

Minor Divinities in Padalisvarar Temple in Tamilnadu: Iconographical Significance

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Abstract: *There are around two millions temples in India; each year the number increases considerably. From the architectural perspective, two major temple-styles in the country are Nagara and Dravida, the former in the north and the latter in the south. However, there is another style known as Vesara, which is nothing but the combination of the Nagara and the Dravida style. In eastern India, there has prevailed an overlong tendency to focus on the temple art and architecture of the Aryavarta (the Indo-Gangetic Plain) in academic writings, which naturally gives an incomplete picture of India and its history. The present paper is an attempt at paying particular and deserving attention on the art history of South India – specifically speaking Tamil Nadu - through looking into the sculptures of minor divinities as found on the Padalisvarar Temple in the town of Thirupathiripuliyur under Cuddalore District in the state of Tamil Nadu.*

Key Words: *South Indian history, Art and Architecture, Temple style, Padalisvarar Temple, Divinities, Sculpture, Nayanars, Shiva, Brahma, Surya, Adichandikesvara.*

*“catur-vidha bhajante mam janah sukrino 'rjuna
arto jijnasur arthartha jnani ca bharatarsabha*

(“O best among the Bharatas [Arjuna], four kinds of pious men render devotional service unto Me — the distressed, the desirer of wealth, the inquisitive, and he who is searching for knowledge of the Absolute”), said Lord Krishna to Arjuna in the seventh chapter of *Shrimad Bhagvat Gita*. To render devotional services, devotees sometimes come to a temple, which is (Latin *templum*) a building reserved for spiritual rituals and activities such as prayer and sacrifice. Temples are erected by various religions including Hinduism. Hindu temples are known by different names such as *Alayam, Ambalam, Degul, Devalaya, Devamandiraya, Devasthana, Deul, Gudi, Kavvu, Koil, Kovil, Mandir* and *Raul*, the variation in name based on regions and languages. A Hindu shrine is a symbolic house, the seat and dwelling of gods and designed to bring human beings and gods together. Inside the innermost sanctum (*Garbhagriha*) of a Hindu temple, there is installed the image (a *murti*) of a deity or deities. There are around two million temples in India, and each year the number increases considerably. From the architectural perspective, two major temple-styles in the country are *Nagara* and *Dravida*, the former in the north and the latter in the south. However, there is another style known as *Vesara*, which is nothing but the combination of the *Nagara*

and the *Dravida* style.

In eastern India, there has prevailed an overlong tendency to focus on the temple art and architecture of the Aryavarta (the Indo-Gangetic Plain) in academic writings, which naturally gives us not a complete picture of India and its history. The present paper is an attempt at paying particular and deserving attention on the art history of South India – specifically speaking Tamil Nadu - through looking into the sculptures of minor divinities as found on the Padalisvarar Temple in the town of Thirupathiripuliyur under Cuddalore District in the state of Tamil Nadu. The Padalisvarar Temple, which is dedicated to Lord Shiva in the town of Cuddalore, is referred to as the *Padal Petra Sthalam* of Nadunadu. The presiding deity is revered in the seventh century Tamil Shaiva canonical work, the *Tevaram*, written by Tamil saint poets known as the Nayanmars, classified as one of the 275 *Paadal Petra Sthalams*¹ and are amongst the greatest Shiva temples of the continent. This is one of the *Devara Thiruthalam* and 18th *Shiva sthalam* in Nadu Nadu region. On the other hand, the *Divya Desams* by comparison are the 108 Vishnu temples glorified in the poems of the contemporary Vaishnava Alvars of Tamil Nadu. However, the region of Nadu Nadu was located between the Chola mandala and Thondai mandala i.e. the kingdoms of the Cholas and the Pallavas.

