
Thirukkurungudi and Charode: Tracing Sculptural and Inscriptional Vestiges of Erstwhile Travancore

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Received: 03 August 2018; Revised: 08 September 2018; Accepted: 21 October 2018

Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology 6 (2018): 788-812

Abstract: Temple architecture of high standard developed in almost all regions during ancient India. The temple and its structural specificities are the embodiments of the popular culture of the civilization. The complexity and the divergence of myriad temple structures conceal certain structural facets which encompasses stunning and less adored pieces of worship and creativity. Several such structural, iconographic and epigraphical representations that stands overlooked among the mighty columns of the temples at Thirukkurungudi and Charode of erstwhile Travancore are prone to appraisal here. The study also traces the Kerala connection of these temples as gleaned from inscriptions and sculptures within it. The political affiliation of these temples, the impact of maritime relations, cultural and religious interaction and popular history find focus here. The representation of subalterns within the temple calls forth a reading on early society. An extensive historical and archaeological research of the vast canvas of sculptures and conservation of these fading relics of ancient heritage is also stressed.

Keywords: Thirukkurungudi, Epigraphy, Bell Inscription, Aditya Varma, Chitra Gopuram, Aana Shasta, Charode

Introduction

The temple is one of the most significant monuments of Indian architecture as it sums up and represents the subtle values of Indian culture. Elaborations of the temple structure followed the firm establishment of image worship and the accompanying development of the ritual, which took time to crystallize. Temples come in many styles, are situated in diverse locations, deploy different construction methods and are adapted to different deities and regional beliefs, yet almost all of them share certain core ideas, symbolism and themes. The southern temples are extraordinary architectural feats, but they were built to serve as the spiritual link between the gods and humans. Inside the temples people had the ability to draw closer to the gods through the use of rituals and ceremonies. Religious symbols are found throughout the Hindu temple architecture,

which reinforce the spiritual link. Many ideas from the epics and the Puranas, along with symbolically representing the religion's ultimate goal of *moksa*, are seen in the temples.

The paper presents a comprehensive picture of the unnoticed aspects, both sculptures and inscriptions of certain important and once mighty south Indian temples, explaining the niceties of their architecture, the many subtle variations in style and sample of certain rare figurines, that call forth scholarly attention and preservation. The unique panels within the temple of Thirukkurungudi reveal a faded connection with the Kerala temples, which is obviously attested by the authority of Travancore kings in the Tamil region. Similarly the influence of Arab maritime relations and its inherent aspects reveal the nature of commerce and religious toleration prevailed in the region. The depiction of hunter community calls forth a deliberation on society and tradition. The Charode temple preserves in itself an episode of a mysterious artistic inventiveness and popular history. The deliberations upon of each of the features are delineated alongside the narrative for the sake of maintaining continuity.



Figure 1: The Azhagiya Nambi Rayar Temple, Thirukkurungudi

The Azhagiya Nambi Rayar Temple, Thirukkurungudi

Besides the Nambi river and against the backdrop of the Western Ghats (Mahendragiri) on the southern Tamil Nadu-Kerala border is situated the Azhagiya Nambi Rayar temple at Thirukkurungudi. The temple is one among the 108 Vaishnava shrines or abodes of Vishnu. As per the Vaishnava tradition, Thirukkurungudi is said to be the 'Southern Home' of Lord Vishnu and is also called 'Dakshina badri'. Thirukkurungudi is a holy Divyadesa complex of five temples and five Nambis ('Nambu' in Tamil means believe and 'Nambi' means believed by all or the Lord. The deity is venerably called 'Nambi'). The main temple of Thirukkurungudi has three Nambis in *Nindra* (standing), *Irundha* (sitting) and *Kidantha* (reclining) postures. Thirukkurungudi is also known as 'Kuranga Kshetram', Kuranga being the name of Bhumi Devi (Earth) who performed penance for the Lord in this holy place (Figure 1).

