

## Spiritual Tourism in Tiruvannamalai, South India: A Historical Perspective

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**Abstract:** This research paper would update the historical facts, the status of Thiruvannamalai, Tamilnadu which is a **Spiritual Tourist Town** of South India from the historical perspective of spiritual tourism. Most of the foreign tourists believe that the **Arunachaleswarar Temple, Tiruvannamalai Hill** and **Ramanasramam** are one among the spiritual centers of the Universe. Girivalam (Circumambulation) around the 14 km path of the sacred hill has been a traditional practice from time immemorial. It is estimated that on the full moon day (pournami) every month, 10 lakhs devotees visit this pilgrim town to offer their prayers. The ten day 'Karthigai Deepam Festival' (light lit atop the sacred hill) attracts lakhs of people from neighboring states to witness the Bharani Deepam and Maha Deepam. For example on December 8, 2011, nearly 25 lakhs people participated. It is projected that in the next 5-10 years the number of people coming here will go up to 25-30 lakhs. On interviewing the foreigner, the researcher was informed of the need for better infrastructure facilities so that this spiritual centre would emerge as one of the most important spiritual centers of the world.

Key words: Tourism, religion and spiritual journeys

### Introduction

Tourism is based on historical perspectives, because the past experiences in the ancient world were based on the origin and growth of the seven concepts, of them the six concepts namely society, administration (political) economy, **religion**, education and art, belonged to the Cultural Period (40,000 – 10,000 B.C.), (Era). The seventh concept, Science and Technology originated during the civilization period (10,000 – 5,000 B.C.)<sup>1</sup> Tamil Nadu, in South India is the seat of the Dravidian civilization and culture. It's one of the oldest in the world<sup>2</sup> compared to other civilizations. The Indus Valley civilization has contributed to the religious and spiritual thoughts to other civilizations in the world.

### Concept of Religious Tourism

Religious Tourism is a form of tourism where people travel individually or in groups for pilgrimage, missionary, or leisure (fellowship) purposes. Travel for religious purposes assumed

a significant importance. The practice of travelling for religious reasons, going on a pilgrimage for instance has become a well-established custom in many parts of the world. By the end of the middle Ages a large number of pilgrims were travelling to the main shrines in Europe, and travel again assumed an interesting character. However, it was still dominated by religious motivations. Very little actual pleasure travel was undertaken. The adoption and spread of Christianity subsequently led to numerous pilgrims making their way to the Holy Land. So deep and strong was the hold of faith that the ritual of pilgrimage flourished over the centuries. Religion was a great unifying force. Pilgrimages strengthened religious bonds. It provided the impetus for a 'stay-at-home agrarian society to break out of its narrow geographical confines. It also exposed people to new manners and customs, different kinds of food habits and modes of dress. It encouraged exchange of ideas and also fostered trade. It served as a powerful means of forging unity and understanding between people from widely different regions.

Modern religious tourists are more able to visit holy sites around the world. The most famous holy cities are Jerusalem, Mecca and Varanasi. The Most famous holy sites are the church of Nativity, The Western Wall, Brahma Temple at Pushkar and the Kaaba. Religious tourism has existed since antiquity. The Vedas, the ancient religious texts of the Hindus, enjoined that unless a man went on pilgrimage to the four sacred dhams or holy places of the country, he would not attain 'release' and would therefore continue to suffer rebirth for his sins. These four sacred centers are scattered in the far-flung corners of India; the Temple of Lord Jagannath in Puri in eastern India; the Ramashwaram Temple in the deep south, darker on the Gujarat coast in the west and Badrinath in the snow-bound mountains of the Himalayas.<sup>3</sup> These are still India's four great pilgrimage centers and pilgrims flock to them in hundreds and thousands year after year.

India, as a country, offers unity in diversity not only in the matter of tribes, communities and religious ways of life but it also presents itself in its prospects regarding tourism. The religious feeling that is evidenced is neither dogmatic nor sectarian, but moved by deep faith. During the sixth and eleventh centuries a strong movement arose in the country for the revival of traditional Hinduism. The great rulers of the South carried the new wave of devotional Hinduism by building a number of temples. Generally, we can observe that pilgrims visit holy

places to understand and appreciate their religion through a tangible experience, to feel secure about their religious beliefs, and to connect personally to the holy place.

### **Remembering the past**

India's deep rooted heritage and culture has been finding their place in the pages of history books for centuries. Indian civilization is one of the oldest of all the civilizations of the world and it requires ages to go through the entire history in a short time. The history of the land has a great bearing on the growth of tourism. It is important to trace historical background of the spirit of travelling. It is essential to find the root of the urge for travelling in man that is so strong and has continued to survive till date. The tourism industry has its roots deeply entrenched in historical monuments, pilgrim centers and secular monuments. Even the growth of the practice of observing certain Unsays (festivals) and Jatras (fairs) has evolved from the rich cultural heritage of the land in India.<sup>4</sup> The inscriptional evidence with several secondary sources and touristy interviews throw much light on the historical spirit of travelling.

In India, tourism industry is a good source of earning foreign exchange. Having unique tourism resources in her ancient heritage of art, history and culture, it has an enviable place on the tourist map of the world .Tourism has emerged as an instrument for employment generation, poverty alleviation and sustainable human development. It promotes international understanding and gives support to local handicrafts and cultural activities.<sup>5</sup>

### **Tourism Movement in India**

The first effort to promote tourism in India was made in 1945 by setting up a committee under the chairmanship of Sir John Sergeant, the then Educational Advisor to the Government of India. But the real economic and social advantage of tourism was recognized only in the 1960s. A separate tourism development was started in the Ministry of Transport only in March 1958. A committee on tourism known as the Jha committee was set up in 1963, which recommended that the public sector should assume a more active and positive role in promoting tourism. In 1965 the Government of India formed three separate corporations, under the provisions of the Companies Act., 1965. The Government later decided to merge these undertakings into one composite undertaking. Then the Government formed a public sector undertaking, namely The India Tourism Development Corporation Ltd., in Delhi in October 1966 and it came into being

with effect from March 28, 1970. The Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation was created only in 1967.<sup>6</sup>

### **Heritage Tourism in India**

The glorious past of India has ensured that the present and subsequent generations have plenty of historical and cultural heritages to be proud of. The fascinating monuments and heritage sites in the country stand quietly today to retell their story of joy, sorrow, courage and sacrifice before us. Each of the stories is so enchanting and singular that we will be left asking for more at the end of each narration. For centuries, people migrating into the rich country, India, with their respective culture and tradition and later mixing with the rituals of the Indians have given birth to a new colour of heritage and culture. This amalgamation of culture has slowly but gradually enriched the values and faiths of the Indians even further with each sun rise and sun set in the sky.<sup>7</sup>

The number of important monuments and sites in India is so great that a single tour to discover the multifarious facets of its wonderful heritage is not enough. Nevertheless, it will give us an admirable glimpse into the Indian history and heritage. At the end of a trip, we will surely develop a due respect for the Indian heritage while craving for more such tours in the near future.

