

# ORIGIN AND STRUCTURE OF SRI SANKARANARAYANA SWAMY TEMPLE - SANKARANKOIL

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to describe the origin and structure of Sankaranarayana swamy temple at Sankarankoil in Tirunelveli District of Tamil Nadu. Sankaranarayana Swamy temple is situated on the Western end of the town and is surrounded by four car streets. The temple is housed at an extent of 4.50 acres. It is a celebrated 'Sivasthala' for doing penance. It is here that Sri Paramasiva blessed Sri Umadevi with his revelation of 'Sri Sankaranarayana Roopa'. Muthuvirappakavirayar recited Gomathi Ammai Pillai Tamil on Gomathi Ambal of this temple.

**Key words :** Sankaranarayana, Sthalapurana, Gomathi Ambal, Adi Thapaasu

## **Introduction**

There is a traditional belief found in the sthalapurana that sankha and padma were the serpent kings. Sankha was the disciple of Vasuki, an ornament of Sri Paramasiva while padma was the disciple of Adishesha, the bed of Mahavishnu. There arose a controversy between them as to who was superior either Hari or Hara. As they could not find a solution for this riddle in Nagaloka they went to Boologa and they had a debate with Maharishi. Sankha believed that "Sri Paramasiva is the supreme" but the king Padma did not agree to this argument. Both of them were directed to obtain the Judgement from Vyala Bhagavan who narrated them the history of Sankaranarayana.<sup>1</sup> He also directed the serpent king to do penance at Punnaivana kshetra. Accordingly they reached Punnaivana and dug Nagasunai, the Sacred tank and also did penance. Lord Paramasiva revealed his "Sankaranarayana Roopa", on a Full moon day in the Tamil month of Adi. This is celebrated as Adi Thapaasu every year.

## Puranic History

According to the sthalapurana, King Ugrapandya Lord of Korkai, the Vanquisher of the tiger flag of the cholas and the bowling of the Cheras. Used to go daily to Madurai to worship one day on reaching the village of Perunkottur two miles from Sankarankovil, the elephant on which the King was riding plunged into a pit and refused to move. Whilst the King was marveling at the Portent, the God Ayyanar appeared and tied him he need not go every day to Madurai. At that moment a Kaval Paraiyan came and told the King he had found a cobra beside an ant hill and on the Kings request took him to the spot. There a lingam was found and a shrine was built. Such was the orgin of the Sankaranainar temple. Another story describes that God Siva showed his consort Gomathi Amman and to the two serpents Sanka and Padma who were quarreling as to the relative importance of Siva and Vishnu, the unity of the two Gods.

## Other names of God and Goddesses

As Lord Sankaralingaswamy was found in the snake hole he was named as vanmeega nathar. As the Lord was found in the pungai forest he was known by the name Koozhaiyandi and Vaidyanathan.<sup>2</sup> Goddess Gomathy is knownn by the name Avudaiammai.

The image of Ugrapandya and Manikirivan on the right and left Pillar situates in front of the temple respectively. In course of time the king built the mandapa and outer walls of the temple<sup>3</sup>. The dimension of the Sankaranarayana Swamy temple as its stands today is a vast and impressive complex of structures enclosed by high and messive compound walls all around occupying an area of four and half acres. Thus it is one of the largest temple complex in South India. The dimension of the Sankaranarayana Swamy temple are large and well proportioned with a compound walls, standing modest gopuras of floors holding a lot is once Vanished fame and popularity. Dravidian style of architecture was followed in the construction, of this temple.

## Gopura

The significant feature of the temple of the pandiya period is the dominance of the monumental gateway or gopura at the entrance to temple which dwarfed the viman over the central Sanctuary. The temple conspicuous by its goupura for many miles around boasts of great antiquity<sup>4</sup>.

This temple contains four gopuras of which two are of very small size, one in the western gate and the other one in the North. On the eastern side there are two gopuras, one in front of the swamy Shrine and the other in front of the Amman shrine.

