



## Food and Shelter for the Itinerant Pilgrims: Maratha *Chattrams* in Southernmost India

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### Abstract

A *chattram*, also called choultry, primarily refers to a wayside inn or rest house for travelers, mostly pilgrims. They may halt here for a meal or for a few hours or even for a few days or weeks. Such *chattrams* were built almost throughout India by many kings and queens, ministers and merchants. Although there are copious references to such *chattrams* in ancient and medieval literature and inscriptions, actual specimens of such *chattrams* are limited in number. Many of them appear to have been destroyed during wars or in the course of later developments and constructions. In Tamil Nadu, in southern India, the Tanjavur Maratha dynasty (1676-1855) that ruled this region with Tanjavur as the capital, erected scores of such *chattrams*. Some of these *chattrams* have survived to this day. Many of these *chattrams* are massive and elegant buildings displaying innovative architectural features. Some of them also bear beautiful sculptures and wall paintings akin to those in the medieval temples of the region. Mainly based on archival and field researches, the present paper analyzes the historical, architectural and artistic importance of these *chattrams* and simultaneously, probes the role of these institutions in the socio-economic life of the Maratha period. The paper concludes with a brief account of the present-day condition of these *chattrams* and the ways in which they could be put to adaptive reuse according to the exigencies of contemporary times. Unless otherwise stated, all observations in this paper are based on the author's field researches and the archival records in the Sarasvati Mahal Library, Tanjavur.



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### Introduction

A *Chattram* or *choultry* essentially refers to a wayside inn or rest house for travellers. They may

halt here for a meal or for a few hours or sometimes, for a few days or weeks. Throughout history, such *Chattrams* were built in various parts of South and

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South East Asia, by royal families, ministers and merchants. There are numerous references to such *Chattrams* in South and South East Asian literature and temple inscriptions. But extant *Chattrams* are limited in number as many of them have been simply destroyed or else, completely renovated and refurbished for other uses and their initial role as a *Chattram* forgotten in course of time. In Tamil Nadu, the surviving *Chattrams* are mainly those built by the kings of the Tanjavur Nayak and the Madurai Nayak dynasties (mainly sixteenth-seventeenth centuries) and a few more built by the Marathas who ruled after the decline of the Nayaks. Rani Mangammal (1689-1706), the Nayak dynasty queen of Madurai, is historically well-known for erecting *Chattrams* in her kingdom (Aiyar, 1980, p. 165,166). As Madurai and its neighbouring areas had innumerable temples, many pilgrims passed through this region. They made good use of these *Chattrams*.

#### **Maratha *Chattrams*—A Historical Overview**

The Marathas originally hailed from western India (Maharashtra region). They emerged as a major political power in the seventeenth century (Gordon, 1998, p. 1-89) (The book furnishes a fairly detailed account of the rise of the Marathas.)

From Maharashtra, they gradually extended their political influence to many places in northern, central, western and even southern India. By the mid-nineteenth century, their power declined throughout India.

Venkaji or Ekoji, a half-brother of Chatrapati Shivaji (1630-1680 CE.), the famous Maratha king, captured Tanjavur in present-day Tamil Nadu in southern India around the year 1676 and thus, established Maratha rule in Tamil Nadu. The dynasty that Venkaji founded is generally called the Tanjavur Maratha dynasty mainly to distinguish it with the other Maratha dynasties that ruled mostly in western and northern India. The last ruler of the Tanjavur Maratha dynasty was Shivaji II who died in 1855. Soon after his death, the British took over his kingdom.

