



CIVIL ARCHITECTURE UNDER SETHUPATHIS

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Architecture is a diverse range of human activities and the products of those activities, usually involving imaginative or technical skill^[1]. It is the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination typically in a visual form producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power. Architecture through the ages has been a powerful voice for both secular and religious ideas. Of all the Indian monuments, forts and palaces are most fascinating. Most of the Indian forts were built as a defense mechanism to keep the enemy away. The state of Rajasthan is home to numerous forts and palaces. In fact, whole India is dotted with forts of varied sizes. The notable feature about each of the forts and palaces is the exquisite and magnificent work that has survived till date and still receives appreciation from the people worldwide.

Importance of Forts

The fort as a center of a city serve a number of purposes from time immemorial. They hold in it valuable historical information and provide ample scope to enlighten the hidden treasure of the building culture of Tamil Nadu. Most of the forts were the result of the royal patronage. It was thought that building a fort, the king would always have protection and peace throughout the country. It might also ensure fame and even immortality. The Tamil rulers, their chieftains and officials constructed many forts and endowed lavishly for the maintenance of it. The Sethupathis, petty rulers of small principalities of Ramnad also contributed their share to the construction of these forts. These forts which was constructed by Sethupathis are too small but magnificent in front of splendor of forts that beautify India.

Geographical location

Ramnad (at present Ramanathapuram) district is one of the seven coastal districts of Tamilnadu. It is bounded by Palk straits to its

East, by the Gulf of Mannar to its South, Sivagangai district to its North and Thoothukudi district to its North East and Virudhunagar district to its West. The Ramnad district in the early days has been part of the Marava country. The Ramnad kingdom was ruled by the Marava king who bore the title Sethupathi. The Marava kingdom of Ramnad was surrounded by the Maratha kingdom of Tanjore and the Kallar territory of Pudukkottai in the North and by the Nayak kingdom of Madura, in the West and South. Bogalur or Puhalur was the “primary capital” of Sadaikka, the first Sethupathi Chief and he fortified it. Lying 10 miles NorthWest of Ramnad, it is today little more than a hamlet. Later Ramnad became the capital during the rule of Kilavan Sethupathi.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Maravas, to whom the Sethupathis belonged, lived in the *Palai* land during the Sangam period and this area was called Marava country and it was predominantly occupied by the Marava people ^[2]. In former days they were a fierce and turbulent race, famous for their military powers. The Maravas were divided into seven divisions. Among the seven divisions, one was *Chembi Na**u* Maravas. They ruled the country with the title of Sethupathis. The Sethupathis emerged into history during the reign of Muthu Krishappa Nayaka of Madurai (A.D.1601-1609). During that time the Portuguese have settled on the

eastern coast around Rameswaram. The Nayaks found it difficult to collect revenue from these tracts. Also numerous pilgrims had no local authority to ensure their safety from *Sethu* which could be bastion of defense against possible raids from Ceylon. *Sethu* is traditionally equated with Rameswaram.^[3] So he appointed Sadaikka Tevar as the protector and the guardian of the pilgrims to *Sethu* canal and Rameswaram. Hence they got the name *Sethu Kavalan* which means the Lord of the *Sethu*. Later this got the status of dynastical name.

BACKGROUND

The Sethupathi rulers attempted to establish their power by linking the regime with religion. The enormous revenue they derived from land tied with unlimited command of forced labour enabled them to execute the astonishing works. The large share of gross produce which the government appropriated as revenue of the state was diverted for the construction of buildings. The Sethupathis built many strategic fortresses, big palaces and spacious temples with huge towers in and around Ramnad. They are remarkable for the massiveness of their size and of decoration, sculpture and paintings. Many of these works are perfect specimens of arts which represented the 17th and 18th centuries.

