

Influence of Srirangam Temple Festivities on Pilgrimage Tourism - A Study

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Abstract

Srirangam, located in Tamil Nadu, India, is home to the historic Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple, a highly esteemed pilgrimage destination for Vaishnavites. This temple complex showcases an extraordinary display of Dravidian architecture, highlighting the exceptional skills of the Cholas, Pandyas, Hoysalas, and Nayaks, among other esteemed craftsmen. Srirangam is renowned for its vibrant festivals, including Boopathi Thirunaal, Theppa Thirunaal, and Aadi Brahmotsavam, which beautifully highlight its cultural legacy. These festivals showcase elaborate rituals, majestic processions, and widespread celebrations, enriching spiritual encounters and fostering the preservation of traditional arts and crafts. Even in the face of modern changes, Srirangam continues to thrive as a centre for worship and historical study. It provides a window into a magnificent past and remains a heavenly abode for its residents and devotees.

Key Words: Ranganathaswamy – Alagiyamanavalan - festivals – Brammothsavam- Dolothsavam.

Introduction

Srirangam, a small island village rich in cultural, historical, and spiritual significance, is located in Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu. Its peaceful and sacred atmosphere is enhanced by its unique location between the Kaveri and Kollidam rivers, which serve as natural boundaries.¹ Srirangam is famous for the Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple, dedicated to Lord Ranganatha, a peaceful form of Lord Vishnu. It is one of the largest active Hindu temples in the world and a key part of Srirangam's identity. Covering 156 acres, the temple is a stunning example of Dravidian architecture. The complex has seven enclosures, called prakaras, with beautifully arranged halls, shrines, and gateways (*gopurams*). The main entrance, Rajagopuram, stands at 236 feet, making it one of the tallest temple towers in Asia.²

Srirangam: A Celebration Every Day

Ranga assumes a pivotal role, skillfully coordinating the unfolding of events on both the global and celestial stages. As the hero, he consistently seeks to provide entertainment, bringing joy to those around him. This connection is intricately linked with festivals. The Bhakti movement emphasised the significance of festivals and promoted a sense of social inclusivity within the temple. These events were further enriched by the support of royal patrons, providing a fascinating insight into the historical treatment of royalty. Ranganatha, also known as Nithyotsava Perumal during processions, is widely celebrated throughout the year, with festivities occurring on an impressive 322 out of 360 days. These celebrations are in accordance with the Tamil lunar calendar. The schedule is published in a booklet, and the temple releases an annual almanack that is widely used in households. This temple has a unique tradition of having its own specialised almanack.³

The Customs of Daily Life

Every celebration in Srirangam is filled with a variety of rituals, rich in tradition, showcasing the vibrant and lively spirit of these events. These celebrations beautifully combine musical processions, special food offerings, Vedic and Prabandham recitations, and other cherished customs. One key ritual is the Early Morning Ritual (Viswarupa Dharisanam). At dawn, the temple doors open to reveal a sacred scene. The deity is offered symbolic gifts, such as an elephant and a cow, representing blessings of prosperity and good fortune. The offerings include milk, butter, sugar, roti (a Muslim influence), and paruppu (a type of cereal).⁴

Daily Offerings

Pongal Offering: After the main deity is symbolically anointed and the processional deity undergoes a ritual bath, various offerings are made including rice, chukka, jaggery, ghee, pickles, and vegetables. Additional offerings can be sponsored by devotees.

Peria Avasaram's Midday Meal: This "great hurry" dinner consists of vegetables, akkara adisal, saatru amuthu (rasam), and thirukannanamudhu (Payasam).

Dinner (Ksheera Annam): A variety of foods, including vegetables, vadai, appam, thenkuzhal, and the milk-based delicacy Ksheera annam, are sponsored by devotees.

Night Offering for Chelavu Samba: This offering consists of paruppu, akkara adisal, and rice.

Late Night (Aravanai): Served before bedtime are sweet pongal, veggies, and milk.