The main entrance of the temple itself is Gopura i.e. the swamy gopura. It is 125 feet in height and nine storeyed<sup>5</sup>. On the roof there are nine huge **kalasas** which representing the nine storeyed. This huge gopura is a landmark of this town visible to a radius of seven miles. The length of the gopura in North South direction is 56 feet, east west 15 feet and kalasa at the top has 7 feet 4 inches in its height<sup>6</sup>.

The Gopura in front of Amman Shrine is smaller when compared to the swamy gopura. Here Goddess Gomathi is repeatedly shown in the form of either performing pooja in front of a Linga or doing penance. She is either seated or standing with folded hands in front of Dhakshinamoorthy. The **sikhara** is circular<sup>7</sup> in shape.

### Parts of the temple

The temple complex consists of three main shrines. One dedicated to Siva and the other to Gomathi Amman and the third one to Sankaranarayana all the three facing east. Each has an "Ardhamandapa", and "Maha Mandapa" in front of them. The entire structures in each case are surrounded by pillared 'Prakara'. On the northern side there is a Nataraja shrine facing south. The entire construction, including Siva, Amman, Sankaranarayana, Shunmugar and Nataraja shrine are connected by a Mahamandapa. There is an Utsava Mandapa<sup>8</sup> in front of the Amman shrine. There is a huge gopura in front of the Siva shrine. In between the gopura and the Mugamandapa of the Siva shrine, there is a Nandi facing the Siva shrine. There is "**Dvijasthamba**" in front of Nandi. Behind Nandi situates the "**Pali Beeda**". The entire campus is enclosed on four sides by huge walls called "**Mathils**".

This temple was not built at one time Maravarman Sundrapandya I had built the Siva and Amman Shrine<sup>9</sup> in a modest scale. His successor Maravarman Sundrapandya II added the Mahamandapa. During the 16<sup>th</sup> century the gopura was built by Konerinmaikonda Kulasekkara Deva.

## The Siva Shrine

Siva shrine situates in the western side of the temple. It is located in front of the main entrance. It is made of stone the vimana above the shrine is a simple two tier structure and the siikara is a octagonal in structure. The vimana is built of brick and mortar and dressed with stone.

## Amman Shrine

The Amman of this temple is very popularly known as Gomathy Amman or Aavudaithai. In the entire pandya region her popularity is unique and unparalleled. The nature of devotees' offerings to this temple deserves a special study. All the folks firmly believe that prayer to Gomathy immediately wards off ghosts, relieves one from any poisonous bites, and bestows children to the barren women and so on.

Everyday replicas<sup>10</sup> of a snake, scorpion, and centipedes made of silver and at times of gold are put into the "Hundial" of this temple. Offerings of the replicas of the limbs like the eyes, feet, hands or at times a replica of the whole body made of silver are put into the 'Hundial' in large numbers. This Amman shrine situates in the North side of the temple.

## Sankaranarayana Shrine

Sankaranarayana shrine was built in between the Siva and Amman shrine. The temple consists of two main parts; the larger occupied by the lingam, the emblem of Siva, and the smaller by the goddess Gomathi Amman. Between the two a third small shrine has been inserted for Narayana but the building did not lend itself to this addition; for while the lingam and the Amman may, as is usual be viewed from the main entrance through a continuous vista of doorways, so that the humblest worshipper may do homage from the street, it was found impossible to give the God Narayana similar accommodation. He has therefore walled in and has no gat way. Instances of temples which, according to tradition at least, have been converted from the worship of Siva to that of Vishnu are not uncommon; the great temple of Tirupathy and Perumal temple of Srivilliputhoor may be quoted. In Sankaranarayanakovil the attempt, which we may perhaps ascribe to the era of those ardent Vaishnavites, the king of Vijayanagar, was met, it would appear that already the temple contained both Gods.<sup>11</sup>

Though the trustees of the present day make much of the coexistence in this temple of the two Gods and are particular in having the pattas for the temple lands made out distinctly in the name of Sankaranarayana, the newer God plays quite a minor role in the important rituals of the temple.

