

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THIRUVATTAR AATHIKESAVA PERUMAL TEMPLE OF VENADU

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Temples are the primary outward manifestation of the Hindu Religion. A Hindu temple is a structure designed to bring human beings and gods together, using symbolism to express the ideas and beliefs of Hinduism. Venadu, the land of the Tamils especially the Palmyra culture people, is noted for its prestigious Perumal temples such as Aathikesava Perumal Temple at Thiruvattar, Thanumalaya Perumal Temple at Suchindram and Padmanabha Perumal Temple at Thiruvananthapuram. Most of the Vaishnavite Temples in Venadu were founded centuries ago by the Perumal Family rulers of Venadu who were the sub-sect of Nadar alias Naadaalwar community.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article is prepared using primary and secondary sources, with additional information provided by different persons in personal interviews. Among the published primary sources, The Travancore Archaeological Series deserves special mention. Several secondary sources are also consulted in the study.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To glean the original past of Thiruvattar
2. To learn the significance of art and architecture
3. To reveal the inscriptional identities connected with the temple
4. To oversee the ruler's natural identity towards the Vaishnavite religion

Venadu alias Vezhl Nadu, the land of the Tamils

Venadu, the word derived from the Tamil word *Vezhl Nadu*, is the land of the Tamils since the social formation. *Kalithogai* informed the Tamil words *Vezhl Neer* which means 'Palmyra Juice' or *Panai Neer* or *Akkani*. So, the Tamil words *Vezhl Nadu* means the land of Palmyra. The Palmyra is closely associated with a group of people named Nadars who followed Tamil Palmyra culture and served as the rulers of Venadu, Chera, Chola, Pandya Kingdoms, Vijayanagara Kingdom, etc. The Tamil *Sangam* Age Poet Ammoovanar stated in Song No. 183 of *Ayinkurunooru* that 'Nadan' as the ruler of *Kurinji* or Mountainous region.¹ The Census Report-1901 of the Government of Travancore clearly informed that 'Illam' and 'Thiruppaappoor' are the subject of 'Chaanar' alias 'Nadar' alias Nadalwars.² Professor Su. Thamarai Pandian, Head of Palm Leaf Documents, International Institute of Tamil Studies popularly known as World Tamil Research Centre at Tharamani in Chennai of the Government of Tamil Nadu, stated that the aforesaid Institute have Palm Leaf Documents which contain the information of Nadars are the descendants of the Tamil Trio Rulers of the Chera, Chola and Pandya, and they are the *Valankai Saantor* (Right Hand *Saantor*).³ So, *Venadu* alias *Vezhl Nadu*, is the land of the Tamil Palmyra culture people of Nadars and Ezhavas.

LOCATION AND HISTORY OF THIRUVATTAR

Thiruvattar, a charming village and sacred place to the Vaishnavas, is situated in the Thiruvattar Taluk of the present Kanyakumari District of Tamil Nādu. An observation of the geographical position of Thiruvattar will enable us to understand how nature has influenced

and shaped the history of this village. Thiruvattar lies at latitude of 8°15' north and longitude of 77°15' and last about 8 kms north of Kalkuzham later known as Padmanabhapuram, the old capital of Venadu.

'Vaattaaru' was a *Uoor* of Venadu region during Tamil *Sangam* Age. The place 'Vaattaaru' was called based on the River Parazhiyaru which flows through this region with a deep bent originally called as 'Vattaaru' or 'Circular River'. Maangudi Kizhaar also known as Maangudi Maruthanaar, one among the Tamil *Sangam* Age poet, informed that a Vezhir Chieftain named Vaattaarttu Ezhini Aathan was the ruler of Vaattaaru through his song in *Puranaanooru*.⁴ Maangudi Kizhaar also informed the abundance of water in 'Vaattaaru' and for that cause he praised it as *Valaneervaattaaru*.⁵ Maangudi Kizhaar and Vaattaarttu Ezhini Aathan were contemporaries and the later was a panegyrist. Maangudi Kizhaar also known as Maangudi Maruthanaar, also the author of *Maduraik Kaanchi*, tells that the Pandyas ruled the place Kanyakumari⁶ and the Pandiyan King Nedumchezhiyan-II defeated Aay King Tithiyan-II (A.D. 75-125) and Chieftain of 'Vaattaaru' named Ezhini Aathan in the battle of Thalayaalamgaanam.⁷ According to the historians the date of Nedumchezhiyan-II was fixed as A.D. 90-128.

