

Thiruvarankulam: A Cultural Study Based on Inscriptions

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Abstract

This paper examines the cultural history of Thiruvarankulam through the inscriptions engraved on the walls of the Haratheerthesvara temple. As durable and reliable historical sources, inscriptions provide valuable evidence for reconstructing the social, religious, political, and economic life of a region. The records of this temple, belonging to the Later Cholas, Pandyas, Vijayanagara rulers, and local chieftains, reveal the continuous importance of the temple as a centre of worship, administration, social negotiation, and communal life. They document the construction of shrines, mandapas, gopura, and prakara walls; the institution of Santhi pujas; and donations of land, lamps, ornaments, gardens, wells, and festival endowments. The inscriptions also reflect the participation of Brahmins, merchants, warriors, artisans, shepherds, and Nagarathars in temple affairs. In addition, they preserve evidence of taxation, medical service, village protection, and dispute settlement. The study shows that Thiruvarankulam was not merely a sacred space, but also a vibrant social institution where devotion, authority, economy, and everyday life intersected. Thus, the inscriptional evidence of this temple helps recover nearly seven centuries of the cultural history of Thiruvarankulam and its surrounding region.

Keywords Thiruvarankulam, inscriptions, temple culture, Pudukkottai, epigraphy, South Indian history

Introduction

Inscriptions are among the most reliable sources for reconstructing the history of a place or region. Unlike many other historical materials, they preserve contemporary records of social practices, religious endowments, political authority, and economic transactions with a high degree of authenticity. In Pudukkottai district, many historic temples contain inscriptions engraved on their walls, offering valuable evidence for the study of local history. Among them, Thiruvarankulam occupies a significant place because of the architectural importance of the Haratheerthesvara temple and the richness of its inscriptional corpus. This paper examines the cultural history of Thiruvarankulam through these inscriptions, with particular attention to the social, religious, political, and economic life reflected in them. The records show that the temple served not only as a centre of worship but also as an institution that shaped administration, dispute settlement, charity, public service, and communal relations.

A Brief Note on the Temple

The temple of Haratheerthesvara and Sri Brahadamba is held in high veneration by devotees from both nearby and distant places. The garbhagriha of Haratheerthesvara may be assigned to the beginning of the Later Chola period.¹ The temple consists of a central shrine, an ardhmantapa, and a mahamantapa, all of which appear to belong to the same broad phase. According to the Sthalapurana, the temple was built by Karikala Chola. This king, however, cannot be identified with the Karikala of the Sangam age. Karikala was also one of the titles assumed by Rajaraja II (1146–1163 CE) and Kulothunga III (1178–1218 CE). It may therefore be assumed that the temple was built by either Rajaraja II or Kulothunga III.

¹ K.R.Venkatarama Ayyar, A Manual of the Pudukkottai State, Brahadambal state Press, Pudukkottai, 1944, P.No.1001.

Details of The Inscriptions

A total of 48 inscriptions have been recorded in this temple. They include records of the Later Cholas, Later Pandyas, Vijayanagara rulers, and the chieftain families of the Pallavarayars and Kangeyaraya lineage. Their distribution is as follows:²

1. Kulothunga Chola III – 2 Nos.
2. Maravarma Sundarapandya I – 1 No.
3. Sadaiyan Sundaram – 1 No.
4. Veera Pandya – 5 Nos.
5. Maravarma Sundara Pandya II – 1 No.
6. Rajarajan Sundara Pandya – 2 Nos.
7. Maravarma Kulasekaran – 4 Nos.
8. Maravarma Veera Pandya – 6 Nos.
9. Srivallabha – 1 No.
10. Mallikarchunarayar – 2 Nos.
11. Krishna Devarayar – 2 Nos.
12. Achutha Devarayar – 3 Nos.
13. Vijayanagara – No king name – 2 Nos.
14. Chieftains and individual records – 16 Nos.

Through these forty-eight records so far documented, the history of the village, the temple, and the surrounding region can be studied in considerable detail.

