

SWARNA KALEESWARAR TEMPLE AT KALAYARKOIL: A HISTORICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The temple is one of the biggest in this Sivaganga old Ramanathapuram district with imposing towers, Mandapas, etc., It is one of the 14th sacred shrines of Lord Siva in Pandya Nadu which has glorious history dating back to the seventh century A.D. The village of Somanathamangalam or Kalayarkoil where this renowned shrine is situated, derives its name from the Kaleeswaram temple of the place, Kalayar is a corruption of the word, Kaleeswaran. During the Sangam period the place was known as Kanapper. Kalayarkoil derived its name from the Kaleeswarar Temple of the place. Kalayar is a corruption of the word Kaleeswaran, During the Sangam period, this place was known as Kanapper which is seen from the 21st verse in the Purananoru, sung by Iyur Moolaikizhar, a poet of the sangam period. In the 9th century A.D. Saint Sundara moorthy Nayanar described the presiding deity in his devotional songs as kalai. Since then the deity has been known as kalayar, with the Tamil suffix 'yar' added to it, denoting respect. In this temple important for art, architecture, sculpture, painting, fairs and festivals.

Keywords: Swarna Kaleeswarar, Kalayarkoil, Sivagangai, Zamindars, Marudhu Brothers, Pandyas.

Introduction

During the early period, Kalayarkoil gained its importance, and it was one of the fourteen sacred Pandya Temples. Several inscriptions are found in the temple and they belong to the later Pandya period. The Siva temple of Kalayarkoil is well attended by people from near and far. It was built in the 7th century A.D. and the later Pandyas expended the Swarna Kaleeswarar temple considerably. The traditions tell that, in the Poorvakala, there arose a sacred Linga from the Pathalalokha and it split into three-one was in Vanavira Madurai, it was called somesa and the other two were appeared in Devadharuvanam, the name prevalent for Kalayarkoil in those days and got their name as Somesar and Kaleeswarar. The temple here is one of the biggest in Sivaganga old Ramanathapuram District. With imposing towers, Mandapas etc. The temple is under the management of Sivaganga Devasthanam. The temple of Kalayarkoil is a very large and surrounded by a strong stone wall about 18 feet in height and forming a part of the fort which was dismantled. There are three shrines called Someswarar representing school, Kaleswarar representing Sushama and Sundareswara representing Karma. Their consorts are Soundara Nayaki, Sri Swarnavally and Meenakshi respectively. The importance of Kalayarkoil lies in the location of three Siva temples. Three Siva temples surrounded by a strong stone and it is unique in this area.

Swarna Kaleeswarar temple

The Supreme Lord of Kaleeswarar temple is Kaleeshar. According to the stone inscriptions the name of the supreme Lord of this temple is Thirukana Perudayanayanar. Similarly the original name of Goddess Swarnavalli was called Kottathu Nachiar.¹ Here at dawn the rays of the sun fall on Lord Kaleeswara and Lord Someshwara without any hurdle. The three theerthams namely Murthi, Thalam and Theertham are of considerable importance. There are many other theerthamas namely Sivagangai Kali theertham, Vishnu theertham, Saraswathi theertham, Gowri theertham, Lakumi theertham, Thikkuppalagar theertham, Sudarisenana theertham, Vuruthira theertham, Chandra Putkarani theertham etc.²

Sri Apper, Sambandar and Sundaramoorthi Nayanamars have sung in praise of the presiding deities in their Thevaram and have referred to this place as Thirukana Perror. The Sanskrit Sthalapuranam refers to this shrine as Dekashina Kaleepuram. According to the Sthalapuranam the Goddess Parvathi when transferred into Kali by a Curse of Lord Siva came to these forests and did penance to the Lord. She fought and killed a Rakshasa Chandasura in these forests and worshipped the deity at this place. Afterwards she got her original form and rejoined the Lord as Sornavalli.³

Another version is that one of the Pandya king Virasenan and his wife Somananki had no children, had a doll child made of gold and fondling it in the place of a child. When the king learnt about the greatness of the deity in the forests on the way to Tondi, he is said to have come to this forest with his wife and

followers, bathed in the sacred waters and worshipped the deity and the golden child was by the grace of the Lord, transformed into a real living child of the Pandya king and in gratitude and reverence the king built the temple. It is said that the Pandya king conducted festivals in honour of Lord Kaleeswarar during Thaippoosam and Vaikasi Visakam both being holy days of two Tamil months. As approbation of the Pandya's religious activities, Lord Sundareswara along with Goddess Meenakshi appeared before him and blessed him.

