

K.K. PILLAY'S "MONOGRAPH ON SUCHINDRUM TEMPLE" - A STUDY

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Eventhough Dr.K.K.Pillay has his credit of publishing so many books related with the history of Tamil Nadu, its people, the local self governments etc, his magnum opus was the most popular work "**Suchindrum temple - A Monograph**".

Fortunately he belonged to the erstwhile south Travancore and also the religious minded background of his family. He had visited Suchindrum Sthanumalaya Perumal temple so many times.¹ Among the temple festivals of the erstwhile south Travancore Suchindrum Car festival is the most popular one. Thousands of people will participate in it. The agriculturists of Nanchilnad considered it as a thanks giving ceremony to the deity after harvesting.² The newly married couples have the practice of attending this car festival after their marriage. They even will not attend any other festivals before this car festival.

So naturally Dr.K.K.Pillay got the opportunity to visit this temple so many times. He got astonished over the palatial structure, magnificent Gopura (temple tower), majestic Hanuman Status and bull statue and also the micro level architectural specimens.³

Significantly, Kavimani Deshavinayagam Pillai, a celebrated writer, poet and also an epigraphist who had the practice of visiting this Suchindrum temple frequently.⁴

Incidentally, both the scholars met and started discussing about the temple inch by inch Kavimani wanted to expose the significance of the temple at the earliest. So finally both scholars unanimously decided to start a research work on that temple.⁵

Frequent visits to the temple had occurred. They discussed inch by inch about the significance of that temple. In the meantime K.K.Pillay registered this topic for his M.Litt. research. The out come was a beautiful well informed research work on the temple.

The Madras University gave the prestigious M.Litt. degree to Dr.K.K. Pillay and appreciated this venture. After getting proper permission from the University authorities, the work was published in the name of "**Suchindrum Temple - A Monograph**".

Significantly K.K.Pillay has no hesitation to mention the role played by Kavimani Desigavinayagam Pillai. In the preface he extended his sincere thanks to the age old Tamil scholar for his untiring support for the preparation of both the research work and also the monograph.⁶

After this celebrated publication, K.K. Pillay got appreciation from the intellectual forum. A number of foreigners who visited this temple began to purchase this work. At one stage the work was out of print. Very recently it has been reprinted without disturbing the beauty of the original work.

The Suchindrum Temple - A Monograph was K.K.Pillay's most popular work. Mr. James H. Cousins, a renowned historian of the West, who gave forward to this book points out many things about this monograph.⁷ He pointed out that "A refreshing feature of Dr. Pillay's monograph is its freedom of mind and its exercise of the critical faculty. I am entirely in agreement with this explanation of the Visvarupam, and am happy that a caste of so superb an example of stone relief was installed in the Government Museum of Trivandrum for all to see". It is much to be hoped that a work of such dimension and historical and artistic value will find a large number of readers both inside and outside, and will take its place as a book of permanent reference in Universities and Art Libraries.

In 1946 K.K.Pillay received the D.Litt. degree for this historical research. The Suchindrum temple is a systematic study of the evolution of south Indian architecture, sculpture and iconography. In this monograph he gave more ideas about a Hindu temple.⁸ It is one of the important models of monograph. In this book K.K.Pillay discussed a number of south Indian temples.

The first chapter of this monograph speaks about the Geographical basis in which he had analysed all things very clearly. He explained the location, topography, climatic condition, soil, soil containing minerals & vegetation. He had explained all types of trees, flower - gardens, flowers etc. Then he explained scenery and the influence of the neighbouring villages. He had explained very clearly about the Historical background of the village Suchindrum.

In this work he explained the Lemurian theory, Besides, this is the tradition embodies in the so called Lemurian theory, which maintains that there lay a large mass of land to the south of Cape Comorin.⁹ Next, he mentioned the visit of an European geographer who speaks about this region. He was Ptolemy who prepared his work in around 140 A.D.¹⁰ Next he referred Purananuru and Nanchil Porunan. It is said that during the Sangam age one Nanchil Porunan seems to have ruled over a part of Nanchilnad.

Early Pandyas were always in contact with Nanchilnad. Kanyakumari the sacred village at the land's end of India formed a part of the Pandyan Empire for a long time. He analysed the early Pandyas. He had analysed some of the rulers like Sendan, Arikesari Maravarman, Kocchadayan (the son and successor of Arikesari who was the famous warrior). Kochadyan who was known as Ranadhira became the king early in the 9th century A.D.¹¹

He had referred the Velvikkudi plates. The Velvikkudi plates refer to the king Kochadyan. He had mentioned Kochadyan's grandson Jatila Parantaka.¹² Next he explained about Chadayan's successor, Sri Mara Sri Vellabha entered on an aggressive war against the Chera rulers. Lastly he explained the Pandya king Vira Narayana Chadayan, Rajasimha and the decline of the Pandyas.

