

Dwadasalayam: The Sacred Twelve Siva Temples of Kanyakumari – A Symbol of Saiva-Vaishnava Unity

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Abstract

The Dwadasalayam refers to the twelve sacred Siva temples in Kanyakumari district, Tamil Nadu, celebrated for symbolizing the rare integration of Saivism and Vaishnavism, the two major sects of Hinduism. These temples, located in Vilavancode and Kalkulam taluks, hold immense spiritual, historical, and architectural significance. The Sivalaya Ottam, a marathon pilgrimage conducted during Sivarathiri, connects these temples, attracting thousands of devotees annually. Each temple possesses unique features, including distinct architectural styles, ancient inscriptions, and mythological associations. The temples at Thirumalai, Thikkuruchi, Thirparappu, Thirunandikkarai, Ponmanai, Pannipaham, Thiruvattaru, Kalkulam, Melancode, Thiruvadaicode, Thiruppantricode, and Thirunattalam reflect a blend of Dravidian and Kerala architectural styles, with rock-cut carvings, copper-plated domes, and intricately sculpted mandapas. The temples also hold historical relevance, with references to Travancore kings, Jain influences, and Muslim invasions, highlighting their enduring legacy. The Sivalaya Ottam, which begins at Thirumalai and concludes at Thirunattalam, symbolizes a spiritual journey of penance and devotion. This abstract explores the historical, religious, and architectural importance of the twelve Siva temples, emphasizing their role in promoting religious harmony and preserving cultural heritage.

Key Words: Sivalaya Ottam – Saivism – Vaishnavism – Sivarathiri – Dravidian architecture – Kerala temple style – Travancore heritage – Spiritual marathon

Introduction:

In Kanyakumari district where it is celebrated as an integration of Saivism and Vaishnavism two major sects of Hinduism. It is a rare example of Saiva-Vaishnava unity. The temples at Thirumalai, Thikkuruchi, Thirparappu, Thirunandikkarai, Ponmanai, Pannippaham and Thirunattalam are situated in the Vilavancode taluk and the rest of the temples situated at Kalkulam, Melancode, Thiruvadaicode, Thiruvithancode and Thiruppantricode come under

Kalkulam taluk. It is believed that Sivarathiri is a spiritual festival celebrated throughout India in order to get the blessings of Lord Siva for the removal of our sin. Even though it is a national festival in India, it is a unique one in the district of Kanyakumari. The twelve sacred shrines of Siva which are situated around Padmanabhapuram are called as Dwadasalayam.

Thirumalai

Regarding the celebrated "Sivalaya Ottam", the marathon pilgrimage starts at Thirumalai, a village situated very near to Munchirai village. The place Thirumalai was previously called by Srisailanatham, Mangalagiri, Mangalathiri, and Sampugiri etc. Significantly, we can see the remains of a fort very near to the temple. It is called as Uthachikottai (Uthachi fort) in common parlance. The name of the fort itself speaks about volumes of information on the reason behind the construction of the fort. It is believed that a ruler of Madurai along with his princess Uthaichi came to this place, stayed there, and worshipped the God regularly for 41 days. The king had no issues so far. After getting a male child, the king and the queen named the child after Thirumalai Mahadevar -the presiding deity of the temple. That child was none other than Thirumalai Nayak, one of the most celebrated Nayak rulers of Madurai. It is believed that Thirumalai Nayak's father had donated a 7½ kg golden coat (Angi) and a copper plate which refers the land donation. Another notable feature of this temple is its fish symbol. It proves that this temple would have been maintained by the Pandyas. The position of 'Nandhi' statue also attracts the attention of the visitors. Normally 'Nandhi' will be installed straight opposite to the presiding deity. In this Mahadevar temple, Nandhi has been installed just opposite to the sanctum-sanctorum but in a slightly diverted position. In the temple utsav i.e. the main festival, which happens in the Sivaratri period, the first devotee who participates in the Sivalaya Ottam is hoisting the temple holy flag.

Thikkuruchi

The second Siva temple in the temple series is Thikkuruchi, situated on the banks of the river Tambraparani. The presiding deity is called as Thikkuruchi Mahadevar. The Siva temple is in the eastern direction. Significantly no Nandhi statue is available in this temple. There is an interesting story behind this episode. One day the temple's Nandhi disturbed the farmers of Thikkuruchi village. The angry farmers beat the cow and had driven out from that village. It is strongly believed that the trouble making cow was put in the temple's well. So even now, the poojas to be performed to Nandhi are being done to the well.

