

# A Study of Art and Architecture of Avudayar Kovil Temple of Pudukkottai District, Tamil Nadu

Dr. S. Udayakumar

## Abstract

The temple of Tamil Nadu has a long history and archaeology among the temple in South India. The temple in South India context has always drawn the attention of students, researchers as well as scholars of various hues for a long time due to multiple tradition myths and mysteries surrounding it. When we trace the origin of the temple, there is mention of the Kuttam and Kovil, both meaning are mentioned in *Sangam* literature. There is an interesting theory about the history of the temple in Tamil Nadu. In ancient times the public used to assemble in every village at a particular place to discuss the needs of the village and grievance of the public. Besides, such places of the congregation also served as a court of justices to punish the offender, but later it changes into religious practices with the excellent art and architecture.

## History of Avudayar Kovil Temple

This research has taken a challenge to understand the art and architecture of Avudayar Kovil temple in Tamil Nadu. Avudayar Kovil temple belongs to Pandya dynasty. Saint Manickavasagar, then heading the cabinet of Pandya king, came to this place Tiruperundurai, now Avudayar Kovil to buy horses. He heard the sound of "Shivagama mantras there and saw a guru sitting there. The Prime minister fell at the feet of the lord and begged him to teach him wisdom. While learning, Manickavasagar plunged into deep meditation when he opened his eyes, he found his teacher absent in the place and understood that his guru was none other than Shiva himself."<sup>1</sup>

He spends all the money he carried for buying horses in building a temple for him "Guru-Shiva and dedicated himself to the service of Lord. As the saint failed to carry out the order of the king, he ordered the saint to be arrested and jailed. Lord Shiva converted the foxes in the forest into horses, brought them to the king as instructed by Manickavasagar. After delivering the horses, Lord went away. However, at midnight, the horses became foxes and started howling. Angry king, made Manickavasagar stand on the sands Vaigai river, in Madurai under the scorching sun. To teach a lesson to the Pandya who acted against his devotee, Lord made Vaigai flow in spite king ordered to strengthen the banks to avoid a breach."<sup>2</sup> Lord also came to Madurai as a coolie for the repair work. The king struck him with a cane for not doing the work properly. The blow only feels on the king and everyone in Madurai leaving its scar on them. The king came to know that all that happened was Lord shiva's design, fell at the feet of Manickavasagar and begged his pardon.

## Study Area

Avudayar Kovil temple is located in the small town named Avudayarkovil (10°47'N 77°49E), which is around 14 km from Aranthangi city of Pudukkottai district in Tamil Nadu state, India. The town was called as Thiruperunthurai in the ancient times. Avudayar Kovil temple (the word "Kovil" means "temple" in the Tamil language). Avudayar Kovil is called Thirupperunthurai in the inscription and intimately associated with Saint Manikkavasakar. Avudayar Kovil temple is attractive not only due to spiritual reason but also due to its architecture and sculpture.

## Aim and Objectives

This study attempts to collate all the existing research that has been undertaken in the field of architecture, and potential contribution to the existing body of knowledge through a structural and sculpture analysis of Avudayar Kovil temple architecture. This study comprises the details architecture plan of the temple, iconography, and Iconometry of sculpture in the Avudayar Kovil temple. The study will include the structure of pillars, ceiling, and painting of the Avudayar Kovil temple. Studying the detail iconography and story description of each sculpture of the Avudayar Kovil temple and the study also counts the complete sculpture and pillars and mandapam of the Avudayar Kovil temple.



Sculpture view in Avudayar Kovil.  
Photo by Ravindraboopathi. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.

## Sculptures of Avudayar Kovil temple

The most important sculptures of Avudayar Kovil temple and a devotee visiting temple cannot afford to miss the rare sculpture of temple.

1. Dundi Vinayaka sculpture
2. Stone chain with a snake spinning around
3. Udumbu-a lizard-like creature and the monkey
4. One thousand pillars carved in a just two pillars
5. Sculpture lords and mothers in 1008 temple
6. Horses of various countries
7. 27 sculpture representing 27 stars
8. Various signs of dance art-Nattiya Kalai Mudra
9. Pillars expressing seven musical sounds
10. The shade of Koodalavi appearing as the neck of a cow

There are no Nandhi and Bali Peeta in the temple as both lord and mother are formless. The palm leaves and the writing pin used by Manickavasagar are still safe in the temple and temple noted for epigraphy farm, stone flooring, and beautiful sculpture.