IMPORTANCE OF FORTS

Military fortification is a key element in all civilizations. Among secular buildings, fortresses, as parts of defense strategy, are of prime importance. The dictionary describes a fort as a strong or fortified place, usually occupied by the troops and surrounded by walls and moat. Forts form an integral part of India's cultural and architectural heritage. In times of constant war, these forts became a necessity to ward off constant invasions from within the country as well as from outside. Though the forts were primarily used for defense they also over a period of time, became a symbol of prestige for the rulers.

The early Tamil kings attached great importance to forts for they served as the base for defensive and offensive operations. Thiruvalluvar describes the necessity and requirements of an ideal fort in a chapter entitled *Aran*^[4] (fortification). Generally speaking that a fort may be described as a well-fortified and protected area in which the kings used to live with their officials and people. It is a hard and difficult place where no enemy could enter it. The structure of any fort is either in the shape of square or triangle or circle. Mostly the forts were strong made of granite stone wall. So that enemy could not seize it easily. Inside the fort, quarters for officials, army men and needful people were built. Weapon store house was placed in the part of the fort. According to Prof. T.V.Mahalingam, generally forts were

constructed and used by the troops. Hence they were known as *kaḍakams* or *padaiparru*^[5].

FORTS AND ITS TYPES

Fort is otherwise called as *Durga* which means a hard and difficult place where no enemy could enter it. The structure of any fort is either in the shape of square or triangle or *arthachandran* or circle. In India there were four types of forts and they are 1. *Stala Durg*-Forts built on the plains 2. *Vana Durg* - Forts constructed in the middle of the thick forest. 3. *Giri Durg* -Forts built on the top of the hills. 4. *Jala Durg* – Forts constructed on the surface of the water⁶.

STRUCTURE OF A FORT

The general structure of a fort in Tamilnadu has 1. Enclosed forest 2. Ditch 3. Fortified Wall 4. Outer Wall 5. Inner Wall 6. Rampart 7. Palaces 8. Temple 9. Tank 10. Treasury 11. Staff quarters and 12. Army quarters. Enclosed Forest was in the outskirts of the forts. They were covered with thick forest having planted thorny trees through which none could enter into it. Thorny trees like *Karuvellam*(*Acasia*), Babul, Bamboo and *Elanthai* (*Zizipus*)plants were planted around the forts for protection. Every fort had the ditch which is about 80 feet depth, 100 to 300 feet breadth. The ditch was filled with fresh water channeling from the inside forts.

Animals like crocodile lived in the ditch. To enter the fort from the main land there was a wooden bridge. The fort had a compound wall with huge and broad granite stones.

RAMPART

Perhaps the foremost and the most important structure in a fort is the Rampart wall. Usually made of bricks of stones, the strength of the wall determines the overall strength of the fort. Wall was an important place in the construction of the Forts. It was a well-fortified wall to deny the enemy. The wall was too high to climb. It could not be demolished easily. The basement of the wall was built with granite stone. On the Rampart wall, towers are built at regular intervals and can be round, square or rectangular in shape. The tower played a significant role in the defense of the fort. These huge boulders are largely unclimbable and well-fortified every side by the battlement stone walls equipped with loop holes for use of guns and musketry.

INNER WALL

There is a gap between the outer wall and the inner wall, which was filled with straw of Paddy, and Ragi. Also between the inner wall and the outer walls, copper plate was fitted and built with mud. It was strongly by using the mixture of Ragi pulp and Palmyra juice.

OUTER WALL

The outer wall of the fort was built beside the fortified wall. In them, army men could stay and guard the fort. They could not be seen by their enemies because of the construction of the outer wall.

PALACE

Generally palace was built inside the forts. Most of the palaces are situated in the protected forts. In Ramnad, Kilavan Sethupathi constructed the palace Ramalinga Vilasam for his residency inside the fort.

TEMPLE

Another notable thing is that the forts are having one or two temples. For example inside the Ramnad fort, Rajeswari Amman temple, Gothanda ramswamy temple, Chokkanatha swamy temple, Bala Subramaṇia swamy temple are situated. In Tirumayam fort both Siva and Vishhṇu temples are existed. Many guardian deities also installed in separate shrines. In Kamudhi Fort Kundrathu Veeran temple and Kottai Muneeswaran temple are located.

