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HISTORY OF THE ANCIENT PANDYA TEMPLE IN CHINNAMANUR

Dr. B. Ubahara Mary & P. Sivaranjani

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Jayaraj Annapackiam College for Women (Autonomous), Periyakulam, Tamil Nadu, India

ABSTRACT

There is a saying of the famous Tamil Poetess Auvaiyar that 'men ought not to live in places where there are no temples' and Devaram also mentions that 'places without temples are unfit for the purposes of residence, as they are merely deserts'. Hence the popular saying is "No temple, no village". So in ancient India each place of habitation, whether a hamlet or a city, had to maintain its own temple for the prosperity of the inhabitants. The Poolanandeswarer temple is no exception to the richness in history and architectural elements that are indigenous to any temple in the country. It's establishment and the town's background thus traced out also reassures the same.

KEYWORDS: *Temple, Poolanandeswarer, Legend, Arikesari, Chinnamanur, Pandyas*

INTRODUCTION

In this study we have attempted to study and expose the historical background and the speciality of the Poolanandeeswarar temple at Chinnamanur. Temple is an Impression of God's Love. The word 'Temple' is derived from the Latin word 'Templum'. It is a building reserved for religious or spiritual rituals and activities such as prayer and sacrifice. Hindu temples are known by many different names, varying with region and language, such as Alayam, Mandir, Mandira, Ambalam, Gudi, Koil, Kovil, Devasthana, Deva Mandiraya and Devalaya. According to Hindu faith, it is a structure designed to bring human beings and gods together. Inside its Garbhagriha (innermost sanctum), a Hindu temple contains a Murti or Hindu god's image. Hindu temples are large and magnificent, with a rich history.[1]

The great temples of India are philanthropic as well as religious institutions. The more famous of these temples, built in ancient times in the busiest part of the village or town, are the greatest centres of activity. Worshipping gods in temples infuses our mind with feeling of divinity. [2]

The temples reflect the prevalence of communal harmony, love of humanity, peace and prosperity in the society. Prayer strengthens human soul, refines its manners and teaches love and affection. Temples are usually located in the river banks, on top of hills and mountains, inside the cave, jungle, villages and towns. Generally temples consist of Garbhagriha, Ardhamandapa, Mahamandapa and Mukhamandapa. The Nandi (bull) in Shiva temples and Garuda (bird or eagle) in Vishnu temples are placed in the mahamandapa or outside the temple. There are number of temples in Theni district dedicated to various gods. Among them there is no sharp distinction between a saivite and a vaishnavite temple. In this Article we are going to discuss about the ancient Pandya temple in Chinnamanur.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methods, followed in this study, are historical as well as sociological. By applying historical methodology, the history of the temple is explained. Its structure is studied, by using the field visit method. Interview is also used to know its functions. The unconventional methods of oral history, participatory research and observation are used.

Chinnamanur

Chinnamanur is one among the six municipalities in Theni District and Community Development Block in Uthamapalayam Taluk. It is located 22 km. south-west of Periyakulam along the road to Uthamapalayam; a prosperous union of 56522 inhabitants. [3]Chinnamanur was formerly known as 'Arikesarinallur'. It is mentioned in one of the inscriptions of Poolanandeeswarar Temple in Chinnamanur as 'Arikesarinallur' in Alanadu.[4]The hymn of Holy Thiruvasagam has also mentioned its name as 'Arikesari' in one of the well known Thiruvasagathalam. Hari+Ka+Esan+Ari = Arikesari, the word 'Hari' means Vishnu, 'Ka' means Brahma, 'Esan' means Rudra and 'Ari' means 'Indira'. It is believed that, Vishnu, Brahma, Rudra and Indira were worshipped as Lord Shiva in this village, so the village was called as 'Arikesarinallur'. Lord Shiva was called as Arikesarinathar. [5]

