

THE GLORY OF KUMBAKONAM AS A TEMPLE CITY

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ABSTRACT

The Political sequences that led to the rise of Kumbakonam as an urban centre, its previous history and its glory as a temple city are briefly brought to light in the following fourth chapter. The map of Tamil Nadu meant for the location of Kumbakonam and the regions taken under Article is provided.

Key words : Kovanattudaiyan – Kudamukku – Bhudattalvar Kudavayirkottam – Malaikuram – Colanmaligai – Palaiyarai – illuminates the Linga – Karonam – Diksitar – Kudavayil – Konam.

Introduction

Kumbakonam a special town in Thanjavur District, is said to have enjoyed a continuous history for a very long time. It has been a sacred religious centre from the days of the Sangam Age to the present day. It is known for its temple architecture and hence it is called as a 'Temple City'. It differs from other temple cities of Southern India in the diversity of the religious traditions manifested in its architecture and celebrated in elaborate cycle of ritual enactment that have been performed and re-interpreted down to the present day.

Location

Now a days, Kumbakonam is a first class municipal town in Thanjavur District, Tamil Nadu State at a distance of 313 kilometers from Chennai on the Tiruchirappalli main line of Southern Railways, Kumbakonam which is about forty kilometers east of Thanjavur, is located at 10.57° latitude North and longitude 79.42° East. The kaveri and the Arasalar rivers flow on the northern and southern sides of the town.¹

Legendary origin of Kumbakonam

According to the ancient Puranic tradition Kumbakonam originated at the very epicenter of the creation cycle following the Great Deluge. Brahma, the creator, had feared that he would lose the seeds of creation during the flood and prayed to Siva for a plan to preserve them until after the waters receded. Siva instructed him to seeds inside a clay pitcher filled with nectar and water and place the pitcher on the peak of Mount Meru, the rising waters would then carry the pitcher to a holy spot in the South where the new cycle of creation could begin. All went according to a plan, but when Brahman tried to retrieve the seeds following the flood, fire sprang up from the pitcher and he was unable to approach it. Once more he prayed for assistance from Siva. The God appeared as a hunter and shattered the pitcher with an arrow, allowing Brahma to gather the seeds and begin the process of creation. Although shards from the pitcher has scattered in all directions, the nose-like piece and the base remained there, the town that developed on that site was therefore known as Kumbakonam (nose of the pitcher).² Hence it was called as Kudamukku in the days of the Siava saints.

Sambandar records thus:

Kuraviri Solai Sulanda Kulaga Kudamukku³

Appar Sings,

“Kovanattudaiyan Kudamukku⁴

Kuttadi vuraiyum Kudamukku”

Among the 51 pasurams of Nalayira Divya Prabandam which portray the city Among the 51 pasurams of Bhudattalvar alone describes like this:

“Pada mukkin Ayiravaip Pambanaimel Serndai⁵

Kudamukkin Koyilaik Kondu”

Early history



தமிழ்ப் பல்கலைக்கழகம், தஞ்சாவூர்,
மெய்யியல் துறை
மற்றும்
பிரணவ் தமிழியல் ஆய்விதழ்
(மதிப்பீடு செய்யப்பட்ட காலாண்டு சர்வதேச மின்னியல் ஆய்விதழ்)
இணைந்து நடத்தும் பன்னாட்டுக் கருத்தரங்கம்
"தமிழ்ப் பண்பாடும் மெய்யியலும்"
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The region around Kumbakonam was inhabited as early as the Sangam Age. The Colas are said to have a strongly guarded treasury at Kumbakonam in the Sangam Age. It is believed to be the site of ancient town of Kudavayil where the early Chola King Karikala held his court.⁶ Some scholars identify Kumbakonam as the site of the fabled prison of *Kudavayir – Kottam* where the Chera King Kannaikkal Irumporai was imprisoned by the early Chola king Kocenganan.⁷ Kumbakonam is identified with the town of Malaikurram, which had served as the Chola capital as early as the 7th Century C.E. and with the town of Colamaligai which has also served as a Chola capital.⁸ By this time the Cholas were not independent monarchs but ruling as feudatory of the Pallava kings.

