



## EXPLORING THE ARCHITECTURAL MAGNIFICENCE OF THE AKSHAYA LINGA SWAMY TEMPLE

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### *Abstract*

The Akshaya Linga Swamy Temple stands as a testament to the grandeur of sacred architecture, embodying centuries of cultural heritage and religious devotion. Situated amidst lush landscapes, this temple is not merely a physical structure except a manifestation of divine symbolism and meticulous craftsmanship. This study delves into the architectural marvels of the Akshaya Linga Swamy Temple, exploring its intricate design elements, spatial organization, and spiritual significance. Drawing upon historical records, architectural analysis, and sacred texts, By unraveling the layers of symbolism embedded within its design, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how architecture serves as a conduit for divine expression and human connection in sacred spaces.

**Key Words:** Akshaya Linga Swamy Temple, Social significance, Symbolism, Architectural splendor

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### Introduction

In the ancient times, there existed a Chola ruler known as Kochengat Cholan who constructed numerous temples, among which the Keelvelur temple stands prominently. Situated towards the eastern side of the town, this temple is grand in scale. Its temple tower, adorned with



seven tiers, majestically rises towards the eastern direction, showcasing its architectural splendor. It is said that the Saravana Teertham, consecrated by Lord Murugan himself, is located opposite to this tower. Within the temple premises lies the Vasantha Mandapam, where Periya Avudaiyar and Melai Panai, along with Linga, are worshipped. The southern side of the temple's complex houses the Somaskanda shrine, while the northern side houses the shrine of Kochengat Cholan. Alongside them, Sundara Vinayagar also resides. Overlooking the temple complex from the hilltop is the darshan of Lord Padhri Vinayagar. Notably, Nataraja grants his darshan to Natarajaraja once a year on the right foot of Kattumalai. This sacred spot, known as Thalam, holds immense significance. Inside the temple's sanctum sanctorum, one can witness Lingodbhava depicting various deities such as Dakshinamoorthy, Padhri Vinayagar, the 63 Nayanmars, Jurathevar, Agasteeswarar, Vishwanathar, Navagrahas, along with Lingothbavar and Mahalakshmi. Adjacent to the Ambika Sundarakujambika shrine lies the Kuberar shrine, representing uniqueness with its standalone sanctum. The Anjudevarkku Vinayagar shrine, situated within the temple premises, is considered special as it prevents obstacles during worships and rituals. The idols of Idumban and Kali are also worshipped here, with special rituals involving Punukku Chatti and Samprani Tailam.

The temple complex, however, doesn't perform elaborate consecration ceremonies. The presiding deity of the temple is known as Kattumalai Nadhar. This name signifies the divine grace bestowed upon the devotees by granting love to those who are devoted. This temple is mentioned in the Thiruthondargadu, where it is described as a place where devotees praise the Lord without any desires, considering their lives fulfilled. The divine name of the goddess here is Vanamulainayagi, signifying her as the "Guardian of the Woods." In the second Thiruppati, it is mentioned, "*Varulaviya Vanamulaiyavalatu Mani Silambu Avai Arkka*," indicating the divine presence of the goddess. Furthermore, in many hymns, Nyanasambandhar has sung praises of this temple. Thus, Keelvelur is a sacred land of worship, where Murugan, along with his consorts and other deities, blesses devotees with a prosperous life, free from obstacles.

### **The Architectural Splendor of Early Chola Temples**

The Early Chola Architecture denotes the architectural style and edifices associated with the Chola dynasty of South India during the initial phase of their governance, spanning roughly



from the 9th to the 12th century. Renowned for their supremacy and influence in the southern expanse of the Indian subcontinent, the Cholas made significant contributions to the realms of Indian art and culture through their architectural endeavors. Notably, their extensive patronage of temple construction served as a cornerstone of their legacy. The temples erected by the Cholas emerged as pivotal centers of religious, social, and cultural activities within their dominion. Predominantly dedicated to Hindu deities, particularly Lord Shiva, these temples epitomized the essence of Early Chola architecture, laying the groundwork for what is now recognized as Dravidian architecture. Characterized by distinct features such as pyramid-like towers (vimanas or gopurams), pillared halls (mandapas), and intricate stone carvings, this architectural style exemplifies the artistic finesse and cultural richness of the Chola era.

