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SCULPTURES OF THE KUMBHESWARA TEMPLE KUMBAKONAM

****Dr.A. Karkuzhali, Research Advisor & Assistant Professor of History,**

P.G & Research Department of History,

Kunthavai Naacchiyaar Government Arts College for Women (Autonomous), Thanjavur- 613 007.

***Ms.M.Amirthavalli, Research Scholar (Full-Time),**

PG & Research Department of History,

Kunthavai Naacchiyaar Government Arts College for Women (Autonomous), Thanjavur- 613 007.

Abstract

Kumbakonam occupies an important place in the cultural history of India. It lies at about a distance of 50 kms to the north of Thanjavur and is the abode of temples. Each part of the city is studied with temples and the city itself claims hoary antiquity since the Pallava's. Many of the Nayanmar and Alvars have sung the glories of the temples in the city. The several temples found here the Kumbheswara, Sarangapani and Ramaswami temples are found in close quarters. The Ramaswami was a work of the Thanjavur Nayakas while the Kumbheswara and Sarangapani claim the antiquity since at least the time of the Cholas. The importance of Kumbheswara that it is associated with the recreation of the worlds after a Mahapralaya (Cataclysm). At the time of destruction of the cosmos, Brahma packed the seeds of genesis in a Kumbha (Pot or Vessel) and floated it on the waters of Pralaya. The pot reached the surface at Kumbakonam where the temple of the Lord Siva, called Kumbheswara is located. Lord Siva shot an arrow and split the pot into two. Therefore, the place is as Kutamukku (Kutam-Pot, Mukku-Nose, Nose of the Pot). Thereafter creation started on the Tamil story of recreation of the cosmos. It is here that cosmic recreation is said to have taken place. A temple on the site was built long ago, which during the Vijayanagara- Nayaka period reached its perfection. In this article the sculptural works and wonders of the Kumbheswara temple were analyzed and the significance of the Stone Sculpture works is narrated.

Keywords

Divyaksetra, Nayanmar, Kutamukku, Pralaya, Amrataghata, Mulaberas, Garbhagrha, Avaranamurti, Mahamandapa, Puttumandapa, Kampattati-Mandapa, Prajapati, Yajna, Purvahasta, Trisula, Devakoshta, Virasana, Aksamala, Damaru, Prahastas, Chakra, Modaka, Amrtakalasa, Vajra, Sakti, Urdhvajanu, Khadga, Khetaka, Chaturbhuj, Pasa, Kapala, Jvala, Uruhasta, Tarjanimudra, Brahmahatti, Abhayamudra, Dolahasta, Karandamakuta, Gopi.

Introduction

Kumbakonam is a Divyaksetra which is famous for both the Saivas and Vaishnavas. The temples herein are dedicated to Siva (eg. Kumbeswara, Nageswara, Adikumbeswara) and Vishnu (eg. Sarankapani, Chakrapani). Early Bhakti saints of the Tamil country, the Nayanmars and Alvars, have extolled the place and the temples therein as existing around the 7th century A.D. Practically a temple city, there is no part of the city where there is no temple, big or small. It has been estimated that there are a number of temple cars (Ratha), as many as eleven, which is only one of its status in the Indian subcontinent¹. The city in the Bhakti Hymns was known as “Kudanthai”², the name taking its origin in Kutam “Pot”, meaning place of the pot. This name an indirect clue to the later mythology according to which the Cosmic Seeds were sealed in a pot. The place name is also noted as Kutamukku³. Kutamukku was an important Sthala for the Vaishnavas and so it is placed on a par with Arankam (Srirangam), Kadalmallai (Mamallapuram), Venkatam (Tirumala-Tirupati) and so on. Among the Saiva saints, Thirugnana Sambanthar and Thirunavukarasar call the place with the name Kutamukku⁴.