5 The Early Inscriptions of the Temple

The earliest inscription of the temple belongs to the thirty-ninth regnal year of Kulothunga Chola III. It records that the shrine of Brahadambal was built by a lady named Kannudaiya Perumal alias Pirati Alwar, who was connected with the Nishatharaja family of Thirukkodunkundram. She was the daughter of Nishatharaja Keralandar of Ponnamaravathi.³ This record reveals the existence of two branches of the Nishatharayar chieftain family: one ruling the Ponnamaravathi region and the other ruling Thirukkodungundram, or the Piranmalai area. It further suggests matrimonial relations between these two branches. This is an important record because it may be regarded as the foundation inscription of the Brahadambal shrine. Before its construction, only the Siva temple seems to have existed; a separate Amman shrine was added later. The inscription also indicates that Ponnamaravathi was included in Puramalai Nadu alias Rajendra Chola Valanadu, a subdivision that in turn formed part of Rajaraja Pandi Nadu. The next inscription of Kulothunga Chola, engraved in his fortieth regnal year (1219 CE),⁴ refers to the deity as Thiruvarankulam Udaiya Nayanar. It records a collective decision taken by the nattar body of Kurappalthalvu Devi Mangalam in order to settle a prolonged dispute between two groups of people. One group belonged to the temple village, while the other was drawn from neighbouring devadhana villages. During the conflict, cattle had been seized and considerable loss had been caused. The nattars intervened and brought about an amicable settlement. The record further states that anyone disobeying the agreement would forfeit two ma of land to the temple. It also shows that several social groups lived in the village, including Sivabrahmanas, Chettis,

² Chronological List of Inscription of the Pudukkottai State, Arranged According to Dynasties, the commissioner of Museum, Government Museum Chennai, 2002.

³ Inscription of Pudukkottai State No. 174

⁴ Inscription of Pudukkottai State No. 176

Vellalas, Kaikkolas, Devaradiyars, Kammalars, and shepherds. The land taxes payable by these communities to the temple were also fixed by the nattars.

Pandya Inscriptions

Chola rule came to an end around 1279 CE with the close of the reign of Rajendra Chola III. Taking advantage of the changing political situation, Maravarman Sundara Pandya I (1216–1238 CE) emerged as the ruler of the Pandya country. He attacked the Cholas, captured their territories, and brought the Chola country under Pandya control for a considerable period. A record of his fifteenth regnal year is engraved on the walls of the Brahadamba shrine. This damaged inscription only preserves the name of the goddess, Thirukkomakotta Mudaiya Thampiratti. It also contains the word Malaimandalam, which refers to the Kerala region, suggesting that some donation may have been made by a donor from that area.⁵

Another Pandya inscription found here belongs to the twelfth regnal year of Sadaiya Varman Sundara Pandya. His coronation appears to have taken place around 1250 CE; therefore this record may be dated to about 1262 CE. Although the inscription is heavily damaged, it mentions the Nambis of the temple and Jeyasinga Kula Kala Valanadu.⁶

Establishment of New Santhi Pujas

In Siva temples, six daily pujas are usually conducted, and these are also known as Santhis. During the seventh regnal year of Veera Pandya Deva, one Santhi puja was established by Mudimannama Nallur alias Perunkarraikudi in the name of Mudimannaman Santhi. This village is described as a settlement of warriors known as Padai Parru. Lands were endowed to the Thiruvarankulam temple for meeting the expenses of this Santhi puja.⁷ Again, during the fifteenth regnal year of Veera Pandya, the nattavar body of Vallanadu in Rajaraja Valanadu decided to settle certain dues payable to the Sivabrahmanas of the temple. This appears to have been a continuation of an arrangement that had originated in the period of Sundara Pandya and was later sustained by the nattars.⁸ Another record of Veera Pandya, engraved in his seventeenth regnal year, is too damaged to determine its full purpose.

Donation Arrangements

A particularly interesting inscription belongs to the fourth regnal year of Veera Pandya.⁹ It records an arrangement for offering puttu amuthu to the goddess Thampirattiyar through the purchase of land at the cost of 1500 kasu. The tax due from this land was assigned for the expenses of the offering. For this ritual, which was to be performed every Sunday, the donor also provided three kuruni of paddy, one nali of dhal, one coconut, one uri of ghee, and twenty betel leaves. The same record also refers to donations made for lighting perpetual lamps in the temple on various occasions. The blacksmiths were assessed three kasu per furnace, and six kasu collected from two furnaces was used to procure an ulakku of ghee for lighting the lamps. The Vallanattu Araiyaars, who served as local chieftains, collected five achchu annually from the blacksmiths. Each achchu was equal to 1200 kasu. Thus, 6000 kasu was raised through this levy, and an additional 300 kasu was collected from the Panguni festival tax. The total sum of 6300 kasu yielded an interest of 17½ kasu daily, from which seventy-five lamps were maintained. Sheep were also donated for lighting twenty-three lamps and torches. The inscription thus provides detailed information about the arrangements for temple illumination. Another individual, Valithunai Perumal alias Viladarayar, donated lamps for the welfare of a Samanthan, or army chief. These lamps and torches were lighted at the temple gates, and oil for their regular use was supplied by the Nagaraththar and the other inhabitants of the village.¹⁰ The prakara wall of the temple was constructed in the name of Kangeyarayar during the ninth regnal year of Maravarman Sundara Pandya. Kangeyarayar appears to have been a subordinate chieftain ruling this

