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RELIGIOUS TOURIST PLACES IN TIRUVANNAMALAI – A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Tiruvannamalai is a town in the state of Tamilnadu, administrated by a special grade municipality that covers an area of 16.33 km² (6.31 sq.m) and had a population of 144,278 in 2011. It is the administrative headquarters of Tiruvannamalai District. Located on the foothills of Annamalai. Tiruvannamalai has been ruled by the Pallavas, the Cholas, Hoysalas, the Vijayanagar Empire, the Carnetic Kingdom, Tipu sultan, and the British. It served as the capital city of the Hoysalas. The town is built around the Annamalaiyar Temple.

INTRODUCTION

Tiruvannamalai is named after the central deity of the Annamalaiyar Temple. The Karthigai Deepam festival is celebrated during the day of the full moon between November and December, and a huge beacon is lit atop the Annamalai hill. The event is witnessed by three million pilgrims. On the day preceding each full moon, pilgrims circumnavigate the temple base and the Annamalai hills in a worship called *Girivalam*, a practice carried out by one million pilgrims yearly. Roadways are the major mode of transport in Tiruvannamalai, while the town also has rail connectivity. There is a belief that you get all gold things in life even if you think about the place "Tiruvannamalai".

In ancient times, the term "Annamalai" meant an inaccessible mountain. The word "Thiru" was prefixed to signify its greatness, and coupled with the two terms, it is called "Thiru+Annamalai = Tiruvannamalai". Geologists consider this mountain as older than the Himalayas.

Tiruvannamalai is an ancient temple town in TamilNadu with a unique historical back ground. The four great Tamil saivaite poets Sambandar, Sundarar, Appar and Manickavasagar have written about the history of Tiruvannamalai in their literary work Thevaram and Thiruvasagam which stands unparalleled, Arunagirinathar has also written beautifully about the Tiruvannamalai and its Lord Arunachalaeswarar temple. The ancient kings starting from the later Chola Dynasty period accessed from the Tamil works started reposing more faith on Lord Arunachalaeswarar.

They started contributing their share by constructing many Gopurams, mandapams, and shrines, making steady additions to the temple structure over the last one thousand years. During the reign of king Krishnadevarayar of Vijayanagaram, the temple saw many buildings and structures in the form of gopurams and mandapams and most important among them is the Rajagopuram that is 217 feet high. This is believed to be the second tallest Gopuram in the India after Srirangam temple.

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The Arunachal Hill nearby is 2668 feet high above the sea level. On Krittika Nakshatra in the Month of Kartika, Lord Siva became visible to Parvati in the form of a Jyoti. On that day, the chief festival of Tiruvannamalai is conducted. On that occasion, a huge beacon of light is lit at the top of the hill in commemoration of the Jyoti.

Tiruvannamalai is full of spiritual ashrams built by many great holy men and enlightened gurus. Some great saints who attained eternity from Tiruvannamalai are Seshadri Swamigal, Ramana Maharishi and Yogi Ramsuratkumar and many siddhas who attained salvation. They are known as great saints but there are still hundreds of holy saints and gurus in the streets of Tiruvannamalai town.

HISTORY OF TIRUVANNAMALAI

Tiruvannamalai is an ancient city existing since 8th Century. Ellappa Nayanar the Sixteenth century Tamil scholar, recorded extensively about Tiruvannamalai town in his Arunachala Puranam Tamil literary work. There is a Sanskrit work called Arunachala Mahatmyam written in the same period. But there is a known controversy among Sanskrit and Tamil scholars, in claiming which literature is written first about Tiruvannamalai history. Unlike Sanskrit version, Tamil scholar Ellappa Nayanar has extensively recorded about the Tiruvannamalai architecture and the legendary stories about king Vallala the Hoysala king.

The king has contributed in spreading the benefit of Girivalam and Arunachala temple. This subsequently helped the expansion of Tiruvannamalai town. King Vallala was ruling entire South India from Deccan Plateau with Dwarasandra as capital, Halebid lay to the north – west of Mysore. We can still see the richness of Hoysala art, architecture and its unique style in Thiruvannamalai. The history of Tiruvannamalai can be sporadically traced among Chola, Pandya Tamil works ranging from 6th Century to 8th Century.

