

SIX HOLY ABODES OF LORD MURUGA - A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Dr. K. APPADURAI,
Assistant Professor in History,
Department of History,
Thiru Kolanjiappar Government Arts College
Vriddhachalam – 606 001.

The most famous temple dedicated to **Lord Subramania** is at **Palani** in the Dindigal district of Tamil Nadu. It is a popular place of pilgrimage in South India and one of the *Arupadai Veedus* (six most sacred places) of **Lord Muruga**. This place is also called **Tiruvavinangudi**¹ in the epics, probably from the fact that a herd of cows collected there. At an elevation of about 450 metres on **Sivagiri hills** this ancient temple of Muruga is located and one can reach the temple by a flight of 659 steps. The idol is composed of *Navapashana*² (nine different kinds of poisons) blended together in certain rare proportions, the resultant substance resembling wax. The mixing of the nine poisons was done by **Sage Bogar**. Some say that the constituent of the image is an amalgam of nine minerals. The body of the deity is not smooth and seems to have been either scraped out or corroded by age. The posture is a standing one with a stout stick in the right hand that is called **Dandam**³ and therefore the deity is called **Dandayudhapani** (having stick as weapon in his hand). At the neck, there are **Rudraksha beads** in the form of a garland. Here **Lord Muruga** is a *Sadhu* (ascetic) who has renounced all worldly connections.

There are innumerable mandapas on the steps leading to the top of the hill where the temple is situated. By its side, at a distance of a stone's throw, other hill is there, originally brought in **Kavadi** by **Idumban**, and it is called *Idumban Malai*.⁴ The figure of Idumban here is seen at the foot of Muruga as securing His grace. The *Sthala virutsham* is the **Kadamba tree** (*Eugenia racemosa*), the fragrant flower of which is a favourite of Lord Muruga and the trees form an avenue on the **southern Giri Veethi** with a *Nandavana*.⁵ A small but well constructed tank - **Saravana Poigai** is the Teertha of this hill temple and it is located close by. **Krittika Nakshatram** is the most propitious time for worshipping **Lord Muruga**. It is said that as many as 700 abhishekams are done in Krittika days and hundreds daily.⁶ It is an empirical truth that the oblations made to **Dandayudhapani** do not get putrefied for months and years when preserved, as it

had the holy touch of the body of the Lord. Only **Panchamirtam**⁷ made of fruits and honey, etc. is offered in the form of purificatory ablution over the body.

The temple on the top of the hill is built on a vast area with a spacious enclosure, mandapa and 'sanctum sanctorum'. The images of Subramanya are sculptured in different ways. Sometimes he is shown with six faces and sometimes only one. He is often represented as Kumara of great beauty. He is depicted in 'Padmasana' on a peacock. Along with peacock, a cock is also often associated with Him. The main festivals are **Tai Poosam** (January) **Panguni Uttaram** (April) **Agni Nakshatram** (May) **Visakam** (June) **Skanda Shashti** (November), besides other periodical and monthly festivals of the Saivite calender.⁸ The temple car is dragged thrice in the year in **Vaikasi** (June) **Thai** (January) and **Panguni** (April) festivals. Also the **Silver Ratha** is drawn round the town temple in Thai and around the hill in Panguni. The **Panguni Uttaram** celebration of ten days duration in April is the most crowded and the chief festival of the year. The deity is not confined to religious minded Hindus. Muslims call the deity as **Palani Baba** and worship the deity at the rear side of the temple. Devotees on row carry miniature **Kavadis** which are available on hire locally, on their shoulders and climb up all the 659 steps to the sanctum sanctorum to propitiate Him. This is the daily sight in the temple.

PALAMUDIR SOLAI (Solaimalai) TEMPLE

Palamudir Solai, one of the holy abodes of Lord Muruga is situated 18 kilometres away from Madurai, on the Alagar hills.⁹ Here Lord Muruga is seated on a peacock with his two consorts - **Valli** and **Deivayanai**. *Noobura Gangai* is the holy teertham which is making water supply not only to **Palamudir Solai** but also to **Alagarkoil**.¹⁰ The Palamudir Solai temple administration is operating bus services from Alagarkoil to the mountain top. Hundreds of devotees are reaching the temple by foot. The temple is situated in the midst of a forest. **Skanda Shashti**¹¹ is celebrated with all pomp and show.