⁵ Inscription of Pudukkottai State No. 294

⁶ Inscription of Pudukkottai State No. 352

⁷ Inscription of Pudukkottai State No. 364

⁸ Inscription of Pudukkottai State No. 373

⁹ Inscription of Pudukkottai State No. 427

¹⁰ Inscription of Pudukkottai State No. 437

region during the period of Sundara Pandya.¹¹ A ruler named Rajarajan Sundara Pandya governed this area for some years. He was the legitimate son of Maravarman Kulasekaran (1268–1311 CE), but was denied the throne and sought the support of the Khalji army. As a consequence, the invasion of Malikafur took place in 1311 CE. This event is referred to in the Kolappal record as “Sundara Pandyan Thurukkarodu Vanthapothu.” In the fourteenth regnal year of Sundara Pandya, the Nagaraththar of Arulmoli Deva Puram donated tax-free land for the maintenance of perpetual lamps in this temple. The four boundaries of the donated land are described in detail.¹² The term “Valithirantha Panam,” referring to a type of coin, also appears in this inscription. The following inscription appears to continue this record and refers to the supply of ghee for the lamp already endowed by the Nagaraththar of Arulmoli Deva Puram.¹³ During the reign of Kulasekara Pandya, an officer named Bhuvaneka Vira Thondaiman donated a gold diadem to the temple.¹⁴ “Bhuvaneka Vira” was an epithet of the Pandya kings, while “Thondaiman” was a clan name associated with migrants from the Pallava region who served as subordinates under the Pandyas.

At one stage, Thiruvarankulam was associated with a new hamlet named Perunkaraikudi, and hence the place is referred to in an inscription as Perunkaraikudi alias Thiruvarankulam. The urars of this village purchased and mortgaged certain lands from members of the Marava community of Perunkudi, and agreed to pay the taxes from those lands to the temple of Thiruvarankulam.¹⁵ An inscription of the eleventh regnal year of Maravarman Kulasekara Pandya, dated to about 1279 CE, mentions a local administrator named Kalikadintha Pandya Deva, who appears to have been in charge of the Thiruvarankulam region. For his merit, the sthanikas, or temple administrators, appointed flower-garden servants and assigned them wages in cash and food.¹⁶ A medical officer, referred to as Vaidhya Acharya, was appointed at the Thiruvarankulam temple during the twenty-fourth regnal year of Kulasekara Pandya.¹⁷ His name is recorded as Muthaliyar Nimbavana Vaithyachariyar. Certain lands were assigned to him as vaidhyavrihi for his livelihood. The order was endorsed by the temple administrators, including the Srikariyam, the Srimahesvara, and the temple accountant. Another inscription records a social conflict involving groups identified as Poovarasakuli Araiya Makkal, their marumakkal, and others. The dispute resulted in violent attacks and serious injuries, creating prolonged unrest in the locality. Community leaders intervened, reached an agreement, and restored peace, and the terms of this settlement were engraved on the walls of the temple.¹⁸ Certain lands were also donated as Thirunamaththukkani during the ninth regnal year of Veerapandya. The Vallanattu Nattar collectively contributed 11,000 kasu and donated a silver kavasam to the deity of the temple.¹⁹ They also made arrangements for celebrating the festival of the Thiruvathirai asterism in the month of Markali (December–January). The residential area of warriors was known as Padaiparru or Parikkiragam. The warriors living near the temple had long maintained enmity between two factions, leading to serious social tension. At the request of the temple administrators, these groups reached an accord and had it inscribed on the temple walls. According to the record, they agreed to end the hostility that had continued from the time of their fathers and to restore peace in their residential quarter. Another inscription also deals with a similar agreement between two groups.²⁰

Donation of Brahmins

Usually, members of the Brahmin community depended upon the temple for their livelihood, especially through priestly service, and received various donations in the form of cash or land. Only rarely do inscriptions show them