Thirparappu

Thirparappu is situated on the eastern bank of the river Kodayar, ten miles north east of Kuzhithurai, Kanyakumari district. Of the twelve sacred Sivalayams which are situated around Padmanabhapuram the temple of Mahadeva at Thirparappu is the third in order. The temple here faces west, which is a rare feature. The temple has been constructed in western direction. The presiding deity is called as Veerapathrar. Now the ancient temple has been renovated with Kerala style of architecture. The celebrated golden Vikraha (metal statue) of this temple was taken to Thiruvattar and kept preserved in the Adikesavaperumal temple, one among the 108 Vaishnava centres, in order to protect it from the Muslim invasion during the 17th and 18th centuries. At present, the golden statue is kept preserved at Karuvur temple near Kalkulam which is very close to the great Padmanabhapuram palace. One among the noteworthy features of this temple is its ahama system. The Nandi who was unable to face the fierce look of his Lord, moved to the northern side of the shrine. It is said that Siva, after the annihilation of Daksha, selected this place of beauty for his deep meditation. The circular central shrine surmounted by a conical dome of copper sheets, the square mandapa with beautiful wooden carvings on the ceiling and copper plated roofs over it, the quadrangular prakaras around them, the small hall in front of the main shrine and a balipeeta in front of it are all characteristic features of Kerala architecture.

At the entrance to the inner temple and at the central shrine are Dwarapalakas on either side. The Travancore Archaeological Department has officially recorded one copper plate and five stone inscriptions found in the temple. The copper plate which belongs to the 9th century A.D. furnishes some historical particulars as to the political relationship that existed between the petty Ay Kings and the powerful Pandya Kings on the other side of the ghats. This temple was a famous centre of Saivite pilgrimage in the 12th century A.D. and attracted pilgrims from distant places like Madurai. This is attested by an inscription dated 407 Kollam Era corresponding to 1232 A.D. which mentions the gift of a lamp – stand to the temple by a native of Madurai district. There are other inscriptions, one in Malayalam and the remaining two in the Nagari script. These refer to the erection of a mandapa on the bank of the Kodayar which flows in front of the temple. The Malayalam inscription dated 1884 A.D. mentions Ramavarma as the King of Travancore. There is a beautiful statue of Maharaja Visakhman Thirunal Ramavarma who reigned in the Travancore State from 1880 to 1885 A.D. He used to visit this sacred place frequently and stay in a small place there for mental peace. Another notable feature of this temple is the existence of Uttuppurai and Odukkupurai. Thirparappu Mahadevar temple had a close contact with the Travancore kings during the past. During the Tamil month of Maarahazhi, on the Thiruvathirai festival, the Travancore Maharaja after finishing his fast, he would eat the food coming from Thirparappu Mahadevar temple.

Thirunandikkarai

The fourth temple in the Sivalaya series of Kanyakumari district is the temple at Thirunandikkarai, which is situated nine kilometers from Marthandam town. The name 'Nandhi' itself raises doubts about its religious background. Though it is a famous Siva shrine nowadays, it might have been a strong Jain centre during the past. Achutananthi, Sarvananthi, Vajirananthi were the names of some of the Jain monks who were very popular during the early medieval period. On the basis of this fact, some historians are of the opinion that this place Thirunandikkarai might have come after the celebrated Jain monk "Thirunandhi". Significantly the presiding deity of this temple is called as "Nandhi Kesavan". But no Nandhi is available in the main shrine. There is a rock cut temple situated on the northern side of the main temple, where one can see a Nandhi. The rock cut temple has been constructed in the east-west direction. It is believed that the place was once controlled by the Jains and later during the time of Imperial Cholas, it was taken over for the construction of a Siva temple. Significantly, a number of beautiful paintings were there in the rock cut temple till recently. Some of the moral paintings were of typical Kerala style. But all of them gradually disappeared. The Archaeological Dept of the Government of India has taken the temple under its custody in order to protect the remains of the paintings and also the inscriptions available there. The commonalities of that location called that rock as Uzhuthupparai and also Kathavadaichan paarai. This rock cut temple has a veranda with a number of pillars and also possessed a small room with a Sivalinga. Moral paintings of this rock-cut temple are the typical example of Kerala style of paintings. Regarding the sculptural and artistic values of the main temple, there is a hall by name Purushaba mandapa with 27 holes reflecting 27 stars of astrology. Even though it is a Siva temple, the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu, (the God of Preserver) have been carved in copper around the sanctum sanctorum. Finally, it is the only Siva temple as far as 12 Sivalayas are concerned, where the annual Utsav (10 days festival) commences on the day of Sivaratri.

