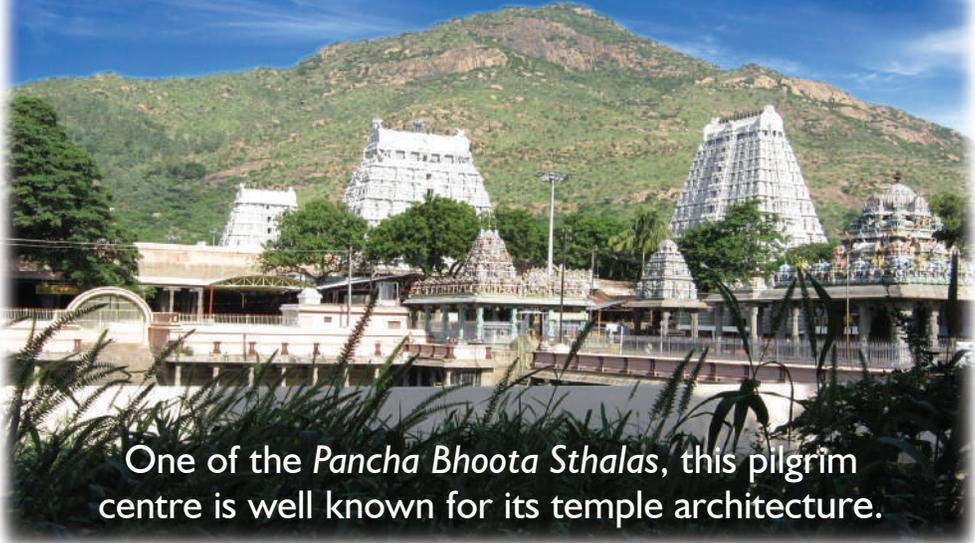


The Grandeur of Arunachala

Dr. CHITHRA MADHAVAN



One of the *Pancha Bhoota Sthalas*, this pilgrim centre is well known for its temple architecture.

One of the largest and oldest temples in India is dedicated to Lord Siva as Arunachalesvara in Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu. The Lord is worshipped in the form of an ancient *lingam*, which is regarded as *svayambhu* (not man-made).

The huge temple, dating back to the ninth century and extending over 25 acres, is at the base of the majestic Annamalai hill that rises up to about 2,600 ft.

Pancha Bhoota Sthala

The Arunachala temple is

one of the *Pancha Bhoota Sthalas* (five famous Siva temples in South India), each *lingam* being a manifestation of a natural element: Land, water, air, sky and fire.

The Arunachala temple represents the *Agni tattva*, the virtues of self-sacrifice and liberation through an ascetic life.

The temple for Nataraja at Chidambaram signifies the *Akasa* (ether), while that at Kalahasti (close to Tirupati) represents *Vayu* (air), Thiruvanaikoil (water) and Kanchipuram (land).

Grand Architecture

The grand towers (*gopurams*), visible far away from the town, are testimony to the architectural grandeur of Arunachala temple. The outermost eastern tower consisting of 11 tiers soaring to a height of nearly 220 feet is one of the tallest temple towers in India. It was constructed in the reign of the illustrious monarch Krishnadeva Raya (1509-1529 A.D.) and completed by a king named Sevappa Nayaka.

Some details of the construction of this *gopuram* are found in a Sanskrit epigraph inscribed on it, which also mentions the name of Srinivasa Dikshita, a renowned Sanskrit scholar who was the author



of 18 dramas and 60 poems. This architectural wonder is studded with innumerable sculptures of various deities, especially the various manifestations of Siva.

Vallala Gopuram

The *gopuram* in the middle in the eastern side is known as Vallala Gopuram named after the Hoysala king, Ballala III, a sculpture identified as this king being found on the base of the tower. There are interesting episodes connected with this *gopuram*.

One is the subduing of the pride of the king Ballala who became very proud after completing the *gopuram*. During a procession of the deity, the palanquin carrying the deity just resisted going through the *gopuram* for unknown reason. It was only after Ballala repented for his ego, the procession proceeded through the entrance.

The other famous episode is of Arunagirinathar who attempted to jump off this tower and was saved by Kartikeya at the nick of the moment.

The *Kili* (parrot) *gopuram*, which is the innermost of the three east-facing *gopurams*, was constructed in the Chola times in the reign of Veera Rajendra Chola around 1063 AD.