This anecdote is presented here from the annals of the seventh day of the Vaikasi Visakam festival. This traditional performance is called, 'Uruthira theertha Mandagapadi'. The Vignettes of the characters having shown to the spectators the dolls representing the holy as well as impeccable characters are discarded into the holy water tank that is traditionally called Uruthira theertham. Those who pick such dolls from the Theertham will be endowed with off springs and they will celebrate such festivals in the year that follows and the dolls will be thrown out into the Theertham in the sequel. The descendants of the zamindar of Devokottai continue celebrating this festival.

The zamindars of Devokottai took possession of Kalayarkoil, a part of Sivaganga zamin, by lease after the reign of king Bhaskara Sethupathy and upto the present their descendants as well as the Nattukkottai Chettiyars have been rendering their services to Kalai Nayagar and to charities with all the proper solemnities. In Kalayarkoil though there was a Vishnu temple, at present it is a popular Saiva center. ⁴ The Siva temple here has been held in Veneration from 7th century A.D. There are two big towers in Kaleeswarar temple. Of these two, the tower in front of Sri Someswarar Sannadhi was built by Maruthu Brothers during their regimant Sivaganga. It is a typical Indian temple consists of a large quadrangle whose four sides are high walls painted white with broad red stripes within the quadrangle is the shrine enclosing the idol of the God, to whom the temple is dedicated. Entrances are there at north, south, east and west. These gopuras sometimes rise over a hundred feet and are magnificent masterpieces of lavish, decorative India art, powerfully, vividly portraying in brick and stone, religious legend or throne or symbolism. It is 151 feet tall. It is from Mamamadurai, materials were brought for building the tower. People were lined up along the road and the bricks were carried by hand from Manamadurai to this place, without the help of any vehicle. Climbing up the majestic tower of Kalayarkoil, one can see the Madurai Meenakshi Temple Tower. ⁵

It is said that after the fall of Kalayarkoil, Vellai Maruthu escaped. In order to catch him, Col. Agnew announced that if the Maruthu did not surrender within the period stipulated the big tower would be pulled down and destroyed. It is said by the people that Vellai Maruthu's surrender only saved the lofty gopuram of the temple. The tombs of Maruthu Brothers are still there. ⁶ The small tower or Panchabuda Gopuram was built by Maravarman Sundara Pandya during the 12th century A.D. The long external corridor called Prakaram of this small tower takes a pride in having a column with the statue of Maravaraman Sundara Pandyan made of stone who is the real author of this small tower. The small tower is an embodiment of unique paintings depicting the whole scenes of the Ramayana and what is more the paintings have not discoloured either by rain or by the rays of the sun since their installation. This small tower, when occasion arose, was repaired and consecrated by the family members of T.R.M. Theena Thayalan Chettiyar.

The name Kalayar seems to gain popularity from 13th century A.D. Several epigraphical records are found in the temple. Most of them are related to the later Pandya period. There are several inscriptions found inside and outside the temple wall. On the South and east wall of the Kaleeswara temple on the east wall of the hundred pillared mandapa in the Kaleeswara temple, on the north and west wall on the kitchen temple, on the west and east wall of the Soundaranayaki Shrine, on the South wall of the same Shrine, right of entrance, on the same wall, left of entrance. Few inscriptions are in damaged condition. These inscriptions are dealing about the Pandya rulers who made endowments to this temple. They were Jatavarman alias Tribhuvana Chakravartin Sundara Pandya deva, Maravarman alias Tribhuvana Chakravartin, Kulasekharadeva, Maravaraman Vira Pandyadeva, Sundaratoludaiyar Mavali Vanadarayar, Tribhuvana Chakravartin Vira Pandyadeva. ⁷