Next the Cholas began to attack Nanchilnad. No information however is available about any battle found in the 10th century. K.K. Pillay explained about the Chola ruler Raja Raja the great, and Rajendra, the great.

Again Kanyakumari was ruled by Parantaka Pandya a Pandya ruler. Then the Venad kings like Kodakerala Varma, Udayamartanda Varma, Parakrama Pandya Chera Udaya Martanda Varma ruled this region. Then Nanchilnad was ruled by the Nayaks. Finally the Travancore kings ruled Nanchilnad.

Suchindrum Temple

In the second chapter of the monograph he gave a vivid picture on Suchindrum, the celebrated village where the famous Sthanumalaya temple is situated. Suchindrum is situated near the land's end of India. This charming village situates in a picturesque location flourishes on the southern bank of the river *Pazhayar*. It is in the midst of many types of trees and flowers, tanks and ponds - as recipient of nature's lavish bounty. A striking feature of early history of South Travancore of which Suchindrum formed the spiritual capital of the region became the cockpit of South India.¹³

Suchindrum, like every other village of South Travancore is surrounded by broad stretches of verdant paddy fields. The paddy fields in and around Suchindrum forms the most fertile in the whole of Nanchilnad. The vast expanses of paddy fields present the most coveted and highly prices paddy lands of Nanchilnad.

To think of Suchindrum is her illustrious Sthanu Malaya temple. The temple has dominated, and continues to dominate, the life of the village. In fact, Suchindrum is a typical example of the village which owes all its fame and glory to its sacred shrine. The name Sthanumalayaperumal temple, so called by virtue of its association with all the **Trimurthis** - Brahma, Vishnu and Siva - stands majestically facing east.¹⁴

The name Sthanumalaya denotes the combination of the Trimurthis. **Sthanu** is a synonym for Siva, **Mal** for Vishnu and **Aya** for Brahma.¹⁵ In the earlier Ethic records, various names have been sued such as Sivindiramudaiya Emperuman, Mahadeva, Paramesvara, Udaiyar, Sivindiramudaiya Nainar, etc. The greater prominence given to Siva in the main temple explains the more popular name, Sthanunathaswamy and Sthanumurthi used in modern times. Suchindrum is the 'Spiritual Metropolis' of Nanchilnad. The temple at Suchindrum finds a place in the *Skandha Purana* and in a number of Sanskrit, Tamil and Malayalam works.

Innumerable inscriptions are available in this temple which chronicles its fascinating history. These inscriptions are mainly in Tamil, and Sanskrit. Inscriptions belong to various dynasties like Cholas,

Pandyas, Cheras (Venad - Travancore), Vijayanagar Empire etc. with 102 out of the 300 or so inscriptions being recorded.¹⁶ They are replete with valuable data detailing names of patronages, royal or otherwise, gifts made over to the temple from sheep to gold, from paddy fields, dry and wet lands, mandapams and flower gardens.

There are two epigraphic records which make reference to Vithala Maharaja. The first one is found on the northern wall of the western gopura of the temple. The inscription states that the gopura was constructed by Ramaraya Thimma Vithala. A Suchindrum record of 320 M.E. (1145 A.D.) shows that by a royal command issued under the manual taxes payable to the king Kotha Kerala Varma were assigned to the temple so that an offering to the deity might be performed as long as the sun and moon last.¹⁷

The temple contains the largest relics of antiquity. The temple is situated in a spacious court enclosed by high walls. It is covered with a *Pradakshinavali*, i.e. a path-way, surrounding several minor shrines, mandapas, halls and subsidiary buildings.

The temple faces the east and has on that side an outer gate surmounted by a lofty gopura of seven storeys crowned with pinnacles. It is the stately tower that attracts the attention first. In fact, the imposing Gopura is seen from a considerable distance.

Even today, pious Hindus passing within a radius of about eight kilometres from the pagoda may be seen clasping their hands in fervent prayer at the sight of the Gopura. The marvelous feature about the Gopura is its grace. Admirably well-proportioned, the tower presents a gradual tapering upwards. The entire gopura and more particularly the jamba of each of the doorways are tastefully decorated with fine figures of deities, all of which bear rich and appropriate ornamentation.