The Padalisvarar Temple was built in the seventh century A.D. and dated a millennium earlier. It is revered in the verses of the seventh-century Shaiva saints Appar and Tirugnanasambandar in their works in *Tevaram*.² Appar is said to have been rescued from death by drowning here, by the grace of the presiding deity. The famous '*Sotrunai VEDIYAN*' - *Namachivayappatikam* was composed here. *Vyagrapadar* (the saint with tiger's claws and feet) is said to have worshipped here, as in Omampuliyur, Erukkattampuliyur, Perumpuliyur and Perumpatrappuliyur (Chidambaram). The *theertham* for this temple is the Gadilam River (sometimes pronounced Kedilam), which flows through the Cuddalore and Vriksham is Patiri. It was constructed during the Pallava and Medieval Chola periods. The Shaivite saint Appar is believed to have adopted Shaivism at this temple. It is one of the shrines of the 275 *Paadal Petra Sthalams*. There is a belief or myth that by worshipping this God a single time is equal to 16 times worshipping the Shiva in Kashi, eight times in Thiruvannamalai, and three times in Chidambaram. In the Padalisvarar temple, which is dedicated to Lord Shiva, the various linga forms which are described in puranic stories, *sthala puranas*, *stalamanmiyam* pertaining to the 16th century, sculptures of Dakshinamurti, Lingodbhava murti, have been portrayed.

The temple is constructed in the Dravidian style of architecture. It is classified as Gnazhar Kovil, where the image of the presiding deity is set up under Gnazhar trees. Trees like Kondai, Kongu and Theekku (teak) all fall in the category. The temples constructed in wood made from Gnazhar trees are also classified as Gnazhar Koil. Literary evidence is found in the works of Tirugnanasambandar, who refers the temple as Gnazhar Koil.³ The lord of this temple saved Saint Appar from drowning when he was tied with a stone column and launched into sea as per the orders of the Pallava king Mahendra Varman. Appar, along with the stone, floated on the sea and safely drifted ashore here at Thirupathiripuliyur by the grace of god. Overwhelmed, he sang the thevaram "*Eendralumai enaku endhaiyumai*" (Anything for me today) in praise of the lord.

Sculptures of Vishnu are found in comparatively small numbers in this temple. The god appears in all his three usual postures: standing, sitting and lying. Lower reliefs are, however, only few. The temple also displays a few images of Mahishasuramardini-Durga, Kali, Lakshmi Devi, Sarasvati and Gangadevi. An 18th-century Durga is found in normal standing posture in *devakotta*. However, the main focus in this article is to be thrown on the sculptures of other divinities to assess their individual comparative significance. Lords such as Brahma, Surya, Navagrahas, Dikpalakas, Nandideva, Chandikesvara, Garuda, Kubera, Shaivite Nayanmars, Dvarapalakas, Risis, Kinnaras, Apsaras, Kinnaris, Vidyadharas, Kimpurusas, Gandarvas, Narada, Tumburu, Kamadhenu and social activities such as scenery of lilas with love, alasya spinsters, entertaining sculptures, wonderful animals, clumps forms, dance sculptures, gymnastics are depicted through sculpturing arts. Some of these are being worshipped in this temple and some others are meant only for embellishing the architecture. Moreover, the main purpose of such is to spread the puranic stories among people. Among the above, the images of Brahma, Surya and Chandikesvara are being focused upon.

Brahma:

There are three images of Brahma in the Padalisvara temple. In Hinduism, Brahma occupies a significant position. He was considered the first of the Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. The origin of Brahma and his subsequent history are given in detail in the extensive Puranic and Agamic literature. Derived from Prajapati, the Vedic god of sacrifice, Brahma became one of the members of Hindu Trimurti. Over time, however, Brahma's place became inferior to that of the other deities and his worship became less common. The lower position of Brahma is

clearly seen in the Trimurti icons, mostly found in Central and South India. In these icons, the central place is given to either Vishnu or Shiva, but in no case to Brahma. The other two deities are usually depicted issuing from the main central figure. Thus Vishnu and Shiva were promoted in turn as the Supreme Deity, and this place of honour was not given to Brahma.

