

An Artistic Perspective on the Sethiraya Iswaramudaiyar Temple at Sithayankottai

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Abstract:

The temple in India originated as a place of worship or a cult centre, in the centuries immediately before and after the beginning of Christian era. It was systematically built up as an institution, an innovative focus for all human activities socio, economic and cultural and land symbol of power by ruling dynasties from 4th Century. The place where the deity was enshrined thus became a major concern for all aspirants to power. Hence the art of building temples and carving images was promoted. For upkeep of place of worship, the temple, the special provisions were made such as grants of land, cattle and gold by the rulers, to legitimize their sovereignty. All these trends are also appeared in the *Vaigai* and *Tamiraparani* regions. Several hundreds of inscriptions portrayed in the temples attest to the socio economic role in the way of land grants and other endowments, agrarian settlement and construction of temples and installation of the images of gods and goddesses. Sethiraya Iswaramudaiyar temple located on the river bank of *vaigai* has accommodated several inscriptions, architectural and sculptural importance and this temple belonged to the later Pandya edifice which reflects the specific characteristic features. This temple also contains the remodeled structure of Vijayanagara Nayaka features.

Key Words:

Pandyas, Attrurnadu, Pallipadai, Vimana, Upapitha, Adhithana, Pada, Kumbapanchara, prasthara, pranala, kapota, karnakuta, Arthamandapa, kurmapurana, sculptures, linga, nandi, miniature carvings etc.

Introduction

Temples are the most significant monuments and tangible cultural heritage of India. The *sthalapuranas*, legendary history of sacred places has given the particular significance of each temple with the chronology of the distinguished divine persons who performed miracles and conducted penance in the temple. Temples are not only the places of worship but also the temples were the institution for promoting all forms of activities such as educational institution, cultural centre, socio economic institutions. These temples are known for their structural monuments, art and architecture and sculptures. Large number of temples are located in the interior villages of Pandya territory and those temples are even small in size contain rich architectural and sculptural significance. Sethiraya Iswaramudaiyar temple at sithayankottai has an ornate structure and best examples of Pandya style and some of the structure are Modernised.

The Pandyas (6th -14th c. A.D), who ruled over the southern part of ancient Tamilagam, have made a tremendous contribution to the development of art and architecture. The rock-cut, monolithic and structural temples (early, medieval and late phase) of the Pandyas scattered in different parts of the Pandya kingdom, besides retaining many native traditions, absorbed several art and architectural stylistic traits of the contemporary dynasties of South India. Though few genuine attempts have been made to analyse the rock-cut, monolithic and early structural phase of the Pandya architecture, the structural architecture of the late phase of the Pandyas do not get the adequate attention of the researchers. The structural temples of the late phase of the Pandyas, numbering over two hundred. Still wait for a thorough and systematic investigation and if it is properly done, that would definitely yield a significant outcome to fulfill the lacuna in the structural architecture of the late phase of the Pandyas (S. Kannan, 2013, p.87). In this background, this paper attempts to trace out the architectural details of the structural temple, belonging to the late phase of the Pandyas, at Sithayankottai in Athur Taluk of Dindigul district.

Historical Geography of Sithayankottai

Historical geography is the study of geography based on historical data. As cultural geography is co-related to historical geography, knowledge of historical geography is indispensable for the proper understanding of intricacies of place names. (R. Govindaraj, 2018, P.56.).

The inscriptional records mostly temple oriented provide geographical details in connection with the location of the temples. The inscription describes the position of some donated lands, the whereabouts of the donor etc, such geographical details ranging from a simple mention of a village (R. Govindaraj, 2018, P.56.).

Ancient Tamil country was divided into *Nadus*, like *Cholanadu*, *Cheranadu*, *Pandyanadu*, *Tondainadu* and *Kongunadu*. *Pandyanadu* was divided into *Valanadus* and the *Valanadus* were further divided into *Nadu* (K.V. Raman, 1977, p. 146-147.). Later *Nadu* were further sub-divided into *Ur*, *Muttam* and *Irukkai*, *kandam*, *vattam*, *Urkkil*, *Kulakkil*, *Erikkil*, *Thadagathinkil*, *Atruppokku* and *Atruppuram* (V. Vedachalam, 2019, p.13). Here, the area around Sithayankottai was called *Atrurnadu* (V. Vedachalam, p. 105 and *Avanam*, *Ithal* 4, 9-3). Its nearest Arrur (Athur) was called as *Erivirathalam* (*Avanam Ithal* 4, 9-3.). Athur and Sithayankottai were the most prominent commercial cities (*Vaniga Nagaram*) in ancient times. This is also true in the western part of the town at the foothills of Narasingapuram through *kompanai*, *Kuthiraikulippatti*, and *Chandaimedu*. In this town, there is a fort built by Sethirayan (sethirayan+kottai = Sethirayankottai) changed over time due to its proximity to Narasingapuram and is now known as Sithayankottai (Interview with Satheeshkumar, PSR Architects and Associates, M. Puthupatti.).

