

Divulging the lesser known beauty of Sri Kailasanathar temple in Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu

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Abstract: *The objective of this paper is to divulge information about the lesser known Kailasanathar temple in Kanchipuram, a protected monument of national importance, maintained by the archaeological survey of India in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. The author's clear-cut intention is that, this paper must serve as a torch bearer to the Saiva philosophy of the Pallava dynasty, by exploring this temple premises. The author also wants to test the following hypotheses in this paper.*

1. *The philosophy of Saivism had a profound influence in Kanchipuram, during the Pallava regime.*
2. *Sanskrit is deep rooted in the areas ruled by the Pallava kings and Kanchipuram in particular.*

In order to test the above stated hypotheses, primary data is collected by a direct observation in the temple and the secondary data is collected from published sources such as books, etc. The paper opens up with an introduction to the temple, that contains the reason for choosing this temple to study, followed by an analysis of the inscriptions of the temple site. The essence of the paper is the discussion part that validates the above stated hypotheses. The paper terminates with a conclusion that contains the author's brief recordings about the challenges faced by this temple. By the usage of the temple inscriptions and inferences drawn from the same, the hypotheses are proved to be true. An appendix consisting of selective images taken at the temple premises is supplemented at the end.

Keywords: *Kailasanathar temple, Pallavas, Rajasimha Pallava, Mahendravarman.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The central objective of this paper is to divulge more information about the lesser known Kailasanathar temple in Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu state. Though this temple is of exquisite architectural and spiritual merit, it remains unexplored even by the residents of Kanchipuram, due to lack of knowledge about the temple. The reason, why the author has chosen this temple and intend to reveal information about the same is given in the following.

- a) It is the only temple in Kanchipuram that represents the complete philosophy of Saivism (Longhurst, 1930, p. 13).
- b) It is a great repository of knowledge about the Pallavas and their philosophy of Saivism.
- c) It is said to be the source of inspiration of many temples including the Virupaksha temple (Sharath, 2013) in Bagalkot district of Karnataka state, a UNESCO world heritage site and the Kailasanatha temple of Ellora (Rea, 1909, p. 18) in Maharashtra state. If this temple is studied with due care, then probably it will pave the way for future studies to reveal more information about the temples constructed in similar fashion with this temple.
- d) It stands firmly over several centuries without much damage and is one of the oldest Shaiva temples in Kanchipuram.

Apart from the objective of revealing more information about the temple, the author wants to test the following hypotheses in this research paper.

1. The philosophy of Saivism had a profound influence in Kanchipuram, during the Pallava regime.
2. Sanskrit is deep rooted in the areas ruled by the Pallava kings and Kanchipuram in particular.

For achieving the above said objective and testing the hypotheses, the author had collected primary data by a direct observation to the temple premises and by interaction with the temple priests and nearby residents to the temple. Secondary data is collected from published sources and books in particular. This research shall be analytical research that primarily use information about the temple inscriptions already published and analyses the same.

The temple under study- the Kailasanathar temple, Kanchipuram is located at a distance of around two kilometres from the Kanchipuram city in a rustic suburb called *Pillayarpalayam* and it is easily accessible from Kanchipuram city by buses and Autos. It is declared as a 'protected monument of National importance' under the Ancient monuments and archaeological sites and remains act, 1958 and is being administered by the Archaeological survey of India, Government of India.

This temple is a multiplex of Saiva temples. The preeminent shrine was commissioned by Rajasimha Pallava that has nine Sub-shrines located around it and also houses a splendid vimana on its top. In front of this shrine, a smaller shrine was commissioned by his son, Mahendravarman III. In the right side of the front entrance to the temple, six smaller shrines are present. From a few feet backwards to the entrance of the temple, a large Nandi statue is present. The whole temple premises are surrounded by beautiful gardens and a temple pond is located on the right side of the temple entrance. The inner side of the temple wall houses several smaller shrines in an array, while the outer side of the wall houses statues of the temple protectors called *Yali*. (see Figure 4-Appendix A) This temple can be seen as a clear-cut reflection of the mastery knowledge of Pallavas in the Saiva philosophy. The temple is also the masterpiece of Pallava's architecture. The intricate carvings on sculptures and rare portrayals of Lord Shiva in his various forms in several sculptures are the prime source of attraction of many visitors to the temple.

