



A STUDY OF THE ARCHITECTURE OF SUYAMBUNATHASWAMI TEMPLE AT NARASINGANPETTAI

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ABSTRACT

Suyambunathaswami temple of Narasinganpettai is known for its unique architecture, the main shrine is a pure vesara vimana, a rarely seen architecture in Tamil Nadu. Narasinganpettai is a small village lying in the Thiruvaidaimaruthur block of Thanjavur district, is about 65 kms from the district headquarters Thanjavur. The presiding deity of the temple is Swayambunathaswami and the goddess is Lokanayaki. Among the vimana types nagara was popularly followed in the temple architectural tradition of the Tamils and it is conspicuous through its rich presence in the Tamil country. The other types viz., sala, gajaprishta, vesara, dravida, are sparsely seen, in that dravida is the least. Only six vesara vimanas are known at present in Tamil Nadu. Suyambunathaswami temple of Narasinganpettai is one of the finest and earliest example of pure vesara vimana. This article entitled 'A study of the Architecture of Suyambunathaswami Temple at Narasinganpettai' is a revelation of a rare type of architecture by the scholars of this article. The authors of this article are the first to explore this temple and bring to limelight the architectural excellence of the vesara vimana in detail and the temple complex in general.

Keywords : *vimana, vesara vimana, temple architecture, Narasinganpettai, Swayambunathaswami temple*

INTRODUCTION

Suyambunathaswami temple of Narasinganpettai is known for its unique architecture, the main shrine is a pure vesara vimana, a rarely seen architecture in Tamil Nadu. Narasinganpettai is a small village lying in the Thiruvaidaimaruthur block of Thanjavur district, is about 65 kms from the district headquarters Thanjavur. The presiding deity of the temple is Swayambunathaswami and the goddess is Lokanayaki. Among the vimana types nagara was popularly followed in the temple architectural

tradition of the Tamils and it is conspicuous through its rich presence in the Tamil country. The other types viz., sala, gajaprishta, vesara, dravida, are sparsely seen, in that dravida is the least. Only six vesara vimanas are known at present in Tamil Nadu. Suyambunathaswami temple of Narasinganpettai is one of the finest and earliest example of pure vesara vimana. This article entitled 'A study of the Architecture of Suyambunathaswami Temple at Narasinganpettai' is a revelation of a rarely seen architecture of Tamil Nadu. This article brings to limelight the architectural excellence of the vesara vimana in detail and the temple complex in general.

THE TEMPLE COMPLEX – AN OVERVIEW

The temple complex is a spacious single prakara complex with the main shrine lying in the middle, and a huge compound wall encompassing it with a gopura in the east. Thiruchurru malika is present only on the western side and houses various sub-shrines. Chandeswara shrine is seen on the northern side of the circumambulation. Shrines of Goddess Lokanayaki and Aadavallan are on the northern side of the mahamandapa. The main shrine consists of a vimana, mukha mandapa and two maha mandapas. In front of the maha mandapa, a Nandi mandapa and balitala are seen. The madapalli is on the southeastern side of the temple complex. The vimana of the Suyambunathaswami is pure vesara vimana; vesara talas crowned with vesara sikhara. The vimana of goddess Lokanayaki is pure nagara vimana; nagara tala crowned with nagara sikhara. Three fragment inscriptions are found in this temple complex.



