

ARCHITECTURE OF NINDRA NARAYANA PERUMAL TEMPLE, THIRUTHANGAL, SIVAKASI - A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Building temples, setting up idols, renovating, preserving, and performing rituals and festivals are fundamental practices in Indian culture. It is believed that idols crafted from stone, metal, or wood are not simply representations of deities but symbols of the all-encompassing blessings from a benevolent God to all living beings. Consequently, temples are more than just physical structures; their design carries countless philosophical interpretations and significances. Tiruthangal is about 4 kilometers north of Sivakasi town, along the route connecting Virudhunagar to Sivakasi in the Virudhunagar district. The Nindra Narayan Perumal Temple in Tiruthangal, Sivakasi, is a cave temple hewn from rock, showcasing the Dravidian architectural style. This temple is devoted to the Hindu god Vishnu. It is praised in the Divya Prabandha, an early medieval Tamil collection created by the Azhwar saints between the 6th and 9th centuries AD. As a notable temple, it is significant as one of the 108 Divyadesams scattered throughout the country. The Hindu Religious and Endowment Board of the Government of Tamil Nadu oversees the temple. This extraordinary location needs a robust promotional initiative to raise awareness among local citizens and global tourists alike. These efforts would not only showcase our rich cultural and historical heritage but also enhance government revenue.

KEYWORDS: Vishnu, temple, mantapa, festivals, pujas

INTRODUCTION

Building temples, setting up idols, renovating, preserving, and performing rituals and festivals are fundamental practices in Indian culture. It is believed that idols crafted from stone, metal, or wood are not simply representations of deities but symbols of the all-encompassing blessings from a benevolent God to all living beings. Consequently, temples are more than just physical structures; their design carries countless philosophical interpretations and significances. Tiruthangal is about 4 kilometers north of Sivakasi town, along the route connecting Virudhunagar to Sivakasi in the Virudhunagar district. The geography of Tiruthangal features a flat terrain. The region is mainly drained by the "Arjuna" river, which contributes to a tributary of the Vaippar. The distinctive black and red soil combination across the area creates a colorful and attractive landscape. It is believed that Tiruthangal flourished as an important town during the 2nd century AD. References to it appear in the epic Silapathikaram. The Katturaikathai section of the epics portrays this village, Tiruthangal, as a settlement for Brahmins.

The state archaeology department conducted excavation and exploration activities during the years 1994-95. Four trenches were dug on the western side of Tiruthangal village. Various archaeological artifacts were collected during the exploration, including microlithic flakes, cores, fragments of decorated shell bangles, black and red potsherds, black polished potsherds, and russet-coated potsherds, from both the village and surrounding areas. These archaeological finds led to the initiation of the excavation process. The excavation at Tiruthangal yielded a considerable number of artifacts from both the megalithic and microlithic periods. The archaeological evidence suggested that human habitation in this region might date back to as early as 8000 BCE.

The Nindra Narayan Perumal Temple in Tiruthangal, Sivakasi, is a cave temple hewn from rock, showcasing the Dravidian architectural style. This temple is devoted to the Hindu god Vishnu. It is praised in the Divya Prabandha, an early medieval Tamil collection created by the Azhwar saints between the 6th and 9th centuries AD. As a notable temple, it is significant as one of the 108 Divyadesams scattered throughout the country. This research endeavors to thoroughly investigate the history of the Nindra Narayan Perumal Temple in Tiruthangal, Sivakasi, focusing on its art and architecture, as well as its rituals and festivals.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

"Architecture of Nindra Narayana Perumal Temple, Tiruthangal, Sivakasi- A Study" forms the title of the study. The basic aim of the study is to understand the History, Art & Architecture of Nindra Narayana Perumal temple in Tiruthangal.

- i. The study aims to trace systematically the history of Nindra Narayana Perumal temple.
- ii. The study intends to critically examine the Art & Architecture of Nindra Narayana Perumal temple.
- iii. Finally, the study also aims to sketch the Poojas and Festivals of Nindra Narayana Perumal temple.

