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SUCHINDRAM TEMPLE - FROM TRADITION TO MODERN

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ABSTRACT:

The temple is a large structure with mandapams or halls with gorgeous and inimitable works of arts and sculpture. From the period of Cholas, temples became the very boss of the rural and urban life in all its aspects-religious, cultural, social, economic, moral, educational, etc. They are the storehouse of land's arts, architectural and cultural heritage. Suchindram is near to Cape Comorin, the point where the three seas meet. Suchindram, like every other village of Nanchinad is surrounded by extensive stretches of luxuriant paddylands. The Suchindram temple is an important pilgrim centre and is Citadel of erstwhile Travancore kingdom.

KEYWORDS: large structure , land's arts, architectural and cultural heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Being a religious institution and a place of worship, the temples are the greatest contribution of society to the civilization. It is admired as the abode of God and these offer land and space for the people who want to be near the God.¹ The temple has dominated, and continues to dominate, the life of the village. It is a typical example of the village which owes all its reputation and glory to its sacred shrine.²

ABOUT SUCHINDRAM

Suchindram is near the lands' end of the peninsular India and is a village located about 13 kms from Kanyakumari. The notable feature in the early history of Nanchinad is the history of Suchindram which formed the spiritual capital and it

became the cockpit of South India. The temple is the abode of Sthanumalayan, the presiding deity of the temple.

The origin and history of this temple is linked with number of legends and among them, the two legends are important - one related to Muni Athri and his wife Anasuya and other one with Lord Indra. The place got the name of Suchindram from the Sthalapurana. Indra was relieved of a curse as he had worshipped the deity of this temple, hence place got the name Suchindram. The term 'Suchi' in Suchindram is believed to have derived from the Sanskrit meaning that stands for 'purify'.

Suchindram temple is approximately 1300 years old. The temple was built in the 17th century, previously controlled by Nambudhiris and said that the temple construction took place over a period of 600 years.³ The earliest lithic records of the temple belong to

9th century AD. Sthanumalayan is an amalgamation of the three important Hindu Gods namely Siva (Thanu), Vishnu (Maal) and Brahma (Ayan) presenting together in a single Lingam in the sanctum of the temple and the temple extends over 4 acres of land, situated on the banks of Pazhayar.

The name of Suchindram is found in the earliest inscription in the temple dating C.E 941. There were some legends also prevailed with regard to the origin of this name. Other names of this place such as Thiruchiveendram, Siveendram, Sujeendram, etc. were also found in stone instructions. Suchindram Sthalapurana give some information

connected with the existence of this temple long back. One stone inscription at Karkadu near Suchindram gives details of offerings given by Pandian Maran Chadayan (800-900 AD) to the temple. From then, the construction activities had been continuing till the reign of King Sree Moolam Thirunal.

SUCHINDRAM AND TRAVANCORE KINGS

Before the merger of Kanyakumari in the Tamilnadu state, Suchindram Temple came under the administration of Travancore kingdom. There is a confused frame of legend regarding the relationship between Suchindram and erstwhile Travancore. Historian Shangunny Menon says that during the Mohammadan rule of Pandyan kingdom, one Nancikkuravan, a feudatory chief under Travancore, obtained possession of Nancinad and established himself as a ruler. In 1116 AD (229 M.E) he was driven away by the king of Travancore. Renowned historians Nagam Aiya and Velupillai uncritically supported this account. Velupillai states that Nancikkuravan was defeated by the King Vira Kerala Varma. Shangunny Menon, holds that the Kuravachief was expelled by the Travancore king in 292 M.E.⁴ The inscription of Koda Kerala Varma at Suchindram shows that Vira Kerala's reign must have terminated before 320 M.E (1145 AD). He was one of the earliest patrons of the Suchindram temple among the Venad rulers. Vira Ravi Varma, the successor of Kerala Varma extended his authority and support to the eastern part of Nancinad.

The next Venad ruler connected with Suchindram was Udaya Marthanda Varma (12th cen. AD/4th cen. M.E) associated with the construction of the Ardh Mandapa of the temple. The later centuries witnessed the rule of majestic monarchs one by one.

The modern era in the history of Nancinad and of the entire Travancore state have dawned from the reign of Bala Marthanda Varma (1729 -1758 AD), the maker of modern Travancore. As a farsighted statesman, he initiated the bold policy of curtailing the overgrown power of the Yogakkar at Suchindram. His reign came to an end in 1758 AD and his successors ruled the land in a progressive and splendid manner. Next to the Padmanabhaswamy Temple, the Suchindram pagoda has received the greatest attention at the hands of the Travancore rulers. The elegant, graceful Temple tower construction was started by Maharaja Vishakam Thirunal and completed during the reign of Maharaja Sree Moolam Thirunal of Travancore.⁵ The Pillai arther and Chapparather (Temple cars) was made in AD 1864 by Maharaja Sree Moolam Thirunal. During the reign of Maharaja Ayilyam Thirunal, a Lottery scheme was introduced in 1875 AD to raise funds for rebuilding a portion of the temple and the sum of over Rs.40,000 was raised.

STRUCTURES OF ATTRACTION

From olden days, Suchindram temple is related with Gnanarany forest and Kontraitree and the tree is noted as the Temple tree or 'Sthala Vriksha'.