Maduraik Kaanchi and *Malaipadukadam* were contemporary and related works based on the information of Nannan, the hero of *Malaipadukadam* who was also referred in *Maduraik Kaanchi*.⁸ Nakkirar in *Nedunalvaadai* and Maangudi Maruthanaar in *Maduraik Kaanchi* also informed the Pandyan King Nedunchezhiyan-II of Thalayaalamgaanam. Therefore, Ezhini Aathan of Thiruvattaaru, Aay King Tithiyan-II, Nedunchezhiyan-II of Thalayaalamgaanam and the Tamil *Sangam* Age works named *Ahanaanooru*, *Nedunalvaadai*, *Maduraik Kaanchi* and *Malaipadukadam* were belonged to more or less the first century A.D. and first part of second century A.D. All these shows that 'Vaattaaru' was a place from the aforesaid period.

The Inscription of Venadu King Sri Veera Uthaiyamaaththaanda Vanmar Thiruvadi dated KE 354 (A. D. 1179) mentioned the place Thiruvattar and his stay at a Flower Garden to the east of Thiruvattar.⁹ So, 'Vaattaaru' was called as Thiruvattaar during the time of the aforesaid king. The Tamil word 'Thiru' denoted the honorific prefix.

The Venadu King Veera Ravi Ravivarman belonged to Thiruppaappoor Chaanaar alias Nadar family identified the place of 'Vaattaaru' as modern Thiruvattaar¹⁰ through his Tamil Inscription engraved on the Aathikesava Perumal Temple at Thiruvattaar dated Kollam year 779 (A.D. 1604). The Superintendent of the Department of Archaeology of Travancore State in A.D. 1908 named T.A. Gopinatha Rao, also identified 'Vaattaaru' as modern Thiruvattaar¹¹ of Venadu.

'Vaattaaru' later known as Thiruvattaar is a mountainous region of Venadu. Ammoovanar, the Tamil *Sangam* Age poet, who informed that *Naadan* as leader or head of *Kurinji* land¹² which represents mountainous region. The *Naadan* also known as Nadar community people occupied majority in population of Thiruvattaar till date. *Maduraik Kaanchi* of Maankudi Maruthanaar also mentioned the Tamil term *Avai Eruntha Perum Pothiyil*¹³ which means the Council *Avai* was convened in the place of *Pothiyil* of the village or *Uoor*. This shows that the *Naadan* also known as Nadar community people served as Chieftains of Thiruvattaar *Uoor*.

Perumal Desam, Perumal Rulers and Perumal Temples

The name of the Aathikesava Perumal Temple raised the information of who were the Perumals. The Manalthittai Tamil Inscription No. 24 dated KE 722 (A.D. 1547) mentioned a Desam named 'Perumal Desam' which comprises the places from Mankalam to Manakkutti and to the west of Thoivalai and east of Pantrivaykkal in Nanchilnadu.¹⁴ This inscription informed an account for Desam known as 'Desakanakku'.¹⁵ So, this area was the original land of the Perumals.

Perumals were one of the ruling Royal Family of Venadu and Chera Kingdom from the aforesaid region who belonged to Nadar community. The Venadu King Cheraman Perumal Kulasekhara Aalwaar (A.D. 805-820) was the founder of Eraniel Palace and one of whose descendants and Member of King Cheraman Perumal Family Trust named Thiru John Rose Nadar was the present owner of Eraniel Palace and Uthayagiri Fort.¹⁶ Moreover, Mudi Choodum Perumal is the original name of Muthukutty Swamikal, popularly known as Vaikunda Swamikal, who belonged to Perumal Family Nadar of Perumal Desam. The present ISRO Chief Dr. V. Narayanan also belonged to Perumal Family Nadar of Perumal Desam.

The Vaishnavite Perumal Family rulers of Nadar alias Naadaalwar community established several Vaishnavite temples in Venadu including the prestigious Perumal temples such as Aathikesava Perumal Temple at Thiruvattar, Thanumalaya Perumal Temple at Suchindram and Padmanabha Perumal Temple at Thiruvananthapuram.