The vimanas, towering structures adorning the sanctum of the temple, stand as iconic representations of Chola architecture. Constructed in a pyramidal fashion and embellished with elaborate carvings and sculptures, these granite towers soar to remarkable heights, symbolizing the grandeur of Chola craftsmanship. Complementing the vimanas, the temples often encompassed expansive pillared halls or mandapas, serving as venues for various religious ceremonies and communal gatherings. Adorned with ornate sculptures and varying in pillar count and arrangement, these mandapas contributed to the architectural splendor of Chola temples. Among the hallmarks of Chola architecture are the finely detailed bas-relief sculptures adorning temple walls. Depicting an array of deities, mythological narratives, and intricate patterns, these sculptures showcase the artistic mastery of Chola artisans. Common motifs include scenes from Hindu epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana, reflecting the religious and cultural ethos of the period.

In their temple construction endeavors, the Cholas favored the use of granite, enabling intricate carving and ensuring the longevity of their architectural marvels. The temples often featured spacious courtyards and sacred tanks (temple tanks) for ritualistic purposes, enhancing both the layout and functionality of these sacred spaces. Elaborately adorned entranceways, guarded by sculptures of divine beings, served as portals to the spiritual realm, underscoring the Chola's reverence for the divine. Noteworthy examples of Early Chola temples include the Brihadeeswarar Temple in Thanjavur, the Airavatesvara Temple in Darasuram, and the Chola Nataraja Temple in Chidambaram, each embodying architectural excellence and spiritual



significance. As enduring symbols of Chola heritage, these temples continue to captivate and inspire reverence in contemporary times.

The architectural blueprint of temples during this period typically adhered to a square or rectangular plan, with the main sanctum housing the primary deity (Lord Shiva) occupying a central position. Enclosed within a series of diminishing enclosures or prakaras, the sanctum exuded a sense of hierarchy and sanctity. Gopurams, monumental entrance towers, served as gateways to the temple complex, characterized by their pyramidal form and adorned with simplistic architectural elements and sculptures. Intricately sculpted narratives depicting facets of Shaivism and Hindu mythology adorned the temple walls and pillars, enriching the spiritual ambiance of the sacred space. The shikhara, a prominent tower or spire atop the main sanctum, boasted a simple yet elegant design, while the Nandi Mandapa, housing a sculpture of the divine bull Nandi, stood as a testament to the Chola's devotion to Lord Shiva. Early Chola architecture stands as a testament to the artistic prowess, cultural richness, and spiritual devotion of the Chola dynasty, leaving an indelible mark on the landscape of South Indian temple architecture.

### **The Enduring Splendor: Kilvelur Atsalinga Swami Temple and Attic Temple**

Amidst the epochs of Kings, Nayaks, and Sambuvarayas, the Kilvelur Atsalinga Swami Temple stands as a beacon of artistic transformation. Tracing its origins to the era of Kilivelur Chola Atsayalinga, under the patronage of Tirunavukarasar during the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, this temple evolved through the annals of time, witnessing the reigns of various dynasties including the Cholas, Pandyas, Marathas, and Commanders. Nestled along the Cauvery south bank, it proudly holds the distinction of being the most ancient temple in South India, spanning an extensive 5.00-acre area. At the heart of Periyakoil lies the majestic Attic Temple, facing eastwards and adorned with a grand Rajagopuram boasting seven tiers. Surrounded by the serene Saravana Poikai, this temple exudes an aura of tranquility. Within its precincts, the Somaskanda Vimana and Catelipar Vimana grace the southern and northern sides respectively, enriching the spiritual ambiance. The antiquity of the temple is evident in the presence of venerable deities, while historical inscriptions chronicle the benevolent deeds of kings, adding depth to its sacred aura.



The Arthamandapa serves as the entrance hall, adorned with sculptures and featuring a unique absence of pillars, harmonizing with the overall architectural composition. Distinct sculptures depicting deities adorn its walls, showcasing nuanced variations in artistic embellishments. Moving further inward, the Garbhagriha, or sanctum sanctorum, emerges as the epitome of divine connection. Crowned by a pyramidal tower, it serves as the abode of the deity, embodying profound spiritual symbolism and architectural splendor. Crafted meticulously from black stone, the Garbhagriha resonates with intricate carvings, inviting devotees to immerse themselves in its sacred ambiance. The Kilvelur Atsalinga Swami Temple and Attic Temple stand as timeless legacies, embodying the rich tapestry of culture, spirituality, and architectural brilliance woven by ancient civilizations.

