

Chozhas and their Land of Temples in Kalki's *Ponniyin Selvan*

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Abstract

The architecture reflects a fusion of arts, the ethics of dharma, ideals, principles, values and the mode of life cherish in the Chozha land. The prosperity gifted by the Kaveri turns the Tamil royalty towards raising immense temples to the Gods. This study explores the temple building expertise of the Chozhas as described in the novel *PonniyinSelvan*.

Key Terms: Chozha, culture, river, temple

Embossed with intricate architecture, variety of scriptures and marvelous inscriptions, the temples remain the very soul of the culture and heritage of Tamil land. The architecture reflects a fusion of arts, the ethics of dharma, ideals, principles, values and the mode of life cherish in the bioregion. The prosperity gifted by the Kaveri turns the Tamil royalty towards raising immense temples to the Gods. “Temples which had been constructed from bricks and wood were renovated and rebuilt with granite. These services are performed by the Chozha kings and by the members of the royal family from the time of VijayalayaChozhan” (FF 69). Written by Kalki in five parts and translated by C.V.Karthik Narayanan, the novel *PonniyinSelvan* describes and gives a glimpse of the Chozhas’ culture in the temple building expertise through Vandiyathevan’s journey to Pazhayarai, the capital city of the Chozhas:

The beautifully sculpted temples built by the Chozha devotees on the banks of the Kaveri would be wonderful to look at! Aha! Pazhayarai! The capital of the Chozha kings! The city which made Poompuhar and Uraiyur look like villages. What would the palaces with their gopurams, market places, army camps and Siva and Vishnu temples look like? Vandiyathevan had heard that the audiences in the temples felt transported while they listened to expert musicians render the thevarams and the Thiruvaimozhipasurams. (FF 7)

At the back of the temple tradition, consequent flourishing of culture has been the invisible bounty of the Kaveri. The river’s banks on the either side are adorned with Shaivite and Vaishnavite temples next to each other. The strategies of the administrators to construct temples and mandapams not only as places of worship but in anticipation of floods to safe guard the inhabitants show their concern towards the bioregion. The biophilic nature of the Kings and the people towards nature never let them find fault with it but instead take remedial measures brilliantly for the survival:

History tells us that AdithaChozhan, the son of VijayalayaChozhan, constructed one hundred and eight temples along the Kaveri, right from its source in the Sahasyamountains until it

merged with the sea. Perhaps Adithan hoped that, just as people used the temples in normal times to worship, they could climb up the mandapams in times of flood and find refuge there. Sometimes the breaches made the rivers change their courses. Old records show that the Arisilar and the Kudamurutti rivers often changed the directions in which they flowed. (PS 97)

The ideology that humanity and nature are spiritually connected is ubiquitous across cultures and throughout time. The novel brings out the beautiful integration of nature and spiritual culture of the Chozhas in the region. Creating wonders in stone seems to have been in the genius of the people since KarikalaChozha built the Grand Kallanai with stone across the Kaveri two millennia ago. The vista in the area is awe-inspiring as the huge stones showered by the Kaveri waters are gently touched even these days. The Chozhas are astonishing temple builders right from the times of King VijayalayaChozhar:

The first Paranthaka Chozhar, the grandson of VijayalayaChozhar, was known as the “Great Lion Who Conquered Madurai and Eezham.” The founder of the Chozha Empire, he became famous in history for having laid the golden roof over the gopuram of the Chidambaram temple. Besides the many titles bestowed on him was the prestigious one, Veeranarayanan. (FF 17)

The Chozha temples, which are invariably built along the Kaveri banks shows the deep spiritual and ecological significance. Spiritual development in the dwellers of the place is a prominent feature that raises Chozha rulers and people to moral upliftment. The rulers of Chozhas are spiritual in nature. The love of place and spiritual power help them construct hundreds of temples in and around the Chozha regime. In the determined words of PonninSelvan, the titular hero of *PonninSelvan*, it is apparent that the spirit runs in his blood:

I'll construct hundreds of Siva temples all over the Chozha country in good time...I'll build tall gopurams and stupas which the sea cannot submerge, even if it rises... I'll construct an enormous temple in Thanjavur with a gopuram touching the sky and call it 'DakshinaMeru'... I'll put up a granite structure next to it that even a deluge cannot bring down. (PS 28)

It is well known that the natural areas with water flow have positive energy vibration and hence the temples play a vital role in the ecosystem. The seeker experiences the beauty of nature and recognizes the importance of God's creation on one side and spirituality on the other side. It is obvious that natural environs have a tendency to take human world closer to divinity.

Through them can be seen palaces of many storeys touching the skies, and the golden kalasams and spires of the temple gopurams. “Appappa! How many small towns there are inside this big city of Pazhayarai! Nandipuravinnagaram, Tirchatthimutram, Patteeswaram, Arichandrapuram and the temples in these towns are all part of Pazhayarai, the capital of the Chozhas. (FF 227)

These temples that are built along river banks are an excellent example of merging ecology with traditions of spirituality. Built along the banks of the river Kaveri, the prominent features of the setting of temples in Pazhayarai are described in a way that substantiates the Chozhas' spiritual belonging to the world of nature:

