

A New Light on the Cultural History of Kanyakumari District

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Kanyakumari district in the state of Tamil Nadu is situated at the southernmost end of India. The boundaries of the district are Arabian Sea on the west and the Western Ghats on the east. On the north is the district of Tirunelveli and on the south is the Indian Ocean. The northern part of the district shares the mountainous landscape of Kerala and the southern part is traditionally called the Nanjilnad, comprising more plain lands, resembling the neighbouring Tirunelveli district.

Kanniyakumari district has promising cultural heritage and religious legacy. There are the cultural and religious heritages on the location of Bhagavathi temple at Cape Comorin, Thanumalayaperumal temple at Suchindram, Nagaraja temple with Jain memories at Nagercoil, St Xavier's Church at Kottar and the Vaikundapathy at Swamithoppu, Bhagavath Amman temple at Mandaicode, Ancient Jain Temple at Chitharal, Ancient University Parthipapuram Salai at Munchirai. Kottar and Koolakkadai are commercial centres over the ages. The author of 'Periplus' visited this region in 78 A.D.¹ The district always plays a vital role in the religious, social, cultural and economic life of the people.

The credit for the architectural beauty of the temples found in Kanniyakumari goes to these rulers. The city of Kanniyakumari have been around for thousands of years as it has been the city of culture, history, arts, economy and the hub of civilization for centuries. Kanniyakumari (Cape Comorin) represents all the beautiful things that India has to offer the world. In Kanniyakumari district many temples, churches, religious pillars and statues are situated. It is a place of mixed culture that is reflected in the arts, buildings and even in the food.

The district had produced many army Chiefs, philosophers, thinkers, scientists, poets, novelists, and grammarians of ancient and modern times. There was no disparity; casteless, undivided people as pure as the nature had begotten them, were then living here during the earliest centuries. But, it is a historical fact that we see in the later periods that this place is being subjected for various cultural influence under the Cheras, Cholas and the Pandyan, the British, and others producing diverse types of cultural societies.²

Together they ruled over this land with a unique culture and language, contributing to the growth of some of the oldest extant literature in the world.

After the middle or later part of the Sangam period, we find the place is very much nurtured by the great cultures of Buddhism and Jainism, which are traceable from many of the local historical sites.³ The place with a history of a number of royal political power play and patronage, The district is worth visiting to explore the indigenous culture and architecture of the ages. Due to bounties of wealth, there have been consistent clashes and conspiracies among dynasties throughout historical ages. The 9th century was testimony to the clashes among the Chola, Pandya and Cherra dynasty over the conquering of the city. In 1125 A.D. the Venad kingdom took over Kanniyakumari district from the Cherras. During the reign of the kingdom of Travancore from 1550-1750 A.D. the city flourished and it holds some outstanding specimens of art and culture. In this context, it is possible to bring in to light the unique nature of the famous Shiva temples of Kanniyakumari district.⁴ While singing the glory of our motherland, the national poet Subramania Bharathi says: All the nations in the world it is Bharat that nurtured the highest culture and civilization. The poet says that kumari is a land of temples which elevate the people to spiritual dignity.

The temples of Hindu Gods and Goddesses are enshrined with the real pillars and protect forts of Hinduism. They have the greatest influence in strengthening the spiritual and cultural aspects of the district. Ancestors have sacrificed their lives for the construction and maintenance of these temples. Sculptures, music, dance, mantras and every aspect of kumari culture were dedicated to God in temples. Kumari temples are thus the standing monuments of the everlasting spiritual and cultural heritage.

Literature

Sangam literature is the most valuable and copious source for the study of Sangam age. They consisted, of Tolkappiyam, a Tamil grammar work, Eight Anthologies (Ettuttogai), the ten poems (Padinen Kill Kanakku), the twin epics, Silappadikaram and Manimekalai and other poems like Tagadur Yattirai and Bharatam of Perumdevanar. At the end of each poem, the name of its author and the occasion of its composition are given. The Sangam works dealt, with the Aham and Puram life of the people. To collect various information regarding politics, society, religion and economy of the Sagam period, these works are useful. The Sangam works were secular in character.

