

REPORT OF SEMINARS

TEMPLE ARTS : TEMPLE BRONZES

Dr. V. N. SRINIVASA DESIKAN

Reprinted from

The Bulletin of The Institute of Traditional
Cultures of South and South East Asia, Madras
1989 April to 1990 March



UNIVERSITY OF MADRAS

Madras - 600 005, INDIA

TEMPLE ARTS

INTRODUCTION :

A symposium on 'Temple Arts' was held under the joint auspices of the Institute of Traditional Culture, Madras, and the Kuppusamy Shastri Research Institute for Sanskrit, Madras on 24th December 1988, at the Sanskrit College Campus, Mylapore, Madras-4, between 2 p. m. to 5 p. m.

Dr. A. Gnanam, M.A., Ph.D., Vice-Chancellor of the University of Madras, presided over the first session and Dr. C. E. Ramachandran, Professor and Head of the Department of Indian History, University of Madras, presided over the second session of the symposium.

In the first session Dr. Saskia Ker Senboom Story, a scholar cum artist from Netherlands, staying in India from 1975, well versed in Sanskrit and Tamil Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society, who learnt dance from Tmt Nandini, and Music from Mr Krishnamoorthy and whose doctoral thesis was on 'Devadasi system of dance at Tiruttani temple,' gave a lecture cum demonstration on Temple Dances. Dr. S. S. Janaki, Director of the Kuppusamy Research Institute of Sanskrit, Mylapore, Madras-4, a specialist in Saiva Agamas and who has written books on Saiva rituals and symbols in saivite temples, gave a lecture on 'Sangeetha in Saiva Agamas'.

During the second session Dr. N. Srinivasa Desikan, Curator of the Government Museum, Madras, a specialist in Temple Bronzes on which he has written a book, read a paper on 'Temple Bronzes'. Dr. P. Shanmugam, Reader in the Department of Ancient History and Archaeology, University of Madras, and a specialist in Epigraphy read a paper on 'Management of Temple Musicians and Dancers as revealed from Chola Inscriptions'. Lastly Thiru V. Natarajan, Sales Manager, in the Handicrafts Development Corporation, Madras-17, gave a lecture demonstration on 'Temple Bronzes and the technique behind their making'. With the vote of thanks by Dr. K. R. Hanumanthan, the Director of the institute, the symposium came to an end.

The Director, welcomed Dr. A. Gnanam, the Vice-Chancellor and Dr. C. E. Ramachandran, the Presidents of the sessions, the other participants in the symposium and the scholarly gathering. In his welcome address, he briefly traced the origin, growth, aims and

achievements of the Institute. Founded in 1957, by the UNESCO, located in the University of Madras with Dr. Lakshmanasamy Mudaliar the then Vice-Chancellor of the University of Madras as its President and Professor K. A. Nilakanta Shastri as its Director, it had done yeomen service to the cause of traditional cultures of South and South East Asian Countries. Originally its aim was to preserve the traditional cultures of the South and South East Asian Countries, where the rapid industrialisation and westernisation soon after their newly won freedom, posed a serious threat to the very existence of their hoary traditional cultures. The Institute conducted seminars to highlight the Indian Culture and its influence on the ancient cultures of South and South East Asian countries and published a biannual Bulletin containing the reports as well as articles by learned scholars and news about important cultural activities going on in the Asian Countries. It served as a window through which India and the other Asian Countries, understood and appreciated one another's culture. Through such dissemination of cultural information the Institute tried to promote harmony and friendship between India and the other Asian Countries. The Institute's aim is not only to preserve but also promote and propagate the traditional cultures of such countries.