The temple has been extolled in song by great Azhwars like Nammazhwar, Thirumangai Azhwar (*Periya Thirumozhi*: 9.5.2-3), Ramanujar etc..Though the exact date of consecration of the temple is unknown, mention is found in Verses dating to 8th century AD. References on Thirukkurungudi temple is found in *Sundara Kanda* in *Valmiki Ramayana* (Sundara kanda: Sloka 5.1.5-5.1.7), *Kaisika Puranam* and *Varaha Purana*. Legends related to the temple revolve around Vamana (Vishnu's Incarnation) and Shiva also. The famed "Araiyaar Sevai" originated from Thirukkurungudi. The temple finds mention in the *Subhagasandesha* (Figure 2) ('Subhagasandesha' is an unpublished 'sandeshakavya' in which Subhanga, the messenger in the poem is directed to see Rama Varma (the then Travancore ruler) at Thirukkurungudi in Tirunelvely, where he then resided. The poem depicts the topography and places of reverence from Kanyakumari to Trissur via Thirukkurungudi (Figure 1). A version also mentions Subhanga carrying the message of one Naryana to the latter's wife stationed at Trissur in Kerala) (*Kerala Society Papers* 1997).

<p>[ഏലാവല്ലി കലിത കടളിപേലവസ്സർശശിതാൻ വാതാൻകുടീസുകലവധൂകുന്തളീനസപോരാൻ ആലിംഗ്യാസ്മിൻ കമലഭവനാ- കേലി കല്യാണരംഗം യായാ യായാവ വസുമതി മംഗലം ശ്രീകരംഗം, തസ്മിൻ കേരളേ ജയഹരി മഹീ പാലസാമ്രാജ്യലക്ഷ്മീ ലക്ഷ്മീലീലാമരകതരിശി വിശ്വവിക്രാന്തിദാതൃഃ, കല്യാണാനാ മുദയ വസതി കാമദോഷാഘ്നീ നതാനാ കാഞ്ചിൻമൂർത്തി ഭജ കലിമലാ ദൈവമാവാകവാണിം.]</p>	<p>Transliteration elavalli kalita kadali pelava spars'a s'itan vatan kumbhisutakulavadhu-kuntaligandhacoran, aliNgyasmin kamalabhavana kelikalyanaraNgam yaya yayavara vasumati maNgalam s'rikuraNgam. tasmin ksetre jayaharimahi- palasamrajyalakshmim laksmililamarakatagirim, vis'vavis'rantidatrim, kalyananam udayavasatim kamadogdhrim natanam kancin murtim bhaja kalimala- dvaitacarvakavanim.</p>
<p>Content: Here the poet of Subhagasandesha i.e Narayana asks Subhanga to worship Vishnu , the Lord of Thirukkurungudi (Sree Kurangam), who is described as 'jayaharimahipalasangyalakshmi' i.e., 'the wealth of the country, ruled by the kings of Jayasimha's line'.(Jayasimha was the father of Samgramadhira Ravi Varma, who was the king of Quilon from 1266-1316 A.D, and who , after conquering the rulers of the Pandya nd Chola countries, crowned himself as the Lord of the whole of South India on the banks of the Vegavati in 1312-13.Thirukkurungudi and Valliyur were the eastern capitals of the successors of Ravi Varma.</p>	

Figure 2: Reference from Subhagasandesha on Thirukkurungudi (Sreekurangam)

Nindra Nambi or Azhagiya Nambi is also called as "Sundara Paripoornam", meaning "Perfect and complete beauty". The deity is present along with two pirattiyars, Maarkandeya and Brighu. Also there are separate shrines for Veetrirundha Nambi called as "Vaikundhanadhan" and Kidantha Nambi. Close to the Nambi's legs, the head of Mahabali is found. These huge idols are carved of stone with the application of natural colours and decorated with gold leaves as per the agama rituals.The deity; Sree Vaishnava Nambi is the prime festival deity of the temple. He stands with four hands,

two of them carrying the Sankhu and Chakra, third with Varada hasta and the fourth in the Yoga mudra. He wears Kasturi tilaka on His forehead and the sacred Yagnpoaveda on His body. Also the sacred Vaijayathi mala occupies His chest. Lord Shiva is given equal place in this temple as 'Mahendragiri nathar' and poojas are performed in both the shrines at the same time. The Bairavar shrine is also present. The temple is renowned for its breath -taking sculptures.



