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# A Study of Art and Architecture of Chennakesava Temple at Somapalyam, Chittoor District, Andhra Pradesh

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**Abstract:** Somapalyam is a small village of Mulakala Cheruvu mandal of Madanapalli Taluk of Chittoor district. It is also known as Somapalem and ruled over it for some time as a feudatory to Vijayanagara dynasty. It is not possible to find the exact dates regarding the construction of this particular Chennakesava temple, as no inscriptions found there. The mural paintings executed in the ranga madapa has the stylistic reminiscences with that of veerabhadra svami temple at Lepakshi of second half of 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Style of executions and characteristics are akin but variant in themes. If Lepakshi murals depicted with shaivite theme, the Somapalyam temple is depicted with Ramayana themes as the temple is dedicated to God Vishnu as Chennakesava Swami. All the panels are enriched by textile designs as a boarder painting. Most of the colours are faded today even though the archaeological department doing its best. The Somapalyam temple may be stated as an intermediate stage in the development of Vijayanagara Art in Rayalaseema from Tadipathri to its pinnacle at Lepakshi.

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**Keywords:** Somapalayam, Chennakesava, Murals, Kalyanamandapa, Gollamandapa, Ramayana, Textile

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## Introduction

Somapalyam is a small village in Mulakala Cheruvu mandal of Madanapalli Taluk of Chittoor district. It is the most striking of Vijayanagara temples in Rayalaseema which contain paintings of the great mural tradition of Lepakshi. It is not possible to find the exact dates regarding the construction of the temple as no inscriptions found from there. But nobody can doubt that it was not built in the Vijayanagara times. It was under Tuluva dynasty that the Rayalaseema enjoyed its best days. The great Krishnadevaraya is no way greater than in the splendor of his benefactions to the temple. The three most famous temples in Rayalaseema are Tirumala, Kalahasti, Srisailam were granted with truly regal gifts. All experts agree that it was in his reign the Somapalyam temple was built. This is strengthened by the number of local traditions which differing in details, but unanimously agrees that it was built during the time of Krishnadevaraya (1509-1530). Due to the political conditions after the fall of Vijayanagara dynasty, this area underwent into the control of Nawab of Kadapa, later it was attacked by Maratta army under Balwant Rao who captured the fort of

Gurramkonda, sixteen miles east of Somapalyam. Again in 1766 A.D. this area went under the control of Hyder Ali. In 1777 A.D. the inhabitants of somapalle were driven out and temple was partly destroyed. Later there was a virtual anarchy in the region by number of polegars known as local chieftains, later affected by severe drought till 1802-03. Due to these reasons this temple is hidden and unexposed, not well known to the society and not well recognized. In 1882, Sewell cited about this temple in the list of antiquities and mentions *“three inscriptions in this “old sculptured Vishnu Temple” on the flag staff, on the wall of a room and pillar of a mandapa, called the village as Somapalle”*. In 1902 - 03 the Archaeological survey mentioned this temple in its report. In 1937 Dr. James Cousins wrote a note on the temple and mentions it as a Vishnu temple.

Since the temple contains no inscription on its foundation, it must be dated on the basis of its style. According the architectural style, it indisputably proclaims into the first half of the Sixteenth century. The style unfolds the reign of Krishnadevaraya, which lasted from 1509- 1530 A.D. He was succeeded by Achyutharaya, and in whose time the Lepakshi temple was built. Later some additions and paintings were executed during the time of king Achyutharaya (1530-1542). According to local tradition there lived a shepherd, in the neighborhood of Somapalem who became suddenly rich by acquiring hidden treasure. Then approached the Vijayanagara rulers and put a chieftain, built a fort and temple at Somapalem. It is also called Somapalyam and ruled over it for some time as a feudatory to Vijayanagara dynasty. Two names Krishnappa, Chinnanna (Rao 2016) were popularly motioned on two places in the temple. The plan of the temple, architectural style and construction of the kalyana madapa unfolds that they can be ascribed to Vijayanagara style. The mural paintings executed in ranga madapa has the stylistic reminiscences with that of Veerabhadra svami temple at Lepakshi in the second half of 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Styles of executions and characteristics are akin but variant in themes. It suggests that the date of the temple belongs to early 16<sup>th</sup> century and describes that Vijayanagara kings are patronized both Shaivism and Vaishnavism. If Lepakshi murals are depicted with shaivite theme, the Somapalem temple is depicted with Ramayana themes as the temple is dedicated to God Vishnu. It has the same style of pillar carving, same use of monoliths and multiple pillars. And same specialization in the “black stone” as the temples in Hampi and same detailed sculptural affluence as Vittala temple in Vijayanagar (Cousin 1937) confirms its dating, that it belongs to the Vijayanagara period.

