

## **Religious Heritages Of South Travancore**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Travancore, one of the oldest princely states of India, is indisputably the most scenic and attractive portions of India. Travancore owns both natural and man-made resources such as temples, churches, mosques, palaces, forts, memorials and other monuments. The temple is a large structure with mandapams with gorgeous and unique works of arts and sculpture. The worshiping places forms the core of social life in the country. They integrate the various segments of the society from diversity. From the period of Cholas, temples became the very boss of the rural and urban life in all aspects such as religious, cultural, social, economic, moral and educational. They are the storehouse of arts, architectural and cultural heritages. The present study focusses certain religious heritage resources in South Travancore.*

**Keywords:** *Heritage, Katusarkara Yogam, Thripadidanam, Vattezhuthu, Vazhipaad, Garbhagriha, Communal harmony.*

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### **Introduction**

Travancore is a place where the Goddess of Prosperity dwells. This state has a rich antique and a magnificent history. Religious place is a symbolic house, seat and body of God. The worship places and their precinct have command in the socio-political, economic and

cultural life of the common people. It is admired as the abode of God and these offer land and space for the people who want to be near the God. People consider visiting the temples, churches and mosques and offering worship to their deities as an important part of their routine life. A sacred house of gods and goddesses caters to the religious needs of the people and provides a link between man and god and the earthly life and the divine life.

### **Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple, Trivandrum**

Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple, dedicated to Lord Vishnu located in Trivandrum. The history of Sree Padmanabhaswamy temple dates back to 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The temple is one of the 108 holy abodes of Lord Vishnu. Sree Padmanabhaswamy temple gave its name to Kerala's state capital 'Thiruvananthapuram'. 'Thiru' 'Anantha' 'Puram' means 'Sacred abode of Lord Anantha Padmanabha'.<sup>1</sup> There are many legends regarding the origin of the temple. In the Sanctum Sanctorum, Lord Sri Padmanabha is in the Yoganidra posture and reclines on the Serpent Anantha. The Serpent Anantha has five hoods facing inwards, signifying contemplation. The Lord's right hand is placed over a Siva Lingam. Sreedevi and Bhudevi, two consorts of Vishnu are by his side. Brahma is seated on a lotus, which emanates from the navel of the Lord.

The deity is made from 12,008 Saligrama stones which are from the banks of the Gandaki river in Nepal on elephant's back. The idol of Sri Padmanabha is covered with Katusarkara Yogam. The platform in front of the Vimanam and the platform where the deity rests, are both carved out of a single massive stone and hence called 'Ottakkal Mandapam'. The deity is visible through three doors. The head and chest of the Lord Padmanabha are seen through the first door; while the hands can be sighted through the second door, and the feet through the third door. Only the kings of Travancore may perform Sashtanga Namaskaram on this Ottakkal Mandapam. It is traditionally believed that anybody who prostrates on this mandapam surrenders all that he possesses to the deity. Among the six Kallaras or Chambers in the temple, Chamber B is very closely associated with Sri Padmanabhaswamy. It is not a part of the temple treasury. Inside the temple, there are two other important shrines, Thekkedom and Thiruvambadi, for the deity Sri Yoga Narasimha and Sri Krishnaswamy respectively. There are also shrines for Ganapathi, Sasta, Lord Narasimhar and Sri Rama. The granite idol of Lord Thiruvambadi was brought from Gujarat. Grand idols of Garuda and Hanuman stand with folded hands in the Valiya Balikkal area.<sup>2</sup> The temple stands by the side of a tank, named Padmatheertham. A 7-tier Gopuram was laid in 1566 A.D and was made in the Pandyan style. In 1750, Marthandavarma devoted the kingdom of Travancore to Lord Padmanabha. Since then, the name of every Travancore king was heralded by the title Padmanabha Dasa. The donation of the kingdom of Travancore to Lord Padmanabha was known as 'Thripadidanam'. It was the King Marthandavarma who introduced the Murajapam and Bhadra Deepam festivals in the temple. Only Hindus are allowed inside the temple. A strict dress code is followed while entering the temple.<sup>3</sup> The deity Sri Padmanabha is the tutelary god of the royal family of Travancore.