HISTORY OF PANCHA BOOATHA STHALAMS

In Tiruvannamalai Lord shiva came to be worshipped by devotees in the form of fire and it is one of the Pancha bootha sthalas in Tamilnadu along with Kanchipuram, Thiruvanaikoil, Sri Kalahasti and Chidambaram representing Earth, Water, Wind and Space respectively.

Four Brahmotsavams are celebrated every year, the most famous of which is the one celebrated during the Tamil month of Karthigai (November/December). The ten day event culminates on the day of Karthigai Deepam. On that evening, a huge lamp is lit in a cauldron with three tons of ghee at the top of the Annamalai hill.

Every full moon night, tens of thousands of pilgrims worship Shiva by circumambulating the Arunachala hill with bare feet. The circumambulation covers a distance of about 14km. On the yearly Chitra Pournami (full moon) night in the Tamil calendar year; hundreds of thousands of pilgrims from across the world visit the sacred town. Advaita Vedanta guru Ramana Maharishi lived in Tiruvannamalai for fifty three years until his death in 1950. His ashram, Sri Ramanasramam, is located at the foot of the Arunachala hill, to the west of the town. Seshadri Swamigal and Yogi Ramsurat Kumar are examples of two other gurus who lived in this town.

HOLY MOUNTAIN TIRUVANNAMALAI

From the ancient times, the story of the sacred mountain tells us that a quarrel between the Lord Vishnu and Lord Brahma depicts the origin of the mountain. Both the creator and preserver of this universe were fighting to claim who is powerful among them. This went on for years. The sage Narada also convinced them that neither of the two was powerful nor supreme. Then, Lord Siva made up his mind to show the truth, which is actually supreme among the two. In order to prove this he took the form of fire which was very big.

This fire stood in front of the two and a voice was heard from the fire, which was Lord Siva himself and told that “Among you both who will first approach the top and bottom of this dazzling fire will be said to be the most powerful forever.” Then Brahma transformed himself as a swan and flew up to the sky to reach the top of the fire and kept flying for hundreds and hundreds of years. But could not reach the top on the other side, Lord Vishnu transformed himself as a boar and starting digging the earth to find the bottom. He was also unable to find the bottom of the fire.

ARUNACHALESWARAR TEMPLE

The temple is situated at the bottom of the Annamalai hills, and faces east, lying over 25 acres. The temple complex covers 10 hectares, and is one of the largest in India.

The walls on the East and West measure 700 ft (210 m), the South 1,479 ft (451 m), and the North 1,590 ft (480 m). The temple has numerous shrines, with those of Annamalaiyar and Unnamulai Amman being the most prominent. The Temple is significant to the Hindu sect of Saivism as one of the temples associated with the five elements, the Pancha Bhoota Stalas, and specifically the element of fire, or Agni. Shiva is worshiped as Annamalaiyar or Arunachaleswarar, and is represented by the form of Linga, with his idol referred to as *Agni lingam*. His consort Parvati is depicted as Unnamulai Amman. The main shrine of Annamalaiyar faces east, housing images of Nandi and Surya, and is the oldest structure in the temple. Behind the walls of the sanctum, there is an image of Venugopalaswamy, an incarnation of Vishnu.

Around the sanctum, there are images of Somaskandar, Durga, Chandekeswarar, Gajalakshmi, Arumugasami, Dakshinamoorthy, Swarnabairavar, Nataraja, and Lingodbhavar—the last an image of Shiva emanating from *lingam*. The Palliyarai, the divine room for resting deities, is located at the first precinct around the sanctum. The shrine of his consort, Unnamulai Amman, lies in the second precinct, with Amman depicted in a standing posture. Sambantha Vinayagar, the elephant god shrine, is located to the north of the flagstaff and the *Bali peeta*, or platform for sacrifice. To the south of the thousand-pillared hall, there is a small shrine for Subramaya and a large tank. Pathala Lingam, the underground *lingam*, is the place where Ramana Maharshi (1879 – 1950 CE) is believed to have performed his penance.

