

Arunachaleswarar Temple at Tiruvannamalai in Tamil Nadu – A Study

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Historical Background of Tiruvannamalai

Tiruvannamalai region was a part of the “Tondai Mandalam” in the ancient period. The history of this town dates from the mediaeval Chola period particularly from the period of Aditya I and Parantaka I (A.D. 871-955) when the Chola Empire had expanded northwards to include practically the whole of Tondaimandalam. An inscription of Kannaradeva (Krishna III) indicates that after Parantaka I the Chola rule over this region was not very much effective because of the Rashtrakuta invasions and occupation of this area by Krishna III. The recovery of this region by the Cholas was a slow process and reached its successful conclusion only towards the close of the rule of Rajaraja I in A.D 1014. Further, the rule of Rajendra I and Rajadhiraja I over this area is attested by their inscriptions. Once again a fairly long gap of over a hundred years is indicated by the absence of any Chola inscription till the beginning of Kulottunga III's reign (AD 1183). Large scale activities in the period of Kulottunga III and Rajaraja III are indicated by a number of records in the Arunachaleswarar temple. An interesting inscription at Tiruvannamalai, which records the agreement entered into by a number of feudatory chieftains to support one another and swearing allegiance to the ruling Chola king Kulottunga III in A.D 1210, is pointing to a period of great political tension under the late Cholas.

In the later period the inscriptions of Kopperunjinga clearly show that by the second quarter of the 13th century, the Kadavarayas had established

complete mastery over this region for some years leading to the final decline of Chola power.

A brief period of Pandya supremacy over this region is indicated by the inscriptions of the Pandyas of the Second Empire which were the works of Jatavaraman Srivallabha and Tribhuvanachakravartin Kulasekhara of the 13th century A.D.

The Hoysalas under Vira Vallaladeva (Ballala III) also exercised sway over this area (around A.D 1340) indicating that the Hoysala power continued to influence Tamil politics even after the Muslim invasions of Malik kafur.

After the Hoysalas, Tiruvannamalai region passed into the hands of the Vijayanagar rulers, whose southern invasions were carried on by Kumara Kampana and this led to the establishment of Vijayanagar authority over practically the whole of Tamil Nadu. Vijayanagar inscriptions in this temple are fairly large in number and range from the period of Harihara II to the late Vijayanagar ruler Venkatapatideva Maharaya i.e. from the late 14th to the 17th century A.D. Following them, the Nayak feudatories of Thanjavur, established their independent sway over this region and under the famous Sevappa Nayaka, carried out large scale renovation and building activities in the Tiruvannamalai temple.

After Nayak rule, this region gradually passed into the British hands after the Carnatic Wars except for a brief period of subordination to the Mysore Odeyars in A.D 1816.

After Independence, Tiruvannamalai was a part of the North Arcot District. The civil district of North Arcot was later divided into Vellore district and Tiruvannamalai District in September 1989. On the whole,

Tiruvannamalai is traditionally rich in historic and spiritual values but it lacks in industrial growth.

Sri Arunachaleswarar temple

Tiruvannamalai is one of the 22 famous sacred centers (***Padal Petra Sthalams***, places praised and sung by four great Nayanmars, the Saivaite saints) in the heart of the Nadunad. This town is a reputed Siva Sthalam in Tiruvannamalai District. According to the famous Skandha Puranam, it is here that God Siva demonstrated to the world that he was the all pervading power by appearing as a blazing hill of fire. To commemorate this event, a grand festival is celebrated here every year on the Karthigai Asterism day in the Tamil month of Karthigai with a grand illumination of Mount Arunachala and by installing a glorious deepam(lamp) on the hill top whose flame could be seen from places miles and miles away from Tiruvannamalai town. According to Arunachala Puranam, the very thought on this sacred Sthalam brings to the devotee the status of Mukthi or Moksha, salvation Saint Thirugnana Sambandar had also sung in praise of the deity of this sacred place.

The interesting legend concerning this Sthalam is as follows: Once there was a hot debate between Vishnu and Brahma on the issue “who is superior?” At that time, Siva appeared before them and wanted them to find out his head and feet. With a view to finding out his head Vishnu took the guise of a swan and flew to the sky and Brahma transformed himself as boar and moved down the earth in search of the feet of lord Siva. But they failed in their attempts. Siva therefore, took pity on them and offered them a dharshan in the form of a lingam and also as blazing flames of fire. This form became the famous hill Arunachala. Thereafter, Vishnu and Brahma prayed to Siva that His divine Jothi should glorify and illuminate the top of the hill eternally. Accordingly Siva granted their boon by saying that His Jothi will illuminate the top of the hill every year in the poorva paksham on the Krithigai asterism day in the month of Karthigai. It is the grand

Jothi of the lord that is being celebrated as the grand festival as Annamalai Deepam every year which is witnessed by thousands of devotees. This is vividly narrated in the famous Thiruvachagam of Manickavasagar, the saivaite saint.