Later, the name of the village was changed as Chinnamanur by Chinnama Nayak. During the period of Rani Mangammal of Madurai, the city was renamed as Chinnamanur. The Brahmins were brought by her to this town. Brahmins are still prominent among its inhabitants. Suruli River irrigates this town. It is at a height of 374 m above sea level. As per the religious census of 2011, Chinnamanur had 90.57% Hindus, 7.55% Muslims and 1.81 % of Christians and 0.05% other religions. [6]

Theni District

Theni District is one of the 38 districts of Tamil Nadu state in India.[7]Theni district was formerly known as 'Ala-Nadu'.[8] Until twentieth century, this district was a part of the present Madurai district. Theni District was bifurcated from Madurai District on 1.1.1997. The district is known for fertile lands under river Periyar irrigation, popularly known as 'Cumbum Valley'.

Figure 1: Theni District.

Location and Size

Theni District is bound by Kerala on the western side, east by Madurai District and north by Dindigul District and on south by Virudhunagar District. The total geographical area of the district is about 3242.3 sq. km. The district is located between 9° 30' and 10° 30' in the north latitude and between 77° and 78° 30' on the east longitude. This District is surrounded by the Western Ghats, with its ubiquitous green stretches of cultivated lands and tea gardens.

Historical Background of Theni District

Theni district formerly a part of Madurai district has a hoary past. It has seen the rise and fall of many dynasties (like Pandya, Chola and Nayaks). The Sangam Pandyas had a glorious past. The Tamil country had been ruled by Pandyas, one of the ancient rulers. They ruled Tamil Country for several centuries and Madurai as their Capital city. The most important ruler among the Pandyas was Mudattirumaran, who founded the city of Madurai on the banks of the river Vaigai. The Sangam Pandya and Chola power began to decline during the mid of 3rd century A.D. due to the invasion of the Kalabhras.[9] In 6th century, Kadungon, the Pandya ruler defeated the Kalabhras and founded the First Pandyan Empire with Madurai as Capital.

The Pandyas had their control over the present Theni District. It is evident from a number of Pandyan inscriptions available in this district. Two copperplates of the early Pandyas have been unearthed at Chinnamanur. Twenty seven stone inscriptions of Pandyas were found in the Rajasimhesvara alias Poolanandeeswarar and Lakshmi Narayana Perumal temples in Chinnamanur. These inscriptions mentioned the gifts made to these temples. The inscriptions also mention Chinnamanur as Arikesarinallur, which have been founded by the early Pandya King called Arikesari.

The last ruler of the First Pandyan Empire was Rajasimha. [10] Nilakanda Sastri and some other authors would call him Rajasimha II. [11] After the death of Parantaka Viranarayanan, Rajasimha III came to the throne with the title of 'Maravarman'. [12] So he was called as 'Maravarman Rajasimha'. He was the son of Parantaka Viranarayanan and Vanavan Mahadevi, a Kongu Chera Princess. He ruled the Pandya country from 900 A.D to 920 A.D or little later. [13] He was the donor of the Larger Chinnamanur Plates, in which his military achievements were mentioned.[14] When he was encamped at Chulal to the East of Rajasimhakulam, he granted the village Narchegai Puttur (small village near Chinnamanur) to the Brahmana Parantaka,[15] in Alanadu and renamed as 'Mandara Gaurava Mangalam'. So he got the title of 'Mandara Gaurava Meru'. [16] These plates also give us considerable historical material regarding the Pandyas of this period.

The Udayendiram Plates of Prithivipathi II said that, the Pandyan King Rajasimha was defeated by Prantaka I, the Chola King, and he got the title 'Madurai Konda Parantaka'.[17] The Pandya got the help of the Ceylonese ruler Kasyappa V, but Parantaka defeated the combined forces of the Pandya and Ceylon at the Battle of Vellur and assumed the title 'Maduraiyum Ilamum Konda'.[18] The Chola then assumed the significant title 'Sangara Raghava'.[19] In that war, the Ceylonese King sent a large army to help the Pandya King. But due to the spread of a deadly disease many from the Illam army died and the rest of the force retuned to Ceylon. [20] Consequently the Chola occupied Madurai and the Pandya King fled to Ceylon with the Pandyan royal insignia. With this the Pandya domination in Tamil Nadu came to an end. The Pandya Empire was pushed to the point of paying homage to the Chola Empire. Pandya Country became the part of the Chola Country.