The term culture is taken by the Institute in a broader perspective to include not only fine-arts such as Sculptures, Architecture, Painting, Music and Dancing but also social science, such as history, politics, anthropology, Sociology, Ethnology, Psychology, philosophy, religion, linguistics and others which ultimately shape the life of Man. In a sense culture satisfies the mental and spiritual needs of man. It brings out the divinity and perfection already in Man. The trend of the modern times to decry culture as a non-utility subject is to be deplored. Its utility is to be looked at from the psychological and spiritual angles rather than merely from material angles, he said. Cultural Institutions like this also help the promotion of the ideals of SAARC i.e. co-operation and peace among the various countries of Asia through the understanding of one another's culture. He also thanked the central and State Governments for giving Grants to the Institute after the discontinuance of the UNESCO

grant. He paid glorious tributes to the former Vice Chancellors and Directors of the Institute prof. K. A Nilakanta Shastri, Dr. K. K Pillai and prof. Thirugnana Sambandam who contributed their mite towards the success of the Institute, all these years.

The Vice-Chancellor in his presidential address, remarked that India is a land of culture and therefore there is no question of redundancy in the existence of the present Institute and many other cultural institutions at the same time. He wished the Institute a continued existence for quite a long time. He said that the Temple culture is a fit subject to be probed into since temples of our country especially of Tamil Nadu are not only repository of culture but the very spring of all cultural activities. It was the epicentre and hub around which all the social, economic and cultural activities revolved. Religion originated to satisfy the spiritual needs of Man, not only in India but also in the whole world. The urge to adore the supreme God in Nature came first; Temples philosophy, rituals etc. came only next to satisfy this urge. Long before Sankara or Thirumoolar religion and temples were there. They inspired the spiritual and cultural activities of villages and towns. They were also centres of their socio-economic life. They promoted creative arts such as architecture, painting, Music and dance. Artisans lived in the temples and produced objects of art with self-less devotion. They never cared for money alone. The temple served as a Kalyana Mandapa where marriages were performed. It had a flower garden which served as a park, Religious and philosophical discourses were held there. Education was imparted there in various Arts and religious principles. The whole Community worked together to conduct Poojas and festivals in the temples. It gave scope for not only individual but collective excellence. No wonder the kings and Nobles granted Tax-free lands to such temples. Therefore our culture is undoubtedly a temple culture. It is a poverty culture unlike the automobile culture of the West based on opulence, science and Technology. We must make a holistic study of this temple culture. Analysing its various aspects such as sculpture, music and dancing is like the blind men interpreting an elephant.

after touching its various limbs. These various aspects synthesised into a single culture which has evolved in our country over centuries. We must not only preserve its various aspects but also promote and develop them by using the modern technological devices. Already music and Bharatha Natyam have grown in such directions. In temples like Meenakshi temple of Madurai we can witness such a development over centuries, in art and architecture. Of course, by doing so we should take care not to destroy the fundamental aspects of our traditional Culture.

Dr. Saskia ker Senboom dwelt at length on the traditional Sathurāttam or temple dances practised by Devadasis especially of the temple at Tiruttani. She described the various rituals performed by the Devadasis for the deities of the temple. To produce subam or auspiciousness for the deity and the temple was their motto. With that end in view they performed some rites to remove the evil eye from the deity that is Drishte.parihara and did upacharas like fanning the deities, singing and dancing before them. They performed Pushpanjal idance, the worship through flowers before the deity. They completely eradicated their ego in front of God while they danced, Their dances became the basis and bed-rock of the later Bharatha Natyam. The lecturer demonstrated by dancing the various phases of the temple-dances of the Devadasis.

Dr. S. S. Janaki said that of the three terms used by Dr. Saskia, i.e. Shashtra, Sampradāya and prayoga of temple dances and music, she would like to take up only the Shastric part of it. Agamas abound with principles governing temple music and dance. Temple Devadasis performed the sixteen upacharas indicated in the Agamas. These upacharas are connected with the Panchaboothas or five elements. Their singing represented the ether or space. The concept of Sangeetha in Agamas is highly philosophic. They declare that Sangeetha or Music represents the etherial aspect of Lord Shiva. Shiva is represented in the temples as Rupa (with form), Arupa (formless) and Rupa-arupa (with form and formless). Shiva with forms is represented in the Prakara or outer compound of the temple. In the moolasthanā or Garbhagraha only a lingam is found. It represents

