A HINDU PHILOSOPHICAL READING OF THE DRAVIDA ARCHITECTURAL IDIOM IN THE KANDY PILLAIYAR KOVIL AND ITS ADAPTATION TO THE SRI LANKAN CONTEXT

Jayasinghe R.V.

Undergraduate, Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya
rochj@rocketmail.com

Abstract

In this paper, the architectural structure of the Pillaiyar Kovil in Kandy is studied as a text that is meant to be interpreted, and it was done so in terms of Hindu philosophy in order to understand the principles and the 'way of life' the Pillaiyar Kovil is designed to give expression to, and what might have been the culture it was supposed to represent, and address. Principal architectural structures were held against the ritualistic and philosophical backdrop of Hinduism, and it was found that many scientific underpinnings form the core of the kovil architecture. Interviews with trusted sources and research through journals and historical sources were undertaken to read the architectural idiom as a text in order to comprehend the worldview that was dominant at the time. Its annual *ther* festival and its crucial role in the Kandy Esala Perahera bear sufficient testimony to the fact that the kovil has been well-integrated in Hindu-Buddhist communal activities throughout the years since its inception; one could assume that during this period, there was a huge influence of both religions on each other, at least culturally. This could be why despite some very fundamental differences between the respective philosophies of Hinduism and Buddhism; culturally they seem to go hand in hand especially with Buddhism taking a more ritualistic approach, similar to that of Hinduism.

Keywords: *Hinduism, Buddhism, Ethnic & Religious Integration, Architecture, Philosophy*

A HINDU PHILOSOPHICAL READING OF THE DRAVIDA ARCHITECTURAL IDIOM IN THE KANDY PILLAIYAR KOVIL AND ITS ADAPTATION TO THE SRI LANKAN CONTEXT

Rochana Jayasinghe

The art and architecture of any building presumably resonates a certain 'way of life' celebrated, and adhered to, by the society and culture of that era. Historically speaking, most of the human being's artistic creations seemed to have been done in the service of religion and spiritual expression. Temples devoted to Hindu worship, known as Kovil, have been constructed in such a manner that evokes the philosophy and practice of the religion.

The Pillaiyar Kovil, devoted to God Ganesh, stands opposite the Kandy Police Station and is considered one of the oldest kovils in the city. The detailed history of the kovil is unknown; however, it is unanimously agreed that the temple was built once the Nayakkar dynasty started ruling the Kandyan Kingdom (Sharma). According to the temple priests, upon finding a statue of Ganesh in a well, a group of Hindu devotees had started to build a shrine for this elephant-headed son of Shiva and Uma Devi (widely known as Parvati in orthodox Hindu terminology). What started out as a small, modest shrine without walls, has progressed throughout the centuries to what it is today: a monument for many other important Hindu gods and goddesses, and a significant landmark in Kandy holding great importance for Hindus and Buddhists alike. In addition to daily prayers and *pujas* in the kovil by its regular visitors and devotees, the kovil also conducts the annual *ther* festival, the procession of the Hindu gods and goddesses. This festival has been halted since 2012 as the temple is being renovated, and new

structures are being added. The kovil also plays a significant role in the Kandy Esala Perahera; the final day of the Perahera, constituting the procession of the four *devales* Vishnu, Natha, Katharagama and Paththini, starts from this kovil after the water cutting ceremony (Rajendran). Therefore, it goes without saying that this kovil might have always been a truly integral component of the society and culture of both Hindu and Buddhist devotees. The building taken into consideration in this study, is the main shrine and not the *vasanthamandapam* (marriage hall) or the portion that is under construction.