Figure 3: The Bell having Inscription of Aditya Varma



Figure 4: Different Inscriptions

The Bell and Other Inscriptions

The highlight of the temple is a huge hanging bell in the Kulasekara Mandapam, in front of the Sanctum Sanctorum (Figure 3). The inscription on the bell has caught royal attention, as Vishakam Tirunal Rama Varma of Travancore (AD 1873) had visited the temple exclusively to recopy the inscription (*The Indian Antiquary*, Series 9. 1873). The inscription less known to the laymen reads: “In the year Bhavati (644) of the Kolomba era, King Aditya Varma, the ruler of Vanchi, born in Vishakha, who is a string of gems of virtues, and a matter of all arts(kala), who adorns the Jayasimha dynasty, and who has attained the sovereignty of Chiravaya Mandalam (Kingdom) , hung up the bell which adorns the gate of Murari (Vishnu) enshrined in the Sri Kuranga (Tirukurangudi) temple”(Kerala Society Papers Vol. II 1997:170).

The inscription dated Malayalam Era 644 or 1468-1469 AD reveals the suzerainty of Travancore kings upon the Tamil territories. Tirukkurungudi and Valliyur had been the early capitals of Venad (later Travancore). The bell had been donated by Aditya Varma who was the sovereign of Venad belonging to Jayasimhanad (Quilon). The Travancore rulers had extensive control of these regions even in the first half of the 17th century. The

fact is testified by the *Subhagasandesha* which reveals that the rulers of Travancore, particularly of Jayasimhanadu (Quilon branch, also known as Kallil Tavazhi) owned the western and southern portions of the Tirunelvely District during 15-17th century. There are lithic records of Travancore rulers within these areas in Adanaur, Mannarkoil, Alvar-Tirunagari, Karisulntamangalam, Kallidaikkurichi, Tirukkurumkudi, Ambasamudram, Tiruppuvanam, Tirupptaimaritur, Pallakkal, Harikesavanallur, Mele-Chevval, Brahmadesam, Mannarmangalam, Attazhanallur and Kalakkad during the period from 1399 to 1645. These inscriptions reveal the names of rulers such as Vira Udayamarthanda Varma, Ravi Varma, Vira Kerala Varma, Rama Varma and Marthanda Varma (Ulloor: 237). The 13th century inscription during the period of Veera Kerala Kulasekhara depicts of a Malava Chakravarti Alankara Enbavan donating land to the Nambi temple for instituting daily food offerings on behalf of the former (*Thirukkurungudi Kalvettukkal* 2016).

The earliest inscription noticed is of the Pandya king Maranjadaiyan (Varaguna I) around 796 C.E. It records the gift of land to temple (SII 15/19). Yet another inscription at Thirukkurungudi is a fragment from the 10th century that records a donation of a 'nandha vilakku' or a perpetual lamp. Fifty goats were also donated for its maintenance. Thirukkurungudi inscription of Prantaka Nedunjadaiyan's fourth year shows that the huge reservoir called Vasudeva-eri and certain minor reservoirs like Arak-kulam and Nakkan-eri-kulam belonged to Vaikunta-valanadu, a larger *brahmadeya* in Nanguneri (SII, XIV, no.19).

The long inscription at the entrance of the Chitra Gopuram records how water from Uchi Malai flowed down through the Paralai River. In 1313, a stone dam was constructed to divert the water to the northern river and a canal in Kalakkad. The inscription states that Ayyapallai Ayyan, the temple maniyam (officer), deputed Tirumalai Servaikaran and Tirumalai Asari to repair the dam and clean the canal to bring water back. This dates the Chitra Gopuram to the 17th century. Inscription also reveal the mechanism for administration of the temple. The inscription on the wall of the inner sanctum states that the monastery that administers the temple was created in the 14th century as the Thirumangai Matam with offerings for Tridandi sanyasis.

