

Murugupillai Navaratnasamy – the maestro swimmer  
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Murugupillai Navaratnasamy was a household name in every nook and corner of the country in the mid-1950s. He was known for his extraordinary feat of successfully swimming the 34 miles of the Palk Strait from Velvettiturai (VVT) to Point Calimere, better known as Kodikarai in Southern India on March 25, 1954. He was 44-years old when he achieved this hard-earned fame.

The Diamond Jubilee of this memorable event that placed this little island prominently on the world map then, is being celebrated now on an elaborate scale at Thondaimanaru, the place of birth of super swimmer Navaratnasamy by the memorial Diamond Jubilee Society to honour this hero.

While a student at Hartley College, Point Pedro schoolboy Navaratnasamy learnt from one of his teachers about the astonishing feat of an Englishman successfully swimming the English Channel, a distance of 25 miles. The idea of swimming the neighbouring waters leading to India began germinating in his young mind in that very hour. It began taking root as years passed. From then onwards he took to the water like a duck, never failing even a day to practice swimming in all possible hard and strenuous ways thus conditioning his body for the challenge.

Having joined Government Service as an Agricultural Instructor, he earned a reputation for hard work. He married Leelavathy, a young woman from his village, and led a contented wedded life. The couple were blessed with three sons; however, the destiny of fate plucked his young wife early, leaving Navaratnasamy devastated and the dream of his life-long ambition in pieces.

It took him an unusually long time to come to terms with his wife's death. He believed it shattered his future and that of his three small son. By then he was over 40—years old. His associates, friends and many who were aware of his dreams tried to rekindle his boyhood ambition by constant persuasion and flattery which however failed.

The influence of his three small boys was the last resort. It paid dividend with Balachandran, the second son, who in later life at age 16 created history by swimming from Kayts to Karainagar and back with his hands and legs tied, making a vow that he would fulfill his father's ambition if the latter does not do so.

Navaratnasamy's first attempt on March 16 however had to be abandoned due to a rough sea and a gale and storm that struck when he was only seven miles away from his destination, Point Calimere. Undeterred he decided to have a second go nine days later.

A mammoth crowd thronged the shores of Velvettiturai from where he took off at 4 p.m. on March 25, 1954 in the presence of a distinguished gathering including C.Barr Kumarakulasingam, Commissioner of Assize, Jaffna, T.Ramalingam M.P for Point Pedro and the Minister of Post, V. Nalliah, M.P.

The strenuous exercises he had undergone, the sacrifices he had made in having his middle aged body trim and fit, the different strokes of the game he had learnt and mastered - all came into play in the challenge to cover a distance of 34 long miles in a rough sea that experiences a change of tide every six hours making swimming more and more difficult when the waters of Bay of Bengal enter the Indian Ocean and return.

The shark-infested sea with reptiles and sea snakes a plenty posed many problems and hindered his progress. Overcoming all these challenges, Navaratnasamy set foot and hoisted his flag at Point Calimere exactly at 7 pm the following day March 26, 1954.

It was a historic event that brought praise and bouquets from all over the world for this little island of ours. Navaratnasamy was received on the shores of VVT by a crowd of over 25,0000 including many VIPs and politicians, and the entire peninsula took a festive mood with crackers and fireworks all over.

The press of both countries, India and Ceylon, gave very wide coverage and messages of congratulations were received from Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India and his counterpart here Sir John Kotalawela.

The swimmer was honoured with a public reception in Jaffna by the City's Mayor who presented him with a valuable golden memento. In Colombo a public reception was held in his honour with the premier, Sir John Kotalawela, presenting him with a silver shield. In addition, there were a host of congratulatory messages received from foreign dignitaries. Taking pride of place was a message from Queen Elizabeth who sent him a medal to be worn on the occasion of her coronation.

Reaching age 60, Navaratnasamy retired from Government Service in 1965. While in retirement, he trained to row around Sri Lanka in a catamaran circumnavigating a distance of 760 miles. He died on 30.06.1969. He is survived by his eldest son, N.Ramachandran who is a retired Manager of the Bank of Ceylon.

May this National hero be remembered for many more years to come!