

Artistic Narratives in Military Spaces: Sculptural Reliefs and Symbolism of Sankagiri Entrances in Salem District

Dr. R Pricila¹, Letitia K Vinoy²

^{1,2}Assistant Professor, Department of History, Holy Cross College, Trichy

Abstract: Sankagiri, an impressive fort is seen on a hillock of Salem district, with its elaborate, massive ramparts running all the way the hill. This fort is said to have been the holding of “Theeran Chinnamalai” an indigenous warrior who fought against British oppression. This paper tries to traces out the historical significance of Sankagiri fort and elaborates its architectural features.

Keywords: Fort, Mandapas, Fort entrance

I. INTRODUCTION

Sankagiri was earlier known as Kunrathur as per the inscription available. Since the hill is in the form of conch, the hill is called Sankagiri, adding the Sanskrit name of ‘giri’ means hill. Present districts of Salem, Erode, Coimbatore, Tiruppur, Dharmapuri, Krishnagiri, Namakkal, Karur and Dindigul belonged to Kongu region with Sankagiri as its capital.

Sankagiri Fort was built in the 14th century by the Madurai Nayaks and later expanded. As per the historian Mr Karunaharan, the fort was constructed from Chozhas and expanded by Hoysalas, Pandiyas, Vijayanagara kings, Madurai Nayaks, Mysore Udayars, Mysore Thalavais and British. Even though the 6,7 and 8th walls were constructed by Mysore Kings, it was believed that the hilltop temples, mandapas and ponds existed more than 800 to 900 years before. It has 11 fort walls built around a hill and in the last phase, these walls were built by the British.

¹The fort was once a seat of power and authority. This fort is very strongly built by placing the granite stones one over other. Tipu Sultan considered this fort as his important military base and later its was taken over by British army. The main reason is the strategic location of the fort as the only side of the hill is climbable and all the others are extreme steep to climb. The fort complex includes death well, granary, two oil godowns, one explosives godown, two Mosques, two Perumal (VaradharajaPerumal and Top Hill ChennaKesavaPerumal) temples, some administrative buildings of the British Army and cemeteries of British soldiers. The Varadaraja Temple is alone renovated and used for worshiping. The rest of the buildings are in dilapidated condition.

Besides being a strong military base during different dynasties, the Sankagiri fort is known for the myths surrounding the places in it. ²A tale about a cave on the fort notes that once a Muslim monk by name Sha-Ha-Mardan- Gazi, entered the cave and never returned, but was strangely seen on the same day at another cave near Shivasamudra Falls in Karnataka. The fort, which has many entrances with strange names

¹ <https://salem.nic.in>

² Baig, Amita and Singh, Joginder, 2010, Forts and Palaces of India, p.56, Om Books International, Delhi.

like *RanamandalaVaasal* (The gate of bloodshed) and *VellaikaaranVasal* (White man's gate), contains another entrance named after an agricultural woman's who used to carry buttermilk to the British soldiers atop the mountain. Interestingly, the gateway is called *MorthittiVasal* (Buttermilk Gate) ! The geography of irregular fort is dictated by the terrain. Some of the fort walls have long and meandering shape.

II. ARCHITECTURE OF SANKAGIRI FORT

The Sankagiri Hill Fort takes us through various fort entrances. Fort entrances are connected with the features of Hindu temple architecture like Mandapams. The architectural styles of different dynasties can be identified in the entrances of the fort. We can find many temples inside the fort which were devoted to several deities.

THE TEN ENTRANCES OF THE SANKAGIRI FORT

There is history for every entrances of the Sankagiri Fort. Each entrance have intricate carvings and pillars with in it. The rain water from the top of the hill passes through the entrances of the fort.

1. FIRST FORT ENTRANCE - PULIMUKHA VASAL or ULIMUKHA VASAL



The first entrance is known as “Pulimukha Vasal” as we can find a tiger’s face at the top of the Entrance. The Entrance was shaped as inverted ‘U’ and it will not be visible when you see from straight. Once we enter, there is a hall, may be a resting place.³ We can notice an open space in the left turn, the soldiers will be hiding here. The invaders will barge in after breaching the first entrance, the soldiers hiding in that left corner will attack them thus slowing them down, it’s a defense strategy.

2. SECOND FORT ENTRANCE – KALKOTTAI VASAL or KALLA VASAL

A small entrance can be identified by the left side of the main entrance like a wicket gate with a mandapam attached to it. The mandapam pillars are designed with the reliefs of Hanuman, Rama and Seetha in the posture of sitting on the laps of Rama, Arjunan’s penance to get Pasupathaasthiram, Bairavar, Shiva in hunter posture, war between Shiva & Arjuna and a Prince who constructed the mandapam. After crossing the second entrance there is Veerabadra temple with Nandhi statue. We can find a pond with steps at two sides in the right side of the second gate. The face of the nandhi statue in Veerabadra temple is destructed due to the ⁴number of invasions occurred during the period. The intricate carvings and the art work shows the skilled workmanship. Kannada inscription can be found in the site.