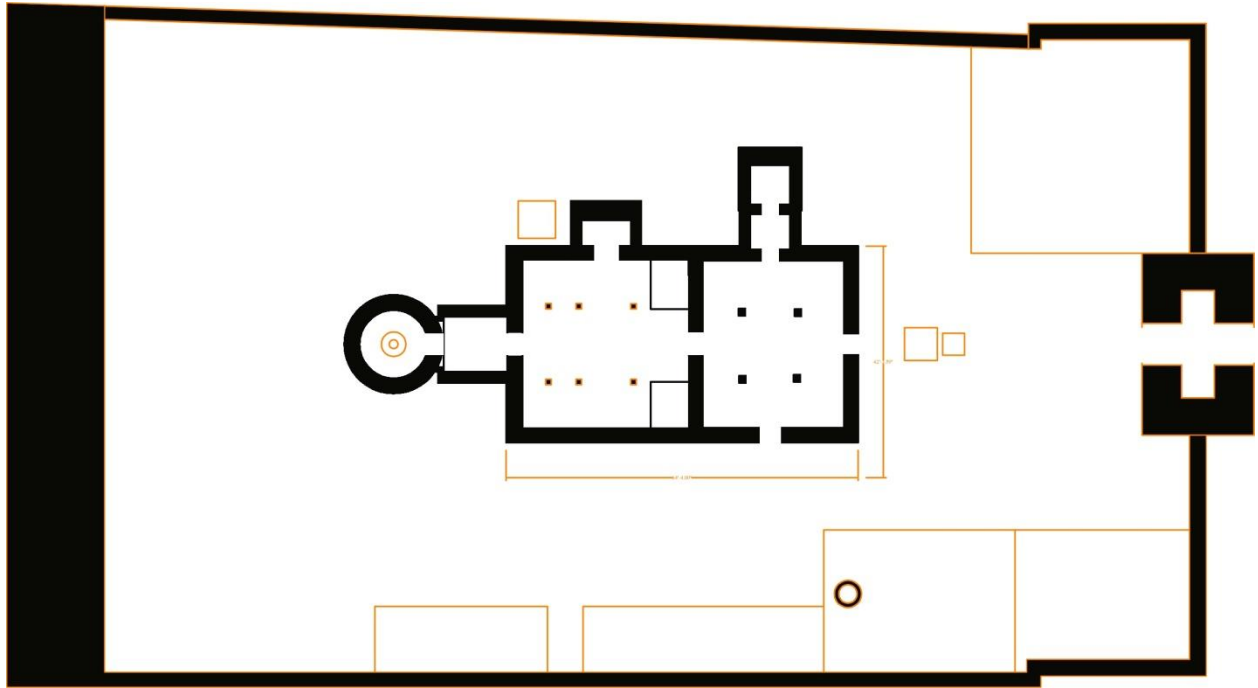
THE VIMANA OF THE SUYAMBUNATHASWAMI TEMPLE

The ashtanga pure vesara vimana has an adhishtana, bhitti, prastara forming the aditala and above that the hara of the aditala, second tala, griva and sikhara forms the superstructure of the vimana. The superstructure is fully refurbished with modern finishing but retaining its soul. The superstructure is richly adorned with stucco figures. The diameter of the outer circumference of the vimana aditala is 19'.

Upoupana, upana, jagati, octagonal kumuda, gala complex and pattika are the components of the padabandha adhishtana. The Upana is ornamented with padma series. Gala with padas flanked by kampakas forms the gala complex. Above the pattika is the vedika complex which carries the components of gala and pada flanked by kampakas and the vedika forms the upper component. A thin kampa run above the vedika component. The bhitti

that raise above the vedika is cantoned with brahmakantha pilasters. The cardinal directions viz., west, north, south are adorned with kosktha panjaras while the eastern cardinal direction forms the doorway of the sanctum. The pilasters are distributed at equal intervals in between the koskthas, five on each division.

The brahmakantha pilasters possess capital components of kattu, kalasa, tadi, kumbha, pali, phalaka and virakantha. Above the pilasters rests the vettu-taranga potikas bearing the prastara elements of uttira, vajana, valabhi and kapota. The outer face of the vettu-taranga potikas are ornamented with flower medallion. Shallow kudus are shown at frequent intervals in the kapota. The tala ended with bhumidesa is represented with yazhi frieze.



PLAN OF THE TEMPLE COMPLEX

THE KOSHTHA PANJARAS OF VIMANA ADITALA

The kosktha panjaras are formed above the pattika piercing the vedika complex. It has a pair of brahmakantha split pilasters carrying the same features of the pilasters of the mother wall. The pilasters bear the prastara of the panjara which carries all usual features. The panjaras are crowned with a plain sikhara. The kosktha in between the pilasters is 3'2" height, 1'5" width and 7" depth. Dakshinamurthy, Lingodhbava and Brahma adorn the kosktha panjaras on the south, west and north respectively. The kosktha panjara of Dakshinamurthy on the southern side is added with a small mandapa in the front.

THE HARA OF THE ADITALA

Above the bhumidesa little inside, the hara of the aditala is shown, appliqué from the harmaya of the second tala i.e., an arpita hara. Bhadrasalas-panjara-vrittakutas form the hara elements; while the former occupies the cardinal directions, the latter the sub-cardinal directions, whereas the panjaras are in between them. The hara elements are interconnected by the harantara. It is quite interesting to see that even the kutas of the hara are in vesara type.