After the subjugation of the Pandyas by Rajaraja I, the early Pandya rule was brought to a complete end. The inscription of Parantaka I and Rajendra I, the Chola rulers were found in the temples in Chinnamanur. [21] The Pandyas occupied a subordinate position and paid tribute to the Cholas till the end of the rule of Kulottunga III in 1218. The Pandya power was revived during the beginning of the 13th century. They threw off the Chola yoke and proclaimed their independence. Inscriptions were the main source of information for the study of "the age of the Second Pandyan Empire". [22]

Inscriptions of later Pandya rulers of the Second Pandyan Empire are found in the different places in Theni District. Among them, inscription of Jatavarman Kulasekhara I, Maravarman Sundara Pandya I, Jatavarman Sundara Pandya I and Maravarman Kulasekhara Pandya I, were found in the temples in Chinnamanur. [23]

It gives valuable source to know about their political and cultural activities.

Sivagami Amman Sameta Poolanandeeswarar Temple in Chinnamanur

Arikesarinallaur is the former name of Chinnamanur, which denoted the combination of all the three, 'Murthy' (god), 'Sthalam' (temple or place) and 'Theertham' (holy water tanks). Its 'thalapuranam' was translated into Tamil from Sanskrit about 300 years ago by Poolananda Kavirayar with the help of Vanar. This puranam consisted of 945 hymns with the legend history of Poolanandeeswarar Temple. It was written on the palm leaves. Later it was written in paper in 1954. Sage Soodama told the Naimicharanya Sages, "Poolavanam is the greatest temple among the Shiva temples mentioned in the Sankara Sangeetha in the Kanda Purana, one of the eleven Puranas".[24]

Poolanandeeswarar temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva. Presiding deity or god (Urchavar) is Poolanandeeswarar and mother or goddess (Thayar) is called as Sivagami Amman. The temple is situated on the bank of Mullai River. The temple is referred in the inscription as Rajasimhesvaram Udaiya Nayanar in Arikesarinallur, a brahmadeya in Alanadu. [25]

Temples are generally divided into two types. One is to build a new temple where we want and the other is to build where the God already exists. Thus the deity in the temple, built on the spot where the god already exists, is called 'Swayambhu Murthy', for example, the famous Swayambhu Saneeswarar Temple in Kuchanoor. The Poolanandeeswarar temple was similarly built by Rajasimha, the Pandya King. Lord is Swayambhu Murthy with a cut scar. [26] The Sanskrit word 'Swayambhu' which means 'self-manifested', 'self-existing' or 'that is created by its own accord'. The word 'Swayam' means 'self' and 'bhu' means 'to take birth or arising' The word Swayambhu is used to describe a self manifested image of a deity, which was not made by human hands, but instead is naturally arisen, or generated by nature.[27]

The Poolanandeeswarar temple is one of the oldest famous Shiva Temples. This temple was built about more than 1000 years ago by King Rajasimha Pandya. The temple has around 27 inscriptions. Inscription on the North wall of the temple mentioned, the record of the Kulasekhara Pandya I, which was written during his 41st year of his reign. In that record the same temple is denoted as Tiruppunduraiudaiyar alias Rajasimhacholisvaramudaiyar at Arikesanallur. [28]

Figure 2: Poolanandeeswarar Temple.

Specialty of the Temple

The Poolanandeeswarar temple is one of the Thiruvasaga Sthalam; it is mentioned in the hymn of Holy Thiruvasagam. Hymn line 190 refers the word 'Arikesari'.

*"Kalayar Arikesariyai Potri"*29]

There are Five Mukti (Salvation) Temples in India. They are

- Kasi

- Thiruvannamalai

- Chidambaram

- Thiruvarur

- Arikesarinallur (Poolavaneswarar temple).

