

The Architectural Splendor of Pushpagiri Temple complex with the Reference of Chenna Kesava Temple

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Abstract: The Pushpagiri Temple Complex holds immense spiritual significance for Hindus in the Kadapa region, situated in Andhra Pradesh, India. This location found on the shores of the Penna River, about 16 kilometers from Kadapa City. The multiple temples in Pushpagiri are well known for Saivas and Vaishnavas alike, this is the only sacred location. Saivas refer to it as "Madhya Kailasam," and Vaishnavas refer to it as "Madhya Ahobila." The only location in Andhra Pradesh where the holy peetham of Sankaracharya is situated is Pushpagiri, also referred to as "Second Hampi." This ranks among the significant Advaita mutts founded by Sankaracharya. The holy temple site has been gifted with grants and monuments by successive rulers, kings, and feudal landlords who controlled the region. The sacred temple of Pushpagiri complex's architectural designs date from the period of the Ikshvakus to the contemporary chieftains who served the Vijayanagara Empire's monarchs. Cholanadu's architectural influence was particularly noticeable within Pushpagiri shrines. The Chennakesava Swamy temple remains the biggest of the many sanctuaries in Pushpagiri. During the rule of the later Vijayanagara dynasty, the Musunuri leaders constructed the Chennakesava temple. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata tales are depicted in the sculptures adorning the shrines, which also show different Hindu divine beings in various poses.

Key Words: *Pushpagiri, Pennar, Art and Architecture, Advaita mutt, Sankaracharya, Shaivites and Vaishnavites, Chennakesava Swamy temple.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The history of the sacred Pushpagiri temple complex has been extensively chronicled. There are other Puranas that support this, ancient texts such as the Srisaila volume in the Epic of Skanda and the Sri Ranga Mahatma in the Sacred Text of Garuda find mention in the Sundarakanda section of Valmiki's Ramayana; the location is thought to have been referenced. It was thought in antiquity that constructing a temple here would bring prosperity; thus, the kings and wealthy people built several temples here. Hence the historical name Pushpagiri, those in Sanskrit word mean a florid mountain. Therefore, in ancient times, Pushpagiri was graced by over 101 temples. The temple complex is situated at an elevation of 380 meters (1,000 feet) above sea level, spanning approximately 7.5 square kilometres (2.9 square miles). The surrounding hamlets are enveloped in lush greenery, with crops sustained by both rainfall and the river's continuous flow throughout the year. Despite the region's hot tropical summers, water remains abundant due to the underground reserves supported by the river. While a small arid mountainous section marks the spot where the mound is believed to have fallen, the rest of the landscape is richly verdant, predominantly cultivated with paddy fields. During the monsoon season, the scenery transforms into a breathtaking spectacle. The Pinakini River flows west to east, altering its course southward at Pushpagiri before shifting east again near the hamlet of Sivalapalle, ultimately reaching the sea in Nellore District. An Agastya Maharishi ashram once stood Approximately 10 kilometres away from the point where the Papagni and Pinakini rivers converge. Following his passage of the Vindhya Mountains, Sage Agastya pledged never to return in order to prevent the range from enlarging and competing with the Himalayas. The sage remained in the southern part, but his disciple creates a sacred Linga in this region and gone towards the Ganges valley. The Linga temple eventually adopted the name Sri Agastheeswara Swamy temple in honour of the renowned saint Agastya.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: The presence of numerous well-preserved structures standing side by side, untouched by acts of vandalism driven by differing communal ideologies, clearly reflects the sense of harmony that

