



ICONOGRAPHICAL STUDY ON THIRUKKANNAPURAM SAURIRAJA PERUMAL TEMPLE

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Abstract: *A Hindu temple is a symbolic house, seat and body of god. It is a structure designed to bring human beings and gods together, using symbolism to express the ideas and beliefs of Hinduism. The temple is the focus for all aspects such as religious, cultural, educational and social. Architecture of a Hindu temple, these core elements are evidenced in the oldest surviving 5th- 6th century. The present study focused of iconographical of Sauriraja perumal temple in Thirukkannapuram. Vishnu is one of the principal deities of Hinduism, and the Supreme Being in its Vaishnavism tradition. The Sauriraja perumal temple is of great significance because it figures prominently in the hymns of Kulasekarar, Nammalvar, Antal and Tirumankai. The temples consist of the sanctum sanctorum, ardhamanapa, mahamandapa and mukhamandapa. The temple being of Vaisnava affiliation most of the iconographical illustrations pertain to the avatars. Among the minor divinities are dvarapalakas, Nidhis, Garuda, Hanumat and Donor . Among these images, a rare specimen of Pancamukha Anjaneya adds the richness of iconographical heritage. The Sauriraja perumal temple is richest historical aspect and Vishnu with Devi represent temple of Thirukkannapuram area in Nagapattinam district. Though there are several hundreds of temples for the Lord Vishnu in India, the one studied herein have a legendary mark in Tamil Vaisnavism.*

Keywords: *Sourirajaperumal Temple, iconography, Vishnu, Devis*

INTRODUCTION

A temple is a structure reserved for religious or spiritual rituals and activities such as prayer and sacrifice. It is typically used for such buildings belonging to all faiths where a more specific term such as church, mosque or synagogue is not generally used in English. These include Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism among religions with many modern followers, as well as other ancient religions such as Ancient Egyptian religion¹. The symbolism and structure of a Hindu temple are rooted in Vedic traditions, deploying circles and squares². A temple incorporates all elements of Hindu cosmos presenting the good, the evil and the



human, as well as the elements of Hindu sense of cyclic time and the essence of life symbolically presenting dharma, kama, artha, moksa and karma³. The spiritual principles symbolically represented in Hindu temples are given in the ancient Sanskrit texts of India, while their structural rules are described in various ancient Sanskrit treatises on architecture⁶ Vishnu is the "preserver" in the Hindu trinity that includes Brahma and Shiva⁸. In Hindu iconography, Vishnu is usually depicted as having a dark, or pale blue complexion and having four arms. A traditional depiction is Vishnu reclining on the coils of the serpent Shesha, accompanied by his consort Lakshmi, as he "dreams the universe into reality"⁹. The reality would be brought in to public through this studies. It is an attempt of a study of this scholar, humanly is not possible to explain all aspects of this temple with full details because of not available some of the reliable sources.

DETAILS OF STUDY AREA

Sauriraja Perumal Temple in Thirukkannapuram, a village in the outskirts of Nagapattinam in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, is dedicated to the Hindu god Vishnu. Thirukkannapuram is on the Nagapattinam-Nannilam route.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The present studies are regulated following objectives i) Historical importance of the Sauriraja Perumal Temple ii) Architectural elegant of Sauriraja Perumal Temple iii) Iconographical stylish of the Sauriraja Perumal and Devis and other deities in Thirukkannapuram.

SOURCE OF STUDY

The study has utilized both primary and secondary data in order to collect and gather primary, temple observation and structure. The secondary data were gathered from the record of temple books and journal.

HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE OF THE TEMPLE

Sauriraja Perumal Temple is Vishnu god and the temple constructed in the Dravidian style of architecture, the temple is glorified in the *Divya Prabandha*, the early medieval Tamil canon of the Azhwar saints from the 6th – 9th centuries AD. It is one of the 108 *Divyadesam* dedicated to Vishnu, who is worshipped as Neelamegha Perumal and his consort Lakshmi as Tirukkannapura Nayagi. As per Hindu legend, the presiding deity is believed to have



appeared with a wig to save a devotee, leading to the name Saurirajan. Thirukkannapuram literally means City of Kannan. The presiding Lord of the Thirukkannapuram temple is *Sauriraja*. The Sanskrit word *saura* means 'hero' or 'heroic'. *Sauri* also means the locks of hair. Therefore, *Sauriraja* stands for a heroic king or the Lord whose locks of hair are beautiful¹⁰.

