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Sri Lanka

Keerimalai Rises from the Ashes of War

Siva Poomi Madham restores pilgrim services on the northern coast of Sri Lanka, reinvigorating the worship at an ancient holy site

by Rishi Thondunathan, Sri Lanka

Keerimalai, located at the northernmost tip of the Jaffna Peninsula, is one of Sri Lanka's ancient holy sites. Here is located the Naguleswaram temple, one of the nation's famed five Iswarams, all dedicated to Lord Siva. Others are Thirukoneswaran on the eastern Trincomalee Coast, Thiruketeeswaram on the northwest coast, facing India, and Munneswaram in the west, just north of Colombo. The fifth site is believed to be submerged beneath the ocean at Galle, off the island's southernmost tip. Eminent scholar and historian Dr. Paul E. Pieris says these Iswarams existed in Lanka long before the arrival of Vijaya (543 bce). Saint Tirumular, in his treatise on Saivism, the Tirumantiram, refers to Sri Lanka as Siva's land; and both the Skanda Purana and Mahabharata mention pilgrimages to bathe in the Keerimalai springs.

Keerimalai's freshwater spring flows from a cave in the rock face at ocean's edge, fifty feet above sea level. In ancient times a legendary sage with a mongoose face bathed in the springs and his face was made human, hence the name Keerimalai: in Tamil keeri is "mongoose" and malai means "mountain," referring to the rock face above the ocean. Subsequent kings built a retaining tank for the spring waters. For millenia, Hindus of the Jaffna Peninsula have come here to disperse their loved ones' ashes in the sea and perform antyeshti for the deceased. During the new moon in the month of July, known as Aadi Amavasai, Hindus from all over the island pilgrimage here to bathe in the Keerimalai Spring as part of a sacred ceremony honoring ancestors.

Before the civil war started in 1983, Keerimalai was a thriving complex with five major temples. Six established madhams, or rest homes, were filled with a constant stream of pilgrims. The samadhi shrines for great sages who did tapas here have inspired devotees through the centuries.

The war took its toll. Keerimalai was occupied by the Sri Lankan army, displacing local residents. Access for pilgrims was barred, and Keerimalai degenerated in neglect. After nearly three decades of devastating war, Keerimalai lay in ruins. Keerimalai's light started to shine again in 2012 with the January kumbhabhishekam of the Naguleswaram temple, held after restoration and rebuilding.

But the madhams that provided the important services of accommodation and feeding of pilgrims remained in rubble. Dr. Aru Thirumurugan, founder of Siva Poomi, was inspired to do more. He felt that if support for pilgrims was restored, Keerimalai's sacred traditions could be revived and preserved. Owners of the land of one madham transferred it to Siva Poomi Trust with the intention of bringing its services back to life. With the collaboration of the All Ceylon Hindu Congress and the support of many devotees, the Trust began reconstruction of the Siva Poomi Keerimalai Madham in August, 2011. I was blessed to be part of this project. On January 28, 2012, we opened the building along with the head of Nallai Aadheenam, the chief priest of Naguleswaram and other dignitaries from the Jaffna Tamil community.

Once again there is a madham (if still only one) serving pilgrims to Keerimalai. It boasts a beautifully decorated facade, six rooms, bathrooms, a common hall and kitchen facilities. The first section, the Annadhanam (feeding) hall, is complete and in full swing serving the pilgrims at large. A second section will contain additional lodging for pilgrims; this is currently under construction, fully sponsored by the All Ceylon Hindu Congress. The whole project is a shining example of how organizations can come together to accomplish great things.

While the Naguleswaram temple and Siva Poomi Keerimalai Madham are up and running, the rest of Keerimalai's temples and madhams remain in ruin. Only time will tell if Keerimalai will degenerate into just another tourist beach resort--or if the waters of its sacred springs will renew the face of Keerimalai and raise it to its former glory. Restoring the temples and madhams in Keerimalai would ensure that it will always remain a sacred pilgrimage site for Hindus. Like the Ganga sites of Rishikesh or Kashi in India, Keerimalai could rise again as one of Sri Lanka's prime

centers of religious and cultural tradition.

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