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RESEARCH ARTICLE

முற்காலச் சோழர் கோயில் கட்டிடக்கலை: திருவேள்விக்குடி மணவாளேஸ்வரர் கோயிலைச் சிறப்பாகக் கொண்டு ஓர் ஆய்வு

Early Chola Temple Architecture: With Special Reference to the Tiruvēḷvikkuḍi Manavāḷēśvara Temple

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ABSTRACT

The Chola rulers made significant contributions to the development of temple architecture in Tamil Nadu, particularly through the evolution of the Dravidian architectural tradition. The present study examines the distinctive architectural and sculptural features of the Tiruvēḷvikkuḍi Manavāḷēśvara Temple, situated near Kuthalam in the Cauvery region. Constructed during the reign of Uttama Chola (970–985 CE), the temple represents an important phase in the development of Early Chola architecture. Drawing upon literary sources, inscriptions and architectural evidence, this study analyses the structural components of the temple, particularly the Garbhagriha, Artha Mandapa, Nataraja Mandapa and Vimana.

Special attention is given to the architectural arrangement of the Adhisthana, Bhitti and Prastara, including their distinctive mouldings, pilasters, ornamental motifs and sculptural representations. The Adhisthana exhibits an elaborate arrangement of Upana, Jagati, Adho Padma, Vritta Kumuda, Kanda, Pattika and Vedika, enriched with sculptural representations of Yalis, elephants and human figures. The Taranga Potikai, Makara Toranas and floral scroll decorations further demonstrate the artistic excellence of Early Chola craftsmanship. The study also identifies the architectural modifications of the Later Chola period, particularly in the upper portion of the Vimana.

A comparative examination with other Early Chola temples in Kuthalam Taluk reveals certain variations in the arrangement of architectural mouldings, pillars and decorative elements. These distinctive features suggest artistic experimentation within the established Early Chola architectural tradition. The study concludes

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that the Tiruvēḷvikkuḍi Manavāḷēśvara Temple occupies a significant position in the evolution of Chola temple architecture, reflecting both continuity in traditional structural principles and innovation in architectural and sculptural expression.

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Introduction

Temple architecture occupies a significant place in the cultural, religious and artistic history of Tamil Nadu. The Pallavas laid the foundation for the development of the Dravidian architectural tradition, which attained further prominence under the Cholas. The architectural structures and decorative elements reflect the significant developments that took place during this period. The architectural components of the temple, including the Garbhagriha, Artha Mandapa and Vimana, exhibit distinctive features such as elaborate Adhisthana mouldings, ornamental Potikas and pillars, Taranga Potikai, Makara Toranas and sculptural representations.

The present study examines the architectural and sculptural characteristics of the temple based on literary, inscriptional and architectural evidence. Furthermore, by comparing the structural and decorative elements of the Tiruvēḷvikkuḍi Manavāḷēśvara Temple with those of other Early Chola temples in Kuthalam Taluk, particularly the Uthavedeeswarar Temple and the Uthvaganathar Temple, the study highlights the temple's distinctive artistic features and its significance in the evolution of Chola temple architecture.

Historical Background of Thiruvelvikudi

Thiruvelvikudi is the 23rd sacred Shaivite temple (Paadal Petra Sthalam) situated on the northern bank of the River Cauvery in the Chola region. It is located approximately 1½ kilometres northeast of Kuthalam in Kuthalam Taluk, Nagapattinam District.

According to the Sthala Purana (temple legend), this sacred place is believed to be the site where the divine marriage ceremony of Lord Shiva was performed. Hence, the village came to be known as Velvikudi. It is also referred to as Kauthuka Bandhana Kshetram, as Lord Shiva is believed to have tied the ceremonial marriage wrist-thread (Kankana Dharanam) to Goddess Parvati (Pirattiyar) at this sacred site. At present, this place is known as Thiruvelvikudi or Thirulakkudi.[1]

Literature and Inscriptions Evidence

The temple occupies an important place in the devotional literature of Tamil Nadu. In particular, the Tēvāram hymns of the Twelve Tirumurai contain references to this temple. Tirugnanasambandar, in the Third Tirumurai, has sung eleven hymns on this temple, while Sundarar, in the Seventh Tirumurai, has sung twenty hymns.[2]

