

Temple Festivals as reflected through Art and Literature during the Nayak period

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Abstract - Krishnadevaraya (1509-1529 A.D) ascended to the Vijayanagara throne after the death of his father, Narasimha II. Krishnadevaraya made a far-reaching expedition in the Tamil country in 1512 A.D., for settling the amounts that lesser chiefs were expected to pay and posting Telugu chiefs in-charge of the important provinces of Madurai, Thanjavur and Ginjee (A.Mahalingam,p.7). The governors were called as 'Nayaks' and the Governors of the Tamil country tried from time to time to overthrow the suzerainty of the Vijayanagara Empire. During the rule of Tuluva dynasty, the Nayak kings of Madurai and Thanjavur became prominent as they fully subjugated the Tamil country. Though, the Nayaks practically became independent after the battle of Talikottai or Rakshasi-Tangadi, they accepted the Vijayanagara's suzerainty as and when it suited their convenience. These were the people who carried the art and literary traditions of Vijayanagara to the Tamil country. This paper unravels the celebration of festivals in Madurai temples during the Vijayanagar Nayak period through the corroborative sources like inscriptions literature and foreign notices.

Key words: Nayaks, *Vsantotsava*, *Thirukalyanam*, *Chitra* festivals, *Navaratri* festivals.

I.INTRODUCTION

The Nayankara system became a prominent feature of the Vijayanagara provincial organization from the middle of the 16th century A.D. Under this system the king was regarded as the owner of the soil and he distributed lands to his dependents, who were called the Nayaks. The Nayaks ruled over their territories with a great measure of freedom. In return they paid a fixed annual contribution to the imperial government and maintained a sufficient number of troops, and helped the king in his wars. In course of time, the Nayakship became hereditary, when the central control grew weak and inefficient (D. Devakunjari,p.181). The Nayaks of Madurai and Thanjavur ruled as the subordinates of the Vijayanagara and soon rose to prominence. A large number of festivals celebrated in monthly and annual modes by the rulers

rendering their patronage and support. The temple structure is also expanded and elaborated by adding several architectural components and attracted several hundreds of people mingled in a particular place for the worshiped and celebrating the festivals. The Nayak rulers of Tamil country were followed religious tolerance and they favored to unify the religious sects within the Hinduism. This is caused to celebrate the prominent festival know as Chitra festival convened on the occasion of the Minakshi Thirukalyanam or the sacred marriage of Lord Siva and Parvati.

General prosperity and a natural desire for association made the people to indulge in leisurely pursuits like celebrations of festivals resulted in social gathering. Many festivals were organized to express solidarity in religious beliefs (A.Mahalingam, 2012,p.225). Madurai temple has a rich tradition of festivals from the ancient times. The *tiruvatirai* festival is the one among them which is conducted in the month of *margali*. It sin referred to in paripadal which is popular at the present day (Paripadal,II, 74-79). The Pandya inscription of the medieval period describes the *Avanitirunal* (Madras Epigraphical Reports (MER) 278 of 1942) and also mentions *Tiruppuratirunonbu* festival in the month of *Aippasi* (MER. 281 of 1942).

II.CAR FESTIVALS

The prominent car festival was conducted from ancient times. The *navarathri* festival and the *Ammankolu* or *darbar* are observed from puranic times. During the period of Krishnadevaraya the Adi festival for Amman was inaugurated. The celebrated Nayak ruler, Tirumalai Nayak was instituted the Tiruvilaiyadal festival and he also dug the Vandiyur Teppakulam and originated the big floating festival. During the time of Ranimangammal the *onjal* festival in Ani and the *Karthikai* festival were established. From the time of Tirumalai Nayak, festivals are celebrated all the twelve months of the year (D.Devakunjari,p.302). The festivals during the 15th and 17th centuries reflected in the art and Architecture and literature. The increase of devotees and Kings ideology was devoted to construction of innumerable mandapas in the already existing temples. The literature of this period speaks about the significance of the festivals of the period. As temples grew they employed an increasing proportion of the community as ritual programmes became more and more complicated. It is associated functions of the temple, such as civic meetings, education, dance and theatre that paved way for the spate of columned halls and artificial tanks of water that were contained within the temple walls, such as at Madurai and other cities. There are also reinforced pavilions for the consorts of the gods and their vehicles (George Michell 1977,p.151-155).

