

## **PILGRIMS AND FIRE**

### **SECOND HALF OF THE XX CENTURY, TAMIL NADU, SOUTH INDIA**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Mountains have significantly shaped various communities' and civilizations' narratives and belief systems. They are often mythologized and revered for their cultural and spiritual significance. This paper explores the cultural and social history of Arunachala, a sacred mountain in the northern area of Tamil Nadu, India, which is believed to be the earthly form of Lord Shiva and has been mythologized and revered in Hindu tradition for centuries. Since 1950, Arunachala has become an increasingly popular destination, facing various challenges, including environmental degradation, cultural erosion, and socio-economic impacts on the local community. This paper reflects on one major event that occurred in the city of Tiruvannamalai: the Kartighai Deepam celebrations. This paper is a historical/ethnographic account based on my experience - from a consumer behavior point of view - describing how the city changes and adapts during the celebration.

**Keywords:** Pilgrimage, Tamil Nadu, mythology, ceremony.

#### **Introduction**

Everything is nature! Not just the mountains and flowers but also humans and all their creations. However, many ask: Is nature an element separate from man? Throughout history, many writers and artists have explored the dichotomy between cities and countryside, nature and the built environment, natural landscape, and cityscapes. However, only those who see the city as unnatural can idealize nature as an environment separate from the rest of their cultural imagination and, therefore, imagine all their surroundings untouched by man as nature. A

peasant does not suffer from this malice because everything around him is natural. There is no division between the cork oaks, stone houses, rivers, and streams and the animals that provide warmth, companionship, and later food and sustenance. There is no need to sustain this thought because everything is intuitively part of the same imagery, a constant and self-sustaining circle from birth to death, from the use to the reuse of resources, ideals, and dreams provided.

Through the lens of unity, we explore the intricate setting of mythology, Hinduism, and the rich cultural heritage of India. The research presented in this paper brings us to the eclectic state of Tamil Nadu, the sacred town of Tiruvannamalai, and, ultimately, to the revered mountain of Arunachala.

In Hindu mythology, unity is a central theme, often depicted through the interconnectedness of gods, nature, and humanity. The stories are replete with anthropomorphic and anthropometric<sup>1</sup> (Nabovok, 2000) symbols and metaphors that emphasize the oneness of all existence. This perspective encourages the understanding that the divine and the mortal realms are not separate but part of a unified whole. India, with its diverse cultures and traditions, is a living example of unity in diversity. Tamil Nadu, a state in southern India, is particularly renowned for its deep-rooted art, music, and religious traditions (Pillay, 2023) and it is home to some of the country's oldest and most revered Shiva temples, each symbolizing a facet of this unity<sup>2</sup>.

Tiruvannamalai, a town in Tamil Nadu, is a significant pilgrimage site. It is believed to be a place where the divine presence is palpable, a point where the earthly and the spiritual realms intersect seamlessly. The town is most famous for the Arunachaleswarar Temple, which is dedicated to Lord Shiva, and Arunachala, the sacred mountain that embodies Lord Shiva's eternally. According to Hindu belief, it is not just a geographical feature but a manifestation of the divine. The mountain is venerated in numerous myths and is during the festival of Karthigai Deepam, where a gigantic beacon is lit atop Arunachala, symbolizing the descending presence of Lord Shiva itself.

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<sup>1</sup> *Anthropometry*: The study of body measurements and proportions. *Anthromorphy*: Having human-like characteristics (used primarily in describing animal, plants, and inanimate objects).

<sup>2</sup> The Five Pancha Bhoota Sthalas temples are situated on the ancient border of Tamil Nadu. These temples are part of the Tamil Nadu pilgrimage route, as Shiva's devotees wish to visit all the temples to experience Shiva in all five forms.

The Arunachalesvara Temple, in Tiruvannamalai is associated with the element of fire, which represents the cosmic fire that sustains and transforms the universe in Hindu culture. Besides the Arunachalesvara Temple, which represents the element of fire, the others are the Srikalahasti Temple, dedicated to the Air (Vayu) element, located in the city of Kalahasti in Andhra Pradesh; the Jambukeswarar Temple, dedicated to the Water (Jala) element, located in Tiruchirapalli, Tamil Nadu; the Ekambareswarar Temple, representing the Earth (Prithvi) element, located in Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu; and the Thillai Nataraja Temple, symbolizing the Space (Akasha) element, located in Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu. These temples, each devoted to a different element, collectively embody the Pancha Bhootas or the five fundamental elements of nature and are pivotal in the Shaivite tradition of worship in South India.

Viewed through the lens of unity, the pilgrims' journey - from the intangible mythological accounts to the physical presence of Arunachala - reflects a profound understanding of interconnectedness with traditional, popular, contemporary, and religious and cultural practices and manifestations.

This paper examines the current cultural practices and representations of cultural heritage displayed during the Karthigai Deepam festival in Tiruvannamalai. The fieldwork, conducted between 2023 and 2024, and the ethnographic database derived from these visits utilized a comprehensive methodology including interviews, participatory observation, documentation in fieldwork notebooks, photographs, audio recordings, and videos.