## Architecture

The temple is built in Vijayanagara style. It's a small temple building enclosed in a single court when compared to the other Vijayanagara temples. The shrine and court walls are constructed of plain masonry with ornamental brick niches on the wall heads. Though the building as a whole is not very remarkable, there is some well worthy portions required of conservation. Kalyana mandapa is the best example with four lavishly carved pillars and a carved ratha in front of the Mahamnadapa. But several parts of the temple are ruined, for example, the gopura is totally in a dilapidated state. We may notice some repairing works handled by the Archaeological Survey of India

from the backside of the gopura. The building is briefly referred to in the “list of Antiquities” (Volume I, page 133). Local tradition says that the architect was a goldsmith who was also constructed the well known fort at Vellore in North Arcot district, Lepakshi temple Anathapur (Marshall 1904) and Jalakantheswara Temple at Vellore. The name of the chief Architect was Dankanacharya (Ramaswamy 1982).



Figure 1: Chennakesava Temple

The Chennakesava temple (Figure 1) can be entered through the gopura on the east side. Usually the lower part of the temple is constructed in stone and upper part is with brick, lime plaster and has rich work of statues. The brick work was ruined, and the archaeological department is trying to renovate and revive its past glory. Almost 90 percent of sculptures lost their charm, and the sculptures at the right side of the gopura are all out of recognition. Inside the temple complex, on the South- East corner one can notice two small restored rooms; they are called as yagasala and kitchen. On the south of the court, a grain store and three Alvar shrines. Out of them, only one shrine contains an image.

In the South-West corner, we notice a finely carved figure with figuration fronts. The entire shrine contains a finely sculptured image of Lakshminarayana swami image is worshipped. The side shrines are for Alvars, but only one of them contains headless worshipping image. In front of these is a fine and rich carved Kalyana mandapa in polished blackstone. The pedestal is supported by four finely sculptured piers with images and shafts attached to them. It is minutely carved and almost appears as in marble. The Kalyana mandapa has contained the most valued and delicate sculpture. At either end stands a small figure of a horse rampant and each side has sculptures of female attendant in delicate details. The intricately carved circular dome with projecting figures resembles some of the fine Chalukyan temples in Bellary district. The Maha mandapa has direct entrance to the sanctum. The ceiling of the Maha mandapa is of flat stone slabs, covered with plaster and decorated with scenes from Ramayana.

Ardha mandapa is a small antechamber attached to the shrine. The Girbhagriha, the main shrine contains the image of God Chennakesava swami which is finely carved in black stone. The courtyard walls are built of large stone blocks. In front of the entrance

of the Gopura (north east corner) there is choultry called Gollamandapa or peddanayana mandapa.

### **Gollamandapa (Shepherd Mandapa)**

The adjacent mandapa which is built to the left-hand corner (North East side) of the gopura is known as Gollamandapa. It is abutting to eastern prakara, opened to East, closed to North, South and West. According to local people, the builder built this mandapa to the memories of Yadavas (Golla community) who served and encourage the temple construction. As the king thought to give them a reward for their services to the temple, they appealed the king by asking to construct a mandapa on their name for the significant services during that construction of the temple. The king ordered to do so. There is another mandapa with high plinth in that mandapa having four pillars. Purpose of this mandapa is that it was used as a resting place for the divine images when taken from the temple on the occasion of festivals. There are two pillars at the entrance. They contain large sculptures of women as it were offering a welcome to the visitors or devotees. Like in the interior there are ten more pillars, and each is adorned with sculpture in high relief. This mandapa is adorned with fine sculpture with details than the sculpture inside the temple (Figure 2). These are large and up to five feet than the rest in the temple. All they are sculpted in Anjali mudra; sheathed daggers at the waist, and stylized dhoti ending in fold near the ankle. The noses of these sculptures were damaged during invasions of iconoclasts. The long conical cap of these men in standing pose on the either side of the mandapa is strongly and clearly suggests that this temple belongs to the Vijayanagara kings. Some names are inscribed on the left of the mandapa as “Golladana” and “Peddanayana”.