METHODOLOGY AND SOURCE MATERIALS

This study explores and evaluates the history, art, and architecture of the Nindra Narayana Perumal temple located in Tiruthangal, Sivakasi. The information collected from fieldwork and existing literary sources has been thoroughly examined to assess the aspects relevant to the topic. The researcher employed a narrative and descriptive methodology. The sources utilized for this research can be broadly divided into primary and secondary types. Primary sources

include inscriptions and archival documents, while secondary sources comprise published works, magazines, online data, and similar materials.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THIRUTHANGAL

Tiruthangal is located approximately 4 kilometers to the north of Sivakasi town and lies along the route connecting Virudhunagar to Sivakasi in the Virudhunagar district. Geographically, Tiruthangal features a flat landscape. The region is predominantly served by the Arjuna River, which feeds into a tributary of the Vaippar River. The area displays an eye-catching contrast of black and red surface soil. It is thought that Tiruthangal thrived as a significant settlement during the 2nd century AD. Mentions of it can be found in the epic Silapathikaram. Additionally, the Katturaikathai of the epics describes Tiruthangal as being a Brahmin settlement. There are also references to this village in the inscriptions discovered at the Nindra Narayana Perumal temple located in Tiruthangal.

The excavation and exploration took place during the 1994-95 period under the state archaeology department. Four trenches were established on the western side of Tiruthangal village. Throughout the exploration, various archaeological artifacts were discovered, including microlithic flakes, cores, decorative shell bangle fragments, black and red potsherds, black polished potsherds, and russet-coated potsherds, found in and around the village. These archaeological findings led to the decision to proceed with the excavation. The Tiruthangal excavation produced a significant number of artifacts from both the megalithic and microlithic periods. The archaeological discoveries indicated that human settlement in this area may have been present since 8000 BCE.

HISTORY OF NINDRA NARAYANA PERUMAL TEMPLE

The current structure of the temple is thought to have been constructed by Devendra Vallabha, a king of the Pandya dynasty. It is situated atop a granite hill that rises 100 feet (30 meters) high, and a granite wall encircles the temple, enclosing its various shrines and water bodies. Later additions to the temple were made by subsequent Pandya rulers, as well as by the Vijayanagar and Nayak kings in the area. The temple can be found on the opposite side of the well-known Karunellinathar temple, a Shiva temple, and can be accessed from the hillock of that temple. In recent times, two benefactors, named Ramanujadasa and Narayanadasa, facilitated the construction of the Kalyana Mantapa, Garuda Mandapa, and other halls. In 1979, heavy rains caused the collapse of the northern compound wall, measuring 120 feet by 30 feet, which was subsequently repaired with support from the local community. Today, the temple is overseen and managed by the Hindu Religious and Endowment Board of the Tamil Nadu Government.

NINDRA NARAYANA PERUMAL TEMPLE – LEGENDS / STHALAPURANAMS

According to Hindu mythology, there was a contest among the wives of Vishnu, namely Sridevi, Bhoodevi, and Neeladevi, to demonstrate their devotion to him. Sridevi came down to earth and nurtured a secluded area surrounded by rice fields. She engaged in deep devotion, and her worship attracted the attention of all sages who began to honor her at that location. Understanding that solitude would not be suitable, she created a sacred water body and worshipped Vishnu. Impressed by her devotion, Vishnu manifested at that site. Following her example, Bhudevi and Neeladevi acknowledged that Sridevi was the most devoted of them all. Vishnu expressed his desire and chose to reside (Thangal in Tamil) there with his wives.

In another tale, Ranganatha of Srirangam Ranganathaswamy temple was taken by the devotion of Andal. He set out for Srivilliputhur Divya Desam to ask for her hand in marriage. As he approached the area, night fell, and he decided to stay there for the night. Since he lingered in this location, it became known as Thiruthangal, and the nearby hill became called Thalagiri.

Manmadan, the son of Vishnu, was turned to ash by Lord Shiva and was reborn as Pradyumnan, the son of Krishna, during the Krishna Avathar. His son, Anirudhan, fell in love with Ushai, the daughter of Banasuran, even though he had only seen her in a dream. She asked her friend for help on how to win his love. Her friend, Chitraklekha, painted several pictures, and Ushai recognized Anirudhan in one of them. Using her magical abilities, Chitraklekha abducted Anirudhan while he was asleep in his bed. Upon learning this, Banasuran imprisoned Anirudhan. In response to his grandson's imprisonment, Sri Krishnar battled Banasuran, freed Anirudhan, and eventually married him to Ushai. This tale is one of the oldest narratives associated with this sacred site. Another story linked to this location involves Lakshmanan, the brother of Sri Ramar. Chandrakethu, the son of Lakshmanan, observed a fast on Ekadesi and bathed in oil just before the Dhuvadesi day. Consequently, he transformed into a tiger. He came to this place and prayed to the deity, ultimately achieving his salvation (Mukthi).