In the realm of temple architecture in Tamil Nadu, the term "prakaram" denotes the circumambulatory path encompassing the primary sanctum sanctorum (garbhagriha) of a Hindu temple. Integral to the temple complex, the prakaram assumes a pivotal role in its design and functionality. It provides devotees with a route for circumambulation around the central deity's sanctum, a practice known as "pradakshina," symbolizing reverence and worship in Hindu tradition. This path embodies the cyclical essence of life, death, and rebirth, signifying the devotee's journey from ignorance to enlightenment. Typically enclosed by a compound wall, the prakaram's width may vary across different temples, sometimes featuring multiple prakarams, each holding its own significance. Pillared halls or mandapas along the path serve for religious rituals, gatherings, and housing smaller shrines dedicated to various deities.

The prakaram itself often hosts smaller shrines honoring other deities, saints, or mythological figures, adorned with intricate carvings, sculptures, and friezes narrating tales from Hindu epics and mythologies. Grand entrances or gopurams mark cardinal points, allowing access to the temple complex and the prakaram. During festivals, the prakaram facilitates processions, while serving as a congregational space for devotees to partake in rituals and festivities. Symbolically and practically, the prakaram in Tamil Nadu's temple architecture aids in facilitating rituals, accommodating congregations, and enhancing the spiritual ambiance of the temple. Its diverse designs and features across temples showcase the rich architectural heritage of Tamil Nadu. Transitioning through the primary entrance gate, one enters the first prakaram, greeted by a copper-clad vine tree and altars of Ganesha. Noteworthy features include a



grandiose Nandi Swami, smaller shrines dedicated to various deities, and the presence of sixty-three deities of Katumalai. Additional sacred entities like Anju Vattatambal and Nataraja contribute to the sanctity of the space. Further exploration reveals the Mulasthanam of several deities, including Sundarakujambikai and Ekambareswarar. Notably, separate shrines for Utsava Balasubramanya and Durgaiyamman add to the spiritual richness of the prakaram. Witnessing the sacred artifacts and spiritual ambiance, devotees attest to the temple's surpassing aura, drawing comparisons to Kashi. Adjacent to the imposing five-tiered Rajagopuram lies a black stone vimana and a Bhairava adorned with ten arms. An elevated water tank serves as a source of potable water, while the Vasantha Mandapam stands repurposed as an office space, nestled between the Rajagopuram tiers. Rajagopuram, a monumental entrance tower, stands as a distinctive feature of many temples in Tamil Nadu. Its ornate design, intricate carvings, and symbolic significance mark the transition from the secular to the sacred realm within the temple complex. Acting as a gateway to spiritual enlightenment, the Rajagopuram guides devotees on their sacred journey and serves as a beacon visible from afar, directing pilgrims towards the sacred space. Consecrated at the entrance gate of the Atsayalingaswamy temple, the towering Rajagopuram showcases intricate craftsmanship, offering a regal and awe-inspiring spectacle. Surrounding structures, meticulously reconstructed from black stone, contribute to the architectural grandeur of the temple complex. The prakaram and Rajagopuram stand as integral elements of Tamil Nadu's temple architecture, blending architectural beauty, religious symbolism, and cultural significance to create a spiritual haven for devotees and visitors alike.

### **The Rajagopuram: A Symbolic Marvel in Hindu Temple Architecture**

The Rajagopuram, an imposing entrance tower, stands as a hallmark feature in numerous temples, embodying both functional utility and profound symbolism within the realm of Hindu temple architecture. Typically the tallest edifice within a temple complex, its construction entails intricate architectural nuances, defining its characteristic pyramidal or conical silhouette. Adorned with an array of sculptures and carvings depicting deities, mythological narratives, and religious motifs, the Rajagopuram serves as a testament to the rich cultural and artistic heritage of the region it inhabits. Beyond its ornamental allure, the Rajagopuram holds profound symbolic significance, marking the sacred transition from the secular external world to the divine realm encapsulated within the temple's sanctum sanctorum. Its sculptural narrative, often drawn



from Hindu mythology, provides devotees and visitors with a visual elucidation of religious narratives and serves as a conduit for spiritual connection.

