Fire on the Mountain
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FEATUREFEATURE

Fire on the Mountain

Worshipping Lord Siva In a Celebration of Light

Choodie Shivaram, Bangalore

Silent Slideshow

The all-pervading quiet of early morning is suddenly disrupted by a mad clamor of thunderous sound. Ringing bells, pounding drums and piercing nagaswarams (temple horns) almost overpower the belting voices of hundreds of devotees who are singing songs in praise of Siva, the Lord of Arunachala. It is 4:30 am on the 14th of December, 2005, and the small main sanctum of the massive Tiruvannamalai Siva temple in Tamil Nadu is packed with souls who have been waiting in line all night for this moment.

The chief priest has just finished a simple ritual called bharani dipam and now ceremoniously waves a huge camphor flame in the direction of nearby Arunachala mountain. Although he is chanting Sanskrit slokas, he cannot be heard amidst the deafening furor of devotion that surrounds him. Finally, he touches the flame he is holding to the wicks of five huge, earthen, ghee-filled pots, representing the sacred elements earth, air, fire, water and ether. As these five flames loom up with red-yellow light, the famous, one-day, South Indian festival of Krittika Dipam officially begins.

I am here with my mom, my dad and my aunt. As ardent Hindus, we are all enjoying ourselves immensely and worshiping fully. My father is 80. Generally, he stays away from crowds. For him, a group of five is a lot of people. Yet, when I invited him to come with me on this pilgrimage, he accepted without hesitation.

I am also attending this sacred event as a correspondent for Hinduism Today. In that capacity, I am ever at the ready for a good quote. As soon as the bharani dipam concludes, I approach a very official looking person. With one finger poised on the "start "-button of my handy, pocket-size tape recorder, I introduce myself and begin an informal conversation. The lady I am talking to tells me her name is Dr. Malathi and that she is a government doctor on duty here in service to devotees attending the festival.

"There is immense significance in this first Krittika Dipam ceremony called bharani dipam, " she explains. "At this time, the universal Lord manifests as the five elements, which will later fully merge to become one when the Krittika Dipam flame is lit in the evening. From one to many and many to one. This is the whole essence of Saivism and the meaning of Krittika Dipam."

All across India, millions of bonfires are lit on hills and in temples on Krittika Dipam. But nowhere is this festival celebrated like it is in Tiruvannamallai, also known as Annamalai, Arunachala, Arunadri and Tiruvarunai--and famous as the home of Sri Ramana Maharshi.

Krittika Dipam occurs annually in the lunar month of Kartika, which occurs in November/December, on the last day of the 10-day festival called Brahmotsavam. It is on this auspicious day that, at precisely 6:00 in the evening, a sacred fire is lit on top of the 2,682-foot-high Arunachala mountain to symbolize the merging of all manifest existence back into the one source of all things. It is said that those who witness this sacred ceremony receive the blessings of Siva and Parvati in person. All of the traditional temple rituals that are performed during Brahmotsavam create a spiritual fervency that culminates with great power on Krittika Dipam as a grand congregation of devotees, holy men, officials, police personnel and media squeeze together, shoulder to shoulder, to witness the festival's magnificent consummation.

"Preparations for this holy day begin one month in advance with the local administration, revenue department, police and temple authorities synergizing their efforts, " says Mr. Jayram, deputy commissioner of Tiruvannamalai. "It's not an easy task managing tens of millions of people. Even a small lapse can be very costly. It is God who guides us and gives us the strength we need. We endeavor to see that we give our best to those who come seeking Arunachala."

Since early morning, temple staff and volunteers have been carrying five-gallon containers of ghee and large pots of thick, braided cloth wicks to the top of Arunachala mountain. Once the mountaintop flame has been lit, it must be kept burning for ten days, which requires vast quantities of wick and clarified butter.

As the day wanes into dusk and night begins to darken the sky, pilgrims stand or sit, motionless with anticipation, at the base of Arunachala mountain, preparing to worship God Siva as an infinite pillar of light (See sidebar: A Legend of Fire).

At 6 pm, a roaring fire is ignited in the temple at the base of Arunachala. This signals the lighting of a similar blaze on the summit. When that flame is seen by the thousands of devotees below, the entire countryside explodes with flashing luminescence. Bonfires, lamps, neon lights and fireworks light the night like day as a surging, thronging, emotionally charged mass of devotees chant, "Arunachala Siva, " "Annamalai " and "Annamalai Harohara."

