

Massive Structure Of Sri Athinatha Perumal Temple At Alwarthirunagari In Eral Taluk - A Historical Study

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to highlight the massive structure of Sri Athinatha Perumal temple at Alwarthirunagari in Eral taluk of Thoothukudi district. Alwarthirunagari is located 26 km east from Tirunelveli. Constructed in the Dravidian style of architecture, the temple is glorified in the Naalayira Divya Prabandham, the early medieval Tamil canon of the Alvar saints from the 6th–9th centuries CE. It is one of the 108 Divya Desams dedicated to Vishnu, who is worshipped as Adinathar and his consort Lakshmi as Athinathanayagi. The temple is also classified as a Navatirupathi, the nine temples revered by Nammalvar located in the banks of Tamiraparani river. The temple is the most prominent among the nine Navatirupathi temples.

Key words : Sri Athinathar, Alwarthirunagari, Alwars, Nammalvar, Navatirupathi, structure

Introduction

Alwar Tirunagari was a centre for Vaishnava tradition¹. It was the birth place of NammAlwar². Manavala Mahamunigal who praised NammAlwar was also born in the same village³. The Athinatha swamy temple is situated in the centre of the village⁴. NammAlwar got enlightenment under the Tamarind tree which grew inside the temple complex⁵. Other temples constructed around the Athinatha temple are Tiruvengadamudaiyan temple. Pillai Logacharya, Alagar Temple, Desigar temple and the Andal temple⁶. The Adinatha temple was constructed in the early period.

There are some legendary accounts about the origin of the Athinatha temple. According to one legend, one day lord Brahma went to Vaikunda, the Sacred abode of Lord Narayana and prayed to Him. Lord Vishnu accepted his prayer and said that, he had selected a place on the banks of the Thamirapharani River known as Adhisekram⁷. Brahma was requested to go there and pray.

Alwar Tirunagari is otherwise known as Tirukurugur. Tirukurugur was the capital city of Thiruvalluvalanadu⁸. In the Thiruvalluthivalanadu there are nine Vishnu temples known as Navathiruppathi. Alwar Tirunagari is one among the Navathiruppathis⁹. These nine temples are situated on the banks of the Thamiraparani River¹⁰.

The Athinatha temple got much importance because the deity of NammAlwar is there only. In this temple a separate temple was constructed for NammAlwar¹¹. So Lords from Navathiruppathi came to Alwar Tirunagari on the fifth day festival of Vaikasi Thirunal¹².

During the Sangam age the temples were built with perishable materials¹³. After the Pallavas stone and other things were used to build the temples. In the Athinatha temple the deities of Athipiran and Thiruvengadamudaiyan are made up of a mixture of sand. This is known from the Talavaralaru. But it is not true since the deities are made of granite.

Massive structure of the temple

The Athinatha temple has a grand structure with lofty Mandapas through which the main entrance leads into the inner precincts¹⁴. A Number of paintings depicting the scenes from Ramayana are found there¹⁵. But the Paintings were in a dilapidated condition. Some Paintings were destroyed before 1915¹⁶. This Mandapa has many pillars. There are some remarkable pillars, 48 in number carved out of a single granite stone¹⁷.

In the Athinatha temple Varahanayanar is depicted as Jinapiran¹⁸. Varahanayanar gave his darshan as Jinapiran to his followers. So they called him as Jinapiran. Temple to Varahanayanar is situated on a Mandapa in the South side Prakara, on the wall of this temple some inscriptions are found. One of the inscriptions found on the north wall of the temple was inscribed during the reign of Maravarman Sundarapandya II. This record was issued on his fifteenth regnal year¹⁹. From this record the Jinapiran Sannathi was built and the deity of Varahanayanar were installed by Araiyan Viradamudichchan alias Pallavarayar of Chakkarapaninllur in Sevvirukkainadu²⁰. Pallavarayar was minister of the Pandyan King.

Yagasalai is located on the eastern side of the second Prakara. An inscription is found on the north wall. From this record it is known that Malavaraipati built an artistic mandapa for the God Sthitadh-ipali (Nira Adhinatha in Tamil) and also called Tata-Tatasarinagri ie. Alwar Tirunagari²¹.

Pandal Mandapa is situated adjacent to the Raja Gopura. This Pandal Mandapa was constructed by Pandala Ramasamy Nayakar. He started the ceremony of Garuda Sevai in the Adhinatha temple in 1807.²² Lords from Navathiruppathi participated in the ceremony of Garuda Sevai.

On either side of the Pandal Mandapa some important architectural Mandapas are located. They are Kannadi Mandapa and Vahana Mandapa²³. At the entrance of the Kannadi Mandapa there is a small mandapam. In this Mandapa some life size statues are there. There are some musical pillars also²⁴. Kongaiyankuradu and Kilikuradu are located in the Pandal Mandapa²⁵. Alter and Kodimara are erected in the same Mandapa. After that the second Gopuram is situated adjacent to it Garuda Mandapam, known as Garudar Sannathi is located.

