



JALAKANTESWARA TEMPLE OF VELLORE – A CENTRE OF HISTORICAL, RELIGIOUS AND TOURIST ATTRACTION

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ABSTRACT :

Tamil Nadu is known as the land of temples not without reason. The huge temples of Tamil Nadu are known as much for their architectural and historical splendor as they are for their sacredness. In fact, it would not be exaggerating to say that the Jalakanteswara Temple of Vellore is a centre of tourist attractions in its own right . It is one of the best specimen known for architectural beauty and a centre of thronging of devotees of Tamil Nadu.



KEYWORDS : Jalakanteswara Temple, Bomma Reddy, Architecture, Sculpture, Vellore, Velpadi, River Palar

INTRODUCTION :

According to one legend Vellore Fort was built by Bomma Reddy (also referred as Bommi Reddy), a native of Basrachalam, a town on the bank of the river Godavari. According to the oral tradition, Bomma Reddy's mother's name was Lakshmi. As both the brothers were still small boys their mother died. The father married again, and had four sons from the second wife. When the boys came from the age Ethama Reddy divided his property into two halves gave one to the two sons from the first wife and the other half to the sons of the second wife. This division rankled the four sons who conspired to get rid of the step-brothers and usurp their land . The later came to know of the conspiracy providentially and escaped from Badrachalam .They fled south towards Rameshwaram enroute and they halted at a village called Thirumani near Pallikonda.¹

One day Bomma Reddy went to forest in search of some game. He took his dog with him. As they were proceeding all of a sudden a hare assaulted his dog on a particular spot. He was astonished at the incident but dismissed it as and happening due to interposition of superman Dane influence. That night he dreamed in which he saw a lingam on a spot where his dog was attacked by the hare. He was told in the dream that it was his duty to dig the lingam out and built a temple on the spot. Further he dreamed that a treasure would be found on a particular spot on the hills. which he discovered and built the temple and fort.²

According to another legend, the king of the region where there Reddy brothers took asylum was Raja Karikala Chola. His capital was Kailasapatnam. Bomma Reddy went to king to pay his respects. He told the king his story and sought his permission to get settled down in his kingdom, which the king willingly granted. The brothers were asked to settle a Velapadi, a settlement south of the river Palar. There were already many families living in Velapadi. Once a notorious bandit from Arni came to Velapadi with the intention of plundering the families living there, the Reddy brothers went to the rescue of the people. They gave him a fight and forced him to flee. The incident was reported to Raja Karikala Chola. He called the

brothers and rewarded them for their bravery and placed under the command of Bomma Reddy a group of Soldiers.

Bomma Reddy was a devotee of Lord Siva .He ardently desired to build a temple for the Lord. One night he dreamed in which he was pointed a place from where he could get treasure which would help him in fulfilling his life time dream. He found the treasure and took possession of the riches. He was looking for building a temple. Accidentally there came a very proficient architect from North India who had come down to the south to visit all holy shrines. The architect heard about the search of an architect on his way from Tirupathi to Tiruvannamali. He came to Velapadi and met Bomma Reddy and offered his services which the latter accepted with pleasure. Thus the fort came to be built.³

Yet another legend is in circulation . Bomma Reddy who had settled down at Velapady, had a cow with a five-teat udder. Once he found that it suckled to a cobra with five hoods He also found that the serpent lived in an anthill in the middle of a pool of water. In fact the serpent was none other than Lord Siva who communicated to Bomma Reddy in his dream to build a temple for him. He also pointed at the spot where a treasure lay buried as well as a lingam. Bomma Reddy took possession of the treasure and built the temple and placed the lingam in the temple. The temple was completed and dedicated to Jalakanteswara or Siva residing in water.⁴

The architect of the temple came some where from north India. In an occasion both the architect and Bomma Reddy were standing near the plot where when the temple was intended to be built, suddenly there came a hare and began chasing Bomma Reddy's hunting dog. The animal ran in certain way. Both men took it as a sign from the unseen, indicative of the plan.

