

What is the future of Hindus in Sri Lanka?

"That's the triangular mountain I've frequented since childhood. I yearn to worship Shiva while witnessing the sunrise there. Despite visiting effortlessly many times, my body has hindered my trips in recent years," Sinnasamy laments, gazing at Sivanolipathamalai (Adam's Peak).

Sinnasamy, now over 70, had his father Periyasamy brought from Tirunelveli (South India) by a supervisor to work in a tea plantation in Maskeliya during British rule in the early 20th century. Sinnasamy is Periyasamy's son.

Sinnasamy shares his old memories with us, "This place is known as Shiva Light Foot (Sivan oli patham) because Shiva worship, Sun worship, and Foot worship are all located together like nowhere else in the world."

Four religions worship the same place, 'Sivanolipada Malai', situated 2,243 meters (7,359 feet) above sea level on the border of Sabaragamuwa and Central Provinces. This location holds historical significance in Sri Lanka and is known as "Siripada" in Sinhalese and "Adam's Peak" in English.

This mountain, revered by Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims, was known as Shivanadi Pada Malai. Recently, it has been politicized and renamed Sri Pada Mountain, erasing its previous name like in the case of Kathirgamam.

Ginigathena is located on the road from Colombo to Hatton, passing through Carolina Junction, Notton Bridge, Laxapana, and Mausakele to reach the foothills of Nallathanni. From there, you can climb the steps on foot to reach the hill. This route is the most convenient way to access the mountain.

Also, from Kuruvita on the way from Colombo to Ratnapura, you can head east through Eknelikoda, Embultheniya, Kuruluvana to reach Balabethale, and then proceed to climb the mountain on foot.

“There is no other place in the world like Shivanolipadamalai where devotees from all four religions visit the place together. Fa-hsien (337 AD - 422 AD), a Chinese Buddhist monk who traveled across the Indian Ocean to Nepal, India, and Sri Lanka in search of Buddhist scriptures between 399 - 412 AD, and Ibn Battuta (1304-1369) from Morocco, mention in their notes that Sivanolipada Malai is a place where people of all religions visit together. Despite the lack of scientific or archaeological evidence, Shivanolipadamalai, a site revered by all ethnic groups in Sri Lanka for centuries, has faced issues due to systematic Buddhistization driven by racist Buddhist chauvinist forces.” - N. Saravanan.

When speaking with the locals, it was revealed that an ancient Shiva temple once stood on this hill, and Hindus have revered it as a sacred site since the era of Linga worship.

Sun worship of Shiva is an ancient Hindu practice. Atop this mountain lies a large, superhuman footprint revered by Hindus as Lord Shiva's. It is therefore called 'Shivanadipadam'. Some argue it belongs to Ravana, but evidence is lacking.

Shivaolipadam was initially a Hindu place of worship but has intermittently come under Buddhist rule. Hindu influence had been observed to dominate once again. When the Arab traveler Ibn Battuta visited Sri Lanka in 1345, Sivanoli Padam Malai was a Hindu-influenced location under the Aryan Emperor's authority. Ibn Battuta noted that when he expressed his wish to the Aryan emperor to visit the mountain, the emperor dispatched 15 Brahmins, 4 yogis, and 50 others to assist him, and he encountered Muslims and Christians on the mountain, says Sri Lankan historian NKS Thiruchelvam.

Hindus worshipped at Sivanolipathaamalai before Buddhism arrived in Sri Lanka. According to Pali texts, Lord Buddha visited Sri Lanka thrice. During his initial visit, Sivanolipadamalai was a primary place of worship in the country. Pali scriptures mention a prince named Mahasuman residing on this mountain, and Lord Buddha's first visit was to impart Buddhist principles to him.

The researchers have concluded that the footprint on Sivanolipathamalai does not belong to Lord Buddha. It is widely believed that Lord Buddha never visited Sri Lanka, with scholars stating he never ventured beyond the Vindhya Hills in India. Contemporary Indian texts do not mention Lord Buddha traveling outside of India.

Prof. Paravithana mentions the mountain deity on Sivanolipadamalai as 'Samanda Pathira', revered by Mahayana Buddhists. He notes this deity is Sumana, a Yaksha god, transformed into "Saman". Additionally, he highlights the Sanskrit equivalent of the Pali term Sumana as 'Yaman'.

