

Research Papers



BRAHMOTSAVAMS OF CHIDAMBARAM NATARAJA TEMPLE

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Abstract

Hindu temples are the embodiment of rituals, pujas and festivals. Temples and festivals always go together, we cannot think of a temple without a festival and a festival without a temple. Festivals are celebrated not only for religious purposes but also cultural and commercial landmarks. Chidambaram is the sacred place (the booloka Kailas) for the Saivites, and the Saivas and the temple is one of the most ancient temple of India. The Nataraja temple complex as it stands today has an unrivalled serenity and dignity. In Chidambaram Nataraja temple, the poojas were conducted regularly six times every day. Sometimes special poojas were also conducted on some occasions.

The special poojas were conducted with garlands, flowers, nectar, camphor, fruits, ghee, payasam, etc. The two Brahmotsavam of this temple are: the Ani Thirumanjanam in June-July and the Margali Thiruvathirai in December-January. It is worthy to note that these two celebrations are observed with undiminished fervor and grandeur even to this day. According to historical and traditional evidence, it is clear that these two Brahmotsavams of Nataraja temple (Ani Tirumanjanam and Arudra Darsanam) are ancient. Even today these festivals are celebrated on a mass scale. Thousands of devotees take part in these festivals.

Introduction

Hindu temples are the embodiment of rituals, pujas and festivals. Smiritis and Agamic canons describe the various modes of the performance of pujas and other rituals in the temple. Festivals and special gala occasions served as a unifying factor between the rules and the ruled. Temples and festivals always go together, we cannot think of a temple without a festival and a festival without a temple. Festivals are celebrated not only for religious purposes but also cultural and commercial landmarks.¹

Chidambaram, the headquarters of the taluk of the same name in the Cuddalore district of Tamil Nadu is situated on the Villupuram-Mayiladuthurai section of the Southern Railway. It is well served both by rail and by a network of good roads. Chidambaram, also known as Thillai was called Puliur and Perumbarrapuliur in the past. Originally the area was full of Thillai shrubs (*Excecaria Evagallocha* Linn) now found only in Killai and Pichavaram forest areas, east of Annamalainagar, Chidambaram is the sacred place (the booloka Kailas) for the Saivites, and the Saivas and the temple is one of the most ancient temple of India.²

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The great temple is located almost at the centre of the town. It covers an area of about 40 acres. Outside the temple walls, there are four car streets each sixty feet wide. Between the temple and the walls, there are spacious flower gardens on all sides and avenues of fruit and other beautifying the surrounding area. The temple is conceived on a large scale indicative of the magnificence of the minds of the devotees who built the temple.³ The most ancient part consists of the Moolasthanam flanked with prakaras both small and big which remind one of the glorious.

The Nataraja temple complex as it stands today has an unrivalled serenity and dignity. It covers a rectangular area of between 52 and 53 acres – measuring nearly 400 yard in length and 350 yards in width. The forthwall of enclosure, the Virappa Nayakan Madil, envelops the entire complex around and crowding it on all sides, lies the town of Chidambaram with its house, gardens, yards and shopping complexes encircling the outer most walls of the temple. From each of the four entrances on this wall to the temple (on the east, south, west and north) a small street called the Sannadhi street. Lined with houses or shops, lead upto the corresponding “car street”. The “car streets” are located where there were originally moats of the eighteenth century fortifications.⁴

Dance sculptures are found in almost all the gopuras of this shrine. The images, representing 108 dancing postures with descriptive Sanskrit verse of Bharata Natya Sastra's are found in the eastern gopura of the temple. Minor shrine for Maha Ganapathi, Meenakshi Sundareswarar and Subramaniya are found in the temple complex. The Thousand Pillared Hall is in the north. Eastern corners the hundred pillared hall between Sivakami Amman shrine and Meenakshi Sundareswar shrine. The hall of the celestial dance is found in front of the Nataraja shrine. The Devasabha is situated in this sacred prakara.⁵ The temple has attracted the attention of several successive monarchs of olden days and merchant princess of modern times.