SWAMIMALAI MURUGAN TEMPLE

Thiruveragam, popularly known as **Swamimalai** is a small village situated about 10 km. west of Kumbakonam town in the Thanjavur District of Tamil Nadu.¹² Situated north of the two rivers **Arasaru** and **Cauvery**, this compact village of **Swamimalai** is quite famous for the temple of Sri Muruga. It has many names as **Gurumalai**, **Dhatrigiri** and **Eragam**. Unlike the other temples for Muruga, there is no natural hill here although the name Swamimalai suggests the presence of a hill. Yet, the temple and its precincts are not bereft of their natural splendour and beauty as evident from the name '**Thiruveragam**' means in Tamil, a 'place of beauty'.¹³

The temple at **Swamimalai** is built on an artificial hill which is only 20 metres in height from the ground level and it consists of two portions, one relating to the ground floor and the other to the top of the hillock. It has three towers, one on the eastern direction, one on the west and the third one on the south. The southern tower is the **Rajagopura**,¹⁴ biggest and consists of five storeys, carrying rich sculptural wealth. The temple has three *prakarams* (enclosures) including the one around the presiding deity, **Swaminatha**, at the top of the hill. The enclosures are connected to the ground floor by a flight of steps, sixty in number, each step symbolically representing one Tamil year.

Mythologically, this place is looked upon with great religious significance as it is the fourth abode among the six important places where Lord Muruga is the presiding deity, although under different names. Apart from this, it is here that Lord Muruga expounded the significance of "**Pranava Manthiram**" (OM) to His father **Siva**.¹⁵ Hence the presiding deity of this temple is known as '**Swaminatha**'. The rare '*Upadesham*' (advise) by the son to his father is beautifully depicted in one of the sculptures. Although this great temple is an ancient one, only the main temple is an old architectural piece and the rest are all recent innovations and additions. Apart from this, the various '*Theerthams*' of this place such as *Vajra Theertham*, *Kumara Tharai*, *Saravana Theertham* and *Nethra Pushkarini*, which are noted for their miraculous cures.¹⁶

Of the many festivals celebrated in this temple, **Valli Kalyana festival** which takes place in the month of April is the most popular. During this festival, the presiding deity decorated as a hunter is taken to **Sri Swetha Vinayagar temple** situated a little away from the temple. There the Goddess **Valli** is taken as captive and brought to Swamimalai temple where marriage is performed to **Muruga** with **Valli**.¹⁷ This festival attracts a huge crowd of devotees and pilgrims.

TIRUCHENDUR MURUGAN TEMPLE

Tiruchendur temple is a celebrated sea-shore temple of Lord Muruga, which is situated in the Tiruchendur taluk of Tuticorin District.¹⁸ The distance from Madras is about 650 km. The temple is on the shore of the **Gulf of Mannar**. The surging cool tides of the sea wash the foot of the temple. Before entering the temple, pilgrims either wash their feet or take a bath in the sea. The bathing ghat contains *nine Teerthams* according to the Sthalapuranam.¹⁹ About 200 yards south of this temple, at the sea-

shore, there is a rare natural phenomenon. It is the **Nazhi Kinaru** (well) 14 sq.feet in area and with a flight of 34 steps. Inside this well, there is another small well, one square feet in extent and seven feet deep. The water in the small well is crystal clear and sweet to taste²⁰ whereas that in the bigger well is highly sulphurous in smell and brackish.

The war between **Surapadma** and **Lord Muruga** and the success of the latter in the war is celebrated every year at **Tiruchendur** on the days of **Skanda Shashti** ie., the sixth day of the waxing moon in Aippasi (October – November). These six days are considered to be very sacred in the Hindu religious calendar.²¹ Originally the temple was of a very modest construction, but during the course of about 1000 years, many additions and alterations were made by the **Pandyas**, the **Cheras**, the chieftains and the wealthy people of this locality, as a result of which the present gigantic structure has grown up. **Tiruchendur** means a sacred and prosperous town of victory. The temple was originally constructed on the sand-stone reefs of the beach, but due to corrosion by the sea, the stone began to disintegrate.