There are two wooden temple cars and they were donated by Maruthu Brothers and the other by the T.R.M. Thina Thayalan Chettiyar family members. It is on this wheeled car on festive occasions the idol is dragged through the streets. Another one car which was made by a renowned sculptor by name Kuppamuthu Achariar during the reign of Maruthu Brothers fell to pieces and the other sculptures are at present displayed at the Madras Museum. In 1959 the Managing Director of the Somasundaram Mills Private Limited, Coimbatore, Mr.P.S.S. Somasundaram Chettiar of Devokotta decided on restoring the tower and hence carried out renovations of the old tower and on 11-11-1959 conducted Kumbabisheka. ⁸

In between the main tower and the small tower there was once a library called "The Saraswathy Mahal". At present the building is used for the Temple Office. Outside the main tower on either side of it

there are shrines for Lord Ganesha and for Lord Muruga, the latter being founded by Mr. KN.K.S. Arunagiri Chettiyar of Nattarasankottai.⁹

Also there are sculptures depicting the wedding of Meenakshi. Also there is an icon of Rishabha Vahana. Kannappa Chettiyar of Okkur demolished the old mortar mandapa and constructed a stone mandapa and a tower over the sanctum sanctorum and a gold column. The walls surrounding the sanctum sanctorum for sculptural techniques, on the right side of the Goddess Soundaranayagi the Itcha Sakthi statue erected above and the Gnana Sakthi statue erected right behind the Goddess and on the left side of the Goddess Kiriya Sakthi statue erected below render the artistic skill of the sculptures of yore. All the pillars are decorated with sculptures and they present a divinely atmosphere. The sculpture of Lord Hanuman holding Mount Sanjeevi in one hand right behind the Goddess is very impressive.

In front of the shrine of Goddess Soundaranayagi there is a car mandapa having four rows of columns each row possessing eight columns. This mandapa is called Vahana mandapa. Since wooden vahanas of Gods are placed inside this mandapa, it is called Vahana mandapa. In front of the second pillar in the first row there is a statue of the Raja of Sivaganga Muthu Vaduganatha Periya Udaya Thevar who died in 1772 in a battlefront when he fought against the British. A short description of his life is found above this statue which, though sketchy, seems to be quite enough to know about the king's life and further there is a flag pillar, altar and Nandhi and it is the entrance of the Someswar Temple. On one side of the flag pillar, altar and Nandhi there is Ukgran mandapa (also called paneer Mada) and on the other side of them there is the great Varnalingam which consists of 1008 lingas and hence it is called Mahalinga.¹⁰ This mandapa possesses three rows of pillars each row having five pillars. In the paneer Mada there are six small rooms. They are Mahaganapathy Paneer Mada, Someswarar and Soundaranayagi Paneer Mada, Kaleeswarar Paneer Mada, Sandana Arai Sambrani Arai and Pushpa Arai. It is said that in this mandapa, in days of yore things like sacred ash, rose water, sandal paste and frankincense were prepared and stored. The top inner surfaces of the rooms present picturesque paintings of Someswarar and Soundaranayagi of Kaleeswarar and Swarnavalli of Someswarar bringing the Heavenly Ganges for Pakeeratha of Easwarar under the Punnai tree and of Mahalakshmi.¹¹