The Temple

The name “Kumbeswara” would mean Iswara of the Kumbha. It might denote the Lord broke or opened the pot or the Lord of the place where the pot reached the surface from the primeval waters of Pralaya. According to Mythology, Adikumbeswara originated from the Pot- Kumbha of the Pralaya time. He is called Amriteswara of Amritaghateswara because he had his genesis in the nectar of the pot. He came as a hunter, Kirata and got possession of the Amritaghata (Pot of Ambrosia). Therefore, he is also called Kiratamurti. At the time of final deluge, he entered into the Kumbha and became the vital energy of Cosmic Creation. He enabled Brahma the God of Creation, to commence his work of creation of the Cosmos. It was at Kumbakonam that first work of creation took place.

Images in stone sculptures

The sculptural legacy of the Kumbeswara temple is divided mainly on the basis of the media of artistic work such as stone, stucco, wood, painting and bronze. Though the temple possesses a good collection in bronze, all could not be photographed due to restrictions of the temple administration. The stone images in the temple are mostly found on wall or pillar sections. They are installed in various parts of the temple also in case of Ganapathi and Murukan. The Stucco images appear mostly on the various Sthalas of the Vimana and Gopura. The wall section at the top also provides for Stucco images, which is a peculiar feature of the temple. The bronzes are kept in Mandapas and are used mainly on festive occasions as Baliberas (Processional images). The wooden images are found in the temple cars. They are five temple cars in the temple meant for Siva, Devi, Ganapathi, Murukan nad Chandikeswara. Paintings mostly appear on the ceiling of the Mandapas. A wide variety of stone images appear in the temple in its various parts. Most of the Mulaberas, including the Linga, housed in the Garbhagrha are of stone. The Avaranamurtis located in the various parts of the temple are in stone. Besides, the pillars in its base or on the different levels accommodate a number of images. These are carved on the stone pillars.

Virabhadras

There are two images of Virabhadra in the sculptural pillars of the Mahamandapa. A Sculptural pillar is one in which a life size image of an iconic theme is appended⁵. Such sculptural pillars appear in huge numbers in temples of the Vijayanagara-Nayaka period all over Tamilnadu. In the present case, both the images face each other. In such a case, the two are called Agni-Virabhadra and Aghora - Virabhadra. The presence of Virabhadra images in more numbers may be found in Athmanatha temple at Avudaiyarkovil also. Virabhadra is a terrific manifestation of Siva. Siva had taken the hand of Sakthi daughter of Dhaksha Prajapati, without his consent. Dhaksha conducted a sacrifice not inviting Siva. Sakthi at the time of Yajna was insulted by her father, she committed suicide. To wreck vengeance, Siva created Virabhadra by plucking a hair from his Head. He was sent to destroy both Daksha and his sacrifice. Virabhadra cut the head of Dhaksha and completed the job assigned to him. The mythology occurs in mythological works such as the Vishnu Purana.

One of the images is ten handed. All the hands on the left side are broken and the front hand catches hold of the head of a person. Various weapons appear in the right hands. The right Purvahasta is broken. Perhaps it had the Trisula, sent on the demon that the Lord holds. The punished person is likely to be Dhaksha. Originally, he had a human head and after cutting his head, he was given a new life and fitted with the head of a goat. Dhaksha in iconographical illustrations usually appears with a goat head. The Lord wears a Jatamakuta and is fitted with a number of ornaments. He wears Padacarams (Anklets) and Sandals. He is also fitted with a mustache. Below the image instrument players are present. Virabhadra (means one in whom heroism projects) destroyed not only the sacrifice but also cut the head of the Prajapati. Appeased, later Siva gave him a goat head resurrected him. The present illustration shows the scene of cutting the head of Dhaksha. The other image of Virabhadra is in the same mould. It is eight handed all the hands are broken. He kicks a goat headed being with his feet. Evidently, the scene relates to resurrection of Dhaksha after his chastisement. The death of Prajapati in Hindu tradition is not a single doom. That means all creative work is stopped. In order to Dhaksha to resume his work of creation, he was resurrected and fitted with the head of a goat so that he might continue his work.