A noble *Sannyasi*, **Mouna Swami** took up the renovation work and it was followed up by two others in succession for 72 years and the noble edifice of three prakarams was constructed in black granite stone.²²

The Gopuram is on the west (instead of being in the east as usual because of the sea) and is a gigantic structure of nine storeys with a height of 137 feet, commanding a good view of the surrounding area. Historical evidences state that the Gopuram was constructed roughly 300 years ago by **Desikamurtiswami**, the then head of the **Tiruvavaduturai Mutt**.²³ Scenes depicted on the Gopuram are from the life of **Saint Manikkavasakar**. In the ninth storey, a huge bell was fixed by **Mr. Eden**, the then Collector of Tinnevely (1832-1839). The ringing of the bell indicated the hours of the day. There is a tradition that when this bell rang for worship at mid-day, the call was relayed by a series of bells on mandapas where drummers were stationed along the route as far as the residence of **Vira Pandya Kattabomma Nayak**, the Poligar of **Panjalamkuruchi**.²⁴ At this signal, Kattabommon's thoughts turned to God and he took his mid-day meal only after the worship at the temple was over.²³ Similarly, there is another tradition that about 1648 A.D. a race of sea-faring men, probably the **Dutch**, raided the temple and carried away the Panchaloga idol of **Shanmuga**, thinking it to be of solid gold. They tried to melt it, but failed. At this juncture, a storm arose

foreboding disaster to them. So, out of fear, they threw the image overboard. When this news spread in the locality, all the devotees were immersed in grief.

A local agent of the Nayak ruler at Tinnevely named **Vadamalaiyappa Pillai**²⁵ who was a great devotee of Lord Subramania ordered the making of another **Panchaloga** idol. When the duplicate was ready and on its way to Tiruchendur, **Vadamalaiyappa Pillai** had a dream and acting on the advise conveyed to him, he went to the sea and took out the original idol from the spot where he saw a lemon on the waters and a Garuda hovering over it. The idol was reinstalled in the temple in the year 1653 A.D.²⁶ The duplicate idol was then consecrated in the shrine of **Tirupiranteeswarar**, east of **Palayamcottai**.

About 200 ft. north of the temple, there is **Valli's cave**,²⁷ cut inside the natural sand-stone rock facing east towards the sea. There are two images, one dedicated to **Valli** and another to **Dattatreya**. Behind the frontal cave, there is a circular passage leading to another cave inside, where there is a shrine of Valli kept in a niche. The cave overlooks the sea and is an ideal spot for meditation. There are three prakaras (circular corridors) round the temple and there are several shrines for other Gods. The most interesting of them is the image of Vishnu installed in a hollow of the rock. Here **Venkatesaperumal** is seen in a standing posture and facing the east. The presence of Vishnu's shrine with all his devotees inside a Siva temple is a common feature in South India, demonstrating the catholicity of the Hindu religion.²⁸

The sanctum sanctorum is of **Lord Subramanya** facing east in the form of a young and beautiful ascetic, rapt in contemplative worship of Siva. He holds in one hand a rosary of beads and in the other, flowers to be offered to Siva. By His side, there is another sanctum for **Arumuga** or **Shunmuga** facing south. A number of festivals are celebrated almost throughout the year and therefore Tiruchendur has become a great pilgrim centre.²⁹

TIRUPPARANKUNTRAM MURUGAN TEMPLE

Tirupparankuntram temple is situated almost on the outskirts, only 7 km. away from **Madurai**.³⁰ It has been a place of pilgrimage right through the centuries and even

today, pilgrims throng to the shrine of **Muruga** in their multitude, but hardly one of these devout souls pay attention to the beauty of the temple or the construction of the sanctum. From the beautiful **Asthana mandapa** on the main front facing the street, one climbs through two higher mandapas to the sanctum of Muruga. Actually, the shrine is a large rectangular chamber excavated into the huge main rock. This rock-cut Pandya sanctum follows the usual plan of many such edifices with two chambers on either side and reliefs on the facing wall.³¹ In the chamber on the west is a Linga with the characteristic **Somaskanda panel** on the back wall as in many early Pallava shrines.

