

A PANORAMA OF GINGEE FORT AND ITS HISTORICAL VALUES**Dr. V. Thirumurugan**

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The early history of the spot is buried in obscurity the place is called Senji in Tamil and origin of the name is variously given. To derive it from Sanjiviparvatam which Hanuman is said (in the Ramayana) to have carried from the Himalayas to Sri Lanka to bring to life hosts of Rama's dying warriors is farfetched. Local tradition believes that Senji Amman was one of the seven virgins who were guardian deities of the village, and that as her temple was in the central hill of the village it came to be known as Senji Amman Kottai or senji Kottai or Senji. for brevity1.

Gingee is situated in the north western corner of Villupuram District it is 37 Kms from Villupuram Taluk in the South, and 25 Kms from Tindivanam by road in the East. It has an area of 410 square miles and a population of 422,880 Gingee is the headquarters of the taluk. It is a place of rugged mountains. It is famous chiefly for the historical fort which rises about a mile to the west. The fortifications of Gingee stand on three hills named Rajagiri, Krishnagiri, and Chandrayan Durg.

The three hills of the place rise in the form of triangle, all being steep, strewn with huge boulders which are largely unclimbable, and well fortified on every side by battlemented stone walls equipped with loopholes for the use of guns and musketry. They are connected with one another by a stone rampant sixty feet thick and an external ditch eighty feet wide.

The citadel on the north is called Krishnagiri, on the South Chandrayan Durg, and that on the west, the highest and most inaccessible of the three, Rajagiri or "the king of hall". There is also a smaller and less important fortified hill, Chakkili Durg, to the south of this last.

Rajagiri is the highest and the most invulnerable part of this almost impregnable fortress. It consists of a long and high ridge covered for the most part with gigantic boulders, which at its northern end rises suddenly into a great rocky eminence with almost sheer sides the top of which stands 968 feet above the sea, some 800 feet above the plain below it. This is the chief citadel of the fortress.

The strongest and the highest of the hills is the Rajagiri also called the Great Mountain on account of its precipitous height; the hill ought to have been totally inaccessible before it came to be fortified. This rock and on to 600 feet height at its top levels; and on the summit of it, rising above the ridges, is the innermost citadel surrounded by strong walls that render an escalade impossible except on the north plank where, however, nature has provided an additional means of rendering an attack impossible by a width and 60 feet in depth. This chasm has been artificially deepened further. The entrance to the citadel, as we find it today, it by means of a wooden bridge thrown over it. The citadel can be reached by a fortified path and the narrow bridge, seven gates have to be traversed before reaching the citadel. The lower fort is entered by two gates one on the north called the Arcot (or Vellore) gate and the other on the east known as the Pondicherry Gate. East of the last and just outside the walls of the lower fort was formerly a pettah or small town which was defended by a weaker wall with bastions.

Rajagiri is reached from the little plateau on the ridge above referred to by the fortified path and narrow bridge already mentioned. The walk on the plateau is picturesque, the grey granite steps running through the thick green jungle. On the plateau close under the sheer side of Rajagiri, which rises like a huge wall above it, is a tank with reverted sides, a reservoir for water deep down in the howls of the ridge a visit to which at once reveals to one the inner anatomy of these odd boulder hills and a shrine to the goddess Kamala Kanni Ammal. To this deity buffaloes used to be sacrificed formerly at the fort of the hill. In front of her shrine is a stone slab 3 ½ feet by 4 ½ feet carved in a most uncommon manner. It bears representations of a bow, five arrows, a buffalo's head, a ram's head, and four human's heads, and it is locally declared to refer to the sacrifices of men and animal which in olden days were made at this spot to appease the goddess. It is said that her temple stood here long before the fort was ever built.

On the top of Rajagiri in a fairly level space is temple to Ranganatha, a mantapam, two big granaries, a masonry, and flag staff. A building of unusual design which is supposed to have been a magazine, and another with a deep chamber under its floor which is called "the treasury" under some of the boulders are two hallows in the rock in which there is always water, even in the driest season. These are deep clefts in which the rain collects and which always contain water because their shape and shaded situation result in the annual evaporation being less than the annual supply. A little lower down the hill, in a small mantapam on its some seven feet in circumference at a breach, which must have cost no small effort to carry to this elevated portion. On the breach end is some lettering in English and grantha characters. The lower fort, as has been said, is surrounded by a wall and ditch, and includes within it an inner fort lying close under Rajagiri. The ditch still contains water, which is used by the adjoining ryots for irrigating their crops.