Long-time pilgrims assert that, even years later, the very thought of an otherworldly moment like this recreates it, just as if it is happening fresh and new. I can certainly say with full assurance that it is not an experience I will ever forget. No words in any language--spoken, whispered or thought--could ever express even a hint of the intense spirituality I felt right then and there in the middle of that perfect devotion.

Through my eyes only

Although Tiruvannamalai is only a five-hour drive from Bangalore, where I live, I have never been there. Imagine the thrill I felt when I was asked to write this story.

As I enter the ancient temple town on the day before Krittika Dipam, it is raining--a blessing, so they say. We become abruptly aware that we are but four of thousands, perhaps millions. Mothers with babies cradled in their arms, men with children perched on their shoulders, pilgrims of all shapes, sizes and ages are streaming in from all directions. Public and private transports are packed beyond capacity. Hotels have been booked for months. Yet, none of this seems chaotic. It's all somehow just wonderful.

I have never witnessed a congregation of such gigantic proportions. When we move in the street, we are all so tightly packed together we can't even see our own feet. I quickly discover that a crowd like this has a mind of its own. When it moves, we do, too. We have no choice.

Maneuvering about is also difficult because the roads are so muddy from the incessant rain. Although many pilgrims fervently pray for the skies to clear so the festivities will not be disrupted, none of the activities is actually thwarted by the weather.

Our first objective is to make our way through the crowds to Kailas Ashram, where we will be most cordially hosted for the next two days, thanks to the caring hospitality of Sri Jayendra Puri Swamiji (See sidebar: Heir to the Throne). Due to a shortage of accommodations, many people are literally living on the streets, finding shelter wherever they can. Even the hundreds of ashrams in this holy town are full.

Internationally renowned photographer Thomas Kelly--also on assignment for Hinduism Today--is working with me on this story. He arrived before me and is already snapping photos with great enthusiasm and inspiration. When we first connect, he is bubbling with excitement at the abundant photographic opportunities that have already come his way. After he gives me a quick update of what he has done thus far, we set off together to explore new festival adventures.

The devotees around us are firmly focused and seem to know exactly what they are doing. Although many of them do not live here, few are first-time pilgrims like Thomas and me. Still, their faces betray a newcomer's fresh sense of anticipation. All day long, devotees have been climbing Arunachala just to touch the vessel that will hold the flame that will be lit that evening.

"They look like ants on a march, " exclaimed Thomas, pointing to the continuous stream of people trekking up the slopes. Ah, yes! Another photo opportunity. In a flash, he is capturing the scene on camera. Although devotees are discouraged from climbing the mountain because it is said to be Lord Siva incarnate, thousands still scale the slopes unabashedly on Krittika Dipam.

The chosen fishermen

A flame taken from the five earthen pots that were lit just after the early morning temple ceremony of bharani dipam is kept burning in the temple throughout the day as a symbol of the merging of manifestation back into God, the one source of all. This single flame is referred to as the bharani dipam. At 10:00 in the morning, a select group of fishermen are blessed by the temple priest with a small ceremony. At this time--amidst ringing bells and temple music--the priest gives the fishermen a lamp that has been lit from the bharani dipam in the temple. This lamp, also called bharani dipam, will be taken by the fishermen to the top of the mountain.

Local fishermen are traditionally given the privilege of carrying the bharani dipam up the mountain and lighting the krittika dipam in the evening, because--according to a popular myth--Parvati (the wife of Lord Siva) was born in a fishing village. "There are around 75 fishing families that are bestowed with this hereditary privilege, " explains Saravana, a young fisherman who lives nearby. "Three of them carry the dipam. Each year, the duty rotates. There is never infighting amongst those who share this duty. The elders decide."

After their consecration ritual, the fishermen take off up the mountain. Their hike up the steep, rugged slopes will take about four hours. They take their sacred task seriously, never losing sight of the fact that the flame they carry will be seen by thousands as the eternal light of Lord Siva.

After photographing the pujas in the temple, Thomas--an experienced mountaineer--takes off barefoot up the hill, hunched forward under the considerable weight of his large, heavy camera bags (See sidebar, page 24: OK, I Can Do This). He moves quickly to keep up with the fishermen, who are waiting for no one. It was not exactly our plan that Thomas would go up the mountain at this time, but he is moving on inspiration, and I don't want to impede him.

In the temple, all is quiet after the fishermen leave. The rains continue. No one cares. Everyone is engrossed in preparing for the coming evening. Some wait to enjoy entertaining events scheduled for the afternoon. The festival administration is busy making seating and security arrangements in and around the temple for the scores of VIP guests--politicians, film stars, senior court judges, bureaucrats and

more.

