

RELIGIOUS MARVEL'S OF RAMESWARAM: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT :

Even now, temples remain the focal point of the lives of the great majority of Hindus in India. This holds true for both the individual and social spheres of life. The religious beliefs and rituals comprise the warp and woof of Hindu socio-cultural activities. Tamil Nadu has developed into a perfect destination for pilgrimage tourism throughout history. The event is held in one of Tamil Nadu's pilgrimage centers. The state is distinguished from other states by its ethereal allure due to its architecture, history, legends, festivals, customs, rituals, and music. One of the most significant commands given to Hindus since the beginning of time is to make the pilgrimage to Rameshwaram. South India, especially Tamil Nadu, has long practiced the pilgrimage to Rameshwaram, which has become part of folklore. Several ancient kings took great pride in having established victory columns in Rameshwaram. These included Krishna III the Rashtrakuta, the Hoysala, and Vishnuvardhan in the 12th century.

Key Words: *History, Tourism, Pilgrimage, Rameswaram, architecture,*

INTRODUCTION :

The great majority of Hindus in India still base their entire existence around their temples. This holds true for society as a whole as well as for individuals. The religious rites and beliefs that make up the warp and weft of Hindu sociocultural activities. Architecture, vaastushashtra, astronomy, astrology, and a host of other performing arts, including dance, music, painting, and sculpture, all trace their roots to the temple. Despite being centers of worship for the supramundane, temples paradoxically function as the hub of people's everyday lives (Menon.S (1937:14). Certain temples become pilgrimage sites, which draw trade and business. Over time, a few of them become not only hubs for economic expansion but also centers of political influence. Examples of temple-centered urban development are Banaras, Kanchipuram, Thirupathy, Puri, Kolkata, Dwaraka, Gaya, and Thiruvananthapuram. (Rao, 1988:23).

Pilgrimage Tourism in Tamil Nadu

Madurai, Rameshwaram, Karaikal, Trichy and some of the most visited temples are Meenakshi Temple, Brihadeeswara Temple, RamanathaSwamy Temple, PalaniAndavar Temples ParathaSarathi Temple, Swami Malai, kapaleeswarar Temple, Chayavaneashwara Temple, Kumbeswara Temple, Mailapur Temple, Annamalai Temple, Manakulavinayagar Temple. These are some of the famous pilgrimage sites visited by all over the year. The Government of Tamil Nadu has taken recent measures to promote the various places of worship as a fine channel of pilgrimage tourism in Tamil Nadu. There have been some individual efforts too by few tour companies in promoting some pilgrimage festivals which un avoidably are the best times to experience Tamil culture and religious rituals. Infrastructures improving every year to accommodate the ever increasing number of devotees. Even the tourism department. Run several busses to link the various sacred sites through the state. Tamil Nadu which over the pages of history has evolved as an ideal place for pilgrimage tourism. It takes place in the pilgrim centers of Tamil Nadu, to see the architecture, the history, the legends, the festivals, the traditions, the rituals, the music this gives Tamil Nadu a mystical charm and an edge over all other states. Pilgrimage tourism reveals the high positive effects of pilgrimage season on income, employment and high standard of living of residents in Tamil Nadu. Tamil Nadu is the land of pilgrimages. And it has a history that dates back to several thousand years. It is a land where traditions and culture blend and continue to live in harmony. The state abounds in monuments and temples that are ancient and each has its own story of religious, artistic and cultural accomplishment and specialty waiting to be heard. With thousands of temples occupying the land scope of Tamil Nadu. The state is also called the land of temples. Tamil Nadu environments in which

