



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

History

GLIMPSES OF TEMPLE SOMESWARAR TEMPLE - ATTUR FROM THE LIGHT OF EPIGRAPHICAL SOURCES

KEY WORDS: Panchasthalas, Someswarar temple, Chola king Rajaraja I

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to highlight the epigraphical sources of Someswarar temple. The origin of most of the South Indian temple is a mystery. It is very difficult to identify the exact date of establishment. With the help of inscriptions alone is difficult to confirm the person who constructed the temple. However, with the help of inscriptions and the style of architecture, one can define the date of establishment. The origin of the Someswarar temple is also a riddle. This temple is located at the centre of Tuticorin and Tiruchendur highway. It is about 15 kms distance from Tiruchendur towards the northern direction. The original structure of this temple was constructed during the early Pandya period and was developed by erecting more mandapas by the Chola king Rajaraja I (A.D. 985-1014) in 1006 A.D. when he annexed the Pandya territory

Introduction :

The origin of most of the South Indian temple is a mystery. It is very difficult to identify the exact date of establishment. With the help of inscriptions alone is difficult to confirm the person who constructed the temple. However, with the help of inscriptions and the style of architecture, one can define the date of establishment. The origin of the Someswarar temple is also a riddle. This temple is located at the centre of Tuticorin and Tiruchendur highway. It is about 15 kms distance from Tiruchendur towards the northern direction. The original structure of this temple was constructed during the early Pandya period and was developed by erecting more mandapas by the Chola king Rajaraja I (A.D. 985-1014) in 1006 A.D. when he annexed the Pandya territory¹.

The special feature of this temple is that the Vishnu Shrine by the name, Pallikonda Perumal,² located on the north-west of the central shrine in the form of Ananda Sayanam (sleeping posture) worshipping Siva. There are five holy sites in Tamil Nadu on the basis of this structure. They are Tillai (Chidambaram), Nellai (Tirunelveli), Uttirakosamangai (Ramnad), Tiruchiralaivai (Tiruchendur) and Arrur Sendamangalam³ (Attur). The above mentioned five holy places are called Panchasthalas.

The inscription⁴ which was inscribed on the upper side of the Vinayaka image on the Mahamandapa mentions about the origin of the temple. Attur area was filled with forest and grass land in ancient time. It was a centre of grazing land for cattle from the nearby areas. One fine morning when the cows were grazing, to the great surprise, one of the cows extracting its milk by itself in a particular place. This wonderful incident happens every day. A cattle-rearing boy noticed the scene and the same was reported to the king. The king went to the spot along with his ministers in person and witnessed the scene. Then he returned to the palace. In the midnight of the same day the king had a dream and got the vision of god. The deity in dream told him that he was in the form of Linga under the ground, take the Linga by digging the soil and conduct pujas on the basis of *Saiva agamas*. Moreover, if you construct a temple for me in the same spot, you and your country will be benefited. After uttering these words the deity disappeared. The king rushed to the spot in the very next day and dug the soil. To his great surprise, he could find a Sivalinga inside the soil as per the dream of the previous day. So he constructed a temple and worshipped Lord Siva in the form of Linga. The prime deity of the place named as Someswarar (Somanathar) and the goddess as Somasundari Amman. The prime deity is named so, because once rishi Gautama, after taking bath in the holy tank Chandra Pushpakarni got the vision of God in the form of Soman (Chandra) and got relieved from his leprosy.

The special importance about the Someswarar temple is the existence of a shrine on the north-western verandah of the prakara, dedicated to *Pallikonda Perumal (Vishnu)*, similar to the one at the *Nellayappar* temple at Tirunelveli. This temple was also