The mulabera in the *sanctum sanctorum* stands facing the east. He is in sthanaka (*T. ninra kolam*)¹¹. The Goddess of the temple is called Kannapuranyaki. The *vimana* is of the *utphalavadaka* variety. The tank is called *nityapuskarini*. Sage Kanva and *Garuda* are believed to have rendered services to the Lord. The following hymns of the Alvar extol the praise of the Lord: Nammalvar's *Tiruvaymoli*, Kulacekarar's *Perumal Tirumoli*, Periyalvar's *Tirumoli*, Antal's *Nacciyar Tirumoli*, Tirumankai's *Periya Tirumoli*, *Ciriyatirumatal*, *Periyatirumatal* and *Tirunetntantakam*.

Thirukkannapuram is the only place that has been extolled in about 128 hymns of the Alvars. Literature is mainly the hymns of the Alvars from Kulasekara to Tirumankai. Inscriptional sources date since the time of Rajaraja I. Kulasekara Alvar is to talk about the ksetra. He has 11 hymns in the *Perumal Tirumoli*. He was born in the womb of the world famous Koala (wife of Dasaratha). He reached Cempon having wrecked the crowns of the King of southern Lanka. You are the eye's black pupil, the Lord of Thirukkannapuram is surrounded by forts¹². Nammalvar, next to Tirumankai, has contributed the maximum number of hymns. His contributions are *Tiruvaymoli*, *Tiruviruttam*, *Tiruvaciriyam* and *Periva Tiruvantati*. Forts surround Thirukkannapuram. There the Lord is resting on the leaf of *al*¹³. *Tirumoli* of Periyalvar has exalted the Lord at Thirukkannapuram. You offer blessings to all those men and women that have had your *Darsana*. You are the Lord of Kurunkut, Vellarai and Colaimalai. You are the honey of fortified Thirukkannapuram. My Lord dances the *Centkirai* type of dance. Lord of the seven worlds do dance and dance. Vishnu like Siva is a great dancer and Nataraja¹⁴. The *Nacciyar Tirumoli* of Antal talks of Vamana who is pleased to occupy happily Venkatam in the forest and Kannapurankar. Come running, take my hand, unite with me and dance and dance with me. Antal's supplication in the *Nacciyar Tirumoli* is full erotic appeals¹⁵. Tirumankai Alvar has 100 hymns on Thirukkannapuram that appears in the *Periya Tirumoli* as follows. The *cakra* resembles the bow and the *sankha* powerful missile. He holds the powerful *dhanus* in a hand. The other hand holds the warlike



disc. He stands as the *garbhagrha* (*karuvaraipol ninran*) who is the Lord of Thirukkannapuram. The holy basil appears on his long crown. He wears the shilling makarakundalas¹⁶. He wears the golden necklace, studded with gems¹⁷. Thirukkannapuram temple has been celebrating the four ayanas of the year and festivals during the Tamil months of *Aippaci* (October-November), *Cittirai* (April-May) and *Maci* (February-March)²². The record reveals the fact that Utkrsta-ayogana (va) or Pattanavar were weavers who supply cloth to the gods, kings and peoples¹⁸.

