

Religious And Sociological Significance Of The Girivalam Of Thiruvannamalai Sri Arunachaleswarar Temple (South India)

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Abstract: *Sri Arunachaleswarar Temple is a Hindu Temple dedicated to the deity lord Siva, located at the base of Annamalai Hills in the town of Thiruvannamalai, South India, there has been a massive surge in devotees worshipping at sri Arunachaleswarar Temple and walking the Giripradakshina path around the Theyu (Fire) Jyothir Lingam Mountain of Arunachaleswarar, especially at the time of Full Moon Day.*

As we walk of Giripradakshina path around the Theyu (Fire) jyothir Lingam Mountain of Arunchalaswarar Siva, we will encounter many Lingams, Temples, Ashrams and shrines on the way. Some of these are extremely ancient and some even invisible to the morden era. Girivalam is not the path for the faint hearted, the raucous or for the mere tourist. Rather, it is the Divine circle of silence. One must tread the path with purity. It is for the silent arpirant, the true seeker of truth and enlightenment.

On the full moon day of every calendar month, several lakhs of people circumambulate the Holy Arunachala Mountain by foot, for fulfillment of views, for some people, It is for the mitigation of their sufferings and for many others it is a Holy pilgrimage, For the sages, saints and Pious people it is their holy march towards God realization.

Girivalam is a special journey of identification. It is for everyone who has developed the ears of the soul, So that might hear and partake of the truth in this world of form. It we walk the Giripradakshina path with a pure uncluttered mind His Divine energy penetrates. The soul begins to open like a lotus flower. So that it has the awe-inspiring opportunity to understand its true nature.

I. INTRODUCTION

The influx of peoples into the west from South and South-East Asia has been accompanied by cross-cultural interaction and spirituality on a massive scale where exchange of ideas has become the driving force for change. The names of the Divine are being repeated over and over again throughout the world Sri Arunachaleswarar Temple is a Hindu Temple dedicated to the deity lord Siva, located at the base of Annamalai Hills in the town of Thiruvannamalai, South India, there has been a massive upsurge in devotees worshipping at Sri Arunchaleswarar Temple and walking the Giripradakshina path around the Theyu Fire Jyothir Lingam Mountain of Arunachaleswarar, especially at the time of Full Moon Day.



Figure 1: Thiruvannamalai Sri Arunachaleswarar Temple

II. SIGNIFICANCES

In Thiruvannamalai the devotee can feel the presence of Divinity. Arunagiri valam is the path of spirituality that many wish to take. We can begin to understand how exceptional this journey is when we realize the relevance of the many glorious happenings that have taken place on Arunagirivalam since the dawn of time. As we walk of Giripradakshina path around the Theyu Jyothir Lingam Mountain of Arunachaleswarar Siva we will encounter many Lingams, Temples, Ashrams and Shrines on the way. Some of these are extremely ancient and some even invisible to the human eye. There are also ashrams and shrines that have developed in the modern era. All are the magnificent, and all of them, great or small, old or modern, hold the 'Vital Key' to understanding the true depth of our wonderful Hindu religious heritage. We have attempted to record as many as possible as it is my sincere wish to bring greater understanding about this path of Divinity¹. we earnestly pray that this information will help us preserve and protect all that is sacred on Arunagirivalam.

Arunagirivalam is not the path for the faint hearted, the raucous or for the mere tourist. Rather, it is the Divine Circle of Silence². One must treat the path with purity. It is for the silent aspirant, the true seeker of truth and enlightenment. Everything that has taken place in this blessed area since the dawn of time has special significance. As each foot treads the sacred path, as each pebble or stone is turned or touched by human hand, something is recorded that has an effect on our destiny. This is extremely important for everyone to understand in the modern age where we are prone to carry forward individualistic aims at the cost of our rich religious and historical cultural heritage.

Arunagirivalam is a special path of Grace. If it is possible for us to understand that we cannot dissociate ourselves from the richness of the glorious past we may be able to spread the wings of the soul, take hold of the hands that guide us on that path and stand within the Jyothi Light.