When the Chola ruler Vijayalaya ascended the throne, he was waiting for the turn to come up. When the Pallavas and Pandyas were engaged in war, Vijayalaya captured Tanjore from Muttaraiyar and made it as capital. He built a temple there for Nishumbasudhani (Durga). In the Tirupurambiyam battle that took place in 880 C.E. near Kumbakonam, the Cholas took the side of Aparajita Pallava against the Pandiyas under the leadership of Aditya I, the son of Vijayalaya.⁹ In this battle the Pandiyas were routed out. The Pallava king Aparajita felt so much pleased with Aditya I, that he confirmed the latter's possession of Tanjore, besides allowing him to add some fresh territory to his own. Aditya however did not feel satisfied with these. He calculated cleverly that if he made a supreme effort he could bring the pallavas down. He further felt that the Pallava's fall would enable him to bring all Tamil Nadu under his control. With the Help of his son Parantaka I he was able to Subjugate the Pallavas and became the powerful ruler of Tondai mandalam, Chola mandalam and Kongudesam. Thus the Vijayalaya line of Cholas became popular and the rulers who ruled in this line were called as "*Imperial Cholas*"¹⁰

Kumbakonam during the days of the Cholas

Kumbakonam came in to limelight during the rule of the Imperial Cholas who ruled from 9th Century C.E to 12th century C.E. In this town the Cholas developed a characteristically Tamil form of urbanism that grew by aggregation from its core in the Kaveri Valley to an empire that at its peak in these centuries extended from the Ganges Valley in the north to Srilanka.¹¹ Kudamukku, present day Kumbakonam, was the sacred religious centre, organized around its several temples, whereas Palaiyarai, 2km to the South –West was the royal centre and the residential capital, with its palaces, royal temples and administrative and military establishments.¹² Moreover the village Kumbakonam was greatly expanded as an illustrious town with efforts of Rajendra I, the son of Rajaraja I, to celebrate his victory over the king of Bengal and his march to the Gangas river in 1023 C.E. According to the official inscription, Rajendra I had spent part of his youth in the palaces of Cholanmaligai (Plaiyarai).¹³ Extensive land grants were given to the Brahman religious aristocracy by the Chola king and hence Kumbakonam became a major centre of religious study and worship. Soon it developed into an urban centre because of the availability of sufficient resources which resulted in consisting of a large population.

As the cholas were devout saivites, many Siva temples were constructed in Kumbakonam. The *Nagesvara* temple located in the heart of the town is one of the finest examples of early Chola art and architecture that embodies several strata of ritual symbolism. The earliest and probably the most consistent ritualistic and iconic theme in the *Nagesvara* temple draws its inspiration from worship of suriya, the Sun God. To the present day the most auspicious and important annual festival celebrated in this temple occurs on the day when the sun penetrates through the inner Sanctum Sanctorum and illuminates the *Linga*. The walls of the sanctum which displays the finest stone sculptures of royal persons are very unique among Indian temples in providing with an entire service of secular portraits.¹⁴

The temple of *Kasi Visvanatha* which is called as *Karkonam* temple is a very popular temple situated near the Mahamaham tank. According to a legend Lord Rama is believed to have stayed in Kumbakonam and worshipped Kasi Visvanathar to acquired the skill to fight against his enemy Ravana. As Rama acquired the trait of his need, this place came to be called as *Karkonam*.

The architectural style of the *Somesvara* temple which is situated in the Southern portion of *Sarangapani* temple resembles the Chola feature of the 12th century. The *Baanapurihvara* temple



dedicated to Siva is another marvel of the Cholas. This temple is noted for the *narthana mandapam* which is adorned with ornate pillars suggesting their original form.¹⁵

Along with the Siva temples, temples dedicated to Lord Visnu gained popularity. The famous *Sarangapani* temple, *Cakkarapani* temple, *Ramaswami* temple are the noted temples which were elaborated with the construction of additional mandapas during the *Vijayanagar - Nayak* Kings. Among them the *Ramaswami* temple was founded in the early 17th century by Govinda Diksitar,¹⁶ a powerful minister of Raghunatha Nayak. The architectural details noticed in this temple seems to be the emulation of the chola style which made the most explicit contribution to the renewed sacred core of Kumbakonam. The *Chakkarapani* temple is dedicated to Visnu as the bearer of the disc (*cakra*) with which he destructs all evils. Worshippers enter the central shrine from different directions according to the time of the year, reflecting the influence of astronomic calculations on temple rituals. Since no inscriptional evidences are found in this temple, it is believed to have been built in the fifteenth century following the architectural style of the Cholas.