The hara elements, karnakutas and bhadrasalas possess six angas. A common vedika complex runs for the hara elements and above that bhitti with pilasters and prastara with usual elements are shown. Each hara element is crowned by a sikhara and surmounted by the finial, stupi. The alpa nasikas of the hara elements are adorned with stucco figures of various deities. Siva with his

consorts, Vishnu with his consorts, Brahma and Dakshinamurthy are adorning the nasika of the bhadrasalas on the east, west, north and south respectively. The nasikas of the vrittakutas and the panjaras are adorned with Siva and Vishnu in various forms, Muruga, Ganesa, goddess, erotic figures or other puranic themes.

SECOND TALA

Since an arpita hara, only the prastara elements of the second tala viz., uttira, vajana, valabhi and kapota are visible. The valabhi is ornamented with maddalas at frequent intervals. Bhumidesa is shown above the roof of the tala. A pair of bracket figures is shown at each direction bearing the roof of the second tala.

SIKHARA

Above the bhumidesa of the second tala the vedika complex is shown on which rests the griva of the sikhara. The griva is adorned with koskthas at the prime directions and nasikas in between. The koskthas are crowned with kirti mukhas and adorned with prime deities of the direction as like the hara of the first tala. Besides the griva wall is decked with dikpalas. A pair of nandi is shown seated in the four corners. The dome shaped sikhara is ornamented with geometrical patterns, chandramandalas at the ridges and a lotus blossom at the apex. A metal stupi is seen at the pinnacle.

THE RECESSION

In between the vimana and the mukha mandapa a recession is seen. The recession is 1'8" in the east-west direction and 14'10" in north-south direction. It has an adhishtana, bhitti and prastara carrying the same features of the aditala of the vimana.

Panjara adorn the recession on both sides, it is 6'3" height and 1'10" width.

THE PANJARA OF THE RECESSION

Unlike the koshta panjaras of vimana aditala, here the panjara has an adhishtana, denoting a full-fledged vimana. The adhishtana of the panjara is kapotabandha type with the components of upana, jagati, rudra kumuda, gala complex, the kapota, followed by a thin kampa. The kapota is decked with a pair of kudas, central and corner pattas. Above the kapotabandha adhishtana rests the vedika complex and above that raise a pair of brahmakantha split pilasters carrying the usual capital components. The prastara directly rests on the virakantha. As like the kapota of the adhishtana, here also the kapota is decked with a pair of kudas. Bhumidesa is shown above the roof. The panjara is crowned with a sala sikhara. A vedika complex is shown above the bhumidesa and above that rest the griva. The griva is decked with a nasika and the sala sikhara carries five stupis at the pinnacle.

THE MUKHA MANDAPA

Next to the recession is the mukha mandapa, extending 14'10" in the east-west and 15' in the north-south directions. It has an adhishtana, bhitti and prastara carrying the same features of the vimana aditala. The bhitti is cantoned by four brahmakantha pilasters on the north, south and east. In between the middle pair of pilasters koshta panjara is shown in the northern and southern side whereas on the eastern side the middle pair of pilasters flank the entrance of the mukha mandapa and the spaces in between the pilasters on either side is adorned with a koshta panjara. The pilasters and the panjaras of the mukha mandapa carry the same features of the aditala of vimana. The koshta of the panjara is 2'11" height, 1'3" width and 9" depth. Lord Ganesa and Goddess Durga adorn the koshta panjaras in south and north respectively. The panjaras in the eastern side are empty, but in correspondence to the koshtas, Lord Subrahmanya with his consorts in the north and Lord Ganesa in south are placed on a platform in the floor of the maha mandapa.

THE MAHA MANDAPA

Next to the mukha mandapa is the maha mandapa a pillared hall, extending 36' in the east west and 35'10" in the north-south directions. It has a basement, wall and roof, proper adhishtana features are absent in the basement, but the wall is cantoned by plain brahmakantha pilasters at

frequent intervals. Vettu-taranga potikas that rests above the pilasters bear the usual prastara components and above that bhumidesa is shown. The roof of the mandapa is covered with cement plastering. The shrine of Aadavallan is on the northern side of the maha mandapa.

THE OUTER MAHA MANDAPA

Next to the maha mandapa is another pillared mandapa having a common outer wall with the maha mandapa. The mandapa measures 28'6" in the east-west and 35'10" in north-south directions. The basement, wall and the roof of the mandapa possess the same features of the maha mandapa. Doorways are seen both in the east as well as in the south. Besides, the shrine of Goddess Lokanayaki is on the northern side of the mandapa facing south.

