

## **TOPIC**

Medieval and Early Modern Puranic and Religious biographies of Tiruvannamalai - based on the Puranic Text of Arunachala Mahatmaya a important portion of Skanda Purana

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## **AUTHORED BY SRI JOYDIP**

Mobile – 9339775464 , Mail – [joydip.chakladar@gmail.com](mailto:joydip.chakladar@gmail.com)

Address – 93, Itbhata Road, Burdwan - 713103

## **ABSTRACT**

The research paper comes with a important research question – “What is the significance of this biographies of Tiruvannamalai like Arunachala Mahatmaya which is based out of Puranic Text of Skanda Purana ?”

The answer is given in these research paper on “Medieval and early modern religious biographies on Tiruvannamalai”. The genre of literature in Arunachala Mahatmaya based out of Skanda Purana, is not only useful for deepening our knowledge in cultural and religious history of Tiruvannamalai , but also valuable , if one wants to study the cultural constructs , and reconstruct the development of these place, with active people participation, and also let Tiruvannamalai to gain an International recognition on becoming the UNESCO World Heritage Site, for its uniqueness of religious , cultural and spiritual atmosphere, preserving its greenery and environment from rapid urbanisation . This modern interpretation of the puranic text from Skanda Purana, is important and significant, for raising awareness among people in general, the need for preserving the greenery , the forest and the spiritual atmosphere, which needs to be preserved in a better fashion for our future generations to come.

## BRIEF PROFILE OF SRI JOYDIP

Sri Joydip is the founder and Managing Trustee of Sri Joydip Ashram – a Educational trust working on Spiritual , Leadership Education and Management Consultancy and a participant of United Nations Global Compact Program working on area of Human Rights , Anti corruption, Environment and Labor Laws . He completed his Management Education from Indian Institute of Management , Kolkata and have been a Guest Faculty on Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta from the period of 2004-2007, before he dedicated completely to spiritual search, and started his own Spiritual Education organization- Sri Joydip Ashram working on Synthesis of Eastern and Western models of Spiritual Education. Sri Joydip has written a Series of 50 articles in Times of India [ Speaking Tree] on the "The Glory of Arunachala" and have plans to make a Documentary film on "The Glory of Arunachala". Sri Joydip can be reached by mailing [joydip.chakladar@gmail.com](mailto:joydip.chakladar@gmail.com)

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## Introduction

The Glory of Arunachala, is a part of Skanda Purana . It is found in Book I of Maheswarakanda . The Section II of Book I of Maheswarakanda is Arunachala Mahatmaya . Skanda Purana is one of the largest Purana out of the 18 puranas, which exist. Written between 5<sup>th</sup> Century A.D – 11<sup>th</sup> Century AD , Skanda Purana of 81,000 verse is considered as “Shiva” as revealed to Lord Kartikaya who is the son of Shiva , who was also general of the armies of Gods.All puranas are considered to be authored by Vyasa , however here Vyasa , might be indicated as a title , where many knowledgeable person have got these title, who authored the Puranas.

All religion be it Islam or Christianity or Hinduism lay great emphasis of sanctity of certain places and enjoin pilgrimage to them. Larger rivers, mountains and forest have always been venerated as abodes of Gods . The thriving spiritual tourism industry has made the visits to these abodes possible in much easier fashion.

Ancients Sustras, Smiritis or Sastras have not attached much importance to pilgrimage, however Mahabharata the great epic considered pilgrimage, as more meritorious then sacrifices . Hence it was natural that Puranas vied with one another on glorifying these tirthas. Skanda purana is not one book , but a library of such Sthaala Puranas or Tirtha mahatmayas. Hence its important research document, in many disciplines of ancient history.

These genre of literature which we found in Puranas, is not only very useful for deepening of our knowledge, in cultural and religious history of India, in general , but also most valuable those wants to reconstruct the development of regional history and local cults or to

gain a deeper insight in various religious institution . Skanda purana is thus a mine of social , cultural , political , historical , geographical , philosophical along with various myths and legends and so on.

Skanda purana also gives emphasis to moral purity, when it goes through describing all these subjects mentioned above and ancient Indian philosophy, in a more direct and straight forward fashion with a story telling style that masses can accept and understand the highest spiritual principles. Infact , these Puranas are the sources of many “Spiritual Kathas” which held on different part of India and attended by the larger population of India.

The “Skanda purana” has special importance, as it covers the whole of India. Thus it describes the topography and cultural tradition of Arunachala in Maheswara Kanda, and also Himalayan Region of Uttarpradesh, alongwith Orrisa , Malawa Rajasthan , Gujarat. Reading Skanda Purana and Arunchala Mahatmaya is similar to gaining the experience of an wandering monk who might had to travel whole India , to gain such kind of experience. The authors of each of this sthala purana, like Arunachala Mahatmaya, know there region like a palm in their hand.