Mosques, temples and pavilions jostle one another in picturesque confusion at the base of the hill. The old gate-ways of the fort have been walled up; and the new gaps in the walls made for carrying the road from Tindivanam to Thiruvannamalai are now used as entrances into the enclosed fort area. The batteries between the Pondicherry and the Arcot Gates were probably erected by the French during their occupation of the place in the fifties of the 12th century. The gates which are modern in their setting are the work of the French who occupied it for about ten years (1751 - 1761). From the old Pondicherry Gate we directly reach Sadatullah Khan's Mosque.

In the lower fort are found the ruins of the Venkataramana swami Temple whose original tall graceful monolithic pillars are said to have been carried away to Pondicherry by the France and to have been built into the base of the statue of Dupleix in the place dela-Republique at that down. The stone car stand Sittampur nearby, which is still a township inhabited by a fairly numerous body of Jains, is also said to have been built of stone-pieces dismantled from the Venkataramanaswami temple of Gingee. This temple is said to have been built by one Muthiyalu Nayakan². In A.D 1860, a Jain official and a member of the Madras provincial service, Sri Baliah, took away a number of stone pieces from Gingee to Sittampur; among them the great stone elephants, placed at the foot of the Terumutti (car-stand), are noteworthy. The most admirable carvings in the Venkataramanaswami temple are found in the panels on either side of the gateway under the entrance; and they depict well known scenes from the Ramayana, from the different incarnations of Vishnu and the Puranic legend of the churning of the ocean of milk by the Devas and the Asuras³.

On the southern side of the Fort at about 1 km distance there is a beautiful temple of the Pattabhi Ramaswami; this temple is also deemed to be architecturally as important as, and perhaps even more than, the Venkataramana swami temple. The twelve pillared mandapam in it constitutes its most conspicuous feature. In A.D 1858 the collector of South Arcot suggested the removal of its pillars to Madras and their utilization as a base for the statue of General Neill, at Madras, which was then in process of manufacture.⁴

To the west of the Venkataramana swami temple there is the tank known as the Anaikulam used for bathing elephants. Further west of the Anaikulam are situated the famous tanks, the Chakrakulam and the Chettikulam, the latter of which is said to have been built. By one Rama Chetty in the day of the Maratha occupation of the place and under the rule of Rajaram towards the end of the 18th century. Near the Chettikulam is a platform where Raja Desing a body is said to have been burnt by order of the Nawab with full honours and in orthodox Hindu style. Between the two tanks is a large stone-image of Hanuman under a tottering mantapam. Even now, the people of Gingee town worship here in a grand manner.

Further east are two great slabs of polished stone called the Raja's and the Rani's bathing stones. The latter measures 8 ½ feet by 6 ½ feet and is 9 inches thick; north of these is a long row of buildings which were apparently used as barracks.

East of them is the Kalyana Mahal in some ways the most curious building in the fort. It consists of a rectangular court surrounded by room said to have been used by the ladies of the Raja's or Governor's households, in the middle of one side of which rises a square tower of eight storeys, built of stone, plastered over, which is some 80 feet height and has somewhat pyramidal roof. It is the most conspicuous building in the entire lower fort. The plan of each of the storeys is the same and consists of a single room about a feet square surrounded by a Verandah built on arches from which on either side, two narrow stair ways lead upwards and downwards. Some of the Verandahs have disappeared.

The next beautiful fort is Krishnagiri, the fort lies on the hill to the north of the Thiruvannamalai road, this fort is called as "the English Mountain". A flight of steps of hewn granite pieces carries up to its top.

On Krishnagiri, there are several stone-built granaries a mantapam of no special merit, an empty temple to Ranganathan and a brick and plaster edifice known as the King's Audience Chamber. The Chamber is built in the Muhammadan style, its domed roof being supported on a series of graceful little pointed arches. Under the dome is a square platform with pillar at each corner, and round this ruin an arcade built on more pointed arches in the middle of each of the four sides of which is a kind of bay window with window seat: the Chamber is open to all the windows of Heaven, and Commands a glorious view in every direction. Below it is a hall fitted with books for swinging seats, where bygone, rulers supposed to have been in the habit of whiling away their time.

