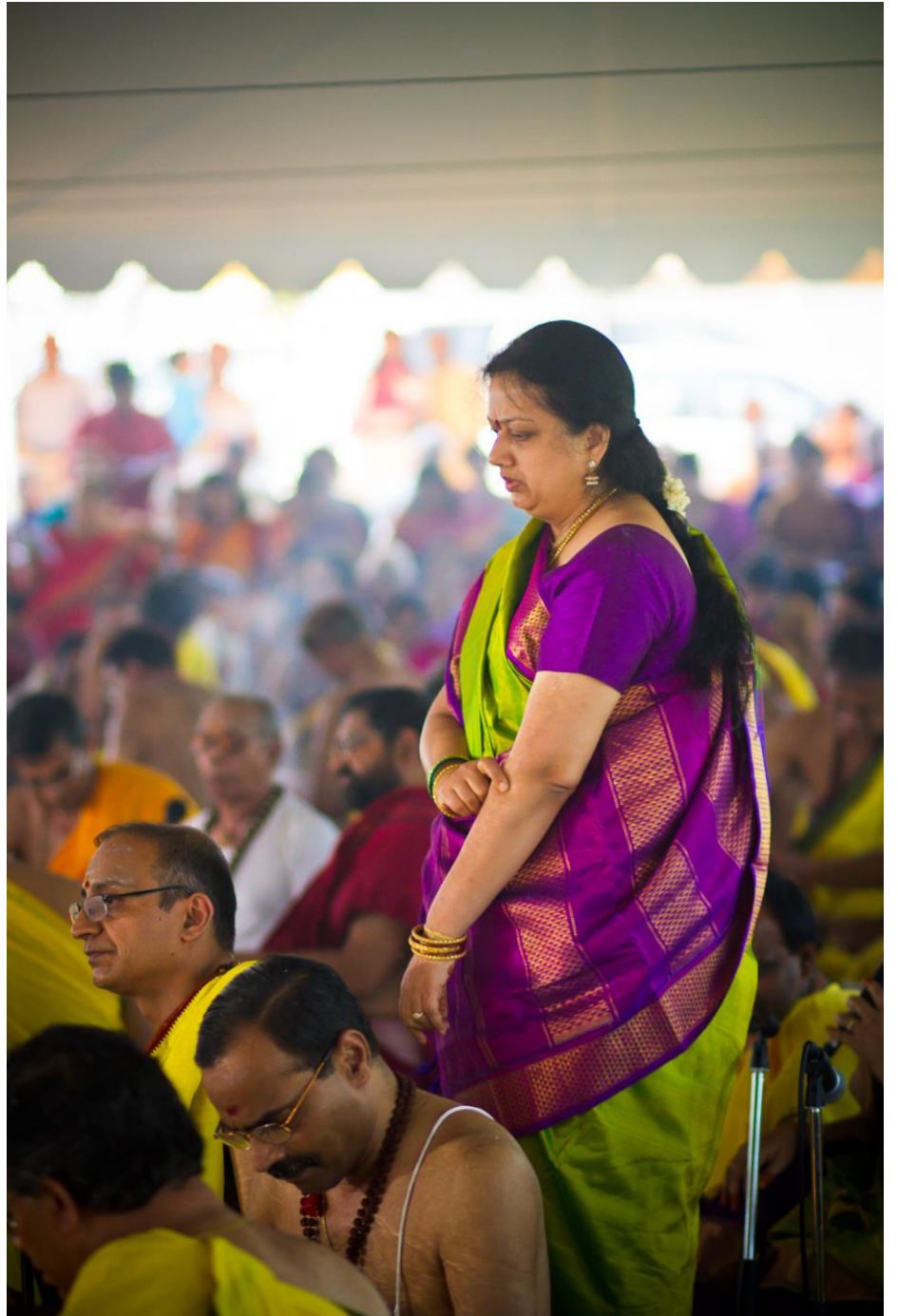
Thick clouds bearing the Mercy and Blessings of the Divine Mother were gathering in the horizon.

And the people who made it all happen.....Shall we call them the Rainmakers?