### **Sri Krishnaswamy Temple, Neyyattinkara**

One of the most important town in South Travancore, Neyyattinkara is located about 12 miles south of Trivandrum, the capital of the state. The place which is of great historical

importance is closely connected with the early history of Travancore. Sri Krishnaswamy temple is supposed to be built in between 1750-55 A.D, by Sree Anizham Thirunal Marthandavarma, the then Maharaja of the Travancore. In the heart of the town, on the banks of river Neyyar, the famous Sri Krishna shrine is situated. History says that King Marthandavarma reached the present site of the temple, and hide in a jack tree, in the course of a flight for escape from the enemies who were plotting against the King's life. When Marthandavarma was seated on the throne, a temple was built near the jack tree and an image of Sri Krishna was installed there. The jack tree, popularly called 'Ammachi Plaavu' (Mother jack tree) stands in front of the temple touching the Nalambalam.<sup>4</sup> The most important festival connected with the deity is the annual utsavam in Meenam which lasts for ten days. During Navaratri, three deities will rest at the temple, on their way to Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple in Trivandrum. They are Sri Kumaraswami from Kumarakoil temple, Sri Munnuutti Nanga, and Sri Saraswathi Devi. They will stay overnight at the Krishnaswamy Temple, and leave for Trivandrum next morning. There will be grand arrangements all along the way and at the temple for receiving the deities.<sup>5</sup>

### **Chitharal Cave Temple, Chitharal**

The Chitharal Cave temple or Chitharal Malai Kovil is located in the small village of Chitharal, in old South Travancore. It is an example of rock cut cave temple architecture, erected by Jains during ninth century.<sup>8</sup> It was a Jain temple and later converted into a Hindu temple. This temple is at present dedicated to Goddess Bhagavathi.<sup>9</sup> The idol of Goddess Bhagavathi was installed instead of Padmavathi Devi by Sree Moolam Thirunal, King of Travancore in 1913 A.D.

The main attraction at the top hill is two large rocks facing each other.<sup>10</sup> Above the hanging path, there is a dilapidated tower on a rock on the northern side. Chitharal temple faces west and stands on a rock, which is the most elevated temple in the neighbourhood and lies north-west of Kuzhithurai. This is a temple with Mandapam, Corridor and Balipeedom with a Madappalli. There is a brick tower gopuram of a small size. There is a water spring on the rock in front of the pagoda.<sup>11</sup> The entrance door is guarded by Kshetrapalakas. The Sreekovil is divided into three compartments for Mahavira, Parswanatha and Padmavathi Devi. The most important image of this Jain temple is that of a Muni facing west, sitting in a posture called Padmasanam on an elevated stone plinth quite naked, no beard, no hair, face quite shaven-appearance, no brahmanical thread or marks of ashes on the fore head. The Muni is adorned with a tier of three umbrellas looking like a triple crown with the snake entangling the pole of the umbrella. The images are all made of a hard paste called 'Kaduku Sharkkara'.<sup>12</sup> There are 3 inscriptions in the plain surface of rock, in the north side of pagoda. There is another inscription on a piece of broken pillar used as one of the stone steps, and the fifth inscription is on a concrete stone in front of the pagoda.<sup>13</sup> Chitharal is included in the national heritage list and under the protection of the Archaeological Survey of India.

### **Adikesavaperumal Temple, Thiruvattar**

Thiruvattar is one of the big villages in Kalkulam taluk,<sup>14</sup> situated at a bend of Tambraparani river and is about fifty kilometres south of Trivandrum.<sup>15</sup> It is one of the 108 sacred places for Vaishnavites.<sup>18</sup> Thiruvattar is noted for its temple dedicated to Adikesava

Perumal, which is one of the oldest in South India. One of the Travancore kings Adithyavarma has composed ten verses in Sanskrit called Avatharana Dasakam in praise of the God Kesava of Thiruvattar. The temple faces the west. The Adikesava Perumal temple at Thiruvattar is considered to be of equal sanctity as that of Padmanabhaswamy temple, Trivandrum. The God Adikesava is stated to have taken his rest at Thiruvattar after having killed an Asura.<sup>16</sup> The temple can claim to have a considerable antiquity. From an inscriptional record in the temple it is seen that the present shrine dates from the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

The deity Adikesava Perumal, found in the Sreekovil, is in Ananthasayanam posture sleeping and facing westwards. This image bears a close resemblance to the deity in the Sree Padmanabhaswamy temple at Trivandrum. There are wood carvings all-round the temple. The Ottakkal mandapa is smooth and slippery. There is another Sreekovil dedicated to Krishna and located on the north-western side of the above Sreekovil. This consists of Garbhagriha and an Ardha mandapa with a small Prakara round it. There are Vilakku Madams around this temple. The Sreekovil consists of a Garbhagriha having three doorways and a Maalika and of an Ottakkal mandapa in front, and is built in granite and provided with a copper sheeted roof.<sup>17</sup> The terraced Balikkalpara on the western side of the Ambalam is built in granite. There is a Sribalipura all-round having a terraced granite roof.

