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## Worshipping the eternal fire-tracing the journey from Vedas to an agamic shrine

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### Abstract

Fire is one of the earliest interactions that man had with nature to shape his civilizational growth. Worshipping fire as a source of energy is a standard feature in several civilizations. Indian tradition hails fire as a twin - the protector and destroyer. Agni, the fire God is worshipped in *Vedic* scriptures as a medium between the celestials and man. He is also looked upon as an individual God with specific rituals to propitiate. *Rudra*, the form of Siva is closely associated with fire through the *roopa* and *Guna* aspects. Traditions like, worship of *Ashtamoorthy* form of *Siva*, *Siva* as the quintessence of the five natural elements and *Siva* as the ever growing primordial column of eternal fire, brings *Siva* worship very close to worshipping *agni*. In *Tiruvannamalai*, an ancient temple based settlement in *Tamil Nadu*, the prime deity is worshipped as *Tejo Lingam*, the embodiment of Fire. This paper traces the transitional journey of worshipping *Agni* in the *Vedas* to that of worshipping *Siva* with similar aspects in an *agamic* temple.

**Keywords:** Agni, Rudra, Siva, Tiruvannamalai, Vedas, agamas

### Introduction

Fire is probably one of the most prominent natural element that is considered sacred. Discovery of fire is undoubtedly one of the turning points in the evolution of mankind. The constructive and destructive power of fire has been perceived by man and hence tamed fire has been made an element of worship in several traditions across the world. Apart from being used for domestic purposes like cooking and providing warmth, fire is also a sacred symbol whose nature has been understood in the ancient past and hence considered divine.

### Fire worship in India

Safe guarding fire is documented as one of the most challenging tasks in the prehistoric pasts. Hence the tribal leader's responsibility it was to maintain a fire pit where the fire is alive throughout. Other families had the privilege to borrow or share some fire when they needed. Fire plays an integral role in nourishing life forms and hence addressed as divine.

### Agni, The Vedic God

*Rig Veda*, the earliest in the compilation of sacred hymns, revere *Agni* in several instances. The very word *Agni* has a cognate in Latin as *IGNI*, which forms the root for the English word ignite. Since the fire is lit every day, *Agni* is considered immortal. Also *Agni* has the tendency to treat all his devotees equally. He sees no difference in their gender, caste, creed or language. He reacts the same way irrespective of one's social or economic status. *Vedas* describe *Agni's* family to consist of his wife *svaha*, daughter *agneya* and son's *pavaka*, *pavamana* and *suchi*. The origin or birth of *Agni* is explained through the act of friction caused by rubbing of two wooden logs. This tradition is still upheld in *Vedic* fire sacrifices where the fire for the ritual is caused by churning two wooden logs using a coir rope. However the interesting quality of *Agni* to be noted here is he engulfs the very material (wood) that have caused him.

### Fire in rituals

*Vedic* traditions place fire at a prime position. *Agni* is identified as the fire god who is dual in nature. He can protect and destruct. The nature of fire to treat all people equal enables it

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being offered the pedestal of a witness. During important occasions like marital vows, *Agni* becomes the witness or *sakshi* for consummating the wedding. The newly married couple go around the fire, holding hands as a mark of taking vows to venture a life of togetherness and being mutually supportive. Fire plays a vital role in the final rites performed in India. Cremation traditions invoke *Agni* through a simple ritual performed in the house of the deceased and the fire invoked is carried to the cremation ground and the pyre is lit. It is believed that the body is offered to the almighty through the *Agni*. Even in case of a burial, small fire torches are held as a part of the procession. Fire is a part of traditional court proceedings where the witness swears on fire. It is believed that if the person lies, fire shall take its own course to punish the person.

Apart from being a part of the *vashthu purusha mandala*, *Agni* also is an integral part of the sacred orbits, *devata avarana*, around the deities. The *Saiva agamas* consider 5 such sacred concentric orbits around a *Siva lingam*. The fourth from inside houses the directional deities and there at the south east the presence of *Agni* is invoked through chants and rituals.

### Forms of Agni in Indian tradition

Indian traditions split the vast expanse of the universe into three layers. The earth, the ether space above and all that is between as the transition space. Fire is venerated to be a resident of all three spheres. Interestingly the scriptures describe him to take three different forms in each of the layers coinciding with the characteristics of the elements dominating that sphere. He is the sun in the space above, he descends as the lightning cutting through the transformational layers and settles down as fire on earth. Philosophically speaking the very functioning of human physic is governed by the *Agni* that is constantly burning inside. Referred to as the *Jataragni*, a fire that is burning within the abdomen. This fire is compared to the fire in a sacrificial altar and the food consumed is equated to the offerings made in the fire. Indian tradition describes eat as a form of offering to the deity installed within. This fire strengthens the individual by supplying the energy for physical and mental health.