The deity of the temple is called Jalakanteswara. It is a combination of two words Jal (water) and Kant (neck). The Sivea linga was found submerged in water in the pool upto its neck, and hence the name Jalakaenteswara. But all the inscriptions available regarding this temple refer the name as Javaraharesawara which means one who destroys Jvara (Vyadi) sickness The name originally given to the deity was Jvarakanteswara which became in course of time Jalakanteswara.⁵

Epigraphically evidences are found in seven villages around Vellore. Out of these eight four seem to have been engraved in the same year in Atchaya year Saka 1488 corresponding to A.D 1566, during the reign of the Vijayanagar King Sadasivadeva Maharaya. The eight inscriptions mention that Chinna Bomma Nayaka submitted his request to Thirumalai Devaraya to obtain permission from the king Sasasivadeva Maharaya for the grant of villages to be gifted to Jalakanteswara temple at Vellore. The details of the inscriptions are given below.

Inscription I

This was found in village called Arapakkam, which lies east of Vellore, in between Vellore and Arcot. This mentions a requisition made by Chinna Bomma Nayak to Tirumalaiadevaraya which was to be forwarded to Sadasivadeva Maharaya, the king of the region. The king granted the gift of the village (Arapakkam) to the Jalakanteswarar temple on Saturday, the 2nd of Iypasi (Tamil) month.

Inscription- II

This inscription was found in Ariyur Village, near Vellore. According to this the two villages of Sitteri and Murugeri (close to Ariyur) were gifted to the Jalakanteswara temple of Vellore.⁶

Inscription- III

This inscription refers to the gifting of Saduperi village. saduperi near Vellore is a village and there stand a huge waterbody known as Saduperi Tank ('eri' means tank). This village was also gifted to the temple in the fort.⁷

Village of Arapakkam, Sitteri, Murugeri and Saduperi were gifted by Chinna Bomma Nayak He got permission from the king Sadasivadeva Maharaya to do so through Mahamandalsevar who ruled the Vellore region on behalf of the Vijayanagar king.

Talaikotta battle was fought in 1565 changed the equation in the governing pattern of the South India. The central power of the Vijayanagar Empire declined and some of the governors who ruled on behalf of the Emperor became assertive. There are three inscriptions pertaining to Jalakanteswara Temple, dated 1575. But this time the Mahamandaleswara was Sriranga Deva Maharaya I who ruled over Karnataka.

Inscription- IV

It is found in Sathuvachari which was a village on the eastern side of Vellore then, and at present it is part of Vellore City. This village was gifted to the Temple of Jalakanteswara.⁸

Inscription- V

This inscription mention the gift of the village then known as Sampanginallore to Jalakateswara Temple.⁹

Inscription- VI

It was found in Perumugai a village between Vellore and Arcot .This village was also gifted to the Jalakateswara Temple.¹⁰

Inscription- VII

This inscription was found in Sakkanur village . This village too was had been gifted in the same way to the Jalakateswara Temple.¹¹

All these inscriptions make one point very clear that the construction in one form or other had been executed most probably an addition to the temple by Bommi Nayak who would have obtained permission from the monarch whose viceroy he was. Though temples are abodes of the gods, definite techniques were applied for building the temples The techniques and the layouts of the temple varied from region to region and time to time The patterns and styles were derived from vedic and puranic sources and the construction was done as per the tenets of vastu.

The temples of India are divided into three major groups depending on the layout, artistic appearance and architecture. These three groups are Nagara, Vasara and Dravida.¹² All North Indian temples built north of the river Narmada are generally labeled as Nagara.

The temple which had been built in the Deccan Plateau and in the northern part of the Tamil country are classified as Vasara. The temple standing south of the river Krishna upto Kanyakumari are called as Dravida. Under the last group come all those temples which were built by the Pallavas the Cholas, the Pandyas besides the Hoyasalas of Dwarasamudra and Chalukyas of Badami.

The Pallavas and the Pandyas built magnificent temples. This art reached its zenith under the Cholas. In addition to these monarchs many of chieftains such as Sambuvarayars, Mutharayars, Adiyamans and the like also built temples and shrines. During the Vijayanagar rule, religion received a shot in the arm. Temples were enlarged and renovated. Patronage of temples became the creed of the well-to-do. Particularly the Nayaks, the rulers of the regions representing the monarch, took special care to build or enlarge temples. By this time building temples became an artistic pursuit and one beauty after another was given shape.

The historians have come to the conclusion that the Temple of Jalakanteswara which stands inside the fort of Vellore was built by Venderumankonda Sambuvarayar during the early Fourteenth Century. They conclude that the first stage of this temple was undoubtedly the contribution of this king.¹³ The outer *prakara* and *mandapas* located there in must have been added to the earlier structures of Sambuvarayaras during the time of Sadasivadeva Maharaya (A.D. 1540-1572) when Chinna Bommi Nayaka was the Chieftain of the region of Vellore. And this conclusion is substantiated by the inscription quoted earlier.