First and foremost is **Shri Raghu** of course whose dream it was to conduct a Sahasra Chandi and he had the energy and the blessings of the Divine Mother to make it a reality. He explained it all so beautifully in the speech he gave on the concluding day. Hope somebody recorded it for posterity. What can I say about him that you don't know already! He is my Guru and I will attempt to say a few things that I have observed. There is a gentleness about him and at the same time his depth of knowledge is formidable. And his patience is legion. I observed this when I attended the classes he conducted to train all his new initiates in the rituals. He is a true teacher. I never saw him get annoyed or lose patience even when we asked him the silliest of questions. His gentle but forceful teaching was such as to make even a blockhead like yours truly get the hang of it without any difficulty. The vague resolve to learn some basic chanting that had trickled into my mind several

years ago became firm and the resolve has been indelibly written in stone that I must learn it formally from my Guru, Shri Raghu only. Will it happen? Only time will tell.

And then **Akhila**.....if you can imagine a typical Guru pathni (குரு பத்தினி) of yore, then you have Akhila in a nut-shell. But unlike many of them Akhila is a force to reckon with, in her own right. I know that all women are the manifestation of the Divine Mother or அம்பாளின் அம்சம் as we say, but in my case whenever I think of the Divine Mother, it is Akhila's face that pops into my mind. I know that you may be embarrassed by my statement about my feelings can I? They come unbidden from the depths of the human heart. And you are my Guru Matha (குரு மாதா) and that is how I see you. Please bear with me. I look forward to continued inspiration and learning from you both.



Shri Raghu's father, **Shri Yegnaratna Mama**.....

He could be best described as a super human being with an encyclopedic knowledge of rituals like yegnam, (fire rituals) Kumbhabhishekams (temple consecration rituals) and an authority on all matters concerning the worship of Chandi. It can indeed be said that what he does not know about Devi Mahatmyam can be written on the back of a one penny stamp with space to spare! He is also an inordinately humorous man, full of stories. At the end of every chanting session he would not only regale his audience with his funny stories but explain the nuances of the Devi Mahatmyam in the form of parables which were understood and assimilated even by novices like yours truly. I would attend the chanting sessions especially to listen to mama in the end. As I said earlier, I developed a

strong bond of affection and awe with him. I actually began to look upon him as a surrogate father. Thank you mama for all your insights.



### Shri Yegnaratna mama's younger brother Shri Sundaram Chithappa ....

What can I say about Chithappa? Shy and retiring but sharply observant which is a truly remarkable combination. I would consider him a giant among humans. Such was his endearing nature that he became chithappa to us all.



His concentration when he is performing his rituals is so complete as to give you horripilation. And his devotion and service (சேவை) to his brother is astonishing. He is indeed a Lakshmana to his Rama Shri Yegnaratnam mama.

When he was informed about the Sahasra Chandi, he was initially reluctant to come to Canada since the Aradhana Day of his Parameshti Guru Swami Kameshwaranathendra Saraswati (whose Matham is located in Suthamali, Tirunelveli) fell at this time and Chithappa is normally fully involved with the celebration of that event. But then he was convinced that his involvement and service for the Sahasra Chandi was absolutely essential and he not only agreed to come but offered a donation from his meagre savings! It

was so heart-warming to hear such things. In this day and age such individuals exist!

On the last day when I went to take his blessings, he looked at me and said, “ரங்கநாதன் தானே? (It is Ranganathan isn't it?). It was as if I was awarded the Oscar or better still knighted by the queen, so much was the thrill that coursed through my body that he remembered the likes of me. You filled my heart to overflowing dear Chithappa. Thank you. I ardently pray that our paths cross again and again in the years to come.

### **Ramakrishna Chithappa....**

Very few people are even aware of Yegnarathnam mama's other brother, Ramakrishna Chithappa's existence let alone his tremendous role in the Sahasra Chandi we all witnessed. Like the proverbial root of the bamboo plant that I talked about earlier, while remaining in the background he was responsible for the drawing up the detailed plans for the edifice of the Sahasra Chandi! All of you must remember the elaborate Sankalpam that we all undertook under the guidance of Yegnarathnam mama at the start of the event. It was designed by Ramakrishna chithappa!