A dispute once broke out between a revered Banyan tree and Aadhisesan regarding who held greater power. They went to Brahma, who ruled in favor of Aadhisesan, since Lord Vishnu rested upon the Serpent Lord. Displeased by Brahma's judgment, the sacred tree began to perform penance in hopes of receiving blessings from Vishnu. The Lord instructed it to go to Thiruthangal and transform into a hill. By granting this wish, the Lord would come to the hill and receive Sridevi, who was meditating at its base.

As per Hindu mythology, there was a disagreement among Goddess Sridevi, Goddess Bhodevi, and Goddess Neeladevi regarding who was the most exalted. Eventually, in her anger, Goddess Sridevi departed from the realm of Lord Sriman Narayanan and traveled to Thiruthangal to meditate. Impressed by her devotion, Lord Sriman Narayanan blessed her with the promise that she would incarnate as Goddess Annapoorani, who provides nourishment and shelter to all. Consequently, the place was named "Sripuram," and these are the boons (varam) bestowed upon those who please the Perumal, given for Sengamala Thaayar. Since Thirumagal resided in this location and performed tapas, it was therefore named "Tiru thangal" (where 'Thangal' indicates a place of residence).

The goddess of this site is also referred to as Jaambhavathi. She was the daughter of the esteemed Vishnu devotee Jaambhavan, who had immense love and devotion for Sriman Narayanan. During the time of Ramayana, Jaambhavan wished to embrace Sri Ramar, but Sri Ramar denied him the chance. Instead, he promised Jaambhavan that in the Krishna Avathar, he would be allowed to do so. In the Krishna incarnation, Jaambhavan approached Krishna with the intent of stealing the Siyamanthaka mani, which resulted in an eight-day pursuit. During the Vamana Avathar, he requested Lord Vishnu to ensure he would be slain solely by his weapon, the Chakkaram. Consequently, he was killed on the 28th day, at which point Sri Krishnar helped him recall his previous life. Filled with joy at having been killed by such a great being who cares for the universe, Jaambhavan made a final request to Sri Emperumaan: that he marry his only daughter, Jaambhavathi. As his last wish, the Perumal wed Jaambhavathi.

The Lord manifested before Sri Devi, Pururavas, Banasura, Lord Siva, Muruga, Markandeya, Brighu Maharishi, and a tiger. There is an ancient saying that if someone visits Thiruthangal, they will not be reborn in this world.

STRUCTURE OF THE TEMPLE

Typically, temples are built to face east in accordance with Hindu agamas, which are the principles derived from the Vedas. The Nindra Narayana Permal temple is oriented towards the east. The entrance to the gopuram is referred to as mottai (flat) gopuram because it lacks a tower (gopuram) at the entrance. This temple features three prakaras:

- Garbhagriha prakara
- Suttru prakara
- Outer prakara

The primary shrines include a Garbhagriha, an Artha mandapa, a circumbulatory pathway, and a Thiruchurrumaligai. In front of the main shrine is a covered hall (maha mandapa) that is supported by three rows, each consisting of six pillars. The three niches within the Garbhagriha are shallow and exhibit characteristics typical of the Pandyan style.

SANCTUM / GARBHAGRAHA

The sanctum is enclosed by walls on three sides, with the front featuring double doors that can be opened and closed. Consequently, the Mulavar is protected, and surrounding it are parkaras. The main deity of this temple is Sri Nindra Narayana Permal, also referred to as "Thiruthankal Appan."

A depiction of the presiding deity, Ninra Narayana, is positioned in a standing pose facing east on the temple's third tier and is shown with the Abaya Mudra (his right foot signaling devotees to seek refuge at his feet). It is said that he manifested to Bhoomadevi and Sridevi, and their images are situated within the sanctum. The sanctum is flanked by imposing figures of Dwarapalakas, believed to have been created during the reign of Sattur Kolarapatti. Within the sanctum, there are eleven images: Ninra Narayana Perumal, Markandeya, Garuda, Aruna, Viswakarma, Bhudevi, and Sridevi on the right, while Neeladevi, Usha, Aniruddha, and Bhrihu are on the left. The festival metal image of Thiruthangal Appan is placed in front of these images. Because the deities are made of stucco, ablutions are not performed here as they are in other temples. The roof over the sanctum, known as Somachandra Vimana, is reminiscent of the structures found in Srirangam Ranganathaswamy Temple and Alagarkovil.

This level also includes the Mahamandapam and the shrine of Garuda, Vishnu's eagle mount. The images of Nardanakrishnan, Andal, Durga, and Vinayaka are positioned in the area surrounding the sanctum, while the Azhwars' images are located in the hall leading to the sanctum.

