



Kalugumalai Vettuvankoil: A Cultural Tourist Centre

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Abstract:

As a cultural importance tourist centre, Kalugumalai Vettuvankoil is the monumental work of the early Pandyas. The cave temple of Lord Shiva is famous for its architectural beauty. Once it was one of the important centres of the Jains. The proximity and diversity of the Jain sculptures and Vettuvankoil show that the two religions may have coexisted while still not interfering with each other. Kalugumalai attracts large number of domestic and foreign tourists. Recently, the Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation has initiated steps for the development of Kalugumalai region. This will help the cause of promotion of tourism in this region.

Cultural tourism is the most demanding tourism today. It is the subset of tourism concerned with a country or region's culture especially its arts. Tamil Nadu has numerous cultural important tourist centres. Among these, Kalugumalai is important one. The rock-cut temple at Kalugumalai is the monumental work of the early Pandyas, though an incomplete one, the aesthetic beauty of the sculptures remind us of its equality with Kailasanatha temple, Ellora. Kalugumalai, Thoothukudi district of Tamil Nadu is situated at a distance of 50 kms away from Tirunelveli. It is a massive dome of rock, some 300' in height. Kalugumalai literally means the hill of the vulture, the shape of the hill also resembles a vulture. The place is therefore known as Kalugumalai.¹ Once it was one of the important centers of the Jains. The bas-reliefs found here are the contributions of the Jains. The cave temple of Lord Shiva is famous for its architectural beauty.

The object of focus in this town is a rocky hill with a large number of Jain sculptures on top and an 8th century Pandya temple,² Vettuvankoil situated halfway up the hill. At the approach to the hill was a bridge over a canal. During the monsoon, water would flow over the bridge and the whole area would be green. Steep steps had been cut that went right upto the top. We took the other, circuitous route that were first to Vettuvankoil and then sloped more gently upwards. A careful study of the Vimana shows many differences.³ Lord Shiva is shown playing an Udukkai or drum, and not with a Veena as in the former. Lord Vishnu, is shown with Chandra and Surya on either side with the latter accompanied by the consorts. A traditional pattern is followed with respect to the direction faced by these gods, for instance Lord Shiva faces east. Also, the three-tier structure, with eight sculptures in the first tier is typical of Pandya architecture. The Pillayarpatti temple and the one at Tirupparankundram are Pandya temples built in this style.⁴

There is a story told of a father and son, sculptors working on this temple, the father was sculpting the rock at the top. While the son who was sitting at the bottom of the hill, listened to the sound of the chisel travelling downwards and following it, made a sculpture that was of extraordinary beauty. Lore has it that

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the father slew the son in a fit of jealousy, thereby giving the temple its name, Vettuvankoil, "temple of the one who cut". Blood curdling, but that is the way of folklore.⁵

At the top of the hill where a beautiful banyan tree casts its shadow over a row of Jain Tirtankaras, frozen in time setting a date on sculpture is a very tricky job and depends much on the interpretation of history.⁶ A deep insight into the culture and times is required. According to P. Ramachandran, sculptor and scholar in Asiatic studies, the Kalugumalai Jain sculptures must have been sculpted during 8th-10th century C.E.⁷ The statues of Parsvanatha and Adinatha, which are similar to the work in Vettuvankoil, must have been built during the time of Pandya ruler Parantaka Nedunjadaiyan in the 8th century C.E.⁸ and the rest over a period of time in the 9th and 10th centuries, during the time of Parantaka Viranarayanan.⁹

Kalugumalai is also important because it holds many inscriptions that shed light on the prevalence of Jainism was rooted out from the Tamil country in the 6th century by Saivism and was revived must later on by the Digamber saints who came from North India.¹⁰ However, the Kalugumalai sculptures bear evidence that it continued to exist in the Pandya regions in the 8th to 10th centuries.¹¹

The proximity and diversity of the Jain sculptures and Vettuvankoil show that the two religions may have coexisted, while still not interfering with each other. Also, the indigenous and independent nature of this religion is evidenced by inscriptions that state that there were many women teachers and saints.¹² This is not practice in the form which came from the North at a later period. So the Kalugumalai site is a treasured historical monument to the existence of a whole unique culture.¹³

Kalugumalai contains a priceless unfinished Pandya monolith cave temple, part of the iconographic richness that helped chronicle the burgeoning richness of the Tamil culture, traditions and sacred centres containing religious art.¹⁴ At the top of the hill, there is another temple dedicated to Lord Muruga, known here as Kalugachalamurthy or Arumugasamy. This Murugan temple faces southwest. Around the sanctum of Lord Muruga, several mandapas were built by the Rajas of Ettayapuram.¹⁵ The Panchaloga Uthsava Vighram of Lord Muruga is a graceful one. Saint Arunagirinathar had visited this shrine and sung about it in his famous Thirupugazh.¹⁶ The temple has a car, a gold palanquin, ten silver vahanas, a wooden ratha and five other vahanas. Pujas are performed six times daily. Skandashasti, Thaipooam, Panguni Uthiram and Vaikasi Visakam are the important festivals in this temple.¹⁷

Kalugumalai attracts large number of tourists as well as archaeologists from India and other countries. Kalugumalai is well connected by roadways in all the Southern districts of Tamil Nadu. It is 15 kms away from the Kumarapuram Railway station and the nearest airport is Thoothukudi airport. Recently, the Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation has initiated steps for the development of Kalugumalai region.¹⁸ If proper facilities are provided it will definitely increase the arrival of tourists of large numbers to this spot. So, the Tamil Nadu Government should come forward to provide the facilities which will attract more number of tourists to this area. This will help the cause of promotion of tourism in this region.

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