The *Adi-Kumbeshwara* is the largest and most important temple at Kumbakonam. This temple was built in the Chola period but assumed its present dimension by the chieftain of Accuta Nayak of Tanjore who embellished the temple by renovating and constructing the additional mandapas. This temple is connected with the creation myth of the city. According to the legend, Shiva sent an arrow to rupture the pot. The pot's mouth fell in a place and this came to be called '*Kudavayil*'. The remaining part of a pot, other than its mouth was called *konam*. It stayed at one place where Siva made a lingam with the nectar from the pot and the earth. The place where a lingam was made from the contents came to be called *Kumbeshvar*.

The most celebrated earlier temple of Vishnu is that of *Sarangapani* temple which is noted for *vaidika vimaana* designed as a chariot with wheels drawn by horses and elephants. Though the core of the temple existed in the Pallava and medieval Chola periods, the present structure of the temple can be attributed to the later Cholas most likely to the region of Vikrama Chola. The gate way portion of the *gopuram* of this temple is also attributable to the time of the later Cholas but the super structure of eleven tiers may belong to the Vijayanagara period.¹⁷

Mahamaham Tank

This is the most sacred place situated in the heart of the city with sixteen shrines covered by small *gopuras* each dedicated to one of the sixteen mahadanaas bestowed by a ruler on the holy place. The present layout which is seen today was designed by the Chieftain of the Nayakas Govinda Diksitar. Praised by the Nayanmars of the Seventh Century, its sanctity has made it a place of pilgrimage for more than a millennium. The Mahamaham which occurs every twelve years exactly takes place at the full moon day during the Tamil month *Tai*. According to the legend, such is the purifying power of this tank that all the goddesses of sacred rivers of India, from the Ganges to the Kaveri are believed to have bathed here in order to get rid of the sins of all humanity accumulated in their waters. The west facing *Kasi Vishvanathar* temple near to this northern bank of the tank provided a sanctuary for the enshrinement of the river goddesses. During this festival, all the Gods in various temples of Kumbakonam are taken out in processions to the Mahamaham tank and are worshipped by thousands of people. Recently the Mahamaham festival was celebrated on 28th February 2016. Thus the festival of Mahamaham is a southern equivalent of the great kumbamela festival held at the confluence of the Ganges at Prayarg in North India.

Apart from many temple which are situated in the town of Kumbakonam, there are many number of temples found in the nearby places within a radius of ten miles from Kumbakonam. The temples of Tiruvidaimarudur, Trichuvanam, Ammachatram, Tirunageshwaram, Sivapuri, Saakkottai, Kottaiyur, Patteshwaram, Dharasuram Tiruvalachuli, Swamimalai, Tirupurambiyam are noted for their sacredness. Thus Kumbakonam which has earned itself the exalted reputation of the Benaras of Southern India is a picturesque temple town located in the Kaveri river basin. It occupies a unique position in Hindu myth and legend because of its multiple religious themes temples were constructed by them which



stand even today as a testimony proving their supremacy over this town and the areas around it. The temples which are selected for the study of dance sculputures are located in this great city of Kumbakonam and the places few miles around it.

Conclusion

The emergence of Kumbakonam as an important city during the days of the Cholas has made it as their secondary capital. *Kudamukku* as it was called by this name during their time, included in itself the sites of Paliyarai and Darasuram. Palaiyarai became prominent by the existence of the royal palaces and the military regiments of the Cholas. Darasuram was called as *Rajarajapuram* during the days of Rajarajs II. The entire surroundings of Kumbakonam as it was totally called by the name 'Kudandai' had been enjoying an abundant wealth of art and culture. It represented a sacred and devotional centre with many temples being constructed in and around it. The availability of the dance information through the dance sculputures is enormous in Kumbakonam just because it got developed into an urban centre with sufficient economic resources. Endowments by members of the royal family, officials, merchants and artisans led to a stedy growth of the temple establishments.

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