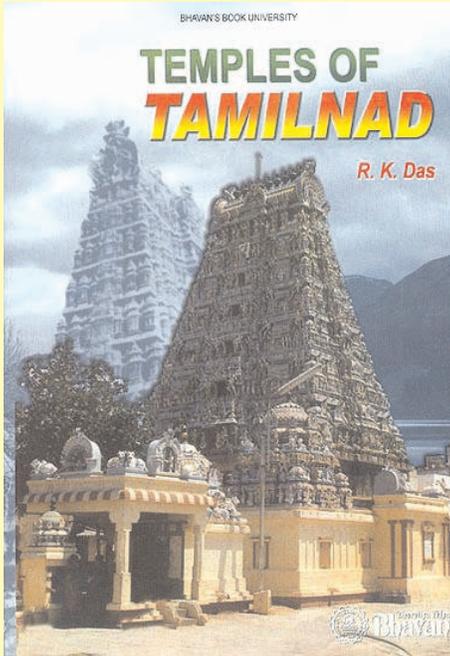




Temple Town of Kanchipuram

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The history of Kanchi can be traced back to several centuries before the advent of the Christian era. The place finds its name in Patanjali's Mahabhashya written in the second century B.C. Manimekalai, the famous Tamil classic, and Perumpanattu Padai, a great Tamil poetical work, vividly describe the city as it was at the beginning of the Christian era.

Buddhism took deep root in Kanchi about the 1st century A.D. Its influence began to decline in Kanchi and in South India when there was a great awakening among the Hindus under the Vaishnavite Acharyas, and Acharyas and Saivite Nayanmars. The lack of royal patronage for Buddhism under the Pallavas, Cholas and Vijayanagar kings greatly undermined the vitality and popularity of this religion. However, sporadic preaching of the principles of Buddha Dharma continued to exist till the end of the 13th century. During Hiuen Tsang's visit, when the country was under the Pallavas, there were hundreds of Sangharamas (Hostels) and ten thousand Thera priests. Kanchi was proud of producing Dignaga the famous Buddhist logician, Bodhi - dharma and Dharmapala who set high standards in the mastery of Buddhist learning. Dignaga served in Nalanda University with distinction and was well versed in the Mahayana and Hinayana systems and wrote many standard works, which are admired by the Chinese, and the Japanese even today. Dharmapala

abandoned worldly life in his youth and became a great teacher at Nalanda on Buddhist logic and meta - physics.

About 2 miles to the south of Kanchi, Tiruparutikunram, a suburb of Kanchi, on the southern bank of Vegavati, has long been known as Jaina Kanchi. It is a stronghold of the Digambara sect of Jainism. For want of royal patronage and public support, the religion did not thrive and was confined only to a few staunch followers and their descendants. The city was under the Cholas from the 10th to the 13th century. The Cholas evinced keen interest in the development of religion, as is evident from the inscriptions on the walls of the temples. The weakness of the later Cholas and the - confusion caused by the invasion of Malik Kafoor was responsible for the capture of the city by the Mohamedans. The invasion was said to have been attended with great devastation, according to the historian, Ali bin Azizullah.

Kanchi is regarded as one of the three most important centres of Vaishnavism, the others being Srirangam and Tirumalai (Tirupati), It is also regarded as one of the four Vaishnavite centres in South India, with the addition of Tirunarayanapuram in Mysore. Every Vaishnavite even today prays to the presiding Lords in these four places three times a day from wherever he might be. In ancient texts, Kanchi is called as Satyavrata Kshetram. Saint Poigai Azhwar, the first of the first three Azhwars, was born here and Sri Vedanta Desika, the last of the Vaishnavite Acharyas, was also born here.

The great Vaishnavite former, Ramanuja, who was born in sriperumbudur, spent his early years in Kanchi and had his education and spiritual enlightenment at the feet of Lord Varadaraja. Alavandar, one of the greatest of the Vaishnava Acharyas, stayed here dedicating his life to Lord Varadaraja. This is the place where the great devotee Tirukkachi Nambi, an elder contemporary of Ramanuja, spent his life in the service of Lord Varadaraja and learnt the six great principles of Visishta - dvaita philosophy from Lord Varadaraja Himself.

