

Art & Architectural Significance of Thiruvattar Adikeshava Perumal Temple

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Abstract

Temples are the primary outward manifestation of the Hindu Religion. Many temples, from Kashmir in the North to Cape Comorin in the South, can be seen. A Hindu temple is a structure designed to bring human beings and gods together, using symbolism to express the ideas and beliefs of Hinduism. The temples of Travancore were not merely religious institutions but were organizations where economic, cultural and, to some extent, political activities were concentrated; Travancore is an embodiment of temples. Some of these temples are famous and are mentioned in the *Puranas*. Most temples in Travancore were founded centuries ago, and their genesis is lost in obscurity. The Temples of Sucherdrum, Cape Comorin, Thiruvattar, Trivandrum, Varkala and Vaikom are some of the oldest temples in Travancore.

Keywords: *Architecture, Royal patronage, inscriptions*

Methodology

This article is prepared using primary and secondary sources, with additional information provided by different persons in personal interviews. Among the published primary sources, The Travancore Archeological Series deserves special mention. Several secondary sources are also utilized in the study.

Introduction

Sri Adikeshava Perumal temple is an ancient temple in Thiruvattar. The deity of Sri Adikeshava Perumal is 22 feet high, made out of 16008 *Saligrams*, and is seen in a West facing *Bhujanga Sayanam*. The Lord is lying on his snake couch and has to be viewed through three doors. This

Deity of Adikeshava is considered the Elder brother of Lord Ananta Padmanabha Swamy in Trivandrum. This Temple is older than Padmanabha Swamy Temple at Thiruvananthapuram. Its structure is similar to that of Padmanabha Swamy Temple. This temple's style and architecture are taken as the sample to construct the Padmanabha Swamy Temple. The idols of Adikesava and Sree Padmanabha are installed so that they face each other. One of the unique occurrences at this temple is that between the 3rd and 9th day of Puratasi and Panguni,¹ during dusk, the sun's rays directly fall on the Lord inside the sanctum, almost as a mark of respect from the Sun God to Sri Adi Kesava Perumal. Another remarkable feature is the *Ottaikkal Mandapam* (single stone hall) outside the main sanctum of the temple altar, measuring 18ft in width and 3ft in height. That has been built on a single stone in the 12th Century AD.

Geographical Position

Thiruvattar, a charming village and sacred place to the Vaishnavas, is situated in the Kalkulam Taluk of the present Kanyakumari District of Tamilnadu.² This district has been within the jurisdiction of Travancore till 1956 AD; hence, for a study of the district, it must be treated as a part of Travancore. The Kanyakumari District comprises four Taluks: Thovala, Agasthyavaram, Kalkulam, and Vilavancodu. Thovala and Agasthyavaram, the two southernmost Taluks, were known as Nanchinadu. While the Taluks of Kalkulam and Vilavancodu were known as *Idanadu*, Kalkulam Taluk is bound east by Agasthyavaram and Thovala, on the west of Vilavancodu, on the south by the sea and the north by the great mountains of Western Ghats. These separate the district from the Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu³. An observation of the geographical position of Thiruvattar will enable us to understand how nature has influenced and shaped the history of this village. Though the boundaries of the Taluk differed at different times, Thiruvattar was within the jurisdiction of Kalkulam Taluk. Thiruvattar lies at latitude 8°15' north and longitude 77°15' and last about 8kms north of Padmanabhapuram, the old capital of Venadu³. This village is bounded on the north by Thriparappu *Pakuti*, on the east by Ponmana⁶ and Aruvikara *Pakutis*, on the south by Mekkodupakuti and on the west by Arrur and Ayumanapakuties. This village has an area of 7 sq. miles (18.13sq.km).⁴