## Manickavasakar

Manickavasakar was a 9<sup>th</sup> century Tamil poet Tiruvasakam. He was one of the main authors of Saivite Tirumurai, and his work forms one volume of the Trimurti. According to account the king of Pandya dynasty has selected Manickavasakar as a part of his region after seeing his military acumen. The Manickavasakar sculpture is made up of granite stone. The Manickavasakar sculpture is carved along with the pillar which is facing towards the main shrine; this indicates that Manickavasakar is always facing Lord Shiva. The headdress is similar to Buddha headdress style, but the author does not indicate to say that it belongs to the Buddha period, it just to say that it looks like. The description of the headdress is each lamb of hair is round; if we look little detail, it seems like the honey bees. He is wearing one Rudraksha mala near to his neck, three long Rudrakshas near to his breast and two Rudraksha mala on his right and left arms. He is wearing a short dhoti which is up to knee, He held his hand near to chest in a humble manner, and he stands on Kamal Pedam (Fig. 1).

## Vinayaka sculpture

Lord Vinayaka is praised as Ugandha Vinayaka, Lord Vinayaka is the god of wisdom, intelligence, luck, and fortune. The iconography of Ugandha Vinayaka has same as other Vinayaka but an essential aspect that in this temple Ugandha Vinayaka has sat with Devi, its unusual among Vinayaka of other temples. Ugandha Vinayaka located the left corner of the main shrine. The very important and distinctive aspect of Ugandha Vinayaka in the temple is he sitting with goddess Kali with two hands. "Elephant head, wide mouth, and large ears: The large head of an elephant symbolizes wisdom, understanding, and a discriminating intellect that one must possess to attain perfection in life.<sup>3</sup> The trunk and two tusks with the left tusk broken. Elephant eyes and the four arms and various objects in the four hands, the left side of the body symbolizes emotion, and the right side symbolizes reason (Fig. 2).

## Athmanabhar

"Lord Shiva here is Athmanabhar, and his consort here is Yogambikai. However there is no actual granite representation of Lingam or Ambal, and that is why this temple is called the AvudaiyarKoil."<sup>4</sup> In AvadayarKoil, God is bereft of any form. After passing through several thresholds, devotees stand before sanctum and peep in hoping to have a glimpse of the Linga (also spelled as lingam), as is the case in all other temples. But it is empty! Only a Peeta is formed, and devotees are asked to pay obeisance to it. The bottom-most Peeta is the Saktipeeta, and it represents the fusion of Shivam and Skati for the realization of the Supreme Truth. Since no Linga (also spelled as lingam) or idol is consecrated here, the Lord is known by the name of Atmanadha- Lord of the Soul.

## Varagunavarman II Pandiya King

In the later years, Pandiya king extends the temple with beautiful sculpture and pillars. The Pandiya king sculpture was carved 8 to 9 feet, and his headdress was carved different from other Pandya kings, even the hairs have carved in details manner, his eyes are carved prominent, a nose is sharp, he is standing in *Samb Pathamstyle*. He is in Namaskara Mudra, and he is well decorated with full of ornaments. He is craved in a big mustache (Fig. 3).



Figures: 1. Manickavasakar. 2. Vinayaka sculpture. 3. Varagunavarman II Pandiya King

## Mahishisurmardini

According to Markandeya Purana, Durga or Mahalakshmi had killed a demon called Mahishasur. So she was called as Mahishisuramardini. Vishnu Dharmottara Purana describes her as Chandika with twenty hands and sitting on the back of a lion. Padma Purana mentions her as Nanda. Svayambhava Manvantara said that Vaishnavi killed Mahishasura on the Mandara Giri. Matsya Purana, Silparatna, and Rupamandana ascribed her with eighteen hands, and Devi Mahatmya characterized her with a thousand arms<sup>13</sup> Most of the stone panels of Mahishisuramardini found in Goa are of four arms (hands). The four-handed stone panels are generally depicted with Trishul in upper right hand, and a sword in lower right hand, Dhal (shield) in the upper left hand and holding a tail of buffalo with a lower left hand. (e.g. Mahishisurmardini sculpture at Limgao). This sculpture is a masterpiece for simplicity and facial expression. Simple ornamentation of a necklace, Kankanas (bangles) in the hands, Kiritmukut, broad ears and chest, show the sculptural features of the early medieval period. Some of the panels of Mahishisurmardini are depicted while piercing a spear into buffalo's (demon Mahisha) body. In Avudaiyar Kovil Mahishamardini carved in between two pillars with eight hands and sitting on buffalo (Fig. 4).

