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PUNDARIKAKSHA PERUMAL TEMPLE- A STUDY

Research paper in History

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Abstract:

The temple is built as a fort. There are rooms built of stones on the south side with high echo powers. Being one of the 108 famous Vaishnava Divya Desas, this is the birth place of Saint Uyyakondan EngalAzhwan. To have the darshan of the Lord Pundarikaksha, the devotee has to pass 18 steps first representing the 18 chapters of Bhagwat Gita. The next 4 steps at the Gopuram tower entrance represent the four Vedas. After worshipping at the Bali Peeta there are 5 steps representing the five Bhoodasspace, water, fire, wind and earth. There are two entrances to the sanctum sanctorum, the Dakshinayana entrance open from Aadi to Margazhi Tamil months covering from July-August to December-January and the second Utharayana open from the Tamil months Thai to Aani covering January-February to June-July. The temple is on a hill of white rocks (Vellaiparai in Tamil) 50 feet tall, hence the name Vellarai with the respectful prefix Thiru – Tiruvellarai. The front Gopuram tower is in an incomplete stage. A Yogi, Pundarikakshan by name cultivated a flower garden – Nandavanam, grew Tulsi plants and worshipped Perumal and Mother. Perumal, pleased with the bhakti of Pundarikakshan blessed him with His darshan. Perumal also came to be known as Pundarikaksha Perumal.

Prayer begins at the Bali Peeta in the temple. Realizing their wishes, devotees perform Bali Peeta Tirumanjanam and offer pudding-pongalnivedhana to Lord. Those seeking child boon, bathe in the Theerthas and consume the nivedhana offered to Perumal. This prayer, according to belief, ensures child boon without fail.

Perumal graces the devotees in a standing form facing east. The Vimana-tower above the sanctum is of Vimalakruth design. Emperor Shibi, Sage Markandeya, Lord Brahma and Lord Shiva and Garuda Bhagwan worshipped Lord Pundarikaksha in this temple.

Lord Vishnu told Mahalakshmi who was also present on the occasion that he had transferred all rights of the place to her and He would be there only in Archarupa idol in the place.

The emperor was preparing to take on his mission then. Sage Markandeya stopped him and said that Lord Vishnu was already on the mission to destroy the Ravana group in His incarnation as Lord Rama and that he could therefore return to his kingdom. The king was not happy at the suggestion. Markandeya asked him to build a temple for the Lord who granted him darshan. Obeying the sage, the emperor brought 3,700 families to conduct the pujas in order. On the way one died and the number fell short by one. Lord assured the Shibi that he would replace the deceased and make the number 3,700 as the emperor wished.

Mother Sengamalavalli is in the sanctum sanctorum. During festival times, Mother leads the procession in a palanquin



Introduction:

Pundarikakshan Perumal Temple or Thiruvellarai in Thiruvellarai, a village in the outskirts of Tiruchirappalli in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, is dedicated to the Hindu god Vishnu. Constructed in the Dravidian style of architecture, the temple is glorified in the Divya Prabandha, the early medieval Tamil canon of the Azhwar saints from the 6th–9th centuries AD. It is one of the 108 Divyadesam dedicated to Vishnu, who is worshipped as Pundarikakshan and his consort Lakshmi as Pankajavalli.

The temple is believed to have been built by the Pallavas of the late 8th century AD, with later contributions from Medieval Cholas, later Pandyas, Vijayanagar kings and Madurai Nayaks. The temple has three inscriptions in its two rock-cut caves, two dating from the period of Nandivarman II (732–796 AD) and the other to that of Dantivarman (796–847). It also has Pallava sculptural depictions of Narasimha and Varaha, two of the ten avatars of Vishnu.

A granite wall surrounds the temple, enclosing all its shrines and six of its seven bodies of water. The rajagopuram, the temple's gateway tower, is unfinished. A swastika shaped temple tank built in 800 AD by Kamban Araiyan during the reign of Dantivarman is outside the temple complex. The Vijayanagar and Nayak kings commissioned paintings on the walls of the shrine of Pundarikakshan, some of which are still present.

