



## Lecture Series on World Heritage and Culture

78<sup>th</sup> Lecture on 'Sacred Geography of Kanchipuram'

By

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## SACRED GEOGRAPHY OF KANCHIPURAM

Kanchipuram is a sacred center for all Indian religious faiths from very ancient times. It is located about 72 kilometers away from Chennai, the capital of the present Tamil land. This place has two principal divisions, the big Kanchi and the little Kanchi, which are respectively called the Siva Kanchi and Vishnu Kanchi. The former is the bigger division having the group of larger temples like the Kailasanatha, Vaikunthapperumal, Ekambranatha and Kamatchi. The little Kanchi is a compact village centering round the Varadarajaswami temple. There is also another area called Jain Kanchi where the Jain monuments are located. Kanchipuram was famous along with Takshasila, Varanasi, Valabhahi, Nalanda and other great centers of learning. It was visited by the famous Chinese traveler Hiuen- Tsang who describes the significance of the place and its Buddhist *stupa* believed to have been erected by Asoka the great. This pilgrim also attests that Kanchi was a city well planned with long and broad avenues and wise people. It was a center of Sanskrit and Tamil learning and a renowned cauldron of religious discourses. There was a university (*Gatika*) at Kanchi where students and scholars from different places studied. This is one of the seven Mukthichetra centers, the others being Ayodhya, Mathura, Varanasi (Kasi), Hardvar, Ujjain, and Dvaraka. These are the centers of liberation where the gods dwell along with the people. It is in Kanchipuram, "Siva is said to become present as a *linga* of earth, reminding us of the multitude of *parthiva lingas* shaped from a pinch of clay. In Kanchi, according to legend, it was the goddess Parvati herself who fashioned a *linga* from the earth. When Siva tested her devotion to him by sending a torrential flood, she clung confidently to the *linga*. The marks of her breasts and bangles are indented upon the earth *linga* even today they say".

Kanchi is mentioned in *Kamakshivilasa* as *Akasa pitha*. Legend has it that once Vyasa visited Saptagadavari during which he was cursed by Nandi (Siva's vehicle) that his lifted hands should remain as such forever. On the advice of Vishnu, Vyasa made a long pilgrimage and finally came to Kanchi and worshipped Siva here and got rid of the curse. It is given visual effect in the stucco images found on the *vimana* of Vyasa – Santasyaya temple located between Siva- Kanchi and Vishnu Kanchi. The *Sakti tantras* mention Kanchi as one of the most important *Sakti pitas* of the Sub continent. Sri Harsa of later times also refers to the presence of a ruling prince of Kanchi in the *swayamvara* of Damayanti. Bharavi, a court poet of the Ganga king Durvinitha, in one of his Sanskrit stanzas has said *pushpesu jaadhi, purusesu Vishnu, narasesu Ramba, nagaresu Kanchi*- meaning just as jasmine among the flowers, Vishnu among the male (gods), Ramba among the celestial beauties, Kanchi is greatest among the cities. It is believed that Karikala, the Chola king of the early common era (Sangam age) had built the city of Kanchi surrounded by walls and brought people to live here.

Kanchipuram played a leading role in the Bhakti movement which flourished during the 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries and received the encomiums of Tamil religious saints- Saiva Nayanmars and Vaishnava Alvars. One of the Alvars, Poigai Alvar was born at Thiruvekha of Kanchi. Saiva Nayanar Thirunavukkarasar refers to the goddess Kamakshi of *Kamakotipitha*. Another saint Sambandar refers to Kanchi as a highly prosperous city and rising high up to the sky in fame and the building and mansions are touching the sky there. Saint Sundarar's hymns mention about *Kamakottam* in the ancient city of Kanchi as Kanchi mudoor Kamakottam. Thrumangai Alvar states that Kanchi was surrounded by stone ramparts (Kallal madil suzl Kanchi). Buddhism and Jainism had received liberal patronage here. "Great religious leaders and saints were attached to this like Sankara, Ramanuja, Vedanta Desika, Manavala Mahamuni, Kachiappa Sivacharya to mention only a few. There are a number of *mathas* and seminaries of many persuasions in the city, the most famous being the *Kanchi- Kamakoti -peeta* of Sankaracharya presided over by a galaxy of successive saints of great

eminence". It was the capital of the Pallava rulers for a few centuries. It is said that "India can boast of quite a few ancient cities which are noted for either religious or cultural or educational or political importance. But there is only one city in the whole of south India that can really claim all the aspects cited above. The city which was held in high esteem for sacredness, power, plenty and prosperity all through the ages from the dawn of civilization to the successive centers of the historical period, retains its celebrity even to the present day".