Historically festivals evolved around the myths and legends of the particular aspect of the deity enshrine in the temple, and the popular beliefs encoded in to the temple's origin myths. They grew in number and importance depending upon the temple's locale, the founder patron and their significance for the community, Birth asterisms of the royal family and bhakti saints and spiritual leaders were important accessions for institution. Festivals, particular for religious leaders continue this day. Other festivals to celebrate the god's victory over evil forces or demons which have been basic to the puranicreligion are still observed in all the temples. Festivals associated with Siva, Vishnu, Kali (Durga) and Subramanya are celebrated in their respective temples. Durga Killing Mahisasura is amongst the major myths celebrated in these temples. Processions of the deities, regally attired and ornamented on their decorated Vahana (Vehicles) or in their chariots are still major events in sacred centres on all such occasions. These processions have their counterparts in royal parades, about which poetic compositions exist from the 11th century. On such accessions, the interface between the sacred and the secular is highly visible (R. Champakalakshmi 2007,p.122).

III.FLOAT FESTIVALS

Brhamotsava, Navaratri, Vasantotsava and other festivals Teppam or float festival are the important festivals and devoted to large guttering of population in the temple institution during the Nayak period in Tamil Nadu. The music instruments and dare posture are delineated in the temple architecture (R. Champakalakshmi 2007,p.125).

Though religious in origin, festivals have much political, economic and social content in the activities connected with their celebrations. Originally they were intended to celebrate on some religious occasions. In due course they were used as the occasion for the emperors to show off their might (Y.Nirmala Kumari,p.88). The idea of kingship as a sacred condition may be augmented more persuasive, by consideration of forms of public ritual especially those in later medieval South India. One such public ritual was the *Mahanavami* (great nine days) festival. The *Mahanavami* is first reported in the greatest South Indian kingdom of medieval times, the Vijayanagara kingdom. This annual ceremony was celebrated by the Vijayanagara kings during the lunar month of *asvina* (Tamil month:Purattasi) corresponding to mid September to mid October. The festival consisted of nine days of earliest commentators in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The latter were foreign sojourners in the Vijayanagar, the capital city of the

kingdom. Thereafter, the festival became known in many parts of South India (Burton stein,p.311).

The foreign travelers described that celebrations of this festival were in glowing term. It was the occasion for the display of military power of the emperor to ward off both the internal and external enemies of the kingdom. During this festival there was display of empire's wealth, which kept the viewers in awe and respect towards the emperor. From the eye-witness accounts of Abdur Razzak (Elliot and Dowson,pp.116-17) Paes and Nuniz it can be understood that they were complete awe-struck by the wealth, military power, pomp and glory of the Vijayanagara-Nayak rulers.

During the *Mahanavami* celebrations people used to display their skill in different sports such as wrestling, fencing and amusements like music and dance.

In the context of Mahanavami celebrations Paes writes: "Come many women playing many trumpets and drums and pipes and viols and many other kinds of musical instruments" (Robert Sewell,p.273). In the sculptural panels of the Vijayanagara-Nayak period, there are several musical groups playing on different musical instruments. In the Southern prakara of the Varadaraja Perumal temple at Thadikkombu, female dancers appear. Among them musician with clarinet, drums, cymbals and flute are present. The dancing postures and playing of musical instruments are represented in most of the Nayak monuments such as the Kalyana Mandapa of Venkatachalapathi temple at Krishnapuram, Nellaiappar temple at Tirunelveli, Meenakshi-Sundaresvara temple at Madurai etc. These symbolic depictions reflect the celebration of certain festivals like Mahanavami.

Though religious in nature the *Mahanavami* celebrations also fulfilled the purpose of displaying the wealth, pomp and military force of the empire. The narrative of Paes supports this view: "These days of festival are past, the king holds a review of all his forces and the review is thus arranged. The king commands to pitch his tent of Mecca Velvet a full league from the city, at a place already fixed for that purpose, and in this tent they place the idol in honour of which all these festivals are celebrated. From this tent to the king's palace the captains range themselves with their troops and array, each one in his place according to his rank in the king's household. Thus the soldiers stand in a line... Those on foot stand in front of those on horses, and the elephants behind the horses in this array were each captain with his troops (Robert Sewell,p.275). Several panels of foot soldiers, cavalry and elephants are represented in the Vijayanagara-Nayak temples, which corresponds to the Mahanavami military parade. The foot

soldiers are represented in the sculptural panels at Tirupparankundram, the cavalry men are depicted in the sculptures of Tirupparankundram, Pudu Mandapam and Ranganathaswamy temple at Srirangam. The elephants are portrayed in the painting panel at Alagarkoil.

