



A REDEEM ON SATTANATHAR CULT WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SATTANATHASWAMY TEMPLE AT SIRKAZHI

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Abstract:

Sri Sattanathaswamy temple at Sirkazhi is one of the most ancient and biggest temples in South India. Few temples can excel this in having preserved the sculptures and the original placement for such a long period. In its sculptural richness and elegance, this temple ranks as one among the great temples of Tamil Nadu. The more important iconographic feature of Sattanathar cult its development, and its peculiarities are critically examined in relation to the time and ritual significance. This culmination of Bhairava cult and its practice came into existence in the 16th century A.D. It is proved by a literary reference viz., *Tirukkazhumala mumanikkovai* of Pattinathadigal. Other literary evidences pertaining to Sattanathar are the history of Sattanathar, *Maruthavana puranam* and *Thirumayilaipuranam*. The modelling of this image is superb. The very purpose of this paper is to identify the image Sattanathar and assess its age and style.

Key Words: Parivara-Devatas, Iconography, Griva- Kostha, Sangama Moortham, Penance, Incarnation, Dwarf, Avatar, Patala, Arthajama, Abisheka, Moolavar, Tirumaligaipatti, Prabha, Jatamandala, Dhathura, Patrakundalas, Kandigai, Sthanasutharam, Udharabandham, Yagnopavita, Urasutharam, Valayas, Delineated, Consummate, Gnanamudra, Ghata & Apex.

Introduction:

Sirkazhi is an important place in the Nagapattinam district of Tamil Nadu and is famous for its religious and historic point of view. The name Sirkazhi is a combination of two words i.e., Sri and Kali¹ -Srikali meaning an auspicious place for Goddess Kali, later corrupted into Sirkazhi. Sri Sattanathaswamy temple at Sirkazhi is one of the most ancient and biggest temples in South India. It has a unique place in the history of Saivism,² It is closely associated with St. Thirugnanasambandar of Sirkazhi.³

Sri Sattanathaswamy temple contains a large assemblage of sculptures ranging to various periods. They not only reflect the importance of the cults,⁴ which came into prominence but also the growth and development of sculptural art patronised at various times.⁵ Few temples can excel this in having preserved the sculptures and the original placement for such a long period. In its sculptural richness and elegance, this temple ranks as one among the great temples of Tamil Nadu. The majority of the sculptures are Saivite, consisting of different aspects of Siva, besides many *parivara-devatas*⁶ and subsidiary deities distributed appropriately in different parts of temple. The very purpose of this paper is to identify the image Sattanathar and assess its age and style.

The more important iconographic features of this icon and their peculiarities are critically examined in relation to the tune and ritual significance. The present temple complex at Sirkazhi is named after Sattanathar, who is enshrined in the *griva-kostha*⁷ of the *Sangama moortham* of this temple.

The legend⁸ relating to the installation of the Sattanathar image at Sirkazhi is an interesting one. Bali was an *asura*- emperor, who through his devotion and penance defeated *Indra*, humbled the Gods and extended His authority over the three worlds. In order to restrain him Visnu, who was entreated by the Gods for production, assumed His fifth incarnation, the form of a Brahman dwarf, known as the *Vaman- avatar*.⁹ He appeared before Bali and asked for a gift of only three paces of ground with His feet as a boon, which was granted. As water granting the gift fell into His hand, the dwarf expanded His form till it filled the world. Lord Visnu now manifesting Himself deprived Bali of His possessions in two strides, the Heaven and earth, but an account of the virtues, the latter possessed. He measured lastly *patala*,¹⁰ the internal regions still in His dominion.

After that, He is said to have roamed about the world with pride instilling great fear in the hearts of mortals. Lord Siva brought Him down with a blow and spared His life, when Goddess Lakshmi prayed for it. It is said that Visnu desired that the Lord Siva should wear His bone and skin (Egoism and Maya), where upon Lord Siva wore the skin as mantle and bone as a mace and took the name of Sattanathar, the Lord of the coat of skin.