Among the above Mukti temples, Arikesarinallur is the holiest. Because Lord Shiva granted a gift to Kamadhenu (the divine cow) that anyone who resides in Arikesarinallur, or drowns in the Surabi River or stands in the Arikesanathar temple, have got direct salvation during their dying process. [30]

Specialty of God

In the Poolanandeeswarar temple, the idol of Lord Shiva is miraculously changing according to the devotee's height. Weather the devotee's standing or sitting in front of the Idol Shiva, the height of the Idol will change according to your height. So Shiva is called as '*Alavukku Alavanavar*'. [31]

Legend

There are many temples in India. Apart from the newly built temple at present, every major temple built by the ancestors is reminiscent of many legend and historical stories. Similarly, the Poolanandeeswarar temple is reminiscent of legend and historical stories.

Salvation for Tiger and Cow

During the Daksha Yajna (sacrifice) those who insulted Lord Shiva were punished by Lord Veerabhadra. Kamadhenu (the divine cow) and Karpaga Virksham (the divine tree) were also punished by Lord Veerabhadra. Lord Veerabhadra cursed the divine cow Kamadhenu to become an ordinary cow and Karpaga Virksham to become a Poola Tree 'Bombax Malabaricum'. Both begged for pardon from the curse. Compassionate Lord Veerabhadra said that when Lord Shiva emerges as Swayambhu under Poola Tree, your curse will be relieved and Kamadhenu will get relief from the curse by tiger.

Cursing Gandharva as a Tiger

A Brahmin was doing penance in Kasi. Gandharva from celestial world came found that the Brahmin did not rise up to show his respect towards him. So the Gandharva roared like a tiger in front of the Brahmin. Hearing the roar, Brahmin trembled. Gandharva looked at it and laughed. The angry Brahmin cursed Gandharva asked to become a tiger. Realized his mistake, Gandharva asked for relief. Brahmin informed him that when you heard one of the names of Lord Shiva you will be relieved from your curse by cow and the cow curse will be relieved by you.

Kamadhenu was living among the cowherd owned by Brahmin in Deivanayagapuram village. Lord Shiva appeared as Swayambhu Lingam in the nearby forest. The Poola tree was grown in the left side of the Lingam. It was giving shade to the Lingam. In forest, the cow Kamadhenu was grazing fearlessly with other cow and it was went alone to drink water, during this time the tiger(Gandharva) who was cursed by Brahmin tried to kill the cow. It was found by cow and said to the tiger, you will eat me after hearing my word! I will go home and give milk to my calf and come back. Wait till then. When tiger dared to say that I will eat you when he has starving for three days, the cow shout 'sivasiva' and the tiger heard its shout and knew his origin. The cow assured tiger that after feeding calves I will return back to satisfy tiger hunger. Tiger agreed to Kamadhenu demand and waited for her return.

As promised, the cow returned back to tiger. Tiger astonished and did not try to eat the cow. Kamadhenu said if you did not kill me I will take my life by hitting on the nearby rock after you eat my flesh. The cow ended her life as said. The tiger has feared about hell and he ended his life by hitting on the rock. Lord Shiva appeared at this time and gave back their original form to both of them.

Salvation of Karpaga Virksham

The Pandya King Rajasimha, being the Shiva devotee, he visited and stayed in Virapandi, where he saw the thick forest with Poola tree in the Eastern side of Surabi river. He called one milkman from the forest and asked him to bring milk for his food every day. The milkman who was bringing milk to the palace was getting tripped and falling down on the ground by a tree root as well as a stone. It was happened again and again in the particular spot. The third day, the milkman passed this same way, this time he brought an axe for cutting that tree root. He fell down this time also, so he started cutting the root. Immediately, blood started oozing out from the stone (which is Shiva Lingam) and Lord Shiva was emerged in this place. The Karpaga Viruksham (poola tree) relieved from its cursing.