ARCHITECTURAL ELEGANT OF THE TEMPLE

The Indian temples whether Buddhist, Jain or Hindu could be viewed in two perspectives, viz., horizontal and vertical¹⁹. The temple faces the east. The Lord is in *sthanaka* mode. Devi is called Kannapuranyaki. The Vimana is of the *utpalavadaka* variety. The temple is in two *prakaras*. The square *garbhagrha* is subjoined in the east by the *ardhamandapa*, *mukhamandapa* and *mahamandapa*. The *garbhagrha* is fitted with three *devakosthas*. On the northeast corner, small chapels for *Palliyarai* (bedroom) and Sauri perumal are present. The *ardhamandapa* is fitted with eighteen pillars. The *mahamandapa* consists of the same number of pillars. On the northest direction, a chapel for Cakravarttitirumakal butts out of the *prakara*, peering into the second *prakara*. The entrance to the temple is in the south of the *mahamandapa*. The eastern section of the *mahamandapa* accommodates the chamber of *Paksiraja-Garuda*.

The second *prakara* in the south provides separate chapels for Kannapuranyaki and Antal. These two include a *mukhamandapa* and *mahamandapa*. A variety of pillars stand in the empty space that links this part of the temple with the main shrine. On the east of the main temple in the second *prokara* a pavilion for *Garuda* and the *dvajasthamba* stand. A *gopura* adorns the *tirumatil* in the east. The *rayagopura* appears nearby in the east. The *tirukkulam* lies to the east of the rayagopura. Normally the *tirukkulam* appears close to the eastern *rayagopura* only in case of Ugramurtis in order to do away with the *raudra* of the Lord. The second *prakara* on the southeast accommodates a chamber for Bhibisana who is called an Alvan. Nearby the *matappalli* (temple kitchen) lie. The chamber for Alvars and the *vahanamandapa* lie on the southeastern wall part. The yagasala lies on the northeast.

The vimanas of the temple conform to the prescriptions of the *siasastras*. The *mulavar vimana* accommodates three devakosthas, housing images. The *gopuras* are of the usual



mode with a solid stone plinth and superstructure of brick and mortar. The small *gopura* is in two *talas* and the *rayagopura* in six *talas*. *Karnakudus* and *kosthapanjaras* appear on the *talas*. The towering member of the *gopuras* is a barrel-shaped *sikhara*. *Mahanasikas* appear at the either end of the *sikhara*. The Hindu temple is of three basic varieties that are applicable to the different parts of the country²⁰.

Temple Type	Region	Shape	Presiding God
Nagara	North India (region from Himalaya to Vindhya)	Square (<i>catuasya</i>)	Brahma
Vesara	Central India (region from Vindhya to Kirsna river)	Circle (<i>vrta</i>)	Siva
Dravida	Far South (region to south of the Kirsna)	Octagonal (<i>astaksara</i>)	Vishnu

ICONOGRAPHICAL STYLISH OF THE TEMPLE

Vishnu iconography show him with a dark blue, blue-gray or black colored skin, and as a well dressed jeweled man. He is typically shown with four arms, but two armed representations are also found and discussed in Hindu texts on artworks²¹⁻²². Vishnu iconography shows him either in standing pose, seated in a yoga pose, or reclining. Archaeological evidence suggests that Vishnu temples and iconography probably were already in existence by the 1st century BCE²³. Iconographical forms of Vishnu have been gleaned from texts since the early Vedic period as the *Rig Veda* talks of the striding Lord, Trivikrama²⁴. Vishnu appears alone in several instances. He is rarely seated and mostly standing. Vishnu in *Padma Purana* is supposed to be reclining and in the company of Sri, Bhu and Niladevi²⁵. Several images of Vishnu-alone (in case of Nrsimha, he is called Kevala-Nrsimha²⁶ appear in the temples under study. Most of the images are of the sthanaka type. At least ten images of *sthanaka Vishnu* are reported from Thirukkannapuram temple.

The three images from the Thirukkannapuram temple are housed in *devaksthas*. The *kiritamakutas* are short. Two images hold the gada in the front right or left hand. In one, the left is in *Uruhasta* mode. The major *avatars* are ten and so-called dasavatara (dasa "ten"). They are: *Matsya*, *Kurma*, *Varaha*, Nrsimha, Vamana/Trivikrama, Parasurama, Sri Rama, Balarama, Kirsna and Kalki²⁷. The plinth mouldings of the Thirukkannapuram temple accommodate such a running panel of the dasavatas. Thirukkannapuram temple houses an image in a devakostha. The thighs and belly are prominent. He is nude.



