ABSTRACT

VARKALA is a coastal town and municipality in Trivandum district situated in the Indian state of Kerala. Varkala is the only place in Kerala where cliffs are found adjacent to Arabian sea. These tertiary sedimentary formation cliffs are a unique geological feature on the otherwise flat Kerala coast, and is known among geologists as Varkala formation and a geological monument as declared by the geological survey of India. It is a very ideal tourist spot surrounded by the greenery beautiful meadows, deep puzzling valleys and dales. Varkala is one of the health resorts in Kerala and is regarded as a Spa of Kerala as its mineral waters possess medicinal properties and is a remedy for many diseases. The Varkala seashore is a haven for sun bathing and swimming. It is called as Papanasam Kadappuram and hundreds of Hindu devotees perform Vavubali here on new moon days. The 2000 year old Janardhanaswamy Temple attracts a large number of devotees to this place. It is believed that Brahma performed a great yagam at Varkala and the strata of lignite and mineral waters found in Varkala are attributed to this yagam. The Sivagiri Mutt situated on an eminence two miles east of Janardhanaswamy Temple is held sacred by the Hindus especially the Ezhavas. It was built by the great spiritual leader
Sri Narayana Guru where he breathed his last. A quiet seaside destination on the shores of the Arabian sea Varkala is, with each passing day becoming a favourite destination of tourists from various parts of India and abroad. The present paper highlights the historical significance of Varkala, the religious monuments of Varkala, Varkala as a health resort and above all Varkala as a tourist paradise.

**Keywords:** Varkala, Papanasam, Janardhana, Sivagiri, Anjengofort, Kappil, Ponnumthuruthu

**INTRODUCTION**

India is a multi destination country with a variety of tourist attractions. Tourism is the second largest net foreign exchange earner for the country. Tourism creates more jobs than any other sector. The significant feature of the tourism industry is that it employs a large number of people – educated, uneducated, skilled and unskilled. All the states in India are blessed with tourist potentialities. Kerala located on the south western tip of India is regarded as Gods own country as it serves the needs of the tourists who visit Kerala. Among the tourist destinations of Kerala, Varkala is considered as a paradise, which is a place of historical and religious importance even from ancient days and is a health resort of Kerala.

**Historical Significance of Varkala**

Varkala, a village in the Chirayenkeezh Taluk, situated 26 miles north of Trivandrum city. The place is known throughout India as Janardanam being so named after the
ancient temple dedicated to Janardana situated on the summit of a table land contiguous to the sea1. It is visited by Hindu pilgrims from all parts of India, who regard it as sacred as Gaya itself. Some call it as Southern Varanasi or Benaras. The place has a great antiquity. From an inscription found in the temple dated A.D.1252 it is seen that the central shrine of the Janardanaswami Temple was rebuilt in that year. There is in the temple a Dutch bell with an inscription in Latin. It is supposed to have been presented to the temple when the Dutch evacuated Anjengo where they had a factory.

Varkala was in former times known also as Udaya marthanda puram. So named after a Travancore King Vira Udaya Marthanda Varma. It is believed that he was instructed by Lord Brahma to build a temple at this very place to redeem him of his sins. The following tradition is current about the name of the place and its ancient temple dedicated to Janardanaswami:— on one occasion, sage Narada went to the abode of Narayana and after paying his respects left the place to see Brahma. The Rishi, as was his wont, travelled all along from one lokam to another sounding his vina, the tunes of which so enraptured Vishnu that he quietly followed the Rishi unobserved. When Narada reached Brahmalokam Brahma saw Naryana following him and immediately offered salutations to him, on which Vishnu realizing his awkward position, suddenly disappeared. Brahma when he got up saw that the person before whom he had prostrated was his own son Narada. The Prajapathis who were present laughing at Brahma’s expense, the latter cursed them that they should become human beings and suffer the miseries of birth and death. Narada consoled them and advised them to do penance at a place he himself would select for them. He threw his valkam (bark garment) which fell
on a tree. Hence the name Varkala a corruption of valkalam. A temple was built by them near the place and was consecrated to Vishnu.

