



JVARAHARESWARA ROCK-CUT CAVE TEMPLE AT NARTTAMALAI

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ABSTRACT

Narttamalai is a small hamlet lies on the northern part of Pudukkottai district of Tamil Nadu. It is about 19 kms from the district headquarters Pudukkottai and lies enroute of Thiruchirappalli-Pudukkottai highways in about two kms west of NH 210. The village is nestled between nine rocky hillocks and one among the hillock is Melaimalai lying west and south-west of the village is a treasure trove of early stone architecture. The hillock houses a structural temple and five rock-cut caves which belong to early medieval period. Rock-cut cave architecture flourished in the Tamil country between C.E. 6th to 9th centuries and Pudukkottai is next to Kanchipuram district of Tamil Nadu to bequeath rock-cut cave temples in rich number. The district Pudukkottai was under the sway of Muttaraiyars who were feudatories of the Pallavas and later under the Cholas with their rise in the mid of the 9th century C.E. Nearly twenty-two rock-cut caves are found in this district. This article entitled 'Jvarahareswara Rock-cut Cave Temple at Narttamalai' is purely a field based study and attempts to bring to limelight the architecture and history of this rock-cut cave temple.

Key Words: Narttamalai, Rock-cut cave temple, Muttaraiyas, Pudukkottai, Jvarahareswara

INTRODUCTION

Narttamalai is a small hamlet lies on the northern part of Pudukkottai district of Tamil Nadu.¹ It is about 19 kms from the district headquarters Pudukkottai and lies enroute of Thiruchirappalli-Pudukkottai highways in about two kms west of NH 210.² The village is nestled between nine rocky hillocks and one among the hillock is Melaimalai³ lying west and south-west of the village is a treasure trove of early stone architecture. The hillock houses a structural temple and five rock-cut caves which belong to early medieval period. Rock-cut cave architecture flourished in the Tamil country between C.E. 6th to 9th centuries and Pudukkottai is next to Kanchipuram district of Tamil Nadu to bequeath rock-cut cave temples in rich number. The district Pudukkottai was under the sway of Muttaraiyars who were feudatories of the Pallavas and later under the Cholas with their rise in the mid of the 9th century C.E. Nearly twenty-two rock-cut caves are found in this district. This article entitled 'Jvarahareswara Rock-cut Cave Temple at Narttamalai' is purely a field based study and attempts to bring to limelight the architecture and history of this rock-cut cave temple.

THE VILLAGE NARTTAMALAI

The name Narttamalai originated from the term Nagarattar-malai, or the hill of the Nagarattars, a settlement of mercantile community. Nagaram, Telingakulakalapuram, Telungakulakalapuram, Kulothungasolapuram are the other names of the village which are gleaned through inscriptions.⁴ The inscriptions reveal that the Nagaram or Narttamalai was a flourishing city under the active administration of a local civic body the 'Nagaram' during the medieval period.⁵ Narttamalai and its neighbourhood are rich in continuous cultural deposit viz., megalithic burial sites,⁶ remnants of Jainism,⁷ rock-cut cave temples, structural temples. A big tarn known as Arumaikulam is seen at the foot of the hillock. An inscription found on the northern bank of the sluice mention it as Animattaeri.⁸ Narttamalai is also a famous pilgrim center, the goddess temple called Narttamalai Mariamman temple attracts pilgrims from various parts of Tamil Nadu.

