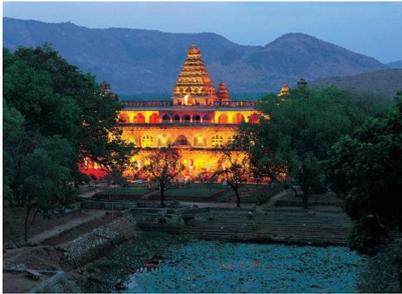


Tirupati – Proving Riches in Belief

Tirupati, the abode of Lord Venkateshwara, a form of the Hindu God Vishnu, is located in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh in India. It represents both the bustling temple town at the foothills and the main pilgrimage centre, Tirumala, nestling 3,000 feet high on cool verdant hills of the Eastern Ghats, 600 km/40 miles south of Hyderabad, the state capital. These hills are said to resemble the mythical serpent Adishesha, the mount of the Lord Venkateshwara. Hence, the deity is called 'Shashachalavasa' and the Lord of the Seven Hills.



Tirupati is considered to be the richest temple in the world with the shrine attracting devotees perhaps more than any other temple in the world with the firm belief that the wish expressed before the image of the Lord will be granted. It is a pleasant drive from Tirupati upto Tirumala with the road winding up past forested slopes offering splendid views of the plains. In earlier times people climbed to the temple on foot. Many people today do the 11 km trek as part of their pilgrimage starting the ascent from Alipiri and shouting 'Govinda Govinda' and 'Om Namah Venkateshsaiya' (other names of Venkateshwara) as they go up.

The temple has witnessed the rise and fall of several powerful dynasties. The Pallavas, Cholas and Pandyas were all patrons of the shrine and endowed it with wealth. Later in the 16th century the Vijayanagar kings enriched and embellished the temple and gave it a lease of life. According to a story, a local chieftain called Tondaman discovered the Lord's idol in a huge ant-hill and later built a temple on the southern banks of Sri Swami Pushkarini, a holy water tank.

Imposing gopurams or gateways to the temple dominate the scene. The temple structure is in itself an architectural wonder and a perfect example of the Dravidian style. The exquisitely worked and gilded Vimana (cupola) – Ananda Nilayam above the temple and the huge pillar in front of the deity are wrapped in gold sheets, gleaming in the sun. Within the three enclosures of the temple complex in the sanctum is the majestic swayambhu or the naturally formed image of the deity profusely bedecked in precious stones as it stands on a lotus with the symbols – the sankha (conch) and the chakra (discus) in his hands and images of the Goddesses Lakshmi and Padmavati on the chest.



Worship in the temple starts in the early hours of the morning before dawn with the Suprabhatam when the deity is woken from rest. This morning ritual is an unforgettable experience as myriad flickering oil lamps light the sanctum and the deity decked in glittering ornaments amidst the chanting of priests. The annual Brahmotsavam is a unique and resplendent festival attracting millions in the short span of a week besides the Vasanthotsavam (spring festival) in Mar.–Apr. and Rathasapthami in Feb., with the main deity taken on procession around the temple chariots.

What makes Tirupati so popular is a mystery. People visit it over and over again spilling buses, cars, taxis and trains and waiting patiently for hours together in serpentine queues to have a darshaan (glimpse) of the Lord known as Balaji in North India. Yet, there is order in all the chaos as devotees praise and beseech Him for fulfilment of their wishes. In spite of the surging crowd, the temple premises are clean and green. The Tirupati Tirumala Devasthanam (TTD) manages to keep pace with increasing pilgrims and is constantly endeavouring to provide better facilities.

One can move anywhere on the hills in a bus provided by the temple authorities free of charge. The TTD provides guesthouses and dormitories free of charge, cottages and rooms for the pilgrims at affordable costs. All around the temple is a shifting mosaic of colours as people move around the colourful stalls selling souvenirs, handicrafts, brass lamps, copper vessels and all paraphernalia needed for the rituals. The air is full of the indefinable fragrance from flowers, incense sticks and oil lamps.

Devotees to Tirupati donate money in Venkateshwara's hundi (donation pot). The collections go as high as Rs. 22.5 million a day (\$400,000). Many offer gold as a token of their love for the God with annual gold offering often going as high as 3000 kg. In addition, many devotees have their head tonsured as an offering to the Lord. The 600 temple barbers shave the pilgrims' heads and more than \$6 million dollars is raised annually through its auction by the TTD to international buyers for use as hair extensions and in cosmetics.



Revenue is also generated from the thulabharam ritual in which the devotee sits on a pan of a weighing balance while the other is filled with materials such as sugar, jaggery, tulsi leaves, banana, gold, coins,

etc., greater than the weight of the devotee. This is mostly performed with newborn babies or children. In Arjitha seva (paid services) pilgrims can view and participate in a limited fashion in the various sevas performed to Lord Venkateshwara and other idols in the temple. They can also obtain prasadam in the form of clothes, sacred and blessed rice, food articles and a viewing of the deity.

The popularity of the temple can be judged by the annual budget estimated at Rs. 10 billion (\$186 million) in 2008 with almost everything coming directly from donations. Devotees give donations which runs into millions. Depicting the Indian legacy, the temple is really significant from the religious point of view and evident from the growing numbers visiting it world over. Sri Venkateswara is a benefactor of boons in the Dark Age and people come here to seek his blessings.

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