the rupa-arupa form of Shiva. Linga is only a symbol which has no definite shape but at the same time we can see the form. Above the Linga there is space and that represents the formless nature of Shiva Ākāśa Linga. The temple music also represents the formless aspect of Shiva i.e. Nātha Brahmam. Shiva manifests himself as Nātha or Music in temples. The Devadāsīs illustrate the music through their dances. Everything is performed with utmost piety and devotion because the temple is considered to be the body of Shiva. It is similar to the human body. The Gopura is the face, the outer prahara the physical body, the inner prahara the Mental or subtle body and Garbha graha the blissful body the Ananda Maya Kōsha. Linga represents Jiva or individual soul and its layam or merging with Shiva the cosmic soul. The temple should not be considered as mere stone and mortar. It is the body of Shiva, permeated by Shiva's Chaitanya or presence. Every particle of the temple is surcharged with the chaitanya of God and the worshipper in the temple gets automatically elevated to a higher spiritual plane. The purpose of the temple is to elevate the human being into a divine being.

The word 'kōyil' in Tamil means the abode of God. The word Ālayam means the immersion of the soul with God. A Tamil proverb says that one should not live in a village where there is no temple. It is because of the spiritual vibrations that emanate from the temple and produce peace, plenty and prosperity to the whole community in the village. Pooja is of two kinds parārtha pooja (external worship) and Āthmārtha pooja (internal worship). The temple is established for the former which naturally leads to the latter which frees a soul from bondages and help, it to become one with God. Sangeetha is one form of worship of Shiva through Nātha.

During the second session, the President Dr. C. E. Ramachandran, stressed the fact that the temple was the centre of socio-economic and cultural activities of the people. He pointed out how it served as even a banker advancing money to the needy people. Since monarchs patronised the temples, they were

prosperous. But now a days the temples are poor and their priests are poorer. 'We have starved our temples and that is why we are starving' he declared. He also briefly traced the history of music and dancing in Tamil Nadu. The Sangam works speak of different types of temples but no vestiges of them are found, because they were built out of mud and mortar and therefore perished. Only the Pallavas used stones for building temples. They also patronised music and dancing. Pallava inscriptions refer to the temple dancers called Manickkathār and Devaradiār. 'During the Chola period there seems to have been a huge establishment of dancers and musicians in all important temples especially the Brahadeeswarar temple of Thanjavur.

After the President's speech Dr. V. N. Srinivasa Desikan, Dr. Shanmugam and V. Natarajan presented the following papers :

Dr. V. N. SRINIVASA DESIKAN, "TEMPLE BRONZES"

Every country has to its credit a rich and wide variety of cultural heritage which has been handed down to it from the past. This cultural heritage has different categories such as architecture, sculpture in stone, metal, clay and wood, paintings and coins. These rich and valuable collections speak of our past and its valuable traditions and they stand as testimonies of the life of the past.

It is in this context the temple icons of Tamil Nadu have to be studied. These temple bronzes reflect the glory of our land, the land of temples. Though many countries could boast of their rich cultural heritage, India's cultural heritage and particularly of Tamil Nadu is unique, unparalleled and incomparable as far as the bronzes are concerned. The Greek and Roman art stood for perfection but the achievement of the Tamils in the field of sculptural art, especially temple bronzes represent the religious consciousness of the people. To quote Percy Brown "It is mind materialised in terms of rock, brick stone or metal". Our temple bronzes are well-known for the artistic workmanship combined with the element of sacredness and sanctity which are in abundance but they are totally

absent in the Western art. The Bhakti movement propagated by the Nayanmars and Alvars contributed a long way for the production of master-pieces. The devotional hymns of the Saivite and Vaishnavite saints speak of many forms of the deities, Siva or Vishnu as the case may be and thus the sacredness and sanctity have been attached to the bronzes. One of the saints while praising the God felt that he did not want to see any other thing in the world except worshipping the lord of his choice. Yet in another hymn one alvar wants to be born "as herb, or worm or stone or dust. It's privilege high there so to dwell" (referring to Tirumalai). In another hymn one of the Ālvars while praising the lord says "If you grace me with the sight of your form, I do not want the pleasures of family life". Such is the great devotion the saints had to their Gods. There is no wonder that the sacredness and sanctity attached to these temple bronzes has no parallels. But the works of art of Picasso, Michael Angelo and a host of others are in a different footing. The theme and object of our art piece is totally different from that of a Western art piece. The image worship has been and still is the keynote of the Hindu way of life. Modelling of icons in metal is based on high traditions and according to the prescribed rules laid down in our ancient texts.