The paper begins with the introduction to the ethnographic context and then explores the Karthigai Deepam festivities. This section offers a vividly written account based on firsthand observations from 2023 and 2024. The third part and conclusion delves into the behavior and experiences of the pilgrims participating in this religious celebration.

## **1. Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu, India**

### **1.1. Arunachalesvara Temple**

As we drive past Gingee and travel another ten kilometers towards Tiruvannamalai throughout Nachipattu village, the Arunachala hill looms into view. The entire hill presents itself in a sweep, an incredible sight. Less than 45 minutes later, we are at Tiruvannamalai town. As we enter, the busy, bustling town strikes us away with her burning energy. Pilgrims enter the town area by foot, car, train, or bus at all speed.

Tiruvannamalai, a bustling district headquarters, is a spiritual and cultural epicenter and an economic hub. Its densely populated urban area of approximately 145,278<sup>3</sup> people covers a 13.00 square km expanse. Predominantly Hindu, the city also embraces Islamic and Jain minority communities, evident in mosques and Jain temples scattered on its outskirts. Over the latter half of the 20th century, Tiruvannamalai experienced a surge in tourism, prompting urban infrastructure expansion to accommodate the influx of visitors.

At the heart of Tiruvannamalai lies the iconic Arunachalesvara Temple (Fig.1), one of the most prominent temples in honor of Shiva in Tamil Nadu and Arunachala. Though its significance predates the 9th-century Chola period, the temple traces its roots back to that era and is a testament to the city's enduring spiritual legacy. However, it has witnessed centuries of religious and historical transitions, including shifts in rulership between Muslim, French, British, and Hindu reigns.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.census2011.co.in/census/district/26-tiruvannamalai.html>

What is the population of Tiruvannamalai district in 2023? The question, though important, has no correct answer. The last census of Tiruvannamalai was done in 2011, and the next census of 2021 has been postponed or canceled. The next seems to schedule for 2031.

This 25-acre temple complex is intertwined with the city's labyrinthine streets and bustling markets, creating a unique atmosphere, and drawing pilgrims and tourists alike to seek Lord Shiva's divine blessings (Reinicke, 1999; Butler, 2021). The temple, accessible from all sides with four tower entrances, is a pivotal junction interconnecting different parts of the city, amplifying the city's spiritual vibrancy and the pilgrim's mobility.



Fig. 1: Arunachalesvara Temple. View from the outside. Photo credit: Fátima Barahona, 2023

## 1.2. Arunachala

Standing sentinel over Tiruvannamalai is Arunachala (Fig.2), an 860m mountain steeped in geological significance and mythological lore. Its reddish hue, derived from the Earth's minerals, earns the moniker "Arun," meaning fire in Sanskrit. Once lush with vegetation, Arunachala's ecosystem underwent degradation due to human intervention, though efforts towards reforestation and preservation have been underway<sup>4</sup>.

References to Arunachala abound in ancient Sanskrit texts and contemporary Tamil literature, underscoring its spiritual and cultural importance. The Arunachala Mahatmya and Arunachala

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<sup>4</sup> Much of this work is been managed by The Forest Way, a Charitable Trust based in Thiruvannamalai, in the state of Tamil Nadu, South India. For more on this: <https://theforestway.org>

Puranam delve into its mythical origins and societal significance, weaving narratives that span millennia and reflect Hindu society's evolving sensibilities.

The legend of Arunachala, wherein Lord Shiva manifests as a fiery mountain, encapsulates profound philosophical teachings within Hinduism. Pilgrims circumambulate Arunachala (a ceremony known as *girivalam*), symbolizing spiritual realization and cosmic equilibrium. This practice is particularly revered during full moon nights when thousands gather to walk around the mountain in the moonlight.

Dotted with shrines and lingams, the pilgrimage route around the mountain holds deep spiritual significance for devotees. It culminates at the Arunachalesvara Temple, where blessings from Lord Shiva are sought in unison by an enormous human mass of devotees.

As Tiruvannamalai navigates the complexities of urbanization and modernization, Arunachala remains a steadfast symbol of spiritual devotion, cultural richness, and natural beauty.

Transcending physical boundaries casts a spiritual aura over the entire region. Regardless of religious affiliations, pilgrims are drawn to the serene energy of Arunachala, experiencing moments of transcendence and transformation amidst its ancient presence.



Fig. 2: Arunachala. View from the Tamarai Kolam Park. Photo credit: Fátima Barahona, 2023

### 1.3. Ramana Maharshi and other Ashrams

Since 1950, the Ramana Maharshi Ashram in Tiruvannamalai has maintained its significance as a spiritual sanctuary and a beacon of the teachings of Ramana Maharshi, one of the most revered sages in Tamil Nadu. Founded in the early 20th century by devotees of Ramana Maharshi, the ashram has served as a hub for spiritual seekers from around the world, drawn to the tranquil ambiance and the teachings of self-inquiry propagated by Ramana Maharshi. The story of the ashram traces back to the life and teachings of this Guru. Born in 1879 in Tiruchuli, Tamil Nadu, as Venkataraman Iyer, he experienced a profound spiritual awakening at 16<sup>5</sup>. Renouncing worldly pursuits, he journeyed to the sacred Arunachala mountain in Tiruvannamalai and settled in the surrounding caves. His silent presence and unwavering focus on self-inquiry attracted disciples and devotees, laying the foundation for what would later become the Ramana Maharshi Ashram.