Etymology

The Sthala Purana of this temple encircles a demon named Kesa. The concerned story is said to be recorded in an old Sanskrit manuscript in the form of a conversation between Sree Paramasiva and Sree Parvathy Devi. This place was known initially as 'AdiAnanthapuram' in the ancient city of Anantha; it became famous later on as 'Thiruvattar'. This name came from abundant water in the form of a swift-making river, 'Vattar' (a river of perennial waters). Because it flowed around the Sri Adikeshava Temple, it gained the honorific prefix 'Thiru' for itself. A less popular version also prevails. It substitutes 'Vattar' with 'Wattar,' the curved river, as it flows through the temple. The Lord Adikeshava Swamy means 'foremost friend'. Legend says that Lord Adikeshava Swamy defeated the demon Kesi. The demon's wife prayed to the River Ganga and River Thamarabharani for the temple's destruction. But it was in vain, and she surrendered to the Lord. Thus, the formation of the rivers made in a circle came to be known as Thiruvattaru.⁵

HISTORICAL EVENTS REGARDING THE ADIKESHAHA TEMPLE

During the rules of Umayamma Rani of Travancore, a Muslim adventurer known as Mukilan, accompanied by his band of men, entered Travancore territory with an eye on plundering the wealth of the temples. The Rani (queen) sent Kottayam Kerala Varma of Malabar to deal with this threat. Kerala Varma, a great scholar, composed what is famous as 'Pata Sankeerthana Slokams' or war reaches for victory. These stanzas were addressed to Sree Adikeshava Perumal, whom he paid homage to as he went into battle. Four miles away from Thiruvattar, Kerala, Varma clashed with Mukilan in armed combat and killed him⁶.

Maharaja Marthanda Varma, maker of modern Travancore, reached Sri Adikeshava Perumal Temple just before embarking on the battle of Kulachal in 1741 AD with the formidable Dutch forces. He prayed before this deity, placed his sword before the idol, and received it back from the officiating priest with the blessing of God. The battle conceded in disaster for the Dutch and triumph for Travancore. Thus, the dreams of conquering the rich land of Travancore entertained by the Dutch lay shattered.

The third incident revolves around the Nawab of Arcote, set in 1740 AD. Chanda Sahib and Bada Sahib, relatives of Nawab, came to the wealthy plains of Manjanadu during their plundering expeditions. He invaded the Temple and carried away the Archana Bimba of the Lord. It was sent to the Nawab and kept locked in a room. Despite piling weights on it, to the amazement of all, it would be found stationed on top of everything. Finally, to prevent this mysterious happening, he secured the idol firmly by making a hole in its head, but its supernatural powers could not be controlled. It is believed that the Arcot Nawab developed a severe stomach ache. Hindu friends asked him to return the sacred idol to its abode immediately. At once, orders were issued by the Nawab for the safe return of the idol, and along with it, the pain disappeared. Realizing his folly and as an expression of gratitude, he sent a gold crown and a gold plate to carry the crown, along with the Archana Moorthy. Both these gold offerings were to accompany the deity daily for the *Sivelies*. It was festival time in the temple when the idol reached back. The Nawab instituted a special pooja at his cost during the ten days of the Uthsava. It is performed on the Uthsava Bimba on a separate Mandapa before being replaced in the sanctum. This pooja continues to this day during the *Uthsavas* and is well-known as the *Thiru Allah Pooja*. The temple is situated at a high elevation in what was once a forest of Chempaka trees blooming in a profusion of golden glory.

The temple of Sree Anantha Padmanabha Swamy at Thiruvananthapuram and Sree Ananthasayee at Thiruvattar closely resemble each other not only in the main icon but as far as the general structure and internal arrangements concerned as well. This holds good for many of the unique modes of worship and festivals. The Kulashekhara Perumal of Travancore, who hailed from chera blue blood, gave equal importance to both temples. Most of the official functions in the family conducted in the Sree Padmanabha Swamy Temple echoed in the Sree Adi Keshava Perumal Temple as well. In fact, '*patti*' and '*pattiyettam*' were performed by the house of Travancore at Thiruvananthapuram, and they had to be performed by the house of Thiruvattar. However, the official surrender as Sree Padmanabha Dasa was restricted to the Sree Padmanabha Swamy Temple. The representative of the Travancore Maharaja, sword in hand, would participate in the Thiruvattar Temple Uthsavas. Still, specific significant differences are in evidence. They are the absence of Sree Brahma in the Sree Kovil and Sree Narasimha Moorthy within the temple's walls at Thiruvattar and their presence in the Temple at Thiruvananthapuram. A separate temple for Sree Narasimha Swamy is situated outside the temple complex, adjacent to the Eastern Nada at the

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back. Siva is seen near the feet of Sree Adi Keshava while he sits in Sree Padmanabha Swamy's right hand. While Sree Keshava Perumal rests with his Head to the South,Sree Padmanabha Perumal also reclines with his head to the South. They are believed to be lying down facing each other.⁷

The dimensions of the Thiruvananthapuram Temple are more elaborate. Barring such dissimilarities, there is no denying the closeness between these Mahakshethras, which significantly and intentionally mirror each other in concept, worship, culture, history and tradition. Since a comparative study of these two great centres of divinity does not fall within the scope of this text, it is not being attempted except in passing reference.