The milkman saw everything and narrated the incident to the Pandya King. The king came to the spot and realized that it was the Leela of the Lord and prayed to him to come down to the level of human beings as his presence is too huge for everyone to see and pray. The Lord reduced the size of the bolt of light to the height of the King. The king was overwhelmed by this grace and hugged the Lingam. The impressions of some of the ornaments worn by the King got embossed on the Lingam.

Equivalent to Chidambaram

During Dwapara Yuga, Lord Vishnu got up from his sleep suddenly in Vaikunda. Goddess Lakshmi asked him the reason for his wakefulness. Lord Vishnu replied that he was thinking of Shiva Sthalams and he found that there was one Shiva Sthalam named Poolavanam, which was never visited. Lord Vishnu visited this Shiva thalam immediately and worshipped Lord Shiva here. Lord Shiva performed his cosmic dance to Lord Vishnu. Lord Vishnu asked Lord Shiva about the absence of Parvathi in this holy place. Lord Shiva informed that this place is equivalent to Chidambaram. Paramanantha Koobam (well) of Thillai is present here on the left side of the Temple premises. This koobam represents Sivagami Amman. Lord Vishnu offered his prayers to the koobam. He again came to Lord Shiva and asked if this sthalam is equivalent to Chidambaram, then there is a need to have a Sivagangai Theertham (the holy water tank) similarly to Chidambaram. Lord Shiva created Sivagangai theertham in front of his shrine on the request of Lord Vishnu. Lord Vishnu took bath in the Theertham and worshipped Lord Shiva. Lord Brahma, Eleven Rudras and Lord Indira with Indrani worshipped Lord Shiva here.

Other Names of God in the Temple

Names given to the Idol of the Swayambhu Lingam are

- 'Poolavanesar' or 'Poolanandeeswarar' (the lord was stayed under the poola tree)

- 'Arikesarinathar' (lord was worshipped by Lord Vishnu and others)

- 'Paalundanathar' (lord drank the milk which was bring by milkman to King)

- 'Alavukku Alavanavar' (lord reduced his size as per the request of Pandya King)

- 'Thaluvakkulainthavar' (lord was hugged by Pandya king) and

- 'Rajasimheswarar' (lord was called by the name Pandya King).[32]

INSCRIPTION IN THE TEMPLE

Inscription on the South Wall of Main Shrine

There are 27 inscriptions exists in and around the walls of the Poolanandeeswarar Temple. [33].It mentions the gift and donations rendered by Pandya rulers to this temple. Inscription on the south wall of the central shrine mentions the old name of the temple as Rajasimheswaram Udaiya Nayanar in Sri Arikesarinallur, a Brahmadeya in Alanadu of Pandya - Mandalam. [34].

The earliest inscription of the temple dated to the 10th year of Maravaraman Sundara Pandya I (1226 AD), records the gift of lands by king as Devadana. An inscription found on the north wall of the central shrine belongs to the 6th year of Jatavarman Sundara Pandya I; it records the gift of the proceeds of tolls levied on certain articles of merchandise. Another inscription of the same wall and same king dated his 7th year mentions the gifts granted for the maintenance of a flower garden. This inscription mentions this temple as Vikrama Pandisvaramudaiya Nayanar at Sivallavanpadaividu.

Figure 3: Inscription on the South Wall of Main Shrine.

Inscription on the North Wall of Main Shrine

An inscription found on the south wall of the shrine of the Goddess Sivakami belongs to the 3rd year (1271 AD) of Maravarman Kulasekhara Pandya I; it records the gift of land to the temple. Another inscription on the same wall of the same king mentions the sale of the land. Another inscription on the north wall of the central shrine in the Rajasimheswara temple belongs to the 8th regional year of the same king records the gift of land by the Mahasabha, the pannaicheyvagal and velicheyvargal of Arikesarinallur, a brahmadeya in Alanadu. The 41st regional year (1301 AD) of Maravarman Kulasekhara I mentions the gift of land and name of the temple as Thirupunduraiudaiyar alias Rajasimhacholiswaramudaiyar at Arikesarinallur.