Following Ramana Maharshi's *mahasamadhi* (a event that is described by: “a realized being's conscious exit from the body”) in 1950, the ashram continued to thrive under the stewardship of his devotees and disciples. It became a center for preserving and disseminating his teachings, emphasizing self-realization through self-inquiry, meditation, and devotion to the inner Self.

Throughout the decades, the ashram has welcomed countless seekers, scholars, and spiritual enthusiasts, offering them a serene environment for introspection and spiritual growth. The ashram's library houses a vast collection of texts related to spirituality, philosophy, and the teachings of Ramana Maharshi, attracting researchers and scholars from various disciplines. In addition to its role as a spiritual retreat, the Ramana Maharshi Ashram has also been actively involved in charitable activities, including providing food, education, and healthcare to the local community. Its outreach programs reflect the ashram's commitment to embodying the compassionate teachings of Ramana Maharshi in practical ways<sup>6</sup>.

Today, the Ramana Maharshi Ashram is a legacy of one of India's most revered spiritual luminaries. Its tranquil surroundings, profound teachings, and compassionate outreach inspire and uplift spiritual seekers from all walks of life, ensuring that the light of Ramana Maharshi's wisdom shines brightly into the present and future<sup>7</sup>.

In Tiruvannamalai, the Ramana Maharshi Ashram holds a unique position among the various ashrams in the city, each contributing to the spiritual fabric of the region in its way. While the Ramana Maharshi Ashram is renowned for its focus on self-inquiry and the teachings of

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<sup>5</sup> The Hindu, 24 December 1939.

<sup>6</sup> One of the many initiatives is the journal Mountain Path, founded in 1964 by Arthur Osborne. For consulting any volume from 1964 to 2021 access here: <https://www.gururamana.org/Resources/mountain-path>

<sup>7</sup> For more on Ramana Maharshi use this link: <https://www.gururamana.org>



Ramana Maharshi, other ashrams in Tiruvannamalai offer diverse spiritual paths and practices, enriching the spiritual landscape of the city (Fig.3).

One notable ashram in Tiruvannamalai is the Seshadri Swamigal Ashram, dedicated to the revered saint Seshadri Swamigal, a contemporary of Ramana Maharshi. This ashram, situated near the Arunachalesvara Temple, attracts devotees who seek blessings and guidance from Seshadri Swamigal's teachings.

Another prominent ashram in Tiruvannamalai is the Yogi Ramsuratkumar Ashram, which is dedicated to the mystic saint Yogi Ramsuratkumar. This ashram is known for its emphasis on devotion and service to humanity (*seva*, the act of serving), reflecting the teachings and compassionate spirit of Yogi Ramsuratkumar. Additionally, several minor ashrams and spiritual centers are scattered throughout Tiruvannamalai, each offering its unique approach to spirituality, meditation, and self-realization. Despite their differences in focus and practices, the various ashrams in Tiruvannamalai share a common goal of facilitating spiritual growth and inner transformation among seekers. Many pilgrims and visitors to Tiruvannamalai explore multiple ashrams during their stay, seeking inspiration, guidance, and spiritual nourishment from the diverse array of teachings and traditions available in the city.



Fig 3: Ramana Maharshi Ashram. Devotees waiting for the light to be lit at 6:0 P.M. on top of Arunachala. (on the right a symbolic fire is kept lit at the ashram 24/7, during the 10 days of the Karthigai Deepam) Photo credit: Fátima Barahona, 2023

Multiple ashrams in Tiruvannamalai create a vibrant spiritual ecosystem where seekers can explore different paths, connect with like-minded individuals, and deepen their understanding of the divine. Each ashram contributes to Tiruvannamalai's rich tapestry of spiritual heritage, fostering a sense of unity, diversity, and reverence for the eternal truths that transcend individual traditions.

## **2. The Kartigahi Deppam celebrations**

Karthigai Deepam, a festival deeply rooted in the vibrant tapestry of Tamil culture, stands as a testament to the enduring spirit of devotion and illumination. On the tenth day, as the sun sets on the horizon and twilight envelops the land, homes, and temples become beacons of light, casting a dazzling spectacle across the landscape. This grand celebration, in the sacred month of Karthigai, nestled within the embrace of November or December, marks the pinnacle of reverence towards Lord Shiva and his revered son Murugan. Legend intertwines with tradition, weaving tales of divine intervention and celestial splendor. Karthigai Pournami, the full moon, serves as the celestial stage upon which the divine light manifests in all its resplendent glory. Stories echo Lord Shiva's transcendence into a towering column of fire, quelling cosmic disputes and illuminating the universe with his majestic radiance.

