

The Cult Of Tridev In Uthamar Temple At Tiruchirappalli: A Historical Analysis

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Abstract

The Uttamar Temple, located in Tamil Nadu's Trichy district, stands as a significant monument in the history of Hindu worship, particularly for its unique dedication to the Tridev-Lord Shiva, Lord Vishnu, and Lord Brahma. Unlike most temples in Tamil Nadu, where the worship of Shiva and Vishnu became predominant after the sixth century CE, the Uttamar Temple maintains the ancient tradition of revering the Tridev together. This temple, situated on the banks of the Kollidam River along the Trichy-Salem National Highway, is one of the few where the three deities are enshrined side by side. The Uttamar Temple holds a special place among the 108 Divya Desams, the sacred Vaishnava shrines revered by devotees. The temple's architecture and iconography underscore the theological unity of Saivism and Vaishnavism, highlighting that both traditions are integral aspects of the same religious framework. Despite the rarity of temples dedicated explicitly to Lord Brahma, the Uttamar Temple includes him as a central figure in its worship, alongside Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu. This inclusiveness reflects the temple's broader theological significance, particularly in recognizing Brahma as part of the Tridev, thus underscoring the temple's role in sustaining the worship of all three deities in a single sacred space.

Keywords: Saivism, Vaishnavism, Thirukarambanur, Tridev, Trinity.

Introduction

The prominence of Tamil Nadu as a significant cultural and spiritual hub is deeply rooted in its extensive network of temples, which have long been a defining characteristic of the region. The Devara saints, with their profound devotion, constructed temples that are not only architectural marvels but also evoke a deep sense of reverence for the divine. These sacred spaces, much like places that nourish the body, offer spiritual sustenance, providing devotees with an environment that fosters inner peace and devotion.

The Supreme Personality of Godhead, in divine compassion, is believed to descend into this world to alleviate human suffering and bring joy to the lives of countless individuals globally. His presence manifests in various forms across the world, bestowing blessings upon those who worship Him with unwavering devotion. Within the theological framework, the Supreme Personality of Godhead is conceptualized in five distinct manifestations, one of which is the Archa form. This particular form is enshrined as an idol within temples, where devotees regard the idol as the most fitting representation of the divine, and thus, the ideal focus for their worship.

Historically, temples in Tamil Nadu have transcended their primary role as places of worship to become pivotal centers for social services. These sacred spaces were integral to the community, housing not only shrines but also hospitals and libraries, and serving as cradles of artistic expression, including music, dance, literature, and architecture. The inscriptions found within these temples are invaluable historical records that shed light on the rich cultural heritage of Tamil Nadu. Furthermore, temple festivals have historically played a crucial role in fostering social cohesion, bringing together diverse communities in celebration and devotion.

The adage "temples are good" aptly reflects the multifaceted benefits these sacred institutions provide. They are a testament to our cultural identity and heritage, which we are duty-bound to preserve for future generations.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- To conduct a comprehensive analysis of the historical background underlying the veneration of the Tridev at Uthamar Kovil.
- To critically examine the architectural infrastructure and distinctive features of the temple complex as revealed through its stylistic elements.
- To undertake a systematic survey of the rituals and festivals observed at the temple, with a focus on their liturgical significance and cultural implications.

Methodology

In this study, a comprehensive methodology was employed, integrating descriptive, critical, and analytical approaches to achieve a nuanced understanding of the subject matter. The descriptive approach offers a detailed historical overview of

the temple, situating it within its broader cultural and temporal context. The critical approach is applied to scrutinize the Tridev temple, assessing its significance and the various interpretative frameworks that surround it. Finally, the analytical approach delves deeply into the art and architectural elements of the temple, providing a meticulous examination of its stylistic features and symbolic meanings.

Place of worship and its location

In Tamil Nadu, there exists an extensive array of temples, with one of the most distinguished among them being the Arulmigu Uttama Temple. This sacred site is situated in the Tiruchirappalli District, along the banks of the Kollidam River, strategically positioned on the route connecting Trichy and Salem. The Uthamar Kovil is renowned for its dedication to the Tridev worship, embodying a deep spiritual significance for Vaishnavites as one of the 108 Divya Desams.