The inscriptions expose various offerings and sources of income. The sustenance pattern of the village is also revealed. Most inscriptions record gifts of land, usually in villages close by but also in far off Kerala referred to as Malai Nadu (SII Vol. XIV:19). Kaladi and Meithuruthi are two places mentioned. Most of these inscriptions are from the 13th century during the reign of Maravarman Sundara Pandyan. One of them mentions food offerings, of 10 padi (16 kilograms) of amuthu (rice), with proportionate quantities of kari amuthu (vegetables), nei amuthu (ghee), elai amuthu (betel leaves) and adaikai amuthu (areca nuts). To enable this food offering, Purusha Narayana Per Eri, a large lake, was donated to the temple. The funds generated from fishing rights and charges for water supply to fields were used to buy materials for the feast. Other towns mentioned include Sri Vallabha Chaturvedi Mangalam (Tirunelveli) and Tiru

Muthukuti (Tenkasi). A thirteenth century inscription on the wall of the inner enclosure mentions Malava Chakravarti constructing the Azhagiya Manavala Perumal shrine in memory of his father (*Thirukkurungudi Kalvettukkal* 2016).

There are three copper plate inscriptions in the temple dated 1456, 1537 and 1592 indicating grants from Sabala Veera Chandra Ramavarma Maharaja, Vittala Raya of Vijayanagar Empire and Vira Vasantha Venkatadeva respectively indicating several grants to the temple. Another inscription on the wall of the inner enclosure states that in 1571 during the reign of Sadasiva Rayar, the Kerala King Udaya Marthanda Varma along with his queens donated a garden through Mahabali Vanathirayan, a local chieftain. A 16th century inscription is about the land donated to the temple by a Devadasi dancer called Alankara Valli, who was one among the devotees who stayed back at Tirukurumkudi during the Muslim invasion of Thirumaliruncholai near Madurai. Different inscriptions (Figure 4) reveal that the temple received grants from the Chera, Pandya and Madurai Nayak dynasties. The Kerala connection of the temple is well attested by the above donations at varied periods. The blend of Kerala and Dravidian style of architecture and sculpture is noteworthy in Thirukkurungudi.



Figure 5: Sculpture of Kamadeva



Figure 6: Sculpture of Rathidevi

The Temple and Its Sculptures

The temple layout includes the entrance area before the Chitra Gopuram, the Chitra Gopuram and the inner precincts of the temple that include all the shrines and the sanctum. The entrance area before the gopuram has a huge hall and mandapa called the 'Rathi mandapa', possessing rarest of the rare sculptures. The exclusively carved image of Kamadeva/Manmadha and his consort, Rathidevi stands opposite to each other. Kamadeva holding his famed sugarcane bow on one hand and arrows made of flowers on the other, is seen with fine draping and heavily ornamented (Figure 5). Rathidevi is seated upon her favourite Swan, is a visual treat exposing all feminine beauty. Her right hand clutches a tree branch and a peacock (Figure 6).



Figure 7: Composite Sculptures -Kunjar Art Forms in the Gopuram



Figure 8: Chitra Gopuram



Figure 9: Arab Merchants on Trade

The gopuram is over forty metres, with massive wooden doors towering to 7.5 metres. It has several small niches, each of which has a bas relief. Themes from both the Vaishnava and Saiva is found in detail. Unusual sculptural themes include a depiction of Saturn with his mount, the crow. The niches of the gopuram has finely carved animal figurines with composite features in it. Thirukkurungudi is one among the few temples where the craftsmen has used the 'Kunjar art form'. Animal frames were commonly used, elephant and horse being the most commonly used forms. 'Kunjar' or the elephant is the main composition of the art form. Elephant's shape is used as the shell within which figures of women are artistically intertwined and seated in a creative manner (Figure 7).

The artist uses his creativity and employs various acrobatic postures of women to adjust them within the shell or the frame. Horse and elephant made of birds is another one (Figure 7). It highlights the artist's skill of composition and assemblage, importantly within the parameters of a frame work.