The spiritual essence of the Rajagopuram extends further as devotees traverse its threshold, embarking on a symbolic journey towards spiritual enlightenment. Rituals and ceremonies associated with its consecration underscore its sacred role, drawing devotees into communion with the divine. Moreover, the practical utility of the Rajagopuram becomes apparent as it guides pilgrims from afar, directing them towards the sacred precincts of the temple complex. In Tamil Nadu, the construction and preservation of Rajagopurams stand as integral components of the region's cultural and artistic identity. These monumental structures, some standing for centuries, contribute to the architectural and religious heritage of the land, embodying a fusion of architectural splendor, religious symbolism, and cultural significance.

### **Illumination**

In the southern direction of illumination lies the imposing structure of Padmaupanam, with its stairways leading to the platform, adorned with celestial beings, devoid of any ornaments or embellishments, presenting the Dravidian style with its domes and pinnacle alongside a forested backdrop. Its large and small nostrils are sealed by mid-sized tufts. The large nostrils are adorned with floral motifs while the small ones are fashioned as buds, exhibiting simplicity. In contrast to the celestial beings, the large nostrils display elephants and the small ones exhibit warriors. Above this structure stands the temple's main sanctum, flanked by the divine couple. To the east of illumination, in both the northern and southern parts of the celestial abode, numerous travelers, musical groups, theatrical troupes, wrestlers, royal retinues, elephant riders, Maratha warriors, the young of elephants, hunters, and those who receive royal patronage engage in various forms of entertainment. These activities, along with the valor of the Maratha warriors, form part of the historical duties.

### **Intermediate Enclosure**

In the second courtyard of the grand temple tower, situated in the northern entrance, stands the main hall along with the northern porch. Alongside the towering structure, adorned with intricate sculptures and decorative motifs, stands the grandeur akin to the first tower.





Amidst this, the intermediate enclosure, bustling with activity, houses the somaskanda, flying celestial chariots, and other divine beings. Towards the northeastern corner of the enclosure reside deities such as Kadiravan, Bairavar, and Vishwanathar. At the northern extremity lies the primary shrine of Anjuvattathammaan, adorned with festivity and reverence. In the southeastern part of the enclosure, adjacent to the elephant temple, are the sanctums of Vishwanathar and the Thiruthondar, accompanied by devotees in constant pilgrimage. Towards the southeast, in another enclosure, reside deities like Patrinayakar, Agathiswarar, Aalungkoveshuvarar, Vishwanathar, Ashtalakshmi, Jambukeswarar, and Kayilasanathar. All of them are ensconced within a single enclosure, reminiscent of the Dravidian architectural marvels, featuring intricate spires and sculptures. In one of the sanctums towards the northwest, nestled amidst a serene forest, lies the deity of Ammai, with her attendants, surrounded by garlands of flowers and hymns of praise.

The southern courtyard houses a magnificent statue in the form of Anumaran, commemorating the patron's devotion. Further to the south, amidst the courtyards, lies a structure housing the images of Marathi rulers, including Thukkajji and Thulajji, along with other sculptures, portraying scenes of valor and grandeur. The adjoining courtyard reveals the essence of Marathi culture, showcasing educational institutions and the rule of Thulajji. In another precinct, deities Nandhi and Nandiya are depicted in a divine tableau. Towards the northern end of the southern courtyard reside deities such as Pragadeeswarar, Annamalai Eswarar, Ekambareswarar, Kalahasteswarar, Kubera, Kariyamman, and Choleeswarar. In the northeastern corner of the southern precinct, the revered Palasubramaniyar finds his abode. The inner sanctum of the elephant temple is graced by the presence of Oottisendeswarar, epitomizing divine splendor and majesty.

### **The Magnificent Rajagopuram of Atsayalingaswamy Temple**

At the threshold of the sacred Atsayalingaswamy temple, nestled within the towering edifice of the Rajagopuram, one encounters a monumental architectural marvel soaring to a height of approximately 60 feet. Adorned with 64 intricately crafted sculptures, this imposing structure commands reverence and admiration. From its pinnacle, one beholds a panoramic vista, spanning approximately thirty kilometers, punctuated by towering pillars and distant gopurams.





Adjacent to this resplendent Rajagopuram, meticulous reconstruction has transformed the enclosure wall of the secondary temple, fashioned from black stone and reaching a formidable elevation of 30 feet. Sculptural masterpieces adorn its surface, evoking awe and wonder in all who behold them. Within the precincts of the temple, distinct sanctums honor the revered deities, each meticulously crafted to preserve their sanctity and grandeur.