Figure 2: Sculptures in Gollamandapa

### **Deepastambha**

The Dwajastamba or Deepastambha was erected nearby 25 feet distance from the entrance of the gopura. The Dwajastamba is the component of two materials of stone. For the square platform granite was used and for the stamba or pole which nearly 50 feet in height was made of schist. It has been carved from the top to bottom on four

sides with convolves creeper in low relief from the base to the capital which carved out of the single stone or monolith in whitish tone. There is a square capital which had iron rings at the each of its four corners. On the lowest tier of the of platform of Dhvajasthambha, a tiny sculptures of 4- 5 inches in height were carved in a frieze of procession of men and animal are shown moving in clock wise direction where we can't find the starting point of the frieze. Men and women are depicted in animated postures in playing musical instruments. These have similar characters with friezes of Hazarama (Ramachandra temple) and Maharnavami platform. On the schist pillar, the carvings are executed in shallow relief with fine and smooth finish; whereas the platform made of granite was completely carved on granite. The temperament of granite is hard and bestowed little finishing. The height of the platform of dwajastamba is nearly six feet and divided in to seven tiers each was carved with different design. No repetition is seen in this. The band of this structure on upapitha is carved full of patter design of geese the most favorite element of Vijayanagara artists. From the bottom there are three tiers along the Pattika and another four friezes are in similar dimension which differs with measurements as in decreasing length and breadth. On the Pattika, the procession is depicted in fine action with dynamism. I found the finest carving the temple is the first frieze on the platform of Dhvajasthambha. The element of makara is nearly 5 inches in length and is carved as if it is trying to come out from beneath the frieze with a tilting head, which enhances its dynamic posture. This unfolds the command of Vijayanagara sculptor on the stone.

The temple might be built during the Achyutadevaraya time which was loaded with friction with Islamic states which is reflected in the architecture with no elaborate carvings on adhisthana of the gopura and walls of the temple and pillars are carved in rough, lacking smooth finishing as sculptures in the Gollamandapa. The carving of images will be seen in Kalyamandapa and standing figures of Gollamandapa only. The remaining portion contains no rich carvings, this gives immediately an easy clue that this temple was built during the last days of the war situations. That is why; somewhat hurriedness and roughness in the treatment of sculptures in the walls of gopura and adhisthana are left unfinished. But paintings are executed very well. But in the third panel we may notice the hurriedness in paintings. There is a lot of difference between the quality of first panel and third panel. The author hypothecates that the simultaneous works were commissioned to complete the temple construction hurriedly. Moreover, it was built by the subordinate of the Vijayanagara kings. Perhaps Vijayanagara kings might not be supervised properly this construction. It is observed that there are four types of stones were being used in the temple construction. The Kalyanamandapa is carved of Blackgranite, and other temple part are with red granite, the Gollamandapa is of white granite, the deepa stamba is schist stone which was apt for shallow and finest carving with details.

## **Paintings**

In general, Indian art whether it is miniature, or mural it is religious and decorative in nature. The Somapalyam mural paintings are possessed with high quality of drawing

and sweeping strokes with neat and careful depiction. Like Lepakshi mural they too are decorative in nature than the existed before. All the panels are enriched by textile designs as a boarder painting. It is on the verandah in front of the door that the eye is caught by the patches of colour on the ceiling, once a series of paintings executed on the plaster over the granite ceiling slabs, the artists took the theme of Ramayana for these murals. It is easily be traced the method of execution and style is similar to Lepakshi murals that is made of Fresco-Secco. N.S. Ramaswamy has also mentioned the same in his monograph on Somapalem temples.

The fourteen pillar mandapa can be divided in three panels in that murals runs from the south to North direction (Figure 3). Each is divided into horizontal bands. The first panel towards east has been divided into three horizontal bands. The second panel or middle panel is divided into four horizontal bands interrupted by the central ceiling with dome.



Figure 3: Paintings in the Ceiling of Mahamandapa

The third in the extreme west, adjacent to temple walls and is divided into three. The episode of Ramayana which is portrayed is from the marriage of Rama and Sita to Rama's coronation. Most of the murals are waned and washed out, some of these episodes which can be identified are; Rama bending Shiva's great bow, Rama slaying Tataka, Dasaratha is trying to appease Kaikeyi and Rama bidding farewell to Dasaratha. It is identified that in many areas flakes of plasters are peeled off and covered with fungi. In the temple, paintings are appears on this ceiling only. These incidents are portrayed in authentic Lepakshi model. Totally 10 horizontal panels contain the scenes from Ramayana. Each frieze is up to 2 feet width and 32 feet length each. In panel 1 at extreme eastern side, the story runs from right to left and from the South to North in direction (Figure 4).