once existed among the people of Kadapa district. This peaceful coexistence, particularly in the Pushpagiri region, prevailed long before conflicts arose between Shaivites and Vaishnavites. This is supported by a number of temples with two of them being located close together. Chennakesava's Vaishnavite Shrine and the Shaivite temples of Indranatheswara, Bhimeswara, Trikuteswara, and Vaidyanatheswara that surround it. According to a local tradition, the Amrita Sarovar would be an exciting experience because of its sanctity—when Garuda was transporting nectar from Indra Loka, one drop of it landed at this location and transformed the pool into a sacred one. Despairing over his difficult life, an elderly farmer decided to jump into the pool one day and end his life. He changed into a young man after the fall. When he realised this, he was so shocked that he ordered his wife and some oxen to swim in the pool. They became youthful as well. When word of the holy pool spread throughout the land, everyone flocked to this location in a move to experience youth. Right after Satya Loka heard the news, Brahma enlisted the aid of Lord Vishnu and Lord Siva. Anjaneya was given the order to close the pool. Anjaneya threw a hill into the water, but it didn't sink; instead, it began to float like a flower. Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva choose to clasp their feet at the ends. The imprints left by Siva's foot and Vishnu's foot, respectively, were known as Rudrapada and Vishnupada. This Temple Complex features a long-documented history. The temple is described during the Skanda Purana, Rasaratnakara of Satyanatha, in Srisaila Volume. As found in the Ikshvaku inscription, which were later on discovered from the location, it was recognized under the name Gateway to the South entrance to the renowned Jyothirlinga shrine of Srisailam. The location has held spiritual significance since the time ruled by Karikala Chola during the early Chola period.

Various monarchs, rulers, and native leaders who dominated the area donated gifts and landmarks within the temple premises. Later monarchs and governing nobles provided patronage. Numerous rulers from numerous dynasties have given the temple generous donations and endowments when kingdoms shifted and emerging dynasties began. Somadeva of the Vaidumba Dynasty, who took Chola authority, donated endowments to the temple, among them was the Pallava ruler Chiddana Devaraja. Yadava Singana, and another Kesa dynasty ruler. Sri Vaidyanatheswara Temple flourished in the patronage of Rashtrakuta monarch Krishna Vallabha, the one who granted land used for the shrine's regular care. The rulers of the Kakatiya dynasty, Gangaya Sahini along with Ambadeva, erected numerous more temples in their names in addition to the names of their queens and daughters, adding related to the architectural splendour of the holy site. The Musunuri rulers built the sacred Chennakesava shrine under the patronage of the later Vijayanagara emperors. As per an inscription, the principal Temple Tower of Chennakesava Swamy was constructed by a tantric sage known as Aghora Shivacharya.

3. ART AND ARCHITECTURE: The Pushpagiri shrine complex's architecture is divided into two categories: Shaivites and Vaishnavites. Shaivite temples are Indranatha, Vaidyanatha swamy, Trikutesvara, Bhimesvara and Vaishnavite temple is Chennakesava Temple.

Indranatha Temple: Also known as the Indranadheswara temple, the Indranatheswara shrine is situated on the northern side of the river, directly across from Pushpagiri town. The most ancient known mention of this holy place appears in a 1078 CE epigraph, a historical record signifying the estate donation by Ahavamalladeva of the Vaidumba family. Another epigraph from 1182 CE documents the allocation of lands situated in Mulakanadu region for the everyday rituals dedicated to the temple's presiding deity. The Indranadheswara Temple, which faces the east, incorporates a series of stone steps leading up situated by the Penna River. Within the temple complex, there is a courtyard and a partially ruined gateway tower. The temple's Gopuram is positioned slightly towards the southwest, and the overall structure is nearly square in shape. Upon entering, a Mandapa can be seen to leftward, strengthened by 12 intricately carved pillars in wonderful symmetry. Along the temple's circumambulatory pathway, towards the northwest, stands a sacred 'Bilva tree,' revered in the worship of Lord Shiva. Reflecting ancient architectural traditions, the Linga is enshrined within the sanctum sanctorum, preceded by a Mukhamandapa with 16 pillars which is encircled by three sub-shrines. The Mukhamandapa gives way to the Antaralaya, leading toward the main sanctum where the sacred Linga remains, while no rituals are currently performed. Outside the temple structure, there is a Mandapa dedicated to Nandi. A defining aspect of this temple is its expansive, open-pillared Mandapa with 16 intricately carved columns, forming the entrance to the chief shrine. All the sub-shrines remain unoccupied without any deities, excluding the chief shrine.