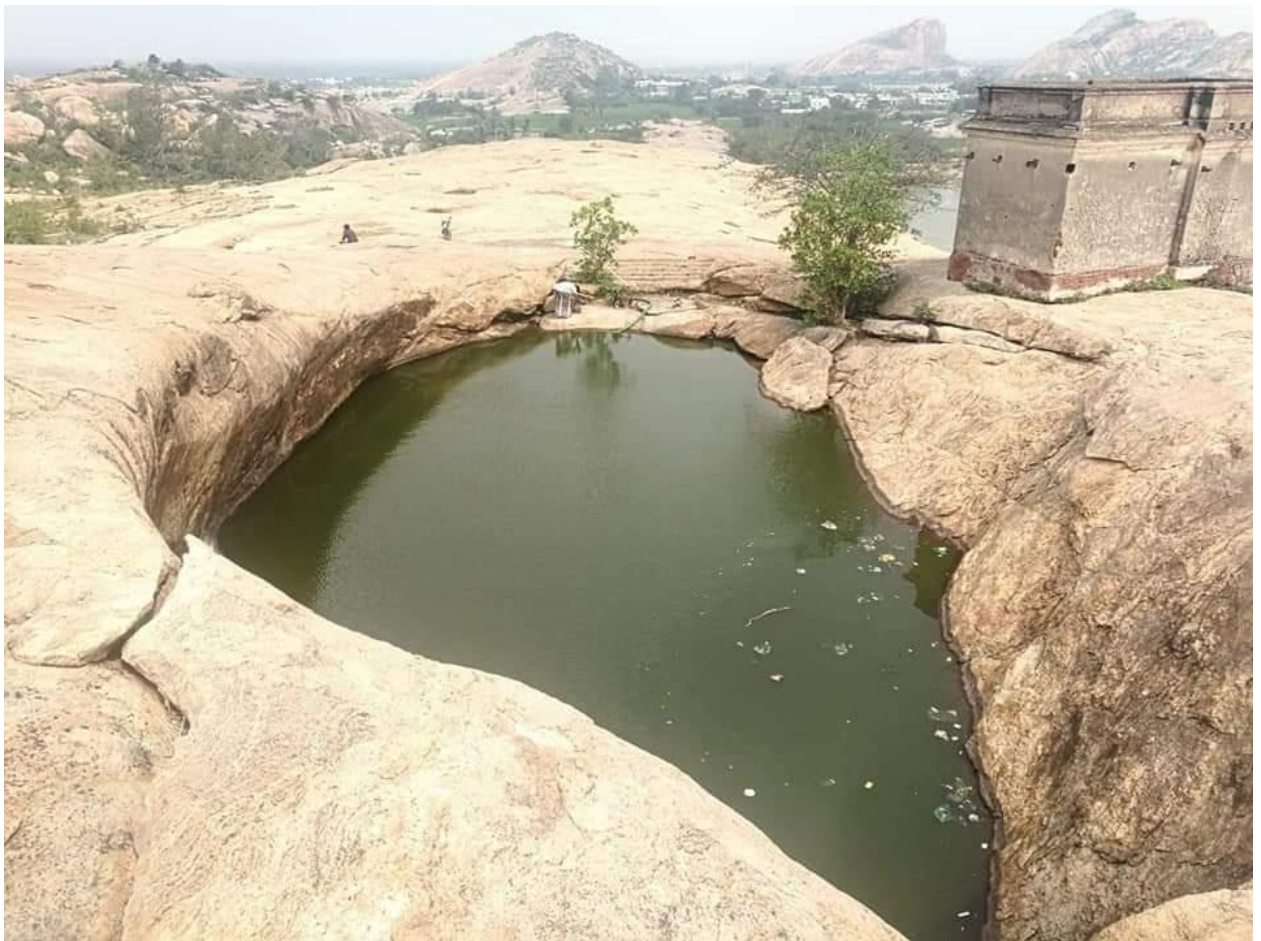


ANIMATTAERI AND THE MELAIMALAI HILLOCK

THE MONUMENTS OF MELAIMALAI HILLOCK – AN OVERVIEW

A structural temple and five rock-cut caves are found in the Melaimalai hillock. Vijayalaya Choleeswaram is the structural temple lies on the top ledge of the rocky hillock. In the early phase of temple architectural tradition i.e. in stone medium, Vijayalaya Choleeswaram is an innovation in various levels in the Chola-Muttaraiya region viz., double walled aditala, nagara and vesara talas, synthesis of nagara-cum-vesara in a tala, anarpita hara, hara for the mandapa, etc. Among the five rock-cut caves two remain unfinished. The rock-cut cave temples viz., Pazhiyiliswaram, Pathinenbhumi Vinnagaram and the two unfinished rock-cut caves are in the top ledge of the hillock on the elevated rock in front of the Vijayalaya Choleeswaram temple

complex. One of the rock-cut cave temple is excavated inside a crater on the way to the top-ledge of the hillock. Usually the pit is filled with rain water that inhumes the rock-cut cave temple for years, however an NGO has brought to the cave and deity to visibility after some 150 years.⁹



**THE TALAVARASINGAM THIRTHA IN THE HILLOCK
THE JVARAHARESWARA ROCK-CUT CAVE TEMPLE**

The rock-cut cave temple is a well formed cellar excavated on the western precipice of the tarn and a rock-cut Linga is housed in. The cellar is excavated 50cms inside the surface of the hillock which gives shaved extensions on sides and top. The side extensions are 50-55 cms in the upper level whereas 30-32cms at lower level due to natural tapering of the surface of the hillock. It is 196cms width between the side extensions. The cellar has a doorframe with rock-cut jambs, lintel and sill. The aperture between the jambs is 167cms and between the lintel and sill is 203cms, forming the doorway to the cellar. The cellar shrine is a cubical chamber; it is 257cms in the east-west and 263cms in the north-south directions and its height is 237 cms. The walls, roof and the floor of the cellar are well formed and with smooth finishing. A rock-cut Linga to a height of 161cms is formed in the center of the cellar. The square avudaiyar is 131 cms on all sides and 49cms height with the features of adhishtana. Jagati, kumuda, gala complex, pattika and the upari kampa are the features seen. The usual overhanging spout is absent instead the square avudaiyar has a very small spout facing north. The rock cut cylindrical bana is 49 cms.



