

Sculptural Art of Thiruvavaduthurai Udaiyar Temple at Thiruvavaduthurai

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Abstract

The article explained the Sculptural Art of Thiruvavaduthurai Udaiyar Temple at Thiruvavaduthurai is a good field for the study of iconography of the Chola dynasty. The sculptural art of the temple could be brought under various heads on the basis of the media. To begin with stone dominated, later bronze and stucco came into the period. Paintings and woods were to be found at a very late phase of the Chola period.

Keywords: Bronze Icons, Saivism, Sculptural Art

1. Introduction

Thiruvavaduthurai is one of the holy centres of Saivism sanctified by the worship and hymns of the Saiva Nayanmar. It is also called Kshtrivana meaning forest area. Thiruvavaduthurai was known in the past as Thiruvavaduthurai, the place which enables human beings to reach the blessed state of final disentanglement from all embodiments, and the lord of the present temple of Masilamanisvara was called Thiruvavaduthurai Udaiyar or Paramasvamin. Further in Sanskrit, this place is known as Gomukthipura - meaning cow + absolution + town. According to the legends, nine crores of Siddhars (hermits) lived in this place. That is why the place is also known as "Navakoti Siddhapuram". Thiruvavaduthurai is located on the main road from Mayiladuturai to Kumbakonam in Tamil Nadu. It is situated 20 miles from Mayiladuturai and 15 miles from Kumbakonam in the Tanjore district, Tamil Nadu. The village is famous because of the Thiruvavaduthurai Gomuktheesvara temple and the Thiruvavaduthurai mutt.

Sculpture is one among the fine arts. The heritage in this regard dates back from the late Pallava to the Maratha times. There are vestiges of Pallava iconography in the temple also, example being Matrkas. This is to apprise that from the late Pallava to the Maratha, there is a continuous chain of activity which serves to trace the various phases of art and the changes that have shaped the artistic heritage of this sub-region.

The iconographical heritage of the temple includes its masterpieces in stone, bronze, stucco, wood and painting. Among the stone works are the image of Bhiksatana, Vinadhara, Lingodbhava, Agastya, Dvarapala, Ganapathi, Brahma, Durga and Nandi etc. The latter includes a variety of them such as Gajasamhara, Nataraja and Chandikesvara was illustrated with due reference to the myth. Actually the myth was codified by Sekkilar in the 12th century A.D.

The dynastic affiliations of the sculptural art would enable their classification into Pallava, Chola (early and later). The modern pieces were mostly imitating the Vijayanagara tradition. This is simply unique

because there is continuity in the artistic phase of the Thiruvaduthurai temple¹. It is in this regard that the temple has proved to be a “living culture”. Whereas many of the temples like Thiruvaduthurai in Tamil Nadu are living entities: Other good examples being Madurai, Srirangam, Chidambaram, Ramesvaram, Tiruvallikkeni, Tirumeyyam, etc. These temples have claims for hoary antiquity right from the Pallava - Pandya and have kept alive their traditional spirits.

2. Sources

The study mainly depends upon the data forthcoming from the temple itself. The primary sources may be divided into literature, including sthalapurana, epigraphy, silpasastra, vastusastras and interviews with scholars and temple priest. Besides, the temple itself has provided first-hand material in aspects relating to architecture and iconography. Secondary sources, K. A. Nilakanta Sastri and S. R. Balasubrahmanyam have passing references to Thiruvaduthurai but do not even touch upon the basic problems connected with even the Chola artistry. The District Gazetteers give some historical details of the Vijayanagar period. So, the major part of the study depends upon the temple and its records. Among the original sources, inscriptions constitute a special category. They were first surveyed by the epigraphy department and the synopsis published in Annual Reports on South Indian Epigraphy (ARE). The full texts were published separately in the volumes of South Indian Inscriptions (SII).

3. Methodology

The work is mainly based on field data. This especially applies to a survey of monuments relating to architecture and iconography. Canonical works of the region are taken into account to explain the symbols and the intra-regional implications of cultural properties. As early as 1925, 1926, all the seventy five inscriptions were reported by the Epigraphy Department and subsequently the full texts published in South Indian Inscriptions. These published works have been taken into account for a study of the epigraphical sources.