Physical structures are said to be guided by the broader worldview which they are part of. A kovil is the 'house of God', with '*koi*' meaning 'God' and '*il*' meaning 'house in Tamil (Duraiswamy 2); thus what we see reflected in Hindu kovil architecture is an episteme which considered sacred and essential, the worship of gods. Hinduism having originated in India, it can be safely assumed that it might also be the birthplace of Hindu kovils. Hindus base their temple architecture on the ancient architectural text, the *Vastu Shasthra* (Kumar). Among the massive numbers of kovils in India, there are two principal types of Kovil styles as seen in North and South India: Nagara and Dravida respectively (Dutta and Adane). Dravida architecture, the architectural idiom that emerged in South India, is that which is employed in Sri Lankan Hindu temples, including Pillaiyar Kovil (Sharma). Even Dravida architecture has been in a constant flux due to the aesthetic ideals imposed by the several dynasties that came into power. It is unclear as from what dynasty the Pillaiyar Kovil draws its inspiration. Since the kovil was built during the Nayakkar dynasty in Kandy (Sharma), one could presume that the Nayakkars imported their own unique style of architecture, though there is no record of this.

Nevertheless, the Pillaiyar Kovil contains all the basic elements of a Dravida Hindu kovil, as per observation. In order that we may understand the principles and the 'way of life' the Pillaiyar

Kovil is designed to give expression to, it is vital that we analyze integral components of Hindu kovil architecture and what spiritual message they give rise to. After all, that itself is what could give us a clue as to what might have been the culture it was supposed to represent, and address.

The saint Tirumalar has stated that the body is a temple (Trivedi). Every key fragment of a temple represents an important part of the human body. The great cosmos is reflected in the human body. It is constructed so that it resembles the shape of the human body, thus signifying that the body is the temple of God (Duraiswamy). It is said that the plan of the temple resembles a man lying on his head with the head on the west and the feet, east (Trivedi).

According to Duraiswamy,

> a kovil is the symbol of ultimate enlightenment and the principles of its construction, the form of its architecture and detailed decorations as well as the various day to day rituals that take place within the walls are aimed at achieving enlightenment, or *moksha* (3).

The several births one takes are the stages in the progression towards *moksha* and the temple functions as the source of enlightenment, helping the devotee towards this end (blessingsonthenet.com).

Kovil architecture, as observed, is imbued with religious symbolism, thus reinforcing this spiritual link. Before entering the Pillaiyar Kovil, one sees the left side wall painted in red and white stripes with a large ஓம் (Om) written on it. The red and white stripes represent the divine unison of the white sperms of Shiva and Parvati's red blood in her ovaries. The stripes are supposed to always be of equal height and width, thus representing the equality of male and female form in all creation (Kulendiren 77).

The main entrance of the kovil is the *gopuram*. The structural meaning of the doors is that they signify the movement from the temporal to the spiritual (Rodrigues). (See Fig.1.) Then we come

to the *muha mandapam* containing *moolasthanam* or *karuvarai*, refered to as by European historians as 'sanctum sanctorum' (translated as the 'Holy of Holies') containing within them, *murthi*s (idols) of the main deities of the temple. Starting from the left, is the statue of Ganesha which was supposedly found in the well when the shrine was built, next Shiva (Supreme God in Shaivism), Murugan (refered to as 'Kathirkaamam' by the temple priests) the other son of Shiva and Uma Devi, and Uma Devi (Parvati). In front of the *muha mandapam* one finds the *dhwajstambha* (flag post) and *vahana mandapam* (See Fig.2.) where sits the carrier of the deity, and in the case of this temple, principally presided over by Shiva, the *vahana* is the bull Nandi, from whom permission must be taken to enter the *muha mandapam* (Rajendran).