Tamil was the official Language of Venadu Rulers

All the Inscriptions of Venadu rulers are written in Tamil Language and so Tamil was the official Language of Venadu rulers and they are Tamilians.

Perumal Temples of Venadu

Origin of the Aathikesava Perumal Temple, Thiruvattar

The Perumal rulers of Venadu established some reputed temples such as Aathikesava Perumal Temple at Thiruvattar, Thaanaalaya Perumal Temple at Suchindram, Parpanaabha Perumal Temple at Thiruvananthapuram, etc. Among them Aathikesava Perumal Temple at Thiruvattar is considered the first of its kind. The origin and development of Aathikesava Perumal Temple is connected with various kings of Venadu and of individuals of several centuries.

The original historical evidences to identify the person or persons who constructed this temple was buried and made focus on false legends and traditions. Almost all ancient temples of South India possess inscriptions but they are silent on the origin of temples. This is the case with Thiruvattar Temple also. However, there are some stray evidences regarding the origin of this temple too. Aathikesava Perumal Temple at Thiruvattar was originally a temple constructed by the Tamils in the Tamil Style of architecture. The local people who lived around the temple believed that this temple was built by their ancestors of the ruling royal family of Perumal Nadar's. There is no authentic record to prove the exact period in which this temple originated. But the history of this temple dates back to the latter half of 8th Century A.D. and this is evident from a reference made by the Vaishnava Saint Nammaalwaar in his 'Thiruvaaymozhi'.

Cheramaan Perumal Kulasekhara Aalwaar was the Venadu ruler from A.D. 805 to 820 who lived at a palace in Kulasekharam and subsequently he constructed another palace at Eraniel and settled there. He was a staunch vaishnavite. The life history of Paramapaathan, one of the disciples of Sankaracharya, contains the information about the king. So, most probably the Venadu King Cheramaan Perumal Kulasekhara Aalwaar was the founder of Aathi Keshava Perumal Temple at Thiruvattar. The descendants of the Venadu King Cheramaan Perumal Kulasekhara Aalwaar and Member of 'King Cheramaan Perumal Family Trust' named Thiru John Rose Nadar was also confirmed the same.¹⁷

The antiquity of the temple gets confirmation epigraphically with the help of a fragmentary inscription of Rajendra Chola, already noticed, who makes a mention of the presiding deity. Thus, the earliest inscription and historical information do not go beyond the first half of 11th century A.D. Contrary to this several historians and others tried their level best to give Sanskrit colour regarding the origin and architecture of the temple. The Kadigaipattinam Tamil Inscription No. 20 dated KE 773 (A.D. 1598) of Venadu King Veera Ravivarmaraana Kulasekhara Perumal informed the name of two temples such as Sri Parpanaabha Perumal and Aathikesava Perumal.¹⁸

Early Structure of the Temple

Vaishnava Saint Nammaalwaar clearly mentioned the early structure of Aathikesava Perumal Temple at Thiruvattar during his time of 8th Century A. D. as *Malaimadaththu Aravanai Mel* through his reputed Tamil work named *Thiruvaaymozhi*.¹⁹ Here the Tamil words *Malai* means ‘mountain’, *Maadam* means ‘a raised structure or a chamber borne on pillars to ensure a certain degree of privacy’, *Aravanai* means ‘serpent’ and *Mel* means ‘on the top’ i. e. ‘top of the serpent’. Hence the Tamil words *Malaimadaththu Aravanai Mel* means ‘the god reclined on a serpent in a building situated on a mountain’. This was also explained as ‘Thiruvattar where big houses situated on the mountains and the god is reclining on the serpent bed’ as stated by Purushottama Naidu²⁰ and Annankaracariyar,²¹ the commentators of *Thiruvaymozhi*.

One of the Inscription of Venadu King Sri Veera Uthayamaaththaanda Vanmar Thiruvadi belonged to the latter half of the 12th Century A.D. mentions that he repaired ‘Thiruvathilmadam’ or sanctum and ‘Thiruchchurumandapam’ or surrounding mandapam. Thus, the early structure of this temple during 8th Century A.D. was ‘Maadam’ and 12th Century A.D was ‘Maadam’ and ‘Churumandapam’.