The history of the temple is also known through its inscriptions. There are 44 inscriptions belonging to the period from Uttama Chola (970–985 CE) of the tenth century to Rajadhiraja Chola III (1216–1256 CE) of the thirteenth

century. Among the six inscriptions of Uttama Chola, details concerning donations such as : Donations for lamps, 400 kalanju of silver, donations of two kasu, 142 kalanju of land and 30 kasu for temple worship are recorded.[3] Two inscriptions of Rajendra Chola I record donations for maintaining land revenue and lamps.[4] An inscription of Rajadhiraja Chola records land-tax details.[5]

Three inscriptions of Rajendra Chola II contain information relating to agreements.[6] An inscription of Adhirajendra records the grant of four mā of land.[7] An inscription of Kulottunga Chola I records an agreement.[8] Three inscriptions of Vikrama Chola contain details of land revenue,[9] while an inscription of Rajadhiraja Chola II records a donation for lamps.[10] One inscription of Rajaraja Chola III contains the name Rajakesari, a surname of a Chola king.[11]

Architecture

In ancient times, temples were constructed using materials such as wood, brick and lime. Later, temples were constructed by excavating and shaping rocks, resulting in the development of rock-cut temples.[12]

Tamil architectural traditions developed through several historical stages. After the Pallava period came the Chola architectural tradition, followed later by the Nayaka and Maratha architectural traditions. The architectural styles developed according to the rulers and the historical periods in which they flourished.[13]

Like the Pallava rulers, the Chola kings made a major contribution to the development of temple architecture. Chola architecture may broadly be divided into three periods: Early Chola Architecture (850–950 CE), Middle Chola Architecture (950–1070 CE), Later Chola Architecture (1070–1270 CE). These are also described respectively as the period of emergence, the period of development, and the final phase of Chola architectural achievement.[14]

During the Chola period, temples displaying distinctive architectural features were constructed in several places. The Tiruvēḷvikkuḍi Manavāḷēśvara Temple belongs to this architectural tradition. It was constructed during the reign of the Early Chola king Uttama Chola (970–985 CE).

Temple Architecture Style

The temple extends approximately 300 feet from east to west and 245 feet from south to north. The architectural layout of the temple consists of a Garbhagriha (sanctum sanctorum), an Artha Mandapa and a Nataraja Mandapa. The Kalyanasundarar Shrine is situated on the southern side of the Nataraja Mandapa, while the Nataraja Shrine is located on its northern side. Adjacent to these structures is the Maha Mandapa. Along the western side of its surrounding corridor, facing east, are several subsidiary shrines, including the Valanchuzhi Vinayagar Shrine, Subramaniyar Shrine, Thirumal (Rama) Shrine, Gajalakshmi Shrine and Chandikeswarar Shrine. The Chandramurthi Shrine and the Amman Shrine are situated in the northeastern part of the temple complex.

The Amman Shrine follows a sequential architectural arrangement consisting of a Garbhagriha, Artha Mandapa, Maha Mandapa and Mukha Mandapa (front hall). The wall surrounding the inner prakara (circumambulatory enclosure) measures 13 feet in height. Adjacent to the inner enclosure stands a three-tiered Rajagopuram (main entrance tower), crowned with five kalasams (ornamental finials). The wall surrounding the outer prakara measures 7 feet in height.

Architectural Elements of the Garbhagriha Adhisthana

The traditional temple architecture of Tamil Nadu generally consists of six principal structural components: Adhisthana (base or pedestal), Bhitti (wall), Prastara (roof or entablature), Griva (neck), Sikhara (superstructure or crown), and Stupi (finial).[15] These six components constitute the fundamental architectural framework of a temple.[16] The Adithala refers to the foundation portion embedded beneath the ground level. The Upapitha is the subsidiary platform constructed above the foundation. It serves to increase the overall height and elevation of the Garbhagriha (sanctum sanctorum). The Adhisthana is the visible basal portion of the temple structure situated above ground level. Since it forms the exposed foundation of the building, it is referred to as the Adhisthana or basal platform.[17]

