

Kumbakonam Airavathesvara Medieval era UNESCO World Heritage temple

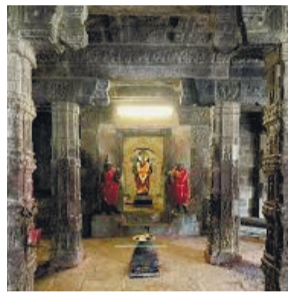


Kumbakonam is an ancient temple town with many temples and a great tourist attraction. The town is flanked by two rivers, the Cauvery and the Arasalar. The name Kumbakonam means "Pots Corner". According to mythology, when the world got destroyed by a tsunami, Lord Brahma asked Lord Shiva for advice as to where he could start the creation. Shiva asked Brahma to make a pot with sand collected from various holy places and float it in the river. Accordingly, Brahma placed the pot in the river, and the pot stopped in a particular place. Then Lord Shiva shot an arrow, which broke the pot into pieces, and the nectar inside the pot spilled into the place, and life was revived on earth. That is the starting point of creation: Kumbakonam. Kumbakonam rose to be a prominent town between the 7th and 9th centuries AD. The town reached the zenith of its prosperity during the British Raj and was named as 'Cambridge of the South' for being the prominent center of European education and Hindu culture. The general perception is that people born in this town have brilliant brains. Airavathesvara Temple is located in Darasuram, Kumbakonam. It is one

of the most visited and admired temples in India. The temple is one of the eighteen large Hindu temples from the medieval era in this area. The temple is an architectural marvel and accommodates a few brilliant sculptures, exquisite stone carvings, and bronze castings. The main deities in the temple are Lord Shiva - Airavathesvara (the protector of the elephant) and his consort, Periya Nayaki Amman (Parvathi). The temple also displays both Vaishnavism and Shaktism traditions. This temple is one of the religious sites that are part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site.

History The temple was built by Raja Raja Chola II, the ruler of Chola kingdom during the 12th century. It is said that the armies of the Delhi Sultanate led by the Muslim commander Malik Kafur in 1311, Khusrav Kham in 1314, and Mohammad bin Tughlaq in 1327 looted this temple and destroyed it to find some treasures.

Architecture The temple is built in the Dravidian architectural style. The temple is a square-plan structure completed in 1166 CE. The temple complex features a 24-metre high vimanam and a stone image of Shiva. The inner court yard measures



about 107m by 70m. The temple is surrounded by a strong, well-built wall with a series of bulls facing outside. The boundary wall is punctuated by an entrance gate with a small gopuram on one side and on the opposite side is the entrance. There is a small pavilion for the seated Nandi facing the sanctum in front of the main entrance. Right before the entrance, there is a flagpole, Dwajastambam, made of pure copper. Both Nandi and the stambham lie aligned on the east-west axis.

The sanctum has a square plan with 39 feet sides. There is no prakaram in this temple. The garbhagriha is connected to the mukhamandapa through the ardhmandapa, supported on pillars and flanked by two massive dwara palakas (sentinels). The Maha Mandapa has a rectangle plan measuring 79 feet by 59 feet with six rows of pillars (totaling 48 pillars). East of this mandapa is the Agara mandapa, called the Rajagambhiram Thirumandapam, which is a masterpiece in this temple. The fascinating feature is that it is designed like a chariot on which Lord Shiva rides, taking the avatar as Tripurantaka, to destroy the three demon brothers. The chariot is pulled by three galloping horses and elephants. Lord Brhama is the charioteer. The chariot is held by eight pillars with Yalis, and in the front are images of five deities: Agni, Indra, Brahma, Vishnu, and Vayu.

The mythical creatures,

capital.

Legend

The temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva. As per mythology, Lord Shiva was worshipped here by Airavata, Lord Indra's elephant, who had seven trunks and four tusks. After being cursed by Sage Durvasa for not respecting him, the spotless Airavata turned into a discoloured elephant. The elephant got freed from the curse only after taking a dip in the sacred waters of this temple.

It is also believed that Yama, the King of Death, also worshipped Lord Shiva here. Yama, was cursed by a sage, as a result of which he suffered from a burning sensation all over his body. He took a dip in the sacred tank of this temple and got cured. This temple tank is thus named Yama theertham.

Deity The main deity is in the form of a lingam, 1.5 meters tall. The stone temple incorporates a chariot structure and includes major Vedic and Puranic deities such as Indra, Agni, Varuna, Vayu, Brahma, Surya, Vishnu, Sapta matrikas, Durga, Saraswati, Lakshmi, Ganga, Yamuna, Subrahmanya, Ganesha, Kama, Rati, and others. Shiva's consort has a dedicated shrine in the temple called the Periya Nayaki Amman temple.

Shiva's consort, Periya Nayaki Amman (Parvati), has a detached shrine close to the north of the Airavathesvara temple. The latter was built by Kulothunga Chola III, and some historians suggest that the Nayak rulers of Thanjavur made some additions. This temple, it is said, marked the beginning of a new practice of building shrines dedicated to the goddess as Lord Shiva's consort and not just another attendant deity.

Festivals

Mahashivratri: This is one of the most important festivals celebrated at this temple. Devotees offer prayers to Lord Shiva and seek his blessings. The festival is celebrated in the months of February or March.

Natyanjali This festival is dedicated to Lord Nataraja and is celebrated in the temple in the months of February or March. Classical dancers from all over India come here to offer their prayers through dance performances.

Arudra Darshan: This festival is celebrated in December or January and is dedicated to Lord Shiva. The highlight of the festival is the abhishekam (holy bath) performed on the deity.

Brahmotsavam: This is a nine-day festival celebrated in the month of April or May. The festival is dedicated to Lord Shiva and Goddess

Story & photos:
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Parvati. The temple is decorated with lights, and various cultural events and processions are held during the festival. **Adi Pooram:** This festival is celebrated in the month of July or August and is dedicated to Goddess Parvati. It is believed that on this day, the goddess took the form of a young girl and got married to Lord Shiva. **Navaratri:** This is a nine-day festival celebrated in the months of September or October. It is dedicated to Goddess Durga and her various forms. The temple is decorated with flowers and lights, and various cultural events and processions are held during the festival. Pujas Daily routine pujas are performed here. Benefits The devotees who come and pray to the Lord can get rid of the ill effects of curses. The Lord here is said to give all kinds of wealth (Aishvarya) to the devotees. **Temple timings:** 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. 4 to 8 p.m.

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