INNERSIDE

THE MANDAPAS

The outer maha mandapa is 25'11" in the east-west and 30'6" in the north-south directions. Four pillars are seen in the mandapa, it is interesting to see the pillars are not monolithic instead the pillars are constructed out of stone blocks. The pillars are segmented as three squares and kattu in between. Vettu-taranga potikas rest above the pillars and bear the uttira. The Goddess shrine is on the northern side. Sculptures of Sri Surya, Sri Chandra, Sri Kalabairava, Sri Saniswara are seen on the eastern side of the mandapa. The legend of the temple Yoga Narasimha worshipping the Linga is shown as a miniature on the western wall of the mandapa.

The inner maha mandapa is 30'10" and 30'6" in the north-south and east-west directions respectively supported by six pillars. Unlike the outer mandapa here the pillars are monolithic, segmented as three squares and kattu in between. Some of the potikas above the pillars are vettu-taranga while some are madalai-nanudal. On the southeast corner of the mandapa a small chamber is seen. Sculptures of Sri Dakshinamurthy, Sri Subrahmanya with his consorts and Sri Vinayaka are seen in this mandapa. Nandi and balitala are seen in the floor of the mandapa oriented towards the sanctum.

The mukha mandapa is 11'6" in the north-south and 11'9" in the east-west directions. Pillars are absent in this mandapa. The plain walls of the mandapa directly bear the uttira which is followed by vajana and valabhi. The valabhi is ornamented as padmavari. The roof of the mandapa is covered with stone slabs. The mukha mandapa while

adjoining with the sanctum reduces 7” on both sides that creates the recession on the outer side. The diminution of size has both engineering and architectural significance. On engineering aspect the diminution is made to connect the wider rectangular structure with the cylindrical structure whereas architecturally it adds elegance by creating a recession. The curvature of the cylindrical sanctum extends on the floor of the recession.

THE SANCTUM

An aperture is shown to a width of 4’2” and to the height of 10’5” on the wall of the cylindrical sanctum which forms its doorway. A pair of plain brahmakantha pilaster flanks the entrance. The potika that rest above the pilasters are vettu-taranga and bear the lintel. Above the lintel is the vajana and valabhi that adjoins the roof. The cylindrical sanctum is 12’6” in diameter and the wall of the sanctum is plain but possesses the prastara elements of uttira, vajana, valabhi above it. The sanctum houses Lord Siva in the form of Linga and in the name of Suyambunathaswami. The vesara avudaiyar of the Linga carry the features of a padabandha adhishtana viz., upana, jagati, octagonal kumuda, gala flanked by kampas, pattika and upari kampa. The upper three components of the adhishtana features are followed for the long gomukha that extends in the north. The bana is rudra in type.

THE GODDESS LOKANAYAKI SHRINE

The goddess shrine is on the northern side of the outer maha mandapa facing south. The shrine consists of a vimana and mukha mandapa, the vimana is an ashtanga pure nagara vimana. It has an adhishtana, bhitti, prastara forming the aditala and above that hara of the aditala, second tala and griva, sikhara forms the superstructure of the vimana. From the kapota of the aditala and the entire superstructure is fully refurbished with modern plastering and painting.

The aditala of the vimana is 11’6” in the east-west and north-south directions. The vimana is segmented as karna-bhadra-karna divisions demarcated by a pair of pilasters. The bhadra divisions on the east, west, north are adorned with koshta panjaras. The adhishtana is padabandha type with upopana, upana, jagati, octagonal kumuda, gala complex and pattika forming its components. The upana is ornamented with padma series. The vedika complex rests above the adhishtana and above that raise the bhitti cantoned by brahmakantha pilasters.

Karna-bhadra-karna segments are demarcated by a pair of pilasters. The brahmakantha pilasters possess upper ornamentation of kattu, kalasa, tadi, kumbha, padma pali, phalaka and virakantha. Above the pilasters rests the vettu-taranga potikas with medallion ornamentation on its face. The potikas bear the uttira and above that run the vajana and valabhi. The roof of the aditala extends on sides as flexed hanging kapota.

Above the bhumidesa the hara of the aditala is shown. The arpita hara has karnakutas in the corners, bhadrasala in the middle and panjaras in between and these elements are interconnected by harantara. As like the hara of the vesara vimana here also the hara elements are six angas. The koshtas of the bhadrasalas are adorned with the goddess in seated posture whereas the same in the karnakutas and panjaras are adorned with the goddess in standing posture. Female bracket figures are shown on the roof of the hara bearing the second tala. The harmaya of the second tala is veiled by the arpita hara and hence the prastara of the second tala alone is visible. The prastara of the second tala carry all the usual components and the tala ends with a bhumidesa. Above the bhumidesa little inside the vedika complex is shown on which rests the nagara griva and sikhara.