At the centre of the entrance are the images of Siva and Parvathi, seated on a bull, flanked by Vishnu mounted on Garuda on the left and Brahma riding on his *Vahana*, the **Hamsa** on the right. The Vali-mounted canopy overshadowing the image of Narasimha, which crowns the topmost storey in the centre, is handsome. In the back view of the tower are the Sikhara or Ucchamandapa and the two Dhvajasthambas.¹⁸

The sculpture which consists of well-wrought pillars and attractive images of Gods adds to the beauty of the interior. The pillars exhibit an exuberance of floral work in their pedestals, head and thorana work in the shafts and adhapadma petals at the capitals. Numerous images of deities are accommodated in the niches on the walls. In the centre is a standing image of Vishnu holding the conch, discus and club in three of the hands, while the fourth is stretched out in the *abhaya* post. It is flanked on the right by standing figure of *Garuda* in worshipping attitude.

One of the friezes at the bottom contains sculptured forms of animals such as lion, tiger, bear, elephant, deer, ram and monkey. In the centre, there is also Vishnu, the flanking figures being Indra having in his hands the *Vajrayudha* and the lotus flower and Varuna holding a sword and noose standing by the side of his *Vahana*,

the **Makara**. There is another representation of a well proportioned and attractive figure of Vishnu in sitting posture, holding the conch and discus in two of his hands. It is canopied by a five-headed cobra.

Though many of the earlier structures of this temple do not exist at present, yet there are parts which are attractive to a student of ancient history. The oldest inscription in the temple, on a rock on the south-west corner near the Kailasa shrine shows that there were in the temple shrines of Ten Thiruvengadathalvar, Amarabhujanga Perumal and Suchindramudaiya Nayanar.¹⁹

Other structures besides the gopura already noticed are the large hall called Shenbakaraman Mandapa, the Chithrasabha, the pillared portico erected near the Dhvajasthamba and the Garuda and Nandhi Mandapas on the eastern side. The Chithrasabha was built in the year 1410 A.D. and the Shenbakaraman Mandapa was in existence prior to 1471 A.D.

It may be said here that in the decorative treatment of these structural monuments, which are nearly 500 years old, the sculptors have indulged in utilizing a large number of pillars noted for their variety of shapes and forms, richness of ornamentation, fine modeling and intricate chiseling are marvelous to witness.

There are two major deities in this temple, one Sthanunathaswami (Siva) and the other Thiruvenkitappa (Vishnu). In this temple are seen some of the finest examples of wood and stone sculptures. The images of Cheraman Perumal and two other Nayanars and also of Siva and Parvathi and the Saivite saints and above all the fine stone sculptures illustrating the stories of *Mahabharatha* and *Bhagavatha* are a marvel of workmanship.

According to K.K.Pillay the splendid art and architecture of the grand temple in Dravidian style is of arresting excellence and has received additions and undergone renovations during the onward march to meet the approaching centuries. The royal contributions of the different dynasties to the holistic evolution of the Suchindrum temple are formidable and include the early Pandyas, Cholas, Cheras, and later Venad kings, Vijayanagar rulers, Nayaks and finally the philanthropic Travancore rulers of the modern age.

At the outer periphery of the four main streets, there are two or more small shrines dedicated to various deities who guard these ancient villages. Passing the sacred *Theppakulam* (Holy Pond) with Mandapa in the middle, the temple with its elegant seven storied gopura is arrived at. This gopura standing 134 feet in height is well proportioned and gradually tapers upwards with panels and outer figures in plaster of gods and goddesses, variety of extra-terrestrials, scenes from the epics and Puranas, appearing in mind-boggling array. The upper stories are of brick and mortar.

The temple gopura, a landmark of this countryside can be spied quite a distance away from the highway.

The main streets running around the four extremities of the village are of considerable width forming pathways for the mighty temple *Rathas* (chariots) to be drawn during the *Rathotsavas* (chariot festivals or car festivals).²⁰

There are two rows of pillars in the *Natakasala*. They are rich in decorative detail with eight of them carrying the figure of a standing female form. According to K.K. Pillay these damsels represent those Devadasis (temple maidens) who donated this grand edifice. Sculptures relating to the Sthalapurana are also depicted. The figures of Neelakanda, Sastha, Nataraja and Kali chiseled on the wall face are hailed as wonderful works of art.