Fig. 1. *Gopuram (Entrance)*

Fig. 2. *Vahana Mandapam*

Around the *muha mandapam*, are the subsidiary *karuvarai* (s) (See Fig.3.); a term which literally translates into 'womb house'. Starting at the left from the entrance, and going in a clockwise manner, the *karuvarai* (s) house the following deities:

1. Kaali, goddess of time, creation, destruction and power

2. Poet saints: Gnanasambandar, Manikkavar,Thirumalar

3. Venkateswara, a form of God Vishnu

4. Ganesha, god of new beginnings, remover of obstacles

5. Parvati, consort of Shiva

6. Shivalingam, an iconic representation of Shiva, symbol of his energy and potential

Shakthi, symbol of energy and potential of Parvati

7. Murugan, god of war and Deivayani and Valli, his two consorts

In the front near the entrance, we find the smaller *karuvarai* (s) of:

8. Bhairava, fierce manifestation of Shiva associated with annihilation

9. Saneeswaran, god of deeds

10. Suriyan, the son god

11. Sandiran, the moon god.

There are also other gods without *karuvarai*s of their own; Brahman; the Supreme Creator of all beings, Sandeswaran, and Dhakshinamoorthy, an avatar of Shiva (See Fig.4.). On the right side of the entrance of the kovil, is the pantheon of all the gods in this temple, as led by Nataraja, one of the avatars of Shiva (See Fig.5.).

Fig. 3. *A karuvarai*

Fig. 4. *Sandeswaran, Brahman, Dhakshinamoorthy*

Fig. 5. *Pantheon of gods*

The symbolism behind the *karuvarai* (*Garbagriham* in Sanskrit) is significant, as not only does it serve to show the deep faith of the Hindu devotee in the power of the gods, but it also throws light on the advanced scientific basis for the construction of *karuvarai*, thus revealing the celebration of logic, order and reason (Kumar). It is a windowless, dark chamber, intentionally created thus to focus the devotee's mind on the tangible form of the divine within it

(Encyclopaedia Britannica). Its access is restricted to the priests who perform the duties of taking devotees' offerings inside and chanting sacred hymns to seek blessings from the respective deity. The *muha mandapam* on which are the principal *karuvarai*, is said to have its location calculated to be a point of total equilibrium and harmony as it is representative of a microcosm of the universe. Also, Duraiswamy observes;

> Scientists speak of the specific relationship between the size of the image and the capacity of the sanctum sanctorum. This relationship is important because the air column inside resonates to the sound of the *pranava mantram* 'OM' as the priests chant.
>
> Scientific research shows that if the sanctum sanctorum is correctly built, the air molecules vibrate to the maximum producing intense sound. The sanctum sanctorum thus acts as a volume resonator, the image on the pedestal as an energy reservoir, the worshippers as receivers and the air inside as a medium for the transfer of energy (7).

There are other interpretations as well. Since the *karuvarai* means the 'womb' and thus, the source of life, the devotee who comes to worship, is said to attain new birth in the darkness (Trivedi).

Right above the *muha mandapam* is the square-chambered sanctuary which is topped by the *vimanam*. The *vimanam* over the *karuvarai* attracts cosmic rays and the rays are directly given to the *karuvarai* which is quite dark. Since the cosmic rays cannot stay in the dark, they are immediately emitted and hit the chests of the devotees outside (Dutta and Adane). The Pillaiyar kovil *vimanam* has approximately five stories with intricate sculptures of mythology related to Shiva (Sharma).

The *vimanam* is related to the Hindu belief that gods are attracted to mountains and caves; temples that are not built on the sides of mountains are made to reflect the visual nature of mountains because of this belief (Rodrigues). According to (Encyclopaedia Britannica), 'the *vimanam* attracts holy powers from the cosmos like our nose attracts oxygen from air'. Other sources also say that the *vimanam* is also conceived as Mount Meru, the mythical axis of the universe, on the slopes of which the gods reside, and that it symbolizes 'the upward aspiration of the devotee, a potent metaphor for his ascent to enlightenment' (Kumar). (See Fig.6.)

Fig. 6. *A view of the Vimanam*

Important to discuss are the other numerous paintings, sculptures and intricate designs on the walls, doors and columns of the temple. The many paintings on the ceiling of the *muha mandapamam* and the ceiling outside it, depict mythology related mainly to Shiva, Ganesh and Murugan (Sharma). There are other depictions of flowers, animals, minor gods, of which the significance is uncertain. However, as per some sources, it could be said that these secular images symbolize the devotee shedding influences of the material world, and attaining inner peace and the potential for spiritual expression, on the way inside. From these features, it goes

without saying that the architecture of this building intended to motivate its visitors and devotees to spiritual exploration.