A lot of people are seeking special treatment, but few are getting it. Temple officials are constantly hassled for "festival passes." Although some devotees just want these tickets so they can snuggle up close to VIPs, others have a better reason. On Krittika Dipam day, the temple is closed after 3 pm to those without passes. Luckily, I have one.

By 5:00 in the evening, the area surrounding the temple flagpole, as well as the adjoining terrace, is packed. Unmindful of the incessant drizzle, people are grabbing seats to observe the dramatic arrival of five exquisitely decorated palanquins, carrying the Hindu Gods Vinayaka, Subramanya, Siva, Amba and Chandikeshwara. The devotees are constantly moving and adjusting their positions to get a better view and to make way for still more people pouring in. Experienced pilgrims know exactly what's going to happen. For first-timers like me, the anticipation is enhanced by a sort of blessed ignorance.

Not wanting to miss even the smallest detail of what is going on and fully determined to perform my duty as a reporter well, I am constantly dispatching a barrage of questions to people around me. While some of these kindly folks answer me with courteous patience, others find me a distraction and slowly inch away or pretend not to hear.

Suddenly, the crowd's attention shifts to the temple entrance from behind the flag pole. Some devotees jump up to get a better view. The police shout at them to be seated. The first palanquin arrives with a dramatic flair. It's the Vinayaka Deity, a form of Lord Ganesha. Exquisitely bedecked with a variety of flowers artistically arranged, this relatively small Deity seems magically large in its luxurious setting. More than eight people are carrying the heavy wooden palanquin. They dance with graceful dignity to the accompaniment of temple music, devotional singing and Sanskrit prayers. Soon enough, they reach their designated position in front of the flag pole and come to a stop.

In a few minutes, the next palanquin arrives, as if in competition. It's a little bigger. Unmindful of its weight, those who are carrying this celestial cargo somehow manage to dance with abandon, rocking the Deity joyously. I ask the person next to

me which Deity this is. "Subramanya, " he snaps impatiently.

No one wants to shift their gaze even for a moment. I'm beginning to think that maybe I had better do the same--otherwise, I might miss something important. I try to get closer to the flag pole, but a policewomen stops me.

Now another palanquin is arriving, rocking to and fro. "Swami, Swami, " the crowd shouts. Here, "Swami " is referring to Siva. Amba (Goddess Parvati) is right behind, followed by Chandikeshwara. I have learned that, when the crowd shifts its gaze, something new and important is about to happen.

Within about 30 minutes, five palanquins have arrived in all their spiritual pageantry. Now, we wait for the climax, the coming of Ardhanarishvara (Lord Siva as half man, half woman). I am told that this will occur immediately after the krittika dipam is lit. People are now either stubbornly holding their seated positions or inching forward for a better vantage point. Everyone wants to be able to see the mountaintop. The drizzle continues. There is a bit of agitated commotion, but it is of little consequence. All eyes are looking up.

Finally, the appointed moment arrives. Against the backdrop of a sunset sky, crowned with the rising star of Kartika, thundering firecrackers, ringing temple bells and a frenzy of rhythmic chanting merge to create a cacophony of chaotic splendor. Camphor is lit in a cauldron by the temple flag pole, signaling priests on top of the mountain to light their flame. The timing is perfectly synchronized. The air is charged as the overpowering sight of light, signifying Siva in the form of Jyoti (divine light), merges with Parvati to become Siva/Sakti. Now, finally, Ardhanarishvara is brought out of the temple with great ceremonial fanfare. This is the only day of the year that this particular Deity is ever moved. It is most auspicious.

The sight of the krittika dipam is magical. It brings an inexplicable joy. People are ecstatic, mesmerized by the light. In a moment of complete absorption, I forget myself and lose consciousness of everything and everyone around me. The rain clouds that have intermittently masked the dipam now create a diffusion of light and color that produces a most striking effect. Even though this is uniquely beautiful, I am aching for at least one moment of perfect visual clarity so that I can

witness the mountaintop flame unobstructed. I shout loudly with impatience, "Arunachala, please remove that cloud for just a moment." In a jiffy, as if in answer to my plea, the cloud vanishes like a curtain pulled aside. The people nearby look at me in surprise as if to ask, "How did you do that?" Well, that's Arunachala! My aged parents are standing there with me at this precious time. The glow on their faces betrays their fulfillment and brings me great joy.

