



**RELIGIOUS SERVICES OF HINDU SANGAMS IN
VIRUDHUNAGAR TOWN**

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ABSTRACT

Religion has made significant contributions to the lives of individuals as well as society as a whole. Religion has achieved great feats for humankind. Religion is often seen to be quite clearly trying to prevent society from moving away from traditional values. In Virudhunagar town, this is achieved through Hindu religious Sangams. Hinduism is practiced and preached by many Hindu Organizations and Sangams, each of which follows the variants and perspectives of all or particular philosophy propagated and transferred through generations by saints. They differ on how to achieve life's ultimate goal – *Athma Gnana* or self-realization. So various Hindu religious Sangams budded in the society and each one follows its own way to preach the people for the salvation of soul. Thereby many Hindu religious Sangams spring in Virudhunagar and each one of its follows its own path in guiding the people towards self-realization. Hence the present paper explains the religious services by various Sangams in Virudhunagar town.

Key Words: Hindu Organisations, Religious Services, Sangams, Virudhunagar, Traditional values.

INRODUCTION

Religion in India is characterized by a diversity of religious beliefs and practices. Religious diversity and religious tolerance are both established in the country by the law and custom; the Constitution of India has declared the right to freedom of religion to be a fundamental right¹.

India is the birth place of four of the world's major religions; namely Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism but Hinduism is the most significant one. It is

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believed Hindu Religion started in India many thousand years ago. Since then it has been the most dominant in Indian society. With more than 80.5% population of Hindus in India, Hinduism has the largest number of followers in India².

Hinduism is the major religion in South India state of Tamilnadu. The total number of Tamil Hindus as per 2001 Indian census is 5,4,85,079 which form 88.1% of the total population of Tamil nadu³.

its own path in guiding the people towards self-realization.

There are 18 Sangams functioning very well in the town. Most of the Sangams are Virudhunagar born Sangams and they have no other branches anywhere in the society. These Sangams are administered mostly by the Nadars of the town. The functioning of all the Sangams shows the cult of Hinduism in Virudhunagar. They are *Sixty Three Nayanmar Madam, Karaikal Ammaiyar Sangam, Samarasa Sanmarga Sangam, Kaivalya Mather Sangam, Mather Manivasaga Sangam, KasthuribaS evaSangam, Sri Ramachandra Mission, Sakthi Sangam, Swami Ayyappa Sangam, Yogasana Aalayam, Melmaruvathur*

Adhipatasakthi Valipadu Mandram, Prajapita Brahma Kumaris Iswariya VishwaVidyalaya, Sri Aurobindo Annai Meditation Center, Sri Sathya Sai Seva Samidhi, Isha Yoga Center, Sri Anantha Pureeswarar Arul Aalayam, Yogi Ramsuratkumar Sangam and Namadwaar Meditation Center.

RELIGIOUS SERVICES OF THE SANGAMS

Religion has made significant contributions to the lives of individuals as well as society as a whole. Religion has achieved great feats for humankind. Religion is often seen to be quite clearly trying to prevent society from moving away from traditional values. In Virudhunagar town, this is achieved through Hindu religious Sangams.

“*Knowledge is Supreme Power*” says a Sanskrit verse. Knowledge is the goal of mankind without which, human beings are nothing better than a forest of brutes. Therefore, Sangams of Virudhunagar aims to give very Hindu the knowledge of their scriptures and holy texts to empower them in a cultural challenging world. Religion and spiritual knowledge is not something to be bought and read it has to be acquired through direct contact. Swami Vivekananda said, “The soul can only receive impulses from

another soul, and from nothing else. We may study books all our lives, we may become very intellectual, but in the end we find that we have not developed at all spiritually”⁴, Therefore realizing that religious knowledge is a prerogative of every Hindu.