The earliest reference to this God Sattanathar as Apathutharanar is found in the temple record. Land gift was made by one Venkatadeva Maharaja¹¹ (1598 A.D.) for performing the *arthajama abisheka* to this image (Sattanathar).

Even today, on every Friday at mid-night, a special puja is performed to Sattanathar along with a coating of civet. This habit of coaling with civet is really unique one, which is not in practice anywhere else in Tamil Nadu, in a few temples of Thanjavur and Nagapattinam districts.

This practice came into existence in the 16th century A.D. It is proved by a literary reference viz., *Tirukkazhumala mumanikkovai* of Pattinathadigal.¹² Other literary evidences pertaining to Sattanathar¹³ are the history of Sattanathar, *Maruthavana puranam* and *Thirumayilaipuranam*. Another important literary work, *Apathutharanarmalai* was composed in praise of Lord Sattanathar in the middle of the 18th century A.D. The Sirkazhi *Sthala puranam*¹⁴ of Arunachalaki also mentions this God as the main deity of this temple. It seems from the available data that this worship (Sattanathar) has evolved from the Bhairava cult. Further we may say that it is the culmination of Bhairava worship.

Apart from the *Moolavar* housed in the *griva kostha*, one more image of Sattanathar is installed on the western side of the *Tirumaligaipatti* of the central shrine. This Sattanathar is not mentioned in any *Silpagamas*. This brilliant iconographic form of Sattanathar is one of the presiding deities of this temple. The facial expression, implements and other attitudes of this image differ from the *ugra* form of Bhairava.

The image of Sattanathar is housed within the beautiful *prabha*. The five flames are broken in condition. The head of the image is artistically embellished with an extremely beautiful *jatamandala*, the resplendent crescent moon, a symbol of beauty, *dhathura* flowers with a skull at the centre and a snake are arranged in the *jatamandala* from left to right, which add to the beauty at its zenith.

The face is carved with a compassionate look and magnified with beauty. The square and smiling face, pointed nose and closed eyes are finely executed. Both the ears are adorned with *patrakundalas*. Around the neck, a simple *kandigai* is placed. *Sthanasutharam, udharabandham, yagnopavita, urasutharam* and a long *yagnopavita* of bells are found in the chest. Simple *valayas* and anklets are seen in this image.

The modelling of this image is superb. Its proportions are beautiful, the head dress is fine and the poses of the hands are realistic. The postures of the legs, like those of the arms are delineated with consummate skill and appear to be life-like. The right arm shows *gnanamudra* and the left is stretching downwards with gentleness and gracefully placed on a *ghata*. The drapery of the image covers the whole body, (skin of Visnu according to the local legend) it is transparent and also attractive. From the stylistic point of view this Sattanathar image is assigned to 16th century A.D.

A number of miniature sculptures are found in the pillars, and *gopura* entrances of this temple complex all of which show its popularity during 16th century A.D, and afterwards. A grant of village in the name of Sattanathapuram¹⁵ donated to the Brahmins situated on the southern side of Sirkazhi on the way to Mayiladuthurai also strengthens this statement.

Methodology:

By employing both primary and secondary sources this paper has been attempted. Inscriptional and Sculptural art are the major and authentic source materials for writing this paper and it is supplemented by contemporary literary evidences. The methodology adopted in this study is descriptive and analytical.

Conclusion:

Vaitheeswaran koil, Thalainayar, Panthanallur, Mayiladuthurai, Tirusakthimutram, Amber, Nagappattinam and Sengattangudi in the Thanjavur and Nagai Quaid - E- Milleth districts of Tamil Nadu, are some important places famous for Sattanathar worship. The above study of the Sattanathar cult in and around Sirkazhi and in some villages of Thanjavur and Nagai Quaid -E- Milleth districts shows the great importance of Sattanathar worship in this region, This worship at its apex is also proved by the surrounding temples of Sirkazhi.

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