All the four outermost



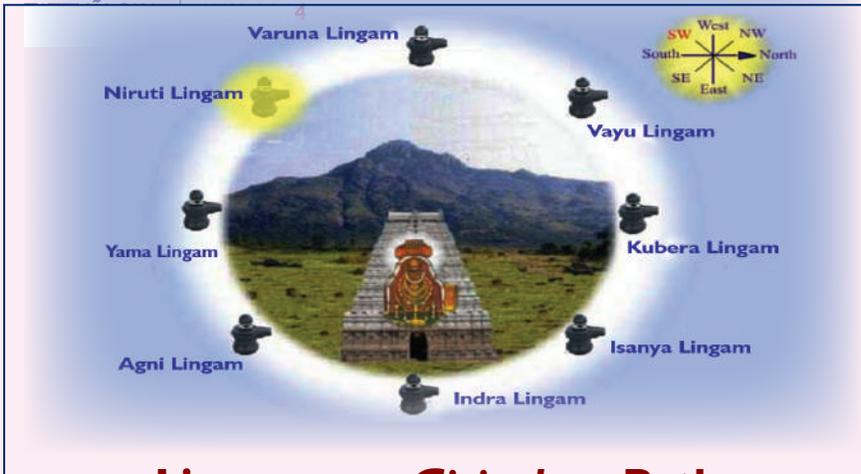
gopurams have well-carved panels of dancers in various dance movements conforming to the famous treatise, the *Natya Sastra*.

The temple has five circumambulatory passages (*prakarams*), each having been added from time to time. The exquisite thousand-pillared *mandapam* built during the reign of Krishnadeva Raya of the Vijayanagar dynasty is used even today for large

gatherings, such as the one for the worship of the *murti* of Nataraja on important dates.

An inscription about the temple states that the *vimanam* (the structure over the main sanctum) of the temple was covered with gold during the reign of Rajarajadevan, a vassal of the Chola king Kulottunga III (1178-1218 AD).

There are several sacred tanks



Lingams on Girivalam Path

There are eight lingams around the Arunachala hill, one in each direction.

Indra Lingam (East): Is the first *lingam in the girivalam* (circum-ambulation) path starting from Ramana Ashramam; worship of this lingam yields health and wealth.

Agni Lingam (South East): This lingam, near the lotus tank, is the only one on the right side of the circumambulation path. It is in the the south- east direction, and relieves worshippers from all diseases and helps them to face challenges of life.

Yama Lingam (South): Is next to Agni lingam and three km. away from the Rajagopuram. It occupies the south direction and has a holy tank called "Simma Tirtha." It relieves worshippers of economical problems.

Niruti Lingam (South West): Is so located that from here we see two peaks of the holy Arunachala hill, said to represent 'Siva' and 'Sakti.' It also has a holy tank nearby, called "Sani Tirtha."

Varuna Lingam (West): Is the fifth lingam and is eight km. from the *Rajagopuram*. A holy tank, Varuna Tirtha, is located here. Worship at this temple relieves one from critical diseases and promotes social status.

Vayu Lingam (North West): The very approach to this site gives a pleasant feeling and peace of mind, especially for women and children.

Kubera Lingam (North): Most devotees shower coins on this seventh lingam along the Girivalam path. Worship of this lingam with coins grants wealth and peace of mind. It is placed in the north direction.

Isanya Lingam (North East): Is the eighth *lingam* along the *girivalam*. By worshipping it one gets peace of mind and an inclination towards deeper worship.

in this temple, of which the Sivaganga tank, dug around 1517 AD on the orders of Krishnadeva Raya, is the best-known.

Sacred Tree

The *sthalavriksha* is Mahizham (Bakula in Sanskrit) tree, whose flowers have many medicinal uses. According to local belief, those who sit under the tree for meditation after worshipping Arunachala stand to gain immensely in terms of spiritual elevation and end of physical sufferings.

Steeped in History

Tiruvannamalai has been venerated in several ancient texts and hymns. All the Tamil Saivite saints, called Nayanmars, have sung on the glory of Siva, adorning the temple. The seventh century Nayanmars, Appar and Jnanasambandar, have sung in praise of the temple. The celebrated eighth century Manicka Vachakar had composed the celebrated work *Tiruvembavai* in the temple. It is sung during December-January with devotional fervour in thousands of homes even today.

The Nayanmars refer to both the pillar of fire concept with Brahma and Vishnu searching for either end and also of Parvati being part of Siva. In one verse,

Jnanasambandar described this hill as being *jnana-tiral*, a dense mass of *jnana*.

Sri Ramana Maharshi has stated that there is an *aitikya* (tradition) that this hill is *lingasvarupa*, that is to say, that this hill itself is God. That is the cause of the glory of this place. The tradition of this place is that this hill is the form of God and that in its real nature it is full of light.”

“Arunachala is pure wisdom (*jnana*) in the form of a hill. It is out of compassion to those who seek him that he has chosen to reveal himself in the form of a hill visible to the eye. The seeker will obtain guidance and solace by staying near this hill.”

The Maharshi used to say that other holy places, such as Manasarovar, Varanasi and Chidambaram, are sacred because they are the abodes of Lord Siva, whereas Arunachala is Siva himself.

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