The heartbeat of Karthigai Deepam resonates through the ages, echoing the ancient rituals and timeless customs passed down through generations. Oil lamps, meticulously crafted with reverence and devotion, radiate their gentle luminescence, symbolizing the eternal triumph of light over darkness. Prayers ascend like fragrant incense within the sanctity of homes and temples, seeking blessings and solace from the divine.

Temples adorned with ornate decorations and devotees' throngs become sanctuaries of celestial communion. Flowers, offered with devotion and humility, adorn the sacred shrines while chants and hymns reverberate through the hallowed halls. Atop the revered hill of Arunachala, in the ancient city of Tiruvannamalai, the sacred flame becomes a beacon of hope, guiding souls on their spiritual journey.

As the festival reaches its crescendo, bonfires blaze in public squares, casting their warm glow upon jubilant faces. These towering infernos, symbolic of the eternal flame within, unite communities in a symphony of joy and camaraderie. Traditional delicacies, steeped in centuries of culinary heritage, tantalize the senses, and nourish the soul, fostering familial and communal harmony bonds.

Though its origins lie deep within the heartland of Tamil Nadu (Navobok, 2000), the essence of Karthigai Deepam transcends geographical boundaries. From the misty hills of Kerala to the sun-drenched shores of Karnataka, devotees converge, their hearts ablaze with devotion, to pay homage to the eternal light that illuminates the cosmos.



Karthigai Deepam is more than a festival; it is an eclectic display of devotion, an ode to the divine, and a celebration of life's eternal illumination. It serves as a poignant reminder that within the depths of the human soul, a sacred flame flickers, guiding humanity toward the shores of spiritual enlightenment.



திகதி	தினம்	சமயம்	விருந்தினர்	சாலை / இடம்
14.11.2023	வெள்ளி	28	வெள்ளி	இடம் : அருள்மிகு திருக்கோயில் 8.30 மணி - காலை நேரம்
15.11.2023	புதன்	29	புதன்	இடம் : அருள்மிகு சீடம் 8.30 மணி - சிவம் சாலை
16.11.2023	வியாழன்	30	வியாழன்	இடம் : அருள்மிகு சீடம் 8.30 மணி - சிவம் சாலை - சிவமேலாடி இடம்
17.11.2023	சனிக்கிழமை	1	வெள்ளி	1 மணி : 4.45 மணிக்கு 6.12 மணிக்குள்ளே மகா மகாவிழா தொடங்கும் போது இடம் மாற்றம் சாலை : பஞ்சாங்கத்தின் வெள்ளி விளக்கம் இடம் : பஞ்சாங்கத்தின் வெள்ளி விளக்கம்
18.11.2023	சனி	2	சனி	சாலை : சீராயல், சந்திரமேடி - தனியாக சிவம் சாலை இடம் : பஞ்சாங்கத்தின் வெள்ளி விளக்கம்
19.11.2023	ஞாயிறு	3	ஞாயிறு	சாலை : சீராயல், சந்திரமேடி - தனியாக சிவம் சாலை இடம் : பஞ்சாங்கத்தின் வெள்ளி விளக்கம்
20.11.2023	திங்கள்	4	திங்கள்	சாலை : சீராயல், சந்திரமேடி - தனியாக சிவம் சாலை இடம் : பஞ்சாங்கத்தின் வெள்ளி விளக்கம்
21.11.2023	வெள்ளி	5	வெள்ளி	சாலை : சீராயல், சந்திரமேடி - தனியாக சிவம் சாலை இடம் : பஞ்சாங்கத்தின் வெள்ளி விளக்கம்
22.11.2023	புதன்	6	புதன்	சாலை : சீராயல், சந்திரமேடி - தனியாக சிவம் சாலை - 63 நாள்களில் வீதி உடல் இடம் : பஞ்சாங்கத்தின் வெள்ளி விளக்கம்
23.11.2023	வியாழன்	7	வியாழன்	சாலை : 7.30 மணிக்கு 8.30 மணிக்குள்ளே மகா மகாவிழா தொடங்கும் போது இடம் மாற்றம் பஞ்சாங்கத்தின் வெள்ளி விளக்கம் - தொடர்ச்சியாக
24.11.2023	வெள்ளி	8	வெள்ளி	சாலை : சீராயல், சந்திரமேடி - தனியாக சிவம் சாலை மணி : 4.30 மணிக்கு தொடங்கும் 8.30 மணி - இடம் : பஞ்சாங்கத்தின் வெள்ளி விளக்கம்
25.11.2023	சனி	9	சனி	சாலை : சீராயல், சந்திரமேடி - தனியாக சிவம் சாலை இடம் : பஞ்சாங்கத்தின் வெள்ளி விளக்கம்
26.11.2023	ஞாயிறு	10	ஞாயிறு	அதிசயம் : 4.00 மணிக்கு புரணி தீபதரிசனம் மணி : 6.00 மணிக்கு மகா தீப தரிசனம் இடம் : பஞ்சாங்கத்தின் வெள்ளி விளக்கம்
27.11.2023	திங்கள்	11	திங்கள்	இடம் : 9.00 மணிக்கு மகா தீப தரிசனம் பற்றி சந்திரமேடி தொடங்கும்
28.11.2023	வெள்ளி	12	வெள்ளி	அதிசயம் : அருள்மிகு சிவமேலாடி 8.30 மணிக்கு தொடங்கும் போது இடம் மாற்றம் இடம் : 9.00 மணிக்கு மகா தீப தரிசனம் தொடங்கும்
29.11.2023	புதன்	13	புதன்	இடம் : 9.00 மணிக்கு மகா தீப தரிசனம் தொடங்கும்
30.11.2023	வியாழன்	14	வியாழன்	இடம் : அருள்மிகு சிவமேலாடி - வெள்ளி விளக்கம்