Proceeding further is a mandapa or hall with eight magnificent pillars, all with very finely carved with two-metre-high sculptures, largely free-standing. Each of the images has an interplay of folk as well as classical themes. All of them have very high detail. Each gemstone of the many ornaments that adorn the figures from head to toe, every fold of the garments has been painstakingly carved. The muscles and veins are also finely defined. The pillars behind these sculptures are simple compositions of alternate square and octagonal blocks. At each intersection is the usual Naga bandham (serpent motifs that adorn the side panels).

The Chitra Gopuram (Figure 8) connects the entrance to the inner temple complex. Its base is of stone and the rest of brick. The stone is beautifully carved as are the interiors of the five-level brick superstructure. The panels demonstrate the sculptors' vigilant attention to detail adorned with rare themes. The doorway inside the gopuram is 5.5 metres tall and the ceilings are superbly carved with religious themes and floral motifs. The upper walls have unique panels of Arab merchants on trade (Figure 9). "The entire panel could be divided into three scenes based on the themes. From the right side, the subject is depicted clockwise. If one looks at the right portion the arrival of the ship over the sea is seen. The lower portion of left side conveys the message of sailors landing and moving to the destination. The upper part of the left side gives the message that they reach to the local chieftain's/king's place and offer their gift" (Athiyaman 2015:99-11).

The scene of maritime relations is attributed to sixteenth century. Arrival of Arabs on a ship, trading of camels and horses etc., reveal the brisk trade between South India and the influence and spread of Islam in India. The incorporation of Muslim merchants within the panels of a Hindu temple exemplifies the indubitable sway of trade and the Arab trading community upon the then socio-economic and cultural scenario of South India. The commercial relation with the Arabs with India remained since antiquity. The activity peaked during Chola period and later. They were permitted to indulge in socio-religious and cultural activities in Tamil region and even made donations to temples and acted as arbitrators. They enjoyed the patronage of the rulers and mingled with the public. Even though the patronage to these Arab traders continued during the Nayak rule, the invasion of the European colonial powers changed the situation. The Portuguese and their successors in India ruthlessly persecuted the Arabs. Thus the trade relations and religious toleration were gravely affected. To scholarly opinion (Athiyaman 2015:99-11); "The harmony of the Locals and Muslim Traders were disturbed by the arrival of Europeans. The early part of the 16th century the coastal Tamil region witnessed mass conversions and in turn created strife among the three religious people. To show the goodwill with Arab traders the kings could have ordered the trade themes to be painted (or sculptured) in the temples though the religion is different."



Figure 10: Rama, Varuna and Sethubandhan



Figure 11: Krishna Stealing Butter



Figure 12: a – Puthanamoksha, b – Killing of Sakatasura, c – Gopika Vastrapaharana and d – Kaliyamardana



Figure 13: Bhima and Hanuman



Figure 14: The Garuda Story



Figure 15: Gajendramoksha

There are probably more than two thousand stone and wood relief panels on the Chitra Gopuram. The primary subjects to be the stories of Krishna from the *Bhagavata Purana*, episodes from the *Ramayana* and Shaiva themes. Several nature-inspired themes are evident as well. The sculptors are within the rectangular compartments in the ceilings each with six or nine panels. It includes various forms of Vishnu, Lakshmi, Devi, Ganesha, Shiva and Parvati etc. Free-standing wooden sculptures of gods and goddesses, demons; and animals such as tigers, elephants, boars and leopards being the common ones are represented here. The tigers have been given short wavy stripes and the leopards have spots. The ceiling of the fourth-level has even more innovative panels, depicting the incarnations of Vishnu, Narasimha, and Garuda. One spectacular image in stone is of Rama holding a drawn bow with arrow threatening Varuna (the Sea God) to cooperate to build Ramasethu (the bridge to Lanka). The panel even has waves in the foreground (Figure 10).

Krishna themes adorn the walls, ceilings and wooden panels quite in large numbers. Themes include, Kamsa killing Maya (the seventh child of Vasudeva and Devaki), Krishna stealing butter (Figure 11), Puthana moksha (Figure 12 a), killing of Sakatasura (Figure 12 b), Gopika Vastrapaharana (Figure 12 c), Kaliyamardana (Figure 12 d) etc.