they live. This course will explore the phenomenon of pilgrimage tourism. Pilgrimage tourism offers tremendous opportunities of generating revenues earning foreign exchange and providing employment. Today all countries of the world are striving to develop pilgrimage tourism was incorporation during July 1971 under the companies Act 1956. The entire share capital of Rs 678.63 lakhs has been subscribed by the state government. Tamil Nadu tourism was formed with the objective of promoting pilgrimage tourism in Tamil Nadu by providing infrastructure facilities of transport accommodation and others. To fulfill this objective, Tamil Nadu tourism has expanded its activities into 3 main operations namely hotels transport and fare. Domestic and foreign tourist arrivals in Tamil Nadu in the year 2007 are totally 278.38 in lakhs. In 2008 it was 305.24 in lakhs. A domestic tourist arrival is 293.05 lakhs. Foreign tourist arrivals are 12.19 lakhs. Tamil Nadu tourism is currently engaged in promotion of 18 less known pilgrimage tourist spots. In the last three years, in case of pilgrimage centers it was Rs 45.41 crore provided by the central government. Rs 21.57 crore spent by the state government. The increase in tourist arrivals also enabled Tamil Nadu tourism to double its net profit from 4.43 crore in 2007-2008. In 2008-2009 it was 9.50 crore in pilgrimage centers; such a growth has been achieved through numbers of forms. Based on the length of stay, transport used, price paid and the pilgrimage tourism motivation leading to it. In India lot of pilgrimage potentials are there as well as in Tamil Nadu. Pilgrimage tourism plays a major role in economic generation in India and in Tamil Nadu. Every year pilgrimage tourists are doubled in pilgrimage centers; it shows that pilgrimage potentials in Tamil Nadu are versatile. This study is to analyse the problems faced by the pilgrims. Developments in pilgrimage centers, Pilgrim is different from being a tourist. For a tourist travel is an end in itself for a pilgrim travel is a means to an end Pilgrims with pilgrimage tourism the Indian life style (Adrian Ivakhiv, 2003). But it has had a profound impact on other peoples of the world and the tourism in big way. (American Geographical Society) Pilgrimage tourism earns over 3.5 trillion worldwide. For India, it is presently the third largest export industry but our share in world tourist inflow is only 0.37 percent. Besides economic, the social and environmental gains of tourism were also significant. (Bar, Doron and Cohen-Hattab, Kobi(2003)), It is considered as an ambassador of peace and international brotherhood.(Claudia Liebelt , 2010) It brings better understanding between different nations and civilizations. Likewise it helps in protecting environment old monuments and cultural the aim of this study was to determine, what pilgrimage tourism is, how it is different from other forms of tourism and the opportunities, issues and challenges in pilgrimage tourism. This paper investigates pilgrimage tourism and its issues and challenges and its cultural importance and socio economic development through pilgrimage tourism and also it analysis the basic infrastructure issues in pilgrimage sites and it covers emerging challenges in pilgrimage tourism and pilgrimage tourism promotion is one of the fastest growing tourism in the world. (K. ElumalaiAnd M. Rajendran (2013)

Number of tourist visited in Tamil Nadu from 2008 to 2021

S. No	Year	Domestic in Nos.	Foreignin Nos.	Total Nos.
1	2008	62618252	2040419	64658671
2	2009	78037607	2369050	80406657
3	2010	103010435	2804504	105814939
4	2011	136750750	3308438	140059188
5	2012	184136840	3561740	187698580
6	2013	244232487	3990490	248222977
7	2014	327555233	4657630	332212863
8	2015	333459047	4684707	338143754
9	2016	343812413	4721978	348534391

10	2017	345061140	4860455	349921595
11	2018	385909376	6073345	391982721
12	2019	494864957	6866209	501731166
13	2020*	1406.51	12.28	1418.79
14	2021**	1153.36	0.57	1153.93

**-No arrivals due to Lockdown from April to Aug.2020*

*** 2021 Tourist visits were reduced owing to COVID restrictions.*

Source: Commissioner of Tourism, Chennai-2

From the above table, it is evident that the number of foreign and domestic tourist arrivals in Tamil Nadu has increased extraordinarily during the period under study i.e. the number of foreign tourist arrivals was 2040419 in 2008 and increased to 6866209 in 2019. For domestic tourists, the number of arrivals was 62618252 in 2008 and increased to 494864957 in 2019. Unfortunately, the ratio between domestic and foreign tourists has decreased due to COVID 19. In 2020, the number of domestic tourists was 1406.51 and in 2021 1153.36 and the ratio of foreign tourists was 12.28 (2020) and 0.57 (2021).

