

= Pundarikakshan Perumal Temple =

Pundarikakshan Perumal Temple or Thiruvellarai a in Thiruvellarai , a village in the outskirts of Tiruchirappalli in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu , is dedicated to the Hindu god Vishnu . Constructed in the Dravidian style of architecture , the temple is glorified in the Divya Prabandha , the early medieval Tamil canon of the Azhwar saints from the 6th ? 9th centuries AD . It is one of the 108 Divyadesam dedicated to Vishnu , who is worshipped as Pundarikakshan and his consort Lakshmi as Pankajavalli .

The temple was built by Shivi Chakravarthy , king of Ayodhya in Treta Yuga 15 lakh years ago . This temple is older than Srirangam temple. The temple has three inscriptions in its two rock @-@ cut caves , two dating from the period of Nandivarman II (732 ? 796 AD) and the other to that of Dantivarman (796 ? 847) . It also has Pallava sculptural depictions of Narasimha and Varaha , two of the ten avatars of Vishnu .

A granite wall surrounds the temple , enclosing all its shrines and six of its seven bodies of water . The rajagopuram , the temple 's gateway tower , is unfinished . A swastika shaped temple tank built in 800 AD by Kamban Araiyan during the reign of Dantivarman is outside the temple complex . The Vijayanagar and Nayak kings commissioned paintings on the walls of the shrine of Pudarikakshan , some of which are still present .

Pundarikakshan is believed to have appeared to Garuda (vahana of Vishnu) , Sibi Chakravarthy , sage Markandeya and Hindu gods Bhoomadevi , Brahma and Shiva . Six daily rituals and three yearly festivals are held at the temple , of which the chariot festival , celebrated during the Tamil month of Chittirai (March ? April) , is the most prominent . The festival is unique in the state as a community feast is offered , a custom stretching back many centuries . The temple is maintained and administered by the Hindu Religious and Endowment Board of the Government of Tamil Nadu .

= = History = =

Pundarikakshan Perumal temple is believed to have been built by the Pallavas , as seen from the three inscriptions in its two rock @-@ cut caves . Two of the inscriptions are dated from the period of Nandivarman II (732 ? 796 AD) and the other from the period of Dantivarman (796 ? 847 AD) . The temple construction completed presumably during the time of Dantivarman . The influence of Azhwars , the Vaishanva saints of the 7th ? 9th centuries helped spread Vaishnavism to a greater extent among the public and the ruling Pallava kings , who became temple patrons .

A Chola inscription indicates an endowment to the shrines of Krishna (an avatar of Vishnu) and his consort Rukmini inside the temple by King Parakesarivarman (907 @-@ 955 AD) . The temple had later additions from the subsequent Chola , later Pandyas , Hoysala and the Vijayanagara kings . The temple suffered extensive damage during a flood and was repaired by a merchant around 1262 ? 63 .

In modern times , the temple is maintained and administered by the Hindu Religious and Endowment Board of the Government of Tamil Nadu . An Executive officer appointed by the Board manages the temple along with Srirangam Ranganathaswamy temple , Sri Azhagiya Manavala Perumal Temple at Woraiyur , Sri Vadivazhagiya Nambi Perumal Temple and Mariamman Temple at Anbil . Annadhanam scheme , which provides free food to devotees , is implemented in the temple by the Board . Under the scheme , free food is offered to hundred devotees every day in the temple and the expenditure is fully funded by the contributions from devotees .

= = Architecture = =

Pundarikakshan Perumal temple is located in Thiruvellarai , a village 27 km (17 mi) from Tiruchirappalli , on the Thuraiyur road . The shrine of Pundarikakshan is built on a 50 ft (15 m) tall artificial hill . There are two stepped entrances to the sanctum , Utharayana Vaasal and Dhakshanayana Vaasal , each open for a six @-@ month period . From 15 January to 15 June , Utharayana Vaasal is opened , Dhakshanaya Vaasal is for the other six @-@ month period .

Pundarikakshan , the presiding deity of the temple is named " Maayavan " during Dakshinayanam and " Thai Maatha Naayagan " during Uttarayanam . The two gates in the temple are believed to represent the continuous cycle of entering into life and getting out of it . An image of the presiding deity , Pundarikakshan , is seen in a standing posture facing east . He is believed to have appeared to Garuda , Sibi Chakravarthy , Bhoomadevi , sage Markandeya , Brahma and Shiva , all of whose images are housed inside the sanctum . The consort of Pundarikakshan , Shenbagavalli , (also called " Peri Pirattiyar Lakshmi Devi ") has a separate shrine . The Utsavar (festival image) of Pankajavalli is called Shenbagavalli and is housed inside the same shrine . The temple has Pallava sculptural depictions of Narasimha and Varaha , two of the ten avatars of Vishnu . Narasimha is depicted holding a demon in one panel , the other shows him tearing the demon .

The rectangular walls around the temple enclose all the eight shrines and six of the seven water bodies associated with the temple . Besides the main shrine for Pundarikakshan and Pangayavalli , the temple has shrines for Azhwars , Garuda , Ramanujar and Uyyakondar . The seven water bodies are Divya Theertham , Kanda Kshree Theertham , Theertham , Chakkara Theertham , Pushkala Theertham , Padma Theertham and Varaaha Manikarnika Theertham . The vimanam (structure over the santum) is called Vimalaakkruthi Vimaanam . There are various sculptural depictions of Krishna on the pillars of the temple , in the most notable of which he is depicted dancing on a pot . He is seen dancing in Swastika posture with his bun like hair @-@ do , ornaments and anklet . In another sculpture , he is seen slaying the demon Bhagasura . The Vijayanagar and Nayak kings commissioned the Krishna paintings on the exterior walls of the shrine of Pundarikakshan ; they have clear Telugu language labels . Paintings with some of the popular themes from the epic Ramayana were also commissioned by the Nayak kings in the temple .

