

THE ARCHITECTURAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE OF CHIDAMBARAM NATARAJA TEMPLE - A STUDY

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The celebrated Nataraja temple at **Chidambaram** or **Tillai** as it is otherwise called, of Cuddalore District in Tamil Nadu is too well known to all.¹ **Chidambaram**, known from time immemorial as '**Koyil**' (the temple) has also other names such as **Sitrambalam, Puliur, Chitrakoota, Perumbarapuliur, Pundareekapuram.**² From the early beginning of the origin of the Nataraja temple at Chidambaram, the most famed of five southern temples dedicated to **Siva**, represent Him as the deity of five elements – **Earth** (Kanchipuram) **Water** (Thiruvannaikkal), **Fire** (Tiruvannamalai), **Air** (Kalahasthi) and **Ether** (Chidambaram). At Chidambaram, **Siva** is represented as the element of **Ether** (Akasha).³ Chidambaram is the centre of the **Saivite cult**. The temple complex covers a vast area and is located in the centre of the city. The name is derived from the most important portion of the Nataraja temple, called '**Chit-Ambala**' meaning the '**atmosphere of wisdom**', or **Mystic Hall.**⁴ This concedes within itself the secret symbol of God. When a veil over a semi-circular doorway in the 'sanctum sanctorum' is parted, it reveals more 'ethereal space' - symbolic of Siva in His manifestation of the "**Formless Form**" in "**invisible presence**" - a profound indication of a solution to the mystery of life, which is explained in one word - "**Nothingness**".⁵

The temple is a perfect synthesis of two concepts - **Siva** as the **cosmic dancer** and **Siva** as "**Akasha Linga**" totally formless - "**Chit-Ambaram**" literally means the "**Ether of Knowledge**". To a general visitor, the Chidambaram temple today offers a veritable feast of rare art treasures.⁶ The towering '**Gopurams**' rising against the

tropical azure, the exquisitely carved pillars gleaming here and there, the bas-reliefs and other sculptured pieces lavished almost everywhere.⁷

The Nataraja temple at Chidambaram is the work of dedicated artists spread over a millennium. Surrounded by four towering 'gopurams', four enclosures under the golden roof of sanctum (*Ponnambalam*), Lord Siva dances with the whole cosmos as his theatre.⁸ The Nataraja temple has a powerful mythological support as the *Kailas* of the south, the abode of Siva on earth. The Lord is said to have been worshipped here by seers like **Patanjali**, **Adi Sankarar**, **Appar** and other Saivaites.⁹ Many structures in the temple which are mentioned in the epigraphical and literary records exist no longer.¹⁰ The scars of battles of the 18th century can still be seen in many parts of the temple. The English and the French armies used the temple as a fortress. **Hyder Ali** of Mysore also camped in the temple and stationed a garrison of 3000 soldiers inside the temple enclosure.¹¹ During that time, the idol of Nataraja was removed for safe custody to **Tiruvarur** temple and brought back only after several years.

Some part of the temple were renovated during the last part of the 19th century, by a devotee **Pachiappa Mudaliar** of **Kanchipuram**. **Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiyar**, and the *Nagarattar* community, took the work of clearing the wild growth of vegetation within the temple building and performed the Kumbhabhisheka ceremony in 1891.¹²

Chidambaram temple is a veritable encyclopedia of the art of dancing. There are the bas-reliefs and other sculptured pieces essentially on dance themes executed in seemingly endless friezes which illustrate in startling vividness some of the most subtle aspects of dancing.¹³ Equally impressive, but of a different vein, are the *Sabhas* or **Sacred Dance Halls** with their inevitable pillars. Once these imposing edifices are entered, one comes upon the temple itself which encompasses the Court of Tillai, the *Chit Sabha* together with the other four sabhas - *Raja Sabha*, *Deva Sabha*, *Nritta Sabha* and *Kanaka Sabha*.¹⁴ The sacred hall where the **Lord of Tillai** is stated to have entered into a dancing bout with **Goddess Kali**, is possibly the oldest among the major structures that

have grown around the central sanctum and one that ranks easily among the foremost of its kind today.¹⁵ Of these sabhas, the *Nritta Sabha* or the **Hall of Dance** is the most interesting creation and is designed in the form of a chariot with wheels and horses.¹⁶ The hall contains dancing figures more graceful and elegantly executed than any other of their class in South India.

Nowhere else are these, so picturesquely set up as in the Nataraja temple at Chidambaram.¹⁷ The 'Sabha' by its position replaces the sanctum in other places. The Chidambaram temple is longer from north to south while most temples are longer from east to west. **Nataraja** is the family deity of the Imperial Cholas,¹⁸ who were the strong followers of Siva and had covered the Sabha with gold, thereby giving the Sabha, the name *Kanaka Sabha* or the **Golden Hall** and to the image of **Nataraja** - the grand name of **Kanaka Sabhapathi** and *Kanakasabai Tirunatanam*.¹⁹ By the side of Lord Nataraja shrine, to the left, is the sanctum of **Goddess Sivakamasundari**. To the right is the *Chidambara Rahasyam*²⁰ wherein, there is no image or Lingam is found. A **Tiruvasi**, the circular arch or Prabha with a *Vel*, is in front. The Prabha is decorated with **Golden Vilva leaves** hung over it.²¹ Here Lord Siva is worshipped as **Akasha** which pervades the whole world.

Within the innermost enclosure, curiously enough, there is a temple for Vishnu called **Govindaraja Perumal**, who is said to have witnessed the dance of Siva.²² Infact, **Chidambaram** is the sacred place held in high veneration both by the **Saivites** and **Vaishnavites** in view of the existence within four walls of the temple of both the famous shrines of **Nataraja** and **Narayana** as **Govindaraja**.²³ It is one of the 108 sacred places where **Mahavishnu** is worshipped in His many manifestations of *Archavathara*.²⁴ This shrine which faces east lies close to the **Chit Sabha** of **Nataraja** who faces the south.

It is unmatched among similar shrines, for no where else do we find an ancient Vishnu temple complete with separate tower, *Bali peedam*, *Dhawajasthamba*, Garuda shrine facing the Lord and a separate *Thāyār sannathi* (mother shrine), all with a separate management of its own and with its own rituals, in such close proximity of the sanctum of **Siva** and within the same precincts.²⁵ The next enclosure contains shrines of **Narasimha** and **Venugopala** and at the north east corner stands **Hanuman** in a little niche with his hand raised and joined in obeisance to the Lord. The **Thāyār** (mother) is called **Pundarikavalli**.²⁶

It is somewhat surprising that a temple so ancient does not celebrate the annual festival of *Brahmothsavam*. There seems to be an arrangement with the **Dikshitar**s (the temple priests) of the Nataraja temple under which this prohibition is in force. All other customary festivals such as *Chitra Pournami*, *Ani Jyeshthabishekam*, *Adi Pooram*, *Panguni Uttiram* are conducted with grandeur with procession in the main streets of the town. There is a vast sacred tank, adjacent to the Rajasabha, which is called by the Saivites as “**Siva Ganga**”.²⁷

END NOTES

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