There is wonder that so many great saints and devotees have been unable to leave Arunagiri. It is said that the perfume of the ancient saints fill the air as they silently tread the Divine Circle and remain within the folds of Siva's Divine Grace. When Siva appeared as the Column of Effulgence before Brahma and Vishnu, their pride was annihilated, as also their sense of separation from Him. At their request, Siva took the form of the motionless hill, Arunchala and abides there eternally in the form of the Linga.

The holy Arunchala is the primal or Adi Linga. The path around its base is the sacred Yoni. Pradakshina of the hill is therefore circumambulation of the source of all Lingas. Making a circuit of the hill is the worship of Arunchala and the Lord is pleased with it. Sonachala has been worshipped by Soma (the moon), Surya (the sun), Agni (fire), Indra and other Devas, Dikpalakas (protectors of the direction), Gandharvas, Siddha Yogis, sages and others. While doing the Pradakshina, one bows mentally to the invisible Gods and Siddhas going the rounds and keeps to the left edge of the path. There are various visible and invisible sacred Tirthas (tanks) around the hill. There are eight Lingas at the eight cardinal points besides the temples of Arunchalaeswarar and Adi Annamalai. Some

important mythological stores associated with the various sports on the Giri Valam.

The Nakshatra (star), the Devatas (deities) presiding over the planets, and divisions of time such as Tithi, Yoga, Hora etc., all become favourable to the devotees performing Pradakshina of Arunagiri. Girivalam on auspicious days like the full moon day, eclipse etc., and yield manifold merit. The details of the special benefits accruing on performing Pradakshina on different days of the week.

III. MEANING OF PRADAKSHINAPATH

The syllable pra in the word Pradakshina means rooting out sins, 'da' granting desires, 'kshi' obliterating the fruits of 'Karma', and 'na' bestowing of Gnana (self – knowledge) and Mukti (Liberation).

On the day of Pradakshina, one abjures all thought of the opposite sex. After taking bath and wearing clean white clothes and the holy ash and remaining free from fear, anger, irritation or sorrow, one walks on bare feet. He proceeds giving alms but without accepting any. He does not wear shirt or shawl or carry an Umbrella. Without swinging the arms, with a silent soft tread, one saunters like a queen in her "tenth month". He bows to the holy hill from each of the eight cardinal directions and to the lord of the direction Dikpalaka, enshrined in the Linga there. During the Girivalam the devotee maintains silence of speech and mind or meditates on Arunachala or sings devotional hymns.

As the sins are expired and as merit accrues, the the desire prompted devotion to Arunchala flowers into Nishkamaya Bhakti, Spontaneous and desire less love. The mind gathers



Figure 2: Girivalapath



Figure 3: Astalingas in Girivalapath

sattvic preponderance and turns inward. With Self-inquiry, it subsides into its source, the Self which is Arunchala. The sacred Arunchala calls to itself all Gnanis, the knowers of the Self.

Lord Siva's magnetic call reaches outwards far and wide into the world of souls living in far off places. Those who have developed the ears of the soul can sense and hear His call. This very powerful magnetic pull attracted the great Sages and Saints like Appar, Sundarar, Manickavasagar, Tirugnana Sambandar, Kannappa Nayanar, Arunagirinathar (Kambathu Elayanar), Seshadri Swamigal, Ramana Maharishi and Yogi Ramsuratkumarar etc. to Tiruvannamalai. Even Gods like Vishnu, Brahma, Devas and Puranic Rishis and Saints are no exceptions.

On the full moon day of every calendar month, several lakhs of people circumambulate the Holy Arunachala Mountain by foot, for fulfillment of vows, for some people, it is for the mitigation of their sufferings and for many others it is a Holy Pilgrimage, For the Sages, Saints and Pious people it is their Holy March towards God realization.

The mountainous Linga worship makes bondage non-existent. Ceaseless worship of Arunachala Siva creator of all, destroys the bonds that hold us to the world of senses. Thiruvannamalai is "The Light of the Universe" and the light is always there.

It was in that far-off existence that a Divine stream arose which had the power to unite and carry forward out love. In an extraordinary and wonderful manner our souls were ever joined, and since that time we have strived life after life against a multiplicity of popular instincts, impulses, and barriers to keep alive all those wonderful Divine elements within us. And, in that unity we have grown to understand, it does not even matter if we live far apart, or appear outwardly different from each other in this world of form. As long as our souls are inseparable we can continue to walk his sacred path together in meaningful silent love. Thus, we have grown to understand that there is a sublime purpose in our union. It reveals itself, it has consecrated all our actions, and it has filled us with holy significance so that the whole body has become subservient to the ecstatic soul.



