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CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL STUDY OF MULBAGAL TEMPLES OF VIJAYANAGAR PERIOD

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Abstract
This research article examines the historical, religious, architectural, and cultural significance of the temples of Mulbagal and its surrounding region during the Vijayanagara period. Mulbagal, historically known as Mulavayi and Mudebagilu, occupied an important position in the political and religious geography of the Vijayanagara Empire. The region functioned as a significant administrative centre and, according to the historical tradition presented in the sources, was associated with the governance of princes and important provincial officials. The Vijayanagara rulers and their associates contributed to the renovation of older temples and the construction of new religious monuments in the region. The temples at Anjanadri, the Anjaneya temple complex, Someshwara, Veerabhadra, Gowaladeval, Veeranarayana, and other sacred centres illustrate the interaction of religion, political authority, architecture, inscriptional culture, and local traditions. The study also considers the role of temple complexes, mantapas, gopuras, inscriptions, pushkaranis, and sculptures in understanding the cultural history of Mulbagal. Through an examination of the available historical traditions and the cited reference works, the article highlights Mulbagal as an important regional centre of Vijayanagara religious and architectural heritage.

Keywords: Mulbagal; Vijayanagara Empire; Vijayanagara Architecture; Anjanadri; Anjaneya Temple; Dravidian Architecture; Temple Heritage; Inscriptions; Kolar District.

Introduction

The Vijayanagara Empire occupies a distinguished position in the history of South India. Established by Harihara and Bukka of the Sangama dynasty, the empire developed into a major political power that exercised authority over extensive parts of South India for more than three centuries. The rulers of the Sangama, Saluva, Tuluva, and Aravidu dynasties supported and patronized religion, literature, art, architecture, and temple institutions. Hampi, the imperial capital, became a major centre of political and cultural activity, while numerous provincial centres also developed strong religious and architectural identities.

Within this wider historical framework, Mulbagal occupies an important place. Historically associated with the name Mulavayi and also referred to as Mudebagilu, the region developed as a centre of political, religious, and cultural activity. The concentration of temples, inscriptions, sacred institutions, sculptures, water structures, and traditional centres around Mulbagal provides valuable material for understanding the regional expression of Vijayanagara culture.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the historical importance of Mulbagal during the Vijayanagara period.
2. To document the major temples and religious institutions associated with the Vijayanagara tradition in and around Mulbagal.
3. To examine the architectural features of selected temples, including gopuras, mantapas, vimanas, pillars, adhisthanas, and temple enclosures.

4. To understand the role of inscriptions and temple structures as sources for reconstructing the history of the region.
5. To highlight the religious and cultural significance of Mulbagal as a regional centre of Vijayanagara heritage.

Historical Background of the Vijayanagara Empire

The Vijayanagara Empire was founded by Harihara and Bukka of the Sangama dynasty, with the support of their brothers Kampaṇa, Marappa, and Muddappa. The empire emerged in a period of political change in the Deccan and South India and subsequently developed a powerful administrative and cultural system. The Vijayanagara rulers are remembered for their patronage of Hindu religious institutions and for the development of distinctive forms of temple architecture.

The Sangama dynasty was the longest-ruling dynasty of the empire. Bukka Raya and Deva Raya II were among its prominent rulers. The later reign of Krishnadevaraya of the Tuluva dynasty is especially remembered for political expansion and cultural patronage, and is often described as a golden age in the history of Vijayanagara. The Aravidu period continued the imperial tradition in a changed political environment.

The patronage of rulers, provincial governors, military chiefs, religious leaders, and local elites resulted in the construction, enlargement, renovation, and maintenance of numerous temples. Mulbagal and its surrounding areas form an important regional example of this wider process.

Mulbagal: Historical and Geographical Context

Mulbagal, historically known as Mulavayi and Mudebagilu, is situated in the present Kolar district of Karnataka. The region occupies an important position in the eastern part of the district and has historically connected several religious and cultural centres. The area is described as extending over approximately 823 square kilometres, with Srinivaspur, Kolar, and Bangarapet regions forming its neighbouring areas.

Local traditions associate Mulbagal with the sacred identity of Anjaneya and Anjanadri. One tradition connects the place with the Mahabharata and the worship of Hanuman, while another associates Anjanadri with Anjana Devi, the mother of Anjaneya, who is believed to have performed penance in the region. These traditions demonstrate the manner in which sacred geography and historical memory became integrated into the religious identity of Mulbagal.

During the reign of Harihara, the region surrounding Mulbagal was associated with Muddayya, while during the reign of Bukka, Bhaskara is said to have served as a provincial governor. The political importance of the region subsequently increased under Kampana, the second son of Bukkaraya. Inscriptions and local historical traditions point to Mulbagal as a significant centre of political and religious influence.