NammAlwar was born in the Village called Alwartirunagari. He renounced the world in this thirty fifth year to practice Yoga²⁶. In this temple NammAlwar got much importance. NammAlwar Sannathi is situated sixty feet away from the Perumal Sannathi²⁷. The Vimana of NammAlwar Sannathi is higher than the other Vimanas of the Adhinatha temple²⁸.

Jadavarman Kulasekhara's (1190 – 1220) inscriptions are the earliest found on the walls of NammAlwar shrine. The same King built a separate temple to NammAlwar²⁹. The deity of NammAlwar was made during the time of Madurakavi Alwar who was the disciple of NammAlwar³⁰. NammAlwar wears Makilampu Garland, His hair was decorated as a crown, His face has much brightness and signs of meditation³¹. Madurakavi constructed the temple and installed the deity³².

The deity of Ustavara (NammAlwar) was made from the Thamiraparani River water. NammAlwar wanted to go back to Srivaikunda, the sacred abode of Lord Narayana. His disciple requested him to continue to bless his disciples in the form of an idol. NammAlwar accepted his idea and instructed him to take certain quantity of Thamirabharani water. He took it in a copper vessel and boiled it. When Madurakavi took the quantity of water prescribed by NammAlwar he felt that the water was much less. Hence he poured some more water and boiled it. From this an idol. This was named as Ramanuja. Madurakavi again did the same thing and got the idol of NammAlwar³³.

In front of the NammAlwar Sannathi, Thirumanjana Mandapa is situated. In this Mandapa also there are some life size statues. They are statues of Karna, Arjuna, Narthaki, Hanuman, Rama with Sita, Lakshmana and others³⁴.

Within the temple walls there is a tamarind tree with seven branches³⁵. NammAlwar sat for 16 years in meditation under this tree³⁶. Among the trees the tamarind tree gets significance among the Vaishnavas. Vaishnava temples do not have sthalavirshas. The temple at Alwar Tirunagari may be pointed out as Vaishnava temple having a sthalavirksham³⁷. It was held with great sanctity from the hoary past³⁸. Around the tamarind tree there is a wall. In this wall one can see the images of 108 Divya Desas. The Ustavara of the main deity (Adinatha) was known as Polinthunirapiran. The deity of Adinatha was made in the 12th or 13th century. So a temple to Adinatha was also built only at the same time by the Pandyas³⁹.

Thiruvaimozhi Pillai was teacher of ManavalaMahamunigal⁴⁰. He built the stone Mandapa in front of the Polinthunira Adipiran. In this Mandapam some pillars are there. On one of the pillars the image of Thiruvaimozhi Pillai was inscribed. He sat on the Mandapa which is situated on the north side of Perumal Sannathi and explained the meaning to Thiruvaimozhi. In this Mandapa some Sannathis are there. They are Poneintha Perumal Sannathi, SenaimudAlwar Sannathi, Raman (Rama with Sita and Lakshmana) Sannathi⁴¹.

In a tall and larger temple, there is a separate building in the temple precincts dedicated to the cosmic mother with in the Garbhagiraha (called Tayar Sannathi or Nachiyar Sannathi) who is a Mula Vighraha of the Goddess. In the Athinatha Temple, temples to his consorts are there. They are known as Kurugur Nachiyar Sannathi and Adinathavalli Sannathi⁴².

Pagal Pattu and Era Pattu Mandapams are also in this temple. These Mandapams were built during the time of the Nayaks but it was not known who built them.

There is a stone Nadasvaram in this temple⁴³. It has the length of one foot and 4 or 5 centimeters as diameters. This instrument was given to this temple, in the time of Krishnappa Nayak. The Nadasvaram is otherwise known as Mohaveena. For a long time this instrument was not used. The instrument was used when they practiced Bharatha Natyam.

Conclusion

The Adinatha Alwar temple is one among the biggest temples in Tirunelveli District. In the Adinatha temple there exists an incomplete Gopuram⁴⁴. On this Gopuram some images of the Kings are inscribed. The Gopuram is in a dilapidated condition. A granite wall surrounds the temple, enclosing all its shrines and two of its three bodies of water. The rajagopuram, the temple's gateway tower, is 95 ft (29 m) tall. The Swamyabhu murti of Vishnu faces east and is in standing posture. The feet of the murti are buried under earth. Goddess Lakshmi and Bhudevi are worshipped here as Athinathanayaki and Thirukkurukornayaki. The shrine is located on the banks of Thamiraparani River. The sacred water body in the temple is known as Brahma Theertham. In modern times, the temple is maintained and administered by the Hindu Religious and Endowment Board of the Government of Tamil Nadu. The temples houses a number of paintings depicting various scenes of the epic *Ramayana*. There are composite pillars in the temple numbering 48 which has remarkable sculptures. There is a tamarind tree on the precincts of the temple, which is believed to have been the birth place of Nammalvar. Devotees take strips of the trees for medicinal purposes.

End Notes

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