Sethiraya Iswaramudaiyar Temple at Sithayankottai stands on the bank of *kodavanaru* and *Kulaiyaru*. The *vimana* of this east facing Siva temple is built of stone upto *prasthara* (entablature). On its original layout the Sethiraya Iswaramudaiyar Temple has a square *sanctum* and a rectangle *arthamandapa*. An inscription of the eleventh year of Maravarman Kulasekhara period, found in the Sethiraya Iswaramudaiyar Temple at Sithayankottai, refers to the construction of this edifice to the west of *Arrur Erivirathalam* (G. Sethuraman, 2018,

p.47). The temple has four epigraphs at different places. According to the inscriptions, the temple was erected over as a *Pallipadai temple* or *Adhithagiraham* (Kudavayil Balasuprahmaniyan, 2014, p.50.) (temple to be erected in memory of Pothiyan Sethirayan) by king Sethirayan in the 13th Century during the Pandya period (*Avanam, Ithal* 4, 9-1.). Besides these epigraphical sources, certain architectural and sculptural traits of the monuments also support this dating.

Architecture

Exterior parts of the *vimanas* and their *mandapas* have been used as source of embellishment and were not uniform through the ages. Decorative motifs and symbols of the temples differ from one age to another and one region to another depending upon the patronage rendered by the rulers and the traditional heritage of guilds employed (R. Santhakumar, 2007, 122.).

The Pandyas of the early period, have contributed to the development of rock-cut architecture. But these Pandya caves have not received much attention. They are however contemporary with the Pallava rock-cut *mandapas*. They exhibit the same features as those of the Pallavas. Of these comes the one at Tirupparankundram and the other at Singaperumalkoil at chengalpattu are worth mentioning. As against the Pallava and Rashtrakuta creations the solitary contribution of the contemporary Pandya is the monolithic *vimana* called Vettuvan koil at Kalugumalai of the 8th or early 9th century (T. Ramaswamy, 1999, P.43). The Pandyas turned their attention from the main shrine and its *vimana* to the outlying portions of the temple. The importance of the *vimana* structure was pushed to the background. They spent their resources and energy to embellish the existing temples by way of adding *mandapas*, additional sub-shrines with the enclosure and *gopuras* (T. Ramaswamy, 1999, P.43).

Vimana

A *vimana* means the entire edifice from *upana* to *stupi* (R. Santhakumar, 2007, p. 121.). Generally, the Pandya edifices were three stages of development of *vimana*. At first, the base and the wall of the temple up to the entablature were built of stone and surmounted

by a single or multi storeyed superstructure made of brick and stucco. In the next stage, the entire temple was built of stone but with superstructure consisting of a single storey. In the final stage, all structural stone temples with multiple storeyed superstructures were built. The superstructure of this temple has entirely rebuilt with stone upto *prasthara* and *griva* and *sikhara* made up with stucco (G. Sethuraman, 2018, p. 52.). Here the first stage has followed without storey and constructed the temple.

Upapitha

Upapitha, a sub-base of a *vimana*, possesses identical parts of its *adhithana*. The use of *upapitha* as a structural part was introduced by the Pallavas and was almost continued by the succeeding dynasties in Tamilnadu. It was optional in small temples and functional in big temples. According to *agama sastras*, there are eight varieties of *upapitha* such as *taranga*, *panchanga*, *satanga*, *astanga*, *pratipatra*, *pratisundara* and *kalyankarigai* should be used in a temple. Sethiraya Iswaramudaiyar shrine stands on a raised *upapitha* which has vertical mouldings of *upana*, and *padmajagati*, The *kanda* of the base displays a simple and undecorated and *kapota* decorated with simple *kudus* with bear miniature carvings but it is blurred.

Adhithana

Over the *upapitha*, rises the *kapotabandha adhithana*, the real base of the *vimana*, with its simple matrix consisting of *upana*, *padma jagati*, *vrtta kumuda*, *kanta kapota*, and decorated with *simhamukha kudus*, miniature relief carvings of in the gaping mouths of the *kudus*. It portrays some *puranic* themes, elephant riders, ducks, cow, monkey, etc., Above the *kapota*, *kanta* and *padma vedi or vari* are appeared.

Pranala (water chute) is positioned in the *vrttakumuta* of the plinth, it is usual *simhavikra motif*, it has been increased in length. A square sink is placed below the *pranala* to collect the ablution water and an elaborate lotus pendant is noticed at its end. Hence, the ablution water flows from the mouth of the *simha* itself.

Pada

The *pada* (wall) is divided into *karnas* and *badhras* with a recession in between. The pilasters are square or *brahmakanta* type and they are arranged on the corners of these divisions. The pilaster of this temple carry the components like , *nagabandha* with creeper design, *kalasa*, *tadi*, *kumbha*, *padma* with lotus petals projecting out of the *palaka*, broad *palaka*, *virakanta* and lotus bud. *Kasyapa Silpa Sastra* mentions three types of *panjaras* namely *kambha*, *kumbha* and *kambhakumbha*. Here the recess looks as wide as *badhra* having a *kumbha panjara*. It is one among the many embellishments of *bhitti* or wall portion. It is in the wall recesses are made to rest, differing from the one in the other part of the *vimana*. The *badhra* or the central portion of the wall is very wide having a *devakostha* (niche) without an image of divinity. It obviously proves the fact that the typical Pandya architectural characteristic features. The niches carry *kapotas* embellished with *simhamuka kudas* and creeper, leaf, foliage, and vegetal designs and are crowned with *salas*.