Pundarikakshan is believed to have appeared to Garuda (the sacred eagle bird of Vishnu), SibiChakravarthy, sage Markandeya and Hindu gods Bhoomadevi, Brahma and Shiva. Six daily rituals and three yearly festivals are held at the temple, of which the chariot festival, celebrated during the Tamil month of Chittirai (March–April), is the most prominent. The festival is unique in the state as a community feast is offered, a custom stretching back many centuries. The temple is maintained and administered by the Hindu Religious and Endowment Board of the Government of Tamil Nadu.

History:

Pundarikakshan Perumal temple is believed to have been built by the Pallavas, as seen from the three inscriptions in its two rock-cut caves. Two of the inscriptions are dated from the period of Nandivarman II (732–796 AD) and the other from the period of Dantivarman (796–847

AD). The temple construction completed presumably during the time of Dantivarman. The influence of Azhwars, the Vaishanva saints of the 7th–9th centuries helped spread Vaishnavism to a greater extent among the public and the ruling Pallava kings, who became temple patrons.

A Chola inscription indicates an endowment to the shrines of Krishna (an avatar of Vishnu) and his consort Rukmini inside the temple by King Parakesarivarman (907-955 AD). The temple had later additions from the subsequent Chola, later Pandyas, Hoysala and the Vijayanagara kings. The temple suffered extensive damage during a flood and was repaired by a merchant around 1262–63.

In modern times, the temple is maintained and administered by the Hindu Religious and Endowment Board of the Government of Tamil Nadu. An Executive officer appointed by the Board manages the temple along with SrirangamRanganathaswamy temple, Sri AzhagiyaManavala Perumal Temple at Woraiyur, Sri VadivazhagiyaNambi Perumal Temple and Mariamman Temple at Anbil. Annadhanam scheme, which provides free food to devotees, is implemented in the temple by the Board. Under the scheme, free food is offered to hundred devotees every day in the temple and the expenditure is fully funded by the contributions from devotees.

Architecture

A large, deep tank with four entrances Swastika tank, with stepped entrances in all four sides, was built in 800 AD,



Swastika Tank. Pundarikaasha Perumal Temple at Thiruvellarai.

There is a Swastik shaped tank behind this temple. This is also known as MamiyarMattupentheertham (Mamiyar is mother-in-law and mattupen is daughter-in-law). The shape of the SwatikKulam facilitates some sort of privacy. If one is bathing in any one of the segments of the Swastik then they cannot be seen from elsewhere. The Swastik Tank is an ASI monument.

Pundarikakshan Perumal temple is located in Thiruvellarai, a village 27 km (17 mi) from Tiruchirappalli, on the Thuraiyur road. The shrine of Pundarikakshan is built on a 50 ft (15 m) tall artificial hill. There are two stepped entrances to the sanctum, UtharayanaVaasal and DhakshanayanaVaasal, each open for a six-month period. From 15 January to 15 June, UtharayanyaVaasal is opened; DhakshanayaVaasal is for the other six-month period. Pundarikakshan, the presiding deity of the temple is named "Maayavan" during Dakshinayanam and "Thai MaathaNaayagan" during Uttarayanam. The two gates in the temple are believed to represent the continuous cycle of entering into life and getting out of it. An image of the presiding deity, Pundarikakshan, is seen in a standing posture facing east. He is believed to have appeared to Garuda, SibiChakravarthy, Bhoomadevi, sage Markandeya, Brahma and Shiva, all of whose images are housed inside the sanctum. The consort of Pundarikakshan, Shenbagavalli, (also called "PeriPirattiyaar Lakshmi Devi") has a separate shrine. The Utsavar (festival image) of Pankajavalli is called Shenbagavalli and is housed inside the same shrine. The temple has Pallava sculptural depictions of Narasimha and Varaha, two of the ten avatars of Vishnu. Narasimha is depicted holding a demon in one panel; the other shows him tearing the demon.