## Dwarapalakas

Dwarapalaka is the door-keepers of the temples, and sculptures representing them are noticed invariably in all the temples. The sculptures of these "Dwarapalaka are found carved both in relief as well as in the round. They are always carved in pairs. The forms of these sculptures closely resemble those of the main deity. They are four-handed and the attributes they carry vary based on the creed to which they belong."<sup>5</sup> The Shaiva Dwarapalaka holds the trident, and the kettle drum in their upper hands and the Vaishnava Dwarapalaka hold the conch and the discus in their upper hands. The mace is common for the Dwarapalakas of both the creeds, which is held in their lower left hand. Their lower right hand is disposed in various gestures like the *Tarjanimudra*, *Abhayamudra*, and *Swargahasta*. But the commonly found gesture is the *Tarjanimudra*. Their faces are shown as ferocious, and they wear a *Kirita*, which is occasionally shown with a halo of flames. The carving of the prominent canines shows the ferocity of the face. They are shown as standing with one of their legs firmly placed on the ground while the other leg is lifted across the other leg and shown as resting upon the mace. The left leg of the Dwarapalaka to the left side of the doorway is shown is lifted while the right leg of the Dwarapalaka to the right side is shown as lifted. This is a posture common in Tamil idiom, whereas the Dwarapalakas in the Kamataka idiom is sometimes shown in Tribhanga or Dwibhanga. The Texts prescribe that the Dwarapalaka shave to be provided for all the doorways of all the four directions. Dwarapalakas are found carved at the doorway of the Gudhamantapa. They are sometimes carved on the pedyas of the Dwdrabandha. They are even found in the Mahddwdras of the temple. The temple of Brihadishwara at Tanjavur has Dwdrapdlakas carved on the Mahddwdra. The Dwarapalakas sculptures are found in almost all the temples of the region of our study. They are found carved in the round as well as in relief all their forms are as described above. Sculptures of Dwarapalakas that deserve mention for their good workmanship are those found at Shukavaneshwara temple at Salem, Kailasanatha temple at Kargudi and the Soundararja Perumal at Salem. The Mahddwdra of Kamanatheshwra temple, considered as one of the earliest Mahddwdras of the region, has the sculptures of Dwarapalakas. They exhibit the features of Chola sculptural art. A sculpture of a Dwarapalakas is carved attached to the shaft of a Bhadraka pillar. Strangely, this sculpture is not carved near the doorway (Fig. 5).

## Pillars of Avudayar Kovil

Pillars are supporting the corners of Garbhagriha and Antharala are known as canton pillars. The canton pillars are prominently shown in the rock-cut cave architecture. Here the canton pillars are chiselled in the monolithic rock in the corners of Garbhagriha and Antarala. Whereas in Avudayar Kovil at Avudayar, these pillars were prepared in granite rock and arranged in the corners. Pillars supporting various mandapas of the temple are found in various shapes, such as square pillars, round pillars, projected square pillars, octagonal pillars, sixteen-sided pillars, star-shaped pillars, etc.

## Yali Pillars

In Hindu temples, different animals or creatures have been used, which is sometimes thought to be a guard at the gate of the temple. The Yali has been made of the different structure and body parts and in some cases, it looks like a body of cat and head and face of a lion and the nose of the elephant and the tail is sometimes look like almost all of the structure is made a 3D model. Yali is considered a sacred animal which is very dangerous in look so makes it powerful and it is made using the body parts of other animals like lion, elephant, snake, etc. Yali has been an integrated part of the pillar in Indian history because of their carving on the pillars. The power of Yali is considered to be so much more than the lion and the elephant. They have always increased the beauty and art of the pillar (Fig. 6).



Figures: 4. Mahishamardini; 5. Dwarapalakas; 6. Yali in Pillar



## Pillars with Horse

Asvakanta Pillar possesses a rampant horse attached to a Citrakhanad shaft. These horses always have human mounts and are quite tall. The pillars of this type are found in umpteen numbers in Tamil Nadu. Asvakanta variety is noticed in quite good numbers in the Avudayar Kovil. Some variants of this type of pillars are also noticed. They are called variants not because of the change in the theme of the figural sculpture, but in the depiction of these figural sculptures. Wherever they are shown in relief, they are of course carved as rampant animals identically on both sides of the *Bhadra* part of the pillar shaft (Fig. 7).