Two rare stone panels possibly found nowhere else in the Tamil region within the temple include popular tale related to Bhima and Garuda. One is of Bhima unsuccessfully trying to lift the tail of Hanuman (Figure 13). The sculptor has emphasized Bhima's gargantuan proportions by showing clouds on either side and has deliberately shrunk Hanuman and given him a crouching position. The other panel is from the story of Garuda's meeting with his father. Here the half-eagle, half-human figure carries in his beak a branch of a tree on which sit four meditating sages, and in his talons an elephant and a tortoise (Figure 14).

Gajendramoksham, largely famous in Kerala is unique in the temple and is rare in Tamil Nadu (Figure 15). The relief in stone reveals the Kerala connection. The service of craftsmen from Kerala could not be ruled out as the region once belonged to the Kerala rulers. Gajendramoksham is a favourite theme of artistic depiction in Kerala. The largest of the frescoes in Krishnapuram Place in Kayamkulam is well renowned. In Kerala the theme appears as the subject of frescoes in the temples at Karat (Kozhikode), Shornoor, Vaniyankulam (Palakkad), Kidangoor (Kottayam) and Kodumon (Kollam). Also are the wood sculptures on the same theme at Kaviyoor and Chathankulangara (Sashibhooshan1997:21-23).

The main temple complex is beyond the Chitra Gopuram. Within the complex on the right is the Virappa Nayaka Mandapam. It is believed to be built for Muthu Virappa Nayaka (1609-23) of Madurai Nayak dynasty. Huge three metre carvings on the pillars of the mandapam include two of Narasimha, one holding the sinful Hiranya on His hand (Figure 16a) and the second, tearing him apart (Figure 16b). The life- size sculpture of a warrior king upon a heavily decorated horse is breath taking (Figure 17). Among the

sculptures of the Nayak queens, one wears the *tiruman* (Vaishnava caste mark) that only men wear. Two pillars have images of Bhima and a Purushamriga (Vyakhrapada Muni, the tiger footed Saint i.e. a satyr of sorts, with human body but animal's legs (Figure 18). Noteworthy are the rows of finely engraved *yalis* of which a pair of *yali* sculptures have freely rotating stone balls inside their mouths (Figure 19).



Figure 16: a - Narasimha capturing Hiranyakashipu and b- Slaying Hiranyakashipu

The sculpture of a Kurati (woman from the hunter community of the hills) with a prince and holding an explicitly carved basket is worth noting (Figure 20). Besides the Manavala Muni's shrine nearby is a five and half feet tall sculpture of a Kurava. The image clasps a long spear which is realistically carved out of granite. In the right hand he holds a monkey and a crane. Ornamented with a conch and bead garland in the neck, weaved basket hangs on his shoulder. A sickle is seen held on the waist. Historically, the depiction of Subaltern classes in a colossal manner within the precincts of a conventional centre of worship is incredible. The images presumably suggest the recognition that these marginalised ones from hunter community received from the rulers and the people

or that that of an indelible part played by them in the societal life of the period. It is to be noted that the craftsmen/sculptors were keen in representing the daily life of the period thus throwing floodlight to the then social strata. It might also be assumed of a lasting trail of popular tradition/story (related to the hunters) inevitably interwoven with the then culture of the region, owing to the proximity of Thirukurungudi with the hills of Mahendragiri, which was an abode of the hill men.



Figure 17: The Warrior King



Figure 18: Purushamriga/Vyakrapadamuni

As already mentioned, the core of the temple has three independent shrines for Vishnu—standing, seated and reclining, are the oldest structures in the temple and presumably of the 8th century. The main deities are made of stucco and painted with natural dyes. There are subsidiary shrines for Shiva and Bhairava, no less of any grandeur. The shrine has an ‘Ashtanga Vimana’ meaning there are three storeys of sanctum sanctorum. The themes of the temple at Thirukkurungudi are both Vaishnava (Figure 21a) and Saiva (Figure 21b). The fusion of iconography of both the sects remains an epitome of religious amalgam. The depiction of features and themes commonly found in Kerala temples expose the indelible mark of its political and cultural indulgence upon the temples situated in the then Travancore.