IV. SPRING FESTIVAL (VASANTOTSAVA)

This festival as described by Nicolo Conti has been identified as Holi by Robert Sewell, B.A. Saletore, (B.A.Saletore,pp.396-97) A.H.Longhurst (A.H. Longhurst,pp.65-66) and others. But the suggestion of Anila Varghese (Anila Varghese,p.106) is that this festival could be more accurately described as *vasantotsava* that fell on the full moon of *Chitrai* (March-April) rather than Holi, which is celebrated on the full moon of *phalguna* (February-March). There are no ephigraphical references to Holi, while literary and archaeological date is available of the celebration of *vasantotsava* in the Vijayanagar.

Vasantotsava centers around the worship of *Kama* (Madana or Manmatha), the god of love. After Siva reduced *Kama* to ashes, seeing the grief of Rati, Manmatha's consort, Siva relented and agreed that on one day in the year *Kama* would reassume his bodily form and *vasantotsava* commemorates this day. *Kamadeva* is called *Vasanta*, the demi-god of the Spring Season and the commander of his forces is *Chitra*. The spring festival connected with Madana was vary in India from at least the third to the twelfth century A.D. while *holi* was celebrated mainly from fourteenth century onwards. *Vasantotsava* continued to be celebrated even till the 16th century, when *holi* had already became popular. In course of time, the worship of Madana died out and the great festivity connected with it was transferred to the *holi* festival.

Nandi Timmana in his *Parijathapaharanam* states that Krishnadevaraya used to listen to the poetry in his court during the celebration of *Vasantotsava* (*Parijathapaharanam*,139). Sculptural evidences of this festival are also extent. Relief of *Kamadeva*, often accompanied by his retinue are found in the Vijayanagara-Nayak monuments. Manmatha or *Kama* is shown with his usual sugar-cane bow and is often in a chariot drawn by his *Vahana*, the parrot. This is depicted in the pillars of Pudu Mandapam at Madurai, Andal temple at Srivilliputtur, Alagarkoil near Madurai and Ranganathaswamy temple at Srirangam. That the representation of *Kama* is linked with *Vasantotsava*.

Madurai Chokkanathar Ula, a Tamil literature, composed by Puranathirumalai Nathar in the beginnings of the 16th century provides a detailed description of a seven day festival, but the work failed to mention the month during which it was held. (U.V.Swaminathaiyar,p.5)

V.CHITRAI FESTIVAL

The celestial marriage of Meenakshi-Sundaresvara is celebrated during the month of *Chitrai*. This *chitrai* month has its own claim for prominence in Madurai temple and ending of that festival in a *Tirthavari* on *Chitraipournami* (full moon) at *portramaraikulam* (lily tank) for it was on that day that Indra worshiped Sundaresvarar and founded the Madurai temple by erecting the *Indra Vimana* borne by eight elephants. In the fitness of things, the annual *chitrai* festival ought to have been in vogue even prior to the days of Tirumalai Nayak (A.V.Jeyechandrun,p.219). This was strengthened by another fact that the *Chitrai* festival is preceded and succeeded by two important *Vasantha* (spring) festivals, a *kotaivasantham* (pre-summer) in the month of *Pankuni* (February-March) and *Vasantavila* (post summer) in the month of *Vaikasi* (April-May). It is likely that Tirumalai Nayak made the *Vaikasi Vasanthavila* really fastidious enough by the creation of Pudu Mandapam. The sculptural representation does not give identity to us to assume the particular festival. But the dance and musical instruments are essential elements both of the celebrations in temples and of the public rituals and festivals.

The celestial marriage or Tirukalyanam of Meenakshi is referred to in the Tiruvilayadalpuranam (Tiruvilaiyadalpuranam,765-780). It gives many descriptions of marriage ceremonies and marriage patterns of the Nayak society (A. Mahalingam,p.221). The marriage scene is sculpturally represented in the Pudumandapam and Kambathadi Mandapam of Meenakshi temple.

VI.CONCLUSION

The festivals during the Medieval Tamil country elaborately celebrated. The puranic and kings ideology devoted to the celebration of festivals in a stupendous manner. The festivals are demonstrated to the expansion of art and architecture and literature of that period gives reference to the celebration of festivals.

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