### Agni as Rudra

*Satapatha Brahmana* lists the names of *Agni* as follows: *sarva*, *bhava*, *pasunampati*, *rudra*, *Agni*, *ashanta*, *shantatma*. The popular name of Siva as *Trayambaka* also is connected to the three formed nature of *Agni* such as the sun, the lightning and the fire on earth. The heat emanating from the sun causes the wind to blow and this in order causes accumulation of clouds. Coming together of these clouds causes lightning and shower. The storm that erupts, heavy blowing winds, darkness of the atmosphere lit by striking lightning etc., causes a terrifying effect. These attributes and display of *Agni* are all characteristic of Rudra.

### Worshipping Siva as Fire

Agamas describe the very form of *Siva Linga* to be a representation of the column of fire that grew up at the beginning of the cosmos. This cylindrical form of the lingam coincides with the column of fire, the origin and extent of which is unknown. In response to the theory, the base of the lingam is not to be exposed and the top of the lingam is to be covered with flowers always. The *roudra*

form of Siva is worshipped in all His glory. Similar to the characters described for fire, Siva blesses His devotees either through *anugraha* or *nigraha*. The description of the divine physic of Siva always identifies him in the complexion of glowing fire. Almost all the *Vedic* hymns celebrating *Agni* can also be attributed to Siva. In the *agamis* temples dedicated to Siva, apart from the installation of deities, Siva is also invoked in the fire that is lit in the *yagasalai*, the fire in which offerings are submitted.

### Conceptualization of Arunachalam shrine

*Tiruvannamalai* is an ancient town in the north western part of *Tamil Nadu*. The district has several art sites from the prehistoric parts and several evidences of continuous human history. The town is dominated by the sacred hill called *Arunachalam* around which the town has developed. The temple dedicated to Siva as *Arunachaleshwara* is one of the most prominent *Siva* shrines of south India that draws thousands of pilgrims every day. The mountain is believed to be the divine manifestation of Siva himself and the temple with a lingam consecrated in the sanctum sanctorum is a representation of the mighty hills. *Brahmanda puranam* elaborates two important traditional accounts pertaining to the appearance of Siva at *Tiruvannamalai kshethram*. The first episode is the most popular *lingodhbava purana* which is elaborately dealt with in several of the *maha puranas*. It is a clear re-depiction of the Vedic concept of Siva manifesting as the ever growing primordial fire, the origin and culmination of which cannot be perceived. Brahma and Vishnu submit at the feet of Siva by offering themselves. This account is the basis on which the shrine at *Tiruvannamalai* is constructed. The local traditions acknowledge the town to have been the venue of the *lingodhbava* manifestation of Siva. The column of fire later cools into a hill and the town developed around it.

The second popular episode involves *Parvati*, the consort of Siva coming to this shrine as a part of her pilgrimage to perform specific rituals in order to propitiate Siva. On the day of concluding her vows, Siva again appears as a column of fire and Devi unites with Him. Later the divine couple appear on a *Rishaba vahanam* and bless the celestials and other devotees. This incident is associated with the *Kartikai Deepam* festival celebrated at the temple coinciding with the full moon night of the month of *Karthikai* (Mid November - mid December). The festival is one of the oldest customs mentioned in the *sangam* literature and is celebrated across the state of Tamil Nadu.

### Observations

Siva, the most popular deity widely worshipped in Tamil Nadu has been referred to in the *Sangam* anthologies. Temples dedicated to the deity, attributes, description of the divine self, traditional accounts from *puranas* and *ithihasas* associated with Siva are all described. The cosmic dance that he performs is sung in the invocatory works of *Kalithogai*, another *Sangam* anthology. Saiva religion and the associated theology becomes a part of the Tamil society. The ideology of addressing Siva as "*Ashtamoorthy*" a form in which eight aspects of Him culminates is also mentioned in *Manimekalai*, a post *Sangam* classic. The eight aspects include earth, water, fire, air, ether, sun, moon and the soul. The tradition of observing the essence of Siva in the five elements is rooted in ancient Tamil literature and is also reflected in the *Saiva agamas*. Worshipping Siva as *Tejo*

*lingam* at *Tiruvannamalai* coinciding with the *lingodhbava* episode should have come into practice even before that. Including the festival of lighting lamps on the full moon day of the month of *Karthikai* is an extension of the appearance of *Tejo* lingam.

### Conclusion

Worshipping the fire as *Agni* is probably one of the oldest ritual worship tradition by mankind. Several ancient religions around the world understand fire in a unique way and revere it. Indian tradition has understood fire as a multi-dimensional divine energy that can both create and destruct. The quality of fire to treat all living beings equally and consuming all that is offered, elevates fire among the celestials and designates him to be the messenger carrying the offerings to deities. The concept of perceiving God as an ever growing column of fire has been qualitatively transferred to the shrine of *Tiruvannamalai* where Siva is worshipped through *agamic* dictums as the *Tejo lingam*.

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