The date of the foundation stone of the principal shrine is estimated to be between 550 A. D. to 567 A. D (Hultzs, 1890, p. 12). The architecture of this temple is very unique in comparison with the other Shaiva temples of Kanchipuram. One can find that, many of the Kanchipuram temples are made up of hard stones, but this temple is built up of sandstone, apart from granite that gives good support to the upper structure. It is considered to be a development of the shore temple in Mamallapuram, built by the same king (Longhurst, 1930, p. 2) and bears a strong resemblance to the shore temple (Longhurst, 1930, p. plate V). Initially the flooring of the temple is made up of sandstone and later changed to granite by the Archaeological survey of India, because the former had lost its strength and degraded gradually over centuries.

2. INSCRIPTIONS :

The following is an analysis of the temple inscriptions, based on the English translation of the original Sanskrit inscriptions by Hultzs, who served as the government epigraphist in the archaeological survey of southern India in the later part of the nineteenth century. He considers this temple as a treatise of inscriptions not only on Sanskrit and Pallava grantha character, but also on Tamil alphabet and language (Hultzs, 1890, p. 12). Out of the several inscriptions in the temple, the inscription numbered 24 by Hultzs, that rounds the outside of the principal shrine is the most significant inscription. The reason for pointing this one, as the most significant, is due to the fact that it is excellently preserved over centuries, as it is written on a hard granite slab. It contains twelve verses in Sanskrit language. The other inscriptions are greatly damaged due to a number of factors and they are of minor interest. It opens up with an invocation to the holy river Ganges that appears to be black by the splendour of Lord Shiva's neck and then red by the rays of the gems of Lord Shiva's gems. This is followed by the pedigree of the Pallava dynasty, (represented below) in the second and third verses.



The fourth verse (Hultzs, 1890) gives a glimpse of the characteristics of the kings of Pallava dynasty. This verse is significant to prove one of my hypotheses, that the philosophy of Saivism had a profound influence in Kanchipuram. The verse says that the Pallava kings know how to practise the doctrine of Trivarga, which is the base of most of the Sanskrit texts. Further, the fourth verse addresses the Pallava kings as 'pious' - a very strong believer of Saiva philosophy and living in the path shown by the same. It gives several characters of the Pallavas, such as who always spoke the truth, who assiduously honoured the aged, who forcibly subdued the lust and other internal foes and so on. From the above said characters, one can draw inference that these characters are the result of the philosophies of Saiva doctrine.

The fifth verse (Hultzs, 1890) is an analogous statement that compares Lord Subramanya, the son of Lord Shiva with the founder of the principal shrine, Rajasimha Pallava. The statement of analogy is that, as Lord Subramanya