## Pillar with lamp

"Throughout time sacred monuments have provided spaces to facilitate a dialogue between man and god. Though light has been such an important element in the design of sacred monuments, not much has been written on the subject."<sup>6</sup> The lamp pillar of Avudayar Kovil is 9 to 10 feet in height; there are four levels of lamps between distances of 2.5 feet and the lamp is round shaped. Each level of the lamp is debited of sculptures and the pillar lamp is located in the left and right side in the main shrine (Fig. 8).

## Architecture of Avudayar Kovil

The science of architecture (*Vastu Vidya*) was a branch of occult knowledge from the Vedic period. "Avudayar Kovil is noted for the Zephyr (granite) roof work. The ceiling of the Kanaga Sabhai (golden hall) is a grandeur creation in stone. The ropes, rafters, and nails all are made granite."<sup>7</sup>

The bow-wielding Muruga, Kali and Siva's Rudra Thandavam (wild dance) is the finest specimen in sculpture art. Many renovations have been carried out, much of the current structure dates to the fifteenth CCE. The temple covers an area of over 10 acres (40,000 m<sup>2</sup>) and faces south, constructed so that the setting sun strikes the sanctum even though it is cloistered within three circumambulatory paths. The thousand pillared halls have several delicately crafted pillars with depictions of Oodhwa Tandavan of Shiva, Kaaraikkaak Ammaiyaar, Dhanurdhara Subramanya, etc.

## Gabhagraha

"The most important part of a temple, its very heart as it were, is the Garbhagrha or sanctum."<sup>8</sup> That is square with a low roof and with no doors or windows except for the front opening. The image of the deity is stationed in the geometrical Centre. The whole place is completely dark, except for the light that comes through the front opening. Over the roof of the whole shrine is a smaller tower. There are no images, iconic or anionic, in the sanctum. In the Shrine of the Lord, only a Pitha, is under worship (Fig.9).



Figures: 7. Pillars with Horse; 8. Pillars with lamp; 9. Garbhagrha

## Vimana

Vimana (temple with its towers) have been sought to the erected and not for the sake of god. The place where the chief deity is installed in the sanctum is called Garbhagraha, and the tower over it is called vimana.

## Antharala

Antarala, a narrow passage connecting the Garbhagraha and the Mukhamandapa to the mandapa (pavilion or hall). As already stated, in most of the temple the Antarala is identical with Mukhamandapa or Sukanasi pillar with Pandya king.

## Mukhamandapa

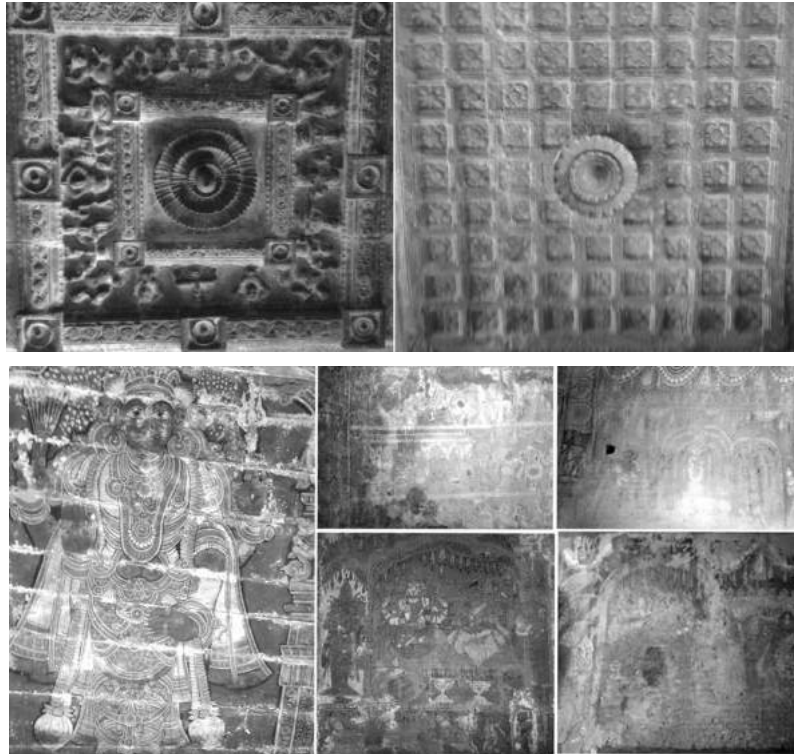
In front of the Garbhagrha and contiguous to it is the Mukhamandapa, sometimes called Sukanasi or Ardhamantapa, depending upon its proportion relative to that of the Garbhagrha. Apart from being used as a passage, it is also used to keep the articles of worship including Naivedya (food offerings) on special occasions. There 16 different pillars such as Yail pillar, horse (Fig.10).



