

HINDU RELIGIOUS CENTRES IN KANYAKUMARI DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

The temples are the places where devotees worship God and so the place of worship should be sacred. Temple is called as koil or kovil in Tamil language. The term koil is derived from the two words 'ko' and 'il'. 'Ko' in Tamil means king. God is placed in part with kings or superior to kings in governing the people. 'il' in Tamil means house. Hence, the residing place of God is called koil. It is a general belief that temples are the abodes of Gods and Goddesses. The temples are considered as places of worship from time immemorial.³ They are considered to be the backbone of Hinduism. It is said that by worshipping a God or Goddesses, the devotees get comfort and solace. Hence, the ancient kings and chieftains constructed temples for themselves and for their people.

Kanyakumari is considered as a very sacred place by the Hindus, and its antiquity can be traced to a remote past. Bathing in the sea at this point, and worshipping the Goddess, duly observing vows, were believed to remove all sins, secure merit, ensure the uplifting of souls to the blissful regions.¹ In the Vana-Parva of the Mahabharata

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[v. 23] it is said that "one should bath in the firtha called Kanya on the sea coast. Bathing there cleansed of all sins" and further in mind one reaches the region of Manu, the lord of creation, Whatever gift is made at Kanya, the rishis of rigid vows say, becomes everlasting. It is believed by the Hindus that the most heinous of sins are those committed on the banks of the Ganges and (Kanya) kumara.² These imprecations are not uniform, which led to differences in their interpretation.

Suchindrum Thanumalaya Swami Temple

Suchindrum is a small village about 12 kms away from Kanyakumari and about 7 kms from Nagercoil. According to the tradition, Suchindrum is the place where Indra attained "suchi" ie., purification. Actually 'suchi' means purity and "Suchindrum" denotes the place 'where Indra attained purity'.³ The present structure of the temple is the work of a number of persons spread over a number of centuries and is one of the best specimens and a storehouse of the Dravidian style of art and architecture.⁴

Suchindrum has recorded history. The 123 inscriptions of the place (the earliest one belonging to the 9th Century A.D.) narrate a lot about this *Chadur Vedimangalam*, its evolution, distinctiveness and development. The King of almost all dynasties of the south had viewed with each other to commemorate their association with the 124 metres long and 72 metres wide main temple, by constructing halls and arranging for the conduct of special *poojas* in their name.⁵ The *Chempakaraman Mandapam* and *santhi pooja* along with the *Veerapandian Manimandapam* and *santhi pooja* are just two examples. Chanda Sahib and Baba Sahib who set fire

to the old temple in 1740, have also left behind their doings in some mutilated stone sculptures in the inner passage. A brass chair, known as "paranki narkaly" presented by the Portuguese to Travancore king is even now used in some temples here.⁷

The monolithic good looking (*satvic*) Anjeneya of 5 metres height invites admiration. The 4 metres high stupendous Nandi, made of mortar and bricks, is the second best in the country. The 40 metres tall, seven tier *gopuram* is stately in look and its outer space is studied with exquisite plaster figures depicting scenes from *puranas* and epics.⁸ The temple has four Temple cars (chariots), with splendid wood carvings and is quite majestic in appearance.⁹ The famous Suchindrum 'Kaimukku' deserves special mention.

The contribution of the temple to a typical cultural synthesis is patently original. The presiding deity *Thanu* (Siva) *Mal* (Vishnu) *Ayan* (Brahma) in the Linga form, the top, the middle and the base of which are identified with the trinity.

Thirumalai Mahadevar Temple

Among the twelve Sivalayams, the Thirumalai Mahadevar Temple is said to be the first one.¹⁰ It is located on the top of a petty rocky elevation and it is reached by a flight of 95 steps. It is situated at a distance of about six miles South of Kulithurai in Vilavancode Taluk.

There are two *Srikoils* in this temple, one dedicated to Siva, and the other to Sri Krishna. The *Siva Srikoil* consists of a *garbhagraham* and a room in its front called,

nishabhamandapam which is built fully in granite.¹¹ The temple records describe the principal deity as *Soolapaani*.¹² In an inscription of the seventh regnal year of the Chola king Rajendra (1012-44) engraved on a rock in the outer *prakara* of the temple, the main deity is called, Munchirai-Thirumalai-Devar. This Siva Temple has a Dravidian *vimana*. The *ottupurai* lies on the north-eastern corner of the compound and has a thatched roof with mud-walls. This is used during the *utsavams* in the temple, and has its walls and roof.

Thirupparapu Mahadevar Temple

The third among the twelve Sivalayams is the Mahadevar Temple at Thirupparapu near Kulasekharam. Thirupparapu was formally known as *Srivilasam*. *Sri* means 'Thiru' and '*visalam*' means parapu'. Therefore it was known as Thirupparapu.¹³ The word 'Thirupparapu' denotes a pavilion of beauty and sacredness. An inscription belonging to the Ay ruler Kokkarunandadakkan is found in this temple.¹⁴ Generally the Siva Temples face the east. But, this shrine faces west. *Virabhadra*, the principal deity of this temple, represents a ferocious aspect of Lord Siva and he is also known as *Jatatharar*.¹⁵ It is said that *Nandi*, the vehicle of Lord Siva is unable to face the fierce look and hence it turns to the northern side of the shrine.

