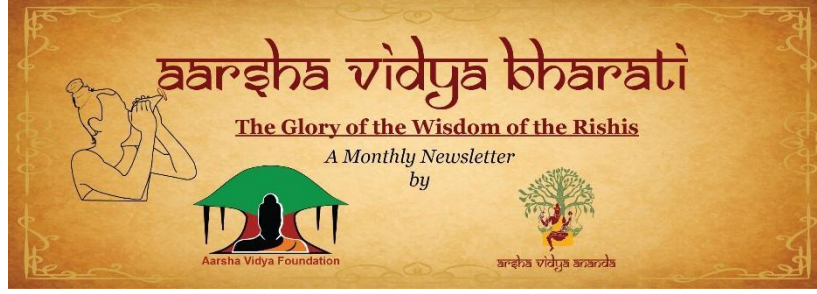

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Tirthayātrā to Srisailam

By Priya Gopie, Trinidad & Tobago

In May 2023, I was scheduled to attend a conference in Hyderabad. When I spoke with Swamini Brahmajnananda ji about visiting her in Mumbai, she suggested that instead she would come to Hyderabad. Since it was my first visit to *Bhārat*, Swaminiji suggested that we go on *yātrā*. So we planned a *yātrā* to Srisailam – a temple town nestled in the hills in Andhra Pradesh. Varsha Shankar from Bengaluru joined us.



In Srisailam, Lord Shiva and goddess Shakti take the form of Sri *Mallikārjuna Swāmi* (one of the 12 *Jyotirlinga*-s) and *Bhramarāmba Devi* (one of the 18 *Mahā Śakti Pīṭhā*-s) on a mountain named Sri Shaila. As the two are side by side in the same temple complex, Srisailam is considered of special significance even in the *Purāṇa*-s. Sri Narasimhaswamy in *Satya-yuga*, Sri Rama alongside Sita Devi in *Tretā-yuga*, all five *Pāṇḍava*-s in *Dvāpara-yuga*, many Yogis, Rishis, Munis, preachers, spiritual teachers, Kings, poets and devotees in *Kali-yuga* have visited Srisailam seeking the blessings of Sri *Bhramarāmbika Devi* and *Mallikārjuna Swāmi*.

After the *Purāṇa*-s, the earliest known historical mention of Srisailam hill can be traced in Pulumavis Nasik inscription of 1st Century AD. The Satavahanas, Ikshvakus, Pallavas, Vishnukundis, Chalukyas, Kakatiyas, Reddy Kings, Vijayanagara Emperors and Chatrapathi Shivaji are among the famous emperors who worshipped *Mallikārjuna Swāmi* and made several contributions to the development of the temple.

Any anticipated experience can be in line with what is expected, less than expected, different from expected, or more than expected. This trip was definitely more than I could have ever expected.



The weather that is usually arid and hot at this time of the year had cooled its ways in anticipation of our *tīrthayātrā*! The 5 hr (214km) drive from Hyderabad to Srisaïlam was punctuated with some memorable stops. After driving through a part of the lush green Nagarjunsagar-Srisaïlam Tiger Reserve, we paused to admire the Srisaïlam Dam built over the Krishna River. Then, we stopped off at the Krishna Ghat, and climbed down the many steps to reach the river. On the way down, we

bought some offerings for the river. Then, we got into a saucer-shaped bamboo boat to get to the middle of the river to do our puja. We sang chants to Lord Krishna as we did *pūjā*. On returning to the shore, we explored the nearby temple that had *mūrti*-s of Datta Sai, Hanumanji, and did *pradakṣiṇa* around a peepal tree that had many *nāga-mūrti*-s around its roots.