HISTORY OF RAMESWARAM :

Rameswaram is a major pilgrimage center located on a small island in the Gulf of Mannar, 572 km from Chennai. Railway and road bridges link it to the mainland. Because Sri Rama performed pooja to atone for his sin of killing the Demon King, Ravana, and expressed gratitude to Lord Shiva upon his return from Sri Lanka, Rameswaram is considered sacred. It is an island in the Gulf of Mannar that is connected by road and rail to the mainland at Mandapam. It has a conch-like shape, just like the one held by Lord Maha Vishnu. The pinnacle of a Hindu pilgrim's journey towards salvation is Kashi-Rameswaram. It's thought that a pilgrimage that begins in northern India at Kashi or Varanasi ends at Rameswaram, where Lord Ramanathaswamy is worshipped. There are twenty-two theerthas, or wells, in and around the main temple of Rameswaram. This location holds equal sacredness for Shaivites and Vaishnavites. According to Hindu mythology, one can atone for their sins by traveling to Rameswaram and praying to Lord Shiva. Its length is 197 meters. The island is shaped like a conch, and the Sri Ramanathaswamy temple is located near the water on the eastern side. An amazing road bridge and rail bridge span Mandapam, connecting the island to the mainland. The shrine was merely a thatched hut in the past. The little shrine was progressively transformed over the ages into the enormous and magnificent building that it is today. The Ramanathapuram region was ruled by various dynasties at different times. Pandya Kings ruled until the fifteenth century. Subsequently, the Nayaks of the Vijayanagar empire ruled over the area until the late 17th century. Then the Sethupathis, who were the earliest chieftains of the region, came to power. They lavished their funds for art and architecture of the Rameswaram shrine. Notable among them were UdayanSethupathy, ThirumalaiSethupathy, RaghunathaSethupathy and MuthuramalingaSethupathy, whose statues are housed in the temple.

HISTORY OF RAMANATHASWAMY TEMPLE :

Lord Shiva, the god of gods, was worshipped by Lord Rama here after his return from Sri Lanka, which is why the temple and the island of Rameswaram got their names. According to legend, after slaying Ravana, Lord Rama traveled back to India with his consort Seetha, where they first set foot on the Rameswaram shores. Lord Rama desired to worship Lord Shiva in order to atone for the "dosha" of killing a Brahmin. As the island lacked a shrine, he dispatched Sri Hauman to Kailash in order to retrieve an idol of Lord Shiva. The towering eastern structure, comprising nine

tiers and standing 126 feet tall, was finished between 1897 and 1904 by the ALAR family of Devakottai using funds from Thiruppani. In addition to arranging for the performance of AshtabandanaKumbabishekam in 1925, they also renovated the Sanctum Sanctorum and the prakaram (innermost corridor) between 1907 and 1925. The third AshtabandanaMahaKumbabishegam was performed on 5-2-1975, and the pair of lime stones were replaced with black granite with sufficient lighting and ventilation.

World Famous Third Corridor :

Outer Wing - East_ West – 690 feet

North-South - 435 feet

Innerwing - East_ West - 649 feet

North-South - 395 feet

Total number of pillars – 1212

Height of Corridor – 22 feet 7 ½ inch

During the construction of first corridor, it was decided to renovate the second corridor. The lime stone structure in Second corridor was dismantled and started granted stone work. But only compound wall in west side and one portion in north side of western wing in south gate was renovate. After that no Renovation works as done. Therefore, it was proposed to complete the Renovation work of Second Corridor by collecting Funds from the public. Between 1961 to 1985, the Renovation work of Second Corridor was taken up and completed the western side of Second Corridor and a portion in North and South side, from the Temple Renovation Fund. Now it has been proposed to complete the Renovation of Second Corridor which has been unfinished and the Renovation work is started now. The Sethupathymandapam in front of the Temple's Raja Gopuram (main Tower) was constructed by RamanathaSethupathy, a descendant of Ramnad Raja dynasty, with his own donation of Rs. 2,75,000 /-. This construction was started on 19-11-69 and completed on 11-2-74. It is also most essential to construct the North and South Gopurams. ShriJagadguruSringeriPeedathipathy and ShrijagadguruKanchiKamakotiPeedathipathy have given their kind blessings for the constructions of the North and South Gopurams of the Temple.

MYTHOLOGICAL IMPORTANCE OF RAMESWARAM :

This place has great significance in Hindu scriptures. It is said that Rama worshipped Lord Shiva here to wash away the sins he had committed in the war of Ramayana. He wanted a big Shiva Lingam for this purpose but could not get it in time. So Sita built a small lingam, which some say is kept in the Rameshwaram temple. According to the scriptures, this is also the place from where Ra started building the famous Ram Sethu (floating bridge) to rescue Sita from Lanka.