THE MUKHA MANDAPA

The mukha mandapa is 11’6” in the east-west and 11’4” in north-south directions and adjoins the northern wall of the outer maha mandapa of the main shrine in the south. The adhishtana, bhitti and prastara of the mukha mandapa carry the same features of the aditala of the vimana. The koshta panjaras in the eastern and western wall of the mukha mandapa possess the same features of the koshta panjaras of the vimana aditala. The southern wall of the mukha mandapa is sectioned by four brahmakantha pilasters; the inner pair of pilasters flank the entrance and the space in between the pilasters on both sides are adorned with koshta panjaras. Inside, the mukha mandapa is 6’6” in the north-south and 7’3” in the east-west directions.

THE SANCTUM

The sanctum is 7’3” cubical chamber housing goddess Lokanayaki in standing form. The goddess is standing in sama on a pedestal with the front hands in abhaya and varada while the back hands are in kataka and carry lotus flower. The goddess is clad in silk attire and decked with jatamakuta, kundalas and all usual ornaments.

THE SCULPTURES

Sculptures are found in the koshta panjaras of vimana aditala and mukha mandapa, shrines in the thiruchurru, and also find placed inside the maha mandapas. Besides, stucco figures are found in the superstructure of the Suyambunathaswami vimana and the goddess Lokanayaki vimana. Among the sculptures in this temple complex Surya and Chandeswara in the shrine of Atchyanathar-Achyambigai and Sri Gnanambigai in the thiruchurru, and Chandeswara in Chandeswara shrine belong to Chola period, the rest of the sculptures belong to very late period.

HIGHLIGHTING ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES – AN OVERVIEW

Suyambunathaswami vimana of Narasinganpettai is one of the fine example of pure vesara vimana. Even though the superstructure of vimana is of modern finishing, it explicitly brings to the forefront the traits of the original framework over which the refurbishment is made. Highlighting architectural features of this temple complex are vesara vimana, vettu-taranga potikas, koshta panjaras, vritta kutas. The segmentation of karnabhadra-karna is demarcated in the super structure, though the aditala simply left with equal distribution of pilasters. Jvarahareswara, yet another example of ashtanga vesara vimana has only karnakutas in the hara whereas in the Suyambunathaswami vimana vritta-kutas are shown in the hara.

PERIODIZATION OF THE TEMPLE

Absence of defining inscriptions makes us to rely only on the architecture to assign the period of the temple. One of the defining element in temple architecture is the potika, its presence in various types in a temple complex help us to understand the expansion of the complex through the ages. Hence, the presence of vettu-taranga potikas throughout in this temple complex from the gopura to the vimana, signify that the entire temple complex belong to same period and also can be assigned to later quarter of C.E. 11th century or early part of C.E. 12th century. As like, the koshta panjaras forms the major element of ornamentation in the shines of god and goddess. It is a significant feature of the Later Cholas architecture which also corroborates the above mentioned period. The sculptures of Surya, Chandeswara and Goddess in the thiruchurru undoubtedly place the sculptures to the Later Chola period. Among the two Chandeswaras,

the one in the shrine is earlier than the Chandeswara in the thiruchurru.

A well planned concept is seen in this temple, the shrine of the lord is a pure vesara ashtanga vimana whereas the shrine of the goddess is pure nagara ashtanga vimana. Presence of vettu-taranga potikas, koshta panjaras in the goddess shrine also substantiate to place the shrine a near contemporary to the vesara vimana.

The madapalli and the mandapa addition to the Dakshinamurthy koshta denote that the temple remain under the patronage of the Nayaks or the Marathas in the later period. The presence of Maratha inscriptions in the mandapa of the main shrine also authenticates it. A blessing in disguise to this temple complex is that there is no much latter addition collapsing the original soul of the temple. Besides, at present the temple remains under the efficient management of Thiruvavaduthurai Aadhinam that helps to retain the glory of the temple in all its originality. The Suyambunathaswami temple lying in the midst of the meadow, exhibiting the artistic mastery of the Cholas in all its magnificence undoubtedly brings a great ambiance to its visitors.

END NOTES :

1. Field visits on 03-05-2015, 17-12-2017, 26-12-2017, 10-04-2018

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