³ Singh, Pratap Ashok, 1987, Forts and Fortifications in India, p.116, Agam Kala Prakashan, Delhi.

⁴ Interview with History teacher Mr. Karunkaran, Salem on 20.08.2023



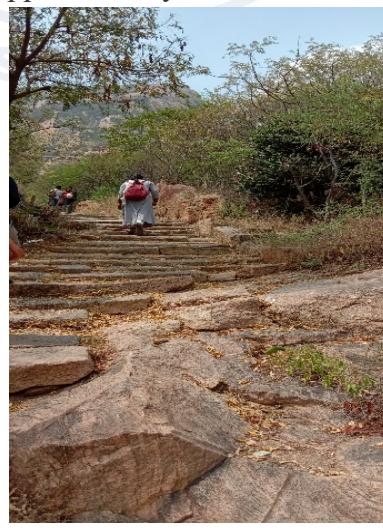
3. THIRD FORT ENTRANCE – KADIKARA VASAL

The Third entrance is called “Kadikaravasal” as this entrance was used to calculate the time using the sunlight here.



In this entrance too, we can find very intricate stone reliefs. The relief of Suryan, Chandran, Raghu, khethu, fish etc., Ganga and Yamuna with flower rings are designed on the pillars of mandapam. From this point sun will not be visible during evening hours, and shows the time. This gives warning to the soldiers.

After crossing the third entrance, two temples are there. Among the two temples, one is very ancient. People call this as “Kottai Mariamman Temple”. It is about 800 years old. The other temple is “Varadharaja Perumal Temple”.⁵ This belongs to Vijayanagar Empire Era of 15th century and it is really big. The temple played a pivotal role during wars by giving protection to the people through its shielded roof. Apart from the two temples, another temple is dedicated to Naga god. We have to climb the steps to reach the fourth entrance and the path will be tough from here. Because approximately there are 1400 steps to reach the hilltop.



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Karunakaran, K, Sankagiri Fort and Town History, p. 120, Priyadarshini Publications, Salem.

4. FOURTH FORT ENTRANCE – RANA MANDAPA VASAL

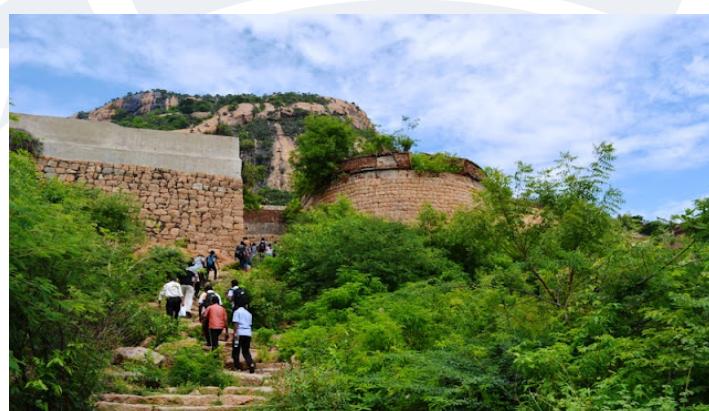
The fourth fort entrance is decorated with Sanguchakkaram (Conch and Chakra) and Gods patham reliefs are there. (Both positions are reversed). The devotees who cannot climb to worship Sri Chennakesava Perumal, they will worship here and return back. Anchaneya relief is carved beautifully. There are 21 + 12 (Right side and left side) view point built with brick, through which shooting will be done on the enemies through pistols. Before 5th entrance a platform was constructed to place guns.



5. FIFTH FORT ENTRANCE – PUDUKOTTAI VASAL

A demon's relief with horn & mustache and a tortoise on the right side of the entrance. The mandapam pillars are carved reliefs of Lion, Kamadhenu, Hanuman, Narasimhar . The first five entrances are constructed by a king named KUNNI VETTUVAN. This fort was built stage by stage during different periods by the kings as per their administrative convenience. The 6th, 7th, and 8th entrances were built during Vijayanagar Empire period and Chola empire. But Archaeological Survey of India has not referred about the presence of Pandyas here, but we can find two fishes symbol of Pandya dynasty in the entrance.

After crossing the fifth entrance, we can see one mosque, where muslims worshipped. When we climb up, it's a wall, we can also monitor people movement from here. When we climb up after the fifth entrance, small Mandapam will appear. Soldiers were used to stay there for safety purpose.