STRUCTURE OF THE TEMPLE :

The Rameshwaram temple has high walls and a huge structure of nandi. It has the longest corridor among all Hindu temples in India with about 4000 pillars. The carvings on the granite pillars are amazing to look at. The stone on the floor of the corridor is not indigenous but was brought from across the seas. There are also many small shrines dedicated to other deities in the temple.

ATTRACTIONS OF RAMESHWARAM :

Rameshwaram has a magnificent beach which is a great attraction for tourists. The Palk Strait is located in the northwest of the island. Another major tourist attraction is Adam's Bridge, a chain of limestone cliffs between Rameshwaram and Mannar Island. According to geological reports, this bridge was passable until the 15th century, when the channel was deepened by storms. Rama Sethu is also a source that attracts people from all over the world.

THE SPECIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF RAMESHWARAM :

Rameswaram is also the most potent vortex on the face of this earth to remove and dissolve your most serious and stubborn karmas (sins) impacting on your money, health and relationships. Every

year, thousands of pilgrims come to Rameswaram from all over the world to wash away their unwanted negative karmas by bathing in the sea of Rameswaram followed by a bath at the temple wells of the main temple at Rameswaram which is several thousands of years old. In mythical times, **Lord Rama** (one of the great avatars of **VISHNU**) ordained Rameswaram as the perfect geographical space to remove the most sinful karma. In Lord Rama's own case, he had to get rid of his karma for having killed the demon Ravana in battle. Although Ravana was an evil being and had to be killed, in accordance with the karmic rules of the universe, killing someone has its own consequences and Rama needed to atone for his actions. Rama established a shrine for Lord Shiva in the Rameswaram temple and ordained that whosoever had done terrible karma could come to this shrine and wash their sins in the Rameswaram temple.

PLACES TO VISIT AROUND RAMESWARAM :

- 1. Sri Ramanathaswamy Temple:** This temple situated near the sea on the eastern side of the island is renowned for its magnificent prakaras or corridors with massive sculptured pillars on either side. The longest corridor in the world is here and it is 197 metres long from East to West and is 133 metres wide from South-North. The temple has a Gopuram 38.4 metres tall. Different rulers built the temple as it stands today, at different periods from the 12th century A.D. Pooja is performed for an hour early morning daily to the Spadikalingamthat was given by the Shankaracharya to this temple.
- 2. Agnitheertham:** Sri Ramanathaswamy temple faces east. The seashore, about 100 metres from the main entrance of the temple, is very calm and therefore ideal for bathing. The water at this place is considered sacred and known as Agni theertham. Pilgrims perform poojas in honour of their ancestors at this seashore.
- 3. GandamadanaParvatham:** It is a hillock situated 3 kms away and is the highest point in the island. Here one can see the imprint of Lord Rama's feet on a chakra. The entire island of Rameswaram is visible from this point.
- 4. Sugreevar Temple/Theertham:** It is situated on the way to GandamadanaParvatham near the Doordarshan Kendra.
- 5. Satchi Hanuman Temple:** This temple is considered to be the place where Hanuman delivered the good news of finding Sita to Rama with satchi or evidence, Choodamani or the jewel that belonged to Sita. Situated 3 kms from the main temple, on the way to the GandamadanaParvatham.
- 6. Badrakaliyamman Temple:** This is a temple for Devi Durga, situated 2 kms from the main temple on the way to the GandamadanaParvatham.
- 7. The Five-faced Hanuman Temple:** This temple is 2 kms from the main temple, the deity of Hanuman drawn with *senthooram*. Idols of Lord Ram, Sita and Hanuman brought from Dhanushkodi during the 1964 cyclone were placed here. The **floating stone**, used to build the *SethuBandanam* or the bridge between India and Lanka can be found in this temple.
- 8. Jada Theertham:** About 3.5 km from Rameswaram on the Dhanushkodi road. Legend has it that Lord Rama, on his way back after killing Ravana, Worshipped Sri Ramalinga (believed to be installed by him). Before doing so, he washed his hair (Jada) in this theertham to purify himself.
- 9. NambuNayagiamman Temple** this temple is greatly venerated by the people of Ramnad District. It is situated 8 kms from the main temple in Rameswaram on the way to Dhanushkodi.
- 10. Kothandaramaswamy Temple** This temple is located 12 kms away from Rameswaram. A popular belief is that Vibishana, brother of Ravana, surrendered before Rama here.
- 11. Dhanushkodi (18 kms)** The southern tip of the island, Dhanushkodi was completely washed away by the 1964 cyclone. Tourists can witness the remains of the devastated town. Tourists can do surfing here.
- 12. VilloondiTheertham** This Theertham is situated 7 kms from the main temple on the way to Pamban.
- 13. Annai Indira Gandhi Road Bridge (12 kms)** It is also known as the Pamban Bridge that connects the Rameswaram island with the main land. It is the longest sea bridge in India and its length is nearly 2.2 kms and stands as a fine example for Indian architecture. The bridge was