The findings revealed that impact assessment of tourism is a complex matter and contains both positive and negative elements. Different types of tourism have different effects on different societies. In Thiruvannamalai, all the alterations are directed towards projecting it as a 'heritage city' with a treasure of royal experiences to offer to the domestic as well as international travellers. The findings reinforce that the residents of Thiruvannamalai had a more optimistic perspective regarding the economic impact of tourism. It was found that not only does the community benefit economically from an active tourism industry, but community pride is also enhanced. The influence of tourism on consumption patterns and traditional values is also viewed from conservation of important elements of the cultural heritage of an area that might otherwise be allowed to deteriorate or disappear.

### **Historical Perspective of Religious Tourism in India**

'Religious tourists' in India is a category of travellers primarily motivated by religious considerations. According to social scientists like **Graburn** (1977), **Jafari** (1987), although such journeys may be regarded as sacred by the travellers concerned they differ from the more inclusive concept of tourism as a sacred journey. This is why as a supplier you tend to categorise these religious destinations as centers of historic and cultural attractions in association with one or more religious identities<sup>8</sup> Historical Perspective of Religious Tourism, Travellers performing pilgrimage, People attending religious meetings/discourses, and People travelling as participants to stage dramas and musical production like Hare Ram Hare Krishna, Identifying some existing religious tourism products, Characteristics of Religious Tourism, Issues and Considerations for Designing Religious Tourism.<sup>9</sup>

India is a land of pilgrimage. Travel for religious purposes has been there from the most ancient times. Practically, all religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism have their major and minor pilgrimage Centers in different parts of the country. There are also centers of Sufism, churches and mosques that are visited by people. In fact, to a majority of domestic tourists in India pilgrimage has always been the main motivation. In our country all major temples, shrines and sacred spots are found scattered all along major riverbanks or in the hills. The confluence of holy rivers called "Sangam"; attract millions of tourists every year when pilgrims assemble there to take holy dip in these rivers. For example on the day of "Sankranti" a bath in holy Ganga water is believed to relieve a person of all the sins. Another dimension added to it is that in an effort to unify the country Adi Shankaracharya established four peeth (centers) in the four corners of the country. They are Badrinath in North, Kanchipuram, Arunachaleswar (Bhatalinga) at Thriuvannamalai in south India.<sup>10</sup>

### **Pilgrimage Tourism in India**

In the Ancient period, India was known as the most civilized and culturally developed country, the home of great poets, saints, philosophers, rulers and legendary warriors. Due to its rich culture and heritage, the various religions of the world originated and flourished in India. In the ancient era mystique and mythology in the soil of this country plenty wonderful pilgrimage and worship places. These religious monuments gained a key prominence and evidence of most visited Indian places by locals and overseas tourists. India being versatile and a huge country, is known as divine destination of all kinds of pilgrims following any belief around the world. India

has been quite famous all over the world for its religious, spirituality and tolerance and its secular characteristics, also known as “yogabhoomi” is the gateway to the Almighty Heavens.

Most of the great religions are the integral part of Indian heritage and culture like Hinduism, Christianity, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Islam. These religions are blended with the soil of India. The country is a blissful serenity of Indian regions ambience, where Lord Buddha, Sai Baba, Mahabir and Guru Nanak once lived on this soil and dedicated themselves to enhance the spirituality for betterment of life in the world Religion and devotion to the Gods is a remarkable aspect of the culture and traditions of India.<sup>11</sup> Hindus still believe that to attain salvation. It is said that there are abodes of 330 million gods and goddesses in Hindu religion and methodical history.<sup>12</sup> It reveals immense divinity in the air itself. In Himalayas, where the divine destinations like Badrinath and Kedarnath are located, Himalaya is known as the most sacred pilgrimage tourist sector, and most beautiful tourist places with snowy peaks, highest mountain range of Everest, hill stations, lakes, splendid grasslands, wildlife, streams, waterfalls and plenty beautiful rivers.

### **Tourism in Modern India**

The Indian culture has persisted through the ages precisely for the reasons of antiquity, unity, continuity and the universality of its nature. Thus, within the ambience of Indian culture one can identify 'Indian Music', 'Indian Dance', 'Indian Cinema', 'Indian Literature', Indian Cuisine' 'Indian Fairs and Festivals' and so on.<sup>13</sup> This is the only country in the world where you will find mountain summits, sun kissed beaches, gurgling rivers, river rafting, para-gliding, mountain biking, trekking, mountaineering, monuments dating back to ancient past, fascinating backwaters, a variety of flora and fauna and countless fairs and festivals are sure to make your visit a memorable one. The southern tip of India is famous for its fantastic sunrise and sunset. Jawadhu hills Sri Arunachaleswarar Temple and Ramanashram and the great tourist centers in Thiruvannamalai district of Tamilnadu Most of the Foreign Touristers believe that the temple and the Ashram are the spiritual centers of the Universe.

### **Heritage Tourism in Tamil Nadu**

Tourism in Tamilnadu in India has flourished due to its ancient Indian heritage. A state in South Eastern India, Tamilnadu is the heart of rich Dravidian culture. Many great powers of

the past including the Cholas, the Pallavas, the Pandyas and the Vijayanagara Empire ruled over parts of Tamil Nadu and left behind spectacular temples and monuments, which tourists can see on their tours of Tamilnadu India. Some of the best-known Tamilnadu tourist places are: Chennai, Madurai, Kanayakumari, Ramaswaram, Sivakasi, Tiruchirapalli, Kanchipuram, Mahabalipuram, and Tanjore.<sup>14</sup> Tamil Nadu the seat of the Dravidian civilization and culture, is considered one of the oldest in the world. This Article would help in updating the historical facts of the area which has a rich traditional background in Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu.

### **Pilgrimage Tourism in Tamil Nadu**

No Indian state is more dominated by its temples than Tamil Nadu where temple architecture catalogues the tastes of successive dynasties and testifies to the centrality of religion in everyday life. It is also known as the land of temples. The multiplicity in culture and religious performances in Tamil Nadu has led to construction of several places of worship, which belongs to the followers of diverse religions. Since the Hindus exceed in population their places of worship dot the whole landscape.<sup>15</sup> Most temples are built in honour of Lord Shiva, Lord Vishnu and their consorts; all are characterized not only by their design and sculptures but also by constant activity, devotion, dancing, singing, pujas, festivals and feasts. Each is tended by Brahmin priests, recognizable by their dhotis, a sacred thread draped over the right shoulder, and marks on the forehead. The Kanyakumari temple and Tamil Nadu is an important center for pilgrimage for years. The Meenakshi temple complex in Madurai in Tamil Nadu is one of the largest in India and the presiding deity of the temple is Goddess Meenakshi.<sup>16</sup> Tamil Nadu was also influenced by Christianity during the Portuguese and British invasions. Hence the travellers will also come across a number of churches.