At this juncture a brief note on the activities and different foci of the three brothers will aid in understanding.

**Yegnarathnam mama** is an authority on Homams and all its organizational requirements.

**Sundaram Chithappa** is an authority on all ritual aspects of Chandi.

**Ramakrishna Chithappa** is an authority on the theoretical aspects of Tantra Shastra in general and Sri Vidya worship in particular. Most books on the esoteric aspects of Sri Vidya are extant in the Grantham script. Ramakrishna chithappa's life work is in validating hundreds of these books and preserving them for future generations. A formidable task indeed, if I may say so. All strength to you chithappa!

Now let me share some nuggets of information which are common to all three brothers. They are more examples of the activities hidden from the knowledge of the lay person. It is not difficult to conceive that there was so much planning to do. Since the day the project was mooted, the focus of all the three brothers....every waking moment of the day...was on the planning of the intricate details of the Event. I believe that their foremost intention was to plan all the important rituals on days when maximum number of devotees would be able to attend, in other words, during the two week-ends that formed part of the calendar of events scheduled.

It seems every evening mama and Sundaram Chithappa would take long walks (separately) and when they returned both of them would exchange their thoughts. Some new insight would have been arrived at during their solitary constitutional and they would thrash it out later. It is obvious that each was deeply pondering on some aspect of the event during their walk. Later in the evening, after Raghu and Akhila returned from work, they would have lengthy discussions with Ramakrishna Chithappa in Chennai over the phone. Every individual ritual (prayogam) had to be well thought over, planned in intricate detail so as to be executed successfully.

It must be added that Yegnaratnam Mama in addition to all these activities, travelled across the United States all by himself for the chanting sessions in various cities, prior to his coming to Canada. Oh wow! My admiration of him has reached awesome proportions.

Then there were these Mandalams to be prepared. (*Sanskrit Mandala, 'circle'*) is a spiritual and ritual symbol in Indian religions, representing the universe. In common use, **mandala** has become a generic term for any diagram, chart or geometric pattern that represents the cosmos metaphysically or symbolically; a microcosm of the universe.

(Thank you Google)

There were many kinds of Mandalams like Matraka Mandalam, Yogini Mandalam, Kshethrapala Mandalam, Navagraha Mandalam (prepared by Sriram Srinivasan), Sarvathobhadra Mandalam prepared by Amit & Malavika Bhatt etc. which were prepared for Sahasra Chandi. Each of these Mandalams served a particular purpose and had its own individual ritual prescribed and was used to invoke a particular deity or deities. It is important to note that the colour of every Mandalam was of the utmost importance. Sundaram Chithappa personally supervised the painting of each of them. He would not be satisfied unless every nuance of shade of the particular colour was achieved. He would not compromise even an iota. Short cuts or cutting corners was anathema to Sundaram Chithappa. Many of us would not have even noted their presence since the kalasams were placed on them for consecration.

Also there was this question of video webcasting all the events pertaining to the Sahasra Chandi including every chanting of the Devi Mahatmyam over the 3 month period.

If you really care to think about it, the word awesome falls woefully short in covering even half of it. Like I said before, one could truly experience such an event only once in one's lifetime. We are indeed blessed.

**Shri Sriram from Chennai...**



Although I did not have much interaction with him, I was a silent observer of his attention to details and the way he performed the various rituals. He was another important Mover & Shaker of the Sahasra Chandi event. It was a great pleasure knowing him and once again I pray that I will see more of him in the years to come.



### **Haran Aiya from Rochester....**

He needs no introduction. When he was informed about the Sahasra Chandi, he expressed his great thrill and without hesitation he pledged all his support and suiting action to words he sent a team of his pupils to Canada just before the event and they were of tremendous help in all the activities. I was blessed not only to make his acquaintance but get really close to him. But that is a story for another rainy day.....

### **Uma & Murali....**

It was Uma whom I consider my sister from many births, who inspired me since I reacquainted with her in this life-time, and who made it possible for me to resume my spiritual journey from where I had left off. I admire this couple's energy and enthusiasm and I pray that they continue to inspire the younger generation with their example.