The main entrance of the temple has stylishly fashioned with the figures of Lord Siva and Uma seated on a Bull, Parvati on a Swan and Vishnu on Garuda. The temple has two shrines in the sanctum sanctorum. One is for Lord Sthanumalayan located on Vadakkedam and the other is for Thiruvenkida Vinnakara Emberumanon Thekkedam.

The temple has a white Gopuram of seven stories called as the Temple tower or 'Rajagopuram' is a majestic one and the tallest of the few temple towers in present Kanyakumari district. This tower forms the entrance of the temple and faces east direction and is the stately tower that attracts our eye that is seen from a considerable distance. Its height from the ground to the top is 134 feet 6 inches and covers nearly 5,400 square feet plinth area. It is an exceptional example of classic South Indian temple architecture. The unpainted gopuram consists of carved images of deities and the scenes from Puranas. The inside wall of this Gopuram contains an excellent collection of paintings painted with herbal extracted colours.

Besides the Rajagopuram, the other attractions of the temple are Oonjal Mandapa, Natakasalai, Sculptures of various deities, Mural paintings, Vasantha Mandapa, Prakara, Chitra Sabha, Musical pillars, Kulasekhara Mandapa, Alangaram Mandapa, Marthanda Mandapa, Teppakulam, Temple Cars made of Iluppai wood (Rathams), etc.⁶

Water used for temple activities is collected from the huge Temple Tank at the right side of the temple. Major attraction of this temple is the 4 Musical pillars with a height of 18 feet, presenting exceptional example of architecture. These have been carved out of a single granite stone located in the area of Alangara Mandapa. When struck these pillars, create various musical notes. A wonder, different pillars have different music instrument sounds when struck, some pillars transmit the sound like a bell and hence are enclosed by iron cages so that they are not damaged by the civic.⁷

The temple has a dancing hall as well as around 1035 beautifully carved pillars. There are around 30 shrines in this temple. By the side of sanctum sanctorum, there is a shrine of Lord Vishnu and the idol has been made by combining eight different kinds of metals. On the right side, there is shrine of Lord Rama and Sita and left side that of Lord Ganesha. On the front, there is Navagraha Mandapa.

Another noteworthy feature was the temple holds a massive idol of Anjaneya or Lord Hanuman standing majestically at a height of 22 feet is sure to pull every devotee here. The statue has been carved out of single granite rock and covered with very intricate carvings showcasing the extraordinary skill of the sculptor. It is said that this statue was kept hidden in the temple because of the fear of Tipu Sultan's attack. Later in the year of 1930, it was found and was subsequently brought back to its previous glory. Another striking aspect is the carving of Lord Vinayagi in the temple. Majestic image of huge white Nandi (Maakkalai) made of brick and lime mortar, is also charming with a height of 13 feet and length of 21 feet and width of 10 feet.⁸

The present system of conducting of regular Poojas of the temples such as Palli Unarthal, Usha pooja, Mristaana pooja, Uchikala pooja, Evening pooja and Special poojas has evolved over a long period of time.

The three major festivals celebrated with great enthusiasm and thrill in Suchindram temple are Margazhi festival (December-January), Chithira festival (April-May) and Aavani festival (August-September). The popular one is the 10 day-long Car festival which is celebrated during the month of December-January every year, attracts throngs of thousands of people.

NAVRATRI FESTIVAL AND SUCHINDRAM

The deity of Sundaram temple Munnoottu Nangaioor Munnuthitha Nangai (considered as the incarnation of Karthiyayani) was taken in a ceremonial procession to Padmanabhapuram palace for taking part in the inter-state Navratri festival. The decades-old tradition culturally binds the people of both Tamil Nadu and Kerala till today. Before starting its journey to the Palace, the deity was taken around the Mada Veedhi of Suchindram temple in a traditional palanquin. When the deity reaches the Neelakanta Swamy temple in Kalkulam and after that it is received by Keralites with police band and taken in a splendor procession.⁹

The Navratri festival is being celebrated with much passion and vigour from the days of Travancore Kings. The idol from Suchindram temple along with the Goddess Saraswati from Thevarakattu Temple at Padmanabhapuram Palace and Lord Murugan from Velimalai in Kumarakovil will be taken to the Padmanabhaswamy temple in Thiruvananthapuram in a ritualistic procession prior to the commencement of the festival, for Parivettai (hunting on horseback).

The Sword of the erstwhile Travancore Maharajas kept in 'Upparika Malika' would be taken to Thiruvananthapuram from the Padmanabhapuram palace in the presence of high officials. The Deities of these temples will return to their respective abodes after the Navratri festival.

TEST OF HONESTY

The extent under the rule of Travancore kings once was and it has a significant place in the history of Travancore. This temple is noticeable in the history as the place, where the Test of Honesty has been conducted by the kings. If someone comes under suspicion of theft or any other criminal doings, the person will be taken to this temple. Then a huge vessel will be placed in front of him filled with scorching ghee. The dubious person should dip his or her hands inside the hot ghee and if he or she got charred, it is decided that the person is the offender. This practice has been followed for several years till Swathi Thirunal abolished this barbarian practice.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

Temples are the most momentous architecture as it sums up and represents elusive ideals, principles and morals of Indian culture. Ranging among the outstanding temples of Tamilnadu, the multifaceted reputation of Suchindram Temple has reached out to distant lands and all over the subcontinent, a distinction which is claim independent of its inclusion among the 108 great Siva temples of the nation. It has now turned out to be a centre of tourism. Huge mobs from all over India are visiting there on all days.

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- ⁶Personally visited and confirmed.
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