The construction work of Jalakanteswara was commenced on 19th of the month of Panguni in Sukkila year corresponding to Salivahanna year of Kaliyoga and to after consulting auspicious days in almanac. As it stands today Sri Jalakanteswara temple is situated on the northern side of the fort, inside it not far from rampart in A.D.1193.¹⁴ At present there are steps going down to reach the temple. The level of the fort carpet area had been raising since it was built. When the temple was built both the level of the temple and surrounding space would have been the same. The ground level of the temple is nearly three meters lower than the plane and the steps help one to reach the temple. Since the offices of the North Arcot district were moved inside the fort in the beginning of the early 1920s, the ground level has been maintained.

The Archaeological department was entrusted the job of safeguarding the temples as then there was no deity in the temple. Then the level of the temple carpet area and that of the fort was the same. The department was trying to find ways and means to drain rain water which used to get logged. A systematic excavation, as it is the want of the Archaeological department, was carried out in and around the temple premises. Then it came to the light that mud had completely covered the ground to a substantial height. The removal of accumulated mud exposed the level of the ground as well as the excellently laid drainage system. The excavation further brought to light the following.

1. Adhistana mouldings of the temple's structure.
2. Shrines of the temple.
3. A tank, square in shape with a flight of steps, located on the east of the marriage hall built next to the temple.
4. A small ring well on the north-eastern corner of the inner prakara of the temple.¹⁵

The main entrance of the temple otherwise referred to generally as Gopuradwara, is a very imposing structure. There is yet another entrance perhaps built to decongest the inflow of the devotees during the festival occasions. It is not as grand as the main one. Both these entrance face south, and they are connected by a huge compound wall referred to as Thirumadhil ('Thiru' means sacred and 'Madhil' means wall). This wall was around the temple on all four sides. These walls are built in such a way that two separate sections stand. One is known as outer *prakara* and the other inner *prakara*.

Jalakanteswara temple's complex occupies a total area of 8786 square metres measuring 95.6 meters in length and 92 meters in breadth. Like similar edifice, the main gopura is rectangular in shape, measuring 23 meters in length and 15 meters in breadth. For the base of this *gopura* and upto its height of fifteen metres granite stones have been used for construction. Over the structure of this *gopura* stand seven tiers, generally known as *talas*. To erect those *talas* brick and mortar had been used. They go on reducing there dimension till the *griva* (neck) is reached. Then the top is capped with vaugon vault, with *nasika* and *yalis* on both sides. The middle top has seven *kalasams* in a raw all of which point to the sky. Each of the seven *talas* has openings on two sides, on the southern and northern side. They have been built in such a way that they present a sloppy appearance, at the same time being gradually reduced in size. On the side of both southern and northern openings there is a *dwarabalakas*.

At the four corners of the *gopura* there stand four load beams hewn out of stones. Then there is the *griva* portion. On all these the stone load bearers and the *griva* there are attractive stucco figures of various deities. The doorway of the *gopura* stands 7.15 meters tall whereas its width measures 4.15 meters. The doorway is two-strayed, with raised basement of on both sides of the entrance. The eastern side has a flight of stairs that leads to the first floor. From that point there are similar stairs made of wood leading to each *tala*. Staircases made of stone and wood are arranged adjacent to the inner face of the wall alternatively on east and west. On each of the storey in the middle capitals, beams, load bearing pillars etc made of wood are also provided. Each *tala* has wooden ceiling on which lime mortar has been paved as a result of which it serves as flooring to the next floor.

Both in the ground floor and the first floor there stand stone pillars on either side of the entrance of the *gopura* which bear some beautiful bas relief sculptures. The middle pillar of the first floor faces west. It has the sculptures of the king Sadasivadeva Maharayar and that of Chinna Bomma Nayaka. Both these have

been carved as standing with folded hands worshipping the lord. The wooden doors of the gateways are very big. The ceiling of this entrance contains some beautiful figures, such as *ashtadigpalagas* – the eight cardinal deities and dancing girls.