Fig 4. Entries for the temple November 2023 Fig 5. Karthigai Deepam 2023 daily program

The Tamils' religious calendar is vast (Fig. 5), and the Deepam festival is celebrated in the month of Karthigai (Gregorian November/December). During the ten days of festivities, participants witness unique events and experiences.

There are distinct ways to visit the city and experience the Karthigai Deepam festival. You can embark on a traditional pilgrimage journey, immersing yourself in the festival's spiritual fervor and cultural richness. Join thousands of devotees as you circumambulate the sacred mountain of Arunachala (*girivalam*) during the full moon nights. Visit ashrams, temples, and holy sites along the route to pay homage to Lord Shiva and soak in the atmosphere of devotion and reverence. Participate in rituals, witness cultural performances, and participate in communal feasting and festivities.

Alternatively, one can opt for a more observational approach, taking in the sights and sounds of the festival as a spectator. Wander through the bustling streets adorned with vibrant decorations, stalls selling traditional wares, and colorful processions. Observe the rituals and ceremonies in temples and ashrams and engage with locals to learn about the significance of each tradition and custom. Capture the essence of the festival through photography, storytelling, and personal reflection.

One can also fully immerse oneself in the festival's cultural tapestry by participating in various rituals and activities. Volunteer at temples or ashrams to assist with preparations, serve devotees or participate in community service initiatives. Engage in spiritual practices such as meditation, chanting, or yoga to deepen the connection with the divine. Learn about traditional cuisine by sampling local delicacies and attending cooking demonstrations. By embracing the customs and traditions of Karthigai Deepam, one can enrich the cultural experience and forge meaningful connections with the community.

During the festival, the city undergoes a complete transformation. The urban landscape becomes a vibrant circus two weeks before the festivities begin. People from all over start arriving and setting up makeshift camps in the surrounding areas. Tents made of cloth or blue tarps sprawl out into large encampments, as families often travel in large numbers, sometimes bringing carts with cows for milk and minimal cooking utensils. Water, essential for life, is collected and transported in small metal containers by the women. A huge cattle market comes is organized just across the main road. The feeling is akin to traveling to a distant time, where time seems to have changed or even stopped upon reaching Tiruvannamalai. The contrast between Europe and Asia is evident in this setting, but the event's magnitude is striking even for visitors familiar with India or Tamil Nadu. The festival leads participants to extreme experiences, with abstract planes and sensations oscillating between faith, mysticism, and mythology. The sonic landscape, the silences, and the physical and emotional spaces transform over time, challenging the visitor's perception.

In the streets, not just the dirt roads and traditional attire make an appearance, but also the food, rituals, and even the language – the century's old, untouched Dravidian language.

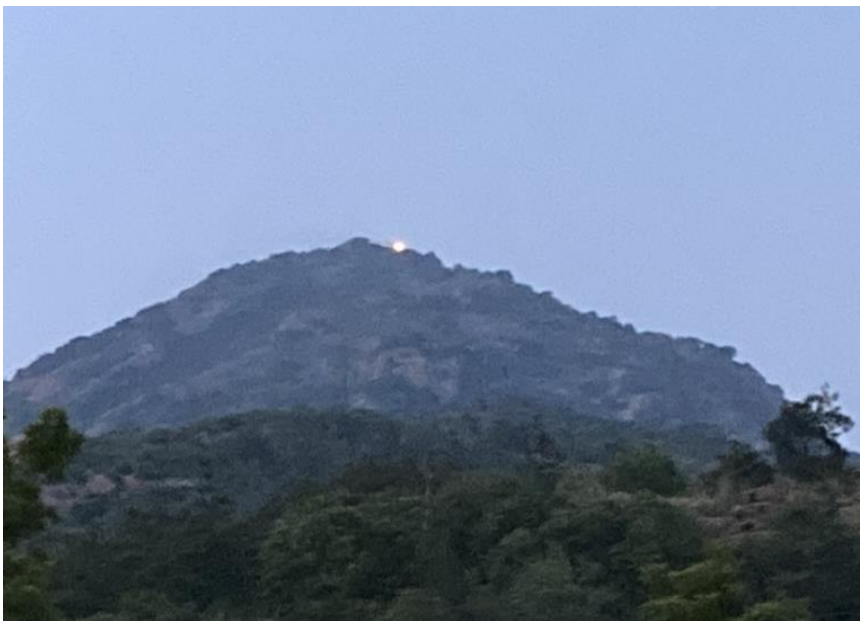


Fig 6. Arunachala. Shiva fire lit on top, from the 26.11-04.12.23. Photo credit: Fátima Barahona

## 2.1. Different ways to celebrate Karthigai Deepam:

### Circumambulate the Mountain

Embark on the sacred journey of circumambulating the Arunachala, approximately 14 kilometers. This pilgrimage typically takes around 5 to 7 hours to complete. As one traverses the path encircling the mountain, the sense of being enveloped in a serene atmosphere, surrounded by natural beauty and spiritual vibrations, is undeniable. Countless devotees in this meditative trek, offer prayers and experience the profound energy of the sacred landscape.