Against this background sculptural art of our temple bronzes has to be studied. This branch of art in Tamil Nadu has a hoary past and can be traced to the Sangam Age. This art is also a living art of today. This is being practised even now by craftsman "who have kept alive the ancient technique both by preserving the text relating to the mode of preparation as also the contemplative hymns or dhyanaslokas which describe the forms of individual icons".

The Sangam literature have reference to the temple construction and to the existence of temples for different Gods. Though there are references to the image making in different media in Manimekalai, not a single specimen of earlier art is available due to the fact that they were all made of perishable materials. The temple bronzes are cast by the *cire-perdue* or lost-wax process. *Cire-perdue* is a composite French term, *cire* means wax and

perdue means lost. When translated to English the word *cire-perdue* would mean lost-wax. It is so called from the fact that the wax model which serves as a core of operation is drained out before the actual casting takes place. This process is common for both the types of casting (i.e.) solid and hollow, where wax is replaced by metal.

The method of casting of images is elaborately dealt with in the *silpasastra* and there is a chapter on it in *Manasara Abhilashitarthachinthamani* or *Manasollasa* by the Western Chalukyan king Someswara gives a clear picture of casting of images in metal. These texts deal with construction of temples, fashioning of icons, with iconographical details and also lay down the data for the size and form of these icons. The *sthapathis* followed meticulously the instructions that are given in the text and were responsible for the production of some of the best master-pieces.

Since these temple bronzes were meant as *Utsavamurtis* meticulous care has been given by the *sthapathis* while fashioning them. The history of temple bronzes is closely connected with the temple construction. With enlargement of temple complex, the rituals such as worship, bathing etc. connected with the temple were gradually elaborated. Festivals occupied a pre-eminent position in the mode of worship. Once the rituals and the festivals were observed in the temples, the images were required for taking out in procession on the days of the festival. Thus it led to the necessity of preparing deities or idols in metal. Therefore a beginning in the use of metal images for procession was started. Since this was only a beginning in the making of bronzes, the bronzes were small in size and slowly bigger bronzes were cast.

Once the number of festivals increased, a good number of *utsavamurtis* were fashioned to meet the needs of the temples. When the temple building activities witnessed a steady growth of new aspects such as shrines for peristylar deities and a separate shrine for Devis, necessity for processional deities (*Utsavamurtis*) were felt. Thus the production of metal images also increased. When the numerous festivals were observed from time to time the number

of temple bronzes also increased side by side. But with the numerous bronzes coming to the temple the workmanship slowly became poorer. This was due to the fact that emphasise was on the quantity, size and technique and not on the quality.

Besides the bronzes of gods and goddesses meant for worship, there are bronzes of nayanmars, alvars and saints (acharyas) and of persons of royal order. The last class of bronzes (i e.) of royal persons, known as portrait bronzes, include queens also. Invariably in all Saijvite and Vaishnavite temples, bronzes of nāyanmārs and ālvars are available. As for the portrait bronzes, there are very few icons like Rajaraja I, Kulottunga, Lokamahadevi (queen of Rajaraja I) and Vijayanagara King Krishnadevaraya with his queens (Tirupati temple).

Yet there is another class of bronzes used in services. The Dipalakshmi bronzes come under this category. Since temple worship is a form of yagna and offerings are made to God, lamps besides other objects have a special place in the offerings. Among the lamps, the commonest form of a temple lamp is in the form of a female figure holding in her hands a shallow bowl to contain oil and wick. The ones in the temples show no stereotype uniformity and are known as Dipalakshmis (Pāvai Viḷakku).

In spite of the stress on the quantity than on quality the religious purpose for which these bronzes were made (i e.) worship, gained great momentum. Thus numerous bronzes were made and are available in the temples.

It may be seen thus, that the temple bronzes played a pre-eminent role in the daily festivals, offerings, rituals, etc.

