



LEARNING ON ARTISTIC SIGNIFICANCE OF VASANTHA MANDAPA AT VARAGUNAPANDEESWARAR TEMPLE – RADHAPURAM, TAMILNADU

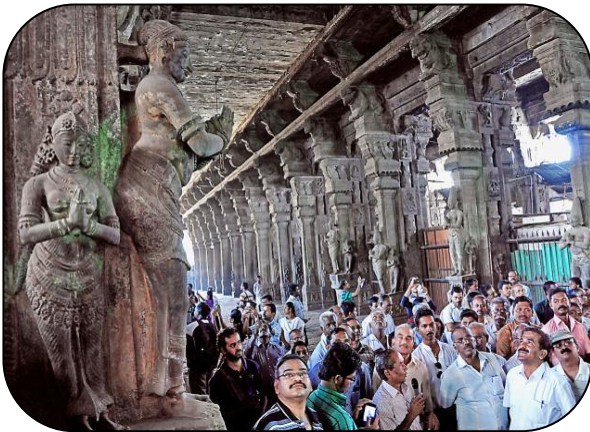
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ABSTRACT:

Radhapuram is an important village and one of the taluks in Tirunelveli district. It is famous for the VaragunapandeeswararNithiyakalani temple situated in this village. There are three main shrines in the temple one for lord Varagunapandeeswara another one for GoddessesNithiyakalyani and the third one for lord Murugan. There are different mandapams in this temple, among which the Vasanthamandapa is a significant one. This paper depicts the salient feature of Vasanthamandapa in the Varagunapandeeswarar Nithiyakalyani temple at Radha

puram.

Key word: Artistic, Pillars, Temple, Vasanthamandapa, Varagunapandeeswarar

Artistic Significance of VasanthaMandapa

Vasanthamandapa is situated on the North West end of the outer *prakara* of this temple. There is a background for the emergence of the name *Vasanthamandapa*. During the Tamil months of *Chitrai* and *Vaikasi*, there will be heavy temperature in this region. In order to reduce the temperature, the *urchavamoorthis* (procession idols) of this temple are seated in the midst of full of water in the outer *prakara* of *vasanthamandapa*, and special *poojas* and *abishekas* are performed to the *urchavamoorthis*. It is generally called as *Vasanthorchavam*.¹ Regarding the artistic significance of this *mandapa*, the numerous pillars and the carving of different but unique sculptures over the pillars highlight the artistic sense of the Pandya artisans. The themes of the sculptures depict the *puranic* tales and the Hindu philosophies.

Vasanthamandapa is exactly square in shape facing the east. It has 30 ft height and 30 ft length and 40 ft width. Just like a Shiva temple, this *vasanthamandapa* itself has a *sanctum*, *arththamandapa* and *mahamandapa* with four pillars, twelve pillars and twenty pillars respectively. So totally the *vasanthamandapa* looks like a 36 pillared *mandapa*. The *sanctum* is 8 ft long and 8 ft wide. The structure has the elements like *Upaana*, *Mahapadmam*, *Kambu*, *Kandam*, *Kumudam*, *Kabotham*, *Yazham*, etc. The pillars are based on their differences in shapes and ornamentations like *Vedigai*, *Nagabandam*, *Padmakattu*, *Thongumaalai*, *Kalasa*, *Thaadi*, *Kudam*, *ThamaraiEthazhthattu*, *Palagai*, *Veerakandam* etc.

ArththaMandapa

A separate *arththamandapa* in which there are twelve is seen in front of the *sanctum sanctorum* of the *Vasanthamandapa* pillars which have been beautifully decorated. Each pillar starts with *vedigai* as basement and *pothigai* at the top, with innumerable sculptures in between. The pillars of *arththamandapa* have been beautifully decorated with sculptures like birds, flowers, *yantras*, *kumbapanchakams* and epic scenes, yoga postures, etc. The existence of erotic sculptures² adds additional glamour to this *mandapa*.