### **History and Sources of Tiruvannamalai**

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

stories about King **Vallalan** of the Hoysala Empire. The king has contributed in spreading the benefit of Girivalam and Arunachala temple. This subsequently helped in the expansion of Tiruvannamalai town. King Vallala was ruling the entire south India from Deccan Plateau with Dwarasamdura as the capital and now called Halebid that lay to the north-west of Mysore. We can still see the richness of Hoysala art, architecture and its unique style distinguished by a high density of details and embellishments, among the remains in Halebid.

Till then the history of Tiruvannamalai can be sporadically tracked among Chola, Pandiya Tamil literary work ranging from 6th century to 8th century. The oldest script the 6th century Tamil script written on Madurai Meenakshi Temple wall, refers to the grandfather of Madurai meeta Sundara pandiyan (Who liberated Madurai from Kaalee ruler) Kulesekara Pandiyan II. In the script, Tiruvannamalai has been mentioned as Thiruvanangum Malai as part of Madurai kingdom,<sup>17</sup> As we know the enormous details of Tiruvannamalai History began appearing only after Ellappa Nayinar's Arunachala Puranam. King Vallalan was the Founder of Tiruvannamalai Town. The work is based on the Arunachala Mahatmyam, written several centuries before in Sanskrit, but the chapter dealing with King Vallalan and his exploits in Tiruvannamalai can only be found in the Tamil version. To find out why he is so revered in Tiruvannamalai, and indeed, why he was in Tiruvannamalai at all, it is necessary to go back a few years to get an account of his family history.<sup>18</sup>

King Vallala succeeded his father Narasimha and later expanded his territory upto Tiruvannamalai by taking over his father's brother's kingdom on 31st January, 1292. He was thirty years old when he was crowned as king. Later he lost most of his ruling territory to Delhi Sultan Ala-u-din Khaliji and kept Tiruvannamalai as one of his capitals. Since then the Grace of Arunachala spread all over India and Tiruvannamalai became mainly the spot for spiritual pilgrims.

### **About Tiruvannamalai**

Successive kings of south India have given great importance to Tiruvannamalai and the temple of Arunachala. For a thousand years these kings have built prakaras outlying temples, gopurams and compound walls, dug ponds, offered jewels and donated gold for the upkeep of temple lands. Historically famous kings like Raja Raja Cho-zhan, Rajendra Chozhan, Harihara



Bukkar, Krishna Deva Rayar as well as kings of Chera, Chozha, Pallava, Pandya, Rashtrakotta, Hoysala and dynasties were proud to have Tiruvannamalai as part of their kingdom.<sup>19</sup> Some of them made it their capital.

Historical details about Tiruvannamalai and the Arunahalewsara temple are available to us through stone inscriptions on the prakara walls and copper plates. These inscriptions refer to a period of about thousand years starting from 750 A.D. The earliest archaeological findings from these stone inscriptions point to the fact that the greatness of Arunachala was known to the kings from the spiritual works. Thevaram and Thiruvagasam.<sup>20</sup> We come to know that Tiruvannamalai was historically and spiritually famous even from those ancient times. We have clues that the temple was small during the visit of Appar, Manikavasagar, Sambandar and others.

Tiruvannamalai was earlier known as Thiruanna nadu and the presiding deity was known as Thiru Anna nattu Mahadevan. This region was called Thondai Mandalam and was ruled by the Pallavas. It then passed into the hands of the Rashtrakootas, a dynasty to which belonged Krishna III, who undertook important renovation work during the tenth century A.D. The region then came under the rule of chieftains like kadavaraya, the Banas and Sambuva Raya. From the thirteenth to the fourteenth century, the Pandya kings ruled over it. Then came the Hoysalas who made Tiruvannamalai their capital and they waged war to establish their power. The Vijayanagar kings who took over from them spent enormous amount for the worship and other requirements of the temple.<sup>21</sup> Poets like Saiva Ellappa Navalar have sung in praise of the Naickers of Tanjore who came to power after the Vijayanagar kings, for the great service they rendered to the temple. Important renovation work was done in the sanitarium by Aditya Chozha-III in 750 A.D. and Parandhaka Chozha-I in the tenth century A.D.<sup>22</sup>

### **Tiruvannamalai under the chola and other rulers**

The history of Tiruvannamalai dates from the early Chola period, the period of Aditya I and Parantaka I (871-955 AD) when the Chola Empire had expanded northwards to include practically the whole of Tondaimandalam. After Parantaka I till the reign of Rajendra I, the rule of the Chola Empire is not confirmed by inscriptions inside the Arunachaleswarar Temple. Possibly on account of the Rashtrakuta invasions and occupation of this area by Krishna III. This is perhaps indicated by a single inscription of Kannaradeva (Krishna III) found in the Temple.

The inscriptions of Kopperunjinga clearly show that by the second quarter of the 13th century, the Kadavarayas had established complete mastery over this region leading to the final decline of Chola power.<sup>23</sup>

The Hoysalas under Vira Vallaladeva (Ballala III) of around AD 1340 also exercised sway over this area which indicates that the Hoysalas continued to influence Tamil politics even after the Muslim invasions of Malik kafur. After the Hoysalas, Tiruvannamalai passed into the hands of the Vijayanagar rulers, whose southern invasions under Kampana led to the establishment of Vijayanagar authority over practically the whole of Tamil Nadu.<sup>24</sup> Vijayanagar inscriptions in Arunachaleswarar Temple are large in number and range from the period of Harihara II to the late Vijayanagar ruler Venkatapatideva Maharaya of the late 14th to the 17th Centuries AD.<sup>25</sup>

### **King Vallalan of Tiruvannamalai**

King Vira Vallalan III was an illustrious king who ruled over the Hoysala Empire from 1292 till 1342. His empire at its peak covered a large part of South India. It had three capital cities, one of which was Tiruvannamalai, although it was then known as Arunasamudra, or Arunai for short. The king was an ardent Saivite and during his stay in Tiruvannamalai he made many improvements to the Arunachaleswarar Temple. Tiruvannamalai was near the geographical centre of his empire and this encouraged him to make protracted stays there, particularly after the destruction of Dwarasamudra. It seems that during the last fifteen years of his reign he was constantly in residing at Tiruvannamalai.<sup>26</sup>

The king Vallalan to whom God Himself manifested as a child then bestowed His grace by giving him a boon. In a famous place called Arunai (Tiruvannamalai) there are mansions with jewel-bedecked pinnacles and gardens dense with fruit-giving trees which reach up to the starry firmament. In this place dwell beautiful devadasis equal only to Arundhati (Vasishta's wife) in chastity. One of Vallalan's generals, Harihara, was sufficiently powerful to operate independently of the new king. With the aid of his two brothers, Kampa and Bukka, he defeated all the neighbouring kingdoms, founded the Vijaynagar Empire, which included the Hoysala territories, and, under the title of Harihara I, became its first king. Throughout the

Arunachaleswarar Temple there are tributes and reminders of King Vallalan. One of the major Gopurams at the Temple is the Vallala Gopuram.<sup>27</sup>

### **About the Temple**

The temple has a history of several hundred years and built by several Kings during their period. It has been built by several Tamil kings such as Cholas and Pandiyas. And several small kings donated and built several small things. This temple is one of the “Panch Boodha Sthalam” and it is “Agni” Sthalam. It has also importance as “Padal petra Sthalam”. That is the four famous ‘Saiva Saints and Poets’ such as Appar, Sundarar, Manichkavasakar and Thirugnana Sambandar wrote several hymns on Lord Arunachaleswara.