The entrance has early type cubical pillars with lotus medallions and angular bevel corbels with roll ornament, so characteristic of the Pandya caves.³² There are two **Dwarapalakas** at the main entrance and two more each on either side of the Linga and Vishnu shrine chambers. Many pilgrims and tourists who visit **Tirupparankuntam** do not seem to know of the existence of subsidiary cave shrines excavated in the rock, which are as interesting and one may even appear, the most valuable to the students of Archaeology.³³ The Devi who is seated on a throne in the centre is described as **Annapoorna**. Adjoining this is another chamber on the east side, known as the **Tulasi Arai**, a room used for storing the pooja flowers.

Circumventing the rock, one can come across on its southern side another rock-cut cave with more sculptures in relief. This is locally called the '**Umaiyanda Koil**'. The rock-cut with its cubical but worn out pillars is a very early one though the sculptures within it and on the rock surface outside appear to later executions.

TIRUTTANI MURUGAN TEMPLE

Tiruttani with the famous temple dedicated to **Lord Muruga** is situated 70 km. away from **Chennai**, on the way to **Tirupathi** on the Chennai – Bombay Railway route.³⁴ The temple is situated on a small hill, which is reached over a flight of 365 masonry steps. It is one among the six famous abodes of Lord Subrahmanya. It is considered to be the sacred place because Lord Subrahmanya resides in blissful repose here, after his marriage with Valli.³⁵ The mission of Subrahmanya's incarnation was fulfilled when he vanquished the demon **Surapadman** and his hordes at **Tiruchendur**. The happy reunion with Valli brought peace to his mind. The agitated physical condition was relaxed, peace and tranquillity prevailed at his new abode **Tiruttani**.

Tiruttani is a great pilgrim centre. There are about 150 choultries and rest houses in the holy place. The temple is built in Dravidian style of architecture.³⁶ Distribution of food to the poor is considered very meritorious in this sacred shrine and pilgrims

make it a point to feed the hungry and the destitute in numbers, according to their might. **Tiruttani** is also known by many other names.³⁷ As Lord Siva, who is the origin of the world (*Moolam*) worshipped Lord Subrahmanya here, it is called **Mooladri**. Lord Siva learned **Pranava Mantra** here from Subrahmanya; so it is called **Pranavadanangaram**. As Lord Indra got boons from Subrahmanya at this sacred place, it is called **Indranagari**.