During the period of 145-101 BC, when Ellalan ruled Sri Lanka, Shiva worship was prominent at Sivanolipathamalai. Historical references indicate that Tamils had established settlements in this region and regularly visited Sivanolipathamalai for worship.

There are seven ways to reach the summit of this mountain. Many of the place names along these routes are Tamil, indicating the historical presence of Tamils in this region. On the Ratnapura-Kuruvita path, names like Kilimalai, Andiyamalai, Ramakallu, Kungumam, Oosi Malai, Mohini Aruvi, Rajamalai can be found. Similarly, on the Hatton route, locations such as Nalla Thani, Sami Madam, Kasi Aru, Semmadam, Umaichami Madam, and Oosi Malai are situated in the vicinity of the mountain. These place names serve as evidence of the longstanding Tamil habitation in these regions.

There is evidence that the name 'Shivanadi Padam' gained popularity during the British period. During this time, the name Sivanadipatham was written on the name boards erected by the British in the areas near Sivanolipathamalai. Even today, we can see the name boards from the British period with the name 'Sivanadi Padam' at Notton Bridge, Maskeliya, Hatton, etc.," historian N.K.S. Thiruchelvam says.

In recent years, some individuals have begun utilizing this mountain with political motives, despite its historical significance as a unifying place of worship for Sri Lanka's three ethnic groups.

In 2018, the trilingual name board at the foot of Sivanadipada Malai was replaced with a new name board reading 'Gautama Buddha Bhagavan's Sri Padasthanam', sparking controversy and becoming the root of the issue.

This area, previously under Ambagamuwa Pradeshiya Sabha, became part of Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha with the expansion of district councils in Nuwara Eliya District. A former member of Ambagamuwa Pradeshiya Sabha filed a case claiming that the Buddhist pilgrimage site of Sivanadipadamalai should not be in a minority area. The case was eventually dismissed.

Following the local council elections, a skirmish erupted between the supporters of the two parties during the inaugural session of the Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha, which convened for the first time.

On March 28, 2018, a new name plaque was brought and placed at the base, sparking speculation among locals that it may have been orchestrated by certain ethnic groups unhappy with Sivanolipathamalai's presence in the predominantly Tamil area under Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha.

After this, the situation was somewhat pacified following the adoption and implementation of a resolution by the Maskelia Divisional Council to reinstate the nameplate to its original state.

It's an issue that requires a sensible approach. The new name stone was installed here on the day the new Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha was established. When I discussed this with the Government Agent, the ex-president of Maskelia Pradeshiya Sabha, Senbhagavalli, mentioned that she was not informed about it. We can't compromise on our religious rights while handling this matter delicately. That's how we proceeded," she explained.

Following the name change matter, a Shiva lingam was installed in the Shiva temple at the base of the Sivanolipada Malai by the World Saivite Thiruchchabai, with numerous Tamil and Sinhalese devotees in attendance.

Speaking on the issue, Member of Parliament V. Radhakrishnan stated, "Historically, communal and religious groups have attempted to rename Shivanadatha Malai. Subsequently, Hindu priests from India and local Buddhist Theros enshrined a Shiva idol at the base of the hill. As a result, the area has come to be known as Sivanutalada Malai Foothills."

In any case, the name "Sivanolipadamalai" has vanished not only in Sri Lanka but also among the Tamils, and now the name "Sri Pada" has become established. This suggests that some who argue that "Sri Pada" is its sole name have succeeded in their goal.

The fact that a place revered for centuries has now faced unprecedented religious discrimination reflects the peak of today's racist trend. State endorsement and institutionalized Sinhalese Buddhist chauvinism have led to the dominance of one religion in a region once known for religious harmony worldwide. This is why others struggle to resist these powerful forces," according to Researcher N. Saravanan.

It is the duty of all parties to protect Sivanoli Padamalai, which has long been an example of religious unity, and not let it become a source of religious discord like "Sri Pada" in the future.

After the war ended in 2009 and the armed Tamil struggle was suppressed, leaving them powerless, Sinhalese politicization escalated significantly.

Such chauvinistic tendencies are now somewhat subdued due to political conditions. This activity, which intensified slightly after former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa came to power, has decreased since Ranil Wickremesinghe became President, and a softer trend is being followed.