Land Donation to the Temple

The Venadu King Shri Veera Uthayamaathanda Vanmar Thiruvadi gave a land as a gift to Aathikesava Perumal Temple in A.D. 1223 (K.E. 398) for God of Aathikesava Perumal Temple at Thiruvattarau.²² This inscription tells the practice of offering ‘rice’ to the God of Aathikesava Perumal Temple by the Venadu rulers. The income from the land were used to purchase ‘rice’, for offerings.

Mutilations of the Inscriptions of Aathikesava Perumal Temple

The Aathikesava Perumal Temple was renovated during the time of Venadu King Shri Verali Ravivarmar alias Kulasekhara Perumal dated 779 M.E. (1604 A.D.) leads to mutilation and fragmentation of old inscriptions of the temple. Because of the renovation, the temple lost many of its old inscriptions and some became fragmented. For instance, the inscriptions of Rajendra Chola of 11th century A. D., and some of the inscriptions of Venadu ruler Sri Veera Uthayamaaththaanda Vanmar Thiruvadi of the latter half of the 12th century A.D., were mutilated badly during the renovation.

Venadu King Shri Veera Ravi Ravivanmaraana Kulasekharapperumal (A.D.1598-1623) and Renovation of Aathikesava Perumal Temple

Venadu King Shri Veera Ravi Ravivanmaraana Kulasekharapperumal was mainly responsible for the present structure of the temple. The available inscriptions provide some accounts of the renovation and the evolutionary growth of this temple. The Keralapuram Tamil Inscription dated KE. 782 (A.D. 1607) of the Venadu King Shri Veera Ravi Ravivanmaraana Kulasekharapperumal stated that he was the son of the ruling family of Shri Keezhapperoor Illam Thiruppaappoor Swaroopam Thiruvananthapuram Rohini Thirunal Umai Ammai alias Ammai Pandaram.²³ This shows that she was a Queen from Nadar Community. The two Tamil Inscriptions which engraved on Aathikesava Perumal Temple at Thiruvattaru in Kanyakumari District dated KE 778 (A.D. 1603) mentioned the name of then Venadu King as Shri Veerali Ravivarmaraaya Kulasekaraperumal belonged to the ruling family of Keezhapperoor Illam Thiruppaappoor Swaroopam.²⁴ Among the three inscriptions, the inscription dated A.D. 1603 at Aathikesava Perumal Temple and the inscription dated A.D. 1607 at Muththalakurichi tells that the Venadu King and his brothers were the sons of Umai Ammai alias ‘Ammal Pandaram’.

The Tamil Inscription engraved on the Central shrine of Aathikesava Perumal Temple at Thiruvattar dated A.D. 1604 (KE 779) mentioned the name of Venadu King as Keezhapperoor Illam Thiruppaappoor Swaroopam Shree Veerali Ravivarmaraaya Kulasekharaperumal.²⁵ The Tamil Inscription No. 41 dated KE 780 (A.D. 1605) at Uthayamaarthandam mentioned the name of then Venadu King as ‘Ravivanmaraana

Kulasekharapperumal'.²⁶ Another Tamil Inscription No. 42 dated KE 780 (A.D. 1605) at Uthayamaarthandam also confirmed the name of then Venadu King as 'Ravivanmaraana Kulasekharapperumal'.²⁷ The Tamil Inscription No. 43 (No. 34 of 1100) without date at Uthayamaarthandam tells the name of Venadu King as Ravivarmaraana Kulasekharapperumal Thampiraan.²⁸ The Tamil Inscription engraved at Shri Veerakeralapurathu Mahadevar Temple at Muththalakurichi dated KE 782 (A.D. 1607) mentioned the name of then Venadu King as Shri Veerali Ravivanmaraana Kulasekharapperumal.²⁹ Like that the Padmanabhapuram Tamil Inscription engraved on Neelakandaswami Temple at Padmanabhapuram dated K.E. 798 (A.D. 1623) of the same king also mentioned his name as Shri Ravivanmaraaya Chiravai Mooththa Thampiran.³⁰ The Department of Archaeology of Govt. of Kerala stated through its publication named 'Padmanabhapuram Palace' informed that the Kalkulam Palace was constructed in A.D. 1601³¹ during the time of the Venadu King Shri Veera Ravi Ravivanmaraana Kulasekharapperumal. The Census Report-1901 of the Government of Travancore clearly informed that 'Illam' and 'Thiruppaappoor' are the subject of 'Chaanaar' alias 'Nadar' alias Nadalwars.³² From this it is clear that then Venadu King belong to Nadar community and Nadars are the ruling class of that period.