### **Structure of the Temple**

The structure of the temple is well planned and built. It has seven prakaras and nine great towers. The Eastern tower was built by King Krishnadevaraya in the Fifteenth Century. This tower is called Raja Gopuram and it is the second largest tower in India. It is 217 feet high and was built in stone. The area of the Temple is 25 acres; it has two big tanks, namely ‘Brhamma Theertam’ and ‘Siva Ganga Theertam’. It has also the Thousand Pillar Mantapam’ which has thousand pillars in it.

### **Builders and contributors**

The temple was built by many kings during several periods. The first two prakaras was the oldest one and built by the oldest and first Pandiyan Kings. Then the Chola Kings and Pandiyan Kings built the other prakaras. Later in the Thireenth century the ‘Hoysala Kings’ from Karnataka built some small sannadhis and prakaras in the temple. They also made some contributions to the temple. The Eastern tower was built by King ‘Krishnadevaraya’ of Andra Pradesh. So the temple has “Stone Scripts” of old Tamil, Telugu and Kannada Languages But most of the ‘Stone Scripts’ were in ‘Granth’ a form of Sanskrit language. From the Stone Scripts we come to know that Lord Arunachaleswara has several names and the temple has very good tradition.

Several kings and jamindhars have contributed lands and Jewels to Lord Arunachaleswara. Even the contributions made by the oldest kings do not exist now, some

jewels contributed by the 'Hoysala kings' with their symbol in it are found in the Tergle. From the last century most of the contributions were made by the "Nagarathars". The 'Nagarathars' are known as 'Nattukottai Chettiars' a community from Tamil nadu and they made several contributions to the Lord. The existing 'Vahanams' and Jewels were made by the 'Naharathars'. They performed the Kumbha Abhishekam to the temple in 1942 and 1976.<sup>28</sup> till then no 'Kumbha Abhishekam' was performed. The Government didn't take any measure for that.

### **Tiruvannamalai Pilgrimage**

The pilgrimage site is often chosen based on where human beings can experience the luminosity (a spiritual elevation) and presence of miraculous aspiration. Those are felt by people either as a field of energy, spiritual ambiance or communication with the elemental forces of the sacred sites. The ancient Tamil literatures and Hindu script have ample evidence that Tiruvannamalai has been a pilgrimage site since BC 150.

Travelling to Tiruvannamalai means entering into the orbit of divine field, filled with density of holiness and sounds which leave the influence on visitors physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually Tiruvannamalai is one such pilgrimage site, filled with mystical experiences, fascinating explanations and mysterious powers which are transferred from one generation to another generation through self realization, guru student relationships and religious stories for thousands and thousands of years. With 1500 years of history, pilgrims continuously have their experience of visionary revelation, miraculous apparitions, and awakening of self realization at Tiruvannamalai. The mysterious capacities around Tiruvannamalai awaken and catalyze the pilgrim compassion, wisdom, peace of mind and respect to the earth.<sup>29</sup>

### **The eternal sunrise of Tiruvannamalai**

Tiruvannamalai ranks as one of the five holiest towns of Tamil Nadu, synonymous with the fifth Hindu element of fire. The name means "Red Mountain" which refers to Mt Arunachala and its "unearthly" crimson colour in the dawn light. Mythology identifies the mountain as the place where Shiva asserted his power over Brahma and Vishnu by manifesting himself as a lingam of fire or Agnilingam. The event is commemorated annually at the Nov/Dec *full moon Karthigai Festival* and is known as the "*Pradakshana*" (the most auspicious of the monthly full moon circumambulation of the mountain). The town is full of shrines, sacred tanks, ashrams and

paved pilgrim paths scattered around the mountain, but the main focus is undoubtedly the vast Arunachaleshwara Temple - "Temple of the Eternal Sunrise". Over 1,000 years in the building, this enormous complex consists of three concentric courtyards and it is here that Bagawan Sri Ramana Maharshi sat in a state of supreme awareness while ants feasted on his flesh! His gift to humanity was the demonstration of a perfectly integrated consciousness while still in body in accordance with the ancient teachings of "Advaita" (non-duality)<sup>30</sup>

### **Influence of Earth in Tiruvannamalai**

*Earthly Influence of Tiruvannamalai has the distinct geographical characteristics such as localized magnetism, radio activity, geometrical activity and the presence of underground water. The richness of ionization is caused by Red Mountain Arunachala and flow of ultrasound. On it has the unusual pleasant sound which has the transformative effective on human beings.*

Pilgrimage to Tiruvannamalai, awakened the deepest realization of spiritual wisdom to Seshathiri swamigal, Ramana maharish, Yogi Ramsuratkumar , Lee Lozowic and all other sages and shamas. The Spiritual gurus list continues to grow align with the Tiruvannamalai Pilgrimage.

Arunachala is in the eastern ghats of North Arcot District. It is an isolated hill, about fifty miles inland from the Bay of Bengal and rises into a peak of 2268 feet above sea level. On this hill there are many caves and hermitages near which are freshwater springs and tanks. On the western slopes are forest areas, but the eastern slopes, until recent years and the beginning of recent reforestation programmes, were barren. From recorded history, this area has been believed to be sacred. Other names of Arunachala are; Arunagiri, Sonagiri, Sonasaila, Sudarsanagiri, Jothirlingam and Tejolingam.<sup>31</sup>

The town of Tiruvannamalai (derived from the word malai = mountain), lies at the eastern foot of Arunachala. Within this town there is the 24 acre Arunachaleswarar Kovil, one of the largest Temples in India and around 2,000 years old. The temple grew from a small sanctum-sanctorum housing a lingam to its present size, over the course of many centuries.

Many saints have sung songs in praise of Arunachala and its sanctity. Early Tamil literature records the visit of Tirunavakkarasu and Tirugnanasambandar, two saints who were contemporaries of the Pallava king Mahendra I (600 to 633 AD).<sup>32</sup> Tirugnanasambandar was

inspired by the sight of the hill when he saw it from a town called Arianinallur, near Tirukkolilur (twenty miles from Arunachala), and composed hymns in praise of it. He visited Tiruvannamalai, stayed on the hill and worshipped it as a tejolingam. The author Sekkilar Swami - 1088 AD his 'Periyapuramam' says that Tirunavakkarasu worshipped Siva on the top of the hill and obtained enlightenment. Sundaramurti Swami refers to the worship of Annamalaiyar in his work Tiruttogai, and Manikavachakar also sang about Arunachala's in his hymns.<sup>33</sup>

### **Saints (Sathu) of Thiruvannamalai**

In the history of Tiruvannamalai, at any point of time, their lives atleast one great sadhu. In the recent past, Seshadri Swamigal, Ramana Maharishi the Sadhu Ram Surat Kumar, Saduvom swamigal, suddananda and Narayana gurusamy Sadhu lived on the top of the Hill.