TANK

In the middle of the fort, there was a tank with protected water. The tank was useful to provide water for the ditch located in the outside of the forts. In Ramanathapuram, Kilavan Sethupathi constructed a reservoir

towards the west, outside the palace walls. It is called Muhavai Urani with arrangements for the rain water to collect there, as provision against the severe drought of the dry season.

TREASURY

Government offices and Treasury were located in the forts. Many small buildings were constructed in Ramanathapuram for the above said purpose near the palace. Ramanathapuram Samasthanam Devasthanam office is running here until now.

STAFF QUARTERS

Inside the forts, there was a colony for the government personnel living. They could call for anything for the urgent government duty. Many small houses were constructed in the back side of the Ramnad palace but these are in dilapidated conditions.

ARMY QUARTERS

Soldiers were living in the forts. The forts have the following facilities.^[7] Postern,^[8] Openings^[9] Moat,^[10] Slit,^[11] and Tunnel.^[12] Two broad categories of forts may be distinguished in Southern India during these centuries; hill sites with natural defensive capabilities and urban sites in plains and valleys.^[13] The Sethupathi rulers constructed both type of forts in many places of their territories. For military purpose, Sethupathis divided the country into seventy

two divisions and appointed chieftains in each division. So they constructed many forts in and around Ramanathapuram.

BOGALUR

Bogalur was the primary capital of Sadaika alias Udaiyan (A.D.1605-1621) and he fortified it. Lying ten miles north-west of Ramanathapuram, it is today little more than a hamlet. It is said to have contained a big fort, a palace and a military cantonment^[14]. Sadaika Thevar started his kingship from Bogalur and it was an ancient capital of Sethupathi rulers of Ramanathapuram .

RAMANATHAPURAM FORT

Raghunatha Sethupathi alias Kilavan Sethupathi (A.D.1674-1710) constructed Ramanathapuram fort by brick and stone walls of 27 feet high and 5 feet thick surrounded by a ditch and defended 32 small bastions, now ruined. A mile west of Ramanathapuram are the remains of the fort and the buildings of Sethupathis called Mulai Kotha[am]. The fort was formerly garrisoned by a company of native infantry. Ramanathapuram was stormed by Tirumalai Nayak during the reign of Sadaika Thevar alias Dalavay Sethupathi(A.D.1635-1646) and the Sethupathi was captured and taken to Madurai. In 1726 A.D. the Thanjavur force advanced to Ramanathapuram, captures and took Thanda Thevar as prisoner and ruined the fort. During the reign of Muthu Ramalinga Sethupathi (1763-1772) his minister Damodaran Pillai

strengthened the fort and placed it in a through defense. In June 1772 A.D. the Company's forces supported the military undertaking of the Nawabs of Carnatic and captured Ramanathapuram. The fort was passed into hands of Nawab of Arcot. In 1792 British occupied Ramanathapuram and deposed Muthu Ramalinga in 1795A.D.

This fort was constructed in a rectangular shape with the one entrance gate in the East. In all the 32 bastions weapons like spear, archery, swords, *valari* etc., were kept. Many big burners were kept above the gate and from that molten lead was poured on the enemy entering the fort. In A.D.1770 according the British records there were 44 canons were placed on the top of the wall on four sides of the fort to defend.^[15] This fort faced many wars from Madurai Nayak (A.D. 1702), Marathas of Thanjavur (A.D. 1709 & 1771) and Nawabs of Arcot (A.D. 1772) but till this Mulai Kothalam stands firmly.