The Marathas built palaces, forts, temples and *Chattrams* or *choultries* in many parts of India. In North India, they built some *Chattrams* for the benefit of the pilgrims visiting the holy city of Varanasi (also called Banaras and Kashi). The Tanjavur Maratha dynasty built several *Chattrams*

in different parts of Tamil Nadu. Many of these *Chattrams* appear to have been established to cater to the requirements of the pilgrims, from both North India and elsewhere, travelling to the famed pilgrim centre of Rameswaram and other neighbouring temple-towns in southern Tamil Nadu. Those days, from Tanjavur, there were two major routes to reach Rameswaram. One route was through the region of Pudukkottai. Some of the areas between Tanjavur and Pudukkottai were, in those days, covered with thick jungles and further, Pudukkottai was under the control of a non-Maratha ruler and hence, the Marathas could not build any *Chattrams* on this route. The other route was through the main highway linking Tiruvaiyaru, Tanjavur, Orathanad (Orattanad) and Pattukkottai. The latter route was mostly within the kingdom of the Tanjavur Marathas and hence they built many *Chattrams* on this route. Due to these *Chattrams*, this route became more popular than the other routes. In course of time, this route began to be known as the 'pilgrim route' (Suresh, 1993, p. 6-17). This road-route runs almost parallel to the southern Coromandel coastline and at places, the road is barely a few feet away from the sea (the Bay of Bengal). Incidentally, this route was also a major trade route frequented by merchants including those proceeding to Sri Lanka and South East Asia from the Maratha port near Manora and other ports on the coast of Tamil Nadu (Bhosale, p.11).

Field explorations have revealed several more *Chattrams* that have never been documented or published so far. These *Chattrams* appear to have been used not only by the pilgrims but also by other travellers proceeding from one place to another within the Tanjavur Maratha kingdom. Mapping the location of all these *Chattrams*, one is able to infer that the above 'pilgrim route' was a part of a larger network of trade routes and pilgrim routes crisscrossing the kingdom. The northernmost *Chattram* is at Malliyam, barely 5km from Mayiladuturai, close to the northern border of the kingdom. This was probably the first halting place for anyone coming to the kingdom from the north. The next *Chattram* is at Amma*Chattram*. The *Chattrams* at Malliyam and Amma*Chattram* are now partially destroyed. After Amma*Chattram*, we have large *Chattrams* at Darasuram (near Kumbakonam) and Tiruvaiyaru, both of them fairly well-preserved. According to some of the elderly residents of this region, there were one or two major *Chattrams* at some places

between Darasuram and Tiruvaiyaru but we have no archival or archaeological evidences for the same. Tiruvaiyaru with its large Panchanadisvara Temple and other shrines, is itself a significant pilgrim centre and thus, a major 'pilgrim route' commences from this place and extends right upto Rameswaram. Thus we have a series of *Chattrams* all along this route—mainly at Tanjavur, Orathanad, Pattukkottai, Rajamadam, Sethubava*Chattram*, Manamelkudi (also called Manalmelkudi), Mimesal (or Mimisal) and finally, at Rameswaram itself. Shorter pilgrim routes linked each of these places to certain other sacred towns in the region.

The precise number of *Chattrams* built by the Tanjavur Marathas is not clear. While one estimate gives the number as 16 (other than the *Chattrams* at Mimesal, Manamelkudi and Rameswaram), many of the traditional accounts give different numbers—15, 18, 20, and sometimes as high as 550. The earliest *Chattram* seems to have been built around 1728 (Krishna, 1994, p. 17-18). The locals generally believe that the location of the major *Chattrams* was planned in such a way that one *Chattram* was separated from the next by a day's travel by walk or bullock-cart. This would mean that the distance between one *Chattram* and the next

was always equal. But field explorations reveal that this is not always the case. For instance, the distance between the *Chattram* at Amma*Chattram* and the one at Darasuram is around 8km while the *Chattrams* at Mimesal and Manamelkudi are separated by 17km. This plausibly indicates that several *Chattrams* on these routes no longer exist. On date, around 25 *Chattrams* survive, some in various stages of extinction. These have been erected by various kings of the Tanjavur Maratha dynasty. Among these *Chattrams*, the most noteworthy include : the Draupadi Ammal *Chattram* at Manamelkudi, the Vennar *Chattram* at Tanjavur (1749), and the Yamunabayi or Yamunambal *Chattram* at Nidamangalam (1761)—all built by Pratapasimha(1740-1764); the *Chattram* at Amma*Chattram*, the Rani Rajambal Kalvi *Chattram* at Darasuram, the Mohanambal *Chattram* at Rajamadam and the Rajakumarambalpuram *Chattram* at Mimesal—all erected by Tulajaji II(1764-1787) ; the Kalyana Mahal *Chattram* of Tiruvaiyaru and the Muktambal *Chattram* of Orathanad—both constructed by Sarfoji II(1798-1832); and the Sreyasi *Chattram* of Tanjavur (1837) (Fig. 1) founded by Shivaji II(1832-1855). In addition, local merchants and even British officials founded smaller *Chattrams* in the region.