Dashinamurthi

The southern Devakoshta of the main temple houses an image of Dakshinamurthi. Temples for Siva since the early Chola period provide for five images on the Devakoshtas. They are:

South : Dakshinamurti (Garbhagrha)

Ganapathi (Antarala)

West : Lingodhbhavamurti (Garbhagrha)

North : Brahma (Garbhagrha)

Mahisasuramardhini (Antarala)

The same pattern continued to hold ground down to the Nayaka time of which the best example is the Kumbeswara temple.

Dakshinamurthi in the present image is seated in Virasana. He holds the Aksamala and Damaru in Parahasthas. The front right hand is held in Gnanamudra and so the imager may be identified with Gnana Dakshinamurthi. On the pedestal, two Rishis are carved. On either side of the Lord of Wisdom, four more Rishis were seated. They are listening to the discourse of Dakshinamurthi who is the Lord of Wisdom. He is teaching to most learned among the Scholar Rishis. He is considered to be a Professor's Professor. Gnana means Wisdom, Dakshina means Gifted or Free and Murti for the Lord.

Ganapathi

There are few images of Ganapathi in various Mandapas. Usually Ganapathi is a seated image. Rarely standing and dancing images are spotted. An interesting image in the temple is fitted with ten hands. He holds various emblems like Chakra, Modaka, Naga and so on. The front right hand holds a Modaka. The proboscis is turned to the left and holds a pot. It might be the Amritakalasa. On his left thigh, a Devi is seated. She is Siddhi. The image may be identified with Sakthi- Ganapathi. Ganapathi is supposed to have two wives. They are Siddhi (the Miraculous power) and Buddhi (Wisdom). In another erotic form, he is called Uchchista- Ganapathi, also united with a Devi.

Sanmuka

Sanmuka is the six faced Arumukan (Aru or Sat- "Six", Mukam or Mukha-"Face"). The Lord is in Sthanaka mode and is twelve handed. The hands hold various emblems such as Vajra and Sakthi. He is attained by two Devis. They are Valli and Devasena. Devasena was the daughter of Lord Indra and so Murugan appropriates his emblem, the Vajra. Valli is a typical Tamil spouse of the Lord. She mostly appears in temples of Tamilnadu. In North Indian tradition, Skanda (Tamil Kandan) has only one spouse. She is Devasena. A number of images appear on the pillar sections in the various Mandapas. These images are enumerated one by one.

Gajasamharamurthi

Gajasamharamurti was the Lord who slaughtered the elephant-demon⁶. He was an associate of Andhakasura (Darkness personified). Siva slaughtered both the demons. The elephant's skin was flayed. In the image under study, Siva stands on the head of the elephant. The dissected skin of the elephant spreads up above in a semicircular form. Siva stands within the Prabhavati created by the skin and dances lifting the left leg. The leg is posed in Urdhuvanju mode. He is four armed, and he holds Khadga, Khetaka, and Trisula.

Bhairava

Bhairava is a fearsome manifestation of Siva⁷. He appears on a pillar section, juxtaposed with an image of dancing Devi. Bhairava as usual is accompanied by his dog Vahana. The dog appears behind the Lord. He is Chaturbhuj and holds the Damaru, Pasa, Kapala and Trisula in his hands. He is nude and sparks of Jvala appear behind the Tiara. He is fitted with a Kapalamala.

Mohini

Mohini is a minor incarnation of Vishnu⁸. She appeared as a beautiful damsel to distribute the Amrita “Ambrosia”, obtained by the Gods and Demons by Churning the Ocean of Milk. Mohini is also supposed to have followed by Bhisatana to the Darika “Pine Forest” forest. In the present image, Mohini is linked with Bhiksatana who appears in the next carving. Mohini stands a graceful exposure, exposing her genitals. She has one hand in Uruhasta mode and the other held up in Tarjanijudra. She is beautifully decorated with Kundalas and a Kondai.