### **Shunmugar Shrine**

Sri Shunmugar shrine situates, in front of the Amman shrine. The paintings of the Six Padaiveedu are depicted on both sides of the walls. A bronze statue of Shunmugar in a standing posture is installed there with his two lower arms. He shows his abhya with his right and "Varadha" with his left. He carries a vajra in his upper right and Sakthi Ayudhna or vel (Lance) in his upper left arm. He is standing erect in Samabhanga posture flanked by his two consorts, Valli on His sleft and delivayanai on His right.<sup>12</sup>

### **Nataraja Shrine**

Nataraja and his consort might belong the early part of 12th century A.D.<sup>13</sup> In this temple Nataraja shrine locates on the Northern side of the prakara. A bronze image of Nataraja in the Anandha Tandava pose is enshrined in this structure. Here Nataraja has His right foot planted firmly on the back of crouching Muyalakan and lifting His left leg. He has an enigmatic smile on His face. The entire figure is surrounded by a "Prabha Mandala" carrying flames. This anandhatandava is being witnessed by four persons, the foremost is Goddess Parvathy. The other three witnesses are sage Patanjali, sage Vyagrapada and saiva hymnal Poetess Karikkalammaiar. Karaikkalammaiar is shown as a figure playing symbols and witnessing the dance.

### **Srichakra**

Srichakra is installed, in front of the Amman shrine, by the Srilasrivelappa Thesiga swamygal X of Thiruvadudurai.<sup>14</sup> Devotees by sitting on the chakra pray Gomathy for the cure of their diseases. In case of bodily pain a dab of rice flour on a leaf is placed on the part affected; a hallow is scooped out in the paste and in it ghee is poured; the gee is set alight, and when it has burnt itself out, the cure is complete.<sup>15</sup>

## **Durgai Amman Shrine**

This shrine is on the northern side of Sankaralinga swamy shrine. It faces towards the south. By pouring gingely oil into the squeezed lemon, womenfolk lit lamps in front of the shrine on every Tuesday and Friday with the belief that this will hasten the marriage of young ladies and also would give relief to married ladies from Rahu and Khedu thosam (something inauspicious) and leads to a happy married life.<sup>16</sup>

## **Pulithevar Room**

It situates in between the swamy shrine and the Amman shrine in the Mahamandapa. It is a wooden structure with elaborate and intricate carvings. In the hind wall of this structure there is an imposing portrait painting of this freedom fighter and it is 10 feet high.<sup>17</sup> Kattabomman and other freedom fighters fell into the clutches of the British rulers and were executed, but Pulithevar could not be caught by the British. The devotees strongly believe that Pulithevar took an asylum in this temple and from there escaped miraculously without falling into the British. All the combing operations of the British became futile. This legend enhances the prestige of the devotees of Pulithevar and that of the deity of this temple as an unparalleled protector. Thus this temple had afforded protection for people against marauders and invaders.

## **Navagrahas**

This temple has a separate pedestal for **Navagrahas**, the divine personification of the nine planets of the Hindu astrology. They are the sun, the Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn, Ragu and Kethu. Saturn who is believed to be the cause of human miseries attracts the greatest crowd on Saturdays, a day supposed to be especially scared to him. When compared to the popularity of the Navagrahas in other temples, their worship is not very popular in this temples, because of the unshakable faith the devotees have for Gomathi Amman of this temple.

## **Thiruchuttu (Adi Holy Round)**

It is a circling movement of the devotees, which means going around the outerpragara of the three main shrine of this temple. During Adithapasu festival days the devotees of Gomathi have the habit of going around the outerpragara of three main shrines for hundred and eight times. This hundred and eight round is to start from the first day of the Adithapasu festival. As to their convenience and ability they will complete eight or twelve (or any numbers) rounds per day. By this

way they complete hundred and eight rounds before the eleventh day of Adithapasu vision, (i.e.). They will complete hundred and eight rounds within eleven days. By doing this, devotees believe that their wishes, wants and desires will be fulfilled by the Goddess Gomathi.<sup>18</sup>

#### END NOTES :

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