KAIKFEER DHARGA

A Muslim prayer hall, which was once a Hindu temple can be found here.⁶ The unique feature here is the secret passage of 200 meters which is believed that Sufi muslim saint Abdul Qadir Jailam, also known as Dhastagir stayed here. He earned the title Mahabub Suhani (Most Beloved of God). Nobody ventured into the secret passage during recent years.



JAMIA PALLIVASAL

This is also a muslim prayer place which can be found on the hill below Sri Chennakesava Perumal temple, with steps chiseled on the rock.⁷ This is standing on three walls without roof and it was believed that a lady by name Jatsaabee was buried under this mandapam.

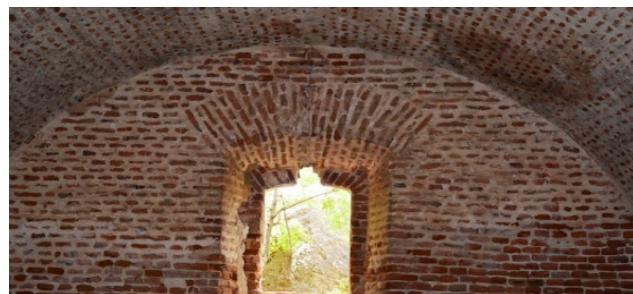
6. SIXTH FORT ENTRANCE – ROKKA THITTIVASAL

This entrance has a mandapam with a Vinayagar relief on it. There is vertical rock with a pond which was used for drinking purposes. This pond is called as Surya pali. Immediately after crossing the sixth entrance, in the left side, there is a cave underneath which may be approximately 15 feet. There are two stone relics depicting Lord Shiva.



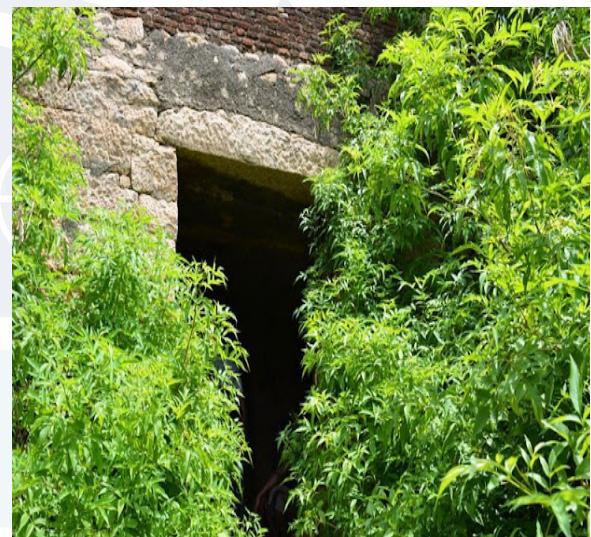
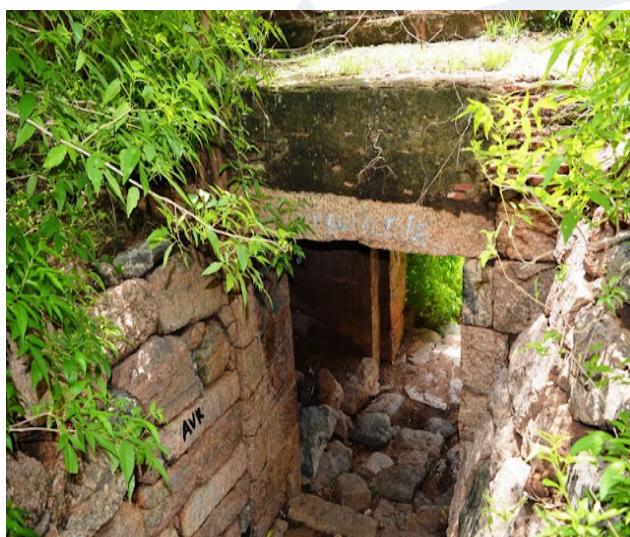
⁶ Rajannan, Busnagi, 1992, Salem Cyclopaedia: A Cultural and Historical Dictionary of Salem District, Tamil Nadu, p.52, Institute of Kongu Studies

⁷ Tewari, Rakesh, 2016, Indian Archaeology 2006-07-A Review, Archaeological Survey of India, Janpath, New Delhi.



7. SEVENTH FORT ENTRANCE – PAVAL THITTIVASAL.

The 7th entrance has a small mandapam to take rest. After the seventh resting entrance, on little up there is a Thunder striken boulder, it is called so because, that stone got split into two because of thunder strike.