Figure 10: Mukhamandapa

## Ceilings

Ceilings are different types. 1) Domatic Ceiling; 2) Flat ceiling; 3) Rectangular ceiling; 4) Square ceiling; 5) Circular ceiling; 6) Rotated square ceiling; 7) Octagonal ceiling, etc. The outline of these ceilings is generally square, because the Garbhagriha, Antarala, and Mukhamandapa are square. Square ceilings are further classified into flat, rotated, circular and octagonal. Flat ceilings are generally found at the corners and on the sides of the central ceiling in the Sabha-mandapas. Two rotated squares by placing two squares, one over the other, are called trabeated system (Kadalikiikarana). Here the upper one is smaller and turned 45 degrees over the lower. The lower square is achieved by placing four triangular slabs over the corners of the Ankara formed by beams or walls. Placing smaller triangular slabs over the corners of the lower square forms the upper square. A flat slab is placed at the top for covering the central gap. The space of the ceiling is reduced at the top by creating these squares. The lower square is exactly half of them, and the upper square is half of that of the lower. A flat slab one-fourth of the size of the Ankara is used at the top. The squares not only reduce the areas but also break the monotony of the comparatively plain interior. The ceilings of the top slabs are decorated generally with circular lotuses. The ceiling of the Kanaga Sabhai (golden hall) is a grandeur creation in stone. The ropes, rafters, and nail all are made of granite. The bow-wielding Muruga, Kali and Siva's Rudra Thandavan (wild dance) is the finest specimen in sculptural art (Fig.11).



Figures: 11. Ceilings; 12. Painting of Avudayar Kovil

## Painting of Avudayar Kovil

It has been generally accepted that the Avudayar Kovil classical school of painting tradition influenced the classical Pandiya painting tradition of ancient South India. The painting of Avudayar Kovil includes Gaja-Lakshmi, ceiling louts painting, Lord Shiva, Gaja-Samharamoorthi, Manikkavacakar, etc. The basic colours such as white, green and red were used in Avudayar Kovil. The colour used in the traditional mural painting of Avudayar Kovil is generally obtained from three different sources, mineral, vegetal and chemical. All colour "cannot be used in murals, among them only such mineral colours that are lime resistant are suitable for mural painting. Five are the basic colours (*Panchavarana*-Yellow, red, green, white and black of which white is the wall itself and all other pigments are prepared from stone and leaves;"<sup>9</sup> the wall preparation is an elaborate process, and on the specially prepared wall, the picture is drawn first in line and coloured, the iconography of most of which are based on *Dhyanaslokas*. Colour is applied in a sequence such as yellow, red, and green, black and must be clearly demarcated by black line (Fig.12).

