Efficient way of Darshan of the Lord Venkateswara of Tirupati/Tirupati Balaji Temple

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Abstract
Many temples in India are not well organized for the general public. The temples located in south India are much better compared to northern part of the temples. Clear examples are Kasi Viswanatha temple of Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh and Tirupati Balaji temple in Andhra Pradesh. Although south Indian temples, in general, are better organized there is still a vast scope for improvement. In this article, the queue system followed in Tirupati Balaji temple is critically examined and innovative procedure is suggested considering the safety and comfort of the thousands of daily visitors to the temple.

Introduction
Sri Venkateswara temple on Tirumala Hills, located near Tirupati town, Chittoor District of Andhra Pradesh in India (Fig.1) is well known to be the most sacred place for all Hindus. It has largest number of visitors compared any other temple in India, perhaps in the world. Although, there is no clear evidence on the history of it’s origin, there are evidences that it has attracted the attention of great kings since 9th Century AD. The Pallavas of Kanchipuram in 9th Century, the Cholas of Tanjore in 10th Century and Vijayanagara pradhans during 11 to 14th century have developed this temple by adding various facilities for the visitors (Narayana Reddy, 1988). For example, it is not easy in earlier days to visit this temple as it is located in the middle of a thick forest cover over a hill at an elevation of about 850 m. above mean sea level. Development of the temple includes, creation of approach paths in the hilly terrain and addition of other facilities both inside and outside the temple. Unlike other Hindu temples, especially in north India, which are grossly mismanaged with disorderly way, this temple is relatively well organized. One exception in northern Indian part of temples is the recent newly constructed Aksharadham temple complexes.

The belief on the Lord Venkateswara (Fig.2) has grown over the years, and thus the offerings by the devotees to the God has grown so much, it became the richest in India. The income to the temple mainly comes from the pilgrim’s offerings in the form of cash and gold. In recent years, the crowd has increased to unmanageable level by the administration (Subramanyam Naidu, 1990). Comfortable ways are provided to a few rich people in the form of VIP (Very Important Person) darshan, but the majority of common people suffers due to heavy crowd. For example, each day a minimum of about 0.05 to 0.1 million people visits the temple to have glimpses of the God. The number of persons visiting the temple increases to 0.5 million each day on a few special occasions and also during the period of school, college long holidays (Narayana Reddy, 1994, 1996). For this reason May-July i.e. during the summer holidays for the schools and colleges, each day it may reach a record number of about 0.75 million people. Information and details about the temple is not available easily in the published electronic media except a reasonably good coverage in Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tirumala_Venkateswara_Temple).

The present article is devoted to a brief review of existing procedures of queuing system, and suggests a way out with innovative concepts that may help the authorities for implementation. This is also an attempt to make the information available in the published electronic media for all to have detailed knowledge on the temple system. Although the concepts presented here are meant to Tirupati Balaji temple located in Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh state, India, it can easily be implemented in many temples of India.

Fig.1 Location of Tirupati in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India
2. The Hindu Way Of Prayer To The God

To appreciate the concepts, one needs to understand the way of prayers in Hindu temples. Unlike Christians or Muslims way of praying, Hindu way of praying to the God is completely different. Both the Christians and Muslims either sit or stand freely for a long time in large halls and offer prayers to the God. But the general category of majority of Hindus carry flowers, coconut, cash and offer them to the God and spend a few seconds or minutes before the God, depending on the number of visitors to the temple. In peak time, one can get hardly a few seconds to see the God. One can only have a glimpse of God and no time to stand but all the time moving in forward direction as many number of devotees waiting for their turn in a queue.

This way of crowd, sometimes resulted in stampede at times causing injury or even death to the people. Although, such occurrences are rare, and limited to special and auspicious days, there is an urgent need to introduce new ways in all the temples. With the modern high technology available at the door step, one needs to effectively plan to avoid such incidences completely with effective planning. In general, such stampedes are more common in northern part of India than in south India. Among the various temples in India, temples of south India are more orderly than north Indian temples. This is clear if one visits to the famous Kasi temple of Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh state of India. But more need to be done in all the temples of India keeping the safety of the people.