**Fig.1: Sreyasi Chattram, Tanjavur**

### **Tanjavur Maratha *Chattrams*—A Survey of their Architecture and Art**

Hitherto, studies on Maratha architecture have been mostly confined to their palaces, forts and to a lesser extent, their temples. The Marathas are particularly known for their defence architecture. Indeed, Chatrapati Shivaji has been hailed as one of the greatest fort-builders. But the Maratha *Chattrams*, although not adequately studied, are equally important from the perspectives of both architectural innovations and the artwork within them.

Like the Maratha palaces, the Maratha *Chattrams* reflect the peculiar socio-political conditions of their times. From a historical perspective, the Marathas originally hailed from Western India and were undoubtedly 'foreigners' with their own distinctive art and cultural traditions, when they first settled in Tanjavur. But they appear to have quickly adjusted themselves to the new environment and their *Chattrams* naturally contained elements of both the Maratha style and the native Tamil tradition. Many of these *Chattrams* appear to have been modeled on the region's Hindu temples of an earlier period, mainly the Medieval Chola and Vijayanagar period temples. In fact, some *Chattrams* actually house a temple within their premises. Simultaneously, atleast some of these buildings also exhibit Islamic architectural features including long rows of Islamic style columns and cusped arch openings. These buildings were erected at a time when the European Colonial powers, mainly the British, were rapidly colonizing large parts of India including Tamil Nadu. Thus, these *Chattram* buildings occasionally even display certain elements of the British or Colonial architecture.

The Tanjavur Maratha *Chattrams* are normally massive buildings. They are brick-built and lime-plaster structures. They have spacious pillared halls (dormitories), dining rooms, kitchens, open courtyards and bathrooms. The roof of the *Chattrams* are generally of three types: vault roof, tile roof and the Madras terrace roof which is a flat roof composed of a series of wooden beams, parallel to each other, and covered by a layer of bricks held in position with lime mortar. Often, a single *Chattram* displays two or more types of roofs. The vault roof is seen in certain sections of the *Chattram* of Orathanad. The inclined tiled roof is seen in the Rajamadam *Chattram* which, however, earlier had a thatched roof. The Madras

terrace roof (flat roof with wooden reapers) is mainly seen in the Kalyana Mahal and other *Chattrams* built by the last two Tanjavur Maratha kings—Sarfoji II (1798-1832) and Shivaji II (1832-1855). The pillars in the various *Chattrams* also display wide variety in form and design. Plain as well as profusely carved circular, square and octagonal pillars are seen in different *Chattrams*.

A few of the Tanjavur Maratha *Chattrams* are known not merely for their architectural grandeur but also for their exquisite artwork such as stucco and brick-cut sculptures and wall paintings. Some of the *Chattrams* also had excellent woodwork decoration such as octagonal wooden pillars with crockets and sculptures of warriors and horses as in the *Chattram* at Rajamadam. Most of these wood carvings have, however, been destroyed.

A detailed architectural analysis of the three biggest and well-preserved *Chattrams* is furnished below:

#### **Yamunambal *Chattram*, Nidamangalam**

From the perspectives of history and architecture, this is one of the most important *Chattrams* of the region. It is one of the earliest and biggest *Chattrams* of the Tanjavur Marathas. In terms of art and architecture, it served as a forerunner for many later *Chattrams*. . But unfortunately, due to its rather obscure location and various other reasons, it is not as well-known as the *Chattrams* in Tanjavur and Tiruvaiyaru.

