



SCULPTURES OF THE NAGESWARA TEMPLE KUMBAKONAM

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ABSTRACT

Nageswara temple is one of the most ancient temples at Kumbakonam. Regarding its origin many mythological and traditional accounts are woven around it. The architectural style of the main shrine proves that it belongs to the early Chola period. Other than the central shrine, the structural embellishments seem to have been added later in order to expand the infrastructure of the temple. In this article the sculptures of the temple, particularly the portrait may be said to be the best among the extent of the early Chola images. Miniature bas-reliefs depicting the scenes of Bhagavata Puranas and Ramayana are the exquisite features of this temple.

KEYWORDS

Nageswara, Mahamaham Tank, Nagaraja, Salvation, Nagathirtha, Bhaskara Ksetra, Ardhanari, Prakrti, Purusa, Tribhanga, Bhadravana, Karanda Makuta, Patrakundala, Makarakundala, Parasu, Kartarihasta, Katisutra, Padasutra, Brahma, Rosary, Kandika, Abhayahasta, Katihasta, Jatamakuta, Vastrayajnopavita, Udarabandha, Katisutra, Patta, Padasaras, Padaraksas, Kapala, Camara, Lolahasta, Ardhapadmasana, Adhithana, Bhagavata, Devi- Bhagavata, Puranas.

INTRODUCTION

One of the remarkable early Chola temples known popularly for the architectural and sculptural innovations is the Nageswara temple. Its unique art history has differentiated it with the other contemporary temples raised during the same period which led to mark a stage in the evolution of South Indian temple architecture. The heavy sculptural decorations in the tiers of the Vimana with the frontal projections and the beautiful life size portraits in the niches of the main shrine have identified this temple as a unique shrine richer

than the existing temples belonging to the same period. With the sense of gratitude, to acknowledge the blessings in the form of natural resources of God on earth for the sustenance of living beings, people began to worship God and there emerged an institution called a temple. God is equated to an emperor, i.e. custodian of public welfare and the temple, the dwelling place of God in the palace, where a king resides. There was a shift at the commencement of ancient and medieval period to consider the temple as the hub of society to administer and guide both the social life and the political. The present study aims to trace the activities of temples in general and those items of gifts and donations endowed to temples in consonance with the specific activities in particular. The temple is not only a religious monument, but also a social cultural document. Inscriptions engraved on the temples form the most authentic source for reconstructing the ancient history of Tamilnadu. They will enable us to understand the main current of the social, economic, political, cultural and religious history of Tamilnadu. The activities of temples such as daily rituals, monthly and annual festivals, the relief measures undertaken during natural calamities, have been identified and listed. The omens and augurs prevalent in the then society and relevant alternate adherence followed in temple rituals will be analyzed.

Sculpture in tamilnadu like many others branches of its art dates back to the Sangam age. In the 12th century Chola sculpture becomes graceful the best examples are the temples of Chidambaram, Kumbakonam, Darasuram and Tribhuvanam. Adi Kumbaswarar region are beautiful has relief sculptured and pointed in an attractive manner at the rajagopuram, north and west gopurams. He is credited with repair and construction 16 Mandapas on the bank of Mahamaham tank of Adi kumbaswarar temple in Kumbakonam. Nageswarar temple images of the first type have a somewhat retrained modeling rather advanced and pose often three-quarter profile. The bas reliefs of the Nagesvara may be examined in detail under two broad categories images of deities and portrait sculptures. Every art form in Kumbakonam whether its Sculpture, Painting, Architecture, dance, and music has both direct meaning as well as suggestive reasoning. In sculptural art, divine forms are represented not only as more sculpture but they have their respective religious philosophy, mythological background and symbolic meanings etc. Existence Tamil land since Sangam period is well attested by literature. But specimens of early sculptures are available from the days of Pallavas, Pandyas, Cholas, Vijayanagar Nayaks. Pallava sculptures depict a well-built body with a thick bank of simple ornaments on it. In these sculptures the sacred thread is shown as crossing the right arm of the sculpture. This is tradition also seen in every temple exists as a treasure house of art as Kumbakonam. Artists engaged both in stone and metal carvings, displayed their Nexium talent and knowledge in various art forms in the temples.