The shrine of Sivangai Vinayagar is present in the northern bank of the Sivanganga tank. It has got four stately towers on all the four sides and four high stone walls just like the rampart walls of a fort. The eastern tower called the Rajagopuram is the highest. The southern tower is called Thirumanjanagopuram, that in the west is called Peygopuram and that in the north is called Ammaniamma Gopuram. The Rajagopuram which adorns the East Gateway is 217 feet high with 11 storeys, its base measure 135 feet by 98 feet. This tower was built by king Krishna Devaraya of Vijayanagar and completed by Sevappa Nayaka of Thanjavur. Krishna Devaraya also constructed the Thousand Pillared Mantapam and dug the tank opposite to it. Ammani Ammal a Sanyasini built the North Gopuram which is called after her name.

The structure was built during the Chola dynasty in the 9th Century, while later expansions are attributed to Vijayanagar rulers of the Sangama

Dynasty (1336–1485 CE), the Saluva and the Tuluva Dynasty (1491–1570 CE). The temple complex houses many halls; the most notable is the thousand-pillared hall built during Vijayanagar period. At present, the temple is maintained and administered by the Hindu Religious and Endowment Board of the Government of TamilNadu.

The towers, the pillars in the Mantapams and Vimanams consist of figures of Sculptures of Excellence. In the side walls of the Entrance of East Gopuram there are dance poses and figures of Bewitching Beauty. Generally stone – idols are fixed with what is called “Ashtabandana”. But in this case it is “Swarnabandana” (Gold) which is of special importance. There are five inner rounds including what is called Madavilagam running just outside the temple walls and the four car streets and the path round the Giri the temple is said to have Seven Prakaras.

As enjoined, one should enter the temple by the main gate in front of the Sanctum sanctorum. Before entering the eastern gate we see the Sixteen – Pillared Mantapam and the Four - Pillared Mantapam. When we pass the Eastern Tower Gate we see the Gopura Ganapathi. This deity is held in high esteem and veneration by all devotees and the first worship to him. We first come to the fifth prakaram and see before us the Kambathilayanar Sannidhi and Gananappai Mantapam. Here it was that God Muruga appeared in a Pillar for the sake of the king Prabudevaraya as prayed for by saint Arunagirinathar in response to his famous song “Athalsadanarada”. To the south there is the sacred tank called Sivaganga. It has stone steps and Thirumalapathi Mantapam on all four sides.

KARTHIGAI DEEPAM FESTIVAL

We should know in detail about this annual holy beacon festival. Brahma and Vishnu were both quarrelling about their relative superiority. To give a decision on it and to erase their ego Lord Siva stood before them in the form of a blazing mountain. Having failed in their attempt to find out its top and bottom the two prayed to Lord Siva for his grace. He blessed them saying that he would appear in the form of Jothi on the top of the hill every year on the day of Karthigai in the month of Karthigai. To commemorate this event every year, the festival is being conducted at Tiruvannamalai.

There is ample literary evidence to prove that this lighting festival is one of the oldest Tamil countries. Tholkappiam is the oldest extent work in Tamil literature. In commenting on one of the

Sutras in Tholkappiam, Nachinarkiniar, the prince of commentators, mentions "the light lit on the karthigai day of the Karthigai month". Scholars ascribe the age of Tholkappiam to be three thousand years old. Jeevaka Chintamani, a Jain work and one of the five great Tamil Epics by Thirthakka Devar mentions "lighting a lamp on the hill on Karthigai day". Karnapatu and Kalavazhinpathu, the two old Tamil literary works refer to lighting on Karthigai day. Saints Appar and Sambandar who lived in the 7th Century A.D make references in this respect. There is a proverbial saying "light on the hill" when one wants to express a thing world – wide. This bears eloquent testimony to the antiquity of the lighting festival on the hill.