referred to as "*Rajaraja Vinnagar Pallikondarulina Devar*"⁶ during the time of *Rajaraja* and in the period of *Sundara Pandya* the deity was called *Tirunarayana Vinnagar*. The shrine is outside the wall of the *tiruchchuru-maligai*,⁷ the entrance to it being on its wall and the garbhagraha being in a cella built outside, with a wagon shaped vimana. This shrine was built by Rajaraja I during his 22nd regnal year (A.D. 1007).⁸ The recumbent Vishnu has his head to the west and the feet to the east and lies on a serpent whose coils however are not to be seen above the floor level; the hood (with five heads) is a modern replacement. *Sridevi* and *Bhudevi* are seated. In the same chamber, on the western side, there are four bronze images of exquisite quality and finish, of *Rama*, *Vishnu*, *Sridevi* and *dancing Krishna*. The image of Rama is fascinating. His two arms are in the posture of holding the bow and arrow, which however, are not there now. He wears *patrakundalas*. These icons measure 89 cms (2'11"), 69 cms (2'3"), 58 cms (1' 11") and 61 cm (2') respectively.

Inscriptions of the Temple

The temple contains a large number of inscriptions ranging from the days of Rajaraja I to the sixteenth century A.D. These are of the Later Cholas and their Chola-Pandya viceroys cover almost half the number of the total of ninety and odd records. The remaining, relating mostly to the Pandyas of the post-Chola era. The inscription refer the presiding deity as "*Somadeva alias Ten Tribhuvanam Udayar*" and the *Vishnu* shrine as *Rajaraja Vinnagar Pallikondarulina Devar* and was also called as *Tirunarayana Vinnaga Devar* in the period of *Sundara Pandya*.¹⁰

There are ten inscriptions of the days of Rajaraja I, which are the earliest to be found in this temple. They are all engraved on the walls of the central shrine. A twenty first year (A.D 1006) inscription¹¹ which is the earliest of them, records a gift of sheep for a lamp to the temple of Someswarar by *Kandan Sittan of Alangudi in Vandalai-Velur* in *Arulmolideva valanadu*. Three others belong to his twenty second regnal year (A.D 1007); one of them stops with the mention of *Somanatha devar* alias *Ten Tiruppuvanam Udayar*. Another incomplete piece in the same characters mentions a merchant *Velan Teran* alias *Purusha- Manikka Setti*. The next record seems to state that *tiruvunnaigaiyar* agreed to provide for offerings to the deity with the income from the land endowed, by purchase, to the temple by the kings regiment called *Arulmolideva terinda parivarattar*. The third one of the year registers a gift of land as *Kudininga-devadanam* for the expenses of the *tiruchchennadai* of the images of *Olakka-Vitankar* and *Nityasundarar* in the temple of *Somanathadevar* alias *Ten Tiruppuvanam Udayar* at *Arrur*, a *brahmadeya* in *Kudanadu* in the sub-division of *Rajaraja Valanadu* by *Bharadvajan Madhava Udaya Divakaran* of *Kalitava-mangalam*, with himself as a tenant.

There are two records of the next year, the twenty third (A.D. 1008) year. One of them mentions a sale of land made tax-free by the assembly of *Kiranur* for worship and offerings to the images of

Rajaraja Vinnagar Pallikondarulina-dever (Vishnu), Durga-Bhagavati, *Sapta-matrikas*, *Kshetrapalar* and Ganapati set up in the temple of Somanathadevar alias *Ten Tiruppuvanam Udaiyar* at *Arrur Sendamangalam*. The other inscription which is on the basis of the characters belonged to the time of *Rajaraja I* refers to a gift of sheep by a person from *Parantaka valanadu*.

In the twenty-fourth year (A.D.1009) inscription, a lady of *Kalkurichchi* in *Tiruvaludi valanadu* makes a gift of sheep for a perpetual lamp to the temple. In continuation of this inscription is another record of the 17th year (A.D.1002) of the same king recording gift of sheep by a *Vellala* of *Marudur* in *Manavira-Valanadu*. Another record of the twenty-seventh regnal year (A.D. 1012) of *Rajaraja I* also refers to a gift of sheep for a lamp. A twenty-eighth year (A.D.1013) inscription mentions a gift of land after purchase from the *uravar* of *Varandivayal*, for the mid-day offerings to the image of *Purambalai Pillaiyar Ganapatiyar* in the temple of *Somanathadevar* alias *Ten Tiruppuvanam Udaiyar* at *Arrur-Sendamangalam*.

