Homage To Shiva And Shakthi

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Lit interior of the Sri Ponnambala Vaneswarar temple complete with stone floors and sculpted pillars

Unlike the lively colours that distinguish kovils of Sri Lanka, the Sri Ponnambala Vaneswarar Temple is a regal structure, sculpted entirely of stone blocks and columns. Within its premises you are drawn into a story of ardent faith and dedication.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara | **Photographs** Mahesh Bandara

A staunch devotee of Lord Shiva and his consort Shakthi, Ponnambala Mudaliyar finally realised his dream of constructing a Shiva temple in 1857 as an expression of his devotion. Following his death in 1887, his eldest son, Mudaliyar Kumaraswamy took on the administrative duties and was later succeeded by his brother Ponnambalam Ramanathan. Under his administration the building underwent an extensive renovation phase, which until then stood as a modest structure. It was his wish to rebuild the temple in the image of ancient stone temples of Tamil Nadu.

By 1912 the completed building that remains today, Sri Ponnambala Vaneswarar, bears a striking resemblance to Dravidian temple architecture of solid and sculpted stateliness. Incidentally the temple is the only one in the country built entirely of stone. At the rear gate the cattle shed highlights the place of reverence given to cows in Hindu religion, in particular Shiva temples where the cow is the vehicle of the deity. Further down towards the temple’s entrance are the *Sri Pushkarini* or the holy pond and the *Ther Mandapam*, the enclosure that shelters the chariot used for the annual festival. While there are many trees of value in the premises, a tree that has grown as a fusion of Bo and Nuga is a rare one. A small shrine for the idols Santhana Gopala and Kalinga Narthanar sits at the base of this tree.

The temple itself is an impressive work of stone, with a formidable blind exterior only interrupted by the striking *gopuram* entrance and seated guard stones poised high on the four corners. Inside the structure, a high and long stone-pillared hall shelters the many idols of worship including the main shrine at the centre. Rows of chandeliers suspend from the high ceiling and illuminate the interior adding to the grandeur.

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The pillars that run the length of the hall are a display of craftsmanship as the carved patterns differ from one another, ranging from swans, dancing peacocks to mythical creatures. These features are in contrast to conventional Hindu temples of Sri Lanka, which are embellished with paintings and vibrant colour. Some pillars also bear elaborately carved figurines of Shiva and Shakthi in two forms—Pradoshamurthi where Shiva and Shakthi are seen together on a cow and Arthanareshwarar, an embodiment of the two deities as a single entity. Although sculpted on the narrow pillars they have been faithfully produced in detail and devotees drape flowers, apply ‘kum kum’ and offer prayers to these figures.

While the main shrine occupies the centre, many other places of worship are positioned along the hallways around it. Shrines of nine planetary gods, Sri Maha Vishnu, Sri Brahma and Lord Murugan are among the many. As evening falls, the high pitched melody of the Nadaswaram and the drums reverberate throughout the temple. The first *pooja* commences at 5.30 in the morning and the *Nithya Utsavam* is held daily in the mornings and evenings at 7am and 7pm respectively. Following the *pooja* the two idols, Shiva and Shakti are taken around the temple premises amidst the chants of the devotees. However, the temple’s main festival, the *Maha Utsavam* is held annually during the Tamil month of *Panguni* (mid March-mid April) and prevails for nine days leading up to an auspicious day marked by a special alignment of constellation. The ‘*TherThiruvila*’ is the most significant event of this festival where the idols of the gods including Shiva and Shakthi are borne in special chariots around the temple and the streets. Lord Shiva occupies the largest chariot and the idols are returned to the temple after the festival. On the evening of *Theertha Thiruvila*, one of the most important customs, the marriage of Lord Shiva and Shakthi takes place marking the end of the festival.

Although there is a calendar of events throughout the year and daily, devotees trickle in to offer all manner of prayers at the various shrines. From special *poojas* conducted by the temple custodians, to a solemn prayer muttered in isolation, the temple is a reassuring presence for all those who seek solace in its refuge.