A few minutes after the dipam is lit, the crowds reluctantly and slowly disperse. Yet, the experience is not over. In a sense, it has only just begun. Wherever we all go, we will carry with us the sublime thrill of the divine adventure the we have all just shared. The overwhelming aftermath of our exaltation takes a long time to settle down into the reality of routine life. I resolve to return to this holy place again and again.

On Krittika Dipam day, many devotees fast all day, taking food only after the lighting of the sacred fire in the evening. This is the traditional practice of the fishermen who light the krittika dipam. "We don't drink even water the entire day, " says Senthil, one of the fisherman. "Only after returning from the hill late at night do we take prasadam (sacred food offering)--and even then, only from the temple."

Thomas, our photographer, also fasted. To be honest, he really didn't have a choice. When he followed the fishermen up the hill in the morning, he carried no food or water. Little did he know that his next opportunity to eat or drink anything at all would be only late that night. When I catch up with him in the evening, he is famished. "You have certainly become an ardent devotee of Arunachala, " I tell him jokingly. He laughs. He is happy.

After nightfall, we see groups of people lighting lamps in the streets. Every house, every shop, every temple--not only in Tiruvannamalai but in all surrounding villages and towns--is bedecked with beautifully flickering lamps.

Throughout the day, street merchants have been performing annadana (free distribution of food). For this one day, the entire town has merged as one family of unforgettable warmth, amity and cordiality. Even amidst the discomfort of the crowded streets, life runs smoothly and everyone gets along harmoniously. A senior police officer informs me that there has not been a single instance of misbehavior,

theft or crime during the festival.

"Nearly 2,500 police personnel are on duty during the festival, " he explains. "They have been briefed that this is a religious congregation, and devotees should not be harassed or dealt with harshly. Our work has mainly been crowd control."

When the dipam was lit, I saw scores of policemen and policewomen forgetting themselves in devotion as they merged in the experience of Arunachala.

The residents of Tiruvannamalai take great pride in the spiritual heritage of their famously powerful temple town. "I grew up here and never miss a single cerebration, " says Dhanalakshmi, who sells coconuts in front of the temple. "See how many people come to see our God here." She is not disturbed that the crowds attending the temple might place a burden on her small town.

The temple is closed for a day after Krittika Dipam, because it is believed that, when Arunachala manifested Himself in the dipam, He temporarily shifted His abode from the temple to the hilltop.

Walking around the mountain

One of many distinctive features at Tiruvannamalai is the custom of giri pradakshina, or girivala, as it is sometimes called--the eight-mile circumambulation of the holy Arunachala mountain. No one knows when this custom began. One of the 1,008 names given to Arunachala by Adi Shankara is Giripradakshinapriya, which means "lover of giri pradakshina."

Bhagwan Ramana Maharshi often spoke of the significance of this sacred practice. He performed giri pradakshina himself many times. "Do not consider, even for a moment, that Arunachala is merely a hill of rocks and boulders, " he cautioned devotees. He offered a unique interpretation of the word pradakshina (literally "circumambulation "): "Pra stands for 'removal of all sins,' da stands for 'fulfilling of

desires,' kshi stands for 'freedom from future births,' na stands for 'deliverance received through jnana.' "

The attitude of the people coming here, even during non-festival times, is strikingly focused. Completely unmindful of formalities and protocols, most of them could not care less about VIPs who might also be visiting. They also seem oblivious to inconveniences or discomforts of any sort. These rare pilgrims wait patiently in long queues for hours, just for an instant of eye contact with their precious Lord. And they will perform giri pradakshina in the worst of weather.

Giri pradakshina is best performed early in the morning, on a day when the sun is just rising behind Arunachala, yielding the subtle pastels of daybreak. Eight temples, constructed to face in the four primary and four secondary directions, constitute important stops for the devotee as he treads the path around the holy mountain. There are also many other temples to visit along the way. This journey is traditionally performed barefooted, starting at Ramanashram. It is considered especially auspicious to perform this holy practice on purnima (full moon day), when the crowd is said to be as massive as during Krittika Dipam.

The entire road around the mountain has been recently resurfaced, thanks to a donation from the famous Tamil movie actor, Rajnikant. Locals tell me he has contributed immensely toward the development of Tiruvannamalai.

There is a strong belief that prayers will be answered when giri pradakshina is performed. This conviction has increased the number of visitors to this holy place considerably. Yet, sincere devotees strive to maintain a selfless purity in their worship by not seeking personal reward. "Girivala should be done on foot and with devotion. Then, automatically, Arunachala will answer your prayers. He knows what you need. Performing this act with a motive dilutes devotion, " asserts Mani, a local auto driver.

