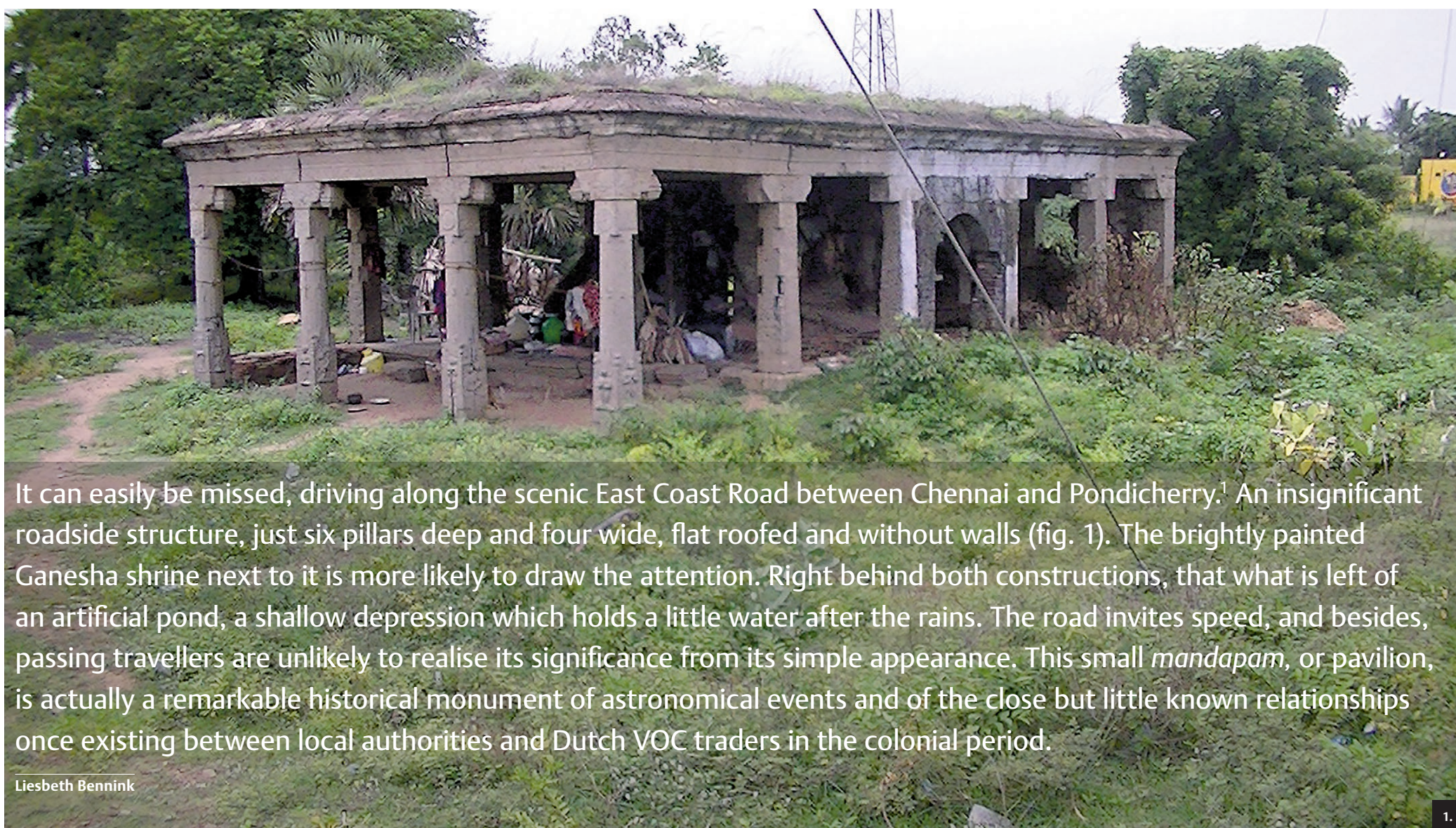


# Decoding a mysterious pavilion



It can easily be missed, driving along the scenic East Coast Road between Chennai and Pondicherry.<sup>1</sup> An insignificant roadside structure, just six pillars deep and four wide, flat roofed and without walls (fig. 1). The brightly painted Ganesha shrine next to it is more likely to draw the attention. Right behind both constructions, that what is left of an artificial pond, a shallow depression which holds a little water after the rains. The road invites speed, and besides, passing travellers are unlikely to realise its significance from its simple appearance. This small *mandapam*, or pavilion, is actually a remarkable historical monument of astronomical events and of the close but little known relationships once existing between local authorities and Dutch VOC traders in the colonial period.

Liesbeth Bennink

## The pavilion

Even upon entering the open structure this significance does not become immediately apparent. We find the pillars are decorated with reliefs of an average quality depicting deities, people and symbols, including a few nice *maithuna*, or erotic scenes. There is no spectacular art and a casual visit is not likely to generate much further interest. To realise the significance we have to look up, at the ceiling.