JVARAHARESWARA ROCK-CUT CAVE TEMPLE

INSCRIPTIONS

An inscription¹⁰ and line drawings are seen just above the rock-cut cave temple on the surface of the hillock, that is, on the western brim of the tarn. The inscription mentions three calendars viz., Saka 1781, Kaliyuga 4958, Gregorian calendar 14th May 1857. Besides, the inscription mentions the tarn as Talavarasinga thirtha and the deity as Jvarahareswara. It details about the worship of the deity Jvarahareswara by the then King and Queen of Pudukkottai kingdom. Above the inscription inside a square line drawings of a trident and axe are shown.

The inscription further reveals that the water of the Talavarasinga thirtha was baled out completely and the deity Jvarahareswara who had been consecrated in the rock-cut cave temple inside the thirtha was offered with abhisheka, puja and offerings. Brahambadas Sri Sivaramsvamidass Excellency Raja Ramachandra Tondaiman Bahadur with his wife Rani Janakibai Saheb worshipped the deity Jvarahareswara. It is quite interesting to see that the inscription possess an English word 'Excellency' in transliterated in Tamil. Besides, a new inscription has been discovered on the northern jamb of the rock-cut cave temple. The inscription reads 'seerangaraya(rin) mun poosai'

CONCLUSION

The rock-cut cave temple lacks foundation inscriptions; hence architecture is the only source to assign period. As said earlier, the rock-cut architecture flourished in the Tamil country during C.E. 6th to 9th centuries and Pallavas, Pandyas, Muttaraiyas and Adhiyas were the dynasties who existed during that period and contributed to this

type of architecture in their regions. Pudukkottai region was under the control of the Muttaraiyas and they also actively contributed to this mode of architecture. Pazhiyili Iswaram of Narttamalai, Aalatturthali at Malayadipatti, Pushpavaneswara at Poovalaikudi are the rock-cut cave temples with foundation inscriptions that authenticates Muttaraiyas contribution towards excavation of rock-cut cave temples in this region. Above all, the presence of rock-cut Linga in the sanctum is an added feature. Rock-cut Ling in the sanctum is one of the characteristic feature of the Muttaraiya rock-cut cave temples. Hence, we can assign the Jvarahareswara rock cut cave temple to the Muttaraiyas and its period as C.E. 8th century.

END NOTES

1. Field visits on 18-11-2007, 21-12-2008, 12-10-2010, 06-01-2019, 14-01-2019
2. Latitude 10⁰30' 17.40N Longitude 78⁰45' 28.40 E
3. Melaimalai, Aaluruttimalai, Kottaimalai, Kadambarmalai, Paraiyanmalai, Uvaccanmalai, Bommamalai, Manmalai, and Ponmalai are the nine rocky hillocks. Melaimalai is also known as Samanarmalai, Sivanmalai.
4. *Inscriptions of Pudukkottai State* Nos.112, 113, 114, 158, 125A, are the inscriptions that speaks about the activities of the Telungakulakarapuram Nagaram.
5. *Pudukkottai Manual Volume II, Part II* states that the Nagaram flourished for many centuries. The earliest reference of the Nagaram is available for the period C.E. 7-9th centuries and it became prominent in the C.E. 10th century. It controlled the temples, received and managed gifts for them, controlled taxation, effected sales and other revenue survey and accounts of the village and functioned through an executive body of its own creation. Silaya chettis, seems to have been the the chief mercantile class in this Nagaram. The Nagaram was associated with or affiliated to the great corporation Ainnuruvar. P.1070
6. A vast Megalithic burial site is seen in a km west of Narttamalai.
7. *Inscriptions of Pudukkottai State* Nos. 158, 474 reveals the prevalence of Jainism in the region. Natural cavern is seen at Aluruttimalai.
8. *Inscriptions of Pudukkottai State* No. 11. The inscription reveals that the sluice named Animattaeri at the foot of the hillock was made by Vendrimadatta Tamiladi Araiyan alias Mallan Viduman. The mason who excavated the tarn was Sonnaraiyan for whom a gift of land was made. On paleography basis the inscription can be assigned with the period last quarter of C.E. 8th century or early part of C.E.9th century. Mallan Viduman being the Muttaraiya Chieftain.
9. The team 'Yathum Ure Yavarum Kelir' an NGO in Pudukkottai district baled out the water from the tarn and brought to limelight the rock-cut cave temple and the deity.
10. *Inscriptions of Pudukkottai State*, No. 892
11. 'சீரங்கராய(ரின்) முன் பூசை'. The paleography of the inscription suggests it could be of C.E. 17th or 18th century.