Figure:1 Indranatha Swamy temple, Pushpagiri, Kadapa.

Vaidyanatha Swamy Temple: Boasts immense religious and historical significance, drawing devotees from far-off places that seek blessings and offer prayers to Lord Vaidyanatha Swamy. The temple is situated within the prakara that



Figure:2 Vaidyanatha Swamy Temple, Pushpagiri, Kadapa, Andhra Pradesh.

encompasses both the Triketesvara and Bhimesvara shrines, with access provided through a gopura on its southern side. The temple faces eastward and comprises of a mukhamandapa, an antarala, and a garbhagriha in its plan. Inscriptions discovered within this ancient temple date returning to the 13th century A.D., The Vaidyanatheswara Swamy Temple received patronage from Krishna Vallabha, the Rashtrakuta monarch, who granted land for its every day upkeep. An ancient rock inscription verifying this discovery has been excavated by the ASI. The magnificent Vaidyanatha Swamy shrine is decorated with numerous reliefs and rock-cut sculptures of different Hindu celestial deities. The temple featuring the Sri Chakra within the sanctum of Kamakshi, positioned to the left upon entry the compound through the northern temple gateway is the most spectacular and

unquestionably ancient. There are two shrines across the entire complex, one for Kamakshi Devi and the other for Vaidyanatha Swamy.

Trikutesvara Temple: Also known as Chitrakutesvara Temple, is a magnificent structure located within the Vaidyanatha Swamy temple complex. The construction of three shrines - Hachalesvara, Pallavesvara, and Umamahesvara - was documented in an inscription dating back to A.D. 1255. The temple's foundation is made of sandstone while the superstructures are constructed with brick and stucco. The ground floor comprises a Nandimandapa, kalyanamandapa, and a mandapa transept that connects the mukhamandapa; around the mukhamandapa lies a shrine consisting of antarala and garbhagriha on its south, west, and north sides.

Bhimesvara Temple: The Chitrakutesvara complex's north eastern corner is where the Bhimesvara temple. This shrine is constructed of stone up to the cornice and a brick superstructure, and it faces east. This temple is made up of a Nandimandapa, a mukhamandapa, antarala, and a garbhagriha on the ground.



Figure: 3 Triketesvara Temple, Pushpagiri, Kadapa, Andhra Pradesh.

Chennakesava Temple: (Vaishnavite): The largest and best known among shrine is the Chennakesava Temple, which according to the earliest inscriptions present within the temple complex, dates back to 1298 A.D. The Musunuri Nayaks built the Chennakesava Temple during the rule of the later Vijayanagara kings. The temple faces west, featuring a towering Dwajasthambam that overlooks as the Penna River alters its path; it flows from east to south. Leading from the main gateway tower, a route directs visitors to the Pushpagiri temples nestled within the village of Pushpagiri. The Chennakesava shrine showcases remarkable architecture, comprising three sanctums on a raised platform, accompanied by two smaller shrines situated beyond it. Inside the elevated platform, the main sanctum enshrines Chennakesava, with a shrine to its left dedicated to a Linga. Additionally, a smaller shrine, once believed to house a seated image of Umamaheswara Swamy, has been left vacant due to vandalism. A relief carved into the back wall of this shrine is thought to be a representation of the original deity.



Figure:4 View of Bheemeswara, Triketeswara, Vaidyanatha temples.

In the temple's circumambulatory path, there is an additional sub-shrine in the northeast corner of the platform that contains another Shiva Linga. The temple features intricate carvings on all sides, and the sanctums of Chennakesava Swamy and the Shiva Linga are separated by a ridge to facilitate individual Parikrama around each shrine. A unique aspect of this temple is that both sanctums share a single flagstaff, where Garuda, depicted with fold hands, faces the shrine of lord Chennakesava.