I could not stay away

I performed the giri pradakshina when I returned to Arunachala, one week after

Krittika Dipam. This time I came with my husband and children. As we entered the town at two in the morning, we eagerly looked for the dipam atop the mountain. Nothing was visible. Suddenly, my daughter spotted the fire, flickering daintily. For hours, we stayed up watching the divine flame. It was supposed to have burnt out on the previous day, yet there it was--still burning.

We started our giri pradakshina just before dawn. It was beautiful. Yes, my feet did hurt and there were pebbles and thorns, but the trek was certainly not tiring. Elderly pilgrims, even people with disabilities, were walking without too much difficulty. They took their time, and their devotion was exemplary.

During the 10 days that the flame burns on Arunachala after Krittika Dipam, it consumes a ton of ghee and 1,000 feet of thick, cotton wick. The fishermen who have been chosen to light the dipam hike up the mountain every day to restock the cauldron and keep the flame alive. They consider their task a sacred privilege.

A month after the celebration has ended they perform fire-walking to absolve themselves of any sins they have accrued by setting foot on the mountain while carrying the dipam. They also arrange for special pujas (worship ceremonies), abhisheka (water ceremonies) and homas (fire ceremonies) to be performed in their names.

Countless holy men--including Agasthya, Brighu, Valmiki, Vyasa, Narada, Apasthambha, Vashistha, Sambandar, Guhai Namasivayar, Manikyavachagar, Arunagirinathar, Seshadri Swamigal, Siva Yogaswami and Sivaya Subramuniyaswami--have received divine inspiration in this holy place. Illumined saints and sages, most notably Bhagwan Ramana Maharshi, have made Arunachala their home. That these great souls lived and influenced so many is proof of the power of a spirituality that is unknown to many of us who spend so much time absorbed in the problems of everyday life. I can say from my own experience that anyone who makes a pilgrimage to Tiruvannamalai at any time will come away feeling completely recharged, cleansed and born anew.

A Legend of Fire

The popular Hindu festival of Krittika Dipam is inextricably connected to an ancient Hindu legend recorded in an important Hindu literary work entitled Skanda Puranam. According to this story, two Hindu Gods--Lord Brahma, the creator, and Lord Vishnu, the preserver--each claimed superiority over the other. Somewhat embarrassed that distinguished Gods of the celestial realm should be engaged in such a puerile altercation, Lord Siva, the Lord of the Universe, appeared before them as a pillar of fire, known as sthanu or lingodbhavamurti in Sanskrit. In an effort to somehow ameliorate their discord, He boomed forth in a deep voice, "Whosoever should find either the beginning or the end of this light of mine shall be considered, now and forever more, the superior of you two. Let this be true."

Upon hearing this, Vishnu took the form of a boar and dug into the depths of the Earth, seeking the beginning of the light. Alas, he returned disappointed. Brahma became a swan and flew up and up, seeking the light's end. He, too, was about to give up in despair when, by chance, he happened upon a falling flower that, amazingly, started talking to him.

The flower--a pandanus odoratissimus, commonly known as a screw pine--asked the God what in the world he was doing flying up so high. Brahma replied that he was seeking the end of Siva's light but had been thus far unsuccessful in finding it. Upon hearing this, the screw pine--not knowing the light had no beginning or end--delightedly struck upon a mischievous plan: They could tell Siva they found the end of the light and be each other's witness to the fact. Brahma liked the idea and so they returned and reported their story.

Siva, of course, was upset. He had no patience with liars. Hence, He decided and so decreed that Brahma and the flower should be provided a lesson in humility, by which they might learn the error of their ways. Lord Brahma, He proclaimed, would not be deified in temples, and the screw pine would never be used in worship. This has indeed come to pass. There are no Brahma temples (except for one), and nobody ever worships with screw pine flowers. It goes without saying that Vishnu was judged superior to Brahma.

There is an epilogue to this story, which applies specifically to Arunachala mountain. Lord Siva was so upset with Brahma and the flower that he was scorching all three worlds with the roaring flames of His righteous indignation. Finally, the celestials asked Him to stop. Siva obliged by cooling down and manifesting as Arunachala mountain. Both Brahma and Vishnu prayed to Siva that He take the form of a

lingam on the east side of the mountain and, in remembrance of His own blazing fire, appear as a light, further up toward the top, each year on the Hindu holy day of Krittika Dipam. Lord Siva granted this prayer.