An inscription records the then Mirasudar, Subbha Reddiyar of Chinnamanur, who lived in Subbulapuram dated on 25.01.1948, provided funds for the construction of Nayanmar Mandapam. An inscription records the fund provided for the construction of Subramaniya Shrine building by N.K. Ponnusamithever dated 1972. An inscription mentions Rs. 3.6 lakh spent for the manufacturing 6 wheel for temple car (*ther*). This fund was given by T.T.V. Dhinakaran, the then MP of Periyakulam constituency dated 15.04.2003.

Figure 4: Inscription on the North Wall of Main Shrine.

STRUCTURE OF THE TEMPLE

Generally, the Principal Features of the Temples Are;

- The Garbha Griha, or the cell containing the sacred deity, with a vimana or tower over it.

- Mandapas, or pillared halls, in front of it.

- Gopura, or the entrance tower, opening through the walls enclosing the vimana on all sides generally, but with special reference to the east.

- The Varandah, or Prahara

- Theerthas (tanks and wells), held sacred for purposes of bathing.

- Subsidiary shrines dedicated to the various other minor gods, and

- Sthala Virksham (tree).

Upon entering the Poolanandeeswarar temple, the Poolanandeeswarar Temple is located after passing of the Dhwaja Stambha (flagpole) and then the Nandhi Bhagavan and then the Mandapam. The main shrine has a Garbhagriha, Antarala, Ardhamandapa, Mahamandapa, Mukhamandapa and Nandhimandapa in the front of the temple. The Prakara has the sculptures of sixty three Nayanmars in the southern side of the main shrine.

The entrance of the Mahamandapa has sub shrines for Ganapathi and Murugan. On the north side of the mahamandapa has a room facing the south with Utsavamurtis of Poolanandeeswarar in Nadaraja form and Sivagami Amman. Another important shrine is Sivagami Amman Shrine in this temple. It is located on the north side of the main shrine. It has Garbagriha, Arthamandapa and Mahamandapa. On the northern side of these two main shrines, there is a shrine for Chandegeswarar and Chandeswari, the accountant of Lord Shiva.

In between the Shiva and Amman Shrines, there is a separate shrine for Lord Subramanya. There are sub shrines for the Ganapathi, Dhakshina Murti, Kanneeswararmudaiyar, Vishnu Durga, Lakshmi, Kali, Kalabairavar, Brahma, Saptakannikas and Samaya Kuaravar. There is an image of a maiden in the south east corner of the Temple. It is believed that she was the daughter of Rajasimha who attained puberty at late age after having worshipped Lord Poolanandeeswarar. On the inner side of the eastern wall of the main entrance are images of Chandra in the north and Surya in the south. Navagrahamandapam is located on the southern side of the temple.

The temple covers the area of 2.52 acres, but it is located on one acre. The temple koobam (well) is located on the north side of the Amman temple. It is called as 'Sivagamiammankoobam. The temple tank (Theppa Kulam or pond) is located in front of the temple. It is called as 'Sivagangai Theertham'. The pond is 87 feet long by 87 feet wide and eight feet deep. The temple car (ther or chariot) is located on the second theradi street. It is 36 feet height and 18 feet wide.

The temple is surrounded by wall with a seven stroyed Rajagopuram facing the east. Sthala Viruksham of the temple is Poola Tree; it is located on the northern side of the main shrine. Its Botanical name is 'Bombax malabaricum'. There is a Nagalinga Tree in the temple garden premises. Its Botanical name is 'Couroupitaguianensis'. Nagalinga flower from this tree will look like a Lingam covered by Adiseshan's head.

Sculptures in the Temple

Sculpture is the art of making statues. The Sanskrit term archabera or vigraha and the Tamil term bimbam or silai are used to signify the idols or images. Sculpturing is one of the oldest and most widespread arts of the world. It is defined as the art of cutting, carving, hewing, moulding, welding. There are two types that may be defined as bas relief and high relief. In the bas relief, front and the side posture can be seen, whereas in the high relief all sides of the sculpture can be observed.