MahaMandapa

It is significant to note that the 20- pillared *mahamandapa* has the elements like *upaanam*, *kandam*, and *vaajanam*. *Mahamandapa* is the entrance to *vasanthamandapa*; and it is built as outer *prakara*. At the entrance of the *vasanthamandapa*, there are two *dwarabalakas* with *sangu*, and *chakra* in their right and left hands respectively facing the east. The pillars of *mahamandapa* have been beautifully erected with elements like *Vishnuchakra*, *Maharathoranam*, etc. The standing posture of a saint carved at the *adhithanam* of a pillar situated at the south - eastern side of the *mahamandapa* is so beautiful. In the same pillar, on the southern side, a saint seated in *Swasthic asana* with *Thiyanathandam*, and *rudraskshahas* been well finished. In the western side of the same pillar, a sculpture of a saint with long beard, long nose and big ears is seen in *Koottumuthirai* posture.³

Design of Mandapas

Normally temples and the *mandapas* were built by the ruling dynasties. Significantly, at the *vasanthamandapa* of Sri VaragunapandeeswararNithiyakalyaniAmbal temple at Radhapuram, a sculpture of a majestic man with tightened mustache is there at the southern pillar of *vasanthamandapa* and his name has been mentioned as Meenakshinathan.⁴ It confirms the liberal donations given by the individuals to this temple. The Tamil letters emphasise that the period of the erection of this *mandapa* might belong to the 18th century A.D. Another pillar of the *vasanthamandapa* has a Saiva saint's posture; and his name, has been mentioned as Azhwarthirunagari Subramanian. Once again it confirms the participation of general public in the construction of this temple.⁵ Another pillar of *vasanthamandapa* has a sculpture which depicts the *Gajendramoksha* or *GajendraVimochanam*. On the southern side of *vasanthamandapa* Anjaneya is seen in the first pillar. In the southern side of the same first pillar, Sri Rama, in a warrior posture, has been beautifully encarved.

Madurai Meenakshi's sculpture is seen in one of the southern pillars of *vasanthamandapa*. There is also a sculpture of Lekshmanan, brother of Sri Rama having the third day on his head moon is seen in the central pillar of *vasantha mandpa*.⁶ The beams connecting the pillars have been beautifully erected with flowers. A sculpture with peacock and *annam* (duck) in the opposite

direction is seen in one of the beams connecting the pillars. Floral decorations are seen in a number of places, and they highlight the artistic significance of the temple. The scene of snake fight is seen in the western side of the central pillar of *vasanthamandapa*. One of the top positions of the pillar highlights a five storied flower design which is so attractive. In between the third and the fourth pillars an *Asura*⁷ with unpolished teeth is seen. Unfortunately, the western and northern side of the first pillar on the western side of *vasanthamandapa* has been pasted with cement. So it is not possible to see the sculptures on that side. But on the remaining sides, a Saiva saint's sculpture in *yohanishtai* style is seen. A Ramayana epic scene is there in the third pillar of the western row of *vasanthamandapa* in which a *Vaanaran* (monkey) is holding a stone on his head. A five headed cobra (*panchanagam*) sculpture is seen on the backside of a Sivalinga. The fifth and sixth pillars in the middle row of *vasanthamandapa* are seen with limestone pasting; so it is not visible to identify the sculptures. In front of the *arththamandapa*, within the *vasanthamandapa*, three granite steps are there in which the head of an elephant with its raised hand has been beautifully carved.⁸

Eye-catching Pillars

It is significant to note that a female saint with *ruthraksha* in her ears, neck and hand in *anchalihastaposture* has been encarved in the pillar situated in the northern side of *vasanthamandapa*. This beautifully decorated sculpture is 3¼ ft high and 1 ft wide. Parasurama, one among the incarnations of Lord Vishnu, is seen in the pillar standing on the southern side of *vasanthamandapa*. A *Saravanabavayantra* is seen on the northern side of a pillar situated in the central part of *vasanthamandapa*.