In the 1970s, over 260 locations were identified as archaeological sites in Sri Lanka, with some of these sites being converted to Buddhism. While the conversion of certain sites like Kurundur Hill to Buddhism is causing significant issues in the country, it is crucial to contemplate the implications if over 260 sites were to undergo such conversion.

"It would be inaccurate for Tamil individuals to argue that there was no presence of Buddhism in locations where Tamils worshipped, while the Sinhalese celebrated their own traditions for an extensive period. Historical evidence suggests that Tamil communities practiced religions such as Jainism, Vaishnavism, and Buddhism many centuries ago. Hence, Buddhism is not exclusive to a particular group; Tamils have also embraced it. The concern arises when it is asserted as Sinhalese Buddhism, as forcibly claiming sites where Tamil worship has long prevailed could lead to significant repercussions," stated analyst N. Saravanan.

According to historical records, King Tuttakaimunu, who engaged in a conflict with King Ellala, venerated Murugan in Kathirgama and vowed to construct a temple if victorious. Subsequently, upon winning the battle, he erected Viharas and built a temple for Kathirgama Kandan.

Examining this narrative, it appears that the Sinhalese populace has revered Kathirgama Murugan since that era. Nonetheless, it is believed that even before this period, the Ellala king Kathirgama was blessed by Murugan, indicating that people had been venerating Murugan there long before. This suggests a longstanding Tamil presence in the region. The situation has become intricate as Tamil-led worships have been neglected, and Sinhala Buddhism has dominantly taken charge.

Tamil devotees from across the country visit Kathirgamam to worship. In the Eastern Province, the custom of going on foot from Batticaloa to Kathirgama Kandan is still observed today.

Accusations persist that Sinhalese settlements in Tamil regions are being disguised as development projects to alter the population balance in the North and East, hindering Tamils from returning to their own lands.

The US-based Oakland Institute, which regularly monitors and publishes research reports on human rights in Sri Lanka, stated that land expropriation in the north and east has worsened since the regime change in 2019. This includes irrigation projects, military settlements, archaeological reservations, wildlife sanctuaries, forest, and special economic zones.

Anuradha Mittal, executive director of the Oakland Institute, which coordinated the research for the report, said: "The denial of permission to Tamils to use their ancestral lands, changing the names of villages, converting churches and Hindu temples into Buddhist viharas and erecting monuments establishing Sinhala supremacy is a concerted effort to erase Tamil history and culture."

Ponnudurai Satsivanandam, a Trincomalee based social activist, says that "all politicians have politicized Thirukoneswaram, and ravaged the most ancient symbol of Tamils."

"After 2007, Sinhalese politicians and government officials gave wrong advice to the Sinhalese people who lived in Ratnapura and brought them as entrepreneurs and made the existence of Tamils questionable. Although there are many places in Trincomalee, it is wrong to engage them in business activities in this sacred temple environment. Besides protecting the sanctity of Thirukoneswaram in Trincomalee, the town of Tamils, the government should take steps to ensure the right of worship of the Tamil people is protected in the future as well," he said.

Lingeshwari says that when he came here in 2001, there were only 3 shops, now there are 56 shops here. Lingeshwari, a mother of three from a female-headed family, alleges that only four shops there are owned by Tamils and that Tamil traders are discriminated against.

"Our shops are not provided with electricity. Don't know the reason for this. During festival seasons, electricity facilities will be provided in areas where Sinhala traders have shops. But Tamil traders will not have that facility. It has been 23 years since I started this shop. Even in these 23 years I have not been supplied with electricity. I don't know why this prejudice against us. If we question this, we will be retaliated in other ways." She expresses her inability.

Karunarathana, a Sinhalese trader from Serunuvara, Trincomalee, says that he has been running a shop here since 2003. However, he claims that the government has not given him any other assistance for all these years after being given the space to set up shop here.

"Similar is the situation in Trigoneswaram, where the majority of Tamil people lived, Sinhalese settlements have been planned and carried out today. If this situation continues, the condition of Kathirgamam may occur in the future. There's a chance for that. All these are being carried out based on a pre-planned agenda," points out analyst N. Saravanan.

