



## Glory of Bharath » Bharath Darshan

Dear Sai brothers and sisters,

Our sacred journey this month takes us to the famous Chidambaram dedicated to Lord Nataraja. The shrine is the only Shiva temple to have its main deity represented in this anthropomorphic form, as the supreme being who performs all cosmic activities

### Chidambaram



Chidambaram is one of the five Pancha Bootha Sthalams, the holiest Shiva temples each representing one of the five classical elements; Chidambaram represents akasha (aether).

Thillai Nataraja Temple, Chidambaram is a Hindu temple dedicated to Shiva located in the town of Chidambaram, East-Central Tamil Nadu, South India. The temple is known as the foremost of all temples (Kovil) to Saivites and has influenced worship, architecture, sculpture and performance art for over two millennia. The Sangam classics list chief architect Viduvelvidugu Perumtaccan as directing an early renovation of the shrine. A major shrine of Shiva worship since the classical period, there have been several renovations and offerings to Chidambaram by the Pallava, Chola, Pandya, Vijayanagara and Chera royals in the ancient and pre-medieval periods. Its bronze statues and stone sculptures depicting various deities and the famous Thillai trees (Exocoeira agallocha) of the surrounding forest reflect the highpoints of early Chola and Pallava art while its famed gold plated gopuram towers are medieval structural additions by the royals Aditya I, Parantaka Chola I, Kopperunchinga I, Krishnadevaraya and Jatavarman Sundara Pandyan. King Kocengannan Chola was born following prayers his parents offered at the temple and later in his life he refined its structure. The shrine gave the town its name.

The deity that presides here is Thillai Koothan (Thillai Nataraja - Shiva, Lord of Dance). Chidambaram is the birthplace of the sculpture and bronze image representation of Shiva as the cosmic dancer, a Tamilian concept and motif in Chola art that has since become notable as a symbol of Hinduism. The consort deity here is Sivakami Amman (form of Amman - mother goddess and female energy). Two other forms of Shiva are represented close to this in the vimana (inner sanctum) of the temple - as a crystallised lingam - the most common representation of Shiva in temples, and as the aether space classical element, represented with empty space and a garland of fifty one hanging golden vilvam leaves (Aegle marmelos).



Lord Nataraja and Goddess Sivakamasundari

Shiva is captured in pose as Nataraja performing the Ananda Tandava ("Dance of Delight") in the golden hall of the shrine Pon Ambalam. The sculptures of Chidambaram inspired the postures of Bharatha Natyam. The Chidambaram complex is admired for its five famous halls (ambalam or sabhai), several grand smaller

- History
- Aims
- Concept
- Parenting
- Events
- Training Programmes
  - October 11
  - December 09
- Expansion
- Development
- Syllabus
- Bal Vikas Administration
- Past Students
  - [June 2010](#)
  - [September](#)
- Home

#### Activities from States

[At the Lotus Feet](#)

[Gurus Corner](#)

[Children's Corner](#)

[From the Annals of the World History](#)

[Special Page](#)

[Glory of Bharath](#)

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~ January [download](#)

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~ December [download](#)

~ October [download](#)

~ September [download](#)

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~ July [download](#)

~ June [download](#)

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~ January [download](#)

~ February [download](#)

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~ January [download](#)

~ February [download](#)

~ March [download](#)

~ April [download](#)

~ May [download](#)

~ June [download](#)

~ July [download](#)

~ August [download](#)

~ October [download](#)

~ November [download](#)

shrines to the Hindu deities Ganesh, Murugan, Vishnu and Sivakami Amman which contain Pandyan and Nayak architectural styles, and for its endowment from many water tanks, one of which links it to the Thillai Kali temple.

### Legend

The story of Chidambaram begins with Shiva strolling into the Thillai Vanam (vanam meaning forest and thillai trees - botanical name *Excoecaria agallocha*, a species of mangrove trees - which currently grows in the Pichavaram wetlands near Chidambaram). In the Thillai forests resided a group of sages or 'rishis' who believed in the supremacy of magic and that God can be controlled by rituals and mantras or magical words. Shiva strolled in the forest with resplendent beauty and brilliance, assuming the form of Bhikshatana, a simple mendicant seeking alms. He was followed by his consort. The sages and their wives were enchanted by the brilliance and the beauty of the handsome mendicant and his consort. On seeing their womenfolk enchanted, the rishis got enraged and invoke scores of serpents (nagas) by performing magical rituals. Shiva lifted the serpents and donned them as ornaments on his matted locks, neck and waist.