VIMANAM

The upper structure of a sanctum in the Dravidian architectural style is referred to as the vimanam. There are various types of vimanam. The design or nomenclature of the temple style is determined by the type of vimanam present. The base of the vimanam is square in shape. It consists of three main components: griva, sikhara, and kalasaa, which is the final and most significant ritual part of the temple. Kalasas represent the ultimate and highest ritual aspect of the temple. There are four kalasas located atop the vimanam. These are recognized as Sadurveda kalasa, with "Sadur" meaning four. The four kalasas symbolically correspond to the four Vedas of Hinduism. In the Devachandra Vimanam, the 13th Chola dynasty emphasized the carving of towering vimanas (stones above the main shrine) and expansive walled courtyards.

GARUDA SHRINE

Every temple possesses unique features of its own. In a Shiva temple, the Nandi statue (bullock) is found, while in a Vishnu temple, the Garuda statue (eagle) is present, and in a Murugan temple, the peacock statue is located in front of the main shrine. These are the vahanas (vehicles) of their respective deities. In Nindra Narayana Permal temple, Garuda is positioned in front of the main shrine. He is depicted in a distinctive stance, with a pot of Amrita in his right hand and a serpent in his left hand, while his other two hands are posed in a supplicating gesture.

THAAYAR SANNATHI

The consort of Ninra Narayana, Aruna Mahadevi (also known as "Shenbagavalli"), has a dedicated shrine on the second tier. The Utsavar (festival image) of Arunakamala Mahadevi, referred to as Shenbagavalli, is contained within the same shrine. Unlike many other temples, the image of the Thayar is shown in a standing position. All rituals are first conducted for the Thayar before those for the principal deity. The second tier features a four-pillared hall, a vehicle hall, and a mirror room.

A cave temple, displaying characteristics of Pandyan art, is found on the lower tier, to the west of the Kalyana Mandapa. The cave houses the image of Pallikonda Perumal, with Sridevi and Bhoodevi depicted at his feet, while sages Markandeya and Bhrgu are prominently positioned on either side. The temple is enclosed by rectangular walls that surround all its shrines and water bodies. The rajagopuram, the primary entrance tower, has a flat design, which contrasts with the steeper structures typical of other South Indian temples.

ALANGARA MANDAPA

This Mandapa is located directly opposite the main entry. Idols of deities are adorned in this mandapa for processions held during festivals. Occasionally, the marriages of devotees take place in front of this mandapa.

ARTHAMANADAPA & MAHAMANDAPA

There is a covered hall known as the maha mandapa in front of the arthamandapa, supported by ten stone pillars arranged in two rows, each pillar standing ten feet tall and two feet wide. All pillars feature floral designs and a variety of forms. A Kalabairavar shrine is found on the northwestern side of the mahamandapa. On the western corner of the mahamandapa, and in front of the arthamandapa, a seated Nandi statue is established. The arthamandapa is regarded as the shoulder of the deity of the shrine. There are eight pillars, organized in two rows, within the arthamandapa. The arthamandapa follows the traditional Imperial Chola style and is round, capped with a flat ceiling edged with bevels.

SUB-DEITIES OF THE TEMPLE

The temple features distinct shrines dedicated to the sub-deities, including Vinayagar, the Navagrahas, Madurakavialwar, Alwars, Andal, Chakarathalwar, and Aanjaneya. This temple houses a bronze statue of Lord Vishnu and a panchaloga representation of Ramanujar. The Madurakavialwar shrine is situated to the northeast of the temple and is oriented towards the south. He was a disciple of Nammalwar. Madurakavialwar is regarded as the Gnana Nidhi. The term Nidhi signifies wealth. While Kuberan represents the wealth of money, jewels, land, and other assets, Madurakavialwar symbolizes the wealth of knowledge. He is depicted in a standing position, with his hands joined together in worship of God.

PAINTINGS

Language and visual art serve as tools to express human ideals and emotions. Humans are driven to convey their feelings through these forms. Such painted artworks can be found on the temple walls. They depict the ten incarnations of Vishnu, along with scenes from the marriage of Permal. Many of the paintings showcase a wide range of colors. The image of Rama is included, highlighting the character traits that people should emulate.

During this period, significant emphasis was placed on painting. The primary characteristics of the artwork in this temple are:

- The paintings predominantly feature profile perspectives.
- The facial features, such as the nose, eyes, elbows, and legs, are defined and sharp.
- The bodies are adorned with various ornaments.
- The figures appear plump and full.
- The edges of the paintings are embellished with floral designs.
- The majority of the artwork is predominantly red in color.