History has it that the blazing fire of lord Siva took the shape of the Arunchala hill. Geologists confirm that among the four-fold basic types of hill this had its origin through ignition. The hill is 2668.feet high above the mean sea level. At the down when the sun raises in the early the hills shines in crimson symbolizing fire. Devotees who come around this hill in a Pradhakshinam (clock-wise direction) have to cover a total distance of 14 Kilometers (8.miles) in circumference. Several caves, ashrams and shrines are found in the area around the foot hills. There is also another temple in the other side of the hill called Adi Annamalai and the deity in the temple was worshipped by the Saivaite Saint Sri Manickavasagar.

The Siva temple dedicated to Sri Arunachaleswarar is a very big shrine centrally situated over an extensive area of about 24.acres. This is one of the biggest temples in South India. The outer walls of this temple are very high; the four pagodas beautifying the temple are soaring high to the skies loftily on all its four sides. The 11 tiered Raja Gopuram at the eastern entrance is 217feet high. The construction of this lofty pagoda was begun by Sri Krishna Devaraya, the significant Vijayanagar king in 1516A.D as a commemoration for his victory in wars and this was later on completed by the Tanjore king Sri Sevappa Naiker. Devotees call the southern pagoda as the Thirumanjana Gopuram, and the northern pagoda as the Ammaniammal Gopuram. It is said that a Sanyasini by name Sri Ammaniammal has constructed the northern pagoda about 200 Year ago.

A special feature of the temple the 1000 pillared Mandapam is situated on the right side of the inner portion of the Raja Gopuram. The stone inscriptions of this temple state that this 1000 pillared Mandabam and the Thirukkulam adjacent

to it were built by the Vijayanagar king Sri Krishna Devaraya. On the left side is found the Sannidhi of Sri Kambathilaiyanar, the Sannithi of lord Muruga, who gave dhrshan to Sri Prabuda Deva Maharajan complying with the request of saint Arunagirinadhar through his verse, and this is found as a temple for Sri Kambathilaiyanar, sculptured on a pillar in the sixteen pillared Mandapam to the north of the thirukulam.

The names of the Sthala

This temple is a Theyu Sthalam among the Pancha Bhoodha Sthalams. Besides, this is a famous “Mani-Pooragathalam” among the “**Aratharathalangal**” the source of all existence. This ancient Sthalam is also known by several other names such as Arunai, Arunagiri, Tiruvannamalai, Gowri Nagaram, Thesu Nagaram, Sona Sailam, Sonagiri Arunachalam, Sivaloga Nagaram, Mukthipuri, Sudha Nagaram, Gnana Nagaram, Sonai Verpu, Arunai Verpu and Uyirvali Kantham. The special glory of this sacred Sthalam is in the fact that Goddess Parvathi gained a permanent place in the left side of body of lord Siva through her severe penance.

Temple Architecture

The Arunachaleswara Temple has 11 storied high sculptured Gopurams. There are in total 9 Gopurams of which four are found within temple precincts. The larger one or the big tower is called by the name of Raja Gopuram. Thirumanjana Gopuram and Pey Gopuram are to the north and south of the temple. The outer corridor has a granite wall that links the entrance Gopurams. The massive wall is about 30 feet high.

On entering the temple from the east, there is the thousand pillar hall built by Vijayanagar king Krishna Deva Raya. The 1000 pillars have the inscriptions with the sculptures of the Naik period. The hall where the procession deity uthsavar Lord is placed and worshiped is known as the Ani Thirumanjana mandabam. The sacred tank or pool of Siva Ganga is towards the south of the

Kambathu Ilayanar Mandapam with enclosed corridor. The tank is used for the purification and ablution of the deities in the temple. The water to the tank is provided by the canal called Thirumalai amman Devi Samundram.

The third Mandapa has 16 pillars and it is in this Mandapam that the Pancha Murthis or the five deities are kept for the public for have Darshan on the day of Karthigai. The sanctum is reached by the main entrance in the east and inside the sanctum Lord Siva is personified as Annamalaiyar who is present in the Linga. The Rudra baga is covered with gold plate. There is the Devi shrine to the opposite of the Mandapa.

The grand celebrations of the Karthigai Deepam Festival,

The Karthigai Deepam festival is celebrated in the Tamil month of Karthigai (November – December). It begins on Utradam day with flag hoisting and is celebrated for nine days. Earlier it was celebrated for three days.

Each morning and evening of the festival the five deities, Siva, Parvathi, Subrahmanya, Ganapati, and Chandikeshvara, go around the car streets in procession. On the seventh day, the same deities, each on a huge wooden car, are led in turn around the temple streets in a procession.

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, in short, is the philosophic truth behind the celebration of the festival.

In the early hours of the tenth day, the Bharani Deepam in five agantams will be lit in Arunachaleswarar sannithi (Sanctum). In the evening the Pancha Murthis will be brought to the katchi Mantapam(central hall). At dusk (pradosha,-

evening) the Karthigai day which is synchronizing with the full moon day, the deity, Ardhanareeswarar is brought to this place with the five Deepams which are put in a big receptacle near the flag – staff. At the same time the beacon light on the hill is lit. the huge concourse of devotees from all parts of our country in a million voice raise a cry simultaneously “Harohara to Annamalai” which will rend the air. It is a sight for all to see. On the same night the eleven storeyed gopuram is also illuminated lit with “Ahals” (earthen oil lamps) kept in rows in all the storeys. Though this festival is very special to Tiruvannamalai it is common throughout the Tamil country. Lighting festival is celebrated in all the temples of South India including Vishnu temples.