Today, the 2,682-foot-high Arunachala mountain is actually regarded by many as Tejo Lingam, Lord Siva as a pillar of fire. Some even say that the traditional worship of the Siva Lingam, as it is currently practiced throughout India and around the world, commenced on Arunachala. The eight-mile circuit around the base of the mountain is itself a pilgrimage destination. Along its way are more than 360 tirthams (holy tanks) and 400 lingams. Ramana Maharshi's ashram is situated on this circuit, making it all the more famous.

An Historic Temple

The 1,300-year-old Arunachala Siva temple of Tiruvannamalai in Tamil Nadu, with its giant, 217-foot gopurams (entrance towers), is India's second largest temple and one of its most sought-after pilgrimage destinations. Great South Indian kings--including Rajaraja Chola, Rajendra Chola, Harihara Bukkar, Krishna Deva Rayar, as well as the kings of the Chera, Pallava, Pandya, Rashtrakotta, Hoysala and Naik dynasties--were proud to have this sanctuary within their kingdom boundaries.

Historical details about it are revealed in stone inscriptions on the walls and copper plates of the temple itself. These inscriptions, which refer to a period of time spanning a thousand years, starting from 750 ce, indicate that the greatness of this holy, pilgrimage destination was made known to the kings of the times, primarily through important South Indian devotional literature like the Thevaram and Thiruvasagam.

Aruna means "force " and achala means "that which cannot be moved." Thus, the Arunachaleswarar Temple represents Lord Siva as an indomitable, unmovable power. This special Siva temple is located 125 miles from Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu.

Its day-to-day administration is currently controlled by the Hindu Religious and

Charitable Endowments department of the Tamil Nadu Government.

OK, I Can Do This!
By Thomas Kelly, Kathmandu, Nepal

The fishermen who have been chosen to light the Krittika Dipam are all gathered together inside a side shrine adjacent to the main temple. They have just been blessed by the temple priest who now lights the ghee lamp they will carry up Arunachala mountain. To the thundering of drums, they all suddenly rise together to stride quickly out into the main temple courtyard where hundreds of pilgrims are waiting for them. As they make their way out of the temple into the street heading for the trail that leads up the mountain, I think to myself, "Should I follow them and risk not being able to return to the main temple in time to photograph the events that will take place there at 6:00 pm?" I look at my watch. "OK, " I thought, "I can do this."

I run with my camera gear to catch up with the procession. The main maagi, who is carrying the ghee lamp, is moving very quickly. At first, a few of his colleagues stumble behind him with a cluster of pilgrims clumsily striving to keep up. As the progression proceeds, more pilgrims join the march. Soon, there are hundreds. Then there are thousands.

As we approach the beginning of the climb, I suddenly notice everyone taking off their shoes. This requires some thought, but there isn't much time. Soon enough, off come my Teva sandals.

Pilgrims scramble along the snake-like trail, snatching blessings at various shrines along the way. Storm clouds are gathering rapidly around the mountain's summit. Now we are meeting devotees coming down. There is only one trail and we tangle in a human traffic jam. Miraculously, the maagis thread their way through this obstacle as if it is not there.

The rain begins in earnest halfway up the mountain. I don't have an umbrella, and my camera gear is wet. I search anxiously for a plastic bag of some sort to cover my

camera. Luckily, I find a man selling popcorn to pilgrims. Before I can ask, he sees my need and gives me an empty bag. I cut a hole in the bottom of it so that my camera lens can stick through enough that I can continue shooting pictures.

The maagis have gotten ahead of me. I have to hustle to catch up. After two hours more of continuous walking, we arrive at a resting point within 200 meters of the summit. There is a huge crowd of people already here. Policemen are desperately trying to control and direct many of these people around a precarious rock outcropping, which cannot be avoided by those wanting to reach the summit. It takes all the strength that I can muster just to hoist all of my camera gear over that rock obstacle, but it is worth it. I now have a great vantage point from which I can take photographs in a number of directions.

The rain is really coming down. Everyone is soaked--yet no one is unhappy. The excitement of having reached the top of the mountain makes it all worthwhile. There isn't much room on the summit. I can see a copper vessel about five feet deep and five feet wide. All the pilgrims are wanting to touch this sacred container that will hold the Krittika flame. Some are making offerings of ghee into it. I madly snap photos for about 20 minutes, before beginning my descent. My feet are aching from the stone bruises I got coming up. I check my watch and realize that I must now move quickly.