The chief characteristics of the murals are; the faces are portrayed as round and bulging and protruding eye in three quarter face as reflected in the conventional style of Ellora paintings and 14<sup>th</sup> century Jain miniatures. Their bulging eyes are often considered as a symbol to express the feeling of amaze, wonder and celebration. Majority of the human figures are always depicted in elongated and slightly tilted against the gravity and rarely seen in sitting postures. Both feet are pointing in the same direction as that of the leather puppet that constitutes popular folk-art form in this area. Most of the ladies have the same type hair –knot, but Kirita and hair styles of men vary in great deal. The standing postures of divine beings are represented as frontal body and profile face with a slim waist.



Figure 4: Murals in the Ceiling of Mahamandapa

The artist preferred to draw profile figures. No ordinary persons are represented in these paintings. Every participant is belonging to the Ramayana only, they are divine and semi divine in nature (Figures 5 - 8). Unlike like Lepakshi, common people were never been portrayed. All the panels are enriched by textile designs as a boarder painting. Similarly, the Nayaka paintings of Tiruvalanjuli have also been painted with borders of textile designs (Sivaramamurti 1968). But not as rich as in the Lepakshi murals.

With the reference of these we understand that how much level of craftsmanship was executed in those days. By seeing this; one can understand the aesthetic sensibilities of the weaver's skill of those days. Rhythm of dancers, adoration of Sita, and emphasis on the beauty of women are infused with orchers, sensuality of heavy breasts, round lips

and innocent fisheyes gives resonances of the adoration of beauty. The male figures were often shown in action and elegant costumes are the unique style of Vijayanagara style. The fusion between human figuration and spiritual inclination has been transferred into a poetical grace. Refinement in the handling of soft whites, yellows, ochers, pale flesh tints, grays against the red and ochres, and bold sensuous lines, bulging eyes brought strangeness in the appearance, apart from the earlier traditions which creates visible stirrings on the beholders.



Figure 5: Rama Killing Demon Tataki Represented in Panel 1



Figure 6: Painting of Coronation of Sri Rama

These are painted on the horizontal and vertical beams which divides the entire ceiling as panels. These are fully painted. The contemporary costumes and jewellery were meticulously rendered in all the panels. This shows the importance was given for the jewel dresses and fashion in the royal patronage as well as the contemporary life of the people of Vijayanagara dynasty. The Choli, made of diaphanous material was intentionally selected to emphasis the beauty of woman. In the painting, we may notice the second female figure wears a kind of full sleeves blouse in torques blue, which strengthens my idea of diaphanous material. The “pallu” (end piece of saree) of the 5 yards lengthy sari goes around the body twice for good covering which we see on the fourth frieze of the middle panel.

In some cases, the pallu passes through the left arm while covering breasts, rests ultimately on the right. In some cases, it passes through the right shoulder, which goes behind the back of woman and rests on left shoulder. A gathered hair into a knot was a habit of ladies is recurrent feature of these paintings. Instead of garlands, loose flowers on the knots but also seen on the upper garments. Most remarkable feature lies in the exquisite textile designs both for clothing and figures as wells as for the borders and backgrounds with limited palette with light orange or light yellows while blue is replaced by green wherever necessary.

