
Thiruvarur in Ancient Times - As Gleaned from Sacred Tevaram

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Abstract: Thiruvarur is well known for Thiyagarajasamy temple, but it is a shrine in vanmikanathar temple complex. Besides the vanmikanathar temple that there are two other ancient Siva temples namely Araneri Appar and Paravaiyun mandali at Thiruvarur and all the three are eulogized in Tevaram, a sacred literary work jointly composed by saiva saints namely Sambandar, Navukarasar and Sundarar in 7th-8th century CE. The saints visited the three Siva temples at Thiruvarur and sung padikams in praise of lord Siva as the supreme god and his various forms like alamaram nizhal aram sonnai and kadamba nadam adinai.

Keywords: Prithvikshetra, Thiyagarajar, Arur Paravaiyun Mandali, Anjalai Veli Arur, Padal Perra sthalangal, Alamaram Nizhalil Aram Sonnai, Kadamba Nadam Adinai

Introduction

The history of India is traced to 1.2 million years and the history is not only very old but continuous and uninterrupted. The Indian history is well known for its rich and varied cultures. Each region of our country has its own unique cultural heritage as it is evident from thousands of religious and secular monuments such as Stupa, Vihara, Temple, Church, Mosque and forts and palaces and so on. Hence these monuments serve as standing testimonial to the glorious cultural heritage and considered as mirror of growth. It is fact that temples at Srirangam, Chidambaram, Thiruvarur, Madurai, Thanjavur, Darasuram, Tribhuvanam, Rameswaram, Thanjavur, Kumbakonam, Tiruvannamalai, Kanchipuram, etc., in Tamil Nadu which stand today due to Bhakti movement spearheaded by Nayanmars and Azhvars during 7th - 9th century CE. The Nāyanmars i.e., the saivite saints (63 Nos.) include Thirugnanasambandar, Thirunavukarasar, Sundarar, Manikkavasagar and Karaikalammayar, who were ardent devotees of Lord Siva. They travelled to remote areas of Tamil Nadu and worshipped the god in Siva temples and composed sacred *Padhigams* (Songs) in praise of lord Siva in Tamil known as Tevaram (Te+āram i.e., garland for God) and Thiruvasagam. These saints have not only revived the Saivism but also developed music and Tamil literature. Their padhikams on each and every ancient Siva temple

(padal perra sthalangal) accounted to 274 Nos. (Balasaranathan 1990, xvii) Thiruvarur, Chidambaram, Thiruvanaikka, Thiruvalavai (Madurai), Thirumarugal, Thiruneelakudi (Thennalakudi), Thiruvaiyaru, Thirunallaru, Thirukudamukku (Kumbakonam), Thiruvannamalai, Thirumuruganpundi, Thiruanjaikalam, Thirunelveli and so on and these are commonly pre-fixed with the sacred term *thiru* for the temple towns. There are three such ancient Siva temples at Thiruvarur town alone and the Tevaram padhikams on these temples speak glory of lord Siva and the prosperity of the temple town. An attempt is made in this paper to derive salient features on the iconography of lord Siva and prosperous Thiruvarur town based on Tevaram literary work.

Thiruvarur -A Prominent Saivite Centre

The temple town Thiruvarur (Thiru+Ār+Ūr) shows that it was named so due to *prithvi* Sivalinga (made of earth) enshrined in the Vanmikanatha temple of the place wherein the term Ār refer the earth (Balasaranathan 1990: xv). Also, the place name is attributed to the Goddess Lakshmi (Thiru) who stayed there for worshipping lord Siva (Natarajan 2011: 273). However, it is pertinent to mention that the Ārur (Ār+Ūr) can be defined as the place named after certain tree known as Sarakondrai (*Cassia fistula*) grown in the area as the term Ār refer that tree (Tamil Lexicon 1982: 239). The Sarakondrai is mentioned as Sthalavriksha of the ancient Siva temple at Thiruvatikai near Panrutti in district Cuddalur (Swamy 1978: 58). The places named after the tree such as Thiruvarur, Thiruvalankadu and Thirupanayur was already reported but without any details (Rajendran 1998: 299-300). The terms *thiru* and *ūr* denote the sacred prefix and type of village settlement, respectively. The temple town Thiruvarur included in the old Thanjavur district is now headquarters of the district of the same name in Tamil Nadu and it was a prominent town till the British times. It is mentioned that Thiruvarur was in Thiruvarur kūrram under the territorial division of Gayamanikka valanadu in the Chola inscriptions of 11 - 12th century CE.

