

## HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF TIRUNELVELI

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Research Article

### Historical Significance Of Tirunelveli

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#### Abstract

The aim of this article is to spotlight the historical significance of Tirunelveli. Tirunelveli is situated six hundred and two kilometers to the South of Chennai in Tamil Nadu of India. It's located on the northern bank of river Thamiraparani. Tirunelveli was Just a Chief town of the Pandyas to the South of their Capital. During the Nayaks Period, It became the Capital of their Southern province. In 1801, during the acquisition of the Nawab of Arcot, Tirunelveli District was called as Tirunelveli Seemai. After that, British named it as Tinnevelly. There are about one hundred inscriptions were copied from Tirunelveli town alone upto the year 1912.

**Key words :** Tirunelveli, Thamiraparani, Nellaiappar, Gandhimathi Amman

#### Introduction

Tirunelveli district is one of the 38 districts of Tamil Nadu state in India. Tirunelveli is situated six hundred and two kilometers to the South of Chennai<sup>1</sup>. It is located on the northern bank of river Thamiraparani as well as it is situated one and half miles west of Tirunelveli Junction railway station. Tirunelveli is headquarter of Tirunelveli District and the head quarter of Tirunelveli taluk<sup>2</sup>. Tirunelveli was called as Southern Pandya country, Manikkavasaker referred Tirunelveli in his Thiruvassagam as Southern Pandya country is Sivalogam<sup>3</sup>. Tirunelveli is one among the fourteen Sivasthalas in Pandya country sung by the Thavaram Trios.

The word Tirunelveli the sacred Paddy hedge appropriately refers to the paddy fields which surrounded the town. In the early period, Tirunelveli region was called as Then Pandya nagaram, (southern city of Pandya country) because Madurai was the capital of Pandya, it located northern side from Tirunelveli. Hence, Tirunelveli called Then Pandya nagaram. Meaning of the word 'Tirunelveli' is sacred Paddy hedge, shows that there was continuous belt of Paddy fields and the temple of Nellaiappar was found line the midst. The writings of the early Greeks and Sangam Pact do not mentioned the town, According to U.V. Saminatha Aiyer, the line of Madurai bench, referred Saliyur (Nellin Urkonda)<sup>4</sup>. Sthalapurana and Gandhimathi Pillai Tamil were attested another name of Tirunelveli was Saliyar<sup>5</sup>. Tirunelveli was Just Chief town of the Pandyas to the South of their capital. During the Nayaks period it became the capital of their southern province. Since then it was known as Tirunelveli Seemai<sup>6</sup>. In the Devaram hymn's generally ascribed to seventh century A.D. There are reference about Tirunelveli, Thiruganasambandar had verified this town and the temple. Thikkilam pugalaruan Tirunelveli Sambandar (Devaram) 3,350.7 Thenilvandamar Pulli Thirunelveli Uraiselvar Thama Devaram (3,350.1)<sup>7</sup>. Manickavasagar in his Thiruvassagam hymns versified this town. Thenpandi Nadu Sivalogam<sup>8</sup>. In his Periyapuram, Sekklar referred Tirunelveli as Thenporunai Punainadu<sup>9</sup>. In

this Manonmaniyam drama, Sundarampillai referred Tirunelveli as “Piduyar Nellai”<sup>10</sup>. In the year 1912, one hundred inscriptions were copied in the Tirunelveli town<sup>11</sup>.

### Etymology

The Sthalapurna says, four Vedas were requested to the Lord Siva, we want to become the bamboo trees and Lord Siva come under the shadow feet of these trees Lord Siva accepted their request and he became himself lord Siva Idol and kept under bamboo trees and Lord Siva come under the Shadow feet of these trees Lord Siva accepted their request and he became himself the Lord Siva Idol and kept under bamboo trees<sup>12</sup>. As per the Nellaiappar temple Sthalapurana, one day Ramakon the milk vendor of the Manappadai ruler Muluthumkonda Raman knocked down by the stone on his way when he was carrying the Milk on his head he fell down the Milk put was broken. Then he cut down the stone with his axe. Suddenly bloodshed down on the stone. Ramakon immediately ran to the palace and inform the matter to the King Muluthumkonda Raman. King rushed to the spot and worshipped the Lord, the Lord Siva appeared in the form of Lingam the Lord in the place is called as Vendavalarthalingam<sup>13</sup>. As per tradition Muluthumkonda Raman constructed Venuvananather temple at Tirunelveli<sup>14</sup>.