K.K.Pillay observes that the inner walls of the floors of the gopura offer a feast to the lovers of art. A grand array of murals in unbroken continuity cover the wall faces from top to bottom. They portray the Ramayana story in the first two floors and the Sthalapurana in great wealth of detail in the rest of the floors. Other than the celestial and epic themes, the pictorial representations of illustrious personages, most of them being rulers are visual historic data. A rare mural of Marthanda Varma Maharaja and his nephew and successor Rama Varma Maharaja is on view.

The *Vahanappura*, housing the beautiful silver Vahanas (vehicles) of the divinities is located near at hand. Thirteen different kinds of lovely vahanas including sixteen palanquines are available for the pleasure of deities. The Koorma Vahana (tortoise vehicle) seen here invites special mention. It is not common for a temple to own such variety and number of vehicles.²¹

The fabulous musical pillars of the temple stand in four groups of pillars, the two groups on the northern side numbering twenty four and those on the southern side thirty three. Initially ornamental with high quality workmanship, each set is finished out of a single block of granite which when tapped produce different musical sounds.

The **Alankara Mandapa** where the Vahanas are decorated presents a visual delight due to its fine sculptures. Standing directly opposite, the Sree Rama shrine in a posture of abject humility is the gigantic figure of Sree Hanuman measuring over 16 feet in height.

To the east of the eastern Sivalippura, a huge white bull '*Maakkaalai*' and the temples of Konnayadinathar and Garudalvar are located facing the Shenbakaraman Mandapam.²² The bull, considered the second largest one in India, is made of brick and mortar and plastered outside and lies holding its head erect.

Garudalvar, over six feet high, stands appropriately facing the sanctum of Maha Vishnu. At the four corners offering superb workmanship, the magnificent statue of Thirumala Nayak, and those of his men are stationed. When a thin wire is passed through the right nostril of Thirumala Nayak's statue, it emerges through the left ear and vice-versa. Such was the astounding precision and versatility of the artisans of yore.

The rites and rituals prevailing in this temple here offer a striking constancy perhaps starting by the 13th century A.D. when Malayala system of worship would have become established. While five pujas are normally performed in many temples, here, apart from other ceremonies, eight pujas take place daily.²³

Three annual festivals are celebrated. The least spectacular is the one dedicated to Vishnu in the Malayalam month Kanni (September - October) which is restricted to within the temple walls. Most magnificent is the ten-day **Margazhi Utsavam** with the first day coinciding with the birthday of King Rajaraja Chola. The far-famed Rathotsavam (Car festival) falls on the 9th day when all the four Rathas are pulled through the streets of Suchindrum by the devotees.

Thus enclosed within formidable walls and commanding a total area of 93,900 square feet containing over 30 shrines big and small and three hundred odd inscriptions along with copper plates and palm leaf scrolls which unfold phases of its mighty past, the temple of Sree Sthanumalayaperumal towers high on its unshaken pedestal of perennial glory.

Until the middle of the last century people used to resort to this temple for the ghee ordeal. Among the persons who have taken oaths in this temple was a former ruler of Cochin. In 937 M.E. (1762 A.D.) he made the following declaration at the shrine at Suchindrum:

We, myself and nephews, do hereby declare under the solemn oath in the presence of Sthanumurthi that we shall from this day the 12th Karkadakam 937 M.E. on no account neither oppose nor sanction war against Sri Padmanabhadasa Balarama Varma Kulasekhara Perumal, king of Travancore, and his nephews.²⁴

In point of importance, it is hardly second to Sri Padmanabhaswami's temple at Trivandrum. It is said that Parasurama on his arrival here constructed towers and mandapas to the temple and arranged for the celebration of the annual festivals. There are two important festivals one in the month of Medam (April) and the other in Dhanu (December). The latter is the more important and is largely attended by people from all parts of Kerala and beyond. It lasts for ten days.

On the ninth day, the huge temple cars are taken through the streets round the temple. The car procession is an important festival. Its object being the welfare of the State, the Maharaja was expected to fast on that day until the cars return to their original position; the information was conveyed by sign guns and later by telegram.

Ranging among the grand temples of Tamil Nadu, the multifaceted fame of Suchindrum temple has reached out to distant lands and all over this sub-continent, a fame which stakes its claim independent of its inclusion among the 108 great Siva temples of the nation. It has now become a pilgrimage centre. Huge crowds from all over India are visiting here on all days.

Description of the temple

Under the topic of description of the temple Dr.K.K. Pillay described the temple with inch by inch.