## Significances of the temple

Saint Manickavasagar established the original shrine. "More than 1200 years old based on the predictions of Manickavasagar's period and south facing temple which is a rare kind in Siva temples. This temple was called Tiruperundurai, Sathurvedhimangalam, and Sivapuram. This temple is full of sculptures with minute details and perfect chiselling."<sup>10</sup> Avudaiyar Kovil mandapams (hallways) are decorated with breathtaking sculptures. The granite roofs are assembled and are marvellous pieces of construction. "Some of the sculptures are Tundi Vinayagar, stone chains, two pillars with thousand legs, 1008 Sivalayas god and goddess sculptures, horse sculptures are world-famous. The larger than life monolith figures of Agni and Agora Veerabadras at the entrance and Kaalidevi, Subrahmanya with a bow,"<sup>11</sup> Bikshadanar, Sankaranarayanar, Urdhuvathandavar, Pasupatheeswarar, and Narasimhamurthy are noteworthy. Two other sculptures of "Kuravan and Kurathi" exhibits the excellence of the artists for minute details from toe to hairstyle, to the veins and bones of the body lovingly recreated makes the visitor wonder at the dedication of the sculptors of that era. Avudayarkoil- Sabthaswara pillars Avudayarkoil-Saint sculpture, the most awe-inspiring work is seen insides of the Canopy and Sunshades are known as "Kodungai," which stretches all around the Mandapams. The work was done under the stone that forms the sunshade or overhang of the roof. It usually sits on top of the beam stone and is a superb example of the craft of the 9th-century artisans. There is a popular story that states that any contract written for all subsequent temples specifically exclude the structure of Athmanandha Swamy's Avudaiyar Koil from being replicated. Sculptors from these parts consider the sculptures of this temple as a benchmark in carving. The rafters, tiles, padding with hinges and decorative nails chiseled out of stone looks as though they were done in wood and iron. All over the ceilings are decorated with flowery patterns and stone chain links. Tiyagarajamandapam of this temple has a stone chain, and Panjatsaramandapam has Sabthaswara pillars. Thiruvacakam was originated from this shrine. That is no Lingam in the sanctum. Instead, it only has the base, formlessness (Avudayar), which has a metal cover placed on it. This represents formlessness, the absolute ultimate. This temple does not have a Nandhi, Dwajasthambam and Navagraha statues. Instead, Navagrahas are represented as pillars. Utsavamurti of the temple is Manikkavasakar Pittukkumannsummanthakadhai (Tiruvilaiyadalpuranam) has happened in this location. Pradosam is not celebrated in this temple. Brahma was taught the Gayatri Mantra here by Atmanathar. Hence this place is also called Chaturvedapuram. "As soon as we entered right atop were these Kodungaigal - Tiled Terracotta Roof simulation. The planks, the nuts, the bolts, the wooden logs, everything is sculpted of rock!"<sup>12</sup> The best way to depict the awesomeness of Avudaiyar Koil is the words in the ancient contract signed by any Vishwakarma Acharya who begins to build a temple. Any temple can be built with any detailing except "The Pillars of Tharamangalam."



Mural on the ceiling of Avudaiyar Koil at Pudukottai District showing the impalement. Mural also depicts Crows and other unidentified animals feeding on impaled corpses. Photo by P. Jeganathan. June 24, 2016. Licensed under CC-BY-SA-4.0.

## The Granite Grills of Thiruvananthapuram

The Tiled Terracotta Roof simulation of Avudayar Temple

It's amazing how they built this temple. Nowhere near the locality of this temple was any granite hillock. So the granite must have been brought all the way from Pudukkottai! All over the temple, we can find a lot of meaningful sculptures. There is no separate shrine or idols for Navagrahas (nine planets) similar to another temple. They are found only in the pillars. The 27 stars have figures in this temple. There is a Saphaswara pillar (musical pillar), and the stone chain is a famous sculpture in this temple.

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### Author

Dr. S. Udayakumar is a Post Doctoral Associate at School of Humanities National Institute of Advanced Studies Bangalore. E-mail: [archaeology1987@gmail.com](mailto:archaeology1987@gmail.com)



Athmanatha Swamy Temple Avudayarkoil  
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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Athmanathar Temple : Athmanathar Temple  
[https://temple.dinamalar.com/en/New\\_en.php?id=641](https://temple.dinamalar.com/en/New_en.php?id=641)
- <sup>2</sup> Athmanathar Temple: [https://temple.dinamalar.com/en/New\\_en.php?id=641](https://temple.dinamalar.com/en/New_en.php?id=641)
- <sup>3</sup> Hindu Deities: Lord Ganesha. <http://koausa.org/Gods/God8.html>
- <sup>4</sup> Home | Pudukkottai Business Diary. <http://www.pudukkottaibusinessdiary.com/>
- <sup>5</sup> Dvarapalaka, Dvārapālaka, Dvara-palaka: 4 definitions.  
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- <sup>8</sup> Temple Architecture – Devalaya Vastu – Part Five (5 of 9 )  
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- <sup>9</sup> Preparation techniques of pigments for traditional mural  
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<http://chennaitian.blogspot.com/2011/08/avudayar-koil-formless-ultimate-god.html>
- <sup>11</sup> This God doesn't have shape - Avudayar Koil Temple. <http://www.arunachalaramana.org/forum/index.php?topic=8304.0>
- <sup>12</sup> Avudaiyar Koil, Pudukkottai - Tamil Nadu | My Travelogue.  
<http://travel.bhushavali.com/2012/02/avudaiyar-koil-pudukkottai-tamil-nadu.html>