END NOTES

1. Somalay, **Palani The Hill Temple of Muruga**, (Palani : The Temple Publications, 1975), pp. 11-12.
2. **Navapashana** - a herbal combination of Nine Medicines. They are (i) Sadulingam (ii) Manosilai (iii) Kantham (iv) Kendhi (v) Rasa Karpuram (vi) Vellai Pashanam (vii) Gowri Pashanam (viii) Thotti Pashanam (ix) Aritharam.
3. **Dandam** means the holy slick held by the Saints - Seers - Sages.
4. Zvelebil Kamil, **The smile of Muruga : On Tamil Literature of South India**, (Leiden : E.J. Brill Publications, 1973), pp. 77-82.
5. **Palani Stalapuranam** (Tamil), (Palani : Temple Publications, 2000), pp. 1-3.
6. **Ibid.**, p.19.
7. Balasubramanya Kavirayar, **Palani Stalapuranam** (Tamil), (Madras : Vaidyanatha Press, 1924), pp. 12-14.
8. Asim Kumar Chatterjee, **The cult of Skand Karthikeya in Ancient India**, (Calcutta : Punthi Pustak, 1973), pp. 35-39.
9. **Solaimalai** - Divine Sport (Folder), (Chennai : Dept. of Tourism, 2003).
10. **Solaimalai Stalapuranam** (Tamil), (Madurai : Temple Publications, 2003), pp. 1-2.
11. J.M. Nallaswami Pillai, **The Light of Truth**, (Tirunelveli : TSSNPK Publications, 1912), pp. 12-14.
12. **Swamimalai** - The Sound of Om (Folder), (Chennai : Dept. of Tourism, 2003).
13. S.C. Bhatt (ed.), **The Encyclopaedic District Gazetteers of India Southern Zone**, (New Delhi : Gyan Publishing House, 1997), Vol. 2, p. 1014.
14. K. Sundaram, **Monumental Art and Architecture of India**, (Bombay : D.B. Taraporevala Sons Co. Pvt. Ltd., 1974), pp. 94-99.
15. C.P. Ramasamy Aiyar, **Fundamentals of Hindu Faith**, (Madras : University of Madras, 1959), pp. 15-19.
16. N. Subramaniam, **The Hindu Tripod and Other Essays**, (Madurai : Koodal Publishers, 1976), pp. 48-49.
17. Fred Clothey, "Pilgrimage Centres in the Tamil Cults of Muruga", Article in the **Journal of the American Academy of Religion** (1972), Vol. 40, pp. 79-95.
18. J.M. Somasundaram Pillai, **A Plan for Tiruchendur**, (Madras : Gordon & Co., 1946), pp. 2-6.
19. **Tiruchendur Stalapuranam** (Tamil), (Tiruchendur : Temple Publications, 2002), pp. 3-6.
20. J.M. Somasundaram Pillai, **Tiruchendur - The Sea-shore Temple of Subramaniam**, (Madras : Addison Press, 1966), pp. 15-19.
21. X.S. Thani Nayagam, **Tamil Culture and Civilization Readings : The Classical Period**, (New Delhi : Asia Publishing House, 1970), p. 185.

22. V.S. Chengalvaraya Pillai, **History of Tamil Prose and Literature**, (Tirunelveli : TSSNPK Publications, 1928), pp. 71-75.
23. Pakali Koothar, **Tiruchendur Pillai Tamil** (Tamil), (Madurai : BNC Brothers Publications, 1939), pp. 13-19.
24. N. Vanamamalai (ed.), **Kattabommon Kathai Padal** (Tamil), (Madras : New Century Book House, 1969), pp. 31-39.
25. Panchalamkuruchi **Azhivu Charithira Kummi** (Tamil Manuscript), (Madras : Manuscript Library), Verses 51 - 59.
26. T.S. Ganapathi Sastri, **Tiruchendur Murugan**, (Tiruchendur : Shunmugavilas Book Stall, 1995), pp. 16-17.
27. **Tiruchendur Stalapuranam** (Tamil), (Tiruchendur : Tirukoil Pathippagam, 1999), pp. 15-18.
28. P.C. Punnaivananatha Mudaliyar (ed.), **Tiruchendur Pillai Tamil**, (Madras : Kazhakam Publications, 1974), pp. 15-18.
29. Veerimalai Kavirayar, **Tiruchendur Stalapuranam** (Tamil), (Tiruchendur : Devasthanam Publications, 1963), PP. 11 - 14.
30. **Tiruchendur** (Folder), (Chennai : Dept. of Tourism, 2002).
31. Thirupparankundram where even the hard rock surrenders (Folder), (Chennai : Dept. of Tourism, 2003).
32. K.K. Pillay, **A Social History of the Tamils**, (Madras : University of Madras, 1975), pp. 335-336.
33. K.V. Raman, **Some Aspects of Pandya History in the Light of Recent Discoveries**, (Madras : University of Madras, 1959), pp. 71-72.
34. **Ibid.**, p.79.
35. R. Nagasamy (ed.), **Tiruthani and Velenjeri Copper Plates**, (Madras : Dept. of Archaeology, 1979), pp. 2-5.
36. **Tiruttani Stalapuranam** (Tamil), (Tiruttani : Temple Publications, 1999), pp. 1-5.
37. N.R. Murugavel, **Thiruthanigai Tala Vilakkam** (Tamil), (Madras : Pasker Press, 1977), pp. 2-7.