Ponmanai

The fifth Siva temple which comes under the 12 Sivalayas is situated at Ponmanai, a place which is 7 kilometres away from Thirunandikkarai. The presiding deity of this temple is Thippilan Kattappan which means the protector of tribal areas. As per the oral history, during the past, the tribal people had the practice of worshipping this temple. The sanctum-sanctorum of this temple has been constructed in a circular shape. In the Muha mandapa,

Nandhi is there. Significantly, no permanent Dwajasthamba (flag post) is available there. The vimana of the temple has been covered with copper sheets. In the Nandhi mandapa, we can see the Puranic scenes and Navagraha (9 planets) which have been carved in wood.

Pannipaham

It is the sixth Siva temple of the 12 Sivalayas situated in the Thuckalay - Surulode road. Till recently no proper road facilities were there for this temple. The pilgrims had to reach the temple by walking 2 kilometres atleast. It is situated in the eastern direction. The presiding deity of this temple is called as Kirathamurthi. Within this main temple, a small shrine has been dedicated to Kalapairavar. Significantly no permanent Dwajasthamba is available in this temple.

Thiruvithamcode

Thiruvithamcode is a peaceful village situated near the Thiruvananthapuram – Kanyakumari highway, just three kilometres from Thuckalay town. The place name Thiruvithamcode contains much significance. The temple is otherwise called as Thiruvithamcode Mahadevar temple and it is the seventh temple in the twelve Sivalayas. It is believed that Thiruvithamcode or Thiruvithamcore was derived from Thirithamcode or Thiru Vaazhum Code meaning the Code (land) where Thiru (prosperity), Vaazhum (reigns). Situated in three acres of land, the temple stands in the eastern direction. Actually, there are two temples standing in a line and a little apart from one another when they are viewed from the front. The main temple is dedicated to Siva and the one in the south, to Mahavishnu. Like the South Indian temples, here too a lofty boundary wall encircles the temple complex. The main entrance and other parts of the wall carry many engravings of Sree Hanuman in various postures. Both temples have separate copper enclosed Dwajasthambas with the Sapta Rishies seated around them. Flag hoisting celebration is conducted in both the flag staffs simultaneously. The 'Nalambalam' contains within it a grand Sreekovil. The big granite Yali on the raised northern platform of the Idanazhi is of special importance. The Yali has a stone ball inside the mouth which is too big and not possible to taken out. It would have been carved from inside the Yali's mouth itself and which is rolling around. Such type of expertise is seen in quite a few temples as examples of excellence in stone craftsmanship. The Sreekovil is situated on a good elevation. It is a granite, large, rectangular in shape and three-chambered one. Long, solid, spaced granite sleepers connect the outer periphery to the lower level of the sanctum roof. In the first enclosure, dignified granite Nandhi faces the master residing within the innermost recess. The rectangular granite roof of the sanctum is massive and plastered over with lime and mortar. Many engravings are there on the northern and southern walls of the Sreekovil.

Kalkulam

The temple is situated within the Padmanabhapuram fort and it is the seventh Sivalaya of the twelve Sivalaya line. The name Kalkulam came into existence during the later period. Originally called as Sirvarthanapuram, Kalkulam got the new name Padmanabhapuram later. The presiding deity is called as Neelakandeswarar which is 10 feet height. It is said that this temple was constructed by Maharaja Marthandavarma after worshipping the Meenakshi temple at Madurai. Significantly, this temple was constructed with typical Dravidian style. Infront of the temple there is a Theppakulam (holy tank) in which the floating festival is celebrated every year. Among the twelve Sivalayas it is the only temple which was built with Dravidian style of architecture. The entrance of the temple was covered with a gopura (tower). The images of Karna, Kangananathar, Venugopal, and Arjuna have been carved in the pillars of the Chitrasabai. A temple dedicated to Vishnu by name Ramasamy temple is also there very near to the Neelakandasamy temple. The most significant focal point of this temple is its modern carvings about the entire episode of Ramayana in 145 wooden plates. It is said that the celebrated Tamil scholar Neelakanda Sivan, who wrote 2000 Tamil Keerthanas (mantras) is said to come to this place and through His blessings, he had written it.

