

Jungle Ganesh



The kovil faces the historic Sangaman Kanda rock

In the jungle an ancient shrine sits. Built over time by resilient worshipers in this quaint green haven, it is one of the closely guarded secrets of Sangamankandy, Thirukkovil.

Words Keshini de Silva | **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda



Pavilions lead to the holy chamber

After visiting the spellbinding stretch of beach in Komari we headed inland in search of the elusive Ganesh kovil in the jungle in Sangaman Kanda or Sangamankandy as it is known in Tamil. We drove along the main road and gravel roads, across desolate lands and through thick groves until we finally surfaced at a flat clearing.

Between the foliage, vistas of a colourful structure were visible. It was the Sangamankandy Jungle-Pillayar Kovil. With thick forest on its borders, indeed its name “Jungle Ganesh” was well suited. Tall mango and neem trees towered around the kovil like strong guards. At the sound of approaching humans,

monkeys screeched running into hiding. Quickly they peeped from leaves and through rooftops gathering an account of the infrequent guests. Residues of fireplaces were the only indication of human existence. These were the remnants of the Friday *pooja* (prayer service) held earlier that week.

Although the kovil was first consecrated to Lord Shiva, today it is largely a kovil dedicated to Lord Ganesh (Pillayar) for reasons unknown. It's a strange mystery as even the statue placed within the sacred-most chamber bears the likeness to a Shiva Lingam.

We were told the structure that stands today was constructed centuries ago, during British rule after the Portugese destroyed the ancient kovil and drove its patrons away. During this period of isolation forestry had taken over the deserted land. When the worshippers returned in search of their beloved shrine the woods refused to relent. Therefore, the villagers carefully excavated some of the remnants of the ancient kovil and placed it in this clearing a short distance away. This includes the effigy placed in the hallowed chamber; believed to be the Shiva Lingam of the ancient shrine. Brick by brick, farmers and fishermen built a kovil around these holy relics.

Hence, the architecture of this kovil is quite different to others, simple structures later topped with elaborately sculptured roofs. The *Maha Mandapam* (main pavilion) and the intermediary pavilion are built in a hut or *kudil*-like structure. A chamber with a colourful *Vimana* to house the *sanctum sanctorum* seemed to have been added later. The customary Lord Murugan shrine, the brother of Lord Ganesh, was on the right. Although a kovil established by Shaivites (followers of Lord Shiva) there are shrines for Naga Bana (the king of snakes and an expression of Lord Vishnu) and Hanuman in its precincts. As we explored, monkeys nimbly clambered around these structures, curious about our every move.

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In Sri Lanka, the lives of communities are directly linked with a temple or kovil, which the worshippers diligently maintain. And so did this little community in Sangamankandy. Scattered construction on the kovil premises affirmed the

continued commitment of the people to develop their kovil.

Surrounded by dense shrubbery on all corners, the kovil entrance faced the Sangaman Kanda rock. The other side of the rock façade revealed ruins hinting at the existence of an ancient Buddhist monastery. Ties between Buddhism and Hinduism were close here with accounts of King Devanampiyatissa inviting patrons of the ancient kovil to witness the planting of the Sacred Bo Sapling in Anuradhapura.

This stretch of the southeastern coast was an important part of the bygone Ruhunu Kingdom. Historical records suggest temples among other buildings, were developed by the great King Vijayabahu, who expanded his rule from Ruhuna to Polonnaruwa.

Beyond this wall of thorns, not only does the jungle jealously guard the ruins of the ancient shrine destroyed by the Portuguese settlers. Far into the thicket, villagers describe seeing other ancient ruins of palaces and temples that boast of the prowess of our ancestors. The journey there is described as a challenge through thick vines, prickly bushes and the threat of the wild.

We strolled towards the end of the clearing marked by a well. A faint design was etched on its rim, giving it the allure of something ancient. We continued aimlessly until we spotted a parting in the thicket. It was a path honed by regular use. Judging by its direction our guess was that it led to the ruins of an ancient palace. Sadly we were unable to explore further as the fast approaching night signaled that the area is now under the reign of the wild. Villagers warned the gentle giants, especially lone bull elephants, might not be as forthcoming about our arrival as the monkeys.

And so we left, our last glimpse saw the kovil veiled in a curtain of dry leaves, unraveled by a sudden gust of warm winds.

***Sangamankandy
Jungle-Pillayar Kovil,
Thirukkovil,
Ampara***