To the east of the temple lies Kadambathirtham, while the south is bordered by AyyanVayal and the Kollidam River, sources from which water is drawn. A well is also located to the south of the temple, and it is believed that PrahladaTirtha and Padmatirtha existed to the north, with Brahma Tirtha to the south. The temple itself is encircled by a small pond and is perched on a hillock, further elevating its sanctity.

The revered Azhvar saints, particularly ThirumangaiAzhvar, have composed hymns in praise of Lord Uthamar (Purushottaman), the presiding deity of the temple. ThirumangaiAzhvar's verses emphasize the temple's holiness and the Lord's benevolence, underscoring the profound spiritual importance of this sacred site.

Multifaceted Nomenclature of Uthamar Kovil

Uthamar Kovil, a temple of profound spiritual and religious significance, is recognized by various appellations that reflect its rich cultural heritage and religious importance:

1. **Thirukkarambanoor:** This is the temple's traditional name, rooted in its geographical and historical context.
2. **Purushottaman Perumal Temple:** This designation is derived from the temple's presiding deity, Lord Purushottaman, also known as Uthamar, underscoring the site's importance in Vaishnavite worship.
3. **Bhikshandar Kovil:** This name is associated with the veneration of Lord Shiva in the same temple complex, indicating the temple's significance within Shaivite tradition.
4. **Kadambanur Divya Desam:** As one of the 108 Divya Desams, a term used to denote the most sacred abodes of Lord Vishnu, this name emphasizes the temple's esteemed position within the Vaishnavite canon.

These varied names encapsulate the temple's multifaceted identity, highlighting its integral role in both Vaishnavism and Shaivism, and offering a testament to its enduring religious and cultural importance.

The Concept of Tridev in Hindu Cosmology

The concept of *Tridev*, or the Trinity, holds a central place in Hindu cosmology, encapsulating the three primary deities responsible for the universal processes of creation, preservation, and destruction. This trinity consists of:

➤ **Brahma: The Creator**

Brahma is revered as the architect of the universe, credited with the genesis of all living beings. He is traditionally depicted with four faces, each representing one of the four Vedas, and is often portrayed seated upon a lotus, a symbol of purity and divine knowledge.

➤ **Vishnu: The Preserver**

Vishnu's role is to maintain and sustain cosmic order, or dharma. His preservation of the universe is exemplified through his ten incarnations, known as the Dashavatara, which include prominent figures such as Rama and Krishna. These incarnations are believed to manifest at critical junctures to restore balance and righteousness in the world.

➤ **Shiva: The Destroyer**

Shiva is the deity associated with the destruction necessary for renewal. His function is not merely annihilation but the dissolution of the universe's illusions and ignorance, thus paving the way for regeneration. Shiva is often depicted in deep meditation, symbolizing the contemplative destruction of the ego and the material world.

Together, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva represent the cyclical nature of the universe in Hindu thought—creation, preservation, and destruction—ensuring the continuous renewal and sustenance of cosmic balance.

Kumbakonam Brahma Temple (Brahma Sthalam)

- **Location:** Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu
- **Deity:** The Kumbakonam Brahma Temple, while primarily dedicated to Lord Brahma, also houses shrines for Vishnu and Shiva. This confluence of the three principal deities, known as the Tridev, underscores the temple's significance within the broader spectrum of Hindu worship.

Brahmapureeswarar Temple

- **Location:** Tirupattur, near Trichy, Tamil Nadu
- **Deities:** Dedicated to Lord Shiva in the form of Brahmapureeswarar, this temple also venerates Lord Brahma and Lord Vishnu, thereby serving as another key site in Tamil Nadu where the Tridev are collectively honored.

Tirukkodikarai Vishnu Temple (Varadaraja Perumal Temple)

- **Location:** Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu
- **Deity:** Though predominantly a Vishnu temple, the Tirukkodikarai Vishnu Temple also pays homage to Lord Shiva and Lord Brahma, particularly during specific rituals and festivals, further illustrating the interconnectedness of the Tridev within Tamil Nadu's religious practices.

