

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF SRI ADHI RETHINESWARAR TEMPLE - A STUDY

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Temples are the abode of wisdom and are therefore, worthy places of worship. A large number of temples, mosques, churches in India, have ancient style of Architecture. Temple is a place use for public worship most of the temples are situated at the heart of the town or city and villages.

History of Thiruvadana

Thiruvadana taluk -population 2,418 is the headquarters of the taluk of that name. It is situated on the road from Madurai to Thondi at the 60th mile from Madurai. The nearest railway station is Devakottai Road which is about 22 miles. It is also 32 miles east of Sivaganga and is connected by road to Madurai, Devakkottai and Ramanathapuram, from the sea it is 8 miles westwards.

Thiruvadana goes by the following twelve names in puranas

Parijathavanam, Vannivanam, Kurukkathyvanam, Vilvavanam, Muthipuram, Adirathneswaram, Adana, Markandeyapuram, Agastheeswamm, Padumapuram, Gomutheswaram and Vijayeswaram.

The sun god once made a Lingam from a sapphire and worshipped it. Hence the place was called Adhi Rethineswaram and the moolavar as Adhi Rethineswarar. The sthalapuram of the place has it that a son of *Varuna* (God of Water) was cursed to be born in the form of an elephant with the head of a sheep.

This illustrates the name of Thiruvadana. The word Thiruvadana is a comparison of three Tamil means viz. (*Tiru + Adu + Anai*) *Thiru* means 'beautiful', *Adu* means 'sheep' and *Anai* means 'elephant' it may also connote 'victorious elephant.'¹

It is said that saint *Durvasa* used to do tapas for 12 years at a stretch and take meals at the end of it. Once the son of Varunas who happened to come that way, ate the food intended for the saint. The saint on waking up from tapas found that this food has been eaten by the son of Varuna. The saint therefore cursed him to be born in the form of an elephant with a need of a sleep. The interpretation is that he may be in perpetual desire for food with the huge stomach of an elephant. Served by a disproportionately small, intend that of the mouth of a sheep. To make amends the son of Varuna in the latter form worshipped the lingam and obtained salvation in the latter. From worshipped the Lingam and obtained salvation in the latter. Form worshipped the Lingam and obtained salvation resuming his original form. It is after this the Lingam was named Ajagajeswarar. It is also called as Adanainathar, Adhi Rethineswarar and Rethinanathar. The amman deity is known as Anbayiammai, Saint Thirugnana Sambandar has visited this temple and has sung Tamil songs in praise of the place.²

With a majestic 150 feet gopuram signaling welcome to the devotees, this old sculptured Siva temple was founded by Sundara Pandya and Kulasekara Pandya, during 300 A.D. the temple is 422 feet long and 252 feet broad and is surrounded by a wall. Koothan Sethupathi who ruled over Ramanathapuram during 1621-1635 made additional endowments to Thiruvadana temple Sadika Thevar who was in Ramanathapuram during 1605 to 1621 made grants to the temple. Hiranya Garbhayaji Sethupathi has also made grants to this temple and has recorded it in two copper plate sasanams.³

It is one of the 14 great Siva temples of Pandiyas. The fourteen temples are:

Madurai, Thirupuravayil, Thircoutrallam, Thiru Aappanurk Thirvedagam, Thirunelveli, Rameswaram, Thiruvadanaï, Thiruparankundram, Thiruchuli, Kalayarkoil, Tiruppattur , Piranmalai and Thiruppuvanam.

The temple was renovated by Chettiars family of Devakottai in the year 1889 at a cost of Rs. 12 lakhs, *kumbabisegam* was celebrated in the year 1953. The two chief festivals are *Vaikasi Visaham* (10 days in April) and *Audi Pooram* (15 days in July).

Thiruvadanaï is administrated by a panchayat it being the headquarters of the taluk. There is a taluk office with a tahsildar. It is also the headquarters of the panchayat union. There is one post office cum telegraph office. The place is connected by telephone.

Thiruvadanaï, which is popularly known as '*Ajagajapuram*' in Sanskrit, is the ninth among the fourteen sacred Sivasthalams in Pandyanad. The temple is said to have been built by Pandya kings. It was well maintained by the Nayak kings of Maduri. The inscriptions in the temple throw light on its antiquity. This reputed shrine which is under the patronage of the Raja of Ramanathapuram has been visited by the great saivite saint Thirugnanasambandar who has composed a sacred *padhigam* in praise of this *sthalam*. Sri Arunagirinathar has also glorified this *sthalam* in his famous *Thiruppugazh*.⁴

The presiding deity Sri Adhi Rethineswarar is a *suyambu* Lingam here. His divine consort is known as Sri Snegavalliambal. Legend has it that once sage *Birigu* who went to sage *Durvasa* forgot to pay homage to him. This enraged the sage who cursed him to become *Ajagajam* an animal with the head of a goat (*Ajam* in Sanskrit and *Adu* in Tamil) and the body of an elephant (*Gaja* in Sanskrit and *anai* in Tamil). Thus reduced, *Birigu* found it difficult to sustain his huge body with the food taken through the small goat's mouth. He worshipped the lord here, got rid of his sin and regained his original form. The presiding deity is therefore, called Thiru Adanainathar or Ajagojeswarar. The place also came to be known as Thiruvadana and Ajagajapuram.⁵

The district of Ramanathapuram is part of the ancient kingdom of Pandyas. It consists of several sacred shrines which show a high standard of art architecture and sculpture of the part. Two great poligars of local chieftains namely the Sethupathy of Ramanathapuram and the Raja of Sivaganga, who became independent. In the early days of eighteenth century the Nayaks had done great service to the cause of Hindu religion by undertaking construction, renovation and administration of temples. A number of inscriptions are found in the district which reveals the great antiquity of temple.⁶

The prince varuni cursed by the saint came to this temple and take both in the holy tank in front of the temple and attained his original human status. Hence *theertham* (tank) in front of temple is known as *Varuna theertham* named after him. Further Lord Sun also came and worshipped at the temple. The Tamil version of Aadhi means sun hence the presiding deity named as Sri Adhi Rethineswarar. This famous temple was also visited by great *mahans* and other

saints.⁷ *Thevaram* praising the deity that will cure all illness of the human beings. The other famous saint Sri. Arunagirinathar have also sung two songs in Thirupugazh.

The temple which covers an area of about 10 acres has a gigantic 139 feet high *rajagopuram* with nine tiers and presents an inspiring view.⁸ The *gopuram* is a specimen of Dravidian art, it was recently renovated. It has two *prakarams* and two sanctum sanctorum, a part from a beautiful *mandapam* in front of the Swamy Sannathi called Chockuttanchar mandapam which consists of about 291 artistically carved granite pillars. This temple stands as testimony to the glory of Temple culture of Tamilnadu.

END NOTES

1. **Census of India**, 1961, Vol. IX, Temples of Madras State, Madurai & Ramanathapuram, p. 11
2. Narayana Group, K.C., Deputy Superintendent of Census Operations, Madras-Pondicherry, p.270.
3. Saminatha Thesigar, **Sthalapuramam**, Published by Ramanathapuram Smasthanam & Devasthanam, Ramanathapuram, p.23.
4. Narayanaswamy, V., & Balasubramaniam, P., **The 108 Thivya Desa Shrines**, Varagi Printers, 1996, pp.26-30.
5. Interview with Mr.Kanna, Adhi Rethineswarar Temple, dated 25.4.2018.
6. **Ibid.**
7. Balasubramiam, S.R., **Early Chola Art**, Bombay, 1996, p.38.
8. **Ibid.**, p.69.