Then, of course before we could go to and receive the blessings of Lord Shiva and Devi *Mātā* at Srisaïlam, we had to make sure that *Gaṇapati*-Baba recorded our visit. And so we stopped at the ancient *Sākṣi Gaṇapati* Temple which is about 2 km from the main temple complex. *Sri Gaṇapati* is exquisitely made holding a book in the left hand and a pen in the right hand in such a way as noting down the names of devotees. After chanting *Gaṇapati Atharvaśīrṣa Upaniṣad* and a short *pūjā* and an archana, we broke a coconut to break free of all negativity and limitation.

As we approached Srisaïlam, we were greeted by large statues of *Lingam*-s and a Shiva-Parvati *mūrti*. As it was already evening, we decided to enjoy the Light & Sound show. Set in an open-air garden theater with the night-sky as the roof, this show was a marvelous sight to behold. As the lights danced over the fountains, in rhythm to the sound, the stories recounting the glories of Srisaïlam with huge images of Lord Shiva, Devi *Mātā*, and Lord Ganesha had us spellbound. Though the audio was in Telugu (which none of us spoke) still it was spectacular.

The next day, we readied before dawn and made our way to the temple complex barefoot in order to have *darśana* of *Bhagavān*.

First we had *darśana* and did *abhiṣekam* as a group to *Mallikārijuna Swāmi*, who is in the form of a *lingam* at Srisaïlam. Then, we were ushered across to the *Bhramarāmba Devi* Temple. As we entered Her *Garbha-graha*, Her shakti was palpable. We sat down and did kumkum *pūjā* to an exquisite *Śri-cakra* made of old stone to the chants of *Śri Lalitā Sahasranāma*. Then, we came before the *mūrti*-s of Devi & Lord Shiva, and did about an hour-long chanting of sacred mantras including *Śri Rudram*, with a *kalaśa* of water and some flowers that we were later able to



individually offer to the *Mallikāṛjuna Lingam*. After this offering, we spent some quiet time in individual prayer at Devi's temple.

The temple complex houses many other shrines that each have a remarkable story of their own. Lord Rama and Devi Sita, as well as the *Pāṇḍava*-s are among the many notable devotees who have all dedicated shrines that stand to this day. There was an unforgettable sight of a line of Nandi-s, gazing at their respective *linga*-s. Of note, wherever we saw a *lingam*, there was a Nandi looking on at the *lingam*. We were also able to see and pet the cows and calves living in the complex. It was barely 9am when we had finished all the activities, yet the day already felt so full. We refreshed ourselves and then set off to visit a few local pilgrimage sites.



First we stopped at *Phaladhārā & Pañcadhārā* which is at a distance of about 5 km from the Srisailam temple. It is said that the names of these streams signify their origin from the forehead of Lord Siva, the *Phaladhārā* (*Phala* = forehead, *dhārā* = Stream) and denote the five aspects of Siva, the *Pañcadhārā* (*Pañca* = five). The water from this stream flows uninterrupted in all the seasons. As we walked down the 160 steps, the gushing

sounds of the pure water kept us company. *Bhagavān Ādi Śankarācārya* composed the *Śivānanda Lahari* here. We visited the *Śri Śārada Candra Moulīśvara Śankara Mandiram*, where Kanchi *Paramācārya* has installed *mūrti*-s of *Śri Śārada* and *Ādi Śankarācārya*. Adjacent to the mandir, a much smaller waterfall falls onto about a dozen dispersed miniature *Lingam*-s, ensuring a continuous *abhiṣekam* that is indeed a pleasant sight to behold.

After this we visited the nearby Hatakeswaram, where we had *darśana* of Lord Shiva in the form of the Shiva *lingam* that had emerged from pieces of broken pottery, Atikeshwara.

From there, we continued on to the *Śikhāreswara* temple which is at the highest point in Srisailam Hills at an altitude of 2830 feet above sea level. The temple is an ancient stone structure with steps and tank dating back to 1398 AD. Here one can get a panoramic view of Srisailam and when one looks between the ears of the Nandi outside the shrine, there is a view of the Srisailam temple complex. And so, we got one last look at Srisailam from Nandi's vantage point before starting back the journey from whence we came.