During Rani Gowri Lakshmi Bayi's reign(1811-1814 A.D.), three hundred and forty-eight major temples, including the temple under survey, were brought under the direct control of the Travancore state. There were 14 sub-temples or '*keezhaidams*' operating under the Thiruvattar Temple. As a land owner of natural consequence, it owned extensive acres of paddy fields and landed property. Even under changed circumstanceswith the control of significantdevaswom standing transferred to the Tamil Nadu Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department, it still owns considerable assets like Rubber estate and coconut grove.

Architectural significance

The Hindu Temple Architecture is an open, symmetry-driven structure, with many variations, on a square grid of padas, depicting perfect geometric shapes such as circles and squares. In ancient Indian texts, a Temple is a place for Tirtha Pilgrimage. The Temple of Thiruvattar Temple is a Dravidian-style building with wooden pillars, doors, and roofs. The Lord Siva near LordAdikeshawa Perumal is situated inside the *sannidhi*. Deepalakshmis are many, but one resembles the other. The Ottaikal Mandapam(Single stone Hall), made of a single stone 3 feet thick, is a marvel. OorthuvaThandavam, Venugopala, Rathi, Manmatha, Lakshmana and Indrajith are excellently carved. The Temple is also renowned for its murals.

The temple is closely associated with the famous Sree Anantha Padmanabha Swamy Temple, Thiruvananthapuram⁸. The main deity was initially covered with Gold Kavachams, in which diamonds and other precious stones were embedded, and the Kerala Kings presented them to the

Temple. There is also a small shrine for Lord Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy near the River and opposite the Adikeshava Perumal Temple. Alwar saint Nammalvar had sung two pasurams in praise of Adikeshava Swamy. The idol of Perumal is made of a mixture of materials called *Kada Sarai Yogam with 16,008 Salagrama stones (Stones with Narayana Forms)*. The devotee has to worship perumal through three entrances. The procession deity is in a standing form of grace with Mothers Sree Devi and Bhoodevi. There is no Lotus or Brahma on the Navel of Perumal. It is believed that the Devotee worshipping Perumal here would have no further Birthus. Garuda, Sun, Deities of the five weapons (Panchayadha) demons Madhu and Kaidaba are in the Sanctum Sanctorum, and Maharshittadhaleya is near the head of the Lord. Between the 3rd and 9th day of Puratasi and Panguni, during dusk, the Sun's rays directly fall on the Lord inside the Sanctum, almost as a mark of respect from the sun God to Adikeshava Perumal. ⁹Possibly due to its royal colouring and subsequent position in the domain of Travancore, this Temple offers a fine blend of Kerala and Tamil styles of Architecture. All Artistic elaborations required by a Great Temple are present here. Wood, stone, and other building materials are used to erect this grand edifice. The outer walls of dressed stone rise 10mtrs high and are painted with ochre and white vertical bands, symbolic of the Vaishnava Caste. Majestic heights of Granite steps lead to the entrances from road level, and white stone Pathways on three sides reach the Parali River flowing around the Temple. Only the Northern Gateway gives access to the main road, while the Western one recalls the Panoramic view of the village nestling below. Gable-type architecture adorns the Eastern and Western entrances. Though no full-fledged Gopura exists, the western entrance, which is the main one, is double storied, though the foundation for many more floors has been laid. Preliminary work on it, including the generously sculptured base, has been carried out. ¹⁰

Two hundred and twenty-two Deepalakshmis adorn the Spacious Sivelippura learned from the granite pillars. One extraordinary aspect is that they vary from pillar to pillar in the style of dress, hairstyle, and features. The copper-coved Dhawajasthambha rises beyond the Sivelippura. ¹¹ A Malayalam inscription is engraved at the base of the flag mast. Two gigantic and unidentical Dwarapalakas, flank the entrance of the Belikkalpura.