Similar offerings are made for Ranganayaki, although they do not contain anything for the lord. Rather, they consist of puttu, keera (greens), curries made from bitter gourds (pakarkai), and pickles made from limes (narthangai). The appam that is served to the lord is not given to Thayar.⁵

Chithirai - Virupanna Thirunaal and Kodai Thirunaal take place in April-May

The eleven-day Chithirai festival is named after the reign of Virupanna, the Vijayanagara king, in 1383. In order to plant nine various types of grains, which sprout throughout the festival, the priest starts the celebration by taking a scoop of dirt from beneath the revered bilva tree (sthala vriksha). Prior to the festivities, Vishwaksena, the top commander of the lord, performs a town inspection known as nagara sothanai. The ceremony commences with the temple accountant listing all the lands and villages he possesses, thus reiterating the lord's dominion. In the past, accountants would commute on elephants, but nowadays, this practice is purely symbolic due to the government's ownership of the temple grounds. The goddess is paraded around on different vahanams (vehicles) every day of the festival.⁶

Vasanth Thirunaal - Vaikasi (May-June)

The Vasanth Thirunaal event is held during the Tamil month of Vaikasi in a mandapam that is believed to date back to the 15th century. In the past, the event was funded by the entire village of Puthur. The lord stays nine days in the mandapam in a grove, where he watches the Arayar Sevai and hears the 4000 Divya Prabandham proclaimed.⁷ This festival's importance and magnificence were highlighted when it was observed as a Brahmotsavam during the Nayak era.

Aani - Jyesthabhishekam (June-July)

The processional deities at the Jyesthabhishekam event—which takes place in the Tamil month of Aani—are delicately anointed with aromatic herbal combinations.⁸ Water from the Kaveri River is brought in a gold pot, gifted by Vijayaranga Chokanatha Nayak in 1734, on the back of an elephant every other day. This ritual also incorporates the utilisation of gold flywhisks and other ceremonial items.

Pathinettam/Irupathettam Perukku in July-August, during Aadi

A special prayer is offered for the processional god at the Kaveri River on the 18th or 28th of the month of Aadi. The goddess gives Andal flowers on the way back; the two share the same birth month.⁹

Aavani Pavithrotsavam August or September

During the nine-day Pavithrotsavam ceremony, Vedic hymns are chanted to ceremonially cleanse the temple. Every day, Namperumal, the deity who is carried in a procession, is present for the recitation of hymns and the performance of sacrificial fire rituals. This ceremony pays tribute to Kulasekhara Azhwar as the primary saint. The celebrations take place at the Cheranai Vendran Mandapam, which was built by Jatavarman Sundravarman I. In addition, there is a Uri festival that celebrates the Rohini asterism for Krishna. During this festival, there is a competition where participants try to climb a slippery pole to retrieve a jug of sweets placed at the top.¹⁰

Purattasi (September-October)

During the Thayar and Navarathri Uthsavam in Purattasi, the processional deities are decorated and positioned in a mandapam. During Vijayadasami, priests ceremonially launch arrows in four cardinal directions from the Namperumal shrine. Worshippers are given leaves from the Vanni tree, and the deity begins a customary hunting activity. Prior to the dissolution of the Devadasi system, the principal Devadasi would engage in a dance that imitated a goat being assaulted. Upon the lord's arrival at his shrine, specific offerings of panagam and vadaparuppu are presented.¹¹

Dolothsavam October-November

The Dolothsavam festival in Aipasi lasts for a duration of nine days. Each afternoon, Namperumal is positioned in the Unjal (swing) Mandapam, directly facing a bas relief of Kanthadai Ramanuja Muni, a prominent advocate of this event. Multiple melodies are sung while the Unjal is softly swayed. Historically, Devadasis would employ flywhisks and perform intricate dances to the Unjal songs crafted by Pillai Perumal Iyengar, igniting fires using clarified butter (now substituted with oil). The sequence persists until the seventh day, on which the deity also pays a visit to the Thayar shrine for reverence. On the eighth day, the Mandapam in the Madhurakavi Nandavanam yard is adorned with great attention to detail. This period also aligns with the observance of Deepavali.¹²

Karthikai (November-December) Chokkapaanai Uthsavam and Kaisika Ekadesi

The Chokkapaanai Uthsavam and Kaisika Ekadesi are observed during the month of Karthikai. Kaisika Ekadesi showcases the Arayar reciting verses to pay tribute to Nampaduvan, who achieved salvation in Thirukurungudi. There is apprehension that the distinctive practice of Arayar Sevai may be terminated.¹³

Margazhi December to January

The month of Margazhi, which spans from December to January, is distinguished by the celebration of Peria Thirunaal, also known as the Adyayana Uthsavam. This event comprises the illustrious Vaikunta Ekadesi, which is separated into two segments: Raa Pathu, consisting of ten nights with nighttime activities, and Pagal Pathu, consisting of ten days with morning activities. On the seventh day, the Arayar Sevai ritual recounts the tale of Vamana.¹⁴ The eighth day portrays the process of churning the ocean. The ninth day showcases the Muthukuri Sevai ceremony. Finally, on the tenth day, Namperumal, disguised as Jaganmohini, dispenses nectar to the deities, barring the asuras. Another notable aspect of these ten days is the performance of Vedic chanting. Arayers chant verses from the Thiruvaimozhi during the Raa Pathu festival.