A unique feature of this temple is the presence of a separate shrine for Vishnu who is worshipped here as Lord Govindaraja. This shrine is adjacent to the shrine of Lord Nataraja. It is recorded in the Pundarikapura Mahatmya that Vishnu wanted to enjoy the dance of Lord Nataraja and so he is seen in a reclining pose on Adishesha as Govindaraja. This kind of combination of a Siva and Vishnu shrines is rarely met within any other part of our country.⁶ In Chidambaram Nataraja temple, the poojas are conducted regularly six times every day. Sometimes special poojas are also conducted on some occasions. They are performed by Dikshidars alone who were the hereditary priests of the temple. The special poojas were conducted with garlands, flowers, nectar, camphor, fruits, ghee, payasam, etc. The two Brahmotsavam of this temple are: the Ani Thirumanjanam in June-July and the Margali Thiruvathirai in December-January. It is worthy to note that these two celebrations are observed with undiminished fervor and grandeur even to this day. The Abhishekams or sacred baths are given to the Lord and the Goddess in the Thousand Pillared Hall at the end of festivals.⁷ Mahabhishekam (the great holy bathing) of the pleities, Nataraja and Sivakamasundari, is conducted six times in a year, on certain specified datas. The 'Kamikagama' lays down the schedules.

Month	Festival day	Venue
1. Dhanus (Margali)	Ardra (Star)	1000 pillared mantapa
2. Masi	Sukla paksha caturdasi	Kanakasabha
3. Chitirai	Tiruvonam (Star)	Kanakasabha
4. Ani	Uttaram (Star)	1000 pillared mantapa
5. Avani	Sukla paksha caturdasi	Kanakasabha
6. Purattasi	Sukla paksha caturdasi	Kanakasabha

Of these six, two are Brahmotsavam's (great festivals), Ani Tirumanjanam and Arudra Darsanam in the Tamil month of Ani and Margali. These two Mahabhishekams are performed in the Raja Sabha (1000 pillared mandapa) before sunrise. The remaining four are performed in the Kanaka Sabha.⁸

Ani Tirumanjanam

Reckoning ten days ahead of this day, the festivals opens with the Dhvajarohana (the hoisting of the holy flag) on the flag-staff in front of the Nataraja shrine in the second prakara. Certain preliminary

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rituals like Vigneshvara puja, Anujnai, Vastu santi and Rakshabandhana are performed on the two days preceding the Dhvajarohana day. On this day, the eleven-day festival formally begins. In the Dhvajarohana puja, arohanam is conducted to all the Devatas, the deities of the 'eight directions'. Brahma and Akasa who are thereby invoked; the ten Balipithas are consecrated and the Santhi rituals are performed seeking the Lord's grace for a successful celebration of the festival.⁹

From the evening of the first day of the festival to the morning of the eighth day, the Utsavamurti's (processional deities) which are the Pancamurtis (the five deities): Somaskanda, Sivakamasundari, Subramanya, Vinayaka and Candesvara are taken out in procession (twice daily) over the four car streets of Chidambaram in gold and silver plated mancams (compact canopies supported by four tastefully fabricated pillars which are sized to accommodate the decorated icons) and in the night processions, various vehicles appropriate to the deities with gold or silver casements, are used to carry the deities. The departure of the processional deities from the Alankara mantapa in the second prakara, the passage through the Yaga-sala, where pujas and homas are performed on all the festival days and the ascent over the twenty-one steps and the emergence through the Tittivasal and East sannathi street is marked by colourful festivals and rapturous Nadaswaram music. On the evening of the eighth day, Bhikshatanar charmingly decorated, is taken out in what is termed a Golden ratham or amidst thunderous calls from the devotees around of Bhikshatanarukku pillai pillai (alms to the Begging Lord, please).¹⁰

The Rathotsava (the car festival) on the ninth day and Ani Tirumanjanam and the grand darsan of Nataraja and Sivakamasundari as they emerge from the Thousand Pillared Mantapa on the tenth day of the festival constitute the highlight of the eleven-day festival. On the preceding afternoon, the icons of Nataraja and Sivakamasundari are prepared for the precious jewellery collection of the temple and the icons are covered with a local shawl except for the exposure of the face for public view and the kalapujas performed. In the early hours of the car-festival day, the ritual of yatra dana (prayerful offering at the commencement of the journey) signals the departure of Nataraja and Sivakamasundari from the Chit sabha/Kanaka sabha. The forward and backward movement of Nataraja and Sivakamasundari, alternately in quick succession, as they pass through the first and second prakaras and on to the east sannadhi street to the Ter-adi stir up intense emotional fervor among the thousands of devotees who throng the entire temple premises and assemble in large numbers all along the passage ways.¹¹ The music thrills and the incense refreshes and leave us in a state of 'godly abandon'. A display of unalloyed devotion to the cosmic dancer and His consort is fully brought out by this fascinating spectacle. The emotionally charged crowds move on with but one single thought of Nataraja and His consort.

As the cars move on along the four car streets, thousands of devotees vie with one another to pick up the thick ropes and pull the cars. Coconuts are broken and lighted camphor is waved by thousands of householders on the route, the fronts of their homes profusely decorated with rangoli. Hundreds of garlands, of flower and fruit, baskets and varieties of silken wear are sent upto the Dikshitaras accompanying the deities on the cars on the move for repeated decoration of the Lord and His consort. It is a gorgeous spectacle every moment of the days march.