Kanchipuram is a temple city having around 150 temples in it in addition to the Jain monuments and Buddhist relics. These temples were built in different periods and in different styles by different dynasties who ruled Kanchi from 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE to 16<sup>th</sup> century. In CE 639, Hieun-Tsang mentioned about eighty deva temples sighted by him in Kanchi. Kanchipuram and its political history is associated with the Pallavas, Early Chalukyas, Rashtrakutas, Gangas, Cholas, Pandyas, Hoysalas and the Vijayanagara- Nayaks. Of its Vaishnava temples 18 are sung by the Alvars and they form part of the 108 *divya chetras*. "There are about 650 inscriptions found in Kanchi which throw a flood of light on many aspects like religion, politics and culture and most of them are engraved in temples as they generally speak not only about the grants and gifts to those religious institutions but also about the constructions of the temples. More than half of the inscriptions, that is 350 numbers are found in Arulalaperumal (Varadarajaperumal) itself in Vishnu Kanchi. The inscriptions of the Cholas are 235 numbers which is by far the largest among the inscriptions found in Kanchi. The second largest, that is 158 numbers of inscriptions come from the Vijayanagar rulers. 47 inscriptions belong to the Telugu Pallavas and the Pandyas have 12 numbers. Though the Pallavas have ruled for more than three centuries with Kanchi as their capital, it is surprising to note that they had left only 12 inscriptions in proper Kanchi". But still it is evident that the Pallavas erected many structural temples dedicated to Siva and Vishnu. Here, some of the historically and artistically important temples have been taken for our study.

#### **Kailasanatha temple**

The beautiful Kailasanatha temple was erected by the celebrated Pallava ruler Rajasimha who was otherwise called Narasimhavarma II. The temple is named after him as Rajasimhesvara. "One of the inscriptions believed to have been composed by the Pallava monarch himself praises Siva, whose abode is Mount Kailas in the Himalayas. May Siva be permanently present in this temple, Rajasimhesvara, built of stone, which rises as if reaching the clouds, which surpasses Kailasa in its beauty and which was built by Rajasimha, the righteous king of kings". The temple is a typical example of a royal shrine, built in sandstone. Mahendravarma III, the son and successor of Rajasimha, had built and added a shrine at the entrance of the temple called Mahendravarasimhesvara. The Kailasanatha temple stands in a rectangular courtyard, within an enclosure wall which contains fifty eight small shrines, all opening toward the central edifice. The sanctum is placed at the western end of the enclosure. The main *vimana* of the temple is a large and massive four storeyed structure with an octagonal *sikhara* built on an east-west axis with the sanctum facing east. The exterior walls of the *vimana* and the attached shrines are a veritable treasure house of Saivite iconographic forms. This is surrounded by nine smaller shrines, with the two at the eastern end now accessible only through a pillared hall that was added at a later date. An important feature of this temple complex is the presence of gopuras (gateways) and proto gopuras in the enclosure walls.

"In contrast to early Pallava monuments, which are generally rather simple in their architectural and sculptural embellishment, this temple complex is rather lavishly decorated". This is the richest of all the Pallava shrines in terms of figural decoration. The sculptures occur not only in

the main niches, but also on their flanks. They not only are inside the attached cardinal and corner shrines but also are on outer walls of each shrine. The panels on each shrine are topped by powerfully wrought *makara – toranas*. The main sanctum has a *linga* which is large in size, and is fluted, sixteen facets and polished. On the rear wall, a special niche is carved with the Somaskanda panel, with Siva and Parvati seated with little Skanda on Parvati's lap and Brahma and Vishnu standing behind on either side. This sculptural panel is the specialty of the Pallavas who supposed to have faith in an ideal family life style. Though Somaskanda panel was introduced earlier by the Pallavas, it became popular only during the reign of Rajasimha. An inscription equates him with Skanda. One major sculptural motif particularly associated with Rajasimha's reign is the rampant lion, which appears almost ubiquitously as part of the façade decoration of the shrines in the compound wall. The architectural features of this temple form the basis of later southern styles, although their treatment will be elaborated upon and modified. "Historically another aspect of the temple deserves mention. Inscriptions on the pillars of the detached *mandapa* record that the Early Western Chalukya king Vikramaditya II (CE 733-744), visited the temple, and was apparently so impressed by it that he did not carry off its treasures as spoils of war but instead allowed them to remain at the temple".