T. A. Gopinatha Rao, editor of Travancore Archaeological Series, vol.-I, stated that "Mr. Sangunni Menon in his 'History of Travancore' stated that the history of Travancore about this period (early part of Seventeenth Century A.D.) is not clearly known but he adds a Veera Ravivarman was ruling and KE 779 (A.D. 1604) is said to be the last year of his reign"³³ T. A. Gopinatha Rao stated that the third inscription of Veera Ravivarman is dated KE 782 (A.D. 1607) and "Mr. Sangunni Menon seems to have been misled by some unreliable materials".³⁴ It is true to say that Mr. T. A. Gopinatha Rao also misled the history of Venadu by converting the names of rulers as 'Varma' from its original name of 'Vanmar', 'Panmar', 'Varmar', etc.

The Venadu King Shri Veera Ravi Ravivanmaraana Kulasekharapperumal had a married life and he had two wives named Devi Erayiamakkutty Ammai and Devi Ezhaiya Erayiamakkutty Ammai.³⁵ This inscription No. 42 informed the name of the younger brother of the aforesaid Venadu King as 'Aathichchavanmar'.³⁶

The Tamil Inscriptions of Venadu King Shri Veerali Ravivarman alias Kulasekhara Perumal engraved on the central shrine of the Aathikesava Perumal Temple at Thiruvattaru situated in Venadu (present Kanyakumari District) tells about the reconstruction work made by king and his family members to Aathi Kesava Perumal Temple.³⁷ The King Veerali Ravivarman alias Kulasekhara Perumal and his family members constructed four Thirumaligaippaththi, one Thirumadappalli, one Neerarai (water room), the flooring of the inner portions of the temple, the Single Stone Mandapa, building for lights and room for Balikkal.³⁸

Among them Prince Aadityavarman, the first younger brother of the Venadu King, constructed the floor of four sides of the inner Prakara made of stone where he sat in the 'Pandaram' area of the temple.³⁹ Deviyar Naachiyar Ammai, the consort of Prince Aathityavarman, constructed a 'mekkupaththi' in the 'Pandaram' Area of Prince Aathityavarman in the temple.⁴⁰ Prince Ramavarman, the second younger brother of the Venadu King and the younger brother of Aathityavarman, presented the idol of 'dvarapala' made in metal.⁴¹ Deviyar Kesava Perumal Ammai, the consort of Prince Ramavarman, constructed a 'mekkupaththi' in the 'Pandaram' area of Prince Ramavarman in the temple.⁴²

Deviyar Erayumakutty Ammai and Deviyar Ezhaya Erayumakutty Ammai, the consorts of Venadu King Shri Veerali Ravivarman, constructed another "mekkupaththi" in the 'Pandaram' area of Nambirattiyar.⁴³ The Second Tamil and Grantha Inscription dated KE.778 i.e., A.D. 1603 engraved on the north and west bases of the Ottaikkal Mandapam (Single Stone Hall) of the Aathikesava Perumal Temple mentioned that the Venadu King Veerali Ravivarman alias Kulasekhara Perumal of Keezhaperur Illam Thiruppaappoor Swarupam constructed stone slab floor to the front Mandapa of the temple.⁴⁴

ART & ARCHITECTURAL IMPORTANCE

The Aathikeshawa Perumal Temple of Thiruvattar has a fine Tamil-style of architecture with wooden and stone pillars, doors, and roofs. Wood, stone, and other building materials are used to erect this grand edifice. They are beautifully crafted. Venadu King Shri Veera Ravi Ravivanmaraana Kulasekharapperumal was the prominent person who gave present shape to the temple. One extraordinary aspect is that the sculptures of the pillars they vary from pillar to pillar in the style of dress, hairstyle, and features. The temple complex contains five Mandapas constructed by Venadu King Shri Veera Ravi Ravivanmaraana Kulasekharapperumal and many of these Mandapas are replete with exquisite wooden carvings. Scenes from the Puranas, like churning the ocean of milk, are worked on in detail.

