

The Ritual Practices In Vaiṣṇava Temples (Divyadeśam) of Kerala Associated With Alvars: A Field Study.

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INTRODUCTION

The 108 Divyadeśams (divine temples) of vaiṣṇavās are part of the cultural heritage of India. Their influence on the religious and cultural history of India has been explored by historians of east and west. These temples became more famous from the time of the vaiṣṇava saints (ālwars) onwards, who were wandering mendicants travelled across country singing the hymns of Lord Viṣṇu. They are believed to have lived in between 8th to 9th centuries A.D in Tamilnadu. Their movements were primarily restricted around Vaiṣṇava temples of India and sung in praise of presiding deity of these 108 temples. The collection of their songs is known as Divyaprabandha (4000 verses).

It is interesting to note that among 108 temples mentioned in the songs, only 106 can be located on the earth, that lie scattered throughout India. The rest of the two are believed to be situated beyond early realms.

This paper intends to shed some light on the current ritualistic practices of these temples. In all these temples, the rituals are being performed according to the Kerala traditional method. The text, on which these rituals are based, is “Tantrasamuccayam”. As the name suggests, it is a compilation of many other works which gives a detailed description of the construction, daily worship, yearly festivals and other rituals of deities like Viṣṇu, Śiva, Śivanarayana, durgā, subrahmaṇya, gaṇapati, and Śāstā.¹ This work is dated back to the

¹Śrīśeśeśaharisumbhajidāmbikeya-
vighneśbhūtapatināmavibhinnabhūmnaḥ
Vakṣyeparasyapuruṣasyasamānarūpa-
marccāvidhimsahaprthak ca viśeṣayuktam-Tantrasamuccayam-Ch-1,verse 3.

fourteenth century (A.D).The author of this text is Sri Cennā s Narayanan Namboothiri.Another Kerala ritual manual text called Viṣṇu Samhita has a deep influence on this text².This has three available commentaries,in which two are in Sanskrit and one is in Malayalam which is surviving in manuscript form.

The Eleven Temples

The eleven divyadeśam temples are –

1. Sri Nāvā Mukunda Temple , Tirunāvāya
2. Sri Uyyavandaperumāl temple, Tirumittakkod.
3. Sri Kāṭṭakkaraappan Temple , Trikkākkara.
4. Sri Muzhikkalathan Temple , Tirumūzhikkulam.
5. Sri Kolapirān Temple , Tiruvalla
6. Sri Albhuta Narayanan Temple, Trikkodittānam.
7. Sri Imayavarappan Temple, Tirucciṭṭāṭtu.
8. Sri Māyapirān Temple, Trippuliyūr.
9. Sri Kuralappan Temple, Tiruāranmula.
10. Sri Pāmbanayyappan Temple , Tiruvanvandoor.
11. Sri Ananda padmanabhan Temple, Tiruvanantapuram.

These eleven temples are based on the songs of Tirumankai³Nammālwar⁴ and kulaśekharaālwar⁵.In every temple, the song about the particular deity is

² .There are two Sanskrit commentaries of Tantra samuccaya called Vīvaraṇa ad vīmarśinī which are believed to have written by the author's son and disciple respectively.Its says,'This text was influenced by both Nigama and Āgama.Nigamas are vedas and Āgamas are texts like Viṣṇusamhita“Nigamāḥ vedāḥ, āgamāḥ viṣṇusamhitāditantram”Tantrasamuccayam s-1, vīvaraṇam.

³Tirumankai Alwar was born in a tribal family in a small village called Tirukkuaiyalu.His real name was kalliyān.He is stated to be as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu's bow called śāraṅgam.He was very good at archery and worked as a military commander to the Cola king. Later he married to a Vishnu devotee called kumudavalli and became one staunch Vishnu devotee himself.-ALWARS, THE VAISHNAVITE SAINTS by M.Venkataraman.

written. There are many inscriptions in these temples mostly in *vattezhuthu* (An ancient south Indian Script).