### Ascend to the Summit

Ascend the mountain to reach its pinnacle and witness the majestic spectacle of the Karthigai Deepam celebration from above. Arrive at the summit around 6 p.m., just in time to behold the illumination of the divine light atop the mountain (Fig.6). From this vantage point, the pilgrim has a breathtaking panoramic view of the surrounding area and the radiant glow of the festival below. This awe-inspiring experience offers a unique perspective on the spiritual significance of Karthigai Deepam.



Figs. 7 and 8. Arunachala fire preparations 2023. Photo credits: Fátima Barahona

### Participate in Temple Activities

Alternatively, one can immerse oneself in the vibrant ambiance of the festival by participating in the activities and rituals at the temples (Fig. 4) and shrines surrounding the mountain. Spend time contemplating and praying within the sacred precincts, soaking in the spiritual atmosphere, and absorbing the centuries-old traditions. Engaging with fellow devotees,



witnessing elaborate rituals, and participating in offerings and ceremonies as pilgrims connect with the divine essence permeating the temple grounds.

Whether one circumambulates the mountain, ascends to its summit, or immerses oneself in temple rituals, each pathway offers a profound and transformative experience during the auspicious occasion of Karthigai Deepam. All three experiences allow pilgrims to extend and immerse themselves within the essence of Shiva, rejoicing in His divine presence. These options are not mutually exclusive; many pilgrims undertake all three in one visit. In their quest to connect with the spiritual essence of Karthigai Deepam, pilgrims embrace the challenges of their journey with unwavering devotion. Despite the physical discomforts and uncertainties of accommodation, their spirits remain undaunted as they seek solace and communion with the divine. Through their shared pilgrimage experiences, these devotees forge bonds of camaraderie and resilience, united by their reverence for Shiva and the sacred traditions of Karthigai Deepam.



Figs. 9 and 10. Festivities around Arunachalesvara temple 2023. Photo credits: Fátima Barahona

Every morning and evening, wooden cars circle the main temple at sunrise and sunset for ten days before the fire is lit on top of Arunachala. Each day, a different deity is honored, and a different group of families adorns the *deity* (saint) with dress and flower ornaments (Figs. 9 and 10).

During the Karthigai Deepam, the pilgrimage journey often begins with pilgrims entering the Arunachalesvara temple to seek blessings before embarking on the circumambulation circuit around the sacred mountain. Along the 14 kilometers, the path is dotted with numerous temples and ashrams where pilgrims pause to seek further blessings, including revered sites like the Ramana Maharshi ashram. After completing the circumambulation and offering prayers at various sacred sites, pilgrims typically rest during the afternoon, rejuvenating their spirits for the next phase of their journey. Around 3 p.m., they begin the ascent of the mountain, a trek that typically takes 2 to 3 hours to reach the summit. Arriving at the mountaintop just before 6 p.m., pilgrims eagerly anticipate the lighting of the sacred fire. As the sun sets and darkness descends, the illumination of the fire atop the mountain marks the culmination of their pilgrimage, a divine spectacle that fills their hearts with reverence and awe (Figs. 7 and 8). This sacred moment, witnessing the radiant glow of the fire against the backdrop of the night sky serves as a powerful reminder of the divine presence that permeates the entire pilgrimage experience.

### **3. Pilgrims in the 20th century in Tiruvannamalai: What do we consume today?**

The term pilgrim (from Latin: peregrinus) has various meanings and associations. For example, in the Roman Empire, from 30 BC to 212 AD, it was used to distinguish a free provincial man, a resident of the empire who did not have the status of a Roman citizen. We can idealize the pilgrim as someone with no country of departure or destination. A pilgrim has no flag or group of closed cultural values; we can risk saying that a pilgrim is moved by faith and that this movement is open to anyone who wants to join. Although it may seem like an ancient idealistic or romanticized vision, we find this in the group of pilgrims around Arunachala. There is no religious pre-selection here, and given the polytheistic character, all the saints are acclaimed.