Tirunelveli Nellaiappar temple Sthalapurana mentioned the genesis of the name Tirunelveli<sup>15</sup>. It said that, a devotee of Siva name Vedasarma, he went to take bath in the river Thamiraparani, on that day he spread out the paddy to dry under the sun, and went for his ablutions in river Thamiraparani. He requested to the Lord through prayer for rain because that year Tirunelveli region was suffered by the famine. Vedasarma's request was accepted and when he was bathing, a thunder storm broke out and it rained heavily. He saw the wonderful miracle on the rainy day. Rain fall was around the paddy. The paddy did not get soaked and did not get even a single drop of rain at the paddy. Sunlight was covered the spreading paddy. So according to the Tirunelveli sthalapurana, the place was called Tirunelveli as the lord of the town hedged by the paddy for Tirunelveli means “sacred hedged paddy”. Though, as said in the Purana, the paddy was hedged by rain in course of time it was called as “sacred paddy hudge”<sup>16</sup>.

The sthalapurana says that the earlier name of Tirunelveli was “Venuvanam” where lord Siva married. His consort Gowri other names of Tirunelveli according to sthalapurana are Thirumoothipuram Tharanisaram. Skalasithi, Irapuri, Venuvanam, Nelveli, Nellore sadiveli, Salivadi, SaliNayar Bhirama Viruthapuram and Tharugavanagam. The author of the Puranic works equates Tirunelveli to that of Kanchipuram in sacredness and calls it as Thenkanchi<sup>17</sup>. Other shortened names to refer Tirunelveli are Nellai, Nellaiyempathy and Nellaiyembalam<sup>18</sup>.

The area now comprising the Tirunelveli region formed the Part of Pandya country. Kadungon (575 – 600) was the Pandya ruler. Who had Madurai from the Clutches of the Kalabhras. He was succeeded by Maravarmam Avanisulamani (600 – 620). Sezhiyansendan (620 to 642 A.D.) was son and successor of Avani Sulamani one of his inscription found in Malaiyadi Kurichi. Arikesarimaravarman (641 – 670 A.D.) was the contemporary of Saiva saint Thiruganasambandar. He was converted to Hindu religion from Jain religion by Thirugana Sambandar then he was called as NinraseerNedumaran. The name of the Village Arikesarinallur situated near Veravanallur was named by him as ArikessariNallur<sup>19</sup>. During his rule Thiruganasambandar visited Tirunelveli and he had versified Nellai appear temple. Fourth regnal year 950 A.D. inscription of Virapandya found on the west wall of the small shrine in Nellaiappar temple<sup>20</sup>. Fifteenth regnal year 961 A.D. inscription of Virapandya found on the

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west wall of the Mulamahalingar shrine mentioned Tirunelveli as Kilvembunadu<sup>21</sup>. Later Cholas and later Pandyas inscriptions were found on the walls of the Nellaiappar temple.

When the Pandya country came under the imperial Cholas. It was known as RajaRajavalanadu since 991 A.D. It became RajaRajamandalam in 1012 A.D. and was rechristened as RajaRajapandianadu since 1022 A.D.<sup>22</sup>. The Country was sub-divided into Vallanadus and the area now Tirunelveli district. Comprised the Mudikondachola Valanadu. The Valanadu was divided into many Nadus and Kurrams. As evidenced from the inscriptions Tirunelveli was mentioned as Kilvembunadu<sup>23</sup>. During from the later Pandya Empire to the Vijayanagar period, there are changed the administrative setup and the Local self-government. Ravivarman the rule of Venadu instituted Revivarma Sathurvedimangalam at Tirunelveli and settled the Brahmins in Agrahara to do the Pujas in Nellaiappar temple.

During the time of Visvanatha Nayak (1529 – 1564) of Madurai, Tirunelveli became headquarter of Southern Province and was called as Tirunelveli seenai As per the Madura manuscript Ariyanathamudaliyar the Dalavay of Visvanatha Nayak of Madurai was solely responsible for the formation of town<sup>24</sup>. On acquisition from the Nawab of Arcot in 1801. The British named it as Tinnevelly.