The General Ritual Practices

A day in the temple starts at the early morning with opening of the sanctum sanctorum, followed by *abhiṣekam* (celestial bathing) and the other poojas. The pooja is basically *ṣoḍaśopacara* (sixteen upacaras). Except one temple (Tirucittāttu), every other has 5 poojas a day including morning and evening. In Tirucittāttu, pooja is only twice in a day. Among these eleven temples, Tiruvalla Śrīvallabha temple has a purely vaiṣṇavic set of practices which is described in the text *Yajanāvali*, which is in the manuscript form. This is a *paddhati* (practical ritual manual) in both Malayalam and Sanskrit.

1. Śrī Nāvā (Nava) Mukunda Temple, Tirunāvāya.

This temple is situated on the banks of the river Bharatappuzha. The main deity nāvāmukunda is with Lakshmi and ganapati. Tirunāvāya is a famous pilgrimage centre near Tirur in the Malappuram district. This place used to be the venue of the ancient historical ritual called *māmānkam*. This temple was attacked first by Tipu sultan and then by the Muslims in the riot called *māppilalahala* (Muslim mutiny).

It is believed that nine salagramas⁶ are buried across the temple in different places. There is another belief associated with the temple is that both gaṇapati and lakṣmi used to worship Mukunda with the lotus flowers from a lake near the temple. Even now the offering of the lotus garland is believed as very

⁴Nammalwar was born in a small town called kuruhur in Tirunelveli of Tamilnadu. His father was a small prince who paid tribute to the Pāṇḍian king of Madurai. As a child, Nammalwar was extraordinary because he was totally different from others in nature. His parents named him as māraṇ Nammalwar and Madhurakavi Alwar were from the same period of time and many of the paasurams that sang by Nammalwar is written down by Madhurakavi Alwar.

⁵. Kulaśekhara Alwar was a king of Chera Nadu or Malanadu. His father Thidaviradhan ruled the kingdom for several years and after him the throne was given to Kulaśekhara. He ruled the country very well. He composed 105 pāaurams called perumal Tirumozhi.

⁶. A celestial stone from Yamuna in which Lord Vishnu is being invoked and worshipped.

fruitful. The pāsuram by Nammā lwar is written on the wall both in Malayalam and Tamil. Five poojas are done every day with *śīveli* (offering to the bhootadevatas). The pooja is according to the Kerala tradition with a different *dhyāna* (visualisation of the deity).

The *utsavam* (yearly festival) is in the *Meṣa* month (April or May) every year. This temple is very famous for *pitṛkarma* (ancestral rituals) as well.

SrīUyyavandaperumal temple, Tirumittakkod.

This beautiful temple is situated in the Palakkad district near pattāmbi. This is also called Tiruvincikkod Añcumūrti temple (Ancu-five) because of the legend that there are five forms of Vishnu which are erected by the Pancapāṇḍavās. There is also Lord śiva inside the sanctum sanctorum as a main deity. Arjuna is the one who installed the main idol. The others are outside the prākāra. śāsta, durga, gaṇapati and dakṣiṇāmūrti have different shrines in the temple with daiypoojas. The Viṣṇu in this temple is also called āpadsahayar (one who helps in distress). Kulaśekhara ālwar had written a pāsuram praising this deity. This place is also very famous for ancestral rituals.

Some people believe that the temple was established by King Ambariṣa and the famous story related to his ekādaśivrata happened here.

There is five daily poojas with *śīveli*. The utsava is in the uttarayaṇa period .

3. SrīKāṭṭakkaraappan Temple, Trikkakkara

This temple is dedicated to Vāmana, and this is related to the famous harvest festival called Onam. During the festival, the oṇasadya (onam feast) is distributed on the day of Tiruonam for a huge number of people. This temple is believed to have been built by Lord paraśurāma .