The Skanda purana, states that entire purana got narrated by Skanda to Bhrigu, who was an Saptarishi, and had special understanding of “Nabagraha”, and there movements and how it affects human life . He was also considered the father of Vedic Astrology, which is the true form of astrology. Further, Angirasas, who are considered as fire priest, got it from Bhrigu .And then Cyavana got it from Angirasa and Reika got it from Cyavana , and it is thus traditionally handed down to Suta through Vyasa. The rest of the last chapters is only “Phalasarutis”.

The position of Skanda Purana as a Mahapurana, is not disputed at all. But very nature of Skanda Purana as a library of Kshetras, and Mahatmayas, is basically different form other puranas like Visnu Purana or Bhagvad Purana . Though many books of Skanda Purana share the Puranic ideas about – Swarga , Pratiswarga , Manvantara but there are some ideas also missing . We have to understand the Purana is meant to make the Vedic philosophy popular, and it has all the attributes, to make the terse philosophical truth more acceptable to the masses. A society of Puranic India , is of utmost interest and importance to the researchers on Historical traditions. Like other puranas, Skanda Puranas go to the idealistic classless society existing in “Kreta Yuga”, where there was free provision of Shelter , food , clothes and ornaments , and absence of concept of Adharma . The evolution of Varnas like Kshtriyaas and introduction of performance of sacrifices, appeared in Treta Yuga.

Yet , equality and moral purity or dharma, has been the essence of Skanda Puranas, and the same voice also continues in the Arunachala Mahatmaya or the Glory of Arunachala. Puranas as a whole , is considered as fifth Vedas , which brought all the principles of Vedas, in application to society, so there is importance of how these wisdom relates to contemporary society and its constructs.

The Glory of Arunachala, contemplates on number of spiritual principles, which are also important for modern society. The modern social construct, though lately has started recognising the importance of environment, have not given enough appreciation to the environment, so we can see the wrath of nature constantly destroying the earth in the form of Cyclones , earthquakes , global warming , extreme weather – the recent example is the destruction the pilgrimage of Kedarnath in Uttarakhand. Bhagvad Gita terms it as “Adi devic problems”, the problems which gets rise, when we don’t recognise the contribution of nature, and relentless sacrifice of

different forces of nature, which we have always received without anything in return, and taken for granted . We have received sunlight from our birth, wind, water, sky and also earth. However we never done any sacrifice to these panchabhootas, that we can remain with them in balance both in our microsomic body [ Individual body] and macrosomic body [ the body of earth] .

There are many sadhanas, which where were told in Arunachala Mahatmaya which exactly does the balancing to our body and mind and also to the environment, and by that way we bring homeostasis, and promotes a overall , health in individual level and also in collective level, at the same time “wellness and happiness” both to individual and collective life.



## Origin of Arunachala

There are many stories and myths, which are there on the Origin of Arunachala, and each of them are very symbolic which tries to give different aspects of the spiritual significance, of the origin of Arunachala . Given below is one of the stories from Skanda Purana – Maheswara kanda from the section – “The Glory of Arunachala” <sup>1</sup>.

Parvati enquired: How did this *Linga* of fire come to exist on earth? How did it become cool and easily visible to all beings? How are the holy waters rising from this sacred hill withdrawn into it? You must enlighten me. .

Gautama said: This hill was a mass of fire in the *Krita Yuga*, jewels in the *Treta Yuga*, gold in the *Dvapara Yuga* and emerald in the *Kali Yuga*. In the *Krita Yuga*, when it spread out for several *yojanas* as a mass of fire, Maharshis circumambulated it. Thereafter, at the humble prayer of the *devas*, Bhagavan Arunachala gradually became cool. Gautama continued: The *devas* prayed thus: ‘Bhagavan! Lord of Arunagiri! Although your nature is fiery you must illuminate the world in a cool form. The Vedas regard you as the embodiment of Siva and proclaim you as “that which is copper-coloured, bright, crimson red and wholly auspicious”. Salutations to you, who are known by the Vedas, and who are Soma and pure bliss. The whole world, moving and un-moving, is your form”.

## The Form of Arunachala

Gautama continues his discussion with Gowri in Skanda Purana on “The Glory of Arunachala”<sup>2</sup> and elaborates about the form of Arunachala. The form of Arunachala, which is considered to produce at the end of *yugas*, cloudbursts, flooded streams and overflowing oceans. For it is said in the Vedas: “From fire, water came into existence.” It is therefore said that the world came into existence from you who are the Supreme Self. O Mahadeva! Sonachala! Ocean of Compassion! O Lord! Let all men know you.’ When the *devas* humbly prayed, the Lord who loves His devotees immediately became cool and visible to all. Thereafter rivers and streams began to flow. Rains falling from the clouds were no longer withdrawn into the hill. An Effulgence bright as millions of rising suns can be seen in the eyes of enlightened *jivas*, who worship it. In accordance with the prayers of the *dikpalakas*, *devas*, *maharshis* and other great souls, all the *tirthas* wander around the Hill.