Every temple has the sculptures of presiding god or goddess and other minor gods. Generally, Shiva temple has the sculptures of Nayanmars and Vishnu temple has Alvars. Like that Poolanandeeswarar temple also has number of sculptures of various Gods. They are Nadaraja, Dakshinamurti, Brahma, Surya, Chandra, Vinayagar, Subramaniyar, Durgai, Kali, Bhairavar, Saptamathas, Lakshmi, Nandhi, 63 Nayanmars and Navagrahas.

Shiva

Shiva is the God of Holy Trinity in the Hindu pantheon. He is assigned with the function of 'destruction' the other two, creation and protection given to Brahma and Vishnu respectively. Over the periods he has been known as Maheswara, Neelakanda (blue colour Throat), Sambhu, Sankara, Mahesa and Mahadeva. He wears the garland of skulls, cloths made up of tiger skin, big snake as necklaces and smears his body with ashes. He uses a strong bull named Nandhi as his chariot (mount). He carries a trisoola (a trident) in one hand and a Damaru (kettledrum) in the other hand. Commonly he is worshipped in the form of Lingam.

In general the chief image in the central shrine (Garbhagriha) of a Shiva temple is Lingam. Rarely one can see the anthropomorphic images of Shiva in the central shrine. In Chinnamanur, the Garbhagriha of Shiva temple enshrines Lingam with the name of Poolanandeeswarar.

Dakshinamurthi

Dakshinamurti, one of the twenty five benign manifestations of Shiva is the lord of wisdom or Guru. Dakshina means south and his name indicates he is facing the south direction. The cult of Dakshinamurti was popular since the beginning of the 8th century A.D of which specimens are found in the Pandya period. The image of Dakshinamurti is facing with south direction in the Poolanandeeswarar temple.

Nataraja

All deities are envisaged under a number of aspects and forms which bear different names, emblems and symbols. Thus Shiva as a cosmic dancer is called Nataraja. Nataraja is the most celebrated dancing form of Shiva. In the area of the present study there are separate shrines for Nataraja in the Saivite temples. The sculptures of Nataraja and Sivakami are depicted in Poolanandeeswarar temple.

Brahma

Brahma, the god of creation is one among the Hindu trio. He is the god of wisdom and the four Vedas are said to have sprung from his head. He is commonly depicted in one of the niches on the northern wall of garbhagriha in the Shiva temples. Legends describe that he was born from the lotus originating from the naval of Vishnu. The figure of Brahma is seen in standing posture in the niches on the northern wall of the central shrine in Poolanandeeswarar temple.

Surya and Chandra

The word Surya is derived from a Sanskrit word, which means 'sun'. Surya is the solar deity in Hinduism. Chandra is a moon god. In medieval Hinduism, Surya and Chandra are also an epithet for the major Hindu gods Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu. The figure of Surya is seen in standing posture on the inner side of the southern wall and Chandra in the northern wall of the main entrance in Poolanandeeswarar Temple.

Vinayagar or Ganapathi

In the Poolanandeeswarar temple, there is shrine for Ganapathi in the south west corner. Ganapathi, the son of Shiva and Parvathi, is the remover of obstacles and his worship is believed to be essential before any auspicious affair. He is called Ganapathi because he is the pathi (chief) among the Shiva Ganas (attendants). He is also called Vigneswara, Vinayaka, Ganesa and Pillaiyar. The favourite garland of Ganapathi is made of Grass (arugampul). In all the Saivaite temples, Ganapathi is depicted at the entrance of the main shrine.

Subramanya

Subramanya, the son of Shiva and Parvathi, is known by various names like, Skanda, Kumara, Karthikeya and Shanmuga. He is believed to be a Tamil god popularly known as Muruga. In all the Saivite temples of the area of the present study, shrines for Muruga are raised near the main entrance. In Poolanandeeswarar temple, the shrine for Muruga is located in between the shrine of Shiva and Amman with the name Somaskandar. He is with his consorts Valli and Deivanai.