Historical Context of Uthamar Kovil

The Uthamar Kovil temple in Tamil Nadu is dedicated to the worship of Lord Brahma, Lord Vishnu, and Lord Shiva. Architecturally, the temple is designed so that the three shrines align as pilgrims proceed through, symbolizing the unity of creation, preservation, and destruction—the fundamental cosmic functions attributed to the Tridev.

Inscriptions from the Mahendravarman Pallava dynasty highlight the construction of a cave temple dedicated to the Trimurthis (the triad of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva) in Mandakapattu, near Villupuram. Additionally, several Koodaivara temples prominently feature depictions of Brahma and Tirumala Shiva, indicating the historical significance of these deities in the region.

Chola temples continued the tradition of integrating the images of Tirumala and Brahma into the walls of the sanctum sanctorum, symbolizing the triadic functions of the divine. The linga, representing the amalgamation of creation, preservation, and destruction, further embodies this triadic principle. Sculptures within these temples often depict Lord Shiva alongside Lord Tirumala, reinforcing the concept of divine unity and monotheism.

In these temples, ceremonies like the Pitsadana Murti, conducted by Lord Shiva, are of particular importance, symbolizing the bestowal of divine blessings upon devotees. The temple rituals, including the unique dances, the thudirpoli with the mridangam, and other traditional performances, are integral to the worship practices. These rituals reflect the aesthetic simplicity and spiritual depth inherent in Tamil Nadu's temple culture. Lord Shiva, revered as Pitsadner, is not worshipped for material wealth but for the spiritual absolution and divine qualities he imparts to his devotees.

Historical Significance of the Temple

The temple in question holds a profound place in historical and religious contexts. It is revered by devotees who refer to the rising deity Tirumala as Purushottama and Uttama, and the divine mother as Poornavalli. Additionally, Lord Shiva is venerated under the epithets Pitsadhanamurti and Soundaraparvati. Various historical accounts also suggest the existence of separate temples dedicated to Brahma and his consort Saraswati.

The Supreme Personality of Godhead is recognized as Uttamar, a designation that, along with Lord Tirumala, plays a crucial role in the preservation of life, ensuring its continuity without annihilation. Historical narratives describe an incident where Lord Shiva, having squeezed the fifth head of Brahma, attempts to remove it by holding it in his palm. Following this, Pitsadana, after undergoing a ritual bath, embarks on multiple pilgrimages to the temple of Uttamar. This act follows Shiva's pinching of Brahma's fifth head. Furthermore, the divine mother is depicted as beseeching Pitsadana to seek the vision of Purushottama Vatsumi, commonly identified as Tirumala, by placing a petition on his forehead.

On certain occasions, Lord Shiva's abode is entirely inundated with water. This deluge is attributed to a curse placed by Shiva upon Brahma, leading to the establishment of a distinct shrine known as Poornavalli. This shrine is notable for its uniqueness, as there are no other comparable temples in the universe.

In response to the devotees from Gurusthanam expressing dissatisfaction, Brahma addresses their grievances. Devotees, particularly on Thursdays, honor Lord Brahma in large numbers. After their wishes are fulfilled over eleven weeks, they reserve the twelfth week for relaxation and further petitioning. Astrological considerations also play a role in the worship practices: if the horoscope indicates Vishnudosh, remedies are sought on Wednesday; if Shiva and Guru Dosh are present, actions are taken on Thursday; and if Nagadosha and Sumangali Dosh are evident, Friday is observed. The benefits of worshipping Brahma on the auspicious Aati leaf become apparent, offering solace and joy to the adherents. For any additional doshas, the benefits of worship are similarly realized on Friday.

Infrastructure

Despite its proximity to the river, the temple is encircled by coconut palms and farms. Access is gained through the main entrance, where one is greeted by the Purushottama temple, the altar, the flagstaff, and the grand temple carriage. Flanking the entrance are two prominent domes, leading to the sanctum sanctorum—the innermost chamber that houses the deity. This deity is depicted standing on a cyan-colored column known as Aravin. The figure of Lakshmi is portrayed on the breast, while Brahma is represented on the belly. Purushottama, accompanied by Sridevi and Bhudevi, is presented in a magnificent form before the Moolavar, providing service to the worshippers.