The general style of the construction and sculpture indicates it was built during the period of the Nayaka dynasty (16-17th centuries). It is structurally divided in a front porch and an inner area with a raised floor and is otherwise empty. The Ganesha temple is aligned to the east, facing towards the nearby coast just a few kilometres away. The orientation of the *mandapam* is not aligned with the cardinal directions, very uncommon for Hindu constructions. It faces slightly west from south, with a declination of 200° 9'.

The pillars that form the front porch are decorated with images of gods and people. This is traditionally the place where donors were depicted.<sup>2</sup> Here we find the other aspect that makes this hall an important historical document. Among the human donors represented are two men in European dress, and their appearance takes pride of place. Altogether seven people are depicted. Three Indian males, accompanied by two Indian females, most likely two couples and an unmarried person. And two Western males dressed in full regalia of the highest authority and social status.

## The donors

Portraiture is not very common among South Indian art, and the depiction of Westerners is actually very rare. Possibly because portraiture was mostly done as part of temple construction where the donors would be represented, sometimes in an almost abstract, general way. Only during the Nayaka period did the individual depiction of the kings and their wives and ministers as donors become a regular feature for temple construction. As can be seen for instance in the Bhuvaraha temple in Srirangapatna. It could be argued that the Westerners depicted could be generic. The situation and the individual features are arguments against this.

The entrance would traditionally be the place where donors had themselves depicted as worshippers. Both the Indians and the Westerners portrayed show a large amount of individuality in dress and appearance. Even the two females can be easily distinguished on the bases of dress, hairstyle and jewellery. These donors have also been treated individually through their size (fig. 2). From left to right, the reliefs of the three Indian males and accompanying females become smaller in size and less well defined. Also on the basis of dress and attire it can be concluded that the couple on the pillar second from the S/W corner must have been persons with the highest status here. On the next pillar to the right the couple is slightly smaller. The third Indian subject on the S/E corner pillar is smallest and least well-dressed. He is also left unaccompanied by a female.

Fig. 1: Overview of the pavilion from the S/E.

Fig. 2: The four pillars forming the porch, showing most of the depicted donors.

Fig. 3: Westerner with round hat and turned walking stick.

(All photos by author)

One of the Westerners is placed facing west on the S/W corner pillar (fig. 3). Comparing this position to the placement and sculptural treatment of the Indian donors we can deduce that the Westerner held a higher status than the principle Indian donor. He wears a coat with a single row of four large buttons and a kind of clasp at the bottom, a hat with a narrow rim and a decoration on the front, and a spiralled walking stick. He wears his hair long and open and holds what could be a pair of gloves in his left hand.

The second Westerner is depicted on the corner pillar of the S/E corner, facing North (fig. 4). He wears a heavy coat with a row of clasps for closing and a simple collar, heavy high heeled shoes, a walking stick and a cocked hat. What distinguishes him the most from the first gentleman is the sword he brandishes by his side. Only persons of the highest authority, such as the captains of ships, were permitted to wear swords. For all intents and purposes, these images show enough individuality of dress and appearance to suggest that the subjects stood as model and the artist depicted what he saw. Also, a generic 'Westerner' would not require two depictions. And the place of honour among the donors and deities on the frontal row of pillars would make such a generic depiction highly unlikely.

The conclusion would be that two Westerners were important participants in the construction of the pavilion, with its accompanying Ganesha temple and tank. Given the highest respect and honour through the inclusion of their portraits among the principal donors. Their dress exudes wealth and



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# How astronomy brought together local dignitaries and foreign traders



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status through the way they have been portrayed by the Indian sculptor. So who could they be?

Just some ten kilometres away on the Coromandel Coast is the village of Sadras or Saduranga pattinam. Between 1612 and 1818 this was a *factorij*, or trading post, of the Dutch East India Company (VOC). It grew into a busy town with a large fort, the remains of which can be seen till today. The residents of this settlement have been known to frequently visit the nearby temple of Thirukallukundram, where they left their carved initials on the pillars and walls of a Pallava Rock temple.<sup>3</sup> As there were no other European settlements in this area, it is probable that the two gentlemen depicted were associated with Sadras, and were therefore VOC officials. On the pillars of the roadside *mandapam* we now find proof of extensive collaboration and interaction between the local population and authorities and the Dutch traders of the VOC.