A pillar standing in the central portion of *vasanthamandapa* highlights a puranic scene in which Lord Balakrishnan defeats a snake (*Vasugi*)⁹ is an addition to the artistic importance of this temple. In the third pillar situated on the eastern side of *vasanthamandapa*, a *yoga Narasimha* sculpture is seen in a seated position in which the fingers of both the hands are facing towards the earth. In the same pillar at the northern side, a *nandhi* sculpture popularly called as *athikaranandhi* is in a standing posture in *anjalihastha* style. The other incarnations of Lord Vishnu have also been beautifully depicted at the pillars of *vasanthamandapa*. *Parasurama*,¹⁰ one of the incarnations is seen in the bottom of the second pillar situated at the southern side of the *mandapa* and *Varahaavathara* is seen in the southern side bottom of the above mentioned pillar. Similar to Lord Guruvayurappan,¹¹ one Sathiyarayanan sculpture with standing posture is seen in one of the pillars of the western row of *vasanthamandapa*. A Saiva saint in a standing posture, wearing cap, *Kundalam* in his ears, *rudraksha* in his neck with raised hands in *anjalihasta* style is seen on the northern side of a pillar situated in the western row.

A sculpture of *Macha avathar*, one of the incarnations of Lord Vishnu is seen in the bottom of a pillar facing towards the west. In the same pillar, on the northern side, there is the *Rama – Seetha Suyamwara* (marriage) scene including the breaking up of *Thanusu*.¹² In addition to that, *Kurmaavathar*, another incarnation of Lord Vishnu has been carved out at the bottom of the western side of the fourth pillar at the southern row of *vasanthamandapa*. *Narasimhaavathar*¹³ has been carved out at the bottom of a pillar in the same row. *Rama avathar* is seen at the bottom of a pillar situated at the western row of *vasanthamandapa*. There are four pillars in this now. A beautiful *Venugopalakrishna* sculpture is seen in the pillar situated at the southern side; and at the other side, a cow is enjoying the song of Lord Krishna which has been encarved fantastically.

Arjuna's penance¹⁴ scene has been beautifully carved out at the bottom of the first pillar situated at the western row of *vasanthamandapa*. Another episode of Lord Krishna's life *Kalinganarthana* has been beautifully encarved at the north and western side of the middle part of

a pillar situated at the western row of *vasanathamadapa*. *Rama avathar* scene is also available at the bottom of the second pillar situated at the western row of *vasnathamandapa*. Significantly, Goddess Nithyakalyani is seen in four pillars with lotus flower in her right hand and ornaments in her ears and hip. In the northern and southern side of the *adhithanam* the third pillar is situated in the western row of the *arththamandapa*. In the eastern direction of the *adhithanam* the second pillar is situated at the northern row. In the sanctum of *vasanthamandapa* facing the south, the sculpt of Nithiyakalyani has been beautiful encarved¹⁵ On the southern side of the second pillar of western row of *vasanthamandapa*, a Siva saint with long hair, tough beards, sharpened nose, *kundalam* on his ears, covering the Sivalinga with his hands and worshipping is seen.

*Bharathanatya*¹⁶ concert has been encarved at the western side of a pillar situated in the western row of *vasanthamandapa*. Both male and female dancers are dancing in the sculpture. *Krishna avathar*, another incarnation of Lord Vishnu has been encarved at the southern bottom of the pillar situated at the northern row of *vasanthamandapa*. Lord Krishna is playing *Pullaankuzhal*- flute (a musical instrument); and in the western side, Lord Krishna is dancing on a cobra.¹⁷ In the central part of the pillar, a cow touching a Sivalinga with its tongue is seen. The second pillar of the northern row has been beautifully encarved in which Lord Nataraja in dancing posture is seen on the southern side and in the northern side *Saint Pathanjali* sculpture with five-headed cobra over his body and a snake is looking like a tag covering His hip is there. In the western side of the same pillar, the sculpture of saint *Viyakkirabaatha* in standing posture has been beautifully encarved. Below this sculpture a female saint in yoga posture is seen under a tree.