By the time I reach the main temple, it is 5:30 pm. Pilgrims are everywhere. The main temple entrance is blocked. I am in a panic. How am I going to get in?

I take out my press pass and struggle toward the police who are holding back the crowds. They let me through. With some degree of effort, I reach a balcony in view of the main temple courtyard. From there, I can also see the mountain summit. As the temple fire is lit at 6 pm, the mist on the mountain is just breaking up. The moment is overwhelming. Thousands of pilgrims are chanting "Aum Namasivaya." I close my eyes briefly to relish the moment. When I open them an instant later, the first sight I see is fire jumping skyward from the top of Arunachala. "Magnificent, " I think to myself as I start clicking shots. "Siva and Parvati are one."

Heir to the Throne

No one who knows Sri Jayendra Puri Swami could ever doubt that he would be a worthy successor to His Holiness Sri Tiruchi Mahaswamigal, who attained Mahasamadhi on January 14, 2005. Although Jayendra Puri Swami was officially nominated as the successor to the pitam (seat of authority) at Sri Kailash Ashrama Mahasamsthana in Bangalore, India, on December 11, 2003, he has been in charge of the administration of both Tiruchi Swami's ashram and its adjoining Rajarajeshvari temple since 1993.

Jayendra Puri was born on October 20, 1960. His family was well respected. His childhood was happy and fulfilling. And he was a bright student at the top of his class. Yet something was missing. "I had experienced a lot of success in life, " explained Swami, "but I felt a strange hollowness. I came from a somewhat modern family, so my first exposure to Hindu scriptures was when I was 27 years old. What was amazing was, when I finally read these scriptures for the first time, it was like I knew them already. They all seemed so very familiar."

It was then that Jayendra Puri felt inspired to make his way to Kailash Ashrama Mahasamsthana to seek guidance on the divine path from His Holiness Sri Tiruchi Mahaswamigal. The instant he met the elder swami, he knew immediately that he had found his guru. There was not even a trace of doubt in his mind.

"My aim in life was to attain the Divine Mother in all of her beauty and divinity, " said Sri Jayendra Puri Swami. "I came to Mahaswami in 1987. As soon as I met him, I expressed to him my desire to take sannyas (Hindu monastic vows of renunciation). He told me to wait. A month later, he sent me to Haridwar to learn scripture and to be of service to a saint there who was old. Just before I left, he gave me the robes of brahmacharya (white robes signifying a vow of celibacy). I lived there for seven-and-a-half years. Early in 1989, before the Allahabad Kumbhmela, I wrote to Mahaswamigal, again seeking initiation into sannyas. He finally gave me permission with instructions that my guru in Haridwar should conduct the rituals in his name."

In Haridwar, Sri Jayendra Puri Swami kept to himself and performed his disciplines well. On completing his duties and study, he returned to Sri Kailash Ashrama Mahasamsthana to serve the Goddess and his guru, His Holiness, Sri Sri Sri Tiruchi Mahaswamigal.

One of Jayendra Puri's many special talents is his aptitude for learning languages. He can speak all the South Indian dialects, as well as Hindi. He is also fluent in German and Italian. "Seeing my flair for languages, " said Swami, "Mahaswamigal arranged for a tutor to come here and teach me Italian in the ashram."

When His Holiness Sri Tiruchi Mahaswamigal was asked why he chose Jayendra Puri Swami as his successor, he said, "This man is well educated and sincere. He has a thorough knowledge of the shastras and carries on the tradition of the ashram with complete devotion. He is compassionate. He has concern for the poor and works for the welfare of all. He is calm and composed. He understands our sampradaya (spiritual lineage)."

After nominating Jayendra Puri Swami as his successor, Sri Tiruchi Mahaswamigal called together all of the ashram and temple residents, as well as a select group of distinguished devotees, to inform them of his decision. At this time he made it known that proper respects should be paid to his successor, and that all appropriate protocols should be followed. Everyone felt blessed to have witnessed their Guru's ordination and blessing of his most worthy successor.

I first met Jayendra Puri Swami when I was appointed guardianship of nine small children from Malaysia, who had come to learn scriptures in the Kailas Ashram gurukula (priest training school). When he first spoke to me, his sparkling eyes and bright face made me feel like I was in the presence of an enlightened man.