The Thiruvattar temple possesses twenty-two inscriptions in Tamil, Tamil Vatteluttu and Sanskrit Nagari script relating to Chola and Chera royalty.<sup>18</sup> There are many fine murals that adorn the walls of the Cheruchuttu and the Thiru Ambadi shrine of Lord Krishna. Majority of the paintings around the Cheruchuttu depict the epic themes. Krishnaleela, Saraswathi, Narasimha, Gajendramoksha, Shakti, Panchakshari, Vishnu on Garuda, Ananthasayana Murthy, Hanuman, Sri Rama, Kali and Siva are portrayed. This temple offers a fine blend of Kerala and Tamil styles of architecture due to its royal colouring and subsequent position in the domain of Travancore. Lofty gable-type architecture adorns the eastern and western entrances.<sup>19</sup> The spacious Sivelippura, is adorned by two hundred and twenty-two Deepalakshemies carved out of the granite pillars. But they vary from pillar to pillar in mode of dress and hair style. The copper covered Dwajasthambha rises up beyond the Sivelippura. A Malayalam inscription is engraved at the base of the flag staff. Two gigantic and unidentical Dwarapalakas, are seen at the entrance of the Balikkalpara.<sup>20</sup> The temple contains five Mandapas abounding with exquisite wooden carvings which are the gift of the Travancore craftsmen to the temple art of this state.

Some historic events of interest recorded on here are: In 1679 A.D, during the rule of Umayamma Rani of Travancore, a Muslim adventurer known as Mukilan accomplished by his soldiers entered Travancore with an eye to loot the wealth of temples. The Rani sent Kottayam Keralavarma of Malabar to deal with this threat. Four miles away from Thiruvattar, Keralavarma clashed with Mukilan in a war and killed him.<sup>21</sup> Another historic event is King Marthandavarma reached Sree Adikesava Perumal temple just before embarking on the Battle of Colachal in 1741 A.D with the tough Dutch forces. He prayed before this deity, to aid him at war, placed his famous sword before the idol and received it back from the officiating priest with the blessings of God. The battle concludes with the disaster of the Dutch and victory of Travancore.<sup>22</sup>

**Sthanumalayan Temple, Suchindram**

Suchindram temple is an important citadel of Travancore kingdom. Suchindram temple is approximately 1300 years old. The term Suchindram finds place in one of the earlier inscriptions dated C.E 941. Suchindram Sthalapurana give some information connected with the existence of this temple long back. The place got the name of Suchindram from the Sthalapurana. Indra was relieved of a curse as he had worshipped the deity of this temple, hence place got the name Suchindram. One stone inscription at Karkadu near Suchindram gives details of offerings given by Pandian Maran Chadayan (800-900 AD) to the temple. From then, the construction activities had been continuing till the reign of King Sree Moolam Thirunal.<sup>23</sup>

The main entrance of the temple has stylishly fashioned with the figures of Lord Siva and Uma seated on a Bull, Parvati on a Swan and Vishnu on Garuda. The temple has two shrines in the Sanctum Sanctorum. One is for Lord Sthanumalayan located on Vadakkedam and the other is for Thiruvenkida Vinnakara Emberuman on Thekkedam. The presiding deity of this temple is Sthanumalayan. The representation of the three central gods of Hinduism in one linga makes it distinct and unique in India. The main temple houses all the major Gods of Hindu Pantheon. The temple is a store house of varied sculptures. The well-polished figures of Garudalwar, King Thirumalai Nayak, the Musical Pillars, the two Travancore kings' statues, the Vasanthamandapa, the Yalis,<sup>24</sup> the sculptures on the base of the Gopura are all very fine pieces of art. The monolithic good looking Anjaneya of five metres height invites amazement and admiration. The 40 metres tall, seven-tier gopura is classic and its outer space is studded with gorgeous plaster figures depicting scenes from puranas and epics. The temple has four chariot cars, the biggest one remains as the biggest in whole of Tamilnadu with splendid wood carvings. This is quite majestic in its appearance. The temple has a Theppakulam, Muha mandapa, Unjal mandapa or Kalyana mandapa, Vasantha mandapa, Alankara mandapa, Chithrasabai mandapa, Chenbakaraman mandapa, Aditya mandapa and Anuppu mandapa.<sup>25</sup> A brass chair, known as 'Paranky Narkalee' presented by the Portuguese to the Travancore kingdom is even now used for the temple rituals here.<sup>26</sup> Before the merger of Kanyakumari in the Tamilnadu state, Suchindram Temple came under the administration of Travancore kingdom.