The fourth of the twelve Azhwars, Tirumazhisai Azhwar, also lived here. The hymns of the Azhwars in praise of the Lord, Divya Prabandam, are a perpetual source of inspiration to all Vaishnavites.

The Nayanmars have praised the Lord here in their Tevarams. Sundaramurti Nayanar regained his sight here. Saikt, Pattinathadigal also poured out his divine songs in praise of Lord Ekambaranatha here. It is said that six out of the 63 Saivite Nayanmars belonged to Tondaimandalam of which Kanchi was the capital. It was here that Adi Sankaracharya established the Kamakoti Peetham. Manimekalai sought salvation here, through her service to humanity.

The great Tamil work Kanda Puranam and Kanchi Puranam were composed here. Tyagaraja also has sung about Lord Varadaraja and the Goddess Kamakshi Devi. Kanchi is the birthplace of the famous historian Chanakya, also called as Kautilya, of the Maurya Empire. As both Saivite and Vaishnavite saints with their great learning flourished in the 6th and 7th centuries, they made Kanchi a great seat of learning of Sanskrit and Hindu religion, next only to Kasi.

Kancheepuram is the Banaras of the South. Saint Appar has sung of the city as of boundless learning. The catholicity of the Hindu religion allowed both the sects to flourish side by side under the influence of their different tenets. The Saivite stronghold is Big Kanchi known as Siva Kanchi and the Vaishnavite stronghold is Little Kanchi or Vishnu Kanchi. Both combined form the city of Kancheepuram. - It is said in Brahmanda Purana that Kasi and Kanchi are like the two eyes of Siva. Kanchi Kamakshi and Kasi Visalakshiare always spoken of together.

The temple of Varadarajaswami

The centre of attraction in Vishnu Kanchi is the temple of Varadarajaswami situated on the top of Hastigiri or Elephant Hill. One has to ascend 24 steps up the hill to reach the sanctum sanctorum. Lord Varadaraja is in standing posture facing towards the west with his gracious look. The figure is huge in size with four hands holding the insignias of Sankha, Chakra, etc., and richly decorated with costly jewels. It is said in Brahmananda Purana that the entire creation came to a standstill once because of the pollution of the mind of Brahma, the Creator. To get rid of this mental pollution he entered into deep meditation on the banks of the holy Ganga to purify himself. He heard an invisible voice wherein he was directed to perform one



ṣaptapuri & the char dham

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thousand yagas to bring purity to his mind.

As the number was overwhelming for him to perform during a lifetime, he intelligently selected Satyavrata Kshetram. As the most sacred place where performance of one yaga gets the merit of a thousand. Brahma had previously got into an altercation and misunderstanding with his consort Saraswati. Finding Brahma engaged in celebrating a sacrifice, Saraswati wanted to spoil its merits by washing away the sacrificial area, and transformed herself into the form of River Vegavati. Brahma started fervently praying to Lord Vishnu to save him from this predicament by arresting the flow of the river. Mahavishnu came in the form of Yathoktakari Perumal and laid his flat against the course of the fast-flowing river. Just then Brahma concluded his yaga and Mahavishnu emerged out in the form of Varadarajaswami. Brahma requested him to bless his devotees for all time to come at this place and Mahavishnu conceded to his request and remained manifested there in physical form. It is believed that Mahavishnu appeared to Brahma in Krita Yuga, to Brihaspati in Dwapara Yuga and to AdhiSesha in Kali Yuga.

The Vijayanagar kings constructed the temple and the grand gopurams on the east and the west which are architectural marvels. There are five prakarams around the temple, with high outer compound walls. The whole temple covers an area of about 23 acres. Probably this is the largest area covered by a temple. Within the first prakaram there is a hundred-pillar mandapam built in the 16th century A.D. by the Vijayanagar kings.