Based on the Belikkalpura platform, a fragmented inscription related to King Rajendra Chola 1st of the Chola dynasty from 1013 to 1045 AD. This is the earliest inscription here and describes the deity as the Thiruvattar God, who is seen reclining. This hall is multiplied in Nayak style. Its outer

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structure is at total variance with its counterparts in south India due to the construction of its gabled copper-tiled double root. The many granites paved quadrangle. Beautiful and prominent sculptured stone figures Reti and Kamadeva face each other on the raised platforms on either side.

The temple complex contains five Mandapas, some within and some without the second enclosure. They include the Mandapas, where the temple council is said to operate as 'Kothanalloor Sabha', from Kota Udaya Marthanda Varma's region used to meet in session, one where Kerala temple arts were performed, one where Thiru-Allah Puja is conducted and so on. Many of these Mandapas are replete with exquisite wooden carryings, which are the gift of the Travancore craftsmen, to the temple art of this state. Scenes from the Puranas, like churning the ocean of milk, are worked on in detail. The Namaskara Mandapa of the Temple is named after the prince of Travancore, Udaya Marthanda Varma Thiruvati, who had built it. It is cited as a remarkable example of Kerala carving. The pillars are also excellent specimens of the same. Inviting attention is the wooden ceiling of the Mandapa, where, among other carvings, Sree Vinayaka sculptures carved out of granite pillars are a wonder world of celestial beauty. They include highly rated sculptures of dancing Kali, Indrajith, Venugopala, Kirata, OorthaTandaua of Mataraja, Sree Rama, Lakshmana, Hanuman, Vettakkaran, an unusual panel of a cow being suckled by a lioness and figures of the saint king Kulasekhara Alvar as well as other Chera royalty. The subsidiary figures are also mainly rated high, with the figure of an Apsara¹², standing on the side of handsome Indrajith, flower garland in hand, ready to use him being given top quality. She is cited as possessing such excellence that the master craftsman removed the left eyeball to present perfection. Over the temple, stone, wood and stucco have lent themselves to expert craftsmanship.

The central western double doorway gaining entry into the *Chuttambalam* is unusual. On the second panel of one door, instead of a lotus, is an Ananthashayana, and on the other door, in the same manner, a GopastreeVasthrakshepa is presented. The rest of the panels carry the traditional wooden lotuses. The Edanazhi in the Chuttambalam ends in the inner, and his marriage procession, complete with bandsmen, is entrancingly executed.

The next enclosure is the *Cheruchuttu*¹³, The Srikovil of Sri Adikeshava Perumal follows within these confines. It is copper tiled and has a gold stupa lined up on top. It is fronted by the Ottakkal Mandapa, which conjoins these *Srikovil*. This Mandapa measures feet square and 3 feet in thickness and, like its counterpart in the Sree Padmanabha Swamy Temple, is considered an

architectural feat. Beautiful figures curved out of wood are seen in and around this area. The inner wooden door is also lavish in ornamentation. Only the Maharaja of Travancore has the right to prostrate on this *Mandapa*.