Figure 19: Yali with Stone Balls in Mouth



Figure 20: Kurati



Figure 21: a - Trivikrama (Vishnu) and b - Shiva Thandava



Figure 22: The Aana Shasta Temple at Charode



Figure 23: Elephant with Mutilated Mahout



Figure 24: Elephant Sculptures

The Shasta's Elephants: Shasta Temple at Charode

The temple of Shasta at Charode, popularly known as Aana Shasta ('Aana' in Malayalam means Elephant, hence the 'Shasta upon elephant') is located just a kilometer away from the Padmanabhapuram Palace at Thuckalay in the Kanyakumari District of Tamil Nadu, the early capital of Travancore (Figure 22). *Shasta* is a generic term that means "Teacher, Guide, Lord, Ruler" in Sanskrit. In South India, a number of deities are associated with Shasta. The Shasta cult is famous in Tamil Nadu, the Kerala equivalent being Aiyappan. Though Shasta and Aiyappan are of different conceptualizations, both are worshipped as similar forms.

The consecration of the temple being Shasta on elephant or Kaala Shasta /Gajarooda Shasta /Maha Shasta, is one among the eight forms of Shasta (The eight forms being: Dharma Sashta, Gnana Sashta, Kalyanavarada Sashta, Kaala Sashta, Sammohana Sashta, Santhana Prapti Sashta, Veda Sashta and Veera Sashta). He is regarded as the annihilator of enemies. Mythology says, since one of his (Shasta's) devotees won over Yama or Maha kaalan, He is called as Kaala Shasta. Other than this temple at Charode, there is no known temple for Kaala Shasta. Here sashta is found sitting on an elephant, one of his Vahana (Vehicle). Unknown of its antiquity, a small granite temple readily captures one's attention with its countless elephant sculptures around its premises. Believed to have housed 1001 elephants (sculptures), there are only few hundreds left, each carved with exquisite precision. No two look the same. The elephants are of varying sizes chiseled out of single hard granite and is unique. Few had mahouts

upon them(though mutilated) (Figure 23) and looks elegant with its meticulous carving. The head dress, decorative ornaments, bells, chains and drapings are finely carved, exposing the grandeur of royalty. Four huge elephants (two each on either side) adorn the entrance to the sanctum sanctorum (Figure 24).

The legend associated with the temple revolves around an incident such that a then monarch on his entourage was stopped by a frenzied elephant. The devout king prayed and vowed to the mammoth that a temple and 1001 sculptures of elephant would be made at the very spot if the latter would let him proceed and would not cause any havoc in the village. The animal disappeared and the temple and sculptured were erected at the spot. The temple forms a part of the local history associated with the Padmanabhapuram Palace and the royal family. Presently shorn of its glory, the temple stands unnoticed amidst a vast plantain field, craving for conservation and preservation of its fading remnants. To the present scholars the antiquity of the Sastha temple can be ascertained to the period of the Ays. It can well be substantiated by the fact that the region comprising the temple (Charode near Padmanabhapuram in Najanadu) was under the suzerainty of the Ays.