KAMUDHI FORT

A 250 year old small fort, situated on the high ground above the Gundar river to Kamudhi in Ramanathapuram district is now in a dilapidated condition. It was constructed during the period of Udaya thevar alias Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathi (A.D. 1711-1725) with the assistance of French engineers. Vijaya Regunatha Sethupathi, son of Kadamba Thevar and a nephew of Kilava+ Sethupathi, succeeded the throne of the Ramanathapuram Kingdom after the death of

Kilavan. As his rival, Bhavani Sankara, an illegitimate son of Kilavan, constantly troubled him. So the King had to keep his forces in constant readiness for any military undertaking. The fort in Kamudhi is also known as Kottaimedu. He also built forts at Rajasingamangalam Oriyur, Arantangi, Tirupattur, Kamudhi and Pamban. These forts were constructed according to the traditional method of Tamil country in rectangular shape. But Kamudhi fort is differs from these. It is a small fort but it was built on the rocky mountains which is adjacent to the northern part of the bank of river Gundar. It has three lines of fortification in circular shape with buildings and a fine wall. The fort has a twelfth century Siva temple constructed by the Second Pandya ruler Maravarman Sundara Pandya. This small fort has no residential quarters. To have uninterrupted water supply the fort is linked with the nearby Gundar river through a channel.

The forces of Sivagangai under Marudhu brothers captured this fort for some time. Bushes and shrubs have sprung up in and around the fort. After the fall of Panchalamkurichi on August 25, 1801, the forces of the East India Company controlled this strong fort of Kamudhi belonging to the Ramanathapuram kingdom and were dismantled thereafter. Legends say that Kattabomman stayed for a day in this fort on his way to Ramanathapuram to meet the then Collector Jackson, on September 9, 1798. A

flood that occurred in the end of the last century at Gundar and due to the ravages of time the fort is in dilapidated condition.

THIRUMAYAM FORT

Situated on the road to Madurai, Tirumayam is one of most interesting places around Pudukkottai. There are couple of rock cut cave temples and an old fort, both of which are worth visiting. At the top of the hill is an old fort called Oomaiyan Kottai^[16] where captured rebels were imprisoned by the British. The Thirumayam fort is a 40 acre wide^[17] in the town of Thirumayam in Pudukkottai – Karaikudi highway in Pudukkottai district. It is built on a hill. It was also used as army outposts. It was handed over by the Sethupathi to his brother-in-law, Raghunatha Raya Thondaiman (A.D.1686-1730), the first Tondaiman Raja, along with the area of Thirumayam. The cession was confirmed in A.D.1728. The value of the acquisition of the Palayam and fort must have been fully realized by the Pudukkottai king, when in 1733 the Tondaiman was left with this bit of territory alone after Anada Rao, the Tanjore general, had overrun the whole of the Tondaiman country. Here, Vijaya Raghunatha Raya Tondaiman besieged until Ananda Rao had retired. There is an unconfirmed tradition that Kattabomma+ and his brother Oomayan were for a time detained at the fort before the Tondaiman handed over to the British.

ARCHITECTURE

Originally it was a ring fort with seven concentric walls, and a broad moat all round. The lines of the old outer defenses are now marked by occasional remains of the works and ditch. In the northern entrance is a shrine to Bhairava, and in the southern are shrines to Hanuman Sakti Ganapati and Karuppar – all protecting deities of the fort. The walls above the rock that enclose the main citadel are comparatively well preserved. The top is accessible very easily on the west side, on which side narrow steps, and have been carved in the perpendicular boulders. From the existing remains one may conclude that the walls were surmounted by parapets of strong brick work, ragged by machicolations and pierced by musketry vents.

At half way up to the top, to the right is a chamber which was used as a magazine^[18]. Opposite to it, on the western slope of a boulder, a little below the top of the fort, is a rock-cut temple containing a Linga placed on a square *yonipitha*, the spout of which is supported by the figure of a dwarf. On the top of the fort is a platform on which a gun is mounted. To the south of this platform is a pond. On the perpendicular southern slope are the rock cut temples of Siva and Vishnu. The citadel and the walls of the fort on the hill top provide an excellent perch for a view of the surrounding country side. Presently there are three entrances, on the north, on the south and

on the south-east. Originally the main entrance to the fort was from the south side.