took birth from Lord Shiva, this Pallava prince took birth from Ugradanda Pallava. Further the fifth verse says that, Rajasimha Pallava got rid of all his impurities by walking on the path of Saiva doctrine. This statement gives a mammoth support for my hypotheses. This verse is a clear-cut reflection of the Saiva doctrine that Pallavas followed and they may have inscribed it in the temple, so that it helps the future generation to must know the deep influence of Saiva philosophy on them. There is a Tamil proverb that says, “*As is the king, so are his subjects*”. When this proverb is applied to the fifth verse, inference can be drawn that if the king had followed the Saiva philosophy, then probably his people should also be a follower of Saiva philosophy. This should include the people of the northern districts of Tamil Nadu and Kanchipuram in particular or the historical region of ‘*Tondaimandalam*’ that also includes the districts of Chittoor and Nellore in Andhra Pradesh. Second inference is that, there are very great Acharyas or Gurus, who excelled in the Saiva philosophy lived in Kanchipuram, so that they serve as teachers to the Kings of the Pallava dynasty and taught the same. The sixth verse (Hultzsch, 1890) is also an analogous statement that compares the Rajasimha Pallava to Lord Manmatha, Lord Vishnu, and Lord Kubera. The notable words in this verse are, “the king charmed refined woman in secret”. The words ‘refined woman’ and ‘in secret’ has to be noted with utmost care. Inference can be drawn from here, that even though he was a king, who had several territories under him, he only charmed refined woman. This shows the absence of lust in his minds that may probably due to his Saiva philosophy. Secondly this charming occurred only in secret as a part of private life; not in public. The word ‘in secret’ needs an extra ordinary care of analysis. The stressing of this word has to be analysed in line with the temple sculptures. On a careful analysis, one can find that, the temple is devoid of erotic sculptures. This may be probably due to the philosophy of Tamil Saiva Siddhanta, that the essence of Kama must be felt only in secret and not by mere representation of erotic sculptures. A question may probably arise in the minds of the readers, is it significant to note, a king charming woman in an inscription? The answer to this question is simple. The Pallavas followed the paths of dharma, artha, Kama and moksha. Kama is an integral part of their life and the same is reflected in the inscriptions. The seventh verse (Hultzsch, 1890) talks about the hearing of a divine voice without body, by the Pallavas even in the kali age. The eighth verse (Hultzsch, 1890) is a comparative statement of lord Vishnu with Rajasimha Pallava. Like Vishnu who rescued sinking people from the ocean of sin, he was protecting people in the kali age. The ninth verse (Hultzsch, 1890) is important in revealing the architectural beauty of the temple. It says that “this extensive and wonderful house of Lord Shiva resembles his fame and laughter”. From this statement, the beauty of the temple can be well understood by the readers and needs no further explanation. In the tenth verse (Hultzsch, 1890), the Pallava king asks Lord Shiva to have a permanent seat in his shrine. The eleventh verse (Hultzsch, 1890) adds more architectural beauty to the temple, by saying that the top of the temple touches the clouds and robs Kailash of its beauty. This verse addresses the king Rajasimha Pallava, as the ‘pious king of kings’. In the twelfth verse (Hultzsch, 1890) that terminates the inscriptions, Rajasimha pallava asks Lord Shiva for a long time to protect the earth. This verse has to carefully analysed, because he does not ask for extra wealth, extra territories or any other material derivatives. Instead of these earthly pleasures, he asks Lord Shiva to give him a long time to protect his subjects. He does not ask anything that would favour himself or his family but put forth a request for a general cause. The profound influence of Saiva Siddhanta can be understood in this verse that his requests are for a noble cause. The next question that may spark in our minds is that, why this requisition was placed in the last verse? It may probably a result of Saiva philosophy. This is in comparison with a normal devotee seeking the blessings of Lord Shiva in a temple. First, before a devotee asks for anything, he first speaks about the hurdles of his life followed by a request to overcome them. The same pattern can be observed in the inscriptions. The first eleven verses talk about his happiness and in the final verse, he also requests Lord Shiva seeking his blessings.

Inscription numbered 27 (Hultzsch, 1890), that runs around the smaller shrine, located in front of the principal shrine has four verses in Sanskrit. The first three verses give the same meaning, but in various words, viz., Mahendra pallava, the son of Rajasimha pallava had built this temple. These verses also give a glimpse of characters of Mahendra pallava, also with a request in the final verse for Lord Shiva to have a permanent presence in his shrine. Inscription numbered 29 (Hultzsch, 1890), on the third niche contains three Sanskrit verses that say that this small shrine was founded by *Rangapataka*, a queen of Rajasimha pallava. Inscription numbered 30 (Hultzsch, 1890), on the fifth niche is in Sanskrit. It belongs to a female, whose name is lost in the course of time.