Melancode

Melancode Siva temple, the ninth Sivalaya of the series is situated very near to Velimalai Kumaraswamy temple popularly called as Kumarakoil. It has the distance of 3 kilometres from Kalkulam Neelakandasamy temple. The presiding deity of this temple is called as Kalakalar. The temple has been constructed in the eastern direction which is surrounded by fertile paddy fields. Melancode Siva temple is the smallest among the twelve Sivalayas. The Siva temple at Melancode occupies a unique place among the twelve Sivalayas. Large number of female devotees are coming to the Melancode Amman temples on all Tuesdays and Fridays which are very near to the Siva temple. In addition, with this the Tuesdays of the Tamil month Aadi also attracts huge number of people. On those days this Kalakalar temple at Melancode is busy to receive the devotees. In that Sivalaya, there exists Vinayagar shrine, Sastha shrine and also the celebrated Nagaraja Kavu. In the sanctum sanctorum, there is a Linga which is seen in a slightly tilted.

Thiruvidaicode

The temple at Thiruvidaicode is the tenth Siva temple of the Sivalaya series. This temple is also situated among the paddy fields. Though the temple is situated in the eastern direction, the main entrance is in the northern side. The presiding deity is called as Jadathari. One among the 18 Sithars, Edaikkadar lost his breath in this place, so it is called as Thiru Edaikkodu. Even now, the burial ground of Edaikkadar is available just opposite to the sanctum sanctorum of this temple. This temple possessed a unique position among the 12 Sivalayas. Just like Puri Jagannath temple of Orissa, here also the Sivalinga is looking like an unfinished one. Opposite to the presiding deity, Nandhi is there. But it is in damaged condition.

Thiruppantricode

The presiding deity of this temple is called as Thiruppantricode Mahadevar. This temple had a close relationship with the Travancore kingdom. When the Muslim general Muhilan conducted an expedition against the Travancore state in A.D.1680, this place got affected severely. Muhilan entered the temple, demolished it and even broken the presiding deity also. The Travancore army started repulsing the Muslim attack. A stiff battle had happened at Thiruvattar in which Muhilan was very near to taste the victory. But the unexpected arrival of insects in the battlefield confused the entire Muslim army. Muhilan fell down from the horse and finally he lost his life in the battlefield itself. After the Muhilan expedition, the temple was in the devastated position for a long time. In 1885, Moolam Thirunal Maharaja, ruler of Travancore saw a dream in which the God told him to reconstruct the temple. The next day Moolam Thirunal Maharaja visited the spot, and ordered to start the renovation of the temple. Till his death, the Maharaja had much faith over this temple. It is a specimen for typical Kerala style of architecture. The vimana of this temple has been beautifully designed. During the Tamil month of Karthikai, annual festival (utsavam) is celebrated.

Thirunattalam

The last Siva temple of the twelve Sivalaya series, Thirunattalam Sankaranarayana temple is situated four kilometers from Thiruppantricode. There are two temples one dedicated to Lord Siva and another one for Vishnu situated very closely. There is a holy tank (Theppakulam) in between the two temples. Both the temples are standing in the eastern direction. The presiding deity of the temple is called as Sankaranarayanan. The name of the presiding deity itself speaks that both Siva and Vishnu are the same. Arthanareeswarar, Thirukannappar are the other names of the presiding deity. The Vimana of this temple is conic in shape. Two inscriptions have been identified by the Archaeological department. One of the inscriptions says about the maintenance of the chaultry at Nattalam. Another one speaks about the presentation of Mahabaratha story in the Nattalam temple. Another significant factor related with this temple is its holy tank (Theppakulam). The participants of Sivalaya Ottam will start

their marathan journey from Thirumalai and will finish it at Nattalam. Earlier they will start Viratha (fasting) on Ekadasi day and will finish their Viratha at Nattalam after taking holy path in the holy tank at Nattalam. The twelve Siva temples and their architectural significance get attraction throughout the country due to the celebrated Sivalaya Ottam, nowadays. Even though Sivalaya Ottam is a unique spiritual marathan running, lakhs of pilgrims are very eager to participate in it nowadays.

Conclusion

The Dwadasalayam, comprising the twelve sacred Siva temples of Kanyakumari district, stands as a testament to the region's rich spiritual heritage and cultural harmony. These temples not only serve as places of worship but also symbolize the unity of Saivism and Vaishnavism, reflecting the syncretic nature of Tamil Nadu's religious traditions. The Sivalaya Ottam, the annual marathon pilgrimage held during Sivarathiri, attracts thousands of devotees, highlighting the enduring spiritual significance of these shrines. Architecturally, the temples exhibit a unique blend of Dravidian and Kerala styles, with rock-cut carvings, copper-plated domes, and intricate sculptures, showcasing the region's artistic excellence. The historical references to Travancore kings, Jain influences, and Muslim invasions further enhance the temples' historical value. Despite centuries of change, the Sivalaya temples continue to inspire devotion, promote religious unity, and preserve the cultural legacy of Kanyakumari, making them enduring symbols of faith and tradition.

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