The non-Tamil sources did not supply enough information of ancient Tamil history. The epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata provide ideas about the life of Tamil people. Ramayana of Valmiki gives

information about the pearls and gems in the Pandyan Kingdom. Tamil literature of the classical period is known, as the Sangam literature, which is the most copious and valuable source for the study of the Sangam age. The poets that lived in the Sangam age composed a number of Tamil works. These Tamil works are classified into Ettutogai, Pattuppattu and Padinenkikanakku. The twin epics Silappadikaram and Manimekalai belonged to this age. Kural, is also included in the list of Sangam works. The most ancient available Tamil work is Tolkappiyam of Tolkappiyar. Scholars believe that the work belonged to the second Sangam period. Tolkappiyam, the greatest grammatical, work on Tamil, derived its title from the name of its author Tolkappiyar. Though it is a grammar work, it also mentions the conduct of love and war and some traditional concepts of sociology. It is generally held that Tolkappiyar was one of the disciples of Agastya, a mythical figure in Tamil literature.

Art and architecture

The word 'Art' is derived from the Latin word 'Ars' meant 'skill'. Collin's Encyclopedia defines art as an expression of a word of thought and feeling trying to portray relationship between God and man. Art can also be defined as "the use of skill and imagination in the creation of aesthetic objects, environments or experiences that can be shared with others".⁵ Hence Art is well defined as the production or expression of what is beautiful, appealing or more than significant. It is a universal language which people of all nations can understand. Each nation has its own mode of expression of its art, i.e., architecture, sculpture, painting, music and dance though the culture of each nation is different.

Many efforts have been made to express in a few words the precise meaning of architecture and its relation to human experience. Lethaby has approached the subject the most neatly in stating that "Architecture is the matrix of civilization". To such a definition it may be added that view historically architecture remains as the principal visible and material record, through the ages, of man's intellectual evolution.⁵

Art can be divided into two main categories i.e., Visual arts and Graphic arts. Visual Arts deal with architecture, sculpture, painting, dance and music. The most imposing among visual arts, architecture, had developed into two forms i.e., secular and religious. The survival rate of secular specimens through the ages is slender compared to the religious multi differential buildings. Graphic Arts comprise wood cutting engraving bone and ivory carving, floral and animal motifs over ceramics etc. It is no exception to this universal phenomenon.

One can find different types of art and architecture in the temples of Kanniyakumari District. The architectural beauty of this beach land is greatly inspired by religions, like Islam, Christianity and Jainism.

Similarly, in Kanniyakumari district the word koil denotes Suchindrum. The holy place Suchindrum is considered as the spiritual metropolis. In this temple Dakshinamurthy is given pride of place. But in Suchindrum temple, Lord Dakshinamurthy the God of Wisdom occupies the first place.⁷ The 123 inscriptions of the place narrate a lot about its evolution, distinctiveness and development. The presiding deity of this temple is Sthanumalayan (Thanu-Shiva, Mal-Vishnu, Ayan - Brahma). The main temple houses all the Godheads of Hindu Pantheon. The temple is a store house of varied types of sculptures. The well-polished figures of Garudalwar, King Thirumalai Nayak, the musical pillars, the two Travancore Kings' Statues, the Vasanthamandapa, the Yalis,⁸ the sculptures on the base of the Gopura are all very fine pieces of art.

Architecturally we find several types of temples in Kanniyakumari district. The temple of Nagaraja at Nagercoil which unifies the four streams of Indian religion Saivism, Vaishnavism, century A.D. The melodies sound produced by the musical pillars of Suchindrum temple, the religious Jainism and Buddhism is a fine example of religious integration. The temple also serves as an arena of sports. The Nagaraja temple of Chera style, Cholarajakoil of Chola style and the Suchindrum temple of Pandya style clearly show the impact of Chera, Chola and Pandya rule in this Kanniyakumari district. This district is having temples of great antiquity and cultural importance. Temples also functioned as a source of history. Educational institutions were also run by the temples like Parthipapuram Salai. It is one of the most ancient and important Jain temple. It has been referred in the early literature of Travancore.