The Ekambaranatha temple is one of the largest structures in Kanchipuram occupying approximately 23.5 acres of land. It has five enclosures built around the small central sanctum housing the grand Sivalinga. "According to mythology, Siva married the goddess Kamakshi under an ancient mango tree in Kanchi. As the story tells us, Parvati in sheer playfulness closed the eyes of Siva. This nearly brought about the destruction of the universe. In expiation of this sin, she was born on earth to perform a penance at Kanchi, the most sacred place on earth. Here, she made a *linga* of earth under the four- branched mango tree. Siva, also in jest threatened to wash away the *linga* in the floods released from the drops of Ganga nestling in his matted locks. Kamakshi's companion Kali contained the flood in the skull bowl in her hand when Siva caused an overflow. At this point, Vishnu appeared to help out Kamakshi and requested Siva to award the fruit of her penance to his sister Kamakshi. Kamakshi embraced the *linga* in order to save it from the floods when Siva moved by her gesture of devotion revealed his true self as the Lord of the Mango (Ekambaresvara) married her". The mango tree here is regarded 2500 years old and its four branches yield fruits of four different tastes- sweet, sour, astringent and bitter. This is the age old *Sthala purana* about the origin of the temple. Historically, this temple was not built by either a single dynasty or a single ruler. The earliest structure seems to have been erected by the Pallavas as it is mentioned in the *Mattavilasa Prahasana* of Mahendravarma I. The temple has two *gopuras* on the southern side. It is entered through the southern entrance *gopura* with nine tiers, which was constructed by the Vijaynagara emperor Krishnadevaraya in CE 1509.

### **Vishnu temples**

Of the Vishnu temples of Kanchi, the earliest one is the Vaikunthaperumal temple. This temple, with a *vimana* actually larger than at Kailasanatha, is one of the rare Pallava temples dedicated to Vishnu. Built by Nandivarma II (731-795CE), it is exceptional in having three sanctums, one above the other; in one is a standing, in the second a seated, and in the third a recumbent image of Vishnu. This type of structure is called *Ashtanga vimana* temple. It is also a *sandara* type for at the ground level it has two circumambulatory passages, the inner one entered from the *antarala*, the outer lit by openings in the outside walls, from an eight pillared *mandapa* attached to the *vimana*. It gives evidence of a great engineering acumen of the Pallavas, who built three concentric walls forming concentric squares, one inside the other containing ambulatory passages in between.

This is a west-facing, four storeyed structure crowned with an octagonal *sikhara*. The core structure is surrounded by a raised cloistered gallery separated from the vimana by a narrow passage at the ground level. This gallery is a unique feature of this temple. The pillars in this gallery are in sandstone like the rest of the temple structure, excepting the lower sections of the *adhithana*, which are in granite. The reliefs in the gallery, executed in two superposed panels, provide an illustrated history of the Pallavas particularly providing a picturesque documentation of events beginning with their ancestor Brahma up to Nandivarma II's coronation. Only some of these panels have labels of identification. The rest of the labels have all disappeared. But the gallery remains the most fascinating section of the Vaikuntha Perumal temple. The three major Pallava structural temples- the Shore temple at Mamallapuram, the Kailasanatha temple and Vaikuntha Perumal temple were 'showpieces of imperial strength and royal status. In the opinion of Percy Brown, the Vaikuntha Perumal temple "has many commendable features, for it displays an economy in the disposal of its parts together with a skillful marshalling of the main elements, so as to produce a unity of conception, which has resulted in a building having considerable architectural merit".

