Thiruketheeswaram Kovil: Sacred Eeswaram Of Mannar

Posted on



The monumental tower with its intricately carved statues adding colour to the Kovil

The clouds gathered in an otherwise vacant pale blue sky. In stark contrast, the red and white stripes with the burst of colour that erupted within mingled with an indescribable sense of quietude and serenity of the vast open temple grounds. As we gradually approached the great Thiruketheeswaram Kovil in Mannar, we were instantly overcome by a spiritual aura that encompassed the age-old symbol of divinity dedicated to the supreme Lord Shiva.

Words Kamalika Jayathilaka Photographs Menaka Aravinda and Damith Wickramasinghe

Just inside of the small gateway leading towards the main shrine stood the majestic *Gopuram*, the monumental tower-like structure characteristic of a Hindu Kovil with its intricately carved statues of deities and other associated figures and animals showered with a sea of colours. We cautiously proceeded through the gates and into a wondrous world of culture and history that steadily unfolded before us.

From a Distant Past

According to legendary beliefs, the Thiruketheeswaram in Mannar is the temple where Ketu Bhagavan worshipped Lord Eeswaran (another name for Lord Shiva) whereby the shrine acquired the name “Thiruketheeswaram.” Enriched by a past of no less than 2,500 years Thiruketheeswaram is closely associated with the ancient port of ‘Manthotai’ (Mathoddam) a gateway into the Island used by traders that sailed in and out of it centuries ago. It is therefore, the belief of some that the Kovil was subsequently built and maintained by merchants from South India.

Later with the advent of the Portuguese in the 16th Century, the great Thiruketheeswaram Kovil had been destroyed along with a countless other Buddhist and Hindu temples all over the country by Portuguese colonialists. It is said that the Portuguese Governor at the time had given orders to transport the temple stones to build the Mannar Fort.

The original temple site having been retraced in 1894, efforts had been underway to restore the temple in the process of which the *Shiva Lingam* (representation of the deity Shiva used for worship in temples) of the old shrine had been unearthed. In 1910 local Tamils had rebuilt the Thiruketheeswaram to its present state.

Enriched By A Past Of No Less Than 2,500 Years Thiruketheeswa Ram Is Closely Associated With The Ancient Port Of ‘Manthotai’…

Divine Blessing

At the gates and facing the main shrine, a small grey structure was dedicated to Nandi, the bull, the vehicle of Lord Shiva housing a stone image of a seated Nandi. He is also considered as the gatekeeper and is found in all temples venerating Lord Shiva. Passing this we stepped into the temple compound, the main shrine sitting in the midst of countless statues and images of various Hindu deities. On our left was a long corridor held up by a series of columns. Along the corridor were statues of ancient figures who had glorified Lord Shiva in their song and praise, dedicating

their lives to the revival of Hinduism.

Far back behind the main shrine was the *Shiva Lingam* next to a line of statues representing more deities. It is said that the *Lingam* is kept outside of the main shrine as its female counterpart could not be found and therefore replicas were especially made in India to be installed in the main shrine. The *Garbhagriha*, the small unit, the innermost sanctum or shrine stood in the centre where Lord Shiva resides and only priests are allowed within. Outside stood the vast bronze coloured *Dhwaja Stambha* or the flag hoisting mast of the temple.

The Thiruketh Eeswaram Kovil In Mannar Comes Alive With Lights And Activity Especially During Maha Shivaratri…

Celebrating the Devout

The Thiruketheeswaram Kovil in Mannar comes alive with lights and activity especially during Maha Shivaratri – a festival celebrated each year in reverence of Lord Shiva. During this festival, the Shiva temple is flocked by many devotees from all over the country both young and old, who come to perform the traditional Shivalinga Pooja or to worship and hence hope for favours from the deity.

At sunrise the devotees cleanse themselves in the traditional *Palavi*, a tank which is next to the temple. This is a significant purificatory right adhered to at all Hindu festivals. Then the worshippers carry pots of water to the temple with which they bathe the Shiva Lingam.

As we stepped out of the temple we stopped for a while on the banks of the holy *Palavi*, the tank that stretched over a vast expanse. As a soft cool breeze swept over the glistening waters, we left the divine place of worship touched by the spiritual essence of the great Thirukethiswaram Temple in all its grandeur.

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