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The Arayar Sevai ceremony of Srirangam

Arayar Sevai is the act of worship conducted by the Arayar, who are individuals that are recognised as both "those who offer praise to Vishnu" and "rulers." The Divya Prabandham was categorised into Iyarpa, which was intended for recitation, and Isaippa, which was meant for singing. Naathamuni, together with his cousins Keezhai Ahatthu Aazhwan and Melai Ahatthu Aazhwan, composed musical arrangements for the Isaippa paasurams and instructed his nephews in the art of singing and worshipping in the presence of the sacred Srirangam. Traditionally, the Arayar Sevai ritual was conducted in Kanchipuram, Thirupathi, and Thirukurugudi. However, in modern times, it is predominantly observed in Srirangam, Sriviliputtur, and Azhwar Thirunagari.¹⁶

The Arayar normally performs this ceremony in front of the Uthsava Murthy within the temple. The Arayar dons a cap embellished with Vaishnavite symbols, while the priest bestows upon him fabric and blossoms. The Arayar commences his performance, positioned a short distance from the deity, employing a set of cymbals known as "kulittaalam" to establish the rhythm. Following a brief introduction from the drums, he proceeds to have a distinctive conversation with the Lord during the religious ceremony.

Arayar Sevai comprises concise words called Kondattams, which extol the adventures of Azhwar with Perumal and Thayar, typically accompanied by uncomplicated music. The performances, characterised by apt abhinayam (expressions) and explanations in a combination of Sanskrit and Tamil, adhere to a pattern that mirrors the temple's historical background and established customs. During designated days, particular scenes are enacted with dramatic effect. For example, a diviner (Kattuvicci) use pearls to foretell favourable outcomes for a woman (Nayaki) in matters of love. During the Chokkapaanai Uthsavam, it is customary to ignite an entire coconut tree, although in modern times, only half of a coconut tree is typically used. On this day, the Arayers also recite the initial verses of Thirumangai Azhwar. Vaikunta Ekadesi, the most pivotal day of the occasion, is the exclusive day when the Paramapadha gate is unsealed, granting passage to the lord, symbolising deliverance for devotees, which draws substantial crowds. On the eighth day, a theatrical performance portrays Thirumangai Azhwar surreptitiously taking the lord's jewellery, while the temple accountant compiles a fascinating inventory of the pilfered things. On the tenth day, the statue of Nammazhwar is positioned at the base of Namperumal, and Thulasi is gently scattered on it, representing the amalgamation of Nammazhwar with the Lord while the final ten verses of the Thiruvaimozhi are chanted. The celebrations culminate with Namperumal symbolically beseeching the Arayar to bring back Nammazhwar to his sacred abode. This month also commemorates the asterism of Thondaradippodi Azhwar.¹⁷

Thai (January–February) Boopathi Thirunaal

The Boopathi Thirunaal event, which takes place during the Tamil month of Thai, lasts for a duration of 11 days. Every day, there are processions that end with the big "ther" which is a processional chariot. In addition to the festivities, this festival include harvest rituals, such as a ceremonial hunt on Kanu and the presentation of Pongal.¹⁸

Maasi (February–March): Theppa Thirunaal (Float Festival)

The Theppa Thirunaal, also known as the Float Festival, has a duration of nine days. The initiative or expansion was carried out by Jatavarman Sundara Pandya I. Throughout the festival, the divine being is transported in regular processions on a boat to a Mandapam located at the centre of the temple tank. Prior to returning to the temple, the deity partakes in a customary ablution at this site.¹⁹