The rectangular walls around the temple enclose all the eight shrines and six of the seven water bodies associated with the temple. Besides the main shrine for Pundarikakshan and Pangayavalli, the temple has shrines for Azhwars, Garuda, Ramanujar and Uyyakondar. The seven water bodies are Divya Theertham, Kanda KshreeTheertham, Theertham, ChakkaraTheertham, PushkalaTheertham, Padma Theertham and VaraahaManikarnikaTheertham. The vimanam (structure over the santum) is called VimalaakkruthiVimaanam. There are various sculptural depictions of Krishna on the pillars of the temple, in the most notable of which he is depicted dancing on a pot. He is seen dancing in Swastika posture with his bun like hair-do, ornaments and anklet. In another sculpture, he is seen slaying the demon Bhagasura. The Vijayanagar and Nayak kings commissioned the Krishna

paintings on the exterior walls of the shrine of Pundarikakshan; they have clear Telugu language labels. Paintings with some of the popular themes from the epic Ramayana were also commissioned by the Nayak kings in the temple.

The Rajagopuram, the main gateway tower, is an unfinished structure. A swastika-shaped temple tank built during 800 AD is present in the south-western corner of the street around the temple. It has four stepped gateways, each having 51 steps. The tank is believed to have been built by Kamban Araiyan during the reign of Dantivarman. In modern times, it is maintained by the Department of Archaeology of the Government of Tamil Nadu. The temple complex covers an area of 2.62 ha (6.5 acres), while the tank covers an area of 0.1256 ha (0.310 acre).



An archaeological study in 2010 revealed that the layout of the rock-cut caves in the temple is similar to that of other rock-cut temples such as the Rockfort and Pechipalai cave temple. The unfinished caves in the temple, along with the lower cave temples in Tiruchirappalli and Tiruparankunram, each have a shrine for Shiva in the east and Vishnu in the west, separated by a central bay between them. An archaeological study in Tamil Nadu has thrown light on interesting facets of cave temple architecture during the Pandyas-Pallavas reign, besides uncovering musical inscriptions engraved on some temples.

The study has revealed that cave temples of the Pandyas and the feudatories exhibited several cult images of Ananthasayi (Lord Vishnu), Lord Ganesh and Durga, which were not seen in the Pallava corpus of cave art, Dayalan, Superintending Archaeologist.

The cave temples in non-Pallava region contained inscriptions that facilitated a workable chronological sequence. The inscriptions provided additional clue to cross check the sequence of

cave temples. A majority of the cave temples in non-Pallava region were the handiwork of laymen and only few showed the royal patronage, whereas it was not so in Pallava cave temples. The study revealed interesting details about rock cut cave temples. The rock-cut cave temple at Tiruchirappalli and unfinished rock cut cave at Tiruvellarai near Tiruchi, and Pechipalai cave temple had the same layout.

The concept of common group of Pantheistic nexus, the Shanmata (Sanskrit, meaning six opinions -- in this six major deities are worshipped) was again an inimitable feature found in some cave temples in south Tamil Nadu. The pantheistic concept was perhaps a unique synchronism and amalgamation of various cult worship at one centre. The lower cave temple of Tiruchirappalli, cave temple at Tiruparankunram and the unfinished cave temple at Tiruvellarai had two principal shrines, one for Lord Shiva in the east, and one for Vishnu in the west and a central bay.

The reliefs of Lord Brahma, Skanda, Surya, Ganesh, and Durga were found on the hind wall of the Central bay, the grouping of many Gods and Goddesses in single panel was found in bas-relief panels and plaques of Tiruttani, Uthiramerur, and other places in Pallava region. An interesting feature of cave temples at Kudumiyanmalai, Tirumayam and Malaykoil was that they had. "Musical" inscriptions engraved on or near the temple. Large musical notations had been engraved on an almost all vertical scarps of rock. The musical epigraph at Thirumayam had been badly chiselled off. All three places contain a code word "Parvardiniye" inscribed in rectangular and similar character. According to the musical inscription, the person who codified 'svaragamas' was a great devotee of Maheswara (Shiva) and disciple of Rudhracharya. The person who systematised the music potentialities was Gunasena. "Perhaps, the first music books were in the form of inscriptions,"

The cave temples in South Tamil Nadu were unique in another way--they show a diagnostic stylistic feature of its own, perhaps amalgamating various idioms and tracts, the lower rock cut temple at Tiruchirappalli and Kudumiyanmalai temple exhibited novel pillar forms not generally found in Tamil Nadu.