The sculptural beauty of the pillars is amazing. Ornamental rings carved out of single stone at the Four Corners of the mandapam in the form of a chain are a delightful spectacle. All the pillars contain marvelous specimens of Vijayanagar art from top to bottom. There are carvings depicting different legends from Hindu mythology and forms of dancing damsels in various poses. The cavalcade of marching soldiers, the baffling and intricate physical feats as shown in a circus by a number of

men and women and monkeys, are vivid portrayals of the socio - physical culture of the time. The sculptors were postmasters in depicting life-like figures with their crude chisel on black granite. The scenes remain as sharp as when they came out of the sculptor's dexterous hands and still remain a marvel to the sightseers even centuries after. It may verily be called the Museum of Vijayanagar Art and Sculpture.

Coming to the religious sanctity of the place, it is said that the town contains 18 Tirupatis praised by Vaishnavite Alwars. The Varadarajaswami temple itself contains three sacred places of puranic importance; first, the shrine of the presiding deity, Lord Varadaraja, the second, the shrine Lord Yoga Narasimhaswamy in the cave below Hastigiri Hill, and the third, the shrine of Sri Perundevi Tayar, consort of Lord Varadaraja.

The Dhvajastambham of over 100 feet in height is made of a single stone. The Ananta Teertham, a holy tank, is on the north of the 100-pillar mandapam. There are two mandapams in the tank - one for Lord Sri Artigiri Varadaraja and another called the Neerali mandapam. Lord Sri Artigiri Varadaraja is lying below the water and is taken out once in a generation for the worship by the devotees.

A beautiful flower garden is inside the prakarams where shrines of Azhwarshave been installed. Sri Perundevi Tayar, the consort of Lord Varadaraja, pays a visit to this garden every Friday, when a festival is celebrated. It is said that Sri Perundevi Tayar had her manifestation in a holy tank near the eastern tower. The shrine of this Tayar is on a small hillock. On entering the Hastigiri Hill gate we notice in Sri Guha Narasimha's shrine, Lord Sri Alagaisingar and Sri Harithartha Devi. The Supreme God here gave Lord Brahma a darsan. Yathoktakari Temple. The name Yathoktakari means "one who did as was bid".

We have seen earlier how Mahavishnu acted according to the desire of Brahma and saved him from having to forsake the sacrifice started by him. Here, during the time when Tirumazhisai Azhwar was doing his services in the temple, he had a great devotee by name Kanikannan, a gifted poet. An old lady who had been a dancing girl in the King's court in her youth was very much devoted to him (Kani Kannan) and he

rejuvenated her into a girl of sweet sixteen by pleasing the Lord with his songs.

Seeing her, the King also wanted to rejuvenate himself and therefore sought the help of Kanikannan. But Kanikannan refused the request of the King, as his desires were for mundane pleasures, whereas the rejuvenation of the old lady was meant to help her to serve the Lord and his devotees for a long time with all the strength of her body as desired by her. The King wanted to use the good means for a bad end. He wanted to neglect the path of Saranagati or self surrender, which is the essence of all religions. The King became annoyed and banished Kanikannan from the city. Tirumazhisai Azhwar himself could not stay in the city without his devotee Kanikannan.

He approached the Lord with the following words: "Wilt thou keep silent, my Lord of Kanchi, when our devotee Kanikannan is to leave the place and I myself have to go with him? Rather, Thou thyself should quit this place folding up thy snaky bed, taking it along." It is said that the Lord Himself at once left the place along with the Saint and his devotee. The whole Kancheepuram grew dark as under a total eclipse of the sun, and everything became gloomy. The residents of Kancheepuram ran to the King's court and protested against his order. The King had to come down and approach Kanikannan with an apology. The divine party was by then halting on the outskirts of the city on the bank of the river Palar in a place, which to this day is known as Orikkai (Oru-iravu-irukkai) or the place where the Lord stayed for a night.

Kanikannan accepted the apology of the King and Saim Tirumazhisai desired the Lord too to retrace his steps, approaching Him with a prayerful song. The Lord heard his prayer and returned to the city, which immediately became bright as before. To commemorate this incident, a festival is celebrated to this day in the month of Tai (January - February) on the birth constellation Makham of the Azhwar.

This is how Yathoktakari the Lord, who was ever so ready to abide by the wishes of the devotee, the Azhwar, proved it by his action. The first and foremost of the Dravidian saints, Poigai Azhwar (1017 - 1137 A.D.), was born in the immediate neighborhood of this temple and sang in praise of the Lord. ■