### **The inimitable Jai and Vimala Jaikumar....**

If you can imagine a high energy dynamo made of human flesh, then Jai is that person. Yes! A veritable human dynamo! A multi-faceted personality without whose help, this huge event may not have seen the light of day. I am not sure how many things he handled but it was sure mind-boggling! And beware! He is full of mischief and one is never sure what he will be up to next! But he endears himself to one and all and is an inspiration to all and sundry. It is said that no man is indispensable but I beg to differ in this case. Jai was indeed indispensable for the Sahasra Chandi Yegnam and there is no gainsaying that fact. My hats off to you sir!

He was ably supported by Vimalaji who along with Jaishree Bala and Sathi Aunty made waves and performed astonishing feats in the catering department. Vimalaji also happens to be my Reiki Guru. I offer my humble pranams to you Vimalaji.

### **Jaishree Bala.....**

Another incredible and formidable human being whose tireless efforts made it possible to feed so many during the 10 days of the Sahasra Chandi. She continued to function against all odds and there were times when I have remained open-mouthed with wonder at the way she managed things. What can one say but just stand up and applaud her. Thank you Jaishree for all your sterling work. Cheers!

### **Shanti Sati Mami...**

Before the Sahasra Chandi (henceforth I will refer to it as the "Event"), I only knew of Shanti Sati Mami. It was a great pleasure to get to know her during the 10 days. She took upon herself to be responsible for making and distributing of the oats porridge for the Ritwicks every single day of the event. And she was the foremost volunteer to handle the garbage (soiled plates) during the event. Our heart goes out to you. Thank you Mami. You were one of those who made the days memorable for me. I look forward to a long and fruitful association with you. Sai Ram.

The list would of course be incomplete if I do not mention **Rajkumar Sundaram**....

What shall I say about this dear man? He is a multi-functional human being who has all his wits about him. Organizing some purchase here, doing security detail with Mata Amritanandamayi there, participating in Shri Balakrishna Shastrigal's Adhirudra Homam all in the space of one day! He was the true spirit behind the Procurement committee and I learnt much from him. And in spite of his various accomplishments, he remains a humble human being. God bless you and keep you and may you remain an inspiration to us all especially to me. He addresses me as அண்ணா (older brother) but sometimes I wonder...shouldn't it be the other way around?

I should also applaud Raghu & Akhila's daughter **Sowmya**, the scion of the Bhaskara Prakasha Ashram, who is doing her parents and the tradition proud. God bless you child and may you reach the pinnacles of fame.

Now that I have introduced you to the key players I want to speak about a few others who stayed in the background, but whose help and cooperation were so indispensable for the smooth movement of the event. Things moved on oiled hinges because of these people. Let me name them one by one.

- First and foremost is **Pandit Surendra Sharma of The Hindu Heritage Temple** for offering the temple premises for the event and also in cooperating in every way to make the event such a grand success.
- **Chandramouli Gurukkal** of *Adi Parashakthi Temple*, Markham who not only offered food for all the guests for the first 4 days of the event but also helped by providing us with all the puja items required for the event.
- **Bhaskara Gurukkal and his wife Smt Sudha** of *Sri Bhuvaneshwari Temple* who without hesitation offered their temple premises and their kitchen equipment for the large scale cooking of food for the devotees attending the event.
- **Chandru Gurukkal** of *Siva Satyanarayana temple* who offered his temple premises to make the 1000+ modhakams for the Sahasra Modhaka Ganapathy Homam conducted on Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> July 2015.
- **Amit and Malavika Bhatt** who helped in preparing and painting many of the Mandalams required for the event on wooden boards. I have already talked about the Mandalams earlier in the narrative.
- **Mahesh Ram and Venky Jayaraman** who took care of all the webcasts throughout and were the go to people for all IT issues.

There were scores of others who made all this possible but with whom I have no acquaintance since I do not move in such exalted circles. Like a deep sea creature which only sees the brightest things on the water's surface, similarly, from the depths of my ignorance, I can perceive only the most prominent images. There were others like **Bhaskaran & Mythili, Nathan and family from Oakville**

and other countless individuals from Canada and the United States who quietly worked to make this event a possibility. I apologize for not naming you individually. But my heart goes out to all of you in gratitude. All of you made this memorable probably a once-in-a-lifetime event possible! Thank you.