3. Queue System at Tirumala

The procedure of the queue system in Tirumala is continuously being improved from time to time (Narayana Reddy, 1987). There are separate queues created for the persons with and without (free darshan) the God as compared to the ticket holders who can afford to buy the special ticket. Although several innovative ways are introduced in the system by the official agency – Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam, popularly known as TTD (Aiyangar 1940; Murthy, 1984), the present queue system is inadequate to the increasing number of pilgrims. One notable change in recent years is in the construction of a large queue complex. It consists of number of large halls with sitting arrangement. The idea here is to facilitate the pilgrims to sit and relax in these halls for a few hours till their turn comes. About 2 to 3 hundred persons can be accommodated in each hall. The gate for the hall will be opened one after the other. The average time to wait for a darshan of the Lord varies from a minimum of 1 hour and may go even upto 12 hours in the peak season. Another innovative idea introduced due to IT revolution in India is called ‘Sudarshanam’. In Hindu mythology it means auspicious meeting of the God the Lord Venkateswara. It is simply a bio-metric system. A band is fixed to the individual person’s hand 2 or 3 days before as a token with date and time mentioned on it. A web camera photo of the person is also taken at that time and recorded onto the computer. Such offices or centres are distributed all over India at selected cities like Hyderabad, Chennai, Bangalore, Delhi etc. The arm band is all weather proof and cannot easily be destroyed for a few days unless one can cut it with a blade or scissors. Additionally, one can reserve the date and time much in advance, may be about one or two months in advance. (http://www.enotes.com/topic/Tirumala_Tirupati_Devasthanams). It is just a ticket with a magnetic marker given to the person with finger impression and web camera photo recorded. Although such innovative procedures are introduced, it appears that they are inadequate to handle the large number of Hindu devotees.

Some improvements are made to make the Tirupati Balaji temple clean and tidy in recent years. The authorities have restricted the breaking of the coconut or offering of flowers to the God. In majority of south Indian temples, it is customary to give small food item (Prasadam) to all the visitors. They used to prepare inside the temple close to the central location. They have also shifted this location to a separate place to prepare food items. This is to reduce the congestion and pollution due to waste water and waste food materials etc. near the central location inside the temple.

4. The Procedure Of Darshan:

As mentioned before there are four procedures available for the pilgrims of general category to choose. One is without payment, i.e., called free darshan, the second and third ones are through Rs.50/- payment ticket queue or Rs.300/- payment ticket queue and the last one is a special queue meant only for those who have reached the temple location by walking 14 kms using
large number of steps of the hill from nearby town Tirupati. Bio-metric system is compulsory for all the categories except for the busy persons who have made their visit without prior planning i.e. Rs.300/- queue for Darshan. The persons from all the four categories walking in different queue lines, which are usually in a single person line, will be merged finally into one line near the main entrance of the temple. The single person line becomes multi-person line with people of three to four in number stand side by side. Here large number of persons try to rush towards the God by pushing and pulling from the main entrance to inside the temple till the location of the statue of God. This is the main problem being faced by many persons. Here, sometimes stampede happens. Fortunately, so far no death toll reported in this temple, although minor bruises occur to a few persons. Muscular men will have upper hand. Ladies with small children, sensitive persons and old persons will be at the receiving end. Realizing this problem, there is a special timing and special queues are provided by the authorities for the old (>65 years) people, physically handicapped persons and also for the ladies with children less than one year old.

![Fig. 3 Location of the temple at Tirumala near Tirupati, A.P., India (map downloaded from google and modified). The paths A to K shows the existing queue lines.](image)

5. Present Queue System And New Effective Queue System

The direction and movement of the present queue system is presented in Figure-3. For easy description, A,B,C,D,E,F,G,H etc and also arrow marks are shown in the figure. The location A is the entry of all the persons from the Vaikuntam Queue complex. There is a bridge like structure and the queue line slowly reaches down stairs close to the main compound wall of the temple. These lines follow the compound wall and takes a left turn to reach the main entrance of the temple (B and C directions). The location C is near the main entrance to the temple. In figure 4, the entrance gate of the temple on the ground with white colour gopuram above the entrance with a picturesque undulating hills as back-
The ground can be seen. The queue follows meandering through D and E. The location E is the entry to the innermost compound wall in which the statue of Lord Venkateswara is located. After having darshan to the God one need to exit by following the queue lines F, G, H, I, J and K. The main crowd would like to spend as much time as possible between the paths of E and F such that they can spend more duration to view the God. Everybody would like to resist the forward movement. They all tried to walk slowly. Realizing this problem authorities have engaged a few volunteers, both men and woman on either side of the line between E and F to physically drag or push the people to move. Often one can hear big arguments between the volunteers and the devotees. This way hardly they find time to look at the God. As many single line queues merged, there are 3 to 4 people starts moving in as one line standing side by side. The job of the volunteers is to physically drag the devotees towards the exit. Another problem is all the persons are not of the same height. Here taller persons have an upper hand. They can view the God bit more time than short persons. The authorities have put up a gradual slope from the point E towards the God. This has improved a bit but not adequate. The short and tall disparity could not be solved by this facility. After the exit from the innermost compound wall one need to follow the path F,G, H etc. by making round the innermost compound wall. Between G and H locations, there will be a place one can offer cash, silver or gold to the God. This place is known as HUNDI. This is a special place and has a bit history but out of the scope for the present study. Near the location H free sample food (Prasadam) will be given to all. After taking Prasadam, one needs to come out of the temple again through the main gate where the main entrance is also located. The line follows the paths of I, J and K. Near the location J sweet will be given to the persons depending on the ticket he purchased more number for Rs.300/- and less number for Rs.50/- ticket. After taking the sweet (called Tirupati Laddu) again one follows the same path between I and J to reach K located on the Road.