In the beginning, Tirunelveli region was called as Then Pandya nagaram, (southern city of Pandya country) because Madurai was the capital of Pandya, it located northern side from Tirunelveli. Tirunelveli city developed around Sri Nellaiappar, Gandhimathi amman temple. Now a day's this temple is located the center part of Tirunelveli District. The general dimensions of the whole enclosure of the temple are 850 feet by 756 feet. The main entrance of the temple faces the eastern side with Rajagopura<sup>25</sup>.

The four sides of the god's temple immediately within the outer walls are flanked by raised corridors surmounted by runs of pillars. In the South Eastern corner of this circuit or prakara, is a small shrine containing a Sivalinga, which is popularly known by the name of Anavaradhakhan. In explanation of this curious Muhammadan suffix. It is said that a wife of one of the Nawabs fell sick one day and consulted the Brahmanas of the place as to how she might be cured. The Brahmanas prescribed some rites to be performed at the Nawabs expense in the temple. The Nawab consented and his wife not only regained her health but soon after presented the ruler with a male child. The boy was given the name Anavaradhakhan and the shrine was built in the corner of the temple. With an opening in the outer wall so that the Muslim King and his son might without offence worship the god within. In the Southern Prakara are a number of life Statues of the Nayak rulers carved in one block with the pillars which support the roof of the mandapa. Following the prakara round to the North West corner one comes to the shrine of the god subramanya, where the god and his Vahana, a peacock are sculptured from one block of stone. The mandapa in the north east corner disfigured now by streaks of road and yellow paint offers a good example of the stone carving which imitates the wood work of beams and rafters. Guarding the entrance to the next enclosure and forming each a pillar are four gigantic stone figures recelling the type met with at Tenkasi. The gateway leads into the manimandapa within this again is the dark narrow enclosure in which the god Venuvaneswarar is placed. In the north east corner of the first or outer prakara is a second lingam and it is the God, Nellaiyappar, Lord of Paddy who gives his name to the temple and is regarded as its presiding deity. The traditional belief that this God formed the centre of an original and smaller temple is probable enough for his enclosure, lying same feet below the

general level of the temple is now walled in by buildings. Which ignore the position due to this God and must therefore be of later construction than the shrine itself. An inscription of Sundarapandya refers to the deity of the temple under the two names "Vrihivriteswara" "Lord of the Paddy hedge and Venuvaneswara, Lord of the bamboo forest is related in the Sthalapurana to explain the origin of the latter God. Vishnu in the person of Padmanabhaswami has a shrine beside that of the "Lord of the bamboo forest".

From the Precincts of the god the temple of the Goddess is entered through the Sangilimandapa supported on Pillars carved into figures or sculptures of Yalis. Pachaivadivel Kasiviswanatha, Hanuman, Arjuna and Bhima. This mandapa was constructed by the Vadamalaiappillai the Governor of Tirunelveli and a great devotee of Siva during the ThirumalaiNayak period in 1647 A.D. Kumaran temple is located in the western side of this Sangili mandapa. Besides the mandapa on the left as one enters is the thamarai tank of stone surrounded by a pillared cloister. On the other side of the mandapa is a well-kept pleasure garden in which both the God and Goddess are placed during the six weeks of the Vasantha festival in the months of May and June. This garden had been designed by ThiruvenkadaKrishnamudaliar in 1756 A.D. A Square Vasanthamandapa with hundred pillars is found in the midst of this garden. This Vasanthamandapa is proud of having the statues of Lord Siva with water dripping from the head of sage Agasthiya and other sages which serve as examples for the excellence of workmanship of the architect. Discourses on Saivism and other Philosophical talks take place in this mandapa.