The Kanniyakumari Temple architecture is a marvel in itself. Built in Dravidian style of temple architecture this temple is known for intricate carvings that adorn both the stone temple walls and the black stone temple pillars. The temple has a small cupola that is surrounding by couple of smaller couple. The main entrance of the temple faces east. This door is opened only five times during the Hindu calendar year. The main entry point of the temple is the northern gate. There are other shrines dedicated to Vijaysundari and Balasundari the playmates of the Goddess. There are 11 theertheams associated with this temple. The confluence of the seas and the southern tip of the subcontinent is still revered has been revered for centuries. The sanctum sanctorum is distinguished by the three separate corridors and the main Navaratri Mandapam. There is also a huge Kodistambham or flagpost that is a feature of this temple. The Blackstone

image of Kumari Amman adorn with an enchanting garland is the highlight of the Amman koil. Especially it is belived that the noses ring that could be visible from furlongs away, so much so that many ships crashed to the shore. This idol is said to be installed by Parmasura and is made of blue stone. The shrines of Vinayagar and Thaigasundry are also housed within the temple.

The Ghanathiswamy temple is a 1000 year old temple and is said to have been built by the King Raja Raja Chola. The architectural style of the Cholas is quite apparent in this temple. It is located near Railway Station. There are 16 cultural inscriptions found in this temple that date back to the years 1038 A.D., 1044 A.D., 1045 A.D.

Food

Rice is the staple food of the people, although for some people in the hilly areas, tapioca is the main food.⁹ Though there are some vegetarians among the people, majority of the people use agro, meat and fish products. Fish caught in the seas around the district during the night or early morning hours reach the markets of the interior towns and villages early in the morning. The food is spicy, and the people in the district tend to use more grated coconut in their curries and food preparations, like neighboring state, Kerala.¹⁰

Flora and Fauna

The flora and fauna of Kanniyakumari district are vast and diverse. Animals on the hills of the district include Bengal tiger, elephant, sambar deer, porcupines, hedgehogs and wild boar, while pied kingfisher, painted stork and cranes are commonly found both in the water bodies and wetlands. Reptiles include monitor lizards, pythons, blood viper and other snakes.¹¹ In Mahendragiri hills, one can find elephant, tiger, leopards and deer. Leopard cubs often stray onto the highway near the hills and are sometimes run over by motorists.¹² In the wetlands, one can see several varieties of storks and migratory birds during specific seasons. Trout and other varieties of several species of storks and migratory birds during specific seasons are seen in the district.

Kanniyakumari district is also noted for its medicinal plants and herbs. Maruthuvamalai is one of the famous medicinal plant areas of the district. The district also has a huge forest cover, accommodating a wide variety of plants, trees, and shrubs.¹³ Commercial varieties include various kinds of plantain, jackfruit, mango and coconut. In addition to fruits, a variety of flowers like roses and jasmine are also

produced in and around Thovalai region. Common garden varieties in the district include crotons, lilies, and dahlias.

Festivals

Festivals are held in all the district in connection with various celebrations in the temples, mosques and churches. The Ratholsav (Chariot fest) at Suchindram attracts huge crowd in the month of January. Pongal and Deepavali are also occasions for festivity and rejoicing among the Hindu Communities. Muslims in all the district observe Muharram and Ramzan. Christmas is an important festival for the Christians. In the St. Xavier's Church at Kottar, an annual festival in the month of December is usually celebrated on a grand scale and attracts Catholics from all over South India. They are played during the time of festivals in temples, and also different celebrations.

Festivals are the symbols of the way of life and culture of a country. Most of the festivals have a religious and scientific background for their celebration. They reveal the customs and the civilization of the people. In Hindu religion, Festivals have been invested with great significance. They are prescribed to enable a person to pursue his religious life and to concentrate on God on these occasions. Religious festivals especially, the temple festivals have more inspiring effects. Man believes that there is a super power presiding over his destiny and supervising all his functions Though invisible, his presence is felt by man through the manifestations of nature, and he wants to build a rapport with him through many methods such as prayers, rituals, and festivals Some of the folk-art forms particular and most common in the district are listed below:

Many folk arts are popular in Kanyakumari district. They play an important role in essaying the culture of their rich tradition.¹⁴ Some of the popular folk art forms of the district comprise of Kalia, kathakali, Bow Song, Karagam Dance, and Kalari. They are exhibited during the time of festivals in temples.