Bhiksatana

Bhiksatana means the mendicant⁹ Siva appeared as a mendicant during a visit to the Daruka forest, begging alms. He was reduced to the status of a beggar for having cut the fifth head of Brahma who turns accrued Brahmahatti (Sin of Killing Brahma). Bhikstana appears as a man of bewitching beauty. He holds a Damaru in a hand. An antelope and a dwarf Gana appear on his sides. His locks of hair are beautifully arranged, falling on both sides. During the Chola period the casting of Bhikstana images in bronze was very common. Bhiksatana is a coveted theme in Chola art and is described in the inscriptions of Rajaraja I found in the Rajarajeswaram at Thanjavur.

Kalashamurthi

Kalashamurthi or Kalari is the Lord Siva who punished the God of Death, Yama or Kala. He dared do harm to one of Siva’s devotees, called Markandeya. The boy was engaged in Siva Puja at a time when Kala threw his Pasa to take away the life of the boy. Siva came from the Linga and kicked Yama away. In the present illustration, Siva is found in dancing mode with his right leg placed on the Avudai of a Linga. Markandeya is embracing the Linga. Siva holds the Mrga and Trisula in his hands. Interestingly, Yama is missing in the illustration.

Aghora murthi

Aghoramurthi is a terrific manifestation of Siva. In such a form, he usually chastises a demon. In the present illustration, he is walking. He holds a long Trisula in front of his two hands. Sparks of Jvala, an indicator of the Lord’s fury appear behind the Tiara. He is fitted with a Kapalamala, another indicator of the Lord’s fury. If the demon is found on the Trisula, the image could be called Andhakari. Therefore, he might be Virabhadra who is on a march to punish Dhaksha Prajapati.

Alingana murthi

Siva in an erotic play with Devi is known as Aalinganamurthi. In the present illustration Siva stands close to Devi, touching her Chin. He holds the Tanka and Mrga in Parahastast. Another hand is near Devi’s pap.

Umasahitamurthi

Siva in the company of Uma is called Umasahitamurthi. Normally they are found seated. In the present illustration, both are standing. Siva stands holding the Tanka and Mrga in Parahastast. His right hand

is in Abhayamudra and his left hand perhaps embracing Devi. Therefore, this could also be another type of Aalinganamurthi. Devi holds a lotus in one hand and the other is suspended below in Dolahasta.

Murugan

Murugan is standing. His vehicle, the Peacock appears behind of him. He holds the Vajra and Sakthi in Parahastas. The front right hand is in Abhayamudra while the left is in Uruhasta. He is fitted with a Karandamakuta.

Erotica

Few of the pillars accommodate some erotic energy imagery. In one a man and girl are found embracing each other. The man touches the girl at her pap and is fondling her. The girl reciprocates by placing her leg on that of the man. In another illustration, a woman is seated on a cot. She is pregnant. Perhaps she is waiting the time of delivery of the child. Nearby another image of Krishna cleaving the mandibles of a bird is found. It is Bakasuravadham. It is not clear why these two images are juxtaposed. Maybe the pregnant woman is a Gopi. It may have something to do with the Krishna- Lila themes.

Conclusion

Overall, the Kumbheswara temple at Kumbakonam is a remarkable contribution to the Temple Architecture and Sculpture. The unique feature of the temple is in its sculptural wealth. These images are found in various artistic media such as stone, bronze, stucco, and wood. This article has paid a special attention to the sculptural heritage of the stone images and for the Sculptures in pillar sections. Thus, the Kumbheswara temple is the pride city of the Kumbakonam. Its mythology traces the origin of the cosmos and people therein within the precincts of the temple.

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- 4.ThiruGnanaSampanthar and ThiruNaavukarasar were Tamil Saints of the Bhakti Age (7th Century AD who wrote thousands hymns in praise of Siva. Their literature, clubbed with that of Suntharar, is called Devaram. For a brief history of Kumbakonam see Vivek Nanda, Anna Dallapiccola and George Michell, "The Ramaswami Temple", South Asian studies, Vol. 13, 1997, pp.1-15.
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