It is ordained that a pilgrim to Tiruvannamalai for this festival should take one meal on the previous (Bharani) day, worship Bharani Deepam during the early hours on the Karthigai Deepam day, go around the hill walking the entire distance of 14 kilometers (eight miles), and on the way should worship lord in Adi (Ani) Annamalai temple fasting completely that day and should see the lighting of the Deepam on the hill that evening. Only after that devotees take prasada (food).

Every year, 15 lakhs of people participate and the holy fire is kept burning for 11 days on the hill top. The deity, Ardhanareeswarar, is brought in procession and kept in the hall before the public on karthigai deepam day only.

Surrounding shrines

Adi (Ani) Annamalai temple is one of the three temples in this Sthala and the deity in this temple is also said to shower grace to the people. This is an old temple existing prior to Annamalaiyar temple and is called Adthi Arunachala.

This shrine is located in the north – west of Tiruvannamalai town, about 6 miles on the circuit route of the hill towards the west.

The legend narrates that in ancient times, Brahma got infatuated with Thilottama, his own creation and got rid of his passion only by worshipping a

Sivalinga installed by him. In the East the deity worshipped by Thirumal came to be known as Annamalai Nadhar, and that in the west worshipped by Brahma is called Ani Annamalai Nadhar.

The lord enshrined here is Ani Annamalai. The temple also is known by the same name. Here we see a temple for Manickavasakar, and a shrine for Mariamman and two tanks. In this temple, Ani Annamalai Nadhar is in the form of a Sivalinga in the sanctum sanctorum and Devi Unnamulai Ammai has a separate shrine. Within this temple there is a shrine in the north of the main threshold for Palani Andavar and Somaskandar. As seen in other temples here too we find Ganesa, Chandrasekara, Subramania, Shanmuga, Gajalaxmi, Navagrahas and Chandikesvarar.

Thirunavukarasu Swamigal mentions in his Thevaram hymns in seven songs about this Ani Annamalai. Manickavasaga Swamigal composed Thiruvembavai with this temple in the central theme. A shrine has sprung in the very place he composed Thiruvembavai.

During Karthigai festival day all festivities that take place in the Annamalaiyar temple are held here too. The idols of Ani Annamalaiyar join the procession of Annamalai Nadhar. During the Karthigai day village folks light lamps of thinai flour and worship. This ancient temple of Ani Annamalai has been renovated by Nagarattars in the 20th century and has been maintained properly as per agamas.

Girivalam or Giri Pradakshina

The hill is of 2668 feet high (800 m). The road encircling the mountain where devotees circumambulate is 14 km long. Earlier, the Girivalam path was thorny and rocky and today the roads are well laid out. In the earlier period Pandya king Vikrama Pandiyan (1276 A.D) first laid a path way here. Two mile stones are still seen opposite to Raghavendra temple testifying to this fact. While the circumambulation is considered beneficial on any day, of late, it has become

popular to congregate there on full moon days and festival days (like Karthigai, first day of the Tamil month, and Tamil New year day). Chithira Pournami, especially, being the first full moon day of the year, is very popular and lakhs of devotees undertake Girivalam on that day.

We also see many groups where one of them had small chariots / kavadi strung to them while the others beat a drum. Passerby throw coins in the bowls kept near them. In fact, it is believed that while doing the Girivalam, one should donate to the mendicants and offer food to the dogs and cows on the way. The Eight Lingams are said to have been worshipped by celestials of the specific directions, and are representations of Arunachala himself. They are:

1. Indra Lingam (East)
2. Agni Lingam (South East)
3. Yama Lingam (South)
4. Niruthi Lingam (South West)
5. Varuna Lingam (West)
6. Vaayu Lingam (North West)
7. Kubera Lingam (North)
8. Esanya Lingam (Norht East)

Recently Chandra lingam was relocated after eviction of encroachers near Adaiyur road. In Adi Annamalai temple, sun rays directly fall on the Lingam on 1st Chithirai (April) and 5th Avani (September) every year. This is a rune sight to be seen and worshipped.

Tiruvannamalai is the unique place providing abode to the following saints

1. Arunagirinathar
2. Vitpatchathevar
3. Gugai Namachivayar
4. Guru Namachivayar
5. Deivasigamani

6. Arunachala Desikar
7. Mahan Seshadri Swamigal
8. Bagawan Ramana Maharishi
9. Sri Yogi Ram Surathkumar

It is also considered that of is holy place were thousand of siddhars have been living and offering blessing to people.

Tiruvannamalai is thus a sacred place and abode of the gods of the Hindu pantheon were people through to worship and get the grace and blessing of the almighty.

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