Even today there are some beautiful remains of this old fort entrance, about one kilometer south of the fort. The structure of this fort- entrance is like a courtyard with pillared corridors on all sides and majestic entrances. The entire structure is decorated with a number of beautiful sculptures all along. The rampart wall shows the defensive structure of the fort.

HANUMANDAGUDI

Hanumandagudi lies four miles east of Devakottai on Vattam road and is situated on the northern bank of the Virisilai river. The fort of Sethupathis on the southern bank of the river is in ruin which one can see even today. This place is said to be one of the seven forts of the kingdom. (Elukottainadu)

MANAMADURAI

Manamadurai is 28 miles east of Madurai. This place of had an important fort of Sethupathis. It is situated on the high ground so it is called as Kalkottaimeadu. Chokkanatha Nayak (A.D.1659-1682) of Madurai kingdom captured this fort when he marched against Tirumalai Sethupathi because the Sethupathi refused to come to the aid of Chokkanatha Nayak against Vanamiyan, a Bijapur general, when he laid siege to Madurai. All the traces of it have now disappeared.

ORUR FORT

It is situated on the south bank of the river Pambar, and eleven miles north east of Tiruvadana. There are the remains of the old fort built by Thiru Uḍaya Thevar alias Muthu Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathi. There is a Muni Iyya temple in it.

PAMBAN FORT

The area of the Pamban Island is about 67 square k.m. The island extends for 30 kilometers in width from the township of Pamban in the west to the remains of Dhanushkodi towards the south-east. It constitutes a separate taluk of Ramnad district with four administrative divisions^[19]. Thiru Uḍaya Thevar alias Muthu Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathi built a fort here. From an early period Pamban was used as a refuge for the Ramnad chiefs. In 1749, the Dalavay of Ramnad rebelled against Sethupathi Racka Thevar fled to Pamban to hide himself. The building in which the Ramnad chiefs took refuge may still be seen in a ruined condition and it is called as Kaattu Bangalow or Forest Bangalow. Most of Pamban Island lies below sea level. However, there are a few hillocks and elevated physical features in the vicinity of Rameswaram of which Mt. Gaṇḍamana is the tallest.

RAJASINGAMANGALAM

Rajasingamangalam is a town situated in the east of Ramanathapuram^[20]. During the

period of Muthu Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathi, about two miles north-east of this place a fort was constructed in A.D.1710. This fort was completely dismantled by British after A.D.1801. But the remaining part still existed today in a ruined condition called Arumugamkottai because of its six sides. It was hexagonal in shape. Here Raghunatha Sethupathi built a *madai* (a Channel for water) known as Raghunatha Madai.

TIRUPATTUR

This fort was constructed by Muthu Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathi. Once it was captured by Chokkanatha Nayak of Madurai, the Sethupathi defeated and recovered the fort again. After the separation of Sivaganga, Tirupattur fort came under the Sivaganga domain. After the capture of Marudhu Brothers, This fort fell and the Company's forces encamped here on August 27, 1801.

KALAIYARKOIL

Muthu Vaduganatha Sethupathi built a strong fort in Kalaiyar Koil in A.D.1772. It was captured by the British and completely dismantled after reducing Ramanathapuram.

TIRUPULLANI FORT

After the death of Sella Thevar alias Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathi, Damodara Pillai, a Dalavay of Muthu Tiruvayi Nachiyar and a nominal sovereign of the period erected

a fort in Tirupullani. It is seen in dilapidated condition. When Tuljaji, the Maratha ruler of Tanjore invaded Ramanathapuram, Sethupathi stayed here and look after the war.