In the south west corner close to the compound wall of the temple there stands *kalyana mandapa*. On the South – east side there is the temple kitchen known as Madapalli. By the side of it on the northern side there is yet another *mandapa*. It was a raised platform in the middle. This *mandapa* is called as *Utsava-mandapa*. The second *gopura* which is smaller than the first leads to the inner court-yard (inner *prakara*). The courtyard has two chambers-one each on each side, but there are no stairs as the first *prakara* has. The enclosure wall of this inner *prakara* also is connected to this *gopura* on either side. The ceiling of both the *gopuras* should have had excellent paintings, but only a few traces of those paintings are left.

The second *gopura* bears the sculpture of Raghua and Kethu. The top of the outer faces of both these enclosure – walls contain a series of bas-relief sculptures, representing various gods. The sub-shrines which adore the inner *prakara* are as follows:

1. Ganesha – facing the southern entrance.
2. Ganesha, Balaji and Subramanya with his consorts Valli and Deivanai – facing east.

On the north – western corner there is a shrine with stucco *Vimana* over it, enshrining the goddess Akilanteswari. Nava-Joth (nine oil lamp) representing the nine planets (Navagraha) is located facing this shrine.

In the middle of the court-yard of the temple the main shrine complex has been built. The Linga form of Lord Siva (Jalakanteswara) and a Garbhagriha are enshrined in this complex besides *ardha mandapa* and *mukha mandapa*. There is also a doorway on the south leading to the *pradakshina manpada* around the shrine. The main shrine is at a lower level compared to *pradakshina mandapa*, and stand aloof. An enclosure wall on one side and a row of pillars on the other support the roof of the *pradakshina mandapa*. These pillars are found on the three sides of the *mandapa* very close to the outer wall of main shrine. At the base they are square and above till the lintel they are round and plain. Probably for the display of the Utsava beras, there is a raised platform close to the outer wall on all the three sides of the main shrines cloister. Over the roof of the main shrine there is a beautiful stucco, *vimana* with a *kalasam* at the top. There also stand two huge sculptures of Dawarapalakas. These two are in the architectural style of Vijayanagar whereas the remaining structures in the complex belong to the period of the Sambuvarayas of the early period.¹⁶

Then there stands Nataraj Shrine. It is a pillared hall with a shrine on the northern wing facing south. It is a rectangular *garbhagraha* with a stucco *vimana* over it. There are very fascinating carvings on the pillars of the front *mandapa*. These carvings depict the ten carnations of Vishnu better known as *Dasavathara* (Dasa. Ten avathara – avatar, incarnation) In addition to these there are some saivite and vaishnavite sculptures. The cloister *mandapa* on the east enshrines *navagrahas* and the one that is situated in the southern direction has sixty three saiva saints in a row (Nayanmars and Saptamatrikas) as also Ganesha and Veerabadra.

On the North east corner of this *prakara* there is a well, with an underground chamber and a door made of stone slab. The North West corner of the outer *prakara* has yet another structure called as '*Vasanthamandapa*'. Just below it there stands a pillared hall (*mandapa*). To reach this *mandapa* steps then should swim in the northern direction to cross the well and reach the underground *mandapa*. This well which one has to swim across to reach the *mandapa* is called as Simha-kinara.

Legend has it that there is a lion's figure in stucco at the ground level with an opening through its body which was used to enter the water level of the well, and hence the name Simha (lion) Kinara (well). There are such stucco figures at Virinjipuram and Gangaikonda Cholapuram.¹⁷ The lion figures might have been destroyed though the name stuck. At present for the safety of the visitor the well is covered with a stone slab and kept under lock and key.

There are three underground chambers The first one is the chamber supported to be located under Vasantha mandapa . It is said that there is a small Jalakanteswara Temple in it and that the deity is made of bronze. There is yet another small well in the north east direction of the inner *prakara*. On its southern side there is a door like slab of stone resembling a door. Entry into a chamber situated inside can be made through this door. There is a third chamber. It is generally believed that the room is at the head of a passage which leads to and underground passage. This chamber is situated under the sanctum of the present shrine of Nataraja. On the western side of Shrine of Nataraja there is an opening in the floor, which can be used to reach the underground chamber There is no way out excepting the opening above. All the three chambers would have been built as safe rooms to keep deities and their ornaments during emergencies.¹⁸

The *kalayanamandapa* which is called as a museum by itself is considered as post Vijayanagara piece of architecture which must have been completed during the closing years of Sadasivadeva Maharaya.¹⁹ It is counted as one among the four best pieces of architecture built during the Vijayanagara period They are :

- 1) Thousand pillared mandapa in Madurai
- 2) The mandapa of Nellaiyappar temple at Tirunelveli.
- 3) The mandapa of Perur, near Kovai.
- 4) The Kalyanamadapa at Sri Jalakateswara Temple.