The other dieties apart from vāmana are bhagavatiyakṣi ,brahmarakṣas, śāsta, and nāgās. There are five poojas every day.

There is another śivatempebeside the main shrine which is believed to have been worshipped bymahābali.

4. SrīMuzhikkalathan Temple, Tirumuzhikkulam.

The form of Viṣṇu here is a bit different from the previous one . Here in the Bhuṣaṇās, there is kaṭibandha instead of the lotu s. There are five poojas a day. utsava is in the uttarayaṇa. The sub deities are bhagavati. ganapati and goṣālakriṣṇa. Here the Pāsuram was written by *Tirumankaialwar*.

The following five temples are situated in the Kottayam district and isbelieved to be built by thePancapāṇḍavās.

5. SrīKolapirān Temple, Tiruvalla

This temple is situated in the town called Tiruvalla in Pathanamthitta district. This is dedicated to the puruṣa called Śrīvallabhan .It has a unique kind of ritualistic custom. Kathakali is performed daily in this temple as an offering to the lord.

It is believed that Lord Vallabha appeared for sage durvāsa and ghaṇṭākaraṇan. The idol of Śrīvallabhan is worshipped by lakṣmi and kriṣṇa. There is a shrine for sudarśnacakra. It is also said that this temple was a place of learning and thousands of students, during ancient times, learned various subjects like Veda, vedāṅga, mīmāṃsa, tarka, āyurveda, jyotiṣa etc. śrīvallabha is also called kolapiran, Tiruvazhmarvan and sundarayan. Nammalwar and tirumangaiā lwar are the people who praised the glory of the lord. The famous Malayalam poetry called Uṇṇunīlisandeśam describes the beauty , fame and the serenity of this temple.

The temple is being controlled by ten brāhmin families of Tiruvalla from the time it was built to the 18th century. This temple had 15 major priests and over a hundred assistants. This temple also used to give food and shelter for the students and the other visitors.

As stated before, the ritual manual is different here. There are five daily poojas. For each pooja, the mantra, dhyana, bhūṣaṇa (cloths and attires) and nivedya (food offering) are different. This temple is strictly vaiṣṇavīc in nature. It is a rule that no śivamantra should be uttered inside the temple.

Every year the utsava is held in the uttarayana period. There is a six day ritual called dravyakalaśam along with it. This dravyakalasam includes the prayaścitta (conspiation ritual) as well.

6. Srī Albhuta Nārāyaṇan Temple, Trikkodithanam.

The deity is called as Albhuta Nārāyaṇa or Amṛtanārāyaṇa. It is believed to be built by the youngest among pāṇḍavās sahadēva. There are two deities inside the same sanctum sanctorum. One is facing the east and the other to the west. The deity facing east is lord viṣṇu and the one who is facing the west is yoga narasimha. This deity is very rare and said to be very powerful. On the Viṣṇupīṭha there is a bimba of lakṣmīnārāyaṇa sitting on the g aruḍa called kalpakavallitāyār which is again a rare one. There are five poojas every day.

7. Sri Imayavarappan Temple, Tiruchittattu.

This temple was established by the eldest among pāṇḍavas , yudhiṣṭhira . Lord ayyappa and gośālakṣṇa are the sub dieties. There are two poojas a day and ten days of utsava every year.

8. Sri Māyapirān Temple, Trippuliyoor

This temple is believed to be built by bheema. There are five poojaseveryday. The sub dieties are Yakṣiayyappa, rakṣas and nāgās. The utsavais of ten days every year.

9. Sri Kuralappan Temple, Tiruaranmula.

This is a quiet famous one among the five. It was built by Arjuna. The upadevatās are balarāma, śiva, ganapati, śāsta, yakṣi, a goddess called erankāvubhagavati and nā gās. There are five poojas a day. The utsavais at the time of oṇam.

10. Sri Pāmbanayyappan Temple, Tiruvanvandoor

This temple was built by nakula. There are five poojas daily. Nammālwār sang the pāsura here. Utsava is also for ten days. The sub dieties are ganapati, śiva and śāstā.