4. Sculpture of the Pallava Period

It is indeed an enigma that no surviving monument of the Pallava period is to be found in the core delta region. Rock-cut art need not be expected in view of the topographical peculiarity of the landmass which consists of the delta plains, vast stretch of alluvial soil, fit only for paddy or sugarcane cultivation. So, rock-cut art was barred by the natural phenomenon but at least few structural temples could have been there. The idea gets stronger when we take into account the hymns sung by the Nayanmar. The two sets of Matrikkas in Thiruvaduthurai and Tiruntutevankuti would show that stone images could have formed part of brick temples.

The hymns of St. Sambandar, St. Appar and St. Sundarar prove existence of a temple at Thiruvaduthurai. The images of Sapta Matrikkas lend further support. These images are worn out to such an extent that it is difficult to make out their features. All seven were present, flanked by Virabhadra and Ganapati. The Matrikkas are found seated in latitasana posture with the right leg suspended and left rested on the pedestal. Other emblems are not visible. Of the seven found in Thiruvaduthurai, only five are originals. The first one, labeled Brahmi, is actually Virabhadra, who is seated in utkutikasana, having both hands rested on the erect knees. This model may be found in the Ellora caves (e.g. XIV) and Malaiyatippatti in Tamil Nadu. The next image labeled, Mahesvari is in fact Brahmi because the head is visible if not other features. Stylistically speaking, the images are slender with oval faces and the femme grace of the Pallava icons³. One in Thiruvaduthurai is endowed with cap-like headgear as we find Gajalakshmi in the Varaha-mandapa of Mamallapuram or few other specimens in Kanchipuram (e.g. Kailasanatha temple). These idioms are typical of Pallava art which peep upto Tirupparankunram in the far South as the image of Jyesthadevi in the cave temple there is endowed with a similar tiara. On this basis, it may be proved that vestiges of Pallava temples in the region around Thiruvaduthurai and Tiruntutevankuti were to be found which had become extinct in course of time. Somehow, the images of the Matrikkas were adored by the folk and so they have survived.

The Sapta Matrikkas were popular in the Tamil country from at least the 5th century A.D. as pointed out by the Tamil epic, *Silappatikaram*. The Matrikka cult is supposed to have reached the Tamil country during the Pallava country from the Chalukyan region⁴. The Thiruvaduthurai and Tirunutevankuti images are very important in the history of the Matrikkas imagery in the Tamil country because they seem to be the earliest appearing in Cholanadu region.

5. Chola Period

There are many important stone sculptures in the temple. All of them are life size (about 5 inch height) and appear in devakosthas. The dvarapalakas, stationed in ardhmandapa are also life size. These were in typical early Chola style and represented as Lingodbhavamurti, Brahma, Ganapathi, Mahisasuramardini, standing on the decapitated head of the buffalo-demon and an image of Dakshinamurti in the southern devakostha of the temple, which belongs to the Chola period⁵.

6. Dhakshinamurti

Dakshinamurti is another popular theme in Chola art and assigned an important place within the iconographic programme of the temple. Normally, the South devakostha of the sanctum sanctorum is reserved for Dhakshinamurti, the south-facing Lord. It has been recently suggested that Dhakshina is a word which denotes the Lord's functional quality as master of the arts or Lord of wisdom. An early reference to the Lord is found in the *Manimekalai* (6th century A.D.) calling Siva Alamaracelvan (the Lord seated below the al tree).

The fashion of installing Dakshinamurti on the southern devakostha began with the later Pallavas whose structural temples at Takkolam, Thiruttani and Tiruvatikai-virattanam provide for images at the location. The Vettuvankovil of Kalukumalai is another good example in which the Lord is Gnana-Dhakshinamurti, having the mirudanga, placed on the lap and posing to play the instrument. Dhakshinamurti called as Dharmavyakhyanamurti, Vinadharamurti, Gnanamurti and Yogamurti⁶.

7. Brahma

Brahma occupying the northern devakostha is a samapadasthanaka image. The Lord stands upon a padmapitha which is placed just above the pranala. The Lord was caturbhuj and holds the kamandalu (left) and aksamala (right) in parahastas. The front left was in uru and the right abhaya mudras. The Lord decorated with a number of ornaments and jatamakuta. The upper part of the devakostha consisted of a pancara motif which provided for a miniature sculpture.