The corridor leading to the sanctum sanctorum is adorned with an image of KadambaMaharshi, to whom the construction of Tirumala is traditionally attributed. To the left of the sanctuary is the Lakshmi shrine. Near Dwarapalagar, Anjaneya is depicted wearing a tribute kolam. Anjaneya, having arrived early this morning, has a small bell fastened to his tail, which curves over his head. He is known as JayaveeraAnjaneya and is venerated for fulfilling the desires of those in need. On the eastern side of the southern aisle is the shrine of Mother Poornavalli. The kolam associated with this shrine is adorned with a lotus blossom in its upper arms and exhibits the abhaya mudra in both hands. Additionally, the kolam bears the mother's blessing, represented through the Vardham mudra. The Perumal temple plane is referred to as the designated aircraft, featuring intricately carved tale motifs on its rectangular form. Sri Devi Bhoodevi and Tirumala are situated to the east, while Narasimha Murthy is positioned to the south. Worshippers revere Lakshmi Narasimha in the western region and Tirumala Vaikundavasa in the northern region.

The Tirumala shrine is positioned behind the Shiva temple to the west. The entrance to the innermost chamber of the Shiva temple is adorned with a structure known as the Mandapam. The deity manifests in the form of Linga and is referred to as Pitsadner. The sanctum's walls display idols of Pillaiyar, Bichchadanamurthy, Dakshinamurthy, Brahma, and Durga. The temple, constructed during the Chola era, features intricately sculpted miniature statues that commemorate the divine acts of Lord Shiva. Within the entrance area dedicated to Lord Shiva is a sacred shrine to Amman, located to the south. The standing kolam represents the goddess-shaped heroine, Soundaraparvati, who holds a lotus blossom in two of her four hands, with the remaining hands displaying the Abhaya and Varda mudra gestures. The front hall venerates the deities Mahalingam, Ganapathy, Brahma, and Dhandayuthapani. The entrance to the sanctum sanctorum showcases representations of the sun and the moon. The term Bichadanar is linked to an exquisite depiction from the southern Devakottam, exemplifying the artistic style of the Chola era.

Ritualistic Practices and Temple Layout

The temple engages in ritualistic ceremonies known as pujas, specifically dedicated to Lord Dakshinamurthy, who presides as the principal deity situated at the southern wall of the temple. Lord Shiva, revered as the progenitor and patron of music, dance, and knowledge, manifests in the form of Dakshinamurthy to impart teachings in yoga, music, and various other artistic disciplines.

In West Tiruchur, the Lakshmi Narayan and Rama Temples are situated, with nuns in residence. The Venugopal Shrine is located at the northwest corner, oriented towards the north. Devotees worship Lord Shiva in the form of the Linga at a separate temple in Tiruchur known as Dasarathalingam. Additionally, the temple houses statues of Ayyanar and Chandikeswarar, while Varadaraj Perumal, Nammazhvar, and Thirumangaiyazhvar are situated in proximity.

In the southern direction, distinct sanctuaries are dedicated to Brahma and Sarasvati. The image of Brahma depicts him reclining, adorned with a garland and a kundika, while maintaining a yogic pose with two of his upper arms. This unique temple, exclusively devoted to Lord Brahma, attracts a considerable number of devotees every Thursday. These gatherings are centered around the fulfillment of personal desires, with attendees openly expressing their wishes.

Adjacent to Brahma's sanctuary is the Kalaimakal shrine. Here, Kalaima is depicted in the sukasanakolam posture, holding a garland and a leaf while displaying the Abhaya and Vardha mudras. On Thursdays, numerous individuals participate in prayer rituals aimed at enhancing the quality of education. JnanaSaraswati is an alternative name for this deity, reflecting her association with wisdom and learning.

Conclusion

The Uthamar Temple, with its unwavering dedication to the divine triad of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, epitomizes the profound interconnectedness and unity among the Hindu deities. This sacred site stands as a testament to the intricate theological and symbolic interrelations within Hinduism, reflecting the seamless integration of these principal gods into a cohesive spiritual framework.

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