Next to the Padmanabhaswamy temple, the Suchindram pagoda has received the greatest attention at the hands of the Travancore rulers.<sup>27</sup> In 1544 A.D, Ramaraya Vittalaraja, army chief of Vijayanagar empire first constructed the Athistana of the temple Gopura by using the black granite. In 1881 A.D, the elegant, graceful Temple tower construction was started by Maharaja Visakam Thirunal and completed during the reign of Maharaja Sree Moolam Thirunal in 1888 A.D. The Pillaiarther and Chapparather was made in A.D 1864 by Maharaja Sree Moolam Thirunal. Another significant event is the introduction of lotteries in India by Maharaja Ayilyam Thirunal, the King of Travancore. The king introduced this system on Aavani 7, 1875, to raise the fund for the construction of new Gopura. He collected nearly 40,000 rupees for rebuilding a portion of the temple.<sup>28</sup> In 1888, the Kumbabhishekam ceremony was conducted. The Prakara of this temple is the second largest one in South India. The Hanuman or Anjaneya statue it is 22 feet high including four feet in the underground. A female posture of Vinayaka in the name of Vigneswari is engraved in the Chembakaraman Mandapa.<sup>29</sup> A biggest Nanthi or Makkalai of Suchindram is certainly a product of Thirumalai's artistic design.

### **De Lannoy's Church, Udayagiri Fort**

De Lannoy, called as Valya kappithan of the Travancore army was a Roman catholic. He built a chapel at Udayagiri fort in 1765 A.D. The permission to build the chapel was given by King Ramavarma of Travancore kingdom. After his death, he was buried with in the chapel which he built, with military honour in an impressive tomb.<sup>30</sup> Worships were conducted here and De Lannoy, his family and the Catholic officers of the army used to worship here at the time of King Sree Karthika Thirunal. It is adjacent to the south wall of Udayagiri fort. There is an altar and a worship hall which stands westwards. The main entrance is in the western front. The stone cross is not found at present.<sup>31</sup> There was a Priest appointed by King Sree Karthika Thirunal and was paid by the King.<sup>32</sup>

The chapel, tombs and the fort were renovated in 1762 A.D during the time of Sree Karthika Thirunal Maharaja. During the renovation many facts have been surfaced. In the northern side of Udayagiri fort, there is a tunnel but no information is available regarding the purpose of it. This tomb stone measures 6 feet in length, 3 feet width in north to south direction. But the head of the tombstone with marking of a bone in 'X' shape is kept towards the South. It is not known to whom it belongs to.<sup>33</sup> After 1898 A.D the roof of the church was vandalized and some changes were made.

### **St. Michael Church, Puliurkurichi**

St. Michael Church is closely associated with Devasahayam Pillai, a Catholic Martyr who has been declared by Rome as Saint. In 1775 A.D, a Church was built at Puliurkurichi. Devasahayam Pillai was originally a Hindu and because of the advice given by De Lannoy, he embraced Christianity. The irritated Maharaja of Travancore ordered for his arrest and tortured Devasahayam Pillai. On the way he was taken to the place which is called locally as Muttudichan Paarai. In order to remember the sacrifices of Devasahayam Pillai, a memorial has been constructed in 1992 A.D.<sup>34</sup> It is believed that when Devasahayam Pillai ran for life, in order to quench his thirst he kneeled on a rock. He got water from the rock where he knelt. This place is still protected and the water is given as a sacred water to the visitors even now. The church reconstructed recently after getting the fund from Rome.

### **Arappalli, Thiruvithamcode**

Arappalli is located at Thiruvithamcode in South Travancore. It is also called as Thomayar Kovil. This Church is old-fashioned, almost hidden amongst the coconut groves and lotus ponds of this amiable border village near Thuckalay. It claims an antiquity of about two thousand years. In 53 A.D, St. Thomas, the disciple of Jesus Christ, came to India and built seven and a half churches. In 63A.D, he built a church for St. Mary at Manikramam in Thiruvithamcode.<sup>33</sup> Only this church built by him is called as Half Church (Arappalli), since the height of the church is less.<sup>34</sup> According to a historian, the original church was built under the patronage of the King. The present church has been erected in the site of the original church. The church has been rebuilt at least five times but retaining the style of the original church. It is the existing oldest church structure in the world.