The mandapam is located next to the outer *prakara* wall on the south Western corner. It has three compartments with forty six pillars. The first unit is an open madap and has twenty four pillars. The other two units are open on one side and closed on the remaining three sides. Each unit is higher than the other . As a result, the ground level of the second unit is about a metre higher than the first and the third higher than the second. On the southern wall there is a door which opens to a side room. Probably the room would have been used for storing the wedding paraphernalia.

The top tier or the unit has been executed as a masterpiece of architecture. It has a platform in the shape of a tortoise (*kurma*) located in the middle of the central bay It appears that the upper stage of the *mandapa* is constructed on the back of a tortoise. Its mouth is carved facing east and the tail west. The four legs of the tortoise serve as resting stone on the ground in four corners. Around the base of this platform there are eight beautiful sculptures – the cardinal deities of eight directions (*Ashta diggas*).There are carved snakes which serve as the load bearers.

The basement dividing the *mandapas* into three sections have some beautiful sculptures. No steps are providing to step from one tier to the other. On the eastern face of the basement there are very beautifully carved panels There are decorative figures on the central ceiling of the open *mandapa* and on the ceiling of the *Kurma* platform two rows of parrots beautify the central ceiling .Two rows make two circles and each circle has sixteen birds perched topsy turvy around the torus of the lotus blossom These birds are shown catching the drops of water from the lotus petals thinking them to be pearls . Dancing girls in the form of a chain have been carved.

On the outer surface of the *mandapa* four cardinal deities with their worship have been carved .Indira is seen seated on an elephant on the eastern side. Easana is shown seated on a bull in the north west side On the south east corner Agni is depicted seated on a sheep .Yama seated on a buffalo has been carved in the middle of the southern side. Nirutti is shown seated on the shoulder of a person on the south-west corner. Similarly Varuna Vayu and Kubera have been carved .The servants and devotees of all the cardinal deities are shown surrounding their lords in poses.

A row of swans have been carved outside this circle with *kirtimukas*. There are lotus buds at the four corners of this row. Uma-Sahita-Siva are presented as blessing their devotees on the inner ceiling. Parvati with two of her attendants shown as chamara bearers and four lady worshippers are depicted on the outer square of the ceiling . Vinayaka and Vishnu with Brahma have been carved on the east. To is south there are carvings of Vishnu with Sridevi and Bhudevi besides brahma with Saraswathi and Savitri on the north. Subramanya on his vehicle peacock with his consorts Valli and Deivanai are found on the western side on the

middle. On the same side the sculptures of Vijayanagar king Sadasivadeva Maharaya and his chieftain Chinna Bomma Nayak with royal attendants are presented.

Themes from the Ramayana and other epics have carved on the lintel beams of the base and the middle *mandapas*. There are also figures of dancers and musicians. There is a ventilator opening in the outer wall facing east that is situated in the south-east corner. There is an attractive sculpture of Rishaba-Kunjaram (Bull and Elephant). The wall facing the south there is a carving depicting the saint Singer Annamacharaya, worshipping Lord Srinivasa. The saint is represented holding a musical instrument in his hand.

Totally there are forty six pillars which support the *kalyanamandapa*. Each pillar bears exquisite piece of Sculpture on all its four sides. All carving has been done on the best granite stone, black in color. The figures are so meticulously polished that one can mistake them as cast in bronze. The episodes represented are both the Saivite and the Vaishnavite, but the latter from the majority Seshadri concludes his description thus:

In total this *kalayana-mandapa* though looking to be small in size than many other such mandapas in Tamil Nadu, it is a masterpiece of art and a museum by itself and every inch of it explains the workmanship and the skill of artists who made it for the enjoyment of the lovers of the universe.²⁰

Legend has it has Jalakandeswara temple was built first and not the fort. The sculptor who happened to meet the Reddy brothers built the temple keeping in view all the Vastu compulsion. The temple's construction commenced on 19th pangu in Sukkual year corresponding to AD 1193. According to historians the fort was built during the regime of Chinna Bomma Nayak (AD 1526-1565) one of the Nayak kings. The building of the fort was undertaken compulsion according to legend.

END NOTES

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