**Ramanasram:** There is a surge of spiritual seekers in this temple town during the months of November, December and January. During this time, festivals like Guru Ramsuratkumar Jeyanthi, Maha Deepam, and many more are celebrated. Participation in Girivalam (a spiritual custom – During Girivalam people circumambulate the Arunachala hill and worship 8 Siva lingams placed around the Arunachala hills) on a full moon day, worshipping Arunachala Siva and walking around Annamalai hill to meet the enlightenment gurus.

### **Festivals**

A number of festivals are celebrated in the temple, some for a few days and others lasting for just a day. To mark the sun's turning northwards, the Utharaayanam festival is celebrated for ten days in the month of January. The Vasanthautsavam festival in the months of April-May is observed to commemorate kamadhaganan, the burning of Man-Matha, the personification of desires. This festival also lasts for ten days. The quarrel between the Lord and Goddess and Saint Sundarar's efforts to reconcile their differences is the celebration of the Thiruvaoodal festival.

Then there is Maha Sivarathri, occurring in February-March. This is a very important spiritually significant festival that reevalts the story of Brahma, Vishnu and all other deities paying homage to the column of fire after the humbling of the pride of Brahma and Vishnu. At their request, Lord Arunachla, out of compassion takes the form of lingam. On the previous day itself a solemn atmosphere pervades the whole town and the temple. Tiruvannamalai is the place

where Saivism began and flourished and hence Maha Sivarathri has a special significance. It is the oldest festival of South India which is also the most elaborate and most important.

### **Karthigai Deepam**

This festival falls in the Tamil month of Karthigai when the star Karthigai is on the ascendant and usually occurs on a full moon day. In Kamarpadu, the poet in one of the stanzas, describe here in the Tamil month of Karthikai during the time of the Krithika star, the lamps lit by the people blossomed on earth, bringing rain in its wake. In another Tamil work, the kalavazhi Narpadu dating back to the third Sangam period (after 1000 B.C) the poet says, “in the battle the blood oozing out from the dead soldinis’ fbodies is like the red coboured flame of the lamps lit during Karthikai Deepam festival’. In another Sangam work, Pazhamozhi, in stanzas ending in proverbs, one stanza ends with this phrase, “like the beacon on the Hill”. This is a clear reference to the beacon lit on the holy hill of Arunchala.<sup>34</sup> The deepam festival is not confined to the temple, but involves the whole town. Once a small village, Tiruvannamalai had now grown into a small city, yet the charm and beauty of the deepam festival will remain the same as it was hundreds years ago. The Deepam burns for seven, nine, eleven or thirteen days and at about six every evening it flares up and burns throughout the night. The Deepam is visible for miles around. There is a strange fascination about it. To walk around Arunachala slowly with our attention fixed on the light, without a thought is an experience. Some of the festivals are famous and important the most famous festival is “Karthigai Deepam” and it is celebrated in the month of November / December.<sup>35</sup>

The Karthigai Deepam festival is celebrated for ten days. During the festival everyday in the morning and night ‘Lord Arunachaleswara’ will be taken in a procession. In the morning ‘Lord Chandrashekara’ and in the night ‘Lord Periya Nayagar’ is com throughates streets. The smiling face of the ‘Periya Nayagar’ steals the show; everyone should have dharshan of ‘Periya Nayagar’. People worship the ‘Pancha Moorthis’ ‘Vinayagar’, ‘Subramaniyar’, ‘Arunachaleswarar’, ‘Abeethakuchaambal’ and Sandeswarar during the procession in the night.<sup>36</sup>

On these days festivals elaborate arrangements will be made for the procession. Even night Deeparadhana will be performed for ‘Pancha moorthis’ in the ‘Kalyana Mandapam’. Everyday big ‘Vahanas’ will be there for swami. The sixth day is ‘Silver chariot’. The chariot is made up

of pure silver and it is beautifully built. The seventh day is Maha ratham. This chariot is made up of wood and it is very big. It takes the full size of the road while running. All these 'Silver Vahanams are maintained by the nagarathars.'<sup>37</sup> On the Evening, 'Panch Moorhtis, will have the maha abhishekam and very grand 'alankaram' then they come to the 'Deepa-darshana Mandapam'. Exactly at 6, 0 clock Mahadeepam will be lighted on the top of the Mountain. At the same time 'Deeparadhana' will be performed to 'Pancha moorthis'. Lakhs of people will dharshan the Mahadeepam every Year and they will go to extreme excitement. Two days after the 'mahadeepam' Arunachaleswarar will go to perform the 'Giri Pradhakshina'<sup>38</sup> (Making round the hill).

### ***Arunachala: The Spiritual Center of the world***

Each of the spiritual centers of India has its own character and its own line of tradition; and among them it is Tiruvannamalai (Arunachala) that represents the most direct, the most formless and the least ritualistic of paths, the path of Self-enquiry, whose gateway is silent initiation. This is expressed in the old Tamil saying: "To see Chidambaram, to be born at Thiruvarur, to die at Banaras or even to think of Arunachala is to be assured of Liberation." "Even to think of" because in the case of the direct path physical contact is not necessary. Hence, it was no accident that Ramana Maharshi made Tiruvannamalai and its sacred Arunachala Mountain his home.

When the **Maharshi attained** Self-realization through a swift, spontaneous act of Self-enquiry while yet a lad of sixteen, he left home and set out as a Sadhu for Arunachala. He remained there for the duration of his life. At the time of his passing, more than fifty years after his arrival, a bright star was seen moving slowly across the sky and sinking behind the peak of the holy mountain. Tiruvannamalai, at the foot of Arunachala, is a town of medium size, 120 miles southwest of Chennai, an ancient town with a large and splendid temple. Certain yearly festivals draw thousands of pilgrims here from all over South India. This is especially so at Karthigai (known also as Deepam), which usually falls in November. On this occasion a beacon light of clarified butter (ghee) is lit at 6 pm on the summit of the mountain.<sup>39</sup> At the Ashram itself, of course, the popular festivals are the anniversaries of the birth and passing of the Maharshi (Jayanti and Aradhana), which fall respectively at the winter solstice and the spring equinox.



Although associated with the most simple and direct spiritual path, Tiruvannamalai is not the most famous of India's holy places, for the direct path can never be the most popular. It is more austere than some other paths and hence it is perhaps rather for the intrepid few than for the many. Indeed, the method of Self-enquiry had almost gone out of use in recent centuries. It was the Maharishi who revived it, gave it a new direction, simplicity and universality and made it accessible to all seekers through his grace and guidance.

Arunachala is OM itself. I will appear on the summit of this hill every year at Kartigai in the form of a peace-giving beacon." This refers not only to the sanctity of Arunachala itself but also to the pre-eminence of the doctrine of Advaita and the path of Self-enquiry of which Arunachala is the center. One can understand this meaning in Sri Bhagavan's saying, "In the end everyone must come to Arunachala."