Of the five elements Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Ether, fire is considered important as being in the middle. Adding Sun, Moon and Soul to these it is said that God exposes Himself in eight forms "Ashtamurthams". So the Vedas, Agamas and Puranas extol God as Rudragni Sivajothi and Paramjudar. Just as fire destroys impurity in anything, god destroys the darkness of ignorance and egoism in men and blesses them with the light of wisdom. This is the philosophic truth behind the celebration of the festival. Something should be said about the festival proper which will be of use to a devout pilgrim. The Karthigai Deepam festival is celebrated in the Tamil month of karthigai (November – December). It begins on Utradam day with flag hoisting and goes on for nine days.

SRI SESHADRI SWAMIGAL ASHRAM

Seshadri Swamigal ashram is next to Sri Ramanashramam between the second and third Lingam on the circumambulation route. Regular pujas are performed at the Samadhi of Sri Seshadri Swamigal. There are a few platforms for meditation facing the holy hill Arunachala, from this garden.

RAMANA ASHRAM

In 1903 there came to Tiruvannamalai a great Sanskrit scholar and savant, Ganapati Sastri known also as Ganapati Muni; he felt the grace of the sage enveloping him. He met Ramana Maharishi and composed hymns in Sanskrit in praise of the sage, and also wrote the Ramana – Gita explaining his teachings.

Ramana sat most of the time in the hall that had been constructed for the purpose as the witness to all that happened around him. There were numerous invitations for him to undertake tours. But he never

moved out of Tiruvannamalai and in the later years out of the Ashram. Most of the time people sat silently before him. Sometimes some of them asked questions; and sometimes he answered them. It was a great experience for them to sit before him and to look at his eyes. Many did experience the time coming to a stop and a stillness and peace beyond description. His ashram is an important place at Tiruvannamalai which is between the second and third lingam on the circumambulation (Girivalam) route. Your spiritual connection will be evoked when you meditate at the meditation hall of Ramanashram. A book stall in the ashram sells of photographs and books.

YOGI RAMSURAT KUMAR ASHRAM

After a prolonged spiritual voyage, yogiji finally reached Tiruvannamalai in the Southern India. Swamiji began living in a small house in Sannadhi Street near Temple. He continued to bless the devotees who thronged at thousands to his house at the Sannadhi Street. The devotees wished him to have an ashram which he gently accepted. The yogi Ramsurat kumar ashram is constructed at agrahara collai with a total area of 3.5 Acres.

PARVATHAMALAI

Parvathamalai is located at Thenmahadevamangalam village which is about 20km off Polur. Polur is about 35 km north of Tiruvannamalai. There's a very powerful Lord Siva temple at the top of the Parvathamalai hill. Numerous Siddhars and spiritual beings from the celestial worlds worship here every night. Reaching the hill is somewhat difficult. Hence it is better to start early in the Morning and return as early as possible. During the full moon day, this hill attracts a lot of devotees. This is a place known for spiritual power.

CONCLUSION

Tiruvannamalai is a very important religious place and it has been rightly called as a spiritual centre of in Southern part of India . During the religious festival, the town will come alive with the Deepam all around the surroundings. Because of the popularity of this festival, people try to visit Tiruvannamalai at least once in their lifetime.

Arunachaleswarar temple is the main attraction for the people visiting Tiruvannamalai. The architectural style used in the Temple is also one of the main

attractions for the international tourists also. Numerous documentaries have been made on festivals in Tiruvannamalai. To add grandeur to the main temple, there are four stately towers which envelope the temple from different directions.

During the annual festival, the holy mountain of Tiruvannamalai is lit illuminated with Deepams, which brings people from all over southern India to Tiruvannamalai irrespective of age, gender etc. For people visiting the place, having seen the Deepam lightning up is good sign for the future well-being and prosperity. For time immemorial this place was considered as notable centre for religious sages and holy man. During early times, most religious people, sages and holy man make it a point to visit Tiruvannamalai and it was rather meeting place for ancient intellectuals for the quest of religious knowledge.

Unlike Chennai city, Tiruvannamalai is not economically developed but it is now catching up with the rest of the Tamil Nadu Cities and soon it will also become an important town in Tamil Nadu. Already the spiritual importance of Tiruvannamalai is well known all over the Southern India and now it has become an important place for all people across the Southern India, since it is a significant centre of religious and cultural activities.

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