It is important to mention that lord Siva in the Vanmikanatha temple is an aniconic representation of Sivalinga made of *prithivi* (earth) (Natarajan 2013: xv). Hence the temple is one of the important pancha bhūta kshetras which include Thiruvannamalai (fire). According to tradition, the lord Vishnu worshipped in the Somaskandamurti is familiarly known as lord Thiagaraja of this temple. It is also said that the image of Somaskandamurti originally held by lord Indra was received and installed in the temple by certain ruler named Muchukunda chakravarthy. The Somaskandamurti of this temple is known as *vithividankar* (first among the Sapthavidankar) and the dance performed by the god here is known as *ajabha* (Pillai 1991: 25-31).

The temples at Thiruvarur are so sacred and it had attracted a band of Nayanmars. Besides the visit and worship of lord Siva by the first four Nayanmars that this place has witnessed marriage between saint Sundarar and Paravayar. The saint Sundarar regained his lost eye at this temple. Also, the saint Sundarar and Cheraman perumal became friends after their first meet at Thiruvarur. The other Nayanmars include Naminandi who desilted the kamalalayam tank, Thandi adikal who used tank water to

burn lamps, (Nambinandi நிரல் thiruvilakku ittamai), Thiruneelakanda yazhpanar and Kazhar singar. The Thiruvarur is important for being the birthplace of the Sangitha Mummurthigal namely Thiyagarajasamy, Muthusamy Dikshithar and Shyamasastr. The *āzhi ther* (temple car) festival and *theppam* (floating festival) attract thousands of devotees every year. The temple is important for possession of rare percussion musical instrument known as *panchamukavadhyā* or Kudamuzha. The temple is large, extensive and covers an area of 33 acres. The Tevaram literary work refer the temple, tank, and red lotus pond each have covered five *vēlis* (1 *veli* = 6.61 acre). The temple complex known as Thiyagaraja swamy temple consists of many shrines, mandapas, temple gardens and gopura entrances and a stone chariot recalling the story of calf and prince. Though the temple's antiquity goes back to the times of the Pallavas based on Saptamatrika figures, but the art and architectural developments pertain to the Chola, Vijayanagara and Maratha periods as it is evident from 65 inscriptions belong to these periods copied in the temple. The inscriptions record the gift of land, money, cattle to pujas and festivals in the temple and the legend on calf and prince and other details.

Three Siva Temples (Padal Perra Sthalangal) in Thiruvarur

The first three Nayanmars (Saivite saints) namely Thirugnana Sambandar, a native of Sirkagzhi (7th century CE), Thirunavukarasar, a native of Tiruvamur, (7th century CE) and Sundarar of Thirunavalur (8th century CE), have visited Siva temples at various places and sung padhigams in praise of the lord Siva (padal perra sthalangal). The devotional padhigams of these saints are enlisted as first seven *thiurmurais* in Periyapurana. It is to be noted that the visit of one or two Nayanmars to either one or two of the Siva temples was the practice. It is pertinent to mention that there are three ancient Siva temples (padal perra sthalangal) namely 1.) Thiruarur-Purridam kondar (Vanmika nathar) or Thirumulatana nathar commonly known as Thiyagarajasamy temple, 2). Thiruvarur Araneri – Araneri Appar or Akileswarar (temple on southern prakara of Thiyagaraja temple) and 3.) Ārur paravaiyun mandali near temple car stand at Thiruvarur alone (Balasaranathan 1990: 25-31). Of these three Siva temples, the Purridam kondar temple is the most important as it enshrines the *prithivi* linga and popular for its adjacent Somaskandamurti (Thiyagarajasami) shrine. This temple was visited and worshipped by all the three Nayanmars and the padhigams on the lord Siva refer as *Atthan Ārur, Thirumulatana sevadiyan* and *Arur Appan*. The next Siva temple known as Thiruarur Araneri was visited by saint Thirunavukarasar. The last Siva temple known as Arur paravaiyun mandali was worshipped by saint Sundarar alone. It is to be noted that the name of the temple Paravaiyun mandali referred by the saint Sundarar shows that it was brick built and converted into stone by Sembiyam Mahadevi the queen of Chola Gandaraditya (950-956 CE). The Saiva saints viz., Thirugnanasambandar has composed 5 padhigams, Thirunavukarasar 21 padhigams and saint Sundarar 9 padhigams to a total number of 34 padhigams on all these temples (Balasaranathan 1990: 31). The maximum number of padhigams indicate the much importance given by Nayanmars to the sacred Siva temples at Thiruvarur next only to Chidambaram in Tamil Nadu. Besides extolling the deeds of lord Siva that

these padhigams furnish a fair account of prosperity and environment of the ancient Thiruvarur. For the sacred services rendered that these Nayanmars were regarded as Saivite saints and worshipped in the Siva temples. This is evident from an inscription of Chola Kulothunga III (1186 CE) recording installation of bronze figures of Saiva saints namely Aludayanambi (Sundaramurti) and his consort Nachchiyar, Aludaiyapillayar (Thirugnana Sambandar) and Thirunavukarasar in the temple of Thiagaraja samy temple (Ramesh 1986: 3).