Next the Chandrayan Durg and the Chakkili Drug were also fortified to some extent but their military and strategic value is relatively small. Their flanks are now completely covered with shrubs and stone pieces; the visitor finds it a hard task to negotiate a climb up their sides and reach their tops.

The nearby villages are also important sources to know the history of Gingee dynasty; villages like Singavaram, Melacherry, and Valudavur are closely connected with the Gingee history.

Singavaram is 4 Kms away to the west of the Gingee fortress. It is a good specimen of the South Indian type of the rock-out shrine of Lord Ranganatha, the pagodas at Singavaram was built only by Tubaki Krishnappa Nayak, who added largely to the main fort of Gingee.. It is approached by a steep flight of steps. The recumbent deity God Ranganatha is said to have been the tutelary God of Raja Desing. The image was hewn out of a living rock, and is about 24 feet long and is in the usual reclining posture, lying on the coils of the serpent Ananta. The head of the image is turned aside, and according to the popular ballad of Raja Desing, when the hero requested the God's blessing before proceeding to fight against Sadatullah Khan, the Nawab of Arcot, in AD 1714 the deity did not permit him to go to the battle, and turned his head aside as a mark of his disapproval of Desing's head strong haste.

Singavaram may be identified with the Bishun Gingee the 18th century chronicles (Vishnu Gingee). There were two separate towns known as sheo Gingee (Siva Gingee) and Bishun Gingee (Vishnu Gingee), the latter being regarded as a popular and flourishing town. It was also a place of pilgrimage.

Singavaram was a well known Vaishnava Shrine. The image of the God is believed to be the very one from the great Singavaram temple that had been taken away from it for the sake of safety during its sack by first Muhammadan invader under Malik Kafur.

The idol at Singavaram is supposed to be larger than the one now at Srirangam; it is believed that the idol is the original one brought from Srirangam during the Muhammadan invasions. Singavaram belonged to the jurisdiction of Gingee, and hence we find that Gingee has often been referred to by some travelers as consisting of two towns, the great and little Gingee

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surrounded by a wall three mile in circumference enclosing the two towns and five mountains of rugged rock on the summit of which are built five strong forts. The five mountains referred to very probably include the Singavaram hill, the four others being the Rajagiri, the Krishnagiri the Chandrayan Drug and the Chakkili Drug.

Great Gingee should refer to the whole area including Singavaram; and Little Gingee was very likely the designation of Gingee proper, i.e., the area covered by the four other mountains.

Thirunathan Kundram is situated in the north of Gingee 2 Kms away from the Fort. There is a rock 100 ft height in this place. There are stone steps to reach the rock. It a very important place for the Jains. In the top of the hill there is big rock which has the 24 images of the Jain Teerthankaras carved. Every year, Jains from Sittampur visited this place and also celebrated religious festival.

This village of old Gingee or Melacherry in 5 km away from the western side of Gingee Fort. It too was a fortified place. Desing's ancestors even now are living in the village. In the northern side of the village, a Siva temple is carved in a rock. In the south west of the village, there is a temple for Panjali Amman, and a big lake. It is an old temple. The people of southern side are taking the soil from this place and used it for the construction of new temples in their places. Another temple is for Goddess Pacchiamman; she is called as the protector of the village. The seven big Jadamunis' statue is in front of the Pacchiamman temple. The limits of Great Gingee should have included Melacherry or the village of old Gingee.

Neelampondi, an important village 6 Kms away from the fort is located in the northern side. The Nawab of Arcot, Sadatullah Khan, and Raja Desing fought in this village in A.D 1714 and the Nawab gained victory. For the victory of Nawab Fetch pet, a small village was founded in that place. The dead body of Desing's comrade Mahabat Khan and his horse Neelaveni and Desing's horse Parasari, were also buried on the bank of the tank at Fetch pet, near the Bill of Kadalimalai is in the western side of Fetch pet village.

Yet another village is Valudavur; it is 60 Kms away from Gingee in the eastern side near Pondicherry the village is on the bank of river Sankaraparani. It is surrounded by fertile lands the fort, the mosque and the temples which once filled the village were in a state of ruin and have now disappeared. Valudavur is considered to have been the headquarters of Mahabat Khan, the friend of Desing Rajan. The old mosque in the village is said to have been built and endowed by the one of the Nawabs of Kurnool. It was one of the principal outposts of Pondicherry in the wars of the 18th century.

Thus the above said are very important to know the monumental importance of the past history Tamilnadu. Which explore to know the past history to the future generation.

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