TEPPAKULAM

Sacred water is referred to as teertham in Tamil. It is said that consuming this holy water from sacred sites can protect individuals from ailments and malevolence, while bathing in it can cleanse them of their sins. Consequently, every sacred site possesses its own unique sacred water. The temple's teppakulam (holy tank) is known as papavinsa teertham. This tank is square in shape, measuring 85 feet in length and width. It is situated on the southeastern side, near the main entrance of the temple. People believe that immersing themselves in this tank can cure their illnesses and grant them a renewed life.

UNIQUE FEATURES OF THIS TEMPLE

Unlike other temples, this one lacks a rajagopuram, the gateway tower. A distinctive aspect of this site is the Garudan. Garudalwar is depicted with a snake in his left hand and an amudha kalasam in his other hand, presenting his seva, while his additional two hands are folded, having a total of four hands. Another uniqueness is that the Thaayar is positioned in a standing posture facing her divine face towards the east. Typically, in all other temples, the thaayar is portrayed as seated, making this temple's standing position particularly special.

Garbhagraha, mandapas, vimanam, main entrance, prakaras, pillars, teertham, sculptures, and paintings are standard elements found in a temple. These features are incorporated to serve the community. People visit temples not only for worshipping the deity but also for relaxation, tranquility, and mental refreshment. After worship, they sit in the Mandapas and enjoy the surroundings. This experience brings about a sense of renewal and clarity. Therefore, the art and architecture of the temple were designed to contribute to the well-being of individuals. In this manner, the artistic and architectural aspects of the Nindra Narayana Perumal Temple cater to the spiritual needs of its devotees.

INSCRIPTION OF THE TEMPLE

The northern wall of the mandapam of the temple issued in the reign of Kulasekara Pandya states that the formation of a chaturvedimangalam in the king's name is called Kulasekar Chaturvedimangalam. Another inscription identified on the western wall of the first prakara of this temple records the land was donated for expenses that occurred while the God was taken out in procession on the New Moon (Ammavasai).

The South wall of this temple's mandapa also states that the land was donated for the expenses of the everyday Pujas in the temple. The Western wall of the first Prakara of the temple in the reign of Jadavarman Kulasekara Pandya records the land donated for the maintenance of land which yielded flowers for the worship of God and maintenance of a Perpetual lamp in the temple. Vattelutthu was inscribed on a stone identified on the floor of Mandapam during the rule of Varaguna Pandya. The North wall of the Arthamandapa of the temple records the endowment of land by two individuals for reciting Ramayana.

The Southern side of the Arthamandapa of this temple under the rule of Later Pandya Sundarapandya states that the gift of land as Madappuram for the temple servants, Thiruveedi Thiruppani Seyyum Janankal.

CONCLUSION

The Ninra Narayana Perumal Temple is a rock-cut cave temple devoted to the Hindu deity Vishnu, situated in Thiruthangal, a town on the fringes of Sivakasi. Built in the Dravidian architectural style, this temple is celebrated in the Divya Prabandha, an early medieval Tamil collection of verses by the Azhwar saints from the 6th to 9th centuries AD. It stands as one of the 108 Divyadesams dedicated to Vishnu, worshipped here as Ninra Narayana, with his consort Lakshmi revered as Arunakamala Mahadevi. The Nindra Narayana Permal temple faces the east. Its entrance gopuram is termed mottai (flat) gopuram since it lacks a tower (gopuram) at the entryway.

The temple features three prakaras: the Garbhagriha prakara, Suttru Prakara, and Outer Prakara. There are distinct shrines for various sub-deities, including Vinayagar, Navagrahas, Madurakavialwar, Alwars, Andal, Chakarathalwar, and Aanjaneya. Inside the temple, one can find a bronze statue of Lord Vishnu and a panchaloga image of Ramanujar. The walls showcase painted illustrations, including depictions of Vishnu's ten incarnations and the marriage scene of Permal. Most of these artworks are vibrant and colorful. Rama's image is illustrated in a manner that reflects the character traits one should emulate. The temple is managed and overseen by the Hindu Religious and Endowment Board of the Tamilnadu Government. This remarkable site deserves an extensive campaign to raise awareness among both the Indian populace and international visitors. Such efforts will not only foster understanding of our historical, cultural, and artistic heritage but also help in generating revenue for the government.

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