Temple Landscape of Mulbagal and Its Surroundings

The Vijayanagara period witnessed the renovation of older temples as well as the construction of new religious buildings in and around Mulbagal. Several temples display features associated with the Dravidian architectural tradition and the regional forms developed under Vijayanagara patronage. Important sites connected with this heritage are found at Mulbagal, Kandibooru, Kurudumale, Virupaksha, Avani, Gudibande, and surrounding areas.

Anjanadri Hill and Its Temple Heritage

Anjanadri Hill, situated to the western side of Mulbagal, is described as a natural fortified site and a traditional stronghold of local chiefs. The hill and its surrounding religious structures preserve several layers of religious and architectural history. Inscriptions refer to the place as 'Mulbagalu Nadabedu'.

An inscription associated with the period of Devaraya on a large stone temple mentions the construction of a lake. Such inscriptional evidence is particularly important because it connects temple institutions with water management, religious patronage, and local administration.

At the foothills, the Okkola Veerabhadra and Pete Veerabhadra temples provide examples of the Vijayanagara architectural tradition. Sculptural remains and images found in temples, pushkaranis, and wells further demonstrate the density of religious activity in the region.

Venugopala Swamy Temple and Architectural Features

The Venugopala Swamytemple is situated on the bed of a lake and is described as being constructed entirely of stone. Its Vijayanagara-style Vimana Gopura has collapsed, but several architectural elements continue to provide evidence of its former character.

The temple is positioned on a raised platform and is surrounded by a spacious outer courtyard and a strong enclosure wall. The surviving structural components include a Garuda Mantapa, Mahamantapa, Rangamantapa, pillars, and portions of the adhisthana. The Rangamantapa contains an extensive arrangement of carved pillars. Sculptural representations of Garuda and Anjaneya occur in the temple complex, while elephant motifs indicate the existence of a circumambulatory arrangement. The surviving architectural fragments and brick courses of the damaged Vimana Gopura contribute to the reconstruction of the temple's original architectural form.

Temple Complex at the Northern Base of Anjanadri: At the low-lying northern base of Anjanadri is a large temple displaying characteristic features of Vijayanagara architecture. Its Gali Gopura has undergone recent renovation. Inscription stones are located in front of the temple, including an inscription recording a grant by Srirangaraya in which the local Agrahara was made tax-free (Sarvamanya). The temple contains a spacious Navaranga with rows of pillars decorated with relief sculptures. The pavilion associated with elephant motifs is notable for its carved architectural details.

Veeranarayana, Krishnanda Matha and Religious Institutions

Adjacent to the Veeranarayana structure is the Krishnanda Matha, where the image of Gowala Krishna is accompanied by Rukmini and Satyabhama. The Shankara Matha to the east of Mulbagal is traditionally associated with the expansion and development of this religious landscape. The wider sacred environment of Mulbagal includes important centres such as Ramba Tirtha, Vidyashankara, Shaneshvara, and Bhavani temples.

Shri Padaraja Mutt Brindavana and Madhva Tradition

Approximately 2 km east of Mulbagal is the Shri Padaraja Mutt Brindavana. A Yoga Narasimha image carved on a boulder is associated with the Madhvara Narasimha Tirtha tradition. Akshobhya Tirtha is traditionally said to have visited the site, and under Shri Padaraja the deity became associated with regular worship. Shri Padaraja subsequently became an influential religious figure in the region and is traditionally associated with the Vijayanagara political and religious milieu, including the court of Saluva Narasimha.

Someshwara Temple

The Someshwara Temple is another important monument of Mulbagal. It represents the Dravidian architectural tradition. Although its early construction is associated with the Pallava and Chola periods, the temple underwent renovation during the Vijayanagara period. Its history therefore illustrates the continuity of sacred architecture across several historical periods and the practice of later dynasties preserving and modifying earlier religious monuments.

Anjaneya Temple: The Principal Sacred Centre

The Anjaneya Temple of Mulbagal occupies a central position in the religious and historical landscape of the town. Pilgrims travelling towards Tirumala Srinivasa have traditionally passed through Mulbagal and visited the temple. The temple is associated with the historical memory of the Vijayanagara period and is regarded in local tradition as a 'Dharma Setu'. The principal Anjaneya image is carved from a single monolithic rock. The temple faces west towards Anjanadri and has a tall gopura at the main entrance. The larger temple complex includes the Anjaneya shrine, the Seetha Lakshmi Srinivasa Temple, and shrines dedicated to Govindaraja and Varadaraja. A strong protective enclosure surrounds the complex.