Thirukkannapuram temple accommodates an image of dancing Kirsna in a miniature relief within a *kirtimukha*. No attendant is present, including the snake, Kaliya. These two images lend further support to the theory of the Dance of Vishnu. Kaliya in the Thirukkannapuram image is five hooded. Kirsna is nude, thereby suggesting he is still a boy and not a lad or man. Kirsna playing his magical band, the *venu* "flute", is called Venugopala. One image is from the Thirukkannapuram temple. A image housed in devakosthas.

The Lord is seated on the neck of *Garuda-purusa*. Four armed, he holds the *cakra* and *sankha* in *parahastas*. The forearms are in *abhaya* and *varada*. The elephant and crocodile appear below. Two miniature reliefs appear in the Thirukkannapuram temple.

ICONOGRAPHICAL STYLISH OF DEVIS AND OTHERS

Normally Vishnu temples do not accommodate images of Siva, Ganapati and Murukan. This trend is common since the early medieval period as one may find in the Vaikuntha Perumal temple at Kanci²⁸. *Devakosthas* also accommodate images, especially in the shrines dedicated to Devis. Gajalaksmi is also known as Gajapujitalaksmi. Gaja is elephant and *pea* "worshipping". In this mode, Laksmi is worshipped by two elephants that stand to the right and left. Thirukkannapuram temple houses an image in which Devi is seated in *ardhapadmasana*. *Caturbhuj*a, the rear arms hold *padmas*. *Dvarapalaka*s (*T. vayirkappan*) are gatekeepers that appear at the entry point to any Indian temple, Buddhist or Hindu. *Dvarapalaka*s appear in Thirukkannapuram temple surveyed. *Garuda* is the mount of Vishnu. The *Garuda Purana* narrates his heroic exploits who fought with Indra valorously. *Garuda* image appear in Thirukkannapuram temple. The images have the hands folded in *anjali bandha* and wings.

Hanumat or Anjaneya with a projecting mouth (*hanu*) like a monkey is the aide of Rama in the *Ramya*na. Actually the faces are three, central frontal human and two on sides in profile. One is supposed to be behind and one above. The upper part of the head is a *kirita*, which could be counted as a head²⁹. The images from the Thirukkannapuram temple show Hanumat with a human body and monkey face. The hands are folded in *anjali bandha*. The *Acaryapurusa*s that came in the later medieval period commented on these works and the *Vedas*³⁰. *Acaryapurusa*s festivities were undertaken in their honor. Images of the *Acaryas* were installed in a quarter of the temple. An image of *Acaryas* has located on Thirukkannapuram temple. Ramanuja is seated and usually holds a banner in a hand. A five-



hooded snake appears above the head of *Manavalmamuni* as he is supposed to be an incarnation of Adisesa. Donor to the temples used to install their images with their spouses in a part of the temple since the Pallava period³¹. An image from the Thirukkannapuram temple illustrates a king who wears a sword on his hip. He has the hands in *anjelibandha*.

CONCLUSION

Sculpture is the art of making statues. The Sanskrit terms *archa bera* or *vigraha* and the Tamil terms *bimbam* or *silai* are used to signify the idols or images. Thirukkannapuram temple is large establishments with constructional evidences getting back to the Chola time and coming down to the Nayaka-Maratha periods. Recent additions and renovations were going since the 19th century. The temple is in two or three *prakaras*, endowed with *rayagopuras*, *teppakkulams* and pillared halls. Besides the main shrine for Lord Vishnu secondary chapels for Tayar and Antal exist. Minor deities of the Vaisnava pantheon such as Garuda, Hanumat and the Acaryapurusas have chambers reserved for them. The temples consist of the *sanctum sanctorum*, *ardhamanapa*, *mahamandapa* and mukhamandapa. Others, e.g. *vasantamandapa*, are reserved for festive celebrations. These serve the purpose of ablution for pilgrims and water-chariot festival during *mahotsavas*. The temple is endowed with a *vahanas* for procession of *baliberas* during festivals. The temple being of Vaisnava affiliation most of the iconographical illustrations pertain to the *avatars*. The *garbhagrhas* enshrine cult images of Vishnu names Sauriraja. Other aspects of Vishnu are Vaikunthamurti, Laksmi-Narayana, seated and standing Vishnu, Sesasayi, *dasavataras* (particularly Sri Rama, Kirsna as Kaliyamardana and Venugopala, Nrsimha slaughtering Hiranya or united with Laksmi), Garuda-Narayana and Donor. These images include rare elements and add to the iconographical heritage of the Tamil country. Some of the Devis such as Icchasakti, Krryasakti and Jnanasakti are housed in *devakosthas* for the Devi shrines. The iconographical catalogue includes the images of Vaisnavi, Gajalaksmi and so on. Vishnu is the delicious food for Kulasekarar who calls him *enkal innamute Rakavan*, Raghava our most delicious food.