Imparting *Bhagavad Gita* knowledge is the major religious activity of most of the Sangams of Virudhunagar. All the Sangams except Yoga and Meditation centers conducts *Bhagavad Gita* classes in its premises. *Bhagavad Gita* is known as one of the most fundamental texts that form the basis of Hinduism. The *Bhagavad Gita* classes were taken weekly once by eminent Saints and Gurus who preach *Bhagavad Gita* in a spiritual manner⁵.

Great Tamil literatures are also preached to young minds in the Sangam in the form of games. For example, *Samarasa Sanmarga Sangam* organizes *Thirukural* competition in the form of quiz. Every year, the Sangam conducts District Level Quiz Competition in the topic “*Kuralneriarivom*” of in the month of July from 2001 onwards⁶.

The two great Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and great epics like *Cilapathikaram* and *Manimekalai* are also preached in the

Sangam. Thus the preaching of *Bhavad Gita*, Hindu epics, Tamil epics and *Thirukural* are common to most of the Sangams. Other specific feature of the Sangam is that each Sangam has a notable Tamil literature for its preaching. For example, *Samarasa Sanmarga Sangam* makes *Thiruvarutpa* by *Vallalar* for its preaching as it is formed to distribute the philosophy of *Vallalar*⁷.

Other Tamil literatures preached in the Sangams are *Paranjoti's Thiruvilaiyadalpuranam*, *Thirunavukarasar's Thevaram*, *Manikkavasagar's Thiruvagasam*, *Arunagirinathar's Thirupuzha* and *Alwar's Nalayira Divya Prabandham*. Both Saivite and Vaishnavite literatures are practiced by the Sangams. Sanskrit slogans, amman songs, *bajanai* and *keertanais* are recited in the Sangams. The members of *Yogasana Aalayam* memorize *Thayumanavar* songs and recite it during the annual say function in the Sangam⁸.

Sangams focus on temples where families especially women gather for prayers. Women as mother play a key role in molding the family with moral, cultural and religious values. Therefore, it is pertinent that the mothers are equipped with knowledge in this respect. *Bajanais* and *keertanais* in the month of Thai and

Panguni in the temple premises like *Mariammal Temple* or *Veilukanthamman Temple* by various Sangams like *Karikal Ammaiyyar Sangam*, *Yogasana Aalayam* and others immerse women with devotional thought and lead women towards right pathway of moral and social values⁹.

Thus the general increase of religious knowledge through Sangams is not only necessary to give Hindus self-confidence in their own religion, thus bringing them on a par with other religious people in religious discussions. This new knowledge of religion is also helpful in resisting Missionary work not only of Muslims but also of some Christian denominations, which are sometimes even more offensive against Hindu superstition. Thus classes in religious literature and carrying out of worship in the form of festivals surely are a real basis for an improvement of Hinduism in Virudhunagar.

PRAYER AND MEDITATION

Prayer and meditation is the major religious contribution of the Sangams to the society. Prayers are conducted in all the Sangams every day. Punctuality is maintained by *Yogasana Aalayam* in conducting prayers at 6 o'clock both in the

morning and evening¹⁰. Prayer is conducted on every day at 7:00 PM in *Samarasa Sanmarga Sangam*¹¹.

Helping other people on their spiritual journey is one of the most prominent qualities of an enlightened person and this is done through group meditation. A research has said that group meditation had reduced global crime rates, violence and casualties during the times of meditation by an average of 16%¹². Such great group meditation is practiced by many Sangams of the town. Group meditation is performed on all Sundays between 10 a.m and 10:30 a.m. (the meditation time in Auro bindo Ashram in Pondichery) in Sri Auro bindo Annai Meditation Center. Group meditation is also practiced on all Sundays in Sri Ramachandra Mission. Brahma Kumaris conducts meditation daily between 6:30 and 7 hours both in the morning and evening time. The members of *Yogasana Aalayam* conduct yajna on Full moon day along with group meditation in the Prarthana Hall and the yajna is performed specially by women devotees¹³.

RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS

Hinduism almost certainly has a longer list of festivals than any other religious tradition, and there are

considerable regional and denominational variations, the Sangams of Virudhunagar celebrates these festivals in a spiritual manner either in the Sangam premises or in town's temple. The Sangams celebrate festivals like Sivaratiri, Navaratiri and others to invoke the soul's natural qualities by creating an environment replete with auspiciousness and the abundant gifts of nature; to give people spiritual impetus and inspiration, which helps them perform their daily duties and to forge a healthy sense of belonging by peacefully bringing together individuals, families and communities. Festivals are observed with acts of worship, offerings to deities, fasting, feasting, vigil, rituals, fairs, charity, celebrations, Puja, Homa, aarti etc., by the Sangams¹⁴.

Mahasivaratiri Festival or 'The Night of Shiva' is celebrated with devotion and religious fervor in honor of Lord Shiva by the Sangams of Virudhunagar. On Shivaratiri, worship of Lord Shiva continues all through the day and night. Nightlong vigil or jaagran is also observed in Shiva temples where large number of devotees spends the night singing hymns and devotional songs in praise of Lord Shiva. This custom is observed in Sri Vala Subramaniyar Temple of the temple. On Shivaratiri day, the chanting of 'Om

NamahShivaya' mantra is observed by the devotees of Sangam from morning 6 a.m. to next day morning 6 a.m. The devotees of each Sangam performed this chanting for each one hour. For example, the devotees of *Sakthi Sangam* perform the chanting from 6 a.m. to 7 a.m. Then *Yogasana Aalayam* members chant mantras from 7 a.m. to 8 a.m. Thus Shivratri is celebrated in spiritual manner by the Sangams of Virudhunagar with co-operation¹⁵.

Margazhi month, the month of cultural conscious and Andal, one of the twelve Alvars, is full of *bajanais* and *keerthanais* in Virudhunagar town. Certain Sangams like *Karikal Ammaiyyar Sangam*, *Mathar Manivasaga Sangam* and *YogasanaAalayam* members spiritually dedicate themselves to the *bajanais* and *Andal's Thiruppavai* by going round the car streets of the town by lifting a '*kumbam*' in the early morning hours. The Sangam members also conduct special *bajanais* for 21 days during *Panguni Pongal* festival of Mariamman Kovil and for 7 days in *Vaikasi Pongal* festival of Veilukanthamman¹⁶.

Navaratri is one of the holiest Hindu festivals of the Sangams where people across the town worship the different avatars of Goddess Durga for

nine days. Navaratri Golu is displayed in all the Sangams of the town except the Yoga centers like Isha Yoga center, Brahmakumaris and Sri Auro bindo Annai meditation center. The festival is celebrated for the people to get victory in their lives and the philosophy behind the festival is explained by every member of the Sangam as "At Navaratri, Goddess Durga is invoked first to remove impurities from the mind. The Goddess Lakshmi is invoked to cultivate the noble values and qualities. Finally, Saraswati is invoked for gaining the highest knowledge of the Self. This is the significance of the three sets of three nights when all these three are gained subjectively, and then there will be Vijayadasami, the day of true victory"¹⁷.

The devotees of *Swami Ayyappa Seva Sangam* conduct special *bajanais* in *Ayyappan Sannidhi* of Sri Vala Subramaniyar Temple during Karthigai and Margazhi months. The festival is celebrated as *Ayyappan Mandala Pooja*¹⁸.

The guru Pooja is celebrated on the mukti day of saints and gurus to illustrate the Nobleness and preaching of saints. *Karikal Ammaiyyar Sangam* observes mukti day of *Karikal Ammiyar* in the month of Panguni; *Sixty three Nayanmar Madam* celebrate the mukti day of 63 Nayanmars; muktiday of Vallar by

Samarasa Sanmarga sangam in the month of Thai; mukti day of Gandhiji and Kamaraj by *Kasturiba Seva Sangam*; mukti day of Thayumanavar by *Yogasana Aalayam* and mukti of Sri Aurobindo and Annai by Sri Aurobindo Annai Mediattion center, the kind of celebration brings to mind the greatness of Saints like Thayumanavar, Vallar, Gandhiji, Sri Aurbindo and the literary works and invokes one to follow the path of the Saints¹⁹.