The temple complex also preserves a Dvaita religious tradition associated with the Vijayanagara period and the memory of Kampana Raya. In this manner, the monument connects religious practice, political history, pilgrimage, and the literary-cultural memory of the region.

Shri Ramachandra Deva Temple

The shrine of Shri Ramachandra Deva lies to the south of the Navaranga of the Anjaneya temple. The shrine contains the images of Shri Rama, Sita Parameshwari, and Lakshmana. The Garuda-Gopura Mantapas are traditionally associated with patronage obtained during the reign of Krishnadevaraya. The expansion of the Anjaneya temple also included the construction of a spacious Navaranga Alankara Mantapa on the northern side. The temple is traditionally associated with the reign of Shri Krishnadevaraya and the influence of his ministers Kondamarasa and Ayyana. The row of shrines contains images including Gopalakrishna, while a separate shrine dedicated to Narasimha is located in front.

Sri Venkateshwara Temple

Within the Anjaneya Temple complex stands the Sri Venkateshwara Temple. Its entrance is oriented towards the east, with an exit on the northern side. The architectural plan consists of a Mukhamantapa, Navaranga, Sukhanasi, and Garbhagriha. A separate shrine for Padmavathi Ammavaru is located in the Navaranga, while images of the Alvars are installed in the Sukhanasi. The Garbhagriha houses a tall image placed on a Garuda pedestal.

Govindaraja and Varadarajaswamy Temples

Two additional shrines within the Anjaneya Temple premises are dedicated to Varadarajaswamy and Govindarajaswamy. The two temples face each other. In the Govindaraja Temple, the Perumal in the Garbhagriha is represented in a reclining posture on Adishesha and is attended by Sri and Bhudevi. The iconographic arrangement recalls the reclining form of Ranganatha. The shrine of Varadarajaswamy stands opposite the Govindaraja shrine and has undergone renovation.

Architectural Significance

The temple monuments of Mulbagal demonstrate several characteristic elements associated with Vijayanagara architecture. These include tall gopuras, stone-built temple structures, spacious

Navarangas and Mahamantapas, elaborately carved pillars, Garuda Mantapas, Sukhanasis, Garbhagrihas, strong enclosure walls, raised adhisthanas, sculptural reliefs, elephant motifs, and water structures such as lakes and pushkaranis. The coexistence of older Pallava and Chola monuments with later Vijayanagara additions reveals a process of architectural continuity, adaptation, and renovation.

Inscriptions as Historical Evidence

Inscriptions constitute an important source for understanding the history of Mulbagal. References to Devaraya, Srirangaraya, and other rulers and patrons provide evidence concerning temple construction, water works, land and tax arrangements, and religious patronage. The inscription mentioning the grant of an Agrahara as Sarvamanya is particularly significant for understanding the relationship between religious institutions and local administration. Together with temple architecture and oral traditions, these inscriptions help reconstruct the historical development of Mulbagal.

Religious and Cultural Significance

Mulbagal's temple landscape represents more than a collection of individual monuments. Temples, mathas, sacred hills, tirthas, inscriptions, sculptures, and water structures formed an interconnected religious and cultural environment. The patronage of rulers and religious leaders strengthened the region's importance as a pilgrimage centre. The presence of Vaishnava, Shaiva, and Madhva traditions illustrates the plural religious character of the area and its integration into the broader cultural world of Vijayanagara Karnataka.

Discussion

The evidence presented in this study indicates that Mulbagal functioned as an important regional centre within the Vijayanagara political and religious network. Its significance arose from the combined influence of political administration, temple patronage, pilgrimage, religious institutions, and architectural activity. The temples also demonstrate that Vijayanagara architectural culture was not restricted to the imperial capital at Hampi. Rather, its architectural vocabulary was expressed through provincial centres, where local traditions interacted with imperial forms.

Conclusion

The temples of Mulbagal provide valuable evidence for understanding the regional history of the Vijayanagara Empire. The renovation of earlier monuments and the construction of new temples transformed the region into a significant centre of religious and cultural activity. Anjanadri, the Anjaneya Temple complex, the Ramachandra Deva shrine, the Sri Venkateshwara, Govindaraja and Varadaraja temples, Someshwara, Veerabhadra, Gowaladeval, and associated mathas and tirthas collectively preserve the architectural and religious memory of the region. Their inscriptions, sculptures, architectural components, and associated traditions provide important avenues for historical research. Preservation and systematic documentation of these monuments are essential for safeguarding the cultural heritage of Mulbagal and for enabling future scholars to study the regional dimensions of Vijayanagara history.

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