Teradi Bhutattan, Teradi Madan and Udaya Martanda Vinayakar

Just to the south of the entrance there is a small unpretentious enclosure enshrining Teradi Bhutattan. The swami Ter, the biggest of the temple cars, stands in front of Teradi Butattan. On the other side to the north of the entrance Teradi Madan and Udaya Martanda Vinayakar shrine presents.

Natakasala

It is placed in the main porch of the *Natakasala* on either side of its entrance the devotees can see two lives like statues of its polished gneiss, erected on raised stone pedestals. The two figures stand face to face of each other with hands clasped in Anjali.

The Gopuravatal

At the western extremity of the Natakasala porch stands the prodigious door way, 24 feet in height on either wing of the *Gopuravatal* there exists an elevated terrace of stone. The stair case leading up to the inner recesses of the Gopura is found on the southern terrace.

Unchal Mandapa

The Unchal Mandapa is a rectangular pavilion of stone 30 feet 6 inches long and 28 feet 4 inches broad. The four pillars at the different corners of the Unchal Mandapa present exquisitely sculptured figures.

Uttupura and Madappalli

The Uttupura, the feeding place of Brahmins is an extensive hall 74'10" long and 31'5" broad, large enough to feed numerous person at a time. The Brahmin visitors and pilgrims were fed in this hall on occasions of the minor festivals of the temple.

Daksinamurti

Near the entrance to the eastern Sribalipura there is seen the old shrine of Daksinamurti. Hardly two feet in height, is a small image of Daksinamurti portrayed in the typical Sukhasana.²⁵

Nilakanta Vinayakar

The west of Vasantha Mandapa, found the nice little shrine of Nilakanta Vinayakar. The size of the Ganapathy shrine is very small.²⁶

Kankalanathar

To the west of the Nilakanta Vinayakar temple there stands the Kankalanatha shrine. It is a nice little structure, even smaller than the Vinayakar temple.

Kailasattu Mahadevar

A few yards to the west of the Kankalanathar koil there lies a huge piece of rock upon the northern end of which stands the ancient Kailasanathar koil. Enclosing this shrine a wall was erected on the rock in the year 1917. The shrine on the rock is described as that of Kailasattu Mahadevar while popularly, the deity is known as Mahadeva of southern Kailasa. A remarkable feature about the shrine is that it faces west. Inside the Sivalinga and Nandi opposite to it appear to bear the marks of age. The pattern of the Garbhagraha itself suggest an early origin of the shrine.

Ceravatal Sasta

At the western most extremity of the southern Sribalipura the small shrine dedicated to Sasta. In the records of the temple the deity is described as Ceravatal Sasta. The people in the locality use the appellation 'Hariharaputra' which is an alternative name for Sasta. The image found in the sitting posture is about 3 feet in height.

Ramaswamy koil

At the northern corner of the west Sribalipura there appears the pretty little Ramaswamy koil.²⁷ The images of Rama and Sita, in the Sukhasana pose, are hardly above 1'9" in height, near the entrance on the south, stands the never - failing companion Lakshmana, while on the north, is the unerring devotee Hanuman.

Northern Sribalipura

The shrine of Ramaswamy faces the northern Sribalipura, Unquestionably the most attractive of all is the Sribalipura of the pagoda. Its length is only 263'9" about 40 feet less than that of the corresponding southern Sribalipura.

Subramaniaswamy koil

To the west of this porch parallel to the northern Sribalipura, stand the Subramania shrine and the enclosed Mandapa in its front. A small portico 6 feet by 4½ feet, leads westward to the enclosed pavilion. Attached to the pillar on either side of the entrance to the portico, there appears an elaborately carved figure of granite. Each bearing a sword and shield, the two figures, at first sight, seems to *Dwarapalakas* of the Subramaniaswamy temple.

Kala Bhairavar

Returning to the northern Sribalipura, about the middle of it and just to the east of the northern entrance to the temple there exist the shrine of Kala Bhairavar facing towards south.²⁸

Musical Pillars

Facing the Kala Bhairava shrine appear the marvelous pieces of art, the so-called **Musicals pillars**. These are constituted by the four groups of pillars two on the north and two on the south, standing parallel to each other.

The two northern groups present each a cluster of 24 pillars, while the southern ones present a cluster of 33 pillars.²⁹

To summarize the writings on Suchindrum temple K.K.Pillay visited a number of intellectuals, scholars in order to clarify the oral stories.

END NOTES

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14. **Ibid.**, p.39.
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25. K.K.Pillay, **op.cit.**, p.20.
26. **Ibid.**, p.22.
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