What do we consume during a pilgrimage? This is a pertinent question since, during a pilgrimage, the participant wants to be consumed by the experience itself. Observing this religious experience in Tiruvannamalai takes us into a world of consumption and exacerbated transactional economic exchanges. Contrary to what one would expect from a traditional meditative space characterized by quietness, cleanness, and isolation, the city of Tiruvannamalai presents a chaotic, bustling town with millions of people seeking to unite their presence with Shiva, using fire as a means of a vehicle. Despite this apparent contradiction, the concept that fire consumes and burns all analogies, and that life emerges from ashes holds profound significance. In this context, it raises an intriguing question: Is the pilgrim consuming the pilgrimage, or vice versa? The truth, in this case, is that the pilgrimage consumes the pilgrim. Amid the chaos and activity, the pilgrim is transformed. The journey to Tiruvannamalai, with its intense spiritual energy and the act of engaging in fire rituals, profoundly affects the seekers. The pilgrimage is not merely a physical journey but a transformative process that consumes the ego and personal identity of the pilgrim, allowing a rebirth from the ashes of their former self.



Far from detracting from the spiritual experience, the bustling environment enhances it by breaking preconceived notions and allowing the pilgrim to surrender entirely to the divine. In the end, it is the pilgrimage that consumes the pilgrim, leading to a deeper understanding and union with Shiva.

### **3.1. The increase of visitors: challenges and possible solutions**

The influx of visitors and the growing popularity of its ashrams have also introduced several challenges, such as pollution and mobility issues. Addressing these problems is crucial to maintaining the sanctity and livability of this revered town.

The rise in vehicle traffic due to the influx of pilgrims and tourists has increased air pollution. The emission from cars, buses, and motorcycles contributes to deteriorating air quality, which can affect the health of residents and visitors. Additionally, with more people comes more waste. Improper disposal of plastic bottles, food wrappers, and other non-biodegradable items has become a significant issue. Despite efforts to keep the town clean, the sheer volume of waste can overwhelm local waste management systems. The sacred tank in the Arunachaleswarar Temple and other water bodies in the area can suffer from pollution due to inadequate sewage treatment and waste dumping<sup>8</sup>.

The narrow streets of Tiruvannamalai can become heavily congested, especially during festival times and important spiritual gatherings, making it difficult for residents and visitors to move around efficiently. While there are some public transport options, they often need to be improved to meet the needs of the growing number of visitors. This situation increases reliance on private vehicles and auto-rickshaws, exacerbating traffic problems. The large number of pilgrims walking around the town, particularly those undertaking the *girivalam* (circumambulation of Arunachala Hill), creates safety issues as the roads are not equipped to handle the mix of pedestrians and vehicles safely.

The Tiruvannamalai district collector and the local authorities intend to implement various solutions and mitigation strategies to tackle these challenges. Some of these ideas were already in place during the last Kartigai Deepam celebration of 2023, but some were shown to be insufficient. Here is a summed account of the local mayor's significant proposed areas of action: sustainable waste management practices such as comprehensive waste segregation, recycling programs, and increasing the number of waste bins, particularly around the popular tourist and pilgrimage routes, with the intent of managing the increasing tones of littering register at every occasion. Educational campaigns to raise awareness among visitors and residents about keeping the town clean and enforcing stricter regulations on single-use plastics.

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<sup>8</sup>This information was collector by direct interviews with the district collector and his staff collaborators.

Significantly reduce plastic waste and ban plastic disposable items, which can be substituted by other biodegradable materials such as banana leaves. Other measures implemented are related to the safety and hygiene of the visitors, but the number of toilets, water points, and police forces on the ground needs to be increased.

Promoting electric vehicles (EVs) has already been done in several Indian cities like Mumbai and Delhi, and the intention is to do it here as well. However, there needs to be more adherence to the program for the moment. Dedicated pedestrian zones, especially around critical areas like the ashrams and the temple, are being created to enhance mobility and safety. Dedicated pedestrian pathways and improvements, especially along the *girivalam* route, have also been constructed to enhance safety and encourage more people to walk rather than use vehicles. Developing better traffic management systems, such as one-way routes, designated parking areas, and shuttle services for pilgrims, alleviates traffic congestion. However, due to the large number of pilgrims, even without cars, there is not enough space for the constant influx of pilgrims. During the full moon, many visitors do not even touch the ground around Arunachala, instead they are carried away by each other, resembling a river stream. Moreover, for all these reasons, and due to the annual increase of visitors<sup>9</sup>, local authorities are considering closing a city after a certain number of visitors, as it is already being done in some European cities like Venezia and Barcelona.

More robust local governance and collaboration between municipal authorities, ashrams, and community groups are essential for addressing these challenges. Regular stakeholder meetings and feedback sessions can help in creating effective strategies. Encouraging volunteer programs where visitors and locals can participate in cleanup drives, awareness campaigns, and environmental conservation projects can foster a sense of collective responsibility.

While Tiruvannamalai's spiritual ecosystem continues to thrive, it is crucial to address the environmental and infrastructural challenges that come with its popularity. By implementing sustainable practices, improving infrastructure, and fostering community engagement, Tiruvannamalai could balance its spiritual significance with the need for a clean, safe, and accessible environment for all.

Furthermore, in Hindu philosophy, this unity transcends physical forms. It manifests in the collective consciousness, binding everything from the myths of gods to the sacred geography of places like Tiruvannamalai and Arunachala. This unity invites devotees and seekers alike to experience the divine not as a distant entity but as an integral part of their existence.