constructed with sufficient elevation. The islands near by and parallel rail bridge below can be viewed from this bridge.

14.Kurusadai Island (23 kms) This island can be seen off the main land of Ramanathapuram in the Gulf of Mannar. It is a Marine Biosphere, a paradise for the Marine Biologists and Nature lovers. Marine wealth abounds here and this attracts many a scholar and researcher to this Island. It is about 4 kms from Mandapam. The Fisheries Department gives permission to visit this Island. Off Kurusadai Island one can see plenty of coral reefs, and marine life such as the dolphins and sea cows or the Dugong. There is much potential here for eco-tourism, scholars and ecologists.

15.Ramalingavilasam Palace: This palace in Ramanathapuram that is currently under renovation. The Sethupathi Rajas built the palace in the latter part of the 17th century. The colourful, huge murals painted with natural dyes depict everything from business meetings to military conflicts. They are truly breathtaking to behold. The palace also houses a museum of the weapons used by the Sethupathis in the various wars.

16. Dhanushkodi: This is a strip of land about one km wide and 18 kms long on the eastern end of Rameswaram island. On one side are the waters of the Indian Ocean and on the other the waters of the Bay of Bengal. The two seas otherwise known as Ratnakaran and Mahodadhi with their confluence is shaped like a bow while the strip of land resemble an arrow poised for release. Devout Hindus consider the AdiSethu or the arrowhead, a sacred place to perform religious rites. It is also place worth visiting for its scenic beauty and bird life.

17. Water Bird Sanctuary: There are around five hundred water tanks in Ramanathapuram District and most of these are happy hunting grounds for water birds from October to January during the north-east monsoon season. The native birds come for feeding, while the migratory birds, from as far as Europe and Australia, come for breeding. The Arichamunai Bird Sanctuary at Dhanushkodi, the Kanjirankulam and Chittirankudi Sanctuaries on the mainland in Ramanathapuram are a paradise for bird watchers. October to January is a good time to visit Ramanathapuram and explore these sanctuaries.

18.Devipattinam(70 kms) Also known as Navabashanam, this coastal Village has a temple dedicated to Devi who is said to have killed the demon Mahishasura at this spot. It is said that Rama calmed the sea at this coastal village to install nine stones representing the Navagrahas or the nine planets. The Hindus perform religious rites for the forefathers here.

19.Uthirakosamangai (72 kms) is an ancient Shiva Temple here, where the deity here is carved in Emerald. The annual Arudhra Festival in December attracts a large number of devotees. The famous Shaivite saint Manickavasagar sang in praise of this temple as the first place where Lord Shiva was consecrated.

CONCLUSION :

A pilgrimage to Rameshwaram has always been one of the important instructions for Hindus. The great temple of Sri Ramanatha is connected to Kasi by tradition. A pilgrimage to Kasi is not complete without a pilgrimage to Rameshwaram. In ancient times, groups of pilgrims, many of whom were very old, travelled huge distances to the two temples. It took them months and years, and some did not survive the dangers of such an incredibly long journey. The pilgrimage to Rameshwaram has a long tradition in South India, especially in Tamil Nadu, and has become part of folklore. Many ancient kings boasted of having set up victory pillars in Rameshwaram – Krishna III the Rashtrakuta, in the 10th century the Hoysala, Vishnuvardhan, in the 12th century the Hoysala and the Vishnuvardhan.

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