On Friday the 17<sup>th</sup> of July 2015 we entered another world. Bright clouds pregnant with Ambal's Mercy and Grace which had begun to gather in the horizon for the past weeks started rapidly scuttling across the skies and the first of the thunders crashed in the evening and the drizzle of Her blessings started.

As far as my meager knowledge goes, there were several 'firsts' in this Event;

- Procurement and consecration of literally hundreds of the Navakshari Yanthram and giving them as prasadam to all the sponsoring devotees.
- Archanai of the yanthrams was done by chanting the Devi Mahatmyam in a unique way. After every verse, was intoned with reverence of the particular Chapter Devta. This was done over several days and this strengthened the spiritual aura of the Yanthram manifold. I must digress here a bit to relate an incident which occurred during such a chanting/ consecration on the third day (Wednesday I believe it was). I will name the event "*The Advent of Balakrishna Shastrigal*". Let me elaborate a bit so that the full import of the event would be appreciated! The chanting had just reached the part in the Devi Mahatmyam where Lord Shiva (*the only place in the Durga Saptashathi where Easwaran makes His appearance*) goes as messenger of Ambal to Shumbha & Nishumbha and that is when Shri Balakrishna Shastrigal majestically entered the hall with his retinue! Shastrigal needs no introduction to the people of GTA and so I would not even attempt to do so.....it would be like the mosquito trying to introduce a lion! Shri Balakrishna had just culminated his Adi Rudra Mahayegnam at Scarborough, a formidable task. He bestowed his blessings with a profound Vedic chanting to the participants of the Sahasra Chandi! Yegnaratna Mama in an emotional 'thank you' speech indicated to the assembled devotees the intense significance of the moment of Shastrigal's entry! He emphasized that it was as if Lord Shiva Himself has come to give His blessings for the Event!

Now let me talk a little about the actual Homams which started on Thursday July 23<sup>rd</sup>.

Before embark on that, there are two things that I wanted to say.

1. Normally Ritwicks who participate in Homams are constrained to be in one position from start to finish. Yegnaratna mama in his great wisdom announced that any ritwik who for some reason needs to leave the Homa Kundam need only to raise his hand and another will take his place and mama had ritwicks on standby for that very purpose. By doing so, mama taught us all an important lesson. It was the lesson of the significance of having a choice in any matter! The very fact that the choice to leave the homa Kundam existed eased the minds of the ritwicks (many of them to my knowledge - myself included - very uneasy with the prospect of sitting for long periods of time). Probably a barrier disappeared from their minds and wonder of wonders, such a thing never came to pass! No ritwik had to be replaced at any time during the

4 days of the Homams! Can we chalk this up to another 'first'? *And there is another curious corollary to this. There were many devotees (ritwiks included) who had certain clinical conditions which entailed the regular intake of certain special drugs else they would be subjected to very nasty manifestations of their conditions. Strangely no such incidents occurred in spite of the fact that many of them did not even take any medications for the duration of the Sahasra Chandi!!! There have been dozens of emails from the persons concerned, attesting to this fact!* Remarkable isn't it?

2. Right at the outset, Pandit Surendra Sharma of the Hindu Heritage Temple had expressed his uneasiness about the safety of the Homam fire since there were to be three Homa Kundams. The fire in the Kundam had to be maintained at an optimum level. Too low and there would ensue a lot of smoke. On the other hand too high a level of the fire would create an actual risk of a conflagration. Obviously it was like walking a tight-rope walk. But Shri Raghu and mama the veterans that they are, with hundreds if not thousands of Homams to their credit, had everything under control throughout.

Actually the very first Homam of the Event was the Sahasra Modaka Ganapathy Homam that took place on Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> July 2015 in which I had the good fortune to participate. To tell you the truth, I was keeping myself in the background being reluctant to be in the presence of so many stalwarts in the field of rituals but then Shri Raghu's eyes sought me and signaled me to come forward. Akhila actually beckoned me saying, "ரங்கா நீங்க ரெடி ஆயிடுங்கோ" (Ranga you get ready). Thus it transpired that this ignoramus participated not only in this Homam but also for two more sittings of Navakshari Moola Mantra Homam later in the week. I ken not what good deeds I have performed in previous lifetimes to have had this opportunity. I am eternally grateful to Shri Raghu and Akhila for bestowing this blessing on me. In fact he gave all his initiates a fair share in participating in the various rituals, the hallmark of a true Guru.