LOCATION OF THE TEMPLE AND ITS STHALA PURANA

This temple is located in the heart of the town of Kumbakonam to the North- West of Mahamaham tank. Many legends and traditions are being woven around the region of Kumbakonam regarding its origin right from the days of the ancient period. Like all temples, the Nageswaran has its own mythology and tradition regarding its origin and association. According to legends the serpent

King who was called Nagaraja worshipped Lord Siva in this temple for attaining Salvation. It is said the sufferings of the Nagaraja to bear the weight of the whole earth were intense and hence he pleaded the Lord to relieve him from the acute pain. Lord Siva granted his request and instructed him to proceed to Kumbakonam and pay his homage to presiding deity of an ancient temple. Since Nagaraja worshipped the Lord in this temple the presiding deity of the temple came to be called Nageswara. A well in the temple where Nagaraja is believed to taken his bath is called as Nagathirtha¹.

Besides the worship of Surya has its own iconic theme in this beautiful temple. The reason for the specific association of Surya the Sun God with the presiding deity of this temple is mentioned in the Sthala Purana. It is said that the wife of Lord Surya was unable to bear the tremendous heat raised from the rays of her husband and hence she left to her father's place. The father – in – law was furious with Surya and made him to lose his splendor by his extraordinary power. This made Lord Surya to worry about his state and suddenly he heard a voice from the heaven which instructed him to visit the Nageswara temple in Kumbakonam. Lord Siva was worshipped by Lord Surya in this sacred temple and Surya was restored with his rays. At last this place itself was called as Bhaskara Ksetra. Hence this temple contains a separate shrine for the Sun who has regain his splendor in this place. To the present day, the most auspicious and important annual festival celebrated here occurs on the day in the Tamil month of Chittirai when the Sun penetrates through the inner sanctum and illuminates the Linga².

SCULPTURES

The Nageswara temple excels in sculptural representations when compared to the other early Chola temples. The portrait sculptures are considered to the best among the available early Chola sculptures. They are noted for their depth of profundity of facial expression and pleasing apotheosis of serenity and dignity. They even exhibit refined technology and excellent modeling with extreme sensitiveness. Apart from these portraits the sculptural representations of deities are carved with precision in this temple. The architectural embellishments are noticed in the form of miniature has reliefs containing mythological stories and scenes from Ramayana. The decorative designs of floral and vegetal patterns, the string courses of animal representations, the figures of men and women form the main sculptural representations.

FEATURES OF THE CHOLA SCULPTURES

The Chola sculptures were designed in such a way that they were meant to embellish the architecture and hence were subsidiaries to architectural features. Though they inherited to the technology of stone cutting from the Pallavas, they exhelled in stone carving with much more precision and perfection. The sculptures of the Cholas are very delicate and original in conception and spirit. They are characterized by a realistic and elaborate treatment of ornaments and costume. Thus, registering an innovation in the decorative details than that of the Pallava images.

ARDHANARISVARA

The image of Ardhanari seen in the rear wall of the sanctum is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable specimens of that deity in the entire South Indian art. The combination of masculine and feminine aspects in the right and left side of the divinity is the main feature of this form³. The combination of Prakrti and Purusa to form the substratum of the cosmos is plastically rendered here with the characteristic of cola charm. The sculpture is noticed in tribhanga posture standing on a double semicircular bhadrasana. The male aspect of the right side is seen with jata whereas the female aspect of the left is noticed with karanda makuta. The right ear has patrakundala and the left ear has makiara kundala. On the right side two arms are shown, the upper one holding parasu in kartarihasta and the lower placed on the bull. On the left side single hand is shown as catching a mirror like image. The neck is adorned with three necklaces and the sacred thread is looking like a cloth flowing from the third necklace of the female side. The thigh of the male part is covered with a restrained drapery while the female portion is covered by a sari extending below the knee with six folds in an elegant way. The katisutra is noticed around the waist and padasutras are present in both legs. The difference in the sex is exhibited very nicely with the depiction of a full breast for a female part. The bull standing at the back wears a bell at the neck and the forehead is decorated with jewels.