A close glimpse of Nataraja and Sivakamasundari is possible only on two days of each of the two Brahmotsavams which means on four days in a year. The decorations on the rear of the icons of Nataraja and Sivakamasundari bring out the rare dignity and charm of the icons and the lovely jewellery. All the same irrespective of such considerations, the car-festival gives thousands of devotees a much-prized chance to feel the thrill of a close view of their Lord and His consort. It is a heat-warming experience.¹² By about 11 am, the five cars move upto the junction of the west and north car streets, where they are parked till about 4 pm for public darshan. There is a colony of fishermen close by and by a long-established tradition, the fisherman community justifiably regard, Sivakamasundari as a daughter of their fraternity.

Just as Meenakshi is looked upon as a fisherman's daughter, so is Sivakamasundari in Chidambaram. To the fisherman and fisherwomen of Chidambaram, Nataraja is the son-in-law of their community to whom, as well to their daughter Sivakami, all honours are done on the happy occasion of the Rathotsava, when they are right their door to bless them. Along with Nataraja and Sivakamasundari, Vinayaka, Subramanya and Candesvara are also taken out in individual care around the four car streets on the Rathotsava day. Late in the evening, the 'Kattalai' offerings are carried to the cars to the accompaniment of Nadaswaram music and the Ubhayadars. Neivedyam (offerings) and

camphor worship over, Nataraja and Sivakamasundari are moved out the cars in a colourful procession to the front portion of the Thousand Pillared Mantapa for the Eha-kala Laksharcana and Neivedyam, followed by 'Mantrakshatai' and Diparadhana. The vilva-puja is a delight for the eye and the soul.¹³ Ani Tirumanjanam is celebrated on the tenth day of the Nataraja and Sivakamasundari are divested of the sumptuous ornaments and the large collection of silks, garlands and flowers; and preparations are made overnight for their holy and ceremonial bathing (Mahabhishekam) from about 3 am the next morning, which is completed usually before sunrise, pot full of milk, tender-coconut water, honey and sandalwood paste, among many other items offered for it, make the Mahabhishekam an ideal occasion for meditation on the supreme reign. The beauty of the contours of the two icons is brought out before the devotees eye in striking contrast to the colourful and innate view of the decorated deities on the rathotsava day.¹⁴

On the night of the Ani Tirumanjanam day, the dhvaja-avarohanam takes place. The two ghats (pots) of holy water, consecrated at the Yaga-sala from the commencement of the festival, are used for prokshana (sprinkling of the sanctified water Nataraja and Sivakamasundari) and for the Abhisheka of the sphetikalinga, Candramaulisvara. On the night of the eleventh day, the festival is rounded off with a 'Muttu-p-pallakku' for the panca-murtis tastefully decorated palanquins carry the utsava-murtis around the temple along the four car streets.

Arudra Darsanam

Of the two Brahmotsavams of the Nataraja temple, Arudra Darsanam is particularly important for the Chit sabha. Ten days ahead of the day of the Tiruvadira star in the Tamil month of Margali, the festival flag is hoisted (Dhvajarohanam). The pattern of the ten days Arudra Darsanam festival is the same as that of Ani Tirumanjanam festival with a difference that in the Arudra festival, Saint Manikkavacakar is accorded a special status in the rituals of worship during the festival period. In the Sayaraksha Diparadhana (around 6 pm) of Nataraja, a decorated icon of Saint Manikkavacakar is brought in procession and stationed before the Lord. Likewise, Manikavacakar is taken out in procession in the morning on the ten days of the Arudra festival and when the Arudra Darsanam is over, Diparadhana is offered to Manikavacakar also. The protocol includes a vidayatti (leave taking) festival for Manikavacakar also. It is performed for Nataraja.¹⁵ According to historical and traditional evidence, it is clear that these two Brahmotsavams of Nataraja temple (Ani Tirumanjanam and Arudra Darsanam) are ancient. Some scholars have involved Kopperunjinga's name as the starting point. However, these two festivals have been celebrated even before Kopperunjinga's period. No. 223 Vol. IV of Epigraphica Indica makes pointed references to 'Margali-t-Tiruvadira-t-tirunal' and Tiru Anit-tiurnal. It proves that these two important festivals of the Nataraja temple have been observed even from earlier time, at least as early as during the period of Rajendra Chola I. Even today these festivals are celebrated on a mass scale. Thousands of devotees take part in these festivals.

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