The dvarapalakas appear within the arthamandapa on both sides of the entrance which leads into the garbhagraha. They were massive figures. Both of them were dvibhuj and stand in tribhanga posture⁷. They have one of their hands rested on a huge gada which was planted on earth. The other hand in case of the right dvarapalaka was in sucimudra and the left one vismaya. Both of them decorated with patrakundalas, necklaces, keyuras with lion-face motifs, kankanas, udarabandha and vastra-yajnopavita. They wear jatamakuta (left) and karandamakuta (right).

8. Ganapathi and Subrahmanya

The other images of the Vijayanagara style are housed in the varahamandapa of the temple. Ganapathi was caturbhuj and holds the ankusa and pasa in para hastas. The front right holds the danta and left sodaka. The image is seated in lalitasana attitude. Nearby, an image of five-hooded Naga was found. The other, Subrahmanya, appears in the company of the Lord's consorts and the peacock vehicle, Mayura or Sikhi-vahana. The purvahastas showed the abhaya and varada mudras. The image is standing in samapada aspect. The Lord is accompanied by Valli and Devasena. One of their hands on the Lord's side holds a flower and the other hand suspended in dolahasta attitude.

9. Sanisvara

There was a stray image of Sani, one among the Navagrahas. The Lord standing in samapada attitude and dvibhuj. The right hand showed the abhayamudra and left in uru hasta attitude. Sani, one among the important

members of the Navagraha 'nine planetary deities', rarely appears independently. A separate shrine for the Lord is found at Tirunallaru.

10. Bhairava

Bhairava is one of the fierce manifestations of Siva. He was nude like Bhiksatana and accompanied by a dog as vahana. Silpa texts talk in terms of sixty four types of the image as accounted in Rudrayamala and quoted in Sritatvanidhi. Bhairava was found standing on a padmapitha and bhadrapitha. The hands as usual are four; showing damaru and pasa or naga in outer hands. The front two hold a trisula and kapalapatra. The Lord decorated with all kinds of ornaments, including a naga-udarabandha, nude and fitted with jvala, appeared behind the head.

11. Kailasa Linga

Towards the other end of the row, five things were housed, called panchabhuta Lingas. These were five in number and stand for the pancha-Lingas represented Ap, Prithvi, Tejas, Vayu and Akasa. These images came in support of the traditional view that originally the Lord was known as Kailasanatha, an epithet so popular in early medieval tradition⁸. Further, a row of arupattumuvar was housed in the temple.

12. Surya

An image of Surya was within the limits of the mahamandapa. The Lord was standing in samapada attitude and dvibhuja. Both the hands were pulled forward upto the chest and carry blossomed lotuses, a mode familiar with pan-Indian tradition. The Lord wears shorts and a number of ornaments, including karanda makuta, necklaces and kankanas. The head was encircled by a halo.

The Silappatikaram of the 5th century A.D. contains the earliest invocation to the Sun God with the words, Thinkalai porrutum thinkalai porrutum., Nayiru porrutum Nayiru porrutum. Nayiru and Thinkal were the sun and moon respectively.

13. Bronze Icons

The exquisite collection of the temple's icons were the bronzes which are twenty in number, most of them Chola and a few from the Vijayanagara period. A large number of bronzes with remarkable beauty have been preserved in the Thiruvaduthurai temple. Most of the images were well kept in a separate room⁹.

14. Stucco

Stucco is a perishable material. Images made out of it consist of the core brick. Stucco images appear at the superstructure of the two vimanas of the temple in Devi shrine and the gopuras.

15. Wood Vehicles

There were a few wood carved vehicles in the Thiruvaduthurai temple. Big temples in Tamil Nadu were usually provided with a number of vahanas used for seating the images of the gods and goddess for Ula procession during Brahmotsava and other periodical festivals¹⁰. The vahanas were taken out in the morning and the evening on all festival days.

The Cholas were known for their paintings as well as the finest Murals (paintings done directly on walls).

16. Conclusion

Most of the images belong to the Vijayanagara period and Chola period. The 7th century A.D Thiruvaduthurai was growing in importance. The development of art and culture were interwoven with the historical factors. This was simply unique because there was a continuity in the artistic phase of the Thiruvaduthurai temple. In this regard the temple has proved to be a "Living Culture".

17. References

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