Inside the Someswarar temple one can see Mahamandapa, Artha mandapa and the sanctum sanctorum. On entering the Sannathi and turns left, one can see the statue of surya and beside it there is another sanctum sanctorum. On either side of the Swamy there are the statues of Dwarapalakas attached to it. At the corridor, on the right side of the Swamy there are the statues of Vinayaka, Selva Vinayaka, Karpaga Vinayaka, Gowthama Vasista, Karaikal Ammaiyar, Sreedevi, Sugandavana Perumal, Poodevi, Naganathar, Kasi Vishalakshi and Kasi Visvanathar all being in a row. In the second row there are the statues of Veerapathra and the Astasakties namely Bhrammi, Maheswari, Gowmari, Vaisnavi, Varaki, Indrani, Samundi and Gajalakshmi. On the left corner of the corridor there is the statue of the Lord Subramanya found with his two wives Valli and Theivanai riding on the peacock vehicle. On the right side of the outer part of the walls of the sanctum sanctorum of the swami there is the icon of Dakshinamurthi and behind it there is the icon of Lingotbhava and on the left side is the icon of Bhrama all being decorated with sculptural skills. Beside the icon of Bhrama, the icon of Sondeeswara is found. The pillars with sculptures here are quiet attractive. On the top of the second pillar in the first row there is Yali and on its mouth a chain made of stone is hanging. On the right side of the temple adjacent to the corridor there is the sculpture of Chandra or moon. Someswarar temple was constructed during the 17th century by Maruthu Brothers.¹²

In the outer corridor of Someswarar Sannathi also in the corner there is the shrine of Lord Selvavinayaka. In front of it his Moonshika Vagana is located. Behind it the altar is installed. On either side of Lord Vinayaka, Nagas are found seated. Adjacent to the shrine there is a hill or Naga. It is believed that the Selva Vinayaka temple might have been originally called Cellapillayar temple but the stone inscriptions by Sundaratholudayon Mavalivanathiraya say that the temple was called Selva Vinayaka temple. In the later days after the invasion of the Muhammadans this temple was demolished by them. During the reign of vanathirayar this temple was reconstructed and the image of Lord Ganesh also was installed anew. This image of Chella Pillayar can be seen even today in the shrine of Selvapillayar temple at Kalayarkoil. This particular small temple has been renovated by the Nattukottai Chettiyars. During the invasion of the Mohammadans the great walls of Kalayarkoil and its kitchen were demolished. These walls and the Kitchen were reconstructed by the Nattukottai Chettiyars.¹³

On proceeding around this shrine in the clockwise movement there is a great mandapa with one hundred pillars in front of Lord Muruga temple. This great mandapa consists of Moolamandapa, Arthamandapa and Velli mandapa. The mandapa has more than one hundred pillars. On seventh July 1962 this great mandapa was renovated by the commission of Madras Hindu Religious Endowment Board.¹⁴

The entrance of the small gopura remains closed. Adjacent to it there is a Mandapa. On the right side of the Mandapa is found the Gowri theertham. Adjacent to it there is a gateway leading to Lord Kaleeswarar Sannathi. While entering Swamy Sannathi on the left side, there are the statues of Chinna Maruthu, Periya Maruthu and Kilavan Sethupathi. On the right side of the entrance one can see the Yahasala Mandapa. Adjacent to it on the right side of the passage leading to the mandapa of one hundred pillars. Near this mandapa on the right side there is a mandapa called Sanku mandapa. It is named so because in the rooms of this mandapa one thousand and eight conches are kept. It is traditionally observed that holy water from eighteen holy tanks are brought here and these conches are filled with this theertha and Sankabisegam is performed in honour of Lord Kaleeswarar on Sivaratri Kirithikai Mondays. This festival is celebrated during the Tamil month of Karthigai, in the Santhana mandapa. On its walls the paintings representing Lord Krishna playing on flute, Lord Nataraja, Poipillai changing into Meipillai, Lord Muruga are found on the left side of the Santhana mandapa facing Sanku mandapa, there is the mandapa called Ukrana mandapa. On the walls of this mandapa the paintings of the four chettiers viz. Arunachalam, Somanathan, Vellaian and Narayanan in their life size. Besides it there are paintings of an elephant performing Abiseka for swami and of Lord Vinayaka. In Between these two Mandapas there are flag pillar, altar, Nandhi can be seen. On the left side, the statue of Alagappa Chettiar is found on the pillar. Along with this statue Maravaraman Sundara Pandya statue also is seen on the next pillar. The statue of Vengai Marban is skilfully sculptured on the pillar installed on the right side. Near the jayasthampa there is a Adikara Nandhi, next to it there is Suriya Pillayar on the right side. There are also the sculptures of the Saivaite saints Appar, Sambandar, Sundarar and Manikka Vasagar. Adjacent to them there are the statue of sixty three saivaite saints in a horizontal line. In the extreme corner there is the statue of Lord Vikneshwara beside sixty three saivaite saints. There is a row of Pancha lingas viz., Mahalinga, Swarnalinga, Suyambulinga and Caranalinga, Adjacent to it there are the status of Ashtalakshmi, Athilakshmi, Santhanalakshmi, Gajalakshmi, Dhanalakshmi, Danyalakshmi, Vijayalakshmi, Mahalakshmi and Veeralakshmi installed in a row.¹⁵