It is believed that Pratapasimha (1740-1764) built the Yamunambal *Chattram* in memory of his queen Yamunambal who died during pregnancy. This is a large *Chattram* with massive solid walls. The brick and plaster walls have been raised on a granite plinth. Two ornate colonnades project on either side of the front hall or entrance court and appear to be like moving chariots, having been provided with strong stone wheels. Each colonnade has atleast two wheels, some of them broken. The Marathas appear to have borrowed this idea of 'wheeled structures' from both the Chola and the Vijayanagar kings who built such chariot-shaped chambers or mandapams in some of their temples (The Medieval Chola dynasty king Rajaraja II erected a chariot-shaped chamber, with wheels moved by horses, within the Airavatesvara Temple (twelfth century) at Darasuram near Kumbakonam, within

the Tanjavur Maratha kingdom. This is the most famous wheeled structure in this region. There are a few more chariot-shaped or wheeled structures, probably built around the same time, in the temples at Tiruvalanjuli, Kumbakonam and other places in the region. Krishnadeva Raya, the famous Vijayanagar monarch, erected a chariot-shaped structure made of a single piece of stone, complete with wheels, in the Vithala Temple at Hampi in Karnataka (early sixteenth century).

The present *Chattram* is one of the few *Chattrams* to have underground rooms or chambers that were accidentally discovered in 1897 when the building was undergoing major alterations. (Hemingway, 1906, p. 228). The *Chattram* displays sculptures on the ceiling, walls and pillars. The balustrades flanking the small flight of steps, leading to the front hall or entrance court, feature elephant figures. This hall exhibits sculpted brickwork wherein the red bricks themselves are carefully cut and carved and placed as part of the pillared structure. This brickwork art is overlaid with stucco and paint. These columns have prominent brackets fashioned to resemble banana flowers and the domes over them are also intricately carved. In the chamber behind this front hall, the vaulted ceiling exhibits sculptures displaying swans and parrots in stucco. The exterior wall displays stone sculptures featuring various themes such as warrior on horse and woman playing the vina, a very popular musical instrument of the Maratha period. The figures of warrior on horseback are strikingly similar to the sculptures featuring the same theme in the Vijayanagar-Nayak temples of a slightly earlier period. Some of the sculptures in this *Chattram* feature love scenes. Such sculptures are not common in Tamil Nadu but are occasionally seen in temples and other buildings in Central India and the Deccan.

#### **Muktambal Chattram, Orathanad**

This is the largest and one of the most beautiful among the *Chattrams* of the Tanjavur Marathas. It was built by Sarfoji II around 1802 A.D. There are many accounts pertaining to the origin of this building. According to one such account, this was originally a small palace that Sarfoji built for his favourite queen or mistress Muktambal. On her request, the palace was later converted into a *Chattram*. According to another account, the king established this *Chattram* to fulfill the last wish of

Muktambal. It is believed that the building also served as a royal camping place when the king and his officials visited this area from Tanjavur. This explains the *Chattram's* unusually large size and elaborate artistic ornamentation unknown in any other Maratha building in this region. During the Maratha period, apart from its use as a *Chattram* and as a royal camp or retreat, a Veda *patasala* (Veda school) also functioned in this building (Krishna, 1994, p.17-18). The school had hundreds of students on its rolls (Krishna, 1994, p.17-18). During the reign of Sarfoji, priests performed several Vedic rituals and sacrifices in one of the bigger halls of this *Chattram* (Somasundaram, 1935, p. 58-59).

As regards architecture and art, the Muktambal *Chattram* shares several common characteristics with the Yamunambal *Chattram* of Nidamangalam. Probably, the latter served as the prototype for the former. The Muktambal *Chattram* has a granite plinth, and the brick walls and columns are raised over this plinth. The *Chattram* has two large courtyards at the entrance. One of them is partially enclosed by two ornate colonnades, parallel to one another. Each of these colonnades is shaped like a chariot, with stone wheels having twelve spokes each, drawn by horses. There are four wheels at the base of each colonnade. Behind these courtyards, there are a series of smaller courtyards and halls that comprise the living quarters. The kitchen and the rear yard are further behind. The first floor has ornate halls with columns. Like the *Chattram* at Nidamangalam, this *Chattram* also boasts of exquisite sculpted brickwork that adorns the entrance court. These brickwork columns, unlike the ones at Nidamangalam, have been left unpainted and unplastered, and thus, when sunlight falls on them, a magnificent red glow fills the hall. As in Nidamangalam, these columns have conspicuous brackets in the form of banana flowers and the domes over them are also richly carved. Again, as at Nidamangalam, the balustrades, flanking the small flight of steps leading to this hall, display elephant figures. The granite plinth bears a profusion of sculptures. The slender pilasters, rising above the plinth, exhibit charming female figures playing musical instruments.