Sanskrit texts like *Rupaamandana*, *Suprabhedagama*, *Silparatna* and *Vishnu Purana* give details about the iconographic forms of Brahma. He is to be shown with four faces and four hands. According to the aforementioned texts, the four faces of Brahma signify the four Vedas, the four Yugas and four Varnas. The heads of Brahma, according to *Rupamandana*, should face the four arms. *Suprabhedagama* mentions that each face must be shown with three eyes (*trimbaka* posture). He may either be shown standing or seated on a *padmasana* or on a swan. On his heads, should be the *jatamuktas* and he should be adorned with all ornaments. On his chest, there should be a *yajnopavita*. The undergarments should consist of white cloths and the upper portion of the body should be covered with a deer's skin worn in the *upavita* fashion. In his ears should be shown golden or ruby *kundalas*. The hands should variously hold an *akshamala* (rosary), *kamandalu* (water-pot), *sruva*, *pustaka* (book of the Veda), *kurcha* (handful of Kusha grass) and *ajyasthali* (ghee-pot). The *Amsumadbhedagama* says that *akshamamala*, *kamandala*, utensils or ingredients meant for *yajna*, *ajayastali* (utensil to keep ghee for offering), and bunch of *durba* (grass) are to be possessed by Brahma.⁴ His two front hands should generally be held in the *abhaya* and *varada* mudras. The *Rupamandana* prescribes for Brahma a beard too. The third canto of *Visnudharmottara Purana* mentions about the coming of Brahma in a sitting posture in a chariot being pulled by seven swans.⁵ According to some texts, to the right and left of the god his consorts Sarasvati and Savitri should be depicted with all ornaments. But most of the texts enjoin the figure of Savitri alone seated on the left side of Brahma. The *Rupamandana* prescribes four faces and four hands for Savitri too and says that in her hands she should hold an *akshamala*, *pustaka*, *padma* and *kamandalu*. According to *Silparatna*, Brahma should be surrounded by Rishis and the Vedas and the *ajyasthali* should be placed before him.

In the sculpture of Lingodbhava made by Pandyas and Pallavas, Brahma could be seen seated on a swan, which started his journey to reach the peak of Shiva.⁶ In the Lingodbhava image of the Chola period, Brahma and Vishnu stand around Shiva in the form of worshipping.⁷ In Elephanta Caves on Elephanta Island in Mumbai Harbour, Brahma is depicted coming in a chariot drawn by seven swans in the art

of the Vakatakas (7-8th century C.E.).⁷ In the cave number 2 of the Badami cave temples, an image of Brahma is depicted with Gayatri Devi and Saraswati Devi.⁸ Many sculptures of Brahma are seen in this cave temple. The Brahma figure could be seen installed in a niche facing north in the temples constructed in Tamil Nadu during the period of the Cholas. In the Padalisvarar temple, three sculptures of Brahma are depicted. One image is seen in the northern side of the sanctum sanctorum (*garbhagriha*) or inner shrine chamber). The image in the niche of the sanctum has three faces; the arms hold *akshamala* and *kamandala* and show the *abhaya* and *varada* mudra. Other details related to clothing and ornaments could not be easily guessed. Even so, the face of the icon suggests that it was built around 1400 AD.

The second is on the projected part of a pillar. It is shown in standing position in *samapadaasthanaka*. The feet are turned aside being in *vaivasvasthanana*.⁹ He has three faces and four arms. The lower arms show the *abhaya mudra* and *katiyavalambida mudra* (keeping the arm on the waist). The upper right and left arms are shown with *akshamala* and *kamandala* respectively. The real grace of divinity is not found in this sculpture. It was probably installed between 1800-1900 A.D. The third icon is a bronze statue. It is very rare to find the image of Brahma made of bronze. The icon in question has eight hands. The lower right hand holds the *akshamala* and the left arm a mirror. It may also have been built between 1800-1900 AD.

Surya

There are three Sun images found in the Padalisvarar temple. The sun-god is referred to as Surya or Aditya. Surya is one of the major five deities in Hinduism, considered as equivalent deities in *Panchayatana puja*. Vedic India had a vigorous tradition of Sun-worship, which forms an integral part of Nature-worship so prominently practiced by the Aryans. The very concept of Sun god among the Aryans was based upon the phenomenon of light whose chief source was Sun. The Sun was worshipped under various forms and names in the Vedic tradition: Surya, Savitri, Mitra, Vishnu, Pushan, Bhaga, Vavaswat and Adityas (Mitra, Aryaman, Bhaga, Amsa, Daksha, Varuna, Martanda). Surya is the most concrete of the solar gods, because he represents the simplest and most direct form i.e. the round red orb of the Sun.¹⁰ Savitri is the spiritual power of the Sun and thus a more abstract deity as compared to Surya. He represents primarily the stimulative aspect of the Sun. Majority of scholars takes Mitra to represent the beneficent aspect of the