Further enraged, the sages invoke a fierce tiger, whose skins and bones were used by Shiva as a shawl around his waist. The rishis gathered all their spiritual strength and invoked a powerful demon Muyalakan - a symbol of complete arrogance and ignorance. Shiva wore a gentle smile, stepped on the demon's back, immobilized him and performed the **Ānanda Tandava (the dance of eternal bliss)** and disclosed his true form. The sages surrender, realizing that Shiva is the truth and he is beyond magic and rituals.

### Temple structure



A classical Shiva temple as per Agama rules will have five prakarams (closed precincts of a temple) or circuits each separated by walls one within the other. The outer prakaram will be open to the sky except the innermost one. The innermost one will house the main deity as well as other deities. There will be a massive wooden or stone flag post exactly in line with the main deity. The innermost prakaram houses the sanctum sanctorum (karuvarai in Tamil). The temple is supposed to be located at the lotus heart of the Universe: Virat hridaya padma sthalam.

A gold-roofed stage is the sanctum sanctorum of the Chidambaram temple and houses the Lord in three forms: the "form" - the anthropomorphic form as an appearance of Nataraja, called the Sakala-thirumeni, the "semi-form" - the semi-anthropomorphic form as the Crystal linga of Chandramaulishvara, the Sakalanishkala-thirumeni, the "formless" - as the space in Chidambaram-rahasyam, an empty space within the sanctum sanctorum, the Nishkala-thirumeni.



### Significance of the temple design

The layout and architecture of the temple is replete with philosophical meanings. The place where temple located is the center point of world's magnetic equator. Three of the five Panchaboosthala temples, those at Kalahasti, Kanchipuram and Chidambaram all stand on a straight line exactly at 79 degree 41 minutes East longitude - truly an engineering, astrological and geographical wonder. Of the other two temples, Tiruvanaikkaval is located at around 3 degrees to the south and exactly 1 degree to the west of the northern tip of this divine axis, while Tiruvannamalai is around midway (1.5 degree to the south and 0.5 degree to the west).



~ December  download

» 2009

~ May  download

~ June  download

~ July  download

~ August  download

~ September  download

~ October  download

~ December  download

» Home



The 9 gateways signify the 9 orifices in the human body. The Chitsabai or Ponnambalam, the sanctum sanctorum represents the heart which is reached by a flight of 5 stairs called the Panchaatchara padi - pancha meaning 5, achhara - indestructible syllables - "SI VA YA NA MA", from a raised anterior dias - the Kanakasabai. The access to the Sabhai is through the sides of the stage (and not from the front as in most temples). The Chit sabha roof is supported by four pillars symbolic of the four Vedas.

The Ponnambalam or the Sanctum sanctorum is held by 28 pillars - representing the 28 agamas or set methodologies for the worship of Shiva. The roof is held by a set of 64 beams representing the 64 forms of art and is held by several cross-beams representing the innumerable blood vessels. The roof has been laid by 21,600 golden tiles with the word SIVAYANAMA inscribed on them representing 21600 breaths. The golden tiles are fixed using 72,000 golden nails which represents the no. of nadis that exist in human body. The roof is topped by a set of 9 sacred pots or kalasas, representing the 9 forms of energy. The artha mandapa (sanctum) has six pillars denoting the six shastras (holy texts). The hall next to the artha mantapa has eighteen pillars symbolizing the eighteen Puranas.

### **The Ananda Tandava Posture**

The Ananda-tandava posture of Nataraja represents pancikritya functions of the godhead believed to have created the dynamic force to create the world. The demon under Nataraja's feet signifies that ignorance is under his feet. The fire in this hand (power of destruction) means he is the destroyer of evil. The raised hand (Abhaya or Pataka mudra) signifies that he is the savior of all life forms. The arc of fire called Thiruvashi or Prabhavati signifies the cosmos and the perpetual motion of the earth. The drum in his hand signifies the origin of life forms. The lotus pedestal signifies Om, the sound of the universe. His right eye, left eye and third eye signify the sun, moon and fire/knowledge, respectively.

His right earring (makara kundalam) and left earring (sthri kundalam) signify the union of man and woman (right is man, left is woman). The crescent moon in his hair signifies benevolence and beauty. The flowing of river Ganges through his matted hair signifies eternity of life. The spreading of his hair and drape signify the force of his dance. Another notable point of this posture is that it is based on the six point star. Nataraja's head forms the topmost point of the star, while his spreading hair and right hand form the upper side points. His drape and raised left leg form the lower points, and his right leg that rests on the demon Myalagga forms the lowest point. Surrounding this is the arc of fire.