The majestic Northern Gateway entrance and granite steps lead to the temple from road level. The white stone Pathways on other three sides help to reach the temple from River Parazhiyar flowing around the Temple. Gable-type architecture adorns the Eastern and Western entrances. The Western Gateway gives the panoramic view of the Thiruvattar village. The Western Gateway is double-storied and treated as *Gopuram* or Tower though no full-fledged *Gopuram* exists.⁴⁵

The *Srikovil* of Sri Aathikesava Perumal, situated in front of the Ottakkal Mandapa, is rectangular in shape, copper tiled and has a gold stupa lined up on top. The inner wooden door is also lavish in ornamentation. It contains three sets of doorways.

The idol of the main deity has two arms, and the total length is 18 feet. Made of Katu Sarkara Yogam, the most complicated, have been lined with 6,008 salagramms. The Venadu Kings presented a gold *anki* to the main deity which covers the idol from neck to knee in which diamonds and other precious stones were embedded. The Perumal is in sleeping posture with a head towards the south. The right-hand exhibits the mystic symbol known as 'Chin Mudra' while the left-hand stretches out. Beautiful idols of Sri Devi and Bhoomi Devi are seated nearby and are also of Katu Sarkara. Siva is present in Linga form and is kept on a wooden plank near the feet of Aathikesava Perumal, but Brahma is absent.⁴⁶ Alwar saint Nammalvar had sung two *pasurams* in praise of Athikesava Perumal Swamy. The devotee has to worship Perumal through three entrances.

The *Ottaikal* mandapam (*single stone hall*) constructed by Venadu King Shri Veera Ravi Ravivanmaraana Kulasekharapperumal, made of a single stone of three feet thick, is a marvel. *Oorthuva Thandavam*, Venugopala, Rathi, Manmatha, Lakshmana and Indrajith are excellently carved.

The Venadu King Uthaya Maaththaanda Vanmar constructed the Reception Mandapam of the Temple. It is cited as a remarkable example of Tamil Nadu style of carving. The pillars are also excellent specimens of the same. Inviting attention is the wooden ceiling of the Mandapa, where, among other carvings, Sree Vinayaka sculptures carved out of granite pillars are a wonder world of celestial beauty. They include highly rated sculptures of dancing Kali, Indrajith, Venugopala, Kirata, Oortha Tandaua of Mataraja, Sree Rama, Lakshmana, Hanuman, Vettakkaran, an unusual panel of a cow being suckled by a lioness and figures of the saint King Chermanaan Perumal Kulasekhara Aalwar as well as other Chera royalty. The subsidiary figures are also mainly rated high, with the figure of an Apsara, standing on the side of handsome Indrajith, flower garland in hand, ready to use him being given top quality. She is cited as possessing such excellence that the master craftsman removed the left eyeball to present perfection. Over the temple, stone and wood have lent themselves to expert craftsmanship.

The open structure of *Belikkalpura*, constructed by the Venadu King Shri Veera Ravi Ravivanmaraana Kulasekharapperumal, contains an entrance with two gigantic and unidentical Dwarapalakas. King Rajendra Chola-I (A. D. 1013 to 1045) called the deity as the Thiruvattar God and constructed the *Belikkalpura* platform. This *Belikkalpura* platform has a fragmented

inscription of King Rajendra Chola-I (A. D. 1013 to 1045) which is the earliest available inscription of the temple. The raised platform of *Belikkalpura* contains beautiful and prominent sculptured stone figures Rathi and Kamadeva facing each other. The gabled copper-tiled double roof of the *Belikkalpura* of Thiruvattar Aathikesava Perumal Temple is differed with its counterparts in south India. Later this hall is multiplied in Nayak style.

The central western double doorway gaining entry into the *Chuttambalam* is unusual. On the second panel of one door, instead of a lotus, is an 'Ananthashayana', and on the other door, in the same manner, a 'Gopastree Vasthrakshepa' is presented. The rest of the panels carry traditional wooden lotuses. The gold *Garudavahana* of the deity and Narathamuni on the wall house find a place in the Sanctum.

To the right and left of the Mandapa, separate from it, are rooms that are too long-railed. They house ten painted figures representing the *Dasa Avathara* of Maha Vishnu and Vishwakasana, along with Druva and Bhrgu Maharshi, respectively, on either side.