Bow Song (Villu Pattu) is an ancient form of musical, a story-telling art of southern Tamil Nadu. Bow, the age-old weapon of warriors paradoxically lends itself to be used as a primary musical instrument for the Villu Pattu artists. There are Udukku, Kudam, and Thala - Kattai etc as supplementary instrument in their performances. Udukku mentioned in the ancient Tamil literature as Thudi, is a small drum with a slender middle portion which is held in the left hand and played with the right hand. This may be seen in the pictures and statues of Lord Nataraja, - the cosmic Dancer, adorning his left hand. Sometimes the Villu

Pattu team divides itself into two groups, each trying to prove opposite view points of a subject by conducting the programme by exchange of questions and answers. This is called Lavani Pattu. The songs used by the Villu-Pattu artists are mostly traditional folk-songs. In the present days, folk art is regarded as most ethnic one and this is perfectly transmitted by bow song.

Thiruvathirai Kali occupies the pride of place among the folk dances. It resembles Kummi and is played especially during Onam festival. Young girls perform this art form mostly 8 to 10 in number. They perform in circles and sing in chorus.

Kalial is a folk dance done by group of men or boys in the country side. A group leader sings song and keeps time with cymbals. The players stand in a circle holding sticks and dance around a lighted lamp repeating the songs sung by the leader. They turn, twist, lean forward and backward and move around singing to the tune. At the beginning the steps are elaborate and at times, they are also very quick. When invited to perform in a function, the players generally begin the dance with an invocation for heavenly aid and conclude the dance with a torch - dance using lighted torches. This folk dance exhibits the artistic life of the country side. This dance is very refreshing to perform as well as to enjoy.

Kathakali is a unique form of dance-drama, which has its origin in Travancore. Kathakali is a relatively recent (fifteenth or sixteenth century) development of earlier dances, which arose out of religious expression through symbolical action. In this art-form, the characters express their ideas not by words, but by significant gestures. The conversations between the characters, as well as the narrative portion of the story, invariably in verse, are recited by the singer to the accompaniment of musical instruments. The gestures by the actors on stage are enactments of the lyrics. The costume and make-up of the actor are also important aspects in Kathakali. The headgears are made of light-weight wood and are decorated with pieces of mirror, spangles, and coloured stones. Usually, a Kathakali performance extends from eight to ten hours. With the advent of cinema, the popularity of this art has declined. It is now performed in the district twice a year during the time of festivals.

Karagam Dance is a kind of dance common in the country side. It is played by both men and women during the time of festivals and marriages. Kalari also known as Adimurai in Kanniyakumari district is an ancient martial art, still preserved in the villages of this district and also in Kerala.¹⁵ A tradition believed to have been founded by Parasurama is known Vadakkan Kalari: and another credited to Agasthiar is called as which emphasis is on striking at vital points of the body and not on weapons, even

though sword, knife, Urumi (rolling sword), Mankombu (horns of a deer), Kandakkodali, (a kind of axe), mazhu (a kind of axe) etc., are also used.

People and culture

The people are the main human resource of the district. Their culture, religion, aptitude, habits, beliefs, talents etc. have a bearing on how the district presents itself to others. Tamil and Malayalam are the main languages of this district for a long time. Hindus and Christians form a sizeable percentage of the population of the district and there are a number of Muslims dominated belts in the district. The caste system in the Society has weakened to a great extent especially after independence because of growth of education and improvements in transport and communication. Some of the communities in the district are Nadars, Nanjilnadu Vellalars, Paravas, Mukthavas, Vilakki Thalanayar, Kammalar or Asari, Nairs, Chackarevars, Kerala Mudalis etc. Rice is the staple food of the rich and poor alike in the district. Some among the poorer section also use tapioca. Beverages like tea and coffee are widely spread even in to the rural area of the district.

Some organizations like Joint Action and Motivation-Awareness (JAMA) and Historical Research and Publication Trust work for the conservation and protection of cultural heritage sites of Kanyakumari district. They studied the most of the sites' management and ancient heritage policies for promoting human values over a span of time. They prove that the Kanyakumari sites are to be an outstanding examples of a type of buildings, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates a significant stage in human history. Such examples are common all over Kanyakumari district. The destruction of such buildings and temples is the nemesis of Kanyakumari's architectural heritage.

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