### **The Splendor of Katumalai Temple Complex**

Amidst the serene Kattu Hill Temples of Tamil Nadu, the Katumalai Temple complex stands as a testament to architectural grandeur and spiritual opulence. Of the 17 temples gracing this sacred landscape, the Katiliappar Temple in Kilyvellur captivates with its distinctive charm. Central to this complex is the towering Tirupani, crafted from resilient black stones, encompassing an expansive 25,000 square feet. The sanctum's façade, adorned with vibrant Om symbols and the divine presence of Lord Vinayaka, welcomes devotees into a realm of spiritual transcendence. Majestic Dwarapalakas stand sentinel, exuding an aura of reverence and protection. Ascending to the upper reaches of the temple reveals further architectural splendor, with the entire structure crafted from the enchanting black stone, a testament to the mastery of artisans. Within the temple precincts, the presence of sacred water bodies, known as Theerthas, holds profound spiritual significance. These bodies of water, graced by the divine Lord's presence, serve as purifying agents, cleansing devotees of their sins through ritual immersion. Festive celebrations find their genesis in the sanctity of these consecrated waters, embodying a rich tapestry of spiritual heritage.

The Katiliappar Temple in Kilvellur boasts nine distinct Theerthas, each contributing to the sanctity of the temple complex. Of particular note is the concealed Theertha beneath the Ilantai tree, shrouded in mystique yet integral to the spiritual landscape of the temple. Devotees, in their reverence, extend veneration to these sacred waters, perpetuating the tradition of spiritual purification and divine connection. Situated on the southern side of the Rajagopuram, the Saravana Theertha holds sacred significance deeply rooted in its connection to Lord Muruga. Legend has it that Lord Muruga invoked Katiliappar for worship, immersing himself in the waters of this holy pond to cleanse himself of impurities. The precision of its engineering marvel leaves observers in awe, as waters flow flawlessly from a distant source, defying conventional



explanations. Adjacent to the Saravana Theertha stands a shrine dedicated to Ganesha Perumal, alongside the Indra Tirtha well, both enveloped in an aura of divinity and reverence. These sacred water bodies, steeped in mythological lore and spiritual significance, serve as conduits for devotees to establish a profound connection with the divine, transcending the boundaries of time and space. The Rajagopuram stands as a testament to human ingenuity, spiritual devotion, and artistic brilliance, embodying the timeless essence of Hindu temple architecture. Together with the sacred Theerthas, it forms an integral part of the spiritual drapery of Tamil Nadu, beckoning devotees on a journey of self-discovery and divine communion.

## **Conclusion**

The architectural magnificence of the Akshaya Linga Swamy Temple stands as a testament to the profound ingenuity and spiritual devotion inherent in sacred design. Through intricate craftsmanship and meticulous attention to detail, the temple's Rajagopuram, secondary prakaram, and sanctums evoke awe and reverence, guiding devotees on a transcendent journey of spiritual enlightenment. The rich tapestry of legends and rituals surrounding the temple's sacred spaces, complemented by the presence of revered theerthams, adds depth to its significance as a pilgrimage site. As a beacon of cultural heritage and religious fervor, the Akshaya Linga Swamy Temple continues to captivate the hearts and minds of all who behold its divine splendor, serving as a timeless testament to the enduring power of sacred architecture. The architectural marvels and spiritual sanctity of temples in Tamil Nadu, particularly exemplified by the Kilvelur Atsalinga Swami Temple and the Katumalai Temple complex, stand as enduring testaments to the rich cultural heritage and artistic brilliance of ancient civilizations. These temples, adorned with majestic Rajagopurams, intricate sculptures, and sacred Theerthas, not only showcase the architectural prowess of their builders but also serve as sacred spaces where devotees can commune with the divine. The Rajagopuram, with its towering presence and symbolic significance, marks the transition from the secular to the divine realm, guiding pilgrims on their spiritual journey. Moreover, the presence of Theerthas adds a layer of spiritual purification and divine connection, enriching the temple complex with profound significance and reverence.



Through their architectural splendor and spiritual opulence, these temples continue to inspire awe and devotion, echoing the timeless essence of Hindu temple architecture in Tamil Nadu.

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