Inside the rectangular Srikovil, which can be viewed through three sets of doorways, with the middle guarded by Dwarapalakas, rests the mighty Sri Adikeshava Perumal on the serpent Adishesha.¹⁴ This idol has two arms, and the total length is 18 feet. Made of KatuSarkara Yogam, the most complicated, have been lined with 6008 salagrams. A gold *anki* covers the idols from neck to knee. The Perumal is in Yoga Nidra with a head towards the south. The right-hand exhibits the mystic symbol known as 'Chin Mudra' while the left-hand stretches out. Beautiful idols of Sri Devi and Bhoo Devi are seated nearby and are also of KatuSarkara. Siva is present in Linga form and is kept on a wooden plank near the feet of Bhagavan, but Brahma is absent.¹⁵ This Linga was initially worshipped in a Brahmin household and was entrusted to the temple much later. They are beautifully crafted. The Uthsava Moorthy kept within the Shrine was stolen some years back, and festivals were consequently suspended. Due to the interest of the Tamil Nadu government, another silver Uthsava Moorthy was made, and the festival was once more conducted in 1996. The gold Garudavahana of the deity and Naradamuni on the wall house find a place in the Sanctum. The gold idol of Thripparappu Sri Mahadeva used to be in this Srikovil for a long, receiving its share of daily worship. This sacred idol is deeply distressing, though it remains in sad neglect in a substantial room where it was shifted for security reasons following a series of significant thefts in Thiruvattar Temple. To the right and left of the Mandapa, separate from it, are rooms that are too long-railed. They house ten painted figures representing the Desa Avathara of Maha Vishnu and Vishwakesana, along with Druva and Bhrigu Maharshi, respectively, on either side. At the northwestern corner of the Thirumuttam is a small platform seated for idols representing the Veda Moorthies' great Yagas that used to be conducted here. This again confirms that Travancore will be a Yaga Bhoomi once, contradicting the country's belief.

Outside the Chuttambalam, in the northwestern corner facing east, is the independent temple dedicated to Sree Krishna as Venugopala (the divine flute player). A Sree Krishna Temple of similar status and situation is found in the Sree Padmanabha Swamy Temple, as well as with some modifications.¹⁶ The Thiruvattar Sree Krishna Swamy is believed to have been consecrated in 1235 AD and projects on early Chola style of architecture. The idol is made of granite. Despite its

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independent nature, this Shrine has no Dwajasthambha, and a makeshift one is provided during the Uthsavas. The SapthaMaathikkal (7 mothers) find their place as Beli stones here and in the temple's name. Another separate shrine with the temple walls stands in the southern country areas and is dedicated to Sastha. He faces east. A notable feature is the presence of Namskara Mandapas. It indicates this deity's importance as shrines usually do not have such Mandapas. This structure is a beautifully carried ceiling of wood on which, in addition to the Ashtadikpalakas, scenes from Ramayana are also depicted. In a room near the southern wall, some salagramas and Sivalingas are kept. The available inscription in this temple did not help much in gleaning information about the administrative framework of the Adikeshava temple. At the same time, the Mathilakom records, Nittus or royal writs of Travancore Maharajas, Devasom records, and Tirattu or account are mainly in asses in the mode of administration of this temple. However, the religious and ministerial administrative staff were turned differently, such as Devakarmikal, Devakarya, peyyunnavarkal, and Thiruppathy SriVaishnavarkal.

The inscription of Koda Marthanda Varma of 348 M.E (1178 AD) in this temple, already noticed, refers to the provision for daily rice and chaff-free paddy to be brought. These, in the beginning, orals were the transfers of this temple. Kudanailorsabha might have administered the affairs of the temple during that time. According to the Huzur office plate of Karunandadakkan, the land Ay king there existed a Sabha within the Ay Kingdom.¹⁷ Thus, Sabha existed during the 9th century AD in the Kalkulam taluk of Kanyakumari District of Tamil Nadu. Hence, at Kudainalloralso, there might have been a Sabha during that century; probably, Kudainallorsabha might have been entrusted with the work of administering this temple. Adi Keshava temple was one of the major whose administration came under the control of the state. However, the Land Revenue Department administered these temples in the state's name. This order of assumption was executed not under any law but under the Melkoima right vested with the sovereign as the spiritual head of the state.

CONCLUSION

The historical antiquity of the temple is well established through clear and conspicuous references made in religious and literary works. It can be seen that the temple has been in antiquity for about 1200 years. Though some temples can claim great historical antiquity, they have only mythological origin. We can see references to this temple in various Puranas and literature. This reference gives

information on the antiquity of this temple. The unique workmanship employed for the construction of the temple reserves special attention. The temple's central aspect is that stone and wood have been used to depict art and culture. This temple's style and architecture were taken as the sample to construct the Sri Ananta Padmanabha Swamy Temple. This temple, once a power centre of protection, now faces neglect from the authorities. It lost its popularity after the fall of the Travancore royal family. Yet the rich and rare treasures that Sree Adikeshava Perumal holds are still best ours, lavish on the passing world and undisturbed by the fluctuations of fortune.

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