“After the end of the war, the Buddhist chauvinists intensified their aggressive activities in the traditional Tamil areas of the north and east in a systematic manner. New Viharas are set up to hurt the sentiments of the people and incite religious commotions. The religious rights of Tamils and Muslims and Christians are being denied by giving prominence to Buddhism. All these take place with the full blessings of the Department of Archeology. The people of northern and eastern provinces are suffering under the occupation of Sinhalese and Buddhist extremists. Temples, lands and ancient symbols of Tamils have been Buddhistized in northern and eastern provinces. Why are there viharas in the Tamil area? This is the question of the people. In this situation, the government should immediately stop the acquisition of native lands of Tamils by declaring them as archeological sites. Their rights should be given to them," says Member of Parliament Sivagnanam Sritharan, who has been vocal about the Buddhistization being carried out in the North-East.

Thus, the government has denied the allegations made by the Tamil side that Buddhistization activities are being carried out in the Tamil areas, and the government says that it does not discriminate on the basis of religion and language.

“It is mentioned in Article 9 of the Constitution that priority should be given to Buddhism. However, nowhere is it mentioned that other religions should be made secondary. Also, the government and the ministry did not putdown anyone on the basis of religion and language. The Department of Hindu Religious Affairs has been advised to take necessary steps to restore the ancient Hindu temples in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. Adequate measures have been taken to protect Hindu religious culture and religious symbols," said Vidura Wickramanayake, Minister for Buddhist, Religious and Cultural Affairs.

Like Sivanolipathamalai and Kathirgamam, Nainadivu is a place where Tamil and Sinhalese people worship together. Nainadivu, which has a unique historical reputation among the Sabta Islands, is located approximately 37.3 kilometers southwest of Jaffna city. The Sinhalese call it Nagadeepa. There is no land route to Nainadivu. From Jaffna you can drive to Kurikatuwan and from there you can take a boat to Nainadivu Island. Nagabhushani Amman temple on this island is of historical significance. This temple is known as "Nainadivu Nagabhushani Amman Temple". A Buddhist Vihara built near this temple is found and it is called Naga Vihara. Buddhists believe that Gautama Buddha visited this island. Also, apart from a few Buddhist monks in this Vihara, the island has historically been inhabited by Tamils.

Ven. Kalallegama Dhammathilaka Thero of the Naga Vihara says that the Naga Vihara is strengthening the relations between all the ethnic groups of the Tamil and Sinhala speaking communities in the place of worship in this island based on Naga (the serpent).

Devotees irrespective of race, religion and language visit the temple. The Tamil people of this island are very fond of us. There are no differences here. The Nayaka Thero of our Vihara had made arrangements to bring a male elephant to participate in the Nagapoosani Amman Temple

festival procession held recently. Those who come here also go to temples. Tamil devotees also visit the Vihara," he said, pointing out that Nainatheevu was a common place of worship for all.

Meanwhile, visitors can observe that idols of Tamil gods have been placed in one part of the Naga Vihara.

Mathiyaparanan Ambikaipagan, a member of the Annadhana Sabha, says that not only Tamils but people of all religions including Buddhists come to the Amudhasurabi Annadhana Mandapam in Nainathivu, which is a sacred land of religious harmony.

"Though it is a small island, Tamil, Sinhala, Muslim and Christian people visit it not as a tourist spot but as a place of their spiritual worship. We don't discriminate against them. Hundreds of Buddhist pilgrims come to this Amudhasurabi Mandapam to cook food and donate to the temple. People from Hambantota, Anuradhapura, Kandy and Gampaha come here. It is crowded here on weekends and there is no racial, religious, clan or caste differences," said Ambikaibagan.

In a small country like Sri Lanka, where the Tamil and Sinhala speaking people have been facing many hardships for the political gains of the separatists for so long, even though a decade has passed since the end of the war and peace was restored, the chauvinist trend of Sinhala Buddhistization carried out in the name of religions continues to keep the Tamil people in fear.

With the establishment of Buddhist Viharas and Sinhala settlements in the Tamil areas in the North and East and the existence of Tamils being questioned, there is a fear in the minds of the Tamil people that over time the worship of Tamils in Hindu temples will be defaced and that too will be Buddhistized. The need of the hour is to remove this situation and ensure that people of all communities can carry out their worship without fear and without change. It is also important to pay attention to this issue.