The Ays were the earliest ruling dynasty in South Kerala. The Ay kingdom functioned as for long as an effective buffer State between the Pandya and Chera dominions, but with its decline the Chera Empire was exposed to the direct attacks of the Pandyas and later on the Cholas from across the erstwhile Ay territories. Ays had established an extensive kingdom of their own long before the Venad kings set themselves as apolitical power. Infact upto the beginning of the 10th century AD, the Ays were the dominant power in South Kerala and Venad (later Travancore) was only a small principality comprised of the territories lying between Trivandrum and Quilon. At its height the Ay kingdom extended from Tiruvalla in the north to Nagercoil in the south including the Western Ghats which comprised its important portion. The erstwhile South Travancore known as Nanjanad (present Kanyakumari District) was included in the early Ay kingdom. During the period of the mighty Ay Karunandadakkan (857-885 AD), the kingdom extended approximately from Trippappur in the north to Nagercoil in south and continued to have its capital at Vizhinjam. However during the time of the Ay ruler Vikramaditya Varaguna (885-925) Nanjinad came under the sway of Cholas, as the Pandyan King Maravarman Rajasimha II (905-955) was defeated by Prantaka Chola (907-955). The Ays seems to have helped the Pandyas in their fight against the Cholas. After the death of Vikaramaditya Varaguna the Ays lost the status of a separate dynasty and its northern territories became part of the Venad region of the Chera Empire. The Cholas are referred to in the inscriptions of the 10th century as having sacked the Chera strongholds of Kandalur and Vizhinjam. There are no references to the Ays as a separate power in the inscriptions of the age. The Venad kingdom obtained an independent status only in the beginning of the 12th century AD. At that time the royal house belonged to the Kizhperur family. Towards the latter half of the century a branch of the Ay family which had set up residence at Trippappur and another (Chiravai) which had its headquarters at Atanturuti merged in the Venad family (Menon 2016). Venad further came to be

known as Travancore or Tiruvithamkoor. Therefore, the destined area housing the temple is undoubtedly of the Ays and later of Travancore.

To corroborate the above claim, the reverence for elephants by the Ays too append to it. 'Elephant' was the royal emblem of the Ay kings. Moreover the famed Ay ruler Ay Athiran, a patron of arts and letters famous for his bounty, is said to have given horses, chariots and villages as gifts to poets and bards. But as his country was fertile and teemed with elephants, he specialized himself particularly in elephant gifts (*Purananuru* 130, 131). Further, Ay Karunandadakkan on the ninth year of his reign, let loose an elephant from dawn to dusk to fix the area that he purchased from the Sabha of Munchira the plot of land locally known as Uzhakudivilai, fixed its boundaries, erected a temple on it, set up an image of Vishnu in the temple and named the village round it Parthivasekharapuram (TAS Vol. I: 30). He also set up a Salai, famously known as the Kandalur Salai. It was an ancient custom, in which an a she-elephant is let loose; as it wanders about and finally returns home, the route traced by it is marked and the area included in it is granted for some charitable purpose. In fact, the elephant remained an inevitable element in the day today affairs of the Ays. For the Ay's particular penchant for elephant symbol, the representation of the elephants (sculptures) within their shrines of worship could be validated. And even the Ay kings espoused the cause of Hindu religion and culture in their region, with complete religious toleration. The proximity of the temple with the royal palace of the Venad rulers (Padmanabhapuram palace) too ascertain the temple of its royal affiliation.

Conclusion

The South Indian temple sculptures bestow a unique identity to the temple building idiom in India. The South Indian temple were centers of power that decided the fortunes of kings and the subjects alike. The temples represented the grandeur of once prevalent kingdoms which poured endlessly upon the temples competing each other to etch of their offerings in the form of structural embellishments and epigraphical records. The two temples and the sculptures in the present study remain unique with their unusual presence within the temples of India. Both these temples claim an exceptional position within the architectural, iconographic, historical and archaeological point of view of South Indian temples. Thirukurungudi remains an epitome of rare sculptural mingling in South India, probably being the only Vaishnava site, which also reserves the Shaiva tradition. The inscriptions reveal the extent of political suzerainty of Travancore rulers and sustenance of then social relations in a temple centered society. Distinction may be accorded to the Kerala affinity in sculptural representations within the temple. The portrayal of Arab trade within the temple is a signifier to the once prevailed invigorating maritime trade relations of South India with the Middle East, and calls forth an inquisitive research. Subalterns of the hunter community being represented within the temple disclose a faded relation of them with the then elite centered social system. The minor, yet relevant elephant monoliths of the temple at Charode exposes a hidden episode of local history and political history, adding to the sculptural and religious

heritage of erstwhile Travancore. The monumental remnants are on the verge of obliteration and urge for instantaneous conservation for posterity.

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