Sun.¹¹ Mitra of the Veda is identical with Mithra of the Indo-Iranian religion.¹² Vishnu is the spirit of the Sun's rays in its capacity of creation, preservation and maintenance and also the personification of the swiftly-moving luminary.¹³ Pusan appears a solar deity in his capacity of prosperity which had two aspects – production and protection of cattle which were useful for agriculture as well as for trade as mediums of exchange. Admittedly, Vivasvata is connected with the first sacrifice and is described as the father of the human race several times in the Vedic literature. Bhaga has been described by Yaska as the presiding deity of the forenoon.¹⁴ The solar divinities – Surya, Savitri, Pusan, Vishnu, Mitra, Varuna, Bhaga, Aryamana and Amsa described above are jointly invoked under the name of Adityas in the Rig-Veda. However, the Rig-Veda is rather indefinite as to the names and names of the gods that the group includes. The friendly nature of Aryamana, which resembles Mitra - the Sun-god, is hinted at in the Rigveda.¹⁵ In the Atharvaveda, the friendly nature of Aryaman is maintained.¹⁶ Amsa is almost synonymous with Bhaga expressing both the concrete sense of share, portion and that of apportioner.¹⁷ Daksha was regarded with Aditi as the universal parent representing the luminous sky.¹⁸ Varuna appears to be a representative of the luminous encompassing sky.¹⁹ However, he is also regarded as the nocturnal sun.²⁰ Martanda, as it seems to be suggested in the Rig-Veda, represents the setting sun.^{20a} In the Epics, the personality of Surya has been fully humanized.²¹ With humanization, there developed a family around him. In the early puranas, the story of Samjna and her shadow Chhaya as wives of Surya is referred to.²² Surya has many children – Yama, Manu and Yami by Samjna; two Asvins – Dasra and Nasatyas and Revanta from Samjna in mare's form; Manu Sanischara and Tapati from Chhaya. In some late passages of early puranas,²³ the attendants of Sun god – Danda and Pingala – also find mention.

The Agamas i.e. *Amsumadbhedagama*, the *Suprabhedagama* and the *Purvakarasnagama* contain the prescriptions for the construction of sun-images. Sun-god should be shown seated in his chariot drawn by seven horses. Aruna, the charioteer, should be placed in the front. It is suggested that the image of Aditya should have two arms and hands, each holding a lotus. He should wear only one cloth and the body should be covered with a long coat as in Northern India. The body should be beautiful and red in colour. The garment should be of red colour. His body should be adorned with all ornaments like coronet, *kundala* and necklace. He should wear *Yajnopavita* and a *Karanda mukuta*. His head should be surrounded with a halo or *prabhamandala* of medium size. The goddess Usa and

Pratyusa should be depicted standing on the left and right of the god engaged in dispelling the darkness.

The sculptures of Sungod in Tamil Nadu are found only from the period of Pallavas. At Mahabalipuram, an image of Sun is shown on the Dharmaraja ratha.²⁴ In the lower rock-cut cave temple at Tiruhipalli a sculpture of Sun could also be noticed, which belongs to the period of Mahendravarman-I. On the other hand, in North India, Buddhagaya Sun image belongs to 1st century B.C.E. The sculptures of Surya are found in the Bhaja cave temples too.²⁵ In the Padalisvarar temple three images²⁶ of the Sun god are found. Two of them are being worshipped in two different temples and the third one forms a part of the Navagraha image. There is a Sun image in the sanctum sanctum (*Garbhagriha*). The Sun god is in standing posture in *samapadaasthanaka*. Interestingly enough, the deity has four arms. The lower right arm shows the *abhaya mudra* and the left the *varada mudra*. Both the upper arms are shown as holding blossomed lotus flowers. The deity puts on lengthy cloth in the lower portion of his body. Innerwears (*antaravasa*) are visible on both sides hanging right from the waist. The lower arms are adorned with *kanganas*. The *bhujanga* rings and *keyuram* adorns the upper arms. Ears are adorned with rings made up of gems. Ornaments embedded with gems are found around the neck. The head is bedecked with *karanda makuta*. To show the *prabhamandala* around his head, a circular form is depicted. This icon was most probably installed 200 years before, that is, in 1800 A.D. But the actual charm is lacking in the image. The second sculpture is found in another shrine with the above-mentioned artistic characteristics. Both the upper arms hold lotus flowers which are depicted, though, as buds. The *Abhaya mudra* and the *Varada mudra* are displayed in both the right and left arm respectively. The head is surrounded by *prabhamandala*. The sculpture is based on *padapitha* made on top of the other. The image was most probably installed around 1600 A.D. A small-sized image of Surya is made as one of the Navagrahas. This Navagraha panel might have been installed in the later period, perhaps in 1800 A.D.