Tēvaram – A Source of Siva Iconography

In the 6th - 7th century CE that the Siva temples built of brick ought to have enshrined Sivalinga in the sanctum-sanctorum besides certain forms of lord Siva in the pad kosthas and the mandapas of the temples. In these circumstances, it is astonished to note that how it was possible by the Nayanmars to derive and accomplish such an exhaustive iconographical details of lord Siva include ornaments and attributions in their padikams. These padikams (Natarajan 2013) vividly narrate the qualities of the lord Siva as *Sengkanaga tanikundru Sivane* (appearance of lord Siva as small golden hill), *nīrani meniyon* (who smeared sacred ash), *kolpuli toludai kuzhakar* (wearing tiger skin), *vanni kondrai mathiyodu kūvilam senni vaiththa piran* (gods jatamakuta adorned with leaves of vanni, kondrai flowers, moon and vilva leaves), *nerri mēl orrai kannudaiyai* (forehead with single eye), *kinkinikal annanor* (wearing anklet), *kanalendi kaivisi ādum avirsadayan* and *vinayanin ādum thi kūthan* (dancing Siva with agni in hand), *karam nankum mukkannum udayai* (four arms and three eyed), *kadambada nadam ādiani* (performed the ajabha dance), *malarkondrai mālaiyon* (wearing garland of kondrai flowers), *talaiyuruva ciramalai* (wearing garland of skulls), *sūlapadaiyan* (holding trisul), *kattuvankam ,kanal, mazhu, mān thanodu attamam puyamakum* (lord Siva with eight arms hold kattuvankam (bone), agni, battle axe and deer). The god is a dancer with musical instruments namely montai, *tālam*, *kodukotti*, *kokkarai*, *kuzhal* and *vinai*. Further the padikams praise him as *kapala kattanga kodiyār* (mace made of skull and long bone), *vellaiyērerum vikirtha* (riding on white vrishaba), and *vīrattam mēvinan* (the eight places where lord Siva stayed and performed terrific acts) and *mayanam kāththan* (who stays in burial ground).

The god Siva is also mentioned as *Malayan madanthai manala* (who married daughter of mountain's king), *Thirumalukku āzhi aliththai* (who offered the weapon *Chakra* to lord Vishnu), *Pāsupatam Pārthanku aliththai* (pāsupata hastara offered to Arjuna), *tāthu malar Candikku kodutha* (Chandesa blessed with pomegranate flowers i.e., Chandesa anugrahamurti as depicted in the sculpture at Gangaikondacholapuram temple, *pāththathal tuyalakanai pāthukaththai* (protected the asura i.e., later tuyalakan sent by saints at Tharukavanam), *kadal nanju mundirunda kandar* (thirunilakandar), *Angamalar thayan cirankal Aintholindrai aruththan* (Who cut off one of the Brahma's heads), *Brahman than thalai kaiyenthi pichchaiyerrun uzhandaru* (Bhikshatanamurti who holds Brahma's skull for begging), *madhayanai yiriruvai pōrtha* (Gajasamharamurti), *ālamara nizhal aram sonnai* (Dakshinamurti), *Sadayil melumor thaiyalai vaithhar* (Gangadharamurti), *Brahman tan ciramerintha, kaiyanju nānkudaiyanai kāl viralal adarthanum* (Ravana anugrahamurti),

butha padai udaiyai (army of buthaganas), *Kāmanaiyum kariyaka kāynthar* (who burnt Manmatha), *kāmanaiyum kālānaiyum kanninodu kālin vizha* (Kamantakamurti and Kalantakamurti), *kankala vedakaruththar* (Kankalamurti), *muppurameitankān* (Tripuranthakamurti), *kōdaliyal irumbu pidithavar inburapattar* (Chandikesvara) and *ūnakam kazhintha ḍṭṭil unpathum* (who eat food in skull), *gangaiyōr varsadai mel karanthan* (Gangadharamurti) and *pennuruvod ānurumāyinan* (Ardhanarisvara) and *Thirumalōr pakaththin kān* (Harihara). Further these padhigams refer lord Siva at Thiruvarur as *Arur mulattenan, āzhi ther vithakan* (lord Siva on Thiurvarur temple car), *Thiruvarur manala* and *madaveethi aruran*.