Fig. 4 Photo showing the entrance to the temple.

Having personally visited this temple more than 50 times since child hood, being the native of Tirupati town, I find the following are the main problems to the present queue system. They are a) mixing up of the single person lines to multi-person (3 to 4) line near the main entrance, b) entry and exit are through same location, the exit lies just side of the entry location, c) too many meandering of the lines d) there is no control on the number of persons at different locations (this resulted in number of persons per square foot space is nearly 1 and at times one can feel suffocation or sweating), e) visibility of God is advantageous for taller and younger persons than shorter and relatively old persons and f) pulling and pushing by the volunteers to speed up the movement is also an issue to worry.

In order to solve all the above problems mentioned above in a-to-f, I have suggested an alternative way and presented in figures 5 and 6. Figure 5 is a schematic diagram while figure 6 is same as figure 3 downloaded from google map showing a different path for the queue. The main features of the present effective new queue suggested here are a) maintenance of the single person queue system from beginning of the line till the visit to the God b) separate entrance and separate exit as shown in the figures, c) reduction of meandering of the lines d) stop or restriction at different locations within the single line queue such that a minimum of 2 sq.ft of space for every person exist, e) introduction of step like path in the queue near the God such that short persons will be in the front side and taller persons will be at a step behind and so on, like five different steps f) introduction of moving walker system (like we all see in some airports) and reduction of volunteers meant to push or pull the persons.
As per the suggestion (a) above, one can maintain and walk all through out in a descent manner, the advantage of the suggestion (b) is many fold. Even if some calamity like fire happens inside the temple, people can easily escape from the two gates. Additionally, congestion within the queue reduces substantially and there will be relatively better free flow of persons. Suggestion (c) is meant to reduce the walking distance of the persons and (d) is to make all the persons to have comfortable breathing space while walking. Suggestion (e) is to have the glimpses of God bit more time irrespective of their height, gender or age and finally the suggestion (f) is to use the modern system to have uniform duration to have darshan of the God.

Fig. 6 Location of the temple at Tirumala near Tirupati, A.P., India (map downloaded from google and modified). The paths A to H shows different queue lines suggested from the present study.

Fig. 5 A schematic diagram suggesting different queue system and also the step like structure nearest to the stature of God inside the innermost compound wall of the temple.
All these suggestions are made with careful observation and keeping the comfort and safety of all the persons visiting the temple. The suggestions, if implemented by the authorities also increase the income for the God as it helps to see the God simultaneously in five queues. From my personal counting at the exit of the gate of the innermost compound wall it is about 250 persons for 5 minutes. This means for every minute about 50 persons are coming out and thus each person on an average will get about 1 to 1.5 seconds to view at the nearest point from the statue of God. The new system helps the persons to see the God more than 2 seconds. The number of persons increases from 250 in 5 minutes to atleast three to four times, i.e 750 to 1000 persons in 5 minutes. This is mainly due to simultaneous view of darshan by five persons standing at different heights.

6. Summary And Conclusions

Realizing the importance of the holy Hindu temple located on Tirumala hills near Tirupati town of Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh state in India, and also keeping the safety and comfort of half a million people visiting the temple daily an effective queue system is suggested in the present study. The salient points of the new queue system are – 1) to create separate entry and exit gates to the temple, 2)maintenance of single person queue throughout and 3) introduction of steps at the nearest location of the God where the persons will have darshan of the Lord Venkateswara.

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References