8. EIGHTH FORT ENTRANCE – IDIVIZUNTHAN KUNDRU VASAL.

The Gun powder storage pit can be found by entering the 8th Threshold. It was Mandapam like structure. The original entrance of the mandapam was destroyed during 1880, and the Britishers constructed an explosive storage godown with brick and lime mortar.⁸ The gun powder and explosives were used to be stored here. They used to dump and store the gun powder from the front and will take and use in the other side.

Before proceeding to the ninth gate we could find a narrow path going left. From there we could find a beautiful scenic view from the hill. At a distant location we could find it is Arthanareeswarar Temple of Tiruchengode.

9. NINTH FORT ENTRANCE – COMPANY GATE

The Ninth Entrance is called as “Company Gate” as it was built by the East India Company during 1799. The British resided here. All their important offices and officer’s quarters are found after this entrance. The entrance is built very strong with high walls which holds major strategic importance.⁹ This was constructed to celebrate the victory against Tippu sultan. The doors were removed now but the fixed portion of the keel exists. There were totally six door hinges. From the hinges available, we could get to know that the doors must have been

⁸ Rao, Vittal, 2018, Forts in Tamil Nadu, India, 58, Pustaka Digital Media.

⁹ Murugesan, C.S, 2020, Historical Forts of Tamil Nadu, p.180, Shankar Pathippagam, Chennai.

huge and thick. The once constructed hoses for Kajaravuthar was destroyed. If we move further we can reach the 10th entrance.



10. TENTH FORT ENTRANCE – MYSORE or UDAYAR VASAL.

The steps leading to this gate was chiseled on the rock. Only 37 steps out of 60 remains now, the rest were hidden by the boulders. On the left wall of the tenth entrance, we could find demons gods, and a mythical story called “Gajendra Moksha” which was carved on the stone. The mandapam has the relief of Boothaganas, Suryan, Chandran and the story of Gajendramoksham. The tenth entrance was used as a resting place. The pillars here have rich carvings. There is Kamadhenu and many other stone relics with carving of four monkeys, wherein we could trace a monkey in all four sides.



This gate might have been constructed by the Mysore kings. There are lot of interesting places after this entrance. After crossing the Mandapa, climbing up the stairs , an Ancheneya temple, w is there. After crossing this temple, there is an other temple called Chennakesava Perumal Temple. The Varadharaja Perumal Temple at the foothills, during festivities he will be taken here to the top at this temple and returns after the festivities. Next to Chennakesava Perumal temple, if we walk for 150 Metres in a narrow path down, one mosque is there showing the striking feature of religious intolerance among the rulers. This will be clearly visible from the foothills. This fort was under the control of Tipu Sultan for a long time, so we could find a Mosque used by the people. From the mosque in the top, we could see the view of entire town. A watchtower is located in the place little above this mosque. From there, we could see the region to an extent. A triangle shaped hill at a distance is visible, which is named as the Old Sankagiri Durg.

In the top, there are lot of water storing tanks. As there were many soldiers, they require water. Each tank had its own purpose like drinking, cleaning horses, cooking and many other utilities. The rain water is carefully channelized to each one of these tanks, if all these tanks are filled the surplus will be stored at the pond in foothill. An excellent water management system could be witnessed.



At the top, a Mandapam called “Nelkuthi Mandapam”, is used to store the grains in order to protect the people from famine. These granaries indicate the benevolence of the rulers. There were three rooms, they served as oil storage tanks.



There were lots of cruel punishments given to the prisoners those days. The notable feature of the fort is the places which served as punishing fields. The place called “Man Hole” is a stone structure with 6 feet high and 5 feet wide and a small opening at the top. People used to push the convict inside, through the hole and close it. After the person dies, the corpse will be taken out and thrown as a prey to eagles. The skin peeling hall here highlights the severe punishments of the period, wherein the skin of the convict is peeled off and he will be thrown down the valley. Due to this, crime rates were reduced and law and order was strictly followed.

III. CONCLUSION

The Sankagiri fort in Salem district, which is maintained by Archaeological Survey of India is an underrated historical spot. The paper emphasizes on the significance and architecture of the fort where we can identify both the worshipping places of Hindus and Muslims. The fort houses many Hindu temples inside the fort which were devoted to several deities. Kottai Muneeswaran temple, Sri Veerabhadra temple, which was constructed during 16th century, Sri Kottai Mariamman temple, Sri Varadharaja Perumal temple, Sri Chennakesava Perumal temple are the major temples inside the fort. The presence of Darga of sufi saint

Kafeer and Jamia Pallivasal is noteworthy. It shows the religious harmony and intolerance of the rulers in the Salem district.

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