Surprisingly, there are only five records of the days of *Rajendra I* (A.D.1012-1044), three in his third year (A.D. 1015) and the rest in his fifth year (A.D.1017). Among his third regnal year inscriptions, one is incomplete and another refers to a gift of sheep and the third which is on the east wall of the *Perumal* shrine, registers a sale of land to the temple of *Someswarar* by the assembly, the *Karanmai* tenants and *Nakkan Tukka dichchan*. The two records of the fifth year (A.D. 1017), one of the 200th day, both refer to the gifts of sheep for perpetual lamps from persons in *Chola mandalam*.

Next, there are three records of the days of *Vira Rajendra*; (A.D. 1064-1070) the fourth year (A.D. 1067) inscription mentions the provision made for offerings in the temple of *Somanatha devar* every Sunday by one *Narayana Tiruvengadam* alias *Atula-Vichchadira Muvendavelan*, the headman of *Attur*. The fifth regnal year (A.D. 1068) inscription of *Virarajendra* on the north wall of the *Someswarar* temple registers a gift of land, after purchase, by *Virasir Muvenda Velan*, the headman of *Karuppur* and a resident of *Vetchiyur*, a village in *Serrur Kurram*, a sub-division of *Arumolideva Valanadum*. *Chola mandalam*, for providing on the day of *Ayilyam*, the natal star of the king, special worship to the several deities in the temple. A seventh year (A.D. 1070) record deals with a gift of money to the *aganaligaiyar* for a twilight lamp in the temple by one *Arangan Sodi*, a *Vellala* of *Tidarcheri* in *Pampur nadu*. Apart from these records, there are others given with the regnal years of the *Chola-Pandya* Viceroy, three relate to *Jatavarman* alias *Sundara Chola Pandya deva* and are of his sixth, twenty-first and thirtieth regnal years; The first (A.D. 1024) refers to a gift of buffaloes for a lamp in the temple of *Somanathadeva* by a *Vellala* of *Arrur-Sendamangalam*, a *brahmadeya* in *Kuda nadu*. Two *Sivabrahmanas* of the temple received the gift and undertook to supply the ghee required for the lamp. The second inscription found in a random stone in the pavement of the *Soma Sundari Amman* shrine, records the provision made by *Bharadvajan Lokaditya Kuttan* of *Arrur* for a perpetual lamp. The third inscription records a gift of sheep and a lamp-stand for a perpetual lamp by one *Pandan Kattangan* of the *Sundara Sola Pandya terinda palayaval* (a unit of the army).

Similarly of another Viceroy, *Maravarman Vikrama Chola Pandya deva's* four records have been found. One, inscription of A.D. 1020, records a gift of buffaloes for a perpetual lamp to the temple of *Someswarar*. Another inscription of his twenty-second regnal year (A.D. 1042), also deals with a gift for a perpetual lamp to the temple of *Someawarar*, *Attur* in *Rajadhiraja Chaturvedi mangalam*, a *brahmadeya* of *Kudanadu*, a sub-division of *Uttamachola Valanadu* in *Rajaraja Pandi Nadu*, by a native of *Kshatriyasikhamani Valanadu*. A third of his twenty-fifth year (A.D. 1045) inscription states that the gift of money made by one *Kandan Ayyanar* alias *Nirpasikhamani Muvendavelar* of *Mangalakkal* which was invested in the purchase of lands out of the yields of which the *aganaligai Sivabrahmanas* of the temple agreed to provide milk-porridge to the deity and feeding 15

Sivabrahmanas in the temple on each 'New moon day'. The menu is given for the food to be served in detail and the articles to be used in cooking, including pots and vessels, as well as betel and nuts are also mentioned. And finally, the fourth inscription, also of his twenty-fifth year (A.D. 1045) mentions coins a unit of measure for grains called the *Somanatha marakka* which throws light on the social aspect of the period and was named after the prime deity of the temple.

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