### ***Giripradakshina (Girivalam) and Lord Vishnu***

"Giripradakshina or circumambulation of the Hill . . . . Is traditionally performed following the movement of the planets around the unmoving sun, which means keeping the Hill always at one's right. The eight cardinal points are marked by Shrines, Tanks and Mandapams, for those edifices date from an earlier medieval period when the Vaishnava faith was in the ascendant over the Saiva faith, and the Hill was then regarded as the Wheel of Time in the hands of Mahavishnu, the Lord of the Sun.' A vivid description of the glory of Arunachala and the bliss enjoyed by the earnest devotees who worshipped here, is given in many of the Puranas, such as the Sivamaha Purana, Brahmanda Purana, Arunachala Mahatmyam and others, The most famous legend regarding the origin and sanctity of Arunachala and its manifestation as a Lingam at its eastern foot, over which has come into being the Arunachala temple, goes thus:

Lord Brahma, the creator, and Lord Vishnu, the preserver each claimed superiority over the other. Somewhat embarrassed that distinguished Gods of the celestial realm should be engaged in such an altercation, Lord Siva, the Lord of the Universe, appeared before them as a pillar of fire, known as sthanu or lingodbhavamurti. In an effort to arbitrate their discord, Lord Siva declared that, "Whosoever should find either the beginning or the end of this light of mine shall be considered, now and forever more, the superior of you two."<sup>40</sup>

In the request of the gods Vishnu and Brahma, Siva established Himself as the Arunachala Hill and also as a small Lingam at the eastern foot of the hill so that all could worship both as emblems of Siva. Lord Siva in so doing admonished them thus: "All jivas live, move and have their being in Me. I am latent in you just as fire in wood, ghee in milk and so on. You cannot perceive such latency with the aid of your senses, or by learning either from books or from scholars, but you can know me only by meditating on me alone; I am now here as the Arunachala hill and also as a lingam.

This myth has given rise to two iconographic representations. One of them is well-known: the lingodbhavamurti – Vishnu and Brahma in the attitude of worshippers. The other representation is a later development, specific to Tiruvannamalai, where Siva and Parvati are figured on a stele covered with semi-circular incisions to represent the mountain; the rear face of the stele is a lingam, which is visible from the rear niche of the sanctuary. This representation is known locally as *adi mudi*, the high and the low, after the same words in poems by the thus two *nayannars*, Sambandar and Sundarar, referring to the directions in which Brahma and Vishnu sought the extremities of the pillar of fire.

The history of this *sthalam* says that five *Jivan Muktas* are always to be found living at Arunachala. Therefore, even today there are *Jivan Muktas* living here, though unseen and uncomprehended by us. How many *Jivan Muktas* must have lived here in the past? If all their *samadhis* exist in this place, one cannot through mere words extol the purity of this Holiest of all Holy places.<sup>41</sup> as a symbol of the centre, the mountain, like all mystic centers, emanates a space which is cardinalized in the same way as a mandala. The route of 14 kilometers around the mountain and centered on its vertical axis, is oriented to the cardinal points by the distribution of shrines consecrated to the eight lingas of the directions.

'It is said that the Gods do not come down from the Mountain. It is man's task to climb towards them. Overcome by compassion, Lord Siva has made this progress possible by introducing the *Giri Pradakshina*, this edifying ritual which aims at walking round the Holy Mountain with the mind fixed on the immutable Centre.' Arunachala is the physical embodiment of *Sat*, the reality, and hence to have contact with it in any manner is *Sat-sang*. Ramana Maharshi used to say that the benefits which can be gained by meditation and various other forms of mind-control only after great struggle and effort, will be effortlessly gained by those who go round the

Hill and that the power of Arunachala is such that even if one does pradakshina (perform circumambulation of the 14 km pathway around Arunachala) with no faith, it will still have its effect and surely purify the mind.

Because Arunachala is the Fire of Knowledge (jnanagni) in the form of a Hill, the outgoing tendencies (vasanas) of the mind are automatically scorched when one goes round it. When damp wood is brought close to a fire, it will gradually be dried, and at a certain point it will itself catch fire. Similarly, when the mind which is soaked with worldly tendencies goes round the Hill, the tendencies will gradually dry up and at a certain point the mind will become fit to be burnt by the fire of jnana. Ramana Maharshi said of pradakshina to Kunju Swami: "This Hill is the storehouse of all spiritual power. Going round it benefits you in all ways"

The circumambulation of Arunachala (Giripradakshina) has been prescribed as a panacea for all the ills of life. The Maharshi encouraged all of his devotees to make the nine-mile circuit, even those who were infirm, knowing for certain that the spiritual benefits of giripradakshina far outweighed any physical hardships. The Maharshi's "Five Hymns to Arunachala" are the ecstatic outpourings from the spiritual heart of a fully illumined sage united forever with his beloved, Arunachala. There is immense inspiration and guidance on the path in each and every stanza of these poems.

### **Sri Ramana Maharishi**

*Widely known as the unique Sage of the 20th Century his life is a perfect example of simplicity, purity, equality and equanimity, born from the unalterable experience of the Self*

As a Hindu spiritual master, Venkataraman was born on Jan 9, 1879 in a Tamil speaking Brahmin family, in Teruchuzhi, Tamilnadu. After experiencing at the age of 16 what he later described as liberation (moksha), he left home for Arunachala, a mountain considered sacred by Hindus. He lived at the mountain for the rest of his life. Although born a Brahmin, he declared himself an "Atiasrami", a Sastraic state of non-attachment to anything in life and beyond all caste restrictions. The ashram that grew around him, Sri Ramana Ashram, is situated on the westernized foothill of Arunachala.<sup>43</sup>

Sri Ramana Maharshi maintained that the purest form of his teachings was the powerful silence which radiated from his presence and quieted the minds of those attuned to it. He gave verbal teachings only for the benefit of those who could not understand his silence (or, perhaps, could not understand how to attain the silent state).<sup>[2]</sup> His verbal teachings were said to flow from his direct experience of Atman as the only existing reality.<sup>[3]</sup> When asked for advice, he recommended self-enquiry as the fastest path to moksha. Though his primary teaching is associated with Non-dualism, Advaita Vedanta, and Jnana yoga, he recommended Bhakti to those he saw were fit for it, and gave his approval to a variety of paths and practices.