The Narasimha cave temple in Madurai district and Tiruttangal cave temple had been built with ideas borrowed from outside, reflecting mobility of art use, he said. Use of 'monolithic

nandhi' was also unknown in Pallava cave temples. Though paintings were executed in the Pallava cave temples, it was limited and not as abundant as in the non-Pallava cave temples located in lower Tamil Nadu, regarding sangam period (third century BC-third century AD), he said there was practically not much material evidence at present vouching for existence of structures of that period. The reason was use of perishable materials like wood and brick for construction of secular and religious edifices. Both the Pallavas and Pandya rulers had patronised art and architecture. The earliest architectural activity in Tamil Nadu was associated with the induction of iron technology in this region. The megalithic monuments must have required considerable time and labour, Their construction was a well organised feat of engineering and coordination of manpower. The stones had been levered from one place to another using simple engineering techniques such as wooden levers, props and stone supports. The stones were secured in position by means of interlocking system without use of mortar, As per records, the Pallavas emerged as a powerful force during the rule of Mahendravarman I (571-630 AD) and Narasimhavarman I (630-668 AD) and dominated the Telugu and northern parts of the Tamil region for about 600 years until the end of the 9th century.

They are believed to have established the foundations of medieval south Indian architecture. The Pandyan Empire, an ancient Tamil dynasty, is said to have had their golden phase under MaravmanSundaraPandiyar and JatavarmanSundaraPandyan (1251 AD), but became extinct after the establishment of the Madurai Sultanate in the 16th century.

Legend



The word Vellarai means white rock. Owing to the presence of white rocks in the region, the place is historically referred as Thiruvellara. As per Hindu legend, when SibiChakravarthi stayed there with his warriors, a white boar crossed his path. He chased it and the boar hid inside a hole. Markandeya, a sage, was doing penance there and the king narrated the incident to him. The sage asked the king to fill the hole with milk. While doing so, Hindu god Vishnu appeared before them. The sage asked the king to bring 3700 Vaishnavites from the north and build a temple on the site for Vishnu. As requested, the king took 3700 Vaishnavites and started building the temple. While doing so, one of the Vaishnavites was killed in transit and the king was concerned by the accident. Vishnu appeared incognito as Pundarikakshan, a Vaishnavite, and requested to be counted among the 3700. According to another legend Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu, performed penance at the temple, and Vishnu appeared before her as Sengamalakannan. The presiding deity has since been called "ThamaraiKannan", meaning the one who has eyes resembling lotus; his consort is called "PankachaValli". The Hindu god Shiva in form of Neelivaneswarar is believed to have worshiped Pundarikakshan to absolve himself from the sin of holding Brahma's severed head. Vishnu appeared to both Shiva and Brahma, adhering to their prayers.

Significance of Religion

The temple is revered in Nalayira Divya Prabandham, the 7th–9th century Vaishnava canon, by Periazhwar in eleven hymns and Thirumangai Azhwar in thirteen hymns. The temple is classified as a Divyadesam, one of the 108 Vishnu temples that are mentioned in the book. Some of the ancient Sanskrit books consider the temple as an uthamakshetram, meaning the place that gives the best to its devotees. The sculptures on the pillars of the temple reveal the earliest practice of Krishna worship in Tamil Nadu. VedanthaDesikar (1269–1370) has revered the temple in his work HamsaSandesam. As per Hindu legend, the eighteen steps in the temple represent the eighteen chapters of the Hindu scripture Bhagawad Gita and the last four steps represent the four Vedas, the sacred Hindu religious texts. The sound made in front of some of the big pillars of the temple echoes around the temple. Some of the sacred verses are recited more than once in front of these pillars during worship. Thiruvellarai is the birthplace of Uyyakondar, a disciple of Ramanuja and ThirukurukaiPiranpillan. Uyyakondar (also called Engalazhwan) is believed to have taught Sri Bhasyam to NadadhoorAmmal in the temple.