The shrines of Ambal and Ganapathy of this temple are facing east on either side of the *mukhamandapam*.¹⁶ This is built in granite. To safeguard against the Muslim invasions, the golden idol of Mahadeva (Utsava Murthy) was sent to the famous Aadi-Keshava Perumal Temple of Thiruvattar. It is still preserved in the 'Sanctum' of this temple.¹⁷ This temple was a famous *Saivite* pilgrimage

center in the 12th Century A.D., and it attracted pilgrims from distant places like Madurai.

Kalkulam Nilakantaswamy Temple

The Nilakantaswamy Temple is said to be the seventh one among the twelve *Sivalayams*, at Padmanabhapuram, the ancient capital of South Travancore. It is a seat of *Vaishnavism* as well as *Saivism*. It is a place in which the blending of two cultures namely Tamil and Malayalam are to be seen.¹⁸ The principal deity is named as 'Kalkulam Mahadeva' in the lithic records.

The temple faces the east. The main deity *Nilakanta* is in the *Linga* (phallic) form. There are two *srikoils* dedicated to Siva and Amman.¹⁹ The *Siva srikoil*, consisting of a *garbhagraham* and *ardhamandapam*, is built in granite. There is a small *neerazhi* in the *theppakulam* in front of the temple.

Sri Mahadevar Temple at Thiruvithancode

Sri Mahadevar Temple at Thiruvithancode is located at a distance of 54 kilometers from Trivandrum.²⁰ The temple dedicated to Sri Mahadevar bestows on it the status of a pilgrim centre. The past glory of this temple still continues to hold it as one of the twelve *sivalayams* of *Sivalaya Ottam*, where devotees pour in during *Sivaratri* in the month of February or March. In olden times the Venad kings used to come there and to Valavechagostam (a very powerful Devi temple nearby) before assuming rulership, to take an oath that they would rule justly and well. Though almost all famous temples of South Travancore and the rest of the Venad had considerable

interaction with the Thirupparapoor Swarooppam, even later on, this temple must have been of such significance in the scheme of affairs so as to warrant the assumption to the kingship of the land-Chiravayi Mooppu by Adithya Varma in 1544 A.D.²¹ at this Sri Mahadevar Temple, Thiruvithancode.²²

Nattalam Siva Temple

The Siva Temple at Thirunattalam is said to be the twelfth one among the twelve *Sivalayms*. The Nandi is installed in a pavilion in the *namaskaramandapa*. The temple consists of a circular outer structure in masonry, with an inner *garbhagraham* with masonry walls of the deity. There is also a small Ganapathy Koil near to *Srikoil*. There is a granite floor in front of the *Srikoil*.²³ An inscription belonging to the 16th Century A.D., is engraved on a rock in front of the temple.²⁴ In the Vishu Temple, the Lord Vishnu faces the east. The inhabitants of this area call him Sankaranarayana. The temple has two *prakaras*.²⁵ The southern side of the inner *prakara* is having a separate shrine to Lord Vinayaka.²⁶

Sree Adi Kesava Perumal Temple, Thiruvattar

The enchanting village of Thiruvattar was under the jurisdiction of Travancore, till 1956 when the re-organisation of the Indian States took place.²⁷ Now part of Tamilnadu, it still basks in the grandeur of a great spiritual centre the furious Sree Adi Kesava Perumal Temple.²⁸ Situated in Kalkulam, Kanyakumari District, it is about fifty kilometers South of Thiruvananthapuram and can be reached only by surface transport.²⁹ Originally known as 'Adi Anantapuram' or the ancient city of Ananta, it

became famous later on as Thiruvattar. During Rani Gowri Lakshmi Bai's reign (1811 - 1814 A.D.), three hundred and forty-eight major temples including the temple at Thiruvattar were brought under the direct control of Travancore State.³⁰ There were fourteen sub-temples or 'Keezhaidams' operating under the Thiruvattar Temple. The Thiruvattar Temple possesses twenty-two inscriptions in Tamil, Tamil Vattezhuthu and Sanskrit Nagari script relating to Chola and Chera royalty. These inscriptions seem to date from the ninth to the sixteenth Century A.D.

Kanyakumari Bhagavathiamman Temple

The land's end of the Indian subcontinent, Kanyakumari has unique historical and cultural heritage. The Kumari Amman Temple, a symbol of Dravidian architecture constructed on the southernmost corner of Kanyakumari where the three seas, namely, Arabian sea, Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal meet. This temple is dedicated to the Goddess Bhagavathi, also known as Kanyakumari. *Kanni* means virgin and *Kumari* denotes a particular stage of a woman.³¹ The Goddess in this temple is a virgin that is why she is called Kanyakumari. Originally this temple was constructed on a rock known as "Sri Padaparai" nearly 600 feet away from the shore. Maran Chadayan, a Pandya King who ruled Kanyakumari between 765 A.D and 815 A.D replaced the mortar and used stone for the construction of this temple.³²

Mandaikadu Bagavathi Amman Temple

In Mandaikadu Temple, poojas are performed early in the morning at 8.a.m and the temple remains open till 1.00 p.m and again it is reopened at 6.30 p.m for worship.³³

The daily pooja takes place immediately after *thirunada* *thirappu*, which means opening of the sacred gate. Daily pooja is conducted for the creation of wisdom. In the early days during the daily pooja, *prasadam* is offered on Thursdays and Fridays. Weekly poojas conducted on Thursdays and Fridays are considered to be of great importance. During these days female devotees come in huge crowds. During these days worship is done with camphor, flower and fragrant water.³⁴ Thus temples are considered to be the main backbone of Hinduism. The temples are the places where the devotees worship God and so the place of worship should be sacred.

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