Ramana spent ten years living in temples and caves meditating, and pursuing spiritual purification, keeping the disciplines of silence and non-attachment. At this point, his reputation as a serious teacher (he was called Brahma Swami) began to grow and other seekers began to visit him. His disciples, some of whom were learned individuals, came to him with sacred books. He became conversant with religious traditions of South India written in different regional languages.<sup>44</sup>

Early disciples had difficult time learning about Ramana's background and even his native language because he was silent and refused to speak. As time passed he ceased his ascetic phase and began to live a more normal life in an ashram setting. Many people came to him with a variety of problems, from both India and abroad. Ramana's disciples constructed an ashram temple, and spacious enough to accommodate the many visitors. All ate the same food and Ramana sat with the rest of the people during meals and did not expect special treatment. The ashram was a sanctuary for animals and Ramana had great fondness for the cows, monkeys, birds, and squirrels that inhabited the grounds.<sup>45</sup>

Ramana continued to practice the method of inquiry into the nature of the self best expressed by the question "who am I?"<sup>46</sup> Ramana was not a guru in the classic sense of a teacher who gives instruction on a regular basis or gives mantras during initiation. In fact, if the seeker wanted to practice repetition of a mantra rather than the "who am I?" method of self inquiry, he recommended repeating the pronoun "I" or the phrase "I am" rather than repeating sacred Sanskrit words or the names of gods. This focused the person's mind on "being itself" or the

mystery of their own awareness rather than an external object or word. However, Ramana did give informal initiations using a special glance, or touch, or in dreams.<sup>47</sup>

## **Impact of Spiritual Tourism in Tiruvannamalai**

### ***V.S. Ramanan- president- Ramanasramam***

When on the 30<sup>th</sup> August, 1896, a boy of 17 left his home at Madurai after a profoundly life-transforming spiritual experience, to arrive at Tiruvannamalai, drawn by the power of Arunachala, the Hill of Holy Beacon, on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1896, none could have known that he was triggering a spiritual tourism on an unprecedented scale drawing pilgrims to him from all over the world.

That was Venkataraman, later revered by all as Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi, the supreme symbol of Advaitic non-dual experience as he came to be hailed. He himself never left Tiruvannamalai and from 1926, he left not even the Ashram campus as he stopped going round his beloved Arunachala. He, like Lord Arunachala, was an irresistible magnet attracting devotees from everywhere. Ramana drew to him not men, women and children but also birds and beasts who knew his language of love and him theirs of fearless trust. The tourism continues and grows. It is indeed a pilgrimage; the most sacred one for it marks the journey towards Self-knowledge, which he made easy and accessible for all.

An *American* who came here is renting a room and staying for 2 months in Tiruvannamalai. He is visiting Mooji's satsang. He is not definite about coming back. A *Netherlands* citizen is travelling alone and arrived at Tiruvannamalai from Mumbai. He stays in a guest house for 2 months to study with the world renowned Vedanta teacher James Swartz. He likes to visit Ramana Ashram and he is definitely coming back in December 2012. He has obtained spiritual knowledge but has never met Ramana Maharishi. He proposed marriage to his girl friend and she said yes. He strongly would like to have special tourist police, he had a theft experience and the police officers were not able to understand his English.

Another *European citizen* travelling with a friend from Mumbai and staying for one month in a hotel in order to visit a specific teacher and ashram. He plans to come back and he

has got spiritual knowledge while in Tiruvannamalai. He thinks that Ramana Maharishi is a Guru Dev and he experienced a very big change in his life for the better.

One double *citizenship USA and France* travelling alone and arriving from Trivandrum has rented a room and stayed for 2 weeks for spiritual studies. He obtained spiritual insights and sees Ramana Maharishi as an awakened being. He is not sure to come back and see the life changes as part of the ongoing journey of life, as reflections on identification with the self. *Oda Mueller* from Switzerland has been regularly visiting Ramana Ashram for meditation and also walked around the Arunachala Hill. She appreciates the calmness and the high energy level of this place.

*Renee Kruisdijk* from the Netherlands has been visiting this place for the past 5 years and studies Vedanta in Swami Suddhananda Ashram. Renee also walks in nature around the mountain and meditates in Ramana Maharishi ashram or visits Thiruvannamalai big temple. *Loes Penders* from the Netherlands comes to Thiruvannamalai to attend courses on Advaita Vedanta and to be in Ramana's ashram and the big temple in the town. *Samuel Sapiuha* from the USA just came to Tiruvannamalai by accident and had no purpose to visit this place in the past.

*Piers Wildman* from England came to Tiruvannamalai to learn Vedanta and thinks that many people from the West are coming here because of spirituality. He personally thinks that India should make it easier for people to get visas. Pier thinks that Tiruvannamalai is a beautiful town and has wonderful people.

*Caroline Schauss* from Germany says that she is attracted to the temple and is interested in the Hindu rituals and has attended Poojas. She received flowers and felt welcome and grateful that she sees and experiences some important aspects of Indian lifestyle. She felt concerned about the proper dress code followed by some tourists. She hopes that Tiruvannamalai and India in general can change too much for tourist's needs because it is beautiful as it is. The Ashram and climbing the mountain, the cave was a nice and balanced programming forme in contrast with the crowded, busy and beautiful town.

*Michael Ridgway* from London thinks that Tiruvannamalai has become more internationally known in recent years because many Westerners visit the place. It is partly due to the increasing interest in Advaita Vedanta in the West due to the life and works of Ramana

Maharishi. He thinks that the impact of all these tourists is likely to have both positive and negative effects, that it should help the economy of the area and some of the unique facts of this original place. *Hilbrand* from Holland thinks that the Vedic tradition as presented by Ramana Maharishi's teaching is the greatest motivation to enjoy being in Tiruvannamalai.

*Eric* from Germany says that Tiruvannamalai has a very big impact as the East meets the West. It brings higher property values, which is more or less desirable for local inhabitants. Here it is good for bringing value of God to the West and experience a simpler living. *A Mark Banks* from U.K. I think there is a strong social, cultural impact on Tiruvannamalai as a result of tourism we see here. I believe this impact can be generalized as being positive due to the nature of tourism here focusing on spiritual inquiry. In general cultural exchange between two cultures is I believe positive.

A woman from *Mexico* travelling alone came here and rented a house. She is here to visit Ramana Ashram and the Arunachala Girivalam/Pradarshina and practice meditation. She obtained spiritual knowledge and thinks that Ramana Maharishi is an enlightened being. "It has been interesting to see similarities and differences between Sri Ramana Maharishi's teachings and Buddha's teachings. She says that the town is too hot in April.

*Thomas from Canada* came here with friends He rented a house for 6 months or more and meets specific Vedanta teachers for spiritual studies. He Plans to come back to Tiruvannamalai to obtain spiritual knowledge. He thinks that Ramana Maharishi is a great model of satvic qualities. Men from Canada travelling alone rented a room for a week. He is visiting spiritual sites and our places in tour India. He is not sure to come back again. He obtained spiritual knowledge and his views about Ramana Maharishi are that Maharishi is positive, honest and beautiful. Changes in his life, "Yes, a powerful experience of profound India. I think. Ei. Full moon walks..."

A woman from USA coming from Puttapharthi travelling with her family rented a house with friends for over 6 months. Her purpose is the Arunachala Girivalam/Pradakshina, spiritual study and meditation. She is not sure to come back to Tiruvannamalai. and says that Ramana Maharishi is the heart of the town. She has got spiritual knowledge and this visit has brought to

her important changes in her life. She suggests that people should lower the loud speakers in some temples noise pollution and clean up garbage in street not just for Girivalam, regularly and day alone or all needs awnings and comment action needed is that awareness and action community actions.