The rest of the inscriptions occur in the inside of the enclosure of the principal shrine. These contain more than two hundred titles of its founder, the Rajasimha pallava. These inscriptions are arranged in four tiers. The first one is in hard granite slab and therefore in excellent condition. The other three tiers are on sandstone and most of them are spoiled. The second tier is almost entirely spoiled by water-dripping and white washing. The majority of the third tier is also lost and only a smaller part remains. The fourth-tier inscriptions, though certainly not good but of acceptable reading quality. Hultzsch considers that, the inscriptions of the first and second tier is a later copy of the third tier. The fourth tier also repeats some of the titles of the first three tiers, but also adds few on its own. These fourth-tier inscriptions are of immense significance, as they are beautiful calligraphic inscriptions, with letters representing birds, animals, etc. these ornamental inscriptions add aesthetic beauty to the architecture of the temple.

Apart from the inscriptions described above, there are Kanarese inscriptions inscribed in one of the pillars of Maha mandapa. It records the victory of a Chaulukyan king named Vikramadithya II, who conquered the city of

Kanchipuram. The Chaulkyan and Pallava dynasties are said to be natural enemies to each other. Vikramadithya II wanted to destroy this temple, as it was built by the pallavas, but he got astonished by the architectural beauty of this temple and left it intact without causing any damage to it. Further he has also given grants to this temple (Longhurst, 1930).

My hypotheses can be seen reflected in the several hundred titles inscribed in the temple. These occur in the inscription numbered 25 by Hultsch that rounds the inside of the enclosure of the principal shrine. In many of the titles, the founder king of this temple, Rajasimha Pallava is seen with the qualities of Lord Shiva and they are described below with due analysis.

1. The titles of the fifth niche say that he was too proud to have a bull as his sign. This must be analysed with the sign of the Lord Shiva, the bull. The close analogy must be understood by the readers.
2. The titles of the ninth niche say that, his companion is the bow. This should be connected with Lord Shiva, whose companion is also a bow, because Lord Shiva is a hunter.
3. The titles of the eleventh niche are explicit in revealing, how deep he followed the Saiva philosophy. It says that, Lord Shiva is the refuge of Rajasimha Pallava. This needs no further elaboration to support my hypothesis number one.
4. The titles of the thirteenth niche projects him as a wonderful archer and a man of knowledge in musical instruments. Lord Shiva is also a great archer and also had exquisite knowledge in musical instruments.
5. The titles of the seventeenth niche, projects him as the fulfiller of desires. Further it says that, his gifts never cease. This should be analysed with Lord Shiva, who fulfils the desires of his devotees and his gifts to devotees never cease.
6. The nineteenth niche says that, his bow excites terror. The repetitive due importance of bow must be carefully noted by the readers.
7. The first title of the twentieth niche says that, he is omnipotent-a man who can do anything. The second title says that he is benevolent-kind and helpful to his people. On a due analysis of the adjacency of these two titles, it can be understood that these are the two most significant qualities possessed by Lord Shiva. These are two diagonally opposite qualities, usually not used in adjacent words.
8. The twenty first niche says that, Rajasimha Pallava represents Arjuna in his valour. It is followed by a saying, that he is fearless in the twenty second niche. These two needs a significant analysis by the readers. It should be probably an analogy of *Kiratarjuniya* that projects Arjuna combating against Lord Shiva in the great epic of Mahabharata. The same combating picture is also portrayed in one of the smaller shrines, in the south wall. From this inference can be drawn, that the king Rajasimha has a comprehensive knowledge about the great Sanskrit epic of Mahabharata.
9. The twenty third niche is extremely important to support my hypotheses. It says, "Rajasimha pallava resembles Manu in his deeds". From this saying, the following inferences can be clearly drawn.
 - a) Rajasimha Pallava is an ardent follower of Manu smriti, the ancient legal text in Sanskrit language, one among the dharma sastras.
 - b) He posses' deep knowledge of Sanskrit, as Manu smriti is a Sanskrit text. Without a thorough knowledge of Sanskrit, understanding the text and following the same in his deeds is not possible.
 - c) Manu smriti is the constitution of the pallavas.
 - d) In the time of the pallava regime, several great teachers of Sanskrit language lived in Kanchipuram and taught Sanskrit to him.
10. The thirty first niche further says that, he is an unrivalled archer. This is analogous to Lord Shiva, who is also a great archer.
11. The thirty sixth niche says that, Rajasimha Pallava's authority is the Saiva doctrine. Further, it also says that, he resembles *Tumburu*, a divine singer. From this line, inference can be drawn that, he is a spiritual music performer. Tumburu also appears several times in the great epic of Mahabharata. Therefore, this point has to be read along with the inference of point 8.
12. The thirty seventh niche, says in explicit terms, he is a follower of Saiva doctrine. This should be a probable result of the teachings of great acharyas, who excelled in the Saiva doctrine and lived in his rule.
13. The forty ninth niche says that, his anger is unbearable. This needs estimation to Lord Shiva, whose anger is also unbearable.
14. The fifty fourth niche says that, he resembles Bhagadatta in the knowledge of elephants. Bhagadatta is a mighty commander-in-chief of Kaurava's army in the Kurukshetra battle, (who is a master in controlling elephants) that happens in the Mahabharata. This further supports my hypothesis, that Sanskrit is deep rooted in Kanchipuram. Because without the knowledge of Sanskrit, this kind of deep understanding in a great Sanskrit epic and comparing a character in that epic is not possible at all. If this point is read along with the inference of point number 8 and 11, it is clear without any doubt, that Rajasimha pallava is a master of the great epic, Mahabharata.