The rajagopuram , the main gateway tower , is an unfinished structure . A swastika @-@ shaped temple tank built during 800 AD is present in the south @-@ western corner of the street around the temple . It has four stepped gateways , each having 51 steps . The tank is believed to have been built by Kamban Araiyan during the reign of Dantivarman . In modern times , it is maintained by the Department of Archaeology of the Government of Tamil Nadu . The temple complex covers an area of 2 @. 62 ha (6 @. 5 acres) , while the tank covers an area of 0 @. 1256 ha (0 @. 310 acres) .

A archaeological study in 2010 revealed that the layout of the rock @-@ cut caves in the temple is similar to that of other rock @-@ cut temples such as the Rockfort and Pechipalai cave temple . The unfinished caves in the temple , along with the lower cave temples in Tiruchirappalli and Tiruparankunram , each have a shrine for Shiva in the east and Vishnu in the west , separated by a central bay between them .

= = Legend = =

The word Vellarai means white rock . Owing to the presence of white rocks in the region , the place is historically referred as Thiru Vellara . As per Hindu legend , when Sibi Chakravarthy stayed there with his warriors , a white boar crossed his path . He chased it and the boar hid inside a hole . Markandeya , a sage , was doing penance there and the king narrated the incident to him . The sage asked the king to fill the hole with milk . While doing so , Hindu god Vishnu appeared before them . The sage asked the king to bring 3700 Vaishnavites from the north and build a temple on the site for Vishnu . As requested , the king took 3700 Vaishnavites and started building the temple . While doing so , one of the Vaishnavites was killed in transit and the king was concerned by the accident . Vishnu appeared incognito as Pundarikakshan , a Vaishnavite , and requested to be counted among the 3700 . According to another legend Lakshmi , the consort of Vishnu , performed penance at the temple , and Vishnu appeared before her as Sengamalakannan . The presiding deity has since been called " Thamarai Kannan " , meaning the one who has eyes resembling lotus ; his consort is called " Pankacha Valli " . The Hindu god Shiva in form of Neelivaneswarar is believed to have worshiped Pundarikakshan to absolve himself from the sin of holding Brahma 's severed head . Vishnu appeared to both Shiva and Brahma , adhering to their prayers .

= = Religious significance = =

The temple is revered in Nalayira Divya Prabandham , the 7th ? 9th century Vaishnava canon , by Periazhwar in eleven hymns and Thirumangai Azhwar in thirteen hymns . The temple is classified as a Divyadesam , one of the 108 Vishnu temples that are mentioned in the book . Some of the ancient Sanskrit books consider the temple as a uthamakshetram , meaning the place that gives the best to its devotees . The sculptures on the pillars of the temple reveal the earliest practice of Krishna worship in Tamil Nadu . Vedantha Desikar (1269 ? 1370) has revered the temple in his work Hamsa Sandesam . As per Hindu legend , the eighteen steps in the temple represent the eighteen chapters of the Hindu scripture Bhagawad Gita and the last four steps represent the four vedas , the sacred Hindu religious texts . The sound made in front of some of the big pillars of the temple echoes around the temple . Some of the sacred verses are recited more than once in front of these pillars during worship . Thiruvellarai is the birthplace of Uyyakondar , a disciple of Ramanuja and Thirukurukai Piran pillan . Uyyakondar (also called Engalazhwan) is believed to have taught Sri Bhasyam to Nadadhoor Ammal in the temple .

According to Hindu legend Ramanuja (1017 ? 1137) , the leading expounder of Vishishtadvaita philosophy , visited the temple . One of his disciples placed Ramanuja 's sandals along with the image of Varadarajar . Ramanujar became furious at this , for which the disciple explained that for Ramanuja Varadarajar is god , but for him , Ramanuja is supreme . Thiruvellarai is the birthplace of Uyyakondar , a disciple of Nathamuni and Thirukurukai Piran pillan . Acharya Uyyakondar (Engalazhwan) is believed to have taught Sri Bhasyam to Nadadhoor Ammal in the temple .

= = Festivals and religious practices = =

The temple priests perform the pooja (rituals) during festivals and on a daily basis . As at other Vishnu temples of Tamil Nadu , the priests belong to the Vaishnavaita community , a Brahmin sub @-@ caste . The temple rituals are performed six times a day : Ushathkalam at 7 a.m. , Kalasanthi at 8 : 00 a.m. , Uchikalam at 12 : 00 p.m. , Sayarakshai at 6 : 00 p.m. , Irandamkalam at 7 : 00 p.m. and Ardha Jamam at 10 : 00 p.m. Each ritual has three steps : alangaram (decoration) , neivethanam (food offering) and deepa aradanai (waving of lamps) for both Pundarikakshan and Pankajavalli . During the last step of worship , nagaswaram (pipe instrument) and tavil (percussion instrument) are played , religious instructions in the Vedas (sacred text) are recited by priests , and worshippers prostrate themselves in front of the temple mast . There are weekly , monthly and fortnightly rituals performed in the temple .

The Chariot festival is the most prominent festival of the temple , and for the surrounding villages . It is celebrated during the Tamil month of Chittirai (March ? April) when devotees pull the chariot round the streets of Tirvellarai . Verses from Nalayira Divya Prabandham are recited by a group of temple priests amidst music with nagaswaram (pipe instrument) and tavil (percussion instrument) . The chariot festival is unique in the state as a community feast is offered by several individuals and committees , a custom many centuries old . The processional idols of Pundarikakshan and Pankajavalli are brought to the temple car early in the morning amidst religious chanting . Ratharohanam , the rituals associated with taking the idols to the temple car , is performed at an auspicious time before commencing the procession .