Through the years since then, my family and I have interacted with Jayendra Puri Swami on many occasions. Each of these experiences left us feeling refreshed and rejuvenated. The ease with which he narrates and quotes from scriptures leaves us spellbound. Under the brilliant stewardship of Jayendra Puri Swami, the high standards of Hindu tradition set by Sri Tiruchi Mahaswamigal have been raised still higher, and without dilution.

I had the opportunity to stay at Kailas Ashram's branch in Thiruvannamalai during the Krittika Dipam festival. It was an experience I will always treasure. We were humbled by the hospitality, care and warmth we felt there. My father has always told me, "Never aspire to receive from an ashram or a temple. Seek only to give." Nevertheless, there we were at Kailas Ashram, seeking nothing, yet receiving all.

Swami was particularly careful in seeing to the needs of my parents. He personally ensured that they experienced no discomfort.

Swami's personalized care was not confined to my family alone. Everyone who stayed at his ashram was a recipient of his love. Jayendra Puri Swami is already famous for the special love and care he gives pilgrims and devotees who come under his guardianship. By the example that he sets, he inspires us all toward humility and service.

The Silent Sage of Peace

When the legendary Indian sage, Sri Ramana Maharshi, attained mahasamadhi at the age of 70 on April 14, 1950 in Tiruvannamalai, witnesses saw a bright shooting star moving toward the holy mountain of Arunachala. Such an auspicious event was the perfect culmination to a life so quietly powerful in its enduring spiritual influence, even beyond the shores of India.

"A conscious bliss ensues when one abides as the Self, " he told his devotees. "Inquire: 'What is the true import of I?' The bliss of That is spontaneous, indestructible and limitless."

English novelist and playwright Somerset Maugham pilgrimaged to visit the sage in 1938. When he entered the ashram after the tiring journey, he fainted and was taken to a hut where he remained unconscious for some time. When he opened his eyes, Ramana Maharshi was sitting by his bed. "He bore himself with naturalness and at the same time with dignity, " the famous author later wrote. "His mien was cheerful, smiling, polite. His eyes with a gentle benignity rested on my face. His body was absolutely still. He said, 'Silence is also conversation.' "

Ramana Maharshi was born with the name Venkataraman in Tirucculi near Madurai in South India. His father died when he was 12. At that time, he was sent to live with his uncle in Madurai where he attended school, played with friends, swam in the village lake and frequently won in games of competition that he played with local neighborhood boys. Even as a child, he was religiously devout--yet open-minded.

One of his closest friends was a Muslim named Sab Jan. "God's creation is alike, " he told his friend. "There is no differentiation in creation. God is the same. The apparent differences in God are created by men."

One day, when Venkataraman was alone in his home, the fear of death overwhelmed him. He explained, "The shock drove my mind inwards, and I said to myself mentally 'Now death has come. What does it mean?' I dramatized the occurrence of death. I lay with my limbs outstretched stiff, as in rigor mortis, and imitated a corpse. 'Well then,' I said to myself, 'this body is dead. It will be carried to the burning ground and burnt and reduced to ashes. But with the death of this body am I dead? Is the body I?' " Suddenly the fear of death vanished, and he became absorbed in the Self.

Shortly after that, he pilgrimaged to the great Siva temple in Tiruvannamalai at the base of Arunachala Hill. There he found a cave, sat in meditation and entered a trance-like state. Day by day, his austerities intensified. His absorption was so deep that ants ate into his skin, leaving scars that would be visible throughout his life. When his uncle, Nellaiappan, finally found him a year later, Venkataraman could neither speak nor hear. Nellaiappan notified the boy's mother, who soon arrived to help nurse him back to good health. She lived with him for the rest of her life in the ashram that Ramana Maharshi established following his famous austerities.

Today that ashram is still a living, thriving place. Although it is located on the edge of town, it is a world unto itself, comprised of a temple, a meditation hall, library, large dining hall with excellent food, gardens, peacocks and lots of guest cottages. A free midday meal is served to the local holy men.

Ramana Maharshi taught a method called self-inquiry, in which the seeker focuses continued attention on the I-thought in order to find its source. Those who have practiced this method testify that in the beginning, a relentless effort of concentration is necessary. Yet eventually, long-term consistency yields a blissful sense of oneness as the mind dissolves into the heart center.

Although Ramana Maharshi left no formal successor, his teachings today guide thousands around the world. Some read his books and visit his ashram; others follow one of several teachers who perpetuate his wisdom. "The mind is a form of

energy, " said the sage. "It manifests as the world. When the mind sinks into the Self, then the Self is realized; when the mind issues forth, the world appears and the Self is not realized."