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE TEMPLE:

The principal shrine, commissioned by Rajasimha Pallava is dedicated to Lord Shiva. The inner sanctum is square in shape and houses a Shiva Lingam of six feet in height and three feet in diameter (Longhurst, 1930). The inner sanctum is surrounded by a massive wall of six feet thickness. The Shiva Lingam faces the east direction and it is a sixteen sided one. There is narrow circumambulatory passage around the inner sanctum that can be reached by a flight of steps. The local people are of the opinion that, the entry and exit of this passage symbolises the birth and death of an individual. Behind the Shiva Lingam, a large bas-relief engraving portraying the image of *Soma Skanda*-Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati sitting together, with Lord Subramanya seated on the lap of Parvati. This Soma Skanda image is located on several places in the temple.

In front of the principal shrine, there is another smaller shrine, built by one of Rajasimha's son named Mahendravarman III. It houses a Shiva Lingam, which is smaller in comparison with the one in the principal shrine. The inner shrine chamber is rectangular in plan and measures five feet in width and ten feet in length (Longhurst, 1930). The angles of this shrine houses stucco lions. The normal images of door keepers are sculptured in both the sides of the entrance to this shrine. (Figure 7-Appendix A)

There are fifty-nine smaller shrines located in an array on the inner side of the temple wall. Each small shrine is comparable to a temple, in terms of architectural merit. Each of them houses an image of Lord Shiva in his various forms, along with a shikhara built in the top. These small shrines house seventeen different forms of Lord Shiva as *Samhara Moorthy* (portrayed with anger) and twenty-three forms of Lord Shiva as *Anugraha Moorthy* (Portrayal of Lord Shiva showering his divine grace over the devotees). The reason, why this number of portrayals is sculptured is not known. Apart from these small shrines in the temple wall, there are nine sub shrines located round the principal shrine. These sub shrines also portray Lord Shiva in his various forms. (Figure 2-Appendix A)

There is a Maha mandapa located at a distance of twenty-six feet from the principal shrine that houses the Kanarese inscriptions of Vikramadithya II, a Chaulukyan ruler. (Figure 3-Appendix A) This mandapa is originally detached from the principal shrine, but it is now connected with the principal shrine by means of a modern Ardha mandapa. This Ardha mandapa should be probably a later addition in the fourteen or fifteenth centuries, but the exact date is not well known. It simply serves as a connector between the Maha mandapa and principal shrine and is of no particular artistic or architectural merit. It spoils the superior architectural beauty of the temple.