In the Southern corridor of the Nellaiyappar temple, the flagstaff Mound shed and Granary rooms are situated. The Pillars in this corridor have beautifully carved structures of the Nayak rulers till the days of Vadamalaiyappillai. On the southwest of this corridor is the Thiruppanimandapa, where during the Ani Festival the deities would be seated on sixth and seventh days of the celebration. To the North of this mandapa Arumuganainar temple is situated. The noteworthy feature of this temple is peacock Vahana, Valli and Deivayanai have been carved out wonderfully. The temple elephant is accommodated in the Northern corridor of temple. Western corridor possesses one of the beautiful images of Lord Ganesa. The Eastern corridor is decorated with the most attractive statues of Nandhi, Pavalakkodi, Alli, Manmathan, Rathi, Kuravam and Kurathi. In the Somavaramandapa or Navarathiri mandapa, Navarathiri festival and Karthigai somavara festival are celebrated every year. The stone rafters and stone replicas of this mandapa are very intricately designed. The images of Vanniadisattanar and Bairavar and a sacrificial altar are found to the west of this mandapa and to the north of this is the Navagraha Mandapa.

Before entering into Swamy Nellaiyapper temple Nandhi and Flagstaff are situated. Which was built in 1155 A.D. The sculptures of Virabhadra, Arjuna, Karna, God Vinayagar and Lord Murugan create an ever lasting impression in the minds of beholders. In the Southern side of Nandhimandapa images of sixty three Nayanmars and Sekkilar found. It is said that SivanthappaNayak is solely responsible for this temple in 1654 A.D. Next to Nandhimandapa is image of Suryadevar has been installed. The Musical Pillars that attracts the attention of everyone through their marvel and wonderful music note are in the Manimandapa<sup>26</sup>. These clusters of musical pillars are unique and this place is suitable for performing dance. The main purpose of the installation of musical pillars carved out of monolithic resonant system is to amplify the sound by the bell at the centre of the chamber. The Symbolic figure of a temple

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dancer or devadasi and an announcer with conch standing. Just behind her depicted at the bottom of cluster of forty eight pillars in the South East corner of the Manimandapa and the figure of dancing devadasi provide the evidence to the theory that this cluster of Musical Pillar has been used as an instrument for playing Jatis for dance programme. This Manimandapa along with musical pillar was constructed by the Pandya ruler Nindrasir Nedumaran during the seventh century A.D. There is sanctuary of Venuvananathar in front of the Manimandapa. It is in this sanctuary that Lord Venuvananathar blessed Muluthumkanda Ramakone. In this place there are twenty one platforms and these twenty one platforms started growing due to the great devotion of Ramakone. Because of this Nelloiyappar is also called as Mahalingam or Suyambulingam<sup>27</sup>. Pallikondaperumal shrine was constructed during the reign of RajaRaja I<sup>28</sup>. Pallikonda Perumal or Lord Govindha in reclining posture adore the southern direction of the Suyambulinga. Valampuripillaiyar, Chandrasekharar are found at the entrance of the Suyambulinga sanctum and images of Dakshinamoorthy, Lord Siva in the guise of Bikshandar and Chandeswar are found around the sanctum. If one Proceeds further he can come across a Lingam at a lower level and this said to be the moolavighraha of this temple. It is also called as Pitlingam and also as Thirumoolanather. In the South corridor of the Venuvananathar temple there are images of four Saivasaints. Santhanachariya, Sathamathas sixty three Nayanmars. Pollapillaiyar and Ravana with Kailasaparvatha in his hands.

Ganthimathi Ambal temple is also built here is above 850 feet in length of 756 feet width or breadth and adorned an entrance by Gopura. Besides conducting religious discourses and teaching Kolattam, to girls, teaching of Tirumurai to devotees also take place in this mandapa. Unjal festival which is celebrated here after the Tirukkalayanam of Swami Nelloiyappar and Gandhimathi Ambal in the month of Aipasi and hence this mandapa is called Unjal mandapa. Beautifully adorned Gandhimathi Ambal gives dharsan to millions of her devotees during laksha deepa and bhadra deepa festival from this mandapa only. This mandapa was a gift from Serakulam piraviperumalpillai a staunch devotee who built the Thaipooza mandapa on the left bank of river Thamiraparani near Sulochanamudaliyar Bridge. To the north of Unjal mandapa the sacred tank with a flight of steps on its four sides. This temple has another tank called Karuman tank. Another beautiful structure of this Ambal temple is the Thirukalyanamandapa or marriage hall which is 520 feet in length and 63 feet in width, in the month of Aipasi, Sengel festival on Panguni Uttiram take place every year<sup>29</sup>.

### End Notes

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  - 7 Devaram, 3.350, line 7.
  - 8 Manikkavasagar, Thiruvagasam, Sivapuranam, line 90.
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