## **Home Church, Nagercoil**

The Home Church at Nagercoil is an outstanding example for the architectural achievement of the L.M.S missionaries. Rev. Charles Mead, who belonged to London Missionary Society was responsible for the construction of this grand church with Greco-Roman and Gothic architecture. Rev. Charles Mead assumed charge of the mission, he wanted to build a Church at Nagercoil and asked the missionary Rev. Richard Knill to lay the foundation of a church measuring 1401.7 feet.<sup>35</sup> The Maharani of Travancore donated liberally cash and timber for the construction work. The prisoners from the local jail contributed their free labour. The Nagar Amman Kovil (Nagaraja Temple) elephant was used to lift wooden beams.<sup>36</sup>

It is seen from the church records that this church was built in 1600 A.D and was enlarged in 1865 A.D. In 1930 A.D, the church was raised to the status of the Cathedral, which has been called as Stone Church (Kalkoil) as it is built with huge granite stones.<sup>37</sup> For the construction of this magnificent church, the successive Maharaja of Travancore donated Rs.2500/-. The Raja of Cochin and Raja of Tanjore came forward and liberally donated for the construction.<sup>38</sup> The Maharani of Travancore donated the landed property and granite stones for the construction of the church.<sup>39</sup> In this context, the role of Colonel Munro, the Resident Regent of Travancore kingdom deserve special mention.

## **Elankadai Muslim Jamaath, Kottar**

Elankadai Muslim Jamaath is located at Kottar. 'Kadai' means 'shop' in Tamil. In 15<sup>th</sup> century, Travancore King Sree Veera Udaya Marthandavarma donated the people of Elankadai Jamaath, Kalavanaadivilai and its surroundings and some other gifts in the form of cash. This money was used to build a mosque in the place where Bava Kasim Appa was buried. That is the Bava Kasim Mosque. Due to his selfless sacrifice, Kottar Elankadai has become the largest Muslim Jamaath in South Travancore.

## **Jummah Palli, Mathavalayam**

Jummah Palli is situated at Mathavalayam. Mathavalayam has been named after the existence of layam (stable) of the Travancore kings in this place nearly 400 years back. The horse division of the Travancore army was stationed and maintained in that place. Two hundred years back a mosque was built there and called as Sheikuna Sheik Saamion Nayagam Jumma Palli. It was renovated and opened in 1986 A.D.

## **Beemapalli Mosque, Trivandrum**

Beemapalli Mosque or Beemapalli Durgah Shareef is situated in Trivandrum, the erstwhile capital of Travancore. The tomb of Syedunnisa Beema Beevi is one of the main attractions of this mosque. She was a pious Muslim woman who is believed to have possessed great spiritual powers. Her son Sayyidussaheed Maheen Abubacker is also entombed here. In every year, a feast is held in honour of Beema Beevi. Pilgrims from across the state and globe come to the mosque to see the feast. The most significant festival at Beemapalli mosque is the Chandanakuda festival, lasting for ten days. This festival also

known as Beemapalli Uroos, is a very colourful festival that is celebrated to commemorate the death anniversary of Beema Beevi. Hoisting of the mosque's traditional flag, marks the opening of this festival. The devotees bring earthen pots (kudams) filled with coins as offerings. These pots are covered with sandal wood paste (Chandanam). Hence the name Chandanakudam. While a white cloth covers the opening of the Chandanakudam, a garland decorates its neck. The mosque is widely visited by people of all religions and castes.<sup>40</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Religious heritages are the most momentous architecture as its sums up and represents elusive ideals, principles and morals of Indian culture. The Travancore kings are mainly Vaishnavites, but encouraged the construction of temples for Siva and other hindu gods also. The Christian, Islam and Jain structures of South Travancore are equally famous like the Hindu monuments, even though they are numerically less in number. The catholic and protestant missionaries introduced various styles of architecture in this area. The sufi saints who come from Saudi Arabia did an admirable role for the spreading of Islam in South Travancore region. The present Kanyakumari and Trivandrum districts has a number of beautiful, decorating stylistic pagodas reflecting the age-old heritage.

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