11. Sri Ananta padmanabhan Temple, Tiruvanantapuram.

ŚriAnantapadmanābha swami temple is at Tiruvanantapuram (the capital of Kerala). The name itself means the place of the lord of Ananta. The temple construction is a mixture of Kerala and ancient Dravidian kovil model which has high walls and doors. The moolasthānam (the place of origin) is supposed to be at kasargod in north Kerala.

The main diety in the temple is in the Anantaśayanam posture. Beside his feet there is Lakshmi and bhū midevi. This bimba is of 18 feet long and there are three doors through which people can have the darshan of the lord. The whole idol is covered with kaṭiśarkara. (a herbal mixture used for fixing the idols). Through the first door, from face upto the right hand is visible which is placed over a śivalinga. In the second door, gold abhiṣekamoorthies of Lord

Padmanabha, brahma sitting in the lotus which is emanating from the the navel, Lakshmi, and silver utsavamoorthi of Padmanā bha is seen. Bhūmidevi, sagemārkaṇḍeya, and his lotus feet are seen through the third door. The idol is made from 12,000 salagramas. The trustees of this temple are the Titular Maharaja family members who are called padmanabhadāsa. (the servant of padmanabha). The famous saint vilwamangalathuswā miyar is the founder of this temple.

There are two other shrines inside the temple called tekkeḍom and tiruvambādi in which resides narasimha and kṛṣṇarespectively . Tiruvambadi idol is of pāthasarathi (the charioteer of pārtha) which is made of granite.

Daily Poojas and other rituals.

There are 4 poojas a day with two bhūtabali. There are two bimbās inside the sanctum sanctorum apart from the main . The first pooja is for the snā nabimba. At the time of snāna (holy bath) the bimba is taken out to the maṇḍapa and after the snāna and alankāra, again it is taken back. After finishing that, starts the uṣapooja followed by the bhūtabali. Then around 11.a.m. the afternoon pooja starts which also ends with another bhūtabali . In the evening there is a pooja at 6.30p.m. The other dieties are vyāsa, gaṇapati and śāsta.

The utsava is held here twice in a year which includes very elaborate rituals. The conspiation rituals are also performed yearly.

The Speciality of the Idol of These temples.

The idol in these temples except the Padmanabha temple Thiruvanantapuram, is a bit different from what is mentioned in Tantrasamuccayam . The text describes Viṣṇu who holds conch, discus, club and lotus⁷. But in these images, not only the

⁷ .bhāsvalbhāsvalSahasraprabhamaridarakoumodakīpankajāni.....TS-7-65

viṣṇu doesn't hold the club and instead of the lotus, there is a lump of clay in his lower right hand. This is the main significance of all these divyadesam temples.

According to a paperwork done by Albert.J.Gail in the iconography of Vishnu, this image dates back to 5th century CE.⁸ The lump of clay represents the earth (pṛthvitatva). Viṣṇu also has a mark on the right side of his chest called Śrīvalsam, which according to some is the lakṣ mi herself. This represents his two spouses, Bhumi and lakṣ mi.

Conclusion

For over six centuries, Tantrasamuccayam has been the traditional text for all the temple practices in Kerala. The dhyāna of the above mentioned idol cannot be seen in any texts. What used to be the way of worship in these temples before the emergence of tantrasamuccayam is worth to be studied. The existence of such an idol which goes way back to the fifth century shows how ancient these temples and its practices are. As this is a field study, the majority of the information mentioned in this paper is based on the interviews done with the priests and other local people related to the temples. The divyadeśam temples and ālwars are not very popular among the common people of Kerala. This study gives general information on the significance of this forgotten heritage of ancient India. Further studies about these temples and its many facets are required.

⁸ "The earth and the lotus A contribution to Vishnu's iconography in India" by Adalbert j.Gail University of Berlin

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