Panguni (March–April): Aadi Brahmotsavam

The Aadi Brahmotsavam, which is thought to have been initiated by Vibhishana, has a duration of 11 days. Notable features of the festival consist of a ceremonial march on the bronze "ther" and a visit to Jeeyarpuram where unique dishes such as curd rice, bitter gourd, greens (keerai), deep-fried savouries (vadam), and mango pickle are served. The deity also frequents the Uraiur temple. The ninth day, known as Panguni Uthram, holds great importance. At first, Thayar declines to grant the lord permission to enter, and her priests express their disapproval by hurling floral projectiles at him. Nammalwar acts as an intermediary, using the Arayar, to reconcile conflicts and bring together the deities involved in processions. Panguni Uthram is renowned for its commemoration of harmony and the chance for worshippers to observe the divine beings. The festival's distinctiveness is enhanced by the palanquin, which can be transported in several embodiments such as a lion, horse, serpent, or thunderbolt (vajra).²⁰

Significance of Srirangam Festivals in Pilgrimage Tourism

The festivals held at Srirangam, such as Boopathi Thirunaal, Theppa Thirunaal, and Aadi Brahmotsavam, are significant cultural occasions that draw tourists who are interested in experiencing the true Tamil history. Srirangam is a key destination for cultural tourism due to its festivals that showcase a diverse range of traditional rites, processions, and festivities that are exclusive to the region. Visitors to Srirangam during these festivities can fully engage with the island's rich historical and cultural stories. The festivals act as dynamic showcases of Srirangam's spiritual and artistic customs, offering guests a captivating and enlightening encounter that establishes a connection with the area's historical heritage.²¹ The festivals also facilitate the promotion of local arts and crafts, as they frequently incorporate traditional music, dancing, and artisanal goods. Tourists get the chance to observe and buy handcrafted products, such as temple decorations, ivory sculptures, and traditional fabrics, right from the place where they are made. This not only promotes the livelihood of local craftsmen but also enhances the overall experience for visitors. For individuals in search of spiritual enlightenment, the festivals provide a deep and meaningful relationship to the divine. Engaging in or witnessing the rites and celebrations enables tourists to encounter the spiritual customs and convictions of the local community, augmenting their comprehension and admiration of Tamil spiritual traditions.

The festivals' collaborative aspect fosters a lively ambiance that amplifies social engagement among tourists, locals, and pilgrims. This collective encounter promotes a feeling of inclusion and attachment, enhancing the overall journey and reinforcing cultural interactions.

The surge of tourists during festival periods can exert a substantial economic influence on the local economy. It enhances the commercial prospects for local vendors, hotels, restaurants, and transportation services, so bolstering the overall economic robustness of the region. The festivities play a crucial role in maintaining and upholding traditional practices and rituals by drawing in tourists. Tourism has a significant role in maintaining the importance and liveliness of these historical traditions by attracting attention and generating interest. Festivals that achieve success often attract media coverage and garner attention from travel guides and influencers, hence enhancing Srirangam's visibility as a tourism destination.

Conclusion

The pilgrimage tourism in Srirangam provides a unique opportunity for individuals to enhance their spiritual well-being and immerse themselves in the local culture. The island's lively festivals, which are deeply based in centuries-old customs, offer a thorough understanding of the fundamental values of dedication, harmony, and cultural legacy that characterise this precious place. As individuals from all parts of the world join together to participate in intricate customs and extravagant festivities, they become integral to an enduring story that surpasses geographical and cultural limitations. The trip to Srirangam is more than just a physical excursion; it is a transforming pilgrimage that revitalises one's faith and promotes a feeling of communal unity. The grandiose temple architecture, the melodic chanting, and the vibrant processions collectively generate an ambiance of reverence and delight, leaving an enduring impression on the hearts of the visitors. Viewed from the perspective of pilgrimage tourism, Srirangam stands out as a symbol of unbroken cultural traditions and strong spiritual energy. It serves as a symbol of the lasting impact of belief, attracting numerous followers annually to commemorate the collective human journey of dedication and harmony. Within the sacred areas of Srirangam, pilgrims have a deep connection with the divine and a strong sense of belonging to a long-standing tradition that has been maintained and protected throughout history. This international acclaim aids in promoting the region and appealing to a wider audience who are interested in immersing themselves in its cultural and spiritual attractions. These festivals provide tourists with significant knowledge about the history, religion, and cultural traditions of Tamil Nadu. Providing educational tours and events that are connected to the festivals can enrich the learning experience for tourists, allowing them to gain a more profound comprehension of the region's cultural legacy.

End Notes

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