



## Renovation of Traditional Water bodies (Teerthams)



By  
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### Revival and Renovation of Papa Vinashaka Teertham

#### Introduction

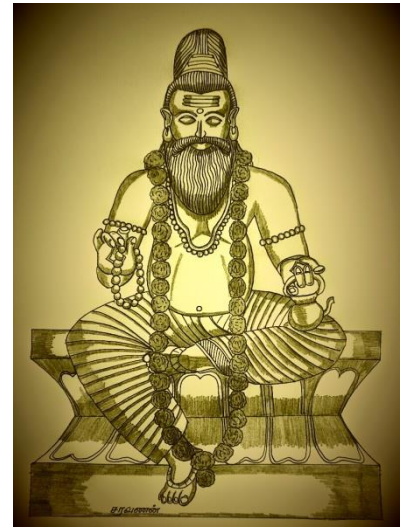
Teerthams, one of the very important water resources for the rural community in South India occupy a significant position in supporting livelihood for the rural poor and safeguarding the local ecosystems. After independence, the continuous neglect of these unique Teerthams due to encroachments has resulted in their deterioration and several small scale water resources becoming extinct. In this context, true to its mission of protecting the traditional water bodies since 1990s, Vivekananda Kendra has been undertaking rehabilitation and restoration of small scale water bodies in coastal island by building social capital and bringing back local management.

#### The spiritual significance

Water as purifier is known to all. Everyone take bath to keep them hygienic. All religions have given water a significant place in all their rituals to ward off the impurities or to initiate or for making resolves for new actions. Most of us intentional or unintentionally commit actions which cause harm to the living being around us and feel sorry for it. Over the period, our ancestors have shown pathways to be free from guilt and to invoke goodness of the individual through many deeds instead of condemning him forever. Rameswaram known for Teertham is associated with mythological stories conveying act of sanctifying of the people who have committed wrong.

#### The mythology

Thida Murugan belonged to the Karalan caste, rated to be low in social hierarchy in Tamilnadu. But, that did not deter him from aspiring for higher studies. His search for a qualified teacher took him to Brahma Tapovanam, a place near the Himalayas. But for the teacher who was also a Rishi, for reasons best known to him, Thida Murugan's caste status was an indeed a disqualification. Denied permission to study, Thida Murugan was deeply hurt. A curse soon escaped from his mouth "If I am true to myself, let me die and the rishi lose his knowledge as well", said Thida Murugan. The outcome of the curse took its toll. Tida Murugan lay dead and the rishi lost his knowledge and started behaving just like an animal, roaming around the country.



Years later, Sage Agasthyar happened to meet the teacher behaving like an animal, and soon understood the reasons behind it. Full of compassion, Agasthya advised him to propitiate Lord

Shiva. Greatly pleased with his penance, Lord Siva created a Teertham, a holy water body where taking bath regularly, the rishi could wash away the sin of denying the low caste aspirant of knowledge. This is now known as Papa Vinashaka Teertham. Even now taking bath in the Teertham is considered to be of great meritorious act. Mythology calls for the need for knowledge to be made available to all, value others and avoid discrimination based on caste.

### **Reviving of Teertham: Kendra's Endeavor**

The scientific aspect of modern day holy water bodies derives its origin in the form of mythology. The mythology of Papa Vinashaka Teertham brings critical parallels between mythology and science. Vivekananda Kendra has been undertaking rehabilitation and restoration of small scale water bodies in coastal island by building social capital and bringing back local management.

The criteria for selection of a location is, existence of a Teertha as per literature sources and conclusive proof of its utility in the past supporting the community and livestock needs of the area. The focus of the revival is three fold viz., natural conservation of the system, improvement in access/supply of water to animals/other domestic uses and Institution building and incidental benefits of it.

### **Process of Revival:**

It all happened thus: Shri.Ramamurthy, a Teertha Mitra worker of Green Rameswaram project in a casual talk with Sis.Saraswati, the Kendra worker, told about the existence of an old dilapidated structure near the check post of Mandapam panchayat, 19 km from the world famous Ramanatha Temple in Ramanathapuram district, Tamilnadu. With the photograph of the structure, Shri.Nandakumar, the District collector was informed, who wanted names of the water bodies for exploration.

### **Collaboration is the Key:**

Shri.Pakshi Siva, President, Temple Protection Committee, Rameswaram was contacted to know the history of Teerthams. He culled out the list of Teertham from *Sethumahatmiyam* with the names, location and its importance. The list was taken to ascertain the administrative boundaries of the location from Shri.G.Kannan, Municipal Commissioner. Water bodies were identified with respect to the locations in Municipality and Village Panchayat. The draft of the list was submitted to District Collector who directed Shri.Ramesh, Personal Clerk to put it into format for processing the request. On submission, District Collector directed Shri.Kalyansundaram, Assistant Director, Town Panchayat to issue orders to make use of the good office of the Collector to renovate water bodies in the island for the benefit of future generations.

### **Reminiscences of the Community:**

When the town panchayat order was shared with Shri.Marai Kayar, President, Mandapam Panchayat office, he vividly recalled the times he used to fish in the pond when young. Other Community members of the Village, Dr.Rajendran, Fisheries Department, Mandapam and

Ms.Rajeswari, Balwadi teacher too shared their experience of using the water for domestic and washing purposes earlier. “It has turned into the present state as none took care of it” they confided regretfully. All that reinforced the existence of the mythological pond. Later, it was triangulated with Field measurement book (FMB) further strengthening our stand of identification.

### Perseverance Pays:

Soon logistics for renovation were worked out. When it was suggested for facility for the labour to stay near the place of renovation near Muniswar Temple, the idea was laughed at by the Temple Trustees, saying that the area was already given to highways and hence the work will not be relevant. However, our disappointment was short-lived, as Shri.Patrick, President, Pamban Panchayat offered the community hall for the accommodation. It only reinforced our belief that for good work there would always be the openings, provided it was pursued till the end.

### Community gets involved

Renovation work was started with the support of the community resulting in rehabilitation of the Teertha. Keeping the original dimensions of the tank intact, the work soon got completed by adding a few things like steps, gate and a compound wall.

**Table 1: Details of Teertha Renovated**

Sl. No	Parameters	Dimensions
1	Length	32.00ft
2.	Breadth	28.00ft
3.	Depth	12.00ft
4	Steps	10 nos
5	Gate	1 gate
6	Compound wall	896 sq.ft
7	Any other	Volume : 10,752 Cu.ft

The renovation that created employment for 250 man days, resulted in water storage capacity of 10,752 cu.mt, and surprisingly regenerated 7 springs as well, resulting in sustainable use of the Teertham. Now the community too is happy that it has reduced drudgery of people who previously used to travel half a furlong for washing and drinking water.

### The crowning glory



Now in that place, that till a few months back was infested with bushes and labeled as mere mythology, stands the beautiful Papa Vinashaka Teertham, a place of pilgrimage for thousands of devotees from all over India to ward off their impurities and manifest the divinity.