Outside the *Chuttambalam*, in the north-western corner facing east, is the independent temple dedicated to Sree Krishna as Venugopala (the divine flute player). The Thiruvattar Sree Krishna Swamy is believed to have been consecrated in A. D. 1235 and projects on early Chola style of architecture. The idol is made of granite. Despite its independent nature, this Shrine has no *Dwajastambha*, and a makeshift one is provided during the *Uthsavas*.

Another separate shrine faces east with the temple walls stands in the southern country areas and is dedicated to Sastha. It indicates this deity's importance as shrines usually do not have such Mandapas. This structure is a beautifully carried ceiling of wood on which, in addition to the *Ashtadikpalakas*, scenes from Ramayana are also depicted.

Architects of Aathikesava Perumal Temple

The inscription dated KE 779 E (A. D. 1604) Venadu King Shri Veera Ravi Ravivanmaraana Kulasekharapperumal talks about the architects of the temple during his period. This temple consisted of one Chief Architect known in the post name of 'Mooththa Aasari' and other Architects in the post name of Aasari.⁴⁷ Then 'Mooththa Aasari' was 'Thiruvaattaarru Udaiyankutti Aachichachamasari' followed by three other architects named Eechchakutty Chinthamoni Aasari, Kaaththavan Charuvanka Aasari and Nayinakutty Thiruneelakander Aasari.⁴⁸

Temple Administration and Officials of Aathikesava Perumal Temple

The available inscription in this temple did not help much in gleaning information about the administrative framework of the Athikesava Perumal Temple. Several other Inscriptions of Venadu rulers contains the information of the Venadu rulers entrusted the duty of monitoring temple affairs to the Local Self-Government of that area. This shows that all the Temples of Venadu Kingdom were under the control of the Venadu Government. The Thiruvattar Athikesava Perumal Temple was not an exceptional one. Now Thiruvattar Athikesava Perumal Temple is administered by the Government of Tamil Nadu.

The inscription of Venadu King Shri Veera Ravi Ravivanmaraana Kulasekharapperumal dated KE 779 (A. D. 1604) talks about the temple officials of Aathikesava Perumal Temple at Thiruvattar during his period. The post of the Temple Accountants was called as 'Shri Pandarakanakku' of the temple.⁴⁹ The post of Auditor or Chief Accountant of the temple was called as 'Melezhuthu Kanankku'.⁵⁰ Kittinan Kittinan was then 'Meleluthu Kanakku'.⁵¹

FAIR AND FESTIVALS

Though several festivals associated with this temple, the *Perunthamirthu* and *Kalapa Pooja* are noteworthy. It is in the month of Thai (held for about 12 days). The other most famous festival is in the Tamil month of *Panguni*. The festival is widely known as *Panguni Festival* and is celebrated for about ten days (the Tamil month of *Puratassi*). The festival of *Thiruvonam* in the Tamil month of *Aavani* is worth mentioning. The most significant festival

is “Vaikuntha Ekathasi” during which milk ablutions plus rice are made as part of the *prasadam* offerings to the Lord. This festival is known as *Chorkkavalas* and usually occurs in the Tamil month of *Markhazi*. The Sun’s rays directly fall on the Lord inside the Sanctum between the 3rd and 9th day of the Tamil months of *Puratasi* and *Panguni*.

CONCLUSION

The historical antiquity of the temple is well established through clear and conspicuous references made in religious and literary works. It can be seen that the temple has been in antiquity for about 1200 years. The unique workmanship employed for the construction of the temple reserves special attention. The temple's central aspect is that stone and wood have been used to depict art and culture. This temple's style and architecture were taken as the sample to construct the Sri Ananta Padmanabha Perumal Swamy Temple. The fairs and festivals of the Aathi Kesava Perumal Temple conducted in the Tamil months shows it as the temple of the Tamils. Some scholars tried to connect the Tamil architecture of Aathikesava Perumal Temple at Thiruvattar with the Dravidian architecture of the Pallavas by informing the ‘Maadakkovil’ with the Arjuna Radha and Draupati Radha at Maamallapuram.⁵² It is generally accepted that many South Indian temples were not constructed and completed at a stretch but gradual development through the ages.⁵³ Aathikesava Perumal Temple at Thiruvattar is not an exceptional one. The idol of Uthsava Moorthy kept within the Shrine was stolen some years back, and festivals were consequently suspended. Due to the interest of the Tamil Nadu Government, another Uthsava Moorthy was made in silver, and the festival was once more conducted in 1996.

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