BRAHMA

The sculpture of Brahma is noticed in a niche found in the North wall of the central shrine. He is seen as standing on a double lotus pedestal with four arms. The upper right arm holds a rosary while the left a kandika. The lower right arm is shown in abhaya hasta and the left is placed on the thigh (katihasta). He is depicted with jatamakuta above the three faces. The patrakundalas with flowers are seen in the ears. Besides the vastrayajnopavita going over the right arm the figure is decorated with an udarabandha, armlets, rings, bangles and necklaces. The Katisutra is noticed and two loops are seen suspended from the katisutra in between the legs. The lower garment is very long depicted up to the feet in the level of the ankles. In the iconographic detail this sculpture seems to be an excellent specimen of an early Cola Brahma.

BHIKSATANA

The image of Bhiksatana is noticed in a niche to the East of Durga. Even this sculptural representation upholds the claim of early Cola art. The divinity is represented in beautiful tribhanga posture with the face in profile. The left leg which is folded slightly is in the forward move indicating the rhythm of the slow motion. The head is decorated with jeweled jatamakuta furnished with the skull and the crescent moon. The third eye is depicted on the forehead and a patta is also shown. The right ear has a patrakundala while the left ear has no such Ornament. He is decked with necklaces, armlets and an udarabandha⁴. In the feet padasaras and padaraksas are noticed. The upper right arm holds the drum and the left a skull cup(kapala). The lower left arm holds a camara and the lower right is depicted in lolahasta which is depicted as fondling a deer shown as jumping and looking at his fingers. Around his waist an entwining serpent is noticed as a katisutra. Beside

him a dwarf is shown as accompanying him carrying a weapon instead of a food pot. Thus, the execution of the image of Bhiksatana attracts the spectators by its glory marked with gracious serenity and tenderness.

KANKALAMURTI

In the south wall of the inner circuit the image of kankalamurti is noticed in a chamber probably belonging to a later period. The image seems to be not finished completely. The upper right hand is depicted as fondling a deer which is looking with a raised head and the upper left arm is designed as if holding a trident characteristically with a corpse on its top. The lower left arm holds a damaru and the right is engaged in beating the drum with the backbone of Brahma. The lower garment covers the thighs with the broad and circular designs. The jatamakuta above is simple and the ornamentation consists of bracelets, kundalas and yajnopavita. The third eye on the forehead is depicted.

BHAGAVAR

In the North-Western side of the prakara there is noticed a separate shrine for Bhagavar⁵. His head is bald and he has elongated ears. He is nude and has no ornaments. The right hand is in chin mudra and the left is kept on the left thigh. The legs are folded in ardhapadmasana posture. He is depicted in the attitude of meditation.

MINIATURE BAS -RELIEFS

The mythological legends carved in miniature representations is the outstanding feature of this temple. These miniature reliefs are noticed in the adhisthana portion of the central shrine. They are six inches in breadth and four inches in height and are carved on the pilaster strips like a tier running. This nature of depicting miniature bas-reliefs was a characteristic feature of the early cola temples⁶. Examples of this kind of narrative sculptures are found in temples like Pullamangai, Kandiyur, Tirukkarugavur, Punjai and Tiruvarur. In this temple the reliefs are arranged in two tiers, the top most one narrates the story of Ramayana and the lower one narrates many scenes from the Bhagavata, Devi- Bhagavata and puranas. The sculptural representation of the scenes of Ramayana in this temple is fuller and more perfect than at Pullamangai. The temples are the dwelling place of the Hindu Gods and hence our ancestors took keen interest in building the temples on a large scale which resulted in conferring a unique title to our Tamilnadu as a Land of Temples. These well-constructed temples are known for their grandeur size, architectural styles, iconography features and nature of materials. These living archaeological monuments throw ample light on the socio- economic and cultural activities of our ancestors⁷. Divinity and spirituality were woven around these existing monuments which highlighted the people's mentality and beliefs.

Conclusion

While concluding the study the scholar could assess the significant role played. The charitable endowments were classified to the temple for the other purposes the individuals. Under ancient and medieval period indicated the fairly satisfactory at the people. At the end of rule of Kumbakonam temples art Saivism

in the various places was limited the period of time could not have been possible maintained. Thus, the Nageswara temple is one of the existing temples in Kumbakonam sharing the common characteristics of all the early Chola temples. The sculptures particularly the portraits may be said to be the best among the extent early Chola images. Miniature bas reliefs depicting the scenes of Bhagavata Puranas and Ramayana are the exquisite features of this temple. The available Chola inscriptions of this temple which are mostly donative, incidentally throw much useful and welcome light on the prevailing social, political and economic conditions and also the system of temple management and administration.

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