Brahma said: On hearing these details, Gowri enquired with great enthusiasm about the true origin of the *tirthas*. She asked: ‘O Bhagavan! Which of the *tirthas* here are invisible and which are visible? Please tell me!’

Gautama recollected what Siva had formerly told him and said: The “*Indra Tirtha*” is situated in the east; Indra got rid of the sin of killing a Brahmin by bathing in it. The *Brahma Tirtha* is situated in the quarter of Agni (southeast); Agni’s sin of seducing the wives of others was removed by bathing in it.

## **Beyond Mythology**

In comparative mythology , we can find similar construct and structure of the stories associated with Gods and deities , in different cultures . These comes with the themes and subthemes where are find a similarity between the stories and deities and the cultural construct alongwith the belief system, which it tries to create from gaining certain state of subjective experience. In Hindu Mythology which is the part of the South Asian Mythological tradition, we find these mythical stories which communicate a subjective truth, which is the base of the cultures, existing is South Asian countries . On these there are 3 most important volume of work , which created the mythological tradition of India. They are “Mahabharata” , “Ramayana” and “Puranas” . Arunachala Mahatmaya is a part of the vast mythological tradition of India, and it is found in Skanda Purana which is again one of the longest Puranas out of 18 puranas. Out there, it is a part of Maheswara kanda . Skanda Purana is one of puranas, which have both a combination of Sthala Mahatmaya and also Mahatmaya of different mythological objects . It depicts some stories of the place – Tiruvannamalai and also about the Mythical Mountain – Arunachala Shiva which is closely associated with the Mythology who is considered ultimate aesthetic , yogi , guru and also a symbol of a liberated individual. These mythical stories often create a belief system, which can be considered as reinforcing cultural tradition of one subjective Truth. In these case the subjective truth of “Self Enquiry” is reinforced which is related to Arunachala. As Mt.Arunachala is considered the form of “Self Enquiry” the highest path of any sadhana, and the Ultimate Sadhana asserted by many scriptures like Yoga Vasistha , Astavakra Gita , Ribhu Gita .

It again gives a basis of the Cultural Assumption, which was made out of the subject truth of self enquiry, where the rituals of different sorts were designed in the Temple town of Tiruvannamalai starting from the yearly Deepam Festival of 10 days , monthly Girivalam, of taking sacred walks around the hill , weekly ritual of Pujas to the Divine Guru Dakshinamurty, who can give us the blessing to “Pragya” and “Medha” for taking us to the knowledge of Self Enquiry, which will lead us to highest strung yoga which is known as Advaita . There are also different Tirthas , places and temples around Arunachala, which gives different people having different psychological and karmic bondage, to move over them, “out of worshipping” in these temples and taking Girivalam and also attending in Guru Poornima and Deepam festival, for gradually gaining the highest states of consciousness, which is the advaita consciousness.

The mythological structure of Arunachala Mahatmaya, depicts the subject truth of self enquiry in the story form. The path of knowledge , and the cultural assumptions created from it, on how rituals can be developed and designed like lighting fire, in the peak of Arunachala, and in the Arunachaleswara temple, can lead one to the subjective experience of liberation from the existing Human condition and transform his consciousness where he could move to an higher states of thought, which helps him to see his existing problem from an higher context, and by that actually able to vanish a lot of thoughts, which are the root of the creation of the problem. The form of liberation known as “Jivanmukta” is sorted by many.

It is these, which is the utility of going through these mythological stories of Arunachala Mahatmaya, and create a belief system which can help us to live in the culture of wellness and create wave of

wellness in our life both in context of Health , Wealth and Wellbeing at the same time , bring more appreciation from the people across the world , about this sacred geography and religious and cultural tradition , that it could be further preserved for future generations to come. This would help us also to take initiatives like making Arunachala and Tiruvannamalai ,a UNESCO World Heritage Site for better preservation of the sacred geography , religious and cultural tradition.

Now different places, have different cultures and it is based on the cultural assumptions existing there. Culture is the sum total of collective behaviour, and it is based on the cultural framework a collective consciousness, operates in a certain place in a certain way. So one of the ways to change a culture of a certain place , is to understand the cultural assumption existing there, and then the subjective truth it expresses. When we understand these two important basis, then the mythological stories which are existing to depict the subjective truth and the cultural assumption can be reworked for creating a different interpretation to change the collective behaviour of the cultural framework that will serve higher Human and Enviromental preservation causes.

This is the way also to rework a cultural , development and management issues alongwith leadership issues, by working on the central belief system . These also present in other places too , and there can be creation of myths , like something like Mahatamayas, on other places too understand the cultural themes, and how they depict a subjective truth and what are the cultural assumption, they made which rule the collective behaviour and how they can be transformed. Once this sacred geography, cultural tradition and religious tradition, is preserved in a better fashion , it could be a success story on how the vast wealth which is lying in India , in the

form of sacred geographies ,religious traditions and also cultural traditions can be preserved.

## **Reference**

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3. Sri Joydip , The Glory of Arunachala Series , Published in Speaking Tree Blog of Times of India.