After all the slide shows, documentaries & trailers, the curtain for the main event lifted on Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> July. On the first three days, that is, from Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> July till Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> July, **Navakshari Moola Mantra Homam** and **two rounds of Chandi Homam** were performed. I must add here that there were three Homa Kundams with an average of 9 ritwiks per Kundam. These of course transpired in the morning. In the evenings we had Navakshari Moola Mantra Japam, Sri Lalitha Sahasranamam, Sri Lalitha Trishati parayanam etc always followed by Mangalarathi.

On Friday we had **Shata Suvasini Pooja** (*I later heard that more than 150 suvasinis were honoured*), **Nava Kanya Pooja**, **Vatuka Pooja** in addition to all of the above and finally on Saturday we had **the Sri Lalitha Sahasranama Laksharchana** in which hundreds of devotees participated and it was such an inspiring sight.

On Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> July, the concluding day of the Sahasra Chandi, we had quite a few Homams; namely, **Ganapathi**, **Navagraha**, **Rashi**, **Digpalaka**, **Navakshari Moola Mantra**, **Chandi**, **Sri Vidya** and which were followed by **Balidanam**, **Poornahuti**, **Vasordhara**, **Veda Ghosham**, **Yantra Abhishekam** and followed by **Mangalarathi**.

Actually there are no words to describe this crucial part of the event. The whole spectacle was beyond belief and everyone without exception was under a great thrall. I can only say that கண் கோடி இருந்திரந்தாலும் போறாது. திவ்ய காட்சி ஆகவல்லவா இருந்தது (*even with a million pair of eyes, we couldn't have taken in the full glory and magnificence of the event*)! I also had the additional blessing of carrying one of the Poornahuti to the sacred fire. I thank you Amma. There is nothing more I seek from life.

And when the Poornahuti was offered.....



Reiki flowed freely from my hands (Vimalaji will understand what I am talking about), and Ambal manifested in various forms in the sacred fires as evidenced by many photographs snapped by many devotees during the proceedings.

And finally when the last Poornahuti was offered .....*Black clouds gathered in a perfectly cloudless sky exactly over the pandal and few drops of rain fell like a blessing ... ..*

**The winding up ceremony.....**

Two events of note transpired during the winding up ceremony at the main temple apart from all the appreciation and thank you speeches by Shri Raghu and others (I touched upon it at the early part of this narrative if you remember).

1. Chandramouli Gurukkal conferred upon Yegnaratnam mama the title of “**Sahasrachandi Chakravarthy**”.
2. **Sundaram Chithappa** in a moment fraught with emotion conferred his kanganam (ceremonial bracelet) to **Raghu**. Later Akhila shared with me the true magnificence of what had just transpired. When Sundaram Chithappa took the mike in his hand, Akhila confessed, they were gripped by intense uneasiness. The reason was not far to seek. Chithappa has always been an intensely reticent human being and has been a very very private person and consequently he had never heretofore spoken in a large gathering. And when chithappa announced what he was about to do, there was a collective gasp from all the assembled devotees. And when he gently placed the kanganam on Shri Raghu’s hand I don’t think there was a single dry eye in the whole assembly. The story behind the kanganam is worth telling. It seems Sri Vimarshananda Swamigal (Shri Raghu’s grandfather) regularly used to conduct Chandi Homam at the ashram of His Holiness Sri Haridoss giri Swamigal and on one occasion it was Swami Haridoss giri Swamigal who conferred this kanganam to our Guru and Acharyar! The transference of this article to Shri Raghu assumes a vast significance. It means that the mantle has been passed on. Shri Raghu holds the baton now. It was chithappa’s way of telling him that it is now his responsibility to carry the tradition forward to the next generation!