The *adhithana* of the pillars situated at the *sanctum* of *vasanthamandapa* have been filled with floral designs. Nearly 80 flower designs are there. At the roof of the *sanctum*, there are nine squares, every one of which has been filled with eight storied lotus flowers. Nearly 16 *Thiruvaachitoys* are seen on the beams connecting the nine squares of the *sanctum*. *Yali* is seen only at the *sanctum* of this *vasanthamandapa*. It is seen in the four edges of the *sanctum*. In the central portion of the pillar situated at the edge is connecting the south and the west, there are so many beautiful floral designs. In the midst, nearly 32 *Nagathaaliflowers* are seen in a circular shape with 16 pieces of another floral decoration.

Saint Agastiar is seen at the pillar situated at the *sanctum* of *vasanthamandapa* in a standing posture, and playing *Veena* (a musical instrument). In order to establish unity among Saivism and Vaishnavism and also to assert oneness of God, *the sculpture of Sankaranarayana* in standing posture is seen in a pillar situated at the *sanctum* of *vasanthamandapa*. A sculpture of Lord Brahma with four heads and four hands is seen at a pillar situated in the northern part of the *sanctum* of *vasanthamandapa*. Within the *sanctum*, there is a beautiful sculpture of *Pichadanamurthi* with four hands – one holding a lotus flower, and another holding an *udukkai*, the third one touching a dog and the fourth one being the *abayakaram*. A sculpture of Veerabhadrar with a sword is seen at the pillar situated on the western side of the *sanctum* of *vasanthamandapa*. Interestingly, seven erotic sculptures are there at the *vasanthamandapa*. At the top of the second pillar situated in the western row of the *arththamandapa* of *vasanthamandapa*, there exists an erotic sculpture in which a man touches the breasts of a female with his hands and passionately kissing her. It is quite interesting to mention that the sculptures of *vasnathamandapa* alone are plenty in number, all of which have been designed elegantly.

CONCLUSION

The artistic significance of the *vasanthamandapa* and the various sculptural features found in the same *mandapa* through light upon the splendid art of architecture and sculpture of Paniyas'

period. It is worth mentioning that the devotees who visit the Varaguna pandeeswarar - Nithiyakalyani temple enjoy the elegance of the various sculptures and are very much fascinated by them. The structure of the temple in general and that of the *vasandamandapa* in particular stands strong even after a lapse of 1200 years from the date of its construction.

REFERENCE AND FOOT NOTE

1. *Vasanthorshavam* - spring festival. During the Tamil month of Vaikasi, it is celebrated in this temple.
2. *Erotic Sculptures* - It is every common among the sculptors of Tamil Nadu to annex certain sexual postures in the construction of temples to avoid *thirusti* (cowardness)
3. Personal interview with A.K.Perumal aged 70, Epigraphist, Nagercoil on 05.05.2015.
4. *Meenkashinathan* - a local philanthropist who built the Vasanthamandapa of this temple.
5. Personal interview with Varadarajanlyyenkar, aged temple priest, Kallidaikurichi on 10.02.2014.
6. It means chandradarshan, ie. third day of moon which is very popular among the common people
7. *Asura* - Devil Force.
8. Elephant with raised hand was normally used by the Travancore kings due to their emblem. So it may be a later addition.
9. *Vasugi* - It is the name of a snake which was killed by Lord Krishna.
10. *Prasurama* - One among the incarnations of Lord Vishnu.
11. *Guruvayurappan* - Name of the presiding deity of the city Guruvayur.
12. *Thanusu* - Name of the arm broken by Rama, epic hero.
13. *Narasimha Avatar* - One among the incarnations of lord Vishnu. In that avathara a devil leader Hamsa was killed.
14. *Arjuna's penance* - One among the five heroes of Mahabharata who took penance for getting more powers.
15. S.M.LakshmanaChettiar (Somalay), *Tirunelveli Mavattam* (Tamil), Madras, 1965, pp.40-50
16. *Bharthanatya* - A classical dance form originated in Tamil Nadu.
17. Lord Krishna at the young age played with Adeshesa, a five headed snake.