Another observation of personal interest was the striking similarity between the statues of a lion in the kovil and the iconic *Yapahuwa sinhaya* in Sri Lankan architecture (See Fig 7.). In terms of history, Sri Lanka faced an invasion from the Pandyan dynasty in India, during the Yapahuwa Era. It might have been during this era that this lion statue would have been incorporated to 'Lankan' architecture with the influence of the Pandyans. So, it could be that rather than the Pillaiyar Kovil drawing its inspiration from prevailing 'Sri Lankan' architecture, the kovil was built in the original Pandyan style.

Fig. 7. *Lions*

However, it is still intriguing to draw the parallels, because if *per se*, this kovil is influenced by the lion in Yapahuwa, it does reveal much about the culture during which the kovil was built; that it was open to diversity and the wealth of multiculturalism. It is widely known that the kings

of the Nayakkar dynasty were those of Telugu origin who converted from Hinduism to Buddhism and worked towards the protection and development of Buddhism in the

Kandyan Kingdom (Pieris). Hence, one could assume that during this period, there was a significant influence of both religions on each other, at least culturally. This could be why despite some fundamental differences between the respective philosophies of Hinduism and Buddhism, culturally they seem to go hand in hand especially with Buddhism taking a more ritualistic approach, similar to that of Hinduism.

The kovil's substantial role in the Kandy Esala Perahera bears sufficient testimony to the notion that throughout the centuries, the kovil has contributed to goodwill, peacekeeping and harmony among communities. This can be seen even today, with a significant percentage of its visitors being Sinhalese: even a Buddhist monk during one visit for observation.

Bibliography

blessingsonthenet.com. Dravida Temple Architecture. 2018. 2 March 2018
　　　<http://www.mahavidya.ca/2015/06/26/the-Dravida-style-of-hindu-temple/>.

Boundless Art History. The Nayak Dynasty. 2018. 12 March 2018
　　　<https://courses.lumenlearning.com/boundless-arthistory/chapter/the-nayak-dynasty/>.

Duraiswamy, Sivanandini. "Temples and Sacred Worship." Duraiswamy, Sivanandini.
　　　Remembering Hindu Traditions. Colombo: M.D. Gunasena, 1997. 1-20.

Dutta, Tanisha and Vinayak S. Adane. "Symbolism in Hindu Temple Architecture and Fractal
　　　Geometry - 'Thought Behind Form'." International Journal of Science and Research
　　　(IJSR) (2012): 489-497.

—. The arts: Religious principles in sculpting and painting. 2018. 3 March 2018
　　　<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hinduism/The-arts#ref303933>.

Kalugampitiya, N.M. 'Art and Architecture', ENG 204 Lecture, University of Peradeniya. 08
February 2018 Presented. Lecture

Kulendiren, Pon. Hinduism a Scientific Religion: & Some Temples in Sri Lanka. Bloomington:
　　　iUniverse, 2012.

Kumar, Nitin. The Hindu Temple - Where Man Becomes God. May 2003. 10 March 2018
　　　<https://www.exoticindiaart.com/article/hindutemple/>.

Pieris, Kamalika. The Vaduga Kings of Kandy. 28 January 2012. 12 March 2018
　　　<http://island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-
　　　details&code_title=44149>.

Rajendran, Nithya. Personal Interview. 05 March 2018.

Rodrigues, H. The Dravida Style of Hindu Temple. 26 June 2015. 3 March 2018
　　　<http://www.mahavidya.ca/2015/06/26/the-Dravida-style-of-hindu-temple/>.

Sharma, Maghan.Personal Interview. 23 February 2018.

Trivedi, Kirti. "Hindu temples: Models of a fractal universe." The Visual Computer (1989): 243-
　　　244.