#### **Kalyana Mahal Chattram, Tiruvaiyaru**

This is one of the most well-known and well-preserved *Chattrams* in the region. It was definitely built by Sarfoji II who built many of the other

buildings in the neighbourhood. But the exact date of the *Chattram* is not clear. He probably built it as a small *Chattram* around the same time when he built the Muktabal *Chattram* in Orathanad (around 1802). After his pilgrimage to Varanasi in northern India (early 1820s), he appears to have enlarged or renovated the Kalyana Mahal *Chattram*. This renovation may have been a part of Sarfoji's bigger

program to build and expand several buildings on the banks of the rivers in his kingdom after his observation of the riverbank architecture of Varanasi (Suresh, 2015, p. 68-75). It is said that this building was initially erected for use by the 24 queens or concubines of Sarfoji before it became a full-fledged *Chattram*.



**Fig. 2: Kalyana Mahal Chattram (extreme right) and other Maratha buildings on the bank of the Kaveri river, Tiruvaiyaru**

Interestingly, the Kalyana Mahal building within the fort at Gingee (Tamil Nadu) was also meant for the use of the queens. One may recall that this fort was under the Marathas in the late seventeenth century. Plausibly, the Kalyana Mahal of Gingee inspired the Kalyana Mahal of Tiruvaiyaru since both share certain stylistic and design features (Suresh, 2015, p. 68-75).

The Kalyana Mahal *Chattram* is located on the banks of the river Kaveri, with some sections of the structure actually projecting into the river bed (Fig. 2, building on right). The building mainly consists

of three distinct sections or bays linked to one another by pillared verandahs and rooms. The living quarters consist of rooms and corridors surrounding courtyards. Some sections of the building exhibit wall paintings featuring Hindu deities. Stucco sculptures featuring peacocks and dancing figures are seen above the archways between the pillars.

#### ***Chattram* Administration**

The Tanjavur Marathas had a very efficient administrative system to maintain the *Chattrams*. The *Chattrams* were under the overall administrative control of the senior officials stationed in the capital

city of Tanjavur. In addition, the local officers within each *Chattram* managed the day-to-day affairs of that particular *Chattram*. Sometimes, the local residents provided voluntary service for the maintenance of the *Chattrams* in their neighbourhood.

The *Chattrams* yielded substantial revenue by means of royal grants and donations from the travelling public. The *Chattram* officials maintained

meticulous records of the institution's income and expenditure including details of the accounts relating to the purchase of rice and other foodstuffs. These records, mostly in the Marathi language, were periodically sent to the Sarasvati Mahal Library in Tanjavur (Fig. 3) where they are preserved to this day. Some of the *Chattrams* mentioned in these records are, however, now not traceable.



**Fig. 3: Sarasvati Mahal Library, Tanjavur**

**The *Chattram* as a Socio-economic Institution: Discussion**

The basic concept of a *Chattram* is that of a rest house-cum-feeding house. But in the Tanjavur Maratha kingdom, the *Chattram* reached its most mature stage of evolution and often became a large self-contained institution with its own source of water-supply, kitchen gardens, poultry farms, hospitals, dance auditoriums and even small temples attached to it (Suresh, 2015, p. 68-75). The manifold activities of the *Chattrams* included feeding the poor and the needy and provision of separate accommodation

for different classes of travellers such as Brahmins, traders, soldiers and even foreigners. While some people stayed for a few hours or days, others halted for a few weeks or even months. Families that wanted to stay in the *Chattrams* but desired to cook their own food were permitted to do so and were provided with grains, vegetables and firewood. Sometimes, the *Chattrams* hosted special feasts for the inmates and neighbours. The *Chattrams* also offered special facilities including highly nutritious diet to pregnant women and lactating mothers. The hospitals inside the *Chattrams* were, in most cases,