Bhairavar

Bhairavar is referred to as Kshetrapala, Kshetranam Pataye i.e. protector of sacred city. He is said to have born of the blood of Shiva. Generally he is shown with dishevelled matted hair, three eyes and a red coloured body. His symbols are the trident (trisoola), sword and kettledrum. In Poolanandeeswarar temple, the sub-shrine for Kalabhairava is located in the northern side of standing posture facing the southern side.

Nayanmars

The famous sixty three Saivite devotees obtained the favour of Shiva, and their images are also to be seen in Shiva temples. They are usually represented in standing posture. Stone images of the Nayanmars are seen in the southern side of the Poolanandeeswarar temple.

Nandhi

Nandi, the vehicle of Lord Shiva, is generally represented by the recumbent bull placed in front of the shrine facing the figure of Shiva, symbolizing the soul of man, the jiva yarning for Paramatma the great soul god. He is important member of the Shiva cult. The purpose of positioning Nandi just in front of Shiva is that the devotees must see the god between the two horns of Nandi on Pradosha days, the sacred days for Shiva. Nandi is represented in recumbent bull form in the Shiva temples. It is placed in front of the main shrine in Mahamandapa in Poolanadeeswarar temple. There are two Nandi mandapas in the entrance of the shrines of Poolanandeeswarar temple, one is in front of Shiva Shrine and another one is in front of Sivakami Amman shrine.

Figure 5: Nandhi.

Goddess

The term Sakti means energy, force or power. Goddesses are described as bearing a close relation to power or energy. Hence they are known as embodiments of Sakti. The consorts of Brahmanical gods are Lakshmi (consort of Vishnu) and Parvathi, Kali and Durga (various manifestations of the consorts of Shiva. Parvathi, the consort of Shiva is called as different names such as Uma (light), Annapurna (bestower of food), Durga (inaccessible) and Kali (black). In general she is called as Devi or Maha Devi or mother. In Poolanandeeswarar temple, Parvathi is called as Sivakami. Her shrine is located in the northern side of the temple.

Durga

Durga is a popular deity. The northern niche of the ardhamandapa of almost all the Shiva temples, houses Durga either on seated or standing posture. Image represented in the northern niche of the arthamandapa in the Poolanandeeswarar temple has four arms. Another famous image of Durgai is located in the right side of the Amman temple named Vishnudurgai.

Lakshmi

Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu, is the goddess of wealth and prosperity. She is depicted in the outer side of the Poolanandeeswarar temple in the northeast corner.

Saptamathas

The worship of seven mothers seems to have been in use from the time immemorial. In South India it was popular from 5th to 10th centuries. The Saptamathas are Brahmi, Maheswari, Gaumari, Vaishnavi, Varahi, Indrani and Chamundi are the female forms of Brahma, Mahesan, Kumaran, Vishnu, Varahamurthi, Indira and Rudra respectively. The Saptamathas panels are depicted on the southern side of Prahara along with the images of Nayamars in Poolanandeeswarar temple.

63 Nayanmars & Saptamathas

Figure 6: 63 Nayanmars & Saptamathas.

Navagrahas

Generally in all important Saiva temples of Tamil Nadu, the images of Navagrahas are found in the north eastern corner of the temple and they are venerated and worshipped. Navagrahas are considered as nine planets. They are Surya (Sun), Chevvai (Mars), Budha (Mercury), Guru (Jupiter), Sukra (Venus), Sani (Saturn), Rahu-the ascending node and Ketu- the descending node. They wield infinite power and exert their influence on the human beings in the universe, as stated by the legends. Their images are depicted on the northeast corner in the Poolanandeeswarar temple. [35]

Figure 7: Navagrahas.

CONCLUSIONS

There are many temples in Theni district with utmost historical and architectural information about our ancient religious and social lives. This study mainly attempts to bring out one such temple which in turn may instigate interest in researching many others. The hidden inscriptions and the sculptural elegance leave us spell bound. Thus, it is a vital source to reach out to our ancient form of culture and tradition.

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