The Varadarajaswami temple seems to have existed during the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE as a small thatched shed. It is evident that it was sung by one of the early Alvars Bhutatalvar. The reconstruction of the temple was carried out probably during the 11<sup>th</sup> century under the Chola monarchs. The corridors and *gopuras* were added subsequently during the Chola and Vijayanagar-Nayak rule. There is a story about the origin of Varadaraja cult at Kanchi. According to it, "Once, Brahma performed a penance at *pushkar* (in North India) to have a *darshan* of Vishnu. The latter appeared before him in the form of *tirtha rupa* that is *jala rupa*. Not satisfied with this, Brahma continued his penance for he wanted to see Vishnu in his form with four hands holding the disc and conch. This time Vishnu appeared in the form of a forest called Naimisaranyam. Again Brahma continued his penance. This time he heard the divine voice of Vishnu saying that if he wanted to see him he has to perform 100 *Ashvamedha yagas*. Brahma replied that it would take a long time to do so as he wanted to have *darshan* of Lord Vishnu as early as possible. The divine voice replied, if he wishes so, he should go to Kanchi, the *mokshapuri* and perform one *Ashvamedha yaga* as performing one *yaga* at Kanchi is equal to completion of hundred *yagas*. Accordingly, Brahma came to Kanchi and performed the Ashvamedha yaga at Hastigiri or Saytyavritachetra. At the end of the yaga, Vishnu came out of the fire with conch and disc and gave darshan to Brahma. Brahma installed the deity with a mula bera made of Atti wood and started performing Utsavas. Another version says that it is Attigiri because the idol was made of Atti wood. Later this wooden idol was replaced with a stone sculpture which is now in worship in the sanctum. Thus, according to this sthalapurana we come to know that the Lord Varadaraja or Arulala Perumal appeared from the fire of yaga performed by Brahma and enshrined in the temple". The Varadaraja temple as it stands today is a vast and impressive complex of structures, enclosed by high and massive compound walls. There are four corridors and many sub shrines including the *Kalyana mandapa*, thousand pillared hall, etc. The *Kalyana mandapa* is an important contribution to the Vijayanagar times. The pillars are tall and monolithic and their shafts are sculptured into rich and varying patterns like rearing horsemen, etc. This 16<sup>th</sup> century work is the most attractive edifice, richly adorned with innumerable sculptures of the Vaishnava pantheon, *puranic* stories, portrait figures, besides remarkable architectural motifs and designs.

#### **Kamakshi temple**

The Kamakshi temple is located in Siva Kanchi in the heart of the KANCHIPURAM TOWN. It is located at the center of all the other important temples and mainly very nearer to the Sankara

mat. The temple of Kamakshi, Kumarakottam and Ulagalanda Perumal temple with four other VAISHNAVA Divya desas including the temple of Kalikambal are located within the four main streets known as Rajaveethi. Kamakshi is the presiding deity of Kanchi with a separate shrine for herself originally called Kamakottam though the present stone temple and the image of Kamakshi inside the sanctum is a consecration of the Chola rulers.

### **Buddhist Relics**

The Chinese traveler Hiuen Tsang, who visited Kanchi in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, mentions that Kanchipuram was the birth place of Dharmapala Risa who was a Professor of Nalanda University. According to him there were many monasteries and Chaityas in and around Kanchipuram. He mentions about a Stupa which was about 100 feet height at Kanchi. But none of these religious edifices are seen today. However, traces of an old *sangarama*, overgrown with shrubs, probably built by the younger brother of Asoka is found in a place to the east of the city. There are reference to the Buddhist center at Kanchipuram in more than twelve Pali literary works. There were more than one viharas(monasteries) at Kanchi. The Buddhist sculptures were found in the Ekambaranatha temple and it is evident that there might have been a monastery near this temple site. Another monastery seems to have existed by the side of Kamakshi temple. Buddhist marble pillars were found by Jouveau Dubreuil in 1927 CE. Two images of the Buddha were found in the Karukkil Amarntha Amman temple. Five images of the Buddha were discovered near Kamakshi temple by T.A.Gopinatha Rao. All these factors reveal that Kanchipuram was once a famous Buddhist cultural center where scholars from different areas served as teachers in the monasteries.

### **Jaina monuments**

Kanchipuram was one of the Jain centers in Tondaimandalam region. Just as Siva and Vishnu Kanchis, there is also an area called Jaina Kanchi within this sacred spot. When Buddhism which flourished at Kanchi between 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE and 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE began to decline, the Jains seemed to have migrated from Sravanabelagola to Kanchi. The regular colony of the Jains (Jinakanchi) called as Thirupparutthikkundram became one of the important centers of learning of the Digambaras. Some of the Pallava rulers seemed to have patronized Jainism. The great Pallava monarch Mahendravarman himself was once a patron of the Jains. There are two Jaina temples at Thirupparutthikkundram, one dedicated to Mahavira and the other to Chandraprabha. Though these temples were said to have been erected during the Pallava period, there are no traces of the Pallava architectural features in these temples. They have been renovated, enlarged and rebuilt with additional shrines and pillared halls. A shrine of Dharmadevi is said to have been built during the Chola period. The sangeetha mandapa of one of the temples was erected by one Irugappa, a Vijayanagar general, between CE 1387 AND 1388. The monuments also exhibit the paintings of the Nayak period. They depict the incidents associated with the life story of Rishabhanatha, Neminatha, Mahavira and Dharmadevi. There are the paintings depicting scenes from the Bahavata purana.

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