Chandesvara

Two sculptures of Chandessvara are found in this temple. Ādichandiksvvara is regarded as one of the eight *parivara devatas*. The other seven are: Bhairava, Ganapati, Surya, Jesta Devi, Sapta matrikas, Chandra and Subrahmanya. He is considered to be the guardian of the temple belongings in the Shiva temples. The lands and properties belonging to a temple of Shiva used to be registered in his

name. According to Sastras, he is always installed in the north eastern corner of Shiva temple. In the *Chandikesvara purana*, the birth of Visarasarma at Seignalur is narrated. It is also stated in the *Periya Puranas*²⁷ that he was born into a Brahmin family and was called Visarasarman. When he was a young boy, their cows remained uncared for. Hence he was entrusted with tendering and caring for the cows. While doing so, he made a lingam made of sand and would pour some milk on the lingam. The news of this wastage of milk eventually came to the ear of his father, Datta. The father himself came to the field and scolded his son for wasting the milk by pouring on sand when Chandesha was deep in meditation in front of the sand lingam. Thus he could neither notice his father's arrival nor listen to his words. This enraged his father, who kicked the sand lingam. This interrupted Chandesha's meditation and he struck his father's leg with a staff. The staff turned into an axe and his father's leg was cut off.²⁸ At this time, Shiva manifested himself, blessed Chandesha and brought back the severed leg of Datta to the former condition.²⁹ Pleased with the devotion of Chandesha, Shiva also appointed him as the caretaker of his wealth (caretaker of Ganas as per another version).³⁰ The image of Chandikesvara should have four faces, with four or twelve arms. He is to hold *akshamala*, *trishula*, *uli* or *parashu* and *kamandala* in his hands.³¹ He should have three eyes. There should be *jatamakuta* over his head with a crescent on it. Serpent should be shown as his sacred thread (*yajnopavita*). According to the Sastras, he has to be seated in *padmasana*. While sitting in *virasana*, he must have *parasu* in one hand and spade in the other.³² He has to be shown as furious with blackened skin.

The representation of the above deities shows that whoever be the personal god for whom the temple has been dedicated, the devotees never fail to show their respect to other minor deities. However, there might be a message underlying that the god for whom the shrine has been built and whose icon has been installed in the *garbhagriha*, is superior to other deities displayed. Two of three images of Surya have been shown with four arms. Four-handed sun images are very rare in India, especially in North India. Two Sun images with four hands are also known Bengal.³³ However, while two sun images of the Padalisvarar temple are shown in standing posture, the above-mentioned images from Bengal are seated, one in *lalitasana* and another in *padmasana*. One of the Bengal images is made of bronze and has legs covered as usual while the other is made of blackstone has the bare feet in front of which is seated Mahasveta. While both the Padalisvarar images show *varada* and *abhaya mudra*, the Bengal black stone image holds *sankhya* in

right hand and *chakra* in left hand. The sun images in the early medieval north India are not found usually with *karanda mukuta* on the head unlike the sun images on the Padaliswarar temple. *Karanda mukuta* might have been provided to the Sun because of his position being accessory here on the Shiva temple. The sun images appear in Tamil Nadu much later because while in North India, the sun image appears in 1st century B.C. on the Bodhgaya temple in Bihar, Anantagumpha cave in the Khandragiri hills in Orissa and a cave at Bhaja in Maharashtra, the same are found in proper or far South only from the period of the Pallavas (275 A.D. to 897 A.D. It may be attributed to the fact that the exclusive devotion to the Sun was brought to North India by Sun-worshipping Magas from Sakadvipa (Iran) and it naturally took time to reach the far south.

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