There is a Nandi mandapa located at a few feet backwards, from the front entrance of the temple and it houses a large Nandi statue made up of sandstone. This mandapa has exclusive *Gandharva* images, sculptured on its base. The sculpture portrays them, as they are upholding a major structure, dancing and overwhelmed in joy. It does not have a roof, but there are four majestic lion pillars on the corners, whose purpose is not certain. (Figure 1-Appendix A)

4. DISCUSSION :

The fact that the majority of the inscriptions are in Sanskrit language, needs an extremely careful analysis. The inscriptions of a temple are written, so that the forthcoming generation must gain knowledge about the temple history. It is matter of common sense that, the inscriptions are written in a temple in a language, which the majority of the people of that particular period knows and the language should be in wide practise. From this, we can infer that, Sanskrit had a profound influence in the areas ruled by the pallava dynasty and Kanchipuram in particular (read along with point numbers 8 and 14 of the inscriptions number 25).

Consider the following statement by Longhurst who served as the superintendent of archaeological survey of southern circle, India in the early twentieth century. "The vast collection of Saiva deities and legends depicted in the bas-reliefs must be quite the largest and most complete in India and should prove a veritable mine of information to a student of Saivism." (Longhurst, 1930, p. 13) He addresses this temple as the 'most complete' one in India. This statement has to be assessed along with the background knowledge of the temple architects. The finesse behind the temple sculptures, that represents the comprehensive Saiva philosophy, should be a presumable reflection of the temple Sthapathis or architects. It is devoid of any doubt that, they possessed deep or mastery knowledge in Saiva philosophy because without having mastery knowledge in Saiva philosophy, constructing this kind of temple is not possible. For this to happen, the philosophy of Saivism, must have flourished before and during their times, so that they learnt it from their ancestors and also passed the same to their generations. This must be the reason, why Kanchipuram houses several ancient Saiva temples of extreme architectural and spiritual merit. From the above, the author concludes that, Saivism had a profound influence in Kanchipuram is proved to be valid (read along with fifth and twelfth verse of inscription numbered 24 and point number three and twelve of inscription numbered 25).

5. CONCLUSION:

Without any uncertainty, this paper proves the stated hypotheses to be true. The author believes that, the paper also succeeded in its objective of divulging more information about the temple that exposes the divine glory of the temple and the mastery Pallava architecture. The readers may conclude that, Sanskrit flourished in Kanchipuram and especially in the Pallava regime. This is necessary to understand that, Sanskrit and Tamil languages co-existed without any clashes between them in Kanchipuram. This is evident from the inscriptions, written in both Sanskrit as well as in

Tamil language. The author wants to terminate the essay with his following recordings about the challenges of the temple, with a view that the readers rectify the same.

1. The first and foremost thing that has to be addressed is the lesser funding available to the temple. The archaeological survey of India maintains only the outer part of the temple that consists of the inscriptions, sculptures, etc. The spirit, in which Rajasimha Pallava built this temple and maintained it, should continue at any time and particularly in the present time.
2. As it is a major spot of tourist attraction in Kanchipuram, several shops of commercial interest are established within a close vicinity of the temple. The devotees must remember in their minds that, the temple is a divine complex constructed purely for spiritual purposes and not intended for shopping in a market complex.
3. For the promotion of the divinity of the temple, an official website that contains comprehensive information about the temple must be developed and maintained.

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Appendix A-List of Figures

Figure 1The Nandi



Figure 2 An Array of small shrines on the inner side of the wall



Figure 3 A view of the Vimana along with the Maha mandapa



Figure 4 An outer view of the vimana along with Yali statues



Figure 5 The Temple Pond



Figure 6 Entrance of the Temple



Figure 7 Front entrance of the Mahendravarman's shrine