In the same corridor on the left side of the swami the Silver car mandapa is located. In this mandapa the Rishabavahana of Lord Siva made of silver and the Mooshika Vahana of Lord Gonesha are found. During festival days three Rishaba Vahanas would be brought outside the temple of public display and they perform as utsavamurtis. These three Rishba Vahanas are also kept in this Vellivahana Mandapa. One of these three Rishbavahanas is in disrepair. Another one has been renovated by ALCT. Alagappa Chettiyar's son Chidambaram Chettiyar of Devakottai, on third Chitrai in Sadarana year. In the Tamil month of Karthigai in the year Anandah AR. Ramanathan Chettiyar provided his contribution to Swarna Kaleeswara Swami which is referred to by the side of the swamy S.KR. Arunachalam Chettiyar of Okkur contributed to Mooshika Vahana on 23rd of Vaikasi in the year Karana. Adjacent to it the Ruthratchara Mandapa is located. Besides it there are the status of Dwara Balagaas, on either side of the sanctum sanctorum of the Suyambulingam and the status of Dwara Balagaas have been made of Panchaloga. In harmony with the stone inscriptions adjacently there is the Nandhi Kannadi Punniya Vasana Platform and there is the statue of Kanapper Udaya Nayanar. This particular sanctum sanctorum is built of black marble stone. On the right side of the outer corridor on the walls, the Devaram, Thiruvagasagam hymns are engraved. In between Lord Ganesh and Lord Muruga there are two gigantic statues of Lingotbava and Brahma. Outside the sanctum sanctorum of Swami there is the statue of Lingotbhava, Brahma, Durga and Sandeeswarar.¹⁶

Towards the swarnavalli Temple, there is Lakshmi seated on the back of the elephant, on either side in the western direction of the entrance of the shrine. On the left side of Goddess Swarnavalli the holy chamber is located. Inside the chamber there is a golden swing with a golden vimana. On the walls of the other Sanctum Sanctorum of the Goddess, on the right side there is a statue of Ikhasakthi and behind the Goddess there is the statue of Ghanasakthi and on the left side of the Goddess there is a statue of Girayasakthi which stand for some philosophical prepositions on the left side of the Goddess near Girayasakthi. In between Goddess Swarnavalli temple and Lord Swarna Kaleeswara temple there is the Meenakshi Sundarashwara temple. In order to bless Varaguna Pandya, Meenakshi Amman and Sundareswarar made appearance to Varaguna Pandya. Varaguna Pandya built Sundreswarar temple in gratitude.¹⁷

In front of the temple there are four rows of pillars having eight pillars each. In the second row right in the middle there is a statue of the Nandi and a statue of king Varaguna Pandya who constructed this temple. Also there is a statue of Surya and on the left side there is a statue of Chandra. In the inner corridor in front of the swamy there is a pair of the statue of Dwara Balagas on either side and in front of them there is a statue on Nandi. On the left side of the swamy there is a statue of Goddess Meenakshi. On either side of the Goddess there are the Statues of Dwara Balagas. In the outer corridor in the right corner there is a Pancha