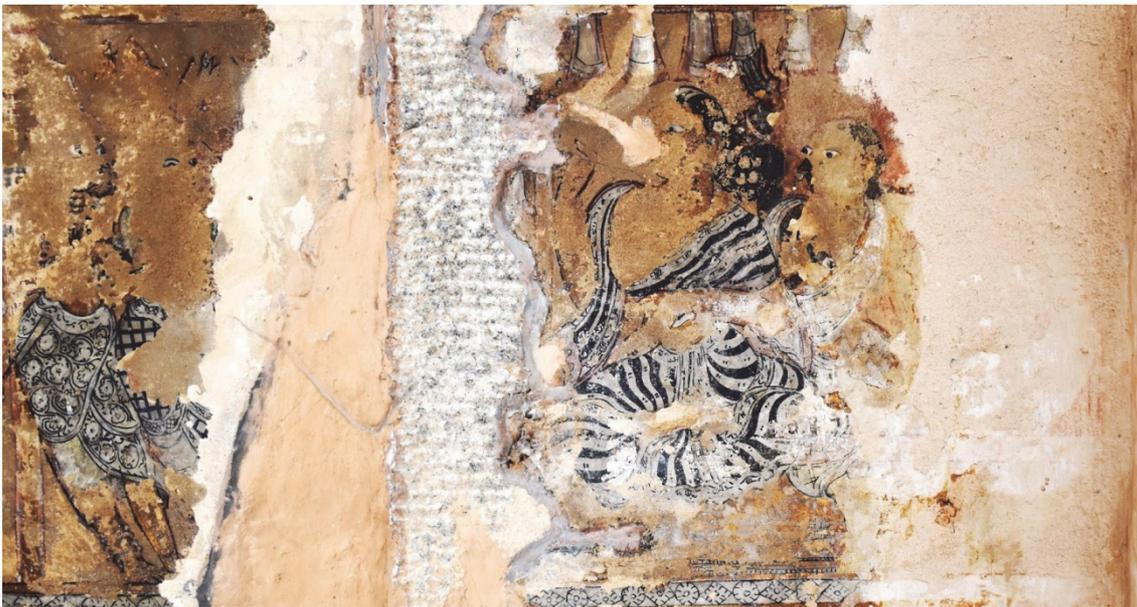


Figure 7: Painting of Sita in Lanka

The height of these figures is governed by the position of objects in the space. The principle of verticality could be predominating and similar as well as to the Lepakshi murals. Various types of backgrounds were served for these compositions; they are of two types: former is being the trees which is used to the division of the space into a compartment. The trees are stylized into an umbrella shape. In all over the murals there are two or three trees are seen. The latter is the background which is decorated with ornamental hangings. The loose flower decoration is the distinctive feature in this

tradition. Circular, Semi-circular, bell shaped and multi curved hangings and some floral festoons are arranged on the upper section of the panel which gives the semblance of a stage. Architectural setting was shown in the eye level and more details are not as rough as Lepakshi. The same features can be observed from the Pundarikanksha temple at Tiruvellarai in the vicinity of Srirangam. Architectural settings been used just as an auxiliary element to the paintings but sometimes they were contextual.



Figure 8: Decorative Patterns on the Beams of the Mahamandapa

The drapery consist the dhoti tied to the waist and the cloth with fringes hanging in front. Both men and women seem to wear without garments to cover the body above their waist. Men wear turban with crest of jewels. The chieftains and princes usually wear a long conical makuta or kireetas. For women, the garments seem very long which lengths nearly five yards (Figure 7).

Most remarkable feature lies in the exquisite textile designs both for clothing and figures as wells as for the borders and backgrounds with limited palette while blue is replaced by green wherever necessary (Tomory 1989). Even freshly painted, these murals are very small in quantity compared to the vast extant of Lepakshi. In Lepakshi we may find huge mural of Veerabhadra in Lepakshi and Vishnu in Tadipathri, but there is no such huge image in the Somapalem temple which is smaller than its predecessor and successor.

The Somapalyam art is essentially the art of mural miniaturist. The range of colour palette in Somapalem murals are dark brown, light blue, dark and light yellow. As in 1937 Dr Cousins wrote on them as “dark patches of colour (Ramaswamy 1982). All colours are faded today even though the conversationalist done his best.

## Conclusion

In overview of the Vijayanagar style, it is not a direct development of classical painting. But it serves its decorative purpose exceptionally well with its undercurrent of folk art discernable in the tableau –like placing of flat figures against a patterned background. Historically its importance lies in its influence on the later Muslim painting in the Deccan and continuity of tradition from Ellora to western Indian miniature paintings. The paintings provide a glimpse of the richness and colour of cosmopolitan society; its styles and fashions in terms of textile and jewellery designs.

Today paintings are in a miserable state of preservation. In many places plasters are peeling off and colours are fading and in need of better maintenance and expert restoration. Just because of the technique they adopted, today we are able to see the red colored line and impressions, as some percolated which too fading away. As a result of human negligence, especially of uncleaning and damping and leakage, sinking of water thorough the cleavages of ceilings causing the painting into the stage of deterioration. The glorious Ramayana story now has shrunk to a few patches here and there. 90% of the visual appearance of paintings is lost which we can't restore their charm again. At the least care should be taken by governments and public to keep their existence for future generations. The Somapalyam temple may be stated as the intermediate stage in the development of Vijayanagara art in the Rayalaseema from Tadipathri to its pinnacle at Lepakshi.

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