offering options of Western and the traditional Indian systems of medicine. These hospitals served those staying in the *Chattrams* and others. The doctors in some of these hospitals regularly corresponded with their counterparts in the Dhanvantri Mahal, the big hospital established by the Maratha king Sarfoji II within the palace in Tanjavur. Sometimes, doctors in the *Chattram* hospitals referred seriously sick patients to the Dhanvantri Mahal. The *Chattrams* also provided shelter, food and medical facilities to the animals such as cows and horses accompanying the travellers. Often, schools and colleges functioned within the *Chattrams*. These educational institutions catered to the children of the inmates of the *Chattrams* and also the neighbouring public. Many of these schools and colleges had a playground where the students were given training in sports and athletics, mainly wrestling. The *Chattram* at Malliyam even had an auditorium where performances, mostly by female dancers, were regularly held. Even the Maratha king, during his visits to this area, witnessed these performances.

The Tanjavur Maratha queens appear to have played a significant role in the establishment and maintenance of many of the *Chattrams*. Several *Chattrams* bear the names of the queens. For instance, the Mohanambal *Chattram* at Rajamadam is named after Mohanambal, the queen of Tulajaji II (1764-1787) who built this *Chattram*. Again, some of the villages and settlements adopted the name of the local *Chattram*. To mention an example, the area around the Muktambal *Chattram* (in Orathanad) is called Muktambalpuram. Invariably, the queens administered the *Chattrams*. Many of the *Chattrams* were endowed with large tracts of lands and hence, the king often gifted these *Chattrams* and the lands surrounding them to some of his queens and concubines and in return, these queens and their children were not supposed to claim the throne or any other property of the king. Thus, the *Chattrams* often avoided succession disputes.

The *Chattrams* exercised profound influence on the socio-cultural life of the Marathas. These institutions provided employment to hundreds of people. The *Chattrams* also promoted the growth of various arts and crafts. Sculptors, carpenters and painters could display their skills on the doors and walls of these buildings.

The Marathas were immensely proud of their *Chattrams*. They considered the erection and maintenance of these institutions as a meritorious service, a noble act of charity that will bring good to them in this life and in the next. These gorgeous *Chattrams*, with their lush gardens and airy courtyards, were indeed indispensable to the local public and the weary travellers traversing the region during the inhospitable tropical summers in the pre-motor car age.

### Conclusions

When the Tanjavur Maratha rule ended in 1855, the royal family's properties including the temples and the *Chattrams* came under the British Colonial administration. A protracted legal battle ensured the return of the temples to the legal heirs of the erstwhile rulers. The administration of the *Chattrams*, however, continued to remain with the government.<sup>14</sup> At present, the District Collector of Tanjavur district—the district's seniormost administrative official—administers the *Chattrams* and their properties. Tanjavur is the only district in Tamil Nadu, probably in the whole of India, to have a separate *Chattram* administration department. With the introduction of railways and other contemporary means of transport and communication, and hotels and hostels suiting all budgets, the role of the *Chattrams* has considerably diminished. Most of them no longer serve their original purpose. The income from the lands belonging to the *Chattrams* is not always adequate to maintain these huge buildings. Many of the *Chattrams* are now rented out to schools or are used as shops or warehouses for storing rice or salt. A few are kept locked or else, the buildings have been simply destroyed or demolished.

Presently, Tanjavur region is the only place in the entire country to have a large network of *Chattrams* erected by a single dynasty. In recent years, local heritage lovers and voluntary cultural organizations such as INTACH (the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage) have been trying to enlighten the local people and the administration about the historical and architectural importance of these *Chattrams*. Thanks to these efforts, atleast some of the bigger *Chattrams* such as the Muktambal *Chattram* of Orathanad are now being restored and preserved as archaeological monuments for tourism. Simultaneously, there are plans to convert some of



these buildings into museums. Such adaptive reuse will ensure the long-term survival of these valuable heritage buildings.

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