*Jacques*, European from France is travelling alone. Jacques stayed here for six months in Swami Suddhananda ashram. He is learning Vedanta at the ashram but he is not sure to come back to Tiruvannamalai although he has obtained spiritual knowledge. His view on Ramana Maharishi Ashram is that it is a good place for spiritual tourist. He has profound changes, in the way in which he sees life, people and the Universe.

*Mr. Shankar*, a Tamil Nadu resident now living at Swami **Suddhananda** Ashram studies yoga, meditation and Vedanta. He also likes the Girivalam / Pradakshina walks and visits spiritual sites. Mr. Skankar is still learning and acquiring spiritual knowledge. About Ramana Maharishi Ashram he thinks that it is fully suitable for advanced studies. A Time bound, transformation has started.

*Amy Tomson* from Hanuman Temple, Neem Caroli Baba Ashram, Taus, New Mexico, USA. Amy is travelling alone and rented a room for 5 to 6 months in Tiruvannamalai and he plans to come back again. Her purpose is to do meditation and walk the Arunachala Girivalam/Pradaskshina and to awaken from obstructions to self- realization. “It doesn’t feel like a visit as I have come home to a family.” Only Arunachala knows about her spiritual knowledge she says, “I do my best to learn from all experiences”. Ramana Maharishi is a great inspiration; his being and teaching are one. Amy feels that it is difficult now to put in words what came in her life due to her visit to the Ashram. *Shiva* from Delhi is travelling alone and he is renting a room but has no specific address in Tiruvannamalai. Shiva likes to visit Ramana Ashram Samadhi and perform the Arunachala Girivalam /Pradakshina. He thinks that better local transportation from Ramanasramam to different important sites. He thinks that he has not gained yet a lot of knowledge. In Shiva’s eyes Ramana Maharishi was and is the highest manifestation of a Godly man and wisdom incarnate now since he came here he can handle situations and problems with better understanding<sup>48</sup>



## Findings and Suggestions for the Promotion of Religious Tourism

As Tiruvannamalai is rich in history and tradition combined with religion to live harmoniously more steps can be taken to promote this city as the religious capital of South India. For thus transport, accommodation and other conveniences to pilgrims should be improved. Making the prominent temple locations easily accessible to pilgrims is a major step to be taken for developing religious centers as tourist centers. Good roads, trains, lodges, dharmas Salas for the pilgrims to stay in a comfortable way are very essential. Higher income groups, middle and low income group pilgrim's needs should be taken care of in this regard.

- ★ Shopkeepers are occupying the temple premises and due to that sanitary standards are low. These traders can be shifted to a distant place.
- ★ The tourists complain that during their visit to the shrines they are not able to worship god placed in sanctum sanctorum without any disturbance. This may be corrected and tourists should be allowed to have a good worship of the Gods.
- ★ Most of the temple details are displayed only in Tamil Language. Due to this tourists are not able to enjoy the aesthetic religious and historical background of the temple. Hence various language brochures can be freely distributed to tourists. Directional boards leading to the temples may be placed near the temples in a proper way.
- ★ The guide facility for domestic and international tourists may be improved. Rates for guides may be fixed by Government. Prior advance reservation may be made available through website and internet for visit, darshan to see offering poojas and for availing other facilities of the temple.
- ★ During important festival days the temples can have Camera and TV facilities so that the tourists can see the pooja through the TV and CCTV. Maybe the temple administration ought to be to be tourist friendly and devotees friendly so that they act as religious ambassadors of the country.
- ★ Management of the temples should conduct periodical meeting with the traders, pilgrims and locals to solve the grievances faced by the tourists.
- ★ The temple authorities should see that the sanctity of the temple is not spoiled by the traders, touts and other stake holders.

- ★ Improving the sanitation in the temple area making the place attractive and providing information about the religious ceremonies and their timings in various languages for the benefit of tourists will have a good image about the religious spot. Provision for rest rooms for women and men outside the temple but near the tourists centre separately will do a great amount of satisfaction for the pilgrims.
- ★ Provision for meditation, bhajan programme, and discourses on religious and spiritual subjects and cultural shows on religious themes for the pilgrims will enhance the quality of the spiritual environment in temple locations. In this regard the Tamil Nadu Government has recently announced that school students will be taught moral science through stories from Hindu epics in the Hindu temples during the May vacations.

### **Benefits of religious tourism in Tiruvannamalai**

Tiruvannamalai Pilgrims buy souvenirs which helps the local traders to make a livelihood. The full moon day is very famous and most pilgrims buy this as a remembrance of their trip. Besides the Government and Private sectors will earn a great deal which will boost the economy of the State.

### **Conclusion**

Religious tourism promotes international understanding. It generates innumerable benefits, both in social and economic spheres. It is widely acclaimed as an important global industry offering immense employment opportunities, both direct and indirect. It has emerged as an instrument for employment generation, poverty alleviation and sustainable human development. Religious tourism is an important way to celebrate, preserve and promote a State's unique heritage to increase opportunities for artists, promote public arts participation and boost economic development. Religious tourism would sustain development, both economic and religious, can be answered only through an interdisciplinary and global approach, and in partnership with the public and private sectors, intergovernmental organizations, academics, civil society and local population.

The challenges of religious tourism in Tiruvannamalai are lack of tourism infrastructure, management skills, and marketing and limited tourism season. These challenges can be overcome by proper tourism planning. We believe in the continuity and dynamism of Tamil religious heritage and it is our endeavour to help people from all over world over to get

acquainted with the same in Tiruvannamalai. And there cannot be a better way to understand this than to experience it. Travel to Tiruvannamalai in the religious tour packages has withstood thousands of years and it is still going strong. The private tourism sector and tourism department may join hands and can work unitedly to improve the religious tourist arrivals in Tamil Nadu.

Success of any spiritual tourism depends upon the infrastructural support, which has been provided by the government and local administration. In other words, besides accessibility, other infrastructural activities like connecting roads, sewage disposal plants, water, electricity, gasoline, telephone lines, bus terminals, railway stations, accommodation and catering units should also be planned to facilitate the visits of pilgrims. To achieve a high rate of success, carrying capacity of each religious centre must be worked out and accordingly supporting services must be provided. Nowadays, a large proportion of pilgrims mix up religious motives with recreation. So, while designing the package(s) this aspect must be given due attention. As a result, memorable and enjoyable religious visits for pilgrims can be designed. If we study trends among religious tourists we see that they prefer to visit places which are also rich in other touristy attractions.

With the passage of time religious tourism has gradually evolved from its stoic and ascetic character in the past to become a partially hedonistic pursuit. While the growing trend in travel implies a corresponding growth in religious tourism, this growth is likely to be augmented further by the shift in consumer tastes in favour of spiritual pursuit.

The Government of Tamilnadu, the local municipality and the temple officials should take necessary measures to improve the amenities provided to the large number of devotees. They should constitute a committee to look into the problems faced by the people and make the pilgrimage convenient. There is no doubt that in the next five years this temple town which is also a spiritual Tourist-Centre will attract lakhs and lakhs of people from all over the country and is also a place of cultural and spiritual centre of the Universe.

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