The Adhisthana is one of the most significant architectural elements of a temple, as it serves as the principal supporting base of the entire structure. It provides structural stability while also contributing to the aesthetic appearance of the temple. The Adhisthana is composed of various architectural mouldings and decorative elements, including Upana, Janma, Paduka, Jagati, Kumuda, Kumbha, Padma, Karna, Kanda, Pattika, Vajana, Kapota, Prati, Patra, Manjala and Sribandha. These components are arranged in different combinations and enriched with ornamental features, reflecting the technical knowledge and artistic excellence of traditional Tamil temple architecture.[17]

Garbhagriha (Adhisthana–Prastara (Fig. - 1)



The Garbhagriha (sanctum sanctorum) measures 10 feet in length and 10 feet in width. At the centre of the sanctum, the presiding deity, Manavaneeswarar, is enshrined in the form of a Swayambhu Lingam (self-manifested Shiva Lingam), measuring approximately 4¼ feet in height.

Adhisthana (Basement)

The Adhisthana of this temple consists of a series of architectural mouldings arranged in the **Fig. - 1**

following order: Upana, Jagati, Adho Padma, Vritta Kumuda, Adho Padma, Kanda, Pattika, Kanda and Vedika. The Upana portion displays a slightly projecting Adho Padma moulding, while the Jagati is comparatively elevated and appears as a broad, flat band. Above the Jagati is another Adho Padma moulding, surmounted by the Vritta Kumuda.

The Kumuda is circular in shape and exhibits a remarkably smooth and rounded appearance. Above the Vritta Kumuda is another Adho Padma moulding, followed by the Kanda portion, which is decorated with a continuous series of sculptural representations of Yalis and elephants. A warrior seated on a Yali is also depicted. Human figures are carved at the western and northern corners of the structure.

The Pattika (Sri Bandha) is comparatively narrow and is followed by the Kanda and Vedika mouldings. These architectural elements collectively enhance the ornamental appearance of the Adhisthana, which measures approximately 12 feet in height. On the northern side of the Garbhagriha, a Pranala, also known as a Gomukha (water outlet), is provided without any decorative embellishment.

Wall Portion (Bhitti)

The wall portion (Bhitti) of the Garbhagriha is adorned with square-shaped pilasters at its four corners. The Devakoshtas (niches) on the southern, western and northern sides are each embellished with two pilasters. Altogether, ten pilasters, measuring approximately 5½ feet in height, are distributed along these three sides.

These pilasters exhibit architectural components such as the square base (Saduram), eight-sided shaft (Kal), Padma Bandha, Kalasa, Tadi, Kudam, Padma, Palagai and Taranga Potikai (corbel). The pilasters are characterised by square and octagonal sections and are crowned with Taranga Potikai. The presence of Taranga Potikai (ordinary corbel) reflects the architectural characteristics of the Early Chola style.[18]

Prastara (Entablature)

Above the wall portion (Bhitti) is the Prastara (entablature), which consists of architectural elements such as Uttira, Ezhuthagam, Kapota and Yali. The Ezhuthagam portion is ornamented with a continuous series of Bhutaganas (dwarf figures). Above this section is the Kapota (cornice), which is comparatively small and does not exhibit a prominently projecting form.

The corners of the Kapota are decorated with ornamental motifs resembling leaf scrolls (Ilai Karukku) or Patralata designs. These decorative features exhibit the characteristic artistic traditions of the Early Chola period.[19]

Above the Kapota, a continuous row of Yali figures forms an ornamental frieze, further enhancing the architectural appearance of the structure. The total height of the structure, extending from the Bhitti (wall portion) to the Prastara (entablature), is approximately 8 feet.

Vimana (Fig. - 2)

Above the Prastara (entablature) rises the Vimana, which exhibits the characteristic features of the Dravidian architectural style. It is an Ekatala Vimana (single-tiered superstructure), consisting of architectural elements such as Karna Kudu, Sala and Panjara. The Griva (neck portion) is circular in shape.



The Griva Koshtas (niches) contain sculptural representations of Dakshinamurthy on the southern side, Vishnu on the western side and Brahma on the northern side. Stucco sculptures depicting Nandi, the sacred vehicle of Lord Shiva, and Karna Kudu motifs are found on all four sides of the Vimana.