People place great importance on these festivals and the rituals which accompany them. Accordingly, such rituals are important elements in the contribution of Sangam to religion and individuals.

PERSONAL SEARCH FOR MEANING

Sangams of Virudhunagar has made significant contributions to the life of individuals in areas such as the personal search of meaning, ethical guidance, sense of belonging and ritual meaning.

Human experience is characterized by a search for the understanding of the great questions of life. Those questions include those of origin (where do we come from?), purpose (why are we here?) and destiny (what happens when we die?). People will look towards religion for

answers to these enduring questions, especially during times of personal trauma or crisis. Philosophies like *SamarasaSanmargam*, *Kaivalyam*, *Rajayogam*, *Sahaj Marg* and Isha Yoga of various Sangams of Virudhunagar paves the way for the personal search for meaning. The religious festivals of the Sangams also provide an opportunity to realize the self through *sadhana*, *seva*, *satsang*²⁰ and the Guru's grace²¹.

Sangams of Virudhunagar has been sought out by people for guidance in the field of ethics, which enables individuals to act in a morally correct manner. Religious Sangams also offers guidance in social concerns relate to matters such as the unequal distribution of wealth resources²².

One of the strongest desires that exist in human experience is the need to feel a sense of belonging. The nature of Sangams makes it well suited to providing this sense of community. This is because Sangams have the capacity to bring together people of similar ideals and to provide an opportunity for people to express these values in a supportive environment and this is practiced through the conductance of *Satsang* and most of the Sangams like *Sri Ramachandra*

Mission, SakthiSangam conducts *Satsang* monthly once²³.

Thus Sangams of Virudhunagar serve as centers of religious knowledge, hub of religious rituals, gathering place for religious awareness, ground for personal search and convention center for different philosophies of religion.

CONCLUSION

The study of Hindu religious Sangams of Virudhunagar portrays the religious, social and cultural condition of the people of Virudhunagar. The people of Virudhunagar are religion, social and cultural tolerant and they are not fanatics to any aspect and accept the change as such in the society. This is evident through the religious Sangams of the town.

The inauguration period of Hindu Sangams portrays the cultural change of the society. The Sangams formed upto 1980s were based on religion and they recite ancient epics, *puranas* and Tamil Literatures like *Bhagavad Gita*, *Ramayanam*, *Mahabharatham*, *Thiruvartpa*, *Thiruvagasam*, *Thayumanavar* Songs and others except *Yogasana Aalayam*. They conduct *bajanais*, *keerthanais* and recite epics and

puranams and they reflect social condition of the people of Virudhunagar.

The establishment of Sangams by women also depicts the status of women in Virudhunagar. Most of the sangams are established for and by women. *SakthiSangam*, *KarikalAmmaiyar Sangam*, *Kaivalya Mather Sangam* and *Mather Manivasagam Sangam* were inaugurated with the efforts of women only. This shows the liberal freedom enjoyed by the women of the town. The women of that period, ie., in the mid decades of 20th century, the women of Virudhunagar are bold enough to come out and inaugurate Hindu religious sangams in the town.

The study displays the religious condition of the Nadar community of the town. Most of the earliest Sangams were established by Nadars only. Nadars are not only religious fanatics and accept the change in the society calmly and it is reflected in the establishment of yoga and meditation centers in the new millennium by other community people of the town.

Various social service activities of the Sangams establish the service mind character of the people. Blood donation and medical aid are the great services of *Swami Ayyappa Sangam*. 1800 blood donors in the hands of religious Sangam is a notable one.

Thus all these Hindu religious Sangams are rendering a Yeoman Service to mankind to lead a peaceful life physically, mentally and spiritually. For physical strength, *yogasanas* are taught by well-trained *ashana* teachers. For mental strength, meditation, Vedanta and *Bhagavat Gita* are taught. For spiritual strength, upadesha (Diksha) ie. preached.

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