Prastara

The *prastara* or entablature portion of this temple accommodates *vajana* or *eludakam*, *kapota* (cornice) and *yali* frieze in vertical order. The *kapota* is bell shaped. It shows the ribbed supporting frame work and is imitating the wooden ribs, on its bottom instead of *bhuta* frieze, which became popular during the Vijayanagara Nayaka period.

The 13th century monuments mostly have both *ekatala* and *dvitala vimanas* and rarely *tritala vimanas*. The superstructure of the *ekatala vimanas* consists of *griva* platform, *griva*, *sikhara* topped by finial, while that of the *dvitala* and *tritala* comprises upper *talas* in addition to the *griva* platform, *griva* and *sikhara*. The superstructure of these temples are mostly built of brick and stucco and rarely of stone in addition to brick. The *griva* and *sikhara* are either square (*nagara* type) or octagonal (*dravida* type) in shape and rarely circular (*vesara* type). Here the superstructure is absent.

Ardhamandapa

The *ardhamandapa* of the Sethiraya Iswaramudaiyar Temple imitates the architectural characteristics of the sanctum almost in all aspects, except the all, which differs from that of the garbhagriha due to reduction in length. The *ardhamandapa* wall of this temple on each side has a pair of pilasters and an empty niche at the centre.

Sculpture and other Arts

Indian sculpture is one of the important modes of visual communication of religious ideas. The images of gods and goddesses are the representations of philosophical, mythological and symbolical aspects of various sportive, incarnations and attributes of different sects sometimes claiming superiority of the one over the others. The Hindu temple is conceived as a microcosm or a model of the universe, the macrocosm. As the cosmos is an idealized one, the sculptures which adorn various parts of the temple are also conceived and made in an idealized style (V. Vedachalam and G. Sethuraman, 2019, p.15.). During the later Pandya period, sculptures of Saiva, Vaishnava, Devi or Amman, Jain, Buddhist and Folk deities were set-up in the temples. The *astaparivara* deities are absent in the temple.

The *kudus* of the *kapota* of *adhistana* and *upapitha* in the Sethiraya Iswaramudaiyar temple displays miniature relief sculptures, which include the *Siva purana*, *Truvilaiyadal purana*, and other *purana*. In addition to these sculptural representations from Hindu religious literature and some *kudus* show a plenty of floral and creeper decorations also. The following are the important themes found in the *kudus* of *adhistana* and other places.

The sanctum has a *linga* with square base and the water chute of the *linga* is carved on the northern side of the square base.

An image of Nandi, carved in a separate piece of stone, is placed at the entrance of this temple. It looks like later addition.

The brief account found in the *Kurma purana* about the Narasimhavatara or the man-lion incarnation of Vishnu (T. A.Gopinatha Rao, 1985, p.146). The theme of the Narasimha

fights with Hiranyakashibhu miniature carvings appears on the southern wall of the *ardhamandapa*.

Elephants images are found frequently represented on the south wall of *Karnakudu* structure. And an elephant is performing *linga-abhisheka*.

Elephants and riders are shown, as in the lively relief on *kudu*. Rider fights with someone.

Animals and birds such as horse, pigeon, and monkey are worshiped the *linga* which is depicted on southern side of the *kapotakudu*.

On the same side monkeys are frequently found and worship the *linga*.

Cow and calves often appear in the temples. The cow is shown licking its hind leg, giving birth to a calf, sucking it, or performing *linga-abhisheka*. Of these motifs, the most interesting is the cow performing a *linga-abhisheka* with its own milk, a frequent motif in local *sthalapuranas*.

Many dancing posture, Saiva devotees, *Navakanta* scene, Kamadenu, seated Jaina monk, Wrestling scenes, acrobats, one man who carry the another man, human bust and foliage designs carved within the *kapotakudu*.

Horse riding warrior engaged in battle which was engraved in this temple.

Antelope was carved in the monument and used as a decorative motif.

Composite Animals are also depicted. A mythical deer with two heads appear in *kudu*.

Conclusion

The foregoing study reveals that the Pandyas epoch during this period was mostly a continuation of the early and medieval Pandyas in many respects with slight modification. The investigation of the architectural and sculptural details of the Sethiraya Isawaramudaiyar temple at Sithayankottai beyond doubt proves the fact that the architectural

features of this temple display the pandyas typical stylistic traits. But some of the *karnakudu* reliefs show similar to the Vijayanagara Nayaka miniature sculpture. Miniature carvings of *kudus* and *Kumbha panchara* has more ornamented so this temple might be renovated during the Vijayanagara Nayakas.

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