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<sup>9</sup> For the year 2023 the official number launch by the local administrative authorities and after by local newspapers is of 4 millions visitors around Arunachala on the moment when the fire was lit on top of the mountain (26.11.23 at 6:00 p.m.) on the Kartighai Deppam 10th day.

Furthermore, the intricate relationship between pilgrims, circumambulation, religious celebrations, and Hinduism reflects profound spiritual concepts deeply ingrained in Hindu tradition and practice.

Circumambulation, or *pradakshina*<sup>10</sup>, is highly significant in Hinduism. It symbolizes reverence, devotion, and a journey towards spiritual realization. Pilgrims often circumambulate sacred sites, such as temples or mountains, as a form of worship and purification. Walking around these sacred spaces mirrors the cyclical nature of existence and reinforces the devotee's connection with the divine.

Religious celebrations, such as festivals and rituals, allow pilgrims to deepen their spiritual practice and connect with their faith community. These celebrations often involve elaborate ceremonies, devotional singing, and communal feasting, fostering a sense of unity and devotion among participants. Pilgrims participate in these celebrations to express their reverence for the divine and seek blessings for themselves and their loved ones.

With its rich setting of beliefs and practices, Hinduism provides a fertile ground for exploring spirituality through pilgrimage and religious celebrations. The diversity within Hinduism allows pilgrims to engage with a wide range of deities, rituals, and sacred sites, each offering unique opportunities for spiritual growth and enlightenment.

The relationship between pilgrims, circumambulation, religious celebrations, and Hinduism embodies the timeless pursuit of transcendence and union with the divine. It speaks to the eternal quest for meaning and purpose in life and the belief in the power of devotion and ritual to lead one closer to ultimate truth and liberation.

In the 20th century, pilgrimage in Tamil Nadu underwent significant transformations due to various socio-cultural and technological advancements. Before this period, pilgrimages were often arduous journeys undertaken primarily by devout individuals seeking spiritual solace and blessings from sacred sites.

However, with improved transportation infrastructure such as railways, roads, and later air travel, pilgrimages became more accessible to a more significant population segment. This accessibility led to a surge in pilgrims visiting Tamil Nadu's revered temples and holy sites throughout the 20th century.

Additionally, the 20th century witnessed the revival and reinvigoration of religious practices and festivals, spurred by cultural movements and a renewed interest in Tamil Nadu's rich religious heritage. Festivals like Pongal, Thaipusam, and Arudra Darshan gained prominence and attracted pilgrims nationwide and beyond.

The proliferation of mass media, including newspapers, radio, and later television, played a crucial role in disseminating information about pilgrimage sites and facilitating pilgrim

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<sup>10</sup> Circumambulation meaning: *pradakshina* in Sanskrit and *girivalam* in Tamil language.

experiences. Pilgrimage tourism also emerged as a significant industry, with tour operators organizing package tours to popular destinations in Tamil Nadu.

Furthermore, advancements in communication technology in the latter half of the 20th century, such as the internet and mobile phones, revolutionized how pilgrims planned and experienced their journeys. Contemporary online resources provide detailed information to pilgrims about temple timings, accommodation options, and transportation routes, empowering pilgrims to make informed decisions and streamline travel arrangements.



Figs 11. Festivities inside Arunachalesvara temple 26.11.2023. Photo credits: Fátima Barahona

#### **4. Conclusion**

Examining the Karthigai Deepam festival offers valuable insights that transcend its specific cultural context and have broader implications for studying cultural heritage. By analyzing the intricate rituals, traditions, and community participation associated with the festival, researchers can draw parallels and extrapolate findings that apply to understanding diverse cultural heritages worldwide. The festival's emphasis on spiritual devotion, communal harmony, and celebrating enlightenment provides a universal framework for exploring and comparing cultural practices across different societies and regions. This study prompts a deeper exploration of the underlying principles and values shared among various cultural heritages, fostering a more profound understanding of the human experience and how communities express their collective identities. Moreover, it encourages scholars and enthusiasts to engage in comparative analyses,

identifying commonalities and distinctions in cultural practices, beliefs, and heritage expressions. Such endeavors promote cross-cultural dialogue and appreciation, fostering mutual respect and understanding among diverse global communities.

Furthermore, the study of the Karthigai Deepam festival catalyzes interdisciplinary research, inviting scholars from fields such as anthropology, sociology, religious studies, and cultural heritage management to collaborate in exploring the multifaceted dimensions of cultural expression and preservation. By examining the festival's societal impact, historical significance, and contemporary relevance, researchers can extrapolate methodologies and best practices for the documentation, conservation, and sustainable management of cultural heritage in a global context. The scholarly investigation of the Karthigai Deepam festival enriches our understanding of this specific cultural tradition. It serves as a broad springboard for advancing knowledge and discourse surrounding cultural heritage. It underscores the interconnectedness of human experiences, fosters intercultural dialogue, and promotes the preservation and appreciation of diverse cultural expressions across the globe.

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