Varkala attracts large numbers of pilgrims from all parts of India. It is believed that Brahma performed a great yagam there and the strata of lignite and the mineral water found in Varkala are attributed to this yagam. There is also a tradition that when the west coast was reclaimed from the sea by Parasurama, earth quakes were frequent and the land was unfit for human habitation. To overcome these difficulties Parasurama is believed to have sprinkled gold dust over the land and buried coins in many places. He is also believed to have performed a great yagam at Varkala.

**Religious Monuments of Varkala**

Varkala is a coastal town and municipality in Thiruvananthapuram district situated in the Indian state of Kerala. It is considered as a pilgrimage centre for the Hindus. The major pilgrim centres of the place are;

**Janardhanaswamy Temple**

It is a very important Vasihnavite shrine and attracts thousands of pilgrims. The temple is about 2000 years old. It is often referred to as Dakshin Kashi. To the temple is attached a holy tank. The temple has an ancient-bell removed from the shipwreck, donated by the captain of the Dutch vessel which sank near Varkala without causing any causalities.
Sivagiri Mutt

Sivagiri is a famous ashram in Varkala founded by the philosopher and social reformer Sri Narayana Guru. Sri Narayana Guru’s tomb is also located here. The Samadhi of the guru attracts thousands of devotees every year during the sivagiri pilgrimage days 30th December to 1st January. The Sivagiri Mutt, built in 1904, is situated at the top of the Sivagiri hill near Varkala. Even decades after the Guru breathed his last here in 1928 his Samadhi continues to be thronged by thousands of devotees, donned in yellow attire from different parts of Kerala and outside every year during the pilgrimage days. The Sivagiri Mutt is also the headquarters of the Sree Narayana dharma Sangham, an organization of his disciples and saints, established by the guru to propagate his concept of one caste, one religion, one god. The Gurudeva Jeyanthi, the birth day of the Guru and the Samadhi day are celebrated in August and September respectively every year. Colourful processions, debates and seminars, public meetings cultural shows, community feasts, group wedding and rituals mark the celebrations.

Papanasam beach

Varkala Papanasam beach (Destroyer of Sins) is a haven for sun bathing and swimming. The beach is bordered by high cliffs. The long sandy beach, towering red laterite cliffs and soothing mineral springs have turned Varkala into a beautiful destination. Papanasam beach is important centre for the Hindus. It is in this beach that many Hindus come to drain the mortal remains of their dead relations ie, Vavubali on new moon days. Varkala Beach, also known as Papanasam Beach, is a beautiful stretch of sand renowned for its solitude unlike other commercial beaches.
of Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. The beach itself is divided into two parts, the southern area of the beach lying at the end of the road leading from Janardhana Swamy Temple regarded as sacred by Hindus. The sublime beauty of Varkala beach is one of a kind. The backdrop of crystal blue waters against the cliffs of Kerala is a unique one since these sedimentary formation peaks are not found anywhere in the otherwise flat coastline of Kerala. Sunsets at the Varkala Beach are especially pristine and call for a serene walk along the beach. This place is a paradise for the seafood lovers. The eating joints nearby offer some of the India's best moth watering and affordable food.

**Varkala as a Tourist Spot**

It is a very ideal tourist spot surrounded by the greenery, beautiful meadows, deep puzzling valleys and dales. The enchanting hill station dotted with tea gardens till soon be one of India’s foremost eco-tourism projects.

**Varkala Tunnel**

Varkala tunnel is a century old tunnel under one of the cliffs in Varkala. It was once used for passing boats carrying goods and people between Thiruvananthapuram and Kollam. The tunneling work started in 1869 and was completed in 1876. A big hole at the top of the tunnel provides plenty of light and air. It is popularly known as Varkala Thuruthu. The construction of the 924 feet long tunnel began under the supervision of Diwan Sir T. Madhava Rao of Travancore and completed at the time of Diwan Sheshayya Sastri.