Although the Sikhara (crowning superstructure) exhibits certain octagonal features associated with the Dravidian style, it is predominantly designed in the form of a Vesara Sikhara (circular superstructure). Above the Sikhara is a prominently expanded lotus-shaped architectural element known as **Fig. - 2**

the Maha Padma. The Stupi (Kalasa), resembling a lotus bud, is positioned above the Maha Padma and forms the crowning finial of the Vimana.

The architectural portion extending from the Griva to the Stupi is constructed using bricks and lime mortar. This upper portion alone belongs to the Later Chola period, indicating a subsequent phase of architectural development or renovation. The total height of the temple structure, measured from the Adhisthana (basement) to the top of the Vimana, is approximately 45 feet.

Artha Mandapa (Fig. - 3 & 4)

The Artha Mandapa of this temple is supported by four pillars arranged on either side. These pillars consist of various architectural components, including Pattika, Urdhva Padma, Saduram (square section), Kal (octagonal shaft), Padma Bandha, Kalasa, Tadi, Kanda, Kudam and Kanda, which collectively support the Uttira (beam). The basal portions of the pillars are beautifully ornamented with lotus petals carved in the form of Urdhva Padma (upward-facing lotus). Each pillar measures approximately 6½ feet in height.



(Fig. - 3) (Fig. - 4)

The Devakoshta portions on the southern and northern sides of the Artha Mandapa exhibit remarkable architectural and sculptural features. They are adorned with Makara Toranas (ornamental arches), designed in a semicircular form. The lower portions of these arches are embellished with floral scroll motifs resembling blossoming flowers emerging from creepers.

Particularly noteworthy is the exquisite sculptural representation of Lord Shiva holding Goddess Parvati in a divine marriage scene (Kalyanasundara Murti). This composition beautifully portrays the celestial wedding of Shiva and Parvati. Although the sculptural theme is derived from the Sthala Purana (local temple legend), its artistic execution reflects the distinctive characteristics of the Early Chola sculptural tradition.[20]

Conclusion

An examination of the architectural features of the Thiruvelvikudi Manavaleswarar Temple reveals that its Garbhagriha, Artha Mandapa and Nataraja Mandapa exhibit the distinctive characteristics of the Early Chola architectural style. However, when compared with other Early Chola temples in Kuthalam Taluk, particularly the Uthavedeeswarar and Uthvaganathar Temples, certain variations can be observed in the architectural elements extending from the Adhisthana to the Prastara of the Garbhagriha.

The Adhisthana of the Garbhagriha consists of a series of architectural mouldings, including Upana, Adho Padma, Jagati, Adho Padma, Vritta Kumuda and Adho Padma. Above these mouldings, the Kanda portion is embellished with remarkable sculptural representations of Yalis and warriors seated on elephants. Human figures are also depicted at the western and northern corners of the structure. These ornamental features constitute some of the distinctive architectural characteristics of the temple.

The pillars of the Artha Mandapa exhibit a unique arrangement of architectural components, including Pattika, Urdhva Padma, Saduram (square section), octagonal shaft, Padma Bandha, Kalasa, Tadi, Kudam and Kanda. Such a combination of architectural elements is not found in the other Early Chola temples of Kuthalam Taluk considered in this comparative study.

Furthermore, the pilasters adorning the wall portions of the Garbhagriha and Artha Mandapa display remarkable artistic craftsmanship. Particularly noteworthy are the Makara Toranas found above the Devakoshtas, where the lower portions of the semicircular arches are beautifully ornamented with floral scroll designs resembling blossoming flowers emerging from creepers. These decorative features are not commonly observed in the other Early Chola temples of Kuthalam Taluk.

Thus, although the Thiruvelvikudi Manavaleswarar Temple exhibits certain architectural and sculptural features that distinguish it from other contemporary stone temples (Kattrali) of the region, its structural components remain firmly rooted in the Early Chola architectural tradition. The distinctive arrangement of its mouldings, pillars, pilasters and ornamental motifs suggests an important stage of artistic experimentation and architectural development. Therefore, the temple may be regarded as a significant example of the evolving Chola architectural style, reflecting innovative artistic features within the established traditions of Early Chola temple architecture.

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