There are four Siva temples: Vadathali in the north, Thenthali in the south, Keezhthali in the east and Metrali in the west. There are four streets where the troops live: AriyapadaiVeedu, PudhupadaiVeedu, ManapadaiVeedu and PampaipadaiVeedu. Right in the centre, the many storeyedChozhapalace rises to the sky. Is it just a single building? It was, before VijayalayaChozhar. Now, one would need a thousand eyes to see the adjoining palaces built later for each prince, each queen and each princess. The imagination of ten thousand poets would not suffice to describe them. (FF 227)

Besides stone structures, people thronging in from various places make a living culture in Chozhas' land. Since the land irrigated by Kaveri is so copious, the settlements in this area grow large and the scriptures that they bring with them from everywhere further enriched the Tamil Ethos and Culture. An increasing number of devotees throng the temples heeding the call given by the mellow hymnologists of Vaishnavism and Shaivism who refer to the Kaveririver in ecstatic terms. In Kalki's words, the culture that have been brought into the Chozha bioregion through its water resources is explicit:

The Rashtrakutas in the north were very strong during Paranthakar's reign. Expecting an invasion from Maniaketam, Paranthakar stationed a huge army in Thirumunaipadi under the command of his son, the crown prince Rajadhithan. Since thousands of soldiers waited there idly, Rajadhithan thought of a plan to help the people. He had realized that huge quantities of water were flowing wastefully into the sea through the Kollidam, known to devotees as the VadaKaveri. In order to conserve this water, he employed the soldiers to dig a huge lake and store at least a part of the catchment. He named this lake "Veeranarayanam," after his father. Along its banks, he built a town named Veeranarayanapuram and a Vinnagaram, a Vishnu temple. (FF 17)

From the time of Vijayalayar, the Chozha kings regard "Siva and Durga as the deities of their clan and worshipped them. But they did not hate Vishnu or the other gods" (PS 28) and they have made it customary to construct a temple there:

Vinnagaram is the Tamil equivalent of Vishnugraham, the dwelling of Vishnu, in Sanskrit. Since Vishnu reclines on water and is always surrounded by it, it was customary to build a Vishnu temple beside a lake, in order to protect the lake bunds. (FF 17)

Due to nature's abundance, there is an integral enjoyment of the physical, intellectual, psychic and spiritual aspects of life in the region. No doubt, the Chozhas has left behind an eternal legacy. Their patronage of Tamil literature and their enthusiasm in building temples have resulted in some great works of Tamil literature and architecture. The Chozha kings ardently built temples, envisioned them in their kingdoms not only as places of worship but also as centers of economic activity. Under the Chozhas, the tamil land touches new zeniths of brilliance in art, religion and literature. Colossal architecture in the structure of magnificent temples and sculpture in stone and bronze reach a finesse never before accomplished anywhere in the country. Regarding the Chozhas' cultural and spiritual practice of temple building, Om Prakash in *Cultural History of India* describes:

Temple building received great impetus from the conquests and the genius of Rajaraja I and his son Rajendra. The maturity of Chola architecture found expression in the two magnificent temples of Tanjore completed about 1009 A.D. and another temple at Gangaikondacholapuram. The superb Siva temple of Tanjore is fitting memorial to the material achievements of the time of Rajaraja. The largest and tallest of all Indian temples, it is a masterpiece, constituting the high-water mark of South Indian architecture. (176-177)

The Chozhas are fervent devotees of Lord Shiva. They build large temples dedicated to Shiva and expanded the Shiva shrine at the temple complex at Chidambaram, covering the roof of the shrine with solid gold. Most Chozha rulers, while devotees of Shiva, are not only tolerant of the beliefs of others but even supported the building of temples to Vishnu and Jina. The most distinctive amongst the crafts associated with the temple is the making of the bronze images. The bronze images of the Chozha period are considered among the finest in the world. Om Prakash in *Cultural History of India* elucidates the temple at Gangaikondacholapuram:

The temple of Gangai-kondacholapuram, the creation of Rajaraja's son, Rajendra, was evidently meant to excel its predecessor in every way. It was built about 1030 A.D. and is in the same style as the temple of Tanjore. The greater elaboration in its appearance attests the

more affluent state of the Chola Empire under Rajendra. The temple is larger in plan though not in height. (177)

The temples that are built over a period of nearly 200 years not only reflect the glory, prosperity and solidity but also the Chozhas' deep sense of belonging to the region. The Chozhas' grit and brilliance towards art and architecture in the temple building expertise are in their blood and veins. At this point it is much important to witness Ponnuyinselvan "talks of the future with such enthusiasm" (KS 282) which reflects his determination towards 'fulfilment':

There are certain tasks I want to accomplish in this world. I wish to be of great service to everyone. I saw the Choodamaniviharam once from outside. I've seen the stupas and viharams at Anuradhapuram. I want to make the Choodamaniviharam as big as the Abhayagiriviharam there. I will see that sculptures as big as the ones in Anuradhapuram are installed here. I also want to renovate the Siva temples in the Chozha country. Looking at the stupas and viharas in Lanka, feel dejected when I see the Chozha temples. I want to construct a temple in Thanjavur with a gopuram as high as the sky and install an idol of Mahadeva big enough for it. Acharya! The gopuram of Siva temples and Buddhist viharams in the Chozha country are going to vie with each other to reach up to the sky. Thousands of years from now, our progeny in this divine Tamil country will look at them and be amazed. (KS 282)

The above statement clearly proves his determination and vision which has come true that no one could ever question the bond between human culture and nature and their expertise in temple building.

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