STRUCTURE

This building structure is a large one. The whole shape of the fort is rectangular. Inside the fort there are four square shaped rooms. The four huge rooms has huge arches as seen in Ramalinga Vilasam. The height of the building is roughly 20 feet. The height of the building shows it was not used for residential place. It might be served as the warehouse of arsenal or store rooms. All the four rooms are opened in a square shaped open verandah. As per the traditions for a free air flow these open space is used. They were entirely built with burnt brick and mortar. The ceiling is in pyramidal shape. The special feature is for the ceiling also they used flat burnt bricks. The bricks are arranged vertically bonded with mortar. Hence the whole room is very cool and the arms and ammunitions could be stored safely. For such a huge room no cross bar or pillars are used. There are steps leading to upstairs. It is situated on the way to the village Pallacheri from Tirupullani. They bear silent testimony to the engineering skill of the bygone days. These rooms has not any architectural decorations.

The popular saying of local as *irupathoru aranmanai* denoted twenty one

such building might have existed. At present they are in dilapidated condition. Trees through the walls and huge ant hills (now residence of snakes) are seen. Archaeology department should take care of it to protect the civil and military architecture of the Sethupathis which are more than 300 years old.

Thus the Sethupathis constituted many forts on the borders of his territory. Most of them were used as army outpost. Constant war with Madurai Nayaks and to ward off his neighbouring rulers the Sethupathis might have constructed a chain of forts. These forts were small. But the negligence of their maintenance led to the dilapidated condition of them. Though they had lack of architectural beauty, they served their purposes. The outer wall has the traditional pattern to engage the soldiers in defensive tactics. It is to be noted that the Sethupathis did not compromise in the defense of his kingdom. The chain of forts testifies it.

CONCLUSION

Besides the Vellore fort, Sethupathis forts alone remain as an example for the military architecture of TamiNadu. Many of the forts are destroyed due to the ravages of time and the military action of the Britishers. Tirumayam fort alone stands on a hillock to bear a silent testimony to the military strategy and military architecture of the Sethupathis. So their civil architecture is a praise worthy one. Though

simple in style their palaces and forts bear testimony to their civil architecture. It is to be noted that the civil architecture of the rulers both in the form of palace and forts are still in existence belong to the Sethupathis alone. (Though Madurai Nayaks and Thanjavur Marathas palaces are still existed, forts belonged to this period are not existed now). Thus the Sethupathis though ruled a small principality contributed a lot to the civil architecture of the 18th century Tamil country.

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7. Website: [www. Youngintach.org](http://www.Youngintach.org). **Fascinating Forts**, the Heritage Club Newsletter, Vol.9. No.1, January-March, 2012.
8. Postern or the side gate is made on the Rampart wall and cannot be detected by the enemy.

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9. Openings on walls so that soldiers can shoot the enemy without getting hurt.
 10. Moat was made of full of water surrounding the fort so that the enemy cannot climb the wall easily.
 11. Slit was made above the gate so that hot oil can be poured on the enemy entering the fort.
 12. Safe underground passage for escape.
 13. George Michelle, *Architecture and Art of Southern India*, Delhi, 2000.
 14. R.Nagaswamy and N.S. Ramswami, Ramnathapuram, an Archeological Guide, Chennai.1973.
 15. S.M.Kamal, *Sethupathi Mannar Varalaru*, Ramanathapuram, 2003.
 16. The fort is popularly called as Oomaiyan Kottai after the dumb brother of Veera Paṇḍya Kattabomman of Panchalam Ku}ichi. It is believed that after the escape of Oomaidurai from the Palayamkottai prison in 1802, it himself at Thirumayam fort and fought against the British.
(www. Thirumayam fort.com.)
 17. M.Balaganesan, Tirumayam Fort Sports New Look, The Hindu, October 19, 2012.
 18. A chamber for holding a supply of cartridges to be fed automatically to the breech of a gun.
 19. *Pamban Island*, Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.
 20. The Village named after a Pandya King Rajasimha. He constructed many irrigational tanks in Ramnad kingdom including Ramnad Big Tank.