### Astronomical significance

The reason behind the construction of this pavilion makes this collaboration of even greater interest. Earlier I indicated that the uniqueness of the *mandapam* is defined by its ceiling. This ceiling presents an elaborate and intricate sculptural plan with an astronomical theme revolving around solar and lunar eclipses. In Indian ritual traditions lunar and solar eclipses are considered a time of great potential danger as well as power. Kings would offer large donations and aspirants would even seek to attain *Surya Loka* through self sacrifice.<sup>4</sup> This pavilion records as many as two lunar and two solar eclipses, possibly even more, through depictions of *nagas*, or serpents, approaching a lunar or solar disc (fig. 5). Such symbolic representations are known through the oral tradition to commemorate the occurrence of an eclipse. Other symbols have been found to occur on other similar pavilions and ceilings in temples in connection with eclipse depictions.<sup>5</sup>

The ground plan of four by six pillars divides the structure and the ceiling in a frontal porch and a raised platform with three wings or aisles. Each area has its own sculptural plan. The front porch has a central scene where a large lotus medallion is flanked by a *Purushamriga* (Indian Sphinx) and the saint Kanappa sacrificing his eye to the Shiva Linga (fig. 6). Further depictions to the east in this area include a large striped animal (possibly a tiger) chasing a small deer; a lunar eclipse (identifiable by the lunar sickle marked within the disc); a solar eclipse (where a *naga* approaches a disc); and a pair of fish facing each other. In the western section of the front porch we find reliefs of a Gandha Bherunda (two-headed eagle) and a scorpion with a human face flanking a small lotus medallion.

The reliefs on the ceiling covering the three aisles of the raised platform include depictions of a solar and a lunar eclipse (identifiable by the depiction of the lunar hare in the disc, fig. 5); a whale; a moray eel swallowing what could be a hare; some monkeys; (pairs of) fish; two turtles or tortoises; another human-faced scorpion; several lotus medallions; and a pair of *nagas* facing each other. The representation of Rahu, the demon who equals the ascending lunar node, further emphasizes the astronomical symbolism (fig. 7).

Since our discovery of this eclipse *mandapam* on the East Coast Road we have identified many similar pavilions. The sculptural program of these pavilions confirms a connection between depictions of eclipses through *nagas* chasing discs, and symbols such as (pairs of) fish, turtles or tortoises, *makaras* (mythical fish with elephant trunks) and whales, lotus medallions, and others. These pavilions were constructed in religiously inspired complexes that included the combination of a pavilion (usually with a raised floor, consisting of lay-outs of four by four or four by six pillars), a Ganesha temple, and a constructed *tirtha* (sacred pond) or sometimes a river.

We can conclude this small *mandapam* on what is today the East Coast Road (ECR) along the Coromandel Coast was originally intended for a ritual role related to the occurrence of eclipses. Probably a series of lunar and solar eclipses that would have been considered to be of some special significance.

The accurate prediction and ritual celebration of lunar and solar eclipses has been of prime importance in the calculation of sacred time in India. The discovery of many such eclipse related pavilions in the landscape of Southern India, that can be dated to the Nayaka period on the basis of their reliefs and structural design, underlines this. What makes this pavilion unique is the inclusion of two Westerners among the depicted donors.

Eclipses can be accurately dated, and are sufficiently rare to make a probable dating possible. And the VOC kept good track of the personnel that was stationed in the various trading posts and their movements. It should be possible to connect the eclipses for which this pavilion would have been constructed with the VOC staff present during that time in Sadras. This would make it possible to come up with a possible identification of the two people portrayed here as donor.

On the NASA website we can calculate the occurrence of eclipses for a particular spot on earth.<sup>6</sup> The generated list for the location of the pavilion on the ECR offers only one clear total solar eclipse for the two centuries between 1612 and 1800. In 1680 a total eclipse occurred on the 30th of march. Moreover, in 1676 (11 June) and 1688 (30 April) solar eclipses that were 80% total occurred as well. In 1687 (5 November) another solar eclipse occurred that was 50% total. Total lunar eclipses in that period occurred in 1675, twice in 1682, and once more in 1685. No other significant eclipse phenomena with such a high profile can be found for this location in the period 1612-1800.