Azhither (Temple Car) at Thiruvarur

The temple car of Thiruvarur temple is famous for being the highest in India. The temple car was used for carrying the processional deities during the annual festival known as *ther thiruvizha* or *rath yathra*. The ancient Siva temples at Thiruvarur and Chidambaram witness temple car festival from the earliest times. The Tevara padikam of the saint Thirunavukarasr refers the temple car known as *āzhi ther* and it reads as *ōngolimāp pūndathor āzhither viththakanai nān kandathu ārure*. It explains that the temple car was Chakrayudha shaped (*āzhi*) (Tamil Lexicon 1982: 112) and it was pulled down by prancing neigh male horses (*ōngoli + mā*) (Tamil Lexicon, Vol V, 3142) with the amazing god (Viththakan) as witnessed by the saint Thirunavukarasar at Thiruvarur. The padikams also mention that the streets around the temple enabled the temple car procession (*therurum neduvīdhi*) and the procession of Thiyagarajasamy (Bhavani *vīdhi* Vidankar). So, it is clear that the antiquity of the temple car festival at Thiruvarur is about 1300 years old and it is being celebrated with pomp and splendor till today retaining the same type of the temple car of the Tevaram times.

Prosperity of Thiruvarur Town

The town of ancient Thiruvarur with the Siva temples was well planned and enjoyed prosperity. The padhikams (Natarajan, commentaries on tevaram) refer that the Thiyagarajasamy temple covered an area of *Ēkolvēli pozhilagam* and *anjanai veli arur* (5 veli) and the god as *āzhitervithakanai nān kandathu ārur* (lord Siva on chakrayudha shaped temple car at Arur). The Thiruvarur town was mentioned as *selvam malkiya ārur* (wealthy arur), *karukol sōlai sūzha nīdu mādamaligai* (high buildings covered with full of flower garden), *māmathil suzh thiruvarur* (perhaps temple with high prakara), *sīrkol madankal suzh* (row of buildings), streets of Thiruvarur was flourished with singers perhaps singing the sacred padikams, devotees, saints, anthanars, saivas, pasupatas, and kapalikas (*pādupavar, tozhupavar, virisadai virathikal, anthanar, saivar, pāsupatar, kapalikar teruvinanar poliyum Thiruvarur*), *niraiiththa māligai vennakai araitththavai madanthaimārkal ādum* (girls with white teeth danced in buildings).

The agricultural fields around Thiruvarur were very fertile and referred such as *allal akan kazhani* (large muddy agricultural fields) with fertile soil (vandal vari), *annam vaikum vayal pazhanathani* (agricultural fields with swan birds), *senkamala vayaludai sūzh* (field with red lotus flower), *alli malar kazhani* (field with lily flowers), *ālaiyin vempukai*

poi mukil thoyum arur (smoke from sugar boilers at Arur covers like cloud) and *thikkelam niraintha pugazh Thiruvarur* (famous town). The agricultural field at Thiruvarur was full of water (nīr vayal) with jumping vālai and āral fish and cranes (nārai). The town had coconut groves, areca palm, plantain, pomegranate and mango trees (*tenku, kamuku, ilavazhi, matulam, mā* and *palat īnkani*).

Thus, the entire Tevaram padhigams pertained to the Siva temples at Thiruvarur invariably praise the lord Siva as the supreme god and vividly explain the various forms of lord Siva in such a way that a common man can understand easily. The expression for Chandesa anugrahamurtis, i.e., *kōdaliyāl irumbu pidiththar inburapattu* explaining the Nayanmar Chandesa who cut off his own father's leg using iron axe and the reward for the devotional act is alone suffice to the above fact. The forms of Siva such as Ardhanariswara, Lingodbhava, Dakshinamurti, Tripurantakamurti and Kankalamurti were largely represented in sculptures and bronzes of the Pallava, Pandya and Chola periods perhaps due to the popularity of the *Tevaram padikams*. Hence it is easily inferred that the Tevaram padikams ought to have paved the way for the origin and development of Saiva iconography in Tamil Nadu. The town Thiruvarur with wide streets enabling temple car festival, street with row of high buildings, buildings with flower gardens, coconut, mango, pomegranate and plantain trees, paddy fields with varieties of fish and birds show the pollutant free environment. The Tevaram padikams pertaining to Thiruvarur temples point out the zenith reached by the Saivism in the Thiruvarur region, where people enjoyed the fertile agricultural lands and prosperity. In the absence of other literary and epigraphical sources, these Tevaram padhikams serve as unique and rare primary source in reconstructing the religious and economical history of the Thiruvarur area in the early medieval period.

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