loga idol representing Sundareshwara Meenakshi. Near it there is the statue of Vallabha Ganapathi having Vallabi. On the right side of the wall of the sanctum sanctorum of the Swamy there is the statue of Lord Dakshinamurti and behind the swamy there is the statue of Lingotbhava and on the left side of the swamy there is the statue of Brahma and beside it there is the statue of Sondigeshwara. In the outer corridor in the left side there is the statue of Lord Subramanya with Nagas on eigherside. In the same outer corridor behind Goddess Meenaskhi a Panchaloga idol representing Lord Nataraja with Karaikal Ammaiyar on the right side and Umadevi on the left side is found. Near the icon of Nataraja there is the statue of Bhairava. In front of it there are nine planets called Navagrahas surrounded by four pillars.¹⁸

On the right side of the entrance of Panchabuda Gopuram there is a statue of Udaya Perumal Kaundar with a gun in the hands as if challenging the British. After his escape from the British he took asylum under Maruthu Brothers. He dedicated his life for more than 23 years to the service of Maruthu Brothers till his death. There is a white bear idol in front of the Udaya Perumal Statue. The White bear is representing the Britishers, a gun was given to the hand of Udaya Perumal for killing it.¹⁹

Vaigasi and Adipooram festivals are conducted in honour of Someswarar. In the Tamil month of Thai a festival lasting for 10 days in honour of Kaleeswarar is celebrated. During Adi Pooram devotees honour Goddess Swarnavalli. Similarly on the full moon day of the Tamil month of Margali a festival in honour of Lord Kaleeswara is celebrated. And during Margali thiruvathirai, a festival in honour of Lord Nataraja is conducted. During Puratasi Navarathiri Laksharshanai is carried out in honour of Goddess Soundara Amman.²⁰

The Pandya kings who founded the temple and the early Zamindars of Sivaganga had granted a number of villages for the upkeep of this temple. Particularly in the year 1910 the net assessment of the village of Irumburayal will be assigned to the person performing the mandagapadi service in the months of Thai and Vaigasi in the temple of Kalayarkoil. Seventh day Mandagapadi festival of Vaikasi and Thai of each year. Both to be celebrated in Kalayarkoil Devasthanam of Sivaganga Division. The income from these Inam-villages form the only source of revenue to the temple.²¹ These *inam* estates have now been taken over by the Government on 1.10.1951 under the Madras Estates Act of 1948.

Conclusion

The Swarna Kaleeswarar temple of Kalayarkoil, from the ancient period Kaleeswarar Temple is an important saivaite centre. The importance of Kalayarkoil lies in the location of three shrines namely Someswarar, Kaleeswarar and Sundareshwarar and their consorts Soundaranayaki, Swarnawalli and Meenakshi respectively. Pandiyas made elaborate contribution to the Kaleeswarar Temple. Vanathirayas, Kilavan Sethupathi and Maruthu Brothers made praiseworthy contributions to this temple. The early Zamindars of Sivaganga had donated a number of villages for the maintenance of this temple. At present, Nattukkottai Chettiyars are about the upkeep of this temple. In early days under the Pandya and Chola rules, the temples and their properties were managed by the village assemblies through special committees called *Variyam*. These *Variyams* looked into the accounts of these trusts. They also organized mutts out of the temple funds and established in them Vedic schools and charitable institutions also changed. Saints Thirugnana Sambandar, Sekkizhar, Appar, Sundarar, Kallada Thevar, Kabila Thevar, Parana Thevar, Paranjothi Munivar, Arunagirinathar, Kumara gurubara swamigal, Aiyur moolankilar, Avvaiyar, Ukkiraperuvazhuthi, Perumpatra puliyur Nambi (13th Century) Umapathy Sivachariar (14th Century) and Poyyamozhi pulavar have visited Kalayarkoil temple and composed numerous devotional songs and poems hymns in praise of the presiding deity performed. A lofty Rajagopuram (150 feet) and an imposing Teppakulam tank (with a mandapam) named Aanai madu adorn this shrine, Airavatam the elephant of Indra is said to have created this tank. Kalayarkoil temple type is Dravidian architecture.

End Notes

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