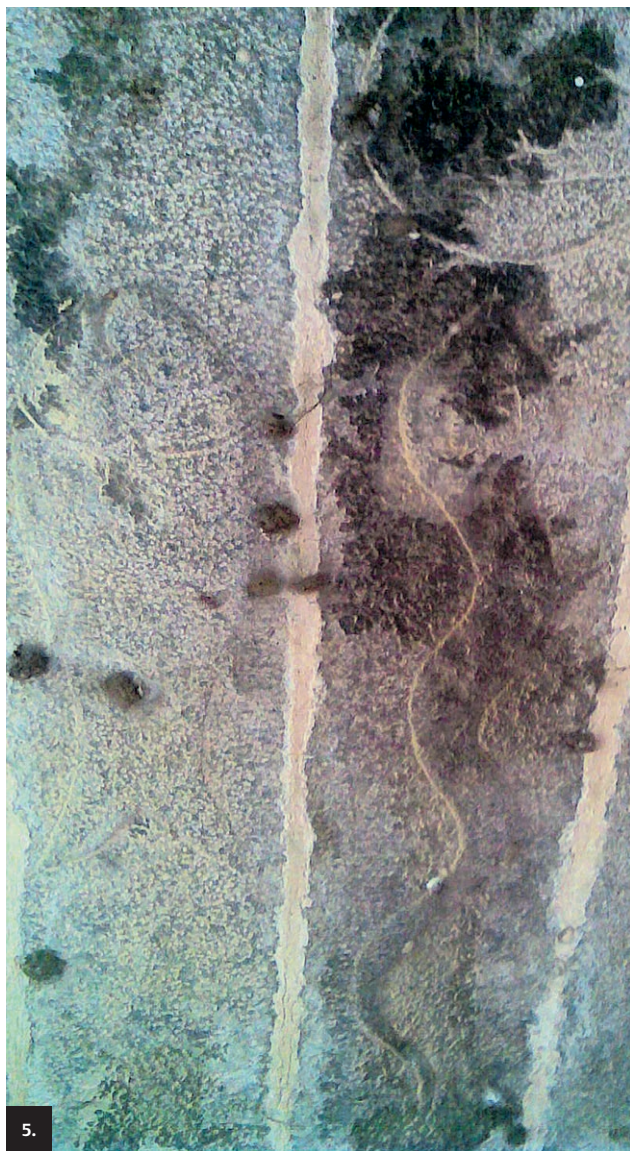
The details of the dress of the two Western donors also point towards this era. Particularly the cocked hat, or *tricorne*, on the man with the sword indicates the timeframe. It evolved from the broad-brim hat of Spanish soldiers in the Eighty Years' War. By binding the brims it obtained a triangular shape called 'tri-corne'. The hat depicted here is broad brimmed and has been bounded at the front. This type of hat was especially popular for military wear all during the 17th and 18th centuries.

The question before us is, who could these two VOC officers who joined this astronomically inspired project as donors be? Could we find any references to the eclipses among VOC archives? The avid interest in scientific subjects among many of the VOC personnel is well documented. Could we also find these eclipses documented through references in personal reports? It must be emphasized that the VOC strictly forbade any participation in local religion. So this is all quite mysterious. We have been fascinated by these questions ever since we one day stopped our car and stepped into this pavilion on the East Coast Road. I am still pursuing the answer. My next stop is the VOC archives. And who knows, to be continued ...

**Liesbeth Bennink combined her history study at the Rijksuniversiteit Utrecht (The Netherlands) with her training as Bharata Natyam dancer. Seeking a deeper understanding and knowledge of Indian dance in the context of the ancient traditions in which it is rooted she found a scholar and master who could open up this world to her in the person of Raja Deekshithar. He was also a member of the traditional community who are the custodians of the Shiva Nataraja temple in Chidambaram, India. Raja and Liesbeth commenced a cooperation that lasted for many years and only ended with Raja's sudden death in 2010.**

### References

- 1 Google Earth gives the coordinates 12°36'37.75"N 80°10'1.46"E
- 2 Information shared with me by Raja Deekshithar, independent scholar and member of the hereditary community in charge of the Nataraja temple in Chidambaram. We discovered this *mandapam* and its significance together, in 2009. Raja Deekshithar passed away in 2010.
- 3 Velde, P.G.E.I.J. van der. 2011. *Wie onder palmen leeft. De sublieme wereld van Jacob Haafner (1754-1809)*, Amsterdam: AUP; Pol, B. van der. 2011. *De VOC in India*, Zutphen: Walburg Pers; Peters, M. & F.A. de la Porte. 2002. *In steen geschreven: leven en sterven van VOC-dienaren op de kust van Coromandel in India*, Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Bas Lubberhuizen.
- 4 Shylaja, B.S. 1997. 'Dating stone inscriptions from eclipse records', *Bulletin of the Astronomical Society of India* 25:601-614.
- 5 The discovery of this and other such pavilions and the astronomical significance of their celebration has been discussed in 2009 and 2010 by Raja Deekshithar (1949-2010): <http://tinyurl.com/mysteriouspavilion>; <http://tinyurl.com/mysteriouspavilion2>
- 6 <http://eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/eclipse.html>. With my sincere acknowledgement and thanks to Mr. Fred Espenak of the NASA Eclipse website where all this information has been made available, and to NASA in general for allowing the copyright free use of its maps and images.



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Fig. 4: Westerner with cocked hat and sword.

Fig. 5: Serpent chasing the moon with the lunar hare depicted in outline.

Fig. 6: Lotus medallion with Indian Sphinx and Saint Kanappa.

Fig. 7: Bodiless Asura Rahu, the ascending lunar node, causing the solar eclipse.



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