**Anjengo Fort**
Anjengo Fort, situated 12 km off Varkala at Anjengo, is believed to have been built in 17th century. Presently the fort is protected by the National Heritage monuments. The cemetery in the fort shelters the deceased occupants of the fort. The popular Muthalapuzhi Lake is situated very close to the Fort. Autos or cabs can be taken to reach the fort.

Kappil Lake

Kappil boat club is a recent venture on the backwater tourism in the area. Kappil is 6 kms north of Varkala. Kappil lake gives way to the enchanting world of Kerala backwaters. This serene estuary meanders through dense coconut groves before merging into the Arabian Sea. The bridge over the lake is quite a vantage point to view the backwater stretching which and grey to the distant blue horizon.

Light House

The light house at Varkala is another tourist highlight in the vicinity. Varkala Lighthouse was built in 1684 by the British to assist the navigation of ships coming from Britain. It stands 130 feet tall on the Varkala Beach and attracts tourists for a mesmeric bird's eye view it provides of the Arabian sea and the backwaters. It, therefore, is a perfect attraction for photographers, beach lovers and picnickers.

Water sports

Several water sports operators are to be found along the beaches, and travellers can easily do a lot of water activities with good fun. The Kapil Lake, situated close to the
beach, is another famous destination to enjoy moments of peace. The Chilakkoor Beach which is close to the Varkala town is a perfect destination to view the sunset. Though the beach is not developed commercially, it is an ideal place for leisurely evening walks.

**Ponnumthuruthu**

This beautiful Golden Island can be reached by boat. There is a temple dedicated to Sivan and Parvathy which is very famous. Ponnumthuruthu, also known as Golden Island is located 20 km from Varkala. It is popular for its 100 year old Shiva Parvathi temple situated amidst thick coconut groves stretched over the sandy beaches. Boats from Nedunganda can be taken through a 30 minute backwater ride to Ponnumthuruthu which offers a perfect getaway from the bustle of city life.

**Varkala the Spa of Kerala**

Varkala is the only place in southern Kerala where cliffs are found adjacent to the Arabian Sea. These tertiary sedimentary formations cliffs are a unique geological feature on the otherwise flat Kerala coast and is known among geologists as Varkala formations and a geological monument as declared by the Geological Survey of India. There are numerous water spouts and spas on the sides of these cliffs.

Varkala is one of the health resorts in Kerala and is famous for its navigational springs of mineral waters believed to possess medicinal properties. There are numerous centres for yoga and massage. Most of these centres are seasonal and of varying quality, most of the resorts in Varkala do provide these services. One week to one month programmes are available at some of the resorts. The Swamis of the Sivagiri Mutt do take
meditation classes. There is also a nature cure centre near the beach. Varkala has also centres for kalaripayattu, one of the oldest living tradition of martial training and physical culture in the world, which also strengthens mind through physical exercise. Varkala can be regarded as a spa of Kerala which is a centre of medicinal bath that cure many diseases.

Conclusion

Varkala has an import place in the religious history of Kerala state. The papanasam beach at Varkala is quiet, lean and secluded unlike the Kovalam international beach. The beach at Varkala grew into prominence and caught the attention of tourists very recently. Today many tourists prefer Varkala to Kovalam as it is less crowded with less numbers of shops, beach sellers and still lesser amount of commercialization. The raw and unused stretch of beach is a loner’s delight where one could swim, play cricket or volleyball and even manage to practice yoga. It is a perfect place to watch the sun set or relax gazing at the horizon and can maintain mental strength. As the mineral waters posses medicinal properties a bath in Varkala can cure several diseases. Hence varkala is regarded as the ‘Spa of Kerala’.

References:

2. Ibid., p.612,
4. Ibid p.782.
11. *Ibid*. 