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8. David White (2006), *Kiss of the Yogini*, University of Chicago Press, ISBN 978-0226894843, pages 4, 29
9. Fred S. Kleiner (2007). *Gardner's Art through the Ages: Non-Western Perspectives*. Cengage Learning. p. 22.
10. Kesava is another name of Vishnu, which means one with beautiful locks of hair.
11. 17. Images in the *garbhagrha*, called mulabera, are either sthanaka, asana (T. irunta kolam) or sayana (T. kitanta kolam).
12. Cempon is another *divyaksetra*.
13. It is a reference to the Vatapatrasayi form of the Lord in which he is reclining on the leaf of the *vata* or *al* leaf. For an illustration see Raju Kalidos, *Temple Cars of Medieval Tamilaham*, Pl. 34.
14. Kurukur is the birth place and Catakopan the christened name of Nammalvar.
15. Raju Kalidos, Dance of Vishnu: the Spectacle of Tamil Alvars, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Cambridge 1999, Vo. 3:9:2, pp. 223-50.
16. Two types of ear ornaments are popular in Indian tradition. They are *makarakundala* (*makara*, mythical fish) and *patrakudala* (*patra*, leaf).
17. Vishnu's favorite necklace is the *vaijayantimala*.
18. ARE, 1922, no. 508.
19. There is no much difference in the horizontal and vertical sections of the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain temples. All are of the same type. Only with reference to the



- sculptures, the distinction between the three could be chalked out, e.g. the Jain temples in Sravanabelgola, Buddhist temples in Kancipuram and any Hindu temple.
20. *Mayamata*, Chap. 19, p. 322.
 21. Steven Kossak; Edith Whitney Watts (2001). *The Art of South and Southeast Asia: A Resource for Educators*. Metropolitan Museum of Art. pp. 30–31, 16, 25, 40–41, 74–78, 106–108. .
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 24. Kalpana S. Desai, *Iconography of Vishnu* pp. 1-2. The author cites Macdonell, Keith and Jan Gonda in this regard
 25. *Ibid.*, 1.2.3-6.
 26. Kevala means "alone", "exclusively one's own". See Monier M. Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, p. 309.
 27. Iconographically Kalki may be anthropomorphic or theriomorphic with a horse-face. The horse-faced is also known as Hayagriva (haya "horse") who in another mythology is supposed to do away with a demon, called Hayagriva who had the head of a horse.
 28. This temple accommodates some images of Siva as a subservient principle to Vishnu. It is a reaction to several of the Saiva forms in which Vishnu is subordinated to Siva; e.g. Lingodbhavamarti.
 29. According to the Rupamandana, cited in B.N. Sharma (1976: 2-3), the upper looking fifth head in Sadasiva represents Isana who is invisible. He need not be presented in anthropomorphic form.
 30. The descendancy of the Acaryas is as follows: Ramanuja Kurattalvar, Nanjiyar, Nampillai ,Vatakkuttiruvitipillai: Pillailokacarya and Alakiyamanavalar (Rangaswami 2006: 1).
 31. Raju Kalidos, *Encyclopaedia of Hindu Iconography: Early Medieval*, Vol. IV, Pl. LIV.