The Chennakesava temple is oriented westward and enshrines a majestic 10-foot-tall standing idol of Chennakesava Swamy. The intricately carved stone aura surrounding the deity beautifully depicts the ten incarnations of Vishnu. The temple remains an active place of worship, where both the Shiva Linga and the divine idol are venerated. Completing the shrine's Parikrama leads to the sanctum of Rajyalakshmi Devi, the beloved consort of Chennakesava Swamy to the right side of her shrine stands a mandapa, and descending towards the river steps, there is a Hanuman shrine, that seems to have been introduced into the temple complex during a later period. The west-facing Tower traces its origins back to the era of Sage Aghora Sivacharya and has undergone several renovations across different periods. Within the temple premises lies a sacred water body known as Amrutha Sarovar (Nectar Lake). It is believed that this theertham possesses mystical properties, and bathing in its waters is said to reverse aging.



Figure: 5 Back view of Chennakesava Temple, Pushpagiri, Kadapa.

Iconographic Sculptures: The shrines feature intricate carvings of Hindu deities in diverse posture, illustrating scenes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. The outer walls of the temple are adorned with exquisite sculptures and carvings, featuring depictions of Sri Yoga Narasimha Swamy, Nataraja Swamy, Lord Shiva's family with their vahanas, Bhakta Kannappa, Vishnu in his various forms, Rama and Sita, Krishna imparting the Bhagavad Gita to Arjuna, Mahishasura Mardini, the dancing Ganapati, and numerous other fascinating carvings.



Figure: 6 The Varaha avatar, Incarnation of the Vishnu in the form of a boar Chennakesava temple, Pushpagiri, Kadapa



Figure: 7 Mahishasura mardini Chennakesava Temple, Pushpagiri, Kadapa



Figure: 8 A Story from Mahabharatha Krishna and Arjuna on Chariot, Chennakesava Temple Pushpagiri, Kadapa, Andhra Pradesh

4. CONCLUSION: The Pushpagiri temple complex, along with the surrounding villages, is home to scattered temples dedicated to both Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions. During a time when South India witnessed intense conflicts over the supremacy of different sects, this secluded region nestled amidst forests and mountains, remained a sacred space where both Shaivas and Vaishnavas worshipped in harmony. The Pushpagiri temple complex contains numerous inscriptions spanning various historical periods. The architectural styles of its temples have evolved significantly under the reigns of different kings and their feudal lords. The structures within the complex exhibit influences ranging from the Ikshvaku era to the later chieftains who served under the Vijayanagara Empire. Cuddapah district's mountainous terrain contributed to the rise of several local feudal kingdoms, which resisted foreign invasions for an extended period. The temple complex holds a well-documented history, tracing back to the early Ikshvakus and continuing through to the regional Zamindars. Unfortunately, some inscriptions have become illegible or have deteriorated over time due to neglect or deliberate vandalism by later rulers. However, a few significant inscriptions remain intact and readable.



Figure: 9 Intricate carvings on adhishtana, Chennakesava Temple
Pushpagiri Temple

The Chennakesava Swamy temple features intricate sculptures on all its sides, the temple complex features a ridge that divides the shrines of Chennakesava Swamy and Shiva Linga, allowing devotees to perform Parikrama around each deity individually. A distinctive aspect of this temple is its single flag-staff, bearing an image Garuda in a reverent posture, hands folded, face the Chennakesava Swamy shrine. The temple's carvings beautifully illustrate numerous Hindu deities in diverse poses, along with scenes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Notably, many of these carvings have remained in relatively good condition over time.

A testament to the enduring presence of ancient Hindu traditions and cultural practices in the Pushpagiri region for centuries and the annual temple festival is conducted for 10 days in March-April in every year and this pilgrim centre brims with devotees during Sivarathri and Vaikuntha Ekadasi, a large number of individuals from diverse locations people from across South India travel to the region for religious pilgrimages and tourism.

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