¹¹ Inscription of Pudukkottai State No. 468

¹² Inscription of Pudukkottai State No. 488

¹³ Inscription of Pudukkottai State No. 547

¹⁴ Inscription of Pudukkottai State No. 554

¹⁵ Inscription of Pudukkottai State No. 567

¹⁶ Inscription of Pudukkottai State No. 575

¹⁷ Inscription of Pudukkottai State No. 595

¹⁸ Inscription of Pudukkottai State No. 605

¹⁹ Inscription of Pudukkottai State No. 607

²⁰ Inscription of Pudukkottai State No. 618, 619, 643

making donations to the temple in which they served. During the reign of Srivallabha Pandya, one Brahmin individual named Ulaga Pillai made a donation for the sacred bath of the Vinayaka idol in this temple.²¹

Interest of Vijayanagara Kings on This Temple

After Kumara Kampanna ended the anarchic rule of the Madurai Sultanate, the whole of the Pandya country came under Vijayanagara rule around 1378. The Vijayanagara rulers established a system of administration closely tied to religious institutions and generously supported temple development. In this wider context, the Thiruvankulam temple also benefited from their patronage. In 1514 CE, during the period of Mallikarjuna Rayar, this area appears to have been administered by chieftain groups such as the Thondaimans. A Santhi puja named Alaiyil Anjatham Santhi was established, and lands in Palaiyur Nadu were endowed for its maintenance.²² During the rule of Mallikarjuna Rayar's son, Swami Nayakkar served as the administrator of this region. At that time, the villages of Palaikudi, Kalankudi, and Kilinallur arranged for their protection by appointing Padikaval warriors. These warriors acquired lands for their livelihood through purchase and mortgage, but as they were unable to pay the taxes due on them, the lands were finally sold to the temple and the tax arrears were settled. The same issue is recorded in another inscription of the Krishnadevaraya period. The village lands were later resold for the expenses of the temple car festival and the regular performance of pujas. During the reign of Achutharayar, certain lands were also donated to the temple. At Thiruvankulam, separate quarters were allotted to warriors and merchants. The warriors' quarter was called Padaiveedu, while the merchants' quarter was known as Peruntheru. These two groups jointly donated lands as Madapuram for the maintenance of the temple mutt.²³

In 1539 CE, the Pudukkottai region was under the control of the Pallavarayar family. One Sivanthelunthan Thirumalai Pallavarayan established a Santhi puja in his own name and endowed lands for its maintenance. The Nagaraththars played a crucial role in religious activities throughout Tamil Nadu, particularly in the Pudukkottai region, which may be regarded as one of their important homelands. In this temple, the Nagaraththars of the nine village groups installed a swing for the Thiruvathirai festival in 1542 CE. Numerous individual philanthropists also donated generously for the upkeep of the temple.

One Chera Pandiyan alias Sankaran Devan of Kulathur constructed a mandapa for the deity Alagiya Kuththan. Ulakan Thiyakappillai of Muvallur Sundara Pandya Puram donated a kalasam for special ablution. Srirama Patta Pillai of Palaiyur in Ariviyur alias Kulasekara Pattinam donated a silver kavasam to the god. Another individual dug a well in the temple. One person dedicated himself as a full-time servant to the temple. A flower garden was raised by a noble donor named Arasa Kanta Raman. The southern compound wall was built by the Nagaraththars belonging to the nine village groups. A water tank was excavated by Pallikondan Alagiya Perumal, and the temple gopura was constructed in the name of Kangeyarayar by Araiyan Periyar Vallavan. The front mandapa was built through the contributions of various individuals. Some merchants donated one pillar each for the construction of the mandapa, and their names are engraved on those pillars.²⁴

Conclusion

A collective study of the inscriptions of the Thiruvankulam temple reveals the many dimensions of the cultural life of the village and its surrounding region. The temple functioned not merely as a sacred centre of worship, but also as an institution closely connected with administration, economic exchange, social regulation, public charity, and communal organization. The inscriptions record the establishment of Santhi pujas, donations of land, lamps, ornaments, and festival endowments, as well as the construction of shrines, mandapas, gopura, and compound walls. They also preserve evidence of taxation, medical service, village protection, and the settlement of social conflicts. Brahmins, merchants, warriors, Vellalas, artisans, shepherds, and Nagaraththars all appear in these records as active participants in temple life. Thus, the inscriptions make it possible to reconstruct nearly seven

²¹ Inscription of Pudukkottai State No. 728

²² Inscription of Pudukkottai State No. 729

²³ Inscription of Pudukkottai State No. 733, 737, 745, 746

²⁴ Inscription of Pudukkottai State No. 752, 1058, 1059, 1060

centuries of the cultural history of Thiruvankulam and demonstrate the central role of the temple in shaping the religious, social, and economic life of the community.

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