Figure 4: Sri Annamalaiyar and Unnamulai Ammai – Main Deities

The Lingam Mountain of Arunachaleswarar is Lord Siva, who calls us to Thiruvannamalai to witness His presence in His Lingam form at that blessed place. For the means of salvation of souls the Lingam Mountain calls loudly to seekers of truth. Lord Siva's mighty invitation draws us to Him like a powerful magnet. The magnetic call spreads outwards in waves of glorious light into the universe, into the worlds of souls in far off place. So that even though Lord Siva's Lingam Mountain form at Lingasthanam.

As our bare feet touch the holy ground, our souls will have the opportunity to move outwards and enter the Tunnel of Divine Existence, that Divine Circle, where the saints and the gods and even some departed Souls walk. We may even feel and smell the sweetness of their presence as we take the path around the Holy Lingam Mountain, Indeed, there is no better place of contact, no easier route through Tunnel of Life (Samsara), than doing Giripradakshina around the holy Lingam Mountain of Arunachaleswarar Siva. The soul, lifted by the Grace of Siva, becomes fully enfolded; elevated to such a great height it is able to experience the ecstasy of knowledge.

IV. SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF GIRIVALAM

When we pray that we will be able to make this special journey and have the opportunity of walking around the Lingam Mountain. If for some reason we are unable to walk, do not let this deter from this wonderful task go by a taxi, a bike, or even a horse cart. Go around the Lingam Mountain for the sake of our soul. But, before we start this special holy walk of identification clean our body and to make an extra special effort to empty all thoughts from our mind, as it neither is nor granted to anything on this earth to recreate, to pass into a new form until it has arrived at nothingness.

In general, it is said that by circumambulating the hill one obtains the merit of performing thousands or horse sacrifices, innumerable vajpeyas (a particular sacrifice) and bathing in all the tirthas.⁸ Even a great sinner who has no good deed to his credit can attain all kinds of powers. The merit acquired by bathing in all the tirthas, by performing all the sacrifices, by studying all the scriptures and by following all the dharmas

can be easily acquired by merely circumambulation Sonachala (Holy hill).

A devotee who circumambulates the hill on a Sunday penetrates the region of the sun and attains liberation. He gains the world of Siva. He who circumambulates the hill on a Monday lives free from the affections of old age and death. He who circumambulates the hill on a Tuesday is released from all debts and becomes an emperor. If pradakshina is done on Wednesday, he becomes omniscient and wise; on a Thursday. If pradakshina is done, he will attain the fame of a Guru.

Circumambulation on a Friday brings prosperity and takes him to the abode of Vishnu; a Saturday pradakshina brings worldly success and averts the ill-effects threatened by the planets in one's horoscope.

The panchamuka darshan is an ope shine on Arunagirivalam. Five Lingam are seen on a stone plinth. These Sivalingas are the embodiment of the five faces of Lord Siva in this world of matter. The top is dedicated to Ishana. This is the all seeing, three eyed face of the Lord which looks upwards. The other four faces of the Lord point to the four directions of space. The east is dedicated to Tatpurusha; the south is dedicated to Agoram; the north to Vamadeva and the west to Sadiyojatha.

The five Lingas are also considered to symbolize the five elements and five syllables of the Siva mantra, Na – ma – si – va – ya as well as the syllables of A – ru – na – cha – la. The position of the head is placed between the pillars on the top of which, on the entablature, are legs crossed in padmasana posture, surmounted by a Linga. If one perceives the hill, he can see the five peaks of the hill. This is called seeing the five facets of the Arunai hill.

V. CONCLUSION

Therefore, Arunagirivalam is a special journey of identification. It is for everyone who has developed the ears of the soul, so that might hear and partake of the truth in this world of form. It we walk the Giripradakshina path with a pure uncluttered mind His Divine energy penetrates. The soul begins to open like a lotus flower so that it has the awe-inspiring opportunity to understand its true nature.

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