As they say, ‘All good things must come to an end’ and regrettably I must now bring this long and meandering narrative to a close on a small personal note. Did I hear a collective sigh of relief? Tried your patience to the limit huh! I must thank you for giving me such a patient hearing and I promise not to dawdle too long. A few more minutes and I shall leave you to your ruminations.



*Here goes.....*

The drizzle of grace that commenced on July 17<sup>th</sup> became a steady downpour as the days progressed with the various rituals and flood waters were observed lapping at our feet. By the time the Homams started on Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> the downpour intensified into at least a category 3 hurricane (we call them cyclones in our part of the world) of Ambal's grace and the flood waters rose and started bearing the oddest of things along in its mighty force. And like in any flood, the most unlikely things were brought together.

Along with flotsam like yours truly who was borne along the flood waters were fragrant materials flowing side by side like....

**Shri Venugopal and his dear Wife Kanakeshwari Amma.** I learnt from him what service to humanity really means. A great Sai Devotee whose every cell in his body lives to serve others. I am amazed and totally bowled over by this man. He never stands still but his eyes are ever roving seeking for things to do. One moment he is sitting cross legged chanting and the next he is serving water to someone and the very next he is picking up something strewn on the ground to throw in the garbage while his mouth continues to chant with devotion. We used to be enchanted with his stories, his experiences with Swami that he used to recount while sitting in the store-room. And his humility! One has to be with him to experience it. There were moments when I asked myself, "Is he for real?" Verily I consider myself as dust beneath his feet. Oh Divine Mother! I thank you for bringing this sweet couple into my life. And God bless you both!

**Mythili and Ganesh.....**

This frail looking woman who in appearance is like a girl just graduated from high school but with a core of steel! Her energy was incredible and it was a great pleasure to have been associated with her. And when she called me *அண்ணா*, it was as if I have obtained a great treasure! God bless you ma and your strong and silent life partner Ganesh whom it was a delight to know.

**Swami...**

Another fragrance that wafted into my life. Our relationship has been forged in steel. There is no question that our paths will continue to crisscross.

**Sriram and Hema...**

His single-minded and stern adherence to the rules was admirable and also it turned out that we are long lost cousins! Strange world isn't it!

**Vidya Parthasarathy...**

This eager beaver was another individual who endeared herself to all by her willingness to help despite so many personal problems.

**Ramesh....**

This individual from USA stayed in the background quietly taking care of the garbage detail during lunch times. Later we learnt that he used to be a guitarist in M.S Viswanthan's orchestra! Incredible what these flood waters brought together!

உங்கள் அனைவரின் கூட்டால் இந்த நாறும் இப்பொழுது மணக்கிறது! (Due to your association even this worthless piece of string has become fragrant.)

And on Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> July, this hurricane (by this time a category 5) became a Tsunami of grace....

And this mighty Tsunami has swept me and many others like me and has hurled us onto the shores of a beautiful world heretofore not known to me. My erstwhile world with all its belief systems has mostly crumbled and now barely standing on shaky foundations!

In this world I am akin to a larva just emerged from its egg, looking about in wonder. In time, with your help, I aspire to emerge from the chrysalis and fly away to the higher regions of this world with Mother's Grace. I seek your blessings and all the Gurus of our tradition.

Having said all this, I discern the hand of my Swami, Sri Satya Sai Baba guiding me through all the various stages of my spiritual life. He has finally dropped me at the feet of the Divine Mother, Maha Tripura Sundari.

How I came to Swami is a matter for a whole other book which I have undertaken to write with the hope that He will bless me to finish it in this lifetime. May He guide my hands!

And the greatest fruit of the Sahasra Chandi? The whole lot of us who participated in this divine event fused into one family. The Sahasra Chandi Family was born. Our relationship has been forged in steel! May Ambal Tripura Sundari continue to bless us for all time! The lesson of what we could achieve by team work was learnt and firmly etched in our collective minds.

They say that you can experience an event such as a Sahasra Chandi only once in a life-time. It came true because of one man's dream. Who knows what Shri Raghu will dream up next?

We shall step quietly and leave him to his dreams shall we?

**श्री गुरुभ्योः नमः**

**Sri Gurubhyo Namah**

*Sai Ram*