According to Hindu legend Ramanuja (1017–1137), the leading expounder of Vishishtadvaita philosophy, visited the temple. One of his disciples placed Ramanuja's sandals along with the image of Varadarajar. Ramanujar became furious at this, for which the disciple explained that for RamanujaVaradarajar is god, but for him, Ramanuja is supreme. Thiruvellarai is the birthplace of Uyyakondar, a disciple of Nathamuni and ThirukurukaiPiranpillan. Acharya Uyyakondar (Engalazhwan) is believed to have taught Sri Bhasyam to NadadhoorAmmal in the temple.

Festivals and religious practices

The temple priests perform the pooja (rituals) during festivals and on a daily basis. As at other Vishnu temples of Tamil Nadu, the priests belong to the Vaishnavaita community, a Brahmin sub-caste. The temple rituals are performed six times a day: Ushathkalam at 7 a.m., Kalasanthi at 8:00 a.m., Uchikalam at 12:00 p.m., Sayarakshai at 6:00 p.m., Irandamkalam at 7:00 p.m. and ArdhaJamam at 10:00 p.m. Each ritual has three steps: alangaram (decoration), neivethanam (food offering) and deepaaranai (waving of lamps) for both Pundarikakshan and Pankajavalli. During the last step of worship, nagaswaram (pipe instrument) and tavil (percussion instrument) are played, religious instructions in the Vedas (sacred text) are recited by priests, and worshippers prostrate themselves in front of the temple mast. There are weekly, monthly and fortnightly rituals performed in the temple.

The Chariot festival is the most prominent festival of the temple, and for the surrounding villages. It is celebrated during the Tamil month of Chittirai (March–April) when devotees pull the chariot round the streets of Tirvellarai. Verses from Nalayira Divya Prabandham are recited by a group of temple priests amidst music with Nagaswaram (pipe instrument) and Tavil (percussion instrument). The chariot festival is unique in the state as a community feast is offered by several individuals and committees, a custom many centuries old. The processional idols of Pundarikakshan and Pankajavalli are brought to the temple car early in the morning amidst religious chanting. Ratharohanam, the rituals associated with taking the idols to the temple car, is performed at an auspicious time before commencing the procession.

Conclusion:

The temple is believed to be of significant antiquity and is believed to be initiated by the Pallavas of the late 8th century AD, with later contributions at different times from Medieval Cholas, Later Pandyas, Vijayanagar Empire Vijayanagar kings and Madurai Nayaks. The temple has three inscriptions in the two rock-cut caves, with two of them dating back to the period of Nandivarman and one to Dantivarman (796–847). The temple has Pallava sculptural depictions of Narasimha and Varaha, two of the ten avatars of Vishnu.

The temple is enshrined within a granite wall and the complex contains all the shrines and six of the seven water bodies' associated with it. The "gopuram - rajagopuram" (the gateway tower) is left unfinished. Outside the second precinct, there is a "swastika" shaped temple tank built in 800, designed in such a way that a person entering through one of the four enclosures cannot be seen from the other three. The Vijayanagar and Nayak kings contributed to the paintings in the walls of the shrine, some of which are still present.

Pundarikakshan is believed to have appeared for Garuda (the sacred eagle bird of Vishnu), King Sibi Chakravarthy, and sage Markandeya and Hindu gods Bhūmi|Bhoomadevi, Brahma and Shiva. The temple observes six daily rituals and three yearly festivals. The chariot festival, celebrated during the Tamil calendar Tamil month of "Chittirai" (March–April), is the most prominent festival of the temple. The festival is unique in the state as a community feast is offered, a practice followed across different centuries. The temple is maintained and administered by the Hindu Religious and Endowment Board of the Government of Tamil Nadu.

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